



Job quality across European Countries: Drivers of Change and Policy Implications

by Federica Romano

The harmonization of working conditions among European Member States has always been an important goal for the European Union, as confirmed by Article 151 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), which states that *“the Union and Member States shall have as their objectives the promotion of employment, improved living and working conditions, so as to make possible their harmonization while the improvement is being maintained”*.

Taking this as a starting point, a recent report published by Eurofound, [Convergence and divergence of job quality in Europe 1995–2010](#), analyzes changes in working conditions across the EU Member States to better understand whether job quality is similar across Europe.

To this purpose, the report examines the convergence and divergence of job quality in Europe during the period 1995-2010. As reported by Eurofound, divergence occurs when varying rates of change intensify differences in job quality, while convergence takes place when different rates of change decrease differences. Eurofound analyzes four aspects of job quality: skills and discretion (job discretion, cognitive demand and training); work risks (environmental risks, physical demands); work intensity (workload, task interdependence); and working time quality. By examining these four dimensions, the report gives evidence of a general convergence across the EU countries in training, workload and working time quality, as well as of the divergence in job discretion and cognitive demand both between and within countries.


The report also confirms that there are still significant differences in job quality between many European countries and examines the main drivers of change: **national institutions; macroeconomic factors; work and employee characteristics**. Referring to the **national institutions**, job quality appears to be better in Nordic countries and in countries with higher wage coordination. Furthermore, the institutional regimes of Northwest countries, for example the United Kingdom, seem to reduce the increase in work risks and workload. **Macroeconomic factors**, such as GDP and unemployment rates, can affect workload. In fact, faster increases in workload occurred in countries with high unemployment, which resulted in workload converging between countries. In addition to this, **work and employee characteristics** are important drivers of change. Men in particular appear to have higher work risks and work intensity, and experience faster increases in physical demand and workload. Older workers (over 55) also tend to suffer faster declines or slower growth in work risks and work intensity, resulting in divergence from other age groups. The results indicate that increases in work risks and work intensity may be particularly challenging in male workers aged from 15 to 54 years, and that workers over 55 are more likely to leave jobs with higher work risks, voluntarily or involuntarily.

Also **demographic changes**, according to Eurofound, **require specific attention**. In particular, in many countries the ageing of the workforce does not generate improvements without policy and

collective actors focusing on the problem. Considering this demographic phenomenon, work risks will require constant health and safety efforts at all levels, as older workers have fewer possibilities to leave the labor market in the future due to restrictions on early retirement and disability benefits. In this context, it becomes important to improve job quality over the entire life course.

In conclusion, the improvement of job quality is influenced by multiple factors and, as highlighted by the report, economic and technological changes alone do not automatically increase job quality or remove adverse working conditions. For this reason, ad-hoc political commitment to improve job quality is essential: national institutions, including trade unions, collective bargaining or employment protection legislation, may help to produce and harmonize a certain level of job quality across Europe.

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