Opportunity Knocks? The Possibilities for Improving Job Quality

Introduction

Job quality and recognition that it needs to be improved has gone mainstream amongst policymakers. In September 2015 the G20 - the forum of governments and central banks of the advanced economies which includes the US and UK - signed the Ankara Declaration. This explicitly and formally recognizes the importance of job quality. It commits governments to strengthening job quality as a route to achieving strong, sustainable and balanced economic growth that might also deliver inclusiveness and improved living standards. The significance of this development should not be under-estimated, as G20 countries contribute 85 per cent of gross world product and have two-thirds of the world's population (G20.org).

Analysing the potential for, and challenges in, improving job quality is timely. The Ankara Declaration is part of a trend in which supranational and inter-governmental organizations such as the OECD (2014) and the European Union (Muñoz de Bustillo et al 2009) have introduced initiatives to promote job quality and its economic and social benefits. National governments also recognize the importance of the issue. Scotland, for example, established a Fair Work Convention in 2014 to guide workplace practice (Fair Work Convention 2016), subsequently stimulating a Parliamentary Inquiry into work, wages and well-being, which argued that the low road to poor job quality must be closed off and a high road to good job quality created (Scottish Parliament Economy, Enterprise and Tourism Committee 2016). Resonating with this aim, practitioners within countries, for example professional human resource associations (e.g. the UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) and national labour union confederations, (e.g. the AFL-CIO) as well as individual unions have become increasingly aware of the importance of job quality (see Findlay et al. 2013).

There has also been renewed academic interest internationally in job quality. Explicitly and implicitly, job quality featured strongly in what are now classic studies of work (e.g. Baldamus 1961; Braverman 1974). Some of this academic research translated into workplace interventions through the international Quality of Working Life movement of the 1960s and 1970s (for a recent review see Grote and Guest 2016). However interest waned with the onslaught of economic crisis from the mid-1970s, with job losses exercising not only policymaker but also academic minds, resting on the assumption that, by way of response to the crisis, it was better to have any jobs than pursue good jobs (www.makingbadjobsbetter.org.uk). With this renewed interest, research now focuses on job quality generally (e.g. Gallie 2007; Holzer et al. 2011) and on what might be termed 'bad jobs' (e.g. Kalleberg et al. 2000; McGovern et al. 2007; Gautie and Schmitt, 2009; Kalleberg 2011). A key concern has been how to define job quality (see Findlay et al. 2013; Wright 2015). While no definitional consensus has emerged and debates over objective job characteristics and subjective employee perceptions continue (Knox et al. 2016), key components have been identified and a second research dimension has emerged evaluating patterns of, and trends in, job quality nationally and internationally (e.g. Kalleberg 2011; Leschke and Watt 2008; Muñoz de Bustillo et al. 2011).

This research shows that too many developed countries have poor quality job and that whilst there have been some improvements within some countries, a number of previously good jobs are worsening and there is growth in the number of bad jobs (Fernández-Macías 2012; Rothstein 2012; Goos and Manning 2007; Green and Mostafa 2012, Kalleberg 2011). For example Lescske et al. (2012) point to deterioration in overall job quality over the 2000s in UK, France, Sweden, and Ireland that includes falls in more than one dimension of job quality. As Carré et al (2012) explain, good jobs can deteriorate and bad jobs get worse, and, with employment growth or contraction, the stock of good and bad jobs can change nationally – as well as by industry and locality (Green and Owen 2006).

As a result, there have been calls by academics for interventions to improve job quality. For example, Kalleberg (2011) has called for a 'new social contract' to address jobs polarisation and precarity (e.g. PEPSO 2015), Grimshaw and Carroll (2008) have outlined a 'new deal' for workers in low-wage, low skill jobs, and Osterman and Shulman (2011) have called simply for bad jobs to be made good. Most recently, following the Presidential election success of Donald Trump, the Economic Policy Institute (2016) has called for a 'real agenda' to support good jobs in the US.

Taken together, the debates signalled above raise the obvious question – if job quality is a problem, what can be done – and by whom - to maintain or improve it? These are challenging questions. As Warhurst and Knox (2015a) explain, beyond agreeing what job quality is, there are three key dilemmas. First, deciding which jobs need intervention – the bad jobs or the good ones that are deteriorating, most obviously. Second, identifying whose responsibility it is to intervene: government, labour unions, employers or perhaps even community organisations for example. Third, where the point of intervention should be: in the workplace or outside the workplace and, if the latter, whether intervention should occur prior to work, through education, or parallel to work, through legislation. This special issue explores these options. Recasting these dilemmas, this opening article contributes to the debate on job quality interventions by providing a framework for reflection that focuses interventions that are within and outwith the workplace, examining not just where intervention occurs but also who intervenes and with what impacts. The next section outlines contextual reasons for intervention to improve job quality and the factors that shape it. The following section examines the emerging scope for intervention, with the final main section based on the framework analysing and evaluating the loci of targeted intervention.

Reasons to be cheerful? The good and bad news about job quality

Policy interest has been stimulated by both bad and good news about job quality – that is, the negative and positive drivers for improving it (Warhurst and Knox 2015b). The bad news relates to the negative impacts of poor job quality on individual workers, firms and countries. Particularly for individuals, there is strong evidence of the negative impact of poor job quality. Working in bad jobs can depress individual earnings, job satisfaction and health (Chandola 2010). Bad jobs can also impose costs on employers directly and indirectly, for example, through higher turnover rates (Sisson 2014) that in turn pose additional recruitment and retraining costs, and through lower productivity and performance. The cost of bad jobs is also externalised beyond the workplace to healthcare, welfare and taxation systems and so is of concern to governments (Chandola 2010). This bad news story also bridges individuals and societies in terms of career and earnings progression potential and their implications for inequality and social mobility. In the US, concern over growing income inequality and living standards has stimulated discussion on how to improve job quality (Hiltonsmith and Daly 2014). As for the good news, there is increasingly strong evidence attesting to the importance of good quality jobs for individuals, organisations and countries (Green 2009; Tomlinson and Walker 2010). For the EU, economic crisis threw into sharp focus the recognition that countries with better job quality tend to have higher employment participation and lower unemployment rates. The Scandinavian nations' attention has been drawn by the apparent relationship between good jobs, organizational learning cultures and company-level innovation, as witnessed in the various Finnish working life development programmes (Alasoini 2009). More broadly, there is now evidence of a strong correlation between innovation and job quality across countries and industries, whereby those with high innovation have high job quality and those with low innovation have lower job quality (Erhel and Guergoat-Larivière 2016). In Scotland, concerns over the limited impact of improving skills supply, poor skills deployment and a growing concern over poverty and inequality and its relationship to sustainable growth have driven policy and practitioner concerns over job quality, and have shifted the policy debate significantly towards support for fair work and workplace innovation (Findlay et al 2016a; 2016b). In Australia, the focus on job quality arose with government recognition that more effective skill utilization could be levered through working practices that characterize good jobs – management-worker consultation, opportunity for workers to learn new skills and have sufficient autonomy to make decisions about how to do their jobs for example (Skills Australia 2012).

Given the range of positive outcomes associated with good jobs and the range of negative outcomes associated with bad jobs, what then explains the persistence of the latter and good jobs becoming worse? The answer, of course, is complex. The quality and quantity of jobs is shaped in large part by structural and technological factors, mediated by national institutional characteristics (Vidal 2013; Frege and Godard 2014; Haldane 2015). This mediation is notably through the role and activities of social partners in national and workplace level policy and practice. As Holman (2013: 496-7) has argued, institutional facilitators of good job quality in social democratic regimes include policies promoting full employment and employment rights for all alongside 'organised labour's strong capacity to influence decision-making within firms and government'. An example of this possibility is provided by Simms (2017) in this volume. She argues that job quality outcomes should be understood as the result of contested power dynamics amongst interest representation.

In liberal market regimes, however, reduced trade union power and increasingly individualised employment relationships lower the pressure on employers to invest in good job quality. This point is made by Kalleberg (2011) for the US and McGovern et al. (2007) for the UK. Put bluntly, the weakening of organised labour is a key driver of declining job quality. Strong institutional environments can shape job quality more directly than weaker institutional environments. Moreover employer practices can offset any negative impact on workers of weak or unfavourable institutional environments (Frege and Godard 2014). As such, it should be recognised that differences at the firm-level can exist within countries and industries, mediated by employers. Put simply 'deviation by individual organisations' is possible (Vidal 2013: 589).

The emerging scope for intervention

The message is clear: job quality is not pre-determined but results from choices made by countries, industries and firms (Sen Gupta, Edwards and Tsai 2009). There is, therefore, scope for agency in job quality outcomes. The obvious question then is why common sense (good jobs are better for everyone than bad jobs) is not common practice. Part of the answer relates to alternative business models and strategies (Boxall and Purcell 2017), and part to the differential impact of bad jobs on workplace stakeholders. Indeed, these two answers are interlinked. While individual workers most directly bear the costs, and while society bears the knock-on effects and the remedial costs of addressing the negative impact of poor quality work on individuals, employers' short term performance and profitability may, in some contexts and under particular business models, be predicated on limited job quality (Keep et al. 2006). Moreover, while employers may collectively bear the important opportunity costs imposed, individual employers may not. The stark reality is that for some employers, providing poor jobs is consistent with profitable operations – and not just in the short term. Where institutional constraints are weak, employers may externalise the costs to welfare and taxation systems and, in terms of financial insecurity and ill health, to workers. For some individual employers, therefore, providing bad jobs makes good business sense.

Correspondingly, the problems of poor job quality are unlikely to be resolved without intervention. Technological change can and does in some circumstances eliminate such jobs. Similarly, market positioning and employer strategies around service quality can and do drive improvements, as Findlay et al. (2017) argue in this volume for the Scottish health sector. However, the growth of industries and occupations that are less susceptible to technical change, such as routine interactive and personal service work, limits the technological route to enhanced job quality, and the low-cost driven business models that prevail in many industries and countries are, as employers often argue, inimical to improving job quality. Where there is a strong business case for attracting and utilizing high quality labour through high quality jobs, market signals are more likely to be sufficient (Skills Australia 2012). Beyond this possibility, the strongest case for intervention arises from assessing the full costs of poor job quality from a multi-stakeholder perspective and from consideration of the particular impacts on distinctive sections of the workforce, given that much (but not all) of the burden of poor quality work falls disproportionately on women, the young, temporary workers and those in involuntary self-employment (OECD 2014) To illustrate, 40 per cent of young workers in OECD countries are in non-standard work, and opportunities to transition beyond this are increasingly limited (OECD 2014).

The costs and missed opportunities of poor job quality do not, in themselves, establish a case for intervention. Beyond relying on stakeholders to drive interventions, levels and forms of intervention must be identified that could improve job quality without generating other negative consequences. As Pond argues, 'the prevailing wisdom has been that there is a cruel but inevitable trade-off between the quality and the quantity of jobs that an economy can generate. The higher the wage offered and the more generous the conditions of employment, the fewer jobs that will exist (1997:167). Neoclassical arguments become more prominent in a globalised economy where concerns abound that ‘too much’ employment protection can reduce employment levels as employers shift from countries with higher to those with lower employment protection. Beyond such concerns, some commentators argue that bad jobs are employment access points for workers with low human capital, despite evidence that these so called entry points can become bad job traps (Booth and Snower 1996; Sarfati 2015).

The trade-off argument has, however, been refuted in Erhel et al.’s (2010) longitudinal analysis of job quality and quantity in EU countries which is cited widely in the 1997 European Union’s ‘more and better jobs’ employment strategy. As Erhel et al. note: ‘Our empirical results tend to validate this positive view of the link between job quality and quantity. The correlation between employment rates and some components of job quality is positive and significant when longitudinal European data are used’ (p.8). Job quality interventions need not, therefore, decrease employment. Similarly, research on regulatory interventions has established that the costs and consequences of labour standards are often overstated and that well-designed labour standards may have little or no negative employment effects, allowing considerable scope for variation in these and in wider labour market institutions (for a point-by-point critique of the trade-off argument, see Osterman 2012).

More pragmatically, for many advanced economies, the option of competing on the basis of poor quality jobs is highly circumscribed – given demographic characteristics, institutional structures and political imperatives, particularly around concerns over growing inequality – a race to the bottom is a race that they are unlikely to win – certainly not electorally, as the 2016 Brexit result in the UK illustrates (Warhurst 2017). The economic case is also now clearer: job quality is part of the solution to economic sustainability, not a barrier to it. There is no necessary clash of policy outcomes in wanting both more jobs and better jobs as part of the route out of crisis and into economic growth. As Eurofound, the agency charged with improving living and working conditions within the EU, states, ‘High levels of employment and good economic performance are not achieved by compromising on job quality’ (2016: 49).

Acknowledging that interventions may be required and can, at the macro level at least, avoid negative employment effects, is an important first step in establishing their credibility. The next step is to understand the drive to intervene. Often this is to remove bad jobs or to make them better. The other is to create or maintain ‘good jobs’. Both can stem from productivist and non-productivist orientations. The former focuses on improvements as a vehicle for boosting enterprise and economic performance and can, at government level, link with broader developments in industrial, education and innovation policy. The latter, based on altruism or social responsibility, focuses on decreasing the burden of poor quality work on those who bear it most. The two can be connected – reducing the burden on individuals may also enhance economic performance directly and indirectly as argued in models of inclusive innovation and growth and there are emerging examples of policy debates driven by concern over both (The Scottish Government 2014). Both of these drivers affirm that this is a multi-stakeholder issue. While immediate workplace stakeholders – employers, workers and unions – are most proximate, inaction at workplace level can drive other stakeholders – community organisations, consumers/service users and government among others – to pursue change that enhances job quality.

Targeting interventions in job quality

Targeting intervention involves consideration of who can intervene, where and with what impact. Relevant stakeholders who can drive change do so in different and sometimes overlapping spheres. There are two different ways of thinking about the loci for intervention. The first and most straightforward is to consider which jobs, in which sectors, industries and regions could and should be prioritised for intervention (Carre et al 2013). In focusing on where bad jobs are to be found, this approach is largely problem driven and remedial in orientation.

Targeting specific bad jobs or the components of bad jobs has the benefit of relative conceptual simplicity. Gaining consensus on what makes a bad job is easier to achieve than agreement on what makes a good job. Employment that doesn't pay a living wage cannot be said to be good (although what constitutes a living wage will vary geographically and demographically); deciding on what level of income constitutes a good job is trickier. No guaranteed hours contracts (more commonly described as zero-hours contracts in the UK) are often exploitative, but the reality of, and perceptions of, job and employment security in ostensibly more secure open-ended contractual arrangements are far more difficult to categorize (Findlay and Thompson 2016). For both good and bad jobs, while identifying the job itself is important, it is also crucial to understand the relationship between job quality and job holders given the predominance of certain groups in good and poor quality work (Knox et al. 2015).

The second way of considering loci is more general – should intervention to improve job quality take place inside the workplace or elsewhere, either prior to entering the workplace or parallel to the workplace? While interventions at multiple levels may be the best option to impact on job quality (Pocock and Charlesworth 2017, this volume), considering loci discretely allows a greater focus on what specific actors can contribute to job quality interventions.

Workplace interventions

The most obvious loci in which to address job quality issues is the workplace, and can happen through a variety of routes. Employers can address job quality dimensions directly (for example, by raising pay or redesigning jobs to support better skills use). Trade unions can influence employers to improve job quality (Rothstein 2012). Addressing job quality as an internal workplace stakeholder issue has important attractions, not least in terms of a dialogue that can better define job quality and job quality improvements in context.

Given the asymmetry of power and the contractual nature of the employment relationship, employers are most able to affect job quality interventions. However, employers also have multiple and potentially competing interests. If skill equilibrium theory is correct, a link exists between firms' product market strategies and skills and pay. By taking the 'high road' and moving into product markets based on quality or innovation rather than cost, firms should be able to raise the pay and skill levels of their employees - though this coupling of product and labour tends to be tighter in manufacturing than services (Lloyd et al. 2013). In sectors and industries where quality of goods and particularly services is a key strategic priority, high quality work is an important managerial priority (Findlay et al. 2017, this issue; Lindsay et al. (2014). Employers can, and do, configure job quality – in terms of pay, contractual stability, training and skills formation, job design, career development opportunities and so on - to produce good or at least better jobs. As Metcalf and Dhudwar (2010: 1) note, 'employers determine terms and conditions and how work is organised, including pay, the balance between temporary and permanent work, skill requirements and progression structures'. Employer choices can be driven by business models and the need to drive high quality performance, but also by broader concerns over corporate social responsibility and reputation. Unfortunately, the 'low road' of competing on cost remains attractive to many firms, especially where institutional constraints are weaker. In these organizations, neither business pressures nor employers' orientations are likely to drive improvements in job quality (Metcalf and Dhudwar 2010; Lloyd et al. 2008).

Trade unions also have long had a direct interest in improving job quality. Prior to the 1980s, in many of the advanced economies they played an important role in relation to key dimensions of job quality such as pay and benefits, access to training, occupational health and safety and employment security. Union absence is strongly associated with poorer job characteristics (Clark 2005), while union presence is associated with better job characteristics (Hoque et al 2016).

Recently, however, many of the union gains made over decades on job quality have been rolled back with the decline of trade union membership and strength. This process is, however, uneven across and within countries. Where union rights are institutionally secure (Frege and Godard 2014) or where industrial power has been maintained, unions continue to maintain or even drive up improvements through collective bargaining, but also through, for example, collaborative work with employers on skills and learning (e.g. Wilson 2015, Findlay and Warhurst 2011). Where unions may not have a significant presence, they can adopt innovative organising strategies often in conjunction with other organisations; one example being London Citizens and US and UK unions campaign against low pay in the London hotel industry (Lloyd et al. 2008).

Workplace interventions in relation to job quality are, however, highly dependent on the orientation of employers and the relative power of workers, individually or collectively. Where unions are absent, or lack industrial power (Simms 2017, this issue; Gregg et al. 2014), responsibility for creating better jobs has shifted either onto the shoulders of individuals as we discuss below, or to stakeholders external to the workplace.

Interventions outwith the workplace

There are two possibilities for intervening outwith the workplace. The first is prior to entry to the labour market and, topically, centers on initial education and training for workers and, we would argue, managers. The second is parallel to the workplace and typically centers on action by the state and community organizations.

Interventions prior to the workplace

Education and training is widely considered as a key policy lever for improving opportunity for individuals to access better jobs. In terms of relative risks and rewards, workers have perhaps the strongest interest in improved job quality and can invest in and develop their own human capital to improve their prospects of accessing good quality work. Policy intervention can support and influence individuals to invest in skills, often through public provision and funding, and with the possibility of offering mutual gains for employers and government. As Findlay and Warhurst (2012: 3-4) have argued, 'Under-pinning this supply-side intervention is an assumed causal chain – from workforce development based on increasing workers' skills through organisational development that provides more highly skilled jobs to business development and to a more productive economy. Supply-side intervention in the labour market also avoids the political and operational challenges of more direct government intervention in the management of firms'.

However the education lever has limitations. While better qualifications are associated with higher pay and autonomy, returns to human capital investment are imperfect and differentially distributed (Keep et al. 2006). In addition, while education and training may improve the stock of skills and capabilities available to be deployed in good quality jobs, it cannot address the level of demand for higher skills in better jobs. That is, good jobs have to exist in which these skills are needed, and there is not enough room at the top currently; indeed the best qualified workers – graduates – often find that they have to trade down to work in non-graduate jobs for lack of sufficient number of appropriate graduate-level jobs (Tholen et al. 2016). Even if good jobs are being created, they are being counter-balanced by the creation of bad jobs, at least in the US (Kalleberg 2011) and UK (Hurley et al. 2015). In some economies, it is becoming more evident that the stock of good jobs is failed to keep pace with the stock of workers with higher qualifications. Individuals improving their qualification levels is therefore important but not sufficient where employer demand for higher skilled workers is limited (Keep and James 2012).

Education systems impact on job quality in other important ways. If employer choices play a part in job quality, then what informs these choices should be of analytical concern. One obvious area of interest is management education. The assumption must be that what is taught – and what is not taught – matters. The provision of management education orientated to job quality issues varies enormously between countries. For example, Finland and many other Northern European countries have evolved substantial innovation support systems to deliver organizational development to enable technological change and workplace innovation (Ramstad 2009a & 2009b), whereas the UK government has consistently refused to consider such developments. Even worse, in terms of management education, is the degree to which people management is an integral component of taught courses rather than an optional supplement. Some UK management schools, for example, Oxford University's Said School, have abandoned teaching human resource management.

Management education, as with the education of workers, has more potential for levering improvements in job quality than is currently being realized. Underpinned by research-based evidence on job quality interventions and the effectiveness of high road business strategies, and encouraged by government, better business education on the costs and consequences of job quality could facilitate greater commitment to job quality and more effective interventions within workplaces.

Interventions parallel to the workplace

Where employers fail to address poor job quality, it provides a strong justification for others to intervene. These external stakeholders include civil society organizations, customers, relevant experts and government at all levels, whose role has taken on increased prominence as trade union power has declined. Although aiming to improve job quality in the workplace, many of these stakeholders' locus of intervention is not the workplace.

Over the last two decades, an array of civil society organizations have entered the debate on job quality, working both independently of and alongside trade unions (Bernhardt and Osterman 2017). A plethora of advocacy and campaigning groups – living wage campaigns, fair trade organizations, equalities groups, health related campaigners and service users – have responded to discrete job quality problems, often focusing on single issue campaigns and drawing on a wide stakeholder group. Their campaigns can be aimed at government, in terms of enforcing or increasing regulation, but also at employers, focusing on business benefit – see, for example, Wills and Linneker (2014) and Coulson and Bonner (2015) - and the public. This form of activism highlights the link between the economic and social impact of bad jobs and provides an alternative route to influence important dimensions such as low pay, exploitative working conditions and health and well-being. For example, the UK Living Wage campaign unites workers, communities, businesses, unions and faith groups to address in-work poverty and has, since its inception in 2001, accredited around two thousand Living Wage employers and increased the earnings of some of the lowest paid workers by £210 million. Other notable examples include consumer initiatives such as Fair Trade (Moore 2004) and combined safety and environmental campaigns (Meyer 2009).

Where employers do not, and unions and community groups cannot, address job quality problems, intervention often falls to various levels of state, national and supra-national government. Legislation sets and aims to enforce minimum standards that impact on job quality by intervening directly in workplace or job level practice – for example, through minimum wage requirements, anti-discrimination legislation, working time restrictions, health and safety regulation and employment rights relating to work-life balance. As Murray and Stewart (2015: 41) note, 'Anglo-Saxon … labour law is based on the idea that if working conditions are left to the "higgling of the market", then socially undesirable and unjust outcomes will result.' Independently or in response to union or social movement pressures, legislation can be used to close off the low road. Legislation not only protects workers but can provide a level playing field for business competition.

Unlike legislation specifically designed to impact workplace practice, government may not intend to influence job quality per se – as Bosch and Weinkopf (2017, this issue) argue – but may do so in pursuit of other policy objectives. Broader priorities relating to competitiveness, innovation, education and inequality can bring policy interventions that indirectly affect job quality.

Legislation, though, is a powerful but imperfect lever: powerful in its reach though often imperfect in its application or enforcement (Kahn-Freund 1972). Quasi-governmental organisations established to support regulatory interventions have a role in shaping workplace practice in ways that support key dimensions of job quality – such as equalities organisations focusing on access and opportunity, and occupational health and safety organisations that promote not just safe but healthier forms of working.

Many of the levers – soft and hard - that government can use to address bad job characteristics are available to support the creation and maintenance of good jobs – but from a more ambitious and positive agenda. Governments can, for example, insert job quality clauses into public procurement contracts for private and voluntary sector contractors; align economic development and business support to a job quality agenda; providing assistance for technological or business system upgrading, especially for smaller or informal businesses, conditional on these being used to support job quality improvements; use industrial policy levers to support competitive strategies that are not based on pure price competition; and use education system levers to drive not just skills and qualifications but expectations of high quality work into the labour market. Government can pursue integrated policies that aligns workplace practice better with family, community and civic life, for example by facilitating support in the reproductive sphere that can improve the interface between work and family life (Pocock and Charlesworth 2017, this issue). In this respect governments are more likely to act on job quality where there is pressure for them to do so. A focus on job quality per se is at greater risk of being dismissed as a marginal concern; it is likely to gain more traction with support from a broader constituency of relevant stakeholders.

Conclusion

The costs and missed opportunities arising from poor job quality do not simply affect workers in bad jobs. Acknowledging the full economic and social costs imposed by poor job quality in the short and the long term – on workers, employers and society – provides the rationale for interventions to enhance job quality by stakeholders within and outwith the workplace.

In the context of current opportunities, this article has sought to map out the terrain of job quality interventions. Yet driving and designing effective interventions – to make bad jobs better and support good jobs - is not straightforward and different levers operating in different loci are available to different stakeholders. Agency is possible: levels of job quality are not wholly structurally determined and employers facing similar market conditions can make distinctive choices. These choices may be influenced by institutional factors as well as the drivers for intervention. In regimes in which employer choices are relatively unfettered, however, diminished trade union power and increasingly individualised employment relationships lower the pressure on employers to invest in good job quality.

National and international legislation and regulation offer greater reach and impact than reliance on individual employer approaches but are largely remedial in orientation and generally target the poorest job characteristics only, and there is often little appetite across governments and businesses for more regulation without external pressure. Moreover, the existence of individual employment protections does not always ensure ready access to effective remedy nor to effective enforcement. While legislation may be the tool of last resort with which at address bad jobs, its potential to support good jobs is more questionable.

Weaker institutional constraints are at least part of the explanation for a focus on job quality interventions prior to and parallel to the workplace. Yet interventions by external stakeholders outside of the workplace are less likely to be sensitive to workplace context than well-designed job quality interventions constructed at workplace level by direct stakeholders. This point does not underplay the potential of non-workplace interventions and in particular the role of government. National governments and supra-national governmental bodies such as the European Union are now leading debate about the importance of good jobs for workers, businesses and society. Intervening to improve job quality, however, requires more than exhortation, and many governments fail to deploy sufficiently or at all the range of levers at their disposal.

In an increasingly globalised world, the challenges of improving job quality are significant. We have argued that there is scope for intervention and evidence that intervention can be effective. Returning to where this article began – renewed policy and academic interest in job quality – there is a pressing need to widen and deepen our knowledge of job quality interventions especially through empirical work that can explain and evaluate the effectiveness, impact and sustainability of interventions at every level. Aligning an economic and social case for good job quality remains an urgent research and policy priority.

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