

# Job quality and working conditions

Strategic Foresight – driver 6

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# Definition

Job quality and working conditions are two interrelated and mutually reinforcing aspects of the labour market. Job quality and broader working conditions characteristics have an essential role in the functioning of the labour market.

At the global level, the job quality and working conditions aspects are included in Article 23 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 and in the [International Labour Standards](#) and the [Decent Work Agenda](#) curated by the International Labour Organization (ILO). The International Labour Standards create a global framework that promotes opportunities for all to obtain a decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and dignity (ILO, 2023a). Additionally, the ILO activities for achieving decent work focus on job creation, rights at work, social protection, social dialogue, and placing gender equality as a transversal objective (ILO, 2023b).

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) defines **job quality** as a multidimensional concept covering all work and employment characteristics that positively or negatively impact employees' health and well-being (Eurofound, 2023a). As reproduced in Table 1, it also provides a conceptual framework for understanding the various areas covered by the broad concept of job quality and separates these dimensions into factors that have a psychological and physiological influence (job demands) and those that support the well-being of workers (job resources) (Eurofound, 2022a).

**Table 1. Job quality dimensions and factors (negative - job demands and positive - job resources)**

Dimension	Job demands	Job resources
Physical and social environment	Physical risks	Social support
	Physical demands	
	Intimidation and discrimination	
Job tasks	Work intensity	Task discretion and autonomy
Organisational characteristics	Dependence (self-employed only)	Organisational participation and workplace voice
Working time arrangements	Unsocial work schedules	Flexibility of working hours
Job prospects	Perceptions of job insecurity	Training and learning opportunities
		Career advancement
Intrinsic job features		Intrinsic rewards
		Opportunities for self-realisation

Source: Eurofound (2022a), Working conditions in the time of COVID-19: Implications for the future, European Working Conditions Telephone Survey 2021 series, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. p. 29

In the EU, the fundamental role of working conditions is recognised in core legal acts. Article 31 of the [Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union](#) and in Article 151 of the [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#) set the scope for actions and policy development at EU level in this area.

Therefore, a broader understanding of **working conditions** encompasses the environment and circumstances in which work takes place, including all work features with a physical and mental impact on employees and considering the economic aspects of work and their influence on overall living conditions (Eurofound, 2022b). Most areas of working conditions are an integral part of labour law, subject to regulation by legislative and executive acts, collective agreements, employment contracts, as well as established work rules, customs and practices.

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) proclaimed in 2017 at the Gothenburg Summit guides the employment and social agenda at the EU level. The second chapter includes the six principles that can guarantee European citizens access to fair working conditions, namely secure and adaptable employment, wages, information about employment conditions and protection in case of dismissals, social dialogue and involvement of workers, work-life balance, and healthy, safe and well-adapted work environment and data protection (European Commission, 2023a). Also, core parts of the EU acquis establish common standards for all EU Member States on aspects related to working conditions such as transparency and predictability, contractual employment situation (e.g. permanent or temporary, full time or part-time work, temporary agency workers), general and sectorial working time arrangements, health and safety, work-life balance, adequate minimum wage, workers' rights in case of employers' insolvency and transfer of undertakings (European Commission, 2023b).

## Developments to date

Job quality and working conditions are vital aspects of the labour market and essential drivers in shaping the demand for and supply of labour. The evolution of the EU labour market and the implication of job quality and working conditions depend on transforming influences of multiple factors such as availability of labour, strategic choices of companies, the regulatory framework and integration of new technologies and digitalisation.

Strategic choices of companies represent an essential driver in the demand for labour and in understanding the working conditions provided to their employees. Companies can always decide their priorities for investments, either focusing on revenues and productivity with less concern about working conditions and how they treat their workforce or adopting an inclusive approach where growth and productivity go hand in hand with improving the working conditions and employees' experience in the workplace (Eurofound and Cedefop, 2020). To some extent, companies' strategic choices are determined by the regulatory framework that needs to be constantly updated to ensure that workers are treated fairly and have access to adequate working conditions that do not threaten their health and well-being.

The rise of labour shortages in specific sectors of the economy can drive the future evolution of working conditions and job quality. The availability of workers in specific sectors, along with peoples' preferences and interests, emerged as an important area for labour market transformation. Evolving labour shortages in the post-COVID-19 period were observed in sectors that rank low regarding job quality and working conditions.

Digitalisation and deployment of new technologies (e.g. robots and automation of processes, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning, Internet of Things (IoT)) drive the change in the workplace, facilitate the expansion of new ways of work and further impact the quality of jobs available nowadays and in the future. Harnessing the transformative force of technology to change the way people work and their workplaces needs to be done through the lenses of job quality. This can ensure that workers are protected from negative outcomes such as an elevated sense of insecurity and increased work intensity, reduced autonomy, loss of privacy, discrimination, and significant impact on their work-life balance.

At global level, the ILO (2023c) observed that economic slowdown and disruptions in supply chains influences employment prospects, working conditions and forces workers to accept lower quality jobs.

Clark and Kozak (2023) identified an improvement in job quality over the period 1997 – 2015 in 13 OECD countries by utilising areas of job quality such as pay, hours of work, job prospects including promotion and job security, the difficulty and stress-related factors, job content related factor and Interpersonal relationships. It also pointed out that job security, job interest and autonomy are the dimensions of job quality that are highly valued by workers.

Eurofound's latest job quality index considers six dimensions: the physical and social environment, job tasks, organisational characteristics, working time arrangements, job prospects and intrinsic job features (Eurofound, 2022a). The index determines the degree of job strain experienced by workers and self-employed persons, building on the OECD quality of the working environment methodology that considers job demands (negative influencing factors) and job resources (positive influencing factors) (OECD, 2017). Using this framework, Eurofound identified and presented the overall job quality situation in the EU Member States and by relevant labour market characteristics such as gender, economic sectors, employment status, occupation and other characteristics. The main developments observed in 2021 through the European Working Conditions Telephone Survey (EWCTS)<sup>1</sup> – conducted during the height of COVID-19 - were the following.

- Overall, around 30% of EU workers were in strained jobs where the negative influencing factors overcame the positive ones.
- Considering the gender dimension, women (30%) were more often working in strained jobs compared to men (27%).
- At the national level, the situation in Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal and Slovenia was better, with less than 25% of workers in strained jobs, than in Belgium, Czechia, France, Ireland, Italy, Poland and Slovakia where more the 1/3 of workers were in strained jobs.
- By employment status, temporary agency workers (40%) and those with fixed-term contracts of less than a year (37%) were more often found to report strained jobs.
- At the sectoral level, workers in strained jobs were identified more often in health (45%), transport (42%) and agriculture (40%).
- Most affected occupations were skilled agricultural workers (44% were in strained jobs), elementary occupations (43%), plant and machine operators (42%), and services and sales workers (38%) (Eurofound, 2022a).

The European Commission (2023c) observed that job quality and working conditions in specific sectors and occupations are also associated with persistent labour shortages. Sectors such as health, residential care, and transport, where the job strain experienced by workers is well above the EU average, are also experiencing labour shortages. In terms of occupations, the job strain was significant for nurses (61%), caregivers (55%), drivers (44%), cooks and bartenders (43%), doctors (43%), and cleaners (36%), occupations that are also among those experiencing persistent labour shortages. Similarly, it was highlighted that persistent labour shortages observed in specific economic sectors in the post-COVID-19 period emerged due to changes in workers' preferences and in areas where job quality is low (Causa et al., 2022).

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<sup>1</sup> The European Working Conditions Telephone Survey (EWCTS) in 2021 was conducted in extraordinary circumstances by telephone survey and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The previous waves of the European Working Conditions Survey were based on face-to-face interviews.

The green transition and policies adopted to reduce the detrimental effects of climate change trigger sectoral, occupational and task changes and influence working conditions and job quality aspects. Climate change has multiple impacts on work related aspects, such as an increase in risks associated with heat stress (EU-OSHA, 2023a), impact on job prospects and job security for workers in specific sectors, on earnings, changes in the physical and social environment, work intensity, and working time quality (Eurofound, 2023e). Additionally, the emergence of labour and skills shortages in areas related to the green transition and renewable energy increases the work intensity of workers already active in those sectors and can reduce their job quality (Eurofound, 2023f). EU mobile workers face challenges in job quality and working conditions. In most EU Member States, EU mobile workers have a higher incidence of fixed-term contracts and part-time employment compared with the national workers (European Commission, 2023e). Also, the working conditions of mobile seasonal workers are particularly challenging as these workers experience lower protection in terms of labour rights, precarious employment contracts, employment insecurity, and increased health and safety risks (European Commission, 2023f).

The expansion of new forms of employment (e.g. ICT-based mobile work, platform work, casual work, voucher-based work, employee sharing, and job sharing) creates new work opportunities that can enhance the integration of vulnerable groups but trigger additional challenges from the perspective of job quality and working conditions. Eurofound (2020a) observed that multiple areas of job quality are influenced by the transformative impact of the new forms of work, such as the job prospects by 'locking' some groups of workers in low-quality jobs with limited perspectives for improvement, reducing social protection generated by the difficulty in defining the employment status of workers, changes in working time related to workers experiencing too many or too few working hours and unpredictable work schedules consequently impacting the work-life balance, reduced autonomy due to algorithmic management and increase monitoring and control. Kellog et al. (2020) identified potential areas of job quality negatively impacted by algorithmic management, such as accelerating precarity, especially among low-skilled workers, increasing work intensity and stress, loss of privacy, and discriminatory practices.

Technological advancements and the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) were associated with opportunities such as increased wages, reduced exposure to dangerous and unhealthy conditions, diminution of tedious tasks, and increased worker flexibility and work-life balance. On the other hand, some challenges technology can bring for job quality are related to task fragmentation, increased skill requirements, enhanced monitoring of workers, reduction of autonomy, and raising the risk of job strain and work intensity. (OECD, 2019; Deshpande et.al 2021; Milanez, 2023)

Digitalisation was also emphasised as a factor shaping the job tasks workers perform, with increasing complexity and having implications for job quality. Apart from agriculture, all economic sectors experienced an increase in the use of cognitive tasks and a decrease in physical routine ones between 2010 and 2015 (Eurofound, 2020b). Additionally, Cedefop's second European Skills and Jobs Survey (2022) observed that digitally intensive jobs that require an elevated skills level are generally of higher quality, as these roles provide increased autonomy, more opportunities for on-the-job learning, lower degree of routine tasks and higher wages.

Also, a series of psychosocial risks associated with telework were identified. This includes work intensification (related to work and information overload, long and irregular working hours), low communication and social support (associated with isolation, virtual team collaboration, and remote supervision), and challenges in the reconciliation of work and family life (EU-OSHA, 2021).

Physical environment improvements impact workers' workplace engagement (Duque et al., 2020) and psychosocial work factors were found to have a significant association with negative health-related outcomes, especially mental disorders (Niedhammer et. al., 2020). Additionally, research indicated the role of job quality in accentuating some health-related factors and further hampering the participation of older workers in the labour market, especially among those with a low skills level (Stiller et al., 2023). It was also observed that in the EU, some aspects related to the physical and social environment dimension of job quality registered limited progress, as workers reported accentuate musculoskeletal problems associated with performing repetitive movements, experiencing tiring and painful positions and carrying or moving heavy objects (Vendramin and Parent-Thirion, 2019).

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) pays particular attention to assessing the psychosocial risks employees face in their working environments. To this end, the European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER) gathers insights on the situation and measures adopted to ensure a safe working environment. The ESENER 2019 observed two psychosocial risks prevalent in European enterprises, namely 'dealing with difficult customers/ patients/ pupils and so on' (59%) and 'time pressure' (45%). To a lesser extent, psychosocial risks such as 'long or irregular working hours' (21 %) and 'poor communication or cooperation within the organisation' (18 %) were identified. ESENER data also revealed the sectoral dimension of exposure to psychosocial risks in the workplace, as workers in human health and social work activities are more exposed to 'difficult customers/ patients' (81 %), those in professional, scientific and technical activities to 'time pressure' (58%) and workers in accommodation and food services to 'long or irregular working hours' (39 %). (EU-OSHA, 2022) Also, aspects related to working time, especially the exposure to long working hours, were associated with an increase in health-related risks such as ischemic heart disease and stroke in research conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) (Pega et al., 2020).

# Future perspectives

Job quality and working conditions will likely be shaped in the future by changes in the place where the work is performed, including teleworking and hybrid work, the use of robots and automation, digitalisation and increased use of IoT and AI technology in the workplace, and to some extent the climate change and green transition.

Climate change effects, such as increased environmental hazard events and higher temperatures, are expected to continue to disrupt labour productivity and negatively influence working conditions (ILO, 2018). The acceleration in developing and installing renewable energy sources and enhancing recycling supports the long-term green transition goals. However, it raises challenges in terms of workers' physical working environment and exposure to new health-related risks (e.g., workers who produce solar photovoltaic panels are exposed to toxic substances and electrical hazards) (Eurofound, 2023e).

The conventional understanding of the workplace has been severely disrupted for many workers by the COVID-19 pandemic with the acceleration of remote and telework. It is likely that multiple companies and workers will adopt a hybrid work model for the medium to long term, and this would also influence the job quality and working conditions. The increased use of telework and hybrid work will have both positive and negative implications for job quality in areas such as working time, work intensity, task discretion and autonomy, and career prospects (Eurofound, 2023c) and raises concerns related to exposure to physical work-related factors (e.g. sedentary, body posture problems) and psychosocial and organisational work-related factors (e.g. time pressure, task complexity, visual demand, management practices, social and professional isolation, etc.) (EU-OSHA, 2023c). Similarly, research indicated that organisations with clear work policies experience enhanced well-being and productivity among their employees, but the move towards remote work poses challenges in maintaining a work-life balance and collaborating with peers (McKinsey, 2021).

Increasing workplace automation and the use of robots can improve job quality and working conditions by reducing exposure of workers to specific health and safety risks (e.g. working with chemicals, in high or low temperatures, and electromagnetic fields), enhance or restore human performance by using exoskeletons (Hery et al., 2021; Eurofound 2023d). However, it can also negatively impact job quality by reducing wages and job opportunities (Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2020), as well as due to augmented employee monitoring possibilities or increased stress caused by working with machines or intensified work pace. EU-OSHA research, for example, emphasises that the use of surveillance technologies and algorithmic management practices accentuates psychosocial risks and has a negative impact on workers' health outcomes (EU-OSHA, 2023b).

The Industry 5.0 framework can help redefine and improve future workers' job quality and working conditions (European Commission, 2023d). This emphasises three aspects: the focus on a human-centricity future that gives careful consideration to human-machine collaboration, the importance of resilience in skills development, industrial organisation, and decentralised governance structures, and views sustainability as a cross-cutting theme for all sectors can help in redefining and improving job quality and working conditions for future workers (European Commission, 2021b).



# Hypotheses about the future

This analysis presented the main drivers of change and potential dimensions of transformation for job quality and working conditions by 2030. The following hypotheses are envisaged:

- In the first hypothesis, technological innovation, the human-centric approach, and aspects related to sustainability converge to create an environment that enhances job quality, provides good working conditions, and prioritises employee well-being and productivity. European workplaces are characterised by adaptability, flexibility, and a commitment to sustainability and the green transformation.
- In the second hypothesis, fast technological adoption, automation, and robotics substitute workers and worsen socioeconomic inequalities. Digitalisation is a factor accentuating work intensity and a strong source of stress for the workforce, increasing psychosocial risks and burnout. Flexibility in terms of working arrangements becomes a source of conflict, reducing work-life balance and increasing workers anxiety. Job quality is severely damaged as wages decline and job opportunities are limited.

## H1: Uplift job quality and working conditions

By 2030, deployment of innovative practices that enhance job quality and working conditions shape the workplace. Most companies adopt a hybrid work model acknowledging employees' options to work remotely or in office and supporting workers' flexibility and reconciliation of work and family life. This approach will focus on improving workers well-being, which can further increase productivity.

Integrating technology, automation and robotics in multiple workplaces further reduces health risks and tedious tasks. Simultaneously, workers undergo comprehensive training programmes that support technology adoption and focus on enhancing their productivity with the help of new tools available. Digitalisation becomes a true resource of skills improvement and job performance, while integration and use of digital applications further reduces work intensity, spurs creativity and innovation among workers.

Employers compete for labour increasingly on the quality of work and employment they can provide. Labour retention is seen to improve because relatively good working conditions enhance the bond between employer and worker.

## H2: Post-industrial Taylorism

By 2030, the fast pace of deployment and adoption of automation, technology, and robotics reduces available job opportunities and exacerbates existing socioeconomic disparities. Technological advances have a detrimental impact on job quality and working conditions. The large-scale adoption of digitalisation, intended to streamline processes, transforms into an additional source of stress and psychosocial risks for the workforce. Employees face an increased work intensity and an omnipresent sense of burnout. The initial expectations of enhanced efficiency and convenience materialise into increased mental and health challenges as job demands overwhelm workers.

Remote and hybrid work models become a source of stress as the benefits of improved work-life balance and effective collaboration between remote and in-office workers fail to materialise. The absence of clear policies and failure to regulate important aspects of working conditions accentuates the job strain experienced by workers. Additionally, employees experience feelings of being undervalued and struggle to reconcile productivity demands with their personal lives.

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