

Job insecurity and work intensification

A nation-wide survey conducted by the University of Cambridge reveals the extent of job insecurity and work intensification. A joint collaboration between the ESRC Centre for Business Research and the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, the Job Insecurity and Work Intensification Survey (JIWIS) included more than 300 in-depth interviews with men and women employed in a wide range of industries and occupations. It found:

- f** Job insecurity has spread throughout the 1990s, particularly amongst professional workers. And work has become more intense. More than 60 per cent of employees claim that the pace of work (and the effort they have to put into their jobs) has increased over the past five years.
- f** The fear of redundancy is not the only aspect of job insecurity. Although many employees are not unduly worried about losing their jobs *per se*, they are extremely worried about the loss of valued job features, such as their status within the organisation and their opportunity for promotion.
- f** More than 40 per cent of employees think that management can be trusted 'only a little' or 'not at all'. And three-quarters of them claim that management and employees are not 'on the same side'.
- f** Job insecurity and work intensification are associated with poor general health and tense family relationships.
- f** Employees who enjoy high levels of supervisory support are healthier than other employees. But while supportive relationships between managers and employees ease the symptoms of workplace stress, they do not remove the cause.
- f** The researchers conclude that the root cause of job insecurity and work intensification lies with the reduced staffing levels pursued by senior managers in response to the market pressures from their competitors and dominant stakeholders.

The prevalence and redistribution of job insecurity

The project investigated changes in levels of perceived job insecurity over the last three decades. The results show a gradual increase in job insecurity between 1966 and 1986, with the trend most pronounced for blue-collar workers during the late 1970s and early 1980s. This is not surprising given the economic depression – with heavy job losses in the manufacturing sector – during this period. More surprising is the extent to which so many people continued to worry about their jobs even after the economy recovered. Comparing the 1986 Social Change and Economic Life Initiative (SCELI) data and the 1997 Skills Survey, the researchers conclude that feelings of job insecurity in the late 1990s are higher than at any point in the post-war years.

Comparisons also revealed that the *spread* of job insecurity has been widening. In the mid-1980s, operatives and craft workers felt much more insecure than those in professional and managerial jobs. But, by the mid-1990s, although a large percentage of manual workers continued to worry, there was a slight reduction in their feelings of insecurity. By contrast, non-manual workers experienced a significant increase in job insecurity during this period. Within this broad category, the biggest 'losers' were professional workers; they went from being the most secure group of workers in 1986 to the most insecure in 1997 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Percentage change in job insecurity, 1986 versus 1997

Professionals	+ 28
Clerical	+ 10
Managers	+ 9
Associate professionals	+ 9
Craft	- 4
Operatives	- 7

Source: Social Change and Economic Life Initiative (1986) and Skills Survey (1997)

The sources of job insecurity

Psychological research suggests that trust is vital to maintaining 'a sense of security'. But one of the study's most striking findings was the degree to which employees did not trust their employers. Asked if management could be trusted to look after their best interests, 44 per cent responded 'only a little' or 'not at all'. Moreover, only 26 per cent agreed that 'in this organisation, management and employees are on the same side'.

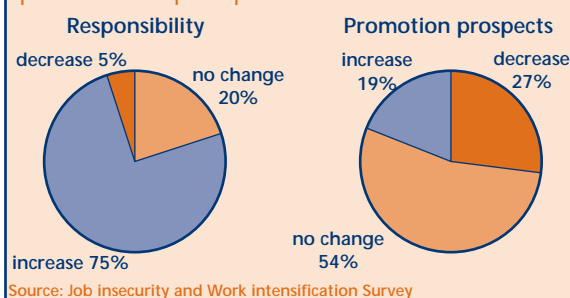
Not surprisingly, most senior managers surveyed were deeply concerned about this lack of trust and its

effect on employees' morale and motivation. Several organisations had introduced comprehensive job security agreements. However, although most employees welcomed these agreements, many were not convinced that, under pressure, their employer would actually *stick* to them.

Such suspicions were often confirmed by their senior managers. Although eleven of the organisations surveyed claimed to have 'a stated policy of deliberately avoiding compulsory redundancies', in most cases these policies were not seen as binding. As one senior manager put it, "although it is our basic operating philosophy to avoid redundancy, in the event of a merger all bets would be off".

The study also reveals the *multidimensional* character of job insecurity. For example, many employees were not unduly worried about losing their job *per se* but were extremely concerned about the loss of valued job *features*, such as their control over the pace of work and their opportunities for promotion. These fears were particularly noticeable in organisations where senior management had made a concerted effort to eliminate existing job demarcations and flatten their managerial hierarchies, but were evident in all the organisations surveyed. Despite the large number of employees reporting an increase in their *responsibilities*, more than a quarter of employees reported that their promotion prospects had decreased over the past five years (see Figure 1); 41 per cent said that they would like to change their position within their organisation.

Figure 1: The percentage of employees experiencing a change in their jobs with respect to their responsibilities and promotion prospects



The effects of job insecurity

Health and well-being

The survey confirmed a significant correlation between job insecurity and 'poor general health' (see Figure 2). Analysis based on the longitudinal British Household Panel Survey also revealed that people do not adjust to job insecurity. On the contrary, physical and mental well-being continues to deteriorate the longer employees remain in a state of insecurity.

Figure 2: Mean General Health Questionnaire scores by how people felt with their employer

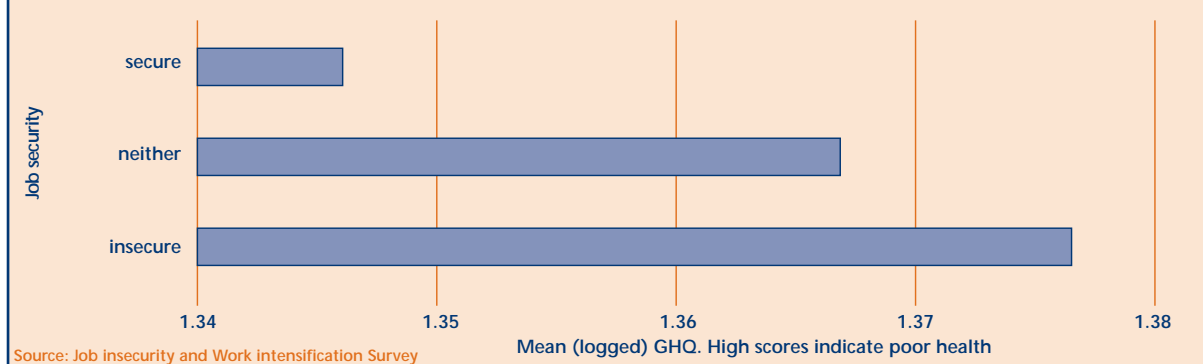
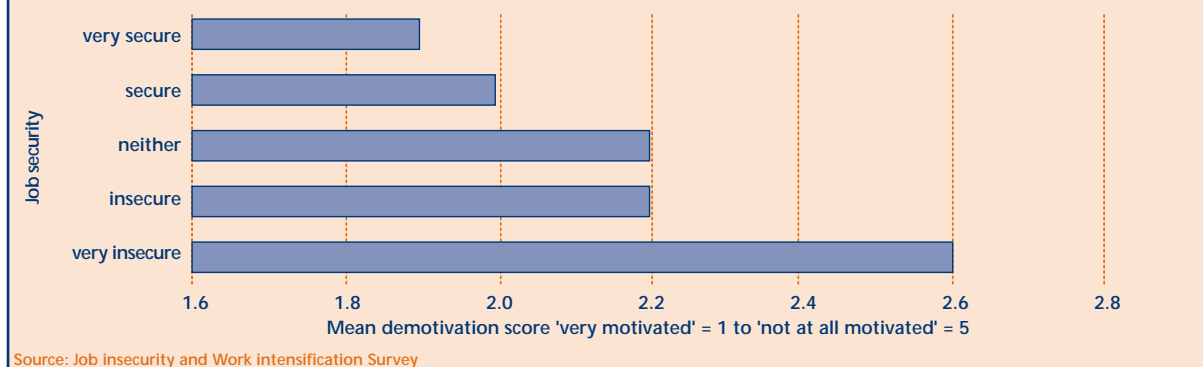


Figure 3: Mean demotivation scores by how secure people felt with their employer



Family relationships

All survey participants were asked: 'Does job-related stress cause tension within your home or household?' The more insecure people felt at work, the more likely they were to experience tension at home, irrespective of whether the affected employee was a man or a woman, or was working full- or part-time.

Organisational efficiency

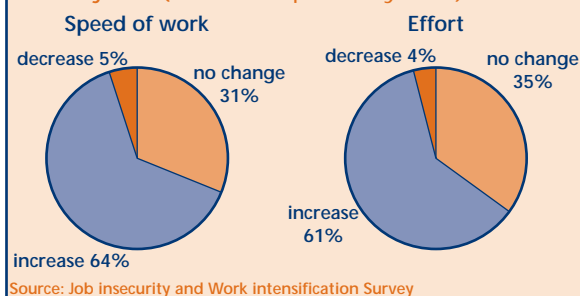
Conventional economic theory often assumes that security breeds complacency. By contrast, the survey found quite clearly that the relationship between job insecurity and self-reported motivation levels is a negative rather than a positive one (see Figure 3).

The intensification of work

Two-thirds of surveyed employees said they 'always' or 'regularly' worked longer than their basic working hours; just over 30 per cent of full-time male employees were regularly working more than 48 hours a week. Moreover, 39 per cent of all interviewees claimed that their working hours had increased over the past 5 years while only 15 per cent said their hours had declined.

In addition, more than 60 per cent of interviewees claimed that the speed of work (and the effort they put into their job) had increased over the last five years (see Figure 4). Fifty per cent also described their current staffing levels as either inadequate or 'very inadequate'.

Figure 4: The percentage of employees experiencing an increase in the speed of work and the effort they put into their jobs (over the past 5 years)



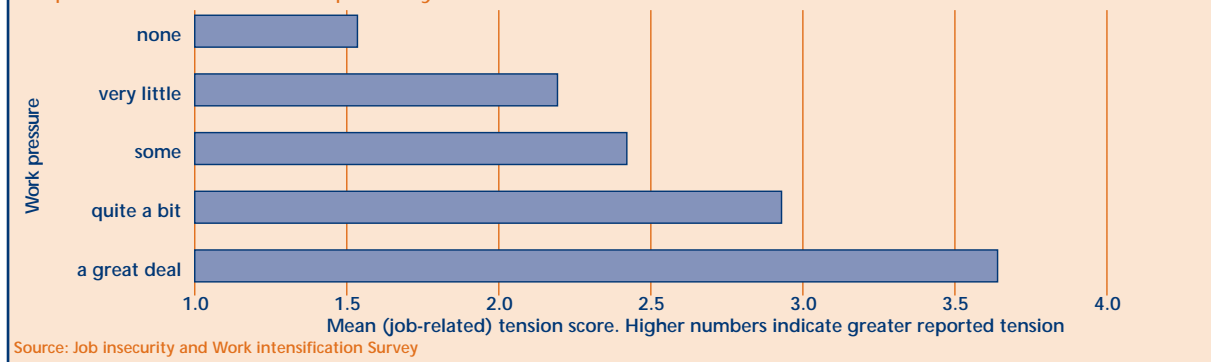
The effect of stress on health and family

Pressure levels were strongly associated not just with poor general health but also with tensions in people's family life. The pressures came from managers, from colleagues, and from inadequate staffing levels. But pressure 'from the sheer quantity of work' seemed to have the greatest impact (see Figure 5). Again, this relationship was equally strong for men and women, and for full- and part-timers.

The management response

Several organisations were clearly concerned about increased stress and were trying to help employees cope, emphasising the need for a more supportive

Figure 5: Scores for job-related tension in the home when asked 'how much pressure do you experience from sheer quantity of work?'



relationship between line managers and their staff. The survey confirmed that employees with high levels of supervisory support - information, practical and emotional - were healthier than other employees.

Nevertheless, the study also makes it clear that supportive relationships between line managers and employees may ease the impact of work-place stress but do not cure it. They do not address the root cause of work intensification: the reduced staffing levels pursued by senior managers in response to the market pressures exerted by their competitors and dominant stakeholders.

Moreover, some forms of supervisory support could actually exacerbate stress. For example, the introduction of performance appraisal systems and other forms of 'feedback' could generate feelings of frustration and hostility, particularly when employees were subject to inadequate staffing levels and unrealistic targets.

Conclusion

The researchers suggest that, in the short term, the drive to reduce costs and/or increase profits may well have increased 'efficiency'. But, in the long term, the forces currently driving British industry have worrying implications not just for individual employees and their families, but also for Britain's future growth rates and the health of its 'social environment'.

Whilst there is much that individual employers can do to uphold their 'duty to care', there is also a pressing need for policies aimed at regulating both the labour and capital markets in which they operate. As revealed by the organisations which participated in the JIWS, the intensity of the pressures to which producers are subject means that the single workplace, or even the single firm, may find it difficult to sustain a credible commitment to the health and security of its employees. The researchers conclude that, over the long term, such commitments can only be established by investment in regulatory institutions which would

allow for creative, rather than destructive, competition.

About the study

The survey was based on interviews in twenty establishments across England, Scotland and Wales. They encompassed a wide range of industries including: manufacturing, construction, health care, retail, transport, education and public administration. The researchers gathered data from senior management, line management and employees, covering a range of occupations from the most senior to the most junior. Three hundred and forty employees were interviewed, 26 of whom also participated in a second round of in-depth semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted between late 1997 and late 1998.

The researchers also analysed data from a number of other sources, including the first six waves of the British Household Panel Survey (1991 to 1996), the work histories contained in the Social Change and Economic Life Initiative (1986), and the 1997 Skills Survey.

How to get further information

The full report, **Job insecurity and work intensification: Flexibility and the changing boundaries of work** by Brendan J Burchell, Diana Day, Maria Hudson, David Ladipo, Roy Mankelov, Jane P Nolan, Hannah Reed, Ines C Wichert and Frank Wilkinson, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 902633 41 5, £13.95 plus £2 p&p).