

# Designing work in a digitalising world

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**A German trade union has developed a ‘compass’ to help works councils frame digitalisation in workers’ interests.**



Thorben Albrecht

Industrial companies increasingly introduce digital technologies to raise productivity. This not only alters production but changes business models.

It also leads to new tasks at work and new work processes—with effects on job security, workloads and skill requirements and so the quantity and quality of work. Shaping the use of digital technologies on the shopfloor is therefore crucial for works councils and other workers’ representatives.

To ensure workers’ interests are articulated amid these new and often complex changes is not easy though. Trade unions need to provide workable tools, which allow works councils to assess new technologies and influence the processes. One such tool is the ‘compass for digitalisation’ which has been developed by the German metalworkers’ union IG Metall, together with researchers.



Detlef Gerst

**Clear picture**

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The compass is an aid to assess and shape digitised work. It helps actors in a company get a clear picture of the current situation and introduce, frame and improve digital work processes. Compared with other instruments that assess digitalisation in companies, the compass does not only measure to what extent digital possibilities are exploited but also evaluates whether a company's strategy is adequate and assesses the quality of the change process.

Its results help management and workers' representatives get a realistic and holistic impression of the state of play when it comes to digitalisation. Utilisation of the compass is therefore ideally done by a team made up of representatives of the works council, management and selected experts from affected departments. It is possible for works councils to use the tool without management participation—but it is advantageous for improvements in work design if there is joint action from the beginning. At least part of the team (or the moderator) should have a basic knowledge of occupational science.

There is one precondition for optimal impact: management and workers' representatives must be willing to evaluate and shape the situation together. First, they assess the current state of digitalisation and the existing work design. In a second step, they agree on targets to be achieved with new technology—achievement of these targets is subsequently measured with the help of the compass. Employees affected by the changes should be involved from an early stage and throughout the process.

### **Surveillance avoided**

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One instance where the compass has already been used by a works council is a 'Miele' factory near Hannover. At an assembly line for laundry dryers an assistance system was to be introduced, to help workers assemble different versions for different export countries' requirements. The works council used the compass to assess and document the work process and then analyse the new system, using a tablet to help workers avoid deficient products and manage their growing variability.

The works council was able to specify the workers' qualification needs and made sure that the new system could not be used to control workers' behaviour or performance. By using the compass, management and the works council could ensure that productivity targets were fulfilled, training schemes adjusted and surveillance of workers avoided.

Companies of course vary greatly in terms of their overall structure, as well as work organisation and workforce age and qualification range. So the compass has been designed for use in all industries and *vis-à-vis* all digital technologies. In each company it can be adjusted to the specific conditions, as it is constructed in such a way that every issue, every technology, each area in a company can be brought into focus—in detail and in an overview.

One aspect is crucial: introducing new technologies needs to be understood as a holistic process. New digital systems can only exceptionally be introduced in workplaces in 'plug in and play' mode. Rather, a systematic, co-ordinated approach is required, which while

sometimes tedious is necessary to improve both productivity and the quality of workplaces.

### **Knowledge and experience**

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Workers having a say in digitalisation is equally critical, to maintain or improve the quantity and quality of work and to secure workers' rights. Therefore, workers' representatives must enjoy a right to be involved in the design and application of digital tools from the outset.

But even if they have such rights, *securing* workers' interests in practice is often easier said than done, as workers' representatives can lack knowledge and experience in digitalisation. Trade unions must provide workers with the training and tools required to enable them to face the continual challenges of digitalisation.

The compass for digitalisation is such a tool to shape the future of work in a very practical way. Most works councils need external support by the union to use it for the first time. But the example of Miele shows that works councils can easily learn to use the tool autonomously.

### **About Thorben Albrecht and Detlef Gerst**

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Thorben Albrecht is policy director at IG Metall. He was a member of the Global Commission on the Future of Work established by the ILO and a state secretary at the German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs from 2014 to 2018. Detlef Gerst is head of the 'future of work' department in IG Metall. Previously he worked as a social scientist for the Sociological Research Institute at the University of Göttingen.