

Introducing Workplace Innovation in the Public Sector

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And how to build a high performing public sector organisation

Workplace innovation has an important role to play in helping public sector organisations across Europe adapt to unprecedented challenges, redesigning services in ways that meet increasingly complex social economic needs by unleashing staff knowledge, skills and creativity more effectively.

The concept of workplace innovation describes the introduction of workplace practices that enable and empower people at every level of an organisation to use and develop their full range of knowledge, skills and creativity in the workplace.

Governments from Finland to the Basque Country are promoting workplace innovation to improve the competitiveness of businesses and the well-being of workers. It is now time to promote workplace innovation in the public sector itself.

Workplace innovation in the public sector

Public sector organisations face unprecedented challenges in addressing complex social, economic and environmental policy demands within ever tighter financial constraints. The transformation required to meet these challenges means using and developing the

talents and skills of their entire workforce to the fullest possible extent.

Fully engaging public sector staff in improvement and innovation involves more than an isolated management initiative or programme: rather it involves the introduction of empowering work practices and procedures at every level from day-to-day operations to strategic decision making.

The four elements

We can identify four interdependent ‘Elements’ of workplace innovation that combine to form “**The Fifth Element**”, a powerful combination of high performance, innovation and employee engagement:

1. Jobs and Teams

People are more productive and healthier when they can exercise control over how they perform their tasks, and when they are part of supportive teams that plan their own work and take time to reflect and improve.

2. Structures, Management and Systems

Organisational walls and ceilings, management roles and behaviours, and metrics and incentives all play a key role in shaping attitudes to work, performance and capacity for innovation.

3. Employee-Driven Innovation and Improvement

People at every level can make important contributions to product, service and process innovation and improvement when there are regular opportunities for them to do so.

4. Co-Created Leadership and Employee Voice

Leaders can empower others to lead in areas that reflect their knowledge, experience or

passion, and make better decisions when they are based on the tacit knowledge and experience of all those jobs are involved.

The Essential Fifth element

The Fifth Element is a clear approach designed by Rosemary Exton and Peter Totterdill at the request of the European Commission as part of the EUWIN programme to explain the benefits of workplace innovation and provide practical guidance on making change happen.

The Fifth Element highlights the importance of understanding the interdependence between the workplace practices described in each of the four elements. Elements do not exist in isolation but are influenced, for better or worse, by the extent to which the principles that underpin them are aligned with those of the others. Each Element is therefore associated with specific 'Interdependencies' - other workplace practices known to exert influence on it – and which must be considered during the planning and implementation of change.

In short, public sector bodies need to take a systemic view of their own organisational structures and practices. Creating the culture of innovation and enterprise needed for twenty-first century challenges requires tenacity. It means challenging deeply embedded attitudes and behaviours, asking difficult questions, and being open to experiences from a diverse range of other organisations.

The views expressed in this blog are those of the authors and not necessarily those of EIPA.

