Workplace innovation for better jobs and performance

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Abstract
Purpose - This paper describes the need for workplace innovation policies and practices in Europe and evaluates programs that already have been developed.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper describes the concept of workplace innovation and trends in society explaining its emergence. The paper then presents and discusses the results of evaluation research as far as this is available.

Findings - A growing number of countries is conducting or developing some kind of programme on workplace innovation. These programmes differ in size and governance. Evaluation research shows that simultaneous improvement of performance and quality of working life is possible under certain conditions such as the participation of employees in change projects.

Research limitations – Concepts and designs of evaluation research projects differ considerably.

Implications - This gives new challenges for companies, trade unions, governments and researchers. In EU2020 little attention is paid to workplace innovation but there is a ray of hope in the draft integrated guidelines for employment policies and in the Flagship Initiative Innovation Union.

Originality/value – Social innovation in the workplace, or workplace innovation, is a new concept, covering to some extent new practices that appear to be relevant for organisations and governments.

Keywords Workplace innovation, organisational performance, quality of working life

Paper type Reflective practice, viewpoint

1. Global leadership

DSM Anti-Infectives in the Netherlands holds global leadership positions in active pharmaceutical ingredients such as penicillin. Key drivers of profitability are price and access to global markets. The key success factors are new technologies and operational excellence. The ingredients are produced using enzymes in biotechnological processes. Operational excellence was achieved by the introduction of autonomous teams and the creation of a special job, that of the operation expert, who gears activities of different departments for one another. After the introduction of these changes, the plant produced 50% more with 50% fewer staff members in each shift. Its competitive position is among the first three of the world.

2. Workplace innovation

This is a very good example of what we nowadays call Workplace Innovation. Workplace innovation is defined as the implementation of new and combined interventions in the fields of work organisation, HRM and supportive technologies. Workplace innovation is considered to be complementary to technological innovation. Some people use the broader concept of non-technological innovation, in which also dynamic management, new marketing practices and external collaboration are included. I will assert and try to convince you that by introducing workplace innovation, improvement of quality of working life and organisational performance

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can be achieved simultaneously (Pot and Koningsveld, 2009). This gives new challenges for companies, trade unions, governments and researchers.

3. Examples of companies
I shall give some examples of other companies that are moving in that direction. IKEA is one example of firms that know how to mobilize human resources. If you go shopping at IKEA, you see short meetings of department staff standing in a circle in the shop itself, discussing what should be done and what can be improved. IKEA also has a spectacular product and process redesigning model, called Future Search. IKEA includes all stakeholders, customers, suppliers, employees, management etc., and is able to decide on innovation within a couple of days (Weisbord and Janoff, 2005).

For IBM (2008) “today, collaboration is the name of the game.” They are looking for ways to connect communities of employees, partners, customers and others to create a world of new innovators. Although 75% of CEOs said in 2006 that collaboration is very important, only a little more than half said they actually collaborate to a large extent. The CEOs considered their employees to be the most significant source of innovative ideas, followed by business partners and customers. A large number of interventions in work organisation and development of new ICT-tools was to make IBM a smart company and should enable IBM to sell this concept to their customers as well.

At Philips, workplace innovation was initiated in the real estate department to develop smarter offices and to economize by decreasing the number of office buildings. The current office space at that time was underutilised for 40% of the time. However, it very soon became clear that this ‘mobile working’ required changes in the work organisation, better ICT-support and changes in the way employees were managed: managing by output and not by presence. So the HR department joined in. The implementation of workplace innovation is worldwide. Eindhoven in the Netherlands and New Delhi were pioneers in 2009. In a presentation to employees the management said: “Philips cares about people. As employees, you create our company’s future. Workplace innovation will enable new, more flexible ways of working, to benefit both you and the future of Philips, which means we will create work environments that enable you to be more productive, inspired and creative: to live our brand (Wiesenekker, 2009).”

This kind of mobile working was also introduced at Microsoft Nederland. One of the effects is that 49% of the employees reported higher productivity, 1% lower and 50% the same (presentation October 2010).

Another example is the Asian Development Bank, which has its headquarters in Manila. Olivier Serrat, head of the Knowledge Management Center, writes that “harnessing creativity and innovation in the workplace (…) has become the critical organisational requirement of the age”. A form is being distributed to the branches to “assess a workplace’s friendliness to creativity and innovation” (Serrat, 2009).

4. National programmes
A growing number of countries is conducting or developing some kind of programme (www.workinnet.org) aimed at labour productivity, development of competences, quality of work, learning, and innovation. Examples of programme titles are: work place development (Finland), innovative Arbeitsgestaltung; Innovationsfähigkeit (Germany), value creation (Norway), social innovation (Netherlands and Belgium), management and work organisation renewal (Sweden) and workplace innovation (Ireland and the UK). These policies on the level of
organisations and sectors are connected to policies on national and European levels concerning 'flexicurity' (employment, education and social security; European Commission, 2007) and innovation. Key concepts are ‘dynamic management’ (absorption of external knowledge), ‘working smarter’ and ‘utilisation of skills and competences’.

Examples of countries outside Europe who have recently been working on national programmes are Canada, South Korea and Singapore. In Canada, the programme Workplace Skills Initiative (WSI) has been carried out in 2008 – 2010. In South Korea, an initiative for a workplace innovation programme was taken in 2009 by the Korea Workplace Innovation Center (KOWIN). Unfortunately the centre is running out of budget because the Lee Myung-bak administration cut funding in 2010 after a strike last December at the affiliated Korean Labor Institute. Workplace innovation in Korea is still relatively scarce but research shows positive effects on performance, mediated by worker attachment to the workplace (Frenkel and Lee, 2010). Although in Singapore finance minister Tharman Shanmugartnam advocates on internet “to get into the virtuous cycle of better skills, better jobs, higher wages and incomes”, the emphasis of the Productivity@Work part of the SPRING programme is mainly on productivity and not on quality of working life.

5. Urgency
Why have these programmes come into existence, already before the financial and economic crises? There are 4 main reasons for the emerging attention for workplace development. The first one is the need to enhance labour productivity to maintain our level of welfare and social security in the near future with fewer people in the workforce due to the ageing population. The second reason is the need to develop and utilise the skills and competences of the potential workforce to increase added value as part of a competitive and knowledge-based economy. The third reason is that private and public work organisations can only fully benefit from technological innovation if it is embedded in workplace innovation (making technology work by means of proper organisation). The fourth reason is that workplace innovation itself appears to be more important for innovation success than technological innovation does. Research by the Erasmus University/Rotterdam School of Management in industrial sectors shows that technological innovation accounts for 25% of success in radical innovation, whereas non-technological innovation, or social innovation – as it is called in the Netherlands - , accounts for 75%. The success of incremental innovation can be based for 50% on each technological and non-technological innovation (Volberda et al., 2006).

6. Evaluations in EU countries
Evaluation research has been carried out in some countries and I would like to share some results with you. Interesting data have been collected about the results of the Finnish Workplace Development Programme – concerning ‘work, organisational and management practices’ (WOM) - in 470 projects in the years 1996 – 2005. Management and staff representatives and experts of 409 projects in different sectors and of different sizes made a self-assessment. Performance was measured by labour productivity, quality of goods and services, quality of operations, flexible customer service and smoothness of operations. Quality of working life (QWL) covered team-like working methods, cooperation between management and staff, social relationships in the workplace, development of vocational skills and mental well-being. In a cluster analysis, 3 groups were distinguished: the best group (achieving better performance and better QWL) with 152 projects, the worst group (poor or no impact for both factors) with 31 projects, and a group with the remaining projects. In the best group, employment was increased
significantly more than in the worst one. The most striking difference between the best group and the worst one was that in the best group the staff played a role in initiating the project more often, employee participation was stronger and internal collaboration was better than in the worst group (Ramstad, 2009).

In another investigation, a representative sample of 398 manufacturing firms with more than 50 employees in Finland in 2005, it was found that innovation practices such as performance-based pay, flexible job design and employee involvement, developing employee skills and labour-management cooperation are positively correlated to firm productivity. However, not all specific interventions had a significant effect. Profit-sharing and consultative committees seem to matter more than individual incentive systems, teams, job rotation and formal training strategy (Jones et al., 2008).

Finally – concerning Finland – a survey among 5270 employees confirmed the expected positive effects of workplace development on quality of working life but the research did not cover performance outcomes (Kalmi and Kauhanen, 2008).

In Germany there have been no systematic evaluations so far. One exception is the management survey of AOK (an insurer) among 212 partner companies. A wide variety of issues were paid attention to in these companies (both in production sectors and in trade and services), ranging from physical workload (91.5% of production companies; 80% of trade and services) to sickness absenteeism, ergonomics, work organisation, safety, style of leadership, up to stress management (30.8% production; 50.5% trade and services (Bonitz et al., 2007). Performance results as assessed by management were substantial (Fig 1).

![Fig. 1. Performance effects as assessed by management (Bonitz et al. 2007:23)](image)

Further analysis shows that higher productivity goes hand in hand with better communication and higher employability, resulting from both a decrease in absenteeism and an increase in social and vocational competences (Bonitz et al., 2007: 34).

In an important report on ‘high performance work systems’ (HPWS) in Ireland, employee well-being was only measured by employee turnover. Nevertheless, the conclusions of this investigation among 132 medium to large companies in the manufacturing and services industries are relevant. The results of HPWS confirm that “strategic human resources
management practices are clearly associated with business performance outcomes, including labour productivity, innovation levels, and employee well-being. The more novel findings relate to the discovery that other factors, including diversity and equality systems, and workplace partner systems, are positively and synergistically associated with significantly higher levels of labour productivity, workforce innovation, and reduced employee turnover (Flood et al., 2008: 10).”

In the United Kingdom a lot of attention is paid to management-worker-cooperation. It is difficult to link management-worker-cooperation directly to performance, but a review by Totterdill et al. (2009) shows that a combination of representative and direct partnership of management and staff exerts a positive influence on the development of activities and practices that have a direct impact on performance. Totterdill and Fricke (2005: 3) stress the importance of workplace innovation for regional development. “Critically, workplace innovation should be seen as the product of a complex process of learning grounded in, for example, vertical and horizontal interaction within firms, networking between firms (industry associations, supply chain relationships, etc.), public policy, vocational training, industrial relations, the financial system, and so on.”

Damanpour et al. (2009) studied the adoption of innovation types over 4 years in a panel of 428 service organisations in the UK. They found that “the combinative adoption of innovation types (service, technological, administrative, fp) over time helps develop organisational capabilities and affects organisational conduct and outcome. (…) Organisational success in service organisations does not follow a technological trajectory and depends on the adoption of both technological and non-technological innovations (p.671).”

Cristini and Pozzoli (2008) looked at the diffusion of innovative workplace practices in the UK and Italy and their impact on the firm’s added value, using data from the 2004 Workplace Employee Relations Survey on British establishments and two surveys on manufacturing firms located in the North of Italy. The average incidence of innovative practices is similar in both countries, but they differed in terms of the composition of the set of workplace practices. Italian firms prefer functional flexibility (job rotation), information sharing and meetings while British firms have opened to teamwork, human relations training and employees’ financial participation. In both countries, functional flexibility is positively and human relations training negatively related to performance measures. The effects of the other measures differ per country. Teamwork only rates positively in the Italian sample and financial participation is only positive in the British sample.

Love at al. (2006) also found differences between countries. They used a nationally representative postal survey of British and German manufacturing plants’ innovation activity to investigate the impact of cross-functional teams. Using optimal combinations of cross-functional teams in the innovation process increased innovation success in the UK by 29.5% compared to 9.5% in Germany. One explanation is that too much occupational specialisation in German firms may reduce their ability to introduce effectively cross-functional teams. The results suggest the potential value of cross-functional team working in the more technical aspects of the innovation process, but that development of market strategy should remain a focussed, single discipline activity.

Let us turn now to my home country, the Netherlands. Research by the Economic Institute for SMEs in 2008 in 650 Dutch SMEs indicated that companies with workplace development projects achieve higher productivity and financial results compared to companies that do not implement this kind of projects. However, the outcomes regarding quality of working
life have not been measured except for employment that in most cases had increased (Hauw et al., 2009).

Table 1 Working Smarter and Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance criterion</th>
<th>SMEs without working smarter</th>
<th>SMEs with working smarter</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Company results</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company turnover</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productivity</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Economic Institute for SMEs. Source: Hauw et al., 2009

The Erasmus Competition and Innovation Monitor of the Erasmus University Rotterdam – edition 2009 - included 910 Dutch companies of different sizes in different private business sectors. The broad concept of social innovation of the ECIM covers dynamic management, flexible organisation, working smarter and external cooperation. Compared to non-socially innovative companies the socially innovative companies perform better regarding increase in turnover, profit and market share, and regarding innovation, productivity, new clients and reputation. Consistent with earlier results of the ECIM, technological innovation by means of R&D and ICT investments determines 25% of innovation success, whereas social innovation (management, organisation and work aspects) determines 75% (Jansen et al., 2009).

Table 2 Social innovation and performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance</th>
<th>Performance social innovative versus not social innovative organisations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase in turnover</td>
<td>15% higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in profits</td>
<td>14% higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>37% higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productivity</td>
<td>22% higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New clients</td>
<td>20% higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation</td>
<td>12% higher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Erasmus Competition and Innovation Monitor. Source: Jansen et al., 2009

In the Netherlands Employers Work Survey (edition 2008) the Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research (TNO) includes four aspects in social innovation: strategic orientation, product-market improvement, working flexibly and organising more smartly. In different sectors, 3,468 employers with 10 or more employees filled in the questionnaire. Company performance was measured as a combination of an increase during the last two years in turnover, profit and labour productivity. This combined performance was significantly better in organisations with more social innovation. This is also the case for the four different aspects of social innovation. The employer respondents in innovative companies were more contented with the terms of employment and HR practices in their companies. Concerning the quality of working life: no correlation existed between social innovation and job autonomy, except for the determination of working times and breaks. A cluster analysis showed that the group of socially
innovative companies had a 35% lower average percentage of absenteeism compared to the non-socially innovative companies (Oeij et al., 2010).

After all these figures on programmes you may be interested in an example of a single firm, Bronkhorst High Tech in the Netherlands. This firm holds a worldwide position on mass flow and pressure measurement and control for the process industry, life sciences, food, energy etc. Together with the employees and supported by TNO, the management implemented Demand Flow, Lean Manufacturing and training on the job. The results were higher productivity (20%), shorter throughput time (minus 30%), a more flexible work organisation and enthusiastic staff.

7. Evaluation European level
Figures on the European level indicate that workplace innovation works, but that there is room for improvement, both in the number of organisations that have implemented it and as regards the results. An evaluation of 5 cases of internal flexibility measures (organisational, payment schemes, working time, location and skills) showed that all companies reported positive effects, in particular concerning financial results, employability of employees and response to changes in market demands. Workload and overtime were only reduced in 2 companies (Goudswaard et al., 2009). The companies involved were Dexia bank in Belgium, GNK Autostructures in UK, MRW in Spain, Palfinger in Austria and Saab Microwave Systems in Sweden and Norway.

In the Innobarometer, commissioned by the European Commission, innovation trends were investigated between 2006 and 2009 in sectors of industry that are supposed to be innovative. The firms had at least 20 employees. Of the enterprises surveyed, 49% introduced new or significantly improved organisational solutions (e.g. in knowledge management, workplace organisation, external relations). “Organisational innovations were equally characteristic of enterprises where innovation revenue is the primary or ‘only’ significant source of sales income (both 63%), contrasted by a markedly lower figure (47%) among enterprises where innovation tends to be less important” (Gallup Organization, 2009: 21-2). The most sought-after skills to support innovation were general communication skills (58%), capacity for team working (56%), creativity (48%) and negotiation skills (46%). To support innovation, 46% of the firms introduced mechanisms to collect innovative ideas from employees, while 40% used staff rotations and secondments to bring new perspectives to work processes. There are differences between large and small companies. Of the large companies, 69% created cross-functional/departmental teams in innovation projects, whereas only 28% of the small companies did so (Gallup Organization, 2009).

In the European Manufacturing Survey (3000 companies) the effects of product innovation, service innovation, technological innovation and organisational innovation were compared. Only organisational innovation has positive effects on all relevant performance indicators. The best results are achieved when technological innovation and organisational innovation go hand in hand (Ligthart et al., 2010).
Table 3 Differential and Alignment Performance effects of Innovation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of innovation</th>
<th>Delivery time</th>
<th>On time</th>
<th>Prod Lead time</th>
<th>Turnover change</th>
<th>Added value 05</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Product innovation</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological process</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Organisation process</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product related services</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
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</table>

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<th>Alignment of Innovation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technological process &amp; organisational process</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological process &amp; product related services</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological process &amp; product innovation</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational process &amp; product related services</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organisational process &amp; product innovation</td>
<td>+</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Product related services &amp; product innovation</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
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8. Conclusions workplace innovation

In a growing number of countries and sectors of industry, it is considered a matter of urgency to develop all competences of the potential workforce and to increase labour productivity by ‘working smarter’. The recent financial and economic crises have not affected that conviction. It is an extra reason to invest in the simultaneous improvement of quality of working life and performance by means of interventions in the domain of workplace innovation. As the reader may already have noticed, it is difficult to draw general conclusions from the research that we have presented because concepts, measurements, and research designs differ considerably. Nevertheless, our study convinced us that workplace innovation can serve the objectives of both quality of working life and organisational performance if those objectives are combined purposefully in the process of redesigning work. These conclusions are consistent with those of a review of research on the contribution of teamwork to organisational performance. Out of 31 studies, 26 reported positive effects on operational performance and 28 on financial performance. Most studies reported higher employee commitment and satisfaction and lower levels of turnover and absenteeism (Delarue et al., 2008). Some evaluation studies indicate that the effects are stronger if more HR practices and/or organisational changes are implemented.

However, empirical evidence shows that simultaneous improvement of quality of working life and performance is not always achieved. Conditions for success and failure appear to be complex and partly depending on local circumstances. The most interesting lesson is that the commitment of management combined with participation of employees is definitely the most important condition for success in the quality of working life and performance. The most
important pitfall appears to be top-down projects rather than participatory projects with employees and their supervisors.

9. European policy
As I mentioned before, there is room for improvement and the urgency is clear. Support from the European Commission would be helpful. However, the many attempts in the beginning of this year to include workplace innovation in the EU Strategy 2020 (European Commission, 2010a) failed. As was the case during the Lisbon Strategy, workplace innovation is regarded as a private matter for employers. As Werner Wobbe (2009) of the Commission put it in a conference presentation in Stockholm: “Since its revision in 2005, the Lisbon Strategy has been based on a partnership between the EU and Member States with a focus on the promotion of growth and more and better jobs. A priority area on sustainable work organisation characterised by convergence between productivity and quality of working life was not included, although it might be perceived in the realm of the current priorities. The current European ‘perception of work’ may be classified as an individual one. This notion has a focus on the quality of a single workplace, its individual skill requirements and the individual employment condition protection. The collaborative character and its implications in the ‘Nordic debates’ which are meant in the notion of ‘new forms of work organisation’ are badly understood.” In addition, I would like to emphasize that – generally speaking - enterprise strategies are mainly focused on the external world, customers and competitors, and not on the optimisation of internal resources. Moreover, innovation is considered to be tantamount to technological innovation. Another reason might be that workplace innovation pays off after some time, while the majority of managers are dependent on short-term results. And last but not least, many employers do not like to change the existing balance of power in their organisations.

What can be done? Of course, as is stated in the Berlin Declaration of WorkInNet “European policymakers need to include sustainable work systems and work-oriented innovation in the growth strategy if the EUROPE 2020 vision is to be achievable (WIN, 2010). However, this is not sufficient; policymakers together with enterprises have to create conditions under which more advanced forms of workplace innovation will occur on a large scale.”(…) The need for such changes is no longer a matter of contention: there is ample evidence that such workplaces perform better against all the economic and social measures that underpin EUROPE 2020.”

We are in good company. Some distinguished scientists in the USA have expressed the same concern about the US-policy. “President Obama and Congress have taken actions to respond to the deepening economic crisis and have embarked on an ambitious strategy to transform the U.S. economy to once again make it work for all Americans. However, (…) research and practice over the past two decades has demonstrated that translating large investments into long term job growth and high productivity requires complementary investments in training and workforce development, full engagement of worker skills to drive innovation and partnership-based labor management relations” (Kochan et al., 2009: 2). In the opinion of these scholars, labour laws and practices have to be changed. Research in the USA also shows that the argument of many executives that they are prisoners of iron economic laws which dictate that they have no choice but to match working conditions offered by their lowest-cost competitors, is not valid (O’Toole 2008).
Regarding the EU2020 strategy there is a ray of hope. In the proposal for a Council decision on guidelines for the employment policies in the member states (European Commission, 2010b) ‘innovation in work organisation’ and ‘social innovation’ are mentioned but the content of those concepts is not yet clear. The same holds for the Flagship Initiative Innovation Union that was published 6 October 2010 (European Commission, 2010c). Furthermore the social partners also show interest in workplace innovation and they are preparing an opinion on ‘innovative workplaces’ in the European Economic and Social Committee; part of it is a hearing on 15 December 2010.

However, we should not wait for the European Commission. Fortunately some national programmes are running in the EU. These programmes differ in a number of respects. Some are directed by the government, which supplies substantial amounts of money to stimulate action and to finance research (e.g. Finland, Germany, Ireland). In other countries, the government is neither leading, nor financially in the forefront, and the initiative lies primarily with social partners and companies (e.g. Belgium, the Netherlands, UK), supported by consultants and researchers. This latter model could be a risk. As we know from Frieder Naschold’s ‘best practice model’ for national workplace development, the strategic justification should primarily arise from macro-level industrial policy issues rather than the industrial relations system or the research and development system alone (Naschold, 1994). The most sustainable innovation can be achieved if companies, social partners, governments and research organisations work together.

Another example, in which more progress has been made already, starts from productivity. In its memorandum ‘Productivity, the high road to wealth’ (EANPC, 2005) and recent policy statement (EANPC, 2010), the European Association of National Productivity Centres (EANPC) has elaborated on the connection between productivity, innovation, work organisation, skills, health and social partnership. I can strongly recommend you to read these documents.

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