

# Mind the gap: France: Employee perspective

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# MIND THE GAP

## France



EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE

Shanyuan Foo and Ariane Ollier-Malaterre

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, information is presented on the perceptions of work and job satisfaction with work life for employees in France. Specifically, we look at work-life satisfaction in relation to age. The primary data set used for the paper comes from the European Working Conditions Survey conducted in 2005.

Organizations that want to remain employers-of-choice must periodically assess how shifts in the business environment might affect the effectiveness of their talent management strategies, policies, and programs. Globalization and changes in the age composition of the workforce—two important 21st-century trends that affect today's businesses—make it important for managers to consider:

- How does age affect employees' preferences for an idealized job and their assessments of their employment experiences?
- Do employees' perceptions of their employment experiences vary from country to country?

### *What does "mind the gap" mean?*

Train stations across England play recorded messages to remind passengers that they should "Mind the Gap." These words of caution urge train travelers to pay attention to the space between the door of the train car and the platform in the station for safe commutes and travels.

For this series of our research publications, we have adopted the phrase, "Mind the Gap." The Mind the Gap series aim to remind employers to pay attention to any gaps that might exist between employees' priorities and need and employers' allocation of workplace-based resources. Our Mind the Gap papers also aim to help our readers to such gaps in quality of employment in other country contexts.

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The Sloan Center on Aging & Work in Boston, in collaboration with the Middlesex University Business School in London, created the Mind the Gap series to provide employers with basic employment-related information country-by-country. There are two types of papers in the Mind the Gap series.

**Employee Series:** This series examines the perspectives that adults of different ages have about employment and the assessments that they make about their employment experiences. These papers focus on one central question: *Does age affect employees' preferences for an idealized job and their assessments of their employment experiences?*

**Employer Series:** This series examines the prevalence of human resource policies and programs at workplaces in a selected country. Because most talent-management strategies and programs are age-neutral, we compare the availability of selected human resource policies in practices in the targeted country with the availability of similar policies and practices in a small number of countries with approximate economic circumstances. These papers focus on one core question: *How does the availability of human resource policies and programs in the targeted country compare with other countries?*

Although papers in both series focus on a single country, when the information contained in two or more papers are considered in tandem, it is possible to consider whether employees' perceptions of their employment experiences vary from country to country.



## Quality of Employment: Dimensions of a “Good Job” and a “Good Place to Work”

Most people would agree that good jobs are a good thing. High-quality jobs offer benefits to employees and to the organizations where they work.

- **Benefits for Employees:** The quality of employment affects the health and well-being of employees. Research confirms that poor quality jobs (such as jobs requiring extreme work hours, jobs that are very demanding, particularly those where employees do not have access to the resources they need to meet those demands) are associated with negative outcomes, including high stress levels and physiological reactions like cardio-vascular problems.<sup>1</sup>
- **Benefits for Employers:** Employers often connect the quality of employment they offer to employees to their employer-of-choice strategies. There is some evidence that the adoption of policies and practices that promote the quality of employment available to employees is related to positive outcomes for organizations, such as customer satisfaction and organizational performance.<sup>2</sup> Employer-of-choice strategies can result in enhanced employee engagement which, in turn, can be linked to organizational outcomes, including financial measures. For example, higher employee engagement can reduce costs like those associated with unwanted turnover. One study found that 59% of highly engaged employees report that they intend to stay with their employers in comparison to the 24% of disengaged employees who “intend to stay.”<sup>3</sup> A number of studies have linked employee job satisfaction with positive performance indicators. Fortune reports positive relationships between being recognized as a “great place to work” and stock indices.<sup>4, 5</sup>

In this paper, we focus on eight important dimensions of the quality of employment:

- Fair, Attractive, and Competitive Compensation & Benefits
- Opportunities for Development, Learning & Advancement
- Wellness, Health & Safety Protections
- Opportunities for Meaningful Work
- Provisions for Employment Security & Predictabilities
- Workplace Flexibility
- Culture of Respect, Inclusion & Equity
- Promotion of Constructive Relationships at the Workplace

The following sections of this paper use the quality of employment framework as a structure to discuss the perspectives of employees about their employment situations.

# QUALITY EMPLOYMENT IN FRANCE:

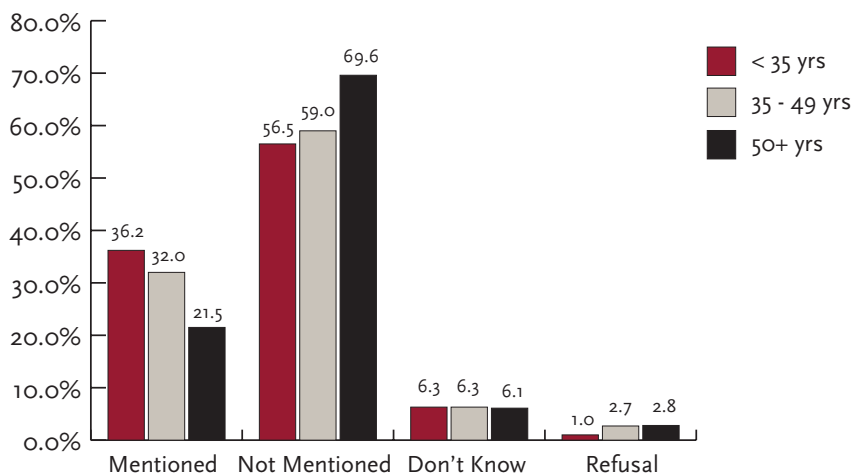
## I. Indicators of Fair, Attractive, and Competitive Compensation & Benefits

- *Compensation and benefits are distributed in a fair and equitable manner, meeting most of employees' basic economic needs.*

- According to the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) in 2005, compensation for overtime work does not seem to be common. This is particularly acute with older workers aged 50 and above, who reported that overtime compensation is not mentioned (69.6%). In comparison, this figure is smaller for the workers in the age category of 35-49 years (59.0%) and workers in the age category of below 35 years old (56.5%) respectively.<sup>6</sup>
- Compensation has become an acute area of negotiations in France since the 35-hour workweek regulations of 1998-2000 induced compensation freezes for all categories of employees. Standard of living has continued to grow, but the growth rate has slowed down and is among the lowest in the EU. It has become of the greatest concerns among employees, especially for young employees.<sup>7</sup> This is also especially true for exempt employees who are not paid overtime hours, even though their workweek is as long as before—the 35-hour workweek for exempt employees was implemented in most companies by granting one or two additional vacation weeks, not changing the length of the workweek.
- Employees were asked if their compensation includes overtime payment. Availability of overtime payment is highest for workers in the youngest age category, below 35 years old (36.2%). Figure 1 indicates that as the age category of French employees increases, overtime payment decreases, with 32.0% for workers aged 35-49, and 21.5% for employees aged 50 and above.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 1: Availability of overtime compensation by age group



Source: EWCS (2005)<sup>6</sup>

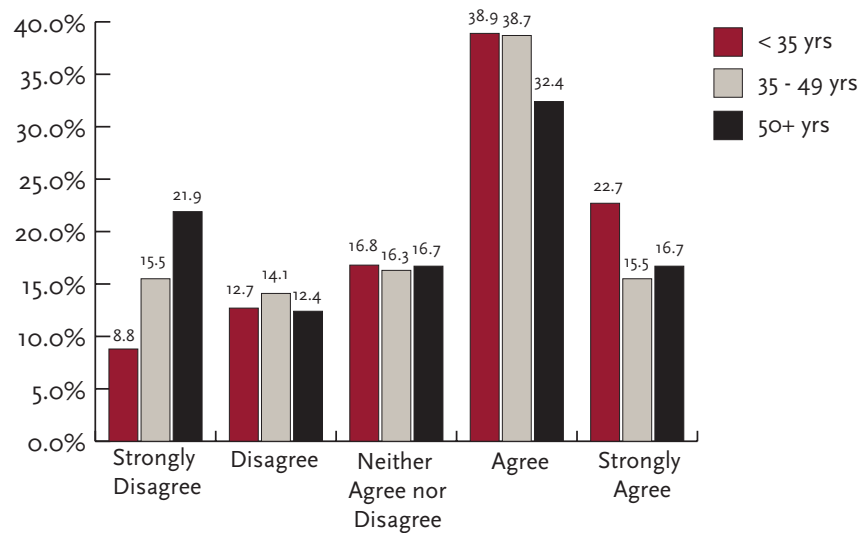
## II. Indicators of Opportunities for Development, Learning & Advancement

- *Opportunities for the development of expanded skills and responsibilities are available.*



- Younger employees were more likely to report that their job offers good career prospects (42.9%). In comparison, midlife and older employees were less inclined to believe their jobs offered good career prospects. Similarly, these two age categories of employees reported the highest level of disagreement with their job having good prospects for them—59.9% for older employees and 49.7% of midlife employees. This compares to 40.5% for younger employees.<sup>6</sup>
- As indicated in Figure 2, younger employees are more likely to agree that their job provides them with learning and growth opportunities, with 38.9% and 22.7% of them agreeing/strongly agreeing with this statement. Comparatively, older employees were most likely to strongly disagree, (21.9%), while midlife employees ranked the highest in disagreeing with the statement (14.1%).

Figure 2: Perception of growth opportunities in company by age group



Source: EWCS (2005)<sup>6</sup>

### III. Indicators of Wellness, Health & Safety Protections

- ▶ *Well-being is promoted through workplace policies, and social protections are offered in case of illness.*
- Employee well-being is promoted through employment regulations and workplace policies in France. Because of increasing concerns of suicides at the workplace,<sup>8</sup> the prevention of stress and burnout has been a major focus of efforts on the part of the government, employers and unions in the recent years, as attested by the number of workshops, training sessions and press articles on the topic.



### IV. Indicators of Opportunities for Meaningful Work

- ▶ *Opportunities for meaningful and fulfilling work are available.*

*This dimension is omitted due to lack of data availability*



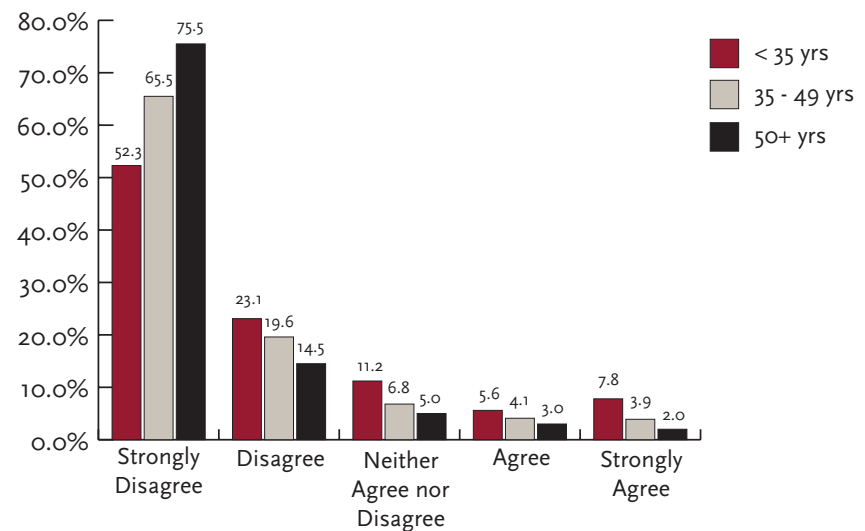


## V. Indicators of Provisions for Employment Security & Predictabilities

- *Terms of employment are communicated clearly, with an emphasis on smooth transitions through jobs and careers.*

- Overall, employees seem to feel some sense of job security in the next 6 months. In particular, older employees felt more secure in their jobs compared to middle aged and younger employees, with 89.9% either strongly disagreeing, or disagreeing that they would lose their jobs in the next 6 months (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: Job security for the next 6 months (by age group)



Source: EWCS (2005)<sup>6</sup>



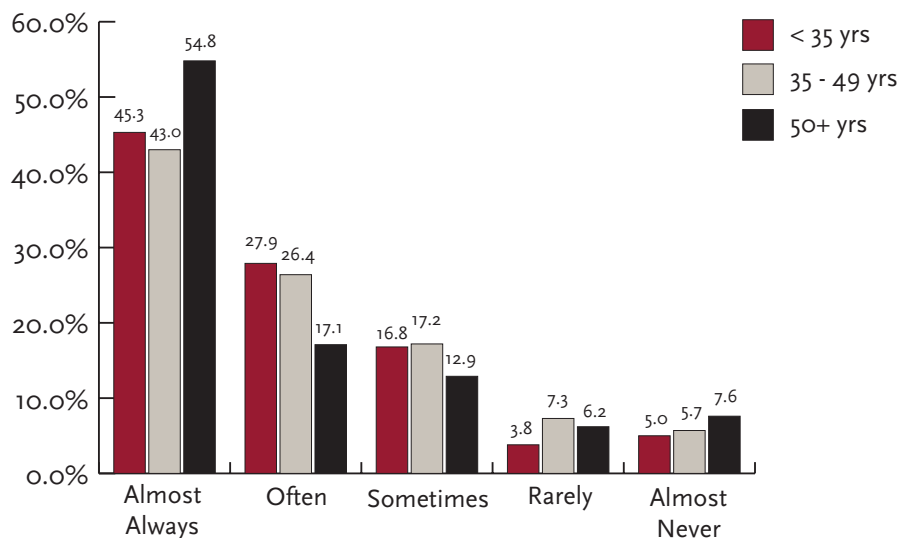
## VI. Indicators of Workplace Flexibility

- *Options, choice, and control over work conditions and hours are available.*

- Most exempt employees may choose their starting/ending work times and, as in the U.S, how often they work during the evenings/weekends. Telework is much less diffused than in the U.S., and job shares are really scarce (for a comparison of flexible work options in the U.S, the U.K and France, see Ollier-Malaterre, 2009).<sup>9</sup>
- In France, younger employees reported the lowest figures across all age groups for being able to take a break at work whenever they wished (27.5%) and also were most likely to report that they had no say in deciding when they can take a break (24.5%). In comparison, middle age and older workers reported the highest figures for being able to take breaks whenever they wished (32.3% and 42.9% respectively).<sup>6</sup>
- While middle aged and older workers reported the highest figures amongst all age groups in their ability to decide when to take holidays or days off (35.3% and 35.7% respectively), older employees were also most likely to report not being able to decide when they could take holidays or days off (24.3%).<sup>6</sup>
- Employees were generally satisfied with the amount of time they had to complete the job, with 54.8% of older employees in particular reporting that they have enough time to get the job done, as opposed to 43.0% for middle aged employees and 45.3% for younger employees.<sup>6</sup> (See Figure 4).



Figure 4: Tasks commensurate with time given to complete the job



Source: EWCS (2005)<sup>6</sup>

## VII. Indicators of Culture of Respect, Inclusion & Equity

- Diversity, inclusion, and employee personal growth are valued.

*This dimension is omitted due to lack of data availability*



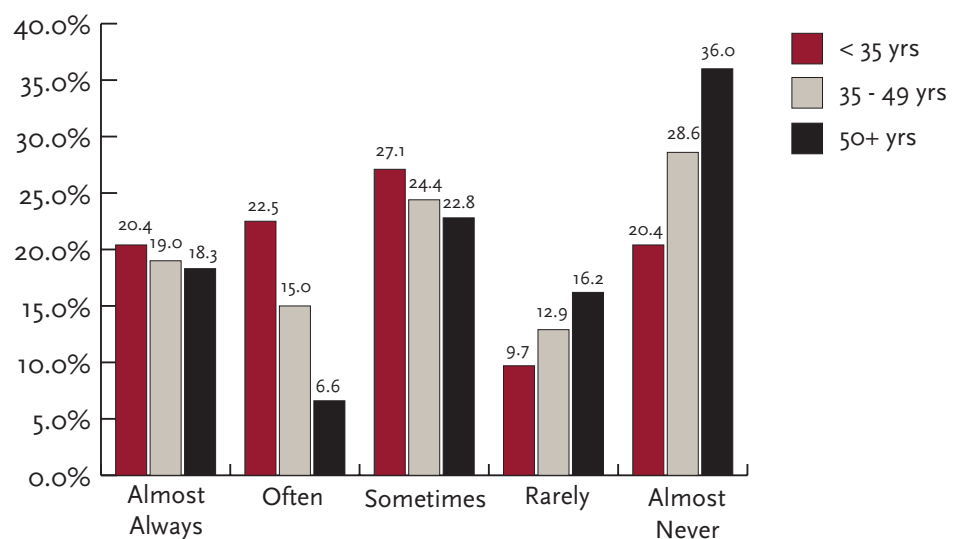
## VIII. Indicators of Promotion of Constructive Relationships at the Workplace

- Interactions with supervisors and coworkers are professional and respectful.



- Younger employees reported the highest figures in terms of getting assistance from colleagues when they requested it (34.8%). In comparison, about 22.5% of older employees reported almost never receiving assistance despite asking for help, compared to 17.2% middle-aged employees and 9.5% younger employees.<sup>6</sup>
- Respondents were asked if they were being able to get assistance from superiors when they requested for it. The lack of assistance offered despite asking for help is most prominent amongst older workers (36.0%), followed by middle aged workers (28.6%) and younger workers (20.4%).<sup>6</sup> (See Figure 5).

Figure 5: You can get assistance from your superiors if you ask for it



Source: EWCS (2005)<sup>6</sup>

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION:**

### **MINDING THE GAP**

Older employees in France appear to have a greater sense of job security compared to all other age groups, and were also more likely to have the ability to dictate when they took breaks and days off, as well. However, they were also more likely to face difficulty in getting support and help at work from fellow colleagues and superiors despite asking for help, reporting the highest figures in not getting assistance across all age groups.

Overall, age stratification is relatively strong in France, with older employees, on the one hand, benefiting from better compensation levels, yet leaving the workforce early, compared to the U.S, and younger employees encountering more difficulties integrating into the job market.

## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

Established in 2007 by the Sloan Center on Aging & Work, the Global Perspectives Institute is an international collaboration of scholars and employers committed to the expansion of the quality of employment available to the 21st-century multi-generational workforce in countries around the world.

The Global Perspectives Institute focuses on innovative and promising practices that might be adopted by employers and policy-makers.

The Institute's research, publications, and international forums contribute to:

- ▶ a deeper understanding of the employment experiences and career aspirations of employees of different ages who work in countries around the world;
- ▶ informed decision making by employers who want to be employers of choice in different countries; and
- ▶ innovative thinking about private-public partnerships that promote sustainable, high quality employment.

In addition to the Mind the Gap series, the Global Perspectives Institute publishes a Statistical Profile Series that highlights workforce demographic trends in different countries and a Global Policy Series that focuses on selected workforce policy in certain country contexts.

For more information on SCAW publications, please visit us online at:  
[www.bc.edu/agingandwork](http://www.bc.edu/agingandwork)

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The Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College promotes quality of employment as an imperative for the 21st-century multi-generational workforce. We integrate evidence from research with insights from workplace experiences to inform innovative organizational decision making. Collaborating with business leaders and scholars in a multi-disciplinary dialogue, the Center develops the next generation of knowledge and talent management.

The Sloan Center on Aging & Work is grateful for the continued support of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

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Allen, T. D., Eby, L. T., Poteet, M. L., Lentz, E., & Lima, L. (2004). Career benefits associated with mentoring for protégés: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 89(1), 127-136.

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4 Great Places to Work Institute. *What makes a great place to work: Financial results*. Retrieved from <http://www.greatplacetowork.com/great/graphs.php>

5 Unfortunately, most of the research linking employer-of-choice strategies with business outcomes tends to focus on correlational relationships. Such studies do not definitively establish that being a “best place to work” causes positive organizational performance; indeed, it also might be true that high profits and strong financial growth cause higher employee engagement and foster perceptions that a particular workplace is an employer of choice.

- 6 European Working Conditions Survey(EWCS) has been carried out 4 times by the Eurofound( the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions): in 1990/91, 2000 (extended to cover the 10 new member states, Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey in 2001/02) and 2005 (31 countries). The Foundation conducts a survey to study working conditions in Europe every 5 years.
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- 9 Ollier-Malaterre, A. (2009). Organizational work-life initiatives: Context matters. France compared to the UK and the US. *Community, Work and Family*, 12(2), 159-178.

### *Mind the Gap Series:*

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