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Individualisation of the work relationship: a challenge for trade unions

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Policy implications

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Job-related suffering is not a new phenomenon. Yet, whereas painful manifestations used traditionally to be associated with manual labour, symptoms of malaise have become more widespread and are now found, in extremely individualised forms, among all occupational categories and in all fields of work. This development is testimony to the emergence, within new forms of work organisation, of unprecedented types of contradiction that give rise to new difficulties – while at the same time they open up new avenues for action. In this paper we will first of all consider the changes in work organisation and the ways in which they lead to an individualisation of the work relationship. We will refer also to the fact that the greater the degree of isolation in which an employee carries out his work, the harder it will be for him

to put into words the work-related problems with which he has to contend. This stress on isolation will enable us to home in on the highly negative consequences – at the individual as well as the collective level – of the difficulty experienced by employees in giving expression to and defending the standards and values that underpin their commitment to the work they do. In conclusion we will describe some 'research-actions' illustrative of the potential contribution of trade unions in reconstructing a collective capacity for expression and assertion of the authority conferred by the experience gained through work.

1. Changes in work organisation

Among the most striking features of the new forms of work organisation, in both the public and the private sector, we draw attention to demand-driven supply networks (DDSN), to management's increased detachment from the practical aspects and details of work performance, and to an intensification of labour that contributes tremendously to the isolation of employees.

The move towards demand-driven supply networks (DDSM)

When, in the 1970s, Western markets began to reach saturation in terms of the population's need for consumer durables (cars, electrical household appliances, etc.), the situation triggered a shift in the determinants of business success which became much less dependent on the economies of scale that had enabled the mass production of standardised products and much more dependent on the capacity to adapt constantly to quantitative and qualitative fluctuations in demand. This was a change that impacted heavily on workers. Between 1984 and

2005 the proportion of French employees who stated that their pace of work was dictated by external demands – made by customers, patients, or users – requiring immediate responses rose from 28.3 to 53.2% (DARES 2012). The phenomenon continued to gather steam, for in 2010 67% of workers in the EU were affected by it (Eurofound 2010a). In just a few decades the world of work, even in heavy manufacturing sectors, had developed in the direction of the organisational patterns and methods associated with services.

An essential feature of jobs in services is, generally speaking, a process of negotiation and joint construction of outcomes with

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the users of the services. It is no longer simply a question, as in all forms of work, of solving the problems posed by the wide-ranging material features of a situation that the management is no position to properly grasp. Negotiation with the user – touching inevitably upon the very purposes for which a job exists and is performed – requires workers to grapple with a plethora of ethical dilemmas of which no mention is made in their formal job description and work procedures. This kind of situation necessarily brings into play not merely employees' technical skills but also their personal work ethic, their values, and the quality standards they seek to achieve in their work. Thanks to this development, work becomes far more interesting; workers are involved in new types of situation in which they sense the presence, to a much greater degree than before, of an opportunity to endow their work with a more human dimension, with the capacity to contribute, at the same time, to the forging of a common world.

Unfortunately, this potentially positive development is frustrated by increasingly prevalent management criteria that deliberately fail to take account of the subjective and social dimensions of the work to be performed.

Detachment from work and the rise of managerial principles: the increasing hierarchical divide

These changes in the world of labour have entailed powerful repercussions at the level of managerial functions. To the extent that successful performance of a job depends very much on an ability to adjust to situations in the light of their diversity, variability and unpredictability, it is no longer possible to specify job content in any detailed way; what has become indispensable alongside employees' skills is an *aptitude for initiative-taking* and a highly developed *sense of responsibility*.

We have witnessed a historic shift in terms of managerial detachment from the practical details of work performance. Employees have discovered with astonishment that it is perfectly possible for them to be managed by bosses who are pretty much ignorant of what they actually do. Here too the proportions of the phenomenon are overwhelming: more than 80% of European workers state that it is up to them to find solutions to problems that arise unexpectedly in performance of their work (Eurofound 2010b).

Not that management control is a thing of the past. On the contrary, in a context of work intensification associated with the new hegemony of financialisation, control has become stronger and, insofar as it is based very much upon statistical and accounting indicators, has acquired a much more abstract dimension.

Formal quality standards and certification procedures have not done away with this tension between autonomy and control. Conceived more often than not from the outside, without the actual work dynamics having been taken into account, the certification and quality standards frequently look more like the return of a prescriptive approach intended to impress the outside world than a means of solving the problems inherent in work organisation.

The situation therefore calls for an effort to deal with the tension between management criteria and working norms¹. Yet these very developments – towards service-type norms and growing pressure of management criteria – have generated an individualisation of the working relationship such that any effort in this direction is fraught with complication.

Individualisation of the work relationship

Recent decades have been marked by a process of work intensification that actually influences the nature of the work entailed, for a job performed at differing degrees of intensity is no longer the same job. This is a phenomenon of which ergonomists have been aware for a long time but it is hardly rocket science: anyone can observe that the more the pressure of work is stepped up, the more it becomes essential to focus on those aspects of the job that one regards as having priority and to reduce the amount of attention accorded to secondary goals. What does this mean in practice? For a majority of employed workers, at all levels of the hierarchy, to perform their job is to select, within the mass of all that is supposed to be done, what will actually get done and what aspects or tasks will have to be sacrificed on the altar of speed and efficiency.

Yet no social mechanisms have been devised for collectively arbitrating how this selection is to be made. On the contrary, the intensification of work, the proliferation of job descriptions and hierarchical levels, the individualisation of working hours, are such that there is ever less opportunity for collective discussion. Every worker copes with the situation as best s/he can, depending on his/her sensitivity and the aptitudes and skills that personal and professional experience to date has enabled him/her to develop.

In this context it is no longer possible for each worker's efforts and experience to enrich those of other workers. On the contrary, differences begin to give rise to tensions among workers and inter-personal conflicts proliferate. In France the SUMER survey conducted by the Employment Ministry states that 22% of employees say that they are currently experiencing hostile behaviour in the workplace (Arnaud *et al.* 2013).

This individualisation of conflict is not the result of a trend towards individualism that may be described as a feature of the contemporary mentality but the consequence of a form of work organisation that forces employees to determine their immediate work priorities on the basis of personally selected criteria.

This process has considerably inhibited the possibility for expression of any set of 'working norms' that could be set against the prevailing managerial norms.

Yet in order to take the full measure of this problem, there is a need to refer to an extremely serious but generally neglected

¹ What is meant by 'working norms' is the faculties brought into play by workers to deal with unforeseen situations and with the contradictions and dilemmas that they encounter in the work situation. These 'norms' are not only an expression of the shared legacy that defines a given occupation but also contain elements of individually acquired capacities deriving from personal experience and circumstance.

difficulty: to speak about work is no straightforward matter, for what a worker actually does is, to a certain extent, concealed from the worker's own awareness (Davezies 2012).

2. The shadow side of work

A significant proportion of the work one does is performed in the absence of conscious control, insofar as it calls upon the enactment of embodied skills that are brought into play virtually automatically. If it were necessary to await the production of a formalised reason to act, the resulting action would be far too slow, and nothing would run to schedule.

What is more, not all aspects of work are available to consciousness in the same way. Human beings are far more conscious of their failures than of all the efforts they deploy to ensure that things run smoothly. It is when reality puts up resistance, when failure ensues, that conscious attention is brought into play. All elements testifying, on the contrary, to a harmonious relationship with the situation remain in the shade.

This shadow quality of the positive dimensions of any activity is at the heart of the problematic tackled by ergonomic analysis. When an ergonomist is called in to diagnose the nature of a problem, the drift of the diagnosis is invariably as follows:

"Contrary to the general belief within the company, the work of this operator does not consist simply in the performance of A, B, and C ... but also in dealing with W, X, Y, for, were this not the case, production would be quite severely disrupted".

What is most striking here, however, is not that management lacks awareness of the employee's work; it is the fact that the employee, on hearing the diagnosis, and while recognizing it as a description of what s/he does, at the same time gains a new awareness of the activity in question. The employee's reaction invariably testifies to a flash of recognition: 'I never realized that I did all that!'

This lack of awareness on the part of the employee of the factors that testify to his/her having the situation under control is attributable to a particular property of the human brain. Once an action is underway, the brain goes into an automatic drive that anticipates the sensory feedback that will be produced by the initial action. The employee, accordingly, subsequently processes only whatever information turns out to differ from what was projected. The sense data signalling that all is going as planned are deleted. The only information processed is that which may testify to some form of resistance on the part of the real world and hence to a need for adjustment. This type of regulation – known as 'feed forward' mode – is much more efficient than a simple feedback mode regulation that would require processing of every piece of information collected by the senses (Jeannerod 2009).

For this reason the major portion of all that we have learned to do, and by virtue of which our world just about manages to retain its human form, remains pretty much in the shadow.

And so there is an imbalance: workers are conscious of any failures and shortcomings in their work while remaining unaware of the positive dimensions of their work performance. Comparison with the work done by others and discussions among colleagues are required for one worker to realize that s/he does things slightly differently from others and to become aware of the specific features and particular consistency of his/her own way of doing things. It is through such awareness that workers' efforts and approaches can become mutually enriching and that a community of interests and values fuelled by the diversity of experiences and quality standards of each individual can come into being. Individualisation of the relationship to work, on the contrary, disrupts the circulation of activity and experience, entailing extremely negative consequences at different levels.

3. Consequences of individualisation of the work relationship

All the factors described above contribute to the isolation of employees. The consequences of this situation are increased vulnerability of the individual worker, an impoverishment of workplace industrial relations issues and debate, and significant disruption of production.

The dangerous dynamic of individual conflicts

The isolation of employees supplies a route to understanding why the malaise suffered by workers finds expression, more often than not, in emotionally laden individual conflicts even though its origin invariably lay in a disagreement over how the work was to be done. If the difference of opinion degenerates, it is because it arose in a context of relationship imbalance.

The supervisor or middle-manager draws an employee's attention to some shortcoming in work performance; for a balanced discussion to take place, with some hope of a positive outcome, the employee would need to supply an account of what s/he has been doing, in other words, the problematic issues with which s/he has been grappling and of which her/his boss is unaware. Yet the employee is aware above all of where s/he has fallen short of expectations and, as s/he has neither the time nor the space nor the requisite support to think about and get to grips with the relationship to her/his job, s/he is incapable of putting forward her/his own working norms in opposition to the formal criteria enumerated by the supervisor or boss. This is why the employee has recourse to prefabricated arguments – for example, bullying² – which have been placed in circulation as a means of structuring conflicts with the hierarchy. This approach conceals the underlying conflict of standards, or norms, and locates the problem within a highly emotional register where it is very likely

2 What we refer to here is the tendency to put forward prefabricated diagnoses in the absence of attention to the conflicts underlying the situation. There are of course situations in which workers are ill-treated in a manner that must indeed be described as bullying but, even in such cases, it will be worthwhile to bring into the open the underlying conflict at the level of standards or norms.

to become radicalized, with serious risks for the employee's health (Davezies 2004).

The divorce between workplace industrial relations and actual work

The lack of attention to the details of the work actually performed is, in addition, a factor that impoverishes the collective endeavour and prevents operations from running smoothly. A given situation is not perceived in the same way by all workers. Each individual invents ways of responding based on those aspects that his/her experience and sensitivity tell him/her to regard as important. This diversity of perception offers great potential for enrichment.

However, if attention is not paid to the details of the work that is performed, each individual's experience remains at best an individual resource and fails to contribute either to collective enrichment or to potential changes in work organisation. The creativity and indeed the vitality of the organisation are thereby weakened.

Research at the workplace level reveals a striking contrast between the repetitive and stereotyped nature of what employees say collectively about their work and the practical intelligence that they deploy individually in dealing with the dilemmas and contradictions that they encounter in it.

In situations where each individual has to manage as best he or she can, it has been known for a long time that a particular etiquette stemming from the need for viable workplace relations prohibits criticism of colleagues' work. This being the case, the difficulties encountered are almost as rarely subject to discussion as are the positive and affirmative aspects of the job.

Shared talk or group discussion is built up around what so obviously constitutes a shared fate: the attacks suffered by the group or team, in terms of status, budget, or staffing levels. On the contrary, the sensitive response to situations and the effort to humanise work that each employee seeks to deploy remain by and large unformulated.

This being the case, the trade unions are relegated to the position of a receptacle for grievances – which for trade unionist activist psyches can represent quite a burden – whereas the positive, affirmative dimensions of the work remain, as it were, the private property of the individual employee.

Management decisions that turn out to be counter-productive

Insofar as they think in terms of a vision of the employees' work that is at a very far remove from reality, managers frequently take decisions that are detrimental to employees' positive attitudes to their work. Indeed, from the standpoint of work, to do one's job properly is to provide the most appropriate responses to all the many details of the situation; the management standpoint, on the contrary, gives priority to the speeding up and standardising of responses. This being the case, employees have to ensure the

quality of production in spite of and sometimes even by going against management instructions. They make the necessary effort to do this because the possibility of recognizing themselves in terms of their work performance is a facet of their identity and an important determinant of their health.

In an industrial setting, management's abstract and distant vision of work also leads it to take decisions that turn out to have extremely adverse effects. The reduction of maintenance, running down of stocks, or outsourcing of tasks not directly linked to production, have as their consequence the sometimes very serious effect of depleting technical capacity, with harmful consequences for production that are both quantitative and qualitative.

Generally speaking, middle management fails to get senior management to understand the difficulties with which they are struggling and the employees do their best to ensure production, in spite of worsening conditions of work, with all the risks thereby entailed for their health.

In all of these situations, the search for discussion forums that could foster a return to mutually beneficial conditions of work and production appears in the forefront of requirements.

4. Together regaining control over work: 'research actions' and their impact on trade union work

To speak of work in the manner in which we understand it, it is not enough to sit together around a table. There is a need to encourage the questioning process and bring it round to the live issues that arise for each worker in performing a job; it is important also to ensure, as far as possible, that employees remain, individually and collectively, in control of what they express, for any excesses could go against them afterwards. Insofar as workers' representatives seem naturally well placed to take on these responsibilities, we have devised 'research actions' that have been conducted with a number of trade unions (Théry 2006; Chassaing *et al.* 2011; Gâche 2012). These actions, which involved worker representatives, were jointly facilitated by researchers and trade unionists. This joint initiative was able to be carried out because trade unionists are concerned at the considerable gap between the matters that are discussed with management, in the official workplace representative bodies, and those that are of real concern to employees on a day-to-day basis. Together, therefore, we constructed and experimented with new types of relationship with employees, focussing on issues of relevance to their work.

At the basis of these efforts is the conviction that, so little being known about the experience of employees, about what goes on in their minds, there is a need to approach them, using appropriate tools, in a spirit of open enquiry.

Depending on the situation and the resources available, the trade unionists employed various methods of approach. It turned out that the important thing was not so much how the enquiry

was launched as the determination to use it to speak about work, and the subsequent use that was made of the findings.

The first principle is the effort to move beyond generalities and the prefabricated modes of expression to which employees spontaneously resort when speaking about their work. Indeed, there is no work in any general sense; there is work only *in situ*. The workers' representative is therefore not content with recording the problem outlined by the employee in general terms but seeks to understand what is really at stake by urging the employee to go back over events that are localisable in both time and in space and on the basis of which these general interpretations were built up. This simple attempt to 're-contextualise' opens up extensive possibilities for enquiry concerning all the ins-and-outs of the problem, possibilities which do not exist if the exercise is confined to generalities. The main risk at this stage is to hurriedly assume that one has understood what the employee is saying. The questions need to be phrased, on the contrary, in a manner that will bring to the surface the employee's knowledge of her/his work and will assist him/her in formulating it.

The process of questioning is guided by a second principle also: employees tend to come under attack because they seek to deploy or defend, in relation to their work performance, standards that come into collision with the managerial norms adhered to by the hierarchy. By approaching the matter differently, on the basis of concrete situations, it is possible to avoid victimisation and to place the emphasis on the positive dimensions of work that the employee attempts to preserve or to promote. The discussion thus facilitates emergence of interests and values that can be shared and potentially universalized. The trade unionists involved in the enquiry are encouraged to pay particular attention to this aspect, for at this point the discourse can depart from the register of complaint and express the potential for affirmation that gives rise to a dynamic approach to work.

An approach of this kind is not without its difficulties but it reveals to the worker representatives some hitherto unsuspected questions about the unresolved problems of work organisation and their consequences on employees, on production, on workplace relations, and on the environment. When such problems arise, the trade union representative's reflex tends to be intervention as early as possible in the worker representative bodies or circulation of a leaflet in the company; but it can be fruitful to resist this need for an immediate response, for what should take place before any discussion with the hierarchy is a collective formulation by employees of their viewpoints.

The material that has been gleaned from the enquiry conducted among a few employees is put into shape and presented to the whole of the group or groups that share the same work situation. In turning round and going back to the employees in this way, it is not a question of issuing them with explanations of their own experience but of prompting an expression and sharing of their differing views and responses to their experience. The goal is to initiate a process of awareness-raising, of collective formulation and development of norms or standards pertaining to the work they perform.

By means of these discussions the employees are able to take the measure of their contribution: they become aware of the authority conferred on them by their work experience; they stand together collectively to defend work quality in the face of management decisions that turn out, on the ground, to be counter-productive.

This gradual achievement on the part of employees of a more mature awareness in relation to their work can prove transformative in the practice of industrial relations. It is not only that thinking in this way about problematic issues gives rise to highly relevant diagnoses that benefit from the breadth of accumulated experience that has contributed to their formation. Such an approach also serves to combat isolation; it reconstitutes the social fabric in the workplace by strengthening links among employees and with trade unionists; it changes the terms of discussion in the representative bodies by conferring on the interventions of workers' representatives greater weight and authority, thereby enhancing their power.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, the emphasis placed by senior management on the managerial, accounting, and financial dimensions is certainly one of the problems of our time, but this trend does have a potentially positive counterpart: it is the employees who, in the performance of their work, take responsibility for the aspects that are no longer decreed or settled by management; it is the employees who make the effort to get the production out on schedule in spite of any inappropriate decisions taken by a management that is located too far away from the arena of activity; it is the employees who seek to humanize the work organisation and that particular fragment of the world which, through their work, they help to shape.

As long as individual employees keep themselves to themselves while behaving in this way, the trend we have described very much resembles a disaster to which the increase in individual workplace conflicts and the different expressions of occupational malaise bear witness. But as soon as the questions with which employees grapple in the midst of their work become subject to collective formulation and responsibility, important individual and collective spaces for action and development can begin to open up.

The current incidence of pain and distress in the workplace thus draws our attention to the fact that developments in the world of labour signify a need and a demand to deepen democracy in the workplace in relation to numerous aspects of the activity and relationships that take place there.

Recommendations

The situation calls for practical measures designed to foster the development of autonomous spaces for collective expression and formulation within the differing occupational groups in the workplace. If these discussion groups are to be productive, it

is desirable for them to be led by persons with at least some degree of training in work analysis. A second purpose of the group formulation can obviously be to enrich discussions with management. However, insofar as middle management itself has great difficulty in getting senior management to listen to it, it cannot constitute the employees' sole interlocutor. There is a need to strengthen the second path to workplace discussion of problems arising, namely, worker representatives. In order to perform this task, these representatives need not only to develop their own skills and knowledge so that they are qualified to conduct surveys among employees but also to obtain the rights required for them to take on this role.

Translation from the French by Kathleen Llanwarne

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