

Summary report Workshop 12: THE IMPACT OF AUTOMATION ON WORKING CONDITIONS, HEALTH AND SAFETY

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The panel addressed the issue of automation by exploring the interaction between people and machines from various perspectives. There are several forms of automation involving a variety of sub-issues – from mechanical problems, to hardware problems, to software problems, to artificial intelligence. The panel put its main focus on the basic form of automation which concerns millions of workers in Europe. Keeping this in mind, the red thread of the panel was *worker and workers' perspective* on the issue thus building a bottom-up narrative on automation.

The big directions of the debate were threefold: (1) Why – after 30 years of having European-level regulation in this field (Machine Directive, the Framework Directive on safety and health at work) – workers still confront situations at their workplace that are threat for their health and safety? (2) What could be the solutions in order to ensure that the interaction between the human and the machine does not put the health and safety of workers in peril? What kind of co-operation would be needed between the involved parties to achieve this aim? (3) What kind of action could workers proceed to in order to improve the situation?

From the workers' perspective, three aspects – often found in automated machines and systems – were emphasized as critical in relation to health and safety in an automated (traditional manufacturing) workplace. The first aspect concerns the logistical arrangement of the machine which – if not done properly – may create a risk of serious injuries. The second aspect refers to remoteness between the worker (operator) and the machine that characterizes certain work situations. The third aspect concerns the maintenance operations. All together, these aspects (still) contribute in creating potentially hazardous situations for workers.

Furthermore, the discussion was expanded by asking the question if the issue of automation and the related problems workers face in factories might be relevant to other fields as well. The panelists indicated that, indeed, the experience of regulating traditional manufacturing workplace can and should be used also in other sectors that are influenced by automation, for instance, such as retail, transport, social services, and security. The workers in these sectors are nowadays surrounded by data processes and algorithmic decision-making which (partly or fully) have undertaken the role of managers and, as a result, now dictate how workers should carry out their tasks and make their decisions. This creates additional anxiety for workers who often (a) are not trained to work with the machines on such a level; (b) are not entirely aware about the role the machines have on their work process. On top of that, there is a huge lack of regulation which contributes to the workers' lack of awareness of their rights in this regard.

In general, the question about the role of regulation in ensuring health and safety was a recurring one throughout the entire panel. Some panelists indicated that there is already good regulation in place (at least, as long as traditional manufacturing is considered). And the overall trend is that the occupational health and safety situation is gradually improving across Europe (if one considers, for instance, the decreasing number of fatal work accidents). Thus, the problem rather lies in **application of law** and ensuring that the involved parties comply with legal requirements. In particular, several panelists noted the importance of complying with **the obligation to carry out risk assessment**.

Another stream of the discussion focused on the need to tackle the **lack of communication** between the involved actors during the machine production process. Panelists repeatedly noted that there must be an **interaction between the designer of the machine, the manufacturer of the machine,**

worker, and employer to have the health and safety conditions under control – because all the mentioned parties have their requirements, concerns and limitations. This would increase the chance of carrying out a proper risk assessment on potential danger of the machine during its design phase. The **responsibility of both machine designers** (*“Machines have to be made better.”*) **and employers** was also stressed, along with the **involvement of workers in the machine manufacturing process from the very beginning**.

Another facet of the same argument addressed the usage of technologies in workplaces other than traditional manufacturing. Employee monitoring was discussed in particular because in many cases it is carried out illegally, is harmful to workers, can lead to changing job descriptions or discrimination. As a solution, the experts stressed **the need to adjust risk assessment** of workplaces to the developments of new technologies and the ways they are used by employers. Once again, the role of engineers and designers of technologies was emphasized, together with demand for market education demonstrating that workers’ performance assessment – using the new technologies – can be successfully carried out in less intrusive ways.

In the end, the discussion turned into a broader debate on the **culture of dialogue** and **safety as a social issue**. Additionally, it was marked that – in order to advance the culture of dialogue between the involved actors – the **workers need to be aware of their rights** (for instance, about already existing regulation confining employers’ rights to monitor employees). Also, workers **need to know to whom they can talk within the company** in order to raise their concerns. The conclusion was that the defense of workers’ rights and improvement of working conditions implies putting effort into daily communication and daily fight. Thus, the role of workers’ representatives, work councils, and trade unions in general.