

Working conditions and employment quality

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For much of the latter half of the twentieth century, many Western democratic regimes made full employment one of the guiding principles of their social and economic policy. The Spanish constitution of 1978 is no exception; the final paragraph of Article 40 references the special importance of full employment as a means of individual economic and social progress.

These public policies placed the primary (although not exclusive) stress on the quantitative aspect of employment. Action taken in this area consisted not so much of directly generating employment (aside from the necessary provision of jobs in the public sector), but of fostering the most favourable conditions for its creation, fundamentally in the private sector.

In this progressive democratic context, the qualitative dimension of employment —i.e. the development of individuals' rights and obligations— was entrusted to a legal and labour system with two main pillars: legislation, which guaranteed certain unwaivable rights, and a process of collective bargaining to develop and improve on the minimum legal standards.

To put it in expressive schematic terms (albeit somewhat crudely), the public authorities created conditions for economic growth, the private sector generated jobs, and collective autonomy endowed those jobs with content, enabling a progressive improvement in the rights of working people. In a way, these three strands have operated as independent but complementary packages, and throughout the second half of the twentieth century they gradually emerged as essential vectors of a democratic and socially advanced employment model.

However, the evolution of this model over the years has not always been linear. In the last quarter of the twentieth century (principally), political and economic schools of thought emerged that argued that the best way of enabling growth was to substantially reduce public intervention in all areas, including the economic space.¹

1 In the last two decades of the twentieth century in particular, neoliberal policies were promoted by the governments of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US.

Similarly, they posited that rights-protecting legislation, articulated through a combination of legal minimums and collective autonomy, hindered job creation by making labour relations more inflexible and reducing business competitiveness. To varying degrees, this outlook permeated different political, doctrinal and scientific discourses. Moreover —especially in the wake of the great recession of 2008— they were translated into legislative initiatives that opted for a degrading of working conditions and reduced protection of workers' rights as the best way of ensuring business competitiveness and preventing or tempering job destruction.²

Today, when employment figures have returned to their pre-2008 levels, the discourse on employment has taken on a new momentum, but there is now a great emphasis on aspects related to quality. In this new context, it is essential to build further on the operational concept of 'job quality', identifying the conditions required to construct or rethink the model from this new perspective.

QUALITY OF EMPLOYMENT. THE REFRAMING OF A CONCEPT

The inclusion of job quality among the essential variables of political and academic discourse is a relatively recent development, yet it is by no means new in the field of salaried employment. Job quality, defined as a progressive improvement in workers' rights and in their legal protection and security, has been a persistent demand of trade unions. It is also one of the generic goals of constitutional systems in social states governed by the rule of law.³

In material terms, however, the emphasis in these demands and the way they have been translated into collective bargaining processes has been on setting the price of labour and the two basic related variables: salary and working hours. From the employee's perspective, indubitably, an ever better-paid job in exchange for a shorter working day must be considered an advance in terms of quality. Nor should it come as a surprise that employers often view this step as one of the potential causes of a decline in company profits and thus a threat to business competitiveness.

2 A clear example can be seen in the Spanish labour laws of the early twenty-first century, especially the 2012 Labour Reform Act (*Ley 3/2012*), passed by the conservative government of the People's Party which enjoyed an absolute majority. Among other significant changes, such as the reduction in severance pay for unfair dismissal, this latest legal reform also introduced into the collective bargaining system, as a specific instrument to enable wage devaluation, the priority of the company agreement over sectoral agreements, thus enabling the establishment of working conditions for workers that are inferior to the standards set in the reference sectoral agreement. To this end, the 2012 law made the legal procedures for downward modifications of acquired labor rights more flexible and easier.

3 Article 35 of the Spanish Constitution of 1978 refers to 'adequate remuneration' as a necessary complement to the right to work.

It is therefore important to explore new dimensions of quality employment that can at least partially decouple it from the confrontational logic of a reductionist dialectical vision, still wedded to the perception that the interests of those supplying employment and those demanding it will forever be opposed and irreconcilable.

Contrasting with this stance, the proposed reconfiguration of the discourse on job quality is underpinned by a widely shared conviction—in the theoretical discourse at least—that improving people's working conditions, and thus their quality of life, cannot be incompatible with economic growth and business sustainability; rather it should be viewed as one of its essential premises.

It seems clear that this transition will require the development of new conceptual frameworks, within which more inclusive proposals on quality employment can emerge and mature. All this in turn requires the development of broad processes of dialogue between the political, social and economic agents concerned, grounded at all times on a solid theoretical and empirical foundation.

And with this principle in mind, our primary aim in devoting an entire issue of *Ekonomiaz* to quality employment and working conditions is to make our own modest contribution to establishing the idea—as a preliminary step towards the design of regulatory, legal and/or conventional policies and proposals—that beyond the desirability of steering policy towards the quantitative goal of full employment, quality jobs should form a pivotal element of any competitive economy in a prosperous and socially cohesive society.

AN EXPLORATION OF THE CONSTITUENT ELEMENTS OF QUALITY EMPLOYMENT

If quality employment is to be more than just a theoretical benchmark and become a real operational concept, we need to make some headway in establishing its defining characteristics.

As we have already argued, increased job quality should at all times be oriented towards two complementary goals: bringing about an improvement in people's welfare and acting as a lever for economic development and the reinforcement of the productive fabric. It is therefore a dynamic reality and one that is constantly coming up against the specific needs of individuals and companies. The process of building (revising and updating) this concept is therefore nourished by three essential vectors: dialogue between social partners; public policy, discussed and validated as far as possible within the framework of tripartite social dialogue; and scientific debate and study, encompassing both the degree to which the theoretical models match the proposed aims and an assessment and empirical analysis of the results achieved at any time.

In necessarily broad terms, quality employment might be said to be that which not only guarantees adequate and updated remuneration, but is also stable, healthy and safe, compatible with employees' personal and home life and matched to both their own skills and the production requirements of the company. At the same time, however, a progressive increase in job quality should also encourage workers to engage in business projects and thus contribute to company viability and sustainability.

1. A well-paid job

Pay is undoubtedly one of the central pillars of the idea of satisfactory employment. In a modern, democratic model of labour relations, suitable payment depends to a large extent on the combined interplay of two complementary steps: the legal establishment of a minimum floor and a solid framework of collective bargaining enabling these minimum salaries to be adapted constantly to specific features and developments in individual industries and companies.⁴ From this perspective, a necessary premise for a progressive improvement in job quality can be seen to be the existence of a collective bargaining model, affecting a large proportion of the salaried population, that is closely linked to the circumstances it seeks to regulate. In our case, this means that any agreements should for preference be negotiated within the specific ambit of the autonomous community of the Basque Country and should match the specific circumstances of the region.

2. Stable employment

In addition to adequate pay, another fundamental indicator of quality is the maintenance of employment over time and, consequently, of the income that will enable people to build a solid life project based on stable and reasonably-paid jobs in such a way that they can achieve a satisfactory level of personal autonomy. This is especially true in the case of younger people.

For many decades our labour market has been burdened by abnormally high rates of temporary employment (at one point it accounted for almost a third of the total), resulting in a high percentage of fragile (precarious) jobs that were not very resistant to recessionary economic cycles.⁵ Although the situation has begun to change significantly since the 2021 reform, the truth is that, beyond a nominal growth in permanent contracts and the correlative and unde-

4 While not all EU member states have legislation establishing a minimum (interprofessional) wage, European convergence regulations, such as Directive 2022/2041, set out the basic requirements for guaranteeing fair and adequate minimum wage conditions for workers throughout the union.

5 A good example can be seen in the reaction of the job market to the great recession of 2008. Once the full impact of the crisis kicked in, Spain's unemployment rate soared to two or three times that of other European countries, largely due to the extremely high temporary nature of the labour market.

niable decline in the proportion of temporary contracts over the last three years, the real challenge is to reduce (unwanted) churn among workers — in other words, to make open-ended contracts not only the predominant legal rule, but also a well-founded situation in our labour market and a hallmark of our labour culture.

3. Safe and healthy employment

Thirdly, it is becoming increasingly evident that quality employment cannot exist if the conditions of safety and health —not only physical, but also psychological and emotional— in which people work are not guaranteed. Both conceptually and also legally —with the emergence some three decades ago of legislation on workplace hazards— occupational health and safety has progressed from mere compliance with company obligations to prevent workplace accidents or illnesses to an active search for the overall well-being of employees during the course of their work. In this sense, the classic components of the so-called ‘safety debt’ have been progressively supplemented with other actions and corporate policies ranging from the promotion of psychosocial health to issues of diversity, working environment, gender equity and age management.

4. Employment that enables work-life balance without creating gender inequality

Undoubtedly, quality employment must also enable those engaged in it to reasonably reconcile their paid employment with their personal and family lives, without creating inequalities or gender gaps. Indeed, the existence of mechanisms of work-life balance is often perceived as a necessary precondition for the development of a more satisfactory regulatory framework for working people. Nonetheless, recent debates and research have shown that many of the structural causes underlying gender imbalances are due to an unequal distribution of household responsibilities between the sexes and their direct and indirect negative impact on women’s professional careers.

Co-responsibility has therefore become an essential constituent of equality policy and although complex to implement, it is one of the most effective instruments for progressively bridging wage and pension gaps and getting past the occupational segregation that is one of the primary causes of those gaps.

Clearly, this is not the only arena for developing public policies, negotiated deals and business decisions aimed at advancing real and effective equality between women and men in the workplace. In recent years, respect for gender equality has been shown to be a determining factor in the process of improving job quality, with beneficial effects for improving organisations’ internal equality and work environments. Some empirical research also indicates that improvements in

equality levels have a generally positive impact on business efficiency, albeit the correlation is not always linear.

5. Jobs that match the skills of individuals and the needs of companies in a context of ever-greater automation of production processes

For company sustainability to be more than just a vague generic statement of intent, it is essential to ensure continuous training for employees and constant adaptation of their professional skills to the requirements of a digitalised economy and the new and changing needs of companies within it. Nonetheless, it is clear that new automated decision-making systems are affecting not only the production- and management-related side of business organisations, but also the manner in which staff conditions evolve and are dealt with, and they will do so to an even greater extent in the near future. In this situation, there is an inescapable need to arbitrate rules and procedures, through both legislation and agreement, that will enable improvements in business efficiency to be made through the progressive and dynamic upskilling of staff, without threatening employment or undermining employee workplace wellbeing.

6. Employment that fosters employee engagement in business projects

Quality employment, under the conditions we have set out —which will naturally have to be broadened, amended and/or fine-tuned as public policy, social dialogue, theoretical reflections and empirical research develop— should at all times be geared towards fostering employee engagement in business projects. It is easy to call for initiatives aimed at improving job quality, but much more difficult to put in practise. Ultimately, the basic aim of any such initiative might be said to be to encourage a virtuous circle comprising on the one hand satisfactory, high-quality work and on the other, business management dynamics and practices that are grounded on people, their skills (training) and their attitudes (engagement), with a view to generating shared value — i.e. a circle in which improvements on one side should always impact the other, and the two should feed into one another.

(SOME OF) THE ESSENTIAL CONDITIONS FOR EMPLOYMENT QUALIFICATION

1. An employment relations model based on negotiation

To address this process successfully, it is essential to identify the premises or conditions of possibility from which to advance towards negotiation and public policy aimed at a progressive improvement in job quality. Clearly, it would be

impossible to examine all these ‘conditions’ in any detail here. Nonetheless, it seems obvious that the first is to consolidate our own model of labour relations, centring around Interprofessional Agreement regarding the structure of collective bargaining in the Basque Country (Basque Structure Agreement of 2017) published in the BOPV of March 3, 2017, which, with the consensus of all the most representative social agents, guarantees the prioritisation of sectoral agreements negotiated and signed in the Basque Country. In development of this agreement and under its legal aegis —unquestionable in the light of the latest labour reforms⁶— the progressive increase in the coverage of Basque collective bargaining (as opposed to Spain-wide negotiations) constitutes one of the essential paths towards improving rates of job quality and adapting working conditions to the specific characteristics and needs of social and economic circumstances in the region.

2. Collective bargaining that is strong on content, swift in procedure and adaptable to the changing needs of individuals and companies

On this foundation, a model needs to be constructed that expands the content of bargaining procedures and also improves, streamlines and technifies them. Many of the challenges we face are well known. One might mention, *inter alia*, the disappearance and/or rapid transformation of many occupations and the emergence of new ones; the technification and digitalisation of production processes arising from the incorporation of artificial intelligence; and the imperative need to arbitrate formulas and mechanisms that allow collective regulations to be adapted to an evolving labour and economic scenario in order to preserve (and improve) the competitiveness of companies without detracting from individuals’ rights.

For a number of years now, the need to reinforce collective bargaining has been a constant mantra. Perhaps now more than ever, though, it is becoming evident that there is an urgent need to construct a narrative and generate bargaining dynamics that are not viewed as an impediment to addressing and resolving pending challenges, but rather as the only acceptable starting point for advancing towards an efficient model within the framework of an inclusive and cohesive society.

It is this this central role played by collective bargaining that perhaps explains the clearly legal tendency of many of the theoretical contributions and reflections

6 While it is a technically complex regulation and in certain specific cases there are impediments to its practical application, the current wording of Article 84.4 and 5 of the Workers’ Statute (enshrined in law by Royal Decree Law 2/2024) leaves no legal doubt as to the precedence given to regional and provincial agreements negotiated and signed in the Basque Autonomous Community.

in this issue of the journal — an aspect that may seem unusual in a publication that normally has a more economic orientation.

3. A model of employment relations that is supported and sustained within the context of a solid and permanent framework of bilateral and tripartite social dialogue, without diminishing the autonomy of action of the social partners

The improvement in job quality proposed here also requires structures that will facilitate and sustain social dialogue — not only bipartite (promoting, channelling and enabling collective bargaining and agreements that regulate working conditions), but also tripartite (creating frameworks and spaces for ongoing encounters between public, economic and social agents).

Numerous examples illustrate the growing complexity of negotiation processes in the area of labour relations. As mentioned, issues such as occupational health and safety, lifelong learning, effective gender equality and the promotion of co-responsibility, among others, should play a much more central role in labour agreements and pacts if they are to achieve their full potential in improving employment quality. Bipartite social dialogue, in its most classic form as a direct emanation of collective autonomy ought therefore to address areas of growing importance in the field of labour relations that it has previously evaded or even opposed. However, neither the continuous and growing legal references to collective bargaining, nor the demands in this regard from companies and employees, nor even the determined will of the social partners, seem sufficient in themselves to successfully take on this (inescapable) process of reinforcing the material content of collective agreements.

To respond appropriately to a complex and changing labour situation, collective bargaining requires permanent material and technical support structures, financed and sustained with public resources. Beyond any theoretical reflections on the necessary transition towards a model of ‘assisted or supported collective bargaining’, the growing involvement of industrial relations boards in the effective development of bargaining processes is demonstrating that it is possible to respond more efficiently and more swiftly to these and other new regulatory challenges, without diminishing the autonomy of the negotiators.

At the same time, it is also essential to bolster the framework of social dialogue itself. The social partners do not merely regulate and organise the labour space through collective bargaining agreements. The role of the most representative trade unions and business associations as interlocutors with governments is an essential

part of their DNA.⁷ However, the growing intersection of the public and private spheres and the shared objectives (in generic terms at least) of social, economic and political agents to increase efficiency and, at the same time, improve people's well-being, make it necessary for any such interlocution to be not merely episodic or formal, but permanent and substantive.

The creation and consolidation of permanent tripartite frameworks for dialogue is, therefore, a new condition for designing and implementing policies, together with strategies and public action plans, which, without renouncing the principle of the democratic legitimacy of political power and without in any way diminishing the inalienable powers of the public administration, are more and better aligned to the real needs of the administrees and their representative organisations.

ARTICLES AND CONTRIBUTIONS INCLUDED IN THIS MONOGRAPHIC ISSUE

With regard to the proposed arrangement, the first article in this monographic issue, written by the professors of the Basque Institute of Competitiveness (Orkestra) **Mercedes Oleaga, Susana Franco and Iratxe Aristegui**, acts as a general framework, providing some background for the contributions of the other authors by analysing the symbiotic relationship between quality employment and business competitiveness. Starting from the premise that it is necessary to move beyond traditional theoretical discourses that pit business profitability against employment quality, the study makes a correlation analysis between the main variables linked to competitiveness and the extrinsic and intrinsic factors used to measure employment quality. In their analysis, the authors empirically demonstrate the virtuous and reciprocal incidence (more evident and direct in some cases than in others), between increased competitiveness (measured using those variables) and an improvement in quality indicators.

The article also highlights the connection between territorial competitiveness and quality employment in the service of inclusive and sustainable welfare. The study includes a comparative analysis of the different regions (autonomous communities) of Spain, showing that the Basque Country occupies first place in job quality. It also demonstrates a more direct correlation in the Basque case between quality employment and levels of competitiveness, itemised for each variable.

7 The Trade Union Freedom Act (*Ley Orgánica de Libertad Sindical* or LOLS) confers on the most representative trade unions (both at the level of the Spanish state (Section 6.3) and the autonomous communities (Section 7.1)) the power to represent workers before public administrations and any other entities and bodies provided for. Additional Provision 6 of the Workers' Statute confers a similar capacity on the most representative business organisations with respect to employers (also at state and regional level). In the exercise of these powers, both parties have come together in a number of councils and advisory bodies, both general (e.g. the economic and social councils) and industry-specific, assuming the role of interlocutors of the governments and public administrations in an ever-wider range of issues.

The second article, by **Antonio Baylos**, professor at the University of Castilla-La Mancha, delves directly into the framework of collective bargaining (general reflection) as a necessary condition for the establishment of a labor culture—and effective practices consistent with it—oriented toward the consolidation of quality employment and fair and equitable working conditions. The article first analyzes and denounces attempts to subordinate the right to work, constitutionally recognized as a right of citizenship, to the imperatives of economic policy. This has led to prioritizing the purely quantitative dimension of employment and, by undermining the protective effect of collective agreements, enabling the devaluation of material working conditions as the preferred way to generate new jobs (a clear example of which was the 2012 labor reform). After highlighting the reorientation of many of these policies through the latest labor reforms and the commitment to a hiring model that favors stability and reverses the wage primacy of the company agreement, the reflection focuses on the importance of collective bargaining, not only to establish decent wages, which is a key factor and a necessary condition for job qualification, but also as a particularly suitable means to promote a genuine bilateral and agreed-upon employment policy tailored to the needs of workers and employers and consistent with the demands of quality employment.

The third article is by **Jesús Cruz Villalón**, a professor at the University of Seville and chair of the National Consultative Committee on Collective Bargaining Agreements (CCNCC). In it he addresses a technically complex—and inevitably somewhat dry—topic, but one which is of capital importance in any regulatory system of collective bargaining: the rules defining the bargaining structure, i.e. the criteria of precedence between collective bargaining agreements at different levels. These rules determine the way in which the legislator has decided to distribute the broad regulatory power attributed in any democratic system of labour relations to collective autonomy among the social partners (unions and employers' organisations).

The article offers a meticulous and comprehensive analysis of recent changes in the rules governing the structure and concurrence of different employment agreements. The last four decades have been marked by a certain tension with regard to the equivalence of collective bargaining agreements of different scopes—functional (sectoral or company) and territorial (state, regional and provincial). The prevalence of one agreement or another has been determined on the basis of timing or by the attribution of an order of legal precedence. The author reaches a series of (mainly technical) conclusions, regarding both the undeniable complexity of the current model, built through the progressive superimposition of successive legal reforms, and on the difficulties in interpreting and effectively applying some of the recent regulations. In addition, he examines the clear precedence now given to regional agreements over state ones. This situation also extends to pro-

vincial agreements when so stated by a regional Interprofessional Agreement — as is the case in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country.

The fourth article is by **Salvador del Rey**, professor and lecturer in Labour Law at ESADE Law School, who explores a more specific topic, but one which is highly relevant to the future of employment, particularly job quality, namely the impact on employee working conditions of the mass introduction of AI and algorithmic management of processes in companies. The author begins by examining the Fifth State Agreement for Collective Bargaining (AENC), which is a general orientative framework and set of recommendations on conducting collective bargaining, and is not directly enforceable in law. He goes on to describe in broad terms how the issue has been addressed in the collective agreements negotiated to date. The analysis shows that there are few references to the use of AI. Generally speaking, any clauses and provisions dealing with such practices are quite limited in scope and most agreements that do address the issue simply restate the general guidelines.

The article goes on to highlight the difficulty of transposing general EU regulations on AI oversight to domestic law and the domain of collective bargaining or even to business practices themselves. It stresses the complexity of ensuring human oversight of decisions taken by automated AI systems (which are playing an ever-greater role in companies), even questioning its technical feasibility. The author nonetheless finds that there is a broad regulatory field for collective bargaining, both when it comes to specifying the intensity of this oversight, and the introduction of agreed mechanisms to ensure its effectiveness.

The fifth article, by **Cristóbal Molina**, professor at the University of Jaén, explores the way in which diversity —particularly age diversity— is addressed, as a new condition for improving employment quality. The notion of job quality is widely used, but it is a dynamic, multidimensional concept that is still under construction. We need to escape an outdated reductionist vision that almost exclusively associates quality employment with two forms of security: contractual security (i.e. job stability) and economic security (the right to adequate pay). Today, one cannot conceive of quality employment without the existence of a safe and healthy workplace. In societies undergoing intensive aging that are now involved in a complex demographic transition —as is the case of the Basque Country— it is not feasible to create safe and healthy environments without properly addressing the issue of age. Age management is essential not only for improving the quality of life of older people and maintaining their employability without a diminution in productivity, but also to adapt employment to the new work culture of young people and generate collaborative diversity-based environments.

This article offers an extensive analysis of the real situation faced by older people, highlighting the particular impact of unemployment (especially long-term

unemployment) on the over-50s, the inadequacy of benefits for this cohort (who account for the majority of unemployment benefit recipients) and the persistence of age-related prejudices. It goes on to explore the contrast between public discourse, with its commitment to active and healthy aging, and the reality, in which any policies associated with these goals are limited in scope.

The author concludes by stressing the need to link quality employment to the overall sustainability of the system and arguing that this is a convergent challenge common to the three major transitions of our time —digital, demographic and environmental.

The last two articles address, from different perspectives, the issue of effective equality between women and men as a strategic vector of employment quality, not only from the perspective of simple fairness (to overcome current inequalities and persistent gender gaps in wages and benefits), but also as a factor that can improve company balance sheets because of its potential impact on increased productivity.

Mariola Serrano, tenured lecturer at the University of Deusto law school, analyses the internal labour regulations regarding the pension gap between women and men and the way they have changed in recent years, an issue that clearly illustrates the main outcomes of gender inequality in industrial relations. The author demonstrates that it also has a negative impact on later stages of life following employment, acting as a factor in chronifying inequality and hindering social cohesion.

As her starting point, she explores the gender wage gap as a contributory factor in the current pension gap in a contribution-based social security system. She analyses the evolution of successive legal reforms which sought to partially alleviate these differences in benefits by introducing a maternity-related pension supplement. Not only was the measure inadequate to significantly reduce the differences between women and men, she notes, but it was implemented through defective legislation. Following a key ruling from the European Court that an allowance initially established only for women was incompatible with the principle of non-discrimination, the law was redrafted to extend the allowance to men under certain circumstances. The result was complex and largely confusing domestic legislation, and a new ruling from the European Court is currently being awaited to determine whether or not it conforms to EU standards.

Given the inadequacy and complexity of the exclusively legal route to remove or significantly reduce the gender-based pension gap, the article concludes that it is necessary to tackle the structural roots of gender inequality and notes that the business community would be well advised to act directly in order to combat and cushion against any negative repercussions at later stages of life.

The seventh article is by **Leire Gartzia** and **Jon Pizarro**, both lecturers at Deusto Business School (DBS). They analyse the relationship between increased productivity and greater diversity, particularly with regard to improvements in gender equality in business, especially in management structures. According to the authors, it is frequently argued that there is a direct correlation between a greater presence of women in management posts and company boards and improved levels of efficiency and better economic and financial results. Such claims are made not only in direct or indirect support of certain initiatives or statements, but are also repeated in scientific analyses and studies. However, the article shows that in many cases this correlation has either not been empirically proven, or is weak or even non-existent, as scientific evidence and a range of analyses and research have shown. In any event, the interconnection between the two factors is complex and is influenced by many other structural factors; it requires, *inter alia*, the attribution of real power and an effective and not merely symbolic presence of women at the decision-making and management levels of companies.

On this premise, and assuming that it is generally accepted that women tend to display more collaborative and participative leadership styles —particularly important in organisations with socially complex tasks— the authors argue that the elimination of gender inequalities is linked not only to business performance but also to an intrinsic imperative of justice, which, as well as favouring economic sustainability, adds social value and reinforces companies' role and position from this perspective.

This monographic issue of the journal also contains four short contributions. The first is an essay by **Jon Bilbao Saralegui** —director of labour relations at CONFEBASK, the Basque business confederation, for over 30 years— on the way the business position on employment has evolved. The article summarises key landmarks in the institutional position of the employers' representative and the socio-political and trade union context in which its projects developed over that time, including the tremendously pernicious (but largely forgotten) impact of terrorism. However, the author believes that too much priority has been given to raw data, as a core element in building the business community's institutional position on employment, with not enough stress laid on the background. For this reason, his reflections are not limited to a mere description. In this context, he particularly regrets the lack of any new proposals, for example any further discourse on the 'new business models' initially devised by the employers' association of Gipuzkoa, which might contribute to reinforcing the strategic commitment to quality employment within a less confrontational and more collaborative relationship model.

The second piece is by **Jorge Arévalo**, deputy minister at the Basque education department in several governments and principal architect of the current model of vocational training in the Basque Country. He begins his piece with an examination

of the transformations currently taking place in society, which is transitioning towards the ‘fifth industrial revolution’, with profound repercussions at many different levels in economic, business and labour areas but also social and cultural domains. According to the author, new workspaces are constantly emerging in which humans, robots, autonomous machines and artificial intelligence will come together and interact to generate new products and services. Responding to these challenges requires both predictive diagnostics and the drafting of flexible models that will guarantee continuous training and upskilling of people, who are the core element of any sustainable and competitive economy. The article highlights the strengths of the Basque model in this regard and its proven ability to adapt flexibly to the changing requirements of companies and workers.

The third short essay —by **Yolanda Zarandona**, secretary general of the Basque Labour Relations Council— summarises and contextualises the creation of the Basque Interprofessional Agreement on the structure of collective bargaining, signed in January 2017 by the four most representative trade unions and the business confederation, CONFEBASK. The agreement was forged within an adverse legal context arising out of the 2012 labour reform, which prioritised state-level agreements over regional or provincial bargaining, yet it offered a clear demonstration of the unanimous commitment of all Basque social partners to a collective bargaining framework of their own. Currently, and as a consequence of the latest labour reform of 2024, any uncertainty has been removed — as also recognised in the article by Professor Cruz Villalón on the precedence given to regional agreements over state ones and the validity of the Interprofessional Agreement in assigning identical weight to Basque provincial agreements. The strengthening of collective bargaining, solidly grounded in this agreement, is therefore a necessary, albeit insufficient, condition for consolidating and reinforcing a framework of labour relations that matches the specific characteristics and needs of the Basque Country, and within that framework to address the progressive improvement in job quality as the hallmark of an efficient, inclusive and cohesive society.

Lastly, we include a report by **Francisco Javier González López** of the Basque Labour Relations Council describing the current structure of collective bargaining in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country. This is intended to help readers navigate the complex map of collective agreements affecting the region, from both a static and a dynamic perspective, showing the way in which different areas of negotiation have evolved over recent years.

Our *Other Collaborations* section includes an article by **María Jesús Luengo-Valderrey, José Domingo García-Merino, Julián Pando-García and Iñaki Periañez-Cañadillas** explaining how, in a changing economic and social environment, it is necessary to redefine the notion of what constitutes an excellent economist. Professional excellence depends not only on technical knowledge, but also on cross-cutting skills. The text presents research conducted by the University of the Basque

Country and the Basque Association of Economists aimed at identifying the skills that employers rate highest in an excellent economist. Using a variety of methods, the authors create gender-differentiated profiles, because although the competencies are the same, they are prioritised to different degrees among male and female economists.