



# Working conditions in the European Union: Work organisation

## Executive summary

### Introduction

The fourth *European Working Conditions Survey* (EWCS) conducted in 2005 by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) addresses topics that figure high on the European Union's employment policy agenda. The overall aim of the EWCS is to provide an overview of the state of working conditions throughout Europe, and an indication of the extent and type of changes affecting the workforce and the quality of work. Following the 2005 survey, Eurofound carried out further in-depth analyses of its findings on key themes relating to working conditions in the EU. The diversity in forms of work organisation across Europe was one of the themes explored and is the subject of this report.

To this end, the results of the EWCS have been analysed to map differences in the main forms of work organisation across EU countries, examining structural, demographic and cross-country characteristics that help define the different forms and exploring the relationship between work organisation and the various dimensions of quality of work and employment. The study includes an analysis of the links between work organisation and human resource management (HRM) practices, along with an examination of work organisation in small establishments and in 'non-market' sectors – such as public administration and social security, education, health and social work institutions. Based on its findings on work organisation in the EU, the study concludes by proposing some relevant policy indicators of forms of work organisation that could be useful in the context of the European Employment Strategy (EES).

### Policy context

The considerable diversity in forms of work organisation in the EU has a huge influence on the quality of European policy debate and initiatives. The 2005 European Council decision on guidelines for the employment policies of EU Member States confirmed the leading role of the EES in implementing the employment and labour market objectives of the Lisbon Strategy, including improving quality and productivity at work and strengthening social

cohesion and inclusion. These objectives can be furthered by designing appropriate policies to foster forms of work organisation that promote improved performance with due regard for health and safety, while at the same time cultivating sustainable social equality in terms of access to jobs, careers and influence in the workplace.

### Key findings

Based on the analyses and set of variables used in the research, four main types of work organisation were identified: the 'discretionary learning', 'lean production', 'Taylorist', and 'traditional' or 'simple structure' forms of work organisation.

The discretionary-learning form, which applies to 38% of the employees surveyed, is characterised by high levels of autonomy at work, learning and problem solving, task complexity, self-assessment of quality of work and, to a lesser extent, autonomous teamwork. Lean production (26% of the employees) is mainly defined by a higher level of teamwork and job rotation, self-assessment of quality of work and quality norms, and the various factors constraining work pace. Conversely, Taylorist forms of work organisation (20% of the employees) correspond to low autonomy at work, particularly in methods of work, few learning dynamics, little complexity and an overrepresentation of the variables measuring constraints on the pace of work, repetitiveness and monotony of tasks, and quality norms. In traditional or simple-structure forms (16% of the employees), all of the variables of work organisation are underrepresented and methods are largely informal and non-codified.

The forms of work organisation adopted in the 27 EU Member States (EU27) depend on sector of economic activity or occupational category. For instance, discretionary-learning forms of work organisation are highly developed in the services sectors, while lean-production and Taylorist forms are most frequent in the manufacturing industries. In terms of occupational category, 'traditional' or 'simple structure' forms of work organisation are particularly characteristic

among service and sales workers as well as unskilled workers, while discretionary-learning forms are more prevalent among senior managers, professionals and technicians. The demographic characteristics of employees also play a role: for example, discretionary-learning forms are more frequent among older employees, while Taylorist forms mainly apply to younger employees. At the same time, lean-production forms are characterised by an overrepresentation of men, while traditional or simple-structure forms are characterised by a greater presence of women.

From a cross-country perspective, wide differences also emerge in terms of the importance of the four forms of work organisation across the EU27. Discretionary-learning forms of work organisation are most developed in Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands, while lean-production forms are more apparent in Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK), along with many of the eastern European countries and Finland, Luxembourg, Malta and Portugal. Taylorist forms of work organisation are most diffused in the southern European countries and in many eastern countries, while traditional or simple-structure forms are most apparent in southern and certain eastern European countries.

HRM policies represent a further characteristic in distinguishing the different forms of work organisation adopted in EU countries. In particular, policies adopted in the areas of training, type of employment contract, payment system and work-related consultation and discussion play a critical role. For example, the discretionary learning and lean-production forms tend to be characterised by higher levels of further training provided by the employer, greater use of variable or incentive pay forms, more secure tenures associated with greater use of indefinite contracts, and higher involvement of employees in work-related discussion and consultation.

Turning to the impact of work organisation, important relationships emerge between each form of work organisation and certain dimensions of quality of work and employment: physical risk factors, working time, work-related health and safety risks, intensity of work, work-life balance, intrinsic rewards, psychological working conditions related to HRM or social integration at work, and satisfaction with working conditions.

Exposure to physical risk factors, for example, is much less frequent in the discretionary-learning and traditional or simple-structure forms than in the lean production and Taylorist forms of work organisation. Long weekly or daily working hours are more apparent in the lean production and discretionary-learning forms and lowest in the Taylorist and traditional or simple-structure forms. Perceived job

insecurity and being underpaid for work is highest among employees engaged in Taylorist forms of work organisation and lowest among those whose work adheres to discretionary-learning forms. At the same time, the percentage of employees who are satisfied or very satisfied with the working conditions in their main paid job is highest in the discretionary-learning cluster and lowest in the Taylorist cluster.

## Policy recommendations

- The adoption of discretionary-learning forms of work organisation, compared with lean production and Taylorist forms, can result in better working conditions in the sense of lower work intensity, less exposure to physical risks, fewer non-standard working hours, better work-life balance and lower levels of work-related health problems.
- Discretionary-learning forms of work organisation are also associated with higher perceived intrinsic rewards from work, better psychological working conditions related to HRM policies and social integration at work, along with higher overall levels of employee satisfaction with working conditions.
- Eurofound proposes four indicators that could be used to monitor Member States' progress in developing innovative forms of work organisation:
  - the percentage of employees learning new things in the job;
  - the percentage of employees involved in problem solving in the job;
  - a composite measure of autonomy at work based on the average of the percentages of employees exercising control over their work method, pace or order of tasks;
  - the number of employees working in autonomous teams, which can decide on the division of tasks, as a percentage of the number of employees working in all teams.
- The EWCS should be further exploited to contribute to the development of a series of indicators for the various dimensions of quality in work: physical risks, work-related health and safety risks, working time, work intensity, work-life balance, psychological working conditions and satisfaction with working conditions. These could be used to inform policy and complement the indicators of innovative forms of work organisation.

### Further information

The report *Working conditions in the European Union: Work organisation* is available online at:  
<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef0862.htm>

The report on the fourth *European Working Conditions Survey* and secondary analyses of survey data are available on the European Working Conditions Observatory website: <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ewco/surveys/>

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