



# **Work life balance in Hong Kong: Survey results**

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## **Executive summary**

This report, based on a survey of 1,027 employees in Hong Kong, reveals the general improvement in work-life balance of Hong Kong employees compared with our same study done in 2004. Results of a questionnaire-based survey distributed in cooperation with Hong Kong employers showed the following:

- Compared with 2004, employees now work 5 hours a week less
- In 2008, there has been a significant reduction in people working overtime and working late into the evening on a regular basis
- Many more companies are now allowing some sort of flexible working compared with 2004
- There are significant improvements in workers' happiness with their jobs although only very small improvements in work-life balance
- There is a dramatic reduction in people considering leaving their jobs in the next 12 months

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In 2008 the key aspects of the study reveal that:

Employees in Hong Kong work long hours:

- The average working week is 49.6 hours (in 2004 it was 55.2)
- 62.4% of people regularly work unpaid overtime.
- 51.7% of people work late into the evenings

People work late:

- 62.6% to get their job done and be more productive
- 37.4% out of obligation and often work less hard because they are expected to stay late

Employees' health is being affected:

- 82.5% of people said they suffered stress and 75.4% from lack of exercise
- 46.4% report poor diet and 45.6% exhaustion resulting from their jobs

Employees are taking sick leave:

- 27% of people take sick leave in order to recover from working long hours

Employees think the average annual leave is insufficient:

- The average number is 19 days but people think 23 days would be fairer

Work-life balance is being affected:

- Most people think they have too much work to do, which detracts from their work-life balance
- Most people are unhappy about the amount of time they spend with their family and friends
- But, more people are happy with their jobs than are unhappy with them

Potential staff turnover rate is high

- 12.9% of people said that they would consider leaving their jobs in the next 12 months

In 2008 demographic data was included in the survey for the first time. Key findings include:

- On average women work fewer hours than men and are less likely to work overtime on a regular basis
- Younger men (under 30) work the longest hours of any demographic group
- Men tend to take more sick time than women because of their long work hours, but are no more likely to leave their jobs in the next 12 months
- There is no great difference between men and women in terms of their happiness with their jobs
- However, women are more satisfied with their work-life balance and time spent with family and friends than men
- Longer hours are worked by younger people. They are also most likely to work regular overtime
- The age group over 50 works more overtime than the group from 40 to 49
- Young people are less likely to have flexible working arrangements than older people and are more likely to take sick leave as a result of working long hours
- Younger people are more likely to leave their jobs in the next 12 months
- Workers in the range 40 to 49 are most satisfied with their jobs, are happier with their work-life balance and time spent with family and friends

## **Introduction**

Work-life balance is an essential part of Corporate Social Responsibility. Corporations are increasingly recognizing that an inadequate work-life balance can have detrimental impacts on staff performance, satisfaction and retention. When employers target good work-life balance, they can see that reducing stress and frustration resulting from poor work-life balance can be beneficial to both parties.

From a similar study conducted in 2004, we found that long working hours affected workers' daily lives which often resulted in health problems and affected staff turnover. The government of Hong Kong has recognized this and in order to improve work-life balance, took the lead in reducing the amount of working hours in public sectors by moving from a five and a half day working week to five. The five-day working week arrangement was introduced into the civil service sector in July 2006 and much of the business sector has followed suit by implementing a five-day week arrangement as well. Our results show that by 2008 this policy has been effective in reducing the average working week by around half a day.

## **Research methodology**

In January and February, 2008 a survey was distributed to an established network of Hong Kong businesses to collect data about a number of facets of work-life balance. A questionnaire comprising 16 questions was used as the survey instrument.

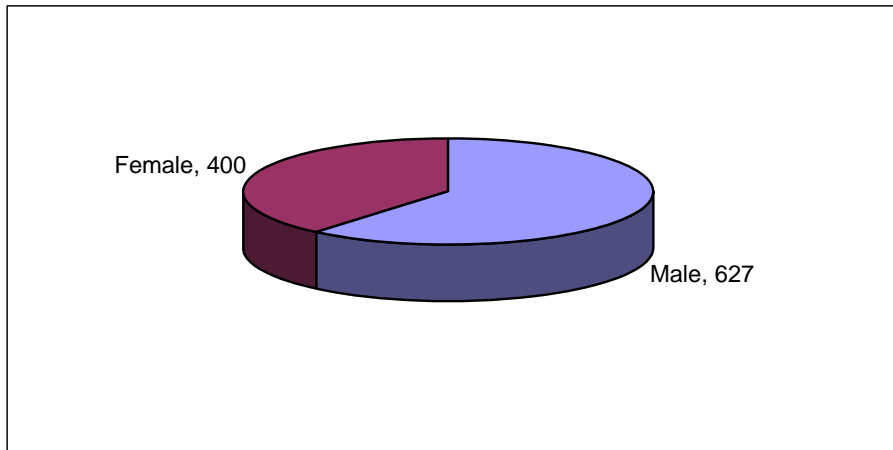
Data concerning the gender and age of respondents was also collected in order to examine any differences amongst men and women and different age groups.

### Distribution of responses

1,027 completed questionnaires were collected. Table 1 provides a breakdown of respondents by age and Figure 1 provides details on the distribution of respondents by gender.

Age	No. of respondents
Under 30	248
30-39	369
40-49	280
Over 50	130

**Table 1: Distribution of respondents by age**



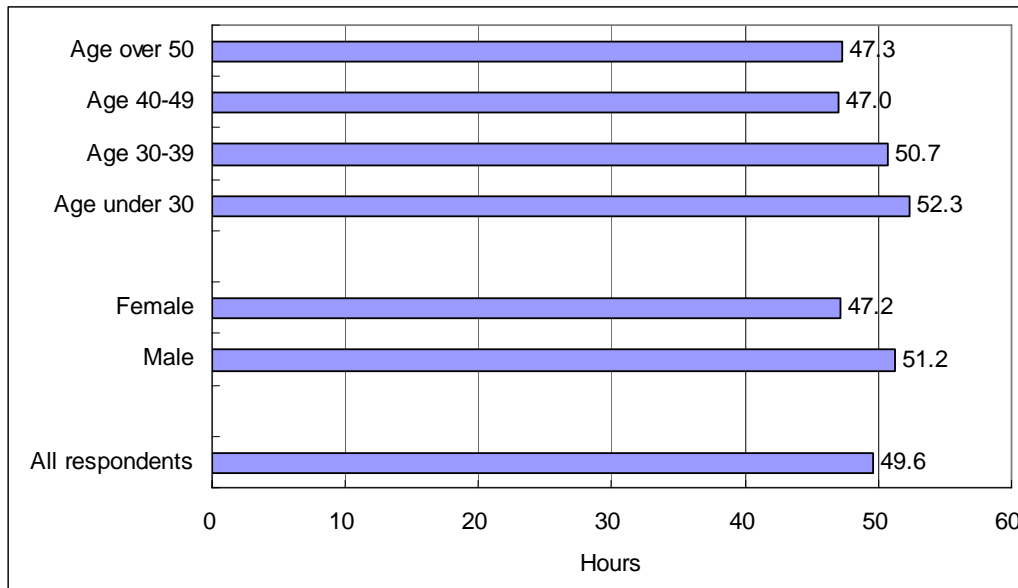
**Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by gender**

## Results

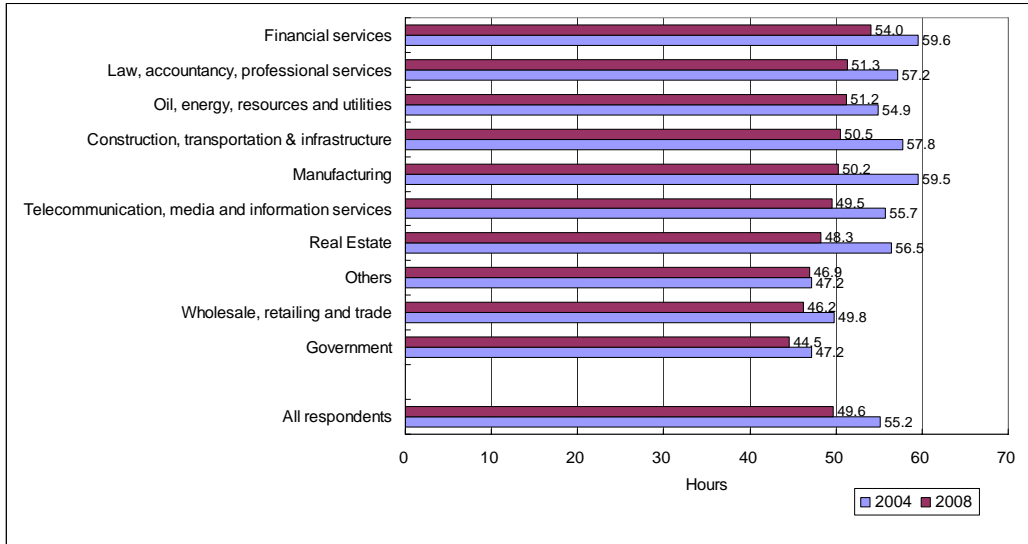
### Working hours

Figure 2 shows that the average working hours for those people included in this study was roughly 50 hours. The findings demonstrate that younger people work longer hours compared to older people. It also reveals that males tend to have longer working hours than females.

Figure 3 illustrates the average amount of working hours among different sectors in both 2004 and 2008. In 2008, the range of working hours spanned from 44.5 for Government employees to 54 for those in Financial Services. Interestingly, all sectors have seen their average number of working hours decrease. The manufacturing sector had the largest decrease from 2004 to 2008.



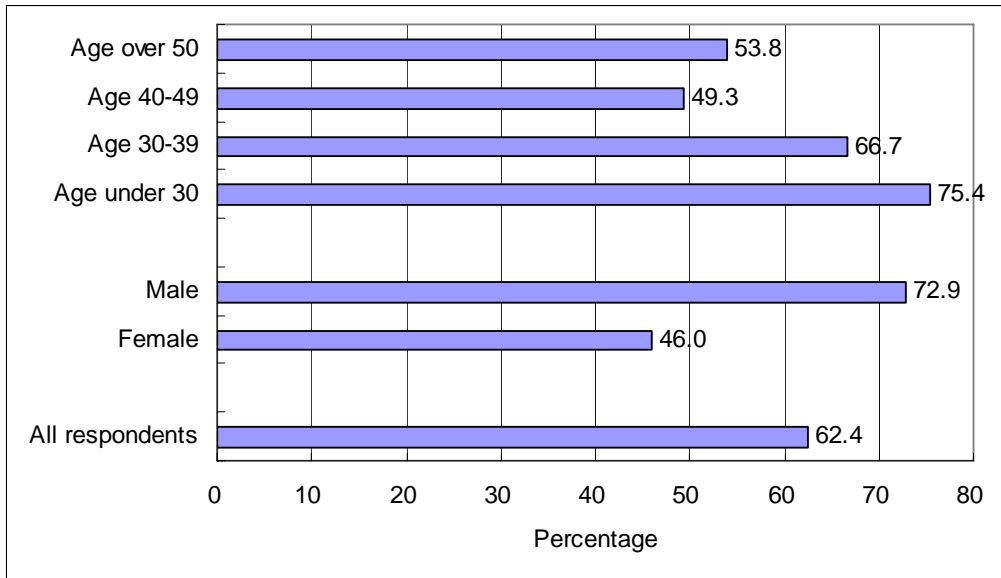
**Figure 2: Average working hours per week**



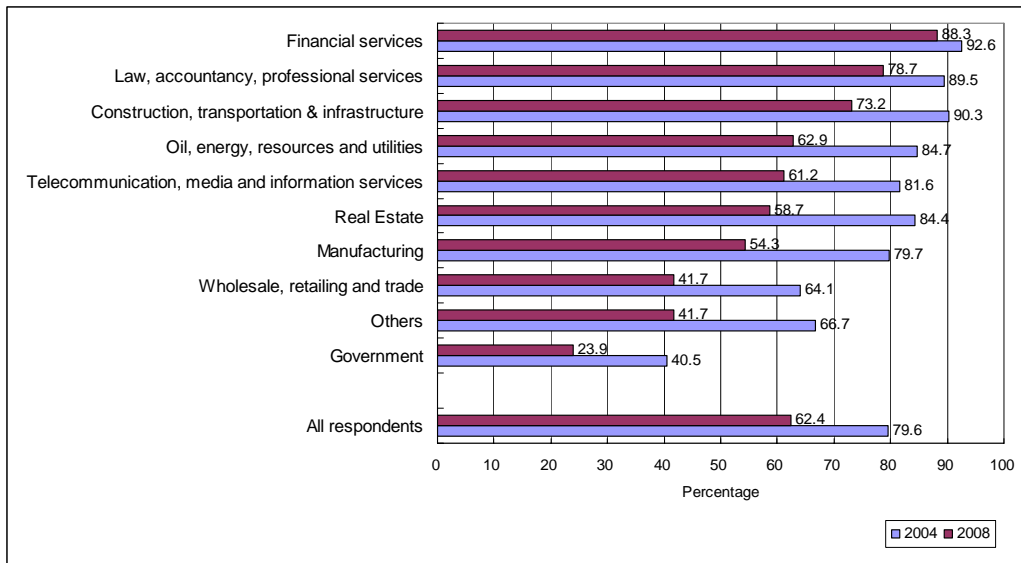
**Figure 3: Average working hours per week (2004 & 2008)**

Figure 4 reveals that on average around 62% of respondents are regularly working unpaid overtime (with a high of 75.4% from people under age 30 to 49.3% from people between age 40-49). It also reveals that more men (72.9%) work overtime than women (46%).

As seen in figure 5, fewer people are working overtime compared with those in 2004. The real estate and manufacturing sectors saw the largest decreases with roughly 30% less people working overtime compared to the 2004 results.



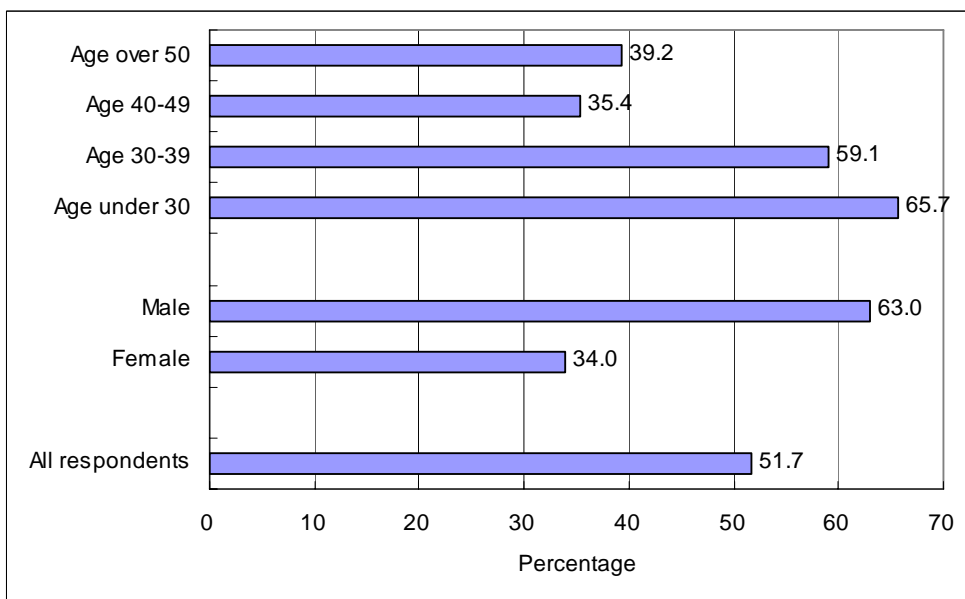
**Figure 4: Regularly working unpaid overtime**



**Figure 5: Regularly working unpaid overtime (2004 & 2008)**

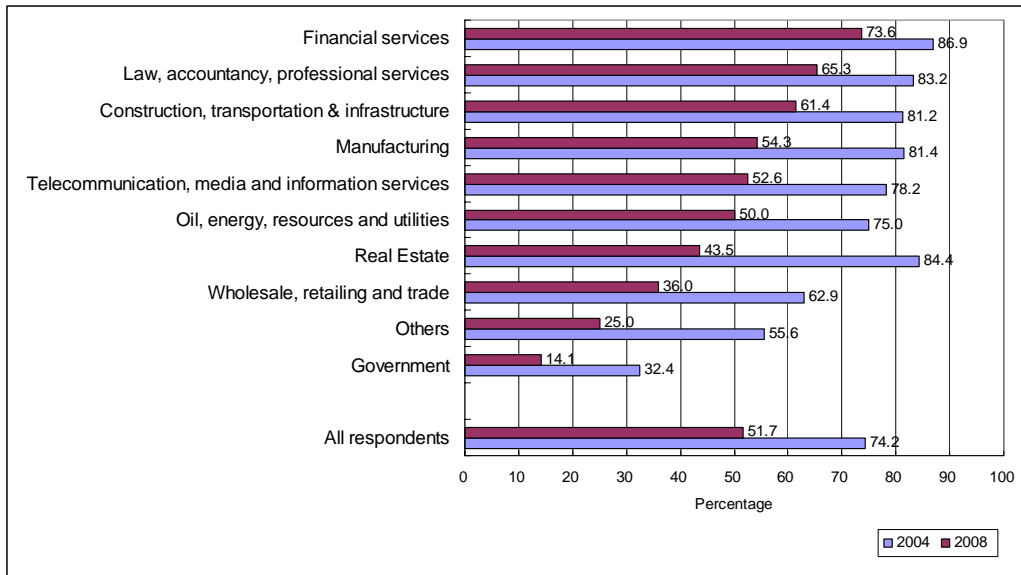
Regularly working late into the evening is still common in Hong Kong, especially for people aged 30 and under (65.7%). Figure 6 shows that on average, around 52% of people work overtime regularly. However, there are significant differences between men and women.

Respondents in all sectors showed a decrease of 30% in the percentage of regularly working late into the evening. Figure 7 breaks down the trend of the decreasing of regularly working late into the evening in all sectors.



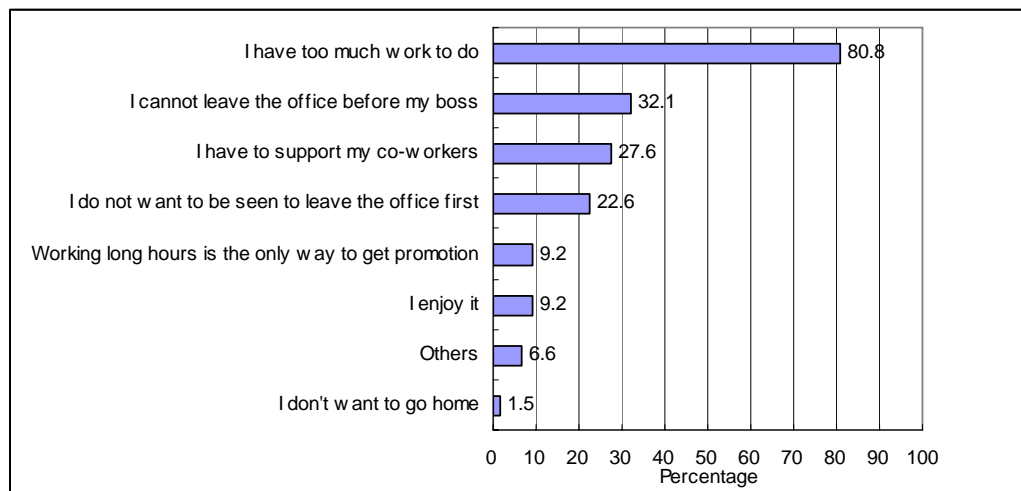
**Figure 6: Regularly working late into the evening**



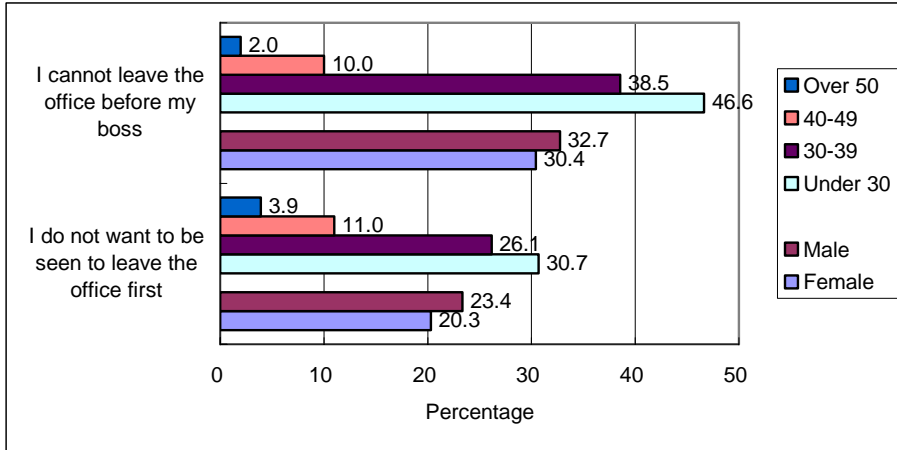


**Figure 7: Regularly working late into the evening (2004 & 2008)**

Respondents were asked for their reasons for regularly working late. Figure 8 shows that around 80% did so simply because they had too much work to do. Figure 9 illustrates that there is a trend among younger workers to work late because they “cannot leave the office before my boss” and “do not want to be seen to leave the office first”.



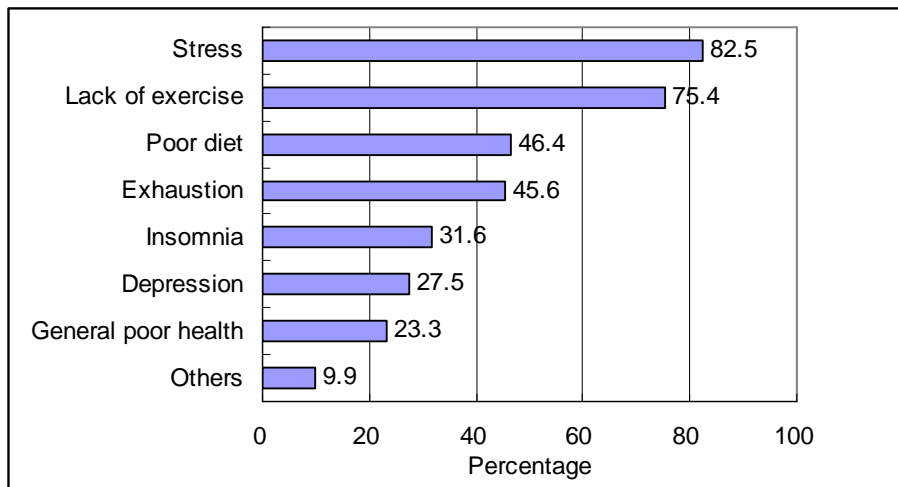
**Figure 8: Reasons for regularly working late**



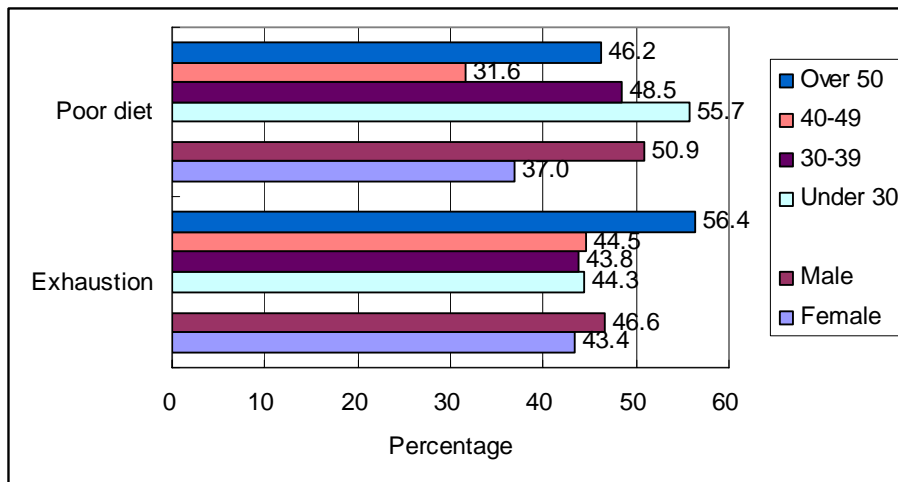
**Figure 9: Breakdown of reasons for regularly working late**

## Health effects

82.5% of respondents said they suffered from stress and 75.4% from lack of exercise due to long working hours. In addition, Figure 10 shows other negative health effects including poor diet (46.4%), exhaustion (45.6%), insomnia (31.6%) and depression (27.6%). When we take a closer look at exhaustion and poor diet, a higher percentage of respondents age 50 and over suffered from exhaustion among the age groups while there were a much higher percentage of respondents aged under 30 suffered from a poor diet compared with other age groups (Figure 11).

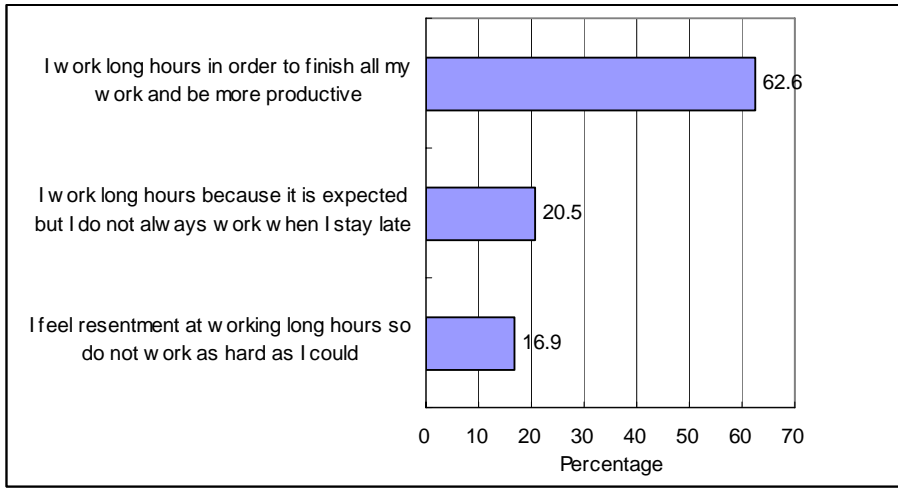


**Figure 10: Health effects due to working long hours on regular basis**

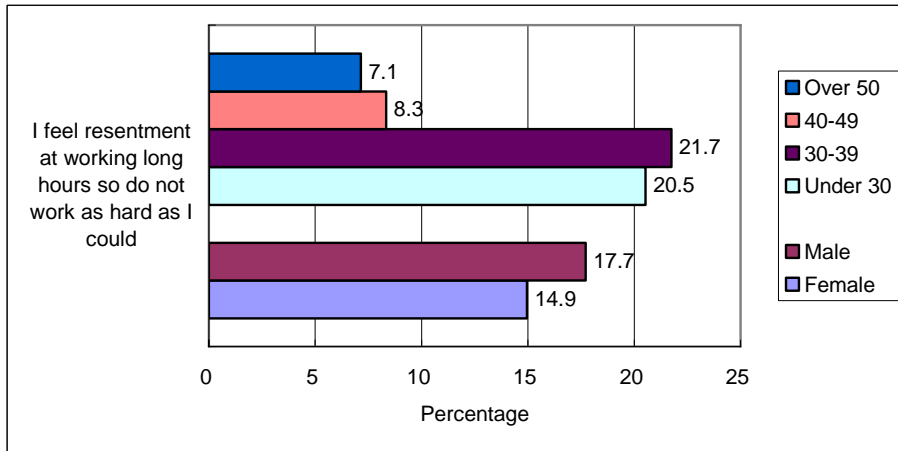


**Figure 11: Breakdown of health effects due to working long hours on regular basis**

The survey also asked for the reason for working unpaid overtime (see Figures 12 and 13). More than 60% of respondents said that they worked overtime to finish all their work and be more productive. In contrast, 16.9% of the respondents work late out of obligation and often work less hard because they are expected to stay late. If we take a closer look at this scenario a much higher percentage of the respondents are under age 39 (i.e. group 30-39, and group under 30, than the respondents older than 40), due to the fact that respondents over 40 are in management positions.



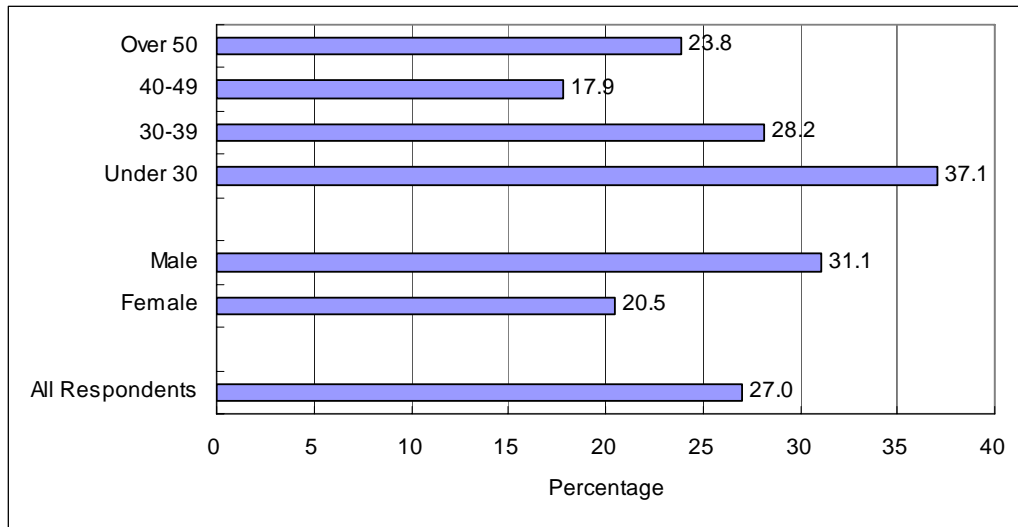
**Figure 12: Reasons for working unpaid overtime**



**Figure 13: Distribution of workers who feel resentment at working long hours**

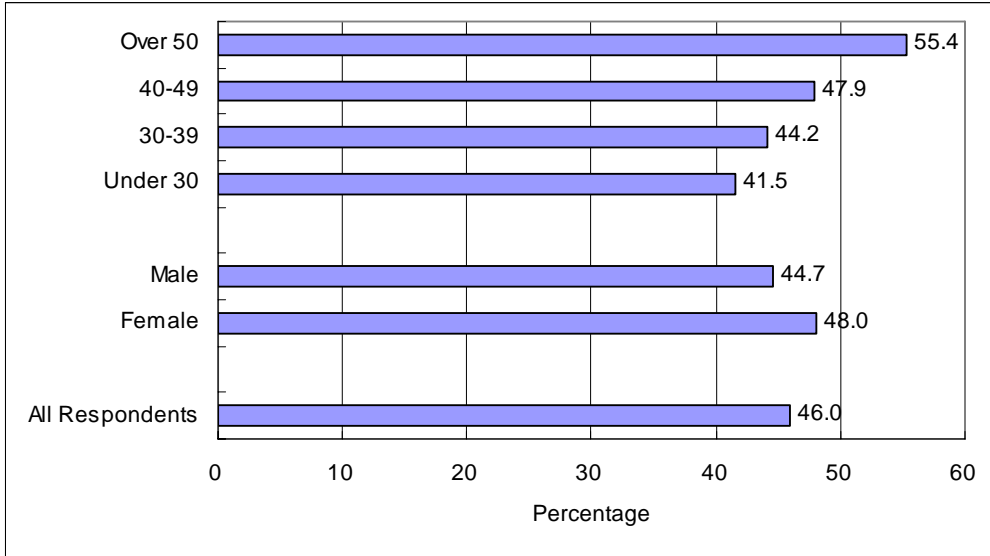
## Sick leave

Figure 14 shows that 27% of respondents take sick leave to recover from working long hours. This Figure also shows that much higher percentage of respondents under age 30 take sick leave than other age groups. Also, males had higher tendency to take sick leave to recover from working long hours than females.

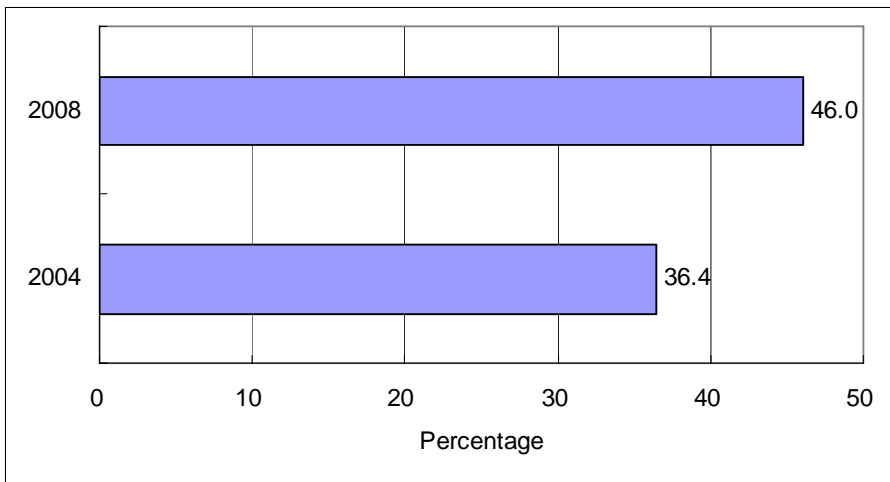


**Figure 14: Do you ever take sick leave to recover from working long hours?**

To compensate long working hours, companies should allow flexible hours. Compared to 2004, 46% of the respondents said their company allowed flexible working hours to compensate for working late, an increase of 9.6% (Figure 16). It seems that companies are beginning to understand that a more flexible policy on working hours can improve the effectiveness of their staff.



**Figure 15: Does your company allow flexible working hours to compensate for working late? (2008)**



**Figure 16: Does your company allow flexible working hours to compensate for working late?**

## Annual leave

Figure 17 provides data on annual leave amongst the respondents. They were asked to state how many days leave per year they received and how many they thought would be fair. Across the entire survey, the average annual leave was 18.7 days, which was less than what workers considered fair.

It is interesting to note that the differences in number of days of actual annual leave among difference groups are very small.

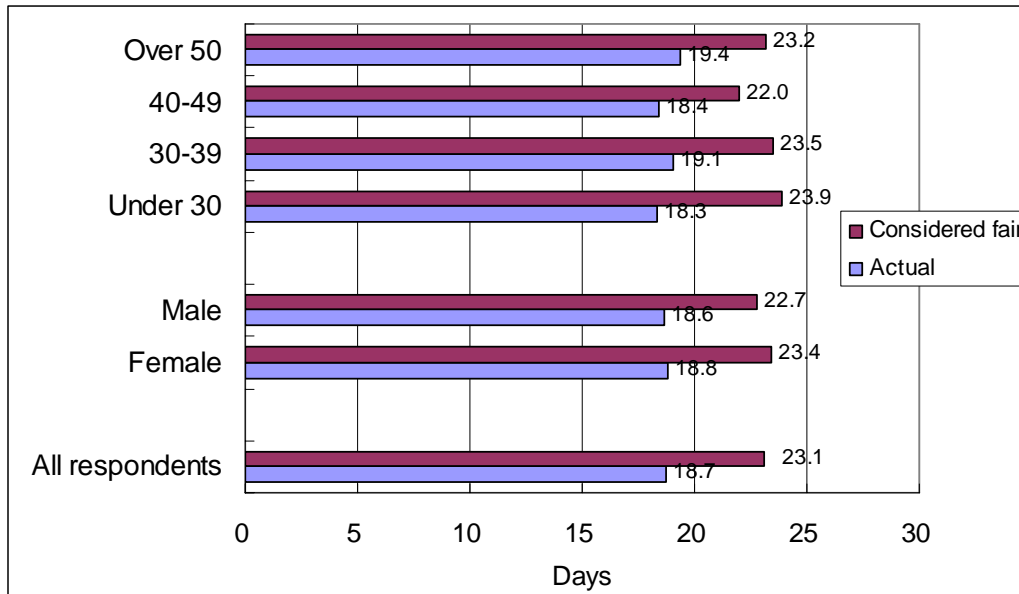
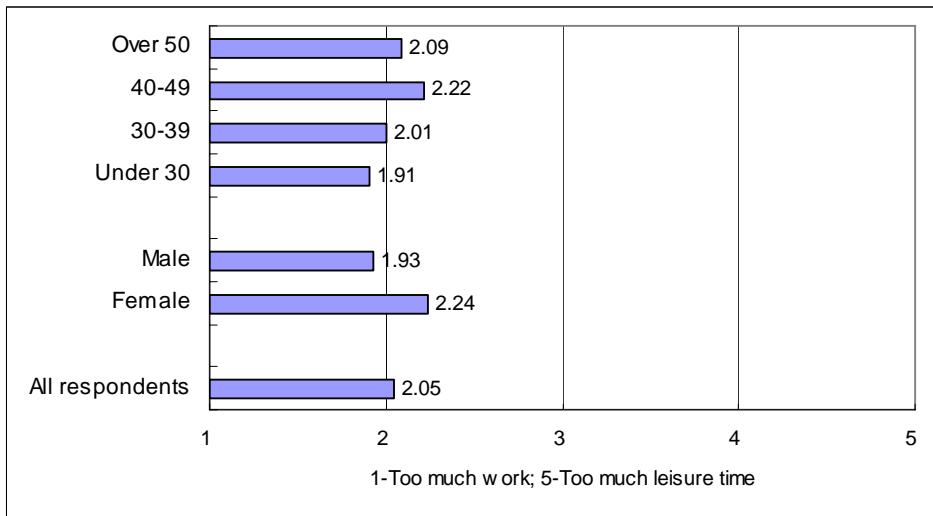


Figure 17: Annual leave per year (2008)

## Work-life balance

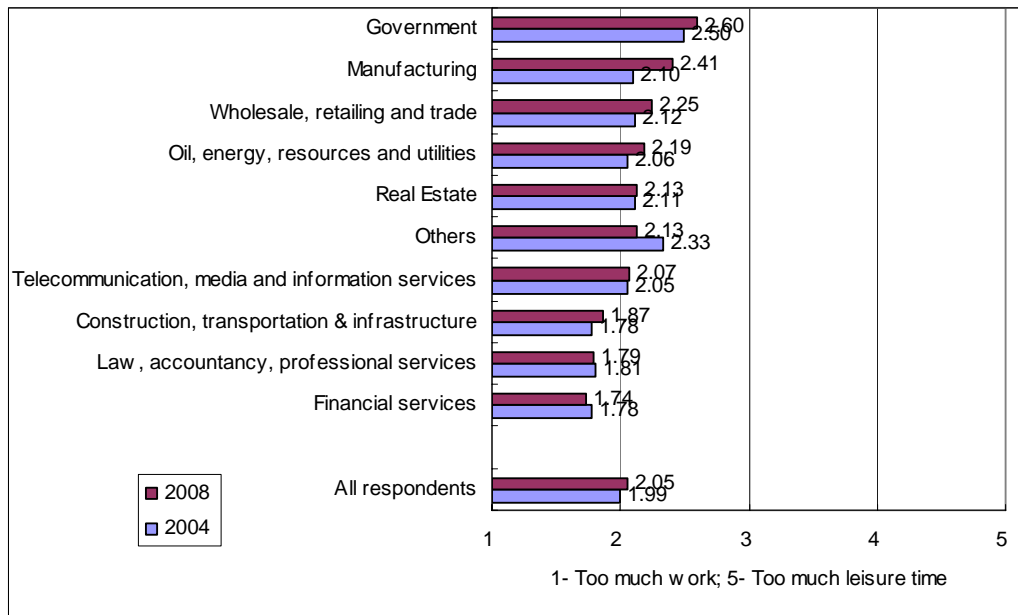
Respondents were asked to rate their work-life balance on a five point scale (1. too much work; 2. a little too much work; 3. my life is very balanced; 4. a little too much leisure time; 5. too much leisure time). Therefore, a score of 3 would be representative of a good work-life balance while a score significantly lower than that would relate to work impinging on a good balance (see Figures 18 and 19).

Overall, a score around 2 would mean respondents consider themselves to have a little too much work to do. The highest score was 2.6 in government and the lowest was 1.74 scored in the financial sector. However, the average scores calculated in age groups, gender and industrial sectors all averaged less than 3.



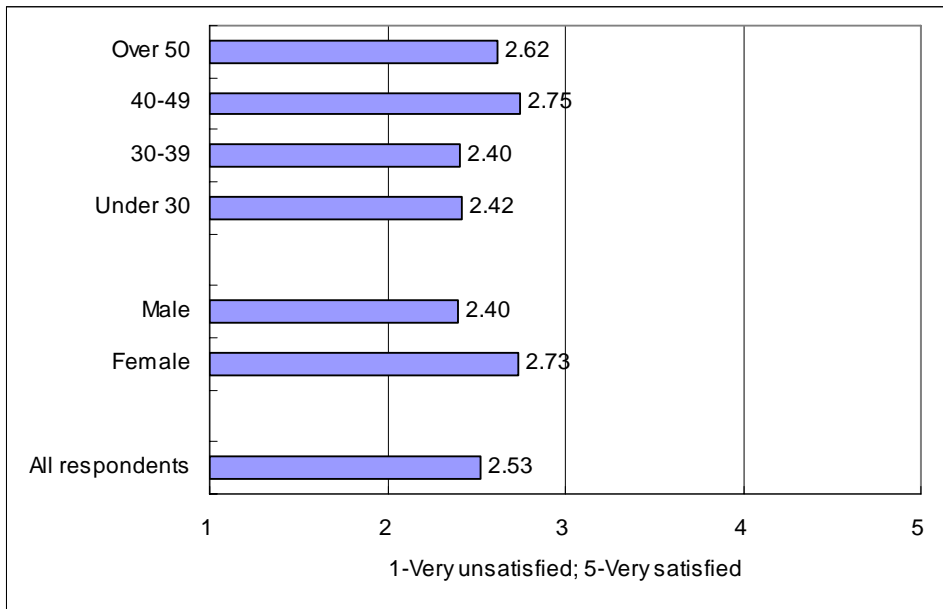
**Figure 18: Work-life balance (2008)**



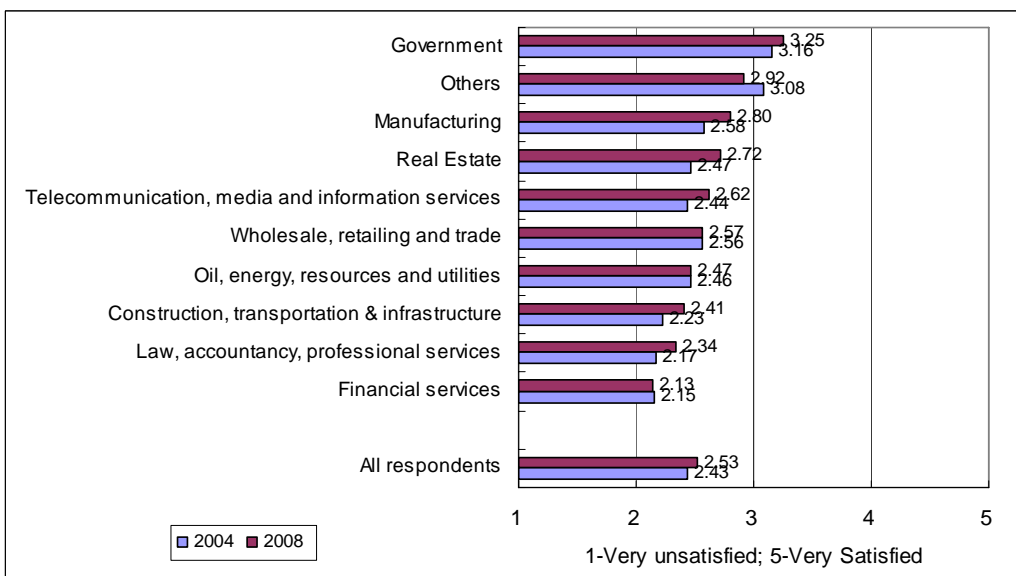


**Figure 19: Work-life balance (2004&2008)**

Respondents were also asked about their satisfaction with the amount of time spent with family and friends (Figures 20 and 21). The five point scale ran from very unsatisfied (1) to very satisfied (5) with a score of 3 being neutral (neither satisfied nor unsatisfied in effect). A good work-life balance ought to be associated with scores significantly above 3. Across the entire study, the average score in satisfaction with the amount of time spent with family and friends was 2.53 (see Figure 20). There was a slight increase in scores of satisfaction in most sectors, and in general, the average mark increased from 2.43 in 2004 to 2.53 in 2008.



**Figure 20: Satisfaction with the amount of time spent with family and friends (2008)**

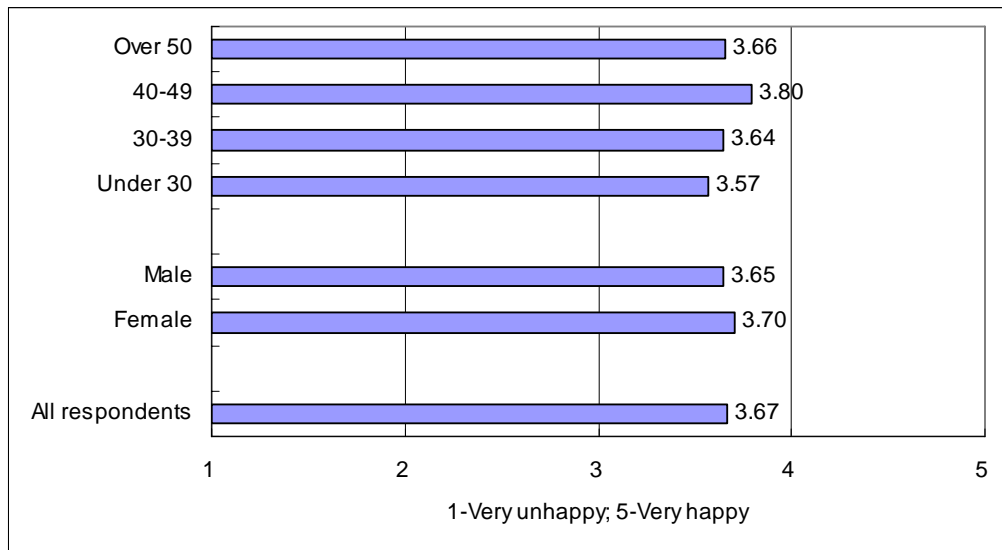


**Figure 21: Satisfaction with the amount of time spent with family and friends (2004 & 2008)**

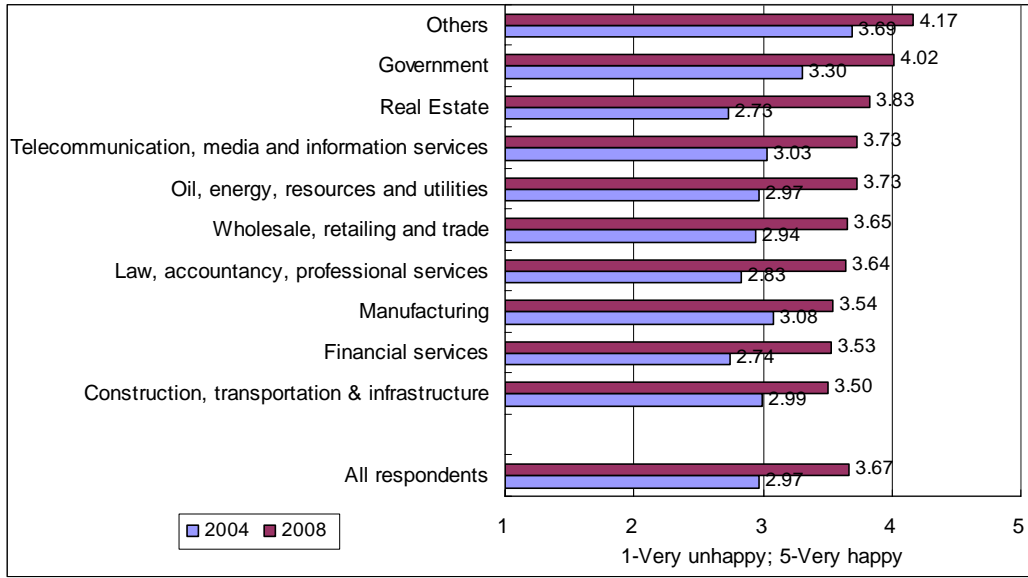
## Employee happiness with work

Overall happiness with the respondents' jobs were also ranked on a five-point scale ranging from very unhappy (1) to very happy (5) with a score of 3 again being neutral (Figures 22 and 23). The average scores of all groups in age or gender are over 3, illustrating that in general, workers were happy with their job (see Figure 22).

Workers also appear to be enjoying their working life more in 2008. By comparing the survey results with 2004, there is a 23.6% increase in the score of happiness from 2004 compared to that of 2008 (from 2.97 in 2004 to 3.67 in 2008). One circumstance that can explain this particular outcome would be shorter working hours leading to the improvement employee happiness.



**Figure 22: Happiness with job (2008)**

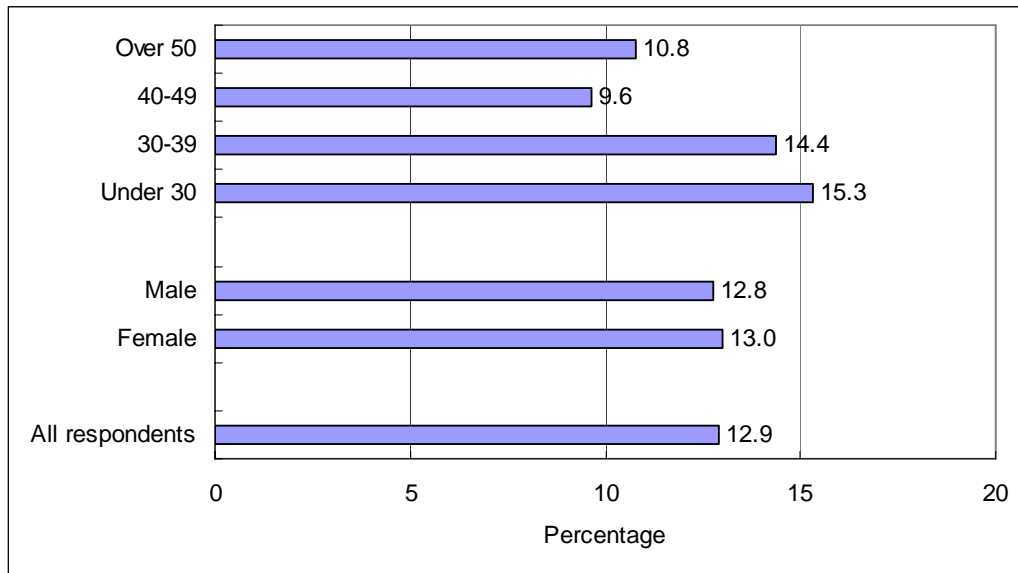


**Figure 23: Happiness with job**

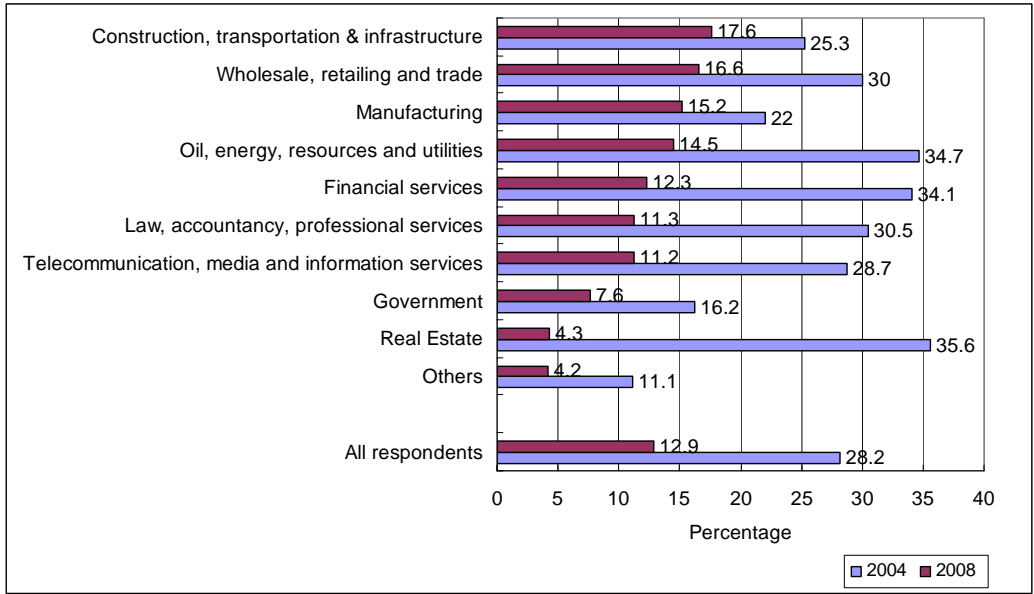
## Staff turnover

The final question asked was whether respondents are considering leaving their jobs in the next 12 months (this does not mean that they actually would). 12.9% of the respondents said they would consider leaving their jobs in the coming year.

The reason behind the more than 50% drop compared to the responses in 2004 may be attributed to shortening of working hours and improved working culture. These aspects improve work-life balance of workers and as a result, lower the turnover rate of staff. The reduction of staff turnover rate also helps companies reduce the amount of time and resources spent on employing and training new staff.



**Figure 24: Considering leaving job in the next 12 months (2008)**



**Figure 25: Considering leaving job in the next 12 months**

## Conclusions

This survey has illustrated that improvements have taken place in the work-life balance of Hong Kong employees. Compared with a similar study conducted in 2004, Hong Kong workers appear to be much happier. Respondents were seen to have shorter average working hours with fewer people working regular overtime. This may be part of the reason for the increase in overall employee satisfaction with work-life balance and a lower likelihood of changing jobs over the coming 12 months..

The government's contribution in promoting 5-day work weeks has been just one response towards in proving work-life balance. The action has led to many businesses implementing the 5-day work arrangement as well. Although some employers may have added to Saturday morning hours to the weekday work load, it seems that people often work beyond this new requirement anyway, with the net effect being a shortening in the workload of around half a day.

We have also seen significant increases in the numbers of companies offering flexible working arrangements to deal with work life balance issues.

For the first time the report also examines age and gender. It is clear that young men work longer hours than any other group. Satisfaction with work is highest among 40-49 year olds. Workers above 50 tend to work longer hours and experience more exhaustion than those a decade younger, however.

There remains an alarmingly high percentage of respondents who feel that work is the cause of health problems, specifically stress and lack of exercise. It should be remembered that such illnesses can become a financial burden to companies and taxpayers who must spend more in regards to medical expenses. In addition to the financial burden, health problems are likely lead to lower productivity and effectiveness of workers.

It is the responsibility of companies and the government to promote healthy working attitudes and practices in order to keep employee satisfaction high. Indeed, most companies are realizing that it is in their own best interests to promote work life balance in order to retain a productive, healthy workforce. And although the exact level of a good work-life balance is difficult to pinpoint, this study shows that an improvement across all sectors has been made.