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Job Quality Matters

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This special issue of the *Journal of Industrial Relations* focuses on job quality. Implicitly and explicitly, job quality features strongly in current debates about work amongst policymakers, practitioners and academics. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2010) makes strong demands for a ‘decent work’ policy agenda to raise labour standards, enhance employment and income opportunities, provide social protection and social security, and promote social dialogue. With the Lisbon Agreement of 2000, the EU has also promoted ‘decent work’, trying to balance the raising of employment participation and improvements to job quality (see Kok High Level Expert Group, 2004). In the US, unions and think tanks have called for improvements to job quality to deal with social and economic problems (AFL-CIO, 2008; Brookings Institute, 2007). In addition to the recent publication of a raft of academic books on the subject (e.g. Bazen et al., 2005; Gallie, 2007; Gautié & Schmitt, 2010; Green, 2006, 2009), academics on both sides of the Atlantic oriented to public policy have called for a ‘new deal’ or ‘new strategy’ for workers in bad jobs (Grimshaw et al., 2008; Haley-Lock & Ewert, this issue; Osterman, 2008; see also the UK’s ESRC-funded seminar series Making Bad Jobs Better, available at: <http://ewds.strath.ac.uk/badjobsbetter/Home.aspx>).

Debates about job quality are not new. Throughout the last half of the 20th century (if not earlier; see Darr & Warhurst, 2009), two camps fought a war about the future of work. On the one side were the optimists, plotting a rising

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trajectory of good jobs. As early as 1959, for example, Peter Drucker first used the term 'knowledge worker', which was to become so vogue amongst academics and governments 40 years later following the publication in 1993 of Robert Reich's influential *The Work of Nations*, with its promotion of 'symbolic analysts'. Prior to this latter publication most of the debate about these jobs centred on the class position of the worker who held them; typically whether or not they represented a new working, middle or ruling class (Darr & Warhurst, 2009). Minus the concern with class, such claims continue, but now cast as a feature of a knowledge-driven economy or a creative economy, although as Florida (2005) admits, there is little difference between these two types of putative 'new' economy. With rising education levels, technological advances, upskilling and demand for intrinsic rewards from work, things could only get better, this camp claimed. Interestingly, a feature of this camp more recently has been an assumption that capitalism itself was morphing into something different and potentially more liberating for workers. Karl Marx was partly right, as Florida (2002: 37) states, for example, because the workers now own the means of production: 'it is inside their heads'.

In the opposing camp, the pessimists, led first by Braverman (1974), claimed to identify a 'degradation of work' (the subtitle of Braverman's benchmark book, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*). Because of the needs of capitalism, work, they said, could only get worse. Taylorism or scientific management represented 'nothing less than the explicit verbalisation of the capitalist mode of production' Braverman claimed (1974: 86), and heralded the separation of conception and execution, task fragmentation and standardization, and a working life of repetition and drudgery, all captured vividly in Charlie Chaplin's black and white movie classic *Modern Times*. A second wave of what became called 'labour process analysis' produced case studies to back up the claim of the gradual erosion of workers' autonomy and capacity to control and organize work (e.g. Zimbalist, 1979) and a general tendency of deskilling (Thompson, 1989). This approach to the study of work, now transmuted into 'labour process theory', has become something of an orthodoxy, underpinning much critical research on work and industrial relations in the Anglo-Saxon countries of the US, UK and Australia (Kitay, 1997).

Lying between these claims by academics of two job-quality trajectories – work steadily getting better or worse – were policy and practice; and both appeared to be influenced by economic cycles and the rising and falling relative strength of labour against capital (Durand, 1998). Thus in the 1960s and early 1970s the Quality of Working Life Movement wanted to make jobs better and became very influential in the US and Europe (Davis & Taylor, 1972). With the Oil Crisis in 1973, worldwide recession and high unemployment, emphasis shifted from better jobs to any jobs and governments focused on job creation. The quantity not the quality of jobs became the issue. Although well meaning, this approach was ultimately flawed, creating neither good jobs nor sustainable jobs, as Scotland's quickly forgotten 'Silicon Glen' illustrates. Many of the jobs created were the result of foreign direct investment, and incoming foreign companies offered labour-intensive operations – hence their attractiveness to policymakers. However, as any undergraduate studying international business knows, such low-skill, screwdriver-plant jobs

are often vulnerable when the economies of foreign investors' countries of origin take a downturn or the investors find more amenable – read cheaper – locations elsewhere. It seems that job content matters after all.

With the economic boom and tightening labour markets over the 1990s and early 2000s, good jobs came back onto the policy agenda as a feature of the aforementioned strategies by governments in the US and Europe to create the putative knowledge-driven and creative economies (Warhurst, 2008) intended to create comparative advantage for these countries with low-cost countries in the developing economies (see e.g. Department for Education and Skills, Department of Trade and Industry, Her Majesty's Treasury and Department for Work and Pensions [DfES, DTI, HM Treasury & DWP], 2004 KOK High Level Export Group, 2004). During the current global economic problems, it seems that lessons from previous recessions have been learnt. Although now focused on the 'green' and IT industries, the stimulation of good-quality jobs with high skills and high wages is regarded by governments as a sustainable way to overcome the current economic malaise (e.g. House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, 2009; Welsh Assembly, 2009). Job quality and in particular the need for good jobs are thus never far from policy thinking and work-related research in the US and Europe.

Acknowledging the Importance of Job Quality in Australia

Extant research in Australia does not specifically address the recurring job-quality debate that appears elsewhere, which may create the impression that job quality, or more precisely 'bad jobs', is not an issue here. International researchers in the US and Europe are increasingly questioning the quality of jobs, highlighting the growth of poor-quality or 'bad jobs' (Gallie, 2007; Green, 2009) and initiating concerted attempts to improve job quality through the development of government, employer and/or union policies directed towards enhancing workers' employment experiences, opportunities and outcomes (e.g. Batt et al., 2003; Bernhardt et al., 2003; Brown et al., 2008; Cox et al., 2008; Edwards et al., 2009; Grimshaw et al., 2008), Australia, in contrast, seems to have been diverted down another path. That path, which some claimed was more akin to an 'avalanche' (McCallum, 2007), is otherwise known as the *Workplace Relations Amendment (Work Choices) Act 2005*. Ironically, it was without any choice that researchers in Australia became bound up in the Howard government's *Work Choices* agenda as they attempted to understand the content, meaning and implications of this unprecedented and radical legislation (e.g. Baird et al., 2009; Ellem et al., 2005; Forsyth & Sutherland, 2006; Hall, 2006; Isaac, 2007; Knox, 2009; Pocock et al., 2008; Sheldon & Junor, 2006).

Yet a closer analysis reveals that much of this research and debate conveys a fundamental preoccupation with our need to (defend and) preserve specific entitlements, including enshrined minimum wages and conditions of employment, as well as preferences and expectations central to our working lives such as job security, working hours, skill development and the right to collectivize – factors that are highly consistent with the notion of job quality. Another reading, therefore, of Australian research and debate about work is that it

was and still is also strongly concerned with job quality; it is just that *Work Choices* masked and subsumed this concern, with industrial relations reform being offered as a means of enhancing Australian working lives while arguably degrading the key factors that would ordinarily be associated with 'good jobs'. If nothing else, the experience of *Work Choices* has punctuated the employment equilibrium and forced many industrial relations researchers to critically evaluate what they consider significant and essential in the terms and conditions of Australian employment.

Acknowledging the Benefits of Job Quality to Australia

Rising employment participation rates in Australia make the quality of work an increasingly important policy focus. International research suggests that job quality can affect individuals' job satisfaction, general life satisfaction and health. It also can affect the health and well-being of employees' children, relationships and household life. Beyond the individual and their household, having a good job can result in higher productivity, lower rates of turnover and reduced absenteeism (Appelbaum et al., 2003; Clark, 2005; Goulden, 2010; Green, 2006) and similar findings are now also emerging in Australia (Masterman-Smith & Pocock, 2008). In this light, knowing more about what makes a good job, and how to expand the volume of good jobs, has the potential to create significant social and economic benefits.

As Peetz and Murray, Bamberry, and Skinner and Pocock also highlight in their contributions to this special issue, aspects of work such as long hours, job flexibility, the fit between preferred and actual hours, job security, job control and autonomy, access to skill development and learning, and the quality and nature of supervision are all factors that – both in Australia and beyond – define job quality – both in Australia and beyond. A better understanding of the elements that make up a good job, and deeper analysis about how better job quality affects the well-being of workers and wider social life, as well as economic and workplace outcomes, are vital areas of research into the future.

This research requires analysis at the level of the individual, workplace, industry and labour market, investigating differences by gender, age, industry, occupation and location. The increasing proportion of women in the workforce across industrialized countries makes comparative analysis of job quality by gender vital in view of men's and women's distinctive experiences at work. Increasing rates of participation in paid work over a wider span of the life cycle – from teenager to aged citizens – makes a life-cycle approach to analysis of job quality also important. What makes a good job for a teenager engaged in study may be very different from that of a worker with dependent children or an older worker. In this light, facilitating transitions between jobs of varying characteristics is likely to matter to the creation of a 'good career' through a series of 'good jobs'. A future research agenda might also usefully weigh up the relative role of labour regulations, institutions (such as unions, health and safety bodies and the like), workplace cultures and job design in creating good jobs. There is also an important gap in relation to robust international comparative work that

can help inform the settings that promote more good jobs, and good consequences arising from them.

Where Next?

Despite both the new 2010 Labor government and the coalition opposition stating that the industrial legislation is fixed, at least for the time being, there is sufficient flexibility and ambiguity within current Fair Work legislation (Cooper & Ellem, 2009) to precipitate further disputes and confrontations during its implementation. In this context, it is important to now move beyond merely identifying the factors in Australia that might characterize good jobs; job quality itself needs to be brought to the fore. Isolating job quality from industrial relations debate might help sanitize it, making it less of a political football and helping researchers and policymakers to step outside these (important) skirmishes and reframe ideas and initiatives to improve job quality.

In Australia, researcher and policymaker concern with job quality has long existed but it has sometimes been obscured, being subsumed within industrial relations. Mainstreaming the issue of job quality in Australia will allow theorizing and analysis of job quality to be more overtly pursued, and provide the means by which better-quality jobs might be delivered. This special issue brings together a set of research findings that illuminate some of these issues. However, many gaps remain, and there is a need for a more systematic and comprehensive research agenda that investigates good jobs, their consequences and how to create more of them. This special issue hopefully marks the start of that process in Australia.

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