

Most employees can work smarter, given the chance

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More than half (58 percent) of employees in Britain can identify changes

at work which would make them more productive, a research team drawn from UCL Institute of Education (IOE), Cardiff University and Nuffield College, Oxford has found.

These findings are published today in the Skills and Employment Survey (2017). The survey seeks the views of employees working across a range of sectors. A total of 3,300 workers from across the UK, aged 20 to 65, were interviewed for the research, which is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Department for Education and Cardiff University.

The study, which issues results every five years, reveals efficiency-enhancing ideas are more frequently offered and acted upon in organisations where [employee](#) involvement is high. Such employers allow employees more autonomy to decide how to do their jobs, are more supportive of those they manage, give employees more opportunity to express their views, and carry out appraisals which affect employees' earnings and/or training opportunities. For example, 28 percent of those whose line manager is highly supportive are in jobs which also provide employees the opportunity to put forward efficiency-enhancing ideas compared to just 13 percent of those whose managers are less supportive.

Often employees yearn for the opportunity to tell employers what should be done with 18 percent of them estimating that their suggestions, if acted upon, would increase their productivity a great deal. These changes include:

- "Being allowed to put more ideas forward rather than being told what to do by people who can't do it," (a machine operator working for a chemicals company)
- "The skills of the team need to be up-to-date; this would make me more productive. So, I wouldn't have to check their work all

the time like now," (a foundry technician working for a bronze sculpting company)

- "Better connectivity internationally, such as video conferencing between Singapore, Denver and London offices," (a business analyst working in banking).

The survey also showed one in eight (13 percent) employees had made suggestions in the past year to management and/or their colleagues which had contributed a great deal to improving efficiency. Over 70 percent had taken more direct action by making efficiency-enhancing initiatives themselves or with colleagues.

The researchers also noted that the incidence of technical change at work has fallen sharply across all occupational groups since 2012 and that these changes have become less skills-demanding.

"Not so long ago, computers were only used by the most educated, but nowadays they have become a general purpose technology found in virtually all organisations and industries, and used by most workers," said Francis Green (UCL Institute of Education). "While this technology was being rolled out it meant that everyone had to become more skilled, but in the last decade the incidence of technical change at work has been falling, and since 2012 the required level of literacy and numeracy skills at work has fallen for the first time."

Productivity at Work: the Workers' Perspective, one of the three reports published today, says, 'more needs to be done – and can be done – to raise productivity...greater involvement of workers is the key, but this is where management practices have taken a backward step in recent times with sluggish productivity one of its unwelcome consequences.'

The findings also show that:

- Despite skills shortages in specific economic sectors, the growth in demand for skills in general has slowed down considerably since the survey series began in the mid-1980s, even reversing in some domains. This places downward pressure on productivity. Since 2012, literacy and [numeracy skills](#), for example, have declined in importance, the trend for higher qualifications on entry has come to a halt and the time spent learning on-the-job and getting training has fallen. By 2017, average training time for jobs had fallen to 7.8 months – a level only previously recorded in the mid-1980s.
- Only a quarter (25 percent) of respondents strongly agreed that their employer treated employees in the organisation fairly. Researchers believe this may be having a knock-on effect on job performance given that those with a high sense of organisational fairness are more willing to go the extra mile and become more productive as a result.
- Over the last two decades, women have not only caught up, but have overtaken men in occupying jobs that require higher education qualifications. Gender differences in the length of training undertaken and the time needed to learn to do the job well have either narrowed or vanished completely. However, the researchers note: "Much still needs to be done to translate greater gender equity in jobs skills into equal pay as evidenced by the persistence of the gender pay gap."

Alan Felstead, Research Professor at Cardiff University's School of Social Sciences and leader of the research team, said: "Britain has a longstanding labour productivity gap with international competitors, despite British employees working more intensively than many other nations. Our research seeks to understand the role of employees in sparking a much-needed reversal in this state of affairs.

"The big message coming out of our findings is that workers have great

ideas about how productivity could be improved. Growth is unlikely to come from simply increasing the supply of [skills](#); employers need to harness the views of their workforce and treat them fairly. This will give us a better chance of closing the [productivity](#) gap."

The three reports published today—Productivity in Britain, Skills Trends at Work in Britain and Fairness at Work in Britain—are part of the Skills and Employment Survey (2017).

Provided by University College London

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