

Part-time work

What is part-time work?

The ILO Part-Time Work Convention, 1994 (No. 175), defines a part-time worker as an “employed person whose normal hours of work are less than those of comparable full-time workers”. This is a common legal definition of part-time work and is reflected, for example, in the European Union’s Part-Time Work Directive.

For statistical purposes, however, part time is commonly defined as a specified number of hours. The threshold which divides workers into full-time and part-time workers varies from country to country (see the table below for some examples), but is usually either 30 or 35 hours per week.

Statistical definitions of part-time work

Country	Threshold
Finland, Canada, New Zealand	30 hours
Australia, Austria, Iceland, Japan, Sweden, United States	35 hours
Hungary, Turkey	36 hours
Norway	37 hours

The forms that part-time work takes vary to a great extent, not only with respect to the number of hours worked, but also to their distribution across the working day, week, month and year. Part-time work can also take special forms, such as job-sharing (one full-time job is split into two part-time jobs), progressive retirement (reduced working time for older workers close to retirement age) and parental leave that can be taken on a part-time basis (reduced working hours for parents).

How is part-time work regulated?

In the early 1990s, efforts were made at the international level to improve the employment conditions of part-time workers. The ILO’s Part-Time Work Convention promotes access to part-time work and states that measures shall be taken to ensure the equal treatment of part-time and comparable full-time workers, particularly regarding:

- participation at the workplace;
- occupational safety and health;
- discrimination in employment and occupation;
- hourly basic wage rates;
- statutory social security schemes;

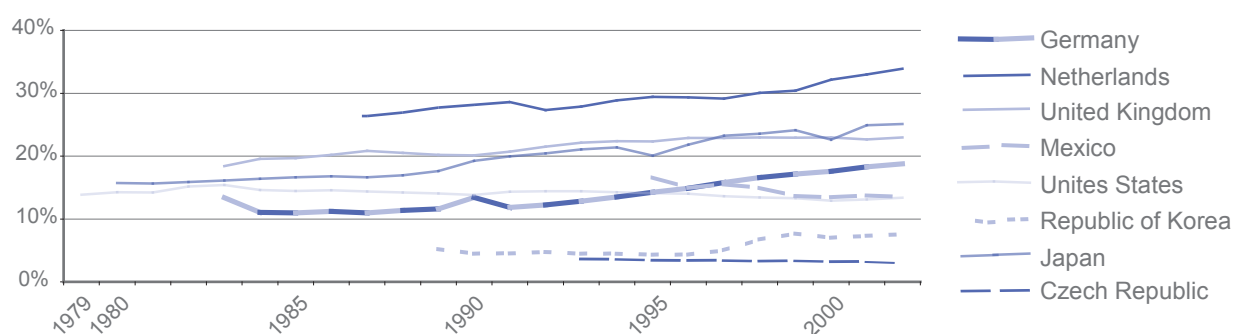
- maternity leave, termination of employment, paid annual leave and paid public holidays, and sick leave.

In 1997, the European Union adopted the Part-Time Work Directive, which has similar content to the ILO Convention and also embodies the principle of equal treatment for part-time workers. According to the Directive, employers should give consideration to workers’ requests to shift from full-time to part-time work and vice versa. The main principles of the Directive have been integrated into national laws across Europe.

Who works on a part-time basis?

In most industrialized countries, the share of part-time workers as a proportion of total employment has increased by one-quarter to one-half over the last 20 years, although the United States is a notable exception to this trend (see the chart below). However, the incidence of part-time work remains low in most developing countries, such as Mexico and the Republic of Korea, as well as in countries in transition, like the Czech Republic. In Europe, the highest part-time rate occurs in the Netherlands, where nearly one-third of all workers have a part-time contract.

Share of part-time workers on total employment*



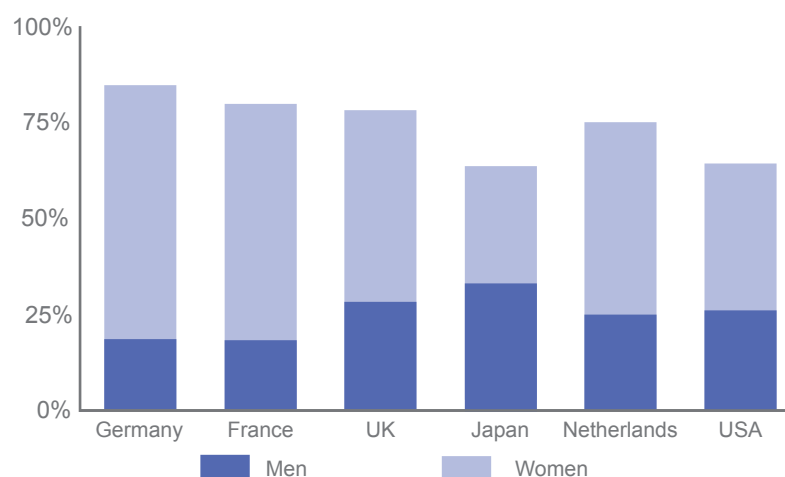
* Defined by a common definition of less than 30 usual hours worked per week in the main job.

Source: OECD Labour Market Statistics, 2003.

Who works part-time?

In industrialized countries, the proportion of part-time workers is especially high among women. In many countries, the share of part-time workers is also particularly high in the services sectors and among low-skilled employees.

Proportion of part-time workers among male and female employed persons (2002)



Source: OECD Labour Market Statistics, 2003.

Potential advantages and disadvantages of part-time working

Some common advantages which can result from part-time working, for both employers and employees, are summed up below.

Advantages for employers

- Improved adaptability of the workforce to fluctuations in customer demand.
- More flexible work-planning.
- Preferential tax treatment provided to firms who hire part-time workers.

Advantages for employees

- Better balance between work and family life.
- Entry point into the labour market for young people.
- Entry point into the labour market for women.
- Potential for additional job creation.

On the other hand, part-time work can entail the following potential problems:

Disadvantages for employers

- Higher taxes and social contributions when part-timers used to cover the same hours as full-timers.
- Higher costs for the coordination of employees' work.

Disadvantages for employees

- Lower incomes due to shorter hours and lower hourly wages than comparable full-time workers.
- Lower social security benefits and limited career progression and training opportunities.
- Potential for work intensification, i.e. part-time hours with a "full-time workload".
- Potential for gender discrimination: part-time work can reinforce traditional family roles and offer poorer terms and conditions of work to women.
- Potential for irregular working hours.

Ensuring high-quality part-time work

Social dialogue between employers and workers at the company level is crucial in order to establish beneficial conditions for part-time work. This approach, together with equal treatment legislation, can help to ensure that both employers' and workers' preferences regarding flexible working time are reflected in part-time working arrangements.



Case example

One example of a collective agreement aimed at ensuring decent working conditions for part-time workers is that applicable to the French establishments of the retail firm IKEA. The rate of part-time work in different IKEA stores varies from 30 per cent to 47 per cent of employees. The number of hours of work of individual part-timers depends on the fluctuations in the volume of customers and varies from less than 16 hours a week to 36 hours a week. The agreement on part-time work sets up the following conditions for part-time work in this firm:

- The same wage rates are set for part-time and full-time workers.
- Part-timers receive “pro-rata” non-wage benefits comparable to those of full-timers.
- Part-time work should cover four-fifths of full-time working hours (30 hours per week or 130 hours per month).
- Daily working time must amount to at least four hours.
- Any changes in working time have to be communicated to workers at least three days before they are implemented.

Source: Meubles IKEA France SNC: “Durée du travail”, in *Accords et règlement intérieur*, 30 January 1996, pp. 20-31.