

SEAD

Sustainable employment in the age of digitalisation: challenges, obstacles and opportunities

DURATION
15/12/2019 - 31/03/2024

BUDGET
1 385 627 €

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Context

Automation and the digital revolution affect the nature and quality of jobs. As workers are reallocated from declining sectors and occupations to growing ones, skill mismatches and structural unemployment tend to occur, and income inequality and poverty levels may rise as the digital revolution mainly destroys jobs in the middle of the wage distribution. Moreover, new technologies automate certain tasks rather than whole occupations, so also the task content of occupations changes. Recent evidence suggests that jobs done by lower educated workers have become substantially less skilled which is weakening their labour market position. On the other end of the skills-spectrum new opportunities for intrinsically rich jobs are created.

The 'organisational level' is an important mediator between technological applications and actual work experiences at the individual level. Existing organisational structures affect the selection of technology and, reversely, new technologies necessitate a change in the way work is organised (e.g. more flexible, self-learning behaviour). The nature of this organisational change is likely to determine the outcomes of digitalisation. Related questions are how digitalisation affects workers in a day-to-day-situation and what are the consequences for job quality in certain professions. Since processes of organisational change are important determinants of employee well-being and performance, they need to be complemented with supporting HR-practices, organisational culture, management and leadership and framed by guiding public policies and strong social dialogue, to result in organisational efficiency and effectiveness. Organisational change and its effects on workers take place in both 'traditional' organisations and in the novel business models that digitalisation has made possible. In particular, the 'lean platforms' (e.g. Uber, Listminute, Deliveroo, TaskRabbit, Amazon Mechanical Turk) have made room for a new organisational model, which is mostly project-based and involves a 'new' type of freelance self-employment. While freelance work and other new forms of employment cultivate an image of success, autonomy and flexibility, many niches of freelancing and platform work are characterised by insecurity, low career progression, low bargaining power and partial exclusion from current systems of social protection.

These developments raise the question of whether 'sustainable employment' can be advanced by new technologies and new organisational models, and to what extent they involve threats. Social policies in the fields of social protection, labour market regulation and social dialogue, income protection and social inclusion, can play a key role in optimising opportunities and buffering vulnerability in 'the new world of work'.



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Objectives

The main objective of this project is to assess the potential for sustainable work and employment in the digital era, by identifying challenges, obstacles and opportunities in new and changing labour market niches. More specifically, the research objectives are:

- To study the changing structure of the Belgian labour market and the changing task composition of occupations over the past decades.
- To study the processes and effects of occupational change related to technological innovation in the Belgian labour market in terms of skill requirements, job content and job quality.
- To study the socio-demographic characteristics, economic profile, skills composition, job content and employment conditions of those engaging in digital platform work.
- To study which organisational models optimise job quality in a context of technological innovation.
- To study the interrelation between technological innovation, 'autonomy supportive HR-practices' and 'well-being-promoting management styles' in order to promote sustainable employment.

Methodology

The project uses a mixed methods approach, including both statistical and in-depth qualitative research.

Impact

The project aims to gain insight into the challenges and opportunities for sustainable employment in the digital era, and to inform effective policies aimed at optimising opportunities and limiting the vulnerability of workers. In order to maximise the impact, dissemination activities are organised throughout the project (e.g. workshops, social media communication, policy briefs, etcetera).

Deliverables

All deliverables are centrally communicated via the project website www.sead.be. Research results will be communicated to be the academic world (via journal articles and conference presentations), policy makers (via a follow-up committee and a series of policy briefs) and the broader public (for example via social media). A final report integrates the main results of the project. Datasets are created (by collecting data and linking and enriching existing data), and are made available in a user-friendly way.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Coordinator

Christophe Vanroelen
Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)
Interface Demography
Christophe.Vanroelen@vub.be

Partners

Nick Deschacht
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven)
Department of Economics
nick.deschacht@kuleuven.be

Miet Lamberts
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven)
HIVA - Research Institute for Work and Society
miet.lamberts@kuleuven.be

Esteban Martinez
Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB)
Metices
esteban.martinez@ulb.ac.be

François Pichault
Université de Liège (ULiège)
LENTIC
f.pichault@uliege.be

LINKS

www.sead.be