Forty-four years of work

A Dutch fifteen-year-old can expect 44.0 years of working life, the longest in the EU. The EU average is 37.5 years, and in 2000 the Netherlands itself stood at 35.5.

Summary

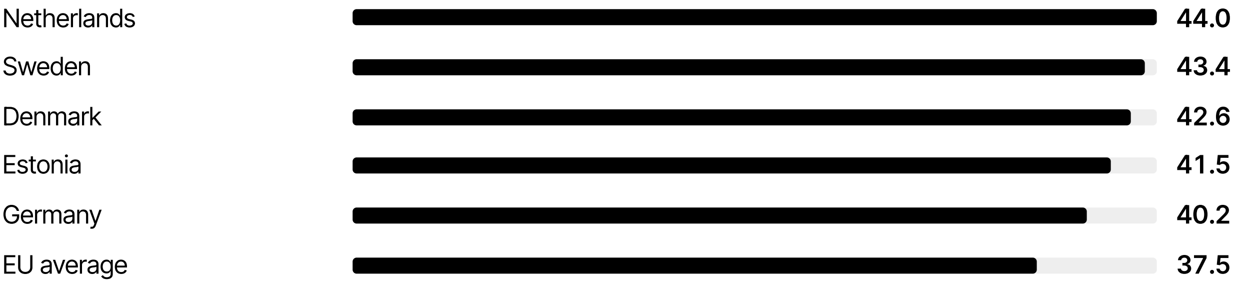
Nowhere in the EU does working life last as long as in the Netherlands: 44.0 expected years in 2025, against 43.4 in Sweden and 37.5 on average in the EU. More striking is the pace at which it happened. In 2000 the Netherlands stood at 35.5 years; 8.5 years were added in 25 years, driven by women's labour participation and later retirement. For replacement demand this is the softest cushion there is: people keep working longer. But the cushion is largely used up, because a working life can hardly be stretched much further.

How long does a person work? Eurostat calculates it every year: the number of years a fifteen-year-old is expected to be active in the labour market if today's participation rates per age hold. The Netherlands stands first, and the road there says more than the ranking.

The longest in Europe

A Dutch fifteen-year-old can expect 44.0 years of working life in 2025. Sweden follows with 43.4 years, Denmark with 42.6. The EU average is 37.5 years.

44.0 years expected working life of a Dutch fifteen-year-old in 2025



Expected duration of working life in years, 2025. Eurostat, lfsi_dwl_a, retrieved 1 September 2026.

The gap with the EU average is 6.5 years. That is not a detail: per person it amounts to more than a sixth of a working life.

It gained 8.5 years in 25 years

In 2000 the Netherlands stood at 35.5 years, around the European middle of the time. By 2015 it was 39.9, by 2025 it is 44.0. A quarter of a century added 8.5 years of working life, and the Netherlands climbed from mid-table to first place.

The engines are familiar. Women's labour participation kept rising, the retirement age moved with life expectancy, and early exit went from rule to exception. Each of those movements stretched the working life, and together they did it faster than anywhere else in the EU.

The quiet answer to replacement demand

This library showed earlier that 19.9% of Dutch workers are 55 to 64 years old and that vacancies arise mostly because people leave, not because jobs are added. The lengthened working life is the quiet answer the market has been giving for 25 years: the outflow into retirement kept being postponed.

That is also where the limit sits. Whoever already stands at 44.0 years does not add another 8.5. The stretch that dampened ageing for a quarter of a century is largely spent. The replacement demand that comes now has to be met by recruitment, not by working even longer.

What this figure does not say

- It is a model expectation, not an observation of a real generation. The figure says: if today's participation per age holds, a fifteen-year-old works this long. Policy and the economy shift that picture.
- Years are not hours. The Netherlands combines the longest working life in the EU with a lot of part-time work, as this library showed in the paper on the hours reserve. In hours worked per life the lead is smaller than in years.
- The figure counts labour market participation, so it includes spells of unemployment between jobs.

What this means

- **The quotable number.** 44.0 expected years of working life in 2025, the longest in the EU, against 37.5 on average. In 2000 it was 35.5 here.
- **The stretch is gone.** What longer working could absorb has largely been absorbed. The next round of ageing will not be dampened by working longer still.
- **The older candidate has become the norm.** In a market where working life lasts 44 years, a candidate of 55 is not an exception at the end but someone with nearly a decade to go.
- **Hours are the open flank.** Whoever wants to enlarge labour supply will find more room in the hours reserve than in extra years.

Method and sources

All figures come from Eurostat, dataset lfsi_dwl_a, expected duration of working life in years, reference years 2000, 2015 and 2025, retrieved on 1 September 2026, licensed CC BY 4.0.

The indicator is a model calculation: the expected duration of labour market participation of a fifteen-year-old at the participation rates per age of the reference year. It is expressly not a cohort measurement; nobody was followed for 44 years. The comparison over time uses the same method for each reference year. The remark on part-time work rests on this library's earlier paper on the hours reserve and is substantiated there; this paper adds no new figures on hours.

Europe, Replacement demand, All markets

Sources

- Eurostat (lfsi_dwl_a), duur van het arbeidsleven, CC BY 4.0