

Emotional exhaustion may trigger cut in working hours

Researchers in the Netherlands have been examining to what extent workers are modifying their hours to cope with high levels of work-related emotional exhaustion. Findings reveal that most full-time employees would prefer a cut in their hours, with those reporting emotional exhaustion wanting a larger reduction in their working week. By contrast, most employees with part-time contracts would like to increase their hours, with the preferred increase being larger in those with low levels of emotional exhaustion.

Background

With labour shortages expected in the coming years, the Dutch Government is searching for opportunities to increase the number of hours each person works.

Compared with many other European countries, the Netherlands has a large proportion of its workforce on part-time contracts. This suggests there is potential to plug the gap in this predicted labour shortage.

Most part-time workers are female, as many women in the Netherlands choose to reduce their working hours once they become mothers. However, as children grow older and need less care, a study, [Distributed Time \(in Dutch\)](#), has shown that women are deciding not to increase their working hours. This seems to show that factors other than caring for their offspring keep them from expanding their working hours.

Researchers have been trying to gauge the impact of emotional exhaustion on how people decide on changes to their contractual working hours. They have tested the hypothesis that workers modify their working hours as a means of coping with high levels of work-related emotional exhaustion.

Full-time versus part-time work

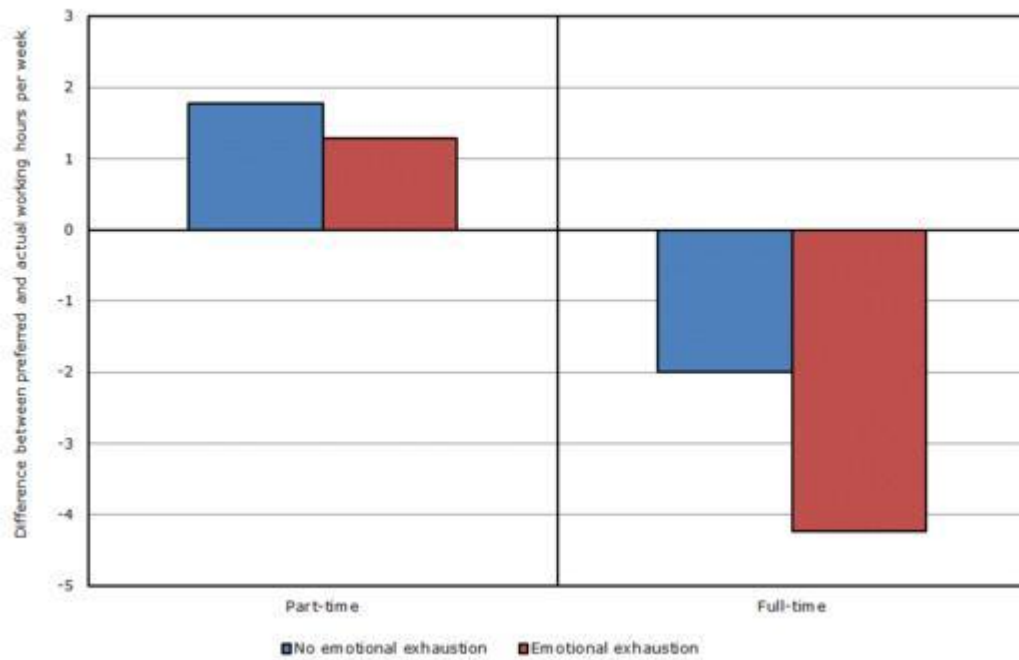
If workers modify their working hours as a means of coping with high levels of work-related emotional exhaustion, then the prevalence of emotional exhaustion is expected to be higher in full-time workers than in part-time workers. Analyses of data from 22,376 employees who participated in the [Netherlands Working Conditions Survey \(NWCS\)](#) in 2007 show that this is the case.

The prevalence of emotional exhaustion was measured using the Utrecht Burnout Scale that asks respondents to assess the applicability of a series of statements to the way they feel about their work. The prevalence was 12.4% in employees working at least 32 hours per week, and only 8.4% in employees working part-time.

Figure 1 shows that, on average, full-time workers – those working more than 32 hours per week with a mean of 37.6 hours per week – wanted a reduction in their working hours, and that the preferred reduction was larger in those reporting emotional exhaustion.

For employees with a part-time contract – those working less than 32 hours per week with a mean of 19.7 hours – the opposite was true. They wanted to increase their contractual working hours, and this preferred increase was larger in those with low levels of emotional exhaustion.

Figure 1: Preferred change in contractual working hours, by contract and emotional exhaustion

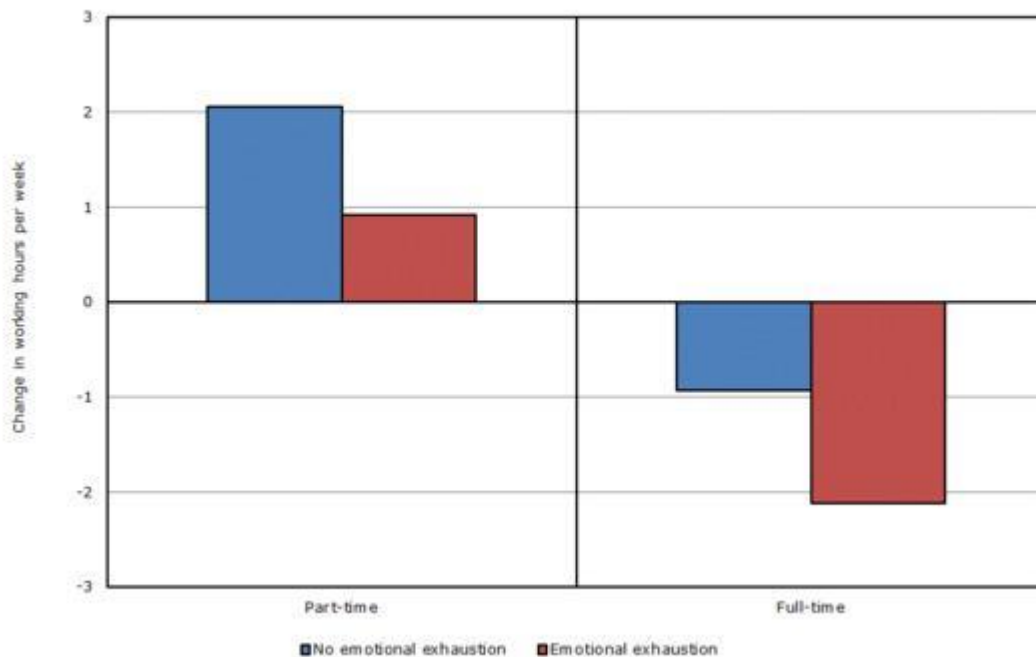


Source: TNO/CBS, NWCS 2007

Two-year follow-up data from 7,195 participants in the Netherlands Working Conditions Survey between 2007 and 2009 were gathered with a questionnaire that was comparable to the questionnaire used at baseline in the 2007 NWCS. These data show that contractual working hours and emotional exhaustion are not only related to the desired changes in contractual working hours, but that they also predict changes in contractual working hours (Figure 2).

The increase observed among part-time workers over two years of follow-up was 1.1 hours per week smaller if emotional exhaustion was present at baseline. Similarly, full-time workers showed a decrease in contractual working hours that was 1.2 hours per week larger if high levels of emotional exhaustion were present in 2007.

Figure 2: Change in contractual working hours over two years, by contract and emotional exhaustion at baseline



Source: TNO/CBS, NWCCS 2007, 2009

Commentary

To summarise the findings, employees working part-time reported less emotional exhaustion than those in full-time jobs. Emotional exhaustion shows a strong correlation with the desired and actual change in contractual working hours. A reduction of labour supply may therefore be added to the list of adverse consequences of high workloads.

Research on the health effects of working conditions has so far not taken into account the possibility that people reduce their contractual working hours to cope with a high workload and to prevent or alleviate emotional exhaustion. The present findings suggest, certainly in the Netherlands where many people work part-time, that the negative effects of a high workload are underestimated.

A study, [Part-time work and workload \(in Dutch\)](#), has shown that workload and the prevalence of emotional exhaustion is high in the education and care sectors. These are sectors where many work part-time, and where large labour force shortages are expected. It may be that in these sectors, many employees are only able to do the kind of work asked of them on a part-time basis. By working part-time they optimise their workload and reduce the risk of developing emotional exhaustion. This mechanism, however, adds pressure to the labour force shortages in these sectors.

References

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