

# The underemployed -- increasing and overlooked

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While unemployment has been a frequent topic of discussion during the recession, underemployment and its effects have not, even though the number of underemployed workers has also increased. A study published online last week in the *Journal of Management*, "'I Have a Job, But...': A Review of Underemployment," by University of Nevada, Reno Assistant Professor Frances M. McKee-Ryan and University of Alabama Assistant Professor Jaron Harvey brings attention to the topic and its potentially detrimental effects to individuals, organizations and society.

The study illustrates that part of the problem with pinpointing the rate and effects of underemployment is the varying definitions of the term and related terms. For example, some define it simply as those working fewer hours than they desire to work, while others include those working in jobs that pay less than their previous jobs, or those working in jobs for which they are overqualified, considering their level of education or experience. The authors highlight the fact that while unemployment rates are declining in the United States, underemployment is on the rise.

In the article, the authors identify eight such dimensions or categories that can comprise the underemployed. Depending on which of these are included, the study states that the current rate can be estimated at affecting anywhere from about one in ten to about one in three employees in the current [workforce](#).

According to lead author McKee-Ryan, in the managerial sciences department at Nevada's College of Business, "All reflect a job that is

substandard in some way, and all have potentially detrimental effects on individuals and our society."

McKee-Ryan says that researchers and scholars in different disciplines – economics, management, psychology and sociology – view and study underemployment differently, but she and co-author Harvey have attempted to bring together the research from all fields into an interdisciplinary examination of this important topic.

"We found that underemployment is a complex phenomenon that is difficult to study," McKee-Ryan said, "but, two key trends emerged from the various studies that we reviewed."

McKee-Ryan said that first, difficult situations – either economic or personal – can lead individuals to experience underemployment. Some of the situations identified include the recession, repatriation after an overseas assignment, seeking employment after a layoff, balancing work and family demands, or feeling like there are no other choices.

Second, the study's findings suggest that no one is immune to the possibility of experiencing underemployment, despite their occupation, education, age, race, gender or other distinguishing factors.

"Underemployment is quite prevalent across the board in our current economic conditions and is linked to a broad range of negative outcomes for employees, yet it is a relatively unresearched topic. As a society, we need to be concerned with creating high-quality jobs for our increasingly educated population as the economy improves following this recession." McKee-Ryan said.

In their study, McKee-Ryan and Harvey conclude, "We propose continuing to bridge the multiple disciplines that investigate underemployment from varying perspectives and create a broad-scale

research agenda to develop research in this critical area."

**More information:** The full study can be found online at [jom.sagepub.com/content/early/.../398134.full.pdf+html](http://jom.sagepub.com/content/early/.../398134.full.pdf+html)

Provided by University of Nevada, Reno

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