



# Quality of Employment

## Definitions, Methodologies & Ongoing Debates

This policy brief reviews the development of concepts related to the quality of employment in the academic literature. It highlights the need for internationally comparable datasets on employment conditions so that policy makers can better understand and respond to labour market developments.

### What is Quality of Employment?

In recent decades an increasing amount of public policy and academic attention has focussed on different aspects of the quality of employment. Analysts have recognised that for many people, just having a job may not be enough to ensure even a basic standard of living. As the dual processes of globalisation and liberalisation have generated continuous calls for labour market flexibilisation, employment conditions such as wages, job stability and career prospects have changed. Thus, the latter have become at least as important a subject of study as traditional indicators, such as employment or unemployment rates.



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This paper explores the development of concepts related to the 'quality of employment' in the academic literature in terms of their definition, methodological progress and ongoing policy debates. Over time, these concepts have evolved from simple studies of job satisfaction towards more comprehensive measures of job and employment quality, including the International Labour Organization's concept of 'Decent Work' launched in 1999.

The literature on the 'quality of employment' is very diverse and spread between academic and institutional publications. Theoretical conceptualisations of the quality of employment have been diffuse, thus limiting their political impact. An overview of the quality of employment literature reveals the extent to which multiple concepts have developed in parallel. First, we must highlight the extent to which the terminology is confusing: expressions such as 'quality of working life' (predominantly linked to workers' own evaluations of one's job), 'job quality' or 'quality of work' (often focussing on the job content and work environment)

and finally 'quality of employment' and 'Decent Work' (which include all of the above as well as other issues such as labour relations, rights, gender gaps and work-life balance) are often used interchangeably and without clear definitions. This reflects the complexity of the subject: there are not only multiple facets of jobs that should be taken into account, but also multiple levels on which jobs can be analysed, ranging from a

that has developed. Whilst the process of academic research has been organic and tackled by several academic disciplines, international institutions such as the ILO and the EU have attempted to develop and operationalise decent work or job quality for their own purposes within the constraints imposed by their constituents.

Finally, and as we will see, the theoretical literature that conceptualised the quality

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particular work environment to broad labour market systems in which jobs are performed. It also reflects the fact that different academic disciplines have focussed on different aspects of the quality of employment.

Second, we must distinguish between the academic and institutional literature

of employment is often intertwined with methodological discussions of its measurement. In fact, all theoretical approaches sooner or later must confront the question of how the quality of employment can be measured. Without appropriate methodologies for measurement, the concept of the quality of employment itself leads nowhere.



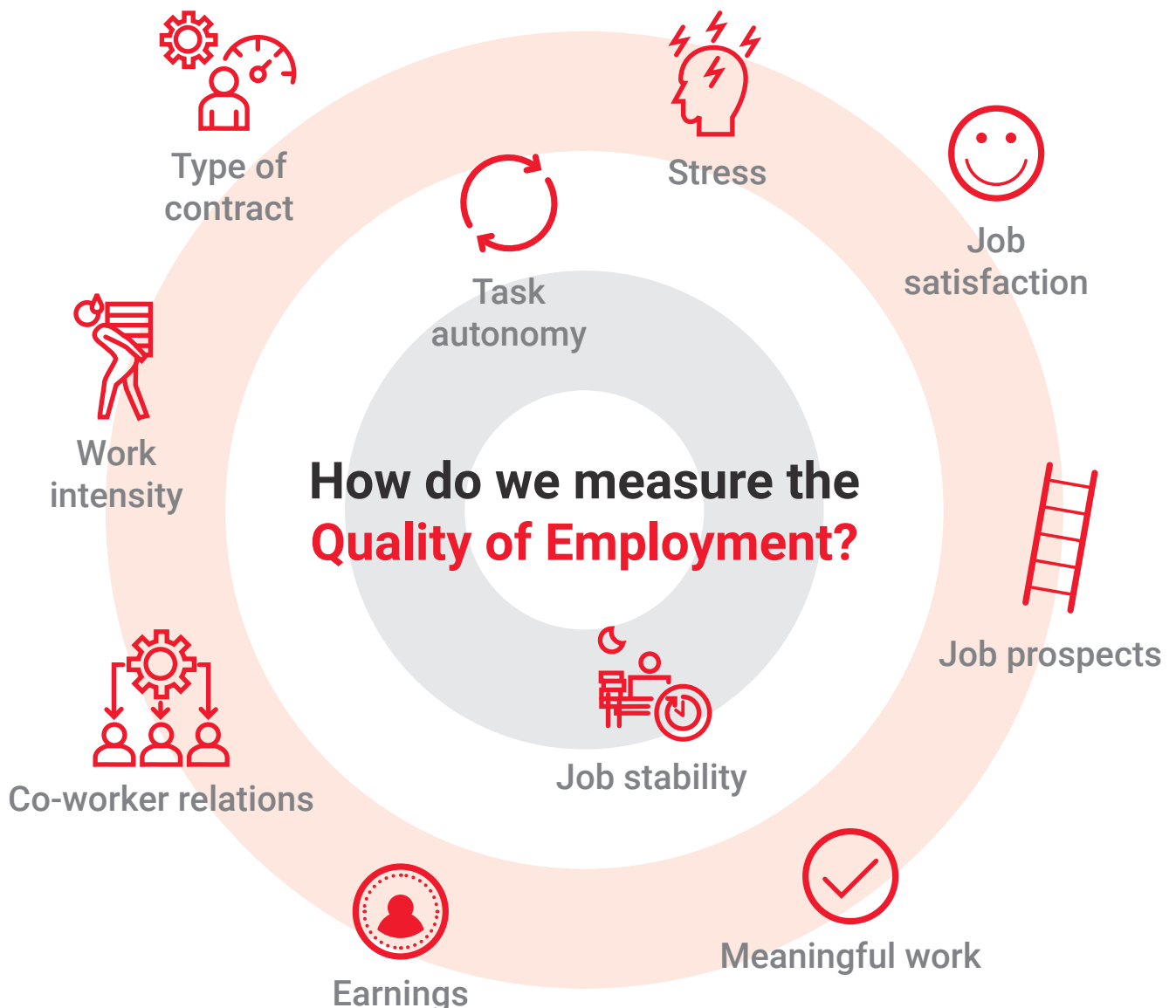
## Data and Methodological Issues

The literature on the measurement of the quality of employment has had to confront difficulties on multiple levels. First, successful measurements require reliable, and preferably also comparable, sources of data. Theoretical and methodological advances on the subject of the quality of employment are closely related to data availability. Conversely, data availability and comparability further theoretical and conceptual progress. The availability of comparable data across European countries has thus generated a virtuous circle in which empirical evidence has expanded the theoretical understanding of labour markets, which in turn has increased the efforts invested in data gathering.

A second problem that the measurement of the quality of employment has to confront is the question of which aspects of employment we are investigating. Whether we are interested in individual workers, jobs themselves, the regulatory environment or the labour market as a whole generates different methodological requirements. For example, do we consider the unemployment rate or an individual worker's risk of becoming unemployed? Here, data constraints often dictate which variables can be used or not, especially in a comparative context.

Third, although broad conceptual agreement now exists on what constitutes a "good job", there is still no methodological consensus of how

this should be defined and measured in practice. In particular, definitions may vary depending on the perspective of the analyst: for example, while governments require workers to contribute to social security systems, some workers may prefer to work informally so that they do not have to contribute, i.e. they prefer a higher level of earnings in the present over securing future income when they retire. Another frequently cited example is that employers would prefer more flexible employment relationships while unions and workers are likely to prefer stable employment conditions. This leaves analysts, policy makers and researchers with the question of how to reconcile these contradictory interests.



## Policy Implications and Conclusions

The paper on which this policy brief is based shows that concepts related to the quality of employment attract much research in the European context. However, this is hardly the case in other countries. We offer an explanation for this difference based on three overlapping ideas.

First, we argue that internationally comparative data on working conditions is central to progress. Twenty-five years ago there was very little internationally comparable micro-level data in Europe, making comparisons of labour markets or other aspects of quality of life costly and time-consuming. This situation has now changed in Europe as labour force surveys in EU member states have been standardised and a dedicated survey of working conditions has been established (the European Working Conditions Survey). These datasets not only facilitate statistical comparisons of countries' labour markets, they also provide a fertile environment for rapid theoretical developments in the understanding of how labour markets operate and the drivers of job quality. Researchers can demonstrate the usefulness of their conceptual approaches by applying their theoretical frameworks to internationally comparable data, and other researchers can respond constructively with further analyses from the same or other datasets.

Second, the academic process of defining the quality of employment has been organic; for instance, many of the lessons of the social indicators

movement in the USA were later taken up by comparative researchers in Europe. This evolution of ideas, although non-linear, has led to clear advances over the decades. Gradually, fuzzy and poorly defined concepts have solidified into a consensus on how to approach the subject of the quality of employment, which can now inform policy.

Third, the academic research community consists primarily of independent researchers. Whilst interested in the

and conclusions of the research.

The purpose of this article is to review existing debates around the quality of employment and related concepts, thus allowing for a clearer understanding of what constitutes good-quality jobs and the possibility of quantifying them. Placing the quality of employment high on the policy agenda has a much better chance of success if globally relevant operationalisations derived from cross-national comparative data are developed.

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policy implications of their research, they are not constrained to tell a particular story that might be viewed differently by the various social partners, namely, employers, trade unions and governments. This contrasts sharply with international institutions, which are often constrained by the interests of their stakeholders, whom they must consult. This leads to a longer decision-making process where each of these parties has a particular concern for the directions

Academic and institutional efforts undertaken so far provide valuable lessons for achieving such a goal. In this latter area international institutions, particularly the EU, have made significant contributions. We conclude that the quality of employment has attracted more systematic attention from both policy makers and researchers in recent years as internationally comparable data becomes available. ■

### Further reading

For a more detailed discussion of the arguments presented in this paper and a list of references, see the complete paper on which this policy brief is based:

**Brendan Burchell, Kirsten Sehnbruch, Agnieszka Piasna, Nurjk Agloni (2014)** "The quality of employment and decent work: definitions, methodologies, and ongoing debates" in Cambridge Journal of Economics, Volume 38, Issue 2, Pages 459–477  
<https://academic.oup.com/cje/article/38/2/459/1712154>