

Articles - European social partners discuss digital transformation in the European chemical industry

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On 18 and 19 October European Social Partners in the chemical industry held a conference on the digital transformation in the chemical, pharmaceutical, rubber and plastic industries. Around 80 delegates gathered in Tallinn, Estonia, on this occasion, representing the European Commission, European Parliament as well as the member associations of both the ECEG and industriAll European Trade Union. The stakeholder conference took place in the framework of a two-year project financially supported by the European Union on “Our future workplace – digital transformation in the chemical industry”.

Preliminary research results show that job transformations are more likely than job reductions for the chemical, pharmaceutical, rubber and plastics industry. While workforce in some company divisions is at risk (especially administration and accounting), new job opportunities are likely to arise in IT-services, R&D, or management. The working environment will move towards an increase of mobile working and collaboration in heterogenous and interdisciplinary teams. Digital transformation in the sector is expected to reduce the number of hazardous tasks and might

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increase the level of psychological stress. Overall, the general health of employees is expected to stay the same or to improve slightly. Moreover, in the framework of collective agreements working-time flexibility and mobile working are among the topics which will increase in relevance in the next five years. At the same time, qualification, data protection and performance monitoring will need greater consideration as well. Finally, the preliminary results show that a skills shift is clearly visible. Whereas basic digital skills broadly exist, more advanced digital and transversal skills will require more attention. Especially the importance of following social, technical and transversal skills will rise in the next 5 years:

- Social skills: The ability to work in multi-disciplinary teams, self-learning and adaptability
- Technical skills: Use of IT-tools (use of software to process and store information) and Big Data analysis (skills for in-depth analysis and interpretation of large amounts of data)
- Transversal skills: Skills to implement digital solutions and skills to communicate using digital tools

Those results will be confirmed at the SSDC plenary meeting of chemical industry on 3rd December with the publication of the final report.

Ulla Saar, Head of Working Life Development Department, Ministry of Social Affairs, Estonia, welcomed the conference participants to Tallinn. She highlighted that “in the digital revolution, workers and their well-being should not be left behind. They are the backbone of our companies”. She emphasised that “only via Social Dialogue can we ensure that the digital transformation is a win-win story.”

Isabelle Laurent, European Commission, congratulated the ECEG and industriAll Europe for a very productive social dialogue committee.

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“As social partners with a long history of joint cooperation, we can shape the digital transformation in the way that would meet the needs of employers and employees. We believe that the chemical industry is here to stay and is an important solution provider to the future challenges of the society”, declared Yves Verschueren, President of the European Chemical Employers Group.

“There can be no successful digitalisation or industry 4.0 without a full focus on the human factor. Workers need to receive upskilling and retraining programs. We need a work to be organised well. The best way to get through these transitions is through meaningful social dialogue and collective bargaining – these will be key,” stated Luc Triangle, Secretary General of industriAll European Trade Union.

Delegates had the opportunity to exchange with a wide range of stakeholders, such as company representatives (chembid GmbH & Co. KG, Clariant GmbH, Continental AG, BASF SE), trade union and employer representatives coming from 17 EU member states and youth representatives (European Young Chemists Network and industriAll Europe Youth Group), who touched upon changes related to the numerous impacts of digitalisation on the future generation of workers and the manufacturing industry in Europe.

Through their current actions and commitments, the social partners aim to make an effective and long-lasting contribution to the future of the European manufacturing industry.

The project website with more information is available here in three languages (EN, FR, DE): www.ourfutureworkplace.eu

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About ECEG

ECEG, the European Chemical Employers Group, founded in 2002, is a recognised European Sectoral Social Partner, representing the chemicals, pharmaceuticals, rubber and plastics industries in Europe. Our sector provides approximately 3.3 million direct jobs in more than 94.000 enterprises.