



European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

Finnish quality of work life surveys

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This report is available in electronic format only.

This report examines the findings of Statistics Finland's quality of work life surveys. It considers the many changes that have taken place in the working environment over a period of 25 years. Although there have been important improvements, the surveys reveal that certain physical work environment problems remain to be resolved, while many new, more social and psychological work environment problems have also arisen.

The quality of work life surveys are extensive studies, involving between 3,000 and 6,000 persons, and covering the entire employee population in Finland. So far, [Statistics Finland](#) has carried out five of these surveys: in 1977, 1984, 1990, 1997 and 2003. The surveys have been conducted through personal, face-to-face interviews (see appendix). These interviews usually last a little over an hour and include questions on the employees' physical, psychological and social work environment as well as their experiences relating to it. It also asks about their work experience, position in the labour market, conditions of employment, occurrence of physical or psychological illnesses, work motivation, job satisfaction, and experiences relating to gender equality and fair treatment.

The same questions have been used in enquiring about these issues over the past 25 years, resulting in a useful time span for comparative analysis. Thus, the quality of work life surveys provide an important tool for assessing changes in working life in Finland.

Structural changes in the labour market

The structure of the employee population has changed in many ways in the 25 years covered by the quality of work life surveys. These changes also have an influence on how experiences of working life have evolved. For example, improvements in working conditions do not necessarily arise from actual improvements that have been carried out at workplaces, but from the fact that certain types of tasks have become more prevalent while others have grown less so.

The clearest change in the structure of the employee population is that there are now more white-collar workers and people are better educated. In the first survey in 1977, 55% of employees had only a basic level education. By 2003, this proportion was reduced to just 18%. Educational level has grown, especially among women, who now are better educated than men in employment. Among female employees, 43% have a third level education while this figure stands at 33% for men. Even more remarkably, in 2003, the number of female employees (1,013,000) exceeded the number of male employees (1,002,000).

Among the Finnish labour force, the public sector, both at government and municipal level, is a key employer, particularly for women. This fact remains unchanged during the period from 1984 to 2003. In that time, the percentage of female employees in the public sector rose from 43% to 47%, whereas, among male employees, it declined from 28% to 21%.

Work experience measured in years has been rising steadily since 1984. This is connected with the ageing of the employee population. It is noteworthy that the difference in average work experience between women and men is less than one year in Finland: since 1984, women's average work experience has grown from 15.9 to 19.9 years, while men's has risen from 17.7 to 20.7 years. It is also typical of Finland that both men and women stay a long time in the same job. In the latest survey in 2003, the average length of time working for the same employer was 10.1 years for all employees (9.9 for women and 10.2 for men). This length has extended since 1984 when it was 8.3 years for all employees. These high retention levels are occurring in spite of the fact that the overall insecurity and incidence of fixed-term employment has also increased.

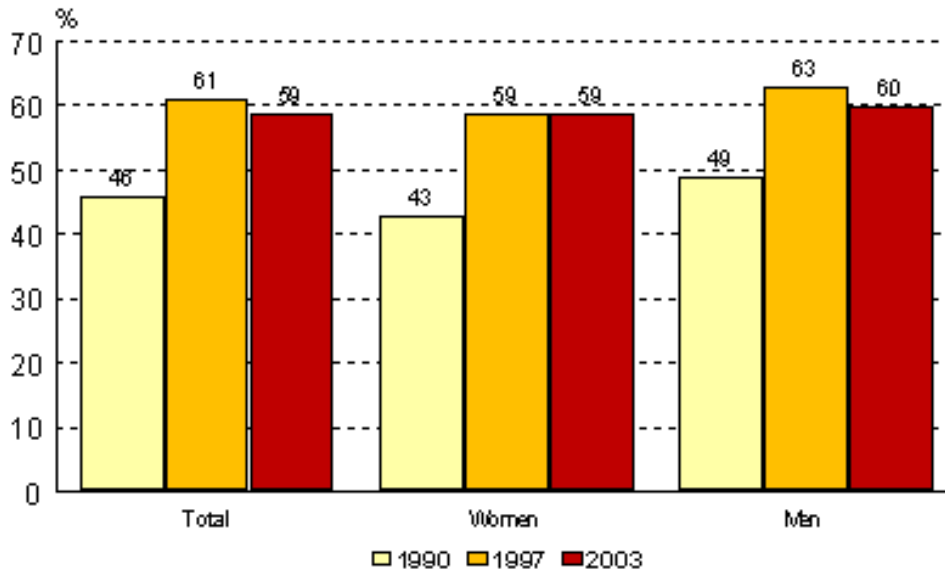
Changes in work organisation

In addition to finding out how respondents experience their working lives, the quality of work life surveys have also been used to learn as much as possible about the organisational factors most likely to affect working conditions. These include, above all, different organisational development measures, and management strategies in general. The last three surveys, in particular, looked at diverse measures associated with management by results. The aim was to determine how common these measures are becoming at Finnish workplaces, and the implications for working conditions.

Compared with the 1990 survey, work is widely assessed by productivity. Both men and women can be subject to intensified monitoring of results, though it is still slightly more prevalent for men.

Figure 1. Assessment of work by productivity

Has increased in recent years,
Quality of Work Life Surveys 1990, 1997 and 2003



According to the findings of the latest two surveys, the adoption of group or team working also seems to have become widespread at Finnish workplaces (see question A18 of the [2003 questionnaire - 222kb.pdf](#)). In 2003, 81% of respondents said that team working applied at their place of work. However, this question is a typical example where the respondents' own perceptions and definitions can vary a great deal. Nevertheless, the finding can be considered as indicative. The increase since the previous survey, in 1997, was from 73% to 83% for women and from 74% to 78% for men.

The fact that workplaces are subject to continuous change becomes obvious in Figure 2, which indicates major changes in the organisation in recent or coming years (see question B42). Almost half of employees experienced or will experience changes in management or information systems. One third expected or had had changes in customer groups or products, and every fifth employee faced changes in ownership of workplace. Regarding changes at workplaces, there is little difference between women and men; only changes in ownership are more common for men than for women, which is mostly a consequence of differences in gender distribution by sector.

Figure 2. Major changes in work organisations

In recent years or in next few years. %
Quality of Work Life Survey 2003

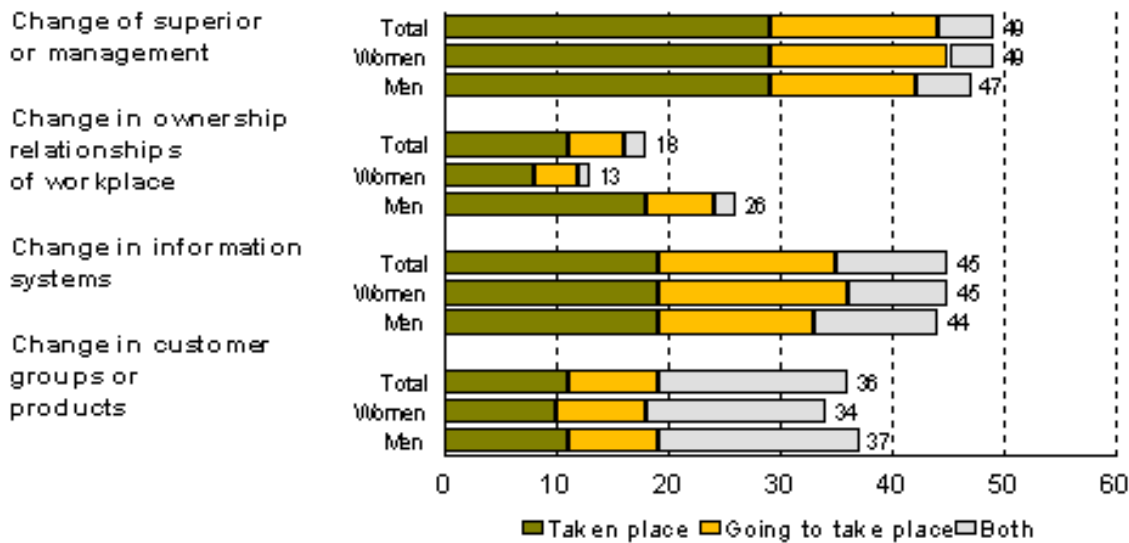


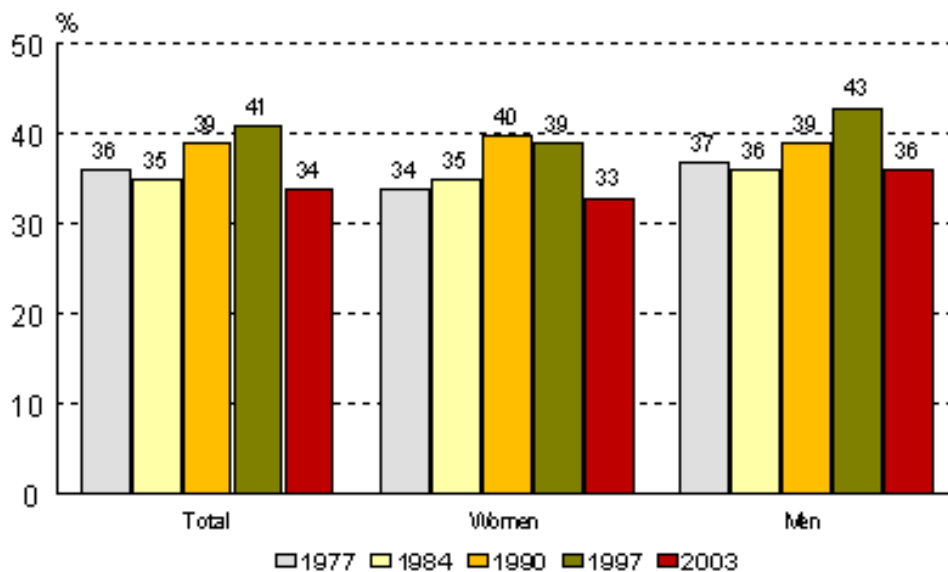
Figure 3 shows how and when respondents are informed about changes relating to work. This is essentially linked to influencing and development opportunities. The full distribution of replies to this question in 2003 was: 'At the planning stage' (34%), 'Shortly before the change' (39%), and 'At the implementation stage' (25%). In other words, approximately every fourth employee faces changes without receiving any prior information about them. Since 1997, there has been a surprisingly clear decrease in people being informed about changes. Before that, in the 1990s, information flow had improved slightly.

Looking at these results in more detail, the deciding factor in getting information is the respondent's position at the workplace. While 49% of upper salaried employees are informed at the planning stage, the corresponding proportion in the blue-collar employee group is only 22%. By gender, the differences are significant: 54% of male upper salaried employees are informed of changes at planning stage, as opposed to 43% among their female counterparts. Also, the decline from 1997 figures is greatest in this female group: from 55% to 43%. According to employers, employees working in the private sector seem to have experienced the biggest fall in being informed about changes (from 41% to 32%). In contrast, central governmental employees are better informed than at the time of the 1997 survey (from 41% to 49%).

Figure 3. Being informed about changes relating to work

At the planning stage.

Quality of Work Life Surveys 1977, 1984, 1990, 1997 and 2003



Opportunities for self-development in work

Perceptions about opportunities for development are positive. The topic has been studied in four of the quality of work life surveys and the prevailing trend appears to be one of improvement. Women experienced an even more significant increase in their opportunities than men from 1977 to 2003: the proportion of women who think that development opportunities are good increased from 23% to 37%. Among men, the same figures were 33% in 1977, rising to 42% in 2003. According to occupation, opportunities for development are especially good for men in administrative management work. Of all the men in this group, 67% regarded their opportunities as good. By sector, the central government leads in this respect (men: 58%, women: 46%).

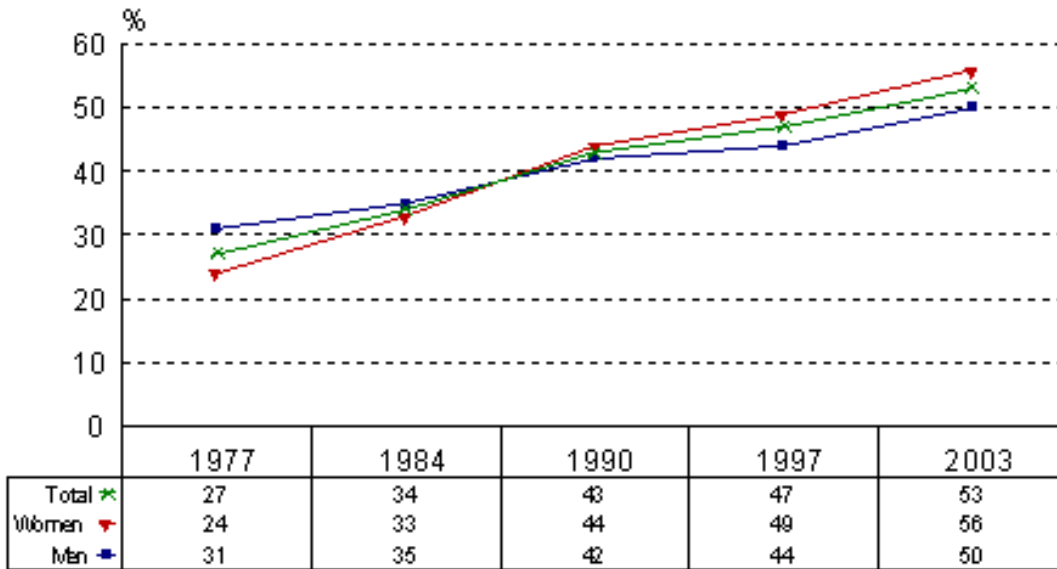
The 2003 survey also asked how important employees found development opportunities for themselves. Among women, 52% considered it very important and 38% rather important. Among men, the figures for each were 43%. Thus, when adding these two positive responses together, slightly more women (90%) than men (86%) regard development opportunities as important. Compared with the question of how important employees found advancement opportunities, development at work is considered much more important. Only 35% of women and 34% of men found advancement opportunities very or rather important.

The results indicate that participation in training paid for by the employer has increased noticeably over the past 25 years. Still, participation in in-house training is very clearly tied to position: while 68% of upper salaried employees had participated in it, the proportion was only 34% in the blue-collar employee group. Here, too, the public sector is foremost: of all those working for the government, 72% - and 63% of those working for municipalities - had received in-house training in the last 12 months. In the private sector, the corresponding proportion was only 47%. An examination by age group shows that the least amount of training is invested in the very young: among 15 to 24-year-old employees, the proportion was just 35%. There is most probably a link between this and temporary employment relationships, and occupations, or position in the workplace in general.

Figure 4. Participation in training paid for by employer

In the last 12 months.

Quality of Work Life Surveys 1977, 1984, 1990, 1997 and 2003



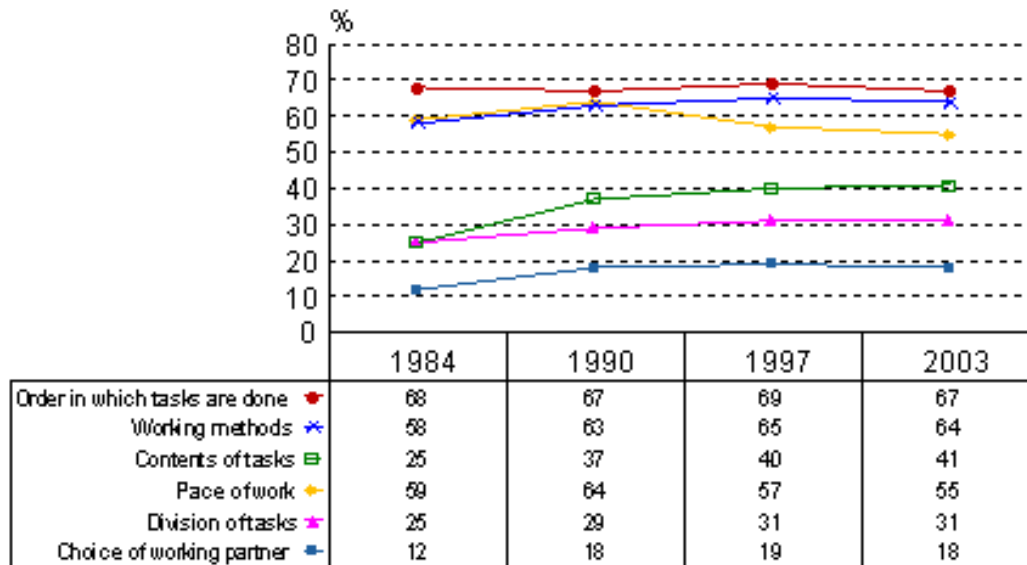
Opportunities for influencing own work

Since 1984, the quality of work life surveys have included a question about opportunities for influencing one's own work. The respondents are asked to assess the extent to which they can influence various aspects of their work. Figure 5 indicates the changes that have taken place. The trend has been rising or stable in respect of all aspects except influencing the pace of work. Here, the trend has been decreasing since 1990. By gender, there are systematic differences in men's and women's work. Women have less opportunities for influencing almost all the itemised aspects of work. The order in which tasks are done is the only aspect on which women have as much say as men. For all employees, the clearest increase has been in opportunities for influencing the content of one's work. Men's opportunities have advanced even faster than women's. Influencing the pace of work seems to have become more difficult for women today and here the gap between genders has widened somewhat.

Figure 5. Opportunities for influencing own work

Can influence a lot or quite a lot.

Quality of Work Life Surveys 1984, 1990, 1997 and 2003



Social relationships at workplaces

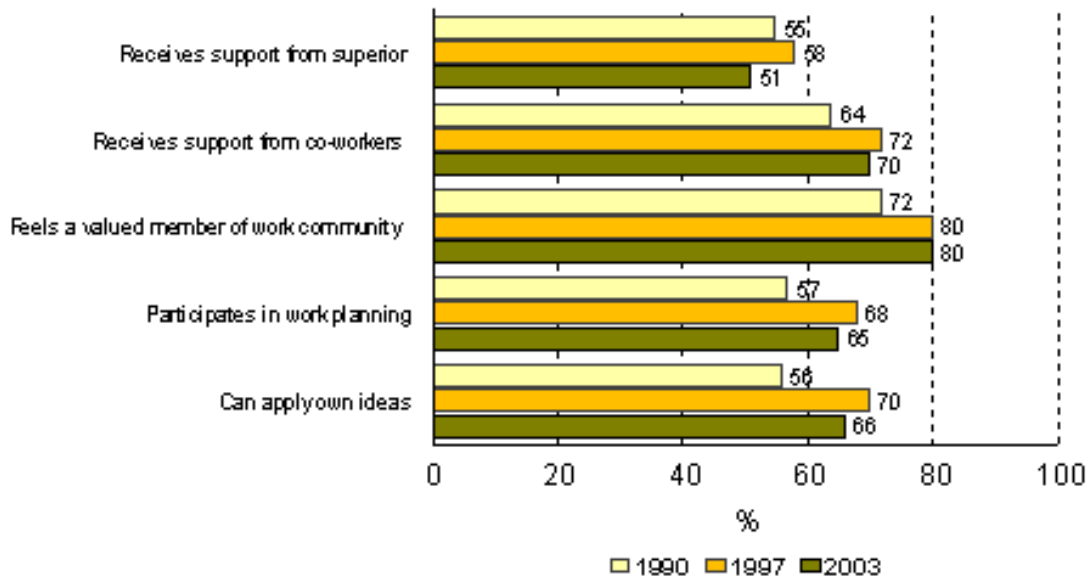
At the same time as work tasks evolve and working methods improve - as in teamworking, for example - work also becomes more intense, causing various pressures to build up. The workload increases and, at worst, employees feel threatened by redundancy. All these factors increase competition and conflicts experienced by employees.

Looking at the encouragement from the work community, surprising changes can be seen (Figure 6). Support from superiors in particular has fallen since the last survey. Women are slightly more satisfied than men regarding the factors connected with social relationships at work. The division by gender has remained unchanged since the previous survey. Women receive more support, especially from co-workers, but also from their superiors. The decrease in support from superiors has taken place especially among men in the private sector (56%-44%). Among women, the decrease was greatest in the public sector (63%-53%).

Figure 6. Encouragement from work community

Always or in most cases.

Quality of Work Life Surveys 1990, 1997 and 2003

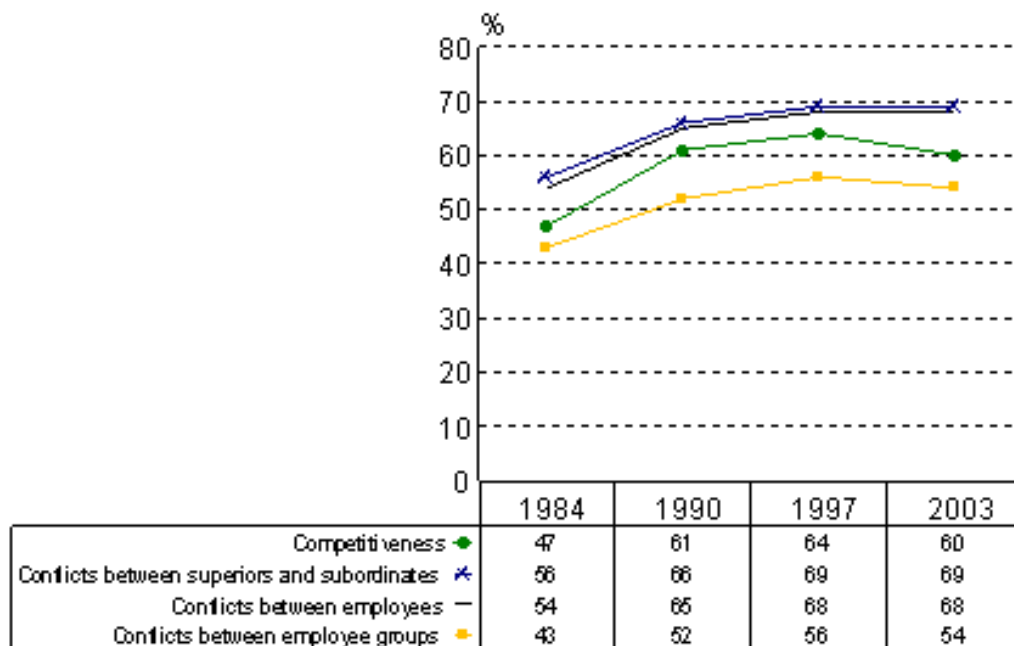


Competitiveness and conflicts increased steadily at workplaces from the 1980s until 1997. Since then, they have remained steady or decreased slightly. Various uncertainties regarding work and work-related stress are clearly associated with the occurrence of conflicts at workplaces. The same factors are also associated with the phenomenon known as ‘workplace bullying’. This has emerged from more detailed analyses done in other contexts. (Sutela and Lehto, 1998 and [FI0406TR01](#), 2004). In all, 22% of Finnish wage and salary earners are currently, or have previously been, subjected to workplace bullying. Furthermore, the proportion of those employees who have observed this phenomenon is as high as 42%. Both personal experiences and observations of it as a bystander are more typical among women than men.

Figure 7. Conflicts in work unit

A lot, quite a lot, or some.

Quality of Work Life Surveys 1984, 1990, 1997 and 2003



Being subjected to physical violence at work has also increased. Here, too, the change is greater for women than

men. However, it appears that the fear of physical violence, rather than actually becoming subjected to it, has increased most. This topic is covered in more detail in the topic report *Violence, bullying and harassment* (FI0406TR01). The rise in both physical violence and the fear of it is linked with the increase in the type of work that involves customer contact; the violence originates mostly from customers. As many as 51% of all employees were doing customer contact work for at least half of their working time. With women, the percentage is as high as 63%.

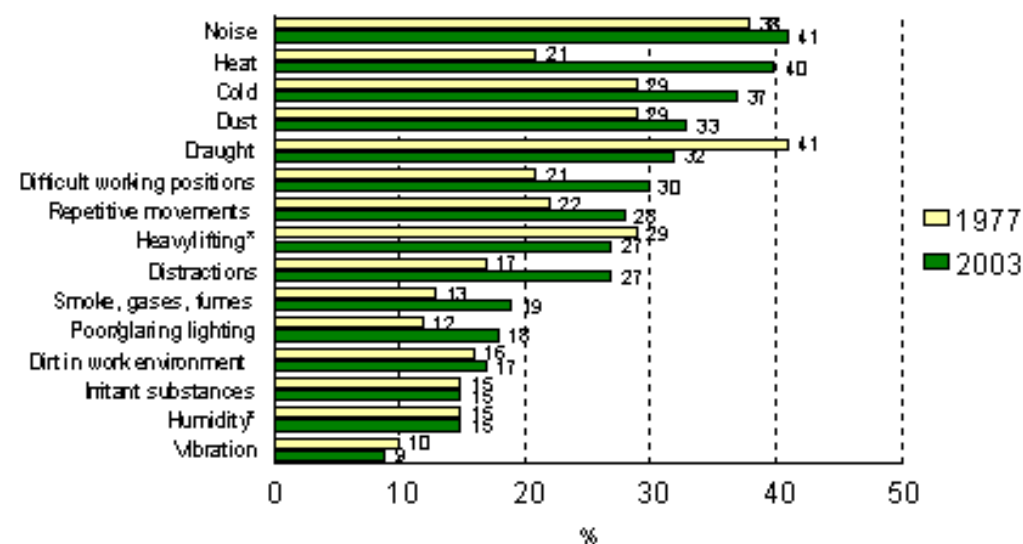
At the same time, the proportion of people in supervisory positions has been rising continuously, which also indicates changes in the nature of work and social relationships. This is, in fact, quite surprising, considering much talk about lighter organisational structures. More than one in three employees (35%) say that their work entails supervisory tasks. The proportion of women working in a supervisory capacity has clearly increased. Today, 36% of employees have a female superior while, in 1984, this was the case for 26%. It is a particularly characteristic feature of working life in the Nordic countries (Paoli and Merllié, 2001).

Adverse physical factors in work environment

A surprising feature throughout the 25 years covered by the quality of work life surveys is a continual increase in a diversity of adverse physical factors. Much has been achieved in the field of occupational safety in the same time period, and it would be logical to assume that this would be reflected in the survey findings. In questions like these, comparison becomes more difficult because consciousness of adverse factors has increased, which influences personal assessments and experiences. In other words, the surveys do not exactly explain how the occurrence of adverse physical factors has changed, but rather how respondents experience their own working environment. An experience, which - from a quality of working life perspective - has developed in a negative direction, obviously gives cause for concern.

Figure 8. Adverse physical factors in working environment

Quality of Work Life Surveys 1977 and 2003



* 1984 and 2003

Measured by experiences, only very few adverse physical factors have diminished or even remained stable (see question B13). Among these few are draughts, heavy lifting, dirt in the work environment, vibration, and humidity. Irritant substances are now at the same level as in 1977 but were at a higher level in the intervening years. Adverse physical factors which have increased include heat, cold, a noisy or distracting work environment, repetitive, monotonous movements, and difficult working positions.

Adverse physical factors were usually connected with men's work, as men's occupational structure has centred more on the manufacturing and production industry, in which these problems are more prevalent. In the latest

survey, factors such as heat, cold, vibration, draughts, noise, smoke, gases and fumes, humidity, dust, dirt in the working environment, and irritant and corrosive substances were mostly apparent in men's jobs. A noisy or distracting working environment and repetitive, monotonous movements are more typical in women's jobs. Even heavy lifting has increased in women's work, being now on the same level with men's work.

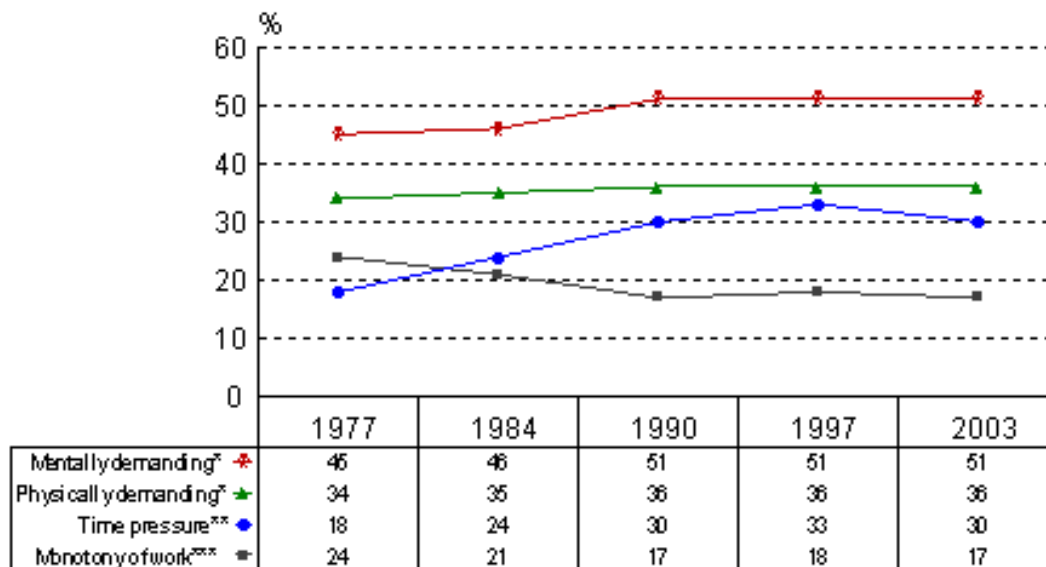
Different demands of work

The monotony of work has been given much consideration for as long as efforts have been made to improve work and working conditions. The redesigning of work patterns was a response to the Tayloristic work organisation, in which the monotony of work reached its peak due to extreme task specialisation. As late as a couple of decades ago, it was quite common in Finland for women's work to be very monotonous. In 1977, almost one third of Finnish women regarded their work as monotonous, while under one fifth of Finnish men thought this of their work. However, the situation has changed and there is no difference between the genders in this respect today. An explanation of the change is the increased prevalence of service-oriented jobs and the almost total disappearance of, for example, women's industrial work - especially work adhering to traditional Taylorist patterns of work organisation.

Of all the aspects of work described here (Figure 9), the one of how physically demanding work is has changed the least. This is rather surprising as one would assume that mechanisation would have alleviated this feature in particular. Here, too, the explanation may lie in the development of the employment structure towards service occupations, e.g. care work continues to be highly demanding physically.

Figure 9. Different demands of work

Quality of Work Life Surveys 1977, 1984, 1990, 1997 and 2003



* very or rather demanding
 ** extreme or moderate adverse effects
 *** highly or rather monotonous

Greater demands mentally and increasing pace of work go almost hand-in-hand. Besides time pressure, other factors also dictate how mentally demanding a job is. Conflicts arising from a variety of factors at a workplace, for example, lie behind growing psychological demands. Over the survey period, women's work has become more strenuous than men's in this respect. Increased pace of work was particularly apparent in the 1990s. There is not much difference in this respect between genders. However, when the subject was studied more closely in the earlier quality of work life surveys, differences emerged in what women and men regarded as reasons for the increased pace (Lehto, 1998, p. 53; Järnefelt and Lehto, 2002). Women highlighted the lack of human resources, while men put the emphasis on more demanding targets and increased competition. Both regarded general factors of increased

and expanded tasks as the underlying reasons for the higher pace of work.

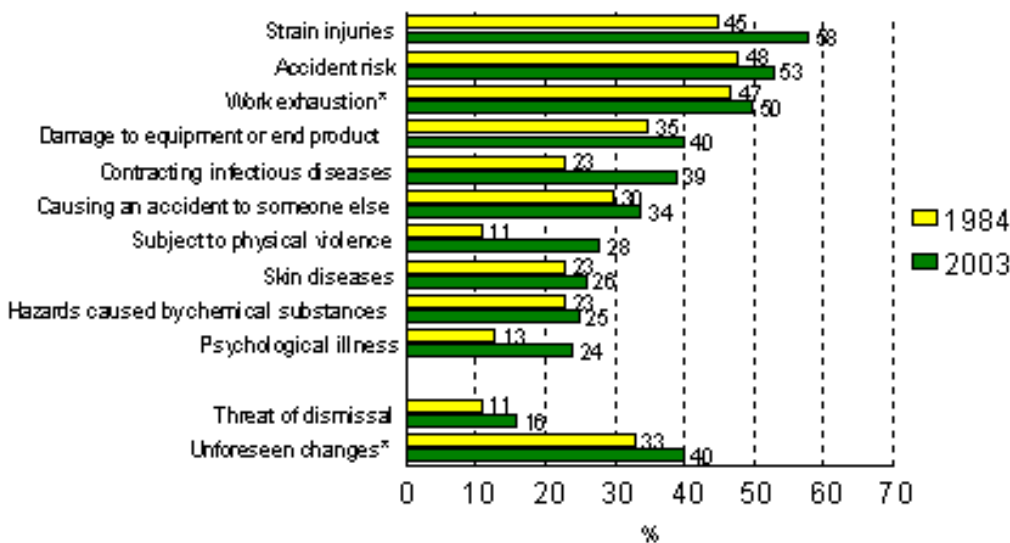
Figure 10 below shows employees' attitudes to various illnesses or accident hazards, on the one hand, and to various risks relating to their labour market position, on the other. It describes the experience of hazards among those who have either 'experienced as a clear hazard' or 'thought of occasionally' the given problems connected with work (see question B15). The greatest increase since 1984 occurred in the experience of contracting infectious diseases, becoming subjected to physical violence, and receiving strain injuries. For example, more than 25% of employees today fear becoming subjected to physical violence, while the corresponding proportion in 1984 was only 11%.

Accidents at work and strain injuries are factors that are feared most: over one half of all employees are afraid of them. There are considerable differences between the genders in experiencing various hazards. For example, 63% of men felt that accidents at work were a hazard while 44% of women thought so. More women (39%) than men (15%) were afraid of becoming subjected to physical violence. The last two surveys in 1997 and 2003 included as a new kind of hazard the fear of 'severe work exhaustion'. Surprisingly, many employees (50%) feared it in 2003. More than every second female respondent (55%) and as many as 44% of the male respondents said that they thought about this hazard at least every now and then.

The last two items in Figure 10 offered a 'yes' or 'no' response to the experience of different threats (see question B16). There has been a distinct increase in the 1990s in such feelings of insecurity regarding work. Many employees regard unforeseen changes as a further insecurity factor. As was mentioned at the beginning of this report, unforeseen changes are one of the most disturbing issues in today's working life. Looking at the background variables, especially highly educated, upper white-collar employees, both men and women, working in the private sector are the most concerned about unforeseen changes in their work.

Figure 10. Experience of hazards and insecurity

Quality of Work Life Surveys 1984 and 2003



* 1997 and 2003

Recurrent aches and pains

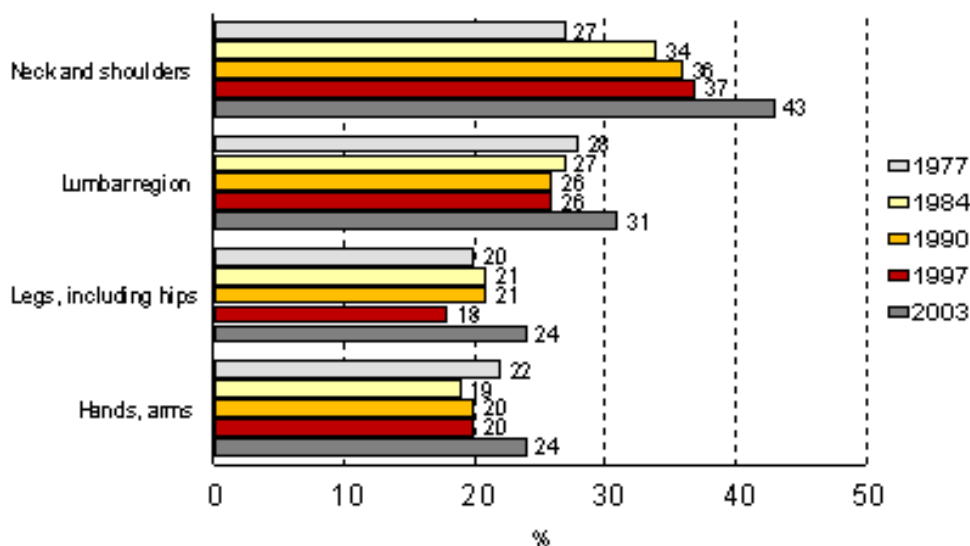
All of the quality of work life surveys questioned employees whether they suffer from recurrent aches and pains. Over the 25 years, there has been a clear rise in the incidence of recurrent neck, cervical spine and shoulder pain: today, 43% of employees suffer from them while, in 1977, the proportion was only 27%. This trend may be attributable to the increasing amount of sedentary and IT work.

Recurrent aches and pains are more common among women than men. More than half (51%) of female employees

suffer from recurrent neck and shoulder pain; the same figure for men is 34%. Among both genders, a significant increase can be seen since the survey in 1997.

Figure 11. Recurrent aches and pains

Quality of Work Life Surveys 1977, 1984, 1990, 1997 and 2003



Psychological symptoms

The quality of work life surveys also include questions about psychological symptoms. Overall, employees appear to suffer from them today as much as in the past. However, there has been a distinct increase in sleeping difficulties, from which almost half of all employees suffer at least once a month (47%), and in the feelings of fatigue, apathy and lack of energy. This lack of energy is the most common of the symptoms, suffered from over 50% of men and 66% of women at least once a month.

Women suffer from more of the listed symptoms than men. In addition to fatigue and sleeping difficulties, a further common problem is the feeling of tension, nervousness and irritability, experienced at least once a month by 46% of all employees: 41% of men and 49% of women. Three out of four (78%) of the employees who suffer at least once a week from these symptoms believe that their symptoms are related to work or work matters. This was asked in the 1997 survey but not in the most recent survey in 2003.

Figure 12. Women's psychological symptoms

Suffers from at least once a month.
Quality of Work Life Surveys 1977, 1984, 1990, 1997 and 2003

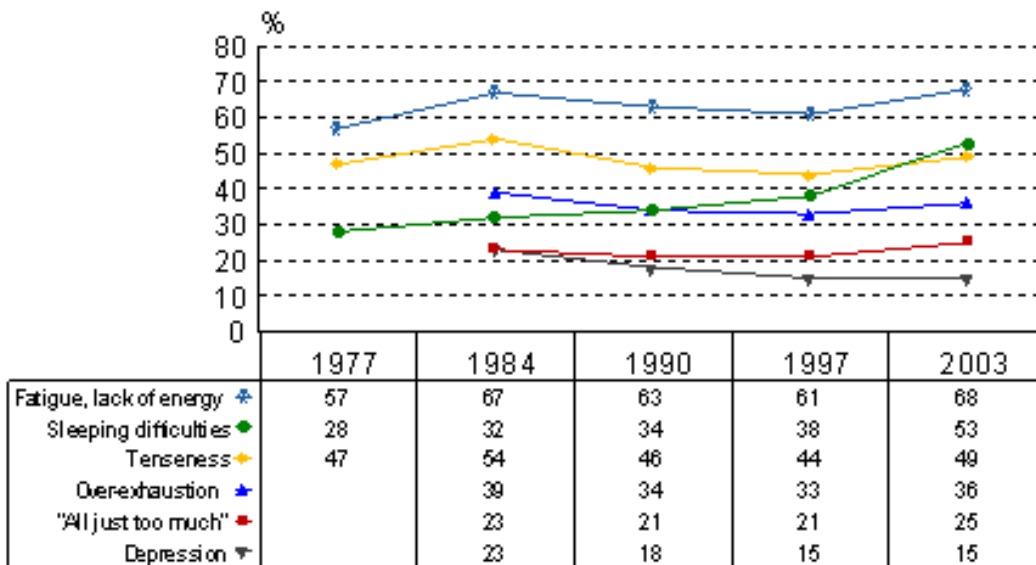
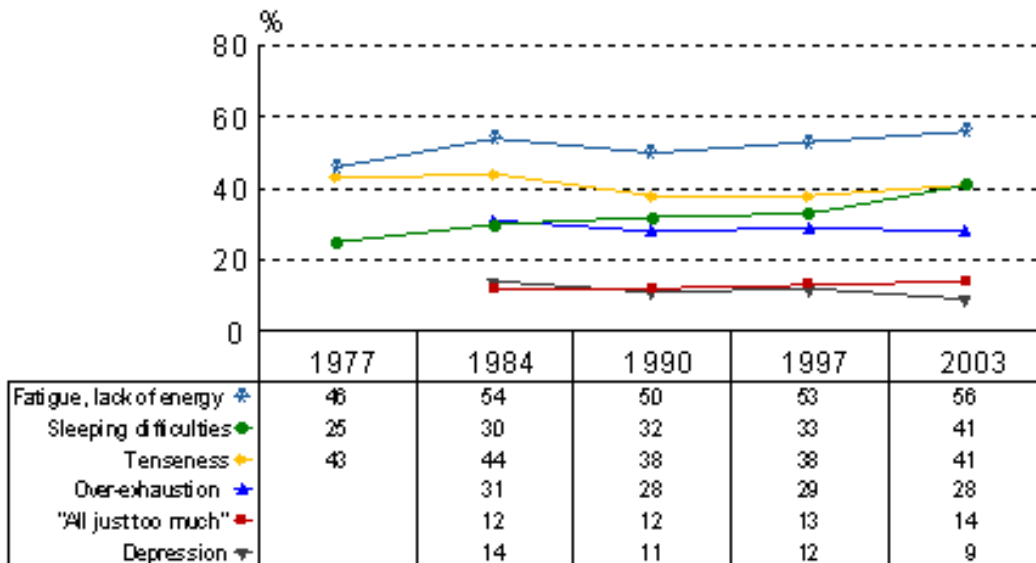


Figure 13. Men's psychological symptoms

Suffers from at least once a month.
Quality of Work Life Surveys 1977, 1984, 1990, 1997 and 2003



Commentary

This report provides a short overview of the results of the Finnish quality of work life survey, carried out by Statistics Finland since 1977. This survey has the longest tradition in studying working conditions in Finland. Since 1992 the Ministry of Labour conducts its own annual survey, the Working Life Barometer. Its content is planned to complement the Statistic Finland study but the working life barometer investigates more the experiences of short-term changes in working conditions.

Since 1994, the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health also carries out its work and health survey every three years. This survey is based on telephone interviews with smaller samples and lower response rates as the quality of

work life survey. Because of its longer history and higher reliability, the quality of work life survey is used here to describe changes in working conditions. Nonetheless, most of the latest results from these three research tools correspond closely. The appendix briefly describes all three surveys.

In considering the long-term changes, some positive trends are important. Employees are much better educated now than 25 years ago, and experiences in development opportunities and in-house training have increased all the time. Positive developments can also be seen in opportunities to influence one's work, although opportunities to influence the pace of work have decreased since 1990 and some other aspects have also fallen since 1997.

It is of some concern that various demands and threats of work have also increased. The pace of work has increased since 1977, with the last survey showing a slight alleviation. Still, the threat of severe work exhaustion continues to grow. A new factor to emerge is the growth in numbers of people who are uninformed of coming changes in the workplace. Fewer employees say that they are informed about changes at the planning stage. This concerns all employees, including those who are well-educated and in good positions. The private sector seems to be the least well-informed in this sense.

Behind these uncertainties and increased demands are presumably the ever tougher competition in the private sector and lack of resources in the public sector. The outcomes of such demands are clear: social relations have suffered, as has the health of employees. Symptoms, such as sleeping difficulties, fatigue, tension, and neck and shoulder pain, have been on the increase, especially among women.

These results mean that action for better working life and well-being has become more urgent. Physical work environment problems have still to be resolved, while many new, more social and psychological work environment problems have also arisen. The task of work life surveys is to reveal the connections between the many changes in the working environment in order to help towards improving circumstances.

Anna-Maija Lehto, Statistics Finland

Appendix

Quality of work life surveys, Statistics Finland:

Working conditions survey 1977. Personal face-to-face interview; sample size 7,500 employed people (15-64 years of age); 5,778 employees included in data (91% response rate).

Working conditions survey 1984. Personal face-to-face interview; sample size 5,000; 4,502 employees included in data (89% response rate).

Quality of work life survey 1990. Personal face-to-face interview; sample size 5,000 employed people; 3,502 employees included in data (85% response rate).

Quality of work life survey 1997. Personal face-to-face interview; sample size 3,800; 2,979 employees included in data (79% response rate).

Quality of work life survey 2003. Personal face-to-face interview; sample size 5,300; 4,104 employees included in data (78% response rate).

Working life barometer, Ministry of Labour:

Since 1992, the Ministry of Labour carries out working life barometers as telephone interviews each year among about 1,000-1,300 employees aged 18-64 years. The interviews have been made in connection with the Finnish labour force survey by Statistics Finland. The response rate has fluctuated between 87% and 90%.

Work and health survey, Finnish Institute of Occupational Health:

Work and health surveys have been carried out in 1994-1995, 1997, 2000 and 2003. The samples included about 5,000 of the Finnish speaking population between the age of 25-65 years. Interviews were made by telephone, and response rates were 56% in 2000 and 67% in 2003. The number of working people in the data (both employees and self-employed) was 2,100 in 2000 and 2,300 in 2003.

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