

Pace of work stabilising, but not in all sectors

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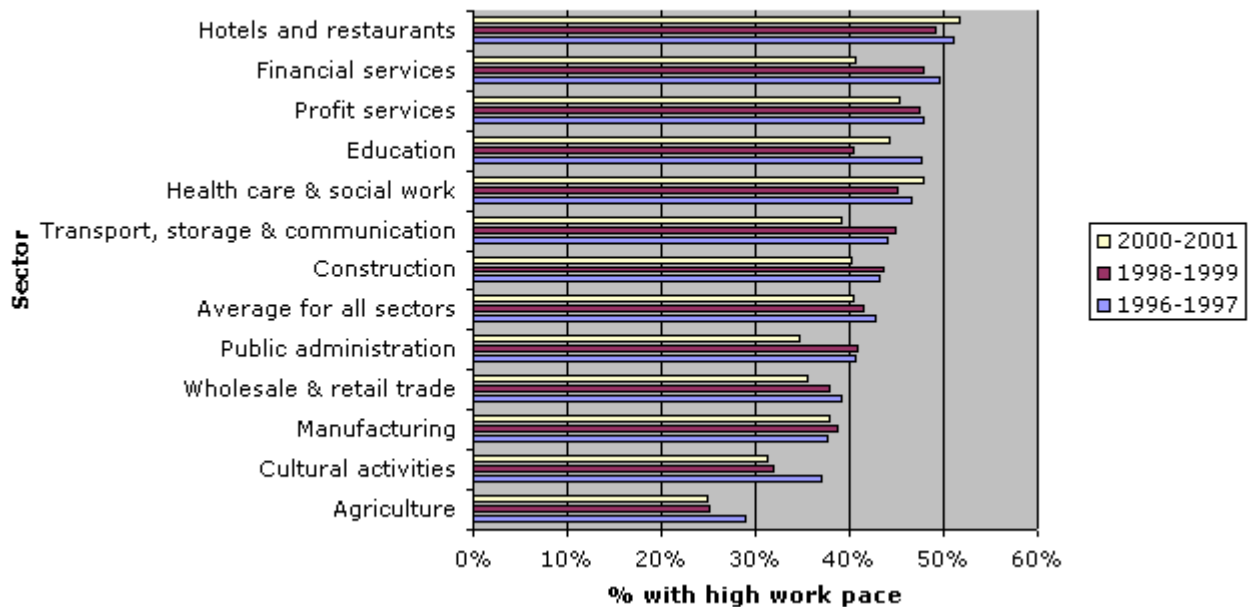
Irene Houtman

The Netherlands had the highest level of work pace in Europe but this position has levelled off in the last five years. There appears to be a general trend towards a decline in work pace. However, different sectors show varying trends, with work pace on the rise again in the education, health and HORECA (hotel and restaurant) sectors.

In the Foundation's third European survey on working conditions (2000), the Netherlands took top position with respect to pace of work, compared with other EU Member States. In 2000, 42.3% in the Netherlands, compared with an EU average of 32.1%, reported a high level of work pace for more than half of their working time. National statistics from the [Central Bureau of Statistics](#) in the Netherlands indicate that the pace of work had been on the increase for about 20 years, from 1977 until 1997 (Houtman et al, 2001).

Since 1997, the pace of work has levelled off at national level. Sector-specific data reveal that in the majority of sectors there has been a decline in work pace over the past five years (see figure). However, since 2000, some sectors are again showing further increases, in particular the health care, education and HORECA (hotel and restaurant) sectors. These areas indicate an average rise in work pace of 3.2%, compared with the 3.6% average decline among the other sectors.

Work pace (source: CBS)



Why the increase?

Several explanations have been put forward to account for the 20-year increase in work pace.

- The reduction in working time from 40 hours to 36 hours per week was designed to create jobs. However, the reality was that people had to do the same amount of work in less time.
- Work has become more centralised. ICT developments and teleworking mean that the boundaries between work and private life have largely disappeared, according to the experiences of over 60% of the population. This has contributed to the intensification of work. (The lack of boundaries between work and private life is also considered to be an important cause of chronic fatigue.)
- Work demands have become more directed towards cost-efficiency, quality, service, flexibility and continuous improvement. This calls for new methods of work organisation, such as 'just in time' management.

Why the change?

These processes are still ongoing, yet the general picture reveals a levelling off in work pace in the Netherlands. Most sectors indicate a decline in work pace, particularly over the last four years (see figure).

The decline is not associated with a ceiling effect. The HORECA sector, which was highest in 1996, has experienced a further increase in work pace (2.6%) since 1999. From 2000 onwards, slightly higher increases can be seen too in the public sectors of education (2.9%) and health care and social work (3.6%).

The changes in pace of work may well be related to the recent economic recession in the Netherlands. Recession generally means less work, thus reducing work pace demands.

However, the recession has impacted differently on the education and health care sectors. These sectors have become unpopular due to low wages and a high workload, resulting in a shortage of personnel. Also, both sectors are in a transition phase, moving from traditional public service, and product-oriented, organisations to become more demand-oriented service providers. These factors contribute to rising levels of work pace. (Hesselink et al, 2001)

The HORECA sector, too, has felt the effects of the recession. This sector has a relatively high percentage of non-permanent jobs and a high staff turnover (Van den Bossche et al, 2003). Recent cutbacks have led to a reduction in the workforce, thereby generating an increased pace of work for the remaining staff ([Central Bureau of Statistics](#)).

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