Conclusions from the panel debate, 13 September 2017

Social partners should impel businesses to include ethics in their corporate cultures

“Engineers are improving our lives, they take on increasing responsibility for the future of our societies and such responsibility is ethical and moral as much as it is technical”, stressed Trond Markussen, President of ANE and NITO at the panel debate: Engineers views on disruption – threats or opportunities. He further claimed that ethics should be an integral part of corporate cultures. There should be a bad labelling system for the companies, which don’t integrate ethics in their business models. In conclusion, Trond stated that ethics should be embedded in the education systems and engineers should swear a Hippocratic Oath.

‘Naked truth is that I was made to treat my engineers as cattle, but is it right that we lay all the responsibility for ethics on individual engineers and ignore the regulatory dimension? Social partners have a role to play to remedy with the fear factor and should mediate the dialogue between the engineer and the manager when it comes to the ethics dilemmas. Just putting the responsibility on the engineers will not work, the whole system of management layers should be accountable”, in response to Trond’s suggestion pointed out Sara Hermansson, engineer, Director Customer projects in Northvolt AB.

Ida Auken, Member of the Danish Parliament, called for a more integrated debate on technology and use of data. “Data is the fundament for future societies – but we still need engineering of data to be able to use them fully and in way we can all accept. An idea would be getting an inspiration from the environmental movement on how to regulate the data and privacy of people, enterprises and society”. Engineers play a vital role, and should be invited to take part in the debate about ethics, they also need to embrace and tame changes, - according to Ida.

“Privacy is dead. Long live privacy. What we once enjoyed is gone, but we still need it. We will create it. Engineers will create it, because we need to experiment. Experimentation requires us to fail, to innovate in safe spaces”, argued Irina Schklovski, Associated Professor at the IT University of Copenhagen. “There is an urgency to look into the legacy, and it is not just a responsibility of a single engineer or an individual, it is an organizational responsibility. The legal systems are here to stay and can help us to manage the interoperability, understanding how to integrate old systems in the new ones”, continued Irina.

Six Silberman, Researcher at IG Metall noted that ethical issues were affected more by the goals and beliefs of management and corporate governance structures than by what engineers thought. In addition, he also underlined the necessity looking into our economic system. “Why nobody speaks about the capitalism? The huge amount of data is collected every day, everybody voluntary contributes to this collection and somebody earns a huge amount of money on this. We need to ask honest questions: why are business models are developed to exploit?”

Perhaps we need to learn from “Debating with an engineer is like wrestling with a pig in mud... after a while you learn that the pig really likes playing in the mud. Engineers are smart. Let them do their thing. Let them innovate. Ensure another group is in place to think through the ethical and social implications. Social partners should take their responsibility and urge relevant stakeholders to reflect on ethical dilemmas. Visionary unions should go hand in hand with visionary politics,” were the concluding remarks from the panelists.

The panel debate was organised in the framework of the European services workers union, UNI Europa yearly conference: Future world of work for Professionals and Managers. The conference is hosted by ANE and takes place in the Conference Centre of the Danish Society of Engineers, 12-13 September.