



Trends in job quality in Europe: a report based on the fifth European Working Conditions Survey

Executive summary

Introduction

This study measures job quality in the 27 countries of the European Union, as well as the seven additional countries in Europe that participated in the European Working Conditions Survey. Four indices were constructed for the study; earnings, prospects, intrinsic job quality and working time quality. The four indices cannot be reduced into a single index of job quality because associations between them are weak, and neither increase over time nor move in similar directions. They are, however, theoretically and conceptually coherent.

The intention was to find an objective means of assessing the principle established in a number of EU directives that work should adapt to the workers. The indices constructed for this study do not rely on subjective measurement such as preferences and attitudes, but are built on the self-reported features of jobs that are associated with workers' well being.

Policy Context

Following the introduction of the European Employment Strategy in 1997 through the Treaty of Amsterdam, and the subsequent launch of the Lisbon Growth and Jobs strategy in 2000, the idea of 'more and better jobs' came to the fore among European Union policy objectives. This development was paralleled by similar concerns from transnational bodies such as the OECD, and from individual national governments who wished to complement their targets for the numbers of people in employment with objectives for the quality of work and employment.

Subsequent years saw also the development at the European level of the concept of 'flexicurity', a strategy to foster the introduction of policies to improve both flexibility and security. While flexicurity policies focused more on the labour market rather than individual jobs, flexicurity was seen as consistent with the aim of raising the quality of work and employment.

The issues with which policy-makers were concerned included productivity, the welfare of working people, raising job quality through initiatives such the use of available skills and acquisition of new skills, rising stress levels associated with 'job strain' and other environmental and psychosocial risks, and the growing prevalence of 'precarious' work.

Job insecurity became a particularly salient issue with the onset of the global economic crisis in the latter half of 2008, especially among young people. Policies to encourage sustainable employment have still been widely seen as important in the drive to improve job quality. Europe 2020, which is a strategy for sustainable growth and jobs, includes as one of its core guidelines 'developing a skilled workforce responding to labour market needs, promoting job quality and lifelong learning'. Increased understanding of the social costs of poor job quality has focused attention on physical and social environments at work. Prolonged life expectancy and the ageing of the population suggest jobs will have to be of good quality if more workers are to be persuaded to work longer.

There are, therefore, many reasons for wishing to clarify the concept and measurement of the quality of paid work for the purposes of policy analyses, and this study seeks to amplify the work already done towards this end in the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) series.

Key Findings

Using the four indices specifically constructed for this study, it was concluded that 14% of jobs in Europe are high paid good jobs; 37% well balanced good jobs; 29% are poorly balanced jobs and 20% are poor quality jobs.

Workers in poor quality jobs had, on average, the lowest levels of health and well-being, showing more health problems, lower subjective well-being, and found less meaning in their work. These poor quality jobs, where workers could be said to be most at risk, were especially concentrated in establishments with fewer than five employees, and in the private sector. They were also more prevalent in countries with lower levels of GDP per capita, though the association with national income is far from perfect.

Overall levels of average job quality in the 15 Member States that have participated in every wave of the EWCS since 1995 show relative stability in three of the indices – skills and discretion, good physical environment and work intensity – although the latter has increased over time slightly. However, this apparent stability hides important differences by country.

In contrast, there was a rise of more than 5 points over time in the working time quality index. This rise reflects largely reductions in working time and less work during non-standard hours.

On average men have higher monthly earnings than women. In terms of the working time quality index, women do better; indeed, they work on average shorter hours, and less frequently do shift work during non-standard hours. Women also enjoy a slightly higher level of intrinsic job quality, which comes from working on average in somewhat better physical environments. Finally, the measurement of the prospects index is almost the same for men and women.

Levels of the four job quality indices vary across industries in Europe. Those working in the information and communication sectors or in finance and insurance are highest ranked on most indices.

The self-employed who have employees have the highest level of earnings. In contrast, the self-employed without employees have lower earnings, yet a higher working time quality index. This latter advantage is due to flexibility in the management of their work, not to their having fewer work hours or less shift work.

Those employed on indefinite contracts have relatively high values on most of the indicators, while those employees with fixed-term or temporary contracts have lower job quality on all dimensions.

Policy pointers

The lack of aggregate change in the physical environment suggests that efforts be redoubled to bring about improvements. Policy could usefully be focused on the increasing prevalence of posture-related risks in the workplace.

Similarly, rising levels of work intensity in the majority of countries contribute to a rising risk of high stress levels and their consequent ill effects on health and well-being. Policies to reduce the presence of stressors are indicated, as well as programmes to ameliorate the effects of high levels of stress.

Some positive signs are found in the increases in the growth of the skills and discretion index in the majority of countries. This index goes to the heart of the intrinsic character of work, and is at the same time associated on average with higher levels of productivity. In some countries where there is, however, evidence of a decline in this index, policy attention needs to be directed at the source of this fall.

The largest aggregate change, however, took place for the working time quality index, and here the picture is positive, showing rises both overall and in most countries. However, working time flexibility still needs to be monitored.

Policy to ameliorate the detrimental effects of work on health and well-being needs to be conducted on a fairly broad front.

Further information

The full report on *Trends in job quality in Europe* is available at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef1228.htm>

For further information contact Agnès Parent-Thirion, Research Manager, apt@eurofound.europa.eu