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Building the future of work together

Now is the time for the EU to create futureproof labour markets that work for all

by Sonja van Lieshout

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As we countdown to the European Parliament elections in June and a new European Commission to take office later in the year, the World Employment Confederation-Europe (WEC-Europe) has drawn up [a manifesto](#) setting out the HR services industry's vision for a European political agenda through 2029.

As we discussed those ideas with policymakers and stakeholders early on in the year, it was encouraging to see a broad alignment on the main ingredients for the Europe we want and for building futureproof labour markets that work for all. Work is an essential part of people's lives and a special focus must be centred on supporting labour market access for our youth.

At the heart of our vision lies the conviction that **Social Justice** should be at the very core of the EU's 2024-29 political mandate. Social justice means striking a balance between an enabling economic environment for companies and access to social protection and opportunity for workers. It needs to be based on a new social contract that enables an economy and labour market that protects and empowers everyone; provides skills that allow everyone to reach their potential; and delivers appropriate labour market regulation in this digital age.

In creating this manifesto, we have reflected the strategic priorities in employment and social affairs laid out at the EU's Granada Summit at the end of 2023, which emphasised competitiveness, skills, and leaving no one behind. As EU policymakers embark on a new, 5-year mandate they would be well advised to focus on three main priorities:

Firstly, **a new social contract**. The HR services industry is a strong believer in the essential value of diverse forms of work combined with effective social safety nets that provide adequate social protection for all. This is the very embodiment of social justice at European level. In an environment where people switch jobs and roles more frequently, and potentially also change their employment status from worker to self-employed, part-time, agency work etc, there is an essential need to ensure the transferability and portability of rights to create stability and security - particularly in times of uncertainty and volatility.

By ensuring the transferability and portability of social protection rights and valuing and promoting the diversity of labour contracts as an instrument to meet the needs of both workers and employers, a new social contract promises to enable the EU economy while empowering and protecting everyone at the same time.

The second area that needs attention is **skills to empower everyone in the labour market**. The digital and green transitions are set to have a significant and transformative impact on Europe's labour market. Demand for green talent grew over 38% in 2021 and is soon set to outpace supply.


In this new environment, skills and qualifications are the currency that is required to succeed. The need to address skills and labour shortages is urgent – including a focus on fair labour mobility, the posting of workers and demand-driven legal migration. We also need to design skills policies to equip workers in diverse forms of work with the right skills to move forward and prosper. This includes strengthening career guidance to support labour market transitions and valuing and promoting social dialogue-driven and bipartite forms of providing access to skills and training. The HR services sector continues to play an instrumental role in equipping people with the right skills based on a demand-driven approach, particularly in the context of the digital and green transitions in Europe.

The third building block that policymakers should set in place to create 21st century labour markets that are fit-for-purpose, is **fair and appropriate labour market regulation in times of digitalisation**. This means increasingly moving to hybrid work and a hybrid workforce that allows individuals to thrive and companies to meet their business needs combined with balancing their private life needs. The regulation needs to value and enable diverse forms of work and ensure decent working conditions and social protection for all workers, regardless of their contract and status. We need existing EU standards for the use of AI in employment to be implemented and a level-playing field established for digital labour platforms based on the correct classification of labour suppliers.

Shaping a new approach and social contract is a responsibility that should be shared jointly among EU policymakers, national governments, parliament and social partners. The close collaboration with our sectoral social partner UNI-Europa over the past five years has been instrumental in driving social innovation and supporting labour market resilience in a challenging economic environment.

More than 15 years since the 2008 Directive on Temporary Agency Work was adopted, its main principles of no unjustified restrictions, equal treatment and equal pay remain essential to delivering diverse and flexible labour markets and must continue to be enforced and upheld – particularly in cross-border situations.

Working in partnership with public employment services, social partners, and policymakers at both EU and national level, the HR services industry can continue its contribution to shaping employment and social policies and to offering fair and decent employment and working conditions that ensure that no one gets left behind.

Sonja van Lieshout
President, World Employment Confederation-Europe
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