

# WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

**The working population of the European Union (15 Member States) is 147 million, of whom 83% are employees and 17% self-employed.**

**In 1996 the European Foundation interviewed a representative sample of 1000 workers in each Member State, or 15 800 persons in total. (See page 14)**

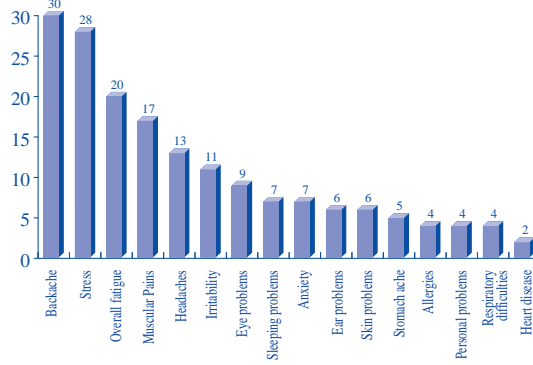
The survey reveals that:

- the most common work-related health problems are:
  - back pain (30% of workers)
  - stress (28% of workers)
  - muscular pains in arms or legs (17% of workers)
- health problems are most often connected with poor working conditions;
- absenteeism due to work-related health problems affects 23% of workers each year (averaging out at 4 working days lost per worker);
- exposure to physical hazards (noise, vibration, dangerous or polluting products or substances) and to poor workplace design remains very common (28% of workers are exposed to intense noise, 45% to painful or tiring working positions);
- the pace of work is increasing all the time;
- repetitive and monotonous work is still very common (37% of workers perform short repetitive tasks and 45% perform monotonous tasks);
- workers are gradually being given more autonomy over their work, although in general this is still rare;
- work is largely dominated by external constraints (the client has replaced the machine as the main factor dictating the pace of work);
- computers have now become an important feature of work (38% of workers use computers);
- only 32% of employees have had training provided by their company in the last 12 months;
- violence at work is not a marginal phenomenon (9% of employees claim to have been subjected to intimidation);
- the main feature of the organisation of working time is its dispersion (irregular hours, weekend work, night work);
- working conditions differ widely between occupational categories, sectors of activity, countries, types of employment status. Casual and temporary work is on the increase, and is characterised by poor working conditions.

**Health and work**

29% of the workers questioned consider that their work affects their health. The work-related health problems mentioned most frequently are **musculo-skeletal** complaints (30% of workers claim to suffer backache and 17% muscular pains in their arms or legs) and **stress** (28% of employees). (T.1)

T1. Work-related health problems



**Absenteeism and work**

23% of workers claim to have been absent from work for work-related health reasons during the past 12 months. The average number of days' absence per worker is four days per year (for the EU as a whole, this represents 600 million working days lost per year).

Absenteeism increases significantly with the arduousness of the work (multiplied by 3 for painful or tiring positions, multiplied by 2 for repetitive movements). (T2).

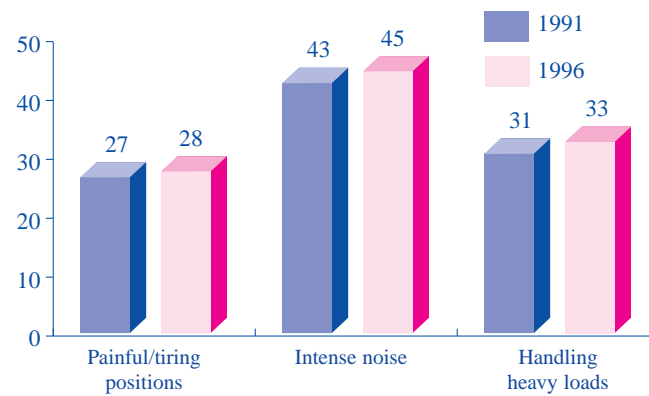
T2. Annual number of days absence

	Employees with....	
	painful or tiring working positions	repetitive movements
Permanent exposure	8.2 days	5.8 days
No exposure	2.6 days	2.8 days

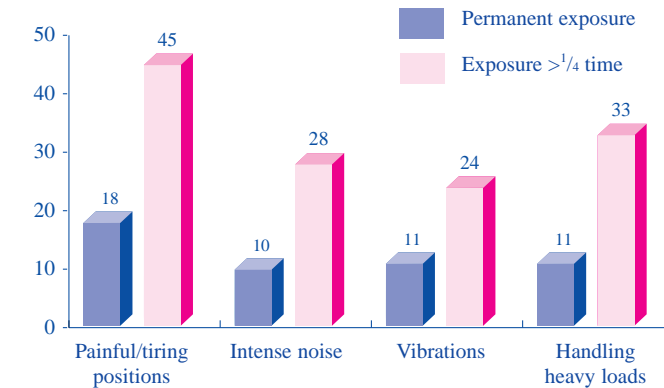
**Exposure to physical hazards is still very prevalent**

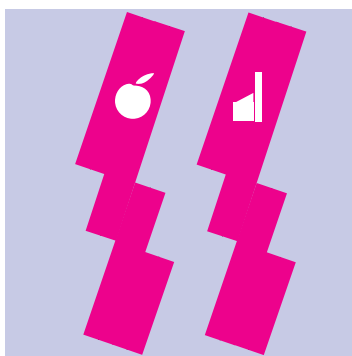
Stressful physical environments (noise, polluted air, heat, cold, vibration), carrying heavy loads and working in painful or tiring positions are just as prevalent in 1996 as in 1991. The proportion of workers affected remains high. Almost a third of employees are exposed to intense noise or required to handle heavy loads, 40% have to work in painful or tiring positions, and more than half have no personal control over comfort factors at their workplace (lighting, ventilation, temperature, etc.). (T3.)

T3. % of workers exposed in 1996



T3a. % of workers exposed in 1991 and 1996 (12 countries)





# PUBLICATIONS

## RELATED PUBLICATIONS

*Foundation Publications are on sale from the official sales agents of the EU or the Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, L-2985, Luxembourg. Where prices are not quoted, the document is free of charge and is available on request from the Foundation.*

- 1. Second European Survey on Working Conditions (1996)**  
(available in disk format only).  
Cat. No. SX-05-97-414-EN-Y  
ISBN No. 92-828-0552-2.  
ECU: 16.00.

■ A disk with the SPSS data in raw format is available from the Foundation, subject to certain conditions, by special request

- 2. First European Survey on the Work Environment (1991-1992).**  
Cat. No. SY-75-92-114-EN-C,  
ISBN 92-826-4378-6.  
ECU: 22.50
- 3. First European Survey on the Work Environment (1991-1992). (Summary report)**  
Cat. No. SY-72-92-477-EN-C.

## NEW PUBLICATIONS

*Four new publications emanating from the information collected through the Second European Survey are to be published by the end of 1997. These are :*

- 1. Working conditions and precarious employment in the European Union.**
- 2. Gender and Working Conditions in the European Union.**
- 3. Time constraints and autonomy at work in the European Union.**
- 4. Working environment indicators in the European Union.**

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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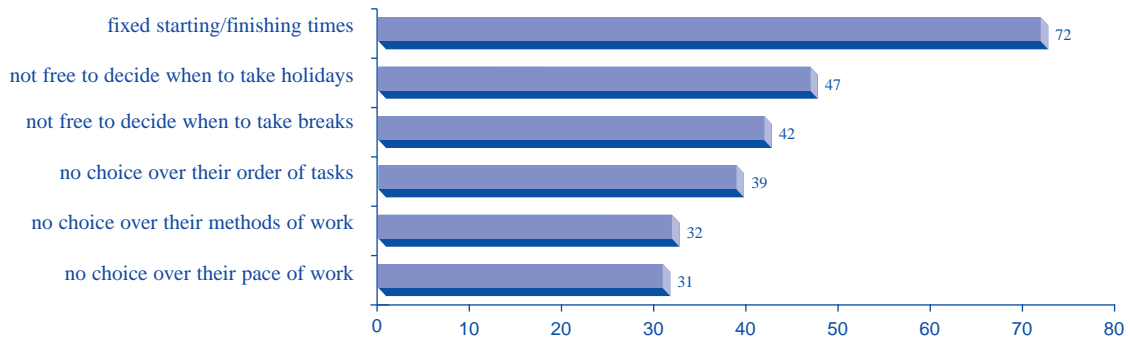
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T.9 Employees' autonomy in their work (in %)



■ **Job demands: responsibilities, but inadequate training**

Work intensity and worker autonomy need to be viewed in the context of job content and the support available.

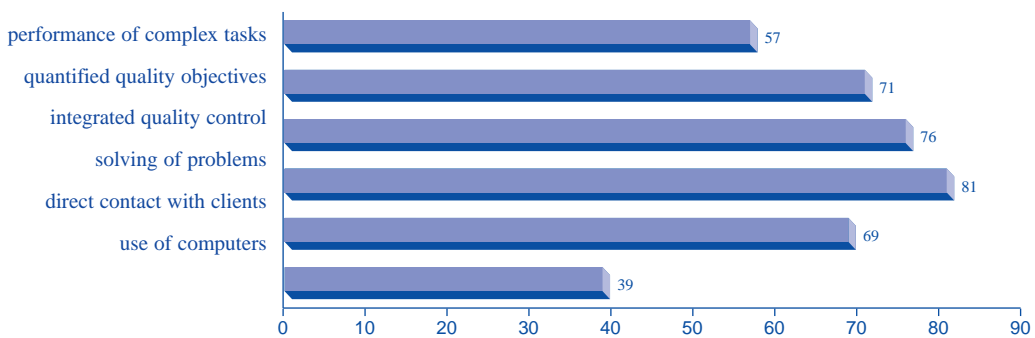
tasks to be performed, precise quality standards to be met, quality-control to be exercised, problems to be solved independently. For 74% of them the work involves acquiring new skills.

Computers also feature strongly nowadays: 39% of all workers and 41% of employees use them.

Furthermore, 69% of workers have direct contact with clients.

In this respect, it is clear (T.9) that for a majority of workers the job demands are high: complex

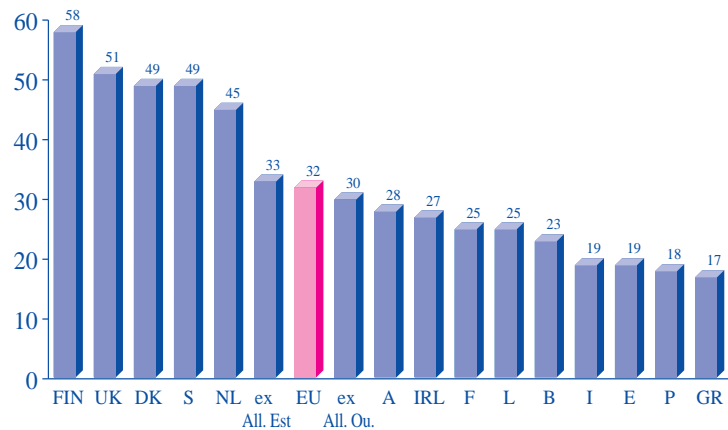
T.9. Job demands, all workers (in %)



With regard to these job demands:

- 89% of employees say they can get assistance from colleagues if required;
- only 32% have received **training** from their firm in the past year (T. 10);
- 7% regard the demands of the job as too high for their skills;
- 11% regard their skills as too high for the demands of the job.

T10. Proportion of employees having undergone training paid for or provided by their employer within the past 12 months (by country)





**Working hours**

The main features are:

on the one hand, a high proportion of **part-time** workers (14% of all workers work fewer than 30 hours per week). Most part-timers are

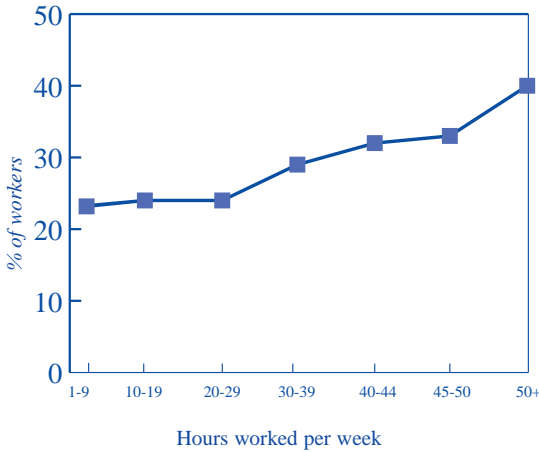
women (26% of women workers).

and on the other hand, a high proportion of workers with **long hours** (49% work more than 40 hours per week, 23% more than 45 hours).

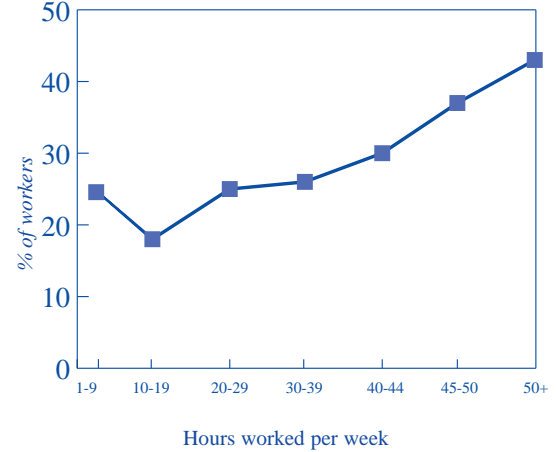
Proportionally more men than women work long hours (31% of men work more than 45 hours per week).

Health problems increase with hours worked (T11. and T12).

T11. Backache



T12. Stress



Working hours are also characterised by their **dispersion** (52% of workers work at least one Saturday per month; 29% at least one Sunday; and 21% at night, at least occasionally) and by their **irregularity** (33% have

irregular hours and 13% do shift work).

The average time spent daily travelling **from home to work and back** is 38 minutes in total. But there are wide variations:

23% of workers spend more than one hour, and 9% spend one and a half hours or more commuting each day.

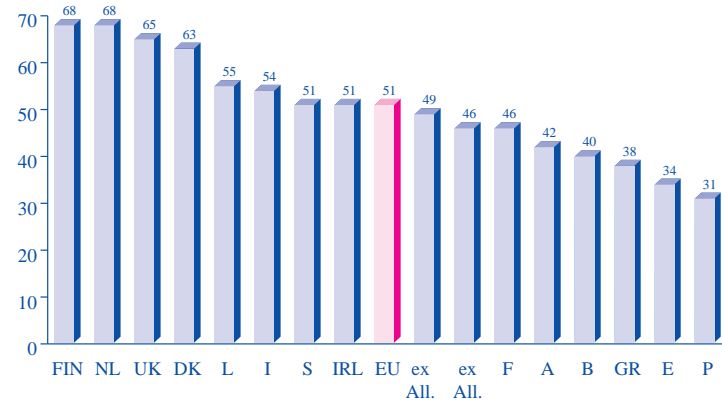
**Worker involvement**

45% of employees are involved in organisational choices within their production unit (division of tasks, staff replacements for absentees, timetables, production objectives, etc.).

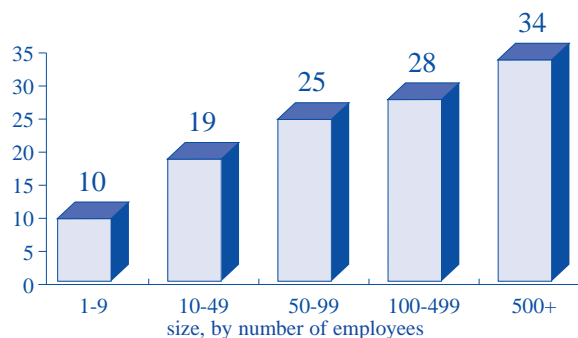
50% are consulted about changes in the organisation of work or in working conditions. Wide disparities noted between countries emphasize, beyond cultural differences, the weight of the institutional context.

Only 24% of employees have had contact with staff representatives in the past year, although this percentage varies considerably depending on the size of the firm.

T13. % of employees consulted on organisational changes (by country)



T14. % of employees having had contact with staff representatives in the past 12 months, by size of firm.



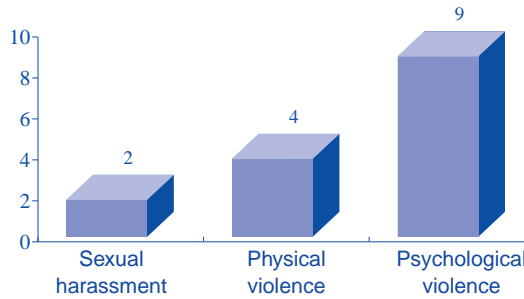
■ **Violence at work**

Although the words and the concepts used most certainly cover very different realities and sensitivities from one country to another, and from one profession to another, violence at work (whether physical or psychological, collective or individual, generated within the work group or outside it) is clearly a major problem, and one which will need to be monitored very closely in the future.

The survey reveals that, in the EU:

- 3 million workers are subjected to sexual harassment,
- 6 million workers are subjected to physical violence,
- 12 million workers are subjected to intimidation and psychological violence.

T15. % of workers subjected to:



■ **Substantial disparities**

The averages given throughout this document do not reflect the disparities observed:

- **between countries:** there are substantial disparities between countries, in particular between those of the North and those of the South. These are partly attributable to structural differences (the relative weights of the different sectors of activity are not the same), but not exclusively. In other words, the policies adopted both at company level and at national level strongly dictate working conditions.
- **between sectors of activity:** construction, manufacturing and agriculture remain the sectors where workers are

most exposed to the traditional physical risks. However, poor working conditions are also observed in some service sectors, especially in transport and in hotels and catering. The latter sector, for example, has the highest proportions of workers faced with high-speed work, repetitive and monotonous work, night work and irregular working hours.

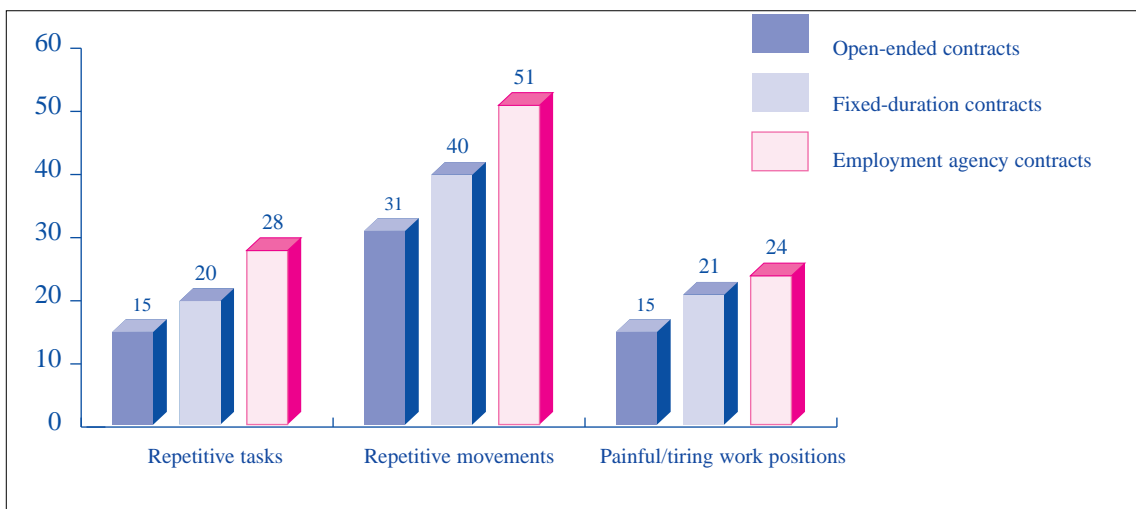
- **between professional categories:** skilled and unskilled manual workers (but also unskilled non-manual workers) are the most exposed.

- **between the sexes:** men remain more exposed than women to the traditional industrial risks (noise,

vibration, handling heavy loads, etc.). On the other hand, women have less autonomy than men in terms of managing their time (choosing when to take breaks, when to take holidays, etc.).

- **between employment statuses:** casual work is increasing. However, casual workers (those on fixed-duration contracts or on temporary employment agency contracts) have poorer working conditions than permanent workers (those on open-ended contracts) (T.16).

T16. % of employees exposed to certain stress factors, according to their employment status





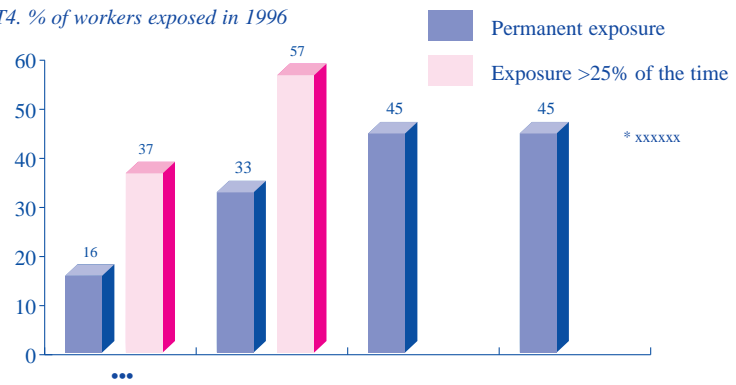
**Repetitive work**

37% of workers say that their work involves short repetitive tasks, and 57% that it involves repetitive hand or arm movements. Moreover, 45% say there is no system of task rotation in their work. (T4)

Repetitive work often goes hand in hand with working at high speed: 49% of workers with repetitive tasks are also required to work constantly at high speed.

Repetitive work correlates closely with musculo-skeletal disorders. (T5.)

T4. % of workers exposed in 1996



T5. % of workers performing short repetitive tasks and repetitive movements who have health problems (1996)

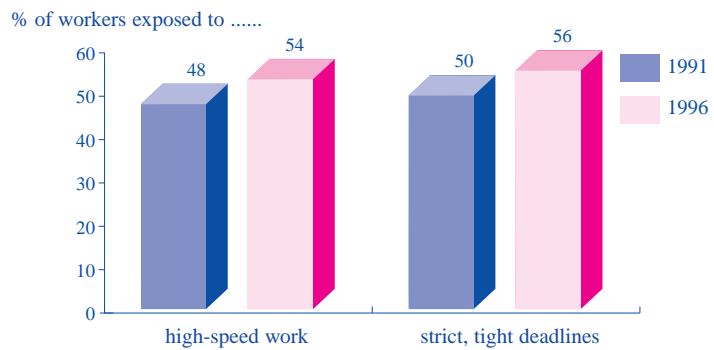
Exposed to ..	Permanently performing....	
	short repetitive tasks	repetitive movements
backache	45	43
muscular pains	30	28

**Pace of work**

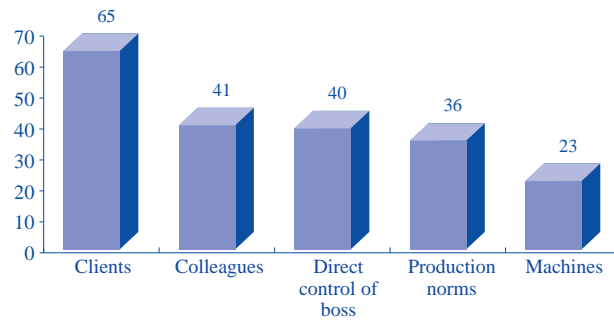
The pace of work has increased sharply between 1991 and 1996. In 1996 more than half of workers are exposed to working at high speed and to tight deadlines.

The pace of work is dictated by external demand (clients, users, patients, etc.) rather than by machines. (T7.)

T.7 Increase in time constraints between 1991 and 1996



T7. Factors dictating pace of work



**Worker autonomy increasing**

Between 1991 and 1996, the percentage of workers with a measure of autonomy over their own pace of work increased from 64% to 72%.

This still leaves 28% of all workers (and 32% of employees) with no personal control over their pace of work, 28% (32% of employees) with no personal

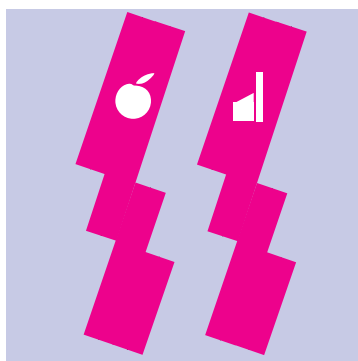
control over their methods of work, and 35% (39% of employees) with no personal control over the order in which they execute their tasks.

Also, a large minority of workers still have little autonomy over the management of their time: 37% of all workers (42% of employees) cannot choose when to take a break, and 41% (47% of employees) cannot choose when

to take their holidays or days off. Finally, 66% (72% of employees) do not have "flexi-time"<sup>1</sup>.

"Blue collar" workers (especially in manufacturing) and workers in the transport and hotel and catering sectors have very little autonomy in their work.

<sup>1</sup> i.e. the opportunity to vary their starting and finishing times, within certain limits.



# SECOND EUROPEAN SURVEY ON WORKING CONDITIONS

As social integration moves forward, and as the number of initiatives dealing with the work environment at Community level increase, more comprehensive and homogeneous data on the working conditions in the Community is required. The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions has carried out two surveys on the working environment in Europe. These surveys have formed an important part of the Foundation's work in the area of its programme concerned with improving the quality of employment and of working conditions.

The first survey on working conditions in Europe was carried out in 1991, covering the 12 countries that were Member States of the European Union at that time. It was a prototype survey, with only about 20 questions.

The second European survey on working conditions took place in January 1996 and collated the views of 15,500 workers from all over Europe. 1000 workers in each Member State of the European Union (15 Member States in 1996) were questioned simultaneously about their working conditions. The sample is representative of the working population (employees and the self-employed). It is a questionnaire-based survey, involving face-to-face interviews conducted outside the workplace. The questionnaire covers all aspects of working conditions: physical environment, workplace design, working hours, work organisation and social relationships at the workplace.

Its findings highlight how pollution, noise, stress and musculo-skeletal disorders are among the rising occupational hazards in the EU. The survey underlines a need for a more holistic and multidisciplinary approach to tackle health and safety issues in Europe. Above all, it clearly indicates that health issues must be central to the organization's structure and development.

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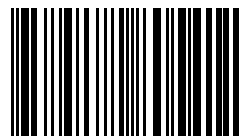
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