

# Manifesto for a new Quality of Working Life

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## Abstract

Poor quality jobs and their negative consequences for worker wellbeing are frequently associated with Taylorised work and rising non-standard, often precarious, employment. Our manifesto offers a new approach to Quality of Working Life to improve worker wellbeing. In doing so, it outlines the need for a new measure of job quality that pays due attention to employment as well as work problems, and a new approach to practical reform that involves statutory minimum standards rather than just voluntary firm action. Significantly, a receptive political-economic context currently exists to enable the implementation of this manifesto.

## Keywords

job quality, minimum standards, non-standard employment, Quality of Working Life, standard employment relationship, Taylorised work

## Introduction

On the Embankment in London stands a memorial to Samuel Plimsoll. It was erected by the National Union of Seamen in recognition of his services to seafarers of all nations. In the 19th century, Plimsoll campaigned for a science-derived line on the side of ships to mark the legal limit to which they can be safely loaded. In the face of fierce opposition

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from vested interests, his idea was eventually adopted and enforced. Prior to its introduction ships were frequently overloaded to disastrous outcome with the loss of countless seafarers' lives. A similar moment is now here with the quality of working lives. Too many poor quality jobs exist to the detriment of worker wellbeing. Intervention is needed to rectify this situation. This article is a manifesto for a new Quality of Working Life (QWL). It explains why this new QWL is needed and what it would involve.

Back in the 1960s and 1970s, when working lives were typified by 'standard' employment, QWL was the focal point of initiatives to improve working life generally. Driven by multi-disciplinary social science, the QWL movement was influential in helping firms to make voluntary changes to work design and it captured the attention of policymakers worldwide. The movement faded – though did not die – as economic and political circumstances changed from the late 1970s (Guest, 2021).

We are not alone in wanting to see a new QWL. Grote and Guest (2017) too have called for a renewed focus on QWL that puts worker wellbeing at its heart. We agree with much of the content of their revised QWL framework. However, as Grote and Guest recognise, alternative framings of a new QWL might exist.

Our manifesto offers that alternative. It is based on two arguments. First, the need for improved conceptual focus with any new QWL. This focus, we argue, needs to better balance the work and employment that comprise jobs. While the term 'work' is often used as a catch-all term that includes 'employment', the two are not synonymous. Work is defined as an activity performed by persons to produce goods and services for own or others' use (ILO, 1993). This work can be unpaid or paid. If the latter, it tends to fall within an employment relationship, turning workers into employees. Their employment has terms and conditions, most obviously but not only pay (Murray and Stewart, 2015). It is our contention that many of the problems identified with work by the original QWL still exist but that there are new problems arising from employment-related developments. A key concern is non-standard forms of employment that are becoming increasingly prominent and complex (Stanford, 2017). Thus, work and employment need to be disentangled and problems with both addressed. Second, the voluntaristic nature of the original QWL undermined its sustainability. Significant scope still exists for firms to voluntarily improve working lives through their human resource management. However, not all firms are making these improvements and some workers need protection to ensure their wellbeing. To this end, we argue for the creation of minimum standards of job quality driven by the state. As such, our manifesto represents not an incremental change to the old QWL but a radically different approach to the same ends. Importantly, we indicate how political and economic circumstances are now amenable to the introduction of these standards.

Our manifesto thus addresses the weaknesses of the original QWL and offers a new approach to improving the quality of working lives while remaining wedded to the principle of applying multi-disciplinary social science to social practice and public policy (see Loveridge et al., 2017). To make our case, we first outline the original QWL and then frame the need for a new QWL. The following section then explains how job quality can be used to establish minimum standards. Finally, we highlight the now favourable political and economic context within which a policy window has emerged that is receptive to our manifesto.

## The original Quality of Working Life

QWL emerged within a particular historical political-economic context. Over the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of owners and managers led to exploitation of workers, generating insecure employment and unfair wages (Westley, 1979). In response, the labour movement agitated for greater employment security and trade unions bargained for more equitable pay. At the same time, the introduction of mass production involved operations characterised by strong internal divisions of labour reliant on a consistent and dependable workforce.<sup>1</sup> Attendance and performance requirements could be achieved more effectively by developing a stable workforce and permanent employment (Stanford, 2017). By the 1950s, problems related to security and pay subsided in most industrialised countries as the standard employment relationship (SER) provided permanent full-time employment with a single employer (Bosch, 2004).<sup>2</sup>

Expansion of the SER was also influenced by broader political-economic forces (Kalleberg, 2009). Keynesianism promoted full employment and post-war unemployment was low. Tight labour markets encouraged employers to recruit and retain workers by offering permanent jobs rather than risking supply based on contingent or subcontracted workers (Grantham, 1994). Additionally, labour market institutions reinforced the SER, leading it to become the normative benchmark. According to Stanford (2017: 389), 'Labour laws defined rights and responsibilities associated with employment, on the assumption that a "job" entailed certain reciprocal expectations of fairness and stability.' Moreover, trade union and bargaining laws were based on similar assumptions of a stable, consistent workforce based in a single enterprise. Subsequently, social welfare programmes were shaped around the SER (Vosko et al., 2009).

While the SER addressed employers' needs, new challenges emerged for their employees. Mass production and Taylorism generated worker dissatisfaction: 'widespread affluence made people forget about the old problems of security and equity. They now wanted satisfying, interesting and relevant work' (Westley, 1979: 116). In this context QWL emerged. Research informing QWL began in the 1940s, centred on productivity and efficiency problems in the coal industry. The solution, Trist and Bamforth (1951) surmised, was to make workplace technical and social systems fit together better. Socio-technical systems theory suggests that focusing on either the technical system, as per Taylorism, or the social system, as per human relations, yields suboptimal outcomes. Instead, Trist and Bamforth argued, both were necessary.

Early QWL was underpinned by the 'psychological requirements' needed *in work*, e.g. through small-group working. However, the list of requirements soon expanded beyond employees' immediate work to encompass needs provided *from work*, e.g. 'a desirable future' (Emery and Thorsrud, 1976). Illustratively, by the 1970s Walton (1973) was listing eight characteristics of QWL: adequate and fair compensation; safe and healthy working conditions; opportunity to use and develop human capacities; opportunities for continued growth and security; social integration in the work organisation; constitutionalism in the work organisation; work and the total life space; and the social relevance of work life.

Two points are important here. First, while the list covered both work and employment, in practice, work design became the primary focus to improve worker satisfaction and organisational efficiency/productivity (e.g. Cherns, 1975). In the context of full employment and the SER, secure employment was largely taken for granted. Second, QWL had become a 'work+' approach, extending beyond the workplace to address wider societal issues (Walton, 1973). Subsequently, the end goal of QWL became ambiguous – was it to provide job satisfaction or workers' emancipation?

Nevertheless, by the early 1970s, QWL was hugely influential, with numerous studies and work design research centres in Canada, France, Norway and the UK (Grote and Guest, 2017). However, reflecting on his research (and attendance at a NATO-sponsored QWL conference), Guest (2021) notes that the conceptual meandering and lack of agreed focus were becoming problems for the QWL movement, particularly effecting its implementation. As research continued, these problems became more apparent and more difficult to resolve. Illustratively, Burchell et al. (2014) note the confusing terminology – often used interchangeably – ranging from 'quality of working life', 'quality of work' to 'quality of employment'; all without clear definitional distinction. Such terms reflected the organicism of the concept and different foci taken up by different disciplines as interest and use of QWL migrated from psychology to sociology and industrial relations.

Another problem was that many outcomes of QWL failed to be sustained. Workplace experimentation relied on voluntary employer participation. Involving employers meant that work redesign was slow and resource intensive. Moreover, some managers proved intransigent, reluctant to cede power and control of work, and trade unions insisted on focusing on the pay outcomes from work redesign, with other potential outcomes sidelined (Guest, 2021).

With the economic slump of the mid-1970s, companies' interest in QWL as the route to efficiency/productivity gains became displaced by interest in other concepts, including transformational leadership (Guest, 2021). Changing economic and political circumstances – the Oil Crisis followed by economic depression and the emergence of neo-liberal-inspired governments – also affected government interest in QWL. The so-called 'Golden Age' was coming to an end and the SER began to unravel (Stanford, 2017). While pockets of interest remained in some countries, as an international movement, QWL fell away. Practical gains in work design proved to be brief and superficial, too dependent upon the voluntarism of now uninterested companies.

## **Reframing the need for a new Quality of Working Life**

Grote and Guest (2017: 149) recently argued for 'rekindling' QWL to promote employee wellbeing. They argue that Walton's (1973) core characteristics of QWL remain relevant, making just two additions: 'individual proactivity' and 'flexible working'. Proactivity involves having control over work activities without too much employment risk being shifted onto the worker, while flexible working involves control over when and where work is done. Thus, what Grote and Guest add is having the type of control over work that is a key legal test of self-employment – the capacity for workers to decide what work is done, when, where and how<sup>3</sup> – while seemingly remaining in employment. This call is laudable but while work and employment continue to be offered as constituents of their

renewed, as with the old QWL, it is work that is again the primary focus. Indicatively perhaps, the example provided by Grote and Guest of an application of their new QWL is again work design.

We agree that work design needs to be improved. Too many workplaces in advanced economies remain Taylorist. Approximately 20% of UK workplaces are Taylorised, with a further 21% 'constrained' workplaces, with high cognitive expectations of workers but extremely low autonomy. The EU-27 average is 24% and 24% respectively (Mako and Illissy, 2015). While lacking national-level quantification, research indicates that Taylorism also persists in Australian workplaces, with some managers 'habitually run[ning] their outlets using industrial-age factory principles akin to scientific management' (Gould, 2013: 325). Similarly, a version of Taylorism, McDonaldization, thrives in many US firms (and beyond, globally) (Ritzer, 2010). There is still an important task to be completed therefore in (re)designing work in many organisations in advanced economies. Such workplaces position workers as a disposable asset rather than a resource and thereby intentionally constrain human capabilities and capacities (Bryson, 2007). These workplaces also generate political disaffection. In the UK, poor work can be linked, for example, to a propensity to vote for Brexit (Goodwin and Heath, 2016) and similar developments in other EU countries have created concerns about the future of the European project (Eurofound, 2018b). Similarly, in the US poor work has been linked to the rise of populism/Trump and threats to democracy (Blanchflower, 2019). Work still matters therefore as a focus of intervention.

The key issue now, however, is to apply any new QWL more firmly to employment. While most EU workers still have standard forms of employment, the proportion has dropped and non-standard employment (non-SER) has risen. This non-SER has four main types: temporary, part-time and self-employment, and employment with multi-employer arrangements. It includes precarious/contingent work, agency work and independent contracting (Stanford, 2016). Recently, it has come to include zero-hours contracts, at least in the UK. Huge increases in temporary employment have occurred in some countries, often associated with agency working. Approximately 40% of young people in Europe are 'trapped' in low paid, temporary jobs and only 20% of temporary workers have been able to find full-time jobs since 2012 (Alderman, 2017). Similarly, there is a clear rise in some countries of self-employment, often hard to disentangle from 'bogus' or 'fake' self-employment (Kalleberg, 2018). Part-time employment has risen in almost all EU countries, with some being involuntary, and is strongly associated with low pay and often irregular and undesirable hours (Eurofound, 2018a).

Nationally, non-SER ranges from 10% in Hungary to more than 40% in the Netherlands. Across Anglo-Saxon countries, around half of the workforce have a SER and half non-SER (Lewchuk et al., 2013). In UK, around 3.7m workers have insecure contracts (TUC, 2019), with nearly 1m workers on zero-hours contracts, a number that has increased dramatically over the 2010s (ONS, 2020). During the last decade, almost all new (around 9m) jobs created in the US were non-standard with no net increase in SER (Katz and Krueger, 2016). In Australia, around 33% of employees were temporary in 2015 (Lass and Wooden, 2019) and non-SER accounted for almost half the workforce in 2018 (Ai Group, 2018). Consequently, Hipp et al. (2015) argue that non-SER has become the new normal. Workers in such precarious employment can experience low

pay and poor prospects and are insufficiently covered by labour laws, collective bargaining arrangements and welfare support (Standing, 2011).

This non-SER employment has clear negative consequences for employee wellbeing, particularly physical and psychological health. Although variations exist, non-SER is frequently associated with poor mental health for example. A review by de Witte et al. (2016) of longitudinal studies found clear evidence of a causal impact of job insecurity on health and wellbeing. Belgian data show that poor general and mental health are associated with precarious employment and at significantly higher levels than for standard employment (Van Aerden et al., 2017). Swedish data similarly show that perceived job insecurity has adverse general health effects on workers in permanent and temporary employment (Virtanen et al., 2011). Over 80% of the 133 studies in a series of meta-reviews by Quinlan and Bohle (2015) found a negative association between precarious work and worker wellbeing, in this case physical health and safety. They conclude that 'there is a strong body of scientific evidence on the adverse health effects of job insecurity and precarious work' (p. 69). Moreover, they highlight growing evidence of spillover effects on workers' non-work lives and families, including high-risk behaviours such as drug use. For their families, low pay and consequent in-work poverty results in more children being raised in poor households, effecting children's life chances and increasing inter-generational risks of poverty.

The new QWL should not abandon the work redesign aspirations of the old QWL, and those of Grote and Guest, but it must more clearly engage with (re)emergent problems with employment. The challenge for a new QWL is to affect improvements to both work *and* employment, and ensure that previous blockages to making and sustaining improvements are addressed and, moreover, that any gains cannot be easily reversed. This task might usefully draw upon recent developments regarding job quality and from which minimum standards can be derived.

## Measuring job quality and establishing minimum standards

The importance of job quality has long been recognised by advanced economies' inter-governmental bodies (e.g. ILO, 1999). Recently, however, interest has intensified, partly because of awareness that there is no trade-off between job creation and job quality (Davoine et al., 2008; Osterman, 2012) and also because promoting job quality stimulates competitiveness (EC, 2012). In 2015, the new UN Sustainable Development Goal 8 cited the goal of creating decent work and the G20 Ankara Declaration committed the leading advanced economies to creating better jobs for all. In 2017, the European Commission's new European Pillar of Social Rights included a commitment to creating fair working conditions.<sup>4</sup> Some individual member countries have also made their own pledges to improve job quality. For example, in 2018 the UK Government published its *Good Work Plan* (HM Government, 2018) in response to its *Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices* (Taylor et al., 2017).

What is striking about these commitments is that they argue for improving job quality without offering a measure of it. A measure is needed to enable improvement to be assessed and for future targets for improvement to be specified. As yet, however, there is no scientific consensus on that measure. There are two related problems. First, there is a



conceptual cornucopia, for example, ‘decent work’ and ‘fair work’ as well as ‘QWL’. While these terms overlap, they typically have their own origins and uses. For example, ‘Fair Work’ in Australia centres on provision of minimum standards of employment (and only employment). ‘Fair Work’ in Scotland centres on promotion of social partnership, both as a feature of, and to support progressive workplaces (Fair Work Convention, 2016). Second, there is a plethora of measures. Different concepts and disciplines use different indicators: economists favour pay, sociologists favour skill and control at work and, currently, psychologists favour job satisfaction. Moreover, single and multiple indicators are variously used, including by the same governmental bodies; usually driven by data availability (Findlay et al., 2013). This variety disables comparative and longitudinal analyses and hampers effective policy development. A single, agreed measure is needed.

By way of response, Warhurst et al. (2017) have suggested that these multiple terms can be considered a family of concepts, namely ‘job quality’. In terms of developing measures, they note that research illustrates several approaches but the one that has gained consensus involves literature reviews of international, multi-disciplinary research to identify common, job-only-focused items across work and employment, and that ‘have a clear and direct impact on the wellbeing of workers’ (see Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2011: 2). Adopting this approach led to the identification of seven dimensions of job quality: terms of employment; pay and benefits; job design and the nature of work; social support and cohesion; health, safety and psychosocial wellbeing; work–life balance; and voice and representation. Each includes objective and subjective sub-indicators. For example, pay and benefits includes items on actual pay received (objective indicator) and perceived appropriateness of that pay (subjective indicator). These measures have been adopted by the UK’s Chartered Institute for Personnel & Development (CIPD, 2018)<sup>5</sup> and recommended for UK Government use by the Measuring Job Quality Working Group established to deliver on the recommendation of the *Taylor Review* that the UK Government adopt a standard measure of job quality (MJQWG, 2018).

Significantly, these measures emerge out of a wide range of international, multi-disciplinary social science research, capturing common measures across the family of concepts (see Warhurst et al., 2017). Given that range, they are applicable beyond the UK. They also have the acceptance of key stakeholders, including trade unions and employers, and have demonstrable real-world relevance (see MJQWG, 2018). Subsequently, they offer a consensual approach to deriving an evidence-based measure of job quality and, in turn, improving employee wellbeing. Covering both work and employment, these measures offer a framework for both conceiving a new QWL and, unlike the past, the possibility of measuring progress to its achievement. Over time, data gathered will enable analysis of job quality trends. These data will help identify aspects of job quality that deteriorate or remain low and require improvement, for example pay or work–life balance or, germane to our manifesto for a new QWL, employment contract statuses.

This measure also enables development of a framework of minimum standards across work and employment to provide a solid floor to protect the most vulnerable workers who currently lack adequate protection (Standing, 2011). Bad jobs, we argue, are those that are detrimental to workers’ wellbeing. If the tipping point into that detriment can be identified, a baseline can be established for each dimension, much like the Plimsoll Line.

Below the line job quality is detrimental to wellbeing. Job quality at or above the line is at least neutral to wellbeing or ameliorative of it.

We recognise that the baselines for each of the seven dimensions need to be established evidentially, requiring another literature review of international, multi-disciplinary research to identify the point at which the quality of each dimension tips into being detrimental to worker wellbeing; aided by bearing in mind that it is easier to discern and agree what makes a bad job than a good job (Findlay et al., 2017). These baselines will establish the minimum standards for each dimension. While this task is beyond the scope of this article, we can suggest some guiding principles and potential examples. In terms of the principles, we suggest that any minimum standard: is quickly and easily understood; has a clear underpinning rationale; is objectively measurable; is actionable by employers; be presented in an easy-to-read format as a complement to employment contracts; and enables compliance that is easy to discern externally.

In terms of examples, we recognise that, as each dimension comprises multiple sub-indicators, multiple minima may exist for each dimension, though we argue that each minimum standard would need to be based on 'the essential characteristics of jobs that meet workers' needs' (Eurofound, 2012: 10) rather than their preferences, which can be driven by their individual demographics and circumstances (Knox et al., 2015). The minimum standard for pay, for example, could be based on a living wage. If employers cannot or will not pay a living wage, their business model is unsustainable for both the individual worker and host government. Either the worker's wellbeing is unmet and immediately or gradually diminished or the state needs to provide a remedial 'social wage' through welfare. The living wage does not disable employers offering or unions bargaining higher wages, it simply provides a wage floor below which no employer can go. Aspects of job design and the nature of work might be trickier. While a statutory right to employer-provided minimum training can be easily quantified and established, determining how much task variety is needed not to 'extinguish the individual', as Davis (1972: 427) put it in his exposition of socio-technical systems, is less easy. However, it could presumably be attempted by drawing on an updated version of the psychology research that influenced the QWL pioneers.

Establishing these minimum standards with statutory regulation overcomes the weaknesses and challenges that characterised the original QWL (Guest, 2021). However, it does not eliminate employer choice. Some employers are already willing and able to offer good job quality and research can draw out their lessons and subsequent actions for other employers. Others, willing but unable, might want to improve job quality but have worries about its practical business implications or just want advice/guidance, including SMEs that typically possess limited managerial capacity and capabilities (Edwards and Ram, 2021). Nonetheless, we would also suggest that large firms are likely to need some support. This group can be directed to the high road, encouraged by government and supported by action researchers, as happened previously in the US through the National Training Laboratories and in the UK through the Tavistock Institute for example (Burnes and Cooke, 2012). For both groups of employers, minimum standards would provide a benchmark above which they can develop better jobs. The third group of employers deliberately premise their business models on poor job quality, failing to meet worker needs and detrimentally impacting worker wellbeing. The shortfall in job quality often



requires state-funded remedial actions either through welfare or healthcare support. Market-based approaches to changing this employer behaviour have not worked (Murray and Stewart, 2015). As persistent low roaders, these employers need to have that road closed off (Carré et al., 2012). The imposition of statutory minimum standards of job quality is the obvious roadblock. It would provide an important and necessary solid floor for the wellbeing of workers below which employers could not drop. In this respect it would 'correct' any deficit in current worker wellbeing and employer behaviour, and shape the behaviour of others, while enabling employers who currently offer good jobs to continue to do so.

As Quinlan and Sheldon (2011) point out, statutory minimum standards include both substantive conditions and procedural rights. Substantive conditions include wages and hours of work, and occupational health and safety (OHS) standards. Procedural rights include worker rights to collectively organise, bargain and take industrial action. It must be noted that statutory minimum standards are not without limitations as regulation is often 'deficient, eroding and poorly enforced' note Sheldon and Quinlan (2011: 24). Illustratively, existing standards may fail to address significant changes in work arrangements, including work intensification associated with outsourcing, privatisation and downsizing, thereby enabling employers to evade or bypass existing standards (e.g. Wahl, 2011). Equally, Maconachie and Goodwin (2010: 419) indicate that employer 'evasion of workers' entitlements is arguably a calculated business decision prompted or enabled in part by non-unionised workplaces and under-resourced enforcement agencies. To prevent 'regulatory failure' involving inadequate minimum standards or inadequate enforcement, Quinlan and Sheldon (2011: 12) assert that there 'needs to be a refashioning of the scope of labour standards to meet emerging work practices and to ensure that the standards' critical role in social protection is not circumvented by stealth or omission'. A point to which we return later.

## **An idea whose time has come?**

To be clear, our new QWL is not a new push of the old approach. Given the acknowledged shortcomings of the original QWL, what we suggest is more radical. It is a set of statutory minimum standards across the key dimensions of work and employment that comprise job quality. These dimensions are common across multi-disciplinary social science and have gained stakeholder acceptance. While there are challenges, we believe that history has turned again, with a political-economic context that is now favourable to our manifesto.

For ideas to feature in the 'decision agenda' of government, Kingdon (1984/1995) argues that 'problems', 'policies' and 'politics' need to 'couple', in other words, align. Events – cyclical and otherwise e.g. elections or crises respectively – can trigger an alignment. At this point a 'policy window' opens that allows for an idea to become policy relevant and translate into politicians' decision-making. Such a window has opened for our manifesto. Job quality is currently considered a problem in the advanced economies and a search for policy solutions exists driven by pressing political developments. Most obviously, the UK Government and European Commission are concerned with a perceived crisis of legitimacy, as workers 'left behind' in the process

of globalisation and economic recovery after the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) are becoming discontented and finding expression at the ballot box. As we have noted, Brexit is a salient example (Goodwin and Heath, 2016). In response, successive UK Prime Ministers May and Johnson have responded by demanding a country that ‘works for all’ and ‘level[s] up’ respectively (May, 2016; BBC, 2019) and, following the *Taylor Review*, the UK Government now accepts that ‘equal importance should be placed on the quality and quantity of work’ (HM Government, 2018: 21). Similarly, as right-wing populism has emerged in a number of Member States, the European Commission has realised that EU economic integration (through the euro) needs to be coupled with social integration. It has established the new European Pillar of Social Rights to provide ‘a compass’ for a renewed push to improve the working conditions of EU citizens to better cohere them to the European project (EC, 2018). A key issue is precarious employment (EC, 2019). ‘In the future,’ the EC states clearly, ‘greater attention should be given to the aspect of the quality of work’ (p. 7) (‘work’ being, as we noted earlier, a shorthand for jobs). Worried too about the lack of social inclusiveness in member states’ economies, the OECD now argues that its previous call for active labour market policies is insufficient and that member states need to place more policy emphasis on job quality as a solution (OECD, 2018).

What is significant about current governmental interest in job quality is that it includes a concern with standards. The Measuring Job Quality Working Group (2018) established following the UK’s *Taylor Review* highlighted value in exploring a minimum job quality standard. In addition, the European Commission is introducing a new Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions Directive that requires all EU employees to receive written information about their jobs, and that might be a precursor to the emergence of minimum standards (Kiss, 2018). In the US, Osterman and Shulman’s (2011) analysis of new green or, in US parlance, ‘weatherisation’ jobs involving home energy efficiency improvements reveals how failure to develop adequate wages, working conditions and career structures is linked to the absence of statutory minima. They conclude that ‘the bottom line is that without a clear federal government position and a strong set of federal standards, the pace of progress is slow and very uneven and unlikely to have a broad national impact’ (pp. 117–118). Similarly, employment law experts and international advisors assert that the state should intervene to set minimum standards that ‘set the outer limit to exploitation’ and thereby prevent the ‘higgling of the market’ that leads to ‘socially undesirable and unjust outcomes’ (Murray and Stewart, 2015: 41). These developments reflect a political-economic context in which state intervention to improve job quality is, for the first time in many years, possible and within which there exists recognition that statutory minima would be useful.

Such interventions have precedent. As Quinlan and Bohle (2015) point out, identification of job-induced health problems in the 19th and early 20th centuries led to regulatory interventions by the state. Cast as ‘wellbeing’, we would argue that the same needs and responses hold today in relation to the problems with work and employment. As the same authors point out, precarious employment – and Taylorist work organisation we would add – are not economically determined, inevitable or irreversible. Indeed, they note:

... the decline of precarious employment and growth of permanent employment in industrialised societies during the 20th century . . . was not an inevitable result of market forces or technology. Rather, it was a historically contingent outcome shaped by regulatory and institutional pressures. (Quinlan et al., 2001: 516)

History also shows that such interventions can work (Murray and Stewart, 2015). For example, a strongly regulated, centralised system operated during most of the 20th century in Australia, providing legally binding industrial awards that prescribed minimum wages, other entitlements and employment conditions including hours of work. It privileged the SER (and the male breadwinner model), reflecting the political-economic context at the time, and imposed restrictions on the use of the non-SER by employers. Accordingly, Murray and Stewart argue that awards limited managerial controls over the labour process, reducing potential worker alienation, work intensity and health and safety concerns, and ensuring a measure of employee autonomy, control and dignity. This system was largely dismantled by successive Federal governments from the early 1990s in Australia (Knox, 2009).

Of course, some statutory minima currently exist in the advanced economies, the most obvious being those for the minimum wage and occupational health and safety. However, while important, they are insufficient for current needs, we suggest. First, these minima are uneven and fragmented: they exist for some dimensions of job quality but not others and take-up varies by country. For example, many but not all countries have statutory minimum wages: the UK does, and in the EU so does Germany but not Italy for example. Where they exist, it is important to note their effect on firms: encouraging employers to adjust their behaviour to make productivity improvements, which in turn raise firm performance (Riley and Bondibene, 2015). As such, they can be mutually beneficial for employees and employers. In other countries, such as Australia, minimum standards exist for wages as well as working hours and leave entitlements, for example. However, these employment (but not work) minima can vary between awards, enterprise agreements and the National Employment Standards (see Fair Work, 2020). Fragmentation is further compounded by responsibility for enforcement being distributed across different government departments/agencies. In the UK at least seven enforcement bodies exist, including three different, siloed, central government departments (BEIS/Home Office, 2019). In the EU, existing laws and Directives about work and employment have developed ad hoc and piecemeal and with responsibility likewise dispersed across different agencies (Auböck and Prammer, 2020).

Second, for those minimum standards that do exist there can be compliance issues. Thus, measuring job quality and creating minimum standards are important, but not sufficient. Monitoring, enforcement and sanctions are necessary to ensure compliance. Current practice is not always good. Monitoring would be achieved best through comprehensive, periodic analyses involving employee surveys. However, no dedicated, large-scale job quality survey exists within the UK or elsewhere that covers the seven dimensions. Options would include revising existing surveys such as the internationally adopted Labour Force Survey or developing new bespoke national surveys (MIQWG, 2018); the latter option is now being pursued in the UK by the CIPD, though is still developing (CIPD, 2018). Enforcement with sanctions is likewise limited. For example,

as a result of budget restrictions and limited resourcing, US employers face a low probability (0.008) of being investigated. Even if an employer is investigated, the consequences of non-compliance have been minimal for most US employers; less than 2% of all investigations over 1998–2008 incurred financial penalties, averaging US\$9218 (Weil, 2011). In 2018, the UK's Employment Agency Standards Authority had nine inspectors covering 18,000 employment agencies. Only 14 prosecutions had been made for non-payment of the minimum wage in almost 20 years. Moreover, until recently fines for non-payment were, as with the US, paltry and did little to incentivise compliance (Roberts, 2018). While, from 2019, the EU has a Labour Authority, its remit is narrow: to monitor only cross-border working and its efficacy in that task untested as yet.<sup>6</sup>

However, as Fine and Gordon (2012: 205) opine, 'Just as there is nothing inevitable about bad jobs, there is nothing inevitable about faulty regulation.' We believe that establishing an adequately resourced and empowered single agency with regulatory responsibility for all of the dimensions of job quality and their minimum standards is necessary. Having a single agency will enable co-ordination of the minima across the dimensions of job quality, provide economies of scale that might address the resourcing problem and provide a 'one-stop' shop for workers looking for information or redress. Part of the remit of this agency should extend to monitoring and adjusting for unintended consequences in employer behaviour following the introduction of the minimum standards. In the EU there are suggestions that the monitoring and enforcement remit of the new European Labour Authority should be expanded to encompass all work within the EU (see Warhurst et al., 2020). In this respect, we need to be clear that while our new QWL seeks to improve worker wellbeing within firms, the state has to be the guarantor of minimum standards, measuring and monitoring job quality, and ensuring compliance and making any necessary adjustments to the minima. If the state acts as guarantor but has too few resources to adequately monitor job quality, other actors can support the state and make good the resource shortfall. Fine and Gordon (2012) suggest a partnership approach involving employer representative organisations and unions where they exist, and civil society organisation where unions do not exist. Interestingly, employer representative organisations often champion minimum standards in specific sectors in order to ensure a level playing field for their members (Murray and Stewart, 2015). For these partnerships to work, we suggest that they must be formalised, sustained and active and, again, having a single agency to coordinate these potential partners will be helpful.

## Concluding remarks

Conceptually, our manifesto for a new QWL maintains a focus on work while concomitantly, and more substantively, enveloping employment. It is necessary because, despite past QWL interventions involving management and trade unions, wellbeing problems with work persist and new problems with employment have emerged. Where other means have failed, intervention falls to the state, most obviously through legislation (see also Findlay et al., 2017). By tightening conceptualisation of QWL and shifting responsibility for its implementation and continuance to the state, we redress problems with the original QWL and, through it, provide an approach to improving work *and* employment that is more likely to be sustained. We acknowledge that this approach does not explicitly

address wider social change. However, following Quinlan and Bohle's (2015) point about precarious work having spillover effects into non-work and family life, it is an approach that will likely have wider, if indirect, societal impact. Importantly, as we noted, putting these rights and responsibilities on a statutory footing has successful precedent. Moreover, we believe that the political-economic context is now favourable to our new QWL.

Our new QWL has a clear purpose: to support worker wellbeing in the workplace. The statutory measures that we advocate would provide a solid floor of objective job quality. Work and employment practices that drop below the minima would have a detrimental effect on employee wellbeing. By the same token we also suggest that job quality dropping below this floor would also have a detrimental impact on organisational performance, so employers too can benefit (Barling et al., 2003). Such an outcome would help develop a business case for the introduction and maintenance of the new statutory minimum standards.

Additionally, our new QWL will need to be capable of absorbing and/or withstanding political and economic challenges, including unforeseen challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. If there is no trade-off between job quality and job quantity (Davoine et al., 2008; Osterman, 2012) and job quality offers a route to economic recovery and growth (OECD, 2018) not just general competitiveness (EC, 2012), it will be vital not just to maintain current levels of job quality but improve them following the economic shock wrought by COVID-19. Minimum standards will ensure the first task and provide a springboard to the second, as we noted earlier regarding employer choice and union negotiation. Other, structural, challenges include the impact of new digital technology, not just on job destruction but also job quality, particularly in relation to so-called gig work in which some companies take advantage of current regulatory loopholes (Healy et al., 2017). This technology also enables employers to connect with the global oversupply of labour in relatively unregulated, lower cost destinations dominated by substandard jobs (Wood et al., 2019). Consequently, while it is individual countries that would agree to minimum standards (even in the EU), these standards will need to be internationally transferable in order to be truly meaningful. In this respect, inter-governmental bodies, including the ILO, would be needed as active participants.

We believe that our manifesto will help shape and accelerate the direction of travel for policymakers in the advanced economies. Similar policy momentum is gathering for the developing economies out of similar concern for growing employment 'casualisation' in the wake of the GFC (see Cazes and Verick, 2013) and likely post-COVID-19. For this reason, for advocates of QWL who stepped into the shadows in the 1970s because history seemed to be against them and who are now re-emerging, there is new hope. But, as we have argued in this article, the scope and type of intervention has to change. Samuel Plimsoll had to fight hard and long but time came for his idea. These days it is a non-issue, simply a common-sense application of science that helps save seafarers' lives. The introduction of minimum standards of job quality should be viewed the same way – a simple idea, supported by social science that, on reflection, could one day also be regarded as just plain common sense. If the introduction of the Plimsoll Line saved lives, our manifesto will hopefully improve working lives.

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## Notes

- 1 Hence Ford's introduction of the \$5 day to recruit and retain workers (Beynon, 1973).
- 2 At least for men. Such jobs tended to be male dominated, leading to suggestions that perceptions of what comprises good jobs is gendered (Wright, 2015).
- 3 See <https://www.gov.uk/employment-status/selfemployed-contractor>.
- 4 See respectively: <http://g20.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Declaration-G20-Labour-and-Employment-Ministers-Meeting-Ankara.pdf>; <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-8-decent-work-and-economic-growth.html>.
- 5 Featured in the CIPD's new annual *UK Working Lives Survey* (CIPD, 2018).
- 6 <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1414&langId=en>.

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