

## Digital Technologies and Job Quality: Do Trade Unions Make a Difference?

### Findings Summary, June 2023

Digitalisation raises many questions for the future of work, with intense debate surrounding the implications for employment and job quality. Trade unions have an interest in 'good work', and are potentially important actors in shaping public policy and digital change at the workplace. *Digital Technologies and Job Quality* is a two-year research project, funded by a [Leverhulme Trust](#) Research Project Grant, involving researchers at De Montfort and Cardiff universities in the UK. The project explored how unions in the UK and Norway are engaging with digitalisation as they seek to shape better outcomes for workers. Here we outline key findings from the research.

#### Research team

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#### The research questions

1. How far do unions at national and workplace level agree on how to respond to robotics/AI?
2. How far are unions able to influence their implementation in the workplace?
3. What opportunities and constraints do unions encounter in seeking to deliver better outcomes for workers?

The research adopted an international comparative sector approach, focused on exploring the perspectives of trade unionists. The project examined unions' role in relation to **lower-level and intermediate-level workers in four sectors**. Over 100 interviews were undertaken with national and regional union officers, and senior and workplace union representatives from eight unions.

#### Participating Unions

Sector	Job category	Norway	UK
Retail supermarkets	Shopfloor workers	Handel og Kontor	USDAW
Food and drink processing	Operatives	NNN	Unite
Banks	Admin & clerical	Finansforbundet	Accord
Hospitals	Admin & clerical	Fagforbundet	UNISON

#### Comparing unions in Norway and the UK

The research found that trade unions in Norway are better positioned to shape digitalisation for the benefit of workers than their counterparts in the UK. This reflects the Norwegian institutional environment that is both more favourable to unions in general, and which provides important supports to bolster unions' role and influence. Central are legal regulations, national and sector collective agreements, and employee reps on company boards that provide rights for consultation and involvement in digitalisation. In the UK, the lack of

tripartite social dialogue and similar institutional supports represent major barriers to the potential role that trade unions could play. Despite the national picture, the research finds some important sector variation. The comparison of supermarkets in the UK and Norway identified more similarities than differences in unions' role, with both finding it difficult to influence digitalisation. In many cases, employers are resistant to involvement, and unions are often hindered by a lack of proactive workplace reps and weak organisation. High labour turnover, many small part-time jobs and the use of students render union organisation challenging.

## Job losses

In Norway, unions were less concerned about job losses. For example in food and drink processing, investment in digital technologies is seen as critical to

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*We do not fear technology, we welcome it... work will be easier. Due to competition, you need new technology in order to get more money, good resources. (NNN food & drink rep, Norway)*

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increasing productivity and safeguarding jobs in the longer-term. Unions in the UK presented job losses as a bigger issue, leading to more defensive approaches in some cases. These positions reflect different contexts, where Norwegian workers have more job security, particularly older workers, and collective agreements require a greater emphasis on retraining and redeployment. Workers in Norway also have stronger welfare supports and more chance of finding decent alternative employment.

## Influencing digitalisation

The general position adopted by unions in both countries is that if digitalisation is to benefit rather than harm workers then workers' collective involvement is key. The participation of affected workers in the

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*it's [new digital technology] slowed the job right down, it's done everything it shouldn't have done. That's because we weren't involved from day one. (Unite food & drink rep, UK)*

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implementation of technology can also help to ensure that it is embedded successfully and that problems can be foreseen and avoided.

Unions in Norway were more successful in influencing the implementation process than the selection or design of technology. There were many examples of unions being involved in project groups and working jointly with management to adapt and implement digital technologies. Unions focus on ensuring that existing workers are retrained to undertake new jobs, that displaced workers are redeployed, and staffing levels are adequate. There is evidence that unions can still make a difference in the UK. In a few cases, UK unions were involved in the introduction of digital technologies, Apart from these cases, the unions' role is more about

mitigating any potential effects, such as minimising redundancies, and pushing for greater access to training and redeployment.

## Monitoring and surveillance

One area where unions in both countries resist forms of technology is the use of new digital tools to extend and deepen monitoring and surveillance. Apart from the hospital sector, this was a major concern as these tools can undermine workers' privacy, enhance the use of performance management, and lead to work intensification and stress. Stronger rights to privacy and

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*I think they realise if they start the process, and they don't involve the staff then it's going ...to make life more difficult and it's best if they just ask the people on the ground that's doing the work, that's going to be using the technology. (UNISON hospital rep, UK)*

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collective agreements make it more difficult for managers in Norway to monitor workers than in the UK. As expected, Norwegian unions are generally more successful at limiting the extent to which individual workers are watched and measured at work. Nevertheless, there is variation across workplaces in both countries, with proactive reps and strong workplace organisation vital in protecting workers from encroaching surveillance.

## Implications

- Unions can influence digitalisation to improve worker outcomes.
- Supportive labour market regulation, public policy and collective agreements matter in enhancing the role that unions can play.
- Strong workplace union organisation and proactive union reps are needed to influence management decisions around digital technologies.
- It is important that unions review the training needs of union reps to equip them to deal with digital change at work.
- Involving unions and workers in digitalisation can bring benefits for both management and workers.

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The findings from the project are discussed in detail in four sector reports which are available on the project website <https://udig.powi.dmu.ac.uk/papers-and-reports/>. A recent publication from the research is: Payne, J., Lloyd, C. and Jose, S. (2023) 'They tell us after they've decided things': a cross-country analysis of unions and digitalisation in retail. *Industrial Relations Journal* 54(1)3-19.