

Elementary occupations: skills opportunities and challenges (2016)


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Summary

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Key facts:

- People employed in elementary occupations usually perform simple and routine tasks which may require the use of hand-held tools and considerable physical effort.
- The five key skills for elementary occupations are teamwork, problem solving, communication, learning and job-specific skills.
- The number of people employed in elementary occupations has been increasing. Between 2005 and 2015, employment grew by 8% and it is projected to grow by a further 8% between 2015 and 2025.
- Most of EU Member States report **surpluses** of elementary occupations; **shortages** are quite rare.
- Looking to the future, a strong demand is expected. In addition to new jobs created, there will be significant number of jobs vacated by workers who are expected to leave the occupation mainly due to retirement ('replacement demand').
- There will be about 11.8 million job openings across the EU needing to be filled between 2015 and 2025.

Who are they?

People employed in elementary occupations usually perform simple and routine tasks which may require the use of hand-held tools and considerable physical effort. Most occupations in this major occupational group involve skills that require completion of primary education or the first stage of basic education and, in relation to some jobs, a short period of on-the-job training. In summary, elementary jobs are ones that anyone with the requisite level of educational attainment could fulfil.

Elementary jobs can be divided between the following occupational groups^[1].

- **Cleaners and helpers** are usually engaged in sweeping or vacuum cleaning, washing and polishing floors, furniture and other objects; taking care of linen and bed-making; helping with preparation of meals and cleaning in kitchens; etc.
- **Agricultural, forestry and fishery labourers** will undertake tasks related to digging, raking and shovelling using hand tools; loading, unloading and stacking supplies, produce and other materials; watering, thinning, weeding and tending crops by hand or using hand tools; planting, harvesting, picking and collecting produce by hand; feeding, watering, and cleaning animals; etc.
- **Labourers** in mining, construction, manufacturing and transport will typically be engaged in digging holes; sorting, loading, unloading, moving, stacking and storing materials, equipment and products; cleaning machinery, equipment, tools and work sites; packing and unpacking material and products; etc.
- **Food preparation assistants** will typically carry out tasks related to preparing simple or pre-prepared foods and beverages such as sandwiches; washing, cutting, measuring and mixing foods for cooking; operating cooking equipment such as grills, microwaves and deep-fat fryers; cleaning kitchens; etc.
- **Street and related sales and service workers** will perform tasks such as hiring or receiving items for

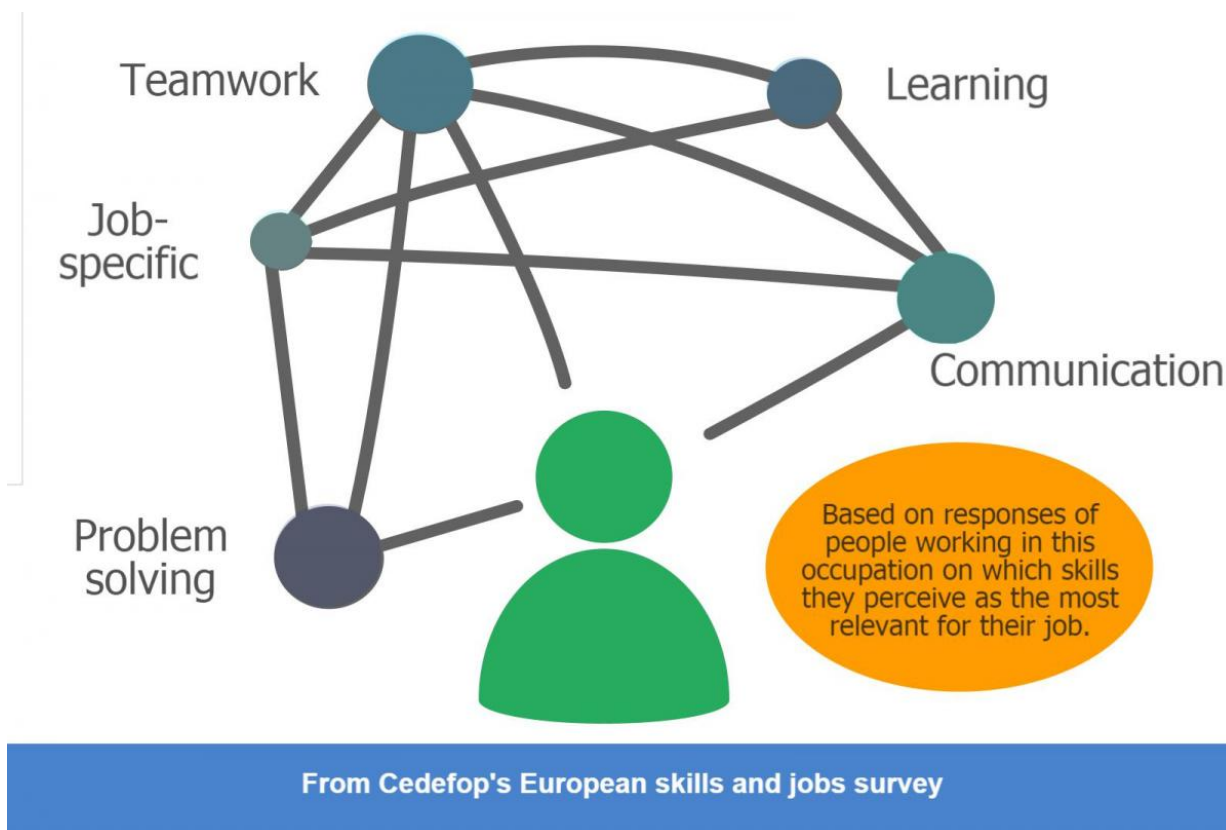
sale, or making simple items; loading and unloading goods; displaying goods or calling out to attract customers' attention; approaching potential customers on the street and offering goods for sale; etc.

- **Refuse workers and other elementary workers** will collect, load and unload garbage; sweep streets, parks and other public places; chop firewood; carry water; beat dust out of carpets and perform other odd-job tasks.

What skills do they need?

According to [Cedefop's European skills and jobs survey \(ESJS\)](#) the key 5 skills for elementary occupations are **teamwork, problem solving, communication, learning** and **job-specific skills**. These skills could support employees in this occupation to also tackle anticipated future skill challenges (see drivers of change below).

Figure 1: Most important skills required for elementary occupations



Where are they mostly in demand?

The labour market dynamics for this occupation differ across EU Member States:

Figure 2: Shortages and surpluses for elementary occupations across the EU

■ Shortage



- Surplus
- Varied for detailed occupations (see analysis)



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According to [Cedefop](#), elementary occupations are mostly exposed to skills [surpluses](#). On a more detailed level, an oversupply of ***cleaners and helpers*** is recorded in Bulgaria, Estonia, Spain and the United Kingdom, while ***agricultural, forestry and fishery labourers*** are inclined to face surpluses in Bulgaria, France, Hungary and Austria.

Comparatively, skills surplus of ***labourers in mining, construction, manufacturing and transport*** is more probable, since this mismatch concerns 11 member states: Bulgaria, Germany, Ireland, Estonia, Greece, Spain, Cyprus, Hungary, Austria and the United Kingdom. On the other hand, a skills [shortage](#) for this occupation has been reported in Hungary.

Food preparation assistants are vulnerable to skills surpluses in Spain, France, Italy and Hungary; a shortage of them affects Belgium.

Lastly, Bulgaria, Estonia, Spain, Hungary and Romania are subject to surpluses of ***street and related sales and service workers***; an excess of ***refuse workers and other elementary workers*** affect Bulgaria,

What are the trends for the future? ^[2]

The number of people employed in elementary occupations has been increasing. Between 2005 and 2015, employment grew by 8% and it is projected to grow by a further 8% between 2015 and 2025. This overall growth conceals differences between the various types of elementary occupations. Almost all occupations are expecting employment growth (with more positive forecast for labourers in mining, construction, etc., around 12% growth), except street and related sales and service workers, where employment is forecast to decline by almost 10%.

Workers in elementary occupations span all sectors. Cleaners and helpers are employed mainly in administration and other services (about 30% of all cleaners and helpers) and other services (around 25%). Over 80% agricultural labourers work in the agriculture sector, as expected; and labourers in mining, construction and manufacturing are mainly found in manufacturing and wholesale and retail (about 30% in each of them), and construction (15%). Over two thirds of food preparation assistants are found mainly in the accommodation and retail sector and those in street and related sales mainly in wholesale and retail (around 75%). Refuse workers are found across a variety of sectors with public administration having the highest concentration (of only ca. 13% of all refuse workers). Though employment growth across elementary occupations will differ between 2015 and 2025, the above industrial structure of employment will remain more or less unchanged.

Looking to the future, the combination of growth in the number of people employed and the number of workers who are expected to leave the occupation mainly due to retirement ('replacement demand') ^[3], will mean that there will be about 11.8 million job openings across the EU needing to be filled between 2015 and 2025. It is estimated that 85% of these new job openings will be driven by replacement demand.

Traditionally, almost all people working in elementary occupations hold low or medium level qualifications. Interestingly, by 2025, the share of highly qualified ones will almost double, reaching about 14%. More than half of these employees will continue to hold medium level qualifications.

More information on employment trends for this occupation can be found elsewhere on the [Skills Panorama](#).

Which drivers of change will affect their skills?

The employment growth in elementary occupations can be attributed to the [polarisation of skills in the labour market](#). There are a number of factors underlying this trend:

- the theory of **task-based technological change (TBTC)** ^[4] that identifies technological change to mainly impact routine jobs, which do not require their incumbents to respond to outside stimuli.

Accordingly, their jobs can be replaced by technology, which **automates** the tasks workers once carried out. It has been observed that routine jobs, susceptible to being replaced by automation, are typically found in the middle of the occupational structure (administrative jobs and skilled production jobs) ^[5]. Higher level skilled jobs which require their incumbents to utilise cognitive skills cannot be readily substituted by automation (at least to the same extent). Lower skilled jobs, such as those found in hospitality, require their incumbents to interact with customers such that they are less vulnerable to substitution by automation compared with middle-level jobs. The greater use of robots in the future may have an impact on this relationship, but historically automation seems to have had the result of hollowing out the labour market. ^[6] Additionally, some elementary jobs, such as those in agriculture, are more susceptible to automation. ^[7] Moreover, remaining jobs are unlikely to experience up-skilling: rather, new devices are likely to reduce the demand for, e.g., heavy lifting, etc. with simple machine operation replacing manual labour.

- **globalisation** is another key driver of change for elementary occupations whereby many jobs have been transferred to countries with lower labour costs. ^[8] This has been observed in manufacturing where many manual production jobs have been transferred to low labour cost countries outside the EU.
- finally, **rising levels of income inequality** have created a demand from well-off people for a range of **personal services** (for example, cleaning), and a strong supply of much less well-off people willing to provide these services. ^[9] This has been observed in relation to work-life balance, where some large corporations provide a range of 'concierge services' to their senior executives so that they are able to spend more time at work. The impact of this is to stimulate job growth at the lower end of the occupational distribution. Much of this work involving personal services is non-routine in nature and thus is less susceptible to automation, too.

If one considers some of the drivers of demand for elementary occupations in specific sectors, there are additional issues such as:

- the impact of an **ageing population** on the demand for **personal care services (health and social care)** which will undoubtedly require workers in elementary occupations to provide non-routine services such as personal and home care involving activities such as bathing, foot care, etc.;
- changes in **consumer preferences** affecting elementary occupations in the retail sectors. There is increasing use of online retailing and use of self-serve check outs and kiosks in various outlets (including shops, banks and airports). Such change has negative implications for the numbers of elementary workers, although in the case of online shopping there is some compensating increase in the number of those required in warehousing and logistics. For those still working in retail outlets and others, there is likely to be greater need for customer service and communication skills.
- there is also demand for more **personalised**, face-to-face customer service skills to be provided by workers in elementary occupations in areas such as retail (particularly up-market retailers) and hospitality (e.g. concierge services). The tasks involved in providing such services are mainly non-routine and therefore require good communication and customer service skills.

How can these skill needs be met?

Many elementary jobs provide a means of labour market entry for people. In this sense, the time spent by people in elementary jobs may be transitional. But because wage levels are low and opportunities for ongoing professional development and training may be limited, there is a danger that people become trapped in low wage, low skill work in elementary occupations. Policy and regulation regarding contractual arrangements, work conditions and working time also have implications, many negative, for elementary workers; for example some types of flexible working arrangements particularly in sectors affected by seasonal fluctuations (e.g. care work, retail, hospitality). These arrangements, such as zero-hour and part-time contracts are more frequent in some Member States over the past decade and more common for low-skilled workers in low-paid jobs ^[10] and reduce even further the likelihood of their being able to access skills development opportunities. ^[11] The skill challenge, therefore, is to improve the employability of people working in elementary occupations such that they have the opportunity to experience some upward occupational mobility. ^[12]

A significant share of jobs at elementary occupations is undertaken by third-country migrants ^[13]. Many of these immigrants have no or poor language skills of the host country and may be low-qualified; or have higher qualifications, but no documentation of them. Therefore, more than two in five third-country nationals residing in the EU and holding high-level qualifications are found in medium or even low-skilled occupations ^[14]. Developing their skills will improve their [integration into local societies](#) and their productivity as workers. The [New Skills Agenda of the European Commission](#) identifies the importance of ripping the existing skills of migrants through [validation and recognition of their skills and qualifications](#); as well as the need to support their skill formation through dedicated learning initiatives.

Almost by definition, jobs listed as elementary occupations especially in the primary sector (such as agriculture or fishing) have low requirements for skills or educational attainment levels ^[15]. But elementary jobs do not need to be devoid of training and qualifications. As the example below indicates, the British Institute of Cleaning Science has introduced a qualification for cleaners – the Cleaning Professional's Skills Suite (CPSS) 2.0 Qualification.

What do I need to do to achieve the CPSS 2.0 qualification?

To be awarded CPSS 2.0 accreditation the minimum requirement is the three Mandatory units: (1) Chemical competence; (2) Safe assembly & care of equipment; and (3) Storage of equipment & materials. These mandatory skills ensure the safety of the operative, the users of the building, and sustainability of the building. Following the successful completion of the three mandatory units, operatives will then learn what skills are directly relevant to them and the environment they are cleaning in, tailored to meet the specific needs of the business.

Source: [British Institute of Cleaning Science](#)

A further challenge in relation to skills is the relatively high incidence of over-qualification in elementary occupations ^[16]. This may reflect two issues: the trend toward more people with high skills (and often higher levels of educational attainment) being employed in low-skilled jobs ^[17]; and, a tendency for

workers in low skilled jobs to more often report, compared to workers in higher skilled jobs, that they are over-skilled ^[18]. Where workers' skills are under-utilised or where they are overqualified and there is little room for progression (as is often the case in elementary occupations), there are concerns over recruitment and retention.

References

- [1] Defined as ILO ISCO 08 groups 91-96. More details on the sub-occupations can be found in ESCO: [ISCO 91 Cleaners and helpers](#); [ISCO 92 Agricultural, forestry and fishery labourers](#); [ISCO 93 Labourers in mining, construction, manufacturing and transport](#); [ISCO 94 Food preparation assistants](#); [ISCO 95 Street and related sales and service workers](#); and [ISCO 96 Refuse workers and other elementary workers](#).
- [2] 2016 [Cedefop forecast](#)
- [3] More information on replacement demand and how it drives employment across sectors, can be found on the Skills Panorama [here](#).
- [4] Autor, D. & Dorn, D., (2009), 'The Growth of Low Skill Service Jobs and the Polarization of the U.S. Labor Market' *National Bureau of Economic Research: Working Paper 15150*, Autor, D, Levy, F & Murnane, R 2003, 'The skill content of recent technological change: an experimental exploration' *Quarterly Journal of Economics*. 118(4), 1279-1333.
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[12] European Commission DG Enterprise and Industry 2014 *High Level Forum for a Better Functioning Food Supply Chain* (See chapter 6)

[13] For example, see European Research Area, MAFE project 2013 *African migrants at work: Labour market integration in Europe & re-integration of returnees*, MAFE PROJECT Policy Briefing No. 4

[14] Communication from the Commission to the European parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 2016, Action Plan on the integration of third country nationals

[15] CEDEFOP, (2015), *Skills, qualifications and jobs in the EU: the making of a perfect match?-Evidence from Cedefop's European skills and jobs survey*

[16] Ibid.

[17] Dolphin, T., (2015), 'Technology, globalisation and the future of work in Europe: essays on employment in a digitized economy' *Institute for Public Policy Research* London. (see Figure 14)

[18] CEDEFOP, (2015), *Skills, qualifications and jobs in the EU: the making of a perfect match?-Evidence from Cedefop's European skills and jobs survey* (see figure 14)

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