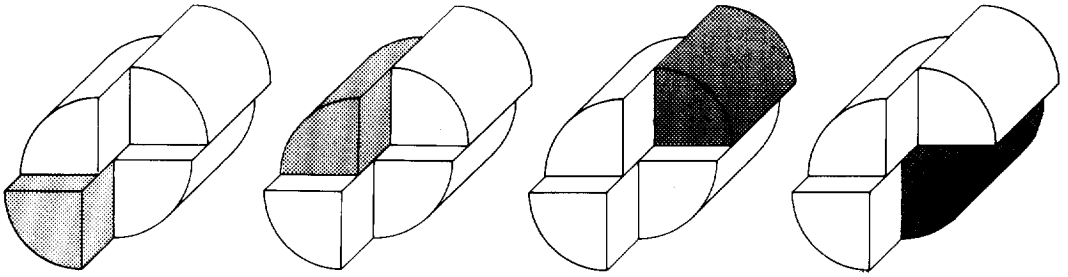
The Quality of Jobs



What makes jobs "good"? Time was when most of us would have answered that question simply in terms of pay. Today, we are likely to ask also about benefits offered, about steadiness of the work, and about other job conditions.

Four articles in this issue of the *Monthly Labor Review* explore different ways we assess job quality.

Job characteristics. Because people devote so much time and effort to their jobs, the nature of the job as well as the conditions of the workplace are, along with pay, important determinants of the value of employment. In "More than wages at issue in the job quality debate," Neal Rosenthal provides a review of the job attributes most commonly valued by workers in looking at the quality of the job they do.

Rosenthal notes that developing measures of overall job "quality" is difficult because the same job characteristics may be valued quite differently by different persons (for example, some may seek outdoor work while others shun it). Although the pay level established for the position is important, job attributes and working conditions also are of wide interest.

Contingent work. Among the most valued attributes of a job of high quality is security and constancy of employment. While part-time employment and flexibility in working hours meet the needs of many workers and their families, concern has developed about the phenomenon of contingent jobs. These are jobs in which security of ongoing employment is limited. Because "contingency of employment" is difficult to measure directly, some researchers have used new groupings of employment statistics to estimate the extent of contingent employment.

In "On the definition of 'contingent work'," Anne E. Polivka and Thomas Nardone evaluate these data and assess their adequacy in providing the information needed. The authors conclude that existing employment data are not well-suited to measure contingent employment, and outline the steps needed to collect the type of data they believe will better identify this segment of the labor market.

Flexible benefits. What were once called "fringe" benefits have become essential to many workers and their families. Increasing attention has been focused on noncash benefit compensation, such as pension rights, health insurance coverage, and employee leave. Some employee benefits plans now let workers choose the types of benefits they want their employers to provide. These plans reflect the diversity of workers' needs, and help employees balance their work and family responsibilities.

In "Flexible benefit plans: employees who have a choice," Joseph R. Meisenheimer II and William J. Wiatrowski report on the prevalence of flexible benefit plans among medium-sized and large employers, and review case studies of employee choices made when such plans are introduced.

Costs versus value. How much do workers value these noncash benefits? When is the value to the employee equal to the dollar cost of the benefit to the employer? Melissa Famulari and Marilyn E. Manser tackle these difficult questions in "Employer-provided benefits: employer cost versus employee value," by reviewing measurement issues and relating them to economic theory.

They recognize that cost may not be a good proxy for the value of the benefit to the worker. They suggest that more could be learned about how to value benefits by surveying workers to determine whether they would choose less benefits in exchange for more cash, and by studying the relationship between family spending patterns and employer-provided benefits.

THE DIVERSITY OF THESE ARTICLES illustrates the complexity of job quality issues, and of the whole range of expectations and needs that workers have from their jobs. Wider recognition of this diversity will help us improve our understanding of the labor market and suppress the inclination to classify jobs as "good" or "bad." □

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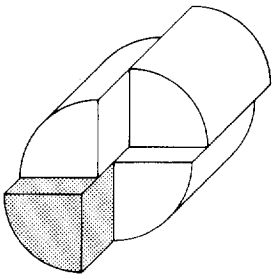

More than wages at issue in job quality debate

Nonwage characteristics of jobs play a role in employment decisions; workers often trade wages for job security, status, and other job attributes

Neal H. Rosenthal

Everyone agrees that the quality of jobs differs, but determining if one job is better than another can lead to great debate. Whether jobs have qualities deemed positive ("good jobs") or negative ("bad jobs") depends on the criteria used to evaluate the job as well as who does the evaluation. Economists focus their good jobs-bad jobs debate on wages, while individuals, as well as counselors and psychologists, who are primarily concerned with a comprehensive view of an individual's well-being, also consider the importance of job satisfaction, job security, and many other factors.

This article discusses the effect of nonwage attributes of jobs on the perceptions of job quality. It broadens the good jobs-bad jobs debate by considering factors in addition to wages which may be important to individuals in determining the quality of their jobs. The intention is not to detract from concerns about the economic benefits of work, but to highlight important aspects of job quality other than wages.

Individual values

Individuals consider a multitude of factors in addition to earnings when characterizing a job as "good" or "bad." For purposes of this discussion, these factors are grouped into five categories: job duties and working conditions, job satisfaction, period of work, job status, and job security. Although many of the factors are associated with specific occupations, it is important to remember that they can vary within an occupation. Just as earnings may have a wide range within an occupation, so may working conditions, job security, and determinants of job satisfaction.

The value individuals place on different job attributes varies and is determined by many factors. These values are derived from the socioeconomic background and the environment in the geographic area in which they live. In addition, different interests, perceived abilities, and interests in activities other than work, such as leisure or family responsibilities, result in individuals viewing the quality of a job from different perspectives.

It is not surprising that there is great diversity in how jobs are valued. This country's population has very diverse backgrounds. People live in inner cities, suburban areas, and rural areas. The population includes foreign born immigrants, sons and daughters of immigrants of different cultures, and those whose ancestors have been in the country for many generations. Educational attainment varies from high school dropouts to recipients of doctorate and other advanced degrees. Family economic backgrounds range from the very wealthy to those

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living in poverty. Each background would influence a person's perspective of the quality of his or her job.

Individuals from these diverse backgrounds have widely different interests and abilities. Some have artistic and creative talents, others work well with their hands. Some people are endowed with above-average intellectual abilities, and some are not. Some like to work with people, others prefer to work alone. Some prefer to work outdoors, others like an office environment. Structured working conditions are preferred by some, while others prefer unstructured conditions. Each individual reflects a unique combination of interests and abilities.

Job characteristics

Just as individuals differ, the characteristics of jobs differ. Many job characteristics are commonly perceived to be positive and others negative. Hazardous conditions and lack of job security are viewed by most workers as negative. However, all jobs with these characteristics are not undesirable. Playing professional football, for example, is certainly hazardous to one's health and lacks job security, but most athletes are not deterred from pursuing a professional career in the National Football League because of this.

Whether job characteristics are deemed negative or positive depends on each individual's personal view. For example, artistic jobs are viewed as desirable by many, but common perception does not indicate that nonartistic jobs are undesirable. Nevertheless, someone without artistic talent would likely be extremely frustrated in a job which required artistic abilities.

The following discussion defines some characteristics that may determine an individual's perception of a job's desirability. Nonwage benefits that translate into earnings, such as employer-paid health insurance, employer contributions to pension plans, and paid vacations, are not discussed, although, like earnings, they are important to a job's desirability. Some job attributes that relate to earnings, such as advancement opportunities, are discussed. Commonly held perceptions of the effect of a characteristic on job quality and specific occupations associated with the characteristic also are included.

Job duties and working conditions. The actual tasks performed on the job and the environment in which the tasks are performed, both the physical workplace and relationships with others, are important in evaluating the desirability of jobs.

Hazardous jobs involve work with dangerous equipment or materials or in dangerous surroundings. In general, hazardous jobs are viewed as less desirable than those that have little or no risk to the worker's physical well-being. Nevertheless, millions of workers are in jobs with potential hazards—construction craft occupations, metalworking occupations, driving occupations, and a variety of production occupations in manufacturing industries, to name a few.

Repetitious jobs requiring the same tasks to be done over and over again are, in general, not considered as desirable as jobs in which the tasks are varied. Jobs on the assembly line in manufacturing are commonly used to exemplify repetitious work, but many clerical workers are in occupations having this characteristic, for instance, word processors, statistical clerks, and file clerks.

Physical stamina is required in some jobs, as workers may have to lift heavy weights, walk long distances, stand for long periods, or stoop frequently. For many, such activity is undesirable. A variety of workers require physical stamina to perform their duties, including construction craft workers, postal mail carriers, laborers, and food counter workers. In contrast, sedentary jobs, such as those performed at a desk in an office, may be considered undesirable by many people.

A *generally confined* work space which requires workers to be in one place most of the time during the workday, rather than moving from place to place, is often considered an undesirable characteristic. Among the workers experiencing this characteristic are long distance truckdrivers, telephone operators, and cashiers.

At the other extreme are jobs that require workers to be on the move with little time in one place. These jobs may be desirable or undesirable, depending on individual preference. Sales representatives, insurance adjusters, mail carriers, and telephone and cable television line installers are typical workers of such occupations.

Stress is created in some jobs because of deadlines, life-threatening situations, and supervisory pressures. Air-traffic controllers are commonly used as an example of workers in a stressful occupation. Most workers consider stress to be undesirable, but some receive a feeling of importance and vitality while under stress.

Autonomy is lacking in jobs that are closely supervised or where the tasks have to be done in a very specific way. Some jobs are in settings that make it difficult to receive or make personal phone calls, receive visitors, or leave the worksite for any reason without obtaining the supervisor's permission. Such restraints make the job

Actual tasks performed and the environment are important in evaluating desirability of jobs.

undesirable to some workers. In general, jobs that permit more initiative in determining how the work should be done and more freedom in deciding one's movements are more desirable.

Some occupations are subject to more or fewer constraints than others. For example, assemblers in a manufacturing plant tend to have less autonomy than newspaper reporters covering a sporting event. However, the degree of autonomy in a specific job is often determined by regulations imposed by employers or individual supervisors rather than the occupation itself. Because of the value placed on autonomy, it is not surprising that self-employment is a goal of many workers.

Many job characteristics result in intrinsic satisfaction.

Working with detail is required in some jobs requiring precision in handling or dealing with specific items. There is no generally held view that this characteristic makes good jobs or bad jobs, although individuals may strongly believe that this characteristic is either desirable or undesirable for them.

Workers in occupations requiring attention to detail include accountants, optometrists, drafters, watch repairers, machinists, air-traffic controllers, surveyors, and dental laboratory technicians.

Working as part of a team is important in jobs requiring cooperation with coworkers in order to accomplish objectives. While this characteristic is not considered positive or negative, individuals may have strong feelings about its effect on job quality.

Many projects may require workers in different occupations to work together as a team. Construction projects, scientific research projects, professional team sports, performing arts, and advertising campaigns all may require individuals in different occupations to work as a team. Conversely, each of these activities are conducted in some settings by individuals working independently.

Job satisfaction. Many job characteristics result in intrinsic satisfaction. For the most part, all the characteristics listed below are positive, but the lack of the characteristic is not necessarily negative.

Ability to see the results of a job in a physical product can give a worker a sense of pride and satisfaction. Brickmasons, chefs, choreographers, artists, and architects are in occupations that possess this job attribute.

Problem solving, that is identifying a problem or goal and deciding what must be done to achieve a successful solution, is an important part of some jobs. Automobile mechanics, industrial production managers, physicians, police detectives, and engineers are among the workers having problem solving as a significant job attribute.

Creativity involves designing new products or services, procedures for making work more efficient, ways to accomplish a task or goal, or composing a song. Architects, designers, advertising workers, industrial engineers, and performing artists are in occupations where creativity is a significant job characteristic.

Recognition of a job well done is an aspect of some jobs. Some occupations lend themselves to public acclaim or appreciation by supervisors and associates for the accomplishments of the workers. Writers and editors, public officials, and performing artists commonly are identified with this characteristic. Of course, they can elicit just the opposite reaction.

Ability to influence others is needed in some jobs in order to stimulate others to think or act in a specific way. Teachers, counselors, psychologists, salesworkers, and managers are associated with this characteristic.

Ability to fully utilize the skills that individuals have obtained through work experience and school training is possible in some jobs. This characteristic is generally not associated with specific occupations, but is determined more by the manner in which employers use their workers. In general, workers with the most formal education view this characteristic as more important than those with little education. Studies have shown that this attribute is very important to workers.[1]

Opportunities to learn new skills is available in some jobs. New skills or training usually will enhance opportunities for advancement. This characteristic often is associated with the practices of employers rather than with a specific occupation. Research shows it is important to many workers.[2]

Possible advancement opportunities can be an important characteristic of a job and can lead to increased earnings and other desirable job attributes, or to a reduction in undesirable attributes. Most occupations have advancement potential, but to widely different degrees. Occupations having little or no advancement potential are known as "dead-end jobs."

Period of work. The hours of work differ among jobs in terms of total hours worked per week and the hours when workers must be on the job. Some periods of work are generally viewed as negative aspects of a job and others are considered positive.

Weekend and shift work are required in some jobs. That is, workers are assigned work during the weekend or on shifts other than the usual workday. In general, these work schedules are

considered undesirable, but they may be welcomed by full-time students or persons in search of a second job.

Jobs in retail sales, food service, and health service often are associated with weekend and/or shift work. Other activities that may require unusual hours of work are police and fire protection, public transportation, performing arts, power generation and distribution, and some manufacturing operations.

Overtime is often needed on some jobs during peak times or to meet deadlines. The chance to earn overtime pay periodically may be considered desirable by some workers, but others may not appreciate spending the extra time at work.

Overtime is not associated with specific occupations, but is generally more common in industries in which deadlines are important to meet or in which some segments of the work must be completed before others can begin, such as construction, durable goods manufacturing, and advertising.

Flexible work hours allow workers to set their own hours of work within some time framework as long as the required total number of hours are worked and the job is done. Such arrangements are considered desirable by workers.

The availability of flexitime generally is determined by the employer rather than by the occupation, and is more common in office-related work environments. Salesworkers also have great freedom in setting their own schedules to conform to the times when the customer load is heavy.

Part-time work (fewer than 35 hours a week) may be considered desirable by workers who have family commitments or prefer more leisure time than would be available with a full-time job.[3] To the contrary, a part-time job may not be desirable if an individual would like to work full time and increase his or her earnings.

Although part-time jobs are found in most occupations, jobs in some occupations are largely part time, especially in food service and retail sales activities. Many clerical occupations also have above average numbers of part-time jobs, as employers can organize the work to accommodate part-time work schedules.

Job status. How the importance of a job is perceived has an effect on an individual's view of the quality of his or her job. One's socioeconomic background has a great impact on how a specific job is viewed by each individual.

Social status is recognized as being associated with occupations.[4] Those having high status are naturally more desirable. A person's socioeconomic status has some bearing on how he or she ranks occupations by status, but studies have shown remarkable consistency in the ranking among different groups and over time.[5]

Occupations that rank high in social status generally require high educational achievement and include physician, lawyer, college professor, engineer, and architect. Occupations requiring little education are usually at the lower end of the spectrum and include laborer, janitor, and private household worker.

Status within an organization has a bearing on job satisfaction and is important to workers in evaluating a job's desirability. This characteristic is determined by the actions of the organization in which an individual is employed, rather than the occupation.

Job security. The chance of keeping a job despite economic conditions or other factors, can be a significant and positive aspect of a job. The amount of security associated with a job is more commonly determined by the employer or activity than by the occupation. Jobs in government are more secure than construction jobs, given the high risk of layoff because of seasonal and cyclical factors that affect the construction industry.

Tradeoffs

Everyone would like the perfect job—a job with varied duties, little stress, a product that can be seen, problem solving tasks, recognition from the public, flexible hours, high social status, and security, along with high wages. Very few individuals, however, have jobs with all of these qualities. But individuals usually try to choose a job that has more of the qualities that are most important to them and avoid those that have characteristics that seem undesirable.

Status within an organization has a bearing on job satisfaction.

Wages are generally considered the most important determinant of job desirability.[6] One reason is that higher pay may enable one to obtain greater enjoyment of life away from work. For example, enjoying leisure, caring for family, and the ability to meet one's needs for food, clothing, and shelter depend largely on the level of one's wages. Most workers spend about one-fourth of each week at work and, therefore, nonwage attributes of a job can be very important in determining job quality.

Individuals, therefore, usually consider nonwage job characteristics when selecting a job, in some cases trading wages for these nonwage characteristics. The more education and experience an individual has, the greater the variety of jobs available to him or her, compared with counterparts with lesser education or experience. Yet, data show that job shifting is greater among young workers and workers in

low paying jobs.[7] This may be because young workers have little understanding of what job characteristics are important to them, and gain that knowledge through experience in different jobs. Because wages are so important to most workers, many often leave a low paying job for a higher paying position, but they may also leave because of concern about other job characteristics.

Measurement difficulties

The values placed on each job characteristic differ among individuals. Studies have attempted to identify which characteristics are important to job satisfaction and to establish relative measures of the importance of different characteristics. Measurement poses significant problems to researchers engaged in these efforts because of the highly subjective nature of the responses to questions in the surveys used in the studies.[8] For example, individuals are usually asked to rank specific job attributes in some subjective way, such as high, medium, or low. The results of studies using this type of response can be very tenuous. In addition, problems arise when studies on job satisfaction are compared because the job attributes being measured often reflect the special interests or theories of the researchers.

Some job satisfaction studies can be very informative, however, especially if they focus on a very specific job characteristic. For example, as part of a supplement to the Current Population Survey in May 1985, information was gathered on whether employees would prefer to work more, fewer, or the same number of hours at the same hourly rate of pay they were currently earning. About a fourth of the respondents said they would prefer to work more hours and earn more money; nearly 10 percent preferred to work fewer hours and earn proportionally less; and the majority indicated they would prefer the same number of hours. While this survey lacks information on the relative importance of part-time work to job satisfaction, it does provide information on the extent to which workers are satisfied with their current hours of work.[9]

In contrast to other job characteristics, earnings do lend themselves to statistical measurements that allow comparisons among jobs and occupations, and cross classification by sex, race, and other characteristics. For this reason, earnings studies are perhaps the most reliable evaluation of job quality, although they do not represent a truly comprehensive measure.

The value of nonwage attributes of jobs has traditionally been part of the theoretical concepts used to explain labor market behavior. However, these attributes have, for the most part, been ignored in the debate concerning good jobs-bad jobs. Yet, trends indicate changes have occurred over time that affect nonwage attributes of jobs. Technology has had a great impact on reducing hazardous, tedious, and dirty jobs. Occupational safety and health legislation has improved workers' safety. Employers, in attempts to reduce labor turnover, have adopted practices to improve job quality and job satisfaction. For example, new management practices focus on reducing occupational rigidities and involving employees at all levels in the decisionmaking process concerning a variety of subjects affecting job quality. And finally, labor organizations increasingly have focused on nonwage aspects of jobs, such as job security, in labor-management negotiations.

Wages may be the most important concern in the good jobs-bad jobs debate, but they should not be the only concern in this very important issue. □

Footnotes

[1] Barry Gruenberg, "The Happy Worker: An Analysis of Educational and Occupational Differences in Determinants of Job Satisfaction," *American Journal of Sociology*, September 1980, pp. 247–71.

[2] Christopher Jencks, Lauri Pearlman, and Lee Rainwater, "What Is a Good Job? A New Measure of Labor Market Success," *American Journal of Sociology*, May 1988, pp. 1322–57.

[3] Rebecca M. Blank, *Are Part-Time Jobs Bad Jobs?* (Washington, The Brookings Institution, 1989).

[4] Otis Dudley Duncan, "A Socioeconomic Index for All Occupations," in Albert J. Reiss, ed., *Occupations and Social Status* (New York, Free Press, 1961), pp. 109–61.

[5] George A. Kanzaki, "Fifty Years (1925–1975) of Stability in the Social Status of Occupations," *The Vocational Guidance Quarterly*, December 1976, pp. 101–05; and Stefan J. Harasymiw, Marcia D. Horne, and Sally C. Lewis, "Occupational Attitudes in Population Subgroups," *The Vocational Guidance Quarterly*, December 1977, pp. 147–56.

[6] Jencks, Pearlman, and Rainwater, "What Is a Good Job?"

[7] *Occupational Projections and Training Data*, 1982 edition, Bulletin 2202 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1982), p. 14.

[8] Graham L. Staines and Robert P. Quinn, "American workers evaluate the quality of their jobs," *Monthly Labor Review*, January 1979, pp. 3–12.

[9] Susan E. Shank, "Preferred hours of work and corresponding earnings," *Monthly Labor Review*, November 1986, pp. 40–47.