CALL FOR PAPERS AND PANELS

Employment in the Era of AI and Digital Platforms: Understanding and Regulating Transitions

22ⁿᵈ CONFERENCE IN COMMEMORATION OF PROFESSOR MARCO BIAGI

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Marco Biagi Foundation - University of Modena and Reggio Emilia

Introduction

Among the great challenges posed to employment relations in our society, the use of technology, data, and, most importantly, automated systems and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in any economic sector plays a crucial role.

In this context, AI represents the most advanced and complex family of technologies, which, despite delivering a wide range of economic and societal benefits across the full spectrum of industries and social activities, also entails several challenges as well as new threats to human beings and their fundamental rights.

The current level of implementation of AI systems involves a wide range of applications: for example, software for voice, image, and facial recognition, industrial and domestic robots, autonomous vehicles, virtual assistants, as well as any assistive technology to improve the functional capabilities of people with disabilities.

In the world of work, such implementation has mainly taken two forms: the first is directed at redefining tasks that workers perform, while the second, commonly referred to as "algorithmic management" and whose success is mainly due to and facilitated by the platform economy business model, involves the use of AI-based analytics and algorithms for management functions, i.e., hiring, monitoring, supervising, and training workers, as well as scheduling hours and breaks.

Both task redefinition and algorithmic management impact job quantity (the number of jobs) and job quality, including adherence to fundamental principles and rights at work, raising also concerns with regards to the room left for social partners in the highly fragmented, dematerialized workplace environment and to the increasingly unbalanced employment relationship.

The role of policymakers in this scenario is, therefore, pivotal, considering that the (inadequate) regulation of ongoing changes leaves innovation "free" to advance towards any outcome, which might not be the one that offers the greatest protection for humans and their rights.

In this regard, a regulatory response for AI governance has already been given by international actors pursuing different approaches, depending on the various balance among the many interests involved (innovation, security, respect for human rights, ethics) as well as on each country's societal values and national priorities. These include, but are not limited to, the risk-based approach (on which both the EU and US converge, despite various degrees of intensity and the eventual

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interaction with other regulatory sources); the anthropocentric approach (adopted by EU) and the state-control approach (followed by China).

These differences also deserve careful investigation concerning the various public and private powers that operate as market actors.

The extent of the changes and the introduction of new regulatory instruments calls for a new rationalisation of the state of the art, observing ongoing processes of change and digital transformation, and identifying innovative practices, in order to fill the existent and future shortcomings and grasp the upcoming challenges.

To this end, the Call for Papers encourages papers with a theoretical/conceptual approach, as well as papers adopting empirical methodologies. The papers should deal with the key issues related to AI and digital labour platform, on one or more of the following main topics/tracks:

- **Track 1: Navigating the Human-Machine Interface and its Occupational Implications.**
- **Track 2: The Bright and Dark sides of Algorithmic Management in the Age of Big Data and AI.**
- **Track 3: Human/Non-Human Rights and AI in the Work Environment and Beyond.**
- **Track 4: Collective Rights and Social Partners in the Era of AI and Automation.**
- **Track 5: From Threat to Opportunity: AI's Role in Promoting Workplace Inclusion.**

Track 1: Navigating the Human-Machine Interface and its Occupational Implications

One type of application of AI technology in the workplace entails the automation of tasks generally performed by workers.

In this circumstance, AI is not only used to automate repetitive tasks, potentially leading to redundancies, but it can also enable artificial agents to perform cognitive functions, such as decision making, previously only associated with humans. The intricate nature of such exploratory tasks, like solving new problems, demands a hybrid approach that integrates human intelligence with AI and may lead to augmentation, thanks to the complementarity between human labour and technology or replacement of humans also in creative tasks.

However, while the adoption of AI for problem-solving might augment human capacities, increasing the effectiveness and innovativeness of decision-making process, it could interfere with human behaviour by, for example, imposing formal rationality, exacerbating organisations' learning myopia and challenging the conventional boundaries of human labour performance.

Furthermore, the performance of cognitive functions by AI requires a new form of interaction between humans and machines, whose effects are central aspects of contemporary debate concerning the development of AI questioning also, from a structural perspective, the very roots of knowledge itself.

Beyond the technological determinism, such a combination can take place in different forms, leading to very different outcomes for both companies and individuals (also in terms of well-being and greater quality of work).

Against such a background, we invite papers that address, in particular, the following (but not exhaustive) issues and questions:

- Reflecting on how the increasingly dense interaction between human and non-human subjects impacts on the redefinition of professions and roles in the production mechanism;
- Exploring the conditions under which the humans-AI collaborations leads to win-win solutions for both workers and companies, i.e. in terms of productivity and well-being;
- AI design and adoption and related power dynamics;
- Management strategies to navigate the tensions or find a balance between automation and augmentation, control approaches;
- Exploring the relationship between AI and soft skills, in terms of replacement or complementarity with humans;
- Investigating if the augmentation of tasks may lead to new strategies of reasonable accommodation or work-life balance;
- New competences and complementary skills.

Track 2: The Bright and Dark sides of Algorithmic Management in the Age of Big Data and AI.

The availability of big data has triggered a significant transformation in the entire Human Resource landscape, leading to a shift from mere administrative functions, consisting of the collection of employee records, to more strategic and specialised functions which generally go under the label of algorithmic management.

The term was firstly coined to describe management systems adopted in the platform economy, which, since then, have constituted a laboratory for the development of algorithmic management devices, now entrenched in workplaces of any economic sector.

Nowadays, algorithmic management is considered a system of control that relies on machine-readable data and software algorithms to manage relationships with personnel and support organisational decisions dealing with nearly all the aspects and stages of the employment relationship, from recruitment to termination. Indeed, since the initial implementation of automated and algorithmic systems in the management of the workforce, we have observed a persistent transformation in the scope of the employer's authority, resulting in a shift towards a more mediated, augmented, and opaque system of powers at the disposal of the employer.

The advancements in digitalisation have been further triggered by the entrance of AI in HRM, which has transformed and enabled every facet of HR while contributing to firm's competitive advantage, in the name of greater objectivity, impartiality, accuracy and reduction of costs, and, consequently, has prompted the need to shed light on its potential benefits and dangerous drifts.

Albeit the important benefits stemming from the adoption of AI, this digital transformation entails several challenging aspects, such as the privacy concerns, the lack of transparency, the deterioration of collective protections and the discrimination risks, incorporated by historical and institutional bias.

Understanding these challenges is essential to balancing the benefits of AI with employee rights and well-being.

Against such background, we will welcome papers that address in particular the following (but not exhaustive) issues:

- Legal instruments and regulatory techniques to tackle the risks posed by algorithmic management;
- The subjective scope of legal protections against the abuses and malpractices in algorithmic management;
- How to ensure transparency, explainability and accuracy in HR decision-making;
- The impact of AI-enabled technologies in shaping HRM functions;
- The impact of algorithmic management in changing the allocation of powers, risks and responsibilities;
- Standardisation in HRM as a booster for indirect discriminations;
- Emerging AI tools and platforms for HRM professionals (i.e. AI applications in Recruitment and Selection, Automated Compensation Systems, personalized learning and development using AI algorithms, AI-driven career pathing and skill-mapping; continuous performance evaluation, personalised employee engagement strategies using AI);
- Changing roles of HR professionals in the era of AI;
- Bias reduction and fairness in AI-driven tools;
- AI-driven employee feedback systems and sentiment analysis;
- Enhancing workplace culture and employee satisfaction through AI.

Track 3: Human/Non-Human Rights and AI in the Work Environment and Beyond.

Although AI provides many economic and societal benefits across different industries and social areas, it also brings several risks and emerging threats to human beings and their fundamental rights, among which occupational health and safety, discrimination, data privacy, and, in general, the right to work, with critical social and environmental impact.

Concerning occupational health and safety, the impact of AI is multifaceted. On one hand, it may improve workplace safety by predicting hazards, monitoring compliance, and automating dangerous tasks. In this respect, AI also has a potential to improve workplace inclusiveness, as it can operate as a tool of reasonable accommodation. On the other hand, it can introduce new risks, such as those associated with the reliability of AI systems and the potential for decreased human oversight, while also questioning the boundaries for the identification of the employer's responsibility.

Another critical concern typically associated with AI and heavily impacting workers is the discrimination risk. Indeed, despite its presumed impartiality and accuracy, AI raises ethical concerns and exacerbates structural discriminations, due to either inherent algorithmic bias, absorbed by systemic issues, human or representation characteristics, or the opaque nature of algorithms, which masks intentional discriminatory conducts.

Data privacy is another fundamental right that intersects inevitably with AI, given that the use of AI involves by its very nature extensive data collection and analysis. Automated processing of such data, in this regard, entails at least four major concerns for workers: the collection or use of special categories of data; the risk of a losing control over one's personal data; and the decisions based on automated or semi-automated processing and on non-work-related data with legal effects for workers.

A common protection strategy advanced against these drifts of AI with regard to fundamental rights is the limitation in the use of this technology, either in terms of prohibition or in terms of substantive and procedural limitations, like for example a demand for explainability and transparency, allowing employees to understand how decisions affect their work and careers, while also ensuring mechanisms for human oversight.

A different strategy might pave the way for a protection of any kind of worker, including both human and non-human, in order to avoid exploitation of both and, as such, nullifying the competitive advantage between them as well as the consequent degradation of work.

However, as AI continues to advance, it is essential to prioritise the protection of fundamental rights in the workplace, leveraging AI's potential benefits while mitigating its risks. This requires a collaborative effort between policymakers, employers and researchers to create a future of work that upholds human dignity, safety, and inclusion. In this regard, the newest legislative instruments increasingly rely on compliance standards developed by private actors. This is a cause of concern insofar as it indicates the weakening of public control.

Against such a background, we invite papers that address, in particular, the following (but not exhaustive) issues and questions:

- Technological sovereignty and AI in a geopolitical perspective: the role of States and private powers;
- The social and environmental impact of AI;
- AI, ethics, and the protection of human rights;
- The investigation on the potential positive or negative implications of AI in terms of social and environmental sustainability;
- Implication of the use of enabling technology on workers' health and safety;
- Personal data protection and AI: intersections between disciplines and critical issues;
- Employee data governance, accuracy, robustness, and cybersecurity;
- Algorithmic transparency, explainable AI, and human oversight;
- The surge of new grounds of discrimination and the legal ground for protection;
- The issue of intersectionality and multifactorial discriminations in AI;
- The effectiveness of the hybrid approach of regulation between voluntary and mandatory legal measures.

Track 4: Collective Rights and Social Partners in the Era of AI and Automation.

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The implementation of AI and the increasing use of automated systems in the workplace increase the employer's powers and give them new forms, intensifying the existing imbalance in the employment relationship.

The need for collective protections is thus even greater. This should make the case for strengthening workers' representation rights, combining traditional instruments with innovative experimental practices. However, new technologies create unprecedented challenges for traditional actors, which they cannot readily cope with through well-established practices. This is particularly evident in platform work, where workers respond by reinventing collective organising (e.g. the riders' grassroots movements, their claim strategies and the results they achieved).

In many cases traditional unions have seen independent unions as competitors, thus avoiding the possibility to promote common actions, in other cases traditional unions, independent unions and grassroots groups managed to build variable alliances obtaining crucial outcomes reconstructing paths of solidarity.

Against this background, scholars and social partners point out that the active intervention of workers' representatives in the definition of design and management aspects related to the use of AI in production organisations, according to bargaining or collaborative partnership methods (or a mix of the two), represents a crucial factor not only for industrial democracy but also for the efficiency of production processes.

Furthermore, the role of social partners should be emphasised not only during the phases preceding and accompanying the introduction and use of automated decision-making and monitoring systems, which may include AI techniques (such as worker involvement, collective bargaining, and information) but also during the litigation phases. Finally, as seen in Europe, social partners can play a pioneering role in defining shared principles and strategies to harness the benefits and address the challenges posed by new technologies, especially in the absence of timely legislative interventions.

Against such a background, we invite papers that address, in particular, the following (but not exhaustive) issues and questions:

- Technological changes and strategic capability of the social partners;
- Relationship between better working conditions and the presence of workers' representatives in companies adopting technologies with AI components;
- Workers' representatives' role in of ensuring human supervision and control over AI systems, data processing and transparency;
- The emergence of litigation strategies as a way to tackle weak unionisation;
- Paths for an effective renewal of the collective representation within the frame of a fast-evolving industrial relations system;
- Online platform work and collective rights;
- Impact of the transnational nature of digital platforms on representation and collective rights;
- Trans-organisational and transnational alliances among platform workers;
- AI and workers' participation;

- How broader networks of actors collaborate to set standards and organise collective action to address issues pertaining to the use of AI in management;
- Collection of best practices in collective bargaining that try to switch the trend of job fragmentation and job insecurity;
- Negotiating the use of algorithms and AI in the workplace.

Track 5: From Threat to Opportunity: AI's Role in Promoting Workplace Inclusion.
Rather than conceiving AI uniquely as a threat to objectivity, neutrality, and inclusion, it may also represent an opportunity to foster inclusion in the workplace.

This may occur by using AI for the design and operation of enabling technologies, which can be a tool to meet the requirement of reasonable accommodation, supporting workers in their work performance and enhancing inclusivity. Indeed, the use of technologies using AI systems at work can benefit individuals with visual, motor, cognitive, and communicative disabilities by providing direct assistance and creating a more accessible work environment (i.e. for example enabling technologies, exoskeletons, or augmented reality). At the same time, it can open up access to opportunities for new jobs that were previously inaccessible to workers with disabilities.

Furthermore, it may be possible to leverage the flexibility of AI in the design of HRM processes in a way that corrects biases already happening in humans' mind, and yet opaque and not explicit, and meets the needs of vulnerable workers (i.e. such as tailoring their work-life balance demands). Such beneficial aspects of AI are also in line with the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which mandates countries, among other things, to promote the development, availability and use of new technologies suitable for persons with disabilities as well as to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination on the basis of disability by any person, organization or private enterprise.

Despite its significance, few scholars have delved into this area of research. Therefore, we encourage papers that address this background, and particularly the following (but not exhaustive) issues and questions:

- Impact of AI on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives within organisations;
- AI and new vulnerabilities in the world of work;
- Inclusive AI: tools for promoting diversity and mitigating biases;
- Involvement of vulnerable people in the development of inclusive AI systems;
- Practices for ensuring accessibility of AI-powered technologies, such as exoskeletons or augmented reality tools, for vulnerable people;
- New job opportunities arising for people with disabilities;
- AI role in training employees, both with and without disabilities, to work more effectively in increasingly digital and automated work environments;
- Balancing the use of inclusive AI and collection of sensitive data.

SUBMISSIONS

1) **Papers**. Scholars who intend to contribute to one of the conference tracks should present by 01 October 2024 a submission with:
• the title of the proposed paper;
• an extended abstract of about 2000 words (not including the bibliography), specifying the topic and the nature of the paper (theoretical analysis, discussion paper, presentation of empirical data);
• the disciplinary (or inter-disciplinary) domain of the paper (e.g., Labour Law, Organisation Theory, Labour Economics, Sociology, Industrial Relations);
• the author's affiliation;
• an indication of the conference track for which the paper is intended, bearing in mind that the Scientific Committee reserves the prerogative to assign papers to the track and session it deems to be most appropriate.

2) **Panels/Round Tables/Book presentations**. The organisers welcome the submission of proposals for full panel sessions (including round tables, book presentation or other innovative panel formats) addressing topics described in this call. Panels should consist of four presentations or three paper presentations and one discussant. The panel convenor may also serve as the chairperson of the panel. Proposals should be submitted by the panel convenor by 01 October 2024 and should indicate, in one single document:
• the title of the proposed panel and papers;
• the names of the speakers/discussant/chairperson;
• a brief outline of the objective and the rationale of the panel (about 500 words);
• an abstract of each paper (about 2000 words not including the bibliography).

PhD Panels. PhD candidates are encouraged to submit proposals on one of the topics included in the conference tracks. Up to 8 proposals will be selected to be included in one or more "PhD Panels" where authors will present their papers. Senior scholars will serve as discussants. To be eligible for a PhD panel, candidates shall defend their thesis no earlier than June 2025. The same deadlines apply.

Paper and panel/round tables/book presentation proposals will be selected by the Scientific Committee by 15 November 2024.

Selected authors (including panel proposals) will be required to submit a paper of 8000 - 10000 words no later than 14 February 2025. The papers should take the form of a research article rather than simply the description of a work in progress.

The Scientific Committee reserves the right to reject papers and panel proposals that are not consistent with the conference tracks or papers that are not consistent with the abstract previously approved.

As a condition of participation in the conference, the proposed work must remain unpublished (i.e., not under any stage of submission or review at any journal or book) before the closing of the conference. Primary publication opportunities will be provided to proponents of works selected by the Scientific Committee of the Conference. In any case, extended abstracts of all the selected papers will be given the greatest possible prominence.

The working language of the conference sessions is English, and interpretation services will not be available. Abstracts and papers should be submitted in English.

DEADLINES
• Deadline for submission of abstracts (papers and panels): **01 October 2024**
• Notification of acceptance: **15 November 2024**
• Deadline for submission of full papers (papers and panels): **14 February 2025**

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CONTACTS

Expressions of interest, panel proposals, abstracts, and full papers, as well as requests for information, should be addressed to the e-mail address: marcobiagiconference@unimore.it
The first draft of the conference program will be distributed by the end of January 2025
Further information will be posted on the Marco Biagi Foundation website: www.fmb.unimore.it

This call for papers has been elaborated by the Local Scientific Committee with the support of: Dr. Noemi Miniscalco (University of Modena and Reggio Emilia), Dr. Giuseppe Molinari (University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Marco Biagi Foundation), Dr. Federica Palmirotta (University of Modena and Reggio Emilia), Dr. Ilaria Purificato (University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Marco Biagi Foundation).