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Joint ECE-Eurostat-ILO Seminar on
Measurement of the Quality of Employment
(Geneva, 3-5 May 2000)

Topic 4

EMPOWERING WORK. RECENT CHANGES AND DEVELOPMENTS IN WORK CONTENT AND ACCESS TO TRAINING

Invited paper submitted by Statistics Finland¹

Summary

1. In this paper, three subjects will be discussed:

- 1) Why is the question of “skills-developing work” so important?
- 2) What is the situation in Finland concerning the development of work and the qualifications of the labour force?
- 3) How to study, and produce statistics on, these qualitative aspects of working life?

2. The demands for more qualified labour and better work content increase together with growing demands for better competitiveness, effectiveness and productivity. The factors lying behind these changes are, above all, internationalising economic relations, intensifying global competition and the effects of the new information technology. Correspondingly, at the European Union level, the contemporary “Employment strategy” and the green paper “Partnership for a new organisation of work” put much emphasis on “training, confidential relationships and employee participation”. Additionally, the demands for gender equality and for empowering elderly people to stay in employment are some of the factors behind the qualitative requirements of work.

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3. The results of the Finnish Quality of Work Life Surveys 1977-1997 show interesting changes in work content, developmental aspects of work and qualification levels of employees. In many respects, the changes are for the better: opportunities for in-house training have increased, work has become less monotonous, employees can better participate in the planning of their own work, etc. The educational levels of both men and women in the labour force have gone up enormously. Compared to other European countries, Finnish working life is also quite well advanced in work development: access to training is most common in Finland, use of information technology at work is extensive and employees widely feel they can learn new things at work. Unfortunately, these changes have brought about harmful effects as well. Tendencies toward better effectiveness, productivity and flexibility have caused more time pressure, insecurity about employment contracts, growing social problems at workplaces and increased tiredness, even burnout, among employees.

4. The third aim of my paper is to discuss the possibilities for studying these qualitative aspects of work and employment. Experiences with the Finnish Quality of Work Life Surveys have shown that it is not easy to get information with very standardised survey questions. Employees' subjective experiences can only be reached with very sensitive research instruments. That is why the Work Research Unit of Statistics Finland has developed special triangulation methods that combine qualitative and quantitative data collections and analyses. In order to gain comprehensive understanding of work life phenomena, information is needed from all possible levels, i.e. from statistics on employment, as well as from quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews.
