



MAGAZINE

ADAPTATION TO A NEW WORK REALITY



IS ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE A JOB KILLER?

Concerns, possibilities and limits of AI on the European labour market

REPORT

Sustainable tourism for the benefit of workers

INTERVIEW

Activist Dunja Robin about women and girls with disabilities on the labour market

EZA SNACK DEBATES

Our new event series in Brussels

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Dear friends and readers of the EZA Magazine,

A home that offers protection, education that guarantees democratic access to society, social security that does not leave people to their fate when they are sick or without work, and intergenerational solidarity that connects the young and the elderly: these are the essential guarantees for a just and decent society. Basic rights for everyone, wherever and whenever.

Currently, we observe the speed with which artificial intelligence (AI) is entering our lives and will continue to transform the future world of work. Among the above-mentioned safeguards, education in particular plays a crucial role in preparing us for the potential revolution that AI is bringing into our working environment. The curricula used in schools and vocational education, as well as continuous education and training will need to have a much broader focus on AI than the classic, general or technical training that we know at the moment, in order to prepare and qualify the workforce to use AI. Like any technological innovation, AI can of course make a useful contribution, for instance, to medical research and treatment, or it can make production processes less strenuous for people. But it can also lead to the dehumanization of the world as we know it, and threatens to displace human potential.

The challenge is particularly great in the workplace, for highly skilled people, but to an even greater extent for those who do not have higher education. At the same time, inexperienced workers may benefit the most, according to a recent study. Moreover, we must not lose sight of the fact that privacy and democratic rights may also be compromised. ZOOM and MS Teams, which we learned to use during the Covid-19 pandemic, are now coming under fire for allegedly spying on conversations or meetings, supposedly as training for artificial intelligence. But all kind of AI chatbots could also use our private correspondence or documents when there are no rules in place. Not to mention the impact of facial recognition.

In the United States, the most important players in the field of AI have made a commitment – albeit without formal obligations – to respect several rules for responsible, safe use of AI. This is a first step. However, these rules must be binding, also in Europe. Beyond lip service, there is a need for standardising trustworthy AI. The Artificial Intelligence Act is the world's first attempt at a comprehensive law to regulate artificial intelligence. It thus has pioneer character. The European Commission hopes that it will inspire other countries to adopt similar laws, as was the case with the data protection regulation.

You can read more about the European AI Act in this EZA Magazine. To highlight the importance of this topic, EZA had decided in the beginning of the year that the issue of AI and its impact on the world of work would also be addressed at the kick-off seminar in Sofia at the end of November. I am convinced that with human and social intelligence, it will be possible to have a fruitful discussion about artificial intelligence in order to meet the challenge and use the potential of AI.

Luc Van den Brande, EZA President



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IS ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE A JOB KILLER?

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become an omnipresent factor of everyday life, and not just since ChatGPT has been dominating the headlines for weeks. The possible uses of AI are increasing all the time, but so are related concerns about the future of work and jobs. A topic that is being discussed by the trade unions and in the EU parliament.

TEXT: Ralph Würschinger
PHOTOS: Adobe Stock, Ralph Würschinger, Andreas Amann



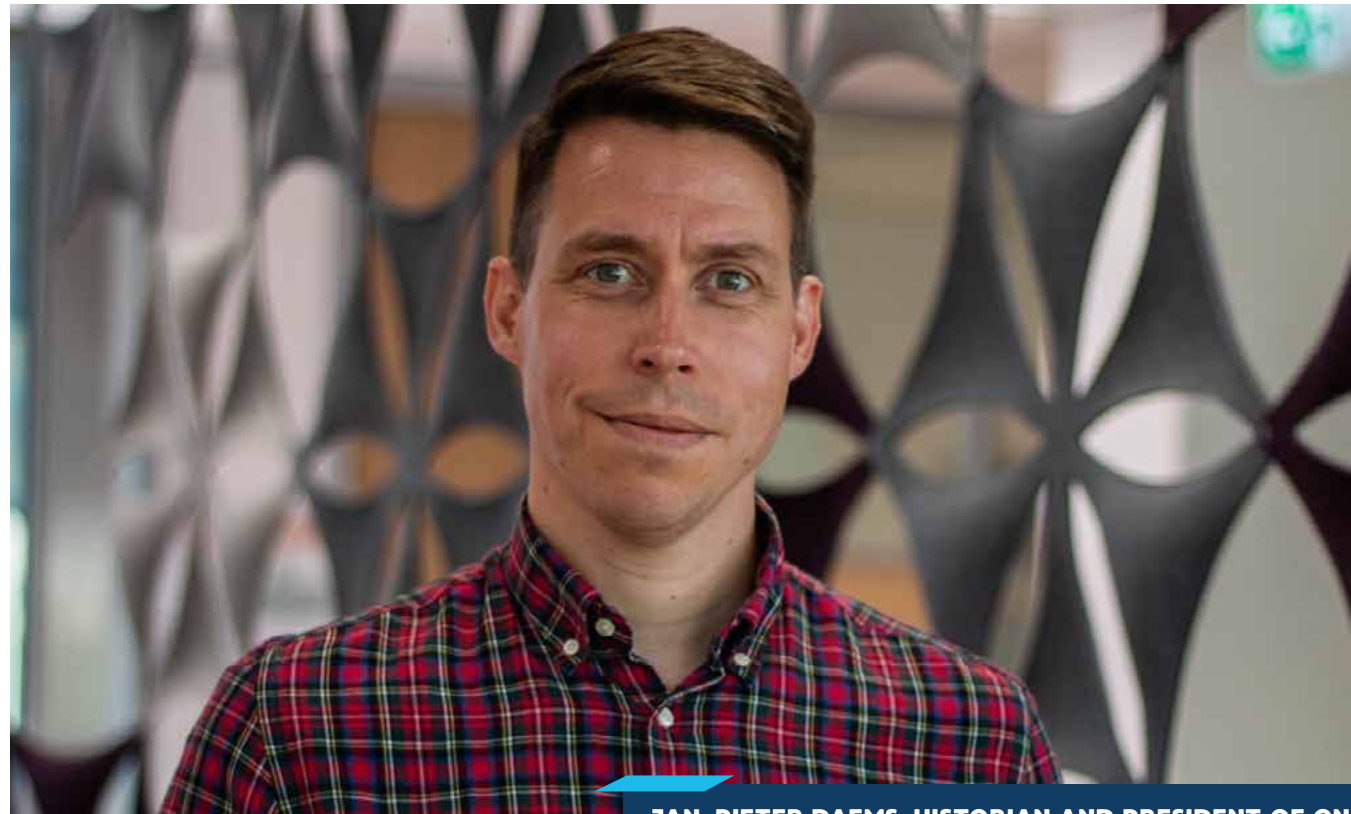
“Digital technologies, especially Artificial Intelligence (AI), are transforming the world at an unprecedented speed (...) We will jointly define standards for this new generation of technologies that will become the global norm.” This is what European Commission President-elect Ursula von der Leyen wrote in her agenda in 2019. Around four years later, the norm seems to be within reach. A draft of the so-called AI Act has been drawn up. The trilogue consultations are about to take place. An agreement is expected in 2024.

It will then probably take another two years until the new legislation comes into effect. The current draft takes a risk-based approach. In other words, AI systems are broken down into various risk levels. Accordingly, so-called **social scoring systems** are unacceptable: they entail collecting and classifying personal data to see whether a person is creditworthy or has a right to claim social benefits and so on. **Nor are predictive policing tools** allowed for predicting crimes. The current draft apparently permits face detection and biometric recording in public. If a photo, text or sound has been created by artificial intelligence, this should be made clearly obvious. **Recruiting software** for awarding jobs is not going to be forbidden but will be subject to strict obligations. Violations will incur penalties of up to 30 million euros. As far as business associations are concerned, the draft is a piece of excessive legislation that could inhibit growth. On the other hand, trade unions and NGOs fear that the draft does not give sufficient consideration to the workers in the EU. # A look at what is happening on the other side of the Atlantic shows how AI and its impact on workers harbour great potential for conflict. At the instigation of various trade unions, in early July 2023 many screenwriters and actors gathered outside the headquarters of the streaming

provider Netflix in Los Angeles. The demonstrators carried banners and signs with messages such as “No sleep ‘til fair deal”, “pay me”, “stop trying to make freelance happen”, but also “AI is not art”, “AI wrote this sign” or “AI eats brains”.

The potential for disruption

They demand higher inflation-adjusted pay. At the same time – and this is new in the history of labour disputes – this is the first prominent strike about the use of artificial intelligence. Many of those on strike fear that AI will use their faces in films or imitate their voices or replace minor roles with computer-generated figures. They demand reassurance about the way artificial intelligence is going to be handled in future. AI is also already an issue for trade unions in continental Europe and in the EU. “We now have to think about how we use this new technology. What I’ve learnt as a historian is that this isn’t going to happen of its own accord”, says Jan-Pieter Daems, board member of CNV, the second largest trade union federation in the Netherlands and EZA member centre. His remit includes sustainable employment as well as health and safety at work. “The first industrial revolution in the 19th century brought many people into the cities where they found themselves working in precarious, poor conditions (...) That was the origin of our trade unions. It took years for workers to stand up and say ‘This isn’t how we want to work, this isn’t how we want to live’. And I hope with all my heart that we’re not going to see this happening again in the future.”



JAN-PIETER DAEMS, HISTORIAN AND PRESIDENT OF CNV

For several years now, artificial intelligence and algorithms have been used in various fields in the Netherlands, for example to check illegal lettings in Amsterdam or to manage child benefit claims. In 2022, the latter resulted in the Dutch government having to pay a fine amounting to 2.75 million euros. For years, the tax authority had illegally made discriminating use of information about people's nationality and wrongly demanded child benefit repayments. Reappraisal took nearly ten years. Such scandals must not happen again in future. Throughout the country, local authorities are campaigning for a transparency database where they want to list all automated decision-making systems.

AI and the labour market: a complex combination

Whether in the latest Indiana Jones movie where the main character's face was artificially made to look younger, in the treatment of COVID where AI accelerated the diagnosis process, or in the way ChatGPT writes texts, artificial intelligence offers a wide range of possible applications. CNV also uses AI in the

form of a chatbot: people who visit the official website to ask questions can communicate via the chatbot. The answers are generated by AI if no human interlocutors are available. Depending on the complexity, artificial intelligence deals with such tasks quickly and reliably because it has access to huge quantities of data and algorithms to solve problems. It learns to recognise patterns and learns from mistakes – as long as these are pointed out by someone from the outside. Many corporations have been using algorithms or artificial intelligence in their recruitment processes for a good number of years. In some cases, this can have discriminating consequences for workers. The software scans the existing workforce and the applicants, and generates an ideal candidate for the specific job on the basis of education, professional experience, age, gender and other desired parameters. Recently this has led to discrimination. Amazon, for example, rejected female job candidates because the algorithm said men had greater technical savvy. In another case, ethnic minorities were rejected by AI because they often lived further away from the workplace and the software made a connection between distance to the workplace and the frequency with which workers handed in their notice. Two years ago, the Austrian labour market service (a service company with the function of a public

employment office) wanted to introduce an algorithm that would estimate the chances of jobseekers on the labour market. The program would classify people into three categories, according to which they would be granted support measures or not. Factors influencing the decision include age, nationality, gender, vocational training and career to date. The process is still awaiting approval for two reasons: besides the lack of any legal basis, there is also no possibility for affected persons to find out why they have been put in a certain category. A decision is to be taken before the end of the year. The Public Service Trade Union in Austria hopes that the algorithm-based system will not be used in this way. The following statement is made on their website: "Classifying workers according to the sole category of being "easy" or "difficult" to place in work, without any broad-based support programmes, discriminates against people with disabilities, migrants and women with children."

Concern about adapting to a new working world

Experts all over the world agree that artificial intelligence will continue to play an ever greater role. A study on behalf of the ITRE (Committee on Industry,

Research and Energy) predicts that AI will boost work productivity by 11 to 37 percent by 2035. Furthermore, AI is said to make a positive contribution to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and could accelerate the development of new medication, to name just a few aspects. On the other hand, the study also concludes that AI will result in considerable job losses, while new, better paid jobs will emerge at the same time. It is not clear which ratio is involved here. In June 2023, McKinsey published a report according to which generative AI – in other words, AI that generates text, pictures or sound – could automate 60 to 70 percent of the total workload in the USA. A few months earlier, a report was presented by Goldman Sachs, stating that AI poses a special threat to the following lines of work: office and administrative jobs (46 percent), legal work (44 percent), architecture and engineering (37 percent), business and financial transactions (35 percent). The report suggests that it depends on how adaptable workers can be. Jan-Pieter Daems sees employers as having a great responsibility here. "60 percent of the employers fail to equip their workers properly to enable them to deal with the digital transformation or to make them fit for the future of their work", he says, referring to a survey conducted by the CNV in 2023. The trade union federation is already being approached by members who are concerned that they might not be able to keep up with future work requirements.



PROF. DR SABINE PFEIFFER'S RESEARCH FOCUSES ON TECHNOLOGY, WORK AND SOCIETY

"It is part of the way our economic system works that every company takes a look at new technologies and analyses whether they can replace human labour", says Prof. Sabine Pfeiffer from Friedrich Alexander University in Nuremberg, Germany, and adds: "For the most part, technology takes on just individual tasks. Many jobs have disappeared (in the EU - editor's note) in recent decades not because of technology but because of our global economy, where workers in other parts of the world are paid to do the work. In many cases, these people will be working in conditions that are less automated." Sabine Pfeiffer is a sociologist and expert in technology, work and social affairs. Furthermore, she is a founding member of the "Rat der Arbeitswelt" (Council of the World of Work), a board of experts that advises the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in Germany.

She feels the fear of artificial intelligence is being exaggerated, and is particularly critical of statements made by Big Tech directors like Elon Musk or OpenAI boss Sam Altman. Musk on the one hand demands that AI development should pause at a certain level for a period of six months; on the other hand, he continues to work at AI in his Tesla vehicles. Sam Altman proposes that AI should go through cautious, slow development, advocating rules and conjuring up scenarios where an almighty AI could cause drastic accidents and disruption to society. At the same time, in spring 2023 he launched an advanced version of ChatGPT with a clear improvement of previous AI. "Warnings like this don't help anyone. Instead, experts should concentrate on explaining to governments exactly what AI can and can't do."

The sociologist makes it clear that neither dystopia nor utopia will be caused by AI, and that this technology isn't going to solve all the problems. "It depends where we use AI. It shouldn't be used in areas with consequences for living creatures or in critical infrastructure", says Sabine Pfeiffer. In many lines of work, artificial intelligence is neither economical nor

expedient: in her expert opinion, the know-how present in the workforce far exceeds the capabilities of AI in a great many areas. "Of course, jobs will be lost to AI", says Sabine Pfeiffer, but not to the extent indicated by reports in the media.

Dealing with AI on the EU level

To ensure this doesn't happen, human rights organisations and trade unions such as the CNV and also the ETUC are exerting their influence on the European Parliament. In the opinion of these organisations and trade unions, the present draft of the AI Act is inadequate. Esther Lynch, ETUC Secretary General, says in this respect: "We must ensure that wherever parts of jobs, entire jobs or entire sectors of industry are being replaced, other top-quality jobs emerge." For Jan-Pieter Daems from the CNV, the AI Act is an important step but doesn't go far enough. "Employers must offer further training for their employees, but training should also be provided in all EU member states for those workers who have lost their jobs due to AI and need assistance to move into other lines of work." Sabine Pfeiffer is sceptical. The AI Act can only make a difference if laws are adopted on a national level with legally binding sanctions. On the intergovernmental level, there has already been work on drawing up a voluntary code of conduct between the EU and the USA, which could draw on the AI Act. Once the AI Act is adopted, it will be up to the member states to fulfil the requirements or extend them even further. Until then, the CNV seeks to maintain dialogue with the EU and also on the national level, hoping that consideration will be given to their wishes. "It offers a great opportunity for us as workers and trade unions to create a better, fairer society. But it depends on whether we as humans are in control, or whether technology is in control."



The "We Work Europe" podcast provides more information and insights into artificial intelligence. The link to the podcast episodes is here.

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN THE INTERESTS OF WORKERS

A visit to the Algarve in Portugal looks at how sustainable tourism can improve working conditions and which problems this sector is facing



TEXT: Lukas Fleischmann
PHOTOS: Lukas Fleischmann

In May 2023, the hinterland of Portugal's Algarve coast is already bone dry. The rain that often falls in spring simply failed to arrive this year. The roads are therefore extremely dusty when Bosi takes tourists from Faro airport to their hotels. Bosi is in his late 20s, would rather not mention his surname and came originally from Brazil. But he has been living in Portugal for 15 years and recently started working as a driver. "There's not much else to do here", he says while driving the minibus through the countryside. "I like driving, and I enjoy talking to people." When asked what he thinks about the current drought,

he answers: "It's good for tourism, because it makes the holiday season in Portugal much longer. Many of the tourists who come here are only interested in the hotels and their pools. So it doesn't really matter whether everything behind the hotel complex has dried out." By now, he has been working for ten hours. Particularly in the peak season, it is not rare for drivers like Bosi to work up to 16 hours a day. "In the winter, there's nothing going on here so there's no jobs either. I have to work hard in the summer to get by in the winter." In the peak season, from May to September, Bosi says he earns up to € 1,000

per month. The minimum wage in the country is € 740. At the same time, the cost of living is very high in this part of Portugal: his apartment costs € 600 rent each month, all year long. The income he earns in the summer has to cover it. Many foreign investors and tourism development projects make rents increase every year, while wage levels remain more or less the same. Bosi's example illustrates the dilemma affecting many countries that are highly dependent on tourism: seasonal staff employed in mass tourism work long days in the summer to get by in the winter. There are few unionised jobs, so there are scarcely any wage increases. Many accept these conditions because there is no alternative. A major part of these workers originally come from South America, from countries such as Brazil or Colombia. Many are motivated by unemployment and the hope of a better life in the EU so they try their luck in Portugal's tourism industry. The great demand for workers means they soon find employment. In contrast to many other sectors, there are few formal hurdles to be taken. After an onboarding phase of just a few months, they start to work in a hotel or as a driver, like Bosi. While this provides a livelihood for many people, many travel destinations in southern

Europe are threatened by the climate crisis. Droughts and heat are gnawing away at the economic mainstay of whole national economies. In Portugal, tourism accounts for around 15 percent of the GDP, and this increases to even 50 percent on the Algarve, Madeira and the Azores. At the moment, the region is benefitting from climate change because it has extended the peak season. But in the medium and long term, July and August will be simply too hot and too dry, so that water supplies will start running out and potential guests will look for cooler regions instead. As far as tourist numbers go, before very long the peak season could soon become what used to be the former winter, the only difference being that by then, entire regions will have been destroyed by drought and dryness.

Tackling both problems with more sustainability

Sustainable tourism is one way of improving working conditions for the workers and also the environmental conditions in the destination countries. In specific terms, this means tourists should minimise their carbon footprint as far as possible, for example by using public transport whenever they can. At the same time, tourists should eat locally in the towns and villages, and ensure whatever else they consume is done with a sustainable approach that doesn't involve any long transport distances. It is also a case of respecting and protecting the biodiversity in the respective regions by preserving natural habitats. This kind of sustainable tourism should ensure the Algarve remains an attractive destination all year round. People can go hiking or cycling here even in winter, because the normally damp and windy winter months have become mild and sunny due to climate change. Theoretically, sustainable tourism also has a positive impact on workers living here, reducing the throngs of tourists in the hot summer months and offering workers employment for the whole year so that they no longer rely on precarious seasonal jobs in the summer. Such a transformation from cheap mass tourism to sustainable traveling also reduces the price pressure and should give hotels, restaurants and agencies more financial scope to pay fairer wages.

A complex reality

For hotel manager and sales director Lino Martins, this development has already begun. He works for a hotel group that has five hotels in Portugal. "In the past, none of our hotels were open in winter, now we run



SALES MANAGER LINO MARTINS

SERVICE EMPLOYEE IN AN ALL-INCLUSIVE HOTEL



three all year round." Sustainability features greatly in the claims made on the hotel website. "Water management is an increasingly important topic for us. For example, we now have several interlinked water circuits. Water from the washbasins is treated and then used for flushing the toilets, for example. Furthermore, we are trying to make drastic reductions in the amount of plastic we use, and we have fitted solar panels to supply power", says Martins. But at the same time, the hotel offers the direct opposite of sustainable tourism: all-inclusive buffets at any time of day and night, several large pools, and a remote location far from towns and villages which is mainly to the benefit of large international companies rather than local businesses and restaurants.

The rooms are air-conditioned to 18 degrees and all have a fridge humming away with just one small bottle of water inside. Guests arrive by plane, and a private shuttle service brings them to the hotel. "We know it's still not ideal, but we're making progress", is how Lino Martins comments on the current situation. More than 150 people work in the group's latest hotel near the Rio Formosa nature reserve. Here again, Martins willingly admits: "If you want an easy job or lots of time for the family, you shouldn't work in the tourism industry. But we are trying to improve the working conditions with a number of measures". These include constructing buildings next to the hotel to provide low-cost accommodation for the workers. Furthermore, the hotel claims to pay wages way above the minimum wage in Portugal. The downside is that the construction of these buildings in turn results in huge consumption

of resources and land, causing the local population to leave the surrounding villages and towns. What's more, continuing to build these hotel complexes brings even more tourists into the country. Faro airport alone handles nine million passengers every year and has got back to the pre-pandemic level. But despite these developments, when workers at Lino Martins' hotel were asked about their conditions, they appeared to be satisfied and gave a particularly positive mention to the extra benefits such as the accommodation provided by the hotel.

Everything is at stake

Ana Paula Fernandes Martins is the mayor of Tavira. The town is located on the Algarve and has a population of around 25,000 inhabitants, with an economy that is reliant on mass tourism and agriculture. Ana Paula is increasingly worried about the future of her town. "Most people here work in the tourism industry, but it hasn't rained since December. Without water, there's no life, and no work, and certainly no tourism", says the mayor. When asked what local politicians are doing about this development, she simply says: "It's difficult. We need huge investment, and lots more time to implement it. Initially, we can reduce the amount of water used in gardens and promote water reuse." She also sees the future in terms of sustainable tourism, because there is no viable alternative. She passes the buck above all to the large tourism companies. "They could pay more and put a greater focus on sustainability. They've got the money that's needed."



ANA PAULA FERNANDES MARTINSIS THE MAYOR OF TAVIRA.

But it doesn't seem to be as easy as that. After all, statistics show that mass tourism with its intensive consumption of resources has been at the receiving end of a great deal of support in recent decades. According to the national statistics portal PORTDATA, between 1995 and 2020 Tavira's water consumption, for example, increased nearly twenty times over, although the curve then dropped sharply in 2020 due to the pandemic and the fact that tourists stayed away. The local authorities seem to be out of their depth when it comes to reconciling tourism with sustainability. Critics also point out that it is far too easy to get building permits for major hotel projects, without enough attention being paid to the extra burden this will put on local resources. This is not only true for the Algarve but for many tourism regions in the country. As long as this development continues, more and more giant hotel complexes will continue to generate precarious jobs in the tourism industry, causing more social and ecological harm than benefit in the long term.

Sustainable future for fair holidays

It is a complex situation that affects both workers and tourists. But one thing is clear: there will have to be a move away from traditional mass tourism for the Algarve to survive and for an improvement in the jobs. This would also have a positive impact on working conditions, because sustainable tourism all year round would result in more stable employment and less exploitation. Tour operators and tourism companies have their share of responsibility and most put a far greater focus on sustainability, while the local authorities need to provide the necessary framework conditions. What's more, consumers also have a role to play and need to think about the damage caused by their summer holidays - not just in terms of the natural environment but also the people and labour involved.

This text was written during the seminar "From linear to circular: the role of workers' organisations in the circular economy" held by FIDESTRA Portugal, the International Platform for Cooperation and Migration (IPCM) and EZA in Cabanas de Tavira in May 2023. The corresponding podcast episode presents more workers advocating a change to more sustainable tourism.



"WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES AND CHRONIC ILLNESSES ARE AMONGST THE MOST MARGINALISED PEOPLE IN THE LABOUR MARKET"

In the EU alone, there are an estimated 60 million girls and women living with chronic illnesses or disabilities. German activist Dunja Robin talks about strategies to improve the situation of one of the most marginalised groups on the labour market.



DUNJA ROBIN IN HER OFFICE IN MUNICH

“IS EVEN BETTER IF EMPLOYERS PERCEIVE HIRING WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES NOT AS A CHALLENGE, BUT AS AN OPPORTUNITY AND A SOLUTION TO SOME OF THEIR EXISTING CONCERNS.”

INTERVIEW: Lukas Fleischmann

PHOTOS: Lukas Fleischmann

EZA: Hello Dunja, you're an activist from Munich and Managing Director of "Netzwerkfrauen Bayern" (Bavarian women network). You work to improve the situation of women and girls with disabilities and chronic illnesses. How many people are we talking about at the EU level?

Dunja Robin: According to the European Disability Forum, there are over 100 million people living with disabilities. Women and girls constitute 60 percent of this population. So we're talking about 60 million people. I was really surprised when I read this number for the first time, and I think it's important to note that these figures are estimates. However, it shows that disability and chronic illness are much more prevalent than we thought.

EZA: Do you have an explanation why there are 10 percent more women with disabilities and chronic illnesses than men?

Dunja Robin: I'm not 100 percent sure. But I think part of the explanation is that women generally live to an older age. So there is a larger group acquiring disabilities as they get older. This reveals another issue: the variety of disabilities is huge. There are the visible ones like people in a wheelchair, but also invisible ones such as autism. Furthermore, disability can also be temporary, for example, after cancer treatment.

EZA: Disabled people are one of the most marginalised groups on the labour market. This is reflected in the number of unemployed or in the precarious nature of their employment. Statistics indicate that women and girls with disabilities and chronic illnesses are affected to an even greater degree. Can you explain this particular situation?

Dunja Robin: It is as if we're looking at gender equality through a magnifying glass. Inequalities that already exist

in non-disabled people are compounded when a chronic illness or disability is added. The economic marginalisation of women with disabilities in the labour market is likely to result from a combination of factors including social prejudice, the lack of adequate support systems and workplace barriers as the specific needs of women with disabilities are not adequately addressed. That has enormous consequences. A study by the Sinus Institute in 2021 revealed that female workers with disabilities in Germany earn on average 667 euros less per month than their male counterparts with disabilities. At the same time, women with disabilities bear a far greater share of informal unpaid work and responsibilities as carers than their male counterparts. The numbers are astonishing: 78 percent of women with disabilities are burdened by this. That's almost the same number as the 80 percent of women without disability. If we look at the male ratio, we see 40 percent of men with disabilities are burdened with informal unpaid work compared to 30 percent men without disabilities. This is also a figure which I find most astonishing.

EZA: Let's talk about finding solutions. What can employers do to improve the situation?

Dunja Robin: The initial step, and possibly the most vital one for them to take, is to develop an awareness for the issue and foster an inquisitive mindset towards solving it. It is even better if employers perceive hiring women with disabilities not as a challenge, but as an opportunity and a solution to some of their existing concerns. A diverse workforce and inclusive workspace bring clear benefits for the company itself, including increased productivity, a good reputation, greater marketing opportunities and creativity. I assume that every country in the EU provides support measures for mitigating additional expense related to adjustments and assistive tools, as well as platforms that offer guidance. Employers should put the knowledge acquired to good use to create and document a comprehensive inclusion plan that

fosters diversity and is ingrained in the company's culture. It should consider various facets including recruitment, onboarding, continuous learning, career progression, support in cases of disabilities acquired during employment, and transition phases such as returning from parental leave or nearing retirement.

EZA: How can trade unions be of assistance?

Dunja Robin: Trade unions have the potential to go beyond awareness and implement concrete measures through collective agreements. Here are just a few examples. Trade unions can negotiate to include explicit non-discrimination clauses stating that there should be no discrimination based on disability. This can help ensure equal treatment and opportunities for women and girls with disabilities. Trade unions can also call for employers to allow reasonable arrangements for employees with disabilities, such as flexible work hours, assistive technology or workplace modifications. This is especially important for disabled women who may

“A DIVERSE WORKFORCE AND INCLUSIVE WORKSPACE BRING CLEAR BENEFITS FOR THE COMPANY ITSELF, INCLUDING INCREASED PRODUCTIVITY, A GOOD REPUTATION, GREATER MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES AND CREATIVITY.”

also have responsibilities as carers. Some trade unions negotiate for the inclusion of hiring quotas for people with disabilities. This requires employers to ensure that the workforce includes a certain percentage of people with disabilities. Moreover, trade unions can also advocate for workplace committees that focus on diversity and inclusion, including disability issues. These committees can be tasked with monitoring the implementation of inclusion measures for disabled people. Finally, trade unions can help negotiate disability-related leave policies that are accommodating and non-penalizing.

Infobox 1

In March 2021, the EZA published the study “People with disabilities on the labour market: Levers for a higher employment rate” in collaboration with the HIVA Research Institute for Work and Society in Leuven, Belgium. The study can be found and downloaded at www.eza.org and offers additional information on the topic discussed in this interview. For example, the study highlights that there is little to no trade union involvement in innovative projects for greater integration of people with disabilities: “Despite the fact that many of the trade unions in the various countries are actively involved in publicly defending the rights of people with disabilities on the labour market, they rarely participate in designing or implementing the various projects.” However, according to the authors, there are definitely possibilities for trade unions to play a greater role, which could improve the labour market chances for people with disabilities while at the same time increasing membership and support for the trade unions.

“AND I WOULD LIKE TO STRESS ONCE MORE THAT ANY FEARS EMPLOYERS MAY HAVE OF THESE WORKERS BEING OFF SICK MORE THAN OTHERS, OR LESS MOTIVATED OR OTHERWISE LESS PRODUCTIVE ARE, IN MOST CASES, A MISCONCEPTION.”

EZA: Principle 17 in the European Pillar of Social Rights stresses that people with disabilities have the right to income support that ensures living in dignity, services that enable them to participate in the labour market and in society, and a work environment adapted to their needs. At the same time, most EU countries have quota systems for private or public enterprises or institutions. Awareness versus quotas – do we need more regulation, perhaps also on the EU level, or would you prefer a strategy of awareness and education?

Dunja Robin: When considering solutions for promoting inclusivity, a balanced approach that combines awareness and education with regulation can be most effective. Simply imposing measures without understanding and support can lead to frustration and resistance, while solely relying on voluntary commitments often falls short of achieving the desired outcomes. I think it's crucial to establish a framework with clear guidelines and consequences that are perceived as fair. This framework should encompass awareness-raising campaigns, educational initiatives, incentives, deterrents and well-defined rules. Quotas have proven to be effective, especially in the short term, as they initiate and promote the desired transformation.

EZA: Does greater integration of women and girls with chronic diseases or disabilities offer economic advantages for the EU?

Dunja Robin: That's a clear yes! Integrating women and girls with chronic diseases or disabilities into the workforce and society can offer several economic benefits for the European Union. These include the increased workforce and productivity: the EU can expand its workforce by integrating women and girls with disabilities into the labour market. Their unique perspectives and skills contribute to innovation and productivity. Again, we are talking here about 60 million people with individual skill sets. And I would like to stress once more that any fears employers may have of these workers being off sick more than others, or less motivated or otherwise less productive are, in most cases, a misconception. Secondly, there is a reduced dependency on social welfare. When women and girls with disabilities are in paid employment, they are less likely to be dependent on social welfare schemes. This reduces the burden on the welfare system and generates additional tax revenues, turning welfare recipients into productive, tax-paying members of society. And thirdly, as already mentioned above, a diverse workforce brings clear benefits to companies.

Infobox 2

Also in March 2021, the European Commission adopted the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030. This strategy contains a set of actions and initiatives such as the European Accessibility Resource Centre “AccessibleEU” and the EU Disability Card that aims to facilitate proper support when people with disabilities travel or move to another EU country. The European Commission also established its renewed HR strategy, including measures to promote diversity and inclusion. More information can be found at www.ec.europa.eu.



Dunja Robin, born in Ingolstadt in 1985, has been working as Managing Director at Netzwerkfrauen Bayern since 2017. This organization is an association of women that represents the interests of women and girls with disabilities and chronic diseases. The Netzwerkfrauen network offers advice based on the peer-to-peer principle which implies that only affected people advise affected people. They support their target group with regard to specific questions, organize meetings for direct encounters or establish contact with other organizations, persons or initiatives. Dunja Robin studied social work. She has personal and professional experience of the many barriers faced by women with disabilities in the labour market. If you would like to get to know Dunja better, you can listen to the latest episode of the EZA podcast “We Work Europe”.



EZA SNACK DEBATES: OUR NEW EVENT SERIES IN BRUSSELS

A new series of events to discuss the most relevant developments in EU social policy



TEXT: Sergio De la Parra
PHOTOS: EZA

In June, our Brussels team launched the EZA “Snack Debates” series. This new event format aims to strengthen our foothold in Brussels, while offering members and friends in the capital a new space to discuss the most relevant developments in EU social policy. In addition to providing a platform for exchange, these face-to-face or hybrid events also offer our participants the opportunity to network with like-minded organizations. To this end, we invite experts in the field to help us gain a better understanding of the topic of the day during a short, informal debate. No big conferences, no expensive banquets. Just interesting content served up as a snack.

The first two meetings – one online and the other one in hybrid format – focused on the Year of Skills and the reform of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) respectively. For the first meeting, it was our pleasure to welcome Kristīne Krivmane, Team Leader for the European

Year of Skills at the Commission’s DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, and ETUC advisor Agnès Roman. The discussion focused on the Year of Skills’ objectives, its main initiatives and the players involved. Ms Roman also pointed out that it was a mistake just to focus on the skills mismatch, adding that European companies do not lack skilled workers but fail to offer them quality jobs.

Our guest for the debate on the reform of the SGP was Frédéric Allemand, research fellow at the Law Faculty of the University of Luxembourg. After outlining the main features of the new package, Allemand discussed some controversial aspects of these new rules, including the social dimension of the new SGP and the democratic legitimacy of the process, as well as the questionable effectiveness of the package and its legal complexity. **We look forward to seeing you at the upcoming events!**



MAGAZINE



WE WORK EUROPE

The EZA magazine for your ears

From now on, you can listen to EZA's new **We Work Europe** podcast on your smartphone or PC free of charge. In the comfort of your own home or while you are on the move. In the future, three episodes will be published for each EZA magazine and will appear on all podcast platforms.

For **We Work Europe**, we travel throughout Europe and meet member centers as well as experts in the field of labor issues, discuss current events and look at developments in social dialogue and European social policy.

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