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Decent Work: What Matters Most and Who Can Make A Difference ?

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Decent Work: What Matters Most and Who Can Make A Difference?

Purpose: What matters most for improving work quality, and who can make a difference, are perennial themes in employee relations research. The literature on work quality provides answers to these with regard to various constructs on a continuum from 'soft' to 'hard' variables, identifying stakeholders who may influence employers who fall short of reasonable expectations with regard to these. A construct of 'decent work' with both soft and hard variables was adopted for research, and methods which were collaborative and participative, with stakeholders in one national context.

Design/methodology/approach: The 'decent work' construct was operationalised from the literature and refined by collaborative and participative research. Exploring the relative importance of the constituent parts of decent work involved research with a range of stakeholders; employees, employers and advocates. The study involved most prominently low paid workers, with employers and advocates also engaged through interviews.

Findings: Primarily hard 'decent work' variables were identified among employees, primarily soft variables among employers and a mix of hard and soft among advocates. There are some common priorities across these stakeholders.

Research limitations/implications: The main implication is that to engage a range of stakeholders requires a combination of soft and hard variables to be included in research and policy development. However, generalization about what matters most and who makes a difference to work quality is intrinsically limited in context and time. In this research the extent of employer engagement, in the collaboration initiated by advocates and concerned most with the experiences of low paid workers, is also a limitation.

Practical implications: What matters most are a set of soft and hard priorities to engage across stakeholders. Pay is an abiding priority among these, and the priority most prominent for many advocates seeking to make a difference through influencing low pay employers to provide a living wage. While the living wage is a significant focus for work quality it is not in itself sufficient, as other soft and hard variables in the workplace matter as well. Those who can make a difference are the employers falling short of benchmark standards. Influence on these through decent work knowledge and skills in management and professional development programmes as well initiatives advocating wider adoption of the living wage.

Social Implications

Targeting problem areas of work quality, and problem employers, through primarily 'hard' strategies, including legislation, needs to be complemented if not integrated with 'soft' strategies, including identifying positive role models that can impact on the problems of low pay, low skill, wellbeing, work-life balance and precarious forms of employment.

Originality/Value

The identification of what matters and who can make a difference is based on an original, collaborative, research project, in one national context, offering analytical generalizability about 'decent work', and an experience of collaborative research.

Introduction: Researching Work Quality

Studies typically indicate that while work quality is perceived by many to be good there are clearly significant minorities for whom this is not so, with a consequent need for further research to identify

1
2 what matters most and who can make a difference in improving work quality (CIPD, 2018; Tagian,
3 2007). The current interest in work quality on what matters most, and who can make a difference, is
4 formed in part by the persistence of perceived shortfalls in some sectors and in part by the changing
5 workplace context. If the old workplace context was one with employment in large manufacturing
6 and service organizations, with a strong trade union presence, and an espousal of participatory
7 management the current and emerging context is one with employment in organizations adopting or
8 experimenting with new business models, particularly those enabled by digital technology (Boudreau
9 *et al.*, 2015), with no trade union presence and flatter, or even virtual, management structures. This
10 current context as a focus is clearly seen in the recent UK review and consultation on good work
11 (Taylor, 2017), which aimed to engage stakeholders and source views on potential new legislation
12 for this changed context.
13
14

15
16 A specific example of the current context, widely reported and discussed publicly, is the company
17 Amazon. Amazon had come to be perceived as an icon of poor work quality and employment (Boewe
18 & Schulten 2017; Osborne 2018), from their pay rates to their working conditions and employment
19 terms. Until, that is, in 2018 Amazon appeared to change in a dramatic turnaround, to become a
20 leading proponent of ending low pay and become a role model for this (Lauerman and Kahn 2018).
21 How the reversal of reputation from being pilloried to being feted as a role model came to pass, and
22 its extent and sustainability, provides a significant contextual case about what matters and who can
23 make a difference. The short answer, in the case of Amazon, is that pay mattered most; and a
24 combination of bad publicity, public pressure, threats of legal action and rethinking business strategy
25 in the longer term each had a part to play.
26
27

28
29 Yet single cases, even these more dramatic and striking ones such as Amazon, cannot be relied upon
30 to answer more generally the themes of what matters most and who can make a difference. The three
31 objectives of the research undertaken and reported here to contribute to addressing these themes in a
32 more empirically grounded way were;
33

- 34 • Objective 1; Is 'decent work' a useful construct in the field of work quality?
- 35 • Objective 2; Does a collaborative approach to research help illuminate key problem areas?
- 36 • Objective 3; What lessons about impact in a specific context can be identified and generalised?
- 37

38
39 The research reported in this paper adopted a construct of 'decent work' and a collaborative approach
40 to research in a specific context, Scotland. The literature on work quality was reviewed to identify
41 the options available on constructs and research design. The choice of 'decent work' as a construct
42 emerged from this. The collaborative approach and choice of methods is explained. This meant
43 engaging a range of employees, employers and advocates, in a collaborative identification of priorities
44 for improving work quality. The findings of the primary research are presented. The extent to which
45 findings from this context may be generalised provides the basis for, in conclusion, contributing to
46 the key work quality themes of 'what matters most' and 'who can make a difference'?

47 48 49 **Literature Review**

50
51 Work quality research has generated a range of constructs, indices and typologies (Sehnbruch *et al.*,
52 2015; Warhurst *et al.* (2017). The literature on work quality is quite extensive and complex as a
53 consequence of this (Sengupta *et al.*, 2009; Findlay *et al.*, 2013; Wright, 2015b). The constructs share
54 a purpose, to capture what matters most for more 'good' jobs and fewer 'bad' jobs (Feingold, 1984;
55 Nolan and Wood, 2003; Clark, 2005; Williams, 2007). They vary in scope and focus, generating
56 multiple constructs, indices and typologies of work quality (Oldham and Hackman, 2010; Eurofund,
57 2012; Crespo *et al.*, 2013; Maclean *et al.*, 2013; Burgess *et al.*, 2013) which include: job design;
58 ergonomics; decent work; competency; fair work; quality of employment; quality of working life;
59 quality of work; job quality; good jobs; better work; better jobs; dignity at work; and fulfilling work.
60

1
2 Some of these constructs can be critiqued as tending to the vague and all-encompassing (Burchell et
3 al., 2014) while others can be critiqued as insufficiently inclusive of a social justice agenda (Blustein
4 et al., 2016) which some believe to be integral to the purpose of researching work quality.

5
6 The diversity of constructs can be organised and explained in various ways, including with reference
7 to a 'hard' to 'soft' continuum (See Figure 1) mapping to the work quality literature. The recognition
8 of 'hard' and 'soft' aspects within management is long established (see Storey, 1989), providing a
9 simple and effective way of mapping the work quality literature.

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12 -----
13 Insert Figure 1 Here
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16
17 The use of a 'hard' and 'soft' continuum in mapping work quality constructs helps to connect work
18 quality to themes in general management research, themes which have associated with them
19 applications in practice; from the 'soft' applications of influencing workplace culture to the 'hard'
20 applications of measuring efficient and effective performance. It is always possible to have
21 reasonable pay, good contracts and holidays and still be working in employment contexts without
22 fulfilment and lacking supportive managers which can have significant impact on both employee
23 productivity and wellbeing. Equally it is also possible to be in employment and workplaces with
24 supportive managers and fulfilment but lack the pay and security and benefits of secure holidays.
25 The concern is not with one or the other employment and workplace context, but both.

26
27
28 Some work quality research may be particularly concerned with the soft factors, including culture,
29 values, ethics, human relations, encompassing social and wellbeing policies (Di Ruggerio *et al.*,
30 2015). Some work quality research may be particularly concerned with hard factors, processes and
31 resources, including technology, and the optimal management of technical systems and human
32 factors at work (Salvendy, 2012), often to achieve productivity improvements. Some work quality
33 research may be less exclusively hard, to produce operational and technical descriptions of work
34 roles and skills or competency (Bartram, 2005) which can be used by agents in workplaces. Some
35 work quality research may combine and integrate both the soft and hard in contexts, recognizing
36 that social and cultural forces, including legislation, are of significance, as well as technicalities in
37 job and role analysis. This is what constructs such as 'decent work' (Simpson *et al.*, 2016; Ghai,
38 2003) and 'fair work' (Scottish Government, 2015b) appear to offer.

39
40
41
42 The 'decent work' construct has a provenance which embodies an aspirational and campaigning focus
43 (ILO, 2008). Initially, the ILO proposed the idea for developing the concept of 'decent work' with
44 the intention of producing a broad range of employment indicators that would allow cross-country
45 comparisons, as well as the analysis of individual labour markets. However, when the ILO released
46 the first publications which sought to operationalise 'decent work' (ILO, 1999; ILO, 2001) the effort
47 to define 'decent work' was in effect 'shot down' (Sehnbruch *et al.*, 2015) and 'decent work' became
48 to some advocates an undefined and unmeasurable concept with little applicability in the context of
49 international practice. Nonetheless, 'decent work' has persisted and maintained relevance and
50 currency in practice and research (Pouyard, 2016), and still valid as a construct for shaping debate,
51 research and action (Vosko, 2002; Tangian, 2007).

52
53
54 The options available for research design on work quality are also diverse (Anker *et al.*, 2003;
55 Bonnet *et al.*, 2003; Brown *t al.*, 2007; Wright, 2015a). Three approaches for researching work
56 quality have been described (Muñoz de Bustillo *et al.*, 2009). These are the 'shortcut', the
57 'intermediate and the 'comprehensive' approaches. The 'shortcut' approach entails identifying a
58 single and simple overall indicator or scale of work quality; for example, job satisfaction indices or
59 scales may be used as an overall indicator or proxy for work quality. The 'intermediate option'

typically entails a stakeholder being asked what they consider as being important for job quality, and responses are used to model work quality. For example, Sutherland (2011) obtained workers' views on the nature of work and what makes a 'good job', with reference to extrinsic and intrinsic factors, including good pay and the type of work. The 'comprehensive' approach accesses and uses either a multi-dimensional construct derived from the academic literature (Antón *et al.*, 2012) though not necessarily multiple stakeholders. There are many examples of the 'comprehensive' approach, with the choice of multiple-dimensional variables reflecting the disciplinary traditions of the researchers, representing economic, sociological or psychological traditions. Examples include the OECD Better Life Initiative (2013), the Subjective Quality of Working Life Index (SQWLI) (Brisbois, 2013), and the Smith Institute's model of seven factors (Sweeney, 2014).

The partners involved in this research endorsed the latter view., that decent work' was potentially relevant and useful for capturing and exploring the experience of individual employees and workplaces as a whole, not just at the 'basic' level. The main disadvantage in adopting 'decent work' as a construct is that the meaning of 'decent' remains for some inherently flawed (Standing, 2008), as it has an inherent vagueness' and represents a flabby platitude rather than a focus for operationalisation and scientific research. Some have characterized 'decent work' as a form of 'basic' level construct (Warhurst *et al.*, 2017). And if, without much contention, everybody can subscribe to the notion of 'decent' work that makes it such a low common denominator that it might fail to challenge or inspire real and meaningful, and measurable change and progress.

In conclusion, from the literature review, the following emerged as the basis for framing research contributing to the key work quality themes of 'what matters most' and 'who can make a difference';

- 'Decent work' may be a useful construct
- A collaborative approach to research help illuminates key problem areas
- Lessons about impact in context can be identified and generalised

Methodology

It is not the purpose here to report and describe the results of the whole research project here in detail, as that is to be found in breadth and depth elsewhere (Stuart *et al.*, 2016). The discussion of methods here is therefore restricted to those aspects of the study most relevant to the specific questions of 'what matters most', and 'who can make a difference'. These are outlined below with reference to the development of the decent work construct, the collaborative approach adopted, and the context for the research, and the mixed methods used in the research project as a whole.

The Construct

'Decent work' has been operationalised as part of an intermediate approach to research design, giving a conceptual framework (Stuart *et al.*, 2016) with five dimensions (see Figure 2) each with a set of indicators; pay, health and safety, work-life balance, terms of employment, and the intrinsic characteristics of work/satisfaction. This construct of 'decent work' is itself based on the Eurofound European Working Conditions Survey (Eurofound, 2012).

 Insert Figure 2 Here

An initial set of items associated with five dimensions of 'decent work' were shared with employees in a pilot study. A smaller list of items of most relevance was derived (see Table 1).

1
2 From this the final model and 26 indicators were established
3

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5 Insert Table 1 Here
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9 It is possible to access and report evidence from publicly datasets about these 26 items from desk
10 research, which was done as a secondary part of the project (Stuart 2016). For example, data on
11 current rates of in-work poverty, workers in jobs that are paid less than the UK Living Wage and/or
12 UK Minimum Wage, workers employed on zero hours contracts, in various forms of precarious or
13 insecure work, work-related illnesses or injuries and those in work defined as low-skilled. This was
14 done, though to identify what matters most and who can make a difference qualitative and
15 participatory research with stakeholders, to explore ‘decent work’ as defined, was necessary.
16
17

18 ***Collaboration***

19
20 These research partners had the aim of documenting what employees, particularly the low-paid,
21 perceived as constituting ‘decent work’ and if their priorities for progress were aligned with other
22 stakeholders. Stakeholders are defined and of concern here most broadly to include employees,
23 employers and advocates of work quality, representing the full range of stakeholders associated with
24 work quality (Green, 2006; Holman, 2013). Employees in the initial research were people in low-
25 paid or low-skilled work and those looking for work, with reference to their most recently held job.
26 Survey data, focus group data, and a large-scale poll were used (Stuart *et al.*, 2016). For employers
27 interviews with a range of organizations were undertaken (Gibb and Ishaq, 2016). Advocates in the
28 form of government, or government supported bodies, trade unions and campaigning groups
29 concerned with poverty, health and inequality as well as professional bodies concerned with
30 employment were also engaged. Engaging a range of stakeholders in work quality is not a new
31 challenge in itself, it is a challenge that continues to reincarnate in in a changing and dynamic
32 employment context.
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37 ***The Context***

38
39 Collaboration was both the means to and the end of the research project, being part of a broader
40 advocacy-initiated partnership between a University and a charity: the UWS-Oxfam Partnership.
41 The context and stakeholders for this research was work quality in Scotland, at a time when the
42 Scottish Government had established a national initiative for fair work, and elections to the Scottish
43 Parliament were in the offing, while the cumulative effects of a long period of austerity on levels of
44 in-work poverty were of general concern. The partners anticipated that work quality problems could
45 be an issue in many situations; among skilled and unskilled workers; in ‘small town’ SME employers
46 or units of global multinationals; in either public sector organizations or digital platform-based
47 organizations.
48
49
50

51 ***Mixed Methods***

52
53 To identify priorities, what matters most, a mix of methods was used. Thirty focus groups engaged
54 277 people in discussions about their work and what it meant for it to be ‘decent’. Participants were
55 mostly employees in low paid sectors such as social care, hospitality, and cleaning. Particular
56 efforts were made to engage groups facing additional disadvantages in the workplace beyond low
57 pay. This included young people, disabled people, black and ethnic minority communities, and lone
58 parents. At participatory street stalls, 433 people engaged with the project. Stalls were set up in
59 areas with relatively high levels of multiple deprivation according to the Scottish Index of Multiple
60

1
2 Deprivation (SIMD). In addition, YouGov was commissioned to undertake an opinion poll of 802
3 Scottish workers earning less than £20,000.
4

5
6 Employers' views were sourced from both the literature and through interviews conducted with
7 employers. A small number of representative employers in several different sectors, totalling eight,
8 were invited to examine and explore 'decent work' as we were using the term through in-depth
9 semi-structured interviews. The eight comprised representatives from both the public and private
10 sectors - managers and human resources staff from each sector. All interviewees had extensive
11 experience across sectors and were thus deemed to be able to provide a valid employers'
12 perspective. Those interviewed had experience in Scotland's biggest employers (the NHS, local
13 authorities, energy companies), and key sectors of employment often seen to offer challenges
14 around 'decent work' (hospitality, tourism), as well as experience in the manufacturing sector and
15 knowledge of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Other related research projects explored and
16 sought views school pupils and people with criminal convictions.
17
18

19 **Results**

20
21 The purpose of this results section is to provide, from among the extensive data sources and
22 findings, the core data on priority rankings with respect to soft and hard variables from the three
23 main stakeholder groups; employees, employers and advocates.
24
25

26 ***Employees; Low Paid Workers***

27
28 What low paid workers identified as the top five 'decent work' priorities are shown in Table 2.
29 These identify primarily 'hard' variables. There was strong agreement amongst focus group
30 participants that a decent hourly rate or salary was a priority. Having job security for participants
31 could mean, for example, having a clear and open-ended contract. A supportive manager for
32 research participants meant respect and appreciation for a job done well, the ability to listen, and an
33 understanding of individuals' needs outside the workplace. There was a strong overall degree of
34 consistency in the data from street stalls, focus groups and opinion poll.
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40 Insert Table 2 Here
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43 ***Employers***

44
45 Employers and human resources managers, from both public and private organizations, shared similar
46 views to each other on 'decent work'. As a group, they welcomed the idea of a clear, widely accepted
47 and easily measurable definition of 'decent work' for application in their own organizations.
48 Employers often believe that they already offer 'decent work' without, however, always having a
49 clear understanding of what that means. A 'decent work' agenda in businesses could be embraced by
50 employers because businesses are concerned with improving performance and want to be attractive
51 places to work. The employers' view report suggested that if 'decent work' were seen as a
52 productivity factor, whilst also providing public recognition, a 'decent work' employer badge would
53 be actively sought by employers.
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56

57 Employer rankings are shown in Table 3, showing a commonality with the agenda for low paid
58 employees. The employer priorities are primarily 'soft' variables.
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Insert Table 3 Here

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7 The interviews with employers found that they often believe that they already offer ‘decent work’,
8 without having a clear understanding of what ‘decent work’ means. Many employers explicitly wish
9 to be known as good employers and be concerned with improving performance and want to be
10 attractive places to work. Whilst they can be unclear about and unfamiliar with the broader concept
11 of ‘decent work’ as others may perceive this, employers may become aware that a ‘decent work’
12 agenda can be linked with initiatives presently undertaken at their organizations. These can be about
13 achieving ‘high performance working’, ‘employee engagement’ or ‘strategic human resource
14 management’. There is then scope for a sense of a shared agenda on ‘decent work’. Employers and
15 HR managers can see the potential of inter-connections and synergies between these existing
16 initiatives and a broad notion of ‘decent work’. Among the interviewees there was a consistent view
17 that ‘decent work’ is more contingent on individual managers rather than work structures, incentives
18 or work conditions.
19
20

21 The particular challenges which employers face in creating more ‘decent work’ are many and varied.
22 In the interviews resource constraints were highlighted, and the potential cost of providing more
23 ‘decent work’ at a time when businesses are often hard pressed and struggling. Some interviewees
24 highlighted the fear of further ‘red tape’ and bureaucracy if ‘decent work’ was to be measured and
25 reported on whilst other interviewees were concerned about the impact of major organization-internal
26 change projects such as, in the case of the NHS, the integration of health and social care, on job
27 quality. Interviewees therefore spoke of a ‘challenge’ in creating more ‘decent work’ and of the need
28 to develop an on-going dialogue about ‘decent work’ rather than expecting one-off events or single
29 initiatives.
30
31

32 *Advocates*

33
34
35 The Scottish government is a significant advocate on work quality, through their advocacy of ‘fair
36 work’. Fair work, as defined and applied by the Scottish Government at the time of this research, was
37 articulated with respect to the government as an employer, and in guidance on procurement of tenders
38 to do government funded work, as well as through support for a Fair Work Commission seeks to
39 capture a range of areas where influence on employers might be focused (see Table 4). This has
40 subsequently been taken forward in the development of a fair work plan. The Fair Work Commission
41 model (FWC 2016) identified 5 themes; voice, opportunity, security, fulfilment and respect. The ‘hard’
42 articulation of these could not be taken forward through legislation, though there was opportunity for
43 the Scottish Government to articulate these in the development of Business Pledge and in
44 procurement guidance. What is noticeable in the context of this study is the switch from ‘soft’
45 variables in the FWC model to a mix of the soft and ‘hard’, most clearly pay, in the explicit
46 articulation, and the prominence of trade unions as significant stakeholders, in the development of
47 the Business Pledge and procurement guidance.
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Insert Table 4 Here
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56 The focus on pay and the prominence of trade unions in the ‘fair work’ framework advocated by the
57 Scottish Government may be seen to represent an explicit articulation of what really matters and who
58 can make a difference.
59

60 For other advocates, represented initially in this research project by the concerns and views of Oxfam

and those who were associated with Oxfam and their 'decent work' policy development, they brought their vision and mission with them to the whole process, the concern with poverty most centrally and in-work poverty as a focal concern. This was integral to shaping the initial project aim and brief, deciding the focus and themes from the literature, and then exploring what the messages and implications were based on the original research findings. That included being knowledgeable about the ways in which policy makers might be receptive to messages they wished to advance about poverty and in-work poverty, which would include understanding and addressing the needs of employers as well as employees. That the priorities which emerged from the employee and employer studies were a shared combination of the 'hard' and the 'soft' is an important outcome of the research, which will be discussed further, later.

Some employee representatives were also interviewed, representing trade unions. Not surprisingly 'voice' was considered to be what mattered first and foremost; having a presence and role in bargaining. Voice was seen as the necessary if not sufficient condition for everything else associated with 'decent work'. Bargaining on 'basic needs' including pay, type of contract, and conditions of work, remains the heart of 'decent work'. This can be a huge challenge in some key sectors, like hospitality, which are typically and operationally more cost-benefit conscious than others, and so seem to have less scope for providing 'more decent work'. In the hospitality sector, if employees have issue with work quality, they can often relatively easily move on to another employer. The effect of high turnover and many employees 'passing through' is that there is little pressure generated on the employer to improve conditions and give employees a continuing voice.

Discussion

Recapping, the themes being explored here are 'what matters most' and 'who can make a difference'. The literature on work quality provides many potential constructs, and these can be mapped with regard to a spectrum of 'soft' to 'hard' aspects of work quality. The stakeholders who may be concerned with work quality will depend on the focus on either soft or hard, or both. 'Decent work' as a construct combines both soft and hard variables and is of potential interest to a wide variety of employee, employer and advocate stakeholders interested in work quality. The three research objectives here are now discussed and reviewed in turn;

- Is 'Decent Work' a useful construct?
- Does a collaborative approach to research help illuminate key problem areas?
- What lessons from the research project about impact in context are learned?

Objective 1; Is 'decent work' a useful construct?

The first objective of was to determine the extent to which 'decent work' was a valid construct for researching work quality. It was already established that 'decent work' as a construct was well grounded in theory and the literature. With 'decent work' priorities identified the scale and focus of action could be gauged with were reference to existing sources of accessible information.

As an interim report of the main study was published just prior to the 2016 Scottish Parliament election., then a main report reporting on low-paid workers views followed, published after the 2016 election at an event hosted at the Scottish parliament, and supported by members of the Scottish Government, the usefulness of the construct seemed to be validated.

The research did show the factors of pay, health and safety, work-life balance, terms of employment, and the intrinsic characteristics of work/satisfaction as being priorities among the greatest number of people in each stakeholder group. It was apparent from both research participants' personal stories, whether employees or employers or advocates. The accompanying

1
2 assessment of Scotland's labour market triangulates well on the significant conclusion that that
3 these priorities are often not well and completely fulfilled. The identification of shared stakeholder
4 priorities, and analysis relative to the status of these suggest, is consistent with other studies; that
5 overall much work is 'decent', though there are also clearly groups for whom this is not so, and real
6 scope for action to address priority areas collaboratively to improve work quality
7

8
9 The employee priorities emphasised the 'hard' factors such as pay and conditions. The publicly
10 available data on these, and others, was reported alongside the main research report (Stuart 2016 op
11 cit). On pay, 444,000 employees in the Scottish context (19.5%) were paid less than the Living
12 Wage. An estimated 118,000 employees in Scotland (5.2%) did not receive the statutory minimum
13 entitlement to paid holidays. Equally on job security, data publicly available showed that 12.6% of
14 Scottish workers reported they might lose their job in the next six months. A non-fatal injury was
15 reported by 2.3% of the workforce in the previous 12 months, while 3.25% of the workforce
16 reported illness caused or made worse by work in the previous 12 months. Stress, depression or
17 anxiety caused or made worse by work was reported by 1.2% of the workforce. On the softer
18 factors there is also publicly available data. On line manager support, 13% of Scottish adults in
19 employment disagreed that their line manager encouraged them at work, 18% were neutral, 60%
20 agreed and 9% reported the question did not apply as they did not have a manager. With the
21 'softer' priorities, the publicly available evidence was that in Scotland, 76.4% said their job gave
22 them the feeling of doing useful work always or most of the time. Only 8% of employees indicated
23 that their work did not provide them with a sense of achievement, and 9% were not satisfied with
24 'the work itself'.
25
26
27

28
29 What the research project added to the labour market assessment in these areas was voice, from
30 lived experience through the views of stakeholders. The voice from employee interviews and focus
31 groups also highlighted the hard and the soft, and work quality in terms of wellbeing and health.
32 That is to be expected, given and acknowledging the nature of many low-paid jobs: employees are
33 often considered to be easily replaceable due to the low level of qualification required to do the role
34 and their (supposedly) low productivity. Low-paid sectors tend to have low rates of unionization, so
35 that workers not only have comparatively little bargaining power, but also minimal protection
36 against managerial decisions and potential malpractice. Low-paid work often means little prospect
37 for training opportunities and workplace progression.
38

39
40 Limited but significant common priorities for employees, employers and advocates, exist across safe
41 environments and supportive managers, both seen as the highest priorities for employers' and also
42 among the top priorities for the low paid group. Clearly employers prioritise indicators associated
43 with the intrinsic character of work, while low paid groups prioritise reward and employment security
44 indicators. The conclusion is that a shared range of both 'hard' and 'soft' factors matter across
45 employees, employers and advocates; researchers and advocates need to appreciate and align with
46 that.
47

48 49 ***Objective 2; Does a collaborative approach to research help illuminate key problem areas?***

50
51 The collaborative research identifies as the central problem and challenge in work quality that
52 different stakeholders perceive different kinds of soft and hard priorities. Combining and addressing
53 both 'hard' and 'soft' factors is the challenge, and necessary to focus and guide sustained
54 engagement, research and action in a pragmatic way.
55

56
57 The purpose of the collaboration was fulfilled, which was to address the social, economic and
58 political aspects of work quality in a combined way. Improvement in work quality may be
59 evidence- based, but also includes and requires more than evidence to support either single issue
60 campaigning on 'hard' factors like pay, or 'soft' factors that may have strong connections with

1
2 productivity, innovation or wellbeing. Progress also requires, the initial research partners believed,
3 civil society action. That requires the shaping of expectations, promotion of dialogue and
4 collaborative action.
5

6 The charity and the university staff, and the dominant focus on low pay workers, were the original
7 collaborators here. 'Decent work' seemed at the outset to offer both a well-grounded and ethically
8 informed construct to adopt, and sustains that value following the project experience. Different
9 collaborators would not have meant different starting and destination goals for participative
10 research. Other social enterprises or disciplines, or research participants may have had different
11 specific concerns, but these too could have been mapped with respect to the 'hard' to 'soft'
12 continuum. It had the potential to motivate and guide debate, research and action among and across
13 stakeholders. This was the belief that underpinned the research initiated by advocates in the form of
14 a campaigning charity, extending through low paid workers and employers in one national context.
15 In other contexts, it may be that simpler or more complex constructs would be more appropriate.
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19 The objective was to explore the extent to which 'decent work' as a construct engaged
20 stakeholders. The conclusion is that 'decent work' can engage stakeholders in a large-scale
21 socioeconomic context with research around work quality. Employees, employers and advocates
22 were all engaged with the research, and were able to express and voice their experiences and
23 concerns with regard to the factors associated with decent work as defined in the research project.
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25

26 ***Objective 3; What lessons about impact in a specific context can be identified and generalised?***

27
28 The third objective was to evaluate impact and lessons from 'decent work' research in the context.
29 With reference to context, at the time the research was being planned and conducted there was
30 political prominence for 'decent work' themes, especially pay, employment contracts and work-life
31 balance, which all featured prominently across the political spectrum in Scotland and the UK
32 (Labour Party, 2017; Conservative and Unionist Party, 2017; SNP, 2017). These longstanding
33 concerns of employees, employers and other advocates in employment featured strongly in political
34 discourse. At the same time, fresh and new kinds of advocacy, representing a new kind of employer
35 and a new kind of employee were emerging around new business models, most prominently those
36 enabled by digital technologies which may seem to challenge traditional employment patterns and
37 relations (UKCES, 2014). Regulation from government will be part of the response to this, though
38 the influence of even the most extensive employment protection policy and legislation may be
39 described as extremely modest (Adascalitei and Pignatti Morano, 2016). Beyond regulation, even if
40 alongside it, there is a continuing scope for advocacy for 'decent work' on the part of a range of
41 actors and institutions concerned with matters other than shaping social policy.
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45 However, in the specific national context of the research there were also some significant
46 challenges in adopting the construct of 'decent work'. In the research context the major actor was
47 the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government currently has no remit in employment
48 legislation, so the levers of influence other than regulation are all that are to hand at present.
49 Choosing to focus on 'decent work' in this context was both a risk and a healthy challenge. The risk
50 was that the major policy stakeholder, the Scottish Government, may not perceive the decent work
51 research as connected to the Fair Work agenda it was advocating. The healthy challenge was that
52 the focus on 'decent work' could complement the Fair Work focus on pay and on productivity and
53 innovation agendas. In practice the Scottish government appreciated and welcomed the
54 contributions being made by the research as supportive of their goals, and thus supported the
55 dissemination of the research.
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59 In context, there is some complementarity and some differentiation provided by the 'decent work'
60 construct and the collaborative approach, as the 'decent work' project was conceived and conducted

1
2 where the construct of ‘fair work’ was favoured by one major stakeholder, the Scottish
3 Government. In this context many of the aspects of work and employment regulation lie with
4 political authorities other than the Scottish Government, meaning no access to the ‘hard’ levers
5 which the Scottish Government would like to have control of. Instead the ‘soft power’ levers of
6 persuasion and influence are presently more to hand. Both ‘fair work’ and ‘decent work’ are
7 intended to be integrative of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ aspects of work quality, though ‘fair work’
8 initiatives keep to the fore the political issue of the lack of control of ‘hard’ factors in work quality,
9 while ‘decent work’ may be more oriented on the ‘soft’ side, complementing the ‘fair work’
10 agenda (Fair Work Convention, 2016). ‘Decent work’ research in this context has a more explicit
11 concern with action through civil society agents and change in organizations or workplaces
12 alongside an impact through social policy or employment legislation. Subsequent to beginning the
13 research, the political discourse in the UK became dominated by the referendum decision for the
14 UK to leave the EU. The reach and impact of any research on work quality risks being eclipsed to
15 an extent by that development. This is a general concern in research, especially on work quality,
16 especially in the Scottish and UK political context. Events may have overtaken the research and its
17 dissemination, though the lessons in context remain worthy of sharing and appreciation.

21 **Conclusions**

22
23
24 The focus of what matters most, based on this research, is that for employees it is typically hard
25 variables, for an employer it is typically soft variables, and for advocates it is a mix of these. The
26 main implication is that if progress on dealing with work quality problems requires mutual
27 engagement of stakeholders then a combination of soft and hard variables need to be included in
28 research and policy development, in the workplace and more generally.

29
30
31 Reflecting on what this implies about who can make a difference is complex and nuanced. The
32 continuing and sustained mutual engagement of employee, employer and advocate stakeholders
33 with the identified priorities is the obvious answer. Will this help with the ultimate aim, to
34 influence those employers who have the reputation, deserved or otherwise, for not providing decent
35 work?

36
37
38 The Amazon ‘conversion’ case discussed at the outset of this paper, from being an icon of the worst
39 to leader in one respect (pay), showed that pay mattered most, and a combination of bad publicity,
40 public pressure, threats of legal action and rethinking business strategy in the longer term each had
41 a part to play. The case of Amazon is especially relevant as they are a company which has facilities
42 in Scotland and whose employment practices have embodied concerns about decent work locally as
43 well as globally. Such conversions are newsworthy because they are unusual, though it is striking to
44 see in practice that it can happen. These organizational and financial circumstances will never be
45 replicated in, for example, hospitality SMES in Scotland; though the intent, the example and the
46 scale of change can and should be referenced. But it needs to encompass more than pay. This case
47 illustrates that who can make a difference depends on collaboration among multiple groups, from
48 existing employees, to advocates campaigning for living wages, and media coverage. The one
49 stakeholder which was not a major influence in this case is Government.

50
51
52 In the case of Scotland, the stakeholder position and role of government is quite prominent; with
53 respect to advocating a living wage, but also as the facilitator of multi-stakeholder initiatives around
54 workplace innovation through campaigning for ‘fair work’. That government advocacy has two
55 features which may accelerate or compromise the ultimate aim of influence on the employers
56 perceived to be not providing decent work; that voice through trade unions and business benefits
57 with respect to productivity are at the forefront of fair work advocacy. Amazon has seemed to
58 turnaround its employment practices, with regard to minimum wages, dramatically without regard
59 to either voice from trade unions or explicit associations with productivity. Whatever the full story,
60

1
2 in a business context like that of the Amazon case the generalization of lessons about what matters
3 and who can make a difference are worth further exploration.
4

5 Recognising that companies like Amazon can make a big difference in real world work quality
6 change for good is relevant and significant. However, this type of case may not immediately and
7 directly lead to general change in work quality locally in Scotland or globally, even if the example
8 of conversion is hopeful and significant. It was not a fair work convention that produced the change,
9 but the pressure of a civil society environment being created by many which was supportive of that
10 conversion and change. This example of conversion and change was supported and influenced by
11 research, most broadly, of many kinds; from press coverage through to employees voicing their
12 experiences, from books to articles.
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16 The implication, for researchers, is that an optimal work quality construct for collaborative research
17 may need to combine the soft and the hard. Research more focussed at each end of the spectrum
18 remains valid in other contexts and for work quality improvement. Research into soft variables to
19 sustain desired and good relations in the workplace, and research into the hard variables to assist
20 with effectiveness, safety and productivity. No single construct in the field of work quality will be
21 fit to be adopted for all work quality contexts and all purposes. 'Decent work' is not intended to be
22 validated as the main or sole construct in the field. It is, though, according to the research completed
23 here, strong as synthetic combination of the soft and the hard.
24
25

26 It is not surprising to conclude that work quality progress emerges by identifying a consensus on an
27 agenda of pay, terms of employment and work-life balance alongside fulfilment and interpersonal
28 relations, among managers and colleagues. It is significant to associate progress with research
29 engaging employers, employee representatives, and active/informed civil society actors, including
30 organizations campaigning for poverty reduction, better health and social equality. These all have a
31 role to play collectively, complementing each other to achieve the shared progress desired. The
32 ultimate outcome sought is more good jobs and fewer bad jobs, in the common interests of all those
33 concerned with productive and humane workplaces. For some, especially SMEs, the scope for
34 progress seems to be considerable. Employees and employers in these are less likely to have a
35 significant trade union presence, nor be subject to the same level of public and media scrutiny that
36 larger employers and workplaces attract.
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39
40 To influence these employers and employees furthest from the reach of government supported
41 initiatives, 'decent work' could be more explicitly developed and advocated across social
42 campaigns, industrial policies and political debate to bring together employees, employers and
43 advocates. The concern that the inclusion of softer factors such as satisfaction and supportive
44 colleagues in 'decent work' can be interpreted as not diluting the agenda to challenge bad practice
45 in basic hard variables like pay and terms of employment, or even providing a soft 'get out' for not
46 progressing on the 'hard' factors, especially pay.
47
48

49 From a 'whole' decent work perspective the Amazon case looks less like converting the worst into
50 the best, though the pay gains are truly significant. Because combining the soft and the hard is the
51 key for progress overall and factors additional to pay matter; contracts and work-life balance,
52 fulfilment and interpersonal relations, among managers and colleagues. The potential value of a fair
53 and decent work construct is substantial. This can be realized by collaborative research in local
54 contexts, with employees, employers and advocates, as equal civil society actors, jointly engaged
55 with each other. For more Amazon-like 'conversions' to be enabled this seems to be the method
56 most likely to help; work quality research that adopts a construct for research addressing soft and
57 hard variables, participative methods, to produce relevant and actionable priorities in context.
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The significant minority who have not and still do not feel positive about work quality present a continuing challenge to our societies and economies, and addressing their concerns is an opportunity for various agents to engage in concerted and focused support for change. The threats envisioned to existing good work quality, in scenarios for employment in the future, suggest that this traditional significant minority with shortfalls in work quality may be joined by other groups. No one can predict with any certainty how these future of work scenarios will play out in practice. What is predictable is that the theme of ‘what matters most’ is likely to remain a combination of both soft and hard work quality variables. And that the actors and agents who can make a difference will evolve and change too, bringing into play new groups who can make a difference, especially among advocates for better work quality. What isn’t likely to change is the need for, and value of, work quality research to help identify what matters most and engage those who can make a difference.

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Hard	←—————→			Soft	
Technical Descriptions	Human Factors	Performance/ Behavioral	Fair work	Human Relations	Values/Ethics
Organization Effectiveness	Job Design	Competency Analysis	Decent Work	Fulfilling work	Social Context and Social Justice
Measurable performance	Ergonomics	Job Evaluation		Meaningful work	Culture

Figure 1: Hard-Soft Continuum to map the ‘work quality’ literature

Employee Relations

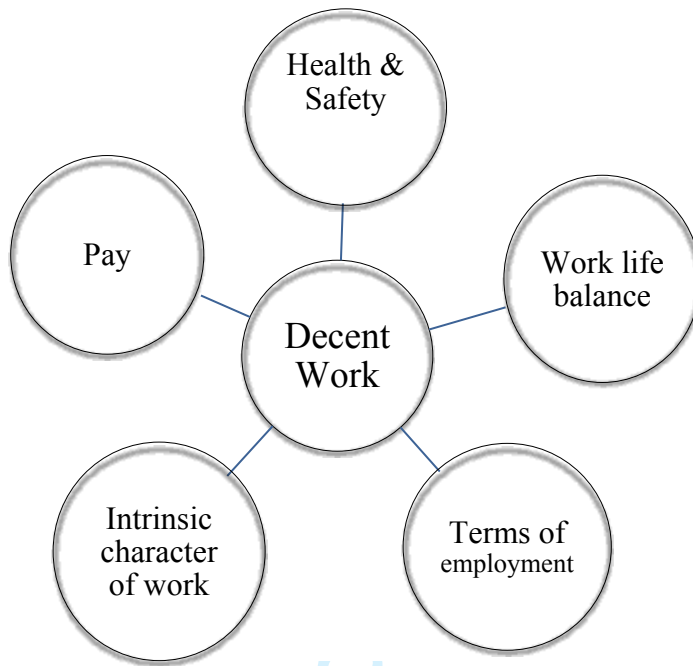


Figure 2: Conceptual framework for 'decent' work variables

Employee Relations

Table 1: List of Indicators with Hard for each of Five Dimensions of 'Decent Work' (from Stuart et al., 2016)		H=Hard S=Soft
Dimension 1: Pay		
1.	An hourly rate or salary that is at least enough to cover basic needs	H
2.	Being paid fairly compared to other similar jobs	H
3.	Being paid fairly compared to senior staff	H
4.	Predictable take-home pay	H
5.	Access to financial benefits beyond pay	H
Dimension 2: Intrinsic characteristics of work		
6.	A supportive line manager	S
7.	Ability to develop and use skills in current role	S
8.	Supportive colleagues	S
9.	Control and flexibility over how I deliver my work	S
10.	Work that I believe is socially worthwhile	S
11.	Work that provides me with sense of purpose and meaning	S
12.	Varied work	S
Dimension 3: Terms of employment		
13.	Paid holidays and paid sick leave	H
14.	Job security	H
15.	Regular and predictable working hours	H
16.	Available and effective representation to raise my voice within the workplace	H
17.	Opportunities for promotion and career progression	S
18.	Access to suitable and convenient training opportunities	H
19.	A job in which there is no discrimination because of who I am	S
Dimension 4: Health and safety		
20.	A safe working environment free from physical and mental risk or harm	H
21.	Appropriate support to help employees return to work following absence	S
Dimension 5: Work-life balance		
22.	Enough time to do all the tasks required	S
23.	Work that does not involve excessive working hours	H
24.	Flexibility in choosing my working hours	H
25.	A job that is easy to get to from where I live	S
26.	not expected to arrive before/leave after, my allocated hours/undertake unpaid overtime	H

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1. A decent hourly rate	H
2. Job security	H
3. Paid leave	H
4. A safe working environment	H
5. A supportive manager	S

Employee Relations

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Employer Rankings			Low Pay Workers Rankings	
1	Safe environment	H	Decent hourly rate	H
2	Supportive managers	S	Job Security	H
3	Supportive colleagues	S	Holidays and sick leave	H
4	Purpose & meaning: Work that provides a sense of purpose and meaning	S	Safe environment	H
5	Socially worthwhile: Work that I believe is socially worthwhile	S	Supportive managers	S

Table 3: Employer Rankings Compared with Low Pay Rankings.

Employee Relations

'Fair Work'	Explicit Articulation	
Fair Work Commission (FWC) 5 themes	Voice, opportunity, security, fulfilment and respect	S
Living Wage	Business Pledge, Procurement Guidance	H
Equality	Procurement Guidance	S
Voice (Trade Union representation)	Procurement Guidance; Trade Union for Fair Work and Modernisation Fund; STUC Fair Work; Leadership and Equality	S
Terms of employment (zero hours contracts)	Procurement Guidance	H
Table 4; Fair Work Factors and Scottish Government Articulation		

Employee Relations

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