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Article

The EPOC Survey

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European Data Watch

This section will offer descriptions as well as discussions of data sources that may be of interest to social scientists engaged in empirical research or teaching courses that include empirical investigations performed by students. The purpose is to describe the information in the data source, to give examples of questions tackled with the data and to tell how to access the data for research and teaching. We will start with data from German speaking countries that allow international comparative research. While most of the data will be at the micro level (individuals, households, or firms), more aggregate data and meta data (for regions, industries, or nations) will be included, too. Suggestions for data sources to be described in future columns (or comments on past columns) should be send to: Joachim Wagner, University of Lueneburg, Institute of Economics, Campus 4.210, 21332 Lueneburg, Germany, or e-mailed to wagner@uni-lueneburg.de.

The EPOC Survey

By Ulrich Pekruhl

Introduction

In 1992 the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Dublin) launched a major project on an investigation into the nature and extent of “Direct Employee Participation in Organisational Change” (EPOC).

Based on studies on the conceptualisation of direct participation (Geary / Sisson 1994), the position of the social partners towards direct participation (Regalia 1996), and a literature report on recent research on the topic (Fröhlich / Pekruhl 1996), a survey was prepared that was carried out in the second half of 1996.

When the project started, the subject “work organisation” was gaining increasing importance in the countries of the European Union. Concepts such Lean Production or Total Quality Management came to prominence, Group Work and Employee Empowerment were the catchwords to characterise the

newly arising forms of work organisation. *Direct employee participation was at the core of all these models.* In a broad consensus of all parties these forms of work organisation were acknowledged as an important prerequisite for successful competition in the global market. Moreover, Quality of Working Life issues, which had been debated particularly in Scandinavia and Germany the decades before, now seemed to become an integrated part of these new economic concepts.

However, while everybody was writing and talking about the new models for the organisation of work, very little was known about the actual diffusion of these concepts: Were they just ideas or had they been widely adopted by European companies? Which are the economic effects of these concepts? Which is the organisational frame they are embedded in? These were the gaps, the EPOC survey was meant to close.

After six years, the EPOC data might be somewhat outdated, since the development of new forms of work organisation and their adoption by European firms did not stop. Didn't it? Nobody knows exactly, because the EPOC data still are the only comprehensive source of information on this topic, although some national studies have been carried out since 1996 (cf. Wengel et al. 2002). But even if the absolute numbers for the distribution of direct participation might have changed, it is still interesting to explore relations and dependencies between all the variables and some exciting information might even now be covered in the dataset.

1. About the survey¹

The EPOC survey was planned to be representative of workplaces in as many countries as the budget would reasonably allow taking into account a range of different populations and geographical positions. The ten countries finally chosen were: Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the UK. The choice of the workplace as the level and the general manager as the immediate target is explained by the overall aim of the survey – which was to gather as much data as possible about what was happening in practice. A survey directed at higher levels in the organisation was unlikely to have produced such information and there was some concern that small workplaces in particular might not have a personnel manager. In any event, the general manager was invited to complete the questionnaire him/herself or to pass it on to the manager most capable of doing so.

The gross sample of workplaces differed for the ten countries according to population size, the number of employees in industry and services, and the

¹ Most information about the methodology and content of the survey is drawn from the EPOC main report (EPOC Research Group 1997)

number of workplaces with 20 or more employees (for the smaller and medium-sized countries) and 50 or more employees (for the larger ones). For the larger countries (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the UK) the gross sample was 5,000 workplaces; for the medium countries (Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden) 2,500 and for the smaller countries (Ireland and Portugal) 1,000.

The mailing was carried out in two full waves. The first questionnaires were mailed in the beginning of June 1996, an additional mailing was carried out in October 1996. By 15 November 1996, 5,786 questionnaires had been returned (total response rate 17.8 %) and it was on the basis of these that the data analysis took place.

In data analysis, the remaining sample distortions regarding sector and size of the workplace were weighted for each sector / size cell to reflect the original research universe. The sample distortions between countries were corrected by a weighting factor that accounted for the number of employees represented in the data set for each country and the overall size of the workforce in that country.

2. Information provided by the EPOC data

The original EPOC questionnaire is reproduced in full in the first report on the survey analysis (*EPOC Research Group 1997*).

According to the conceptual framework of the EPOC project (Geary / Sisson 1994) the focus of the survey was on the two main forms of direct participation:

- *consultative participation* – management encourages employees to make their views known on work-related matters, but retains the right to take action or not;
- *delegative participation* – management gives employees increased discretion and responsibility to organise and do their jobs without reference back.

Obviously, this concept of direct participation is clearly *distinguished* from other forms of employee participation, such as financial participation (share ownership, profit sharing etc.) and indirect or representative participation, where workers are involved through their elected representatives (e.g. works councils).

Both consultation and delegative participation can involve individual employees or groups of employees. The two forms of consultative participation can be further subdivided. Individual consultation can be ‘face-to-face’ or at ‘arms length’; group consultation can involve temporary or permanent groups. This makes a total of six different forms of direct participation. The questionnaire was structured around these six forms:

- *individual consultation*
 - (1) *face-to-face*: arrangements involving discussions between the individual employee and his/her immediate manager (e.g. regular performance reviews);
 - (2) *arms-length*: arrangements which allow individual employees to express their views through intermediate measures (e.g. attitude surveys).
- *group consultation*
 - (3) *temporary groups*: groups of employees who come together for a specific purpose and for a limited period of time (e.g. project groups);
 - (4) *permanent groups*: groups of employees that discuss various work related topics on an ongoing basis (e.g. quality circles).
 - (5) *individual delegation*: individual employees are granted extended rights and responsibilities to carry out their work without constant reference back to managers (various forms of 'job enrichment').
 - (6) *group delegation*: rights and responsibilities are granted to groups of employees to carry out their common tasks without constant reference back to managers (all different forms of group work).

This approach to conceptualise direct participation had a major impact on the questionnaire: Rather than asking for labels, such as 'group work', 'quality circles' etc. the "real structures" had been investigated without using any labels. The idea behind was that the information about labelled concepts could be easily misleading, since there is a broad variety of meanings behind these labels, e.g. two managers both talking about 'group work' might mean totally different concepts of work organisation. The use of labels instead of detailed descriptions of actual structures is one of the significant shortcomings of most of the other studies on this topic (Fröhlich/Pekruhl 1996). Particularly if it comes to comparisons between different surveys, problems arise: Can those 90 % of all Japanese companies applying 'group work' be compared with the 4 % of "team based companies" that had been identified in Europe? However, in the analyses of the EPOC data, labels have been used again, but now as a construct, derived from the managers' descriptions of concrete patterns of work organisation.

The EPOC survey targeted the *largest occupational group* (the 'largest number of non-managerial employees at this workplace' in the precise words of the questionnaire). This was done for two reasons: to reduce the complexity of answers required of respondents; and to ensure that answers were as characteristic of many employees as possible.

In order to explore the context of direct participation a number of other topics had been dealt with in the EPOC survey:

- scope and intensity of direct participation (DP),
- other management initiatives not directly related to DP (e.g. working time reduction, flexibilisation, new technologies, product innovation),
- compensation systems,
- qualification and training for DP,
- motives for the introduction of DP,
- estimated economic effects of DP,
- regulation of DP,
- the process of introduction of DP,
- role of representative participation,
- and, of course, basic information about the workplace and the structure of the workforce.

Taking together these “additional” issues they might be interesting on their own, particularly in the perspective of European comparisons and thus worthwhile to become further explored.

3. Major publications

Members of the EPOC Research Team and affiliated scientists published a series of studies based on the EPOC data, numerous articles have been printed as well. The major publications in brief:

- The very first and most comprehensive study was carried out by the *EPOC Research Team (1997)*. This publication gives a broad overview of the results of the survey tackling all important issues and providing information about the most interesting correlations between the variables. The main message of this report: There is a wide gap between the popularity of new forms of work organisation and their actual diffusion among companies throughout Europe (with considerable differences between the single countries).
- *Hegewisch et al. (1998)* investigated in depth the diffusion and use of direct participation in the social public services (education, public administration, health and social welfare). This study was among the first to state that common wisdom is wrong: while the public debate is very much centred around organisational change in the private sector and the public sector is looked at as more or less “old-fashioned”, empirical evidence shows that public services are more advanced than private companies with regard to modern forms of participative work organisation.

- *Schnabel/Webster (1999)* looked at the gender perspective of direct participation. Is there a chance of overcoming gender biased patterns of work organisation, offering equal opportunities for men and women? The answer is not too optimistic: Whereas direct participation is practised both for men and women, old structures are kept in DP-companies and women still are working in less qualified jobs than their male colleagues.
- *Benders et al. (1999)* took up the debate on group work (different forms, different labels, different concepts) and contributed to this debate with a new approach, the “team based company”. In the team based company there is a majority of the core workforce engaged in teams which have considerable rights to organise their immediate work. Not more than 4 % of all European workplaces can be called “teambased”.
- The impacts of different forms of flexibility on employment was analysed by the *EPOC Research Group (1999)*. In this study a number of multivariate analyses have been applied to the data. The results: the correlation between flexibility and employment are very complex . . .

In a more recent study (Wengel et al. 2002) the EPOC data are used again as a reference to evaluate the situation in Germany in comparison with its European neighbours.

4. Data access for scientific and educational purposes

The EPOC data are in the public domain now, i.e. open for further analyses for scientific or educational reasons. The full original dataset is available in SPSS format. However, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions would like to keep track what additional analyses are done with the data and by whom. Thus interested persons or institutions should contact

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and send him a brief description of their intentions. After confirmation by the European Foundation the SPSS-file (PC format) will be distributed via e-mail by the author (ulrich.pekruhl@fhso.ch) including some additional information about the handling of the data (weighting procedures etc.).

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