



# The relationship between employment quality and work-related well-being in the European Labor Force



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## ABSTRACT

In this article, data from the 2005 European Working Conditions Survey are used to examine the relationship between contemporary employment arrangements and the work-related well-being of European employees. By means of a Latent Class Cluster Analysis, several features of the employment conditions and relations characterizing jobs are combined in a typology of five employment arrangements: SER-like, instrumental, precarious unsustainable, precarious intensive and portfolio jobs. These job types show clear relationships with separate indicators of job satisfaction, perceived safety climate and the ability to stay in employment, as well as with an overall indicator for work-related well-being. The findings from this multifaceted approach towards employment quality raise questions about the long-term sustainability of highly flexible and de-standardized employment arrangements.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the 'European Employment Strategy' (EES) came into being at the end of the 1990s, both its focus and objectives underwent some noticeable changes. Although originally the quality of jobs was largely overlooked as an element of importance, the current and well-known tag line "more and better jobs" clearly reflects a shift in the way of thinking. In recent years, the EES has complemented quantitative employment targets (i.e. increasing employment rates) with the objective of increasing job quality (Goetschy, 1999; Muñoz de Bustillo, Fernández-Macías, Ignacio Antón, and Esteve, 2009). On top of this, recent debates concerning an increase of the retirement age in different European countries have again highlighted the importance of job quality. Awareness has grown that prolonging the working life of the labor force will not be possible if jobs are not sustainable, both physically and psychosocially.

Job quality can be divided in two components: 'intrinsic work quality' (job content and working conditions) and 'employment quality' (Holman and McClelland, 2011). Job content points to the nature of the tasks that have to be performed, such as the extent of autonomy for workers. Working conditions refer to the physical, biochemical and psychosocial exposures and demands that are related to a job. Employment quality, in turn, also consists of two components. First, employment conditions concern the mutual agreements between employees and their employer about the organization of employment in terms of the contract, rewards, working hours, etc. Second, employment relations refer to the formal as well as informal relationships between worker and employer (Vets, De Witte, and Notelaers, 2009).

Employment conditions and relations have become modified and de-standardized from the end of the 1970s onwards, due to the increased emphasis on competitiveness and flexibility that followed the breaking-down of the post-Second World War industrial

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mass production model (Ackerman, Goodwin, Dougherty, and Gallagher, 1998; Mückenberger, 1989). These profound changes in the organization of work compel the need to assess both the quality of contemporary employment arrangements and the consequences for individual workers. The latter is particularly important given indications in the literature of a relationship between employment quality and outcomes of health, well-being, work motivation, labor market behavior, etc. in workers (Benach et al., 2014; Isaksson, Hogstedt, Eriksson, and Theorell, 2009). Hence, the objective of this article is to study the relationship between the employment quality of contemporary employment arrangements and the work-related well-being of individual employees.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Employment in Europe: what has changed?

In the years after the Second World War, a so-called 'Standard Employment Relationship' (SER) emerged. This employment standard is used as an ideal-typical point of reference in the rest of this article and was characterized by a unique combination of full-time and stable employment with attached collective bargaining procedures, social rights and protection (Mückenberger, 1989). From the end of the 1970s onwards, a combination of several structural changes caused the SER to erode. The industrialized economies of Europe and the US were confronted with a severe economic recession, globalization processes, technological innovations with far-reaching consequences and demographic change (Scott-Marshall, 2007). The Fordist mode of socio-economic regulation – characterized by unprecedentedly high levels of employment regulation and employee protection – proved too rigid, as employers encountered difficulties to adapt adequately to the rapidly changing situation (Benach et al., 2014). As employers and states sought ways to maintain or (re)gain competitiveness, they tried to cut costs by reducing regulation and protection, as well as by introducing more flexibility in the employment relationship. Moreover, new groups that entered the labor market (such as women and immigrants) were interested in more flexible jobs (Bosch, 2004).

The simultaneous occurrence of these macro-economic and societal changes has led to important modifications in labor markets, employment policies, employment practices, corporate structures and the organization of the work process (Cappelli, 1995; Scott-Marshall, 2010). The overall result can be understood as a process of de-standardization. Consequently, individual workers now bear more of the market risk associated with economic activity than they did in the period after the Second World War (Frade and Darmon, 2005; Scott-Marshall, 2010). This 're-commodification' of labor implies that employees are again more exposed to the unpredictability of the (labor) market, since protective mechanisms have either weakened or disappeared (Frade and Darmon, 2005; Mückenberger, 1989).

Research generally distinguishes between two main 'roads towards de-standardization' of employment situations (Bosch, 2004). On the one hand, a rising share of contemporary employment can be described as atypical, non-standard or contingent (Facey and Eakin, 2010). This category of jobs is often referred to as the secondary or peripheral labor market (Doeringer and Piore, 1971). On the other hand, characteristics of the remaining 'standard jobs' in the primary or core labor market also tend to de-standardize, mostly due to deregulation of national legislation and collective agreements, as well as through processes of restructuring (Streeck and Thelen, 2005). During the past decades, a rise of non-standard employment arrangements has been witnessed, which means that a growing proportion of contemporary employment is characterized by a lack of job security. But also other employment features associated with the Fordist model are increasingly less common in the labor market. More and more, employees – also those in permanent jobs – face de-standardization with regard to their income, benefits, working hours, career opportunities, etc. (Grimshaw, Ward, Rubery, and Beynon, 2001; Scott-Marshall, 2010). To be able to take into account the simultaneous occurrence of (some of) these job characteristics, we use an employment quality concept that contains seven facets of employment de-standardization: [1] employment stability, [2] material rewards, [3] workers' rights and social protection, [4] working time arrangements, [5] employability opportunities, [6] collective organization and [7] interpersonal power relations (Eurofound, 2013; self-reference removed).

### 2.2. What are the consequences for the health and well-being of workers?

Studying the effects of contemporary employment arrangements on employees' health and well-being is crucial because poor health and/or well-being are known to be an important precursor of early drop out from the labor force (Cai, 2010). To date, research has focused mainly on the impact of objective or subjective job insecurity (De Witte, 2005; Silla, Gracia, and Peiró, 2005). Though it provides a lot of valuable information, this body of research may be too narrowly focused on employment stability, while neglecting the potential consequences of other aspects of de-standardization of employment arrangements (Scott-Marshall and Tompa, 2011; Tompa, Scott-Marshall, Dolinschi, Trevithick, and Bhattacharyya, 2007).

Recent research has indeed highlighted the relevance of other 'de-standardized' employment features for the health and well-being of workers. It concerns among others the effects of long working hours (Nakata, 2012; Van der Hulst, 2003; Wirtz and Nachreiner, 2010), irregular or flexible work schedules (Jamal, 2004; Johnson and Lipscomb, 2006) and unmet preferences regarding working time arrangements (Nabe-Nielsen et al., 2010; Wooden, Warren, and Drago, 2009). The relation between low income and poor health has also been documented thoroughly in the literature (Benzeval and Judge, 2001; Fritzell, Neramo, and Lundberg, 2004). Research performed by Hemström (2005a, 2005b) shows that a high income is not able to compensate for the negative health effects of adverse working conditions, as is sometimes assumed. According to Cottini (2012), both working conditions and pay levels – the latter especially for men – are important determinants of work-related health problems.

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