

Changes in the quality of working life over four decades

The Finnish Quality of Work Life Surveys between 1977 and 2008 analyse working conditions over four decades. The data reveal that work continues to be an important area of life for Finnish people. Workers remain loyal to their workplace and committed to their work. The results also show changes in many respects. Opportunities for self-development and influencing work have grown, and work has become more varied. However, the mental burden of work, time pressure and job uncertainties have risen.

Introduction

The Quality of Work Life Surveys ([FI0410SR01](#)) are major studies that involve between 3,000 and 6,000 people and cover the entire wage and salary-earning population in Finland. To date, Statistics Finland ([Tilastokeskus](#)) has carried out six of these studies: in 1977, 1984, 1990, 1997, 2003 and 2008. The surveys have been conducted through personal, face-to-face interviews lasting, on average, a little over an hour. They have included questions about the physical, mental and social work environment and the employee's experiences of these. The studies have also covered employees' work experiences, labour market position, conditions of employment, occurrence of psychological and somatic symptoms, work motivation, job satisfaction, work orientation, perceptions concerning [gender equality](#) and fair treatment, absences from work and reconciliation between work and family life.

Similar questions have been used to examine these issues so that data spanning 31 years are now available on the main topics. Despite this, the survey questionnaire has also been updated to some extent during each wave of the survey to ensure that the survey documents the changes in work life and phenomena as efficiently as possible. Questions on temporary agency work, mobile work, employees with foreign backgrounds and various aspects of job satisfaction, among other things, were added to the 2008 version of the survey.

The data for the Quality of Work Life Surveys have traditionally been collected during the autumn. However, unlike the previous surveys, the data collection for the 2008 wave of the survey took place during the spring of 2008. It is difficult to estimate the possible effects that the season might have on the results, but no seasonal workers have been included in any of the surveys conducted in either season. In the case of the latest survey, the fact that the data were collected during spring and the results published late in the year has, however, produced a somewhat contradictory situation that could not have been predicted: dramatic changes took place in the world economy between these times. The results of the 2008 survey reflect the situation in the spring of 2008, when employment was still growing strongly for the fourth consecutive year and wage earners had a positive outlook about the future. However, since then, Finland has already had to face an economic recession.

Survey findings

This report discusses changes in Finnish work life based on the six waves of the Quality of Work Life Survey from 1977 to 2008. Therefore, the data spans four decades.

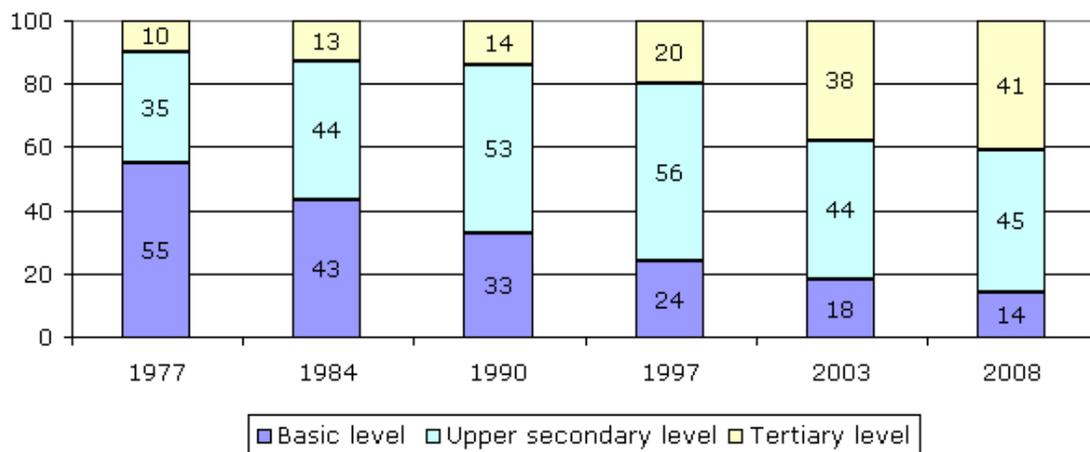
Many results of the 2008 survey have already been published on the European Working Conditions Observatory ([EWCO](#)) during 2009. In this regard, the following topics have been discussed:

- work appraisal discussions are now commonplace ([FI0907029I](#));
- satisfaction with teamwork declines ([FI0906019I](#));
- increase in the number of women in supervisory posts ([FI0906019I](#));
- survey points to an increase in time pressures and job insecurity ([FI0902019I](#));
- increase in workplace bullying over the past 10 years ([FI0910019I](#)).

Structural changes

The structure of Finnish wage and salary earners has changed considerably from 1977 to 2008. In the 1970s, when the baby boom generation entered the labour force, the average age of wage and salary earners was relatively low, most workers had just a basic level of education and almost half of them worked in blue-collar occupations. At present, on coming to the end of the first decade of the 2000s, wage and salary earners are clearly older, but also considerably better educated than they were 30 years ago (Figure 1). Occupations have also become predominantly white-collared jobs.

Figure 1: Wage and salary earners, by level of education, 1977–2008 (%)



Wage and salary earners, by level of education (%)

Source: Finnish Quality of Work Life Surveys, from 2003 according to revised classification of education

Whereas in the early 1980s the use of new information technology (IT), such as computers, was still only a relatively new phenomenon, with mainly white-collar wage and salary earners using IT in their jobs, it is commonplace in nearly all jobs today. An increasing number of employees now also have to deal with other people in addition to their co-workers during their working day. Interaction with customers introduces its own

pressures at work, albeit with rewards. All of these structural changes should be kept in mind when thinking about the long-term changes in work life.

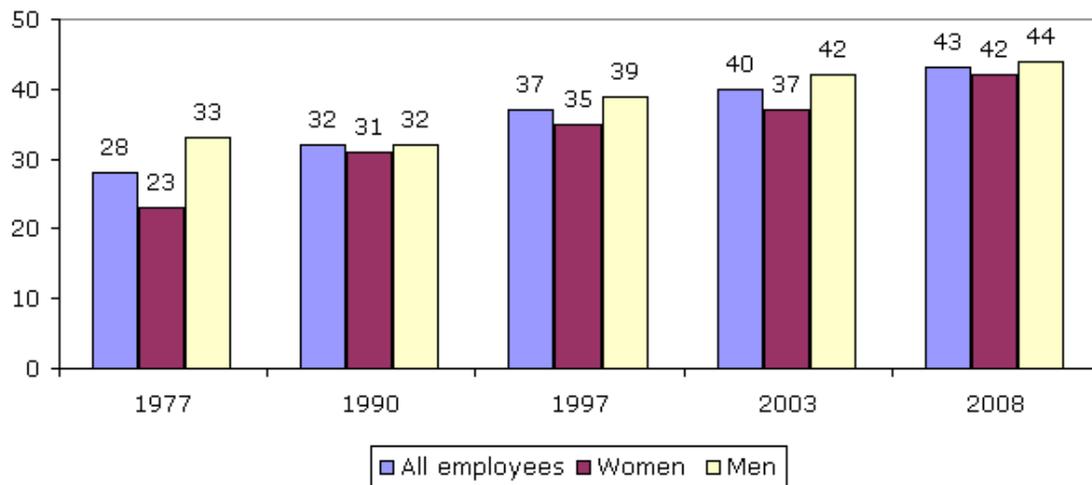
Positive aspects of change

The results of the Quality of Work Life Surveys illustrate the success of working life development measures introduced during the past 30 years. Not only has the level of expertise of wage and salary earners increased, but also their opportunities for further development in their work and for receiving training in their jobs have risen significantly (Figure 2).

Work tasks have also become more varied and independent, employees' opportunities for influencing various factors of their work have, for the most part, improved, and wage and salary earners consider their job to be important and significant now more than ever (Figures 3, 4 and 5).

At the same time, the majority of workers emphasise the content of work as a factor of their job that is even more important than salary. Finnish wage and salary earners also value the opportunities for development presented by their jobs more than opportunities for career advancement connected to the job.

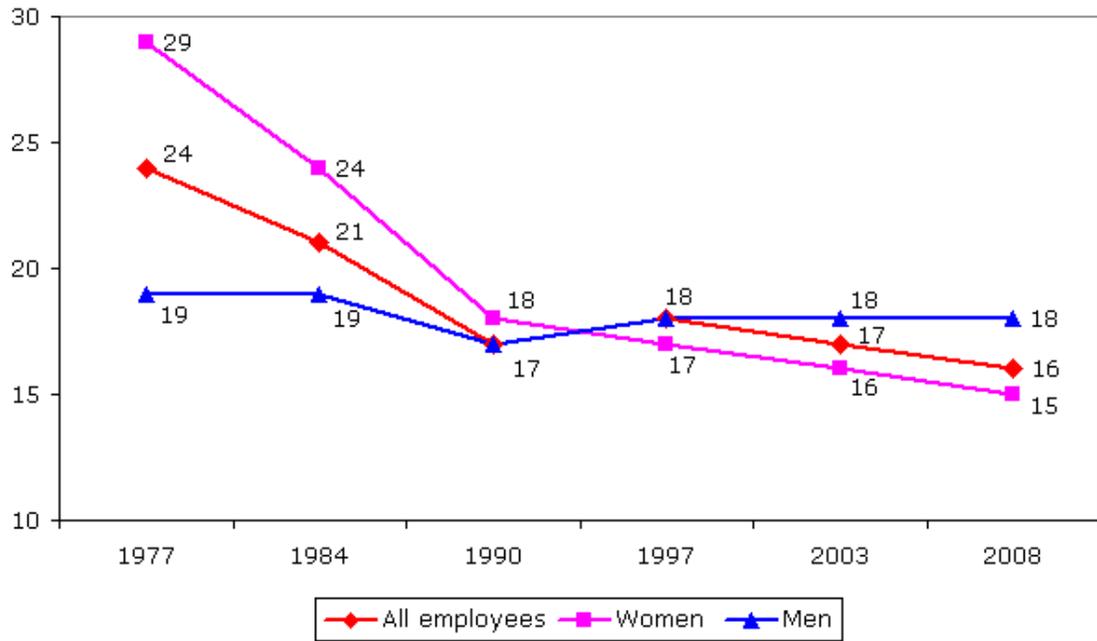
Figure 2: Opportunities for development at work, by gender, 1977–2008 (%)



Opportunities for development at work, by gender, 1977–2008 (%)

Source: Finnish Quality of Work Life Surveys

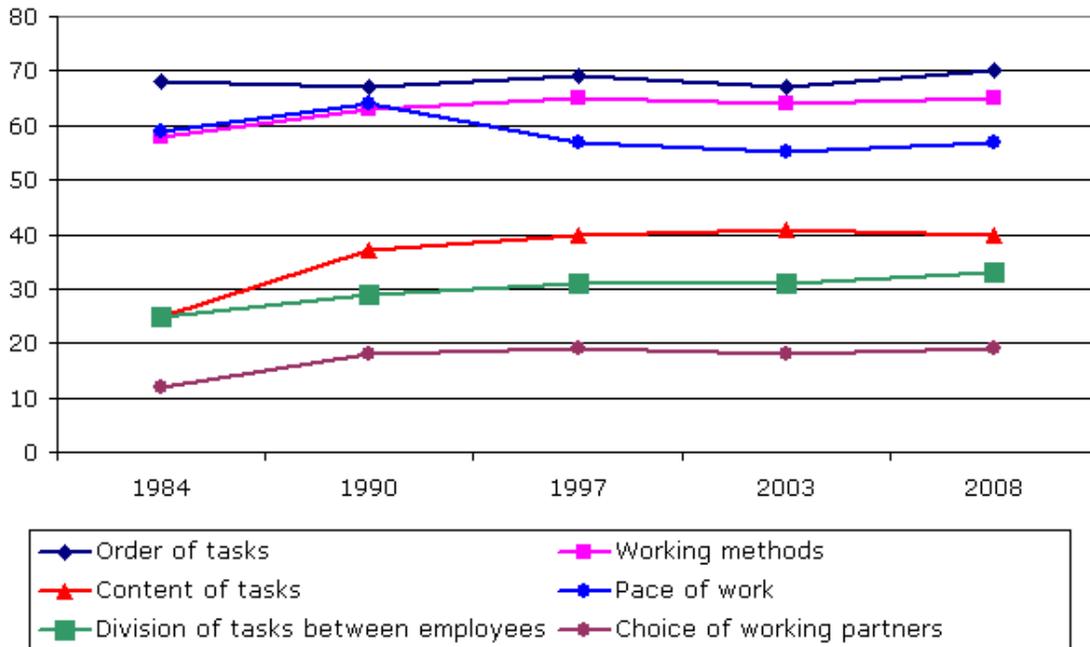
Figure 3: Monotony of work, by gender, 1977–2008 (%)



Monotony of work, by gender, 1977–2008 (%)

Note: Respondents reporting very or quite monotonous work.
Source: Finnish Quality of Work Life Surveys

Figure 4: Opportunities for influencing own work, 1984–2008 (%)



Opportunities for influencing own work, 1984–2008 (%)

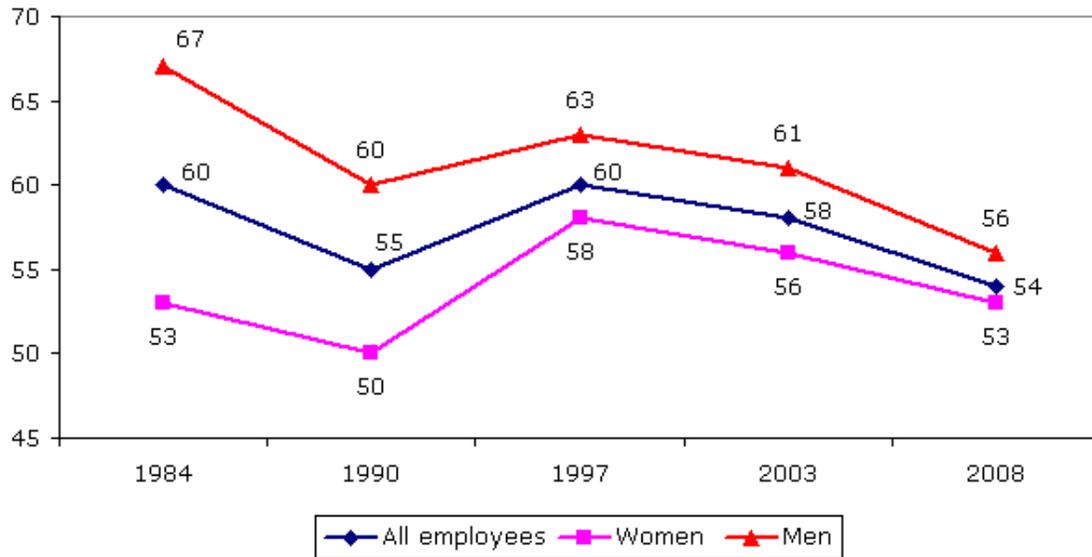
Note: Respondents reporting that they can influence their own work 'a lot' or 'quite a lot'.

Source: Finnish Quality of Work Life Surveys

Importance of work

Good social relationships, workplace safety and having a secure job are also important factors. In general, paid employment is still considered an important part of life by Finnish people, with more than half of respondents giving this answer in all rounds of the survey (Figure 5). However, men consider paid employment an important part of life more often than women. Moreover, many Finnish people would like to continue being employed in some form even after reaching retirement age.

Figure 5: Paid employment very important part of life, by gender, 1984–2008 (%)



Paid employment very important part of life, by gender, 1984–2008 (%)

Source: Finnish Quality of Work Life Surveys

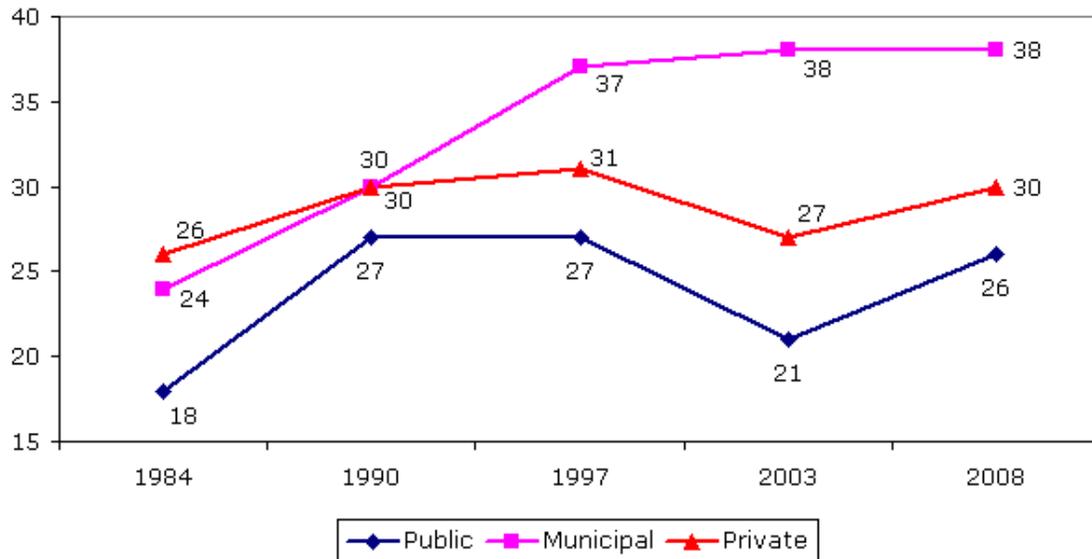
In international comparisons, Finland stands out to its advantage, especially in terms of low organisational hierarchies in the workplace, discussions between superiors and subordinates, frequency of teamwork, opportunities for development and training, use of IT at work and possibilities to influence one's work (see [Fourth European Working Conditions Survey 2005](#)).

Changes after recession in the 1990s

The development of work life or working conditions has not, however, been straightforward or even followed the same trend in all waves of the survey. The over 30-year time span of the Quality of Work Life Surveys includes many different stages of the history of Finnish working life. In terms of working conditions, the most profound changes during the period of study happened during the economic recession of the 1990s.

Employees were forced to adapt to measures applied to cope with the recession such as layoffs and decreasing job security. Expenditure was cut heavily in the public sector and personnel reductions were implemented. As a result, those who managed to keep their jobs had to work under increasing pressure at work. For instance, in the private sector, the pace of work increased markedly when the economy started to recover, but work pressure was especially intense in the public sector where work tasks were never reduced despite significant cuts in resources (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Adverse effects of time pressure, by sector of employment, 1984–2008 (%)



Adverse effects of time pressure, by sector of employment, 1984–2008 (%)

Notes: Respondents reporting 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' of adverse effects.

Source: Finnish Quality of Work Life Surveys

Increased competition

As a way of dealing with the recession, various work organisation models to increase flexibility were introduced in Finland, as well as local agreements and leadership methods to promote competition. Assessment of individual work performance and individual pay became more common. Furthermore, competition also increased between employees, work groups and departments. The reasons given for these reforms included not only the economic recession but also increased global competition.

At the same time, since 1990, the Quality of Work Life Surveys have started to show increased adverse effects of time pressure among all wage and salary earners, the threshold between working hours and private time becoming more unclear, and general job insecurity. However, when the 2008 survey data were collected in the spring of 2008, job insecurity seemed to have temporarily eased to some extent.

Focusing on individual work contributions and increased competition at the workplace can relate to deteriorating social relationships and less satisfaction with the performance and productivity of teamwork, and even workplace bullying. It also appears that the new payment and bonus systems have not contributed to eliminating pay differentials between men and women.

Lack of personnel in public sector

Applying competitive principles is especially incompatible with the public sector, where a clear increase in exhaustion among workers has been reported since the recession of the 1990s. At first, this negative development involved mainly local government workers. However, the 2008 survey shows that, over the past decade, the central government sector has also been affected. The central government sector is currently also affected by time pressure, lack of personnel, insecurity about the future, lack of access to information and lack of openness. These factors have

traditionally not been considered as big a problem in the central government sector as they have been in the other sectors of the economy.

Commentary

The Quality of Work Life Surveys provide an overview of the various, partly diverging, change trends of working life. These surveys can also help to identify the wage and salary earner groups that are at the receiving end of the most problematic consequences of a certain change and during which periods they have been most affected. At least three large, problematic developments can be identified: working conditions problems among public sector employees, difficulties among upper white-collar workers to cope with work, and challenges faced by all employees in reconciling work and family life. These are the issues in Finnish work life that should be given the most attention. Cutting back on competition and individual monitoring would promote working together and forming better-functioning teams in the workplace. Moreover, reducing time pressure and performance assessment in the public sector would provide wage and salary earners with the chance to do their jobs well. Lastly, more attention should be paid to promoting a more positive reconciliation of work and family life.

Broad interview surveys can help to outline changes in working conditions and also provide clues as to which parts of working life need to be developed the most. This is possible especially with sufficiently extensive research material, such as that of the Quality of Working Life Surveys. For instance, in these surveys, certain questions have been repeated in a similar form over a long time, and the content and type of questions have been constantly adjusted with the help of, for example, qualitative methods for highlighting new and current themes at the time of each survey.

Reference

Lehto, A.-M. and Sutela, H., [Three decades of working conditions](#), Findings of Finnish Quality of Work Life Surveys 1977–2008, Helsinki, Statistics Finland, 2009.

Annex: Quality of Work Life Surveys 1977–2008, response and non-response

The complete survey series comprises the following:

- Working Conditions Survey 1977: Personal, face-to-face interviews; sample size of 7,500 employed persons; 5,778 wage and salary earners included in the data. Response rate of 91%.
- Working Conditions Survey 1984: Personal, face-to-face interviews; sample size of 5,000 wage and salary earners; 4,502 persons included in the data. Response rate of 89%.
- Quality of Work Life Survey 1990: Personal, face-to-face interviews; sample size of 5,000 employed persons; 3,502 wage and salary earners included in the data. Response rate of 85%.
- Quality of Work Life Survey 1997: Personal, face-to-face interviews; sample size of 3,800 wage and salary earners; 2,979 persons included in the data. Response rate of 79%.
- Quality of Work Life Survey 2003: Personal, face-to-face interviews; sample size of 5,300 wage and salary earners; 4,104 persons included in the data. Response rate of 78%.
- Quality of Work Life Survey 2008. Personal, face-to-face interviews; sample size of 6,500 wage and salary earners; 4,392 persons included in the data. Response rate of 68%.

The 2008 Quality of Work Life Survey was carried out through personal, face-to-face interviews in connection with the March and April rounds of Statistics Finland's monthly Labour Force Survey ([LFS](#)). At the end of the LFS telephone interviews, those respondents who worked at least 10 hours a week were invited to participate in the Quality of Work Life Survey and a separate face-to-face interview appointment was subsequently arranged.

A total of 4,392 interviews were conducted, and the average duration of a single interview was 66 minutes. The interviews were mainly held at the respondent's home, but sometimes also at the place of work or, for example, in a library or cafeteria. The interviews were mainly completed in March and April 2008, but some interviews were conducted at the beginning of June 2008. In this way, the Quality of Work Life Survey 2008 is different from the previous surveys, as this was the first time that the data were collected during spring and not autumn.

Experts from research institutions, government ministries and universities have contributed to the design of individual surveys in the series. The data collection for the 2008 survey was co-financed by the Ministry of Employment and the Economy ([Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö](#)), the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health ([Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden ministeriö](#)), the Finnish Work Environment Fund ([Työsuojelurahasto](#)), the State Treasury ([Valtiokonttori](#)), the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health ([Työterveyslaitos](#)), the Finnish Centre for Pensions ([Eläketurvakeskus](#)), the Local Government Pensions Institution ([Kuntien eläkevakuutus](#)), the Centre for Occupational Safety ([Työturvallisuuskeskus](#), [TTK](#)), the Social Insurance Institution ([Kansaneläkelaitos](#), [KELA](#)) and the Finnish Rehabilitation Foundation ([Kuntoutussäätiö](#)). The Quality of Work Life Survey has been carried out in close cooperation with the annual Working Life Barometer survey of the Ministry of Employment and the Economy (formerly the Ministry of Labour), which has been carried out since 1990, as well as with numerous other researchers into working life.

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