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Workplace Innovation for Better Jobs and Performance – The Most Important Developments in Modern Working Environments

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The capability to generate sustainable innovations under conditions of knowledge intensity is an eminent societal challenge, demanding more attention on the organizational level for a) *social innovations* and b) *new perceptions of how to generate innovations*. This requires the creation of modern work environments based on c) *workplace innovation* enabling more self-organization and allowing more freedom for individual formatting of job handling.

- a) *Social innovations* become more important for finding sustainable solutions that meet a variety of societal needs (economical, ecological, social). Social innovation focuses on the change of patterns in social systems (e.g., organizations) referring to routines and rules of communication, interaction and coordination of actions. Social innovations may take place on the level of processes and operations (e.g., the process of generating innovations) or on the level of products and services. To understand this new (social) “nature of innovation” (OECD) as a driver of innovation and to see technology (only) as an enabler means to reverse traditional views of their relationship. The generation and diffusion of social innovations differ extremely from those of technological innovation.
- b) Usually, sustainable innovations are not generated by single charismatic brains, brilliant thinkers or lonely entrepreneurs but rather the result of collaboration and interaction in widespread networks of different actors and knowledge workers as well as the result of intense communication with clients, users and consumers. This type of *open innovation* contains more than only internet-based approaches (even if they are supported by technologies like Web 2.0) and represents a *new paradigm of innovation*.
- c) *Workplace innovation* could be seen as the implementation of social innovations at the level of the organization. It is defined as the implementation of new and combined interventions in the field of work organization, human resource management and supportive technologies. Workplace innovation is considered to be complementary to technological innovation. Workplace innovation represents a *big shift* towards more participation, more decentralization of responsibility, more job autonomy, higher internal and external control capacity, more self-organization and learning opportunities, as well as the fostering of organizational and individual absorptivity of and connectivity to external knowledge and expertise. Workplace innovation also includes the ergonomic design of workplaces and an adequate IT infrastructure. We identified the most advanced approaches in so-called *enterprises 2.0*. High involvement and commitment is combined with high performance and innovativeness. Mature enterprises 2.0 could be defined as *socio-digital innovation systems*.

What Are the Opportunities and Risks for Future Working Life?

Introducing workplace innovation allows the improvement of quality of working life (QWL), well-being and the development of talents, and at the same time, the improvement of organizational performance. Workplace innovation aims at win-win situations, combining social and economic goals. Other concepts (e.g. sustainable work systems, high involvement workplaces, innovative workplaces, and new world of work) cover more or less the same topics. Research shows that simultaneous improvement of organizational performance and quality of working life is possible if those objectives are purposefully combined and if the employees and their supervisors are involved.

However, a lot of managers are not equipped for participatory approaches and/or are afraid to share power with their employees. Trust is a difficult asset to develop. Furthermore, defensive routines are hard to overcome, as they have been successful for a long time. Several hundred years ago, management was *invented* (and improved in the following centuries) to coordinate the emerging industrial work. It is not yet widespread knowledge that the organization and leadership of knowledge-intensive workplaces and knowledge workers demands a fundamental renewal of the basics of interaction and collaboration.

The diffusion of workplace innovation does not only need more promotion. It can lead to new profiles of risks and psychosocial constraints as well as the exclusion of older and less well educated people. To investigate and to analyze those phenomena, thorough research will be necessary. It could help avoid or reduce the negative impact of knowledge work and provide practical orientation and motivation for workplace innovation.

How Can Future Work Design Support the Innovative Competitiveness of Organizations as well as the Well-being and Productivity of Individuals?

To foster the opportunities and to minimize the risks of work life, the implementation of workplace innovation and advanced research should be stimulated by national and European programs. A growing number of countries are conducting or developing some kind of program aimed at labor productivity, development of competencies, learning and innovation. It is not only Germany that has a rich tradition in corresponding programs (humanization of work life, quality of work life, innovative work shaping). Examples can be found in Finland (workplace development), in Norway (value creation), the Netherlands and Belgium (social innovation), Sweden (management and work organization renewal), Ireland and the UK (workplace innovation). Europe seems at the brink of uniting the concepts of social innovation and workplace innovation. However, budgets are being cut in a number of countries, while increasing them would be more appropriate. Social innovation in organizations or workplace innovation appears to be a prerequisite for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.