

# Greater autonomy at work

Observatory:

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[Psychosocial work factors](#)

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## About

Country:

Netherlands

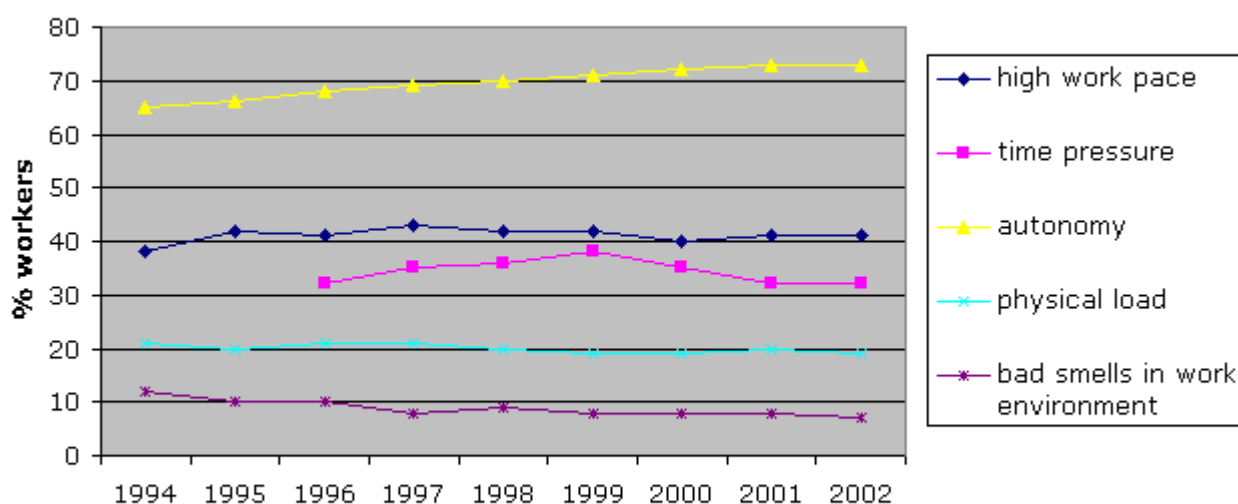
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*In the past 10 years, workers in the Netherlands increasingly report more decision-making power in their work. This is important for an economy in recession and where workers face greater work demands. It makes work more interesting, creates a healthier work environment, and provides opportunities for skills and intellectual development.*

The fourth edition of the [Trend report on work 2004 \(76kb pdf in Dutch\)](#), published by TNO Work and Employment, shows that the quality of work in the Netherlands appears to have stabilised in the past 10 years. Figure 1 illustrates the development of greater job autonomy for the workforce. Negative factors like bad smells and time-pressure demands remain steady or show a slight decline.

**Figure 1 Trends in quality of work**

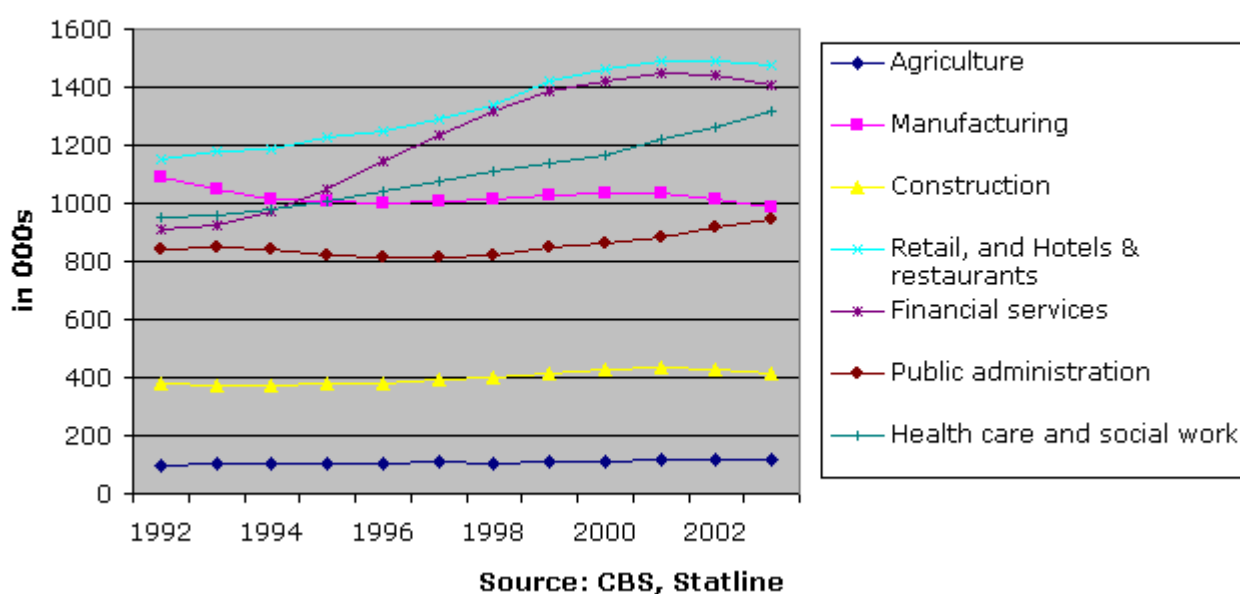


Source: Living Conditions Survey, CBS - [www.cbs.nl](http://www.cbs.nl)

Greater latitude in decision-making has positive effects, while a lack of autonomy leads to varying health problems and higher absenteeism ([de Lange et al, 2003 \(125kb pdf\)](#), Vahtera et al, 2000).

The rise in work autonomy is partly due to the recent shift in employment towards financial services. Figure 2 shows an increase in employment in this sector, as well as in healthcare and social work, and to a lesser extent, in public administration. In these sectors, a high proportion of workers report having relatively high autonomy (see Figure 3).

**Figure 2 Trends in employment by sector**



## Greater job control for most workers

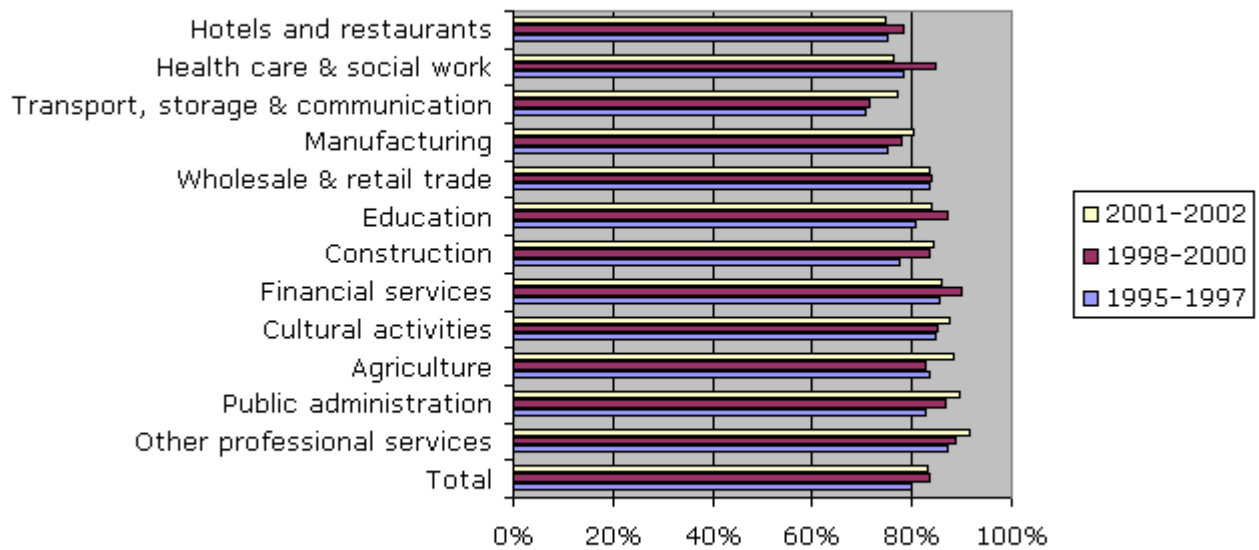
Figure 3 shows a general increase in job autonomy at national level, as well as in many sectors, indicating that the increase is not only due to the shift in employment to certain sectors. Even workers in a shrinking sector like manufacturing increasingly report greater freedom in decision-making.

Exceptions at sector level are education, hotels and restaurants, healthcare and social work. Here, workers report having relatively low autonomy. Although an initial increase was observed, this has recently declined.

The general rise in autonomy may have resulted from the increase in flexible work, greater use of computers, and new ways of working. Teleworking, for example, is positively associated with job control (Third European working conditions survey, 2000).

The exceptions in the three sectors noted may be caused by the fact that flexibility and teleworking are more difficult to achieve when the work is largely restricted to the school, hotel, restaurant or hospital, and to shiftwork.

**Figure 3 Work autonomy, by sector**



**Source: Living Conditions Survey, CBS**

## Health implications

A further positive aspect is that the rise in job autonomy has been accompanied by a levelling off, and even a slight decline, in pace of work (NL0311NU01). Traditionally, workers in sectors with high autonomy have often also reported a high work pace. This is particularly true for the financial services sector, though less so for education, hotels and restaurants, healthcare and social services. Work pace and level of job control together are important predictors of work-related mental health problems, such as 'burnout'.

Burnout appears to be determined by a high work pace (attributable risk of 39%; Houtman and de Vroome, 2002). However, reduced job control is an important co-determinant of sick leave absence (attributable risk of 15% for the total population, while high work pace has a risk of 8%). For absence due to work stress, low job control has an attributable risk of 28%, and high work pace a risk of 42%. Long-term absence and disability resulting from psychological disorders are one of the major costs of poor working conditions, estimated at about €3 billion each year in the Netherlands (Koningsveld et al, 2003).

## References

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