The future of digital work: the challenge of inequality

Second call for papers for Joint Conference of IFIP Working Groups:

- 8.2 Information Systems and Organization
- 9.1 ICT and Work
- 9.4 Social Implications of Computers in Developing Countries

Hyderabad, India, December 10. – 11. 2020

Keynote speakers:

**Renana Jhabvala**, social activist associated with the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA)

**Michael Barrett**, Professor from U. of Cambridge, UK with a long-standing interest in digital work and innovation

Program chairs: Rajendra Bandi, Eric Monteiro, Ranjini Raghavendra

Digital technologies, so much more than mere ‘tools,’ seep into and shape our everyday lives in unprecedented, hence uncharted, manners. Digitalisation is both an enabler and multiplier for far-reaching transformation of private and professional lives, at individual, community, organizational, industry-wide and societal levels. However, digital transformation also raises challenges of better or worse quality of life and work, social inclusion/exclusion, (non)discrimination, (un)employment, and civic (non)participation.

Digitalisation plays a key role in the way we live our lives and is transforming what it means to work. From new ways of restructuring existing work including an increasing ability to work from virtually anywhere, to collaborating across geographical regions. At the same time, job-matching sites are changing and expanding the way individuals look for work and how companies identify and recruit talent. Independent workers are increasingly choosing to offer their services on digital platforms challenging conventional ideas about how and where work is undertaken. Advances in robotics, artificial intelligence and machine learning are ushering a new age of digitalisation and automation as machines match or outperform human performance in a range of work activities, including ones requiring cognitive capabilities. Digitalization will have far-reaching impact on the global workforce involving independent contractors, freelance gig workers, fissured work and outsourced services. The changing nature of work through digital platforms is leading to new ways of control, coordination and collaboration within and between organisations and individual workers.

The changes will not only challenge the existing work models, but also influence wages, income and skills. Major transitions lie ahead and could lead to income polarisation and inequality. Technology hubs and online work centres tend to be located in urban areas and operate in English, encouraging investment by policy makers in infrastructure such as roads and transport while neglecting to support the more traditional sectors such as agriculture or artisanal industry in rural areas. This implies digitalization is deeply implicated in the changes
required to address our global challenges such as the United Nations Millennium Development Goals for health, education, wellbeing and security or as put by Thomas Piketty (2014), the challenges of inequality.

The notion of the ‘digital divide’ between the global South and North, while much discussed in academic and policy literature raises numerous issues as a result of the changing nature of work (Allen 2017; Avgerou and Walsham 2017; Roberts et al. 2014). Differences in opportunities are presented to individuals, communities, or organisations by technologies, mainly as a consequence of deficits in access to the technologies, capacity to use them, relevant contextual content and appropriate application. How then does inclusion into the digital economy operate? Inclusion is not just a mirror image of exclusion, and that to achieve inclusion, it is not sufficient to curb exclusion mechanisms, but to enhance positive measures of inclusion. As Herbst (1974) put it to underscore the social significance of work, “the product of work is men”. However, participation in work-life is highly varied across a number of dimensions including gender, developed vs developing regions, temporal vs permanent employment, migrant workers, entrepreneurship opportunities. The dichotomy between online and ‘real’ life is dismantling, making our online behaviour embedded into rather outside of our everyday lives (Faraj et al. 2011). Digital online platforms are vehicles for community building and sharing, for instance in the form of open source or crowdsourcing. Simultaneously, the traces we willingly if not always consciously leave of our online lives is the source of tech companies’ harvesting of behaviour data for their own commercial purposes (Zuboff 2019).

The IFIP Working Groups 8.2, 9.1 and 9.4 have a long history of supplementing the dominant technology-push accounts of digitalization with socially informed ones. This joint conference brings together these three groups for the much-needed analysis of the social preconditions, engagement and consequences of digitalization visibility. With increasingly vocal proclamations of the consequences of digitalisation, there is a need for socially informed analysis of the uptake of digitalisation for work and everyday life in the manner traditionally promoted by all three of the IFIP working groups. The conference seeks to stimulate and encourage critical discussion of potential shifts in the changing world of work, organisations and its implications in the developing world.

The venue for the joint IFIP conference is Hyderabad, India. Hyderabad and Bangalore are key manifestations of the ongoing struggle of the Global South to tap into, not to say drive, the new digital economy. The conference will facilitate a reflection and discussion about the experiences with India’s efforts so far. With a population exceeding 1.2 billion, India is important in itself but even more so as an early and ambitious example of engaging in the value generation of the digital economy.

For the joint IFIP WG 8.2, 9.1 and 9.4 conference in 2020 we are seeking rigorous and relevant empirical (qualitative and quantitative) studies as well as conceptual and theoretical papers apprising digitalisation in terms of the future of work, organizing and development.

We solicit full research papers with maximum length of 8000 words. The submission site will open in early March and close on May 27, 2020. Notification about acceptance will be sent on July 30. The accepted full papers will be included in the proceedings.
We also solicit research-in-progress papers in the form of extended abstracts, with maximum length of 2000 words plus references. The submission deadline for these is September 10, with notification of acceptance a month later. These papers will be worked on in thematically grouped Paper Development Sessions and they will not appear in the proceedings.

If coming from a developing country as classified by the United Nations, authors with accepted papers can apply for travel grants.

**Important dates:**

- December 9, 2019: Second call for papers distributed
- May 27, 2020: Deadline for submitting full papers
- July 30, 2020: Notification of accepted full papers
- September 10, 2020: Deadline for submitting research-in-progress papers
- October 20, 2020: Notification of accepted research-in-progress papers
- December 10 – 11, 2020: Conference in Hyderabad, India

**References:**