

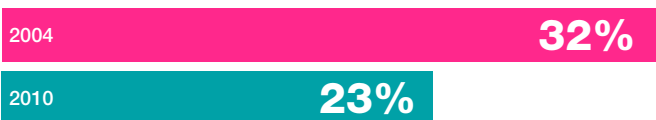
Work and wellbeing

Hard work? Employment, work-life balance and wellbeing in a changing economy

Job insecurity and poor working conditions can have adverse long-term consequences for employees. In the current recession, we examine the wellbeing of people in work and the balance between their jobs and their non-working lives.

Job quality

Several aspects of job quality have deteriorated since before the recession. People in work are now more likely to be concerned about job security. Many also report receiving pay cuts and that their work has become less interesting.



The proportion of workers saying it is "very true" that their jobs are secure has fallen from 32% in 2004 to 23% in 2010.



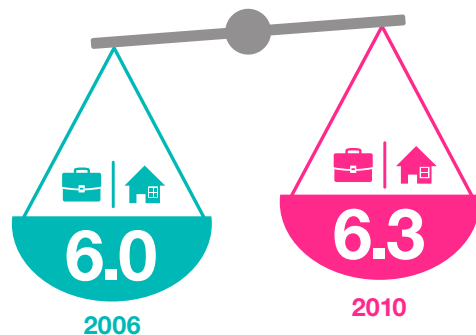
One in five workers (22%) say they have **taken a pay cut** in the past three years, while one in four (24%) say they have had to do less interesting work over the past three years.

Job satisfaction

Despite this fall in job quality, those in work are glad to have a job. Workers' ratings of satisfaction with work and work-life balance are actually higher on average than before the recession.



On average, workers rate their **satisfaction with their job** as 7.3 out of 10, compared with 6.9 in 2006. This is similar among men (7.2) and women (7.3).





Satisfaction with work-life balance is rated at 6.3 on average. This has also increased slightly from 6.0 in 2006.

Authors

Sally McManus and Jane Perry

Sally McManus is a Research Director at NatCen Social Research. Jane Perry is an independent social researcher

 **Quality of employment is known to impact on people's health, life expectancy and life chances** 

Introduction

While economists and politicians argue over the causes of and potential remedies for the double-dip recession afflicting Britain, its human consequences are most obviously observed in the labour market – through increased unemployment and a heightened sense of insecurity among those who remain in work. Although unemployment rates have fluctuated in Britain during the past four years there are about a million more people out of work than there were before the start of the economic crisis (Office for National Statistics, 2012). We know that people who lose their jobs often experience a decline in their general sense of wellbeing (McManus et al., 2012), and that those who are unemployed or economically inactive tend to experience poorer mental health than people in work (Clark et al., 2011). But having a paid job is by no means a guarantee of wellbeing. It can hold negative as well as positive consequences for the way people feel about themselves (Green, 2012). On the positive side, in addition to income, it may provide opportunities for self-development and social interaction. But it can also be a source of stress. For example, quality of employment is known to impact on people's health, life expectancy and life chances (Coats and Lehki, 2008). Thus, jobs associated with better health and wellbeing are generally those with more variety, autonomy, security and better workplace relationships as well as financial rewards (Bryson et al., 2011). It is possible that these aspects of work might have been influenced by the recession. The balance that people maintain between paid work and their home lives is another aspect of personal wellbeing that might be affected by the economic downturn. On the one hand, it is possible that some individuals who find themselves out of work or working reduced hours will see an improvement in some aspects of their work-life balance; for example, by having more time available for family commitments and leisure activities. Indeed, one recent study found that families eat together more when their level of work becomes less intense (Hall et al., 2011). People who keep their jobs may also find that lower levels of workplace production require them to work less hard. On the other hand, we can anticipate that any increase in job insecurity and reduction in household income will serve to aggravate family tensions and financial strains. And where organisations have cut staffing to achieve efficiency savings, the consequence may well be to increase, not reduce, the demands made of employees who remain.

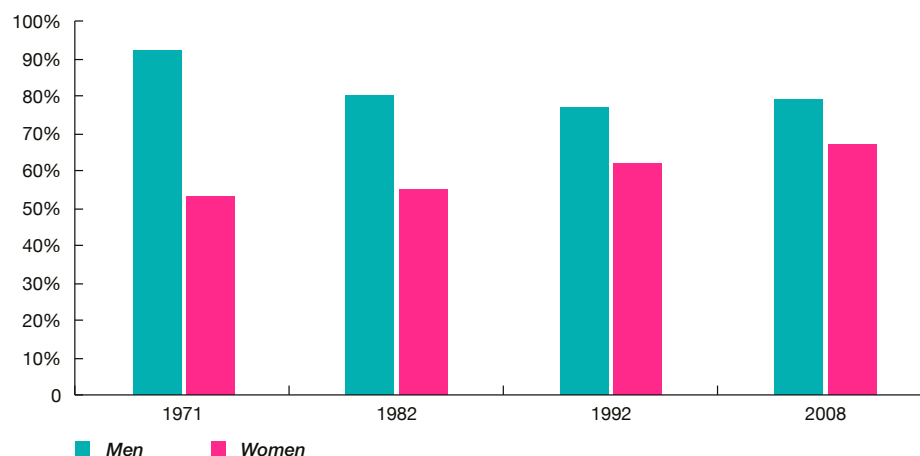
In this chapter we use responses gathered in Britain for the European Social Survey (2004, 2006 and 2010) as well as data from British Social Attitudes (2005, 2009 and 2010) to discover how people's experiences of work have changed and whether they feel that their job quality has improved or declined.¹ In a time of recession, we examine people's working hours, pay and overall sense of security in the workplace. Do more people feel obliged to work harder than they did and has their overall sense of job satisfaction increased or declined? In exploring these issues we pay particular attention to gender differences, and whether certain experiences and views relating to work are more typical of men or women. Has the way in which people think about women's and men's roles in the workplace and at home changed? We also look more generally at people's views concerning work-life balance and how these relate to their satisfaction, happiness and wellbeing.

Employment, economic activity and gender

As a prelude to our exploration of attitudes, we may note that according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) the employment rate among women in the UK and other developed nations remained fairly stable over the past decade until it dropped in almost every OECD country between 2008 and 2009 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010). In previous recessions, it has been sectors employing more men than women (such as manufacturing and construction) that have been worst affected. However, we know that the current downturn in Britain presents a more complex picture. While employment rates initially fell more rapidly among men than women, men's employment has since showed the stronger signs of recovery (Philpott, 2011). One reason for this appears to be continuing job cuts in the public sector and in part-time jobs, where women predominate.

A longer-term perspective reveals that in previous recessions women were less likely to be economically active and that women's income, on average, made a smaller contribution to overall household finances. The pay gap between men and women in the same household was wider, and there were also fewer lone-parent and other households headed by a female breadwinner (Rake and Rotheroe, 2009). However, Figure 6.1 shows that while there have been signs of recent stabilisation, the level of economic activity among working-age women has progressively increased over the past 40 years, moving ever closer to the declining economic activity levels among working-age men.

Figure 6.1 Proportions of men and women economically active in Britain during recessions, 1971–2008



Base: People living in the UK aged 16–64

Source: Labour Force Survey (Spence, 2011)

The data on which Figure 6.1 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

Personal happiness in and out of work

We start our investigation by linking what people say about their personal happiness with whether they are working or not. Using a scale from 0 to 10, the European Social Survey asked people:

Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?

Those in education (who tend to be young) and those who are retired (generally past working age) report the greatest levels of happiness

As we might expect, the results (Table 6.1) show that people's perceptions of their happiness are, indeed, related to the way they spend their time. Those in education (who tend to be young) and those who are retired (generally past working age) report the greatest levels of happiness. This accords with the widely cited 'U-curve' in wellbeing, where levels of happiness and life satisfaction dip during the middle years (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2008). However, we also see that people in paid work (employees and the self-employed) have higher levels of happiness than those who are unemployed or looking after the home or children. The lowest levels of happiness in this comparison are found among people who are permanently sick or disabled. There has been little change in happiness scores in any of these groups since 2004, therefore it seems that the association between economic activity and happiness has not altered during the economic crisis – or, at least, not during its earlier years.

Table 6.1 Self-reported happiness, by main activity, 2010

Economic activity	Average happiness score	Weighted base	Unweighted base
	Mean		
Retired	7.8	534	653
Education	7.9	188	130
Paid work	7.5	1213	1148
Looking after home, children	7.3	163	151
Unemployed and looking for work	6.6	124	124
Permanently sick or disabled	6.3	98	118
All	7.5	2356	2356

Source: European Social Survey

Views of job security

However consistently people rate their personal happiness, we can still expect their opinions about the state of the economy and other employment-related issues to vary over time. For example, when asked how satisfied they are "with the present state of the economy in Britain" on a scale from 0 to 10, people in work give an average score of 3.5; considerably lower than the average of 5.4 recorded among those in work in 2004. The views of men on the economy were more positive than those of women in 2004 (an average of 5.7 compared with 5.0), but the two have since converged (both 3.5 in 2010).

Those in paid work were also asked whether the organisation they work for had experienced changes or difficulties over recent years. Fifty-three per cent of employees say that their place of work has experienced "a great deal of financial difficulty" in the past three years. Reductions in staffing levels are also widely reported, with 39 per cent saying that the number of people employed by the organisation they work for has decreased in the last three years. This compares with 19 per cent who say the workforce in their workplace has expanded. People in work are also more likely to report having experienced a spell of unemployment in the previous five years (49 per cent) than they were in 2004 (42 per cent).

53%

of employees say that their place of work has experienced "a great deal of financial difficulty" in the past three years

Not surprisingly, given rising experience of recent unemployment and increased awareness among workers of job losses and financial difficulties at work, there is also evidence that people's sense of job insecurity has increased. For example, British Social Attitudes has asked employees since 2005 to say whether they think it would be "difficult or easy" for their employer to replace them if they left. Comparing 2005 with 2010 there has been an increase from 33 per cent to 38 per cent in the proportion who say it would be "easy" or "very easy" to replace them. Women (42 per cent) are more likely to say this than men (34 per cent).

The European Social Survey, meanwhile, invites people who are in work to say whether it is true that their current job is secure. As shown in Table 6.2, only a quarter (23 per cent) say that it is "very true" that their current job is secure, down from a third (32 per cent) in 2004. We can also see that the decline in perceived job security has been almost entirely experienced by women. In 2004, 22 per cent of women thought it "a little true" or "not at all true" that their job was secure, compared with 34 per cent of men. In the latest survey the equivalent figures are 34 per cent for female workers and 33 per cent for male workers.

Table 6.2 Perceived level of job security, by sex, 2004 and 2010

	2004			2010		
	Men	Women	All	Men	Women	All
"My job is secure"	%	%	%	%	%	%
Very true	25	40	32	23	24	23
Quite true	40	38	39	41	39	40
A little true	22	13	18	19	20	19
Not at all true	12	8	10	14	14	14
<i>Weighted base</i>	393	387	780	462	516	978
<i>Unweighted base</i>	358	386	744	419	512	931

Base: all in paid work

Source: European Social Survey

Income and working hours

1 in 5

have had to take a pay cut
in the past three years

Feelings of job insecurity may, of course, relate to people's personal experiences in the workplace, their observations (of colleagues being made redundant, for example), and their concerns about the financial health of their employer. In 2010, the European Social Survey asked workers specifically about changes affecting their own job. This included questions about whether they "had to take a reduction in pay" or "had to work shorter hours" in the past three years. The answers show that just over a fifth (22 per cent) report that they have taken a reduction in pay over the past three years. Men who work full-time (25 per cent) and part-time² (34 per cent) are more likely than women (16 per cent full-time, 17 per cent part-time) to say this has happened to them (note that the figure for part-time men is based on a sample of fewer than 100). Reports of pay reductions accord with data from the Office for National Statistics showing a continuous fall in average basic earnings in real terms between mid-2008 and the end of 2009. Basic earnings also rose by less than the level of inflation during much of 2010 (Campos et al., 2011).

Reductions in pay will, in some cases, be a direct consequence of reductions in the number of hours worked, so it is also not surprising that 16 per cent of workers say that they have had to reduce their working hours in the past three years. This includes a third of men (32 per cent) and a quarter of women (26 per cent) who are working part-time; but only one in nine men (12 per cent) and women (11 per cent) working full-time.

Respondents were also asked to reflect on the adequacy of their current household income. The answers show that 40 per cent of people in paid employment feel they are “living comfortably” on their income, while another 45 per cent say that they are “coping”. One in seven (14 per cent) report that it is “difficult” or “very difficult” to manage on their present income. These figures do not differ significantly from the results obtained in 2004.

We also wanted to find out if recent years had seen fewer or greater demands for night work, weekend working or short-notice overtime. In terms of personal wellbeing, unsocial working hours are known to have an especially negative impact on family relationships (Gallie and Russell, 2009). The European Social Survey asked how often respondents’ work involved “working evenings or nights”, “having to work overtime at short notice” or “working weekends”. By comparing the answers given in 2004 and 2010 we find that, while people report an overall reduction in the working hours for which they are paid, there has been no reduction in the proportion expected to work unsocial hours, at least sometimes (Table 6.3). In fact, for women the proportions reporting that they ever work evenings, nights or weekends have increased, while there has been a modest reduction in the percentage of men who say they work at weekends. Overall, men remain much more likely than women to work unsocial hours.

Table 6.3 Unsocial work hours, by sex, 2004 and 2010

	2004			2010		
	Men	Women	All	Men	Women	All
Working unsocial hours*						
% ever work evenings or nights	67	49	59	71	55	63
% ever work overtime at short notice	67	55	61	71	57	64
% ever work weekends	79	53	67	75	58	67
<i>Weighted base</i>	393	387	780	462	516	978
<i>Unweighted base</i>	358	386	744	419	512	931

Base: all in paid work

Source: European Social Survey

* Includes respondents who report working unsocial hours “every day”, “several times a week”, “several times a month”, “once a month”, or “less than once a month”

Job quality

Alongside changes to the terms and conditions of their employment, the recession may also have altered people's views about the quality of their jobs. For example, training budgets may have been cut, thereby restricting people's opportunities for continued learning and skill acquisition at work (European Social Survey, 2011). Scope for career progression and pay rises may also have been reduced. There are different theories about what determines job quality. Some researchers have emphasised the negative consequences of stress resulting from an imbalance between the efforts an employee makes and the rewards he or she receives in terms of recognition or payment (Siegrist et al., 2004). Others have focused more on the relationship between the degree of control (or autonomy) that employees feel over their work, the demands being placed on them, and the extent of any social support they receive from the organisation or fellow workers (Karasek et al., 1998). The European Social Survey asks a number of questions related to these issues that have, in turn, been linked to people's overall health and sense of wellbeing (Clark et al., 2011).

Control

In 2004 and 2010, people in work were asked to assess on a scale of 0 to 10 – where 0 is “I have no influence” and 10 is “I have complete influence” – how much they are able to influence how their own daily work is organised. In Britain, the average overall score has barely changed (from 7.1 in 2004 to 7.2 in 2010). However, women's assessment of their level of control has increased, raising their average from 6.9 to 7.2 – the same as men. Here, as in a number of other areas, we see evidence that the employment experiences of men and women have been converging in recent years.

Interest and variety

Asked if they have “had to do less interesting work” in the past three years, one in four people with jobs (24 per cent) say they have. In a different, although related, question, workers were asked if there was “a lot of variety” in their work. The replies show a modest decline since 2004 in the proportion agreeing that this is “quite true” or “very true”, from 71 per cent to 67 per cent. This reduction is entirely due to a fall in the proportion of male workers who agree that their work provides variety, from 72 per cent to 64 per cent.

Social support

The European Social Survey also asks people in work whether they “can get support and help from co-workers when needed”. The results show that there has been little change in employees' perceptions of this since before the recession. Eighty-three per cent say that it is “quite true” or “very true” that they received support from co-workers, compared with 81 per cent in 2004. Men (81 per cent) are now only a little less likely than women (84 per cent) to agree they get help and support – a smaller gap than in 2004 (78 per cent compared with 84 per cent).

Opportunities for advancement

Workers were asked whether “opportunities for advancement are good” at their workplace. Overall the proportion saying this is “quite true” or “very true” has remained stable at 44 per cent since 2004. However, this masks very different trends for men and women. While men have become more likely to feel that their advancement opportunities are good (increasing from 40 per cent in 2004 to 47 per cent in 2010), women have become less likely to feel this way (from 48 per cent to 42 per cent).

Work intensity

Lastly in relation to job quality, we consider the replies from workers to questions concerning work intensity. Respondents were asked how far they agreed with two statements:

My job requires that I work very hard

I never seem to have enough time to get everything done in my job

24%

say their work has
got less interesting
in recent years

The replies (Table 6.4) reveal a mixed response. Eighty-eight per cent feel that they are required to work very hard, up from 78 per cent in 2004. However, this does not translate into an increase in workers feeling that they are under so much pressure that there is too little time to get everything done. While almost half agree this is the case in 2010, the proportion was the same in 2004, before the recession. Women are more likely than men to say their job requires hard work, and that they don't have enough time to get everything done.

Table 6.4 Perceptions of work intensity, by sex, 2004 and 2010

	2004			2010		
	Men	Women	All	Men	Women	All
% agree job requires that work very hard	76	81	78	85	90	88
% agree never seem to have enough time	47	51	49	45	51	48
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>400</i>	<i>390</i>	<i>789</i>	<i>478</i>	<i>537</i>	<i>1015</i>
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>364</i>	<i>389</i>	<i>753</i>	<i>435</i>	<i>530</i>	<i>965</i>

Base: all in paid work

Source: European Social Survey

When it comes to trends in reported job quality, we have seen that several aspects have deteriorated in recent years, while others have remained stable. None, however, has shown improvement overall. Given our earlier findings on pay and job insecurity, this may reflect a growing perception among workers of an imbalance between workplace efforts and rewards. It is worth noting, however, that some changes in job quality have not affected male and female workers to the same extent. For example, men have become less likely to report variety in their work and more likely to experience social support. Women, meanwhile, report more control in the workplace, but poorer opportunities for advancement. So, what have these changes in job quality and conditions meant for job satisfaction among men and women?

Satisfaction with work and work-life balance

Previous studies have found a long-term decline in job satisfaction over recent decades, attributed to changes in the characteristics of work (Green and Tsitsianis, 2005). Researchers have also identified competing – though not necessarily contradictory – narratives about what may be happening objectively to the quality of employment. On the one hand, the growth of a 'knowledge economy' where employees are increasingly required to work with their heads rather than their hands has been contributing to an improvement in some measures of job quality. On the other, the globalisation of production and markets has exerted downward pressure on the quality of jobs in developed countries like Britain, leading to inevitable decline (Coats and Lehki, 2008).

As shown in Table 6.5, overall levels of satisfaction with work (scored on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is "extremely dissatisfied" and 10 is "extremely satisfied") have been sustained between 2006 and 2010 – and even show a slight increase, from 6.9 to 7.3. In 2006, men were slightly less satisfied with their jobs than women (an average of 6.8 compared with 7.1). Within this figure, the average level of satisfaction with work was similar for both men and women with full-time jobs (6.8), but noticeably higher among women working part-time (7.4). However, we can see that in 2010, the mean scores for men, women, full-time and part-time workers have all converged, (note that the base size for part-time men is less than 100 both in 2006 and in 2010).

On a scale from 0 to 10, the average job satisfaction rating is 7.3

It seems that neither the recession, nor the feared impact of globalisation, has yet brought down the overall levels of satisfaction that workers in Britain express about their jobs. In fact, the adverse economic climate may even have bolstered reported satisfaction with current employment among those who have managed to stay in work and appreciate that fact.

Table 6.5 Satisfaction with work and work-life balance among full-time and part-time workers, by sex, 2006 and 2010³

	2006			2010		
	Men	Women	All	Men	Women	All
Satisfied with work	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
All	6.8	7.1	6.9	7.2	7.3	7.3
Full-time	6.8	6.8	6.8	7.3	7.2	7.3
Part-time	7.0	7.4	7.3	7.1	7.3	7.3
Satisfied with work-life balance	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
All	5.9	6.1	6.0	6.3	6.4	6.3
Full-time	5.8	5.3	5.6	6.2	5.8	6.0
Part-time	7.3	6.9	7.0	6.9	7.0	7.0

Base: all in paid work

Source: European Social Survey

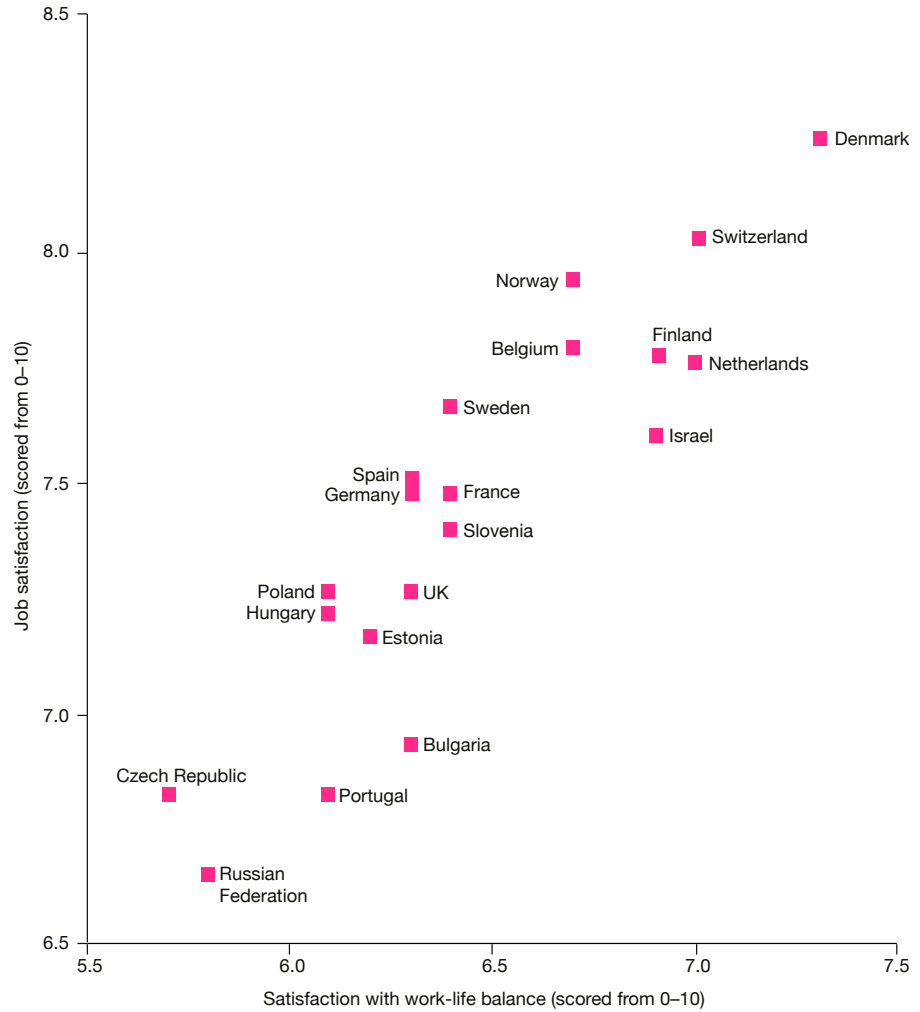
Turning to people's views about the wider balance between their jobs and the rest of their lives, the survey also asked people to rate on a scale from 0 to 10:

And how satisfied are you with the balance between the time you spend on your paid work and the time you spend on other aspects of your life?

The bottom three rows of Table 6.5 show us that average overall scores for satisfaction with work-life balance have also increased in recent years (from 6.0 in 2006 to 6.3 in 2010). Satisfaction is highest for women working part-time (7.0), and noticeably lower among women working full-time (5.8). We also see that the increase in overall scores since 2006 is largely attributable to greater satisfaction with work-life balance among women and men in full-time work.

As we might expect, there is a close relationship between job satisfaction and people’s satisfaction with their work-life balance. Results from the European Social Survey show this is not only true of Britain. Looking at Figure 6.2 we see that although average levels of satisfaction with work-life balance vary greatly between 20 different European countries, the association with job satisfaction is remarkably consistent.

Figure 6.2 Job satisfaction and satisfaction with work-life balance among people in paid work, by European country



Base: all in paid work
 Source: European Social Survey
 The data on which Figure 6.2 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

Figure 6.2 also strikingly shows that both job satisfaction and satisfaction with work-life balance are lower in Britain than in most other European countries participating in the survey apart from Portugal, Russia and four other former members of the Communist bloc. This is likely to be, in part, the result of the longer (unpaid) working hours culture found in the UK. In 2011, the fourth Work-Life Balance Employee Survey⁴ found that just under half (48 per cent) of employees in Britain worked overtime in a typical week, with nearly half (44 per cent) of this overtime being unpaid (Tipping et al., 2012).

Work and home life

Having established that workers in Britain tend to be less content with their work-life balance than workers in neighbouring continental countries such as Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands, our next task is to look more closely at what people in Britain say about the relationship between their personal and working lives. On this theme, the European Social Survey asks people in work to say:

how often do you ...

... keep worrying about work problems when you are not working

... feel too tired after work to enjoy things you would like to do at home

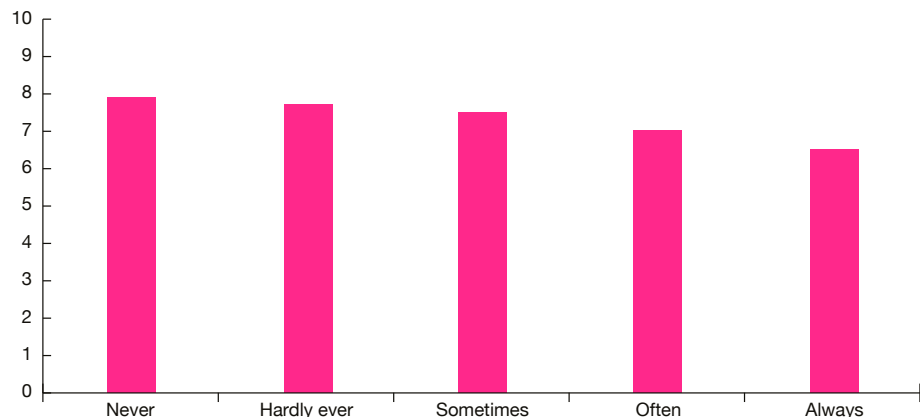
89%

say there have been times when they felt too tired after work to enjoy things at home

In 2004 nearly three out of four employed people (73 per cent) said that they had ever worried about work problems when at home,⁵ but in the 2010 survey this has risen to 80 per cent. An even higher proportion – 89 per cent – say there have been times when they felt too tired after work to enjoy things at home, although this is close to the proportion in 2004.

By cross-comparing data we can see that a relationship exists between the way people reply to these two questions and their responses to more general questions about their happiness and life satisfaction. Figure 6.3 shows how those who “never” feel too tired after work have an average happiness score of 8.0 out of 10.0, compared with 6.6 among people who “always” feel this way.

Figure 6.3 Average happiness score (0–10), by how often too tired after work



Base: all in paid work

Source: European Social Survey

The data on which Figure 6.3 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

However, our analysis finds no association between levels of happiness and whether people work full- or part-time. This matches the findings of another recent study (Pereira and Coelho, 2012), which found that the absolute number of working hours is not the sole determinant of a worker’s overall happiness. Rather, happiness seems to be related to the extent to which workers (both full- and part-time) perceive there to be conflicts between work and other aspects of their lives. Such conflicts among respondents are strongly and consistently associated with lower levels of reported happiness.

A traditionalist view of men as ‘breadwinners’ and women as ‘homemakers’ has declined

Gender, work and family

European Social Survey data, meanwhile, show us that, alongside changes in labour market participation, a traditionalist view of men as ‘breadwinners’ and women as ‘homemakers’ has declined. The survey asks two questions that seek to measure such attitudes. Employed people were asked whether they agree or disagree with the following statements:

When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women

A woman should be prepared to cut down on her paid work for the sake of her family

Table 6.6 shows that in 2004 only 16 per cent of men in paid work and 14 per cent of women in paid work agreed that men are the primary financial providers by right. In 2010, this view is even less popular: only 10 per cent of working men and nine per cent of working women agree. However, we can also see that a much larger group of workers of both sexes feel that women should be prepared to give family responsibilities greater priority than paid work. The proportion of employed women who agree stands at 40 per cent and has not altered since 2004. Interestingly, it is men – where the level of agreement has declined from 36 per cent to 31 per cent – whose opinions appear to have shifted towards a less traditionalist view of women’s roles.

Table 6.6 Gender traditional views among people in paid work, by sex, 2004 and 2010

	2004			2010		
	Men	Women	All	Men	Women	All
% agree a man has more right to work when jobs are scarce	16	14	15	10	9	10
% agree a woman should be prepared to cut down work for the sake of her family	36	40	38	31	40	35
<i>Weighted base</i>	533	442	975	621	613	1235
<i>Unweighted base</i>	478	439	917	563	602	1165

Base: all in paid work

Source: European Social Survey

Clearly a substantial minority of people in work believe that a woman’s family responsibilities should come first if there is any conflict with her chosen working hours – this is the view expressed by four out of ten women in work. It is also apparent that the recession and its consequences for household budgets have done nothing to reinforce the traditionalist view of men’s and women’s work roles, and may even have served to erode it. It should be noted that the survey did not ask respondents whether a man should be prepared to cut down on paid work for the sake of his family. So it is possible that the persistence of this view in relation to women may reflect not the persistence of gender-traditional views about the nurturing role of women, but rather the view that family should take priority over work for everyone.

Demands in the workplace have increased somewhat – workers have become more likely to feel that they have to work “very hard”

Conclusions

In this chapter we have seen that since 2004, many employed people have seen the organisations that they work for encounter financial difficulties and witnessed colleagues being made redundant or failing to have their contracts renewed. Feelings of job insecurity have become more widespread, with women, in particular, feeling more vulnerable than they did before the start of the economic crisis.

Perceptions of job quality have shifted since before the recession among both men and women in work. Demands in the workplace have increased somewhat – workers have become more likely to feel that they have to work “very hard” and more likely to report some types of unsocial working hours. Effort-reward imbalance theory argues that workers can often cope with high demands like this, provided their rewards are commensurate. But we have found that workplace rewards have decreased: people report finding that their work has become less interesting, that it has less variety, and that they have experienced reductions in pay. One thing that has remained stable overall is the level of support provided by colleagues – although it is possible this could reflect a solidarity born of shared insecurity in some of Britain’s recession-hit workplaces.

These trends cannot be good news for families. As well as reductions in pay and in average number of paid working hours, and increases in unsocial work hours, between 2004 and 2010 there have also been small but significant increases in people saying that they worry about work-related problems when they are not working. We have observed a drop in the proportion of workers of both sexes who regard men as priority breadwinners, yet found no accompanying drop, at least among women, in the proportion who believe that a woman should be prepared to cut down on paid work for the sake of her family. One interpretation of this is that the dual burden on women – as both economic providers and caregivers – may have intensified.

This presents us with a conundrum. Many of the factors that we know are associated with subjective wellbeing – like job security and managing financially – have deteriorated, yet levels of self-reported life satisfaction and happiness have remained buoyant. Should this surprise us? In Iceland, Gudmundsdottir (2011) uncovered a comparable paradox when she found that the self-reported happiness of people in her country remained pretty much unchanged during its period of extreme economic crisis. American data sources paint a similar picture (for example, Blanchflower and Oswald, 2002). Our findings likewise show that self-reported happiness and life satisfaction have remained remarkably stable throughout both good and bad economic times. Explanations for this phenomenon include a view that individuals have a wellbeing ‘set point’ that they readily revert to after periods of crisis. However, continuing unemployment is a notable exception to this, being one of the few experiences found to be capable of shifting the ‘set point’ within an individual for the worse (Lucas et al., 2004). As evidenced by the survey data reported in this chapter, such a ‘set point’ seems to exist at a societal level as well as at an individual one.

Self-reported happiness and life satisfaction have remained remarkably stable throughout both good and bad economic times

Another lesson we can draw from the findings in this chapter is that the use of satisfaction and subjective wellbeing indicators to evaluate the social impact of a changing economy carries risks. Used in isolation, such measures may be liable to underestimate the real impact of recession on the quality of people’s day-to-day lives. The British government’s plans to increase the use of subjective wellbeing measures in policy and programme evaluation, as well as for monitoring trends in social progress, have been widely welcomed. But these measures may need to be placed alongside ones that also more directly probe people’s specific experiences.

How satisfied people say they are will depend not only on the objective quality of what they are being asked to assess, but also on what their expectations are. In times of economic crisis workers may expect job loss, and so be satisfied with continued employment. In times of economic boom, they may expect promotion and advancement, and be more likely to report dissatisfaction. We should not, therefore, be surprised that reported job satisfaction has increased since before the recession, even though some aspects of job quality have deteriorated. It is important not to assume that high levels of job satisfaction necessarily mean that all is well in the workplace: they might reflect, in part, low expectations.

Notes

1. British Social Attitudes and European Social Survey analysis excludes Northern Ireland, whereas OECD data are based on the whole UK. Various terms are used in this chapter to refer to people in paid work (for example, “workers”, “people in paid work”, and “employed people”). They all denote everyone who is either an employee or is self-employed, who usually works 10 hours or more a week, and who considers work to be their main activity.
2. Part-time work was defined as working less than 35 hours per week.
3. Bases for Table 6.5 are as follows:

	2004			2010		
	Men	Women	All	Men	Women	All
All						
<i>Weighted base</i>	634	585	1218	550	585	1135
<i>Unweighted base</i>	692	608	1300	607	594	1202
Full-time						
<i>Weighted base</i>	564	313	876	465	303	768
<i>Unweighted base</i>	620	320	940	503	304	807
Part-time						
<i>Weighted base</i>	62	265	327	70	273	343
<i>Unweighted base</i>	63	282	345	86	280	366

4. The fourth Work-Life Balance Employee Survey was conducted by NatCen Social Research for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.
5. This includes people who say they “always”, “often”, “sometimes” or “hardly ever” do this, but excludes those who say they “never” do.

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Appendix

The data on which Figure 6.1 is based are shown below.

Table A.1 Proportion of men and women economically active during recessions, 1971–2008

	1971	1982	1992	2008
	%	%	%	%
Men	92	80	77	79
Women	53	55	62	67

Base: People living in the UK aged 16-64

Source: Labour Force Survey (Spence, 2011)

The data on which Figure 6.2 is based are shown below.

Table A.2 Job satisfaction and satisfaction with work-life balance among people in paid work, by European country

Country	Job satisfaction	Satisfaction with work-life balance	Weighted base	Unweighted base
	Mean	Mean		
Russian Federation	6.7	5.8	1363	1325
Czech Republic	6.8	5.7	1181	1257
Portugal	6.8	6.1	826	798
Bulgaria	6.9	6.3	904	969
Estonia	7.2	6.2	854	854
Hungary	7.2	6.1	745	740
Poland	7.3	6.1	837	548
UK	7.3	6.3	1172	1241
Slovenia	7.4	6.4	616	531
France	7.5	6.4	626	626
Germany	7.5	6.3	1502	1510
Spain	7.5	6.3	899	903
Israel	7.6	6.9	989	992
Sweden	7.7	6.4	797	797
Netherlands	7.7	7.0	954	921
Finland	7.8	6.9	884	884
Belgium	7.8	6.7	830	830
Norway	7.9	6.7	886	916
Switzerland	8.0	7.0	853	853
Denmark	8.2	7.3	823	823

Base: All in paid work

Source: European Social Survey

The data on which Figure 6.3 is based are shown below.

Table A.3 Average happiness score, by how often too tired after work

	How often too tired after work to enjoy things at home				
	Never	Hardly ever	Some-times	Often	Always
Mean happiness score	8.0	7.8	7.6	7.1	6.6
<i>Weighted base</i>	237	351	872	550	136
<i>Unweighted base</i>	216	336	836	515	128

Base: All in paid work

Source: European Social Survey

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NatCen Social Research

35 Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0AX

info@natcen.ac.uk

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