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Published in:

Portland International Conference on Management of Engineering and Technology, 1999. Technology and Innovation Management. PICMET '99.

Link to article, DOI:

[10.1109/PICMET.1999.808113](https://doi.org/10.1109/PICMET.1999.808113)

Publication date:

1999

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link back to DTU Orbit](#)

Citation (APA):

Koch, C. (1999). Participation in virtual organizations - the union responses. In Portland International Conference on Management of Engineering and Technology, 1999. Technology and Innovation Management. PICMET '99. (Vol. 1). Portland: PICMET. DOI: 10.1109/PICMET.1999.808113

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Participation in Virtual Organizations - the Union Responses

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The paper examines the development of manufacturing organizations and employee participation. The focus is on employees and union possibilities to impact the development of virtual organizations and virtual forms of work. Within manufacturing, IT systems is used to integrate across functions inside and outside the traditional organization. Manufacturing has, to an increasing extent become an issue of organizing geographically spread units and can thus be understood as virtual organizations. This development sets traditional participation strategies under pressure. The contribution discusses the necessary revival of the Scandinavian union based strategy of "collective re-sources" and argues for other societal strategies breaking the "single company" paradigm that dominates participation discourses aiming at developing work and democracy.

The trade union confederation in Sweden (LO) and its IT-policy is discussed as a case of central union activity. And case studies carried out in Danish industry are used to illustrate the local level. Both cases indicates that the traditional organization has become a poor unit of operation for participation and influence efforts by employees and unions. It is discussed how unions can develop strategies, addressing this development by using a multilevel strategy. And in particular focusing on sets of organizations as the "unit" for participation and influence. Such a set can consist of one or several IT suppliers and the customer organizations networked, a so-called segment. This new unit is necessary in order to develop an appropriate employee answer to the challenges of virtualization, but is on the other hand difficult to realize.

LO has a range of current activities trying to develop new answers to the challenges of virtualization and IT, compiled in an explicit program. Four main slogans are the creation of "new meeting places", "new classrooms", "new bookshelves" (or new libraries) and "new windows into the unions and enterprises". The LO-program consists of demands to basic systems development, R&D to create new knowledge and best practice. LO in Sweden is thus in a search process from new answers, in the process of providing the central level of a

collective resource strategy addressing virtualization. -At least an infrastructure of new forms of union activity are being built. education and training, the IT use internally in the unions, and IT use at work. IT use at work is the focus of this article. The main new element in the policy of LO in this area, is the idea to make use of "consumer power"; representing the members as users and consumers of IT. LO do argue that at number of traditional unions policy paths are still valid; agreements, qualified user demands in relation to

The cases from Danish industry demonstrates the political process shop stewards at shopfloor level are facing. Alliance strategies with other employee groups, parts of management and "external players" become crucial but are usually not developed. In two out of three cases the pattern seems to be silent consent, whereas the active policy in the third case seems to be the exception. In the active case, even explicit consent to new technology proves insufficient as "signal", and shop stewards have to "take" influence; management is not providing it. The activity case further shows, that the distrust before the change towards virtualization, is underpinned by the virtualization change process, leading to a maintained adversarial situation.

Although union contribution to management of technology is not a total exception in Scandinavia, consent to management change programs seems to dominate. In this respect unions and their member fail to contribute to management of technology and the examples of active policy seem to continue to be the exception. The challenges and possibilities of virtual organizations can seem enormous in comparison with unions and other collective resources. But in fact work place development in Scandinavia is in a continual tension between, on the one hand concepts and ideas stemming from the United States, which are often (but not always) top-down and management driven, and on the other the Scandinavian tradition. Virtual organizations is no exception. It is likely that the main results of future union participation efforts merely ends up maintaining status quo, that is the amount of silent consent, as well as restating the exception of the active union changing strategies.