



Working conditions in the acceding and candidate countries

Summary

Background

Structure of the workforce

Working time

Work organisation

Gender differences

Physical risks and health and safety

Survey methodology

This summary is available in electronic format only

Background

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions carried out its Third European Working Conditions Survey in the 15 Member States of the European Union (EU) in 2000. In 2001, the survey was extended to cover the 12 acceding and candidate countries and the following year the survey included Turkey. The survey covers a wide range of quality-related work and employment issues, including physical risk factors (arising from noise, vibrations, etc), working time (working hours, organisation of working time, etc.), work organisation (the content of tasks, pace of work, work autonomy, etc.), social relations (information and consultation, support, etc.) and a range of work-related health problems, such as stress and muscular pain. This document summarises some of the main findings in the survey that was carried out in the 12 acceding and candidate countries in 2001.

As this survey was the first of its kind to be conducted in these countries, it is not yet possible to identify specific trends in relation to working conditions. Nevertheless, it is worth comparing the findings with those from the 2000 Third European survey. However, while some interesting comparisons may be discerned when comparing the average figures for the 15 EU Member States with those for the 12 acceding and candidate countries, it should be noted that these average figures can in some cases mask wide variations between countries and sectors, etc.

Structure of the workforce

The 12 acceding and candidate countries comprise a total population of 96 million (373 million in the 15 EU Member States), with approximately 43 million persons in paid employment (161 million in the EU). Two countries alone – Poland and Romania – account for over half the total population and workforce of the candidate countries (25 million).

There are considerable structural differences to be found in comparison with the EU labour market. For example, a higher proportion of workers are engaged in agriculture: this accounts for one fifth (21%) of all jobs in the acceding and candidate countries, in contrast to only one twentieth (5%) in the EU. Conversely, the services sector is less important in the acceding and candidate countries, accounting for 47% of all jobs, compared to 66% in the EU.

This last fact has a bearing on the numbers of employees and self-employed workers in the workforce. In the acceding and candidate countries, 77% of workers are employees (compared to 83% in the EU), with 3% of these on temporary employment agency contracts (2% in the EU). Until recently, such contracts were unheard of in the former communist countries. It will be interesting to monitor the evolution of this kind of work in the future, given the recent rapid growth.

A higher proportion of workers in the acceding and candidate countries hold down a second job (10%) than in the EU (6%). They also devote more time to their second job, on average 17.8 hours a week. Finally, the average age of workers in the acceding and candidate countries is higher: over half of all workers (51%) are above the age of 40 compared to the EU (47%).

Working time

Working hours tend to be longer in the acceding and candidate countries. The average working week is 44.4 hours (42.2 hours for employees) compared to 38.2 hours in the EU (36.7 hours for employees). Some 38% of workers work 45 hours or more a week (21% in the EU). There is only a slight difference between the length of the working week for men (45.4 hours) and women (43.3 hours). While long working hours tend to be largely a male phenomenon in the EU, in the acceding and candidate countries, both men and women are equally affected.

Part-time work is less common in the acceding and candidate countries (7% compared to 17% in the EU). Atypical working hours are more widespread, with a higher level of weekend work, night work (21% of workers report working nights at least occasionally) and shiftwork (23% report working shifts at least occasionally).

In the light of these findings, it is clear that the future implementation of the EU Working Time Directive will have a major impact on working time in the acceding and candidate countries.

Work organisation

In comparison with the EU, work organisation in the acceding and candidate countries is based around traditional industrial production methods and tends to be less service oriented. Companies are less open to the outside world, external influences (such as customers) are less marked, while hierarchical levels are more evident. The survey also reveals that there are fewer interruptions at work than is the case in the EU.

Work is also less decentralised and more hierarchical. The average worker has fewer responsibilities and less autonomy in the workplace than in the EU. Workers have far less control over their work - in terms of organising and performing their tasks and arranging their time – than their EU counterparts.

Finally, work is less geared towards learning: 65% of workers say their job involves learning new things, compared to 71% in the EU. Training opportunities in the acceding and candidate countries are fewer, both in terms of the number of workers receiving training (24% compared to 31% in the EU) and the duration of courses (3.2 days per worker compared to 4.4 days in the EU).

Gender differences

Undoubtedly a reflection of the previous labour market system, there appears to be less segregation between men and women in the acceding and candidate countries, as well as less gender-based discrimination in the workplace.

Women account for a greater proportion of the workforce at 46%, compared to 42% in the EU. The highest rates are found in the Baltic States: Lithuania with 51%, Latvia and Estonia with 49% each.

There is less gender segregation than in the EU, whether horizontal (between the various professional categories) or vertical (different hierarchical levels). A higher percentage of women occupy skilled posts (37% are managers compared to 34% in the EU) and conversely a lower percentage are in less skilled posts in the sales and service sectors (54%, compared to 66% in the EU). Women are also more likely to hold down a job involving supervisory tasks or responsibilities: 17% of women report that their job involves supervisory tasks (14% in the EU), compared to 21% of men (25% in the EU).

The above scenario is reflected in a more even distribution of income. A higher proportion of women are to be found in high income brackets and a lower proportion in the low income brackets.

Current trends suggest that the acceding and candidate countries are moving in the direction of the situation prevailing in the EU, in terms of greater segregation between men and women in the workplace. Future surveys will demonstrate the truth or otherwise of this indication.

Physical risks and health and safety

Workers in the acceding and candidate countries are more subjected to the majority of physical risk factors, particularly exposure to intense noise, heat and painful positions.

Some 40% of workers feel that their job endangers their health and safety, compared to 27% in the EU. Similarly, work-related health problems are far more prevalent (although it is worth noting that these figures are based on personal statements).

The most common problems cited are:

- Overall fatigue (in connection with long working hours): 41%,
- Backache: 34%
- Stress: 29%
- Muscular pains (neck and shoulders): 24%
- Headaches: 20%
- Problems with vision: 15%
- Sleeping problems: 9%
- Hearing problems: 9%
- Respiratory difficulties: 8%

When respondents were asked if they could see themselves doing the same type of job at the age of 60 (one indicator of 'work sustainability'), only 50% said yes (the equivalent figure in the EU is 58%).

Survey methodology

The first survey on working conditions in the acceding and candidate countries covered a representative sample of the total active population (employees and the self-employed) in the 12 acceding and candidate countries: Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. The survey was based on a questionnaire selected according to the 'random walk' procedure. A total of 11,000 workers were interviewed in their own homes, comprising 1,000 workers in 10 countries and 500 in Cyprus and Malta. INRA-Europe carried out the interviews and collated the data.

The interviews took place in each country at the same time during the spring of 2001. The data was weighted according to occupation, sector, gender and age, using the same classifications from Eurostat's Labour Force Survey 2000.

The questionnaire was identical to the one used for the Third European Working Conditions Survey, carried out in the 15 EU Member States in 2000. The questionnaire was compiled on behalf of the Foundation by a working group composed of national experts and representatives of employer organisations (UNICE), trade unions (ETUC) and the European Commission.

EF/03/96/EN