

Research Briefing N° 98

Work intensification, insecurity and well-being in Britain's workplaces: recent trends

This research reports findings concerning recent changes in work intensity, perceptions of insecurity and job-related well-being in British workplaces.

Key words: workplaces; work intensification; insecurity; well-being



Key findings

- Fear of job loss has increased sharply, especially over the period surrounding the recession of 2008-09.
- There was a rise in anxiety between 2000 and 2012 about each of three types of unfair treatment: arbitrary dismissal, discrimination and victimisation.
- In 2012 just under one third (31%) of employees were anxious about unfair treatment at work. Just over half of all employees (52%) reported anxiety about loss of job status.
- In the past both fear of job loss and fear of unfair treatment at work were far more common in the private than in the public sector. In 2012 fear of job loss was higher in the public than in the private sector, while fear of unfair treatment had become more similar to the level in the private sector. Fear of status loss was also higher in the public sector.
- Work intensification has resumed in Britain since 2006. Both the speed of work has quickened and the pressures of working to tight deadlines have also risen to record highs.
- Work intensification is associated with technological change, which is therefore effort-biased. Although the resumption of work intensification may also be due to the recession, contrary to some predictions high work intensity is not associated on average with downsizing.
- Happiness at work, an important ingredient of national well-being, can be measured in two core dimensions – ‘enthusiasm’ for, and ‘contentment’ with, the job. In both these dimensions, job-related well-being in British workplaces fell between 2006 and 2012. There was a small drop in the average population-wide score on the *Enthusiasm* scale, and a sharp fall in the score on the *Contentment* scale.
- The falls can partly be accounted for by rising insecurity, work intensification, and increased downsizing.
- An important factor offsetting fear at work and work intensification was the degree of participation allowed to employees with respect to organisational decisions.

What we did

A period of recession leads to a steep increase in unemployment, and the balance of power alters between employers and employees. Recessions thus stimulate workplace changes and accentuate anxieties among those still in work, beyond those long-term changes that can be expected as the economy evolves. This research, among the first findings from using the Skills and Employment Survey 2012 (SES2012), reports trends in Britain in work effort, feelings of insecurity and job-related well-being, and considers some of the proximate causes of these changes. The research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the UK Commission for Employment and Skills and carried out between 2012/13.

This Research Briefing relates to IOE Research Briefing 100 '**Trends in Skills Utilisation and Training in Britain**'.

Further information

[Reports in the SES2012 First Findings Series:](#)

1. Skills at Work in Britain.
2. Training in Britain.
3. Job Control in Britain.
4. Fear at Work in Britain.
5. Work Intensification in Britain.
6. Job-Related Well-Being in Britain.

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How we did it

SES2012 collected data from working adults in England, Scotland and Wales, interviewed in their own homes. The survey was hosted by the **IOE's Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies (LLAKES)**, in collaboration with researchers from Cardiff University and Oxford University.

The sample was drawn using random probability principles subject to stratification based on a number of socio-economic indicators. Only one eligible respondent per address was randomly selected for interview, and 49% of those selected completed the survey. SES2012 is the sixth in a series of nationally representative sample surveys of individuals in employment. The numbers of respondents were: 4,047 in the 1986 survey; 3,855 in 1992; 2,467 in 1997; 4,470 in 2001; 7,787 in 2006; and 3,200 in 2012.