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Three Dimensions of Labour Utilisation: Job Broadening, Employment Insecurity and Work Intensification

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In many industrialised countries, there have been major changes in the pattern of labour utilisation in the 1980s and 1990s. The paper argues that, in Australia, labour utilisation has been changing along three key dimensions: job broadening, employment security and work intensification. These dimensions are affecting both standard 'core' workers and non-standard 'peripheral' workers. Reviewing case study evidence and survey data from a federal government study of workplace change, we analyse employee perceptions to these forms of labour utilisation. Employees are being affected by differing combinations of these dimensions and are experiencing higher stress levels and greater job insecurity.

Introduction

In Australia and other countries there have been major changes in the pattern of labour utilisation in the 1980s and 1990s. Increased competitive conditions precipitated by globalisation, market liberalisation and the availability of new technologies has encouraged employers to use labour more flexibly and intensively (Frenkel and Peetz, 1998). Traditional craft and occupational boundaries and tasks clusters are being broken down and reconfigured as employers seek greater flexibility in the allocation of workers to tasks (Locke et al., 1995). To attain greater correspondence between product market demand patterns and labour deployment, employers have also restructured traditional working-time arrangements and constructed more precarious jobs (Brewster et al., 1997). Additionally, there is considerable speculation as to whether employers are also seeking to increase workers' effort levels (Edwards and Whitson, 1991). The capacity of workers and unions to resist such changes has been tempered by chronic unemployment and declining union density and influence (Peetz, 1998).

The aim of this paper is to make a contribution to the labour-utilisation literature through an analysis of labour-use practices in Australia. We argue that there are three major dimensions of change in labour utilisation which have affected employees in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s. First, the content of jobs has been expanding as employees have taken on more tasks in the cause of greater functional flexibility. Second, the work of full-time, part-time and other employees has become increasingly insecure as management has sought to exercise greater numerical flexibility. Third, the work of Australians has been intensified as management has sought more output per worker. Using data from a government survey, we demonstrate the efficacy of our model and the type of negative effects these changes are having on employees.

Labour Utilisation in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s

Workplace reform has been a key feature of industrial restructuring in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s. In response to the availability of new technologies and greater global competition, employers have been reorganising work and employment structures with the aim of enhancing their competitive capability (Clarke and Niland, 1991). Australian governments have sought to stimulate the reform process through the liberalisation and deregulation of product and capital markets and, to a lesser extent, the labour market (Quiggin, 1996). Unions have supported the reform programme as part of the bilateral Accord between the union movement and the Federal Labor Government – until 1996 when Labor lost office (Bray and Walsh, 1995). While there is some debate as to whether the extent of workplace change can be characterised as radical or incremental, there is little doubt that substantial change has been taking place (Kitay and Lansbury, 1997). The key questions we seek to pose are, first, what have been in the main dimensions of workplace change affecting labour utilisation and, second, what effects are these changes in labour-use having on employees? The paper will attempt to answer these questions by establishing that labour utilisation has been changing along three key dimensions: job broadening, employment insecurity and work intensification.

Job Broadening

The first change in the pattern of labour utilisation appears to be the process of job broadening, commonly referred to multi-skilling, functional flexibility or polyvalence. In many industrialised countries, employers have sought to increase productivity and competitiveness by making work organisation more flexible and sensitive to market demands (Ozai, 1996). By breaking down the rigid horizontal division of labour between jobs, multi-skilled workers are able to perform a wide range of tasks and can be quickly and smoothly redeployed between activities to adapt to changes in product and process in the short and medium term (Atkinson, 1984, 1985). Broadening job boundaries may also involve incorporating higher-level supervisory, coordination and quality control responsibilities into operational jobs. By recombining the 'thinking' and 'doing' aspects of work, it becomes possible for management to incorporate workers into the on-going process of continuous improvement and problem-solving (Best, 1992). The process of job broadening may also be introduced as part of team-based working (Ozai, 1996).

This type of labour utilisation has been particularly important in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s. As a result of National Wage Case decisions of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission between 1987 and 1989, employers and unions were encouraged to review both industrial awards and work practices to promote multi-skilling, career path progression, reduced demarcation, greater flexibility in work practices and management practices that encouraged consultation (Plowman, 1990: 39). While there is mixed evidence of the success of this program, (Bramble, 1989; Curtain et al., 1992: 24-8; Frenkel and Shaw, 1989; Rimmer and Verisis, 1990; Rimmer and Zappala, 1988) it is beyond doubt that job-broadening has been a central element of workplace reform in Australia.

The critical question, though, is what are the likely effects on workers of multi-skilling? Atkinson (1987) and Post-Fordists (Kern and Schumann, 1987; Mathews, 1989a, 1989b; Piore and Sabel, 1984) view this development in positive terms. They envisage that by expanding the task range of jobs, workers will become more skilled and adroit in adapting to customer and production demands. More responsibility and autonomy in turn provides

workers with greater motivation and satisfaction at work. Critics, in contrast, argue that the likely effect of functional flexibility is work intensification (Elger, 1991; Junor et al., 1993; O'Donnell, 1995; Pollert, 1991; Tomaney, 1990).

Employment Insecurity

The second major change in labour utilisation has been growing employment insecurity. The most obvious sign of this has been the expansion of atypical forms of employment such as part-time, temporary, casual, contract and agency labour. In Australia, there is substantial evidence that the non-standard workforce is growing (Campbell, 1997; Lafferty et al., 1997). While part of the shift away from full-time employment can be attributed to cyclical, demographic and structural factors, there is also evidence that the changing structure of employment reflects the outcome of new business policies to achieve greater labour flexibility (Burgess, 1997; Rubery and Wilkinson, 1994).

Atypical employment forms are commonly characterised by insecurity in terms of income, employment and working-time. Indeed, the terms 'precarious employment' and 'non-standard forms of employment' are often used interchangeably (Treu, 1992). However, not all forms of non-standard employment are insecure – for example, permanent part-time work. Equally, not all full-time employment is secure (Burgess and Campbell, 1997: 6). Indeed, the 1994 Australian Workplace Bargaining Survey (WBS94) showed that full-time employees were slightly *more* likely than part-time employees to consider their job security has declined in the previous year as a result of workplace changes (DIR, 1995). 'Permanent' employees – 27 per cent of whom said their jobs were less secure than a year ago – were more vulnerable than casual employees (13 per cent).

One of the weaknesses of the flexibility literature is that it often assumes that a core of full-time workers will be sheltered from employment insecurity (Atkinson, 1987). However, as Cappelli (1995: 563) has noted in the USA case, there appears to be a breaking down of 'many aspects of the internal labour market, even for permanent employees'. Similarly in Australia, many workers have been exposed to a range of changes and threats which have undermined permanency of employment. Chronic high levels of unemployment reduce workers' employment choices and generate insecurity. Government endeavours to promote market liberalisation and micro-economic reform have heightened market pressures and reduced the viability of some sectors of the economy – manufacturing in particular (Quiggin, 1996). Security of public sector employment has been eroded by contracting-out, funding cuts, competitive tendering, privatisation, corporatisation and the adoption of private sector management practices (Rees and Rodley, 1995). Extensive downsizing and delayering in both public and private sectors has threatened the livelihood of both lower and middle level employees (Bramble et al., 1996; Littler, 1994; Littler et al., 1997). Workers face further threats from management efficiency initiatives such as total quality management, business process re-engineering, lean production and other change programs (O'Donnell, 1995, 1996). The scope and intensity of these changes serves to remind all employees that they may be the next ones to lose their jobs. As such, we argue that the second dimension of current trends in labour utilisation is increasing employment insecurity.

Work Intensification

The third major change in labour utilisation has been work intensification or 'working harder'. This controversial issue has been debated at length in the UK (Edwards and

Whitson, 1991; Guest, 1990; Nichols, 1991). In Australia, in contrast, there has been little serious discussion or consideration of labour intensification in the literature. We would argue that work intensification represents a separate and significant form of labour utilisation (Allan, 1997). A careful reading of the Australian research suggests that there is substantial evidence that employers in the 1980s and 1990s have been intensifying work (Donaldson, 1996:64).

A common employer strategy is to provide insufficient staff for an increasing workload. This strategy is rife in the higher education sector as academics are expected to produce more research output and teach longer hours with more students for no increase in real wages (Burgess and Strachan, 1997:30). Similarly, Allan (1996; 1997) concluded there was systematic work intensification in Queensland public hospitals in the 1990s as the government attempted to reduce waiting lists by increasing the throughput of hospital patients. Reeder (1988) also found evidence of employer speed-ups in the fast food industry. Further support for the wide-spread nature of this employer strategy can be found in the national survey of employer practices undertaken by Brosnan and Walsh (unpublished data). They found that approximately a quarter (27 per cent) of workplaces seeking to reduce labour costs relative to other costs simply made staff work harder.

In some cases, the speeding up or intensification of work has been associated with varying combinations of work study, tighter surveillance and disciplinary methods, and the use of performance-based pay. For instance, the introduction of engineered standards and computer performance monitoring in grocery warehouses in New South Wales was found to result in a substantial intensification of employee work effort (Lund and Wright, 1998). In two grocery warehouses, Lund and Wright (1998: 6) found that employee work rates had risen by between 35 per cent and 75 per cent after engineered standards had been introduced. Those workers who failed to achieve output targets were threatened with dismissal. Similarly, within the customer service division of Telstra, Long (1996: 16) noted that the work effort of employees organised was monitored by computer, including the time taken to respond to in-coming and out-going calls and take meal and toilet breaks. Computer-based monitoring of work was also found to be pervasive in Australian insurance, banking, airlines and vehicle repair industries (Long, 1996).

Additionally, employers may also utilise team-work and performance-related pay to intensify employee effort and to build-in closer surveillance (Barker, 1993). For instance, within one Australian service-based organisation, van den Broek found that individual and team performance in responding to customer queries were logged and used to determine team bonus payments. Whiteboards were also employed to display the daily productivity of each team and team member. Such techniques placed considerable pressure on individual team members to conform to managerially-determined performance levels, with workers rather than management sanctioning those team members believed to be shirking (1997: 346-7).

An alternative employer strategy is to not replace staff who leave, thereby increasing the workload for continuing staff. A number of Australian case studies have found that increased work intensity was preceded by substantial reductions in workforce numbers, with greater effort levels demanded from remaining employees (Lansbury and Macdonald, 1992: 231; Junor et al., 1993: 101-3). Similar findings were reached by scholars using case study and survey method to study the effects of downsizing and layering on middle managers in Australian organisations (Bramble et al., 1996; Littler, 1994; Littler et al.,

1997). These academics concluded that the 'survivors' of downsizing and delayering exercises often have wider spans of control, work longer hours, have more responsibilities, manage more people and undertake more work (Bramble et al., 1996: 81; Cascio, 1993: 99; Littler et al., 1996). Indeed, Brosnan and Walsh (unpublished data), in their national survey, found that the most popular method of Australian employers seeking to reduce labour costs was simply not to replace staff who had left (42 per cent of workplaces).

In some cases, the intensification of work is a direct result of numerical flexibility strategies (Bagguley et al., 1990; O'Connell Davidson, 1990; Rees and Fielder, 1992; Stubbs, 1991). Contracting-out of government cleaning services, for example, may prove to be cheaper, but this is often accomplished by the use of less staff (Quiggin, 1996). After the privatisation of the New South Wales Government Cleaning Service in 1994, Fraser (1997: 27-41) found a widespread perception among cleaners that workforce numbers had reduced by between one third and two thirds. The volume of work, however, remained unchanged and was simply reallocated among remaining cleaning staff. The options for staff are to work more vigorously or to work longer hours especially where employers establish a 'work to finish' rule and place responsibility for completing daily workloads on employees (Heiler, 1996: 126).

One indicator of how hard Australian workers are labouring comes from national statistics on the average hours worked per week by full-time workers. From the mid 1960s to early 1990s, average hours remained relatively constant, oscillating around 41 hours per week. By 1995, it had increased to 43 hours. At the same time, the average paid overtime hours declined: 'This means that not only are people working longer, many are also working the additional hours for free' (Buchanan, and Bearfield, 1997: 8). This escalation of paid and unpaid working hours has occurred against a backdrop of continuing high levels of unemployment and under-employment and a significant growth of long-term unemployed (Richardson, 1997: 16).

As we have shown, there is ample evidence that job broadening, insecurity and work intensification represent the major dimensions of workplace change occurring in Australia. Further evidence of the salience of our schema is provided by a national survey conducted by the peak union body, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). Based on more than 10 000 responses to its 'stress at work' survey, the ACTU (1998) found that the most commonly cited conditions facing employers in the workplace were increased workload (70 per cent), organisational change/restructuring (68 per cent), poor career opportunities (46 per cent), uncomfortable temperatures (46 per cent) and job insecurity (43 per cent). Moreover, the three most stressful conditions at work were reported to be increased workload (19 per cent), organisational change/restructuring (10 per cent) and job insecurity (9 per cent).

Evidence from the Workplace Bargaining Survey 1994

Having made a case for the efficacy of our three dimensions of trends in labour utilisation, we present empirical data on what kinds of effects changes in labour-use are having on employees, based on the Workplace Bargaining Survey 1994. In October and November 1994, the Federal Department of Industrial Relations (DIR) conducted this national survey of Australian workplaces with 10 or more employees. The survey examined the type and extent of change introduced into workplaces and the manner in which it was introduced. It covered both part-time and full-time employees. All industries were surveyed, except agriculture and defence. There were 11 233 useable employee surveys returned

representing a response rate of 40 per cent. All results were weighted to provide estimates from their population (DIR, 1995: 7,8).

We measured the three modes of labour utilisation by reference to four questions in that survey. *Job Broadening*, or increased functional flexibility, is measured by responses to a question asking employees whether the 'range of tasks you perform in your job' was lower or higher than 12 months ago. *Employment Insecurity* is measured by whether respondents stated that 'the security of your job' was lower or higher than 12 months ago. *Work Intensification* is measured as occurring where respondents either agreed that the 'effort you put into your job' was higher than 12 months ago *or* they agreed that 'total hours you usually work each week' had gone up in the last 12 months while usual total weekly pay had not gone up. This last qualification removes from our definition those employees voluntarily working more hours simply in order to receive more pay, though by doing so it probably understates work intensification. We only count employees who had not changed jobs in the year preceding the survey. We do not count employees who responded 'n/a' or 'don't know' to the relevant questions.

One of the limitations of this data set is that it only asks workers about changes in their working lives in the last 12 months. As noted in our previous discussion, Australian workers have endured a large number of changes over the previous decade, of which only the most recent will be captured here. To that extent, this data set may underestimate the degree of change affecting employees. A second limitation is that these measures are proxies rather than irrefutable indicators. Nevertheless, as shall be seen, they are sufficiently salient to generate quite a powerful model.

Our suggested conceptual model is presented in Table 1. The object of this typology is to identify the main *dimensions* of labour utilisation and the possible *combinations*. The former is displayed in the columns in Table 1 and the latter is displayed in the rows.

Table 1: Typology of dimensions of labour utilisation

Description	Increasing functional flexibility?	Increasing insecurity?	Work intensification?
Stable	No	No	No
Simple change			
Broadening	Yes	No	No
Insecurity	No	Yes	No
Intensification	No	No	Yes
Complex change			
Broad insecurity	Yes	Yes	No
Broad intensification	Yes	No	Yes
Insecure intensification	No	Yes	Yes
Radical change	Yes	Yes	Yes

We categorised the various possible combinations into four levels. First, employees experiencing no change in their working lives were labelled 'stable'. Second, employees experiencing one type of change have been grouped under the title 'simple change'. The three possibilities here are 'broadening' (more functional flexibility), 'insecurity', and 'intensification'. The third level, labelled 'complex change', includes employees who have reported experiencing two types of change. The labels of the three possible alternatives used here are self explanatory. Finally, there are those employees undergoing radical change – experiencing all three forms of change. The advantage of this model is that it allows us to examine the extent of independence and inter-dependence between the three dimensions of labour utilisation.

Table 2 summarises the results. The vast majority of employees (81 per cent) reported experiencing either one or more types of change in the last 12 months; only one sixth of employees were in the 'stable' group. This result is quite surprising because employees only reported changes in the last 12 months and it indicates that most employees in Australia are experiencing ongoing change at work. While approximately a quarter of employees experienced simple change, it was much more common for employees to report two or more changes. Almost half of employees (42 per cent) reported complex change with nearly a sixth of employees (15 per cent) in the radical change category. Broad intensification was the most widely reported type of change (34 per cent). This latter finding adds weight to the argument of the critical scholars that functional flexibility is typically associated with work intensification (Elger, 1991; O'Donnell, 1995; Pollert, 1991; Tomaney, 1990).

These overall findings reinforces our contention that work intensification needs to be considered as an important dimension of labour utilisation. They also suggest, though, a strong link between broadening and work intensification, with these forms of utilisation occurring more commonly in combination than on their own. All up, about three fifths of employees report work intensification and more than three-fifths report job broadening. Increasing insecurity is less common: just 27 per cent report this, although this is more than double the proportion (13 per cent) who reported their job security had improved.

Table 2: Distribution of forms of labour utilisation

Type	Label	Distribution
Stable		19
Simple change	Broadening	10
	Intensification	7
	Increased insecurity	7
	Subtotal	24
Complex change	Broad intensification	36
	Broad insecurity	3
	Insecure intensification	3
	Subtotal	42
Radical change		15
Total		100

Source: Workplace Bargaining Survey, 1994, unpublished data
(Errors in summation due to rounding)

Implications for Employees: Increasing Stress

The effect that these types of changes are having on employees' perception of stress is displayed in Table 3. A majority of employees reported increased stress over the past year. There appears to be very clear relationship between perceived increases in stress and the complexity of change. Workers with stable work content experienced a low incidence (14 per cent) of increased stress. Approximately half of employees undergoing simple change had a higher incidence of increased stress (44-53 per cent). The incidence of increased stress rose to roughly three-quarters of employees experiencing complex change (70-82 per cent). Those undergoing radical change had a near universal experience (88 per cent) of increased stress.

At the micro level, the impact of any of the changes will vary between workplaces and depend on the specific character and extent of the change concerned. In aggregate, however, these findings imply that the number of changes experienced was more important than the type of change. With simple change, it didn't matter whether the change took the form of increased insecurity or functional flexibility or work intensification – the impact was still that about half of employees reported increased stress. Likewise, with complex change, the incidence of increased stress was about three in four employees, regardless of which pair of changes were in evidence. This is a remarkable finding, especially given that our measures are simple proxies that cannot fully capture the detailed character or impact of changing labour utilisation practices at the workplace. These findings further reinforce the importance of treating work intensification as a separate mode of labour utilisation and demonstrate the efficacy of our model that identifies the inter-relationship between different types of change. They also point to a danger for employers: that the increasing stress that workplace change is putting on employees may lead to the burn-out of workers and the loss of some of the 'gains' that it is meant to have delivered.

Table 3: Proportion of employees reporting increased stress (percent)

Type	Label	Increased stress
Stable		14
Simple change	Broadening	49
	Intensification	53
	Insecurity	44
Complex change	Broad intensification	78
	Broad insecurity	70
	Insecure intensification	82
Radical change		88

(Weighted estimates exclude employees in their job for less than a year)

Source: Workplace Bargaining Survey, 1994, unpublished data

Conclusion

The paper argues that changes in the pattern of labour utilisation represent major features of work and employment restructuring in the 1980s and 1990s. More competitive conditions and the availability of new technology have encouraged organisations to reconfigure work practices and employment relations to improve competitiveness and efficiency. This reform process has been further stimulated by government policies of market liberalisation and deregulation and union cooperation in the program of workplace change.

Based on our reading of the literature, we sought to establish that the pattern of labour utilisation has changed along three key dimensions: job broadening, employment insecurity and work intensification. Employees are increasingly likely to find the boundaries of their job extended, the security of their employment diminished and their work more demanding. These dimensions are affecting both standard 'core' workers and non-standard 'peripheral' workers. Reviewing pre-existing case study and survey data, we contend that there is abundant evidence to substantiate that Australian employees are being affected along all three dimensions.

Using survey data from an Australian federal government study of workplace change, we analysed employee perceptions of changes to these forms of labour utilisation. The results indicate that employees are indeed being affected by differing combinations of these dimensions and are experiencing increased work intensity, a broadening of their jobs, greater job insecurity and high stress levels. Each form of labour utilisation increases worker stress, by broadly similar magnitudes, and almost all workers who experienced each form of labour utilisation also experienced increased stress levels.

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