Skills Utilisation, Job Quality and Job-Related Well-Being in Britain

Some First Findings from the Skills and Employment Survey 2012

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Abstract.
This paper combines six short reports describing first findings from the Skills and Employment Survey 2012. It describes changes in British workplaces between 2006 and 2012, in the context of longer term changes beginning in 1986, under the following headings: “Skills at Work”, “Training”, “Job Control”, “Fear at Work”, “Work Intensification” and “Job-Related Well-Being”.

INTRODUCTION.

The Skills and Employment Survey 2012

The Skills and Employment Survey 2012 (SES2012) collected responses from working adults in England, Scotland and Wales, interviewed in their own homes. The sample was drawn using random probability principles subject to stratification based on a number of socio-economic indicators. Only one eligible respondent per address was randomly selected for interview, and 49% of those selected completed the survey. Data collection was directed by ourselves and conducted by GfK NOP.

SES2012 is the sixth in a series of nationally representative sample surveys of individuals in employment aged 20-60 years old (although the 2006 and 2012 surveys additionally sampled those aged 61-65). The numbers of respondents were: 4,047 in the 1986 survey; 3,855 in 1992; 2,467 in 1997; 4,470 in 2001; 7,787 in 2006; and 3,200 in 2012. For each survey, weights were computed to take into account the differential probabilities of sample selection, the over-sampling of certain areas and some small response rate variations between groups (defined by sex, age and occupation). All of the analyses that follow use these weights. Separate reports and the technical reports are downloadable free from LLAKES at http://www.llakes.org/ and from the survey website at http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/ses2012/

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PART A SKILLS AT WORK

1. The Importance of Skills at Work

Governments, employers and individuals devote large amounts of money and time to education and training. As a result, the stock of well-educated people in the workforce has been increasing rapidly in recent decades. It has been shown that education and training lead to beneficial social outcomes such as reduced crime, lower anti-social behaviour and better health and well-being. Yet a central expectation is that education and training will raise skills and so enhance economic performance.

This enhancement depends on whether employers utilise the raised skills. By engaging in skilled work that matches their potential, workers are able to fulfil themselves and meet a basic human need, while enabling businesses to thrive. Yet it is not always possible for people to find employment that effectively uses the skills and educational qualifications they have. The pace of educational expansion may not be closely matched to the increasing demand from employers, and search processes by employers and employees are often imperfect. So there is considerable interest in minimising the mismatch between the skills stock and job skills. To help form relevant policies we need to track the scale of the problem and to monitor how job skills have changed over time.

2. Previous Evidence

Despite large educational expansion the monetary benefits of education have remained high (although they have become more variable in recent years), indicating a parallel expansion of demand for skills. Previous Skills Surveys show that skill requirements in Britain rose from 1986 to 2006. The proportion of jobs requiring graduate qualifications in Britain doubled from 10% to 20% and jobs requiring no qualifications fell from 38% to 28%. The amount of learning time required to do the job well, and the cumulative amount of training, each moved in a similar upward direction. Furthermore, the importance of generic job tasks rose between 1992 and 2006. Nevertheless, earlier findings suggested that the mismatch between qualification demand and supply was widening.

Based, in part on this evidence, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills urged government ‘to invest as much effort on raising employer ambition, on stimulating demand, as it does on enhancing skills supply’.

3. Concepts and Variables

The use of skills is captured by the concept ‘job skills’ which refer to the abilities workers require to carry out their current job competently; these can be categorised further as ‘broad skills’ (an overall average of job requirements) and ‘generic skills’ (certain skills which are used across a wide range of settings).

Three indicators for broad skills are obtained from the putative inputs needed: education, prior training, and initial post-entry learning. For the first, respondents were asked: ‘If they were applying today, what qualifications, if any, would someone need to get the type of job you have now?’ Here, we focus on the proportions who reported that job entry would require at least a degree and those who said that no qualifications would be needed. We also present data on ‘over-qualification’; that is, workers who had a qualification higher than the level required for entry.

The second broad skills indicator, prior training, comes from the question: ‘Since completing full-time education, have you ever had, or are you currently undertaking, training for the type of work that you currently do?’ If ‘yes’, ‘How long, in total, did (or will) that training last?’ Seven responses were possible ranging from ‘less than a month’ (scoring ‘0’) needed at one end of the spectrum to over two years (scoring ‘6’) at the other. The training time index refers to an average of these scores.

The third broad skills indicator, initial post-entry learning, is based on the question: ‘How long did it take for you after you first started doing this type of job to learn to do it well?’ Six responses were possible ranging from ‘less than a month’ (scoring ‘1’) to over ‘two years’ (scoring ‘6’). The learning time index refers to an average of these scores.

Previous surveys in the series pioneered the development of measures of generic skills at work. Respondents were asked: ‘in your job, how important is [a particular job activity]’. Examples of the activities included: ‘using a computer’; ‘analysing complex problems’; and ‘adding, subtracting, multiplying or dividing numbers’. The 2012 questionnaire covered 44 activities. Factor analysis produced ten types of generic skills. For presentational purposes, we report the proportion of respondents who said that these skills were ‘essential’ to their jobs. Those using computers at work were asked whether they drew on either ‘complex’ or ‘advanced’ skills to do so (with anchored examples).

4. Findings

Qualification Requirements

The qualification requirements of jobs in Britain have moved upwards since 1986 (Figure 1). However, the upward movement became more pronounced between 2006 and 2012. Jobs requiring no qualifications on entry fell from 28% in 2006 to 23% in 2012, while jobs requiring degrees or higher rose from a fifth (20%) in 2006 to around a quarter (26%) in 2012. At no time in the 1986-2012 period have falls and rises of these magnitudes been recorded. Meanwhile, the proportion of jobs requiring intermediate qualifications barely changed.
It could be objected that, even if jobs were unchanged, employers might raise their educational requirements ‘on the rising tide’ of educational expansion. If so, employers would increasingly require new recruits to have higher qualifications on entry than is necessary to do the job. However, there is no evidence of widespread or growing ‘credentialism’ taking place now or in the past. Three-quarters of respondents who reported new recruits would require a degree to get the job also said that a degree was ‘essential’ or ‘fairly necessary’ to do the job. This proportion has remained stable since 1986.

![Figure 1: Qualification Required Trends, 1986-2012](image)

The qualification requirements for part-time jobs have risen the most (Figure 2). In 1986 around two-thirds (63%) of part-time jobs required no qualifications on entry, but by 2012 this had fallen to less than a third (30%). Among full-timers the fall was less dramatic, with the consequence that the percentage point gap between full-timers and part-timers shrank from 32 percentage points to ten.

![Figure 2: Qualification Required Trends by Working Time, 1986-2012](image)

Over-qualification

The results of the survey suggest that between 2006 and 2012 the long trend of rising levels of over-qualification in Britain was put into reverse (Figure 3). From 1986 to 2006, two or three percentage points were added at each data point to the proportion over-qualified. Yet over 2006-2012 the proportion fell by two percentage points, with an even sharper decline among graduates where it fell by six points.
Over-qualification is one manifestation of ‘under-employment’, which should be considered alongside unemployment. Between 2006 and 2012 the total number people with degrees – whether in or out of work – rose by 2.2 million, while the number of graduate jobs rose by 1.9 million (Figure 3). While the graduate over-qualification rate fell from 28% to 22%, the graduate unemployment rate rose from 3% to 4%. The net result is that the proportion of graduates who are matched in graduate jobs rose from 69% to 74%.

This improved qualification matching suggests that employers are starting to use workers’ qualifications more effectively than in the past. There is some support in the data for this suggestion. Thus, nearly nine out of ten respondents (87%) in 2012 thought that they had ‘enough opportunity to use the knowledge and skills’ that they had, up from 82% a decade earlier.

Training and Learning Times

It is also possible that qualifications requirements are increasingly being used as a substitute for prior training and initial post-entry learning. This possibility is consistent with the finding that there has been a decline in both training and learning times since 2006. From 1986 to 1997, there was an upward trend in both measures, but from then onwards upskilling petered out and by 2012 there were noticeable falls in both (Table 1). This decline
may reflect the fact that higher qualified workers need shorter training periods for the job and may be able to get to grips with the job more quickly than lesser qualified workers. Above average falls in long training and learning times were recorded between 2006 and 2012 for jobs that required intermediate or above qualifications on entry. Although it should also be noted that jobs requiring low or no qualifications also saw training and learning times fall.

Table 1: Training and Learning Time Indices, 1986-2012

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training Time Index</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>2.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Time Index (employees only)</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>3.41</td>
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</table>

Gender and Sector
Across all three broad skill measures women have caught up men and closed the gender gap almost completely for qualifications required on entry and the training time required for jobs. Only in terms of learning time does the gender gap still persist. It is these gender trends that lie behind the the closure of the full-time/part-time skills gap; two-fifths of women were working part-time in 2012 compared to around a tenth of men.

On all three broad skill measures, the gap between the public and private sectors has widened with relatively sluggish growth in skilled jobs taking place in the private sector. It is well-known that the public sector staff are, on average, higher qualified. What these results demonstrate is that this extends to skills used at work and is a tendency which has strengthened over time.

Generic Skills
The use of generic skills was on the rise between 1997 and 2006, but has barely changed since 2006. Among ten generic skills, the changes have been modest, with just two moving significantly upwards and one downwards.

Figure 5 illustrates the movement of four generic skills. Of these, numerical skills rose significantly between 2006 and 2012; problem-solving skills declined significantly and professional communication skills remained unchanged. Computer skills requirements continued to rise, but much more slowly than before. Around nine percentage points were added to the proportion of respondents regarding computing skills as ‘essential’ to their daily work activities at each data point between 1997 and 2006, but over 2006 to 2012 just over three percentage points were added. Jobs requiring sophisticated computer use also slowed down. There was a substantial upward movement in sophisticated computer use between 1997 and 2001 and then again between 2001 and 2006; subsequently, however, there was no statistically significant change.

![Figure 5: Generic Skill Change, 1997-2012](image)
5. Policy Implications

The good news is that, given the increased emphasis placed on increasing the qualification stock of the British workforce, these results offer policy-makers some reassurance. Calls for employers to raise their ambitions and make more effective use of qualifications are starting to be heeded. Qualification requirements for jobs have risen a lot since 2006, and more jobs are calling for degree-level qualifications. Levels of over-qualification have fallen for the first time since the data series began. Set against this, training and learning times have fallen and, while some of this decline might be explained as substitution by skill acquisition in education, generic skills growth has also virtually come to a halt.

Thus the issue for policy is that, while existing businesses are making better use of publicly supported education than in the past, the upskilling of jobs which has characterised the last twenty years is slowing down. Since the economy’s prosperity is based on the skills of its jobs, it is on ensuring that this slowdown does not turn into a long-term reversal of the upskilling trends of the 1986-2006 period that policy-makers should concentrate most. More may need to be done to challenge some employers to ratchet up their skill demands. It is an oft-stated ambition for Britain to become a leader in its stock of skilled labour, but to make the most effective use of the skills produced policies to raise skills demand alongside supply are also required.

Selected Recent Studies


PART B TRAINING

1. The Importance of Workplace Training

It is widely held that training for young people and ongoing lifelong learning are highly important in 21st century economies and societies. Training is an essential stage in young people’s transitions from education into work. Ongoing lifelong learning is needed, both as people progress through different stages of their careers, and as new technologies and ways of organising work emerge. Technologies linked to computing and organisational forms such as teamworking have become pervasive across industries and occupations; they continue to transform skill requirements. According to the thesis of the ‘knowledge economy’, the need for ongoing skill formation is high and rising.

Training is also looked to for providing opportunities across the spectrum of society, so that even those who have had fewer educational chances can get on in the labour market. Thus, in principle, training is one of the tools for supporting a greater degree of social inclusion. Unfortunately, training is often unsuccessful in this regard, with opportunities being concentrated among the more highly educated and relatively scarce among disadvantaged groups.

What matters is not only the volume of training that workers receive, but its quality – the extent to which it is effective at raising workers’ skills broadly considered. Some workers receive training that not only improves their technical capabilities but also embeds them further into an occupational community, helps them to be more thoughtful or innovative in their work, and enables them to work more independently. Other forms of training and learning are more mechanical and restrictive, ticking rather mindless boxes. Such contrasts have been evident in all types of training in Britain, but quality concerns have figured prominently in discussions concerning apprenticeships and other forms of training for young people.

Though most training for those in employment is provided by employers, all of society has an interest in the success of training in Britain. Trade unions have, in particular, been active in supporting training through Union Learning Representatives. Analysts and policy-makers need to know what has been happening to the volume and quality of training.

2. Previous Evidence

With the onset of the economic crisis at the end of 2008 it was feared that workplace training might become a casualty. Fortunately it turned out that there was no collapse in training in the recession. Many employers were unwilling or unable to reduce their training effort owing to commercial or regulatory requirements. However, looking over the long term, whereas there was a steady increase in training participation over a 4-week period during the 1990s, in 2003 the rate of training in Britain peaked at 15%. Thereafter training participation has slowly fallen to around 13% today. At the same time, there has been a reduction in the use of off-the-job training, a greater use of training and learning while working, and training spells have shortened in length. Many employers have reported that they were ‘training smarter’ – in effect, trying to do the same with less money.

The above evidence comes from the Quarterly Labour Force Survey, several employer surveys, and from qualitative interviews with employers. There has been little evidence hitherto, however, about training quality – how much it varies between groups and whether it also has been changing. It might be that, with less off-the-job training and reduced participation, the quality has suffered.

3. Training Indicators

The Skills and Employment Survey 2012 and the 2006 Skills Survey provide consistent data on several aspects of training. This report focuses on the volume of training, its quality and future demand.

The volume of training is captured, first, by whether or not workers participated over the previous year in each of several explicitly-stated forms of training. Second, since the length of training can vary from an hour or so at one extreme to several months at the other, we also focus on participation in ‘long training’, defined as training that, overall, took place on more than 10 days per year. In 2012 close to a half of those getting any workplace training were receiving ‘long training’.

Capturing the quality of training is more problematic. We do so by examining multiple indicators covering how workers experienced their training. While no one indicator alone should be relied upon, collectively they are informative about perceptions of whether and how far skills have been improved through the training:

Indicators applying to the latest training spell

- whether the training is certified (that is, leads to a qualification)
- whether the training ‘improved my skills’ a lot
- whether the training ‘made you think harder about different ways of doing your job’ (a lot or a great deal)
whether the training ‘needs to be memorised off by heart’ (a lot or a great deal).

**Indicators applying to all training through the year**

- whether the training ‘helped me improve the way I work’
- whether the training ‘made me enjoy my job more’
- whether very or completely satisfied with the training provided (the 7-point satisfaction scale ranged from ‘completely satisfied’ to ‘completely dissatisfied’).

To capture future demand respondents were asked ‘How much do you want to get any training in the future’. We classify those who answered ‘very much’, from a 4-point scale ranging from there down to ‘not at all’, as having a perceived demand for future training.

### 4. Findings

**Volume**

Figure 1 shows that annual training participation rose by three percentage points from 65% to 68% between 2006 and 2012. Underpinning this change is a particularly sharp rise in teach-yourself training and in the use of correspondence/internet training courses.

This change is countered by a reduction in the length of training typically undertaken. Among those training, the proportion training ‘long’ (for more than 10 days) fell from 59% to 51% over the period. Putting these trends together, Figure 1 also reveals that participation in long training declined by four percentage points from 38% to 34%. Notably, this decline is concentrated among women.

The fall in long training easily trumps the rise in short training, with the result that the volume of training fell between 2006 and 2012. Our best estimate is that average training days per worker year fell by just under a third (32%). We do not, however, attribute the decline in training volume to the recession partly because, as noted above, the decline in the 4-week participation rate recorded by the Quarterly Labour Force Survey set in well before the recession began.

Table 1 shows that participation in training varies very considerably, ranging from Health & Social Work (85%) at the top end to Hotels & Restaurants (44%) at the other. The proportions of workers doing ‘long’ training fell significantly in several industries, but rose in public administration and defence.

![Figure 1: Training Participation in 2006 and 2012](image)

*Note. ‘Long’ training means more than 10 days over the year.*
Table 1: Participation in Any Training and in Long Training, 2006 and 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Participation in Any Training (%)</th>
<th>Participation in Long Training (&gt; 10 hrs) (%)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>66.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>55.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale &amp; Retail</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>59.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotels &amp; Restaurants</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>43.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport, Storage &amp; Communication</td>
<td>53.5</td>
<td>61.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>81.8</td>
<td>84.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real Estate &amp; Business Services</td>
<td>66.3</td>
<td>64.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Administration &amp; Defence</td>
<td>82.9</td>
<td>85.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>79.3</td>
<td>80.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health &amp; Social Work</td>
<td>75.7</td>
<td>85.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Community, Social &amp; Personal Services</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>57.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All Industries</strong></td>
<td>65.1</td>
<td>68.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quality

If the volume of training has declined, what has happened to its quality between 2006 and 2012? Figure 2 records a mixed picture. On one hand, there are few changes in the proportions for whom training is certified, improved skills a lot or improved the way of working. This finding seems consistent with recent qualitative reports from employers that they have found ways of increasing efficiency in their training function, and used them to reduce the time that their employees are not working productively at the workplace. On the other hand, there has been a small but significant fall from 60% to 57% in the proportion of respondents who report that their training had raised the enjoyment of working, and a fall from 44% to 39% in the proportion who were very or completely satisfied with their training. Thus, while there certainly appears to have been no steps towards remedying the often-cited problem of low-quality training, whether or not the decline in training volume has been at the expense of quality remains uncertain.

Figure 2: Perceived Training Quality in 2006 and 2012
Figure 3 focuses on how both the quality and the volume of training are unequally distributed. It is an all-too-familiar finding that training often reinforces skill differences because it is concentrated among the better educated. Our evidence is that the high educated group receives twice as much long training as lower educated workers. Some differences are also found in the quality indicators. The high-educated workers more commonly report that the training improves their ways of working, helps them to enjoy the job, and leads them to new ways of thinking about how to do their jobs; more of the lower educated workers report that the training needs to be learned off by heart. In contrast there are hardly any differences, according to prior education, in respect of the certification and perceived usefulness of training. Overall, the quality differences are not as striking as the volume differences; but it is unfortunate that quality variation appears to exacerbate the existing inequalities, rather than ameliorate them.

**Figure 3: Perceived Training Quality by Prior Education Level, 2012**

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**Future Demand**

Finally, Figure 4 shows that the proportion of workers saying that they want training in the future has risen from 24% in 2006 to 29% in 2012. The rise took place for both high and low educated groups, but was concentrated among male workers. Though not shown in the figure, this wish for future training is linked with having faced a training barrier in the past. For those who did not receive any training in 2012, the proportion wanting future training is much greater among those whose employer would not provide them with desired training than among those not facing such a barrier (37% compared with 16%).

**Figure 4: Perceived Demand for Future Training, 2006 and 2012**
5. Policy Implications

Training in the workplace is partly driven by the needs of individual workers. Yet it is employers who determine the need for training at each workplace, and who play an indispensable role in the provision of training and learning opportunities. Their decisions are partly driven by new technologies and forms of work organisation. Also greatly relevant is employers’ orientation – whether more towards the long term, and whether more towards a high value-added approach with complex and dynamic product specifications. Training’s variation among employers reflects their business strategies. Because training matters for the whole of society, not just for those in receipt of training, there is a continuing case for social engagement with employers over both the volume and quality of training.

In this light, the decline in the volume of training suggests that there could be a deterioration in Britain’s training effort. Given that it is unlikely that a decline in training is warranted in the contemporary economy, a renewed challenge to halt and reverse the trend is posed. Such a call is tempered by mixed evidence about whether the volume decline is harming the quality of the training experience. Quality is not easy to measure well and we have relied here on workers’ own perceptions in a number of dimensions. Our findings imply that it will be important to monitor closely both the declining volume of training, and the ongoing quality of the training process, if long-term ambitions for raising workforce skills are to be fulfilled. The quality of training remains arguably too low and, like the volume of training, is skewed in favour of already-advantaged education groups.

Selected Recent Studies


PART C JOB CONTROL

1. The Importance of Job Control

Earlier research has underlined the negative consequences for job satisfaction of lack of control over decisions about the work task. Moreover, researchers in the area of work psychology have linked lower task discretion to poor health outcomes such as higher blood pressure and increased incidence of cardiac disease. Recent theories of management have also emphasised the importance of engaging employees in decisions affecting their work in order to encourage creativity and increase organisational commitment.

Teamwork has been thought to be associated with more decentralised forms of responsibility in the workplace. Since it provides employees with greater control over their work, it is argued, employees are more likely to put in discretionary effort, thereby enhancing organisational performance. Moreover, teamwork is thought to improve performance by providing greater scope for employees to use their knowledge, skills and abilities, as well as facilitating learning, skills acquisition and information sharing.

In addition to these forms of control over the immediate work task, the involvement of employees in wider organisational decisions has also been viewed as important both for commitment to the organisation and for employees’ willingness to accept organisational change.

With the economic crisis, which has both increased the intensity of work and the urgency for organisational restructuring, the need to monitor the pattern of change in employee’s involvement in decisions has become particularly important. It is by no means clear what impact the economic crisis has had. On the one hand, it might encourage employers to reassert unilateral managerial prerogative by weakening the market power of employees. On the other hand, it might lead to new initiatives to enhance involvement as a way of increasing employee commitment at a time of greater competitive pressure and organisational change.

2. Previous Evidence

Contrary to the widespread expectation that rising levels of skill and the increased complexity of technology would lead to a greater decentralisation of decision-making to employees, evidence from earlier Skills Surveys indicated a significant decline in the level of task discretion for British employees in the 1990s. This was the case for both men and women, for employees in most occupational groups and for employees in both the public and private sectors.

Teamworking increased between 1992 and 2006, but this was not accompanied by an increase in employees’ control over their work. Rather, the proportion of employees in teams with significant autonomy declined from the early 1990s onwards. In contrast, consultative involvement about wider organisational matters increased.

3. Indicators of Job Control

The survey included a range of indicators for the different forms of job control – individual task discretion, semi-autonomous teamwork and organisational participation.

Task discretion

We use four questions which assess how much personal influence people think they have over specific aspects of their jobs:

- how hard they work
- deciding what tasks they are to do
- how the tasks are done
- the quality standards to which they work

The response options range from ‘a great deal’, ‘a fair amount’ to ‘not much’ and ‘not much at all’. A summary index was constructed, by taking the average of responses of the four items. Both individual indicators and the summary index vary between 0 indicating no influence at all and 3 indicating a great deal of influence. A score of at least 2 is used to denote ‘high discretion’ jobs.

Teamwork

Employees were asked whether they usually work on their own or whether their work involves working together as a group with one or more other employees in a similar position to theirs. The question was asked in identical fashion in 1992, 2001, 2006 and 2012, providing trend data.

For those who worked in teams, their decision-making scope was explored through a set of questions on the level of control exercised by the team over key features of work (these were the same aspects of work as for individual task discretion). A summary score was created by averaging the four items. Teams that had a score equivalent to ‘a great deal’ or ‘a fair amount’ of influence over work activities are regarded as ‘semi-autonomous teams’.

From 2006 onwards three additional items were included in order to determine the extent of self-management in teams, asking how much influence team members have over:

- selecting group members
- selecting group leaders
- setting targets for the group

‘Self-managing teams’ are those semi-autonomous teams that also have an average score equivalent to ‘a great deal’ or ‘a fair amount’ of say with respect to these items.

Organisational Participation

An initial question on organisational participation asked whether management organises meetings that provide information about what is happening in the organisation. This was followed by items that sought to capture different forms of dialogue between management and employees. Respondents were asked whether they participated in a quality circle or a similar group, and whether there were meetings where they could express their views about what was happening in the organisation. Employees were then asked whether or not
they thought they would have any say in decisions which affected the way they did their job. We report those who said that they had ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’.

4. Findings

Task Discretion

Task discretion declined throughout the 1990s and has remained flat since 2001 (Figure 1). The stability in overall task discretion, however, conceals differences in trends for men and women since 2006. The trends in task discretion were similar for men and women until 2006, with a slightly lower proportion of women than men reporting that they had high levels of control over their everyday work tasks. However, by 2012 women had caught up with men and indeed exceeded them in the percentage of jobs where the worker had high discretion.

Figure 1: Task Discretion, 1992-2012

There were also differences in the pattern over time for different types of employee (see Table 1 which shows the scores of the summary index for the four discretion items). Both temporary workers and part-timers experienced an increase in task discretion between 2006 and 2012, while it remained stable for permanent or full-time employees. Employees in the public sector enjoyed a higher level of individual task discretion than private sector employees. The gap between the two groups shrank between 1997 and 2006 but widened again between 2006 and 2012.

It was suggested in earlier studies that skill levels were closely linked to the level of task discretion. Evidence for the last two decades supports this. In each year for which data are available managers enjoyed the highest level of discretion, followed by professionals. Operatives and those in elementary occupations had the lowest influence over their work. For almost all occupational groups, the 1990s were marked by a considerable decline in discretion, particularly for administrative and secretarial employees and operatives. However, in the period between 2006 and 2012, the level recovered somewhat among those working in personal services, sales and elementary jobs.

Those with at least A-levels enjoyed notably higher levels of task discretion than those without such qualifications. While both these groups experienced a negative trend in the 1990s, there was an increase in the level of task discretion of employees with no A-levels between 2006 and 2012.

Looking at the variation by industry (results not shown), employees in the construction, health and education sectors consistently reported the highest level of task discretion. Moreover, there was little change in most industries in the 2000s, with the exception of those working in hotels and restaurants who experienced an increase in influence over their work tasks.
Table 1: Task Discretion by Employee Characteristics, 1992-2012

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<td><strong>Contract type</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
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<td>Permanent</td>
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<td>2.27</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>2.19</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Teamwork**

The proportion of employees working in teams increased steadily from 47% in 1992 to 63% in 2012. But the proportion of those in semi-autonomous teams (with significant control over their work tasks) declined between 1992 and 2006. In the most recent period, however, this trend has been reversed, although still not returning fully to the level of 1992. Participation in semi-autonomous teams grew between 2006 and 2012 from 14% of all employees to 18%. Self-managing teams almost doubled up between 2006 and 2012 from 4% to 7%.

Male and female employees reported similar levels of teamworking. However, men were more likely to be working in self-managing teams than women in both 2006 and 2012 (not shown), and this was even more the case in 2012. The steady increase in teamwork is observed among all occupational groups, except for operatives for whom the proportion declined between 2006 and 2012.

![Figure 2: Teamworking, 1992-2012](image-url)
individual task discretion. Task discretion declined in all types of teams between 1992 and 2001, and then remained at a stable level, except for individuals working in semi-autonomous teams for whom it has been on the rise from 2001.

Table 2: Teamworking and Task Discretion, 1992-2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<td>Works in a team</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>2.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does not work in a team</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>2.23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Works in a non-semi-autonomous team</td>
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<td>2.17</td>
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<td>2.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Works in a semi-autonomous team</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>2.34</td>
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<tr>
<td>Works in a self-managing team</td>
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<td>n/a</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>2.46</td>
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<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>2.18</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Organisational Participation

The most recent data provides a mixed picture of trends in organisational participation. There had been an overall rise between 1992 and 2006 both in the proportion of employees in organisations where they could express their views and in participation in quality circles. Access to consultative meetings continued to rise between 2006 and 2012, but there was no evidence of an extension of the scope of the issues they covered. Whereas there was an increase in the early 2000s in the proportion of employees in workplaces where consultative meetings discussed strategic issues (such as the financial position of the organisation and investment decisions), this leveled off with the recession. Moreover, there were declines between 2006 and 2012 in participation in quality circles and in the proportion of employees reporting they had a great deal or quite a lot of say over changes to work organisation.

Figure 3: Organisational Participation, 1992-2012

5. Implications

There was a notable difference in the pattern of change between 2006 and 2012 for the different forms of job control. Whereas individual task discretion remained unchanged, there was a rise in both semi-autonomous and self-managed team work and a decline in perceived influence over wider organisational decisions.

The increase of teams with influence is the first sign that British management might be beginning to take note of views about work organisation that have become increasingly prevalent in managerial theories of ‘high performance’ organisations. Yet the absence of any improvement with respect to individual task discretion, after a marked decline in the 1990s, is of concern given the evidence of its importance for employees’ motivation and for their psychological and physical health. It is also surprising given an increase in the skill levels of the workforce over the period, since it is widely thought that there are significant benefits to management of giving greater responsibility to higher skilled employees.
It is well known that there has been a decline in union consultation channels over the last thirty years. It remains a pressing challenge to find ways to encourage managers to adopt high-involvement work practices, where they have not already done so, and to reduce the reach of bureaucratic and direct controls over workers. There is evidence that many employers in Britain, including in the public sector, are behind the curve in drawing on best practices. The apparent decline in the effectiveness of mechanisms of wider organisational participation is worrying given that it has been shown to be an important source of organisational commitment, as well as reducing insecurity in a period of rapid change.

Selected Recent Studies

1. The Importance of Fear at Work

A period of recession leads to a steep increase in unemployment, but also accentuates anxieties among those still in work. Many studies have shown that fear at work in terms of job insecurity has strong negative effects for both the psychological well-being and health of employees. Indeed some research suggests that its effects on well-being can sometimes be as strong as those of unemployment itself.

Security is also important for motivation. Research on the psychological contract has suggested that relative security both of employment and of status in the organisation is a fundamental part of the expected rewards for effort and, if it is undermined, there is a disruption of the effort-reward balance. Where employees feel unfairly treated or that the intrinsic quality of their jobs is at risk, they are likely to feel less committed to their organisation and hence may be less likely to put in discretionary effort.

Fear at work may take different forms. In particular, three dimensions are likely to be important. It may, first, involve a concern about losing employment with the organisation – this is the most widely discussed aspect of fear. Second, it may also consist of anxiety about unfair treatment at work – for instance, worry about discrimination or victimisation. Finally, fear at work may take the form of anxiety about loss of job status, that is to say displacement to another job in the organisation that offers less opportunity to make use of skills, less say over how work is done, less intrinsic work interest or less pay.

2. Previous Evidence

Empirical studies of fear at work have focused primarily on job insecurity in the restricted sense of worry about the loss of current employment. Such studies have shown that job insecurity is generally well-informed. It is greater at times of recession and in places where unemployment is higher; where people report greater insecurity they are indeed more likely to subsequently lose their job. Yet people can also feel insecure with respect to changes in the nature of their job in their organisation. From the 1990s employers have engaged in more frequent organisational restructuring, as part of their concern to enhance flexibility in work organisation, potentially raising anxieties linked to position within the organisation.

It could therefore be safely predicted that the 2008-09 recession would have substantially increased fear of loss of employment. It is less sure how it will have affected other dimensions of fear at work. A period of sharply rising unemployment could be expected to shift the balance of power in the workplace in favour of employers, which could lead to a reassertion of managerial prerogative and a rising worry about unfair treatment. But conditions of economic difficulty, where pay increases were constrained, might also give management an incentive to seek to raise levels of commitment in the workforce by emphasising the organisation’s quality as a good employer. It could be expected that recession would be associated with a greater frequency of workforce reductions, which were likely to trigger the type of restructuring that could raise anxieties about job status loss. But, at the same time, uncertainties about product demand might lead employers to put a break on investment in new technologies, which are likely to have been a key driver of workplace reorganisation in the past.

3. Indicators of Fear at Work

SES2012 provides data on each of the three dimensions of fear at work: fear of employment loss, of unfair treatment and of job status loss.

Fear of employment loss is assessed through a question: ‘Do you think there is any chance at all of you losing your job and becoming unemployed in the next twelve months?’ Those who thought they might lose their job and become unemployed were then asked about the likelihood of this happening, with response options of: very likely, quite likely, even, quite unlikely and very unlikely.

The indicators of fear of unfair treatment are a set of three items introduced with the wording ‘How anxious are you about these situations affecting you at work’, each having four response options ranging from ‘very anxious’ to ‘not anxious at all’. The items were:

- Being dismissed without good reason
- Being unfairly treated through discrimination
- Victimisation by management

There were four items designed to capture concerns about job status loss, using the same introductory wording and response options as for the previous set. They were:
• Future changes to my job that may give me less say over how it is done
• Future changes to my job that may make it more difficult to use my skills and abilities
• Future changes that may reduce my pay
• Being transferred to a less interesting job in the organisation.

4. Findings

Fear of Employment Loss

Figure 1 shows the proportion of employees who were afraid of losing their job and becoming unemployed. It can be seen that fear of employment loss in 2012 was higher than in any previous period captured by our surveys, including 1986 when unemployment rates were very much higher. There was rising employment insecurity across the decade, but the increase was particularly sharp between 2006 and 2012. The pattern is very similar for the proportion who were very insecure – believing that their chances of losing their job were evens or worse. This was the case for 11% of all employees in 2012, compared to 7% in 2006. The trends were very similar for men and women. Despite the fact that men were consistently more worried about losing their current employment than women, the increase in insecurity between 2006 and 2012 was greater among women.

Figure 1: Percentage Afraid of Losing their Job and Becoming Unemployed, 1986-2012

There was a notable difference in the pattern over time for employees in the private and public sectors. In most of the previous years for which we have data, employees in the private sector were more insecure about their employment than those in the public sector. In 1997, they had a very similar level of insecurity, although a slightly higher proportion of private sector employees were highly insecure (believing the chances were evens or worse). The major change that occurred between 2006 and 2012 was that for the first time public sector employees were quite clearly more concerned about losing their employment than those in the private sector (and they were also more likely to be very insecure).

Fear of Unfair Treatment

A second aspect of fear of work is anxiety about unfair treatment. Figure 2 compares the proportion of employees in 2000 and 2012 who were either very or quite anxious about unfair treatment with respect to arbitrary dismissal, discrimination and victimisation by management. In both years, anxiety was highest with respect to arbitrary dismissal. But whereas in 2000 discrimination was the second most commonly cited source of anxiety, by 2012 it had been overtaken by concern about victimisation. It is notable that a third of all employees were concerned about at least one risk of unfair treatment.
It can be seen that, for employees as a whole, there was a rise in anxiety between 2000 and 2012 with respect to each of the three types of unfair treatment. This was particularly the case with respect to the risk of arbitrary dismissal, but it was also evident for anxiety about victimisation. Anxiety about unfair treatment was considerably greater in the private than in the public sector in 2000. While it increased in both the private and public sectors between 2000 and 2012, the rise was greater in the public sector, leading to some convergence in the experience of employees in the two sectors.

![Figure 2: Percentage Anxious about Unfair Treatment, 2000 and 2012](image)

**Fear of Job Status Loss**

Evidence with respect to job status loss is only available for 2012. It can be seen in Figure 3 that anxiety in this respect was highest about pay reductions, followed by loss of say over the job. In all cases anxiety about job status loss was greater in the public sector than in the private sector. But the differences between the sectors were particularly strong with regard to anxiety about pay reductions and reductions in say. Overall, 51% of employees were concerned about at least one risk of job status loss.

![Figure 3: Percentage Anxious about Job Status Loss: All Employees and by Ownership Sector, 2012](image)
Workplace Change, Employee Participation and Fear at Work

The timing of the rise in both employment insecurity and anxiety about unfair treatment strongly suggests that recession and its aftermath were important factors increasing levels of fear at work. This can be examined more closely by looking at its association with experiences of workplace change over the last three to five years.

It can be seen from Table 1 that two types of change had a strong impact on fear at work – previous reductions in the numbers employed and changes in work organisation. Employees who had experienced such changes were more fearful on all items, but the effects were particularly strong with respect to employment loss and job status loss.

There is an extensive literature on the potential benefits of employee participation in managing processes of organisational restructuring. There is a measure in the survey of the influence that employees consider they have over changes that affect their work. Comparing those who think they have either a great deal or quite a lot of influence with those who report that they have little or no influence, it is evident that organisational participation plays a major role in reducing the anxieties generated by organisational change. Those who had higher levels of involvement at work were less worried that they might lose their employment with the organisation, they were less anxious about unfair treatment and they were less concerned about a risk of job status loss.

Table 1: Percentage with Fear at Work by Workforce Reductions, Workplace Change and Employee Participation, 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Workforce Reductions</th>
<th>Changes in Work Organisation</th>
<th>Great deal/quite a lot of influence over changes at work</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td><strong>Fear of:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment Loss</td>
<td>31.7</td>
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<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>19.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Victimisation</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less say in job</td>
<td>41.0</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>38.1</td>
</tr>
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<td>Less skilled job</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower paid job</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>41.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Less interesting job</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>26.5</td>
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</table>
5. Policy Implications

The evidence from the 2012 Skills and Employment Survey shows that not only was there a sharp rise in fear of employment loss over the period between 2006 and 2012, but also a large increase between 2000 and 2012 in anxiety about unfair treatment at work. Existing concern about the implications of job insecurity for employee well-being need to be extended to the wider issue of fear at work. The growth of fears both of employment loss and of unfair treatment were particularly strong in the public sector. Further there was widespread concern in the workforce about risks of loss of job status, even if employment within the organisation continued. Indeed, the proportion of the workforce that was anxious about potential loss of job status was considerably greater than the proportion concerned about the loss of employment. This again was an especially important problem in the public sector. It suggests that particular attention needs to be paid to the deteriorating climate of employee relations in the public sector.

The growth of fear at work was related to the recession and its aftermath. Workplace reductions and changes in work organisation both led to increased anxieties with respect to all three aspects of fear at work. But our evidence suggests that where employers adopted policies that gave employees a degree of involvement in decision making at work, such fears were much less prevalent. This points to the need to develop policies to enhance employee involvement at times of organisational change. The slowness with which employers in Britain are enhancing employee participation, which is highlighted in another of our reports (No. 3), is becoming an issue of considerable concern.

Selected Recent Studies


PART E WORK INTENSIFICATION

1. The Importance of Work Intensification

Work effort varies, not only in its length, but also in its intensity – the speed and pressures under which it is carried out. Highly intensive work carries both costs and benefits. Excessive workloads can lead to more accidents, high absenteeism and sickness levels, an increase in family breakdowns and even a rise in work-related deaths. These costs fall on workers, employers and government. The problems are known to be greatest when high work effort is seen as not fairly rewarded, or when it is accompanied by low levels of job control. However, hard work can bring benefits, too, through higher pay and/or enhanced promotion opportunities, higher economic output, and increased tax receipts and a reduction in welfare expenditure.

2. Previous Evidence

In one sense British workers are not working as hard as they did in the past as measured by the number of hours spent at work – the average working week has been reducing since records began. While it is true that male full-time employees in the UK work longer hours than the EU average, hours of work in the UK as a whole are below the EU average.

Yet work can change in other ways with each hour at work being worked less or more intensively. This information is not routinely collected in official sources, but has periodically been obtained from high quality social surveys including the Skills Survey series. Previous research shows that hours of work and the intensity of work do not necessarily follow the same path. The early 1990s, for example, were years of substantial work intensification. After that work intensity remained broadly at this higher level for the next decade, with some survey series indicating a small reduction in required effort up till the middle of the 2000s as the economy improved.

Given the severity of the 2008-09 recession and the sluggishness of the economy since, work intensity might be expected to rise further if jobs are reorganised and new technologies force the pace; alternatively, it is possible that work intensity could fall if employers hoard labour despite falling demand.

3. Concepts and Variables Used

Our measures of working hours and of work intensity focus on objective indicators reported by respondents. None are related to personal circumstances and instead focus on the job – the usual weekly hours, the requirement to work hard and the conditions under which it is carried out. The usual number of hours worked per week includes overtime, whether or not it is paid for. ‘Long hours’ is defined as more than 48 hours.

To capture work intensity we partly use responses given to the question: ‘please tell me how much you agree or disagree with the statement: my job requires that I work very hard’. If they strongly agreed, we define the job as involving ‘hard work’. Respondents were also asked to indicate how often they worked at very high speeds. If they said that they did so for three-quarters or more of the time, we classify them as occupying ‘high speed’ jobs. If they reported working to ‘tight deadlines’ for a similar amount of time we refer to them as ‘high pressure’ jobs.

We combine the responses to a number of survey questions in order to identify jobs where workers report high work effort in the context of low job control. ‘High strain’ jobs are defined as those in which respondents ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’ with the statement that ‘my job requires that I work very hard’ and they have little say over at least one of the following: work intensity; task selection; task execution; and quality standards.

The report also uses data on recent changes to staffing levels and the introduction of new equipment. Those who remained in the same job with the same employer over the previous few years were asked whether: there was ‘a reduction in the number of people doing this sort of work’ (staff reductions); ‘new computerised or automated equipment’ (computerisation) was installed; or ‘new communications technology equipment’ (other ICT) was introduced.

4. Findings

Hours of Work

Across the economy usual hours of work fell from 38 in 1997 to 34 in 2012 with usual hours of work declining at each data point. Figure 1 shows that the fall in the average is also reflected in a drop in the proportion of workers putting in long hours.

The trend in long-hours working has mostly concerned men rather than women. Long hours working accounted for around 7-8% of women workers between 1997 and 2012. However, for men, long hours working became much less prevalent – falling from around a third (31%) of those in work in 1997 to a fifth in 2012.
Jobs requiring hard work rose by over nine percentage points between 1992 and 1997, but remained around that figure in 2001 and 2006. However, from 2006 to 2012 hard work rose by around three percentage points – a resumption of work intensification after a decade of little change. Both upward movements in work intensity – in the mid to late 1990s and then once again more recently – followed recessions and therefore provide some circumstantial support, though not proof, for the argument that employers use recessions to ratchet up effort levels.

The early increase in work intensity is reflected in the time respondents estimated that they worked at very high speeds. In 1997, around a quarter (23%) said they worked at very high speeds three-quarters or more of the time. By 2001 the proportion had risen to 38% and by 2012 it stood at 40%.

Similarly, the upward movement in work intensity is reflected in the rising proportion of respondents who reported that they worked under the pressure of tight deadlines. These high pressure jobs rose from 52% in 2001 to 55% in 2006 and 58% in 2012.

Jobs which demand high effort levels, but allow the job-holder limited control over aspects of the work (referred to here as ‘high strain jobs’) have followed a different path. They rose from 23% in 1992 to 36% in 2001, but they have barely moved from that figure subsequently. The pattern varies by gender in that women’s exposure to ‘high strain’ jobs rose faster than men’s between 1986 and 1992 opening up a gender gap which has remained unchanged until 2006. The most recent data collected suggests a reversal of fortunes with women now less exposed to ‘high strain’ jobs than men. The period between 2006 and 2012 saw men’s exposure to ‘high strain’ jobs rise, while women’s exposure fell with the result that...
women are now less, rather than more, likely to be in high strain jobs.

Patterns of Change

Underlying this finding are gender trends in work intensity and discretion at work. In terms of work effort, the gap between the sexes grew with women becoming more likely than men to report that their jobs required them to work very hard. In 1992, the gender gap was two percentage points, but it has since widened to eight percentage points (Table 1). This suggests that women are disproportionately experiencing the pressure to work harder. However, gender trends in autonomy at work have moved more strongly in the opposite direction – offering them more job control – hence the fall in ‘high strain’ jobs among women since 2006.

The pressure to work very hard has grown fastest among women who work full-time. They have seen the pressures to work very hard grow from 38% of jobs in 1992 to 57% in 2012; this substantial expansion compares to a twelve percentage point rise for male full-timers and a fifteen point rise for women part-time workers over the same period. Moreover, women full-timers have experienced some of the largest rises in work intensity since 2006.

Between 1992 and 2012 required work intensity rose faster in the public sector than in the private sector. In 1992 around three in ten of all workers strongly agreed that their jobs required them to work very hard. However, by 2012 the proportion had risen to over half (53%) of the public sector and around two-fifths (42%) of the private sector. Within the public sector it was in the health industry where work intensification was especially sharp between 2006 and 2012. Parts of the private sector also experienced rapid rises in work effort over this period. The proportion of jobs requiring hard work in the construction industry rose by eleven percentage points, putting it on a par with education and health.

The requirement to work hard becomes stronger the higher the qualification level of worker. So, in 2012 a half of those with a degree or equivalent qualification strongly agreed that their job required them to work very hard. This is in contrast to those with no qualifications where around a third (35%) of workers made similar claims. This difference has not changed over the last two decades.
### Table 1: Percentage of Jobs Requiring Hard Work, 1992-2012

<table>
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<td>Women full-timers</td>
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<td>Public sector</td>
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<td><strong>All</strong></td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>38.5</td>
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<td>45.3</td>
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</table>

### Drivers of Change

So, what are the drivers of renewed work intensification? A key one may be technological change, much of which is said to be ‘effort-biased’ – that is, the new technologies enable work to be done more intensively. In plants and offices encountering technological change, one expects that there has been some intensification, and hence that other things equal work intensity would be higher. Consistently, Figure 4 shows much higher proportions strongly agreeing that they were required to work ‘very hard’ in workplaces where new computerised equipment or other information and communication technology had recently been introduced.

Other factors are also likely to have been important in recent years, including increased competitiveness brought on by the severity of the recession and rising levels of unemployment: these may have changed the balance of power between employers and employees. Nevertheless an oft-maintained hypothesis we can reject is that high work intensity is specifically linked with downsizing: as Figure 4 also shows, intensity is not higher in workplaces that have experienced staff reductions. If anything, the reverse was the case. Interestingly, as another of our reports (No. 4) shows, downsizing is nevertheless strongly associated with greater fear at work.

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**Figure 4: Drivers of Work Intensification, 2012**

![Bar chart showing percentage of hard working jobs by different factors]
5. Policy Implications

Those in jobs are working harder, faster and to tighter deadlines than they did in the past. Some groups of workers and parts of the economy have felt these pressures more than others. This renewal of work intensification is likely to have come at a cost in terms of increased levels of stress and potential losses of productivity. Since the costs are both private (for workers and employers) and social (for families and taxpayers), policy-makers in government and elsewhere should consider what policies are available to reverse the upward trend. Given our findings we recommend that attention be given not only to policies that can relieve workplace stress, but also to policies that champion forms of work organisation which lower the prevalence of ‘high strain’ working conditions in which excessive workloads are combined with low job control. In general, better job control entails increased employee involvement and participation. The intention should be to improve the balance between the benefits of hard work and the costs. Regular monitoring of work effort is advised in order to better understand the trends in workplace stress.

Selected Recent Studies


PART F JOB-RELATED WELL-BEING

1. The Importance of Job-Related Subjective Well-Being

In recent years interest has grown in measuring subjective well-being, broadening out from the traditional concern with the growth of GDP. In Britain the Office for National Statistics inaugurated its well-being programme in 2010, then published in 2012 a set of well-being indicators about many aspects of life including work. Noting the importance of having a job, it showed the trend in the employment rate: this has been relatively stable for a decade. Recognising that the experience of work also mattered, it also showed the extent to which people were satisfied with their jobs.

In this report we start from a similar starting point to that of the ONS. Evidence shows that being in work makes a substantive difference to people’s well-being, and that there is a great deal of variety among jobs in their effects on well-being. However, unlike the ONS we hold that the variation is not adequately measured by asking workers whether they are satisfied with their jobs, because their answers depend on what they were expecting and what the alternatives are.

Instead, we utilise a more sophisticated concept of job-related subjective well-being developed by psychologists. In this alternative, the many feelings generated by work are grouped positively or negatively along two dimensions – ‘emotional arousal’ and ‘pleasure’. Then, two scales are generated that capture these dimensions to greater or lesser extents. One scale ranges from the feeling of ‘depression’ (low pleasure, low arousal) to its opposite, ‘enthusiasm’ (high pleasure, high arousal) – the ‘Enthusiasm’ scale. The other ranges from ‘anxiety’ (low pleasure, high arousal) to ‘contentment’ (high pleasure, low arousal) – the ‘Contentment’ scale. It is important to monitor both scales, because (as evidence shows) the same job characteristic often affects the two scales quite differently; moreover, the two scales may have quite different effects on outcomes such as absenteeism and job mobility.

An impressive amount of research has brought out the associations between subjective well-being and a range of job characteristics – including worker discretion, the ability to use skills, access to training, social support, security, and the relationship between effort and reward. Much of this knowledge has yet to be taken on board in policy discussions. In turn, these job characteristics are related to the macroeconomic environment, to strategic decisions that managers make about how to organise work, and to the pressures of increasing global competition. With the economy stagnating since the autumn of 2008, what has happened to job-related subjective well-being?

2. Previous Evidence

Life satisfaction – which is one measure of subjective well-being applying to all facets of life – has been found to be relatively stable for the last quarter of the 20th century in Britain. Yet it is also known that subjective well-being drops when unemployment increases. As Beveridge warned back in 1944 when setting out his blueprint for the post-war welfare state, a downturn in the business cycle affects not just those made redundant. The employment insecurity and disruptions generated among many of those still working magnify the downsides of recessions. Looking at the recent economic crisis, among men in England the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) indicator of low subjective well-being, which is associated with poor mental health, was significantly higher in 2009 and 2010 than it had been in previous years; yet no such drop occurred for women. The suicide rate increased significantly between 2010 and 2011.

Little is known, by contrast, about how job-related subjective well-being has been changing over time in Britain. What we do know concerns job satisfaction, which deteriorated over the course of the 1990s yet picked up in the first part of the 2000s, soon reaching its early 1990s levels.

Our aim in this report is partly to update what has been happening to job satisfaction after three years of economic stagnation, but also to improve the evidence on job-related subjective well-being using the more sophisticated Enthusiasm and Contentment scales.


We investigated these issues using the Skills and Employment Survey 2012 (SES2012), which collected responses from working adults in England, Scotland and Wales, interviewed in their own homes. The sample was drawn using random probability principles subject to stratification based on a number of socio-economic indicators. Only one eligible respondent per address was randomly selected for interview, and 49% of those selected completed the survey. Data collection was directed by ourselves and conducted by GfK NOP.
SES2012 is the sixth in a series of nationally representative sample surveys of individuals in employment. Each comprises a large number of respondents: 4,047 in 1986 survey; 3,855 in 1992; 2,467 in 1997; 4,470 in 2001; 7,787 in 2006 individuals; and 3,204 in 2012. For each survey, weights were computed to take into account the differential probabilities of sample selection, the over-sampling of certain areas and some small response rate variations between groups (defined by sex, age and occupation). The analyses that follow use these weights and consistently apply to those aged 20 to 60.

4. Indicators of Job-Related Subjective Well-Being

To measure job-related subjective well-being, a series of items was introduced with the words: ‘Thinking of the past few weeks, how much of the time has your job made you feel each of the following...?’, each followed by an adjective describing a different feeling. For the Enthusiasm scale, the adjectives were ‘depressed’, ‘gloomy’, ‘miserable’, ‘cheerful’, ‘enthusiastic’ and ‘optimistic’. For the Contentment scale the adjectives were ‘tense’, ‘uneasy’, ‘worried’, ‘calm’, ‘contented’ and ‘relaxed’. Responses could range over six points from ‘never’ to ‘all of the time’. Both scales, constructed by averaging the responses (having reversed the negative items), ranged from ‘1’ to ‘6’ and have been validated in earlier studies.

We supplemented these main measures by two further indicators which, though less ideal for capturing job-related subjective well-being, have the benefit of being available for 1992 as well as for the 2000s, thereby enabling a longer perspective on change. ‘Job Stress’ is a negative measure of job-related well-being. This indicator was obtained by averaging responses to three questions about the frequency of experiencing ‘worry about job problems’, ‘difficulty to unwind at the end of a workday’, or ‘feeling used up at the end of a workday’. The responses again ranged from ‘1’ (‘never’) to ‘6’ (‘all of the time’).

Finally Job Satisfaction is obtained from the combined responses to questions about 14 separate domains of work: pay, promotion prospects, relations with the boss, job security, opportunity to use abilities, ability to use initiative, quality of management, hours, fringe benefits, the work itself, the amount of work, variety in the work, training and the friendliness of co-workers. We averaged the responses, each with scores ranging from 0 (‘completely dissatisfied’) to 6 (‘completely satisfied’).

5. Findings

To illustrate how job-related well-being changed between 2001 and 2012, we focus first on the downside: we calculate the proportion of jobs where the respondent had a low well-being score. Figure 1 (whose notes explain the precise definitions of ‘low’ in each case) suggests that this downside has grown, indicating that well-being has deteriorated.

Between 2006 and 2012 there was a slight rise, from 5% to 6%, in the proportion of workers who were low on the Enthusiasm scale. There was a more substantive rise in the share who were low on the Contentment scale which, after remaining virtually unchanged over the first part of the decade, then took a sharp increase (from 15% to 19%) between 2006 and 2012.

Consistent with this story of declining well-being in the latter period, there was a rise in the proportion reporting high levels of Job Stress between 2006 and 2012 (from 12% to 17%). This change was paralleled by a rise in the proportions reporting a low level of Job Satisfaction (from 9% to 11%).
Table 1 splits the trends in our main measures between socio-economic groups. To capture the whole spectrum of the distribution of well-being, rather than just the low end, we now examine the average scores: these display a pattern of decline after 2006 consistent with Figure 1. The table shows that for Enthusiasm all the decline was for men, with no decrease for women. The drop in Contentment was for both sexes but was much greater for men than for women. These gender differences match the findings about the GHQ indicator during the recession, noted above. Among women there was no notable difference in the trends between those working full-time and part-time.

The table also shows that Enthusiasm is somewhat higher in the public sector than in the private sector, and higher still in the non-profit sector. Yet there are few notable differences between the sectors with the Contentment scale. The overall declines between 2006 and 2012 appear to have taken place across the board.

Finally, with the Enthusiasm scale it is the lower educated (less than A-level or equivalent) whose job-related subjective well-being has fallen the most (from 4.31 in 2001 to 4.19 in 2012), while there has been little change for the higher educated.

Notes: Low Enthusiasm and Low Contentment each mean that the average score is less frequently than ‘some of the time’. Low Job Satisfaction is where the compound score is less than ‘4’ (equivalent to ‘neither satisfied nor dissatisfied’). High Job Stress is where Job Stress is ‘4’ or more (equivalent to ‘much’, ‘most’ or ‘all of the time’).
## Table 1: The *Enthusiasm* and *Contentment* Scales by Socio-Economic Groups, 2001-2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>4.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contentment</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>3.81</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>4.32</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contentment</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working time (women only)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>4.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contentment</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>3.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>4.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contentment</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sector</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Private sector</td>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>4.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contentment</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
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<td>Public sector</td>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>4.33</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contentment</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>3.74</td>
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<td>Non-profit organisation</td>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contentment</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>3.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education level</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Below A-Level</td>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>4.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contentment</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above A-Level</td>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>4.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contentment</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>3.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>4.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contentment</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Scores range from 1 to 6, with higher scores indicating greater well-being.*

As a broad generalisation, those working in higher-ranking occupations (in terms of required education level) experience higher *Enthusiasm* but lower *Contentment* scores. For example, Sales and Retail workers’ average scores are respectively 4.23 (lower than average) and 3.85 (higher), while Nurses, at 4.36 and 3.57, are the opposite. Over the decade, the occupational and industrial structure of the workforce has changed, but we found that these do not account for the declines in well-being. Rather, the changes in well-being may be associated with changes in the jobs themselves.

At first sight it looks from the timing as though the 2006-2012 fall in *Contentment* may be associated with the major economic recession that intervened. Yet the fall could instead be part of a longer run trend, so it is worth looking for other clues. Over this period more workers were in jobs where there had been downsizing (41% in 2012 compared with 30% in 2006), putting pressure on surviving workers. Work has been intensified over the period (see Report 5), and many more people have been fearing job loss (25% in 2012 compared with 18% in 2006 – see Report 4). These changes will have affected well-being negatively, so we attempted to account for the decline in subjective well-being in terms of these proximate determinants. Figure 2 shows the results.
Figure 2: Accounting for the Decline in Job-Related Well-Being, 2006-2012

Notes: Controls are for required work effort, perceived job insecurity (expectation of job loss & unemployment in coming year), change in way work is organised, downsizing in the workplace, gender and age. The estimates apply to workers in post for at least three years.

For the Enthusiasm scale, the upper bar indicates the ‘raw’ fall between 2006 and 2012. The lower bar shows the estimated fall that would have occurred if the downsizing, work reorganisation and so on had not taken place. We calculated this estimate assuming that the relationships between job characteristics and well-being remained the same over the whole period. As can be seen, most of the fall in the Enthusiasm scale is accounted for by the control variables – only a small and insignificant fall would have occurred without the changes in job characteristics, which are mainly associated with the economic crisis.

Doing the same calculation for the Contentment scale reveals that less than half of the decline is accounted for by the measured changing job characteristics.

These findings do not prove that the decline in subjective well-being is caused by the recession, but they are consistent with the story that recession-induced changes in job characteristics and in perceptions of employment insecurity are partly behind it.

6. Implications

Studies of subjective well-being help to reveal both the threats to the well-being of the public in times of recession and the benefits of having better quality jobs. A good quality working life is to be prized for itself. It is also associated with beneficial outcomes for employers, such as lower absenteeism and higher commitment – though research on whether this link is causal has a long way to go. The declines in the Contentment scale for both sexes, together with the fall in the Enthusiasm scale for men, have implications for both the management of the economy and the organisation of work. It reinforces the responsibility of macroeconomic policy makers to minimise instability, and calls for a new engagement with employers in both public and private sectors over an organisation of work that enhances those characteristics, such as control and effort management, which promote worker well-being.

Selected Recent Studies


