Working Conditions in Europe*

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Definition

Working conditions refer to an individual's working environment as well as terms and conditions of employment. This covers various aspects, such as working time, task autonomy, pay, career prospects, work–life balance, type of contract, safety and wellbeing.

Description

One of the key objectives of the European Union (EU) is to achieve ‘improved living and working conditions’ in its member states according to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU, formerly known as the Treaty of Rome). Thus, working conditions in Europe are a focal area of societal monitoring and social science research.

Monitoring Working Conditions in Europe

Until the 1980's and 1990's, the focus of the European Union policy objectives was on creating jobs and reducing unemployment. Increasing the employment rate per se was seen as the key to economic development, social inclusion, and quality of life. However, with the 2001 European Employment Strategy, the issue of job quality and quality of working life has become an explicit goal, said to be at the heart of the European Social Model. *Not just “more” jobs but also “better” jobs* has become the slogan embodying this shift in the first decade of the twenty-first century (European Commission, 2014). The policy objectives were formulated in terms of common indicators and measurable targets for employment and other social domains. Within the framework of the European

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Employment Strategy, ten groups of indicators have been defined to monitor employment quality:

- Intrinsic job quality
- Skills, lifelong learning, and career development
- Gender equality
- Health and safety at work
- Flexibility and security
- Inclusion and access to the labor market
- Work organization and work-life balance
- Social dialogue and worker involvement
- Diversity and nondiscrimination
- Overall economic performance and productivity

These ten dimensions are included in the so-called Laeken indicators which constitute the most comprehensive attempt by the European institutions so far to construct a system of job quality indicators at the aggregate level (Davoine *et al.*, 2008; Muñoz de Bustillo *et al.*, 2009; Royuela *et al.*, 2008). The EU definition of job quality thus relies on a multidimensional approach, including objective characteristics of the job, subjective evaluations by workers, workers' characteristics, and the match between the worker and the job.

Surveys on Working Conditions in Europe

Working conditions in Europe are continuously monitored via large-scale surveys organized by the [European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions](#) in Dublin. The European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) is a repeated cross-sectional survey that has been assessing working conditions of employees every five years since 1990 ([eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/ewcs](#)). The European Quality of Life Surveys (EQLS), another repeated cross-sectional survey first conducted in 2003, provides a broad range of self-reported indicators of quality of life of European citizens. The most recent survey initiative of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, the European Company Survey (ECS) which was launched in 2004, provides an overview of workplace policies and practices in European companies ([eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/ecs](#)). All data sets cover a wide range of European countries. Data sets from all surveys are available to the public and facilitate comprehensive comparative research on the quality of work and life of European citizens.

Table 1: Selected indicators of working conditions (variable means) by country

	Working hours	Stressful job	Unhealthy, dangerous job	Job insecurity	Job autonomy	Job satisfaction	Life satisfaction
Sweden	39.5	3.0	2.1	1.5	3.9	7.6	7.9
Finland	38.4	2.5	2.1	1.6	3.9	8.0	8.2
The Netherlands	33.4	2.5	1.9	1.5	3.8	7.4	7.6
Germany	38.1	3.3	1.8	1.7	3.7	7.9	7.5
United Kingdom	36.0	2.9	1.9	1.6	3.5	7.3	7.5
Portugal	41.6	3.4	2.1	1.9	3.3	6.8	6.3
Spain	39.9	3.0	2.0	1.9	3.6	7.1	7.6
Hungary	43.1	3.1	2.4	1.9	3.0	7.1	6.1
Bulgaria	42.9	3.8	2.5	3.2	3.3	6.4	4.7
Range	2–110	1–5	1–5	1–5	1–5	1–10	1–10

Source: EQLS 2003 (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions and Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, 2006), own calculations. For details of measurement, see Drobníć *et al.* (2010)

Cross-Country Differences in Working Conditions

In a study which explicitly addressed the relationship between working conditions and overall life satisfaction of employed individuals, [Drobnič *et al.* \(2010\)](#) analyzed nine European countries (Finland, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, Portugal, Spain, Hungary, and Bulgaria), using data from the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS 2003, [European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions and Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, 2006](#)). The EQLS data on a subsample of working respondents show substantial differences in terms of working conditions as well as work and life satisfaction among European countries (Table 1). Hungary and Bulgaria report the longest working hours among the nine European countries, whereas the Dutch report the lowest number of working hours in the study. Both Eastern European countries also report the most dangerous and unhealthy working conditions. Further, Bulgarians report the most stressful jobs (followed by the Portuguese and the Germans) and the highest level of job insecurity among all respondents. Participants from the Nordic countries and the Netherlands experience the highest degrees of autonomy, and together with the Germans also the highest levels of job satisfaction. Differences in life satisfaction vary greatly across countries, with respondents in Finland and Sweden being the most satisfied, followed by the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Germany. The Portuguese and Hungarians are less satisfied with their lives, but still report significantly higher levels of life satisfaction than the Bulgarian respondents.

Working Conditions and Quality of Life: Theoretical Links

How important is having a good job for the quality of life and overall life satisfaction of employees? In the literature, the link between working conditions and quality of life has been addressed using the concepts of domain hierarchy and domain salience ([Sirgy, 2002](#)). Domain hierarchy refers to the idea that life domains are cognitively structured in a hierarchical pyramid: overall feelings about life are located at the top of this pyramid, the level below is reserved for satisfaction with the different life domains, and the bottom level pertains to life events within different life domains. Domain salience refers to the importance of different life domains for individuals. Life domains such as work, family, health, or leisure may be differentially salient to individuals ([Sirgy, 2002](#)).

Theory distinguishes three different types of mechanisms linking various life domains: spillover, segmentation, and compensation ([Staines, 1980](#); [Wilensky, 1960](#)). Spillover refers to both the process and the outcome by which affective experiences in one life domain (e.g. work) influence experiences in another domain (e.g. family) and overall life. Compensation describes a mechanism by which

individuals try to balance their affect across domains. For example, an individual may seek to compensate for a lack of satisfaction in one domain by trying to find more satisfaction in another one. Segmentation refers to a mechanism by which individuals strictly separate life domains in order to prevent experiences being transferred between life domains and overall life attitudes (e.g. trying to leave work-related troubles in the office and not bring them home, [Lambert, 1990](#); [Staines, 1980](#)).

Working Conditions and Quality of Life: Evidence from Europe

In the study of working conditions in nine European countries ([Drobnič *et al.*, 2010](#)), employees' subjective evaluation of their overall life satisfaction was used as an indicator of their quality of life. Overall life satisfaction was regressed on a number of self-reported working conditions and country characteristics. Life satisfaction is significantly influenced by economic development as measured by GDP per capita. More affluent societies exhibit higher average life satisfaction. Nevertheless, individuals' job characteristics and working conditions—or more precisely, individuals' perceptions of working conditions—also exhibit important effects on life satisfaction outcomes. The major positive contributions to high quality of life seem to come from having a well-paid job and autonomy at work. The major negative factors are job insecurity and having a dull, boring job. Job autonomy and a dull/boring job are work characteristics that most conspicuously translate into job (dis)satisfaction and through job (dis)satisfaction indirectly affect overall quality of life. Security of employment and pay, however, exhibit the most distinct direct effects on life satisfaction across the nine European countries. Since the perception of being reasonably well paid is an indicator of economic security, this study suggests that the issue of security is the key element in employment that in a most straightforward manner affects people's quality of life. If a certain basic security level is a precondition for well-being, the large cross-country differences in average life satisfaction may to a large extent reflect differences in (perceived) security and the effectiveness of the welfare safety net.

Along more general lines, this analysis suggests that the effects of working conditions on overall life satisfaction are not symmetric. There is a tendency that “bad jobs” are more effective in lowering life satisfaction than “good jobs” in augmenting it. Having a particularly good job does not increase individuals' quality of life much above the baseline level that is determined by factors not related to work, as illustrated by a simulation example in [Drobnič *et al.* \(2010\)](#). Perhaps having a good job is highly associated with other favorable life circumstances which as a whole make individuals satisfied with their lives. However, a bad job—and especially experiencing cumulative disadvantages at work—has

a considerably stronger negative effect on overall quality of life. The second general observation is that the effect of working conditions on overall life satisfaction is stronger in poorer countries in Eastern and Southern Europe than in Nordic and Western European societies. Thus, in more affluent societies, job characteristics and working conditions matter less for individual well-being. Among the countries for which detailed analyses have been performed, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Portugal show evidence of cumulative adverse working conditions and the impact of these on overall life satisfaction is more pronounced than in other countries.

With economic prosperity and increasing welfare state provision, work dimensions that most powerfully impact on people's quality of life seem to change and new determinants of life satisfaction become salient. Negative aspects of work, such as having a dangerous and unhealthy job that does not pay satisfactory wages, are supplemented or replaced by other work characteristics that lead to low job satisfaction and low quality of life, such as a boring job or lack of autonomy at work.

Another emerging issue is intensification of work. Employees in all countries studied experience demanding and stressful work but more affluent societies are confronted with an additional issue: increasing time pressure and intensification of work (see also [Green, 2006](#)). It is in these societies that people increasingly report that they constantly work to tight deadlines and this has a detrimental effect on their life quality. Tight deadlines may be more present in affluent societies with an extensive service sector and less present in manufacturing. Likewise, the meaning and importance of the work-home interface is stronger in Nordic and Western European countries than in Southern and Eastern European countries. Although the reported conflict between work and home is in effect weaker in Nordic/Western societies, its negative effect on quality of life is stronger. This "affluence work-home paradox" indicates that although the tension between work and home is lesser in richer countries, it has a stronger negative impact on life satisfaction, perhaps due to increasing awareness and sensitivity towards the issues of work-life balance or less access to extended family support networks.

The study suggests that interference between work and home mediates between life satisfaction and the following job characteristics and working conditions in particular: time pressure, career prospects, and commuting time. In other words, work intensification and long commuting is a problem for quality of life particularly if it leads to an unsatisfactory management of the interface between work and private life. Likewise, the positive effect of career prospects becomes insignificant when work-home interference is controlled. In broader terms this indicates that, in their subjective evaluation, a career for which people have to sacrifice their personal life does not contribute significantly to quality

of life.

To conclude, working conditions do have a significant effect on quality of life, mainly in a sense that bad working conditions lower life satisfaction. There is large regional variation in working conditions in Europe and also the indicators of high-quality jobs that enhance workers' wellbeing differ to some extent between the countries. Policy-makers have to respond to differing needs when striving to fulfill the Lisbon goal of "more and better jobs" as well as achieving high quality of life for European citizens. For poorer countries in Eastern and Southern Europe, security of employment, dangerous and unhealthy working conditions, and decent pay are the most crucial issues at present. In several Northern and Western European countries, respondents often report that a dull and boring job, intensification of work with tight deadlines, and balancing work and private life decisively contribute to their wellbeing. Together with employment security and pay (economic security), these are the areas where further research and policy interventions are most needed.

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