Human Relations virtual special issue: The Quality of Working Life Revisited

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Introduction

This virtual special issue brings together a number of key articles published in *Human Relations* that focus on the quality of working life. Quality of working life as a movement was influential in helping firms to make voluntary changes to work design intended to enhance worker wellbeing. Demands to improve the quality of working life have existed since at least the first industrial revolution (see, for example, **Hall, 2009**). These demands were given fresh impetus in the mid-twentieth century by a group of researcher-activists based at the Tavistock Institute, the home of *Human Relations*. Driven by the need to address the psychological and social consequences of Taylorised work, their impact on debate and practice was significant and rippled internationally to become a movement. A number of interventions and experiments within workplaces followed. As economic circumstances changed in the last quarter of the century, policymaker, management and trade union support waned, though the ideas underpinning the movement continued in several countries (**Guest, forthcoming**).

Now, in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, there is renewed interest in the quality of working life. This renewed interest arises out of a number of concerns: the emerging gig economy, precarious work more generally, and the impact of new digital technologies on

the quality of those jobs that are not substituted by the clever robots for example (**Warhurst and Knox, 2015**). As we note in the selection of our articles, debate has gone full circle, with a recent call for reinvigorating the quality of working life movement. This reinvigoration now is useful; in part as a corrective to the first wave of technologically deterministic accounts of the predicted impact of digital technology on jobs and recognition in the second wave of analysis that applying a socio-technical approach to the implementation of this technology might better lever positive outcomes for workers (**Dregger et al., 2016**). In part, it is also useful as a potential compass to guide a way out of the COVID-19-driven economic crisis. Given that there is a belief amongst policymakers that job quality can be a driver of economic recovery and growth (**OECD, 2018**), economic renewal post-COVID can be both premised on and seek to deliver a better quality of working life.

It is a good time therefore to revisit articles in *Human Relations* that focus on the quality of working life, including a number of Tavistock 'classics'. The criteria for inclusion require a spread of articles over the decades, but with some emphasis on more recent publications. Another criterion is to capture the spirit of the debates in the different decades.

Trist and Bamforth (1951) is the classic article that sparked the interest in socio-technical systems and how an analysis that took account of both social and technical factors provided new insights into work design and work quality. In the 1960s and 1970s, the focus shifted to worker participation and industrial democracy as the path to improved quality of work. The article by **French, Israel and As (1960)** highlights the importance of participation in managing job change while the article by **Davis and Valfer (1966)** is an early study of work design.

The 1970s saw a flurry of publications in *Human Relations* on aspects of industrial democracy, job design and quality of working life. These include more 'classics' by Tavistock or Tavistock-related writers including **Cherns (1976)** attempting to define the quality of working life as it morphed conceptually. The **Susman (1970)** article, however, highlights the continuing concern about the impact of automation on socio-technical design. The **Oldham (1976)** article illustrates the narrower and, in some respects, more successful approach of the job characteristics model developed by Hackman and Oldham. The article by **Qvale (1976)** outlines the famous Norwegian industrial democracy project which sought to combine direct and representative participation to improve the quality of working life. Finally, an interesting article by **Boisvert (1977)** describes a study of perceptions of quality of working life, showing that workers were primarily interested in intrinsic work design while researchers tended to adopt a broader perspective addressing organizational issues leading to a potential disjuncture in desired outcomes from interventions and experiments.

The issue of work quality had died down in the 1980s, though there were a number of micro-studies exploring, for example, the role of motivation in preferences for work redesign. By the 1990s, a new concern had arisen. Innovations in the organization of work,

seen by some as a new form of Taylorism, was threatening work quality. The impact of lean production is addressed by **Klein (1991)** who examines how lean production threatens job autonomy but has the potential to offer new forms of autonomy. However the article by **Gustavson (1998)** brings a note of reality to the longer-term assessment of the Norwegian attempts to improve work quality.

Moving into the twenty-first century, a new set of contextual factors, partly linked to changes in digital technology and the organisation of work and wider socio-economic changes triggered the renewed interest in work quality. The case for reinvigorating research on quality of working life and specifically work quality is set out by **Grote and Guest (2017)**. Some of the important debates about the nature of job quality were captured in a 2013 special issue of *Human Relations*. The article by **Holman (2013)** compares job quality across European countries and suggests that differences between countries can be largely accounted for by institutional factors. **Cooke et al. (2013)** use a qualitative study, comparing rural workers in Newfoundland and Ireland, to show that a complex array of institutional, family and life stage factors help to shape perceptions of and experiences of job quality. The challenge to any attempt to develop objective indicators of job quality is highlighted in the article by Bozkurt and Cohen (2019). Reflecting the classic study by **Pirsig (1974)** on *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, they reveal a context in which dirty work, that is the repair of damaged vintage cars, can be viewed as quality work.

Going forward, more research on the quality of working life is desperately needed. The dual health and economic crises triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the risks to the physical, material, social and mental wellbeing of workers in a range of jobs. Currently, those workers most affected include the young, women and immigrants, many of whom work in the hospitality, retail and care industries – the industries that already offer relatively poor quality of working life (**Gautié and Schmitt, 2010**). Analysis of jobs in these industries, along with others, will be necessary to determine the nature and extent of the negative impacts on worker wellbeing and the types of interventions needed to (restore and) enhance the quality of working life over the coming years.

Taken together, these articles in this virtual special issue, covering seven decades, illustrate how *Human Relations* has captured the evolving debates on the quality of working life, revealing its complexity, the range of institutional influences and analytic paradigms that inform it and its importance for the way in which it affects workers and their lives. The next decade will reveal whether their insights lever the change that is needed.

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