

**THE PUZZLE OF WORK: AUTONOMY AND COMMITMENT PLUS
DISCIPLINE AND INSECURITY**

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**The Puzzle of Work: Autonomy and Commitment
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Abstract

Accounts of recent developments of work organization in the UK are often organized around ‘optimistic’ (improving levels of skills and training, and better communication at the workplace) and ‘pessimistic’ (increased levels of effort and stress, work intensification, a ‘representation gap’) scenarios. Not surprisingly, research fails to support either of these extreme views. But it is not satisfactory to conclude that the picture is mixed and messy. It is also necessary to address the relationship between the ‘positive’ and the ‘negative’ aspects of work experience, for they often go together. Autonomy and commitment, discipline and pressure, are two sides of the employment relationship, and the issue is not whether one or the other is predominant but how they are re-organized.

The paper reviews the evidence in terms of autonomy and skill; insecurity and pressure; and representation and voice. It also aims to put the contemporary situation in historical context, arguing against the view (often shared in the optimistic and pessimist camps) that the current conjuncture marks a break from all previous experience.

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The nature of work in Britain changed dramatically in the last 30 years of the twentieth century. Sectoral shifts included a move from manufacturing towards services so that, as is often remarked, call centres now employ more people than large parts of manufacturing, notably the strongholds of the traditional image of the worker such as coal and steel. Between 1980 and 1998, the proportion of employees accounted for by private sector services rose from 26 to 44 per cent (Millward et al. 2000: 20). Women comprised a growing proportion of the work force (48 per cent by 1990, up from 33 per cent in 1951). 'Atypical' work (a loose category embracing groups including part-time and temporary workers: loose because the boundaries are unclear and the category 'atypical' is very heterogeneous, including a low-paid home-worker and an independent professional) has become more common.

One key debate has focused on how far the contemporary period is qualitatively different from the past. For example, it is now widely argued that atypical work has not grown as fast as was sometimes believed and that it is less revolutionary than some pundits thought (Robinson, 1999). I will simply state my view, that continuity has indeed been important and that claims that we are now in a post-industrial or post-bureaucratic age are incorrect because they stereotype work in the past as being nothing but large factories and overemphasize relatively superficial current trends (see Edwards et al., 1998). Many arguments about transformation have been well-analysed elsewhere (e.g. by Warhurst and Thompson, 1998). I wish to focus on what work means for the employee. The central puzzle is that rising skill levels and increases in the amount of communication between management and employees and in reported employee autonomy go along with widespread reports of increases in stress and working hours and a sense of a lack of control over one's working life. How can we explain this?

It should be stressed at the outset that, although some writers see the present conjuncture as uniquely prone to uncertainty, dilemmas and 'paradox' (Handy, 1995), these features are inherent in the organization of work. The fundamental tension is between work design which provides responsibility and autonomy and that which calls for predictable outcomes based on defined tasks and close monitoring (Friedman, 1977). Abrahamson (1997) shows that in the US there have been five main phases in which one or the other aspect has been stressed; much the same chronology applies to the UK. The present conjuncture represents a particular balance of the two. A key point is that they are not opposites and that an important recent trend has been the combination of responsibility in relation to work tasks with the monitoring and discipline of the measurement of outcomes.

Workers' responses to our key puzzle also have forerunners. One illustration also has current relevance. Reid (1976) describes the responses of artisans in nineteenth century Birmingham to their employers' efforts to erode the deeply entrenched tradition of Saint Monday (the practice of taking Mondays as an unofficial holiday). A more rational and modern schedule of work involved the loss of the freedoms of Saint Monday but it also meant that workers could earn more money to enjoy the consumer goods now becoming available. One can imagine artisans having different views of the costs and benefits here, with the median response being perhaps a qualified welcome to 'progress' with a regretful look back. The artisan, it is important to note, was probably not wholly committed to 'tradition' and may have had criticisms of some of the idleness that it involved (to say nothing of the pattern of gender segregation ingrained in it). New working arrangements were not simply better or worse than the old but they entailed a re-combination of a range of elements including work discipline and sociability. The re-balancing of work and leisure is not a uniquely contemporary 'paradox'.

We can approach our puzzle in terms of the long-standing sociological distinction between contract and status (Streeck, 1987). An employment relationship based on contract is characterized by short-term market-based links between employer and employee. Status refers to long-term relationships based on agreed obligations and the idea that an employee is more than a factor of production to be hired and fired.

Relevant trends in relation to contract include the rise of temporary and agency work, growing experience of redundancy, the reduction of legal limits to the right to hire and fire and, perhaps most striking, a dramatic increase in income inequality; also pertinent is the decline of trade union organization and the resultant increased importance to the relationship between the individual worker and management. Arguments for status developed around the use of new forms of work organization such as teamwork, which several initial enthusiastic accounts linked to increased commitment and even empowerment.

Claims about enhanced status tended to be made by managerialist writers. These claims were, as Geary (forthcoming) shows, rapidly and properly dismissed by academic critics, who pointed out that: advanced forms of team work are still rare; and the most common form of team working entails rather limited worker autonomy and often also increased work pressure (for example, many studies have shown that new work organization is associated with increased work effort and monitoring of performance). As Geary goes on to discuss, once this critique has been made there has been less consensus on a more accurate picture. The

alternative view – that new work organization merely intensifies exploitation – had some popularity but simply inverts the optimists’ views while ironically sharing with them the belief that new work practices actually achieve their stated goals. Yet it is now a commonplace, even among some pundits of change, that at least half of the experiments variously labelled Total Quality Management or Business Process Re-engineering in fact ‘fail’.¹ The exploitation view also adopted a highly deterministic approach and treated workers as mere subjects of change who were readily indoctrinated by management.

In many areas of work there has been a similar debate between ‘empowerment’ and ‘intensification’ views, with emerging intermediate views stressing a more complex and messy picture than either extreme). My conclusions on work re-organization (Edwards, 2000a) and managerial careers (Edwards, 2000b) are available elsewhere. The present paper draws on this analysis but looks across a broader range of issues while also focusing on one central puzzle. It touches on the very important issue of the explanation of variation but, as explained below, does not address it in detail.

The argument is as follows. First, emphases on status and contract have affected different groups, with relatively small groups enjoying high levels of autonomy going along with quite large numbers suffering unemployment, low incomes and insecurity. Second, status and contract can often go together, so that workers working in teams (status) are also subject to close performance standards (contract). Third, how can we then explain the convincing evidence that skills have been rising across the population and that workers report apparently high levels of commitment to work? For example the largest recent employee survey (part of the Workplace Employee Relations Survey described below) finds that 65 per cent of employees agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘I feel loyal to my organization’ (Cully et al., 1999, 186). And how do we reconcile this with case study evidence which, while avoiding the excesses of a straight exploitation view, still returns a much more down-beat view of workplace change? The answer is that different methods reflect different aspects of a given worker’s experience (notably, increased responsibility but also greater stress) and also, crucially, different levels of understanding. For example, I may express a broad sense of satisfaction and commitment when asked to rate levels of these things but also disquiet about specific features of work such as the bureaucracy of universities or the formalised

¹ TQM and BPR have both attracted large literatures, not least in terms of what these concepts in fact denote. Efforts to test them have often foundered on the fact that what appears to be a clear example of, say, BPR turns out not to match any simple definition. In essence, both approaches are concerned with simplifying business processes, reducing waste, and improving a focus on quality and the needs of the customer.

measurement of teaching and research quality and much else. Finally, different aspects of a pattern both warrant emphasis. The majority of workers may feel commitment, but it is also notable that significant minorities report insecurity and stress.

It is increasingly argued in the UK (Edwards, 1995) and the US (Jacoby, 1999) that events outside the workplace are increasingly shaping what goes on inside it, so that the risks of the market are borne by individuals. For example, benchmarking and best practice are used to tighten the connection between the environment and people's behaviour. But risks are by definition of a probabilistic nature so that the 'same' risk can affect people differently: some people lose their jobs as a result of 'downsizing' but others may find that they are promoted. The task of analysis is to define the parameters of the risk and consider the implications, not to say whether 'on average' the results are beneficial or not.

This chapter reviews primarily British evidence but also uses material from other countries where relevant. In particular, North American debates have strong similarities with those in Britain, reflecting similar institutional contexts. The chapter begins by indicating the importance of different forms of evidence. Four substantive issues are then discussed. Running through each is the fact of variation: though in some circumstances TQM, say, can heighten exploitation, in others it does not. The sixth section draws together conclusions about similarity and difference. The conclusion addresses future prospects.

The Evidence: How Do We Know What We Know?

Britain is well-served with surveys of employing organizations and individual employees. Under the former, the four Workplace Employee Relations Surveys (conducted in 1980, 1984, 1990 and 1998) are widely respected sources based on a representative sample of workplaces.² The 1998 survey also included a sample of employees (numbering 28,000, one of the largest such samples in Britain) who worked in the workplaces that were studied. Several nationally representative surveys of individuals have addressed such issues as skill, reported job responsibility and labour market experience. Major surveys were conducted in 1986, 1992 and 1997, so that trends can be assessed. Such surveys are essential in establishing how common a practice is, and what people think about it. But large data sets are necessarily

² The *representative* survey of workplaces was pioneered by the Industrial Relations Research Unit at Warwick, which also demonstrated later that surveys at company level were feasible and important; Warwick also produced the first, and to date only, representative survey of a particular stratum of management, the factory manager.

blunt instruments. In the field of work, several particular considerations point to the need for case studies.³

First, surveys can paint an overall picture of, say, perceptions of autonomy, but what does autonomy mean to employees and does it mean the same thing in different places? Second, the multi-faceted aspects of experience – recall the Birmingham artisans – have to be understood in terms of the context in which they are embedded. Third, cases can handle bundles of variables. Instead of treating job security, say, as an independent element, case study work would examine its association with other forces. It may well be that there is no overall association between security and acceptance of change because in some circumstances security undermines acceptance (workers feel safe in their jobs and/or distrust managerial arguments) while in others it promotes it (for example, because after a period of job shedding workers now feel that they have to change to protect jobs in the future). Case study work here explains why certain outcomes emerge in certain conditions. A key illustration is the now large literature seeking links between new forms of work organization and outcomes for firms. Much of this began in quantitative vein, but concluded that the drivers of corporate success were the ‘idiosyncratic competencies’ of each firm; these are by definition peculiar and hard to copy, and hence the pursuit of explanation *must* turn on the dynamics of individual cases (see Purcell 1999).

The sociology of work is one area in which cases and surveys strongly reinforce each other. This is not to say that methodological harmony has broken out. Some writers argue that cases are of value only in suggesting hypotheses; this is to deny any real role for the analysis of processes and ‘idiosyncratic competencies’. From the side of case studies, there has been in practice an over-reliance on the single-case format and in some cases an over-emphasis on the ‘accounts’ of people to the neglect of the key question: of what is this a case? That is, case studies need to consider the structural and other conditions which explain why specific outcomes emerged. There has been a tendency in some research to examine an initiative in one context and assume that conclusions apply anywhere. This is one reason why the issue of variation (e.g. why does TQM have one outcome in one context and another in another?) is not a central theme: evidence is often lacking. There are none the less sufficient cases with

³ Goldthorpe (2000: Ch. 4) offers a trenchant critique of ethnography (the method of close observation in natural settings, often entailing the participation of the observer in the phenomena under study) in sociology. He addresses some unduly neglected issues, notably how reliable and open to independent scrutiny the evidence is, and how far it is possible to generalise from single case studies. At least in the sociology of work, some solutions to the latter can be laid out (Edwards, 1992). As for the former the difficulties are, in my view, not fatal, for reasons which I lack the space to explain.

sufficient detail to allow some generalizations to be drawn. A key challenge for research in the future is to develop an explanatory model of different types of situation and then identify cases which exemplify each, as opposed to simply taking the case which happens to be available.

Skill, Autonomy and Involvement

The meaning of skill has been the focus of much debate: does skill mean technical ability or discretion and autonomy; and should it be measured in terms of capacities of individuals or what their jobs actually require of them? Population surveys use multiple measures of skill such as the training time entailed in jobs and reported job autonomy. Clear conclusions emerge about the pattern of skill, but we have to enter some important qualifications in terms of their interpretation.

In the words of Gallie et al., reporting the 1992 Employment in Britain Survey, there has been a 'very extensive upskilling of the workforce' combined with a 'significant devolution of responsibilities *for more immediate decisions about the work task*' (1998: 55, emphasis added). This was accompanied, however, by a rise in work effort. The rise in skill levels was slowest among routine white-collar occupations, so that in some respects there was a polarization of skill. A particularly interesting result was that the introduction of new technology was associated with greater task discretion for men but not for women, suggesting that the determinants of skill increase may be gender-specific; the picture of women white-collar workers doing essentially routine jobs using computers comes to mind. The 1997 Skills Survey similarly reports a rise in skill levels (e.g. between 1986 and 1997 the proportion of workers saying that their jobs had 'long' training requirements rose from 22 to 29 per cent); it also shows that female part-time workers had a much lower use of computers than did other employees though overall skill increases were greater for women than for men (Ashton et al., 1999).

The facts of rising qualifications and training are not in serious dispute. It was popular at one time to argue that commitment to training is often shallow and that firms will cut training expenditures in recessions. Yet the evidence suggests that this is not so (Green and Felstead, 1994). It is no longer reasonable to argue that training is simply neglected. According to Guest's (1999: 14) survey, 84 per cent of employees feel that their employer provided them with 'sufficient opportunities for training and development'. Over half of respondents said

that their firms made a 'serious attempt to make jobs of people like you as interesting and varied as possible', while approaching half reported the presence of a programme for employee involvement. Moreover, the more of these practices a worker reported, the more likely was she to report a high level of job satisfaction and motivation.

Yet several qualifications have to be entered. First, the Skills Survey reports that about a quarter of employees believe that their qualifications are not in fact needed in their jobs, while there was also a gap between skill requirements and respondents' own skills: a third of respondents said that their jobs needed no qualifications on entry whereas only 20 per cent had no qualifications, suggesting that skills are not necessarily used (Ashton et al., 1999: 63, 65). Although only minorities report inadequate training or the non-use of qualifications, these should not be neglected. Whether 'adequacy' is fully assessed in surveys is also open to debate. To say in a telephone survey that one's employer does not provide 'sufficient' opportunities for training is surely to enter quite a strong criticism. And the fact that a third of jobs need qualifications for entry scarcely suggests a high level of skills across the working population.

Second, what do people mean when they report that they have autonomy? Table 1 gives some illustrative figures indicating that reported autonomy is quite high. But consider the following description of a working day, taken from some current unpublished research.⁴ It comes from a home-worker in the clothing industry.

I will wake around 6.00-6.15. From that time until around 8.30 a.m. I am busy in the kitchen preparing breakfast for the family. Then I wash up the breakfast dishes and clean the two toilets, bathroom and wash the clothes. . . . I begin the sewing around 10.30-11.00am. Sometimes I even start sewing as late as 11.30 am, a time when others have completed almost three hours of work. I then sew until 2.00pm. My husband arrives home at this time for his lunch and I make lunch for us both. I start sewing again around 3.00-3.15pm. I then sew until 7.30 pm-8.00pm. But this is all dependent upon my children. If my daughters are at home and prepare dinner, then I can [work up to] this time. Else I will leave the sewing at 6.30-7.00 pm to prepare the full dinner that takes 1.5 hours to cook. After dinner I have to wash up the dinner dishes. I finish around 9.45 pm every day. . . . Usually I will do another half hour's work of cutting the coats that can be done without the use of the machine. I sleep at 10.30 pm.

⁴ This research is funded by the ESRC under its Future of Work programme. This quote comes from a case study conducted by Monder Ram; other participants in the study are James Arrowsmith and Mark Gilman.

This worker might well report choice and the absence of supervision; indeed the definition of her work is that she is not under the direct control of management and yet she is evidently scarcely autonomous in any real sense. Now, this is of course an extreme case, and I am not suggesting that all reports of autonomy are to be disregarded. But it remains important to recognize that the meaning of autonomy has to be considered in context – and also that there remain significant parts of the work force for whom empowerment remains a distant dream.

Table 1: Reported Measures of Autonomy (percentage of relevant group reporting the feature)

	All	Men	Women	Managers	Clerical & related	Plant and machine ops
Great deal of choice in carrying out work	46	51	44	63	40	36
Supervised ‘not at all closely’	27	28	26	41	20	22
Great deal of job variety	35	39	30	49	20	21

Source: 1997 Skills Survey, reported by Ashton et al. (1999, Tables 7.11 and 7.12).

Third, what is the link between responsibility and other developments? Numerous case studies discussed further below show that responsibilities are limited to what Gallie et al. call immediate decisions about the work task. Stephen Taylor (1997) for example studied employees in call centres and found that they were expected to take more responsibility for dealing with customers but were also closely monitored on their performance. As reviews of the evidence increasingly stress, responsibility for the particular task tends to go along with a clear definition of the nature of the task and monitoring of its performance. As Ackroyd and Proctor (1998) conclude from their review of manufacturing, labour flexibility is achieved by semi-skilled workers performing specific tasks, and management takes the form of *indirect* control based on the allocation of costs.

Fourth, non-response to surveys must be noted. It ran at 28 per cent in the Employment in Britain Survey and 33 per cent in the Skills Survey. It is at least possible that workers who feel pressurized and discontented will decline to participate in surveys.

Fifth, there is American evidence that the HRM practices identified by Guest, though important to employees, may leave an expectations gap. Freeman and Rogers (1999) report a population survey which asked how much say employees felt that they had over a range of workplace issues and how much influence they wanted. They report that this gap is large, and that the size of the gap is similar across different categories of worker. Experience of an employee involvement programme reduced but did not eliminate the gap.⁵

Perhaps most important is the issue of the benchmark which is used. Social science has been overshadowed by the work of Braverman (1974), whose thesis of a long-term de-skilling of the working population provided a widely-used benchmark. Leaving aside what Braverman himself meant by skill, it is certainly the case that evidence on training and the like shows that a simple de-skilling view cannot be sustained. But was this ever a reasonable prediction? In an economy undergoing rapid technical change and major shifts in the structure of employment, it would be odd if employers did not try to train their workers in the new abilities that they need.

A different benchmark is that of the learning organization, defined by one of its leading exponents as one where 'people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire . . . and where people are continually learning to learn together' (Senge 1990: 4). As Keep and Rainbird (2000) show, there have been some positive trends here. For example, by 1998 a third of large organizations had attained the standards required for Investors in People status (the national training standard). Yet it remains the case that a third of adults report no education or training since leaving school. Moreover, a study of employers' perceptions of skills found 'a generally low level of autonomy' and that 'most employers simply want people to get on with their jobs' (Dench et al. 1998: 58, 61). My own analysis of training data in the 1998 WERS develops the point. Workplaces with a high level of training were identified. The specific measure used was that at least 60 per cent of the work force had had off-the-job training in the previous year and the average time spent was 2 days or more. Only 28 per cent of workplaces met this criterion. When the inclusion of training in a strategic

⁵ Freeman and Rogers (1999: 112) calculated the difference between the percentage of the sample saying it is *important* to have influence and the percentage claiming that they in fact had a lot of involvement in workplace

plan was also taken into account, the proportion fell to 15 per cent. Finally, a sophisticated approach to training might reasonably be expected to include discussion of its content with employee representatives. When any form of such discussion, even mere information provision, was taken into account, the proportion of workplaces qualifying as ‘sophisticated’ fell to 3 per cent.⁶

Keep and Rainbird identify two sets of constraints on the development of a learning organization. First, managerial practices within firms that stress narrow job duties and performance monitoring are unlikely to sustain a learning culture. These practices are underpinned by cost pressures. Second, the institutional context in the UK does not lead to the embedding of learning. There is little evidence of joint approaches to learning between management and trade unions or of sharing of power with employees. It is assumed that individual companies will generate demand for skills, but in an economy based on short-term profits and lacking any of the established institutions of training that exist in many other countries the conditions are rarely present for this to take place. Training and development have certainly improved, but the model of the learning organization is still a long way away.

It appears that there is considerable attention to skills, but that this is not embedded in a framework in which employees are explicitly involved in developing learning objectives. This helps us to understand part of the puzzle here. Workers certainly report that they receive training, and in a sense this is what they think they ‘need’. But this training is not linked to a longer-term view of its purpose. The image of the learning individual is someone with the ability to make career choices and develop the necessary skills. The situation in practice seems to be one of much more variability and uncertainty.

In brief, skill has risen, but this has gone along with new demands, and the degree of empowerment which is implied has to remain open to question. We might also want to argue that it would be surprising if skill had not risen. As the discussion of the learning organization suggests, the rise has not been sufficient to sustain a picture of a widely and deeply skilled labour force. Many aspects of the British context, such as the emphasis on short-term profitability and the absence of articulated institutions of training, militate against a truly learning culture.

decisions. Seven issues were identified. The average size of this gap across the 7 issues was, in firms without employee involvement, 32 per cent. Where there was EI, the proportion fell to 21 per cent.

⁶ Helen Rainbird, Jim Sutherland, Paul Edwards, Lesley Holly and Anne Munro, ‘Employee Voice and its Influence over Training Provision’, Research report to Department of Trade and Industry, University College Northampton and University of Warwick, September 2000.

Insecurity and Stress

This brings us to the issue of job security. It can be measured in many ways. The most obvious is the mean length of time of jobs. Despite images of insecurity, there was little change in mean job tenure between the 1970s and the 1990s (Gregg et al., 2000). Yet, these authors also show, this average picture masks gender and age differences: mean tenure fell for men but rose for women, and it also rose for older workers; job loss was also associated with a significant drop of earnings. As they and other commentators point out, job tenure is not a good measure of perceived security, since people may stay in their current jobs for fear of being unable to find another one. Stability and security are different things. There is also clear evidence of growing experience of unemployment and risks of redundancy and of a decline in permanent full-time employment (Heery and Salmon, 2000; 15).

As for perceptions of security, it is certainly true that what Guest (2000: 143) calls ‘alarmist’ accounts are inaccurate. In his survey, large majorities of employees reported feeling reasonably secure in their jobs and confident of obtaining an equivalent one relatively easily. Yet 12 per cent of his sample said that it was very or somewhat likely that they would be made redundant in the next two years. Burchell et al. (1999: 17) report that in the 1997 Skills Survey 23 per cent of employees could see some possibility of losing their jobs, a similar figure to the proportion in the 1986 SCEL survey. These authors also report the life history data from SCEL, showing a rising proportion of jobs held at different points in time was felt by respondents to have been insecure. For example, among blue-collar male workers 20 per cent of jobs begun in the mid-1960s were felt to be insecure; the proportion rose to 30 per cent for jobs begun in the mid-1980s.

Perceptions of insecurity have been shaped by its occupational distribution. Thus it is often argued that managerial and professional insecurity have risen, and hence that there is simply an increased awareness of the phenomenon. Gallie et al. (1998; 142-5) show that there was no difference between classes in perceptions of job security, thus suggesting that white-collar employees may now feel as much insecurity as others. This study also showed that the composition of the unemployed changed, so that in an *absolute* sense there is more job loss among such employees than in the past. But the *relative* chances of being unemployed have not changed; that is, people in manual occupations have always been more prone to job loss, and this disparity has not changed. Note also that the first result cited from this analysis is from a regression model in which experience of unemployment is included. This experience shapes perceptions of current job security powerfully, and it is most likely in manual jobs. As

Gallie et al. stress, managerial groups have become more insecure, but the relative chances of suffering job loss remain the greatest among manual workers.

Two conclusions are warranted. First, growing instability of male careers does mean that the traditional image of the male breadwinner in a stable job is increasingly inaccurate. It is also the case that, objectively, experience of unemployment has increased and that it is associated with earnings reductions. Second, however, in terms of perceptions, many people for much of the time feel reasonably secure in their jobs. This should perhaps not be surprising. It would be remarkable if the working population as a whole felt in serious risk of losing the jobs. It is also to be expected that people are more optimistic than perhaps they should be about finding alternative employment. It would also of course be wrong to contrast the current situation with an image of the past in which there was a very high level of job security. Even the period of post-war prosperity saw significant re-structuring of traditional industries such as coal and textiles. Yet a sense of insecurity is greater than it was, even if it is not overwhelming.

As for stress, one common view is that people are being required to work longer hours ('presenteeism'). Yet Green (2001: 58) shows that average hours of work have been constant in the UK since about 1980. He also shows, however, that there have been two important trends in the distribution of hours worked: a concentration into fewer households, and an increasing dispersion of hours worked around the average. Thus the proportions of people working very long hours or very short hours have both risen.

As for stress, studies have variously asked about pace or intensity of work and about perceptions of pressure and stress. Even the more 'optimistic' studies return reports of discontent on such measures. Guest (1999: 17) found that 48 per cent of his sample felt under 'excessive' pressure at work 'all the time' or 'quite often'. A long series of studies finds consistent reports of increased work effort and work pace (summarized by Edwards et al. 1998: 42; also Burchell et al. 1999: 30). Gallie et al. (1998: 219) report from four measures of work strain that a 'substantial proportion' of the British workforce experienced a significant degree of strain. Green and McIntosh (2000) analyse a survey conducted across 12 European countries in 1991 and 1996. They find an increase in work intensity which was particularly marked in Britain. They also usefully confirm the conjecture of several writers, that the pressure of work intensification was greatest in the 1980s in manufacturing but that in the 1990s the emphasis switched to services. Effort levels rose most among non-manual workers, particularly those at a junior level. Perhaps the most interesting result was that the rise in

effort could not be explained by various possible explanatory factors, suggesting that it was widespread and generic.

Green (2001: 64-8) brings together a range of these surveys and also highlights their data on why people work hard. The evidence over time shows an increase in the reporting of all forms of pressure (see Table 2). Green also shows that the number of sources of pressure cited (i.e. between zero and seven) correlates with the extent to which increased effort is reported – which is one indicator that these self-reports are statistically valid.

Table 2: Reported Sources of Work Pressure, 1986 and 1997

per cent mentioning	1988	1997
Machinery etc	7	10
Customers	37	34
Management	27	41
Fellow workers	29	57
Own discretion	61	68
Pay	15	30
Reports and appraisal	15	24

Source: Green (2001: 69), in turn based on the 1986 Social Change and Economic Life Initiative study and the 1997 Skills Survey.

Several points stand out from this table. First, pressures from markets and customers are widely, and correctly, seen as imposing increasing disciplines on employees. It appears from these results, however, that *direct* pressures remain limited, and it seems that they are mediated through the expectations of managers and fellow workers. Second, there has also been interest in the role of appraisal and monitoring systems, as means of measuring performance against pre-defined targets. The importance of such systems has indeed increased, but their direct impact remains relatively small. Third, in the light of discussion of performance-related pay, the doubling in the proportion of people citing pay as an influence on how hard they work is notable. Finally, the role of fellow workers is most striking,

suggesting at first sight that peer discipline has become the predominant force, outside individuals themselves, in working hard. Yet there may be some uncertainty in the data here; a 1992 survey reported by Green put the figure at 36 per cent which implies an unlikely jump in the next five years. (Note also that ‘customers’ were cited by 50 per cent of respondents in 1992: it is not clear why this figure is out of line with those for 1986 and 1997). Detailed research evidence suggests that it is not the case that traditional managerial discipline has been replaced by team- or peer-based discipline in the sense of there being well-entrenched and formalized team systems embracing the establishment and enforcement of norms of behaviour and taking over the role of management (Geary, forthcoming). There are two distinct points here. First, teams in any exact sense remain surprisingly rare, and even when teams exist their formal powers of discipline remain limited. Second, it has of course always been the case that work groups establish norms of behaviour, often re-shaping managerial rules in doing so (Edwards, 1988 and 1989). What we may be seeing, therefore, is the continued and unremarkable operation of work group norms, possibly with some sharpening and focusing in some organizations where self- and team-discipline have been most developed.

It is, again, important not to over-emphasize the costs here. At the end of the 1980s, it was sometimes argued that work intensification had reached such a pitch that workers felt under undue pressure for much of the time (see review by Elger, 1990). Yet surveys have also consistently found that pressure is also accompanied by rises in skill, variety and responsibility. Where employees have been asked directly whether they resent working harder, a majority have been found to say that they do not (Collinson et al., 1998: 61). But it is also true that one-fifth of this sample (of workers in six organizations) said that they were working harder and resented doing so. Most workers have been working harder, but a substantial number have been able to tolerate this burden; a significant minority, however, feel extremely pressurized. How can we understand the position of the former group?

Autonomy, Control and Performance Management

We have seen that skill, responsibility and pressure often go together and that case studies suggest that part of the explanation is a shift away from direct forms of command-and-control management towards more indirect means of controlling performance. A change in means of control, it should be noted, should not be confused with a move away from all forms of

control. It is the failure to understand this distinction which underlies many of the more optimistic managerialist accounts, which contrast traditional instruction with alleged autonomy and empowerment. Yet the move from traditional authority (in any event, as shown below, far from complete) means the development of different forms of control and not the abandonment of discipline.

As Bach (2000) shows, what is in fact meant by performance management (PM) is often unclear, but it embraces the setting of objectives and formal reviews of progress against them; in addition, many commentators see performance-related pay as a central component. Many managerial writers see performance management as fundamentally different from traditional control systems, because it is based on outcomes and not specific instruction as to the details of the work task. It is notable that Gallie et al. (1998: 60), without themselves commenting on the significance of the point, directly base their account of PM on the model of bureaucratic control popularized by Richard Edwards (1979): PM is, far from being the end of bureaucracy, a new form of rule-governed control. Such control is based on personal advancement governed by formal reviews embracing performance and also adherence to company norms of conduct. Gallie et al. measure PM through the use of appraisal systems and the setting of objectives. They conclude that task discretion did not mean the lifting of organizational controls but rather the widespread use of PM in place of more direct methods (p. 303).

Two of the studies just discussed have examined the links between performance management and employee attitudes. A work intensification thesis would suggest that developed PM systems will promote discontent. In fact, both studies found the reverse pattern. Collinson et al. show that measures of trust in management and of satisfaction with TQM were higher where performance targets and appraisal were in place than where they were absent; this result held when the effects of different organizational context were controlled. Gallie et al. (1998: 68, 250) found that experience of performance management systems was associated with high rather than low organizational commitment in private sector organizations. They also explored whether commitment and patterns of management control affect employee behaviour. Behaviour was measured by self-reported absenteeism and job performance, and intentions to leave the present employer (a proxy for quitting). They conclude:

The most widely effective personnel policy appeared to be the use of performance-management systems. With their mix of internal progression, target-setting, appraisal,

and merit pay, these systems strongly reduced job turnover and equally stimulated work quality (Gallie et al., 1998: 287).

Case-based research points to similar results. The study of six organizations mentioned above found that workers reported that the most important influence on working hard was the existence of targets for output; awareness of being observed or monitored was also widespread (Collinson et al., 1998: 64). Thirty per cent of respondents made some reference to new work practices or the devolution of responsibility:

‘more tasks taken on as a result of re-organizing and less staff’.

Particularly notable are replies putting costs and benefits together:

‘[There is satisfaction] because the day goes faster and I achieve better results for the products [but there is also] tiredness and stress, and work down the drain for cost-cutting purposes’.

This last response neatly captures not only a sense of *personal* costs but also a concern about the *organizational* contradictions of new work practices: positive results were possible but were undercut by pressures to save money. As a worker interviewed in a pseudonymous Japanese-owned TV plant, put it, work was harder and more disciplined under the Japanese but the plant was better run (Delbridge, 1998: 48). The ‘sheer quantity of work’ (and by implication the responsibility for completing it) was the main source of work pressure in the 20 organizations studied by Burchell et al. (1999: 30). More intensive case studies underline the importance of new forms of discipline. Baldry et al. (1998) show that in three large white-collar organizations production targets were key aspects of the experience of work; though there was team work, it was constrained and managed, and was not a break from more traditional forms of discipline.

We can see the limited nature of empowerment if we look at two contrasting situations. Clark (1995) argues that, at the greenfield site in South Wales opened by the Pirelli company, an HRM strategy including a high level of work force flexibility, pay linked to the learning of new skills, and self-supervision was largely successful. Worker satisfaction was high and that the plant’s Total Quality programme ‘created a sense of involvement and empowerment’ (p. 235). However, satisfaction was often accompanied by ‘intensified work effort over a shift’ (p. 154). Ambitions of attaining complete flexibility were also abandoned, for reasons including the costs of training and the benefits of specialization in a given set of tasks. It is also notable that workers felt powerless in relation to such issues as pay and staffing levels. That is, even in favourable conditions ‘empowerment’ influenced the immediate work task

but significant areas of work experience were not affected. Newell (2000: 123) also underlines problems of decay of new systems. She found that integrated and advanced HRM policies in greenfield sites worked at best for a limited time: 'attempts to develop an employment relationship based upon consensus and employee commitment give way to a return to more "traditional" ways of managing in the face of the pressure to produce'.

Call centres apparently represent the contrasting situation of extreme worker degradation. It is important to note the terms of this debate, which have been similar to those on TQM. The issue has been whether the work process is subject to particularly tight managerial control and whether workers find ways of resisting this control. Studies have shown that workers can and do resist, but rather more rarely have they asked what this means in terms of the balance of effort and reward. We may start with the questions which are tackled, and then speculate on the wider issue. It is plain that very detailed and specific performance targets are used and that these are used as devices to discipline staff. Note, however, that these targets are not always as fully developed as might appear. Taylor and Bain (1999: 106) report a survey in which they identified nine monitoring techniques; they stress that a quarter of the firms surveyed employed all nine, but it is equally notable that a quarter did not measure adherence to set procedures or tape calls to monitor workers' performance. These authors also make three key points as to why control is not total: managers have to devote a great deal of time to monitoring staff, so that the system is far from self-governing and the management of labour remains uncertain; employees find individual ways to escape from monitoring; and in some circumstances a collective response also develops (Bain and Taylor, 2000).

What this means in terms of the balance of effort and reward is that workers do find some ways of adjusting the balance to suit their own expectations. The study cited above is informative (S. Taylor, 1997). Close observation of workers in two call centres revealed some discretion in immediate tasks but very tight measurement against performance standards. Workers negotiated some space for themselves and were neither powerless nor limited to defensive resistance: they established a way through the structure of control, and not for nothing does Taylor describe the situation as a dialectic. This result seems to be quite common in relation to intensively managed work systems (Elger and Smith, 1998). It also appears that labour turnover can be quite high. Workers may, however, enter such jobs without illusions and tolerate them for a time before moving on, so that there is not necessarily a fixed new group of disadvantaged workers. The survey evidence also shows that

call centres vary in size, and it may be that the most intensive control is practised in the largest and most bureaucratic of them.

We can understand the situation here if we look briefly at one means to manage performance, performance-related pay (PRP). The literature on -related pay (PRP) is full of reports of failures to increase worker motivation (e.g. Marsden and Richardson, 1994). Lewis (1998) studied three financial services organizations and found that noticeable effects were present in only one. It was, moreover, not the 'hard' link between performance management and pay which employees valued but rather the 'softer' aspects of the negotiation of goals and the provision of feedback.

What is going on here? The first part of the answer lies in Kessler's (2000, 282) perceptive analysis of the goals of PRP. Its aim is often to promote 'culture change by sending strong signals about corporate values and beliefs'. Its aim would not then be to raise satisfaction or motivation but to improve work performance and a sense of purpose and direction. Note that Gallie et al.'s finding quoted above was on an outcome measure (turnover, or in fact employees' reported turnover intentions) and work quality, not employee motivation or satisfaction.

It is also important to consider the nature of causation in survey results. Most surveys are cross-sectional, and they thus show that performance measurement is associated with certain outcomes. They do not show that the introduction of a measurement scheme necessarily raises employee satisfaction or indeed performance. McKinlay and Taylor (1996, 288) report a peer review system in a telecommunications factory and show that a lack of clarity in its rules led to its being seen as arbitrary. The point here is not that this is an exception to a general rule. It is, first, that when we look at developments over time in one place rather than cross sectionally we can see that new systems need not have desired effects. Second, and more subtly, it is quite possible that workers in this plant would report quite high general levels of confidence in management while also showing discontent about specific initiatives.

As Collinson et al. (1998) argue, the association between PM and employee attitudes may reflect that fact that employees welcome the sense of discipline and structure which routines provide. As Leidner (1993; 137) shows from studies of workers in insurance sales and fast food in the US, routines can be helpful in structuring the working day and relieving the uncertainties of dealing with customers. Such workers are neither empowered nor ground

down by management but instead have limited expectations of work and find rules a useful source of structure. Pragmatic acceptance of discipline is different from motivation.

Managerial objectives may thus not be motivation in any simple sense. A second issue is that managerial intentions are often not realized. The McKinlay and Taylor study is one of many illustrating this point. Knights and McCabe (1998) demonstrate the same for BPR schemes, while Smith and Elger (1998) show that even Japanese-owned firms, which often arrive with well-defined management systems, end up making various compromises in order to secure the consent of the workforce. It is likely that in such circumstances there will be a degree of scepticism among workers about managers' technical competence. Results from some years ago are suggestive. The SCEL I study found that assessments of the 'ability/efficiency of management' received more negative than positive views (Rose, 1994: 252). A study conducted around 1990 in four organizations asked workers whether they agreed that managers are needed to 'put their knowledge and experience at the service of the group'; only 32 per cent of the workers interviewed agreed with this statement, its tone implying a positive reply notwithstanding (Edwards and Whitston, 1993: 248).

In summary, PM often has more complex goals than affecting worker attitudes. It is indeed performance which is the key, and PM systems are about communicating a set of messages as to how it is to be achieved.

Representation and Voice

If workers are truly empowered, we would expect them to enjoy some structured means to influence their employment conditions beyond the immediate effort bargain. We saw above, for example, that Clark's (1995) workers felt unable to influence pay and other important aspects of working life.

The evidence on structures of representation is very clear. In Britain, the predominant channel of representation is the trade union; there has never been a system of works councils such as that operating in many European countries. The proportion of workplaces where unions were recognized by management for bargaining purposes fell from 65 per cent in 1980 to 42 per cent in 1998. Among the minority of workplaces in 1998 which had workplace representatives virtually half of managers said that they conducted no negotiation with the representatives on any of a list of nine issues. If we consider a central aspect of employment relations, the setting of pay, the results are equally striking. In Britain, collective bargaining

between management and union was long seen as the key mechanism. In the hubristic words of the Ministry of Labour in 1934, collective bargaining

has, for many years, been recognised in this country as the method best adapted to the needs of industry and to the demands of the national character . . . [It] has discharged its important functions, on the whole, so smoothly and efficiently and withal so unobtrusively, that the extent of its influence is apt to be, if not altogether overlooked, at least underestimated (quoted by Hawes, 2000: 3).

Yet in 1998 collective bargaining was the sole means of setting pay in only 15 per cent of workplaces, as against 48 per cent of cases where it was set only by management (Cully et al., 1999: 238, 103, 109).

Employee reports bear out these results. The respondents to the 1998 WERS were asked how often they were consulted by management on each of five issues. Three-quarters said that they were not consulted frequently on any of them. Moreover, employees working in workplaces with team briefing or other forms of direct participation were no more likely than others to report consultation (Cully et al., 1999: 152-3).

The fact that they have lost representative voice does not mean that employees resent this loss. A fifth of union members in the WERS study did not think that a union was the best route to represent employee interests in relation to pay; when 'dealing with complaints at work' was the focus, the proportion rose to over half (Cully et al., 1999: 211). The most recent British Social Attitudes Survey finds that perceptions of the quality of the climate of industrial relations tend to be lower among union members than non-unionists, but it makes the important qualification that perceptions are equivalent where the balance of power between management and union is equal and management supports union membership (Bryson, 1999).

It would be a large task to explain this state of affairs but several summary points can be made. First, there is a difference between cognition (an observationally based view that unions are not very effective) and belief (for example that unions are inherently weak or inappropriate to the modern workplace). Surveys find it hard to distinguish, but it certainly seems to be true that British employees have not lost their general belief in collectivism, equality and fairness (Gallie, 1996). Nor do studies of non-union workplaces suggest that employees feel inherent antipathy to unions; reasons for non-membership are often pragmatic rather than principled (McLoughlin and Gourlay, 1994).

Second, many British workers' commitment to unions has always been instrumental rather than based on deep principle. In a situation where unions have obviously lost power in relation to government as well as employers, it is not surprising to find workers feeling that unions are ineffective. Third, it is equally long-established that workers have more commitment to their own union than to unions in principle, and that they are quite happy to accept the reality of union-management relations. Finally, attitudes to collectivism can alter rapidly, as numerous strikes by apparently quiescent workers have shown.

We can conclude that the shift away from representative systems has reduced employee voice, and that 'direct participation' as practised in teamwork cannot, as discussed above, provide the means for workers to engage meaningfully in key decisions affecting them. Whether legislative and other changes reverse this situation remains to be seen.

Conclusions and Prospects

Some common trends emerge from the above areas. Employees have more skill in the sense of specific technical accomplishments but they also have more responsibility and are increasingly managed through performance targets rather than direct instruction. Insecurity is an issue for many workers, though it is not universal and it would be very surprising if it were. Risk and responsibility have thus been internalised in the sense that employees are held accountable for their own actions, that traditional collective defences against managerial expectations through trade unions are weaker, and that future career prospects may be uncertain. Yet resentment seems to be tempered. How can this be explained?

Part of the explanation is the range of situations which is present. From the TQM literature we can say that there are cases where TQM has led to work intensification. These are likely to be situations where cost pressures are intense and TQM is imported into an essentially traditional work organization based on semi-skilled labour. In other circumstances, a series of factors including relatively high job security, genuine managerial commitment, compatibility between TQM and existing structures of employee representation, TQM is associated with more positive outcomes from a workers' point of view (see Edwards, 2000a, for a summary).

We thus have an apparent paradox of HRM, performance management and commitment going together in surveys and some case studies while other cases and indeed managerial assessments of performance measurement systems suggest a more negative picture. It can be resolved as follows.

First, benchmarks are different. Any quantitative study compares itself with the null hypothesis of no association between the variables. The implicit benchmark in case studies is a perfect association whereby a BPR scheme, say, produces a wholesale welcome among all affected employees. I have argued elsewhere (Edwards, 2000b) that surveys might profitably use different benchmarks. For example, it is widely argued that managers and professionals enjoy more autonomy than other employees and have ‘careers’ rather than ‘jobs’. It is scarcely surprising to find that more freedom to decide on work tasks and more career prospects are reported by these groups than by other employees. Yet on a strong model of social class one would expect very sharp dividing lines between career and job models. The test would then be the presence of certain characteristics in managerial occupations and their complete absence elsewhere. It may then be that there is more overlap than reliance on a model of no association would suggest.⁷ Similarly, case studies need a more relevant benchmark than ‘empowerment’ or ‘intensification’.

Second, different aspects of experience are being assessed. It is important to be clear here. A survey analyst will commonly acknowledge that cases can indicate conditions under which the general rule does not apply but still argue that, overall, relationships and patterns are as revealed by representative surveys. The present point is different. No survey can pick up the nuances of experience. People may in general welcome the discipline which a performance management system provides and they may report more commitment or satisfaction than those not subject to such a system. But they may well also feel that the system can be improved and that it has not directly changed their own behaviour.

Third, we have the risk factor. Does the world of work appear manageable? To the extent that it does not, workers’ daily experience is likely to reflect particularly sharply the contradictions of organizations: between maintaining a set of core values and being responsive to customers (Legge, 1998); between quality and cost; and, crucially for our purposes, between granting autonomy and ensuring specified outcomes. Not for nothing did Streeck (1987) use the ideas of contract and status to argue that uncertainty was built into organizations as they grappled with such contradictions. In some circumstances, the effect of these contradictions can be moderated. Where there is a stable market position and where there is well-organized

⁷ Suppose we have two classes, managers and workers, and measure whether or not a career structure is reported. If we observe 70 per cent of managers saying they have such a structure but only 20 per cent of workers saying the same, a very strong association will be found using a conventional test, whose benchmark is the absence of any association at all. But suppose that we expect that 90 per cent of managers ought to report that they have careers and that we allow for 10 per cent of workers to do the same. Then we will still find a difference from this expected model.

management, new initiatives are likely to have to time to become embedded and the support to work. As Rosenthal et al. (1997) show in a case of a retail firm, a disciplined commitment by management at all levels to a TQM scheme was crucial to the scheme's acceptance by workers. This study has subsequently looked at variations between individual workers in their degree of commitment to the scheme, showing the importance of pre-existing trust in management as a key influence (Peccei and Rosenthal, 2000). The other evidence reviewed above points to the importance of trust and the 'psychological contract' in promoting a sense of commitment. In other circumstances, risk will be less manageable, and uncertainty and disillusion are more likely.

Such considerations help in relation to future trends. It is possible to point to some underlying features of recent developments such as the pressure on employees to manage risk. But the concrete outcomes are necessarily variable: two similar people losing their jobs at the same time may experience very different career paths depending on whether they happen to find a successful new occupation. The uncertainties of the pure market are likely to be moderated by three sets of forces. First, legislation has regulated growing aspects of working life, with the National Minimum Wage of 1999 and the 1998 Working Time Regulations being two of the best-known.⁸ More recent developments cover union recognition and parental leave, with the possibility of statutory works councils being real if distant. Underlying specific laws is the idea of a fair balance of rights and responsibilities. For example, many companies stress their social responsibilities. Second, to the extent that unemployment moderates uncertainty and there is a strong demand for certain types of labour, employees may feel more confident in asserting their rights and in challenging long hours and excessive pressures. Finally, arguments about family-friendly work organization have an increased resonance. How powerful they will be is open to debate, but they indicate a shift away from the wholly work-led agendas prominent in the recent past.

This chapter has focused on the experience of work where contract and status both have increased salience, and not the pattern of employment as a whole. In doing so, it has argued that, while these concepts are a useful starting point, in practice they can both be found in most concrete situations. As sociology since the time of Durkheim has stressed, there is no such thing as an absolutely pure contract, since any contract depends on its social context of laws and expectations. That said, low-paid and insecure work, where contract is a prominent

⁸ Details of these matters and of developments in the regulation of work more generally, in Britain and across Europe, can be found at the European Industrial Relations Observatory site: www.eiro.eurofound.ie.

feature, has also been an established aspect of the economy and it is likely to remain significant. We should also stress that situations characterized by contract embrace skilled professions as well as unskilled work.

It is conceivable that some workers who have for many years struggled with new management initiatives and re-structuring and have found none the less that commitment is possible will face a somewhat less challenging future: to the extent that lessons of implementing change have been learnt, there may be a less frenetic atmosphere. As against that, competitive pressures and ‘globalization’ make the external environment as uncertain as ever. Some organizations, particularly those where the label of being ‘strategic’ in their human resource management, may be able to manage these pressures. The evidence of the past suggests, however, that many organizations fail in this endeavour, which would mean that the contradictions noted above would continue with the same force. The long-standing problems with training and development in Britain, rooted in short-term economic perspectives and the absence of demand for skills, suggest that the planning of anything like a coherent approach to learning will remain a key challenge.

Research has gone a considerable way towards understanding the puzzles of work. It identifies security, trust, and participation as important parameters of the experience of work. If the implications have been learnt, work in the future may reflect a better management of the contradictions of status and contract, though the contradictions themselves will not disappear.

In terms of future research, three brief observations may be made. First, it is often said that new forms of work in the service economy challenge existing theories and concepts. This mistakes the particular and the general. It is certainly true that new forms of work need to be researched, and there may be specific problems of access – for example to the newly mobile worker – which did not exist in relation to large groups assembled in factories. But these are specific issues of the management of research, not matters of principle (see further Edwards, 2001). The theories used to understand work, notably around the tensions between control and commitment and the negotiation of trust, have stood the test of time. Second, it is crucial that future research develops cases which focus on the conditions leading to particular outcomes. It is possible from existing case research to reach some conclusions, as indicated above, but it remains true that evidence is often based on single cases. This is not in itself decisive, since single cases can relate themselves to existing knowledge and explain why the situation was as it was. Why for example is team working relatively acceptable in some circumstance? But in practice many cases still move between general propositions and the specific case without

asking about the distinctive features of the case. Ideally, cases should be comparative and based on a theoretical model. For example, it is possible to identify some different forms of teamworking, and identifying examples of each form and comparing them with examples from other forms will greatly add to the theoretical purchase of case study work. Third, the more that international comparative research can be developed, the more will the distinctive nature of work in Britain be understood.

Two linked studies illustrate these points. Lloyd and Newell (1998) studied sales representatives of a pharmaceuticals firm. This is a little-researched group, and methods such as shadowing reps were developed to understand the work process. The research found that many of the established issues of motivation and discipline were present here, so that the work was not different in principle from other forms of work. Although a single case study, the work was able to explain why a particular initiative, computerization of work schedules, did not lead to autonomy; in the context of competitive pressures, it increased work loads, and the process of its introduction denied any staff input, the result being that morale fell. In short, specific conditions explain specific outcomes. Lloyd (1999) later compared the aerospace industry in Britain and France and was able to explain why French companies retained skilled employees more effectively than their UK counterparts, the explanation turning on different national systems of labour market regulation.

There are major challenges in understanding the interaction of global, national and local influences on the experience of work, and also in understanding the connections between work and non-work experience. Yet recent research suggests that researchers are well-placed to meet these challenges.

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