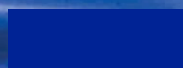




HORIZON 2020 – INNOSUP 04

Workplace Innovation uptake by SMEs

Action report



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1. INTRODUCTION

With Globalisation leading to constant evolutions in society's way of life, technology has gained in importance in every aspect of the way we produce, consume, and connect one with another. Indeed, for years, technological progress was perceived as the most certain way to ensure that further economic and social development would be made possible. With a constant search for more competitiveness, the focus put on productivity was therefore through obtaining better technology, and for long, the human factor was not prioritised.

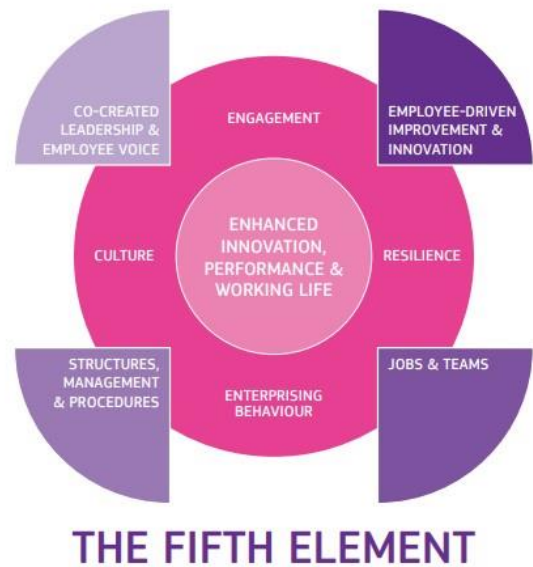
However, since the 1990s and lately even more accurately in a post-pandemic era, it appears clear that technology cannot be the ultimate solution for boosting one's competitiveness and productivity. It must be pursued simultaneously with human-centred innovations. A strong capacity to adapt and innovate is needed when it comes to obtain and maintain a high level of competitiveness. Therefore, since the COVID-19 crisis forced companies and organisation to face their limitations in terms of working conditions, the concept of "Workplace Innovation" has gained a central consideration.

2. WHAT IS "WORKPLACE INNOVATION"?

"Workplace Innovation" (WPI) is all the non-technological innovation related to a business organisation and its structure, including the human resources management, employee engagement, the management of internal processes and decision-making, the design of organisational strategies, the relationships with clients and suppliers, and the working environment.

WPI is a "social process which combines work organisation and working life, combining their human, organisational and technological dimensions. Examples include participative job design, self-organised teams, continuous improvement, high-involvement innovation and employee involvement in corporate decision-making. Such interventions are highly participatory, integrating the knowledge, experience and creativity of management and employees at all levels of the organisation in a process of co-creation and co-design". (Dortmund/Brussels Position Paper, 2012).

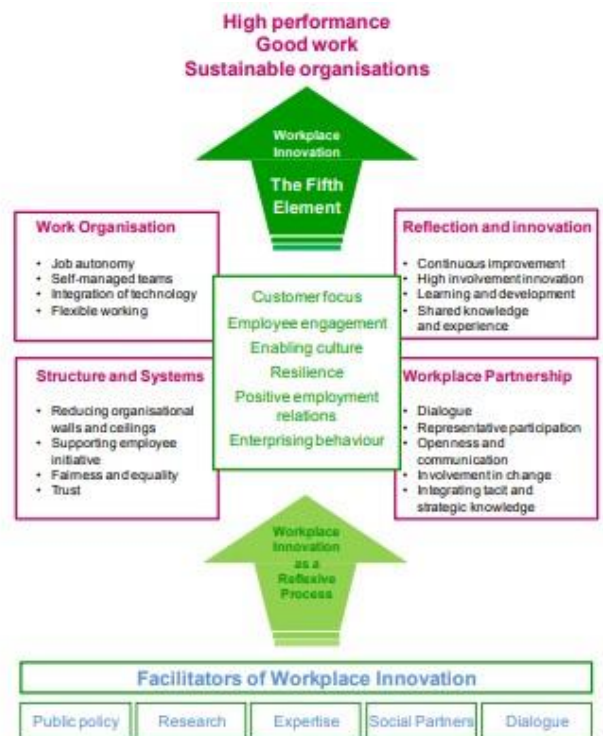
According to [EUWIN](#) (2016), WPI relies on four elements, which are (1) Empowering jobs and self-managed teams; (2) Flexible organisational structures, people-centred management practices and streamlined systems and procedures based on trust; (3) Systematic opportunities for employee-driven improvement and innovation; and (4) Co-created and distributed leadership combined with “employee voice” in strategic decision-making. When coming together, these four elements reinforce each other and create a synergy, the Fifth Element, representing the behaviour of an organisation, its culture for innovation, the strong level of employees’ engagement, and the resilience emerging across the organisation when all the four elements are reunited.



Source: EUWIN

3. WHY IS “WORKPLACE INNOVATION” OF PREMIUM IMPORTANCE?

In constant search for better competitiveness and productivity, many companies and organisations have in the past mostly been focusing their efforts on technological investment, without dedicating much incentive toward Human factors. However, as full automation of the entire economy is not a reality and cannot fully replace human actions, the working force has, in every business sector, a major role to play in the development of a company. Therefore, taking in consideration the need to guarantee good working conditions is crucial. Indeed, several studies since the 1990s have demonstrated that working conditions were to be seen as deeply correlated with the



productivity level of a company, and that WPI was therefore to be considered with as much attention as technological innovation in order for a business to optimally thrive, and reach high competitiveness. (Freeman and Lazeur, 1995; Ramstad, 2009; Gittell et al., 2010; Pot, 2011; Pot et al., 2012a, 2012b; Totterdill et al., 2012a, 2012b; Oeij et al., 2011, 2014, 2015, 2016).

Moreover, this co-dependence of technology and human force needing to be jointly considered by companies has been strongly highlighted with the recent pandemic. With a rapidly changing environment disrupting the entire business processes, there is more than ever the need for companies to show a strong adaptability and a capacity to innovate when it comes to the workplace, and to assess all Human resources practices altogether in order to create a synergy that would not be possible by tackling each issue separately (Milgrom and Roberts, 1995), an objective for which “Workplace Innovation” brings the tools for success.

Source: “Workplace Innovation: European policy and theoretical foundation”

4. WHAT IS THE EUROPEAN UNION DOING IN THIS MATTER?

Since the 1990s, the European Union has been progressively integrating WPI in its agenda. Through the impulse of DG EMPL in 1995, ACTEUR, a policy advisory group, was launched, and evolved later into EWON. In parallel, DG EMPL launched the European Work & Technology Consortium. Both initiatives led in the 2000s to the “Work-In-Net” (WIN) consortium which coordinated research in the field of “Innovation of Work Organisation”. In 2001, the European Commission requested a study, the Hi-Res report, which became the first known attempt to define “workplace innovation” in detail ([EUWIN, 2016](#)). Later, the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘Innovative workplaces as a source of productivity and quality jobs’ (EESC, 2011) and the “Dortmund-Brussels” position Paper (Dortmund-Brussels Declaration, 2012) signed by more than 30 experts and practitioners across the EU, called both for more proactive interventions by the European Commission.


In 2012, WPI then became a high priority for the European Commission and was adopted as one of the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy. Since then, the EUWIN Network was established in 2013 through DG GROW, to englobe the twenty-seven Member-

States, candidate countries, Switzerland and Norway, aiming at reducing the current fragmentation across Europe and establishing “Workplace Innovation Alliances” of employers, trade unions, governments and knowledge institutes. (Pot et al. 2016). In addition, in 2015, the Eurofound study “Workplace Innovation in European companies” (Oeij et al. 2015) was conducted in the shape of a multiple case study among 51 companies from 10 EU Member States. The study’s main purpose was to explore why and how companies apply WPI in order to offer policy-makers recommendations for how to pursue and stimulate WPI across Europe.

Despite obvious benefits, especially SMEs, still only a few companies, implement Workplace Innovation. This is why, in order to allow WPI to be pursued among European companies, several programs emerged under Horizon 2020 for granting funds to innovative projects addressing the workplace, such as INNOSUP-04 action ‘Workplace Innovation uptake for SMEs’.

5. H2020 INNOVATION SUPPORT PROJECT RESULTS

The Innovation in SMEs programme ([INNOSUP](#)) is part of Horizon 2020 and aimed, through funding opportunities, at supporting innovation actors across Europe. The [INNOSUP-04](#) initiative focused on “Workplace Innovation uptake by SMEs”, and led to the accomplishment of two different projects allowing SMEs to progress in order to be more competitive through the pursuit of EU regional standards of well-being at work.

 **Start at Best: Workplace Innovation for Business Competitiveness**, promoted the development of a European-led model of Workplace innovation amongst SMEs, more particularly micro-firms and small companies. The total budget of the initiative was €299 968 with €225 000 provided in financial support to SMEs. Thirty SME benefited from this project, each up to €7 500.



INNovaSOUTH: Implementation of Workplace Innovation scheme in Southern European SMEs, aimed at stimulating Southern European SMEs from Italy and Greece to implement new organisational models for the modernization of the workplace. The initiative’s total budget was €299 875, with €192 000 provided as financial support to SMEs. Twenty-four SMEs benefited from this project, each up to €10 000.

5.1. Start at Best: Workplace Innovation for Business Competitiveness (INNOSUP-04)

Partners:

- [Startup Europe Regions Network](#) (BE)
- [Agência Nacional de Inovação](#) (PT)
- [Attractiveness Research Territory Emilia-Romagna](#) (IT)
- [Cork City’s Local Government Authority](#) (IR)

€225 000 - 71 applications - 30 SMEs selected

When: 25 June 2019 —24 December 2021

Website: <https://startatbest.eu>

Start at Best aimed at enhancing technological and non-technological innovation in the workplace across European SMEs, in order to develop a European-led new model of well-being at work and at contributing to the modernization of the region’s business environment. The project lasted thirty months, with a total budget of €299 968, of which €225 000 served as financial support for SMEs.

The project’s objectives were to raise the visibility and awareness of those SMEs on the relevance of Workplace Innovation for improving Business Competitiveness, to help them implementing their ideas and concepts through financial support of their Workplace Innovation initiatives, and to disseminate their results at the regional scale in order to allow replication across other industries and European countries.

The partners elaborated a data-base for Workplace Innovation Case Studies, by compiling and disseminating a web-accessible repository.

The project launched four calls for proposals in Portugal, Italy, Ireland and at the European level in 2020, in order to select Workplace Innovation proposals submitted by national and regional SMEs and consortia. The proposals had to be designed under four key innovation pillars: 1. Jobs, Teams and Technology 2. Organizational Structures, Management and Processes 3. Employee Driven Improvement and Innovation 4. Co-Created Leadership and Employee Voice

In total, 71 applications were received. The thirty selected projects were each granted €7 500 to implement their ideas.

Although one selected SME could not complete its project and had to reimburse the financial service, the project has been an overall success, with some SMEs achieving particularly promising results.

5.1.1. Success Stories

5.1.1.1. Design-thinking for workplace innovation tessellation by Metrica6

Metrica6 is a Spanish R & D micro-company specialised in product development and innovation consultancy for IoT, home automation, or e-health services. Its project's objectives were to improve communication skills and tools among managers and workers in order to create dynamic protocols for a better holistic performance.

Innovative actions were implemented sequentially to allow an adaptation period for each tool.

- Month 1: Monthly Canva-project co-creation instead of Managers-only.
- Month 2: Linking each employee to one or more customer to better appreciate their needs.
- Month 2: Team member's peer-to-peer review
- Month 3: Custom training based on a semestrial list made by employees.
- Month 3: Scrum adaptation.
- Month 4: "Introductory Roadmap" that links to each referred document or training pill of the organization.
- Month 5: "Phantom Options" are shares that grant access to dividends distribution but not to voting in shareholders' meetings. Development of a 12-month retribution system based on phantom options for all employees as an overall evaluation method of their yearly achievements.
- Month 5: Gamification system that establishes monthly special incentives for outstanding results
- Month 6: Flexible salary and loans.

The company managed to use the situation as an in-vivo test for processes' adaptability, showing a high replicability potential of the implemented actions.

5.1.1.2. Game on! by Visionary Analytics

Visionary Analytics is a Lithuanian small-sized private research institute, providing applied research, evaluation and technical assistance services for the European Union institutions, international organisations and national governments. The project's

objectives was to reinvent the layout and design of problematic business processes by gamifying them.

The company set a performance management system including annual company targets and individual goals, project management and budgeting process, and internal feedback system. A cross-functional gamification tool design involving team members with different capabilities was developed to identify and address the key bottlenecks, but also linked the aforementioned processes together.

This fostered employees' motivation and progress, improved the company's performance, and boosted the innovation culture further. It also helped determining the key areas for improving the company competences map.

5.1.1.3. Boost Managerial Lab by Innovatics

Innovatics is an Italian ICT micro-enterprise delivering projects associated with digitalization, research and development and Business Process Re-engineering across the public and the private sector. The project's objectives were to resolve an increasing interpersonal conflict and to overcome past management mistakes compromising the group's cohesion. The project aimed at developing new methodologies that could favour the management of human resources, the resolution of disputes between employees and the achievement of corporate objectives.

The company used the Lego Serious Play methodology (LSP®) to develop teamwork, creativity, innovation and new skills to be applied to the real world, through exercises in protected simulated environments. New programs were developed: An innovative management laboratory, the 4P model (People, Process, Platform, Place), and a Real Team reference model.

5.1.1.4. Innovation Hub for Virtual Office by [Katty Fashion LTD](#)

Katty Fashion is a Romanian medium-sized enterprise, fashion industry manufacturer, which promotes sustainable fashion and circular economy. Its project's objectives were to design and implement a bottom-up new way of working, based on Agile mind-set, and

create a best practices collection of tools, meetings, internal workshops and webinars that could be used to scale the approach to other fashion industry companies in the region.

The company developed ten workshops to improve their Agile thinking and practices; equipped the employees with knowledge to tackle new ways of thinking and working in a more humanistic, value-based manner; redesigned job roles within the company to ensure flexibility within teams, personal competence development and fostering an idea creation environment; fostered the development of self-organising teams; created concrete daily practices to be addressed adjusted to industry specifics.

The project led to an increased employee engagement level and increased the psychological safety within the team, co-created job roles for some of the employees, enabling to find the optimum potential for everybody at the right time and developing a useful set of Agile practices and tools. From almost no agility know-how and traditional workplace practices, the company developed agile people competencies that led teams to self-organise.

5.1.1.5. Innovation@Workplace by Radicalability

Radicalability is a Portuguese micro-company, which operates in several areas: Real Estate, Consulting, Project Management and Capacity Building. Its project focused on developing a set of methods and tools inspired by different disciplines like Design Thinking, Kegan's Constructivist Theory (The Evolving Self) and Kanban Method (Lean 'Workflow Management' principle).

The project helped developing eight activities co-created by employees, partners and clients. The objective was to increase the company's organizational agility and introduce tools to experiment new approaches and adapt to the market. This resulted into a hybrid policy of remote work, the improvement of physical spaces and digital resources to foster the employees' innovation, the increase of the company's capacity to attract talent by monitoring its motivation and well-being. Furthermore, with a process of employee coaching, the knowledge management and innovation processes in the company has been improved. The project led to an increase of motivation and communication among employees, a stronger agility, more productivity and efficiency.

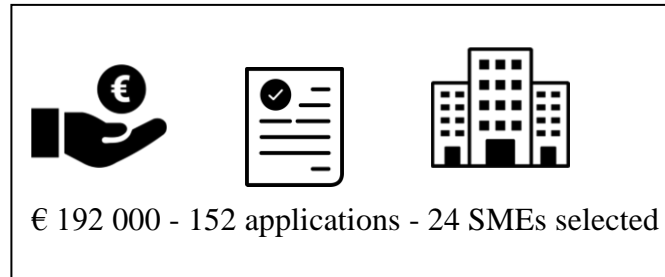
5.2. INNovaSOUTH: Implementation of workplace innovation scheme in Southern European SMEs (INNOSUP4)

Partners:

- [JO Consulting SRL](#) (IT)
- [Institute of Entrepreneurship Development](#) (GR)

When: 01 June 2019 – 31 May 2021

Website: <https://www.innovasouthproject.eu>



INNovaSOUTH aimed at developing Workplace Innovation in regions where traditional business models are still strong, which may prevent companies to achieve a level of competitiveness as high as organisations relying on more up-to-date work-life processes. The project lasted twenty-four months, with a total budget of €299 875, of which €192 000 served as financial support for SMEs.

The project focused on Italy and Greece, more specifically Sicily and Thessaly regions, to allow local SMEs to find innovative solutions to increase employee’s motivation and productivity, which will be translated into added value for the business.

The partners designed a model developed within an Online Manual of Good Practice on Workplace Innovations based on a categorization of practices and Workplace Innovations: Monetary and Non-Monetary Innovations, Short-term and Long-term Innovations.

An Open Call for proposals was launched in 2020 in Italy and in Greece for micro and small-enterprises addressed to local SMEs. The proposals had to cover four pillars: 1. Workplace innovations’ relevance, 2. Impact, 3. Project feasibility and 4. Gender equality.

In total, 152 proposals were received and 24 of them were selected, 12 in each country. Each of the 24 projects received funding up to €8 000 to implement their ideas.

Although a couple of companies have had a slight drawback regarding one or the other pillar, each beneficiary managed to improve its overall “employees’ satisfaction”, some of them even showing substantial improvements regarding happiness-at-work level.

5.2.1. Success Stories

5.2.1.1. Epipla Eleftheroglou

Epipla Eleftheroglou is a Greek furniture manufacturing and trading micro-company. For its project, the enterprise chose to focus on three practices: optimizing its internal management procedures; acquiring feedbacks about relations with clients and suppliers; creating a brainstorming place.

The project, although deploying only a limited number of actions, has proven to have an enormous impact on employees. Thanks to a survey conducted among the team, the progress of the working conditions is estimated to be of 249 %.

5.2.1.2. Ioanna Kechagia & SIA EE

Ioanna Kechagia & SIA EE is a Greek micro-enterprise specialized in the production and processing of olive husk and proposed developments in four areas:: creating a brainstorming place; offering employees benefit and gift cards covering gas expenses; implementing transparency about the company’s practices as a way for promoting co-created leadership; developing an internal evaluation system.

The impact on improving working conditions is tremendous, with 313 % of improvement estimated thanks to surveys conducted among the employees. The enterprise, through their implemented practices, allowed its employees to actively be involved in the everyday processes, express their views and ideas to build further on them, and support the adoption of a CRM system to improve the company’s internal management procedures.

5.2.1.3. **Lefkaditis Konstantinos**

Lefkaditis Konstantinos is a Greek SME which deals with the wholesale of tools, machines and consumables useful for a modern paint shop. The company chose to implement seven practices: organising team events; creating a brainstorming place; optimizing the internal management procedures by acquiring a Customer Relationship Management system; improving employees' competencies with life-long education courses; supporting employee's work-life balance and self-confidence through coaching sessions; involving the employees in the company's strategy during dedicated yearly events; developing an internal evaluation system.

After conducting surveys with the employees, the overall improvement is measured at 62 %. The organization concentrated on relevant practices in order to endorse the building of the team and the staff's development. Attention was paid to the improvement of the processes within the business in order to increase productivity and efficiency, as well as allowing employees opportunities for development.

5.2.1.4. **Lemon Sistemi S.R.L.**

Lemon Sistemi S.R.L is an Italian small enterprise dealing with the installation of photovoltaic systems and the design of energy-saving solutions. The company chose to pursue several objectives: strive for transparency and make employees feel at home in the workplace; improve the work-life balance already during working hours; improve productivity and competitiveness through a peer-to-peer oriented working environment; make employees feel part of the decision-making.

To reach those objectives, the company chose to implement 11 practices: developing the soft skills of employees and managers; allowing employees to listen to music and wear comfortable clothes; organising company events to strengthen the team; creating a space for brainstorming and organising regular sessions; adopting a lean management approach; optimising internal procedures using CRM software; adopting smart and flexible working policies; training sessions and seminars for employees and managers.

The company has enhanced internal communication flows and improved its training offerings, while also improving internal tools that gave importance to employees'

opinions. Employees now feel satisfied with their well-being at work, their work-life balance, and the organizational structure, with an estimated 181 % improvement.

5.2.1.5. Studio Legale Leine-Fell & C.

Studio Legale Leine-Fell & C. is an Italian Law firm. The project aimed to: boost technological innovation to differentiate from competitors; enhance employees' empowerment; and create a new, smarter and more creative work environment.

To achieve these goals, the company focused on twenty practices: 1. Job rotation; 2. Developing managers' & 3. Employees' soft skills; 4. Creating an inspiring working environment by decorating of the office, 5. Allowing employees to listening to music and 6. Wearing comfortable clothes; 7. Organising corporate events to strengthen the team, 8. Gathering feedback and opinions from employees, 9. Developing an internal evaluation system; 10. Designing a creative brainstorming space in the offices; 11. Organising periodic brainstorming sessions; 12 . Promoting active participation of the employees towards the mission of the SME; 13. Granting extra days off as a productivity bonus; 14. Implementing smart working & flexible working time; 15. Granting benefits and gift cards to employees; 16. Implementing lean management; 17. Strengthening internal communication; 18. Optimising internal procedures using CRM software; 19. Trainings for employees and managers; 20. Adopting Transparency of Business Practices as a Core Value.

The surveys conducted with the employees showed improvement is overall estimated at 207 %, with significant progress in the well-being at work, the work/life balance and the organisational structure. In addition, learning opportunities for the employees increased. The organisation has also significantly improved the internal tools for the collection of the employees' opinions.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The INNOSUP-04 programme for “Workplace Innovation uptake by SMEs” was a success, yet highlighted several elements which shall be emphasized in future policies, in

order for European SMEs to reach a high level of Workplace Innovation leading to well-being at work, better productivity and competitiveness.

A first recommendation for future policy incentives is to **further promote a regional agenda** which would nonetheless take into consideration each European sub-region's context and national situations. The INNovaSouth project was a first step forward allowing some less advanced countries to effectively improve their level of workplace well-being. It should however not be an end in itself, and therefore political powers should engage toward WPI at a national level, while in parallel implementing a regional agenda at the European level.

Secondly, attention should be put on allowing **better SME segmentation in future public policies** for more WPI, so that each project would be really adapted and SMEs better to address the subject, depending on its own situation and needs. The Start-at-Best project is a start as it allowed each SME to focus on its own needs.

Finally, public policies should focus on **reinforcing networking incentives**, in order to allow SMEs to work more often and fluently with external partners, in particular in order to find private funding more easily and therefore be able to pursue efficiently their objectives.

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