

## JOB CONTENT IS AS IMPORTANT AS SKILLS

### Criteria for job quality

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#### Healthy and productive work

Poor quality job content (e.g., tasks with high demands/low control and little variety) is contrary to human dignity and human rights ('just and favourable conditions of work', art. 23) and does not comply with Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work) nor with European and national legislation. It poses a risk to physical and mental health, entails costs for organisations and society, does not create sustainable employability, contributes to staff shortages, and leads to wastage of talent and sub-optimal organisational performance.

However, the market mechanism does not automatically lead to 'good work'. There are even signs of deterioration. Moreover, the future of work will look different due to green and digital transitions. That is why policies and actions are needed from the social partners and governments. Focusing on skills development through vocational education and training is not enough - on the job learning appears to be equally important.

If we are to achieve healthy and productive work as well as skills development, we need objective criteria for job quality "based on the state of the art and professional services" (as it is written in the Dutch Working Conditions Act). Job quality covers four dimensions:

- terms of employment,
- job content,
- working environment
- internal labour relations.

In this article I want to focus mainly on job content and internal labour relations.

#### Objective criteria

Why objective criteria? Isn't it enough to ask workers how satisfied they are with their work? Of course, we should ask workers for their opinion. However, subjective measurements (job satisfaction, meaningful work, etc.), although interesting and relevant, are not enough to ensure decent work that complies with the law and human dignity. After all, we know that how people subjectively assess their work also reflects their socio-economic position, their work history and the opportunities they see or do not see in the future.

Objective criteria must also be distinguished from consequences such as competence development, innovative behaviour and stress. Most working conditions laws stipulate that hazards and risks must be tackled at the source (primary prevention). In the case of job content, this is about the organisation of work. Work organisation should provide learning opportunities and contain limited stress risks for successive workers in that workplace. The key concept here is the balance between job demands on the one hand, and control possibilities and available resources on the other.

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Sometimes adaptation to individual workers is also desirable (job crafting) - this is called secondary prevention.

### **Organisational design**

Criteria can be derived from theories of quality of job content. A number of criteria are already included in some widely accepted recommendations (in particular on psychosocial risks, e.g. EU PRIMA-F and ISO 45003), and are regular items in surveys such as the European Working Conditions Survey.

Such criteria can be used by social partners at various levels (e.g. [The European Social Partners Framework Agreement on Digitalisation](#), 2020) and by labour inspectors.

Implementation requires an organisational level participative approach based on design theories such as Sociotechnical Systems Design<sup>i</sup>, Workplace Innovation<sup>ii</sup>, Relational Coordination<sup>iii</sup> and Quick Response Manufacturing<sup>iv</sup>. ‘Lean’ should be evaluated critically as there are many varieties, each with different effects on quality of job content.<sup>v</sup>

Moreover, there is a need to put even more emphasis on proactively shaping not just the way technology is implemented and the roles around it, but also the design of technology per se, in order to maximise its positive consequences.<sup>vi</sup>

### **Policies**

These approaches must of course be embedded in appropriate policies such as the Industry 5.0 strategy of the European Commission. “Industry 5.0 is characterised by going beyond producing goods and services for profit. It shifts the focus from the shareholder value to stakeholder value and reinforces the role and the contribution of industry to society. It places the wellbeing of the worker at the centre of the production process and uses new technologies to provide prosperity beyond jobs and growth while respecting the production limits of the planet. (European Commission, 2021vii)”

Chapter 2 of the *European Pillar of Social Rights* (‘Fair Working Conditions’) defines several key principles that relate to objective criteria:

- “Innovative forms of work that ensure quality working conditions shall be fostered.”
- “Social dialogue and involvement of workers.”
- “Workers have the right to a high level of protection of their health and safety at work.”
- “Workers have the right to a working environment adapted to their professional needs and which enables them to prolong their participation in the labour market.”

In the *European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan* “The Commission encourages national authorities and social partners to ensure the information and consultation of workers during restructuring processes as required by EU rules and to promote the participation of workers at company level with a view to fostering workplace innovation.”

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## The Good Work Criteria

There is good work if:

### *Terms of employment*

- the contract offers job security;
- the work provides a living wage;
- the pay system is transparent and fair;
- workers have decision authority regarding working times and taking free days and holidays;
- workers have the opportunity for extra training and education.

### *Job content*

- the job consists not only of executive tasks but also preparing and supporting tasks -if that is the case, it is called a 'complete job';
- there is a balance of difficult and easy tasks in the job;
- there is autonomy regarding work speed, the order in which tasks are undertaken, and way of working;
- the work is not monotonous and repetitive;
- enough and timely information and feedback is given about one's own (team) work;
- the support of colleagues and boss can be asked for easily;
- workers have insight into the algorithms used.

### *Working environment*

- preventive measures and – where necessary – protective measures have been implemented to work safely and healthily;
- individual workers are not isolated and there are opportunities for contact.

### *Internal labour relations*

- enough and timely information is given about strategy and results of the entire organisation;
- workers in shop floor consultation can participate in decisions regarding (new) 'organisational tasks' including processes, division of tasks and targets;
- there is a legal employee representation;
- measures have been taken to prevent bullying, sexual harassment, discrimination and violence from colleagues/customers/clients;
- treatment is respectful;

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- there is no 'real-time' (digital) control of performance and movements;
- agreements have been made about the collection and protection of worker data (GDPR);
- outside working hours workers do not have to respond to messages from the boss (right to disconnect).

For all these criteria references to legislation as well as scientific literature are available. Most criteria are monitored by the European Working Conditions Survey.

## Afterword

A new analysis of data from the European Company Survey yielded the following report:

CEDEFOP and Eurofound (2023). *Fostering skills use for sustained business performance: evidence from the European Company Survey*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. <http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/425052>

The results support our – also research-based – message that skills are not only related to education, but also to work organisation and quality of work. This is often underexposed, even in this European Year of Skills, despite previous research by CEDEFOP.

On p. 7 of the report, attention is paid to workplace innovation and EUWIN.

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<sup>i</sup> Mohr, B. J., & Van Amelsvoort, P. (eds.) (2016). *Co-Creating Humane and Innovative Organizations. Evolutions in the Practice of Socio-Technical System Design*. Global STS-D Network Press, ISBN-13: 978-0692510032

<sup>ii</sup> Oeij, P.R.A., Rus, D., & Pot, F.D. (eds.) (2017). *Workplace Innovation: Theory, Research and Practice*. Springer, and EUWIN Members & Honorary Advisors (2022). *Workplace Innovation - Europe's Competitive Edge. A manifesto for enhanced performance and working lives*. *European journal of workplace innovation* 7(1), 132-141. <https://doi.org/10.46364/ejwi.v7i1.935>

<sup>iii</sup> Hoffer Gittell, J. (2016). *Transforming Relationships for High Performance. The Power of Relational Coordination*. Stanford Business Books.

<sup>iv</sup> Suri, R. (2010). QRM. It's about time. *The Competitive Advantage of Quick Response Manufacturing*. CRC Press.

<sup>v</sup> Huo, M-L., & Boxall, P. (2018). Are all aspects of lean production bad for workers? An analysis of how problem-solving demands affect employee well-being. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 28(4), 569–584. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12204>

<sup>vi</sup> Parker, S. K., & Grote, G. (2019, 30 December). Automation, algorithms, and beyond: Why work design matters more than ever in a digital world. *Applied Psychology*, 1-45. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12241>

<sup>vii</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, *Industry 5.0: human-centric, sustainable and resilient*, Publications Office, 2021, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/073781>

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