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Well-Being and Work

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Well-Being and Work

Abstract

Well-being, health and safety at work and work-related health problems have been attracting growing public attention in Austria in recent years. An indicator for this rise in interest is the implementation of the Austrian Occupational Health Monitor by the Upper Austrian Chamber of Labour. The survey tries to analyse the links between working conditions and the health status of employees on the basis of very rich data. Some of the most interesting results are presented in this report.

Keywords

well-being, health, safety, Austria, working conditions, employee health

Comments

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Well-being and work

Austrian Occupational Health Monitor

Perception of job strains

Indexes of work-related aspects of well-being

Sick at work – a form of presenteeism

Work-related health problems

Commentary

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Well-being, health and safety at work and work-related health problems have been attracting growing public attention in Austria in recent years. An indicator for this rise in interest is the implementation of the Austrian Occupational Health Monitor by the Upper Austrian Chamber of Labour. The survey tries to analyse the links between working conditions and the health status of employees on the basis of very rich data. Some of the most interesting results are presented in this report.

Austrian Occupational Health Monitor

The [Austrian Occupational Health Monitor](#) (Österreichische Arbeitsgesundheitsmonitor) is a representative quantitative survey focusing on the work-related health of employees. It was developed on the basis of extensive field studies involving experts from the Occupational Health Service in Linz. The Austrian Occupational Health Monitor is commissioned by the [Upper Austrian Chamber of Labour](#) and carried out by the [Institute for Empirical Social Research \(IFES\)](#). The survey is based on and linked with the [Austrian Work Climate Index](#), which allows a wide range of rich analysis.

The survey is based on quarterly waves of 1,000 face-to-face-interviews, amounting to an annual database of up to 4,000 interviews. A stratified multi-stage clustered random sampling is picked out of the main population (employees older than 16 years).

The survey focuses on the respondents' subjective perceptions with regard to their health status, with the aim of investigating work-related health problems. Based on the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) definition of health, the survey addresses 'classic' and psychosomatic health problems (cardiovascular problems, sleep and concentration disorders, headaches and skeletal problems), psychological disorders (irritability, depression, loss of motivation, resignation) and positive health indicators (self-development, self-efficacy, work performance, perception of meaning in life). The dataset referred to here consists of eight interview waves carried out in 2011 and 2012 of a total of 8,954 employed people over 16 years of age.

For this report, the Upper Austrian Chamber of Labour provided unpublished data from the Austrian Occupational Health Monitor, which made it possible to present very recent data and interesting results on different aspects of working conditions in Austria.

Perception of job strains

The interviewees were asked if and to what degree they feel affected by a number of job strains. The types of strains for which the highest percentages of exposure (grades 1 and 2 on a five-grade scale) were reported included 'high degree of responsibility for goods or people' (23%), 'continuously high degree of concentration' (22%), 'frequent work with video display units (VDU)' (18%), 'continuous customer contact' and 'exhaustion' (16% each), and 'exposure to noise, heavy loads, repetitiveness' and 'one-sided physical works strain' (15% each) (Table 1).

Table 1: Perception of selected job strains, by gender (% of grades 1 and 2)

Job strain	Men	Women	Average
High degree of responsibility for goods or	24	22	23

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Job strain	Men	Women	Average
people			
Continuously high degree of concentration	22	21	22
Frequent VDU work	16	20	18
Continuous customer contact	13	20	16
Exhaustion	18	14	16
Repetitiveness	15	15	15
Noise	19	9	15
Heavy loads	17	12	15
One-sided physical work strain (strain affecting just one side of the body)	16	13	15
Strenuous postures at work	15	12	14

Note: The answers were given on a five-grade scale: 1=feel very affected, 5=do not feel affected at all; issues shown are those with the highest scores. The figures in this table include the respondents in grades 1 and 2 for each job strain listed.

Source: Austrian Occupational Health Monitor, 2011–2012

The survey shows important differences regarding gender. A larger share of male workers reported feeling affected by exposure to noise (men: 19%, women: 9%), atmospheric conditions/weather (men: 16%, women: 4%), heavy loads (men: 17%, women: 12%), repetitive physical activity (men: 16%, women: 13%) and strenuous postures at work (men: 15%, women: 12%). By contrast, a higher proportion of women reported exposure to work-related health risks such as ‘frequent VDU work’ (men: 16%, women: 20%) and continuous customer contact (men: 13%, women: 20%). With regard to the health hazards reported by the highest share of workers, such as ‘high degree of responsibility for goods or people’ (men: 24%, women: 22%) and ‘continuously high degree of concentration’ (men: 22%, women: 21%), there are only marginal differences between male and female employees. These gender differences reflect the gender segmentation of the Austrian labour market, where male workers dominate industrial manual labour and female workers predominate in service sector workplaces.

With regard to heavy loads, there is a clear variation between employees with different educational levels. Whereas 30% of those whose highest level of educational attainment is compulsory education (nine years of school) and at least 18% of those with apprenticeship certificates report being exposed to working with heavy loads, this is reported by only 4% of university graduates and 8% of those with a secondary school diploma. The same is true for ‘one-sided physical work strain’, with 28% of workers with compulsory school certificates but just 5% of university graduates reporting exposure to this risk factor, and for ‘strenuous postures at work’, with the same difference between the two groups at the lowest and highest ends of educational

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attainment. This is a clear reflection of one of the main axes of the social division of labour in capitalist societies: that between manual and mental labour.

An interesting aspect is that, with regard to feelings of being exposed to ‘high responsibility for goods or people’, the differences according to educational levels are rather small. Overall, 23% of employees with university degrees reported this feeling, which is the same proportion for workers with apprenticeship certificates, while among those with only compulsory education 20% suffer from the same job strain. This is interesting because it might be expected that workers with compulsory school certificates work in workplaces with very low responsibility levels, especially in comparison to university graduates. But the shares of those who felt that they had a high responsibility for goods or people are not that different for both groups. It must be remembered that the data reflect subjective perceptions and the understanding of what constitutes ‘responsibility’ might vary between different groups of workers. Nevertheless, it is interesting that low-skilled workers – often considered to have a more instrumental attitude to their work – also express feelings of suffering from high responsibility. This sheds new light on the characteristics of those workplaces that are normally seen as having very low job requirements.

At least 17% of respondents stated that, right from starting work in the morning, they very much look forward to the end of their working day (grades 1 and 2 on a five-grade scale). This was reported by more male (19%) than female workers (13%). However, the percentage is by far the highest among workers with compulsory school education (28%), followed by workers with apprenticeship certificates (17%), while workers with a university degree can be found at the other end of the spectrum (11%). A migration background also plays a role in this respect: the shares of workers from the former Yugoslavia (29%) and from Turkey (21%) are far above average.

The survey also addresses the psychosocial impact of work on workers’ leisure time. Some 13% of workers reported that they have problems ‘switching off’ after work (grades 1 and 2 on a five-grade scale). In this respect, university graduates (20%) have greater problems than those with compulsory school levels only (12%). These differences also appear regarding the statement ‘At home I also have to think about problems at work’: 23% of workers with a university degree but only 15% of those with compulsory schooling report this feeling. Some 10% of all respondents reported being worried about the idea that someday they might no longer be able to cope with their work. Not surprisingly, the share of workers who have this feeling rises with age. Thus, 12% of both workers aged between 40 and 49 and those above 50 expressed this feeling, compared with only 8% of those aged between 30 and 39 and 6% of the youngest group (15–29 years).

Some 16% of the total claimed that they felt exhausted at the end of their working day. In this respect, the survey results also indicate major differences according to educational levels. In total, 26% of those with compulsory school education but only 16% of those with apprenticeship certificates and 13% of those with university degrees reported feeling that way. With regard to repetitiveness, 15% stated that their work follows the same routine all the time. This is true to the same extent for men (15%) and for women (15%) but for nearly one-third (30%) of employees with compulsory school certificates. This proportion is twice as high as that among workers with apprenticeship certificates (15%) and three times higher than for those with a university degree (9%).

The survey also provides information on the share of workers who reported that they are very strongly (grade 1 on a five-grade scale) affected by one or more job strains. In total, 10% of the interviewees reported suffering very strongly from one job strain; another 3% were very strongly affected by two job strains; and only 1% by three job strains. By contrast, 86% of respondents did

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not report very strong exposure to any of the job strains. Not surprisingly, employees with compulsory education only are very strongly affected by job strains to a higher extent (13% one, 5% two, 2% three and 1% four job strains) than all the other educational groups (for example, among workers with apprenticeship certificates the figures are: 9% one, 3% two and 1% three job strains).

Indexes of work-related aspects of well-being

The survey also includes some indexes built on the basis of combinations of questions. One of these indexes is called *cognitive persistence*. It is built on ‘lack of ability to switch off after work’ and ‘thinking of work problems at home’. Thus 4% indicate suffering strongly from cognitive persistence while 32% report feeling moderately to strongly affected. This means that, in total, 36% of the respondents suffer to a considerable extent from this type of job strain.

Another index, *resignation*, expresses feelings of work fatigue. It is built on ‘looking forward to the end at the beginning of the working day’, ‘often tired and drawn at work’, ‘work is not much fun’, ‘work is nothing but routine’, ‘feeling drained by work’ and ‘feeling worn out at the end of the working day’. According to this index, 43% are affected by ‘resignation’: 5% of them to a very strong degree and 38% to a moderate to strong degree. Men (45%) suffer to a higher extent from resignation than women (39%). The results also show clear differences along educational levels. Some 63% (9% very strong and 54% moderate to strong) of respondents with compulsory education only are affected by resignation compared with 31% of workers with university degrees, 34% of workers with secondary school certificates and 43% of those with apprenticeship certificates.

Directly related to working conditions is the index called *need for personal growth*, which refers to the need for personal development through work. It is constituted by the following elements: ‘work is an inspiring and challenging task’, ‘possibility to keep learning new things’, ‘possibility to develop my personality’ and ‘possibility to realise my creativity’. The need for personal development through work is rather low for 39% of the respondents (11% very low, and 28% rather low) and rather high for 61% (30% very high and 31% rather high) of the respondents. The results indicate a clear bias along educational levels. The majority (59%) of those with compulsory school certificates and at least 44% of those with apprenticeship certificates expressed a rather low need for personal development at work compared with only 19% of those with university degrees.

Stress at work

One of the most complex indexes is the *psychological stress index* based on more than 20 questions (relating to experience of stress/pressure, demotivation, inability to switch off, feelings of depression, feelings of exhaustion and being overstressed, irritability and a feeling of loss of meaning). According to this index, 29% of workers suffer from psychological stress to a high extent and 10% to a very high extent. An interesting result is that blue-collar workers (39%) suffer from psychological stress to a greater extent than public service workers (27%) and white-collar workers (27%). A closer look at occupational positions shows that construction workers (41%) suffer most from high or very high mental stress levels, followed by factory workers (39%), checkout staff (38%), plumbers (36%) and cleaning personnel (34%), whereas department managers (33%) suffer to a lower extent (Figure 1). These results indicate that mental stress at work is not predominantly a so-called ‘managerial phenomenon’ as it is often presented in the public discourse.

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Figure 1: Psychological stress index: high or very high stress levels according to selected occupations (%)

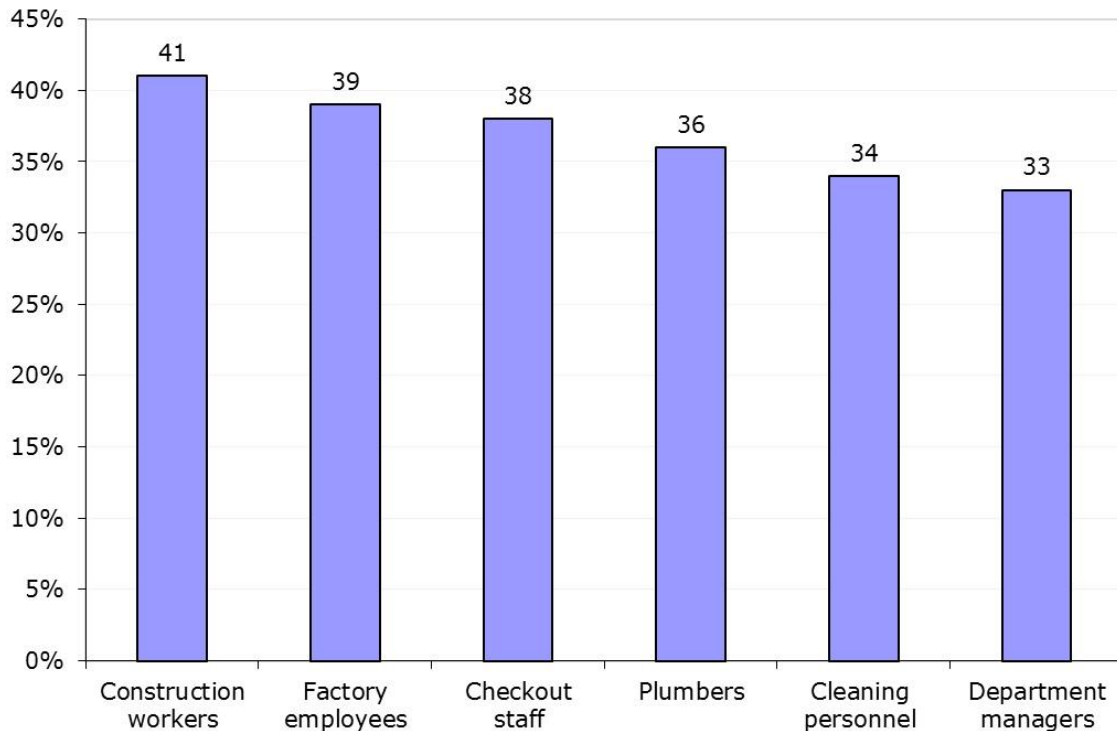


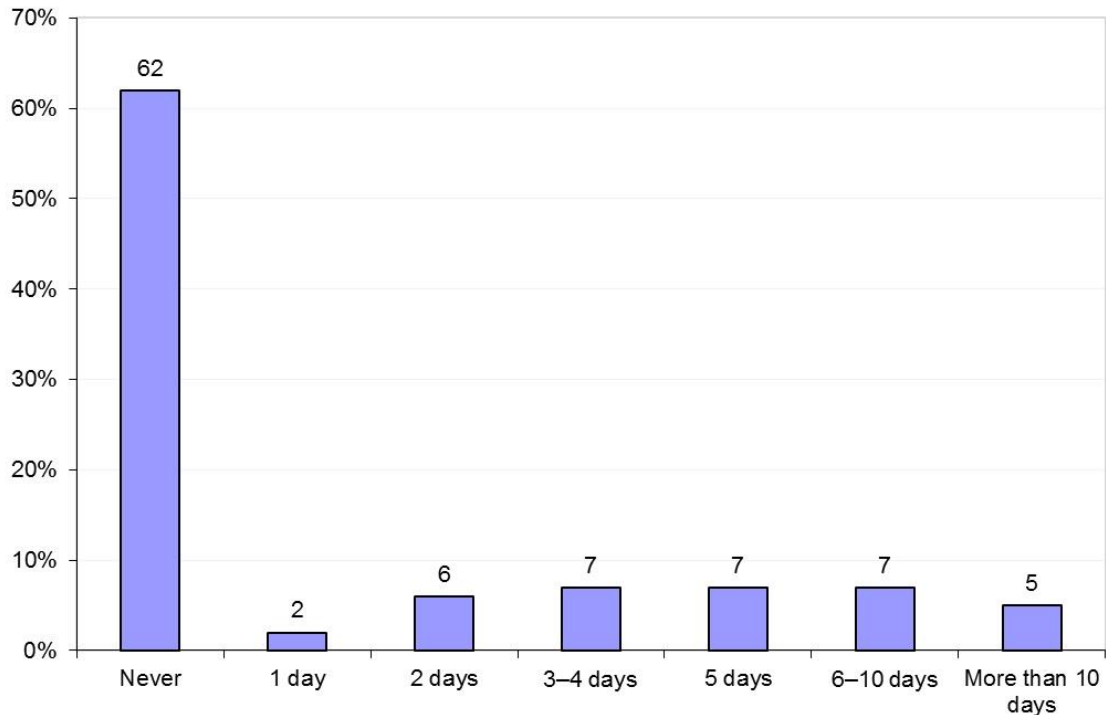
Figure 1: Psychological stress index: high or very high stress levels according to selected occupations (%)

Moreover, an analysis of the Occupational Health Monitor indicates quite serious physical consequences of psychological stress. Some 75% of those affected by psychological stress suffer from muscle tension and/or backaches, whereas 67% feel exhausted. A further 62% suffer from headaches, 58% from sleeping disorders and 53% from nervousness.

Sick at work – a form of presenteeism

The survey also asked about how workers handle sickness and work, and it revealed a high level of presenteeism. More than a third of interviewees (35%) reported that they had gone to work at least once within the past six months even though they were ill. Older workers (aged 40–49: 39%; aged 50+: 37%), and especially employees with university degrees (43%) report an above-average level in this respect. Overall, 5% of workers stated that they had been at work more than 10 times (days) during the past six months although they felt ill, while another 7% each had been at work when ill for between six and 10 days, five days and three to four days (Figure 2). In total, more than a quarter of all respondents had gone to work when sick more than three times within the past six months, which seems to be quite a substantial share. The survey also investigated workers' reasons for doing so. Thus 60% stated they did it 'out of a sense of duty towards their colleagues', 35% each because their work would 'otherwise be left undone' and because they 'had no one to stand in for them and do their work'. Some 17% stated they did it for 'fear of the consequences' if they went on sick leave.

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Figure 2: Percentage of workers going to work when sick in the past six months**Figure 2: Percentage of workers going to work when sick in the past six months**

Moreover, 37% reported having noticed that colleagues of theirs had been at work despite being sick (grades 1 and 2 on a five-grade scale: 1= yes, very often; 5= no, it doesn't happen). Only 3% of the respondents reported having had problems at work because of being on sick leave and another 9% had noticed such problems among colleagues.

Almost one quarter (24%) of those who had gone to work in spite of being sick reported negative health impacts (with another 53% reporting 'no impact' and 22% unable to say for sure). Some 56% of them reported feeling 'more often tired and run down', 39% reported 'lacking in concentration at work', 38% said that they had 'been sick for a longer time than normally' and 22% each stated they had suffered a relapse and that they had developed more serious health problems later. Women (27%), older workers (aged 40–49 years: 27%; 50+ years: 28%) and workers with compulsory education only (35%) suffered from negative health impacts to an above average extent.

Work-related health problems

Looking at work-related health problems, the survey first asks about workers' perception of health problems in recent weeks and then which of these health problems the interviewee relates to work. Not surprisingly, muscle tension and back pain are the health problems most often associated with work. In total, 37% of respondents reported work-related muscle tension and 36% back pain, followed by fatigue (16%) and headaches (13%) (Table 2). Of those who reported at least one health problem, 59% mentioned muscle tension and backache, 41% pains in the legs,

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35% fatigue, 29% sleeping disorders, 28% eye problems, 27% nervousness/distraction and 25% headaches, to name the highest scores. Suffering from physical job strains clearly goes along with educational levels, as people with low educational levels (compulsory school, apprenticeship certificate) report above-average levels with regard to muscle tension and back pain while those with higher education exhibit below-average levels. The highest perception of work-related muscle tension (68%) and back pain (71%) can be found among workers with a Turkish migratory background. This is an indicator for the ethnic segmentation of the Austrian labour market where migrants, especially those with low educational levels (where there is a high share among Turkish migrants), have to work in the physically most demanding and, moreover, low-paid jobs.

Table 2: Work-related health problems, by gender (%)

Health problem	Men	Women	Average
Muscle tension	35	39	37
Backaches	36	37	36
Fatigue	14	19	16
Headaches	10	16	13
Pain in the legs	11	14	12
Sleeping disorders	11	11	11
Nervousness	9	10	9
Stomach trouble	4	4	4
Indigestion	2	2	2
Weakness of memory, difficulties concentrating	2	3	2

Source: Austrian Occupational Health Monitor, 2011–2012

Commentary

The survey results could support the impression that, at least at the level of individual aspects, feelings of being affected by jobs strain are not that high among Austrian workers, given the fact that they do not exceed 23% (highest percentage). But it should be taken into account that the survey does not refer to exposure to health risks at work but to the *subjective* perception of suffering from these risks. The indexes of work-related aspects of well-being used show a much higher level of being affected by aspects such as psychological stress, cognitive persistence or resignation than job strain considered individually. Moreover, the survey points out that, especially with regard to educational levels, suffering from a number of health risks is very unequally distributed among employees, indicating an accumulation of health risks for those with the lowest educational levels. One of the most impressive results of the survey is the indication of quite serious physical consequences of psychological stress.

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