**WHAT ARE THE BEST MEASURES OF GOOD WORK?**

**THREE PRINCIPLES FOR MEASUREMENT SELECTION**

**By Alan Felstead[[1]](#footnote-1) (Cardiff), Duncan Gallie (Oxford), Francis Green (UCL)**

**and Golo Henseke (UCL)**

Job quality, or the promotion of good work, is a ‘hot topic’. It has featured as a prominent element in three separate government reports published in the space of eight months. This began with the publication of the *Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices* in July 2017. One of its recommendations was that ‘more effort has to be placed on measuring quality of work through agreed metrics and better data’ (Taylor, 2017: 102). The importance of good jobs was then emphasised as a key component of the government’s Industrial Strategy which was announced in November 2017. This committed the government to create ‘more good jobs and better pay … high quality jobs for all UK citizens’ (HM Government, 2017: 29). Three months later – in February 2018 – the government announced its response to the *Taylor Review* and its acceptance of the need for agreed measures of job quality. As a result, it has started a dialogue with external experts on the **‘the best measures to evaluate the level of good work’** which will be used to ‘report annually on the quality of work in the UK economy’. A final list of measures and a baseline assessment of job quality in the UK will be published in Autumn 2018 (HM Government, 2018: 13, 23). This short note offers our expertise – as researchers in the field – on why some types of measures should be included and why others should not. This reasoning is based on the application of three key principles and a demonstration of their use in practice.

**Principles of Measurement Selection**

The study of job quality has a long history, but it is only recently has international agreement among experts begun to emerge about what job quality means and how its various dimensions are best measured. The expertise of economists, sociologists and psychologists have come together in indicators agreed by the European Commission through its agency the European Foundation for Living and Working Conditions, the OECD, and the United Nations (Eurofound, 2012; United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2015; OECD, 2017). Other agencies, such as the International Labour Office and the European Trades Union Institute have also contributed.

Typically, data are collected from questions asked of workers who take part in large, robust and long-running surveys. In Britain, these include the Skills and Employment Survey (Felstead *et al*., 2015) and the Workplace Employment Relations Survey (van Wanrooy *et al*., 2014), while internationally the European Working Conditions Survey is the most highly regarded data source (Eurofound, 2017). In Britain, there are also more recent surveys, such as the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD)’s UK Working Lives Survey which was carried out for the first time in 2017-2018 (Gifford, 2018). We argue that some of the measures contained in these surveys are better than others, and that not all reflect the latest developments in social scientific understanding of job quality. In picking the best measures for Britain, three principles need to be applied, consistent with best practice.

***Principle 1: Focusing on Job-related Well-being***

The first principle is that **job quality is constituted by a set of work features which have the capability of enhancing or diminishing worker well-being**. Hence, the identification of good jobs places the spotlight on what might be good for the worker, but not necessarily for the employer. To justify their inclusion as a measure of job quality, then, each feature needs to be theoretically and empirically connected to worker well-being. Many of the long-running surveys outlined above provide the empirical basis on which to test these connections, thereby ensuring that the measures used are fit for purpose.

***Principle 2: Maintaining a Job-only Focus***

The second principle is that **job quality needs to focus on the attributes of the job occupied by the worker and not the workers’ personal circumstances or background**. The distinction here is between the subjective and objective dimension of job quality. The subjective approach is based on the idea that what is important is the ‘utility’ a worker derives from his or her job. This depends on the features of the job, such as the pay, the hours and the type of work, but *also* on each worker’s preferences. What one worker feels about a job may differ from the feelings of another. There may be good reasons for collecting data on workers’ feelings, such as their job satisfaction, not least because job dissatisfaction leads to workers quitting jobs when it would be better to improve them. However, satisfaction measures are affected by individual differences in aspirations and have the shortcoming that workers may not be aware that certain aspects of the job may pose risks to their psychological and/or physical health. On this basis, we do *not* regard job satisfaction as ‘a good starting point for measuring “good work”’ nor do we agree that ‘it is essential that we consider pay measures that capture how people value their earnings’ (HM Government, 2018: 22). Both fail to maintain a job-only focus.

We favour an objective approach which is based on the idea that there is a set of human needs which may, or may not, be met by the jobs people do. On this basis, a good job is one which offers workers opportunities to do a range of things which are conducive to improving their psychological and physical health (Green, 2006). The capacity to enhance well-being, then, depends on how far, for example, jobs enable workers to exercise influence over work and to pursue their personal work-related goals. The needs that workers prioritise will, of course, vary according to individual preferences and constraints, but an objectively defined high quality job is one that allows for a wide range of possible needs to be met.

***Principle 3: Adopting a Multi-Faceted Approach***

The third principle is that **there are a variety of job attributes which have the capability of enhancing or reducing worker well-being**. The most straightforward and easiest to attribute to measure is pay. There is even the suggestion that one only needs to examine rates of pay to make an assessment of the sort of jobs created in particular towns, cities, countries or by particular employers (e.g., Goos and Manning, 2007; Jones and Green, 2009). By adopting such an approach pay becomes the defining feature of job quality – ‘the be-all and end-all’ (Osterman, 2013; Muñoz de Bustillo ***et al*., 2011**).

However, other factors are also important. The way work is organised, for example, influences how well jobs enable workers to use their capabilities. This includes the role workers play in conceiving of the tasks to be done, what level of discretion they are able to exercise in carrying them out, and what range of tasks their jobs involve (Braverman, 1974; Fox, 1974; Thompson and Smith, 2010). Similarly, more recent interest has focused on the security of work, the quality of training offered, the levels of work effort, the opportunities workers have to put their qualifications and skills to good use, and the ability they have to combine work and family life (Gallie *et al*., 2017; Green *et al*., 2016; Felstead and Green, 2013 and 2017; Gregory, 2017). This multi-faceted approach has, therefore, been widely adopted. The Eurofound concept of job quality, for example, focuses on four main job features: earnings, prospects, working time quality and intrinsic job quality. The OECD’s job quality framework is similar but a little narrower, comprising measures of earnings, labour market security and the quality of the working environment.

**Points of Agreement and Disagreement**

While we agree with the government’s view that job quality is multi-faceted (Principle 3), we caution against collecting data which reflects both the objective conditions of the job and the subjective circumstances of the worker. In our view, job quality measures need to be about the job, despite the fact that these are based on self-reported data given by workers themselves (Principle 2). Connections also need to be made with worker well-being since this is, after all, what is behind the desire to increase job quality, thereby ensuring that what is being measured is linked with the outcomes sought (Principle 1). A high priority should be given to selecting measures that have been well-tested by rigorous research and that have been shown to have a strong relationship to worker well-being.

We have put these three principles into practice by developing a short online job quality instrument ([www.howgoodismyjob.com](http://www.howgoodismyjob.com)).[[2]](#footnote-2) It lasts five minutes and measures job quality across ten domains. All the questions have been carried in several waves of the Skills and Employment Survey and all have a validated connection to worker well-being. **We urge the government as well as others, such the Carnegie Trust/RSA who are identifying measures of job quality, to use these three principles in their deliberations**. This will ensure that only the best measures of job quality are selected and used to baseline the UK’s performance and monitor annual progress in the years ahead.

**References**

Braverman, H (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, New York and London: Monthly Review Press.

Eurofound (2012) *Trends in Job Quality in Europe*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Eurofound (2017) *Sixth European Working Conditions Survey – Overview Report (2017 Update)*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Felstead, A and Green, F (2013) ‘Underutilization, overqualification and skills mismatch: patterns and trends’, *Skills in Focus*, June, Glasgow: Skills Development Scotland.

Felstead, A and Green, F (2017) ‘Working longer and harder? A critical assessment of work effort in Britain in comparison to Europe’, in Grimshaw, D, Fagan, C, Hebson, G and Tavora, I (eds) *Making Work More Equal: A New Labour Market Segmentation Approach*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Felstead, A, Gallie, D and Green, F (2015) (eds) *Unequal Britain at Work*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fox, A (1974) *Beyond Contract: Work, Power and Trust Relations*, London: Faber and Faber.

Gallie, D, Inanc, H, Felstead, A and Green, F (2017) ‘The hidden face of job insecurity’, *Work, Employment and Society*, 31(1): 36-53.

Gifford, J (2018) *UK Working Lives: The CIPD Job Quality Index*, London: Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development.

Goos, M and Manning, A (2007) ‘Lousy and lovely jobs: the rising polarisation of work in Britain’, *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 89(1): 118-133.

Green, F (2006) *Demanding Work: The Paradox of Job Quality in the Affluent Economy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Green, F, Felstead, A, Gallie, D, Inanc, H and Jewson, N (2016) ‘The declining volume of workers’ training in Britain’, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 54(2): 422-448.

Gregory, A (2016) ‘Work-life balance’, in in Edgell, S, Gottfried, H and Granter, E (eds) *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Work and Employment*, London: Sage.

HM Government (2017) *Industrial Strategy: Building a Britain Fit for the Future*, London: Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

HM Government (2018) *Good Work: A Response to the Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices*, London: Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Jones, P S and Green, A E (2009) ‘The quantity and quality of jobs: changes in UK regions, 1997-2007’, *Environment and Planning A*, 41: 2475-2495.

Muñoz de Bastillo, R, Fernández-Mercias, E, Antón, J I, Esteve, E (2011) *Measuring More than Money*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

OECD (2017) *OECD Guidelines on Measuring the Quality of the Working Environment,* Paris:OECD Publishing.

Osterman, P (2013) ‘Introduction to the special issue on job quality: what does it mean and how might we think about it?’, *Industrial Relations and Labor Review*, 66(4): 739-752.

Taylor, M (2017) *Good Work: The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices*, London: Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Thompson P, and Smith C (2010) (ed.) *Working Life: Renewing Labour Process Analysis*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (2015) *Handbook on Measuring Quality of Employment*. New York and Geneva: United Nations.

van Wanrooy, B, Bewley, H, Bryson, A, Forth, J, Freeth, S, Stokes, L and Wood, S (2014) *The 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Survey: First Findings*, fourth edition, London: Department for Business Innovation and Skills.

17 May 2018.

1. Corresponding author: [alanfelstead@cf.ac.uk](mailto:alanfelstead@cf.ac.uk) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The quiz will be live on 19 July 2018. This will coincide with the first findings launch of the Skills and Employment Survey 2017. A further event, to be held on 3 October 2018, will specifically focus on Changing Job Quality in Britain. A development version of the quiz can be made available to interested parties on request. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)