



Reduce harmful work stressors.  
Improve job quality and health.

# Healthy Work Strategies

## Job redesign and labor protections have positive effects on worker health and the economy

National policies, laws and regulations can impact working conditions and worker safety and health. To better understand such impacts, in 2012, researchers from the University of South Australia analyzed existing data from 2005-2010 for 31 European countries (27 EU countries, plus Croatia, Turkey, and Norway). The data included country-wide averages of:

- 1) **Work quality**, based on surveys of:
  - a. Managers and employee representatives responsible for occupational safety and health (OSH) – whether each of the following were a major, some or no concern in their workplace: work stress, violence, bullying or harassment?
  - b. Employees –their level of job control
- 2) **Procedures for dealing with work stressors** in their workplace (yes/no) based on surveys of OSH managers. Managers were asked whether there are procedures for dealing with work stress, bullying or harassment, and work-related violence, and whether employees are consulted on measures to deal with such hazards, and whether employees are encouraged to participate actively in carrying out and evaluating these procedures. (The researchers call a positive response to such questions “**psychosocial safety climate**” or **PSC**.)
- 3) **Job redesign efforts to reduce work stress** in their workplaces – based on surveys of OSH managers
- 4) **Union membership** – Percent of the workforce in the country that are union members
- 5) **Income inequality** in the country, that is, the gap between richer and poorer employees.
- 6) **Health** in that country, based on:
  - a. Surveys of employees – ranging from “very bad” to “very good” health
  - b. Life expectancy at birth

## Factors predicting worker health

Countries with a higher percentage of employees who are **union members** and countries with higher **PSC** (worker involvement in procedures to deal with work stressors), had employees with better (self-reported) health, and longer life expectancy. Country averages for work quality and job redesign efforts were not related to worker health. Level of economic development (gross domestic product, GDP) was related to worker health, and income inequality was related to lower life expectancy.

### **Countries with highest levels of unionization, PSC**

With some exceptions, the countries with the highest levels of unionization and of PSC were **Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland**, which have governments that have been strongly influenced by “social democratic” political parties. Those countries tend to have strong social “safety nets” – they have strong worker health and safety protections, and often have free education and child care, and generous family leave policies.

### **Connections to economic growth**

It is sometimes claimed that countries with such strong social safety nets or greater income equality do not do as well economically as other countries. However, the data do not support such a claim. Countries with higher unionization, PSC and income equality have higher GDP. In other words, it appears that GDP is helped by programs, policies, laws which protect workers.

### **Conclusions**

European countries with a higher percent of union membership and more procedures for dealing with work stressors in their workplaces, and involvement of employees in those procedures (PSC), have employees with better health and a population that lives longer. European countries with the highest level of union membership and PSC tend to be those with governments that are strongly influenced by social democratic parties. Therefore, policies, laws and regulations that promote union membership and promote programs and policies to reduce work stress are important parts of a strategy to improve worker health and life expectancy.

### **Reference:**

Dollard, M. F., & Neser, D. Y. (2013). Worker health is good for the economy: Union density and psychosocial safety climate as determinants of country differences in worker health and productivity in 31 European countries. *Social Science & Medicine*, 92, 114-123.