

Precarious work situations

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In response to the strong structural changes taking place in work life, the Finnish church began the Good Change Project (Hyvä muutos projekti) in the beginning of 2007. This project is a continuation of the Good Work Project (Hyvä työ projekti) of 1999-2001, which dealt with questions having to do with the quality of work life. The attention we give to the 'flexicurity' discussion arise from the Finnish situation and the results of the Good Change Project.

For the main part I base the discussion of this topic on the concept arising from Lutheran ethics that the individual not only serves God through his/her work but also thus takes part in building up the society in which he/she lives and serves others. Due to lack of time I will focus on a few alarming issues.

According to research most workers choose a permanent fulltime job if they can. Predictability and permanence of fulltime work create the security that family life and the stability of society need. Currently part-time, on-call, rent and especially short-term contract work is common in Finland. This is despite the fact that it seems clear that workers with long-term contracts are needed. The reason for this seems to be that often employers attempt to work around legal obligations rather than seek flexibility. The **reasons and basis** for part-time, short term, and on-call work, and the use of subcontractors should be ethically sound.

Rent and short term contract workers have trouble getting enough work shifts to support themselves. Our view is that **one should be able to live off the salary** one receives. 'Flexicurity' should, through regulation of work life, support models of work in which short term and part time work can be combined to form the equivalent of fulltime work so that one could support him/herself and his or her family. In connection to this, one can ask from an ethical viewpoint what the just pay for work should be. The possibilities for what just pay would entail are based on either abilities or what is fair or necessary. Lutheran ethics seek to uphold also this latter viewpoint.

There is inequality between long term workers and **workers with unconventional contracts** in Finland. This has to do with even basic issues like holidays, pension plans, in-service training, healthcare benefits and sick leave. When building 'flexicurity' one should, in addition to focusing on the training and development of work life skills for people with unconventional work contracts, also focus on the aforementioned basic issues.

At this time unconventional work contracts do not guarantee secure conditions of contract. As has been outlined earlier, in addition to responsible employers and entrepreneurs, there are unfortunately also other kinds of employers. Also when it comes to subcontracting, especially in the case of employees coming from other countries, in many instances employers in Finland seek to pay less than the

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minimum wage and avoid work regulations. In other words, employers seek to transfer the risks of business to the worker. Creating secure work contracts for others besides those who have long term contracts requires that ardent legislative measures must be taken to make a clear statement that **employers must also carry responsibility**. At the same time, it would be a clear statement that the ‘flexicurity’ model of work aims for general well-being rather than only increasing competition among workers.

It is customary in Finland that family life must be flexible in relation to the demands of the job. The positive aspect of ‘flexicurity’ model is that it thrives to **have flexibility also for the sake of family life**. Here I refer to the on-going discussion in the LKD about making it possible for work to be flexible when it comes to the family’s needs, because of the age and the situation in life of the worker. Because putting the ‘flexicurity’ into action concretely is dependent on successfully creating a national model, special attention should be given to include also this flexibility into them.

The combination of flexibility and security seems to work best when it comes to well-trained workers. However there will always be workers who cannot take on the necessary skills to work in a globalized context because of social insecurities, family situation, lack of schooling and support from home, sickness etc. This group of people’s skills for working life can only be helped to a limited extent through life long learning programmes. In spite of this they are prepared and willing to support themselves through hard work - if suitable work is available. These so to speak **middle work market**, which include jobs that do not require further education, have, with the exception of a few fields, disappeared from Finland. It is equally important to support education and to create and preserve jobs in which these people can, with their own type of contributions, take part in building up society.

‘Flexicurity’ model of work includes the idea that the contribution to the labour force by aging workers should be increased. There is an attempt to keep people in work life longer. Monetary initiatives, changes in attitude, life long learning, and the organization of work for aging workers are good steps in reaching the goals mentioned earlier. However, they are insufficient if the quality of work life is not improved simultaneously. When building ‘flexicurity’ it is important to handle in detail the **questions relating to the quality of work life**. For example workers whose workload increases dramatically due to budget cuts, limited resources, unprofessional management, unreasonable short-term contracts etc. cannot be expected to be able to or want to stay in work life any longer than they want to. Finnish research concludes that the at-work wellbeing of workers is diminishing. In our opinion, this structural dimension has not been emphasized enough in documents dealing with ‘flexicurity’.

In order for ‘flexicurity’ to work there must be **trust** between the employers and the employees. In Finland, we are living in a time of change, where the previous unwritten laws of work life and the trust between workers and employers are eroding as a consequence of globalization. If trust erodes we cannot achieve the ethical and

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attitude-based foundation, with which the combination of flexibility and security can be built.

As a consequence of global competition many profitable factories are being closed down in Finland and production is being moved to countries with lower production costs or production is simply stopped in search of increase in profits. Even companies which are extremely profitable are downsizing in order to give better revenues to their owners. This raises two ethical questions: 1) What are the limits of seeking profits for businesses? 2) Can economy have its own rules so that general ethical principles do not apply? Enlighten thinking has made it possible for some areas of society to have their own rules. As a committee we want to question this type of thinking.

In conclusion, documents dealing with ‘flexicurity’ highlight the need to survive in a global economic competition. This is important. Would it be more reasonable to seek competitive ability through innovation, motivation and know-how instead of production cost-based competition?