

“Very monotonous work”

EUWIN is grateful to TNO's Peter Oeij for drawing our attention to this very interesting article.

Text: Jaco Berveling

A few years ago, journalist Jeroen van Bergeijk worked undercover at a bol.com distribution centre. He started working as an “order picker”. The work of an order picker consists of collecting and collecting orders. It turned out to be hard work with little challenge: “... everything [is] aimed at making you behave like a robot: moving from A to B as efficiently as possible with as many products as possible. And above all, don't think...” There was little variation in the work: “Then you walk to that place, scan that product, and so on. The whole day long. Hallway in, hallway out. Hall in, hall out. Up the stairs, down the stairs.”

Short-cycle work: quo vadis?

Order picking in a distribution centre is an example of “short-cycle work”. It is work of a short-term and repetitive nature. This type of work occurs in the meat processing industry (slaughterhouses), cleaning work, agriculture and horticulture and production work (such as assembly line work when assembling equipment). In his article, Jeroen van Bergeijk gave an initial picture of short-cycle working. A team led by Peter Oeij of TNO conducted more in-depth research together with the RIVM. The report was recently published under the title “Short-cycle work: quo vadis?” Institute Gak financed the project.

The researchers from TNO and RIVM tried to determine the extent of the short-term and repetitive work. They also mapped out the experiences of employees and employers and looked at options to overcome the negative sides of repetitive work. Peter Oeij has been working at TNO for almost 23 years as a senior researcher and advisor. He is mainly involved in labour and organizational issues and is particularly concerned with social innovation. Oeij: “This Institute Gak project is an example of a demand for knowledge about a specific issue related to technology. In this case, the application of technology that is not so beneficial for people's work.”

No definition

The researchers give twelve characteristics of short-cycle work. According to Oeij, the monotonous, repetitive nature of the work, and its therefore stressful side, is the most characteristic: “This creates health risks. It is relatively poorly paid and uncertain work in terms of job and income security.”

Although everyone has an idea of this type of work, surprisingly there is no clear definition. Oeij: “The difficulty is that there are no data collection systems with a definition that is broad enough to cover the most important characteristics. Researchers always measure a different facet of the work. The available databases do lead to a figure, but that figure only says something about a small part of the issue as a whole.”

Experiences on the work floor

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The researchers mapped out the experiences of employees and employers using interviews and focus groups. Two companies were willing to cooperate: a pharmaceutical factory and a wholesaler with order pickers. Many other companies declined. This raises the question of whether the two participating companies are not atypical. Are these perhaps “model organizations” that have their affairs in order? Peter Oeij sees the danger: “There is indeed a positive selection. The two participating companies want to do everything they can to create a good working environment. Yet we see that there are also occupational risks in the positions we investigated. It shows well that we are looking at the tip of the iceberg.”

The positions examined in the factory involved people working with a filling machine and employees behind a conveyor belt checking whether glass bottles are properly filled. In wholesale, the work of order pickers was examined. The interviews show that some employees find the work boring and need variety. The researchers quote an employee from the factory: “I am very happy that I only work part-time, because if I had to do this five days a week, I don't think I would last a year. It is very monotonous work.” Other employees were much more positive about their work.

Oeij emphasizes that insight into the subjective experience of employees is relevant, but that it does not tell the whole story: “The socio-economic circumstances of individuals partly determine whether they adapt to work. Research shows that 75% of people are positive and satisfied with the work they do. If you are a Pole and you earn twice as much here as in your home country, it may be a bad job from our perspective, but you will still be inclined to evaluate the work positively. Not only because of the income, but you are also dependent on that income and you have no alternative. That is why, in addition to the judgments of employees, you must look carefully at the objective characteristics of the work. Do you have room to make your own decisions at work, and can you learn new things? That's what healthy work is all about.”

Fourteen recommendations

Short-cycle work causes repetitive movements. The pace of work is also often constraining when it is tied to machines. The work has a relatively high number of RSI complaints (*repetitive strain injury*), an increased risk of psychosocial complaints, working conditions without much security and often poor occupational hygiene conditions. The researchers have looked at what can be done about this and have come up with fourteen recommendations.

The recommendations address the responsibility of the government (such as expansion of the Working Conditions Act) and the roles and responsibilities of the social partners, the temporary employment sector and companies. For example, companies can try to broaden, enrich or rotate the tasks of their employees. They can give their employees more tasks, let them grow to another position (such as team leader) or let them alternate tasks of a similar level.

When asked what should be tackled first, Oeij refers to the lack of good databases with which short-cycle work can be mapped out: “A lack of knowledge leads to all kinds of problems. You cannot formulate laws and regulations properly and then not enforce them properly. A good research basis is needed to take action. Because the legislator cannot do anything with it and there is no consensus

in politics about what short-cycle work is. Companies then do not take action. So there continue to be situations about which we all say, 'we should do something about that'."

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<https://www.instituutgak.nl/onderzoek/kennisbank/kortcyclisch-werk-quo-vadis/>

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