Executive summary

**Introduction**

In European labour markets in recent years, there has been a growing emergence of so-called ‘more flexible forms of work’, which deviate from standard employment contracts. The need for flexible employment arrangements has been underlined on several occasions. Developing these forms of work is considered necessary for achieving economic growth through the adaptation of business strategies and productivity to globalised markets and economies. Non-standard work can be further divided into ‘atypical’ and ‘very atypical’ forms of work. The former refers to the more usual types of non-standard work, such as fixed-term, part-time and temporary agency work. The latter – ‘very atypical’ forms of work – refers to very short fixed-term contracts of less than six months duration, part-time work of fewer than 10 hours a week, non-written contracts and zero-hours or on-call working.

This report seeks to examine the phenomenon of ‘very atypical’ work, looking at the incidence and nature of this form of work across the 27 EU Member States (EU27) and Norway. At the same time, it attempts to assess the working conditions of these ‘very atypical’ forms of work, including whether such work constitutes a stepping stone to more standard forms of employment or if it entails a risk of social exclusion. In addition, the report sets out to examine the views and actions of the social partners in relation to the selected forms of non-standard work.

**Policy context**

The existence and development of non-standard forms of work have been repeatedly acknowledged by European institutions. For instance, in its 2006 Green Paper, *Modernising labour law to meet the challenges of the 21st century* (COM (2006) 708 final), the European Commission notes how non-standard work forms such as fixed-term contracts, part-time work, on-call and zero-hours contracts, temporary agency work and freelance contracts have become ‘an established feature of the European labour market, accounting for 25% of the workforce’. Moreover, the Lisbon strategy acknowledges the importance of atypical or non-standard work arrangements in allowing for greater flexibility – particularly in the way they allow for ‘adapting hours of work, organisation of working time and the responsiveness of work to fluctuations in the demand for production or services’.

Nevertheless, despite the growing incidence of non-standard work, there is increasing concern over the protection of workers engaged in these forms of work, given that the majority of workers’ rights and protection have been built around so-called ‘standard’ employment relationships. Moreover, while ‘very atypical’ work offers far greater flexibility than other work forms, it is by its nature extremely precarious. Thus, as the European Commission acknowledges, an important issue relating to the evolution of work forms is balancing flexibility and security – as the term ‘flexicurity’ implies – to achieve an optimal balance between labour market flexibility and security for workers against labour market risks.

**Key findings**

**Incidence and nature of very atypical forms of work**

While the incidence of non-standard forms of work is thought to be increasing, a high degree of variety is evident across Europe in the use of each type of ‘very atypical’ contract, mostly determined by each country’s economic background. Moreover, due to the lack of consistent data, it is difficult to determine the exact incidence of ‘very atypical work’. Nevertheless, some trends are evident. For instance, the types of workers engaged in very atypical forms of work tend to be extremely varied, ranging from very low-skilled workers on seasonal contracts to highly-skilled professionals on short, task-focused contracts; clearly, the work situation of these two categories differs radically. Some sectoral characteristics are also visible: for example, seasonal working, which involves short fixed-term contracts, is prevalent in
sectors such as agriculture, or tourism and hotels, while zero-hours working tends to be common in the retail sector and in some parts of the public and care sectors.

Quality of work

In terms of quality of work, non-standard and ‘very atypical’ workers face particular challenges – for instance, in relation to feelings of having less job security, the lack of a fixed career plan, fewer training and career development opportunities, and greater difficulties in reconciling working and non-working life due to the characteristics of atypical work.

In terms of the regulation of non-standard work, legislation and/or collective agreements have been adopted to regulate various non-standard forms of work, depending on countries’ regulatory institutions and processes. In some countries, collective agreements and legislation are even combined, while in others collective bargaining at tripartite level regulates complex issues concerning non-standard employment.

Actions and policies addressing the need for flexibility on the one hand and greater protection for workers on the other have been devised more with a view to addressing non-standard work generally; specific regulations on very atypical forms of work are still rare.

Policy pointers

Given the transient and diverse nature of ‘very atypical’ work, a more coordinated response is required to jointly address the needs of both workers and employers.

Preventive action needs to be taken regarding the health and safety of atypical workers, raising awareness among all the parties involved of the need for a targeted approach.

It is important to highlight the potentially higher risk of poverty among those engaged in very atypical work, which tends to be associated with low-paid work performed by low-skilled workers.

Policymakers should take into account the fact that the problem of undeclared work is an associated issue in many countries, as the informal economy lies at the fringes of non-standard forms of work.

Real flexicurity policies could be a possible way forward; in this respect, the social partners have a critical role to play in assessing and devising the right balance between labour market flexibility and workers’ security.

Further information

The Eurofound report, Very atypical forms of work, is available online at http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef1009.htm

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