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Job quality in triadic employment relations: Work attitudes of Norwegian temporary help agency employees



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Summary In this article we examine job quality and job satisfaction among employees of temporary help agencies (THAs) in Norway. Temporary workers are subject to triadic employment relations as they are employed by the THA but directed by the client organization; characteristics of both of these organizations may affect job satisfaction directly and indirectly through job rewards. Our data are based on a survey of a representative sample of workers employed by THAs ($N = 2678$). We find that job quality is greater when: agency workers possess an asset that is valuable to the client firm; there are not conflicting demands on the temporary worker from the THA and the client firm; and employees prefer to work as temporaries. Autonomy, pay satisfaction, intrinsic rewards, and security are associated with job satisfaction after controlling for the features of triadic employment relations.

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Introduction

During the last three decades there has been a growth in the use of triadic employment arrangements in many industrial countries (Kalleberg, 2000; Connelly & Gallagher, 2004; Purcell,

Purcell, & Tailby, 2004; Smith & Neuwirth, 2009). These depart from standard, bilateral work arrangements where work is both controlled by the employer and usually performed at the employer's place of work. Triadic employment relations are created in various ways, as when an organization contracts out certain functions (e.g., food or janitorial services) to employees of a contract company or when an organization hires workers from Temporary Help Agencies (THAs). The latter is the most widespread form of triadic work arrangement and employment intermediaries such as THAs are playing an increasingly important role in assigning workers to jobs in

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industrial countries (CIETT, 2014; European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions 2006). The relations among temporary workers, their employers (THAs) and the client organization are the type of triadic employment relationship we will examine in this paper.

Temporary Help Agencies, according to conventional wisdom, provide workers with short-term, low-quality jobs; they mainly provide flexibility for the employers and lower costs at the expense of workers (Beynon, Grimshaw, Rubery, and Ward 2002; DeGrip, Hoevenberg, & Willems 1997). Some scholars have claimed that the growth of THAs have led to the growth in bad jobs in some countries (Kalleberg, Reskin, & Hudson, 2000; McGovern, Smeaton, & Hill, 2004). In matching individuals to jobs, THAs may facilitate change or preserve inequalities in the labour market (Kalleberg, et al., 2000; Jahn & Rosholm, 2014). Moreover, the way THAs reward and assign agency workers to client organizations are often found to disadvantage women, emphasizing the importance of employment intermediaries to gender stratification (Fernandez-Mateo, 2009).

At the same time, there is considerable and growing evidence that the types of jobs that THA workers perform are very heterogeneous (Kunda, Barley, & Evans, 2002; Lautsch, 2002). Client firms may use THA employees in core activities (Bidwell, 2009; Matusik & Hill, 1998; Nesheim, Olsen, & Kalleberg, 2007) and they may often work side-by-side with regular, standard workers (Lautsch, 2002). In addition, while women have traditionally dominated THAs, recent trends show an increasing proportion of men. There are also a growing number of high-competence workers in this sector (Bidwell, 2009; Luo, Mann, & Holden, 2010). Moreover, THA workers differ in terms of their preferences, motivation and skill levels, as well as in the characteristics of the job contexts in which they participate (Purcell, Purcell, & Tailsby, 2004). Researchers have begun to investigate how such heterogeneity influences the characteristics of nonstandard jobs and attitudes of workers in such jobs (e.g., Broschak, Davis-Blake, & Block, 2008). Studies have also begun to show how the presence of THA workers influences the dynamics in the client firms such as when they affect the behaviour and attitudes of regular, standard workers (Banerjee, Tolbert, & DiCiccio, 2011; Broschak & Davis-Blake, 2006; Davis-Blake, Broschak, & George, 2003).

In this article, we contribute to existing theories of triadic employment relations by analyzing the sources of differences in the quality of jobs that are experienced by THA workers that are due to the features of both client and THA firms, and to the relations between these two kinds of organizations. We do this by examining the determinants of job quality and job satisfaction among 2678 employees of THAs in Norway. We first discuss the distinctive attributes of triadic employment relationships. We next discuss the concepts of job quality and job satisfaction, and develop hypotheses about how they are affected by the characteristics of triadic employment relationships. We then describe our data and variables, and evaluate our results. While our sample of THA employees does not permit us to compare them to ‘standard’ employees, our unique data set enables us to analyze the work attitudes of THA employees and to derive a better understanding of the role of employment intermediaries and client organizations in the labour market and how triadic employment relations affect the quality of jobs.

Triadic employment relations

Triadic employment relations differ from bivariate employment relations, as illustrated in Fig. 1. Bivariate employment relations are formed between an employer and an employee. The most common bivariate work arrangement is the “standard employment relationship” (SER), which was the normative conception of work in industrialized countries in most of the post-World War II period. The SER involves open-ended contracts in which the work is directed by an employer and done at the employer’s place of business and with regular pay and benefits. Its viability was facilitated by the high economic growth and relatively young labour forces of the postwar period (see Vosko, 2010). Not all bivariate employment relations involve open-ended contracts, however. For example, workers hired on a temporary basis for short durations—also exhibit bivariate employment relations.

By contrast, in triadic employment relations, the worker establishes connections with several employers (Córdova, 1986; Bronstein, 1991; Vosko, 1997). The most common triadic employment relations involve the use of temporary help agencies (THA) that employ workers and send them out to customers to work on an hourly basis at the client’s premises and under the client’s direction. THAs recruit and screen employees, sometimes provide training, and are responsible for hiring and firing, issuing paychecks, withholding payroll taxes, etc. (Carey & Hazelbaker, 1986; Connelly & Gallagher, 2004). Unlike temporary workers who are hired directly by an organization, the triadic employment relationship introduces complications into work arrangements by creating complex linkages among the THA, the client organization, and the individual worker. Agency workers are involved in a complex network of relational ties as their legal employer is the THA but they work at and are supervised by the client organization (Bidwell & Fernandez-Mateo, 2008; Kinnie, Purcell, & Adams, 2008).

We focus in this paper on the characteristics associated with the triadic employment relationship in examining the determinants of job quality and job satisfaction among temporary help agency workers. Nonetheless, we recognize that there are additional characteristics of temporary employment that are associated with their impermanent status that

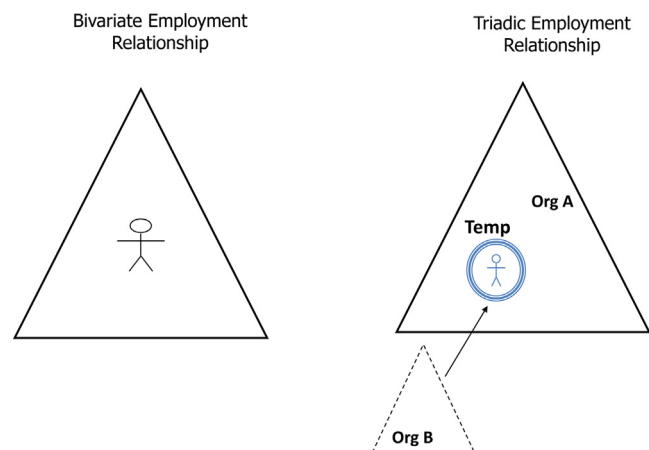


Figure 1 Bivariate and triadic employment relationships.

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