

# THE WORKING CONDITIONS OF THE SELF-EMPLOYED IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

This summary is based on an analysis of the findings of the Second European Survey on Working Conditions conducted in 1996 by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (see page 7).

This analysis was based on a sub-population of 2688 self-employed workers.

- Self-employment accounts for 18% of total employment in the European Union. The self-employed population is predominantly male (66% men, 34% women) and has a higher average age than the population in paid employment.
- Two-thirds of the self-employed are concentrated in the service sector (34%) and in the sectors of commerce, hotels and restaurants (30%). The **service sector is becoming even more predominant** (to the detriment of the primary and secondary sectors) since it accounts, in the case of self-employed jobs held for less than one year, for over 75% of jobs (44% in services and 32% in commerce and hotel and restaurant work).
- The self-employed workers most exposed to **physical risks** during their work are primary sector workers followed by craft (and in particular construction) workers.
- Over half of all self-employed workers face substantial pressures due to **the pace and speed of work**. The pressures experienced by primary-sector and hotel and restaurant workers are due to the speed at which work has to be performed (high-speed work); they are also most exposed to very long working hours and shift work. Craft workers and self-employed workers in the service sector are exposed to pressures arising from the organisation of production (very tight deadlines to be met).
- Physical **health problems** affect self-employed workers in the primary and secondary sectors in particular. Self-employed workers in the service sector are more exposed, however, to health problems of a psychological kind. Hotel and restaurant workers are more exposed to stress than other workers. In the primary sector, there is substantial exposure to both physical and psychological health problems.
- Self-employed workers in the secondary and service sectors have the most **job satisfaction**: 84% of craft workers and 88% of service sector workers consider that they are learning new things from their work in comparison with 71% of traders, 67% of agricultural workers and only 54% of hotel and restaurant workers.
- A new **typology of self-employed workers** can be constructed from the quality of working conditions and interest in the work performed. Self-employed workers working in the service sector are at the top of this evaluation scale and hotel and restaurant workers and in particular self-employed workers in the primary sector are at the bottom.



Less than one worker out of five is now self-employed in Europe (18%). Overall, the proportion for which self-employment accounts is on the decline, since the figure is only 10% for jobs held for less than one year. Self-employment

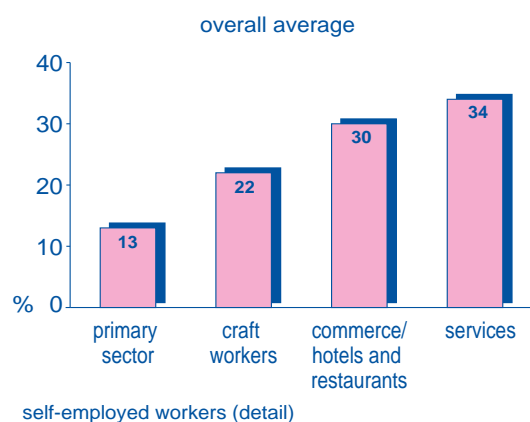


Figure 1

is on the increase in the service sector (+2% in hotels and restaurants; +8% in the other services) to the detriment of the primary and secondary sectors. (Figures 1 and 2)

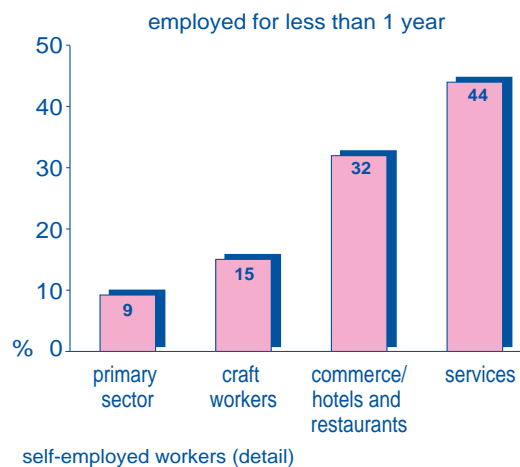


Figure 2

### ■ Distribution by country

Self-employment is well above the European average in three countries of southern Europe: 46% of workers are self-employed in Greece, 33% in Italy and 31% in Portugal. The proportion of self-employment is lowest in Sweden (8%), Denmark (8%) and the Netherlands (10%).

The overall distribution of self-employed workers differs in the EU Member States: the largest proportion of self-employment is in the primary sector in Greece, Finland and Ireland and in the service sector in Sweden, the United Kingdom and Belgium; commerce accounts for the lion's share in Spain; the proportion of craft workers is

higher than the average in Germany and the United Kingdom. (Figure 3)

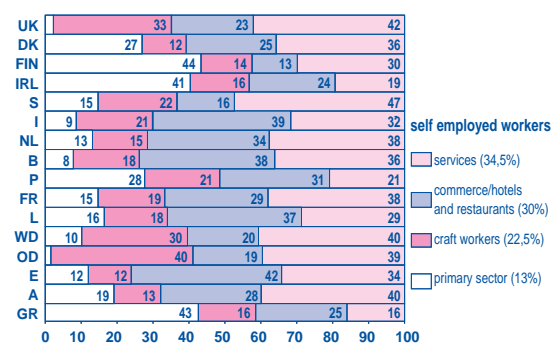


Figure 3

### ■ Characteristics of self-employed workers

Women account for only one-third of self-employed workers. The most predominant male group is the secondary sector which includes craft workers in construction trades and manufacturing industry.

Female self-employed workers are increasing in number since they account for 39% of self-employed workers who have been in their jobs for less than one year (this increase is taking place in all the sectors apart from the secondary sector). It is logical, therefore, that the proportion of women increases as age decreases (women accounting for

42% of the under-25s and only 29% of self-employed workers aged 55 or over).

The under-35s account for only 30% of all self-employed workers. The under-25s (5% of the total) work largely in the sectors of commerce and hotels and restaurants (10%). Older self-employed workers (55 or more) are very clearly over-represented in the agricultural group (27% in comparison with an average of 17%). (Table 1)

While the overall proportions are similar in terms of length of education, there are major differences between the different sectors. Workers in the service sector have attended education for the longest periods; workers in the primary sector are at the other end of the scale.



%	Primary sector	Craft workers	Commerce/ Hotels & Restaurants	Services	EU
<i>AGE</i>					
15-24	1	3	10	4	<b>5</b>
25-34	25	25	24	26	<b>25</b>
35-44	20	30	24	36	<b>29</b>
45-54	27	26	25	20	<b>24</b>
55+	27	16	17	14	<b>17</b>
<i>AGE AT THE END OF EDUCATION</i>					
Under 16	53	31	36	16	<b>31</b>
16 to 19	36	40	43	37	<b>39</b>
20 +	11	29	21	47	<b>30</b>

**Table 1**

**■ Exposure to physical risks**

In general, agricultural and other self-employed workers in the primary sector are most exposed to physical discomforts arising from the performance of their work (repetition, handling of hazardous products, etc.) or the working environment (very high or very low temperatures, noise, etc.).

Craft and other self-employed workers in the secondary sector are also more exposed than average to factors of physical discomfort, particularly workers in the construction sector (80% of whom suffer awkward postures). Self-employed workers in the service sector are least exposed, while hotel and restaurant workers are more exposed to these factors of physical discomfort. (Table 2)

<i>(factor of discomfort experienced for at least one-quarter of time (%))</i>	Primary sector	Craft workers	Commerce/ Hotels & Restaurants	Services	EU
painful or tiring positions	82	59	51.5	40	<b>53</b>
handling heavy loads	73	46	38	24.5	<b>40</b>
low temperatures (indoors or outdoors)	61	35.5	19	8	<b>24.5</b>
breathing fumes or hazardous substances	42	32.5	19.5	15	<b>24</b>
very loud noise	43	34	17	14	<b>23</b>
temperatures that make you perspire even when you are not working	52.2	16	18	10.5	<b>19.5</b>
handling hazardous substances or materials	33.5	19	9	8	<b>14</b>

**Table 2**

**■ Speed and pace of work**

The majority of self-employed workers have high work paces: in 52% of cases because of the need to meet very tight deadlines and in 52.5% of cases because work has to be performed at high speed. These two types of pressures reflect different working situations and affect self-employed workers in different ways depending on the sector in which they are employed. High speed work, connected more with task

organisation, is experienced largely by agricultural workers and hotel and restaurant workers. Very tight deadlines which are linked more with deadlines for delivering work and the planned organisation of work are more the lot of self-employed workers in the secondary and service sectors. (Table 3)

Pressures experienced because of the need to meet very tight deadlines are linked to the status of self-employed workers. Employers<sup>1</sup> are more

exposed to this type of pressure than those working alone, especially when they employ a large number of people.

Employers account for 33% of agricultural workers, 40% of craft workers, 39% of traders and 37% of self-employed workers in the service sector. In the light of these fairly similar percentages, it may be that the sectoral differences noted above are predominantly due to the type of sector. Within each sector, however, self-employed workers who manage people are more likely to be exposed to very tight deadlines. (Figure 4)

Considering that you do not have enough time to finish your work is synonymous with

**status and work under pressure**



**Figure 4**

experiencing time pressures. This feeling of lack of time is most prevalent among agricultural workers and is particularly frustrating as they are also most exposed to work at high speed.

%	Primary sector	Craft workers	Restaurants - Hotels	Commerce	Services	EU
very tight and very short deadlines (for at least one-quarter of time)	46	61	34	38	60	52
high speed work (for at least one-quarter of time)	60	55	61	43	52	52.5
not enough time to complete work	21	16.5	9	15	15.5	16

**Table 3**

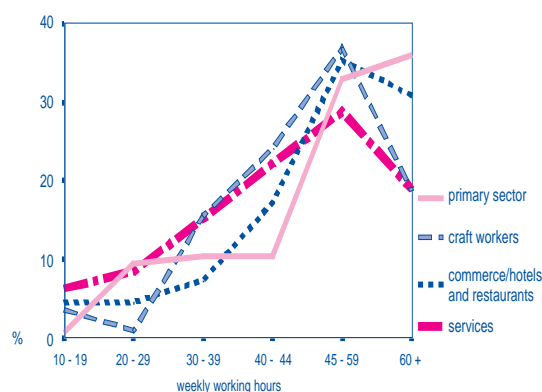
## ■ Working hours

Self-employed workers work an average of 47 hours per week.

Agricultural and other primary-sector workers working over 60 hours per week account for the majority of this group. Hotel and restaurant workers also tend to work very long hours.

The curve that is most pronounced around the average (the most clear-cut peak) is that of self-employed workers in the secondary sector. This group works an average of 46 hours per week.

In the service sector, although there is a peak around the average, it is less pronounced because of the spread of hours in this group which also has the highest figures for very short working hours (less than 30 hours per week). (Figure 5)



**Figure 5**

\* Night work, weekend work

28% of self-employed workers work at least one night per month. Workers in the hotel and

%	Primary sector	Craft workers	Commerce	Hotels and restaurants	Services	EU
night work at least once per month	36	22	16.5	62	31.5	28
Sunday work at least once per month	79.5	39.5	39	74.5	44	48
Saturday work at least once per month	83	92	89	96.5	75.5	83

**Table 4**

<sup>1</sup> It is assumed that self-employed workers who say they manage at least one person (Q9 of the survey questionnaire) necessarily employ them. This estimate is undoubtedly not exhaustive. It does, however, highlight the link between level of hierarchical responsibility and work under the pressure of time.



restaurant sector are very atypical in this case, since almost two out of three have to work at night. Together with agricultural workers, they are also the most affected by Sunday work. (Table 4)

Working on Saturday is not at all atypical for the self-employed population, an average of 83% of whom work at least one Saturday per month (this being the case for almost all hotel and restaurant workers).

**Health**

The longer the working hours, the more substantial the health problems (or the more they are consciously expressed). This is borne out by self-employed workers in the primary sector, 73.5% of whom consider that their work is affecting their health (in comparison with an average of 60.5%) and the largest percentages of whom in practice suffer from problems connected with physical health: in particular back pain (60.5% in comparison with an average of 33%) and muscular pain (39% in comparison with 20%). (Table 5)

In general, there is a major qualitative difference between manual workers who are more exposed to physical health problems and non-manual workers who tend to be more exposed to psychological health problems (stress, headaches, general fatigue).

While self-employed workers in the secondary sector are less affected by psychological problems than other workers, workers in the primary sector *combine* both types of health problem.

Hotel and restaurant workers suffer the highest levels of stress (48%) followed by self-employed workers in the services and agricultural workers.

Traders are overall least exposed to health problems, whether physical or psychological.

When the health problems brought about by poor working conditions become chronic (which is the case for one-third of agricultural workers), this may represent a genuine “threat to health”. Over half (52%) of primary-sector self-employed workers, who suffer from all types of health problem and chronic problems in the largest numbers, consider that their work poses a threat to their health or safety.

%	Primary sector	Craft workers	Hotels & Restaurants	Commerce	Services	EU
“work is affecting my health”	73.5	62	63	56	58	<b>60.5</b>
health or safety threatened by work	52	34	27.5	26	22	<b>30</b>
back pain	60.5	37	31	26	25	<b>33</b>
general fatigue	35	18.5	34	26	18	<b>23</b>
muscular pain in arms and legs	39	23	22	14.5	14	<b>20</b>
headaches	18.5	10	15	9	12.5	<b>12</b>
stress	34.5	31	48	30.5	35	<b>33</b>
chronic or permanent health problems	34	16	13	21	13	<b>17</b>

**Table 5**

**Work Profile**

By far the largest numbers of workers performing repetitive work are in agriculture, hotels and restaurants. Logically, they also account for the largest numbers who feel that their work is monotonous.

The biggest group who consider that their work involves complex tasks are craft workers in the secondary sector. Together with self-employed workers in the services, they are also the largest

percentage who consider that they are learning new things from their work.

Two-thirds of agricultural workers, who tend to think that their work is monotonous, also tend to think that their work is enriching, this is the case for only 54% of hotel and restaurant workers. Traders have a rather average level of interest in their work, not many consider their work monotonous or complex, but 71% of them find it enriching (in comparison with an average of 78.5%). (Table 6)

(factor of discomfort experienced) %	Primary sector	Craft workers	Restaurants - Hotels	Commerce	Services	EU
repetitive hand/arm movements (for at least one-quarter of time)	81	64	73	54	49	<b>59</b>
Short repetitive tasks (for at least one-quarter of time)	50.5	31.5	52	42	29	<b>37</b>
Monotonous tasks	52	36	49	36	37	<b>40</b>
Complex tasks	51	75.5	37	46	64	<b>59.5</b>
Learning new things	66.5	84	54	71	88	<b>78.5</b>

**Table 6**

## ■ A suggested typology

Looking at these indicators of quality of working conditions, on the one hand, and of job enrichment and interest, on the other hand, makes it possible to go beyond the initial lack of comparability of the population of self-employed workers since it is possible to pinpoint:

- people who combine difficult (or even dangerous) working conditions with little satisfaction in their work: self-employed workers in the primary sector and, to a lesser extent, workers in the hotel and restaurant sector;
- people whose working conditions are hard, but whose work provides them with personal satisfaction: craft workers and self-employed workers in the secondary sector;
- people whose working conditions are not, in overall terms, particularly difficult, but who have only an average interest in the content of their work: self-employed workers in commerce and small domestic repairs;
- the group of self-employed workers that seems to be in the best position as regards the quality of their life at work (combining working conditions that are better than average with job enrichment) are service sector workers.

## Categories used

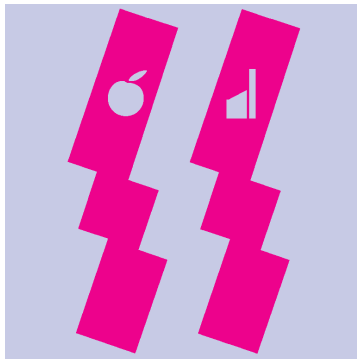
The typology of self-employed workers (option 1 of question 7 (“Are you principally 1) a self-employed worker; 2) to 5) different categories of employee) was constructed from the economic sector (NACE code) using the conventional primary/secondary/service sector distinction. As a result of the size of the service sector, on the one hand, and its lack of comparability, on the other hand, we further differentiated trades connected with commerce and hotels and restaurants from all other services.

The sector “public administration” (obviously concerning civil servants) was excluded from the analysis, as a result of the inconsistencies that it raised for this sub-population (17 cases, i.e. 0.7% of the sub-population).

NACE code details:

Groups of self-employed workers	NACE code sections	Overall %
Primary sector	A- agriculture, hunting and forestry	} 13.3%
	B- fisheries	
Craft workers	C- mining and quarrying	} 12.9%
	D- manufacturing	
	E- electricity, gas and water supply	
	F- construction	
Traders/ hotels and catering	G- wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles and personal and household goods	24.1%
	H- hotels and restaurants	5.4%
Services	I- transportation and communication	4.1%
	J- financial intermediation	3.7%
	K- real estate, renting and business activities	7.1%
	M to Q- other services (education, health, etc.)	19.4%

**Table 7**



## THE SECOND EUROPEAN SURVEY ON WORKING CONDITIONS

If European social integration is to be pursued and Community initiatives developed in the area of working conditions, more comprehensive and comparable data are needed on working conditions in the EU. The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions has conducted two surveys of working conditions in Europe. These surveys are a cornerstone of the Foundation's health-at-work programme.

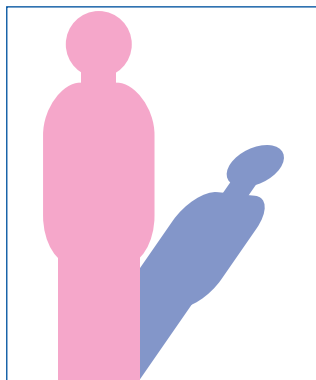
The First European Survey on Working Conditions was conducted in 1991 and covered the 12 Member States of the EU at that time. This was a prototype survey including some twenty questions.

The Second European Survey on Working Conditions was conducted in January 1996 among 15 800 workers throughout the EU. 1000 workers in each Member State (15 in 1996) were questioned simultaneously about their working conditions. The sample was representative of the working population (employees and the self-employed). This was a questionnaire survey conducted by face-to-face interviews outside the workplace. The questionnaire covered all aspects of working conditions: physical environment and design of work stations, working hours, work organisation and social relationships in the workplace.

The survey findings show that stress and musculo-skeletal disorders are the main health risks at work. The survey also highlights the need for a holistic and multi-disciplinary approach to the prevention of occupational risks in Europe. It also highlights the need for integrated management of prevention in enterprises.

This summary has been written for the Foundation by Veronique Letourneux





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