

### Job quality—a “history of the present”

*Demanding work: The paradox of job quality in the affluent economy.* By Francis Green, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2007, 256 pp., \$24.95 /paperback; \$57.50/ cloth.

The “job quality debate” is nothing new, and during a recession, it is even less popular a topic. But in *Demanding Work*, economics professor Francis Green gives us a comprehensive new look at the issues. He summarizes both the data analyses and theoretical background behind a number of international attempts at measuring job quality. We may not have a one-size-fits-all job quality index, but we do have a wealth of data from large social surveys. Green asserts that despite whatever biases may exist with social surveys, we can now isolate those effects and evaluate true quality change over time. So, now that we have collected so much data, do we find trends of declining job quality?

Contrary to some media reports that might suggest otherwise, a very mixed picture of job quality has emerged. While job insecurity (independent of the business cycle) has not worsened, other measures, such as worker autonomy, have declined, and work has intensified for many employees. What is more perplexing is that some quality factors have deteriorated while selected economic indicators have improved. The author presents evidence from a wide range of surveys which “lend an authoritative counterweight to the cult of the vignette, the nice or shocking story, which is too often the sole evidential method of popular or journalistic social science.”

How we interpret the data, explains

Green, is how we construct a “history of the present.” He leads the reader along an interdisciplinary approach to assessing job quality, blending elements of economics, sociology, and psychology, while presenting the work of Nobel Prize economist Amartya Sen and other researchers. Green offers clear, thorough explanations, while examining differing viewpoints (usually with objectivity).

The author discusses skill measurement and explains various theories of the changing demand for skills. Green points out that beyond the job shifts that have occurred along with the increased use of technology, “low-tech” production jobs still make up a large part of the “knowledge economy.” Nevertheless, hard-to-detail effects of evolving technologies do have implications for skill demands, and Green notes that the full effect is often dependent on an organization’s communication structure and how well information is diffused, along with management practices.

In a discussion about working hours and work effort, Green observes that “part of the expressed concern from the time balance pressures” fail to differentiate between household and individual allocation of time. Average households are working more, but individuals, on average, are not working longer.

What then, are the units of effort, and how would we measure them? Green contends that beyond quantifying these units, we need to put them into the larger context, while remembering that organizational efficiency and individual performance may or may not be related. “One of the most frequent generic mistakes in economic commentary,” claims the author, is that productivity gains equal efficiency gains. Although a direct measure of effort may be impossible, the author explains that it is

feasible to measure relative effort and effort change.

Green touches on occupational stress and its emergence as a political and social issue in the 1990’s. “...The work hazard that has risen the most, across many countries, is stress and its related manifestations of ill health.” He reminds the reader, “Stress is only the extreme manifestation of increased pressures at work.”

A British study shows a pattern of work intensification followed by stability of work effort throughout industries between 1992 and 2001. Interpreting these findings, Green notes the dilemma reconciling quantification difficulties with a factor’s importance. He bemoans the fact that economists prefer not to deal with anything other than “hard” data, but he admits the evidence of work intensification presents an “incomplete statistical picture.”

The evidence Green collected points to one other determinant of job quality—worker discretion over labor processes—changing over time. Whereas some would expect wider participation and more worker influence in today’s environment, trends indicate declining discretion. He suggests this may be due partly to increased subcontracting and bureaucratic control. “The understanding of workers’ discretion—its dependence on managerial culture, its relationship to modern technologies, and its importance to workers—needs further development across all the social sciences.”

The job quality picture is incomplete without a consideration of pay. The author touches on wage theory and examines average wage growth as a potential indicator. He notes that the United States manufacturing wage in 1970 led other countries, but by 2000 this was no longer the case. More significant is the “modern

disappointment” of growing wage inequality, as measured by the ratio of wages in the 90th percentile to those in the 10th percentile. Despite overall economic growth during much of the 1970’s and 1980’s, the United States experienced a stagnation of average wages coupled with an increase in wage dispersion. Green claims, “It is self-evident that a rising dispersion of wages implies that job quality is becoming more unequal (unless balanced by an egalitarian trend in the other elements of work).” Green investigates three sources of change—growth of manufacturing in low wage, developing nations; technological change; and in the United States, a deceleration in growth of college-educated labor.

How does job security play a role in quality measurement? The data indicate that job security has “moved in accordance with the macroeconomic and labor market environment in recent decades, but exhibit no clear long-term secular trend.” In short, it is clear that insecurity is not a prime source of declining job quality.

Social surveys have found that “The average job satisfaction of nations is generally either stationary or falling.” Variation exists among European Union countries with regard to trends in well-being. Deterioration occurred in Britain and Germany, but less clear patterns emerge elsewhere. This mixed picture, along with the subjectivity involved, may

lead some social scientists and mainstream economists to dismiss these findings as not indicative of declining job quality. The author proceeds to delineate potential objections, and he offers convincing responses to many of them.

With some major aspects of the quality of work life improving and others deteriorating, “no overall verdict about changing quality can be made without making judgments about the relative value of those aspects.” Green asserts, however, that “Changes in job satisfaction over time within representative populations are a plausible guide” to gauging trends in well-being. Determinants of well-being can be “classified into aspects of any individual’s personality, aspects of her/his job and the match between the job and the individual.” What emerges from a number of studies, however, is the “remarkably large impact of the declining discretion and work intensification” among jobs.

Green devotes a chapter to summarizing results and outlining policy implications of deficient job quality, such as absenteeism and lowered productivity. He warns that national averages that sum the experiences of all workers in a national economy may cloud the picture. “There are enough cases of divergence among different sectors to warn against oversimplifying the verdict.” And, despite having data from many sources around the world, many series are geographically “sketchy.” According to the author,

“The most complete picture has been constructed for Britain.” An editor of the *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Green concludes that the quality of work life is indeed strained. “What is emphasized by this analysis is that, whatever the impact on performance, the taste for reducing workers’ control over their daily tasks has had a very considerable effect on their well-being. The lesson is that, for the benefit of working people, there needs to be less intervention and control from above, and more discretion and self-determination from below even within the confines of a job.” This argument shapes much of his concluding chapter.

Green includes appendixes where he summarizes multivariate analyses behind the study results. An additional data set appendix identifies and describes major sources of data analyzed, such as the British Household Panel Study (BHPS). To his credit, the author was selective in his choice of sources, which is consistent with his concern for quality. Per Green: “Good-quality surveys, with support from administrative data, enable us to settle many of the intriguing issues about job quality in the modern era.” After reading the thorough presentation in *Demanding Work*, however, this reviewer was left wondering if those job quality issues were truly settled.

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