

Kattenbach, Ralph; O'Reilly, Jacqueline

**Article**

## Introduction: New perspectives on the quality of working life

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Ralph Kattenbach, Jacqueline O'Reilly\*

## **Introduction:**

### **New Perspectives on the Quality of Working Life**

How have changes to the organisation of work affected the quality of working life (QWL)? Contemporary debates have been concerned with whether these changes have led to a deterioration or improvement of life at work and how this varies across Europe (Gallie, 2007). Research has shown that the QWL affects not only organisational performance, but the health and well-being of employees' and the degree to which they are satisfied with their jobs (Pichler & Wallace, 2009).

Changes in employment conditions, contractual arrangements and management styles have pervaded both academic and practitioner debates in recent decades. Change has been attributed to that the impact of globalisation, competitiveness and flexibility. This would hold true not only for economic and technological developments and employer needs resulting in an erosion of standard employment relationships in favour of atypical and precarious employment, but also for employees' expectations. The old or traditional psychological contract was displaced by a new and more transactional one (e.g. Blickle & Witzki, 2008). Out-dated traditional career paths have given way for new boundaryless careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Lazarova & Taylor, 2009; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006; Warhurst, Eikhof, & Haunschild, 2008). Furthermore, diversification, changes in the perceived meaning of work and private life and a shrinking and aging workforce should push organisations to adopt new strategies (Seidler, 2009). 'Panta rhei', everything flows and the world has undergone a complete makeover. But, is it true that we have undergone such a fundamental change? Or is the perception of a globalized, restless and accelerated world itself the biggest change that affects our perception and expectations of the working life?

Still the majority of the workforce is working in standard employment relationships with a fulltime job and regular working times (Auer & Cazes, 2000). Atypical work arrangements like shift work, night work and various flexible arrangements have already existed for decades. There is a remarkable rise in contingent work, but in relation to the entire workforce, this is still negligible (Giesecke & Groß, 2006); European comparisons also suggest that the forms of regulation of this employment vary considerably across Europe from very tight regulation in France to more liberal regulation in the UK (Vanselow & Weinkopf, 2009). Both expectations and opportunities to organise work in new ways have been developed by employers and increasingly taken up by employees. But Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt (1984) have already suggested that in

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\* Dr. Ralph Kattenbach, Centre for Personnel Research, School of Business, Economics and Social Sciences, University of Hamburg.  
E-mail: ralph.kattenbach@wiso.uni-hamburg.de.

Prof. Jacqueline O'Reilly, Centre for Research on Management and Employment, Brighton Business School, University of Brighton. E-mail: J.O'Reilly@brighton.ac.uk.

the longer historical perspective employers have always had the opportunity to innovate to accommodate change, potentially the claimed changes might be less comprehensive than being suggested. Diewald and Sill (2005) for example show a generally stable employment structure, despite a growing number of atypical contractual arrangements. And Kattenbach, Lücke and Schramm suggest that perceived career expectations are quite stable over time (Kattenbach et al., 2010). In the context of this contested debate we are interested in examining the extent to which current developments affect the QWL in Europe.

### **The European perspective**

The European Union has provided several directives and guidelines like on the organization of working times (93/104) and the equal treatment of part-timers (97/81/EG) ensuring and adjusting employees' rights across Europe. In 2000 the European Union set the 10-year-target 'to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' (Strategic goal for 2010 at the Lisbon European Council, 2000). However, 'according to the mid-term review of the Lisbon Strategy, the results are, at best, mixed.' (European Council, 2005). Nevertheless, the EU is still striving to create better jobs as part of the Europe 2020 strategy. But a closer look reveals that the intention is mainly aligned to improve jobs as a mean to become more competitive and to create more jobs. In this context the EU promotes for example the flexicurity concept: 'Rapidly changing economies need highly adaptable workers who must be capable of developing their skills to meet the needs of high-growth sectors. Such flexibility must be accompanied by social security provision which also covers periods of change.' (EU, 2010) It seems that the aimed better jobs are rather related to the work than to the working life.

### **Societal and demographic changes**

A wide range of societal and demographic factors are likely to impact on QWL in the future. Changes to the aging workforce and financial restraint on pensions are likely to mean that more people will be working for longer. Whether this will result in a deterioration of the QWL will depend very much on the nature of the sector they work in, as well as on their own health, financial status and the degree of autonomy they can exercise in their working and leisure activities. These developments have been discussed by researchers working in both economic and sociological fields as well as those in ergonomics concerned with improving job design. From the EU perspective a central concern has been focused on the preservation and expansion of jobs, and with them the quality of such employment (Europe 2020). QWL is likely to be affected by these demographic changes in a number of areas. Potentially QWL could be used as a means of recruiting and retaining staff in areas where there are labour shortages; attractive good quality jobs may also attract those not currently in employment to take up work. In particular employee-oriented working time arrangements could be used to facilitate the combination of changing care needs at home, as well as enabling previously unemployed people to find paid work. Further, skilled migrant workers could be attracted to jobs where the quality of working life was seen as a premium. The on-going process of workforce diversification will be intensified. Simultaneously,

realisation of lifestyles (Gignac, Kelloway, & Gottlieb, 1996; van Dongen, 2005) and the importance attributed to non-material rewards have increased. HR management across Europe and beyond have become increasingly aware of the needs to manage this diversity of skills and values amongst their employees.

### **Changes in contractual arrangements and working conditions**

Since the 80s the growth of atypical employment has been seen as undermining the standard-employment relationship (Appelbaum, 2002; Mückenberger, 1985)). There has been an extensive debate on whether in all cases atypical employment is purely an employer-oriented instrument or whether for some employees they benefit from these kinds of work to meet different needs over the lifecycle.

Empirical research has compared not only the effect of different contractual hours, but also of the psychological focuses on work-status congruence i.e. the gap between actual and preferred working hours (Burke, 2004; Burke & Greenglass, 1999). This subject-oriented view should be taken into account especially with regard to the above mentioned diversification in lifestyle preferences. As Royuela, Lopez-Tamayo and Surinach (2007) argue, a combination of institutional measures and subjective perceptions would improve the relevance of research findings. Considering the trend towards more diversified contractual arrangements and a more diversified workforce with different work motivation, values, and needs the subjective perception has gained in importance. The individual's dealing with job demands and job resources are crucial to foresee the impact of job conditions and the person-job fit has become an end in itself.

Regarding the development of job conditions there are some crucial changes that have not been considered sufficiently yet, especially in older concepts of job satisfaction and QWL (cp. (Grant & Parker, 2009). A good example is the flexibilisation of working time models. New designs beyond fixed working hours and flexitime like the use of time accounts and trust based working time expands the employee's autonomy as well as responsibility. Decision latitude is not limited by a given time frame anymore; the boundaries themselves are at disposal which should have an impact on the QWL especially with regard to the work-life balance and job engagement. Although there are some studies done, this issue has not been incorporated sufficiently into models of job motivation yet (cp. Kattenbach, Demerouti, & Nachreiner, 2010).

Another example is the increase in temporary agency work which is an important flexibility instrument for companies (moderate in countries like Germany and Denmark, extensively for example in Spain, the Netherlands and the UK, Giesecke & Groß, 2006, based on EULFS 2004). 'Even though they may not be a dominant form of employment, flexible contracts are important as possible indicators of the shape of things to come.' (Guest, 2004, p.4). The general idea is that such agency workers are more likely to be employed in jobs with poor quality, and that this will eventually lead to poor well-being and performance. Moreover, agency work is related with negative long-term career effects, and poor working conditions (Barbieri, 2009; Smith, Burchell, Fagan, & O'Brien, 2008). Owing to the triangular employment-relationship and the high frequency of changes in job and position the social integration at the work place is not that natural for agency workers than for others. There-

fore social integration has become a relevant criterion for the QWL at least for the group of agency workers and temporary employed people. These developments clearly impinge on debates around QWL.

### **The contributions to this special issue**

Against this backdrop, the aim of the current special issue is to shed light on the QWL and possible consequences in terms of health and well-being in specific groups of workers as well as organisational outcomes. We are glad to present a selection of quite diverse perspectives and approaches to highlight some crucial issues on the topics of QWL as mentioned above. The contributions cover quantitative as well as qualitative approaches from various disciplines considering the macro-level as well as organizational strategies and individual perceptions.

The opening paper by *Peter Mublau* provides an introductory overview on job quality and the quality of work life from a sociological point of view. He broaches the issue of differences in job quality by gender. The integration and participation of women in the labour market on an equal footing with men is a key topic. Men and women are still treated very differently in terms of payment, promotion, and job conditions. The author considers the impact of predominant societal regimes on job conditions and on the allocation of women and men in the labour market. Using data from the second European Social Survey with comparative data from 26 European countries the paper presents gender differences in job quality. He examines whether societies with a more egalitarian gender ideology are associated with less gender discrimination in terms of job quality. Surprisingly, he finds that the job profiles of men and women are not more similar in societies with gender egalitarian norms.

Age is a second discriminatory characteristic of employees whose importance is growing immensely against the backdrop of the demographic change. Retirement age has been postponed and there are less young employees entering the labour market. As a consequence the group of elder employees is growing in numbers and in importance. Age management has become a new field of HRM to sustain older employee's workability. In this vein *Jos Sanders, Luc Dorenbosch, Rob Gründemann, and Roland Blonk* investigate older workers' job conditions and their impact on workability and work motivation. The authors focus on lower educated older workers with less favourable power position, higher conviction to their job and mostly less favourable job conditions. The authors derive practical implications for (re)designing social and contextual work conditions. The active use of job-crafting also for lower-educated employees is an outlook for both management and research.

According to the European goal to preserve employability and to achieve flexibility among the workforce, *Joris Van Ruysseveldt, Karin Proost, and Peter Verboon* analyse the impact of workplace learning and of work-home interference in a stress model. More precise, they analyse the mediating role of workplace learning as well as work-home interference on the relationship between job conditions, energy depletion and psychological fatigue. High or badly designed demands in the job lead to energy depletion and in the long-term to diminished health. Job resources like autonomy and task variety induce a motivational process. In line with these basic assumptions of the JD-R model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001), the authors construct a

work stress model. Using representative data for the Flemish workforce they show the relevance of work life balance policies as well as learning opportunities for stress prevention in the HR management. Work-home interference mediates the relationship between job demands and exhaustion, whereas learning opportunities affect the motivational process caused by job resources.

*Christina Purcell, Paul Brook, and Rosemary Lucas* explore the quality of working life for agency workers in French car manufacturing. Based on qualitative interviews with union representatives they shed light on the working conditions for contingent work in low skilled occupations. The interviews give insights in some HR practices, the impact of aspiration for permanent job placement on organizational behaviour, the mechanism of dual control and how agency worker deal with these conditions. Due to a 'despotic' regime and dual control agency workers experience significantly reduced decision latitude. They have to act against their beliefs and wishes. The only remaining decision latitude is whether to play the game or to leave and to take high losses.

Psychological effects from the workplace are analysed by *Anja Feierabend, Philippe Mahler, and Bruno Staffelbach*. The authors consider the impact of a family supportive work environment on employees depending on the existence of their own care responsibilities. In line with a growing number of people with elder care responsibilities, this group is regarded separately beside those employees with and without child care responsibilities. Most interesting is the question what does a family supportive environment do to those who are not affected by it. The presented study shows that there is a spill over effect of family oriented policies on employees without care responsibilities. Family-friendly culture and dialogue is capable to explain higher commitment among the entire workforce.

These papers make an important contribution to developing the QWL debate in identifying some of the key areas of research for the future in relation to how this affects a variegated group of workers in different economic sectors. Research agendas will also need to address two key areas related first to the long term effects of the recent 2008 economic crisis on the organisation of work and restructuring of employment, and second in terms of the diversified workforce and their employees' needs. Economically successful organisations will be those capable of harnessing high QWL dimensions as a means to develop potentially creative and successful organisations. The manner in which organisations are capable of achieving these challenges will be a key determinant for their future success.

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