

# Autumn Skills Bulletin 2024

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Job autonomy amongst workers  
in Ireland and the EU



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## 1. Introduction

Job quality is an important aspect of employment for individuals as well as employers. Having greater job autonomy in one's every day working life contributes to an individual's well-being; job autonomy, along with the ability to earn an income while learning new skills, is deemed to describe 'good jobs' (Geary and Wilson, 2023).<sup>1</sup> At the same time, job autonomy is also recognised as one of the key areas that contributes to an attractive and engaging workplace.<sup>2</sup>

In this report, we examine the extent to which workers believe they can influence how they can carry out their work tasks (i.e. level of job autonomy). The data is drawn from the ad hoc module on Job Skills in the EU Labour Force Survey (LFS) in 2022,<sup>3</sup> with a particular focus on *who* in the labour market has a higher level of job autonomy (e.g. age, gender) and *what* aspects of employment/jobs promote greater control over work tasks (e.g. economic sector, occupation). We also examine the extent to which workers with different levels of job autonomy also have jobs where tasks are standardised or are repetitive in nature.



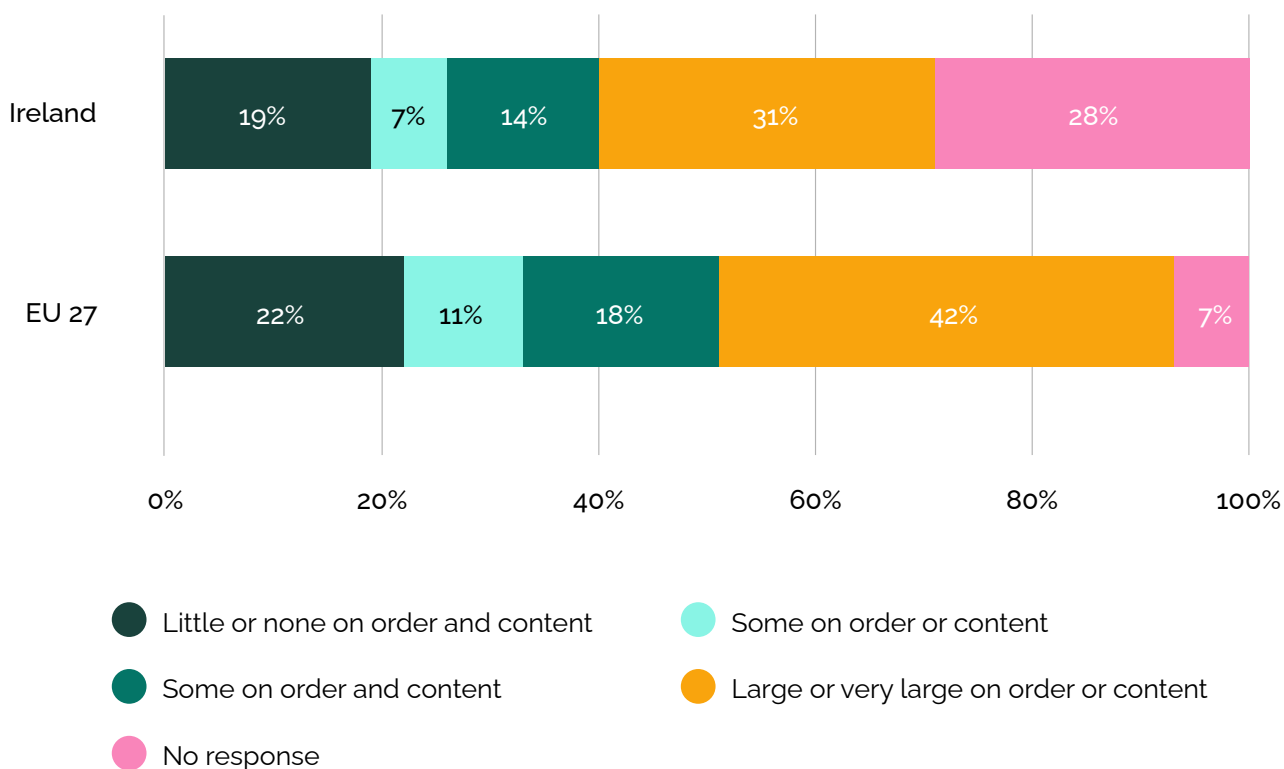
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- 1 Geary, J. & Wilson, L. (2023) *Job quality in Ireland: First findings from the UCD Working in Ireland Survey, 2021* University College Dublin and Nevin Economic Research Institute. [https://www.smurfitschool.ie/t4media/Job%20Quality%20in%20Ireland%20Full%20Report%20\(Geary%20and%20Wilson.%202023\).pdf](https://www.smurfitschool.ie/t4media/Job%20Quality%20in%20Ireland%20Full%20Report%20(Geary%20and%20Wilson.%202023).pdf)
  - 2 PwC (2019) *Secure your future people experience: five imperatives for action*, <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/people-organisation/pdf/secure-your-future-people-experience-pwc.pdf>
  - 3 Respondents are aged 15-74 years and currently employed (at the time of data collection) and the data relates to their main job. The dataset can be found here, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/main/data/database>

## 2. Job autonomy in Ireland and EU 27 countries

The EU LFS measures job autonomy by asking employed respondents the extent to which they believe they can influence how they carry out their work tasks on two dimensions: (1) the order; and (2) the content of tasks.<sup>4</sup> Figure 1 shows that 19% of workers in Ireland (499,000 persons) indicate having little or no influence on both order and content, while 7% (171,000 persons) said they had some influence on one dimension but little or none on the other and a further 14% (365,000 persons) reported having some influence on both order and content. These three categories represent lower autonomy levels (some, little or none) and comprise 40% of respondents in Ireland, which is lower than the 51% recorded for the EU 27 average.

In Ireland, 31% of workers (809,000 persons) said they had a large or very large influence on the order or content of work tasks, which was also lower than the 42% reported for the EU 27 average. For the purpose of this report, the large/very large category is deemed to represent a *high level of job autonomy* (given that it indicates a large or very large influence over one or both dimensions), and this will be the main focus here.

Figure 1: Job autonomy in Ireland and EU 27 average, 2022 (%)



Source: Eurostat Labour Force Survey (data extracted 30.05.2024)

4 The question on job autonomy in the survey has nine response categories which indicate varying degrees of autonomy (none, little, some, large and very large) over two dimensions being measured, i.e. order and content of work tasks. Explanatory notes on the data can be found here, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/metadata/en/lfsq\\_22\\_esms.htm](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/metadata/en/lfsq_22_esms.htm)

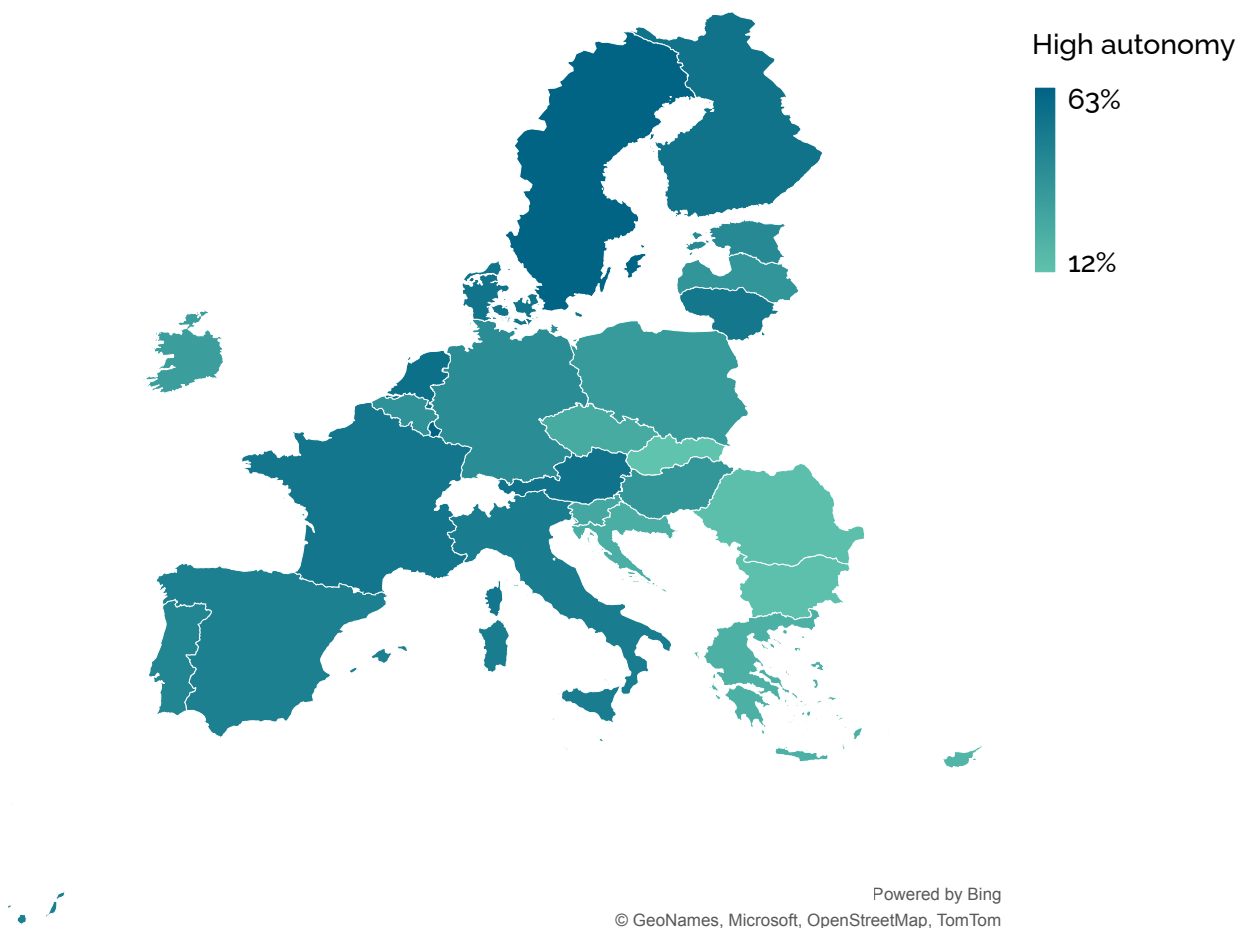
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## High job autonomy

Figure 2 presents the percentage of workers who reported having *high* job autonomy across all EU 27 countries including Ireland. The results range from a low of 12% in Slovakia to a high of 63% in Luxembourg. Out of the 27 EU countries, Ireland is ranked 19th highest at 31% (as already seen in Figure 1). The percentage of workers reporting high job autonomy in Ireland is well behind that of Sweden (62%) and the Netherlands (56%), while it was fairly similar to that for Poland (33%).

Figure 1 shows that the no response category is higher in Ireland (28%) than the EU 27 average (7%), which may help to explain the lower percentage of workers with high autonomy in Ireland. When the no response category was excluded, the percentage of workers indicating high autonomy in their jobs in Ireland was 44% (instead of 31%) while the EU average was 45% (instead of 42%), placing Ireland 13th highest amongst EU countries.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 2:** Prevalence of high job autonomy amongst workers in EU 27 countries, 2022 (%)



Source: Eurostat Labour Force Survey (data extracted 30.05.2024)

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<sup>5</sup> As the no response figures for seven EU countries were missing due to low reliability, a comparison across all EU 27 countries in this report was not deemed appropriate.

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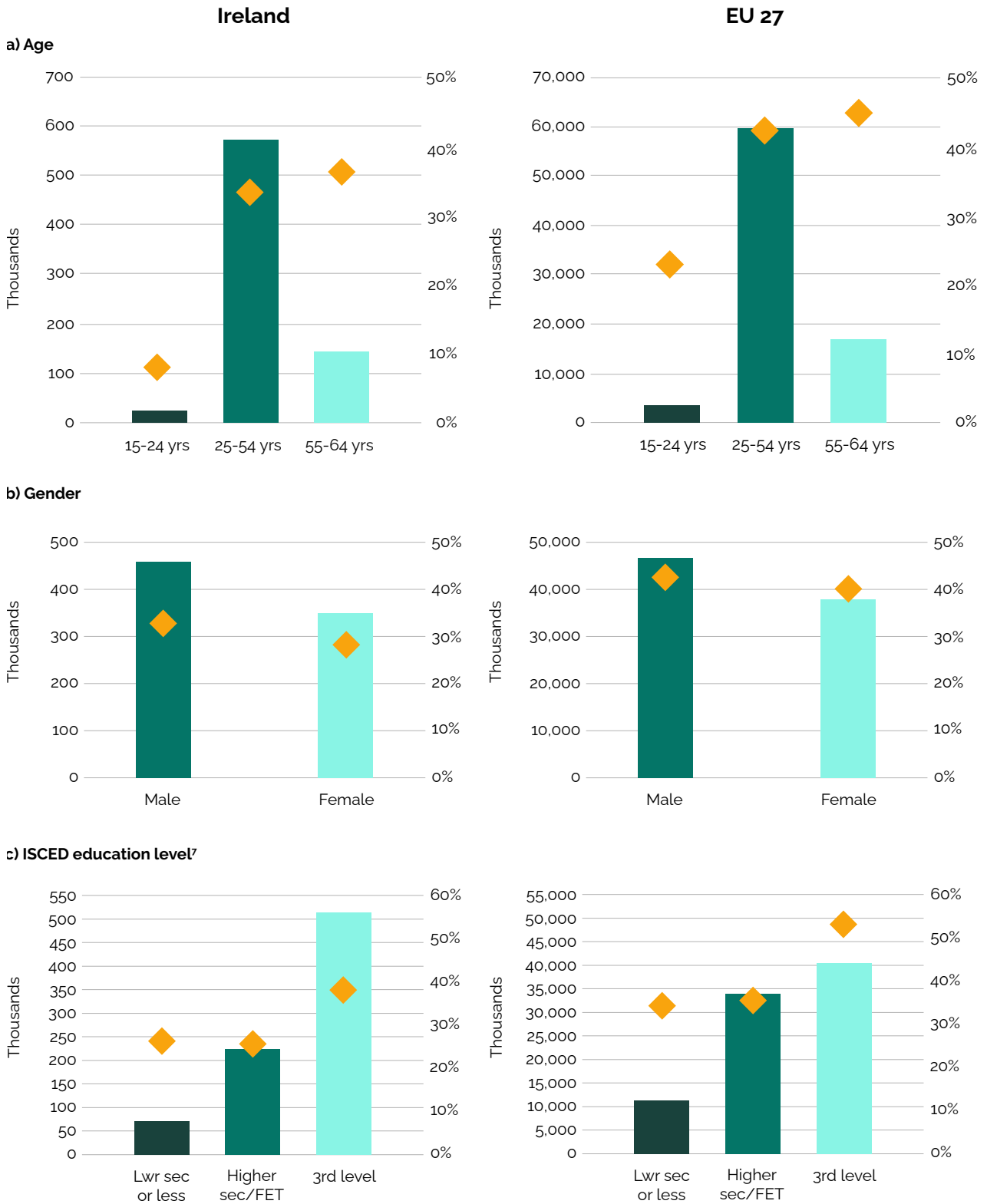
### 3. Variations in high job autonomy by age, gender & education level

Figure 3 presents the results for high job autonomy by age, gender and education level in Ireland and the EU 27 average for the year 2022. The following groups are more likely to report having high job autonomy:

- **older workers** – in Ireland, 38% of respondents aged 55-64 years (149,000 persons) said they had high job autonomy compared to 34% of those aged 25-54 years (602,000 persons) and just 9% of 15-24-year-olds (28,000 persons)
- **male workers** – in Ireland, 33% of male workers (457,000 persons) reported having high job autonomy compared to 29% of female workers (353,000 persons). This gender variation was highest amongst older workers aged 55-64 years with 42% of males (91,400 persons) reporting high job autonomy compared to 33% of females (58,000 persons)
- **highly educated workers** – in Ireland, 37% of those with third level qualifications at ISCED levels 5-8 (513,000 persons) indicated high job autonomy compared to 25% of those with higher secondary/FET qualifications (224,000 persons) and 26% with at most lower secondary education (66,000 persons).

Figure 3 shows similar findings for the EU 27 average, although the percentage of workers reporting high job autonomy was generally higher than in Ireland. In particular, the percentage of 15-24-year-olds who reported high job autonomy was far higher at 24% for the EU 27 average (compared to 9% in Ireland). In addition, the percentage of those with a third level education who indicated high autonomy was 53% for the EU 27 average, much more than that in Ireland (37%).

**Figure 3: Workers with high job autonomy by age, gender and ISCED education level in Ireland and EU 27 average, 2022 (000 and %)<sup>6</sup>**



Source: Eurostat Labour Force Survey (data extracted 30.05.2024)  
Excludes those who did not state their age, gender or education level

6 The figures for the number of individuals are rounded to the nearest 1,000 for ease of interpretation.  
7 The ISCED 2011 education levels are as follows: 0-2, at most lower secondary level, e.g. Junior Certificate; 3-4, upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary, e.g. Leaving Certificate or FET courses; 5-8, third level qualifications, e.g. Higher certificate, Bachelors and Masters degree or PhD.

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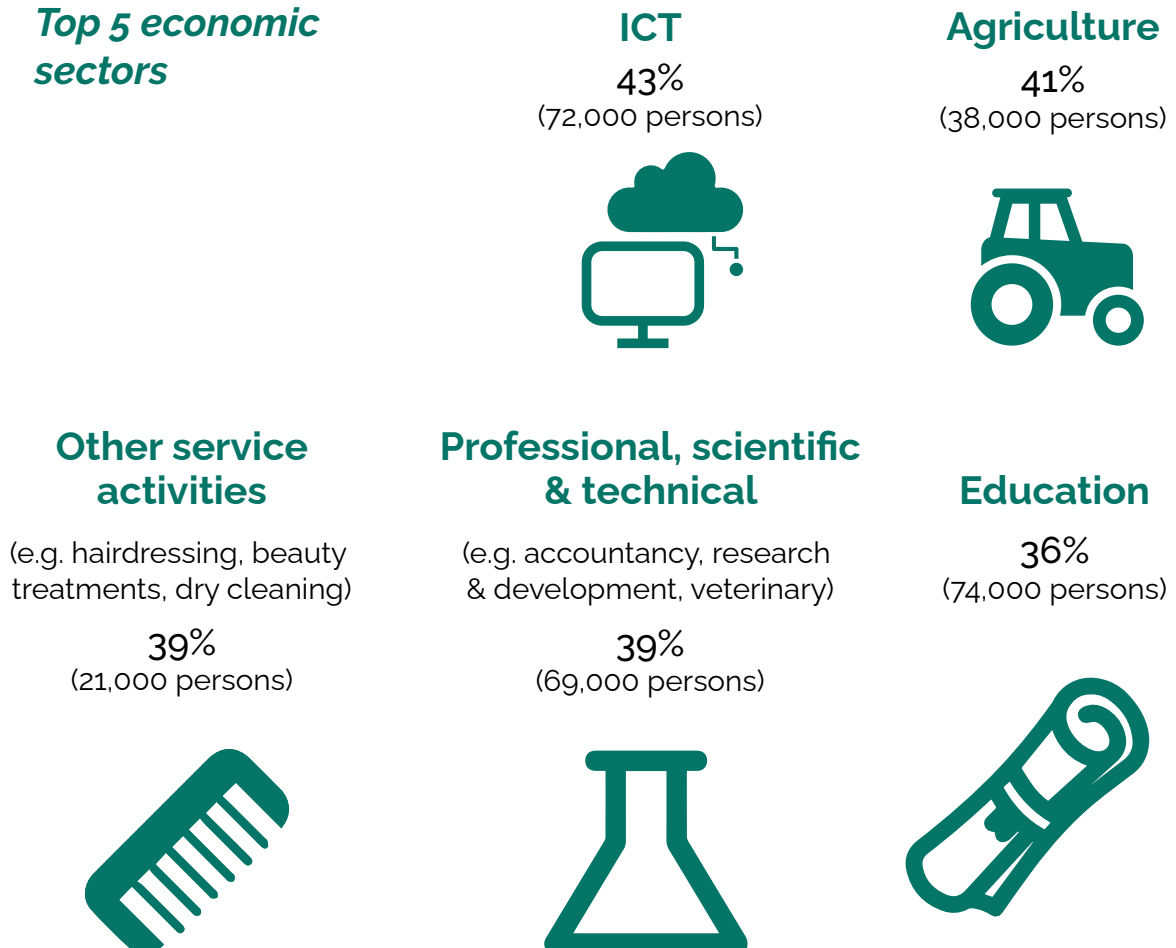
## 4. Job autonomy and nature of employment

### Economic sector

The economic sector in which individuals work can affect the extent of control over work tasks. Figure 4 shows that the top five sectors with the greatest percentage of workers who stated they had a high level of job autonomy were ICT (43%), agriculture (41%), other service activities (39%), professional services (39%) and education (36%), while those with the lowest percentages for high autonomy include accommodation & food (16%) and transport (25%). The top five sectors with high job autonomy in Ireland were similar to the EU 27 average, with the exception of arts and entertainment, which was ranked third highest in the EU (with agriculture coming sixth).

**Figure 4:** Top five and bottom five NACE economic sectors whose workers report high job autonomy in Ireland, 2022 (%)<sup>8</sup>

### Top 5 economic sectors



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<sup>8</sup> The ranking of NACE economic sectors here is based on the percentage of workers within that sector who report high job autonomy levels.

**Bottom 5  
economic sectors**

**Accommodation  
& food**

16%  
(28,000 persons)



**Transport**

25%  
(27,000 persons)



**Wholesale & retail**

26%  
(81,000 persons)



**Health & social work**

26%  
(91,000 persons)



**Industry**

30%  
(98,000 persons)



Source: Eurostat Labour Force Survey (data extracted 30.05.2024)

**Occupational group<sup>9</sup>**

Figure 5a shows that job autonomy varies by occupational group with managers, as might be expected, most likely to report high job autonomy in Ireland at 51% (125,000 persons), followed by 44% of agricultural, forestry & fishery workers (34,000 persons) and 40% of professionals (267,000 persons). This rank order of occupations was the same in Ireland as for the EU 27 average. In Ireland, workers in elementary occupations were least likely to indicate they had a high job autonomy at 15% (27,000 persons) followed by 16% of plant & machinery operatives (24,000 persons) and 19% of workers in services & sales occupations (87,000 persons) – the same three occupations as for the EU 27 average, albeit in a slightly different order. The impact of new technology on job autonomy is also an important consideration here with the adoption of digital technologies such as 3D printing, artificial intelligence and robotics likely to reduce the scope of work autonomy for production and assembly workers in particular (Eurofound, 2021).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The data for occupation is based on the International Standard Classification of Occupations 2008 (ISCO-08).

<sup>10</sup> Eurofound (2021) *Digitisation in the workplace*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/2021/digitisation-workplace>



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## Professional status

Following the above results on occupation, it is not surprising to find that high job autonomy is more likely to be reported by workers who are self-employed compared to employees in Ireland and for the EU 27 average. Figure 5b shows that more than one half of self-employed individuals in Ireland enjoy high autonomy – 56% of those with employees (58,000 persons) and 54% of those without employees (128,000 persons), which compares to just 28% of employees (617,000 persons). The same trend is found for the EU 27 average, although to an even greater extent with approximately three-quarters of the self-employed reporting high autonomy – 77% of those with employees and 73% of those without employees, while 37% of employees gave this response.

## Part-time/full-time employment

In Ireland, individuals who work full-time are more likely to report high job autonomy compared to those working part-time, at 30% (530,000 persons) and 19% (87,000 persons) respectively (Figure 5c). However, this variation does not hold for the EU 27 average, where the percentage of those working full-time and part-time stating high job autonomy were the same, at 37%.<sup>11</sup>

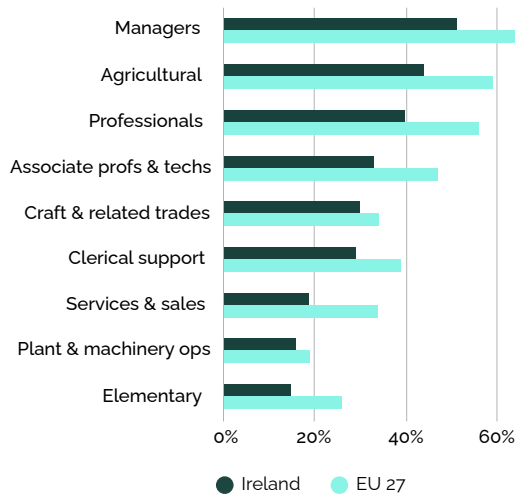
Furthermore, the gender variation in high job autonomy found earlier in this report (Section 3) is also evident here with a larger percentage of full-time working males reporting high job autonomy (56% or 295,000 persons) compared to full-time working females (44% or 235,000 persons) in Ireland (Figure 5d). Similarly, this result holds for the EU 27 average where 58% of full-time working males have high job autonomy compared to 42% of full-time working females. At the same time, Irish females working part-time are more likely to have high job autonomy (82%) than their male counterparts (18%); this difference between the genders also holds for the EU 27 average with corresponding figures of 77% and 23% respectively. However, this is likely to be affected by males comprising a smaller cohort of high autonomy respondents working part-time compared to females, which in Ireland numbered just 16,000 males compared to 71,000 females.

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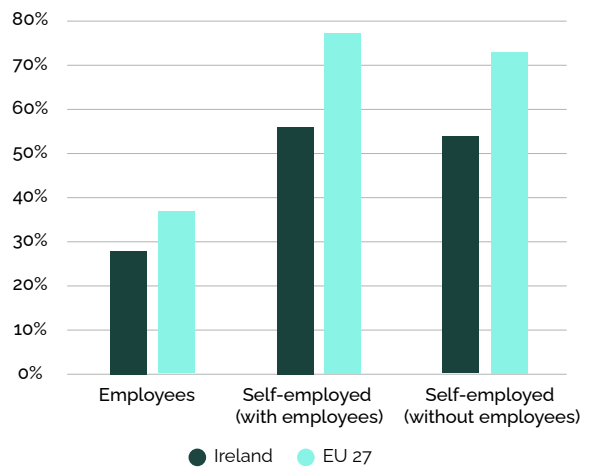
11 As the no response category is relatively high in Ireland (compared to the EU 27 countries), this analysis was also done excluding the no response answers, however the full-time/part-time variation for those with high job autonomy still held in Ireland (42% full-time and 27% part-time), while it was similar in the EU 27 countries (40% full-time and 41% part-time).

**Figure 5: Workers with high job autonomy by ISCO-08 occupational group, professional status and part-time/full-time employment (by gender) in Ireland and EU 27 countries, 2022 (%)<sup>12</sup>**

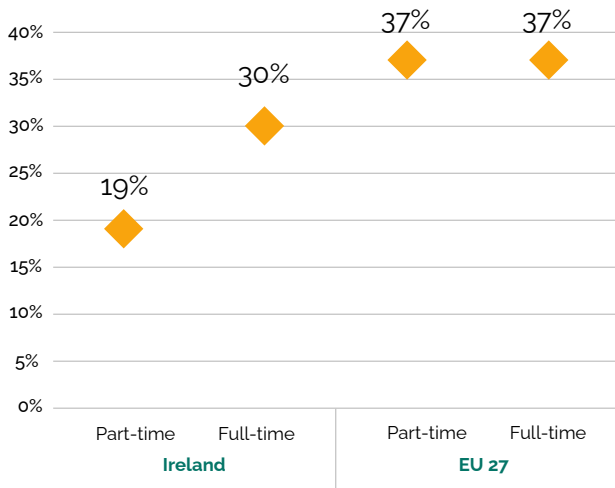
**a) Occupational group**



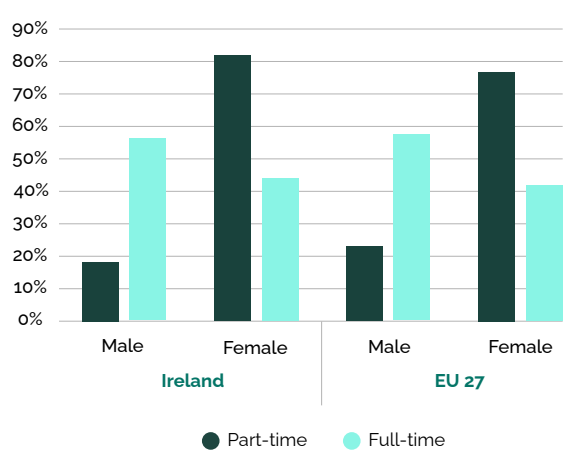
**b) Professional status**



**c) Part-time/full-time employment**



**d) Part-time/full-time employment by gender**



Source: Eurostat Labour Force Survey (data extracted 30.05.2024, 24.07.2024 and 01.08.2024)

Excludes those who did not state their occupation, professional status or whether they worked part-time or full-time.

<sup>12</sup> Data for individuals working in the armed forces was also downloaded from Eurostat, however the figures were missing for Ireland as they were too small to report and considered to have low reliability.

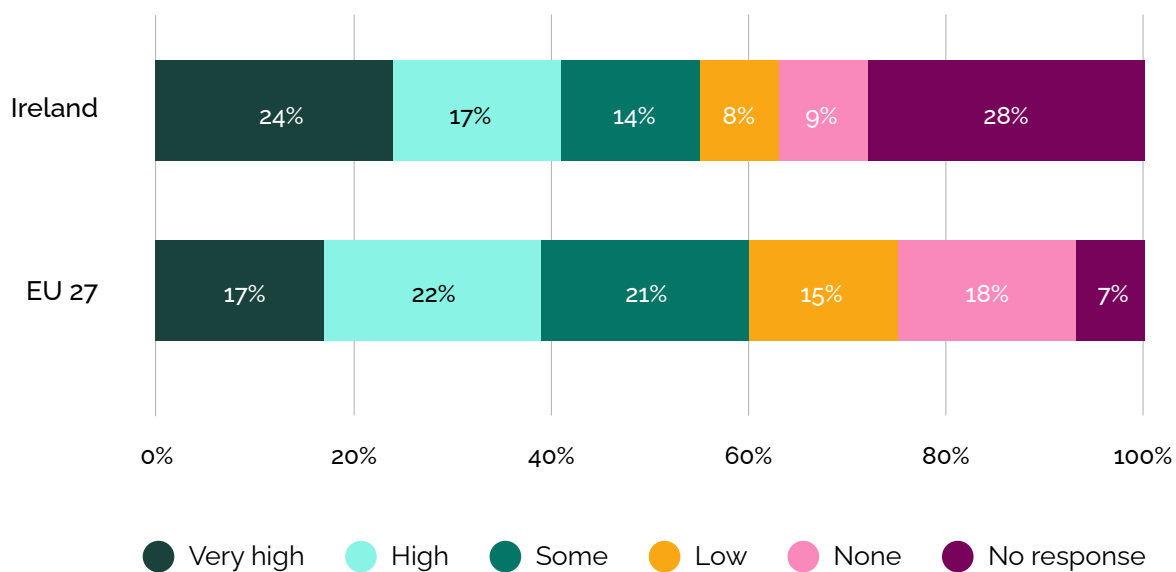
## 5. Job autonomy by standardisation and repetitiveness of work tasks

In addition to job autonomy, the EU LFS job skills module collected data from those employed on both the standardisation and repetitiveness of work tasks.<sup>13</sup> These indicators measured the extent to which certain procedures were strictly followed and whether similar tasks were done in the same way respectively.

Figure 6 shows that approximately four in ten workers report having very high or high standardisation of tasks in both Ireland (24% and 17% respectively)<sup>14</sup> and the EU 27 average (17% and 22% respectively), while Irish workers were less likely to have some or lower levels of standardisation than the EU 27 average. Turning to the results for repetitiveness of work tasks, the percentage of workers who indicated very high or high levels is slightly higher than that for standardisation (44% for Ireland<sup>15</sup> and 49% for the EU 27 average). Again, the percentage of workers who said they had some or lower repetitiveness levels was lower in Ireland than the EU 27 average. The relatively high no response in Ireland may be a factor in these results.<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 6:** Extent of standardisation and repetitiveness of work tasks in Ireland and EU 27 average, 2022 (%)

### a) Standardisation of work tasks



13 In the survey, there were five response categories for both standardisation and repetitiveness of work tasks: very high, high, some, low and none.

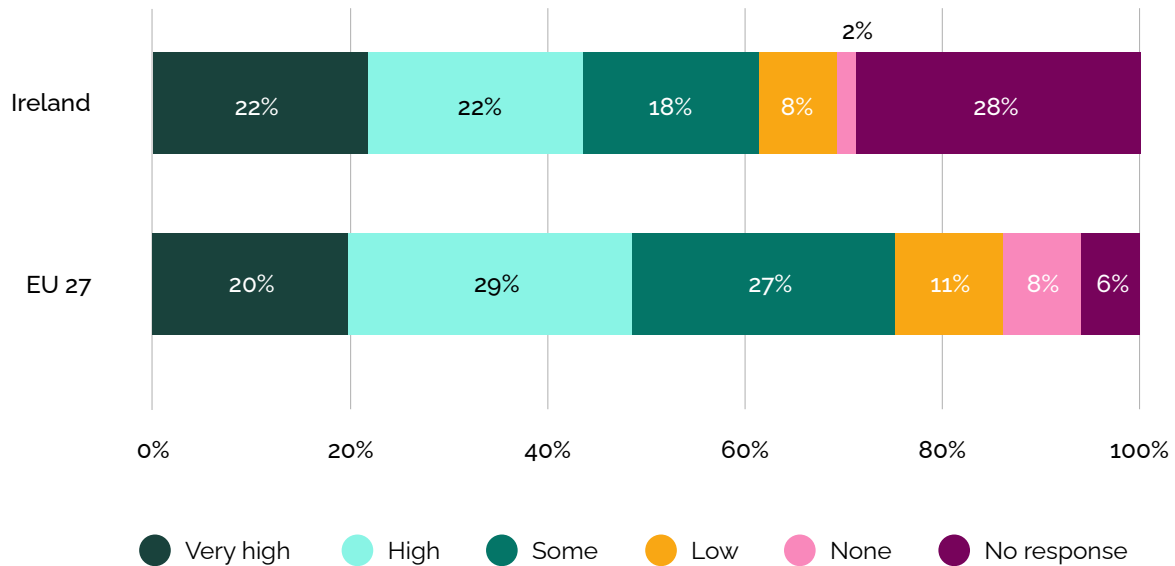
14 These percentages relate to 606,000 and 435,000 persons in Ireland respectively.

15 This result comprises 22% for very high (576,000 persons) and another 22% for high (564,000 persons) in Ireland.

16 The same analysis was carried out excluding the no response category which resulted in a small increase in the very high/high percentages for Ireland, for standardisation of work tasks to 5 out of 10 respondents (from 4 out of 10) and for repetitiveness to 6 out of 10 respondents (from 5 out of 10), while those for the EU 27 average remained similar. Also, the results for the some category rose for Ireland, for standardisation of work tasks to 20% (from 14%) and for repetitiveness to 25% (from 18%). The results for the low and none categories were similar compared to those based on data including no response.

Figure 6: Extent of standardisation and repetitiveness of work tasks in Ireland and EU 27 average, 2022 (%) cont'd

### b) Repetitiveness of work tasks



Source: Eurostat Labour Force Survey (data extracted 22.08.2024)

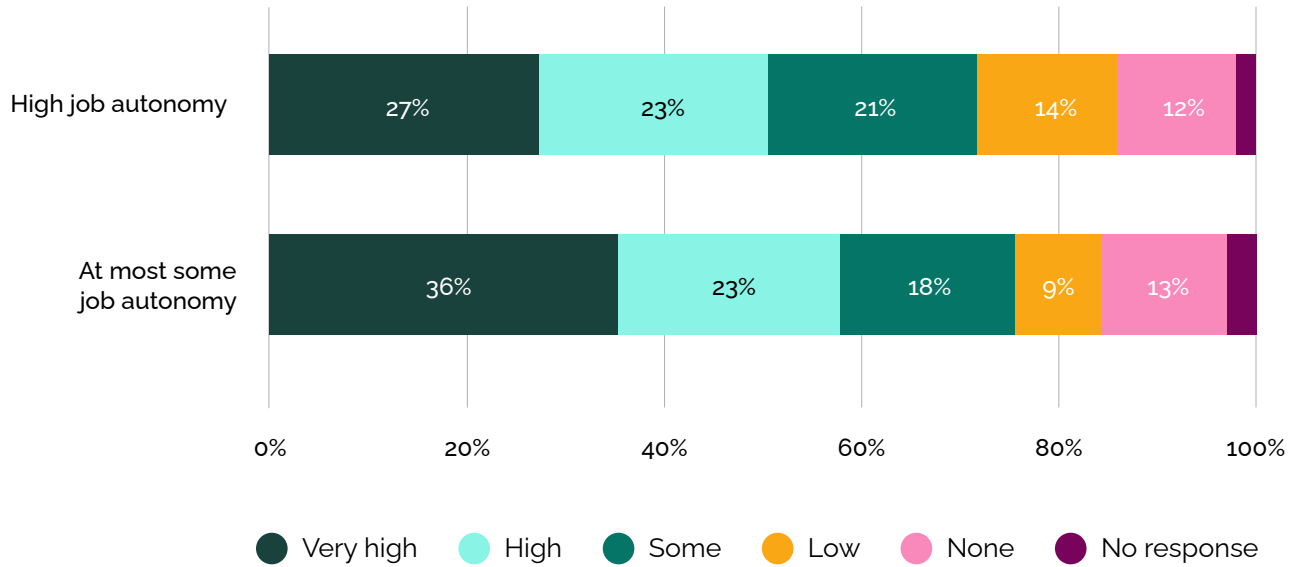
Figure 7 explores how job autonomy varies by the two variables standardisation and repetitiveness of work tasks in Ireland.<sup>17</sup> Figure 7a shows that respondents who report at most some job autonomy (or lower levels) are more likely to state they also experience very high standardisation of work tasks, at 36% (369,000 persons), which compares to 27% (218,000 persons) for those with high job autonomy levels. In contrast, respondents with high job autonomy are more likely than workers with lower levels of autonomy to report low levels of standardisation of work tasks (14% compared to 9%). Similarly, Figure 7b) shows that individuals who say they have high job autonomy are less likely to experience very high or high repetitiveness of tasks, at 28% (231,000 persons) and 27% (222,000 persons) respectively, which compares to 31% of respondents for both repetitiveness categories (323,000 persons for very high and 324,000 persons for high) who have at most some autonomy (or lower levels).<sup>18</sup> While the variations in repetitiveness of work tasks between those with high and at most some job autonomy are not as large compared to the results for standardisation of tasks, these results indicate that those who enjoy high job autonomy are more likely to experience other aspects of good job quality in terms of lower standardisation and repetitiveness of work tasks.

17 The two job autonomy levels presented here are based on two summary variables in the Eurostat data: (1) high autonomy refers to the large or very large on order or content category, and (2) at most some autonomy relates to the category at most some on order and content.

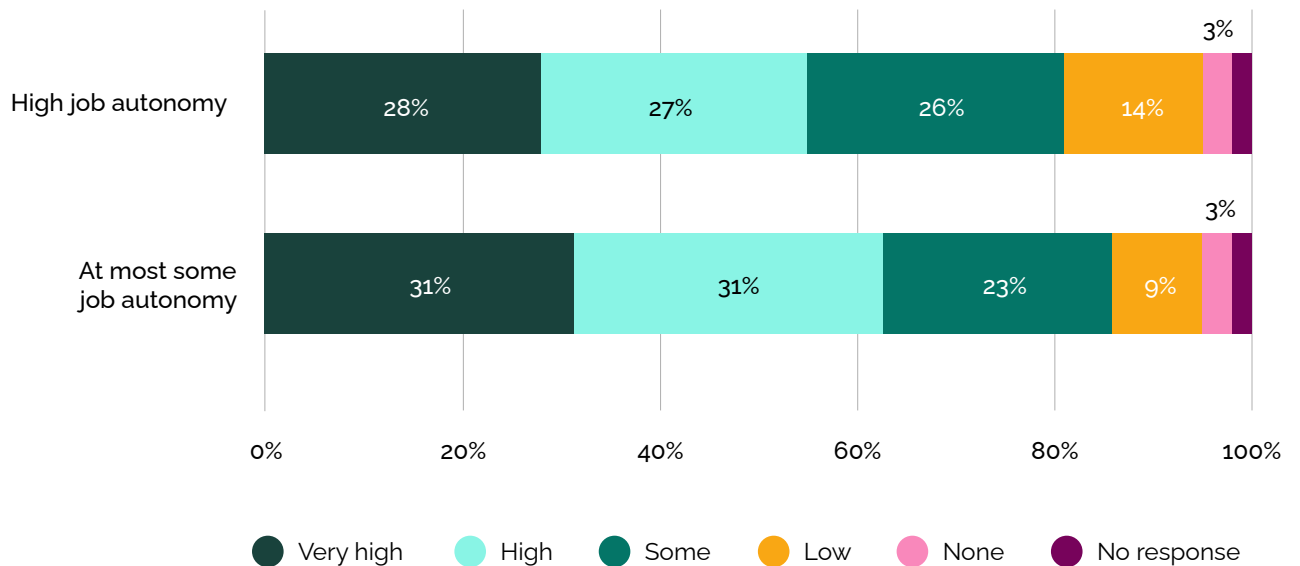
18 The same analysis was carried out on data for the EU 27 average, which showed similar results to that for Ireland.

Figure 7: Job autonomy by level of standardisation and repetitiveness of work tasks in Ireland, 2022 (%)

a) Standardisation of work tasks



b) Repetitiveness of work tasks



Source: Eurostat Labour Force Survey (data extracted 22.08.2024)

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## 6. Conclusion

The results in this report show that a high level of job autonomy is more likely to be experienced by male workers, older workers and those with higher educational qualifications. There are also variations by economic sector, occupation and whether an individual is self-employed and works full-time. Where employers can support and facilitate their workers to experience higher job autonomy may benefit those organisations in terms of greater commitment amongst employees and an ability to attract and retain key workers. Improving job autonomy is also a potential way of enhancing job quality and job satisfaction amongst the Irish workforce; while the majority (67%) of workers in Ireland stated they are satisfied with their jobs (European Skills for Jobs Survey, 2021),<sup>19</sup> shares were considerably higher in countries such as the Netherlands (84%), Malta (81%) and Denmark (80%).

Achieving higher levels of job autonomy amongst Ireland's workforce may be better realised by paying particular attention to those groups of workers who are less likely to report it at present, namely females, younger workers, those with lower educational qualifications and working part-time. In turn, this may also contribute to lowering the levels of standardisation and repetitiveness of work tasks. Finally, monitoring the impact of new technologies on job autonomy in the workplace is also an important task for researchers and policymakers.

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19 CEDEFOP (2021) [https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/european-skills-jobs-survey/data/explorer?country=EU27&field12=A61&indicator=\\_FT184#1](https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/european-skills-jobs-survey/data/explorer?country=EU27&field12=A61&indicator=_FT184#1)

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**Skills and Labour Market Research Unit**

SOLAS  
Castleforbes House  
Castleforbes Road  
D01 A8NO  
Dublin 1

**Aonad Taighde um Scileanna agus Margaidh Saothair**

SOLAS  
Bloc 1, Teach Chaisleán Foirbis  
Bóthar Chaisleán Foirbis  
D01 A8NO  
Baile Átha Cliath 1

**E:** [slmru@solas.ie](mailto:slmru@solas.ie)  
**www.solas.ie**