



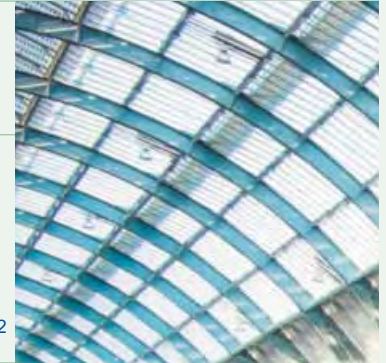
European Foundation for the  
Improvement of Living and  
Working Conditions



# Retail sector: Working conditions and job quality

*'Work plays a significant role in people's lives, in the functioning of companies and in society at large. But what is work? How can we describe it? Is it changing, and if so, is it for better or for worse? Is it fulfilling the numerous and at times conflicting expectations we have of it? How can we take steps to improve work for the well-being of all?'*

Eurofound, *Fifth European Working Conditions Survey: Overview report, 2012*



This report gives an overview of working conditions, job quality, workers' health and job sustainability in the retail sector (NACE 47).<sup>1</sup> It is based mostly on the fifth European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS), which gathers data on working conditions and the quality of work across 34 European countries. Additional information on the structural characteristics of the sector is derived from Eurostat data. The fifth EWCS contains responses from 4,157 workers in retail. The report compares aspects of work in the sector with the EU28 as a whole.

## Structural characteristics

In 2010, 19,314,700 European workers worked in the retail sector, 8.8% of the EU28 workforce. Employment in the sector decreased by 2.4% between 2008 and 2010, and remained largely stable between 2010 and 2011 (Eurostat, 2013).

Countries where the retail sector is a relatively large employer are Lithuania (11.2%), Cyprus (11.3%), Bulgaria (11.9%) and Greece (12.3%). The sector has relatively little prominence in the Czech Republic (7.3%), Finland (6.7%), Sweden (6.0%) and Luxembourg (4.2%) (Eurostat, 2013).

A large proportion of workers in retail (60%) work in micro-workplaces (1–9 employees), compared to 42% of workers in the EU28. Consequently, the percentages of retail workers in small and medium-sized workplaces (10–249 employees, 36%) and large workplaces (250+ employees, 5%) is smaller than in the EU28 (46% and 12% respectively). The sector is female-dominated, with 63% of the workers being women (Eurostat, 2013). It employs a relatively large proportion of young people: 17% of workers are under 25, compared to 9% in the EU28.

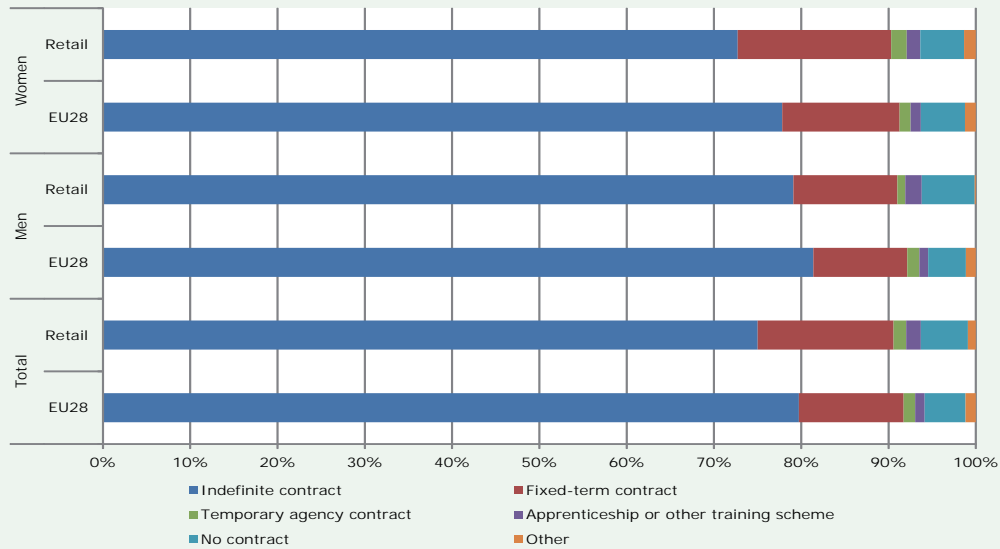
Self-employment is relatively prevalent in retail, with 7% being self-employed with employees and 15% self-employed without employees, compared to 4% and 11% respectively in the EU28. Fixed-term and temporary agency contracts are more common in retail than in the EU28 as a whole and, within retail, are more prevalent among women than among men (Figure 1).

## Retail sector in a nutshell

- Workers are relatively young and healthy
- Working hours are often atypical but tend to be regular
- Work–life balance needs attention
- Levels of employer-paid training are low
- Workers have little exposure to biochemical and ambient risks, but high levels of exposure to posture- and movement-related risks
- Job strain is an issue for workers in large workplaces

<sup>1</sup> Nomenclature statistique des activités économiques dans la Communauté européenne (statistical classification of economic activities in the European Community).

Figure 1: Employment status, by gender



Part-time work is more prevalent in the retail sector than in the EU28, particularly among men, with 40% of women and 17% men working 34 hours or fewer, compared to 38% of women and 12% of men in the EU28.

## Working conditions

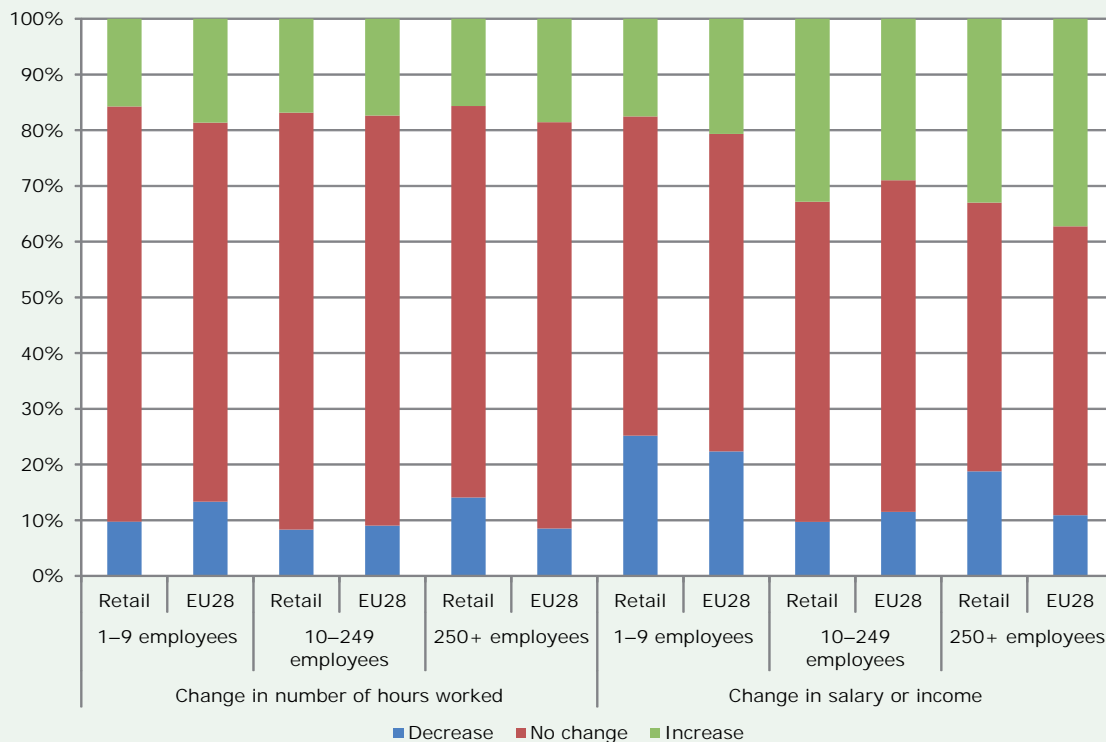
### Changes since the crisis

Figure 2 shows that the retail sector does not differ much from the EU28 average in reported changes in hours worked in the previous year, except for a slightly higher proportion of retail employees in micro-workplaces reporting no changes.

Both in the retail sector and in the EU28 in general, workers more frequently reported changes in salary or income than changes in hours worked in the year prior to the survey. Employees in micro-workplaces were more frequently affected by wage cuts than those in small, medium-sized and large workplaces. The proportion of employees in micro-workplaces reporting a decrease in salary is larger than the proportion reporting an increase. It is worth noting that the proportion of employees reporting an increase in salary was significantly higher in retail than in the EU28 as a whole.

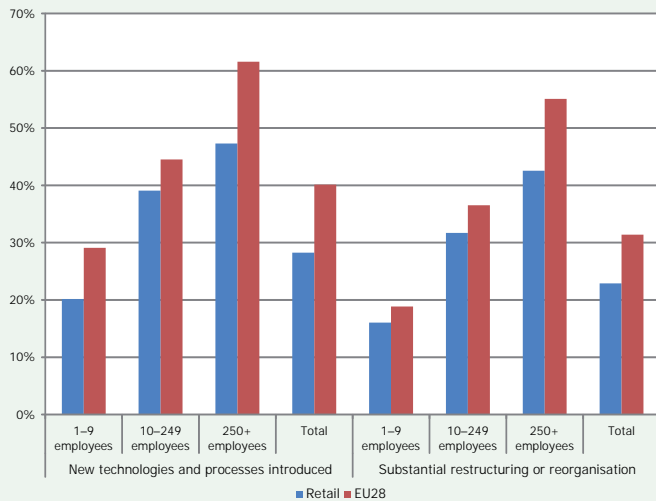
Examining restructuring and the introduction of new technologies, workers in retail were less affected than

Figure 2: Percentage of employees reporting changes in number of hours worked and salary or income in past year, by workplace size



the EU28 average (Figure 3). The retail sector follows the same pattern as the EU28 – the percentage of employees reporting restructuring or reorganisation or the introduction of new production processes and technologies increases with workplace size – but retail shows lower levels of reported changes across all workplace sizes. This difference is most pronounced for large workplaces.

Figure 3: Restructuring and introduction of new technologies in past three years, by workplace size

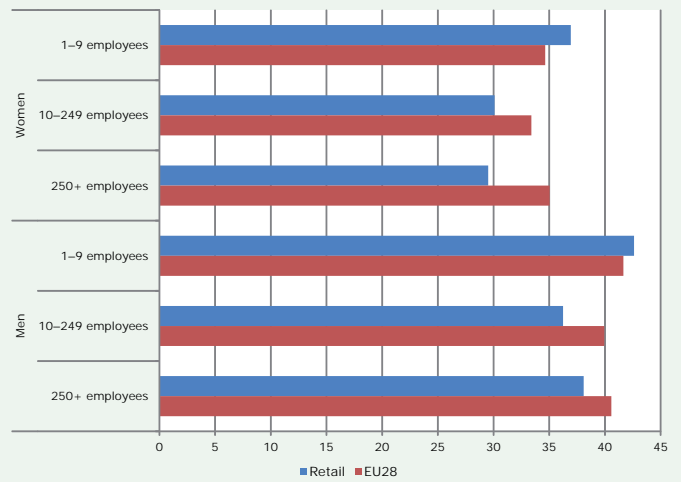


### Working time and work-life balance

Workers in retail work 33 hours per week, on average, compared to 38 hours in the EU28. This is largely due to the relatively high prevalence of part-time work in the sector. As in the EU28, men in the retail sector

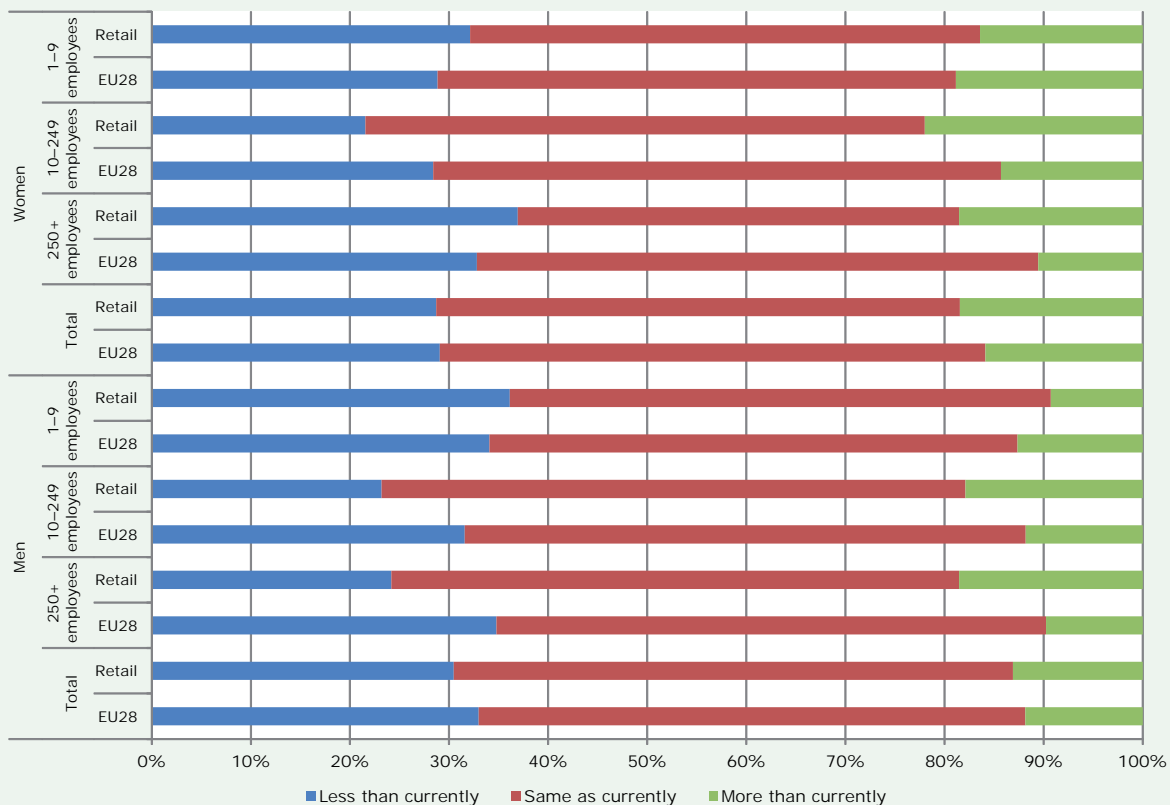
tend to work more hours than women, independent of workplace size (Figure 4). In the EU28, working time does not vary significantly across different-sized workplaces. In the retail sector, however, both men and women in micro-workplaces work more hours than those in small, medium-sized and large workplaces.

Figure 4: Average working hours, by gender and workplace size



When comparing retail with the EU28 average, there are no substantial differences in working time preferences: 29% would prefer to work fewer hours than currently, whereas 16% would prefer to work more hours. However, the data do show differences between different-sized workplaces (Figure 5).

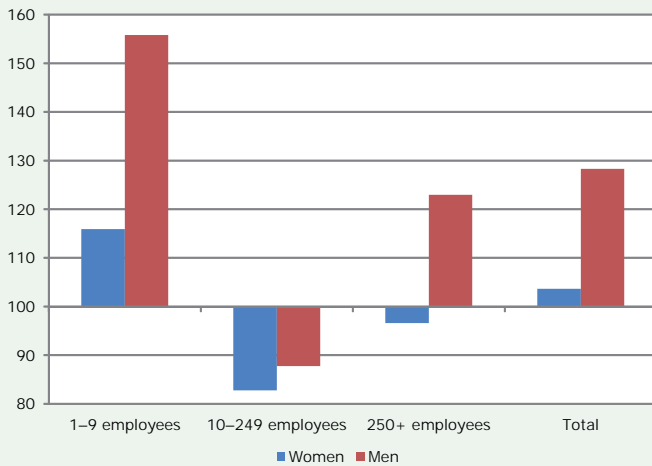
Figure 5: Working time preference, by gender and workplace size



In micro-workplaces, the proportion of individuals who would prefer to work fewer hours (34%) is slightly higher than in larger workplaces. At the same time, the share of those who would prefer to work more hours (14%) is considerably lower than in small and medium-sized workplaces (20%) and large workplaces (19%).

Figure 6 shows that working atypical hours (weekends, evenings or nights) is more prevalent in retail than in the EU28 as a whole, especially for men.

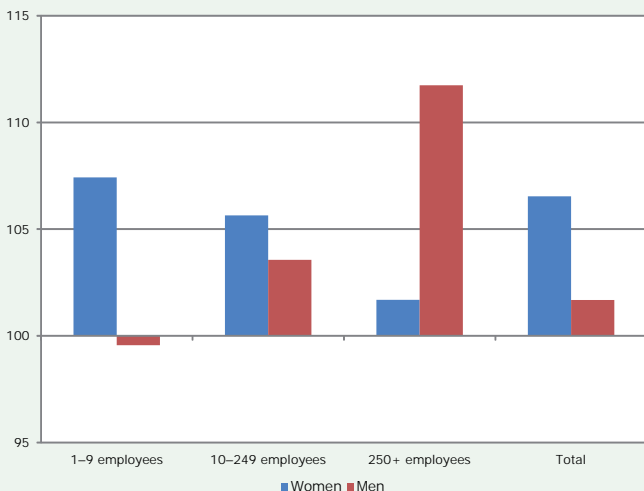
Figure 6: Index of working atypical hours (EU28=100), by gender and workplace size



There are, however, important differences across workplaces of different sizes. Men in micro-workplaces are particularly likely to work atypical hours, while employees of both genders in small and medium-sized workplaces are less likely to do so than the EU28 average.

When looking at the regularity of working time (working the same hours every day, the same days every week), differences between retail and the EU28 are less pronounced (Figure 7).

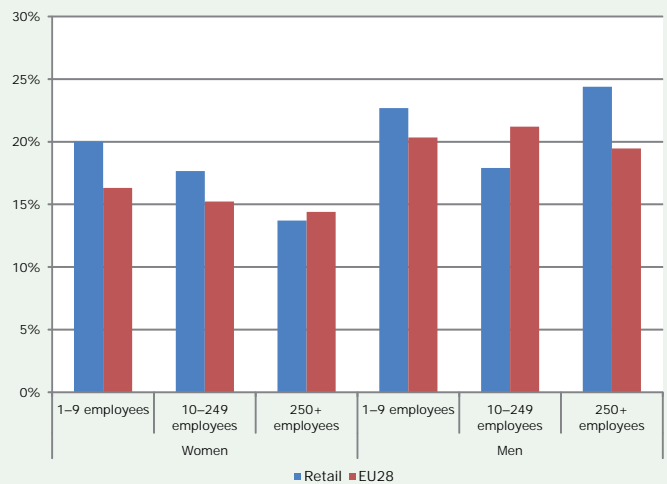
Figure 7: Index of regularity of working time (EU28=100), by gender and workplace size



So, although men in retail tend to work atypical hours, they are slightly more likely to have regular working hours, working the same number of hours every day and the same number of days every week than the EU28 average. Women in retail are somewhat more likely to have regular working hours than the EU28 average. Again, workplace size matters and has the opposite effect for men (the larger, the more regular) than for women (the larger, the less regularity).

Figure 8 shows that work-life balance (the fit between working hours and family or social commitments) is slightly worse for those working in the retail sector than in the EU28 as a whole.

Figure 8: Poor work-life balance, by gender and workplace size



In retail, as in the EU28, more men report a poor work-life balance than women. The most striking difference can be seen in large workplaces, where almost one quarter of the men report a poor work-life balance, compared to only 14% of women.

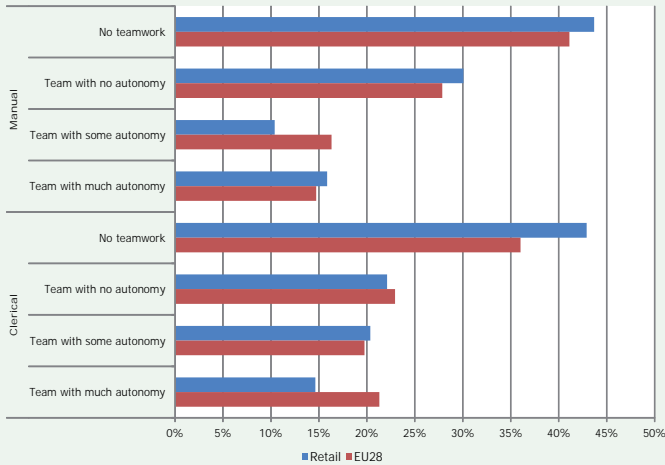
## Work organisation

### Teamwork

Teamwork has been proposed as an alternative to work organisation models based on high levels of labour division. As teamwork reflects a variety of practices, it can also assume a variety of forms. Different types of teamwork can be identified using the EWCS by looking at the level of autonomy within the teams.

Teamwork is slightly less prevalent in retail (57%) than in the EU28 (62%), as shown in Figure 9. This difference mainly refers to autonomous teamwork, which is reported by 33% of workers in retail, compared to 38% in the EU28. Also, workers in clerical jobs in retail are much more likely to work in an autonomous team (35%) than workers in manual jobs (26%).

Figure 9: Teamwork and team autonomy, by occupational category



**Task rotation**

Task rotation is also an important feature of work organisation. Depending on how it is implemented, task rotation may require different skills from the worker ('multiskilling') or may not ('fixed task rotation') and is either controlled by management or by the workers themselves ('autonomous'). Task rotation has been shown to be beneficial for workers' well-being, and autonomous multiskilling systems, in particular, are associated with higher worker motivation as well as better company performance.

Although the percentage of workers in retail working in a task rotation system does not differ from the EU28

(53%; Figure 10), a relatively large proportion of those in retail rotate fixed tasks (16%, compared to 10% in the EU28).

However, in small and medium-sized workplaces, the prevalence of management-controlled fixed task rotation (16%) is slightly higher than in micro-workplaces and large workplaces (11% for both), and slightly higher than in the EU28 as a whole (8%). Large workplaces in retail have a lower prevalence of autonomous multiskilling, both compared to the smaller workplaces in the sector and the average for large workplaces in the EU28.

**Female bosses**

It is interesting to note that in this female-dominated sector, only about half of women and one-fifth of men report having a female boss. These figures are, nevertheless, slightly higher than the EU28 average of 47% for women and substantially higher than the average of 12% for men.

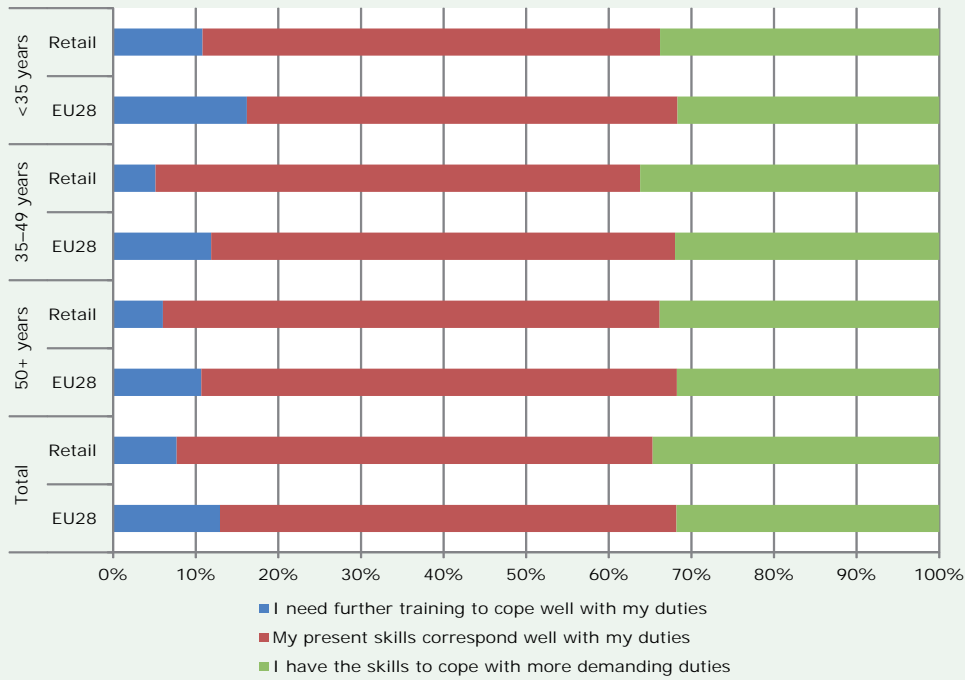
**Skills and training**

Overall, the majority of workers in retail say that their present skills correspond well with their duties (Figure 11). In retail, workers are slightly more likely to be over-skilled than in the EU28 and less likely to be under-skilled. The pattern is more or less the same across different age groups, but both in retail and in the EU28, younger workers are slightly more likely to report being under-skilled.

Figure 10: Prevalence of task rotation, by workplace size

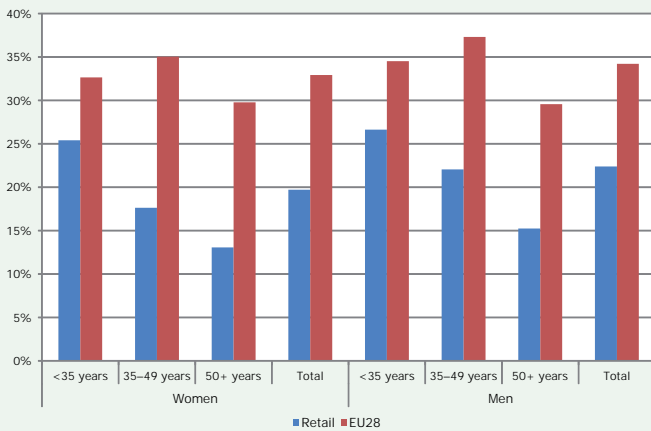


Figure 11: Match between skills and tasks, by age group



The percentage of workers in retail who report having received training is much lower than in the EU28 for both women and men (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Employer-paid training, by gender and age

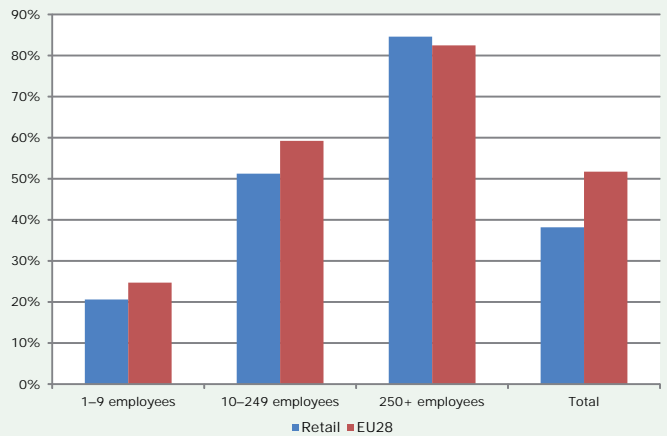


The difference between retail and the EU28 is smallest for younger workers. For both men and women in retail, reported levels of employer-paid training decrease with age.

### Employee representation

The EWCS contains limited information on formal employee representation. It asks whether an employee representative is present in the workplace and whether workers have raised an issue with an employee representative in the past year. Figure 13 shows the combined results of these questions (an employee representative has been considered to be 'available' if they are present in the workplace or when an issue was raised).

Figure 13: Availability of an employee representative in the workplace, by workplace size



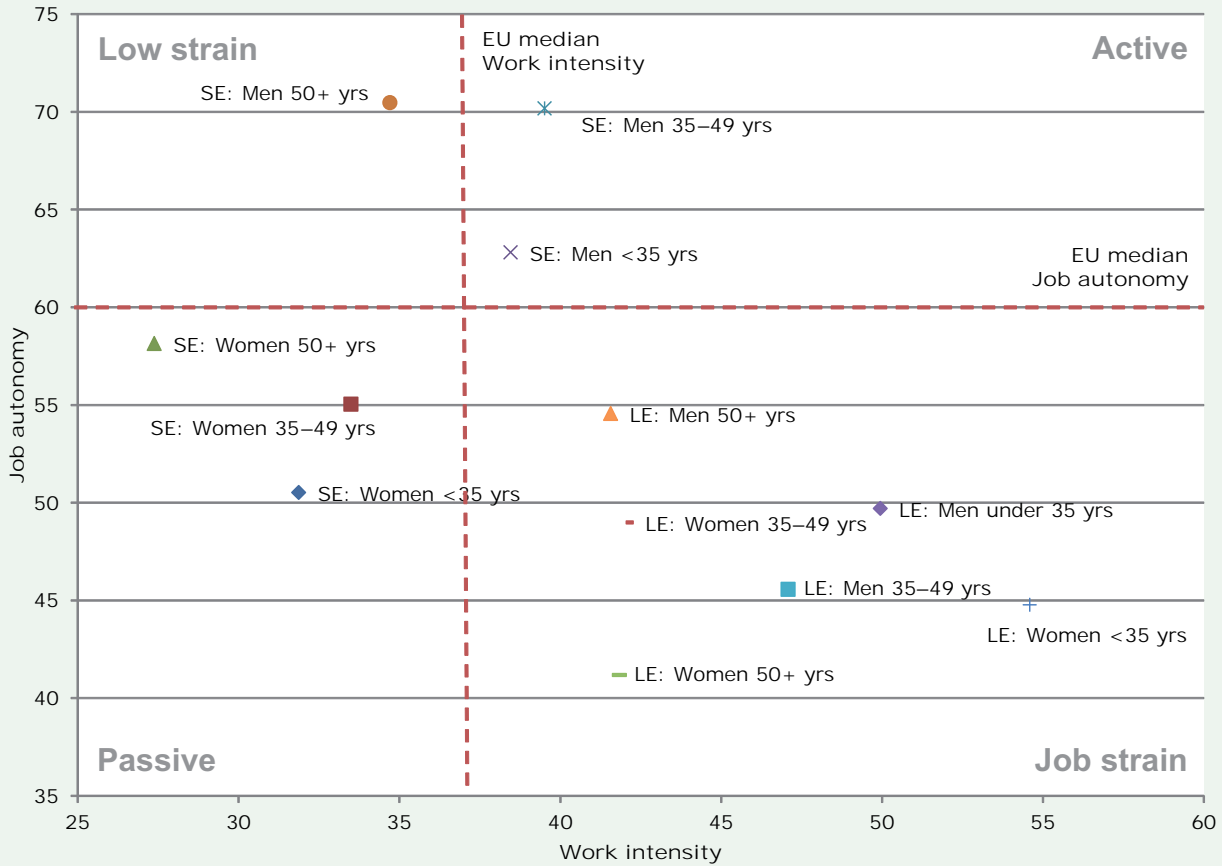
In 2010, 38% of employees in retail reported that an employee representative was available compared to 52% of workers in the EU28. This difference disappears when we look at workplaces with more than 250 employees. As is the case in the EU28, the more workers employed in the workplace, the higher the probability of having an employee representative.

### Psychosocial and physical environment

#### Job autonomy and work intensity

The psychosocial and physical environment has a substantial impact on workers' well-being. According to the job demand and control model of the American sociologist Karasek (1979), workers are more likely to suffer from work-related stress when they are faced with a high level of demands while being limited in the control they have over the way in which they carry out their job.

Figure 14: Distribution of groups of workers by average levels of job autonomy and work intensity



Note: LE = large enterprise; SE = micro, small or medium-sized enterprise

Figure 14 shows the likelihood of workers in retail experiencing work-related stress. Groups of workers are plotted along two axes: job autonomy and work intensity.

The averages for all age groups of women in micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (SEs) are in the bottom left quadrant. They are likely to be in 'passive' jobs, characterised by low levels of intensity and low levels of autonomy. The risk of stress is low in these jobs, but there are risks of frustration and low motivation as the jobs are not very challenging, and workers have little control over what they do in their job and how they do it.

Men over 50 in SEs in retail are predominantly in low-strain jobs, characterised by low levels of work intensity and high levels of job autonomy. Again, these jobs pose a low risk of stress, but workers are less likely to experience frustration and loss of motivation than those in passive jobs.

The top right quadrant contains the averages for men under 50 in SEs. These workers tend to be in 'active' jobs, with high levels of work intensity and high levels of job autonomy. Although their jobs can be very demanding, they have enough control over the way they do their job and can develop coping strategies through active learning.

Finally, the most problematic category is 'job strain' in the bottom right quadrant, which contains the

averages for all workers in large retail companies. Their jobs are characterised by high levels of intensity and low levels of autonomy, posing the risk of unhealthy stress levels and, consequently, a range of stress-related illnesses such as cardiovascular disease and mental health problems.

### Social environment

A good social environment is characterised by the existence of social support and the lack of abuse at work. Social support can help workers deal with high levels of work intensity. Workers in retail are close to the EU28 average on this indicator (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Index of good social environment (EU28 = 100), by gender and workplace size

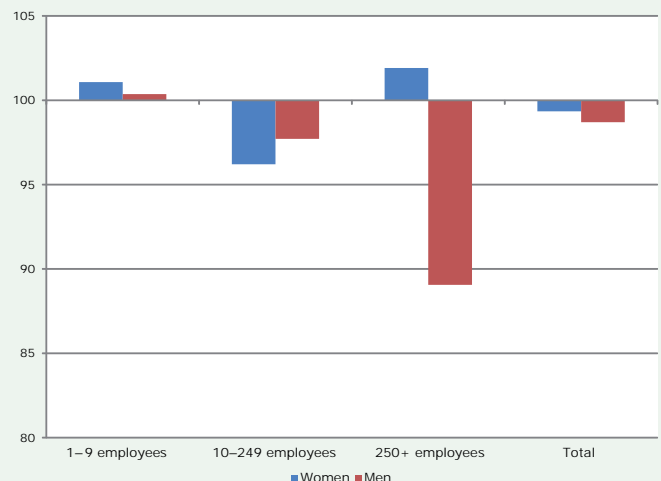
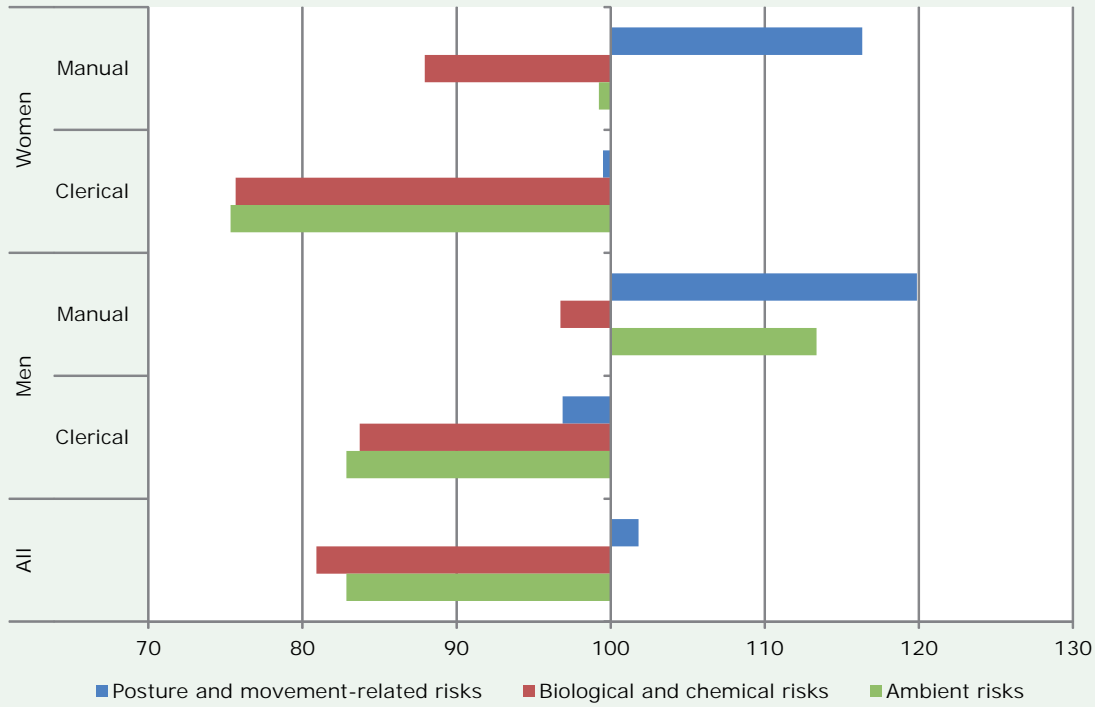


Figure 16: Indices of exposure to physical risks (EU28 = 100), by gender and occupation



Women and men do not differ much overall, but show a different pattern across different sized workplaces. For men, the social environment shows a negative relationship with workplace size; for women, it tends to be best in large workplaces, followed by micro-workplaces, and is worst in SMEs.

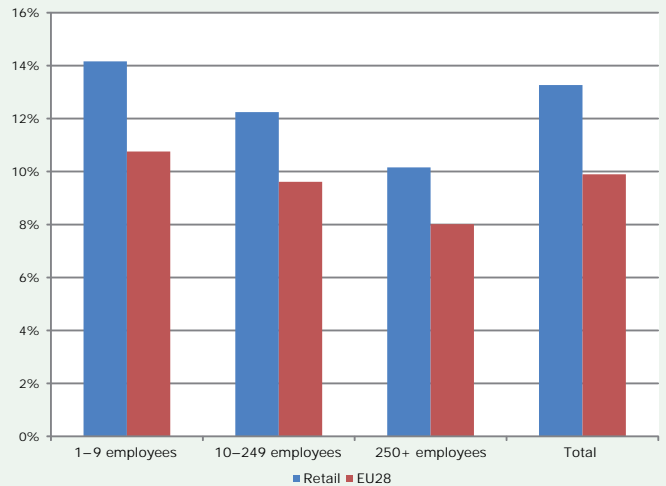
**Physical risks**

In retail, exposure to posture- and movement-related risks is highest, followed by ambient risks and biological and chemical risks (Figure 16), but overall, levels of exposure to physical risks in retail are lower than or similar to the EU28.

However, manual workers report substantially higher exposure levels to these three physical risks than clerical workers, with exposure to posture- and movement-related risks being a good deal higher than the EU28 average among both men and women. Exposure to ambient risks only exceeds the EU28 average among men in manual occupations.

One in eight retail workers report they were not very well or not at all well informed about workplace risks, compared to only one in ten in the EU28 (Figure 17). The percentage of workers who are not sufficiently informed decreases with workplace size, but the differences between retail and the EU28 remain.

Figure 17: Not very or not at all well informed about health and safety risks at work, by workplace size



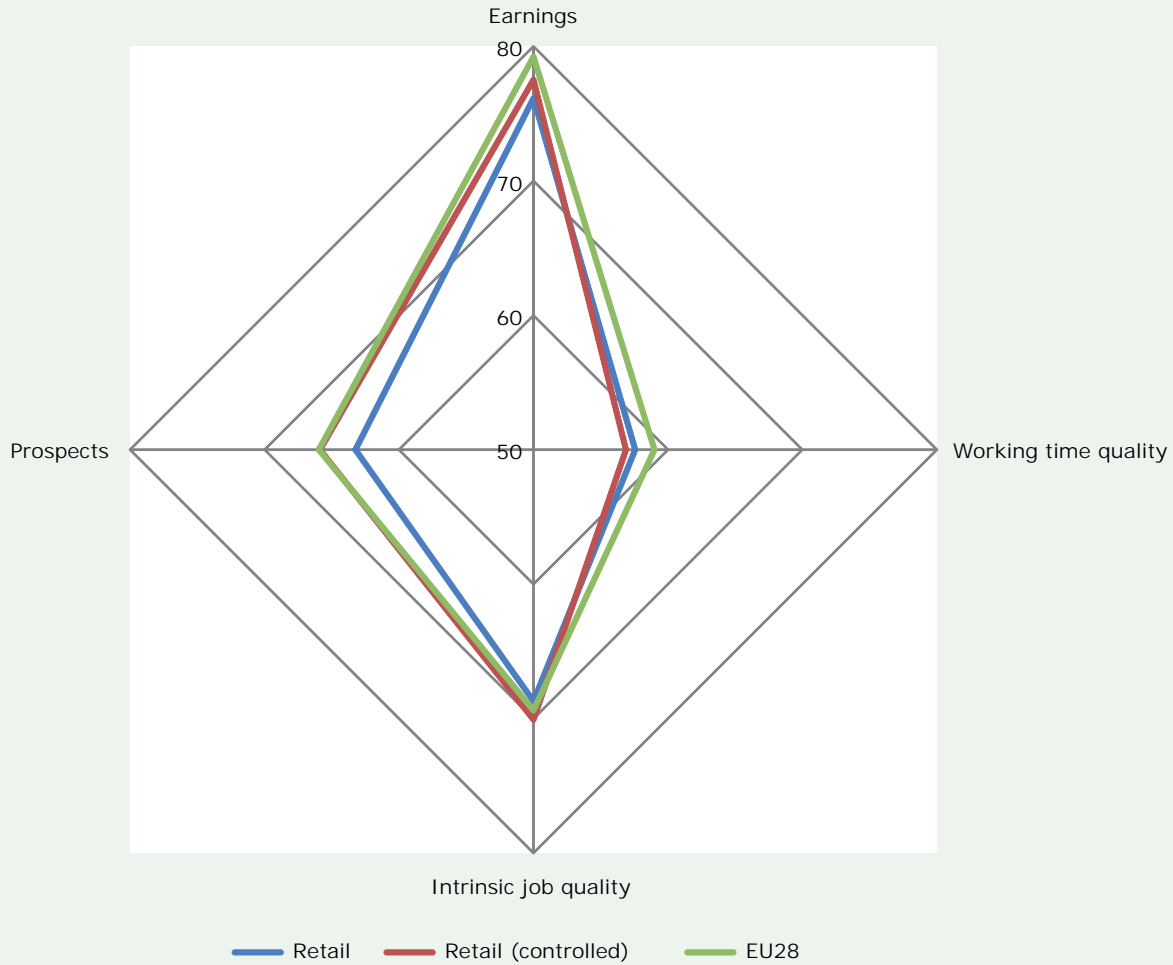
**Job quality**

In the report *Trends in job quality in Europe*, the authors constructed four indices of job quality: earnings, prospects, intrinsic job quality and working time quality. The indices were built using job characteristics that are unambiguously associated with workers' well-being.

Figure 18 summarises job quality in the retail sector. It shows the average score for the sector on each of the indicators, with and without controlling for the structural characteristics of the sector's workers (age, gender, workplace size, education level and country), and for the EU28.



Figure 18: Job quality in retail compared with EU28



Note: Scores on all four indicators range from 0 to 100

Job quality in the retail sector is slightly lower than in the EU28 as a whole. Retail workers have lower earnings, lower working time quality and fewer prospects. However, when controlling for the structural characteristics of the sector – particularly the fact that workers in retail tend to be young and tend to be less likely to have tertiary-level education – the difference with the EU28 average for earnings becomes smaller, and the difference in prospects completely disappears. The slight increase in the difference in working time quality implies that workers in retail are slightly worse off in this regard than workers in other sectors of a similar age and with a similar education.

### Health and sustainability of work

Working conditions can impact both positively and negatively on the health of workers and on the sustainability of their jobs.

Figure 19 shows that retail compares favourably with the EU28 for the lower incidence of absenteeism due to work accidents, along with lower proportions reporting poor health, or that their health is at risk because of work, or that work affects their health negatively. The sector does not differ much from the EU28 average for workers reporting to have worked when sick (presenteeism) and the proportion of workers who think they will be able to do their job at age 60. The difference between retail and the EU28 in terms of poor self-reported health is largely attributable to the fact that workers in retail are relatively young. The other differences remain when controlling for gender, age, education, workplace size and country.

Figure 19: Health and sustainability of work

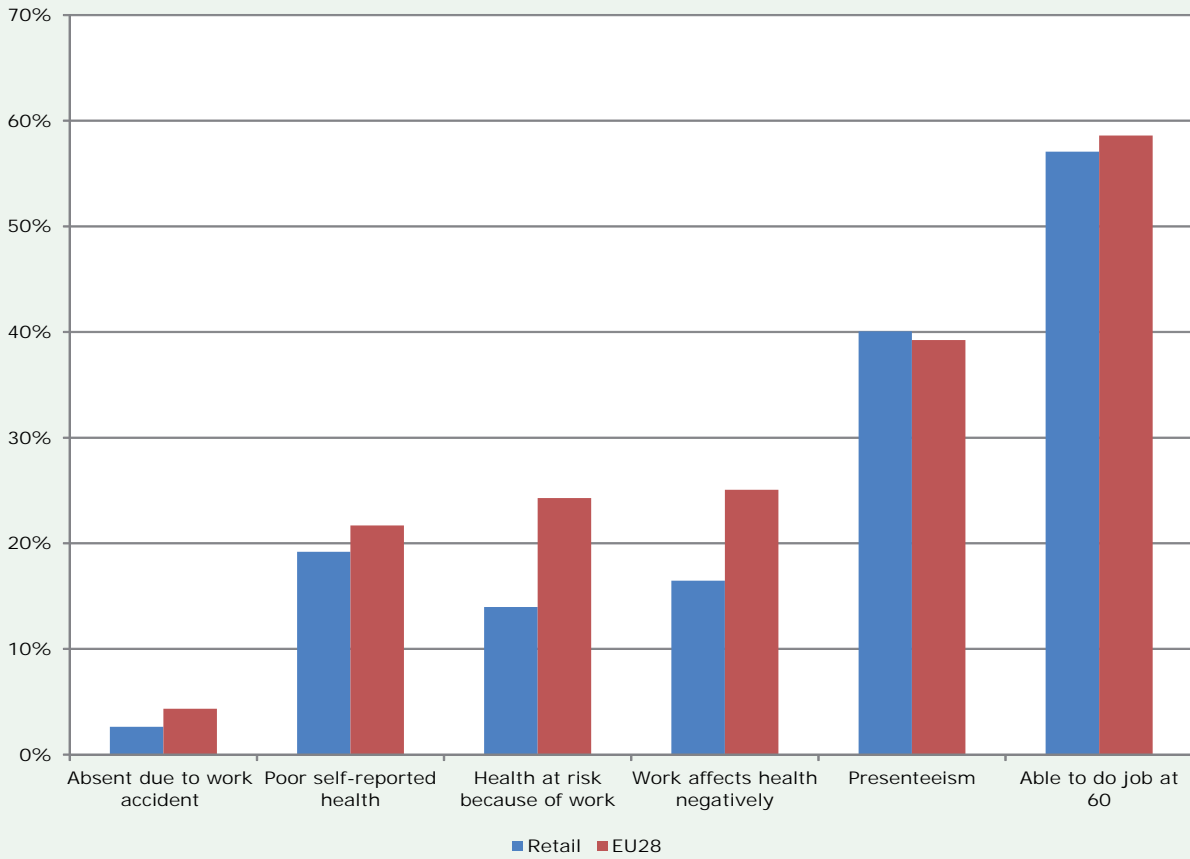
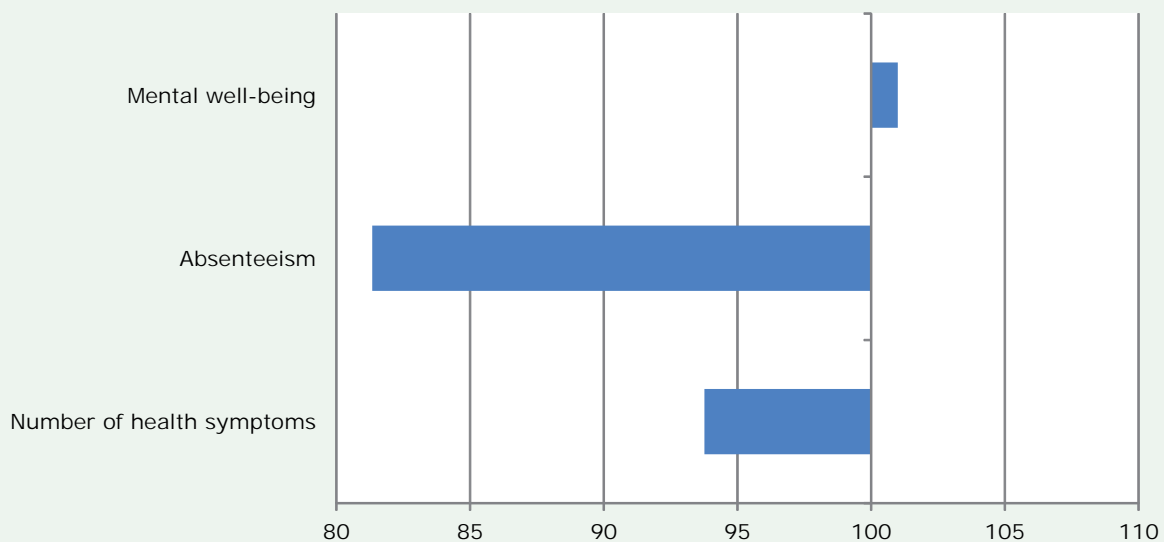


Figure 20 again shows a fairly favourable picture of the retail sector, with mental well-being scores close to the EU28 average, and absenteeism and reported number of health problems being considerably lower. Although the number of reported health problems increases substantially with age, differences between the retail sector and the EU in relation to health problems and absenteeism are still observed when controlling for gender, age, education, workplace size and country.

It is important to keep in mind that the impact of work on health is a very gradual process that can take a long time and cannot be fully captured in a cross-sectional survey. The results in this section are likely to underestimate the often negative health effects that physically and psychologically strenuous working conditions can have.

Figure 20: Indices of health symptoms, mental well-being and absenteeism (EU28 = 100)



## References

Eurofound (2012), *Trends in job quality in Europe*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

Eurostat (2008–2012), EU Labour Force survey database, available at [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/statistics/search\\_database](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/statistics/search_database)

Karasek, R. A. Jr (1979), 'Job demands, job decision latitude, and mental strain: Implications for job redesign', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 24, pp. 285–308.

## European Working Conditions Survey

Eurofound developed its European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) in 1990 in order to provide high-quality information on living and working conditions in Europe. Five waves of the survey have been carried out to date, enabling long-term trends to be observed and analysed.

The EWCS interviews both employees and self-employed people on key issues related to their work and employment. Fieldwork for the fifth EWCS took place from January to June 2010, with almost 44,000 workers interviewed in their homes in 34 countries – EU28, Norway, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo. The 5th EWCS was implemented by Gallup Europe, who worked within a strong quality assurance framework to ensure the highest possible standards in all data collection and editing processes.

The questionnaire covered issues such as precarious employment, leadership styles and worker participation as well as the general job context, working time, work organisation, pay, work-related health risks, cognitive and psychosocial factors, work-life balance and access to training. A number of questions were included to capture the impact of the economic downturn on working conditions.

For more information on the EWCS, see <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/ewcs/index.htm>

## Sectoral analysis

The report *Working conditions and job quality: Comparing sectors in Europe* and the series of 33 sectoral information sheets aim to capture the diversity prevalent across sectors in Europe in terms of working conditions and job quality. The report pinpoints trends across sectors in areas such as working time and work-life balance, work organisation, skills and training, employee representation and the psychosocial and physical environment. It identifies sectors that score particularly well or particularly poorly in terms of job quality and sheds light on differences between sectors in terms of health and well-being.

For more information, see <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/ewcs/2010/sectorprofiles.htm>

### Further information

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