

3 Collecting cross-country comparative multilevel data in organizations

The research design of the European Sustainable Workforce Survey

Zoltán Lippényi, Thomas Martens, and Tanja van der Lippe

Much research in the past has focused on the factors contributing to a sustainable workforce. Comparative studies research, however, has predominantly focused on the individual employee and the country–labor market context. We know relatively little about the role of organizations and their investments in a sustainable workforce. The Sustainable Workforce project set out to explore the causes and consequences of organizational investments in a sustainable workforce, while also taking into account factors at both the individual and country–sectoral context level. To achieve this goal, we needed to gather data at multiple levels: employees, organizations, and different industrial contexts and labor markets. To study the impact of organizational investments on employees, we also needed a multilevel survey design linking employees to organizations. Multilevel organizational surveys are, however, very rare in current organizational research practice.

We broke new ground with the collection of data in the European Sustainable Workforce Survey (ESWS), a multilevel organizational survey among employees, team managers and human resource (HR) managers in organizations in nine European countries. This chapter focusses on the description of this dataset. Our primary goal is to provide the reader with a detailed guide to the design of the survey, fieldwork, and the characteristics of the collected dataset. The chapter primarily serves as a companion to subsequent chapters that use this dataset, but it also aims to inform and guide future organizational data-collection projects.

The first part of this chapter reviews the main publicly available surveys in organizational research that study topics related to the sustainable workforce and the characteristics of the organizations' datasets used by researchers in publications in leading sociology and management studies journals. The second part outlines the design and methodology of the ESWS. Here, we aim to provide a detailed justification of our decisions regarding various aspects of

the survey – e.g., the sampling design of both organizations and employees, survey methods, instruments, and fieldwork. The third part provides a basic description of the collected dataset, including the response rates at various levels, comparing it with known response rates from earlier studies. Finally, a short conclusion discusses the challenges involved in collecting multilevel organizational data, providing practical suggestions for future research.

Taking stock of data used to study the sustainable workforce

Prior to the research fieldwork and designing our survey, we carried out an overview of the prolific publicly available datasets used to study questions related to the sustainable workforce. Table 3.1 provides an overview of publicly available comparative datasets. The main criterion of inclusion was that the dataset should contain information on organizations and/or on employees. Notably, we focus in this section on survey data rather than other data sources on organizations such as business lists (e.g., Fortune500) and reports by the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEO-1 reports).¹

The search revealed the absence of data that include information on employee-, organization-, and country-level. In most comparative studies with data on organizations, no employee-level information is available and large-scale cross-national datasets on employees (such as the European Working Conditions Survey) typically lack information about organizational characteristics and investments. A well-known comparative study that focusses on organizations (but not their employees) is the Cranet Survey (e.g., Den Dulk, Peters, Poutsma, & Ligthart, 2010; Nikandrou, Aspospori, Panayotopoulou, Stavrou, & Papalexancris, 2008) which is a repeated international comparative survey of organizational practices. Another popular dataset is the European Community Innovation Survey, a large-scale comparative study with ample information on investments in innovation and organizational performance (e.g., Hashi & Stojcic, 2014). Lastly, the European Company Survey and the European Survey on Working Time and Work–Life Balance focus on the availability of various policies and on organizational outcomes (Anxo, Fagan, Letablier, Perraudin & Smith, 2007). The common feature of all four datasets is that they only provide organization-level information. Employee-level data are lacking and, from these sources, the consequences of investments at the employee level are little understood.

The Dutch Time Competition Survey and the UK Workplace Employment Relations Study focus on employee outcomes, but these studies only include one country, and are therefore not suitable for cross-country comparisons. To our knowledge, the 2007 Quality of Life in Changing Europe Survey is the only cross-national dataset on organizations and employees. A limitation of this study is that only four organizations (each from a different sector) are surveyed per country. As a result, the possibility of making inter-organizational comparisons between sectors is limited.

We performed a systematic review to provide a benchmark of the design and quality of data represented in high-ranking sociology and management journals.

We confined our search to research articles published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, *British Journal of Sociology*, *Academy of Management Journal*, and the *Journal of Management* in the period 2010–2014.² We did not solely rely on the existing datasets described above as we were interested in authors' own data collections as well.

The results give a clear indication of the scarcity of cross-country comparative multilevel design organizational surveys. We did not come across any articles based on internationally comparative data among employees nested within organizations. In management journals all kinds of self-collected data are reported, and most of them rely on convenience or snowball samples that focus on one sector or even one firm (but seldom on employees). The work of McClean, Burris, and Detert (2013) published in the *Academy of Management Journal* is a rare example of a paper using a multilevel organizational survey. They collected survey data among employees and managers in 136 restaurants in 4 divisions of a corporation-owned chain located in 21 states throughout the US. Nationally representative samples of enterprises, and especially employees nested within these organizations, are rare in the management journals and studies seldom compare economic sectors nationally or internationally. An exception is the Cranet Survey (see Table 3.1) which contains random samples stratified on economic sectors in 32 countries. This dataset contains no employee-level information, however, and the sampling procedure differs by country, making international comparisons problematic.

In the top sociology journals, only a few empirical papers study organizations, and these focus mainly on the level of the organization and/or HR manager. Employee issues are mainly studied from a labor market perspective, and organizational work mostly uses qualitative methods. Compared to the management literature, studies in sociology journals more often employ existing surveys (e.g., the National Organizations Survey) or other organizational data sources (such as EEO-1 reports and Fortune500), rather than collecting their own data. A rare example of a self-collected survey is in Kelly's (2003) paper; here, the managers of 389 US work establishments in the manufacturing, service, public, and non-profit sectors were interviewed, sampled from the Dun & Bradstreet Market Identifier database.

As this short review reveals, the cross-country multilevel design of the ESWS is unique among organizational surveys. It includes multiple organizations, sectors, and countries, and surveys employees, teams, and the organization.

The design of the Sustainable Workforce Survey

Research population

In designing the ESWS, our aim was twofold: (1) to maximize variation across organizations in HR policies and (2) to minimize individual-level variation within organizations. Taking all sectors of the economy and all employees as the research population was not feasible given the multilevel design; we made a

Table 3.1 Overview of (comparative) datasets and surveys on organizations and employees

<i>Dataset/survey</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>Countries</i>
<i>Organizations in countries:</i>		
The Cranet Survey	1989–1993; 1995/1996; 2004/2005; 2008/2009	EU, Australia, Asia, US/Canada
Business Environment and Enterprise Performance Survey	1999/2000; 2002; 2004/2005; 2008/2009; 2011/2013	East EU, Russia, Asia
Community Innovation Survey	2000/2001; 2004; 2006; 2008; 2010	EU
European Company Survey	2004/2005; 2009; 2013	EU
European Survey on Working Time and Work-life Balance	2004/2005	EU
National Study of Employers ^a	2005; 2008; 2012	US
National Organizations Survey	2002	US
Multi-city Telephone Employer Survey	1995	US ^b
Work-Life Balance Employer Survey	2000; 2002; 2007	UK
Human Resource Practices in Multinational Companies in Ireland	2007	Ireland
Netherlands Employer Work Survey	2008; 2010; 2012	Netherlands
<i>Employees in countries:</i>		
European Working Conditions Survey	1990/1991; 1995/1996; 2000; 2005; 2010	EU
European Union Labour Force Survey	1983–2012	EU
National Study of the Changing Workforce	1992; 1997; 2002; 2008	US
<i>Employees in organizations:</i>		
Time Competition Survey	2002	Netherlands
Workplace Employment Relations Study	1980; 1984; 1990; 1998; 2004; 2011	UK
Greek Dataset of Flexible Work	2010/2011	Greece
<i>Employees in organizations in countries:</i>		
Quality of Life in Changing Europe	2007	UK, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, Portugal, Hungary, Bulgaria

Notes

a Follow-up of Business Work-Life Study finished in 1998.

b Four US cities: Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles.

number of theoretically guided restrictions regarding the organizational level, size, and sector, as well as the employees to survey within organizational units. The nine countries participating in the survey, the UK, Finland, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Hungary, and Bulgaria, were decided at the initial phase of fund application.

Specifying organizational level, size, and sector

Previous organizational surveys either used firms (e.g., the Community Innovation Survey and the Time Competition Survey) or establishments – that is, the local unit in the case of multi-site firms (e.g., the European Company Survey and the Cranet Survey) – as organizational units. We chose the establishment level as the primary sampling unit as a number of determinants and outcomes that we were interested in, such as managerial support and work cohesion, manifest within physical workplaces. In addition, selecting firms would have limited the number of organizations in the dataset.

Most existing surveys focus on larger organizations. The Cranet Survey, for example, focuses on establishments with at least 200 employees, while the European Company Survey and Workplace Employment Relations Study are restricted to establishments with at least 10 and 5 employees, respectively. All studies exclude single person organizations (i.e., self-employed persons). As the Sustainable Workforce project explicitly focuses on HR policies, such as work flexibility and training, we excluded very small organizations as they do not usually have formal HR functions or policies. We chose to limit our study to establishments that have more than 40 employees in cases where the organization only had one establishment, or more than 20 employees where the organization had more than one establishment.

Finally, organizational surveys vary in the scope of economic sectors covered. Large-scale organizational studies that only survey a representative of the organization usually cover all economic sectors, such as the European Company Survey. Multilevel organizational surveys typically select the few sectors that are theoretically most relevant or informative for the topic under study, such as knowledge intensive organizations in the Time Competition Survey. We also aimed to include a limited number of theoretically relevant economic sectors in the ESWS. These sectors are: manufacturing, health care, telecommunications, financial services, transport, and higher education. We selected them to reflect variation in the causes and types of investments in a sustainable workforce at the organizational level.

- An increasing number of women participate in the labor force, changing the ways in which individuals and families arrange their work and family life. As female employees in particular experience pressures due to dual commitments, we selected both high (health care and higher education) and low (manufacturing and transport) female employment sectors for the ESWS.

- The aging of the European workforce poses several challenges to employees and to employers. Organizations with older employees face the challenge of replacement demand and have to develop strategies to maintain older employees' productivity. To reflect these challenges, sectors that have relatively young (telecommunications) and old (higher education) workforces are both included in the ESWS.
- Technological development (e.g., improving production technologies and IT possibilities) is triggering a higher demand for highly-educated workers in Europe. The ESWS incorporates sectors that represent the higher-skilled (higher education and financial services) and lower-skilled (transport and manufacturing) segments of the workforce.
- Globalization and innovation have fundamental impacts on the structure of the European economy. Due to the increasing competitiveness of developing countries manufacturing is declining, whereas innovation-intensive sectors of the economy, such as telecommunications, are growing. We aimed to include both shrinking and growing sectors as their capabilities and priorities to invest in employees may differ substantially.
- Organizations in Europe demand greater flexibility in contracting, hiring, and firing, which has profound implications for investments in the workforce. For the ESWS, we selected sectors that employ a high percentage of temporary workers (manufacturing, transport, and also higher education, which employs high-skilled workers) and those that usually offer long-term employment contracts (financial services).

Table 3.2 shows the sectors in the ESWS and their relevant demographic and economic characteristics, averaged for the countries under study.

Specifying respondents within organizations

In order to minimize individual variation within establishments, we sampled a limited number of employee groups. In larger establishments we usually selected departments, while in establishments without a departmental structure we chose to include teams. A further reason for focussing on groups of employees is that it allowed us to survey managers of teams/departments and match them with employees. Managers are an important employee group to study in their own right, and their reports provide an additional source of information about organizational and workplace characteristics, such as investments and outcomes. A similar strategy, using occupational groups, has also been successfully employed in the Dutch Time Competition Survey (Van der Lippe & Glebbeek, 2003).

The groups selected included at least two departments/teams that represent the organization's core activity: for example, if the organization is a hospital, we interviewed nurses; or if the organization is a university, we included a research unit. Furthermore, we chose at least one department or team whose tasks do not particularly refer to the core activity of the organization, such as a finance, communication, or maintenance departments. The rationale was that support teams

Table 3.2 Characteristics of the economic sectors in the ESWS

Sector characteristics ^a	Nace Rev. 2: ^b					
	Higher education	Transport	Telecommunications	Financial services	Health care	Manufacturing
% female employees (2013)	70.66	22.20	31.41	48.15	78.91	28.04
% workers older than 50 (2013)	34.37	33.15	20.18	26.41	33.04	29.90
% workers high educated (2010)	66.37	23.75	64.34	45.55	50.41	28.27
% change N of enterprises (2008–2011)	10.15	-6.10	5.06	5.30	9.68	-7.35
% temporary employment (2010)	14.81	6.28	5.91	2.45	11.03	6.43
% collective pay agreement (2010)	82.40	64.67	35.62	63.40	65.94	57.89

Nace Rev. 1.1:

	Education		
	Transport and communications	Financial services	Health and social work
% public sector ^c (2009 % public)	71.73	13.50	48.86

Sources: ^aEuropean Commission Eurostat Labor Force Surveys series, detailed annual survey results – https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/metadata/en/lfsa_esms.htm.

Notes

Figures are averaged for the countries under study: UK, Finland, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Hungary, and Bulgaria.

a Information based on data from all nine countries, except: “% workers high educated,” where Germany is not included; “% temporary employment” where Sweden is not included; and “% collective pay agreement” where the Netherlands and Sweden are missing; Finland is partially incomplete (Transport, Financial services, and Higher education).

b NACE 2.2 codes: Manufacturing (section C), Health Care (Q8610, Q8710, Q8720, Q8730, Q8790), Higher education (P8541 and P8542), Transport (section H, excluding H5310), Financial services (section K and M6920), Telecommunications (J6110–J6312).

c Source: Eurofund European Company Surveys, 2009 – HYPERLINK “<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/european-company-surveys/european-company-survey-2009/ecs-2009-methodology>,” www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/european-company-surveys/european-company-survey-2009/ecs-2009-methodology.

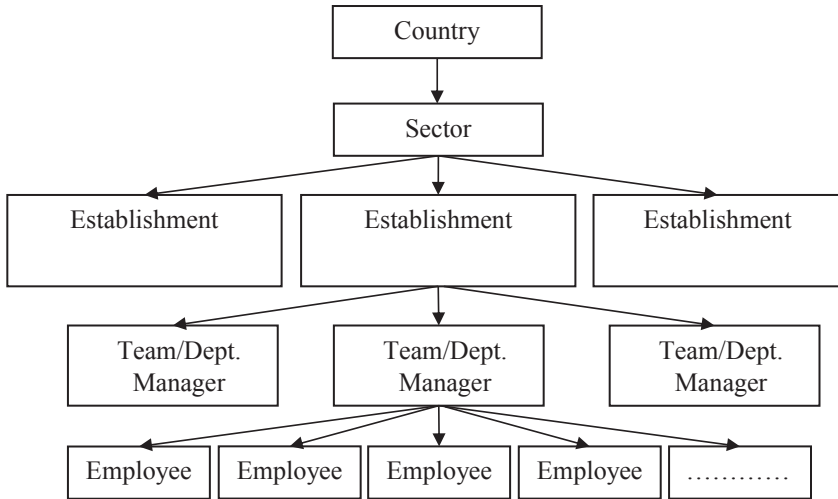


Figure 3.1 ESWS – multilevel design of the data collection.

perform similar activities regardless of sector, and this provides an opportunity to compare organizations while limiting the variability in job characteristics.

The resulting survey design has four layers: employees nested within teams; establishments; sectors; and countries. Figure 3.1 represents the multilevel design of the ESWS.

Sampling establishments and workers

Large-scale organizational surveys use stratified random sampling to select organizations or establishments (e.g., European Company Survey, Community Innovation Survey, and the National Survey of Employers). Based on sampling frames (e.g., commercial or public company/business lists) they sample organizational units stratified by sector and size, resulting in representative samples of organizations. The National Organizations Study and National Study of Employers use a probability proportionate-to-size sample such that larger organizations have a higher likelihood of being selected. These studies do not, however, include the level of employees. Most organizational studies involving employee surveys include a much smaller number of organizations, and rely on a non-probability sampling procedures to select them, such as snowball sampling or convenience sampling (e.g., Chand, 2010; Chang & Smithikrai, 2010; Giannikis & Mihail, 2011). In cases where a random sampling procedure is employed at the enterprise level using a sampling frame, studies are usually limited to one or two economic sectors (e.g., Funk, 2013; Navarro, Dewhurst & Eldridge, 2010).

The unique depth of the ESWS limited the possibilities of drawing a random representative sample from the whole population of organizations. Instead, we used stratified purposeful sampling, which combines qualitative and quantitative sampling (Sandelowski, 2000). We opted to select two or three suggestive cases from multiple sectors and size categories within each country – selecting organizations in highly urbanized areas – building on the plausible assumption that job characteristics, human resource investments, and organizational challenges will meaningfully vary across sector and organization size. We took three size groups: 20–99 employees, 100–249 employees, and 250+ employees. At the start of the project, projections were made to include two establishments per sector-size stratum in our sample.

First, we used quantitative sampling to randomly select cases within sector and size categories from lists of business organizations. We used national business lists as our sampling frame which came the closest to meeting the methodological requirements from organizational sampling frames such as timeliness, representativeness, availability for research (e.g., digitally accessible), and the costs of gaining access (Kalleberg, Marsden, Aldrich, & Cassell, 1990). Important selection criteria were that lists should contain information on sector and size, and that they should list establishments. This latter criterion was the most problematic, as not all countries had lists of establishments. In these cases, we selected organizations at the first step, and gathered information on establishments via online sources or by contacting the organization to select the establishments for the sample. We initially restricted the sample to establishments that are geographically close to the economic center of the country, but relaxed this requirement in most countries due to the difficulty of finding eligible and willing participations in this region. Table 3.3 lists the organizational sampling frames used to sample organizations.

Second, we complemented the random selection with the convenience sampling of suggestive cases from alternative sources, mainly web searches and referrals. We used this method when the random sample from the business lists did not yield enough participants. This occurred either because the ‘population’ of establishments that satisfied the criteria in the business lists was too small or because none of the approached establishments were receptive to our call. Convenience sampling is often relied upon by studies in management journals, and its main advantage is that it improves organizational cooperation and establishing contact with the right gatekeeper.

The main drawback of convenience sampling is that it potentially leads to sample selectivity, decreasing the out-of-sample generalizability of findings. In addition, the calculation of a response rate requires that the sample is random, which is not truly the case with these methods. However, as the main goal of the ESWS was explanatory, to study the causes and consequences of investments in employees, representativeness was not a major concern. In addition, the low participation rate of organizations makes fully random samples unfeasible.

Among existing studies, only a few sample of employees within organizations. Large-scale datasets, such as the Workplace Employment Relations Study and

Table 3.3 Sampling frames used for selecting organizations in the ESWS

Country	Sample region	Sample source	Level
Netherlands	“Randstad”	LISA	Establishment
Hungary	Budapest and Pest-county	Hungarian Central Bureau of Statistics	Establishment
UK	The Greater London area	Experian Business Database; Blueberry Solutions	Establishment
Germany	Mostly Ruhr-area	Bisnode Deutschland GMBH	Organization
Finland	Tampere-Helsinki	Statistics Finland Register of Enterprises and Establishments and a Register of Public Corporations	Establishment
Sweden	West Sweden and Stockholm	Statistics Sweden’s Business Register	Establishment
Spain	Barcelona	Chamber of Commerce of Spain	Organization
Bulgaria	Sofia	Bulgarian National Statistical Institute	Organization
Portugal	Lisbon	Ignios	Organization

the Quality of Life in Changing Europe, randomly select employees from each firm. Similarly, the Time Competition Survey randomly selected employees within principle occupational groups within the organization in order to minimize individual-level variation. In the ESWS, we selected employee groups, in close consultation with the HR manager of each organization, to ensure that they adequately represented the core production and support functions of the establishment. Within these groups, we aimed to include all workers, although in a few cases the organization only supported the participation of a sample of workers.

Survey instruments

The ESWS consisted of three instruments: the organization questionnaire (OQ), the manager questionnaire (MQ), and the employee questionnaire (EQ).³ The three main topics covered by the questionnaires were: (1) measurement of the forms of investments by organizations (human capital, work–life arrangements, work flexibility, employability) and their utilization by employees; (2) measurement of the returns on the availability and use of organizational investments at the employee, team, and organizational level; and (3) general characteristics of employees, teams, and organizations. Tables A1.1–A1.3 in Appendix 1 provide a comprehensive list of the questionnaire modules.

In addition, the EQ and MQ included one survey vignette experiment, administered after the main questionnaire was completed. Participation in this

part of the questionnaire was optional. Three EQ vignette experiments, varying across countries, and one MQ vignette experiment, the same in all countries, was conducted. The topics of the vignette experiments in the EQs were: choice of part-time work (administered in the UK, the Netherlands, and Sweden); readiness to cooperate within teams (administered in Bulgaria, part of the German sample, and part of the Hungarian sample, and Portugal); and job preferences (administered in Finland, part of the Hungarian sample, part of the German sample, and Spain). The vignette experiment in the MQ concerned age-based discrimination and it was administered in all countries.

The source language of the questionnaires was English. The questionnaires were translated into the national languages of the various countries by native translators and compared with the original English questionnaire by proofreading carried by a different native speaker. The translation of the questionnaire was performed by professional translation bureaus.

We tested the surveys to assess their technical properties (i.e., routing, length) and content (apprehension of respondent, scale reliabilities) in a representative Dutch organization (i.e., large organization, presence of a HR manager, existence of various departments and departmental managers, and a diverse workforce) within our own network and made only minor adjustments to the design and content of the questionnaires.

Survey mode

With the spread of computer literacy, web-based surveys and surveys distributed by email have become an increasingly popular method in organizational research (Saunders, 2012). Meta-analyses of management and organizational behavior studies find that web-based research, on average, results in lower response rates than traditional mail-based surveys (Anseel, Lievens, Schollaert, & Choragwicka, 2010; Baruch & Holtom, 2008; Shih & Fan, 2008). Saunders (2012) argues that non-response to electronic surveys might diminish in time with increasing computer literacy. Analyzing a population of IT literate individuals, he found that web-based surveys resulted in a higher response rate than mail-based surveys. Anseel et al. (2010) argue, furthermore, that the effectiveness of web-based administration depends on the type of respondents that is surveyed: web-based surveys are more effective in samples of non-managerial employees than in samples of top executives and managers. They explain this finding by the fact that non-managerial employees receive fewer emails and have more time to complete the questionnaire during work hours than (top) managers.

Taking into account that we had sectors with both high and low IT penetration, high- and low-skilled workers, managerial and non-managerial respondents, as well as country differences in IT literacy, we took a flexible approach to choosing the survey mode for the ESWS. We let participating establishments choose between online and paper-and-pencil modes of administering the survey. We supported mixed mode within a single organization; for instance, managers

could receive online and non-managerial workers paper-and-pencil questionnaires. We did not switch modes between first contact and reminders in the case of online surveys to avoid annoyance and non-compliance through complicating the design and overstressing the organization's capacities.

When the organization provided names and/or email addresses we addressed the questionnaire to the respondent personally, as personal addressing produces the highest response rate (Baruch & Holtom, 2008). However, to remove concerns about anonymity, we also offered the option of distributing the questionnaire anonymously. In some cases, we only received the number of workers or managers within the team, and not their names and email addresses. For the online survey mode, we distributed unique log-in tokens in sealed envelopes with which respondents could log in and complete the survey.

Eliciting participation

Eliciting participation of organizations

Eliciting the participation of organizations is becoming a difficult task, as organizations often conduct their own surveys of employees, feel disinclined to grant research access, and see surveys as an extra burden on employees (Van der Lippe et al., 2009). The primary objective of survey fieldwork is therefore to elicit the participation of establishments in the survey.

We followed common organizational research practice of targeting the relevant gatekeepers instead of the top of the organizational hierarchy during initial contact (Buchanan, Boddy, & McCalman, 1988). We identified HR managers as the actors who are potentially most interested in this research. A team of native research assistants in each country performed a web search or made calls to the establishment to get the contact details of the HR manager. In Bulgaria, we contracted a survey organization to perform these tasks. In the UK and Portugal, research assistants proved to be unsuccessful in entering and contacting organizations, so we sought the help of a UK-based professional marketing company to generate leads for our research assistants. Once contact was established, a personalized invitation letter based on online and telephone information was sent to the HR manager of the establishment by post and/or email, followed-up by a phone call to schedule a research consultation. During the research consultation, which took place in person or by phone, we held a five-minute presentation to the HR manager to explain the research and elicit participation. Once organizations consented to participate, we discussed (during the research consultation) which departments or teams could participate, start dates, and survey mode.

To elicit participation, it is important to provide credentials and offer a tangible product in return for cooperation (Buchanan et al., 1988). Credentials are important because organizational decision makers might be reluctant to cooperate if the contact person is considered to be 'low in status' (e.g., a student) (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2006). A product offered in return for

cooperation could be a research report in a form that is useful for the recipients. To enhance the credibility of the survey, invitation material for the ESWS listed both Utrecht University and our research partner's university located in the given country, because organizations may not be familiar with research institutions and universities outside their own country. We offered a benchmark report as a product based on the survey results; this compares the establishment with establishments from the same sector and country with regard to workforce investments and key productivity outcomes. Organizations value information about what their competitors are doing and how they perform as this is hard to come by, and our experience was that this benchmark report generated much interest among managers.

The three most common concerns of organizations that deter participation are time, anonymity, and confidentiality (Buchanan et al., 1988). In our fieldwork, organizations mentioned seasonal high workload as the most important temporal constraint. We ensured organizations of our efforts to minimize the time investment in the survey, and they could decide on the timing of their participation within the fieldwork period, which particularly helped to overcome these concerns. We emphasized during the initial contact and the research consultation that we would take great care to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. We did not encounter any cases where concerns about anonymity or confidentiality were the reason for declining participation, although some organizations requested a contract prior to participating which specified our data safety procedures.

Eliciting participation of employees and managers

Incentives are key to ensuring high response rates in surveys. Rose, Sidle, and Griffith (2007) and Jobber and O'Reilly (1998) found that monetary incentives significantly increase response rate, regardless of race, age, sex, or company tenure. Monetary incentives have been shown to be especially effective if given as a gift unconditional upon opening or completing the questionnaire (Dillman, 2011). Organizational surveys of employees use monetary incentives to a lesser extent than public opinion surveys (Rose et al., 2007), but there is evidence that monetary incentives work similarly in organizational and consumer populations (Saunders et al., 2006). A cash incentive yields higher response rates than other forms of monetary incentives, such as vouchers or lotteries (Birnholtz, Horn, Finholt, & Bae, 2004), but transferring cash in web-based surveys is complicated and it has also been found to be less cost-effective than other forms of monetary incentive (Gajic, Cameron, & Hurley, 2012). Initially, we planned to give a cash incentive of 5 euro to all non-managerial employees invited to participate in the ESWS, but we encountered ethical objections to handing out cash incentives in several organizations as well as logistical problems. We therefore decided to offer the choice between a lottery among employees who completed the survey and a monetary gift to the organization (based on the number of employees who completed the survey) to spend on organizing activities for staff.

We chose the unconditional cash incentive only in Hungary and Bulgaria, because it was indicated that organizations in these countries highly value compensating workers for their efforts in completing surveys. Seven organizations opted not to give their employees an incentive at all.

In addition to monetary incentives, we implemented a number of response enhancing strategies that had proved to be effective in general survey research and advocated by Anseel et al. (2010) and Baruch and Holtom (2008) for use in organizational surveys. The following methods were used:

- We notified employees about the survey in advance through the HR manager.
- We sent a personalized cover letter and invitation email where we had access to names, and included the name of the organization in all surveys.
- We stressed in the cover letter that sustainable workforce studies benefit employees, to increase topic salience.
- We emphasized confidentiality in both the cover letter and at the start of the survey. In paper-and-pencil based surveys we attached a response envelope and shipped a sealed box in which employees could put their envelopes.
- We ensured respondents that the organization supported our research and used university logos in correspondence materials to raise the status and gain trustworthiness.
- We sent reminders, depending on the survey mode: in the case of personalized online surveys we sent four reminders directly to the respondent; in respect of other survey modes, we asked the HR manager or contact person at the organization to remind workers about the survey.

These strategies follow Dillman's (2011) Total Design Method rooted in social exchange and trust mechanisms. Dillman (2011) argues that questionnaire recipients are most likely to respond if they expect that the perceived benefits of participating in the research outweigh the perceived costs (including risks) of filling out the questionnaire.

Survey administration

The administration of the online survey and the printing and distribution of paper-and-pencil surveys took place at Utrecht University in the Netherlands between March and December 2015. Local research assistants consulted with the contact person at the organization about the timing of the survey and, in the case of the paper-based survey, about dispatching and collecting the surveys. Figure 3.2 illustrates the survey procedure for different modes of contacting and administering the questionnaire, specifying the details of the research material used, stages of the survey, and reminder intervals.

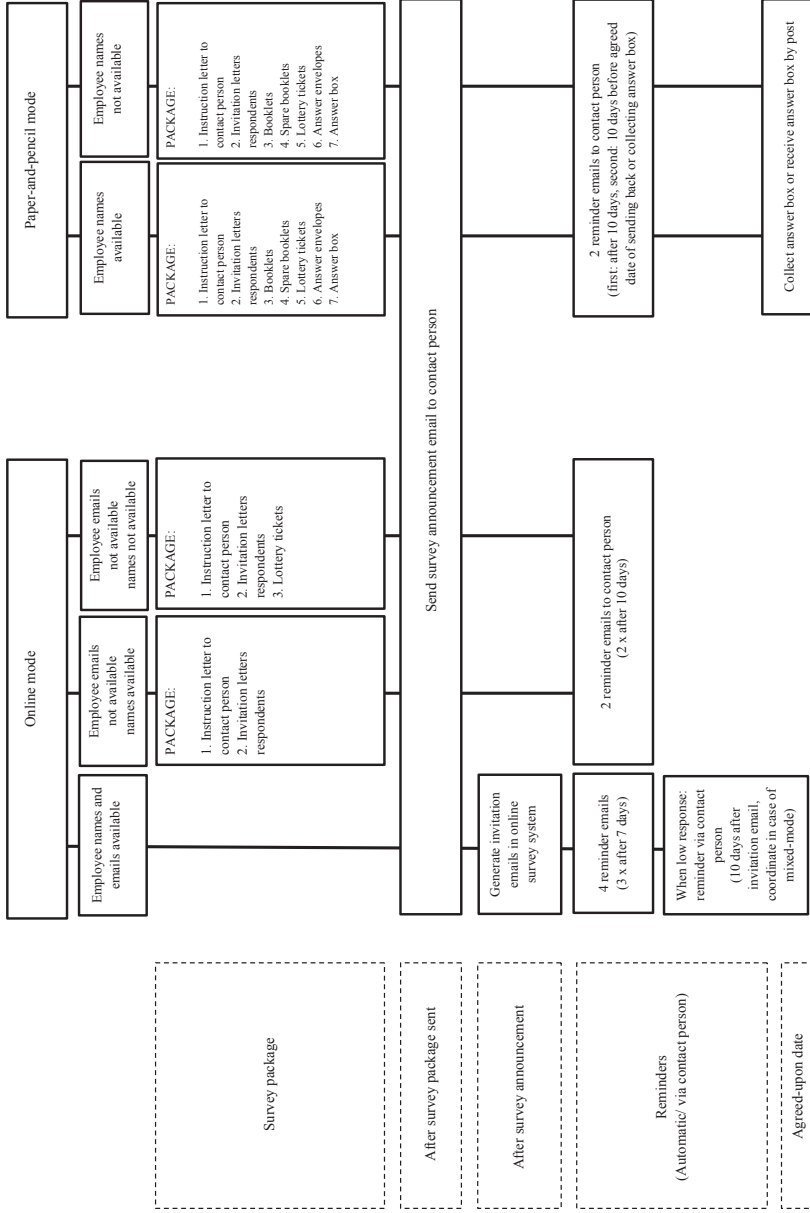


Figure 3.2 ESWS – survey structure and procedures.

Main characteristics of the European Sustainable Workforce Survey

Number of establishments, teams, and workers

The ESWS includes a total of 259 work establishments, 869 teams/departments, and 11,011 employees. The number of employees within the establishment surveyed varies between 2 and 326, with an average of 42.5 employees. The number of teams/departments varies between 1 and 12, with an average of 3.3 teams. Originally, we opted for the selection of three teams/departments, and a maximum of six, but some establishments requested that we include more than six working units. Table 3.4 provides a breakdown of the number of establishments per country and per sector.

At the start of the project, we planned to include 2 establishments per sector-size stratum in our sample to acquire data from 6 establishments per sector-country, 36 establishments per country, and 324 establishments in total. It soon became apparent that not all sectors were receptive to our request for participation.

The manufacturing sector was the least problematic, as many of the issues covered in our study directly apply to manufacturing companies and their employees. Here, we successfully obtained an even distribution of establishment sizes and countries. The Netherlands is over-represented in this sector, where a single manufacturer holding requested that all its subsidiaries should participate. Similarly, managers in health care recognized the value of our survey. Negative decisions about participation were mostly due to the establishment already participating in other studies. The credibility of our study among higher education establishments was high, due to the fact that we had partner universities in all participating countries. Higher education establishments were generally willing to participate in our study. Organizations in the transport sector were also highly receptive and interested in participating, despite our initial concerns that transport organizations would be hard to motivate with a survey about investments and employability due to the growing employment flexibility in this sector.

In many countries it was challenging to elicit the participation of organizations in financial services. Managers expressed concerns about the consequences of bringing investments that their organization does not offer to their employees' attention. Finding organizations in telecommunications proved to be difficult as well, because there was only a small number of organizations in the population – especially large ones – to select from.

While the survey was well received in most countries, we encountered differences across countries in establishments' reactions. HR managers in the UK expressed the most concern about time investment and the sensitivity of the data collected (e.g., wages). In general, they were very upfront about wanting or not wanting to participate. In Germany, HR managers were very eager to discuss the subject of sustainable employment with our research team. However, the time between first contact and participation decision was the longest in

Table 3.4 Number of establishments by country, sector, and size in the ESWS

	Manufacturing			Health care			Higher education			Transportation			Financial services			Telecommunications					
	20/40-	100-	>249	20/40-	100-	>249	20/40-	100-	>249	20/40-	100-	>249	20/40-	100-	>249	20/40-	100-	>249			
UK	1	1	2	99	249	4	99	249	1	0	1	249	99	249	99	249	2	0	1	19	
DE	1	1	1	3	2	1	1	4	2	1	1	2	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	24
FI	1	1	1	3	2	1	2	3	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	2	2	0	1	1	22
SE	0	2	5	3	2	0	2	0	3	3	3	1	1	1	2	2	1	3	2	1	35
NL	8	5	4	2	3	2	2	2	2	4	2	1	3	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	48
PT	2	1	1	3	2	1	0	1	3	1	1	2	1	2	3	1	0	0	3	1	28
ES	1	3	1	1	1	3	1	2	1	1	1	2	2	0	2	1	0	1	0	1	23
HU	2	1	3	2	2	2	2	1	1	0	1	2	0	1	0	2	0	1	0	1	23
BG	4	2	2	2	2	1	3	2	2	3	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	37
	20	17	20	19	15	15	12	15	18	15	10	14	14	9	14	13	7	12			
	57			49			45			39		37		32		259					

Note

UK – United Kingdom; DE – Germany; FI – Finland; SE – Sweden; NL – Netherlands; PT – Portugal; ES – Spain; HU – Hungary; BG – Bulgaria.

Germany, as several organizational stakeholders (including higher management and employee councils) needed to approve the survey. Finding our way through different levels of management and other stakeholders was a time-consuming effort, and in some cases organizations dropped out because we could not reach a key stakeholder. The fieldwork in Sweden and Finland did not pose many problems, as most HR managers were very receptive to our survey and eager to participate. In the Netherlands, likely owing to recent public attention given to employability and work–life issues, most organizations were highly interested in the ESWS project. Spanish HR managers were also enthusiastic about the survey, but we still experienced a high drop-out rate. We found that, subsequently, it was difficult to reach the HR manager, perhaps owing to the high workload that some spoke about during the research consultation. The data collection in Hungary was well received in most sectors, but many organizations declined to participate in the telecommunications and financial services sectors, as managers stated that sustainable employment is not a salient problem.

Despite these challenges during fieldwork, the resulting ESWS presents a sample with a balanced number of organizations in all countries, sectors, and sizes. Importantly, the sample size makes it possible to perform quantitative analyses per country and per sector.

Participation and response

Participation rates are a major concern in employee surveys, especially as the participation of employees is conditional upon the participation of the organization. Low participation at both organization and employee level can produce misleading conclusions which are not generalizable to the population of interest. At the organizational level we cannot provide an estimate of the response (or participation rate) because purposeful sampling is partially non-random. We established contact with decision makers (or their gatekeepers) in approximately 6,000 organizations, were invited for a research consultation in 600 organizations, and in 320 organizations the decision maker decided to participate. For various reasons, such as a board of directors disallowing participation or an unexpected strike, 61 organizations dropped out before data collection started.

Like general population surveys, non-response in organizational studies can be passive (e.g., because of staff turnover, sickness, maternity leave, incorrect mailing address, etc.) or active (i.e., a deliberate decision not to participate). Meta-analyses show that response rates in studies that focus on the organization (or top managers) as the primary unit of analysis are typically lower than in those that focus on individual employees. Cychota and Harrison's (2006) estimate of the response rate among executive populations is 32 percent, while Baruch and Holtom (2008) provide a similar estimate (35 percent) among organizational representatives. Studies that survey the employee have a considerably higher response rate at 52 percent (Baruch & Holtom, 2008). Anseel et al. (2010) conclude in their meta-analytic review that the higher

respondents are situated in the organizational hierarchy, the lower their response rates.

Table 3.5 presents the response rates for our main sample of employees and managers, for both online and paper-and-pencil survey modes, and for each country. It is informative to compare the response rate of the ESWS to the few studies with a similar framework, such as the 2011 Work Employment Relations Study (WERS) and the 2002 Dutch Time Competition Survey (TCS). With a 49.5 percent response rate among non-managerial employees, the WERS produced a figure comparable to the one reported by Baruch and Holtom (2008). The response rate among employees in the TCS was much lower at 29 percent (Van der Lippe & Glebbeek, 2003). However, the TCS also required employees' partners to participate in the study, which may explain the lower participation rates. The response rate in the ESWS was 61 percent among non-managerial employees – around 10 percentage points higher than the figure reported by Baruch and Holtom (2008). The response rate was 81 percent among department or team managers, which is exceptionally high compared to the experience of earlier studies. In the case of the optional vignette survey following the main survey, the participation rate was 61 percent among employees. Managers had a comparable response rate for the vignette survey.

There are two of factors that may have contributed to the high response rate in our survey. First, we had a low number of organizations compared with studies such as the WERS, and this made it possible to focus our efforts on eliciting the participation of employees and managers. We had intensive personal contact with all participating organizations, taking a flexible approach to survey mode, incentives, and administering the survey. Second, we surveyed managerial employees who are in lower-level, non-executive positions and may have had more time to participate than top managers.

Table 3.5 Response rates in the ESWS

	<i>Employee questionnaire</i>			<i>Manager questionnaire</i>		
	<i>All</i>	<i>Online</i>	<i>Paper</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>Online</i>	<i>Paper</i>
All countries	61	59	68	81	79	92
UK	57	58	47	79	83	60
DE	45	46	43	85	83	95
FI	65	65	73	71	74	–
SE	65	64	78	84	83	100
NL	54	56	34	75	76	86
ES	51	51	57	74	77	43
PT	71	77	62	86	84	100
HU	78	71	84	87	83	100
BG	94	93	95	96	88	100

Notes

Figures are percentages.

UK – United Kingdom; DE – Germany; FI – Finland; SE – Sweden; NL – Netherlands; ES – Spain; PT – Portugal; HU – Hungary; BG – Bulgaria.

Conclusions

The ESWS is unique among organizational surveys. It has a multilevel design, including a large-scale sample of employees and managers within teams and organizations, and it is also cross-country comparative. The ESWS fills an important gap within organizational research and we hope that it generates new knowledge and insights that would not be possible without such data.

We encountered numerous country–organization specific challenges during the fieldwork. Getting in contact with establishments and eliciting participation remains a major difficulty in organizational research. Based on our positive experience with professional lead-generation services in the UK and Portugal, we would certainly advise practitioners to consider this as an option. Accommodating organizational requests regarding timing, survey mode, and incentives proved to be highly successful: it contributed to organizations' participation, and generated high response rates and satisfaction with our survey team among participating establishments.

Our advice to future projects is to take a structured, but flexible, approach to survey design. Survey methodologists would undoubtedly concur that differentiating the design across organizations risks comparability, and we can certainly see the validity of these concerns. However, our experience is that without such flexibility it would be an arduous task to elicit acceptable rates of participation. The differences across national and organizational cultures, as well as between the needs and schedules of different employee groups, are too large to make a one-size-fits-all strategy successful. We very much encourage methodological research on flexible design in complex surveys, and hope that our study will be an interesting case for developments in this area.

Notes

- 1 The US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission collects data on the gender and racial composition of the workforce from organizations with more than 100 employees. Employers that meet the reporting thresholds have a legal obligation to provide this data. For more information, see www.eeoc.gov/.
- 2 It appeared that not many articles in the top sociology journals focus on the level of the firm; therefore, we expanded our search for these journals to the period 2000–2014.
- 3 For the complete questionnaires we refer to the following: Van der Lippe et al., 2015a, 2015b, 2015c.