

What is ‘Good Work’ and why does it matter?

Anne Green

City-REDI, University of Birmingham
a.e.green.1@bham.ac.uk

SOTA Review No 26: March 2019

As the labour market has recovered following the Great Recession and employment rates in the UK have risen to historically high levels, there has been growing interest in the quality as well as the quantity of employment. In part this reflects concerns about developments in working practices, including the rise of the gig economy, unequal gains from flexible working between employers and workers, employment insecurity and the implications of labour market trends for the ‘productivity puzzle’. The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices added impetus to ongoing debates on ‘Good Work’ and in setting out its ‘Good Work Plan’ in December 2018 for the first time the UK Government placed equal emphasis on the quality and quantity of work.

Yet there is no single agreed definition of ‘Good Work’ or set of metrics for measuring progress towards it. Personal, work, job and social factors all play a part in ‘Good Work’ and commentators focus on topics such as terms of employment, pay and benefits, job design, health and well-being, work-life balance, and voice and representation. Yet the priority individual workers place on these various topics varies - including over the life course. There is scope for further research on links between ‘Good Work’ and productivity and on good practice in promoting ‘Good Work’ in different sectors and in establishments of different sizes.

Background

Traditionally at times of economic crisis labour market commentators focus on a shortfall in employment available and policy concentrates primarily on job creation and reducing unemployment. In 2018 the employment rate reached a new high point in the UK, with 75.7% of people aged between 16 and 64 years in employment (Clarke and Cominetti, 2019).

As employment has increased in the UK since 2011 a shift is discernible in the academic and policy debate from the ‘quantity of work’ to the ‘quality of work’. Alongside high employment rates there are ongoing concerns regarding issues such as:

- weak productivity growth (Innes, 2018; McCann, 2018);
- employment insecurity and precarity (Rubery et al., 2016; Giles, 2017);
- in-work poverty (Lee et al., 2018);
- skills shortages and skills polarisation (Giles, 2017; Goos and Manning, 2007; Salvatori, 2018); and
- the impact of automation, technological change and the gig economy on the nature and experience of work (Frey and Osborne, 2017; Centre for Cities, 2018; Wood et al. 2018).

These broad concerns regarding drivers of the future of work and outcomes relating to the quality of work have come together under a ‘Good Work’ label. Specific developments adding impetus to debates on ‘Good Work’ in the UK include:

1. The establishment by The Work Foundation (2016) of a Commission on Good Work in order to understand better the factors shaping change, and the nature and scale of opportunities and risks, so as to promote policies to achieve ‘Good Work’. According to the Work Foundation ‘Good Work’ means more businesses pursuing a smarter people-centred approach which secures high performance working practices and seeks to value and unlock the ‘human’ contribution.
2. The commissioning and publication of the independent Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices (2017). The Review called on the government to play closer attention to the quality of work, alongside the quantity of work. Dimensions of ‘Good Work’ highlighted in the review include wages, employment quality, education and training, working conditions, work life balance and collective participation and collective representation.
3. HM Government’s publication of a ‘Good Work Plan’ in December 2018, setting out its vision for the future of the UK labour market, with a commitment to improving the quality of work at its heart.

Evidence

While there appears to be a good deal of consensus regarding the need to adopt ‘Good Work’ principles to date there has not been a single agreed set of indicators of exactly what it encompasses or metrics for measuring progress towards this ambition. Giles (2017) highlights a range of personal, work, social and job factors comprising meaningful and fulfilling ‘Good Work’ which makes the best of people’s talents today and tomorrow (Table 1).

Table 1: Components of ‘Good Work’

<i>Personal factors</i>	<i>Work factors</i>	<i>Job factors</i>	<i>Social factors</i>
skills/ experience/ ambition	management	income and benefits	lifestyle
age	performance review	health and safety	support communities
gender	structures, teams, discretion	hours and job security	personal networks
ethnicity	communication – employee voice	fairness, trust, control	

values/ motivations		development opportunities	
health & well- being			

Source: Giles (2017)

There are other concepts and terms that are similar to ‘Good Work’ that capture some of the same issues. For instance, the Carnegie Trust UK has identified ‘Fulfilling Work’ (White, 2016) as being made up of three components (Table 2).

Table 2: Components of ‘Fulfilling Work’

<i>Availability of work</i>	<i>Quality of work</i>	<i>Work and well-being</i>
How easily and fairly can people find the type and level of work they would like?	Do terms, conditions and opportunities at work meet people’s expectations?	Do wider factors around engagement, connection and agency at work support personal development and fulfilment?

Source: White (2016)

Importantly, ‘quality work’ means different things to different people (HM Government, 2018). Some workers might weight ‘pay’ particularly highly, while for others flexibility and sociability may be especially important. Some workers are keen to progress in work, while others have no ambition to do so – either in the short- or longer-term; (workers’ appetite for progression may be shaped by workplace context and perceived opportunities, as well as by the broader welfare context). Some workers may be relatively well paid and have secure contracts, but feel dissatisfied with development opportunities and the influence they have at work. This suggests that a high score on one dimension of ‘Good Work’ / ‘Fulfilling Work’ might not be aligned with a high score on another.

Primary research involving more than 1,500 low-paid workers in Scotland giving their views on what ‘Decent Work’ means to them highlighted concerns about pay and terms of employment. However, aspects of intrinsic characteristics of work and health and safety were highly ranked too (Stuart et al., 2016). Out of 26 factors associated with decent work identified in a literature review, those ranked in focus groups as most important in order of descending priority are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: Ranking of ‘Decent Work’ factors

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Factor</i>	<i>Category</i>
1	An hourly rate or salary which is at least enough to cover basics and things most people take for granted without getting into debt	Pay
2	Job security	Terms of employment
3	Paid holidays and paid sick leave	Terms of employment
4	A safe working environment free from physical and mental risk or harm	Health and safety
5	A supportive line manager	Intrinsic characteristics of work
6	Being paid fairly compared to other similar jobs	Pay
7	A job in which there is no discrimination based on who I am	Terms of employment

Source: from Stuart et al. (2016)

In 2018 a Job Quality Working Group convened by the Royal Society of Arts and Carnegie UK proposed 18 measures of job quality which encompasses many of the themes and issues outlined above. It proposes collecting these measures via the Labour Force Survey (i.e. a national survey of workers) (Table 4) (Irvine et al., 2018). While six of these are already available in the Labour Force Survey, twelve of the measures would need to be the subject of new questions. The measures represent a mix of factual and attitudinal questions.

Table 4: Proposed 'Good Work' measures

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Measure</i>
Terms of employment	1. job security
	2. minimum guaranteed hours
	3. underemployment
Pay and benefits	4. pay
	5. satisfaction with pay
Job design and nature of work	6. use of skills
	7. control (of the way a worker can do their job)
	8. opportunities for progression
	9. sense of purpose
	10. social support and cohesion
	11. line manager relationship
Health, safety and psychosocial wellbeing	12. physical injury
	13. mental health
Work-life balance	14. over-employment
	15. overtime (paid and unpaid)
Voice and representation	16. trade union membership
	17. employee information
	18. employee involvement

Source: Irvine et al. (2018)

The UK Government's Good Work Plan noted that the Secretary of State for Business would have responsibility for quality of work within Government and has placed equal importance on the quality and quantity of work. It recognised the importance of flexibility to success of the UK labour market but set out the need for legislation to introduce a right for all workers to request a more predictable and stable contract. There is a clear desire to improve clarity regarding workers' employment status and employment rights. The Good Work Plan also set out commitments to extend state enforcement procedures in respect of vulnerable and low-paid workers.

Summary and evidence gaps

'Good Work' is firmly on the policy agenda. Much of the debate on 'Good Work' has been at the national level. While this is important in order to measure progress towards 'Good Work' in aggregate and at the national level there is also considerable interest in how the situation and progress on different measures varies by worker characteristics (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity); industrial sector; geography; etc. Previous data analyses of various dimensions of access to 'Fulfilling Work'

suggest that young people, workers with disabilities and those working in the hotels and restaurants sector are most disadvantaged (Ormston and Hope, 2016). Hence a special focus on promoting 'Good Work' amongst particular sub-groups, sectors and geographies is likely to be appropriate. Yet sample size constraints in the Labour Force Survey means that robust disaggregations of some of the proposed measures in Table 4 are unlikely to be possible.

While 'Good Work' is of relevance to establishments of all sizes, there are less likely to be dedicated human resource functions in smaller establishments and more limited resources to develop employee insight functions. However, as noted by Irvine et al. (2018) given more informal and less hierarchical ways of working in some small establishments, the need for formal mechanisms underpinning 'Good Work' outcomes may be less developed. There is scope for further research on good practice in promoting 'Good Work' in establishments of different sizes and in different sectors.

A further evidence gap relates to rigorous assessment of the extent to which progress towards different aspects of 'Good Work' relates to increases in productivity.

Sources

- Centre for Cities (2018) *Cities Outlook 2018*, Centre for Cities, London.
- Clarke S and Cominetti N (2019) *Setting the record straight: How record employment has changed the UK*, Resolution Foundation, London.
- Frey CB and Osborne MA (2017) 'The future of employment: how susceptible are jobs to computerisation?', *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 114, 254–280.
- Giles L (2017) 'Why we need to improve quality work?', Inclusive Growth Analysis Unit conference on 'Local approaches to improving quality work', Manchester, 4 December 2017.
- Goos M and Manning A (2007) 'Lousy and lovely jobs: the rising polarization of work in Britain', *Review of Economics and Statistics* 89(1), 118-133.
- HM Government (2018) *Good Work Plan*.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/766167/good-work-plan-command-paper.pdf
- Innes D (2018) *The links between low productivity, low pay and in-work poverty*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York.
- Irvine G, White D and Diffley M (2018) *Measuring Good Work: The final report of the Measuring Job Quality Working Group*, Carnegie UK Trust, Dunfermline.
- Lee N, Green A and Sissons P (2018) 'Low-pay sectors, earnings mobility and economic policy in the UK', *Policy and Politics* 46(3), 347–369.
- McCann P (2018) *Productivity perspectives synthesis*, Productivity Insights Network, University of Sheffield, Sheffield.
- Ormston R and Hope S (2016) *Work and Wellbeing: Exploring data on inequalities*, Ipsos MORI Scotland, Edinburgh.
- Rubery J, Keizer A and Grimshaw D (2016) 'Flexibility bites back: the multiple and hidden costs of flexible employment policies', *Human Resource Management Journal* 26(3), 235-251.
- Salvatori A (2018) 'The anatomy of job polarization in the UK', *Journal for Labour Market Research* 52 (8), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12651-018-0242-z>
- Stuart F, Pautz H and Wright S (2016) *Decent Work for Scotland's Low-Paid Workers: A job to be done*, Oxfam Scotland, Glasgow.

- Taylor M, Marsh G, Nicol D and Broadbent P (2017) Good Work: The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/627671/good-work-taylor-review-modern-working-practices-rg.pdf
- White D (2016) Work and Wellbeing – Discussion Paper, Carnegie UK Trust, Dunfermline.
- Wood AJ, Graham M, Lehdonvirta V and Hjorth I (2018) ‘Good gig, bad gig and algorithmic control in the global gig economy’, Work, Employment and Society <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0950017018785616>
- Work Foundation (2016) Commission on Good Work: shaping the agenda in a modern UK economy <http://www.theworkfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/The-Commission-on-Good-Work.pdf>

About the author



Anne Green is Professor of Regional Economic Development at City-REDI (Regional Economic Development Institute), University of Birmingham. Her research interests encompass spatial dimensions of employment and skills, and local and regional labour market issues. She is currently working on aspects of inclusive growth and productivity. She has acted in an advisory capacity on employment, skills and regional issues to several government departments and agencies in the UK and to the OECD and the European Commission. She can be contacted at a.e.green.1@bham.ac.uk

Other SOTA Reviews are available on the ERC web site www.enterpriseresearch.ac.uk. The views expressed in this review represent those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the ERC or its funders.

