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The Indispensables: Our truly essential workers

Findings for a political examination of their
outlook and demands in today's 'transformation society'

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Table of contents

Executive Summary	4
1. The world of work as a place of change	5
2. What we know about (foundation) work in a society undergoing transformation	8
2.1 Foundation work – guiding concept with its challenges	8
2.2 The state of research on foundation work	9
2.3 (Foundation) work and political attitudes in the ‘transformation society’	12
3. Methodology	13
3.1 Focus groups	13
3.2 Qualitative interviews	13
3.3 Opinion poll	14
4. Assessment of foundation work in Germany	16
4.1 What defines foundation work?	16
4.2 Foundation work as emblematic of an unequal labour market	27
5. Good (foundation) work in the ‘transformation society’	37
6. Political conclusions	44
Endnotes	48
References	50
Authors	54
Imprint and acknowledgments	56

Executive Summary

They clean offices, deliver meals, fit car parts or stack supermarket shelves. People whose work requires no formal qualifications yet who lay the *foundations* of our societies. At the same time, these workers in unskilled jobs (whom we shall call foundation workers) are comprehensively ignored in key reform debates. Our study seeks to change this. It attempts to assess foundation work in comparison with skilled jobs and poses the question: *What are the working and living conditions of foundation workers and how do they view their own work and society itself.*

Given a changing world of work uprooted by the ecological and digital transformation underway, our study also examines the democratic relevance of work. It asks: *How do insecure working conditions in foundation work but also on the entire labour market impact people's trust in democracy and openness towards transformational processes?*

To answer these questions, we adopted a multi-method design for our research, made up of qualitative interviews, focus groups and an opinion poll. The results show: Foundation workers are disadvantaged in their place on the labour market. Compared with people in skilled professions, they have fewer formal resources for adapting to and navigating a transitioning world of work. At the same time, their interests are rarely taken up in the world of politics and society. Unsurprisingly, their trust in political actors and democratic institutions is low. Yet, for our democracy, foundation workers are indispensable thrice over: socially, economically, and politically.

Socially indispensable

As a society, we rely upon foundation work. Supermarket shelves must be filled, the old and sick cared for, public spaces cleaned. A material and immaterial improvement of working conditions in foundation work is therefore in the interests of society as a whole.

Economically indispensable

Foundation work pervades our economic system. A fifth of employees in Germany work in unskilled jobs – in manufacturing as well as services. Depending on the sector, employee relations and working conditions vary substantially. In times of seismic economic change, equalisation of those relations and conditions across all sectors is vital if one is to provide employees with a sense of security and counteract the fear of losing one's status as well as divisions among wage-earners.

Politically indispensable

Given the growing approval for right-wing populist parties among workers, it is alarming from a democratic perspective that the concerns of foundation workers go unheard. The more secure and autonomous employees feel in their work, the more open they are towards the transformative processes underway and the stronger their trust in democracy. Buttressing democracy comes with removing precarity – in the sense of boosting financial, physical and psychological security as well as autonomy, participation, and solidarity in the workplace.

1. The world of work as place of change

Our society faces huge challenges posed by change. The rebooting of the economy and society towards net zero, growing digitalisation and automation as well as ageing in our society bring with them enormous adaptation pressures – not least in the labour market and among employees. Working patterns are changing, employment fields are withering away, new economic branches and jobs are emerging.

Political debates about the digital and ecological transformation of the economy and industry take place miles away from the day-to-day life and work of un-skilled employees. The *Bundestag* (German Parliament) decides upon industrial electricity prices, export duties and fleet limits, while these workers clean MPs' offices overnight, serve meals in the canteen and deliver letters and packages. About 20 % of the employed labour force in Germany works in areas requiring no formal qualification but, at the same time, these people are the foundation of our economy and society. In cleaning, hospitality, manufacturing, logistics or health and social care – foundation workers are present in every nook and cranny of our daily lives; their work is *indispensable* for society.

The fact that a fifth of German employees are comprehensively ignored in key reform debates is problematic. This is all the more so given a background of often insecure, physically demanding, badly paid jobs offering little chance of co-determination. Caring for an ageing population cannot be guaranteed if care workers are forced to reduce their working hours due to exhaustion. The energy transition will slacken off if there is not enough staff to install and maintain solar and wind farms.

If we are to cope with the ongoing transformation, a sustainable and socially just labour market is a *sine qua non*. That's because secure jobs and employment conditions are a core element of people's lives and play an important social function. This is where people find friendship and solidarity, experience democratic co-determination and work together with others to resolve problems. Given all the insecurities we live through in times of change, the world of work offers the prospect of getting employees on board with the transition, giving them security and perspective and allowing them to take part in shaping the process of change through co-determination at the workplace.

Instead of using the world of work's potential to garner people's support for the transformation, the very opposite is taking place. We live in a period marked by great economic uncertainty and political shocks. Employees feel above all the direct negative effects of rapid change on their daily working lives: work intensification, changing demands, job-cuts. People worry about the rising cost of living, the direct personal impact of economic insecurities and their own job's future. In times of economic recession, politicians lack the courage and legitimacy to bring to life and fruition ambitious projects for change. At the same time, right-wing populist and far-right political actors succeed beyond measure in weaponizing social insecurity. In the *Bundestag* elections of 2025, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) – since classified by the German domestic intelligence services as extreme-right – won 38 % of the vote among workers and thereby more votes among this class than the conservatives (CDU/CSU) and the social democrats (SPD) combined (Tagesschau, 2025).

The fact that the effects of transformative change on employees' real working lives barely figure in political discussion represents not just a labour market but a democratic challenge. Social acceptance is the key requisite for the successful political management of the transformation agenda. If there is no trust in political actors and democratic institutions or a lack of fundamental openness towards societal change, it is pretty much impossible to win a majority for any ambitious pro-transformation programme. The world of work takes on a decisive role in this regard: It is here that efforts to come to terms with and meet the responsibilities for managing these changes succeed or not. If the transformation is to come to pass, jobs and employment relations must move to the heart of the political debate.

Within this political context, our study has two over-riding goals. For one, it conducts a survey of foundation work in Germany. This involves around eight million unskilled employees, who are among the most vulnerable on the German labour market. We examine in depth the following questions: *How does one define the labour market segment known as foundation work, and in what respect does it differ from skilled employment? What are the work-related and living realities for foundation workers across a variety of sectors, and what is their perspective on their job and society?* Concretely, we investigate empirically what marks out foundation work in Germany and to what extent there exist cross-sectoral common features or indeed differences in working conditions and collective political attitudes among foundation workers. The study therewith contributes to an ongoing discussion on labour market and social policies in scientific and political circles that has continuously taken on a bigger dimension since the Covid-19 pandemic and the debate over essential jobs (see e.g. Grosse-Jäger et al., 2021; Rump & Eilers, 2024). Going beyond the contribution to the academic debate, the results aim to provide insights into the extent to which the concept of foundation work is also suitable for addressing unskilled employees politically, and what a possible alternative might look like.

Moreover, and going beyond an exclusive focus on foundation work, the study's second aim is to put the democratic relevance of the world of work in times of socio-economic change under the microscope. We want to know: *What is the impact of insecure working conditions in foundation work but also in the entire labour market upon trust in democracy and openness towards transformational processes?*

To answer these questions, a multidimensional research design was chosen; this combines qualitative interviews, focus groups and an opinion poll among 2169 employees. Our research results and political learnings therefrom show: Any examination of foundation work must, on the one hand, focus on the cross-sectoral commonalities which enable us to distinguish foundation work from skilled occupations. This allows for developing political approaches towards the material and immaterial improvement of unskilled occupations. On the other hand, there is a need for a differentiated analysis of foundation work, which brings to the fore specific sectoral differences in terms of working conditions, pay rates, co-determination and occupational health and safety, and which aims to apply them politically in order to equalise employment relations across different sectors. In considering the link between working conditions and political outlook, what emerges is that the dividing line is not between foundation work and skilled occupations but much more between good, secure employment and insecure working conditions. The study comes to the conclusion that foundation workers are socially, economically, and politically indispensable and a political examination of their perspectives and demands is vital. This way, beyond a purely research-oriented readership, the results should be of interest to labour market politicians.

This publication is part of the project, "Foundation work in the 'transformation society'", which the *Das Progressive Zentrum* is conducting with financial support from the Federal Ministry for Work and Social Affairs. The project pursues the goal of giving voice to those in the labour market

who often go unheard in political debates. Foundation workers themselves are invited to join the conversation, and their points of view are a key element of our investigation. In the accompanying documentary, *The Indispensables*, this promise is also met audio-visually. The study's results form the basis for an extensive practical process of developing policy recommendations for improving labour conditions in foundation work and beyond. This is being undertaken with participation from representatives from the worlds of research, politics, employer and employee associations and companies alongside co-operation with employees themselves.

The study is structured as follows. Following this introduction (1), we provide a short overview of the state of research on foundation work and the link between working conditions and political attitudes (2). Section 3 introduces our methodological approach, before going on to discuss the results in sections 4 and 5. Here, we first lay out the common characteristics in foundation work vis-à-vis skilled occupations and analyse the heterogeneity of this labour market segment (4). Then follows an analysis of the role of good (foundation) work in the transformation and of the effects of insecure employment conditions on political attitudes (5). The study ends with central political conclusions that provide key insights for the following process of developing policy recommendations for the material and immaterial improvement of foundation work (6).

2. What we know about (foundation) work in a society undergoing transformation

2.1 Foundation work – guiding concept with its challenges

There is an array of terms for occupations requiring no formal training. Social partners tend mainly to speak of *unskilled occupations* or *employees*. Researchers use the concepts of *elementary work* (e.g. Hall & Sevindik, 2020), *assistant activities* or *assistant occupations* (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2021). These concepts have in common a linguistic downgrading of the employees and their work. They suggest that the employees possess no qualifications and their job involves simple, easy work.

This prompted the Federal Ministry for Work and Social Affairs to introduce the concept of foundation work as a way of describing unskilled work (see e.g. Grosse-Jäger et al., 2021). This is an effort to not only find a positive, appreciative description for this group of employees, but one that appeals to shared experiences and fosters a common identity. Linguistically, it is meant to signify the basic function of this work as the underlying foundation of the economic system that sustains core social structures. The concept furthermore ties into the public debate on essential work and the societal importance of certain occupations that featured widely in politics and society during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In practical reality, the concept is not without controversy. One reason is conceptual blurriness: not every job falling under the definition of foundation work is systemically important – and not all systemically important occupations are foundation work. Consider, for example, the highly qualified, systemically important and much-respected job of doctor. So, any job-related¹ definition of foundation work creates a division between different occupations in one sector and in one place of work. In some contexts, then, foundation work is more narrowly defined, for example in a study by the University of Tübingen as systemically important jobs requiring no qualifications (Babst et al., 2021). Any attempt to offer symbolic recognition via a novel definition runs into further criticism. We saw how, at least for a short period, socially attested importance during the pandemic scarcely resulted in any material or immaterial upgrading of employment relations. In the aftermath, employees themselves and trade unions voiced sharp criticism of an attempted linguistic revalorisation that at the same time brought with it no demands for material improvements.

This shows: The concept of foundation work is tied up with issues about how it plays out operationally and about descriptive precision, as well as how effective it is in political discourse. This also comes out in the findings of our focus groups and interviews, where we discussed the concept of foundation work with participants. For those questioned, the definition is not self-explanatory and, in an initial reaction, it often provokes other associations, for example grassroots work for political parties. After a brief discussion, participants associated the concept with jobs requiring little or no qualifications or those carried out as marginal employment². Accepting the definition

of one's own job as foundation work varies across industries. The concept reflects the multiplicity of work activities to a limited extent only. At best, the concept was accepted as applying to cleaning staff, warehouse workers and logistics workers. It was identified by the fewest number among parcel delivery drivers who find themselves right at the end of the supply chain and among care assistants who stress the interpersonal nature of their work. A female care assistant criticised the sober, cold tone of the concept:

"[...] It's too heartless for me. There's much more going on with this job." (Care assistant, female, aged 38)³

Similarly, the focus group with hospitality workers found the concept a poor fit with their own work:

"Well, I'd rather link this to mini-jobs. [...] I'm not doing a mini-job but a wide range of work activities, a diverse job." (Kitchen assistant, female, aged 47)

It becomes clear that, in the eyes of the focus group participants, the concept of foundation work does not really amount to an upgrade of activities that, one way or the other, fail to win recognition or respect. "Foundation" in the eyes of those questioned suggests not only elementary, unskilled work activity, but that one is positioned at the bottom of the occupational and social ladder:

"Foundation work sounds pretty low-threshold, like the minimum one can do [...]. It makes me feel like I'm not valued enough for what I do." (Cleaning staff, female, aged 19)

"I found it quite negative [...]. It comes over as lacking in something and inadequate [...]. I couldn't settle for that. Foundation smacks of low budget." (Production line worker, male, aged 39)

To what extent the concept of foundation work nevertheless offers some potential for identifying and politically defining unskilled employees remains open. Care assistants and trained healthcare workers have, presumably, more in common as regards their working conditions than, for example, a care assistant and a cleaner who can both be defined as foundation workers but face quite different issues in their everyday work. Despite the lack of scientific and political unity around this concept, the following text uses the designation "foundation work" to describe unskilled work activities. The present investigation links thereby to a growing field of scholarly research (see Section 2.2 below) into this very theme and seeks to help answer the question of how far "foundation work" is an effective analytical and political category for examining a rapidly changing labour market in the 'transformation society'.

2.2 The state of research on foundation work

The empirical data about this labour market segment is – partly due to the varieties of definition and operationalisation of the concept foundation work – unclear as to the scale, numbers, socio-demographic composition and employment relations contained within it (Kaboth et al., 2022). The field of research into elementary occupations and/or unskilled work that has developed in the last few years nevertheless offers some guidance. Depending on the operationalisation of the concept and the available data, unskilled work activities amount to between 16 % and 23 % of employment in the whole labour force; between six and ten million do this kind of work.⁴ There is no agreement either about the growing numbers involved in foundation work. Some analyses, based on data from the Federal Labour Agency (Ittermann & Maylandt, 2024; Rump & Eilers, 2024) and on data from the Institute for Labour Market and Occupational Research (IAB) (Dettmann et al., 2019), show a rise in the absolute numbers

of unskilled jobs as well as the relative share of foundation work in the German labour market. According to an evaluation of the BIBB/BAuA (Federal Institute of Vocational Education/Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health) survey of employees, however, there is a downwards trend in the share of elementary work in all employee relations within the labour force as a whole (Hall & Sevindik, 2020; Kaboth et al., 2022). Given notably the background of digitalisation, it is relevant to ask to what extent assistant occupations are changing or will remain in place (see e.g. Dengler & Matthes, 2018). Overall, one can state: With a share estimated by Ittermann & Maylandt (2024) at around 20 % of all employees in 2023, foundation workers amount to a relevant group of employees which will continue to exist in the short to longer term within a labour market subject to ecological and technological change.

Sectoral, segmental and occupational structure

Going by economic sectors, foundation workers can be found mainly in the services sector and in manufacturing. In both absolute and percentage terms, foundation work is spread most widely across services, where 72 % (around 4 million) of foundation workers are employed. In manufacturing, it is about 1.5 million or some 26.1 % of this group of employees. The primary sector with a share of just 1.9 % of all foundation workers is negligible (Rump & Eilers, 2024). A breakdown of foundation work according to occupational groups shows that the greatest part of foundation workers is employed in transport and logistics (20 %), thereafter in cleaning (12.5 %). In these two occupational groups, unskilled jobs are preponderant. In cleaning 78 % of employees are foundation workers and in transport and logistics it is just above 50 %. Many foundation workers are furthermore active in manufacturing in the area of food production and processing, in social work and education, in health and social care, in metals production and processing, in hospitality as well as retail sales (Seibert et al., 2021).

Sociodemographic composition

Despite this spread of employment in a variety of sectors, the analysis of employment statistics – among others, the one of the Federal Labour Agency into the required performance of unskilled occupations (Ittermann & Maylandt 2024; Rump & Eilers, 2024) – allows for an approximation of the socio-demographic composition of the group of foundation workers in Germany. In the main, women are more often than men employed in foundation work: 17 % of employed women are active in foundation work compared with 15.6 % of men (Seibert et al., 2021). Then again, in absolute numbers, there are more male than female foundation workers. More pertinent here is to look into individual industries and types of job. Here, a differential analysis by Hall and Sevindik (2020) shows that foundation work with a short training period is practised mainly by women whereas that with longer lead-ins, as found more often in the industrial sector, is heavily male-dominated. As such, gender is a relevant category that structures foundation work. Foundation work also plays a central role for migrants: 35.5 % of foreign workers in Germany were active in foundation work in 2021 – versus 12.5 % of employees with German nationality. Thus, the increase in foundation work since 2015 can be traced back almost exclusively to the entry of migrants onto the German labour market. The age distribution within foundation work shows that unskilled jobs are especially important for younger and elderly groups of employees. The proportion of foundation workers among those under 25 is at 25 % strikingly high. Among elderly workers aged over 55 it is closer to around 17 %. What is striking here is that it has been rising constantly since 2017 (Rump & Eilers, 2024). Finally, a glance into educational attainment is instructive: The share of foundation workers with occupational training or an academic degree is at around 75 % lower than in the population as a whole. There, the proportion reaches 91 % (Kaboth et al., 2022). Nevertheless, this shows clearly: The group of foundation workers cannot be equated with that of unskilled employees and under-

scores the necessity of an occupation-centred definition of foundation work as jobs requiring no formal qualification – independent of the employees' educational attainment.

Employment relations and working conditions

Extant empirical research on so-called elementary work or unskilled jobs points to the fact that in the area of foundation work compared to the labour force as a whole, there are more often than not atypical and precarious employment relations alongside poor working conditions. Hence, a higher proportion of employees work part-time, in temporary jobs and on short-term contracts (Kaboth et al., 2022; Schmucker & Sinopoli, 2021). Furthermore, compared to qualified occupations, the proportion of marginal employment in foundation work is especially high at around 25 % (Ittermann & Maylandt, 2024). These employment relations often lead to very little planning for one's professional future and come with personal and financial insecurities. On top of this, these jobs in the area of foundation work can be characterised as more often than not excessively routine, monotonous, almost totally lacking in any sense of autonomy, offering little prospect of co-determination or consultation. They also offer little or no prospects for training and promotion (Bellmann et al., 2015; Hall & Sevindik, 2020; Rump & Eilers, 2024). Pay structures are very different from those in qualified occupations. Foundation workers have on average a lower earnings potential, a strikingly high number of them have a gross monthly income of less than €1500 a month (Kaboth et al., 2022). Pay, then again, depends on the level of education and is, among foundation workers without any vocational qualification, significantly lower (Schmucker & Sinopoli, 2021). The greater risk of precarity is enhanced via certain industry structures that are prevalent in some sectors with a large share of unskilled workers, such as in parcel delivery. Outsourcing of services and subcontracting heighten precarious employment situations, such as illegal employment, difficulties in exercising and enforcing of employment rights, lack

of adequate health and safety controls, little or no co-determination and no collective bargaining (Walser & Kärcher, 2023).

The state of research on foundation work makes clear that a differentiated consideration of this employment segment according to sector, gender structure or job function, is necessary. What distinguishes various groups of foundation workers and how they differ with regard to employment relations and working conditions is a key component of this study. Thereby, our investigation links to preliminary work by Thomas Wind (see e.g. Wind, 2020), who has given us an early insight into different types of foundation work via qualitative interviews and focus group discussions.

2.3 (Foundation) work and political attitudes in the 'transformation society'

Just like in the political debate, the role of unskilled jobs in the ongoing transition is under-examined in research. Research into unskilled and/or foundation work has so far concentrated upon the effects of individual processes such as digitalisation on employment fields (see e.g. Ittermann & Virgillito, 2019). The wider socio-economic context and how foundation workers find their way in a labour market undergoing huge changes is often left out. Their socio-economic positioning in the transition and how this ties in with their political attitudes is minimally researched.

In examining the link between lived working experience and political attitudes, we rely on available research in the field of sociology. Studies show that the more precarious their conditions of employment and job status are, the lower the trust among employees in democracy (Zandonella et al., 2020). Here, job status⁵ and insecure employment relations – such as contract length, part-time work and low pay – are decisive factors. The same goes for breaches of

employment law, unreliable management, discriminatory practices along with a drive to maximise profits instead of looking after the well-being of employees (ibid).⁶

In contrast, experiencing real solidarity and standing up for oneself in terms of autonomy and co-determination have a positive impact upon trust in democracy (Hövermann et al., 2025; Kiess & Schmidt, 2020). The more employees see themselves as active subjects in their workplace, the higher their general satisfaction with the democratic system and how it functions in Germany – and the greater their scope for political action in their own eyes. This is defined as Industrial Citizenship: the “status of wage-earner as autonomous or co-determined citizen in the workplace” (Kiess et al., 2023, p. 5). Putting it the other way round: If employees cannot organise and plan their work autonomously, if they do not feel as active subjects in their work and remain exposed to economic developments as passive objects, they are more susceptible to anti-democratic attitudes (ibid).

Whilst the link between lived work experience and democratic attitudes is increasingly a subject of research, the influence of working conditions upon one’s overall openness towards socio-economic transformation processes gets very little coverage. Here one suspects that experiences of insecurity and precarity at work make one warier about transformation processes in both society and the economy. In their comprehensive social study, *Triggerpunkte* (2023), the sociologists Steffen Mau, Thomas Lux and Linus Westheuser, observe a link between people’s socio-economic position and their view of transition processes. In particular, people in low-skilled occupations and from groups with low levels of education and income tend to perceive themselves as passive objects rather than active agents of change. The transformation underway is not seen as something they can shape and associate it with “stress, tension and helplessness” (Mau et al., 2023, p. 347). The way in which this “change exhaustion” is heavily class-related is explained by Mau et al. as driven by the fact that “capabilities, cognitive

adaptability and experiences of successful and autonomous life-management” (2023, S. 349) are unevenly distributed. Albeit this is not the explicit subject of the research undertaken by Mau et al., the class-related structure of the phenomenon of “change exhaustion” allows for the working assumption that there is indeed a link between the experienced security and autonomy at work and one’s own adaptability – and thereby the openness towards transformation processes.

This is where our study ties in. It examines, for one thing, the observed link between certain factors in the work situation and trust in democracy. For another, it looks at how far such a link can also be seen when it comes to openness towards the unfolding ecological and digital transformation. The results yield information about how far the links indicated in the literature about both foundation workers and employees in Germany as a whole hold true, and the extent to which they matter for democratic stability in times of change.

3. Methodology

In order to draw up a comprehensive inventory of employment relations, working conditions and political attitudes within foundation work, we deployed a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. In concrete terms, this meant developing a mixed-method research format with focus groups, qualitative one-to-one interviews and a quantitative opinion poll (survey period summer/autumn 2024). This way we were able to gain at one and the same time an in-depth, complex understanding of the working reality for foundation workers and a roughly representative grasp in quantitative terms of the working conditions and pattern of political attitudes among interviewees. The following questions were at the heart of this enquiry:

- How do foundation workers perceive their living and working conditions?
- To what extent do they feel noticed by society and represented in politics?
- How do they experience the digital and ecological transformation, and how do they assess the societal consequences and political management of these processes?
- To what extent does their subjectively experienced working life affect their trust in democracy and their open-mindedness about digitalisation and climate protection?

3.1 Focus groups

The first stage involved five virtual focus group discussions lasting two hours each.⁷ These round-tables were attended by six to eight foundation workers (male and female) from the following industries: logistics, cleaning, hospitality, manufacturing and care.⁸ To create a trusting atmosphere for the discussion, the focus groups comprised exclusively women in predominantly female industries (cleaning, care) and only men in male-dominated ones (logistics, manufacturing).

Further, we ensured that in selecting and putting together the groups we took into account the demographic factors of age, family status, place of residence (east/west) and migration history (if any). We excluded the self-employed, employees with less than two years' service in this type of work and those aged under 20 or over 65.

The guidelines (see Appendix A.1) comprised three big thematic blocks: work conditions, relationship with politics and society and attitudes towards digital, ecological and social transition processes. The group discussions were recorded and evaluated on the basis of transcripts and videos. Commonalities and differences in experiences and attitudes were identified and indexed according to industry and other relevant criteria. The focus group findings served as the basis for developing the questionnaire for the quantitative opinion poll.

3.2 Qualitative interviews

As a supplement to the focus groups, we carried out eight individual interviews built around the three themes outlined above. Depending on the participant's place of residence, these interviews took place in person, online or by phone. The conversations were conducted via a shortened version of guiding questionnaire for the focus groups; they lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and took place in German and English. They were recorded, summarized in the form of anonymised result logs and evaluated analytically.

The interviews served to gather insight into further industries where foundation workers are active, such as retail, and the views of non-German employees. The atmosphere of trust further enabled a deeper understanding of individual life-stories in employment. To visualise the results, we created six personas designed

to represent the different types of foundation work, as well as the variety of industries and labour relations. These are fictive characters, who were drawn up along the lines of the focus group participants and individual interviewees. The personas were anonymised in terms of specific characteristics (name, place of residence, employer etc.) but the quotes are based on the actual words of respondents.

3.3 Opinion poll

The quantitative part of our data-set came from a one-off opinion poll. Responses were gathered by forsa online with the aid of the forsa.omninet panel between October 10 and 25, 2024. In total, a representative sample of 1017 foundation workers and a comparator group of 1152 employees who require a professional qualification in the form of training or studying for their job took part.⁹

In drawing up the questionnaire (see Appendix C.1), we reverted to tried-and-tested survey items in established employment opinion polls¹⁰ to ask about work conditions, attitudes towards democracy and open-mindedness about the transition. The draft questionnaire was discussed with the project's consultative panel of scientific experts, as well as to the foundation workers involved in the project. Within this procedure the various survey items were revised and examined for clarity and simplicity of language suitable for the target group. At the end of this process, the final draft of the questionnaire underwent a trial run to test the clarity of the questions, interview length and the quality of the screening process.¹¹

The results were evaluated in a first step for differences between the working conditions of foundation workers and those of people in skilled occupations. Further, and drawing on the heterogeneous nature of foundation work, subgroups of foundation workers were formed based on gender, level of education, presence

of workplace-based co-determination, earnings, working week and perceived societal relevance. This allows for grasping the various job situations of the subgroups and making differentiated commentaries on the employee group we call foundation workers. To answer the research question on the link between the perceived job situation and political attitudes, a second step involved creating indexes for industrial citizenship (autonomy/co-determination at workplace), job security, trust in democracy and open-mindedness towards digitalisation and climate protection (for further details see Appendix C.2). With the help of linear regression models, we assessed links between the index on perceived job security (as measured via Principal Component Analysis (PCA)) and political attitudes towards climate protection, digitalisation and democracy. Our regression models control for the following demographic and socio-economic variables: age (reference category: 18–29 year-olds), gender (reference category: male), educational attainment (reference category: low), equivalent household income on the OECD scale (reference category €2500–4499), place of residence (reference category: west) and party-political preference (reference category: CDU/CSU). All models contain survey weights.

In examining the results, one has to take account of the panel's composition. This one is representative of the German on-line population from the age of 14, consisting of more than 150,000 participants. Recruitment for the panel takes place offline via phone interview. As the poll was conducted in German only and consisted of an online questionnaire, there is a slight breach of the representative nature of the sample – quite common and documented among comparable polls. As a result, groups with a large share of non-German-speaking employees such as migrant workers are under-represented.¹² To counteract further biases, the complete data-set was weighted, using data from the micro-census, according to federal state, gender and age. Given there are no official statistics about the proportion of foundation workers in the entire labour

force, this was assessed via the distribution in the forsa.omninet panel and the entire data-set weighted accordingly.

Given the multidimensional research model, there emerged some partially conflicting results from the focus groups and the quantitative opinion poll. This can be explained by the differing cognitive processes that were deployed in the research methods: While focus groups arrive at results discursively through joint discussion, the response options in polling are pre-determined and respondents are usually focused on answering as quickly and efficiently as possible. The results must thereby always be examined within the overall context of all the available data as well as current research literature.

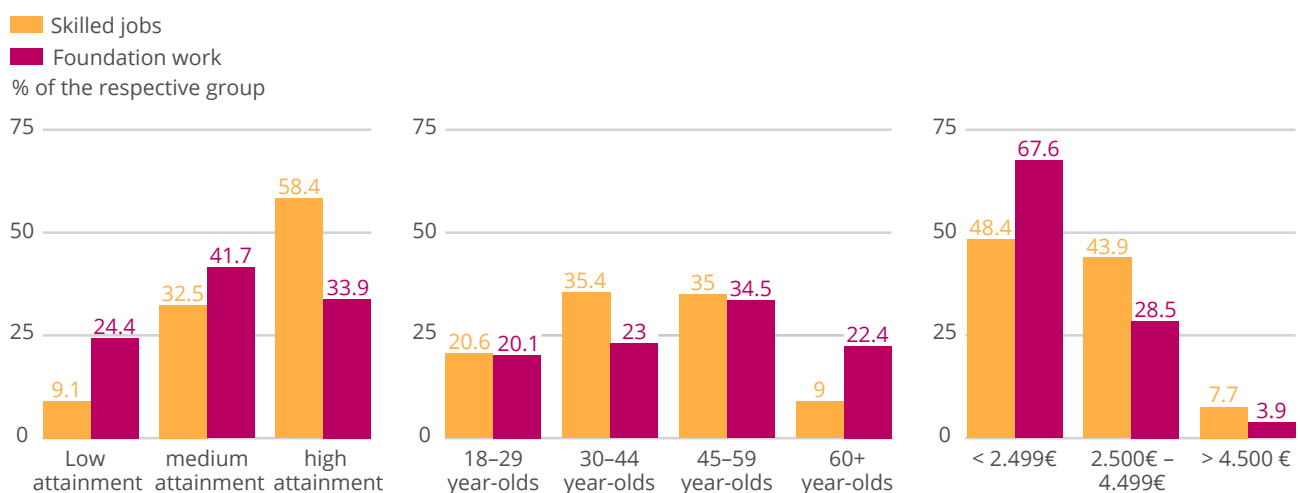
4. Assessment of foundation work in Germany

Research as it stands illustrates the heterogeneous nature of foundation work. Unskilled work takes place in a variety of industries within an array of labour relations. Even so, there are overarching commonalities that distinguish this employment field from skilled jobs. This congruence of commonalities and differences is also reflected in our research results. In the following sections, we first analyse the focus group discussions, the individual interviews and the results of the opinion poll in the light of the shared commonalities in foundation work compared to skilled jobs (4.1). We then examine differences within foundation work in terms of educational level, earnings, working hours, gender, perceived societal relevance and availability of workplace co-determination (4.2).

4.1 What characterises foundation work?

In socio-economic terms, the group of foundation workers is in a disadvantaged position in the labour market compared to skilled employees. Our data suggests that on average, these workers dispose of less cultural and economic capital than the rest of the labour force. Thus, the proportion of foundation workers with low (24.4 %) and medium (41.7 %) **educational attainment levels** is considerably higher than among qualified workers (see Fig. 1). What's more, foundation workers have a lower **household income**.¹³ In 67.6 % of cases their net household income is less than €2500 in comparison with 48.4 % among other employees. While 43.9 % of qualified jobs bring in a net household income of up to €4499, only 28.5 % of foundation workers reach this level.

Fig. 1: Distribution of comparative educational levels, age groups, and household income within foundation work versus skilled jobs



Occupation and role: Monika is forewoman of cleaning teams in a big building services firm. Among her duties are composing rotas, coordinating her teams and cleaning properties. Monika is due to retire shortly and already knows that she will have to carry on doing this job in retirement to supplement her pension.

Working day: On a typical working day, Monika gets up very early. From 5 a. m. to noon, she cleans the rooms at a savings bank and an old people's home. She has a longer break from midday before returning to work in the evening.

Personal profile: Monika is married and has a large family. When her husband was still a truck driver, she took up cleaning simply to earn a bit of pocket money. Since his retirement, she has stepped up her hours of work. Monika has no formal training and has been working for the same cleaning company for 27 years.

Attitude towards her work: Monika appreciates the social value of her work. And she is happy that she has nice colleagues and her employer is reliable. The staff in the offices she cleans are also mainly friendly to her.

Attitude towards politics and society: Even so, Monika would like society to place greater value on cleaning work. When nobody is present at the worksite during her working hours, she feels as if her work is invisible. She opposes any increase in the retirement age because of the physical strain of her work.



**“I have to do this
until I pass out.”**

Monika

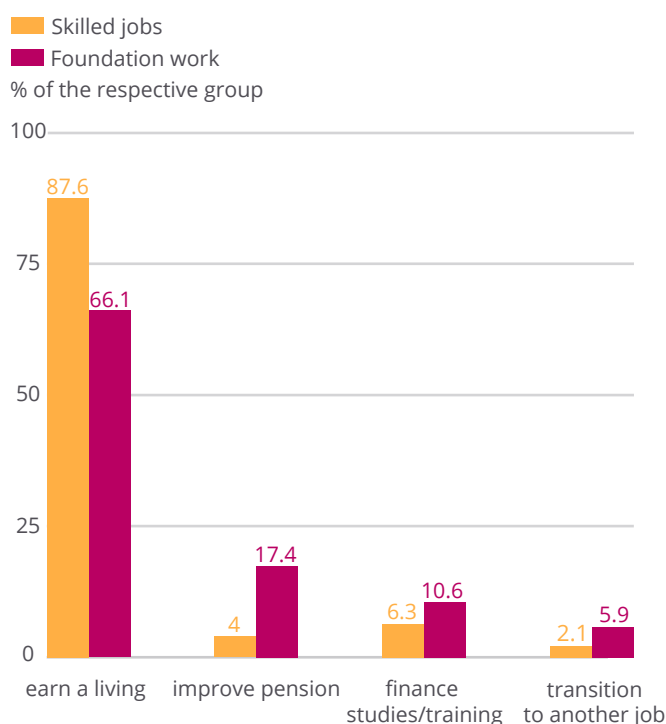
**Aged 62
Landshut**

The material differences can also be seen in how these workers view their own **financial situation**. Almost half of foundation workers agree fully or pretty much with the statement that money can be tight at the end of the month, whereas this is true for 36.5 % of employees in skilled jobs. As for their pension, 52.9 % of foundation workers versus 43.3 % of other employees fear there will not be enough to live on in retirement (see Appendix C.3). The fact that a high share of foundation workers (17.4 %) say that their job serves as a supplement to their pension shows that foundation work plays an important role among older groups of the workforce. Around a fifth (22.4 %) of foundation workers are aged 60 and over, whereas just 9 % of people in skilled jobs are in that age group.

More than earning a living – the function of foundation work for employees

Foundation work fulfils a variety of functions for people in different life situations. In comparison to skilled jobs, it is striking that people take up foundation work a lot more often for other reasons than just earning a living (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Reason for going to work among foundation workers versus people in skilled jobs



Around two-thirds – versus 87.6 % of qualified employees among respondents – admit in the opinion poll that they work to **earn a living**. A participant from the logistics sector puts his motives this way:

“You have to feed your family somehow. What you’d get from unemployment benefits wouldn’t be enough to feed my family. It amounts to next to nothing. I must go out to work, and naturally I’d also like a bit of variety in my days.”
(Warehouse worker, male, aged 61)

Often, foundation work acts as a **top-up to other income sources**. Especially, but not exclusively, female foundation workers report that they are working to contribute to their partner’s earnings which make up the bulk of the household income:

“I’m lucky that my husband earns well and that I don’t work there because I necessarily need the money, but so that I get out of the house. That’s still possible. But it’s not really a dream job.”
(Cleaner, female, aged 38)

Thus, foundation work enables individuals to contribute a bit extra to the household income on top of their caring responsibilities. However, the additional earnings model that applies to women in the vast majority of cases buttresses traditional gender-specific role-allocation and leads to poorer pension provision and an associated risk of poverty in retirement (Kümmerling & Schmiej, 2021). Furthermore, women often fail to get back into full-time working after taking on a part-time job.

For 10.6 % of foundation work respondents working **helps pay for studying or vocational training**. Entry hurdles are low; the shortage of workers often makes finding an unskilled job easy. Students often work part-time in hospitality but also in sectors like logistics or production. The hours of work, frequently outside the core working week in the early hours, evenings or at the weekend, are compatible with the time commitments of the training programme. A hotel employee describes his situation the following way:

"I'm single, study mechanical engineering and work on the side in a hotel, serving breakfast. The hours really suit my studies because it's always mornings till noon, and the rest of the day I'm in the library working on my Master's thesis." (Serving staff, male, aged 30).

Finally, foundation work also serves to **supplement one's pension**. The poll shows that 17.4 % of foundation workers treat their job as a way of improving their pension provision. Already during their working life, foundation workers fear they'll have to carry on working post-retirement:

"Yes, I'll probably have to go on working in retirement, as I don't earn enough to make any savings." (Care assistant, female, no age given)

In line with the large share of foreign passport-holders evident in the research literature, foundation work fulfils an important function as so-called **"arrival" or "entry" work**. For people who have migrated to Germany but have no training certificate or whose qualification is not recognised in Germany, unskilled jobs offer an entry into the labour market. These jobs help them settle into their new homeland, learn the language, gain economic independence and integrate into society (Salikutluk & Jacobsen, 2021). In addition to low qualification requirements, they also offer special entry prospects as these "cross-culturally characterised fields of work" already display a network of people from the same background (Yalçın et al., 2021, p. 234f). Often, however, this unskilled job turns out not to be a springboard into vocational training or another profession. The reasons for this are lack of financial resources, being too old or having a legal status which renders it hard to attain a vocational training opportunity. Particularly migrants whose professional qualifications are not recognised, are "dequalified" this way. One interviewee, who emigrated from Cameroon, describes his entry to the German labour market in these terms:

"I looked for a carpentry business, but they all said we can't take him without a residence permit. And my German wasn't any good either." (Cleaner, male, aged 52)

For people who have brought up children or looked after relatives and left the labour market during this period, foundation work represents the **possibility of (re-)entry** to working life. This is especially true for those who cannot find their way back to the type of job they have done before, or who wish to go back to only a few hours of paid work.

In this context, foundation work can also serve as a **transition to another profession**. This way, unskilled work can meet the precise purpose of earning a steady income for a certain period and bridging the timeframe within which one looks for vocational training or another job. The key is that the entry hurdles to foundation work are low, as no formal qualification is required. Here too, the transition to another line of work, for example via vocational training, may succeed but is not guaranteed. Obstacles include the financial losses that can come with pursuing vocational training. A female care assistant reports:

"Sure, I'd like to go for vocational training, but the pay during training is so low. I simply can't afford that." (Care assistant, female, no age given)

Kofi

Aged 29
Bonn



“I can’t see how this firm is helping me to learn German so I can make this company and job my life.”

Occupation and role: Kofi works as a part-time parcel delivery driver for a big logistics company. The work has eased his entry into Germany and is now paying for his family’s upkeep.

Working day: At first, Kofi worked full-time. His employer did pay for him to do a language course, but this was not compatible with his hours of work. So Kofi had to cut his hours to be able to learn German at the same time.

Personal profile: Kofi is from Ghana, he started studying biology in Hungary and has been living in Germany for three years. Before becoming a delivery driver, he worked in hospitality, but he did not earn enough there to look after his child.

Attitude towards his work: Kofi likes the exchange with his colleagues and appreciates the autonomy in delivery work. Interacting with customers at work helps him learn German. At the same time, time pressures and experiences of racism at work weigh on him.

Attitude towards politics and society: Kofi sees work as helping him integrate. In his experience, employers and politicians must, however, offer more ways for non-German speakers to have better prospects on the labour market. Furthermore, he would like his superiors to show greater respect for him and to enjoy better communications with them. His opinion is that every job is valuable, and all employees should be treated properly.

Not just because of lack of alternatives – the appreciated aspects of foundation work

All in all, foundation workers and qualified employees are similarly satisfied with their work. 81.8 % of foundation workers and 85.3 % of the remaining employees testify to being very or mostly satisfied. But aside from general satisfaction, there is a greater variety of views when it comes to favoured job characteristics. Asked about this, foundation workers cite **contact with people, working together with colleagues** as well as the possibility of **free time management** and **being autonomous at work** (see Fig. 3).

Whereas employees not engaged in foundation work cite being challenged by their job (53.8 % v 28.5 %), further occupational training prospects (30.7 % v 13.1 %) or the contribution to society (36 % v 25.5 %), foundation workers appreciate their work far more for offering the chance of **physical activity** (26.8 % v 12.1 %).

In amplifying the opinion poll results, the qualitative data further emphasises: foundation work is not taken on solely for a lack of alternatives. It is more the case that foundation workers of-

ten decide on their occupation quite decisively because of the positive aspects of the job. For example, the emphasis is put on the feeling of having achieved something at the end of the day and of seeing the results of one's own labour:

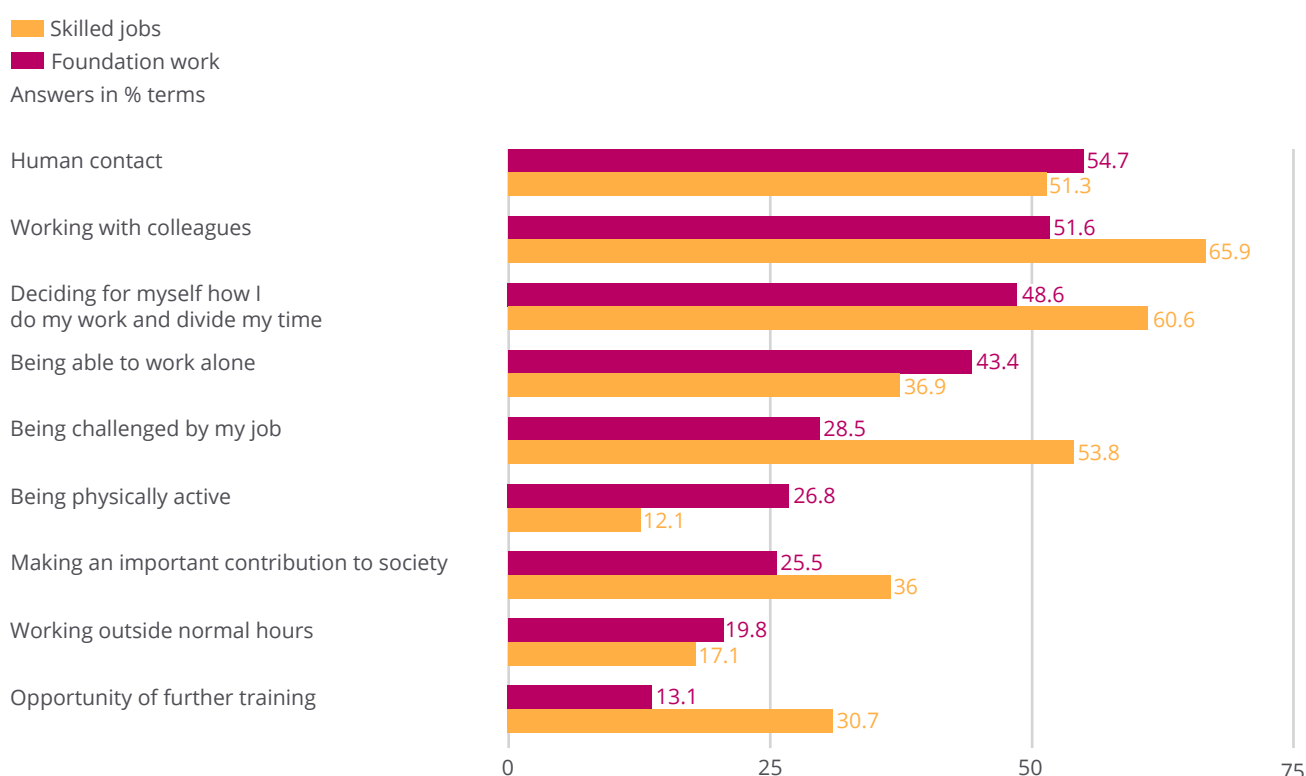
"You work on an object and are pleased when you've done it all, and you can see the result."
(Cleaner, female, aged 52)

Physical work also helps clear your head, according to foundation workers. Office jobs are explicitly turned down because of the lack of social interaction and of physical activity:

"For me, it's important to come into contact with other folk. So, I could never, for example, work alone in an office where I've only got myself for company." (Serving staff/kitchen assistant, female, aged 47)

Something similar affects foundation workers who switch out of an occupation that requires formal training. They suggest their motivation is the poor working conditions that, for example, apply in skilled social work.

Fig. 3: "What's good about your job?", foundation work versus skilled jobs



What also clearly emerges is a distinct pride in the job one does and the feeling of doing something useful for society:

"It's the feeling of being really needed [...]"
(Care assistant, female, aged 38)

The positive aspects of foundation work, much appreciated by employees, do not contradict the structural stresses and strains which they face. Rather, pride in one's work rests on defying such adversities in one's everyday work.

Material and immaterial deficits in foundation work

The focus group discussions disclose that satisfaction at work among the overwhelming majority of participants is a lot lower than their overall life satisfaction. Defects mentioned most frequently are the combination of physical and mental stress, breaches of employment rights, absence of further training opportunities and little recognition for the work one has done.

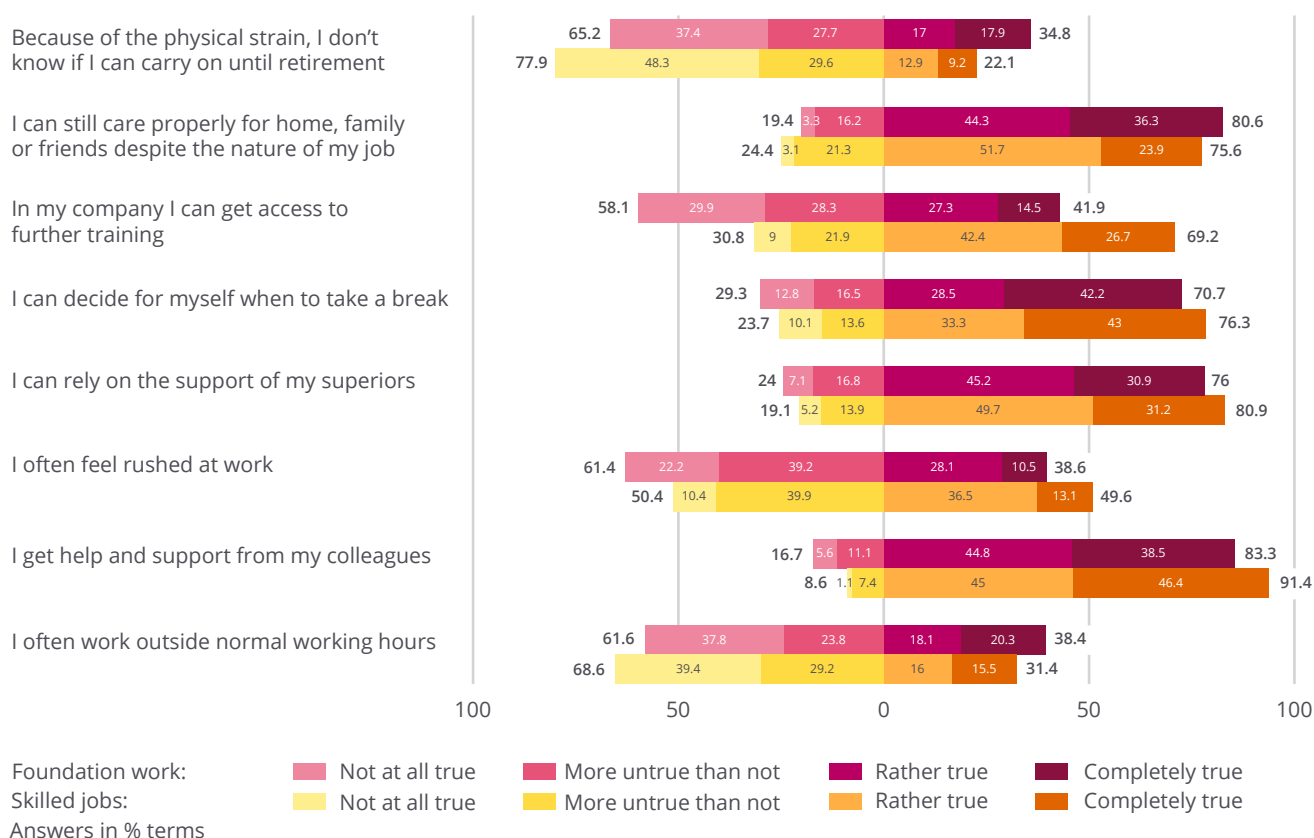
Compared to the rest of the labour force, the average foundation worker is subjected to **greater physical stress**. Around a third of respondents in foundation work (versus around a fifth in skilled jobs) are unsure whether they can continue working until retirement age (see Fig. 4). A care assistant describes the physical consequences of her occupation in the following way:

"I wonder how long I can still do this before I fall apart. On many days, it's extremely stressful. I suffer from headaches and backpain." (Care assistant, female, aged 41)

The stress involved causes many employees to work part-time, and **fluctuation**¹⁴ among the staff is high.

"You can also get pay supplements or bonuses if you stay longer than three months. That's mainly decided upon after one month. You get 200 euros if you recommend someone who sticks with the job, as the bulk of them quit because they say, it's killing them." (Warehouse worker, male, aged 59)

Fig. 4: Working conditions I, foundation work versus skilled jobs



Nesrin

Aged 47
Bremen



“I’ll carry on doing this as long as possible. I’m stubborn and tough.”

Occupation and role: Nesrin works as a care assistant in a hospital. Her job acts as secondary income to her husband’s earnings and enabled her to re-enter an occupation after having children.

Working day: She works 15 hours a week in the hospital, looking after patients. Her working hours depend upon which shift she is on.

Personal profile: Nesrin is married and has five children. It was her dream over many years to become a nurse. Because she first cared for her parents and then brought up her children, she could not complete any vocational training. So she went into care as a lateral entrant and has been doing this for six years now.

Attitude towards her work: Nesrin enjoys the close contact with other people. But time pressure and staff shortages often make her feel overwhelmed. Nesrin worries that she may no longer be able to handle the physical and psychological stress. Even so, she still wishes to become a nurse at some point – also because she would be better paid.

Attitude towards politics and society: Nesrin would like to see more societal recognition for caring jobs. She demands higher pay and more days off from her employer. She thinks that there should be more men working in the care sector because of the heavy physical burden.

38.6 % of foundation workers admit to feeling stressed at work.¹⁵ The **time pressure** and related mental stress is seen as very high – above all in services such as cleaning, care, logistics or hospitality:

“Time pressure [...] you can’t do it in the time you’re given [...]. I’m paid by the hour and if it’s not all done I have to stay on longer.” (cleaner, female, aged 38)

In this regard, foundation workers refer to increasing **work intensification**. Rising costs and, with that, financial pressures on management bring about staff savings, but the workload remains the same and these affect work quality and mental health. Beyond that, foundation workers enjoy less autonomy compared with their qualified peers when it comes to choosing when to take a break (70.7 % v 76.3 %). Some employees report failures to keep to break times. There is not enough time to eat or go to the toilet during one’s shift.

The working hours, which are more frequently outside standard working times among foundation workers (38.4 % v 31.4 %), meet different evaluations within the focus groups. For some, **working outside peak hours**, at night and/or on weekends allows for some flexibility and compatibility with family caring duties:

“I think shift working has its advantages. If my child is ill, I can share looking after them with my wife.” (Production line worker, male, aged 40)

For others, on the other hand, shift working is stressful and brings constraints in one’s private life, such as in fostering friendships or with respect to family duties:

“Hospitality is hard work. We always work in the evenings [...]. So having friends in hospitality mainly goes through people who work in the same trade, so that one meets up around 1 or 2 am at night after the work.” (Waiter, male, aged 44)

In comparison with respondents in skilled occupations, it is striking that foundation workers more frequently fear they will not continue to be **paid if they are sick** (16.2 % v 4.2 %). In Germany, all workers have a right to continued pay if they are unfit for work because of sickness (Maschke, 2012). The fact that even so a sixth of foundation workers are worried about a breach of labour law on the one hand indicates a lack of knowledge among employees, but on the other hand also points to the state’s failure to enforce labour rights. Particularly in sectors typically occupied by foundation workers, where employees overwhelmingly work for subcontractors, there is a frequent lack of effective occupational health and safety inspections (Waiser & Kärcher, 2023).

A key characteristic of foundation work is the lack of occupational **training opportunities**. Only 41.9 % of foundation workers compared with 69.2 % of respondents in skilled occupations indicate that further occupational training courses are available for them. With a gap of some 27 percentage points, this issue of training figures in the opinion poll as one of the strongest difference markers between foundation and skilled jobs. Focus group participants also report on the lack of opportunities to get further training or promotions at their work-place:

“Although I’ve got the basic knowledge [...], I couldn’t work my way up as I don’t have the formal training, but neither were further training opportunities offered [by the employer].” (cleaner, female, aged 44)

Along with the aforementioned material challenges, foundation workers on average possess fewer immaterial resources. They experience **less solidarity and autonomy** in their work than people in skilled occupations. In the opinion poll, they cite less frequently getting support from colleagues (83.3 % v 91.4 %) and their superiors (76 % v 80.9 %), have less of a feeling that they can change anything for the better at work (57.8 % v 67.6 %) and are less often informed about to

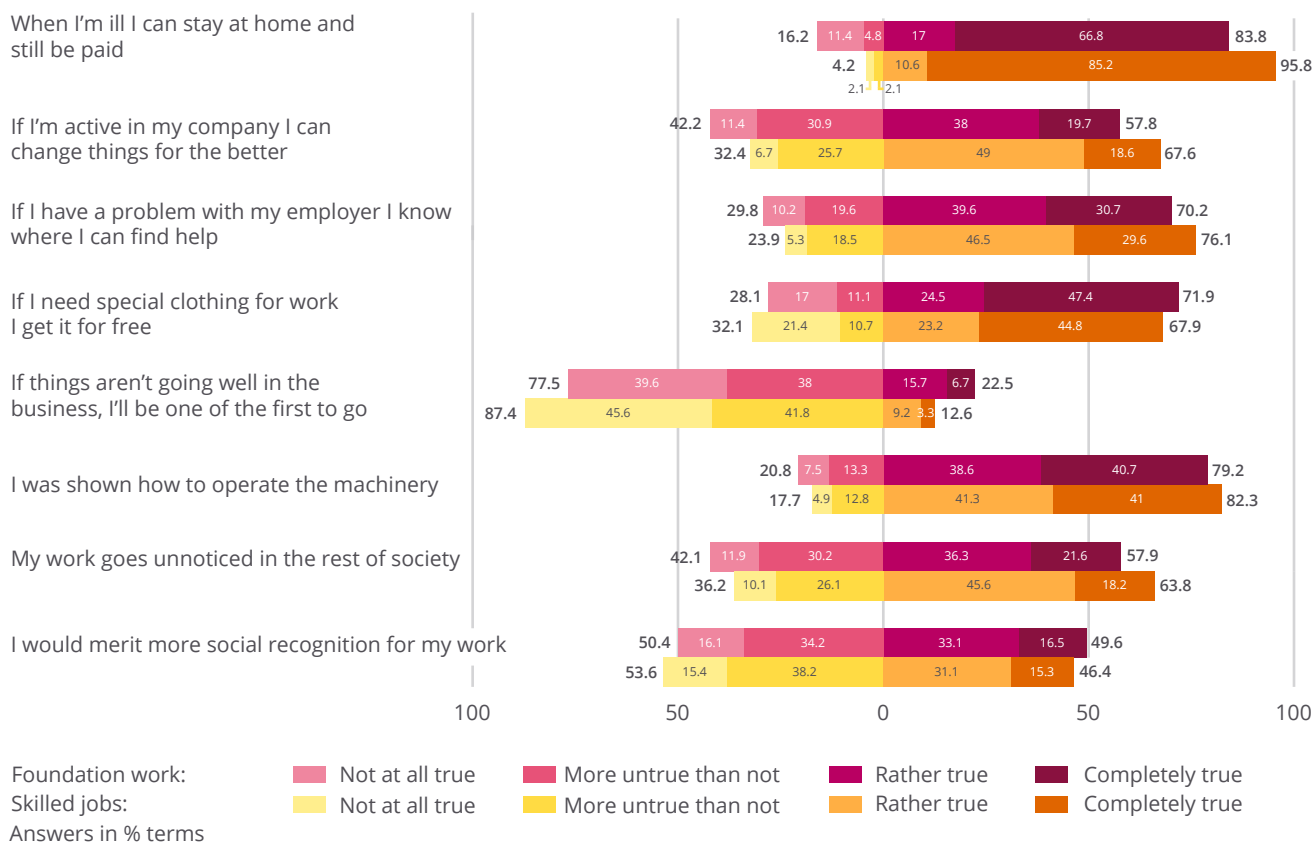
whom they can turn for help with problems with their employer (70.2 % v 76.1 %).¹⁶

Foundation and skilled workers share the feeling that their work goes unseen by society at large (see Fig. 5). Over a half (57.9 %) of foundation workers (and even 63.8 % of skilled workers) would agree wholly or mostly. Additionally, about half of all respondents think they deserve more recognition for their achievements at work. Here, what matters first of all is to recognise that the numbers in both groups are very high. If around a half of the labour force feels their work is not seen and recognised sufficiently, policymakers and politicians have reason to be concerned. The fact that the difference between foundation and skilled workers is small comes as a surprise. Extant research (Babst et al., 2021) and the focus group results definitely indicate that foundation workers perceive and critique a **lack of visibility of and recognition** for their work. In sectors like cleaning services, this can be ascribed *inter alia* to the hours of work, which often are early morn-

ing or late evening. The people who clean train stations, offices or schools are often not directly visible for the rest of society.

"You're hardly noticed at all. In some offices, that's an insurance company, there's an elderly lady and if she comes in early she says: oh, you're working hard again." (Cleaner, female, aged 52)

Fig. 5: Working conditions II, foundation work versus skilled jobs



What changes are required, and who can bring them about?

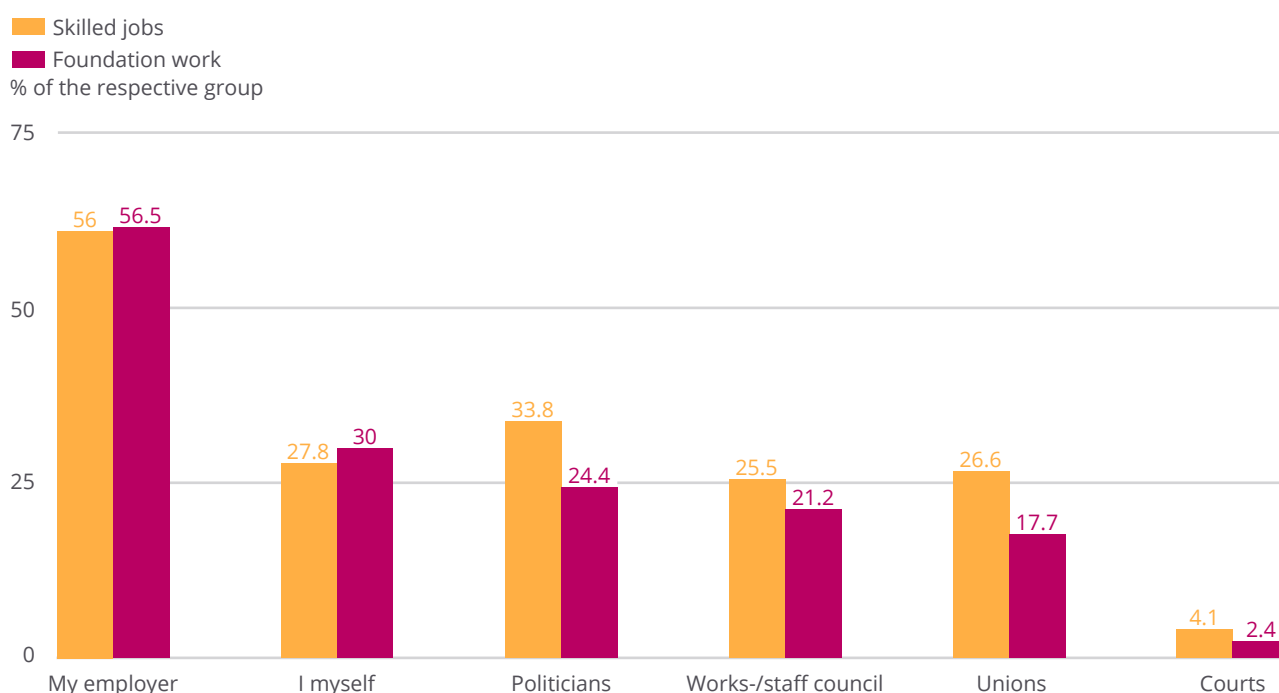
Given the structural deficits in foundation work, it may come as a surprise that such workers and people in skilled occupations give much the same answer to the question about what changes they wish for.¹⁷ Some two-thirds of all respondents (66 % of foundation workers and 63.2 % of skilled employees) make their prime wish **higher pay**. With a difference of up to 12 percentage points between foundation workers and the comparison group, a third to a fifth of respondents would add **less time pressure, more social recognition and more time-off** (see Appendix C.3). The responses show above all that material questions around remuneration for employees is decisive – not just in foundation work but beyond. In the current economic situation this is also driven by inflation and the rising cost of living. The answers also reflect thoughts weighing up how feasible the implementation of these options is across society as a whole. Thus, a shorter working week without any cut in pay is viewed in the focus group as attractive, but participants point to staff shortages making this unfeasible:

“It would be good if I could say, I’ll do less work but I’ve dedicated myself to my residents and I don’t know what would happen to them.” (Care assistant, female, aged 38)

When asked who best can improve your working conditions, all respondents think that the employer is the key actor (see Fig. 6).

Significant differences can be found in the assessment of collective actors. Among foundation workers, trust in the ability of politicians as well as works councils and trade unions to deliver better working conditions is significantly lower. This is not surprising in the sense that foundation workers are much less likely to be employed in firms with a works council. Whereas 66.3 % of qualified workers have a works council in their firm, this is true for only 44.7 % of foundation workers.¹⁸ This gap of more than 20 percentage points shows how the presence of a works council – alongside access to further workplace training courses – marks a key difference between foundation work and skilled occupations.

Fig. 6: “Who do you think is best placed to bring about improvements in your conditions of work?”, foundation work versus skilled jobs



Taken all together, one can say: the common denominator of foundation workers from different fields and occupational groups – in contrast to skilled workers – concerns reduced access to further workplace training opportunities and the lower availability of a works council in the workplace. In our opinion poll, we could detect a significant difference between these two groups when it comes to both issues. These factors define foundation workers as a self-standing employment group on the labour market. Beyond this, the opinion poll shows further differences with regard to the socio-economic situation and working conditions, such as heavier physical stress, an on average lower income and a more frequent failure of continued wage payments in case of illness. Regarding these points, there is a difference between foundation work and the comparator group, which, however, is less statistically significant. One clear reason for this is the sheer heterogeneity of the job-types and employment relations within foundation work that renders a differentiated examination necessary. This is taken up in the following section.

4.2 Foundation work as emblematic of an unequal labour market

There is secure and insecure foundation work, foundation work with or without access to workplace co-determination, systemically important or unimportant foundation work, well-paid, full-time foundation work and insecure foundation work in, say, the form of low-paid mini-jobs. Our research results confirm that the employment relations and work conditions of these workers can be differentiated in terms of the function of employment, educational attainment level, income, working hours, gender, and presence of workplace co-determination. A core finding from the available data is that foundation work acts as the expression and amplifier of social inequities in the labour market. As such, it requires a differentiated scientific analysis. In the following, we

set out eight theses that arise out of our evaluation of the data and inform this core finding.

1. People's perspective on their own work varies depending on the function that their work fulfils.

The findings from the focus groups and individual interviews clearly indicate that, along with the function the work fulfils for people, the perspective on one's own work, identification with the job or the commitment to improving one's own employment situation vary. Thus, we see that social recognition for people who seek a better-qualified job and pay for their studies via a mini-job, is less important than for full-time foundation workers whose job earns them their livelihood. A young woman who has been working as a cleaner since she left school explains:

"I'll probably look for a better job at some point. The thing is that one earns money, it's an 'easy' job. You don't need the Abitur¹⁹ or a bachelor's degree, or anything else. It's no more than that." (Cleaner, female, aged 19)

Having a job fulfils here a very clearly-defined function, namely short-term wage-earning. But it scarcely offers this group of employees any prospect of identifying with it. The motivation to seek out better employment in foundation work is pretty small because of the post's short-term nature.

It is much the same for those who treat foundation work as an entry-level job to the German labour market. Looking back at standards of work in their countries of origin, migrant workers may have different expectations for working conditions in Germany and often know less about their rights than employees on the German labour market. A cleaner who emigrated to Germany from Cameroon says about how the two labour markets compare:

"Everything here works a bit better. I can't say 100 % but maybe almost 80 %." (Cleaner, male, aged 52)²⁰

2. Even where an educational qualification is not required, educational attainment levels structure the labour market.

People with higher educational qualifications have fundamentally better prospects in the labour market. In line with their professional qualification, employment in highly qualified occupations is accessible to them. But even in the field of foundation work – a segment of the labour force, which does not require educational qualifications – employees with high levels of educational attainment enjoy advantages. This is because foundation work has less to do for them with lack of alternatives or economic dependency; it more often serves as a temporary source of income. The results from the opinion poll show that: for people with high educational attainment levels, foundation work is much less often taken on to meet living costs (48.7 % high educational attainment / 79.2 % medium educational attainment / 68.3 % low educational attainment). Almost a third (29 %) of highly educated foundation workers treat this job as a way of paying for their studies or vocational training – and 13 % for moving on to another occupation.

A striking poll finding: Compared with highly educated foundation workers (43.3 %) those with low educational attainment (55.1 %) more frequently think they deserve greater recognition for their job performance. Even when the feeling of a lack of appreciation is pronounced, the difference between the groups of respondents leads one to suppose that highly educated essential workers tend to have alternative sources of recognition, such as a university degree.

Furthermore, the data indicate that on average foundation workers with high educational attainment levels, enjoy better-paid and less physically stressful conditions, as well as benefit from a better atmosphere at work. Those with a higher educational qualification have on average a higher household income (high educational attainment: 8.5 % household income > €4500 / low educational attainment: 0.4 % income > €4500)

and indicate less often that money is tight at the end of the month (36.6 % high educational attainment / 58.9 % low educational attainment). What is more, well-educated foundation workers are much less likely to take up manual or physical jobs: They indicate much more often that digital technology makes their work easier (74.7 % high educational attainment / 43 % low educational attainment). Moreover, 39.5 % of those with low education attainments are uncertain whether they can carry on working until they retire, due to the physical hardship of their work (versus 25.4 % of those with high educational attainment levels). In their working environment, foundation workers with low educational levels feel they get less support from their superiors (72.4 % v 80.9 % for the high educational levels) or from colleagues (76.6 % v 87.1 % for the high educational levels).

3. Poorly paid service jobs in foundation work are particularly insecure.

Foundation work entails a variety of occupations and jobs, from care assistants in an old people's home via production line workers in a car-parts supply business or meat industry to cleaners in a building services firm. The results of the opinion poll show that foundation work plays a central role in the area of production and personal or commercial services, but especially in other service occupations such as parcel delivery or cleaning (see Fig. 7).

Working conditions, remuneration and employment relations vary according to employment field and sector. These differences emerge most clearly when comparing foundation work in old manufacturing occupations and in new services jobs. In the focus group discussion with unskilled employees in the supply industry, it was clear that the workers appreciate the good, collectively agreed pay:

"It's with IG Metall [industrial union], so the pay is decent." (Forklift driver, male, aged 48)



Marco

Aged 27
Cologne

**“I wouldn’t wish
it on anyone.”**

Occupation and role: Marco is a despatch-rider with a food delivery service. This mini-job helps pay for his studies.

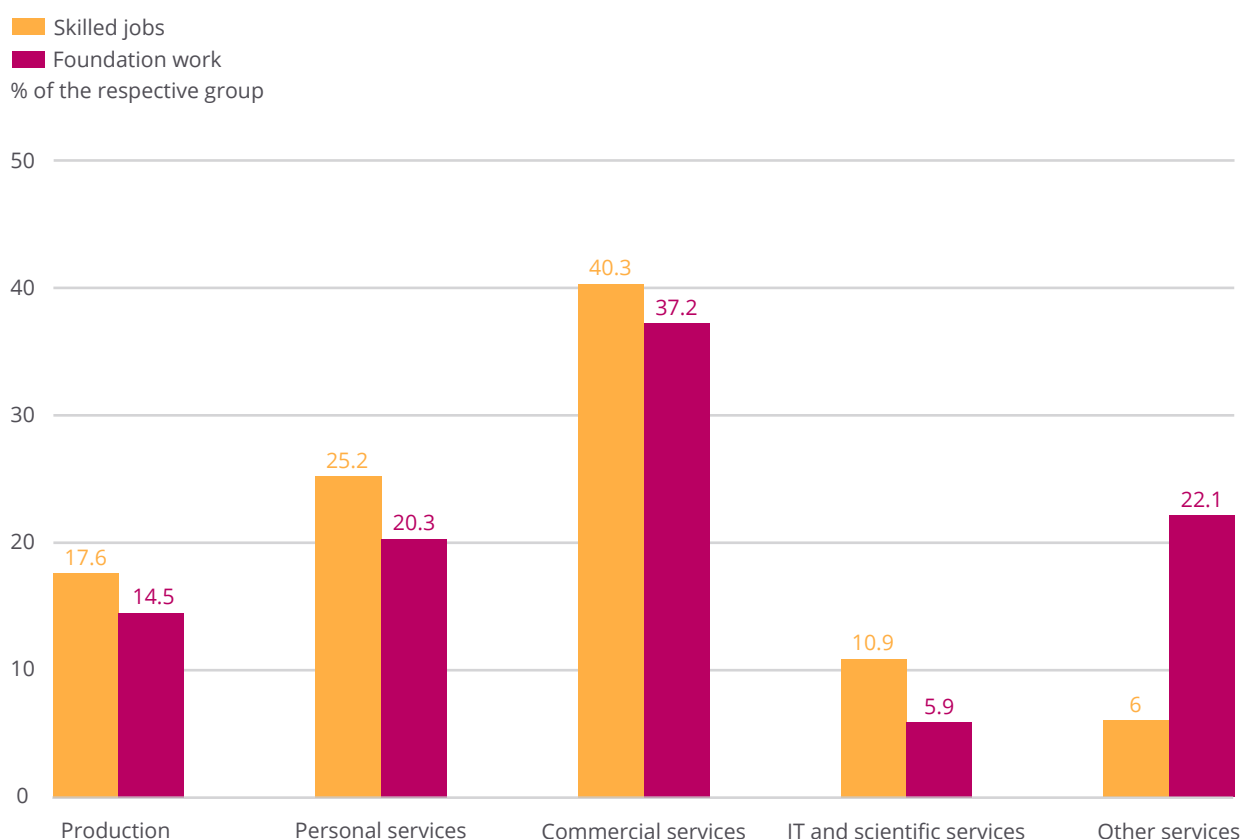
Working day: A shift lasts around four to five hours; the average delivery journey is about 8 km. Marco can only take a break on the spot, which is hard to do when it’s raining or cold.

Personal profile: Marco has a room in a shared flat and is studying mechanical engineering. Since he began his studies, he has been riding bikes for various delivery services. The jobs he took on were marked by poor pay and short-term contracts. He has long campaigned for setting up a works council. He fought for and won a permanent contract by taking legal action.

Attitude towards his work: Marco genuinely cares about being a bike courier. He’s always enjoyed biking as a balance to studying and appreciates the freedom of not having to work a classic office-day. Long-term, the job will not be physically or financially viable for him. On completing his studies, he will be looking for a job as a mechanical engineer.

Attitude towards politics and society: Marco would like to see better working conditions in the sector through higher pay, permanent employment contracts, collective right to sue for employees and better health protection, for example by providing work equipment such as easy-on-the-body backpacks and protective measures in extreme weather events.

Fig. 7: Distribution by occupation in comparison between foundation work and skilled jobs



In service-related fields, by contrast, focus group participants bemoan the low pay that does not reflect the demanding work they do:

“Being on your feet the whole time, constantly running around [...]. That’s stressful enough. And then even more so as it’s not showing up in my pay packet.” (Waiter, male, aged 33).

The minimum wage is seen as a definite achievement. At the same time, being paid the minimum wage is not enough given inflation and the resulting loss of purchasing power:

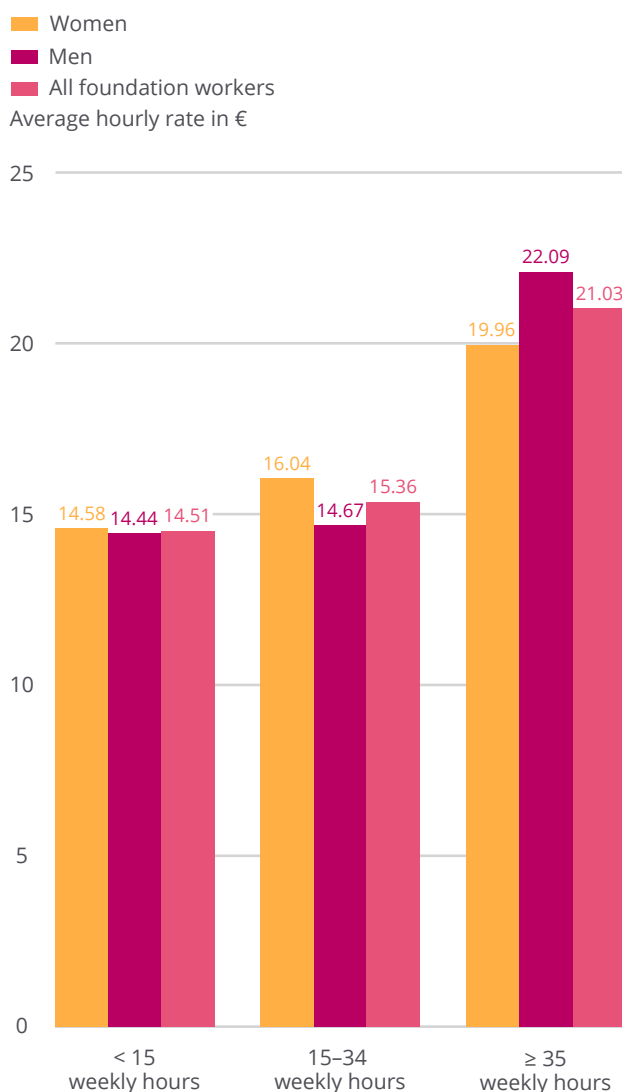
“Then the pay is minimum wage. And that means scratching together everything down to the last penny.” (Cleaner, female, aged 44)

A differentiated assessment of the opinion poll by hourly rates shows that working conditions in the various fields are shaped by wage levels (see

Appendix C.3). Foundation workers on low hourly wages are more likely than average to be on fixed-term contracts (quartile 1: 23.3 %, quartile 4: 3.6 %) and have fewer workplace training courses available to them (quartile 1: 30.2 %, quartile 4: 60.1 %). What’s more, they have less autonomy, for example in organising their break times (quartile 1: 60.5 %, quartile 4: 80.3 %), worry more often than higher-paid foundation workers about not receiving sick pay when they’re ill (quartile 1: 21.3 %, quartile 4: 3.6 %) and feel their work is physically very stressful (quartile 1: 30.8 %, quartile 4: 20.8 %). Foundation workers on low hourly wage-rates fear, moreover, they’ll be one of the first to be let go in any crisis (quartile 1: 31.5 %, quartile 4: 10.5 %). The higher their hourly pay, the more confident foundation workers feel they can change things for the better at work (quartile 1: 50.7 %, quartile 4: 69.3 %) and hence know where to get help when facing issues with their employer (quartile 1: 63.8 %, quar-

tile 4: 84 %). This may be due, not least, to the fact that low-paid foundation workers are much less often employed in firms with workplace co-determination (quartile 1: 34.1 %, quartile 4: 64.9 %). The group of foundation workers hence displays similar structures to those known from research as a whole among dependent employees in the low-wage sector (Grabka & Göbler, 2020). Foundation work in the low-paid sector is characterised by higher workloads, fewer training opportunities and lower levels of co-determination and autonomy.

Fig. 8: Average hourly rate for women and men in foundation work by weekly hours of work



4. Foundation work in low-hours part-time positions is performed under worse working conditions than full-time foundation work.

Economic sectors with an especially high proportion of Germany's overall 6.96 million mini-job-holders are also home to a high share of foundation workers. This includes hospitality, health and social care and other service industries (Minijob-Zentrale, 2025). Our opinion poll results show that where foundation work is carried out in low-hours part-time and without fixed working hours, working conditions are worse than in full-time foundation work.

What's striking is that pay rises proportionally to the weekly hours worked, from an average hourly rate of €14.51 for part-time work (< 15 hours a week) to €21.03 for foundation workers in full-time jobs (≥ 35 hours a week) (see Fig. 8). These pay differences also have a gender component: among full-time foundation workers, the average hourly wage of men is considerably higher; the difference is €2.13 an hour. In annual terms, based on a 40-hour working week, this amounts to an additional gross income of nearly €4500.

Further, foundation workers working in low-hours part-time (25.4 %) have significantly fewer opportunities for further workplace training than full-time employees, are worried more often about gaps in sick pay (low-hours part-time: 29.2 % / full-time: 6.1 %), work less frequently in firms with works councils (low-hours part-time: 30.8 % / full-time: 56.9 %) and feel more easily replaceable (low-hours part-time: 43.1 % / full-time: 13 %).

Our findings align with existing research on marginal employment outside social security coverage: it does not provide insufficient protection against job loss, particularly in times of crisis, and does not adequately shield workers from poverty, even when employed (Linckh & Tiefensee, 2021).

**“Unskilled jobs
can pretty much
be done by almost
anybody.”**



Lennart

Aged 41

Frankfurt (Oder)

Occupation and role: Lennart is an assembly-line worker at a car-parts supplier with 2500 employees. He works to earn a living and feed his family.

Working day: Elements of Lennart's job include gauging car-parts and making them ready for dispatch. Assembly-line work is monotonous, so he can listen to music and get lost in his own thoughts on the job. He works shifts, alternating between early, late, or night shifts.

Personal profile: Lennart has a child and is married; his wife also does shift work. He started out in telecommunications and then joined the firm as a lateral entrant. He has been working there for many years, and he would like to stay with the company long-term.

Attitude towards his work: Lennart appreciates the good team work with his colleagues. The works council makes sure his interests are represented vis-à-vis the management. That makes him feel less replaceable. Lennart also is grateful for the preventive and health measures available in the workplace.

Attitude towards politics and society: Lennart has a positive attitude towards the shift from the combustion engine to electric vehicles, even if that might bring changes to his work. He has no worries about his job because, with demographic change, more people are retiring and there is a constant demand for fresh workers.

5. More workplace co-determination creates better foundation work.

Our survey results suggest that the presence of workplace co-determination has a decisive influence on the job situation of foundation workers. As set out in Section 4.1, foundation workers are overall less likely to be employed in companies with a works council. Some sectors, however, are exceptions.²¹ The majority of focus group participants from the supply industry report that co-determination is available at their workplace and is important for them:

"I look on it as a parachute [...] which supports you. It's there for the individual and the bulk of folk." (Assembly-line worker, male, aged 39)

In the care, hospitality and cleaning sector focus groups, only a few participants mention the existence of a works council. The discussion shows a relatively low level of knowledge about the institutions of works council. Little sense of team solidarity is also seen as an obstacle:

"There should be more joining forces. But there's no real teamwork, so I fear that the same holds true for the other teams, and people say it's not really going to work." (Cleaner, female, aged 38)

A negative atmosphere among colleagues and a poor relationship to superiors, as described above all by focus group participants from cleaning and care, appears to hinder the establishment of a works council. Foundation workers in production, on the other hand, describe good relations for the most part and a collegial sense of togetherness among employees.

The poll results show that the presence of a works council in a company correlates with both the objective and the perceived financial situation. Regardless of qualification requirements, employees in a firm with works council earn, on average, a slightly higher income, are less liable to admit money is tight at the end of the month and are a bit less worried about whether their pen-

sion will suffice. Moreover, a positive link can be seen with compliance with employment law and occupational safety measures. Further, the feeling of being replaceable can be found above all among employees in firms without a works council. These findings apply to the whole sample, irrespective of the differentiation between foundation work and skilled jobs (see Appendix C.3).

Notably, however, about one fifth (21.2 %) of foundation workers in a firm without a works council fear they won't receive sick pay in the event of illness (versus 7 % of the comparative group without a works council). Abiding by current employment legislation therefore seems not to be necessarily ensured for foundation workers without workplace representation. In addition, this group has the least access to company-based training. Only 31.9 % of such workers are given the chance of further training at work, compared with 54.8 % of their peers with a works council. The presence of workplace co-determination is thus a core structural element of foundation work and the labour market as a whole.

6. Female foundation work in service sector occupations offers inadequate financial security.

Differences in pay, working hours and workplace co-determination also show up along gender lines. Especially service industries with a large proportion of foundation workers (cleaning, care, retail) are female-dominated. By contrast, manufacturing occupations, where pay is higher on average and there is greater access to workforce co-determination, are heavily male dominated. This is reflected in the poll results. These show that foundation work by men and women is paid differently and carried out under different working conditions.

Women foundation workers point more often than men to how money can be tight at the end of the month (52.6 % v 43.3 %). Notably, female foundation workers (60.3 %) also worry far more than women in skilled jobs (46.1 %) about whether

their pension will suffice in old age. This holds true for 45.7 % of male foundation workers. These anxieties – and resulting financial dependence upon (married) partners – are confirmed by qualitative research findings. A cleaner, reflecting on her future, says:

"I try not to think about it. I started late to save for my pension [...]. And now there's not a huge amount of money coming in. So I hope me and my husband stick it out for a long time."
(Cleaner, female, aged 38)

Gender differences in remuneration are also explained by different working-time models: part-time foundation work over a few or many hours is much more often practised by women,²² whilst only 31.2 % of full-time foundation work (≥ 35 weekly hours) is done by women and 68.8 % by men.

Looking beyond the financials, women in foundation work have less autonomy than men in deciding when to take a break (66.7 % v 74.5 %). Gender-specific differences show up not only in foundation work but also in skilled occupations. Women in foundation work (40.9 %) and in the comparator group (51.9 %) feel more often stressed than men in unskilled (36.3 %) and skilled (47.6 %) occupations. What's more, women in foundation work (55.5 %) and in skilled jobs (50.8 %) more often state that their work deserves greater social recognition than their male colleagues in foundation work (44.2 %) and in the comparative group (42.5 %).

7. Appreciation is expressed differently depending on the sector – materially or immaterially.

As set out in Section 4.1, foundation workers do not feel less valued than skilled employees, according to the poll data. That comes as a surprise if you think about widespread foundation work occupations such as cleaning or parcel delivery. The result can be explained, however, by examining the different ways in which appreciation is perceived.

In the supplier industry focus group, the appreciation for the work of foundation workers is expressed through good, collectively bargained pay. Immaterial appreciation is therefore not necessarily expected:

"When you see your payslip, that's appreciation."
(Plant-worker, male, aged 41).

In the care sector, the work of women foundation workers is mainly appreciated directly by clients and their relatives, but this appreciation does not figure in appropriate pay levels:

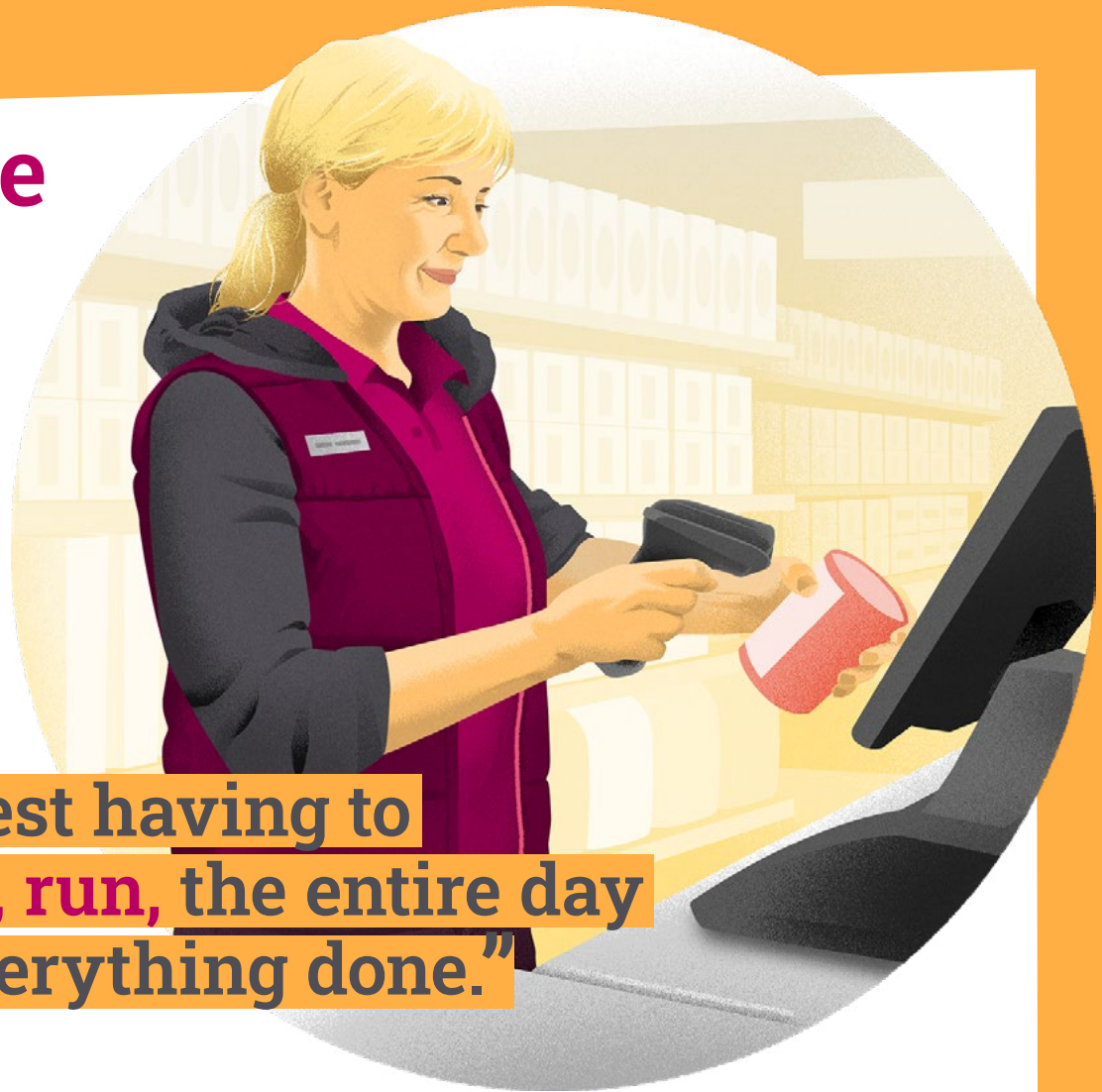
"I get enough from the residents [...]. Their appreciation is entirely enough for me. I don't need any external appreciation from folk who don't know what I do. But more money, I know, talks." (Care assistant, female, aged 38)

In cleaning, on the other hand, a lack of societal recognition and appreciation of the job one does is bemoaned:

"It's not just [those] we work for, our superiors. But also the customers. Like I said, offices, schools. That there should be some appreciation shown. The postie also gets a sweetie or present once in a while on bank holidays from people. But what do we get?" (Cleaner, female, aged 44)

Simone

Aged 56
Berlin



“You’re best having to run, run, run, the entire day to get everything done.”

Occupation and role: Simone works as a check-out operator in retail. The job is her main source of income.

Working day: She works five days a week from 9h30 to 19h00. Her working days have her standing at check-out, stacking shelves or organising the warehouse.

Personal profile: Simone completed her higher school-leaving certificate in East Berlin and studied socialist business management. After German reunification she missed out on getting into a job because of starting a family and seeing her studies dismissed. At first, she worked as a postie and then took up various jobs in retail and distribution. She has been in her current job since 2000.

Attitude towards her work: What Simone likes about her work are the flat hierarchies, a good team atmosphere and a sense of family among colleagues. But the pressure to raise turnover on the store’s management is passed onto the employees. On top of that, there is a lot of physical stress because of constantly having to stay on your feet, and that has already forced Simone to have a knee-operation.

Attitude towards politics and society: Simone feels barely seen by politicians, above all in comparison with male-dominated sectors. What’s more, she would like to feel more appreciation from her superiors and customers. Generally, Simone advocates for shorter opening hours and a four-day week on full pay – and opposes raising the retirement age.

Our research shows that the question of appreciation must be considered specifically for each sector. In general, however, recognition can be expressed in various ways depending on the occupation. Material and immaterial appreciation are, in any case, closely linked and must go hand in hand in any approaches aimed at strengthening appreciation.

8. Foundation workers, who see their work as systemically important²³, wish for more appreciation.

The opinion poll results show that the desire for greater societal recognition is much more prevalent among foundation workers who perceive their work as systemically important. Almost two-thirds of those who think society would not function well without their work also take the view that they would deserve more societal recognition for their work (versus 30.6 % of foundation workers who think society would work well without their work). A similar tendency can be observed in the comparative group. This finding indicates that systemically important (foundation) work does not get the appropriate recognition. However, it's important to note that it still depends on how one understands appreciation (see thesis 7).

The stronger sense of lack of recognition does not, however, correspond to a stronger sense of societal invisibility. Among both foundation workers and skilled employees, those with the feeling society does not notice their work, do not see their job as systemically important (see Appendix C.3). A potential explanation for this is the way society paid greater attention to jobs judged systemically important during the Covid-19 pandemic but, for all that, their material appreciation did not improve.

The opinion poll results give pointers to the working conditions of foundation workers who see their work as systemically important. 40.3 % of them admit that, because of physical stress, they do not know whether they can keep at it until retirement (versus 27.3 % of foundation workers who do not see their job as systemically important). As for financial security: 51.5 % of foundation workers who think their job is essential admit that money is tight at the end of the month (versus 43.2 % of those who think their work is systemically unimportant). Further characteristics noted among this employment group – compared with those foundation workers who do not see their job as systemically important – are a smaller sense of autonomy at work and more time pressure.

The qualitative and quantitative assessment of foundation work in Germany shows that this employment field must be treated in a differentiated manner. Structural inequalities in the German labour market are similarly at play in the area of foundation work. Even so, it becomes evident that foundation workers in comparison with employees in skilled occupations are overall socio-economically disadvantaged in their position in the labour market. Against a background of a rapidly changing labour market given digitalisation and decarbonisation this represents a particular challenge.

5. Good (foundation-) work in the ‘transformation society’

In today’s ‘transformation society’, one continuously characterised by deep-rooted economic and social changes, any examination of the labour market must take account of these processes of structural change. How employees view their work and position in the economy and society is directly linked to these processes of change restructuring the world of work. In particular, the great transformation trends of digitalisation and decarbonisation create enormous pressure for adaptation not only for businesses but also for employees. The impact of the increasing deployment of digital technologies is transforming jobs, creating new fields of employment and skill requirements, leading to the replacement of humans in carrying out tasks by machines or subjecting workers to greater surveillance in carrying out their work (Arntz et al., 2018; Schmucker & Sinopoli, 2022). The decarbonisation of the economy is also bringing about a comprehensive structural change on the German labour market, which is leading to the transformation of current job fields, the erosion of jobs in certain industries and their creation elsewhere (Holzmann, 2022). How this structural change is perceived by foundation workers and beyond will be examined below and analysed along with working conditions.

Transformation experienced as pressure to adapt

The foundation workers we spoke to are aware of the pressure to adapt and their own starting position. The transformative processes are taken on as unstoppable changes overtaking them:

“There’s no point in trying to stop these changes as they’re unstoppable. As has been said, if you don’t adapt, you get left behind. This comes with some anxious feelings or with a sense of being threatened.” (Waiter, male, aged 33)

In the focus group discussions, the respondents assume that there are winners and losers in the transformation and place themselves at the bottom in the adaptation hierarchy:

“The winners are the big firms and the losers are the little guys at the end of the line.” (Warehouse worker, male, aged 61)

In general, many respondents have the sense they will get little or nothing out of the digital and ecological transition policies of business and government, and are much more likely to be exposed to their negative consequences. Concretely, this shows up clearly in the case of digitalisation where foundation workers in their own estimate will benefit much less than skilled workers: 61.2 % indicate that digital technology does indeed make their work easier while as many as 83.1 % of skilled employees feel the same. It is true that digitalisation in the form of new technologies in logistics or industry can make individual operations easier. But for employees what matters most is the negative knock-on effects. The fear is voiced that auxiliary jobs in particular will be made redundant via digitalisation and that jobs could disappear:²⁴

“Everything that can be digitalised will be digitalised [...] Many tasks will stay, but most will disappear, most of all auxiliary ones.” (Receptionist, male, no age given)

“Keyword foundation work: A robot can do this!” (Plant auxiliary, male, aged 41)

But in job-fields marked by human interactions and dominated by women like the care sector the effects of digitalisation are not seen as that prevalent. The opinion poll results confirm: unskilled women workers will benefit less at work from new digital technologies. Moreover, 57.4 % of female foundation workers – compared with 64.9 % of males – suggest these will make their work easier.

Further, people working *inter alia* in parcel delivery, cleaning or ambulant care say that digital softwares like GPS-trackers are already used by the employer to control your work and express concern that this could increase in future:

"We've got this GPS thing. It's voluntary. It measures how many kilometres you've done and where to [...]. Then you can see a street for the most part when you store the data or else map coordinates [...] we've got the app on our personal phones." (Cleaner, female, aged 44)

Looking into the future of their own work, the assumption is that one will have to get a further qualification when new technologies are introduced in order to save one's own job. Given the few workplace training opportunities available in the field of foundation work, this illustrates the disparity between the pressure to adapt and the formal resources available to that end.

The consequences of climate change also have an impact on foundation work, which is already physically demanding to an above-average degree. This is particularly true for occupations that are mobile and performed outdoors. Generally, employees assume that increasing heatwaves will bring extra stress:

"It's already stressful enough [without air-conditioning]. [But] it'll be stressful too without climate change." (Care assistant, female, aged 47)

At the same time it is clear: the consequences of climate change on one's own work may well be experienced. But one feels less affected by these than by policy measures to tackle climate change, as Mau et al. (2023) determine. Thus, current climate policy is perceived within the employed labour force above all as a threat to an already precarious standard of living; everyday worries in the here and now are predominant. The transition is linked first and foremost with further impositions and stresses through price rises and inflation:

"I know what a cucumber costs today. But then I think, that wasn't always the case. That's part of the transition." (Service worker, male, aged 44).

Job cuts are also associated with climate policy measures and are seen as a consequence that is especially noticeable in the supply sector where foundation work is prevalent. Here the decarbonisation of the economy leads to the conversion of production lines and job losses:

"We had 2000 employees in our plant, now it's down to 700 and that's to do with electric vehicles." (Assembly-line worker, male, aged 40)

Lack of resources to adapt to and co-determine change

How far employees can succeed in meeting the challenges of the transition in the labour market is not least a question of available resources which they can draw upon in order to cope with pressures to adapt. These include for example a permanent employment contract, opportunities for further training, so one can deal with the changing demands at work or sufficient pay to be able to put money aside. But workplace co-determination can also be seen as a resource enabling employees to not just passively face change at work, but actively co-manage it.

The quantitative and qualitative assessment of the employment field of foundation work (see Section 4) makes plain that foundation workers as a whole have fewer formal resources for finding their way in a changing labour market. They are not just exposed to a higher degree of insecurity, but on average enjoy less access to further training and workplace co-determination.

Additionally, there is a strong feeling among foundation workers of being replaceable, one that reduces one's sense of security, especially when caught in a crisis caused by the transition. More than a fifth (22.5 %) of the foundation workers polled – versus 12.6 % of respondents in skilled jobs – indicate that they would be one of the first to be let go in the event of a crisis.

What really matters here is the absence of qualifications required to carry out the occupations. That is because, formally at least, anybody else can do one's job. One not only competes with people with the same level of education and training but factually with all groups of employees (with lateral entrants, new entrants, highly educated people etc.):

"Definitely replaceable! I've got no USP here. What I'm doing, others can do too." (Machine operator, male, aged 48)

In order to make up for the lack of formal means for adapting to and handling the changes and insecurities associated with transformation processes – and to master them – foundation workers draw on an array of informal resources. Central to these are pride in one's work, resilience and readiness to make the sacrifices that the job demands. Despite the lack of formal qualification requirements, not everybody is ready to take on the physical stresses that come with the job. Unlike many others, one is not above doing this job:

"In my circle of acquaintances, I always hear people say: I couldn't do that, getting rid of other people's rubbish." (Cleaner, female, aged 52)

One also makes up for the feeling of being replaceable by stressing one's own adaptability. Many foundation workers used to be active in different fields of work and thereby attribute to themselves a certain cross-sectoral flexibility. This ability showed itself in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. In hospitality, with its very high proportion of foundation work, one in four socially insurable employees felt obliged to change jobs (Jansen & Risius, 2022). Even if labour shortages do not necessarily translate into a better negotiating position vis-à-vis the employer, many foundation workers do not worry about their future job prospects because of this tangible shortage. Knowing that in the event of problems with the employer or being let go, there's always another job in another firm or another field of work gives a sense of security:

"For me, personally, [it's not] a problem to change workplaces. That means I can still feel sure enough that I'll have the opportunity, if there is a problem or dissatisfaction is high, then there will be other offers." (Waiter, male, aged 33)

Alongside the emphasis on resilience, flexibility, and adaptability, there is another mechanism for making up for the lack of formal adaptation resources. One's own readiness to take up hard work is revalued via the moral distancing to supposedly "lazy" population groups – a phenomenon that the Canadian-American sociologist Michèle Lamont observed among US workers as early as 2000. The readiness to undertake hard, physically demanding work and the ability to make it through despite economic adversities become an identity-forming hallmark. One's way of working and the moral strength to do it is a source of pride, respect, and recognition (Lamont, 2000, p. 17ff). Supposedly lazy and parasitical population groups like migrants or social benefit recipients are, on the contrary, devalued:

"I've got a problem with the 'Bürgergeld'²⁵. It can't be right that someone who does go to work gets the same at the end of the day as someone who sits at home." (Parcel deliverer, male, aged 38)

"For me, it's important that politicians signal that working is worth it and not working isn't. That way, we'd have far more people in work and fewer at home on the sofa. That's the way it is, the social fabric isn't right any more. Maybe also limiting immigration, just simply keep the money here in Germany and explicitly boost the middle class." (Serving person/kitchen assistant, female, aged 47)

Distancing oneself from other groups of wage-earners can also be understood as symptom of a "demobilised class society" according to Dörre (2019, p. 22). Despite a stronger sense of inequality, the class question can be seen to have been depoliticised. There may be individual signs of class consciousness, one knows about the contradictory interests and positions of power among employees and employers:

"We're working, so our boss can get richer and richer." (Cleaner, female, aged 62)

But there is scarcely any hope that one can do anything via political action to change this experience of inequality. There is a prevalent impression that politicians do not care about one's own problems. Participants assign themselves to a lower social layer whose interests are not represented or dealt with by politicians:

"So, as I said, politicians don't do anything for the little people [...]. Parliamentary allowances are raised, money chucked at other countries instead of being used to help our own country and avoid the weakening of our industries." (Serving person, female, aged 38)

The subjective feeling of being neglected is underscored by the political economist Lea Elsässer in her empirical research. She concludes that the concerns of the lower social classes have scarcely figured in the social and labour market policy reforms since 1980 (Elsässer, 2018). Confidence is therefore low that one's own situation will be improved through collective actors in the foreseeable future. That comes with feelings of rage, apathy and powerlessness.

Secure and co-determined work for democracy and the transformation

In the face of the transformation, foundation workers tend to see themselves as passive objects of the change underway. Policy decisions about the transition are very distant from their daily lives and work, employees see themselves as first and foremost confronted with the negative consequences of these processes of change. This subjective feeling corresponds thereby in large part to a material reality. In Section 4 we showed, on the basis of our data, that foundation workers find themselves in a worse socio-economic position on the labour market than skilled people. On average, they have lower educational attainment levels, dispose over a smaller income and less access to further training opportunities and workplace co-determination. All told, foundation workers therefore have fewer formal resources for adapting to and managing change and thereby asserting themselves in a changing labour market.

Hence, we wanted to know whether and how far employment in the area of foundation work impacts political attitudes. Are foundation workers less open-minded compared with skilled workers towards digitalisation and decarbonisation? Is their trust in political actors and institutions, as well as the democratic system, lower?

The data shows that there are barely significant differences in political attitudes towards digitalisation, climate policy and democracy between foundation workers and other employees. Around a quarter of *all* respondents are worried they are losing out in all the social changes taking place: 28.4 % of foundation workers and 24.3 % of workers in skilled jobs fully or very much agree with the statement: “In our society, so much is changing I’m worried I’ll be left behind.” At the same time, a clear majority of all respondents think that over the long term, digitalisation will bring more advantages than disadvantages to society (see Appendix C.3).

When it comes to climate policy in particular, worries about the financial effects of policy measures dominate – among foundation workers and employees in skilled jobs alike. Almost three-quarters of foundation workers (72.1 %) and two-thirds of the comparison group (66.7 %) are concerned that climate protection will make everything more expensive for them. Similarly high is the agreement of both groups with the statement “People with small budgets are overlooked when it comes to climate protection”.

The response patterns of the groups polled are also similar when it comes to questions of democratic policy. Almost half (47.4 %) of all foundation workers and only a slightly smaller proportion of workers in skilled jobs (39.7 %) agree fully or partially with the following statement: “People like me have no influence on what the government does anyway.” And only 9.3 % of foundation workers and 8.6 % of employees in skilled jobs think that politicians care about their problems and take their concerns seriously. This coincides with the inequality barometer of the University of Constance (Busemeyer et al., 2025) which shows that a considerable part of the population believes that political responsiveness towards their needs is low.

The opinion poll results demonstrate: Economic concerns and scepticism in view of the social transition underway as well as a lack of trust in political actors and the democratic system are only more prevalent among foundation workers to a limited extent. This suggests that the factors that differentiate foundation work from skilled jobs – less access to training opportunities and less of an opportunity to work in a business with a works council (see Section 4.1.) – do not decisively influence political attitudes towards democracy and the transition.

Much more than the differentiation between foundation work and skilled work, it is the experienced work-place realities that seem to influence attitudes towards democracy and the transition in the labour force as a whole. In our data, secure working conditions as well as the experience of autonomy and self-efficacy at work correlate with an open-mindedness towards digitalisation and climate protection, as well as with trust in democracy. To measure this link via a regression analysis we developed indices for “secure work”, “industrial citizenship”, “climate protection” and “democracy” (a complete description of these including the individual items can be found in Appendix C.2).²⁶

The analysis shows that the experience of security at work – measured by financial, physical, and psychological security, abiding by employment legislation and occupational health and safety at the workplace as well as by the feeling of replaceability – is positively connected with open-mindedness towards the transition underway in digitalisation and climate protection, as well as trust in democratic processes and institutions (see Fig. 9).

The same goes for the experience of “industrial citizenship”. We understand this as meaning more than just the presence of a works council. It is about how far one has the sense of being an autonomous worker, experiences real solidarity and enjoys the feeling of being able to achieve some positive change in the workplace through one’s own initiative. The regression analysis suggests the more employees experience autonomy, the capacity to act and the support of colleagues and superiors at work, the more open they are towards the transition processes at work in digitalisation and climate protection, as well as the higher their trust in democracy (see Fig. 10).

The fact that this link stretches beyond foundation work to all employed staff in the sample of the opinion poll shows that workers in skilled jobs, who are employed under insecure working conditions and experience little autonomy or solidarity in their working lives, also have less trust in democracy and lower openness towards digitalisation and climate protection. What matters more for determining one’s political attitudes than the question of working in an unskilled or skilled job appears to be distinct job characteristics, which can be found in the labour force as a whole, but are more widespread on average among foundation workers. A differentiated evaluation of political attitudes according to education and income (see Appendix C.3) confirms moreover what we know out of research on political attitudes towards democracy and the transition (see e.g. Hövermann et al., 2022): The higher the level of education and the higher the income, the higher on average the open-mindedness towards digitalisation and climate protection, as well as the assessment of one’s own political efficacy and of democracy itself.

Fig. 9: Link between the index “secure job” and attitude variables (A) openness towards digitalisation, (B) openness towards climate protection and (C) trust in democracy

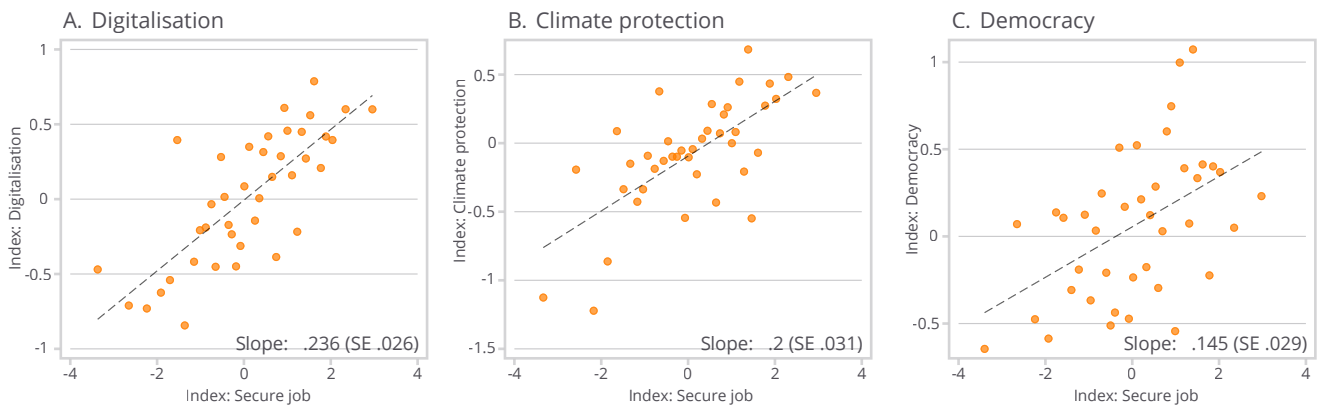
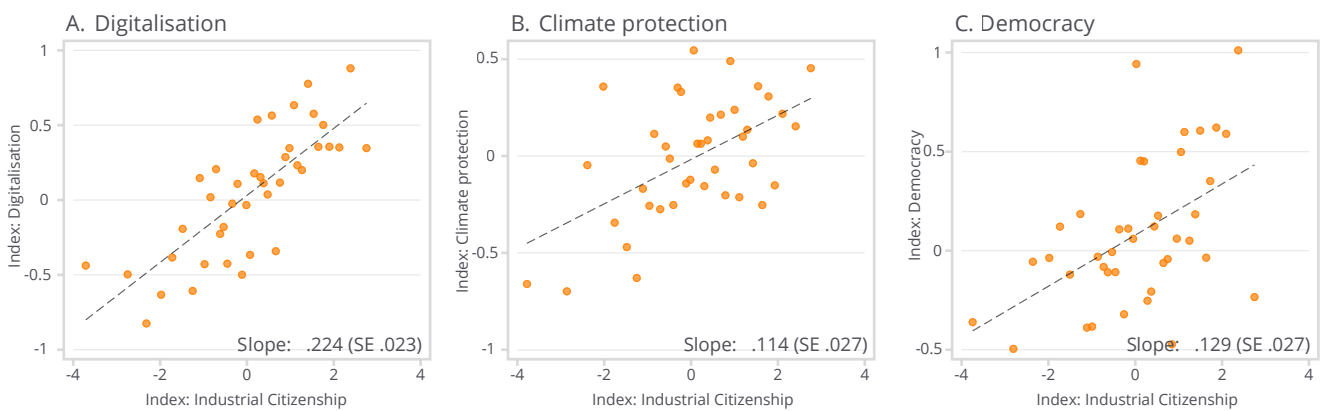


Fig. 10: Link between the index “industrial citizenship” and the attitude variables 9A) openness towards digitalisation, 9B) openness towards climate protection and (C) trust in democracy



6. Political conclusions

This study offers an array of core findings as to what unskilled employees in the German labour market are concerned about and what challenges they face. The empirical evidence shows that foundation workers are disadvantaged in their position in the labour market. In comparison with workers in skilled jobs, they lack the formal resources to adapt to, deal with and navigate the changing working environment. At the same time, their concerns are often overlooked in politics and society. Consequently, their trust in political actors and democratic institutions is correspondingly low. For our democracy, however, foundation workers are indispensable in three ways: socially, economically, and politically. These three dimensions of indispensability serve as the starting point for the political processing of their concerns, as well as the further scientific and public analysis of this employment field.

1. Foundation workers are socially indispensable.

Foundation workers frequently carry out systemically important work that is indispensable for the smooth functioning of our society. Even if the group of foundation workers is not congruent with that of essential workers – not all foundation work can be classified as essential work and, of course, employees in skilled jobs such as doctors also carry out systemically important work – they do fulfil a central social function. They work at the supermarket check-out, care for old and infirm people or deliver parcels.

Despite this social indispensability, foundation workers do not figure in public discourse for the most part. Over half of respondents in foundation work express the feeling that their work goes unnoticed by society and does not get the recognition it merits. This invisibility has, moreover, a material dimension in that foundation workers are economically worse-off than em-

ployees in skilled jobs. On average, they command a lower level of education and income, enjoy less access to further training opportunities, and their interests are less often represented by a works council. Furthermore, to an above average degree, they find their work physically so demanding that they are unsure they can carry on until retirement.

The invisibility of socially indispensable jobs in the area of foundation work along with its insecure working conditions are a problem for society as a whole. Given the importance of their work, we as a society can no longer afford to leave the concerns of foundation workers politically unaddressed. Instead, it is necessary to listen to foundation workers and translate their concerns into policy – in the form of a cross-sector improvement of their fields of work, e.g. through raising the minimum wage, strengthening collective wage agreements or reintegrating core services within the public sector. For without corresponding measures to materially improve working conditions and terms of employment, any attempt to address the lack of social recognition simply through immaterial means lacks credibility.

2. Foundation workers are economically indispensable.

Foundation work is not a marginal phenomenon: People in unskilled occupations make up a significant part – around a fifth – of the German labour force. That is around 7.8 million employees on the German labour market. Political debates on the future of the economy and employment given digitalisation, decarbonisation and demographic change are rarely centered on the question of foundation work and the concerns of unskilled workers. An example: Although there is a shortage of skilled, as well as unskilled labour in Germany, the discussion often narrows to the lack of skilled workers.

The absence of foundation workers from economic policy debates is a problem, given the deep-rooted economic structural changes underway and their impact upon the labour market. Foundation workers have fewer formal adaptation resources (income, training, co-determination) at their disposal to navigate a changing labour market. At the same time, this does not hold true for all foundation workers given the sheer heterogeneity of the employment group; there are overlaps to precarious job conditions in the low-paid sector, but also well-paid, unionised and secure jobs in foundation work. Foundation work is thereby the reflection of a labour market characterised by structural inequalities (see Section 4.2).

Looking at the dividing lines between insecure and secure foundation work makes political sense given labour market developments. Service sectors marked by foundation work like logistics or hospitality are growing, while well-paid and unionised jobs in manufacturing are being cut. This creates anxiety about loss of status – one is afraid to slip into precarious, less well-regarded service jobs (see e.g. Dörre, 2023). Besides offering re-training and further qualification, it is essential to equalise working conditions across sectors and to address structural inequalities in foundation work. Despite the different challenges in the sectors dominated by foundation work, what matters is to use commonalities strategically to learn from one another on a pan-union, cross-sector basis. The debates about how far the ban on service contracts in the German meat industry can be transferred to parcel delivery, for instance, illustrates how this might be done.

When addressing foundation workers in their role in the transition, it is important, however, to emphasise the employees' strengths aside from the challenges. Foundation workers are often adept at compensating for their lack of formal resources with informal ones – say through an inordinate pride in their own work, a marked resilience given challenging physical and mental health conditions at work, and a special capacity to adapt to and cope with changes on the labour

market. If we are to reach foundation workers in the debates around the transformation of the economy and the workplace, it is important to recognise these strengths and use them.

3. (Foundation) Workers are politically indispensable.

The results of the German federal elections in 2025 have underlined once more how very damaged trust in the problem-solving capacity of democratic parties has become. Especially among workers, support for the right-wing extremist AfD (Alternative for Germany) has grown. Our study's results confirm an extremely low level of trust in the democratic political system among employees. The feeling that one's own problems are being taken up by politicians is only shared by a handful of respondents; employees feel invisible and overlooked in political processes. The workforce is variously defined in social discourse depending on the context and is not congruent with the group of foundation workers. But there are significant overlaps, notably in physically demanding foundation work in both industry and services.

Irrespective of the particular employment group (foundation work, workforce, low-paid sector), the study's data substantiate a significant link between certain aspects of working conditions and political attitudes towards democracy and the transition (see Section 5). They show: the more autonomous and secure employees feel in their job and at work, the more open-minded they are towards digitalisation and climate protection and the stronger their trust in democracy. That this observed link exists independently of the subdivision into foundation work and skilled jobs underlines that the actual dividing line in terms of democratic importance runs between insecure work on the one hand and autonomous and secure work on the other.

To counteract the declining trust in the democratic system and buttress employee acceptance for the digital, economic and ecological transformation underway, it is therefore necessary to un-

derstand and manage employment relations as the central arena for these developments. This includes measures that strengthen the prospects for autonomy and co-determination in the workplace, as well as employees' financial, physical and mental security. Such measures can be especially important and effective for employees subjected to insecure employment conditions that currently have few opportunities for democratic co-determination in their working life – in foundation work and beyond.

Prospects

The concept of foundation work is not uncontroversial. As an alternative term to auxiliary or simple work, it serves the goal of a conceptual revaluation of unskilled occupations. But the foundation workers consulted within this study question whether this succeeds entirely. Being part of the foundation means not only building important social and economic pillars, but also finding one's place right at the bottom of the labour market hierarchy. However, the concept seems unsuited to politically address workers, not only for this reason but because of its conceptual fuzziness. Due to the broad definition centred on the required qualification, it creates an artificial division where common political interests would be unifying and suggests commonalities where one can learn from differences. Thus, the concept creates a dividing line between colleagues at the same place of work (e.g. between care assistants and care professionals), whilst at the same time it seeks to address both employees in very different sectors and occupations that are faced with very different obstacles.

Despite its contested symbolic impact and conceptual vagueness, the concept of 'foundation work' has an analytical legitimacy. It brings together several highly topical and relevant debates in labour market policy: the question of working conditions in essential occupations, the challenge of addressing labour and skills shortages in times of structural transformation, and the issue of outreach to and political representation of workers. For this reason, continued engagement with the

group of foundation workers is worthwhile – both academically and politically.

For political outreach, the concept of indispensability seems more appropriate. This serves less the purpose as a conceptual alternative to the designation of unskilled occupations in the academic debate. Rather, in the political discourse, the concept of indispensability serves to create a unifying identity on the basis of the social worth of the (indispensable) work carried out. This normative message allows for a political discourse about pride in the heavy, psychologically and physically demanding work that one carries out on a daily basis despite all the obstacles – to earn a living and to keep society going. At the same time, a moral distancing from other groups of employees (or the unemployed) – as has become typical in right-wing populist and extremist discourse with the image of 'deservingness' – is avoided. The concept does not deny other employees in skilled professions their indispensability. Rather, it seeks to emphasise the social, economic, and political significance of a group of employees who have gone unnoticed up till now – the invisible indispensables.

Endnotes

- 1 Job-related means that the definition of foundation work is oriented towards the skills required to carry out the work and not employees' educational attainment.
- 2 Marginal employment (*geringfügige Beschäftigung*) refers to jobs with low earnings or short-term work, also known as "mini-jobs". As of 2025, this means earning no more than €556 per month (the limit changes with minimum wage updates). Employees in marginal employment are generally exempt from social security contributions for pension, unemployment, and long-term healthcare, and they are not required to pay income tax if it is their only job.
- 3 All verbatim quotations were translated from German, including those from our own qualitative research as well as from other referenced studies.
- 4 Assessments of the employment statistics from the Federal Labour Agency yield values of 5.62 to 7.8 million employees in foundation work, depending on whether only employees who pay social security or also people in marginal employment are included (Ittermann & Maylandt, 2024; Rump & Eilers, 2024). The proportion of foundation work was around 23 % in 2015 according to an estimation by the socio-economic panel (Brenke & Kritikos, 2017); the results of the BIBB/BAuA employee survey of 2018 set the lower boundary of the cut-off point at 15.7 % (Hall & Sevindik, 2020).
- 5 Zandonella et al. (2020) define occupational status via the International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status (ISEI). This "reflects the socio-economic status of an occupational activity via formal education and income" (p. 59).
- 6 Besides trust in democracy, negative ties to anti-democratic attitudes like group-focused enmity and right-wing populism can be detected (see also Hövermann et al., 2022). The study focuses first and foremost on trust in political actors and institutions, as well as the democratic system.
- 7 Conduct of the focus group discussions was entrusted to Dr. Thomas Wind and the Institut für Zielgruppenkommunikation (IfZ).
- 8 We chose industries with a particularly high volume of essential working, based on the statistical calculation of the proportion of unskilled jobs in a given field using the employment statistics of the Federal Agency for Labour from the year 2022 (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2022).
- 9 The opinion poll embraced German-speaking employees over the age of 18. Self-employed people were excluded.
- 10 We reverted to *inter alia* elements from the DGB-Index Good Work, the BIBB/BAuA employee survey, the Copenhagen Psychological Questionnaire (COPSOQ), the study on World of Work and Democracy in East Germany from the Otto-Brenner-Foundation (Kiess et al., 2023) and the 'Mitte'-Studies of the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation (Zick et al., 2023).
- 11 The test-run took place from 27 September until 02 October 2024 in real-life field conditions. Within it, 81 interviews were conducted. Thereafter, the screening process was slightly adjusted, the questionnaire left as it was. The final screening questions can be found in the questionnaire in Appendix C.1.
- 12 This can be seen in the available sample via the comparatively low share of respondents with a migrant background: at 11.9 % significantly below the values of other studies (Rump and Eilers (2024) e.g. register a share of some 30 %).

- 13 Household income was calculated as net equivalent income on the OECD scale.
- 14 A further explanatory factor for this fluctuation could be a comparatively higher temporary contract rate among foundation workers. 13.1 % of those polled versus 7.3 % of all other employees are on temporary contracts.
- 15 Time pressure is not just a problem in foundation work. 49.6 % of skilled workers admit to often feeling stressed at work. This can be explained by the fact that, especially in higher level jobs and among employees carrying out complex activities, time-related stress is very widespread (Schmucker & Sinopoli, 2024, p. 62).
- 16 Taken in themselves, the values in the comparative group are also high. If only a third of skilled workers admit to knowing to whom they can turn when problems with the employer arise, that is all told a matter for concern and points to the need for action.
- 17 The question about desirable changes was multi-choice. Respondents could choose up to five out of eight optional answers.
- 18 All in all, the share of employees working in a business with a works council is above averagely high among opinion poll respondents. The average value in Germany in 2023 was 43 % of employees (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025). This difference can be explained by the distortive data effects in the poll described in Section 3.3.
- 19 *Abitur* is the most comprehensive qualification awarded at the end of secondary education in Germany and entitles pupils to pursue an academic degree at a university.
- 20 This does not mean that foreign employees do not see and bemoan drawbacks. In a situation where residential status depends on one's job, there might be a greater reliance on the job position, which might lead to concerns about negative consequences from any disputes with the employer.
- 21 It is clear from the focus groups that, besides the sector, firm size significantly influences the presence of a works council: the bigger the firm, the more likely a works council is on hand. This corresponds to the current state of research on workplace co-determination (Schlömer-Laufen & Kay, 2011).
- 22 Employment in low-hours part-time work (<15 hours a week) in foundation work is carried out by women in 60.4 % of cases and 39.6 % by men. Foundation work in part-time over higher hours (15–34 a week) is taken up predominantly by women (76.5 %) rather than men (23.5 %) (see Appendix C.3).
- 23 It must be pointed out here that it is not possible via the available data-set to grasp the objective systemic importance of the occupational activities carried out. Therefore, we draw on the expression: “Without my work society would not function well” that measures the subjective societal importance of one's work.
- 24 Focus group participants point out, however, that technological upgrades are costly and must be serviced. According to them, this raises the question whether they are worth it financially when human labour comes cheaper (see also Matthes & Burkert, 2021).
- 25 *Bürgergeld* is a basic social benefit in Germany with the purpose of supporting people who do not have enough income to cover their living expenses or who are unemployed.
- 26 The six scatter plots displayed (Figs. 9 and 10) show the link between the index of “industrial citizenship” (measured as Principal Component Analysis (PCA) of findings on perceived participation and co-determination) as well as the index “secure work” (measured as PCA of findings on sense of multidimensional security at work) and three attitude variables: (A) openness to digitalisation, (B) openness to climate protection measures and (C) trust in democracy.

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About Das Progressive Zentrum



Das Progressive Zentrum is an independent and non-profit think tank based in Berlin. We develop and debate ideas to promote social progress – and bring together people who translate these ideas into action. Our goal as a think tank: the success of a socially just transition. To this end, we work on projects in the programmes “Resilient Democracy” and “Green New Deal”. We are convinced that, if we are to make liberal democracy fit for the future, it is important to learn how to defend its foundations and continuously (re-)democratise them in light of new challenges. Since 2007, our studies, publications and meetings have been providing new impulses for making social progress.

About the project



This study is part of the project **“Foundation work in the ‘transformation society’”** commissioned and sponsored by the German Federal Ministry for Work and Social Affairs in the framework of its programme “Work: Secure + Healthy” (ARBEIT: SICHER + GESUND). Our study and dialogue project aims to give a voice to the perspectives and demands of people in foundation work and bring their concerns to the attention of politicians. As part of this, the research in this study forms the bedrock for subsequent political initiatives to put this to work. A special feature of this project is that five people in foundation work are supporting the project throughout its duration, giving feedback on the process and output.

The project also comprises a 35-minute documentary that accompanies three foundation workers in cleaning, care and parcel delivery during a regular working day.



Study and appendix for download at:

<https://www.progressives-zentrum.org/publication/die-unverzichtbaren-menschen-in-basisarbeit/>

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