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Editorial

Digitalization of Working Worlds and Social Inclusion

Alice Melchior [1,*] and Simone Haasler [2]

[1] Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences (GESIS), Germany
[2] Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany

* Corresponding author (alice.melchior@gesis.org)

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Abstract
Digitalization is engendering profound societal transformation that is significantly restructuring our working lives. For society, and the world of work in particular, digitalization presents a major challenge, as the digital transformation of work does not simply relate to technological innovation; rather, it involves a complex sociotechnical process that is socially prepared, technically enabled, and discursively negotiated, and that ultimately must be individually mastered. As a result, the ongoing digitalization of "working worlds" is characterized by multiple dimensions and processes that evolve and proceed unevenly. These processes interact in complex ways, not uncommonly contradicting each other. Against this background, this thematic issue explores some of the implications and dynamics of the digital transformation of work concerning social inclusion.

Keywords
digital transformation of work; digitalization; social inclusion; sociotechnical processes; world of work

Issue
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1. Introduction

Investigating the relationship between work and technology, as well as their social and organizational modifications, remains a chief aim in the social sciences: How technological innovation impacts and transforms work has been at the very center of the research agenda for decades. Studies on digitalization have thus become a dominant research field in the sociology of work (e.g., Pfeiffer & Suphan, 2020). As the current digitalization is engendering profound societal transformation, digital transformation can be understood as a megatrend in society's present and future development that also significantly restructures our working lives.

Given the sustained interest in the digital transformation of work, it is not surprising that numerous research approaches and perspectives seek to better understand the digitalization of "working worlds," producing a multitude of research findings. However, based on the literature on digitalization and work, three main assumptions prevail: First, digitalization does not simply relate to technological innovation, but rather should be understood as a complex sociotechnical process (Henke et al., 2018; Hirsch-Kreinsen, 2020; Joyce et al., 2023). Nevertheless, technologies are a relevant factor in digital transformation. Second, the influence of technologies on work differs in relation to their contextual embeddedness. This means that different segments of the labor market are affected to different degrees, as the influence of technologies varies, for example, by occupational field, organizational type, and work process (Orlikowski, 2000). Indeed, the use of technologies, and technologies themselves, are significantly shaped by social relations and organizational structures (e.g., Joyce et al., 2023), which are context specific. Third, the sociotechnical process of digitalization should not be understood as coherent, but rather as a multi-layered, contradictory, and unsynchronized process that is socially prepared, technically enabled, and discursively negotiated, and that ultimately must be individually mastered (Henke et al.,

2018). As a result, the digitalization of working worlds is characterized by multiple dimensions and processes that evolve and proceed unevenly, interacting in complex ways and not uncommonly contradicting each other. While new technologies open up abundant technical possibilities in the context of work, the potential of new technologies for the world of work needs to be negotiated and socially prepared. This happens, for example, in discourse about new business models, adjusted working conditions, and new work realities. It also involves conflict about the compatibility of work and family life and work–life balance. Hence, digital transformation not only offers opportunities for social inclusion but also has the potential to reproduce and reinforce existing inequalities or to create new ones. This points to the necessity to address and examine the implications and dynamics of the digital transformation of work concerning social inclusion.

2. Relations Between Work, Technology, Organization, and Society

While different approaches and lines of argument evolve around the complex, multi-layered, and unsynchronized digital transformation of work, three overarching strands of discussion can be identified in research on the digitalization of work. These address the relationship between (a) work and society, (b) work and organization, and (c) work and technology.

In the relationship between work and society, we can see that the social impact of digitalization results in disadvantages for certain groups in the labor market and in structural inequality. These disadvantages relate to gender disparities, uneven labor market participation, newly emerging employee categories, and concerns around work–life balance, to name a few. Also, the relationship and interaction between service and production are changing significantly due to digitalization processes. In the relationship between work and organization, we observe that employees' working conditions are changing, new business models are evolving, labor policy is struggling to establish regulations for digital work, and inter-company processes are being restructured. Hence, the digital transformation of work is also modifying the interplay between autonomy and control, between managers and employees, between management and representative bodies, and between platform providers and crowd workers, among others. In the relationship between work and technology, the focus lies on changes in work processes within organizations. Observed changes include the modification of sociotechnical structures and related forms of interaction and collaboration, which may significantly affect and restructure individuals' workplaces. In this context, the Internet of Things (IoT), Big Data, and artificial intelligence (AI) enable increasing connectivity and integration of physical and digital worlds, with the result that interaction and collaboration between several institutional actors, people, and robotic systems, and between people and algorithms are undergoing dynamic expansion. New job profiles, skill demands, and training requirements are one facet of the implications that these dynamics may induce.

3. The Articles in This Thematic Issue

The articles presented in this thematic issue cover a wide range of methodological approaches and theoretical concepts, as well as empirical research focusing on various work domains, groups of employees, and employment contexts. Most of the articles contribute empirical results to the discussion about the digitalization of the world of work and social inclusion. In addition, it should be noted that this thematic issue presents European perspectives, as all empirical articles use data from one European country or from across Europe. Whereas most articles apply either qualitative or quantitative methodologies, one mixed-method article provides insight into workers' perspectives on the risks and challenges of online platform work, taking their different living situations, socioeconomic status, and health issues into account (Klaus et al., 2023).

Regarding the three overarching strands of digitalization of working worlds, the articles in this thematic issue address primarily the relationship between (a) work and society and (b) work and organization. Although the relationship between work and technology is also considered, changes in work processes within organizations and changing occupational profiles or qualification requirements are not the focus of the contributions. Regarding the relationship between work and society, the articles focus on (un)equal participation in digitalization processes by looking at gender, negotiation positions, levels of material and digital resources, and conflict between work and private life against the background of more flexible forms of working. The thematic focus of the discussion of the relation between work and organization is on platform work, new work realities induced by digitalization, and how telework impacts job quality.

Baumgart et al. (2023) start the issue with a theoretical analysis of the role that organizations play in digitalization processes and how they (re)produce, reinforce, or diminish gender-specific inequalities when new technologies are introduced. In their analysis, the authors look at the reciprocal relationship between organizations, digitalization, and gender. This is followed by a study by Nerland et al. (2023) on discourses of digitalization and inequalities of participation in digitalization processes among Norwegian healthcare workers and how these workers negotiate their positions when new technologies are being introduced. De Marco et al. (2023) study inequalities in labor market participation by looking at how inequalities in material and digital resources of Spanish job seekers influence the outcomes of online job-seeking processes and how this is connected to incidences of burnout. The subsequent three

articles discuss the influence of more flexible and digitalized forms of work on the compatibility of work and private life: Abendroth and Schwarz (2023) shed light on how digital communication with supervisors influences the perceived need for work–life supportive supervisor behaviors in Europe. Entgelmeier and Rinke (2023) show that gender-typical patterns of gainful employment in Germany are reinforced by work-related ICT use even though it is associated both with working overtime and with better temporal alignment of work and private life. Schongen (2023) uses data from German hospitals to explore the impact of digital technologies on work–life balance and its influence on gender- and education-specific inequalities.

The thematic issue then moves on to aspects of the relation of work and organization with a focus on platform work and changing job realities. Arcidiacono and Piccitto (2023) start this section of the issue with a discussion of the myth that platform work is inclusive by analyzing the impact of platform models on job quality in Italy using the OECD Job Quality Framework. Two other articles also discuss the perspectives of platform workers and their work realities: Klaus et al. (2023) analyze the risks and challenges that German-speaking online platform workers face. They differentiate between micro-, meso-, and macro-work and different groups of online platform workers categorized based on their living situations, socioeconomic status, and health. Wiesböck et al. (2023) examine how domestic cleaners in Vienna experience working in the gig economy and how their work realities are modified for the worse as platforms transform the two-party relation between clients and cleaners into an ambiguous three-party constellation.

Friedrich and Vicari (2023) conclude the thematic issue with a study on how the boost in telework during the Covid-19 pandemic modified subjective job quality in different occupational fields.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors

Alice Melchior is a research associate (post-doc) and project coordinator at GESIS Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences in Germany, and a participating researcher in the German Research Foundation (DFG) priority program Digitalisation of Working Worlds. With a background in the sociology of work and technology as well as in science and technology studies, her research examines different facets and dynamics of digitalization in the context of flexibilization, virtual communication, valuation, and job profiles. Her current project focuses on the implications of digitalization for qualification, workplace design, and employment.

Simone Haasler is a social scientist with a research interest in labor market developments, work trajectories and careers, skills, and learning from an international comparative perspective. Before taking up her current position as Deputy Head of the Research Support Division of Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany, she led one of the research projects in the DFG priority program Digitalisation of Working Worlds. Her publications focus on labor market segregation by gender, addressing the interplay between vocational education and training systems, labor market structures, and welfare systems.