



European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

Work environment continues to improve

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In 2006, Statistics Norway conducted the sixth Level of Living Survey: Working Conditions, which outlines the general situation of workers and workplaces in Norway and charts trends in working conditions. The survey results indicate that levels of exposure to physical risk factors are generally low, although the proportion of workers experiencing repetitive movements at work has increased. The findings also reveal that employees have high levels of job demands and job control, and good opportunities for professional development.

Introduction

Every three years, the working conditions of employees in Norway are assessed by an official national survey entitled the Level of Living Survey: Working Conditions (*Levekårsundersøkelsen: Arbeidsmiljø*). Questions directly related to working conditions are submitted only to respondents who are in employment. Statistics Norway ([Statistisk sentralbyrå, SSB](#)) has developed the survey in cooperation with leading research institutions in relevant fields. The main objective of the study is to gather official statistics on the work environment of Norwegian employees. These data are used as a basis for policy decisions that have a direct impact on people's everyday life, for example as an aid in prioritising which aspects of working conditions require the most attention, and/or providing the necessary information to initiate national campaigns or projects aimed at improving the work environment.

From 1989 to 2003, the Level of Living Survey: Working Conditions had a cross-sectional design, where both the sample size and the content of the questionnaire were rather consistent. In 2006, the design of the study was changed to a split panel design, and many of the questions asked in earlier versions of the survey were replaced. A large number of new questions were also included, in particular concerning the psychosocial work environment. These changes have made it difficult to compare between previous waves and the latest survey in 2006, and prevent researchers from obtaining new information on time trends.

Due to the small sample size of 5,000 respondents in the Level of Living Survey from 1989 to 2003, it was not possible to carry out in-depth analyses on trends in the Norwegian work environment – for example, comparing occupational groups. Conversely, the larger sample size in 2006 of 19,000 respondents allows for greater insight into working conditions. See the annex to this report for more detailed information about the Level of Living Survey 2006: Working Conditions.

The survey's questionnaire covers many job-related aspects, such as working time, the physical and psychosocial work environment, work organisation, learning opportunities, pay, trade union membership, sick leave and work-related health outcomes. This report provides an overview of some of the results from Level of Living Survey: Working Conditions 2006. Whenever possible, an account of trends is also given.

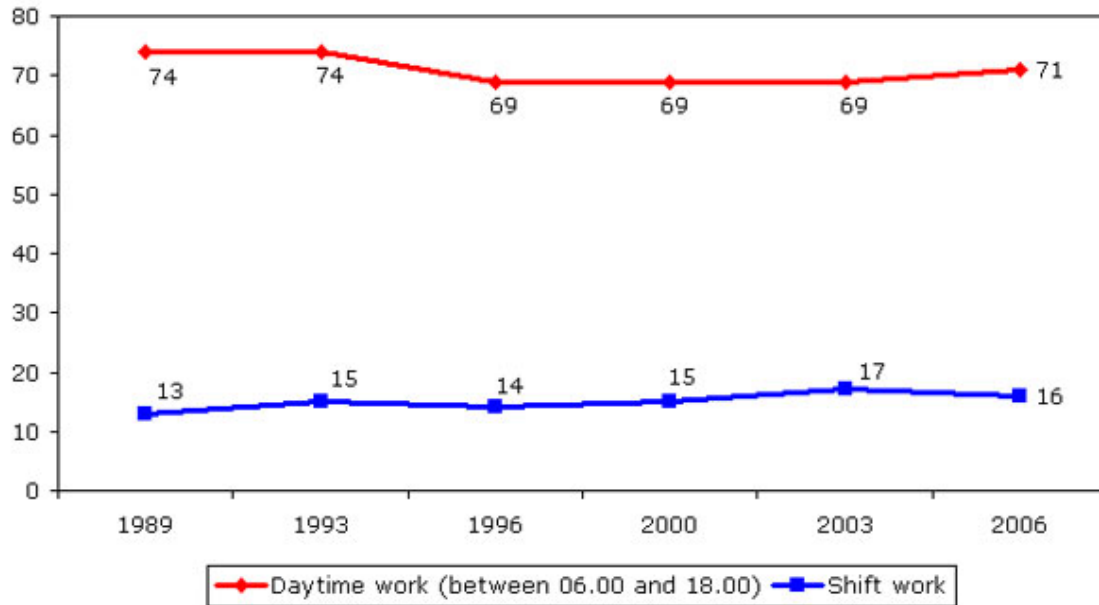
Working time

Working time and work organisation are crucial factors in determining how employees perceive other working conditions. Working time is also an important dimension of [work-life balance](#).

Norwegian employees worked an average of 34.6 hours a week in 2006 (SSB Labour Force Survey, 2006). In general, weekly working hours have not changed much since 1996. Among women, there has been a tendency towards a slight increase in weekly working hours between 1996 and 2006, while average weekly working time for men has decreased by 1.5 hours. Over the past 17 years, an increment – from 13% to 16% – has also been found in the proportion of employees working shifts, and a corresponding reduction in the amount of daytime work – from 74% to 71% (Figure 1). However, in 2006, an increase was noted in the degree of flexibility in

working time: 39% of employees can now decide for themselves when to start and finish their work day (with or without certain limits).

Figure 1: Working time 1989–2006 (% of workers concerned)

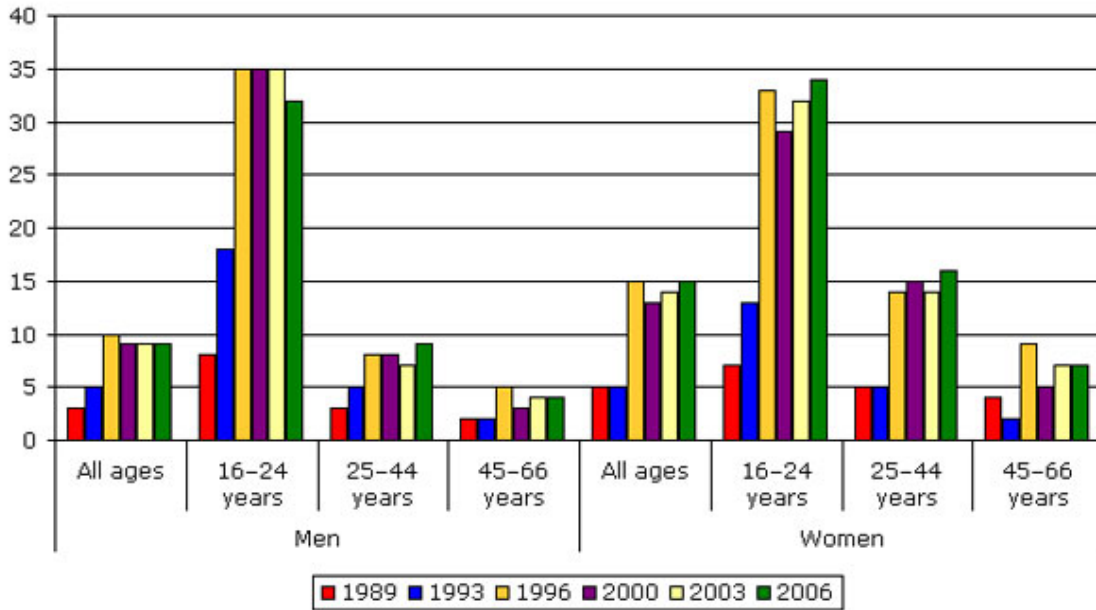


Working time 1989–2006 (% of workers concerned)

Source: SSB, Level of Living Survey: Working Conditions, 1989–2006

It is argued that the high demands for flexibility in today's working life contribute to an increase in atypical employment, such as temporary work. However, Figure 2 shows that although there was a significant rise in the amount of temporary work from 1989 to 1996, the incidence of such work has remained broadly stable over the last 10 years. Overall, 12% of Norwegian employees work on temporary employment contracts, and the majority of these are workers aged less than 25 years.

Figure 2: Workers in temporary jobs 1989–2006 (%)



Workers in temporary jobs 1989–2006 (%)

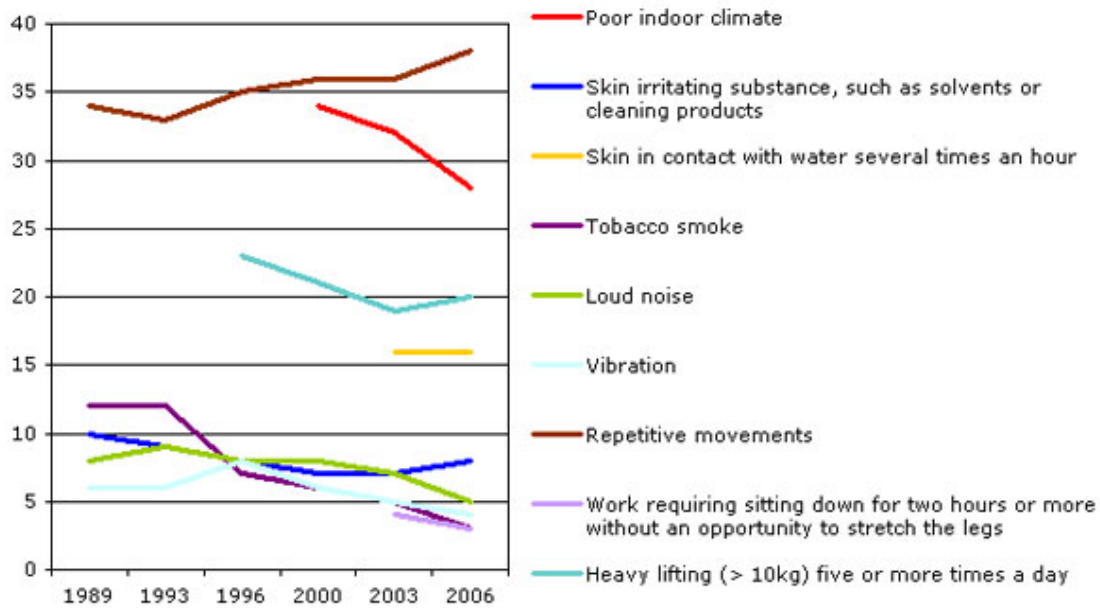
Source: SSB, Level of Living Survey: Working Conditions, 1989–2006

Physical work environment

In general, the survey found low levels of exposure to physical risk factors; these have remained relatively stable over the last 17 years (Figure 3). An exception concerns poor indoor climate, which is one of the most commonly reported physical risk factors. More than one out of four employees (28%) are exposed to a poor indoor climate, and the number was even higher in 2000 (34%). More women (36%) than men (21%) complain of poor indoor climate, probably due to the overrepresentation of women in those occupations reporting the highest levels of exposure to this risk factor – that is, teaching and nursing.

Small changes have emerged in ergonomic strain in the period 1996 to 2006. Exposure to repetitive movements appears to be increasing, and this increment is taking place among men only. In 1989, 28% of the men surveyed reported exposure to repetitive movements, compared with 40% of female respondents; however, over the last 17 years, this gender difference has diminished. In 2006, 38% of the men and 39% of the women surveyed reported being exposed to repetitive movements most of the time at work. Since 2000, the largest increases for workers in this regard can be found among the occupational category of clerks: from 48% to 55%. In terms of economic sector, with the exception of transport and communications, and wholesale and retail trade, there has been an increase in exposure to repetitive movements in all other fields of economic activity, ranging from 1% to 11%.

Figure 3: Exposure to various physical risk factors at least 50% of the time at work, 1989–2006 (% of workers affected)



Exposure to various physical risk factors at least 50% of the time at work, 1989–2006 (% of workers affected)

Source: SSB, Level of Living Survey: Working Conditions, 1989–2006

The wording of the item measuring exposure to skin irritating substances was altered in 2006. From 1989 to 2003, the question was phrased as: ‘Are you in your daily work exposed to skin contact with cooling liquid, lubricants, cleaning products or disinfection fluids?’ In 2006, the question was rephrased into two questions asking about exposure to oils, lubricants, cleaning products, disinfection fluids, solvents or other degreasing products. Figure 3 shows a slight increase in exposure to skin irritating substances in 2006, but it is difficult to know to what degree this rise reflects an actual increase in exposure, or whether it could be caused by the changes in the wording of the question. In any case, exposure in this regard varies considerably between occupational groups, with 21% of nurses and 29% of other unskilled workers reporting the highest levels of exposure, compared with 8% for the total sample; Figure 7 below outlines the full list of occupational categories used in this report.

Men and women seem to be approximately equally exposed to skin irritating substances, at 7% and 9% respectively, but having skin in contact with water several times an hour is much more common among women, at 25%, compared with 9% for men. The highest levels of exposure to contact with water are found among nurses (53%), other unskilled workers (43%) and shop assistants and salespeople (34%). Exposure to these skin-related risk factors is most common in the hotels and restaurants sector (19% for skin irritating substances and 52% for contact with water) and in the health and social work sector (15% for skin irritating substances and 40% for contact with water).

Psychosocial work environment

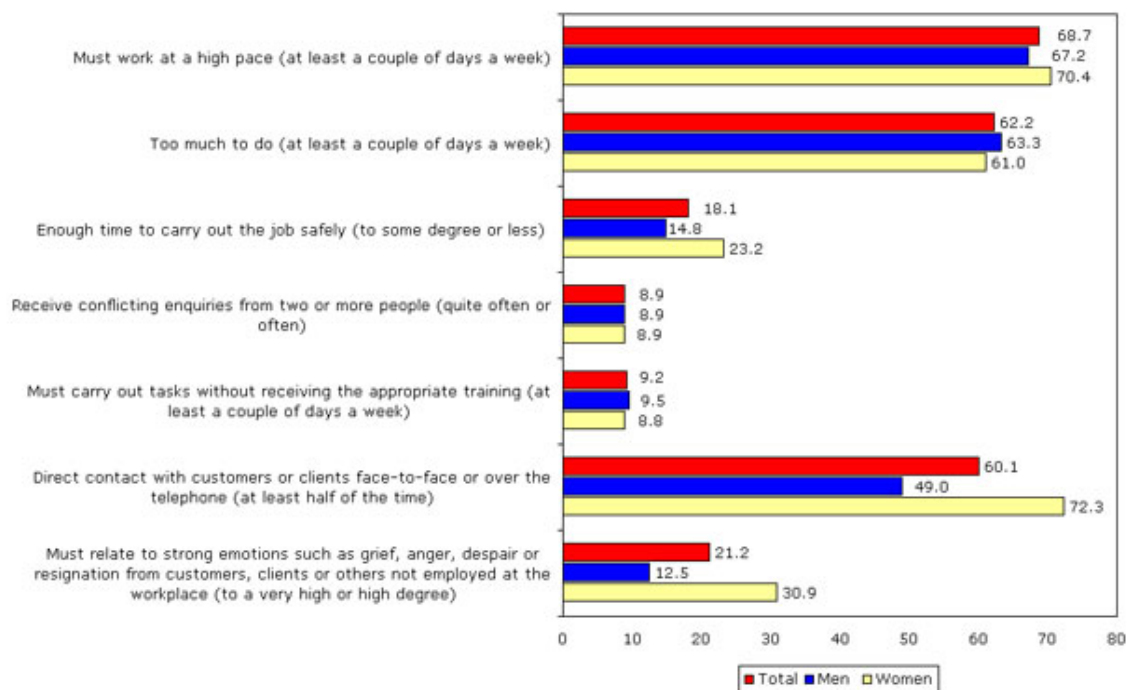
Recent trends in the psychosocial work environment can only be reported within some areas, because many of the items measuring the psychosocial work environment in the Level of Living Survey were changed in the 2006 version. Several new items were included for the first time, such as:

- ‘If in need of it, how often can you get support or help in your work from your supervisor?’
- ‘If in need of it, how often can you get support or help in your work from your colleagues?’
- ‘Does your supervisor treat the employees fairly and impartially?’
- ‘Does your supervisor appreciate the results of your work?’

Job demands

About two out of three employees report high quantitative job demands. In other words, they need to work at a high pace and have high workloads at least a couple of days a week. Emotional job demands, most often associated with work in the services sector and in health and social work, are more frequently reported by women than by men. Some 72% of women and 49% of men have direct contact with customers or clients at least half of the time, and 31% of women report having to deal with strong emotions from others to a high or very high degree in their work, compared with 12.5% of men (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Quantitative and qualitative job demands, by sex (% of workers exposed)



Quantitative and qualitative job demands, by sex (% of workers exposed)

Source: SSB, Level of Living Survey: Working Conditions, 2006

Approximately 5% of all employees are exposed to violence or threats of violence a couple of times a month or more. This proportion has remained stable since 1989. In 2006, 8% of female employees and 4% of male employees reported being exposed to violence or threats of violence

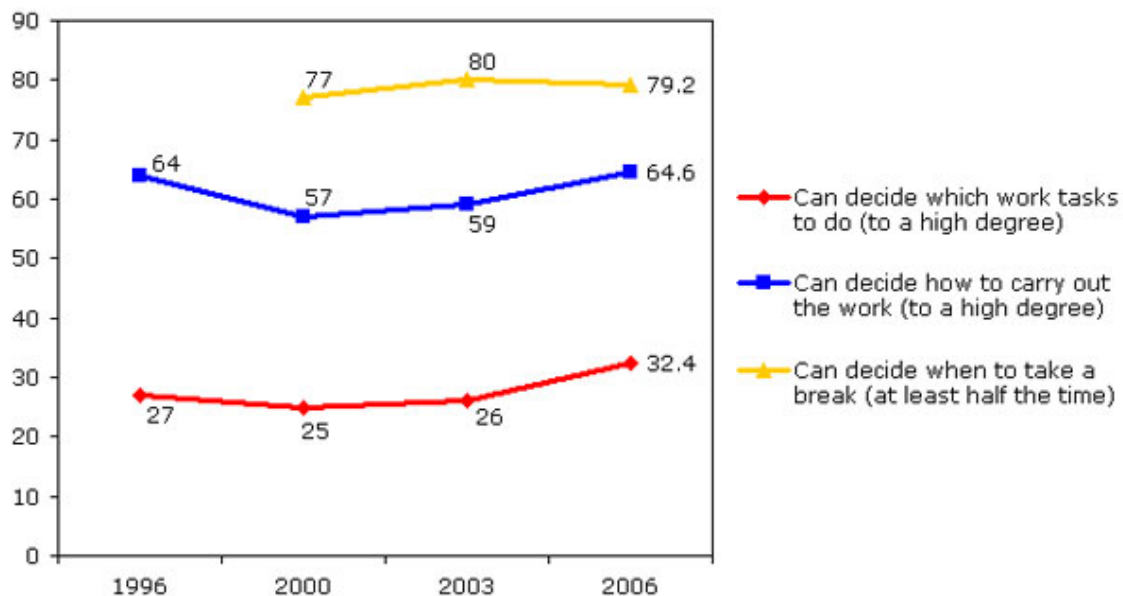
at least a couple of times a month. Some 6% of female and 1% of male employees reported sexual harassment once a month or more. Shop assistants and salespeople represent the occupational group reporting the highest levels of both violence (11%) and sexual harassment (8%). Within economic sectors, violence and threats of violence are most often reported in the health and social work sector, at 17%. Employees in the hotels and restaurants sector report the highest exposure to sexual harassment: 17% in total, accounting for 13% of male and 21% of female employees.

Work organisation

Job control or autonomy

A large number of respondents in the survey stated that they can make decisions regarding important aspects of their work. Nearly one out of three employees can determine which work tasks to carry out, and about two out of three can determine how to carry out the various tasks. Almost four out of five workers can decide when to take a break. Figure 5 shows a tendency towards slightly increased levels of job control over the last 10 years.

Figure 5: Decision latitude, 1996–2006 (% of workers citing high levels)



Decision latitude, 1996–2006 (% of workers citing high levels)

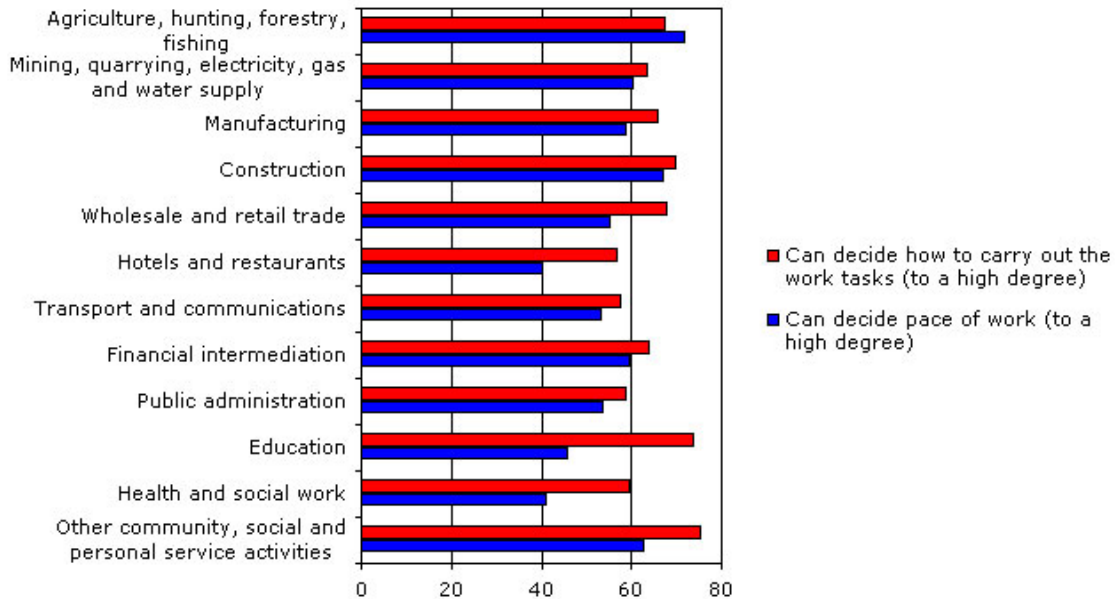
Source: SSB, Level of Living Survey: Working Conditions, 1996–2006

In terms of gender, men generally have more job control than women have. While 61% of male workers in Norway can determine their pace of work, only 45% of female workers can do the same. Meanwhile, 57.5% of men can largely influence decisions that have an impact on their work, compared with 44.2% of women. More than four out of five men (87.8%) and women (84.4%) agree that they have the tools, aids and resources required to carry out their work tasks properly.

In general, employees have a higher degree of control over how to carry out their tasks than over their pace of work (Figure 6). The lowest proportions of employees reporting control over their

work pace are found in economic sectors associated with working with people such as customers, clients or patients. Less than half of the workers employed in hotels and restaurants (40%), health and service work (41%) and education (46%) determine their own pace of work to a high degree. At the same time, employees in the education sector are among those who report the most control over how to carry out their tasks (74%).

Figure 6: Job control, by sector (% of workers citing high levels)

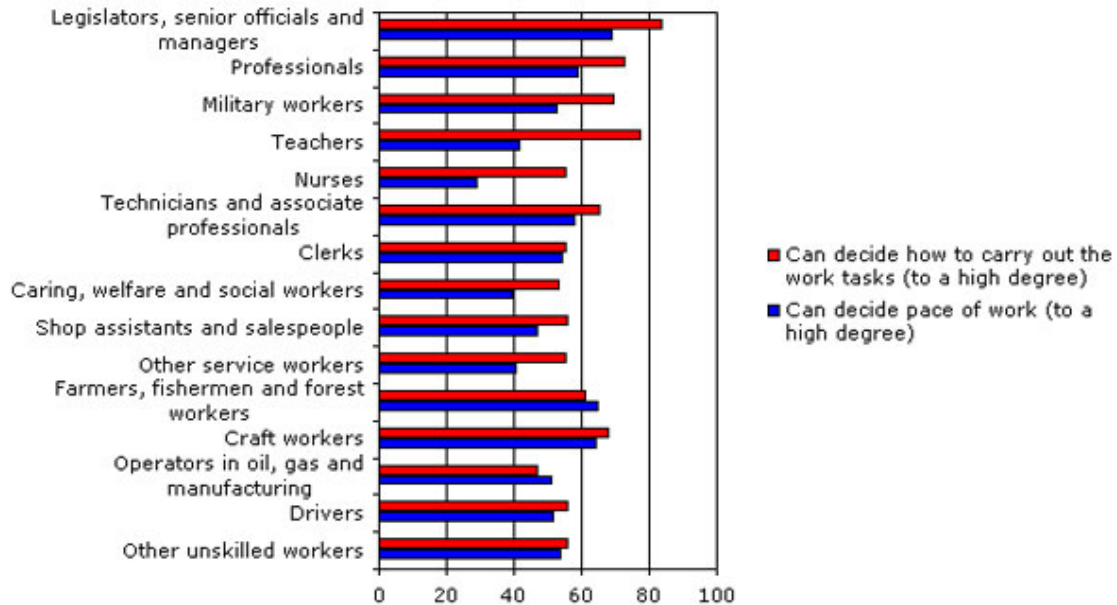


Job control, by sector (% of workers citing high levels)

Source: SSB, Level of Living Survey: Working Conditions, 2006

Job control also varies considerably among occupations. Figure 7 reveals that employees tend to have most control in occupations associated with higher educational qualifications.

Figure 7: Job control, by occupation (% of workers citing high levels)



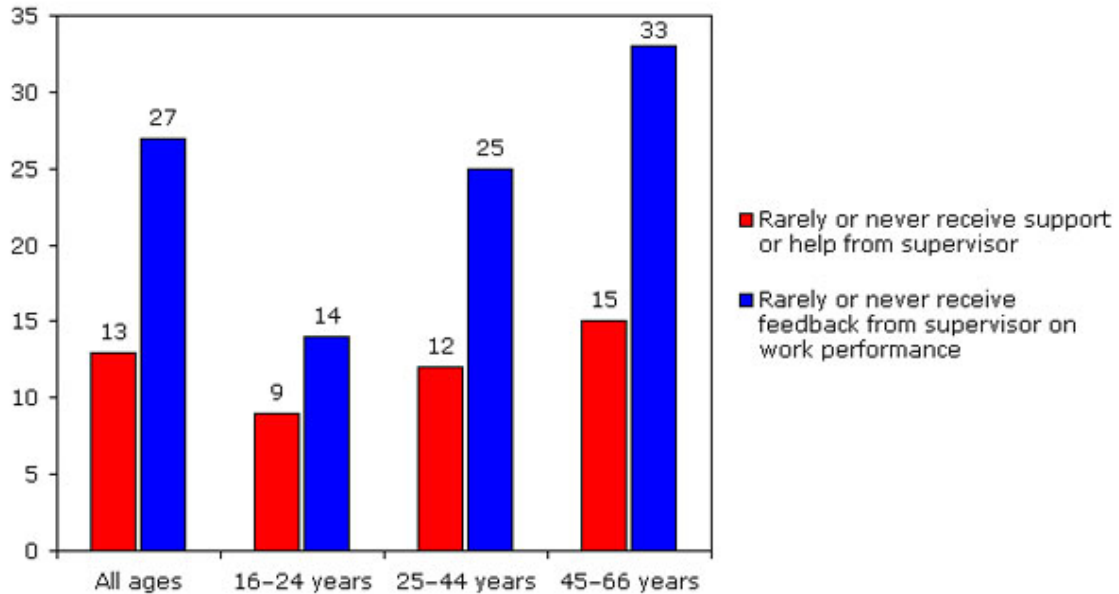
Job control, by occupation (% of workers citing high levels)

Source: SSB, Level of Living Survey: Working Conditions, 2006

Feedback and support

An increasing number of employees can determine important aspects of their own work, but at the same time about one out of four workers rarely or never get feedback from supervisors. In the Level of Living Survey 2006, employees were asked different questions about support and feedback in their organisation. Some 27% of respondents state that they rarely or never receive feedback from supervisors on how they do their job. Older workers more often report both a lack of feedback and a lack of support from supervisors, compared with younger workers (Figure 8). Lack of feedback is reported more frequently in large enterprises than in small enterprises.

Figure 8: Feedback and support, by age (% of workers citing low levels)

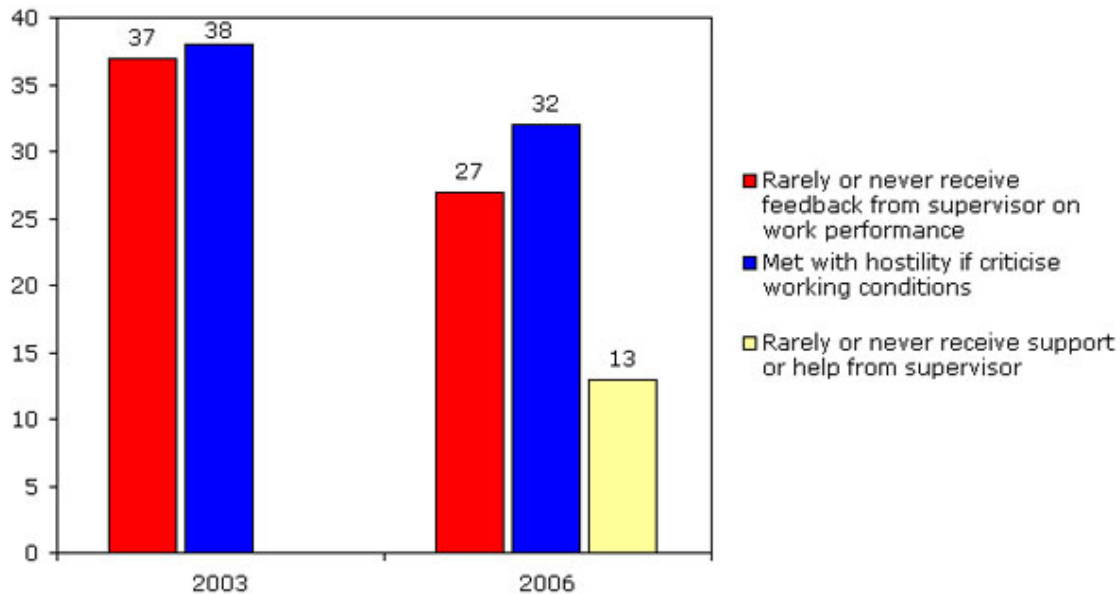


Feedback and support, by age (% of workers citing low levels)

Source: SSB, Level of Living Survey: Working Conditions, 2006

Variations in feedback are also found among different occupations. While 37% of workers in teaching and nursing report that they rarely or never receive feedback from their supervisor, this applies to 24% of craft workers and technicians and associate professionals. Although a high proportion of employees complain of a lack of feedback, the share was even higher in 2003 (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Feedback and support, 2003–2006 (% of workers citing low levels)



Feedback and support, 2003–2006 (% of workers citing low levels)

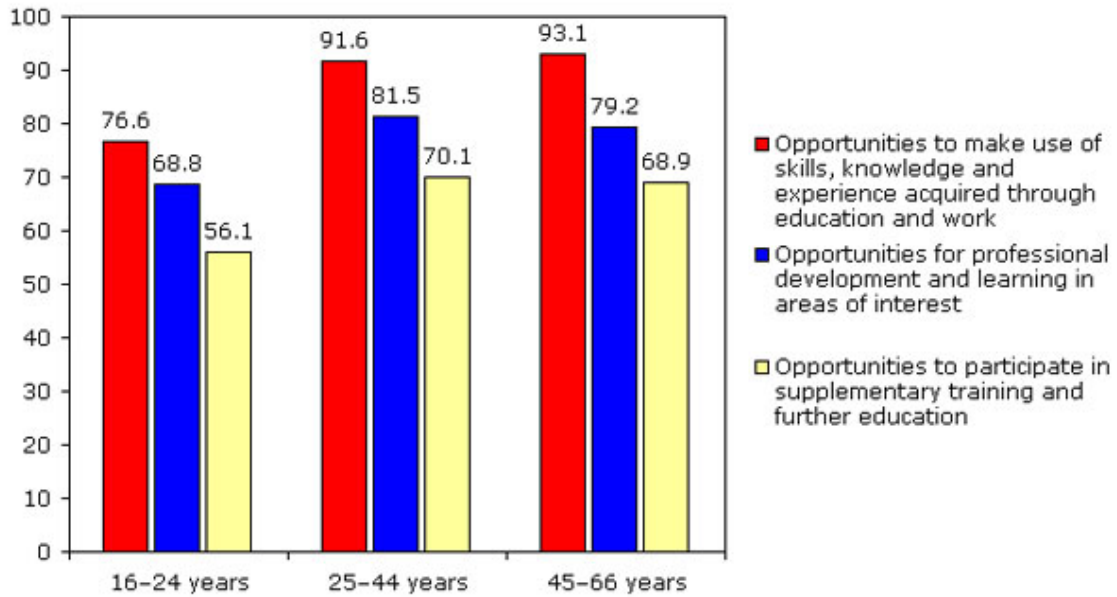
Note: The question on receiving support was only introduced in the 2006 survey.

Source: SSB, Level of Living Survey: Working Conditions, 2003–2006

Learning and professional development

A steady increase is evident in the proportion of employees stating that they have good opportunities in their job for professional development and participation in further education. In 2006, nine out of 10 employees responded that their present job matches well with their educational qualifications and work experience. Nearly four out of five workers report having good opportunities for professional development, and almost seven out of 10 believe that they have good opportunities for participating in further training and education. From 1996 to 2006, a small increase in opportunity may be noted for all of these areas. More men (82%) than women (76%) report having good opportunities for professional development, while workers under the age of 25 years (69%) have fewer opportunities in this regard than older workers: 81.5% of workers aged 25–44 years cite good opportunities in their job for professional development, as do 79% of workers aged 45–66 years (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Professional development, by age (% of workers citing good opportunities)

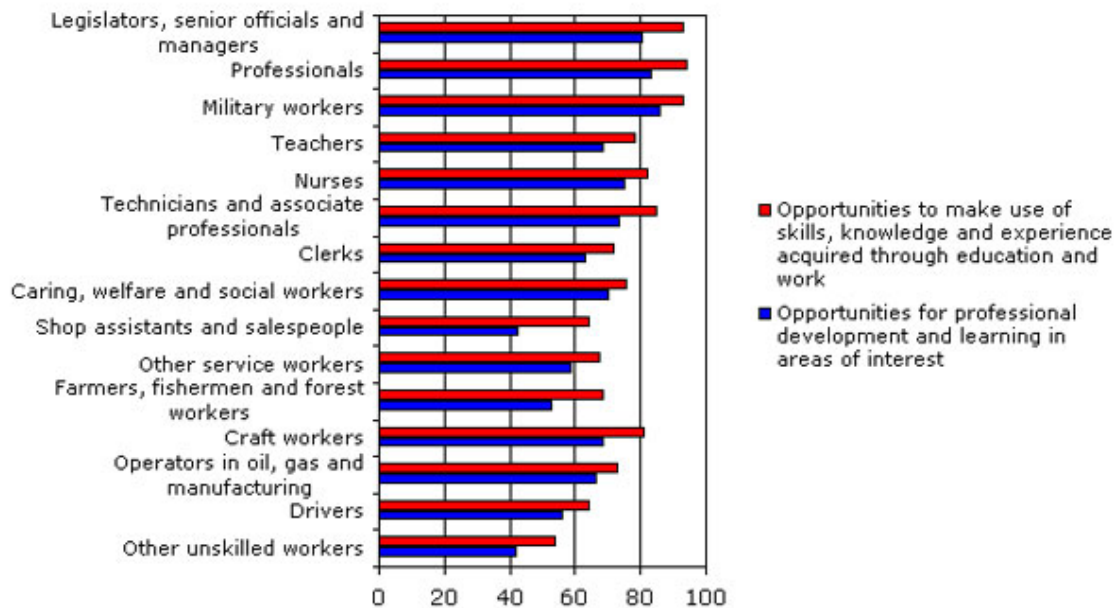


Professional development, by age (% of workers citing good opportunities)

Source: SSB, Level of Living Survey: Working Conditions, 2006

Figure 11 reveals that learning opportunities vary across occupations. In general, it appears that the lower occupational categories – particularly those associated with lower educational qualifications – also provide fewer opportunities for learning and professional development.

Figure 11: Professional development, by occupation (% of workers citing good opportunities)



Professional development, by occupation (% of workers citing good opportunities)

Source: SSB, Level of Living Survey: Working Conditions, 2006

Work-related outcomes

Job security and satisfaction

About one out of 10 employees (11%) reported being at risk of losing their job in 2006. In 2003, this was a concern for 20% of the workers surveyed. This decline in feelings of insecurity can probably be explained by changes in the labour market: the unemployment rate was 4.6% in 2003 and as low as 2.8% in 2006. Some nine out of 10 employees are satisfied with their job, and this number has remained stable since 1989.

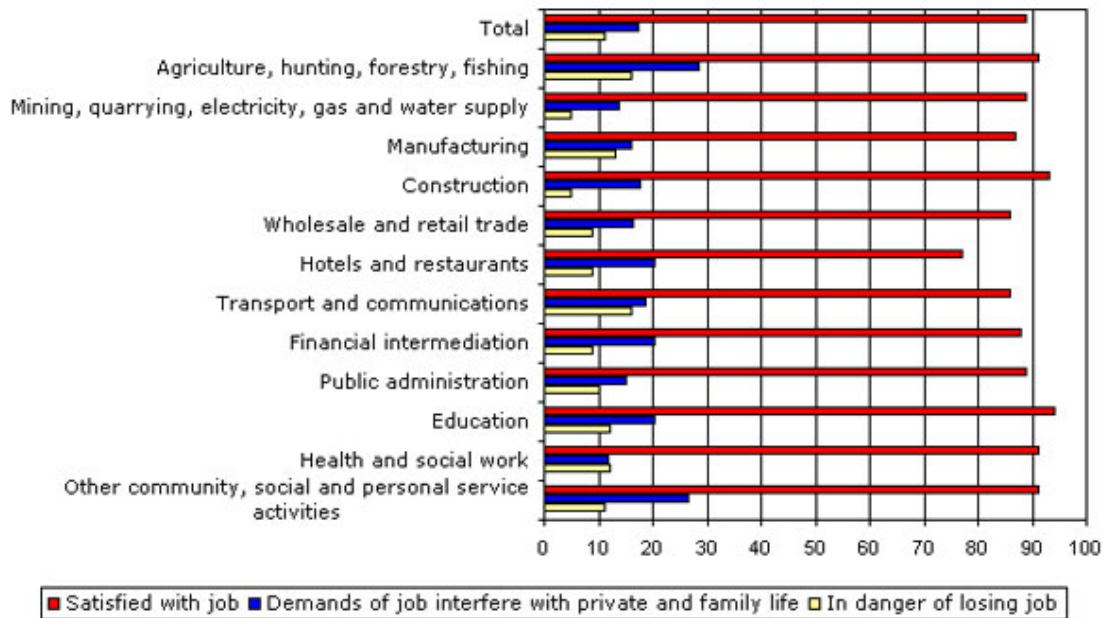
Work–life balance

When it comes to the conflict between work and family life, it is harder to assess trends, because this question was replaced in the 2006 survey. In 2003, 22% of employees reported that they, to some degree or to a large degree, found it difficult to combine working with non-working life. In 2006, 17% of the respondents claimed that the demands of their job often or very often interfere with their private life or family life. Workers aged 25–44 years most frequently report a work–family conflict. Poor work–life balance is most common among the occupational groups of legislators, senior officials and managers, and farmers, fishermen and forest workers.

Surprisingly, work–family conflict is also most commonly reported among workers who have the highest levels of flexibility in their working time. Workers who have a fixed work schedule are least likely to experience a work–family conflict. For more discussion on this topic, see the European Working Conditions Observatory (EWCO) comparative report [Combining family and full-time work](#).

Figure 12 shows how job security, work-family conflict and job satisfaction vary across sectors.

Figure 12: Work-related outcomes, by sector (% of workers affected)



Work-related outcomes, by sector (% of workers affected)

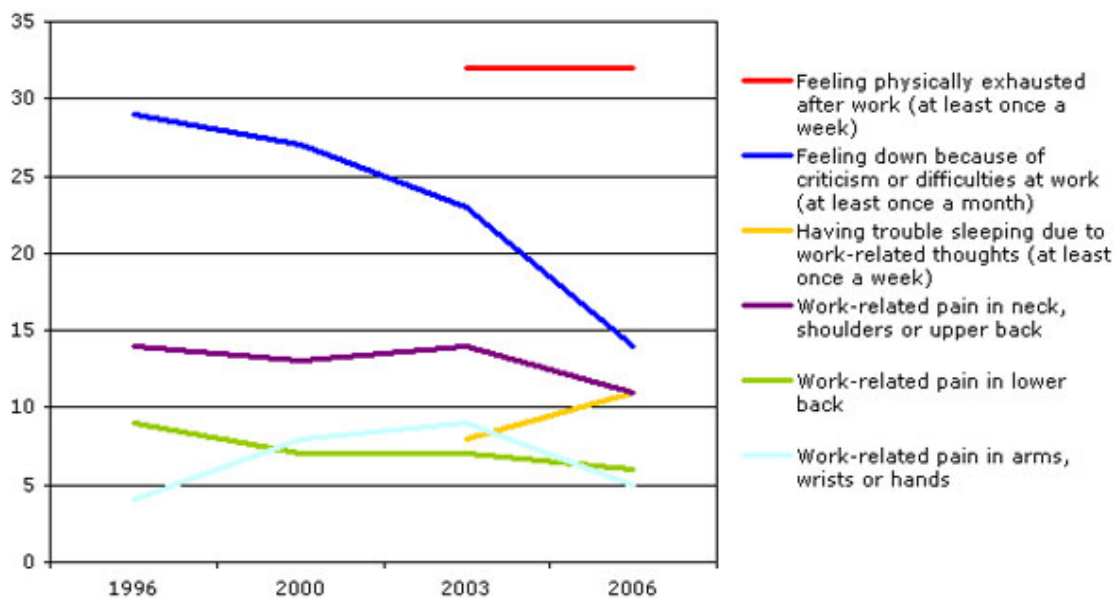
Source: SSB, Level of Living Survey: Working Conditions, 2006

Health problems

Work can impact on health in many different ways, and this effect varies, not only from person to person, but also according to factors such as age, occupation and sector.

Figure 13 reveals that almost one out of three employees feel physically exhausted when returning home from work at least once a week. This is reported somewhat more often by women (36%) than by men (29%), and is frequent in all age groups at an average of 31% to 33%. Notably, 39% of women over the age of 45 years feel exhausted after work. More than one in 10 employees complain of pain in the neck, shoulders or upper back that is entirely or partly work related. Compared with previous years, this is a slight decrease; nevertheless, pain in the neck, shoulders or upper back remains the most frequently reported musculoskeletal disorder. Interestingly, an abrupt decline is apparent over the past few years in the number of employees feeling down because of difficulties at work. In 2006, only half as many as in 1996 reported this, representing a decrease from 29% to 14%.

Figure 13: The six most frequently reported health problems, 1996–2006 (% of workers affected)

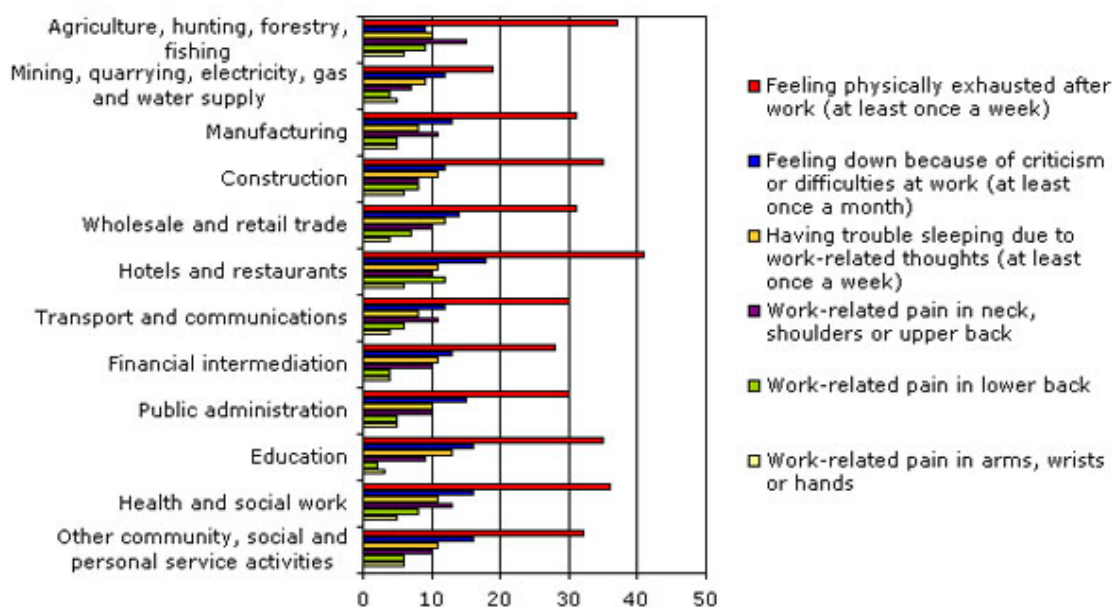


The six most frequently reported health problems, 1996–2006 (% of workers affected)

Source: SSB, Level of Living Survey: Working Conditions, 1996–2006

Feelings of exhaustion after work are most common in the hotels and restaurants sector, where this problem is reported by 41% of employees (Figure 14). As with other sectors characterised by close contact with other people such as customers, clients, patients, or students, many employees (18%) in hotels and restaurants report feeling down because of criticism or difficulties at work. Employees in the education sector seem to have the most trouble sleeping because of work, with 13% of workers reporting this problem. Meanwhile, work-related musculoskeletal disorders are cited most frequently in the agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing sector, amounting to a total of 30% when the three broad areas of work-related pain described in Figure 14 are aggregated; this is followed by the hotels and restaurants sector (28%) and health and social work (26%).

Figure 14: Health problems, by sector (% of workers affected)



Health problems, by sector (% of workers affected)

Source: SSB, Level of Living Survey: Working Conditions, 2006

Commentary

The work environment has been a priority area in Norway for many years, and the country has a long history in fields such as occupational health and safety, and employee participation. As a result, the overall picture of working conditions is positive. Overall, changes in recent years have advanced in the right direction. At the time of the Level of Living Survey 2006, the unemployment rate in Norway was lower than in a long time, and the labour market was characterised by growth and optimism. In just a few years, the unemployment rate fell from about 5% to a situation that can be characterised as a labour shortage in some areas. In such strong economic periods, organisations are forced to enhance their work environment in order to attract and retain the most competent employees.

In recent years in Norway, considerable attention has been paid to what may be termed the ‘time shortage’. This refers to the difficulties which people seem to experience in managing their time and coordinating all of their activities in everyday life. The time shortage adversely affects the balance between working and family life, and is thought to be particularly challenging for working parents with small children. One of the steps taken in an attempt to solve this problem has been to increase the flexibility in working time arrangements. Being able to adapt working time to personal needs is assumed to facilitate a work–life balance. However, based on the results of the Level of Living Survey 2006, this assumption may need to be reassessed before further action is taken and new policies are implemented.

Although the results in relation to the overall work environment in Norway are positive, it should be noted that working conditions vary considerably across occupations and sectors. The new design of the Level of Living Survey will enable a greater focus on the characteristics of the various groups and their work situations. General policies go so far, but at some point it is

important to recognise that different groups have different needs and that they should be treated accordingly.

Trine Eiken, National Institute of Occupational Health

Annex: About the survey

Survey name	Level of Living Survey 2006: Working conditions
Organisation responsible	Statistics Norway (Statistisk sentralbyrås , SSB)
Website address	http://www.ssb.no/english/
Geographical coverage	National
Sampling unit (target population)	All individuals aged 18–67 years, including individuals who are not employed, and individuals moving in and out of employment
Sampling strategy	In 2006, the Level of Living Survey was designed as a split panel survey (or a rotating panel survey) for the first time; from 1989 to 2003, the study had a cross-sectional design. The present structure consists of three panels, each one constituting a representative sample of the Norwegian working population. Over time, the plan is for each panel to be included in the survey three times (for example, 2006, 2009 and 2012), and to replace one panel with a new one every three years. Replacing only one panel at a time ensures continuity in the data, while simultaneously underpinning the representativeness of the entire sample. In the future, new panels will consist mainly of young workers and immigrants, in order to ensure that the total sample (all three panels combined) continues to be representative for the Norwegian working population. This design provides both cross-sectional and longitudinal data for further analysis
Response rate	67.2%
Sample	The sample consists of 12,550 individuals, 9,961 of whom were employed. The results illustrated in this report refer to employees only
Data collection	The data collection took place from 18 September 2006 to 24 February 2007. Data were collected using telephone interviews, with the exception of 0.5% of the interviews which were conducted face-to-face (when the respondents did not have access to a telephone). The interviews took an average of 24 minutes
Publications related to the survey	‘Lack of feedback to one out of four’, SSB, 2007. http://www.ssb.no/english/subjects/06/02/arbmiljo_en/

EF/08/09/EN