Original article

Attitudes toward working conditions: are European Union workers satisfied with their working hours and work-life balance?

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: To describe the satisfaction with working hours and satisfaction with work-life balance and their association in the European Union (EU-28).

Method: This is a cross-sectional study based on data from the Flash Eurobarometer 398 among workers of the EU-28 from 2014 (n = 13,683). We calculated percentages and their 95% confidence intervals (95%CI). We also applied a multi-level generalised linear model using the Poisson family, to calculate the adjusted prevalence ratios (aPR) of satisfaction with work-life balance based on working hours. All analyses were stratified by individual, employment and welfare regime country classification.

Results: The satisfaction with working hours and work-life balance was 80.62% and 74.48%, respectively, and was significantly higher among women. The highest percentages of satisfaction were found in the Nordic welfare regime countries (90.2% and 85.3%, respectively). There was a statistically significant association between satisfaction with working hours and work-life balance (aPR: 2.63; 95%CI: 2.28-3.04), and the magnitude of the association differed in individual, employment and welfare regime country classifications. The main reasons declared for dissatisfaction were “excessive working hours” (48.7%), “shift work” (27.9%), and “inability to influence the work schedule” (28.3%). Differences were observed according to sex and type of welfare regime.

Conclusion: The differences found in the association between satisfaction with work-life balance and working hours according to sociodemographic characteristics and welfare regime show that there are inequalities in the working conditions in the EU countries.

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Actitudes frente a las condiciones laborales: ¿está la población trabajadora de la Unión Europea satisfecha con sus horas de trabajo y su balance trabajo-vida?

R E S U M E N

Objetivo: Describir la satisfacción con las horas de trabajo y la satisfacción con el balance trabajo-vida y su respectiva asociación en la Unión Europea (UE-28).

Método: Se trata de un estudio transversal basado en los datos del Flash Eurobarometer 398 en población trabajadora de la UE-28 en 2014 (n = 13,683). Calculamos porcentajes e intervalos de confianza del 95% (IC95%). Se calcularon las razones de prevalencia ajustadas (RPa) de satisfacción con las horas de trabajo y el trabajo-balanza, mediante un modelo multinivel lineal generalizado con la familia Poisson. Los análisis se estratificaron por características individuales, del empleo y del estado de bienestar.

Resultados: La satisfacción con las horas de trabajo (80.62%) y el balance trabajo-vida (74.48%) fue significativamente mayor en las mujeres. Los porcentajes más altos de satisfacción se encontraron en los países nórdicos (clase de estado de bienestar), siendo del 90.2% y el 85.3%, respectivamente. La asociación entre satisfacción con las horas de trabajo y los trabajadores de la UE-28 (RPa: 2.63; intervalo de confianza del 95%: 2.28-3.04) difirió por características individuales, del empleo y del estado de bienestar. Excesivas horas de trabajo (48.7%), turndesidad (27.9%) e imposibilidad de influir en el horario laboral (28.3%) fueron las principales razones de insatisfacción.

Conclusiones: Las diferencias encontradas en la asociación entre la satisfacción con el balance trabajo-vida y las horas de trabajo según las características sociodemográficas y el estado de bienestar demuestran la existencia de inequidades en las condiciones laborales en los países de la UE.

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Introduction

Neoliberal economic globalization has changed working conditions and the definition of standard employment.\(^1\) The traditional standard employment characteristics (regular working hours, stability, and social standards linked with permanent full-time work) has lost importance and the increasing trend is characterized by a flexible labor market. The flexible labor market has created, on one hand, boundaryless jobs, which means that there are no limits on how long, when and how fast people work.\(^2,3\) On the other hand, non-standard work arrangements have increased, usually associated with low wages and temporary conditions.\(^1\) Although working at unconventional times is becoming popular, the social rhythm of the western societies remains largely unchanged. Therefore, the balance between work and personal life, or work-life balance, has been largely discussed and is considered a policy priority in the European Union.\(^4,5\)

Time has been proposed as a social determinant of health, as it is a resource that people need for good health; accessing health services, partaking in healthy behaviors, resting, working and caring for dependents.\(^2\) Working hours (long working hours, irregular or shift work, night work, etc.) may create a work-life imbalance due to lack of time to sustain a personal life. Poor work-life balance has been suggested to be an intermediate factor of the associations between working hours and health-related outcomes.\(^6\) Lack of time is associated with unhealthy behaviors; unhealthy diets, alcohol consumption, smoking and/or not exercising.\(^7\) Moreover, not having time to recover from work exhaustion may result in a poor mental health status and sleeping problems.\(^8\) Also, rushing to trying to catch up with the out-of-work activities may create stress responses, such as elevated blood pressure, heart rate and cortisol levels.\(^9\) Further, low wages due to few working hours and temporary jobs may create financial insecurities that also have an impact on health status.\(^9\) Therefore, satisfaction with work-life balance is an indicator of well-being that is of public health interest.\(^8\)

Current evidence on satisfaction with work-life balance is mostly based on studies of health and academic professionals,\(^10-14\) with a focus on balance with family time rather than personal time in general, and therefore with little external validity for the general population. Furthermore, almost all the studies done on working hours and work-life balance are based on “long working hours”, whereas, too few hours would also be a predictor of poor work-life balance due to the lower wages earned.\(^15\) Next, there are just two studies describing satisfaction with work-life balance in European population and they date from 2010. Thus, as work-life balance is one of the European Union priorities, an update on satisfaction with work-life balance in European workers is necessary.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine the associations between satisfaction with working hours and work-life balance and to describe the main reasons for dissatisfaction with working hours.

Methods

Study population and data collection

This is a cross-sectional study. We used the data obtained from the flash Eurobarometer 398 survey about “Working Conditions” carried out by TNS Political & Social network between April 3\(^{rd}\) and 5\(^{th}\), 2014, on behalf of the European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.\(^6\) The survey covers the resident population in each of the 28 Member States aged 15 years and over. To complete the questionnaire, the respondents were interviewed via telephone (landline and mobile phone) in their mother tongue. In each country, a multi-stage random sampling design was used. The survey includes information from 26,571 European citizens. For the present study, we excluded people who declared not to be working and participants < 16 years old and > 70 years old (not at working age). The final sample for this study was 13,683 current European workers. From those included, 54% were men, 68% were employees, 78% worked full-time, 83% had a permanent work contract and the mean age was 42 years.

Study variables

Satisfaction with working hours was obtained from the question: “More precisely, how satisfied are you with your “working hours” in your current job?”, with the possible answers “very satisfied”, “satisfied”, “not very satisfied”, “not at all satisfied”. These were dichotomized as “satisfied” (very satisfied and satisfied) and “not satisfied” (not very satisfied, not at all satisfied).

Main reasons for dissatisfaction with working hours were obtained from the question: “Which of the following are the main reasons for your dissatisfaction with working hours?”, with the possible answers; excessive working hours, not enough working hours, constrained by shift work or other forms of irregular working time, working exclusively or mainly at night, constrained by on-call periods at home, constrained by on-call periods at the workplace, unable to influence your work schedule, lack of opportunities for flexible working, and other reasons. For each of these, three maximum answers could be given. All the workers were asked about main reasons of dissatisfaction with working hours; even if they answered that they were very satisfied with their working hours in the previous question.

Satisfaction with work-life balance was obtained from the question: “More precisely, how satisfied are you with your work-life balance in your current job?” with the possible answers “very satisfied”, “satisfied”, “not very satisfied”, “not at all satisfied”. These were dichotomized as “satisfied” (very satisfied and satisfied) and “not satisfied” (not very satisfied, not at all satisfied).

The questionnaire also included information about sex (men, women), age (16-24 years, 25-39 years, 40-54 years, >55 years old), age at the end of schooling (<15 years, 16-19 years, >20 years, still studying), occupation (self-employed, employee, manual workers), working day (part-time, full-time), work contract (permanent contract, fixed term contract, temporary employment, apprenticeship), country typologies classification based on the welfare regime type\(^17\) as follows: Continental welfare regime countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, France, the Netherlands and Luxembourg), Anglo-Saxon welfare regime countries (Ireland and the United Kingdom), Eastern European welfare regime countries (Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia and Slovakia), Southern European welfare regime countries (Cyprus, Greece, Spain, Italy, Malta and Portugal) and Nordic welfare regime countries (Denmark, Finland and Sweden).

Statistical analysis

We calculated the percentages and the 95% confidence intervals (95%CI) of satisfaction with the working hours and work-life balance. We draw a bar graphic with the main reasons of dissatisfaction with work hours by welfare regime countries classification and sex. We fit a multi-level generalized linear model using the Poisson family and country as the aleatory factor, to calculate the crude (cPR) and adjusted (aPR) prevalence ratios with their 95%CI of satisfaction with work-life balance according to satisfaction with working hours. All analyses included sampling weights for each country. The associations between work-life balance and working hours were stratified by individual (sex, age, at the end of...
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