



European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

# Working conditions in France

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*Research over the past few years shows that working conditions in France have deteriorated. Work organisation has become increasingly complex and restrictive. Work rates and rhythms are faster, work is more repetitive, mental strain and stress are growing. The numbers of occupational accidents and illnesses are also rising. However, since the introduction of the 35-hour working week in 2001, employees have greater scope for taking initiative.*

## **Methodology**

Much of the data presented in this report are the result of working conditions surveys carried out every five years by the French Ministry of Labour. The Ministry's research and statistics department, DARES (*Direction de l'animation de la recherche, des études et des statistiques*), submits a questionnaire to around 22,000 employees, comprising a representative sample of the active working population, by sector, profession, age, gender, and socio-professional group.

The survey data are not based on objective measurements but on the declarations of employees, i.e. the way in which they perceive working conditions. Yet these are not opinion polls. The items chosen are as factual as possible and the response options are defined within standard parameters.

Data relating to occupational disorders and accidents are mainly produced by CNAM (*Caisse Nationale d'Assurance Maladie* - Sickness Benefit Fund). They cover all reported cases of accidents and disorders.

## **Increasingly restrictive work organisation**

The 1998 DARES working conditions survey highlights the complex and restrictive nature of work organisation, compared with the results for 1984 and 1991. Increasingly, employees have schedules or deadlines that need to be respected within one hour or immediately (see Figure below).

Such an accelerating pace of work does not necessarily have a negative impact on health and well-being in the workplace. That depends on whether each employee is given the flexibility to adapt his or her own work rhythms to match production requirements. Since the late 1980s, employers tend to appeal more to employees' initiative.

### **Time constraints**

#### **Machine-related constraints**

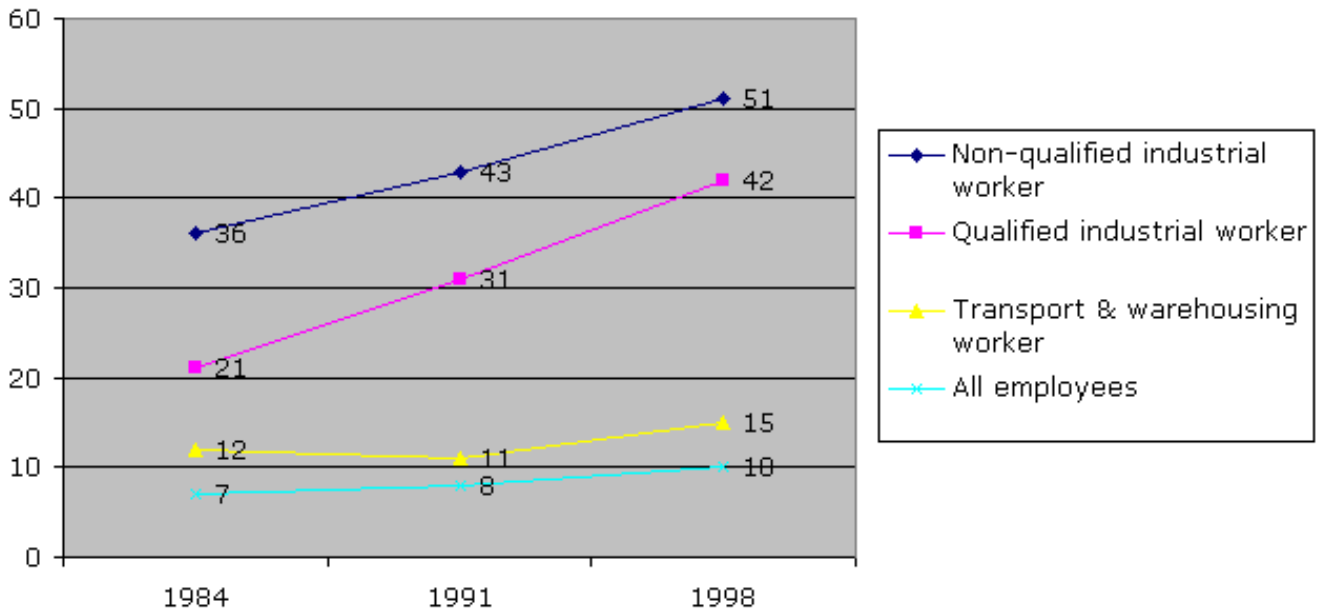
Although new forms of organisation have emerged, Taylorism has not disappeared. Industrial workers, for the most part, remain tied to assembly line work. Far from dying out, this form of work increased from 7.5% in 1984 to 15% in 1998 among qualified workers, and from 20% to 30% among non-qualified workers. It concerns more than one in five workers in the textile, automotive, agricultural and food sectors.

16% of all workers in 1998 reported that their work rhythm was imposed by the automatic movement of an object. This compares with 6.5% in 1984. 19% stated that their work pace was determined by the automatic rhythm of a machine (11% in 1984). This type of constraint tends to be increasing more in medium-sized companies, whereas it is falling or stabilising in larger companies (over 1,000 employees).

Overall, non-qualified industrial workers are most liable to an enforced pace of work. However, qualified workers also state that they are required to work to enforced rates, at an even faster rhythm than non-qualified workers (see Figure). In 1998, more than 650,000 industrial qualified workers were affected, compared with 500,000 in 1991.

Technicians and supervisors also increasingly identify constraints in their own work (technicians: 2% in 1984, 4% in 1991, 10% in 1998; supervisors: 6% in 1984, 8% in 1991, 11% in 1998).

### Working at an enforced pace, among industrial workers (%)



#### Increasingly tight deadlines

Over 60% of industrial workers - almost as many as in the construction industry - are subject to 24-hour production schedules or deadlines. This was the case for fewer than a third of workers in the same category in 1984. The highest proportion occurs in sectors such as textiles, printing, automotive and electronic components. It also concerns 37% of service sector workers: transport, operational services (such as temporary agency work, cleaning), retailing and car repairs. The number of employees having to comply with deadlines of less than an hour has risen from 16% in 1991 to 23% in 1998.

#### Rise in repetitive work

Repetitive work mainly affects non-qualified workers but has also increased among qualified workers (see Table 1). For 13% of workers, this repetitive work is carried out in cycles of less than a minute. Certain service sectors are similarly affected: 40% of self-service employees, 24% in postal services and telecommunications. Other categories have also experienced strong increases.

**Table 1 Sectors most affected by repetitive work (%)**

	Proportion of employees who continually repeat the same movements			... in cycles of less than one minute		
	1984	1991	1998	1984	1991	1998
Total	20	30	29	5	7	7
Postal & telecommunications	36	48	62	10	18	24
Healthcare	20	36	41	3	3	4
Transport	34	30	37	8	9	16
Self-service	44	64	67	18	30	40
Food sales	24	40	37	6	14	11

Hotel and catering	20	46	42	5	10	16
Industrial (qualified)	35	46	51	10	13	15
Industrial (non-qualified)	58	68	70	22	30	31
Transport and warehousing	31	45	41	7	11	10

Source: MES-DARES working conditions surveys

### ***Changes since the reduction in working hours (RTT)***

The reduced working week has, in many cases, modified the work organisation of employees and their working conditions. The 'RTT and lifestyles' survey, carried out in early 2001, measured employees' assessment of how their working conditions have changed one year after the introduction of the 35-hour working week (see Table 2). 1,618 employees were surveyed: 67% men; 46% qualified blue and white-collar workers; 12% non-qualified blue and white-collar workers; 26% professionals; 16% management.

**Table 2 Employee perception of working conditions since the introduction of the reduced working week (%)**

	Men	Women	Total
Improvement	26.5	25.4	26.1
Deterioration	28.5	26.9	28.0
Unchanged	45.0	47.7	45.9

Source: DARES 'RTT and lifestyles' survey, 2001

### **Organisational changes and intensification of work**

Formal organisational changes are often cited as a source of work intensification (see appendix). Changes most frequently mentioned by employees are: having to perform a greater variety of functions (48%), changes in work procedures (38%), a review of tasks (38%), the introduction or increased use of new technologies (36%) and the introduction of team work (32%) - Table 3.

**Table 3 Organisational changes linked to the shorter working week, according to employees**

Organisational changes	%
Increased versatility	48
Changes in procedures	38
Review of tasks	38
Increased use of new technology	36
Introduction of new technology	36
Introduction of new work teams	32
Development of group work	24
Abandonment of certain tasks or functions	20

Outsourcing of certain tasks or functions	19
Shorter meetings	13

Source: DARES 'RTT and lifestyles' survey, 2001

These organisational changes have increased work intensity and are often accompanied by a loss of autonomy. Employees have more tasks to accomplish, with less time to do them. This may partly explain the deterioration in relations with co-workers and the feeling of work being less well done.

Having to take on new tasks is one of the changes observed with the new reduced working week. This increases work intensity and is reported by a quarter of the sample, mainly women with intermediate qualifications (professionals, white-collar workers and qualified blue-collar workers). An equal proportion considers that its work is more subject to new procedures (Table 4). This percentage tends to be made up of male professionals and non-qualified women. The adoption of new tasks is considered by the employees surveyed as disimproving working conditions. This may be due to the increased versatility required, which tends to be viewed negatively by employees.

**Table 4 Most frequently observed changes in work (%)**

	Management		Intermediate qualifications		Qualified workers		Non-qualified workers		All
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	
Less time	52	53	44	55	31	46	37	42	42
More new tasks	23	18	23	30	20	27	16	24	23
More procedures	22	23	29	24	23	21	16	33	24
Fewer relations/discussions with colleagues	22	22	21	26	20	29	26	32	23
Work less well finished	9	12	10	12	9	11	12	14	10
Better organisation	43	43	31	34	18	20	18	13	26
Greater autonomy	17	n/a	21	17	15	13	13	16	16

Source: DARES 'RTT and lifestyles' survey, 2001

### Procedures and flexibility

On the other hand, the reinforcement of procedures tends to be regarded positively in providing a clear framework for employees' work and setting out responsibilities. The working conditions surveys confirm a slow but definite rise in employees' scope for taking initiative (Bué, 1999), which reduces constraints (Hamon-Cholet and Rougerie, 2000). It appears that the shorter working week has a similar effect, especially for qualified professions. Management and intermediate professions believe that they can organise their work better since the introduction of the 35-hour working week (Table 4). Autonomy and satisfaction with working conditions are strongly linked: 40%

of employees who feel more autonomous report an improvement in their working conditions, whereas those who feel a loss of autonomy believe that their working conditions have deteriorated.

### **Working conditions and stress**

Almost one third of employees (29% of men and 37% of women) report being more stressed since the introduction of the 35-hour working week. The figures are even higher among intermediate professions and non-qualified employees. However, such stress appears to be most prevalent (41%) among non-qualified blue-collar and white-collar female workers.

Strong intensification in work and fewer discussions within the work group are major factors that accentuate stress: 62% of employees whose relations with co-workers have been reduced state that they are more stressed. On the other hand, less time constraints, the outsourcing of certain tasks, the introduction of team work, and greater autonomy tend to alleviate tension.

### **Work-life balance**

Since the introduction of the 35-hour working week, a third of employees state that they can more effectively balance home and professional life. Four out of 10 spend more time with their partners, and almost half of parents with children under 12 spend more time with them (Estrade, Méda and Orain, 2001).

The allocation of additional holidays, less time constraints, and more regular working hours favour a positive perception of working conditions. These are all factors that facilitate the balance between home and professional life, and leave more time for the family or household tasks.

In this way, the probability of reporting better working conditions increases when employees spend more time with their family and state that they are better able to balance work and non-work activities. 54% of employees who believe that they manage their spare time better also state that their working conditions have improved; while 78% of those who find it more difficult to balance work and non-work have a negative view of their working conditions.

### **Physical effort and risks at work**

According to the working conditions survey, 72% of employees in 1998 declared that their work involves significant physical effort or exertion. This is almost the same as in 1991, but the proportion increased by 10% during the 1980s (Table 5).

However, the number of employees exposed to several constraints (physical efforts, occupational risks, noise pollution) is rising strongly. The percentage of those who answer positively to at least three of the physical effort variables continues to grow: 16% in 1984; 29% in 1991; 38% in 1998.

This trend is quite similar to that of occupational risks: the proportion of employees who suffer more than two risks increased from 25% in 1984, to 34% in 1991 and 40% in 1998.

The work of manual socio-professional categories (artisan workers, agricultural workers) involves the most physical effort. In 1998, two thirds of workers cited at least three types of effort, compared with 50% in 1991. Seven out of 10 mentioned three risks or more.

**Table 5 Physical and risk factors, reported by employees (%)**

	1978	1984	1991	1998
<b>Physical efforts</b>				
Making at least one physical effort	n/a	64	70	72
Standing for long	51	49	53	54

periods				
Carrying heavy loads	21	22	32	38
Staying for long periods in difficult or tiring positions	17	16	29	37
Walking for long periods or frequently	n/a	17	28	35
Making painful or tiring movements	n/a	n/a	n/a	34
Making other major physical efforts	11	11	19	24
<b>Occupational risks</b>				
Exposed to at least one risk	n/a	62	72	74
Breathing in dust	27	27	35	36
Injury from tools or materials			28	30
Traffic accidents	18	17	25	29
Infectious diseases		14	19	27
Falling	17	14	21	25
Being hit by a projected or falling object	n/a	14	20	23
Handling toxic or dangerous products	14	14	19	22
Breathing in fumes	12	15	21	20
Injury on a machine	17	15	17	19
Being burnt	13	11	15	18
Breathing in toxic or dangerous products	13	13	19	18
<b>Noise pollution</b>				
Very loud or piercing noise levels	27	25	32	31
Not being able to hear someone without them raising their voice	20	16	19	18

Source: MES-DARES working conditions surveys, 1978, 1984, 1991 and 1998. Note: This table does not identify all efforts and risks cited in the survey, only major ones.

The most frequently mentioned occupational risks are the inhalation of dust (36%) and injury with tools or

materials (30%).

Difficult postures (54% report that they have to stand up for long periods), walking, and the carrying of heavy loads show the highest rates of increase (Table 6).

Exposure to infectious risks has begun to extend to professions other than healthcare and cleaning. In 1998, a quarter of employees declared being exposed to infectious risks in their work. This risk presents the strongest increase since 1991 (Table 7).

**Table 6 Physical effort, by socio-professional group (%)**

	Standing for long periods			Standing in a difficult or tiring position for long periods			Carrying or moving heavy loads			Frequently walking for long periods		
	1984	1991	1998	1984	1991	1998	1984	1991	1998	1984	1991	1998
<b>Management</b>	23	26	26	5	10	13	4	6	10	10	13	16
Professionals	43	44	46	9	19	26	10	19	27	18	28	33
Secondary teachers	48	56	64	4	9	16	4	7	15	11	15	23
Primary teachers	65	72	71	5	15	26	1	7	15	8	16	25
Health care professionals	58	63	66	12	23	35	24	40	46	24	44	48
Technicians	34	36	40	10	20	26	9	17	27	17	26	32
Supervisors	57	62	64	12	21	28	19	30	38	39	46	57
<b>White-collar workers</b>	42	48	51	13	26	37	15	26	36	16	28	35
Police and army	47	59	60	14	27	44	11	20	28	36	44	49
Retail workers	75	77	76	12	27	46	29	47	57	16	34	45
<b>Blue-collar workers</b>	68	73	76	27	46	57	40	54	61	19	34	45
Qualified industrial workers	73	75	79	24	39	52	34	45	53	25	39	48
Qualified tradesmen	81	85	89	39	56	67	52	66	74	14	32	46
Drivers	12	19	20	28	51	53	44	50	53	9	14	19
Warehousing/transport employees	53	55	60	15	27	34	34	48	57	26	44	57
Non-qualified industrial workers	71	77	82	22	38	55	35	52	58	20	34	47



Non-qualified trades workers	82	85	90	29	53	64	42	53	63	18	31	47
Agricultural workers	60	83	83	39	65	69	42	66	67	23	45	56
<b>Total</b>	49	53	54	16	29	37	22	32	38	17	28	35

Source: MES-DARES working conditions surveys, 1984, 1991 and 1998

**Table 7 Risk of infectious diseases, by socio-professional group (%)**

	1984	1991	1998
<b>Management</b>	11	13	18
Professionals	19	24	31
Secondary teachers	35	38	44
Primary teachers	33	41	56
Health care professionals	60	65	74
Technicians	6	8	15
Supervisors	8	12	16
<b>White-collar workers</b>	16	23	33
Police and army	16	27	37
Retail workers	8	15	23
<b>Blue-collar workers</b>	10	13	23
Qualified industrial workers	11	11	18
Qualified tradesmen	10	14	26
Drivers	10	19	29
Warehousing/transport employees	6	7	22
Non-qualified industrial workers	9	10	16
Non-qualified trades workers	12	19	31
Agricultural workers	12	25	27
<b>Total</b>	14	19	27

Source: MES-DARES working conditions surveys, 1984, 1991 and 1998

### Work and mental strain

The mental strain of work is more difficult to measure than physical strenuousness. The working conditions survey

helps to quantify some of these factors, even if they mostly depend on the perception of individuals reporting them (Table 8). Social position, function and profession are also significant in monitoring causes of stress (Tables 9 and 10).

**Table 8 Indicators of mental strain at work**

% of employees declaring that:	1991	1998
<b>...an error in their work can lead to:</b>		
serious consequences for the quality of the product or service	60	65
major financial costs for the company	44	50
dangerous consequences for the safety of others	31	38
penalties (risk for job, reduction in pay)	46	60
<b>...they are frequently required to abandon a task to undertake another unscheduled one:</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>56</b>
which disturbs their work	n/a	27
which has no consequence on their work	n/a	21
which has a positive impact on their work	n/a	8
<b>...they are always required to hurry</b>	n/a	<b>20</b>
<b>...doing their work requires them to:</b>		
not lose sight of it	26	32
read small, badly printed or written letters or figures	22	30
examine small objects or fine details	12	16
be careful detecting difficult visual signs	12	13
be careful detecting difficult audio signals	12	13
<b>...even at a moderate level, noise disturbs them in doing their work</b>	26	26
<b>...they are often obliged to cope alone in difficult situations</b>	n/a	24
<b>...to do their work properly, they do not usually have:</b>		
enough time	23	25
clear and sufficient information	18	21

the possibility of cooperating	13	14
enough co-workers	21	24
<b>...they often experience tense situations with:</b>		
the public (users, patients, passengers, customers, etc)	22	30
their superiors	n/a	30
their co-workers	n/a	21
<b>...they receive contradictory orders/indications</b>	n/a	<b>35</b>

Source: MES-DARES working conditions surveys, 1991 and 1998

**Table 9 Frequent work interruptions, by socio-professional group (%)**

Socio-professional group	Function			
	Administrative, accounting, secretarial	Production	Maintenance	Other
Management, intellectual professions	76	72	68	53
Middle management	73	67	60	40
White-collar workers	67	53	57	53
Blue-collar workers	77	47	64	39

Source: MES-DARES, working conditions survey, 1998

**Table 10 Employees stating that they are always required to hurry (%)**

Socio-professional group	Function			
	Production	Warehousing and transport	Retail	Other
Management, intellectual professions	22	n/a	27	17
Middle management	20	34	24	17
White-collar workers	38	27	27	16
Blue-collar workers	23	24	38	20

Source: MES-DARES working conditions survey, 1998

## Occupational accidents and illnesses

### The private sector

The number of accidents resulting in sick leave and the number of serious accidents increased by 3% and 9% respectively in 2002, compared with the previous year. For the second figure in particular, this increase reflects a worrying deterioration in safety. However, this negative development follows a year where figures showed a decrease of 10% in serious accidents.

The number of deaths has appreciably fallen: CNAMTS (*Caisse Nationale d'Assurance Maladie pour Travailleurs Salariés* - excluding agricultural workers) shows a 6% fall on 2001. With 686 reported deaths, fatal accidents fell below 700 cases a year for the first time since 1997 (Table 11).

**Table 11 Occupational accidents in the private sector**

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Number of accidents resulting in sick leave	672,234	658,083- 2.1%	658,551+ 1%	689,859+ 4.8%	711,035+ 3.1%	743,435+ 4.6%	737,499- 0.8%	759,980+ 3%
Number of serious accidents	60,250	48,762- 19.1%	45,579- 6.5%	47,071+ 3.3%	46,085- 2.1%	48,096+ 4.4%	43,078- 10.4%	47,009+ 9%
Number of deaths	712	773+ 8.6%	690- 10.7%	719+ 4.2%	743- 3.3%	730- 1.7%	730=	686- 6%

Source: CNAMTS, Work Relations department: 'Working conditions - 2003 Report', Ministry of social affairs and employment

2000 shows relative stability in the frequency of occupational accidents (according to CNAMTS): 43 accidents per 1,000 employees, compared with 42.8 in 2001, i.e. a slight increase of 0.5%.

### The public sector

In 2001, 30,876 occupational accidents resulting in sick leave were reported. Their frequency in the civil service is almost three times lower than in the private sector: in 2001, there were 16 accidents per 1,000 civil servants compared with 42.8 per 1,000 employees in the private sector reported by CNAMTS (Table 12).

In the public hospital sector, 65,711 occupational accidents were identified in 2001, of which 32,247 resulted in sick leave. 4.7% of hospital staff were victims of accidents (i.e. a 0.2-point increase on 2000. The increase mainly affects large establishments (DHOS, 2003).

**Table 12 Comparing occupational accidents between the public and private sectors, 2001**

	Number of civil servants/employees	Number of accidents resulting in sick leave	Number of fatal accidents
Public sector	1,892,481	30,876(16.3 per 1,000)	36(0.2 per 100)
Private sector (reported by CNAMTS)	17,233,914	737,499(42.8 per 1,000)	730(0.4 per 100)

Source: DGAFP (Direction générale de l'administration et de la fonction publique), in 'Working conditions - 2003

**Occupational illnesses**

Among the illnesses for which medical certificates were issued, musculo-skeletal disorders (MSD) are by far the most frequently reported illnesses (66.7%). With lumbago, musculo-skeletal disorders represent three-quarters of recognised illnesses (Table 13). The increase in the number of recognised disorders is worth noting, as it reflects a rise in reported cases to the medical profession and professional organisations (Table 14).

**Table 13 Major illnesses, 1993-2001**

Ailment	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
MSD	4,610	5,759	6,772	6,772	10,320	12,133	15,240	19,804	23,042
Asbestos related diseases	798	840	1,056	1,056	1,763	2,130	3,059	3,606	4,922
Lumbago and back ache	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	3	130	2,235	2,600	2,632
Deafness	874	816	734	734	709	642	615	602	626
Eczema-type lesions	528	549	475	475	461	423	464	540	559
Breathing allergies	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	335	449	434
Complaints related to contact with cement	318	322	327	327	232	228	238	268	254
Complaints related to contact with silica	268	293	233	233	261	234	289	318	250
Chronic lesions to the meniscus	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	150	207	239
Complaints related to contact with wood	113	118	100	99	113	108	110	142	135

Source: CNAMTS, in 'Working conditions - 2003 Report'

**Table 14 Trend in reported illnesses, 1996-2001**

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Variation %

							(2001/00)
Number of reported, observed and recognised disorders	13,658	15,554	17,722	24,208	30,127	34,517	+ 14.5%
Number of first payments or permanent incapacity	10,120	11,588	13,127	17,750	21,646	24,220	+ 11.8%
Number of deaths	96	95	104	161	235	318	+ 35%

Source: CNAMTS, in 'Working conditions - 2003 Report'

## **Monitoring working conditions**

### **The legislative system**

The objective is to ensure the safety of workers and protect their health. Relevant measures include prevention, information and training initiatives.

The employer enters the results of risk assessments in a single file. This is available to relevant personnel in the company (e.g. health and safety committee) and to the company's medical officer.

The main aim of the assessment is to implement dynamic preventive measures based on a multidisciplinary approach. An agreement between management and unions was signed on this issue in September 2000.

### **Preventing risks and improving working conditions**

Several organisations are involved in occupational risk prevention and the improvement of working conditions in France. They include: the *Conseil supérieur de la prévention des risques professionnels*, the labour inspectorate, professional prevention organisations, the *Institut national des recherches en sécurité*, CNAM, the *Institut de veille sanitaire*, and ANACT (*Agence Nationale pour l'Amélioration des conditions de travail*). Each of these organisations has its own intervention methodology but the emphasis is increasingly on the need for a multidisciplinary approach.

This approach is based on the principle that professional risks are linked to several causes and that individuals react in different ways to risk. The participative approach recommended by [ANACT](#) consists of four areas of analysis:

- work activities;
- work organisation;
- the presence of risks;
- preventative know-how.

This approach aims to implement a prevention action plan, including an evaluation period. The aim is to consider prevention of all occupational risks as a project in itself and, at the same time, to integrate it into the overall work practices of the company. It is important that the employees and their representatives should feel involved in the project.

## Commentary

Working conditions appear to be deteriorating, mainly because they form part of an overall context, characterised by an increasingly complex work organisation and driven by increasing market demands. This is reflected in tighter deadlines, demands for greater productivity as well as quality of service, and innovation.

Work fulfilment is therefore becoming more difficult, with the intensification of work, faster rates, greater mental strain, increased risks and work accidents. At the same time, employees are taking more initiative, according to the DARES survey. They need to cope with complex work situations and production problems.

As far as the reduced working week is concerned, the survey reveals that its effect on working conditions differs according to each socio-professional category. Its impact particularly depends on the quality of interaction between employer and employee (consultation and participation) in the company's work organisation structures.

The reduction in the number of fatal accidents may be due to recent political will and interest by professional organisations, unions and management to invest in preventive action measures to combat risks in the workplace.

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## **Appendix: Organisational changes and indicators linked to changes in the workplace**

Formal organisational changes are those that affect work elements and refer to organisational systems set up in the company. This involves formal changes as outlined in the following question:

Since the introduction of the 35-hour working week, has your unit (department, workshop, production line) experienced the following changes?

- the implementation of new teams;
- the development of group work;
- greater versatility required from employees;
- the introduction of new equipment, new software;
- changes in work procedures;
- shorter meetings;
- more use of new information and communication technologies;
- a revision of tasks allocated to each person;
- the abandonment of certain tasks: certain tasks are now done outside (including subcontracting, outsourcing, etc).

Indicators linked to change in the workplace tend to show more employee satisfaction:

- the adoption of new tasks;
- work relations (relations or discussions with co-workers);
- autonomy in work;
- the quality of work done (careful work, well organised work);
- time available to work.

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