

**Social Innovations in Work and Employment<sup>1</sup>**

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**Paul-André Lapointe, Paul R. Bélanger, Guy Bellemare, Colette Bernier, Louise Briand, Guy Cucumel, Martine D'Amours, Jean-Jacques Gislain, Denis Harrisson, Marie-Josée Legault, Frédéric Lesemann, Benoît Lévesque  
and Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay  
CRISES  
(Centre de recherche sur les innovations sociales)**

After briefly presenting the Work and Employment research area of CRISES, in Section 2 we will put forward our definition of the concept of social innovations. Using the analytical model described in Section 3, in Section 4 we will illustrate the work of researchers in this area, based on four themes: participation and partnership in work environments, indirect surveillance of work, vocational training, and balance between work life and private life. Finally, in Section 5, we will highlight the main findings of our research on innovation and social transformation.

**1. Brief Presentation of the Work and Employment Research Area of CRISES<sup>2</sup>**

The Work and Employment research area includes around fifteen researchers from five universities representing, among others, the disciplines of sociology, economics and industrial relations. The theoretical perspectives used are varied and complementary, and the researchers adhere to any of the following approaches: the theory of regulation, institutionalism, interactionism, and the theory of structuration. The researchers rely on theoretical triangulation. On the basis of these different theoretical approaches, social innovations are analyzed as social constructions that involve actors interested in work and employment. Thus, social innovations are studied according to different and complementary analytical viewpoints, moving away from a determinist vision by letting actors play a central role. Diversity and complementarity are also important features of these methodological approaches, which include both qualitative and quantitative methods.

The research deals with the organizational and institutional dimensions of employment and work; it involves unions and companies as well as public policies, and focuses on themes such as actors' strategies, partnership, corporate governance, new forms of employment, the aging work force, training, and the knowledge economy. Despite this diversity which is a great source of intellectual stimulation and fruitful debates, the theme of social innovations cuts across all the research.

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<sup>1</sup> Modified English version of a paper presented at CRISES International Conference "Innovation and Social Transformation," held in November 2004.

<sup>2</sup> For further information on CRISES and its "Work and Employment" research area, consult [www.cris.es.uqam.ca](http://www.cris.es.uqam.ca).

## 2. Elements for a Definition of the Concept of “Social Innovations”<sup>3</sup>

Besides technological innovations, which involve the introduction of new products or new production processes, there are social innovations. These are organizational and institutional innovations related to the coordination of relations between social actors and the solving of socio-economic problems in order to improve performance. In response to new challenges, social innovations represent new practices, procedures, rules, approaches or institutions introduced in order to improve economic and social performance, to solve an important problem for social actors and/or fill a void in regulation or coordination. However, this definition needs to be clarified further. Firstly, an innovation in a given environment is often an old phenomenon, which sometimes appeared many years ago, in other environments and other countries. Secondly, far from being entirely predictable phenomena, controlled by its promoters and ultimately producing the desired results, social innovations instead follow a complex and largely unpredictable trajectory and produce results which are most often not in line with the desired results. Social innovation is then considered to be a process which follows an undetermined and nonlinear trajectory, evolves according to the actors’ strategies and the solutions put forward to address the contradictions they inevitably carry. Failure to solve these contradictions can, moreover, considerably slow down the diffusion of innovations. Thirdly, the purported capacity of social innovations to improve a given situation can be perceived completely differently by the social actors concerned. An improvement for some can be more or less considered to be a deterioration for others. For social actors, the expected and real results of social innovations are issues that can potentially lead to conflict, and require arbitration and compromises in order to sustain them. The lack of compromises represents another obstacle to the diffusion of these innovations. Finally, social innovations are part of a complex socio-productive system where a large number of actors interact with different strategies and pursue specific goals.

## 3. General Model for the Analysis of Social Innovations (see Figure 1)

The analytical model used to examine social innovations is presented in Figure 1 and its components are presented in the following sections.

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### 3.1 Conditions of emergence

Social innovations generally emerge in a particular context:

- 3.1.1. Firstly, contradictions and clashes appear between, on the one hand, contextual requirements and social demands, and on the other, organizational and institutional forms. These contradictions and clashes are the factors behind the innovations.
- 3.1.2. The result is a crisis seen through the presence of numerous problems and insufficient performance which prompt the actors to react.
- 3.1.3. The actors make a “diagnosis” of the problems and look for appropriate solutions to solve them and/or improve “economic and social performance.” This process gives rise to social innovations.

**3.2** These solutions are, in fact, **social innovations** which vary in nature, according to the objects to which they relate. There are two types of social innovations: (1) those related to the content of the

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<sup>3</sup> The main bibliographical references used to develop this definition are presented at the end of the text.

chosen solution (for example, organizational participation, such as work teams and problem-solving groups, or indirect surveillance mechanisms, in particular), and (2) those related to the “decision-making” process,<sup>4</sup> that is, a new way of solving a problem and implementing it (for example, democratic partnership, establishment of corporate steering committees, new joint committees on work reorganization or continuous improvement or the co-production of indirect surveillance in daycare centres [“Centres de la petite enfance”, CPE]).

**3.3 Social innovations** also represent a **process**. They evolve through tensions and contradictions, encountering resistance or receiving support from social actors. They lead to compromises which clarify their content and the methods of introduction and follow-up and which ensure their continuity. The innovation process is thus unpredictable and largely undetermined.

**3.4** Social innovations create **results** which, most of the time, are not in line with the goals pursued. These results are often “perceived” and “experienced” in very different ways by the various social actors. An improvement for some can very well represent a deterioration for others. The results themselves then become issues for the social actors.

A further element of social innovations relates to their generalization/institutionalization or, conversely, their translation/appropriation/diffusion in local environments, according to whether they originated locally or in society at large. This leads to the question of **social transformation**. According to the approaches to social innovation, which are based on the diffusion of best practices, outstanding performance guarantees the diffusion of social innovations. However, this is not necessarily the case, because the institutional context and the strategies of social actors play a role, slowing down and even “locking down” or, on the contrary, supporting the diffusion of social innovations.

## 4. Selected Illustrations of Research on Social Innovations in Work and Employment<sup>5</sup>

### 4.1. Participation and partnership in workplaces

#### 4.1.1. Conditions of emergence

The requirements of rapid adaptation, flexibility and quality, on the one hand, and employees’ demands for autonomy, on the other hand, contradict the Taylorism/Fordism which prevails in the workplace. This situation is causing a crisis of work and production, which can be seen through numerous phenomena, that is, productivity and quality problems, job losses, absenteeism, and work conflicts. “We can no longer continue as before.”

#### 4.1.2 Social innovations

In order to improve economic and social performance and to adjust to a new environment, various social innovations are being implemented in the areas of production management (JIT, ERP, ISO 9000, among others) and organizational flexibility. However, those that represent the greatest break with Taylorism involve participation in two mechanisms:

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<sup>4</sup> Consult the steps in the decision-making process: diagnosis, inventory of solutions, choice and conception of the chosen solution, and finally, methods of introduction.

<sup>5</sup> Obviously, not all of the research studies by CRISES can be presented here. Among others, the studies by Martine D’Amours on self-employment (D’Amours 2006 and D’Amours and Crespo 2002) and those by Jean-Jacques Gislain on institutionalism (Gislain 2003) should be mentioned. These references can be found at the end of the text, under the “Other themes” heading. Moreover, it should be noted that some of the main publications of the researchers are presented at the end of the text and are classified according to the research themes addressed in this paper.

- Problem-solving groups in which production and trades employees work together with managers, technicians and engineers to solve problems and improve certain specific situations<sup>6</sup>,
- Work teams in which production and trades employees are given the collective responsibility of organizing their own work, formerly the responsibility of first-level foremen.

In some workplaces, “organizational” participation is implemented (introduced and managed) within the framework of an employer/union partnership, which takes form concretely in various joint committees (steering committee, work reorganization committee or continuous improvement committee), where the actors negotiate the introduction of innovations and take on the responsibility for managing them jointly. Participation and partnership are thus combined. This situation can be found in 15 to 20% of manufacturing plants in Quebec.<sup>6</sup>

#### **4.1.3. Innovation process**

The process undergoes various phases. After a crisis period, often accompanied by union concessions and unilateral job cuts by the employer, participation and partnership are established and briefly predominate. Two types of tensions and difficulties then appear: tensions within the union, with regard to its independence from management and at a first assessment of the partnership; and tensions between management and the union, provoked by the management’s strategic reorientation and pressures on employment and compensation. This is followed by a period during which partnership and reorientation are called into question. The situation can then develop in a variety of ways.

#### **4.1.4. Results: economic and social performance**

Performance is a major issue for actors. Whether this involves improving economic performance (productivity, quality, reduction of production costs) or social performance (work intensification, qualification, autonomy, employment and compensation), there are always arbitrations and compromises to be made. The evolution of performance, as experienced by the actors, is a continuous subject of discord and thus a potential challenge to innovations. For employees, the question of employment is crucial. When work intensification is accompanied by increased qualification and autonomy, the innovations can be sustained. Conversely, innovations can have pernicious effects such as increased occupational health problems, which in turn increase absenteeism.

#### **4.1.5. Diffusion and social transformation**

Despite better economic and social performance, the diffusion of local innovations faces a stumbling block, that is, the institutional context and strategies of social actors. Without an institutional framework to make “cooperation” compulsory and independent from the “will” of actors, the partnership is continuously subject to blackmail from the actors, who threaten to pull out of it if they believe that conflictual relations are more likely to yield short-term gains. Moreover, the change in the corporate governance system, now dominated by shareholders hungry for high short-term returns, is an obstacle to introducing and maintaining the conditions required to ensure the continuity of innovations. These conditions are training, job protection, and fair compensation, as well as the investment of time and resources to foster social dialogue. Finally, the institutional framework, excessively permissive with regard to lay offs, does not favour job security, which is considered by employees to be an essential condition for the survival of innovations. To sum up, social innovations are highly fragile.

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<sup>6</sup> Based on the results of a survey conducted in 2001 on management and union representatives of manufacturing establishments with 50 employees or more in Quebec (Lapointe et al. 2006).

## 4.2. Innovations in surveillance practices

### 4.2.1. Conditions of emergence

The crisis of the Fordist and bureaucratic firm, the rejection of modern forms of legitimacy (private property, rules, science), and the development of intellectual work (services, the new economy, etc.) are some of the factors contributing to the efforts to develop new surveillance practices. This raises the question of how to coordinate collective activity and the issue of reconstituting managerial dominance becomes crucial. Thus, traditional surveillance practices, such as management accounting, budgetary control and compliance with bureaucratic rules, are being challenged.

### 4.2.2. Social innovations

Surveillance is an administrative means to reproduce a governance system. It refers to two aspects of administrative power: direct surveillance of subordinates and indirect surveillance through the control of information as a means of governance and coordination of action through space and time (for example, the organizational structure, programming, management indicators, and management by results). Social innovations take the form of new surveillance practices inspired by post-formal models (corporate culture, emotion management, project-based management, etc.). Social innovations also involve the relations between local goods production or service delivery units and decision-making and performance appraisal centres which are usually concentrated in headquarters or the central management of ministries.

### 4.2.3. Innovation process

To illustrate the process of social innovations, we will use the following two cases: the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the CPEs.

- The IDRC is a federal research centre created by the Parliament of Canada which operated from 1970 to 1990 according to the professional bureaucracy model. It was then reformed in the early 1990s and required to adopt a more post-bureaucratic structure (reduction in the number of hierarchical levels, establishment of shifting borders, increased use of contingent labour, promotion of multidisciplinary work teams, adoption of consensual decision making). Concretely, the reform resulted in a centralized mode of governance and flexible coordination methods (mainly matrix-based project management centred on more flexible goals and timeframes) which better characterize the actors (fixed-term contracts) more than orientations. The effects of the reform can be explained by the analysis of surveillance practices, which shows that these practices particularly affect the actors especially (as opposed to material resources) and tend to intensify indirect surveillance (through the introduction of collective and individual performance indicators, for example).
- The case of CPEs, private non-profit organizations, helps to illustrate two aspects of current organizational innovations: the highly participatory practices of local organizations (educators, administrations, parents and children) and a co-construction of surveillance practices by the Ministère-CPE Network. This co-construction is based on a partnership bolstered by thirty years of struggle (daycares and the feminist movement) and is gradually bringing the *ministère de la Famille et de l'Enfance* (family and child ministry) to negotiate surveillance practices (funding policies and practices, the content of budgetary and activity reports, accounting system, etc.), which allows the Ministère and CPEs to recognize each other's distinctive features.

### 4.2.4. Results

In the case of the IDRC, the “debureaucratization” and granting of greater “autonomy” to knowledge workers, in the context of increasing use of self-employed professionals (with no permanent employment relationship with the government or company), have clearly had pernicious effects. Control through performance and pressure on “deliverables,” as well as peer pressure in work teams, are means of indirect work surveillance that increase alienation at work. Alienation manifests itself through the weakening of social protections related to work and the loss of “control over one’s time,” which takes the form of excessively long work hours.

In the case of the CPEs, the results show that relations between local service delivery units and the central management can be redefined through a participatory process, which is more likely to democratize and legitimize new surveillance practices, thereby enhancing their sustainability. The CPE Network and the quality of relations between the Ministère and its partners are the envy of many countries. At a time when the current Quebec government is discussing private-public partnerships, the case of the CPEs offers an attractive alternative model.

#### **4.2.5. Diffusion and social transformation**

The indirect surveillance practices applied to jobs in the knowledge economy are already widely used and are likely to spread, since they fill a regulatory void regarding non-standard work and the limitation of work time, in particular in relation to voluntary but unpaid extra work hours.

The case of the CPEs illustrates the transformation of a social movement into a “social enterprise,” one, moreover, associated with the union movement. Because of their history and social base, the CPEs are in a position to impose “equal to equal relations” on the government. The question then is whether this alternative model is exceptional, or exportable and applicable to public/private partnerships as an alternative model.

### **4.3. Vocational training**

#### **4.3.1. Conditions of emergence**

Although labour qualification is a source of competitiveness for companies, Quebec workers receive little in-house training. Moreover, in the context of the knowledge economy and of the predominance of small- and medium-sized businesses (SMBs), which have few resources for training or simply for managing human resources, this observation is even more relevant. Furthermore, in an economy characterized by innovation, tacit and informal knowledge is essential. Finally, in the context of an aging work force, the issue of intergenerational sharing of knowledge is increasingly crucial.

#### **4.3.2. Social innovations**

Innovations take place at two levels: (1) in workplaces, where there are programs for the mentoring and recognition (and evaluation) of workers’ tacit knowledge, informal qualifications, experience, and social and communication skills; (2) and in institutions, for example, at the legislative level through the *Act to Foster the Development of Manpower Training* (the “1% Law,” 1995), in intermediate, regional and sectoral institutions (Human Resource Sector Committees, Local Employment Centres, sector committees), and in schools. Some studies have emphasized the development of cooperation between various actors who collaborated little or not at all in the past, which certainly constitutes a form of social innovation.

#### **4.3.3. Process**

The “1% Law” was recently amended and the minimum annual wage bill of businesses subject to the law was raised from \$250,000 to \$1 million. The current government justified this change by the fact that businesses with a wage bill of under \$1 million were having trouble complying with the standard (almost 30% were incapable of doing so) but were the main contributors to the national manpower training fund (the *Fonds national de formation de la main-d'œuvre*, FNFMO), the greatest portion of which is used by large businesses. Small- and medium-sized businesses were thus funding the training in large businesses. Therefore, the government was confronted with a dilemma: either find other mechanisms to encourage training in SMBs (which would have required social innovations for the mutualization of training on a territorial basis, supported by the Human Resource Sector Committees), or put an end to any obligation for these businesses to provide training. It decided in favour of the second alternative.

#### **4.3.4. Results**

The expected effects of training are increased productivity and improved general working conditions for employed workers, as well as recognition of workers’ skills. Moreover, raising the level of training of the labour force and recognition of various skills contribute to greater social cohesion. With regard specifically to the 1% Law, its pernicious effects were remedied by eliminating all incentives for training in SMBs, at a time when training is increasingly necessary in the knowledge economy. As for sectoral committees, they have certainly helped to develop training, in particular in sectors where it was still undeveloped, for example in the tourism and hotel and catering industries.

#### **4.3.5. Diffusion and social transformation**

The process of diffusion brings out the role of the government and the political aspect, as an arbitrator of social actors with diverging concerns: unions and other social movements demand more measures to promote training, whereas employers demand less government intervention. The process of diffusion also highlights the role of intermediate institutions (Human Resource Sector Committees, new forms of mutualization, etc.) in the diffusion of training.

### **4.4. Work life-private life balance**

#### **4.4.1. Conditions of emergence**

Various factors contribute to defining the issue of work life-private life balance:

- Increase in the participation rate of couples with children;
- Aging of the population and development of the phenomenon of “natural caregivers”;
- Longer work hours and increase in non-standard work schedules;
- Increase of non-standard jobs;
- Demands for new approaches to managing social time.

The lack of balance between work life and private life leads to many consequences:

- Stress, health problems, organizational problems, and a lack of time to fulfill family and other non-work responsibilities; this creates costs for businesses linked to absenteeism, turnover and loss of productivity;
- With regard to a worker’s career: a slowing down of career progression for those who work fewer hours, more often for women, thereby giving rise to employment inequity;
- The maintaining of the sexual division of domestic chores;
- Poverty among single mothers who are unable to balance work with family;
- Polarization of work time: increase in the number of work hours for some, whereas others are

struggling with a lack of work.

#### 4.4.2. Social innovations

Social innovations come in two forms:

- The implementation of government measures, focused mainly on work-family balance:
  - A reduced-contribution childcare services program;
  - Parental leave;
  - The Québec Parental Insurance Plan, which came into effect in January 2006;
  - Some provisions of the *Act respecting Labour Standards*: in particular, 10 days of unpaid leave for family reasons and a limit on the number of overtime hours which are not consented to.
- The implementation of measures in workplaces, although rather limited, as shown by our studies:
  - Work time arrangement programs: flexible or compressed schedules, specific leave for family or personal reasons, right to refuse overtime hours, part-time hours granted when justified by family reasons;
  - Programs for work at home;
  - Workplace daycares;
  - Joint funds (employers/unions) for childcare services... etc.

Studies also show that men generally have less support from their colleagues and superiors than mothers, and that they hesitate to take advantage of the measures that are sometimes accessible to them; the legitimacy of their demands seems to be at issue. As for women, it is the professionals and managers who have greater flexibility in their working hours, a highly sought after measure. However, women who take advantage of this measure pay the price for it with generally longer work schedules.

#### 4.4.3. The innovation process

The innovation process is fraught with tensions and contradictions. In the case of daytime and nighttime childcare centres for example, it pits the service providers (the childcare workers who must work at night) against the potential users (shift workers), while raising questions about the quality of the services. This, moreover, leads to an extension of night work, a situation that should instead be limited. Furthermore, these programs often include the possibility of taking advantage of unpaid leaves, measures that offer little incentive and mean more loss of income for those who use them. This raises the issue of the compensation of these leaves, something to which employers are opposed. Finally, work-family balance measures do not take into account the fact that jobs in the knowledge economy and specialized services are relatively new. Thus, a formal measure to reduce work time or grant leaves will have no effect with the breaking down of boundaries of time and space between work and non-work and with regard to intellectual work, focused on the solving of complex problems and constrained by the pressure of “deliverables” (the pressure of urgency and the difficulty in evaluating performance).

#### 4.4.4. Results

With regard to economic performance for employers, work-family balance measures offer undeniable advantages:

- A decrease in the level of absenteeism and a reduction in overtime costs;
- An increase in productivity among workers who are less tired;
- A reduction of stress and sick leaves, and thus, of salary insurance costs;
- An increase in the rates of retention and hiring.

All Quebec workers benefit from the Quebec reduced contribution child care policy. In workplaces,

there is a range of measures and fringe benefits linked to the events and obligations related to family responsibilities: makeup pay and leaves following a birth or an adoption, work time arrangement, flexible schedules, part-time work on a voluntary basis. Small- and medium-sized businesses, which make up 97 percent of employers, propose different support measures, but they are informal in the majority of cases, and most often ineffective.

#### **4.4.5. Diffusion and social transformation**

The women's movement and unions have led the struggle for balancing work life and private life. At the same time, other tentative demands are starting to emerge from various segments of civil society, for a different management of social time in which individuals will have a greater control over their time. This social dynamic is also leading to a redefinition of gender relations and more effective sharing of domestic chores and responsibilities, glimpses of which can be seen, although organizations do not always support individuals in these new orientations. This social movement most often turns to the government to demand appropriate public policies and is confronted by the resistance of employers. Social actors not only put forward often contradictory goals, but they also have difficulty developing cohesion. This is particularly true of unions, which must occasionally arbitrate between divergent demands and interests among their members. As for employers, they pit employees' demands for flexibility for more control over their time against the requirements for ever-increasing production flexibility in a context of heightened competition. Finally, the state is asked by both parties to support these efforts, among other ways financially, but also to compel reluctant employers to provide more flexible working conditions. To limit, or even put off such interventions, the state invokes its lack of resources and its refusal to add regulatory measures that increasingly target businesses.

### **5. Conclusion: from Social Innovations to Social Change**

The following are the main observations to emerge from our studies on social innovations in work and employment.

**First**, social innovations represent converging and diverging issues for social actors, in relation to which they adopt behaviours and develop strategies, conducive or not to the implementation and realization of their goals. Without a compromise on the issues raised and the goals sought by the innovations, their implementation is difficult and their impact on improved performance is reduced.

**Second**, social innovations are more likely to help enhance economic and social performance when they are part of a system of institutional complementarity. For example, in workplaces, they are integrated into what is referred to as "bundles," made up of phenomena that belong to the multiple constituent dimensions of a workplace: thus, organizational innovations, such as flexibility and team work, can be accompanied by an appropriate training program, new forms of compensation, union participation in management, and greater cooperation in work relations.

**Third**, social innovations require abandoning old routines and skills and learning new ones. This learning process takes time, which thus delays improvements in performance, and even leads to its deterioration in the short term. There can thus be a relatively long time lapse between the introduction of an innovation and its impact on performance, whether positive or negative. In an economy highly conditioned by short-term returns, the implementation of social innovations is very difficult and innovating actors are under a great deal of pressure to obtain significant results within excessively short time periods.

**Fourth**, in the innovation process, a particular interaction develops between the micro and macro levels, as represented by public policies and the institutional context. On the one hand, local

environments introduce new practices that, to develop fully, require the support of appropriate public policies. On the other hand, the new realities of the labour and job markets prompt the actors and social movements to put forward new demands for public policies, which should encourage or compel local environments to comply with new rules.

**Fifth**, beyond the national level, the globalization of production presents a constraint and a new opportunity for the diffusion of social innovations. The broadening of collective bargaining agreements, the enriching and increased application of international labour standards, the emergence and the diffusion of codes of conduct in multinational firms, and the addition of social agreements in free trade agreements are all modern phenomena that, with the support of social movements that are operating a transnationalization of their actions, represent essential conditions, or even results, of social innovations.

**To sum up**, these various observations show the problems to be overcome in the transition from social innovations to social transformation. The question then is whether this implies that intense mobilization of actors should be at the centre of the strategies for change.

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Figure 1 : General Model of Analysis of Social Innovations



