Commission: ILO (International Labour Organisation)

Question: Does technology help or hinder working conditions?

Author: Spain

Spain lacks an adequate influx of new technology and it lacks enough skilled work for its highly educated population. Regrettably, Spain is not currently known for being a leader in the field of technological innovation. With the current increase of technological advancements globally in an age referred to by some as the “fourth industrial revolution”, employments that entail repetitive activities or the analysis of large amounts of data are becoming increasingly scarce: being replaced by automation. Despite an initial loss in jobs, this automation replacement allows for a more skilled, higher paid workforce with better livelihoods to become accessible for more workers.

Due to Spain’s tourist-orientated economy, the country has a large focus on the service sector and therefore is difficult to digitalise. The number of annual patent applications per country reflect a focus (or lack thereof) on new technologies. In 2014, in South Korea over 3000 patent applications per million people were recorded in contrast with an average 460 patents in EU member states. Unfortunately, during this period Spain recorded fewer than 100 patents. Despite its technological shortcomings, Spain wishes to adhere to the UN SDGs (sustainable development goals); particularly goal number 8 which calls for the “promotion of sustained inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.”

Given the relatively high Spanish working hours (1687 hours per year) compared to other European countries such as Germany (1356 hours per year), Spain has a low rate of productivity. Spanish workers generate $48 per hour on average while German workers generate $60 per hour. Recent research has demonstrated in Spain’s case that investments in connectivity and globalisation over the past twenty-five years have measurably increased productivity of the country. However, not nearly enough to bring them on par with other EU member states. With a widespread uptake in the utilisation of technology by all sizes of companies, an increase in productivity and desirable growth in the economy could be observed. Furthermore, the promotion of the economy is able to generate investment opportunities, increased employment rates, sustainable livelihoods, and higher wages for workers.

Recent studies have demonstrated that 43% of jobs in Spain are at high risk of being replaced by an implementation of automated technology. Nonetheless, the potential to automate the economy must not be associated with detrimental effects and the disappearance of employment. In various countries, technology has been shown to reduce the number of professions yet not reduce opportunities to work. Spain would encourage the introduction of the automation of some professions as the technological advancement would give many people the chance to redirect their nature of work, allowing workers to dedicate themselves to new activities to develop all of their potential (i.e. focusing on their human advantages over autonomous technology such as creativity, perception and intelligence). Additionally, with the implementation of autonomous technologies, new jobs could be created where autonomation would complement workers, increasing productivity which would lead to an increase of salary and improved the conditions of work.

A current report published by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) has concluded that in contrast to other EU countries the Spanish population works difficult hours with an average workday spanning from 9:00 until 21:00. In addition, Spain’s Centre for Sociological Studies has found that 45% of Spaniards say that they find it hard to address family issues given the amount of time they spend at work. Moreover, 36% of respondents stated that they attained only 3 hours of non-work free-time on average per day. Excessive working hours have been shown to create an upward trend in both stress and absenteeism. To remedy the situation, technology can be utilised to construct more flexible working hours schedules via teleworking applications. This teleworking model has accidently become trialled by workers and employers due to the stringent COVID-19 lockdown measures implemented by Spain beginning in March 2020 which prevented many workers from carrying out their jobs in situ. There is now the potential that teleworking could revolutionise working hours allowing for better work-life balance as well as less strenuous work demands.

Despite Spain's current lack in all round technological advancements, Spain is a prominent figure in the European automotive industry. An example of the beneficial uptake of technology is able to be viewed at the SEAT factory where the implementation of exoskeletons has happened in order to aid workers with heavy lifting, to provide structural support for employees and to reduce stress on the body. Spain is obliged to advance its technological exploits in the future and recognises the importance of such new technology. This is confirmed by José Luis Bonet, the head of the Spanish Chamber of Commerce who stated, "companies should realise that digitation and innovation are not an option, but rather an essential condition to assure their survival and progress."

Spain believes the introduction of new technologies to be key for the future success in improving their workforce's labour conditions. In order to boost the positive utilisation of technological innovation, Spain is committed to the implementation of autonomous working to increase productivity which will lead to growth in the economy. By educating and re-training workers displaced by the automation shift, companies could re-deploy these employees to work in complement with these new technologies. With an enriched technology-centric economy Spain would have the fiscal capabilities to assist all workers and employers and create advantageous and favourable employment conditions.