



Public administration: Working conditions and job quality

'Work plays a significant role in people's lives, in the functioning of companies and in society at large. But what is work? How can we describe it? Is it changing, and if so, is it for better or for worse? Is it fulfilling the numerous and at times conflicting expectations we have of it? How can we take steps to improve work for the well-being of all?'

Eurofound, *Fifth European Working Conditions Survey: Overview report, 2012*



This report gives an overview of working conditions, job quality, workers' health and job sustainability in the public administration sector (NACE 84).¹ The findings are based mostly on the fifth European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), which gathers data on working conditions and the quality of work across 34 European countries. Additional information on the structural characteristics of the sector is derived from Eurostat data. The sector includes all public administration activities, including defence, provision of services to the community as a whole (such as public order and fire safety activities) and administration of compulsory social security. The fifth EWCS contains responses from 2,256 workers in this sector. The report compares aspects of work in the sector with the EU28 as a whole.

Structural characteristics

In 2010, 15,638,300 European workers worked in the public administration sector, comprising 7.2% of the EU28 workforce (7.1% in 2008 and 7% in 2012). Employment in the sector decreased by 0.7% between 2008 and 2010 and decreased by a further 3.1% between 2010 and 2012 (Eurostat, 2013).

Countries where the public administration sector is a relatively large employer are Malta (8.7%), Belgium (9.1%), France (10%) and Luxembourg (11.8%). The relative size of the public administration is smallest in Denmark (5.8%), Ireland (5.6%), Romania (5.1%) and

Finland (4.7%) (Eurostat, 2013). A relatively large proportion of workers in public administration (26%) works in large workplaces (250+ employees), compared to the EU28 (12%). Small and medium-sized workplaces (SMEs, 10–249 employees) are predominant in the sector, making up 56% of workplaces in the sector compared to 46% in the EU28. Consequently, the share of workers in micro-workplaces (1–9 employees) is relatively low (18% compared to 42% in the EU28). The sector employs slightly more men (54%) than women (46%) (Eurostat, 2013).

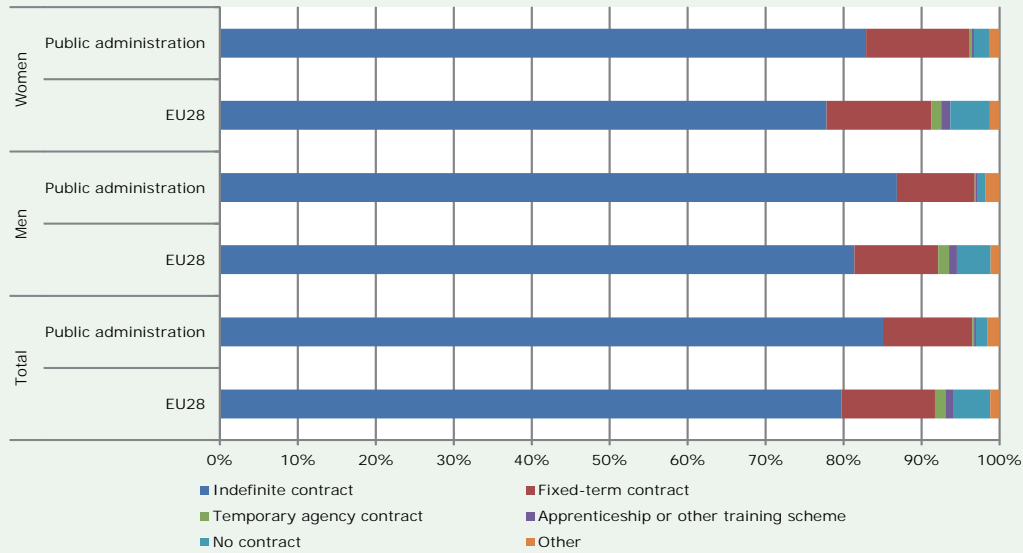
Indefinite contracts are more prevalent in public administration (85%) than in the EU28 as a whole (80%); fixed-term contracts, however, are equally as common in the sector as in the EU28 (11%). Temporary agency contracts and apprenticeships are, on the other hand, less widespread than in the EU28 (Figure 1).

Public administration in a nutshell

- A relatively large proportion of workers (26%) works in large workplaces
- Salary cuts are less common in this sector than in the EU28 as a whole
- The sector scores better than the EU28 average for work–life balance
- Workers receive relatively high levels of employer-paid training
- Workers report fewer health problems but much higher levels of absenteeism than in the EU28 as a whole

¹ Nomenclature statistique des activités économiques dans la Communauté européenne (statistical classification of economic activities in the European Community).

Figure 1: Employment status, by gender



Part-time work is less prevalent in public administration than in the EU28, with only 27% of women and 8% of men in public administration working 34 hours or less, compared to 38% of women and 13% of men in the EU28.

Working conditions

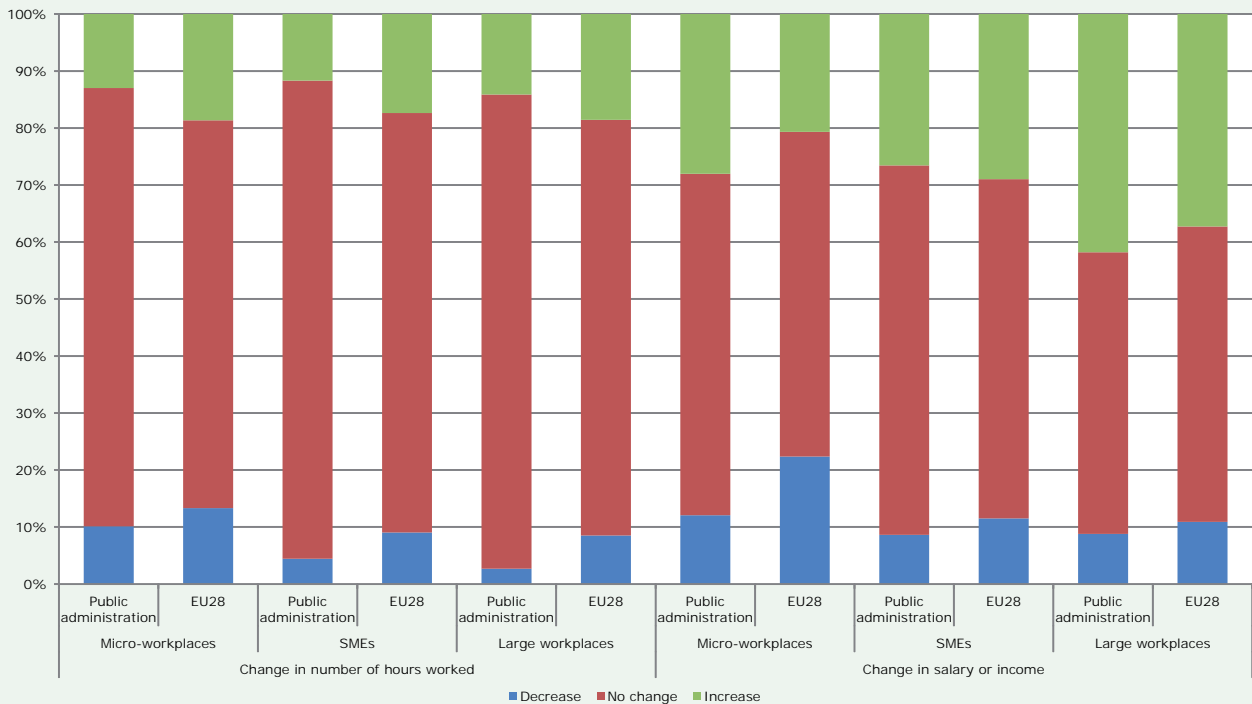
Changes since the crisis

Figure 2 shows that workers in the public administration sector reported changes in their working hours in the year prior to the survey considerably less often than workers in the EU28 as a whole. Across all workplace sizes, the proportion of workers reporting no changes to their working hours was higher than in equivalent workplaces in the EU28. Among workers who reported changes, those in

micro-workplaces often reported reductions in working hours (10%), while workers in large workplaces were most likely to have experienced an increase in their working hours (14%).

Both in the public administration sector and in the EU28 in general, workers reported changes in salary or income more often than changes in hours worked in the year prior to the survey. Employees in micro-workplaces reported wage cuts more often than those in SMEs and large workplaces. Across all workplace sizes in public administration, however, the proportion of employees reporting a decrease in salary is smaller than the proportion reporting an increase, and lower than in the equivalent EU28 workplaces. Conversely, in both micro- and large workplaces the proportion of employees reporting an increase in salary (28% and

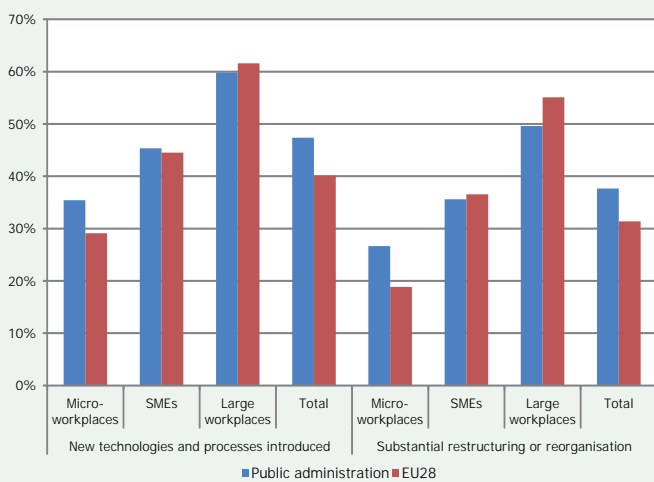
Figure 2: Percentage of employees reporting changes in number of hours worked and salary or income in past year, by workplace size



42% respectively) is higher than in the equivalent EU28 workplaces (21% and 37%).

Workers in public administration reported restructuring and the introduction of new technologies slightly more frequently (Figure 3) than the EU28 average. The public administration sector follows the same pattern as the EU28: the share of employees reporting restructuring or reorganisation, or the introduction of new production processes and technologies increases with workplace size. While the share of reported changes (for both new technologies and restructuring) is higher than in the EU28 for micro-workplaces, it is either the same or slightly below the EU28 average for SMEs and large workplaces in the sector.

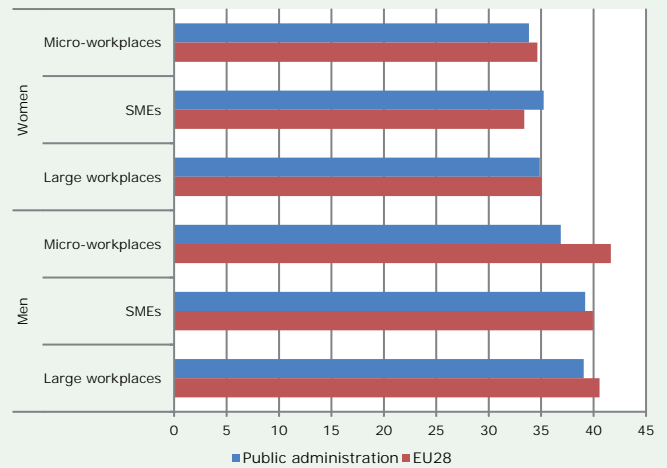
Figure 3: Restructuring and introduction of new technologies in past three years, by workplace size



Working time and work-life balance

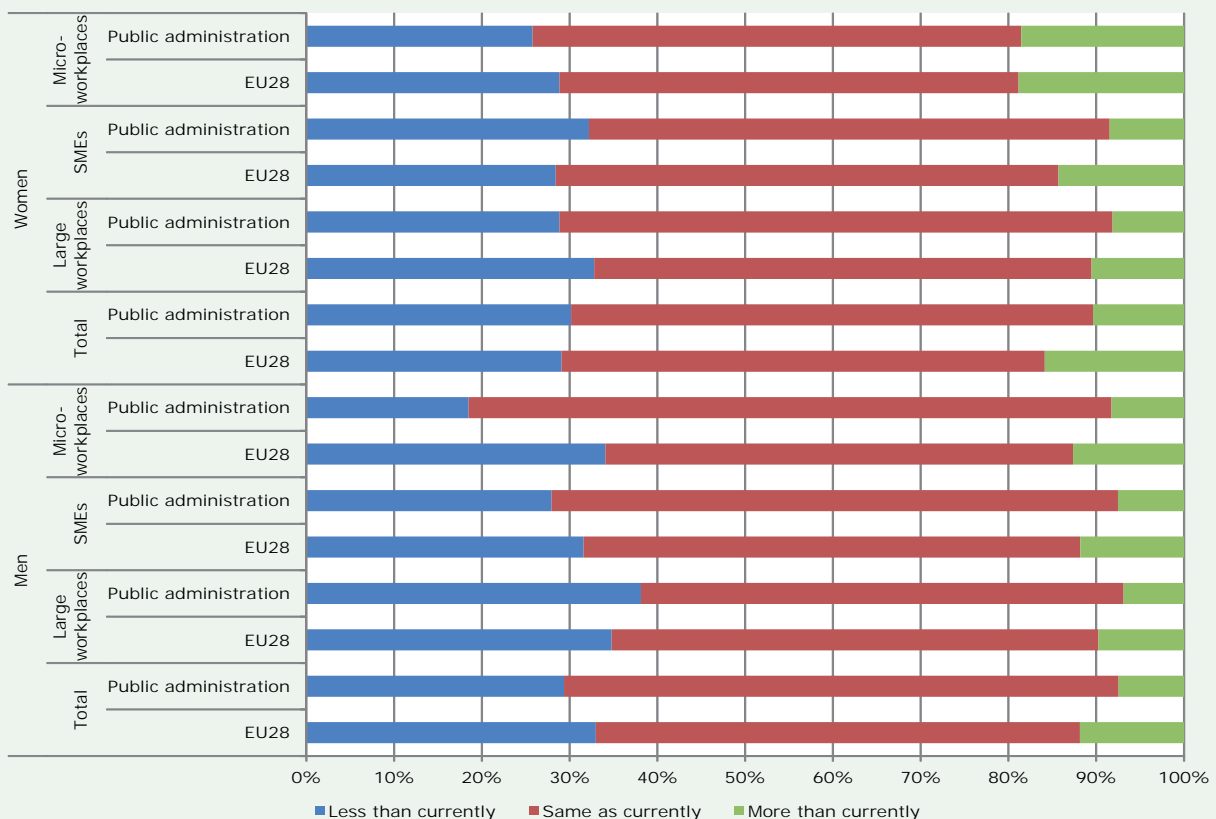
Workers in public administration on average work 37 hours per week compared to 38 hours in the EU28. As in the EU28, men in the sector tend to work more hours than women, independent of workplace size (Figure 4). In public administration, employees in SMEs and large workplaces report the highest working hours; women in SMEs are the only group of workers to report higher average working hours than the corresponding EU28 workplace average.

Figure 4: Average working hours, by gender and workplace size



Workers in public administration appear to be more satisfied with their current working hours than workers in the EU28 as a whole: 60% of women and 63% of men report that they would prefer to work the same

Figure 5: Working time preferences, by gender and workplace size

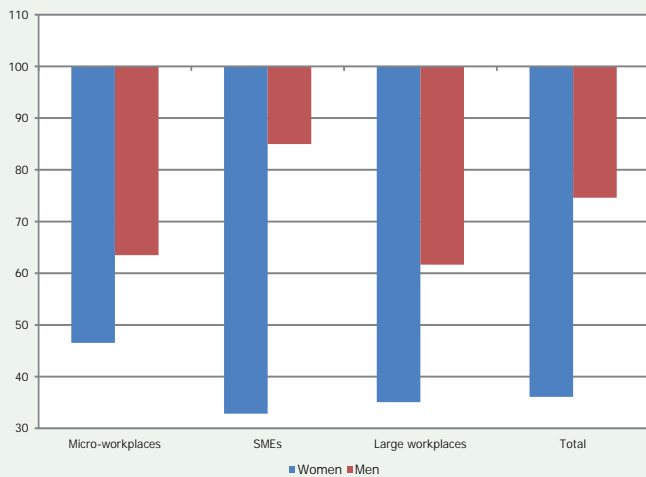


hours as currently, compared to 55% for both men and women in the EU28. Looking at the whole sector, 30% of workers say they would prefer to work fewer hours than currently, whereas 9% would prefer to work more hours. However, the data does point to some differences between the genders and different-sized workplaces (Figure 5).

Across all workplaces, the share of workers that would prefer to work fewer hours than currently is larger than the share of workers that would prefer to work more hours. Women working in SMEs are more likely than women working in micro- or large establishments in the sector or in equivalent workplaces in the EU28 to express a preference for reducing their working hours. Among men, those working in large workplaces are the most likely to prefer a decrease in their working hours.

Figure 6 shows that working atypical hours (weekends, evenings and/or nights) is much less common in public administration than in the EU28 as a whole, especially for women. The same pattern is found across all workplace sizes.

Figure 6: Index of working atypical hours (EU28=100), by gender and workplace size



Simultaneously, workers in public administration are more likely to have regular working hours (working the same number of hours every day and the same number of days every week) than the EU28 average (Figure 7). The only exception is men working in large establishments, who have slightly less regular working hours than the EU28 average. Women in large workplaces are also less likely to have regular working hours than women working in smaller establishments in the sector. While regularity of working time for men clearly decreases in relation to workplace size, this pattern does not apply for women, as the highest levels of working time regularity are reported by women in SMEs.

Given the low levels of atypical working hours and the high degree of regularity, it is no surprise that figure 8 shows that work-life balance (the fit between working hours and family or social commitments) is better for those working in the sector than in the EU28 as a whole.

Figure 7: Index of regularity of working time (EU28=100), by gender and workplace size

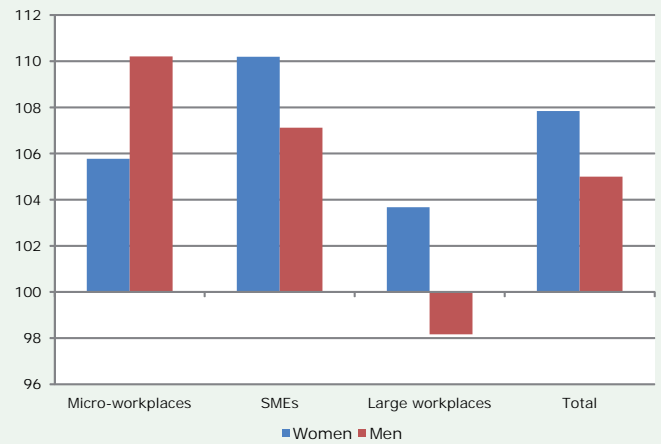
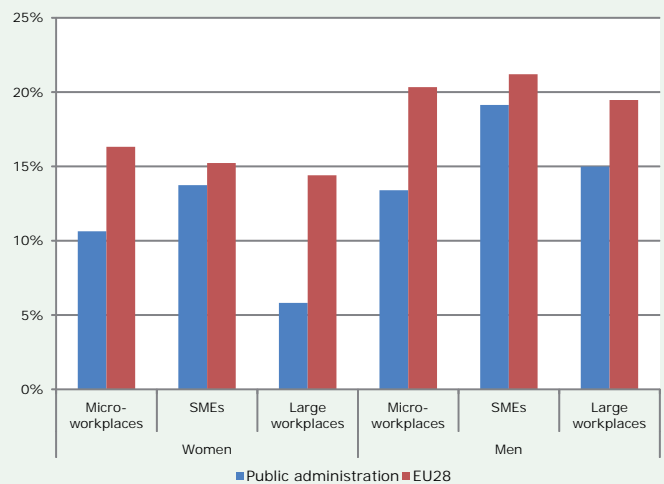


Figure 8: Poor work-life balance, by gender and workplace size



In public administration, as in the EU28, more men report a poor work-life balance than women; the most striking difference can be seen in large workplaces where 15% of men reported a poor work-life balance, compared to only 6% of women.

Work organisation

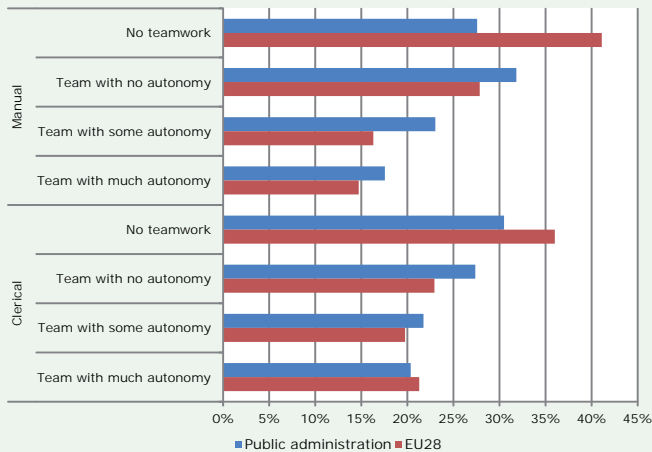
Teamwork

Teamwork has been proposed as an alternative to work organisation models based on high levels of labour division. As teamwork reflects a variety of practices, it can also assume a variety of forms. Different types of teamwork can be identified using the EWCS by looking at the level of autonomy within the teams.

Overall, teamwork appears to be more prevalent in public administration than in the EU28, with 70% of the workforce working in a team of some kind compared to 63% in the EU28 (Figure 9). For workers in both manual and clerical occupations, teamwork with no autonomy is the most common form of teamwork, and is more widespread in public administration than among workers in similar occupations in the EU28. It is interesting to note that

for clerical workers in the sector, working in a team with much autonomy is less common than for clerical workers in the EU28 as a whole, whereas for manual workers in the sector it is more common than for their EU28 counterparts.

Figure 9: Teamwork and team autonomy, by occupational category



Task rotation

Task rotation is also an important feature of work organisation. Depending on how it is implemented, task rotation may require different skills from the worker ('multiskilling') or may not ('fixed task rotation') and is either controlled by management or by the workers themselves (autonomous). Task rotation has been shown to be beneficial for workers' well-being, and autonomous multiskilling systems in particular are associated with higher worker motivation as well as better company performance. The percentage of workers in public administration working in a task

rotation system (50%) is slightly higher than in the EU28 as a whole (47%) (Figure 10).

Management-controlled multiskilling is the most common form of task rotation across all workplace sizes. In particular, large workplaces in public administration are characterised by an above-average incidence of management-controlled multiskilling, compared to both smaller workplaces in the sector and in the EU28 as a whole, while autonomous multiskilling is less common than in large workplaces in the EU28. In SMEs, the prevalence of management-controlled fixed task rotation (11%) is slightly higher than in the other categories (6% and 8% in micro and large workplaces), and slightly higher than in SMEs in the EU28 as a whole (8%).

Female bosses

The proportion of workers who report having a female boss in the public administration sector is the same as the EU28 average (28%). While the proportion of women workers in the sector who report having a female boss is slightly below the EU28 average for women (44% compared to 47%), it is slightly higher for men in the sector (14%) than for men in the EU28 as a whole (12%).

Skills and training

Overall, the majority of workers in public administration (55%) say that their present skills correspond well with their duties (Figure 11). As in the EU28, in all age groups in public administration workers are more likely to report being 'over-skilled' than 'under-skilled'. However, compared to the EU28 average workers in public administration are slightly more likely to report being 'under-skilled' than in the EU28, and less likely to report being 'over-skilled'.

Figure 10: Prevalence of task rotation, by workplace size

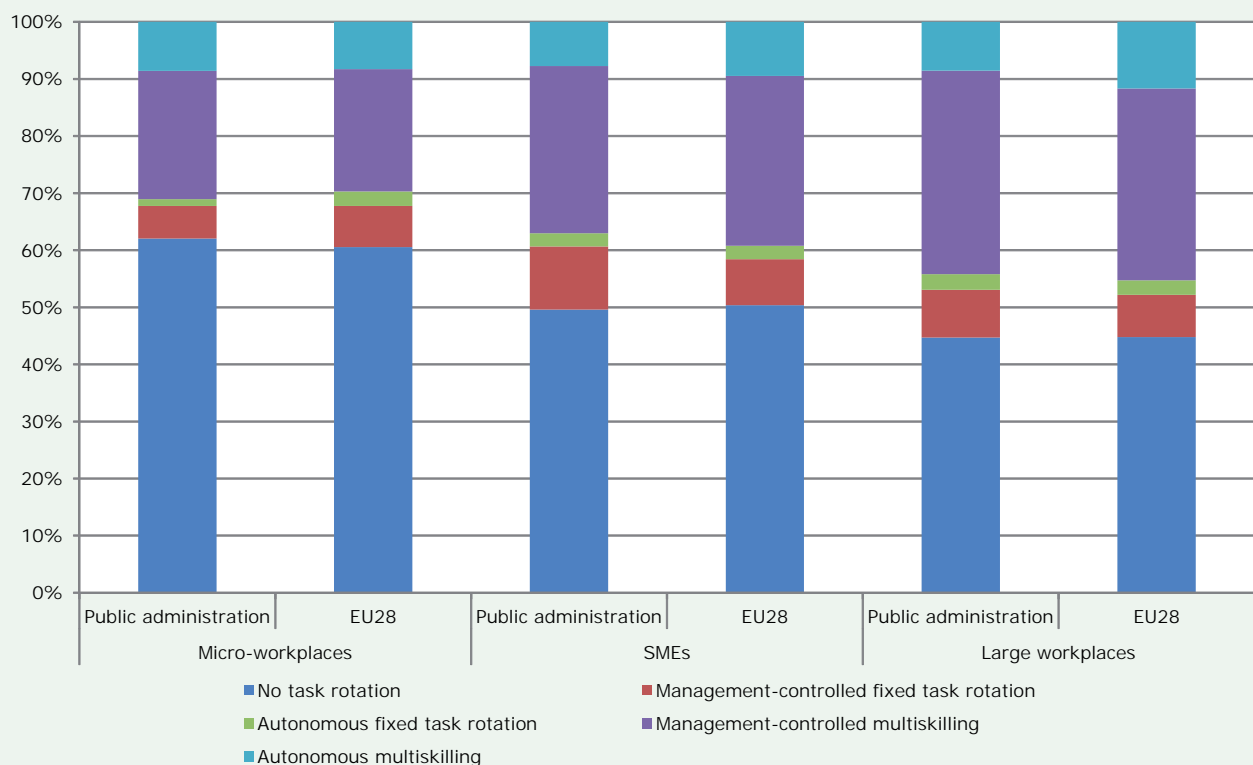
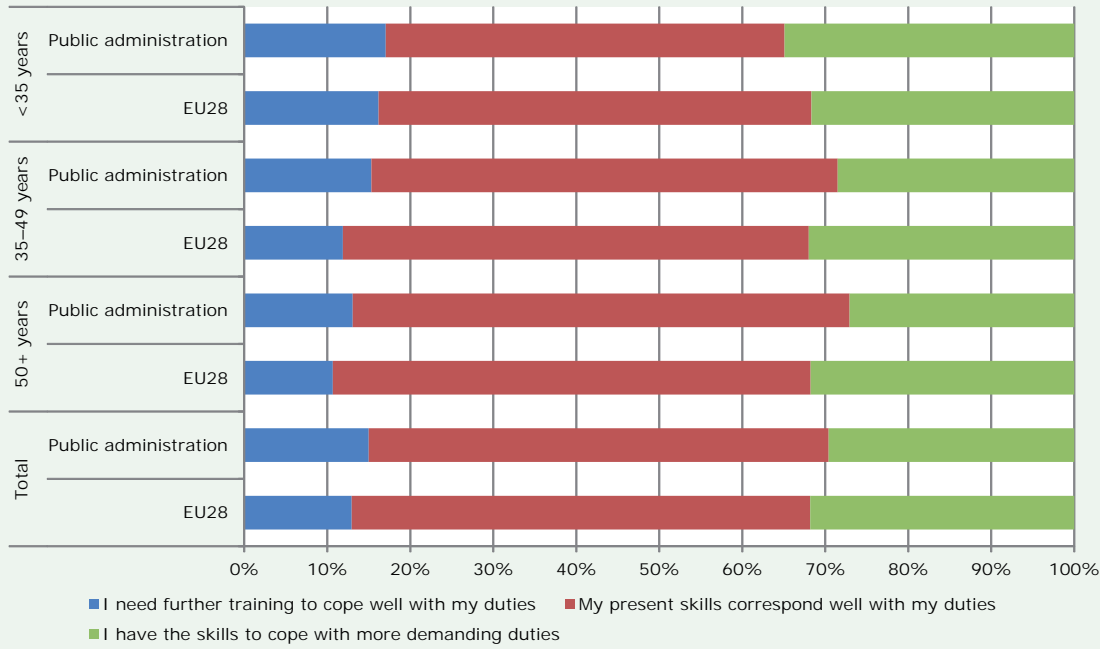


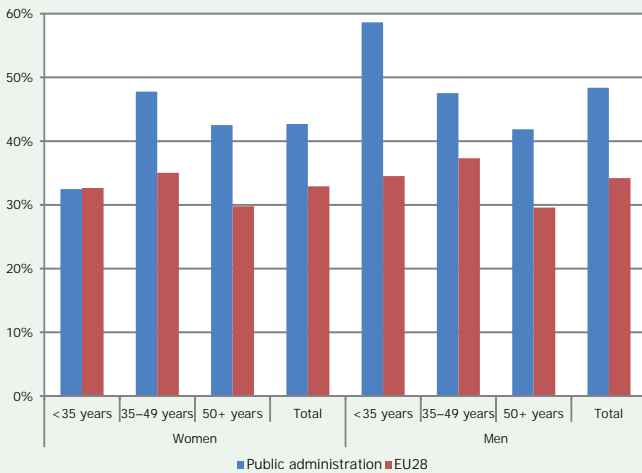
Figure 11: Match between skills and tasks, by gender and age



This pattern is found for workers aged 35 to 49 and workers aged 50 and over but not for younger workers (under 35), the sector who are more likely than their EU28 counterparts to report they are ‘over-skilled’ for their current duties.

The percentage of workers in public administration who report they have received training from their employer is considerably higher than in the EU28 as a whole (Figure 12). The incidence of employer-paid training is approximately the same for men and women in the sector, with the exception of workers under the age of 35, in which category men are much more likely than women to have received employer-paid training.

Figure 12: Employer-paid training, by gender and age

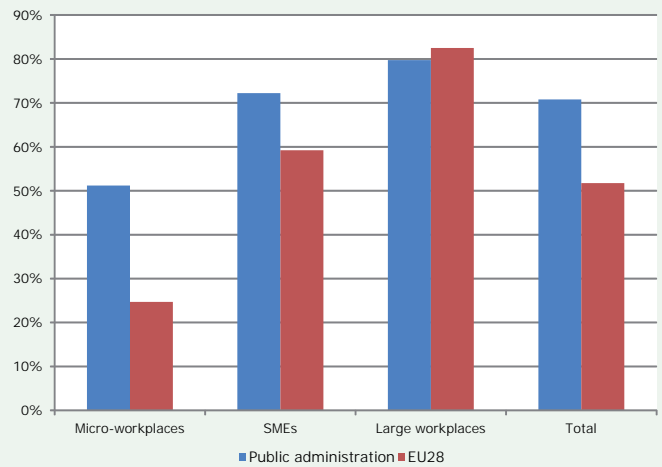


Employee representation

The EWCS contains fairly limited information on formal employee representation. It asks whether an employee representative is present at the workplace and whether workers have raised an issue with an employee representative in the past year. Figure 13

shows the combined results of these questions (an employee representative has been considered to be ‘available’ if they are present at the workplace or when an issue was raised).

Figure 13: Availability of an employee representative at the workplace, by workplace size



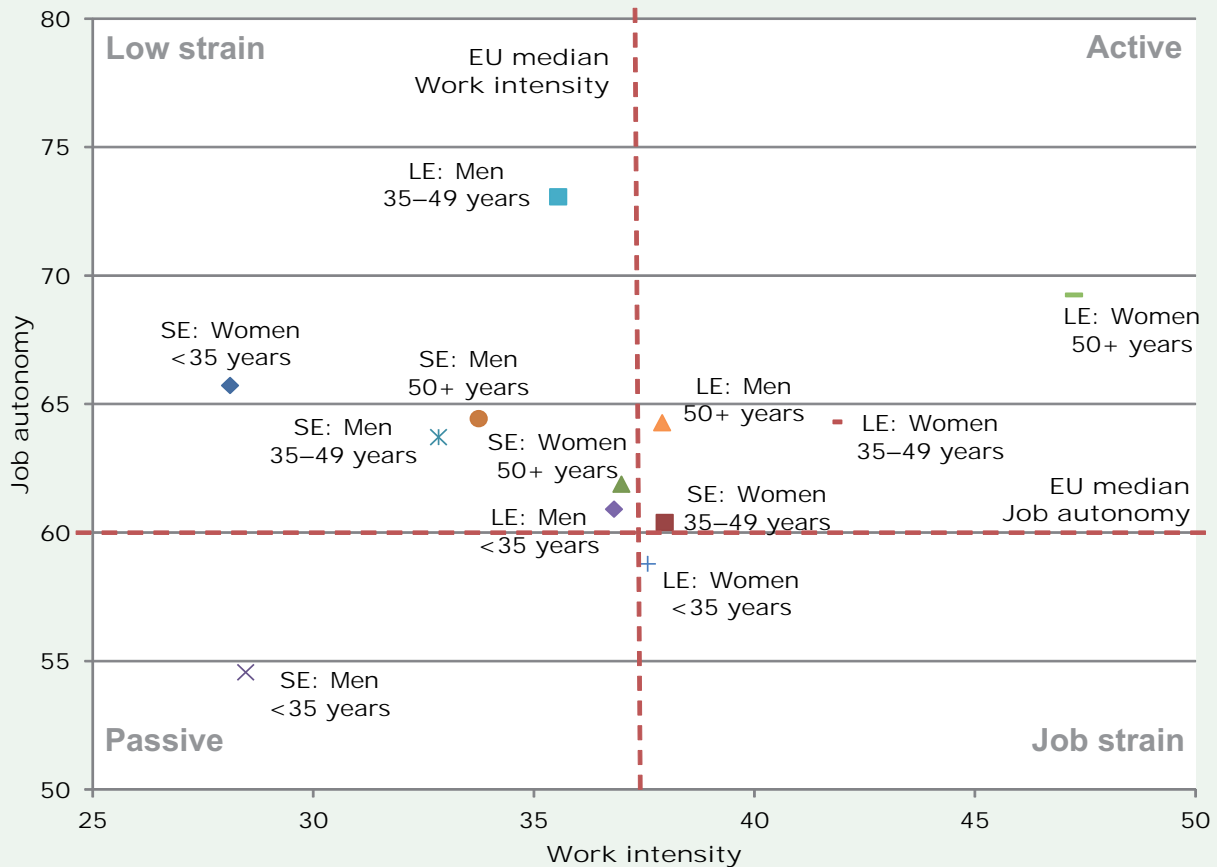
In 2010, 70% of employees in public administration reported that an employee representative was available compared to 52% of workers in the EU28. As in the EU28, the more workers in the workplace, the higher the probability of having an employee representative – although the percentage of workers in large workplaces in public administration who said an employee representative was available is in fact marginally lower than for the average of large workplaces in the EU28.

Psychosocial and physical environment

Job autonomy and work intensity

The psychosocial and physical environment has an important impact on workers’ well-being. According to the job demand and control model of the American

Figure 14: Distribution of groups of workers by average levels of job autonomy and work intensity



Note: LE = large enterprise; SE = micro, small or medium-sized enterprise

sociologist Karasek (1979), workers are more likely to suffer from work-related stress when they are faced with a high level of demand while being limited in the control they have over how they carry out their job.

Figure 14 shows the likelihood of workers in public administration suffering from work-related stress. Groups of workers are plotted along two axes: job autonomy and work intensity.

The averages for men under 35 working in micro, small or medium size establishments (SEs) in public administration are in the bottom-left quadrant of Figure 14. They are likely to be in so-called 'passive' jobs, characterised by low levels of intensity and low levels of autonomy. While the risk of stress is low in these jobs, there are risks of frustration and low motivation as the jobs are not very challenging and workers have little control over what they do and how they do it.

Men under 35 and men aged between 35 and 49 working in large establishments, men aged between 35 and 49 and over 50 in SEs, and women under 35 and over 50 in SEs in the sector are predominantly in 'low strain' jobs, characterised by relatively low levels of work intensity and high levels of job autonomy. Again, these jobs pose a low risk of stress, but workers are less likely to suffer from frustration and loss of motivation than those in passive jobs. Their jobs might, however, not challenge them to their full potential.

The top-right quadrant contains the averages in public administration for men over 50 in large establishments, women between 35 and 49 and over 50 in large establishments and women between 35 and 49 in SMEs. These workers tend to be in 'active' jobs, with high levels of work intensity and high levels of job autonomy. Although their jobs can be very demanding, they have enough control over the way they do their job and can develop coping strategies through active learning.

Finally, the most problematic category is 'job strain' in the bottom-right quadrant, which contains the average for women under 35 working in large establishments in public administration (although their average work intensity is only just above the EU28 median). Their jobs are characterised by high levels of intensity and low levels of autonomy, posing the risk of unhealthy stress levels and unresolved strain, and consequently a range of stress-related illnesses such as cardiovascular disease and mental health problems.

Social environment

A good social environment is characterised by the existence of social support and the absence of abuse at work. Social support can help workers deal with high levels of work intensity. Overall, workers in public administration do not differ from the EU28 average on this indicator (Figure 15). Interestingly, for men the score for the social environment rises with workplace size, whereas for women it is higher for micro-workplace and large workplaces than for SMEs.

Figure 15: Index of good social environment (EU28=100), by gender and workplace size



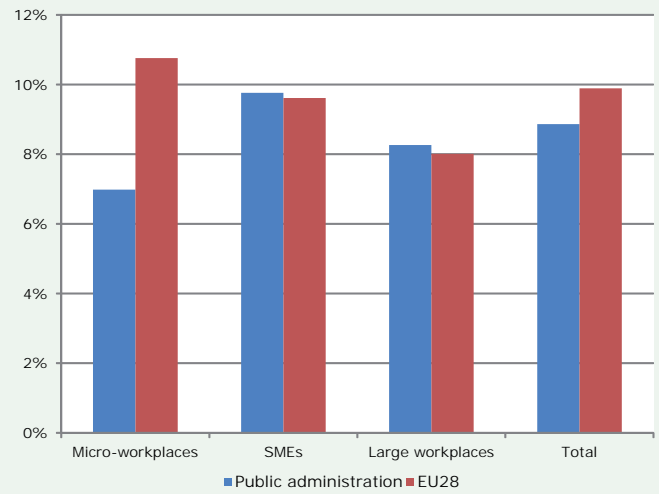
Physical risks

Exposure to ambient risk is the most prevalent physical risk in public administration, followed by biological and chemical risks, but, overall, levels of exposure to physical risks in the sector are lower than in the EU28 as a whole (Figure 16). However, the differences between workers in manual and clerical occupations are striking. While both women and men working in manual occupations report considerably higher than average levels of risk exposure (particularly for ergonomic risks in the case of women and ambient risks in the case of men), levels of exposure to all risks are below average for both male and female clerical workers.

In public administration, 9% of workers report they were not very well or not at all well informed about workplace risks, compared to 10% in the EU28 (Figure 17). However, this overall lower level is

entirely due to the lower proportion of workers in micro-workplaces reporting not being well informed about workplace risks.

Figure 17: Not very well or not at all well informed about health and safety risks at work, by workplace size



Job quality

In the report *Trends in job quality in Europe*, the authors constructed four indices of job quality: earnings, prospects, intrinsic job quality and working time quality. The indices are built using job characteristics that are unambiguously associated with workers' well-being.

Figure 18 summarises job quality in the public administration sector. It shows the average score for the sector and subsectors on each of the indicators, with and without controlling for the structural characteristics of the sector's workers (age, gender,

Figure 16: Indices of exposure to physical risks (EU28 = 100), by gender and occupational category

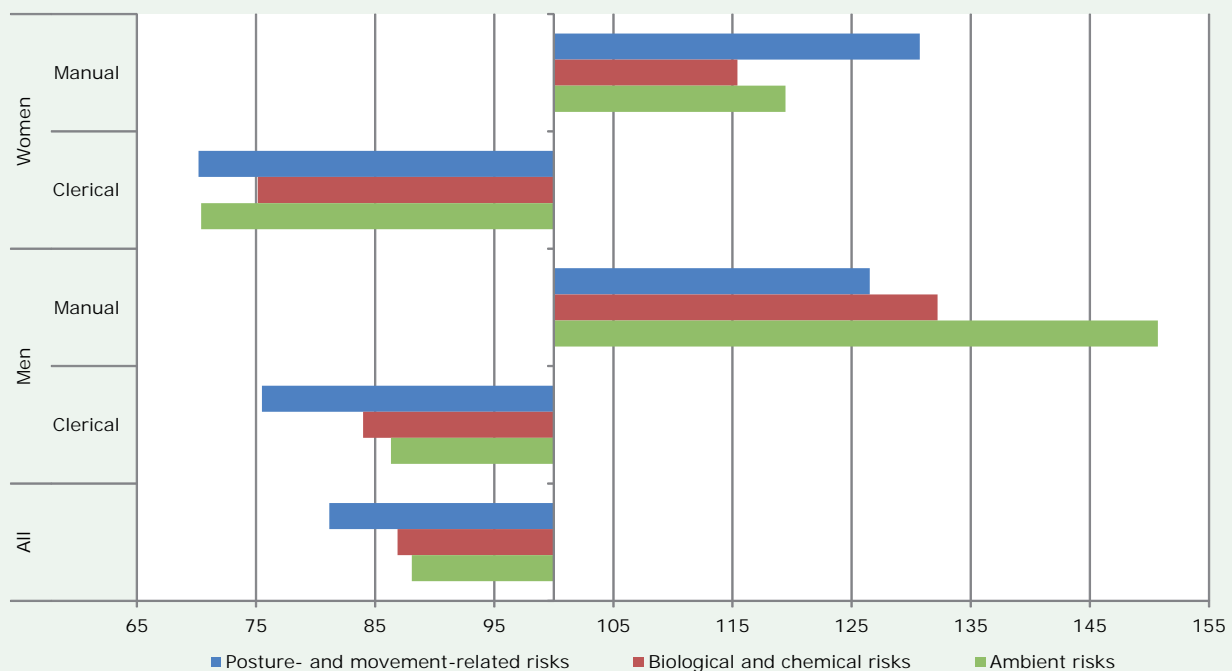
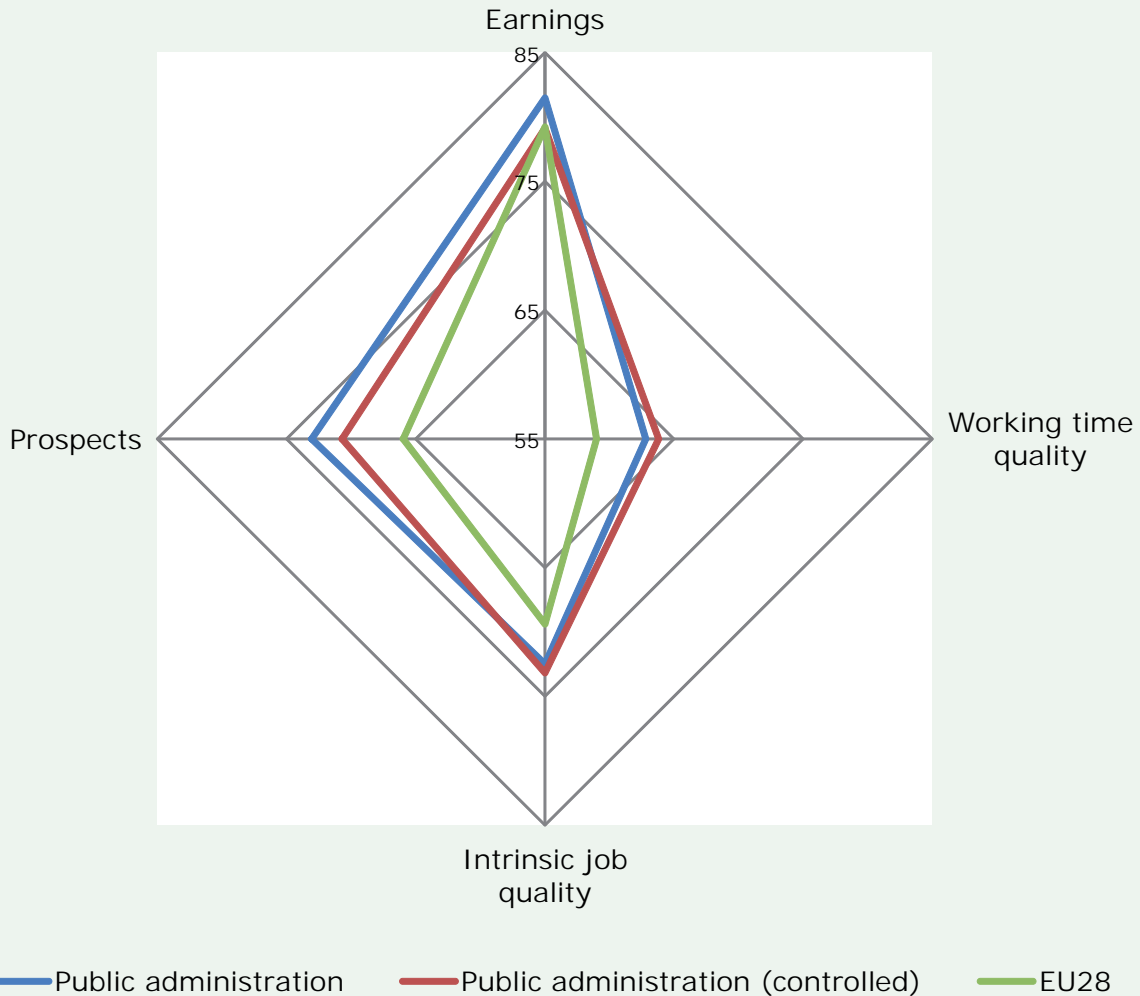


Figure 18: Job quality in public administration compared with the EU28



Note: Scores on all four indicators range from 0 to 100

workplace size, education level and country), and for the EU28.

Job quality in the public administration sector is higher overall than in the EU28 as a whole. Workers in public administration have higher than average earnings, higher working time quality, higher intrinsic job quality and better prospects. When controlling for the structural characteristics of the workforce (gender, age, education, workplace size and country), the difference in earnings disappears. The other differences are slightly reduced, but scores for workers in public administration remain significantly higher than scores for workers in the EU28 as a whole.

Health and sustainability of work

Working conditions can impact both positively and negatively on the health of workers and on the sustainability of their jobs.

Figure 19 shows that public administration does not differ much from the EU28 in relation to health and sustainability outcomes. The proportion of workers who say their health is at risk because of work is the same in public administration as in the EU28 as a whole. Workers in the sector are slightly more likely to report having been absent due to a work accident and to report poor health, but also that they will be able to do their job at 60. Workers in public administration are slightly less likely to report having worked when they were sick (presenteeism) or to perceive a negative effect of work on health. Apart from the difference in poor self-reported health, these differences remain when controlling for the structural characteristics of the workforce in the sector (gender, age, education, workplace size and country).

Figure 19: Health and sustainability of work

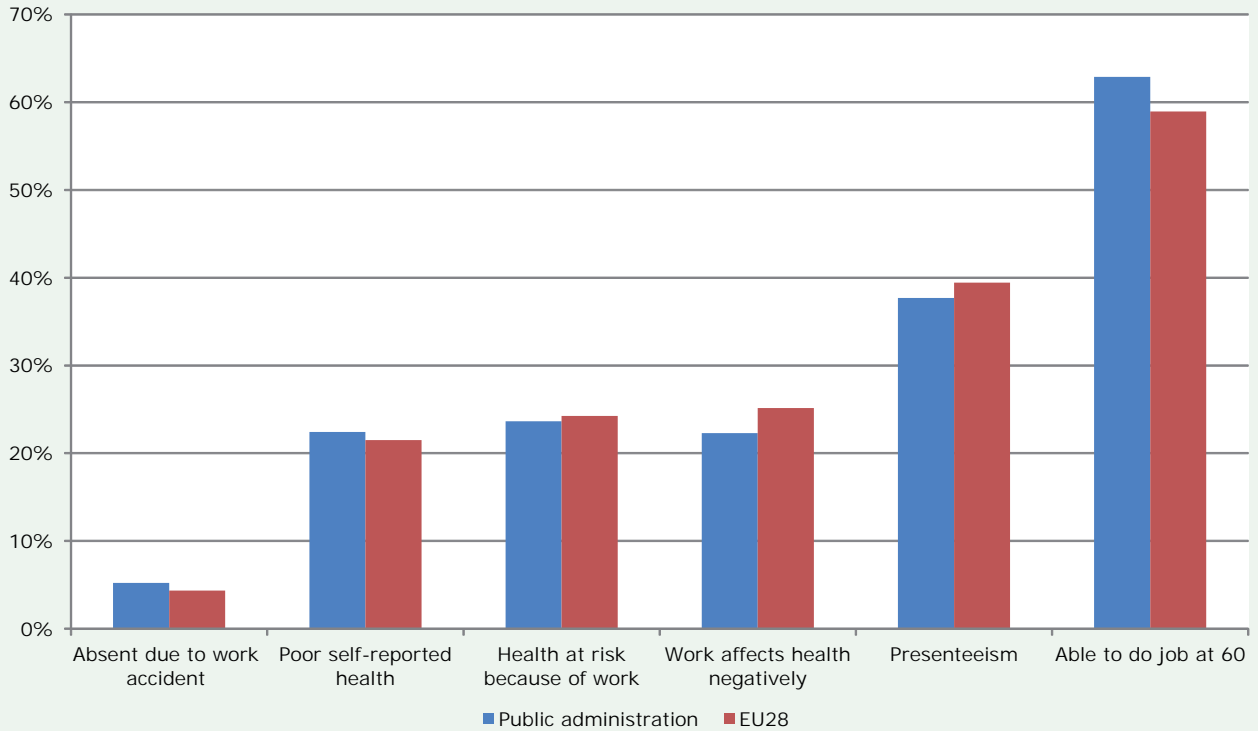
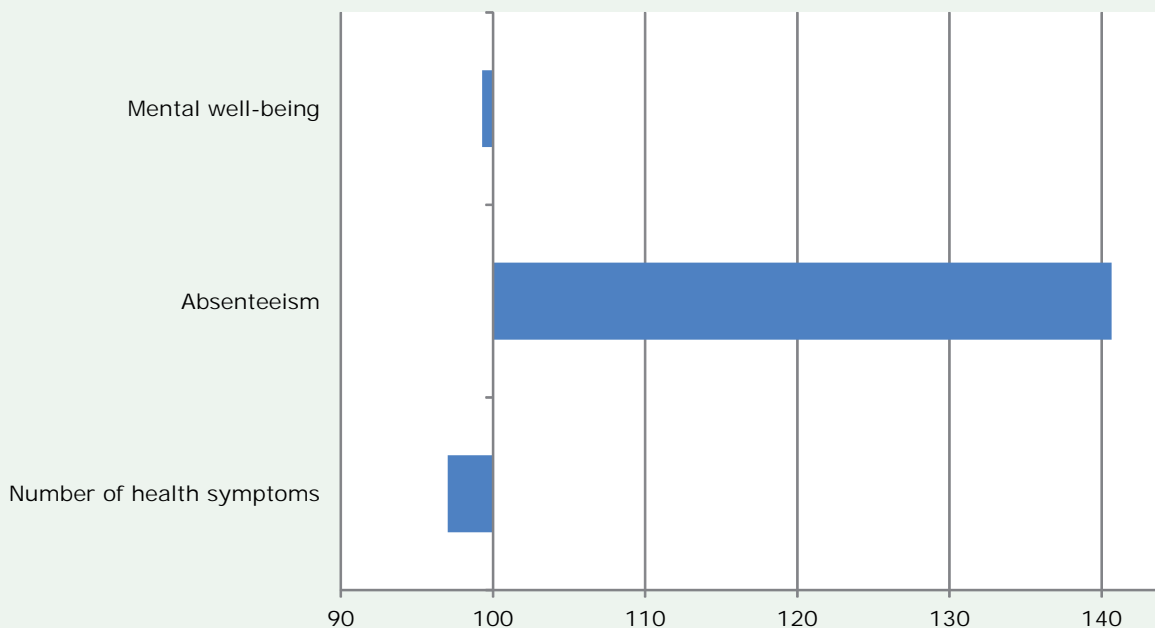


Figure 20 again shows that mental well-being scores in public administration are close to the EU28 average and that the reported number of health problems is slightly lower. However, the levels of absenteeism are much higher. The difference in the reported number of health problems disappears but the difference in the level of absenteeism remains considerable when controlling for gender, age, education, workplace size and country.

It is important to keep in mind that the impact of work on health is a very gradual process that can take a long time and cannot be fully captured in a cross-sectional survey. The results in this section are likely to underestimate the often negative health effects that physically and psychologically strenuous working conditions can have.

Figure 20: Indices of health symptoms, mental well-being and absenteeism (EU28=100)



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European Working Conditions Survey

Eurofound developed its European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) in 1990 in order to provide high-quality information on living and working conditions in Europe. Five waves of the survey have been carried out to date, enabling long-term trends to be observed and analysed.

The EWCS interviews both employees and self-employed people on key issues related to their work and employment. Fieldwork for the fifth EWCS took place from January to June 2010, with almost 44,000 workers interviewed in their homes in 34 countries – EU28, Norway, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo. The 5th EWCS was implemented by Gallup Europe, who worked within a strong quality assurance framework to ensure the highest possible standards in all data collection and editing processes.

The questionnaire covered issues such as precarious employment, leadership styles and worker participation as well as the general job context, working time, work organisation, pay, work-related health risks, cognitive and psychosocial factors, work-life balance and access to training. A number of questions were included to capture the impact of the economic downturn on working conditions.

For more information on the EWCS, see <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/ewcs/index.htm>

Sectoral analysis

The report *Working conditions and job quality: Comparing sectors in Europe* and the series of 33 sectoral information sheets aim to capture the diversity prevalent across sectors in Europe in terms of working conditions and job quality. The report pinpoints trends across sectors in areas such as working time and work-life balance, work organisation, skills and training, employee representation and the psychosocial and physical environment. It identifies sectors that score particularly well or particularly poorly in terms of job quality and sheds light on differences between sectors in terms of health and well-being.

For more information, see <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/ewcs/2010/sectorprofiles.htm>

Further information

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