

CALL

Church Action on Labour and Life

Digitalisation and the future of work and social relations:

Social and climate friendly choices are timely

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Since the beginning of the Corona pandemic in Europe in the month of February 2020, digitalisation has become “the” central issue both at work and in the private life.

Internet has made it possible for people living alone to be connected, to teach and to learn, to maintain at least in part, a social life, to move the desk job to the home, and to continue some automated manufacture.

Some work places such as the care sector, food supply or postal services, have been overwhelmed by work. In addition to the high pressure to increase output, infection was always a possible danger. The income of other work places suddenly dried up because of dependence on daily orders (platform workers) and on an audience (artists).

Churches also had to move church services and pastoral care to on-line platforms and/or in some cases, organized practical help to people in need (food distribution, shopping for the elderly, establishing phone contact with people living in isolation,..).

There are many similarities in European countries because they all have adopted public health measures, but also differences. In one country for example, there was no lockdown and schools stayed open. In other countries, the lockdown has been adopted in particular areas only, while the main strategy has been to confine populations at home and leave some essential economic sectors open, and thus exposed to risk where it is difficult to keep social distance.

CALL underlines the suffering of young people as they were suddenly isolated in the midst of their families. Suffering is particularly difficult when families are dysfunctional and when the consequences of the interruption of many welfare services only partially offered remotely.

One effect of this period is on one hand, the acceleration of the digital abilities of an increasing number of people, and on the other hand, the exclusion of other people as the social digital gap is widening if one has no sufficient access to technical facilities. Children then cannot study at home, which further lowers their standard of education.

The current situation remains uncertain on all levels: public health, social, economic and internationally. We are now facing a new, hard, and long road to a “normality” in many parts of Europe and the world. Yet this “normality” would not have the same definition as before the crisis.

Issues regarding digitalisation of the work place and society, social issues and a global planet facing a climate crisis have become even more pressing. Such issues include:

- Before the present crisis, it was mostly the young generation who chose virtual relationships through social media, but during the crisis, social media became their only means of interaction. How will social relations change after that period of imposed “fasting” from direct social contacts?
- How can we be sure that the home is a proper working or learning place, irrespective of what the law provides? Ongoing research suggests that the home is not a good work place. CALL would like to contribute to the debate by studying how remote work can be good work. Gender perspectives and gender roles have moreover come to the fore, such as who works where in the home.

- Before the crisis few people opted for remote work. Now, remote work has been discovered as a good alternative. Many companies and workers see the benefit in it and may even try to promote it. Could remote work become the future for the majority of white collar workers? We consider that remote work needs to stay an option which you can accept or not, not a condition for work.

There are five areas of problems: organisational policies, digital technologies, physical layout, behaviors/styles of leadership and the implied invitation to mix and (con-)fuse labour and life.

In addition, there are relational implications to take in account. Some companies concede that they cannot do everything by e-mail and need to hold in person meetings, which could still not be enough. Experience also shows that a personal relationships and direct contact help personal wellbeing, while maintaining creativity and efficiency in a company.

Remote work however, implies that a worker needs an appropriate working space, technical equipment, a proper desk and chair and the skill to multitask as worker and parent.

Gender perspectives and gender roles have come to the fore, such as who works where in the home (in the extra room or in the kitchen).

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Ongoing research suggests that the home is not a good work place. CALL wants to contribute to the debate by observing how remote work can be good work.

- Many workers' rights were suspended during the crisis. CALL is concerned that when crisis ends, the workplace should come back to respecting rights: protection of workers, occupational health and safety...
- There are also changes in the manufacturing sector. Some companies are "reshoring", or coming back to Europe as a result of the gap which occurred in the logistic and supply chain. Other are investing in the remanufacturing and the digitalisation / automatisisation of the activities seems to be accelerated).
- The consensus is that after this crisis, the health care sector must be improved, it is possible that strenghtening this sector–may to some extent, help compensate for unemployment in other sectors.
- Democracy and personal integrity issues are important concerning the installation of tracking software and apps that warn of contact in a public space with a person presumed to be infected with the virus. Privacy guarantees need to be built into such software.
- Relaunch of the national and European economy has started including via EU-funding. Relaunch needs be orientated on one hand, to help the most vulnerable and precarious persons, and on the other hand, to focus on bringing forth a climate friendly economy in the near future supporting ecological technology in production or selling such products instead of the former "normal" technologies.

This Statement was made during the CALL network videoconferences in May and June 2020 and is a follow up on the pivotal CALL General Assembly and conference on digitalisation in Berlin, in April 2018.

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