Labour/Management Programme

FIRMS, WORKERS AND THE CHANGING WORKPLACE: CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE OLD AND THE NEW ECONOMY

Report on a meeting of management and trade union experts held under the OECD Labour/Management Programme

Paris, 23rd February 2001
OECD LABOUR/MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME

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FOREWORD

Under the OECD Labour/Management Programme for 2001, a meeting of management and trade union experts on “Firms, Workers and the Changing Workplace: Considerations for the Old and the New Economy” was held in Paris on 23rd February 2001. The meeting was prepared in collaboration with the Business and Industry Advisory Committee to the OECD (BIAC) and the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC).

Below you will find the Agenda for this meeting, along with the overall report of the discussions of the meeting of experts prepared by Mr. Robert Taylor, designated as General Rapporteur for this activity.

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AGENDA

1. Introductory remarks

2. The New Economy: opportunities and challenges

   - The New Economy sometimes refers to the advent of an era of higher non-inflationary growth, spurred by the adoption of ICT and globalisation. What exactly do we mean by the New Economy and what are its expected future manifestations? Does the New Economy affect business practices overall or mainly specific sectors?

   - Do globalisation and the introduction of ICT go hand-in-hand with specific changes in work organisation, e.g. in the direction of flatter management structures, greater emphasis on team work and outsourcing and new forms of remuneration? In view of assertions that the traditional distinction between time at work and time off work is being blurred, what is the impact of new technology of working time patterns?

   - There is some discussion of the impact of ICT on the ability of individuals to create networks, thereby enhancing social capital. On the other hand, others assert that technological change is associated with more individualistic attitudes and lower social capital. What is the relationship between the New Economy and social capital and what is the role of social partners in this area?

3. Labour relations in the New Economy context: evolution or profound change?

   - Some observers argue that the distinction between "employees" and "employers" is being blurred as a result of the increasing importance of knowledge, innovation in work organisation and greater use of performance-based forms of remuneration such as stock options. This view is based on the observation that new workplace practices often entail new forms of labour-management co-operation. How are unions and employers’ organisations adapting their structures and strategies to the changing economic environment?

   - What is the impact of the New Economy on the framework of industrial relations (collective bargaining, individual negotiations, etc.)? What is the impact of the trend towards “individualisation” of work? Is there a need for adapting the legal framework of industrial relations’ systems?

4. Policy requirements: how can the benefits of the New Economy be maximised while reducing social costs?

   - The role of human capital has probably increased in the New Economy. What can governments do to improve life-long learning for all and how can firms and trade unions contribute to this goal? More fundamentally, do new technologies pave the way for a high-trust, high-performance workplace and how should framework conditions change to seize these opportunities?
• Globalisation and the rapid diffusion of ICT have considerably boosted business opportunities, while also exerting pressure for change in the world of work. In what ways can and should employment regulations and social protection systems be adapted?

• Some perceive the New Economy positively, while others continue to feel insecure about their employment and income prospects – this is notably the case of the unskilled. How can the perception of job and income instability be addressed? More generally, is there a risk of growing digital and knowledge divides, and how can they be bridged?

5. Summary of the results of the meeting by the rapporteur

6. Concluding remarks
Globalisation and the rapid growth in the use of information and communications technology in
the workplace cannot together guarantee continuing economic growth, increased productivity and
prosperity in the world’s industrialised nations. The success of the so-called “new” economy will depend
on how companies and workers adapt themselves to the pressures imposed by constant change. This was
the important central argument raised in the one-day conference in Paris that brought together a diverse
range of informed participants from employer associations, trade unions and research organisations.

The focus for the discussion was provided by a background paper presented by Raymond Torres
(OECD’s Education, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Directorate). Its main message claimed that
“work needs to be reorganised to use information and communication technology effectively.” As the
paper argued: “Organisational change, understood as the implementation of new work practices such as
teamwork, flatter management structures and job rotation, tends to be associated with higher productivity
growth. Interestingly productivity gains of firms that combine new technology with organisational change
are considerable, whereas there does not appear to be much economic benefit in implementing new
technology alone.”

The presentation signalled a clear shift of emphasis in the thinking about the implications of the
growth of the “new” economy that is now going on inside the OECD’s secretariat. This recognises that the
impact of technological innovation is considerable not just on the intensification of competition and open
trade but on the development of labour markets. The policy implication means that national governments
will have to develop comprehensive public strategies that it will make easier to carry through
organisational reforms in the workplace and beyond that can guarantee growth in the use of information
and communication technologies but minimise the costs of corporate change and social disruption.

The OECD paper showed that while such modernisation is taking place across most western
industrialised countries, it is often uneven in its incidence. What it sought to do was sketch out an
integrated approach that needs to be implemented more consistently.

This involves the encouragement of a number of measures designed to enhance the quality of
labour markets. It means an active policy to encourage greater mobility of workers which is both
geographical and occupational and will also provide them with the opportunities to develop a wide range
of skills in the use of new technology that can help to narrow the “digital divide” which threatens to
produce greater social inequality between those who have the skills needed and those who do not.

Such a strategy will require a much higher priority being given in financial support and a focus
on raising the quality of human capital available through enhanced education and training programmes.
The OECD presentation argued that both governments and companies have so far – despite their rhetoric –
tended to under-invest in this key area. It was argued that this disparity between promise and action may be
aggravated by the tendency for labour turnover to increase in line with the pace of workplace change, thus
discouraging worker loyalty and commitment and as a result the provision of training.
The OECD presentation called for the active promotion of more flexible management-labour accepted practices that can stimulate more workplaces to adapt to the realities of the “new” economy. It was suggested that “institutions that allow a closer contact between management and employees (such as works councils) can help build a high-skill, high-trust enterprise climate” while “collective workplace agreements raise the probability of firms adopting team-working and new work practices.”

The OECD presentation revealed that the proportion of companies which have introduced flexible working practices rose significantly during the 1990s, especially in Australia, France, the United Kingdom and the United States. While self-managing workteams and mini-business unites were particularly popular in the United States, autonomous production teams grew more significantly in France. It also argued that quality management techniques and teamwork practices grew in northern Europe.

But the OECD presentation also made the important point that such changes are helping to transform the way in which work is being done. “Employees are becoming involved in managerial tasks, including the evaluation and supervision of their peers, the training of new recruits, the organisation of input supplies, the forming of customer relations and the choice of financial and accounting procedures”, it argued. “What matters is not only the competence in a particular activity of production, organisation, development and marketing but rather general knowledge, the potential to acquire multiple skills and the ability to learn how the experience gained from one skill enhances another skill, which facilitates work rotation and soft skills.”

In presenting the report, Mr. Torres emphasised the policy implications for making workplaces more effective in their application of the new information and communication technologies. He stressed in particular that it was important to ensure workers became better-equipped in so-called “soft” skills such as literacy and numeracy, with an added ability to interact successfully with other workers rather than merely acquire technical paper qualifications. He also argued that labour market regulations should not obstruct workplace adjustments to change but assist in making it easier for companies and workers to accommodate necessary innovation. The need for more flexible use of working hours and the greater portability of pensions for workers as they move from job to job was stressed.

Inevitably there was a wide variety of opinions expressed at the meeting on the nature of the “new” economy and its consequences for the development of workplace organisation. John Martin (OECD’s Education, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Directorate) was keen to emphasise in his introductory remarks that perhaps there was a genuine danger of exaggerating the newness of contemporary workplace practices. Were we really experiencing a “new economic paradigm”? he questioned. Or were we merely experiencing a “passing fad”? Was there simply too much managerial hype? Were new forms of working such as teleworking, not just a modern version of older forms such as domestic outwork?

By raising such fundamental questions Mr. Martin introduced an initial and sceptical note of caution into the discussion about the true importance of the issues under scrutiny. But the OECD’s own presentation suggested that even if there is a recognisable tendency to hyperbole in contemporary analysis of the “new” economy it would be quite wrong to deny important changes are taking place in the industrialised economies. There may be more continuity and evolution from past practices than enthusiasts might be prepared to admit but this should not lead to an under-estimation of the significance of current innovation in the future of work. Much of the day’s discussion revolved around that underlying and fundamental issue. If the eventual outcome was not clear-cut and more blurred, muddled and indecisive than some may have wished, this was all to the good. By avoiding simplistic scenarios and glib arguments, the meeting revealed a healthy degree of hesitancy and uncertainty.
The first contributions from the representatives of employers and trade unions in the OECD suggested capital and labour were less polarised over the issues raised than might have been thought.

Filip Hamro-Drotz (Confederation of Finnish Industry and Employers) recognised there was an acceleration taking place in the application of technology innovation in companies and this was having a significant impact as much on the old as on the new. He argued the creation of more open world markets, greater competition and the freer flow of goods, services, capital and knowledge were all helping to accelerate workplace change. But he also acknowledged that “human capital is a key contributor in innovation and economic development”.

Mr. Hamro-Drotz highlighted a number of changes taking place in work organisation and business practice that are reshaping corporate strategies. He pointed to the creation of dual income families which were becoming the norm and leading to more flexible working arrangements through greater use of part-time work, temporary employment, homeworking, job sharing and telecommuting. He also emphasised the greater integration of employees into the global activities of companies. But Mr. Hamro-Drotz also argued trade unions were not a necessary force in the workplace to ensure success in the implementation of the new technologies. “Many new economy companies are union-free as employees find greater benefit in individually negotiating contracts with their employers to maximise their personal benefits,” the employers’ paper he presented went on to argue. It suggested “sound research” existed that conflicted with the OECD’s evidence that suggested “new methods are more likely to be initiated if an employee representative system and collective agreement are in place.”

The main emphasis of the employers, however, was on the need for a marked improvement in lifelong learning for workers. Their paper asserted that “educational institutions are behind in their attempt to keep pace with the change in business needs”. The solid base of education should be supported through a dialogue between business, labour and governments to guarantee that educational systems take into account the realities and needs of the new economy workplace.

It was suggested that it was employees and not companies that should take the initiative in developing the transferable skills needed that were neither job nor firm specific. But the employer’s report also argued a diversity of training methods and delivery systems were required and there was “no one-size-fits-all form of training or method of investment in training”.

The employers asserted the “new” economy has turned the “employer/employee employment relationship up side down”. “Employees no longer stay with a single company for their entire career. People entering the workforce today will work for ten different organisations and change careers at least twice.” It was suggested there must be a move from the “old model that relied on individual employers to provide employment and income security” to “cross firm, community-based institutions” that promote mobility, lifelong learning and other services.

For his part David Coats (Trades Union Congress) said he did not believe there had been a paradigm shift to a “new” economy. The big jobs expansion in the western world had taken place predominantly in the private services sector and not in information technology-based areas. Most employment growth had occurred in large and not small or medium-sized firms. There had been an actual decline in self-employment in the UK for example during the 1990s and with not much significant change in the length of job tenure. Insecurity among workers stemmed not so much from fear of unemployment but was due primarily to the faster rate of change taking place internally in companies. The growth of teleworking was mainly due to managers and teachers taking work home with them and not being paid for doing so. The intensification of work was not due to the impact of new technology. Nor was the undoubted extension of job insecurity to cover white-collar as well as manual workers. He suggested that “Fordist”
methods of production still existed. Mr. Coats went on to point out that only 2 per cent of UK workplaces had experienced functional flexibility during the 1990s. He believed we were seeing more continuity than change in the workplace.

However, Mr. Coats also emphasised the crucial role that trade unions should play through the development of workplace partnerships. He argued exhortation for the creation of more effective negotiated arrangements was not enough. Regulation -- albeit of a minimum kind -- was necessary to encourage workplace change by agreement not imposition. Trade unions remain vital institutions for the development of higher quality social capital, a crucial element in the establishment of high performance workplaces.

Duncan Campbell (International Labour Organisation) gave a fascinating presentation on the information economy. He spoke of the growth of what he called a “shared capitalism” with increasing forms of employee participation stemming from the devolution of authority in workplaces, the emergence of performance-related pay systems and the growth of flatter organisations with less emphasis on management-controlled hierarchies. The ILO’s latest findings in its employment report have found companies perform the best where they have negotiated labour-management agreements for the achievement of workplace change. Mr. Campbell highlighted other trends, notably a close association between changes in the length of job tenure and improvements in labour productivity. The higher the level of employment mobility the faster the rate of productivity growth. But he admitted the causal link between the two phenomenon remains “unclear”.

Neil Anderson (Union Network International) acknowledged the standard form of employment where workers “have a job and a boss and a fixed place of work” is declining. He emphasised the emergence of greater numbers of “new” workers, more diverse, more separated by income inequalities, more different in their “degrees of skill, self-esteem and level of exploitation.” This meant such workers required “new types of collectivism” to deal with the problems and issues they find difficult to resolve as individuals. Mr. Anderson argued this did “not necessarily” mean the continuation of “collective contracts in the traditional sense where pay and conditions are specified.” Instead, a “new type” of trade union involvement is emerging. He pointed to two examples of this from the US initiated by the Communication Workers union. This has established “alliances” with workers who do not have traditional employment relationships subsidiaries at Washtec and IBM. They are provided with access to a wage database, dispute resolution facilities either with advice or legal support, as well as information on how to secure health coverage and pension rights as well as training to upgrade their skills. It has also meant the provision of recruitment facilities. In addition, the union has sought new collective agreements to provide those workers with intellectual property rights.

Bernd Heinzemann (Confederation of German Employers’ Associations) emphasised that most companies wanted to “keep workers with them as long as possible” and were not driven simply by a “hire and fire” mentality. But he added there was a danger of too much regulation not too little in the “new” economy, pointing to a high level of job satisfaction among workers employed in start-up companies. He suggested it was “not a problem” that many new firms are not members of traditional employer associations because they prefer the greater degree of flexibility available outside formalised structures, especially in company start-ups. But he also called for “regular” and “continuous” dialogue within and outside companies on developing a “shared understanding of strategy” with trade unions and workers although suggesting we should “stop talking about collective agreements.” Mr. Heinzemann added that in many new firms, workers are more intensively involved in social dialogues and this should provide a good example of what can be achieved in many existing companies.
Odile Sallard (OECD’s Directorate for Education, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs) raised a number of questions on what governments should do or not do in response to the “new” economy. In the 1990s cutting costs had been given a high priority. Was more of a balance now required through policies to stabilise work and support the new growth environment? Should more be done to help the socially excluded, especially the young, back into work through an encouragement of more labour migration and training through individual learning accounts? She also wondered whether more should be done to lessen the proportion of state spending on “passive” welfare benefits for the unemployed and greater attention be given to active supply side measures.

John Evans (TUAC) argued that the accelerating pace of change and mounting work pressure was causing widespread anxiety and insecurity among workers. This was not a good foundation for a high performance economy, he argued. “It is high time we go beyond the simplistic notion of labour market flexibility where workers are expected to give up social protection, decent wages or job security. We must restore the objective of achieving full employment by ensuring economic policies that translate potential productivity gains into real social and economic benefits. We were also seeing a shift from external to internal flexibility in companies. A common approach was needed in the development of skills. The role of unions was changing from being advocates of regulation to direct service provider”. He pointed out the OECD’s own research showed that the presence of trade unions tended to raise the amount of training being carried out by companies. Mr. Evans argued: “In today’s individualistic society the importance of unions, of workers acting collectively, may well increase globally, confounding those who predicted unions would wane. Working in a dot.com warehouse is not devoid of old economy realities. New uncertainties are driving workers together, even across national frontiers”.

The invaluable exchange of opinions and thoughts at the meeting suggests that this should be the beginning and not the end of a constructive dialogue on the interaction between the new technologies and workplace change that brings together employers, union leaders and academics. In time this could produce a greater recognition of common interests and help to remove the barriers to the creation of the “new” economy without undermining existing social regulations designed to provide some measure of security for workers in a time of rapid transformation.

A particularly fruitful way forward would be for the OECD to carry out a number of case studies of companies in a range of sectors that have gone through workplace change. This would provide an added depth to our understanding and knowledge of what is happening in the world of work. It would also bring particular companies to the conference table to describe and evaluate what they have done. The time has come to move from the macro to the micro level of analysis. Moreover, a case study approach would hopefully help to spread best practice and move the debate from the hype to the reality.

It might also be useful to include chapters on the impact of information and communication technologies on workplaces in some of the OECD annual country surveys. The jobs study agenda has become an integral part of the OECD’s work. It would make sense to also include the issues raised at the February conference in the wider concerns of the organisation. The positive and lasting conclusion of the day’s discussions was to suggest that the organisation of work should not be seen as of marginal importance or merely an add-on to our wider understanding of the new economy but should lie at its core.

Duncan Campbell
ILO

Emerging institutions of « shared capitalism » as evidenced by …

- Increasing forms of employee participation and devolution of authority
- Increasing types and use of performance-dependent income: 20% US workers own shares in their companies
- Flatter hierarchies consistent with greater need for speed and greater access to information
Reasons:

- « Time-to-market » pressures from shorter product life cycles
- Greater information symmetry lessens need for and value of levels of information intermediation
- Greater bottom-up decisions increase innovation and speed: importance of tacit knowledge

Employee participation:

- Appears both (1) to be most diffused and (2) to work best in unionized settings
- In non-union settings, lowers workers’ propensity to support unionization
Outcomes:

- Better performance measured variously
- Correlation between work organization changes and multi-factor productivity growth
- Correlation between work organization changes and diffusion of ICT (Stanford)
Stable v. Mobile Workforce: Different Needs …

- Growing margin of a diverse workforce not reliant on tenure with any one firm – most pronounced in local high tech labour markets – e-lancers, temps
- stable « employee tenure » possibly related to time-to-market pressures and is still consistent with « internalized instability »

Emerging period of institutional change

- Low penetration of unionization in emerging sectors and labour markets
- Gap in servicing needs of a more diversified segment of the labour market
Three trends:

- Continued emphasis on collective worker protection … for most?
- Experimentation with greater individualization of employment relations in a collective framework
- Experimentation with delivery of individually tailored services to members
Rising Disparity in the Effects of ICT on the Quality of Working Conditions

Improvements in the Quality of Worklife

- Independence of work from location in intangible product markets = better balance in work & family
- Decline in share of physically arduous work, more homogeneously distributed between the sexes
- Greater autonomy, responsibility and surveys find link between participation and job satisfaction
But Ageing Workforce Can be a Threat to Employability with risk borne by Worker

And …

- Blurring of distinction between work and employment – e.g. online contracting
- between independent and dependent employment – e.g. e-lancing
- Blurring of distinction between market and non-market hours for knowledge workers
- Irony of greater information: isolation and gender-based differences
Declining Nasdaq makes blurred distinction between worker and employer back in focus

Evidence of increased stress and related issues of mental health

Evidence of invasions of privacy and performance-screening
Experimentation with individualization and partnership

- In collective framework: Dutch « multiple choice model » of working conditions, or Danish agreements on working time
- Cooperation between Communication Workers of America and (non-union) Cisco Systems on retraining

Emerging examples

- Unions as training agencies, e.g. UNISON
- Provision of individualized services by unions (RC Nursing 24-hour call centre, WashTech), rather than collective bargaining
- Organizing e-lancers (UNI) and self-employed (FNV Zelfstandige Bondgenoten, Patrons Indépendants)
Needs:

- Both the forms of participation and collection protection will become more varied, but will continue to be needed.

- Labour market intermediation will be tailored individually, and competition in service provision will increase.
A new growth potential

- Globalisation
- New technology
- Policy reform and other factors

BUT gains are not automatic: governments and social partners have a role.
ICT-use may be more important than ICT production...
(US)

What are the findings?

1) Work organisation is associated with ICT use

Source: Jorgenson and Stiroh (2000)
Changes in work organisation go hand-in-hand with ICT use

Source: OECD

ICT facilitates Telework

Chart 2:
Teleworkers and ICT penetration in some OECD countries, 1999-2000

Sources: Secretariat estimates for ICT users per 100 inhabitants; and E-aTT Final Report, "Benchmarking progress on new ways of working and new forms of business across Europe", August 2000, for teleworkers.
What are the findings?

2) "Knowledge-intensive" employment is key to growth

Returns to the “knowledge-intensive” employment are rapidly increasing (Case of the United States)

Note: Figures in parentheses refer to real hourly earnings in 1985 in US dollars
What are the findings?

3) Employment mobility is associated with faster productivity growth (but causality is unclear)

Low tenure countries tend to enjoy faster productivity growth

Source: OECD
... and there is an association between changes in tenure and changes in productivity growth.

![Graph showing changes in employee tenure and productivity growth](Image)

*Source: OECD*

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**Policy issues**

- Enhancing firm training (and not just education)
  - certification of training
  - emphasis on disadvantaged groups and/or on the individual
Policy issues

• Labour-management institutions
  - there is evidence that these institutions foster firm performance
  - but challenges to labour relations are also posed (e.g. job segmentation; sectoral bargaining)

Policy issues

• Activate labour market programmes
  - high unemployment and labour shortages coexist: this is a problem
Policy issues

- Ensure that employment regulations do not inhibit adjustment
  - flexible working hours
  - portability of pensions

Policy issues

- Looking at migration in a new light
  - migration can help reduce shortages
  - but risk of brain drain and of less emphasis vis-à-vis domestic human capital
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