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How work can damage your health The case for 'decent' work



Dr Katherine Trebeck, Centre for Health Policy
University of Strathclyde

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POLICY BRIEF

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How Work Can Damage Your Health: the case for ‘decent work’ and how to achieve it

Katherine Trebeck, Senior Visiting Research Fellow, Centre for Health Policy.

Abstract

The way we value, structure, manage and reward work impacts on individuals doing that work and on society more widely. This policy brief explores a growing body of evidence that, across the UK, today’s labour market is failing too many workers in multiple ways. It is not delivering sufficient positive outcomes for enough people. Yet comparative evidence suggests there is nothing inevitable about this trend. The impact of a lot of work today on individual health, both physical and mental, and on families and communities is causing considerable concern. There are significant economic costs too. This paper advocates the promotion of more ‘decent work’, explains what that might entail, and illustrates some of the policy changes required to create more quality work for more of our people.

I Background

The UK labour market does not operate in a way that sufficiently supports the health and wellbeing of enough workers. It polarises the highly-paid and those relegated to lower-paid, insecure work. What economists Goos and Manning call ‘lovely’ and ‘lousy’ jobs.¹ Projections suggest this ‘hourglass economy’ is likely to intensify.² People relegated to the lower end of the labour market move in and out of insecure, temporary work. Work that does not lift them out of poverty.³ It offers poor quality in terms of:

- Insufficient hours (in 2012 6.4 million workers in the UK were reported as being underemployed⁴)
- Low pay (in-work poverty is rising as a share of all poverty: most [61%] children in poverty live in a working family^{5 6})
- Insecurity (there are more zero-hour contracts⁷ in the UK than anywhere else in Europe;⁸ Citizens Advice Bureau recently reported there are 1.4 million people on ZHC: mostly young, old and female employees⁹)
- Fragmentation (since the start of the recession there has been a rise in the number of self-employed workers relative to the number of employees – 40% of new ‘jobs’ are self-employed¹⁰)
- Powerlessness (people with few skills become commodities – their time exchanged by employers who treat them as ‘just-in-time inventory’.¹¹ Having few choices about work can be as demoralising as being indentured¹²)
- Gender discrimination (women are disproportionately employed in bad jobs)¹³

There is nothing inevitable about such work. Compared to other advanced economies the UK has a relatively large share (21%) of workers who are low paid. For example, the share of low pay in the UK is 4% higher than the OECD average¹⁴. UK workers face a higher part-time penalty, female penalty and personal services penalty, than workers in comparable economies^{15 16}. There are fewer poor jobs and fewer low-paid workers in Japan, Norway, Germany, Denmark, Switzerland, Netherlands and Canada, than in the UK.¹⁷ Bluntly, the UK labour market has created worse paying, lower status versions of jobs (especially in the personal and caring services) than in other advanced economies¹⁸.

This creates a risk that the way workers *experience* work is bad for their health. For example, a recent study points to a decline in the number of UK employees who feel they have great deal of influence over their work¹⁹. Guy Standing has coined the term ‘precarariat’ to describe those who feel their ‘lives and identities are made up of disjointed bits, in which they cannot construct a desirable narrative or build a career in a sustainable way’²⁰. Epidemiologists Michael Marmot and Richard Wilkinson argue ‘a lack of control over work and home life have powerful effects on health’²¹.

Beyond the individual, social capital is undermined when people have problems with work²². For example, supportive assets are damaged when people can access only short-term, poor-quality work. Social interaction is curtailed when people work anti-social hours or take on multiple jobs to make ends meet. They become both time-poor and income-poor^{23 24}. Long working hours and split shift patterns can leave workers physically and emotionally drained, with little energy left to interact with children – let alone spouses and partners, or the wider community. Of course this is the experience for those working long hours on high pay. And for those who need multiple jobs just to make ends meet²⁵.

So there is a personal and wider social impact of poor quality work. Both lead to economic costs.

II The link between work and health

The lack of decent work leads to a deterioration of mental and physical health. The World Happiness Report found that unemployment, because of the loss of control and status it entails, causes as much happiness loss as bereavement or separation²⁶.

But, while being employed matters, the quality of work involved has clear outcomes for the worker’s health. The 2010 Marmot Review warned that ‘insecure and poor-quality employment is... associated with increased risks of poor physical and mental health’²⁷. Butterworth *et al*

found that moving from unemployment to a low quality job results in a decline in an individual's mental health²⁸. For example, poorer mental health outcomes are linked to precarious employment²⁹. Physical health can also be compromised. The WHO has shown that stress at work is associated with 50% excess risk of heart disease and a range of physical health risks³⁰. This concurs with Antonovsky's notion of salutogenesis³¹. He highlights the relationship between health and stress, particularly the extent to which people can manage and be resilient to stress³².

Such deleterious impacts extend to the children of people employed in bad jobs. UNICEF has warned that children in the UK fare worse than those in other developed countries because extremes of pay and long working hours mean parents have less time and energy to devote to their children³³.

These impacts on individuals and their families have financial side effects. For example, the Confederation of British Industry has recognised that stress in the workplace costs the UK economy £12 billion a year³⁴.

It is important to understand the challenge here. This sort of stress does not stem simply from having a lot to do. There's an imbalance between demands and control and between effort and rewards³⁵. Marmot's famous 'Whitehall Study' – based on the participation of 10,000 civil servants – revealed that stress increases as you descend the organisational hierarchy. A type of stress which leads to greater heart disease³⁶. People who face high demands, but have a low level of control, have a higher risk of heart disease. When individuals have reduced individual autonomy they risk falling into depression, powerlessness, and sense of inadequacy³⁷. Becker and Paulusma (2011) highlight that autonomy, a sense of identity and self-esteem, and 'having control at work' are key factors in death rates amongst workers³⁸. As you descend the organisational hierarchy there is a decline in access to factors that impact on health: control, predictability, degree of support, threat to status, and the presence of outlets³⁹.

III Towards a definition of decent work

From the literature, control emerges as an important factor in what people need to achieve healthy outcomes. For example, Sen observes that we not only value living well and satisfactorily, but also appreciate having control over our own lives⁴⁰.

Similarly, Durkheim believes that higher wellbeing is achieved when needs are proportional to wants and we have the means to satisfy these wants⁴¹. Marmot's work can be used to broaden this out to identify other factors that affect health: predictability; degree of support; threat to status; and presence of outlets⁴². Antonovsky similarly identifies components in being able to

deal with stress: comprehensibility (extent to which events in one's life can be understood and predicted); manageability (having the necessary skills and resources to manage and control one's life); and meaningfulness (a clear meaning and purpose to life), the most important factor according to Antonovsky⁴³.

His point is that work becomes meaningful when it imparts a sense of self-efficacy and enhances self-esteem; when it is perceived as having a purpose; when it creates a sense of belongingness; when there are reciprocal dynamics between individuals and groups; and when the fruits of work enhance both individual and the collective⁴⁴. For Steger, meaningful work encompasses, *inter alia*, skill variety; opportunity to complete an entire task; task significance in the eyes of others; pride; engagement; sense of calling; challenge; and intrinsic work orientation⁴⁵. People who say their work is meaningful and serves some social or communal good report better psychological adjustment; greater wellbeing; place a higher value on work; report greater job satisfaction; work more unpaid hours; show greater commitment to the organisation; and display more organisational citizenship behaviours⁴⁶.

Perhaps more tangibly, there is evidence that job security and good relationships matters more for job satisfaction than high pay and convenient hours⁴⁷. Working part-time out of choice is associated with higher wellbeing than full time work⁴⁸. Similarly, evidence from the Oxfam Humankind Index for Scotland shows that people place significant priority on security and suitability of work, work that pays enough to live on but, above all, is meaningful⁴⁹.

Distilling this diverse evidence facilitates a richer understanding of what decent work looks like, beyond the obvious issues of pay, progression, and suitability and sufficiency of hours.⁵⁰ Additional characteristics emerge. Decent work needs to:

- provide for worker control and autonomy in the sense that the employee has control over their work tasks, organisation of their work and the quantity of work they do.
- impart a sense that one's work is worthwhile and satisfying⁵¹.
- deliver a sense of meaning through, for example, skill variety, opportunity to complete an entire task, be significant to others, and have intrinsic value and purpose.
- enable employees to undertake other activities in their communities (that is, enough, but not too many hours and sufficient pay).
- enhance equality (for example, with minimum wages linked to average or top earnings).

IV Policy implications

Good work, shared and supported, might become a labour market inoculation, a mechanism to create healthy citizens and communities. As the OECD (2010) puts it, 'more and better' jobs are needed, the type of jobs that nourish sustainable and decent economies and societies.

In Scotland there are a range of policy levers that could be used to create more good jobs:

- Create a 'decent work' measure and target government policies at maximising that, rather than headline employment figures.
- Use public procurement and other incentives to expand other forms of labour, as opposed to wage labour in which people depend on others for their employment (such as worker cooperatives in which participation of workers is a defining feature).
- Distribute work more evenly across the population by fostering shared work through disincentives to use overtime, ensure sufficient income for those working shorter weeks (benefit adequacy and take up), career breaks, sabbaticals, increased incentives for part-time working and so on. The public sector can act as exemplar and trend-setter in this regard.
- Adopt policies and contracting mechanisms to support payment of living wages and adapt the acceptable ratio of earnings between highest and lowest paid in an organisation. Harness procurement and public sector trend-setting to do so.

Examples of policy levers that would require action from other levels of government include:

- Address mispricing of capital which currently distorts labour to capital ratios to the extent that employment-creating activities are effectively discouraged.
- Increase security of work via laws to bolster the rights of workers.
- Raise the National Minimum Wage to the level of the Living Wage and tie increases to average earnings.

The sort of work that increasingly characterises the UK labour market is not working for many of those who have to do it. It is taking a heavy toll on their health and wellbeing. More decent work, good work, quality work - call it what you will – will not just make their lives more meaningful. It has the potential to revitalise the health of our economy and enhance the resilience of our society too.

¹ Between 1995 and 2010 personal service occupations (hairdressers, nannies, care assistants and hospital administrators – jobs earning less than £13,000 a year) have increased by 48%; the number of managers and senior officials have increased by 24%;

professional occupations have increased by 36%; while plant and machine operatives have fallen in number by 25% (Truss, Elizabeth, 2011). The current labour market has been described as an 'hour glass', in light of the growing numbers of high and low skilled jobs, but few intermediate jobs – middle income jobs fell by 13% from 1995 to 2010, while high and low income jobs both increased by a third and tenth respectively (Truss, Elizabeth, 2011).

² (Plunkett, James, 2013)

³ (Shildrick, Tracy and MacDonald, Robert, 2013)

⁴ (Aldridge, Hannah *et al.*, 2012)

⁵ (Resolution Foundation, 2012: 4,8,49)

⁶ (Aldridge, Hannah *et al.*, 2012)

⁷ In zero-hour contracts there is no guarantee or defined number of hours an employee must or can work a week – they are employed and paid only when required. When not required, they receive no income.

⁸ (Poinasamy, Krisnah, 2011: 21)

⁹ (Gowans, Rob, 2014)

¹⁰ Especially in administrative and secretarial work where there's been a 52% rise; sales and customer service roles have seen a 32% rise; and personal services 31% rise (Trades Union Congress, 2013). See also (Murphy, Richard, 2013)

¹¹ (Trebeck, Katherine, 2011)

¹² (Dorling, Danny, 2010: 150)

¹³ See, for example, (Fawcett Society, 2014)

¹⁴ (Resolution Foundation, 2012: 9,14)

¹⁵ (Pennycook, Matthew and Whittaker, Matthew, 2012: 4,7)

¹⁶ (Resolution Foundation, 2012: 50)

¹⁷ (Dorling, Danny, 2010: 160)

¹⁸ (Resolution Foundation, 2012: 9,14)

¹⁹ Felstead 2007 cited in (Davies, William, 2009: 54)

²⁰ (Standing, Guy, 2011)

²¹ (Marmot, Michael and Wilkinson, Richard, 2003)

²² (Marmot, Michael, 2004: 210)

²³ (Warhurst, Chris and Trebeck, Katherine, 2013)

²⁴ (Coote, Anna *et al.*, 2010: 3)

²⁵ (Crisp, Richard *et al.*, 2009: 5)

²⁶ (Helliwell, John *et al.*, 2012)

²⁷ (Marmot, Michael *et al.*, 2010)

²⁸ (Butterworth, P *et al.*, 2011)

²⁹ (Becker, Frans and Paulusma, Pim, 2011)

³⁰ Cited in (Davies, William, 2009: 53)

³¹ Antonovsky focuses on mechanisms that promote and support good health

³² (Walsh, David *et al.*, 2013: 42)

³³ (UNICEF, 2011). See also (Scherer and Steiber 2007)

³⁴ CBI cited in (Bryson, Valerie, 2013: 65)

³⁵ (Marmot, Michael, 2004: 122)

³⁶ (Marmot, Michael, 2004: 14)

³⁷ Bauman in (Hanlon, Phil and Carlisle, Sandra, no date)

³⁸ (Becker, Frans and Paulusma, Pim, 2011)

³⁹ (Marmot, Michael, 2004: 112)

⁴⁰ (Sen, Amartya, 1999)

⁴¹ (Morrison, Ken, 2003: 184)

⁴² (Marmot, Michael, 2004: 112). See also (Deci, Edward and Ryan, Richard, 2008)

⁴³ (Walsh, David *et al.*, 2013: 42)

⁴⁴ (Steger, Marti *et al.*, 2012)

⁴⁵ (Steger, Marti *et al.*, 2012)

⁴⁶ (Steger, Marti *et al.*, 2012)

⁴⁷ (Helliwell, John *et al.*, 2012)

⁴⁸ (Abdullah, Saamah and Shah, Sagar, 2012 3)

⁴⁹ (Dunlop, Stewart and Trebeck, Katherine, 2012)

⁵⁰ There is little agreement on a usable definition of 'decent work'. The results of Oxfam's Humankind Index public consultation suggest that decent work must deliver satisfaction and a sense that one's job is worthwhile. It must deliver sufficiency of income, allow people to undertake other commitments outside the work place and it must be secure.

⁵¹ (Dunlop, Stewart and Trebeck, Katherine, 2012)

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About the author:

Dr Katherine Trebeck is a Senior Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Strathclyde. Dr Trebeck is also a global research policy adviser in Oxfam's research team where she is exploring an economy that delivers social justice, good lives, vibrant communities and which protects the planet.

Katherine Trebeck is an active member of the **International Public Policy Institute's Centre for Health Policy**.

Contact details:

Dr Katherine Trebeck

e: ktrebeck@oxfam.org.uk

International Public Policy Institute (IPPI)

University of Strathclyde
McCance Building, Room 4.26
16 Richmond Street
Glasgow G1 1XQ

t: +44 (0) 141 548 3865

e: ippi-info@strath.ac.uk

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