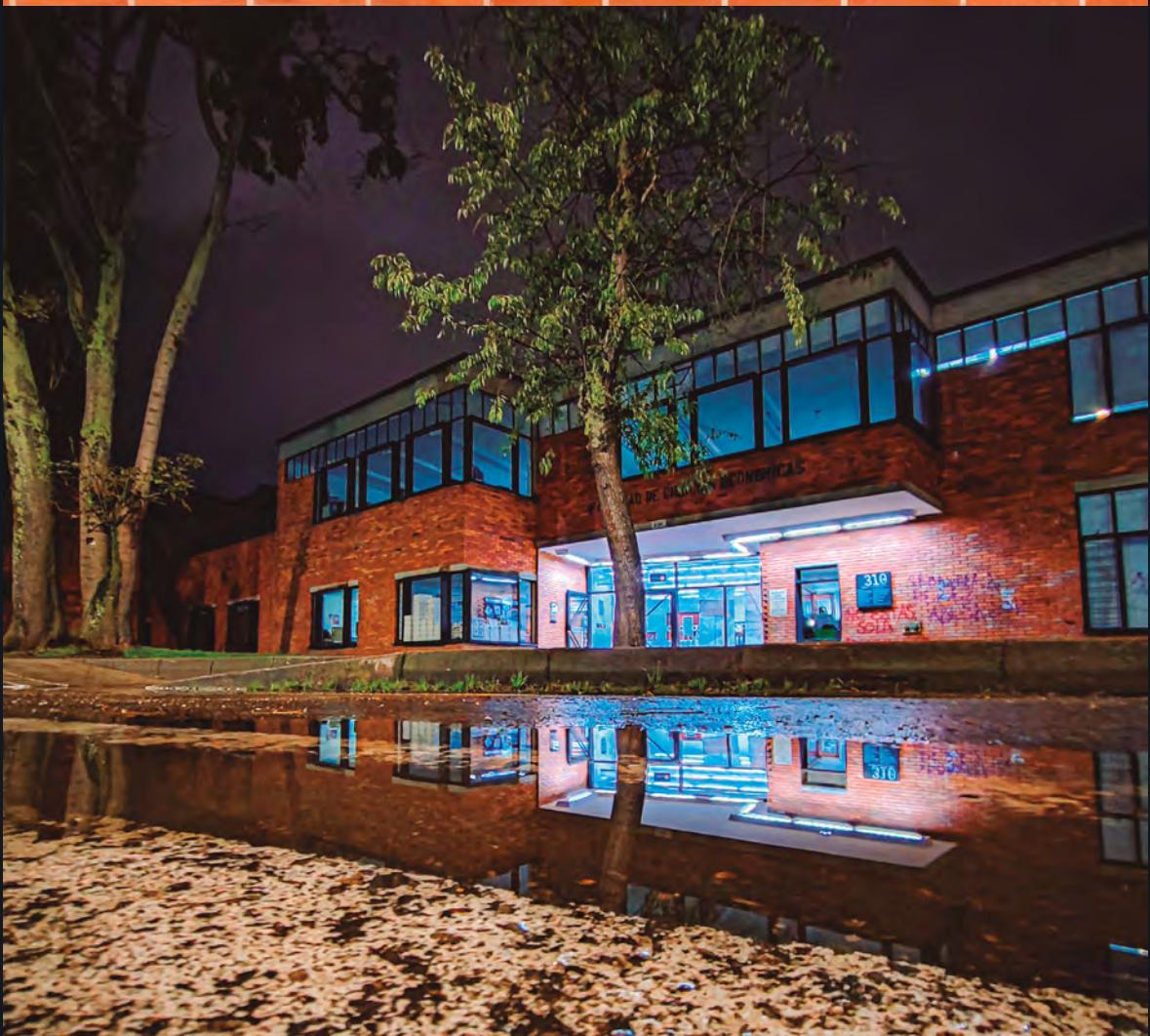


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## THE QUALITY OF ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL WORK IN COLOMBIA: FROM THE MATERIAL TO THE SYMBOLIC

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Mario Eduardo Hidalgo Villota  
Hernando Meneses Linares

**Hidalgo Villota, M. E., & Meneses Linares, H. (2025). The quality of artistic and cultural work in Colombia: From the material to the symbolic. *Cuadernos de Economía*, 44(96), 1193-1218.**

This article analyses the quality of artistic and cultural work in Colombia during the period 2018–2024, based on two composite indices—objective and subjective—constructed using anonymised microdata from the Great Integrated Household Survey (GEIH) conducted by DANE. The adopted methodology enables comparisons with similar studies in other contexts. The results show that the quality of artistic and cultural employment is low and falls far short of international standards defined for decent work. While many workers express symbolic satisfac-

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M. E. Hidalgo Villota

University of Nariño, Department of Economics, Pasto (Colombia).

Economics, Government and Public Policy Research Group, Pasto (Colombia)

Email: [mariohidalgo@udenar.edu.co](mailto:mariohidalgo@udenar.edu.co). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5579-6136>

H. Meneses Linares

Email: [her.men2713@gmail.com](mailto:her.men2713@gmail.com). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3450-3858>

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tion with their activity, the material conditions are precarious and reveal a labour structure with no prospects for improvement.

**Keywords:** Art market; culture; employment; employment conditions; labour.

**JEL:** J31, J44, J48, J53, J58, J81.

**Hidalgo Villota, M. E., & Meneses Linares, H. (2025). La calidad del trabajo artístico y cultural en Colombia: de lo material a lo simbólico. *Cuadernos de Economía*, 44(96), 1193-1218.**

Este artículo analiza la calidad del trabajo artístico y cultural en Colombia durante el periodo 2018-2024, a partir de dos índices compuestos —objetivo y subjetivo— construidos con microdatos anonimizados de la Gran Encuesta Integrada de Hogares (GEIH) del DANE. La metodología adoptada permite establecer comparaciones con estudios similares en otros contextos. Los resultados muestran que la calidad del empleo cultural y artístico es baja y se encuentra lejos de los estándares internacionales definidos para el trabajo decente. Si bien muchos trabajadores expresan satisfacción simbólica con su labor, las condiciones materiales son precarias y revelan una estructura laboral sin perspectivas de mejora.

**Palabras clave:** condiciones de empleo; cultura; empleo; mercado del arte; trabajo.

**JEL:** J31, J44, J48, J53, J58, J81.

## INTRODUCTION

Work is therefore, essential in the production of goods and services to meet needs, ranging from the most basic and essential—such as food and clothing—to the most luxurious—such as customised cars or exclusive jewelry. Work plays a role in the creation of highly useful and dignifying objects, such as medicines used to prevent and cure diseases, as well as in the production of less useful and more controversial items, for instance weapons that destroy life. It becomes visible in the making of something as simple as a pencil—an extremely useful tool for taking the first steps in writing—as well as in a classical music concert that delights the spirit of specialised audiences. In these and many other cases, work is present as the physical or mental capacity of free men and women to produce things that are either immensely valuable or of little use to humanity.

Work throughout history has not always been the same. There were times when it was carried out forcibly and unpleasantly. Fortunately, today, work is performed freely and voluntarily—sometimes out of necessity and at other times out of passion and satisfaction, as is often the case in the artistic and cultural world. The transition from feudalism to a capitalist economy marked the birth of wage labour, a modern form of labour integration that has been both praised and deeply criticised. In the feudal system, for example, landless peasant serfs, deprived of access to the means of production, were forced to sell their labour power to the emerging industrial bourgeoisie, joining textile factories and other highly prosperous economic activities in the late 18th century due to the boom in commerce, advancements in maritime navigation, and the emergence of property rights.

However, in modern times, millions of people still depend exclusively on their labour power to survive—under increasingly unstable conditions. Since the 1980s, the world of work has faced rapid processes of flexibilisation, informality, and lack of protection, driven by the imperatives of global competitiveness. This neoliberal turn has had direct effects on job quality, limiting the capacity of states to guarantee universal labour rights (Sehnbruch et al., 2020).

Although studies on job quality have become more frequent in this century, largely due to the advance of neoliberal ideology, progress in improving working conditions has been modest and, at times, regressive. What is most concerning is that job quality is not improving, and current governments are increasingly indifferent to workers' demands. Cultural and artistic workers are not exempt from this reality. On the contrary, they face specific forms of precariousness associated with income discontinuity, self-employment, lack of social protection, and the symbolic undervaluation of their work (Abbing, 2002; Menger, 1999).

In Latin America, precariousness is intensified by institutional weakness, structural informality, and poor coordination between cultural and labour policies. As Boekhout van Solinge (2019) warns, cultural work in the region is characterised by constant turnover, low unionisation, and limited opportunities for professional sustainability. In the Colombian case, analysis of artistic and cultural work has

been fragmented and mostly focused on qualitative diagnoses or sectoral studies. This article seeks to address that gap through a quantitative approach based on the analysis of microdata from DANE's Great Integrated Household Survey (GEIH) for the period between 2018 and 2024. Using two composite indices—one objective and one subjective—the quality of employment in the cultural sector is characterised, addressing both material conditions and workers' subjective perceptions.

This analysis brings together perspectives from cultural economics (Blaug, 2001; Throsby, 2001; Throsby, 2008; Towse, 2011), labour sociology (Antunes, 1999; Oakley, 2009), and gender studies (Banks & Milestone, 2011; Conor et al., 2015) to provide a complex and situated view of the tensions between autonomy, vocation, and structural precariousness. It also revisits debates on the dematerialisation of work, inequality, and the need for comprehensive cultural policies (García Canclini, 2014).

In this manuscript, we first present a literature review relevant to the subject of study; then, we describe the methodological process used to assess work quality; next, we analyse the results in light of existing knowledge; and finally, we offer some conclusions intended to provoke academic reflection and contribute to future research in this area.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Artistic and cultural work has traditionally been considered an atypical form of employment, situated between vocation and profession, between autonomy and precariousness. In classical economics, Smith (1958) made a distinction between productive and unproductive labour, placing art and culture in the latter category. Although Smith (1958) acknowledged the social value of artistic professions, he argued that the economic value of a musician's or actor's work vanished at the very moment of its performance. This view reflects an economy focused on material goods, where services—and particularly symbolic ones—were considered marginal.

With the emergence of cultural and creative industries, this boundary has become blurred. Since then, artistic labour has not only been examined in terms of productivity. Scholars such as Throsby (2008) and Towse (2011) have proposed specific theoretical frameworks for cultural industries, incorporating the concept of "cultural value" and recognising non-monetary dimensions of work. For instance, Throsby (2008) distinguishes between performing and non-performing artists, highlighting structural inequality within the artistic field. According to him, while some have access to formal employment and social benefits, most face instability, multiple job holding, and low income. In this context, risk, vocation, and informal learning shape career paths marked by uncertainty.

From a sociological perspective, Menger (1999) argues that artistic markets operate under a regime of structural uncertainty. Artistic work is characterised by

discontinuity, an oversupply of qualified labour, and a low probability of sustained economic success. This precariousness is not incidental but rather constitutive of the functioning of the artistic field, where symbolic value and autonomy serve as mechanisms that legitimise fragile labour conditions. Along these lines, Abbing (2002) claims that artists internalise an exceptional economy, in which the pursuit of recognition and authenticity justifies low remuneration—creating a paradox between intensive training and low economic returns.

Oakley (2009) analyses how neoliberal policies have exacerbated this structural precariousness by promoting models of self-exploitation and creative entrepreneurship. Under the discourse of autonomy, an individualising logic prevails that shifts responsibility for labour well-being from the state to the creative subject. In Latin America, this situation is aggravated by institutional weakness, high informality, and the fragmentation of the cultural sector. Boekhout van Solinge (2019) emphasises that informality is a structural condition of cultural work in the region, associated with intermittent employment, low social protection, and the absence of sustained public policies.

In this context, the study of employment quality in the arts and culture must adopt a multidimensional and integrated perspective, as proposed by Sehnbruch et al. (2020), who developed a comprehensive framework for assessing job quality in Latin America. Their approach includes both objective variables (income, hours, stability, and social security) and subjective ones (job satisfaction, work-life compatibility, and perceived recognition), showing that employment quality cannot be captured by a single indicator. This framework allows us to think about cultural work beyond its visible precariousness, considering elements such as autonomy, vocation, identity, and agency that coexist with adverse material conditions.

In turn, Quintana et al. (2020) analyse labour precariousness from a comparative regional perspective in Brazil, Mexico, and Ecuador, highlighting how territorial inequality exacerbates informality and job insecurity. This analysis draws parallels with the Colombian case, where cultural workers in peripheral regions face additional structural barriers to accessing decent and stable employment—thus shaping a territorially embedded artistic precariat. Indeed, cultural precariousness also has an aesthetic and political dimension. This perspective allows us to see vulnerability not only as a material deficit but also as a symbolic inscription in bodies, artworks, and territories.

Furthermore, the gender dimension has gained centrality in the analysis of artistic labour. Conor et al. (2015) demonstrate how creative industries reproduce gender inequalities under a rhetoric of meritocracy and passion. Women, particularly in subsectors such as music, film, and contemporary art, face persistent symbolic and material barriers. Meanwhile, Banks and Milestone (2011) analyse how the individualising logic and the cult of creative entrepreneurship obscure reproductive and affective labour, deepening gender inequalities.

Smith (2016) also warns about the role of universities in producing precarious workers for the creative economy. Although higher artistic education offers legitimacy and networking opportunities, it also contributes to labour oversupply in a saturated market, fostering a highly qualified “cultural precariat” with limited prospects for stable employment. This tension between intensive training and structural precariousness is one of the critical issues facing contemporary artistic work.

From a philosophical-aesthetic perspective, García Canclini (2014) proposes reflecting on artistic labour within a society without a unifying narrative, where fragmentation, immediacy, and obsolescence shape new ways of life and cultural production. In this scenario, artistic work expresses both the unfulfilled promises of modernity and the potential to imagine alternative ways of existence.

Taken together, this review suggests that artistic and cultural work must be analysed as a specific form of labour in late capitalism—marked by the hybridisation of economic and symbolic value, regimes of structural instability, and inequality dynamics rooted in class, gender, and territory. The inclusion of Latin American comparative frameworks, such as those proposed by Sehnbruch et al. (2020) and Quintana et al. (2020), broadens the analysis beyond national specificities and reveals structural patterns that affect cultural workers throughout the region. Therefore, the study of the quality of artistic and cultural employment in Colombia must integrate these dimensions in order to understand and transform the working conditions of those who produce meaning, memory, and collective imagination.

Table 1 presents a comparison between the labour force in the overall Colombian economy and the labour force in the cultural sector during the 2015–2021 period. While total formal employment grew at an average annual rate of 4.9 %, formal employment in the cultural sector grew by only 2.0 %. General informal employment growth was quite dramatic, with an average annual rate of 11.6 %, compared to just 1.9 % in the cultural sector. Additionally, during the period analysed, artistic and cultural workers accounted for only 4.6 % of the total labour force on average. In 2021, cultural workers represented just 2.8 %, with a downward trend, particularly in informal cultural employment.

Recent studies have highlighted that artistic and cultural work operates under structural logics of precariousness and informality. In this regard, Brook et al. (2020) emphasise that cultural industries reinforce social inequalities through exclusionary networks and unpaid labour. McRobbie (2016) underscores that the neoliberal mandate of creativity transforms the artist into an entrepreneur of themselves, legitimising self-exploitation. In a similar vein, Gielen and De Bruyne (2012) warn that current cultural policies instrumentalise art for economic growth, thereby weakening labour rights. These perspectives allow us to place the Colombian case within a global framework where cultural employment must be understood through comprehensive approaches linking economy, culture, and power.

**Table 1.**  
Population employed in the culture sector by occupational category in Colombia 2015-2021<sup>pr.</sup>

Year	Workers employed in the total economy (thousands)					Workers employed in the culture sector (in thousands of people)			Percentage of workers in the culture sector in the total number of employed (%)			
	Salaried worker	%	Self-employed	%	Total	Salaried worker	%	Self-employed	%	Total	Salaried worker	%
2015	6220	51,5	5.847	48,5	12.067	266	50,6	259	49,4	525	4,3	4,4
2016	6.215	51,3	5.893	48,7	12.108	302	51,6	283	48,4	585	4,9	4,8
2017	6.227	51,7	5.818	48,3	12.046	321	52,7	288	47,3	609	5,2	4,9
2018	6.233	51,8	5.792	48,2	12.025	319	51,2	304	48,8	623	5,1	5,2
2019	6.362	52,4	5.781	47,6	12.143	327	50,7	318	49,3	644	5,1	5,5
2020	5.717	51,0	5.485	49,0	11.202	276	51,1	264	48,9	540	4,8	4,8
2021	8.687	40,8	12.595	59,2	21.282	306	50,9	295	49,1	601	3,5	2,3
Average	6.523	50,1	6.745	49,9	13.268	302	51,3	287	48,7	589	4,7	4,6
AAGR	4,9		11,6		8,4	2,0		1,9		2,0	-2,7	-8,7
												-6,0

Pr: Preliminary

Source: Hidalgo (2024). AAGR: Average Annual Growth Rate.

## METHODOLOGY

This research employs a quantitative, descriptive-exploratory approach aimed at analysing the objective and subjective conditions of job quality in the artistic and cultural sector in Colombia. The methodological strategy relies on the use of official secondary sources, particularly anonymised microdata from the Gran Encuesta Integrada de Hogares (GEIH) provided by the Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE) for the period 2018–2024. The analysis focuses on data from the month of June each year, as this period experiences lower seasonal variability in labour market indicators (Pineda & Acosta, 2011), thus allowing for greater comparative consistency, which strengthens the internal validity of the analysis (see Table 2).

**Table 2.**  
Microdata analysed GEIH-DANE 2018-2024

Survey	Municipal seat	Rural	Total
GEIH-2018	16.552.866	4.964.001	21.516.867
GEIH-2019	16.823.384	4.865.908	21.689.292
GEIH-2020	14.448.397	4.384.923	18.833.320
GEIH-2021	15.743.711	4.329.100	20.072.811
GEIH-2022	17.360.583	4.662.013	22.022.596
GEIH-2023	18.274.073	4.778.183	23.052.256
GEIH-2024	18.226.230	4.695.726	22.921.956
Municipal microdata		117.429.244	78,2 %
Rural microdata		32.679.854	21,8 %
Total microdata		150.109.098	100,0 %

The GEIH is a widely recognised source due to its national coverage, statistical representativeness, and ability to break down data by economic activity and occupational characteristics. It is important to clarify that, although the Gran Encuesta Integrada de Hogares (Large Integrated Household Survey [LIHS]) has national representativeness, this study limited the analysis to urban areas only, given that the presence of cultural sector workers in rural areas is marginal or non-existent, and many artistic or creative occupations are not categorised as registered economic activities in these territories. This territorial delimitation enhances the accuracy of the results by focusing on urban contexts where the majority of cultural supply and demand is concentrated in the country.

The difficulty in measuring job quality lies in the fact that job quality is a latent variable that cannot be directly observed, but must be inferred from a set of perceptible indicators that capture different dimensions of the work experience. In line with the specialised literature, Sehnbruch et al. (2020) propose an objective job quality index based on variables reflecting compliance with minimum standards of decent work, as defined by the International Labour Organisation (ILO,

1999) and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth.

To operationalise this measurement, six key dimensions were considered: (1) monetary compensation, (2) job stability, (3) social protection, (4) adequate working hours, (5) access to paid vacations, and (6) representation and social dialogue. These dimensions not only capture the formality of the employment relationship, but also material conditions that directly affect the quality of life of cultural workers. On the other hand, the identification of cultural workers was made based on the International Standard Industrial Classification (ISIC), using its Rev. 3 A.C. and Rev. 4 A.C. versions, taking into account two main groups: a) Creative, artistic, and entertainment activities, which include literary, musical, theatrical, audiovisual creation, visual arts, as well as performing arts and live musical performances; and b) Activities of libraries, archives, museums, and other cultural activities, such as libraries, museums, heritage conservation, and the operation of botanical gardens, zoos, and nature reserves.

Table 3 shows the structure of the index based on the distribution of the examined variables and their percentage weighting. The allocation of weights to each dimension was done using an arbitrary but consistent criterion, grounded in the proposals of Farné (2003), Mora and Ulloa (2011), Sehnbruch et al. (2020), Hidalgo and Tarapuez (2022), and Hidalgo (2024), as well as in the specific conditions of the Colombian cultural sector, with specific weights according to data availability. This methodology provides a comprehensive view of job quality in the sector, integrating economic, social, and symbolic dimensions that define the work experience of artists, creators, and cultural workers. For example, the dimension of unionisation was assigned a lower weight due to its limited impact and effective representation in the sector, though this does not diminish its normative relevance.

In this regard, the decision was made to construct a composite objective index adapted to the Colombian context and validated by its applicability to the GEIH. The methodological strategy applied here facilitates capturing the tensions between symbolic autonomy and material precariousness in cultural work; thus, generating robust empirical evidence to support the design of policies aimed at improving job quality in the sector. In this logic, two indices were constructed to estimate job quality: an objective decent work index composed of variables related to remuneration, stability, social protection, working hours, vacations, and union representation; and a subjective job satisfaction index based on perceptions about income, security, and the compatibility between personal and work life.

The use of composite indices responds to the need to integrate various dimensions of job quality that cannot be adequately captured through a single indicator. This methodological strategy has been validated in previous studies in Latin America (Boekhout van Solinge, 2019; allowing for a richer and more comparative reading of labour phenomena in cultural sectors characterised by their heterogeneity and fragmentation. This analysis is complemented by a critical reading of the results in

**Table 3.**  
Structure of the composite index used to measure the quality of cultural work in Colombia

Dimensions	Indicators	Criteria	Attributes	Score distribution Salaried employees	Score assigned to salaried employees	Score distribution of self-employed workers	Score assigned to self-employed workers
Sufficient income	Monthly labour income	Less than 2.3 minimum wages	Precarious income	5,0%			4,0%
		Equal to 2.3 minimum wages	Average income	35,0%	10,0%		25,0%
		Greater than 2.3 minimum wages	Higher income		20,0%		15,0%
Stability at work	Contractual relationship	Contract duration	Indefinite-term written contract.	15,0%			4,0%
			Fixed-term written contract.	25,0%	10,0%		2,0%
			Verbal contract	0,0%			0,0%
Social security and protection	Social protection	Health insurance affiliation (contributory or subsidised)	Comprehensive coverage	7,5%			20,0%
			Partial coverage	25,0%	10,0%		35,0%
			Occupational risk affiliation	7,5%			10,0%

(Continued)

Dimensions	Indicators	Criteria	Attributes	Score distribution Salaried employees	Score assigned to salaried employees	Score distribution of self-employed workers	Score assigned to self-employed workers
Decent working day	Number of working hours per week	Up to 48 hours per week*	Legal working day	5,0 %	5,0 %	15,0 %	15,0 %
	Paid vacations	More than 48 hours per week	Excessive working day	0,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %
	Workers on paid annual leave	Workers on paid annual leave	Vacations	5,0 %	5,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %
Dialogue and social representation	Union representation	Membership in a trade union or union association	Unionisation	5,0 %	5,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %
		Total		100,0 %	100,0 %	100,0 %	100,0 %

Law 2101 of 2021 gradually reduces the working week from 48 hours per week to 42 hours per week as of July 2023, starting with 47 hours per week in 2023 and ending with 42 hours per week in July 2026, as follows: 46 hours per week as of July 15, 2024, 44 hours per week as of July 15, 2025, and finally 42 hours per week as of July 15, 2026.

Source: Adapted from Farné (2003) and Hidalgo (2024).

light of the specialised literature, seeking to articulate the empirical findings with contemporary discussions on precariousness, cultural value, and symbolic work.

Finally, the methodological approach recognises its limitations, including: the underrepresentation of certain cultural practices not recorded as formal occupations in official surveys, the absence of qualitative variables related to the subjective well-being of cultural workers, and the invisibility of hybrid or informal practices not categorised by the ISIC. Despite these limitations, the results provide a solid characterisation of the labour conditions of a representative part of the Colombian artistic and cultural sector, offering an empirical basis for the formulation of more effective public policies.

## RESULTS

Since the 1980s, the rise of neoliberal policies has structurally transformed labour market conditions globally. The transition from the protected work of the Welfare State to increasingly flexible, intermittent, and unprotected forms of labour led to the widely documented phenomenon of precariousness (Antunes, 1999; Harvey, 2005). This new scenario marked a shift in focus from the quality and sustainability of employment to productive efficiency and market liberalisation. In Latin America, the implementation of the Washington Consensus promoted structural reforms that, while incentivising certain growth indicators, deepened inequality and dismantled social labour ties (Castel, 1995; Offe, 1992).

In Colombia, labour and tax reforms implemented since the 1990s have not led to sustained improvements in job quality. As Hidalgo (2024) states, indicators related to decent work —such as social security, adequate income, and formalisation— continue to be deficient, particularly in sectors such as culture, where labour relations tend to be informal, discontinuous, and marked by self-exploitation. Thus, the quantitative aspect —the number of jobs generated— gradually displaced the qualitative: the dignity and stability of work.

In fact, authors such as Menger (1999) and Abbing (2002) warn that artistic work operates under an economy of expectations: a structural disposition towards risk, irregularity, and income scarcity, compensated by the symbolic, identity-based, or vocational value of creative work. This phenomenon, sometimes called the “paradox of the poor artist,” is observable in Colombia. Indeed, cultural workers report high subjective satisfaction despite objective precarious conditions, which aligns with findings from Throsby (2008) and Oakley (2009) in their comparative studies.

The disaggregation of results by gender reveals a troubling trend: female artists face higher levels of informality, multiple job holding, and lower incomes compared to their male counterparts, in line with the findings of Conor et al. (2015), who analyse how the meritocratic rhetoric of cultural industries masks deep structural gender inequalities. Similarly, the data suggest that women are overrepresented

in cultural management or artistic education activities, which are less economically valued than the more visible professions in the artistic field.

Taken together, the empirical results reflect a cultural sector characterised by a permanent tension between symbolic autonomy and economic subordination. While art and culture generate alternative forms of social value, recognition, and professional identity, the current institutional framework fails to guarantee basic labour rights for those engaged in these activities, limiting their long-term sustainability prospects.

Table 4 presents a comparison between the overall employment quality in the country and the quality of work in the artistic and cultural sector, based on the composite index constructed in this study. Although in both cases the results fall below the 60 % threshold considered acceptable, the calculated index reveals that the quality of work in the cultural sector is systematically lower. This difference is accentuated when broken down by employment type: self-employed workers in the artistic sector obtain better scores than salaried workers, which challenges the conventional logic that associates self-employment with greater precariousness. This suggests that, within the cultural sector, freelance work may be associated with greater creative autonomy, though not necessarily better material conditions.

From an objective perspective, the results of the employment quality index starkly reveal the material conditions of cultural workers. On average, 87.6 % of those employed in the sector earn less than 2.3 current minimum monthly legal wages (SMMLV) —an estimated threshold required for a four-person household to access two basic family baskets. This figure is broken down into 21.4 % for salaried workers and 66.1 % for self-employed workers, highlighting a precarious salary structure that affects the sector as a whole.

Additionally, a high proportion of informal contractual ties exist: 36.5 % of cultural workers report having only verbal contracts, which hinders access to fundamental rights. Pension system affiliation reaches only 30.9 % of the total, split into 15.5 % for salaried workers and 15.4 % for self-employed workers. Although the majority (88.2 %) work up to 48 hours per week, benefits associated with working time are limited: only 43.2 % receive paid vacation. A particularly alarming situation is the very low affiliation to unions or professional organisations, which stands at just 3.8 %, significantly limiting the collective capacity to defend labour rights and revealing a weak culture of sectorial organisation (see Annex 1).

From a subjective approach, the work quality perception index yields equally important results. This index was constructed from three key dimensions: a) Remuneration: satisfaction with income and benefits; b) Security and stability: satisfaction with the current job, type of contract, and job stability; c) Work hours: satisfaction with work schedules and compatibility with family responsibilities.

As presented in Table 5, while subjective index scores are higher than objective ones, they still fall below the 60 % threshold, reinforcing the diagnosis of

**Table 4.**  
Objective index of the quality of cultural work in Colombia 2018-2024

Year	A. Total number of workers*						B. Workers in the arts and culture					
	Salaried worker			Self-employed			Salaried worker			Self-employed		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
2018	35,9%	36,3%	36,1%	16,6%	16,5%	16,6%	9,1%	7,8%	16,9%	13,8%	14,9%	28,7%
2019	33,9%	34,2%	34,1%	15,8%	15,9%	15,9%	11,6%	10,5%	22,1%	11,1%	14,9%	26,0%
2020	35,2%	35,4%	35,3%	16,6%	16,8%	16,7%	9,3%	6,9%	16,2%	24,8%	5,3%	30,1%
2021	35,1%	35,0%	35,2%	16,6%	16,9%	16,8%	6,7%	15,1%	21,8%	17,2%	14,4%	31,6%
2022	37,2%	37,4%	37,4%	16,7%	17,1%	16,9%	5,2%	6,5%	11,8%	15,4%	18,7%	34,1%
2023	36,1%	36,2%	36,3%	16,7%	17,0%	16,9%	3,9%	9,3%	13,2%	13,9%	17,9%	31,8%
2024	36,6%	36,8%	36,8%	16,7%	17,1%	16,9%	5,3%	4,9%	10,2%	20,5%	10,9%	31,4%
Average	35,7%	35,9%	35,9%	16,5%	16,8%	16,7%	7,3%	8,7%	16,0%	16,7%	13,9%	30,5%
AAGR	0,3%	0,2%	0,3%	0,0%	0,5%	0,5%	0,3%	-7,3%	-6,5%	-6,9%	5,8%	-4,4%
												1,3%

\*Data taken from Hidalgo (2024).

structural precariousness. Notably, self-employed cultural workers report higher satisfaction levels than their self-employed counterparts in the rest of the economy, achieving a relative advantage of 63 %. This highlights the presence of a distinct professional rationality, more oriented towards personal and symbolic fulfilment than towards stability or direct economic profitability. In contrast, salaried cultural workers report significantly lower perceptions than the average salaried worker in the country, reflecting frustration stemming from adverse working conditions that do not compensate for the demands of artistic and cultural work.

These findings align with those of authors such as Oakley (2009), Abbing (2002), and Menger (1999), who describe artistic work as a field marked by the tension between symbolic autonomy and material insecurity. Additionally, the low level of unionisation points to the persistence of an individualistic mindset in the artistic field, where notions of “vocation” or “gift” often hinder the development of structured collective demands. The combination of these factors constitutes a pattern of normalised precariousness, where the symbolic value of art conceals, or even justifies, the economic fragility of those who produce it.

These findings are consistent with those pointed out by authors such as Oakley (2009), Abbing (2002), and Menger (1999), who describe artistic work as a field marked by the tension between symbolic autonomy and material insecurity. Additionally, the low level of unionisation points to the persistence of an individualistic mindset in the artistic field, where notions of “vocation” or “gift” tend to hinder the development of structured collective demands. The combination of these factors constitutes a pattern of normalised precariousness, where the symbolic value of art conceals, or even justifies, the economic fragility of those who produce it.

When breaking down the results of the subjective index by dimensions (see Annex 2), a better positioning of self-employed workers compared to salaried workers in the cultural sector is evident in terms of their perception of work quality. In the remuneration dimension, 44.1 % of self-employed workers express satisfaction with the benefits and compensation they receive, compared to only 19.5 % of salaried workers. This subjective satisfaction is more pronounced among male workers, suggesting the persistence of gender gaps in the perception of labour well-being. Regarding security and stability, 69.2 % of self-employed workers are satisfied with their current contract, compared to 60.3 % of salaried workers, and 44.7 % of self-employed workers express contentment with job stability, while only 19.6 % of salaried workers do.

Finally, in the work hours dimension, 63.5 % of self-employed workers report satisfaction with their current workload, and 70.0 % state that they can adequately balance their work schedule with their family responsibilities. These results confirm that the self-employed work model, despite its institutional fragility, offers margins of autonomy and flexibility that are positively valued by artists and cultural workers, especially when compared to traditional salaried models. This particular configuration of work in the cultural sector reflects a hybrid model where identity,

**Table 5.**  
Subjective index of the quality of cultural work in Colombia 2018-2024

Year	A. Total number of workers*						B. Workers in the arts and culture					
	Salaried worker			Self-employed			Salaried worker			Self-employed		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
2018	44,4 %	45,3 %	44,9 %	34,0 %	33,9 %	33,9 %	14,3 %	14,4 %	28,8 %	20,4 %	25,9 %	46,3 %
2019	46,5 %	44,0 %	46,3 %	32,4 %	31,9 %	32,1 %	19,2 %	17,7 %	37,0 %	19,4 %	23,4 %	42,8 %
2020	44,1 %	44,1 %	44,1 %	32,9 %	32,7 %	32,8 %	19,6 %	6,3 %	25,9 %	42,1 %	9,5 %	51,6 %
2021	44,5 %	44,6 %	44,6 %	31,8 %	31,5 %	31,6 %	8,2 %	19,0 %	27,3 %	30,5 %	24,7 %	55,2 %
2022	46,4 %	45,9 %	46,1 %	30,0 %	30,4 %	30,2 %	10,6 %	8,3 %	18,9 %	26,7 %	30,9 %	57,6 %
2023	45,5 %	45,3 %	45,4 %	30,9 %	31,0 %	30,9 %	8,5 %	15,2 %	23,7 %	22,7 %	27,2 %	50,0 %
2024	46,0 %	45,6 %	45,8 %	30,4 %	30,7 %	30,6 %	8,7 %	8,0 %	16,7 %	40,1 %	19,6 %	59,7 %
Average	45,3 %	45,0 %	45,3 %	31,7 %	31,7 %	31,7 %	12,7 %	12,7 %	25,5 %	28,9 %	23,0 %	51,9 %
AAGR	0,5 %	0,1 %	0,3 %	-1,6 %	-1,4 %	-1,5 %	-6,8 %	-8,1 %	-7,5 %	10,1 %	-3,9 %	3,7 %

\*Data taken from Hidalgo (2024). TCAM: Average annual growth rate

creative freedom, and self-fulfilment hold significant weight compared to economic incentives or institutional stability.

## DISCUSSION

Human labour embodies a dual nature. It can represent a source of intrinsic satisfaction—through self-realisation, creativity, and personal development—or it can be experienced as an extrinsic obligation, a means to earn income and ensure subsistence. This ambivalence permeates the entire work experience and becomes especially complex in the case of cultural workers, whose activities lie at the intersection of the symbolic and the economic (Guerra, 2001; Throsby, 2008). For many artists and creators, the meaning of work is not limited to monetary exchange but is loaded with subjective, community, and expressive meanings that escape conventional labour market metrics.

Dominant economic theory has tended to homogenise labour services under assumptions of instrumental rationality and perfect competition; however, labour markets in the arts and culture exhibit structurally atypical traits, such as: low substitutability between workers (due to their unique style and creativity), high income uncertainty, structural precariousness, and strong non-monetary motivation (Abbing, 2002; Banhamou, 2005). Therefore, the economics of art must be treated with differentiated analytical categories that recognise the specificity of creative processes, their discontinuous temporality, their weak institutional articulation, and their dependence on factors such as symbolic recognition, social capital, or access to circulation networks (Ginsburgh & Throsby, 2013; Oakley, 2009).

From this perspective, cultural work should not be treated as a mere input in a manufacturing process. Its creative dynamics cannot be programmed or optimised using Taylorist methods or typical industrial productivity schemes. The “cost disease” notion formulated by Baumol and Bowen (1966) illustrates this condition well: in many cultural activities, it is not possible to reduce production time without affecting quality, nor to exploit economies of scale as in industrial sectors. Therefore, public funding is essential to ensure the sustainability of cultural practices, without shifting all the costs onto the consumer or imposing a purely commercial logic on art.

It should be noted that there is still no full international consensus on how to measure the quality of employment. The ILO has proposed broad frameworks, but their implementation has been limited due to the heterogeneity of national statistical systems and the availability of comparable data. More recent approaches—such as that of Sehnbruch et al. (2020)—propose a multidimensional and regionally contextualised reading, particularly useful for Latin American countries, as it includes both objective indicators and subjective dimensions that allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

What is certain is that the results obtained in this research confirm the persistence of poor labour conditions in the artistic and cultural sector in Colombia. To be

clear, precarious incomes, high informality, limited social security coverage, and very low unionisation are recorded; however, a revealing paradox is evident: independent cultural workers present subjective labour satisfaction indicators that are higher than their salaried counterparts, especially in dimensions such as perceived stability, compatibility between work and family life, and the symbolic value of their profession. This paradox aligns with what authors such as Cardoso and Salas (2024) have described as “an asymmetry between the material and the symbolic” in cultural work; that is, an occupation that, despite its economic precariousness, maintains high identity and vocational value.

The Colombian case also shows that cultural work is predominantly exercised as a liberal profession, characterised by autonomy, flexible hours, and strong self-identification. Far from representing a structural disadvantage, this type of labour insertion can be an opportunity to reconfigure sustainable employment creation models, especially in contexts where the state and the market fail to guarantee stability. However, this requires differentiated public policies that recognise the heterogeneity of cultural work, encourage formalisation without stripping workers of autonomy, and ensure access to basic rights such as health, pensions, and paid leave (Menger, 1999).

Ultimately, this empirical analysis reinforces what has already been documented in previous studies on the quality of employment in Colombia, namely: Farné (2003), Farné et al. (2012), Farné et al. (2013), Farné and Vergara (2007), Hidalgo and Tarapuez (2022) and Pineda and Acosta (2011). Certainly, labour reforms implemented since the 1990s in the country have not substantially improved the quality of work, especially in informal or culturally specific sectors. In response, it is necessary to shift the focus of labour and cultural policies, which should not only address quantitative aspects of employment but also incorporate its symbolic, emotional, and social dimensions. The quality of artistic and cultural work should be measured not only by income or contracts but also by recognition, creative freedom, and the conditions to exercise art as a right, not just as a livelihood.

Although this research offers a rigorous analysis of the quality of work in the cultural sector, it also presents limitations inherent to the quantitative approach and the use of secondary sources. The insufficiency of qualitative information prevents capturing the deeper subjective dimensions of artistic work, particularly experiences of precariousness, exclusion, or symbolic satisfaction not recorded by standard indicators. Moreover, the GEIH data does not fully identify the conditions of informal cultural workers or those with hybrid trajectories, as the GEIH does not specialise in the artistic and cultural workforce but applies to the general Colombian labour force.

## CONCLUSIONS

Artistic and cultural work in Colombia, while a driving force for symbolic expression, collective identity, and intangible wealth, remains largely immersed in precarious conditions from both a socio-economic and a labour perspective. The results fail to meet the 60 % threshold established as a benchmark for identifying dignified labour conditions. In particular, salaried cultural work exhibits the lowest levels of labour quality, including income, stability, and social protection, falling below even the general averages of Colombia's labour market.

However, this diagnosis should not lead to simplistic conclusions. Cultural work cannot be analysed solely through traditional productivist criteria, as it is a sector predominantly composed of freelance professions marked by strong vocation, a high degree of autonomy, and deep commitment to the symbolic value of the activities carried out. This cultural specificity – as argued by authors such as Throsby (2008) and Menger (1999) – implies that despite the precariousness, cultural workers highly value their work for personal fulfilment, the social purpose of their practice, and creative autonomy, even when the objective conditions of employment are deficient.

Moreover, unlike other sectors, independent artistic and cultural work should not automatically be interpreted as a disadvantage. Many workers in the arts and culture find in independence a form of reconciliation between personal and professional life, an expression of freedom, and a way to preserve the meaning and authenticity of their practice, though this does not mean that there are no conditions that need improvement. Certainly, the gaps in access to social security, lack of basic labour guarantees, low union coverage, and the absence of comprehensive protection policies become significant structural challenges.

In this context, it is imperative that public policies and regulatory frameworks recognise the unique nature of artistic and cultural work and that differentiated strategies for promotion, protection, and strengthening be designed. The concept of decent work cannot remain a distant horizon; on the contrary, urgent action is required to move towards forms of protection that combine symbolic recognition with the dignification of material conditions. This demands comprehensive approaches, inter-institutional coordination, and, above all, political will to recognise artists and cultural workers as essential agents in building the social and democratic fabric of the country.

In conclusion, it is suggested to complement this analysis with qualitative studies that explore the labour trajectories, sustainability strategies, and organisational practices of cultural workers. Additionally, regional research is needed to acknowledge the territorial and ethnic-cultural specificities of artistic work in Colombia. With that in mind, it is crucial to promote research that evaluates the impact of public cultural policies on improving labour conditions in the sector, beyond what traditional indicators show.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in the publication of this article.

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## ANNEXES

### Annex 1. Objective dimensions of the quality of cultural work in Colombia 2018-2024

Year	A. Sufficient income				B. Job stability			
	Salaried worker	Self-employed	Salaried worker	Self-employed	Indefinite-term written contract	Fixed-term written contract	Indefinite-term written contract	Fixed-term written contract
Less than 2.3 minimum wages	Greater than 2.3 minimum wages	Less than 2.3 minimum wages	Greater than 2.3 minimum wages	Year	Verbal contract	Verbal contract	Verbal contract	Verbal contract
2018 28,3%	0,8%	2,4%	63,8%	0,0%	4,7%	2018 32,3%	12,9%	27,4%
2019 31,5%	0,6%	4,8%	52,7%	0,0%	10,3%	2019 33,8%	23,8%	18,8%
2020 21,4%	0,0%	5,7%	61,4%	5,7%	2020 34,6%	7,7%	26,9%	0,0%
2021 13,6%	0,0%	8,5%	71,2%	0,0%	6,8%	2021 60,0%	13,3%	13,3%
2022 18,7%	0,0%	1,1%	68,1%	0,0%	12,1%	2022 17,2%	20,7%	24,1%
2023 19,3%	0,0%	1,8%	72,5%	0,0%	6,4%	2023 22,6%	19,4%	32,3%
2024 17,3%	0,0%	1,9%	73,1%	1,9%	5,8%	2024 16,7%	13,9%	25,0%
Average 21,4%	0,2%	3,8%	66,1%	1,1%	7,4%	Average 31,0%	15,9%	24,0%
AAGR -6,8%	-100,0%	-2,9%	2,0%	-	2,9%	AAGR -9,0%	1,1%	-1,3%
							8,1%	8,1%
							-0,6%	13,7%

(Continued)

C. Social protection						D. Working day							
Year	Salaried worker			Self-employed			Year	Salaried worker			Self-employed		
	Health insurance affiliation	Retirement affiliation	Occupational risk affiliation	Health insurance affiliation	Retirement affiliation	Occupational risk affiliation		Up to 48 hours per week	More than 48 hours per week	Up to 48 hours per week	More than 48 hours per week	Up to 48 hours per week	More than 48 hours per week
2018	28,1%	19,0%	19,6%	66,7%	17,0%	11,1%	2018	26,1%	3,3%	38,7%	63,4%	7,2%	1,6%
2019	33,8%	23,8%	18,8%	0,0%	13,8%	10,0%	2019	30,9%	6,1%	58,8%	54,5%	8,5%	0,0%
2020	23,9%	15,9%	17,4%	65,7%	14,5%	11,6%	2020	22,9%	4,3%	38,5%	65,7%	7,1%	0,0%
2021	20,3%	16,9%	18,6%	71,2%	18,6%	13,6%	2021	20,3%	1,7%	66,7%	71,2%	6,8%	0,0%
2022	15,7%	12,1%	11,2%	74,2%	13,2%	29,2%	2022	19,8%	0,0%	34,5%	76,9%	4,4%	0,0%
2023	21,1%	11,0%	11,9%	73,4%	17,4%	14,7%	2023	21,1%	0,0%	38,7%	69,7%	9,2%	0,0%
2024	19,2%	9,6%	8,7%	78,8%	13,5%	7,7%	2024	13,5%	5,8%	25,0%	61,5%	19,2%	0,0%
Average	23,2%	15,5%	15,2%	61,4%	15,4%	14,0%	Average	22,1%	3,0%	43,0%	66,1%	8,9%	0,2%
AAGR	-5,3%	-9,2%	-11,0%	2,4%	-3,3%	-5,1%	AAGR	-9,0%	8,5%	-6,1%	-0,4%	15,1%	-100,0%

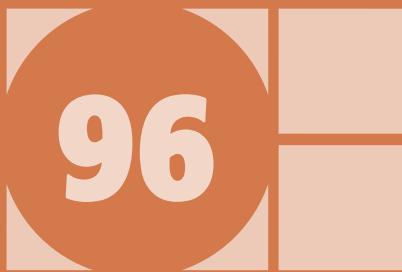
E. Dialogue and social representation (unionisation)											
Year	Salaried worker						Self-employed				
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
2018	0,0%	0,7%	0,7%	1,3%	1,3%	1,3%	0,6%	0,6%	0,6%	1,3%	2,6%
2019	0,6%	0,6%	0,6%	1,2%	1,2%	1,2%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	1,2%	1,8%
2020	1,4%	1,4%	1,4%	2,9%	2,9%	2,9%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	2,9%	1,4%
2021	0,0%	1,7%	1,7%	1,7%	1,7%	1,7%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	1,7%	5,1%
2022	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	4,4%	4,4%	4,4%	4,4%	4,4%
2023	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	1,8%	1,8%	1,8%	1,8%	2,8%
2024	0,0%	1,0%	1,0%	1,0%	1,0%	1,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	1,0%	1,0%
Average	0,3%	0,8%	0,8%	1,1%	1,1%	1,1%	1,6%	1,6%	1,6%	1,6%	2,7%
AAGR	-	4,6%	4,6%	-4,2%	-4,2%	-4,2%	-100,0%	-100,0%	-100,0%	-100,0%	-13,2%

**Annex 2.**  
Subjective dimensions of the quality of cultural work in Colombia 2018-2024

A. Compensation for work: satisfaction with benefits and benefits received.							B. Job security and stability									
Year	Salaried worker			Self-employed			Satisfaction with current job	Satisfaction with current contract type	Salaried worker			Satisfaction with current job	Satisfaction with current contract type	Self-employed		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Year	Year	Satisfaction with current job	Satisfaction with job stability	Satisfaction with current job	Satisfaction with job stability	Satisfaction with current job	Satisfaction with job stability		
2018	9,2%	11,1%	20,3%	15,0%	20,9%	35,9%	2018	26,8%	64,5%	25,5%	60,8%	17,7%	41,2%			
2019	17,0%	14,5%	31,5%	15,8%	18,2%	33,9%	2019	35,2%	68,8%	31,5%	57,6%	20,0%	39,4%			
2020	15,9%	7,2%	23,2%	34,8%	8,7%	43,5%	2020	24,6%	53,8%	21,7%	68,1%	23,1%	44,9%			
2021	6,8%	13,6%	20,3%	27,1%	23,7%	50,8%	2021	22,0%	80,0%	18,6%	74,6%	6,7%	49,2%			
2022	6,6%	6,6%	13,2%	23,1%	30,8%	53,8%	2022	17,6%	48,3%	12,1%	74,7%	24,1%	44,0%			
2023	6,4%	10,1%	16,5%	20,2%	20,2%	40,4%	2023	20,2%	67,7%	16,5%	72,5%	19,4%	41,3%			
2024	6,7%	4,8%	11,5%	33,7%	16,3%	50,0%	2024	16,3%	38,9%	11,5%	76,0%	33,3%	52,9%			
Average	9,8%	9,7%	19,5%	24,2%	19,8%	44,1%	Average	23,2%	60,3%	19,6%	69,2%	20,6%	44,7%			
AAGR	-4,3%	-11,3%	-7,7%	12,2%	-	4,8%	AAGR	-6,9%	-7,0%	-10,8%	3,2%	9,4%	3,6%			

(Continued)

Year	C. Working day		
	Salaried worker	Compatibility between work schedule and family commitments and duties	Self-employed
2018	27,5 %	26,8 %	60,1 %
2019	34,5 %	33,9 %	51,5 %
2020	21,7 %	20,3 %	63,8 %
2021	22,0 %	20,3 %	66,1 %
2022	17,6 %	17,6 %	70,3 %
2023	19,3 %	20,2 %	61,5 %
2024	16,3 %	16,3 %	71,2 %
Average	22,7 %	22,2 %	63,5 %
AAGR	-7,1 %	-6,8 %	2,4 %
			2,6 %



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