proving work

At the heart of the Young Workers' Lab is a simple question: what in this day and age counts as 'work'? Does your time spent reading emails when you should be off-duty count? Where is the limit? How about the time that click workers, freelancers, and courier riders spend waiting for a job to tick in? Or the miles driven between clients and the time spent in traffic jams for the homecare worker? Should your commute count as work? What are the work/life boundaries these days? When is 'work' *work* and how can we prove it?

Many young workers today face highly criticisable working conditions. Warehouse workers have few breaks and run miles per day to meet targets set by an algorithm. Archaeologists spend weeks away from home, with some exposed to workplace harassment. Bankers, insurance workers, and call centre staff are monitored for every keystroke they make, every word they say, the time they spend concluding a sale or giving a piece of advice.

Whilst we know this is happening, unions today rely on anecdotal evidence to push back on irresponsible employers and businesses, or to prove that the working day extends far beyond the hours paid. The Young Workers Lab aims to address this by providing unions with the knowledge, best-practices, and digital tools needed to conveniently collect and manage indisputable evidence about the working lives of their members.

1 The power of data to define work

To do this properly, we must go right to the core of the digital world - to data. Data itself has little value until it is organized, then it becomes *information*. Think about your daily life. When you use a credit card online once, it is hard to guess what sort of person you are. However, combined with GPS data, fitbit data to track your exercise or quality of sleep, and other streams such as your social media profiles, and businesses could well profile you as this or that type of consumer, and even worker.

Can you not just opt out? It is increasingly difficult. Today's world creates so much data that even with a few facts about you, organizations can estimate your future behaviour based on your similarities and differences to other people. They can profile you by filling in the blanks.

UNI has previously warned about the growing use of algorithms in human resources. This recent article in the Guardian described the Isaak system - an analytics system based on data about who emails whom and when, who accesses and edits files and who meets whom and when. The system then groups workers into "influencers" or "change-makers" and via extensive statistical analyses and algorithms can inform management on who is performing badly or greatly or is most likely to leave or become less productive, or…. It is only your imagination (and eventually the law, let's hope!) that sets the limits of what the data and algorithms used on the data can script into our behaviour..

2 Employers have it all... but we can push back

Employers have few, if any, obligations to share the data they mine about their employees, nor the algorithms they use to analyse it. In Europe, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) aims to tackle this to a certain extent by protecting the personal data and rights of individuals. Whilst this is a welcomed step in the direction of good data usage, the GDPR - like other data protection regulations across the world - fails to go the full mile and oblige companies to be transparent, inclusive and accountable to the *collective* group of workers. Put simply, this creates an information asymmetry - management has information we as unions and workers don't have. And this is weakening our bargaining position and power.

And now we are getting to the crux of the Young Workers Lab. To strengthen our bargaining position, our recruiting rate, and organizing success rate and to give us vital information we can use in campaigning and public awareness building, we need our own data. We also need to manage it responsibly, so no one is harmed. By first empowering young workers, who face a world of work that in many ways is precarious and fragmented, we can develop solutions for all types of worker in all forms of work.

Ever since their establishment, unions have created data. We have used the power of networks way before it was called the network age! In filing cabinets, organisers' notebooks, on floppy disks and in excel sheets, we have created a longitudinal data legacy like no other civil society organisations have. If we organised and structured these data, we could gain power over the conversation about gender pay gaps, career paths, educational attainment and the shifting nature of work.

In a blog post to be published soon, we will talk about how to do this using an Open Data Standard for unions, which is simply a field guide for how to organize data according to a common set of standards. Like the metric system or time zones, the adoption of a standard can generate tremendous value and power for those who choose to use it.

3 Putting Young Workers' Needs in the Spotlight

More needs to be done! As the world changes around us, we need a way to safely prove *how* workers work in the digital era, including *where* they work and *when* they work. These slippery boundaries must be addressed! Going back to the beginning of this article, it is time to prove what 'work' means in the digital era.

Take **working time**, for example. The 40-hour work week was established in 1935 by the ILO as a response to widespread unemployment and the need for a redistribution of work. This standard has been the norm ever since. Yet times have changed. Back then workers lived closer to the work site, be it the factory, the farm or the office. Back then, it wasn't possible to work remotely or even work on route to work! Due to technological innovations, many of us can now work or be called to work instantaneously and from *anywhere*.

A sound starting point for the redefinition of work would be to find a way to log, and more importantly *prove*, the conditions under which work is conducted. This is the fun part. In consultation with young workers in various unions, we are currently developing a **simple new app** that gives unions and workers this power. Think of it like a fitness tracker for the workday, one you could customize to record certain things. When you want, and only if you want it to.

In relation to working time, it could measure your commuting time and distance from home to work, your time spent on the road between clients, or even the time spent working whilst commuting. All of this adds up! To boot, whilst your whereabouts and activities are already

recorded by sensors on your phone for *commercial* reasons, our app does the same but for *your* benefit and only when you opt in for it to do so. Each worker **alone** would own the data our app produces. They can choose to share it with colleagues, with the union or simply delete it. The key word here is its voluntary. The unions with the workers decide what to log, when and why.

Consider **rest periods**. As work becomes more precarious and as employers seek new ways to boost productivity, the union movement needs to prove whether workers are getting the rest periods and breaks *they have the right to* and deserve. Our new app seeks to make this simple. For example, young workers employed as 'runners' at live events are reporting to their union that they don't get sufficient rest breaks, even after ten or more hours! So using our app, the union launches a "study" together with the runners. With their phone in their pockets, the app can be set to measure when the phone is not in motion and for how long. It could also measure how far the runners actually walk or run during a live event.

We all need to rest, and with new inventive techniques like the app we are developing now at the Young Workers' Lab, we can create indisputable evidence of whether our workers are getting sufficient and entitled breaks.

4 Making it Work - responsibly

It is easy to see how businesses and employers get carried away with wanting to surveil everything. What power it allows! At the Young Workers Lab, we seek to develop tools that do only what they are told and no more. Our talented [advisors](#) have cautioned us against repeating the mass surveillance of our members that they already are subject to at work and in their private life. In one of our meetings, the tech advisors nudged and pushed us to find a data collection method that is:

A. Empowering to the workers themselves (i.e. it relies on the explicit consent of the workers)

B. Targeted to the concrete issue we wish to measure

C. Is time-limited and as least intrusive as possible.

We answered their call.

Imagine the scenario where workers in a given company feel increasingly pressured to work long hours, they feel stressed and burn-out rates are on the rise. The app we are developing will do the following:

1. In cooperation with their members, the union decides that they want to measure 2 things over a period of say 3 weeks to prove that the wellbeing of workers is under pressure:

    a. Firstly, they will measure rest periods during working hours (this will test whether the workers get the breaks they need during the day)

    b. Secondly, they will log whether the workers use work-related apps outside of core working hours, for example answer emails, or work on a spreadsheet.

2. The members download the app and are asked for their consent for the app to measure the phone's movement/non-movement sensors and the records of whether the phone is on or off at what times of day, and whether the app the members themselves define as specifically work apps are being used, and if so when. The members agree to the 3-week study and the data logging begins.

3. At the end of the 3 weeks, the member can see his or her data. They are given a choice to share the data back to the union in anonymised form or to keep it themselves or delete it.

In short, the system only gathers the data it has been asked to, and the union only gets the data the member wishes to share. We can imagine that the workers will compare their results and start a discussion on what they each found.

Whilst this can strengthen the bonds between members, it too could spur the interest of non-members. The union coordinating usage of the app must then act on its findings. This could be done in multiple ways: through negotiation with management, through public pressure, campaigns, letters and social media pushes.

5 For you to try!

The app, which we will soon announce, is being co-developed by the Guardian Project in partnership with various UNI unions. It will soon be available for you and your union to try as well. Simply drop UNI Global's Director of Digitalisation, Christina Colclough a line, and she will get back to you.

In our next blog post, we will turn to the question of how unions best can handle the data they get in so the union movement as a whole becomes guardians of good data stewardship. We will add to that ideas on creating an Open Data Standard (an example) that will help unions to structure their data so it improves our impact.

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