

ETUI-ETUC Conference, 27-29 June 2016, Brussels

Shaping the new world of work – The impacts of digitalisation and robotisation

Panel 23: Health and safety issues of digitalisation and robotics

Participants:

- Emmanuelle Brun, EU OSHA
- Jan Popma, University of Amsterdam
- Rebekah Smith, Business Europe
- Maria Bjerre, LO Denmark

Moderator: Marianne Detroyer, ETUI

Reporter: Bethany Staunton, ETUI

Speakers divided into two parties: Popma and Brun from the world of research; Smith and Bjerre representing the social partners (from both sides).

MAJOR CHALLENGES

- Physical and psychosocial risks of interaction with robots in the workplace – physical health and safety risks to workers, perhaps through malfunctioning of robot, but also increasing stress and pressure for workers in relation to changing standards of efficiency
- Implementation of OSH legislation and regulation in an increasingly digitalized world where the workforce is dispersed and isolated, and it is not always clear who is responsible for health and safety
- Increased monitoring of workers and use of data

PRIORITIES FOR ACTION (POLICY/ RESEARCH)

- OSH legislation that keeps up with changing technologies in workplace
- Communication between workers and employers – social dialogue – especially the involvement and consultation of workers when new technology is planned and implemented in the workplace
- There needs to be more research on what the effects of robotisation will be on working life – both in terms of job losses/ job creation, and in terms of physical and psychosocial risks

Emmanuelle Brun of EU OSHA outlined the key trends and drivers that were emerging in the world of health & safety in the wake of new technological developments. Robotics and digitalisation present both opportunities and challenges for OSH. Opportunities include removing workers from hazardous jobs and improving quality of work by reducing monotonous work. Challenges include physical risk of working with robots, increased pressure for high efficiency, and diffused responsibility for health & safety with crowdworking and the platform economy.

Jan Popma of the University of Amsterdam focused primarily on the introduction and implementation of robots in the workplace, particularly in relation to the development of AI. Scientists are now not only talking about *if* some robots will be more intelligent than humans, but *when*. This raises questions about authority and subordination: will workers obey the robots? Also issues of privacy, surveillance and discrimination: e.g. robots equipped with sensors and cameras on the shop floor, perhaps reporting back to managers; robots used in job interviews to detect if the applicant has a disease or condition. In line with legislation, workers *must* be consulted when new technologies are introduced and implemented in the workplace.

Rebekah Smith of BusinessEurope presented the employers' perspective. The digital economy is seen as an essential part of competitiveness for employers so one of the main aims is to make sure this flourishes; however, everyone should be able to grasp the opportunities offered. It is important that workers' skills develop in line with technological advances, and that there is a social dialogue on these developments between employers and employees: we need to create an 'open culture' of discussion in the workplace.

Maria Bjerre of LO Denmark concurred on the point about social dialogue but also emphasised that strategies needed to adapt quickly in order to protect workers; we cannot wait for 'full enlightenment' as things are always developing. She stressed that psychosocial risks in relation to robotisation and digitalisation were often overlooked but represent a very important challenge; humans need to feel they are in control.