



Digital skills and remote working in SMEs: insights from international experts from IRESDES4.0 project

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Since March 2021 ADAPT has been participating as a scientific partner in the project "**Industrial relations and Social Dialogue for an Economy and a Society 4.0**" (**IRESDES4.0**), co-funded by the European Union. The project, which will end in March 2023, aims to **improve social dialogue and quality of employment in a digitised labour market** by guiding social partners and other labour market actors towards a better understanding of the implications of the digital transformation on collective labour agreements. The project partnership is led by Confindustria (with the support of Confindustria Digitale and Confindustria Servizi) and involves, in addition to ADAPT, the European DIGITAL SME Alliance and FIM-CISL Veneto. FIM CISL and IndustriALL Europe participate as associated organisations.

The two main topics of the IRESDES4.0 project are **remote working and digital skills development in the workplace**, investigated through a sectoral perspective - targeting the metallurgy sector - and focusing on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). During the first phase of the project, which was also aimed at surveying the current transformations in the world of work, the mentioned issues were investigated mainly through a **desk research** (including a reasoned analysis of international scientific literature and collective agreements of the metallurgy sector), supplemented by information gathered through a series of **interviews** with trade union and employer representatives (for an overview of the preliminary results of the project, see D. Porcheddu, M. Roiatti, *A spotlight on remote work and digital skills preliminary findings from the IRESDES4.0 project*, ADAPT International Bulletin 10 December 2021, n. 21).

One of the main strengths of the IRESDES4.0 project, is, however, the **direct confrontation with social partners**: the results drawn from the research activities are periodically discussed and validated by a **Board composed of experts and stakeholders from different EU countries**. The first of these validation meetings was held last November during the **11th ADAPT International Conference**, while the second took place during the public workshop "**How can social dialogue embrace digital skills for SMES?**", organised by the European DIGITAL SME Alliance on 29 April 2022 in Brussels.

During the project meetings, experts expressed their point of view on the topics of interest of the project, providing the partners with important insights for its future development.

As an example, and without the ambition of being exhaustive, one of the main points of discussion was the **degree of reliability and adherence to the different economic and production contexts of the statistical information released by the main European and national datasets** used in the research. In fact, with reference to the low level of digitisation in SMEs (both in terms of "digital intensity" and of ICT specialists working in firms), the data under examination may not be the only source to be considered in order to provide a concrete picture of the realities in question, given that **SMEs choose, in many cases, to outsource their IT services, rather than directly employing specific personnel to deal with services related to IT infrastructure**. In any case, a possible way to increase the level of digitisation in SMEs has been identified, on the one hand, in the **'education' of small and medium-sized entrepreneurs about the importance of new technologies** for the competitiveness of their companies and the territories in which they operate, but also as a proxy to enable also the green transition (e.g. with the development of more sustainable production processes from the point of view of their impact on the environment). On the other hand, digital skills development could be increased through the **fostering of workers' motivation to engage in training initiatives**, acting also on the development of transversal competences such as the promise of continuous learning.

In fact, one issue that was considered particularly important during the Brussels event was that of **quality training dedicated to the acquisition and/or enhancement of digital skills** by the labor force employed in SMEs of the metallurgy sector (with due distinction between the specific features of the IT sector - where digital skills are mainly advanced - and the manufacturing sector - where, on the other hand, there is still a strong demand for basic digital skills), but also with reference to the urgency of **training for entrepreneurs and updating the trainers themselves**.

With regard to the specific issue of e-skills training, the consensus among experts and workshop speakers was that **it should be tailored to the needs of the individual worker in order to maximise its effectiveness and ensure employability** throughout the working life of all categories of workers. It is therefore worth stressing that **social dialogue and collective bargaining were identified as the most suitable tools to ensure better access to training opportunities** (in terms of widening the pool of workers involved) and the management of e-skills training in both SMEs and large enterprises.

The issue of remote work was also discussed in depth by the Stakeholder Board, especially with reference to the **'new risks' that may affect remote workers**: this is a matter of crucial importance, also in view of the fact that, according to the consensus of experts, **the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the world of work is non-reversible**, and that therefore **the future of work will necessarily be 'hybrid'**.

In particular, and in accordance with the most recent recommendations of the International Labour Organisation as outlined in the [report released on the occasion of the World Day for Safety and Health at Work \(28 April 2022\)](#), it was highlighted that **the protection of workers' health and safety is one of the main topics that needs specific regulation through collective bargaining and social dialogue**. Other risks for those who work remotely, in terms of **personal data protection**, are, in the experts' view, to be found in the **use of technological tools for performance monitoring**, the use of which, therefore, should always be implemented following in-depth assessments and discussions between companies and workers' representatives.

The insights provided by the experts of the IRESDES4.0 Stakeholder Board, besides having significantly contributed to the drafting of the first version of the [Report on the state-of-the-art regarding smart working and digital-skills development in social dialogue practices and CLAs](#), will also allow its updating (e.g. space will be given also to the topics of **digital sovereignty, platform work of IT specialists and the strategic role of employers' associations in enabling virtuous training initiatives for entrepreneurs**).

Finally, with reference to the next steps of the project, the contributions that the experts of the Board will provide during the third validation workshop (the event will be organised by FIM VENETO and will be held next October in Venezia Mestre -Italy-) will also be the basis for the creation of the final output of the project, i.e. a document containing **a set of recommendations, addressed to European social partners, member states and the European Commission for the management of remote work and e-skills development through collective bargaining and social dialogue practices.**

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