

Working time patterns for sustainable work

Introduction

Working time is a recurrent topic of study because the nature of work, its content, the conditions under which it is performed and the labour market itself keep changing. These changes have an impact on working time duration and the way working time is organised. One of the manifest results is the erosion of a clear demarcation between working time and non-working time – the work and private sphere.

The European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) is among the sources that have clearly established the link between working time patterns and the health and well-being of workers. Eurofound's research on job quality shows that working time quality is one of the crucial contributing elements.

This report examines working time patterns in more detail. It provides an overview of the recent evolution of working time duration and organisation in the EU and highlights the most important trends and differences between Member States. Through an in-depth analysis of data from the sixth EWCS (2015), it also examines, from a gender and life course perspective, the links between working time patterns, work–life balance and working time preferences on the one hand and workers' health and well-being, on the other. Finally, it explores the implications of working time patterns for the long-term sustainability of work.

Policy context

New methods of production and new forms of work organisation have resulted in a much more flexible organisation of working time. At the same time, societal changes such as ageing, the growing diversity of life trajectories, varying employment paths and the trend towards a shorter working life have all created challenges for welfare states and social protection systems. It is therefore not surprising that one of the major objectives of the European Employment Strategy is to raise overall employment rates, in particular for women and older workers. However, for workers to be able to work and to continue to work, achieving a good fit between working

time and non-working time through the adaptation of duration and organisation of working time is essential.

It is against this background that, as part of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Commission launched the Initiative to Support Work–Life Balance for Working Parents and Carers. This seeks to enable parents and individuals with caring responsibilities to better balance their work and family lives, and to encourage the fair sharing of caring responsibilities between women and men. It includes a legislative proposal to modernise the EU legal framework on family-related leaves and flexible working arrangements.

Key findings

The analysis of EWCS data confirms that the gender gap in weekly working time remains important, with men in the EU28 working on average 39.2 hours and women 32.7 hours. The gender gap in paid working time is greatest in western Continental Europe, Ireland and the UK.

The vast majority of respondents to the sixth EWCS, independent of gender and employment status, stated that their working hours fit 'well' or 'very well' with their private life obligations. However, men appear to be less satisfied with their work–life balance than women. This can be attributed to the fact that men have longer working hours and therefore relatively more difficulties in adapting working time to family life or other social commitments. At the same time, it is assumed that many women have opted for occupations, sectors and working hours that make it easier to combine work with family commitments.

The duration of working time was found to have a negative impact on the extent of work–life balance, with both men and women indicating that long working hours reduced their possibility to combine work and other social commitments. Working time arrangements that favour fixed and regular working hours, good working conditions, high predictability of working time, the possibility to take time off and/or job autonomy all increase the likelihood of achieving a balanced work–life situation.

The negative impact of work on work–life balance tends to be concentrated during the early phase of parenting – when respondents have young pre-school children. Although this period coincides with a reduction in working time for employed mothers and an increase in working time for working fathers, both sexes express a preference for working shorter hours during the parenting phase.

While overall most individuals seem to be satisfied with their current working time, the majority of the 42% expressing a preference for a change in their working time say they would like to reduce their current working time. Working time preferences do not differ drastically between sexes: if anything, a slightly higher proportion of men reported a preference to reduce their working time while a slightly higher share of women would like to increase their working time.

While there are no differences between men and women regarding the necessity to work during their free time to meet work demands, women more often than men reported that their job prevented them from giving the time they wished to their family. In particular, both men and women working in education, as well as self-employed people, are more likely to report that they work during their leisure time.

In terms of the link between working time and health and well-being, the results show that having control over working time and fixed or regular working time have a positive impact on workers' well-being. Dissatisfaction with working conditions, atypical working hours, long working hours, high work intensity and working during free time were shown to be detrimental to a good work–life balance.

Sustainability of work – measured by the reported ability to work up to 60 or later – is shown to be negatively affected by a number of factors, such as low satisfaction with working conditions, exposure to physical risks, poor work–life balance and atypical working time patterns (shift, night or weekend work). Conversely, work sustainability can be positively influenced by adjustments in working time patterns available to workers which are aimed at enhancing employee-friendly flexibility or specifically designed for workers with care responsibilities.

Policy pointers

Working time policies must adopt a life course perspective. Individuals' needs and preferences in terms of working time vary throughout life. Working time policies should acknowledge this variation over the life course and provide more support and/or flexibility during those periods where tensions of work–life balance are highest.

Policies should continue to promote a more equal distribution of paid and unpaid work between men and women. The gender gap in weekly working hours is mirrored by differences in time spent on unpaid work and care responsibilities. A stronger involvement of men, and fathers in particular, in the domestic sphere could be encouraged through better incentives for men to take family-related leave or to be compensated for reduced working hours during the parenting phase of life.

Policies should be transformative. Policy initiatives such as the recent one by the European Commission, which contain proposals to modernise the legal framework on family-related leaves and flexible working time arrangements, are in line with the needs expressed by men (particularly the preference to work less hours during the parenting phase of life). They therefore have great potential to be well received and are likely to be transformative by promoting a more equal distribution of paid and unpaid work between men and women.

Universal and individual rights should be complemented by collective agreements at sectoral, branch or company level. Regulation of maximum weekly working hours, rest periods, leave, family-related leave and protection during atypical work should take into account the specificities of the sector or branch of activity, while supporting the adaptation of working time to individuals' changing needs and preferences across the various life stages.

Working time policies must address factors having a negative impact on the sustainability of work. Good health, satisfaction with working conditions and flexible work–life balance arrangements are strong predictors for willingness and ability to stay in employment longer. Policies should therefore encourage working time patterns that prevent negative impacts on workers' health and well-being, for example, by deterring long working hours for extensive periods of time. They should promote greater job and working time autonomy, and favour better work–life balance.

Good practice examples need to be identified and promoted. Differences between the country clusters examined in this report point to the fact that policymakers should look for guidance in those clusters performing better in terms of achieving a good work–life balance and greater sustainability of work.

Further information

The report *Working time patterns for sustainable work* is available at <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2017/working-time-patterns-for-sustainable-work>

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