

**Final thesis**

# **The effects of flexible working arrangements on young workers in the Netherlands**



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## Executive Summary

This research was conducted as a response to the recent trend of flexibilisation in the European labour market. Factors for its fast emergence include the increased international competition and the effects of the economic crisis in Europe. Young workers have become overrepresented in flexible jobs. The purpose of this research is to identify the expected effects of flexible working arrangements on the psychosocial risks to which young workers are exposed in the Netherlands. Besides, it brings forward a potential future scenario with regards to the current situation of young workers and their perceptions about work. As the European Union is facing a demographic shift, the support-ratio will increase and young workers will have to cope with more responsibilities in the future. The report sets out to answer the questions by providing clear definitions of the concepts. By means of analysing secondary literature and surveys that were conducted on both European and Dutch levels, results were compared and enabled to draw solid conclusions.

The report shows that flexibility is a multidimensional concept which is mostly reflected in working contracts. It focuses on those working arrangements that are based on a fixed-term, in which the amount of hours and/or working place have not been specified. These contracts are likely to be associated with economic insecurity and a strain of work/life balance. Besides, flexible jobs are more likely to be categorised as precarious, rather than permanent jobs. It was found that an increasing number of young workers in the Netherlands and in the rest of the European Union report high levels of job insecurity and a negative employability. Furthermore, it appears that a large proportion of young workers suffer from work-related stress and regardless of their contracts, do not expect to be capable to work until a higher retirement age in the future.

The report concludes that the strengths and weaknesses of flexible working arrangements are correlated with each other. Yet, as flexibility shifts responsibilities and risks onto workers, flexible workers are more vulnerable. Job insecurity and a strain on work/life balance have an impact on psychosocial risks. As young workers are overrepresented in flexible jobs, they are, indeed, more likely to suffer from psychosocial complaints. If young workers are exposed to high psychosocial risks from a young age on, they might not be capable to work until a later retirement age, at least not to sufficiently bear with an increase support-ratio in the future. Therefore, this report recommends a general improvement of flexible work, by for instance, tackling the causes of psychosocial risks and by raising awareness on this issue. This might enable governments, employers and workers to maintain a sustainable workforce. Besides, due to a lack of data on for instance, undeclared work and internships, the issue may be more serious than the available data suggests it to be. It is therefore recommended to conduct more research on this issue.

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## Preface

As a part of my studies at European Studies at The Hague University of Applied Sciences, I did an internship at the European Trade Union Institute in Brussels from September 2014 until February 2015. This fruitful experience has taught me the necessity of strong industrial relations. I gained knowledge on trade union action and collective bargaining at company, sectorial, national and transnational level, while working from a European perspective. I worked curiously and with a passion for trade unions and their interesting history and I realised that the worker's movement in the European Union is unique. Yet, as neo-liberalist politics are on the rise it is important to think critically. Treaties such as CETA and TTIP may harm worker's protection that is still common in the European Union, as labour standards could be further deregulated.

During my internship, I focused on young workers and their position in the flexibilised labour market. This topic has caught my attention and made me enthusiastic to conduct further research on. Young workers in the European Union face several difficulties in finding stability in a labour market where flexibilisation trends are quickly emerging. As trade union membership is decreasing, labour relations are becoming more individualised. Many young workers are at risk of exploitation due to extreme forms of flexible working arrangements. They are scared to lose their job as hundreds of other people are keen for doing the same work. The high level of youth unemployment in the European Union has made competition very strong. Many young workers do multiple unpaid internships to gain work experience, because have no other options. Others are employed on several kinds of stand-by contracts at the same time, to ensure a sufficient income. This kind of job insecurity is a significant cause for stress. In the Netherlands, work-related stress has become the most-frequently reported occupational health issue. What used to be an issue that was mostly common in managerial positions, has now become an issue that addresses all kinds of workers, regardless of their occupations. One out of six low skilled worker under 30 suffers from burn-out complaints in our country. I am concerned with this topic, as I witness that large groups of young people are suffering from low quality jobs and a feeling of ongoing uncertainty. This research report aims to identify and shed light on the risks which the current generation of young people is exposed to.

While writing this report, I received support from different people. First, I would like to thank Fabienne Scandella, she is a senior researcher at the European Trade Union Institute in Brussels. She has invested time and effort in helping me during my internship and while writing my thesis. Also I want to thank Robbert Coenmans, President of the Dutch youth union FNV Jong, for his time and willingness to share his ideas. I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Margo Peeters, as she has provided me with me very helpful feedback and supervision while writing this report.

## Introduction

Young people in the European Union continue to experience great difficulties in entering the labour market. Although the youth unemployment rate has started to fall in a few Member States, overall 23% of the young European job-seekers aged between 15 and 24 could not find a job in January 2014 (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2014). The financial crisis that emerged in 2008, has accelerated the trend of individualising employment relationships in Europe. As a response to the crisis, labour law reforms and deregulation policies have been adopted in various European countries. These reforms are often aimed at lowering labour standards. Further, in its Europe2020 Strategy, the European Commission encourages these reforms, destined to raise the employment rate in Europe (Lang, Schömann, & Clauwaert, 2013). The growth of various forms of flexible working arrangements are now widespread throughout the Member States. Flexible work can offer benefits for workers, as they might change working hours, tasks or allow working from home. This could be beneficial for workers with family obligations or those who are in education. Employers offer flexible working arrangements to reduce risks at their companies and to enjoy economic benefits on a short-time scale. However, flexible working patterns also come with a number of negative aspects. Contracts are often based on a fixed-term, or do not include provisions on the amount of hours worked. Moreover, flexible contracts provide significantly less secondary benefits than permanent contracts usually do.

The effects of flexible working arrangements can be particularly negative for young workers, as problematic experiences of transitions from education into work are likely to be associated with a general reduction in long-term life chances (Vogel, 2006). Young people are more likely to struggle in finding a job that fits their profile. Hence, young people are more likely to accept work below their educational level, due to high levels of competition. Young people are also more likely than other groups to be employed in insecure jobs, regardless of their education and skills (Di Nunzio, 2012). Consequently, young people are forced to be in between jobs more often, as their contracts might be based on a fixed-term. In 2013, 55% of the young workers in the Netherlands, aged from 15 to 25 years old held a flexible contract (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2014). The majority of young workers is employed on stand-by contracts, such as zero-hours contracts. A large proportion works for agencies, or on payroll constructions.

Moreover, flexible working arrangements are more likely to be associated with precariousness. For instance in Britain, over one million people hold zero-hours contracts, from whom one-third is aged below 24. This zero-hours contract model has been heavily criticised because of its precarious aspects. The workers on these type of contracts are poorly paid, have no regular income and are at risk of exploitation (Trade Union Congress, 2014). The Guardian states that zero-hours contracts

are the ultimate expression of Britain's flexible labour market, because these contracts are deregulating the workforce, freeing up firms to hire and fire, and making employers become less burdened by fixed costs (The Guardian, 2015). Moreover, as the search for a job has become such a struggle for young people, a large proportion of them are doing underpaid or unpaid internships, which enables them to gain work experience and a potential entrance to a job.

The Dutch government is aware of the growth of flexible working arrangements and has therefore introduced new regulations in 2015 that particularly concern zero-hours and agency work constructions. These regulations aim to discourage employers to offer low-quality contracts. Furthermore, after it was shown that work-related stress is the most-frequently reported occupational health complain in the Netherlands, the minister of Social Affairs and Employment, Lodewijk Asscher, acknowledged the issue of psychosocial risks, caused by work (NRC, 2014). As a result, he has introduced the issue of work-related stress on the Dutch political agenda and aims to promote risks prevention at the workplace. Physical health, and therefore mental health have a significant influence on the sustainability of our workforce.

Flexible workers are often unsure about their working times and especially about their income, this is causing job insecurity. Job insecurity has been proven to be a considerable source of stress. Many flexible workers are unlikely to obtain a mortgage, nor can their pension structure develop as their contracts do not promise a financial guarantee. A rising number of young European individuals are forced to live with their parents because they cannot invest in education and do not succeed in finding stable work. Different voices already speak of a 'lost generation'. In southern European countries such as Spain, Portugal and Italy, young workers leave their home countries, searching for better job opportunities in northern European countries. As a preliminary assumption, it would be most likely for young people that these kinds of circumstances have an impact on their psychosocial factors.

This research aims to identify the expected effects of flexible working arrangements on the psychosocial risks to which young workers are exposed in the Netherlands. The issue of job insecurity and the shift towards a whole generation being in flexible working arrangements does not play a major role in the media or at the political level. Even though the issue of work-related stress is acknowledged by the government, young workers in particular are more at risk of harm from work for a variety of reasons. As they lack experience and maturity, an awareness of risks, skills and training, they may also be reluctant to speak out about problems and keen to please their new employer (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2006).

Studies from southern European countries have already demonstrated the problems that young workers face once they have entered the labour market<sup>1</sup>. Yet, the problem of job insecurity is common in northern European countries too. This research aims to find out to what extent Dutch young workers are affected by flexible working arrangements. Another important aspect is to find out how young people perceive their own prospects in the flexible labour market, with regards to the future. The European workforce will be ageing during the next decade. Consequently, a smaller group of workers will have to cover the costs for a growing proportion of retired people. This explains the current trend of European Members States raising the retirement age. It can be questioned whether the current generation of young workers will be able to reach this retirement age, as they find themselves in flexible jobs from a young age on. In this research report, an answer for the main question, and the belonging sub-questions will be formulated:

*What are the expected effects of flexible working arrangements on the level of psychosocial risks to which Dutch young workers are exposed?*

*1. What are flexible working arrangements and why are they used in the Netherlands and the rest of the European Union?*

1.1 What are flexible working arrangements?

1.2 How many young workers hold flexible contracts and in what kinds of sectors?

1.3 What are the positive and negative aspects for offering flexible working arrangements?

*2. What aspects of flexible working arrangements influence psychosocial risks?*

2.1 Work-related stress: a result of high psychosocial risks

2.2. Economic aspects of flexible working arrangements and psychosocial risks

2.3 Work-life balance aspects of flexible working arrangements and psychosocial risks

2.4 Psychosocial risks and young workers

*3. What will the future bring with regards to current and future situations of young workers in the flexible labour market?*

3.1 How do young workers perceive their job security in the flexible labour market?

3.2 How do young workers perceive their employability and career prospects?

3.3 The discussion on the ability to work until a later retirement age

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<sup>1</sup> For example: Di Nunzio, D. (2012). Young Italian shop workers: sick of insecurity.

## Methodology

In this part, the chosen methods that were used for this research are justified. As this research report discusses aspects of flexible working arrangements, it is clear that comprehensible academic definitions are consulted. The meaning of flexibility can imply multiple concepts and are interpreted differently among European countries and research institutes. It is therefore important to choose one definition to avoid confusion. Before beginning the gathering of literature and data for this research, the concepts that are interlinked had to be clarified. These concepts consist of the definitions of flexible working arrangements, precariousness, psychosocial risks and a definition of a 'young' worker.

In determining the chosen research methods, the problem analysis plays a major role (Verhoeven, 2014). As this research seeks to identify potential effects and expectations, the type of research question has a predictive element. The results enabled to provide a prediction for the future. However, due to the complexity of the topic and the given amount of time to conduct it, the research had to be limited in several aspects.

To start off with, the scope of research had its main focus on the Dutch labour market. Despite the assumption that the topic of flexible working arrangements and young workers are slightly reflected in the media, in research and politics, the Dutch labour landscape has an interesting dimension. Often, the Dutch labour market deviates from average European levels. To illustrate this, in terms of part-time work, the Netherlands is known for having its highest level of female workers in part-time work. Furthermore, when European unemployment rates are assessed, the Netherlands has a relatively low unemployment rate. In order to formulate a specific answer to the research questions, both Dutch and European data and literature were assessed. These two dimensions were used to serve as comparisons, to adding value to data and enabled to draw solid conclusions.

Furthermore, the scope of the research was limited to a specific age group of young workers. The reason for this, is that the amount of flexible jobs held by young workers reaches much higher levels than other age groups of the working population. The research only assessed young workers in the age group of 15 to 30 years old. Although, the European statistics often refer to the age groups of 15 to 24 or 25 to 44 years old. However, due to a large proportion of young workers who is still in education or training in the Netherlands, this age category was considered to be too narrow.



Another limit was to focus on the expected effects on psychosocial wellbeing in particular. Indeed, work might impact health in general, meaning both physical and mental health. Austerity measures often lead to less preventive services and a deregulation of health and safety measures at the workplace, and health in general might be influenced. However, taking into account both mental and physical health risks would have been too broad for this research. The reason behind the choice to only assess mental wellbeing, was the now rapidly growing amount of workers in the Netherlands who suffer from the effects of work-related stress. As for young workers, their first experiences on the labour market may be seen as a stressful event. They have little experience in labour relations, they are less trained or skilled, they often have difficulties in asking for clarification or help and they are easy to replace.

This research aimed to identify trends that are being experienced by a large group of people. It was therefore useful to use quantitative data. Both academic and non-academic literature were looked at, enabling to answer the sub-questions in the best suited way. Secondary data from both European and Dutch research bodies served to answering the questions. Statistics were searched for at research agencies such as TNO, CBS, the Dutch trade union movement, governmental institutions and the Dutch Centre of Occupational Health and Safety. To bring more perspective and present comparative data, European data was analysed as well from Eurostat, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Working and Living Conditions (Eurofound), the European Agency for Health and Safety (EU-OSHA), the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) and the European Commission (EC).

As for the first chapter, a preliminary desk research has been conducted. Concepts were defined and the necessity of the research question has to be clarified. The second chapter focused on the phenomenon of psychosocial risks, on how these emerge and what the effects might be. Therefore, qualitative literature was needed. However, the last question is seeking for the perceptions of the young workers themselves. For this section, large surveys and investigations were consulted. A last important aspect worth mentioning is the fact that this research analysed secondary data, and linked it together.

## Chapter 1. What are flexible working arrangements and why are they used in the Netherlands and the rest of the European Union?

### 1.1 What are flexible working arrangements?

Flexible work is a relatively new concept as it emergence developed in the past two decades. In the years following the Second World War, an age of economic prosperity and growth, known as the Fordist era that lasted until the oil crisis in the 1970s, the *standard employment relationship* emerged. Key aspects of standard working arrangements included an open-ended contract, standardised weekly working hours and adequate social benefits. However, the shift from manufacturing to service economies and the increased international competition have led to new forms of work. These developments have caused a widespread need from employers for a more flexible and adaptable workforce. On the other hand, workers seek for job security as well as for more flexible working time arrangements (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2015). While flexible working arrangements were mostly common in seasonal determined sectors or as an entrance to permanent work, these are now also offered in structural jobs, this has been caused partially by the economic crisis, which started in 2008.

From a European perspective, the terminology of *flexible working arrangements* has been defined and redefined by various European academic research institutions and (trans)national research agencies<sup>2</sup>. The definition of flexible working arrangements could be confusing, due to other concepts that are often closely linked or look similar at first glance. To illustrate this, some of these concepts could include, casual, non-standard, temporary or a-typical working arrangements. For this research, the definition of Eurofound can provide a broad and internationally acceptable definition of the concept. According to Eurofound, the meaning of flexibility is contested because it contains three main elements:

- It can refer to employers' desire for flexible labour inputs, in terms of hours, workers or numbers employed, to match changes in demand for products or services. This is external, quantitative, numerical flexibility. It can also refer to changing the tasks and skills of employees to increase productivity within the work. This is internal, qualitative or functional flexibility.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, definitions from Eurostat, the European Trade Union Institute, the European Commission or the European Agency for the Improvement of Safety and Health.

- It can refer to employees' desire for flexible contractual arrangements and working conditions to match changing private and domestic needs. Flexible work may concern different forms of contractual arrangements, as regards working time, to suit better work-life balance.
- It can also refer to a policy response to labour market rigidities, which some economists view as contributing to unemployment. Policies of deregulation aimed at increasing flexibility by, for instance an easier hiring and firing of labour process, may be seen as threatening employment security and quality of work (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2015).

These elements cover all kinds of flexible working arrangements and provide an abstract, multidimensional definition that shows the purpose of its existence. However, this research focuses directly on flexible working arrangements in practice, including those contracts that have flexible working-time and place provisions. When looking from a European perspective, flexible working patterns also include part-time working arrangements. However, the Netherlands has a special status concerning part-time work, as 76.9% of the Dutch female workers hold a part-time working arrangement (Algemeen Dagblad, 2014). Yet, an important aspect of flexible working arrangements in the Netherlands and in the rest of the European Union, is the fixed-term aspect on which a flexible contracts are often based.

Flexible working arrangements are often based on a fixed-term, this is also called non-permanent employment. In the past 20 years, fixed-term employment has increased continually throughout the European Union. In 1983, the workforce who held a fixed-term contract was only 8.1%. In 2005, this number was already 14.5% (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2015). However, the proportion of the workforce engaged on a fixed-term contract varies greatly among the Member States and generally depends on the employment protection legislation in force for contracts. Between 2000 and 2006, fixed-term contracts have strongly increased in Luxembourg, Italy, Cyprus, Sweden, Slovenia, Poland and in the Netherlands. The trend towards a greater use of fixed-term work is particularly growing in the expanding service sector. Along with segmentation of education, the data from Eurostat in 2006 contains a segmentation by age. In the EU25, the fixed-term employment rate of workers between 15 and 24, was 42% (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2014). As the European unemployment rate is still high, the European Commission recommended to simplifying employment protection legislation and developing flexible working arrangements, including short, fixed-term jobs, according to its Annual Growth Survey of 2013 (European Commission, 2013).

From a Dutch point of view, the level of people working on a fixed-term contract seems to be on the rise, as permanent contracts are rarely offered in 2015. According to the Dutch newspaper Trouw, in 2010, 83.000 workers were offered a permanent contract. In 2011, this number declined to 2000 workers (Trouw, 2012). This is a decline of 97% in one year the Dutch Employee Insurance Agency (UWV) has difficulties in clarifying this radical change, but it presumes that this trend must be a response to the on-going uncertainty in the labour market (Trouw, 2012). Employers are scared to offer a permanent contract to new staff, this is why they choose to offer long, fixed-term contracts, with time provisions of more than one year. 80% of the employees holding a long fixed-term contract is replaced by a new one, once the contract has expired. In the Netherlands, 63% of the workers aged between 15 and 35 has a fixed-term contract (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2014).

In short, one can argue that flexible working arrangements have quickly emerged during recent years. These patterns are widespread in most European Member States. Flexible work can have multiple definitions. It could be defined as any kind of form of work that derives from the standard working arrangement. However, this research aims to use a more narrow and practical definition. As the fixed-term element might be meaningful for this research, a more simplified definition for flexible working arrangements can be applied: those working arrangements that are based on a fixed-term, in which the amount of hours and/or working place have not been specified.

## 1.2 How many young workers hold flexible contracts and in what kinds of sectors?

This part tries to identify the proportion of flexible working arrangements in the Dutch and European labour market. Furthermore, it seeks for the most common flexible contracts that are held by young workers. In this way, one might be able to link the concept of flexibility to actual practices in the labour market.

In the Netherlands, the amount of workers on flexible contracts has doubled between 2001 and 2011, as investigated by Statistic Netherlands in 2012. The increase of flexible working arrangements has risen fastest among the youngest group of workers. In 2001, 34% of the young workers held a flexible contracts. Ten years later, in 2011, this proportion increased to 55% of the workers aged between 15-24 and to 22% of those aged between 25-34 (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2014). Therefore, flexible working arrangements often differ among age groups, as 60% of all workers with a flexible contract are aged below 34 years old (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2013). Yet, in the lowest age group (15-25), more than 70% hold a flexible working

arrangement (See appendices 1.0 and 1.1)<sup>3</sup>. As young workers get older in their late twenties, the amount of flexible work decreases (See appendix 1.2)<sup>4</sup>. However, there are different kinds of flexible contracts. Some are more flexible than others. The most common flexible working contracts held by Dutch young workers are the following:

*-Stand-by work:* These contracts imply work on call. There are no working-time provisions written in the contract. This means that an employer can request workers to come on call. There are stand-by contracts with an agreement in advance: in this case the worker may decide whether he or she comes to work after a request. Yet, other stand-by workers should be available to come to work at any moment, in case the employer requests so. In 2013, 224.000 workers in the Netherlands held a stand-by contract. 54% of those are aged 15 to 24 and 20% are aged 25 to 35 years old (Algemene Bond Uitzendondernemingen, 2015). The most common stand-by contract is a *zero-hours contract*. This type does not include hour provisions, and therefore there is no guarantee of work. Another stand-by contract is the *min/max contract*, in which a minimum or maximum amount of guaranteed hours are allocated in the contract. 181.000 workers had a zero-hours contract in 2013: 42% of those were aged between 15 and 25 years old and 20% between 25 and 30 years old (Algemene Bond Uitzendondernemingen, 2015)

*-Agency work:* an employment agency is a mediator between worker and employer, as it tries to connect demands from both stakeholders. However, the worker is contracted under the agreement from the agency. Agency workers are hired on day or hour- basis, and their work can be finished at any moment, like stand-by contracts. In 2012, there were 700.711 agency workers in the Netherlands from whom 43% below 25 years old (Algemene Bond Uitzendondernemingen, 2015). Another form of work that has been outsourced by a company is *payrolling*. Payroll companies are often part of an agency, but have no allocation function. A payroll company is a judicial employer, but has no employer-status. Payroll constructions therefore often lack a collective agreement on agency work (Rijksoverheid, 2015).

The most typical ‘young’ occupations include hospitality services, shop and market sales work, work in the armed forces, and elementary occupations (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2006). These are also the sectors in which a majority of flexible contracts are reflected, as in facility services, financial services, hospitality services, recreational services, transport and logistics, healthcare, education and governmental officials (Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging, 2015). When looking at working-hours, the European Working Conditions Survey of 2010 showed that only 10.1% of the Dutch young workers work a full working week of 40 hours. However,

<sup>3</sup> (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2014) appendices 1.0 & 1.1

<sup>4</sup> (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2015) appendix 1.2

research from the Dutch trade union FNV showed that the majority of stand-by workers in the Netherlands (60%), are not happy with the amount of hours they work, as they reported their wish to work more hours than they currently do, this result can be found in Appendix 1.3.<sup>5</sup> The same research concluded that a clear majority (80%) of these workers would actually like to have a permanent contract with working hours between 24 and 40 hours (Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging, 2015).

As discussed in the previous part (1.1), one meaningful similarity that is shared by most of these contracts, is that they provide work on a fixed-term. Also in the European Union, the proportion of young workers employed on fixed-term contracts is rapidly rising. Between 2010 and 2011, 57% of those aged 15-24 who moved over from education into work found a fixed-term job. For those who were unemployed and found a job, 61% got a fixed-term contract (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2010). Along with segmentation of education, the data from Eurostat in 2006 showed a segmentation by age in the Member States. In the EU25, the fixed-term employment rate of workers between 15 and 24, was 42% (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2014).

In short, there are different levels of flexible work. The most common contracts held by young people in the Netherlands are very flexible, as they do not include hour provisions. Both European and Dutch data show a segmentation by age: the younger one is, the more likely he or she holds a flexible contract. The next part focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of flexible work and seeks for the reasons why one should offer or hold one of these contracts.

### 1.3 What are the positive and negative aspects for offering flexible working arrangements?

The discussion on the efficiency of flexible working patterns is diverse and on-going. What remains certain, is that flexible working patterns do have an impact on the quality of work, but also on the quality of life in general (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2010). These arrangements could be positive for all stakeholders: companies, workers and their families.

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<sup>5</sup> Flexbarometer 2012, see appendix 1.3

**Positive aspects**

From a workers' perspective, flexible working arrangements could serve as an entrance to a permanent contract. As for many young people, several forms of flexible work and/or internships could offer them opportunities in finding a stable job. Accordingly, it is less of a burden to hire a fixed-term worker, and to prolong the contract if the employer and the worker both agree. From a workers perspective, fixed-term work allows to taste from different jobs, as well as to obtain new experiences. Another advantage, as for young people in particular, is that flexible working patterns can be beneficial because of other obligations, such as education or sports. Especially for young women with small children, flexible working could help to combine work and childcare and allow women to remain active on the labour market after giving birth. If the work allows to work from home, or to arrange working-hours per week, flexible working patterns could make room for adjustment and freedom.

From an employers' perspective, flexible work offers multiple benefits on an economic point of view. To illustrate, employers can quickly adjust to staff expenditure, as their contracts include less obligations. Offering flexible contracts enables work organisations to respond easily to the demands of the labour market and to economic changes. Additionally, flexible work ensures employers to the lower costs on their staff and allows for easier hire and fire procedures. Especially in times of economic deprivation, employers take fewer risks when offering flexible working contracts.

**Negative aspects**

A study from Dekker and Olsthoorn found that flexible work does not lead to economic benefits in the long term. Due to the fact that employers invest less in training their flexible staff, productivity growth and innovation capacity can be damaged on a longer period of time. Flexible workers are often less loyal towards the employer and engaged in the work, as they do not belong to the core staff of the company and switch from workplaces often. Another reason is that rotating staff must be instructed over and over, and due to a greater amount of unexperienced staff, flexible work can also contribute to a higher rate of work-related accidents (Dekker & Olsthoorn, 2011).

As flexible workers receive less supplementary training, they are less skilled. Flexible workers also have less control over the order of tasks, pace of work and work methods, they have lower demands and are less informed about risks at work (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2006). According to data on temporary agency work, people employed on temporary contracts have less access to training and to participation in long-term competence development

than workers with permanent contracts (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2006). Often, flexible workers do not get paid if they are on sick leave or holidays, or lack work-related accident and health insurances at the workplace (Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging, 2015).

In economic terms, workers with flexible contract are in particular confronted with the disadvantages of these arrangements as they face high levels of job insecurity and receive a lower pay than permanent employees. Flexible workers suffer more often from financial problems and are struggling in paying their fixed costs. Flexible workers are often forced to be registered as 'unemployed' for a couple of months, before obtaining a new fixed-term contract. This is often referred to in Dutch as the 'flexibele schil' which can be best translated as flexible peel or layer (Heyma & van der Werff, 2013)<sup>6</sup>. Especially lower educated workers run the risk of structurally staying in forced flexible jobs (De Volkskrant, 2011). For instance, low-skilled young mothers who work in hospitality services or the retail sector often run the risk of having a lack of say about their working times (De Volkskrant, 2011). Indeed, flexible work could serve as an entrance to permanent work. However, the permeability to a permanent contract in the Netherlands has decreased significantly in the past ten years.

According to Robbert Coenmans, President of the young workers union FNV Jong, believes that flexible work cannot be labelled as automatically positive or negative. On the one hand, there is a large group of people who are satisfied with their flexible job. Furthermore, flexible work can help reducing youth unemployment. However, extreme flexible work such as payrolling and zero-hours contracts, can be problematic due to financial insecurity (Coenmans, 2013). He argues that the distinction between flexible and permanent contracts should only be the length of time for which they are valid. The problem is that this is often not the case because flexible workers have significantly worse secondary benefits than their core colleagues (Coenmans, 2013).

Indeed, flexible workers often receive a lower pay, less holiday and less training while they are doing the same work as their permanent colleagues. During recent years, it has been questioned by European research agencies, to indicate whether these practices are ethical. Research agencies often associate the negative aspects of flexible working arrangements with precariousness. In scientific literature, an increasing number of jobs are described as to be precarious. The following paragraph will further explain and analyse this concept because precariousness has become an important concept in the discussion on the European flexible labour market.

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<sup>6</sup> Flexibele schil (Heyma & van der Werff, 2013)



#### 1.4 Flexible working arrangements are increasingly described as precarious

As it was discussed in the beginning of this chapter, significant changes have taken place during the past two decades, in terms of globalisation processes, the development of the information epoch, the shift from the manufacturing towards the service sectors and the demographic shift. These changes have led to a tremendous increase of precarious work. Flexible contracts, in comparison with permanent contracts, are more likely to be related to precariousness. The terminology of *precariousness* lacks a universally accepted definition because of its multidimensional nature but it can be referred to as *low-quality work*. Because there is no common understanding of precarious work, determining to what extent flexible work is precarious can be problematic. Yet, Rodgers and Rodgers did propose four dimensions of precariousness:

- Temporal: there is a low certainty over the continuity of employment.
- Organisational: there is a lack of individual and collective control over working conditions, working time shifts, work intensity, pay and health and safety regulations.
- Economic: there is poor and insufficient pay and salary development.
- Social: there is a lack of protection against unfair dismissal, discrimination and there are unacceptable working practices such the access to social security benefits covering health, accidents and unemployment insurances (Rodgers & Rodgers, 1989).

On the basis of these dimensions, another definition has been formulated on what is meant by precarious work: ‘a variety of forms of employment, established below the socially accepted normative standards in one or more respects (the dimensions), which results from an unbalanced distribution towards and amongst workers of the insecurity and risks typically attached to economic life in general and to the labour market in particular (Frade, Darmon, & Laparra, 2004). According to the International Labour Organisation, in the most general sense, precarious work is a means of employers to shift risks and responsibilities onto workers (International Labour Organisation, 2012). Precarious work includes fixed-term, seasonal, part-time, stand-by, day-hire and short-term contracts, as well as self-employment, home working and multiple jobs at the same time (Sargeant & Giovannone, 2011). In times of economic deprivation, flexible workers are the first to lose their jobs. Flexible workers usually receive a lower pay than those in permanent jobs and do not qualify for certain non-statutory benefits such as an end-of-the-year bonus. As they are often dependent on an unemployment benefit after their fixed-term contract has expired, they are constantly in job insecurity. Due to a lack of financial guarantee or hours worked, many flexible workers find themselves in poorness. A survey from the FNV showed that flexible workers find it twice as difficult to lead a decent life than permanent workers do (Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging, 2015). In addition, especially stand-by workers with a zero-hours contract are at risk of unfair

dismissal because employers do not have to fire them officially: they just stop requesting the worker to come to work.

In short, flexible work may be beneficial for workers and employers. However, if workers are forced to stay in flexible forms of work, the purpose of flexible contracts can be questioned. As the majority of flexible workers would like to have permanent work, it is likely that flexible contracts are initiated by employers, due to their cost-efficiency. The negative aspects of flexible work may be often associated with precariousness. Precariousness is increasingly considered in the discussion of flexibilisation in the European labour market. The next chapter will focus those negative aspects of flexible working arrangements that could have an influence on psychosocial risks.

## Chapter 2. What aspects of flexible working arrangements influence psychosocial risks?

In the first chapter, the concept of flexible working arrangements and its positive and negative aspects were outlined. Moreover, it was said that especially those flexible jobs that contain aspects that are considered to be negative, are more likely to be categorised as precarious jobs. This chapter aims to link flexible working arrangements with the elements that are linked to health. As a starting point, it was shown by research from the United States that fixed-term workers suffer more from psychosocial complaints than permanent workers do (Quesnel-Vallée, DeHaney, & Ciampi, 2010). Especially, psychosocial complaints can be the results of job insecurity and this can therefore undermine health (Bohle, Quinlan, & Mayhew, 2001). Outcomes of exposure to psychosocial risks include health problems such as the effects of work-related stress, burn-out symptoms or depressions. In this chapter, the main causes of high exposure to psychosocial risks and the negative effects on health are defined. Further, two main aspects of flexible working arrangements, namely economic insecurity and a strain on work-life balance, are identified and linked to young workers. These aspect have direct impact on psychosocial risks.

### 2.1 Work-related stress: a result of high psychosocial risks

Work has a significant impact on people's personal lives. Nowadays, psychosocial risks are among the most challenging issues in occupational health and safety in the European Union. These risks have an impact on the health of individuals, organisations and national economies (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2015). Psychosocial risks can arise from a poor work design, organisation and management as well as from a poor social context of work. For instance, when there is too little interaction with colleagues at the workplace. Risks can also arise when the content of the work is very monotonous, or either too challenging or diverse. In other words: if people feel unhappy because of their work, psychosocial risks become higher. These risks may result into negative psychological, physical and social outcomes such as work-related stress, burnout symptoms and depression. In the European Union, around half of all the workers consider stress to be common at their workplace and report that it contributes to around half of all the lost workdays (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2015). Work-related stress complaints can be problematic to measure because the symptoms are neither visible nor graspable. Mental health issues are therefore often misunderstood or stigmatised at the workplace, as people may consider them as an individual mistake or weakness. In the European Union, stress is the second-most frequently reported work-related health problem. According to the European Agency for Health and Safety, these are the main causes of work-related stress:

- Poorly managed reorganisations and job insecurity.
  - An excessive workload.
  - Psychological and sexual harassment or third-party violence<sup>7</sup>.
  - Conflicting demands and a lack of role clarity.
  - A lack of involvement in making decisions that affect the worker and a lack of influence over the way the job is done.
  - Ineffective communication or a lack of support from management and colleagues.
- (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2015)

A European opinion poll that was conducted by the same agency found that the most common causes of work-related stress were job reorganisations and job insecurity (7 out of 10 respondents). It demonstrated that insecurity about the future can lead to illness, mental stress and a reduction of self-dignity (Knabe & Ratzel, 2001). Further, the amount of working-hours and excessive workload are main causes for work-related stress, as these factors interrupt professional and private life. Bullying and harassment at work are main causes of stress as well (6 out of 10). The same research found that 4 out of 10 workers think that stress is not handled well in their workplace (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2015).

In the Netherlands, work-related stress is the most-reported occupational health issue, and therefore exceeds the European average, in which MSDs<sup>8</sup> remain the most common occupational health issue, above work-related stress (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2010a). There are 2.1 million workers whom addressed suffering from high levels of stress due to the pace of work. Besides, 1.1 million workers claim to experience inappropriate behaviour from colleagues and 100.000 workers are systematically bullied at work (Rijksoverheid, 2013). In 2012, the Netherlands Centre for Occupational Diseases presented that 76% of all the reported issues included psychosocial factors. This leads to high numbers of people going on a sick-leave each year. In one out of three times, work-related psychosocial problems is the reason for absenteeism at work (Rijksoverheid, 2013). Furthermore, it is estimated by TNO that the total cost for society consists of 6 milliard euros annually, due to the effects of work-related stress (NU.nl, 2006).

Irene Houtman, a senior researcher at TNO, has conducted detailed research on the causes of work-related stress in the Netherlands. She describes work-related stress as ‘a condition that occurs when people are exposed to requirements at work that they are unable or insufficiently able to meet’.

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<sup>7</sup> Third-party violence may refer to threats, physical violence and psychological violence such as verbal violence by third parties such as customers, clients or patients receiving goods or services (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2010b).

<sup>8</sup> MSDs: musculoskeletal disorders

During an interview with the Dutch newspaper NRC she argues that work-related stress does not automatically has to be something negative, as it could also be an incentive to train one's personal capacity by doing just a little more to stimulate the body than it can normally handle (NRC, 2014). However, long-term work-related stress can result in both mental issues, including depression and burnout, and physical health problems, such as heart disease and high blood pressure. This may lead to sick leave and absences due to mental health and musculoskeletal and cardiovascular problems, eventually culminating potentially in work disability or even death (Houtman, Jettinghoff, & Cedillo, 2007).

One could argue that the amount of people who are suffering from the results of high psychosocial risks is high. Long-term work-related stress can result in mental and physical health-problems. The most common causes are job insecurity and a strain on working-hours and workload. In the next section, the relation between economic aspects of flexible working arrangements and psychosocial risks will be further explained.

## 2.2 Economic aspects of flexible working arrangements and psychosocial risks

There is overwhelming evidence that unemployment is strongly associated with economic strain and psychosocial factors that increase the risks of adverse health outcomes, unfavourable lifestyles and economic difficulties (Dooley, Fielding, & Levi, 1996). Furthermore, it was claimed by Benach *et al* that many workers in flexible jobs share the same market characteristics with the unemployed workers, and go themselves through periods of unemployment. Therefore, working conditions under those new types of working arrangements may be as dangerous as unemployment for workers' health (Benach, Benavides, Platt, Diez-Roux, & Muntaner, 2000). It was found that financial insecurity in particular causes that job insecurity leads to stress (Beland, Birch, & Stoddart, 2002). As flexible workers are frequently depended on unemployment benefit or family assistance, they are unable to live autonomously. Besides, flexible workers with fixed-term contracts are forced to constantly prove that they are worth the job or to search for new work. Young people in particular, whom are often overqualified and underpaid, are being used to absorb excess contract work, but being denied regular gainful work (Christopher, 2014). Moreover, especially young workers whom are incapable of finding a job choose to do various underpaid or un-paid internships in order to gain experience and strengthen their profiles for potential future jobs.

Research from the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB) and the Maastricht University showed that flexible workers earn 5% less salary than permanent workers do. Fixed-

term workers earn 2- 7 % less, and agency workers earn 13- 27% less (Cörvers, Euwals, & de Grip, 2011). For those workers with a permanent contract in the Netherlands, dismissal protection is high in comparison with other European countries. In terms of salary development, permanent work is beneficial for worker's as wages rise relatively fast if people work for the same organisation for several years (Cörvers, Euwals, & de Grip, 2011). Consequently, this does not apply to the wages of fixed-term workers. Research from the trade union FNV showed that 15% of the workers with a flexible working arrangements earn less than the legal national minimum wage for a working week of 36 hours (€ 9,58 gross/hour). The situation is worse for those flexible workers who work less than a working week: they have low salaries and not enough hours work. Therefore, they are unable to earn the minimum monthly salary. 11% of them report to not get paid for all the worked hours structurally (Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging, 2015). In the Netherlands, 15% of the young workers aged up to 23 years old is financially independent. A reason for this low number could be the national legislation on wages that are subject for young workers aged between 18 and 23, which is significantly different than in most other European countries (NRC, 2015).

It can be argued that flexible workers earn lower wages than permanent workers and more often go through periods of unemployment. Due to the fact that economic insecurity increases he risks on psychosocial health issues, flexible workers are more likely to suffer from the effects on their mental health.

### 2.3 Work-life balance aspects of flexible working arrangements and psychosocial risks

Flexible working arrangements require flexible lives. Especially for stand-by workers because they can be requested to come at any time. Other flexible workers may have weekly or daily shifts, for instance in healthcare. Also retail and hospitality services such as hotels and bars include irregular working schedules and long (evening and night) shifts. For these workers, it is difficult to plan long- term projects because they are unsure about their working days and working times. Work-life conflicts have been associated with numerous physical and mental health implications (Abercromby, 2007). As 42% of the workers with zero-hours contract are aged between 15-25, they are expected to be available at any time to come work, if requested. In other words, they cannot decide on their own working times. The combination of high demands and a low level of control leads to stress (Karasek, 1979). If working hours constantly change, the ability to keep professional life and private life separately can be affected. Especially long working hours and working on a high pace are associated with physical health risks, such as excessive smoking and alcohol use or weight gain (Abercromby, 2007). Often, young workers have to work to tight deadlines and at very high speed, as the pace of life and work is continuing to increase. Even though data suggests that they work fewer hours than the average working population, young

people do more shift work and have more irregular working hours (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2006).

Flexible working arrangements often include homeworking, also known as teleworking. Homeworking can be beneficial for young families, however, it does blur the barrier between work and home. Working away from an office and away from daily contact with colleagues can also be isolating. Moreover, the increasing use of new technologies among young workers can also affect work-life balance. Smartphones and tablets allow workers to reach others at any time, but they allow employers to reach their workers too, always and everywhere. Even though a working day ends physically, workers are still approachable after working times. This creates a new source of psychosocial risks and is called '*high tech anxiety*' or '*techno-stress*'. Hung *et al* made a comparison with techno-stress:

The existence of ubiquitous techno-stress is like a soldier in the camp. Even if he is not working his shift, he still feels the stress from intangible sources all the time as long as he is there (Hung, Chang, & Lin, 2011).

In short, flexible workers are more exposed to psychosocial risks factors than permanent workers. Economic insecurity and irregular, flexible working times or shifts are both factors that can increase psychosocial risks. Also homeworking and the increasing use of new technologies can blur the ability to separate work and private life. The amount of flexible working arrangements in the European Union rises, as well as the amount of people who report to suffer from occupational stress complaints. In the first chapter, it was said that more than 60% of young workers in the Netherlands hold flexible working arrangements. It is therefore likely that this group of workers increasingly suffer from stress complaints because of work. The next section focuses on the link between psychosocial risks and young workers.

## 2.4 Psychosocial risks and young workers

The Fifth European Working Conditions Survey from 2010 showed that young workers are overrepresented in the lowest-quality jobs. The same research found that young workers experience high levels of stress, and they reported some of the worst health indicators (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2010).

In 2013, ArboNed conducted research on absenteeism in the Netherlands. It found that half of the people who went on a long-term sick leave due to stress, were young workers between 25 and 34

years old. The Dutch young workers trade union CNV Jongeren argues that the problem is much more serious than people think. Both ArboNed and CNV claimed that the reasons lay in the flexible labour market and especially job insecurity. The President of CNV Jongeren, Michiel Hietkamp said that ‘from those who are aware of their work-related stress symptoms, a large group chooses to hide these symptoms from their employer, due to their fear to lose the job and ruin their own future’. Young workers are afraid to be seen as weak or lazy, and by putting their own health at risk, they keep the job. CNV Jongeren thinks that it is only a short-term solution. Young workers who are coping with long-term psychosocial complaints, while this leads to serious health risks on the long term. This can seriously impact their future working lives. Hietkamp argues that work-related stress has been a societal issue since many years, however, the role of young workers has always been neglected. He claims the following:

The biggest part of the problem is the fact that stress is only little being reported due to a taboo. Work-related stress is in particular a problem for young people because they are a vulnerable group. Young workers just entered the labour market, they want to show their good will and hard work. However, this should not be at the expense of their health (Metronieuws, 2015).

Research from TNO showed that especially young workers aged between 25 and 34 suffer from psychological complaints (TNO, 2013). This is a striking outcome, due to the fact that in terms of other work-related health complaints, the percentage of workers increases along with their age (Alkjaer, Pilegaard, Bakke, & Jensen, 2005). In the age category from 26 to 30 years old, one out of six low-skilled young worker addressed suffering from burn-out complaints (NEA, 2012). Irene Houtman argues that the increase of young workers with a burnout is one of the effects of the flexibilisation of the labour market. It has become more difficult to find a job, and especially a job with a permanent contract. As young workers are forced to be in fixed-term jobs, they have to prove themselves over and over again. which leads to stress.

In conclusion, this chapter has identified the main outcomes of psychosocial risks and how they emerge. Work-related stress is one of the most-frequently reported occupational health issue in the Netherlands and in the rest of the European Union. One of the most important causes of work-related stress is the level of job insecurity. Job insecurity and therefore economic insecurity is most likely to be associated with negative health outcomes. Another factor that can cause work-related stress is a strain on work-life balance. Irregular working schedules and the use of new technologies at home, that are usually destined to be used at work, can blur the separation between private and professional life. Recent research has shown that young workers in the Netherlands increasingly



suffer from stress-complaints. In the third chapter, a closer look will be taken at the levels young workers perceive their position in the labour market. Furthermore, future scenarios will be outlined, by linking together the recent trends in the European labour market.

### Chapter 3. What will the future bring with regards to current and future situations of young workers in the flexible labour market?

In the previous chapters, the negative aspects of flexible working arrangements that may increase psychosocial risks were analysed. It was shown that personal financial insecurity and the separation between work and private life are two factors that can influence psychosocial health. The most likely effect of a high level of exposure to psychosocial risks, is work-related stress. Recent studies have shown that young workers suffer from work-related stress complaints and also from burn-out symptoms. In this chapter, the level of perceived job security and employability that are indicated by young workers are examined. European data is retrieved from the Fifth European Working Conditions Survey<sup>9</sup> in which almost 44.000 workers were interviewed. Data from the Netherlands is analysed by the Flexbarometer<sup>10</sup>, a tool that shows developments and trends on flexibilisation in the Dutch labour market. Furthermore, this chapter will address the expectations of work-related prospects of young workers. It will also raise a potential dilemma for the future: several Member States are implementing a later retirement in their countries, as a solution for the ageing population. It will be questioned whether young workers in the European Union will be able to bear with this recent trend.

#### 3.1 How do young workers perceive job security in the flexible labour market?

Despite the proportion of young workers who quickly find suitable work once they have entered the labour market, for many European young workers this experience comes as a disappointment. In January 2014, 23% of young European job-seekers aged 15–24 could not find a job (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2014). The prolonged job crisis forced the current generation of young people to be less selective about the type of jobs they are prepared to accept (International Labour Organisation, 2013). Those young workers who have a higher education qualification or other kind of training which they thought would lead to full-time or permanent employment, now feel frustrated and disappointed that they remain stuck in precarious employment (Clarke, Lewchuk, de Wolff, & King, 2007). The feeling of job insecurity has been reflected in The European Working Conditions Survey from 2010. It showed that 20.9% of the young workers under 30 years old in the European Union think that they might lose their job

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<sup>9</sup> The Fifth European Working Conditions Survey from 2010: workers have been surveyed in the EU27, Norway, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo.

<sup>10</sup> Flex barometer is an initiative from TNO, in co-operation with ABU, FNV and the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs.

in the next six months<sup>11</sup>.

In the Netherlands, the combination of young workers and their vulnerable position in the flexible labour market has been acknowledged and further analysed. In 2014, the Dutch working population shrank by 30.000 workers in three months' time. This change was mainly caused by young workers who had to resign from the labour market, as they were unable to find suitable work (Netwerk Jongeren FNV, 2014). The perception of job security has been researched by the Flexbarometer. To begin with, more than half of the Dutch young workers under the age of 25 report that they find job security something 'very important', and more than 40% reported to find it 'important' (Flexbarometer, 2012). The data comes from young workers who are on permanent contracts, fixed-term contracts, stand-by contracts and agency-contracts. In regards to their perception on the risk to lose their work in the next six months, it showed that 37% of the young stand-by workers address that this could be the case, against 9% of the young permanent workers<sup>12</sup> (See appendices 1.4 & 1.5).

### 3.2 How do young workers perceive their employability and career prospects?

*Employability* refers to workers' capability to gain initial employment, to maintaining it and obtain new employment if required (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). From a European average point of view, young workers are not confident about their working lives. The majority of young workers (60%) report a feeling of negative employability, meaning that they see little chance of finding a similar position if they lose their current job (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2010). Moreover, 59% of the European average young workers think that their current job does not offer good career prospects<sup>13</sup>.

In the Netherlands, the proportion of young workers who perceive their position as negative, is slightly lower than the European average. Yet, a research that was conducted by Intrum Justitia, showed that young workers in the Netherlands are remarkably negative about their financial expectations. Only 14% of the Dutch young workers believe that their financial situation shall be better than the one of the previous generation. This is the lowest percentage in the European Union (Intrum Justitia, 2014). According to the Flexbarometer, 43.4% of the workers under 30 years old report a feeling of negative employability and more than half of them (57.5%) think that their current job does not offer good career prospects. In short, both in the Netherlands, and the rest of the European Union, a majority of the young workers are pessimistic about their work prospects.

<sup>11</sup> Fifth European Working Conditions Survey: question 77a

<sup>12</sup> Flexbarometer 2012, see appendix 1.4 and 1.5

<sup>13</sup> Fifth European Working Conditions Survey : question 77c

Yet, by looking at a future-scenario of the European labour market, it will be necessary to increase the amount of jobs for young people and this might change their views because of the coming demographic shift.

### 3.3 The discussion on the ability to work until a later retirement age

In 2013, The European Commission took measures to increase the employment rate for young people, this program is called the *Youth Guarantee*. The main cause for introducing this initiative is, according to the European Commission:

The potential for a ‘scarring’ effect on a generation of young people is great: studies show that a period of unemployment when young has long-term negative impact on income levels and the risk of further unemployment. Beyond this, evidence has shown that young people’s health status, well-being and job satisfaction are also affected by time spent unemployed (European Commission, 2014).

Its approach is to ensure that all young people under the age of 25, get a good-quality, concrete offer within four months of them leaving formal education or becoming unemployed. In this way, the European Union tries to increase the youth employment rate. This stands in line with the wider EU2020 target to increase the employment rate to 75% (European Commission, 2014). Since 2012, Europe’s working age population will start to shrink: the population aged over 60 years old will increase with about two million people every year. Eurostat has predicted that the reduced birth rates and rising life expectancy means that by 2060, the ratio of people of working age (between 15-64) for every person aged over 65, will halve from one out of four, to one out of two (Eurostat, 2012). This is also called the support-ratio, because the tax contributions of the working population support public services for the retired population. In short, a smaller group of workers will have to cover the costs for a larger group of retired people. This explains the current trend which European Members States are following by raising the retirement age. However, as the quality of work is worsening and young workers are increasingly exposed to risks at work, a dilemma is introduced. There is concern about the ability to meet the Europe2020 targets, as not only will labour productivity be compromised, but the working population's health will deteriorate and these workers will not be receive sufficient social benefits. In 2010, 52% of all European young workers indicated that they did not feel confident about their ability to remain in their current job until the age of 60 (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2010)<sup>14</sup>. In the Netherlands, where the retirement age is currently 67 years, 38.9% of Dutch young workers

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<sup>14</sup> Fifth European Working Conditions Survey: question 75

think not being able to work until the age of 60<sup>15</sup> (See appendix 1.6). However, this expectation is counts for all kinds of young workers, regardless of their contracts.

As discussed in chapter one and two, new information and data have added to the existing evidence regarding the link between precariousness and poor health (Benach *et al*, 2014). The increase of precarious work, while on the other side a prolonging of working-life challenges the current generation of young workers. Research showed that if group of workers that is exposed to high psychosocial risks from a young age on, is expected to perform less during the development of their lives. As recovery from work-related-stress diseases takes a long time, costs are also high (Blatter, Houtman, van den Bossche, Kraan, & van den Heuvel, 2005). Recovery from the results of psychosocial complaints usually takes a long period. On average, workers with the result of a burn-out take 9 months to recover. Despite their treatments, 25% of sick workers stay vulnerable and are at high risk to get a relapse. Some of the people who suffer from psychosocial complaints are not yet able to return back to work after two years (Blatter *et al*). For instance, workers who suffer from stress complaints have a higher risk to get a stroke (23%) than workers who do not have complaints. This was concluded by a research among 200.000 workers from Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Switzerland, United Kingdom and the Netherlands (Kivimäki, Nyberg, Batty, Fransson, Heikkilä, & Alfredsson, *et al*, 2012).

Studies have identified the perception of young workers on levels of job security, employability and their ability to work until a certain retirement age. Young people are, on average, not confident about their future in terms of employment, as they perceive their situations with relatively low job security and report a negative employability. The European Commission aims to increase the employment rate, by for instance, the introduction of the Youth Guarantee. The current generation of young people will be responsible to cover the costs for the group of retired people, which is growing fast. As the worst health indicators are reported by young people, it becomes questionable whether this new generation can carry the weight on the long term.

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<sup>15</sup> Flex barometer 2012: See appendix 1.6

## Discussion

This chapter will link the main results and trends that were needed to formulate an answer to the main research question. It will outline the most notable outcomes and discuss similarities and contradictories. Furthermore, it aims to discuss to what extent the available literature was useful to answer the research questions.

Due to the fact that flexible working arrangements become more common and that there is a trend of an increasing amount of workers who suffer from the effects of work-related stress, it is relevant to conduct research on this topic. Studies have demonstrated the correlation between job insecurity and psychosocial risks, however, this has not been analysed on young workers in particular. The results have shown that nowadays, the majority of young workers is employed on flexible contracts. Therefore, it seems obvious that this group is likely to run the risk of suffering from psychosocial consequences that are connected to flexible contracts. The literature that was consulted for this research confirms this by showing a significant distinction between young workers holding permanent contracts and young workers holding flexible contracts. Young flexible workers address more frequently that they perceive their jobs as unstable and unsecure than permanent workers. Yet, the data on European young workers and their perception towards work comes from the Fifth European Working Conditions Survey that was conducted in 2010. More recent data could have strengthened the evidence. Unfortunately, the Sixth survey is being conducted in 2015 and therefore it is not yet publically published. On the other hand, the data that was consulted from Dutch research institutions is more recent and detailed than the consulted European surveys. Another aspect worth mentioning about the European data, is that surveys are conducted in all kinds of labour markets. Responses in the surveys differ significantly per country, due to all kinds of circumstances. For instance, in Spain, where youth unemployment is very high, the perception towards work is different compared to a country such as Germany. It must be taken into account that this research compared European average data with Dutch data.

With regards to the definition of flexible working arrangements, its multidimensional meaning can cause confusion when looking at different academic studies. To illustrate, some studies on flexibilisation include all kinds of working arrangement that deviates in any kind from traditional, standard working arrangements, such as part-time employment. Other studies exclusively address precariousness caused by flexibility. There are also studies that put emphasise on one aspect of flexible working arrangements, such as the economic aspect, or the physical health aspect. As this research focuses on expected effects on mental health aspects, it was obvious that more emphasis laid at the elements that relate to increased psychosocial factors. This explains why this research focuses on two dominant elements of flexible working arrangements, including to those contracts

that require a fixed-term element, and those contracts that lack clear working-time provisions. The results of this research may be therefore, applicable when using a broader definition of flexible working arrangements. However, this cannot be claimed in this research.

In terms of the discussion on the efficiency and the ethicality of flexible working arrangements, it seems to appear that the strengths are its weaknesses. To illustrate, flexible working patterns allow employers to benefit on a short-time and build higher profits. Flexible work enables them to quickly respond to the demands of the labour market. On the other hand, their flexible staff might be less committed to the work and less skilled, which results into a lower productivity on the long term. The same could be argued when assessing positive and negative aspects as from a workers perspective. Flexible arrangements can be very useful, because there is room for adjustment and people can fit their work easily around other activities, such as education or family obligations. For instance, flexible work offers the opportunity for young mothers to remain in employment and work from home, to make it easier to take care of their children. Students can earn a salary and at the same time study for their degree. Yet, as flexibility also shifts responsibilities and risk onto workers, it makes them more vulnerable as well. It was shown that flexible workers significantly suffer from more job insecurity than permanent workers do. The reason for this is legitimate: they lack security about their financial situation and their work-life balance might be disturbed. These two factors from psychosocial risks and can result into the effects of work-related stress.

Work-related stress has become the most common health issue in the Netherlands and in the rest of the European Union, as this problem reaches the highest levels of work-related health problems. Most workers believe that this issue is common at their workplace. Yet, many workers address that this issue is not handled well in their workplace. This is problematic because the long-term effects of stress can cause serious mental illnesses, such as burn-out, depression, and physical illnesses such as heart diseases. If work organisations do not pay attention to measures on tackling the causes of work-related stress, many workers will be at risks in terms of their health.

An increasing number of flexible jobs are now categorised as precarious jobs. By looking at the five dimensions of precarious work, it seems that many working arrangements in the Netherlands can be called precarious. Especially stand-by contracts meet several characteristics of precariousness. Precarious work has a negative impact on health, including mental health. As a large group of young workers is employed on precarious contracts in the Netherlands, it means that their health is at risk. Research bodies such as Eurofound, Arbodet, TNO and Dutch trade unions have confirmed this argument. However, it remains difficult to research this phenomenon because it seems that much data is missing about this group. To illustrate, it is almost impossible to find data on low, or unpaid internships. The same problem appears for young workers who have

undeclared work. These jobs are not registered and therefore the problem might be more serious than data allows to acknowledge. On the other hand, according to the available data, there is evidence on the perceptions young workers have about their working conditions and future expectations. European surveys and Dutch surveys both confirm that many young workers think negatively about their working lives. Their job security and employability are reported negatively and in regards with their future expectations, a majority believes that their current job will not offer them good career prospects. This could be a rational outcome, as unemployment rates are still high in many Member States and many young workers are on jobs below their educational level.

With regards to the discussion on future scenarios of the labour market, it seems that the employment rate will raise significantly during the next decade, as the working population of the European Union faces a demographic shift. As the support-ratio will increase, it is most likely that there will be more jobs available in the future. It can therefore be argued that the perception of employability of young people, will make a significant progress. Indeed, the quantity of work will increase as more jobs are available. However, the challenge for these job will be their quality. As young workers now address to not feeling capable to work until a later retirement age, this could cause problems in the long-term, as this generation will have to bear with the costs of the previous generation. If young workers are exposed to precarious work from a young age on, they might not, indeed, be able to fulfil their working-lives until society expects them to do now.



## Conclusions

This report aims to identify *the expected effects of flexible working arrangement on the level of psychosocial risks to which Dutch young workers are exposed*. This research was conducted as a response to the recent trend of flexibilisation in the European labour market and the increasing issue of work-related stress. It questions a correlation between flexible work and young workers who suffer from psychosocial complaints. Furthermore, it brings forward a potential future scenario in which the current generation of young workers and their working conditions are contested. The research emphasises in particular those working arrangements that are based on a fixed-term, in which the amount of hours and/or working place have not been specified. Through the research, comparative data on both the European level and the Dutch level was analysed.

To the question ‘*What are flexible working arrangements and why are they used in the Netherlands and the rest of the European Union?*’ a clear answer can be formulated. This descriptive question aims to frame the topic. It was found that in recent years, flexible working arrangements are increasingly offered, regardless of specific occupations or sectors. Main reasons for its fast emergence are the increased international competition and the effects of the economic crisis. Forms of flexibility are usually reflected in employment contracts. Flexibility, however, has a multidimensional definition. It can for instance, refer to flexible labour inputs, such as flexible task divisions or to flexible working conditions. Yet, this research defines flexible working arrangements as those contracts that require a fixed-term element, and those contracts that lack clear working-time provisions. In the past ten years, the amount of young people who are employed on flexible contracts has increased tremendously.

Flexible working arrangements both include positive and negative aspects that are often correlated with each other. These patterns could be beneficial for all the stakeholders, however, if they are not subject of collective negotiations between employers and workers, flexible work can undermine balanced labour relations. As the majority of flexible workers in the Netherlands would prefer to have a permanent contracts with defined working hours, it is likely that flexible working arrangements are mostly initiated from the employers-side. For employers, flexibility enables them to quickly respond to the demands of the labour market. Costs are lower and hiring- and firing procedures are less of a burden. On the other hand, flexible staff might be less committed to their fixed-term job, less skilled and therefore results into a lower productivity on the long term. From the workers’ perspective, flexible work can allow workers to adjust to other activities, such as family or education. On the same time, flexibility shifts responsibilities and risks onto workers, which makes them more vulnerable than permanent workers. They often lack job security and their work-life balance might be disturbed. Moreover, literature categorises various forms of flexible

work as precarious work. This concept can be explained as low-quality jobs and the number of precarious jobs is increasing throughout the European Union. Especially stand-by contracts, are considered to be precarious as these contracts meet all the criteria of precariousness. Research has demonstrated the negative impact on the health of those workers who hold precarious contracts. In short, it can be concluded that the strengths of flexible working arrangements, are as well its weaknesses.

As the research continues to define psychosocial risk factors, those negative aspects that are experienced by flexible workers are further researched in the second chapter. The question, '*What aspects of flexible working arrangements influence psychosocial risks?*' tries to find aspects of flexible work that are likely to increase psychosocial risks. Two factors that are proven to increase psychosocial risks are contested: individual economic insecurity and a strain on work-life balance. The most common health outcome of increased psychosocial risks is work-related stress. Stress has become the most-frequently reported work-related health issue in the Netherlands. This is not surprising as almost all workers consider stress to be common at their workplace. However, many think that this issue is not handled well at their work. This is a problem because, long-term work-related stress can cause serious mental health illnesses, such as burn-out, depression and physical illnesses such as heart diseases. If organisations do not try to tackle work-related stress, the effects will undermine workers their ability to remain in employment. Furthermore, the effects of work-related stress causes high costs for society. Taking all gathered information together, it can be argued that flexible working arrangements have an impact on the exposure to psychosocial risks. A high level of job insecurity and a strain on work-life balance negatively influence health, including mental health.

It is interesting to shed light on the cause-and-effect relationship between the flexibilisation of the labour market, psychosocial risks and the current generation of young workers. This chapter ends by linking work-related stress complaints to young workers in the Netherlands. Due to the fact that 60% of the workers with a flexible contract is aged below 34 years old, it is likely that this age group has a high risks to psychosocial health issues. Research showed that young workers increasingly suffer from the results of work-related stress. Reasons for this might be the fact that they are overrepresented in flexible jobs. Other reasons might be that they are relatively unexperienced in the labour market. Further, they are more likely to work beyond their personal capacity, out of fear to be seen as weak, make mistakes or to even lose the job. Research demonstrates that the problem is common among young workers, as it found that one third of the amount of sick-leaves caused by stress in the Netherlands, were young workers. However, it is estimated that a substantial amount is afraid to report on these complaints. Therefore, it remains

difficult to identify the proportion of workers who actually suffer from work-related stress complaints.

The last question aims to predict the future scenario for young workers: *‘What will the future bring with regards to the current and future situation of young workers in the flexible labour market?’* It raises the question on their ability to work until a later retirement age, regarding current their working conditions. As the population of the European Union faces a demographic shift, the working population will age significantly during the next decade. This means that young workers will have more responsibilities in the future, with regards to the coverage of the larger amount of retired people. As this support-ratio will increase, it is most likely that there will be more jobs available in the future. It can therefore be argued that the perception of employability of young people, will make a significant progress. Indeed, the quantity of work will increase as more jobs are available. However, the challenge for work organisations is to sustain the quality of these jobs. Surveys indicated that large numbers of young workers address to not feeling capable to work until a later retirement age, which could be problematic in the long-term. If young workers are exposed to high psychosocial risks from a young age on, they might not be capable to work until a later retirement age, at least not sufficiently to bear with the increased support-ratio in the future.

## Recommendation

The most striking recommendation that one could formulate from this research is the importance of a general improvement of flexible work. If flexible working arrangements become subject of negotiations between workers and employers, they could become socially acceptable for all stakeholders. However, an increasing amount of jobs have such low quality that workers are at risk of exploitation. As there is an increasing amount of young people who already report work-related stress complaints, regardless of their educational level, employers organisations should re-invent better ways of applying flexible forms of work. If young people are expected to work in the lowest-quality jobs, and also continue working until a later retirement age, it seems that this group has been forgotten during the discussions on deregulations of employment rights and working conditions. It is therefore recommended to employers and governments to actively implement strategies to maintain a sustainable workforce. If young workers are expected to work until a later retirement age, they should be prepared for this by offering ethical contracts and good working conditions. If flexible working arrangements could have the same qualities as permanent jobs do, young workers will be less challenged to reach this later retirement age and live a better life in general.

As the amount of workers who report suffering from the results of work-related stress is still increasing, it is recommended to raise awareness and to provide strong stress-prevention action at workplaces. As almost all workers consider stress to be common at their workplaces, the problem should not be neglected or underestimated. There is still a taboo on work-related stress and this should be brought up for discussion by work organisations. Psychosocial risks and therefore work-related stress should have the same status as other work-related health issues, as for instance, MSDs or high exposure to chemical substances have.

With regards to future research, it is recommended to improve recent data on flexible working arrangements and working conditions. This research has consulted the available data that was retrieved from official working conditions surveys, however, it is most likely that the problem of young people in precarious work is much more serious than data suggests it to be. To illustrate, there are large numbers of young workers who do undeclared work and unpaid internships, because they hope it might lead to a normal job. However, because they are not registered, it is difficult to find data on these patterns.

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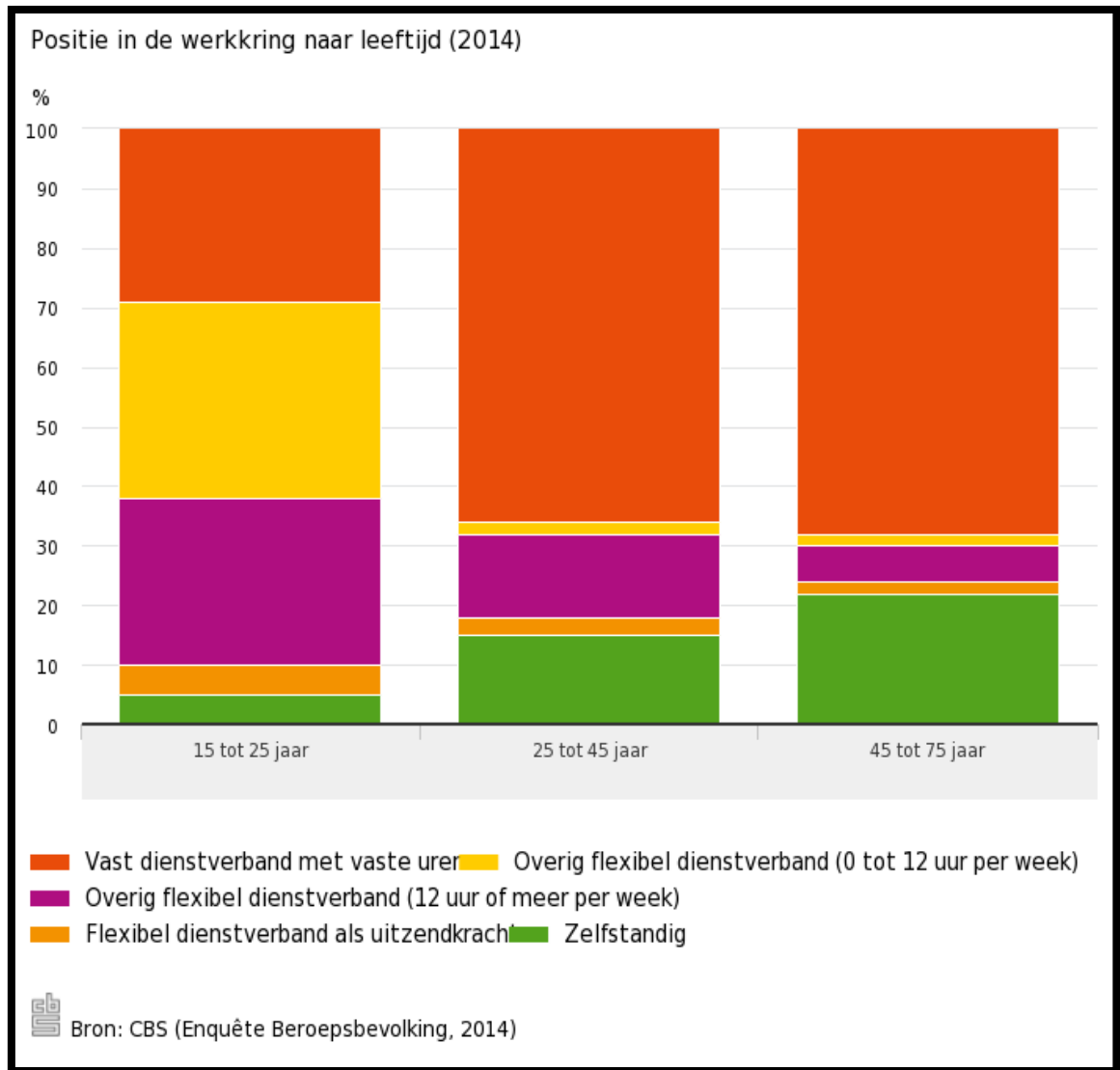
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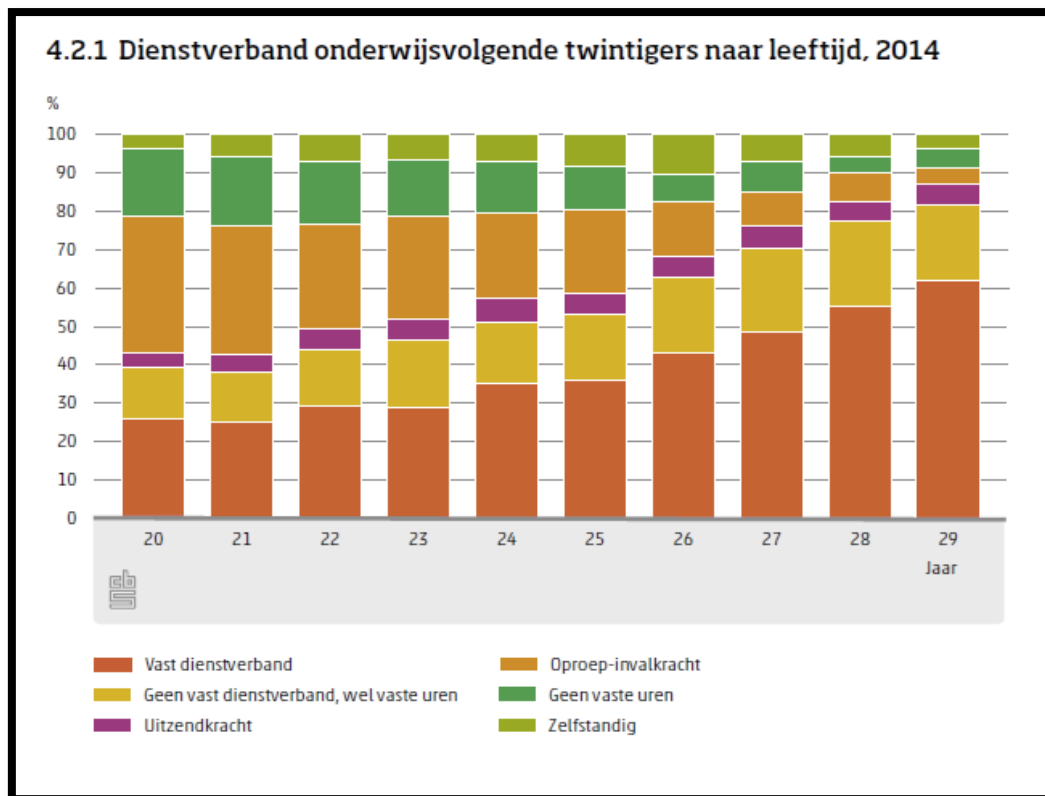
## Appendix

## Figures



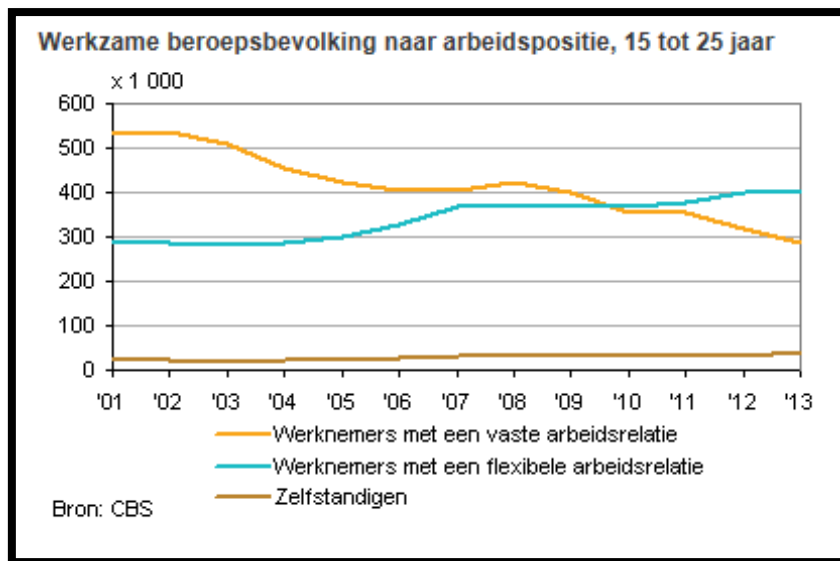
1.0 This bar chart shows three age categories (15-25, 25-45 and 45-75) with the types of working arrangements (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2014):

- Orange: permanent contracts
- Light yellow: Flexible contract with 0-12 hours/week,
- Purple: flexible contract with 12 or more hours/week,
- Dark yellow: flexible agency contract,
- Green: self-employed.



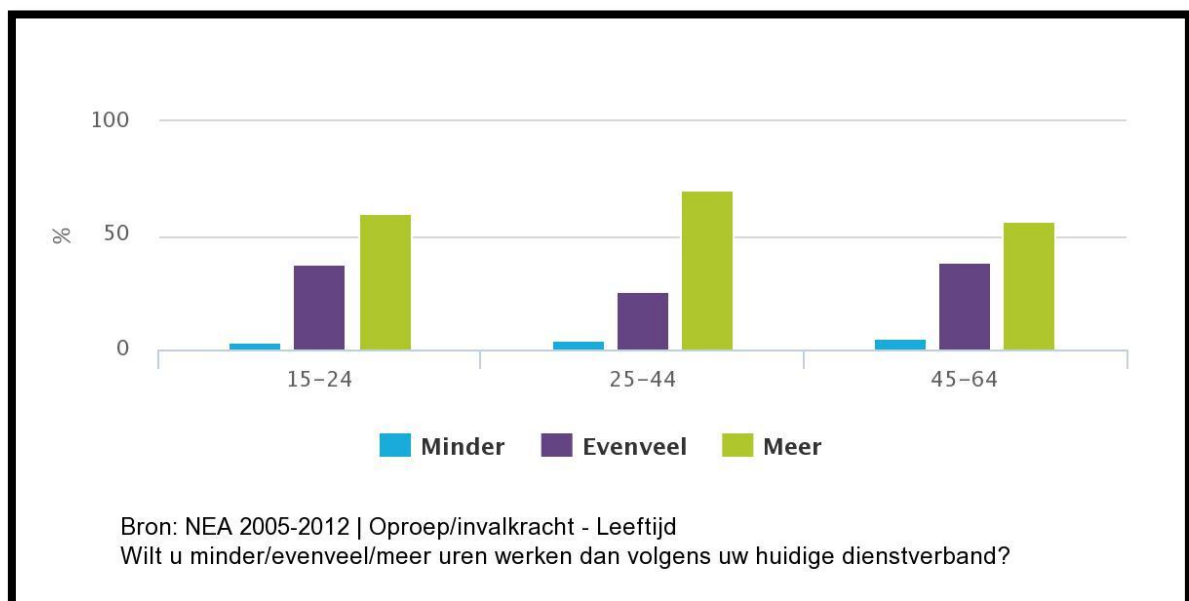
1.1 This bar chart reflects the percentages of young workers between 20-29 years old and their working arrangement in 2014 (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2015):

- Dark orange: permanent contract
- Light yellow: flexible contract with defined hours
- Purple: agency contract
- Dark yellow: stand-by contract
- Dark green: no defined hours
- Light green: self-employed



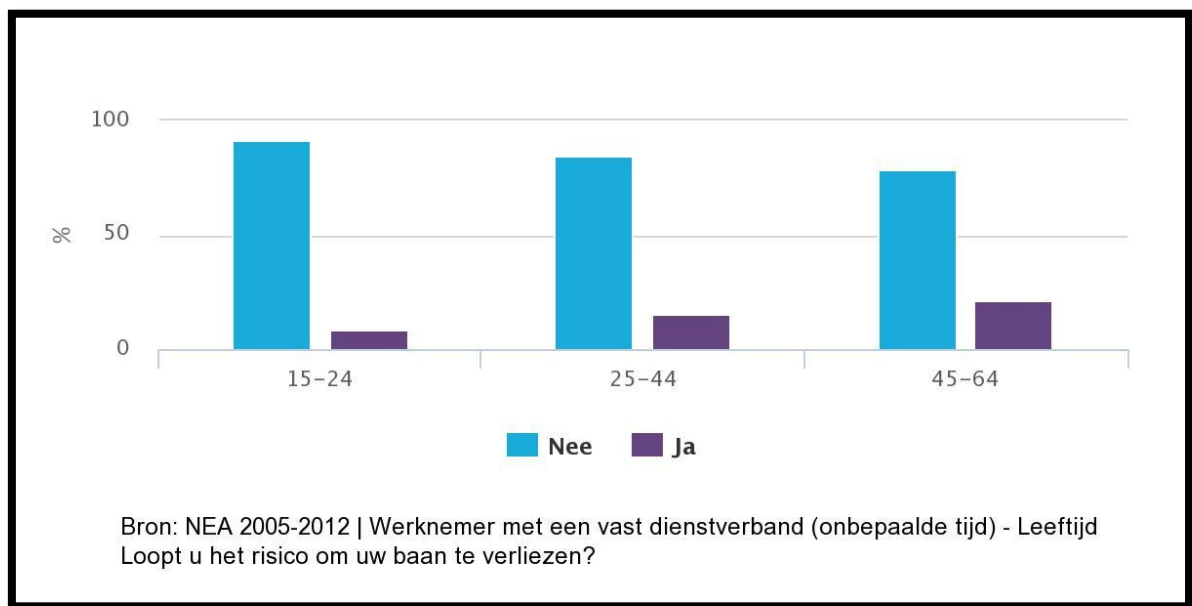
1.2 This graph shows the active working population in the Netherlands, aged between 15-25 years old and the development of time between 2001-2013 (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2014):

- The blue line reflects the amount of young workers in flexible working arrangements.
- The yellow line reflects the amount of permanent contracts held by these workers.



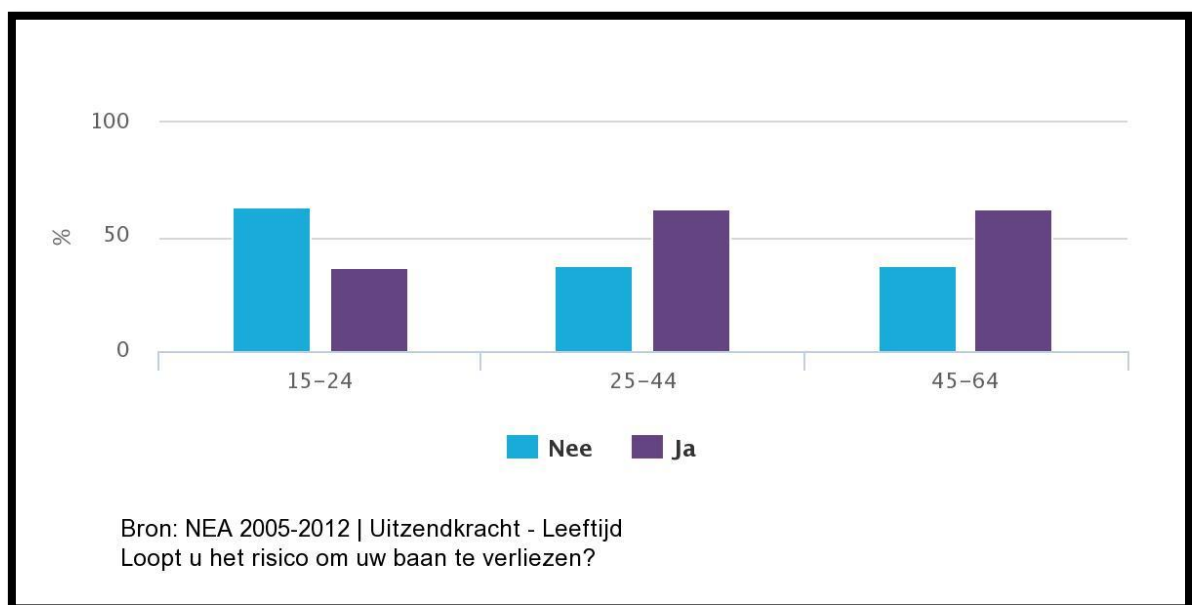
1.3 This bar chart shows the proportion of stand-by workers with a wish to work more less or the same amount of hours, per age category (15-25, 25-44 and 45-64) (Flexbarometer, 2012):

- Blue: less hours
- Purple: the same amount of hours
- Green: more hours



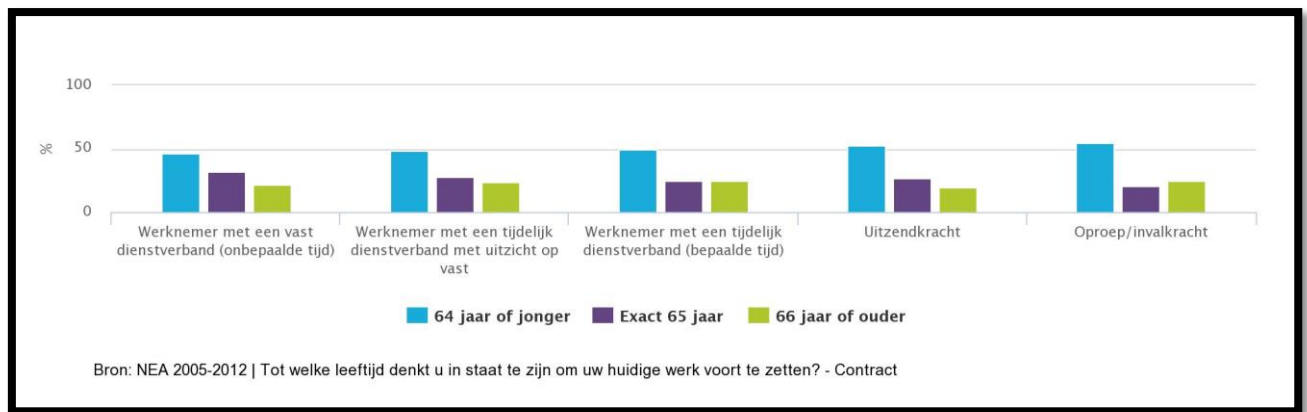
1.4 This bar chart shows the proportion of permanent workers who think they risk losing their job, in percentages, per age category (15-25, 25-44 and 45-64) (Flexbarometer, 2012):

- Blue: No
- Purple: Yes



1.5 This bar chart shows the proportion of stand-by workers who think they risk losing their job, in percentages, per age category (15-24, 25-44 and 45-64) (Flexbarometer, 2012):

- Blue: No
- Purple: Yes



1.6 This bar chart shows the proportion of who think they are able to work until which retirement age, per type of contract (permanent, fixed-term with potential to permanent, fixed-term, agency and stand-by) (Flexbarometer, 2012):

- Blue: 64 years old or younger
- Purple: exact 65 years old
- Green: 66 or older