

Digitalisation and AI: At the heart of Europe's industrial future

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Opinion

Digital transformation and Artificial Intelligence lie at the heart of Europe's industrial future; we must invest to retain our edge, writes Bernd Dittmann.



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Societal needs have a strong influence on the transformation of industry. Two driving forces are digitalisation/Artificial Intelligence (AI) and a growing scarcity of resources.

Recent opinion polls in industry revealed that the digital transformation and AI are top priorities and will play a vital role in companies' future.

AI in particular is viewed as improving product quality. However, the majority see that the biggest

obstacle to its application is lack of experience, as access to digitisation and AI is low.

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The next priority is a strong demand for improved infrastructure and an upgrading of skills.

In the circular economy, there is a clear need to shift from a volume-driven to a resource-driven economy. Global competition for access to raw materials and the need for a fresh approach in the circular economy geared to reduce waste are far from new.

This is why the EESC, the voice of civil society in Europe, is tackling both issues in a workshop at the third Industry Days event, taking place in Brussels on 6 February 2019.

AI is a priority for transforming industry. This, and other automation processes offer enormous potential for transforming European society in terms of innovation and for helping to solve key societal challenges.

“The digital transformation and AI are top priorities and will play a vital role in companies’ future”

AI can also make a major contribution to bolstering industry and improving the EU’s competitive edge.

The key players in AI are currently the US and China; they are investing far more than the EU.

In order to compete, public and private stakeholders need to join forces while all the instruments and funding available at European and national levels need to be coordinated.

European companies are particularly strong in the areas of automation and robotics as well as in the healthcare and automotive sectors, where AI has the highest potential for impact.

These sectors could prove pivotal in guaranteeing that the EU plays a significant global role in ongoing technological development; it is paramount that they do not lose their competitive advantage by underinvesting in AI.

The digital transformation of industry often requires a significant upgrade to current infrastructure. This should be accessible and affordable enough to ensure inclusive Europe-wide uptake of AI, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises.

Industry, especially small and young companies, need to be aware of, and able to integrate, these technologies into new products, services and related production processes.

“The EU plays a significant global role in ongoing technological development; it is paramount that they do not lose their competitive advantage by underinvesting in AI”

Standardisation and interoperability will also be essential for developing AI within the Digital Single Market.

The EESC has stressed the importance of a European AI infrastructure built on open-source learning environments that respect privacy, real-life test environments and high-quality data sets to develop and train AI systems.

These challenges cannot be left to the business community alone; governments, social partners, scientists and businesses all need to be involved.

The EESC believes that it is time for the EU to set standards and become a world leader in this field.

“We need pan-European norms and standards for AI, just as we have food and household appliances,” stressed Catelijne Muller, EESC member and president of the temporary study group on AI.

The industry of the future will also necessarily be linked to circularity. Recognising the crucial role played by civil society in a fair transition to the circular economy, the EESC links policy making and grassroots.

Two years ago, it launched the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform (ECESP), a joint initiative with the Commission (DG ENV and DG GROW).

This platform pools expertise from a variety of European sectors and regions through its Coordination Group. It holds an annual conference, where circular economy community stakeholders can network, exchange ideas and influence the policy debate.

The platform portal - circulareconomy.europa.eu - collates best practices, reflecting the Circular Economy Action Plan in areas such as plastics, food waste, recycling, secondary raw materials and waste management. It also gathers information on relevant research, news and events.

The platform already reaches beyond the EU, with interest from South American and Asian countries as well as Australia, all seeking to replicate the circular policy approach.

This is a shining example of how Europe leads the way towards a more sustainable planet.

The success of any European initiative on industry will depend on two factors; how it is implemented, and whether it addresses the issue in an integrated, horizontal and comprehensive manner.

The rapidly changing nature of the situation also means that policy requires a certain flexibility.

The stakes are high, which is why we must take this challenge seriously.

About the author

Bernd Dittmann is a member of the EESC and the Federation of German Industries (BDI)

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