



Working time and health

The level of hours of work and the way those hours are organized can significantly affect quality of work and the quality of life in general. In particular, work may affect workers' health, especially when the hours of work are long, irregular or at inconvenient

times. For this reason, governments and supranational bodies have introduced minimum standards that help protect workers' health. Also, employers have developed different means to better protect workers from a range of risks at the workplace.

How is employees' health protected against inconvenient working hours?

The ILO Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155), calls on all countries ratifying the Convention to establish a policy to guarantee safety and health at the workplace and a related system of inspections. The protection of employees' health is also included as a major goal in nearly all of the ILO Conventions concerning working time. Special attention is given to groups facing a relatively high risk, such as night workers and pregnant women. The Night Work Convention, 1990 (No. 171), calls for a regular health assessment of night workers and assigns them the right to shift to day-time work when they have

been certified as unfit for night work. According to the Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183), pregnant and breastfeeding women are not obliged to perform work which has been determined to be prejudicial or hazardous to the health of the mother or the child. Similar regulations can be found in most national labour laws all over the world. For example, the European Union (EU) Working Time Directive, which covers all EU Member States, emphasizes that "the improvement of workers' safety, hygiene and health at work is an objective which should not be subordinated to purely economic considerations".

How does working time affect health?

According to a range of studies summarized in the recent ILO report, *Working time: Its impact on safety and health*,¹ the most crucial factors affecting employees' health are long working hours and certain shift-work patterns, particularly those involving the irregular distribution of working hours and work at night. The report states that regular working in excess of 48 hours per week constitutes an important occupational stressor, which significantly increases the risk of mental health problems. Regularly working more than

60 hours per week clearly increases the risk of cardiovascular disease. There is strong evidence that shift work provokes cardiovascular and gastro-intestinal disorders. Sleep disorders are also widely reported among shiftworkers, and there is some evidence of reproductive disorders caused by shift work. The risk of health disorders is further increased by work at night, e.g. an increased risk of breast cancer among female night workers.

Recommendations to prevent negative impact on health

Healthy working time should be a compromise of different needs, including safety requirements for the use of machinery and equipment, quality of service, as well as individual workers' needs and preferences regarding their work schedules. The goal is to identify the best type of working time system to promote high levels of customer and staff satisfaction.

The following measures with respect to the design of shift systems are among those suggested to improve working conditions, and thus the health and safety, of shiftworkers.

- A short night cycle period with regular rotas should be used.
- Individual workers should work few nights in succession.
- Individual workers should have some free weekends with at least two full days off.
- Short intervals between shifts should be avoided.

- Flexibility regarding shift change times and shift length is needed.
- A maximum number of hours of night work should be established that is less than for work during other times of the day (e.g. eight hours in any 24-hour period).
- Regular rest breaks during the shift should be provided.
- Overtime for night work should be avoided if at all possible.

More generally, in order to design healthy hours of work, work schedules should include:

- a maximum length of working hours (daily and weekly hours of work);
- a limit on the amount of overtime and, if practicable, compensation for overtime should include the option of paid time off;
- a minimum period of daily rest should be fixed (at least 11 hours between shifts).

Case example: Long hours, health and influence on working time

The Institute for Employment Studies in the United Kingdom found from its survey studies that continuously working long hours affects workers' health. For instance, over half of the sample of white-collar workers interviewed in the study believed that continually working long hours affected them physically. It was also found that those who work long hours were less likely to take weekly exercise. More interesting was the issue of control over working hours in relation to the effects of long hours on health. The study reported that significantly more employees, who felt that long hours were taken for granted in their place of work, were more likely to perceive a detrimental impact on their health. For example, one employer found that those who worked the longest hours suffered the least negative effects because of the control they were able to exercise. In contrast, more junior-level staff, who were under more pressure and had less autonomy, suffered more. This employer noted that the amount of sick leave staff took was increasing, and felt this was attributable to this work-related pressure and lack of control. Therefore it appears that those who feel less in control of their working hours are more likely to perceive a negative impact of their hours on their health.

Source: J. Kodz, B. Kersley, M.T. Sterbler and S. O'Regan: "Breaking the long hours culture", in *IES Report*, No. 352, 1998, pp. 44-47.

¹ Available at <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/condtrav/publ/wtwo-as-03.htm>.



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