

NOTE ARISING FROM THE FIRST MEETING OF THE ESRC 'MAKING BAD JOBS BETTER' SEMINAR SERIES

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What follows is not an attempt to record or summarise either the presentations or the discussion at the seminar. Copies of the powerpoint presentations given are available elsewhere on the seminar series website, and there are also brief interviews with the key speakers on the website. What this brief note seeks to do is to provide a record of the key points and research and policy issues raised on the day, with the aim of allowing participants to reflect further on these and raise them again as the seminar series progresses.

Purposes of the Seminar Series

These relate to the four seminars within the series and are as follows:

1. Defining and mapping bad jobs
2. Exploring how job quality within such work might be improved.
3. Exploring routes out of such work.
4. Generating and disseminating potential policy recommendations

Timing

Now could be regarded as the best or worst of times to be trying to raise the issue of bad jobs. On the one hand, there is a growing acceptance that the dream of a Knowledge-driven Economy and notions that bad jobs would simply fade away as everyone became a relatively highly paid and skilled knowledge worker with significant levels of autonomy and job discretion are unlikely to come true any time soon. Consequently both researchers and policymakers are being forced to confront the continuing existence (and possible expansion) of large swathes of employment that many might represent as being 'bad jobs'.

On the other hand, the global recession and its impact on employment prospects mean that many might regard any job as a good job. Moreover, tight labour markets and labour shortages have traditionally been one of the main means by which employers were forced to improve some aspects of job quality. High unemployment and an age of mass migration tend to close off this avenue for progress; indeed there is a strong possibility that these conditions would help trap more and more people in jobs that they did not enjoy.

There are plainly concerns about the quality of work in Anglo-Saxon economies – see the Russell Sage Foundation projects, the Cabinet Office's work on 'flexicurity' on workplace change, and the new Work Foundation's recently announced Good Work Commission as examples, but rising unemployment and demanding targets for getting the long-term unemployed/economically inactive back into work mean that there are strong countervailing pressures. In addition, impending cuts in public spending are

liable to mean yet more outsourcing and competitive tendering – which in turn are liable to lead to worsening terms and conditions for many lower end workers who supply the services being outsourced.

Definition and Measurement Issues

There were several different views on what might constitute a bad job, and what characteristics of any given employment contract might make a job bad. Three views were presented from economics (Richard Freeman), Psychology (David Holman) and sociology (Sian Moore).

Potential criteria suggested included:

- Relatively and absolutely low levels of pay, and associated performance management systems
- Limited benefits
- Poor working conditions
- Uncertain levels of working time and/or poor work/life balance
- Insecurity
- Poor job design leading to narrow, repetitive and boring work
- Low levels of skill required and poor training and development opportunities
- Lack of progression opportunities within the firm and/or sector
- Lack of employee voice and representation
- Agency worker status

As we heard from the input given by a low paid worker (a classroom assistant dealing with autistic children), jobs could be extremely complex, responsible and demanding but incredibly low paid (£10,000 p.a.) and at the same time potentially rewarding in terms of intrinsic interest and social value.

Sian Moore's contribution suggested that individuals' perceptions of job quality are the result of experience, expectations and aspirations. 'Good' and 'satisfying' are relative measures, largely depending on expectations. There may well be a tension between traditional notions of job satisfaction and job quality in that low quality jobs can often be made bearable via the social relations that pertain in the workplace.

Questions and Issues Arising from Debate:

1. The Danish model of 'flexicurity' may work well in conditions of relative full employment as a means to help people move jobs, but can it cope with a major downturn in overall levels of employment?

2. What lessons might we draw from the difference between US labour shedding and EU labour hoarding (Richard Freeman's talk)?
3. How can we protect the most vulnerable workers? What would a 'worker well-being first' strategy look like?
4. How can employers (individually and collectively) be encouraged to engage with this debate?
5. What is and should be the role of trade unions? Is the argument that they protect those inside the labour market to the disadvantage of those excluded from employment correct?
6. What is/should be the role of academics?
7. How can power be shifted inside the workplace so that employees have greater voice and influence?
8. How do we make what are inherently potentially good jobs (but which are currently being designed and managed in ways that make them bad) better?
9. How can public policy be moved away from its now deep-seated and entrenched view of the firm/workplace as 'black box' wherein intervention is neither possible nor desirable? How do you get government to intervene, and what form should such intervention take?
10. Would a league table of 'the 100 worst employers' be a viable lever to change employer behaviour?
11. Is government/public purchasing a potential lever (as it proved on anti-discrimination measures in the USA)? Is a consumer movement akin to Fairtrade another option? Threats to reputation and thence to profits often have a larger impact than other factors.