Working conditions in the time of COVID-19: Implications for the future

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we live and work. Even though most of the measures taken to curb the spread of the virus have been removed, it continues to have repercussions on the world of work and on life. This report analyses the working lives of workers in Europe in 2021, their working conditions and job quality, and examines the implications for the future. It is based on data collected by the European Working Conditions Telephone Survey (EWCTS) in 2021 in a probability survey conducted in the EU27 and nine other European countries. Eurofound has been monitoring working conditions in Europe through its European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) since 1991. The EWCTS builds on this work. Collection and analysis of the data is part of Eurofound’s mission to contribute to the improvement of working conditions.

Policy context

The improvement of working conditions has been a goal of European integration since the Treaty of Rome (1957). Good working conditions were recognised as a prerequisite for the development of a competitive knowledge-based economy by the Lisbon Strategy (2000) and as essential to achieving smart, sustainable and inclusive growth by the Europe 2020 strategy. The European Pillar of Social Rights, adopted in 2017, set down 20 principles to guide the Member States ‘towards a strong social Europe that is fair, inclusive and full of opportunity’. The Pillar is being delivered through a wide-ranging set of policy packages alongside the implementation of plans for a just transition towards a climate-neutral and digitalised society. The changes ahead will impact on job quality, well-being at work, gender equality and workers’ ability to participate in the labour market.

Key findings

- The EWCTS delivered a host of findings on the aspects of work that affect workers positively (job resources) and negatively (job demands), a sample of which include the following.
  - Physical and psychological hazards: Repetitive hand and arm movements was the most prevalent physical demand, reported by 71% of workers. Almost 1 in 10 had had to contend with verbal abuse at work in the month prior to the interview.
  - Work intensity: 49% of workers frequently worked at high speed and 48% to tight deadlines. In addition, 19% of workers reported that their job frequently involved being in emotionally disturbing situations.
  - Working time: While roughly half the workforce worked the standard 35–40-hour week, around 19% worked long hours of 48 hours or more per week. In addition, 21% of workers worked at night.
  - Social support: 47% of workers had recourse to social support from their colleagues, while 41% received support from their managers.
  - Autonomy: 54% of workers were free to change the order of their tasks, 51% were able to change the speed of work, and 49% were able to determine their work methods.
  - Participation: Around 6 out of 10 workers were involved in decision-making regarding their work and the organisation that employs them.

- An index of job quality, calculated by comparing job demands with job resources, indicates that some 30% of workers were in ‘strained’ jobs, where the job demands outweighed the job resources. Strained jobs are associated with poorer well-being, poorer work–life balance, less ability to make ends meet, lower levels of work engagement and less trust within the workplace.
The data confirm well-known facts regarding the gender segregation of sectors, occupations and workplaces. Only one in five workers worked in a gender-balanced workplace, while just one-third of managers were women.

Gender disparities in the distribution of paid and unpaid work stood out in the data. Men spent nearly 6 hours more per week than women on paid work while women spent 13 hours more on unpaid work than men; as a result, women worked 7 hours more in total per week than men.

Many workers were in vulnerable situations: 26% reported difficulty making ends meet, 17% were unable to predict their earnings in the coming three months, and 11% thought they might lose their jobs within six months.

One-fifth of EU employees did not have a formal structure in their workplace to represent their interests, while 12% employees had neither employee representation nor regular meetings to express their views.

The analysis of EWCTS data highlighted the different experiences of work during the pandemic depending on workers’ own attributes and their place in the workforce. It seems that those who were able to work from home fared best, although they worked long hours and had high levels of work intensity. Frontline workers, by contrast, fared poorly on several fronts; work intensity was common in this group, and it had the highest proportion of workers who felt unrecognised for their work.

Policy pointers

- The EWCTS findings confirm the ongoing need for policy to address several long-standing issues in the area of working conditions. These include the vulnerability of some employment situations; the lack of formal employee representation in some workplaces; the need to advance worker participation regarding change in the workplace; ensuring decent and predictable earnings from work; and long working hours and work–life imbalances.

- The survey provides evidence of the persistence of gender inequalities in employment, work and the interaction between work and home life. Segregation in employment – sectoral, occupational and in the workplace – and the uneven distribution of paid and unpaid work limit the participation of women in paid work and restrict their career opportunities, affecting their financial security, now and in the future. This calls for a redoubling of efforts to dismantle stereotypes that limit what work men and women do and the pursuit of policies to promote equal sharing of paid and unpaid work in households.

- Good job quality supports well-being and work–life balance. It protects health and can ensure that health status is not an obstacle to engaging in work, which in turn promotes the sustainability of work over the life course. The role of job quality in supporting work engagement and the financial sustainability of work demonstrates that better job quality is not only a goal in itself but is instrumental in achieving other important policy objectives, such as raising living standards and contributing to the economic performance of companies. This centrality of job quality in providing answers to a wide range of key policy challenges suggests that it must be mainstreamed in EU policies.

- EWCTS evidence indicates that working from home, which has largely transmuted into hybrid working arrangements since the pandemic, is not without drawbacks. Management practices and forms of work organisation will need to be adapted to support the development of high-quality hybrid work. A focus on developing their workplace risk assessment skills would enable companies to ensure that work is organised and adequate equipment provided to protect the health and safety of workers when they work remotely.

Further information

The report Working conditions in the time of COVID-19: Implications for the future is available at https://eurofound.link/ef22012

Research manager: Agnès Parent-Thirion

information@eurofound.europa.eu