Guest editorial: The tables have turned: socio-technical perspectives are influential for the future of digital work

The advent of digitalization as an embedded element of work has triggered a shift of transformation in most professions. "Work is what people do, not where people go" outlines a shift in mindset, which has further fueled the surge of interest in and adoption of digital work. In short, digital work outlines the transformational power of traditional work environments increasingly being replaced or supplemented by remote or hybrid work, supported by digital collaborations (Vallo Hult, 2021; Vallo Hult and Byström, 2021). With work no longer confined to specific times or locations, it can become challenging to maintain a clear boundary between personal and professional life, as well as between personal and professional use of digital technologies (Vallo Hult et al., 2021). The concept of digital work, therefore, encompasses a broad spectrum of activities conducted through digital platforms, various types of digital applications and a wide array of communication channels (Asatiani and Norström, 2023). Digital work transcends traditional physical boundaries and can be executed remotely from diverse locations, facilitated by the connectivity and accessibility afforded by digital technology.

The transition to digital work highlights the need for socio-technical perspectives. The socio-technical perspective considers the importance of the social part in which people find themselves on the one hand and the technology on the other (Sarker et al., 2019). When it comes to digital work, socio-technical aspects, such as the impact of the social structures on the technology use alongside the impact of the use of the technology on the social structure, are surely at play for tasks to run efficiently. This can create contradictions and obstacles that must be addressed, many of which are mutually social and technical (Fischer and Baskerville, 2022; Islind et al., 2021). In recent years, the trajectory of digital work and socio-technical arrangements has traversed from rudimentary office applications to interconnected digital platforms, marked by the incorporation of automation and, even more recently, artificial intelligence influencing contemporary digital work (Faraj et al., 2018; Lyytinen et al., 2021; Norström et al., 2020; Ravarini et al., 2024). The expansion in the breadth, intricacy and depth of integration of these digital technologies in connection to work remains an area insufficiently elucidated within scholarly discourse (Baptista et al., 2020; Martini et al., 2009). Due to that, we would like to argue that the tables have turned and that we have entered a new era where socio-technical perspectives are influential for the future of digital work.

In light of the lessons learned during and after the pandemic, we argue for a need to explore the concept of digital work more in depth by investigating the relationship between the social and technical aspects that outline and influence digital work. Following that, we argue for a research agenda where socio-technical aspects are taken into consideration when examining digital work to:

- explore the interplay between the work and the socio-technical arrangements surrounding the tasks;
- generate new knowledge on digital work that can be influential for the future; and
- to attract researchers to explore and develop the topic of socio-technical perspectives as an influential lens for the future of digital work.

We see the meaningful impact of applying the socio-technical lens to arrive at an in-depth understanding of digital work through all kinds of processes. For instance, we see it in design, development and implementation, often deemed the three stages of entering digital technology into social settings. First, through *design,* it is clear that digital platforms and the way they are co-designed can have an impactful and lasting influence on mental well-being through a case of psychiatric care (Sigurðardóttir *et al.*, 2023). Second, through *development*, it is visible that certain socio-technical barriers can prevent workers from experiencing flow in their development work through the case of the software developers and their digital work (Ritonummi *et al.*, 2023). Thirdly, through *implementation* of specific technology into context, it becomes evident that it can radically change the pathways in which tasks are performed; for instance, entering smartphones into the classroom alters the dynamics between teachers and students, putting socio-technical arrangements central stage (Carlsson and Willermark, 2023).

The future holds even more technological advancements that need to be problematized and investigated in connection to their impact on work. The impact of artificial intelligence for data-driven decision-making is already vast (Duan *et al.*, 2019) and will continue to increase, which in turn, has a radical impact on digital work (Islind and Vallo Hult, 2022), further illuminating opportunities to expand the research on the socio-technical aspects of digital work as emerging technologies enter the research scene. In addition to artificial intelligence radically expanding and permeating the research scene, important efforts are ongoing in terms of intelligence augmentation. Intelligence augmentation suggests intelligence that is mid-way between relying solely on human intelligence and capabilities versus exclusive reliance on automated intelligence and capabilities (Kyllonen *et al.*, 2007). Intelligence augmentation recognizes that humans and data complement each other and can form mutually beneficial interactions where data analysis and situated reflection are enhanced (Hassani *et al.*, 2020). Independent of whether artificial intelligence is embedded within digital work settings or if intelligence augmentation is the chosen pathway, the socio-technical perspective is influential in understanding those fundamental changes.

The socio-technical perspective is an influential part of the future understanding of digital work and the unity of the social and technical parts, and it has a significant and long-lasting value for the research community in general and for the research on workplace learning in connection to digital work in particular. We see a surge of increased interest brought on by the pandemic, and there is no publication outlet more suitable for papers exploring the intersection of digital work, learning and socio-technical arrangements than the *Journal of Workplace Learning* and that is why the special issue is in this particular journal. The extended value of more research on digital work and its lasting impact can lead to positive change because digital work can benefit *individuals*, *organizations* and *society* at large in terms of decreased energy use in offices and a better milieu for their employees as well. This special issue rose from excellent contributions to the International Conference on Socio-Technical Perspectives in IS (STPIS, in 2022), where we accepted 33 peer-reviewed conference papers. A subset of those researchers were invited to extend their work into journal publications. Journal publications are, of course, difficult to achieve and get through the needle eye of the publication process as a whole, although merely three papers were accepted for the special issue at last. These papers are excellent, all illustrating important and prominent contributions that will have a lasting impact on the way we conceptualize and comprehend the socio-technical perspective and its influence on digital work in the present and the future. We would like to end this editorial by wholeheartedly thanking all authors who contributed with their work, independent of whether it was accepted in this publication venue or elsewhere, all of the reviewers who, through invisible and unpaid work,

performed excellent work and other contributors who in one way or another helped make this happen. Last but not least, we would like to sincerely thank the *Journal of Workplace Learning* for facilitating this special issue and for continuously keeping the flow of interesting papers on work and learning running. We hope that this special issue will inspire both researchers and practitioners to join the research agenda of furthering the understanding of digital work through socio-technical perspectives.

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