

# Workplace Innovation Programmes: bridging research and policymaking

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## **Abstract**

The article reviews the concept of Workplace Innovation Programmes as public policy tools supported by research. Pursuing a socio-political perspective the text explores programme-level issues. To do this, conceptual definitions are reviewed and the programme's main features, discussed using an analytical model designed by previous researchers. In this sense, programmes underpinned by research as a tool for public policies are presented as mechanisms to link different levels and actors in matters related to productivity and the quality of working life. The article reviews different approaches and strategies for policymaking, aiming at better understand how programmes operate. For this purpose previous European experiences are used. The rationale of this article must be found in a explorative and learning-oriented context to better design and implement programme-based public policies and the use of action-research for policy learning. This is of particular interest in the local context of Gipuzkoa (Basque Country, Spain) where this kind of approach has become of relevance in the policymaking.

**Key words:** programmes; working life reform; policy learning; actionable knowledge.

## **Programas de innovación en contextos de trabajo: vinculando la investigación y la formulación de políticas públicas**

### **Resumen**

El artículo examina el concepto de los programas de innovación en los contextos de trabajo como instrumentos de política pública asistidos por la investigación. Desde una perspectiva sociopolítica el texto explora cuestiones relacionadas con el diseño e implementación de los mismos. Para ello se revisan las definiciones conceptuales y se analizan las principales características de los programas empleando un modelo analítico diseñado por la investigación acción. En este sentido, los programas sustentados en la investigación como herramienta de políticas públicas se presentan como mecanismos para vincular diferentes niveles y actores en temas relacionados con la productividad y la calidad de la vida laboral. En el artículo se examinan diferentes enfoques y estrategias para la formulación de

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políticas, con el fin de comprender mejor el funcionamiento de los programas. Para ello el artículo se apoya en determinadas experiencias europeas. Por todo ello, la fundamentación de este artículo debe encontrarse en un contexto exploratorio y orientado al aprendizaje en diseño de políticas públicas y el uso de la investigación-acción para el aprendizaje político. Lo anterior resulta de particular interés en el contexto local de Gipuzkoa (País Vasco, España), donde este tipo de enfoques ha adquirido relevancia en la formulación de políticas públicas.

**Palabras clave:** programas; reforma de la vida laboral; aprendizaje político; conocimiento práctico.

## 1. Background

*“A good programme is a programme that phases itself fruitfully into ongoing processes, helps improve on them for a period of time, and then waves farewell to processes that continue to gain in momentum, speed, and quality”*

Gustavsen, Finne & Oscarsson, 2001, p. 9.

In Europe, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a series of international seminars and conferences were organised around initiatives and activities focused on working life reform known as programmes. In this context back in 1989, an international conference on action research in relation to new ways of organising work was held in Sweden. In 1991, with the collaboration of institutions and universities from the Netherlands, the action research network itself promoted a second conference with the aim of developing new ideas. Under the title “Action Research and the Future of Work” the meeting was used to discuss matters related to the future of work, the development of new methodologies of action research associated with work and industrial relations, the exchange of trans-national experiences, the strengthening of a collaboration network, and the development of international research programmes. The organisation and contents presented and discussed contain many of the proposals and progress made by researchers, with a strong emphasis on aspects linked to organisational changes. The third conference was held in 1993, in Finland, under the title “Active Society with Action Research” and was hosted by the Ministry of Labour and the Finnish Labour Relations Association. The content of this conference was used for the presentation of several assessment reports and other studies on the experiences of implemented programmes and their links to action research. In general, the idea of addressing development programmes was the main focus. The materials are included in the book “National Action Research Programmes in the 1990’s” edited by Kaupinnen & Lahtonen (1994). Recently, after 25 years, these matters related to the future of work and action research have been re-launched in Norway. In 2018, “Coping with the Future: Business, Work and Science in the Age of Digitalisation and Sustainability” was organised with the aim of bringing together separate discourses that concern the future of work (Johnsen, 2018). The materials are accessible in the “International Journal of Action Research” (2018, Vol. 14-2/3) and the “European Journal of Workplace Innovation” (2018, Vol. 4-1). This will be followed by a symposium held in 2020 in the Basque Country (Spain), focused on the support provided by action research for the design and preparation of public policies and organised by Orkestra, the Basque Institute of Competitiveness.