



The impact of digitalisation on job quality and social dialogue in public services across the EU

Facing the impact of the digitalisation of public services in Spain: the challenge for proactive collective bargaining

Executive summary

Authors:

*Alicia Martínez Poza and Jesús Cruces Aguilera
Fundación 1º de Mayo*

Introduction

This research paper presents the results of the national study carried out as part of the European Commission-funded DIGIQU@LPUB project, which studies the impact of digitalisation on job quality and social dialogue in the public services.

The project aims at improving understanding of the impact of digitalisation on job quality in the public services, by highlighting the perceptions that workers themselves have of the changes generated by digitalisation in the performance of their daily tasks. The study focuses specifically on three sectors: public administration, electricity and hospitals. The project also aims at raising awareness among trade unions and decision-makers of the consequences of the digital transition of work for the public services. From a methodological point of view, the following tools have been used: a) desktop research; b) twelve semi-structured interviews with key informants; c) an online survey of workers; and d) three focus groups with workers and trade union representatives in the selected sectors. Taken together, this information (qualitative and quantitative) has provided first-hand insights into the reality of digital change in public services.

Background information

Over the last decade, the debate on the effects of digitalisation on employment in Spain has become important, following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. The increase in interest in the topic is due to the impact of the crisis, which has helped to boost some pre-existing trends. Digital transformation has also become one of the central pillars of *NextGenerationEU*, which in Spain is being implemented through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan.

Since 2020, the Spanish digital strategy has been mainly deployed through two instruments, coordinated by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Digital Transformation: the *Digital Spain 2025* agenda (recently updated to *Digital Spain 2026*) and the *Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan* (RTRP), which incorporates the various actions included in the agenda. Social dialogue has played a leading role in the laws promoted by the Ministry of Labour: both the law on remote work and the law on the labour rights of workers on digital platforms were agreed with the main trade unions (CCOO and UGT) and the main employers' organisations (CEOE and CEPYME).

In the 2022 Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), the European Commission's mechanism for monitoring progress in digitalisation in Member States, Spain was in seventh place, obtaining a score of 60.8. This position is due, to a large extent, to the important progress made in digital public services, a strategy that has been promoted throughout the central state administration.

Job insecurity is a structural feature of employment in Spain, with a high level of temporary employment. This is why the debate on the repercussions of digitalisation on the quality of employment is of particular relevance in the Spanish context. The current lines of research focus on the digitalisation and quality of employment, from different perspectives: occupational health – ergonomic studies and psychosocial risks; working conditions for platform workers; and, more recently, telework and the 'platformisation' of other sectors due to the increasing use of artificial intelligence. Much of the analysis refers to gaps related to gender, age or educational attainment.

Key findings

The incorporation of new technologies into the electricity sector has gone hand in hand with privatisation of the sector, with a change in business strategy and work organisation. Many new technologies have been introduced, both in personnel management and in the development of work processes. Although the intensification of work seems to be a common finding of the DIGIQU@LPUB survey, the interviews and the focus groups, there is no clear

view on other impacts of new digital technologies. While the survey shows a somewhat positive perception of the resulting autonomy and the benefits of telework, the delegates interviewed and the focus group participants also highlight the negative impacts associated with increased individual responsibility, monitoring and increased competition between colleagues.

In recent years, collective bargaining has focused on the negotiation of various agreements which, while not directly addressing the company's digitalisation strategy, refer to it indirectly as a central element. Closely linked to the implications of digital change, an agreement has been reached on time tracking (associated with the digital clocking-in system), on teleworking and a final agreement on disconnection. In addition, a flexibility roundtable was set up, with the participation of the social partners, to monitor these agreements.

The public administration has undergone a very intense process of digital transformation in the last decade, boosted as a result of the pandemic: the implementation of digital public services has advanced rapidly and today public workers use a multitude of digital resources in their work processes and in the services provided to citizens.

Our analysis shows that the impact on working conditions is uneven, particularly in relation to telework, which is perceived as the major incorporation of digital tools by public employees in recent years. The public sector workforce seems to see teleworking as an opportunity to improve certain working conditions, but trade unions are very reluctant to consider these benefits without weighing up the significant risks they perceive in relation to teleworking. There is, however, a shared view of the impact on processes and tasks, describing a reduction of repetitive tasks and increased work intensity. This implies longer working hours, with difficulties in reconciling work and family life as well as occupational risks, especially psychosocial risks. Besides, training seems to be one of the weaknesses to be addressed.

Concerning digitalisation, telework is high on the social dialogue agenda. Although there are differences across the country, the application of remote working in the central administration has been addressed unilaterally by the central government, with unequal implementation in different institutions. The trade unions are calling for collective teleworking agreements on issues such as identifying the needs of the services and the conditions applicable to teleworking, thus extending collective rights in an agreement that is considered to be individual.

The health sector in Spain, and hospitals in particular, has been incorporating digital tools in recent decades, and the pandemic, as in other sectors, gave a strong impetus to the process. The entire patient management system has changed rapidly and will continue to do so in the

future. There is a generally positive perception of the benefits of digitalisation in improving care and quality of work, but it seems that the workload has intensified and working days have become longer. The Covid-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the healthcare system, which was seriously overstretched and whose shortcomings were highlighted.

The impact of digital change and the facilities provided to implement it depend, to a large extent, on the management of the hospitals and services themselves, on the professional category and age of the workers in the sector. Special emphasis is placed on the difficulties caused by the lack of resources for training during working hours, particularly for technical staff, which results in longer working hours and stress in the learning process.

In hospitals, the incorporation of new digital technologies is not in itself a focus of collective bargaining, which has been marked in recent years by the impact of the pandemic and a shortage of material and professional resources. However, digitalisation cuts across many of the needs raised with regard to working conditions. Particularly striking is the need for quality training for professionals, and for involvement of workers' representatives in the management of digital change.

In general terms, the social partners in the public services have not been very involved in the digital transformation in Spain: discussion takes place ex-post, addressing changes in work organization and working conditions.

Collective bargaining regulates specific matters affected by the digital change, which means that there are no global 'digitalisation agreements'. The social partners instead negotiate on specific aspects of the work situation. In this respect, the main issues addressed relate to telework (public administration, hospitals, electricity), training (public administration, hospitals, electricity), time management and flexibility (electricity).

Conclusion and policy pointers

The results of the present study highlight the importance of addressing the changes brought about by digitalisation in a comprehensive and proactive manner. This process of change must be approached from a holistic perspective, to guarantee, on the one hand, the quality of public services for all citizens, and on the other hand, the quality of employment and working conditions of civil servants and public sector workers.

The effects of digitalisation on working conditions are very much related to the organisation of work, since the intensification of the pace of work and the need to improve training and qualifications are key results extracted from the project's online survey. Better work-life

balance measures, reducing working hours and inclusion of training for workers in working time are possible tools for better wellbeing at work.

It is important to ensure sufficient staff in the public services, limiting attempts to privatise or outsource activities and services, which would have an impact on the quality of service. The uneven impact of digitalisation on working conditions should also be monitored, exploring the particularities not only of sectoral conditions, but especially of occupational differences, considering age, gender and territorial gaps. The impact on working conditions should be monitored through participatory tools to evaluate psychosocial risks.

National stakeholders could address changes by drawing up participatory protocols for action, incorporating a clear and specific procedure to ensure that new technology is not intrusive for workers; those proposing pilot projects should evaluate the impact of technological implementation on workplaces and specific jobs; and bipartite monitoring committees should be set up.

In order to address the changes in a pre-emptive and participatory manner, it is necessary to strengthen workers' rights of information and consultation and enhance social dialogue and collective bargaining. European social dialogue plays a very important role in supporting the social dialogue in the different countries, generating and promoting negotiation processes between the social partners on matters affected by digitalisation, in the various areas and at the various recognised levels.

DIGIQU@LPUB website: <https://www.ose.be/digiquapub/>

Email: amartinez@1mayo.ccoo.es

Referring to this publication: Martínez Poza, A. and Cruces Aguilera, J. (2023), Facing the impact of the digitalisation of public services in Spain: the challenge for proactive collective bargaining. DIGIQU@LPUB project. OSE Working Paper Series, Research Paper No. 57, Brussels: European Social Observatory, July.

With the financial support of the

