



In Summary: Job quality in Ireland

First findings from the UCD
Working in Ireland Survey, 2021

John Geary and Lisa Wilson



University College Dublin
Ireland's Global University



Executive Summary

This Executive Summary explains how we conducted our study of job quality in Ireland and details the key findings and policy recommendations. The study's data is derived from the UCD Working in Ireland Survey (WIIS) 2021.

Our approach to understanding and measuring job quality

Job quality is a complex and multi-faceted concept. Job quality goes beyond pay, or satisfaction with one's job, or indeed any single attribute. Rather, as we see it, a job is composed of a combination of features which can be measured as a set of objective constitutive indicators.

Broadly they are of two forms. The first are 'traditional' economic indicators (pay levels, job security and prospects, working hours and other pecuniary benefits), and

the second are non-economic indicators derived from workers own objective evaluation of their work (its organization, working time quality, job security, prospects, skill acquisition and training, employee voice and representation, and social supports).

These various attributes of a job can also be conceived of as constituting either demands or resources. With this formulation all jobs are composed conceivably of potentially negative and positive attributes. The combination and interaction of these various attributes, we argue, determines the overall quality of a job.

In Table 1 opposite we identify 5 dimensions, together with 14 sub-dimensions, as being essential components of job quality.

These delineations of a good and poor job represent polar phenomena and in between these polar points of good and poor-quality jobs are a range of types of

jobs which possess a mix of good and poor job attributes. Most jobs are likely to occupy such in-between positions. A central challenge for this project was to reveal the variable ways in which good and bad job characteristics combine within particular job types or across particular sections of the occupational structure.

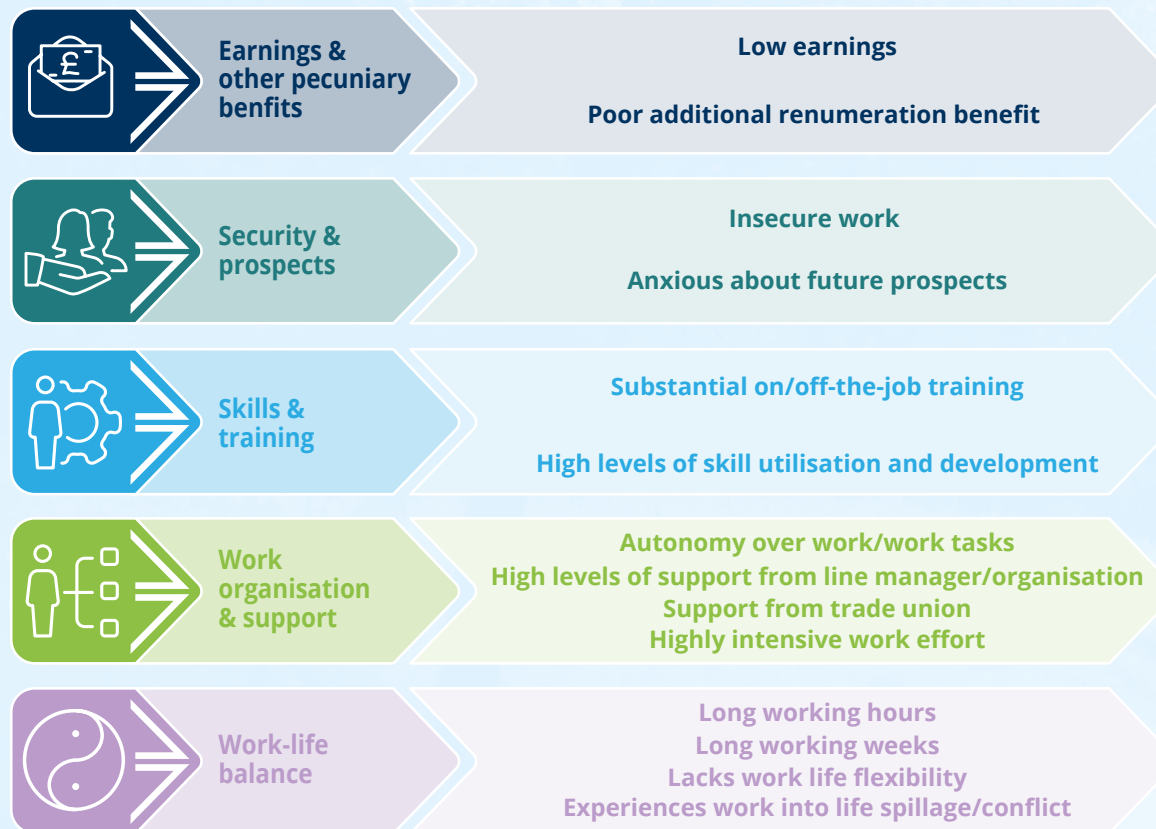
Measuring job quality in Ireland

In measuring job quality in Ireland we adopt a variety of approaches. First, we use a dashboard approach where we provide the results for each individual attribute, of which there are 39, as well as providing aggregate results at the level of the 14 sub-dimensions. The former are not presented here in the executive summary as they are too detailed. The latter however are. See Table 2 overleaf.

Table 1. WIIS Job Quality Framework

Job dimensions

Job sub-dimensions



Our definition of a good quality job is then derived from this framework with the understanding that where these various attributes are present – or indeed absent – they can be said to meet the needs of a worker and have the potential to maintain or improve their health and well-being.

A good job may then be said to be one that: pays well; the demands are not excessive; provides employment security; offers opportunities for career development and advancement; affords discretion over how work is organised; provides social support, including that from management and co-workers, as well as union representation; permits participation in organisational decision-making; is safe to undertake; and provides for work-life balance.

A poor job, on the other hand, is one in which the pay is poor, work is excessively demanding, hours of work are very long, there is little job security, little opportunity to have a say in how one’s work is performed, and there are few training opportunities and few social supports, and opportunities to rest and recuperate.

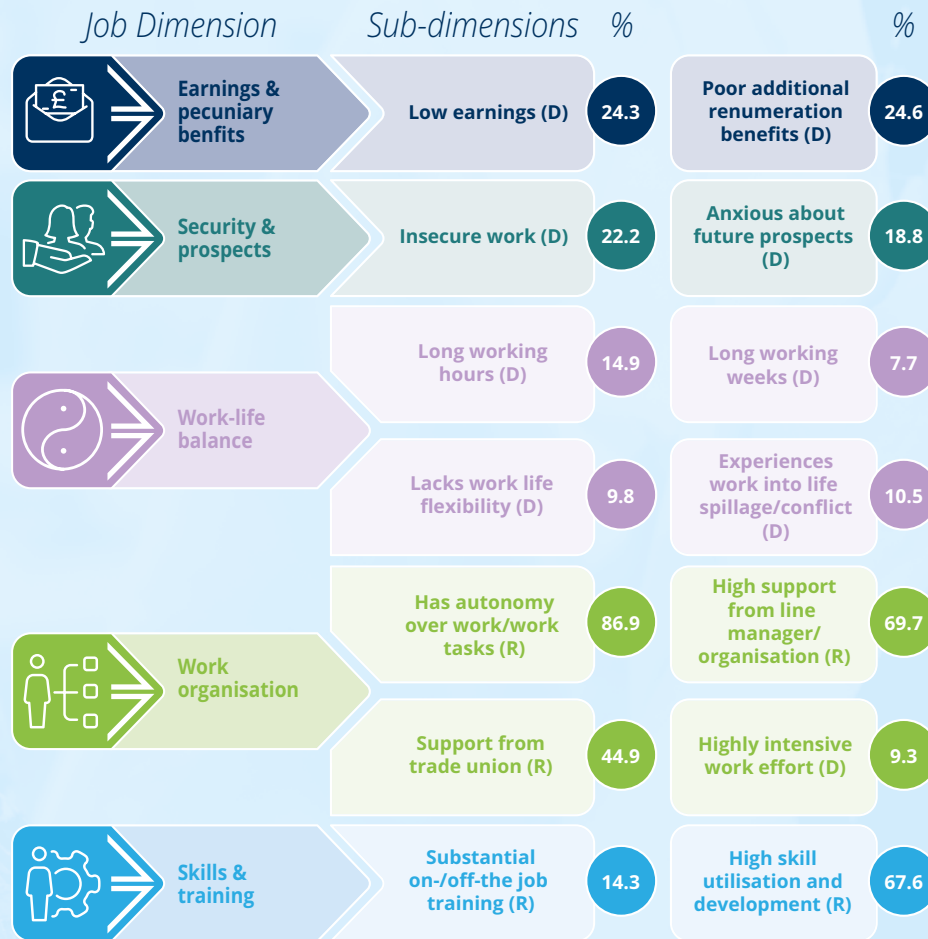
We then provide an aggregate single measure of job quality in Ireland by combining the scores across the various indicators and dimensions. The results are presented along a continuum where lower values indicating higher job quality to lower values indicating poorer job quality. The ensuing analysis provides a descriptive account of how the different attributes of job quality are distributed across the workforce.

Finally, we examine the variable ways in which good and bad job characteristics combine within particular job types or across particular sections of the occupational structure. We use cluster analysis for this purpose with the objective of identifying discrete job types or cohorts.

A summary of our findings

Table 2 provides a 'dashboard summary' of workers access to job resources and exposure to job demands.

Table 2. Dashboard summary of job quality scores by sub-dimension based on exposure to demands (D) and the availability of resources (R)



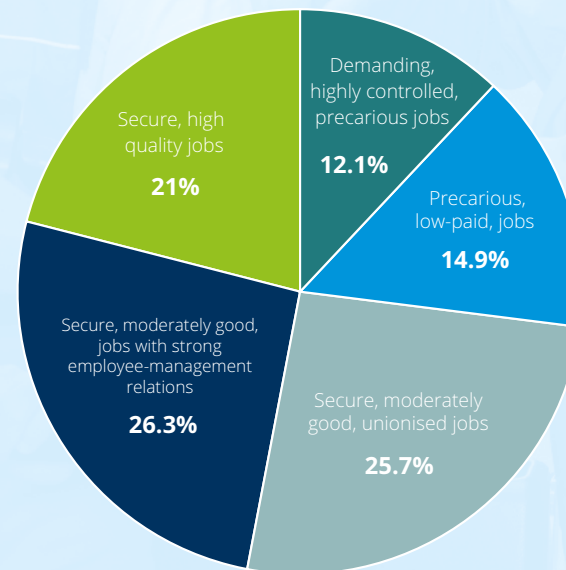
The dashboard above, while informative in telling us about the prevalence of how different attributes of job quality across our labour market, they do not tell us about how work is experienced in the round by individual workers or to fully understand the prevalence of 'good' jobs or 'bad' jobs. To understand this we carried out a cluster analysis in order to identify 'job types' and to see how different aspects of job quality combine across different groups of workers.

We identified five distinct clusters, each of which contains a unique combination of job attributes. We assigned the following descriptive labels to them:

- Demanding, highly controlled, precarious jobs;
- Precarious, low-paid jobs;
- Secure, moderately good, unionised jobs;
- Secure, moderately good jobs with strong employee-management relations;
- Secure, high-quality jobs.

A more detailed description of each cluster's attributes are provided in the body of the main report.

The distribution of these five job types is displayed in the pie-chart below. In brief, almost 15% of jobs are precarious and provide low earnings. A further 12% are precarious and are distinguished from the other precarious job cohort in that the incumbents' work is also tightly monitored and controlled.



In sum, it is reasonable to claim that in combination over one quarter of jobs in Ireland are of relatively poor quality. The remainder – almost three-quarters of jobs – impose relatively fewer demands and provide greater resources to workers. These then are moderate to good jobs.

Precarious, low-paid jobs are more apparent among: females; young workers; those without a third-level qualification; workers in elementary, caring, leisure and sales and customer service roles; and those employed in small firms.

Statistically it was more difficult to determine unequivocally where demanding, highly controlled, precarious jobs existed in the labour market. They are generally equally distributed across jobs, occupations, sectors, albeit we can be more certain that they are less evident among foreign-owned firms.

Secure, moderately good jobs with strong employee-management relations are more apparent in the public sector, in large firms and more likely to be occupied by older workers. There were no evident differences across different levels of educational qualifications, genders, or occupation.

Secure, moderately good, non-unionised jobs are associated with workers aged between 25 to 44 years and in firms in the foreign-owned (FDI) sector.

Secure, high-quality jobs are more likely to be occupied by males, those possessing a degree or higher-level qualifications, managerial workers and those working in the professional, technical, scientific, administration sectors as well as in the FDI sector.

Other headline findings included the following:

1. *Females' job quality is generally poorer than males.*

Females record a lower score than men on 11 of the 14 sub-dimensions of job quality. They are more likely: to be paid low earnings; to be anxious about their future prospects; to work long hours; to lack work life flexibility; to experience work into life spillage/conflict; to lack autonomy over their work/work tasks; to have jobs that require highly intensive

work effort; to be less likely to have high support from management/organisation; to have lower levels of trade union representation/collective bargaining coverage; to have lower levels of high skill utilisation and development; and to be less likely to have been provided with substantial levels of on-the-job or off-the-job training.

Not only are women more likely than men to occupy jobs of relatively poor quality, women occupy relatively fewer of the high quality jobs. Consequently, there is a marked pattern of occupational gender segregation in the Irish labour market.

2. *Age matters.*

Younger workers and older workers fare worse. Workers aged 16-24 score the worst in six out of the thirteen sub-dimensions. Young workers record particularly poor scores in terms of risk of low earnings and in being insecure in their work. Older workers face difficulties in utilising their skills,

receiving training and also report the poorest levels of support from their line management/organisation.

3. *Caring occupations have poor scores no matter what way you 'cut' the data, but they are not alone.*

Those workers employed in 'caring, leisure and other service' occupations exhibit poor job quality across a very broad range of job attributes and across a diverse range of forms of job quality measurement. Beyond this category of worker, those in 'process, plant and machinery operative' positions and 'elementary' occupations do not fare well across a broad range of sub-dimensions of job quality.

4. *Even good jobs have negative attributes.*

Long working hours are a prominent feature of 'secure, high quality' jobs.

5. *Working in the FDI sector is generally associated with having a good job, but not always.*

Jobs are generally better in the FDI sector with one significant caveat. Workers in the FDI sector are more likely than those workers employed in other sectors to have greater demands placed upon them; they work longer hours, experience greater work-life spillage, and encounter higher intensive work effort levels.

6. *The ICT sector performs well across many aspects of job quality, but falls short in a number.*

On the whole, job quality in the 'information, communication and technology' sector is superior to that in all other sectors. This sector scores the best in nine of the fourteen job quality sub-dimensions. That being said, there are a number of areas in which this sector does not perform well. Relatively speaking, jobs in this sector require highly intensive work effort levels and are characterised by an underutilisation of existing skills. At the other end of the spectrum, those

employed in the 'arts, entertainment, and other recreation' sector face particularly poor job quality across a broad range of sub-dimensions.

7. *Higher levels of educational attainment are associated with better jobs, but it is not a fail safe*

Although there is an evident relationship between job quality and level of educational attainment, it is not the case that having a primary degree or above degree-level qualification insulates workers from having bad components in their jobs. However, possessing only a primary or secondary school level qualification significantly increases a worker's likelihood of scoring poorly across many of the job quality components.

8. *Where you live matters. Workers living in the border counties have the poorest job quality.*

While poor job quality jobs are not necessarily concentrated in any particular region in which a worker lives, workers in some regions have poorer job quality. Most particularly, the 'Border' region scores worst in five of the fourteen sub-dimensions and the 'Midlands' scores worst on three of the thirteen.

Implications of findings for policy

In the conclusion to the paper, we examine a series of policy implications which are derived from our research findings. They warrant being read in full. Here, we highlight some recommendations in brief, but their treatment is partial.

First, a vital part of any good jobs strategy is to recognise the variation in the ways in which the good, the bad and the mediocre facets of a job combine within occupations or across certain sectors so that targeted interventions can be pursued.


Second, care work is associated with precarious, low-paid employment, and this work is highly feminised. For this to change requires employers, unions, and government to work together to increase pay levels and the quality of jobs in this broad professional category. This, too, is ever more important with Ireland's ageing population; increasing the number of care workers will be required to attend

to the sick and elderly. To achieve such a change, however, will necessitate a paradigm shift. Care work is often deemed to be peripheral, to be performed by low-skilled, cheap labour, often female and increasingly migrant labour. This characterisation of care work and care workers is, of course, premised on highly gendered notions of orientations to work; work involving care and nurture is identified to be more appropriate to female personality traits than male attributes. Such a model of care work is no longer sustainable if it ever was. Change will require centring care work as valued work, essential for service quality and central to the productive and sustainable performance of an economy, and whose occupants will be appropriately recognised and rewarded both financially and in terms of opportunities for further training and promotion prospects.

Third, it is national policy to promote the growth of high-quality good jobs. The evidence from WIIS suggests, however, that these 'good jobs' have certain negative

attributes. Long working hours are a prominent feature and are likely to be a normalised attribute of these jobs. Whilst one could argue that these 'secure, high quality' jobs inevitably involve a trade-off between long working hours and being able to enjoy other aspects of job quality (good pay, job autonomy, etc.), this position needs to and can be challenged as there is no a priori reason as to why one needs to exchange aspects of a job to be able to enjoy other attributes.

Finally, the State can and should do more to improve job quality. It has several options. It could establish a set of minimum standards across a series of job quality dimensions. While this is not without difficulty, there is precedent for doing so. For example, we already have a national minimum wage, and we are working towards the achievement of a living wage. Workers have rights in respect of sick pay and maternity leave, and there is the forthcoming code in respect of the right to request flexible working. There are many other such laws that affect people's



job quality. Regulations however require oversight and enforcement. While this can be achieved, it requires additional resources. Another approach is for the state to enhance the role of sectoral collective negotiations between unions and employers. This too can provide a means for establishing minimum job quality standards where all parties have a stake in eliminating the use of poor job quality as a method of gaining competitive advantage. The negotiation of sectoral minimum standards creates the business space within which those employers who provide good quality jobs can continue to do so. Good jobs enhance the productive capacity of an economy. Poor jobs do not and worse they lead to negative spill overs where the state – to put it prosaically – is compelled to pick up the tab.



University College Dublin
Ireland's Global University

The UCD Working in Ireland Survey Website:

john.geary@ucd.ie

lisa.wilson@nerinstitute.net

www.smurfitschool.ie/facultyresearch/jobqualitystudy/overviewofstudy/



31/32 Parnell Square, Dublin 1, Ireland

Phone: +353 1 8897722

45-47 Donegall Street, Belfast BT1 2FG, Northern Ireland

Phone: +44 (0)28 9024 6214

info@NERInstitute.net

www.NERInstitute.net

 @NERI_research