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Quality of Work and Psychosocial Risks: A French-British Comparison

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Introduction

In recent years there has been the growth of concern about quality of work issues on international policy agendas. This had been partly reflected in extensive work by international agencies on the development of typologies of the quality of work with a view to better measurement of trends over time. But it is also interesting that there has been increased recognition of the need for policy reform. This was most clearly evident in the commitment in September 2015 of G20 Labour Ministers to promoting better jobs (a declaration later endorsed by the G20 Leaders Summit), which recognised the importance of the quality of work for well-being.

'We emphasise the importance of promoting better jobs, since **the quality of working life is one of the most powerful determinants of well-being in our societies...** We understand that a comprehensive policy approach will be required to make progress on all three dimensions of job quality: earnings quality, economic security, **and quality of the working environment** and we are committed to make progress in the different areas, according to country circumstances.'

In this presentation, I will consider first some issues about the underlying concepts and theoretical arguments, second some comparative evidence about changes in risk factors in France and Britain and third some of the options that have been advanced for reducing psychosocial risks at work.

Section 1. Quality of Work and Psychosocial Risks: Concepts and Theories

What is a good quality of the working environment? There has been a long tradition of theory and research on this issue within a number of disciplines – sociology, psychology, ergonomics and epidemiology. But there have been two predominant answers. The first focuses on the extent to

which the nature of work and its organizational context provide opportunities for individual self-development through providing opportunities for the use of initiative and learning. The second is concerned with the implications of work characteristics for the protection and enhancement of worker physical and psychological health. It is the second of these that leads directly into the issue of psychosocial risks at work.

The term psychosocial risks has been used in quite diverse ways, but a report to the French Ministère du travail in 2011, that drew on a wide range of expertise from a number of academic disciplines, adopted the following definition: "*risques pour la santé mentale, physique et sociale, engendrés par les conditions d'emploi et les facteurs organisationnels et relationnels susceptibles d'interagir avec le fonctionnement mental.*" (Gollac, 2011, p. 31).

An important feature of this definition is that it gives primary emphasis to risks that derive from the work environment rather than from the personal characteristics of individuals.

The focus on psychosocial risks as a health hazard has been informed by a widely shared vision of the changing nature of work. This contends that there has been a decline in traditional physical risks arising in work in part due to the long-term shift from a manufacturing to a service economy and in part from the greatly improved regulative control of risks of accidents at work. But in its place, it is suggested, there has been a growth in new types of risk – psychosocial risks – primarily due to the intensification of work and the shift to types of work that primarily involve interaction with people, whether as clients, pupils, patients or delinquents.

There is some evidence in favour of this view of change: there has been a marked fall over time in fatal accidents at work. However, research on working conditions has shown that there has been a persistence of some physical risk factors such as heavy lifting, repetitive movements, exposure to biological and chemical risks. It is also very difficult to know whether psychosocial types of risk have been increasing or not over the longer term. This is quite simply because we have little evidence about the prevalence of such risks in earlier historical periods. But, there are grounds for thinking that there have been pressures in recent decades that may have accentuated psychosocial risks.

Psychosocial Theories

There are a number of distinct models of psychosocial risks, but two have been particularly influential and well-supported by research evidence. The first is Demand-Control Theory, initially developed by Robert Karasek and then elaborated in what is still perhaps the most important book on the topic 'Healthy Work', published in 1990. The second is Effort-Reward Imbalance theory, developed by Johannes Siegrist in the 1990s, which has just been the subject of a major overview study edited by Siegrist and Wahrendorf (2016) - *Work Stress and Health in a Globalized Economy. The Model of Effort-Reward Imbalance*. In both cases, the primary concerns have been with working environment risks for depression and for coronary heart disease (CHD).

Job Control, Work Pressure and Job Strain (Karasek-Theorell Model). The Demand-Control model focuses upon two dimensions of the working environment – the level of work demands or work pressures on the one hand and the degree of control the worker has over their immediate job (sometimes referred to as 'decision-latitude'). Both work pressure and job control have been shown

by an extensive earlier literature to be important for workers' satisfaction with their jobs, but the innovation in the Karasek schema was to argue that it is essential to take account of the combination of the two in order to understand their implications for psychological and physical health.

The core argument is that the impact of high job demands will vary depending on whether or not the worker has high or low control over their work. Where demands are high but control is high, work pressure may be a source of challenge that encourages personal development. It is where high demands come together with low control that they will have strongly negative implications for psychological and physical health. Other types of job are less consequential, but the theory argues that passive jobs (low work pressure and low job control) also have negative consequences, since they fail to provide the stimulus necessary for personal development.

The Effort-Reward Imbalance Model. The second major theoretical model – The Effort-Reward Imbalance or ERI model – takes a rather different point of departure: the importance of norms of reciprocity for individual well-being (Gouldner, 1960). It posits that, in the work context, an imbalance between effort and reward in work violates this norm, with negative consequences for both physical and psychological health (Siegrist, 1996; Siegrist 2016). Effort is conceived primarily in terms of the time pressures on the job, but the model also introduces a secondary motivational source of pressure – namely a psychological trait of 'over-commitment' - whereby people may have a particularly strong tendency to strive for achievement. The conceptualisation of rewards in the theory is multi-dimensional, involving income, self-esteem, promotion prospects and job security. The emphasis on job security is particularly important, as it is consistent with an extensive research literature showing that job insecurity is almost as harmful as unemployment itself in undermining psychological well-being.

An extensive programme of research has been developed to test both of these theories. The types of studies needed to provide convincing evidence are quite demanding. Ideally they should be prospective studies providing evidence over time and they should demonstrate that more prolonged or frequent exposure increases risks. It is necessary that the effects can be found across highly diverse types of worker and not confined to specific occupations. And, given the very general nature of the hypotheses, findings should be replicated across different cultural contexts.

The evidence that now exists for the negative effects of high demands and low job control is now very impressive. There have been several recent meta-studies that provide estimates of effects based on a large-number of studies, while taking account of the relative strength of the evidence in each study. These show those high demand-low control jobs have a 75% increased risk of depressive symptoms and a 30% increased risks of heart disease (Kivimaki et al. 2012, Theorell et al. 2015; Theorell et al. 2016). The estimated effects arising from effort-reward imbalance are broadly similar. But interestingly some studies have shown that both high demand-low control work and effort-reward imbalance have significant negative effects if considered together.

Overall, the strongest evidence points to at least three aspects of the working environment that are particularly important for psychosocial risks – the intensity of work effort, low job control and job insecurity.

Section 2: Comparison of Trends in Risk Factors in France and Britain 2005-2015

What factors help to account for the prevalence of risk factors in the work environment? There has been a long-standing debate about whether the quality of the working environment is primarily determined by the level of economic and technological development of a society or by the nature of national institutional structure. A comparison of France and Britain provides a case for exploring their importance: they are two economies with broadly similar levels of economic development but with quite distinctive institutional structures.

The two countries are at broadly similar levels of development in terms of per capita GDP. There are however some significant differences to note. The UK experienced a stronger initial shock after the economic crisis of 2008, but it had a stronger recovery in per capita GDP in the period after 2010. France has consistently had a higher level of labour productivity per hour worked, possibly reflecting differences in employers' production strategies, with a greater emphasis on skilled work and capital intensity in France. Finally, Unemployment rates have been consistently higher in France and the country divergence grew over the period 2005 to 2010, perhaps reflecting the differences in production strategies. Overall, the pattern suggests French employers may have followed a more capital intensive strategy at cost of higher unemployment. British employers have relied more on a low skill, low cost, production strategy which supports higher employment levels.

In terms of institutions, there are sharp contrasts between the two societies. The UK is often taken as the exemplar of a liberal market economy with low regulative control, while France has been viewed as a form of state capitalism with stronger regulation often as a result of state intervention. The French have stronger regulative controls with respect to collective bargaining, employee representation, training provision, working time, redundancies and minimum pay. The difference is reflected in the relative strength of the labour inspectorates in the two countries: France has 18.9 labour inspectors per 100,000 workers, the UK 0.9.

A recent comparison of Workplace Employment Relations (Amossé et al. 2016) has also pointed to important differences at company level – in particular with respect to centralization of decision making and employee voice. Decision making with respect to employment and pay is more centralized in France – with respect to employment decisions 87% of workplaces have local decision-making autonomy in the UK, compared with 30% in France. The French have stronger formal employee representation: 53% of French workplaces have employee representatives (accounting for 82% of employees), whereas only 19% of British workplaces have an employee representative (accounting for 48% of employees). In contrast, British workplaces are more likely to consult employees directly ie through team meetings or opinion surveys (45% of British vs 21% of French workplaces use employee attitude surveys).

Finally, it should be noted that there have been important differences with respect to policy support to reduce psychosocial risks. In the UK the principal agency for monitoring psychosocial risks at work and issuing guidelines about 'voluntary management standards' is the Health and Safety Agency. But with the arrival of a Conservative-Liberal government in power in 2010, its work to monitor trends in psychosocial risks through surveys of working conditions were discontinued. In France, after a wave of work related suicides in 2008, the Ministre du travail, emploi et santé set up a College d'Expertise on Psychosocial risks, presided by Michel Gollac, which successfully recommended a substantial

extension of regular monitoring of risks through large scale representative surveys. Also from 2010 obligatory negotiations were introduced for firms of 1,000 + employees on ways of preventing risks.

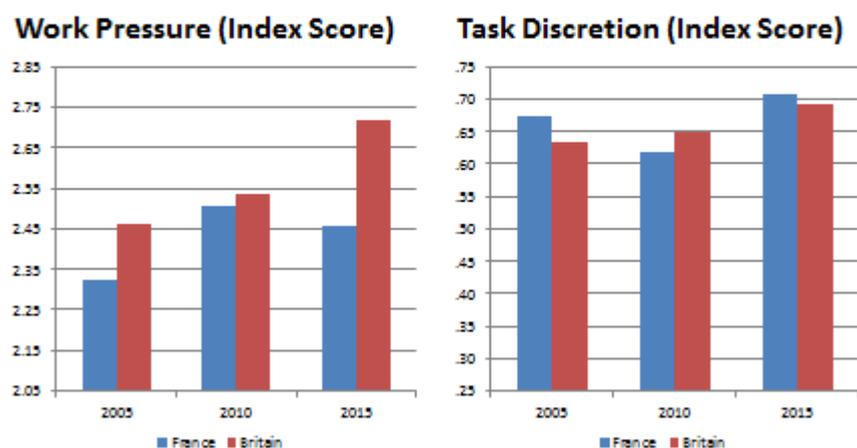
What impact, if any, did these institutional differences between the countries have on worker experiences of psychosocial risk factors in the period between 2005 and 2010, in the wake of the economic crisis and its aftermath? Did a more centralized and regulated state capitalist regime protect employees better from the effect of the economic crisis on work intensity and task discretion than a decentralized liberal market economy? Did the regulated but dualistic labour market in France lead to higher levels of job insecurity than the deregulated British labour market?

The best source of comparative data for examining these issues is the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) Series, conducted by Eurofound (the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions). These provide representative data for people in employment in each country in 2005, 2010 and 2015. We focus on the situation of employees. The EWCS has three commonly used measures of work pressure. Two questions ask people whether their jobs involve working at very high speed, to tight deadlines and the third asks whether they have enough time to get the job done. These have been combined into a single index of work pressure which is the average of the standardized scores. Its measure of task discretion consists of responses to three questions: whether people are able to choose or change 1) their order of tasks, 2) their methods of work and 3) the speed or rate of work. Finally it has a measure of perceived job insecurity, derived from a question asking people how much they agreed or disagreed that they might lose their job in the next 6 months

Trends in Work Pressure and Task Discretion. Chart 1 shows the trends in work pressure and task discretion in the two countries. If we take first the comparison between before and after the economic crisis (2005-2010), it is notable that work pressure rose very sharply in both countries – but particularly sharply in France. Over the same period, task discretion remained broadly at the same level in the UK but declined in France. In short developments in France could be seen as more likely to have exacerbated problems of psychosocial risks in this period, since they increased both the risk factors of high work intensity and low job control. It is interesting that this period coincided with the wave of work-related suicides at Renault and France Telecom in 2007-8.

A second point to note is that the French pattern changes quite markedly in the period 2010 to 2015. The growth of work pressure levels off, while there is an increase in the level of task discretion – both factors that reduce psychosocial risks. This contrasts with the continuous rise of work pressure in Britain. While there may be other explanations, this pattern would be consistent with the view that French policy initiatives with respect to psychosocial risks had some effect in generating a greater awareness of the problem that encouraged some corrective response.

Chart 1 Work Pressure and Task Discretion

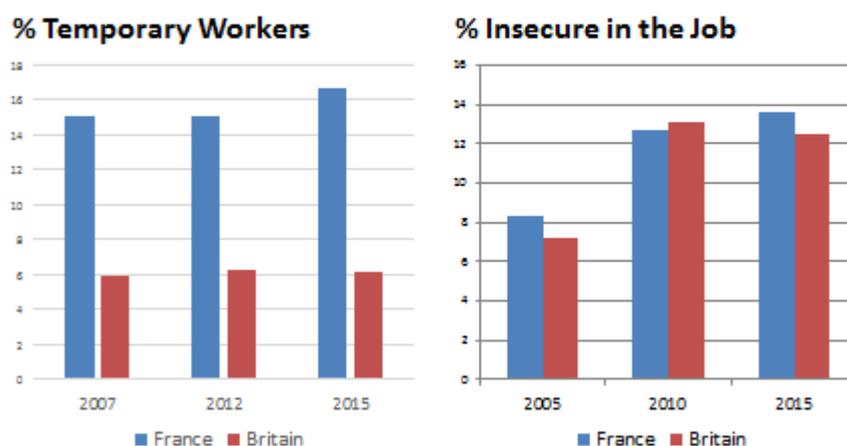


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Trends in Insecurity. The discussion of job insecurity has been increasingly linked to the growth of non-standard temporary work contracts. In that respect, as can be seen in Chart 2, OECD data shows that temporary contracts are much less prevalent in Britain than in France. Moreover there was very little growth in such contracts over the period, while in France temporary work increased somewhat between 2010 and 2015. But the problem of job insecurity is considerably greater in the UK than this suggests. The low proportion of temporary employees partly reflects the fact that it is much easier for British employers to dismiss so-called 'permanent' employees. Moreover, there has been increasing evidence of a growth in new contractual practices that may have generated insecurity – for instance zero-hour contracts that make it possible for employers to change at short notice the number of hours that employees work and indeed may leave them for a period without any work or income, despite being formally employed.

If we look at the measure of perceived job insecurity, it is clear that both the levels and trends in insecurity were in practice fairly close between the two countries – insecurity rose sharply in the period marked by the economic crisis (2005-10) and then levelled off. There was a small improvement in Britain between 2010 and 2015 but some continued increase in job insecurity in France, consistently with the rather different trends in unemployment rates over this period. But, broadly speaking, different institutional structure led to rather similar outcomes with respect to insecurity.

Chart 2 Job Insecurity



2

Which employees were most exposed to changes in psychosocial risks?

Apart from the general trends, the countries may have differed in the types of workers who were most exposed to changes in psychosocial risks. The institutional differences between the countries might lead to a number of expectations. If French employers place a greater emphasis on increasing production through the use of more skilled workers and the British through the use of low skilled workers, increases in work intensity should affect more highly skilled employees to a greater extent than in Britain. If French regulative protection primarily benefits those on permanent contracts in a dualistic labour market, it is those on temporary contracts who should have experienced the brunt of work intensification. Women in France have been more integrated into the employment structure in terms of hours worked than in the UK, we could then expect that they were more affected by efforts to intensify work. Finally, given a more prominent role assumed by the state in France in employee protection, we could expect a greater divergence between the experiences of public and private sector employees.

Given that the main differences in the trends were with respect to factors relating the demand-control model of psychosocial stress, we focus on combined risks with respect to work pressure and task discretion (immediate job control). Vulnerability to psychosocial risks is defined as those who were in jobs that were above the EU-27 median with respect to work pressure and below the median with respect to task discretion. It is important to bear in mind that the sample numbers in the EWCS are relatively small and conclusions about trends for subcategories of the workforce can only be regarded as very tentative until we have stronger evidence from the large-scale national quality of work surveys that are currently being conducted in the two countries.

Occupational Class Differences, The sample numbers in the data only allow us to examine occupations taken at the level of broad occupational classes. We have adopted categories based on the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) 'major group' categorization of occupations (although I have grouped some of the categories and changed some of the labels for

presentational simplicity). The ISCO classification in principle reflects the level and scope of skills required, although clerical, service and sales and skilled manual workers are distinguished primarily in terms of type of skill.

Taking the occupational pattern in 2005 as the point of departure, the two countries were most similar with respect to occupations at the highest and lowest levels of the skill spectrum. Managers and professionals had relatively low exposure to psychosocial risks (mainly because high levels of work pressure were compensated by high levels of job control), while jobs that involved high pressure with low control were much more prevalent among the low skilled. In the intermediate categories, there were differences: technicians, clerical employees and service/sales employees had greater exposure in Britain, skilled manual workers in France.

Between 2005 and 2010, the overall rise in psychosocial risks in this period was primarily to be found in France, reflecting the combined effects of increasing work intensity and declining job control. Consistent with the view that French placed a greater emphasis on skilled employees in their production strategies, technicians and associate professionals were more affected than their counterparts in Britain, where it was primarily the manual working class that experienced a deterioration in their conditions.

In terms of change across the overall period between 2005 and 2010, the introduction of policies to moderate psychosocial risks in France in the second half of the period largely appears to have largely benefited technicians and associate professionals, reversing much of the earlier increase in risks. Service and sales employees, however, continued to stand out as having an exceptionally high increased risk. In Britain, in contrast, the most significant feature of the trend over time is that the position of the low skilled continued to deteriorate over the whole period.

Differences by Sex. In 2005 women were less likely to be exposed to psychosocial risks than men in both countries. Moreover, in the period 2005 to 2010, it is clear that male employees saw the sharpest deterioration in their working conditions. But, if we turn to change in the overall period, it can be seen that there was a growing disadvantage for women. In France there was a convergence between men and women in the levels of risk, whereas in Britain women were now more likely to be in jobs with psychosocial risks than men.

Differences by Contract Status. In France, temporary workers were notably more likely to be in jobs with psychosocial risks than permanent employees both at the beginning and end of the period and they also experienced a worse deterioration of their conditions in the early period of 2005-2010. Moreover, despite the fact that their situation improved over the period 2010 to 2015, their vulnerability remained higher in 2015 compared with 2005. In Britain the figures for temporary workers have to be taken with some caution as the samples numbers are small, reflecting the fact that they represent a much smaller share of the workforce. But it is clear is that, unlike in France, the main increase in risk has been among the permanent workers.

Differences between the Public and Private Sector. The two countries are most similar in terms of the experience of private sector employees. In both countries, those in the private sector were more exposed to psychosocial risks, they experienced a greater increase in risk in the immediate period of the crisis and some overall increase in risk in the long term. But the patterns are quite different in the public sector. In France, there appears to have been an improvement in working conditions in

the public sector over the period as a whole (particularly in the period 2010 to 2015), whereas in Britain there was a deterioration.

Chart 3 Main Categories of the Workforce affected by increases in psychosocial risks 2005-2015

France	Britain
• Service and Sales	• Low Skilled
• Women	• Women
• Temporary Workers	• Permanent Workers
• Private Sector	• Private and Public Sector

3

Overall, the evidence currently available (see Chart 3) suggests that in France the increase in psychosocial risks affected particularly service and sales employees, women, temporary workers, and employees in the private sector. In Britain it affected primarily the low skilled, women, and employees in the public sector. If these patterns are confirmed by the evidence of the national quality of work surveys, they would be consistent with the view that institutional patterns affect the distribution of risks. In particular, the greater vulnerability of temporary employees is what would be expected given the greater dualism of the French labour market and the stronger protection of public sector workers fits well with the assumption that the French state plays a stronger protective role.

Section 3 Policy Options

What are the most effective policies for dealing with the potentially growing problem of psychosocial risks at work? A number of solutions have been offered – but these can be grouped under two broad headings: more individualistic and more collective solutions. The individualistic solutions include a better selection of individuals to jobs and improving individual's coping capacity, while the collectivist include improving collective coping capacity, increasing employee voice and involvement in decisions about work organization and increasing regulative controls.

Improvements in selection and individual coping capacity

These options can be seen as reflecting a view that differences in individual's capacities and personalities play a very significant role in moderating or accentuating the effects of work environment risks. An interesting discussion of the issues they involve can be found in a book by Yves Clos and Michel Gollac (Clot, Y. and Gollac, M. 2014. *Le Travail - Peut-il devenir supportable?*, Paris, Armand Colin).

An emphasis on selection policies underlines the variability in individual responses to work stressors and assumes that more fragile individuals can be detected through personality or other tests. But there are issues about both the feasibility of reliable selection and possible unintended consequences. A statistical correlation between personality factors and reactions to risk is too imprecise to select accurately particular individuals: it is an average effect with substantial individual variation. Further, selection on personality grounds is likely to be stigmatic in its effects and could lead to systematic exclusion of individuals from employment. Such exclusion is likely to lead to psychological distress that may well increase costs to the wider welfare system.

An emphasis on improving individual coping is premised on a belief in the efficacy of counselling of individuals to better withstand the pressures of the job by changes in their perceptions and attitudes. But again there are significant potential problems. While counselling may help individuals to reconcile themselves to their situation, there are limits to the extent to which changes in perceptions and attitudes can dissolve the effects of real pressures arising from the work environment and their harmful effects. Further, if such help does not resolve the difficulties experienced by the employee, it may lead to feelings of individual failure. Finally, an emphasis on improving individual adaptation may distract attention from the need for more constructive action to improve work conditions.

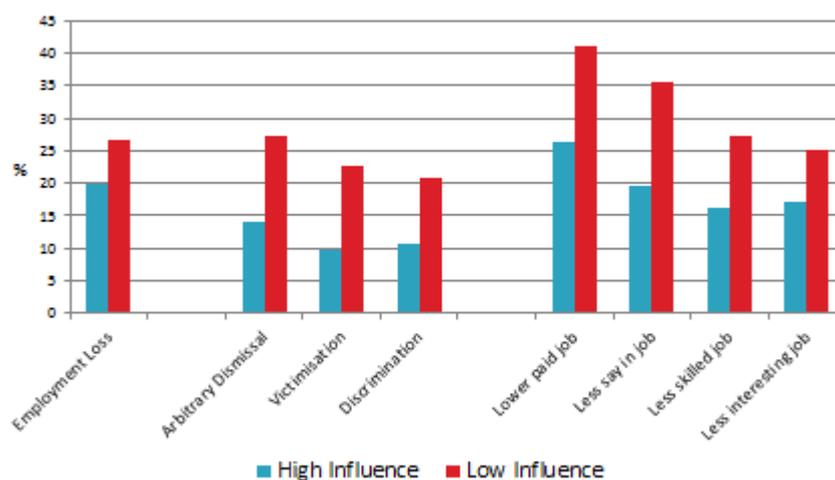
Collective Coping, Employee Voice and Stronger Regulation.

Collective coping has discussed in considerable depth by Marc Lorient (see Lorient, M. 2000. *Le temps de fatigue. La gestion sociale du mal-être dans le travail*, Paris, Editions Anthropos ; Lorient, M. 2015 'Collective forms of coping and the social construction of work stress among industrial workers and police officers in France.' *Theory and Psychology*, 26, 1, 112-129).

Work groups clearly can play a vital role in helping individuals cope with pressures at work by defining problems as normal rather than as individual, reducing stressors through co-operative problem-solving, helping to reduce the consequences of negative events, finding ways of 'crafting' jobs so they are more meaningful. But work environments vary a great deal in their favourability to the development of collective coping, due to differences in the nature of tasks, organizational structure and policies. Moreover, in the longer term, there are grounds for thinking that the capacity for collective coping is being undermined by increased individualization at work. Solidarities are being reduced by the decline of union membership and shared work identities, greater mobility across posts in the interests of 'flexibility', reduced breaks and discussion time, greater competition between employees.

Those who advocate increased employee voice as a path for reducing psychosocial risks argue that dialogue is the best way to create working conditions that meet employees' needs and capacities and are sustainable in the longer term. Apart from taking advantage of the knowledge of those most affected, it is likely to be conducive to a greater sense of procedural justice which also moderates psychosocial risks. As is shown for Britain in Chart 4, there is certainly research support for the view that greater involvement in decision making reduces employee anxiety over issues such as job insecurity, unfair treatment at work and loss of job status. But there are significant potential barriers to a general adoption of such policies. They may be seen to threaten long-standing organizational authority cultures. They may also be seen by employers as threatening competitiveness by leading to higher costs as a result of changes to work organization.

Chart 4 Employee Influence over Changes at Work and Fear at Work in Britain 2012



Skills and Employment Survey 2012; reports at <http://www.ites.org>

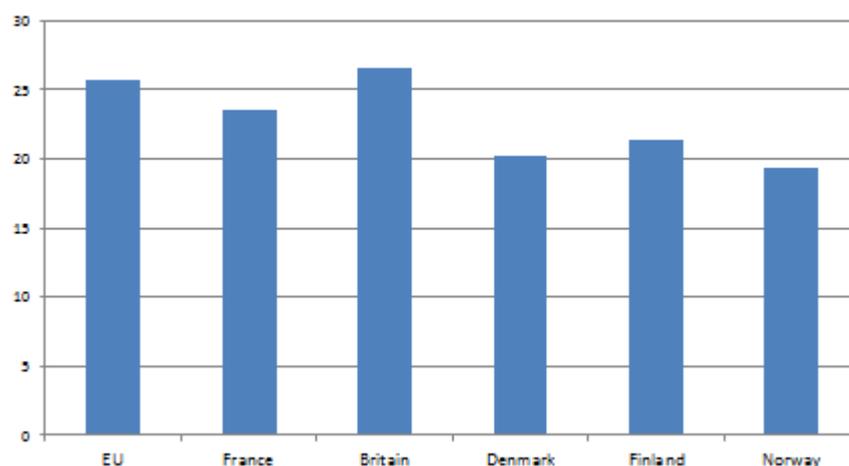
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An emphasis on increased regulative control takes its point of departure from the view that many employers tend to be unaware of the issues or reluctant to introduce change. National initiatives by government and social partners can have a powerful agenda setting effect and may reduce competitive risks within a country by imposing common rules on employers. There remain, however, significant worries that increased regulative controls may reduce international competitiveness. Moreover, taken on their own, regulative controls may be difficult to implement and may be poorly adapted to local conditions.

The existing evidence suggests that it is the combination of national initiatives and company or workplace bargaining that may be most effective. As has been seen, the French example points to the possibility that the combination of state-initiated action and collective bargaining may be effective in moderating rising psychosocial risks. A wider comparison with the Nordic countries adds further support to this view. The most ambitious attempts to introduce workplace reform have been in the Nordic countries. They involved an early extension of the definition of 'health and safety' to include risks to psychological health, strong regulative support for role of works councils with respect to work organization and an extensive programme of work design reform through subsidies

for workplace dialogue on the issue. Such policies appear to have led to significantly lower levels of psychosocial risks in the Nordic countries, particularly as a result of changes to the design of jobs that has raised the discretion that employees have over their job tasks to a considerably higher level than in other EU countries (Gallie and Zhou, 2013). As can be seen in Chart 5, EWCS data for 2015 indicates that employees in Denmark, Finland and Norway were notably less likely to be in jobs that combined the risk factors of relatively high work pressure and low job control than either the average for the EU or employees in France and Britain. The example of these Nordic countries is particularly interesting in that they appear to have maintained a high level of international competitiveness despite significant programmes of quality of work reform.

Chart 5 Wider Comparisons: Jobs with High Work Pressure + Low Task Discretion 2015



3

Conclusions

In short, I would suggest that there are three main conclusions that can be drawn from the evidence that we have been looking at today.

- There is persuasive research evidence that aspects of the work environment constitute psychosocial risks that undermine psychological and physical health.
- The Franco-British comparison suggests that both the trends in and distribution of risk is influenced by the policies of national governments and the institutional structures of the labour market.
- The Nordic examples suggest that a combination of central initiatives for reform and workplace dialogue are likely to be most effective in promoting improvements in work quality.

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