



MOEDPR 118/03

Press Handout

09/10/2003

The Role of Work in a Healthy Life

Closing address by the Minister of Education Dr. Louis Galea at the half-day seminar entitled 'The Role of Work in a Healthy Life' organised by the National Commission for Mental Health – Victoria Hotel, Sliema.

I would like to congratulate the organisers on the important theme of today's seminar. In my closing address, I will offer a few reflections on the importance of quality of work, before turning to highlight some of my government's achievements in this area, the key challenges we still face, and how our accession to the European Union may help us achieve our goals.

Let us start by recognising the value of work – as a source of personal fulfilment, as the foundation for the formation of family life, and for the creation and distribution of economic wealth. To borrow a phrase from the encyclical On Human Work, work allows us to share in the activity of the Creator. To do so, however, work must be in line with human dignity, and this is not always the case. It is helpful to distinguish between work, labour and employment. These terms are not synonymous. Labour is a form of activity that generates the basic conditions of human existence. It is frequently routine, low-skilled, poorly paid and monotonous. It allows for little creativity, personal fulfilment or individual autonomy. In contrast, work is a means through which individuals not only can contribute something of their skill or talent to a process or service, but by so doing they can engage in an activity that is personally expressive and rewarding. Work is a way of seeking to shape the world. Employment is a contractual status, rather than an activity, regulated by employment law. This establishes the rights and obligations attached to both employee and employer to ensure that work is carried out in ways that uphold human dignity.

My government has long been committed to promote more and better work, and this commitment has been reinforced by our forthcoming accession to the European Union. I will spend some time discussing our achievements in the area of quality at work and the challenges we still face, before turning to the ways in which I believe accession will assist us in these challenges.

A growing focus on quality at work takes place in a changing context, marked by a number of trends. Work has shifted away from agriculture and industry, and into services, though at both sides of the skill-spectrum. There has been a growth in both low

and high skill services. A related trend is the rising importance of knowledge and the capacity to use it, as human capital has become the greatest asset for success in today's economy. As trade barriers lift, firms are progressively more constrained by market factors than by industrial ones. To compete, firms must become more productive, which has led to an intensification of the nature of work. A search for flexibility to respond to market requirements has also been associated with the growth of atypical work. For instance, although the indefinite 40 hour week remains the norm, there has been a rapid growth in part-time work, and to a far lesser extent, some growth in the use of fixed-term contracts. Lastly, the workforce profile is changing, with a growing proportion of older workers and a rising female employment rate.

While these are general trends across the developed world, they are also visible in Malta. A third of our workforce is employed in high-knowledge categories – legislative, managerial, professional and technical – a proportion on a par with the EU. The share of services has also risen significantly, rising 11 percentage points since 1983 to stand at 70% of all employment today. Our labour force is ageing, with 34% of the employed aged over 45 and set to rise. The female employment rate is also rising at a modest pace, with 34.2% of working age women in formal employment. Part-time work has risen rapidly, to make up 6.7% of all employment, though if one includes work at reduced hours, this rises to 9.1%. While the vast majority of work contracts are still of an indefinite nature, the proportion of fixed-term ones is also rising, currently standing just below 5% of all employment.

How does Malta compare with other EU and Accession countries on issues of quality at work? The first comparative survey on working conditions in the accession countries was published last year, and results compared to the EU averages. We find some interesting statistics. As regards work organisation, the study found that three quarters of all workers in Malta felt that they had learnt new things in the preceding year; furthermore, three in ten had actually had training in that period. These levels correspond to EU averages. Maltese workers were far less likely to experience work as monotonous, and had greater control over work methods than their counterparts in accession and member states. However, they also reported working to far tighter deadlines, and at a higher speed, than workers in other countries. Maltese workers felt that their pace of work was twice as likely to be controlled by their boss than was the case in other countries, who were more likely to have production targets. All these findings on work organisation are evidence of the growing importance of knowledge, the need to be multiskilled, and the reality of an increasingly intensive work environment.

The study also had interesting findings on working time and conditions. As regards time, one quarter of all Maltese workers report having to work over 45 hours per week, five percentage points higher than the EU average. Shift work and work at weekends was also more likely, though evening and night work were less so. A similar proportion of Maltese workers complained of handling dangerous substances (14%) and moving heavy loads (35%). However, Maltese workers were very less likely to complain of noise levels and of repetitive movements. On the other hand, they were more likely to experience

painful positions at work, with levels of backache and muscular pain that were similar to workers in EU and accession countries. One third of Maltese workers felt their work to place their health at risk, compared to one quarter of EU workers.

In general, though, Maltese workers claim to experience far less stress than their counterparts, with only 17% experiencing stress compared to just under 30% for both EU and accession countries. Four in five Maltese workers are generally satisfied with their working conditions, and four in ten believe they will be neither able nor willing to do the same job at 60. On both these indicators, the Maltese findings resembled those of the EU but were significantly better than those in accession states.

This overview suggests that the situation is not a bleak one and, in comparative context at least, workers in Malta feel quite safe and satisfied. However, this does not mean we have no more challenges ahead in terms of providing more and better work. These are numerous.

The first and very important challenge is to promote access to employment for all. We have one of the lowest labour supplies in Europe, and are committed to raising it in line with Lisbon targets, for reasons both of productivity and equal opportunity. Therefore the creation of jobs is the first and most logical step in ensuring that people have access to quality work. We have taken action. Our Industrial Policy and our Business Promotion Act seek to promote job creation in promising business sectors, in addition to our efforts to assist small and medium enterprises.

However, it is not only creating jobs but ensuring equal access to them that is important. The rising importance of knowledge, not only in the professions but throughout the occupational ladder, brings both opportunities and threats. The illiterate and the low-skilled face the risk of social exclusion in such a context. Older workers run the risk of their skills becoming obsolete with rapid developments in modern technology. Persons with disability, too, are likely to be adversely affected by the intensity often required to raise productivity levels. We have taken action on various counts. The establishment of the MCAST, the diversification of courses within ETC and the growth in opportunities for Adult Education all serve to expand the opportunities of the low-skilled and ageing workers. As regards the access to employment of women and persons with disability, the Equal Opportunities (Persons with Disabilities) Act, and the more recent Gender Equality Act, both aim to eradicate discrimination. The new Employee and Industrial Relations Act, too, protects workers' rights on various issues, with equal treatment for those on fixed term contracts and an extension of the entitlements of part-time workers. We must strive to avoid a dual labour market with a core workforce with good working conditions and a secondary one on low-skill, low-pay work with few prospects. However, legislation is not enough and we must keep up our efforts to win over the hearts and minds of employers too.

A second important challenge is to ensure that once in work, employees are in an environment that respects their needs for health and safety. Progress brings its own challenges in this regard, as commercial constraints, technology and specialised

repetition, time pressures and multiskilling all take their toll. Furthermore, the decline in the share of younger workers means that older workers carry a greater proportion of taxing work than they previously did. We believe that decreasing such wear and tear is important if working lives are to be made sustainable. As regards gender, both men and women tend to face particular risks. While men tend to be more exposed to the risks in construction and heavy industry, women tend to be more prone to repetitive strain injuries, customer pressures, and harassment at work.

Government has shown its commitment to the health and safety of workers. The Occupational Health and Safety Authority Act of 2000 provides for ensuring the physical, psychological and social well-being of workers in all workplaces. It encourages and obliges employers to avoid risk, to identify work hazards and avoid or control them; to ensure that workplaces, equipment and working methods do not have a negative impact on health. Employers are also encouraged to develop a broad prevention policy that ensures that technology, work organisation, working conditions and social relationships have as positive an effect as possible on workers' wellbeing.

The Employee and Industrial Relations Act, the EIRA, recognises these occupational health and safety provisions outlined in the Act as constituting recognised conditions of employment. The EIRA also provides for protection against harassment and sexual harassment at the place of work, an issue also taken up by the Gender Equality Act.

Our legislative framework, therefore, provides a very sound basis for improving health and safety at work, and the implementing agencies are being strengthened to make these aspirations a reality. Once again, however, the law is only the starting point, and good practice is likely to require both encouragement and enforcement for a long time yet.

A third important challenge is to promote the reconciliation of work and family life. We recognise that this is an essential condition for encouraging entry into the labour market and for enabling people to remain at work. There are two key areas where debate and action are needed: the double workload and time management.

For many people, the working day does not end when work ends. A second working day often begins at home, with household tasks, education of children, care of elderly and dependent relatives. As you are well aware, the double workload is still borne largely by women. Turning to time management, flexibility and predictability of working hours are important issues. Flexible forms of time management, including job sharing, career breaks and flexitime, are growing across the world in response to the heightened perception of the need to balance work and life. Fixed, regular weekly hours are still the most widespread pattern in Malta as elsewhere, but a significant number work atypical hours, including night work, shifts and weekends. In this context, it is important for predictable working hours to be negotiated and accepted between employers and workers. This is particularly the case for part-time workers, often women, who must adjust non-working duties such as childminding.

A number of measures have been taken to promote work-life balance, such as the provisions for maternity leave, parental leave and urgent leave in cases of special need. Also, the introduction of reduced hours, though not obligatory in the private sector, is also a very useful measure to enable work-life balance when caring responsibilities require more time. Efforts are also being made to improve the quality and quantity of childcare services in Malta as an important part of parents' ability to combine work and life. Cultural change is hard to bring about, however, and combating the double burden will require a grass roots commitment both by employers to value the parental status of their employees, and by men to assume an equitable share of care and domestic responsibilities.

Conclusion

Those three issues, then, are central to ensuring that work plays a role in a healthy life: first, ensuring that everyone has access to work; second, that such jobs are decent; and third, that they may be harmonised with one's life. While each of these goals may be particularly challenging in the light of competitive pressures, we have a shared responsibility to meet them. Our accession to the European Union will assist us to do so, primarily through the goals which it sets and the governance processes it follows to achieve them. Malta is guided by the European Employment Strategy, whereby the EU encourages its members to pursue full employment, quality jobs and social cohesion, and obliges them to report on the actions they take in each regard. That we will be required to submit a national employment action plan each year after membership will help to keep these objectives in focus and to implement them on the ground.

In addition to the goals themselves, the EU also encourage broad based governance. In line with its principles of solidarity and subsidiarity, the EU requires such labour market actions to be developed, and implemented, in full cooperation with employers and trade unions. It also encourages the involvement of relevant civil society bodies in drawing up and implementing labour market measures. This broad approach to governance significantly increases the chance of measures being relevant, feasible and effective.

Of course, laws and plans alone will not suffice. As I mentioned before, we must work to capture both people's hearts and minds, bringing about a broader and deeper commitment to social responsibility – whether at the level of the firm for its employees, of trade unions for the long-term interests of the labour force, of individuals for colleagues, of both working spouses for each other. We all have the opportunity to lead by example.