



# pub. alert

## The why and how of working time reduction

by Stan De Spiegelaere and Agnieszka Piasna

The ETUI has launched a new publication: 'The why and how of working time reduction'.

This guide maps out the debate on working time reduction and provides multiple examples of experiments carried out in different countries.

Reducing working time is a historic demand of the trade union movement that in recent years has been pushed off the bargaining table. Nevertheless, while the working time of full-time employees in Europe has accordingly stabilised, on average it has continued to decline due to an overall increase in part-time work. This decline over the past ten years has contributed in part to a working-time redistribution equivalent to about 4.5 million jobs.

However, these developments give little cause for cheer. This kind of working time reduction through part-time work is fully financed by the employee via lower wages, meaning it can serve to aggravate rather than fight existing inequalities. The part-time jobs created are increasingly involuntary, offer less career opportunities and are concentrated in lower-level occupations. Furthermore, as most part-time jobs are still occupied by women, they tend to confirm existing role patterns. The current working time reduction through part-time work thus largely represents a business-oriented solution rather than an opportunity for a more satisfying work-life balance for workers.

According to many studies, working time reduction could provide (albeit partial) solutions in the areas of workplace health and safety, gender equality, work-life balance, employment and productivity. Its effectiveness, however, is intrinsically linked to how it is organised: to what extent should working time be reduced and should this be calculated per day, week, month or year? How can the reduction be financed, will it be a voluntary or mandatory measure, and should it be implemented at the company, sector, national or transnational level?

This guide provides numerous real-life examples as well as five in-depth case studies of working time reductions: part-time work in the Netherlands, an experiment in a Swedish retirement home, legal action in France, and measures taken by employers in Belgium – at Volkswagen and at a Flemish radio and television company – in order to prevent lay-offs.

The authors call for a revival of the working time debate and further experimentation. While reducing working time is not simple, and certainly not a magic bullet for dealing with the many issues at stake, it is too powerful a labour market instrument to be ignored.



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## Key findings

- While working time for full-time employees has remained stable in recent years, the average working time has decreased because more people work in part-time jobs. The extent of this individual working time reduction over the past 10 years is the equivalent of more than four million jobs in Europe.
- Individual working time reduction through part-time work could serve to aggravate rather than fight existing inequalities. We need to consider organising a collective reduction in working time.
- There are many reasons to reduce working time; however, not all objectives can be attained at the same time. Increasing productivity through reduced working hours might mean less beneficial effects on employment. Everything depends on how the working time reduction is implemented. An increased flexibility in working hours and workload can easily offset the positive effects of a reduction.
- Working time reductions can be designed in countless ways, depending on the goals and priorities. Multiple examples show how such measures can be effective labour market instruments.

## Policy implications:

Working time reduction is a labour market instrument and should be reconsidered as a valid policy solution for many work-related problems.

- Working time reduction is already happening through an increase in part-time work but policy needs to organise the reduction to guarantee socially equitable outcomes.
- Policymakers and social partners at various levels should consider implementing reductions and can learn from a rich history of experiments.

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