

Modern working life: A blurring of the boundaries between secondary and primary labour markets?

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Fabian Dekker and Romke van der Veen

Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands

Abstract

Today, there is a widespread suggestion that permanent workers are increasingly subject to precarious working conditions. Due to international competition and declining union density, job qualities of permanent workers are assumed to be under strain. According to proponents of a democratization of risk rationale, low job qualities that were traditionally attached to secondary labour markets are transferred to workers in primary segments of the labour market. In this study, the authors test this theoretical rationale among workers in 11 Western European economies, using two waves of the European Working Conditions Survey. The results do not confirm a democratization of labour market risk. Lower job qualities are highly associated with flexible employment contracts and highlight a clear gap between insiders and outsiders.

Keywords

Atypical employment, dual labour market, flexibility, job quality

Background to the study

Growing economic internationalization and increasing business competition force employers to become more competitive. While global competitive forces result in hiring a larger proportion of flexible contract workers in order to be able to respond quickly to changing market demands (e.g. Houseman, 2001), it creates new vulnerabilities for permanent employees as well (Kalleberg, 2011). Kalleberg argues that these economic forces transform the nature of employment also for white-collar occupations who have previously been job-secure. The increasing demands of international capitalism result in increasing work pressure (McCann et al., 2008) and increasing work intensification (Gallie et al., 2004). Given intensified external market pressure, modern management increases the pressure on its employees (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999; Dore, 2008). Job

Corresponding author:

Fabian Dekker, Erasmus University Rotterdam, PO Box 1738, Rotterdam, 3000 DR, the Netherlands.

Email: dekker@fsw.eur.nl

quality is however not only under pressure in the private sector, but in the public sector as well (Tummers et al., 2009). The end-result of these processes is that all workers are increasingly exposed to labour market risks, regardless of their education, skill level or type of employment contract. As Standing (2011: 88) argues: ‘the precariat does not consist of people with identical backgrounds’. Modern working life is changing rapidly for insiders as well as outsiders on the labour market and ‘jobs long thought to be protected from the vagaries of market forces are now subject to new forms of insecurity and downward pressure on compensation’ (Appelbaum, 2012: 314).

The idea of decreasing job quality across different occupations and forms of employment is closely related to the *democratization of risk perspective* (Beck, 1999, 2000). Within the classical labour market literature the idea of a segmented labour market (Atkinson, 1984; Doeringer and Piore, 1971) is dominant. On the secondary labour market employment relations are insecure (temporary and flexible) and working conditions are worse than those of workers on the primary labour market, which is characterized by permanent employment contracts and higher job quality. According to Beck and others there is no longer a clear division of labour markets into a primary and secondary segment. This is for example confirmed by empirical evidence that working conditions have indeed become quite similar for workers in Finland and Canada, regardless of their type of employment contract (Saloniemi and Zeytinoglu, 2007). Saloniemi and Zeytinoglu state that ‘there is an erosion of working conditions across countries and the “peripheralisation” or “casualisation” of “core” employment alongside a growing number of fixed-term, non-standard workers ... blurring the boundaries between the internal and external labour markets’ (Saloniemi and Zeytinoglu, 2007: 124–125; see also Guest and Clinton, 2006).

However, our understanding of developments in working conditions of permanent employees as compared to flexible employees in modern labour markets remains limited. We do not know to what extent the type of employment contract represents different threats towards employees’ working conditions, and how this is related to differences in human capital and labour market position. Several researchers have paid attention to working conditions among different groups of employees (e.g. Blossfeld et al., 2005; Gallie, 2007, 2013; Gallie et al., 2004; Goldthorpe, 2002; Scheve and Slaughter, 2004), recent studies on the convergence of working conditions between permanent and flexible employees are however largely missing, or have a limited focus on a single country (e.g. Barbieri and Scherer, 2009; Keller and Seifert, 2013) or specific facets of job quality (e.g. Burgoon and Dekker, 2010; Scherer, 2009). There have been a few attempts to investigate the claim of convergence in working conditions on a flexible labour market (cf. Kalleberg, 2011; Saloniemi and Zeytinoglu, 2007). With this research we try to contribute to the debate on labour market flexibilization and working conditions among permanent and flexible employees. In this article, flexible employment can be understood as less stable jobs that deviate from the norm of permanent employment, such as temporary employment contracts or agency work (see also Hipple, 2001). We investigate if the transformation of risk created by an environment characterized by increased international competition and a continued decline of unions (Kalleberg, 2011) has resulted in similar developments of job quality between permanent and flexible employees. Hence, our main research question is whether or not permanent employment is related to higher levels of job quality.

The article is structured as follows: first, we discuss ideas on the transformation of risk on the modern labour market. The next two sections address the data set and empirical part of the study. Finally, we present our concluding remarks.

The transformation of risk

Increasing economic openness combined with the implementation of new technologies has given rise to a more globalized economy (Held et al., 1999; Mills et al., 2008) or, following Castells, to a network society (Castells, 2000). In general, this implies an increased pressure on employers to respond quickly to changing market demands (Crouch, 2007; McCann et al., 2008; Thompson, 2003). Concerning the labour market consequences of these processes two perspectives can be observed.

As stated in our introduction, a first perspective on economic globalization can be observed in which it is argued that because of the growth of a more open, globalized economy, work has become more insecure for various groups of employees. According to Kalleberg (2011), job security and working conditions have become more problematic for different groups of employees, not only for flexible workers but also for white-collar workers who have previously been more job-secure. The decline of trade union power has contributed to this process. As a result, it is not surprising that more people are anxious and insecure, even when unemployment rates are low (Kalleberg, 2011).

Survey evidence in the United States shows that white-collar workers have experienced higher workloads and time pressure during the last few years, introducing some 'bad' aspects in relatively 'good' jobs (Kalleberg, 2011). Saloniemi and Zeytinoglu (2007) report that job qualities have become more similar, regardless of the type of employment. Workers with permanent employment contracts do not necessarily experience greater time autonomy and safety at the workplace compared to flexible employees (Saloniemi and Zeytinoglu, 2007: 120). This points to processes of democratization of risk. In this perspective, global and technological change has led to lower job qualities for all. While Ritzer (1993) pointed earlier to the so-called 'McJobs' to symbolize a deterioration of working conditions in the service industries, commentators such as Beck (1999, 2000, 2002), Bauman (2001) and Castells (2000) argue that 'jobs for life' have disappeared and work has become more unstable for everyone, regardless of occupation, sector or type of employment contract. According to Beck, we are living in a 'risk society' (Beck, 1999). Long-term careers are disappearing, increased market pressure decreases autonomy over work tasks and neither the state nor trade unions are capable of protecting employees against growing risks on modern labour markets. Following this line of reasoning, the type of employment contract is no longer an important predictor of an individual's perceived job quality. It can therefore be expected that:

H1a: There are no differences in job quality between permanent and flexible employees.

The second perspective fits with the theory of labour market segmentation. Employers show an increased interest in promoting more flexible employment relations. By using flexible jobs, such as temporary contract work, on-call employment and temporary agency work, employers are able to adapt to market fluctuations more easily, dismissal

costs are lower and workers can be better screened before offering permanent employment. While the flexible workforce is a very heterogeneous segment of the labour market (Silla et al., 2005), most studies report less favourable job qualities for flexible employees compared to workers with permanent contracts (e.g. Barbieri and Scherer, 2009; Booth et al., 2002; Burgoon and Dekker, 2010; De Witte and Näswall, 2003; DiPrete et al., 2006; Draca and Green, 2004; Giesecke and Groß, 2003, 2004; ILO, 2003; Kalleberg, 2009; Keller and Seifert, 2013). Flexible labour relations thus contribute to a segmentation of the workforce between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, which corresponds to the idea of a dual and segmented labour market (Rueda, 2005, 2007). Furthermore, while flexible employees are mostly members of weaker groups on the labour market such as younger and less educated workers (e.g. Hipple, 2001), the use of flexible employment also results in a so-called ‘recommodification’ of risk because flexible workers are often excluded from employment protection and social security, thus intensifying inequalities in risks in contemporary working life (Breen, 1997). Based on this line of argumentation, we hypothesize that:

H1b: Permanent employees experience higher job quality compared to flexible employees.

In order to test differences in job quality between permanent and flexible employees, it is important to take some macro-level conditions into account as well. Based on earlier studies on the relationship between labour market experience and macro-level conditions (e.g. Anderson and Pontusson, 2007) we expect that higher unemployment rates are closely connected to a growing emphasis on market efficiency and competition, which leads to lower levels of perceived job quality among employees (cf. Thompson, 2003).

Regarding differences in national institutions and industrial relations, earlier research demonstrates that the level of employment protection may impact on the perception of job security (e.g. Anderson and Pontusson, 2007). The reasoning is as follows, stricter employment protection makes it more difficult to fire employees. While some argue there is no connection between employment protection and job security (e.g. Erlinghagen, 2008), the level of perceived job security is however supposedly higher in countries with strict employment protection. In our study, we further investigate this link between employment protection and the perception of job security.

The level of trade union density is also supposed to lower labour market risks for employees. According to Western and Rosenfeld (2011), unions are the general voices of equity promoting social solidarity and job quality such as job security and the level of discretion and autonomy over work tasks (e.g. Brady et al., 2013; Edlund and Grönlund, 2008; Esser and Olson, 2012). As the central aim of trade unions is to represent workers’ interests, we expect to find higher levels of job quality within countries with stronger trade unions.

Next, GDP per capita might affect different aspects of job quality too, while flexible employment is bound up with economic conditions as well. Worsening economic conditions may give rise to employment on a temporary basis instead of long-term secure jobs (Goudswaard, 2003). Regarding job quality, it could be the case that regardless of labour market conditions, economic conditions are themselves significant predictors. For example,

economic conditions as measured by GDP per capita, may play an important role in explaining feelings of security at the workplace, regardless of the unemployment rate (Chung and van Oorschot, 2011). Furthermore, Green (2013) has shown that there is a clear relationship between job quality indices and GDP per capita.

Consequently, given differences in institutional arrangements, industrial relations systems and economic conditions between countries we include these relevant control variables and hypothesize that:

H2: Workers perceive lower job quality in countries with higher unemployment rates.

H3: Workers are more job-insecure in countries with lower levels of employment protection.

H4: Workers perceive lower job quality in countries with weaker trade unions.

H5: In countries with better economic conditions, workers perceive higher levels of job quality.

Finally, we control for several individual-level characteristics that may influence the level of perceived job quality as well as the contractual employment situation.

Data and methodology

For our analyses we use the two most recent representative and merged samples of employees from the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) covering 11 different Western European countries during the years 2005–2010. We use these two data sets because they include micro-level data on type of employment and job quality.¹ The 11 countries included represent a clear variety in economic, labour market and industrial relations conditions. We include Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Germany, Belgium, France, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain and Greece. Included are employees between 15 and 65 years. We have weighted the data and recoded some variables for interpretation and statistical purposes.

This study focuses on four different types of job quality: job security, time autonomy, task autonomy and career advancement. These four indicators represent different important dimensions of one's job quality (e.g. Rubery and Grimshaw, 2001). To measure *job security* we use the following item: 'I might lose my job in the next six months' (1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree). This variable contains a left skewed distribution, although the skewness and kurtosis measures stay within acceptable range. *Time autonomy* is measured by the quasi-interval variable indicating the probability of influencing working hours (1 = they are set by the company with no possibilities for changes; 4 = your working hours are entirely determined by yourself). *Task autonomy* is measured by information about applying one's own ideas in job tasks (1 = never; 5 = always). *Career advancement* is captured by the question of whether one perceives that one's job offers good prospects for career advancement (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

The *type of employment* is coded 1 for workers with permanent employment contracts and 0 for flexible employees (including temporary contracts and agency work).² Unfortunately, due to differences in the number of observations, it is statistically not possible to focus on the heterogeneity of flexible employees. At the individual level, we

have included age, gender, job tenure, education, sector and occupational class as control variables. *Age* is measured in years, and *age squared* (divided by 100) is used for checking non-linear effects. *Gender* is measured by a dummy variable (1 = female). *Job tenure* is measured using the question how many years one has been working in this company. *Education* is evaluated by the highest level of education attained (1 = pre-primary education; 7 = second stage of tertiary education).³ In our models, we also control for sector (1 = private sector) and we take account of *occupational class* by using nine dummy variables from the International Standard Classification of Occupations (one-digit ISCO; reference = elementary jobs), because research suggests that labour market risks are less prevalent among certain classes (Tangian, 2007) and sectors (Heinz and Marshall, 2003).

Next, we have included some macro-level variables (unemployment rate, GDP per capita, employment protection and trade union density). The *unemployment rate* is obtained from the EU Labour Force Survey. GDP per capita (in purchasing power standards) data are from Eurostat and allow for a meaningful comparison of economic conditions between countries. With respect to job insecurity, we control for the level of employment protection. Information on *employment protection* is used from the OECD and indicates the difficulty to dismiss individual employees (Venn, 2009). There is no reason to expect employment protection impacts on other aspects of job quality (Anderson and Pontusson, 2007). Information on *trade union density* is available from the OECD Labour Force Statistics and measured by the ratio of wage and salary earners that are trade union members, divided by the total number of wage and salary earners. Finally, a dummy variable is included to capture possible year effects. It should be stressed that it is not our purpose to provide a full explanation of the outcome variables, but rather to examine the specific effect between the type of employment and different facets of job quality. All variables included in the analyses and their values are shown in Table 1.

We are using multilevel regression analysis to test the different theoretical rationales. Multilevel modelling is needed because the data structure includes two levels of variance (country-level and individual-level variables). Therefore, traditional regression methods, such as ordinary least squares regression (OLS), cannot be used (Hox, 2002). The variables added in our models meet all statistical assumptions for multilevel analyses. The total data set contains 24,832 cases, clustered within 11 countries.

Results

Table 2 displays our results regarding different facets of job quality between permanent and flexible employees.

The first model represents determinants of perceived job security. The results clearly show that permanent employees are more job-secure compared to employees with flexible employment contracts. This is an expected finding because of the limited duration of many flexible employment contracts. The higher educated experience higher job security compared to the lower skilled and women feel more secure compared to men. The length of job tenure may affect job security as well: the longer the contract duration, the stronger the perception of job security. Turning to the work characteristics, it looks like workers in the public sector have higher job security than private sector workers and the higher skilled job types (legislators, professionals and technicians) as well as the occupational

Table 1. Descriptive statistics: variables included in the models (country-level post-stratification weighted numbers).

Variables	Response categories	Mean (SD)
<i>Job quality</i>		4.00 (1.18)
Job security	1–5	
Time autonomy	1–4	1.99 (1.19)
Task autonomy	1–5	3.65 (1.33)
Career advancement	1–5	2.81 (1.23)
<i>Type of employment</i>		
Permanent employment (ref. = flexible employment)	0–1	0.86
<i>Individual-level explanations</i>		
Age	in years	40.17 (11.53)
Age squared/100	age squared divided by 100	17.46
Sex (ref. = male)	0–1	0.45
Education	1–7	4.48 (1.31)
Job tenure	in years	9.95 (9.57)
Sector (ref. = public sector employee)	0–1	0.73
Occupational class (ref. = elementary jobs)	0–1	
Legislators		0.09
Professionals		0.16
Technicians		0.15
Clerks		0.12
Service workers		0.14
Skilled agriculture		0.02
Craft & trade workers		0.12
Plant operators		0.07
Armed forces		0.01
<i>Macro-level explanations</i>		
Unemployment rate	in % persons in the labour force without work, but who are currently available for work	8.8 (2.89)
GDP per capita	GDP per capita index (in PPS)	114.39 (11.44)
Employment protection	the overall difficulty to dismiss individual employees	2.23 (0.51)
Trade union density	in % of trade union members	36.96 (22.0)
Year dummy (ref. = 2005)	0–1	0.61

categories armed forces and skilled agriculture are significantly more job-secure. Our findings also suggest that there is no relationship between the level of employment protection and perceived job security. Finally, the level of unemployment in a country is negatively linked to the perception of job security: workers feel more job-insecure

Table 2. Determinants of job qualities in 11 European countries (multilevel regression analysis; unstandardized regression coefficients; estimation: maximum likelihood).

Variable	Job security	Time autonomy	Task autonomy	Career advancement
Intercept	3.818 (0.39)***	0.006 (0.30)	0.350 (0.36)	1.697 (0.34)***
Type of employment	0.907 (0.02)***	0.057 (0.02)**	0.210 (0.02)***	0.108 (0.02)***
Age	-0.003 (0.00)	0.009 (0.00)*	0.043 (0.00)***	0.002 (0.00)
Age squared	0.000 (0.00)	-0.005 (0.00)	-0.041 (0.00)***	-0.023 (0.00)***
Sex	0.048 (0.01)**	-0.101 (0.01)***	-0.088 (0.01)***	-0.274 (0.01)***
Education	0.036 (0.00)***	0.099 (0.00)***	0.076 (0.00)***	0.094 (0.00)***
Job tenure	0.016 (0.00)***	-0.001 (0.00)	0.000 (0.00)	0.000 (0.00)
Sector	-0.309 (0.01)***	0.202 (0.01)***	-0.041 (0.02)*	0.019 (0.01)
Legislators	0.069 (0.04)	0.702 (0.03)***	0.851 (0.04)***	0.872 (0.04)***
Professionals	0.176 (0.03)***	0.288 (0.02)***	0.706 (0.04)***	0.631 (0.03)***
Technicians	0.105 (0.03)**	0.349 (0.02)***	0.457 (0.03)***	0.664 (0.03)***
Clerks	-0.005 (0.03)	0.203 (0.02)***	0.097 (0.03)**	0.523 (0.03)***
Service	0.032 (0.03)	0.064 (0.02)*	0.333 (0.03)***	0.391 (0.03)***
Skilled agr.	0.230 (0.08)**	0.037 (0.06)	0.544 (0.08)***	0.083 (0.08)
Craft & trade	-0.074 (0.03)*	-0.160 (0.02)***	0.300 (0.03)***	0.304 (0.03)***
Plant operators	-0.056 (0.03)	-0.183 (0.03)***	-0.269 (0.04)***	0.060 (0.03)
Armed forces	0.553 (0.10)***	0.206 (0.03)*	0.175 (0.11)	1.195 (0.10)***
Unemployment rate	-0.049 (0.00)***	-0.010 (0.00)*	0.002 (0.00)	0.011 (0.00)
GDP per capita	0.000 (0.00)	0.004 (0.00)*	0.105 (0.00)***	0.003 (0.00)
Employment protection	-0.077 (0.06)	-	-	-
Trade union density	-0.002 (0.00)	0.006 (0.00)**	0.004 (0.00)*	0.000 (0.00)
Year	-0.134 (0.01)***	-0.067 (0.01)***	-0.111 (0.02)***	0.075 (0.01)***
-2LL	59603.42	54832.75	67017.44	63348.28
d.f.	21	20	20	20
Observations	19,797	20,579	20,622	20,373

Source: EWCS (2005–2010).

All models are significant improvements from the null-models (not shown).

*** $p < 0.0001$; ** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.05$.

during periods in which jobs are more at risk. In general, these results are in line with earlier research on the perception of job security (e.g. Sverke et al., 2006).

With regard to time autonomy, most results point in the same direction as with the explanation of job security. Permanent workers experience higher time autonomy compared to flexible employees. Older workers feel more time autonomy as well as the higher educated. Our interpretation regarding the higher time autonomy among older employees is that employers are developing strategies to retain older workers by offering them more flexible working time arrangements. Workers in the private sector experience

more time autonomy compared to public sector employees and people in job types with higher skill levels perceive more time autonomy in their work. Women experience lower levels of time autonomy compared to men. Workers within craft and trade as well as plant operators experience less time autonomy, while most other occupational classes perceive higher levels of time autonomy. The level of unemployment is negatively linked to the perception of time autonomy, while there is a positive association between GDP per capita, trade union density and time autonomy. The overall message is in line with our expectations: in countries with higher unemployment levels it is more difficult for workers to obtain time autonomy, while time autonomy seems to increase across countries with higher levels of GDP per capita. The findings also suggest that trade unions influence job quality in a positive way. Another general conclusion regarding our main interest is that differences in experienced time autonomy derive from the lines of traditional social cleavage such as type of employment contract, gender, educational level and occupational class.

With regard to task autonomy, permanent workers perceive more task autonomy compared to flexible employees. Older employees experience more task autonomy, but this positive association is lower among the oldest respondents. As mentioned earlier, gender, educational level and occupational class are clear predictors of job quality: task autonomy seems to be more problematic for women, the less skilled, plant operators as well as workers in elementary job types. This is also true for workers in the private sector of the economy. We also find that the unemployment rate is negatively linked to task autonomy, while trade union density accounts for rising levels of task autonomy.

Fourth, permanent workers experience higher levels of career advancement. The perception of career advancement increases for certain age groups (25–34 years in particular) and women perceive fewer possibilities for advancement compared to men. The level of education has a positive impact on this specific aspect of job quality and most occupational classes report higher possibilities for career advancement relative to elementary jobs. This is on average most obvious among legislators, professionals, technicians and the armed forces. In this model, no differences are found on the basis of trade union density, unemployment rate and GDP per capita.

Looking at the overall picture, we have demonstrated that job quality is closely attached to the type of employment contract. Hence, hypothesis 1a should be rejected. It turned out that people with permanent employment contracts perceive higher job security, time autonomy, task autonomy and opportunities for career advancement than flexible workers, net from other individual and macro-level characteristics. While a major thesis in the literature suggests a convergence of risk, we have found clear lines of social inequality based on the type of employment contract. The finding that permanent employment is related to higher levels of job quality offers unequivocal support for hypothesis 1b. Our empirical results also show that women, the lower educated and workers in relatively lower skilled job types are facing less favourable job qualities. These results also contradict the theoretical rationale of a ‘democratization of risk’ in modern working life. Regarding cross-country differences, we have found that trade unions and GDP per capita seem to increase different aspects of job quality (time and task autonomy). These findings (partly) confirm hypotheses 4 and 5. We have also observed lower levels of job quality (job security and time autonomy) due to higher

unemployment rates. These results are (partly) in line with hypothesis 2. With respect to the level of employment protection and perceived job security, we did not find a significant connection (see also Erlinghagen, 2008). Based on this finding we reject hypothesis 3.

Conclusions and discussion

This article started with the assumption that there has been a blurring of the boundaries between the secondary and primary labour markets. Given increased market pressure, it was expected that the type of employment contract no longer represents a relevant distinction between insiders and outsiders in modern working life. In other words, permanent employment contracts would no longer contain a buffer against low job quality. However, data on perceived job quality in 11 Western European countries show that there is still good reason to consider workers with flexible jobs as outsiders. On the basis of the results of this study we are able to provide the following answer to our main research question: permanent employment is still related to higher levels of job quality. There are also remarkable differences in job quality when looking at gender, educational level and occupational class. Overall, men, the higher educated and workers in higher occupational classes enjoy higher job quality. These results provide clear evidence for the persistence of social inequality among traditionally more disadvantaged groups on the labour market (cf. Mills et al., 2008). From these findings, we conclude that there has been no democratization of risk as was suggested by different commentators (see Beck, 2000; Standing, 2011) and earlier research findings (see Saloniemi and Zeytinoglu, 2007). Rather, there is clear evidence for the insider–outsider theory of employment.

Across countries, we have seen that economic conditions and the industrial relations set-up affect different aspect of job quality. In a country with a higher unemployment rate, workers experience lower levels of job security and time autonomy. Accordingly, in countries with stronger trade unions and higher levels of GDP per capita, workers possess higher levels of time and task autonomy. Consequently, country-specific conditions determine the level of job quality as well.

The existence of a negative association between flexible employment and perceived job quality also suggests several practical implications. Nowadays, workers are more likely to get flexible jobs (Gallagher and Sverke, 2005). In Europe, there was a more than 6 percentage points increase in flexible employment between 1980 and 2011 (De Lange, 2013). We have shown that flexible employment is accompanied by lower job quality and earlier research findings point to negative consequences of insecure employment on private and family life (Scherer, 2009). Thus, flexible jobs do not seem to facilitate life and employment satisfaction. This highlights a possibility for action by (local) unions, employers and governmental institutions. Earlier research suggests the possible externality of combining increases in labour flexibility, while generating higher levels of security for flexible employees at the same time (Hemerijck, 2013). In the Nordic countries in particular, such as Sweden, Denmark and Finland, there seems to be an effective institutional design aimed at combining a high level of flexibility with relatively high levels of income and employment security, or ‘flexicurity’ (Muffels and Luijkx, 2008). According to Gallie (2007: 99–100), the high level of employee workplace representation in Nordic countries, with their high level of trade union density, is a key explanation. However,

most unions are not likely to represent workers with flexible employment contracts (Rueda, 2007). While the flexible workforce is growing and union strategies and attitudes towards flexible employment have somewhat changed (Pernicka, 2005), most unions oppose flexible employment, portraying this type of employment as highly insecure (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2011). Their primary focus is still on permanent employment (De Jong, 2008) and unions have difficulties in organizing flexible workers (Malo, 2006). This suggests that in an increasingly flexible labour market change in union priorities might be called for, as well as the development of proactive recruitment strategies towards flexible employees (cf. MacKenzie, 2010) and encouraging flexible employees to voice their opinions.

Furthermore, the equal treatment of flexible employees by employers may benefit flexible employees as well. Through HRM policies, such as training, education and career development, employers are able to establish and maintain employee commitment, which is crucial for organizational continuity (e.g. Salaman et al., 2005). In addition, it is observed that learning provisions at the workplace contribute towards increasing employment security on modern labour markets (cf. Bekker and Wilthagen, 2008). Unfortunately, most employers are reluctant to invest in flexible employees (e.g. Booth et al., 2002; Draca and Green, 2004). According to most employers, investing in flexible employees simply makes no sense due to the limited contract duration and, therefore, insecure returns in the future. We would argue this perspective is outdated. Earlier findings in the literature show that HRM policies are strong antecedents of commitment and better employee performance (e.g. Torcka, 2004). There is no reason to assume that these mechanisms are different regarding flexible employees (Kalleberg, 2000). Therefore, it seems desirable to pay more attention to the job qualities of flexible employees, such as the level of autonomy and career development. Increased effort to increase job quality among flexible employees will most likely result in positive employee and organizational outcomes.

Finally, governmental institutions can play a role in improving job quality for flexible employees. According to Burrioni and Keune (2011), labour flexibility poses new insecurities for employees, but these insecurities are not accompanied by institutional complementarities for disadvantaged workers. To ensure better outcomes for flexible employees, a lowering of distinctions between permanent and flexible employees is possible. This can be done by a decrease in the employment protection for permanent jobs, in this way lowering boundaries between insiders and outsiders on labour markets. Especially in highly regulated labour markets, like Italy and Spain, there is a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders. However, a negative effect of lowering labour market regulations is the increased insecurity among permanent workers. Another option is helping flexible workers to move across jobs, making them more 'employable' and less insecure. Although there are significant differences in the institutional make-up and labour market characteristics between Western European economies, future policies might facilitate life-long learning programmes, regardless of the nature of employment contract. While labour markets will most likely become more flexible in the near future and where there is the intention to combine a more flexible labour market with more secure job conditions, flexible employees should be provided with the necessary learning opportunities (cf. Augustsson, 2014).

Future research should differentiate between specific types of flexible workers, such as employees with a temporary contract, agency workers, on-call contracts and (short hours) part-time work. This might lead to different conclusions regarding the perception of job quality. It would also be interesting to examine changes in job quality over a longer time period as well as the economic circumstances and institutional dynamics associated with these developments. Using longitudinal data would then be a logical next step.

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Notes

1. The waves included are 2005 and 2010. Earlier waves contain missing or changed question wordings on job quality.
2. Apprenticeships have been excluded because they can be seen as programmes of vocational preparation instead of jobs per se (Ryan and Unwin, 2001).
3. A model including six dummy variables for educational level (pre-primary education = reference category) shows the same statistical patterns.

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Author biographies

Fabian Dekker is a sociologist at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. His research interests are labour market flexibility, youth unemployment and the consequences of technology for social inequality.

Romke van der Veen is Professor of Sociology of Work at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. He has published extensively on welfare state reform and new social risks.