Commentary I
Monitoring the changing organisation of work: a European perspective

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The EU has set itself to increase participation rates (which are notably lower than in the U.S.), to an overall rate of 70% (60% for women and 50% for the 55+) in 2010.
This means enabling those in employment to remain in it, and those out of it to get more easily into it. One of the ways to achieve such is to improve both quality of employment (job security, social protection, income levels…) and quality of work (health and well-being, skills and competences, conciliation between working and non-working life). Not only should Europe create jobs, it should also create better jobs.
The issue of monitoring (are we making any progress? is quality improving?), and the selection or the development of relevant indicators have therefore become a key issue both technically (how to do it?) and politically (on which issues? for which purposes?).

Ideally, monitoring changes (and their consequences) in the workplace should enable:

1. to measure the *outcomes* (i.e., health, absenteeism, harassment...),
2. to link these outcomes to *work situations* (i.e., design of workstations, repetitive work, working hours and time patterns…),
3. to understand how *organisation* features influence these work situations (i.e., influence of lean production systems on pace of work, skills and responsibilities, control of workers over their work),
4. to understand how the above are related to the *context* (i.e., regulations, labour market, economic restructuring...). This is particularly important when in international comparative research.

To achieve these four objectives, a series of instruments (or research methods) should be used in combination:

Outcomes: there are broadly 2 methods for measuring, one through administrative reporting (precise for occupational accidents but liable to under reporting, more uncertain for occupational diseases, the list of diseases varying from one country to the other), the other method through self-reporting (employee surveys are less reliable due to the subjectivity of the answers on these issues – for example how do people define "stress"? –, but on the other hand enable to relate the responses to the work situations described by the same respondents).
Work situations: these are probably best reported by employee surveys. These surveys have proved a good tool at European level to monitor trends and to trigger debate. They cannot answer all questions and are too broad to enter into details but are sufficient to identify areas for further investigation and action.
The main criticism addressed to them is their supposed "subjectivity". In response to this, the exploitation of three successive EU surveys has shown that self-reporting does not necessarily mean subjective. In fact self-reporting can reflect very precisely the reality of work (i.e., on working hours, night work…).
The main difficulty remains with the interpretation of the data. For example, identical figures can mean different things in different national settings (the EU surveys cover 15 countries and have now been extended to 28), hence the need for contextual information of a more qualitative nature.
Work organisation: this dimension is difficult to monitor through employee surveys. The Foundation is starting a company survey to complement the data collected in the employee surveys. In 2003 the first survey will focus on corporate time policies and in particular on issues of working time variability (and control/negotiation), predictability of working hours and work life balance.

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Some surveys, such as the national working conditions survey in Spain, do combine questioning of companies and interviews of workers in these same companies, thus facilitating the relationship between work organisation features and work situations and outcomes.

As a conclusion, it is essential:
- to combine data sources: administrative and self-reported, corporate and individual, national and international (the European Quality of Work Observatory, due to be launched by the Foundation later this year, will offer such),
- to link numerical and qualitative data: numerical data is essential. But to make the most of it, it needs to be contextualised. In the EU workers are three times more likely to report bullying in Finland than in Italy. To which extent does this reflect cultural values and awareness rather than reality?
- to develop synthetical indicators and indexes: one of the challenges is to reach policy makers and get the message to them. This implies developing user friendly indicators for non-specialist audiences, possibly indexes (for example a "time quality index" based on more specific indicators of duration, control, predictability, intensity).

Example: the following example illustrates how the information is collected, analysed and used.
1. The European employee surveys have shown an *increase in contingent work* (employees on fixed term contracts and temporary agency contracts). This trend is validated by Labour Force surveys.
2. Statistical analyses of the Employee survey data in 1995 indicated a *correlation between contingent work and higher exposure to risks*.
3. These findings led to the commissioning of country reports describing national *labour market features, regulations and collective agreements and the organisation* of temporary agency work. A research based on corporate *case studies* was also carried out with a view to analyse the relationship between employment flexibility and quality of work.
4. The information produced was used by the social partners (employer and workers organisations) to *negotiate* at EU level and by the European Commission to *legislate* on temporary work.

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