

Workplace opportunities and stresses are both increasing

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Teamworking and other modern employment practices can put as much strain on a woman's family relationships as working an extra 120 hours a year, an extensive study of the British workforce funded by the Economic and Social Research Council suggests.

The research finds that while British employers have maintained long-term career relationships with employees in spite of competitive market pressures, they have devised ways of extracting more effort and higher performance. These practices include team-based forms of work organization, individual performance-related pay, and policies that emphasize the development of individual potential.

Such human resource management practices are thought to be good for staff morale as well as an essential ingredient of successful modern business performance. Yet, finds the research, the pressure to perform which they generate has a knock-on effect on employees' families.

Women's family relationships are more adversely affected by such employment practices than men's. In addition, both women and men are more likely to become anxious about childcare arrangements when placed under pressure by workplace practices. Women are also less likely to get help at home from male partners if the men have jobs in which they face the pressures of modern human resource management.

A significant new source of stress in the modern workplace is ICT surveillance. The research shows that more than half – 52 per cent – of

all British employees report that a computerised system keeps a log or record of their work. This picture is confirmed by employers, with managements of one in five workplaces reporting that all employees are now covered by computer-based monitoring systems.

The spread of ICT surveillance has led to a sharp increase in work strain, reflected by feelings of exhaustion, anxiety and work-related worry. There is an overall 7.5 per cent rise in strain among employees whose work is checked by ICT systems compared with those in similar jobs which are controlled by more traditional methods. Evidence of work strain is particularly strong among administrative and white-collar staff in places such as call centres, where it rises by 10 per cent among employees whose work is continually checked by ICT systems.

“Computers and IT systems are bringing surveillance to most workplaces,” comments Michael White, who co-directed the research study. “Now for the first time we can see how this development is damaging employees’ well-being.”

The research, funded as part of the ESRC’s Future of Work research programme, covers the period 1984-2004 and shows significant changes in the prospects and job conditions of British employees: the results are published this week in a book “Market, Class, and Employment” co-authored by Patrick McGovern, Stephen Hill, Colin Mills and Michael White.

On the basis of US experience, it had been widely supposed that the highly competitive market environment in which most businesses and much of the public sector now operate would lead to moves towards hire and fire practices, temporary jobs and a decline in training and the concept of careers. But the research finds that, although British employers use redundancy as a normal way of adjusting staff numbers, in general they have not abandoned the retention and long-term

development of employees.

The proportion of employees in permanent employment remains above 90 per cent and rose during the 1990s. Fixed-term or casual employment grew in the 1980s but declined during the 1990s. Increased use by employers of communication techniques, employee participation, team organization, training and development, and rewards for performance all point to efforts to maintain a long-term workforce.

A decline in trade union recognition and membership, say the researchers, could expose employees to unfair treatment. But this has in part been balanced by a growth in alternative forms of employee engagement such as meetings with management and consultation with individuals over work changes.

By 2000, about one in three employees was taking part in individual bargaining over pay. This is more likely to occur in workplaces where there are no unions and, note the researchers, it is leading to increasing inequality. Managers and professionals are more likely than other employees to strike personal pay bargains. Women are less likely than men to bargain over pay when they are recruited. They are also less likely to be represented by a union, so the ability of women to challenge the gender gap in pay is limited on both sides.

The research concludes that class differences in job rewards have increased since the early 1990s. Earnings inequality, for instance, increased during the 1992-2000 period. This reflected large real increases in the average earnings of higher managers and lower but still substantial gains for other managers, while the earnings of those in semi-routine and routine occupations remained static or declined.

The research examined a wide range of fringe benefits including occupational pensions, sickness pay and paid holidays. There was a

marked class gradient in favour of higher managerial and professional groups across all these. Moreover, the gap was tending to increase rather than decrease over time. Job desirability – reflecting not only pay but also non-financial factors that are valued by employees, such as flexible hours and autonomy in planning tasks – also differed greatly by class.

It is likely, conclude the researchers, that inequality in pay and benefits will continue to grow because of other developments identified by the research. Managerial and professional staff are more able to benefit from the expanding opportunities for personal bargaining over pay increases. They are also the group most involved in pay-for-performance deals which bring opportunities for substantial bonuses or salary increases.

Summing up the research lead author Patrick McGovern says: “The major story about work in Britain is not that it has become more precarious or fragmented, rather it has become more demanding while the returns have become more unequal. The major winners in the so-called new economy are professional and managerial employees who have actually moved further ahead of the rest of the labour force.”

Source: Economic & Social Research Council

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