

Draft Workforce Partnership Council (WPC) Paper - Partnership and Managing Change Annex: Managing the Transition to a Digital Workplace

Purpose

1. To provide the WPC with a draft annex and set of principles for introducing new digital technology into the workplace that can be included as an annex to the Partnership and Managing Change agreement.

Action

2. WPC members are asked to consider and approve the draft annex to the Partnership and Managing Change agreement, including the set of related principles for introducing new digital technology into the workplace.

Background

3. The proposal to develop and publish principles on digitalisation as part of 'Partnership and Managing Change' was agreed by the WPC during the meeting of the Council on the 15 March 2021. Specifically, it was agreed this should be commenced as part of the WPC's 2021 Work Programme.
4. The principles are designed to complement the Partnership and Managing Change agreement and also recognise the importance of the social partnership approach. They are underpinned by a number of the Fair Work Commission's key characteristics for fair work to ensure there is consistency within this broader policy context and alignment with the Welsh Government's Programme for Government.

Recommendations

5. The WPC are asked to formally ratify the proposed draft annex and related principles for inclusion in the Partnership and Managing Change agreement.

Partnership and Managing Change Annex: Managing the Transition to a Digital Workplace

Purpose

1. This annex to the Partnership and Managing Change agreement outlines a set of principles for managing and supporting the workforce as a result of increasing digitalisation. The principles specifically promote a social partnership approach to the involvement, participation and consultation of staff and trade unions.

Introduction

2. In the modern workplace digitalisation takes a variety of forms from the use of automated machinery, to the application of sophisticated data analysis or the use of complex and intelligent computer systems. These features have the potential to offer significant benefits to both organisations and employees but they also raise a number of fundamental questions about the future of work.
3. The true impact of digitalisation remains an area of contention but there is a general acceptance that new technologies offer a variety of challenges for the future, both to how public services are delivered and their resulting impact on the workforce. Research also consistently highlights that digitalisation is likely to affect disproportionately some sectors and workers over others. Whatever the extent of potential impacts, there is little doubt that advances in digitalisation will continue at pace, changing public expectations on how services are provided and how the workplace is both viewed and operated in the future.
4. The impact of the Covid19 pandemic greatly exacerbated a number of drivers that were already in place increasing the demand for digitalised technologies. These included the effects of budget constraints on public services, departure from the European Union, public demand for digitalised services and developments in the world of technology itself, all exerting pressure for more innovative solutions to service delivery. The pandemic itself has redefined how the work environment looks, creating greater need for hybrid models of working based around digitalisation that provide greater flexibility to both employers and the workforce.
5. It is important that the full extent of the challenges that lay ahead are considered within the context of social partnership so that an equitable and balanced approach can be adopted to managing digitalisation in the workplace. For this reason a series of dedicated principles have been constructed as a discrete annex to Partnership and Managing Change. These offer a way of approaching the introduction of new technologies that respect each side of the employment relationship. As such, they provide a useful framework for understanding the introduction and implementation of digitalisation in the workplace which can complement or update an organisation's existing policy statement on partnership and managing change.

Policy Context

6. The policy context is set within the understanding that change is inevitable and that planning for the impact of digitalisation through social partnership is essential.
7. The Partnership and Managing Change agreement is central to introducing new ways of working into public services across Wales. In particular the specific section which outlines the principles of managing change offers the opportunity to provide both consistency and context to the principles set out here for digitalisation. For example, they emphasise the importance of employment continuity, workforce planning, consultation with trade unions and working in social partnership. As such, the principles for managing digitalisation are perfectly suited to be included as an addendum to the Partnership and Managing Change agreement.
8. Social partnership as a policy area in Welsh Government is central to the ambition to make Wales a fair work nation. The need to strengthen social partnership arrangements in Wales was also one of the key recommendations of the Fair Work Commission. To develop consistency in approach, the principles for digitalisation are underpinned by a number of the Commission's key characteristics for fair work as follows:
 - Employee voice and collective representation
 - Security and flexibility
 - Opportunity for access, growth and progression
 - Safe, healthy and inclusive working environment
 - Legal rights respected and given substantive effect
9. In developing the principles for digitalisation by using the characteristics of fair work there is also alignment with the Welsh Government's Programme for Government. Taken together, the Partnership and Managing Change agreement, the Fair Work Commission's recommendations and the Welsh Government's Programme for Government (including the commitment to social partnership and fair work) offer a powerful policy context for developing and promoting the principles for digitalisation set out in this document.
10. The Welsh Government's Digital Strategy also sets out a vision and ambition for a coordinated digital approach across Wales. It recognises that digitalisation is not simply about technology but new ways of thinking, designing public services around users whilst ensuring the workforce is provided with the opportunity to develop digital skills on a continuous basis. The strategy commits to reviewing how public services deliver digital, promoting standards through the development of training and knowledge sharing.

Principles for Digitalisation

These principles are designed to support the significant introduction of digitalisation into the workplace, recognising both the benefits and the impact this can have on the workforce. They develop the broader principles of Partnership and Managing Change setting out ways of working, expectations and guidance regarding the implementation of digitalisation in the devolved public service work place.

Principle 1: Employee Voice and Participation

Interpretation

It is important that staff are consulted at an early stage over the introduction of digitalisation in the workplace so they are involved in the changes being proposed.

Ask

That employers consult trade unions at an early stage over any proposed introduction of digitalisation into the work place explaining the rationale for change. This should allow trade unions sufficient time to discuss any concerns with their members and explore the potential impact of the measures being proposed as part of the implementation process.

Evidence

- That regular structured meetings are held with workers through their trade unions e.g. through Joint Consultative Committees or similar structures to involve them in the introduction of new digital technologies in the workplace.

Principle 2: Flexible and Secure Job Change

Interpretation

That there is clear and consistent communication to the workforce over any proposals relating to job redesign or job redeployment as a result of digitalisation.

Ask

That staff and trade unions are given early notice of any intentions to restructure existing jobs or redeploy staff due to the introduction of new digital technologies. This should include access to proposed workforce planning arrangements as well as the criteria and assessment methods being used to redeploy staff, or restructure jobs, so that employees and trade unions understand the processes involved. Staff and trade unions should be kept informed of developments through regular communication with employers including details of relevant timescales.

Evidence

- That clear guidance is produced supported by regular engagement, outlining workforce planning arrangements and the process being adopted for any job restructure or redeployment of staff including key criteria and timelines.

Principle 3: Opportunity for Progression and Growth

Interpretation

That the introduction of digitalisation into the workplace provides important opportunities for staff and it is essential that these are matched by suitable levels of training and development.

Ask

That the level of training being provided to staff fully supports the use of new digital technologies and does not compromise the ability of a person to perform their job. That organisational training recognises the need to monitor the pace of technological change so it can evolve accordingly to ensure training remains relevant and of a sufficient quality to support continuous learning and skills development. For both staff and trade unions to be informed at an early stage of the types of training being developed so they can better understand and access what is being provided.

Evidence

- That the importance of developing digital skills is recognised in corporate training and development plans and actively promoted within an organisation to ensure full transparency of the opportunities available.

Principle 4: Health Safety and Well-being

Interpretation

That staff are fully supported through the personal impact potentially created by the introduction of new digital technology.

Ask

That the introduction of digitalisation into the workplace is managed in consultation with trade unions so it does not impact negatively on the health and well-being of staff. This should take account of appropriate legislation and include a full analysis of the risks presented to staff by different forms of digitalisation, including those with protected characteristics, to ensure technology is introduced safely and inclusively.

Evidence

- That comprehensive risk and equality impact assessments are developed and regularly reviewed in consultation with trade unions to ensure staff are fully supported regarding the introduction of new digital technology.

Principle 5: Respecting Workers Rights

Interpretation

That the employment rights of workers are substantively acknowledged through the introduction of new digital technology.

Ask

That the introduction of digital technology does not adversely affect compliance with statutory employment rights and standards. That employers are proactive in ensuring workers' rights are safeguarded in the design and implementation of new technology. That workers and their trade union representatives are engaged at an early stage in order to understand how the implementation of new technology relates to statutory employments rights and standards.

Evidence

- That employers, in consultation with trade unions, conduct a review of the impact of new technology on employment rights and standards and ensure workers are kept informed.