

Working conditions in Europe

A big picture view

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Work is growing more intensive, new technology use and training opportunities are still limited, working hours are getting shorter but are still mainly set by employers with limited scope for change, health and safety at work still remain a big concern, working conditions differ widely between the “old” and “new” Member States, between women and men, and between different age groups. This is the evidence from the Fourth Working Conditions Survey done in 2005 by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, following those of 1991, 1995 and 2000/2001. As the fourth survey, it is a rich seam of information on trends in European working conditions.

European working conditions surveys: 1991-2005

The European working conditions survey is the oldest of those done by the Foundation – the first dating from 1991, when Europe had just 12 Member States. It was repeated in 1995 (EU-15), 2000 (EU-15 plus Norway) then extended to 13 candidate and accession countries (12 of which are now Member States of the European Union). The 4th and most recent edition of the survey in 2005 covered 31 European countries (EU-25 plus Romania and Bulgaria – Member States since 2007 – Croatia, Turkey, Norway and Switzerland).

Over the different surveys, the questionnaire has changed to a great extent, and in 2005 comprised over 100 questions and sub-questions. Tightly-focused on industry in 1991, the survey has developed over the past 15 years to include a wide range of indicators for a more searching and thorough-going analysis of working conditions. The downside is that this affects the comparability of all the questions over the years.

Big changes over the past 15 years

The dominant trends of the last 15 years are the spread of non-traditional forms of employment (part-time and temporary work) and greater numbers of women

entering the labour market. Overall, the survey shows that economic growth does not automatically bring improved working conditions. Working conditions remain relatively stable despite changes in the sectoral composition of the labour force that might suggest the possibility of quality improvements.

An analysis of trends since the early 1990s evidences that the use of new technologies is increasingly widespread, average working time is steadily falling, imposed flexibility of working schedules is spreading, work is getting more intensive, work organisation has become more commercial, information on health and safety at work is slightly better, exposure to physical risks and violence is little changed, there is some progress on labour market segregation, but no greater access to training, some groups remain highly exposed and vulnerable to early exclusion from the workforce. This emphatically shows the vital need to continue pressing for improved working conditions in a context marked by the gradual but steady ageing of the workforce, and for the development of the European economy.

Work intensification

The survey measured the level of work intensification through four proxy indicators of work intensity – work to very tight deadlines, at high speeds, not enough time to do the job, interruptions. Indicators on factors of pace were also included.

The survey shows that work intensification in Europe and the number of pace constraints are continuing to grow. More and more people are working at high speeds and to strict deadlines. In 2005, 26% of workers in the EU-27 reported having to work at very high speeds all or nearly all the time, and 12% seldom or never had enough time to finish the job.

The determinants of work pace in the EU reflect the predominance of the service sector and commercial



European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

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organisations. For approximately 70% of workers, their work pace is directly determined by the demands of customers, patients, users, etc., while the automatic speed of a machine determines the work pace of 20% of the working population. Work pace determined by workmates or performance targets also appears to be on the rise.

Work intensification is not always compensated by autonomy and support in the work environment. Highly skilled white collar workers enjoy most autonomy in their work, while lower skilled blue collar workers have less. Level of education determines how much control workers have on how they do their job. In other words, only about half of workers with no more than primary education can choose how to perform their work, compared to 80% of those with tertiary level qualifications. Nor can workers always count on support from their workmates and line superiors to cope with this work intensification. About 67% of European workers can get help from workmates if they ask, and 56% from their line superior.

Work intensification has a clear negative impact on occupational health. Weekly working hours may have gone down, but work paces are steadily rising. Approximately half the workers surveyed say that their work involves painful or tiring positions, while more than half work at high speeds (60%) and to very strict and tight deadlines (62%). The considerably high level of stress in the EU-27 (22%) comes as no surprise, therefore.

Working hours

Weekly working hours in the EU have got steadily shorter since 1991. This reduction is due to a set of factors (e.g. the spread of part-time working). Standard working hours remain the norm for most workers: 58% of workers work the same number of hours each day, 74% the same number of days each week, 61% have fixed starting and finishing times. The working hours are fixed by the employer in most cases: 56% of workers report that their working hours are fixed by their organisation and cannot be changed. Only 24% of employees can adjust their working hours to their needs, in some cases within set limits. Workers with regular working hours, approximately 40 hours a week, working the same number of days each week and hours each day, and starting and finishing work at fixed times, report the highest degree of satisfaction.

However, a goodish number of workers (15%) in Europe continue to work long hours – 48 hours or more a week. The survey shows that long working weeks and non-standard working hours have negative occupational health outcomes. Approximately 55% of respondents who work more than 48 hours a week say that their work is injurious to their health, and 45% report that their health and safety are at risk at work. Of the different non-standard working hours,

night work (after 10 p.m.) seems to be more associated with health problems – particularly insomnia.

Paid and unpaid work

While men in all countries work more hours than women in paid employment, the survey findings show that when working time is calculated by adding together paid and unpaid working hours, commuting time and the hours of a second job, women – including part-time workers – work more than men. Women generally work part-time to spend more time on the family and home, while male part-timers spend even less time doing unpaid work than full-timers.

This does not mean that women are better paid for this “double duty” – if anything, the opposite. Most women fall into the lower income category, and a smaller proportion of women (20%) than men (40%) fall into the top income bracket in all countries. The gender gap between part-time workers is less wide. This shows the road still to travel on gender equality.

Old and new Member States

While general trends can be picked out, working conditions still vary widely between Member States, and especially so between the new and old Member States.

New Member States (NMS) report less gender segregation, with a markedly higher proportion of women in supervisory/management posts than in the EU-15 (28% in the NMS against 24% in the EU-15).

Exposure to physical risks and work-related health disorders reveals a less positive picture. Approximately 40% of workers in the NMS consider they have been exposed to health and safety risks at work (against an average of 25% in the EU-15). Furthermore, the NMS (Bulgaria and Romania most of all) generally record the highest levels of exposure to work-related risks, especially those associated with heavy industry (e.g., noise, vibrations, breathing in fumes or using chemicals).

There are also striking differences between the EU-15 and the NMS where use of information technologies is concerned: 42% of workers in the EU-15 never use a computer at work versus 60% in the NMS.

Northern Europe often seems to set the European pace and perform “better” in terms of employer-provided training and flexible working hours.

Older and younger workers

The gap between younger and older workers is particularly striking where computer use is concerned: almost 20% of workers in the 25-39 age bracket work all their time on computers, compared to 11%



of over-55s. Older workers also get a poorer deal on training opportunities. In 2005, approximately 29% of workers aged 25-39 received training from their employer, against 19% of over-50s.

On the other hand, older workers are less exposed than younger ones to fast-paced work: 37% of workers aged 50-plus report working at very high speeds against 46% of younger workers.

Younger workers aged 15-25 are more exposed than older workers to some physical risks (tobacco smoke, tiring positions, standing positions, heavy loads and repetitive hand and arm movements). Where sickness absence, whether or not work-related, is concerned, workers aged 15-25 (21%) report fewer absences than older workers (23%), and are off work for less time (approximately 3 days against an average 5 to 6 days for older workers).

Exposure to physical risks and health outcomes

The number of workers who consider their health and safety to be at risk because of their work has declined over the last 15 years. However, while the share of the European workforce employed in traditional, physically demanding sectors (e.g., manufacturing and agriculture) is declining, the survey reveals that some physical risks are still prevalent – e.g., approximately 46% of workers report working in uncomfortable or tiring positions for at least a quarter of the time.

Men are more exposed than women to some risks and vice versa. Men report more exposure than women to traditional work-related physical risks (noise, vibrations, etc.), while women, especially in the education and health sectors, are exposed to other risks (e.g., work involving lifting or moving people).

Ergonomic risks (repetitive hand or arm movements, work in uncomfortable or tiring positions, etc.) are more evenly gender-balanced. In occupational terms, blue-collar workers are much more exposed than white-collar workers to almost all physical risk factors at the workplace.

Where the effects of work on health are concerned, some 35% of the workers surveyed reported that their work is bad for their health. The most commonly cited work-related health disorders are back-ache (25%) and muscle pains (23%) followed by fatigue and stress (22%). These are mainly problems for workers in agriculture, health care, education and the construction industry.

Violence, harassment and bullying at work

Bullying, harassment, violence and threats, along with different kinds of discrimination, contribute to psychological ill-health and stress. Around 5% of

workers report having been subjected to instances of violence, bullying or harassment in their workplace in the twelve months preceding the survey. Variations between countries may be wide. For example, there is a difference between Bulgaria and Finland of 1 to 10 (in Bulgaria's favour) in the incidence of exposure to violence. This is due to a set of factors, like cultural differences, the centrality of this issue in public and political debate, the degree of public awareness of the problem, and the willingness to report it.

Women are more exposed (6%) to bullying and harassment than men (4%), especially young women (8% of women aged under 30). There is a higher incidence of women exposed to unwanted sexual attention in the Czech Republic (10%), Norway (7%), Turkey, Croatia (6%), Denmark, Sweden, Lithuania and the United Kingdom (5%), but a lower incidence (1%) in some southern European countries (Italy, Spain, Malta and Cyprus). As mentioned earlier, what constitutes an act of violence can vary from one country to another according to sensitivity to and awareness of the issue, so these percentages do not necessarily reflect the real incidence of the problem.

A higher level of bullying and harassment is reported in larger establishments (over 250 workers), in the education and health sectors, and in the hotel and catering sector. Significantly, rates of violence and harassment are generally lower in sectors where physical risks are high (especially construction and agriculture), although the converse is also true.

Workers who experience violence or bullying at the workplace have more work-related health problems than those who do not. Four times more report psychological health problems, sleep disorders, anxiety and irritability in particular, as well as physiological symptoms, like stomach ache. An above-average number of those exposed to bullying and harassment take time off work for work-related health problems (23% versus 7%) and also tend to take longer sick leave.

Information on hazards

There has been a significant increase in the proportion of workers in the EU-15 who think themselves not well or not at all informed about workplace hazards (15% versus 9% in the NMS). There is also a notable significant correlation between company size and the level of information on workplace hazards. Workers in large firms broadly consider themselves to be well-informed. Permanent employees think themselves better informed about hazards than those with less steady jobs. One point to be made, however, is the minor change made in the wording of the question in the last survey. Up to 2000, the question referred to the "risks resulting from the use of materials, instruments or products which you handle in your job", while in 2005, it

referred more generally to risks related to the performance of the job.

The purpose of this change was to widen the scope of the original question, which was focused on the traditional notion of industrial workplace hazards. The question put in 2005 better reflects the reality of work in present-day Europe, and the real levels of information about workplace hazards.

General considerations

The Foundation's working conditions survey is unique in Europe. Analysing the successive surveys since 1991 allows general trends to be picked out and gives a broad picture of how working conditions in Europe are changing over the years. The statistical data¹ are made available to the scientific community and researchers into the quality of work to help deliver even more searching outcomes: the important thing is to give the labour market participants access to the information to make their own interpretation and decide what needs to be done. Confronted with the many challenges besetting society, astute readers will be able to form a view of developments in hand in society, and reflect on necessary public policy measures.

Methodology

A total of 29 680 workers were questioned for the 2005 survey in face-to-face interviews in their own homes outside the most common working hours, and for over half an hour on average. The survey was carried out simultaneously in 31 European countries using an identical questionnaire available in 27 languages and 11 local adaptations. The respondents (persons in employment as defined by the European Labour Force Survey – employees and self-employed) were selected by multi-stage random sampling in order to be representative of the population in employment. The 2005 Labour Force Survey (Eurostat) was used as the sampling and weighting basis. The interview questionnaire covers a series of aspects of working life: physical hazards, working time, work organisation, job satisfaction, health, workplace absences, whether the job is physically supportable long-term, work-life balance, violence and harassment, pay, time outside work.

Quality assurance² included external control of service providers, clearly defined tasks, responsibilities and functions for the actors, and performance indicators for each stage of production of the statistical data, and systematic checks on the work done by the different actors. A report on the quality of the data produced was written at the end of the survey³.

In 2006, the Foundation carried out its first ever comparative post test on aspects related to development at work and employability; the descriptive report has been published in October 2007⁴.

The survey's strengths and limits

The survey's main defining attribute is to be the only Europe-wide survey on working conditions. This makes it a single source of harmonised data for European policy-makers on key quality of work and employment indicators. As such, it helps inform European policy-making on aspects of work. It also makes up for the lack of national data in many countries and creates a basis for international comparison.

The Foundation's working conditions survey has become a set standard for researchers into the quality of work, and its statistical data are used by many national and international organisations involved in the field. The survey data are also used for derived data analyses, in particular on gender equality in the workplace, work organisation, sectoral profiles, etc. This enables a more searching analysis of the survey findings, giving better insights into how different working conditions interact.

But it must be borne in mind that institutional and cultural differences between countries may influence the way in which the questions are understood and answered. So any between-country comparisons must be approached with caution. The survey describes respondents' own working conditions as they perceive them, working from the principle that workers are best placed to assess their own working conditions and give an easily-digestible big picture view of them. There is also a limitation stemming from the sample size in each country – 1000 per Member State and 600 in the 5 smaller EU countries –, which reduces the scope for subsequent disaggregation of the data. This means that the number of cases may be too small to derive relevant conclusions for a comprehensive analysis at the national or sectoral level. Furthermore, averages may mask between-country, between-sector and within-country differences. In a very real sense, the survey's main aim remains to provide a broad-brush view of working conditions, problems and trends on a European scale. ■

¹ The statistical data are available from the University of Essex (www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/ewcsTitles.asp). Details of how to register are available on www.data-archive.ac.uk/aandp/access/access.asp.

² See: www.eurofound.europa.eu/docs/ewco/4EWCS/4EWCSqualityassurancepaper.pdf.

³ See: www.eurofound.europa.eu/docs/ewco/4EWCS/4EWCSqualitycontrolreportEU25.pdf.

⁴ Fourth European Working Conditions Survey: Qualitative post-test analysis: www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef07671.htm. More detailed information on the post test is available on www.eurofound.europa.eu/ewco/surveys/EWCS2005/post-testindex.htm.

The surveys of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

- Fourth European Working Conditions Survey, 2006. Available in English on www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef0698.htm, to be published soon in German and French.
- Fourth European Working Conditions Survey: résumé, 2006. Available in 23 languages on www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef0678_en.htm.
- Fifteen years of working conditions in the EU: Charting the trends, 2006. Available in English, German and French on www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef0685_en.htm.
- Fourth European Working Conditions Survey: info sheet, 2006. Available in 23 languages on www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef0652_en.htm.
- Fourth European Working Conditions Survey: Qualitative post-test analysis, 2007. Available in English on www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef07671.htm.

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