10

Working longer and harder? A critical assessment of work effort in Britain in comparison to Europe

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Introduction

Among the many outcomes of the Global Financial Crisis, which ravaged employment across Europe from the end of 2008, health problems surrounding work are gradually coming to be properly comprehended as a significant component of the costs of the economic stagnation. In the UK, which is the focus of this chapter, the number of working days lost between 2009 and 2013 owing to work-related stress increased by 24 per cent and the number lost because of serious mental illness doubled (Davies, 2014). Meanwhile, we know that work-related well-being fell significantly between 2006 and 2012 according to multiple measures (Green *et al.*, 2016). Long working hours and work intensification are frequently cited in media reports as the main causes behind the work-related stress epidemic. There is substantive evidence for the detrimental effects of long working hours on various aspects of health, especially in cases where workers are not able to exercise much choice or control over those hours (Bassanini and Caroli, 2014; Kivimaki *et al.*, 2015; Lee and Lee, 2016). Indeed, the European Directive on Working Time (which places regulatory limits on working more than 48 hours per week) derives in part from the principle that excessive work hours are a public health issue. There is also evidence that more intensive work is associated with lower work-related well-being (Green, 2008; Green *et al.*, 2016).

Yet the supposed linkage between deteriorating health and greater work effort is based on a prior assumption that British workers are working longer and harder than their predecessors. Furthermore, it is often suggested that British workers are exceptional in that they work longer than workers in Europe and

beyond. The aim of this chapter is to subject these assumptions to empirical scrutiny.

Typically, long hours and work intensity are both referred to as work effort. The section which follows, therefore, delineates the conceptual differences between extensive and intensive work effort, with the former referring to the amount of time spent at work and the latter referring to the intensity of effort expended during those working hours (Green, 2001). The section proceeds to outline how these two aspects of work effort can be captured using survey instruments. The chapter then outlines the international data sources and surveys used to put the British results in a comparative context as well as outlining the surveys which allow us to track trends over time. The two substantive empirical sections which follow present the results for these two aspects of work effort.

The chapter concludes by rejecting the suggestion that workers in Britain work longer hours than those working elsewhere in Europe and beyond. However, the evidence is that while on average this suggestion is a myth, it does hold for one group of workers: male employees who work full-time. On the other hand, the evidence shows that workers in Britain work harder than other Europeans, that work intensity has risen in recent times and that women working full-time have experienced some of the largest rises since 2006. This provides further evidence of the persistence of gender inequalities which have been the subject of much research over many years (Rubery, 2015; Rubery and Fagan, 1995; see Chapter 1). The section also considers how the chapter's findings might help us to understand better patterns in work-related well-being and the sluggishness of productivity in Britain in recent times.

Concepts and measures

Although used in common parlance, the notion of 'work effort' has two distinct conceptual meanings. It is important therefore that this chapter clarifies both these meanings and outlines how they are measured.

We start, however, by clarifying three concepts – performance, efficiency and skill – which are sometimes mistakenly conflated in the popular discourse with work effort. Performance refers to the extent to which an individual carries out their contractual work tasks and so is synonymous with individual productivity (i.e. the quantity of outputs produced in a given time period). Performance is a function of the capabilities individuals have in carrying out the tasks involved and the speed with which those tasks are carried out – that is, the skills of the person and the effort they devote to the work process. These two aspects are substitutes and need not always go hand in hand (Green, 2006).

An individual's performance is 'efficient' if it could not be improved without an increase in skill and/or an increase in work intensity. A rise in performance triggered by an increase in work intensity does not signify an increase in efficiency since it comes about by increasing an input into the production process. The process of 'productivity bargaining' – common in the 1960s – recognised that increasing productivity often entailed costs for workers and hence trade unions only agreed to changes intended to improve quantitative efficiency in return for an increase in pay and/or other benefits (Gordon, 1976). Misunderstanding this fundamental, if simple, point is the source of one of the most frequent mistakes made in public discourse, with some commentators equating productivity gains with efficiency gains. Similarly, some organisations are structured and managed more efficiently than others. This occurs where an organisation's output could be increased without altering either the skills of workers or the intensity of the work carried out – sometimes characterised as working smarter but not harder.

Work effort, then, comprises the length of time spent carrying out work and the intensity of the effort expended during that time. We refer to the former as extensive work effort which can be relatively easily calibrated by counting the number of hours spent at work by day, week, month or year. Time consciousness and discipline are long-standing institutionalised features of the capitalist workplace which swept away pre-capitalist conceptions of time based on the seasons and the rhythms of nature, such as harvesting, lambing and the like. The factory system, on the other hand, was based on time discipline. Workers were expected to be on time and stay until the end of their shift. They were also expected to turn up every day without fail. Infringements resulted in loss of wages or of the job itself. This was further embedded by the spread of the school system, with its emphasis on punctuality and the regulation of activities by bells and whistles (Thompson, 1967). The measurement of time was crucial and the widespread use of clocks, watches and other timepieces made this relatively easy to achieve. Data sources, too, which measure the average number of hours spent at work, have a long history stretching back well into the nineteenth century. These allow us to chart change in the UK and set current levels of working time in an international context (see Table 10.1 and Figure 10.1). In this chapter and elsewhere (e.g., Green, 2001; 2006) we refer to this as extensive work effort.

Intensive work effort, on the other hand, is more difficult to calibrate, since it entails a mix of physical, mental and emotional demands at work, each of which are difficult to measure. Moreover, intensive work effort is inversely linked to the porosity of the working day – that is, paid periods of on-the-job inactivity between tasks during which the body or mind is at rest. It is also well-known that there is gradation of effort expended in completing a task as effort levels cannot be at the absolute maximum all of the time. These factors make some

types of measurement impossible. Direct measures of intensive work effort are, for example, impossible in most practical circumstances as it would require minute-by-minute on-the-job tracking. Nevertheless, measuring relative intensive effort levels is achievable by taking a multi-dimensional approach. Indicators can be derived from workers' self-reports of effort levels since it is they, rather than managers or work measurement experts, who are best placed to know how intensively they work. In the words of Guest (1990: 306), 'if we want to know whether workers are working hard, we should ask them'. It is best to ask multiple questions focusing on different aspects of work intensity. To provide a robust evidence base requires worker surveys which use carefully worded questions, repeated over several years and administered on large samples of workers. Thankfully, we now have a series of such sources and evidence on which to draw (see the next section: 'Data sources').

In this chapter, we present data on three ways of measuring intensive work effort, all of which focus on objective indicators as reported by worker respondents. Crucially, none are related to personal circumstances and instead focus on the job – the requirement to work hard and the various conditions under which work is carried out. So, as a summary measure of work intensity, we use responses given to the question: 'please tell me how much you agree or disagree with the statement: my job requires that I work very hard.' If they strongly agree, we define the job as involving 'hard work'. Respondents to several of the surveys reported here are also asked to indicate how often they work at very high speeds. The response scales used vary a little between survey series, but importantly not within, thereby allowing over time or inter-country comparisons to be made. If respondents say that they work at very high speeds for three-quarters or more of the time (or all, or almost all, of the time), we classify them as occupying 'high-speed' jobs. If they report working to 'tight deadlines' for a similar amount of time we refer to these as 'tight deadline' jobs. The focus of all three measures is on the requirements of the job for intensive work effort. This is distinguished from 'discretionary' work effort, which focuses on the willingness to, or admission of, working unpaid overtime and/or working more intensively than required.

Data sources

To make European comparisons we draw on several survey series and data sources. They have in common that they are all focused on gathering data from the point of view of workers themselves, rather than relying on management respondents or work measurement experts. For European data on hours of

work, we use the European Union Labour Force Survey (EULFS). The survey comprises a list of common questions, uses a common coding framework for the replies received and adopts agreed definitions. From this, the UK can be positioned and ranked according to working hours. Furthermore, different categories of worker can be delineated and a gender breakdown of the results presented.¹

Data on working hours are also assembled by the OECD. This approach draws together sources such as the EULFS and other data sets – such as those outlined below – into metadata sets which are accessible online. This chapter uses this evidence in order to place the UK working hours in a much wider international context.

To examine UK trends, we use the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) which, as the name suggests, has a special focus on hours of work. It is based on a 1 per cent sample of employees on the Inland Revenue Pay As You Earn (PAYE) register for February (approximately 187,000 employees in 2015). While this is still the main basis of ASHE, this sample is supplemented by two additional samples. One is drawn from the Inland Revenue PAYE register in April – to cover employees that have either moved into the job market or changed jobs between the time of selection and the survey date. A second is taken from the Inter-Departmental Business Register for businesses registered for VAT but not registered for PAYE – to cover businesses that do not have employees above the PAYE threshold. Once employees are selected, the ASHE questionnaires are sent to employers who supply the requested information on the employee's age, gender, occupation, earnings and hours of work (Bird, 2004). The evidence taken from ASHE over several years allows us to track recent changes in the length of the average working week. These results can also be placed in a wider historical context using Office for National Statistics (ONS) data stretching back to the late nineteenth century.

We use a similar mixture of data sources to compare levels of intensive work effort across countries and to plot change in Britain over time. For the former, we draw on data from two sources – the European Social Survey (ESS) and the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS). The ESS is an academically driven social survey designed to chart and explain the interaction between Europe's changing institutions and the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns of its diverse populations. The 2014 survey was the seventh in the series and covers over 20 nations. A 120-item module on 'Work, Family and Well-Being' was included in the second (2004) and fifth (2010) in the series (Gallie, 2013). This included data on the intensity of work.

Our second source of European data is the EWCS. The quality of work has been a focal point of this survey since its inception in 1991. Furthermore, its

content has been expanded considerably since then – from 20 questions in 1991 to well over 100 in the sixth survey carried out in 2015. Its geographical coverage has also extended as new member states have been admitted to the EU. The 2015 EWCS was the largest. It included all 28 member states, the five EU candidate countries (Albania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey), as well as Switzerland and Norway, making a total of 35 countries and involving more than 43,000 workers (Eurofound, 2015, 2012; Smith *et al.*, 2007). We extract data from the 2015 survey on the frequency of working to tight deadlines and at high speed. This is used to rank the UK against EU members in terms of levels of work intensity.

Finally, we draw on the Skills and Employment Survey (SES) series to provide insights into the prevalence, pattern and trends in intensive work effort over time in Britain. The 2012 survey was the sixth in a series of nationally representative sample surveys of individuals in employment aged 20–60 years old (although the 2006 and 2012 surveys additionally sampled those aged 61–65). 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. For each survey, weights were computed to take into account the differential probabilities of sample selection, the over-sampling of certain areas and some small response-rate variations between groups (defined by sex, age and occupation). All the analyses that follow use these weights (Felstead *et al.*, 2015). Similarly, all the findings reported here make use of appropriate survey weights where available.

Extensive work effort

In public discourse, it is commonly assumed that British workers work excessively long hours, making their comparative levels of extensive work effort high by international standards. This assumption is often repeated. Since 1990, for example, there have been 1,423 references in English-language news outlets to this supposed fact.² However, the evidence is not quite as straightforward. In fact, average usual working hours per week in the UK in 2015 was 37.1, putting the UK below the EU28 country average and ranking the UK 22nd out of 28 countries.

Occasionally, news items nuance their claims by substituting the phrase ‘some of the longest hours in Europe’ (329 references). But only rarely do these claims refer specifically to those classified as full-time employees, or more precisely to male full-time employees. When they do, these claims can be supported by robust empirical evidence – male full-time employees work almost three hours

Table 10.1 Usual weekly hours of work in the UK and Europe, 2015

Category of worker	European 28 country average working hours	UK average working hours	UK rank (out of 28)
All workers	37.1	36.7	22
Male	40.1	41.0	7
Female	33.6	31.5	25
All full-time workers	41.4	42.9	3
Male full-time workers	42.4	44.2	2
Female full-time workers	40.0	40.6	10
All part-time workers	20.2	19.4	22
Male part-time workers	19.1	18.8	21
Female part-time workers	20.5	19.6	21
All full-time employees	40.3	42.4	1
Male full-time employees	41.0	43.7	1
Female full-time employees	39.3	40.4	7
All full-time self-employed	47.5	46.0	18
Male full-time self-employed	48.5	46.7	18
Female full-time self-employed	44.9	43.4	21

Source: Data downloaded from European Union Labour Force Survey data explorer found on: www.epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/statistics/themes

a week more than their counterparts elsewhere in Europe (see Table 10.1). The validity of the claim was stronger in the early 1990s, when those in Britain worked longer and the EU was smaller. Yet the assertion is incorrect if applied to the self-employed where typical weekly working hours for both men and women are in the bottom third of EU countries. By misrepresenting the high ranking of male full-time employees' hours as applying to the whole British workforce, the discourse about 'Britons' working the longest hours is not only sexist but also factually incorrect.

Academic writers make this mistake far less frequently. In fact, when they consider Britain's hours relative to elsewhere in Europe, they generally get it right. For example, it is useful to note men's long working hours when considering their role in family life and work–life balance as well as in identifying the difficulties of constructing meaningful part-time jobs given the long working hours of male full-time employees (Cousins and Tang, 2004; Lyonette and Crompton, 2011; Rubery and Grimshaw, 2015; Warren and Lyonette, 2015). Occasional attempts by academics and rare tries in the press have been made to defuse the popular myth about working hours for all

using some hard facts, but with apparently little impact (e.g., Bonney, 2005; Green, 2008).

Most myths endure, but why this particular one lasts is unclear. One possibility is the pull of nationalism; being top or bottom of a country rank is like winning a competition. Working more hours is variously supposed to make British workers seem more hard-working, yet perhaps less happy and maybe less efficient. Nationalist self-deprecation vies in British culture with nationalist aggrandisement, each wanting to make British workers somehow special. The myth's survival is helped by its kernel of truth when filtered by the category of male full-time employees. At the same time, it provides a ready-made context for countless 'human interest' features related to the putative effects of long working hours, including deleterious stories about sexual appetite (too low), office sex (too much), marital infidelity, alcoholism, insomnia and obesity. A typical attribution is: 'Brits work the longest hours in Europe. It's only natural to want to let their hair down.'³ As for explanation, Britain's supposedly long hours are sometimes claimed, without evidential support, to be associated with its opt-out from the EU Working Time Directive which restricts working hours to 48 per week.

Placed in an even wider international context, these claims of relatively high levels of extensive work effort in the UK also appear well wide of the mark. Data assembled by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for 2014, for example, shows the wide range in the annual average number of hours worked by those in paid work. According to this evidence, the UK annual average of 1,677 hours is below the OECD average of 1,770 and well short of the extensive levels of work effort expended in Mexico, Costa Rica and Korea where the annual averages are around 500 hours higher (see Figure 10.1).

Furthermore, the average number of hours worked has been declining over the centuries (despite some periods of stability) and has continued to fall in recent times. In 1870, annual hours worked per person stood at 2,984. By 1913, this was down to 2,624 and continued moving downwards, reaching 1,489 in 1998. The decline in annual hours can also be seen in the reduced length of the average working week. For example, the average weekly hours of a manual worker fell from 53 hours in 1943 to 43.5 in 1987 (Lindsay, 2003). This pattern has continued. According to ASHE full-time employees – despite working the longest hours in Europe (cf. Table 10.1) – have seen their hours of work excluding overtime fall from 40.0 in 1997 to 39.1 in 2015. This decrease is most notable for men, while women's hours have remained stable. For men, there was a sharp dip between 2008 and 2009, from 40.7 to 40.1, and since then they have remained largely stable, not returning to the levels seen prior to the 2008–09 recession (see Figure 10.2). It should also be noted that official,

Figure 10.1 Annual average number of hours worked, OECD, 2014

Notes: The data presented refer to paid workers regardless of whether they are employees or self-employed.

Source: Data extracted from OECD. Stat, <https://stats.oecd.org/>.

Figure 10.2 Average full-time hours of work, UK, 1997–2015

Notes: The data presented are for full-time employees working 30 hours or more and includes overtime.

Source: ONS, 2015: figure 20.

employer-reported, data often hide the extent to which people are working longer hours than they are explicitly paid for, sometimes while at home (see Felstead *et al.*, 2005). While this practice is widespread, especially among managerial and professional occupations, a similar picture of falling working hours since the mid-1990s can also be found in the Labour Force Survey data (also a trusted source of labour market information), where hours – including those that are unpaid – are reported by workers as opposed to their employers.

In short, extensive work effort in Britain has been on a long downward path since the late nineteenth century and has continued unabated over recent decades. Working time has therefore been falling not rising. International comparisons also suggest that working hours in Britain are on average shorter and not longer than elsewhere in the world despite newspaper reports proclaiming the contrary.

Intensive work effort

As previously argued, measuring the level of intensive work effort is difficult since there is no agreed yardstick to measure the degree of effort put into each hour of paid work. We must rely on proxies instead. One of these is to ask workers how strongly they agree or disagree with the statement that ‘my job requires that I work very hard’. How this is felt will vary from job to job. Working very hard could be: coping with relentless pressure, multitasking, being required to concentrate for long spells, doing an emotionally draining job and/or remaining alert at all times. Respondents across Europe to ESS 2010 were asked to summarise the level of intensive work effort they were expected to expend using a five-point agree–disagree scale. This comparison suggests that UK jobs are among the most intensive in the EU. Over a third of UK workers (36 per cent) strongly agreed their jobs required them to work very hard – 15 percentage points above the EU28 average and far exceeding the 13–14 per cent recorded for Denmark and Sweden (see Figure 10.3). Respondents to the survey were also asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement that: ‘I never seem to have enough time to get everything done in my job.’ While this may also pick up organisational inefficiencies discussed above, it is telling that the UK comes second highest and well above the EU28 average on this measure too.

Estimates of the time spent working to tight deadlines and at very high speed (denoted as tight deadlines and high speed for short) offer further insights into the pattern of intensive work effort. They focus on two particular features of the labour process – its speed and the squeezing of more effort out of the available time – which feed into overall assessments of the pressure to work very hard. On the tight deadline measure, the UK tops the rankings with almost two out

Figure 10.3 Intensive work effort – requirement to work very hard, Europe, 2010

Source: Authors’ calculations from the European Social Survey 2010.

of five workers (39 per cent) reporting working to tight deadlines all or almost all of the time (see Figure 10.4). This compares to the EU28 average of around one in four.⁴

By contrast, the pressure to work ‘at high speed’ picks up a different aspect of work intensity, and such pressure in the UK is around the European average. About a quarter of workers (23 per cent) in the UK in 2015 reported working at very high speed all or almost all of the time. This puts the UK neither at the top with countries such as Cyprus, Romania, Greece and Spain, where well over 30 per cent were in high-speed jobs, nor at the bottom with Bulgaria and Latvia, where barely one in ten worked in such pressurised jobs (see Figure 10.5).

These international comparisons of the intensive effort requirements of jobs should be interpreted with the caveat that worker reports can be influenced by cultural expectations and by the nuances of language. It remains possible, therefore, that some international differences reflect the different interpretations of the questions and response scales, rather than real differences in effort requirements. The fact that multiple measures have been deployed goes only some way towards mitigating this reservation about our conclusions. When looking at how patterns of intensive work effort have changed over time within Britain, however, the caveat is further diminished; even though it remains possible that interpretations of intensive work might change over time, if multiple measures

Figure 10.4 Intensive work effort – working to tight deadlines, Europe, 2015

Source: Data extracted from the European Working Conditions Survey 2015 data visualisation tool on: <http://eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/data-visualisation/sixth-european-working-conditions-survey-2015>

are indicating change in the same direction we can have considerable confidence that they are capturing genuine change.

To track these changes over time, we use four data points in the SES spanning two decades, from 1992 to 2012, to update the earlier analysis of intensive effort change given in Green (2006). This is complemented by data collected by other series such as the Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS), although over a much shorter time horizon. The evidence from SES is that jobs requiring hard work rose by over nine percentage points between 1992 and 1997, but remained around that figure in 2001 and 2006. However, from 2006 to 2012 hard work rose by around three percentage points – a resumption of work intensification after a decade of little change (see Figure 10.6). Both upward movements in work intensity – in the mid to late 1990s and then once again more recently – followed recessions and therefore provide some circumstantial support, though not proof, for the argument that employers use recessions to ratchet up effort levels. The most recent increase in work intensity is corroborated by comparing the answers given by employees to WERS in 2004 with those given to WERS in 2010. There was a sizeable seven percentage point rise in the proportion who

Figure 10.5 Intensive work effort – working to high speed, Europe, 2015

Source: Data extracted from the European Working Conditions Survey 2015 data visualisation tool on: <http://eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/data-visualisation/sixth-european-working-conditions-survey-2015>

strongly agreed that their job required that they work very hard. Furthermore, when asked if they had experienced any of a list of specified changes ‘as a result of the most recent recession [in 2008–09]’ while at their current workplace, 28 per cent reported an increase in workload. This was the second highest reported recession-induced experience (van Wanrooy *et al.*, 2014: 8, 40).

This pattern is reflected in the time respondents estimated that they worked at very high speeds. In 1992 around a quarter (23 per cent) said they worked at very high speeds three-quarters or more of the time. By 2001 the proportion had risen to 38 per cent and by 2012 it stood at 40 per cent. Similarly, the upward movement in intensive work effort is reflected in the rising proportion of respondents who reported that they worked under the pressure of tight deadlines. These tight deadline jobs rose from 52 per cent in 2001 to 55 per cent in 2006 and 58 per cent in 2012.

We can also use the data to examine which labour market segments have suffered most or least as a result of the intensification process. Such an analysis reveals that the pressure to work very hard has grown fastest among women

Figure 10.6 Intensive work effort in Britain, 1992–2012

Source: Felstead *et al.*, 2013b: figure 2.

in general and those who work full-time in particular. This gender difference echoes previous findings for the USA (Gorman and Kmec, 2007). In 1992 the gender gap was around two percentage points but by 2012 it had grown to eight points. Women working full-time appear to have suffered most, with 48 per cent of such jobs in 1997 requiring high effort levels rising to 57 per cent in 2012. This substantial expansion compares to a three-percentage-point rise for male full-timers and a two-point rise for female part-time workers over the same period. Moreover, female full-timers have experienced some of the largest rises in work intensity since 2006 (see Table 10.2).

From 1992 to 2012 required work intensity rose faster in the public sector than in the private sector. In 1992 around three in ten of all workers strongly agreed that their jobs required them to work very hard. However, by 2012 the proportion had risen to over half (55 per cent) of the public sector and around two-fifths (40 per cent) of the private sector. Within the public sector it was in the health industry where work intensification was especially sharp between 2006 and 2012 (see also Blackaby *et al.*, 2015). This is possibly reflection of the extension of ‘new public management’ into the public sector in the 2000s, followed by the austerity measures since 2010 which disproportionately affect women workers (Rubery and Rafferty, 2013). Thus nursing and medical professionals have seen their jobs change dramatically and have prompted junior doctors to take

Table 10.2 Percentage of jobs requiring hard work, 1992–2012

	1992	1997	2001	2006	2012
All	31.5	40.7	38.5	42.0	45.3
<i>Gender</i>					
Men	30.5	38.8	36.6	39.2	41.6
Women	32.6	43.1	40.7	45.2	49.6
<i>Working time</i>					
Women full-timers	NA	48.0	47.0	50.1	57.1
Women part-timers	NA	36.1	31.4	37.5	38.7
<i>Sector</i>					
Public sector industries	36.1	45.6	44.9	49.0	55.8
Private sector industries	29.7	38.9	35.9	38.8	40.7

Notes: To produce a consistent indicator of sector we define those working in public administration, education and health as ‘public sector industries’ and those working elsewhere as ‘private sector industries’.

Source: Authors’ calculations from the Skills and Employment Survey 1992–2012 updating Felstead *et al.*, 2013b: table 1.

industrial action in response (Menghji *et al.*, 2015). Parts of the private sector also experienced rapid rises in work effort over this period. The proportion of jobs requiring hard work in the construction industry, for example, rose by eleven percentage points, putting it on a par with education and health.

The requirement to work hard becomes stronger the higher the qualification level of worker. So, in 2012, a half of those with a degree or equivalent qualification strongly agreed that their job required them to work very hard. This is in contrast to those with no qualifications where around a third (35 per cent) of workers made similar claims. This difference has not changed over the last two decades, reflecting an enduring and widespread correlation between skill level and intensive work effort.

There is also evidence that the ratcheting up of work intensity has continued. A subset of those who took part in SES 2012 were re-interviewed in 2014. The evidence from this study suggests that, even over a relatively short time period, there was a tendency for jobs to become more intense. Increased use of computers and teamworking appeared to be driving the upward movement with both enhancing the level of surveillance possible by employers and/or fellow workers (Felstead *et al.*, 2016).

Conclusions

Comparing job quality over time and between countries is difficult due to the scarcity of data. The studies which do exist tend to focus on particular aspects of job quality where data are available. Working time is one such theme. Reductions in working time designed to share out declining volumes of employment and dampen the rise in unemployment following the 2008–09 recession sparked further interest in this feature of job quality. This labour market response received government backing in the case of Germany, and to a lesser extent France, but happened without it in the case of the UK (Bosch, 2010; Felstead, 2011; Kümmerling and Lehnendorff, 2014). Yet even in the context of reductions in working time, newspaper commentaries continue to proclaim that workers in Britain work very long hours compared to those working elsewhere in Europe (e.g., *Daily Mirror*, 8 February 2014; *The Guardian*, 18 May 2010; *Daily Mail*, 25 February 2009; *The Sunday Times*, 10 June 2007). The aim of this chapter has been to subject this claim, as well as the associated one that work has become more intense, to robust empirical scrutiny. In conceptual terms the focus of the chapter is on two dimensions of work effort: its extensiveness and intensiveness.

The chapter makes four contributions to the debate. Firstly, it demonstrates that, on the whole, workers in Britain do not work the longest hours in Europe. However, the claim does apply to men who work full-time as employees, but not to all categories of worker. In fact, average hours of work for those who work part-time or are self-employed are below the EU28 average. When ranked this puts the UK in the bottom third of EU countries. Similarly, when compared against other OECD countries, UK working hours are below average and a long way short of countries whose working hours are much longer.

The chapter also puts data on the length of working hours in a much longer time horizon. It then becomes evident that the trajectory of travel for working hours has been downward since the late nineteenth century. This is our second contribution with recent evidence suggesting that these reductions have continued and may have accelerated somewhat with the preference for working-time adjustments rather than staffing cuts in response to the 2008–09 recession.

However, with respect to the intensity of work the data tell a different story, hence our third and fourth contributions to the debate. The third is that, when compared to other countries, the UK is towards the top of the European league table according to two out of three intensity indicators and about average for the third. The fourth and final contribution is that British workers are working harder, faster and to tighter deadlines than they did in the past. However, some

have felt these pressures more than others. In particular, women workers and those working in the public sector have been hardest hit.

Based on the evidence concerning the detrimental health impacts of long and hard work, it can be inferred that the more intensive work effort in Britain may have contributed to at least some deteriorations in mental and physical health. According to Baumberg (2011, 2014), work intensification from the early 1990s can be linked to rises in incapacity benefit claims from then onwards, with those in poor health especially affected by work strain. More recent intensifications can only have exacerbated this tendency. Nevertheless, by contrast, the decline in working hours since the mid-1990s, including in the proportion of people working especially long hours, could have been expected to have led to an improvement in work-related health problems. Moreover, there are other, potentially equally important, sources of rising stress in the workplace, including the insecurities that grew after the Global Financial Crisis and the long-term decline in workplace autonomy. To illustrate, Green and colleagues (2016) found, using a decomposition analysis of the decline in work-related well-being between 2006 and 2012, that less than a fifth was attributable to changing intensive and extensive work effort.

Another negative conclusion can also be drawn, concerning the discourse on Britain's 'productivity puzzle'. Both the long-term lag of productivity in Britain behind similar economies in Europe and elsewhere, and the peculiar stagnation of labour productivity in Britain through the Global Financial Crisis are a source of concern and mystery occupying a large volume of researcher time (e.g. HM Treasury, 2015). Our findings – along with evidence that the skill levels of workers and their jobs in Britain have also increased (Felstead *et al.*, 2013a) – can be of little help in resolving this puzzle. After all, the quality of labour inputs is improving, the skill demands of jobs have been increasing, the intensity of work is rising and hours in the long term have been falling. In these circumstances, one might have expected hourly productivity to be booming, notwithstanding the rising health costs and lost working days that have been reported. The solution to Britain's quest for greater productivity needs to be sought elsewhere, for example by raising aggregate demand and by remedying the lagging levels of investment and management skill, and not in a further intensification of work effort. Along with de Jong and colleagues (2016) we hold that employers' interest in combating the pressures of work stems not from altruism, but from a self-interested recognition that healthy employees are good for business performance.

Notes

- 1 While our preference is to report UK results, this is not always possible, with many surveys excluding Northern Ireland. Hence, some of the results apply to Britain and the UK; this is reflected in the text.
- 2 These figures are derived from a Nexis database search: <https://nexis.com/>. All English-language news sources were searched using the keywords 'Britain' or 'UK' and the phrase 'longest hours in Europe/the EU'. The search was restricted to items published between 1 January 1990 and 31 May 2016.
- 3 *The Sun*, 4 December 2006. Other references are less euphemistic; the Northern Ireland edition of the *News of the World* proclaimed, on 5 June 2011: 'Too much work and not enough play makes his penis feel very dull indeed and British men are particularly vulnerable since they work the longest hours in Europe.' The myth is not confined to the tabloids, as illustrated by features in *The Times* (28 June 2008), the *Independent on Sunday* (10 September 2006) and *The Guardian* (3 April 1998).
- 4 It should be noted that the Eurofound data visualisation tool which was used to download these data fails to provide an average; this is an estimate based on the pattern of results shown in Figure 10.4. The same applies to Figure 10.5.

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