

## Conversations with the Experts

### Quality of Work and Life in Europe



Laura den Dulk

**Bio:** Laura den Dulk is a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Sociology, Utrecht University, the Netherlands. Her main area of expertise is cross-national research regarding work-life policies in organisations in different welfare state regimes. In 2001, she completed her PhD in Social Sciences on the presence of work-family arrangements in organisations in different European countries. In 1999, she co-edited a book on work-family arrangements in Europe. Her latest co-edited book is *Flexible Working, Organizational Change and the Integration of Work and Personal Life* (Edward Elgar, 2005). Current research interests include the implementation and utilization of work/life policies in organizations, organizational culture and its impact on work-life balance, managerial attitudes towards employees' requests to use work/life policies in different organizational and national contexts and the transition to parenthood. She also participates in the EC research project TRANSITIONS: Gender, Parenthood and the Changing European Workplace: young adults negotiating the work-family boundary.



Tanja van der Lippe

**Bio:** Tanja van der Lippe is Professor of Sociology of Households and Employment Relations at the Department of Sociology and Research School (ICS) of Utrecht University. Her research interests are in the area of work-family linkages in Dutch and other societies. She received a grant (together with Esther Kluwer) from Utrecht University for the comprehensive interdisciplinary research program 'Interdependencies between work and family life'. She is coordinating the large-scale international comparative project 'Quality of life in a changing Europe', financed by the European Commission. Recently she received a grant from the European Science Foundation for the research program 'Gender Inequality in a Comparative Perspective'. She has published extensively on the division of labour between spouses, time use and time pressure in a comparative way, and labour market positions of men and women in Western and Eastern European countries. Her publications include *Women's Employment in a Comparative Perspective* (with Liset van Dijk and Aldine de Gruyter, 2001), *Competing Claims in Work and Family Life* (with Pascale Peters, Edward Elgar, 2007), and articles in the *Annual Review of Sociology*, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *Work, Employment and Society*, *Work and Occupations*, *Journal of Family Issues*, *Acta Sociologica*, *Rationality and Society*, and *Journal of European Social Policy*.

## An Interview with Laura den Dulk and Tanja van der Lippe

By Suzan Lewis, Middlesex University, London, England  
Network Global Perspective Consultant

**Lewis:** Why did you decide to study quality of life and work in Europe?

**Van der Lippe:** One of the big debates within the European Union is how to balance economic performance with socially sustainable forms of work organisations, quality jobs and the preservation and improvement of quality of life in the broader sense. We were interested in how European citizens living in different national welfare state regimes evaluate the quality of their lives. We know that quality of life is influenced by the work place and there are quite a lot of data sets that address these issues, but none of them focus on the role of organisations. We thought that it would be useful to focus on the specific role of the organisation in understanding the relationship between quality of work and quality of life in the different European contexts.

**Lewis:** How did you do this?

**Van der Lippe:** We work in collaboration with colleagues in our partner countries: UK, Finland, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Hungary and Bulgaria, with the support of a grant from the European Commission. We have several data sources, beginning with analysis of secondary data. We also collected our own quantitative data using the same questionnaire in all eight countries. We interviewed four service sector organizations with about 200 employees in each organisation, and we have more than 7,000 responses. We asked respondents about quality of work, work demands and resources, but also family demands and resources because we think it's important to study the quality of life by examining both work and family experiences. We review several aspects of quality of life— not only overall satisfaction with quality of life, but also positive work engagement and work-home enrichment, as well as work-family conflict.

**Den Dulk:** We also wanted to see how gender matters in the relationship between well-being and policies, both organisational and public. We believe that gender is very important.

**Van der Lippe:** One the project goals is to increase our knowledge of how organisations can be healthy organisations that combine economic and social sustainability and to see whether future trends impact this aim. We also have qualitative data from in-depth interviews and innovation groups with employees in one organisation in each country. Finally, we organised a meeting of national experts and used scenario analysis to think about the implications of our study.

**Lewis:** Did you have any difficulties engaging employers as research partners on quality of life issues, or were they all very keen to participate?

**Den Dulk:** It takes a lot of time to get their cooperation, but this varied a lot across the countries and also across sectors. It was easiest in Finland and Sweden. It proved to be difficult in Germany, where there is a very bureaucratic structure. Organisations are often interested, but they are sometimes reluctant to go through all the processes with work councils that have to give permission for the research to take place.

**Lewis:** Do you see many differences in quality of life across Europe?

**Van Der Lippe:** We are still analysing some of our data, but we do find differences between the Eastern and the Western European countries. In Eastern Europe— at least in the countries we focused on, Hungary and Bulgaria— people report lower quality of life than in the West.

**Lewis:** Why might that be?

**Van der Lippe:** Employees in the Eastern European countries report less autonomy at work. The effects of autonomy on quality of life are also stronger in Western countries than in Eastern European countries. It seems that there is more scope for job autonomy to enhance quality of work and quality of life among employees in Western European countries than in the Eastern European countries, where economic factors are more important.

**Den Dulk:** To a certain degree, this also applies to Portugal, where working conditions affect perceived quality of life to a lesser extent than elsewhere in Western Europe. It seems to be related to the welfare, the wealth of a country. Job autonomy is not as important as pay in the less affluent countries.

This also applies to work-life balance support. It's important in all countries but it affects the quality of life more

in the Netherlands or the UK, for instance, than in Portugal or Bulgaria, where employees are more concerned about just making a living.

**Van der Lippe:** The impact varies, though. For example, in conditions of low job autonomy, employees in Hungary report higher quality of life than employees in the Netherlands. When there is quite a lot of autonomy, however, employees in the Netherlands feel more satisfied than employees in Hungary.

**Lewis:** Is workplace support generally important for quality of life?

**Van der Lippe:** Workplace support and household support does impact people's quality of life. In Eastern Europe, there is still little workplace support compared to the other countries in our study.

**Den Dulk:** On the other hand, we found no positive effect for flexible working arrangements, and sometimes flexibility resulted in a negative effect on quality of life. We measured flexibility by asking people if they use flexible work hours or if they work from home. Informal, emotional forms of support seem to be more unequivocal in their effects. Maybe flexibility does work when you combine it with a supportive supervisor, but maybe it doesn't work when you have a non-supportive supervisor. We are still looking at that variable.

**Van der Lippe:** The apparent lack of impact of formal flexible working arrangements may also be related to the level of regulations in Europe in comparison with, for example, the United States. People are more protected in Europe. There are regulations around part-time work, for instance, so if the employer wants to add flexibility, then perhaps it's more employer-led.

**Lewis:** Do you think employer work-life policies are less important when there is good public support?

**Den Dulk:** Even if you have good public support, workplace support remains crucial. It's very important for quality of life. Government support sets a really basic standard, but you still need workplace support to actually implement it.

**Van der Lippe:** We see that in Sweden and Finland. There's a lot of state support as well as workplace support, and people feel more satisfied. The most satisfied people in our study are the Swedish, the Dutch and the Finnish. In the Netherlands, I think part of this satisfaction results from the availability of good part-time work.

**Den Dulk:** In the Netherlands, we have a very strong bread-winner culture, as quite a lot of women have a paid job nowadays. It's comparable to Sweden and Finland in terms of the number of women working, but the number of hours women are working is much lower. Once there are children present in the family, the first priority for Dutch women is being a mother. In Finland and Sweden, that's different. Fathers are more involved, and women are not viewed only as mothers. I think Swedish and Finnish women are maybe more ambitious and focused on work as well, compared to Dutch women.

**Lewis:** So you think that state support makes a difference, but well-being is also inter-related with culture?

**Den Dulk:** It is, but how the workplace is organised and the support offered are important as well. In particular, job autonomy is crucial, especially during times of work intensification.

**Lewis:** I know you are still analysing your findings, but so far are there any findings you wish to impart to employers?

**Van der Lippe:** Employers need to pay attention to work-life support, but it's not just about formal work-life policies. Job autonomy, as well as time and space autonomy, is important, as is manager support. Our data really shows that job autonomy and control help people to cope with work pressure and sustain or even enhance their quality of life. Work pressure is not always a bad thing, as long as people have a degree of job autonomy. We have known this from other research for a long time, and it is shown here again. Highly educated people are often overrepresented in survey research; we included retail organisations where there are many workers with less education. It's interesting to find the effect of autonomy on quality of life and work-life balance in low skilled jobs, too.

**Den Dulk:** From the qualitative results and innovation groups, we see that in times of intense workloads and ongoing organisational change, it is important for employers to listen to employees and collaborate to seek ways of dealing with global work practices without undermining quality of work. Communication in the organisation is also important, because poor communication also proved to be quite a problem affecting the

quality of work for many of our participants.

**Lewis:** What are the messages for public policy makers?

**Den Dulk:** Good public support does matter for quality of life. We definitively find that countries with supports such as working time regulations and public child care facilities, people feel happier.

**Lewis:** Is this level of public policy support sustainable? The study is not only looking at what's happening now with quality of work and quality of life, but you are also starting to look ahead.

**Van der Lippe:** We did a scenario session with high level experts— policy makers, employers, trade union people and so on. They told us that at least in the Netherlands, as well as in some other countries, a social safety net is very important. It's actually the duty of policy makers, according to the high level experts, to provide such safety nets, especially in a globalised world. For the Netherlands, two kinds of future scenarios were envisaged. In one, we had a globalised world where Europe is just one country, and policy regulations would be different in such a world. But in another, more inward looking world, people are very protected, do not trust other people and then there is a different approach to policy.

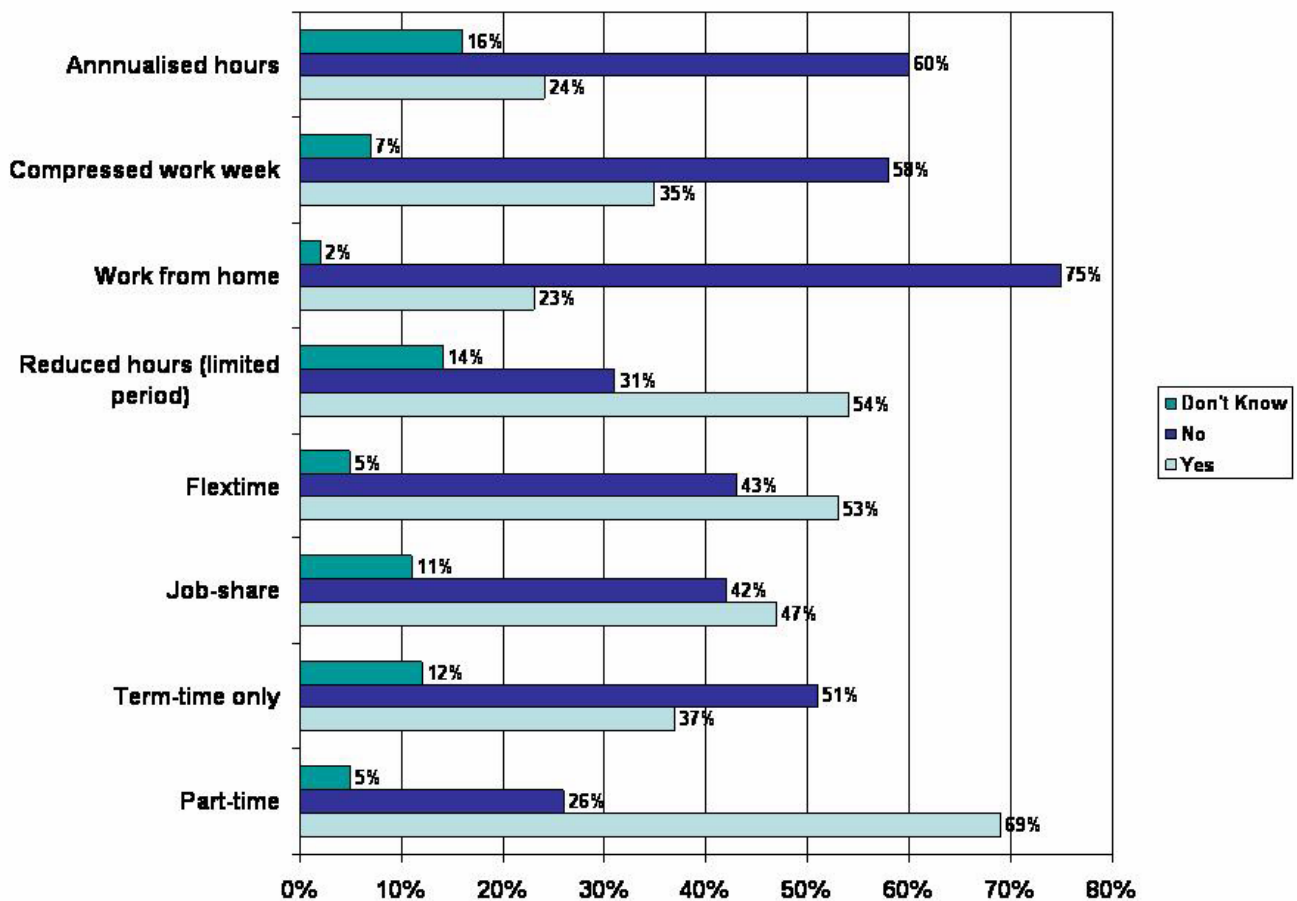
**Den Dulk:** In the second possible scenario, the experts suggested we will become too inward looking, protective, and orientated to our national policies, rather than really having an open society in which international relations will be at the forefront.

**Van der Lippe:** The experts felt that there was a dilemma about how to sustain a social safety net while also being an open, internationally-orientated society. They believed that it might be necessary to think in terms of a more limited social safety net, because many people would want to use these provisions and it might be difficult to finance. They talked about the importance of encouraging independent, well-educated citizens to take responsibility for themselves. If you look at this more generally, all European countries face challenges about how to compete in this global world. They must develop and sustain policies in such a way that it is possible to respond adequately to the pressure of intensification of work and global competition, and still keep socially sustainable work and quality of life. In Europe, we all have different institutional contexts, so these policies will also be different depending on national histories and the current situation. Countries will take different paths. We do not yet know how the future will look, but the scenario planning exercises in the eight countries gave us much food for thought about future trends and debates.

For more information: <http://www.projectquality.org>

[Submit an abstract](#) to the International Community, Work and Family Conference. Deadline: September 30, 2008

## The Availability of Flexible Working Arrangements in Employees' Workplaces



**Source:** Hooker, H., Neathey, F., Casebourne, J., & Munro, M. (2008). *The third work-life balance employee survey: Main findings*. Retrieved from <http://www.berr.gov.uk/files/file38388.pdf>

### Additional Resources Related to Work and Life in Europe

**Business in the Community:** "Business in the Community is a membership of companies with the leadership to translate corporate values and commitments into mainstream management practice. These companies measure and report on progress and illustrate the action being taken to improve the impact of its operations, products and services on society and the environment."

- <http://www.bitc.org.uk/>

**EurLIFE:** "EurLIFE is an interactive database on quality of life in Europe, offering data drawn from Eurofound's own surveys and from other published sources. The data provided deals with the objective living conditions and subjective well-being of European citizens. Today we have 27 EU Member States and the candidate countries Croatia and Turkey in the database."

- <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/areas/qualityoflife/eurlife/index.php>

**European Network for Workplace Health Promotion:** "Since the Network was formally established in 1996, it has been at the leading edge of developments in European workplace health promotion. By carrying out a

number of joint initiatives, it has developed good practice criteria for WHP for many different types of organisation and has established infrastructures for WHP in the Member States. Through these national forums and networks the ENWHP facilitates the cross-border exchange of information and the dissemination of good workplace practice.”

- <http://www.enwhp.org/index.php?id=4>

**Place of Work and Working Conditions: United Kingdom:** “This record examines the incidence of working away from the normal place of the work in the UK. It finds that this phenomenon is growing, although it is more prevalent in some sectors and areas of the country than others. People who work away from the place of work are covered by the same health and safety legislation as office-based workers, although they are likely to be less aware of their rights than office-based workers. Working away from the place of work offers a range of benefits to the employer, the employee and the environment, although there are a number of potential problems, such as social isolation, that need to be managed effectively.”

- <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ewco/studies/tn0701029s/uk0701029g.htm>

The Sloan Work and Family Research Network appreciates the extensive support we have received from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the Boston College community.



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*The Sloan Work and Family Research Network is funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation*