



# TEN YEARS OF WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Exposure to physical hazards at the workplace, intensification of work and flexible employment practices are still a primary cause of health problems for workers in the European Union. In 2000, 83% of the EU working population of 159 million persons were employees and 17% were self-employed. The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions carried out its third European survey on working conditions in 2000 (the two previous surveys date from 1990 and 1995). A total of 21,500 workers across all Member States – both employees and the self-employed – were interviewed about their working conditions. The survey reveals that no significant improvement in risk factors or overall conditions in the workplace took place over the ten-year period since the first survey on working conditions was carried out. The 2000 survey provides an overview of the state of working conditions in the EU, highlighting trends and identifying major issues and changes in the workplace.

## Main findings

- The most common work-related health problems are:
  - backache (reported by 33% of respondents);
  - stress (28%);
  - muscular pains in the neck and shoulders (23%)
  - overall fatigue (23%).
- There is a direct relationship between poor health outcomes and adverse working conditions, arising in particular from a high level of work intensity and repetitive work.
- Exposure to physical risk factors (noise, vibrations, dangerous substances, heat, cold, etc.) and to poor design (carrying heavy loads and painful positions) remains prevalent.
- Work is getting more and more intensive: over 50% of workers work at high speed or to tight deadlines for at least a quarter of their working time.
- Control over work has not increased significantly: one third of workers say they have little or no control over their work while only three out of five workers are able to decide when to take holidays.
- The nature of work is changing: it is less dependent on machinery and production targets and more driven by customer demand.
- The number of people working with computers has increased: from 39% in 1995 to 41% in 2000.
- Flexibility is widespread in all aspects of work: working time ('round-the-clock' and part-time work); work organisation (multi-skilling, teamwork and empowerment); and employment status (18% of all employees work under non-permanent contracts).
- Temporary workers (employees with fixed-term contracts and temporary agency workers) continue to report more exposure to risk factors than permanent employees.
- Gender segregation and gender discrimination – both highly disadvantageous to women – are prevalent.
- Violence, harassment and intimidation remain a feature of the workplace: from 4% to 15% of workers in different countries report that they have been subjected to intimidation.

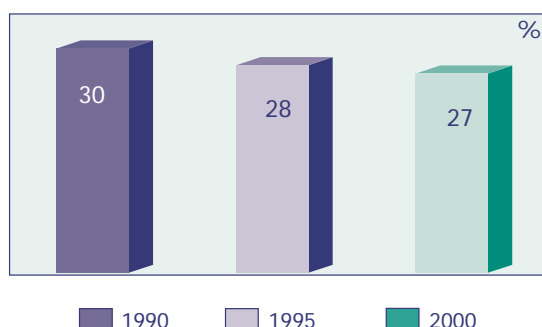


EUROPEAN FOUNDATION  
*for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions*

## Health and work

In general, workers' perceptions of their health and safety being at risk due to work have shown an improvement during the past ten years. As Figure 1 indicates, the number of workers who report risks to their health in 2000 was less than in the two previous surveys.

Figure 1: Workers reporting health and safety risks at work, 1990-2000



However, an increasing proportion of workers report work-related health problems (Figure 2). Musculo-skeletal disorders (backache and muscular pains, particularly in the neck and shoulders) are on the increase, as is overall fatigue. Stress remains at the same level (28%) in 1995 and 2000. There are strong correlations between stress and musculo-skeletal disorders and features of work organisation such as repetitive work and pace of work (see Table 1).

An indication of the level of work pressures felt by workers is shown in Figure 3, which reveals that over one third of all workers (42%) and more than half of workers in certain occupations feel they would not be able to or do not want to continue in the same job until they reach the age of sixty. This question could

Figure 2: Work-related health problems, 1995 and 2000

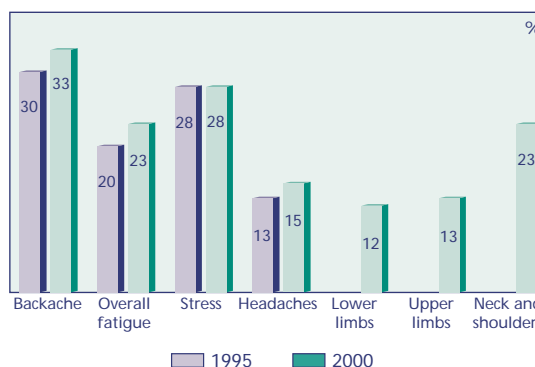
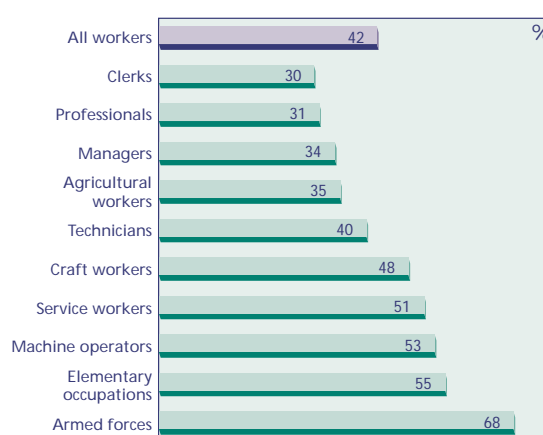


Figure 3: Workers who do not think they will be able to or want to do the same job when 60 years old, by occupation



be considered an indicator of 'work sustainability'. In this respect, blue collar workers, army personnel and service/sales workers carry out the least sustainable jobs.

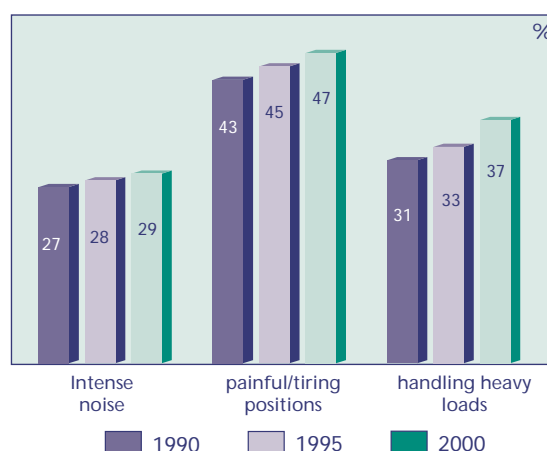
## Exposure to physical hazards

From 1990 to 2000 there was no improvement in classic workplace hazards such as noise, vibrations, inhaling fumes and dangerous substances, high and low temperatures, carrying heavy loads and working in painful or tiring positions. Figure 4 shows that the proportion of workers exposed to some of these conditions at least 25% of the time remains high.

In the 2000 survey, as in previous surveys, male workers are more exposed than female workers to all of these factors, with the exception of painful and tiring positions, where both sexes are equally at risk.

Non-permanent employees, i.e. temporary agency workers and employees with fixed-term contracts, are more exposed to influences such as heavy loads and

Figure 4: Exposure to physical hazards, 1990-2000



painful positions than employees on indefinite contracts (see Figure 12).

## Repetitive work

Repetitive work is still widespread in the workplace. While 33% of workers reported repetitive movements on a continuous basis in 1995, there is only a slight decline – to 31% – in 2000. The proportion of male and female workers reporting repetitive movements is identical.

The question about repetitive tasks was changed in 2000 and trends are therefore difficult to assess. Almost one third of workers (32%) reported carrying out repetitive tasks of less than 10 minutes in 2000, with 22% carrying out tasks of less than 1 minute.

As Table 1 shows, workers engaged in repetitive work are prone to a high proportion of musculo-skeletal disorders.

Table 1: Health problems related to making repetitive hand/arm movements, 2000

%	Backache	Muscular pains in neck and shoulders	Muscular pains in upper limbs	Muscular pains in lower limbs
Making repetitive movements	48	37	24	21
Not making repetitive movements	19	11	4	5
All workers	33	23	13	11

## Work intensity

Intensity of work has increased during the past decade, more sharply between 1990 and 1995 than between 1995 and 2000.

In 2000, more than half of all workers report working at high speed and to tight deadlines during at least one quarter of their working time, as is indicated in Figure 5. Significantly, more than two in five workers state that they do not have enough time to do their job.

There is a strong correlation between work intensity and health problems and injuries at work, as can be seen from Tables 2 and 3.

Figure 5: Working at very high speed or to tight deadlines, 1990-2000

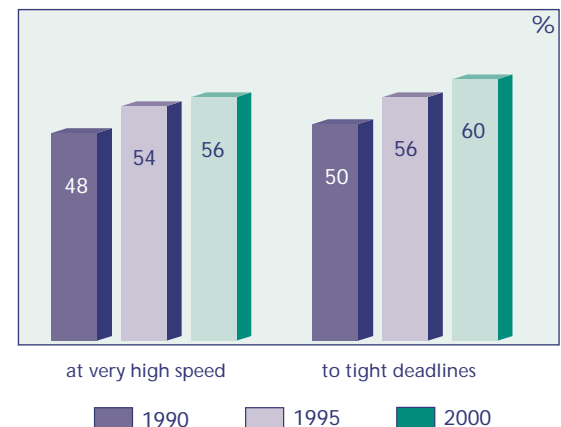


Table 2: Health problems related to working at very high speed, 2000

%	Backache	Stress	Muscular pains in neck and shoulders	Injuries
Working continuously at high speed	46	40	35	11
Never working at high speed	25	21	15	5

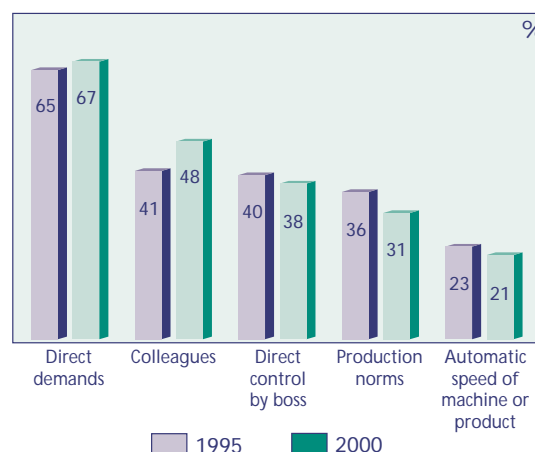
Table 3: Health problems related to working to tight deadlines, 2000

%	Backache	Stress	Muscular pains in neck and shoulders	Injuries
Working continuously to tight deadlines	42	40	31	10
Never working to tight deadlines	27	20	17	5

## Pace of work

Between 1995 and 2000 the pace of work has been increasingly dictated by human demands (demands from external persons such as clients, passengers, users, patients, etc.) and by the work done by colleagues. At the same time, industrial constraints, such as production targets and automatic speed of machines, and bureaucratic constraints, such as direct control by the boss, have become less important, as is shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Factors influencing pace of work, 1995 and 2000



## Worker autonomy

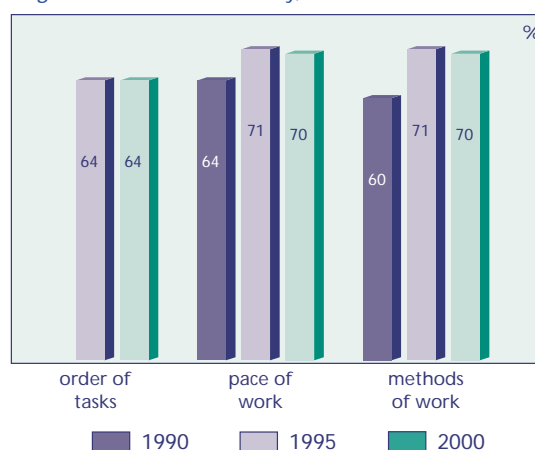
As is indicated in Figure 7, there was a significant increase in workers' control over their pace of work between 1990 and 1995 (from 64% to 71%), while no further improvements were found in the period to 2000. Similarly, a large increase in control over work methods may be noted for the earlier period and almost no improvement in the later period. The same proportion of workers – two-thirds – were able to choose their order of tasks in 1995 and 2000.

These average figures sometimes mask wide divergences which are to be found within occupations and sectors. Particular groups of workers, such as plant and machine operators and sales and service workers, have experienced a sharp decline in their control over work. At a sectoral level, transport and communication workers are similarly affected.

In the year 2000, almost two out of five workers (44%) cannot decide when to take their holidays, a slight decrease from 1995 when the figure was 43%.

Two out of five workers (44%) have control over their working time; not surprisingly, self-employed

Figure 7: Worker autonomy, 1990-2000



workers (84%) have more control than employees (36%). Men have more influence than women over their working time: the ratio is 47% to 41%. Employees on permanent contracts have more influence than those with fixed-term or temporary agency contracts. Occupational groups with a high level of professional skills have most control over their working time.

## Working with computers

The proportion of people working, at least some of the time, with computers has increased, from 39% in 1995 to 41% in 2000. Among the self-employed the increase is sharper, although their use of computers generally is not as high as among employees (33% compared to 43%).

Teleworking on a full-time or nearly full-time basis is reported by just over one per cent of the total population. It is more commonly practised among the higher-qualified professional categories, and in financial services and real estate.

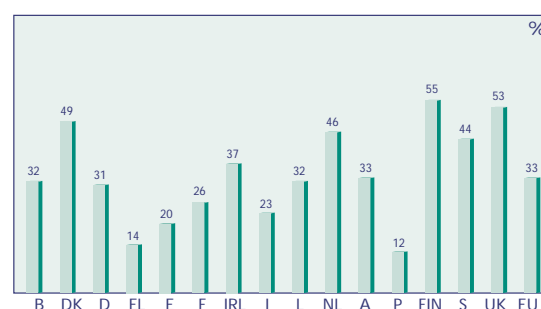
## Skills and training

In 2000, slightly more employees (33%) reported having undergone training paid for or provided by their employer in the previous 12 months than in 1995 (32%). A welcome development is that temporary agency workers are catching up with permanent workers in terms of training provision.

As revealed in Figure 8, there are differing trends from one Member State to another. However, as the exact nature of the training provided is not known, conclusions based on country comparisons should be made with caution.

There was a small increase in the number of workers (8%) in 2000 who regard the demands of the job as too high for their skills compared to 1995, when the figure was 7%. The same proportion (11%) regard the demands as too low in 1995 and 2000. An equally

Figure 8: Employees who have undergone training within the past 12 months, 2000

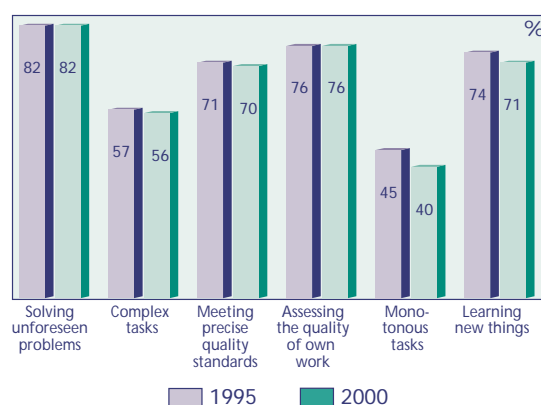


high proportion of workers for both years (89%) declare that they can get assistance from colleagues when needed.

## Job content

Overall, as is illustrated in Figure 9, job content factors regarding the type of tasks performed by workers (solving problems, coping with complex tasks and meeting quality standards) remain stable over the five-year period 1995-2000. While a sharp decrease in monotonous work is found over this period (from 45% to 40%), learning opportunities on the job have declined too.

Figure 9: Job content, 1995 and 2000



## Working time

### Working hours

The average number of weekly hours masks wide differences between different groups of respondents. While the average weekly hours are around 38 hours, self-employed workers report working 46 hours a week and employees around 36.5 hours. As can be seen in Table 4 (p.6), many respondents work less than 30 hours per week, while on the other hand a large proportion work 45 hours or more per week. Longer working hours are of course more common among the self-employed.

### Part-time work

17 % of all respondents report working part-time, but it should be noted that the definition of part-time varies between the member states. More women than men work part-time, (32% versus 6%), and this form

of work is more widespread in some countries, such as the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. When questioned about their work preferences, 23% of those working part-time said they would prefer to work more hours, while 9% said they would like to work fewer hours.

### Commuting

In the light of developments concerning part-time work, it is interesting to monitor trends in commuting. In 2000 the average daily commuting time was 38 minutes. However, wide disparities can be observed both in the group (18% of respondents report daily commuting times of more than 60 minutes) and between countries. The longest commuting time at 46.5 minutes is to be found in the Netherlands.

Table 4: Average weekly working hours, 1995 and 2000

% employees working:	1995	2000
Less than 30 hours per week	15	17
More than 45 hours per week	16	14
Part-time (spontaneous)	-	18

#### 'Round the clock' work

The results from the 2000 survey are consistent with those from 1995. 'Round the clock' work is prevalent, with more than one out of two workers working at least one Saturday per month and one in four working one Sunday per month. Shift work is the norm for 20% of workers while 19% report working at least one night per month.

#### Flexible time patterns

Not only are working hours spread over all days of the week and all hours of the day, there are also flexible patterns within time schedules: 24% of workers report fluctuating weekly work schedules and 41% report fluctuating daily work schedules.

Nearly one fifth of all workers (19%) feels that working time flexibility does not fit in with family and social commitments.

## Gender differences

Gender segregation at the workplace remains prevalent. This is evident not only in the occupational structure, where men and women do not occupy the same jobs (men are more numerous in clerical, sales, professional and managerial positions), but also within jobs, where men generally occupy more senior positions.

Gender inequalities are also obvious when income levels in the same occupational groups are considered, and this is a direct consequence of the occupational segregation (see Figure 10). Women also have less control over working time.

Finally, the double workload remains a strong feature of women at work, as is illustrated in Table 5, where working women are shown to take a more active role in housework and childcare.

Figure 10: Income scales by gender

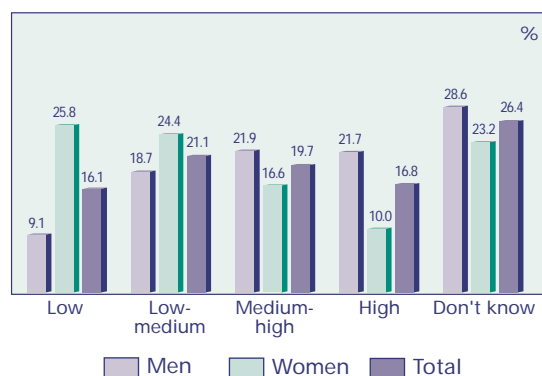


Table 5: Who does what at home?

% of respondents doing it for an hour or more per day	Women	Men
Caring for and educating children	41	24
Cooking	64	13
Housework	63	12

## Temporary workers

Temporary work remains a strong employment characteristic. In 2000, 10% of employees were on fixed-term and 2% on temporary agency contracts. As Figure 11 shows, only half the employees who have worked less than a year in the company have indefinite contracts. The 1995 survey proved that there is a direct link between temporary work and poor working conditions. The 2000 survey reveals the same correlation: Figures 11 and 12 show that temporary workers are more susceptible to physical hazards and a higher level of work intensity and pace than permanent workers.

Figure 11: Job status of employees who have been less than one year in the company (%)

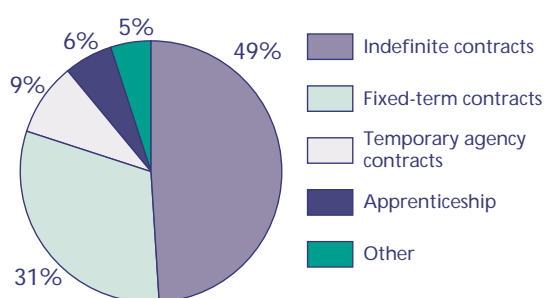


Figure 12: Exposure to physical hazards, by contract

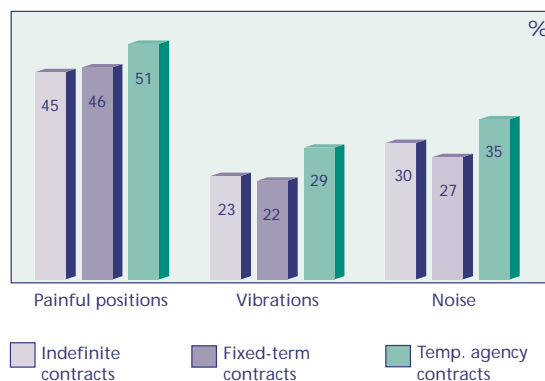
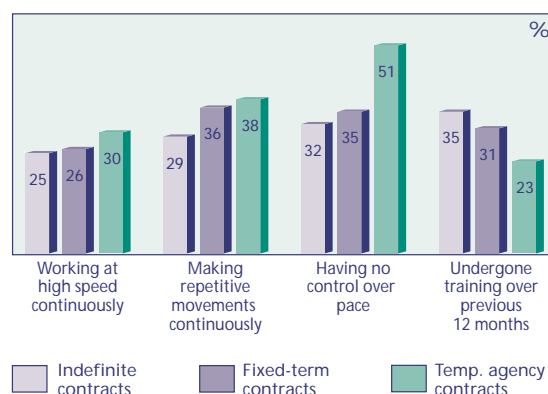


Figure 13: Work intensity and pace, by contract



## Violence and harassment at work

As Figure 14 reveals, violence and harassment are persistent in the workplace. There is a wide variation in the levels reported in countries (from 4% to 15% in the case of intimidation), as is shown in Figure 15. This may be accounted for by different attitudes to these issues among countries and whether they are a matter for public debate or not. In some countries there is undoubtedly a lack of reporting of these issues.

Figure 15: Workers subjected to intimidation, by country

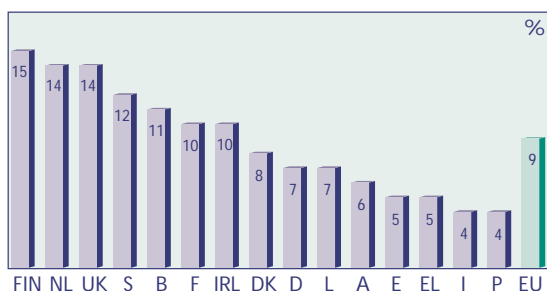
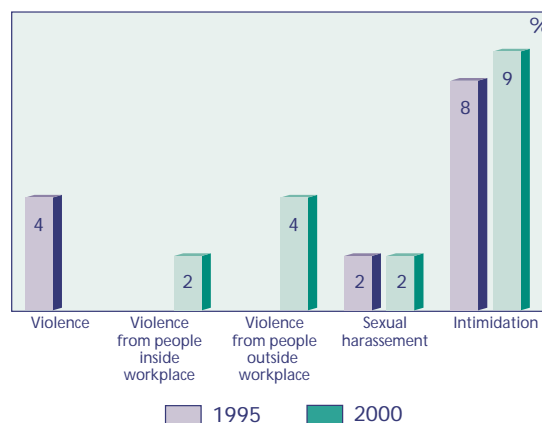


Figure 14: Violence and harassment at work, 1995 and 2000



## THE EUROPEAN WORKING CONDITIONS SURVEYS

Every five years, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions carries out a Europe-wide survey on working conditions. The first survey was carried out in 1990, the second in 1995 and the third in 2000.

The aim of these surveys is to provide an overview of the state of working conditions in the EU, identifying major issues and changes affecting the workplace. The overall aim is to contribute to a better monitoring of the quality of work and employment in the European Union.

For the 2000 survey, a total of 21,500 workers were interviewed in face-to-face interviews, which were conducted outside the workplace. Around 1,500 workers were interviewed in each Member State, with the exception of Luxembourg where the number of persons interviewed totalled 527. The survey was carried out simultaneously in households in all 15 Member States, the interviewer choosing at random one person in each household (the person aged over 15 and under 65 years whose birthday was next). The 1997 Labour Force Survey by Eurostat was used as the basis for the sampling. The questionnaire covered all aspects of working conditions: physical, organisational, psychosocial and social factors of work, time patterns and working hours, as well as work-related health problems.

This is a summary leaflet based on the full report of the survey which will be published in English, French and German. The report will be available as a downloadable file on the Foundation's website ([www.eurofound.ie](http://www.eurofound.ie)) and in a printed version. The printed edition can be ordered from the Office of Official Publications of the European Communities, L-2985 Luxembourg (<http://eur-op.eu.int/>). Information about the working conditions surveys, as well as all language editions of this summary leaflet, are available on the Foundation's website mentioned above.

As a reflection of its tripartite structure, the Foundation has involved representatives of trade union and employers' organisations and governments of the 15 Member States, as well as the European Commission (in particular Eurostat officials) in the design of the survey.

*This leaflet was written by Damien Merllié, Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris, and Pascal Paoli, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, Dublin.*

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Information about the Foundation surveys on working conditions is available on the Foundation website at [www.eurofound.ie/working/surveys.htm](http://www.eurofound.ie/working/surveys.htm). For further details on this topic you may contact:

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