



European Foundation  
for the Improvement of  
Living and Working Conditions

# Changes over time – First findings from the fifth European Working Conditions Survey

## > résumé <

'Inclusive growth means empowering people through high levels of employment, investing in skills, fighting poverty and modernising labour markets, training and social protection systems so as to help people anticipate and manage change, and build a cohesive society. [...] It is about ensuring access and opportunities for all throughout the life cycle. Europe needs to make full use of its labour potential to face the challenges of an ageing population and rising global competition. Policies to promote gender equality will be needed to increase labour force participation thus adding to growth and social cohesion.'

European Commission, *Europe 2020: A European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth*



## Key findings

Key trends in European working conditions have emerged over recent decades.

- The pattern of employment continues to change across Europe, with an ongoing shift from agriculture and manufacturing into services.
- While this sectoral pattern of employment shifts, entrenched gender segregation within it remains constant.
- More women are moving into supervisory roles. Increasingly, they manage other women.
- The proportion of workers with a temporary contract has, overall, been rising.
- The number of hours worked per week continues to drift downwards – on average.
- Standard working time arrangements – a five-day week of 40 hours, worked Monday to Friday – is still the norm for most Europeans.
- Almost one fifth of European workers are having difficulties achieving a satisfactory work–life balance, a slight decrease since 2000.
- The level of training paid for by the employer over the last 12 months rose notably between 2005 and 2010.
- There has been little or no increase in the intellectual challenges that work poses; workers seem to enjoy essentially the same levels of autonomy as they did a decade ago; furthermore,

monotonous work seems to be somewhat more common.

- Fewer workers feel their health and safety is at risk because of their work. The extent to which workers face (most) physical hazards remains unchanged.
- Exposure to tobacco smoke has decreased over the last five years following the implementation of widespread anti-smoking legislation.
- Work intensity remains at a high level, although it appears to have stabilised compared with the previous two decades.
- Substantial numbers of Europeans do not feel confident about being able to remain in their current job until the age of 60.

## Better jobs in Europe

European policy recognises competitiveness and sustainability as essential goals for the EU, to be achieved through building an economically dynamic and socially cohesive Union. Doing so requires that Europe modernises working life, creating 'more and better jobs', as the Lisbon Strategy put it, or delivers 'smart, sustainable and inclusive growth' in the words of the Europe 2020 strategy. Ensuring quality of work and employment is a core element in achieving this objective. The progress already made by enterprises and social partners in this direction can be further consolidated through creating working environments that attract and retain people into employment, improve workers' and companies' adaptability, create sustainable working practices and environments,

boost human capital through better training and skills development while still protecting workers' health and promoting their well-being over the course of their working lives.

Examining how working conditions have changed (or remained the same) can shed light on what progress is being made towards these policy goals. It can also indicate how drivers of change such as globalisation, technological development, more flexible forms of work organisation, the ageing of Europe's population, and the rise in the number of households with two earners have impacted on how people are working and being employed.

These first findings from Eurofound's fifth European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) present an initial overview of some key changes in working conditions over time.<sup>1</sup>

## More labour market participation

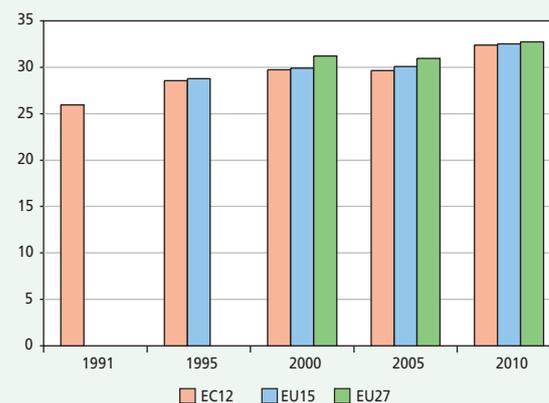
Boosting labour force participation is a key element of European employment policy – not least through involving more women and older workers. To encourage more people into employment in turn requires that the ways in which Europeans work be adapted. In addition, the social infrastructure that supports workers – care services, for instance, or school opening hours – must be adapted to better meet workers' needs, and new forms of employment contracts need to be created, which reflect the increasingly diverse needs of individuals and companies.

### A bigger, more diverse workforce

Between 1990 and 2010, the accession of 15 more Member States to the EU, as well as the increased participation of women, meant that the workforce of the Union rose from around 150 million workers to around 235 million. While the employment rate for men remained at over 75% during the period (rising at times to up to 80%), the rate for women rose from 50% to around 63%. Meanwhile, the proportion of older people (those aged between 50 and 64 years) in work rose from around 49% in 2000 to more than 56% in 2009.

The proportion of women who hold supervisory positions has increased steadily over the past 20 years, rising from 26% of all supervisors in 1991 (in the then 12 Member States – the EC12) to 33% in the EU27 in 2010. The proportion of workers who have a female boss has also risen – from 24% in 2000 to 29% in 2010. Most of these workers are themselves women: in 2010, 47% of women workers said they had a female boss, compared with only 12% of men. And this segregation appears to be increasing: while the proportion of employees with a female boss rose from 31% in 2000 to 36% in 2010 in the services sector (a heavily female-dominated area), it remained stable at 11% in manufacturing – a male-dominated sector.

Figure 1: Proportion of women in supervisory positions, 1991–2010 (%)



The flipside of greater diversity (in all forms) in the workforce is that discrimination at work remains a risk. In 2010, 6% of European workers said that they had experienced some form of discrimination at work – a slight increase compared with 2005. Strikingly, given the European policy goal of retaining people in work for longer, the most common complaint was of age discrimination – reported by 3% of workers. (However, the survey cannot measure the extent of discrimination that prevents people from accessing the labour market in the first place.)

### Services continue to grow in importance

The last decade has seen a gradual decrease in the proportion of workers working in agriculture and fisheries and in industry (manufacturing). This has coincided with a slight increase in the proportion of those working in services. Throughout this period, gender segregation has persisted: women remain particularly dominant in services – notably education, health and social work, and in public administration. For instance, in 2007, while 17% of the female workforce worked in education, only 4% of the male workforce did so. By contrast, men form the bulk of the workforce in manufacturing and construction.

### Greater flexibility in employment status

The proportion of the workforce that is self employed has remained constant over the last 20 years, at 14%. Twice as many men as women are self-employed, this ratio also remaining constant over time.

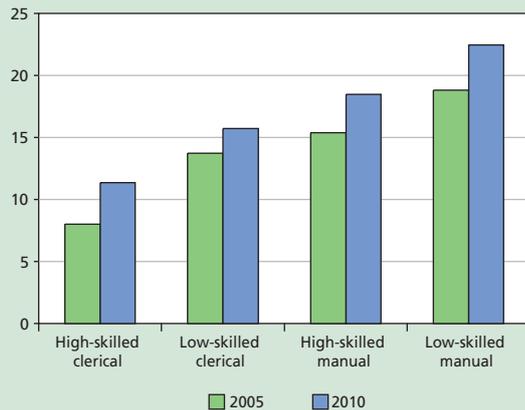
The traditional open-ended 'permanent' contract is still the most common form of employment contract (being held by around 80% of employees). However, the proportion of workers on a temporary – or non-permanent – contract has risen markedly, albeit unevenly, over the last two decades. While temporary workers comprised just over 10% of the workforce in the EC12 in 1991, by 2007 they formed more than 14% of the EU27's workforce. However, this fell to 13.5% in 2009.

### Job insecurity

While labour market participation has increased, workers' anxiety over their job security has also increased in recent years. In 2005, 14% of workers in

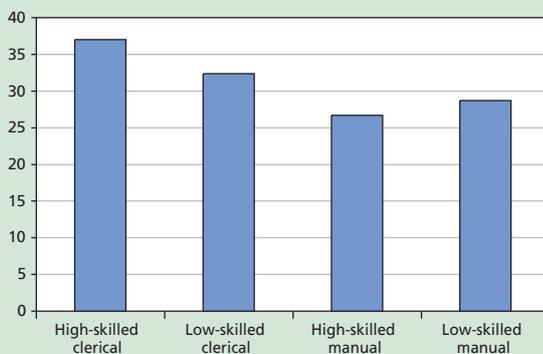
<sup>1</sup> The survey, carried out every five years since 1990, has expanded its coverage in step with the enlargement of the Union. Hence, findings are not available for every year, for every question, in every country.

Figure 2: Perceived job insecurity, 2005–2010, by occupation, EU27 (%)



Note: The figures are for the percentages of workers who strongly agreed that they might lose their job in the next six months.

Figure 3: Perceived employment security, by occupation, 2010, EU27 (%)



Note: The figures are for the percentages of workers who strongly agreed that they could easily find a new job in the event of losing their present one.

the EU27 were concerned that they might lose their job in the next six months; in 2010, this average figure had risen to 16%, no doubt reflecting the impact of the recession.

Employees on temporary contracts feel less secure than permanent workers: in 2005, 10% of workers on permanent contracts were concerned about their job security; by contrast, 35% of those on fixed-term contracts, and 43% of temporary-agency workers, were concerned. By 2010, these figures had risen to 11%, 39% and 53% respectively.

However, workers on permanent contracts are – in 2010 – only somewhat more confident than temporary workers about being able to find a new job (with a similar salary) should they lose their current one: 31% of permanent workers and 26% of temporary workers (those on fixed-term contracts and on temporary agency placements) said that they could easily find another job.

Manual workers – in particular, lower-skilled manual workers – feel less secure in their jobs than do clerical workers and the gap has been widening since 2005. They are also less confident about finding another job with a similar salary, should they lose their current position.

## Work–life balance and working time

A key element of employment – for policymakers, employers and workers – is the length of working time and how it is organised. Discussions at EU level over the last 20 years have focused on making working time more flexible and facilitating shorter working hours, both as a way to make jobs available to more citizens and (increasingly) reconcile work and private life.

### Working time falling – on average

The average length of the European working week is decreasing: it has fallen from 40.5 hours in 1991 for the EC12 to 37.5 hours in 2010 in the EU27 (36.4 hours in the EC12 in 2010). This decrease in working time can be explained by four key developments.

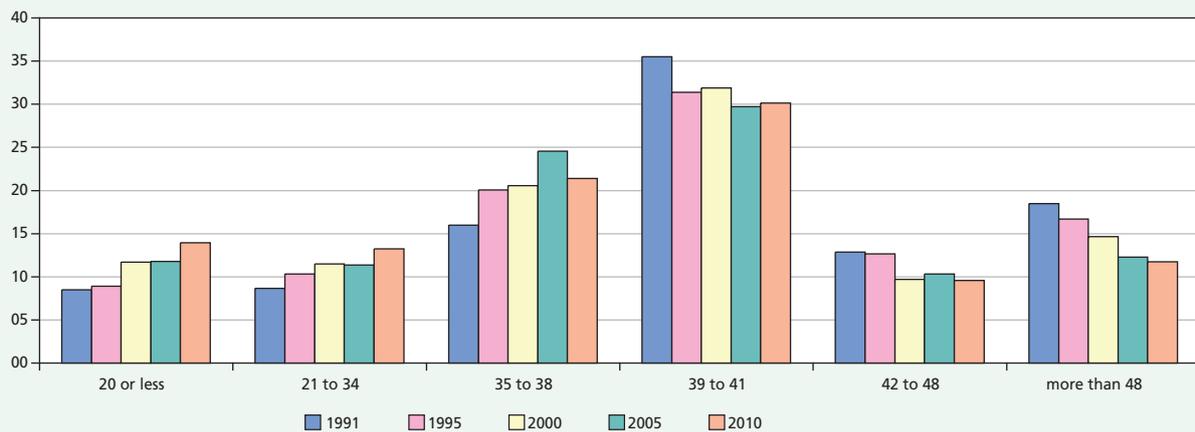
- The proportion of the workforce working long hours (more than 48 per week) has fallen: in the EU27 it fell from 15% in 2000 to 12% in 2010.
- The proportion of the workforce working shorter hours (fewer than 20 per week) rose over the past two decades. In 1991, 8% of the workforce in the EC12 worked short hours; by 2010, this figure had nearly doubled, at 14%. (For the EU27 as a whole, it rose slightly from 12% in 2000 to 13% in 2010.)
- Collectively agreed working time has come down in many countries and sectors.
- Reductions in working hours in response to recession – whether the result of individual company decisions or state-sponsored short-time working schemes – may have also added to the shortening in working hours.

Working long hours has been, and remains, mostly a male phenomenon: 18% of men in the EU27 work long hours, compared with 8% of women. Self-employed workers are also much more likely to work long hours, with 42% in the EU27 working more than 48 hours per week; however, this proportion has also gradually been decreasing since 2000. Long hours remain more common in manufacturing (where 20% of the workforce worked more than 48 hours in 2010) than in services (with 15% working long hours); again, both sectors show a similar decline over time.

Shorter hours are primarily a female phenomenon, with 20% of employed women working fewer than 20 hours per week as against 7% of male workers. Short hours remain more common in services than in manufacturing and agriculture. The prevalence of short hours working varies considerably between countries, reflecting cultural differences with regard to part-time work as well as such factors as the availability of care services and school-opening hours.

On average, men work in paid employment around seven hours more than women per week, the difference remaining more or less constant over time.

Figure 4: Evolution of weekly working hours, 1991–2010, EC12



### ‘Standard’ working hours still the norm

Despite the widely predicted moves toward a 24-hour society, European working hours have – overall – remained remarkably standard. For most indicators of working time stability, the figures have remained the same since 2000, with 67% of workers working the same numbers of hours per week, and 58% working the same number of hours every day. Furthermore, the proportion of European workers who work the same number of days per week has increased somewhat, rising from 74% of the workforce in 2005 to 77% in 2010. Slightly fewer workers in 2010 than in 2000 start and finish work at the same time every day (61% in 2010 as against 65% in 2000).

In 2010, around a quarter (26%) of workers worked at least one Sunday per month, as against 30% in 1995. In 2010, 18% of European workers worked at night – a small decline since 1991. The proportion of workers working shifts has also declined slightly from 20% in 2000 down to 17%.

There is a distinct gender disparity in terms of standard working time. While shift work has been practised equally frequently by women and men over the past 10 years, women are more likely to work regular schedules than are men, and are less likely to work at nights, or on Saturdays; this gender disparity has persisted over the past decade.

### Work–life balance elusive for many

Work–life balance continues to be a key element of the European debate with the European employment strategy highlighting, for instance, its importance in facilitating individuals’ entering and remaining in the workforce and its potential for facilitating greater gender equality. A rise in the number of households in which both partners work has shifted work–life balance higher up the agenda, this being reflected also in the organisation of the workplace.

Overall, 18% of workers in the EU27 are not satisfied with their work–life balance, a marginal decrease since 2000. While men are most likely to experience problems with their work–life balance in the middle of their careers (between the ages of 30 and 49), women are less likely to experience dissatisfaction,

but on a constant, ongoing basis over the course of their careers. Given that women still do most household and caring work, this may seem somewhat surprising. However, many more women than men tailor their working lives to adapt to these domestic demands – by working part time or working regular hours for instance – and so may reduce the conflict they experience from two opposing sets of demands.

### Developing in the job

While European policy seeks to increase the number of jobs, it also seeks to make more use of the skills and expertise of workers in order to boost productivity, not least by creating the conditions that foster the acquisition of skills and encourage worker autonomy. Both training and work organisation play an important role in this.

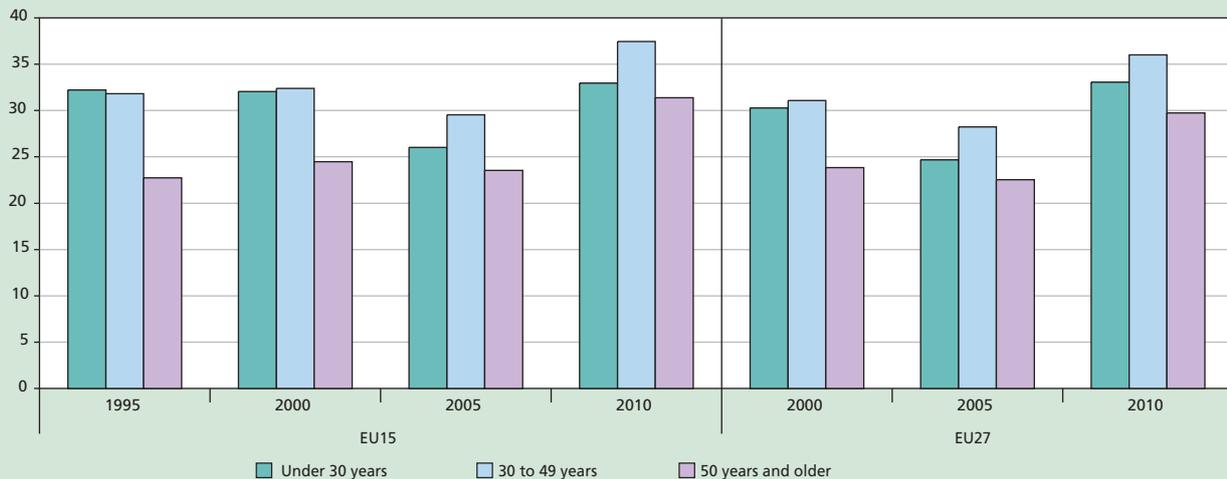
### More workers undertaking training

The survey found that in 2010, training paid for by employers was at its highest level since 1995 (for the EU15), with 34% of workers receiving training in the 12 months prior to the survey. This is a break in a 15-year trend in which employer-provided training had not increased (the figure actually declining between 2000 and 2005). Furthermore, on-the-job training also became more prevalent, involving 24% of employees in 2005, and 30% in 2010.

Not all workers receive equal amounts of training. Older workers receive less, with 30% of those aged over 50 years receiving training paid for by their employer, compared with 36% of workers aged between 30 and 49 years. However, this disparity has eased somewhat, with the proportion of older workers receiving training rising by seven percentage points over the last 15 years, as against a rise of only four percentage points for the younger group.

Permanent employees benefit much more from employer-paid training than do those employed on other arrangements: in 2010, 39% of permanent employees accessed employer-paid training, compared with only 26% of other employees. Moreover, this disparity increased over the previous

Figure 5: Trends in employer-paid training by age of employee, 1995–2010, EU15 and EU27 (%)



10 years, a seven percentage point gap in 2000 nearly doubling to 14 percentage points in 2010.

The picture in terms of occupational groups is also varied. Highly skilled clerical workers fare best, with 47% of such workers receiving employer-paid training, as against 36% of lower-skilled clerical workers. While all occupational groups benefitted from a rise in access to employer-paid training between 2000 and 2010, manual workers fared better than clerical workers, the proportion of manual workers accessing training rising from 18% to 22%. Although this increase was greater than the rise for clerical workers, manual workers still enjoy less training.

While employers were paying for more training for their employees by the end of the decade, more employees were also paying for their own training. In 2005, 6% of employees paid for their own training; in 2010, the figure had risen by a third to 9%.

It should be noted that, while the increase in overall training is welcome, it may at least in part reflect responses to the economic downturn. Many of the short-time working schemes implemented over the past two years have included training in some form during hours no longer worked. Moreover, feelings of job insecurity may have prompted employees to seek to upskill themselves in order to increase their employability.

### Does work challenge us?

A fundamental aspect of developing in a job is having the opportunity to tackle cognitive challenges at work – for instance, learning new things, solving unforeseen problems on one’s own, or performing complex tasks. This is important both for workers’ own well-being, and for companies to ensure that they continually upgrade their in-house capacity to create and innovate. Broadly speaking, there has been no marked improvement over time in this respect.

- In 2010, 68% of workers in the EU27 said that they learned new things in their job – essentially unchanged since 2000.

- Over a 15-year span from 1995 to 2010, the proportion of workers who solve unforeseen problems on their own has remained the same, at 83%.
- Over the same time span, the proportion of workers performing complex tasks has shown little change, at 58%.
- Between 1995 and 2010, the proportion of workers performing monotonous tasks rose, from 40% to 45%.
- Repetitive tasks still form a substantial part of Europeans’ work, with 40% doing repetitive tasks of less than 10 minutes’ duration (although this is less than 20 years ago, when 51% did so); meanwhile, 27% carry out repetitive tasks of less than one minute, a proportion unchanged since 2000.

Also of note is the fact that women systematically report lower levels of cognitive demands (and perform more monotonous and repetitive tasks) than men – a difference that has persisted over successive waves of the survey.

### Making one’s own decisions – autonomy at work

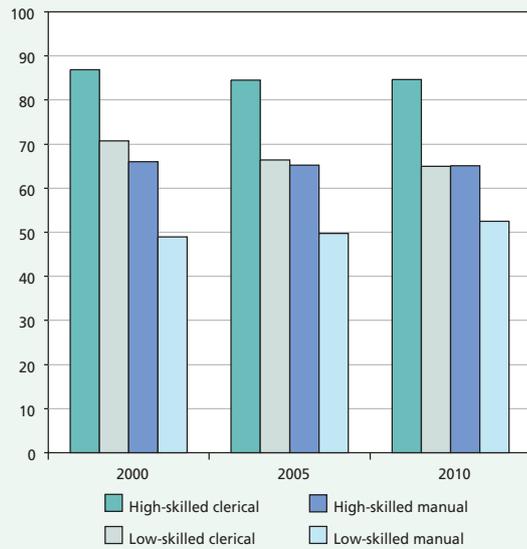
Promoting greater autonomy – enabling workers to make decisions about how they respond to demands encountered in the course their work – can make work demands more amenable, and promote well-being. At the same time, for firms, harnessing employees’ flexibility, skills and creativity and enabling them to take more initiative in their work and be more innovative, can boost European employment, productivity and competitiveness.

The EWCS measures autonomy by means of a number of indicators, which all involve being able to change aspects of one’s work:

- the speed or rate of one’s work;
- the method of one’s work;
- the order of tasks.

The survey findings point to small changes in different directions. For example, since 2000, in the EU27, the ability of workers to change the speed or

Figure 6: Ability to change methods of work, by occupation, EU27 (%)



rate of their work has remained stable; their ability to change their method of work has decreased slightly; by contrast, they are somewhat more able to choose or change the order of their tasks. Regardless of how much, or how little, autonomy individual workers may enjoy, more European workers can adapt their speed of work than their methods of work, or their order of tasks.

Not surprisingly, however, different types of workers enjoy different levels of autonomy. Lower-skilled manual workers enjoy the least autonomy of any occupational grouping, although their autonomy has increased between 2000 and 2010. Autonomy levels at country level have changed over time, indicating the effects of different practices and policies.

## Protecting health and promoting well-being

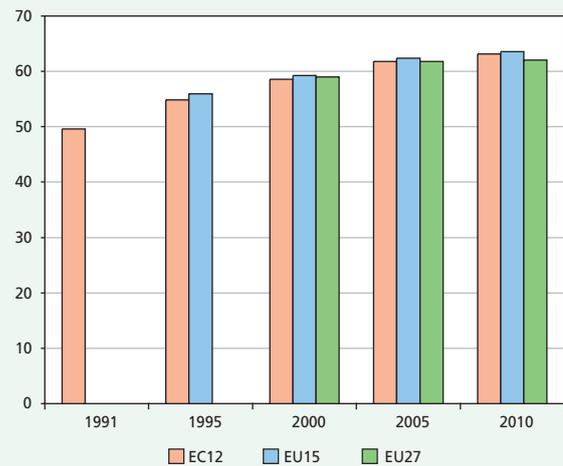
A key element in the concept of ‘better jobs’ is ensuring that workers’ health is protected – creating an optimum environment that supports health and well-being, prevents risks, and guards against workers’ leaving work because of ill health. The 1989 Framework Directive on health and safety stresses the importance of adapting work to the individual, and adopts a wide-ranging perspective that takes into consideration technology, work organisation, working conditions and social relationships.

### Work intensity

Experiencing greater work intensity (for instance, working at high speed or working to tight deadlines) has a strong negative impact on workers’ well-being – especially where workers have little autonomy or little support from colleagues and managers.

Work intensity increased in most European countries over the last two decades (Figure 7 illustrates the generally rising trend for the proportions of workers who work to tight deadlines; the picture is almost identical for workers who work at speed). However,

Figure 7: Working to tight deadlines, EC12, EU15 and EU27, 1991–2010 (%)



Note: Percentages are of workers who work to tight deadlines at least a quarter of their working time.

the increase appears to have at least stabilised at this high level since 2005.

For most workers (67%) in the EU27, the pace of work is set by direct demands from people – for example, interacting with a client. By contrast, only 18% of European workers have their pace of work set by the automatic speed of a machine, and this proportion has been decreasing over the past 15 years. Over the last 10 years, more workers report direct control by their boss as a determinant of their pace of work: this proportion has risen from 33% to 37%. The more factors workers have that set their pace of work – so-called ‘pace determinants’ – the greater the demands put upon them, and hence the greater the potential is for work to have a negative impact on their health. Workers in manufacturing experience twice as many pace determinants as do those in the services sector.

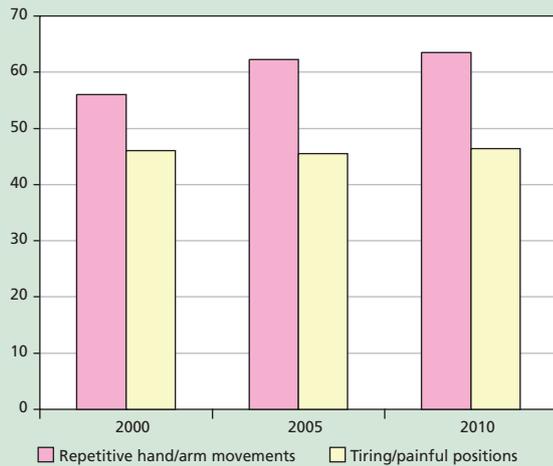
The threshold that workers are expected to reach in some respects appears to be getting more exacting: an increasing proportion of workers in the EU27 are required to meet precise quality standards in their work (74% today as against 69% in 2000).

### Physical hazards as persistent as ever

European workers remain as exposed to physical hazards as they did 20 years ago, reflecting the fact that many Europeans’ jobs still involve physical labour. For instance, 33% of workers carry heavy loads at least a quarter of their working time, while 23% are exposed to vibrations – figures unchanged since 2000. Nor are physical hazards confined to manual workers: nearly half of all workers (46%) work in tiring or painful positions at least a quarter of the time. Moreover, repetitive hand or arm movements are a feature of work for more Europeans than 10 years ago.

The exposure of women and men to physical hazards differs, perhaps in part linked to still-widespread gender segregation in many sectors. These gender differences and similarities have also remained more

Figure 8: Trends in physical demands of work 2000–2010, EU27 (%)



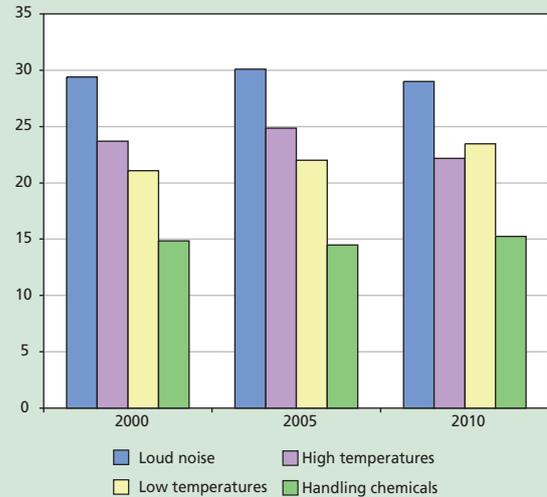
Note: Figures are for those who said they experienced these hazards at least a quarter of their working time.

or less constant over time. For instance, 33% of men, but only 10% of women, are regularly exposed to vibrations, while 42% of men, but 24% of women, carry heavy loads. In contrast, 13% of women, but only 5% of men, lift or move people as part of their work. However, similar proportions of men and women work in tiring positions (48% and 45% respectively), or make repetitive hand and arm movements (64% and 63% respectively).

Work presents other types of hazards. The working environment may be noisy, too hot or cold, or contain materials that are pathogenic (that can result in illness).

- In 2010, nearly 30% of workers in the EU27 were exposed to loud noise for at least a quarter of their working time, a figure unchanged since 2000.
- Meanwhile, 15% either breathe in smoke, fumes, or dust, or handle dangerous chemicals – again, the same proportion as 10 years previously.

Figure 9: Trends in exposures to environmental hazards, 2000 – 2010, EU27 (%)



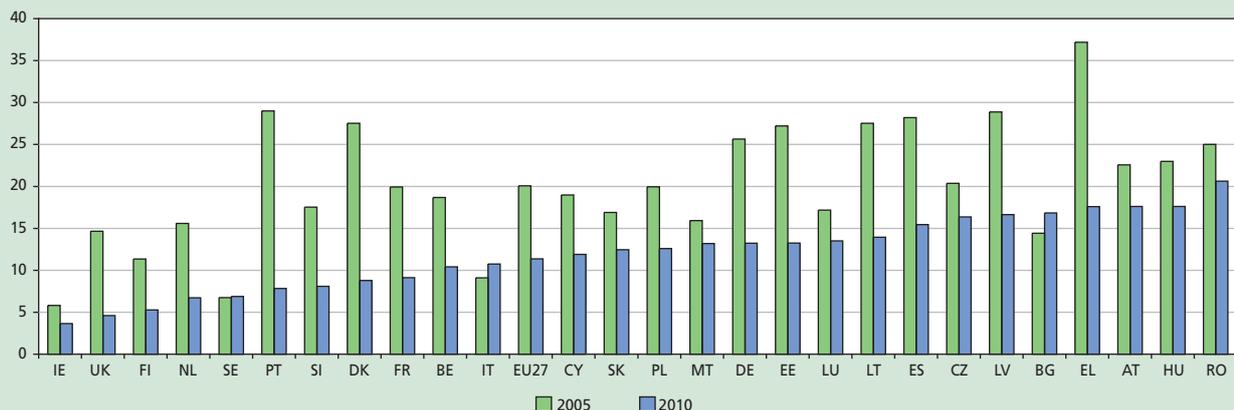
Note: Figures are for those who said they experienced these hazards for at least a quarter of their working time.

- A greater proportion of the workforce handled infectious materials in 2010 than did so in 2005 (11% and 9% respectively).
- And in 2010, 23% of workers in the countries of the EU15 were exposed to low temperatures, the same proportion as in 1995.

With anti-smoking legislation being progressively introduced across the Union, fewer workers are being exposed to other people’s tobacco smoke. National differences reflect – in part – the differing extent of legislation.

The proportion of workers in the EU27 who feel that their health and safety is at risk because of their work has been declining since 2000, falling from 31% of workers to 24%. (In the EC12, the proportion fell from 40% in 1991 to 28% in 2010.) This may partly reflect the better provision of information regarding health and safety. The proportion of workers who report that they are very well or well informed on health and safety risks related to the performance of their job has increased – up to 90% of workers in 2010.

Figure 10: Exposure to tobacco smoke by country, 2005 and 2010 (%)



Note: Figures are for those exposed to tobacco smoke for at least a quarter of their working time; data are available only for 2005 and 2010.

## When I'm 64? Remaining in work for longer

Around 60% of workers in the EU27 feel that they would be able to do their current job at the age of 60. This has risen marginally since 2000, from 57% to 59%. Not surprisingly, workers in different occupations also feel differently. Around 72% of highly skilled clerical workers and 61% of lower-skilled clerical workers said that they could do their current job at age 60. However, this is the case for only 49% of highly skilled manual workers and 44% of lower-skilled manual workers.

The extent to which work and jobs are 'sustainable' depends upon whether working time permits other responsibilities to be met, whether or not one's skills are being upgraded to safeguard employment security, how much personal autonomy a worker has to help them deal with work demands, and to what extent working conditions protect health on a long-term basis. Where these conditions are in place, the scope exists for workers remaining in employment longer, in line with EU policy goals.

### Methodology

Every five years, Eurofound conducts a survey to study working conditions in Europe, the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), interviewing both employees and self-employed people on key issues related to their work and employment. Over time, the number of topics surveyed has been extended. The survey has been carried out five times.

- First EWCS in 1990/1991: workers in the EC12 were surveyed.
- Second EWCS in 1995/1996: workers in the EU15 were surveyed.
- Third EWCS in 2000: the EU15 and Norway were surveyed in a first phase, the survey then being extended to cover the 12 new Member States in 2001, and Turkey in 2002 in a second phase.
- Fourth EWCS in 2005: EU27, plus Norway, Croatia, Turkey and Switzerland.
- Fieldwork for the fifth EWCS took place from January to June 2010, with almost 44,000 workers interviewed in the EU27, Norway, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo.

The figures from the EWCS are estimations. They are based on a representative sample of European workers and not on the whole population. Differences over time and between countries therefore need to be interpreted with care. The text above discusses only those differences that are very likely to reflect true differences rather than being a result of sampling.

Only the responses of workers in the EU27 are analysed in this résumé. Moreover, trend analyses do not necessarily look back over the 20 years of the EWCS to date: some questions have been asked only in recent 'waves'. More detailed reports on trends, results and analyses will be published in coming months on the Eurofound website, where further methodological information is available.

### Further information

More information on the European Working Conditions Survey is available at [www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/ewcs/index.htm](http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/ewcs/index.htm)  
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