

Question in Project:

European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) (English Version)

Question Topic:

Job and career/ Job situation & professional activity

Construct:

Working in free time

General Information:

Note: The item was tested both in English and German.

Online Probing & Cognitive Interviews

Introduction:

From now onwards all the questions are about your main paid job.

Question Text:

English version: Over the last 12 months, how often have you worked in your free time to meet work demands?

German version: Wie oft haben Sie in den letzten 12 Monaten in Ihrer Freizeit gearbeitet, um die Arbeitsanforderungen zu erfüllen?

Answer Categories:

English version:

Daily

Several times a week

Several times a month

Less often

Never

Not applicable

Don't know/no opinion

Refusal

German version:

Täglich

Mehrmals in der Woche

Mehrmals im Monat

Seltener

Nie

Trifft nicht zu

Weiß nicht/keine Meinung

Verweigert

Cognitive Techniques:

Specific Probing. (OP)

Comprehension Probing, Specific Probing, General/Elaborative Probing. (CI)

Findings for Question:

Online Probing:

The intention of testing this question was to see how self-employed people who decide their own hours distinguish between free time and work time. For employees, the intention was to investigate who asks them to work in their free time and what kinds of work demands justify working outside of the regular hours.

In all three countries, self-employed respondents are more likely than employees to answer that they regularly work in their free time. This difference is least pronounced in the UK (at least several times a week: 55% self-employed vs 42% employees), followed by Germany (58% vs 18%) and Poland (72% vs 24%).

However, two problems are associated with this question, which inhibit the interpretability of the results. The first is a question of comprehension of the concept working hours versus free time and their clear distinction. This problem is solely related to the self-employed.

Some self-employed work set hours, for instance because they have opening hours. These are the self-employed who are most likely to state that they seldom work in their free time:

- "I work set times and very rarely need to come in in my free time" (R187UK, less often)
- "I take care of my company. But practically never outside of working hours" (R323DE, less often)

Others appear to use regular office hours as their benchmark for working hours and describe working outside of these hours as working in their free time, although their answers do not indicate that these are unplanned additional hours:

- "The service I provide is often carried out in the evenings or at the weekend" (R287DE, several times a week)

Others clearly state that being self-employed means always being on duty (eleven respondents state this directly).

- "If you have your own company, you don't have free time" (R87PL, daily)
- "When you're self-employed, you never have off" (R353DE, several times a month)
- "I'm always doing business" (R325DE, daily)

The problem becomes particularly evident with nine respondents who explicitly state that they have difficulty distinguishing between working and free time. Particularly striking is that these respondents provide answers from the entire range of the scale, from "daily" to "less often", implying that the answer scale is not suitable for at least a portion of the self-employed. Also, the statements of many self-employed respondents indicate that a substantial amount of their working hours are flexible and/or on short notice, making it difficult to choose a category clearly:

- "For me, work and free time blend together daily" (R396DE, daily)
- "There is a blurring between work time and free time for me" (R34UK, several times a week)
- "I do not distinguish free time from working time and can decide to work when I wish" (R211UK, less often)
- "I work when I feel like it" (R381PL, daily)
- "I have flexible working hours; sometimes I work on holiday but have off on regular working days" (R330PL, several times a month)
- "When you're trying to grow a business, it's difficult to switch off from work. Having said that, my time is much more flexible than if I was employed. I can take time off at short notice." (R192UK, several times a week)

The second error related to the question applies to both employees and self-employed and refers to difficulties in choosing the correct answer category. Several employees and self-employed respondents state that their work has seasonal high times when they work non-stop, and then more quiet phases. These respondents try to state the mean value:

- "Looking at the whole year, this is the correct answer. But there are times that working in your free time is a daily requirement, and then it isn't necessary for weeks at a time. So several times a month is an average across the whole year" (R352DE, self-employed, several times a month)
- "My jobs are irregular" (R14UK, self-employed, several times a month)

- "When it's time for inventory, we work longer than our regular hours" (R186DE, employed, less often)

Testing for reasons why respondents work in their free time, the reasons named are as to be expected. Self-employed are not forced by a superior, but explain that client needs and business promotions require that they demonstrate flexibility:

- "No one asks me but I like to keep my customers happy" (R217UK, less often)
- "No one asks me but I like to keep my customers happy" (R217UK, less often)

For employees, the reasons vary. The most commonly cited ones are that the work load and or superior require it.

Cognitive Interviews:

Q46 intends to measure the work-life-balance, and whether and how often respondents work in their free time. Probing intended to examine respondents' understanding of free time. This is especially relevant for self-employed respondents. Further, it sought to understand whether there are types of work that are not considered when answering the question. For further clarification, probing asked about the reasons for working in free time and whether it is voluntary or paid.

Answers diverged across almost the entire scale. Only one respondent claimed to work in their free time on a daily basis (PL07); however, another respondent later explained that she didn't choose "daily" because that would imply seven days a week, and she only works five (DE07, "several times a week"). The rest of the scale ranging from "several times a week" to "never" was used rather evenly by respondents. Two respondents chose not to answer the question, one of which chose "not applicable" (DE03, with no regular employment), and the other refused to answer, stating that it varies (PL02).

In Poland, only two respondents (PL02, PL14) spontaneously commented on the question and all quickly chose an answer. In contrast, in Germany, eleven of 16 participants gave spontaneous comments on the question wording. Two participants asked to have the question text repeated. Most of the comments related to the topics that were also probed, that is the definitions of "free time" (DE03, DE09, DE13, DE15, DE16) and "work demands" (DE01, DE15, DE16). This indicates different connotations with the terms in the different languages.

In Germany, several respondents ponder over the possible distinction between "working in one's free time" and "doing overtime". While for some respondents these terms are identical, others clearly distinguish between overtime, which is compensated, and working in free time as work that is not compensated.

- "Actually, you could say 'work overtime', right?" (DE12, "several times a month")
- "When I do overtime, then I can take time off on another day instead. But when I work in my free time, that means that I'm sitting at home thinking about work problems. That would be working in my free time, and that's not paid" (DE11, "several times a month")

- "In my free time? . . . Worked to meet work demands? Free time means that it is not working time, in that moment, so I have never worked in my free time" (DE15, "never")

The first probe asks for the meaning of "free time". All respondents define free time in opposition to working time. Examples of these exclusion-based definitions are defining free time as time one doesn't spend working, or with clients, time not spent at the work place, time that is not spent with work-related tasks. Although the definitions of free time don't contradict each other across respondent groups, they do lay a different emphasis. In Germany, participants who are employed only mainly define free time as "not being occupied with work-related tasks", while self-employed respondents are likely to regard free time as time in which they "don't earn money" or, in Poland, as time between order contracts (DE08, DE09, DE10, DE13, PL02, PL12).

Respondents base their distinction between work and free time on diverse factors. Several respondents try to find anchor points to make a clear distinction, for instance by referring to their time accounts or fixed schedules (DE01, DE07, DE12, PL03, PL05, PL14, PL15, PL16), or by whether they are at their office / practice (DE06, DE08, DE10, DE12). Some respondents (DE02, DE04, DE09, DE16) say that having free time is a conscious decision they make when they need it. However, several respondents have difficulties clearly distinguishing between work and free time. This is especially true for several German respondents in jobs that are strongly linked to their interests or personal development, such as self-employment or academic jobs (DE01, DE16).

Respondents name a wide range of work-related tasks that they carry out outside of their contractual or official working time. Across all respondents in both countries and all forms of employment, these tasks are sometimes counted as working time and sometimes not. The tasks can be divided into two broad categories. The first includes thoughts about work that do not involve concrete action for the work place. This would include pondering work problems, making plans for the next day or week, reading up on work issues, and speaking to others about their work. As a second category, there are work-related tasks that require an activity. Some respondents simply understand this type of working in free time as doing overtime (DE11, DE12, PL01, PL05), but are also inconsistent as to whether to count this overtime as working in their free time or not. Other tasks include having dinner with clients or other work-related social events (DE04, PL03, PL07), taking calls, answering emails or preparing meetings (PL04, PL07), traveling to and from work (DE09, DE13, PL08), or measures taken for personal development (PL08, PL11).

In each country, two respondents said that they were asked to work in their free time by their bosses. Of these, three however count this as overtime and the time is compensated (DE08, DE12, PL15, PL16).

In summary, almost all respondents name some sort of work-related activity that they carry out outside their regular working hours. There is no pattern as to when respondents include or exclude certain activities, or whether they include registered overtime as working in their free time.

Recommendations:

Question: We recommend wording the question more precisely, in order to distinguish between ‘overtime’, so work that is carried out and officially registered and compensated in addition to regular hours, and ‘work-related tasks’ that are carried out in free time. This would ensure that respondents make the same distinction between work and free time, both between different types of workers within a country and across countries.

It could be considered adding a category "varies strongly".

We also recommend referring to a shorter period of time, so for instance "in the last four weeks". This makes it easier for respondents to remember concrete situations.

Answer categories: If the time span of the question is reworded, answer categories should be changed accordingly (i.e. never, once, twice, 3-5 times, more often)