

Precarious employment conditions affect work content in education and social work: Results of work analyses

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Abstract

Work content is adversely affected by precarious employment conditions, with consequences for workers and clients/customers. Three examples are taken from professions involving long-term relations between workers and clients. Adult education teachers hired on short-term contracts to teach primarily immigrant populations prepare their courses under less favorable conditions than regular teachers and their employment context foments hostility among teachers. Special education technicians are hired on a seasonal basis which interferes with their ability to coordinate and plan their efforts in collaboration with teachers. Workers in shelters for women suffering conjugal violence who were hired on a casual or on-call basis were unable to follow up with women they helped during their shifts and more rarely engaged in one-on-one counseling. Precarious work contracts can affect mental health not only through employment insecurity but also through negative effects on the ability to do one's job and take pride in one's work, as well as weakening the interpersonal relationships on which successful, productive work depends.

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1. Introduction

In the 1990s, ergonomists from our research team witnessed an example of how new employment practices were affecting work content in a bank. In an attempt to save money, the bank diminished the number of paid off-peak hours by hiring a number of young bank tellers who worked only at times when demand was heavy (noon, evenings, etc.). One Thursday afternoon, an ergonomist observing the work process witnessed a conversation between two experienced full-time tellers. They had just received the work schedule for the following week. "Marie" said to "Anne", "I'm all alone on Monday." Anne commiserated with Marie, but the ergonomist didn't understand, since three other tellers were listed as working on Monday. Marie explained that her three co-workers were all part-time and inexperienced, which meant that Marie's work would be constantly interrupted by questions from the others. In fact, our later observations showed that interruptions were a serious problem for experienced bank workers (Seifert, Messing, & Dumais, 1997).

During further observations, we also noticed that part-time tellers working at peak demand times worked more intensively than did full-time tellers, since the former were not assigned to such tasks as checking the previous days' entries, processing transactions from the automatic banking machines and ordering pizza for the bank manager's lunch. Tasks of part-time tellers were much more likely to involve prolonged standing, frequent walking between the teller

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station and the bank vault and serving a rapid succession of customers whose patience had been tried by standing in line for longer times than during off-peak hours. They were assigned few tasks where they had any control over work speed. Thus, mental, emotional and physical components of the jobs of irregularly scheduled part-time staff differed from those of full-time staff with the same job titles. These observations explained a counter-intuitive finding from the ergonomic study: that part-time workers were as likely as full-time workers to suffer musculoskeletal symptoms associated with their work (Seifert et al., 1997). At the same time, the task content for full-time workers was changed by having part-time colleagues.

This type of observation resulted in our questioning more widely the effects of new forms of work organization on work content. Ergonomists belonging to the research team “l’Invisible qui fait mal”¹ were asked by our union partners to examine several cases where changing employment practices had recently resulted in “atypical” employment contracts or work hours. In response to this request, we found, for example, that variable, unpredictable work schedules resulted in problems for telephone operators with young children since they were constantly required to rearrange child care, day care for elderly parents or sick relatives, and children’s activities (Prévost & Messing, 2001). Nurses who were assigned to a different department every few days experienced difficulties in providing adequate patient care (Seifert & Messing, 2004). In the hotel industry, part-time and casual hotel room cleaners were consistently given less desirable room assignments, were less able to organize their work, and had more trouble accessing necessary tools of their trade, resulting in a heavier physical and mental workload (Seifert & Messing, 2006).

These experiences led us to worry about the effects of atypical work on the work process in situations where the workers’ job is to create a long-term relationship with a beneficiary, such as in education and social work. Although ergonomic analysis initially concentrated on the manufacturing sector, ergonomists are increasingly interested in analysing work in services, where the worker–client relationship must be taken into account (Caroly & Clot, 2004; Caroly & Weill-Fassina, 2006; Cerf & Falzon, 2005). We present here three cases where ergonomic studies have revealed that “atypical” employment relationships can have adverse effects on relationships among employees, on the work process, on work content and, thereby, on employee and client mental (and physical) health. The first case, that of adult education teachers, involves short-term contract employment and multiple part-time employment; the second, that of special education aides, involves short-term contracts only; and the third, a study of work in women’s shelters, involves casual, intermittent employment.

2. Methods

The methods used in these studies, which combine qualitative and quantitative approaches, have been described elsewhere (Messing, Seifert, Vézina, Balka, & Chatigny, 2005). Briefly, they are based on an approach to work analysis developed in France (Guérin, Laville, Daniellou, Duraffourg, & Kerguelen, 2001) and applied to women’s work in Québec. Work is observed and workers are interviewed in an iterative process where information gained with each method enables the other method to go deeper and we arrive at an enriched picture of the work.

2.1. Case 1: Adult education teachers (multiple, limited-term contracts)

The analysis of the work of adult education teachers was requested by the teachers’ union (the Centrale des syndicats du Québec or CSQ) because teachers were discontented with the fact that they were repeatedly hired on 10-month temporary contracts for an average of 15.1 years before being offered a permanent position. Adult education teachers in Québec can be involved in either professional (training for trades) or general education (literacy, French as a second language and high-school equivalency) courses; the study described here involved only general education teachers.

2.1.1. Context

The general education sector of the Québec adult education system is designed for school drop-outs and new immigrants. Government policies on adult education and immigration have changed constantly, with responsibility for

¹ French for “The invisible that hurts”, a partnership between three union confederations and Québec ergonomists and legal scholars to improve women’s occupational health through joint research projects. See Messing, K., & Seifert, A. M. (2001). Listening to women: Action-oriented research in ergonomics. *Arbete och Hälsa*, 17, 93–104.

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