

Job Control in Britain

First Findings from the Skills and Employment Survey 2012

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HEADLINES

Employees' ability to influence decisions at work is one of the most important factors affecting their motivation and psychological well-being, and is also associated with good physical health. This report examines the trends in different types of employee control in British workplaces, and presents a mixed picture.

- Overall, the level of task discretion (employees' immediate control over their work tasks) has been stable since 2001, following a sharp decline in the 1990s. But the trends since 2006 have been different for men and women, with women seeing a small rise, and men a further fall in task discretion.
- There was a rise in the proportion of employees working in semi-autonomous teams (those with significant control over their work activities) from 14% in 2006 to 18% in 2012. This rise reverses a previous long-term decline.
- Between 2006 and 2012 there was also a rise in the proportion of jobs using self-managed teams, from 4% to 7%.
- Halting a previous upward trend, there has been little change between 2006 and 2012 in formal provisions for participation in wider organisational decisions. Yet, the proportion of employees who report that they have a great deal or quite a lot of say over work organisation declined from 36% to 27% between 2001 and 2012.

The Skills and Employment Survey is funded jointly by the Economic and Social Research Council and the UK Commission for Employment and Skills through the ESRC Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies (LLAKES) which acts as the host institution. It is directed by Alan Felstead (Cardiff University and Visiting Professor at the Institute of Education) in collaboration with Duncan Gallie at the University of Oxford and Francis Green at the Institute of Education.

1. The Importance of Job Control

Earlier research has underlined the negative consequences for job satisfaction of lack of control over decisions about the work task. Moreover, researchers in the area of work psychology have linked lower task discretion to poor health outcomes such as higher blood pressure and increased incidence of cardiac disease. Recent theories of management have also emphasised the importance of engaging employees in decisions affecting their work in order to encourage creativity and increase organisational commitment.

Teamwork has been thought to be associated with more decentralised forms of responsibility in the workplace. Since it provides employees with greater control over their work, it is argued, employees are more likely to put in discretionary effort, thereby enhancing organisational performance. Moreover, teamwork is thought to improve performance by providing greater scope for employees to use their knowledge, skills and abilities, as well as facilitating learning, skills acquisition and information sharing.

In addition to these forms of control over the immediate work task, the involvement of employees in wider organisational decisions has also been viewed as important both for commitment to the organisation and for employees' willingness to accept organisational change.

With the economic crisis, which has both increased the intensity of work and the urgency for organisational restructuring, the need to monitor the pattern of change in employee's involvement in decisions has become particularly important. It is by no means clear what impact the economic crisis has had. On the one hand, it might encourage employers to reassert unilateral managerial prerogative by weakening the market power of employees. On the other hand, it might lead to new initiatives to enhance involvement as a way of increasing employee commitment at a time of greater competitive pressure and organisational change.

2. Previous Evidence

Contrary to the widespread expectation that rising levels of skill and the increased complexity of technology would lead to a greater decentralisation of decision-making to employees, evidence from earlier Skills Surveys indicated a significant decline in the level of task discretion for British employees in the 1990s. This was the case for both men and women, for employees in most occupational groups and for employees in both the public and private sectors.

Teamworking increased between 1992 and 2006, but this was not accompanied by an increase in employees' control over their work. Rather, the proportion of employees in teams with significant autonomy declined from the early 1990s onwards. In contrast, consultative involvement about wider organisational matters increased.

3. The Skills and Employment Survey 2012: A Source of New Evidence

The aim of this report is to provide an updated picture of trends in task discretion, teamwork and organisational

participation in the context of the economic recession, using the Skills and Employment Survey 2012 (SES2012). The survey collected responses from working adults in England, Scotland and Wales, interviewed in their own homes.

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. Data collection was directed by ourselves and conducted by GfK NOP.

SES2012 is 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 of the analyses that follow use these weights.

4. Indicators of Job Control

The survey included a range of indicators for the different forms of job control – individual task discretion, semi-autonomous teamwork and organisational participation.

Task discretion

We use four questions which assess how much personal influence people think they have over specific aspects of their jobs:

- how hard they work
- deciding what tasks they are to do
- how the tasks are done
- the quality standards to which they work

The response options range from 'a great deal', 'a fair amount' to 'not much' and 'not much at all'. A summary index was constructed, by taking the average of responses of the four items. Both individual indicators and the summary index vary between '0' indicating no influence at all and '3' indicating a great deal of influence. A score of at least '2' is used to denote 'high discretion' jobs.

Teamwork

Employees were asked whether they usually work on their own or whether their work involves working together as a group with one or more other employees in a similar position to theirs. The question was asked in identical fashion in 1992, 2001, 2006 and 2012, providing trend data.

For those who worked in teams, their decision-making scope was explored through a set of questions on the level of control exercised by the team over key features of work (these were the same aspects of work as for individual task discretion). A summary score was created by averaging the four items. Teams that had a score equivalent to 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' of influence

over work activities are regarded as 'semi-autonomous teams'.

From 2006 onwards three additional items were included in order to determine the extent of self-management in teams, asking how much influence team members have over:

- selecting group members
- selecting group leaders
- setting targets for the group

'Self-managing teams' are those semi-autonomous teams that also have an average score equivalent to 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' of say with respect to these items.

Organisational Participation

An initial question on organisational participation asked whether management organises meetings that provide information about what is happening in the organisation. This was followed by items that sought to capture different forms of dialogue between management and

employees. Respondents were asked whether they participated in a quality circle or a similar group, and whether there were meetings where they could express their views about what was happening in the organisation. Employees were then asked whether or not they thought they would have any say in decisions which affected the way they did their job. We report those who said that they had 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot'.

5. Findings

Task Discretion

Task discretion declined throughout the 1990s and has remained flat since 2001 (Figure 1). The stability in overall task discretion, however, conceals differences in trends for men and women since 2006. The trends in task discretion were similar for men and women until 2006, with a slightly lower proportion of women than men reporting that they had high levels of control over their everyday work tasks. However, by 2012 women had caught up with men and indeed exceeded them in the percentage of jobs where the worker had high discretion.

Figure 1: Task Discretion, 1992-2012



There were also differences in the pattern over time for different types of employee (see Table 1 which shows the scores of the summary index for the four discretion items). Both temporary workers and part-timers experienced an increase in task discretion between 2006 and 2012, while it remained stable for permanent or full-time employees. Employees in the public sector enjoyed a higher level of individual task discretion than private sector employees. The gap between the two groups shrank between 1997 and 2006 but widened again between 2006 and 2012.

It was suggested in earlier studies that skill levels were closely linked to the level of task discretion. Evidence for the last two decades supports this. In each year for which data are available managers enjoyed the highest level of discretion, followed by professionals. Operatives and those in elementary occupations had the lowest influence over their work. For almost all occupational groups, the 1990s were marked by a considerable

decline in discretion, particularly for administrative and secretarial employees and operatives. However, in the period between 2006 and 2012, the level recovered somewhat among those working in personal services, sales and elementary jobs.

Those with at least A-levels enjoyed notably higher levels of task discretion than those without such qualifications. While both these groups experienced a negative trend in the 1990s, there was an increase in the level of task discretion of employees with no A-levels between 2006 and 2012.

Looking at the variation by industry (results not shown), employees in the construction, health and education sectors consistently reported the highest level of task discretion. Moreover, there was little change in most industries in the 2000s, with the exception of those working in hotels and restaurants who experienced an increase in influence over their work tasks.

Table 1: Task Discretion by Employee Characteristics, 1992-2012

	<u>1992</u>	<u>1997</u>	<u>2001</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2012</u>
<i>Contract type</i>					
Full-time	2.46	2.31	2.21	2.22	2.21
Part-time	2.35	2.12	2.07	2.07	2.13
Permanent	2.44	2.27	2.20	2.20	2.20
Temporary	2.41	2.19	1.95	1.93	2.09
<i>Sector</i>					
Private	2.43	2.24	2.18	2.18	2.17
Public	2.47	2.33	2.20	2.20	2.22
<i>Occupations</i>					
Managers	2.72	2.60	2.58	2.51	2.52
Professional	2.56	2.48	2.23	2.28	2.23
Associate Professional	2.61	2.39	2.30	2.26	2.24
Administrative and secretarial	2.46	2.26	2.15	2.18	2.13
Skilled trades	2.38	2.29	2.18	2.24	2.24
Personal service	2.57	2.24	2.24	2.20	2.22
Sales	2.31	2.06	1.95	1.95	2.07
Operatives	2.16	1.91	1.86	1.86	1.75
Elementary	2.23	2.04	1.92	1.85	1.94
<i>Education level</i>					
A-levels	2.53	2.37	2.26	2.24	2.21
No A-levels	2.36	2.18	2.09	2.10	2.15
<i>All</i>	2.44	2.27	2.18	2.18	2.19

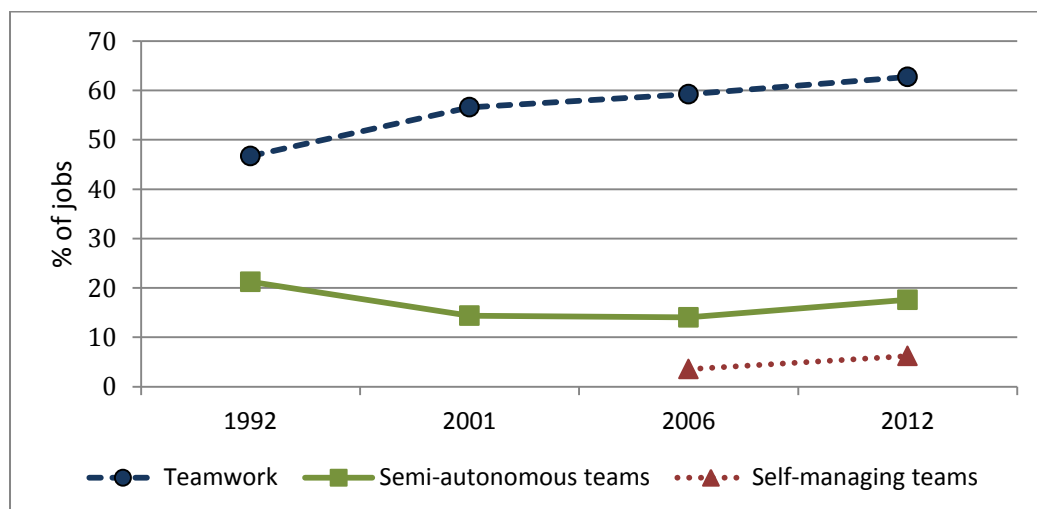
Teamwork

The proportion of employees working in teams increased steadily from 47% in 1992 to 63% in 2012. But the proportion of those in semi-autonomous teams (with significant control over their work tasks) declined between 1992 and 2006. In the most recent period, however, this trend has been reversed, although still not returning fully to the level of 1992. Participation in semi-autonomous teams grew between 2006 and 2012 from 14% of all employees to 18%. Self-managing teams

almost doubled up between 2006 and 2012 from 4% to 7%.

Male and female employees reported similar levels of teamworking. However, men were more likely to be working in self-managing teams than women in both 2006 and 2012 (not shown), and this was even more the case in 2012. The steady increase in teamwork is observed among all occupational groups, except for operatives for whom the proportion declined between 2006 and 2012.

Figure 2: Teamworking, 1992-2012



In contrast to the view that teamwork increases employees' control over their work tasks, the Skills Surveys show that those who work in teams generally enjoy less control over their work tasks than those who

work alone. However, this varied markedly by team type. Table 2 shows the individual task discretion scores of employees in different types of teams compared to those who work on their own. Individuals who work in self-

managing teams and in semi-autonomous teams have higher levels of control over how they do their jobs than those not in teams. Teams which provide significant opportunities for decision-making do encourage individual task discretion. Task discretion declined in all

types of teams between 1992 and 2001, and then remained at a stable level, except for individuals working in semi-autonomous teams for whom it has been on the rise from 2001.

Table 2: Teamworking and Task Discretion, 1992-2012

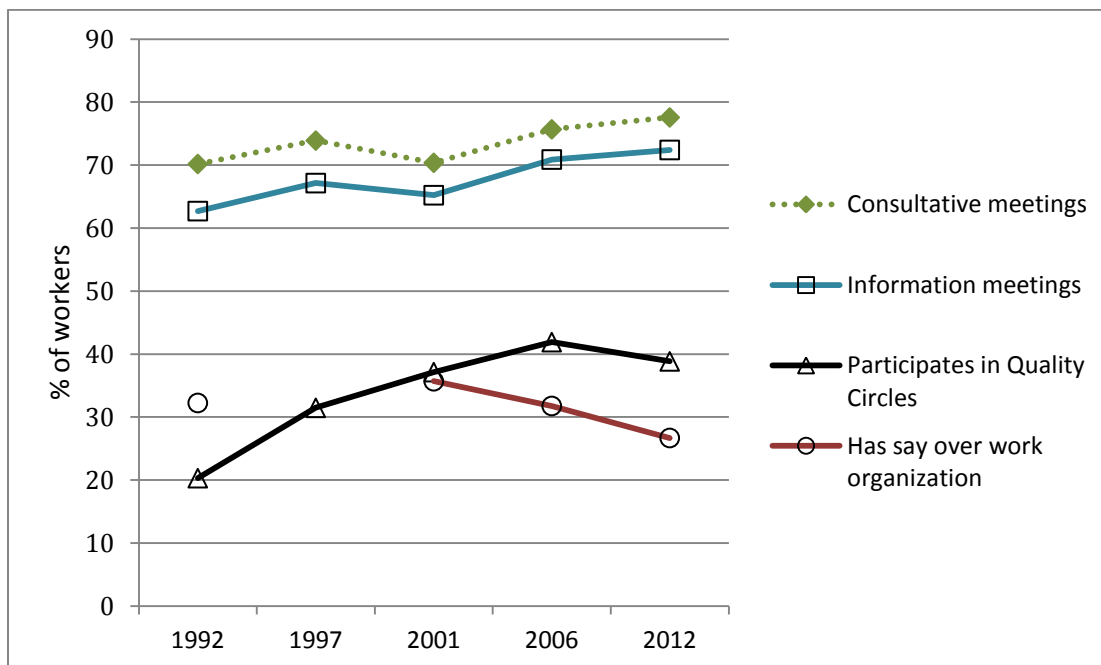
	1992	2001	2006	2012
Works in a team	2.41	2.13	2.15	2.16
Does not work in a team	2.46	2.25	2.23	2.24
Works in a non-semi-autonomous teams	2.41	2.17	2.17	2.16
Works in a semi-autonomous team	2.53	2.27	2.30	2.34
Works in a self-managing team	n/a	n/a	2.46	2.46
<i>All</i>	2.44	2.18	2.18	2.19

Organisational Participation

The most recent data provides a mixed picture of trends in organisational participation. There had been an overall rise between 1992 and 2006 both in the proportion of employees in organisations where they could express their views and in participation in quality circles. Access to consultative meetings continued to rise between 2006 and 2012, but there was no evidence of an extension

of the scope of the issues they covered. Whereas there was an increase in the early 2000s in the proportion of employees in workplaces where consultative meetings discussed strategic issues (such as the financial position of the organisation and investment decisions), this leveled off with the recession. Moreover, there were declines between 2006 and 2012 in participation in quality circles and in the proportion of employees reporting they had a great deal or quite a lot of say over changes to work organisation.

Figure 3: Organisational Participation, 1992-2012



6. Implications

There was a notable difference in the pattern of change between 2006 and 2012 for the different forms of job control. Whereas individual task discretion remained unchanged, there was a rise in both semi-autonomous and self-managed team work and a decline in

perceived influence over wider organisational decisions.

The increase of teams with influence is the first sign that British management might be beginning to take note of views about work organisation that have become increasingly prevalent in managerial theories of 'high

performance' organisations. Yet the absence of any improvement with respect to individual task discretion, after a marked decline in the 1990s, is of concern given the evidence of its importance for employees' motivation and for their psychological and physical health. It is also surprising given an increase in the skill levels of the workforce over the period, since it is widely thought that there are significant benefits to management of giving greater responsibility to higher skilled employees.

It is well known that there has been a decline in union consultation channels over the last thirty years. It

remains a pressing challenge to find ways to encourage managers to adopt high-involvement work practices, where they have not already done so, and to reduce the reach of bureaucratic and direct controls over workers. There is evidence that many employers in Britain, including in the public sector, are behind the curve in drawing on best practices. The apparent decline in the effectiveness of mechanisms of wider organisational participation is worrying given that it has been shown to be an important source of organisational commitment, as well as reducing insecurity in a period of rapid change.

Selected Recent Studies

Gallie, D, Felstead, A and Green, F (2004) 'Changing patterns of task discretion in Britain', *Work Employment and Society*, 18(2):243-266.

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Heller, F., Pusic, E, Strauss, G and Wilpert, B (1998) *Organizational Participation: Myth and Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zhou, Y (2009) *British Employees' Organizational Participation*, Germany: VDM Verlag.

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LLAKES is an ESRC-funded Research Centre which investigates the role of lifelong learning in promoting economic competitiveness and social cohesion, and in mediating the interactions between the two. The Skills and Employment Survey 2012 was funded by the ESRC/UKCES Strategic Partnership (RES-241-25-0001), with additional support from the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods.

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This report may be cited as: Inanc, H, Felstead, A, Gallie, D, and Green, F (2013) *Job Control in Britain: First Findings from the Skills and Employment Survey 2012*, London: Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies, Institute of Education.

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