

Working conditions in the German automotive industry

Regarding the BIBB/BAuA 2012 Employment Survey, a representative random sample of employees in Germany is asked every six years about working conditions, working requirements and resources, as well as about health disturbances. This article focuses on the working conditions in the German automotive industry for the year 2012. The analyses presented here relate to male workers in full-time work who are not employed via a temporary employment agency.

Mental working conditions

The employees were asked about their mental and physical working conditions. They were asked to state whether the individual working conditions frequently, sometimes, rarely or never occur. Mental working conditions include the activity latitude afforded to each employee. Various aspects can be used to describe activity latitude, such as individual influence on the quantity of work, decisions regarding the organisation of work breaks, or the ability to organize and plan work by oneself.

Figure 1 presents the aspects of activity latitude that were investigated and shows the proportion of participants that gave the answer “frequently”. The first three of these aspects refer to a greater degree of activity latitude. If employees answer questions on these aspects with “frequently”, it can be assumed that they have a high degree of activity latitude. A low degree of activity latitude or latitude for action is addressed by the questions relating to a prescribed number of pieces or prescribed time, constantly recurring work processes and work whose performance is prescribed down to the last detail. If these conditions apply “frequently”, it can be concluded that the employees have barely any activity latitude.

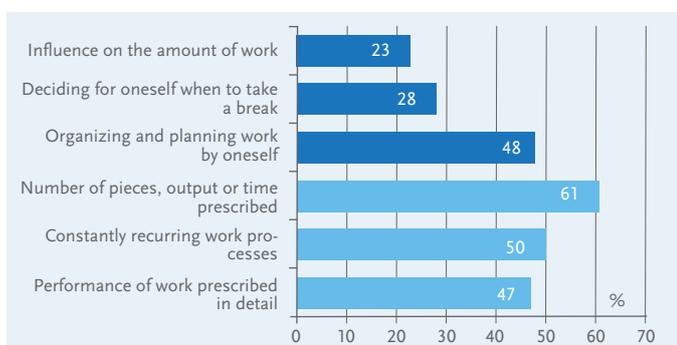


Fig. 1: Percentage of employed persons who report frequently experiencing this degree of activity latitude

Almost half of employees (48%) can arrange and plan their own work by oneself. Just about a third of participants (28%) report being able to decide for themselves when to take a break. Somewhat fewer employees have an influence on their quantity of work (23%). More than half of respondents (61%) report that a specific number of pieces, output or time is prescribed. According to the survey participants, constantly recurring work processes are present for half of employees (50%). In just about half of workers (47%), work performance is prescribed down to the last detail.

Other psychologically relevant working conditions include aspects of work intensity, such as great deadline pressure and pressure to perform or being required to supervise different tasks at the same time, as well as working very quickly, the occurrence of disturbances or interruptions during work, and working at the limits of one's own capabilities.

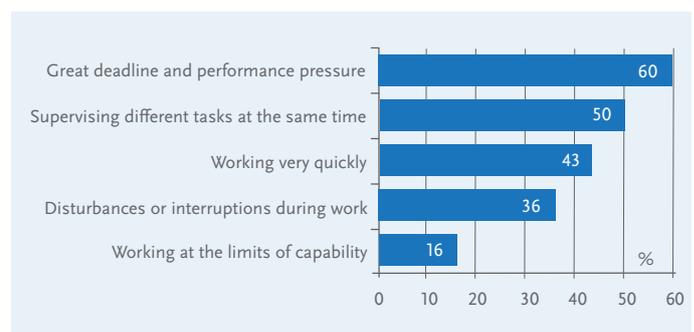


Fig. 2: Percentage of employees that report frequently being exposed to these working conditions

Figure 2 shows the proportion of respondents that report frequently being exposed to these aspects of work intensity. Almost two thirds of respondents often work under great deadline pressure and pressure to perform (60%). In addition, half of employees frequently have to supervise different tasks at the same time (50%). 43% report frequently having to work

very quickly. Just over a third of employees report that their work is frequently disturbed or interrupted (36%). Working at the limits of personal capabilities is reported by 16%.

Physical working conditions

In addition to mental demands at work, the employees were also asked about their physical working conditions. Figure 3 shows the employee data for the answer “frequently”. Performing work standing up represents the most frequent requirement (83%). Approximately one half of respondents report using the hands to perform work requiring great dexterity, fast sequences of movements or greater strength (56%) and working in noisy conditions (48%). Around 40% of employees often work in a dirty environment. About a third of workers (27%) are frequently confronted with demands such as working in cold, heat, wetness, humidity or draught. The proportion of employees who have to handle heavy loads (22%) or are exposed to smoke, gas, dust or vapours (22%) is significantly smaller.

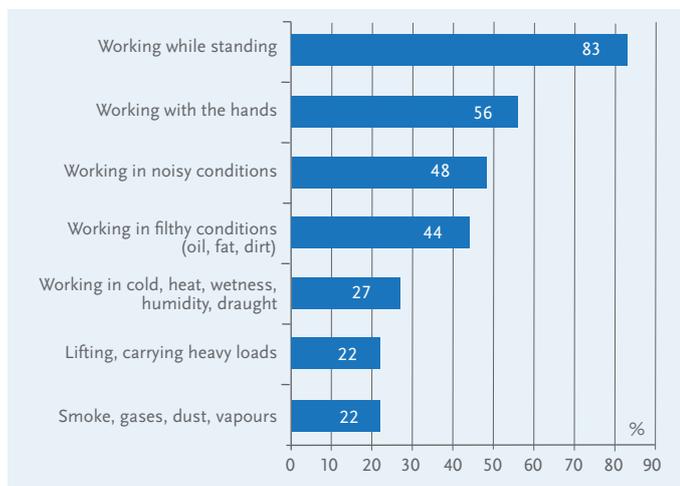


Fig. 3: Percentage of employees that report frequently being exposed to these working conditions

Musculoskeletal complaints

Musculoskeletal complaints occur very often in the general population (see Stress Report 2012). Figure 4 shows the distribution of complaints across individual regions of the body in employees in the automotive industry. The respondents were asked to indicate with “yes” or “no” whether pain had occurred in the corresponding region within the last 12 months. The region most frequently affected is the lower back. More than half of employees reported suffering from lumbago (54%). The second most frequent type of complaint is pain in the neck and shoulder area (43%). About a third of respondents report suffering from pain in the arms (28%) and knees

(28%). Pain in the hips occurred in a quarter of workers (21%). Somewhat fewer employees are affected by pain in the hands (18%).

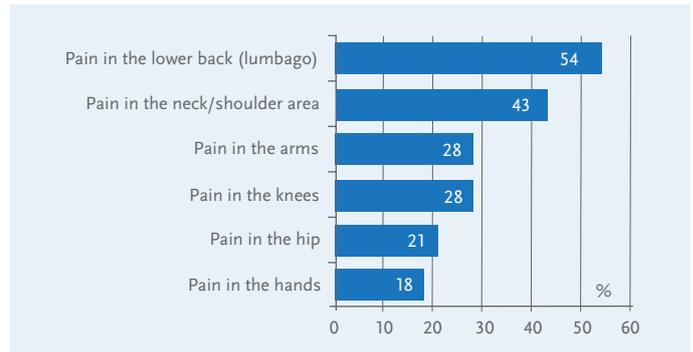


Fig. 4: Percentage of employed persons who report suffering from pain in the corresponding regions of the body

Summary

In the area of mental demands at work, the results show that more than half of interviewed employees often have a prescribed number of pieces, output or time, as well as work under great deadline pressure and pressure to perform. The majority of respondents report working while standing as a frequent physical demand. Regarding complaints in the musculoskeletal system, particularly the lower back, the neck and the shoulder area are to be mentioned.

The results provide a snapshot of the need to regularly document and assess working conditions in a targeted manner with respect to potential mental and physical hazards and to derive appropriate measures, as well as to check their implementation, as required by the Occupational Safety and Health Act (see section 4 of the Act). Highly consistent working requirements, characterised by very frequent repetition or identical movements or working processes, can lead to physical and mental impairments in the long term. On the other hand, a job designed to provide variety can have a positive effect on employees' health and performance.

Would you like to find out more on this topic?

For further information on working conditions in Germany, please visit www.baua.de/dok/717904.

The Stress Report Germany 2012 is also available to download at www.baua.de/dok/3430796 [in German]. As an aid for the assessment of physical stresses, the inventory of methods for assessing and designing working conditions is available at www.baua.de/dok/673886 [in German].

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