

Information literacy of workers is a prerequisite for work fit for people

‘Information is power’ is a claim we often hear, almost as often as the term ‘information literacy’, as one of the many ringing phrases of today’s information age and knowledge society. But is information really power, and who does it really empower? What do we really mean by the term ‘information literacy’, and more importantly – what does it mean for workers?

Information literacy as a skill and as a critical consciousness

The concept of information literacy is nowadays well established and known, mainly in scientific discourse, primarily within the framework of the parent domain of library and information science. But although also often in use in wider public discourse, the term is still too abstract; its meaning (and therefore its value) is not entirely clear, and often (wrongly) it is reduced to *computer* literacy.

Information literacy is a term and concept that originated in the 1970s in the US, a result of the development of information technology and the accompanying information explosion, along with economic progress and a shift towards neoliberalism. These trends required skills and knowledge to enable navigating the overabundance of information, but also to support greater productivity, competitiveness, higher profits and faster progress. Today, however, information literacy is increasingly viewed not just as a set of skills for *finding* and *using* information, but also for *evaluating* it, i.e. enabling *critical consciousness and ethical use* of information. According to this understanding, information literacy is strongly linked to empowerment, social justice and civic activism, thus affirming its role and value in a broader social context.

Research on information literacy in the context of workers' rights

Although information literacy is the subject of much scholarly research, mainly conducted within the home domain of librarianship, information science and education, few studies have dealt with its value in a wider social context. Even rarer are studies focusing on the correlation between information literacy and the state of workers' rights, the perspective of workers and how information literacy can empower workers to protect their rights. This gap motivated the author of this article to conduct research examining the value of information literacy in a wider social context, particularly in the context of workers' rights and the importance of informed and information literate individuals.

An online survey was conducted during April 2021, on a nationally representative sample of 500 respondents-workers with employment contracts. A quantitative methodology was deployed, with data collected by the Hendaal market research agency, with financial support from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. The research examined the patterns of information behaviour of workers and their self-assessed level of being informed about workers’ rights, and of information competences. The research also sought to determine whether there are differences in the level of being informed and in information behaviour according to different categories of workers, including whether they are members of trade unions. It also explored the ways in which workers are informed about their rights as well as the ways in which they use information to protect and fight for their rights and interests, and whether they are willing to engage actively in this fight.

Research results: union members are better informed about rights, and their rights are less often violated

The research yielded a number of interesting results that are presented in part here. The complete results of the study are available in the paper [*Informed, active, empowered: research into workers' information literacy in the context of rights at work*](#), published in *Information Research*. According to a sample of survey respondents, 48% of respondents work for employers where a trade union organises, out of which 46% state that they are union members. Within the overall sample – regardless of whether a union organises at any given employer – the majority of employees (76%) are not union members.

The research showed that most workers estimate that they are quite highly informed about their rights, with union members showing significantly higher level of being informed about workers' rights (and certain specific rights) than non-union members. Union members are also less likely to feel that they have deliberately been denied information; that they do not have enough information; and that they do not know how to assess which information is relevant or where to seek information about their rights. Union activity at the level of the employer in general has a positive impact on workers' level of being informed: workers in a union-organised workplace, compared with non-unionised ones, state a higher level of being informed about workers' rights.

Being informed about workers' rights is strongly correlated with the violation of rights and active struggle for rights. 38% of respondents experienced a violation of rights, and 19% do not know if their rights had ever been violated. Workers who more positively assess their level of being informed about workers' rights are more likely to state that their rights have not been violated, while a higher incidence of violations of rights was recorded among those respondents who felt that their level of being informed was weaker. Also, respondents who are better informed about workers' rights more frequently seek the protection of their rights and are more likely to do so through a lawsuit with the help of their union. Workers who are better acquainted with rights are also inclined to advocate for rights, mainly by actively proposing changes to works rules and collective bargaining agreements, as well as actively participating in the union. At the same time, workers who are more informed about their rights believe that being informed about rights affects their overall job quality. On the other hand, most respondents who are not ready to fight actively for the protection and improvement of workers' rights report self-assessed lower information competences and levels of being informed about these rights. The main reasons why these workers are unwilling to seek protection and fight actively for the improvement of their rights are fear, defeatism and fatalism.

Expectedly, **workers are relatively passive when it comes to seeking and verifying information about their rights:** they are evenly split between being passive recipients of information from the employer and/or the trade union and active seekers of it. They are more active only when they think their rights have been violated or when they are not sure what rights they have. Workers mostly seek information about basic rights and conditions (annual leave, salary, working time, other material rights), and least frequently about trade union organising and the right to strike. Although only a very small percentage of respondents (5%) say they do not inform themselves about workers' rights, it is worrying that almost half of them do not perceive the need for information.

At the same time, the vast majority of respondents (82%) **believe that more information about workers' rights should be available to them**, which they see as the employer's greatest responsibility. The employer, along with the Internet, is the most common source for seeking and verifying information, but also for seeking the protection of one's rights. At the same time, the employer is the most trusted source of information about workers' rights – trusted more than the union and much more than the state.

When asked about the main challenges about keeping informed, **respondents point out frequent changes in regulations, the perception of not obtaining complete and true information and the perception of conscious withholding of information.** However, although they rate their own information competences relatively highly, workers still recognize the need for additional education and support in this area, primarily about where to find information about their rights and especially on how to protect these rights.

What does this mean for the workplace?

The conducted research confirmed the findings of earlier union research, but also what is well-known from practice: **trade unions make a difference!** Union members are better informed about rights, they know the value of this information. Where unions are active, violations of workers' rights are less frequent, and workers are more ready to fight actively for them. Differences in the level of being informed not only lead to more frequent violations of the rights of less informed workers, but can also have consequences for other workers, because of the dumping and spillover of negative effects. This means that unions must **persevere in informing, raising awareness and educating workers** about the significance of union organising and the role of unions, the credibility and reliability of information, as well as the importance of being informed about rights. For instance, this need was recognised by a Croatian trade union confederation, SSSH (*Union of Autonomous Trade Unions of Croatia*), which produced the '[Know your rights](#)' online resource as part of its decent work campaign and its concept of [Work Fit for People](#). Information really is power; the skills and knowledge needed to find, critically evaluate and use it – *information literacy* – are indispensable in today's post-truth age and in the informational, social and political environment characterised by the crisis of trust and democracy.

The implications of this research include, among other things, the need to tackle an almost paradoxical situation: on the one hand, the employer is a key authority for workers in informing them about their rights, but at the same time a key reason why they do not actively inform themselves and fight more actively for their rights (for fear of dismissal, retaliation and similar consequences). This implies that unions in particular, but also authorities such as labour inspectorates, need to examine the reasons why this is so, including the need to investigate the **barriers to union organising** in order to remove them as much as possible. This places before unions the important task of building critical awareness among workers in order to raise their awareness and empower them to recognize and resist oppression and exploitation. Relatedly, another task for unions is to **insist on a better education system that will nurture such an approach and generally promote the value for work(ers) to society.** In addition to educating workers and raising their awareness, as well as that of trade union representatives, there is a need too for the education of employers themselves in the field of workers' rights, encouraging them to adopt more proactive and benevolent approaches in informing workers. It is also necessary to strengthen labour inspection, with a more systematic inspection regime, through improved supervision and prevention activities; and to sanction employer behaviour that discourages workers from informing themselves and protecting their rights, as well as the discriminatory practices of employers.

This research has shown that workers are often unaware of their oppressed position and that they act contrary to their own interests, including by expressing passivity, fear, defeatism and fatalism. Such lack of critical consciousness and fatalism is particularly worrying in the context of the protection of workers' rights because **many workers do not recognise injustice and do not believe that change is possible.** Raising awareness of the positive outcomes and impacts of trade union work and struggle are crucial in breaking such prejudices, and thus in advancing workers' rights in general. We should not forget about **the importance of strengthening democracy in the workplace** in order to provide workers with a voice and an influence on the conditions and organization of work, for which

they themselves have expressed a readiness to advocate actively. **Active and informed workers and citizens, along with an understanding of the power of information, are a fundamental prerequisite for achieving better rights and social justice**, as well as a dignified life or work fit for people. **The role of trade unions in this is irreplaceable.**

Read the full results of the research [here](#). Further elaboration of author's views on how critical information literacy can empower workers to attain decent work are available [here](#).

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