



Eurofound

Social dialogue and working conditions

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Research project: Working conditions and social dialogue

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Introduction

Creating better jobs and working conditions are key elements of the European social model. Improving the quality of work and working conditions is, however, a new dimension within the European Employment Strategy which previously concentrated on quantitative measures such as increasing employment and reducing unemployment. The Lisbon Agenda implies that improving the quality and productivity of work could lead to more as well as better jobs.

This study is based on 23 case studies in four sectors (electromechanical engineering, food, financial activities and insurance services, and wholesale and retail) in six countries (Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, France, Spain and Sweden).

An important delimitation of the report is the requirement of the European Foundation for Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) to focus exclusively on workplace measures to improve working conditions through social dialogue. In many of the cases studied there was a two-sided approach to target the relevant issue at the workplace level, combining an organisational-level approach with measures targeting individual employees. The individual approach at the workplace level is omitted from this report due to Eurofound's exclusive focus on organisational workplace measures.

The study was led by Oxford Research, Denmark, with valuable assistance from KMU Forschung in Austria, the Research Institute for Labour and Social Affairs (RILSA) in the Czech Republic, Great Place to Work Institute Deutschland in Germany, Institut für Mittelstandforschung in Germany, Centre de Recherche pour l'Étude et l'Observation des Conditions de Vie (CRÉDOC) in France, IKEI in Spain and Oxford Research, Sweden. The study would not have been possible without the flexibility and understanding shown by the partners and the participation of the 23 case study companies.

Objectives of the study

The link between social dialogue and working conditions is well recognised both in academic literature and among European stakeholders:

The European social model places great emphasis on the need for social dialogue and it is widely recognised that successful economies in the 21st century will not be possible without a modern system of labour relations and efficient strategies for managing change proactively.

(European Commission, 2004)

Despite this widespread recognition of the existence of links between social dialogue and working conditions, the precise causal mechanisms between these two concepts need further empirical research to be fully understood.

The key question investigated by the study was: how does social dialogue influence working conditions, and what is the nature of the links between social dialogue and working conditions?

The study had three main areas:

- prevention measures towards musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs);
- prevention measures towards stress;
- active policies for older workers at the workplace.

MSDs and stress account for a large share of sick leave and lost productivity in Europe, including the four sectors considered in this study. The ageing of the population is widely debated in Europe, not least at the European level and among the social partners. This report will contribute to an increased understanding of how social dialogue can address the three issues listed above.

Key definitions

The study focused on the concepts of working conditions and social dialogue. The definitions of these concepts used in this report are based on their entries in Eurofound's European Industrial Relations Dictionary:¹

- **Social dialogue:** all types of formal dialogue, involving discussions, consultations, negotiations and joint actions undertaken by employer representatives and employee representatives on working conditions in the workplace.
- **Working conditions:** conditions relating to the working environment and the non-pay aspects of an employee's terms and conditions of employment. This includes areas such as the organisation of work and work activities; training, skills and employability; health, safety and well-being; and working time and work-life balance.

Sectors

Four sectors were selected for study. The selection was made to complement the Eurofound 2009 study on working conditions and social dialogue (Voss, 2009). The study uses the definitions given by the Statistical Classification of Economic Activities in the European Community (*Nomenclature statistique des activités économiques dans la Communauté Européenne*, NACE):

- financial services and insurance activities (NACE codes K64 and K65);
- wholesale and retail (NACE codes G46 and G47);
- electromechanical engineering (NACE codes C26 and C27);
- manufacture of food (NACE codes C10 and C11).

Previous research: point of departure

This 2010 project builds on an extensive body of previous research on representative participation through formal social dialogue. In 2008, Eurofound published a comparative analytical report (CAR) outlining the broad picture on all 27 EU Member States plus Norway. The report described 'some general comments about possible success factors for social dialogue' (Broughton, 2008, p. 31):

- Structures enabling social dialogue are the first prerequisite to give social partners an opportunity to jointly improve working conditions.
- Mutual trust is fundamental for cooperation to achieve improved working conditions despite differences in points of view and expectations.

¹ <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/areas/industrialrelations/dictionary/index.htm>

- All parties involved need to have a clear vision of what their joint efforts aim to achieve. The commitment of social partners to participate in the tasks necessary to implement the agreed measures is a key requirement for success. This is more likely to be achieved when both social partners are involved from beginning to end.
- A cooperative climate between the social partners can be achieved through work on issues where the parties have common aims and points of departure. Thereafter, social dialogue can move on to more controversial subjects.
- The process of social dialogue ought to be straightforward and easy to understand. Problems are more evident in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), where levels of organisational development are lower and where worker-representation structures are less likely to exist. Strategies need to be developed to overcome these problems.
- In many countries, social partners are disappointed with the limited impact of their views and input on the creation of new laws.

The CAR from 2008 was an overview of studies made in all participating countries, both quantitative and qualitative. It included a summary of surveys relating to social dialogue and working conditions, as well as an overview of case studies made at the national, sectoral and workplace level. Thus, the study highlighted existing knowledge as well as the need for further research.

Encouraged by this CAR, Eurofound undertook a larger research project, also called ‘Working conditions and social dialogue’, which was published in 2009. An expert group, including Eurofound stakeholders, supported the project by providing input to the research.

The research questions in the 2009 study were as follows:

- What factors are conducive to better working conditions?
- What are the reasons for such improvements and under what forms of social dialogue are working conditions enhanced?
- How is social dialogue useful for improving working conditions?

In particular, the project sought to examine the questions that still remained unanswered: what is the ‘exact contribution’ of social dialogue to working conditions, and what are the links between social dialogue and working conditions? (Voss, 2009).

The project studied national surveys in six countries to obtain a quantitative understanding of the links between working conditions and social dialogue. This proved very difficult as few of the surveys included indicators on the degree of social dialogue. However, conclusions could be drawn from the second part of the study: ‘... the existence of works councils seem to have a clear [and positive] impact on negotiated and institutionalised solutions’ (Voss, 2009, p. 2). The project carried out case studies in the health care and construction industries in six countries, drawing the following conclusions.

- There has to be a link between agreements on sectoral, national, or even European level with the working reality on the ground. Social partner organisations (and especially trade unions) are fundamental to establishing this essential link.
- In SMEs, it is more difficult to establish institutionalised social dialogue with the partial or full purpose of improving working conditions. For the employee representatives in SMEs as well as in large companies, it is even more important to have clear support from trade union organisations at the sectoral and national levels.

- The roles and responsibilities of the actors involved in the social dialogue need to be clearly outlined at the company level. Both parties need to work together, with a shared understanding of challenges, purpose, aims, and the notion of potential win-win situations.²

This report on social dialogue and working conditions is a continuation of this earlier working conditions and social dialogue project, the results of which were presented at the Eurofound CZ Presidency conference in Prague on 22–23 June 2009. This study builds on the same knowledge, definitions, methodology and theory used in the earlier project.

Structure of the report

The next chapter provides an overview of the policy context at both European and national levels. This is followed by a chapter setting out the report's methodological design.

The fourth to seventh chapters of the report present the findings for the four sectors under investigation (financial services and insurance activities, wholesale and retail, electromechanical engineering, and manufacture of food). Each sector presentation includes a synopsis of the European social dialogue and working conditions, and the case studies for that sector. A short description of the social dialogue in the company is provided at the beginning of each case study. The findings are structured according to the specific aspects of working conditions under investigation (MSDs, stress, and active policies for older workers). Conclusions based on the sector findings are given at the end of each chapter.

The final chapter discusses the findings and puts forwards conclusions based on the 23 case studies and perspectives.

² 'As empirical surveys on working conditions only capture a certain dimension of the quality of labour and working life of employees in Europe, the research included a further dimension – namely, company-based fieldwork on good practice with respect to analysing, elaborating and presenting the findings regarding the positive impact of social dialogue at the micro level on working conditions in the construction and health care sector' (Voss, 2009, p. 5).

Policy context

European policy context

The Treaty on European Union states that:³

Member States and the Union shall [...] work towards developing a coordinated strategy for employment and particularly for promoting a skilled, trained and adaptable workforce and labour markets responsive to economic change with a view to achieving the objectives defined in Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union.

(Title IX Employment, Article 145)

The Treaty also stipulates that:

The Union and the Member States [...] shall have as their objectives the promotion of employment, improved living and working conditions, so as to make possible their harmonisation while the improvement is being maintained, proper social protection, dialogue between management and labour, the development of human resources with a view to lasting high employment and the combating of exclusion.

(Title X Social Policy, Article 151)

The European Union focuses on employment and working conditions. However, it is important to emphasise that, according to the Treaty, the concept of ‘working conditions’ is secondary to employment. Thus, the creation of jobs and high employment rates are prioritised above issues of work quality (Voss, 2009, pp. 9–10). It is therefore reasonable to expect a diminished focus on working conditions from all partners involved in social dialogue in times when unemployment rates, job security and job creation logically are at the top of the agenda.

These shifts in focus or priority to issues related to working conditions can also be seen in recent history. While the European Employment Strategy in 1997 focused exclusively on the employment rate and job creation, the focus is now shifting to working conditions.

The work quality dimension emerged in the Lisbon Growth and Jobs Strategy where the aim was to create more and better jobs. In 2003, the emphasis reverted back to quantitative issues in the context of an economic downturn and increasing global competition (Voss, 2009, pp. 9–10). This change of focus posed a risk that the quality of working conditions might be reduced, as pointed out by the European Commission in its report, *Employment in Europe 2008*:

[Factors such as] globalisation, ... increased use of temporary work, ... skill-biased technological progress, ... and socio-demographic factors ... are often perceived to go hand in hand with increased job insecurity; a deterioration of working conditions (e.g. increased stress and work-related health problems); reduced possibilities to combine work with other private and social responsibilities; and increasing inadequacy of existing social security schemes to cope with more heterogeneous and uncertain individual employment histories.

(European Commission, 2008, p. 147)

³ Consolidated versions of the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union’, *Official Journal of the European Union*, C83, 30 March 2010.

A renewed focus on employment and job creation due to the current economic recession and increased global competitiveness could distract the focus away from working conditions and better jobs.

The concept of ‘flexicurity’⁴ has become a core policy concept in understanding the modern European social model, the idea being to create a win–win situation for both sides of industry. As such, this philosophy is expected to prioritise the improvement of working conditions as a response to the economic crisis. This is supported by the fact that the Europe 2020 strategy launched by the European Commission in March 2010 has three mutually reinforcing priorities (European Commission, 2010a, p. 5):

- **Smart growth:** developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation;
- **Sustainable growth:** promoting a more resource-efficient, greener and more competitive economy;
- **Inclusive growth:** fostering a high-employment economy, delivering social and territorial cohesion.

In the European policy context, the issue of working conditions and employment and the notion that they are mutually reinforcing remain well integrated. It is, however, recognised that the current economic recession may reduce the speed at which working conditions improve. The global recession is thus a major factor affecting this study – a factor assumed to be relevant to companies, social partners and politicians throughout Europe.

National policy context

The selection of countries for this study follows the 2009 Eurofound report on working conditions and social dialogue (Voss, 2009). The six Member States profiled in this study exhibit different traditions of social dialogue and industrial relations. Four of the countries are selected to represent types or ‘models’ of social dialogue and industrial relations (the Czech Republic, France, Germany and Sweden). Austria and Spain are included to demonstrate a wider range of models of social dialogue and to include differences in frameworks regarding the regulation of working conditions (Voss, 2009, pp. 4–5).

An overview of the different models of social dialogue in the six countries is presented in Table 1. Note that this report (like previous ones) does not seek to present a complete overview of all existing information and frameworks on either social dialogue or working conditions. The intention is to focus on the major aspects of these issues, mainly from the angle of the question that motivates this research project – namely, how social dialogue influences working conditions and the nature of the links between social dialogue and working conditions.

⁴ An employment model in which a balance is struck between contractual flexibility (essentially low hiring and firing costs) and security for employees against labour market risks through increased support to unemployed people (in terms of unemployment benefits and employability).

Table 1: Overview of industrial relations models and role of social dialogue

	North	Centre-West	South	West	Centre-East
National example	Sweden	Germany, Austria	France, Spain	–	Czech Republic
Welfare regime	Universalistic	Segmented (status oriented, corporatist)	Segmented (status oriented, corporatist)	Residual	Segmented or residual
Employment regime	Inclusive	Dualistic	Dualistic	Liberal	Liberal
Industrial relations regime	Organised corporatism	Social partnership	Polarised/state centred	Liberal pluralism	Fragmented/state centred
Principle level of bargaining	Sector	Sector	Variable/unstable	Company	Company
Bargaining style	Integrative	Integrative	Conflict oriented	Conflict oriented	Acquiescent
Role of social partners in public policy	Institutionalised	Institutionalised	Irregular/politicised	Rare/ event driven	Irregular/politicised
Role of state in industrial relations	Limited (mediator)	'Shadow of hierarchy'	Frequent intervention	Non-intervention	Organiser of transition
Employee representatives	Union based / high coverage	Dual system / high coverage	Variable*	Union based / small coverage	Union based / small coverage

Note: in France, both union-based and joint employee–employer interest representation applies, while in Spain, a dual system of works council and trade union representatives applies.

Source: Voss (2009, p. 21)

The labour market characteristics in the selected countries also differ. Table 2 shows selected indicators for the different countries' labour markets. Statistics for EU27 are included in the table to allow for comparison with the average situation for EU countries.

Table 2: National labour market statistics, 2009

	Austria	Czech Republic	Germany	France	Spain	Sweden	EU27
Employment rate, 15–64 (%)	71.6	65.4	70.9	64.2	59.8	72.2	64.6
Males	76.9	73.8	75.6	68.5	66.6	74.2	70.7
Females	66.4	56.7	66.2	60.1	52.8	70.2	58.6
Unemployment rate, 2009 (%)	4.8	6.7	7.5	9.5	18.0	8.3	8.9
Males	5.0	5.9	8.0	9.2	17.7	8.6	9.0
Females	4.6	7.7	6.9	9.8	18.4	8.0	8.8
Long-term unemployment (% of unemployment)	21.3	30.0	45.5	35.2	23.7	13.3	33.2
Males	21.6	27.8	44.4	35.3	20.9	13.8	31.8
Females	20.9	32.3	47.0	35.1	27.2	12.6	34.8
Part-time workers (% of total employment)	24.6	5.5	26.1	17.3	12.8	27.0	18.8
Males	8.7	2.8	9.7	6.0	4.9	14.2	8.3
Females	42.9	9.2	45.3	29.8	23.8	41.2	31.5

Table 2: National labour market statistics, 2009 (cont'd)

	Austria	Czech Republic	Germany	France	Spain	Sweden	EU27
Employees with temporary contracts (% of employees)	9.1	8.5	14.5	13.5	25.4	15.3	13.5
Males	9.2	7.0	14.4	12.1	23.8	13.0	12.7
Females	9.0	10.2	14.6	14.9	27.3	17.6	14.4
Average exit age from the labour force, 2008	N/A	60.6	61.7	59.3	62.6	63.8	61.4
Males	N/A	62.3	62.1	59.4	62.5	64.4	62.0
Females	N/A	59.0	61.4	59.1	62.7	63.2	60.8
Legal pension age	Men: 65 Women: 60	Men: 62 Women: 61	65	60	65	65 (workers retain the right to work until 67)	

Note: N/A = information not available.

Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey, 2010, except legal pension age (taken from Artus, 2010) and average exit age for 2008, where Austria figures are not available and EU27 figures are estimated values.

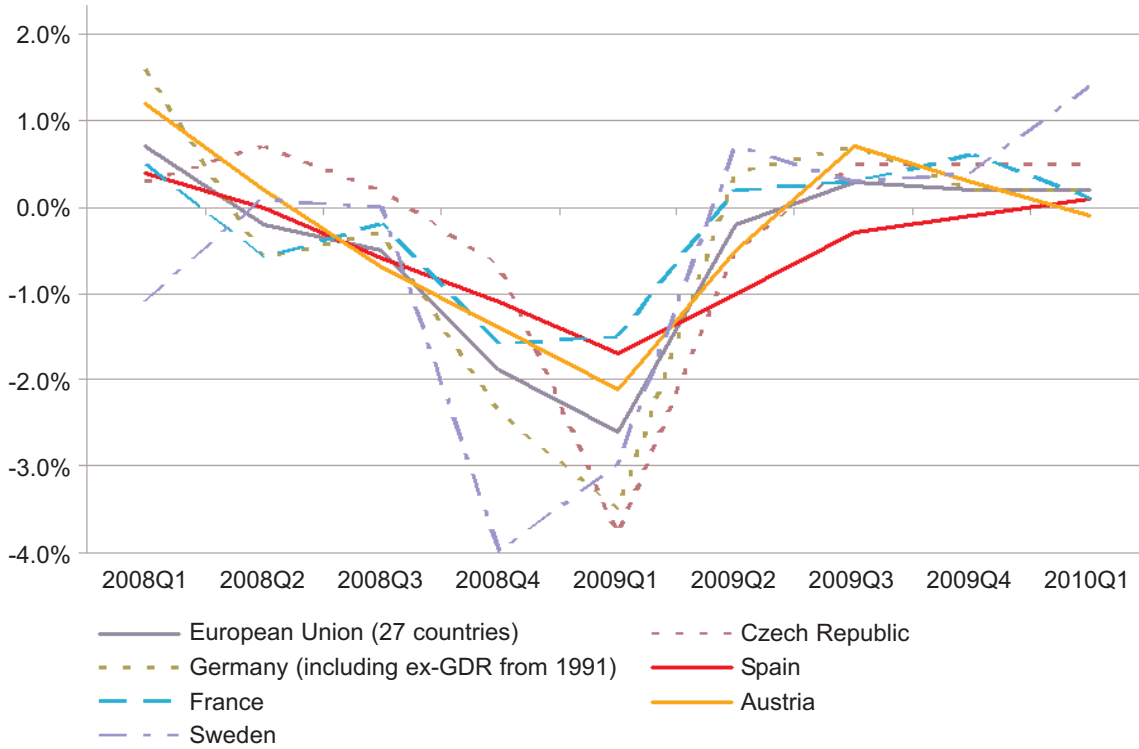
National labour market statistics can shed some light on the different situations in the selected countries. In the second quarter of 2009, Austria had the lowest unemployment rate of the six countries in the study at 4.8%. This is 4.1 percentage points less than the average unemployment rate for EU27 in the same quarter. Spain had the highest unemployment rate at 18%, which is 9.1 percentage points more than the average EU27 rate in the second quarter of 2009.

Long-term unemployment seems to be fairly common in the EU27, with 33% of the unemployed registered as long-term unemployed in 2009 (Table 2). In Sweden only 13.3% of the unemployed were long-term unemployed and, in Germany, 45.5% of the unemployed were registered as long-term unemployed.

Austria, Germany and Sweden have a higher proportion of part-time employees than the other countries selected (and the EU27 average), whereas only 6% of employees in the Czech Republic have a part-time contract. The legal pension age in the different countries ranges from 60 to 65 years. The French have the earliest average exit age at a little over 59 while, on average, Swedes exit the labour market at nearly 64 years of age.

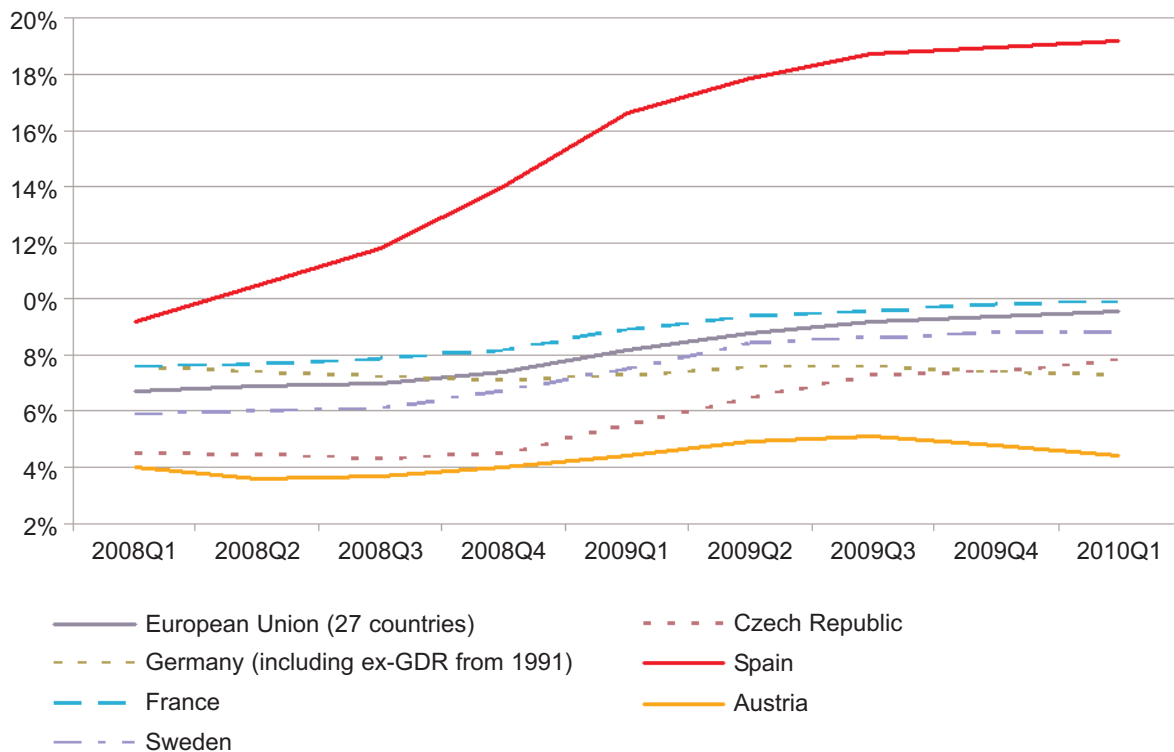
The financial crisis and the subsequent Eurozone debt crisis have affected EU countries in different ways, as seen in Figures 1 and 2. The trend for all countries appears to be similar, with a drop in gross domestic product (GDP) between 2008 and 2009, followed by signs of recovery that begin in 2009.

Figure 1: GDP (market prices) – percentage change on previous period, 2008–2010



Source: Eurostat, 2010

Figure 2: Seasonally adjusted unemployment rate, quarterly averages, 2008–2010



Source: Eurostat, 2010

Governments have acted in different ways to limit the effects of the financial crisis and the subsequent Eurozone debt crisis. For example, Sweden has kept government debt and deficit in check and has not increased fiscal spending to any noticeable degree. This also means that there has been no need for austerity programmes in Sweden.

Spain, on the other hand, has increased government spending during the financial crisis, as have France and Germany. This was done in order to increase demand and to reduce the effects of the crisis. However, these countries also instigated major austerity programmes in 2010 to reduce government debt. The Spanish austerity plan, for instance, aims to save €50 billion and also includes a public sector pay cut of 5%.

The Czech Republic has taken different initiatives to boost the economy. Among other things, the government introduced various measures favourable to companies such as reduced VAT rates on some services and faster write-offs. In addition, employees were offered grants for further education (International Visegard Fund, 2010).

In response to the financial crisis many governments, including the Austrian government, put in place different policy measures to boost bank liquidity and capital, and to increase the confidence of depositors and creditors (OECD, 2010).

Methodological design

As mentioned above, this study is a continuation of the project on working conditions and social dialogue carried out by Eurofound in 2008–2009. However, this project differs in a number of ways. The previous project included three different research methodologies:

- a mapping of existing research;
- a mapping of surveys with relevant content;
- case studies in six countries.

This project incorporates a case study methodology in four new sectors, building upon the case study methodology of the previous project and in the same countries. A separate methodological report has been submitted to Eurofound.

However, it should be pointed out that a social science research project with a cross-national framework has inherent limitations. The study includes 23 case studies distributed across the six countries and four sectors (Table 3). The number of case studies makes generalisation difficult. The final outcome will therefore be an illustration of the most frequent and interesting interrelations between social dialogue and working conditions, rather than the ultimate proof of existence of causal relationships between them.

Table 3: *Case study distribution and employee numbers*

Country	Industrial relations	Sector			
		Electro-mechanical engineering	Food manufacture	Financial	Wholesale/retail
AT	Centre-West	ACC (925)	Fandler (25)	Wüstenrot (930)	Pfeiffer (2,870)
DE		SICK (1800)	MMW (130)	Sparda-Bank München (663)	REWE (16,000)
CZ	Centre-East	OSRAM (988)	Plzeňský Prazdroj (2,353)	Česká Spořitelna (10,300)	Interspar* (4,500)
FR	South		Rémy Martin (353)	Credit Agricole (1,300)	Senior & Cie (169)
ES		Garabi (17) Microdeco (94)		Kutxa (2,701)	El Corte Inglés (65,000)
SE	North	NOTE (85)	Norrmejerier (460)	Swedbank Sjuhärad (186)	Colly Components(31)

Notes: employee numbers (shown in brackets) were obtained through the company human resource (HR) managers.

* Also known as Spar.

Source: *Oxford Research, 2010*

Case studies

The case study method is essentially a qualitative method that aims to capture as many dimensions as possible. It does not isolate factors in the same way as quantitative research does. Instead case studies allow for linkages and comparisons to be drawn during interviews and as the research progresses. It is therefore beneficial to use case studies when causality and qualitative implications are sought (Huws and Dahmann, 2007, p. 29). The role of the researcher is thus interpretative, capable of combining multiple perspectives and details from different contexts. In this study, the task is to combine multiple perspectives across different countries, different social dialogue frameworks and different sectoral contexts.

Although the links between social dialogue and working conditions have been investigated before, their nature is still unclear. This study aims to deepen knowledge by examining different perspectives and sources of evidence.

It was challenging to find companies that fulfilled the selection criteria and interview methodology in all countries. The way that social dialogue is used to improve working conditions differs between countries and in some countries it was difficult to find suitable companies that fulfilled the selection criteria.⁵

That was one of the methodological challenges of the project. The bias created by choosing only those companies that were willing to participate is obvious but hard to avoid. The purpose of the study is to show good examples of how social dialogue can contribute to improved working conditions. Good examples require companies that are positive about the process and where there is trust between the social partners.

The methodology stresses the need for the different respondents to be interviewed independently and separately at the workplace. In some cases, the employee representatives insisted on being interviewed together with the management as a symbol of trust. This was avoided in all but one case study, where it was necessary to deviate from the methodology and interview an HR manager and an employee representative together.⁶

Selection was based on the following criteria.

- The case studies included different company sizes (differentiating SMEs and large companies).
- Selected companies should have an established social dialogue and improved working conditions according to the definitions used in the project.
- The case studies should reflect prevention policies/actions on MSDs, stress, and active policies for older workers.
- The case studies should be exemplary practices, complementing existing work and eventually allowing transferability of some elements to other companies.

National experts and social partners in the different countries were used to identify the companies. The companies were selected because they were acknowledged or known to have a fruitful social dialogue and improving working conditions. Together with Eurofound, it was decided that both sides of the industry should approve the appropriateness of the company based on the study's objectives. The company proposals were approved individually by Eurofound before the fieldwork started.

Interviews

The case studies were conducted between 20 May 2010 and 19 July 2010.

With the purpose of deepening and expanding the earlier findings by Eurofound in its previous study published in 2009, structured face-to-face interviews were used to provide reliable and comparable qualitative data. In order for all the researchers involved to gather comparable facts, an interview guideline was developed based on the one used for the

⁵ For instance, it was more difficult in Spain and France to find companies that suited all the selection criteria. Among the companies identified, especially in France, there was resistance to allowing researchers to interview employee representatives separately.

⁶ When studying and analysing the cases and the different perspectives provided by the social partners, no major consequences of this methodological deviation in the single case can be observed.

previous study. Where necessary, the guideline was adapted to the specific topics to be studied in the project (MSDs, stress, and active policies for older workers).⁷ The interview guidelines were translated into the five national languages by the national experts⁸ and sent to respondents in their national language prior the interviews.⁹

At the interviews, the companies often provided additional material such as annual reports, presentations and meeting protocols.

Due to illness and late cancellation in a few cases, five of the interviews had to be conducted by teleconference,¹⁰ with the national expert also participating where necessary. The length of the 45 interviews varied but lasted on average between one and a half and two hours.¹¹

Two critical factors had to be reconciled when conducting the interviews. First, members of a core research team had to be present at all the interviews to enable researchers to draw conclusions based on findings across different case studies. Secondly, a good understanding was required of both the national language and the national policies and practices regarding social dialogue and working conditions. All interviews were therefore conducted with one member of the core research team and one national expert. Where possible, the interviews were conducted in English. In most cases, however, the respondents were not sufficiently comfortable in English and therefore the interviews were held in the national language or in a mixture of English and national language. The core team was able to provide researchers with language skills for the specific countries in all cases except the Czech Republic, where the interviews were interpreted by the national expert during the interview.

Another challenge was to ensure that both HR managers and employee representatives addressed the same issues and topics, as the interviews were conducted individually. To ensure that interviews were not biased, the interview guideline was followed in both the first and second interviews. The responses were thus not influenced by the responses by the first respondent.

⁷ The interview guideline was complex and detailed. It was a considerable challenge to cover all the questions due to the time available for the interviews.

⁸ To ensure validity of translation, in-house native language skills were used as well as the assurance of the core research team during the interviews that the respondents had the correct understanding of the different questions.

⁹ In France, only the main topics of the interview guidelines were sent to respondents prior to the interview. When comparing the two methods, the conclusion was that sending just the main topics was a better strategy. This is because respondents were able to prepare on the subject of the topics, while sending the entire battery of questions might have deterred them from participating.

¹⁰ This concerned the German food sector (employee representative), Austrian financial services sector (employee representative), Czech financial services sector (HR manager), Spanish wholesale and retail sector (employee representative) and French food sector (employee representative).

¹¹ The interviews ranged from 42 minutes to three hours and 42 minutes in duration.

Introduction to the case study chapters

The next four chapters present the findings from the case studies structured by sector. The sector approach was chosen to give a cross-national view and to enable fair comparisons to be made within sectors because companies face similar challenges in working conditions due to the nature of the product, market, etc. The Eurofound publication from 2009, on which this study builds, is also structured by sector.

Each sector is presented separately, with its European social dialogue and working conditions characteristics followed by an overview of the case studies conducted. The areas of working conditions are then investigated in detail with a particular emphasis on MSDs, stress, and active policies for older workers. Each chapter concludes with findings from the specific sector.

The findings will not necessarily fall equally within the focus areas of working conditions in the sector (MSDs, stress, and active policies for older workers) as this was not a criterion in the case study selection. Given that the purpose of this project was to identify good examples of how to improve working conditions in order to help explain the links between social dialogue and working conditions, the case studies are presented briefly with the emphasis on the mechanisms through which social dialogue improves working conditions.

Previous research on the role of social dialogue in improving working conditions does not give a clear picture of the impact of social dialogue, nor does it identify the mechanisms within social dialogue that improve working conditions.

In general, research has stressed the variety of national contexts as a core element in understanding and assessing the impact of social dialogue and its mechanisms. The previous recognition that findings are often specific to national context poses the challenge of exploring and relating common factors in an effort to compare and create knowledge across national contexts.

The following are identified throughout the findings:

- a mechanism that outlines a straightforward process in social dialogue – achieving transparency and involvement from both sides of the industry;
- a mechanism to reach mutual goals and mutual trust between the social partners in the company – creating a cooperative climate;
- concrete examples that illustrate how social dialogue contributes to improved working conditions within MSDs, stress, and active policies for older workers.

In relation to working conditions, it is important to be aware of the national context. Given that the definition of ‘working conditions’ excludes pay-related issues, it should be noted that differences in acknowledgement as well as contribution to a better working environment are closely related to levels of employment and living standards (Eurofound, 2002 pp. 11, 12, 15). It should therefore be taken into account that this study was conducted in a time of recession and that economic crises have different impacts on different sectors and countries.

Each sector chapter presents the sector’s characteristics and the main findings of the case studies structured on the focus areas of MSDs, stress, and active policies for older workers.

Analysis of social dialogue and working conditions in the financial services and insurance activities sector

Financial sector: summary

The financial services and insurance activities sector (NACE codes K64 and K65) covers:

- banking;
- finance and insurance;
- business and legal services;
- accounting;
- auditing.

The sector creates ‘products’ such as convenient access, information, advice, strategic planning, management, financial instruments, or simply customer satisfaction. It is referred to subsequently in this report as the ‘financial sector’.

The European Union is one of the world leaders in financial services with six million people employed in the sector in 2008 (European Commission, 2009c). The financial sector is a fast-moving and flexible environment, and has received increasing attention in recent decades. Since 1998, the banking market in the EU has tripled and the average premium¹² in the insurance industry increased by 95% between 1996 and 2006 (European Commission, 2009c). As shown in Table 4, the importance of the financial sector varies across Member States, with Germany having the largest number of financial sector employees in 2008 out of the six countries covered by the study.

Table 4: *Number of employees in the financial sector*

Country	1998	2003	2008
EU27	5,785,000	5,827,000	6,018,000
Austria	N/A	N/A	N/A
Czech Republic	93,000	83,000	92,000
France	725,000	773,000	798,000
Germany	1,255,000	1,262,000	1,179,000
Spain	347,000	368,000	413,000
Sweden	90,000	93,000	96,000

Note: N/A = information not available

Source: Eurostat, *National Accounts, 2010*

¹² The premium in the insurance sector is the actual cost charged by insurance companies to their clients for the insurance coverage.

As shown in Table 5, the financial sector in Germany is also important in terms of the share of the employees relative to the overall economy. Compared to 1998, employment has increased in all countries where numbers are available, with the exception of Germany. The Czech Republic also presents an interesting development; there was a sharp decline in the absolute numbers of people employed between 1998 and 2003, followed by an almost full recovery during the next five years.

Table 5: *Percentage of total employment in the financial sector*

Country	1998	2003	2008
EU27	N/A	2.7%	2.7%
Austria	2.8%	2.9%	2.9%
Czech Republic	1.8%	1.7%	1.7%
France		N/A	N/A
Germany	3.5%	3.5%	3.0%
Spain	2.3%	2.0%	2.1%
Sweden	2.1%	1.9%	2.0%

Notes: the percentage of total employment is calculated in hours worked.

Not all the figures are available in the database for both thousands of people employed and hours worked.

N/A = information not available.

Source: Eurostat, *National Accounts, 2010*

The workforce in the financial intermediation sector in the first quarter of 2010 had a gender distribution in EU27 of 51% women and 49% men, with 49% of the employees under the age of 40 (source: Eurostat Labour Force Survey, 2010).

One of the biggest issues in the financial sector in the presumed aftermath of the financial crisis is the degree of public intervention in the financial intermediation market. A number of governments had to take action during the crisis and save banks and financial companies (European Commission, 2010b). New governance structures are now being discussed at the European level in order to provide the EU with tools to stabilise the financial markets. Commissioner Michel Barnier has presented Commission proposals on increased reporting obligation on financial trading and launched a discussion of common taxation of the financial market (European Commission, 2010c).

European social dialogue

At the European level, the most important employer side actors are the following:

- European Banking Federation (EBF), which includes the Banking Committee for European Social Affairs (EBF-BCESA), the organisation involved in European sectoral social dialogue for EBF;
- European Savings Banks Group (ESBG);
- European Association of Co-operative Banks (EACB);
- European Federation of National Insurance Associations (CEA);
- International Federation of Insurance Intermediaries (BIPAR);
- Association of Mutual Insurers and Insurance Cooperatives in Europe (AMICE).

On the trade union side, UNI Europa Finance is the most important actor.

A representative study being conducted by Eurofound will explore in more detail the representativeness of social dialogue actors at European and national levels. Social dialogue in the sector is in place in most of the European countries, though weaker in the new Member States (European Commission, 2009c).

UNI Europa Finance was a signatory to the first joint declaration signed in January 2010 between the European insurance social partners (ISSDC, 2010), which had been under development since 2008. The declaration addresses ‘the demographic challenge in the insurance sector in Europe’ and focuses on three key issues:

- lifelong learning;
- work–life balance;
- health and safety at work.

Dealing with these issues is essential to ensuring a longer and better working life for those employed in the sector and thus retaining and attracting qualified labour to the sector (ver.di, 2010). The signatories on the employer side were AMICE, BIPAR and CEA.

The signing of the first joint declaration by the European social partners and the related demography demonstrate that:

- social dialogue is alive at the European level;
- one focus area of this research project, active policies for older workers, is a timely, relevant, and important issue.

Both the banking and insurance sectors have sectoral social dialogue committees at the European level. The banking committee has mainly worked with lifelong learning issues and the enlargement of the single market, while the insurance committee has demography highest on its agenda.¹³

Working conditions in the sector

Workers in the financial sector often carry out a wide variety of functions including customer support, accounting, banking advice and analysis, stockbroking and dealing with insurance claims. As a result, there are differences in the work environment in stress-related areas such as customer contact, responsibilities, working hours, work organisation, risk of robbery, work pace and workload. There are, however, a few characteristics common to most jobs within the sector.

Working conditions in the financial sector are generally better than the average in terms of work-related injuries,¹⁴ but worse than or on a par with averages when it comes to stress; as seen, for instance, in the statistics for Sweden in Table 6. This is unsurprising since the work environment excludes heavy lifting, exposure to toxic material, dangerous machinery and other factors that generally increase the number of work-related physical disorders and injuries. Meanwhile, many jobs in the financial sector involve frequent customer contact and sedentary work, as well as frequent use of computers, which can increase the number of physical disorders related to these environmental characteristics, especially MSDs.

¹³ See the sectoral social dialogue web pages for the banking and insurance sectors at <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=480&langId=en>.

¹⁴ See data on the relative incidence rate of accidental injuries at work by severity, permanency of the job, length of service in the enterprise, and economic activity of the employer (EU index rate = 100 financial intermediation = 67, 1999) in the Eurostat ‘Health and safety at work’ database available at http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/health/health_safety_work/data/database.

A good indicator of the development of working conditions in a sector is the level of work accidents. Table 6 shows work accidents for the years 1997, 2003 and 2007. All countries have experienced a dramatic increase in injuries since 1997 though Spain managed to reduce the number again between 2001 and 2007.

Table 6: *Work accidents in the financial sector*

Country	1998	2003	2008
Austria	2,013	4,512	4,227
Czech Republic	N/A	N/A	N/A
France	6,952	101,484	99,383
Germany	16,377	72,547	86,622
Spain	38,695	64,425	39,015
Sweden	3,927	4,595	6,148

Notes: data are given for accidents leading to more than three days lost (that is, four days' absence or more).

N/A = information not available

Source: Eurostat, *Population and social conditions database, 2010*

No data are available on work accidents in the sector for the Czech Republic. However, the occupational injury rate in the financial sector of the Czech Republic is very low; in 2009 it was 0.19%. This is significantly lower than the overall average for the Czech Republic in general, which in 2009 was 1.18% (Czech Statistical Office, 2009a).

The financial sector also appears to have a low prevalence of MSDs. For example, 5.3% of workers in the sector in Austria reported backache and muscular pain in 2005, with the sector averages at 24.0% for backache and 20.0% for muscular pain (OHSa, 2010a, p. 8). Furthermore, the Austrian Institute of Economic Research (WIFO) completed a thorough study on absenteeism, sick leave and work-related accidents in various sectors in the Austrian labour market in 2007 showing which illnesses were most common in the financial sector in Austria. In the age group 15–29, injury and respiratory problems were the most common causes for absenteeism. This finding changes slightly with higher age groups; in the age group 30–49, MSDs are the main reason for absenteeism, whereas they had little significance in the 15–29 age group. This trend continues in the age group 50–64, where almost a third of the employees complained of MSD symptoms.

No statistics are available on the prevalence of MSDs in the Czech Republic at the sectoral level. A survey on physical working conditions in the acceding European countries conducted by Eurofound in 2003 found that 12% of employees in the financial sector work in painful positions almost all the time (Eurofound, 2007). This was lower than the average of 21% in the acceding and candidate countries (ACC). The study also found that 21% of Czech employees reported repetitive movement at work almost all the time; this is slightly lower than the overall average of 28% in ACC countries. These working conditions are common risks for MSDs. The study found that 15% of workers in the financial sector suffer from backache caused by their work (Eurofound, 2007).

A survey conducted in 2002 in the Pays de la Loire region in France provided the first estimates of the prevalence of MSDs in the region in the different economic sectors. The study found that 12.2% of male employees in the financial sector had at least one clinically diagnosed upper-limb musculoskeletal disorder, which is slightly higher than the overall average of 11.3%. The prevalence of at least one diagnosed upper-limb MSD for women in the sector was 9.2%, which is significantly lower than the prevalence for men (Ha et al, 2008).

In Germany, indicators of the prevalence of MSDs are taken from the European Agency for Safety and Health at work (OSHA), which in turn collected data from the European Survey on Working Conditions 2005. In the financial sector,

the share of workers reporting backache in Germany in 2005 was 5.9% compared with the sector average of 18.8%, with the share reporting muscular pain at 5.9% compared with the 14.8% average for all sectors. The financial sector thus stands out in the statistics as relatively lightly affected by MSDs (OHSA, 2010b, p. 17).

In Spain's financial sector in 2003, the main physical demands of work that led to MSDs were maintaining the same body posture (41.6% of the workers had to endure such postures), and having to do repetitive movements (31.4%). Same body posture and repetitive movements were significantly more prevalent than other possible causes such as painful or tiring postures, moving heavy loads, or making great physical effort (all below 10% of workers) (Isusi and Corral, 2007).

The most common causes of MSDs in the Swedish financial sector are related to sedentary work and the frequent use of computers. According to the official statistics from the Work Environment Authority (AV), 37% of employees in the sector were involved in sedentary work for more than two hours a day without a break in 2009.¹⁵ There was an interesting gender difference: 33% of male employees had this kind of working conditions, whereas for female employees the rate was 42%. In the economy as a whole the figure was 26%, suggesting that employees working in the sector are more exposed to MSDs related to seating positions, quality of the desk, computer setup and the ergonomic capabilities of office chairs, rather than the frequency of heavy physical work. In 2009, 33% of workers in the sector were involved in repetitive work, which was the same rate as for the Swedish workforce as a whole. However, repetitive work is more common for women, with 38% doing this kind of work compared with 29% of men in 2009 (Work Environment Authority, 2010).

In the Austrian insurance sector, Eurofound's European Working Conditions Survey identified a 2005 study by the trade union GPA which found that 94% of the participants said that they felt stressed and time pressured at work (Parent-Thirion et al, 2006). According to Statistik Austria's report on the reasons for sick leave in the financial sector, 33.5% of sick leave in 2007 was due to psychological reasons (Statistik Austria, 2009).

Sector-level statistics on stress are not available for the Czech Republic but, on a country level, it is known from the European Working Conditions Survey based on 2005 data that self-reported work-related stress is rather low in the Czech Republic (17% of respondents reported stress compared with the European average of 22%) (Parent-Thirion et al, 2006).

In France, direct statistics on stress have not been found but some indicators contributing to stress are available in a survey from 2003; a third of employees (33.7%) reported often working beyond official working hours, while the average for the French economy as a whole was 23.6%. No fewer than 72.4% of workers in the sector had a pace of work defined by an external request requiring an immediate response, compared with the economy average of 55.2% (Arnaudo et al, 2006).

The WageIndicator report used as the German indicator on stress reveals that the total measure of the stress level in the financial sector is rated as 3.3, which makes it the third most stressful sector after hotels, restaurants and catering, and health care (Van Kleveren and Tijdens, 2007).

The financial sector had the highest stress level in the Spanish labour market in 2009, with an average of 6.4% versus the Spanish average of 5.6% (Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales, 2009);¹⁶ over half of workers (54.3%) thought that they were subjected to high or very high stress levels.

¹⁵ In the period 2003–2007, it was 38% of employees (Work Environment Authority, 2010).

¹⁶ Scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is the worst and 10 is the best.

Stress is one of the most common work-related problems in the financial sector in Sweden, with 45% of employees saying that they ‘could not stop thinking about their job even when off work’. The figure for the Swedish economy as a whole was 44% in 2009 (Work Environment Authority, 2009). In addition, 38% of employees in the sector stated that they have to cut down on lunches, work overtime and/or bring work home at least once a week. This is higher than the Swedish average in 2009 of 36% (Work Environment Authority, 2010, p. 148).

Overview of case studies

Table 7: *Case studies in the financial sector*

Country	Company	Number of employees*	Unit of observation
Austria	Wüstenrot Bausparkasse	930	Company level
Czech Republic	Česká Spořitelna	10,300	Company level
France	Crédit Agricole	1,300	Establishment level
Germany	Sparda-Bank München	663	Company level
Spain	Kutxa	2,701	Company level
Sweden	Swedbank Sjuhärad	186	Company level

Note: * according to the HR managers of the respective companies, 2010

Six case studies were carried out in six countries (Table 7). The companies are in general well-established in their respective countries, offering a range of financial and insurance services. Wüstenrot, established 1925 in Salzburg, is mainly active within home loan services; but it also has an important insurance department. Crédit Agricole was established in 1894 by cooperatives of farmers that needed credit solutions, and it has now grown into a nationwide banking group with more than 2,500 branches. Kutxa is the youngest company in the selection, although it was created as a merger between two savings banks (*cajas*) founded in the 19th century. It is now engaged in an expansion phase, establishing branches across Spain. Swedbank Sjuhärad is the smallest company, employing 186 people, but it is connected to a network of similar banks for some of its activities. It is entrenched in the local community and business life in its part of Sweden, offering both bank and insurance solutions. Similarly, Sparda-Bank München builds on its cooperative background, although it now has 44 branches in Bayern. Česká Spořitelna is the biggest company in the selection and one of the most important financial companies in the Czech Republic. It is also the oldest, established in 1825, and it is now active in all financial fields.

MSDs

Although the financial sector is not characterised by heavy-load lifting or other obvious physical work, MSDs are an issue in this sector, as described in the sector outline above. Findings in the case studies also show clear examples of the focus on MSDs in the sector and measures taken to combat them.

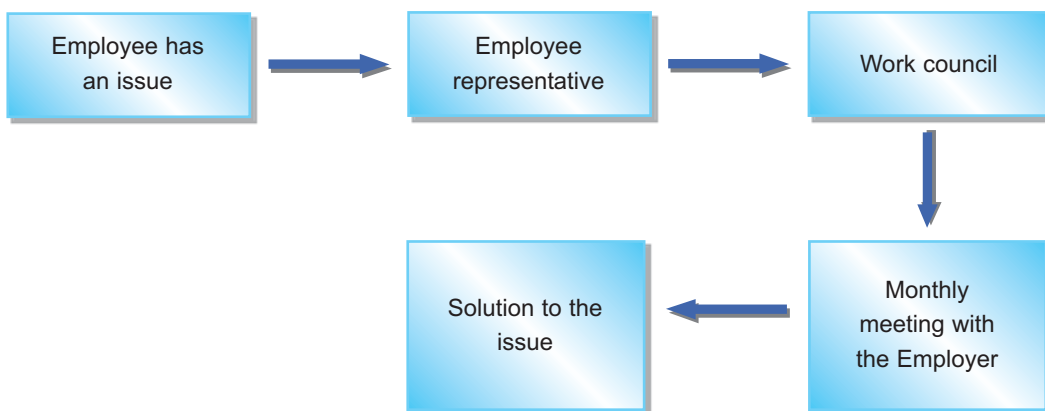
MSDs in the financial sector often take the form of neck/upper-back problems caused by maintaining the same position or body posture in serving costumers and/or sedentary work with frequent computer use.

Two examples show systematic work aimed at preventing or mitigating MSDs: the Spanish case Kutxa and the Swedish Swedbank Sjuhärad. Furthermore, Wüstenrot provides an example of a preventive approach to MSDs through the implementation of a health programme.

Figure 3 illustrates the process used to solve working conditions issues at Kutxa. Each works council is composed of four trade unions and the number of representatives is dependent on the results of trade union elections. There are currently two works councils in Guipuzcoa where the head office is located (one for central services and the other for branches) and one works council in Madrid. In addition, the works councils have delegates at workplaces. The number of works councils will increase due to an increase in the workforce in recent years.

Kutxa has a standing health and safety committee consisting of representatives of the employees and management, as well as members representing technical and service providers inside the company. Once a month, the health and safety committee holds a formal meeting with the different trade unions to discuss which aspects can be improved. According to the HR manager, the fluidity of the social dialogue improves working conditions; they always reach an agreement despite not always agreeing from the outset. The employee representative and member of the health and safety committee also stressed the importance of the health and safety committee in improving working conditions. For example, the health and safety committee is entitled to make investigations every time an employee complains about MSDs, as stated above.

Figure 3: *Process to solve working conditions issues at Kutxa*



Source: *Oxford Research, 2010; based on interviews at Kutxa*

Kutxa regards itself as a pioneer in a systematic prevention strategy on MSDs. Knowing that maintaining the same body posture as well as repetitive movements constitutes the central challenge related to MSDs at a sectoral level,¹⁷ Kutxa has invested in new furniture, an ergonomic reorganisation of its workplaces, and a risk assessment of new offices and workplaces. These measures demonstrate a comprehensive and systematic attempt to prevent MSDs at an organisational level. In addition, the company maintains a policy of investigating individual complaints of muscular pain. Every time a worker complains about some kind of muscle pain, an examination of the workplace is initiated by the health and safety committee. An ergonomic reorganisation of the workplace is conducted to ensure that workers are working in a proper position given the chair's placement and at an appropriate distance from the computer screen, keyboard, mouse, printer, etc. In addition, the committee explains the reasons why the employee should work in a particular position. Equipment to prevent disorders is also provided. For example, to prevent neck disorders, headphones are provided (wireless in some cases for people who have to move around), as well as book rests, footrests, etc.

¹⁷ These challenges go beyond heavy loads, extensive effort and other more common issues within MSDs concerning the obvious physical challenges (Isusi and Corral, 2007).

Kutxa works systematically at both an organisational level and an individual level in terms of prevention as well as treatment of muscular problems. Individual problems are treated as organisational issues and prevented on the organisational level.

In Kutxa, an outcome of social dialogue through the health and safety committee is training courses for employees on how to prevent MSDs, which are followed up by training on the company intranet that provides advice and motivation to increase individual effort. All new employees are enrolled in these courses, which are combined with adjustments and improvements of the physical workplace.

The link between this systematic strategy and social dialogue is clear since the company has a standing health and safety committee consisting of representatives from both the employee and management side. The mechanism used is to establish subcommittees (in this case, the health and safety committee) under the formal institutions of social dialogue to show that special attention is being paid to the issue. The committee has members with specific qualifications, which is crucial to the implementation of the strategies.

Another example is the Swedish case, Swedbank Sjuhärad where the business premises were rebuilt through social dialogue and a strategy from the outset to improve the working conditions. The bank's management and employee representatives cooperated through social dialogue at a subcommittee level to ensure the success of this process. They also undertook an additional review of the work environment in cooperation with a new corporate health and wellness provider, Previa (a company offering medical services, mainly focused on prevention). The cooperation with an external provider was initiated by management but approved and mandated through social dialogue. The reconstruction resulted in, among other things, an improved overall work environment and the implementation of individual work environment plans.

There is a well-established social dialogue between management and employee representatives in the company. The Financial Sector Union (Finansförbundet) has two representatives on the board of directors and one on the executive body. The union representative from the executive body holds two meetings a year with the CEO and the assistant manager to discuss recent trends and employee sentiments. The bank also has several committees with representatives from both the management and the trade unions. For instance, the occupational health and safety committee focuses on improving working conditions in general. This committee can make binding decisions by a unanimous vote.

The individual work environment plans were made by the employees themselves in cooperation with Previa, with the aim of making the work environment suitable for each individual in terms of, for example, ergonomic setup of desks and better lighting and ventilation. According to the respondents, these individually adjusted work environment plans have reduced the level of back- and shoulder-related MSDs.

The contract with the new company health and wellness provider is a success story in itself. The previous company health and wellness provider relied mostly on reactive health care, while Previa, the provider since 2004, relies on proactive measures such as regular checkups and health and wellness training. The measures are considered to have reduced the number of MSDs as well as the rate of sick leave.

The mechanism of using an external contractor is praised by both the HR department and the employee representatives, who state that it has improved the health and well-being of the employees. The cooperation with an external contractor is seen as having a high positive impact, especially in acknowledging the importance of using proactive health and wellness training. The inclusion of external actors through a social dialogue decision to improve working conditions is considered as a success among the social partners.

In both companies (Kutxa and Swedbank Sjuhärad), complaints about MSDs have fallen even though checkups and the opportunity to examine problems would have revealed additional cases to the company.

These good results are due to a comprehensive and systematic strategy to reduce MSDs through the social dialogue process. In both cases, there is systematic work at an organisational level in changing and assessing the physical setup of the workplace.

As shown in the cases discussed above, the use of subcommittees or project groups mandated through social dialogue, in addition to using external experts, is a way to give special attention to the issue of MSDs. This results in a higher engagement as measured by the number of people directly involved. Thus it may also be a suitable mechanism to use when measures require adaptation to change by the individual employee.

In the Austrian case, the focus is on employee engagement and efforts in using company-provided facilities. At Wüstenrot, there are 40 regional and five central works councils, which are elected every four years. The regional works councils meet twice a year to discuss conditions in the company, relevant events and common interests, and the five central works councils meet with the board of directors four times a year or as needed in urgent cases. The social dialogue at Wüstenrot takes place in the workplace between employees and management through the works councils. The role of the works councils is to represent the interest of the employees.

Social dialogue at Wüstenrot has resulted in a health scheme for all the employees implemented at the workplace level. The health scheme is a combination of measures taken at organisational level, such as adjustments to workplaces and work organisation.¹⁸

In developing the health scheme, the social partners also received external support from a professional health insurance company, Gebietskrankenkasse (GKK), as well as a doctor who gave advice on exercise. Through social dialogue between works councils and the management, a Health Circle was also created, which is a type of health subcommittee made up of employee representatives from different departments at Wüstenrot who were in charge of developing relevant activities with the support of the internal and external bodies. The Health Circle meets four times a year.

There were definite positive outcomes from implementing the Health Circle scheme. For instance, all employees were involved in the health programme; according to the HR manager, this cooperation is very important for the development and implementation of the activities. The HR manager also believes that good communication is vital for the development and sustainability of the social dialogue and is therefore positive about the cooperation established. The employee representative also believes that the involvement of management, and also good communication between management and works councils, were crucial for the success of the initiative.

Conflicts are not common between management and other groups of employees. According to both the HR manager and the employee representative, it is essential that social partners inform and communicate with 'their' stakeholders. This includes both managers at different levels and employees so that all share a common understanding of the measures taken, and to avoid potential conflicts.

¹⁸ A vast range of activities and events take place at the workplace level; some are free of charge, and others are offered at a low rate.

The inclusion of external professional experts is a repeated finding. The presence of tension during the process underlines that, when new initiatives are undertaken requiring cooperation, it is important to build consensus before embarking on the project.

Stress

Stress can have many different causes and can be related to both organisational factors and sustained tension in personal relations. The financial sector is a fast-moving and demanding environment requiring great flexibility, and workers in the sector are more exposed to stress than the average for the economy as a whole. The findings below touch on many different angles of the issue of work-related stress.

The financial sector is diverse, but many jobs in the sector require a higher education. This could indicate a working life with considerable independence and responsibilities in planning and meeting targets. The sector consists of jobs where most workers can bring work home. In Sweden, as mentioned above, this is the case for 38% of employees in the sector, which is above average for the workforce in general (Work Environment Authority, 2010). The line between work and private life is not always clear when an individual is responsible for personal planning and management. This means that stress can be an issue affecting work–life balance.

In the Swedish case of Swedbank Sjuhärad, training is given to middle managers to provide them with a tool in their monthly meetings with individual employees. Courses in identifying and acting on the signs of stress serve not only as a practical tool for managers, but also contribute to a shared understanding that stress is significant and is not a ‘personal’ problem.

The measure was initiated by the Swedbank executive committee, on which employee representatives have a seat. The initiatives should be understood as a management tool to be combined with one-on-one meetings, ensuring that management skills are sufficient to address the issues that might arise in these more intimate and individual settings. The finding is a good example of social dialogue holding the parties accountable while providing them with the actual means and opportunities to take action. Social dialogue is then not a matter of refusing management’s right and duty to manage, but rather a process of requesting and providing responsibilities in relation to working conditions. The finding visualises a common goal with respect to different functions in the company.

The Swedish case is an example of an intervention at the workplace level, but other cases also show findings on an organisational level with the intention of preventing stress in the workplace. The Spanish case, Kutxa, provides findings on both the organisational and individual levels. In an organisational setting, stress is perceived as a matter of balancing work and private life.

Both the HR manager and the worker representative refer to the work–life balance in Kutxa as very positive. It can be said that work–life balance in Spain’s financial sector is one of the poorest for all sectors in the country, as the average satisfaction with ‘working hours flexibility’ is 5.7 on a 0–10 scale (Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales, 2009). For both sides, a successful example of improved working conditions has been the reduction of daily working hours so that most employees finish work at 16.50 instead of 20.00. The negotiations lasted around a year and a half and led to a gradual reduction of daily working hours; first to 19.00 and then down to 16.50. Finally, an agreement was reached with all the trade unions.

According to the HR manager, the initiative for this improvement came directly from the employers. They invited the trade unions to begin negotiations on this issue. According to the worker representative, however, the initiative came from the workers and therefore the trade unions.

Both sides agree that the whole process of social dialogue took place with positive and continuous negotiation and communication. At some point there was considerable conflict during the negotiations because the different parties could not agree. The main problem, according to the employee representatives, was that the company took a unilateral decision without consulting the trade unions first, leading to a deadlock in the negotiations. In the end, however, after several more discussions, the negotiations came back on track and the matter was settled amicably. An agreement was signed between all the trade unions' representatives and the company.

According to the HR manager, the determining factor was informing employees about the time aspects involved in all parts of the improvement efforts. The worker representatives take a different view. They argue that the economic crisis and general employee discontent regarding the present working conditions forced the agreement, and they say they would like to have had more time to improve working conditions further. These events and divergent perspectives have motivated further measures to improve general working conditions, such as working time and the physical working environment at the bank.

The company did not use any external support during the negotiation process for reducing working hours. The employee representative mentioned that they merely consulted or questioned the trade union lawyers.

Another approach to avoiding stress at Kutxa is carrying out psychosocial risks surveys over several years with the help of an external technical expert from Mutua, a mutual insurance society focused on workplace injuries and illnesses. The underlying issues giving rise to stress may be organisational (for example, a mismatch between employers' demands on the workers and the resources provided to workers to fulfil the demands, or long working hours); but they may also be relational and involve serious misconduct, employers' abuse of authority, and psychological and sexual harassment at work.

The employee representatives have influence over the surveys through participation in the health and safety committee. The employee representatives state that the psychosocial risk survey at Kutxa gives the health and safety committee a good picture of the level and causes of stress. The survey's function in relation to other measures can be seen in Figure 4, which shows the variety of measures in place to address stress.

Figure 4: Measures to monitor and prevent psychosocial risks at Kutxa, Spain



Source: Oxford Research, 2010; based on interviews with Kutxa

With respect to problematic factors, one of the main problems has been that the financial crisis has reduced the company's ability to fund suggested improvements. According to the worker representatives, a problematic factor has been the dramatic expansion in employment during recent years. One case that illustrates this point was the move by employers to make unilateral decisions without consulting the works councils. Another problematic factor identified by the employee representatives is a resistance to change, especially among older workers.

A well-structured social dialogue has in the Spanish financial case resulted in a broad and systematic approach towards stress and psychosocial risk factors. This well-structured social dialogue combines with the range of preventive measures to reduce psychosocial risks at the workplace.

At the Czech bank, Česká Spořitelna, there are several different forums for social dialogue, in which working conditions and employee interests can be discussed. These are presented in Table 8.

Table 8: *Forums for social dialogue at Česká Spořitelna*

Name	Participants	Frequency
Corporate committee	Management, chair of the trade union and 30 employee representatives	Monthly
Round table meeting	CEO, HR manager, and chair of the trade union	Every second month
Bilateral	CEO and chair of the trade union	Every second month
Bilateral meeting	HR manager and chair of the trade union	At least once a month
Formal local meeting	Branch management and branch-level employee representatives	Varies from branch to branch

Source: *Oxford Research, 2010; based on interviews with Česká Spořitelna*

The HR manager and the chair of the trade union participating in four out of five social dialogue forums listed in Table 8 are proud of the social dialogue at Česká Spořitelna, as considerable time and effort has been put into building a strong and constructive social dialogue. Both parties see the social dialogue as a partnership between the employer and employee representatives, with the common aim of improving working conditions through constructive and honest negotiation. Even when parties have different opinions, solutions have so far always been found. The HR manager emphasises that it is essential to have a partnership between employer and employee representatives in order to ensure constructive and positive dialogue, which makes it possible to negotiate and agree upon measures to improve working conditions.

At Česká Spořitelna, an anti-stress programme was launched in 2009. This was initiated by employee representatives raising concerns about stressed employees, combined with an employee survey initiated by management in 2007, which showed a significant pressure on employees due to heavy workloads. Through discussion at the corporate committee, an anti-stress programme was developed which included courses on how to prevent and cope with stress.

The corporate committee holds monthly meetings at which there is always a set agenda that employee representatives and the management are able to influence. The HR manager compiles the final agenda including suggestions from the management and the employee representative. The employee representative takes minutes of the meetings and publishes them on the company intranet.

The anti-stress training programme is targeted mainly at employees at the branch level who have frequent customer contact. However, the programme is open to all employees. As it is mainly for branch-level employees, it is not possible to have classroom sessions at headquarters and so many of the modules are delivered online. However, one module

involves classroom participation with a psychiatrist. Through the programme, the employees learn to recognise the symptoms of stress, how to cope with stress, and whether professional help is necessary. In many cases, the tools provided through the programme are enough to address the causes of stress, but if professional help is needed, a consultation with a psychiatrist is available. The anti-stress programme is paid for by the company, but the employees pay for sessions with the psychiatrist.

In 2009 the corporate committee ran a pilot for this project and about 100 employees went through the programme. Due to the high success rate and the demand it created, in 2010 it was decided to involve 500 employees. The decision to upscale the programme was based on an evaluation by participants, which showed a remarkable level of satisfaction with the courses and their usability in the work life of the employees. The evaluation was discussed, and the decision was made through social dialogue at the corporate committee. Both sides consider the link to be so finely tuned that nothing slips through.

Moreover, Česká Spořitelna has alternative avenues for individual employees to raise questions and issues to the corporate committee. It has an ethical ombudsman who employees can contact if they are concerned about ethical issues in their work or private life. There is also an open door policy, which means that the employee can contact the HR manager directly with issues or complaints instead of going through the trade union. As discussed above, the problem of stress has been raised through employee representatives who are members of the corporate committee. The issue was discussed by the corporate committee, and subsequently implemented and evaluated through the social dialogue in the company. The mechanism in the current case is a clear and straightforward process in which decisions have been made regarding pilot projects, evaluation, and decisions on permanent provision of courses using the structure of social dialogue. All the information gathered through the additional communication channels feeds into the corporate committee through the HR manager or the trade union.

In the French case at Crédit Agricole Charente-Périgord (CACP), several entities form the structure for social dialogue. Workplace committees consisting of representatives from both management and employees meet once a month to discuss general issues. There is also a trade union body that meets three times a year, holding extra meetings if there is a specific issue that needs to be addressed.

CACP has taken different initiatives to reduce the level of stress by using organisational measures. In 2006, the company launched an initiative to combat stress in the workplace, 'Santé et qualité de vie au travail' [health and well-being in the workplace]. The process and structure of social dialogue was built around finding solutions to a specific problem – in this case, workplace stress.

The initiative started when the committee for workplace hygiene, security, and working conditions (CHSCT) noted that there were many psychosocial risks associated with the bank's operations, most notably risks related to stress. CHSCT, which has 12 members from various unions, brought its concerns to the bank's management, who were receptive to the information and agreed that something should be done.

In January 2007, a steering committee (*comité de pilotage*) was formed, consisting of three members of CHSCT (of which one was the employee representative interviewed at CACP), two members from the management team and two occupational physicians. There was also outside assistance from the regional agency for the improvement of working conditions (Agence régionale pour l'amélioration des conditions de travail, ARACT). In June 2007 it was decided that an outside consultant from Themis Conseil, a private ergonomics consulting firm, should be added to the steering committee. Themis Conseil offers support to companies across a range of industries that are seeking to improve working conditions related to stress, musculoskeletal injuries, and other work-related risks. In this case, the company was retained because of its specific expertise, which was beyond the range of resources available in the bank itself.

The steering committee had two mandates: to examine the current issues related to stress; and subsequently launch a process that includes representation from the employees. The committee began the process by studying stress-related issues and potential improvements. From the 40 potential improvements identified, the management worked with CHSCT to select 15. These were chosen according to two criteria (feasibility and scope of impact) which were applied to the potential projects in a consensus-based process.

The changes to address stress included the following:

- manage high volume of internal communication (emails, memos, directives);
- make communication more efficient;
- manage information flows to help eliminate unnecessary communication;
- improve the internal database to make it more user-friendly;
- support the use of new administration tools by providing training on IT systems and communication software (especially for older workers);
- improve communication between the branch and the central organisation;
- develop a transition programme to help people in the final stages of their career (aged 50+);
- address mobility issues for older workers;
- recognise the skills and competencies of older workers;
- improve team spirit by valuing the team (valoriser équipe);
- improve confidence in the internal courier system, especially concerning the inter-branch document system;
- improve the process of replacing absent employees by creating a pool of trained workers able to perform well immediately upon being placed in an assignment.

Fifteen improvements were identified and then grouped into overarching themes: team spirit, senior workers, management and communication, and cooperation. Responsibility for actions within each theme was assigned to a working group composed of six employees, one CHSCT representative and one manager. Each manager was responsible for presenting progress reports to the CHSCT committee.

One initiative in the list above is aimed at reducing the vulnerability of the small branches when a worker is absent due to illness. The solution to this problem was to create a dedicated pool of replacement employees with training in specific positions related to the work of the company. Previously, temporary employees were recruited on an ad hoc basis, were not well prepared to contribute, and posed a burden on the rest of the employees. Another example involves internal communication. The system of processing documents was very rigid. If one form was filled out incorrectly, the entire file would be sent back to the employee responsible for filling in the form. This caused delays, which irritated the clients and caused significant stress for the employees. This was identified and resolved through the initiative.

The solutions are being implemented according to a structured system that includes members of the management and employee representatives. From a relationship based on conflict and distrust, both management and employee representatives hope to move towards a relationship based on pragmatism and constructive dialogue. Based on the statements by both management and employee representatives, it is reasonable to assume that both sides of the company hope to move on from the conflict-oriented pattern of past social dialogue into one characterised by pragmatism,

constructive dialogue and co-management of working conditions. Both sides seem to be optimistic that a new era is possible and both sides seem committed to working pragmatically to improve working conditions. The cooperation among the unions and the new cooperation between the unions and the management is a feature of union dynamics that appears to be valued by the respondents.

The assistance by external occupational physicians stems from a desire to obtain professional identification of areas of higher impact and to validate the process. In addition to involving doctors, the management also hired a coach to help train the managers in effective performance management. While this adds more complexity to the picture of the mechanisms, the link to a formal social dialogue remains clear.

At Crédit Agricole, the improved cooperation through social dialogue and its impact was mentioned and emphasised by the respondents in relation to the issue of work-related stress. In France, conflict in the workplace is fairly common and a fairly harsh tone tends to be used in communication. This may in itself be stressful. The use of external assistance in identifying, deciding and implementing the concrete measures to reduce stress may be due to this culture of conflict. External assistance may have contributed to a clearer distinction between facts and opinion and thereby facilitated a more constructive process. The experience from the process, and the success of the measures taken fed back into the social dialogue in general, has been an important reason why the tone of communication has improved.

This case illustrates how it is possible to move from conflict to constructive dialogue. In the French financial case, there is now a durable structure of social dialogue for improving working conditions. After some tense years between 1999 and 2005, the social dialogue being built within this particular branch of Crédit Agricole is contributing positively to improving working conditions. While there were significant startup costs in terms of time, trust building and financial resources (especially related to bringing in external partners), the structure, once in place, has been able to contribute to improving working conditions.

Whereas improvements in working atmosphere and relations are indirect results of the process at Crédit Agricole, they were a direct focus in the German case – though not only between managers and employees. At Sparda-Bank Munich there are several forms of employee representation. These include works councils that meet every second week, with a board member present. There are also less formal groups, such as ‘after-work meetings’ where any employee can meet with a board member to discuss issues that they feel are important. Through social dialogue between the works councils and the management, Sparda-Bank Munich has initiated the opportunity for employees to consult a mediator when conflicts arise. The mediators may be internal colleagues specialised in mediation or external contractors. Conflict management is seen as an important theme in the company and is considered a potential factor for reducing stress.

The purpose is to train employees to better handle conflicts with colleagues and act more proactively. These initiatives were created as a response to previous episodes where the communication between employees was poor. It is important to note that communication between all employees has been the focus rather than simply communication between management and employees.

Sparda-Bank Munich also approaches stress on a more organisational level, mainly as an effort to maintain a healthy work–life balance. One of the things mentioned by both the HR management and the employee representatives are the new opportunities for new parents to claim €150 per month for their children aged between one and three years old. This is to help parents pay for their child’s day care. This initiative gives parents the opportunity to return to work more quickly from parental leave safe in the knowledge that their child is being properly looked after.

The initiative was taken by the management but was developed together with the works council. The example involves payment and as such it excludes itself from the definition of ‘working conditions’. But the initial plan for a clear work–life balance measure was a non-pay measure, which is why it is included in the findings.

In summary, the links between the improvement of working conditions and social dialogue have been clear though the mechanisms vary in the cases presented above. Social dialogue mandates the use of external assistance to improve working conditions and thereby include external partners into the improvement process. This is found in several instances and is mainly because of the need for specific professional competences.

Active policies for older workers

When looking at the efforts to keep older workers employed,¹⁹ the findings fall into two categories: either changing the job function or reducing working time. Both would normally have an impact on wages. This is also the case in some of the findings described below. However, even though the measures may have a pay dimension, the measure is focused on reducing working time to keep older workers in employment, which is why it is included.

In Sweden, Swedbank Sjuhärad, has a pension agreement called ‘+10’ which gives employees over the age of 58 the opportunity to work 70% of the time while retaining 80% of their wage. So far 19 employees have notified the management that they would like to take up the benefit. The purpose of the initiative is to lift some of the pressure from workers closest to retirement age and thus motivate them to work longer. The agreement for older workers has not yet been integrated and approved in collective wage agreements; they are, at this stage, only optional offers for banks and employees to use. The unions are, however, pushing for the offers to become fully fledged work environment measures integrated within the collective agreements (Fagerlind and Finansförbundet, 2010).

In Spain, after the economic crisis, Kutxa is committed to take measures relating to older workers including job switches away from direct customer services, which are considered to be more stressful positions.

At the same time, it should be mentioned that the union side has traditionally had a clear purpose in obtaining opportunities for older workers to retire in order to reward a long life of hard work. A transformation among older workers who feel both physically and mentally capable of continuing to work may be in its early stages. They may be willing to work longer under certain conditions. The findings can be seen as consistent with this assessment.

Conclusions

Looking at the sector in general, the case studies show considerable concern about work-related stress. Initiatives and measures to address stress have many different dimensions within the sector. This is not surprising because the surveys and studies discussed in the section on working conditions in the sector identify this issue as a severe problem.

An overview of initiators, issues, and the results of initiatives developed within a social dialogue framework is presented in Table 9.

¹⁹ These initiatives to maintain older workers in the labour market were only discussed briefly in the interviews as the focus was on MSDs and stress measures in the companies.

Table 9: Overview of initiators, issues and results in the financial sector

Company	Initiator	Issue	Result
Wüstenrot Bausparkasse (AT)	Subcommittee: Health Circle	MSDs	A health scheme combining adjustments to workplaces and work organisation
Česká Spořitelna (CZ)	Employee representatives on the corporate committee	Stress	An anti-stress programme was developed containing courses on how to prevent and cope with stress
Sparda-Bank München (DE)	Management	Stress	Conflict mediation Childcare support
Crédit Agricole (FR)	Committee for workplace hygiene, security and working conditions	Stress	Programme: health and well-being in the workplace
Kutxa (ES)	Standing health and safety committee	MSD	Policy on investigating individual complains and ergonomic reorganisation of workplaces
	Management	Stress	Reduction of daily working hours
	Management	Older workers	Alternative placement
Swedbank Sjuhärad (SE)	Occupational health and safety committee	MSDs	Reconstruction of the business premises
	Executive committee where employee representatives have a seat	Stress	Training on work-related stress for middle-managers
	Management	Older workers	Reduction of working time

Source: Oxford Research, 2010

A common mechanism in addressing the three focus areas mandated through social dialogue is the use of subcommittees. Through social dialogue, subcommittees are used to take a more specific and narrow focus on the issue in question, and if necessary, external experts are consulted to contribute more detailed knowledge about the issue. External experts can also help come up with more effective solutions to the problem in question. However, the power to make decisions remains at the formal social dialogue level. Works councils, corporate committees and other negotiation forums allow unions and managers to discuss and decide whether to introduce subcommittees and external experts. These forums also allow social partners to define the mandate that these actors should have. Subcommittees are accountable to social dialogue bodies as they report to and are evaluated by these bodies.

A common element across the companies using subcommittees is that both social partners interviewed point out that the social dialogue is characterised by trust, mutual goals and partnership. This shared vision helps explain why social partners are comfortable with decentralising the process of improving working conditions to subcommittees or external experts (even though social partners still have decision-making power), the identification of problems, strategy development to deal with identified problems and the implementation of measures to improve working conditions.

Analysis of social dialogue and working conditions in the wholesale and retail sector

Wholesale and retail sector: summary

The wholesale and retail trade sector (NACE codes G46 and G47) comprises establishments engaged in wholesaling and retailing merchandise, generally without transformation (processing). Wholesale is an intermediate process in the trade. The retailing process is the final step in the distribution of merchandise; retailers are therefore organised to sell merchandise in small quantities to the general public. This sector comprises two main types of retailers: store and non-store retailers.

The wholesale and retail sector is large, diverse and dynamic. It employs about 30 million people in Europe (Table 10) and is, according to EuroCommerce, one of the few sectors steadily creating employment across Europe (EuroCommerce, 2010). The sector provides 15.4% of total employment in EU27, which translates to 18.5 million jobs in retail and 10.4 million in wholesale (European Commission, 2009a, p. 9). The sector is labour-intensive, generating 11% of the EU's GDP (source: Eurostat, National Accounts, 2010).

Table 10: *People employed in the wholesale and retail sector*

Country	1998	2003	2008
EU27	29,855,000	31,656,000	33,954,000
Austria	N/A	N/A	N/A
Czech Republic	728,000	716,000	741,000
France	3,049,000	3,390,000	3,401,000
Germany	5,896,000	5,922,000	5,979,000
Spain	2,292,000	2,709,000	3,259,000
Sweden	508,000	530,000	557,000

Note: N/A = information not available

Source: Eurostat, *National Accounts, 2010*

Table 11: *Percentage of total employment in the wholesale and retail sector*

Country	1998	2003	2008
EU27	N/A	15.3%	15.4%
Austria	15.0%	14.9%	14.7%
Czech Republic	15.0%	15.1%	14.6%
France	N/A	N/A	N/A
Germany	15.2%	14.9%	14.6%
Spain	16.2%	16.0%	16.5%
Sweden	12.9%	12.7%	13.0%

Notes: the percentage of total employment is calculated in hours worked. In the database, not all figures are available in both thousands of persons employed and hours worked.

N/A = information not available.

Source: Eurostat, *National Accounts, 2010*

As shown in Table 10, the absolute number of employees has risen in all countries. Especially in Spain, the increase is dramatic, with the sector employing one million more workers in 2008 than in 1998. The increase in the relative size of

the sector in comparison with the economy as a whole is not quite so dramatic, particularly for Spain; and in Germany the share of hours worked in the wholesale and retail sector compared with all sectors has even fallen significantly.

In the first quarter of 2010, the workforce in the wholesale and retail sector had a gender distribution of 49% women and 51% men. It is also a generally young workforce, with 53% under the age of 40 (in the same quarter). Most workers in the sector (57%) have a medium level of education compared with 28% of the sector with a low level of education and 15% with a high level of education (European Commission, 2009a, pp. 9–10).

Wholesale and retail is a large and important sector throughout Europe. It is difficult to outline any common issues that employer and employees face in the sector as it is so diverse. Technological development is, however, something that affects most companies in the sector, regardless of whether they are in the wholesale or retail trade. Technological development changes the way that companies interact with customers and the way logistics are handled. Supply chain management and just-in-time logistics have become an important part of even small firms in the sector (Branch, 2008, p. 56).

European social dialogue

The social dialogue actor on the trade union side is UNI-Europa Commerce, which negotiates with retail, wholesale and international trade representation to the EU (EuroCommerce, 2010). A European Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee has existed since 1999. Social dialogue at the European level has reached agreements on integration of the disabled into the labour market, guidelines on teleworking and corporate social responsibility (CSR). The committee's work programme for 2010 and 2011 includes 'health, safety and well-being at the workplace', as well as 'improving the effectiveness of social dialogue'.²⁰

The social dialogue at the European level in the wholesale and retail sector has also been interested in leveraging the challenges of an ageing population. As long ago as 2002 the European social partners for commerce signed voluntary guidelines on age diversity at work. Accepting the challenge of the demographic changes foreseen in the coming years, they advocate an 'age neutral' approach to employment relations in order to enable older workers to stay longer in active working life.

There is room for improvement when it comes to making actors at the company level aware of the social dialogue at the European level, as the respondents interviewed in the study were not familiar with results or outcomes of social dialogue at the European level.

Working conditions in the sector

In wholesale and retail in 2007, almost 6% of all men and women reported suffering from work-related health problems in the previous 12 months; of which 70% complained of either bone, joint or muscle pain, and 10% were stress-related²¹ (Eurostat, 2009a). Official statistics in the relevant countries indicate that the number of accidents is relatively low in the sector, while the issues of MSDs and stress are significant.

²⁰ <http://www.uniglobalunion.org/Apps/UNINews.nsf/vwLkpById/81B897188F1781C1C12576CD00335B09?Opendocument>

²¹ Note that these figures also include sector G45 (wholesale and retail trade and repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles) and thus include more workers than the sectors focused on in this report.

A good indicator of the development of working conditions in a sector is the level of work accidents. Table 12 shows work accidents for the years 1997, 2003 and 2007. It is notable that Spain and France have seen an increase in the number of accidents while Germany and Austria have seen a decline, and the number of injuries in Sweden has been rather stable.

Table 12: *Work accidents in the wholesale and retail sector*

Country	1997	2001	2007
Austria	3,855	4,473	3,360
Czech Republic	N/A	N/A	N/A
France	98,589	115,244	105,118
Germany	110,214	113,663	94,195
Spain	70,822	106,789	101,272
Sweden	8,731	7,909	8,022

Notes: data are given for accidents leading to more than three days lost (that is, four days' absence or more).

N/A = information not available

Source: Eurostat, *Population and social conditions database, 2010*

No data from the Czech Republic are shown in Table 12. In the Czech Republic, the occupational injury rate in the wholesale and retail sector is very low; in 2009, it was 0.88%. This is lower than the overall average for the Czech Republic in general, which in 2009 was 1.18% (Czech Statistical Office, 2009a).

Looking at MSDs, in Austria the share of employees in the wholesale and retail sector reporting backache was 18.3% in 2005 compared with an average for all sectors of 24.0%. The share reporting muscular pain was 14% compared with the 2005 national average of 20% (OHSA, 2010a, p. 8).

The wholesale and retail sector in the Czech Republic is generally at high risk for MSDs. The biggest contributing factors to the development of MSDs among employees in the sector are manual handling, awkward and static postures, lifting, pushing, repetition, and exposure to the cold and vibrations (OSHA, 2007). There do not seem to be any specific figures on the prevalence of MSDs in this sector. However, service and sales workers accounted for 13% of all cases of MSDs within the Czech Republic in 2004 (Kyzlinková-Vasková, 2007).

A French article from 2009 presents a study from 2002 that found that 7.3% of male employees in the retail sector had at least one clinically diagnosed upper-limb musculoskeletal disorder.²² This is significantly lower than the overall average at 11.3%. The prevalence of at least one diagnosed upper-limb MSD for women in the retail sector is 12.4%, which is 5.1 percentage points higher than the prevalence for men. The prevalence of upper-limb MSDs for women is slightly lower in the retail sector than the overall average, which is 14.8% (Ha et al, 2008).

²² The article states that it is possible that MSDs are actually underreported.

In the German wholesale and retail sector, the percentage share of workers reporting backache in 2005 was 17.5% compared with the average for all sectors of 18.8% for the same year. The share reporting muscular pain in Germany was also 13.3%, while the average for all sectors was 14.8% in 2005 (OHSA, 2010b, p. 18).

In Spain, the main physical demands of work that can lead to MSDs in the wholesale and retail sector and the accommodation and food services sectors are maintaining the same body posture (28.7% of the workers had to endure such postures in 2003), together with having to do repetitive movements (28.8%). In the same year, body posture and repetitive motions were significantly more prevalent than other possible causes such as painful or tiring postures, moving heavy loads, or making great physical effort (all below 10% of workers) (Isusi and Corral, 2007).

In Sweden the retail sector has a higher rate of weekly recurring shoulder and arm pain than the overall average in the country. According to official work environment statistics, 39.8% of retail and 32.2% wholesale workers experienced weekly recurring pains in their shoulders and arms in 2005 (Swedish Retail Institute, 2010). With the Swedish average at 34%, the retail sector stands out as having a higher than average incidence of MSDs. Furthermore, the employees in the sector have a much higher prevalence of working tasks that involve repetitive movements (41% compared with the average of 33%). Among women, 49% carry out repetitive movements, while the corresponding figure was 34% for men in 2009 (Work Environment Authority, 2010, p. 103).

With regard to stress, Statistik Austria's report on reasons for sick leave based on 2007 data reveals that 29.7% of sick leave in the wholesale, retail and repair sector is due to psychological causes (Statistik Austria, 2009).

Sector-level statistics on stress for the Czech Republic have not been found. But at the country level, Eurofound's European Working Conditions Survey based on 2005 data reveals that self-reported work-related stress is rather low in the Czech Republic (17% of respondents report stress, compared with the European average of 22%) (Parent-Thirion et al, 2006).

In France, 23.7% of wholesale and retail workers often worked beyond their official working hours in 2003 (Arnaudo et al, 2006). This is almost the same as the average for the economy as a whole, which was 23.6%. In the same year, 67.9% of wholesale and retail workers reported having a pace of work defined by an external request requiring an immediate response, compared with an average of 55.2% over all sectors of the economy.

In Germany, according to the WageIndicator report on stress, a total measure of the stress level in the wholesale and retail sector is 3.1, which makes it the seventh most stressful sector (Van Kleveren and Tijdens, 2007).

For Spain, the WageIndicator report on stress gives a total measure of the stress level in the wholesale and retail sector of 3.3, which makes it the third most stressful sector after hotels, restaurants and catering, and health care (Van Kleveren and Tijdens, 2007).

The share of workers in the Swedish wholesale and retail sector in 2009 who found every week that 'they could not stop thinking about their job even when off work' was 41%. The figure for the Swedish economy as a whole in the same year was 44%. In addition, 37% of employees in the sector state that they have to cut down on lunch breaks, work overtime and/or bring work home at least once a week. This is slightly higher than the Swedish average in 2009 of 36% (Work Environment Authority, 2010).

Overview of case studies

Table 13: *Case studies in the wholesale and retail sector*

Country	Company	Number of employees*	Unit of observation
Austria	Pfeiffer HandelsgmbH	2,870	Company level
Czech Republic	Interspar	4,500	Company level
France	Senior Et Cie	169	Establishment level
Germany	REWE Region West	16,000	Regional establishment level**
Spain	El Corte Inglés	65,000	Company level
Sweden	Colly Components AB	31	Company level

Notes: * According to the HR managers of the respective companies, 2010.

** Covering the former West Germany.

The six cases (Table 13) reflect the diversity of companies that operate in the sector. Colly Components is a small wholesale company selling highly specialised screws to manufacturing companies. Interspar (also known as Spar) is, according to its official website, the biggest food retailer in the world.²³ In the Czech Republic alone it employs 4,500 people. REWE is a German wholesaler of food, one of the most important in Europe. Pfeiffer HandelsgmbH deals with both retail and wholesale in Austria, and Senior & Cie is a catalogue clothing mail order company.

For a comparative study, this would constitute a good basis. The common results throughout such different case studies focus on the common feature, in this case, constructive social dialogue. This chapter also shows examples of good practice and how stakeholders make use of social dialogue.

MSDs

MSDs are a major problem in the wholesale and retail sector and it was expected that the case studies would demonstrate a strong interest in this theme within working conditions. As reported in the 2007 Labour Force Survey, 6% of all men and women in EU27 working in the wholesale, retail and repair sector reported work-related health problems in the previous 12 months; of which 70% complained of bone, joint or muscle pain (Eurostat, 2009a).

Pfeiffer HandelsgmbH in Austria has seven subsidiaries, each of which has its own works council, which means that their interests are represented at all levels and working areas of the Pfeiffer Group. The representatives on the individual works councils are elected every four years. The works councils meet on a regular basis to discuss common interests and goals. However, what is equally important is that the works councils at the branch level are independent units that have their own chairpersons. This means that they can discuss and make decisions independently on matters that concern their respective geographical units. White-collar and blue-collar workers have their own individual works councils and are members of different trade unions. However, the works councils for different professions have meetings together at the group and company level to discuss common interests.

²³ The European works council in the company does not yet cover the Czech Republic.

In total, the Pfeiffer Group has 60 works councils: 10 at the headquarters in Traun, 14 in Unimarkt, and four or five at each location of C+C Pfeiffer. Thus, there is a fully established structure of works councils, organised so that they meet with management as well as with works councils in other parts of the organisation to discuss common goals and challenges.

All employees are members of the Chamber of Labour (AK), as this is compulsory in Austria. In the case of Pfeiffer, approximately 50% of the workforce (not including retail trade, for which information is not available) belongs to an additional trade union. At Pfeiffer, two unions are represented: the Union of Salaried Employees, Graphical Workers and Journalists (GPA-djp) for white-collar workers and Vida for blue-collar workers.

At the Pfeiffer Group, social dialogue has resulted in a wide range of initiatives on improving working conditions and reducing MSDs, particularly at the organisational level. Pfeiffer has focused on improving temperature and climate as well as providing more space for machinery to help employees carry out their work in a safer and less strenuous manner.

GPA-djp conducted a study that included an employee survey on how to improve health and safety measures for all employees. This resulted in the improvement of workstations (including new tables and chairs), fitting new air-conditioning, and investing in new technology and machinery to alleviate physical strains for employees in storage and logistics. A safety handbook for all employees was also drawn up in cooperation with all the works councils as a result of the study.

The employee survey shows that three-quarters of the employees working in the storage area believe that they have job-related health complaints. The survey indicates that employees affected have lower job satisfaction. This again results in sick leave, unmotivated staff, higher staff turnover and, consequently, the need to train new staff. The handbook describes the outcome of the survey and the legal rights of employees, and gives guidance on what the employees can do at an individual level.

In addition to these measures, a health scheme called the Pfeiffer Initiative for Fitness (PFIFF) was developed by the HR manager and the chair of the works councils. It involves making a physiotherapist and a doctor available for the employees to consult, as well as providing classes and seminars on health and MSD prevention.

In the Austrian wholesale and retail case, through social dialogue, problems have been identified by means of a survey, and measures have been elaborated and implemented. Works councils and employee representatives have been involved through the entire process in a continuous dialogue with the management, especially the HR manager.

Germany's REWE Group provides another example of measures focusing on providing the employees with specific tools for the prevention of MSDs. According to both management and employee respondents, the company has a long tradition of social dialogue. Works councils are required by law. REWE's works council meets once or twice a month and meets with all the employees four times a year, though this pattern can vary depending on relevant issues in the different departments. Furthermore, every second year the works council arranges an information day for the whole company followed by a large party. HR management is invited to take part in the works council meetings and vice versa.

At the REWE Group, work-related MSDs are mainly seen within the logistics sector, where heavy loads are common. Around 26% of employee absences in the group can be attributed to musculoskeletal disorders (REWE Group, 2010). In view of this REWE has, together with its health insurance company, arranged different initiatives that include free Nordic walking courses and a free health checkup once a year. Furthermore, employees can use the services of a masseur, which are partially paid for by the company.

In relation to a national pilot project on work-related MSDs, REWE started the GesiMa programme in 2009 to develop a 'toolbox' to increase employee awareness of MSDs, and to improve their knowledge on better health conditions at the workplace and thus make them more qualified to overcome work-related strains (REWE Group, 2009, p. 95). There is still a relatively high level of sick leave at REWE Group, particularly in the logistics sector and for workers in the warehouse.

Given that the general culture of social dialogue in France is more conflict-oriented than the other case study countries, the following French example of measures on MSDs is both an example of concrete measures addressing MSDs and a pilot project in a partnership between social partners working towards a common goal.

At Senior & Cie, there are several forms of interest representation, employee participation and social dialogue. For instance, the workplace committee (*comité d'établissement*), which is composed of members of management and elected employee representatives (*committees paritaires*), meets monthly. At this meeting, general issues related to the company are discussed, negotiated and decided. There are also other committees that meet to discuss, for example, more specific issues regarding health and safety (CHSCT) or trade union-related issues.

Senior & Cie is undertaking an initiative to reduce the risks associated with MSDs based on a combination of equipment upgrades and process changes at the workplace level. The initiative started in 2006. The following two years were spent developing new solutions to address MSDs, which involved significant social dialogue (as described below) to guide development. Throughout this period, management and employee representatives worked together to administer an MSD survey, analyse the results and develop solutions. After several trials, the new MSD solutions were implemented on a pilot basis in 2009.

According to the HR manager, the initial decision to address MSDs was based on a quantitative analysis of the human resources position requested by the HR manager. Workplace doctors working on region-wide initiatives drove a parallel campaign to have MSD-related issues addressed at the sector level. MSDs had become the most significant issue at meetings between HR management and CHSCT.

The project was negotiated at the workplace committee and with CHSCT prior to its launch. The project started with a visit from a CHSCT member to the company's packaging department. An information campaign was launched using posters and other educational resources.

A steering committee (*comité de pilotage*) was set up in 2007 by CHSCT and management to design preventive actions against MSDs. The steering committee consisted of the production manager and a member of CHSCT (an employee representative in the packaging department). In addition, the steering committee organised a working group including employees from other departments on an ad hoc basis:

- an ergonomist from the public regional agency for the improvement of working conditions (Agence régionale pour l'amélioration des conditions de travail, ARACT);
- an expert from the public regional health insurance institute (Caisse régionale d'assurance maladie, CRAM);
- an occupational physician from a non-profit organisation with expertise in health issues at work who provided training and methodological support.

Following a discussion between these experts and the employee representatives, a number of recommendations were made to address MSDs including a number of changed processes and new systems. There are 15 specific changes to be made within six action plans. Examples include:

- facilitating access to products;
- changing the distribution of tasks between occupational positions or departments;
- changing the layout of spaces;
- changing equipment;
- changing working positions;
- limiting the weight of articles that must be lifted.

Suggestions came from both sides of the steering committee. The most concrete change was the introduction of a new handcart. One significant source of MSDs was the need to pack and transport bins of merchandise from the shelves to the processing tables. This involved heavy lifting, twisting and repetitive movements.

The employee representative played a role in managing the implementation process. Once preliminary changes had been developed, the management gradually withdrew from the process and the employee representative took on new responsibilities.

The role of the employee representative was instrumental in implementing the new systems. The initiative has been implemented in one out of 10 sections of the packaging department. The employee representative acknowledged that people tend to trust others who are in similar positions (in the case of the interviewed employee representative, colleagues in the packaging department), which helped encourage some of the workers to adapt to the new system.

It is clear from the example that extensive social dialogue allowed the two sides to work pragmatically to identify problems and then design and implement solutions. The employee representatives stated that, in the past, management would have imposed a decision on them, but in this case a co-management model appears to be emerging, with the employee representatives taking a direct role in implementing the changes.

With respect to the external experts, both sides of the social dialogue highlight the occupational physician as a key actor in the process. The HR manager emphasised that this message was bolstered significantly when it came from the doctor. The HR manager cited an example of employees wanting to use horizontal conveyor belts but the doctor pointed out that vertical conveyor belts were safer. According to the employee representative, the problems related to MSDs had indeed been identified and expressed through the formal channels of the employee representation and through CHSCT. However, the problems were not sufficiently addressed until the workplace physician became involved. From the perspective of the employees, their reports of injury were being dismissed by management as groundless. Once the doctor validated the reports, management seemed to be more responsive.

This points to the fact that acceptance from the users of devices is needed for measures to be implemented effectively. The inclusion of external experts mandated by the social dialogue made the dialogue more constructive and clarified the partners' positions on the specific issue of MSDs.

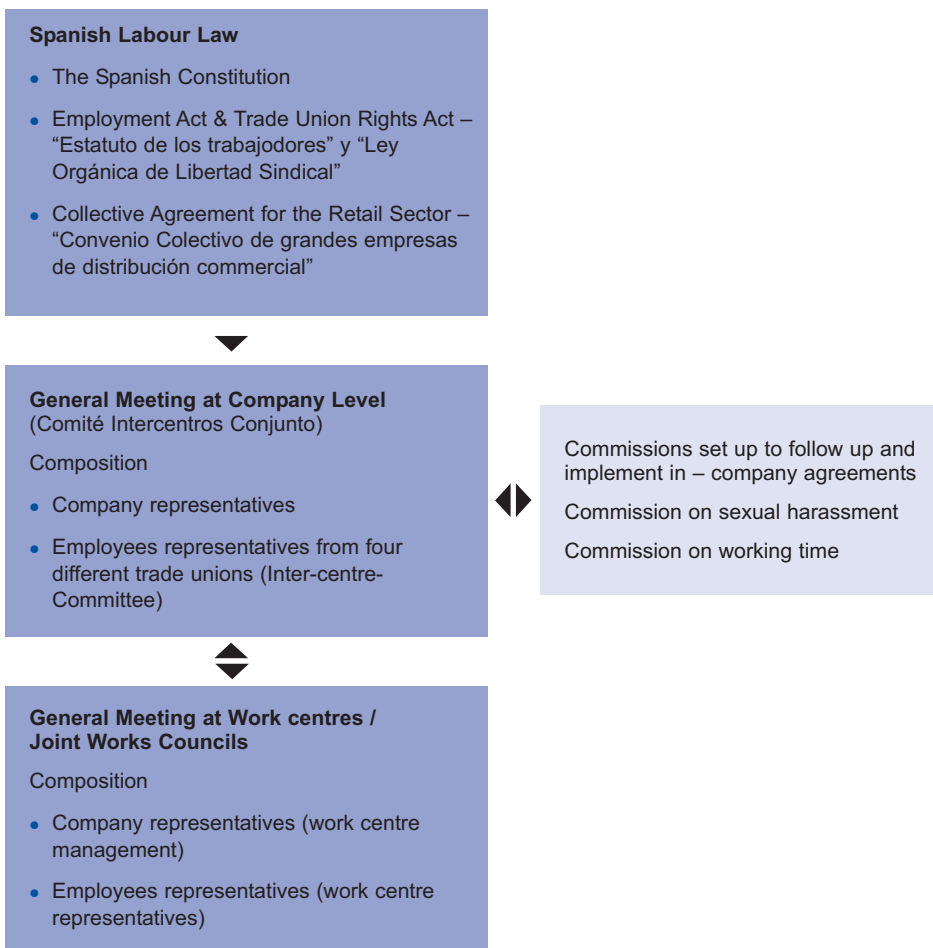
In the Spanish case of El Corte Inglés, the use of social dialogue to improve working conditions has a major impact that may go well beyond the chain's 65,000 employees. The company is an important actor in the sector and it has also chosen

an active strategy to become a first mover. Improvements in working conditions implemented at El Corte Inglés, according to the HR manager, may at some point be transferred to collective agreements at the national level and apply to employees of other companies.

There are about 250 elected union delegates and 1,500 elected employee representatives within El Corte Inglés. The union density rate, according to the HR department, is between 25% and 30%, while the sector average is below 10%. The HR management believes that the high density within the company can be attributed to the services and recreational activities that the unions offer the employees at El Corte Inglés. The unions are also represented on the 100 works councils at the different department stores (work centres) in Spain.

El Corte Inglés has a well-established, formal and democratic social dialogue (Figure 5). The company has formal bodies and committees where issues of working conditions, risk prevention, and health and safety (as well as other issues) are discussed continuously. From the top-down perspective, the company has the agreements, committees, commissions, and councils listed in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Structure of social dialogue at El Corte Inglés



Source: Oxford Research, 2010; based on interview with the HR department of El Corte Inglés

Looking at MSDs, two examples of bottom–up initiatives that have had positive effects at El Corte Inglés workplaces are the distribution of work clothes for workers in the fish sections of the grocery departments and the distribution of ergonomic chairs to employees with sedentary job tasks. In the case of the workers in the fish sections, complaints about a cold work environment that caused stiffness and muscle pain were voiced to the local works council. The local management and elected employee representatives discussed and assessed the issue at the work centre’s general meeting and put forward a solution.

This is a good example of how formal social dialogue at the local work centre level has led to improved working conditions. However, what is interesting is that the local works councils forwarded this problem and its solution to the inter-centre committee, which discussed and assessed the potential benefits of implementing the same measure in other El Corte Inglés stores. The inter-centre committee investigated the need for new clothes by forwarding the issue to the local works councils, who then confirmed the existence of such a need. Subsequently, the general meeting at the company level implemented this measure in work centres within the group. This illustrates how bottom–up social dialogue works at El Corte Inglés and how a proposal or measure travels through the established channels of social dialogue. Typically, an initial complaint is voiced at the store level. It then travels up to the local works council and on to the inter-centre committee. If found useful for other branches or work centres, the measure is implemented on a larger scale through social dialogue at the general meeting at the company level.

The same course of events took place in the case of the ergonomic chairs. This demonstrates that social dialogue at El Corte Inglés can be both bottom–up (as in this case) or top–down (as in the case of the protocol on harassment, see below).

This is a good example of how well-structured social dialogue in a large company can ensure that problems identified in one workplace are discussed and negotiated at the company level and then measures are taken affecting the entire company.

Stress

Unlike the financial sector, stress levels in the wholesale and retail sector (as described in the section above on the working conditions in the sector) are more on a par with national levels in the six participating countries. Nevertheless, stress in the wholesale and retail sector at the case study companies is caused, for example, by bullying, working time, working hours, working weekends, customer contact and related demands, and technological changes. The case studies and the sector statistics on working conditions as described above suggest there might be an important difference between wholesale and retail. Retail workers primarily feel stressed as a result of not being able to disconnect from work and as a result of customer contact, while wholesale workers feel stressed as a result of the high workload.

In the Swedish case of Colly Components, stress issues have been addressed through reorganising and clarifying work, processes and responsibilities. Employee representatives, other employees and management meet every Friday to discuss recent developments in the company. The Friday meeting is fairly informal, and management usually keeps a low profile to allow the employees to share and discuss issues that are important to them. The Friday meetings serve as an additional channel of information for the more formal meetings between management and employee representatives that are held once a month.

The most salient example of how social dialogue has contributed to improved working conditions is the reorganisation of work among the sales staff. Previously, the allocation of work and the distribution of responsibilities were commonly perceived as unclear and therefore stressful. The time registration programmes also showed that some people worked considerable amounts of overtime. The reorganisation started as an initiative from the head of the indoor sales unit, who channelled the discontent of the various employees involved.

The reorganisation was discussed with employee representatives in meetings between managers and the sales people involved. A specific work committee was set up to deal with the reorganisation, which included both employee representatives and managers. The committee came up with the current work organisation, which comprises teams of indoor and travelling sales staff working together. Employees appreciate the reorganisation, and they feel they have more control. Overtime has also decreased. Although it is difficult to measure with certainty, the HR manager believes the initiative has decreased stress levels among the sales staff at work.²⁴

An important approach to deal with stress at the workplace level is to improve work–life balance. One initiative that aims to do this is the opportunity to work flexible hours. Sales staff are a category of employees who often have to answer the phone at all hours. At Colly Components, work–life balance is prioritised and the employees have flexible working hours. There is a working hours bank where staff can store up to 40 hours of working time. This is unusual compared with other indoor sales workers. Furthermore, employees with children have the opportunity to reduce their working time to 75% after the 16 months of paid parental leave.

At Interspar in the Czech Republic, social dialogue operates on two levels: branch and company. Each of the company's seven branches has three elected employee representatives, and of these 21 representatives, three are elected to negotiate with management at Spar headquarters.

The trade union at Spar is affiliated to the Trade Union of Workers in Commerce (OSPO), which in turn is affiliated to the Czech-Moravian Confederation of Trade Unions (ČMKOS).

Historically, the trade unions at Spar were only present in a very few branches. However, this changed when the trade union was established in the Česká Lípa branch in 2006. In 2004, for instance, three branches of Spar had a trade union on-site, whereas all seven branches had a trade union in 2010.

The HR manager and the employee representative agree that the chair of Česká Lípa has been a driver of the trade union at Spar. Furthermore, the trade unions in the Czech Spar have become much stronger as a result of training and assistance from the trade unions at the Austrian Spar. They are currently preparing the Czech trade union to become part of Spar's European works council.

To improve working conditions, social dialogue follows an agreed system. An employee at a branch is able to contact either the branch management or one of the employee representatives with an issue related to working conditions. The employee representatives then schedule a meeting with the branch management, placing the issue on the agenda. The issue is then discussed and a solution is generally negotiated.

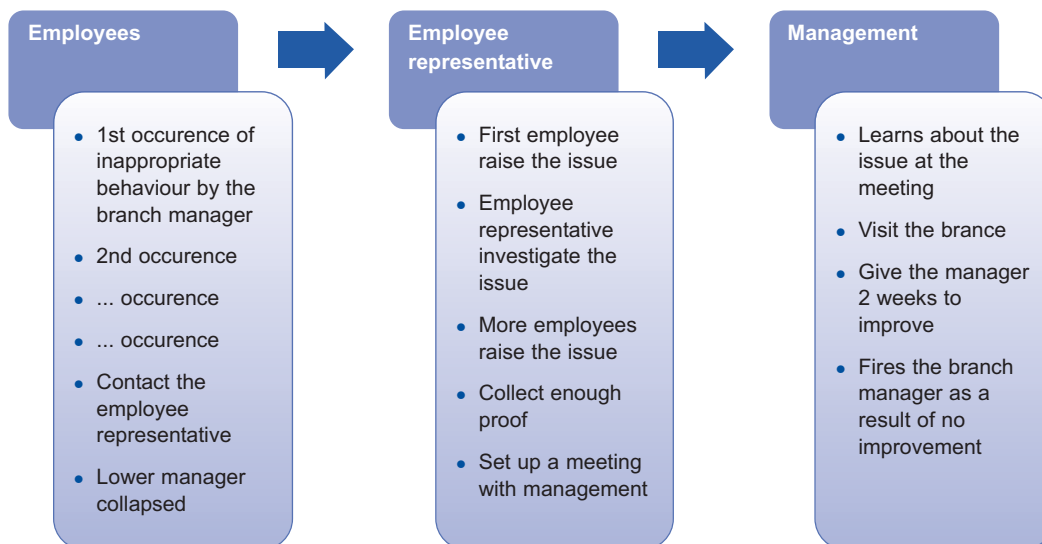
When issues arise that are either relevant for more stores than just the individual branch or the issue cannot be solved at the branch level, the branch-level employee representative contacts the company-level trade union representative. The branch-level employee representative at Česká Lípa is also elected to be a company-level trade union representative. The company-level trade union discusses the issue among the negotiating team (three company-level employee representatives and trade union representatives from the regional branch of OSPO). Generally, a decision is made to set up a formal meeting with the management where the issue can be discussed and a solution negotiated.

²⁴ The employee representative did not comment on the level of stress as a result of reorganisation.

Both the HR manager and the employee representative at Interspar cited a particular incident to give the background for intervention on stress factors. In 2009, a new manager was hired for the branch in Česká Lípa. This manager treated the employees badly and this contributed to a lower-level manager suffering a nervous collapse. The inappropriate behaviour on the part of the senior manager took the form of sending threatening e-mails and verbal harassment, which contradicts ethical as well as company rules. According to the employee representative, the harassment resulted in an extremely stressful work environment in the branch. Both the management and the employee representative noted that a solution was found through social dialogue.

The social dialogue process (Figure 6) resulted in steps being taken to amend the situation and the manager concerned was removed. As a direct result of social dialogue over this specific issue, the psychological working environment has improved at the branch, which has led to less stressful working conditions. However, the measure taken through social dialogue has also had an impact on the psychological working conditions in the other branches. Stress and harassment have become an area of attention in the whole company.

Figure 6: *Details of the harassment case at Spar*



Source: *Oxford Research, 2010; based on interviews with Spar*

The social dialogue structures at El Corte Inglés in Spain were described in the section above. Many social improvements have been brought about by social dialogue in the company.

Both the HR management and the employee representative highlight the modifications made to the working time schedules in September 2009 as a success story. This agreement was negotiated at a time of widespread economic uncertainty and one of the main objectives pursued was employment protection (maintenance) within the company. The modification was brought up for discussion by the management at the general meeting at the company level, as this had been stipulated by the newly formalised State Collective Agreement for Large Companies in the distribution sector. After discussions between workers' representatives at the inter-centre committee, the issue was negotiated in the general meeting at the company level, and a company agreement was signed for the modification and rationalisation of timetables. Thus, social dialogue played a significant and important role during the whole process that led to the agreement. First, the issue was highlighted as a mandatory issue in the sectoral collective agreement. Then El Corte Inglés evaluated and processed the issue in the company's own established bipartite committee. Finally, an agreement was signed between the employee representatives and the management in the general meeting at the company level.

In the past, before this agreement was in place, working hours were distributed equally among employees. In other words, employees worked the same number of hours in the morning and the same number of hours in the afternoon/evening without taking into account whether it was a week day or a Saturday. Thus, the distribution of hours was rigid.

The new organisation of working time meant a substantial change for the employees – change that was not popular among all workers. Nevertheless, both the employee representative and the HR manager believe that the reorganisation has been for the benefit of the employees and the company. According to the HR manager, it is too soon to see the effects of the implementation of the new working time schedules on sick leave or other indicators. Nevertheless, the HR manager and the employee representative believe that there have been positive effects on working conditions. The ability to plan and draw up working schedules for months ahead has had a positive effect on work–life balance. In addition, the agreement took into account the specific work–life balance needs of sensitive groups of workers. According to the employee representative, the agreement is pioneering in the sense that it is the first in the retail sector covering the issue of the number of weekends off. The agreement allows employees to take 12 weekends off per year.

To highlight the importance of the issue of working time, a commission was established because of an order given by the general meeting. The commission's mandate is to follow up on and evaluate the implementation of the new working time arrangements.

Another initiative that was highlighted by both the HR management and the employee representative is the introduction of a new company protocol for psychological and sexual harassment.

Psychological and sexual harassment was at the time (2005) punishable according to Spanish labour law. However, the rules in force did not stipulate how preventative work was to be implemented and how the process should work. According to the HR manager, this union-led initiative was therefore necessary in order to fill the gap. The issue was discussed by management and by the inter-centre committee before the protocol was signed in 2005 at the general meeting at the company level. It was also the first example of implementation of the rules on psychological and sexual harassment, and this implementation protocol was included into the state collective agreement in the next bargaining round.

Overall, the implementation of this protocol shared many of the same characteristics as that of the modification of working time schedules, that is, negotiating and reaching agreements through social dialogue within the company. There is therefore a clear link between the social dialogue, negotiations and agreements, and the actual outcome in terms of working conditions.

In short, the protocol, which is given in print to all employees, protects workers who are under threat of psychological or sexual harassment. The protocol is implemented through an independent commission. The commission on sexual harassment was established by the general meeting at the company level. The commission is composed of at least one company doctor, one representative from the risk prevention department, and one representative from the HR management. At the moment, the commission has seven members and works as an independent investigative body to which employees can make complaints about harassment. The protocol stipulates that an employee who seeks assistance from the commission can never be suspended or fired even if the complaint is false, ensuring the protection of potential victims. During the first year the commission received many complaints, but since then the number of complaints has been quite stable at around 15–20 a year, according to the HR manager.

The main outcome of this protocol is, according to the HR manager, that it offers protection for all employees. It sets boundaries for what is acceptable behaviour within the company – boundaries that have been adopted by the rest of the

sector. It also clearly stipulates what is acceptable and what is not, and it provides employees and managers with adequate tools to deal with these issues. For the average employee, this new protocol means less stress and anxiety related to bullying and sexual harassment. By signing this protocol, El Corte Inglés has made a strong stand against bullying and harassment and has paved the way for the rest of the sector.

Active policies for older workers

The Austrian company Pfeiffer has initiated improvements in working conditions at the organisational level for the employees collectively through a programme called AGE – a collective active policy for older workers in the workplace. The AGE initiative was started jointly by the HR manager and the employee representative with the objective of keeping older employees at work. Pfeiffer has realised the importance of the knowledge and experience of older workers and is using the older workers as internal trainers for new employees with the aim of sharing the older workers' knowledge, competence and experience. Older workers have been educated as internal trainers to hold seminars where, for example, they teach technical skills and about the culture of the company. These educational activities also reduce their physical workload, as less working time is spent at the stores and warehouses. Additionally, there are seminars that aim more specifically at an older age group on topics such as eyesight and memory training.

The AGE project contributes to keeping older people in employment in two ways. Their competence and experience is recognised and valued in a new and improved way through the responsibility to educate new workers, and their working conditions are also improved because they have less arduous working tasks, as well as specific seminars designed to promote their health and well-being.

The active policy for older workers quickly received support among both managers and employee representatives as it was recognised that the experience of the older workers was important for the development of the Pfeiffer Group. A physiotherapist, a workplace safety expert and a doctor were brought in to design the AGE scheme in cooperation with the head of the works councils and the HR manager, who steered the process.

After three years the programme was fully integrated into the company agenda. The respondents to the interviews, who are involved in social dialogue, have not yet evaluated the project and seen whether it has resulted in a greater retention of older workers, but both parties said they believe it has been successful.

Conclusions

A variety of measures and social dialogue mechanisms are reflected in the different approaches and attitudes towards improving working conditions in the wholesale and retail sector. Improvements that deal with working conditions in the sector include those addressing stress (due for instance to harassment), working time and hours, MSDs (due for instance to working positions), tools and temperature at the workplace. An overview of initiators, issues and results of initiatives developed within a social dialogue framework is presented in Table 14.

Table 14: Overview of initiators, issues and results in the wholesale and retail sector

Company	Initiator	Issue	Result
Pfeiffer (AT)	Trade union	MSDs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handbook • Health schemes • New technologies
	Works council	Older workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of competence and experience
Interspar (CZ)	Branch works council	Stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement of the psychological working environment (Lower levels of stress)
REWE Region West (DE)	Works council	MSDs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health checkups • ‘Toolbox’ for employees
El Corte Inglés (ES)	Local works councils	MSDs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clothing and ergonomic chairs • Reorganisation of working time
	Trade union	Stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protocol on psychological or sexual harassment
Senior Et Cie (FR)	Management	MSD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equipment upgrade • Changed processes
Colly Components AB (SE)	Works council	Stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reorganisation of sales department • Flexible working hours

Source: Oxford Research, 2010

According to the structure of social dialogue used in the companies studied in this sector, subcommittees are an important social dialogue instrument. As illustrated in the case studies, the decision-making power remains at the formal social dialogue level and subcommittees are used to place a particular focus on specific issues.

Measures initiated, implemented and evaluated by the social dialogue process at different levels focus on both the organisational level and, as a complement, the individual level. This is true for measures on MSDs, stress and older workers.

The strategy to deal with both the organisational and individual levels in social dialogue is based on the understanding that the individual symptoms of MSDs and stress, for example, need to be solved both at the workplace and at a collective level. However, the measures have to be adopted by individual workers and so measures directed towards the individual level are therefore a necessary component. This conclusion is dependent on the national or sectoral context, and is general for all issues concerning working conditions studied in this report.

The case studies conducted in this sector include a small company, a medium-sized company, a large company, and two very large companies.

In the large companies, social dialogue needs to be structured and organised at different levels to enable the social partners to represent interests, ensure employee involvement, and find and implement solutions at a general level. The combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches within social dialogue, which is encountered in the case studies, enables social dialogue to effectively improve working conditions. In the large companies, a structured social dialogue ensures that problems identified are dealt with not only at the workplace directly concerned but also in all parts of the company.

The structure of the social dialogue is of course less complex in small- and medium-sized companies, where the social partners have more direct contact with all employees.

External experts are used regardless of the size of the company. Both large and small companies need competences in the specific issue they are working to improve. For example, this can be technical, ergonomic or medical expertise needed for a successful outcome. External experts also contribute to finding solutions to problems and making social dialogue more focused on the improvement of working conditions. This finding is independent of national and sectoral contexts, as social partners at the company level encounter issues that need external expertise to be resolved successfully – regardless of sector and country.

The sector case studies demonstrate that, when the social partners make the decision to be an active first mover, a really big company such as El Corte Inglés has the potential, through well-functioning social dialogue with trade unions, to improve working conditions not only for company employees but for others in the sector.

Analysis of social dialogue and working conditions in electromechanical engineering

Electromechanical engineering sector: summary

The electromechanical engineering sector (NACE codes C26 and C27) is often not discussed or treated as a sector in itself but included in several other sectors and activities. Trade unions and employer organisations are rarely specific to the sector and national statistics bundle the sector with other industrial manufacturers.

The electromechanical engineering sector manufactures a wide range of mostly capital goods such as printed circuit cards, light bulbs and compressors which links the sector to many different areas of the economy. In 2007 the sector accounted for 21% of total EU exports of goods to the rest of the world (European Commission, 2009b). The sector employs 3.85 million people (Table 15).

‘The sector is particularly affected by cyclical economic fluctuations, and job losses tend to be large during economic downturns’ (European Commission, 2009b). The employment structure of the sector is moving towards higher-qualified jobs, displaying an ongoing shift from manual workers (apart from electricians) to managers, professionals and technicians, including business and finance experts, and engineers and computer programmers (European Commission, 2009b).

Table 15: *People employed in the electromechanical engineering sector*

Country	1998	2003	2008
EU27	4,110,000	3,796,000	3,850,000
Austria	N/A	N/A	N/A
Czech Republic	157,000	180,000	206,000
France	421,000	401,000	347,000
Germany	1,086,000	1,045,000	N/A
Spain	168,000	180,000	174,000
Sweden	100,000	90,000	82,000

Note: N/A = information not available

Source: Eurostat, *National Accounts, 2010*

As seen in Table 16, the sector contributes 1.7% of total employment in EU27. In the countries included in this study, the relative share varies from 0.9% in Spain to 3.8% in the Czech Republic. Employment has decreased in the sector over the past 10 years in all countries studied apart from the Czech Republic. This may reflect competition from other parts of the world, such as Asia, and increased automation in the industry.

Table 16: *Percentage of total employment (hours worked) in the electromechanical engineering sector*

Country	1998	2003	2008
EU27	N/A	1.8%	1.7%
Austria	2.2%	1.9%	2.0%
Czech Republic	3.0%	3.6%	3.8%
France	N/A	N/A	N/A
Germany	N/A	2.7%	N/A
Spain	1.1%	1.0%	0.9%
Sweden	2.4%	2.1%	1.8%

Notes: the percentage of total employment is calculated in hours worked. In the database, not all figures are available in both thousands of persons employed and hours worked.

N/A = information not available.

Source: Eurostat, *National Accounts, 2010*

The sector has seen a growth in jobs for managers and professionals, increasing the demand for a relatively highly educated workforce. Meanwhile, the requirement for manual and semi-skilled workers with vocational training has fallen (European Commission, 2009b). Work-related injuries have declined steadily in this sector, but there are potential hazards from the continuous use of visual display units and exposure to radiation and solvents (ILO, 2010a).

The workforce in the manufacturing sector (for which a more detailed breakdown by subsector is not available) had a gender distribution in EU27 of 30% women and 70% men in the first quarter of 2010. About 46% of the employees were under the age of 40 (source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey, 2010).

As noted above, the sector is sensitive to business cycles. It is also affected by globalisation and outsourcing of production to low-cost countries, which is perhaps the most topical issue at present. However, generalisations should be avoided; some niches have a competitive advantage when manufactured in Europe and these are less affected by global competitiveness. Nonetheless, there has been a move of manufacturing within electromechanical engineering from EU15 states to new Member States. There are also examples, including some in the sample of companies studied in this research, of companies outsourcing production to non-European countries, mainly Asian (European Commission, 2009b).

The various measures adopted during the years of the financial crisis have been hotly debated in recent years. These have included, for instance, *Kurzarbeit* (short-time working) in Germany. Many of the companies using measures like this were within the manufacturing sector, including electromechanical engineering.

European social dialogue

Social dialogue in the sector is arranged within a broader sector. Many workers in the electromechanical engineering sector are affiliated to organisations that, in turn, are affiliated to the European Metalworkers Federation (EMF). The Trade Union Confederation of Workers' Commissions (CCOO) and Basque Workers' Solidarity (ELA) in Spain, the Swedish Unionen (a trade union for professionals in the private sector) and the German Metalworkers' Union (IG Metall) are present in the case studies.

EMF is engaged in social dialogue at the European level with the Council of European Employers of the Metal, Engineering and Technology-Based Industries (CEEMET). The Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee (SSDC) at the European level was established fairly recently at a meeting in Brussels on 14 January 2010. It remains to be seen what the results of the committee will be. Before the establishment of the body, the two social partners had enjoyed a fruitful dialogue, resulting in two working groups: on education and training, and on competitiveness and employment. The second working group recently published a joint statement on measures to improve competitiveness in times of crisis.

Working conditions in the sector

As mentioned above, the electromechanical engineering sector is often bunched together with the rest of the manufacturing sector when it comes to official statistics. It is therefore a challenge to find specific statistics on injuries, MSDs and stress, for instance,²⁵ and many of the indicators in the following section relate to the entire manufacturing industry.

²⁵ France is not included in this section as no case study was conducted for France in this sector.

A good indicator of the development of working conditions at the sector is the level of work accidents. Unfortunately, there are no numbers for 2007 in this sector and Table 17 shows only work accidents for 1997 and 2001. It is notable that there was a dramatic fall in the number of injuries in Germany between 1997 and 2001, while the other countries showed much smaller changes.

Table 17: *Work accidents in electromechanical engineering sector*

Country	1997	2001
Austria	405	509
Czech Republic	N/A	N/A
France	10,014	9,955
Germany	44,796	14,997
Spain	5,480	7,281
Sweden	1,353	1,135

Notes: data are given for accidents leading to more than three days lost (that is, four days' absence or more).

N/A = information not available

Source: Eurostat, *Population and social conditions database, 2010*

Table 17 has no data from the Czech Republic. The Czech manufacturing sector had an 'incapacity for work due to disease or injury' rate of 1.84% in 2009, which is slightly higher than the national average of 1.18% (Czech Statistical Office, 2009b). Numbers specific to the electromechanical engineering sector are not available.

When looking at MSDs in the six countries, the statistics focus on the manufacturing sector as a whole. In Austria, the share of employees in the mining and manufacturing sector reporting backache in 2005 was 24.9% compared with the average of 24.0%. The share reporting muscular pain was 19.3% and the average was 20% (OHSA, 2010b, p. 8).

For the Czech Republic, sector-level statistics on MSDs are not available.

In the German mining and manufacturing sector,²⁶ 15.3% of workers reported backache in 2005, compared with the sector average of 18.8%. The share reporting muscular pain in Germany was also 13.4%, while the average for all sectors was 14.8% (OHSA, 2010b, p. 17).

According to 2009 data, in the Spanish manufacturing sector, the main physical demands of work that can lead to MSDs are maintaining the same body posture (34.3% of the workers have to endure such postures), together with having to do repetitive movements (38.1%) (Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales, 2009).

In Sweden, working conditions for 2009 data are on a par with the average, both in terms of sedentary work, physically strenuous work and repetitive movements (Work Environment Authority, 2010).²⁷

Regarding stress, when looking at Statistik Austria's report on reasons for sick absences, it can be seen that 32.4% of sick absences in the manufacturing sector in 2007 were due to psychological causes (Statistik Austria, 2009).

²⁶ Unfortunately, no more specific statistics have been found.

²⁷ Subsector breakdowns are not available.

For the Czech Republic, no sector-level statistics on stress have been found. But on the country level, it is known from Eurofound's European Working Conditions Survey based on 2005 data using self-reported work-related stress that the level is rather low in the Czech Republic (17% of respondents report stress compared with the European average of 22%) (Parent-Thirion et al, 2006).

In Germany, according to the WageIndicator report on stress (Van Kleveren and Tijdens, 2007), a total measure of the stress level in the manufacturing sector is rated as 3.1, which makes it the seventh most stressful sector in the country.²⁸

When looking at Spain, it can be seen that the total measure of the level of stress in the manufacturing sector is rated as 3.3, which makes it the third most stressful sector after hotels, restaurants and catering (first), and health care (second) (Van Kleveren and Tijdens, 2007).

The share of workers in the Swedish manufacturing sector who 'every week found that they could not stop thinking about their job even when off work' was 35% in 2009. The figure for the Swedish economy as a whole in the same year was 44% (Work Environment Authority, 2010, p. 85). In addition, 29% of employees in the sector state that they have to cut down on lunches, work overtime and/or bring work home at least once a week. This is slightly lower than the Swedish average in 2009 of 36% (Work Environment Authority, 2009, p. 148).

Overview of case studies

Table 18: *Case studies in the electromagnetic engineering sector*

Country	Company	Number of employees*	Unit of observation
Austria	ACC Austria GmbH	925	Establishment level
Czech Republic	OSRAM Česká republika s.r.o	988	Company level
Germany	SICK AG	1,800	Company level
Spain	Garabi Mantenimiento S.L	17	Company level
	Microdeco	94	Company level
Sweden	NOTE AB	85	Company level

Note: * According to HR managers of the respective companies, 2010

The electromechanical engineering sector is the only sector in the project where two case studies were conducted in the same country. The five case studies (Table 18) nevertheless reflect experiences from different frameworks of social dialogue in Europe. What is striking in all the case studies is how heavily they have been affected by the financial crisis. All companies have had to reduce the number of workers, which naturally has placed some strain on social dialogue in the companies. This also increased the difficulty involved in identifying companies for the purpose of this study, as many companies are currently in a sensitive phase of rebuilding trust and social dialogue. However, six companies were studied.

The selection covers all types of companies, from the multinational light bulb manufacturer studied in the Czech city of Bruntál to Garabi, the small manufacturer of electromechanical parts for lifts and cranes located in the Basque region of Spain. Microdeco is also located in the industrial Basque country in Spain. NOTE, north of Stockholm, is a so-called contract electronics manufacturer; the case study was made at a plant level. ACC in Austria is one of the market leaders in making compressors for refrigerators. Finally, SICK in Germany is one of the leading producers of sensors and its products are used in automation technologies.

MSDs

Heavy lifting, monotonous work tasks, a demanding pace of work, and high and shifting temperatures are challenges relating to working conditions in these sector.

ACC in Austria has addressed issues of MSDs and the problems that companies in the electromechanical engineering sector face. The company has 11 blue-collar and four to five white-collar works councils, which hold meetings monthly or more often if required. Elections for the works councils are held once every four years. All employees at ACC are members of the Chamber of Labour (AK). All employees are covered by collective agreements. Social dialogue at the company is well-established as white-collar and blue-collar workers are represented by individual works councils as well as by trade unions (the manufacturing union, PRO-GE, for blue-collar workers and GPA-djp for white-collar workers), and employee and management representatives meet at least once a week.

ACC has developed a project with the aim of improving working conditions at the company. For example, a project team consisting of employee and employer representatives was set up to identify and measure problems with MSDs. Solutions such as improving workstations and lighting were developed and implemented.

Although the initiative for the project came from the side of the management, who hired someone to develop and implement the project, the whole process has been thoroughly supported by the works councils and the involvement of employee representatives is acknowledged by the respondents. The employee representatives contributed with insights into the different departments, providing crucial support for the development of the programme. The works councils enabled the development of various solutions for different working areas. Social dialogue established at ACC can clearly be fully implemented as an important tool in the daily working processes.

The project leader recruited specifically for the project was supported by a project team consisting of representatives from the management and blue-collar and white-collar works councils. In addition, eight work groups each comprising seven to eight motivated employees were created to represent different work areas. The work groups received training to help them find solutions to the challenges experienced in their work areas and to report their findings to the project team. Although these work groups ensured comprehensive employee participation, this project faced a challenge in including night-shift workers due to their working hours. It was not possible to find a solution to this challenge.

To develop the programme efficiently and to address the challenges posed by working conditions, the project team conducted a survey among the staff at ACC, which was completed by 98% of employees. The survey has inspired 50% of the activities implemented at ACC.

The project led to improved light fixtures in the offices and storage areas. The production plant was equipped with new technology, such as lifts and other machinery, to reduce physical strains on employees and to prevent MSDs. The heights of workstations were also made adjustable for the same reason. The pace of work is sometimes challenging, and the project focused on how to adjust the workstations and work organisation to adapt to the work tempo. Work organisation was adjusted in the production plant to enable more work rotation and to reduce the number of monotonous working tasks. Employees in offices also received improved workstations in the form of customised chairs and tables.

External support was called upon by the project team during the process. External expertise was received from various organisations and institutions. A doctor, a physiotherapist and a safety expert were involved in developing the programme. The professional health insurance company (GKK) also supported the programme. Social dialogue is highlighted as a crucial factor for the programme's success, as is the presence of an external driver for the project.

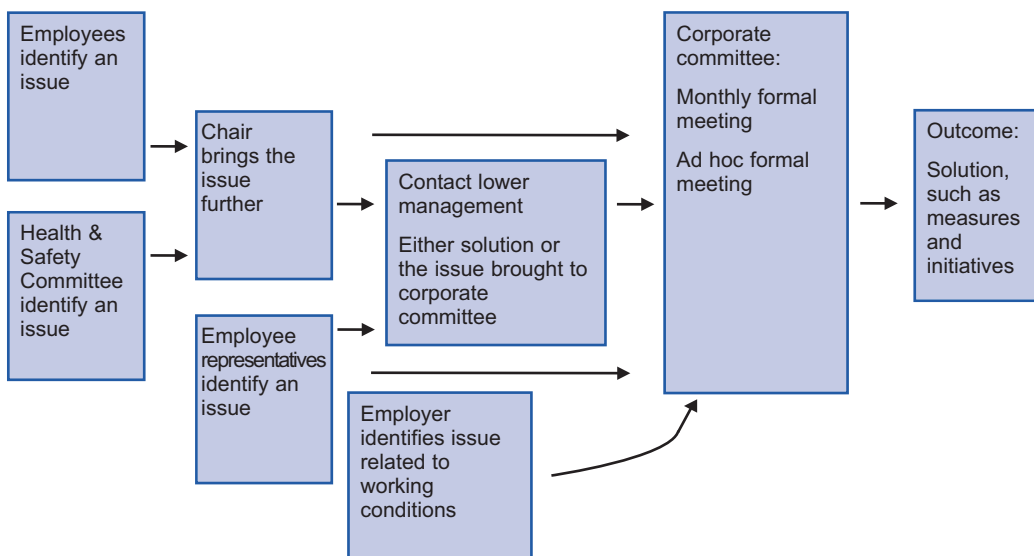
In the case from the Czech Republic, OSRAM, the only trade union is Světlo, which is an independent company-based trade union. Trade unions in the Czech Republic are company-based and can either be independent or affiliated to a trade union confederation (trade union confederations can be sector-specific or specific to a particular region). Světlo is affiliated to Regionální odborový svaz (ROSa), which is a regional trade union confederation. Světlo has a monthly meeting with other trade unions in ROSa, where they share information and discuss working conditions and social dialogue issues.

There is a trade union council that meets monthly. This council consists of 10 trade union members, each elected by other trade union members in their respective section of the plant. Formal meetings between management and the employee (generally represented by the chair) are held monthly as the corporate committee meetings. The meetings are organised by a set agenda, with management and the employee representative each contributing 50%. Minutes are kept. There is a company-wide collective agreement that covers all OSRAM employees.

There is also a health and safety committee with members who are elected by the employees. The health and safety committee and representatives from the safety department examine the plant for potential threats to the health and safety of employees twice a year. The health and safety committee raises issues related to working conditions with the employee representatives, who then bring them to the corporate committee meeting.

The HR manager and the employee representative (chair of the trade union) describe current relations between the employee representatives and management as open and trustful, and state that a compromise is always found during negotiations. However, this good relationship between employee representatives and management has only been in effect for the past few years. The employee representative is concerned about relations with management because the HR manager is leaving. The relations with the HR manager have been important for the social dialogue, as the relationship between the employer and employee representatives only improved when the HR manager became involved in the social dialogue. Figure 7 illustrates the process of solving working conditions issues at OSRAM. Several measures at OSRAM deal with MSDs, as discussed below, and there is a clear process connecting social dialogue from the problem to the solution.

Figure 7: Process to solve working conditions issues at OSRAM



Source: Oxford Research, 2010

According to the employee representative and the HR manager, an important improvement in working conditions through social dialogue was the case of ergonomic chairs provided for employees who sit for most of their shift. In 2006, some female workers approached the employee representative about pains in their lower backs. The employee representative contacted management and scheduled an ad hoc corporate committee meeting to discuss the issue. The outcome of the meeting was that an ergonomic expert was asked to look at possible solutions. The expert's suggestions were then discussed at a corporate committee meeting. The final result of the social dialogue was that all the employees who sit down for most of the day received special ergonomic chairs designed to minimise MSDs. The employee representative believes that fewer women now have back problems as a result of the measure.²⁹

In this case, social dialogue had a direct impact on the improvement of working conditions at OSRAM. Similarly, the employee representative at OSRAM believes there to be strong links between social dialogue and the improvement of working conditions. The employee representative points out that the case of back pain and ergonomic chairs is a good example of how social dialogue can improve working conditions, and the HR manager supports this statement.

Another important problem regarding working conditions has also been solved recently. The HR manager explains that some employees who were standing for long periods during their shifts experienced pain in their backs and legs. When this was brought to the management's attention, the safety department analysed the situation. The findings were then discussed with the employee representatives at a corporate committee meeting and a solution was reached. The solution to the problem was to provide mats and softer flooring in the areas where employees stand up for most of their shifts.

These measures are three of many to prevent MSDs. The case of back pain, which resulted in the provision of ergonomic chairs, appears to have raised awareness of MSDs at OSRAM. This facilitated a process that gave rise to several other initiatives, such as more breaks and job rotations for employees working in a specific section of the plant who had problems with high temperatures, and where a technical solution still remains to be found.

With regard to the third case, because of outsourcing and the resulting reduction in staff and production, the Swedish company NOTE found it appropriate to move to new facilities in 2007. This brought about significant improvements in MSDs, health, safety and well-being. The management states that the move was a substantial improvement, particularly in terms of air quality all year round and heating in the winter. The overall health and safety position has also been improved through consultation with an ergonomist, who evaluated all workstations for hazards that could cause injury or illness to staff. The employee representative cannot recall a single accident or work-related disorder since the move to the new facilities.

Formal social dialogue at NOTE takes place in different committees and involves both employee and management representatives. The company's board has two employee representatives and meets at least once a month to discuss relevant issues. The union representatives and management also meet at least once a month to discuss recent developments such as working conditions. NOTE also has a health and safety committee and an equality committee that focuses on specific issues.

The number of measures and bipartite discussions to improve working conditions has increased rapidly, particularly since 2009. Proposals for improvements are usually initiated by the unions at cooperation and consultation meetings, or through the employee representative who has a seat on the company board. This elected representative has an important position on the board, providing a link between the employer and the employees on all company-related issues. The

²⁹ OSRAM does not have any statistics on MSDs or back pain.

representative, therefore, has a comprehensive view of what the current issues are and can highlight these in discussions and negotiations with management. All the decisions made by the board are therefore reviewed in some way by the employees.

Although the decision to make the move was taken by the company board, of which one of the employee representatives interviewed is a member, the employees participated in groups to evaluate the move according to production, structure and workflow, as well as the makeup of the workplace. In this case, the initiative to change workstations and address climate and safety was a top-down procedure. The involvement of employees during the process made an important contribution to the successful implementation of the improvement of working conditions.

Garabi is a small company in Spain that offers an illustrative example of finding mechanisms to work strategically to improve working conditions, even though it is a small workplace. The measures taken are not specific to MSD prevention, but the company has developed a general approach to the improvement of working conditions, including preventing MSDs.

At Garabi an external actor, Mutua (a mutual insurance society focused on workplace injuries and illness) attends bimonthly meetings involving social partners. In these meetings, improvements to working conditions are discussed between management, employee representatives and heads of teams.

The company has a very open, flat and direct dialogue between the 17 employees and the management. Relations between management and the employees are described as cooperative. There are several forms of social dialogue, which work actively to improve working conditions, with improvement meetings being held every two months on, for instance, working conditions for the employees and performance-related issues. These meetings are between the external expert from Mutua, an employee representative, a representative from management, and the heads of teams. Ad hoc meetings or negotiations are also held between management and employee representatives, if the need arises.

The bimonthly meetings address the process of improving working conditions (among other issues), and the conclusions of the meetings are put together in a common document that is signed by both the worker representative and management.³⁰ At the next meeting, the progress since the previous meeting and future strategies are discussed. In between meetings, improvements in working conditions are discussed between employees as well as between employees and management. This combination of frequent meetings, a steady focus on progress, and a trustful relationship between employees and management are pointed out as crucial for the success of the company.

According to both the management and employee representative, preventative measures to improve working conditions and prevent MSDs were initiatives undertaken by the management, but they were incorporated in the social dialogue process described above. The initiatives involved a formalised step-by-step standard procedure of how to work preventatively. Thirteen steps to improve the prevention system include planning, inspections, investigations, training, emergency measures and responsible employees; they are carried out according to an annual schedule where management, office workers and technicians have equal responsibility. Measures include new lifts to reduce MSDs, work methods introduced as a response to accidents, and work organisation adjustments to reduce MSDs through more varied tasks. The work is evaluated and discussed at the improvement meetings held every second month. The participants coordinate a prevention plan under the review of the external expert from Mutua. The prevention plan is then

³⁰ A copy of the most recent document was provided to the researchers.

signed by both management and the employee health and safety representative. The management and the employee representative both stated that the company is somewhat of a pioneer in prevention measures.

According to the management and the employee representative, the preventative efforts have improved working conditions and lowered the risk of injuries (for example, through the introduction of new lifts) and reduced sick leave. Nevertheless, the greatest improvement is in the formalisation of the preventative work through social dialogue and not necessarily in the practical outcomes. The formalisation will prove to be valuable in the long run. The improvement meeting that includes employee representatives, the external expert from Mutua, the prevention plan and the structured step-by-step standard procedures all help the employees to work towards a safer workplace in a more structured way. This means that, when something happens, the company uses social dialogue resources to take corrective action in good time and can make sure that the same incident does not occur again.

Annual work plans are set up to deal with issues in working conditions. The external expert from Mutua is responsible for evaluating and following up on them, in addition to performing annual health checks.

Some of this work by the external actor is regulated by law, but at Garabi, both sides of the industry want to extend the work that is done by the mutual insurance society, as they see it as a good way to work on improving social dialogue, especially since it is a small company. The company assessment is that it is necessary to use an external provider because of its small size. The use of external experts is widespread, but in this case, it also seems that the external provider coaches the process to a greater extent than is the case in larger companies.

Both respondents stress the importance of transparency throughout the entire process of improving working conditions through a systematic approach. Transparency ensures employee involvement and acceptance of the change needed to improve working conditions.

Stress

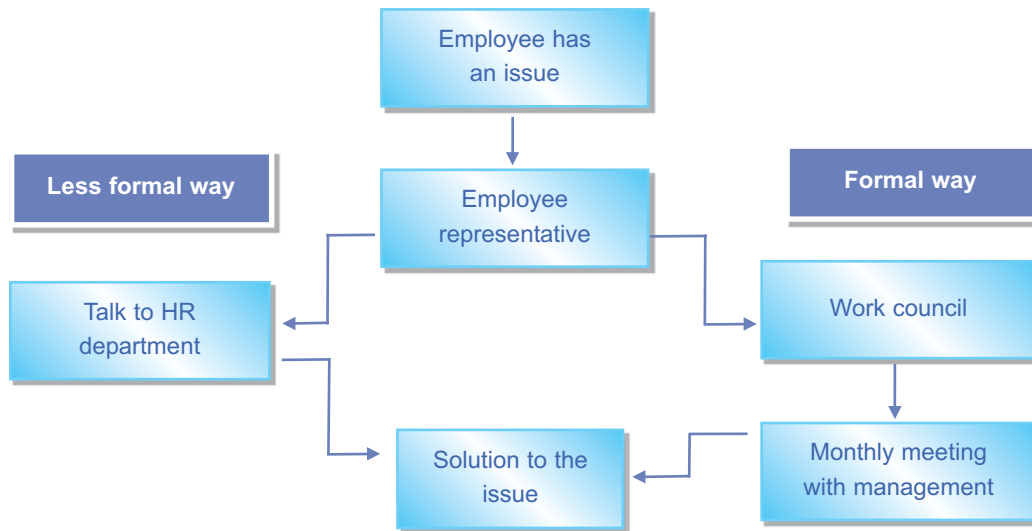
For companies involved in production, a 24-hour production cycle is not uncommon, which requires shifts at night. At OSRAM in the Czech Republic, this issue has been addressed as a work–life balance issue. The social dialogue structure is described in the section above on MSDs and therefore is not repeated here.

In 2006, an employee survey among all OSRAM (worldwide) companies was conducted by HR management which included questions about working time. The results were broken down by the individual companies. Afterwards, the results were discussed and negotiated at a monthly corporate committee meeting between the management and trade union representatives. The survey showed that, among other things, employees (especially women) were not satisfied with their work schedule. Based on the outcome of this survey and following a process of social dialogue in the corporate committee, the schedule was cut from four to three shifts. In addition, employees voted to keep the rotation of shifts so that employees rotate between all three morning, evening or night shifts. The shifts rotate every second or third day, which means that employees work the same shift for two or three days before changing. The female employees consider this the best type of rotation in order to secure a good work–life balance. If an employee is only available to work one type of shift, the employee representatives and HR manager will discuss the individual case. This is an example of how employee surveys can provide information on working conditions problematic for the employees – in this case, the shift system. Through social dialogue, the employees had a direct influence on the structure of the shifts and could deal with the issue identified through the survey.

At Microdeco in Spain, work organisation is used to improve working conditions – especially in the prevention of stress. Microdeco has changed work organisation by creating ‘mini-companies’, or autonomous working groups.

Social dialogue has been formalised during the transformation of the company during the last decade and Microdeco now has a works council representing its employees. Meetings between the works council and the company are held when the works council specifically requests a formal meeting. Figure 8 summarises social dialogue at Microdeco.

Figure 8: *Process of solving working conditions issues at Microdeco*



Source: *Oxford Research, 2010; based on interviews at Microdeco*

All employees now work in self-managing and improvement teams, which monitor and enhance the results of all processes. Thus, these groups or ‘mini-companies’ determine their own training, management structures, and work and process planning. This is always done with the support of the management board, as well as external support. Microdeco received external support for training and help in achieving the proposed adjustments in work organisation.

According to both respondents, the new work organisation reduces stress, as employees now have more ownership of their daily work. They can prioritise between working tasks, make decisions on pace of work, etc. without asking the management about details. Although increased autonomy in general can result in more stress due to increased responsibility in work tasks, both respondents underline that in this case increased autonomy has improved the feeling of control and ownership among the employees and has therefore contributed to reduced stress. However, the employee representative states that training is crucial so that new responsibilities do not feel overwhelming, and there is room for improvement in this respect.

This initiative came from management but was implemented and adjusted through negotiations with the works council. In terms of positive results, the employees have gained more control and ownership of their working day, which reduces stress. In addition, the employee representative believes that the issue of cleanliness and order has been improved through the so-called mini-companies. In general, the overall structure of the company improved through the implementation of ‘mini-companies’, as these also improved communication in the company between the different departments and units, as well as between managers and employees through social dialogue. The employee representative states that this project took place thanks to the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) award that the company received in 2003 because of its organisational work and quality management.

In this case, the company worked with external experts who gave them advice and training on how make the proposed initiatives a reality. In general, the employee representative believes that social dialogue has helped to improve working

conditions. However, the works council wants to see improvements in social dialogue within the company mainly because at present the dialogue is between top management and department heads.

SICK is a large German company that has taken a wide range of measures. Most of the projects on improving working conditions are initiated in part by the works council, but the ideas are often provided by the ISO Institute in Saarbrücken (Institut für Sozialforschung und Sozialwirtschaft), which has worked with SICK for the past decade. The ISO Institute is carrying out research on social culture within companies and is often interested in finding companies it can use in its studies.

The company has a works council consisting of 20 members, which meets every two weeks. All members of the council are members of IG Metall. Within the works council there are three committees, including a work-time committee that focuses on working-time reforms to reduce stress. This has resulted in two important measures regarding working time to reduce the risk of stress at the workplace.

The first measure concerns night-time work – one of the most important issues with regard to working conditions. As the HR manager states, it is very profitable for the employees to work night shifts, but it is not healthy in the long term. The HR management has drawn up a new set of regulations on this issue in collaboration with the works council. Now an employee is only allowed to work night shifts for a maximum of one year, and after that they must move to day shifts. The project is a part of a research project at the ISO Institute and the Federal Ministry for Education and Research. Even though the company has made the regulation for the benefit of the employees' health, it has been a conflict-ridden issue because the employees want to choose their own working hours, including whether to work night shifts or not.

A second important measure taken in 2004 is that employees who have worked overtime can choose to invest the money in their pension fund, or they can choose to save up the hours in a so-called flexible time account. This gives employees the opportunity to take time off for travel, family reasons, or other similar purposes. Last year, 20 employees used their flexible time account to take time off.

Finally, workshops have also been arranged for the employees on how to prevent and deal with stress.

Active policies for older workers

No measures regarding active policies for older workers have been found in the electromechanical engineering sector.

Conclusions

In this sector, equal priority is given to MSDs and stress, while there are no findings on measures towards older workers among the companies investigated.

A variety of measures and social dialogue mechanisms are reflected in the different approaches and attitudes towards improving working conditions in the electromechanical engineering sector. Improvements deal with issues in working conditions in the sector such as stress due to shift work and lack of autonomy, for instance, and MSDs due to suboptimal workstations, poor work premises and monotonous working tasks, among other things. An overview of initiators, issues, and results developed within a social dialogue framework is presented in Table 19.

Table 19: Overview of initiators, issues and results in electromechanical engineering

Company	Initiator	Issue	Result
ACC Austria GmbH (AT)	Management	MSDs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New technologies and work organisation
OSRAM Česká republika s.r.o (CZ)	Employee representative	MSDs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ergonomic chairs and softer flooring • More breaks and job rotation
	Corporate committee	Stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reducing shifts
SICK AG (DE)	Management	Stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reducing night shifts • Flexible time account
Garabi Mantenimiento SL (ES)	Management	MSDs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step-by-step procedures on prevention
Microdeco (ES)	Management	Stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work organisation: self-managing teams
NOTE AB (SE)	Employee representative	MSDs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New facilities

Source: Oxford Research, 2010

In the case studies conducted in this sector, the initiatives focused on the organisation at the workplace level to a greater extent than those in the previous chapters. It cannot be said that this is a general conclusion for the European electromechanical engineering sector, but it is a notable difference compared with other sectors studied. This may be related to the type of work conducted in the sector, where the employees are connected to a specific workstation and where workers are dependent on the production cycles of machines in an industrial production process.

The cases studied illustrate that the primary focus for improving working conditions is on work organisation. This results in employees gaining more control and ownership over their work tasks. To enable such reforms of work organisation or the transfer of responsibility to employees, training is important to empower the employees and to increase their ability to cope with new and wider working tasks. These reforms result in increased employability because they enable employees to gain competences and experience with different and more varied work tasks. This requires training as well as experience in a more varied set of work tasks to increase the employees' ability to adapt to new work tasks, production processes and technology. Furthermore, new work organisation not only requires training and skills in the specific work tasks involved, but also broader skills like project management, time planning, etc. as exemplified in the 'mini-companies', which increases the employability of the employees. New work organisation can also increase the possibility of achieving a better work–life balance because it allows greater control over working hours.

It is also important to emphasise that building social dialogue structures requires effort, and that social partners must have a solid understanding and a shared goal. When the structure of social dialogue to improve working conditions is functioning and both parts of the industry discover that they provide mutual benefits, the structures regenerate themselves. A positive pattern is created, and it facilitates the improvement of working conditions through social dialogue in other areas than just the ones it was originally set up for.

Social dialogue structures have proved important for the sector, as they have contributed to improved working conditions both directly and through the use of dedicated subcommittees. However, the relationships between people involved in the social dialogue structures are also important. All agreements and measures taken between the social partners are based on trust and this can take time to build. Once individuals are replaced for any reason there is a risk that the trust will diminish; therefore, even companies with a tradition of trustful relationships between employee representatives and management risk losing momentum if trust disappears because of a change in the personnel involved.

The use of subcommittees is also seen in this sector. Specific committees have been used to put particular focus on areas within MSDs and stress.

The use of external experts is also widely observed in the case studies conducted in the electromechanical engineering sector. Not only are small companies in the sector using external expertise to help them improve specific working conditions, but external experts can enhance social dialogue, evaluate measures taken, and focus on improving working results. External actors can also prove valuable to initiate the social dialogue process to improve working conditions.

SMEs in the sector also provide examples of flat organisations and an informal corporate culture.

Analysis of social dialogue and working conditions in the food manufacturing sector

Food manufacturing sector: summary

The European food and beverages sector (including manufacturers of drinks) (NACE codes 10 and 11), with almost five million employees (Table 20), is one of the largest employers in manufacturing industry in the EU (source: Eurostat, National Accounts, 2010). According to a sector-wide study completed by the European Commission, the sector is highly diversified and fragmented, with a large share of SMEs and a smaller number of multinational enterprises (MNEs) (European Commission, 2010d).

The sector is characterised by inelastic demand and, despite recent technological developments, by a low-skilled, labour-intensive workforce resulting in lower-than-average productivity in comparison to other industries.

Table 20: *People employed in the manufacture of food, beverages and tobacco*

Country	1998	2003	2008
EU27	5,047,000	5,051,000	4,986,000
Austria	N/A	N/A	N/A
Czech Republic	172,000	149,000	148,000
France	561,000	577,000	557,000
Germany	929,000	979,000	N/A
Sweden	69,000	66,000	58,000

Note: N/A = information not available

Source: Eurostat, National Accounts, 2010

The two manufacturing industries in the sample (electromechanical engineering and food) face employment decline in EU27 as a whole. The same is also true in all the countries featured in Table 20 for the manufacture of food, beverages and tobacco. Table 21 shows the percentage of total employment by the sector.

Table 21: *Percentage of total employment (hours worked) in the manufacture of food, beverages and tobacco*

Country	1998	2003	2008
EU27	N/A	2.5%	2.3%
Austria	2.3%	2.0%	1.9%
Czech Republic	3.2%	2.9%	2.6%
France	N/A	N/A	N/A
Germany	N/A	2.7%	N/A
Sweden	1.8%	1.7%	1.4%

Notes: the percentage of total employment is calculated in hours worked. In the database, not all figures are available in both thousands of persons employed and hours worked.

N/A = information not available

Source: Eurostat, National Accounts, 2010

In general, the food manufacturing sector is less vulnerable to fluctuations in the business cycle than other sectors. Factors such as public holidays, short delivery times, just-in-time logistics and waste reduction all require manufacturers to quickly scale production up or down. This, coupled with the growing number of factories employing continuous rotating shifts (CRS), has led to an increasing demand for flexibility among workers.

In the first quarter of 2010 the workforce in the manufacturing sector (a more detailed breakdown is not available) in EU27 was made up of 30% women and 70% men; 46% of employees were under the age of 40 (source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey, 2010).

The most debated issues in the food manufacturing sector at present are the development of consumer preferences, new regulations in the food industry, and environmental requirements.

Since the creation of the European Union, food security has been a matter of EU regulation. A recent example is the Commission communication on 'a better functioning food supply chain' (European Commission, 2009d). Food manufacturing has also been affected by this in various ways. EU and national regulation has an impact on the conditions for food manufacturing companies. For instance, custom tariffs on third country products are of direct concern to many food manufacturers. Recently, EU competition legislation has also been a matter of debate (Desai et al, 2010).

European social dialogue

The food manufacturing sector has always been the focus of attention for policymakers. This has partly been reflected in social dialogue structures at the European level. The European Committee of Sugar Manufacturers (CEFS) and the European Federation of Trade Unions in the Food, Agriculture and Tourism sectors (EFFAT) have sectoral social dialogue committees dating back to 1999. However, European-level social dialogue occurs in a more informal way in the sugar industry, which has been in place since the 1960s.

The general picture of the food manufacturing sector is that, contrary to the electromechanical engineering sector, the unions operate on a subsector scale. There are specific trade unions for dairies, meatpacking, etc.

Working conditions in the sector

Workers in the food manufacturing sector³¹ are constantly exposed to hazardous work environments with close contact to knives, saws, ovens and heavy transport equipment. Many workers are also at risk of being crushed or being caught between moving parts of machinery. In addition, many workers state that workplaces are often challenging, with slippery floors and temperatures well below the average (Stave, 2008).

A good indicator of the development of working conditions in a sector is the level of work accidents. Table 22 presents the number of the work accidents for the years 1997, 2003 and 2007. It is notable that there was a dramatic increase in the number of accidents in all countries studied between 1997 and 2007.

³¹ In this section, no information on Spain is provided as a Spanish food case study was not conducted.

Table 22: *Work accidents in food manufacturing*

Country	1997	2001	2007
Austria	1,349	1,769	9,056
Czech Republic	N/A	N/A	N/A
France	34,046	36,137	120,145
Germany	68,144	49,324	255,524
Sweden	3,078	2,734	17,817

Notes: data are given for accidents leading to more than three days lost (that is, four days' absence or more).

No information is provided for Spain because no case study was conducted there.

N/A = information not available

Source: Eurostat, *Population and social conditions database, 2010*

It has not been possible to find any specific numbers on injury rates in the food manufacturing sector in the Czech Republic. The manufacturing sector in general had an occupational injury rate of 1.84% in 2009, which is slightly higher than the national average of 1.18% (Czech Statistical Office, 2009b). Sector-level statistics on MSDs have not been found for the Czech Republic.

In Austria, the share of employees in the mining and manufacturing sector reporting backache in 2005 was 24.9% compared to the average for the economy as a whole of 24.0%. The share reporting muscular pain was 19.3%, and the average was 20% (OHSA, 2010a, p. 8).

A study of the meat processing industry and the confectionery industry in France (Caroli et al, 2009) showed that the food manufacturing sector has harsher working conditions than the manufacturing sector in general. A study from 2003 revealed that the meat processing and confectionery industries have significantly more employees who handle heavy loads for more than 20 hours per week (45% and 30% respectively) compared to the overall average in the French manufacturing sector, which stands at 23%. Similarly, both industries have more workers who have to carry out repetitive manual operations for more than 20 hours per week (59% for the meat industry and 39% for confectionery) compared to 29% for overall manufacturing (in 2003).

A survey conducted in 2002 in the Pays de la Loire region in France provides the first estimates of the prevalence of MSDs in France by sector. The results are only an estimate of the frequency of MSDs in France and are limited due to a lack of exhaustive surveillance. The study found that 12.1% of male employees in food and drink manufacturing had at least one clinically diagnosed upper-limb musculoskeletal disorder, which is only slightly higher than the overall average at 11.3% and slightly lower than the average in all manufacturing industries at 12.9%. The prevalence of at least one diagnosed upper-limb MSD for women in food and drink manufacturing was 13.3%, which was slightly higher than the prevalence for men. The prevalence of upper-limb MSDs for women was lower in food and drink manufacturing than the overall average, which was 14.8%. There was a significantly lower share of women diagnosed with at least one upper-limb MSD in food and drink manufacturing than in the manufacturing industries as a whole, where 19.5% of women had at least one upper-limb MSD. This is partly because there are several manufacturing industries with 50% cases of upper-limb MSDs, such as the manufacture of wood and wood products, basic metals and transport equipment, as well as the chemical industry (Ha et al, 2008).

In the German mining and manufacturing sector, the percentage share of workers reporting backaches in 2005 was 15.3% compared to sector average, which was 18.8%.³² The share reporting muscular pain was also 13.4% while the average for all sectors in the country was 14.8% (OHSA, 2010b, p. 17).

³² Unfortunately, no more specific statistics have been found.

Factors that are commonly associated with MSDs, such as awkward working postures, heavy handling and repetitive work, are all above average in the Swedish food manufacturing sector. In 2004–2008, 9.5% and 12.4% of male and female food workers respectively stated that they had experienced disorders due to strenuous working postures. During the same period, the average for all sectors was 7.6% for male workers and 9.5% for female workers. Furthermore, 9.5% of male workers and 10.3% of female workers in the food industry experienced disorders because of heavy manual handling. The figures for the economy as a whole were 5.9% for male workers and 6.7% for female workers. Just under 5% of male workers and 9.9% of female workers in the food industry stated that they had experienced disorders related to repetitive work during a period of 12 months between 2004 and 2008. The average across all sectors in Sweden was 2.7% and 3.7% for male and female workers respectively (Work Environment Authority, 2008). Apart from this, the statistics focus on the manufacturing sector as a whole. Working conditions are on a par with the average, both in terms of sedentary work, physical work and repetitive movement (Work Environment Authority, 2010).

Regarding stress, Statistik Austria's report on reasons for sick leave in 2007 show that 32.4% of sick leave in the manufacturing sector was due to psychological causes (Statistik Austria, 2009).

For the Czech Republic, no sector-level statistics on stress have been found. In France, the indicators used to describe stress in the other sectors are not available for the food manufacturing sector. However, at the country level, it is known from Eurofound's European Working Conditions Survey based on 2005 data that self-reported work-related stress is relatively low in the Czech Republic and France (16% in the Czech Republic and 18% in France report stress, compared to a European average of 22%) (Parent-Thirion et al, 2006).

According to the WageIndicator report on stress (Van Kleveren and Tijdens, 2007), the stress level in the manufacturing sector in Germany as a whole is rated as 3.1, making it the seventh most stressful sector.³³

The Swedish Work Environment Authority's 2008 statistics on work-related disorders in the food manufacturing sector show that between 2004 and 2008, 8% of female workers reported that they had experienced stress at the workplace during the previous 12 months. During the same period the figure for male workers was slightly lower at 6.1%. The average for all sectors in the economy during the years in question was 12% for female workers and 6.8% for male workers (Work Environment Authority, 2008). Thus, the level of stress seems to be lower in the food manufacturing sector than in the Swedish economy as a whole.

The share of employees in the Swedish manufacturing sector in 2009 who 'every week found that they could not stop thinking about their job even when off work' was 35%. The figure for the whole Swedish economy in 2009 was 44%. However, 29% of employees in the sector stated that they had to cut down on lunches, work overtime and/or bring work home at least once a week. This is lower than the Swedish average in 2009 of 36% (Work Environment Authority, 2010).

³³ 'As for measuring work-related stress based on WageIndicator data, we start in considering five indicators: work physically exhausting; work mentally exhausting; working at very high speed; work cannot be finished in allocated time; and work to tight deadlines. All variables are measured on a five-point scale, ranging from 1=never to 5=daily, with the exception of 'work cannot be finished in allocated time', that is measured as a dichotomous variable yes/no, that was recoded to fit the scales 1 = no, 5 = yes' (Van Kleveren and Tijdens, 2007, p. 10).

Overview of case studies

Table 23: Case studies in the food manufacturing sector

Country	Company	Number of employees*	Unit of observation
Austria	Fandler	25	Company level
Czech Republic	Plzeňský Prazdroj	2,353	Company level
France	Rémy Martin	353	Company level
Germany	Münsterländische-Margarine-Werke (MMW)	130	Company level
Sweden	Norrmejerier	460	Company level

Note: * According to HR managers of the respective companies, 2010

Five case studies were conducted in the food and beverages sector (Table 23). One large Czech brewery, Plzeňský Prazdroj, and the French cognac manufacturer, Rémy Martin, represent beverages. The two companies from the dairy sector, Norrmejerier in Sweden and MMW in Germany, both have a strong relationship with the local community. The Austrian company, Fandler, is a small manufacturer of nut oil.

MSDs

Workers in the food manufacturing sector are exposed to hazardous elements in their work environment on a regular basis. Among these are heavy lifting and repetitive work.

The Swedish company, Norrmejerier, is no exception. It has tried to improve working conditions mainly through technology, reducing the amount of lifting and repetitive motions workers have to carry out. Almost all production is currently run by robots, and both respondents claim that Norrmejerier is now a first mover when it comes to introducing new technology in the production line.

The company has created a structure of meetings where a range of issues can be discussed, including working conditions. In recent years discussions have particularly centred on work organisation, as this aspect of working conditions has seen many changes recently because of the implementation of 'lean production' methods. The nature of social dialogue at Norrmejerier is very cooperative, with three different forms of social dialogue carried out locally. These include company negotiations, meetings between union and management representatives at the local level, and the occupational health and safety committee.

The HR manager stresses the importance of social dialogue in introducing major changes in manufacturing process. Changes of this nature are discussed in established work groups, *förändringsgrupper* (which translates roughly as 'change groups'), to ensure full involvement by employee representatives. This is also done through regular meetings between management and employee representatives at different levels of the company. The HR manager considers union involvement as a necessary step to make the implementation of change as smooth as possible. The employee representative agreed with this statement.

This change began in the 1980s when the Work Environment Authority, union representatives and management agreed that working conditions could and should be improved. This started a modernisation of all aspects of production.

Since then, Norrmejerier has been at the forefront of technical innovation, according to both management and employee representatives. This way the company has been able to improve the production process, both through improving

working conditions and through higher production, according to the employee representative. The process has had parallel links with the existing social dialogue as well as a link to ‘change groups’ with employee involvement.

A concrete example of how social dialogue has played an important part in the improvement of working conditions is the latest technological improvement at the Umeå plant – a cheese lift that eliminates manual lifting. The change was initiated by the Swedish Food Workers’ Union (Livs) to limit the risks of MSDs. The employee representative remarked that it was a long and sometimes tiring process to come to an agreement on this with management, but it eventually succeeded.

Technical progress demands longer training for employees on machinery use and safety issues relating to operation. According to the employee representative, the union would like a more comprehensive introduction to machine use and safety precautions. The employee representative and other members of the Livs local branch at Norrmejerier are preparing a document on how such an introduction might be carried out and will present it to management in the near future.

Physical injuries are now uncommon at Norrmejerier. However, there are still examples of MSD-related problems in the refrigerated warehouse. The warehouse contains forklifts and other machinery and equipment that increases exposure to hazards, according to both respondents, and it is also the only place where the employees lift heavier loads.

At Fandler in Austria, social dialogue takes place in works councils. There is a meeting once a week between the works council, the management and the heads of departments. Minutes from these meetings are available for all employees to read. The subjects discussed are mainly the current situation at the company, the improvement of working conditions, and any changes and events coming up. In addition, there is a meeting involving all employees twice a year. Because the company is quite small, continuous dialogue also takes place on an ad hoc basis between the employee representative and the management.

To address working conditions, including MSDs, the extension of the production hall was important, as employees were suffering from physical strains. The HR manager had discussed the problem with the employee representative, and particular attention is currently being paid to working conditions. According to the employee representative, it is important to have management involved in order to execute the project successfully.

Fandler has used external support for the improvement of working conditions. Specifically, the employee representative sought advice from the Austrian Welfare Insurance for Accidents (AUVA), the main insurer for accidents at work in Austria. AUVA offers insurance for employees as well as quality management and advice to employers. The employee representative has also been in contact with the trade union (PRO-GE) at the sectoral level to gain advice and support.

There have been no accidents at Fandler for several years. The employee representative is certain that this is because Fandler has received support from safety experts and a doctor in order to improve working conditions.

Because of the cooperation with the doctor, Fandler has become aware that some employees, especially those working on machines, suffer from back and shoulder strains, as they are constantly subjected to repetitive work. To prevent MSDs, the company introduced a course with eight classes where the employees can learn exercises to improve strength and avoid physical strain. It was a challenge to get all the employees to attend the course as it was voluntary. It was mostly women who attended.

In the Czech Republic, a labour code sets out fairly detailed legislation on health and safety in workplaces. The Czech case in the food manufacturing sector shows an example of a company where additional measures have been taken, with positive results in preventing MSDs.

Plzeňský Prazdroj is the largest brewery in the Czech Republic. The takeover by SABMiller in 2000 led to a change in social dialogue and an improvement in working conditions.

There are three company trade unions at Prazdroj, one at each of the breweries (Plzeňský Prazdroj, Radegast and Velké Popovice). The trade union at Plzeňský Prazdroj also represents employees from the 13 sales departments. The trade unions at Radegast and Velké Popovice are members of the Independent Trade Union of Workers in the Food Industry and Allied Trade of Bohemia and Moravia. The employee representative who was interviewed is a representative of the trade union at Plzeňský Prazdroj, which is the largest of the three trade unions.

The trade union at Plzeňský Prazdroj has a low density rate for sales personnel, which could be seen as a barrier to their adequate representation. Even though there are more employees in the sales departments than among the three breweries combined, sales personnel do not have their own trade union. According to Czech law, trade unions represent all employees equally – non-members as well as members. Therefore, the employee representative does not consider this imbalance in representation to be a barrier. Nevertheless, the Czech structure of trade unions dictates that there must be a single company-based union for all employees, regardless of their position.

When SABMiller took over the three breweries in 2000, it not only merged the management of the breweries but merged social dialogue as well. The HR manager points out that the process of merging social dialogue takes time. SABMiller suggested the trade unions elect a trade union coordinator who could represent the three trade unions. SABMiller also wanted to formalise social dialogue at Prazdroj by scheduling regular corporate committee meetings instead of the previous system of ad hoc meetings. Ad hoc meetings are still an option if pressing issues arise.

The corporate committee consists of the HR manager and six trade union representatives, two from each of the three trade unions. Depending on the agenda, relevant representatives from management also participate in the corporate committee meetings. The agenda for the meetings is set by the HR manager in cooperation with the trade union coordinator, and the agenda is distributed to participants before the meeting. Minutes are taken at all committee meetings.

Each plant has a commission on occupational hygiene, consisting of elected employee representatives as well as employer representatives. The commission's duties include an annual check of health and safety at the plants, as well as considering suggestions from employees on the improvement of both physical working conditions and health and safety issues. The committee's findings are forwarded to the trade union, which then raises the findings at a corporate committee meeting.

When SABMiller bought the three breweries and merged them together under Prazdroj, it brought a new business strategy to the company. SABMiller transformed the old production facilities, bringing in new and more mechanised production processes. These new skills meant that training and education was necessary for the employees, as well as a reorganisation of the work and a reduction in the workforce.

The entire process of extensive changes to the production facilities was discussed, negotiated and implemented through the corporate committee. Both sides were able to make suggestions and the three company trade unions were used as consultants to help achieve a successful implementation.

Throughout the entire modernisation process, the employer and employee representatives were aware of, and put particular emphasis on, the ways in which modernisation could improve working conditions. For the employer, improved working conditions were an important additional effect of the modernisation, which should be encouraged. For the employee representatives, improved working conditions were the main goal for the modernisation.

Some of the important negotiations and decisions in which the trade unions participated were concerned with how to re-skill some employees and downsize the labour force. Some employees were offered a beneficial early retirement scheme and others were offered severance pay. Social dialogue has been critical in preventing conflict due to the need to lay off employees during the process.

According to the HR manager and employee representative, the modernisation and mechanisation of production led to a drastic improvement in the physical working conditions of production. Before the modernisation, much of the production consisted of hard manual labour, which meant a high rate of MSDs and accidents. The mechanisation of production reduced the risk of MSDs in particular by mechanising work processes that cause MSDs such as heavy lifting and awkward working postures. The mechanisation of production meant a reduction in physical risks in general and, more particularly, a reduction in MSDs and accidents at work. The employee representative emphasised that the modernisation has had a positive impact on sick leave and voluntary staff turnover.

The focus has now shifted from reducing physical risks in production through modernisation, to preventing MSDs and physical harm to employees working in non-production areas. New ergonomic chairs were introduced in 2010 for employees who sit down for most of their working day, such as employees in the operations centre. This initiative originated from the operational hygiene committee, which raised the issue with the trade union. The trade union then raised the issue at a corporate committee meeting, where it was discussed and negotiated, and a decision made to replace the old chairs with new ergonomic chairs.

The HR manager and employee representative consider that financial challenges are the main barriers to achieving better working conditions. The HR manager explained that management often has to be persuaded that it is worth investing in the improvement of working conditions.

According to the HR manager and the employee representative, the major focus of working conditions at Prazdroj is to monitor and maintain the current high standard. However, it is still important to be aware of new issues that arise from employees or through checks at the work plants by the occupational hygiene committee. The employee representative considers that ergonomic issues for non-production workers to be an important challenge and notes that the old chairs are currently being replaced by new ergonomic chairs.

Even though relations between management and employee representatives are open and constructive, tensions do occur. For example, there was some tension surrounding the employee survey on satisfaction at work for 2010, which the employee representative claims did not reflect reality. According to information given in the interviews with both the HR manager and the employee representative, it appears that the main reason for the tension arose from the change from an internal to an external survey. The change was not discussed or agreed upon in the corporate committee, and the content of the employee survey was not discussed with the trade union.

When tensions relating to working conditions arise, the formal social dialogue structure is vital for resolving the issue. The HR manager and the employee representative agree that the formal social dialogue structure provides an effective forum for solving issues. The employee survey is on the agenda for the next corporate committee meeting where it will be discussed and negotiated. Both parties are confident that the issue will be resolved as a direct outcome of the social dialogue.

Stress

As seen above, stress in the manufacturing industry, in which food manufacturing is often included, is somewhat below average for all sectors in the six countries.

At Münsterländische-Margarine-Werke (MMW) in Germany, the structure of social dialogue over working conditions at the company is based on a clear premise of open dialogue. This means that every employee can go to the employee representative or the HR department if problems occur. Problems are usually solved on a day-to-day basis. The structure of social dialogue is built around the works council, which meets every second week. The works council consists of seven employee representatives. In addition, there are other committees dealing with specific issues such as safety at work.

As an initiative to combat stress, MMW has implemented a more flexible and adjustable work-time model. MMW has two product lines (margarine and milk), which have different seasonal fluctuations in production. These fluctuations previously meant that workers were dismissed in the low seasons. In 2005, during a period of crisis, two measures were taken to prevent the need for dismissals. One measure was to offer the employees voluntary training on both product lines. Another was the introduction of a work-time model that evens out the workload over the year. In seasons with long working hours, the employees save hours so that they can have more time off in the low seasons. Employment security has thus increased, which is an important factor in reducing stress at an organisational and individual level.

The work-time model was introduced through the works council, causing some debate on whether the issue should properly come from the works council or the management. Worker representatives were sceptical of the model and of taking on the responsibility for being part of the decision. Two out of seven were against the new work-time model at the time of its implementation, but after several discussions, they were finally overruled by the rest of the works council.

The company used an external partner in the process to provide practical help on how to construct the work-time model but also to legitimise the initiative. The external consultant was from Technologieberatungsstelle (TBS), which is supported by the Ministry of Work, Health and Social Affairs and by the different unions in the region of North Rhine-Westphalia. The assessment is that the use of an external expert was crucial for obtaining the necessary acceptance and that the representation of the union side was equally important, because they provided legitimisation in an issue as critical as work time and working hours.

The work-time model is a way to even out workload and to provide employees with needed time off. It is a model that can contribute to a less stressful environment and reduce sick leave and staff turnover. The employees have accepted the fact that the number of working hours is low in some months and high in others.

Both the management and the employee respondents stated that information about goals, as well as transparency in the process of reaching these goals, is necessary. It took time and effort to convince the employees that the works council would be better able to avoid conflicts by taking part in strategic planning rather than having to react on the decisions after they are taken.

According to HR manager, the major change in work organisation at Norrmejerier in recent times has been the introduction of the lean production philosophy in all aspects of the work. The HR manager identifies this development as the single most important initiative to improve working conditions at Norrmejerier. Through lean production,

individual employees have more responsibility and a chance to improve their working conditions.³⁴ Starting in 2008, a lean production course was introduced to all 70 managers in the company, who then started to train groups of workers. Social dialogue has played a part in the lean development work. Different unions have been invited to periodic meetings with the management in order to ensure consensus in implementation.

The employee representative states that the work at Norrmejerier for the blue-collar workers is no longer all about production, but project planning and other tasks as well. It gives the employees more responsibility and ability to influence their working conditions. The employee representative views this change as positive and states that most employees are positive about it. The HR manager also welcomes the change and is convinced that the introduction of lean production will lead to safer and less stressful working conditions.

In the French case, Rémy Martin (part of CLS Rémy Cointreau), constructive social dialogue is fairly new. Major strikes took place in the company in 2005, during a period of tense relations between management and the unions. The case of a stress initiative is thus seen as an example of how pragmatic dialogue can be constructive.

The initiative to prevent stress is currently in progress. A survey among employees has been conducted, but a decision has not yet been made on what concrete actions to take, though a plan for the future process is in place. Decisions will be made at a committee session and will be based on the data provided by an employee survey.

There are several forms of employee representation at Rémy Martin, including works councils, employee delegates who meet with management to discuss grievances and the implementation of legislation, and more specialised subcommittees that deal with specific issues. Two unions are represented at the company: the French Confederation of Christian Workers (CFTC) and the General Confederation of Labour (FO), who work closely together. The HR director states that the structure of the employee delegations lends itself to flexibility and efficient negotiation because there is an interlocking set of people who comprise most of the social partners; the same people sit on many different types of councils. This facilitates open communication and long-term planning.

The stress initiative began when the employee delegates attended a presentation made by a workplace doctor on stress and psychosocial risks. There were presentations by experts and those with direct experience of psychosocial issues (*témoignages*). The representatives realised that there were risks that they had never perceived. After a discussion with other employee representatives, the two representatives from Rémy Martin decided to contact management and held a discussion on the topic.

³⁴ Several academic studies point to the positive impacts of lean production on working conditions, the latest being Tarcisio and Ferreira's 2009 study of a harvester assembly line in Brazil in which they concluded that the workers considered their working conditions had improved after the introduction of lean production. Berggren (1992) also identified positive impacts on working conditions when studying the implementation of lean production in the USA and European auto industry. Jackson and Mullarkey (2000) identified both positive and negative effects of lean production in terms of autonomy, physical demands and social climate. Studies have also shown that lean production plants seem to use more teams for problem solving, to take employees' suggestions more seriously, to rely more heavily on quality feedback both for workers and supervisors, to document production procedures more carefully, and to have employees able to perform a greater variety of tasks including statistical process control. See for instance Tarcisio and Ferreira (2009), Berggren (1992) and Jackson and Mullarkey (2000).

After discussing psychosocial risks with management, the employee representative contacted ARACT, which sent two representatives to investigate. Two separate meetings were held – one with the employee representative and one with the management.

The ARACT representatives recommended administering a 36-question survey. According to the employee representatives, 33 questions came from ARACT, two from the workplace doctor and one from the representatives. The questionnaire was anonymous and administered exclusively by ARACT, which both respondents said was designed to increase the transparency of and confidence in the process.

The process was overseen by a steering group comprising seven members: four members from trade unions (two from FO and two from CFTC), two executives and the HR manager (who is the project manager of the steering group). One of the two members of CFTC is the secretary of the health and safety issues committee (CHSCT).

The survey results were analysed within the CHSCT and presented to all employees. Results were initially analysed at a company-wide level. According to the employee representatives, the overall results were not clear enough to give a picture of what was happening and so they requested a more detailed breakdown. All partners agreed this was a good idea.

Decisions made at the committee session in September 2010 were based on the data provided by the survey. Going forward, the process is characterised by a number of factors that will contribute to the social dialogue on addressing psychosocial risks, including:

- the engagement of experts;
- an institutionalised process with a body made up of management and employee representatives;
- a transparent process of decision-making;
- commitment from both management and representatives to finding pragmatic solutions.

The case study shows the need for specific documentation of the problem. The need to go into further detail can be understood as an expression of disagreement. The interpretation of the survey data differs according to the perspectives of management and the employees. This may also underline the need for external experts to contribute to and maybe even mediate in the process.

Tension is notably higher in the case of Rémy Martin than in the others, which could be due to historic patterns of industrial relations in France. However, it may also be due to a long tradition of a family company with strong links to the geographical area and families in this area, with some families being employed at the company across multiple generations. This can bring about strong loyalty with little tension, but it may also increase tension if there are inherited conflicts related to a class struggle and culture, which in other cases is transferred to a culture of partnership or cooperation.

The links to social dialogue are evident, and the more specific mechanism to reach a successful result is the use of experts and surveys to narrow down the issues of potential negotiation.

Active policies for older workers

In the French case of Rémy Martin, the social dialogue structures relevant for improving working conditions are described above. The company is also relevant for its active policies for older workers.³⁵

In December 2009, an agreement was reached on active measures for older workers, consisting of legally binding topics such as an assessment of the ergonomics of older workers' workstations, an examination of their working conditions, and actions to retain such workers until they retire.

The active measures for older workers are based around four distinct themes:

- anticipation of the evolution of professional careers;
- improvement of workplace conditions and the prevention of workplace strain;
- development of competencies/qualifications and access to education;
- management of the final years of one's career and the transition from activity to retirement.

Beyond legal requirements, this agreement encompasses the assessment and the reduction of work strain for all employees and an assessment of their well-being at work (by submitting a questionnaire to all employees –as described above). The implementation of this programme for workers in the later period of their career was carried out entirely through negotiations between management and works councils to adapt the programme to the company context.

To address the issue of workplace strain, the management retained the services of the regional office of health insurance, Caisse Regionale d'Assurance Maladie de Cognac (CRAMCO) to train the employees in the identification and prevention of workplace strain. CRAMCO has helped develop a risk assessment checklist for each position.

The employee representatives pointed out that these active measures for older workers are important because one-quarter of all employees are in the later stages of their careers. They also point to issues relating to older workers who have lower qualifications than younger employees, stating that because of this younger people are often assigned to work with machines while the older workers carry a larger share of the manual working tasks.

However, an internal memo on active measures for seniors indicates that management is interested in reducing the training differences between the more qualified younger employees and the more experienced yet less qualified older workers. These measures include a programme to track the progress of skills development for workers past the age of 45 and to provide access to outside training programmes. This initiative is aimed at 'professionalising' the workforce, especially those with many years of experience. Additional measures are being taken for employees over 55, including income supplements to encourage a gradual transition to retirement in which the older workers can plan incremental reductions in their time spent working until their pension benefits can be accessed. This enables older employees to stay longer in the labour market as they can gradually reduce working time.

³⁵ The examples below provide contextual information on additional improvements in working conditions but are offered as cursory examples and not full illustrations of the links between social dialogue and working conditions. This is because the analytical focus of this report is on MSDs and stress, which are considered to provide the best opportunities to understand the links between social dialogue and working conditions and the mechanisms within.

Conclusions

In the food manufacturing sector, measures relating to workplace organisation are fundamental to improve working conditions. However, it is also important to complement this with a focus on individual measures. An overview of initiators, issues and results developed within a social dialogue framework is presented in Table 24.

Table 24: *Overview of initiators, issues and results in the food manufacturing sector*

Company	Initiator	Issue	Result
Fandler (AT)	Management	MSDs	• Extension of the production hall
Plzeňský Prazdroj (CZ)	Management	MSDs	• New business strategy • Modernisation of production facilities
Münster-ländische-Margarine-Werke (MMW) (DE)	Works council	Stress	• Flexible work-time model
Rémy Martin (FR)	Employee representative	Stress	• Solutions on stress issues are not yet decided
	Management	Older workers	• Ergonomics of senior workstations and education
Norrmejerier (SE)	Trade union	MSDs	• Technical advancement

Source: *Oxford Research, 2010*

Unions have expertise at different levels. The case studies illustrate that unions at the company level contribute with specific knowledge on machines and working routines and, by formalising and disseminating this knowledge, can contribute to improved working conditions at the workplace level.

In small companies, employee representatives have turned to unions at the sector level to acquire expertise on issues relating to improving working conditions. In small companies, social dialogue actors may need support from sector-level social partners to strengthen the capability of social dialogue for improving working conditions.

Some of the working conditions issues dealt with through social dialogue in the cases studied, such as working time and working hours, are critical. Two aspects are observed in these types of cases in the food manufacturing sector.

- The use of external support from institutions constituted by or supported by social partners can provide legitimacy and can contribute to mutual understanding focused on the improvement of working conditions – not only among the social partners involved but also among all employees and management.
- Information, communication and transparency within the social dialogue processes, as well as with employees, are essential. Without widespread information and transparency, conflict and lack of understanding concerning the need for implemented measures easily arise. Transparency and communication are likely to create better understanding, a sense of ownership and greater support, which is necessary to improve working conditions. Social partners, especially trade unions, are vital as they have a unique system of communication channels with all parts of the company, if well represented and structured in the company. Other forms of employee representation can also fulfil this purpose.

New work organisation puts new demands on the employee and new skills need to be adopted. This is likely to affect employability, as outlined in the conclusions to the case studies in the electromechanical engineering sector.

If there is constructive social dialogue resulting in the improvement of working conditions, and the relations between actors involved in social dialogue are built on trust, then social dialogue at the company level is able to handle conflicts. Conflicts can be handled because the parties involved trust that the structures and inter-personal trust are sufficiently strong.

The case studies in the food manufacturing sector also show that the implementation of new technology, production and management systems can improve working conditions, both in regard to MSDs and stress, provided the implementation has been discussed, negotiated and decided through social dialogue.

Improving working conditions is a long-term endeavour. It is a continuous process, and the cases illustrate that social dialogue needs to follow up on and evaluate implemented measures as well as search for additional issues that need to be addressed.

The use of subcommittees is also seen in the food manufacturing sector. Specific subcommittees have been used to put particular focus on areas within MSDs and stress.

Conclusions

This chapter presents the main conclusions and perspectives based on the 23 case studies conducted. The main conclusions provide a deeper understanding of the nature of the links between social dialogue and working conditions.

Previous studies (Broughton, 2008; Voss, 2009) concluded that the links between social dialogue and working conditions were partly dependent on national and sectoral context. In the research carried out for this project, national context and sector characteristics contribute to the understanding of the specific case, and national context has an impact on the structure of social dialogue, the type of actors involved (such as works councils), union densities, and legislation relating to the labour market and working conditions. Sector contexts impact the working condition challenges that the social partners face.

Table 25 gives an overview of the most important issues and mechanisms by sector. This is done to sum up the findings in the different sectors, both in terms of the challenges and the mechanisms used within the social dialogue to solve these challenges. The issue that has been addressed in most detail in the sectors is highlighted by grey shading. In some sectors the issues have been addressed equally, which is why MSDs and stress are both highlighted in these sectors. Even though the focus may vary according to the specific sector, the overview shows very similar mechanisms. For further detail on the issues addressed, reference is made to the summary tables for each sector in the respective sector chapters.

Table 25: *Overview of important issues and mechanisms by sector*

Sector	MSD	Stress	Older workers
Financial services and insurance activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subcommittees • External support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subcommittees • External support • Employee surveys • Education • Additional information channels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negotiation
Wholesale and retail	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subcommittees • External support • Employee surveys 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subcommittees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education • Additional information channels
Electromechanical engineering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subcommittees • External support • Health checkups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External support • Employee surveys • Training • Additional information channels 	
Food manufacturing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subcommittees • External support • Education • Employee surveys 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subcommittee • External support • Employee surveys 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examination programme on skills

Note: green shading depicts the issue addressed in most detail in the sectors.

Source: *Oxford Research A/S, 2010*

However, national context does not preclude a conclusion in the search for mechanisms that define the links between social dialogue and working conditions across the case studies. This is clear when looking at the overview tables in the concluding sections in each sector chapter. Acknowledging the limitations of case studies in general, this research project makes the following conclusions on the basis of 23 case studies on conditions of success. These conclusions are elaborated below.

- The nature of the link between social dialogue and working conditions is a continuous process of creating a win–win situation for the employees and employers. Thus, continuity does not refer to an automatic process but, on the contrary, to a process which never reaches a final goal and demands a firm and ongoing commitment to creating the win–win situations.
- Formal subcommittees are a mechanism through which social dialogue may improve working conditions.
- External experts are a mechanism through which social dialogue may improve working conditions.
- Additional information channels such as open-door policies, ombudsmen and employee surveys are ways to provide social dialogue actors with information about problems in working conditions and keeping focus on these issues.

Nature of link between social dialogue and working conditions

Links were found between social dialogue and specific improvements in the working conditions in the respective companies. First and foremost, the links between social dialogue and the specific improvements in working conditions were explicitly mentioned by respondents in the interviews. Social dialogue was repeatedly highlighted by the respondents as the key factor in the successful improvement of working conditions. It was found that measures taken are discussed, negotiated, and decided in the formal frames of social dialogue in all cases.

It is also important to emphasise that building social dialogue structures requires effort. It is also important to ensure that the social partners have a solid understanding of the purpose of the social dialogue process and structures to improve working conditions, and that they have a mutual goal. When the structure of social dialogue to improve working conditions is functioning, and both parties in the industry discover that the improvements provide mutual benefits, the structures reinforce each other. A positive path dependence is created that facilitates the improvement of working conditions through social dialogue in other areas in addition to the specific ones for which it was originally created. For instance, when setting up specific social dialogue institutions to deal with 15 measures relating to stress, it has been found that the structures and mechanisms used to implement these measures are suitable for handling new problems in working conditions that come to the attention of the social partners. Furthermore, when working with a specific issue such as work organisation to improve employees' autonomy, other areas of working conditions can also be improved (for example, communication within the organisation).

Social dialogue structures have proved to be important as they have contributed to improving working conditions both directly and through the use of dedicated subcommittees. However, relationships between the people involved in the social dialogue structures are also important. All agreements and measures taken between the social partners are based on trust; trust that can take time to build up. Once individuals are replaced, no matter the reason, there is a risk that the trust will diminish, and therefore even companies with a tradition of trustful relationships between employee representatives and management risk losing momentum if trust disappears through a change in the personnel involved.

Social dialogue seems to embrace the whole process of the measures in most cases – from initiative to implementation. Thus, both sides of the dialogue have the opportunity to set the agenda for social dialogue, which is formalised to varying degrees in the different cases. Likewise implementation, evaluation and follow-up are, in general, overseen or carried

out within the formal framework of social dialogue. The structural setup for the links is clear and there is evidence of the actual application of these structures.

Social partners have expertise at different levels. For instance, the case studies illustrate that unions at the company level contribute with specific knowledge on machines and working routines and, by formalising and disseminating this knowledge, can contribute to improved working conditions at the workplace level. Following the process described above, and using the social partners' specific expertise in the various phases of the process, leads to the following concluding characteristics of the nature of the link between social dialogue and working conditions.

The nature of the link between social dialogue and working conditions is a continuous process of creating a win-win situation for the employees and employers. The process is initiated when social dialogue in a company has the capacity to identify a problem in working conditions or has the knowledge to point out preventive measures before a problem arises.

Looking across the case studies, there are factors that determine the functioning of the continuous process. These include the following.

- **A well-established structure for identifying problems.** First, the social partners themselves constitute an essential structure for identifying problems among those they are representing in the workplace. Formal subcommittees, external experts and additional information channels such as employee surveys are also important structures for gathering information about the working conditions in all areas of the organisation and ensuring that there are no gaps in identifying issues.
- **Forums for social dialogue at all levels of the company.** These can include corporate committees, works councils at different levels depending on the size of the company, board representation, health and safety committees, workplace committees, etc. The different forums ensure that issues are dealt with at the right level and with the actors who have the appropriate mandate, which ensures that a correct understanding of the issues as well as the necessary power and ability to deal with the issues is in place.
- **Understanding of the issue** is ensured when formal social dialogue takes place at different levels. For example, specific subcommittees can ensure that the appropriate focus is put on a particular issue and external experts can be consulted if necessary to provide detailed knowledge.
- **Mandate and ability to act and implement measures** is necessary to ensure that the issue is addressed when necessary and that the working conditions are taken seriously. The essential aspect is that it is clear that social dialogue has the proper authority to act and implement the measure it finds necessary in order to improve working conditions.
- **Communication** and ensuring commitment and understanding of all employees and managers involved is essential if the measure taken will affect improved working conditions. Measures need to be not only implemented, but understood and used in the right way. For instance, introducing new work organisation, new ergonomic chairs and new job functions for older workers requires an understanding and knowledge of the organisation. The social partners are vital for ensuring communication throughout the organisation and also for providing legitimisation to the measures taken.

The motivation and driver for both sides of the industry is the recognition that the efforts made in the continuous process achieve improved working conditions and a win-win situation for employees and employers. This recognition then ensures the continuation of the process and the continuous involvement of social partners.

Impact of European, national and sectoral context

Although the European context of the four sectors differs, all four sectors have an established European social dialogue, with the food manufacturing sector having an especially long history of European-level dialogue. Nevertheless, the impact of the European context does not seem to have impacted heavily on the perceptions on improvement of working conditions presented by the interviewees in the case studies.

Going from the European level to national level, the national legislative context can have an effect on the way in which this representation is structured.

National legislation may be the point of departure for the improvement of working conditions through social dialogue. The point of departure therefore differs according to the countries in which the companies are located. Nevertheless the study also demonstrates that, although different legislation sets the departure point, the continuous process still defines the nature of the links.

In the case studies, sector contexts have mostly had an impact on the nature of the working conditions in the companies. For instance, challenges in financial companies obviously differ from challenges in the electromechanical engineering sector. The need for longer working hours, the amount of sedentary work, the risk of MSDs and work organisation depend partly on the sectoral context.

The collective agreements for the companies studied are often determined and concluded at the sectoral level in the country, which impacts the agreements and the continuous process of improving working conditions at the company level. The sectoral collective agreements are viewed as stating either the minimum standards for improving working conditions, or the institution that establishes themes and frames for the prioritisation of what to address regarding the improvement of working conditions. It is then a task for the company's social partners to determine how to specifically address and solve the topics in the sectoral collective agreement through social dialogue.

The case studies also illustrate that it is not just a top-down process between the sectoral and the company level but that the company, by being a first mover, can determine the way that working conditions in the future are addressed through social dialogue also in sectoral collective agreements, thereby affecting all the companies in the sector. This is a specific observation pertinent to the large companies studied that have an important role in the sector in the country.

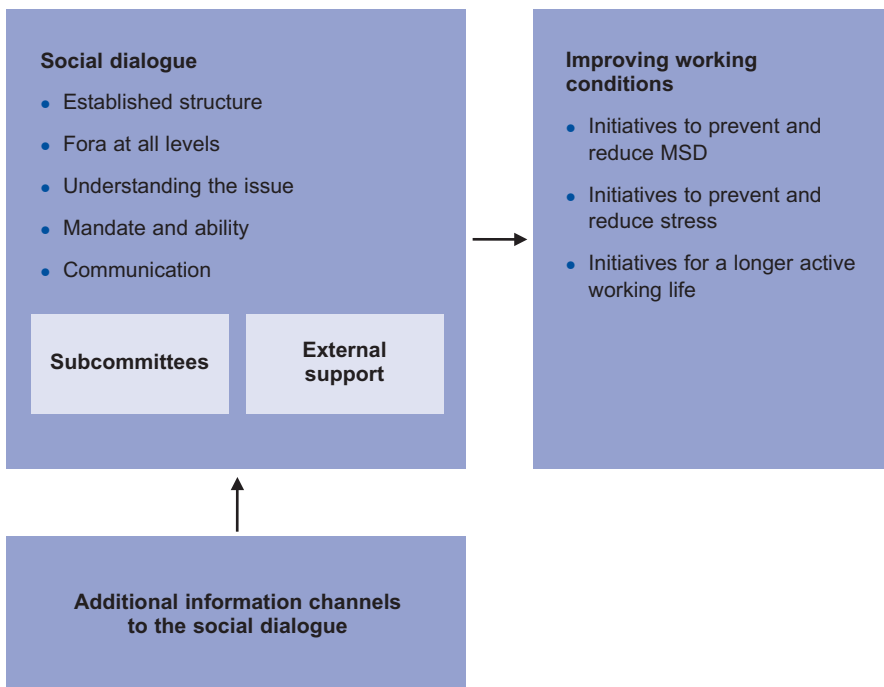
In small companies, it is found that employee representatives have turned to unions at the sector level to obtain expertise in issues relating to improving working conditions. In SMEs, social dialogue actors may need support from sector-level social partners to strengthen the capability of the social dialogue to improve working conditions.

Mechanisms within the social dialogue found to improve working conditions

The mechanisms within social dialogue that lead to improvements in working conditions are, as described above, a well-established structure for identifying problems, forums for social dialogue at all levels of the company, understanding of the issue, and a mandate and the ability to act and implement measures and communication.

Key elements in the continuous process of obtaining these links between social dialogue and improved working conditions are formal subcommittees, external experts and the use of additional information channels. These are shown in Figure 9 and described in the subsequent sections.

Figure 9: Mechanisms through which social dialogue improves working conditions



Note: the lists should be seen as examples and are not intended to be exhaustive.
 Source: *Oxford Research, 2010*

Subcommittees

More than half of the case studies share a similar process, namely the establishment of formal subcommittees. The use of subcommittees is widespread and has a variety of purposes, but a recurrent function is to widen the committee’s involvement in a particular issue.

The general findings support an assessment of the subcommittees as highlighting the specific issue in question, but this may be because the cases selected are good examples. Through social dialogue, subcommittees are used to take a more specific and narrow focus on the issue in question. However, decision-making power remains at the formal social dialogue level because works councils and corporate committees are the forum for negotiation (and other forms of social dialogue) between unions and managers in which they decide to introduce subcommittees and external experts, as well as what mandate these actors should have. Subcommittees are under the responsibility of social dialogue bodies, and report to and are evaluated by these bodies.

However, what is clear is that an enlargement of the number of employees involved spreads out the debate and awareness in the company, such as in the cases related to MSDs.

Additionally, it is evident that the term ‘working conditions’ is quite complex and may require a wider range of competences and knowledge than can be found within the company.

Furthermore, extending employee involvement may provide technical advice and involvement in testing and implementation. This report contains examples of how the involvement of technical staff helped smooth the implementation of the measures to improve working conditions.

Focus on implementation has also been mentioned in case studies where the subcommittees include more employees in the implementation than the usual social partners engaged in the social dialogue.

In a previous research report, the shop-floor level was pinpointed as a crucial level for regulation and social dialogue to achieve effective implementation (Voss, 2009, p. 2). Subcommittees may be a mechanism for ensuring implementation, if they are founded in a formal institution of social dialogue.

External experts

The social dialogue can benefit from the use of external experts in an effort to find more effective solutions to challenges posed by working conditions. It is important to emphasise that the decision-making power remains at the social dialogue level and that the experts are involved according to the mandate of social dialogue.

External experts were used regardless of the size of the studied companies. Both large and small companies need additional competencies in the specific issues they are working to improve. For instance, this may include the technical, ergonomic or medical expertise that is needed for a successful outcome. External experts may also contribute to finding solutions to problems and focusing the social dialogue on the improvement of working conditions. This finding is independent of national and sectoral contexts, as social partners at the company level, regardless of sector and country difference, encounter issues that need external expertise to be resolved successfully.

Moreover, this contributes to the process of identifying what facts are available and what can be discussed, and also to describing clearly the positions of the social partners. It seems that including external experts clarifies issues for discussion and decision.

External experts can also contribute to making the solution to the problem more effective. However, decision-making power remains with the formal social dialogue level because it is works councils, corporate committees and other negotiations forums where unions and managers discuss, negotiate, and decide to introduce and involve external experts and determine their mandate.

Transparency is a vital factor for creating legitimacy for the issue and the measures decided upon. When earlier studies highlighted the importance of clearly defined rules of interaction between the social partners at company level (Voss, 2009, p. 2), the inclusion of external experts may be a mechanism to help obtain this.

The use of external experts is also widely observed in the small companies, not only to support the social partners in improving specific working conditions but also to advance issues arising from the social dialogue, evaluate measures taken, and focus on improving working conditions.

In a few cases, mediating and coaching the process is mentioned as a role taken on by an external partner. These findings largely apply to relatively small companies, which indicate that this type of assistance for the social dialogue may be a mechanism exclusive to SMEs. Previous studies have highlighted SMEs' need for strategies that have a straightforward and structured process, whereas this study suggests that the use of external experts can remedy this.

Additional information channels

Additional information channels for identifying issues and problems related to working conditions are seen in many cases and are underlined as important information channels by many respondents, primarily in larger companies. They provide input to the continuous process of improving working conditions through social dialogue that is described above.

As concluded under both the sections on subcommittees and the use of external experts, additional channels as providers of information operate under the mandate and control of the social partners.

These channels take different forms and are not all easy to describe. Some companies have established alternative institutions such as ‘ombudsmen’,³⁶ hotlines, employee surveys, team meetings and company conferences. Others, primarily SMEs, refer to open-door policies and company meetings involving all employees, which do not replace social dialogue as such.

When analysing the nature of the link between social dialogue and working conditions, the above channels must be understood as providers of information that bolster the framework of formal social dialogue.

³⁶ Ombudsmen and open-door policies do of course have functions other than acting as information channels to identify working conditions issues which feed into the social dialogue.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Overview of case studies

Case study	Participants (interview length*) and interview date	Country	Sector	Employees	Responsible researcher
ACC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Christina Schreiner, HR manager, and Kerstin Gartner (1:31:39) 7 July 2010 Franz Zehner, employee representative, chair of the blue-collar works councils as a full-time job (1:12:00) 7 July 2010 	Austria	Electromagnetic engineering	925	Mats Kullander
OSRAM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ivana Pavelková, HR manager at OSRAM Bruntál (1:38:41) 17 June 2010 Lenka Musilová, chair of Světlo (2:16:58) 17 June 2010 	Czech Republic	Electromagnetic engineering	988	Helle Ourø Nielsen
SICK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gustav Kasper, member of the works council (00:42:00) 5 July 2010 Rudolf Kast, CEO in HR department (01:10:33) 5 July 2010 	Germany	Electromagnetic engineering	1,800	Sandy Brink
Garabi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Iñaki Sarriegi, one of the four partners at Garabi (2:29:18) 13 July 2010 Maidier Uranga, employee representative (1:39:47) 13 July 2010 	Spain	Electromagnetic engineering	17	Mats Kullander
Microdeco	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unai Martínez, HR manager (1:54:29) 19 June 2010 Eduardo Palacios, member of the works council (1:06:48) 19 June 2010 	Spain	Electromagnetic engineering	94	Mats Kullander
NOTE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Katarina Gunnarsson, HR manager (1:59:43) 30 June 2010 José Velosa diCastro, employee representative (IG Metall) and Kristoffer Skogh, employee representative (Unionen) (1:37:06) 30 June 2010 	Sweden	Electromagnetic engineering	85	Jan Persson
Wüstenrot Bausparkasse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mag. Irmgard Reiner, HR manager (1:00:19) 10 June 2010 Karin Winkler, employee representative, head of the works councils in Wüstenrot (1:13:58) 12 July 2010 	Austria	Financial	930	Mats Kullander
Ceska Sporitelna	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jitka Schmiedová, HR manager (2:06:47) 7 July 2010 Zdeněk Jirásek, employee representative (2:27:33) 14 July 2010 	Czech Republic	Financial	1,300	Helle Ourø Nielsen
Spardabank München	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Michael Dumpert, HR manager, and Hermann Busch, member of the board (01:19:26) 9 June 2010 Evelyne Püscher-Koske, member of the works council since 2009, and Oliver Edelmann, head of the works council (01:14:49) 9 June 2010 	Germany	Financial	663	Sandy Brink
Kutxa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Antxon Segurola, HR manager, and Javier Arruti, health and safety policies manager (1:07:24) 18 June 2010 Jose Montero Castro, president of the works council, and Mikel Zabala, prevention delegate and member of the works council (1:31:11) 18 June 2010 	Spain	Financial	2,701	Mats Kullander

Case study	Participants (interview length*) and interview date	Country	Sector	Employees	Responsible researcher
Credit Agricôle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mr Prouillac, employee representative, member of CHSCT (1:50:09) 25 June 2010 Xavier Delos, director of human resources and logistics (2:07:37) 25 June 2010 Denis Bocquet, deputy director (57:46) 25 June 2010 	France	Financial	1,300	Mats Kullander
Swedbank Sjuhärad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stefan Borg, HR and administrative manager, and Marita Larsson, HR assistant (1:31:32) 10 June 2010 Thomas Gäfvert, union representative from the Financial Sector Union (1:31:02) 10 June 2010 	Sweden	Financial	186	Jan Persson
Fandler	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Julia Fandler, owner of the company (1:34:35) 7 July 2010 Peter Schloffer, employee representative and workplace safety representative (59:36) 7 July 2010 	Austria	Food manufacturing	25	Mats Kullander
Plzenský Prazdroj	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Milan Koza, senior HR manager (1:59:15) 13 July 2010 Bohumir Matas, coordinator of trade unions and chairman of the trade union at Plzeňský Prazdroj (2:30:51) 13 July 2010 	Czech Republic	Food manufacturing	2,353	Helle Ourø Nielsen
Münsterland Coesfeld	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Annegret Lülf-Reinersmann, manager and HR manager (1:25:36) 16 June 2010 Verena Hauling, member of the works council and responsible for organisational and employee structure (01:16:40) 12 July 2010 	Germany	Food manufacturing	130	Jan Persson
Rémy Martin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evelyne Durana-Marot, secretary of CHSCT and employee at Rémy Martin, and Michèle Redeuil, vice secretary of CHSCT and employee at Rémy Martin (1:19:08) 30 June 2010 Jerome Charpentier, HR director at Rémy Martin (1:19:10) 30 June 2010 	France	Food manufacturing	353	Nina Middleboe
Norrmejerier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Björn Jonsson, HR manager (2:17:09) 4 June 2010 Ulf Lundmark, employee representative of Livs (2:49:41) 4 June 2010 	Sweden	Food manufacturing	460	Jan Persson
Pfeiffer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Margit Stockenreiter, HR manager (1:13:10) 1 July 2010 Uwe Frosch, employee representative (1:25:40) 1 July 2010 	Austria	Wholesale/retail	2,870	Mats Kullander
Interspar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monika Kosinová, HR manager (1:58:11) 5 June 2010 Mr Skřivan, chairman at Spar's branch in Česká Lípa. (3:42:11) 5 June 2010 	Czech Republic	Wholesale/retail	4,500	Sandy Brink
REWE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ricardo Brenke, head of HR management, and Angelika Winter, head of the works council (2:17:27) 17 June 2010 	Germany	Wholesale/retail	16,000	Jan Persson

Case study	Participants (interview length*) and interview date	Country	Sector	Employees	Responsible researcher
Senior & Cie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thomas Trentesaux, HR director (1:26:29) 29 June 2010 Patricia Mussch, delegate on the workplace committee and CGT, and Magali Joseph, member of workplace committee (1:30:32) 29 June 2010 Marie-Pierre Ollivier, director of logistics and head of the production site (45:16) 29 June 2010 	France	Wholesale/retail	169	Nina Middleboe
Colly Components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anne-Lie Törnblom, HR manager (1:24:17) 20 May 2010 Peter Maslov, employee representative (1:01:51) 20 May 2010 	Sweden	Wholesale/retail	31	Mats Kullander
El Corte Inglés	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pablo Tauroni López de Rodas, HR department, and Marta Torre Sanz HR department (2:29:29) 19 July 2010 José Miguel Bachiller Fdz. De los Ríos, secretary of the inter-centre committee (1:08:35) 16 July 2010 	Spain	Wholesale/retail	65,000	Helle Ourø Nielsen

Note: * The interview length incorporates both interviews, that is, the questions relevant to ‘social dialogue and working conditions’ as well as to ‘quality of work and performance’ (sections 1–5 in the interview guideline).

Annex 2: Interview guideline

Definitions

- Working conditions:** conditions relating to the working environment and the non-pay aspects of an employee’s terms and conditions of employment. This includes areas such as the organisation of work and work activities; training, skills, and employability; health, safety, and well-being; and working time and work–life balance.
- Social dialogue:** all types of formal dialogue, involving discussions, consultations, negotiations and joint actions undertaken by employer representatives and worker representatives on working conditions in the workplace.

Structure of the guideline

- Information on the respondent and the company
- Corporate culture, interest representation and social dialogue
- Improvements of working conditions and the role of social dialogue
- Challenges and issues in the field of working conditions
- Employee satisfaction and other performance indicators

1. Information on the respondent and the company

- 1.1 Function and occupational background of the respondent in the company
- 1.2 History and current structure of the company
- 1.3 Market background/frame and main activities of the company
- 1.4 Number of employees and workforce structure (functions, gender, qualifications)
- 1.5 Employment trends (for example, ongoing restructuring, consolidation, expansion)

2. Corporate culture, interest representation, and social dialogue

- 2.1 Which forms of interest representation, employee participation (works councils if applicable, board level / group level representation, other joint bodies, other forms of direct participation), and social dialogue exist at the company?
- 2.2 Trade unions' structure (unions, density, history) and collective bargaining coverage
- 2.3 How is employee interest representation and social dialogue organised in the company? (for example, number of annual meetings, select committee meetings, joint bodies; who is responsible for the agenda with regard to working conditions; etc.)
- 2.4 Interaction and organisation between different forms of interest representation (for example, joint trade union committees, organisation of collective bargaining, etc.)
- 2.5 Description of the relations between management and employee representatives and corporate culture (cooperative, partnership, conflict-ridden, etc.)
- 2.6 What are the greatest current issues and matters of interest with regard to employee interest representation and employee-employer relations in the company?

3. Improvement of working conditions and the role of social dialogue

- 3.1 Please tell an exemplary 'success story' with regard to improving working conditions in your company
- 3.2 Which were concrete positive and practical outcomes and improvements of this story?
- 3.3 Who took the initiative to address the challenges identified above as crucial?
- 3.4 Have there been any conflicts with management or between different groups of employees?
- 3.5 How was the process of improving working conditions practically organised at the company? (*)
- 3.6 Which bodies were mainly responsible and which role did social dialogue play in this context?
- 3.7 Which factors do you regard as crucial for the success of improving working conditions?
- 3.8 Do you think that social dialogue between management and employees contributed to the improvement of working conditions?
- 3.9 From your point of view, what have been the most critical elements in the example described before?
- 3.10 Existence of eventual external support? (Example: help from labour inspectorate, workplace doctors, ...)

(*) Interviewer: ask for existence of eventual external support. (Example: help from labour inspectorate, workplace doctors, ...)

4. Challenges and issues in the field of working conditions

4.1 Which factors would you describe as hindering and critical?

4.2 Which questions/challenges were not addressed sufficiently by social dialogue? Which main reasons do you see in this context?

4.3 Do you see any barriers regarding a more positive influence of social dialogue on good working conditions? How could the practice of social dialogue be improved?

4.4 Which are the major challenges and issues with regard to working conditions in your company? To which extend would you describe them as sector specific?

4.5 Are there any specific challenges in the following fields?

- MSDs
- Stress
- Active measures for older workers
- Working time
- Labour contracts (part-time, temporary work, agency work, etc.)
- Gender equality
- Qualification, skills, and further training
- Psychological risk factors
- Physical risk factors

What are the measures taken to cope with the challenges?

4.6 How would you describe the general trend regarding the quality of working conditions in these areas during the last five years?

4.7 How do you assess the capacity of different social dialogue actors in regulating working conditions?

4.8 How do you assess the importance of national legislation compared to collective agreements in regulating working conditions?

4.9 Are there any other important actors or institutions regulating working conditions?

- Sector-specific initiatives/rules, collective bargaining, and social dialogue
- Initiatives, agreements, and social dialogue at the company level
- Awareness/implementation of European agreements (example: social partners' agreement on stress)