



The skills nexus between productivity and job quality

Strengthening foundations for a competitive Europe

CONCEPT NOTE

General information

Organiser	Cedefop
Type	Conference
Format	Physical, Cedefop premises in Thessaloniki, GR
Date	29 and 30 June 2026
Participant profile	Policymakers, social partners, researchers and practitioners interested in skills, job quality, competitiveness
Working language	English

Cedefop is organising this flagship conference: The skills nexus between productivity and job quality: strengthening foundations for a competitive Europe, as part of the European VET and Skills Week. The event positions skills development and workplace learning as the primary pathway through which the EU can achieve the dual objectives of enhanced competitiveness and improved job quality.

A high-skilled workforce is crucial for deploying corporate investment in human-centred technology and designing quality jobs. Learning during one's career and the development of workers' expertise as integral parts of quality jobs are also key to ensuring that technological innovation can enhance workers' capabilities and boost productivity.

POLICY CONTEXT

SKILLS AND LEARNING: PATHWAY TO COMPETITIVENESS

European economies are facing considerable challenges due to transformative global geopolitical shifts and rapid technological innovation driven by artificial intelligence (AI). Productivity gaps and lagging competitiveness relative to major competitors exacerbate these issues.

While the [Draghi report on EU competitiveness](#) identifies insufficient technological innovation as the primary cause of low productivity, the European



Commission's [Competitiveness Compass](#) highlights the need to overcome overly bureaucratic procedures and regulations that limit the Single Market's potential. The European Union promotes adopting digital technologies through its [Apply AI strategy](#) and the AI Continent action plan.

The 2025 [Union of Skills](#) communication emphasises the importance of high-quality education, training and lifelong learning. Building a competitive EU calls for a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach to developing skills for quality jobs, offering targeted upskilling and reskilling opportunities, and retaining and circulating talent across the Union. These priorities align with ongoing European Commission efforts to improve job quality via the [Quality Jobs Roadmap](#), initiated in December 2025, and an upcoming Quality Jobs Act to be adopted in 2026. Investment in the workforce's initial and continuing skills development is the foundation of these efforts.

Productivity growth, technological innovation, skills, and job quality have often been treated as separate elements of competitiveness in policy initiatives. Helping EU firms transition from outdated, less competitive processes to high-productivity, high-skills business strategies requires understanding the multifaceted nature of competitiveness. It is also necessary to promote systematic approaches to align priorities and policy actions to improve European competitiveness.

COMPETITIVENESS THROUGH PEOPLE

EU firms could aim to strengthen their competitiveness by investing in automation technology and low-cost production. Emerging digital and AI technologies now have [significant scope to replace labour, even in high-skilled, professional work](#) that used to be immune to technological displacement. Alongside job and task loss, evidence shows that digital technology increases [job insecurity, routinisation, work pressure and workers' fear of technological replacement](#). Algorithmically managed workplaces, with less human control and oversight, risk deteriorating job quality. Such practices could modernise Tayloristic production models under the guise of competitiveness.

However, the effects of technology on job quality are [not deterministic](#). Managerial, policy, and collective bargaining choices influence these outcomes, as do organisational learning cultures. New technologies can also [expand workers' capabilities, enabling them to take on new tasks or improve their efficiency in current roles](#), and improve job quality and productivity. This high-road approach to competitiveness requires continuous skills and expertise development among workers to [handle unpredictability and non-routine tasks](#). Calls to transition from the Industry 4.0 paradigm to Industry 5.0 highlight efforts to foster '[human centred technology](#)', which enhances job quality by building on workers' capabilities.

Striking the right balance between job design elements (e.g. work autonomy, problem solving, delegation of decision-making, and work pressure) and contextual organisational factors (e.g. managerial support, organisational climate and culture, and workplace psychological safety) is crucial for maintaining a human-centred approach that stimulates job quality and continuous skill-building in firms. However, in a challenging economic climate, simply automating jobs is not necessarily appealing. Pursuing the high road by translating workers' skills development into '**practical wisdom**' and expertise – learning to do the right thing and to do things right – offers significant potential for improving Europe's competitiveness.



EVENT CONCEPT

This conference will explore cutting-edge research on how workplace learning, skills development and human-centred technological change can be leveraged to shape quality jobs that strengthen competitiveness of EU industries and firms. The discussions will also draw on Cedefop's recent [European Training and Learning survey \(ETLS\)](#). This survey provides unique insights into the drivers and contextual factors affecting workplace learning among EU citizens. Evidence from experts and policy actors within the skills ecosystem will complement these findings in interactive sessions designed to generate actionable recommendations.

While the partial connections between technological progress, job quality, skills, and productivity have been well-documented in the literature and discussed in policy discourse, a clearer understanding of their complex interactions and comprehensive context is still needed, especially regarding their effect on business competitiveness. Identifying skills policies that foster quality jobs and competitiveness is also essential. Achieving this requires reframing EU skills and vocational training policies, and a shift away from the siloed approach that has long characterised discussions on skills, technology, and job quality in the EU.

The goal of this Cedefop flagship conference is to showcase the synergies created by integrated policy approaches to skills development, job quality and competitiveness. To achieve this, Cedefop will bring together researchers and scholars from various disciplines, practitioners, and policymakers to encourage a productive dialogue on strengthening EU workplace competitiveness through human-centred technological innovation and job quality.

In addition to presentations from external experts on adult education and competitiveness, Cedefop will share its latest research findings on the factors influencing workplace learning. These findings will be based on analyses of the [European Training and Learning survey \(ETLS\)](#), a new Cedefop survey mapping learning and skills development in European workplaces.

The event will address the following questions:

- How do new technologies affect workers' skills development needs?
- Under what conditions can investment in skills align the objectives of good job quality and competitiveness of EU firms?
- How can technological innovation support a human-centred business strategy that remains globally competitive?
- How can skills and workplace learning strengthen the connection between technological innovation and competitiveness?
- How does adopting new technologies in firms influence corporate human resource management, learning practices, job design, and skills utilisation strategies?

