

# Work experiences

## Changes in the subjective experience of work

Krishan Shah & Daniel Tomlinson

September 2021



## Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the Nuffield Foundation for supporting this work, and to Alex Beer and Mark Franks for their helpful comments on an early draft. We thank Jennifer Beckwith, Kate Bell, Pavlina Draganova, Shazia Ejaz, Simon Kelleher and Tony Wilson for their excellent contributions at a roundtable convened to discuss the findings in this report. This work has also benefitted greatly from conversations with, and comments from, Tania Burchardt and Henry Overman at LSE. Finally, we are grateful to colleagues at the Resolution Foundation, particularly Lindsay Judge. Any errors remain, of course, the authors' own.

### Citation

If you are using this document in your own writing, our preferred citation is:

K Shah & D Tomlinson, *Work experiences*:

*Changes in the subjective experience of work*, The Economy 2030 Inquiry, May 2021

### Permission to share

This document is published under the [Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial No Derivatives 3.0 England and Wales Licence](#). This allows anyone to download, reuse, reprint, distribute, and/or copy Economy 2030 Inquiry publications without written permission subject to the conditions set out in the Creative Commons Licence.

For commercial use, please contact: [info@resolutionfoundation.org](mailto:info@resolutionfoundation.org)

## The Economy 2030 Inquiry

The Economy 2030 Inquiry is a collaboration between the Resolution Foundation and the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics, funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The Inquiry's subject matter is the nature, scale, and context for the economic change facing the UK during the 2020s. Its goal is not just to describe the change that Covid-19, Brexit, the Net Zero transition and technology will bring, but to help the country and its policy makers better understand and navigate it against a backdrop of low productivity and high inequality. To achieve these aims the Inquiry is leading a two-year national conversation on the future of the UK economy, bridging rigorous research, public involvement and concrete proposals. The work of the Inquiry will be brought together in a final report in 2023 that will set out a renewed economic strategy for the UK to enable the country to successfully navigate the decade ahead, with proposals to drive strong, sustainable and equitable growth, and significant improvements to people's living standards and well-being.

## The Nuffield Foundation

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. It also funds student programmes that provide opportunities for young people to develop skills in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and the Ada Lovelace Institute. The Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation. Visit [www.nuffieldfoundation.org](http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org).

## Summary

Work in the UK has changed substantially over the last three decades. Whether we think about the composition of the workforce (there are more women, graduates and migrants in it today, for example), the jobs people do (fewer manufacturing roles but many more services jobs) or the way people do their tasks (more digital technology and the rise of new human resources and managerial practices), the world of work has been radically transformed. In this briefing note - the first in our Economy 2030 Inquiry series analysing past, present and future economic change - we examine the subjective experience of work from the late 1980s to the eve of the pandemic.

These trends matter, and are worthy of far more attention than they often receive. The subjective experience of work is important in and of itself: after all, many of us spend more of our waking hours in work than doing anything else. It is a relevant consideration for firms, with job satisfaction and workplace stress linked to absenteeism and all the costs that can entail. But an understanding of the changing experience of work is also critical to the Inquiry's overall endeavour: to provide solutions to the deep-seated problems the UK economy must confront over the next decade such as stagnant productivity and diminished dynamism.

The received wisdom is that the quality of work in the UK has been deteriorating for a prolonged period of time - from the deindustrialisation of the 1980s to the rise in low-paid and insecure work post-financial crisis. But the data reveals these claims are overdone: while employee job satisfaction levels have declined slightly over the past 30 years in the UK, this fall has been relatively modest and is predominantly a result of falls in job satisfaction post-financial crisis. Overall, an average of 54 per cent of employees reported that they were satisfied with their jobs in the period 2010-2012 to 2017-2019, compared to 59 per cent in 1991-1992 to 2009-2011. More troublingly, the lowest earners have lost their 'satisfaction premium' over time: job satisfaction for this group has fallen from over 70 per cent in the early 1990s (far higher than for those with higher earnings at this point) to 56 per cent in 2017-2019, despite the introduction of the National Minimum Wage during this period raising their relative earnings.

Despite the popular narrative that people are now more likely to work in meaningless jobs, we find that employees are more positive, on average, about a range of aspects of work than they were in the past. To begin, 79 per cent of employees report that their job is "helpful to others" in 2015, up from 67 per cent in 1989. Likewise, on average employees feel more positive about the organisations they work for: they are more likely to say they feel "proud" of where they work today; more likely to report that their values are in line with their organisation's than in previous decades; and more likely to report that their



organisation “inspires the best” in them (up from 61 per cent of employees in 2001 to 74 per cent of employees in 2017). Changes at work have clearly not all been for the worst.

Although attachment to work has increased over this period, stress is increasingly flagged as an issue. The share of employees who report that their work is “always” or “often” stressful has risen from 30 per cent in 1989 to 38 per cent in 2015. Strikingly, the proportion of those who report they are often stressed in skilled manual roles (such as driving or care work) has doubled over the same 26-year period, from 18 per cent to 41 per cent. Similarly, the proportion reporting that they feel “used up” at the end of the working day much, most, or all of the time has increased from 20 per cent to 29 per cent between 1992 and 2017, with women reporting a higher rate of change than men.

So, what sits behind these increases in negative experiences of work over the last three decades? The changing composition of the workforce and the industrial and occupational mix provides a small part of the explanation: we estimate around one-fifth of the increase in the proportion of those who feel used up by their work, for example can be explained in this way. Beyond this, we identify two fundamental shifts in the nature of work with explanatory power. First, there has clearly been an increase in the use of computers and digital technology in the workplace – and employees who use computers are more likely to report that they are tense at work than those who do not. Second, and relatedly, there has been an increase in work intensity: the share of employees that “strongly agree” that their job requires they work “very hard” has increased from 30 per cent in 1992 to 46 per cent in 2017. This increase in work intensity has been particularly felt among women working full-time.

When we look at what drives us to work hard today, we find that almost twice as many employees report that clients or customers are an important factor in determining how hard they work, up from 37 per cent in 1986 to 59 per cent in 2017. Supervisors and colleagues are also more important in setting the pace of work than they were in the past, with 50 per cent and 51 per cent of respondents citing them respectively today. At the same time, we find that fewer employees report their “own discretion” determines how hard they work even though the workforce has become more highly educated and more likely to work in “professional” jobs over the period. In 1992, 71 per cent of employees reported having “a great deal” of control over how hard they worked; by 2017 this share had fallen to 46 per cent.

Despite the common narrative about technological change and globalisation, fewer employees now report that there have been changes in the way work is organised in recent years than they did in the past (53 per cent reported changes in the way their work is organised within the last five years in 2001, and this fell to 47 per cent in 2017). But critically, when changes to workplace practices do happen, fewer employees report

that they have a say over them and it is at the lower end of the pay distribution where diminishing levels of control and autonomy are most starkly observed. In 2017, 27 per cent of employees in the lowest earning quartile reported they would have a say over decisions made that change the way they do their job – down from 44 per cent in 1992. In sharp contrast, the share reporting the same has remained constant in the top quartile of the earnings distribution at just under 60 per cent. But interestingly, of all employees reporting having no say in workplace changes, the proportion who believed they should have more of a say fell by 14 percentage points from 66 per cent to 48 per cent between 2001 and 2017.

Our findings demonstrate, then, that job quality has not deteriorated wholesale over the past 30 years: the majority of employees remain satisfied with their job and have greater affinity with their employers than in the past. Beneath the headline figures, however, and across a range of indicators, the subjective experience of work for low earners has deteriorated at a faster rate than for those who earn more. Equally, employees (not just economists!) have noticed that change in the workplace has slowed over the period, despite the fact that they are less likely (or even want) to engage with change decisions. Overall, our analysis of the shifting subjective experience of work has profound implications, from energising the ‘Good Work’ agenda to suggesting that productivity gains from “working harder” may now have been exhausted. As our Economy 2030 Inquiry programme unwinds, we will build on our understanding of the subjective experience of work as we seek a renewed economic strategy for the UK.

## The world of work and the mix of people in work has changed substantially over the past three decades

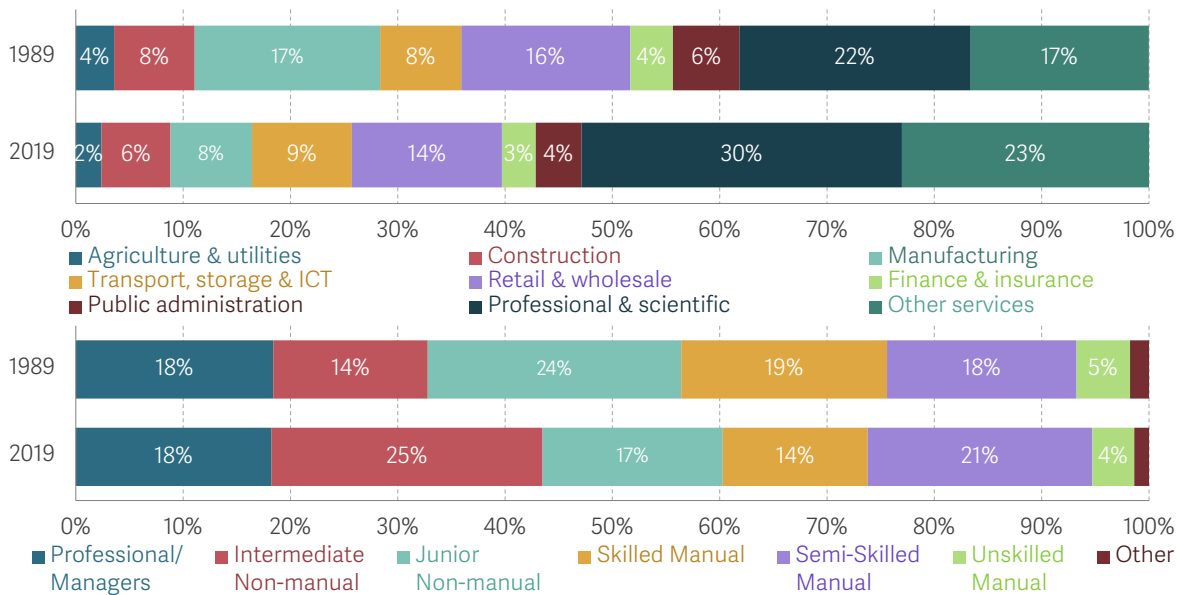
The UK economy has undergone significant change over the last 30 years. The de-industrialisation of the 1980s continued at pace throughout the 1990s, rapidly rebalancing the sectoral mix of the economy. New service industries expanded, taking the place of shrinking sectors like manufacturing, which fell as a proportion of employment from 17 per cent in 1989 to 8 per cent by 2019 (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the occupational mix of the workforce shifted: in 1989, for example, 32 per cent of the workforce were in professional/managerial or intermediate non-manual jobs; by 2019 that figure had risen to 43 per cent – a significant occupational upgrading.

---

<sup>1</sup> T Bell et al., *The UK's decisive decade: The launch report for The Economy 2030 Inquiry*, Resolution Foundation & Centre for Economic Performance, May 2021.

**FIGURE 1: The sectoral and occupational mix of the workforce has changed significantly over the past three decades**

Proportion of employees in each category, by sector and occupation: UK/GB



NOTES: Occupational groupings are defined using the Socio-Economic Group variable in the British Social Attitudes survey, among those aged 17-65 in Great Britain. Industry data is for the UK.

SOURCES: Analysis of NatCen, British Social Attitudes Survey; and ONS, Workforce Jobs.

This substantial change in the mix of jobs in the UK has also been matched by significant changes in workers' characteristics. The last thirty years has seen a rise in the number of women entering the workforce, for example, with the proportion of working-age women in employment rising from 63 per cent in 1989 to 72 per cent just prior to the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> The proportion of the workforce who were born outside the UK has risen from 7 per cent in 1997 to 19 per cent in 2021.<sup>3</sup> While the expansion of higher education over past decades has raised the average qualification level of the workforce; between 2002 and 2017 the proportion of graduates in the 21 to 64 year old population grew from 24 per cent to 40 per cent.<sup>4</sup>

Over this period, the relationship between employees and their employers has also changed considerably. Trade union membership has fallen by one-third since the early 1980s;<sup>5</sup> the post-financial-crisis labour market has seen a large increase in atypical forms of work (zero hours contracts, agency work, temporary work and low-paid self-employed roles accounted for two-thirds of net employment growth between 2008 and 2015);<sup>6</sup> and

<sup>2</sup> ONS, *Female employment rate (aged 16 to 64, seasonally adjusted)*.

<sup>3</sup> See: ONS, EMP06: *Employment by country of birth and nationality* for more detail. January – March 1997 is the earliest entry available in this dataset.

<sup>4</sup> ONS, *Graduates in the UK labour market: 2017*, November 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, *Trade union statistics 2020*, May 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Low-paid self-employment roles are defined here as those in Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) groups 6 (caring, leisure and other service occupations), 8 (process, plant and machine operatives) and 9 (elementary occupations). For further details, see: S. Clarke & N. Cominetti, *Setting the record straight: How record employment has changed the UK*, Resolution Foundation, January 2019.

there has been a rise in general management practices.<sup>7</sup> And while the post-financial crisis jobs boom saw unemployment record a post-1970s low of 3.8 per cent prior to the pandemic, the last decade has also seen a stagnation in real pay, with average earnings currently at the same level they were in 2008.<sup>8</sup>

Alongside these changes to the nature of work, the characteristics of the labour force and the way that work is organised, a popular narrative has emerged, stating that the quality of work in the UK has deteriorated, with ever-more workers joining the ranks of the so-called “precariat”.<sup>9</sup> Future technological change, the argument goes, will compound these trends and force many more people into unfulfilling, insecure, and poorly remunerated employment.<sup>10</sup> This story may seem compelling, but does it really reflect the subjective experience of the workforce today and over the last 30 years?<sup>11</sup> We tackle this challenge by drawing on existing high-quality survey data, which have collected views on the subjective experience of work between the 1980s and the late-2010s.<sup>12</sup> Although an important and a growing share of the workforce, we exclude the self-employed from this exercise – see Box 1 for further details and our reasons.

### BOX 1: Self-Employment and subjective experiences of work

A key feature of the UK labour market over the recent past has been the growth in self-employment. The number of self-employed workers has increased from 3.5 million people in 1992 to around 5 million by the end of 2019, prior to the pandemic. This translates into the proportion of workers who are self-employed rising from 13.5 per cent in 1992 to 15.3 per cent by 2019. This increase has been the most striking following the financial crisis where self-

employment made a larger contribution to the growth in overall employment than the growth in employees until 2014.<sup>13</sup>

Self-employed workers evidently have very different working lives than employees. Most obviously, they do not have sustained relationships with an employer (something we analyse closely throughout this note) and in theory at least have a far greater

<sup>7</sup> ONS, [Management practices in Great Britain: 2016 to 2020](#), May 2021.

<sup>8</sup> T Bell et al., [The UK's decisive decade: The launch report for The Economy 2030 Inquiry](#), Resolution Foundation & Centre for Economic Performance, May 2021.

<sup>9</sup> For example, see: G Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, Bloomsbury, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> G Standing & P Jandric, *Precariat, education and technologies: Towards a global class identity*, Policy Futures in Education, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> This note analyses the changes in the experience of work up to the eve of the pandemic. Of course, the impact of Covid-19 on the way we work has been substantial and we will return to the question of how the pandemic has changed work, and the experience of it, in the UK in forthcoming Economy 2030 Inquiry reports.

<sup>12</sup> Our findings are subject to caveats which apply to all survey-based analyses: while questions may be asked in the same way over many waves, it is not possible to ensure that respondents have interpreted them in the same way over time. Arguably this is a more important factor to bear in mind when analysing subjective experience.

<sup>13</sup> See ONS, [Trends in self-employment in the UK](#), ONS, February 2018.

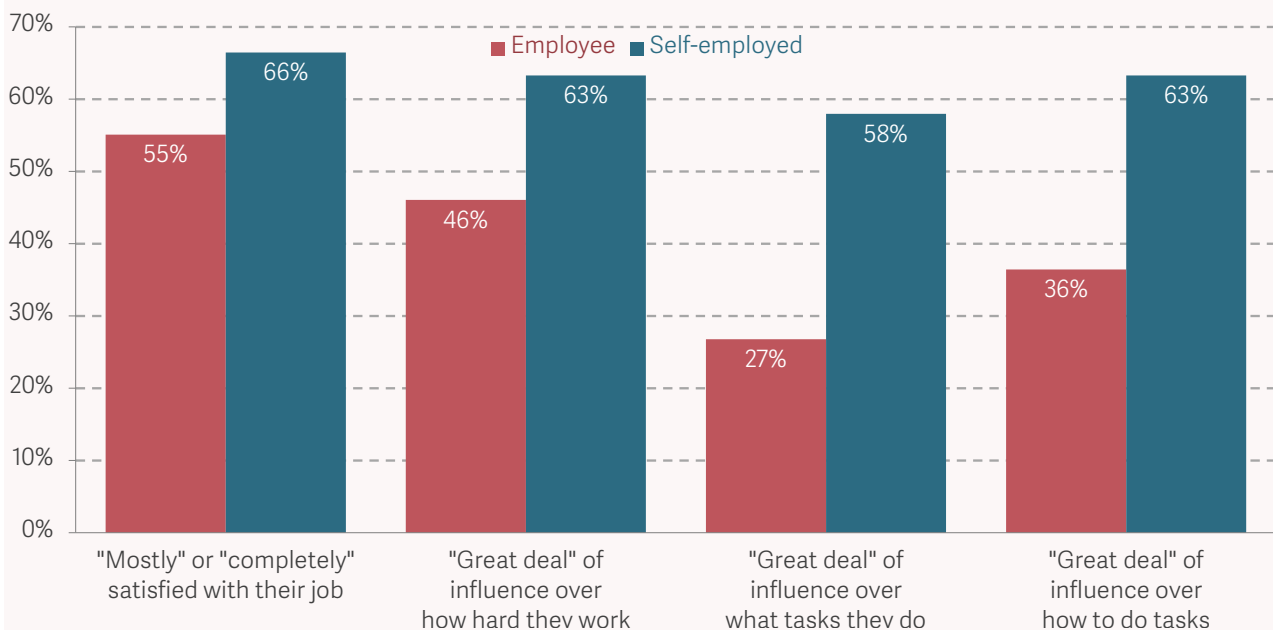


degree of control over the work they do and how they do it. Moreover, self-employment clearly has its challenges. The self-employed are, on average, lower paid than employees<sup>14</sup> and there is also large inequality in self-employed earnings.<sup>15</sup> Alongside this, the self-employed have higher levels of insecurity: by definition they lack the permanent employment contracts that many employees have, and also have

fewer employment rights.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps most concerningly, there has been a rise of 'false self-employment' in recent years, whereby firms classify workers over whom they have considerable control as self-employed, thereby side-stepping some costs (such as employer national insurance) as well as employment rights (such as the right to the minimum wage or holiday pay).<sup>17</sup>

**FIGURE 2: The self-employed have higher job satisfaction, and more control over their work, than employees**

Proportion of employees and self-employed satisfied with their job, with influence over how hard they work, what tasks they do, and how to do tasks: UK/GB, 2017



NOTES: Job satisfaction data is from financial year 2017-18 and UK-wide. "Influence over" results are for those aged 20-60 in Great Britain.

SOURCE: UK Household Longitudinal Study (Understanding Society); Skills & Employment Survey.

<sup>14</sup> A Corlett, *The RF Earnings Outlook Q2 2016*, Resolution Foundation, October 2016.

<sup>15</sup> A Corlett & D Tomlinson, *A tough gig? The nature of self-employment in 21st Century Britain and policy implications*, Resolution Foundation, February 2017.

<sup>16</sup> ACAS, *Checking your employment rights*, July 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Citizens Advice, *Neither one thing nor the other: how reducing bogus self-employment could benefit workers, business and the Exchequer*, August 2015.

Despite this, as Figure 2 shows, we still find that the self-employed, on average, enjoy higher levels of job satisfaction than employees. In addition, and also shown in Figure 2, more of the self-employed have autonomy over their working lives than employees across a range of metrics. For example, almost 58 per cent of the self-employed report having a “great deal” of influence over

the tasks they do, more than double the share of employees (27 per cent). The fundamentally different experiences of employees and the self-employed mean we exclude the latter from our analysis from this point (data limitations also preclude finer-grained analysis of the subjective experience of this important group).

## Overall job satisfaction fell during the financial crisis, but the satisfaction of low earners has fallen sharply since the early-1990s

First, we investigate headline levels of job satisfaction among UK employees. While life satisfaction data has pointed to generally rising well-being between 2011 and the pre-pandemic period, the story of satisfaction at work is more complex.<sup>18</sup> Figure 3 plots trends from 1991 to 2018-2019 in the proportion of employees who report on a scale of one to seven that they are either (six) “mostly” or (seven) “completely” satisfied with their present job. This measure of job quality is broadly stable, until a decline after the financial crisis, falling from 59 per cent in 2009-2011 to 52 per cent in 2012-2014. There has been only a partial recovery in satisfaction since, perhaps reflecting employees’ reactions to slower pay growth in the post-financial crisis period, or equally, the fact that employees often take (or stay in) jobs to which they are not well-suited in the wake of recessions.<sup>19</sup> Overall, an average of 54 per cent of employees reported that they were satisfied with their jobs in the period 2010-2012 to 2017-2019, compared to 59 per cent in 1991-1992 to 2009-2011.

Although current levels of job satisfaction are broadly similar across the income distribution, it is notable that those in the bottom quartile of earners have seen their levels of job satisfaction decline the most since 1991. Over 70 per cent of employees in the lowest-earning quartile reported that they were “mostly” or “completely” satisfied with their jobs in the early-1990s compared to 57 per cent in 2018-19.<sup>20</sup> This decline is more long-standing and less predominantly cyclical than for those with middle or high

<sup>18</sup> For data on life satisfaction from the Annual Population Survey see: ONS, [Personal well-being in the UK, quarterly](#), February 2021.

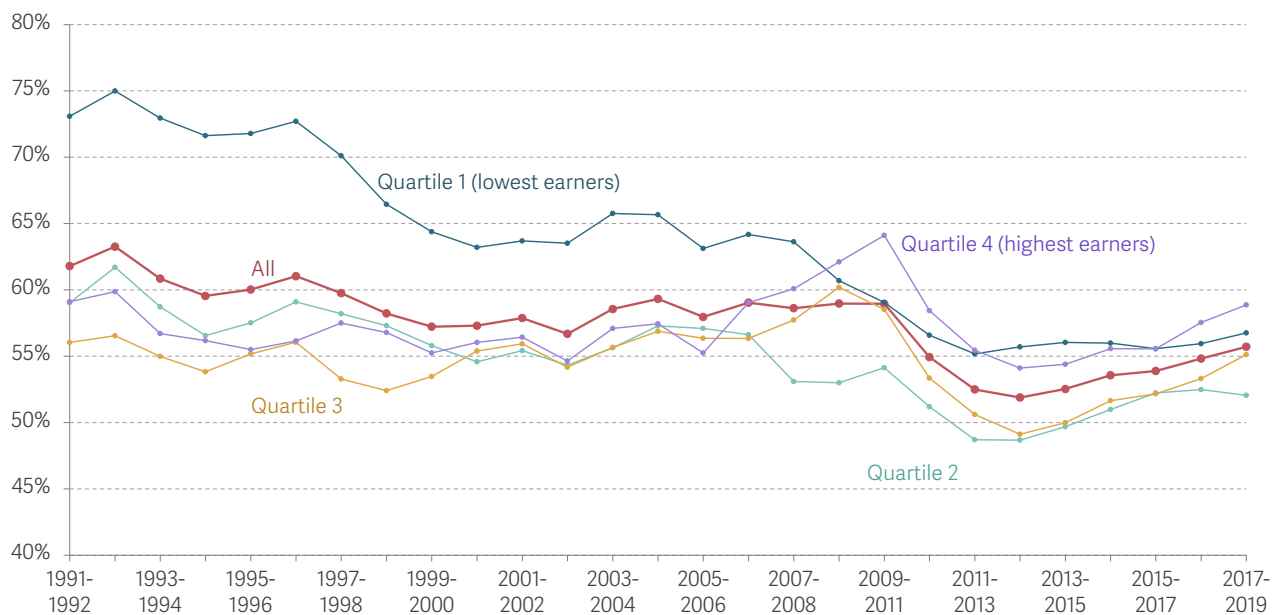
<sup>19</sup> For evidence on job match quality decreasing in recession and early recoveries, see: M Kudlyak & R Hall, [Why has the US economy recovered so consistently from every recession in the past 70 years?](#), NBER, June 2021. See also: S Jager et al., [Worker beliefs about rents and outside options](#), Working Paper, July 2021, which demonstrates how workers’ perception of outside options contributes to their staying in jobs with lower pay than they could earn elsewhere.

<sup>20</sup> This finding of high job satisfaction for lower earners in the 1990s and 2000s has been replicated in other research. See, for example: A Brown et al., [Is Job Satisfaction U-Shaped in Wages?](#), International Labour Office, July 2009.

earnings. It is interesting to note that this fall continued after the introduction of the National Minimum Wage (NMW) in 1999, suggesting perhaps that better pay has not been sufficient to offset the impact of changes in the way low-paid employees work on job satisfaction.<sup>21</sup>

**FIGURE 3: Levels of job satisfaction have remained steady on average but with significant falls for the lowest earners**

Proportion of employees who are “mostly” or “completely” satisfied with their present job overall, employees by monthly earnings quartile: GB/UK, 1991-1992 to 2017-2019



NOTES: Quartiles are constructed using monthly gross earnings. Similar results hold when using hourly earnings albeit the decline for the lowest quartile is smaller in magnitude. Combines responses from 18 waves of the British Household Panel Survey prior to 2009 with responses from ten waves of the UK Household Longitudinal Study from 2009 onwards. Results are averaged over two years/waves. Survey covers Great Britain from 1991-2000, and the UK from 2001 onwards.

SOURCE: Analysis of British Household Panel Survey; UK Household Longitudinal Study (Understanding Society).

It's important to note, however, that the decline in satisfaction is not a story of the experience of the lowest earners becoming notably worse than that of the highest earners; rather, it is one of convergence from higher levels of satisfaction for the bottom quartile compared to the rest of the income distribution over time. As a result, low-earners have lost their 'satisfaction premium' over this period rather than fallen far behind

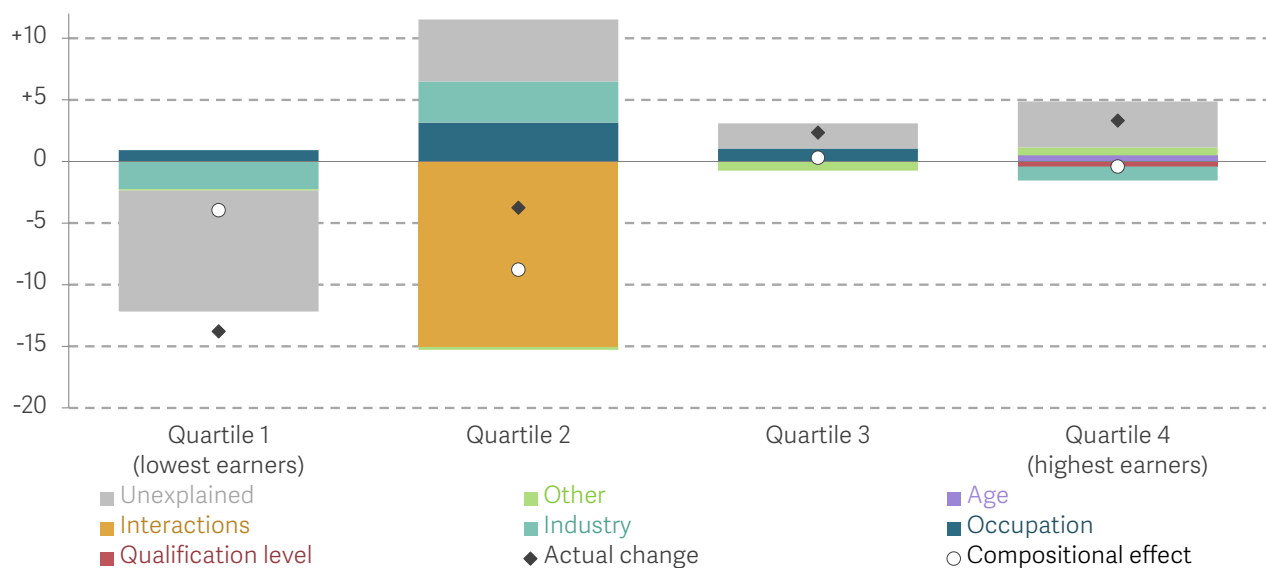
<sup>21</sup> Previous qualitative Resolution Foundation research found employees in retail have benefitted from increases to the wage floor but also staff were also expected to maintain service levels even as managers made the “pyramid smaller” and reduced the number of staff working on the shop floor. For further details, see: L Gardiner & D Tomlinson, [Sorry, we're closed: Understanding the impact of retail's decline on people and places](#), Resolution Foundation, February 2019.

others. Put differently, this suggests that the non-monetary benefits of work which appear to have compensated considerably for low wages at the start of our time period have disappeared over time.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, these trends in job satisfaction could reflect the considerable compositional change in the workforce we have noted. To get a better sense of what is driving the change in job satisfaction, we decompose the change to consider the extent to which the trend can be driven by differences in the composition of the workforce between 1991 and 2018-2019. As Figure 4 sets out, only 4 percentage points of the total 13.8 percentage point decline in job satisfaction of the lowest-paid workers over this period as a whole is accounted for by composition change. This means that the decline in satisfaction for this group is far more a product of the changing nature of work itself, rather than of changes in the workforce characteristics.

**FIGURE 4: The trend in job satisfaction for the lowest earners is not due to compositional changes**

Percentage point change in the share of employees in the lowest monthly earnings quartile who report they are “mostly” or “completely” satisfied with their job explained by differences in composition, by characteristics: GB, 1991 to 2018-2019



NOTES: Interactions refer to the difference between the sum of the marginal effects from the change in individual workforce characteristics and the change predicted by fitting the same logit model on the workforce in 2018-19 and 1991. This effectively measures the impacts of interactions between changes in the different regressors which result from the non-linear setting of a logit model. ‘Other’ is the combined impact from a range of characteristics such as the ‘age’ and ‘full-time/part-time’ which were too small to show clearly. Data limitations mean that we are not able to control for migration status of workers. Sample restricted to Great Britain for the purposes of this analysis.

SOURCE: Analysis of British Household Panel Survey; UK Household Longitudinal Study (Understanding Society).

<sup>22</sup> Workers derive both monetary and non-monetary benefits from their work, with recent research (looking at the period 2014-2018) finding that non-monetary benefits were larger for higher paid employees. See: A Clark et al., [The true returns to the choice of occupation and education](#), Centre for Economic Performance, February 2021.

This convergence in job satisfaction between low earners and others may also in part represent less about what is going on in work itself than changes in unemployment risk over time:<sup>23</sup> when the perceived likelihood of being unemployed decreases and the perceived associated negative consequences for living standards decrease in magnitude,<sup>24</sup> job satisfaction amongst the lowest paid may fall as employees are less grateful for simply being employed.<sup>25</sup>

## Employees report a greater affinity with the organisations for which they work for today compared to the past

Although job satisfaction trends may be indicative of no significant deterioration in employees' subjective perception of the quality of their jobs, there is a lot that could be going on beneath a measure such as this. In Figure 5, we look more closely at the way in which employees describe their jobs, and how this has changed between 1989 and 2015.<sup>26</sup> Across several metrics, recent years have seen clear improvements on the past (although unfortunately, there is no data on this from 2011-2012, the recent low-point of overall job satisfaction). For example, 79 per cent of employees report that their job is "helpful to others" in 2015, up from 67 per cent in 1989. Indeed, even perceived job security has modestly increased (though not since 2005), a fact corroborated in data from other surveys.<sup>27</sup> This suggests that, at the headline level, work continues to be a rewarding experience for many employees who see more value in what they do, despite the changes in the type of work done and the circumstances of employees documented earlier. And rather than the story being one of employees trapped in jobs they do not enjoy, it is in fact the case that more employees are likely to see value in the tasks they complete.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Evidence of rising satisfaction during recessions is documented in P Pilipiec, W Groot & M Pavlova, [A longitudinal analysis of job satisfaction during a recession in the Netherlands](#), Social Indicators Research 148, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> While benefit levels for the unemployed have declined as a percentage of average weekly wages since the 1990s, public perceptions of benefits have moved in the opposite direction with (until very recently) a greater proportion of individuals believing that benefits are enough (or more than enough) to live on, or believing that benefit levels are too high and discourage work. See N Hudson et al., [British Social Attitudes 37](#), NatCen, October 2020.

<sup>25</sup> See: N Cominetti, C McCurdy & H Slaughter, [Low Pay Britain: 2021](#), Resolution Foundation, June 2021, Figure 13 which shows how unemployment among those previously in low paying occupations has declined since 1990.

<sup>26</sup> The time period considered is different due to the frequency with which these questions are asked in the British Social Attitudes Survey.

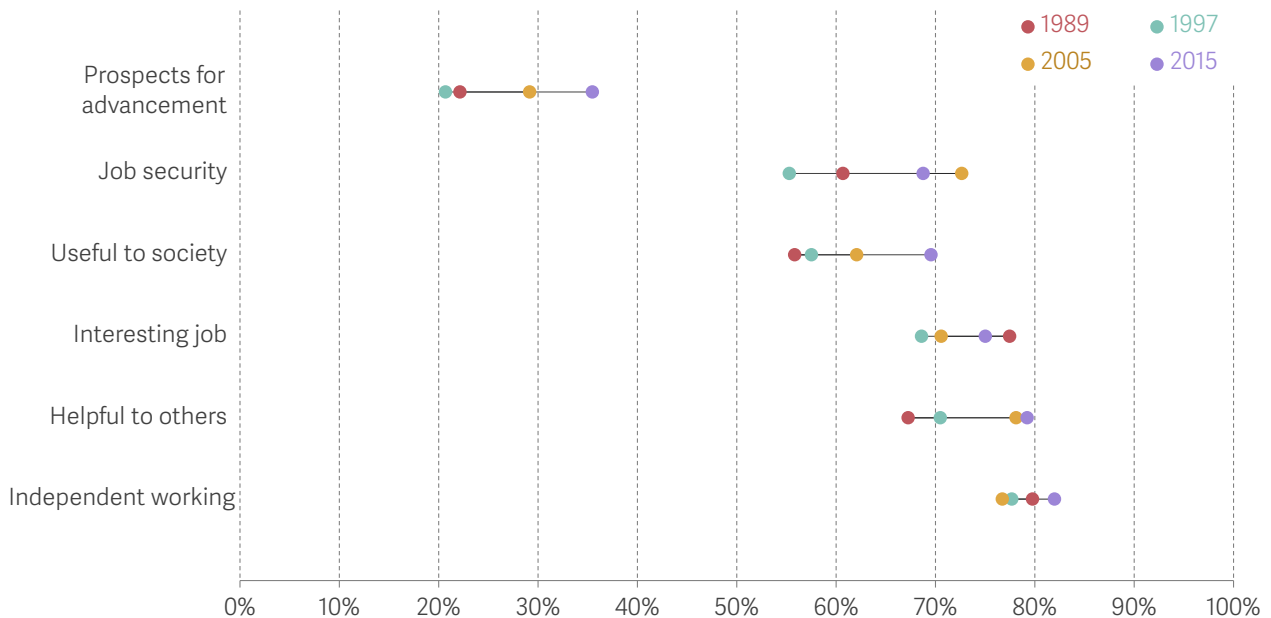
<sup>27</sup> A Manning & G Mazeine, [Subjective job insecurity and the rise of the precariat: Evidence from the UK, Germany and the United States](#), CEP Discussion Paper 1712, August 2020.

<sup>28</sup> For example, see D Graeber, [Bullshit Jobs: A Theory](#), Penguin 2018, which argues that a large and increasing number of workers are doing jobs that they recognise as useless and having no social value.



**FIGURE 5: Employees increasingly believe their job is helpful to others and useful to society**

Proportion of employees reporting that their job has a feature of each descriptive category: GB



NOTES: Employees aged 17-65.

SOURCE: Analysis of NatCen, British Social Attitudes Survey.

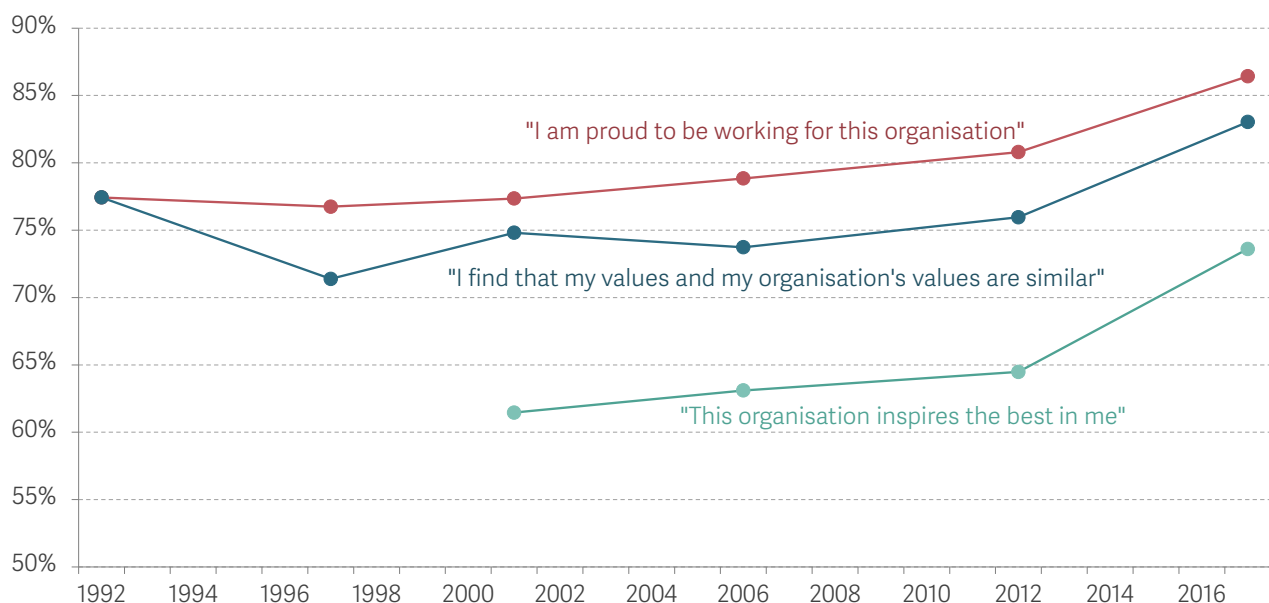
While at a headline level job satisfaction has remained steady over the past three decades and there have been improvements in how employees describe their jobs, it is important not to overstate these positive findings. Looked at differently, the chart reveals that in 2015, nearly two-thirds (65 per cent) of employees did not feel their jobs had prospects for advancements. We also show in Annex 1 that those in the lowest earnings quartile are less likely to have experienced some of the positive trends seen when averaging over the entire workforce. Coupled with the fact that job satisfaction among lowest earners has declined, it is clear that within the broadly positive picture parts of the labour market have seen their experience of work deteriorate.

The greater sense of fulfilment and belief in the usefulness of work over time shown in Figure 5 has also been matched by a greater affinity for the organisations in which we work. Figure 6 presents the proportion of all employees who “agree” or “strongly agree” with the statements concerning their employer. Between 1992 and 2017, there was a 9-percentage point increase in the proportion of employees who agree or strongly agree that they are “proud to be working for this organisation”. And the percentage who report that their organisation “inspires the best in” them has also risen, from 61 per cent in 2001 to 74 per cent in 2017. Most of the increase in these metrics has taken place between 2012 and 2017, and so it remains to be seen whether this increase is sustained in future

survey waves. But at minimum, it's clear that affinity with employers is not declining, and it does look to be the case that employees have a stronger connection to the firms they work for, and feel more aligned with the values their employers exemplify than in the past. These trends are visible across all industries, levels of pay, and age groups of the labour force and may be a product of the proliferation of management techniques which attempt to motivate employees by creating organisational buy-in.<sup>29</sup>

**FIGURE 6: Employees feel greater pride for, and are even more inspired by, the organisations for which they work**

Proportion of employees who agree or strongly agree with each statement: GB, 1992-2017



NOTES: Employees aged 20-60, excluding agency workers and sub-contractors.  
SOURCE: Analysis of Skills & Employment Survey.

## The share of employees with stressful jobs has increased since the late 1980s, particularly among manual employees

Overall job satisfaction may have fallen only slightly in thirty years, and more employees appear to have an affinity with the organisation they work for today, but one major, and somewhat alarming, trend is that the day-to-day experience of work in Great Britain is now more likely to be stressful than in previous decades. As Figure 7 makes plain, 30 per cent of employees reported that work was "always" or "often" stressful in 1989, a share that had increased to 38 per cent by 2015 (the latest year for which we have data).<sup>30</sup> To

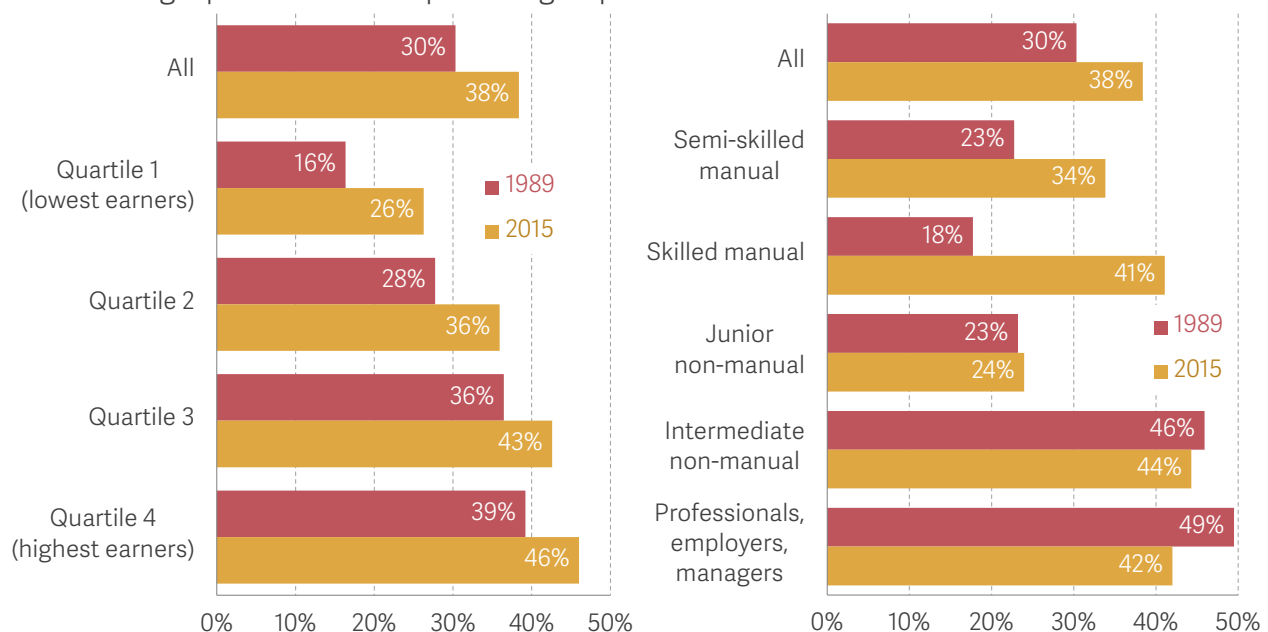
<sup>29</sup> See, for example: J Taylor, *The workplace in transition: A decade of challenge and change*, Warwick Papers in Industrial Relation 97, May 2013, provides evidence how social capital can lead to greater job satisfaction mediated by stronger feelings organisational affinity.

<sup>30</sup> This increase is broad based across the age range.

begin, the left-hand panel shows that increases in stress over this time period have been largest at the bottom of the earnings distribution (even though levels remain higher for those at the top). But the right-hand panel shows another part of the picture. Here, we can see that it is only within manual work that stress has increased over the quarter-century to 2015: the incidence of stress has fallen slightly (from a higher level) among those in non-manual work. The manual jobs in which stress rates are the highest include those in driving and mobile machine operating (classed in Figure 7 as a skilled manual job); and semi-skilled manual jobs such as those in social care and other ‘elementary’ occupations such as cleaning, security, sales, hospitality and storage.<sup>31</sup>

**FIGURE 7: Stress at work has become more common over recent decades**

Proportion of employees reporting that work is either always or often stressful, by gross earnings quartile and occupational group: GB



NOTES: Employees aged 17-65. Respondents are shown a card with options for weekly, monthly or annual before tax earnings bands and select one, as such it is not possible to specify whether the earnings reported are weekly, monthly or annual. Occupational groupings are defined using the Socio-Economic Group variable in the British Social Attitudes survey.

SOURCE: Analysis of NatCen, British Social Attitudes Survey.

Alongside changes in stress levels of different occupational groups has been a process of occupational ‘upgrading’ throughout the workforce over recent decades. In 2015, more employees worked in professional roles (which are more stressful, on average) than in 1989 (see Figure 1). This change in the composition of the workforce between occupational groups accounts for 60 per cent in the overall increase in reported stress over the time period (with 40 per cent accounted for by the increase within groups).

<sup>31</sup> 37 per cent of employees in ‘Elementary administration and service occupations’ report being stressed either ‘always’ or ‘often’. This occupational group includes those working in ‘elementary’ occupations in: administration, cleaning, security, sales, storage and hospitality.

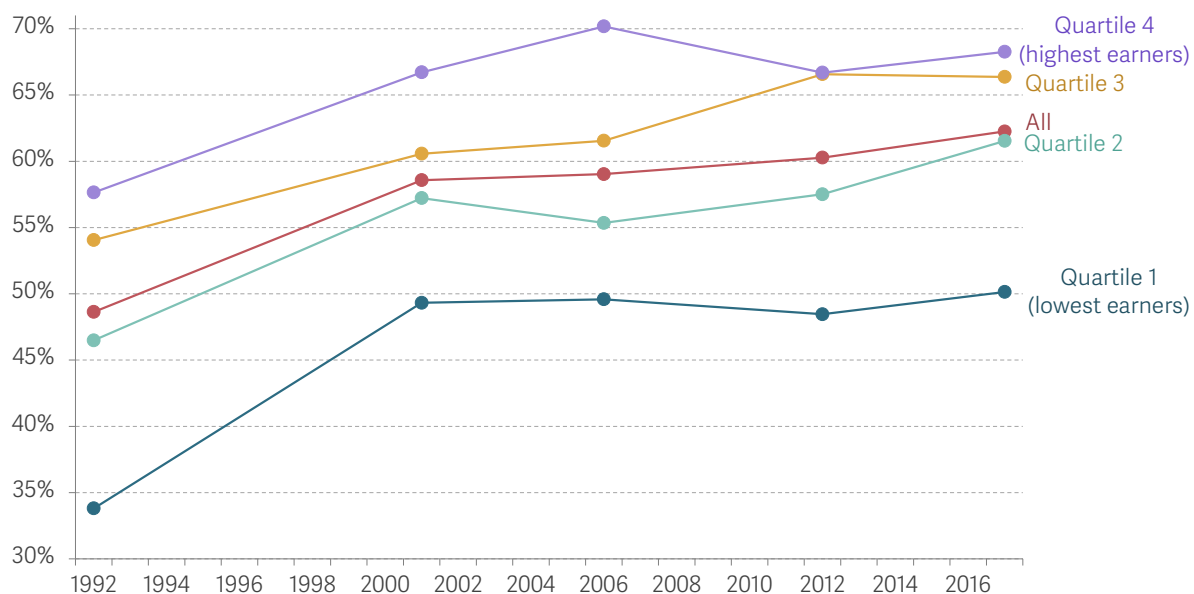
Moreover, compositional change can square our two panels above, explaining why stress has fallen for professionals and managers, but has increased for the top quartile: 80 per cent of this quartile worked in intermediate non-manual or professional roles in 2015 (the high-stress roles) compared to only 60 per cent in 1989.

## Working under “a great deal” of tension became more common since the 1990s, with the rise of computers playing a large role

Between 1992 and 2017, the proportion of employees reporting working “under a great deal of tension” has increased by 13 percentage points (from 49 per cent to 62 per cent). Most of this increase took place in the 1990s, as shown in Figure 8, with a much smaller increase taking place so far this century.<sup>32</sup> As with the experience of stress, it is higher-earning employees who are most likely to be working under tension: 68 per cent of those in the top quarter of the earnings distribution in 2017 report that their work involves working “under a great deal of tension” compared to 50 per cent of those in the bottom quarter. But when we look at rates of change, it is the lowest-earning quartile who have seen their levels of tension at work increase the most, from 35 per cent to 50 per cent over the period.

**FIGURE 8: Working under a great deal of tension is far more common today than in the 1990s**

Proportion of employees who agree or strongly agree that they work “under a great deal of tension”, by hourly earnings quartiles: GB, 1992-2017



NOTES: Employees aged 20-60.

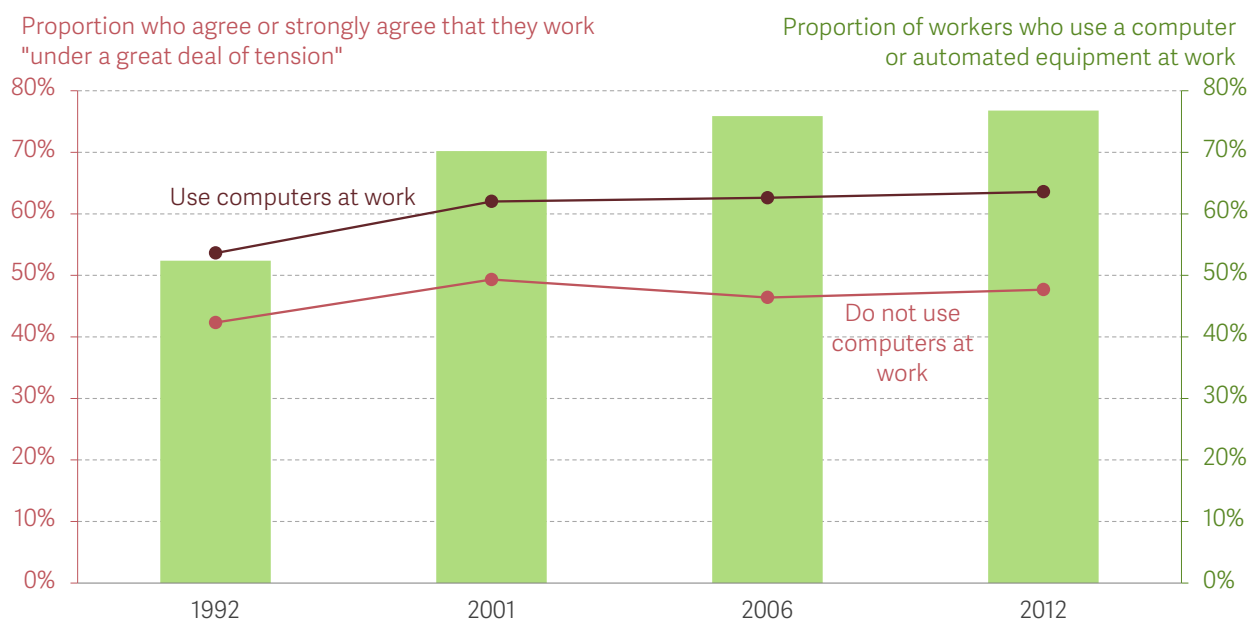
SOURCE: Analysis of Skills & Employment Survey.

<sup>32</sup> The large change in work intensification reported over the 1990s is not a product of changes in survey design or analytical methodology. It has been evidenced in other research, for example, see: F Green, *Work intensification, discretion, and the decline in well-being at work*, Eastern Economic Journal, Autumn 2004.

So what could sit behind this trend? Those working with computers are more likely to report that they experience a great deal of tension at work: in 2012 (the latest year for which we have data), 64 per cent of employees aged 20-60 who used computers at work reported that they worked under a “great deal of tension” compared to 48 per cent of those that did not use computers (see Figure 9). This difference persists after controlling for individual and job characteristics: in 2012, employees that used computers were still more likely to report working under a great deal of tension than those that do not, after taking account of differences in age, sex, qualification, industry, sector (public or private) occupation and full-time or part-time work status. And this helps explain the overall rise in tension at work, because as Figure 9 also makes clear, 77 per cent of employees used computers in 2012 compared to 52 per cent in 1992.

**FIGURE 9: Computer use has become more prevalent, and employees that use computers are more likely to work under tension**

Proportion of employees that use computers, and proportion of employees who agree or strongly agree that they work “under a great deal of tension” by computer usage: GB



NOTES: Employees aged 20-60.

SOURCE: Analysis of Skills & Employment Survey.

Undertaking a similar decomposition analysis to that shown in Figure 4 provides more support for the importance of the growth in computer use in explaining the rise in tension. Adding an indicator variable to capture whether or not a worker uses a computer or automated equipment to the list of explanatory variables reveals that the increase in the proportion of the work force using these machines accounts for almost a quarter of the growth in the proportion reporting they work “under a great deal of tension”



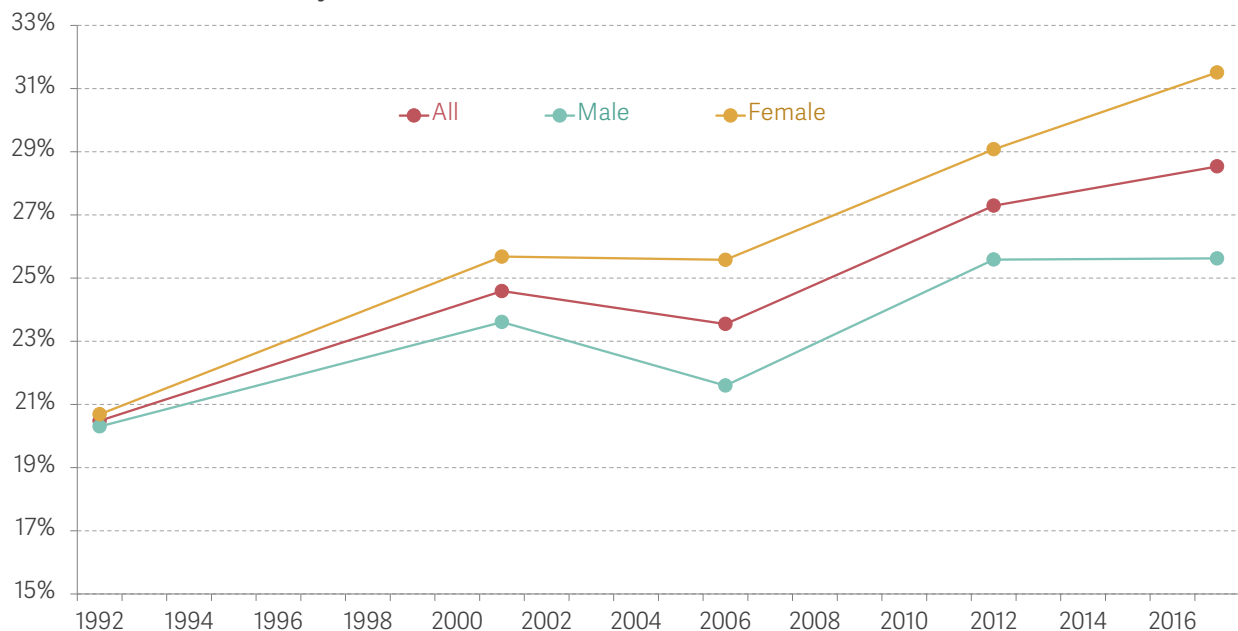
between 1992 to 2012. This points to the fact that some of the changes in the experience of work are the product of structural forces which have changed the nature and methods of work for the many employee over recent decades.

## More employees end the day feeling “used up” today than in the past

We have documented above how the share of employees that are working under stress and tension while at work has increased over recent decades, and therefore it is no surprise to find that the proportion of employees who report feeling “used up” at the end of the working day “much”, “most” or “all” of the time has also increased since the early 1990s. As Figure 10 shows, 20 per cent of employees reported feeling “used up” in 1992, and this increased to 29 per cent by 2017. Interestingly, on this measure, there are smaller differences across the earnings distribution: the share of workers reporting feeling “used up” has increased in all quartiles, with higher-earning workers consistently more likely to report feeling “used up” than lower-earning workers (see Annex 1 for full results).

**FIGURE 10: Work increasingly leaves employees feeling “used up” by the end of the day**

Proportion of employees who feel “used up” at the end of the working day much, most or all of the time, by sex: GB, 1992-2017



NOTES: Employees aged 20-60.

SOURCE: Analysis of Skills & Employment Survey.

But there is a striking difference by gender. In 1992, feeling used up after work was just as likely for women as men, but a gap has opened up over the intervening 25 years, with 32 per cent of women reporting feeling used up at the end of the working day in 2017

compared to 26 per cent of men. As Figure 10 shows, this gender gap emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s, and has remained broadly static since 2006. This gender gap is greater among full-time workers than part-time workers, with 36 per cent of women that work full-time report being used up (in 2017) compared to 27 per cent of full-time men. Women are also more likely to work in the public sector than men, where people are most likely to report feeling “used up” often at the end of the day (34 per cent of public sector employees vs. 26 per cent of private sector employees); it is teaching where feeling used up is most common (a staggering 60 per cent of employees in teaching occupations report feeling used up often at the end of the working day).

It is interesting to note, however, that there has been very little change in the proportion of employees reporting that they come home from work exhausted “always” or “often” over a similar time period – with just over half (51 per cent) of employees experiencing exhaustion in both 1997 and 2017. This suggests that feeling “used up” is not the same as feeling physically tired, but a broader sense of tiredness that could well signify increased emotional and mental strain of work.

### Increased work intensity provides part of the explanation for more employees feeling tense and used up

What has changed in the workplace over the past two and a half decades that can help us understand these negative shifts in employees’ views about their work? A decomposition analysis (similar to that shown in Figure 4) reveals that changes in the mix of jobs and the mix of employees only accounts for one-fifth of the increase in the proportion of us that feel used up.<sup>33</sup> This means that the increased feelings of being used up are driven by much more than just compositional shifts in the work we do or the people in work – other changes that we cannot capture in this analysis must also matter.

One prime candidate for driving some of the changes in the emotional toll of work is the increase in work intensity.<sup>34</sup> The pace of work has increased in Great Britain since the early 1990s across a number of different metrics, as Figure 11 shows: the share of employees that “strongly agree” that their job requires that they work “very hard” has increased from 30 per cent in 1992 to 46 per cent in 2017; the share of employees who work to “tight deadlines” for at least “around three quarters” of the time has increased from 53 per cent

---

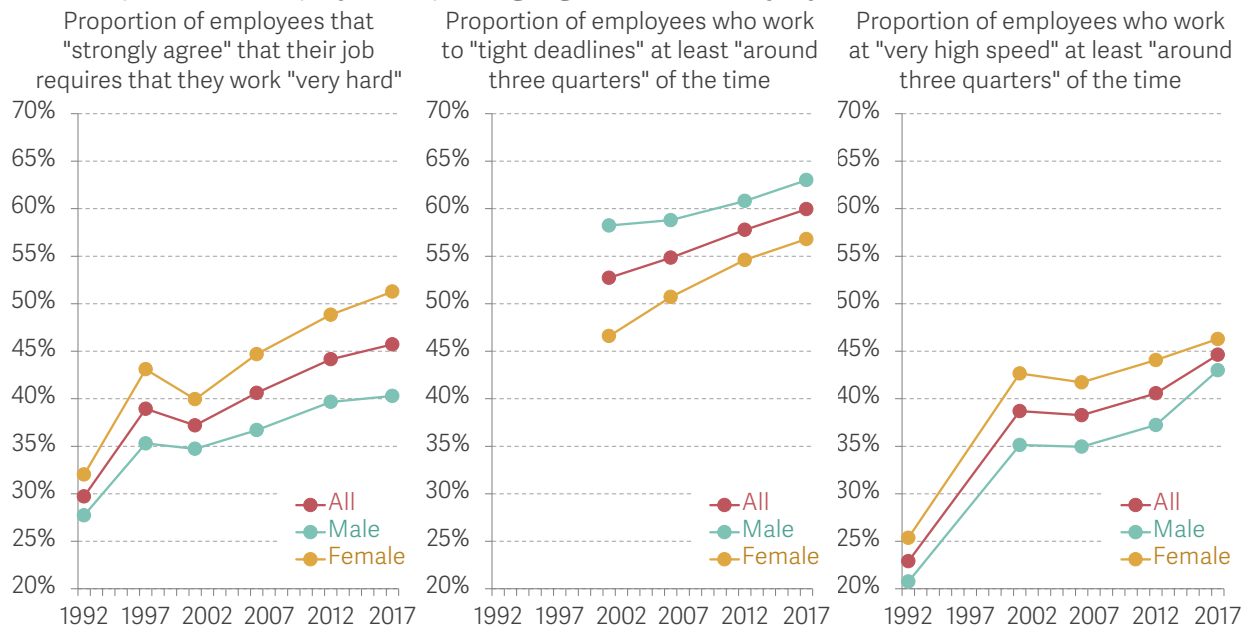
<sup>33</sup> The decomposition considers how changes in the characteristics of the workforce have driven the increase in proportion of employees feeling used up. The characteristics controlled for include the sex of employees, whether employees have children, employees’ age, region, qualification level, whether in full-time or part-time work, occupation and industry.

<sup>34</sup> There has also been an increase in the proportion of workers that agree that their job requires “very hard” work, albeit over a shorter time frame (between 2004 and 2010). See: S McManus & J Perry, *British Social Attitudes 29: Work and wellbeing*, NatCen Social Research, 2012.

to 60 per cent; and the share of employees that report they work at “very high speed” for at least “around three quarters” of the time has almost doubled from 23 per cent to 45 per cent.

**FIGURE 11: A range of measures suggest work intensity has increased in the past 30 years**

Proportion of employees reporting high work intensity, by sex: GB, 1992-2017



NOTES: Employees aged 20-60.

SOURCE: Analysis of Skills & Employment Survey.

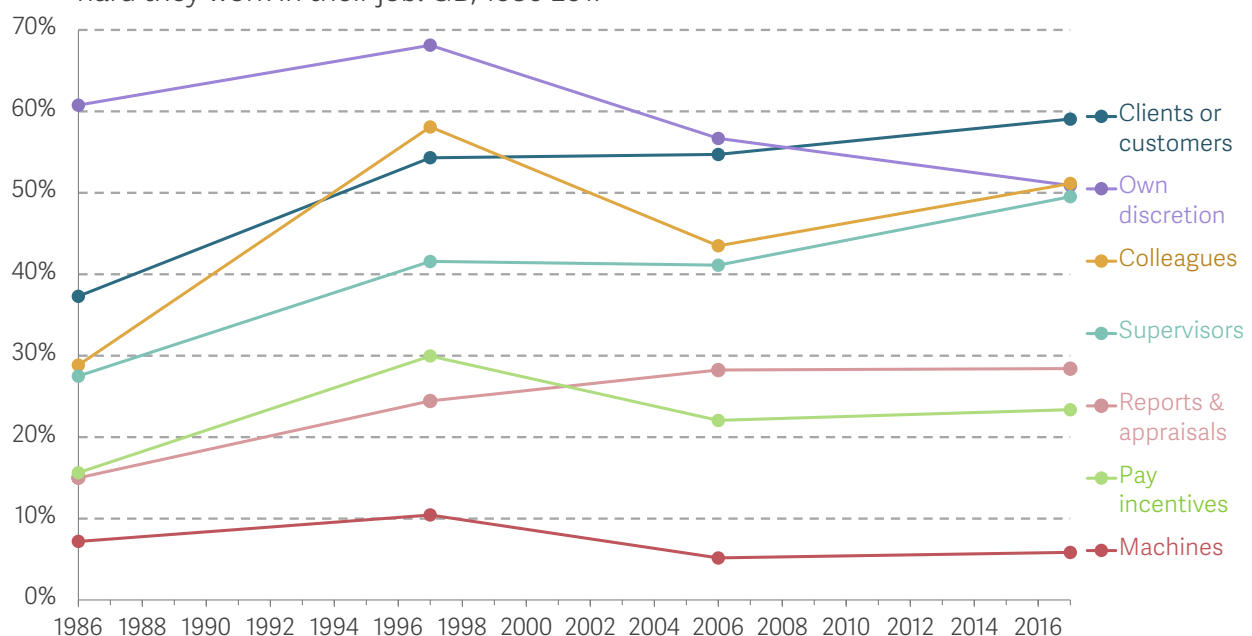
Figure 11 shows that the increase in “very hard” work is greater among women than men, with the share of women who “strongly agree” that they work “very hard” increasing from 32 per cent in 1992 to 51 per cent in 2017 (compared to an increase from 28 per cent to 40 per cent among men). The share of women that report working to “tight deadlines” often has increased from 47 per cent to 57 per cent between 2001 and 2017, a larger increase than reported among men (from 58 per cent to 63 per cent). When we dig deeper still, we find that full-time women have some of the highest rates of hard work: 56 per cent of women working full-time reporting that they work “very hard” in 2017, up from 38 per cent in 1992. This increase is a result of both a change in the mix of jobs that full-time women do (towards those that have higher work intensity), and the fact that women working full-time have, in general, experienced a larger increase in work intensity than men in the same occupations.

## Customers, colleagues and supervisors all have a greater role in determining how hard people work than in the past

The increase in work intensity documented above goes some way to explaining the rise in the proportion of workers reporting that work has a negative impact on them, but the question remains: what has driven rising work intensity?<sup>35</sup> In Figure 12 we show that, when asked to select the factors that are important in determining how hard they work, employees have become less likely to say that their “own discretion” is important: the proportion of employees who report that they have control over how hard they work has fallen by 17 percentage points over time, from 68 per cent in 1997 to 51 percent in 2017. Instead, the share of employees reporting that other factors shape how hard they work has increased. “Colleagues” and “supervisors” were important factors determining work intensity for around 50 per cent of employees in 2017, up from under 30 per cent in 1986. It is “clients or customers”, though, that have become the most-cited determinant of how hard people work, with 59 per cent of employees reporting that they mattered in 2017, up from 37 per cent in 1986.

**FIGURE 12: Customers have become the most important factor in determining how hard employees work**

Proportion of employees that report various factors as important in determining how hard they work in their job: GB, 1986-2017



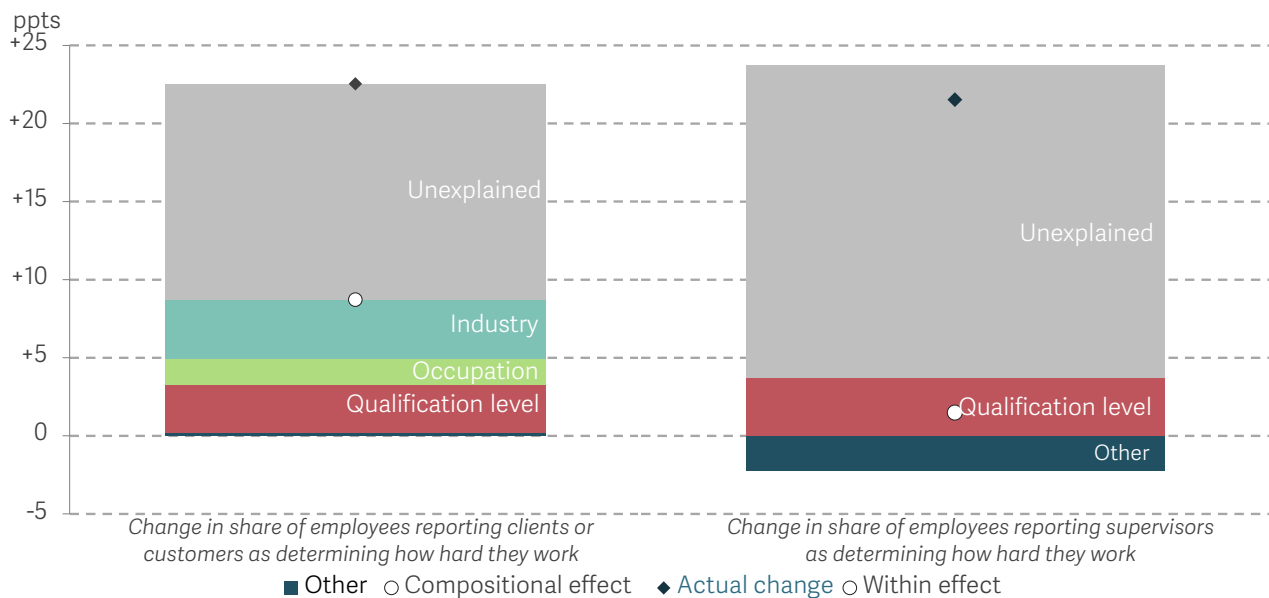
NOTES: Employees aged 20-60. Respondents could choose multiple responses.  
SOURCE: Analysis of Skills & Employment Survey.

<sup>35</sup> Other work has suggested that half of the increase in work intensification (which is also observed across the whole workforce, not just among employees) since 2001 is a result of four factors: “effort-biased technological change, effort-biased organizational change, the growing requirement for learning new things, and the rise of self-employment” (see: F Green et al., *Working Still Harder*, ILR Review, January 2021).

Changes in the workforce over recent decades, such as the movement of employees towards the service sector and the rise of managerial occupations (see Figure 1) explain a small proportion of the changes outlined above. Decomposition analysis (the results of which are shown in Figure 13) reveals that the majority of the shift towards customers and supervisors being an important factor in how hard people work is not explained by compositional factors.

**FIGURE 13: Changes in sectors and occupations cannot explain the rise in the importance of customers in determining work intensity**

Change in share of employees reporting that customers and supervisors are a factor in determining how hard they work that is explained by workforce characteristics: GB, 1986-2017



NOTES: Employees aged 20-60.

SOURCE: Analysis of Skills & Employment Survey.

Much has been made of the growing intrusion of technology and algorithms into work and the monitoring of workers, but the proportion of employees mentioning machines as important in determining how hard they work has not risen substantially since 1986 (and is only mentioned by 6 per cent of employees). This is somewhat of a surprise. However, it should be noted that the wording of the question ("machine or assembly line" to be precise) is likely to mean that people who work in roles where technology or computers shape how hard they work do not think that this question applies to them. Further, we do not have data since 2017 for this (or any other) factor that determines hard work, so any



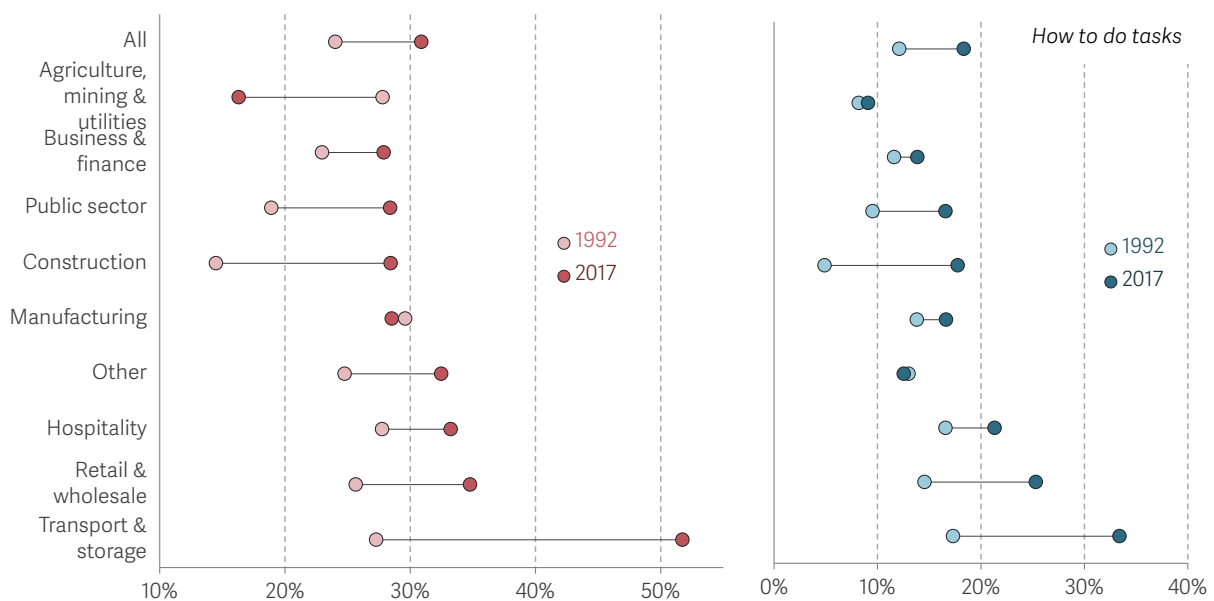
more recent shift – such as the increase in monitoring and surveillance picked up during the Covid-19 crisis – will not have been captured here.<sup>36</sup>

## Employees are less likely to feel they have control over how they do their jobs today compared to three decades ago

How hard people work is not the only domain over which employees are exercising less control than in the past. Figure 14 shows the proportion of employees who report having “not much influence” or “none at all” over two key dimensions of work: what tasks they do, and how they do these tasks. The overall story is one of declining influence, with the proportion of employees reporting a lack of influence increasing by 7 and 6 percentage points respectively.

**FIGURE 14: Hospitality and transport employees report having the least influence over many aspects of work**

Proportion of employees reporting that they have “not much” influence or “none at all” over what tasks to do and how to do tasks, by sector: GB



NOTES: Employees aged 20-60.

SOURCE: Analysis of Skills & Employment Survey.

The variation across sectors in the level of control that employees have is also notable, with employees in the hospitality, retail, and transport & storage sectors most likely to report lacking control (in both dimensions) in 2017. Although the different nature of work in these sectors will shape the extent to which employees have control over aspects of their job, it is clear that those in lower-paying sectors are more likely to work in roles in which they lack control over their day-to-day tasks.

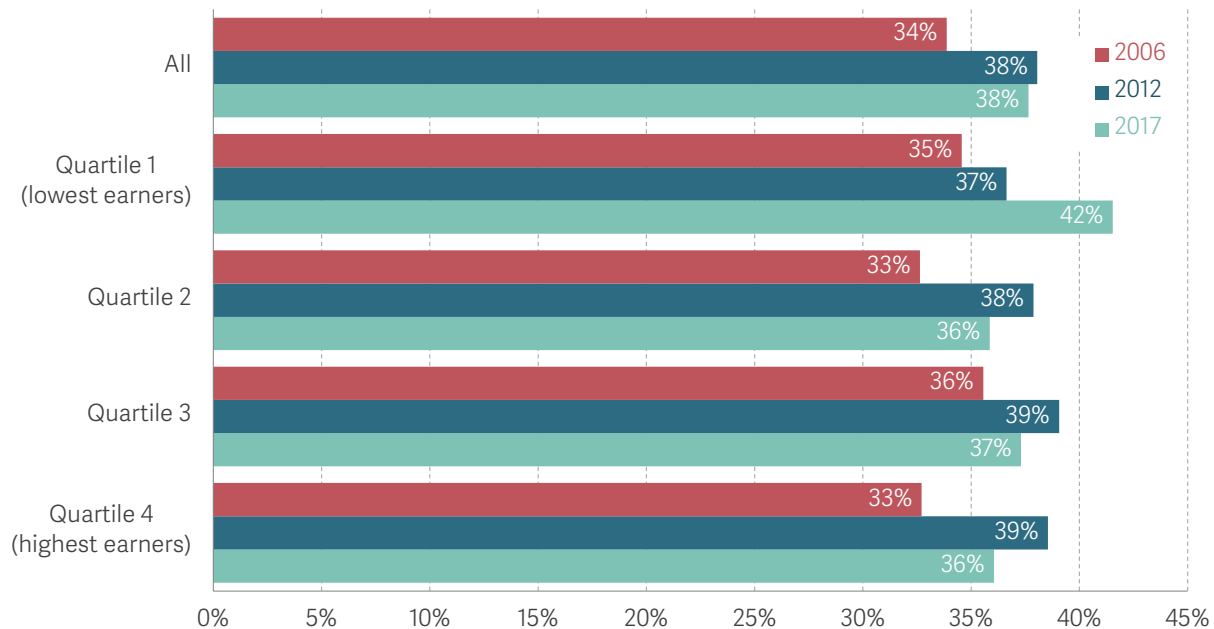
<sup>36</sup> Trades Union Congress, *Technology managing people: the worker experience*, November 2020.

We can also see how this lack of influence has increased sharply over time in some lower-paying industries: in transport & storage, for example, the proportion of employees reporting having not much or no influence over what tasks they do has grown by 25 percentage points since 1992, while those reporting little influence over how to do tasks grew by 16 percentage points over the same time period. This matches more recent reporting on the sector which points to deteriorating conditions for drivers.<sup>37</sup> In contrast, employees in the manufacturing sector have seen only a small decline in their control over how to do tasks, and an improvement in their control over what tasks to do.

Unsurprisingly, as growing numbers of employees report lacking influence over the tasks they do and how they complete them, so the proportion who would like more influence over the way they work has increased, up from 34 per cent of all employees in 2006 to 38 per cent in 2017 (see Figure 15). This change has taken place across the distribution but has been most marked among the lowest-earning employees, with 35 per cent having reported that they would like more influence over the way they work in 2006, rising to 42 per cent in 2017 (and unlike in other parts of the earning distribution, this increase continued between 2012 and 2017).

**FIGURE 15: A growing share of lower-paid employees want greater influence over the way in which they work**

Proportion of employees reporting they would like “much more” or “somewhat more” influence over the way they do their job, by hourly earnings quartile: GB



NOTES: Employees aged 20-60.

SOURCE: Analysis of Skills & Employment Survey.

<sup>37</sup> For example, see: S O'Connor, [UK truck driver shortage signals a broken labour market](#), Financial Times, August 2021.

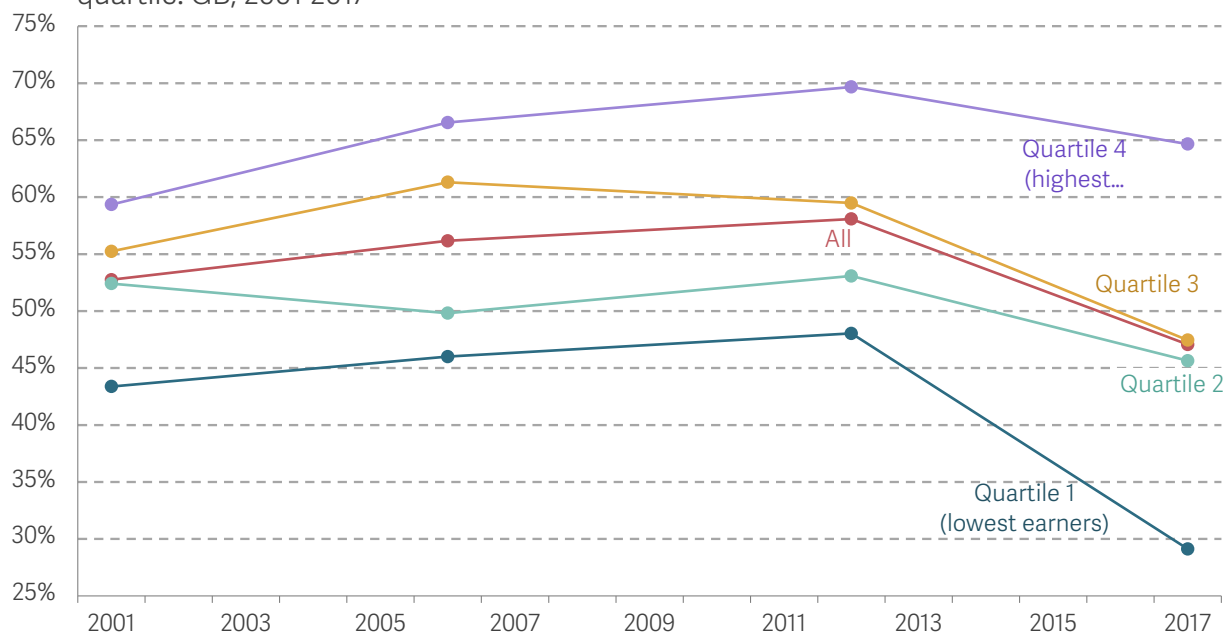
## Workplace changes are happening less frequently but, when they do, fewer employees have a say in them

Thus far, this note has focused on the day-to-day aspects of work, from how employees feel about the jobs they do to the control they have over the tasks carried out. We now turn to look at the pace of change in the way that workplaces are organised, and the extent to which employees have influence over these changes.

It is clear that recent years have seen rapid change in the way some corners of the labour market are organised. There has been the rise of outsourcing, for example, whereby many people present in a workplace are not actually employed by the firm (such as cleaners, post and print room services and catering staff in many a large office). Likewise, the emergence of the 'gig economy' has been widely discussed, and evidence suggests that this app-based way of working has become more common even if still a small share of the overall labour force.<sup>38</sup>

**FIGURE 16: Changes in the way work is organised are becoming less common, not more**

Proportion of private sector employees reporting a change in the way work is organised since they started their employment or within the past five years, by hourly earnings quartile: GB, 2001-2017



NOTES: Employees aged 20-60.

SOURCE: Analysis of Skills & Employment Survey.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example: Statistics Services and Consultancy Unit, [Platform Work in the UK 2016-2019](#), University of Hertfordshire and Hertfordshire Business School, June 2019.

But the subjective experience points to a slowing down of the overall pace of change in the workforce. Figure 16 shows the proportion of private sector employees who have reported a change in the way their work has been organised either since they started their current employment, or within the past five years.<sup>39</sup> Among all private sector employees, this has fallen from 53 per cent in 2001 to 47 per cent in 2017 (this is not an artefact of higher employee turnover: job tenure has remained relatively flat over this period). This fall has been especially pronounced among the lowest earners, with a decline from 43 per cent to 29 per cent between 2001 and 2017.<sup>40</sup> It does not appear to be the case, then, that the firms and employers are going through a period of heightened change and reorganisation, despite a common narrative about disruptive forces originating from technological progress and globalisation.<sup>41</sup>

But it is important to consider how involved employees are in change when it does happen, not least because it is likely that the decade to come will see an increase in the pace of economic change in the UK, as long-run technological shifts continue alongside the shocks caused by Brexit and Covid-19 as well as the transition to a Net Zero economy.<sup>42</sup> Figure 17 demonstrates that, although some forms of organisational participation have increased over time, instances of meaningful involvement of employees in decision making when changes happen have declined over time.<sup>43</sup> Employees do feel more informed and more consulted than in the past: the proportion of employees reporting that management holds meetings to inform them of what is happening in the organisation increased by 8 percentage points between 1992 and 2012 (from 70 per cent to 78 per cent), and the share reporting that management held meetings where employees could express their views increased by a similar amount up to 2012, but has fallen back slightly since. Despite this, employees now feel less involved in the decision-making processes which deliver organisational change: the proportion of employees reporting they would have a say in decisions which changed the way they did their job declined by 9 percentage points (from 51 per cent to 42 per cent) between 1992 and 2017.

---

<sup>39</sup> We look here just at the private sector to avoid public sector reorganisations obscuring the picture when it comes to the pace of dynamism in the private sector.

<sup>40</sup> This same trend holds if public sector employees are included, though the proportions who report changes in the way their work is organised increases as public sector employees are more likely to report having experienced changes in the way their work is organised than private sector employees. It should be noted too that this change is not a result of changing job tenure: the same result (of falling incidence of reported workplace changes) is found if we restrict our analysis to those with short (or long) tenures.

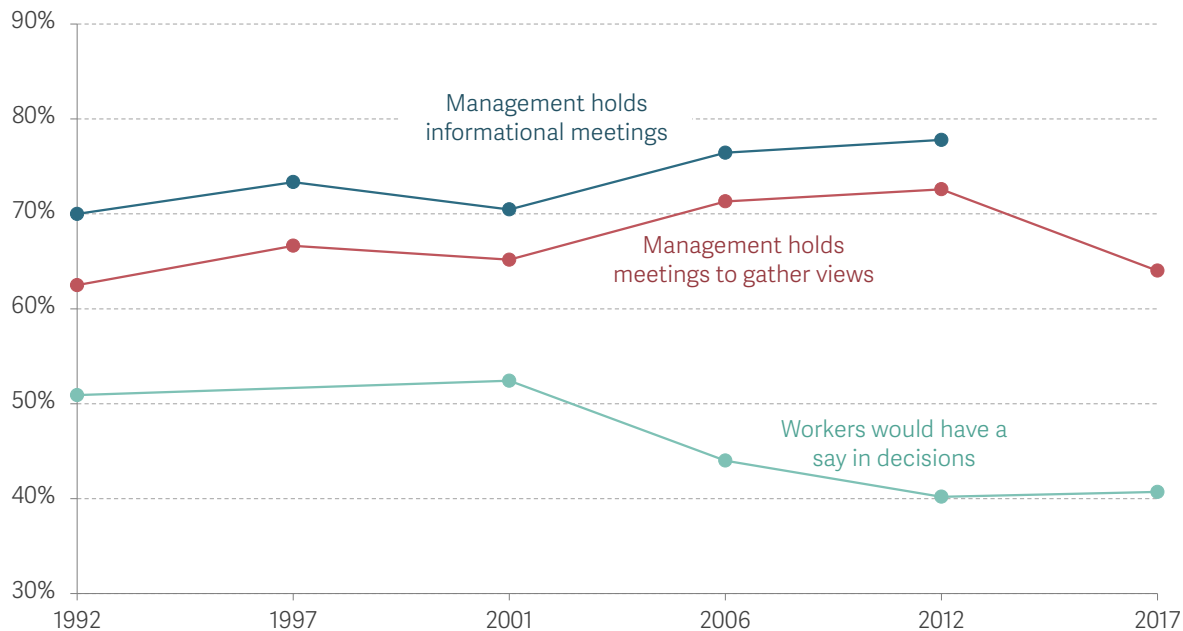
<sup>41</sup> See, for example, McKinsey Global Institute, *Technology, jobs, and the future of work*, May 2017.

<sup>42</sup> T Bell et al, *The UK's decisive decade: The launch report for The Economy 2030 Inquiry*, Resolution Foundation & Centre for Economic Performance, May 2021.

<sup>43</sup> This figure updates the analysis of H Inanc et al, *Job Control in Britain*, Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies, UCL Institute of Education, 2013, pointing to the divergence between measures and feelings of control among employees.

**FIGURE 17: Employers are informing and listening more, but have become less likely to involve employees in decisions**

Proportion of employees reporting various forms of participation in discussions and decisions about organisational change: GB, 1992-2017



NOTES: Employees aged 20-60. No data is available for 2017 for "Management holds informational meetings" series.

SOURCE: Analysis of Skills & Employment Survey.

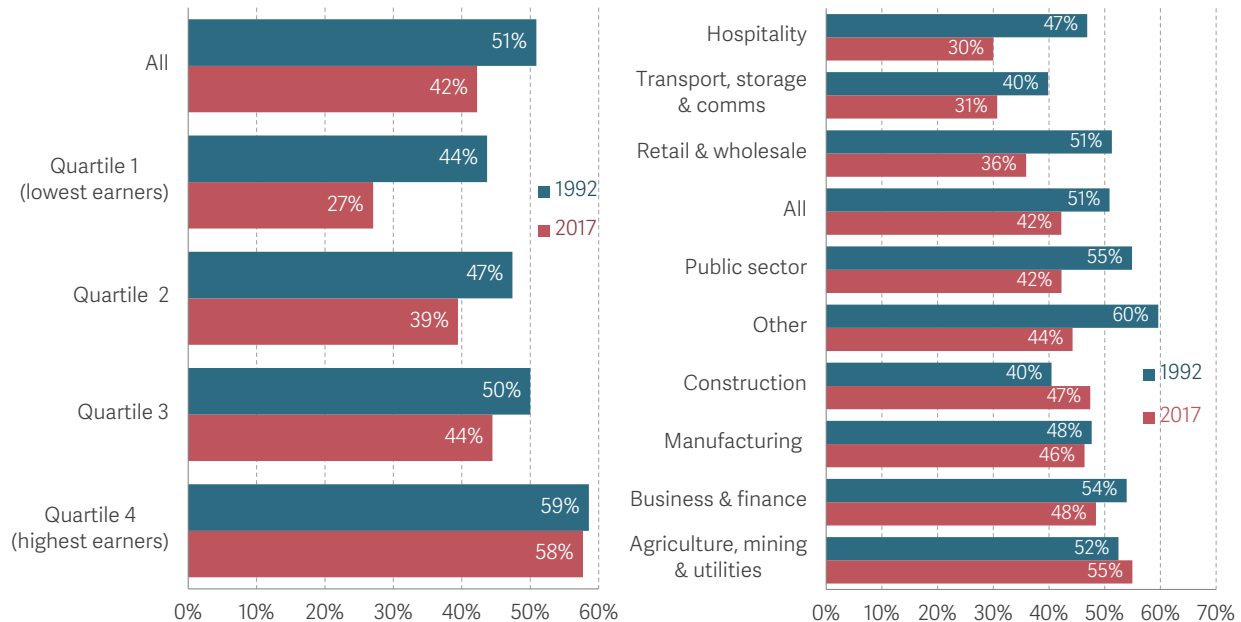
When looking at these changes across the earnings distribution, a picture emerges of the lowest quartile of earners being the least likely to report having a say in decisions which affect their work, and with the largest decline since 1992, with a fall of 17 percentage point from 44 per cent to 27 per cent over this period (see the left-hand panel of Figure 18). This compares to almost no change in reported involvement for higher earners over the 25-year time period: almost 60 per cent of those in the top earnings quartile reported they would have a say in decisions in both 1992 and 2017.

Figure 18 also shows that it is the low-paying sectors of hospitality and transport, storage, and communications where employees report both low absolute levels of involvement and large falls over the last two decades. The proportion of hospitality employees reporting that they would have a say in workplace decisions which changed the way that they do their job fell from 47 per cent to 30 per cent between 1992 and 2017, for example. It is low-paid hospitality employees that have experienced some of the largest declines in involvement; in 1992, 44 per cent of those in the first earnings quartile who work in hospitality reported having some say over key decisions which effect their work: by 2017, this was only 19 per cent.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Analysis of Skills & Employment Survey.

**FIGURE 18: Lowest-earning employees are much less likely to be involved in decisions that affect their job today than in the past**

Proportion of employees reporting that they would have a say in a decision made at their work place that changed the way they do their job, by hourly earnings quartile and by industry: GB



NOTES: Employees aged 20-60.

SOURCE: Analysis of Skills & Employment Survey.

Moreover, it is notable that this decline in the proportion of employees who feel that they have a say in the way that decisions changing the nature of their work are made comes at the same time as the workforce has become more qualified, and as a greater proportion work in managerial occupations, both characteristics that predict greater, rather than lesser, control (according to our decomposition analysis). This again points to the fact that the change is not a result of workforce composition, but due to changes in the way that work is managed and organised.

One important trend that has changed the way that decisions about work organisation are made is the decline of trade union membership and the influence of unions over working life in the UK. Trade union membership rates fell from 28.8 per cent in 1995 to 20.8 per cent in 2017 (they have since risen by almost 1 percentage point), with 36 per cent of employees working in an organisation in which their 'pay and conditions are agreed in negotiations between the employer and a trade union' in 1996 compared to 26 per cent in 2017.<sup>45</sup> This is significant, and potentially worrying, given clear evidence that trade unions lead to improved outcomes for workers across a range of domains, including higher pay, greater rates of off-the job training, and a better work-life balance.<sup>46</sup> Recent

<sup>45</sup> Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, *Trade union statistics 2020*, May 2021.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example: A Bryson & J Forth, *The added value of trade unions: A review for the TUC of existing research*, Trades Union Congress, October 2017.

research has also demonstrated how trade union membership is associated with higher job satisfaction in the UK and other advanced economies.<sup>47</sup>

However, trade union decline does not appear to be associated with employees reporting they have less of a say over decisions.<sup>48</sup> In fact, we find that union membership or presence in 2017 is associated with a reduction – all else equal – in the extent to which individuals are involved in decisions made in their organisations. This result might reflect that the causation could run in either direction: it may be that trade union presence increases when employees feel they have no say (i.e. the causation runs from lacking a say to then joining a union), or it could reflect the way trade unions influence decisions via union representatives, and not by directly involving workers in decisions when they do take place.

## Employees are now less likely to think they should be involved in workplace changes

It might be expected, given that employees are less likely to report they are involved in changes that affect them in the workplace, that there would also be a rising appetite to have a say in such decisions. In fact, the opposite is true. Figure 19 reveals that, when we look at the sub-group of employees who report having no say in decisions which affect the way they do their job, the proportion who believe that they should have more of a say has fallen from 66 per cent to 48 per cent between 2006 and 2017 (and this is apparent across almost all sectors of the economy). It is in hospitality where expectations of involvement are the lowest: in 2017, just 17 per cent of hospitality employees who felt they had little influence over the way their job was organised reported feeling that they should have more of a say.

This decline in the proportion who believe they should have a say is particularly large in sectors which have always had low levels of union representation, such as hospitality and finance. So, similarly to the discussion above, it is not clear that the decline in unions on its own is important here. Moreover, it also does not simply reflect employees spending less time with an employer (which might make them feel less qualified to be involved in such decision making): job tenure has not declined materially over this period.<sup>49</sup> Instead, this suggests that, alongside the decline in the likelihood that employees actually have a say over workplace decisions has come a genuine decline in workers' expectations that they should have a say.

---

<sup>47</sup> D Blanchflower & A Bryson, *Now Unions Increase Job Satisfaction and Well-being*, NBER, August 2020.

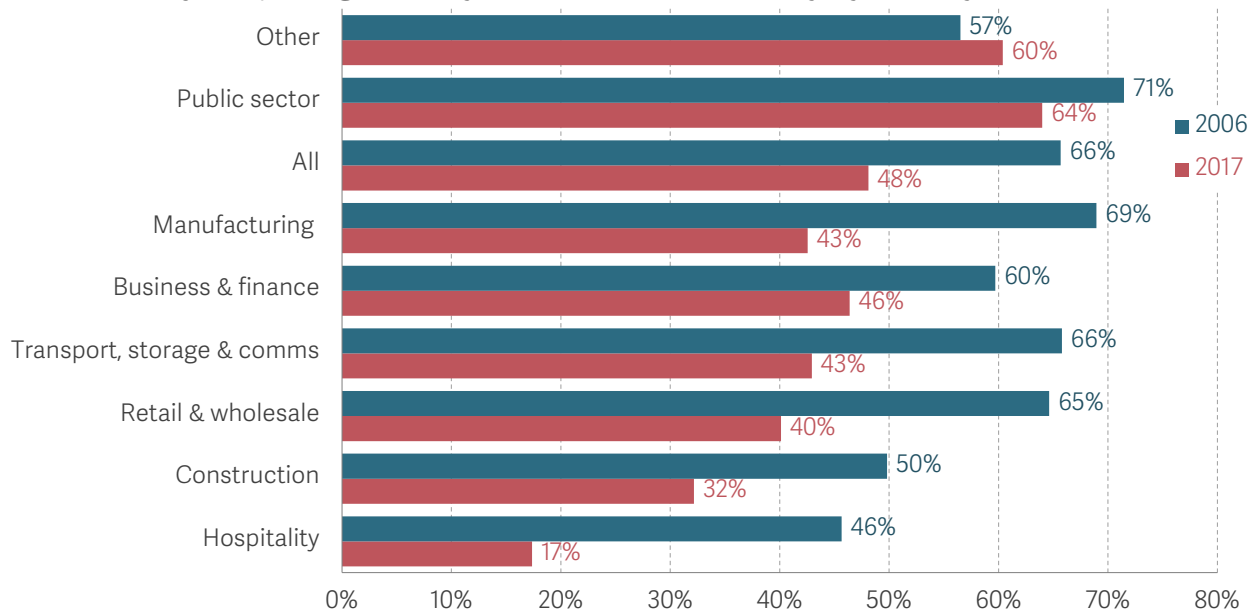
<sup>48</sup> Our analysis of Skills & Employment Survey reveals that, after taking account of age, gender, qualifications, industry, occupation, full-time/part-time work status, and whether an employee works in the private or public sector, there is a **negative** relationship (in 2017) between trade union membership or trade union presence in the workplace and having more say. This relationship is weaker if we focus on those in workplaces where there is collective bargaining (specifically, where unions are recognised by management for negotiating pay), but even there, the relationship is still slightly negative. Skills &

<sup>49</sup> Analysis of OECD, *Labour Force Statistics - Employment by job tenure*.



**FIGURE 19: Employees' expectations of involvement in decision making have lessened over time**

Proportion of employees who say they have no say in decisions that affect the way they do their job reporting that they should have more of a say, by industry: GB



NOTES: Employees aged 20-60. Agriculture is not shown due to small sample size. 2006 is the first year this question is asked with three response options. 'Other' includes recreational, cultural and sporting activities, as well as other service activities.

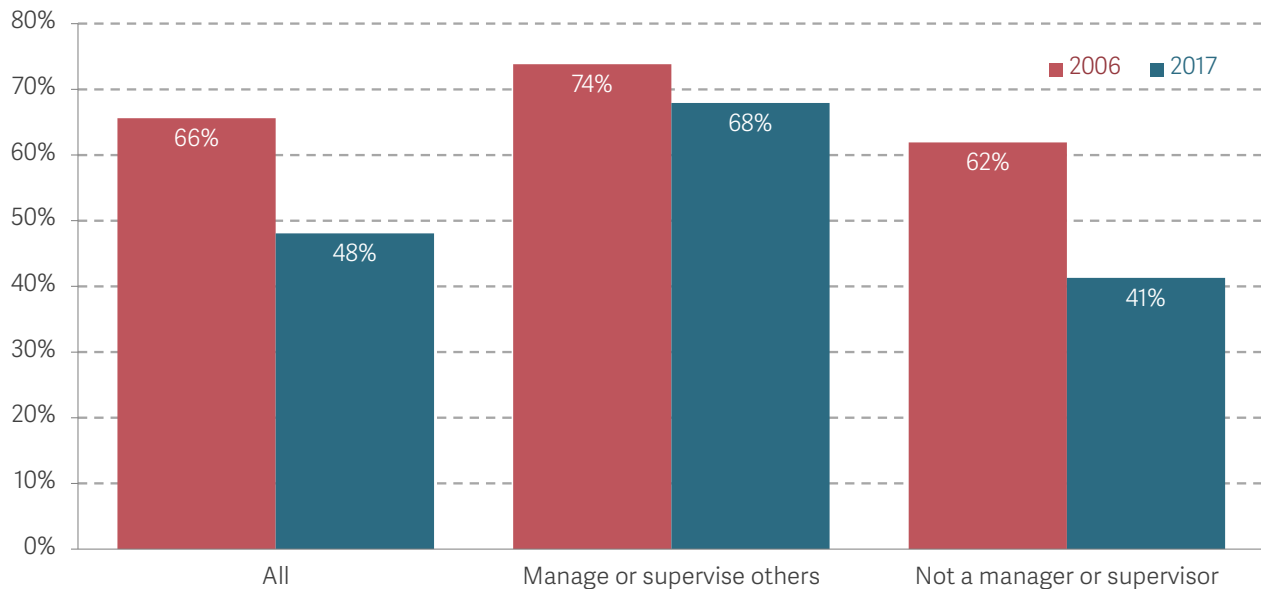
SOURCE: Analysis of Skills & Employment Survey.

It should also be noted that this decline is seen across the age range, and is not just a result of a decline in young people thinking that they should have a say in decisions. But the decline is concentrated among those without managerial responsibilities, suggesting that the individualisation of employee/employer relations that has stemmed from the decline of trade unions and the emergence of new types of work arrangements has had an effect.<sup>50</sup> Employees may now see it as their manager's responsibility to be involved in decision making and view it as sufficient to be informed or consulted in decisions (which, as Figure 17 shows, is happening more often than in the past). Figure 20 shows how in 2017, for example, 41 per cent of employees who were not a manager or supervisor thought that they should have a say over decisions, down from 62 per cent in 2006. Over the same time period, managers and supervisors became only slightly less likely to report that they should have a say (74 per cent in 2006 down to 68 per cent in 2017). This suggests that some of the overall decline may be explained by changing views towards within-firm organisational responsibilities.

<sup>50</sup> OECD Employment Outlook 2018, Chapter 3: The role of collective bargaining systems for good labour market performance, 2018.

**FIGURE 20: The fall in the share of disenfranchised employees who want more of a say in decisions affecting their job is smallest among managers and supervisors**

Proportion of employees who say they have no say in decisions that affect the way they do their job reporting that they should have more of a say, by managerial responsibilities: GB



NOTES: Employees aged 20-60. Individuals reporting having managerial duties and supervising others have been combined into one category due to sample sizes. 2006 is the first year this question is asked with three response options.

SOURCE: Analysis of Skills & Employment Survey.

## Conclusion

Taken together, our findings suggest that the subjective experience of work has changed over the last thirty years in ways that are more nuanced than is ordinarily understood. We do not, for example, find evidence of a wholesale deterioration in job quality: on average, employees' alignment with their firms and their perception of the importance and meaningfulness of their work has improved over the period. But at the same time, employees report that they are both increasingly stressed and "used up" by their work, and that have less control over the tasks they perform and the way work is organised. The changing composition of the workforce (both in terms of personal characteristics and the occupations and industries in which people work) explains only a small part of these trends, suggesting that something fundamental has changed in the nature of work over the last 30 years.

Perhaps most worryingly, there are key areas of deterioration for lower earners. Most strikingly, we find that the 'satisfaction premium' that was enjoyed by those in the lowest-earnings quartile in the 1990s has disappeared, suggesting that the non-monetary

benefits of low-paid jobs are no longer offsetting lower earnings. The lowest earners have also seen their levels of stress rise faster than others; their level of control at work has fallen more steeply; and they have witnessed a sharp decline in meaningful involvement in decisions about workplace change.

Overall, this report rounds out our understanding of labour market changes over time. Our findings raise new research questions – such as why job satisfaction has not fallen significantly when stress, lack of control and disengagement at work have all increased – alongside important questions for policy makers – such as whether the ‘Good Work’ agenda is sufficient to address the issues this note has unpacked, or whether there are limits to seeking productivity gains through an intensification of the working environment. As the Resolution Foundation and Centre for Economic Performance’s Economy 2030 Inquiry gathers pace, these and other questions raised by this note will be uppermost.

## Annex 1: Table of changes in employee experience of work, by earnings quartile

	All	Quartile 1 (lowest earning)	Quartile 2	Quartile 3	Quartile 4 (highest earning)
<b>Work is stressful</b>					
1989	30%	16%	28%	36%	39%
1997	34%	18%	38%	41%	42%
2005	36%	24%	28%	45%	50%
2015	38%	26%	36%	43%	46%
<b>Job is secure</b>					
1989	61%	54%	65%	62%	61%
1997	55%	61%	53%	53%	55%
2005	73%	70%	77%	67%	79%
2015	69%	64%	70%	65%	73%
<b>Job has prospects for advancement</b>					
1989	22%	12%	26%	22%	27%
1997	21%	20%	10%	14%	38%
2005	29%	16%	23%	38%	42%
2015	35%	25%	34%	31%	49%
<b>Job is interesting</b>					
1989	77%	67%	73%	81%	86%
1997	69%	62%	66%	69%	79%
2005	71%	62%	62%	74%	88%
2015	75%	67%	66%	80%	86%
<b>Job involves independent working</b>					
1989	80%	80%	81%	78%	81%
1997	78%	77%	79%	76%	81%
2005	77%	67%	82%	73%	87%
2015	82%	78%	80%	87%	84%
<b>Job is helpful to others</b>					
1989	67%	69%	69%	70%	64%
1997	70%	80%	66%	71%	66%
2005	78%	83%	84%	82%	72%
2015	79%	80%	79%	82%	73%
<b>Job is useful to society</b>					
1989	56%	59%	59%	51%	55%
1997	58%	71%	58%	53%	52%
2005	62%	59%	61%	72%	60%
2015	70%	72%	68%	69%	67%

NOTES: Respondents are shown a card with options for weekly, monthly or annual before tax earnings bands and select one, as such it is not possible to specify whether the earnings reported are weekly, monthly or annual.

SOURCE: Analysis of NatCen, British Social Attitudes Survey.

	All	Quartile 1 (lowest earning)	Quartile 2	Quartile 3	Quartile 4 (highest earning)
<b>Working at speed</b>					
1992	23%	28%	26%	20%	17%
2001	39%	41%	41%	36%	36%
2006	38%	40%	39%	37%	37%
2012	41%	46%	45%	36%	34%
2017	45%	50%	45%	44%	38%
<b>Working very hard</b>					
1992	30%	28%	28%	30%	32%
1997	39%	31%	35%	40%	47%
2001	37%	31%	36%	37%	44%
2006	41%	34%	37%	42%	46%
2012	44%	37%	40%	50%	50%
2017	46%	35%	47%	51%	52%
<b>Working to tight deadlines</b>					
2001	53%	39%	53%	57%	61%
2006	55%	42%	52%	59%	65%
2012	58%	49%	56%	59%	67%
2017	60%	53%	59%	64%	62%
<b>Working under tension</b>					
1992	49%	34%	47%	55%	58%
2001	58%	50%	57%	61%	67%
2006	59%	49%	55%	60%	70%
2012	60%	49%	58%	67%	67%
2017	62%	50%	62%	66%	69%
<b>Exhausted at the end of the day</b>					
1997	52%	52%	52%	48%	54%
2001	47%	46%	48%	49%	46%
2006	47%	48%	46%	50%	44%
2012	49%	50%	47%	49%	49%
2017	51%	52%	52%	53%	48%
<b>Used up at the end of the day</b>					
1992	20%	18%	19%	22%	25%
2001	25%	24%	23%	26%	26%
2006	24%	22%	21%	24%	27%
2012	27%	27%	21%	31%	32%
2017	29%	26%	28%	32%	32%

NOTES: Earnings quartiles are constructed using hourly earnings.

SOURCE: Analysis of Skills & Employment Survey.

	All	Quartile 1 (lowest earning)	Quartile 2	Quartile 3	Quartile 4 (highest earning)
<b>Machines determine how hard to work</b>					
1986	7%	5%	9%	10%	5%
1992	6%	5%	7%	8%	4%
1997	10%	11%	12%	10%	8%
2001	6%	8%	7%	6%	4%
2006	5%	5%	6%	6%	3%
2012	6%	8%	6%	6%	3%
2017	6%	12%	5%	4%	3%
<b>Clients determine how hard to work</b>					
1986	37%	40%	36%	37%	37%
1992	51%	46%	47%	53%	59%
1997	54%	51%	53%	54%	60%
2001	56%	53%	52%	57%	63%
2006	55%	51%	50%	57%	60%
2012	57%	58%	54%	56%	60%
2017	59%	60%	56%	59%	61%
<b>Supervisors determine how hard to work</b>					
1986	27%	26%	29%	29%	27%
1992	38%	38%	37%	40%	37%
1997	42%	45%	42%	39%	41%
2001	43%	43%	44%	46%	39%
2006	41%	40%	38%	44%	42%
2012	45%	43%	43%	48%	46%
2017	50%	48%	46%	51%	52%
<b>Colleagues determine how hard to work</b>					
1986	29%	22%	29%	31%	34%
1992	37%	33%	34%	39%	40%
1997	58%	56%	56%	58%	62%
2001	50%	43%	50%	53%	55%
2006	43%	38%	43%	45%	48%
2012	52%	47%	50%	56%	56%
2017	51%	45%	45%	56%	59%
<b>Own discretion determines how hard to work</b>					
1986	61%	54%	59%	59%	70%
1992	65%	58%	62%	67%	75%
1997	68%	59%	63%	70%	80%
2001	62%	51%	58%	68%	70%
2006	57%	43%	54%	61%	69%
2012	57%	45%	54%	62%	68%
2017	51%	41%	42%	57%	66%

NOTES: Earnings quartiles are constructed using hourly earnings.  
SOURCE: Analysis of Skills & Employment Survey.

	All	Quartile 1 (lowest earning)	Quartile 2	Quartile 3	Quartile 4 (highest earning)
<b>Managers hold information meetings</b>					
1992	70%	52%	69%	77%	87%
1997	74%	53%	71%	82%	86%
2001	70%	52%	68%	77%	85%
2006	76%	61%	74%	81%	89%
2012	78%	63%	74%	83%	91%
<b>Managers hold meetings to get worker views</b>					
1992	63%	45%	59%	68%	77%
1997	67%	47%	65%	72%	82%
2001	65%	46%	64%	70%	80%
2006	71%	57%	69%	76%	84%
2012	73%	57%	69%	76%	86%
2017	65%	47%	61%	71%	80%
<b>Would have a say in a decision made at workplace that changed the way they do their job</b>					
1992	51%	44%	47%	50%	59%
2001	53%	42%	48%	55%	64%
2006	44%	34%	41%	47%	55%
2012	40%	31%	41%	38%	49%
2017	42%	27%	39%	44%	58%
<b>Organisation inspires best</b>					
2001	61%	59%	60%	61%	64%
2006	63%	58%	62%	62%	69%
2012	64%	62%	66%	63%	67%
2017	74%	69%	71%	73%	76%
<b>Proud of organisation</b>					
1992	77%	72%	76%	77%	79%
1997	77%	72%	76%	76%	81%
2001	77%	71%	75%	80%	82%
2006	79%	69%	79%	79%	86%
2012	81%	74%	82%	82%	85%
2017	86%	82%	86%	89%	88%
<b>Share values of organisation</b>					
1992	77%	72%	76%	77%	79%
1997	71%	71%	69%	70%	75%
2001	75%	71%	73%	74%	78%
2006	74%	67%	71%	74%	80%
2012	76%	72%	76%	73%	80%
2017	83%	78%	82%	86%	84%

NOTES: Earnings quartiles are constructed using hourly earnings.

SOURCE: Analysis of Skills & Employment Survey.



	All	Quartile 1 (lowest earning)	Quartile 2	Quartile 3	Quartile 4 (highest earning)
<b>Would like more influence over how to do job</b>					
2006	34%	35%	33%	36%	33%
2012	38%	37%	38%	39%	39%
2017	38%	42%	36%	37%	36%
<b>Little influence over how hard to work</b>					
1992	6%	10%	5%	5%	3%
1997	6%	11%	7%	5%	1%
2001	10%	17%	8%	9%	7%
2006	9%	15%	9%	8%	6%
2012	10%	11%	12%	11%	8%
2017	10%	14%	12%	9%	6%
<b>Little influence over what tasks to do</b>					
1992	24%	32%	30%	23%	14%
1997	29%	42%	38%	26%	14%
2001	34%	47%	41%	31%	21%
2006	34%	46%	40%	31%	21%
2012	31%	39%	38%	28%	20%
2017	31%	42%	37%	29%	18%
<b>Little influence over how to do tasks</b>					
1992	12%	18%	15%	10%	6%
1997	15%	25%	18%	13%	4%
2001	17%	28%	21%	12%	7%
2006	18%	29%	22%	13%	8%
2012	17%	26%	19%	14%	8%
2017	18%	28%	21%	14%	6%

NOTES: Earnings quartiles are constructed using hourly earnings.  
SOURCE: Analysis of Skills & Employment Survey.

## Reports published as part of The Economy 2030 Inquiry to-date

All publications are available on the [Inquiry's website](#).

1. [The UK's decisive decade](#): The launch report of The Economy 2030 Inquiry
2. [Levelling up and down Britain](#): How the labour market recovery varies across the country

The UK is on the brink of a decade of huge economic change – from the Covid-19 recovery, to exiting the EU and transitioning towards a Net Zero future. The Economy 2030 Inquiry will examine this decisive decade for Britain, and set out a plan for how we can successfully navigate it.

The Inquiry is a collaboration between the Resolution Foundation and the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics. It is funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

For more information on The Economy 2030 Inquiry, visit [economy2030.resolutionfoundation.org](https://economy2030.resolutionfoundation.org).

For more information on this report, contact:

**Daniel Tomlinson**

Senior Economist

[daniel.tomlinson@resolutionfoundation.org](mailto:daniel.tomlinson@resolutionfoundation.org)