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Praxis

Job Quality in Britain
Francis Green



"An increasingly affluent economy should be able both to afford, and to be supported by, an increasing quality of jobs. A good job is like a luxury which we can have more of as we get richer and which also helps to keep us affluent"

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Praxis Points

Policy implications: areas for further discussion

This edition of Praxis raises a number of critical issues that have significant implications for employment and skills policy development. Here Katerina Rudiger, Policy Analyst at the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, highlights some of these.

- ① In this paper Francis Green highlights the strong link between good quality work and performance, but stresses that "the causal chain is not yet well understood" (p9). Firms will only change if they have the incentives, awareness and ability to do so. In order to establish a coherent narrative on good quality work, do policy-makers need more evidence on this causal chain?
- ② Where evidence on the link between the quality of work and performance does exist how is it presented to employers? Is making the case for job quality as a fundamental right enough or do we need a 'business case' for good work?
- ③ Workplace policy in the UK is, compared to other European countries, under-developed. In the current institutional framework, many employers will continue to find it efficient to organise work in such a way that workers are easily replaceable, with low autonomy, job security or development opportunities. Is there any need for further policy intervention in this area? What would this look like? What can the UK learn from other countries?

- ④ High Performance Working (HPW) practices, as an approach to managing work organisations, are strongly associated with increased economic performance and general employee well-being, higher job satisfaction and motivation. As a result they are seen to offer mutual advantage to the individual and the employer. Yet the average UK workplace adopts few HPW practices and the levels of awareness around good practice are low. What is the role of government in encouraging the uptake of HPW practices? Does the current public policy framework support HPW?
- ⑤ Good management and leadership are not only a result of HPW but also lead to the greater uptake of HPW practices. Management and leadership skills are crucial for better job design and autonomy in the workplace. Does the UK have a deficit in management capability and if so what needs to be done to address this?
- ⑥ The paper argues that some aspects of job quality may have deteriorated in recent decades because of the introduction of modern technologies. What is the connection between the spread of ICT and general purpose technologies and job quality? Why has greater work place innovation not resulted in greater job autonomy?
- ⑦ What impact does skills utilisation in the work place have on job quality and employee satisfaction? There has been an increase in worker's skills but has this also led to a greater application of these skills in the workplace? How far do workplaces support and enable workers to use their skills?

The aim of Praxis is to stimulate discussion and debate on employment and skills policy issues and we encourage readers to engage with the questions raised above, or make any additional points in response to this paper, on the Praxis pages of the UKCES website www.ukces.org.uk/our-work/research-and-policy/praxis.

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The views expressed in Praxis are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills.

Foreword

Welcome to Praxis, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills' new policy publication.

The UK Commission regularly conducts cutting edge research into core issues impacting on the UK's ability to meet the 2020 ambition for world class standing in employment and skills. This research is published on a regular basis, helping to inform the national debate.

Praxis aims to take this further, acting as a conduit for new ideas and discussion. It aims to anchor this debate in the practical; exploring the implications of research for policy and practice. The name 'Praxis' expresses the process of moving from theory to practice: a process critical to the effectiveness of the UK Commission's work. Praxis provides a space in which to articulate and analyse new, at times challenging, ideas.

Over recent decades the UK has seen significant increases in prosperity and improvements in living standards. The rapid adoption of ICT and other technologies, increased globalisation and changes in consumer demand have resulted in more higher value-added production and knowledge intensive activity. These trends can reasonably be expected to have a positive influence on job quality. Ensuring that future employment growth maximises benefits for both individual well being and economic performance is a concern in international policy circles, as well as the UK.

In this edition of Praxis, Francis Green explores what good quality work means, for both workers and employers. Green examines elements of job quality in practice, such as pay, autonomy, skills, security and work intensity and analyses how these elements have changed over time. He reveals that Britain's job quality has not risen in line with increases in prosperity as might be expected and shows that it cannot be assumed that a more affluent society automatically translates into better quality work. Although there have been

improvements in some areas important for job satisfaction, such as pay and skills, Britain's workers still lack autonomy and fare worse than their European counterparts when it comes to work intensity.

'Job Quality in Britain' raises three important questions for consideration in research and policy communities domestically: what's happening to job quality; how does it compare internationally; and what policy interventions should be adopted to improve it? It highlights the role of high performance working practices as a policy option to improve the nature of work in Britain, an area the UK Commission is itself currently exploring through its Skills Utilisation Project.

A series of additional policy issues are raised by the UK Commission's policy team at the front of this edition of Praxis and we encourage our readers to engage with this debate by commenting via our website www.ukces.org.uk/our-work/research-and-policy/praxis.

Abigail Gibson

Senior Policy Analyst,
UK Commission for Employment and Skills

“Recessions have in the past always ended and... the question of what type of jobs will be grown merits consideration now, not later.”

Author biography

Francis Green has been Professor of Economics at the University of Kent since 1998. Prior to that he taught at Kingston Polytechnic, the University of Massachusetts, the University of Leicester and the University of Leeds.

He maintains an interdisciplinary approach to Economics, one which draws on the insights of other social sciences. He holds that understanding the workplace and how it is changing is central for understanding what makes us better or worse off. His research in labour economics has addressed several overlapping areas: skill, autonomy, the role of unions, work effort and job security. He has written several books and over a hundred papers. His latest book, “Demanding Work. The Paradox of Job Quality in the Affluent Economy”, was published in 2006 by Princeton University Press. He is a member of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills Academic Experts Panel and a consultant on skills issues for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). He is an Associate Member of the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics, and of the Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Economic Performance (SKOPE) at the Universities of Oxford and Cardiff; a Visiting Fellow at the National Institute for Economic and Social Research; and a member of the Advisory Board the LLAKES Centre at the Institute of Education. From 2001 to 2006 he served on the Editorial Board of the British Journal of Industrial Relations.

Editors:

Katerina Rudiger and Abigail Gibson,
UK Commission for Employment and Skills

The problem of job quality

In the last decade job quality has been a prominent issue in policy circles. The vision of “more and better jobs” has been advanced by the British government, and separately by both the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and the European Commission. Business leaders, at the same time, have called for more skilled workers, while trade unions have been drawing attention to the increasingly demanding and stressful nature of modern workplaces and the need to improve the quality of work life (European Commission, 2008).

And now along comes the recession, throwing all the thoughts of economic policy-makers onto the short run. Keeping the rise in unemployment to a minimum rightly occupies centre stage. At this time, any job may seem better than none, and the mantra is therefore “more jobs”, forgetting about the “and better” part. The recession has posed again the trade-off between improving the quality of existing jobs and raising the number of jobs. However, the experience of the previous decade, for example with the raising of the national minimum wage, has shown that this trade-off may be illusory. Raising the wages of the lowest paid did not lead to a loss of jobs. Moreover, in the long-run some improvements in job quality may be a precondition for increases in the numbers of jobs that can remain competitive. This is certainly true with respect to skills, where the concern with quality remains at the top of the long-term agenda.

The essence of a high quality job should be seen first from the perspective of the workers themselves. Improving job quality is part of what we aim for as the country grows more affluent. Indeed, for those people with a job, satisfaction with the job is a very important part of what makes us satisfied with our lives overall. Among those who are mostly or completely satisfied with their job, seven out of ten also say they are mostly or completely satisfied with their lives. This contrasts

¹Figures computed by the author from the British Household Panel Study, Wave 14.

with only one in six among those who are not at all satisfied with their jobs¹.

For employers, however, good quality work is defined by high productivity and performance, contributing strongly to organisational goals. Often there will be little conflict between the perspectives of employers and employees. More skilled jobs will be better for organisational productivity, while helping to meet workers’ needs for satisfying and intrinsically rewarding work. As education levels have risen, more and more workers have been looking for intrinsic rewards. Sometimes, however, meeting employees’ needs – such as for more pay, less strenuous working conditions, intrinsically rewarding work, or job security – may not be in accord with improving organisational performance in the short run. But employers may not always be aware of research that confirms that there are strong links between a satisfied workforce and good performance. This is not helped by the fact that the causal chain is not yet well understood. What we do know, however, is that greater well-being is associated with more commitment and voluntary overtime, improved organisational citizenship, less absenteeism, fewer incidences of counterproductive work behaviour, and lower labour mobility (Warr, 2007: 403-434).

So what are the different aspects of job quality?

Based on the idea that (paid or unpaid) work is part of what makes us humans tick, but that jobs also fulfil other important needs, the most important aspects of job quality are pay, skill, effort, autonomy and security. Pay is what gives us our daily bread, but it also provides recognition and, if not too low, a sense of fairness. More skilled and complex jobs afford the opportunity for workers to fulfil themselves more through their work. Work effort is negatively related to well-being if it becomes too intense and hours are excessive. “Autonomy” refers to the control that workers have over what they do: too little control and they cannot participate fully in the work, which is an important aspect of their needs. Good job design is thus central to a decent job quality. Research has shown, too, that the combination of work

overload and low autonomy constitutes a health risk, which affects the physical side of job security. A good job should also be one where there are no undue health hazards. Finally, security also goes beyond the physical and comprises the financial uncertainty that people face if they fear the possibility of job loss, and a difficulty of replacing it. Poor social insurance exacerbates those effects.

All these aspects of jobs matter, and it is impossible to put them together into one index of job quality that makes sense in all circumstances. Sometimes one factor will be more important than others. We need to make an assessment as to how the workplace is doing on all fronts.

In theory, at least, an increasingly affluent economy should be able both to afford, and to be supported by, an increasing quality of jobs. A good job is like a luxury which we can have more of as we get richer and which also helps to keep us affluent. In the nineteenth century workers tended to work around 55 hours or more per week. Accidents at work were rife. Nowadays we are much richer and most of us can use this wealth to buy better and safer working conditions and more hours away from paid work, than could our forebears. Better health and fewer accidents mean that we are potentially productive workers for many more years in our lives.

However, when looked at over a shorter period, say the last few decades, this picture of affluence and improving jobs is questionable. True, there has been a growth of professional and managerial jobs, which would normally be regarded as good skilled jobs. Yet some aspects of job quality may have deteriorated in recent decades owing to the nature of modern technologies and to changing employment relations in industry. In this increasingly integrated world, the call for better jobs has been felt in other countries as well as in the UK. Recent research has been tracking the changes, trying to account for them in terms of the prevailing institutions and modern technologies, and comparing the UK with elsewhere in the European Union.

The questions being asked in this edition of Praxis are:

Is job quality in the UK rising or falling, and what are the reasons for change?

How do UK jobs compare with jobs elsewhere?

What overall implications can be drawn for policy intervention to affect job quality?

Job quality in the UK: the current position

Pay

Real pay increases should be expected as countries grow, but they are far from inevitable: in the United States, for example, there were virtually no increases in average pay in real terms between the 1970s and 1990s even though the economy was growing, since there was a redistribution of national income away from wages and towards other forms of income.

There is no doubt that pay has been rising in real terms in the UK. Moreover this improvement in job quality has been maintained in recent years: compared with 1997, the median pay of full-time employees was 9% higher by 2008, just before the recession hit the economy. So, even if the economic crisis is reducing wage rises to zero or leading to some cuts, the average job remains much better paid than in earlier years.

Changes in the equality of pay also affect the quality of jobs if, at the same time, they affect the “fairness” of wages as the public perceives them – a genuine but hard-to-measure concept. Some workers have gained a lot more than others, as the labour market became much more unequal. In the recent decade, the biggest gainers have been those at the top end of the pay spectrum. At the 90th percentile – that place in the spectrum where only 10% of jobs pay more – the rise in real pay over 1997 to 2008 was 21%: in effect, someone at this job level is one fifth better off. The gains have also been slightly above average – 10% – for those at the bottom end of the spectrum, following the introduction of the National Minimum Wage in 1998.

Skills

Supporting these rises in real pay, there have also been increases in the skill levels used in jobs across the UK over recent decades. Higher skilled jobs are potentially good news for employees, not just because they mean better pay, but also because they are doing more challenging and fulfilling work. The proviso is this: whether increasing job skills translate into a better work experience will depend on

employees acquiring the matched capabilities to cope with more complex jobs. For employers, higher skilled jobs are associated with higher productivity and better organisational performance. Increasing skills is a central part of the vision advanced in the Leitch review (Leitch, 2006).

There are two main ways that we know that skill requirements are rising. First, the direct measures of skills use are showing this.

Consider Figure 1. It shows that the proportion of jobs needing a tertiary qualification such as a degree or a professional qualification has risen from 20% to 30%. Though much more than qualifications are needed to get jobs, these are often the bottom line or the starting point for being considered.

Figure 1

Trends in required highest qualification for recruitment, 1986-2006

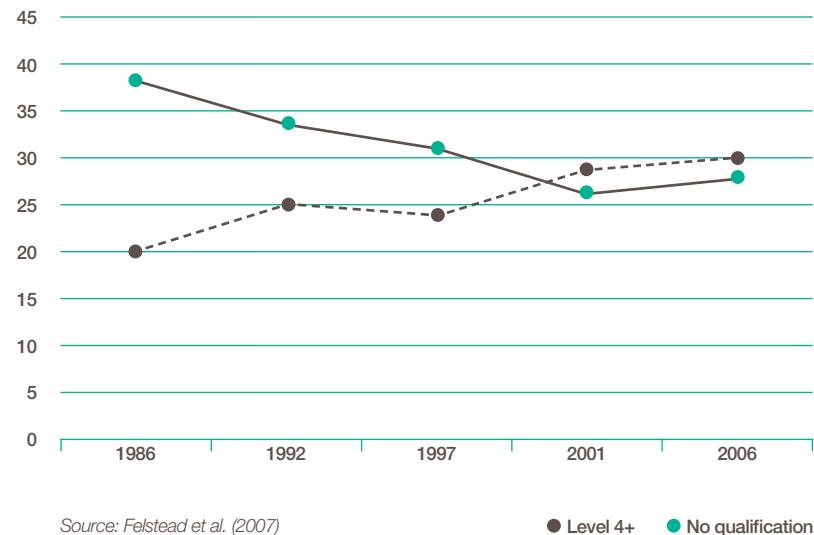
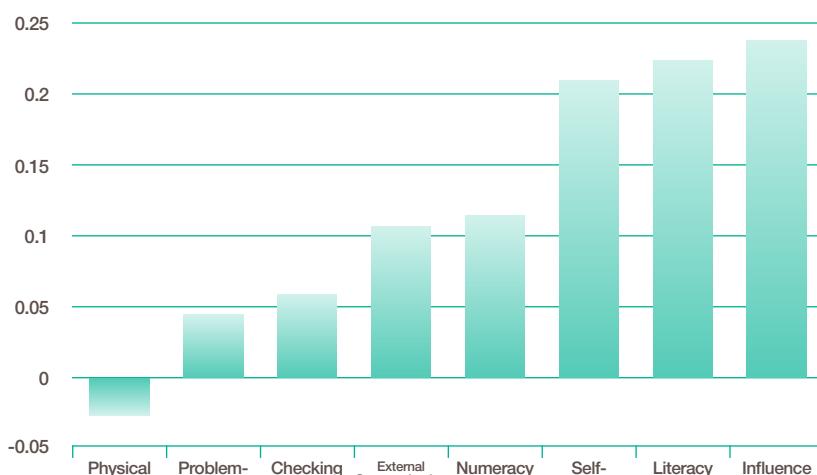


Figure 2 presents a more detailed picture of the skills used in jobs, focusing on the different things that people are required to do. It shows that there have been substantive increases in the uses of several generic skills, over the 1997 to 2006 period. If we add to this the fact that employees are also required to become competent in computer use as IT methods spread across industries, we have a fairly comprehensive picture of increasingly skilled jobs.

Figure 2 The change in the use of generic skills, 1997-2006



Source: 1997 and 2006 Skills Surveys

Second we can infer indirectly that job skills have increased by looking at the changing pay benefits of education. For example, in 1975 men with degrees or above were earning roughly 40% more than men with intermediate levels of education (equivalent to A levels). By 1998 this difference was a bit higher at 48% despite the fact that the proportion

Editor's note: this issue will be further explored in a future edition of Praxis by David Ashton, Phillip Brown and Hugh Lauder, which raises key policy issues about globalisation, skills and the future of work and the challenge posed by the rise of a global high skilled, low waged workforce.

of men with degrees or more had nearly tripled from 6% to 16% (Machin, 2003). The simple economics of supply and demand means that the demand for highly educated workers must have been increasing at least as fast as the supply, because if not their value in the labour market would have fallen.

The skill requirements of jobs have been increasing for several reasons and are likely to continue to do so. Modern technologies require more educated and intellectually capable workers to get the best out of them. Computers are generally “complementary” with higher education. They add value most when employees find ways of using them to generate new products and processes, and are often accompanied by organisational changes that involve workers more in the organisation. Both the technical and the organisational innovations usually require higher levels of analytical skills as well as good interactive skills including the ability to communicate, persuade and influence other workers and customers. Of course, computers cannot substitute for all types of labour, and there will remain many low-paid occupations which cannot be replaced by computers because they involve tasks that cannot be replaced by machines – care workers, for example, fall into this category and are becoming more numerous owing to population ageing (Goos and Manning, 2006). Nevertheless the predominant change in jobs demand has been the substantial increases in the numbers of high-skilled jobs.

The skill level also rises because, with the transformation of the modern education system, there are now many more, better educated people available. Employers find that their staff are better educated than in earlier decades, and can find even better educated new recruits. So they are more inclined to go into lines of work that require well educated labour. Skills increase, too, because many less-skilled jobs can be outsourced to countries with an abundance of lower-skilled labour, though increasingly we are also seeing outsourcing of high-skilled jobs².

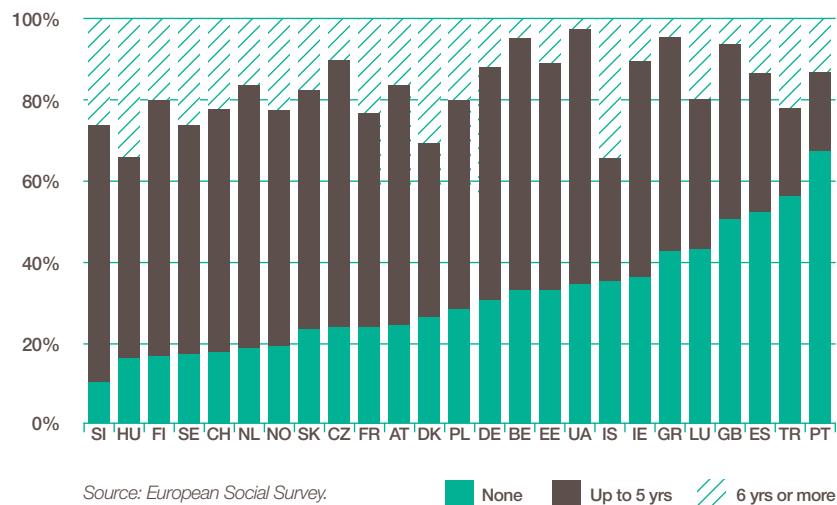
“There is some way to go before British employers place similar demands on the education system as are placed in the major competing regions in Europe”

³Editor's note: it should be noted that the school-leaving age varies internationally and is currently 16 in the UK. The 2008 Education and Skills Act will however raise the compulsory school leaving age to 18 by 2015.

These driving forces are not special to Britain. Everywhere in the industrialised world jobs are being transformed. Unfortunately, Britain has long been caught in a low-qualification trap, which means that British employers tend to be less likely than in most other countries to require their recruits to be educated beyond the compulsory school leaving age. Among European countries, only in Spain, Portugal and Turkey is there a greater proportion of jobs requiring no education beyond compulsory school (see Figure 3)³. There is some way to go before British employers place similar demands on the education system as are placed in the major competing regions in Europe.

Figure 3

Required post-compulsory years of education for recruitment across Europe, 2004



Source: European Social Survey.

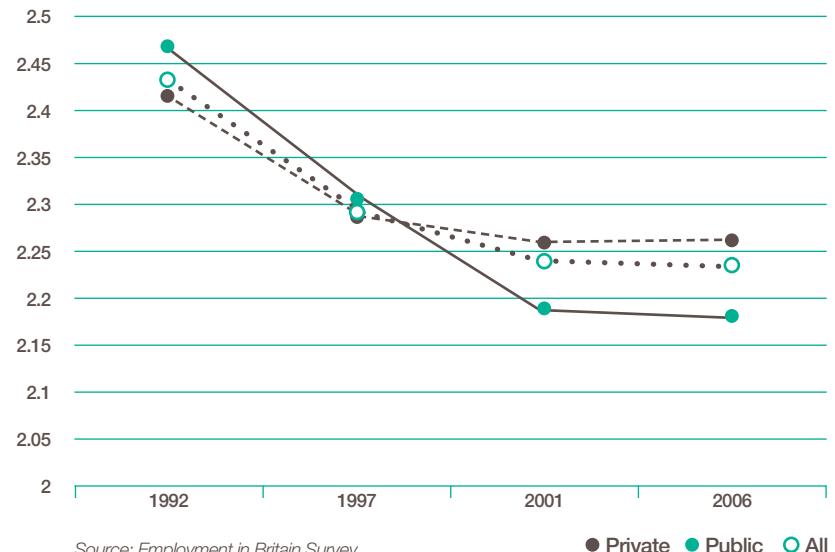
■ None ■ Up to 5 yrs ■ 6 yrs or more

Autonomy

The story about changing job quality has so far been fairly positive, but for some other aspects of job quality in Britain this is not so. An important issue that has emerged from recent findings is that there is a declining level of worker autonomy in Britain. This story is shown in Figure 4. The index of “task discretion” is an average of the scores on four areas of possible employee influence on jobs: on what tasks are done; how they are done; on quality standards; and on the pace at which they are carried out. There was an unambiguous drop in this index in UK workplaces during the 1990s, which levelled off in the current decade. If anything, the decline in worker autonomy was slightly greater in the public than in the private sector. It is very likely that the fall in the 1990s was a continuation of a process begun some time before.

This development signals a deterioration in job quality for people, not only because it goes hand in hand with lower trust, but even more fundamentally because it lessens the extent to which workers can fulfil themselves through their work. The more that a worker is tightly controlled the more they become like a robot and are deprived of part of what gives them their humanity. And this is not just a theoretical assertion: there are many studies that show how well-being is reduced in situations of low autonomy (e.g. Green, 2008).

Figure 4 Index of task discretion, GB, 1992-2006.



Source: Employment in Britain Survey and UK Skills Surveys. Author's analysis.

Note: Index is average scores of degree of personal influence over what tasks are done, how they are done, on quality standards, and on the pace at which they are carried out.

Workers in Britain are not entirely alone in experiencing a deterioration in job quality in this respect. Across Europe the changes in discretion and control are varied, with deterioration recorded in the Southern nations since 1995 and in the Mediterranean new member states from 2000 (European Foundation for Living and Working Conditions, 2009: 29). In striking contrast employees in the Scandinavian countries consistently report higher levels of autonomy at the workplace than in Britain, and exhibit no overall decline in the period since 1995. These differing trends reflect the fact that managerial training and culture varies from one country to another.

Effort

Having less opportunity for control has been found to have substantive health concerns in situations when at the same time the pressure to work very hard is building up (Theorell, 2004). Unfortunately this is precisely what was also happening during the 1990s. One of the most often-heard complaints in the modern day is that people are working much harder than they used to.

What is the substance behind this complaint? There is a myth that Britons work the longest hours in Europe. Actually, they don't. If all workers are included – both female and male – the average weekly hours (36) in Britain are in the middle of the pack as far as the EU is concerned, neither especially high nor low. When one focuses just on men working full time Britain, with an average of 43 hours per week, is on the high side, though not the highest (that honour is reserved for Greece). Nevertheless, this average has been coming down since 1995, a continuation of that very long-run trend noted above. We cannot put the feeling of working harder down to that.

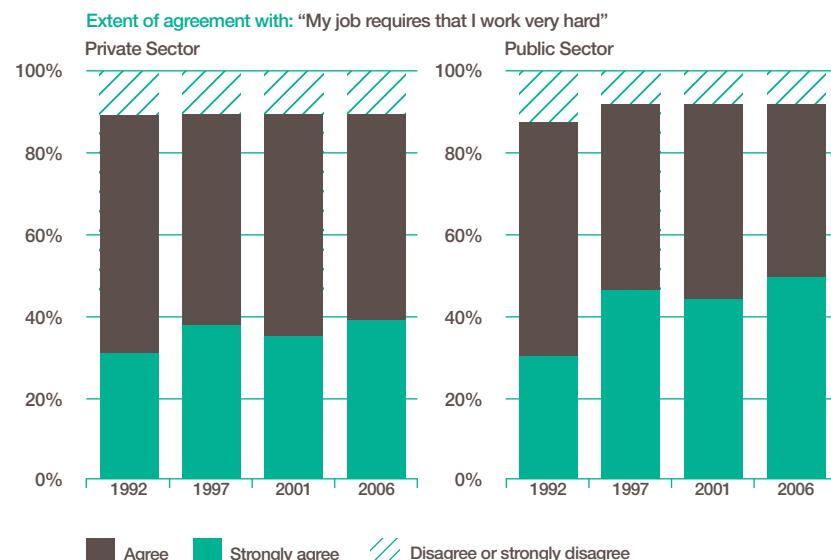
The effort problem concerns, rather, the intensity with which people work. New technologies have enabled a “closing up” of the gaps in the working day, and a squeezing of more and more activities into a given time. Computers schedule tasks much more efficiently, so that there are no pauses between when one ends and the other begins. Think only of the call centre. Computers also enable employers to keep closer tabs on what their workers are doing. Mobile phones give the flexibility to fill previously slack times and spaces with work. The influx of technologies has not enforced harder work in the manner of a slave-driver, but it has made it possible. Those who want, or assent, to work harder are enabled to do so. The result is a general intensification of work, accompanying the other more positive changes already noted, the rising pay and skill.

Figure 5 presents some evidence that the intensification in work has been widespread. Since 1992, the proportion of employees who report strong agreement with the question “my job requires that I work very hard” has risen substantially – from about 26% to 39% in the private sector, and from 26% to 44% in the public sector. Of course, these measures are subjective, but they have been taken in identical ways across time, so one can be reasonably confident that they do measure real trends in UK workplaces. Other measures using different indicators for effort tell the same story. Moreover, it is found that the intensification of work is not at all confined to Britain. As one might expect, the technology has also been stimulating effort rises across most European Union countries. In every country for which we have the data, there has been an overall work intensification between 1991 and 2005 (European Foundation, 2007; Green, 2006). Though the timings of the changes differ, in most cases the bulk of the intensification took place in the first half of the 1990s.

Although rising effort is linked to the technological changes of the modern era, it may also be affected by the declining power of unions, and by the influence of consumerism that drives the desire for harder work in order to get more pay and promotion, so as to pay the credit card bills. Neither technological change nor these other drivers are special in Britain, so it is unsurprising that work intensification is quite widespread across the industrialised world.

Figure 5

The intensity of work effort, GB, 1992-2006

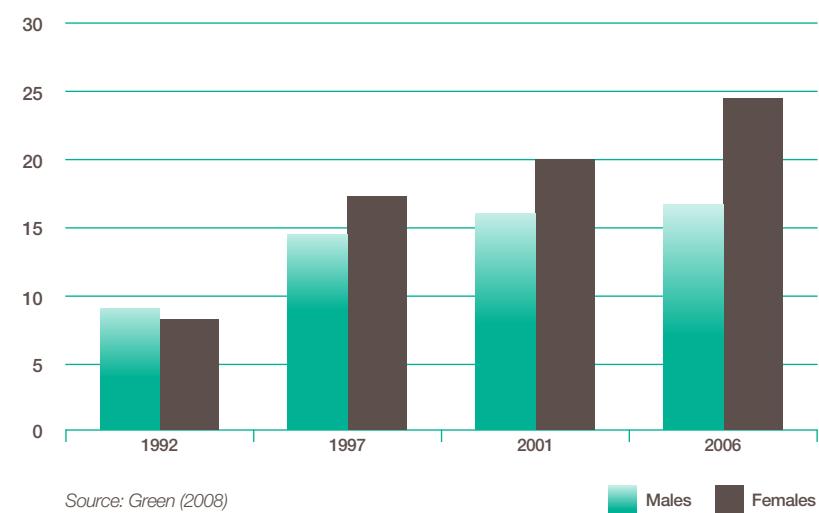


Source: Employment in Britain Survey and UK Skills Surveys. Author's analysis.

In recent years high effort jobs have come to overlap somewhat more with low discretion jobs, just the sort of toxic mix that is feared to be detrimental to health. There has been a somewhat greater upward trend in effort in jobs that have relatively low levels of task discretion. As Figure 6 suggests, this trend appears to be happening most sharply among the jobs held by women.

Figure 6

Proportion of "high-strain" jobs, GB, 1992-2006



Source: Green (2008)

Note: A high-strain job is defined as having high required effort and low task discretion. The definition of low discretion is "at or below median". High required effort is defined to be those who "strongly agree" that their job requires them to work very hard.

Do these trends matter? One might be tempted to argue that, although work has become more intense, and workers have been losing some control over their work, they are at least gaining through lower work hours. Perhaps this is a case of swings and roundabouts? Unfortunately, the evidence does not support such an interpretation. Except at the extremes, lower work hours are not found to be associated with substantial increases in well-being; while increased work effort and lower autonomy are, by contrast, very strongly linked with lower well-being (Green, 2008).

Security

Finally, an important aspect of job quality concerns the risks that employees face from their work. These are of two main kinds, physical and financial. Overall how have jobs changed on these dimensions?

On the physical side, there have been clear long term improvements in the safety of workplaces. According to the Health and Safety Executive, the rate of non-fatal injuries fell steadily by 40% between 1986/7 and 2008 (from 860 to 528 per 100,000 employees). Fatal injuries also fell. These improvements come from the closer scrutiny and regulation of workplaces common in the modern era, but ultimately reflect the increased public demand for safety⁴.

The risk on the financial side is job insecurity – the fear of job loss – and then the fear that if one did lose one's job it could be difficult to replace it with something just as good. Together with the loss of pay while looking for work, these are the ingredients of employment insecurity. Even setting aside the psychological side of employment insecurity, a financially insecure job is normally a sure sign of low quality.

Job insecurity, and the difficulty of replacing a job, are very much tied up with the state of the economy. Consequently, they had until the recent recession been showing improvements since the 1980s, when there was mass unemployment. These improvements were reflected in how people perceive things, though often with a lag. In 1989, when unemployment had already declined from its worst levels in the mid-1980s, as many as 20% of British employees still could not agree that "their job was secure". In 2005, after more than a decade of steady economic growth, this figure was down to only 13%.

In other words, in "normal" times when there is no recession and the economy is stable only a relatively small proportion of the British workforce feels their job is insecure. In this respect British workers have been in a much better position than most of their counterparts elsewhere in the industrialised world. In many countries there have been higher levels of unemployment and a greater usage of non-permanent labour contracts, both of which engender feelings of insecurity.

This picture will have been thrown into turmoil by the current global recession, with unemployment rates rising rapidly. For every employee who suffers job loss, there are many others who endure this insecurity, so the detrimental effects on health are not confined to those who become unemployed. At this time, therefore, the relative security of jobs has become one of the most important aspects of job quality.

⁴ These and other statistics are available at: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/history/index.htm>

“The skill requirements of jobs are also likely to continue rising, since the intensification of global competition, and technological and organisational changes, which were the forces driving the skill increases till recently, are also likely to persist”

Conclusions and policy implications: what should government do?

Work is central to most adults' lives, and is a very important part of what makes for the good life, contributing to happiness and good health and high levels of well-being. Yet, in these times the picture of job quality is rather more complex than the idea that, as we all become richer in a growing economy, the quality of our work will rise just as everything else we have or do is supposed to improve. Some key aspects have been showing definite improvements, including pay and skill.

Pay is likely to continue rising, after the recession, as long as growth resumes and comes to terms with the potential long-term constraints of climate change. The skill requirements of jobs are also likely to continue rising, since the intensification of global competition, and technological and organisational changes, which were the forces driving the skill increases till recently, are also likely to persist. But the story has been dispiriting in other respects. The intensification of work effort, alongside declining autonomy and associated trust, are bad news, and while the decline in the current decade has levelled off there remains no sign of improvement in either, and some danger that high effort demands are becoming combined with low discretion in more and more jobs, with consequent risks of ill health. And now most recently, as mass unemployment looms, there is the steep rise in the threat of redundancy contaminating the quality of jobs with gross insecurity; accompanied by a heightened perception of pay inequality highlighted by the collapse of banking empires.

If job quality is so important for people's well-being, not just at work but for their life in general, what if anything should government agencies be doing to improve jobs?

One answer, associated with a libertarian approach to social and economic life, is: very little. In this view, the nature of jobs in a capitalist society is an essentially private matter for negotiation between employers and employees. The government should therefore only intervene where harm is done to others (for example, through infectious diseases contracted at work), or conversely where there are benefits for others that cannot be organised and paid for through a market; and these are sometimes claimed to be exceptions. In reality, however, there are very many ways in which private arrangements between employer and employee do in fact impinge on others. And there are also equity grounds for intervening to improve job quality.

The benefits to others may sometimes be indirect and hard to quantify, but this does not make them any the less real. Consider, for example, the reasons supporting the political struggle for the introduction of minimum wage legislation in selected industries a hundred years ago. Altruism, and a paternalistic concern for the welfare of the beneficiaries (mainly women), was one driving motive. But ultimately the law was to alleviate the unfortunate spectacle of the “sweated trades” in Edwardian England, affording social, psychological and economic benefits to many people in society, not just those who directly received better pay. Unalleviated sweating labour was a blot on society. The same idea lies behind the need for legal provision of minimum standards for pay in the modern era, and many other areas of intervention in work life, not least through health and safety law. The Low Pay Commission is an unusual example where interventions are fine-tuned and tied to a good evidence base. Its research has been able to test the water while conditions have been gradually eased for the lowest paid.

In light of the evidence identified in this paper, the government should now be trying to support the positive trends in job quality and to halt and reverse the deleterious trends. The greatest priority in 2009 is bound to be for employment security. Macroeconomic and financial

stability is thus the prime job quality policy at the moment. It is the job of government to try to ensure stable macroeconomic conditions, something that it has failed to do recently. However, recessions have in the past always ended and, despite climate change we can expect a renewal of growth over the next few years, which will gradually reduce job insecurity again. The question of what type of jobs will be grown, however, merits consideration now not later. My analysis of recent trends in Britain implies that the three urgent ongoing issues for policy-makers to address are skills, autonomy and effort.

At the heart of its support for rising skill trends in the UK, lies the government's vision for a much more skilled workforce in 2020, matched by an economy that will be demanding increasingly higher levels of skill (UKCES, 2009). As noted above, such a vision if realised will be of positive benefit for job quality from the employees' perspective while also helping to deliver the enhanced performance needed to compete, as businesses find rising supplies of education labour in all parts of the world economy. Raising education and training standards in the UK is all the more pressing since this is happening quite rapidly almost everywhere else. Yet an integral part of this vision will also be to keep the skills demand side growing as fast as the growth in the stock of skills, since otherwise there is the prospect of increasing skills underutilisation, and disillusionment arising from unsatisfied expectations for intrinsically rewarding work (*ibid.*, Chapter 7). The role of “high performance” management practices in stimulating a greater employer demand for skill, and whether policies can be formulated that will lead to more widespread adoption of such practices, is already under review in the UKCES' “skills utilisation” project (*ibid.*, Chapter 8).

But government should also be considering how it can halt or alleviate the negative trends. The decline in perceived autonomy in workplaces is arguably the most worrying. It contributed over the 1990s to a temporary decline in job satisfaction which was later reversed in the first part of the current decade, partly due to rising security. Moreover, as we have seen it has meant a decline in the extent to which the multitudes of ordinary British workers can contribute through their initiatives to the productivity of their organisations. Although job design, of which the extent of worker autonomy is a key part, might appear to be an especially private affair, in fact the government should have a distinct role to play itself. Instead of endorsing the ever-increasing levels of control in its own workplaces, it could begin by re-examining the levels of trust and control afforded its own employees as a way of rekindling innovation and productivity in public service. It could proceed further by trying to learn from the experiences of other countries, especially those in Scandinavia, where job design has for long been open to influence and negotiation.

The UK could learn, for example, from the role played by the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research and its predecessors over recent decades (Gallie, 2003). The higher job quality found in Scandinavian countries can be traced at least in part to the policy emphasis given to occupational health, and to how this concept was broadened to include developmental work, and to place worker control at the heart of the healthy work environment. Very many projects were supported, designed to promote both higher productivity and a healthy environment. Policies cannot always be simply transferred from one institutional setting to another, and it is true that in Scandinavian countries the influence of social partners has been crucial. Nevertheless, there is no reason why the idea of good job design could not be taken up more seriously by government, employers and unions in Britain.

In harnessing better the creative energies of workers, in a more satisfactory psycho-social environment, their work could become more fulfilling, while the organisations they work for reap the dividend of improved performance.

In principle, the expansion of “high-performance” working practices, as envisaged in the UKCES’ “skills utilisation” project, will also lead to greater autonomy, but research suggests also a potential downside, which is that these can lead to greater work overload (Ramsay et al, 2000). The policy needs to be aware of this possibility, and practices should be designed to obtain performance gains by improving efficiency rather than through eking out ever more work effort, an unsustainable strategy. Government policy to directly reduce intensive effort, as opposed to work hours, is extremely hard to formulate without interfering with the prerogatives of either employer or employee. The best hopes for redressing the work intensification during the 1990s come from employee learning and from proper organisational attention to the issues of workplace stress. This is an issue that can only partially be addressed through health and safety provisions. It is, even more so, an issue for managers and unions to work out. Given the way that low autonomy interacts with high work effort to generate poor workplace health conditions, alleviating the UK’s current epidemic of workplace stress could be one of the most immediate tangible benefits from a programme for increasing workplace trust. The benefits for job quality and worker well-being would, according to the research, considerably outweigh any potential gains from further restrictions in working time.

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Recommended readings

The references are already recommended readings but in addition the following are useful:

Amicus (2006). *Good Work. An Amicus Agenda for Better Jobs.* Bromley, Amicus. <http://www.unitetheunion.com>

Brinkley, I., D. Coats and S. Overell (2007). 7 out of 10: *Labour Under Labour 1997-2007*. London, The Work Foundation.

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Notes



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