

Working Paper No.4  
10 May 2005

**ENGLISH ONLY**

**STATISTICAL COMMISSION and  
UN ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR  
EUROPE (UNECE)**

**STATISTICAL OFFICE OF THE  
EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES  
(EUROSTAT)**

**CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN  
STATISTICIANS**

**INTERNATIONAL LABOUR  
ORGANIZATION**

UNECE/ILO/Eurostat Seminar on the Quality of Work  
(Geneva, 11-13 May 2005)

**Session 1 – Invited paper**

**QUALITY OF WORK AND EMPLOYMENT IN THE EUROPEAN WORKING  
CONDITIONS SURVEY**

Submitted by European Foundation for the Improvement  
of Living and Working Conditions\*

**I. Introduction**

1. From the late 80's the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions was involved in developing monitoring instruments on working conditions<sup>1</sup>, in particular through the development of EU wide questionnaire surveys on quality of work<sup>2</sup>.
2. The aim of the European Working Conditions Survey is to describe and monitor trends in the working conditions of people in employment<sup>3</sup> in the European Union. It is a face-to-face survey, conducted at people's homes and based on a multi-stage random sample with a random walk route. The questionnaire looks at a number of variables such as physical environment (work environment (noise, temperature), technology, place of work, contacts with clients), time

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\* Paper prepared by Greet Vermeylen.

<sup>1</sup> Dhondt Steven and Houtman Irene (1997), Indicators of working conditions in the European Union, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions.

<sup>2</sup> Third European survey on working conditions, 2000 and Working conditions in the acceding and candidate countries, 2003, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

<sup>3</sup> Definition used is the one from the Labour Force Survey.

(duration of work, commuting times, working time patterns), organisational environment (job demands (pace of work, job contents), job control (autonomy), skills, training, support), social environment (participation, discrimination, violence and harassment), outcomes (health problems, job satisfaction, absenteeism) and structural variables (age, gender, job category, employment status, seniority, remuneration, organisation). While the questionnaire has expanded at each wave, one of the issues which is kept in mind is to try and detect trends.

3. On basis of the survey, secondary analyses are conducted on specific subjects and other research methodologies are applied to understand better the findings. Furthermore, the European Working Conditions Observatory complements the findings with contributions from a network of national correspondents on the issues linked to quality of work and employment. Other sections in the European Foundation develop similar research in the field of living conditions (Quality of life survey), industrial relations (EIRO and company surveys) and change (European Monitoring Centre of Change).

4. The concept of quality of work and employment lies at the basis of the development of the surveys and has been explored more in-depth in the context of the Lisbon agenda and the European Employment Strategy.

## II. Concept of Quality of Work and Employment (QWE)

5. Quality of work and employment can be approached from various angles: **societal** (from the society point of view it is important to provide healthy and skilled jobs to a maximum of people, high employment levels and high productivity rates), **corporate** (companies need to find workers with the adequate skills in the labour market), **individual** (citizens need jobs which are secure, safe, interesting and which enable active social and family life). All of these angles point however to the importance of job quality. This is however a subjective and multidimensional concept.<sup>4</sup>

6. The definition of quality of work and employment is a very complex issue. One of the difficulties lies in the fact that the determination of the positive or negative features of a job is to a certain extent subjective. The perception that a worker may have of his or her job is strongly anchored in the legal and normative context of the society he/she lives in but may also vary according to his/her individual trajectory and his/her relative position in the same society according to various factors.

7. The quality assessment is related to the normative context in which it is made. The way the job is perceived is influenced by the legal framework of the job (employment status), employment policies and practices as well as the social protection schemes. The provision of childcare facilities by the state or by the employer might make a huge difference in the perception of the quality of the job of an individual.

8. The perception of job quality also differs according to the social status of the individual and the type of contractual arrangement in which the work is organised. The perception one may have of the job quality can be quite different for an unemployed or an employee or self-employee, for a permanent or a fixed-term contract worker, an involuntary part-time employee or a voluntary one, a low-skilled worker or a manager. It will be influenced by the whole situation

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<sup>4</sup> This part is based on a report prepared by Ramón Peña Casas of the Observatoire Social Européen on 'Indicators on quality of employment in the EU' (2002, unpublished) for the European Foundation

of the person, man or woman, old or young, single parent or not, in good health or with special needs.

9. The perception of quality of work and employment will moreover also involve a subjective evaluation of these elements by the worker on the basis of his/her characteristics, experience and expectations. The personal trajectory of each individual is a determinant factor for the perception of the quality attached to the job. Certain factors, such as a lack of money or the depressive effects of long-term unemployment may be a strong reason to accept a job which could be qualified as of low quality, as well. The 'values' considered as important in the employment and the way they are prioritized differ from person to person. Various studies on the psychosocial aspects of work have highlighted the ranking variability of personal issues (e.g. interest of the work, possibility to work in an independent way, self accomplishment, degree of personal power implied by the job, prestige of the function, work helpful to the community, helpful to others,...) among more intrinsic job characteristics (level of remuneration, combination of work-life, flexibility of working hours, job security, career possibilities...) This variability is not only related to the cultural and normative background but could also vary in time according to the general national economical situation. Security of employment is more important in a period of economic crisis while other criteria may seem more important in more stable times of growth.

10. Hence, there is a difficulty in directly measuring job quality in itself. So, in order to measure job quality, one tries to measure significant indicators on each of the multiple dimensions involved and evaluate whether they present good or bad job quality patterns. This may become a complex issue when these patterns are attached to the characteristics of individuals. One example is part-time work, which could be perceived by some as negative when it is not voluntary, but it could also be seen as positive when it is the result of a voluntary decision with a view to reconcile working and personal life.

11. Next to the subjective component, job quality is also a relative and multidimensional concept regarding a job-worker-relationship, which takes into account both objective characteristics related to the job and the match between worker characteristics, on the one hand, and job requirements, on the other.

12. A primary distinction in the more 'objective' dimensions of a job is often made to distinguish the intrinsic characteristics of a job from the extrinsic ones, or the objective features linked to work itself from the social consequences of the employment contractual relation. This duality is reflected in the distinction underlying the concepts of work and employment. Intrinsic characteristics are elements as job content and use of skills, work intensity, health and safety at work and relations in work. Extrinsic characteristics are salary, working time, balance between work and non-work, job security, career opportunities in work (remuneration, status in hierarchy, type of contract, life long learning and training provided by employer), social protection, employment protection, social dialogue, social relations inside and outside of work.

13. The multidimensionality of the job quality concept implies therefore that we have to use a broad set of indicators in order to approach it. This set of indicators need to be assessed as a totality, each indicator providing a piece of understanding of the complex concept of quality of work and employment.

### III. Use of indicators in the European/international context<sup>5</sup>

14. Often the political context has implications for the choice of pertinent indicators. In this context, often the indicators have to be agreed by the member states. This is the case for indicators in the European processes (European employment strategy, social inclusion). Comparability of indicators is an important issue. There are constraints linked to comparability and use:

- i. indicators must be *comparable in space* and therefore use the conventional and cultural norms commonly accepted within the European Union. This comparability could also be extended, as much as possible, to the OECD countries, or in an international context;
- ii. indicators must be *comparable in time* but they must also enable a certain flexibility of conception in order to improve them – many of them remain perfectible – without leading to the possible break up of the temporal series;
- iii. indicators must be statistically robust and not be the object of uncertain fluctuations;
- iv. indicators should be as clear as possible. The conceptual content of the indicator has to be clear and transparent in order to underline clearly the link between the measure and the information expected;
- v. indicators should preferably measure results rather than means, outcomes rather than inputs. So, the indicator must give information on social consequence and not on the means to get there, on the success of the political objective (to improve job quality) and not on the means implemented;
- vi. indicators must preferably be available quickly and in a short time frame to facilitate political assessment;
- vii. it should be borne in mind that these indicators, especially in a wider context (such as at European level or globally) try and capture a bigger picture and could be the result of a political compromise. So, some of the indicators developed at European/international level can be complemented by indicators at national level, which put the accent on specific points which might be more important at a national level or in a certain context. These indicators can be more refined or with a better frequency and might attach more importance to certain dimensions than others. The important thing is that national and European indicators indicate a convergence of the observed tendencies and evolutions. In case of divergence, the reasons for this disparity could be examined. This process should enable a mutual enrichment of sources and avoid the increasing need and demand for information at the European/international level being a burden for the member states, that which also constitutes a characteristic demanded of the indicators;
- viii. All relevant disaggregations of data should be applied (gender, age, education, activity status, profession, economic sector of activity, contract type) in order to understand the meaning of the indicators;
- ix. Despite the complications of this process, it remains a very valuable one in order to capture the concept of job quality. However, it should be borne in mind that indicators and their definition should be in a permanent evolutionary process which should involve both the re-examination of the indicators already identified and the pursuit of additional relevant indicators, taking account in particular of developments in objectives and data availability.

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<sup>5</sup> This part is also based on a report on 'Quality of indicators of employment in the EU' (2002, unpublished) by R. Peña Casas for the European Foundation

#### IV. The construction of a list of indicators on quality of work and employment

##### Types of indicators

15. The ideal would be a combination of indicators at 3 levels:

- 1) **Structural**: that is to say indicators describing the context / the framework  
e.g. the number of labour inspectors / 1000 workers
- 2) **Work and employment situations**: that is to say indicators describing the reality of work and employment and the likelihood that it might have negative or positive outcomes  
e.g. exposure to chemicals
- 3) **Outcomes**: that is to say indicators reflecting on the outcomes of the situations described above  
e.g. occupational accidents, stress levels

##### Aims of the indicators

16. Indicators can serve various purposes and, according to the objectives they have been assigned, they can have very different nature. At least 2 types can be distinguished:

- Indicators aiming at **benchmarking**: they are aimed at measuring progress and should be quite precise. Indicators designed with the aims of comparing (countries in particular, but also groups, occupations, sectors,..) should be used with caution as a thorough knowledge of the context is necessary to understand possible differences (i.e. comparing intimidation / harassment between countries);
- Indicators aiming at **supporting debate and discussion**: imperfect indicators for benchmarking can still be very good to reflect trends and provide time series and therefore draw attention and support debate (i.e. indicators of work intensity).

17. Any list of indicators on quality of work and employment would probably have to be relatively short in order to be understandable. There are at least 2 options which both have their pros and cons:

- **Single indicators**: which reflect one dimension (i.e. % of part-time work). The problem is that used in isolation they are often meaningless (rate of part-time taken out of context does not say much);
- **Complex indicators** (or indexes) which are the combination of several single indicators (i.e. an index of time quality combining: duration of working hours, predictability of working hours, control over time schedules, intensity of work). The problem is that they are difficult to construct. But they provide a more sophisticated and comprehensive picture, as long as the way they are constructed is clear to all.

##### Nature of indicators:

18. A lot of discussion takes place on the “scientific” (and “objective”) nature of indicators. Attention should be drawn on the sources used to build indicators, in particular in the field of

quality of work and employment. Information can be based on administrative reporting (which is not necessarily accurate, i.e. on accidents) or on self-reporting. This last point refers to surveys where a number of the situations are determined by self-assessment of the surveyed, being about the working conditions (European Working Conditions Survey) or the relationship with the employment market (Labour Force Survey) or more broadly the living conditions (ECHP, EU-Silc, Quality of Life survey). Self-reporting should not be underestimated: it is a valuable and a reliable source of information. There are several methods to increase the validity of the questionnaire/questions: through use of validated questions, pre-testing, post-testing (triangulation). These are particularly useful if you deal with international questionnaire, especially if they are conducted in several languages.

## **V. Development of indicators on quality of work and employment by the European Foundation**

19. The European Foundation has been involved in the development of some of the indicators on working conditions. One of the first challenges for the European Foundation was to try and establish one single EU-wide data source on working conditions. Both comparability and trend detection were important elements in this exercise.

20. The European Survey on Working Conditions (ESWC) is carried out every five years. The first European Working Conditions Survey was undertaken in 1990 and consisted of 30 questions. It was conducted as part of a Eurobarometer survey. A second European Working Conditions Survey, and consisted of 60 questions. In 2000, a third European Working Conditions Survey was undertaken in 15 EU member states and Norway, with 80 questions. In 2001/2002, the survey was undertaken in the then acceding and candidate countries. In the Autumn of 2005, the survey will be carried out again in the 25 EU member states, some candidate countries, Switzerland, on a sample size of 1000 interviews per country (600 for small countries).<sup>6</sup>

21. It is an EU-wide source providing specific information on the intrinsic characteristics of work. It contains data on various aspects of job quality such as objective physical working conditions (noise, extreme temperatures, repetitive tasks, etc.) and subjective evaluations regarding work-related health (fatigue, stress, backache, muscular pains) and job satisfaction as well as health-related absenteeism. One of the drawbacks of the European Working Conditions Survey is on the one hand the sample size which may compromise the comparability between countries with regard to in-depth multivariate country analysis and on the other hand the elapsed lap between the survey waves. This last point may be relativised if we consider that changes in working conditions are more structural and only occurs after a certain time.

22. Four main dimensions of quality of work and employment can be identified and are investigated.<sup>7</sup> This should enable to structure the indicators. These dimensions are:

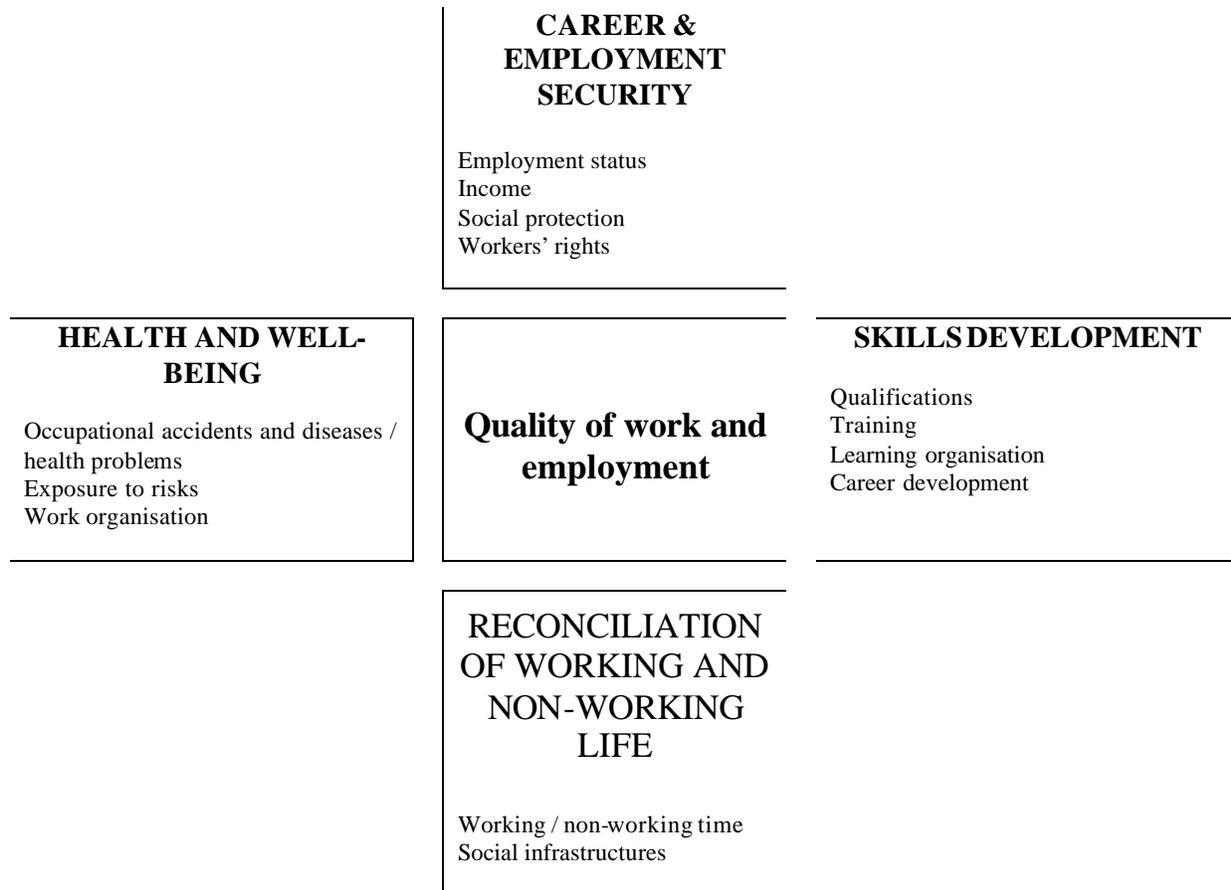
- job security (status, income, social protection, worker's rights),
- good health and well-being,
- skills and competence development,
- successful combination of working and non-working life.

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<sup>6</sup> More information on the European working conditions surveys can be found on the website : <http://www.eurofound.eu.int/working/surveys/index.htm>

<sup>7</sup> This is elaborated in Quality of work and employment in Europe (2002), Foundation paper.

## The concept of quality of work and employment



23. In general, it is found in the European Working Conditions Survey and in other research and statistical findings from all bodies (whether political or academic), that the working population has changed. There are differences according to country, but two phenomena are prevalent: the ageing of the workforce and the increased proportion of women on the labour market. The nature of the work has changed equally. Two phenomena have influenced the quality of jobs and of employment. A first element is the fact that companies are more open to the outside world, meaning more direct contact with customers. This has the implication that often market constraints are influencing heavier than purely industrial constraints. A second element is the information society and the more extensive use of information technology, even though there are big differences from country to country. Another change is in the labour market: there are more flexible forms of work. There is a big increase in fixed-term contract, temporary agency work and other forms of work.

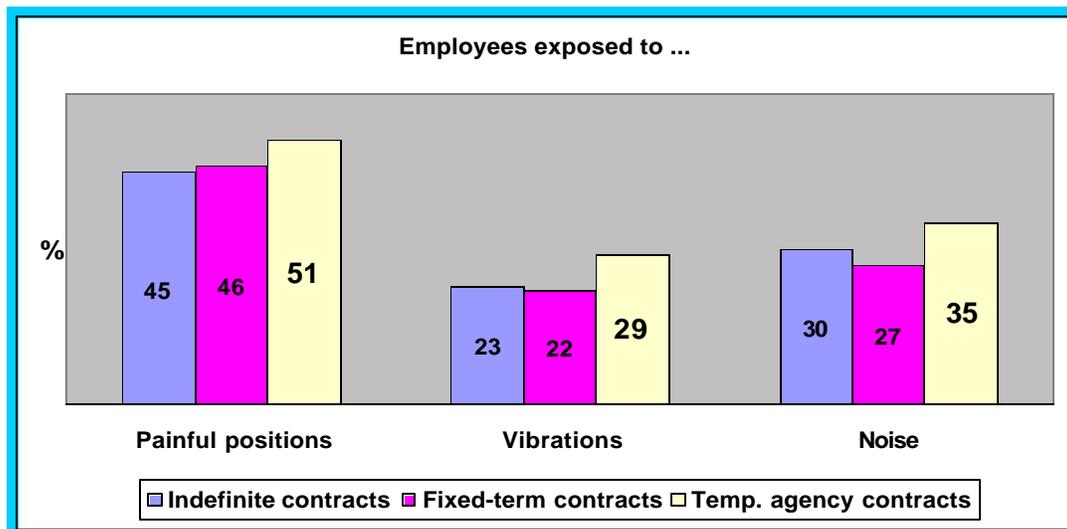
24. The above formulated four dimensions try and capture a number of indicators which could give form to the quality of work and employment of the individuals. The examples given underneath are only a selection of the findings from the survey to illustrate the application of the indicators in this context and give not a complete picture.

**i. Ensuring career and employment security**

25. Under this heading, the following elements should be considered:

- the terms of employment (employment status)
- workers' rights (information, consultation, participation and equal opportunities)
- salary
- social protection

26. As already indicated, there is an increase in temporary work. There is an increase in fixed-term contracts and temporary agency work. However, there is a high correlation between these forms of employment and poorer working conditions, as well as poorer health in general.



27. If we look at workers' rights, we would consider equal opportunities for men and women. There is still a great deal of segregation in the workforce, both horizontal and vertical. A second aspect is information and consultation of workers. Information on occupational risks has improved: in 2000, 86% of the workers felt that they were well informed, compared to 81% in 1995. Involvement in organisational changes varies widely over the countries and among certain categories (non-permanent workers are less involved).

28. Income is an important variable. There are still significant income gaps between men and women. There is also a correlation between low wages and precarious status.

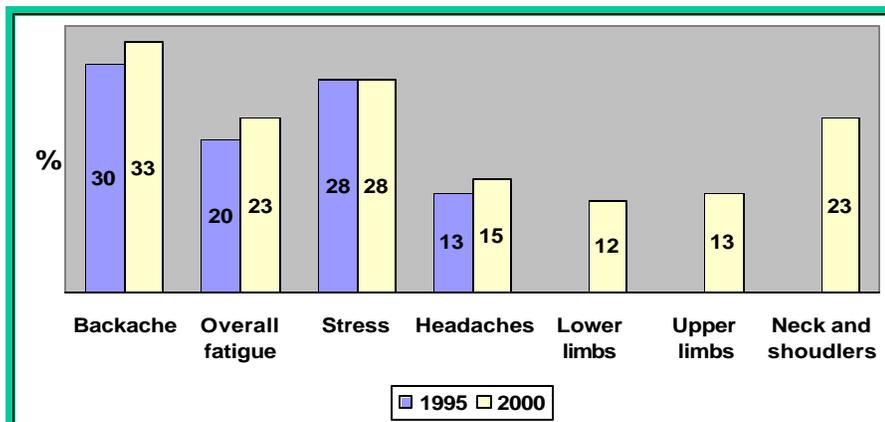
29. Social protection rights are a counterpart to this. Job flexibility should be considered with social protection rights. Flexibility represents a challenge to social protection, where on the one hand, one should try and insure citizens throughout the working life but at the same hand encourage people to stay on or re-enter the labour market (active labour market policies). There are many form of flexibility, each with their different peculiarities which makes it complex for the traditional social protection systems.

**ii. Promotion of health and well-being**

30. Under this heading, one should try and identify indicators which try to look at health in a broad sense, cfr the ILO definition ' the promotion and maintenance at the highest degree of

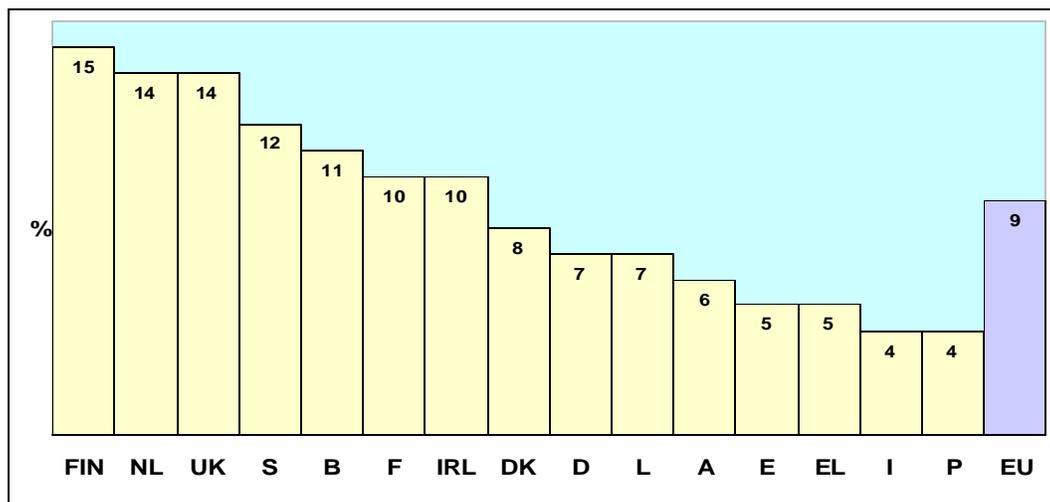
physical, mental and social well-being of workers'. We also try to capture the 'sustainability' of work (i.e. the possibility to be able to stay on the labour market throughout the working life).

31. Some elements which are investigated here are work-related health problems. In the 2000 survey, musculoskeletal problems seemed to have increased. 33 % of the workers, compared to 23 % in 1995 reported backache. A similar trend is observed for pain in neck and shoulders. Psychosocial problems seems to take a prominent place too, with 28 % of the workers reporting stress.



(Work related health problems, EWCS)

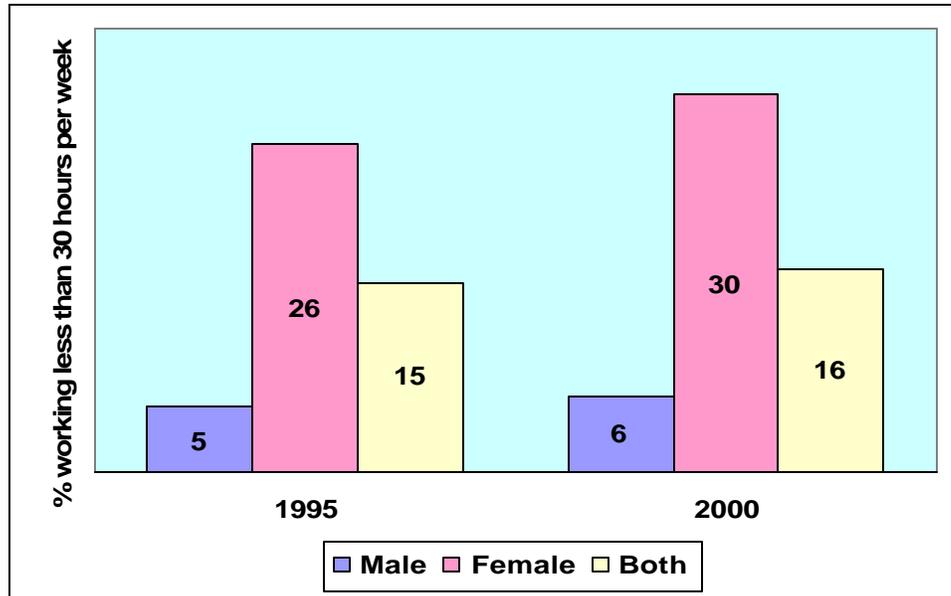
32. Another element which could be considered here is violence and harassment at the workplace. There are wide differences over the countries (and some cultural bias might have to be incorporated) but it is an important issue to consider when looking at quality of work and employment.



Workers subject to intimidation, EWCS, EU15, 2000)

33. Reasons for these health problems can be found in the changing nature of the work, due largely to new technology and increased commercial constraints (direct contacts with clients, more time pressure). Also, one finds that traditional exposure factors have not been reduced (physical environment, work station design).



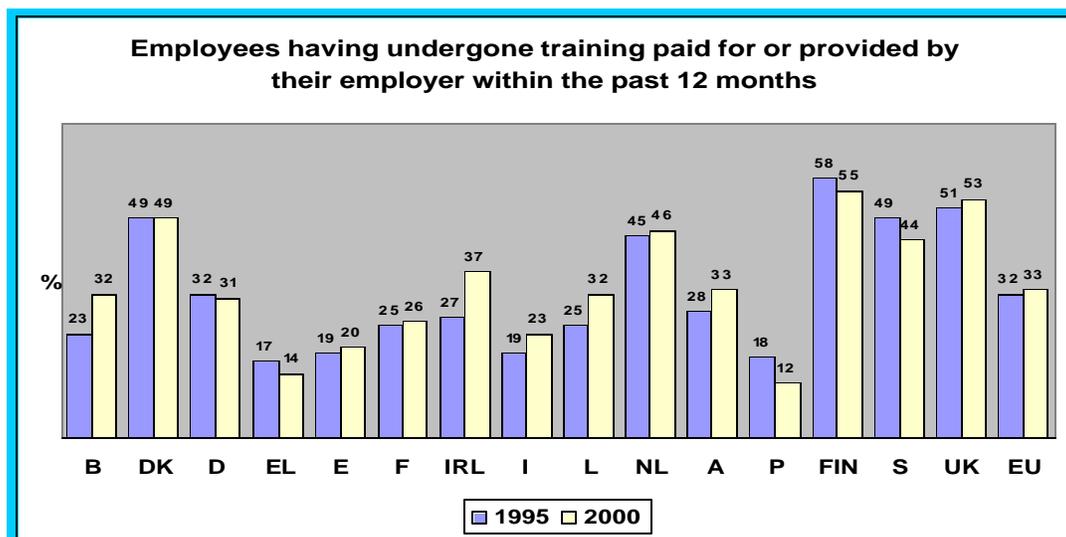


(Part-time workers in EU15)

#### iv. Skills development

38. An important element to measure quality of work and employment is how individuals are enabled to deploy and improve their skills. One could look both at formal and informal learning organisations.

39. Training is an important issue which could be considered here. Who gets training and how long and what kind of training? Is the training linked to the current job or more with a longer term perspective? There are huge differences between the countries. Another important difference could be noted according to employment status (employees on fixed-term and temporary contracts receive less training). Ageing workers receive less training.



40. Skills are also related to work organisations. New forms of work organisation and changing in the nature of the work might require higher levels / new qualifications. It might not only be related to occupational skills but also human or social relations as well as communication skills.

## **VI. Conclusion**

41. These four dimensions try and capture the concept of quality of work and employment. Their importance is that to try and capture a feeling of working conditions of all workers, that is: they should try and capture the situation of all forms of work, in all sectors, work organisations, for men and women of all ages. While it is difficult to force or compress the 'world of work' into a limited number of indicators to grasp the concept of quality of work and employment, it is an important exercise. Employment is much more than just having a job. Europe wants 'more and better jobs'. By developing indicators on quality of work and employment, we can identify what content to give to that sentence.

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