

Netherlands: Steady decline in job autonomy

Published on:

06 May 2015

Job autonomy – how far employees can regulate their own work – has been declining for decades in much of Europe. However, Dutch employees began to report a steady fall only in 2008. The Netherlands Working Conditions Survey (NWCS) indicates autonomy has shrunk most in the business services sector, among young employees and those with temporary contracts.

Low job autonomy: health and organisational risks

Research shows that job autonomy has predominantly positive effects, such as the prevention of stress, burnout and cardiovascular disease. Employees with a good deal of autonomy generally report better well-being, are more productive, more creative, have more self-esteem and have higher work motivation (Lopes et al, 2014). Autonomy also has economic benefits with lower employee turnover and less absenteeism (Spector, 1986). Policy-makers should therefore be aware of the economic and health risks posed by declining job autonomy.

Eurofound's European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) shows that, on average, job autonomy significantly declined in most European countries from 1995 to 2010. But this did not include the Netherlands and Scandinavia, as shown by Lopes et al (2014) who say that job autonomy levels in Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden are above the EU average for all groups of workers.

Indeed, according to a 2004 Eurofound study, job autonomy in the Netherlands increased from 1994 to 2002. However, the Netherlands Working Conditions Survey (NWCS), carried out by the Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research (TNO), has indicated a steady decline in autonomy levels since 2008 (in Dutch) (Figure 1). The NWCS is the largest Dutch employee monitor, each year surveying a sample of more than 20,000 employees since 2005. Overall, the share of Dutch employees reporting high job autonomy decreased from 60.5% in 2008 to 55.6% in 2013.

Figure 1: Dutch employees reporting high job autonomy (%)

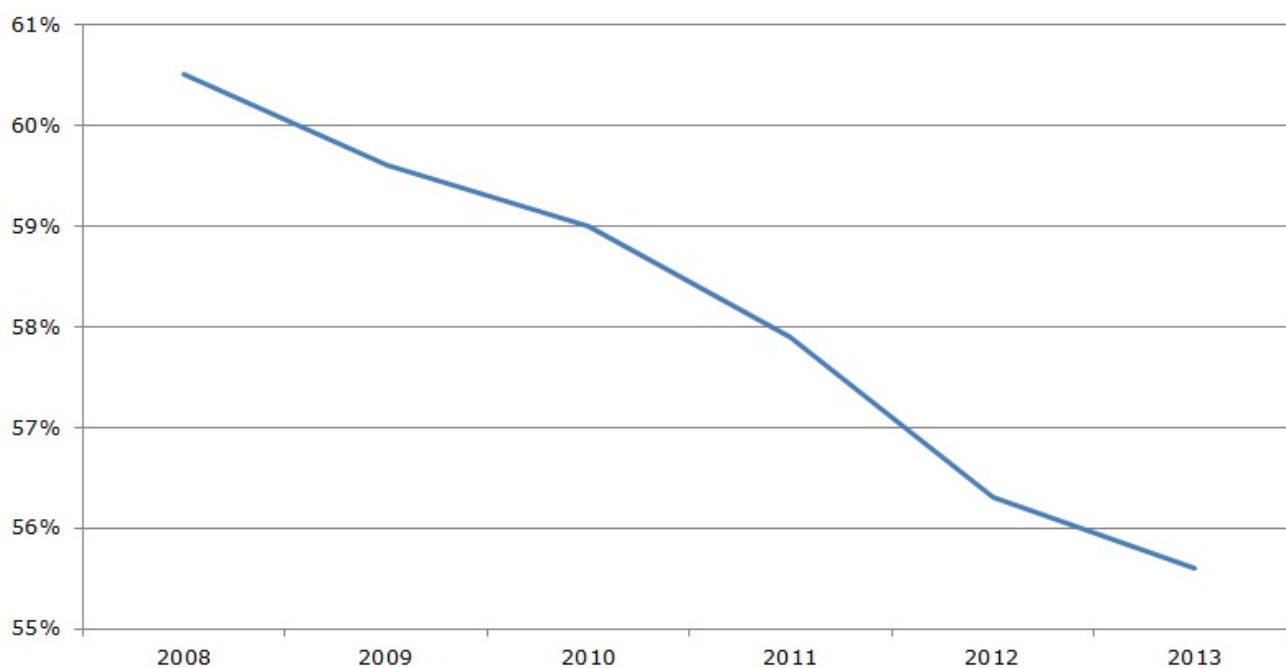
About

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Source: NWCS, 2008–2013 (TNO)

National trends

The NWCS defines job autonomy as the extent to which employees are able to regulate their own work. This involves both the ability to choose how to work, as well as the planning and sequencing of operations. For instance, employees were asked whether they could decide on the pace of their work. The five autonomy indicators used are derived from the Job Content Questionnaire (JCQ) (Karasek, 1985; Karasek et al, 1998).

Table 1 shows the percentage of employees reporting high job autonomy in 2008 and 2013. Autonomy trends across sectors are fairly similar. All sectors show a gradual, declining trend, except for financial institutions and construction (respectively a difference of -0.4 and +0.7 percentage points between 2008 and 2013). Job autonomy declined fastest in the business service sector (-8.1 percentage points). It should be noted that, while the education sector and health and social work sector show moderate declines (respectively -3.5 points and -3.9 points), job autonomy levels in those sectors are generally low.

Second, employees with temporary contracts (such as fixed-term, temporary agency work or on-call arrangements) perceive a larger decline in job autonomy than employees with permanent contracts. Traditionally, autonomy among temporary contract employees is lower than among employees with a permanent contract. Between 2008 and 2013 this difference increased. While the percentage of permanent contract employees who are highly autonomous gradually declined, by 2.6 percentage points (from 63.6% to 61.0%), the percentage of highly autonomous temporary employees declined by 8.6 points (from 46.5% to 37.9%).

In general, young employees report lower job autonomy than older employees. This difference increased between 2008 and 2013: the percentage of employees aged 15–24 who are highly autonomous gradually decreased by 10.9 percentage points, compared with a decrease of less than 5 points among employees aged 35 years or over. This means that, in 2013, young employees reported less autonomy than they did in 2008.

On average, less educated employees, female employees and employees in non-managerial positions report lower job autonomy than highly educated employees, male employees and managers respectively. However, the autonomy differences between the highly educated and less educated, men and women and managers and non-managers have neither become smaller nor larger since 2008.

Job autonomy in the Netherlands appears to be declining most in three groups: in the business services sector, and among temporary contract employees and young employees.

Table 1: Dutch employees reporting high job autonomy (%)

	Subgroup	2008 (%)	2013 (%)	Difference (%-points)
Overall		60.5	55.6	-4.9
Sector	Agriculture and fisheries	46.7	43.4	-3.3
	Industry	66.4	61.9	-4.5
	Construction	67.2	67.9	0.7
	Trade	56.8	49.7	-7.1
	Transport and storage	47.0	42.5	-4.5
	Catering	43.0	36.4	-6.6
	Information and communication	79.0	80.9	1.9
	Financial institutions	73.6	73.2	-0.4
	Business services	69.1	61.0	-8.1

	Subgroup	2008 (%)	2013 (%)	Difference (%-points)
Contract	Public administration	72.7	69.9	-2.8
	Education	52.0	48.1	-3.9
	Health and social work	49.6	46.1	-3.5
	Culture and other services	63.4	59.4	-4.0
	Permanent	63.6	61.0	-2.6
	Temporary	46.5	37.9	-8.6
	Educational level	Low	49.2	-5.8
		Middle	58.9	-6.3
		High	73.4	-4.5
	Sex	Male	66.0	-5.1
		Female	54.0	-4.2
Age	15–24	39.3	28.4	-10.9
	25–34	60.4	55.0	-5.4
	35–44	66.1	63.6	-2.5
	45–54	62.6	61.5	-1.1
	55–64	65.5	61.0	-4.5

Source: NWCS, 2008–2013 (TNO)

Decline of autonomy in business services

Job autonomy is declining in most sectors (Table 1), but the largest fall is in the business services sector. Here, the number of employees who saw themselves as being highly autonomous declined from 69.1% in 2008 to 61.0% in 2013 (-8.1% percentage points). Some of the many changes in this sector might account for this decline.

The distribution of professions is changing more rapidly in the business services sector than in any other. For instance, the percentage of administrative professions within the sector declined from 21.7% in 2008 to 16.4% in 2013. The percentage of specialists, such as engineers, technicians, statisticians and systems analysts, declined from 20.3% in 2008 to 15.0% in 2013. However, the percentage of service occupations, such as cooks, cleaners, guards and waiters, increased from 15.6% to 19.1%. This shift may explain some of the decline in job autonomy in this sector.

Specialist jobs, on average, are more skilled and more autonomous than service professions. In 2013, 81.2% of the specialists in the business services sector reported being highly autonomous, compared with 46.4% of service employees. The sector appears to be changing from a high-skilled to a low-skilled services sector. This shift is also reflected in educational trends within the sector. The percentage of less-educated people increased (from 19.3% in 2008 to 21.4% in 2013), while the percentage of highly educated people decreased (40.4% in 2008 to 38.0% in 2013).

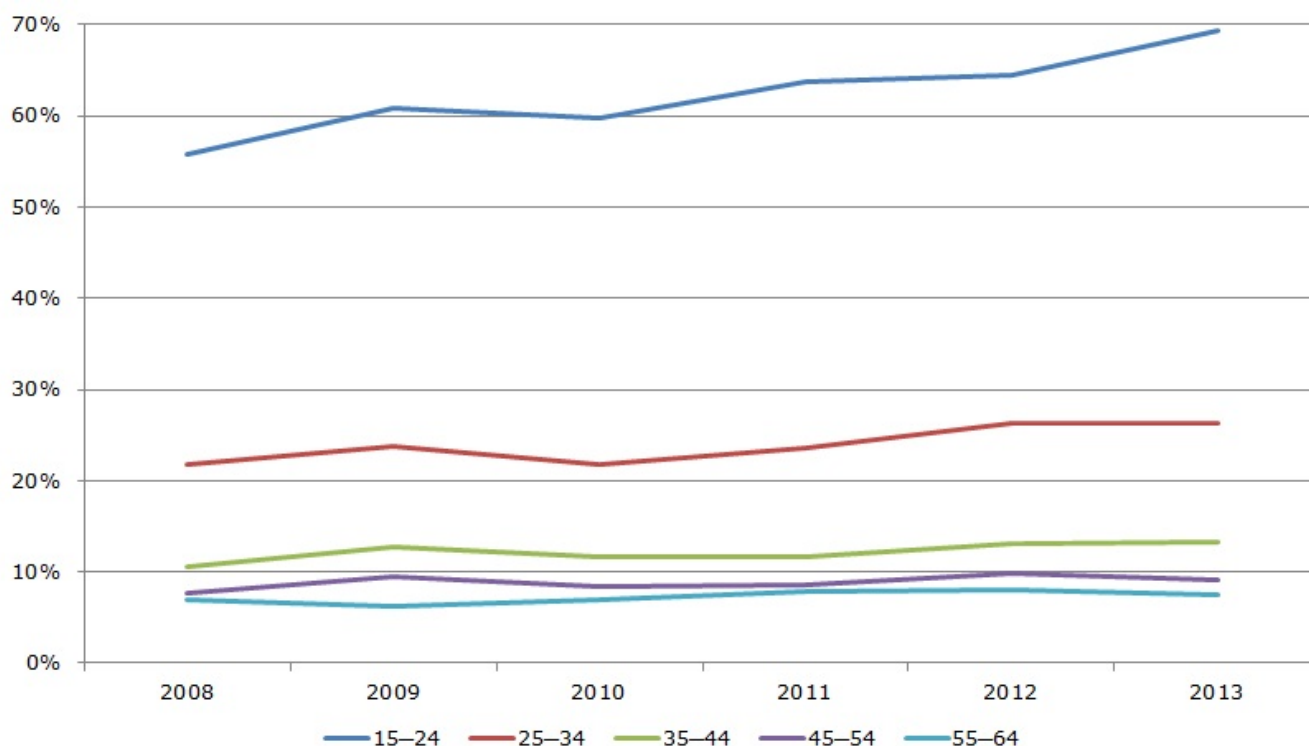
There has also been an increase in flexible labour in the sector (generally an area of less job autonomy), indicated by a remarkable rise in employees with temporary contracts from 20.2% in 2008 to 32.2% in 2013.

Young employees increasingly at risk

Young Dutch employees (15–24 years old) report less job autonomy than older employees (Table 1). This difference increased between 2008 and 2013, with the percentage of highly autonomous employees aged between 15–24 decreasing twice as fast as that in older age groups.

Comparable trends hold for people who have worked for less than three years for their current employer. Some 55.6% of these reported high autonomy in 2008, compared with 44.8% in 2013 (a decline of 10.8 percentage points). However, 66.3% of employees who had worked for 10 years or longer at their current employer reported high autonomy in 2008, compared with 61.9% in 2013 (a decline of 4.4 points). Age and seniority, unsurprisingly, are closely linked: the younger employees are, the less time they have worked.

Figure 2: Dutch employees with flexible contract arrangements, by age (%)

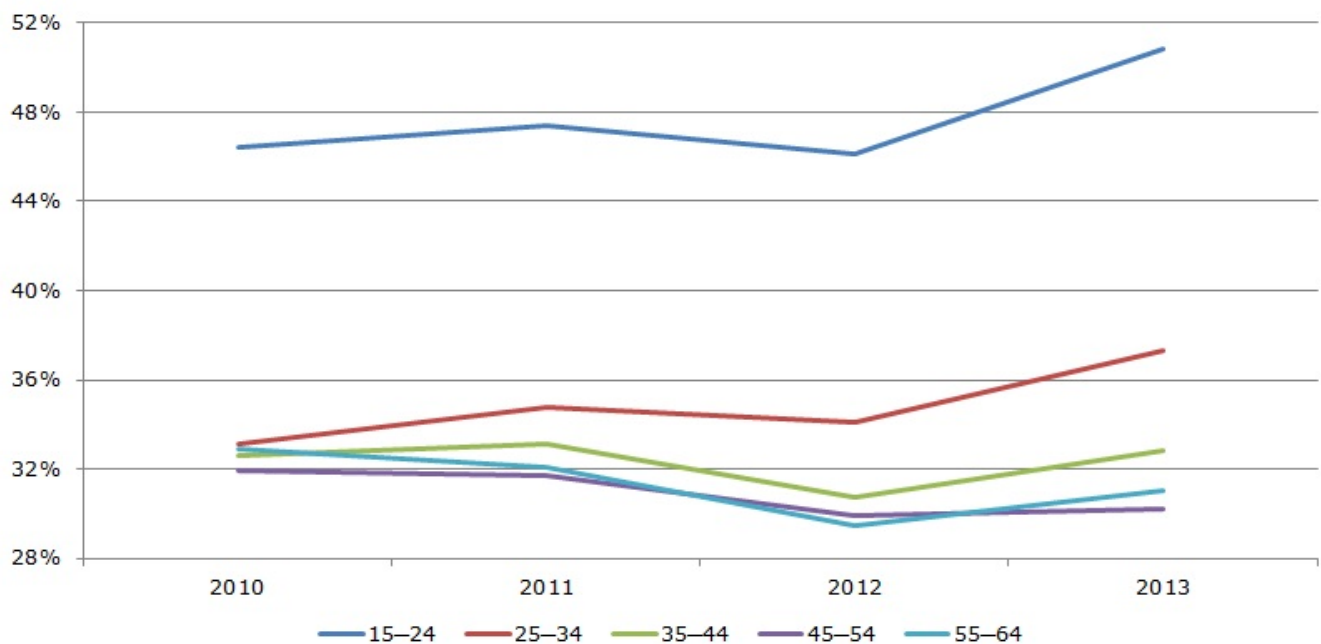


Source: NWCS, 2008–2013 (TNO)

The decrease in job autonomy among young employees seems to be related to the increase in young employees with a temporary contract (see Figure 2). Traditionally, young employees have been more likely than older employees to have a temporary contract. However, this has intensified since 2008. The number of people aged 15–24 with temporary contracts increased from 55.8% in 2008 to 69.3% in 2013 (an increase of 13.5 percentage points). This can be compared with the increase in the overall workforce in the number of employees with a temporary contract from 17.5% in 2008 to 22.5% in 2013 (an increase of 5.0 points).

Another explanation for decreasing autonomy among young employees is a growing skills mismatch. Employees were asked whether their skill level suited their job level. Employees who reported having more skills and knowledge than necessary for their job were considered 'under-utilised'. One can assume that highly skilled employees who are used to high autonomy will be more sensitive to a restriction of their autonomy if they work in low-skilled jobs. The difference between the skills needed for a job and the skills actually possessed is widening among younger employees but decreasing for older employees (Figure 3). In 2013, 50.8% of employees aged 15–24, and 37.3% of those aged 25–34 reported having more skills and knowledge than necessary for their job, while only 31.0% of employees aged 35–64 did so.

Figure 3: Dutch employees reporting skills mismatch, by age



Source: NWCS, 2010–2013 (TNO)

Commentary

Dutch employees have reported a steady decline in job autonomy since 2008. The decline is most prominent among employees in the business services sector, young employees and those on temporary contracts. These subgroups appear to be related. Flexible labour has become more prevalent in the business services sector and among young employees since 2008. The fall in job autonomy among employees with temporary contracts therefore seems to be the reason for the overall decrease in job autonomy.

An increasing proportion of the Dutch workforce consists of employees on flexible contracts. TNO predicts that, in 2020, 30% of Dutch employees will have temporary contracts. A report by the Dutch Social and Economic Council (SER) says employers use flexible contracts mainly to reduce the potential effect of economic fluctuations. This might imply they use flexible contracts even when permanent work is available.

Apart from experiencing a decline in job autonomy, a 2013 report by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) identifies a number of constraints that temporary employment puts on Dutch employees (in Dutch, 3.25 MB PDF). Temporary workers often do not save for pensions, are unable to get mortgages and have minimal access to training. The Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CBP) reported, in 2011, that temporary workers also earn about 5% less than permanent employees, partly because Dutch wages are strongly related to contract duration.

Given the increasing numbers of young people in vulnerable jobs, managers, policymakers and research organisations should try to see how better social security and job autonomy could be organised for people without permanent contracts.

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