Out of control: changes in working-time patterns and strategies for work-life balance in Europe

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ABSTRACT
Global restructuring processes mean that temporal models of working time are becoming increasingly differentiated across Europe, as elsewhere. In order to balance work and life, employees have to accommodate these changes, not necessarily by prolonging their working time, but through an accelerated pace of work and increased workloads. Intensified working time patterns increase the challenges of combining work and family. This paper argues that changing demands on working time have enormous impacts on establishing work-life balance and that – to a great extent – the consequences are shouldered by women. In assessing these changing demands on working time, it is crucial to consider the occupational context: a high level of autonomy in determining their working time as well as great dedication to their work provides women in highly-skilled occupations with the option of developing strategies for emancipation. Women working in semi-skilled and low-skilled occupations are more likely to adhere to traditional gender roles and suffer much more from externally-imposed temporal frameworks and organisational changes. These results underline the need to reflect on contextual categories such as occupational affiliation, skill-level, gender, and institutional settings in evaluating the individual impacts of the changing demands of working time and work-life balance across Europe.

Introduction

For decades, the organisation of patterns of working time has been a crucial aspect of collective bargaining. Technological and organisational innovations have significantly increased productivity, and this has led historically to a reduction in working time being seen as a characteristic of progress in the development of the quality of work in industrial societies.¹ With the creation of welfare states, ‘normal working time’ shaped

¹ There has been a historical evolution of collective standards with regard to working hours and the course of life. These standards, which mainly target male professionals, formed a social welfare model that has shaped social institutions (Hildebrandt & Littig, 2006: 217; Promberger, 2005).
traditional time patterns, which meant a regular working day during the daytime, a free weekend on Saturdays and Sundays after a five-day week, and annual leave. These time patterns established a high degree of collectivity and regularity in individual lives and reinforced the ‘separation of work and life’ (Hildebrandt, 2006:252).2

From the perspective of the welfare state, modern time patterns can be characterised as using freedom from long working days and weeks as a way to enable individuals to ‘balance’ work and life, a feature which has become historically unique. In recent years, quantitative cross-sectional analyses have shown that, overall, working hours are still decreasing in most European countries. However, a qualitative perspective changes the picture and identifies trends that run counter to this.

Empirical results from the large European WORKS project3 show that the restructuring of work associated with the global restructuring of value chains undermines these long-term developments since it increases the demand for flexible working-time patterns. In order to keep jobs and solve job-related issues within sectors and regions, collective bargaining processes have a greater tendency to negotiate acceptance of flexible working hours than to critically discuss the fundamental relevance of the whole process.

In this paper we argue that recent developments in global restructuring have provoked a change in working conditions that supports unmediated patterns of working time. This change has major consequences for work-life balance and the impact is mainly felt by female workers. In an analysis of the changes in temporal organisation of work, we first discuss their implications for work-life balance in European countries. We then present some results of our empirical research from the WORKS project, grouped into different occupational clusters. The occupational groups on which we focus are: knowledge-based occupations in the clothing industry, IT professionals, manufacturing workers in food and in clothing production, and front-office employees in the public sector. Building on these results, the third section links changes in working-time regimes more closely to work-life balance in order to demonstrate the strong effects on individual work-life balance of the increasing demands on working hours. We conclude by considering how the resulting social challenges could be taken into account in national employment policies.

Working time and work-life balance in the context of global restructuring

From Fordist to flexible working-time regimes

Historical studies show that acclimatisation to fixed working-time schedules was a cumbersome and lengthy process. Although church bells were connected to mechanical clocks as far back as the 14th century, the measurement of time by clock only became a universally valid measurement of time management in the workplace of the 19th

2 Although Hildebrandt refers here to the German case, the development of modern time patterns took place similarly in the majority of industrial societies. The key aspect seems to be the relationship between industrial labour and the development of the welfare state.

3 The Work Organisation Restructuring in the Knowledge Society (WORKS) was funded by the European Commission from 2005 to 2009. For further details, see: http://www.worksproject.be
century. In the early phase of industrialisation, controversy over working hours did not focus on the length of a working day, as was later the case. The main focus of conflict was the merciless regulation imposed by a precisely-determined time structure – symbolised by the clocks on the factory gates – as well as the separation of working time from other activities (Deutschmann, 1985; Thompson, 1973; Hildebrandt, 2006).

The implementation of standardised working time, however, was a very long and contradictory process. Historians estimate that workers maintained their traditional sense of time until the end of the 19th century (Maurer, 1992). Very slowly, at the beginning of the 20th century, a division was effected between ‘working time’ and ‘living time’, a division that strongly reflects an awareness of the idea that ‘time is money’ (Deutschmann, 1985; Maurer, 1992).

In industrial societies, the Fordist organisation of working time provided a high degree of collectivity and regularity with regard to cultural time patterns, and this gave workers the ability to plan ahead reliably. But, more negatively, such time regimes could also be restrictive and rigid in relation to individual deviations from these time patterns.

Over the course of the 20th century, working hours decreased by almost half, mainly due to rising wages as a result of renewed economic growth. With the support of trades unions and collective bargaining, progressive legislation was introduced. In most of the industrialised world, the working week dropped steadily to about 35 hours a week (Messenger, 2004).

At the end of the 1990s, these processes slowed down or halted and, in many sectors, weekly working hours began to increase again by a variety of means (Seifert, 2007; Krings et. al., 2009). This development can be characterised as a creeping process embedded in a broader transformation of work on a global scale.

In the context of rapid technological changes and the restructuring of global value chains, a ‘simultaneous decomposition and recomposition of sectors, organisations, labour processes and skills’ (Huws et. al., 2009:5) has taken place that has had a major impact on work organisation in nearly all European countries. In a huge body of literature, such changes in the concept of employment are connected with the term ‘flexibility’, which is often seen as the most important aspect of the ongoing restructuring of organisations (Flecker, 2005; Flecker, 2007; Flecker et. al., 2009). From an organisational point of view, global restructuring has led to the introduction of a broad range of types of job flexibility in order to gain greater internal flexibility. Through the implementation of strategies related to offshoring, downsizing and outsourcing, more and more workers are faced with the prospect of short-term contracts and limited protection (Flecker, 2005; Flecker et. al., 2009). These developments have major effects on working conditions, which increasingly rely on non-standard, non-permanent work and which, in many cases, include fixed-term contracts, temporary work or on-call or ‘stand-by’ work (Krings et. al., 2009; Seifert, 2007).

The expansion of atypical employment strategies is linked with a broader fragmentation of employment that increasingly means that ‘differences and inequalities in terms and conditions are created between workers who were previously employed under the same conditions’ (Flecker et. al., 2009: 32). As a consequence, there is increasing insecurity among the workforce in many occupations where workers feel
continuously under pressure (Di Nunzio et al., 2009). The actual impact of these tendencies, however, can vary considerably depending on national labour market regulations and sector-specific traditions.

With regard to working time, these processes have led to new patterns, and – as the WORKS results show – there is evidence that working times are gradually becoming more irregular, atypical and fragmented across a wide range of occupations and sectors, and in most European countries (Birindelli et al., 2007).

Trends towards increasingly flexible working-time patterns have been discussed and studied intensively since the beginning of the 1990s, not only at a national but also in comparative international terms. An interesting conclusion from these discussions is that Fordist time regimes are rapidly diminishing as a frame of reference in a range of different sectors. As Messenger puts it, ‘during the past few decades in most industrial societies, the historical trends towards a progressive standardisation of working time has given way to diversification, decentralisation and individualisation of working time’ (Messenger, 2004: 2).

Since the 1970s, but especially during the 1990s, new forms of flexible working-time patterns such as flexitime systems, or time off in lieu of overtime, have been discussed extensively in the literature. Especially in knowledge-intensive occupations, these new working-time models have changed normative expectations of working time (Büssing & Seifert, 1999; Hochschild, 2002; Huws, 2003; Seifert, 2005; Holtgrewe, 2006; Walby et al., 2006). Such modifications in working time have appeared to give employees much more freedom to choose their working hours, which has made them attractive to women looking for ways to balance work and life.

However, it is not only in knowledge-intensive occupations that changes in working time are significant. They have also made their mark in other, less qualified occupations. The demand for flexibility, can also be seen both in the public sector and in manufacturing, in less-skilled occupations, where it has led to a ‘roll back’ of working-time patterns, leading to an increase in fixed-term and atypical weekly working hours. These trends have not only led to an increase in the number of working hours in some branches, but have also made it difficult to reconcile work and family demands (Blossfeld et al., 2007; Lee, 2004).

Global restructuring, by increasing the demand for flexible working conditions, seems to have brought both quantitative and qualitative changes to working-time patterns. Although across Europe the average number of hours worked is still slowly decreasing, an increase can be observed in long working hours, irregular work and flexitime work (Birindelli et al., 2007).

Overall, the diversification, decentralisation and individualisation of working time have detached work from Fordist working-time structures and this should be proved empirically. Taking these trends into account, time organisation should be recognised as an issue which implies a dual aspect: ‘a quantitative one – the amount of time, conceded to the other party, and a qualitative one – the control of that time by its subjects’ (Huws, 2003:178). Here, concerns have been increasingly expressed regarding the gap between workers’ actual and preferred working hours. However, estimating these gaps, whether they concern excessively long working hours or marginal and involuntary part-time
work, is still fraught with methodological problems. Nevertheless, the control of working time by its subjects becomes crucial in the consideration of work-life balance (Accornero, 2005; Hochschild, 2002; Paci, 2005; Krings, 2007). This is a particularly important issue for understanding the relationship between collective and individual needs in respect of working time.

Working time and a work-life balance: two sides of the same coin

In many studies, the term ‘work-life balance’ is linked methodologically with the issue of working time, or with the temporal compatibility of working life with family demands (Hildebrandt & Littig, 2006). In this context, the term is defined as an individual’s attempt to find suitable time arrangements and time options that allow the best possible co-ordination of requirement of work with time requirements of personal life. The work-life balance reflects social change, such as a rise of dual-career families, single parenthood and the extension of care to cover older family members, but also the need to maintain employability in a more uncertain labour market (European Foundation, in Huws, 2006:159).

There is a broad consensus in the literature that measuring a ‘good work-life balance’ is an entirely different task, precisely because of the close relationship between the levels of the individual and society. Ten years ago, the term was rarely used. However, according to European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions and many other organisations, work-life balance is now high on the political agenda, with many policies aiming ‘to promote a wide range of family-friendly working arrangements’ (Hardy, Adnett, 2002:158; European Foundation, 2004a; OECD, 2002; 2003). The use of arrangements designed to promote it, such as part-time work or parental leave, differs in the various European countries and depends strongly on female integration into the national labour market.

Indeed, as a scientific concept, ‘work-life balance’ remains unclear because of its multidimensional implications. According to Hildebrandt, the current formula at least integrates the following three aspects which offer a conceptual framework (Hildebrandt, 2006:215).

First, it refers to a number of qualitative changes in Western European societies, which play an essential role in the social organisation of work. The interplay between the welfare sector, the economy, the family, and communities is especially important in this connection. In this context, the shift from the male breadwinner model towards dual-career families, changes in attitudes to gender roles and changes in the division of labour can be regarded as important examples. As experiences in many European countries show, however, the temporal working arrangements of men and women, as well as work-life policies, are all strongly gendered (Messenger, 2004; Green, 2006).

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4 According to MacInnes, the concept of the work-life balance is too vague for an adequate sociological analysis. Very often the debate reduces ‘work’ to employment, and confuses leisure in general, care of family members and specifically parenting with the meaning of ‘life’ (MacInnes, 2006:242). MacInnes argues that its practical application may often work against precisely those labour supply goals governments hope it might address. For instance, it may be older workers, rather than the parents of small children, who are interested in trading working hours for leisure, and they may do this more often by retiring early rather than changing hours (MacInnes, 2006:243; Fagan, Hegewisch & Pillinger, 2006).
Second, it reflects the deregulation of working relationships, which increasingly shifts the regulation of work, and responsibility for it, to the individual. Debates on the increasingly blurred boundaries between the temporal organisation of work and life (Hermann, 2006; Fagan et. al., 2006; Seifert, 2007) are relevant here.

Third, the formula offers an insight into new social risks and problems which may result from this transformation of labour in society, both at the individual and community levels. A growth in job insecurity leads to individual acceptance of and compliance with new working-time patterns, either out of fear of job loss or an inability to insist on a clear job description. This last point reminds us of the heightened sense of insecurity that increasingly seems to determine the framework of working cultures. ‘Whether increased job insecurity would raise work effort is, however, by no means inevitable. On the one hand, workers might work harder if they think it will help them to keep their jobs, perhaps by improving their employers’ likelihood of surviving the pressures of competition; or perhaps, in the case of temporary workers, hard work would be seen as a way of ensuring that their contracts were renewed, or made permanent. On the other hand, insecure workers are also typically demoralised: they may lose a sense of commitment to their employers (Green, 2006:81).

Although there is still empirical research to be done to fully document the new effects of insecurity in working life, there is no doubt that the impact of job insecurity on workers’ well-being is substantial, and closely connected with their work-life balance. Individual resistance to work intensification comes, for example, in the form of absenteeism, or, more drastically, through job mobility, where this is possible. Such responses are only possible when they do not threaten the survival of a worker’s family.

Taking account of these changes in working time under global restructuring, we started from the hypothesis that the trend towards flexible working-time patterns, which can be summarised as ‘diversification, decentralisation and individualisation’, has major implications for work-life balance and, in particular, the work-life balance of female workers. The empirical results of the WORKS project presented in the next section will provide an insight here into the impacts of these trends on a contrasting selection occupational groups in a range of different countries. In this analysis, we highlight the decline of Fordist working-time regimes as well as examining the effects of national institutions in shaping these processes.

Working time and work-life balance: individual experiences of globally-induced changes - research methodology

The research presented here was carried out within the WORKS project, where a large body of data on global restructuring and changes in work was collected from across Europe. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted in parallel. We focus here on the qualitative research methods that were used to examine recent changes.

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5 The project encompassed quantitative research (Birindelli et al, 2007, Ramioul & Huys, 2007) and qualitative research carried out the organisation level (Flecker, Holtgrewe, Schönauer, Dunkel & Meil, 2008) and the level of individuals (Valenduc, Vendramin, Kring & Nierling, 2008), on which this paper mainly relies. However it also draws on the other analyses to complement and verify the findings.
in working life. Individual experience was captured in an international comparative approach through the use of ‘occupational case studies’. In this approach, individuals were interviewed about their subjective experiences of change in selected occupational groups, to make it possible to compare differences between occupations within particular countries on the one hand, and to make international comparisons on the other, with the aim of investigating how the new demands of working time affect working life and what effects they have on life in the workplace as well as on private and family life.

The selection of occupational groups was made with the aim of illustrating the impacts of global value chain restructuring across a contrasting range of sectors. The four sectors that were chosen were clothing, food, IT services, and the public sector. Major restructuring in these sectors took place at different historical moments. The clothing sector has undergone major global restructuring since the 1970s (Dunford, 2004), whilst the largest upheavals in the European food industry can be traced back to the restructuring that began in the 1990s, after the single European market was established (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2004b). In the IT services sector, internationalisation strategies took off on a major scale during the industry’s boom years in the late 1990s, when global offshoring reached critical mass in this sector (Huws, 2003b; Boes & Schwemmle, 2005; Kämpf, 2008). The public sector has more recently undergone major restructuring processes leading to the deregulation of previously well-regulated working conditions (Dunkel & Schönauer, 2007).

Within these sectors, occupational groups were chosen to illustrate a wide variety of working profiles. An ‘occupational group’ was defined as a ‘group of persons who are doing the same activities or having the same professional status’ (Vendramin & Valenduc, 2008:1). The groups were selected according to several criteria. First, they had to be affected by changes in work and knowledge. Second, we wanted to ensure that both ‘old’ and new occupations were represented. Third, we wanted groups with a range of different forms of gender composition. And finally, they had to reflect a variety of different qualification levels, types of knowledge and degrees of ICT intensity (Vendramin & Valenduc, 2008: 23). Thus, the sample ranged from highly-skilled, knowledge-intensive occupations (fashion designers and IT professionals7), to semi-skilled tasks (front-office employees in customer services in the public sector) and low-skilled manual workers (production workers in the clothing and food sectors).

The case studies were distributed over fourteen countries. This made it possible to a look in detail at the impacts on workers with varying levels of knowledge intensity within countries in different parts of Europe as well as being able to compare each occupational group in contrasting national settings (Northern, Central, Eastern and

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6 One prerequisite for the choice of case studies was that all companies researched had undergone restructuring processes at a global level over the past 5 years. Similarly, public sector organisations had to have experienced restructuring within the same period.

7 In the IT sector, three occupational groups were analysed: researchers in ICT, production workers in software development, and IT professionals working for IT service providers. Due to a similar occupational setting and working tasks, these three occupational groups are summarised as one occupation: IT professionals.
southern Europe) (see Appendix 1). The interviews were semi-structured and based on common interview guidelines, which were adapted for each national context. The results were analysed in relation to five central research topics: work biography, changes in occupational identities, skills and qualification, quality of work and work-life balance, taking account of gender as a cross-cutting theme. The overall findings in relation to each of the occupational groups were compared cross-nationally, cross-checked and discussed within the WORKS consortium to avoid misinterpretation.

Findings

One of the most striking overall general findings from the project was that restructuring is associated with a growing intensification of work (Flecker et al., 2008, Valenduc et al., 2008). Intensified working conditions could be seen in all occupational groups resulting from a combination of factors including an acceleration of business processes linked to the need for production to respond increasingly quickly to the market. This led to tighter deadlines, an increasing work load and a range of different forms of flexibility. The mechanisms leading to this intensification varied by sector and occupation. In manufacturing sectors it could be caused by new production modes (new technologies), whereas in more highly-skilled occupations the pressure was more likely to be experienced as the result of tighter deadlines and a high requirement for self-organisation of work. Despite these differences, there was a clear overall trend towards more intensive work profiles in most countries. However the consequences of these intensification processes differed enormously, according to individual career prospects, institutional settings, and specific working conditions.

In the next section, we summarise the impacts, grouping the occupational clusters according to levels of skill. We look first at highly-skilled, knowledge-based occupations: fashion and technical designers in the clothing industry and IT professionals, occupational groups that have several common features with regard to creativity and work performance. We then focus on workers in manufacturing occupations (in the food and clothing production sectors) that require low levels of skill. These jobs are characterised both by a low level of knowledge intensity and a high degree of standardisation of work processes. Finally, we investigate an intermediate group of service industry occupations: front-office employees in the public sector. This group is very heterogeneous and does not only cover a wide range of knowledge intensity but is also affected by a broad spectrum of change processes.

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8 In total, 27 occupational case studies were carried out in 14 European countries with 222 individual interviews. The sample covered the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, the Netherlands and the UK.

9 Each case study consisted of 8-12 semi-structured biographical interviews with employees in the occupations being researched. The interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes, and were conducted during working hours with the consent of the company management.

10 It should be noted that, because of limitations imposed by the research design, our analysis of work-life balance mainly focused on work-family relations and the reconcilability of working and family life. Thus, it is mainly the working and living realities of families with young and adolescent children that are reflected in our research.

11 For further information on the research process as well as methodological implications of the project design see Vendramin & Valenduc, 2008; Huws & Dahlmann, 2007.
Knowledge-based occupations: balancing a high commitment to work with the ‘rest of life’

Designers

In the clothing industry, the trend of acceleration and process speed-up associated with globalisation is especially apparent. Global restructuring leads to increasing time pressure and an increased workload for designers in their daily working routines. Their working process increasingly becomes integrated into a more standardised workflow. This means that designers have to carry out more work involved with administration, communication, and coordination along the value chain. Furthermore, designers are increasingly finding that their performance is controlled by sales figures, set according to economically-driven standards. This erodes the time available for creative tasks, produces shorter deadlines and more rigid schedules and leads to growing pressure. This is exacerbated by the fact that the number of collections per year has doubled in recent years, which contributes still further to the constantly accelerated and intensified working conditions for designers.

In the design profession, time management is converted into time pressure through tighter deadlines and an increase in the proportion of tasks that are subject to continuous market feedback.

We must be good, but, more importantly, we must get to the clients in time. I can have a great idea but there are others who do the same as me and the big brands decide within minutes based on the information they have. So if mine isn’t there, it will not be considered, so I have lost time. So time is a big issue and this dimension is out of control (Portuguese designer, in Vasconcelos da Silva, Woll & Paulos, 2007).

In working life, this increase in time pressure is experienced in several ways. For instance, business trips to trade fairs or clients, which previously included more informal activities and leisure, are now organised with tighter schedules and a smaller budget. Another example is the loss of calm working periods between collections, which were previously spent working freely on concepts for new designs. The time available for reflection and further developments of designs and sketches gets shorter and shorter. The way designers experience this change in time management is exemplified in the words of one interviewee: ‘We have less time to work in depth on products. We have to be faster and more reactive’ (French designer, in Muchnik, 2007a).

Formally, the working time of designers is organised in a wide variety of working schedules, which may involve a fixed structure of hours or freedom for self-organisation of time, with or without overtime regulation. However, these schedules are in practice irrelevant for the designers’ time management. In general, designers work in a project-oriented way with high degrees of self-responsibility and diminished boundaries between work and life. Especially in the peak periods linked to producing collections, they work long hours:

‘Designers are very dedicated to their work and often don’t count hours. They can work ten to twelve hours a day during collection renewal periods, and even work during weekends or the evening, if they have to meet a deadline’ (Valenduc & Muchnik, 2008: 41).
This culture of long hours can only be partly attributed to the increased time demands of globally-induced restructuring processes. It also reflects the strong identification and dedication of designers to their job. The expression of their subjective creativity ranks highly and, together with strong feelings of self-fulfilment, contributes to the high subjective importance of the job.

The work-life balance of designers is, of course, influenced by these developments in working time, especially the long working hours which blur the boundaries between work and life. Because designers are strongly orientated towards their jobs, they basically organise their life according to the demands of work. Whereas this causes only few problems for the life course and family life of male designers, the biographical decisions of female designers are far more strongly affected. For women designers, there is a direct clash between their professional ambitions and the issue of motherhood and starting a family. Because of the high working-time demands, family-friendly policies and part-time work options are not implemented in this industry. Life is organised according to the rhythms and demands of the clothing companies. All designers reported difficulties in combining the high demands of working life with family activities. Although some of the Portuguese and older French designers interviewed for the project had children, for German and young French designers it seemed almost impossible to combine career and family.

All designers I met were between 25 and 35 years old and very few had children, I would say that within the ten to fifteen I worked closely with, only one had a baby (...). Indeed, it's not easy to get a job as a designer. Everybody wants to keep their job and unfortunately it's not convenient to have a baby at this moment. In any case, I wouldn't even think about it now, because of that (French designer, in Muchnik, 2007a).

In the German case, female designers either refrained from having children in order to keep their careers or, when they had children, changed roles according to the traditional breadwinner model. Male designers, by contrast, did not have to make this decision because generally they had wives who were the main carers. Indeed it is, work-life balance that constitutes the most important difference between the work situations of male and female designers. It seems that in this occupation the balance between work and life is still organised very much along the male breadwinner model, which is also true for women following traditional ‘male’ biographical paths. Work plays a central role for both male and female designers, which they enjoy very much and accept as the core of their lives. Up to now, the changed professional demands of globally restructured work processes have been absorbed by the designers, who are still strongly dedicated to the creative aspects of their occupation. If they consider the combination of work and life, it seems that the balance – especially for women – is organised around sacrificing other things in favour of work: ‘renunciation of family formation, renunciation of more stimulating but insecure jobs in order to keep security, renunciation of leisure time’ (Valenduc & Muchnik, 2008:45.). As long as the occupational demands can fulfil the subjective identification, this ‘balance’ will prevail. However, if the time and space for creativity is further threatened by global restructuring, this may cause strong upheavals in the biographies of individual designers in the long run.
IT Professionals

Among IT professionals, the main impacts of globalisation are linked to organisational changes such as outsourcing or mergers. Generally, working relations have to face growing international competitiveness and the development of worldwide markets. This leads to work profiles that are increasingly characterised by a higher level of standardisation, internationalisation and orientation to customers and markets. These demands are transferred to the workers and are experienced as an increased and intensified workload, with a need to meet strict deadlines and increased requirements for cooperation and communication and responding directly to customers’ demands.

In contrast with fashion designers, globally-induced working demands do not cause the same time pressure. The IT professionals interviewed for the project were much more likely to ‘consider their workload as sustainable, and moreover unavoidable in occupations based on project work and submitted to deadlines and quality standards’ (Valenduc, 2008:90). Formally, working time is typically organised along flexible time schemes, with core working schedules which are supplemented by regulated overtime and flexi-time arrangements based on full-time work, negotiated on an individual basis. IT professionals typically work in a project-oriented fashion with a high level of individual responsibility for time- and task-management. They appreciate this autonomy and regard it as a privilege. But, in contrast with the fashion industry, this type of ‘post-Fordist working-time regime’ does not lead to a blurring of boundaries in such a strong sense. Surprisingly, European IT professionals seem to manage to work relatively stable core working hours, which can be adapted flexibly according to the needs of the company as well as to private demands.

However, here too we find change, with highly-flexible working-time arrangements becoming more important as a response to the new time demands that result from outsourcing and mergers on a global level. The task of synchronising different time zones requires an increased ‘need for coordination with Asia in the early morning and US in the late afternoon [which] practically extends the working hours or, at least, the need for availability of employees’ (Valenduc, 2008:91).

In IT customer support too, synchronisation is needed in order to meet the operating hours of the customer company. The synchronisation of working tasks is either organised on the basis of ‘shift work’, which can be planned in advance, or is solved by modern network technologies, which allow work from home. However, this is leading to a new relation between work and private life. A French trade unionist observed that

\textit{with this increased flexibility, related to mobility and new technologies (laptops, mobile phones, internet access, etc.) limits between working time and private time is blurring. More and more employees, even if they leave workplace earlier, work at home in the evening, in the weekend or keep in touch during holidays (Muchnik, 2007b: 15).}

Not only has the synchronisation of working time imposed new demands on IT professionals, but the increasingly frequent need for business travel and growing demands for spatial flexibility show how the demands of flexibility are impinging on working and living arrangements (Krings & Nierling, 2008).
At first glance, the work-life balance of IT professionals seems to be good. Employees generally seem to enjoy a reasonably good salary level, high job security and favourable career paths as well as predictable and autonomous working-time arrangements, which allow for a lifestyle that includes extensive leisure activities such as sports and culture, despite the hard work involved in the job. Employees generally assess their work-life balance positively.

At a second glance, however, it becomes apparent that the working culture of IT professionals is, to a high degree, a male-dominated one. This becomes visible not only in the high proportion of men working in IT, but also in the (flexible) culture of long hours with rare part-time options, the need for synchronisation of working time, and frequent business trips. For men, work constitutes a central part of the biography, has a strong subjective meaning and defines the organisation of daily life. This is often equally the case for young women, who also enjoy the benefits of the occupations. But now it becomes clear that it is also important to take account of each individual’s life-stage when assessing work-life balance and gender relations in this occupational group. The most important gender differences in this occupational group are directly related to having a family. Working-time patterns are strongly aligned to the single-earner model. This is evident in the need for synchronised working hours and frequent business trips and the lack of support for part-time working options. Family commitments correspond negatively with career prospects.

The interviews produced a number of anecdotes that illustrated paternalistic managerial attitudes to women’s care responsibilities. One Belgian manager was quoted as saying that it was women (not men) who had to choose between work responsibilities and family responsibilities. A UK informant described the situation of a single mother, who had a part-time contract but was nevertheless harassed by her manager to take part in meetings any day of the week, outside her agreed hours. In the Netherlands, it was clear that the demands of work did not only affect the workers themselves but also their partners; in this case, all the male employees who were interviewed lived with women who either worked part-time or were not active on the labour market at all (Valenduc, 2008: 94). It seems that the male working culture in IT does not only come into play in the professional sphere, but also in private life. As in fashion design, it is at the stage when a worker starts a family that the gender division of labour becomes clear – and reveals itself to be a very traditional one: women still shoulder the main portion of care work at home, whilst men mainly follow the hegemonic male breadwinner model. Only in the Scandinavian cases were there signs of a more equal distribution of the work-family balance.

This underlines the important impact of cultural and institutional differences. In Scandinavia, the cultural embedding of familial life and institutional settings that provide family support permits family-friendly working models, which can, for instance, lead to a ‘baby-boom’ as in Norway (Krings & Nierling, 2008:64). However, these favourable conditions for work-life balance are far less developed in other European countries. It seems that there is currently something of a backlash in gender relations in working life, which is particularly evident in Central and Eastern European countries where, in the field of IT, highly qualified jobs are at an emerging stage,
placing the - mostly male - employees under high pressure. This workforce shows a high commitment to work with long and widely flexible working hours, thus providing Hungary, for example, with competitive advantages over countries with tighter legislation:

*Flexibility and overtime provide Hungarian employees with a competitive advantage: work councils do not allow working at weekends in Austria or in Germany. There are no limitations in Hungary, and employees do not mind working at weekends. That increases their efficiency and helps them to obtain certain jobs. Flexibility also means that, in contrast to German colleagues, for Hungarians it is not a problem to stand up from their desk and rush immediately to the airport to travel to some remote place. Young and mostly unmarried Hungarian employees even like this (Makó, Illéssy & Csizmadia, 2007: 12).*

It seems that family needs are far from being integrated into this kind of commitment towards work. This has major implications for gender equality in working life12.

**Manufacturing Occupations**

In sharp contrast with the modern, post-Fordist working and living realities of highly skilled employees in design and IT, with their high levels of autonomy and self-fulfilment in their working lives, production workers are confronted with a more traditional, Fordistic organisation of work with high levels of job insecurity and low levels of individual freedom. Production work is strongly affected by global dynamics. Outsourcing and offshoring activities at a global level, as well as technical and organisational rationalisation, are currently reshaping production work in Europe. Global market pressure is either solved by spatially relocating production to remote sites, leading to dismissals on a large scale, or is offset by placing increased demands for temporal flexibility or efficiency onto the local production workers. The reduction in union power and the fear of job loss compel workers to face the forces of globalisation more directly.

Working time in production is generally organised in shifts. Overtime is a common practice and is mostly compensated for by days off; in a few cases it is recompensed by extra pay. Firm-orientated temporal flexibility schemes and an intensification of work are widespread as ways of adapting production capacities to the market. Especially in southern Europe, atypical hours such as overtime, extra hours, night shifts, and weekend work are commonly used in order to be able to handle the frequent high peaks in workload. Workers feel forced to adapt to the temporal demands of the firms and this is a major cause of stress. A Danish case found that workers were put under such pressure by efficiency targets and an increased pace of work that they were afraid of not being able to keep up with the new demands. Here, new stages of automation of production had brought about a loss of autonomy in organising time at work, with

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12 These findings are supported by a recent European study on gender relations at work which stresses a growing polarisation of working hours according to sex in the New Member States: men are increasingly developing a long-hours work style, while women are increasingly working part-time. Gender equality in the former socialist regimes is still higher than in the rest of Europe, but 'a widening gap in working hours may reduce women’s longer-term ability to compete with men in the labour market’ (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2007:57).
the introduction, in a top-down approach, of new piece rates per hours and strict work schedules\textsuperscript{13}.

Production workers seem to be experiencing a heavy loss of autonomy at work, partly because of requirements to adapt to firms’ temporal requirements and partly in response to ever-higher productivity targets resulting from rationalisation. In the past, production workers were able to protect their individual autonomy by drawing a clear line between work and life, a line that was defined by regulated working hours. This also served to compensate for the low levels of job satisfaction in work that consisted of monotonous and repetitive tasks, by privileging the sphere of life. They ‘had’ to work, but were able to enjoy an autonomous private life that was quite separate from it. Flexible working-time arrangements now seem to have deconstructed this temporal order, with workers increasingly feeling ‘that they have to adapt their lives’ (Vasconcelos da Silva, 2007: 8) to flexible working-time demands. Furthermore, individualised fears of not meeting increased productivity targets tie in with fears of job losses which strongly affect the quality of life and also seem to penetrate the former order. It seems that these developments are threatening the old arrangements of work and life in production work.

Although there is a long history of women's employment in production industries, for economic reasons, traditional and stereotyped gender relations predominate in the sector (Nierling & Krings, 2008). This means that gender differences are important in this sector too for understanding how work and life are combined in daily routines. The evidence from our research shows that it is overwhelmingly the case that in these occupations the division of paid and unpaid work is divided traditionally between the sexes. Nearly all the female production workers in the sample were married and had children for whom they bore the main responsibility in terms of childcare and household tasks. They were therefore particularly affected by demands to work long, irregular and unpredictable working hours, which make it difficult for them to plan regular activities or fulfil family obligations. Clashes between unpredictable working hours and fixed family schedules, in particular, make it very difficult to synchronise the time schemes of work and family life:

\textit{Women that have to take their children to kindergarten have quite a lot of problems; when they have morning shifts and must clock in at six they cannot take their children because nobody looks after them at kindergarten or school (Italian production worker, in Pedaci, 2007).}

Very often the combination has to be organised by means of an ‘individual fit’ between working time and the opening hours of public service institutions such as day-care centres or medical facilities. In all countries, female workers rely very much on the support of relatives, neighbours or friends for this.

Of course, different institutional settings create major differences in the ways that work and family are combined. In southern Europe, family networks are still strong...
and seem to be very supportive of the combination of work and life. However, changes are becoming apparent. Whereas in Portugal, company and family seem to be closely connected in an uncomplicated way, even in terms of location, in a manner that ‘still makes it possible to have lunch at home’ (Nierling & Krings, 2008: 113), in Italy, these networks are increasingly eroding. Italian female production workers suffer from dwindling family support as well as from a lack of family-friendly flexible working arrangements and institutional support. In Northern and Continental Europe, family networks are already far weaker. Female workers, who bear the main responsibility here too, have to rely more on public institutions and company measures. However, in all countries there is insufficient support for work-family reconciliation either through organisational measures or worker-orientated flexible working-time arrangements. Individualised arrangements on the basis of social networks are thus still very important for achieving work-life balance.

**front-office employees in public services**

Service occupations\(^\text{14}\) in the public sector are currently undergoing major reorganisation as a result of a heterogeneous range of strategies including privatisation, outsourcing, reorganisation, and downsizing. The most dramatic of these changes involves a transformation from public to private employment, which leads to the development of a dual workforce made up of core employees on the one hand and peripheral ones on the other. These restructuring processes affect many aspects of work including pay levels, work intensity, job security, work content, and job satisfaction. There are major differences in working conditions between core and peripheral employees, but a general trend can still be observed in which time pressure, intensification, performance control, job insecurity, increased workload and constraints on working-time flexibility are all increasing (Muchnik & Valenduc, 2008).

The WORKS research on this group of occupations covered a wide range of different forms of organisation and reorganisation so it was not surprising that there was also diversity in the ways in which working time was reorganised as well as in the degree and configuration of temporal flexibility. In the past, working time was most commonly organised in shifts and followed regular office hours, but global reorganisation in this sector brought deregulation in a broad sense. In order to improve the accessibility of public services to the ‘citizen-customer’, working hours have been extended to include Saturday work, weekend work, and overtime. Although working hours have become more irregular and atypical for public employees, they still remain quite highly regulated compared with the private sector. It seems to have been possible to avoid major changes in working time for public employees up to now by outsourcing temporal demands to the private sector. As an Austrian commentator notes: ‘If the city administration had kept telephone services in-house, an extension of working hours for customer service employees at service centres might have been the consequence’

\(^{14}\) This occupational group was made up of front-office employees in the public sector with a range of different sectoral and occupational classifications (railway and postal services, public administration, local government, call centres). The proportion of women in this occupational cluster was very high, with the result that it was female employees who were most likely to be affected by ongoing changes due to restructuring.
For the time being, this strategy has saved the core employees from fundamental changes by transferring the most demanding requirements for flexible adjustment to the periphery. However, in the long run, further deregulation and increased workload and market orientation may well lead to a deterioration in working-time conditions at the core, as has already happened on the periphery.

The high levels of regulation, security and predictable working time have played an important role in attracting people, especially women, to work in the public sector. Working-time arrangements like family leave and child-compatible working hours are especially convenient for ‘working mothers’ (Muchnik & Valenduc, 2008: 156). Here too, our research found that women were assuming the main caregiver role, following a traditional female identity with a clear division of labour in the household:

The reason for wanting to work in the public sector definitely ties in with them being mothers with children. [...] What they ask from their employment is that it should enable them to give priority to their traditional gender role (Dahlmann, 2007:11).

Preferred working-time arrangements for ‘working mothers’ are predictable (often part-time) working hours, which offer a certain degree of flexibility, if unforeseen events with children arise, e.g. school attendance, or visits to the doctor. This satisfying coexistence of standardisation and flexibility in working hours has never been universal, but only existed in a few of the countries under review. It is rather more the case that restructuring leads to a wide variety of temporal changes, from a flexible to a rigid organisation in shift systems or vice versa. Interestingly, neither type of temporal change was appreciated by the employees, because they had already organised work and family life according to their previous work routines. When changes were made, they were forced to reorganise their well-practised routines in order to accommodate new time requirements. It seems that even employees in the public sector have to organise the balance individually, as is also the case in the other occupational clusters, although they have been able to rely on more support from legislation as well as organisational experience with regard to combining work and family15.

These results suggest that, in terms of work-life balance, the situation of front-office employees in public services is currently at a crossroads. Up to now, the public sector has still been regarded as a convenient source of employment for female employees with family duties. Recent deregulation and restructuring have not damaged this picture - yet (Muchnik & Valenduc, 2008). However, as the situation of peripheral workers already shows, increased and atypical working hours seem to be leading towards a deterioration in the future.

Concluding remarks

It is clear that, due to the ongoing restructuring of value chains and of work organisation, in Europe working times are undergoing significant changes across a range of dimensions, including length, collocation and variability. Shift schedules are on the rise, as are requirements to work unusual or antisocial hours (for instance

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15 The emotional character of service work can lead to further disturbances to work-life balance: ‘front office employees confronted with “critical” or “emotional” situations often transfer their stress from the work atmosphere to the family atmosphere. Stress, uncertainty and anxiety can also be created by the reorganisation process and influence the’ (Muchnik & Valenduc, 2008: 155).
during the evening and night or on public holidays). There is also a rise in overtime and supplementary work and in atypical working schedules, some concentrated in certain days or in certain periods, and some characterised by high variability. Many workers are experiencing the demise of the traditional conception of working time: linear, measured by mechanical deadlines and calculated a priori. Working time is becoming punctuated, instantaneous, fragmented and non-sequential; it is often non-measurable and less easy to account for. The first outcome of these changes is an increasing heterogeneity in temporal regimes, or, in other words, an increasing diversification, de-standardisation and de-synchronisation of time patterns (Accornero, 1997, Chiesi, 1989, Messenger, 2004). Furthermore, significant changes are also occurring in that less visible dimension of working time – often defined as ‘internal time’ – that defines deadlines and dictates the intensity of work within a specific period of time. This results in an overall intensification of work.

Against the background of these trends, an important conclusion that can be drawn from these studies is that there has been a loss of time sovereignty; that, in other words, individuals are losing control first of their working time, and then of the organisation of time in their privates lives. Their employers are responding to a situation in which their time too is increasingly determined externally; they suffer the ‘despotism’ of the growing variability of demand and of production needs and interests. The standard response to this is to seek time flexibility, which means that individual employees must organise and re-organise their working and private lives in line with what the market dictates. Put simply, times have to be adjusted to the market. This tendency is part of the process of ‘re-commodification’ of labour (Streeck, 2008).

This loss of time sovereignty takes different forms in different sectors and, above all, occupations. Although it was present in all the areas we studied, its traits and its intensity were shaped by the specific nature and content of work, the skills required and other factors. The loss of individual control of time is most intense and most evident for production workers, who have been subjected to widespread temporal flexibility schemes and have experienced a strong reduction in working autonomy. Restructuring processes have deconstructed their time organisation, leading to a growth in shift schedules and unsocial hours, especially night work (including for women) and overtime, and, in more general terms, in the variability of working hours. This has been accompanied by a saturation of time, with an acceleration of pace and rhythm, and a shortening of breaks.

Front-office employees in public services have experienced a reduction in the regularity and predictability of their working hours, features of work which, as the case studies show, are important factors, especially for women, in determining the decision to work in the public sector. This is often accompanied by higher time pressure resulting from increasing workloads. These trends are particularly intense and unfavourable for peripheral workers, employed by sub-contractors who provide outsourced services to public administration.

For knowledge-intensive employees, especially fashion designers, the need to adjust personal life to changing market requirements and production needs is an over-riding feature of their situation. It is a prerequisite of their occupation to organise their time according to the demands of work. It could be said that their private lives have been
colonised by their work. All knowledge workers are experiencing greater demands for temporal flexibility, with a continual extension of working hours, higher workloads, a multiplication of tasks, growing pressure, and tighter deadlines. Nevertheless, most of them are enthusiastic about having successfully ‘marketed’ all their time, and having chosen to live with blurred boundaries between life and work. This is because of their strong identification with the job. But if, for instance, family responsibilities increase, the limits of their autonomy and loss of time sovereignty are immediately exposed.

The ongoing restructuring processes thus entails a loss in time sovereignty. An indicator, but also a consequence, of this weakening is the growing difficulty in achieving an acceptable work-life balance. In other words the options individuals have for balancing their lives between work activities, care and assistance of family members, and recreational, social and political activities have been substantially reduced. Arrangements for achieving work-life balance have become more complicated for all occupational groups, specifically with regard to the reconciliation of work and family need. The new working-time arrangements that are emerging hamper the organisation and balance of different kinds of time, and de facto leave only residual time for activities other than work.

Just as there is a growing differentiation of working-time patterns within and between occupations, there is also a growing diversity of models for balancing work and life. One common strategy, very visible in Italy, is to postpone any projects involving family and children that would increase the need for work in the home (Ponzellini, 2006). In some occupational groups, such as fashion designers or IT professionals (in most of the countries studies), women can only be successful if they forego family life altogether (Krings, 2007).

When family obligations do emerge, unequal participation in the labour market between couples is often the result. It is not necessarily the case that one half of the couple (usually the woman) decides not to participate at all in the labour market. It is more common for one partner to opt for minor involvement, which normally corresponds to a drop in expectations and choice with regard to a range of rewards including income, pension, career advancement, learning and personal development. (Mutari & Figart, 2001; Paci, 2005).

Such individual decisions are bound up with specific institutions but, in all the European countries we studied, women were penalised in terms of economic independence, social recognition and the ability to acquire positions of power either within or outside the labour market (Bianco, 1997; Blossfeld et al; 2007, Saraceno, 1983; 1986). These results confirm that it is still women who take on the larger portion of family work. And it is women who bear the burden of having to seek a balance between work and family needs, in an attempt to achieve a ‘double presence’ (Balbo, 1978) or to maintain the ‘double shift’ of paid and unpaid work (Hochschild, 1989).

Surprisingly, and contrary to public debates about the increasing importance of the dual-career model, in most of the occupational groups we found a consolidation of the male breadwinner model, founded on an asymmetric distribution between men and women of the burden of responsibilities and chores. It was possible, however, to observe a break with this model in a minority of cases (for instance among IT workers.
there had been an increase in female participation). However this increased integration has occurred at the cost of major compromises, such as the acceptance of part-time or flexi-time models, atypical contracts that meant reduced working time (Reyneri, 2005; Samek Lodovici; & Semenza, 2001), and accepting tiredness and stress16.

Institutional settings shape the work-life balance, supporting or hampering attempts to harmonise work and life. National regulations, models of working-time flexibility, different models of part-time work, long-term leave options or child-care facilities, and the types of public services available can all play a contributory role here. Not surprisingly, the strongest dividing line in national differences runs between the Nordic countries and the Southern and Continental countries. The former provide a much wider and more effective supportive infrastructure to help individuals find an acceptable work-life balance. In Central and Eastern Europe, it seems that the changes in political regimes have rolled back previous advances towards gender equality (Krings et al, 2009).

In general, it should be noted that the context in which these changes have been brought about has been that of a slowing down of regulatory initiatives at European, national and regional levels. In recent years, collective bargaining has also too often failed to play a significant role. These can be regarded as further factors that have contributed to the unchecked restructuring of working time and its social consequences. The non-intervention of collective bargaining can be related in part to a weakening of trades unions, especially in more highly skilled occupations (Baglioni, 2008; Carriera, 2003; Visser, 2006). However, this process also reflects the effects of specific strategies that have been followed by trades unions. Historically, working time was one of the key issues of collective bargaining. But now it has become an ‘adjustable variable’ (Castel, 1995), that can be used as a bargaining counter to save jobs or guarantee future employment. Where working-time agreements have changed, this has therefore been to the advantage of companies. More overtime, new shift patterns, flexibility, and working hours have been the outcome of negotiated compromises in many sectors (Hildebrandt, 2006). This goes hand in hand with a political shift towards neoliberal strategies across Europe (Rinderspacher, 2005).

These developments raise the question of what kind of working-time model might be sustainable in the long-term for individuals and society in terms of social cohesion. First, in our opinion, there is a need to overcome the normative assumption that a work-life balance pertains only to family work and that it is both an individual and a female problem. The introduction of the dual-career model as a strong expression of female integration into labour markets can no longer be neglected, either by men or in labour-market strategies. If it is introduced with the right sort of institutional support, this can contributes strongly both to gender equality and to the richness of societal development. Second, there is a need to overcome the idea that companies’ interests can be satisfied only by means of deregulation, increasing the flexibility of working time, and an intensification of work that ends up dominating all the time that workers

16 The literature on this topic has also emphasised the tendency towards a progressive delegation of family functions to third parties and in particular to a ‘commercialisation of intimate life’ (Hochschild, 2003). The pressure of work and its colonisation of the other times, obliges families to purchase care and assistance services for children or elderly people from the ‘care industry’.
have available. A better work-life balance (with more time for activities other than work) contributes to a higher quality of working life, which in turn can increase satisfaction, commitment and productivity in the long term. Policies are needed that stimulate such outcomes.

These are the preconditions for developing a less unilateral and monolithic approach to working time, and to overcome temporal regimes that are entirely controlled by companies and market requirements, in which working time dominates all other individual and social times. Such an outcome first requires a particular institutional framework, including not only a revision of ‘city times’ (to be understood as the system of hours kept by the different local services such as nurseries, schools, retail shops, medical services, and transport) but also a range of appropriate public services and institutional support for a work-life balance. There is also a need for general regulations that limit the intensification of work and the colonisation of individual spheres. These can provide the foundations for models of working-time flexibility that are also to the workers’ advantage. Such forms should consider the different requirements of individuals during their lifecycle, providing them with more and varied opportunities to adjust their working time individually. They should permit, for instance, a reduction of working time during certain periods of the year, or of life. This might necessitate a corresponding wage reduction, but could be topped up with forms of public compensation. Such innovations could lead to more self-directed temporal models, and could encourage men and women to participate in a more balanced way in the different spheres of life (Klammer, 2005).

Last, but not least, there is a need for a new normative model of work which can re-integrated human beings into an overall process of ‘vita activa’, with its boundless creativity. The institutional changes we have proposed will be impossible to accomplish without some support to bring about a cultural change, and without some awareness of the unsustainability of an unlimited commodification of labour, of life and of individuals.

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Appendix 1

Distribution of occupational case studies across countries (number of case studies and in-depth interviews)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>low-skilled</th>
<th>semi-skilled</th>
<th>high-skilled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>clothing production</td>
<td>food production</td>
<td>front-office public service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
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<td>Norway</td>
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<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
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<tr>
<td>UK</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total cases</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total interviews: 222 - clothing production, 18 - food production, 34 - front-office public service, 57 - IT professionals, 91 - fashion designers, 22 - total interviews.