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OCDE/GD(91)78

EXTERNAL RELATIONS DIVISION

LABOUR/MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME

NEW FORMS OF EMPLOYMENT IN A CHANGING ECONOMY

Report on a meeting of management experts
held under the Labour/Management Programme

ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Paris 1991

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(Paris, 20th and 21st September 1990)

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SUMMARY

Under the OECD Labour/Management Programme for 1990, a meeting of management experts on "new forms of employment in a changing economy" was held in Paris on 20th and 21st September 1990. This meeting was prepared in collaboration with the Business and Industry Advisory Committee to the OECD (BIAC).

Over the last decade, new forms of employment have been very much in evidence as part-time, temporary and fixed-term employment, among others, have spread in many OECD countries. This development is often discussed under the heading of "labour-market flexibility"; it is also considered by many observers as having contributed to recent job growth.

It is sometimes argued that such forms of employment are relatively "precarious": trade unions, for example, have on occasion argued that they are undesirable and create a "two-tier" society. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss whether these forms of employment do have this effect and, if so, to see how far such "contingent" employees do indeed have inferior training opportunities and promotion prospects; analyse the role management strategies have played in the development of these new forms of employment; and consider whether their undesirable features can be avoided.

The attached report, which is a general summary of the discussions of the meeting of experts, has been drafted by Mrs. Françoise Piotet, Professeur des Universités, Directeur du Centre de Sociologie du Travail et de l'Entreprise, Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers, Ministry of Education (France), who was the general rapporteur.

A list of participants at the meeting is attached in annex.

THE OPINIONS EXPRESSED AND ARGUMENTS EMPLOYED IN THIS REPORT
ARE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE AUTHOR
AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THOSE OF THE OECD.

FINAL REPORT ON THE MEETING

by Mrs. Françoise Piotet
Professeur des Universités
Directeur du Centre de Sociologie du Travail et de l'Entreprise
Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers
Ministry of Education (France)

The new forms of employment are today the subject of a debate involving all the actors in economic life. The number of parties involved (employers and their representatives, governments, workers and their representatives) and their different national contexts make any attempt to harmonize standpoints illusory (1). Analysis is made all the more difficult by the period of change now being experienced by the developed economies: globalisation of the economic system, restructuring of national economies accompanied by a significant expansion of the service sector with its specific constraints, changes in production structures -- whether of goods or services -- through the introduction of new technologies, and the wide variety of legislative, contractual and cultural settings from country to country. All of these factors increase the number of parameters to be considered when analysing individual situations. Whilst acknowledging these difficulties, it is this analysis that the management experts undertook. After hearing three statements by members of the Secretariat on current work in the OECD, they considered the reasons for the new forms of employment and their various consequences on the basis of a description of the respective situations in the various Member countries, concluding the debate with a discussion on probable future developments in these forms of employment.

The benchmark

The debate on the new forms of employment in a changing economy is partly distorted by the benchmark used to define the kind of employment that is regarded as "traditional" -- even though its development is associated with a relatively short period in our history.

In developed industrial countries, one feature of the remarkable economic growth which followed World War II was a considerable rise in dependent employment and a corresponding steady drop in self-employment. Little by little, a kind of labour standard emerged, which has been written into laws or contracts according to the situation in each country or the strain placed on labour markets and involves an explicit or tacit permanent contract applying to a particular place of work and to collectively agreed working hours and conditions. This form of employment developed in a period of intense industrialisation when priority was given to the production of consumer durables. The production methods dictated by this priority, associated with a specific industrial relations and legislative context, gradually forged a socio-economic "standard" for employment.

Upheavals during the 1970s called this standard in question. These upheavals had many causes which were not all exclusively economic in origin.

The oil crises and the emergence of new competitors on the manufacturing market have been partly responsible for destabilizing the developed Western economies. Concomitant demographic and socio-cultural factors aggravated this destabilization, which prompted a dramatic rise in unemployment, varying in degree according to the country.

All the experts present stressed that it was in this context that new forms of employment emerged or that certain forms of employment which were very longstanding but unimportant or confined to particular industries or specific trades have developed. The main ones are part-time and fixed-term employment: temporary and occasional work, which can either be combined or take a wide variety of forms as regards both the time and place of work (weekend work, home work, etc.). Some experts also felt that shift work, night work and flexible working hours should also be included under the heading of new forms of employment, which can be said to encompass the nature of the work contract as well as the increasingly varied forms of paid employment.

Numbers affected

The OECD Secretariat and the various management experts who described current experience in their own countries first endeavoured to determine the extent of the phenomenon and its recent developments.

While these forms of employment have on the whole grown substantially -- in volume -- in every OECD country (2), the trend has been very different from country to country [for example, part-time employment varies from 5 per cent in Italy to over 28 per cent in Norway (3)]. Part-time employment increased in Europe by 3 per cent a year between 1979 and 1985, while at the same time the number of full-time jobs remained constant. On the other hand, in the United States, Japan, Finland, Sweden and Australia, new job generation over the same period was mainly for full-time employment [see reference (3)]. In terms of volume, temporary jobs also multiplied in every OECD country, though they continued to account for only a relatively low proportion of total employment (between 5 and 6 per cent on average, with substantial variations between countries: 4 per cent in Italy, 12 per cent in Denmark and Greece) [see reference (3)]. In terms of flow, jobs of this kind have grown considerably: for example, between 1988 and 1989, 75 per cent of recruitments in France and 50 per cent in Germany were under temporary contracts (4).

Reasons for this development

The experts wished to point out that while the increasing proportion of these forms of employment has been responsible for some occasionally very lively debate, this has been largely based on a simplified view of reality.

These new forms of employment have, in fact, developed under the threefold impetus of governments, employers' policies and the trend of demand for labour.

The prime aim of the policies introduced by the governments of the various Member countries has been to increase employment and reduce unemployment. They have indirectly favoured the development of new jobs

through the various measures adopted to facilitate the labour market integration of young people or the reintegration of the unemployed through various types of training midway between fixed-term employment and apprenticeship. Community work schemes, which are also fixed-term and often part-time (5), may also be cited. The latest study on this subject by the International Labour Office (ILO) emphasizes the leading role played by the State-employer in the growth of part-time work in the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands and France. In France, for example, 63 per cent of the rise in part-time work is ascribable to the public sector (6).

While the policies implemented on behalf of the unemployed by the governments of the countries concerned were much the same, their policies relating to the quantitative flexibility of work differed widely: maintenance or tightening of constraints on employment, limitations on recourse to temporary or fixed-term contracts, new patterns of working time (in Sweden and France between 1981 and 1983) or, on the contrary, further deregulation in order to facilitate recruitment, whatever its form (Germany) (7). It should be pointed out, however, that the effects governments expected from these contrasting policies were identical; it was hoped that these very different measures would produce the same effect: to sustain and increase employment.

For their part, the management experts stressed the need for a relaxation of legal or contractual regulations so that firms can adapt more easily to the constraints of the business environment.

During the meeting, the Secretariat's contributions and the discussion examined more in depth the nature of these constraints, whose causes are economic and technological but are also due to changes in labour force attitudes in the industrialised countries.

Keener economic competition in a market spreading worldwide obliges businesses to try to reduce their production costs in order to become more competitive. To be fully profitable, machines must be able to operate more intensively, and faster technological change increases the need for more rapid amortization of this heavy investment. Fiercer competition prompts the diversification and renewal of products, which obliges businesses to innovate constantly. Demand is more variable, leading to substantial fluctuations in output. Finally, consumers' demands, especially for services, must be met by making adjustments. This modernisation effort prompts businesses to call for flexibility both through the reduction of social security charges and more flexible employment contracts (8), as well as more flexible working hours.

Lastly, the experts all agreed that workers' expectations of employment are changing and diversifying. Women now no longer leave the labour market at times of economic crisis as they did in the past. Many of them want to combine a career with bringing up a family and therefore try to find part-time work. It seems, too, that young people studying or in training are looking for any form of part-time or temporary employment that might help them finance their studies or acquire work experience likely to help them in choosing a career and gaining a permanent footing in the labour market. And older workers appreciate the opportunities these new forms of employment give them to avoid a sudden break between work and retirement. During the debate, other arguments concerned most workers' desire for more freedom of choice between working time

and leisure. Some experts also stressed the role played by taxation (income tax) in workers' (mainly women's) choosing to work shorter hours.

Complex effects of the new forms of employment

-- On the volume of employment

Relaxing legislation or the terms of employment contracts to promote recourse to temporary work has not had the spectacular impact on employment hoped for by governments. For example, a recent German study has concluded that the effect on employment of the new legislation meant to facilitate temporary work contracts has been relatively small (9). During the course of discussion, it emerged, however, that the use of fixed-term contracts in Germany had helped firms to cope with fluctuations in business and avoid increasing overtime. At the same time, quite a few of these contracts were for fairly long periods (at least six months and, for 35 per cent of them, eighteen months) thus allowing employees to acquire effective work experience. These were some of the reasons which prompted the German Parliament to extend the life of this legislation. In France, the legislative amendments of 1983 encouraged a very sharp rise in the number of fixed-term contracts (71 per cent of all recruitments in 1988) but without significantly reducing unemployment.

A more detailed analysis of the statistics is perhaps needed in order to understand not just the theoretical arguments but actual company policies. Despite the difficulties of comparing the indicators, which are due to differences of definition from one country to another, it is clear that part-time work, fixed-term contracts and temporary employment are more frequent in growth sectors than in declining sectors. It is therefore evident that sectoral growth patterns tend in fact to encourage more flexible but more insecure employment arrangements (10). This partly explains the relatively small impact of deregulation policies on total employment. These policies do not change the attitudes of firms in declining industries. On the other hand, those in growth industries find them an effective way of reducing wage costs. In the service sector, especially the distributive trades, part-time employment helps to cope with fluctuations in demand. In the other sectors, this also applies to temporary or fixed-term employment, which moreover is sometimes used as a means of manpower selection.

On the demand side, part-time employment is frequently a deliberate long-term choice (though less for young men than for women). This is of course truer in a period of growth than in a recession (11). Insecure jobs also meet the demand for flexibility by certain categories of workers -- especially young people. There are not enough surveys to conclude that people deliberately choose this type of employment, and it is often difficult to say whether this is so or whether an unpromising labour market leads them, particularly during a recession, to become more fatalistic.

However, the data available indicate that, as a rule and quite apart from government policies to sustain employment, the relative rise in new forms of employment corresponds to a concomitant rise in the supply and demand prompted by a context of abundant demand (apart from some rare exceptions).

The figures and the few surveys available on workers' opinions of these new forms of employment thus bring grist to the mill of the more liberal theories. Further analysis of the quantitative data suggests that the mechanisms promoting or restricting the rise of the new forms of employment are only very superficially explained by the law of the market as understood in its most traditional sense.

-- On the quality of jobs and equal opportunities

The discussion on these points was particularly important since these issues are raised by people who object to the growing prevalence of these new forms of employment.

It must be admitted, at the outset, that these "new" jobs are not haphazardly distributed among the working population. Although part-time work is on the increase for adult men during periods of unemployment, the vast majority of men have full-time permanent jobs. Permanent part-time employment is predominantly associated with women and older workers and, to a smaller extent, young people, while temporary jobs are usually filled by the youngest age group (12).

This general trend is subject to local exceptions which are due both to cultural variables (13) ("lifelong" employment in Japan gives young people the chance of employment on permanent contracts and shifts insecure employment to older workers and women) and institutional variables. Apart from differences in laws or contractual arrangements, some experts pointed out that policies on the work "environment" may also affect demand. The child care facilities on offer and the loans and grants available to students have an important impact on the nature of demand.

These new forms of employment, whether part-time, temporary or fixed-term, are generally less expensive for employers than the traditional forms (except in Australia for part-time work). Even though the "equal pay for equal work" rule is observed, the fringe benefits (social insurance, paid leave, training and various allowances) are often less than those associated with the traditional forms of employment. These benefits, which partly explain the rise in such employment during an economic downturn, have prompted some theorists to diagnose a "two-tier" labour market (14). There is a "hard core" of skilled and protected wage-earners surrounded by a more or less large number of workers whose status is always insecure. While secure part-time work exists in specific labour markets mainly associated with certain service industries, this is not the case for temporary employment or fixed-term contracts, at least when such jobs are taken by younger people. Bridges do exist between the hard core and the periphery, and this fact marginally invalidates this general theory. The latest research on the micro-economics of labour indicates, however, that workers with insecure jobs usually end up unemployed (15).

Changing perspective, from the company standpoint as opposed to that of the labour market, the Secretariat referred to some research which suggests that employers are adopting contrasting strategies, partly because of the institutional mechanisms of labour market regulation. This research sets numerical flexibility -- based on an employer's ability to adjust employment levels to production targets -- against the functional flexibility which demonstrates a firm's ability to adapt its internal labour market to

production processes. Firms choosing numerical flexibility are very adaptable to market constraints in the short term, but this is achieved at the expense of the long-term adaptability that goes with the modernisation of the means of production and the upgrading of workers' skills (16). Using new forms of employment compatible with a Taylorist organisation of production is likely to inhibit modernisation. In the medium-long term a strategy based on massive recourse to numerical flexibility may well cost a company dear. Other research, while partly confirming this analysis, explores the grounds for company strategies more systematically and sees employers as being partly conditioned by the prevailing system of industrial relations and hence the type of internal labour market regulation enforced. In the United States, according to an OECD study, "firms adjusted to changes in demand through a seniority-based layoff mechanism, whereas work organisation was based on a hierarchy of narrowly-defined job classifications, promotion into which relied in part on seniority. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, traditional organisation of internal labour markets was characterised by 'multi-unionism', or a plurality of craft-based unions, and the ability to adjust employment levels to demand conditions was greater in the United Kingdom relative to continental European countries" (17). The greater protection against dismissals afforded by the German, Swedish and Japanese systems means that the firm's adjustment to demand conditions requires greater functional flexibility. The authors of this study also point out that systems are changing in all of the countries mentioned: there is more recourse to numerical flexibility in Germany, while internal flexibility is being negotiated in the United States and the United Kingdom (at least in big firms). However, these findings do not invalidate the two-tier theory: "good jobs" in the primary sector are still concentrated in specific industries or firms; but the generalisations to which this theory has given rise are countered to a large extent.

The difficulties and risks

The rise of the new forms of employment is ascribable to a wide range of factors relating to the mechanisms regulating internal and external labour markets, modernisation, the globalisation of competition, the expansion of the service sector and demographic changes in the composition of the working population. The new forms of employment have many advantages for employers and workers alike. They also have some major disadvantages.

The experts stressed the constraints placed on firms by the rise in these new forms of employment: administration of these jobs is cumbersome, it is harder to organise the work and a greater burden is put on supervisory staff.

For the workers concerned, as some experts observed, apart from equality with respect to statutory entitlements, these jobs certainly do not offer equal opportunities to the employees concerned, who find access to further training and skills more difficult than do permanent and full-time employees and may actually be deskilled (18); they play a less important part in the life of the company as a whole and may thus see little point in upholding collective rights; and they all have fewer career opportunities. Temporary work and fixed-term contracts, which are often said to help young people gain a wide variety of experience, can do so only if the jobs available have a work content

with a modicum of interest and, above all, on condition that the assignments and contracts are not too short-lived (19).

No consensus emerged from the discussion on equal opportunities. Some experts believe that workers freely choose the jobs which suit them best and are capable of weighing advantages and disadvantages for themselves. Other experts, on the contrary, who do believe that the new forms of employment have some disadvantages, consider that proposals might be made to reduce these: for instance, part-time employment should always be voluntary, covered by social security and offered for highly skilled work, although not made subject to specific regulations.

Lastly, workers in insecure jobs clearly incur serious bodily risks in some instances. As an example, a recent study (March 1990) by the Ministry of Labour and the Caisse Nationale d'Assurance Maladie des Travailleurs Salariés (CNAMTS) in France (20) reported that manual workers under contract with temporary employment agencies are more accident-prone, mainly because induction procedures and information are scanty, supervision is inadequate and workers are given jobs they are not qualified to do. The survey also found that the more highly skilled temporary workers (whether on a fixed-term contract or employed by a temporary employment agency) are not so accident-prone. Some countries have introduced strict rules in an effort to redress this wrong; in Germany and Belgium, for instance, construction companies may not have recourse to temporary employment agencies. In France, a recently enacted agreement evidences the concern of employers, trade unions and the legislator that all dependent workers be treated alike (21). The management experts agreed that health and safety standards should not vary according to the type of contract an employee has.

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Technological change and the overhaul of production processes, fiercer competition and more exacting demands on the part of consumers transformed the organisation of work in every developed industrial country today. Even though they do not affect the nature of the work contract between employee and employer, weekend work, staggered working hours and shift work for the sake of greater functional flexibility are becoming commoner -- a change that has tended to divert attention from work contract changes associated with numerical flexibility. The differences between the two types of flexibility now seem less clearcut than had been assumed and both types seem likely to carry on existing side by side, each in its way contributing to making firms more adaptable.

The Secretariat feels that these new forms of employment will multiply in the future, both for the above-mentioned reasons and because they meet workers' demand for more flexible working time not only during the day, week or year, but also throughout working life. Lastly, demographic changes give

reason to believe that it will in the near future be necessary to reconsider the age of retirement, with the possibility of end-of-career arrangements different from those we have today.

This leaves the question of the future pattern of new forms of employment and whether governments will or will not make them subject to regulation. Some management experts opposed further government regulation in this area and voiced criticism of the draft Directive on atypical employment under the European Social Charter. The management experts hoped that special attention would be paid to the level at which regulation begins and that more scope could be left to businesses to reach settlements through negotiation.

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ANNEX

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Management Experts

KADOR•• Director•••••GERMANY
Fritz-Jürgen• Confederation of German Employers'
•• Associations (BDA)

NOLAN•• Director•••••AUSTRALIA
David•• Confederation of Australian Industry

TRITREMMELE• Managing Director•••••AUSTRIA
Wolfgang• Social Policy Department
•• Federation of Austrian Industrialists

GOMEZ ALBO• Director of Labour Affairs•••SPAIN
Pablo•• Confederation of Independent Entrepreneurs
•• of Madrid (CEIM)

SULLIVAN• Vice President, Labor Relations••UNITED STATES
Stewart•• Pfizer Inc.

PARCHET•• Deputy to the Director of International•FRANCE
Mrs. Christine• Social Questions
•• French Employers' Confederation (CNPFF)

NICASTRO• Director, Industrial Policy•••ITALY
Berardino• Gruppo Finanziario Tessile

ANDO•• Adviser (International Activities)••JAPAN
Takayuki• Japan Federation of Employers
•• Associations (NIKKEIREN)

MAGNUSSEN• Director, Economics Department••NORWAY
Olav•• Confederation of Norwegian Business
•• and Industry

TAYLOR•• Assistant Director General•••NEW ZEALAND
Raymond E.• New Zealand Employers Federation

WILD•• Employment Policy Director•••UNITED KINGDOM
Alan•• Retailing and Property Sector
•• Grand Metropolitan plc
•• Chairman of the meeting

GRÜNEWALD• Senior Vice President, European Affairs•SWEDEN
Björn•• International Department
•• Swedish Employers' Confederation

BÖLÜKBASI• Legal Adviser••••TURKEY
Ahmet•• Turkish Employers' Association of Metal
•• Industries (MESS)

Business and Industry Advisory Committee to the OECD (BIAC)

NYBÖLET•• Assistant to the Secretary General
Harald

RAPPORTEUR

PIOTET•• University Professor in the National••FRANCE
Mrs. Françoise• Conservatory of Arts and Crafts

OECD Secretariat

Directorate for Social Affairs, Manpower and Education

SCHERER•• Head of the Central Analysis Division•
Peter••

EVANS•• Principal Administrator, Central Analysis Division
John••

GRUBB•• Administrator, Central Analysis Division
David••

TERGEIST• Administrator, Central Analysis Division
Peter••

Economics and Statistics Department

OXLEY•• Principal Administrator, Growth Studies Division
Howard••

Directorate for Science, Technology and Industry

VICKERY•• Principal Administrator, Industry Division
Graham••

External Relations Division

LAHNER•• Deputy to the Head of Division
Herbert••

CHAS•• Assistant
Mrs. Rosemary

Observers

PREISS•• Acting Deputy Secretary•••AUSTRALIA
Brendan•• Department of Industrial Relations

COX•• Commissioner, Australian Industrial•• "
Phillip•• Relations Commission

ROJOT•• Professor, Paris I University (Sorbonne)•FRANCE
Jacques••

KÖHLER•• European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and
Eberhard• Working Conditions

a
END-OF-TEXT