



Participation at Work in Britain:

First Findings from the Skills and Employment Survey 2017

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HEADLINES

Participation at work is an important determinant of personal well-being and is considered to be a key factor for enhancing motivation and productivity in technologically advanced economies. The report examines trends in different types of participation among British workers, some of the factors that were associated with them and the implications of participation for worker well-being and motivation.

- Task discretion declined between 2012 and 2017. Yet this was the type of participation that had the strongest association with employee well-being and work motivation. The decline was particularly sharp for those in intermediary class positions and for female part-timers.
- There was an increase in semi-autonomous teamwork, which brought the level back to that of 1992. But the proportion of employees involved was relatively small (less than 25%) and semi-autonomous teamwork was only weakly related to higher levels of well-being and work motivation.
- Formal institutions for organisational participation (consultative meetings, quality circles) declined between 2012 and 2017, but the proportion of employees reporting high influence over organisational decisions that affected their work increased from 26% to 30%, returning to a level close to that of 1992. Influence through organisational participation was associated with considerable benefits for well-being (in particular for enthusiasm at work, perceived fairness, and the reduction of insecurity about the effects of organisational change).

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1. The Importance of Participation at Work

Employees' participation in decisions that directly involve or affect their work has been shown to have crucial consequences for their well-being and psychological and physical health. This is, in part, because of the very general value attached to self-determination, but also because participation provides a means for improving many aspects of the quality of jobs and hence the experience of work. Participation at work can take different forms: in particular it is important to distinguish participation in the sense of task discretion (or control of decisions about the way the job task is carried out) and organisational participation (or influence over wider organisational decisions). The two have been shown to be complementary in their effects, with task discretion particularly important for the sense of self-determination and organisational participation for the quality of the wider work environment. But both forms of participation are necessary to ensure employee well-being and health.

There also have been influential arguments about the importance of participation for the innovative capacity and productivity of organisations in an increasingly competitive and technologically advanced economy. There is a growing need for employers to harness high levels of motivation, to create the conditions for continuing learning and to take advantage of employees' experience of their jobs to find ways of improving the efficiency of work processes and the quality of products. The development of participative mechanisms that increase the active involvement of employees in their jobs is seen as a crucial component of an effective management strategy for achieving these objectives, since it will increase employee identification with the organisation and thereby the willingness to contribute to its success.

2. Previous Evidence

Previous research has shown that task discretion in Britain fell sharply across the 1990s and then stabilised from 2001 to 2012. Organisational influence, in contrast, rose over the 1990s, but declined between 2001 and 2012. There has been extensive evidence demonstrating the importance of participation for worker health. Under conditions of high work intensity, workers in jobs with low control have on average a thirty percent higher risk of cardiac illness than those with high control. Organisational participation is important in reducing insecurity (which is strongly linked to psychological distress) in periods of organisational change.

Although less well developed than in the case of health, there has been accumulating evidence of the benefits of participation for job performance and innovation. A wide range of studies have established its importance for job satisfaction and organisational commitment. But there is also evidence that higher

levels of task discretion stimulate employee learning on the job, the willingness to use initiative to introduce improvements at work and greater cooperativeness in the implementation of organisational change.

3. The Skills and Employment Survey 2017: A New Source of Evidence

The Skills and Employment Survey 2017 (SES2017) allows us to assess trends in different forms of participation with respect to the results of previous SES surveys. It also provides information on a range of potential determinants and outcomes of participation. It collected data from working adults aged 20-65 years old in England, Wales and Scotland who were interviewed in their own homes in 2017. The sample was drawn using random probability principles subject to stratification based on a number of socio-economic indicators. Only one eligible respondent per address was randomly selected for interview, and 50% of those selected completed the survey. Data collection was directed by ourselves and conducted by GfK.

SES2017 is the seventh in a series of nationally representative sample surveys of individuals in employment aged 20-60 years old (although the 2006, 2012 and 2017 surveys additionally sampled those aged 61-65). The numbers of respondents were: 4,047 in the 1986 survey; 3,855 in 1992; 2,467 in 1997; 4,470 in 2001; 7,787 in 2006; 3,200 in 2012; and 3,306 in 2017. For each survey, weights were computed to take into account the differential probabilities of sample selection, the over-sampling of certain areas and some small response rate variations between groups (defined by sex, age and occupation). All of the analyses that follow use these weights. For more information on the series see Felstead, A, Gallie, D and Green, F (2015) (eds) *Unequal Britain at Work*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

4. Indicators of Participation at Work

The survey included a range of indicators for different forms of participation – task discretion (or individual influence over task decisions); semi-autonomous teamwork (team influence over task decisions) and organisational participation (including items relating to consultative meetings, organisational influence and quality circles).

Task Discretion and Teamwork

The survey included four questions which assess how much *task discretion* or personal influence people had over specific aspects of their job tasks:

- How hard they work
- Deciding what tasks they are to do
- How the tasks are done
- The quality standards to which they work

The response options were 'a great deal', 'a fair amount', 'not much' and 'not much at all'. A summary index was constructed by reversing the scoring (so that high scores indicate high discretion) and taking the average of the responses to the four items. Scores were rounded to align with the scoring labels of the original items: a score of 4 indicated 'high discretion' with an average response of 'a great deal' across the four items.

With respect to teamwork, we developed three measures: *teamwork* (all work that took place in teams), *semi-autonomous teamwork* (where teams had substantial influence over task decisions) and *self-managed teamwork*. For all surveys other than 1997, employees were initially asked whether they usually worked on their own or together as a group with one or more other employees in a similar position to their own, providing an overall measure of *teamwork*. Those who did work in a team were then asked about the influence the team exercised over the same four aspects of work as in the measure of task discretion. An average influence score was created and teams that had a score equivalent to 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' of influence are taken as involving *semi-autonomous teamwork*.

From 2006 onwards, three additional items were included to determine the extent of self-management in teams, asking how much influence team members have over:

- Selecting group members
- Selecting group leaders
- Setting targets for the group

Self-managed teamwork involves those in semi-autonomous teams that also have a score equivalent to 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' with respect to these management items.

Organisational Participation

There were three indicators of organisational participation. An initial question investigated whether management had established *consultative meetings* by asking whether meetings were organised in which employees could express their views about what was happening in the organisation. Employees were then asked about how much say they had in decisions which affected the way they did their job. Responses of 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' are taken as a measure of *organisational influence*. A further item asked whether the employee belonged to a 'group of employees who meet regularly to think about improvements that could be made within the organisation (sometimes called *Quality Circles*)'.

5. Findings

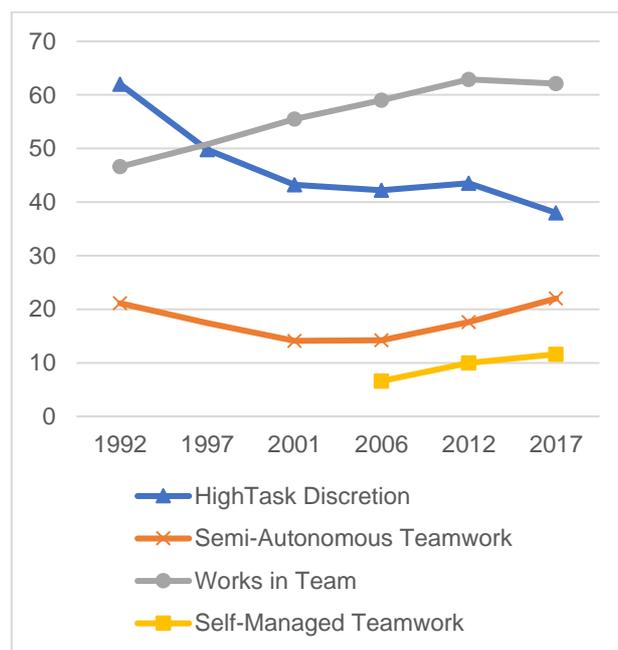
Task Discretion and Teamwork

As had been found in previous research, individual task discretion declined sharply between 1992 and

2001 and then remained at a similar level between 2001 and 2012 (Figure 1). But the period between 2012 and 2017 saw a further significant decline. While the general trends were very similar for men and women, from 2012 women in full-time work had not only caught up with men, but surpassed them, in the number of jobs with high levels of task discretion (Figure 4).

Between 1992 and 2012 there was a substantial expansion of the proportion of workers who worked as part of a team. Although there was a slight decline in teamwork over the period 2012 to 2017, 62% of employees worked in teams in 2017. The proportion of workers in teams that could influence task activities declined between 1992 and 2001, but then increased from 2006. But it remained relatively low: in 2017, only 22% of workers were in teams that has a significant say over the organisation of task activities. The proportion that were in self-managed teams – which could influence the selection of their leaders, members or targets – was considerably lower (12%).

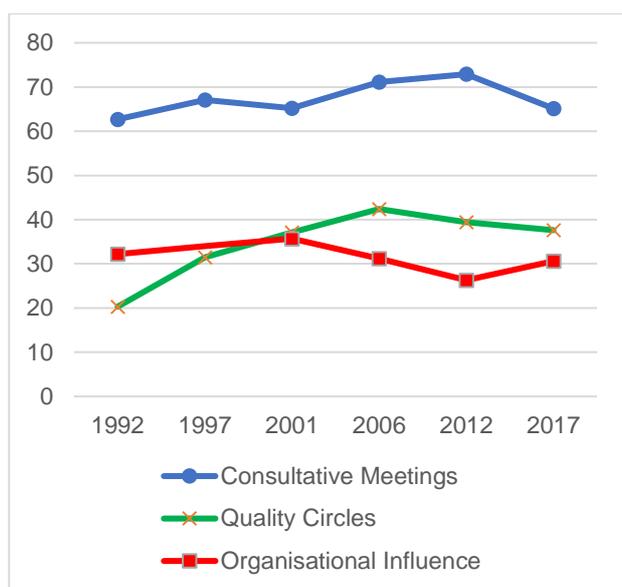
Figure 1: Trends in Task Discretion and Teamwork (% of Employees)



Organisational Participation

A notable feature of the years between 1992 and 2012 was the increase in the proportion of employees reporting that management held meetings in which they could express their views about what was happening in the organisation (Figure 2). In the most recent period (2012-2017), however, for the first time since the survey series asked this question, there has been some decline in the prevalence of consultative meetings. It is notable too that involvement in a quality circle, which rose substantially between 1992 and 2006, has been gradually declining since.

Figure 2: Trends in Organisational Participation (% of Employees)



In all years, employee reports of significant influence over decisions that affect their work have been much lower than might have been expected from the prevalence of consultative institutions. The figures have fluctuated a little over time, rising between 1992 and 2001, declining between 2001 and 2012 and then returning by 2017 to a level close to that of 1992 (but still lower than in 2001). The rise in organisational influence between 2012 and 2017, despite a decline in consultative institutions, reflected the fact that those channels of dialogue that continued to exist were more effective in providing a sense of involvement in decision-making than had been the case earlier (data not shown). However, in 2017, there remained a very considerable gap between the presence of formal consultative institutions and workers' perceptions of influence. Whereas 65% of employees reported the existence of consultative meetings, only 30% thought that they could influence organisational decisions affecting their work.

Participation, Class and Gender

The influence that employees felt they could exercise over decisions varied considerably by occupational class. This can be seen in Figure 3 which broadly categorises occupations into a more highly skilled group of professionals, managers and associate professionals; an intermediate group of administrative, skilled manual and personal service workers; and a less skilled group of sales, operatives and elementary workers. In both 2012 and 2017, higher skilled workers had greater influence over both immediate work decisions and broader organisational decisions. But the striking feature of the data is that the gap between those in the most highly skilled work and those in intermediate and lower skilled work sharply widened between the two years. This reflected a particularly marked decline in

task discretion for those in intermediate jobs and a pronounced increase in organisational influence among the higher skilled.

Figure 3: Task Discretion and Organisational Influence by Occupational Class (% of Employees)

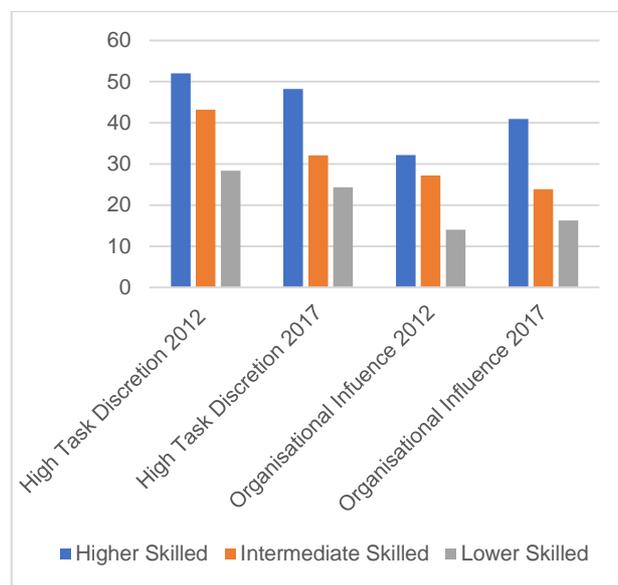
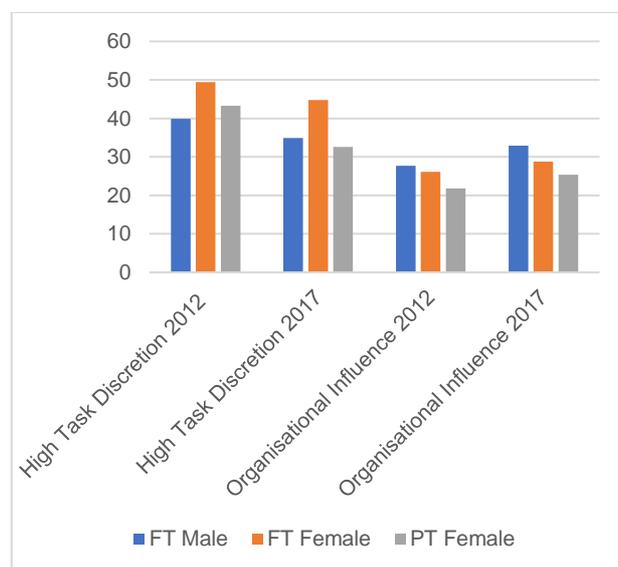


Figure 4: Task Discretion and Organisational Influence by Sex and Contract Status (% of Employees)



There were also variations in the level of participation by sex and contract status (Figure 4). Women in full-time work had higher levels of task discretion than their male equivalents in both 2012 and 2017. But, whereas in 2012, women in part-time work also had higher task discretion than male full-timers, by 2017 they were the category with the lowest task discretion, reflecting a particularly sharp decline over the period. In contrast to the pattern for task discretion, male full-time workers had the highest level of organisational influence in both years, followed by female full-timers. Women in part-time

work had the lowest levels of organisational influence. Both male and female full-timers and female part-timers experienced an increase in organisational influence between 2012 and 2017, but men's relative advantage over female employees also increased.

Participation, Well-Being and Motivation

The evidence from the 2017 survey strongly confirms the positive relationship of participation to both employee well-being and work motivation. However, the various types of participation relate to work attitudes in different ways.

Table 1 presents a comparison on a range of indicators of those who are high or low on different forms of participation. With respect to well-being, there are four items relating to enthusiasm at work, the sense of the fairness of treatment by the organisation, the ability to develop skills by learning on the job and the level of anxiety about the impact of future organisational change on the person's skills. It is notable that, for three out of four of these items, a high degree of task discretion has a very substantial positive effect. There are differences between those high and those low in terms of task discretion of 22 percentage points for enthusiasm, 23 percentage points for fairness and 20 percentage points for learning. In contrast, there is only a small positive difference between those in semi-autonomous teams and those not in teams with respect to learning and enthusiasm, while there is a small negative effect of being in a semi-autonomous team with respect to fairness and anxiety about

future change. Those high with respect to organisational influence are on all items more positive than those who have low levels of influence. The effect on learning is much smaller than with task discretion, but is comparably large for enthusiasm (21 percentage points) and is even stronger than for task discretion for fairness (27 percentage points) and for the reduction of anxiety about organisational change (11 percentage points).

The last three items relate more directly to attitudes to work performance: the extent to which people put in discretionary effort, take the initiative to introduce improvements at work and feel inspired to put in their best performance. Those with high task discretion are very much more likely to endorse responses that indicate a commitment to high levels of work performance than those with low discretion. Indeed there is 30 percentage point difference for discretionary effort and taking the initiative with improvements between those with high and low task discretion. Those who are members of a semi-autonomous team are also more likely to be positive on the performance related items, but the differences are relatively small compared to those not in such teams. Finally, the differences relating to levels of organisational influence are very similar to those for task discretion with respect to being inspired to put in the best job performance (with positive responses 15 percentage points higher for those with high than for those with low organisational influence). Organisational influence, however, has only a relatively weak association with discretionary effort and for use of initiative in introducing improvements.

Table 1: Participation, Well-Being and Motivation (% of Employees)

	Task Discretion		Semi-Autonomous Teams		Organisational Influence	
	High	Low	Yes	No	High	None
Well-Being Indicators						
Enthusiastic much/all of the time	52.3	30.4	47.1	45.4	57.6	37.1
Strongly agrees treated fairly by organisation	46.1	22.7	33.3	38.0	53.8	27.1
Strongly agrees job requires learning new things	45.9	26.0	39.8	34.1	41.7	34.2
Very anxious about effect of future changes on use of skills	20.8	24.8	26.5	19.8	14.7	25.8
Motivation Indicators						
Puts in a lot of discretionary effort at work	79.4	49.5	66.7	63.3	71.7	64.3
Has taken initiative 2+ times to introduce improvements	84.4	53.7	74.0	64.4	71.7	64.3
Strongly agrees organisation inspires very best job performance	24.5	8.0	18.2	16.1	26.4	11.4

6. Policy Implications

The evidence from the 2017 survey confirms the importance of participation for both employee well-being and work motivation. In particular, it has shown that both task discretion and organisational influence relate strongly to employee well-being, while task discretion has a particularly strong relationship to work motivation. It is notable, however, that the trends over time with respect to both forms of participation suggest that British employers have been slow to encourage such developments. Task discretion has declined sharply between 1992 and

2017 as a whole, and, indeed, there was a further decline in the period 2012 to 2017. After an earlier decline, organisational influence increased between 2012 and 2017, but only to a level that was still lower than that of 2001. Despite the growing concern about low levels of productivity in British industry, employers have failed to extend the adoption of forms of work organisation that are likely to encourage high levels of employee performance and a willingness to contribute to innovation. The results point to the need for new policy initiatives to promote participation at work in the interests of both employee welfare and economic performance.

Further Reading

Felstead, A, Gallie, D, and Green, F (2015) *Unequal Britain at Work*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Gallie, D, Zhou, Y, Felstead, A, Green, F and Henseke, G (2017) '[The implications of direct participation for organisational commitment, job satisfaction and affective psychological well-being: a longitudinal analysis](#)', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 48(2): 174-191.

Gallie, D (2013) '[Direct participation and the quality of work](#)', *Human Relations*, 66(4): 453-473.

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All titles, along with technical reports, are downloadable free from the survey website at www.cardiff.ac.uk/ses2017 (1-3 after 18/7/18; 4-6 after 2/10/18).

Also you may like to take the Job Quality Quiz which is an additional output emanating from the project, www.howgoodismyjob.com

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