Scand J Work Environ Health 2001;27(6):361-364

<https://doi.org/10.5271/sjweh.627>

Issue date: Dec 2001

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Refers to the following text of the Journal: [1997;23\(6\):450-457](#)

The following article refers to this text: [2008;34\(2\):83-95](#)

Key terms: [editorial](#); [employment contract](#)

This article in PubMed: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11800322

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A new employment contract

During the last decade, in most mature economic capitalist countries, worklife has been characterized by new corporate constellations, unemployment and the threat of unemployment, downsizing, and new patterns of employment. Globally, there has been continuous growth of nonstandard work contracts (ie, contracts which deviate from the standard contract form, which is full-time, permanent and relatively secure). These characteristics have represented the “standard norm” in contrast to nonstandard employment, which is conventionally perceived as part-time or temporary. Self-employed persons are also regarded as outside the norm. A general trait is weak roots in the labor market for more and more workers. These changes have had, and will have, considerable consequences for the agenda of worklife research.

The background for the changes in employment contracts can be described as a struggle between organizations and companies to avoid risks. In this process a strong center induces uncertainty in peripheral structures so as to create stability and security at the core of its production structure. In this manner a company increases its capacity to handle unpredictability and rapid market fluctuations. The bearers of uncertainty are small subcontracting companies and their employees, the self-employed, and people on time-restricted employment contracts.

At the core of these structures are, at least so far, principally employees with relatively high job security and opportunities for personal and occupational development and also job content and pay. In many respects the ideal of healthy work, in which demands and control are balanced in combination with development opportunities and learning (1), is a reality for this core group and therefore a major plus from the perspective of health. Their relatively strong position depends on the fact that the group possesses skills that are both in demand and expensive to substitute. This core group is also often protected against market fluctuations by strong trade unions. Despite their position, core workers also experience more insecurity in periods of fast structural changes. The concepts of life-long learning and employability have their origin in these structural changes.

The core is encircled by workers with *time-restricted contracts* (also called contingent or temporary work) whose task is to assure organizational flexibility in relation to the troughs and peaks of production. The proportion varies considerably between countries with relatively similar socioeconomic structures. Currently, time-restricted contracts comprise around 15% of the labor force in Sweden. This is a rather strong increase from the 10% in the beginning of the 1990s. The highest proportion in Europe is to be found in Spain and Portugal, the lowest in Austria, Luxembourg, and Denmark. There are considerable differences in work conditions in different types of temporary jobs. In Sweden the major numerical increases have occurred among persons employed to meet emergency requirements (on call) and project workers. These two categories of employment are linked to understaffing and modern goal-oriented forms of work, respectively. Women make-up a large majority of the former category, and men dominate the latter.

A third circle or segment consists of the self-employed. The shift from goods to service production is a driving force in the growth of this group. Service production suits self-employment better than goods production, and many services can be efficiently produced in companies of this kind.

The emerging picture is that of workers with greater mobility in a variety of respects. Such mobility is partly personally chosen and partly enforced. Within its various dimensions, there is movement between

employment and unemployment, between full-time and part-time work, between occupations, between study and paid work, and between job tasks with different degrees of load and different personal-development opportunities. To the picture also belong work-transformation stresses, insecure terms of employment, teleworking and work at home, plus the fact that the boundary between industrial and office work is becoming ever less clearly defined. Fear of unemployment or insecure employment may dampen work-environment criticism, and therefore current signal systems for occupational hazards will not operate as they did earlier (2).

Worklife researchers have lately observed and reacted on these changes in the employment status of workers with few exceptions. A comprehensive overview of recent research on precarious employment has been published by Quinlan and his co-workers (3).

This described development is a challenge for researchers who focus on work organization, the work environment, and health. However, for high-quality research on the new conditions to be grasped and carried out, both new methods and theory formulation are required.

Within the field of health and well-being there are many substantial research questions. I will only mention a few. Data indicate an ongoing differentiation of work conditions between permanent and temporary jobs and also within the groups of temporary employment. More knowledge should be obtained on which mechanisms are operating and creating this polarization by sorting men into the good forms (longer project) and women into the most insecure forms (on call).

Another research topic on a social psychological level is the relation between permanent employees and temporary workers. What happens with the social support system of a workplace when the number of temporary employees increases to one-third or half the employees? What work conditions predict antagonism or friendly cooperation?

A third area for research is regulation strategies that include occupational health systems and their capacity to act effectively in an organizational context with shorter and more insecure contracts (3). How should these systems be organized, and what is their task in this new working world of people who are more and more "just-in-time" employed? Do workplaces become more silent (2) and therefore affect the opportunities of occupational health systems to obtain relevant and correct information for their decision making?

One of the most policy-relevant questions is whether a temporary job is a bridge to a permanent and healthy job or a blind alley with negative outcomes with respect to socioeconomic status and well-being. The necessary design for a valid answer to this question is a longitudinal study in which selection and individual adjustment processes and exposure can be studied. And this brings us to a discussion of methodological questions.

There are many difficult methodological issues that have to be solved before high-quality research can be carried out. First, the area is covered by a plethora of terms: contingent work, precarious employment, temporary contracts, insecure work, atypical work, flexible work, and the like. In research reports these terms are often used without more-detailed information about the specific characteristics of the employment contracts. Often all kinds of temporary contracts are clumped together under the same label and compared with permanent employment, and there are few attempts to define temporary contracts independently of these labels. Polivka & Nardone (4) give one example of a definition: "Any job in which the individual does not have an explicit or implicit contract for long term employment or one in which the minimum hours of work can vary in a non systematic way".

As a result of this vagueness in conceptualization, it is difficult to define the population for investigations and, of course, difficult to compare results from different studies, especially comparisons between countries, which may be useful for identifying the driving forces of contingent work. A research goal must be to develop a consistent definition and sample workers according to that definition.

Another problem is the low response rate in questionnaire studies. A low response rate is a threat to the external validity of the study, and it limits generalization opportunities. Temporary workers are a minority in workplaces and are often weakly integrated into union and company activities. The social pressure for them to take part in a study is low. Often they are excluded by the firm or by researchers.

Furthermore, there is usually no general register of people with temporary contracts. One possibility, which we have used in our studies in Sweden, is to add questions to regular national "labor force studies". Company registers on sickness absence in combination with self-reported data from surveys may also be used, as in the study by Virtanen and her co-workers published in this issue of the *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health* (6). In this study on contingent employment, health and sickness absence, the researchers handled several methodological problems of this sort of study.

As has already been mentioned, we need longitudinal studies to meet some of the more interesting research questions. Here again, we meet the serious but not unsolvable problems of a high proportion of dropouts. However, longitudinal studies on this group raise specific problems? What data should be collected and how can the work history of persons who have had a series of temporary jobs be described and analyzed. As was mentioned earlier, we can expect to meet highly shifting and complex work histories — perhaps many jobs in many different physical, ergonomic, psychological, and social environments. People with these types of jobs probably also move more than people in permanent positions; therefore they are exposed to many different environments during their leisure time.

Many questions arise. What health selection processes are going on between standard and nonstandard employment contracts? Is it possible to reconstruct the work history? Is it possible to develop exposure matrices and methods for analyzing such data for temporary work and other modern types of mobile work? For what variables are subjective data to be preferred when compared with some more objective exposure variables? Do we have theories and methods that can support the analysis of the complex interactions between health promoting and health impairing factors, which can be assumed to operate?

Associated with this problem is the question of mental reference. What groups do temporary workers use as implicit reference groups when they judge work conditions in a questionnaire or in an interview? Is it the core group of workers (which they work close to), other temporary workers, or the situation as earlier unemployed persons?

These questions bring us to the third point, the need to develop strong theories that can contribute to the selection of what data should be collected from among the myriad of possible information.

Therefore, for research on temporary jobs, it is more important than ever to develop strong theories. Here two directions can briefly be mentioned. For studies on stress and health an elaborated job control model seems to be useful. Most studies on control and health use a "within" perspective (ie, control is studied within the workplace context but not in relation to a person's control over his or her worklife (ie, his or her control over the employment situation) (6).

A second and more dynamic approach is to use psychological contract theories (7). Such contracts refer to employees' and employers' perceptions of their reciprocal obligations. The traditional Swedish contract has been job security (lifelong employment) and money from the employer against loyalty and hard work from the employee. The contract of a temporary worker is based on economic exchange; the employer does not offer security or long-term future commitment. Interesting outcomes to study include loyalty, workplace integration, individual and group performance, aspects that, in modern work organization theories, are regarded as fundamental for the survival and development of a company.

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