Sixth European Working Conditions Survey – Overview report

Introduction
Since 1991, Eurofound has been monitoring working conditions in Europe through its European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS). The survey aims to measure working conditions across European countries, analyse the relationships between different aspects of these, identify groups at risk, highlight issues of concern and areas of progress and, ultimately, contribute to developing EU policy aimed at improving job quality.

In 2015, the sixth EWCS interviewed almost 44,000 workers (both employees and self-employed people) in 35 European countries: the 28 EU Member States, the five EU candidate countries, and Norway and Switzerland. Workers were asked a range of questions concerning employment status, work organisation, learning and training, working time duration and organisation, physical and psychosocial risk factors, health and safety, work–life balance, worker participation, earnings and financial security, as well as work and health.

Key findings
Overall, structural inequalities and differences in terms of gender, employment status and occupation are still significant. The research constructed seven job quality indices, representing different dimensions of job quality: Physical environment, Work intensity, Working time quality, Social environment, Skills and discretion, and Prospects and Earnings. These dimensions were selected on the basis of their proven impact (positive or negative) on the health and well-being of workers. In the last 10 years, there has been limited progress in some job quality indices.

Job quality indices

Physical environment
The Physical environment index assesses physical risks in the workplace.

- The exposure of men and women to physical risks differs markedly, pointing to sectoral and occupational segregation in the workplace.
- Over the last decade, there has been an uneven improvement: exposure to noise, for example, has decreased in the EU28 significantly while exposure to chemical and infectious products has increased.

Work intensity
This index measures the level of work demands in the job: for instance, working at high speed and under time pressure, and experiencing emotional demands, such as dealing with angry clients.

- One-third of workers in the EU work to tight deadlines and at high speed.
- Workers in the health sector are exposed to the greatest levels of work intensity.

Working time quality
This index measures the incidence of long working hours, scope to take a break, atypical working time, working time arrangements and flexibility. Overall, the working time quality index has improved in the EU28 since 2005.

- 43% of workers have very regular working schedules.
- One worker in five (22%) works in their free time to meet work demands at least several times a month.

Social environment
This index measures the extent to which workers experience supportive social relationships as well as adverse social behaviour, such as bullying and harassment.

- The social climate in work is generally positive, 89% of workers stating they enjoy good cooperation with their colleagues.
- Around 16% of workers – more women than men – report exposure to adverse social behaviour.

Skills and discretion
This index measures learning and training opportunities in the job.

- There has been a narrowing of the skills gender gap, with women catching up and younger age groups closing the gap with older groups.
Perspectives on working life in Europe

Going beyond the objective measures of job quality, the report also looks at workers’ own assessment of their working lives. It finds associations between the different dimensions of job quality and factors such as engagement, financial security, the development of skills and competences, health and well-being, the reconciliation of work and private life, and the sustainability of work. The findings underline the importance of company and workplace practices in safeguarding health and safety (including against psychosocial risks), improving work–life balance, supporting career development, promoting skills use and development, managing workload and designing meaningful jobs.

Policy pointers

Looking at the findings through the lens of the job quality profiles, jobs in the ‘poor quality’ profile would benefit most from actions to support the various dimensions of job quality and labour market policies focused on moving workers into better-quality roles.

For ‘under pressure’ jobs, the focus should be on improving management quality, ensuring social support in the workplace, facilitating training and providing strategies for coping with emotional demands such as those arising from dealing with angry customers.

The level of physical demands at work in ‘active manual’ jobs calls for greater attention to workplace risks and health aspects. Better working time management and workload organisation could also improve job quality.

Actions to improve job quality in ‘high flying’ jobs should address working time organisation and work intensity. Introducing a shift in values to tackle the culture of working long hours could be one important improvement.

While ‘smooth running’ jobs score highly on most indices, workers earn less than in other jobs, and express a preference for working more hours. Addressing this (bearing in mind the relationship between earnings and working hours) would improve the quality of these jobs.

More generally, job quality can be supported by a wide-ranging set of policies and actions aimed at addressing the issues raised in the survey’s analysis of job quality indices and profiles and that support workers throughout their working lives. In addition to policy initiatives at EU level, by national authorities and social partners, progress can also be achieved through workplace practices and policies at company level.

Further information


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