



# ***Work Intensification in Britain***

## **First Findings from the Skills and Employment Survey, 2012**

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### **HEADLINES**

Working hard can be challenging, stressful and costly, but it can also be stimulating, rewarding and financially beneficial. Work intensification was a feature of the early 1990s, after which work effort levelled off. This report tracks what has been happening in recent years.

- Work intensification has resumed in Britain since 2006. Both the speed of work has quickened and the pressures of working to tight deadlines have also risen to record highs.
- Work has intensified more sharply for women, and especially for women working full-time who have experienced some of the largest rises in work intensity since 2006.
- Work intensification is associated with technological change, which is therefore effort-biased. Although the resumption of work intensification may also be due to the recession, contrary to some predictions high work intensity is not associated on average with downsizing.

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

## 1. The Importance of Work Intensification

Work effort varies, not only in its length, but also in its intensity – the speed and pressures under which it is carried out. Highly intensive work carries both costs and benefits. Excessive workloads can lead to more accidents, high absenteeism and sickness levels, an increase in family breakdowns and even a rise in work-related deaths. These costs fall on workers, employers and government. The problems are known to be greatest when high work effort is seen as not fairly rewarded, or when it is accompanied by low levels of job control. However, hard work can bring benefits, too, through higher pay and/or enhanced promotion opportunities, higher economic output, and increased tax receipts and a reduction in welfare expenditure.

## 2. Previous Evidence

In one sense British workers are not working as hard as they did in the past as measured by the number of hours spent at work – the average working week has been reducing since records began. While it is true that male full-time employees in the UK work longer hours than the EU average, hours of work in the UK as a whole are below the EU average.

Yet work can change in other ways with each hour at work being worked less or more intensively. This information is not routinely collected in official sources, but has periodically been obtained from high quality social surveys including the Skills Survey series. Previous research shows that hours of work and the intensity of work do not necessarily follow the same path. The early 1990s, for example, were years of substantial work intensification. After that work intensity remained broadly at this higher level for the next decade, with some survey series indicating a small reduction in required effort up till the middle of the 2000s as the economy improved.

Given the severity of the 2008-09 recession and the sluggishness of the economy since, work intensity might be expected to rise further if jobs are reorganised and new technologies force the pace; alternatively, it is possible that work intensity could fall if employers hoard labour despite falling demand.

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

What in practice has happened? The Skills and Employment Survey 2012 (SES2012) provides an opportunity to assess changes in working hours and in work intensity in recent years. The survey collected responses from working adults in England, Scotland and Wales, interviewed in their own homes. The sample was drawn using random probability principles subject to stratification based on a number of socio-economic indicators. Only one eligible

respondent per address was randomly selected for interview, and 49% of those selected completed the survey. Data collection was directed by ourselves and conducted by GfK NOP.

SES2012 is the sixth in a series of nationally representative sample surveys of individuals in employment aged 20-60 years old (although the 2006 and 2012 surveys additionally sampled those aged 61-65). The numbers of respondents were: 4,047 in the 1986 survey; 3,855 in 1992; 2,467 in 1997; 4,470 in 2001; 7,787 in 2006; and 3,200 in 2012. For each survey, weights were computed to take into account the differential probabilities of sample selection, the over-sampling of certain areas and some small response rate variations between groups (defined by sex, age and occupation). All of the analyses that follow use these weights.

## 4. Concepts and Variables Used

Our measures of working hours and of work intensity focus on objective indicators reported by respondents. None are related to personal circumstances and instead focus on the job – the usual weekly hours, the requirement to work hard and the conditions under which it is carried out. The usual number of hours worked per week includes overtime, whether or not it is paid for. 'Long hours' is defined as more than 48 hours.

To capture work intensity we partly use responses given to the question: 'please tell me how much you agree or disagree with the statement: my job requires that I work very hard'. If they strongly agreed, we define the job as involving 'hard work'. Respondents were also asked to indicate how often they worked at very high speeds. If they said that they did so for three-quarters or more of the time, we classify them as occupying 'high speed' jobs. If they reported working to 'tight deadlines' for a similar amount of time we refer to them as 'high pressure' jobs.

We combine the responses to a number of survey questions in order to identify jobs where workers report high work effort in the context of low job control. 'High strain' jobs are defined as those in which respondents 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with the statement that 'my job requires that I work very hard' and they have little say over at least one of the following: work intensity; task selection; task execution; and quality standards.

The report also uses data on recent changes to staffing levels and the introduction of new equipment. Those who remained in the same job with the same employer over the previous few years were asked whether: there was 'a reduction in the number of people doing this sort of work' (staff reductions); 'new computerised or automated equipment' (computerisation) was installed; or 'new communications technology equipment' (other ICT) was introduced.

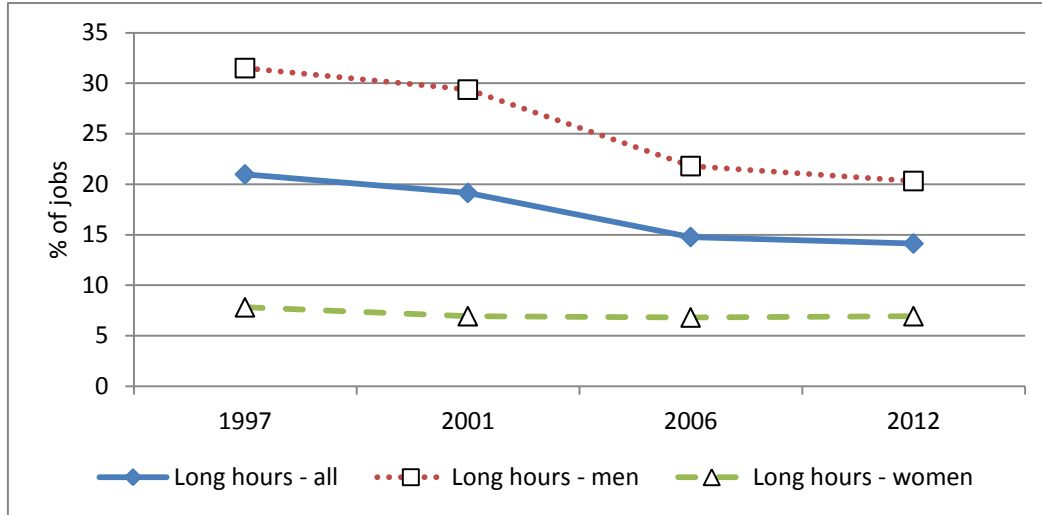
## 5. Findings

### Hours of Work

Across the economy usual hours of work fell from 38 in 1997 to 34 in 2012 with usual hours of work declining at each data point. Figure 1 shows that the fall in the average is also reflected in a drop in the proportion of workers putting in long hours.

The trend in long-hours working has mostly concerned men rather than women. Long hours working accounted for around 7-8% of women workers between 1997 and 2012. However, for men, long hours working became much less prevalent – falling from around a third (31%) of those in work in 1997 to a fifth in 2012.

**Figure 1: Long Hours of Work, 1997-2012**



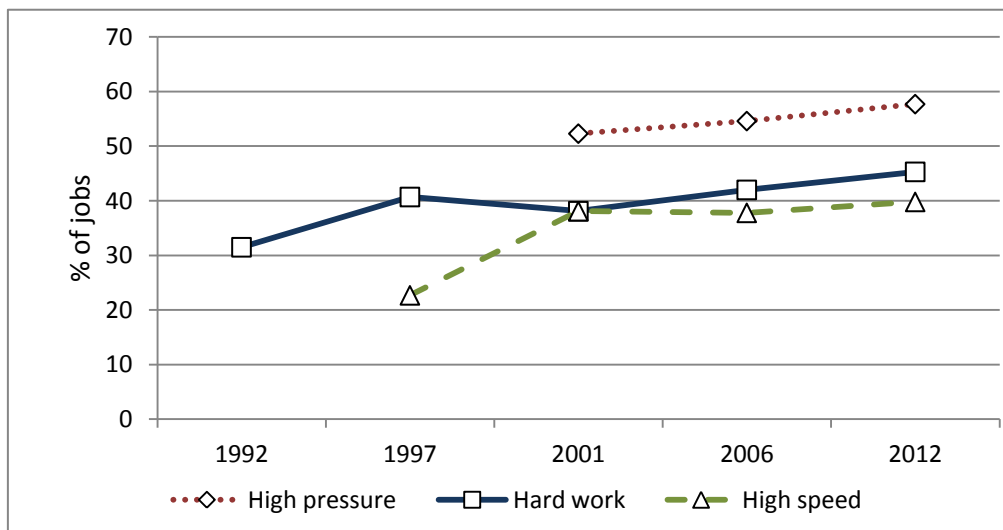
### Work Intensity

Jobs requiring hard work rose by over nine percentage points between 1992 and 1997, but remained around that figure in 2001 and 2006. However, from 2006 to 2012 hard work rose by around three percentage points – a resumption of work intensification after a decade of little change. Both upward movements in work intensity – in the mid to late 1990s and then once again more recently – followed recessions and therefore provide some circumstantial support, though not proof, for the argument that employers use recessions to ratchet up effort levels.

The early increase in work intensity is reflected in the time respondents estimated that they worked at very high speeds. In 1997, around a quarter (23%) said they worked at very high speeds three-quarters or more of the time. By 2001 the proportion had risen to 38% and by 2012 it stood at 40%.

Similarly, the upward movement in work intensity is reflected in the rising proportion of respondents who reported that they worked under the pressure of tight deadlines. These high pressure jobs rose from 52% in 2001 to 55% in 2006 and 58% in 2012.

**Figure 2: Work Intensification, 1992-2012**

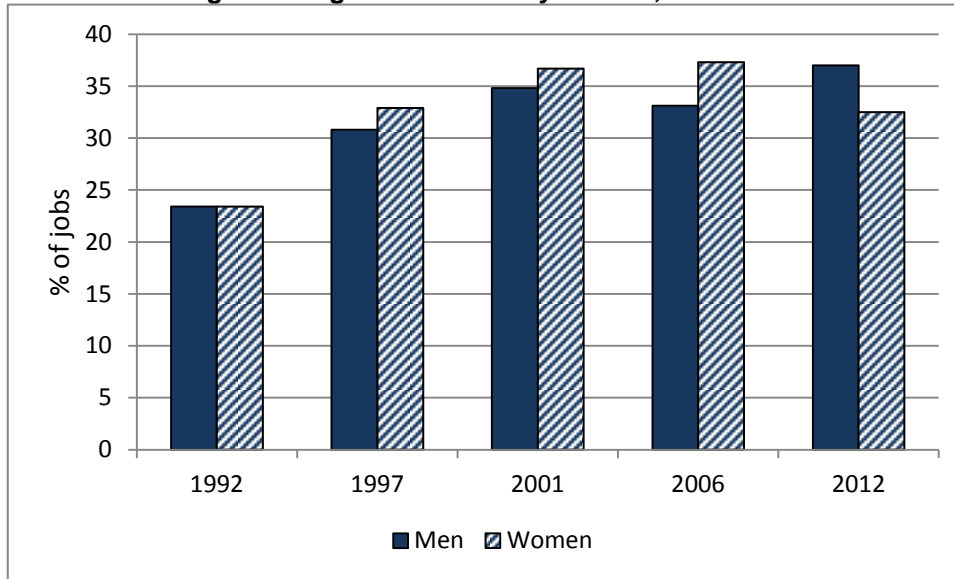


### High Job Strain

Jobs which demand high effort levels, but allow the job-holder limited control over aspects of the work (referred to here as 'high strain jobs') have followed a different path. They rose from 23% in 1992 to 36% in 2001, but they have barely moved from that figure subsequently. The pattern varies by gender in that women's exposure to 'high strain' jobs rose faster than

men's between 1986 and 1992 opening up a gender gap which has remained unchanged until 2006. The most recent data collected suggests a reversal of fortunes with women now less exposed to 'high strain' jobs than men. The period between 2006 and 2012 saw men's exposure to 'high strain' jobs rise, while women's exposure fell with the result that women are now less, rather than more, likely to be in high strain jobs.

**Figure 3: High Strain Jobs by Gender, 1992-2012**



### Patterns of Change

Underlying this finding are gender trends in work intensity and discretion at work. In terms of work effort, the gap between the sexes grew with women becoming more likely than men to report that their jobs required them to work very hard. In 1992, the gender gap was two percentage points, but it has since widened to eight percentage points (Table 1). This suggests that women are disproportionately experiencing the pressure to work harder. However, gender trends in autonomy at work have moved more strongly in the opposite direction – offering them more job control – hence the fall in 'high strain' jobs among women since 2006.

The pressure to work very hard has grown fastest among women who work full-time. They have seen the pressures to work very hard grow from 38% of jobs in 1992 to 57% in 2012; this substantial expansion compares to a twelve percentage point rise for male full-timers and a fifteen point rise for women part-time workers over the same period. Moreover, women full-timers have experienced some of the largest rises in work intensity since 2006.

Between 1992 and 2012 required work intensity rose faster in the public sector than in the private sector. In 1992 around three in ten of all workers strongly agreed that their jobs required them to work very hard. However, by 2012 the proportion had risen to over half (53%) of the public sector and around two-fifths (42%) of the private sector. Within the public sector it was in the health industry where work intensification was especially sharp between 2006 and 2012. Parts of the private sector also experienced rapid rises in work effort over this period. The proportion of jobs requiring hard work in the construction industry rose by eleven percentage points, putting it on a par with education and health.

The requirement to work hard becomes stronger the higher the qualification level of worker. So, in 2012 a half of those with a degree or equivalent qualification strongly agreed that their job required them to work very hard. This is in contrast to those with no qualifications where around a third (35%) of workers made similar claims. This difference has not changed over the last two decades.

**Table 1: Percentage of Jobs Requiring Hard Work, 1992-2012**

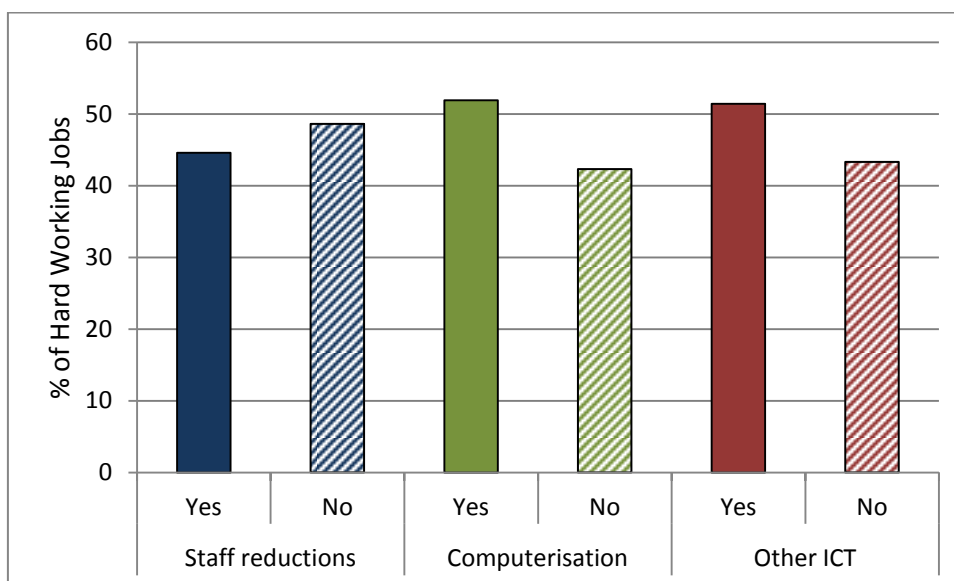
	<u>1992</u>	<u>1997</u>	<u>2001</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2012</u>
<i>Gender</i>					
Men	30.5	38.8	36.6	39.2	41.5
Women	32.6	43.1	40.7	45.2	49.6
<i>Working time</i>					
Women full-timers	37.7	48.0	47.0	50.1	57.1
Women part-timers	24.2	36.1	31.4	37.5	38.6
<i>Sector</i>					
Public sector	31.2	44.4	42.9	47.7	52.5
Private sector	31.8	39.2	36.7	39.3	42.2
<i>All</i>	31.5	40.7	38.5	42.0	45.3

*Drivers of Change*

So, what are the drivers of renewed work intensification? A key one may be technological change, much of which is said to be ‘effort-biased’ – that is, the new technologies enable work to be done more intensively. In plants and offices encountering technological change, one expects that there has been some intensification, and hence that other things equal work intensity would be higher. Consistently, Figure 4 shows much higher proportions strongly agreeing that they were required to work ‘very hard’ in workplaces where new computerised equipment or other information and communication technology had recently been introduced.

Other factors are also likely to have been important in recent years, including increased competitiveness brought on by the severity of the recession and rising levels of unemployment: these may have changed the balance of power between employers and employees. Nevertheless an oft-maintained hypothesis we can reject is that high work intensity is specifically linked with downsizing: as Figure 4 also shows, intensity is not higher in workplaces that have experienced staff reductions. If anything, the reverse was the case. Interestingly, as another of our reports (No. 4) shows, downsizing is nevertheless strongly associated with greater fear at work.

**Figure 4: Drivers of Work Intensification, 2012**





## 7. Policy Implications

Those in jobs are working harder, faster and to tighter deadlines than they did in the past. Some groups of workers and parts of the economy have felt these pressures more than others. This renewal of work intensification is likely to have come at a cost in terms of increased levels of stress and potential losses of productivity. Since the costs are both private (for workers and employers) and social (for families and taxpayers), policy-makers in government and elsewhere should consider what policies are available to reverse the upward trend. Given our

findings we recommend that attention be given not only to policies that can relieve workplace stress, but also to policies that champion forms of work organisation which lower the prevalence of 'high strain' working conditions in which excessive workloads are combined with low job control. In general, better job control entails increased employee involvement and participation. The intention should be to improve the balance between the benefits of hard work and the costs. Regular monitoring of work effort is advised in order to better understand the trends in workplace stress.

## Selected Recent Studies

Green, F (2006) *Demanding Work. The Paradox of Job Quality in the Affluent Economy*, Woodstock: Princeton University Press.

Green, F and Whitfield, K (2009) 'Employees' experience of work', in Brown, W, Bryson, A, Forth, J and Whitfield, K (eds) *The Evolution of the Modern Workplace*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Karasek, R A (1979) 'Job demands, job decision latitude, and mental strain: implications for job redesign', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 24: 285-308.

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All titles, along with technical reports, are downloadable free from **LLAKES** at <http://www.llakes.org/> and from the survey website at <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/ses2012/> (1-3 after 24/4/13; 4-6 after 20/5/13).

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