

walq ing

Work and Life Quality in New & Growing Jobs

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The project in brief

walqing is a project in the EU's 7th framework programme, involving research institutes and universities in 11 countries, with an EU contribution of EUR 2,699,546. It runs from November 2009 to October 2012.

walqing aims to increase researchers', stakeholders', managers' and policymakers' knowledge of the quality of work and life in new and growing jobs. It helps to build actors' capacity to identify both problematic and good practices of market developments, policies and company strategies in Europe.

walqing explores the linkages between 'new jobs', their conditions of work and employment, and outcomes for employees' quality of work and life. It connects micro- and macro-levels of analysis and based on this evidence, identifies both critical configurations and good-practice examples.

walqing focuses on work in growing jobs in Europe with problematic working conditions, precarious employment, low wages and/or lack of social integration. It specifically addresses the representation of vulnerable groups in these jobs such as migrant and ethnic minority workers, some groups of women and younger and older workers.



Research aims

- to investigate growing jobs in Europe with problematic working conditions, precarious employment, low wages and/or lack of social integration;
 - to analyse stakeholder policies aiming to improve conditions in these jobs;
 - to compare the impact of alternative ways of organising new types of work on the quality of workers' work and life.
- walqing** aims to influence policies and practices by
- identifying the conditions of favourable and sustainable 'new and growing job' configurations;
 - involving stakeholders in this assessment;
 - transferring examples of good practice in Europe;
 - identifying gaps in stakeholder, national and European policies. ●

Context

Employment growth in Europe has been a policy aim since the establishment of the European Employment strategy (EES) at the Luxemburg Employment Council 1997, and has been successfully pursued. Indeed, from 1995–2006 the proportion of people in active employment in the EU 15 rose from 60% to 66% of the working age population. The aim of improving the **quality of jobs** has had a more discontinuous history in both EU policy and empirical reality. It was introduced into the EES at the Lisbon Summit in 2000, summarised in the formula of 'more and better jobs'. Meanwhile, various multi-dimensional concepts and indicator sets for the quality of work have been developed. However, recent studies both on the European and frequently on the national level have shown that employment expansion has not necessarily improved the quality of work. For example, the WORKS (FP6) project found that 'on average, jobs in the European Union's 15 core member states became less complex and more routine between 1995 and 2005 ... , Workers also experienced a decline in their learning opportunities'.

walqing explores the linkages between 'new jobs', conditions of work and employment in these jobs in depth, and investigates the more or less favourable outcomes for employees' quality of work and life. It does so by integrating several analytical levels and research paradigms, connecting macro- and micro-analysis:

- the analysis of Europe-wide survey data,
- the exploration and action-research-based development of sectoral and cross-sectoral stakeholder policies,
- the analysis of strategies of companies and public-sector work organisations,
- and the investigation of individual jobholders' careers, perspectives and aspirations.

All these approaches have traditionally addressed similar questions separately, and **walqing's** multi-layered analysis will develop a more detailed picture of favourable and problematic configurations of job quality. The focus of **walqing** will be chiefly on '**new**' jobs. 'New jobs' are understood as jobs found in emerging or growing sectors and economic activities shaped (partly) by new organisational forms. A comparison between private and public-sector organisations will also be included. ●

The research

walqing conducts its research in three pillars. In its Pillar 1 which focuses on **quantitative analysis**, the key innovation of **walqing** will be the theory-led combination of in-depth analyses of the most important European data sources such as EU LFS, EWCS, EU-SILC and ESQI in order to discover patterns of job growth, job and life quality, build enriched typologies and identify likely causes and effects of employment growth. These analyses are used to identify salient sectors and functions in which both critical and favourable configurations of job and life quality are to be found. These will be further investigated through qualitative case studies of work organisations and business functions, institutional analysis and action research.

In Pillar 2, **walqing** joins the perspectives of **institutional analysis** and **action research** to disseminate good-practice examples aimed at improving working conditions beyond their national, company-specific or sectoral contexts (and explore the limitations of such transfers). We shall not only investigate collective actors' policies and their limitations and take stock of successful arrangements, but also go beyond mere description by connecting institutional contexts and

case studies and by proactively translating and disseminating successful solutions and strategies with the help of action research.

Pillar 3 explores the organisational (and inter-organisational) strategies and practices of work organisation, HRM strategies, contractual relations and working conditions, by means of **in-depth case studies** in companies. This includes an analysis of the quality of work and life of particularly vulnerable groups, such as young workers, older workers, migrants and some groups of women. **walqing** also investigates **individual workers' life courses**, perspectives and occupational identities. Individuals may find themselves specifically inhibited or empowered by the balances they draw and the concessions they make between different aspects of job and life quality, depending on their material, social, symbolic and biographical resources and capabilities. ●

Current knowledge & the contributions of walqing

So far, employment expansion in Europe has been heterogeneous and it has chiefly been analysed in terms of wage levels and by comparing countries. Initial **data analyses** of Pillar 1 of **walqing** show that, in line with the expansion of the service economy, employment has grown in both more and less knowledge-intensive services such as education, research and development and health and social work on the one hand, retail and wholesale trade, hotels and restaurants, transport, public administration, sewage and refuse disposal, and private households with employees on the other. However, employment has also been growing in some manufacturing sectors that cover both low-tech industries such as construction and manufacturing of metal products, and more high-tech industries such as the computer industry. Through further analyses, **walqing** will deepen our knowledge of these growing jobs and identify what particular occupational groups account for employment growth, what the characteristics of these jobs are, and where new jobs enhance or generate social vulnerability.

The **quality of work** has multiple components along the dimensions of work organisation, pay and performance systems, skills and possibilities for development, security and flexibility, and collective representation and voice. Research findings suggest a mixed pattern of change, with considerable variation in change between countries. The same is true for quality of life. It is also a multi-dimensional concept which

goes beyond a focus on material resources available to individuals and takes account of indicators such as happiness, subjective well-being, and the freedom to choose one's lifestyle. Obviously, household contexts, public infrastructures and welfare provisions also affect quality of work and life.

Institutions and policies such as industrial relations, labour market and welfare policies continue to make differences for the quality of work and the outcomes for workers, particularly at the lower end and in newly emerging sectors. Some structural changes such as industry **restructuring**, **liberalisation** and **work intensification** that have been observed in previous projects are likely to be exacerbated by increasing unemployment and the further cost-cutting strategies of both companies and the public sector following the **financial crisis**. Unless labour market, welfare and industrial policies intervene effectively, these factors are likely to put pressure on the quality of work overall, and specifically in the more problematic segments of the labour market.

Examples of the actual implementation of **measures to improve** both job quality and productivity in low-wage segments so far are mostly found on the national, local and company-specific level. Here, the methodology of **action research** has been applied successfully with professional researchers and stakeholders collaboratively defining the problems to be examined and developing possible solutions.

Key dimensions of the quality of work and job holders' life are shaped at the **organisational level**. Work organisation can offer learning opportunities, intrinsic interest and challenges or can render work monotonous, tightly regimented and frustrating. **walqing** looks into organisational strategies and practices of work organisation, HRM strategies, contractual relations and working conditions. It has an explicit focus on the most **vulnerable groups** on the European labour market and looks at the interplay of institutional and organisational structures that either generate and increase labour-market-related vulnerability or limit it. In including **individual workers' life courses**, perspectives and occupational identities in close connection with the study of organisations, **walqing** adds the dimension of lived experience, individual agency and sensemaking to the investigation of the quality of work and life. ●

*Ursula Holtgrewe, FORBA, Austria,
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Stakeholders & dissemination

walqing and its findings will be of interest to a wide variety of actors and stakeholders at both the national and the European level:

- social-partner organisations, sectoral associations and networks, civil society actors representing vulnerable groups on the labour market,
- policy makers and public authorities,
- Managers, HR practitioners and works councillors.

walqing will discuss its issues and findings in joint researcher–stakeholder encounters. Sectoral ‘dialogue

conferences’ will be held ca. in Spring 2011, and a ‘search conference for policy lessons’ takes place in July 2012. The final **walqing** conference will be in September 2012.

Reports of the **walqing** work packages will be available on the website from mid-2011 onwards, and additional dissemination activities include:

- regular, bi-annual policy briefs and newsletters (from June 2010)
- a web resource on policies, guidelines and concepts to improve the quality of work (ca. April 2012)
- sector- and group-specific brochures summarising key findings of **walqing** (ca. September 2010).

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