



What is Happening to Participation at Work?

First Findings from the Skills and Employment Survey 2024

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HEADLINES

Participation at work is an important determinant of personal well-being and is associated with significantly higher levels of employee motivation that are likely to be conducive to higher productivity in technologically advanced economies. The report examines trends in different types of participation among British workers, their distribution by gender and class, and the implications of participation for worker well-being and motivation.

- Task discretion – the ability of employees to take decisions about their immediate job tasks – had declined between 2012 and 2017 and fell further in the period 2017-2024. Whereas in 2012 44% of employees had significant task discretion, by 2024 this was the case for only 34%. The decline was particularly sharp for those in associate professional, caring and sales occupations and for female employees.
- In contrast to the period 2006 to 2017, there was also a decline in semi-autonomous teamwork (teams with significant shared responsibility for their work tasks). By 2024 their frequency had returned to the level of two decades earlier in 2001. The proportion of employees involved was relatively small (less than 25%) and semi-autonomous teamwork was related to higher levels of well-being and work motivation more weakly than other forms of participation.
- There was a renewal of the trend that existed prior to 2012 of an increase in the prevalence of consultative committees. But the proportion of employees reporting significant influence over organisational decisions that affected their work decreased between 2017 and 2024, moving to a level lower even than that of 1992. Yet effective organisational participation was associated with considerable benefits for well-being (in particular, for enthusiasm at work, higher job satisfaction and a greater sense of harmony with organisational values). It was also one of the strongest factors affecting work motivation – in particular, the willingness to work harder for the organisation and the frequency of initiating suggestions for improvements in work processes.

The Skills and Employment Survey 2024 is funded jointly by the Economic and Social Research Council, the Department for Education, and the Advisory and Conciliation and Arbitration Service with additional funding from the Department for the Economy to extend the Survey to Northern Ireland (ES/X007987/1).

1. The Importance of Participation at Work

In recent decades, employee participation over decisions that directly involve or affect their work has been increasingly salient in both the managerial and well-being literatures. It has been shown to have crucial consequences for employees' well-being and psychological and physical health – with strong evidence that it affects mortality risks. Its importance for well-being is due, in part, because of the very general value attached to self-determination, but also because participation provides a means for improving many aspects of the quality of jobs and hence the experience of work. Participation, it has been suggested, allows employees to cope better with high levels of job demands, since they have greater scope to modify the flow of work and find better ways of handling it. It enables employees to place greater pressure on management to improve work conditions where they are potentially a source of ill-health. Participative channels can also be used to encourage the provision of training, thereby meeting employee needs for self-development.

An influential branch of managerial theory has also emphasised the motivational benefits of participation, especially with the increasing technical complexity of work and the higher level of employee skills this requires. Increasingly it is suggested, important decisions about work tasks are best taken by those that have acquired tacit knowledge through close familiarity with the work process. There also have been influential arguments about the importance of participation for the innovative capacity and thereby the productivity of organisations in an increasingly competitive and technologically advanced economy, factors that can only become increasingly important with recent developments in AI. Participation facilitates the sharing of ideas about how to resolve problems in the work process and creates the conditions for continuing learning, enabling managers to take advantage of employees' experience of their jobs to find ways of increasing the efficiency of work processes and the quality of products. The development of participative mechanisms that increase the active involvement of employees in their jobs is seen as a crucial component of an effective management strategy for improving organisational performance, since it will increase employee identification with the organisation and thereby the willingness to contribute to its success. This report examines the prevalence of, and trends in, the main forms of participation and compares the relative strength of their association with both employee well-being and motivation.

2. Previous Evidence

While there has been research in Britain over many decades on participation, this has primarily taken the form of case studies of individual 'exemplar' organisations or of developments within particular industrial sectors. Apart from SES, few studies have produced reliable information on trends in different forms of participation. The main focus of previous research has been the implications of participation for employee well-being and motivation. Despite, however, the convergence between managerial and well-being approaches on the importance of participation, there

have been differences in the specific forms of participation advocated. The well-being literature has tended to focus on participation in the sense of task discretion (or the individual's control of decisions about the way the job task is carried out). The managerial literature, in contrast, has emphasised the value of participation through teamwork and organisational participation (in the form of employee consultation over wider organisational decisions).

With respect to well-being there has been in particular extensive longitudinal research on the effects of participation on health, led by the Nordic countries and research on the British civil service. These have underlined the health risks of low task discretion. Under conditions of high work intensity, workers in jobs with low control have on average a thirty percent higher risk of cardiac illness than those with high control. Some research has also shown that organisational participation is important in reducing insecurity (which is strongly linked to psychological distress) in periods of organisational change.

Although less well developed than in the case of health, there has been accumulating evidence of the benefits of participation for employee motivation, job performance and innovation. With respect to motivation, a wide range of studies have established its importance for job satisfaction and organisational commitment. But there is also evidence that higher levels of participation stimulate employee learning on the job, the willingness to use initiative to introduce improvements at work and greater cooperativeness in the implementation of organisational change.

3. The Skills and Employment Survey 2024: A New Source of Evidence

The Skills and Employment Survey 2024 (SES2024) allows us to assess trends in different forms of participation through comparison with the results of previous SES surveys. The interval between the previous survey in 2017 and the current in 2024 was an unusually disruptive period for the labour market and employment due to the combination of Brexit and Covid-19. At the same time, the survey provides information on a wide range of potential explanatory factors as well as potential consequences of forms of participation. All parts of the data collection process were directed by the research team, with the fieldwork carried out by NatCen. The types of data collected in this round were more diverse than in earlier survey years. The overall data series included a face-to-face survey comparable with previous years. But, in addition, it included an online survey of eligible respondents who agreed to join a panel of representatives recruited from previous NatCen surveys. The online survey interviews were largely collected in 2023. The third element of the survey series sought to improve the evidence for Northern Ireland with a push-to-web sample.

Given the possibility that different modes of data collection may have systematic effects on response distributions, the analyses for this report have been restricted to the face-to-face survey, which provides the highest level of comparability with the previous surveys. The sample was drawn using random probability

principles subject to stratification based on a number of socio-economic indicators. The data are from working adults aged 20-65 years old in England, Wales and Scotland who were interviewed in their own homes primarily in 2024. A difference in the data collection process, however, compared to previous surveys is that two eligible respondents (rather than one eligible respondent) were randomly selected for interview per address.

SES2024 is the eighth in the series of nationally representative sample surveys of individuals in employment. The surveys between 1992 and 2001 selected respondents aged 20-60. Although subsequent surveys additionally sampled those aged 61-65, for consistency in the analyses of trends, the report focuses on comparisons of employees aged 20 to 60. The numbers of respondents were: 4,047 in 1986; 3,855 in 1992; 2,467 in 1997; 4,470 in 2001; 7,787 in 2006 (which included Northern Ireland); 3,200 in 2012; 3,306 in 2017 and 2,824 in 2024. Thirty-two percent of those selected for interview were interviewed. For each survey, weights were computed to take into account the differential probabilities of sample selection, the over-sampling of certain areas and some small response rate variations between groups (defined by sex, age and occupation). All the analyses that follow use these weights.

4. Indicators of Participation at Work

The survey included a range of indicators for different forms of participation – task discretion (or individual influence over task decisions); semi-autonomous teamwork (team influence over task decisions) and organisational participation (items relating to consultative meetings, organisational influence and quality circles).

Task Discretion and Teamwork

The survey included four questions which assess how much *task discretion* or personal influence people had over specific aspects of their job tasks:

- How hard they work.
- Deciding what tasks they are to do.
- How the tasks are done.
- The quality standards to which they work.

The response options were ‘a great deal’, ‘a fair amount’, ‘not much’ and ‘not much at all’. A summary index was constructed by reversing the scoring (so that high scores indicate high discretion) and taking the average of the responses to the four items. Scores were rounded to align with the scoring labels of the original items: a score of 4 indicated ‘high discretion’ with an average response of ‘a great deal’ across the four items.

With respect to team influence, we developed three measures: *teamwork* (all work that took place in teams), *semi-autonomous teamwork* (where teams had substantial influence over task decisions) and *self-managed teamwork*. For all surveys other than 1997, employees were initially asked whether they usually worked on their own or together as a group with one or more other employees in a similar position to their own, providing an overall measure of *teamwork*. Those who did work in a team were then asked about the influence

the team exercised over the same four aspects of work used in the measure of task discretion. An average influence score was created and teams that had a score equivalent to ‘a great deal’ or ‘a fair amount’ of influence are taken as involving *semi-autonomous teamwork*.

From 2006 onwards, three additional items were included to determine the extent of self-management in teams, asking how much influence team members have over:

- Selecting group members.
- Selecting group leaders.
- Setting targets for the group.

Self-managed teamwork involves those in semi-autonomous teams that also have a score equivalent to ‘a great deal’ or ‘a fair amount’ with respect to these management items.

Organisational Participation

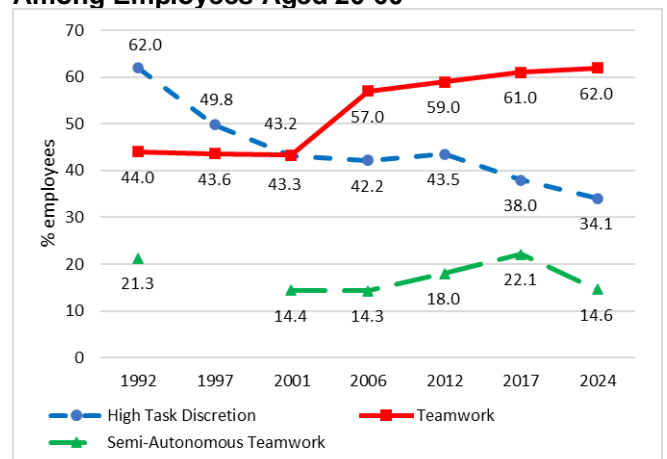
There were three indicators of organisational participation. An initial question investigated whether management had established *consultative meetings* by asking whether meetings were organised in which employees could express their views about what was happening in the organisation. Employees were then asked about how much say they had in decisions which affected the way they did their job. Responses of ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ are taken as a measure of *organisational influence*. A further item asked whether the employee belonged to a ‘group of employees who meet regularly to think about improvements that could be made within the organisation (sometimes called *Quality Circles*)’.

5. Findings

Trends in Task Discretion and Teamwork

As shown in previous SES research, individual task discretion declined sharply between 1992 and 2001, then remained at a similar level between 2001 and 2012. But the period between 2012 and 2017 saw a further significant decline and this continued in the most recent period 2017 to 2024 (Figure 1). Between 1992 and 2012 there was a substantial expansion of the proportion of workers who worked as part of a team, after which the level of teamwork remained very stable. In 2024 62% of employees worked in teams.

Figure 1: Trends in Task Discretion and Teamwork Among Employees Aged 20-60

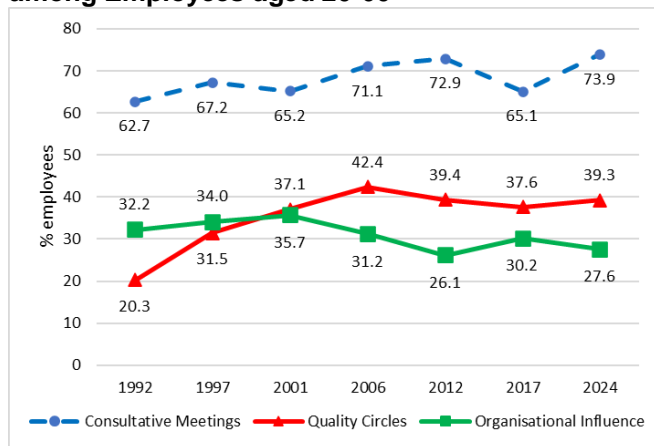


The proportion of workers in teams that could influence task activities however declined between 1992 and 2001, and, despite some increase in the period 2006 and 2017, remained at only around a third of all team workers. At its peak in 2017, only 22% of workers were in teams that had a significant say over the organisation of task activities. Moreover, the most recent period saw a reversal of the previous positive trend and a marked decline of those in semi-autonomous teams. The proportion of workers that were in self-managed teams – which could influence not only task decisions but also the selection of their leaders, members or targets – was even lower. In 2024, only 7% of employees were in semi-autonomous teams that could take decisions relevant to the management of the team.

Trends in Organisational Participation

A notable feature of the years between 1992 and 2012 was the increase in the proportion of employees reporting that management held meetings in which they could express their views about what was happening in the organisation (Figure 2). There had been some sign of a decline in the use of such committees in 2017. But, in the most recent period (2017-24), not only was the earlier level recovered but their use became more prevalent than in any of the earlier periods covered by our data. A controversial issue, however, is how far such consultative committees were primarily channels for downward communication or provided a lever for employees to influence organisational decisions.

Figure 2: Trends in Organisational Participation among Employees aged 20-60



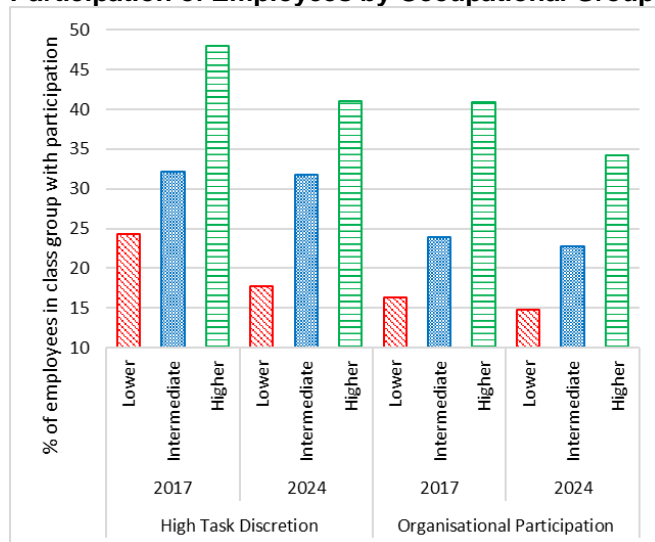
One relevant indicator is the presence of quality circles which were heralded as an effective means for involving employees in decisions to improve both products and work processes. After a marked initial increase between 1992 and 2006, there has been little subsequent expansion. Employees were also asked directly about how much influence they had on decisions affecting their job. In all years, employee reports of significant influence over decisions that affect their work have been much lower than might have been expected from the prevalence of consultative institutions. The figures have fluctuated a little over time, rising between 1992 and 2001, declining between 2001 and 2012 and then returning by 2017 to a level close to that of 1992 (but still lower than in 2001).

In the most recent period employee influence over organisational decisions declined yet again, to the second lowest prevalence over the nearly three decades of data available. Taken together with the growth in consultative committees, there has been an increasing gap between the presence of formal consultative institutions and workers' perceptions of their influence. In 2024, while 74% of employees reported the existence of consultative meetings, only 28% thought that they could influence organisational decisions affecting their work.

Participation, Class and Gender

There were marked differences by class groups in the prevalence of both task discretion and organisational participation. This can be seen in Figure 3 which broadly categorises occupations into a more highly skilled group of professionals, managers, and associate professionals; an intermediate group of administrative, skilled manual and personal service workers; and a lower skilled group of sales, operatives and elementary workers. The differences between class groups are shown for 2017 and the most recent survey in 2024. In both years, a similar sharp class hierarchy in participation is evident, with levels of participation substantially higher among higher skilled than among lower skilled employees. This was the case for both task discretion and organisational participation, as reflected in organisational influence.

Figure 3: Task Discretion and Organisational Participation of Employees by Occupational Group

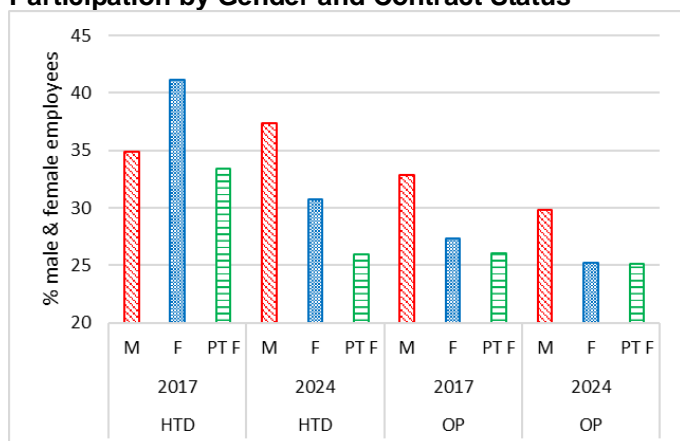


The pattern of change between class groups between 2017 and 2024 was notably different from that between 2012 and 2017. The earlier period, in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, had seen rising class polarisation with an increased gap between the participation levels of those in higher and intermediate skilled jobs and those in lower skilled work. In the most recent period, however, although the lower skilled continued to experience an erosion of their task discretion, this was similarly the case for higher skilled workers and indeed the sharpest reduction in organisational participation was among the higher skilled. A more detailed analysis shows that the reduction in task discretion was particularly marked among associate professionals and among caring and

sales personnel. In contrast, the decline in organisational influence among the higher skilled was evident more widely among managers, professionals and associate professionals.

While the general trends in earlier decades were very similar for men and women, in 2012 and 2017 women had not only caught up with men but surpassed them in the number of jobs with high levels of task discretion. However, the sharper decline of task discretion among women between 2017 and 2024 led to reversion to the pattern prevalent before 2017 of a higher proportion of men in jobs that provided high levels of task discretion (Figure 4). In part this reflected a marked decrease in task discretion among part-timers. But it was also the case that women’s jobs were more heavily concentrated in caring and sales occupations which had experienced a particularly significant decline in task discretion. In contrast, with respect to organisational participation, although men remained more likely to have opportunities for organisational participation than women, there was some decline in the organisational influence reported by men, whereas there was little change over time for women.

Figure 4: Task Discretion and Organisational Participation by Gender and Contract Status



Note: M=Male Employees, F=Female Employees, PTF=Female Part-Time Employees, HTD= High Task Discretion, OP= Organisational Participation

Well-Being and Motivation

The evidence from the 2024 survey strongly confirms the positive relationship of participation to both employee well-being and work motivation. However, the various types of participation relate to work attitudes in different ways. Table 1 presents a comparison of the well-being and motivation of those who are high or low on different forms of participation. With respect to well-being, there are four items relating to the sense to which people feel enthusiastic and contented (with low anxiety) most of the time, whether they are completely or very satisfied with their jobs and the extent to which they feel that their personal values are similar to those of the organisation for which they are working.

With regard to motivation, there are similarly four indicators – the extent to which people strongly agree that they would be willing to work harder to help the organisation succeed, and whether they strongly agree that their organisation inspires the very best from them in terms of job performance. These are followed by whether people feel they are in a job that requires them to learn new things and finally whether they have taken the initiative at least twice during the last year to make suggestions about improving efficiency.

It is notable that, on all four of the well-being items, a high degree of task discretion has a very substantial positive effect. There are differences between those high and those lower in terms of task discretion of 16 percentage points for enthusiasm, 18 for job satisfaction and 15 for value harmony. In contrast to task discretion, there are much smaller positive differences between those in semi-autonomous teams and those not in teams, and semi-autonomous teamwork makes no significant difference with respect to contentment. Those with high organisational influence are more positive on all of the four items than those who have low levels of influence. Indeed, these effects are the strongest of the three forms of participation – with a difference of 20 percentage points with respect to values, 25 for enthusiasm, and 30 for job satisfaction.

Table 1: Participation, Well-Being, and Motivation Among Employees Aged 20-60

| | Task Discretion | | Semi-Autonomous Teamwork | | Organisational Participation | |
|--|-----------------|-------------|--------------------------|------|------------------------------|-------------|
| | High | Low or none | Yes | No | High | Low or none |
| Well-Being | | | | | | |
| Enthusiasm (most or all of time) | 55.6 | 39.5 | 48.0 | 40.9 | 58.0 | 32.8 |
| Contentment (most or all of time) | 25.9 | 19.2 | 22.8 | 23.9 | 25.9 | 16.1 |
| Job Satisfaction (Completely/very) | 64.4 | 46.0 | 56.6 | 52.0 | 69.6 | 38.4 |
| My values and the organisation’s are very similar (Strongly agree) | 29.5 | 14.0 | 26.2 | 19.4 | 32.4 | 12.0 |
| Motivation | | | | | | |
| Willing to work harder for organisation to succeed (Strongly agrees) | 42.4 | 23.0 | 38.2 | 28.3 | 45.0 | 19.8 |
| Organisation inspires very best job performance (Strongly agrees) | 23.2 | 12.0 | 29.5 | 14.0 | 27.7 | 10.4 |
| Job requires learning new things (Strongly agrees) | 43.0 | 32.7 | 44.9 | 34.6 | 37.5 | 33.8 |
| Made suggestions to improve efficiency (More than once) | 75.5 | 56.1 | 66.0 | 58.9 | 78.0 | 49.6 |

Higher levels of participation are also generally associated with higher scores on the motivational indicators. Task discretion is particularly strongly related to the willingness to work harder to help the organisation succeed and to making suggestions to improve efficiency. The general effects of autonomous teamwork are also positive, although less marked than those of individual task discretion except for inspiration to put in one's best job performance. But the strongest associations are again with organisational influence, which makes a 25-percentage point difference with respect to the willingness to work harder and a 28-percentage point difference with respect to whether or not employees have taken the initiative to make suggestions for improvements. While the findings do not prove causation, they are consistent with, and reinforce, the pattern emerging from the wider body of research.

6. Policy Implications

The 2024 survey confirms the importance of participation for both employee well-being and work motivation. This is the case for both individual task discretion and for forms of organisational participation that provide effective influence. It is notable, however, that the trends over time with respect to both forms of participation suggest that British employers have undermined rather than encouraged such developments. Individual task discretion has declined

sharply between 1992 and 2024. Similarly, despite the growth of consultative committees, employees' perceptions of their influence in organisational decisions that affect their work declined in the recent period and effective organisational participation covers just over a quarter of the workforce. Even earlier enthusiasm for the development of semi-autonomous teamwork and quality circles has stalled since 2006.

This lack of more progressive, productivity enhancing, workforce policies is remarkable given the problematic development of the British economy over the period. Since 2009 the UK's productivity growth, as measured by output per hour worked, not only declined sharply compared to the period 1998 to 2007, but fell behind major comparator countries such as Germany and France. With the rapid diffusion of AI, the competitive challenge is now likely to be significantly accentuated. At the same time, the period saw a decline in employee well-being, with measures of stress, depression and anxiety in the workforce rising to constitute half of all work-related illness. Faced by these dilemmas, British employers failed to extend the forms of work organisation that were likely to encourage high levels of employee well-being, improve job performance and enhance a willingness to contribute to innovation. The results highlight the need for major new policy initiatives to promote participation at work in the interests of both employee welfare and economic performance.

Further Reading

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All titles are downloadable free from the survey website: wiserd.ac.uk/project/ses/ses2024. The [NatCen SES2024 Technical Report](#) which outlines in detail how the data were collected along with the questionnaires used. You may also like to take the www.howgoodismyjob.com quiz which is based on some of the questions used in the survey.

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This report may be cited as: Gallie, D, Davies, R, Felstead, A, Green, F, Henseke, G, and Zhou Y (2025) *What is Happening to Participation at Work? Findings from the Skills and Employment Survey 2024*, Cardiff: Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data, Cardiff University.



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