

# USEFUL BUT UNUSED: GROUP WORK IN EUROPE

Scientific and public debate have focused on group work as the central component of direct participation. Group work is a departure from traditional task fragmentation and division of labour. It is defined in the EPOC survey as the process whereby management give formal groups the right to make decisions on how their work is performed on a group basis without reference to management.

## Key Findings

- About 4% of all organizations take group work seriously.
- There are significant economic benefits from introducing group work. The more intensively group work is practised, the greater the economic benefits.
- The motives for introducing group work are predominantly economic. Quality of working life is also mentioned frequently as a motive, but generally together with productivity/economic motives.
- Groups' decision-making rights are generally limited, with a clear hierarchy in the topics about which groups may take decisions.
- In the majority of cases, regardless of the intensity of the group work, the team leader is appointed by management. Joint decision-making on this issue occurs in only a quarter of all cases. Management also decide the composition of the team in almost 40% of workplaces and in only 15% of cases can the group members decide who are to become their colleagues.
- Training for group work occurs in about 25% of organizations and managers are trained slightly more than group members. There is a positive correlation between the intensity of group work and the intensity and duration of training.
- Payment systems change little with the introduction of group work.
- Contrary to expectations, manufacturing lags behind the non-profit sector in the intensive application of groups. However, in the less intensive forms of group work manufacturing is ahead of the other business sectors.
- There are marked cross-national differences in the extent to which group work is used in the Member States. Swedish and Dutch organizations are the most frequent users, whereas the use of group work lags behind in Spain, Portugal and Italy.
- A third of organizations report a reduction in employees following the introduction of group work. However, the reduction in managers is more significant as 44% of organizations with intensive group work have fewer managers following its introduction compared with a 19% reduction for organizations without any form of direct participation.



## Introduction

The report presents an analysis of the results of the EPOC survey carried out in 1996, relating to the use of group work. The EPOC survey was designed to be representative of organizations in 10 European Union Member States. 5,786 questionnaires (18%) were returned and analysed. A quarter of the responses said they had group work.

### The use of group work

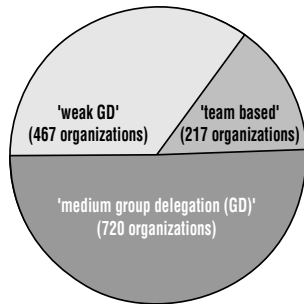
Two criteria were used to divided these organizations into three sub-categories, namely:

1. The percentage of employees working in groups.
2. The extent to which the groups are entitled to take decisions on their own (the number of 'decision rights').

The organizations using group work were then categorized, as follows:

1. Team-based (217 organizations).
2. Medium group delegation (GD) (720 organizations).
3. Weak GD (467 organizations).

Figure 1. Organizations using group work

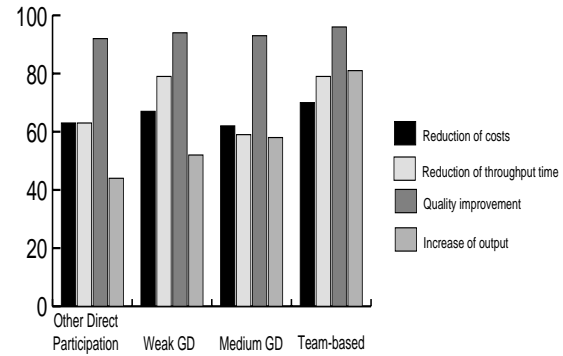


Group work is a common form of work organization in team-based organizations only. However, team-based organisations make about 4% of all responding workplaces, and are thus a very small minority.

### Effects and motives

Although group work is little used, its reported economic effects are significant. These are stronger the more intensively group work is applied (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Reported economic effects



Other findings showed that attendance improved and there was a decrease in sickness levels in up to 50% of organizations with team-based group work.

A reported effect in enterprises applying group work was a fall in employment. However, organizations which have group work perform better, as 22% of these reduced employment, when compared with workplaces with other forms of direct participation but without group work (27% reduced employment), or workplaces without any form of direct participation (35% reduced employment).

Motives for delegating decisions to work groups are economic in almost 90% of responding enterprises. Organizations introduce it because they believe their economic performance will benefit. Quality of working life is also frequently mentioned as a motive (64%), but this is generally linked with productivity motives (58%). In team-based organizations quality of working life is mentioned as a motive almost as much as productivity (81% to 83%). Examples of group work in other organizations also had some influence (18%), whereas regulation or employee demands are hardly ever reported as motives.

### Decision-making rights

Groups' decision-making rights are limited, with a clear hierarchy in the topics about which groups may take decisions:

1. allocation of work, scheduling of work, and improving work processes;
2. quality of work, time keeping, and coordination;
3. attendance and absence control, and job rotation.

Table 1. Distribution of decision-making rights (%)

	Allocation of work	Scheduling of work	Quality of work	Time keeping	Attendance and absence control	Job rotation	Coordinating work with other groups	Improving work processes
Weak GD	27	34	23	31	14	15	27	38
Medium GD	52	58	44	45	32	29	41	57
Team-based	77	76	60	56	51	38	57	75
Total	47	53	40	42	29	26	39	53

In the majority of cases, the appointment of team leaders is a managerial prerogative. Joint decision-making occurs in only about one fourth of all cases, while management decide

the composition of the team in almost 40% of workplaces and in only 15% do the group members alone decide who may become members of the work group.

Table 2. *Employee training and group delegation (GD) (%)*

	Data collection and analysis	Presentation skills	Interpersonal skills	Group dynamics
Weak GD	23	20	15	18
Medium GD	26	29	17	22
Team-based	27	30	30	33

### Training

One might assume that this approach to work organization goes along with considerable training efforts; working together in groups requires cooperative and communicative skills. Yet the amount of training for employees working in groups is modest, as shown in Table 2.

Even in the workplaces with team-based arrangements, the score stays below one third of organizations. Team-based cases do score significantly higher than the two weaker forms of GD. In addition, in less than one fifth of the cases the total amount of training takes more than a week. There is a significant difference between the weaker GD and team-based cases: in about two thirds of the latter, training lasts between one and five days whereas in about half of the weaker GD cases, training takes only one day.

The picture for managers differs somewhat from that for employees. Managers get about the same amount of training for the weaker forms of GD but about six percentage points more in workplaces with team-based groups.

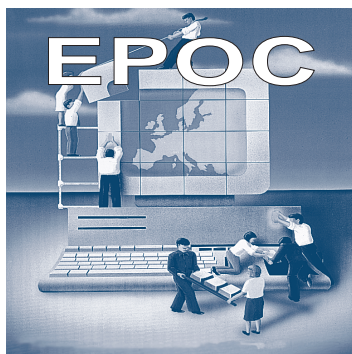
### Country comparisons

Having compared several national indicators from the findings of the survey, Sweden and the Netherlands were found to have the highest levels of group delegation, while France, Ireland and the United Kingdom are above the European average, with Denmark and Germany just below the average. The three countries in the south – Italy, Portugal and Spain – were found, on the basis of these comparisons, to have the least incidence of group working.

## The EPOC Survey – Group Work Analysis Methodology

The methodology key points can be summarized as follows:

- The basis of the analysis of group delegation (or ‘group work’) is a secondary analysis of the EPOC survey.
- Ten countries were involved in the EPOC survey: Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.
- Respondents were workplace general managers or the manager he/she felt was the most appropriate; the focus was the workplace’s largest occupational group. In this report, the terms ‘organizations’ and ‘workplace’ are used instead of the technical term ‘establishments’. An example is a factory of a larger firm.
- The size threshold was 25 employees in the case of the smaller countries and 50 in the remaining countries; the total number of respondents was almost 5,800.
- The technical term used in the survey for group work was ‘group delegation’, defined as rights and responsibilities granted to groups of employees to carry out their common tasks without constant reference back to managers - most often known as ‘group work’.
- The overall response rate for the ten countries was almost 18%, with a range between 9% (Spain) and 39% (Ireland).
- The report on group delegation (group work) was prepared for the Foundation by Jos Benders and Fred Huijgen, Nijmegen Business School, the Netherlands, and Ulrich Pekruhl, Institut Arbeit und Technik, Gelsenkirchen, Germany.



# PUBLICATIONS

## RELATED PUBLICATIONS

*Foundation publications are on sale from your local book shop or the official sales agents of the EU or the Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, L-2985, Luxembourg. Where prices are not quoted, the document is free of charge and is available on request from the Foundation.*

- 1. Useful but Unused: Group Work in Europe - Findings from the EPOC Survey**  
Cat. No. SX-12-99-408-EN-C  
EUR 16.00
- 2. Direct Participation in the Social Public Services - Findings from the EPOC Survey**  
Cat. No. SX-15-98-908-EN-C  
EUR 28.00
- 3. Conceptualising Direct Participation in Organisational Change - The EPOC Project**  
Cat. No. SY-85-94-630-EN-C  
EUR 8.50
- 4. Humanise Work and Increase Profitability? Direct Participation in Organisational Change Viewed by the Social Partners in Europe**  
Cat. No. SX-91-95-431-EN-C  
EUR 25.00
- 5. Closing the Gap - Ideas and Practice: Direct Participation in Organisational Change**  
Available in all languages  
Cat. No. SY-94-96-962-EN-C  
EUR 7.00
- 6. Direct Participation and Organisational Change - Fashionable but Misunderstood? An Analysis of Recent Research in Europe, Japan and USA**  
Available in EN and DE  
Cat. No. SX-91-95-431-EN-C  
EUR 25.00
- 7. New Forms of Work Organisation - Can Europe realise its potential? - Results of a survey of direct employee participation in Europe**  
Cat. No. SX-09-97-002-EN-C  
EUR 30.00
- 8. New Forms of Work Organisation - Can Europe realise its potential? - Results of a survey of direct participation in Europe Summary**  
Cat. No. SX-12-98-077-EN-C  
Also available in FR, DE, IT, PT, ES
- 9. Direct Participation Bibliography - The EPOC Project, Results from a Data Base**  
WP/95/34/EN
- 10. The Position of the Social Partners in Europe on Direct Participation - Volume I: Belgium, Denmark, Finland, United Kingdom, Ireland, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Sweden**  
WP/95/35/EN
- 11. The Position of the Social Partners in Europe on Direct Participation - Volume II : Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain**  
WP/96/03/EN
- 12. Review on the position of the social partners on direct participation**  
WP/97/31/EN
- 13. Potenzialità e limiti della partecipazione diretta: il punto di vista delle parti sociali in Europa**  
WP/97/32/IT

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information on this project please contact:  
**Camilla Galli da Bino**,  
Information Liaison Officer, Work Organisation/Industrial Relations  
Tel: + 353 1 204 3125  
E-mail:  
[Camilla.GallidaBino@eurofound.ie](mailto:Camilla.GallidaBino@eurofound.ie)

Copyright: European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. Reproduction is authorised, except for commercial purposes, provided the source is acknowledged and a copy is sent to the Foundation.

## European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions,

Wyattville Road, Loughlinstown, Co. Dublin, Ireland.

Tel: +353 1 2043 100

Fax: +353 1 2826 456/2824 209

E-mail: [postmaster@eurofound.ie](mailto:postmaster@eurofound.ie)

EF/98/60/EN



OFFICE FOR OFFICIAL PUBLICATIONS  
OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

L-2985 Luxembourg

ISBN 92-828-6488-X



9 789282 864883