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Session 3 – Invited paper

FINNISH SURVEYS ENABLING INDICATORS ON “QUALITY OF WORK”

Submitted by Statistics Finland*

I. Introduction

1. This paper describes the Quality of Work Life Surveys of Statistics Finland. The process of the implementation and the methodology used in these surveys will be presented, and a brief summary will be given of the major findings of the surveys 1977 – 2003.
2. The Quality of Work Life Surveys are extensive studies involving between 3,000 and 6,000 persons and covering the entire wage and salary earning population in Finland. Up to now, Statistics Finland has carried out five of them, in 1977, 1984, 1990, 1997 and 2003. The surveys are implemented as personal, face-to-face interviews lasting, on average, one hour. The response rate of these surveys has varied between 91 per cent in 1977 to 78 per cent in 2003.
3. The permanent contents of the interview can be divided roughly into four categories:
1) Physical work environment, including questions e.g. on adverse factors, work accidents and physical strain.

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2) *Psychic and social factors in work environment*, including questions e.g. on monotony of work, mental demands, time pressure, opportunities for influence and for development, social relationships and discrimination.

3) *Health and stress symptoms*, with questions on recurrent aches and pains, psychic and somatic symptoms, experiences of threat.

4) *Labour market position, family, background variables*, containing questions on work history, type of employment contracts, experiences and threat of unemployment, reconciliation of work and private life, commitment to work, etc.

4. In addition to this, special themes have been introduced in every round: new questions have been added at the same time as some former questions on issues not-so-topical-any-more have been reduced. The special themes have been technological changes in work and gender equality since the 1984 Survey, changes in work organisations (flexibility, productivity) since the 1990 Survey, and time pressure and fixed-term employment contracts since 1997. In the 2003 Survey special emphasis was still placed on gender equality, fixed-term contracts and time pressure. New questions were also introduced on issues such as ageing at work, reconciliation of work and family, working hours and their flexibility, remuneration and new forms of pay, absenteeism, work accidents and supervisory tasks.

5. Whenever possible, identical questions have been used in inquiring about these issues so that findings spanning over 25 years, at its best, are now available on the main subject areas. The surveys are implemented in connection with the monthly Labour Force Survey. The target population is selected from persons aged 15 to 64 among the respondents in the specific rotation groups of the Labour Force Survey (LFS). (In 2003, the rounds of October and November.) The inclusion in the sample of the Quality of Work Life Survey from among the interviewees of the Labour Force Survey is not established until during the LFS interview. The wage and salary earners whose normal weekly working hours amounted to at least five hours are selected from the population of the LFS (aged 15 to 64) into the sample of the Quality of Work Life Survey (QWLS). At the end of the LFS telephone interview, these selected persons are proposed a QWLS face-to-face interview.

6. One of the advantages of such procedure is that all the information obtained from the interviewees already in the Labour Force Survey is available for the data of the Quality of Work Life Survey. In the interview of the QWLS there is no need any more to ask about the interviewee's occupation, his/her normal weekly working hours, etc.

7. The design, analysis and reporting of the Quality of Work Life Surveys are carried out by the Work Research Unit of Statistics Finland. The head of the unit, Head of Development Anna-Maija Lehto has held the main responsibility for these surveys since 1984. She has done most of the work in developing this survey system.

II. The Implementation Process - Time Schedule of the 2003 Survey

8. The implementation process of the Quality of Work Life Survey 2003 started in 2002 by defining the research scheme and assembling the advisory group. Two researchers from Statistics Finland were involved in the Survey, Head of Development Anna-Maija Lehto and Senior Researcher Hanna Sutela. The advisory group consisted of representatives from 10 different

bodies financing the data collection of the Survey¹ as well as of a few independent experts from different universities and research institutes.

9. The questionnaire design was realised in co-operation between the researchers and the advisory group, mainly between August 2002 and April 2003. During this time period, the advisory group met several times. The design work was based on the questionnaire of the 1997 Survey. This questionnaire was looked through question by question and decisions were made whether to keep, delete or add specific questions. The dilemma whether it is more important to retain the comparability in time – and not to change anything in some old question – or to introduce a more up-to-date way to ask about a certain issue was raised from time to time. These decisions had to be contemplated case-specifically. There is enough evidence of how – apparently – a very minor change in the phrasing or in the order of questions may have major effects on responding so that the results will not be comparable in time any more.

10. The programming of the computer-assisted questionnaire took place in April 2003 and was followed by a pilot study in May 2003. Some modifications were still made based on the feedback of the pilot study before the translation into Swedish, in summer 2003, and the training of the interviewees.

11. The importance of a qualified interviewer organisation and careful training of the interviewers cannot be stressed enough. Statistics Finland has a body of some 180 trained interviewees. For this Survey, the interviewers were given an extra 4-hour training by the researchers responsible for the Survey. The aim of the training was not just to give advice on how to code some specific cases, but also to introduce the interviewers to the backgrounds and the objectives of both the whole QWLS system and of some specific questions. This kind of approach obviously increased the motivation of the interviewers.

12. The interviews took place during October, November and December 2003. The data were compiled at the beginning of 2004, and the analysis and reporting of the data have been going on since that. The first report, “Threats and Opportunities. Findings of Quality of Work Life Surveys 1977 – 2003”, was published by Statistics Finland in October 2004. More publications are under way.

13. There are several users for the QWLS data. All the funding bodies are using the data, and in addition to this, the data have been bought by a few universities, the main trade unions and some research institutes that all do their own research. Most of the funding bodies and other major users of the data are contributing to a forthcoming publication of articles based on the results of the 2003 Survey.

14. Much research is also done at Statistics Finland’s WorkResearch Unit itself. In connection with the 1997 Survey, Statistics Finland published several articles and five different publications on the results of the survey. Two of them are translated into English. (See References.)

¹ Data collection of the Survey 2003 was financed by the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, the Finnish Work Environment Fund, the State Treasury, the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, the Finnish Centre for Industrial Safety, the Finnish Centre for Pensions, the Local Government Pensions Institution, the Social Insurance Institution, the Finnish Rehabilitation Foundation and the Occupational Accident Prevention Programme.

III. Methodology: combining quantitative and qualitative methods

15. When interpreting and analysing survey responses one can never be totally sure what the respondents have actually meant by their responses. There is also a strong possibility that the old types of questions, already used for long, do not highlight the new and essential characteristics of the rapidly changing working life. Considering this, Anna-Maija Lehto reasoned that the best way to gain information on the new phenomena of working life and to improve the possibilities of the survey was to combine quantitative and qualitative methods.² (Lehto 1996, Lehto 2002, Lehto 2005.)

16. Quantitative and qualitative methods were combined in the QWLS for the first time in the 1997 Survey. In the first place, the compilation of the questionnaire was preceded by a host of informal interviews with representatives from various occupations. These interviews dealt partly with the new themes to be introduced to the survey, namely time pressure and fixed-term contracts. Interviewees shared their experiences and point of views on these issues. The other part of these interviews concerned revision of some of the old questions from the questionnaire 1990. The interviewees were encouraged to "think aloud" while answering to these specific questions. How did they understand the question – What was actually asked? Was it a difficult question or not, why? Why did they answer like they did, what did they mean by their answer? Were the answering alternatives adequate enough? In their opinion, was the question relevant at all?

17. This method proved to be a very effective and rewarding one. The interviews were exploited in designing and formulating the questions for the 1997 Survey.

18. In the 1997 Survey, at the end of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked whether they consented to Statistics Finland keeping their contact details on record for four years for possible future research concerning the quality of work life. Over 90 per cent of the respondents gave their consent.

19. Later on, a research project on time pressure and gender equality was launched at Statistics Finland's Work Research Unit. Some 40 interesting "cases" were picked among those respondents whose contact information had been retained. These persons were interviewed in a qualitative way. Again, the interviews consisted of two parts: firstly, the interviewees were encouraged to contemplate informally their experiences on time pressure / gender equality at their work. Secondly, the questions on time pressure / gender equality on the survey questionnaire 1997 were revised with the "think aloud" method.

20. The principal aim in these qualitative interviews was to find fresh, maybe even surprising points of view, which had escaped the researchers while designing and analysing structured survey questionnaires. They were also expected to highlight different processes proceeding in time, of which time pressure and workload are a good example. In these respects, these latter interviews also proved to be very rewarding.

21. For example, on the basis of structural surveys, it was already known that the effects of time pressure are experienced as the most adverse among employees aged 25 to 45, less among the very young or the elderly. It had been a slightly surprising finding, considering all the concerns for the coping of elderly employees. Qualitative interviews showed that much of this finding had to do with the fact that elderly employees, with a long working career and a relatively

² Anna-Maija Lehto considers more thoroughly the foundations of the adopted method in her 1996 doctoral dissertation "Working Conditions as a Research Subject".

stable position, simply had learned to manage their time pressure. In many cases this had happened after these persons had been very close to, or had actually even suffered from, burnout. (Lehto 2002, 10.)

22. The process goes on. The lessons learned from these interviews, made after the 1997 Survey, were exploited in designing the survey questionnaire 2003. In this latest survey, the respondents were also asked permission to retain their contact information for a possible future research. Again, over 90 per cent gave their consent. Thus, the sample for further qualitative research is ready.

23. These experiences have proved how crucial it is that some in-depth analysis and research of the data are also done by the institution and by the researchers responsible for the survey design and the data collection in the first place. The survey design in such a survey system as the QWLS is a continuous process: lessons learned from previous surveys can be put to use in the next questionnaire design.

IV. Engendering the surveys as an ongoing process

24. Gender equality and gender sensitiveness have played major roles in the QWLSs since 1984. The principle of gender sensitiveness is involved in every step of the survey process from the questionnaire design to the analysis and reports of the results. This goes much further than only presenting the figures by gender. It has been and it still is about assessing what is characteristic of women's work and orientation instead of taking the work in male-dominated sectors as a norm; questions are then designed to cover these "female" aspects as well. The aim is also to take into consideration gender differences in responding. This is important while designing the questionnaire as well as when interpreting and reporting the results. In addition to this interwoven gender sensitiveness, direct questions on different aspects of gender equality are used. The methodology of combining qualitative research to quantitative research has turned out to be very effective also in finding out characteristics special to women's work and men's work, too. This information has been used both in questionnaire design and in interpreting and reporting.

25. The following is a good example of both the importance of gender sensitiveness in interpreting survey responses and the significance of analysis done by the survey designers themselves. The 1990 and 1997 Surveys had included a question on how long the respondent estimated that it would take for a new employee with the necessary basic training to learn his/her work. The response alternatives were between a few hours and several years. The question seemed to be functioning well since the interviewers reported no complaints about respondents having difficulties in answering it. It was only at the analysis phase that the weakness of this type of question, from the gender point of view, was highlighted. Wide gender differences in answering were detected even in the same occupations and tasks: men tended to overestimate and women to underestimate the time needed. Some of the external users of data would not take into account this difference when analysing results but were simply concluding that the work men do is much more demanding than women's work. To avoid this kind of misuse the question was deleted from the 2003 Survey.

26. Another gender sensitive adjustment could be mentioned here. It was detected that in the 1997 Survey in response to the question "*Could you estimate what proportion of your working hours you have to deal with people other than your co-workers (e.g. customers, patients, passengers, pupils, etc.)?*", 25 per cent of the childminders had answered "*about half of the time*"

or even “less”. For one reason or another, these childminders were evidently referring only to the parents of the children, not to the children themselves. In 2003, when the notion “*children*” had been added to the question (“*e.g. customers, patients, passengers, pupils or children*”), every single childminder answered “*Almost all the time*”. As well known, childminders are mostly women.

V. Structural changes to be taken into consideration

27. With a time span of over 25 years, the Quality of Work Life Surveys provide a very useful tool for assessing changes in working life. It has to be taken into consideration, though, that the changes observed in the experiences of working life are not influenced only by the actual changes in working life. They are also influenced, at least to a certain degree, by the changes in the structure of the employee population – in some cases even by the changes in the awareness of the employee population.

28. The structure of the wage and salary earning population has changed in many ways in the two-and-a-half decades that the QWLSs describe. The clearest change is to be seen in the wage and salary earning population getting increasingly white-collared and better educated. When, in the 1977 Survey, 55 per cent of all employees had only basic level education, the proportion was 18 per cent in the latest survey in 2003. At the same time, there has been a strong change in occupational structure, too. Thus, improvements in some working conditions do not necessarily arise from improvements that have been carried out at actual workplaces but from the fact that certain types of tasks have become more prevalent while certain others have grown less so.

29. Another big change in the structure of the wage and salary earner population is ageing. When, in the 1977 Survey, the average age of employees was 36.2 years, in the 2003 Survey the respondents were 41.6 years old, on average. The ageing of the population has an effect on many trends in experiences. In some cases it seems to be even too easy to explain the changes by the ageing of workforce. This can be misleading, though. This is the case for example when it comes to commitment to work, measured by the question concerning the respondent’s willingness to change jobs, for example. This question has been included in the surveys since the very beginning. The results show that the proportion of those *not willing to change jobs at all* is the largest today at 56 per cent. (Figure 1.) The commitment certainly varies by age. Young people are more willing than older ones to change: 51 per cent of the employees aged under 30 would not be willing to change their job at all whereas the respective proportion is 73 per cent among the employees aged 55 to 64. The conclusion that could be drawn from this is that the ageing of the wage and salary earning population explains the reduced willingness to change. However, further analysis shows that the commitment to the current job has increased most among young employees: in the 1977 Survey the respective proportions were 42 per cent among the employees aged under 30 and 70 per cent among the employees aged 55 or more.

30. As to changes in the awareness of the respondents, workplace bullying may offer a good example. In the 1997 Survey the respondents were asked for the first time whether they reckoned that workplace bullying existed at their workplace and whether they had personal experiences of it – at the moment, previously at the current workplace, or previously at another workplace, or never. Interestingly enough, the answers to the question concerning the respondents’ personal experiences show that the proportion of women who have been bullied *in the past* has gone up in particular (Figure 2). This may be connected with the fact that workplace bullying did not really become a topic of public discussion until after the 1997 Survey had already been carried out. Consciousness of the existence of this phenomenon has grown: it is likely that an increasing

number of different types of behaviour are reported and labelled as workplace bullying. It may also be that a certain kind of personally experienced treatment is only recognised and named as workplace bullying once it has been brought out to the open. (Lehto & Sutela 2004, 56.) Especially in such sensitive issues the differences in awareness as well as cultural differences make international comparisons quite difficult as well (See Lehto & Pärnänen, 2004).

VI. Summary of the findings of Quality of Work Life Surveys 1977 - 2003

31. In considering long-term changes in working life over the 25 years covered by the Quality of Work Life Surveys, some positive trends are important. Employees are much better educated today than 25 years ago, and experiences of development and in-house training (Figure 3) have increased all the time. Women have experienced even a more significant increase in their opportunities for development than men from 1977 to 2000: the proportion of women who think that development opportunities are good has risen from 23 to 37 per cent. Among men the same figures are 33 vs. 42 per cent. Positive development can also be seen in the opportunities to influence one's own work, although opportunities to influence the pace of work have decreased since the 1990 Survey (Figure 4).

32. However, it is of some concern that various demands and threats at work have also grown. Time pressure has increased continuously since 1977, with the latest survey showing only a slight alleviation (Figure 5). Threat of severe work exhaustion, as well as fear of succumbing to mental disturbance and fear of becoming subjected to physical violence at work continue to grow (Figure 6).

33. The latest alarming finding is that employees are no longer informed sufficiently or early enough about coming changes at their workplace. Approximately every fourth (25%) employee faces changes relating to his/her work without any prior information about them. Two out of five (39%) employees are informed shortly before the change and every third (34%) at the planning stage. There has been a surprisingly clear decline in being informed about changes in recent years. In 1997, 41 per cent of the employees were informed about changes relating to their work at the planning stage, and 22 per cent were informed at the implementation stage or after it.

34. Before that, in the 1990s, the flow of information had slightly improved. (Figure 7). This development concerns all wage and salary earners, including those who are well-educated and in good positions. The private sector seems to be the least well-informed in this sense. At the same time, changes take place continuously at workplaces. Almost one half of employees had recently had or will have changes in management (49%) or information systems (45%). One third (36%) also expected or had had changes in customer groups or products and every fifth (18%) employee had changes in ownership of workplace.

35. Behind these uncertainties and demands are presumably the ever tougher competition in the private sector and lack of resources in the public sector. The outcomes of such demands are clear: social relationships have suffered, as has the health of employees. Symptoms, such as sleeping difficulties, fatigue, tensions, and neck and shoulder pain have been on the increase, especially among women.

36. These results mean that action for better working life and well-being has become more urgent. Physical work environment problems still have to be resolved, while many new, more social and psychological problems have also arisen. The task of the Quality of Work Life Surveys

is to reveal the connections between the many changes in the working environment in order to help towards improving circumstances.

37. For more results, see
<http://www.eurofound.eu.int/ewco/surveys/FI0410SR01/FI0410SR01.htm>

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Figure 1. Willingness to change to another job

At the same pay, Quality of Work Life Surveys 1977, 1984, 1990, 1997 and 2003

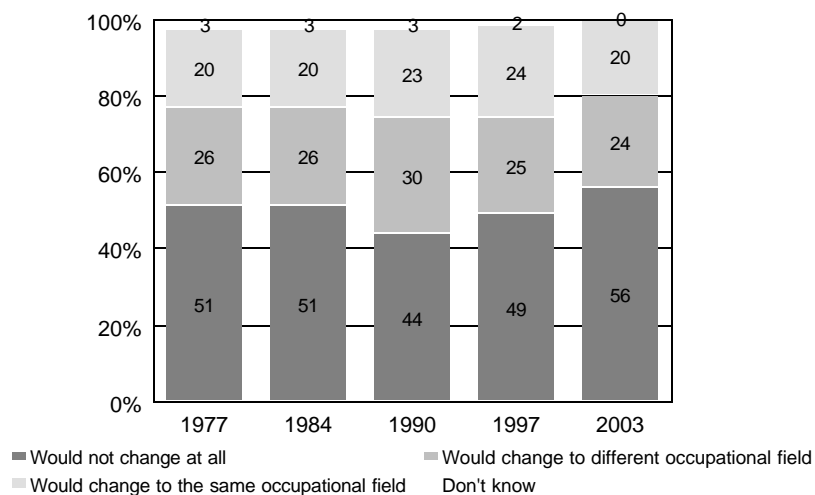


Figure 2. Has been personally subjected to workplace bullying

Quality of Work Life Surveys 1997 and 2003

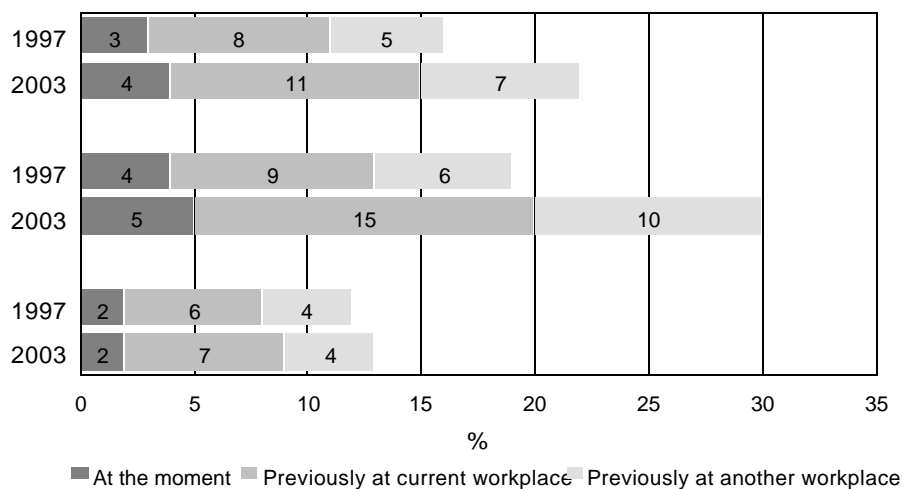


Figure 3. Participation in training paid for by employer

In the last 12 months, QWLS 1977, 1984, 1990, 1997 and 2003

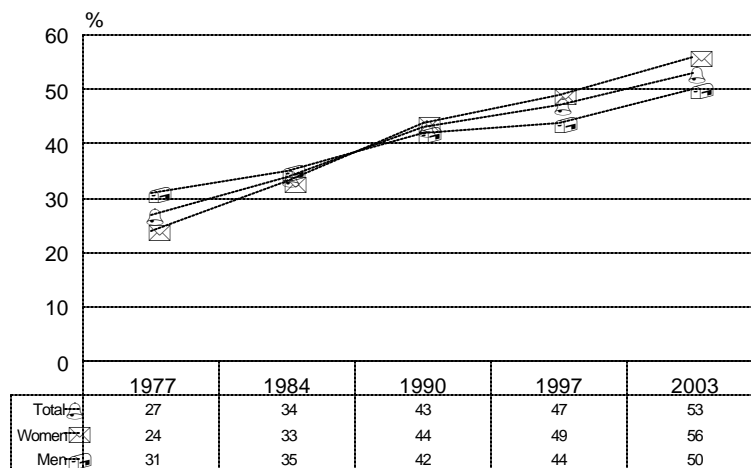


Figure 4. Opportunities for influencing own work

Can influence a lot or quite a lot, QWLS 1984, 1990, 1997 and 2003

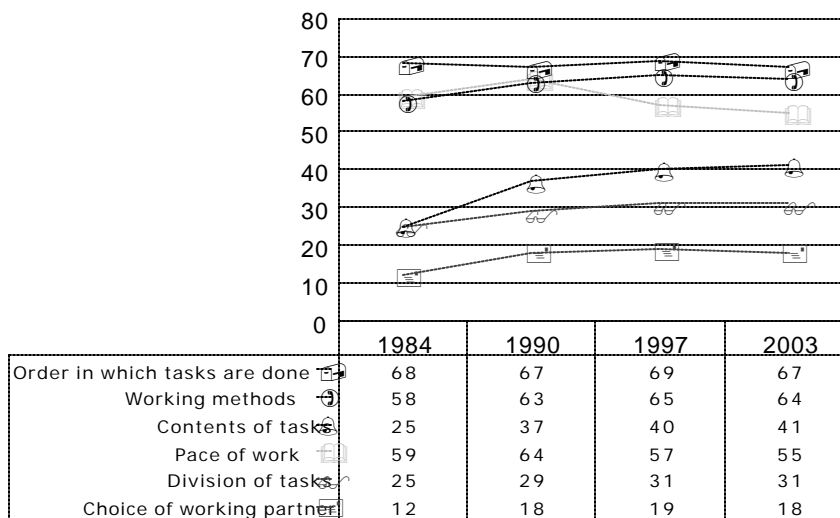


Figure 5. Adverse effects of time pressure

Adverse effects extreme or moderate, QWLS 1977,1984,1990, 1997 and 2003

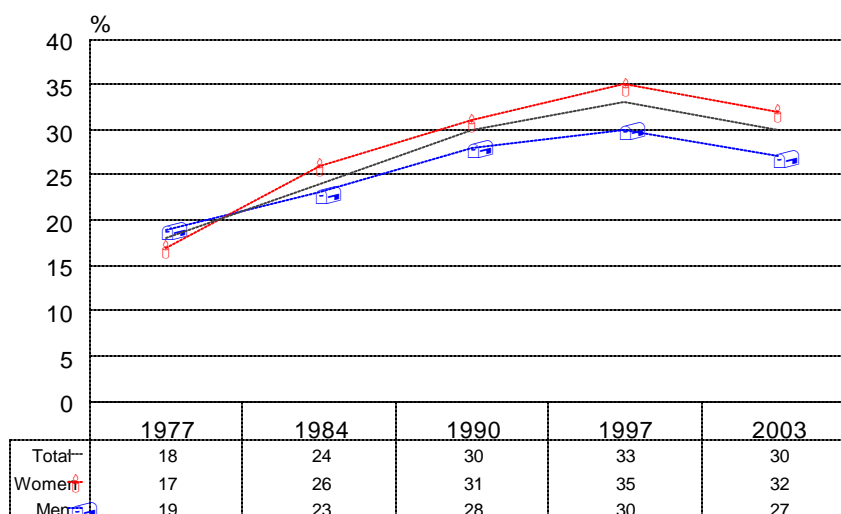


Figure 6. Experiencing of hazards and insecurity

Quality of Work Life Surveys 1984 and 2003

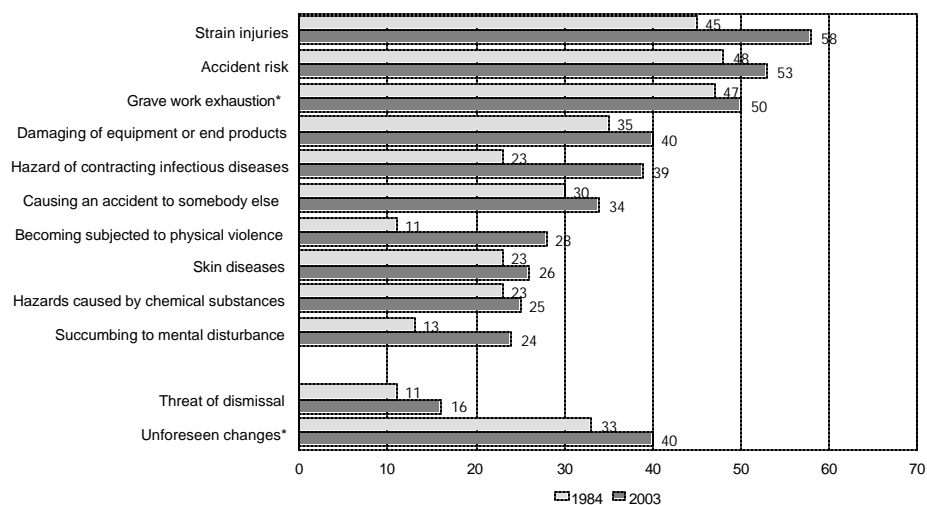


Figure 7. Information about changes relating to own work

Quality of Work Life Surveys 1977, 1984, 1990, 1997 and 2003

