

Hard at Work: What the Evidence Really Tells Us About Job Quality and Wellbeing

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Based on the BRIDGES/EUWIN Webinar, 29 May 2026, featuring Professor Francis Green, University College London

Why Job Quality Matters More Than We Think

We spend nearly a third of our waking lives at work. Yet for decades, policymakers, employers and researchers have paid far more attention to wages and GDP growth than to the broader quality of jobs. Professor Francis Green's new book — *Hard at Work: Job Quality, Wellbeing and the Global Economy* — makes a compelling case that this is a serious mistake.

Drawing on two decades of research and a sweeping review of surveys across the Global North, Green argues that job quality has a profound and measurable impact on human wellbeing — one that rivals even the effect of health itself.

Defining Job Quality: Seven Dimensions That Matter

A central contribution of the book is its clear, worker-centred framework. Job quality, Green insists, must be understood from the perspective of employees — not as a reflection of their personal satisfaction or mood, but as an objective description of actual job characteristics.

He identifies **seven dimensions**:

- **Earnings** — real pay from work
- **Prospects** — job security and opportunities for advancement
- **Autonomy and Skills** — the degree of discretion and skill use workers have
- **Working Time Quality** — duration and flexibility of hours

- **Social Environment** — support from managers and colleagues; freedom from bullying and harassment
- **Physical Environment** — safety and working conditions
- **Work Intensity** — the pace and demands of work

This framework is deliberately narrower than the UN’s concept of “decent work,” which encompasses social insurance and labour dialogue. Green’s focus is strictly on the job itself — making it more precise and easier to track over time.

The Wellbeing Impact: Bigger Than You Might Expect

One of the most striking findings in the book is just how large the wellbeing impact of job quality turns out to be. Green and colleagues constructed a composite Job Quality Index and compared the general wellbeing of workers in average jobs with those in the lowest decile of job quality.

The difference was substantial — roughly equivalent in magnitude to the wellbeing gap between people in good and poor health. By contrast, factors that researchers often study intensively — education, age, gender, marital status, whether someone has children — all had considerably smaller effects.

“Collectively, we need to study job quality,” Green argued. “We need to understand what’s having this big effect on our wellbeing.”

Key findings from individual dimensions include:

- **Autonomy** is strongly linked to job satisfaction, mental health, life satisfaction, and even willingness to accept lower pay. The relationship is slightly curvilinear — autonomy is beneficial up to a point, but workers also need guidance when tasks exceed their competence.
- **Job insecurity** has very large, well-documented negative effects on mental health, life satisfaction and even suicidal ideation — effects that ripple out to families and communities, not just the individual worker.
- **Work intensity** has been increasing in the majority of countries studied, with clear negative consequences for health and wellbeing.

Trends Across the Globe: A Mixed and Sobering Picture

Green analysed survey data spanning at least ten years from multiple countries — using the European Working Conditions Survey as the gold standard for Europe, supplemented by data from the US, Australia, South Korea and elsewhere.

The overall picture is one of **fragmented progress**:

Dimension	Direction of Change
Wages	Predominantly improving (28 of 34 countries)
Physical environment	Predominantly improving (20 of 34 countries)
Prospects	Mixed — no clear trend
Working time quality	Mixed — no clear trend
Autonomy	Mixed — no clear trend
Social environment	Mixed — no clear trend
Work intensity	Predominantly worsening (17 of 34 countries)

Critically, these dimensions do not move together. Countries that have seen wage growth have not necessarily seen improvements in autonomy, social environment, or work intensity. This has an important implication: **earnings cannot be used as a proxy for job quality**. Each dimension tells its own story, driven by its own regulatory, technological and managerial factors.

Specific country examples:

- **Britain**: a clear long-term trend of increasing work intensity across multiple measures.
- **United States**: the proportion of workers putting in more than 48 hours a week rose through the 1970s-1990s, then plateaued; flexibility to take time off at short notice has declined this century.
- **South Korea**: notable improvements in the social environment, linked to regulatory change and shifting government policy in the 2010s.

GDP Growth Is Not Enough

One of the book's sharpest theoretical conclusions is a direct challenge to what Green calls "affluence theory" — the assumption that as countries grow richer, job quality will automatically improve across all dimensions.

The evidence gives this idea only partial support. Higher GDP per capita is associated with better wages, improved job prospects, and somewhat better working time quality. But it has **no consistent relationship** with autonomy, social environment, work intensity, or physical environment (beyond compositional shifts away from heavy industry).

"Just growing the economy is not going to necessarily improve all your dimensions of job quality," Green stated. This amounts to a critique of using GDP as a measure of social progress more broadly — a theme that connects with broader debates in welfare economics and policy.

Bad Jobs: Where Are They, and What Creates Them?

Roughly **10% of jobs** across Europe can be classified as "bad jobs" — defined by multiple simultaneous deprivations across job quality dimensions. The proportion ranges from under 1% in Luxembourg to around 16% in Greece, and this variation is substantially explained by two factors: **national income levels** and **the strength of labour market regulation**.

Crucially, Green also highlights that forced labour — sometimes called modern slavery — affects an estimated 3–4% of the global workforce. These workers are entirely invisible in standard survey data, yet represent the most severe form of job quality deprivation.

Why Job Autonomy Remains Stubbornly Underused

Despite decades of evidence linking autonomy to both employee wellbeing and organisational performance, only around 10% of European companies systematically invest in job autonomy — a finding from the 2019 European Company Survey cited in discussion.

Green's explanation is revealing: granting autonomy requires a **difficult managerial judgement** about employees' competence and trustworthiness. Unlike anti-bullying policies, which present a relatively clear moral and practical case, calibrating the right level of autonomy demands genuine skill and confidence. Many managers — particularly less experienced ones — default to control rather than trust.

"It's a more difficult judgement," Green acknowledged. "People are afraid of losing control."

What Should Be Done?

Green's final chapter moves from diagnosis to principles, identifying three main levers for improving job quality: **employers, workers, and government**.

The most striking finding from his recent research is just how much the employer matters. Workers in the same occupation, doing similar work, show dramatically different levels of job quality and wellbeing depending on which organisation employs them. The identity of the employer — and the management practices they deploy — explains more variance in job quality than occupation or education level.

"Whether you work for an enlightened employer who puts in place a supportive social environment, proper policies about health and safety, makes an enormous difference," Green argued. "We need to find ways of inducing, compelling or persuading employers to operate further up the job quality spectrum." For many employers, this is not just a social obligation — it is a business case. Better job quality generates greater productivity and profitability, as well as better outcomes for employees.

Conclusion: An Agenda for Social Science and Policy

Hard at Work arrives at a moment when job quality is rising up the international agenda — with the EU, OECD and UN all developing frameworks and statistics in this space. Green's contribution is to synthesise and interrogate the evidence with unusual rigour, showing both what we know and where the gaps remain. The core message is clear: **job quality profoundly affects the lives of working people**,

its trends are uneven and cannot be assumed to improve with growth alone, and the employer sits at the heart of the solution. As the world of work continues to be reshaped by AI, flexible labour markets and geopolitical uncertainty, understanding and improving job quality is not a marginal concern — it is central to human flourishing.

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