



*Special Issue - CALL FOR PAPER*

**NEW TRAJECTORIES IN WORKPLACE  
COOPERATION: MANAGERS, EMPLOYEES AND  
UNIONS FOR THE EVOLUTION OF CONTEMPORARY  
ORGANIZATIONS**

*Guest Editorial Team*

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Since the 1980s, increased international competition and market globalization have led several companies to adopt new forms of work organization and employment relationship with the aim of increasing organizational competitiveness (Katz and Darbishire, 2000). Organizational human capital became one of the main sources of differentiation from competitors, which requires adequate management practices to generate and maintain a firm's competitive advantage (Nyberg et al., 2014). The emphasis on employees' knowledge, skills and abilities also led the emergence of new approaches to the design of work systems. For example, the adoption of lean production techniques and high performance work systems became two imperatives for companies having quality and innovation as strategic objectives (Appelbaum et al. 2000; Tapia et al., 2015). In their original formulation, a key characteristic of this new way of organizing was the cooperative approach between management, employees and union for the management of employment relationship, including work organization and coordination (Godard, 2004). The concept of employee voice, in its various forms (direct or indirect, individual or collective, formal or informal), emerged in the debate as a fundamental component of modern workplaces (Wilkinson et al., 2014), although the roots of the debate on participation are older (Kaufman, 2020) and characterized by social actors' contrasting views and interests (see for example Carrieri and Nerozzi, 2015 and Butera, 2018a on the Italian case).

Theory and empirical research have shown that within these organizational changes, cooperation between employers and employees improves outcomes for both parties (Bélanger and Edwards, 2007). Collaborative relational frameworks are said to boost workers' involvement (Vallas, 2006) and to increase employee performance at the same time (Appelbaum et al., 2000). Thereon, reinforcing the cooperative element of employment relations can favour the realization of win-win organizational practices and solutions for all the actors involved (Kochan and Osterman, 1994; Bélanger and Edwards, 2007). This is crucial also because even the same organizational systems such as lean production or high performance work systems can engender very different and indeed divergent social and economic outcomes (Vallas, 2006, Della Torre, 2011, Signoretti, 2019). Moreover, cooperation can prevent work organization and HRM systems from failure because of market and profit pressures (Adler, 2012).

Participative industrial relations based on shared decision-making processes between managers and workers' representatives represent a powerful candidate for boosting cooperative and mutually favourable organizational changes (Casey and Delaney, 2019). This entails to go beyond information and consultation rights by involving unions and employees within the organizational decision-making processes (Cattero, 2016, Butera, 2018a) that do not exclude temporary conflict. The role of participative industrial relations systems in favouring organizational change and competitiveness is particularly critical in several European countries, including Italy, where unionization and collective bargaining remain stable and significant (Pulignano et al., 2018, Pedersini, 2019). In these contexts, unions may represent a strategic actor for realizing win-win organizational practices and systems (Geary and Trif, 2011).

The call for strict cooperation between employers and unions has been recently relaunched under renovated frameworks. The concept of social partnership is appealing (Behrens and Helfen, 2015). Particularly, the principles of "incisive participation" (Carrieri et al., 2015) and "joint participative design" have been introduced (Butera, 2018b). Both refer to consensual decision-making between social actors aimed at assuring both better employment conditions and higher firm competitiveness at the same time. Specifically, Carrieri et al. (2015) widen cooperative decision-making between social actors emphasizing its relation with direct participation. Butera (2018a) highlights how the concept of joint participative design aims

to plan work organization systems achieving higher productivity by emphasizing job autonomy and employee participation. It also incorporates new needs of work-life balance, training and education related to technological innovations such as Industry 4.0 (Butera, 2018b). Participatory systems can be based on a combination workers' direct and representative participation (Sacconi et al. 2019). Recent research has shown how technology 4.0 does not determine on its own organizational configurations that can be instead successfully built by favouring broad participation (Bartezzaghi et al., 2020). Joint design involving technical experts and social actors is needed for designing technological solutions embedded in social systems (Davis, 2020).

The HRM literature has shown how employee voice mechanisms in general favour organizational innovation thus stressing how the expression of employees' knowledge, information, and experience positively affect firm performance (Morrison, 2001; Della Torre et al., 2020). Cooperation at company level between actors within and beyond collective bargaining activities can also lead to jointly define new training initiatives that better fit with companies' and employees' needs (Signoretti, 2017).

Notably, the current pandemic has triggered radical changes in work organization systems such as the diffusion of remote working, the definition of new health and safety systems and the key role of groups of workers in the organisations, often female-dominated but notably under-represented in the structures of representation and decision-making. This external shock is bound to pose substantial challenges to actors whereon collaboration and possibly participative employment and industrial relations would be extremely helpful and can be encouraged by an exogenous crisis indeed (Kochan et al., 2008).

Actors conceive organizational principles and practices on the grounds of their conceptualization of employment relations. However, institutions can provide support or constraints to agency (Roche and Teague, 2014, Doellgast and Marsden, 2019). Research highlighted how actors' ideas and relations recursively interact with the institutional context leading to specific framings of (even the same) organizational systems (Signoretti, 2019). Institutional resources influence but do not determine the content of work organization and HRM practices, thereby giving broad leeway for actors to decide if and how they should be substantiated. Disentangling these relations and the relative importance of different factors is theoretically

determinant to understand organizational processes and outcomes (Hauptmeier, 2012). The institutional embeddedness of companies should be broadly conceived to include laws, collective bargaining structures and inter-firm business relations within global value chains. Actors' ideas and institutional embeddedness should be in turn seen in interaction with international economic shifts and product market circumstances (Delbridge and Sallaz, 2015), which are sometimes better-captured by sector-specific institutions and arrangements, compared to national level ones (Bechter et al., 2012).

Thereon, the comprehension of the characteristics of work organization and human resource management systems would call for the combination of different theoretical contributions from organizational and management studies, employment relations and comparative political economy (Vincent et al., 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2020). For instance, it is still unclear what are the antecedents of lasting applications of shared organizational systems between social actors and the potential underlying support from industrial relations. This analysis on antecedents concerns both organizational innovations, organization systems in general as well as the permanence of work practices impeding organizational change. In the latter scenario, social actors can exert their agency beyond individual workplaces, for instance acting at the territorial level (Trigilia and Burrioni, 2009) or through sector-specific arrangements of collective bargaining. The structural, social and organizational factors hindering the development of cooperative employment and industrial relations also needs further scrutiny along with their influence over work and HRM systems. Joint participative design requires collective efforts including research activities identifying and spreading good practices, as recently emphasized by the special issue for the 50th anniversary of Studi Organizzativi (Butera, 2020).

This special issue welcomes both qualitative and quantitative theory-driven articles, and interdisciplinary approaches combining different literature strands are appreciated. We are interested in contributions focusing on the following subjects (but not limited to them):

- Relationships between organizational innovation and/or employee productivity, and quality of industrial relations systems;



- Recursive interactions between actors' ideas, relations and institutions leading to peculiar organizational and HRM systems;
- The pandemic external shock, actors' reaction and institutions in relation with needed organizational changes (e.g. in terms of health and safety requirements, remote working);
- The role and interactions between social actors for the development of educational and (type of) training activities related to technological advancements;
- Factors hindering organizational change and what social actors can do to overcome such obstacles;
- Employee voice mechanisms and their combination with other HR practices;
- The voice of groups of workers traditionally underrepresented but prominent in the pandemic for their core efforts in organisations and society;
- Innovative organizational and HRM systems and the role exerted by industrial relations and/or institutions;
- Conflict as a source of organizational innovation

### **Details of the process**

Selections of papers for the Special Issue will take place in two phases:

- 1) The first phase will consist in a selection based on abstracts of the paper. **Abstracts** should be 750 words long and be sent **by 30 March 2021** to Andrea Signoretti: [a.signoretti@unitn.it](mailto:a.signoretti@unitn.it)

Acceptance of abstracts will be communicated by the guest editorial team by 15 April 2021.

- 2) The deadline for the submission of the full paper (in English) is **30 June 2021**. Papers will go through the standard review process of the journal and should be 8,000 words (maximum) in length, including abstract, tables, figures and reference section. (<http://www.francoangeli.it/riviste/sommario.asp?IDRivista=73>)

The special issue is expected to be published as the n.1/2022 of *Studi Organizzativi*.

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