



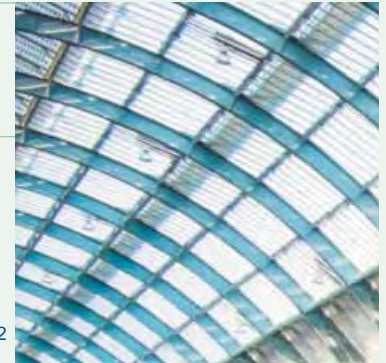
European Foundation for the
Improvement of Living and
Working Conditions



Wholesale 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 wholesale sector (NACE 46).¹ 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 881 workers in the wholesale sector.² The report compares aspects of work in the sector with the EU28 as a whole.

Structural characteristics

In 2010, 7,410,200 European workers worked in the wholesale sector, 3.4% of the EU28 workforce (Eurostat, 2008–2012). Employment in the sector decreased considerably (-5.5%) between 2008 and 2010, with a further decline between 2010 and 2012 (-2.8%). Countries where the wholesale sector is a relatively large employer are Cyprus (5.7%), Malta (5.5%) and Lithuania (5.0%). The sector has relatively little prominence in the United Kingdom (2.5%), Romania (2.3%), and Slovenia (2.1%).

A large proportion of workers in wholesale (60%) work in small and medium-sized workplaces (10–249

employees), compared to 46% of workers in the EU28. Consequently, the percentages of workers in wholesale in micro-workplaces (1–9 employees, 32%) and large (250+ employees, 6%) workplaces is smaller than in the EU28 (46% and 12% respectively). The sector is male-dominated, with 60% of the workers in wholesale being men; the majority of workers in the sector are aged between 35 and 49 (45%), while older workers are slightly under-represented (21%) compared to the EU28 average of 26%.

Self-employment without employees is less common in wholesale (8%) than in the EU28 as a whole (11%). Fixed-term, temporary agency and apprenticeship contracts are also slightly less prevalent in wholesale than in the EU28 as a whole (Figure 1).

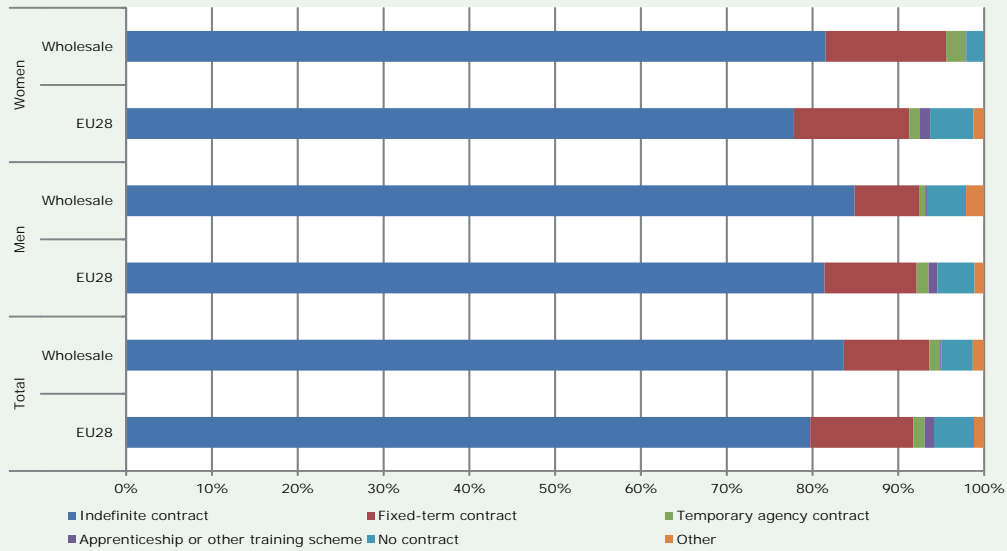
Wholesale sector in a nutshell

- The sector is male-dominated
- Working hours of employees in large workplaces need attention
- Workers are relatively well informed about health and safety risks
- Job strain is an issue for young workers and workers in small and medium-sized workplaces
- Workers have high levels of exposure to posture- and movement-related risks and ambient risks for manual workers
- The proportion of workers reporting a negative impact of work on their health is lower than average

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

² When a breakdown category contains less than 30 cases, no reliable estimates can be calculated. As a consequence, some graphs will have bars missing.

Figure 1: Employment status, by gender



Part-time work is less prevalent in the wholesale sector than in the EU28, with only 26% of women and 6% of men in the wholesale sector working 34 hours or less, compared to 38% of women and 12% of men in the EU28.

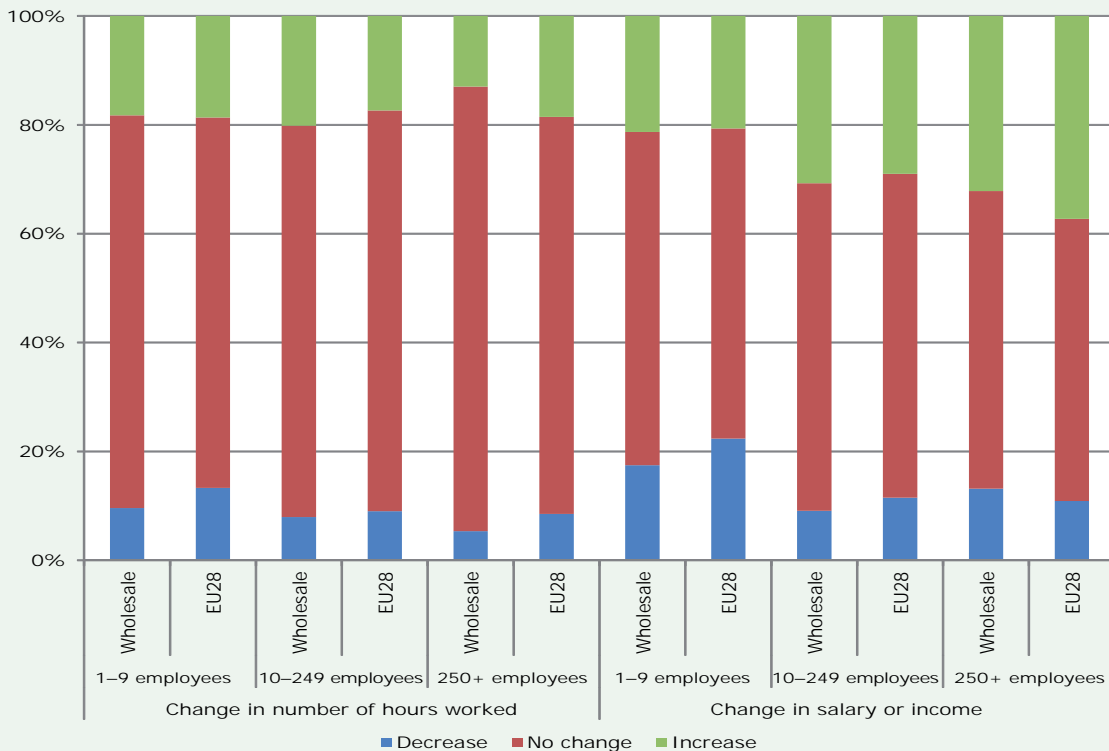
Working conditions

Changes since the crisis

Figure 2 shows that the wholesale sector does not differ much from the EU28 average for reported changes in hours worked, except for a slightly higher share of employees in large workplaces in wholesale declaring no changes, and a lower share of employees in micro-workplaces reporting a decrease in hours worked.

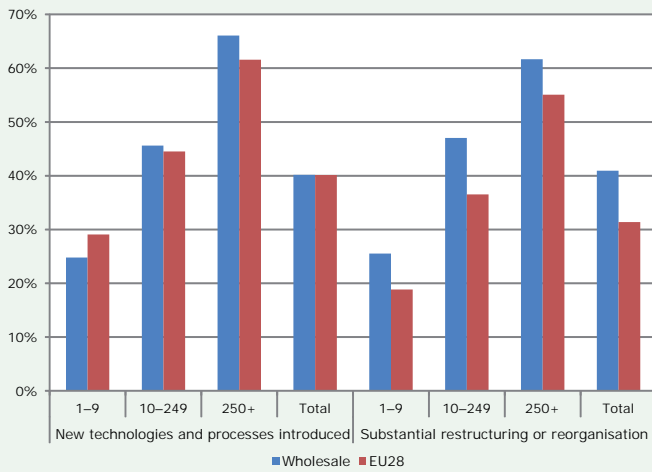
Both in the wholesale sector and in the EU28 in general, workers more frequently reported changes in salary or income than changes in hours worked in the year prior to the survey. Within the sector, employees in micro-workplaces were more affected by wage cuts than employees in small, medium and large workplaces. At the same time, the share of employees in large workplaces in wholesale reporting a decrease in salary (13%) is higher than the EU28 average (10%), while that of employees reporting an increase (32%) is lower than the EU28 (37%). Overall, however, the proportion of employees reporting a decrease in salary was lower in wholesale than in the EU28 as a whole.

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



In terms of restructuring and the introduction of new technologies (Figure 3), workers in wholesale were slightly more affected than the EU28 average. The wholesale sector follows the same pattern as the EU28 – the share of employees reporting restructuring or reorganisation, or the introduction of new production processes and technologies increases with workplace size – but the proportion of workers reporting changes is consistently higher in wholesale than the EU28 average across all workplace sizes, with the exception of new technologies in micro-workplaces.

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

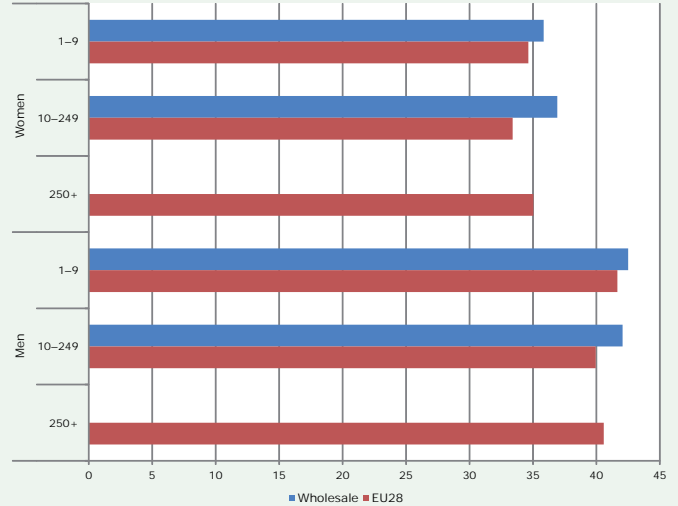


Working time and work-life balance

Workers in wholesale on average work 40 hours per week compared to 38 hours in the EU28. This difference is probably due to the very low prevalence

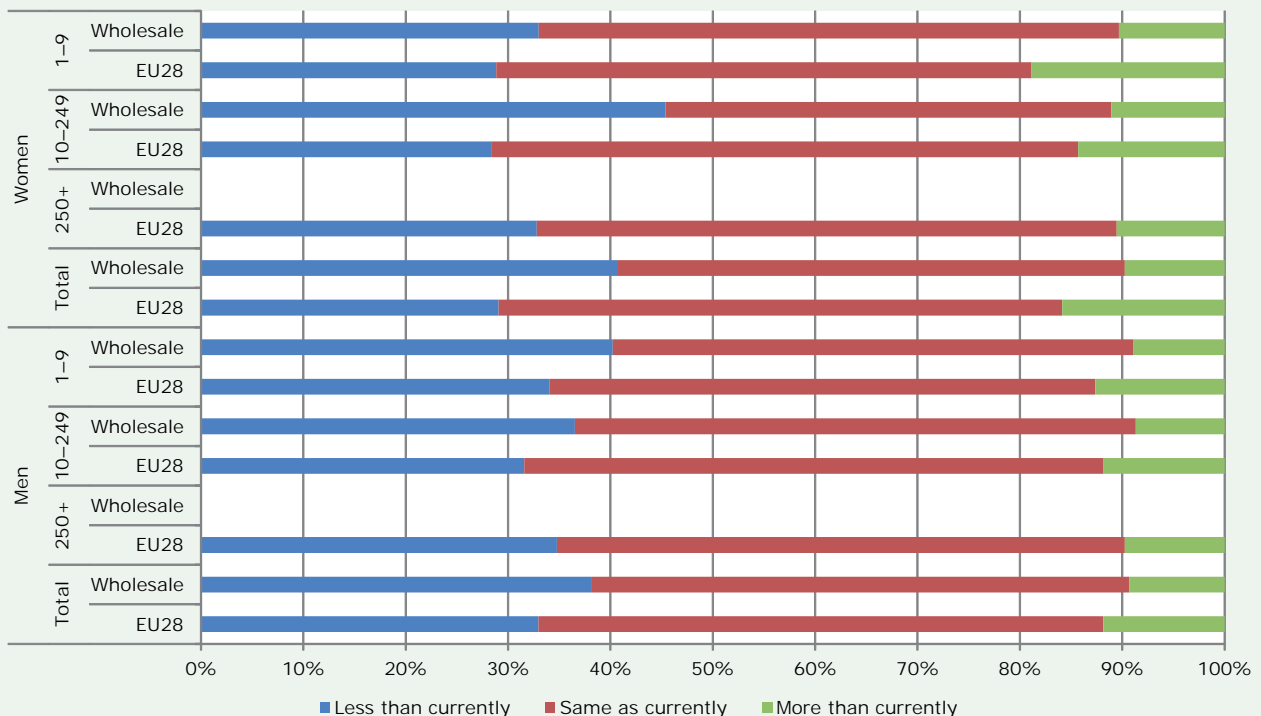
of part-time work in the sector. As in the EU28, men in the wholesale sector tend to work more hours than women, independent of workplace size (Figure 4), and working time does not vary significantly across different-sized workplaces.

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



In relation to working time preferences, no major differences emerge when comparing wholesale with the EU28, except that the share of employees preferring to work fewer hours is higher in wholesale (39%) than in the EU28 (31%). This pattern is the same across all workplace sizes in wholesale, but the difference is particularly pronounced in large workplaces, with 42% preferring to work fewer hours compared to 33% in the EU28.

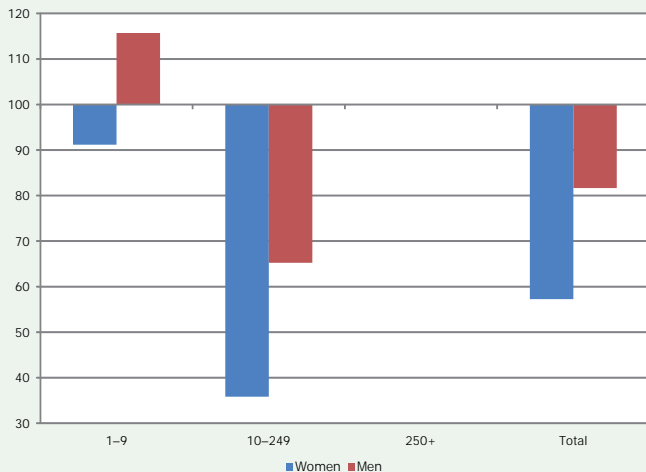
Figure 5: Working time preference, by gender and workplace size



Women in wholesale are also considerably more likely to prefer working fewer hours (41%) than women in the EU28 as a whole (29%).

Figure 6 shows that working atypical hours (weekends, evenings and/or nights) is considerably less prevalent in wholesale than in the EU28 as a whole, especially for women.

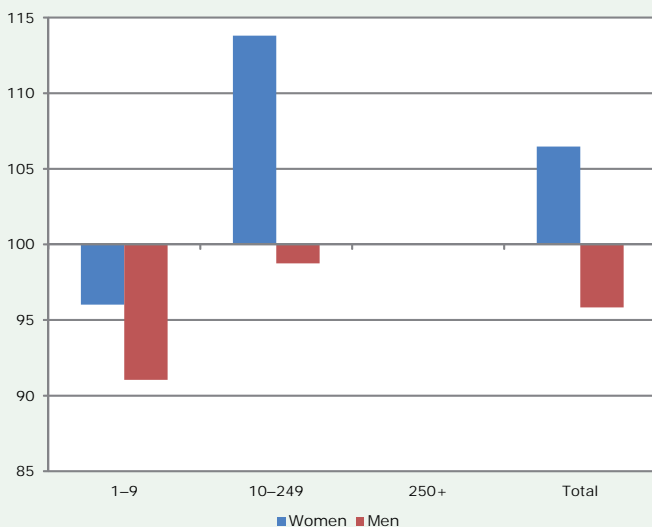
Figure 6: Index of working atypical hours (EU28=100), by gender and workplace size



Women in SMEs in particular are considerably below the EU28 average, while men in micro-workplaces are the only group of workers who on average report more atypical working hours than the EU28.

Differences between wholesale and the EU28 are slightly less pronounced when considering the regularity of working time (working the same hours every day, the same days every week), although differences exist across gender and workplace sizes (Figure 7).

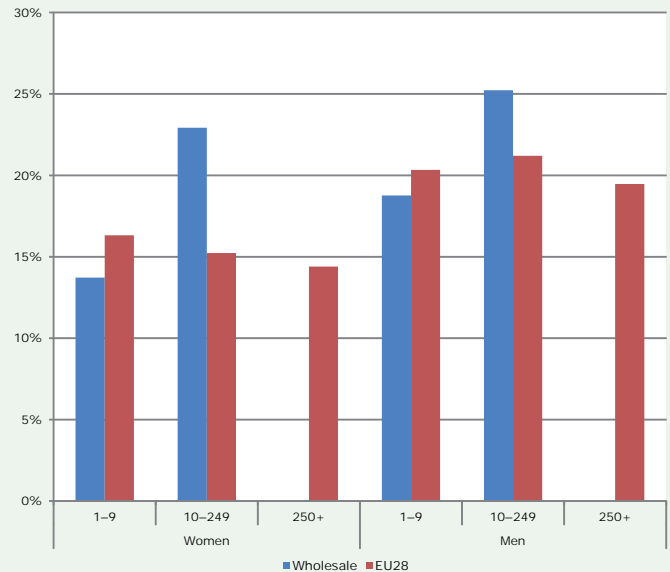
Figure 7: Index of regularity of working time (EU28 = 100), by gender and workplace size



Women in wholesale as a whole are slightly more likely to have regular working hours than the EU28 average, while the opposite is true for men. Workers in micro-workplaces in particular are less likely than the EU28 average to have regular working hours.

Figure 8 shows that wholesale does not differ substantially from the EU28 as a whole in terms of work-life balance (the fit between working hours and family or social commitments), although clear differences exist across workplace sizes.

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



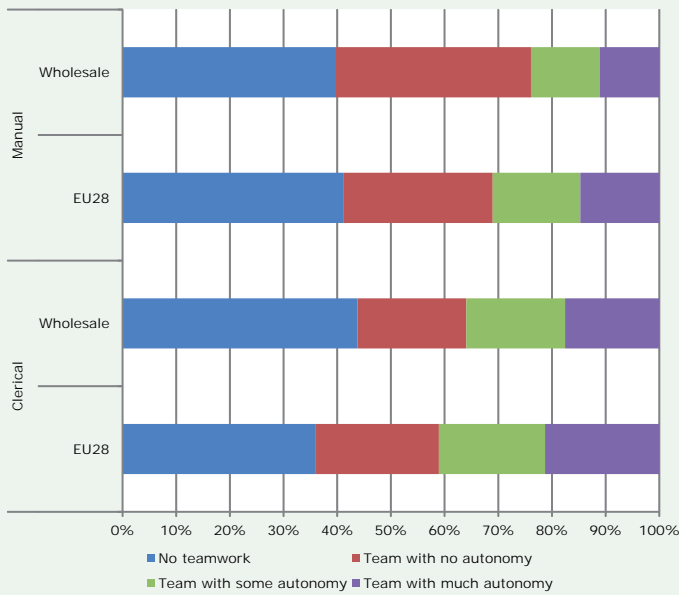
Indeed, while in micro-workplaces the proportion of both men and women reporting a poor work-life balance is lower than the corresponding EU28 average, the opposite is true for workers in small and medium-sized workplaces.

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 wholesale (57%) than in the EU28 (62%; Figure 9). It is interesting to note that while in the EU28 employees in manual jobs are less likely than employees in clerical jobs to work in teams, the opposite is true in wholesale: this difference is mainly due to the higher prevalence of teamwork without autonomy for manual workers (36%) than for clerical workers (20%).

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.

Overall, the percentage of workers in wholesale working in a task rotation system (43%) is slightly lower than the EU28 average (48%; Figure 10); the incidence of task rotation, however, clearly increases with workplace size, and, as in the EU28, management-controlled multiskilling is the most common form of task rotation across all workplace sizes. It is interesting to note that in large workplaces in wholesale, 'no task rotation' is less common than in workplaces of other sizes in the sector and the average of large workplaces in the EU28.

Female bosses

Wholesale is a male-dominated sector, and only 32% of women and 11% of men report having a female boss. These figures are lower than the EU28 average of 47% for women and 12% for men.

Skills and training

Overall, the majority of workers in wholesale say that their present skills correspond well with their duties (Figure 11), and no particular differences exist between the sector as a whole and the average for the EU28.

As in the EU28, across all age groups more workers report being over-skilled than under-skilled; however, both in wholesale and in the EU28 younger workers are slightly more likely to report being under-skilled.

Again, the percentage of workers in wholesale who report having received training does not differ significantly from the EU28 average (Figure 12). Women in wholesale are however slightly less likely

Figure 10: Prevalence of task rotation, by workplace size

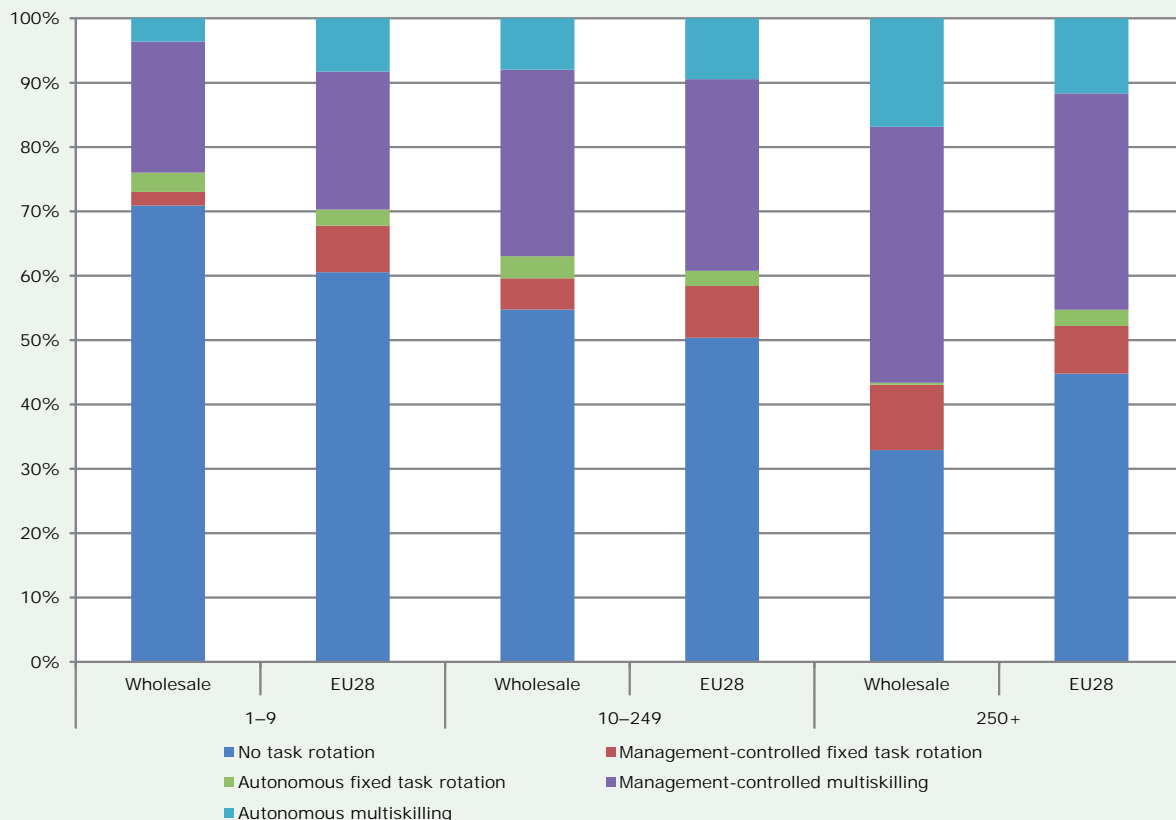
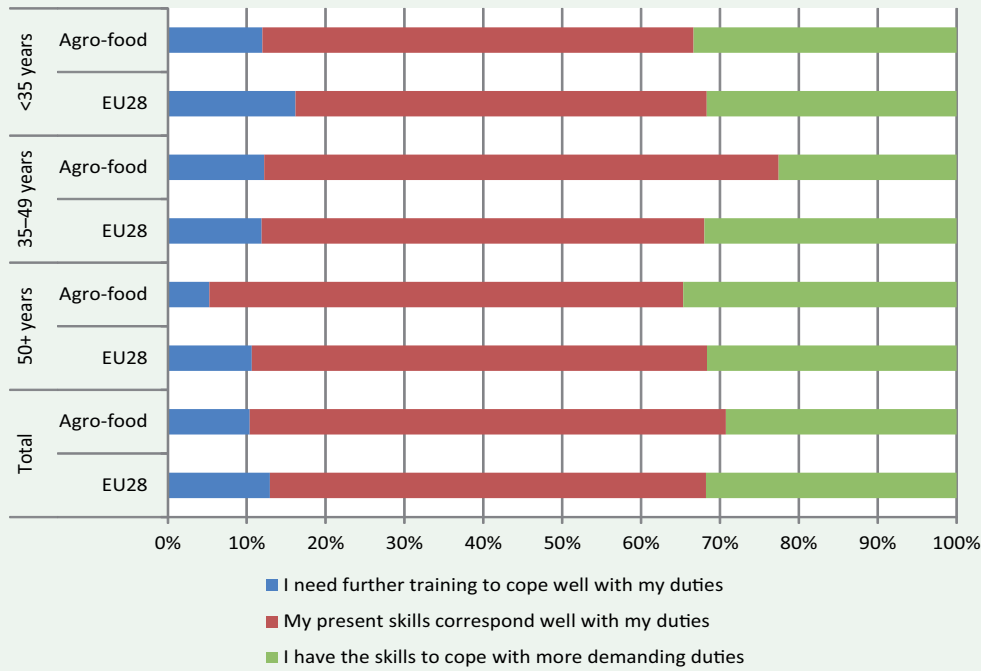
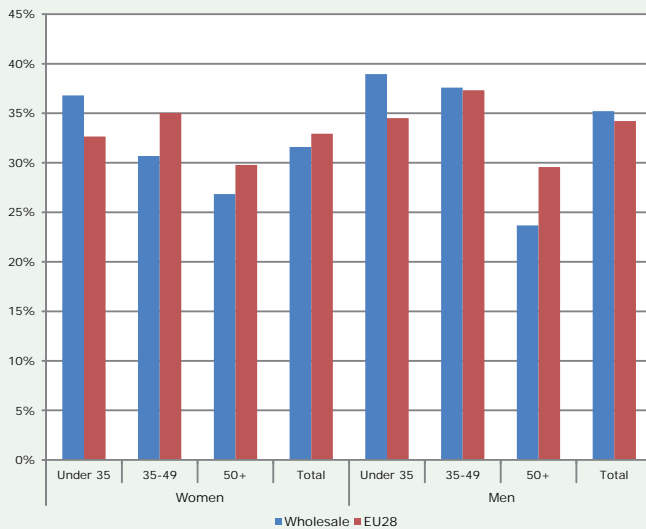


Figure 11: Match between skills and tasks, by age



than the average for women in the EU28 to have received training (30% compared to 32% in the EU28), and this difference is most pronounced for women in the 35–49 age category (30% in wholesale compared to 35% for women in the EU28). Older men in wholesale also report lower than average levels of training.

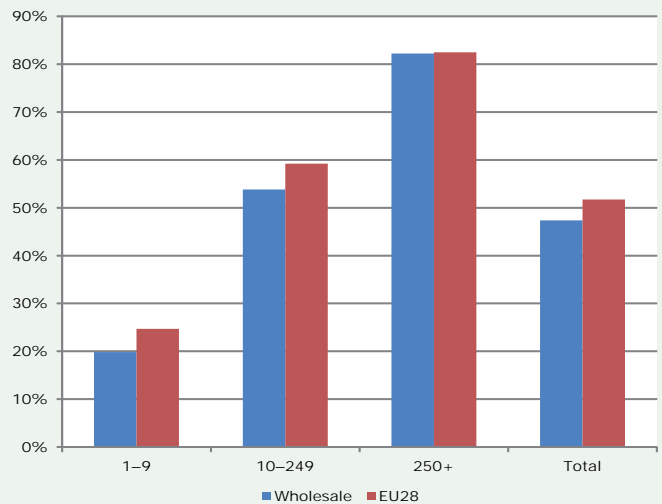
Figure 12: Employer-paid training, by gender and age



Employee representation

The EWCS contains fairly limited information on formal employee representation. It asks whether an employee representative is present at 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 at the workplace or when an issue was raised).

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



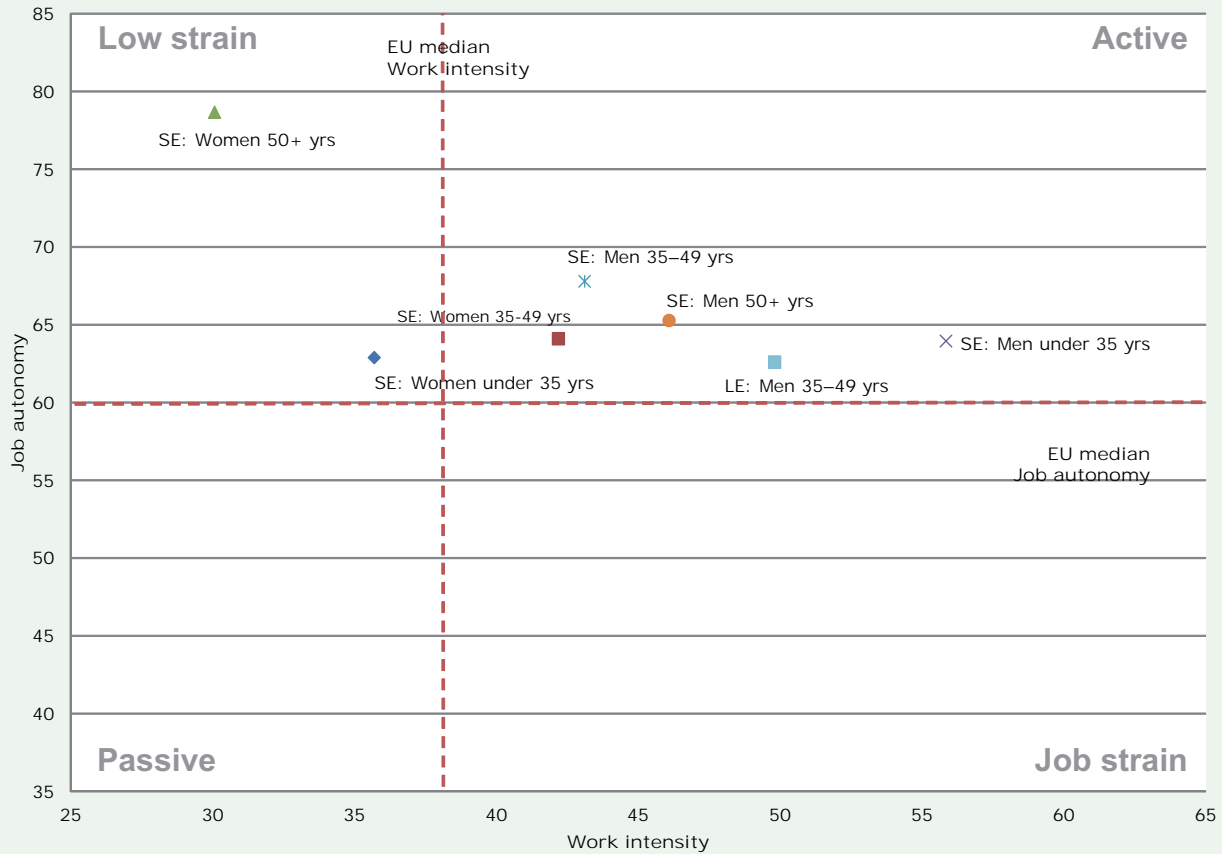
In 2010, 47% of employees in wholesale reported that an employee representative was available compared to 52% of workers in the EU28. This small difference disappears in workplaces with more than 250 employees. As in the EU28, the more workers employed in the workplace, the higher the probability of having an employee representative.

Psychosocial and physical environment

Job autonomy and work intensity

The psychosocial and physical environment impacts heavily 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 demand 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 wholesale suffering from work-related stress. Groups of workers are plotted along two axes: job autonomy and work intensity.

The bottom left quadrant in the figure corresponds to so-called ‘passive’ jobs, characterised by low levels of intensity and low levels of autonomy. This category is empty in the wholesale sector. 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.

The top left quadrant contains the averages for women in micro, small and medium-sized workplaces (SEs) under 35 and above 50 years of age in the wholesale sector. These workers are 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 suffer from frustration and loss of motivation than those in passive jobs.

The averages for all other categories of workers (men in all age groups working in SEs, women aged 35–49 in SEs and men aged 35–49 in large workplaces) are found in the top right quadrant of Figure 14. 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 again is empty in the wholesale sector. The jobs of workers in this category 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.

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

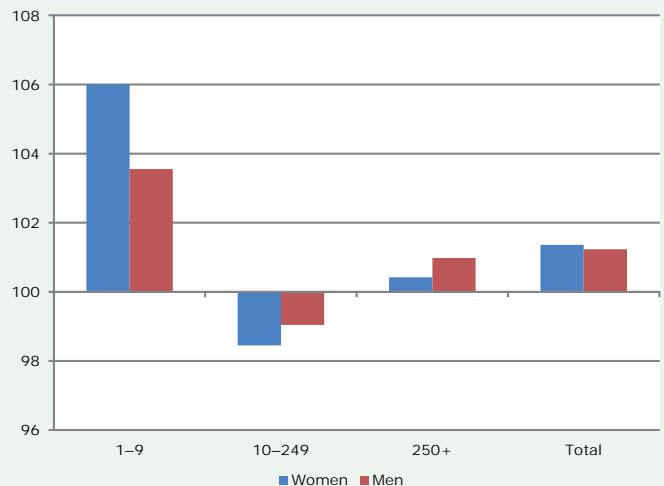
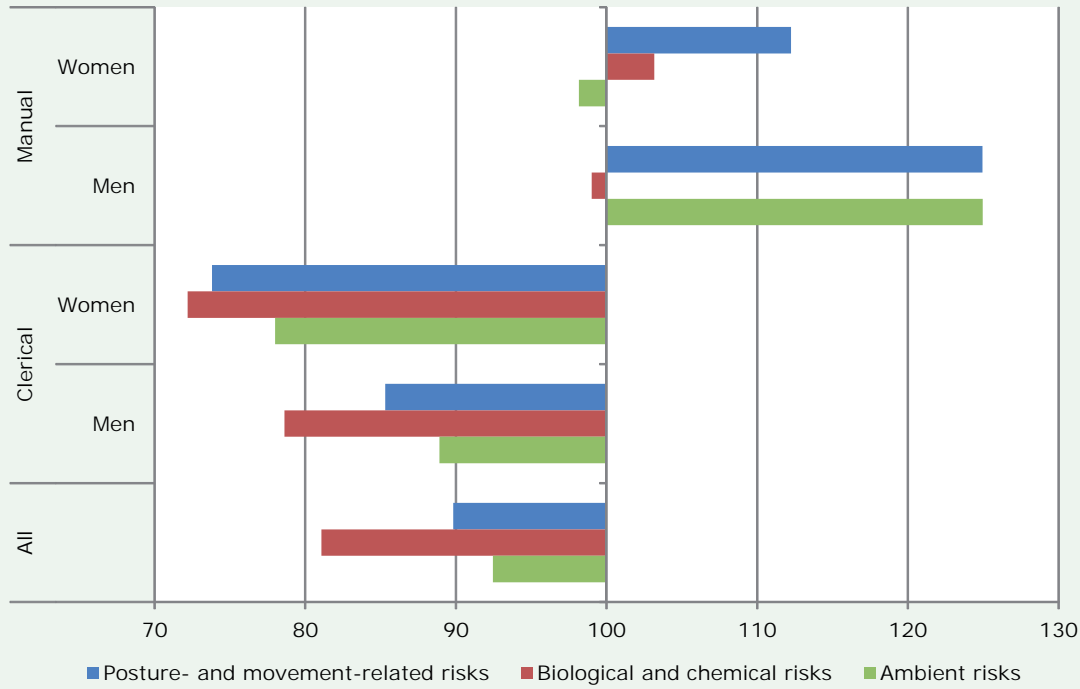


Figure 16: Indices of exposure to physical risks (EU28 = 100), by gender and occupation



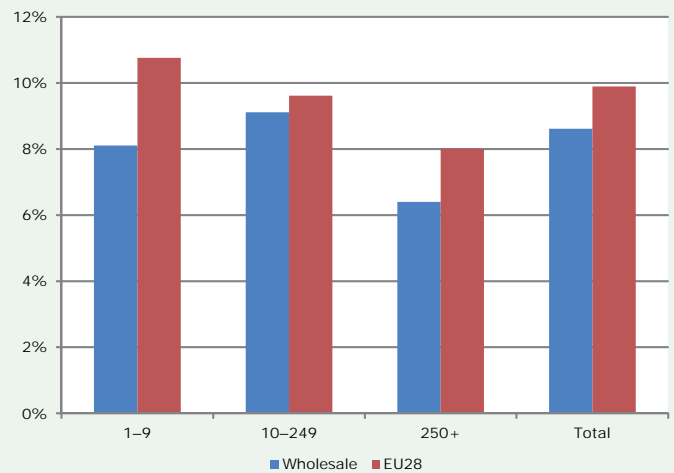
There are, however, differences across workplace sizes. Workers in micro-workplaces, and women in particular, report higher than average scores of good social environment, while the opposite is true for employees in SMEs, for whom levels of good social environment are slightly lower than the corresponding EU28 average.

Physical risks

Exposure to ambient risks is the most prevalent risk in wholesale, followed by ambient risks and biological and chemical risks (Figure 16). Overall, levels of exposure to physical risks in wholesale are lower than in the EU28. Both men and women manual workers, however, report a substantially higher than average exposure to posture and movement related risks. Exposure to ambient risks only exceeds the EU28 average among men in manual occupations.

Only 8% of workers in wholesale report they were not very well or not at all well informed about workplace risks, compared to 10% in the EU28 (Figure 17). The percentage of workers who are not sufficiently informed varies according to workplace size, but the difference between wholesale and the EU28 remains across the board.

Figure 17: Not very well 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 are built using job characteristics that are unambiguously associated with workers' well-being.

Figure 18 summarises job quality in the wholesale 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. Job quality in the wholesale sector does not differ significantly from job

Figure 18: Job quality in the wholesale sector compared with EU28



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

quality in the EU28 as a whole. Workers in the sector have very slightly higher earnings, working time quality and intrinsic job quality than the EU28 average, and do not differ in terms of prospects.

When controlling for the structural characteristics of the sector, some differences become slightly more marked. Working time quality and intrinsic job quality in particular appear slightly higher than the EU28 average, suggesting that workers in wholesale are marginally better off in this regard than workers in other sectors with similar age and education. Conversely, the average score for prospects in the wholesale sector decreases when controlling for background characteristics of the workforce, suggesting that employees in this sector might be worse off on this indicator than workers with similar profiles in other sectors.

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 wholesale compares favourably with the EU28, in terms of the lower proportion of workers reporting their health is at risk because of work and a lower proportion of workers reporting work affects their health negatively.

The sector does not differ much from the EU28 average in terms of workers reporting to have worked when sick (presenteeism), absenteeism due to work accident, workers with poor self-reported health and in the proportion of workers who think they will be able to do their job at age 60. Both observed differences remain significant when controlling for structural background variables (country, gender, age, level of education, establishment size).

Figure 19: Health and sustainability of work

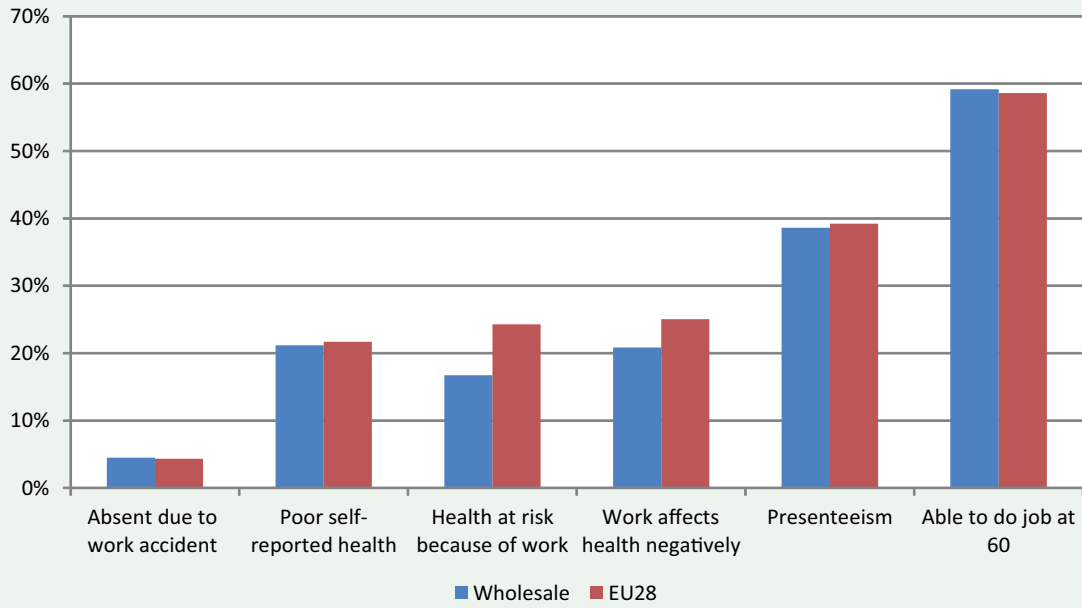
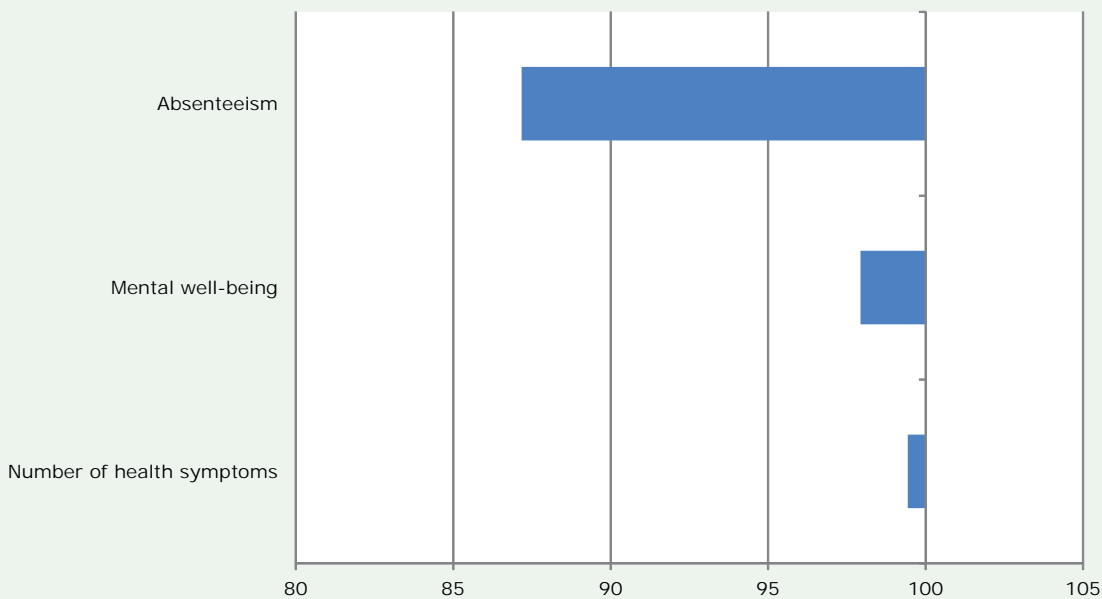


Figure 20 also shows a fairly favourable picture of the wholesale sector, with absenteeism scores considerably lower than the EU28 average and number of health problems very close to the EU28 average. Mental well-being scores are however slightly lower than average. As age and workplace size are both positively correlated with levels of absenteeism, the low prevalence of older workers and large workplaces in the sector largely explains why the observed difference in levels of absenteeism disappears when controlling for structural background variables (gender, age, country, education and

workplace size). The differences between wholesale and the EU28 in terms of mental well-being scores do, however, remain.

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)



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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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