

Special Symposium: The Evolution of the Modern British Workplace
William Brown*, Alex Bryson, John Forth** and Keith Whitfield*****

* **University of Cambridge, UK**

** **National Institute of Social and Economic Research, London, UK**

*** **Cardiff University, UK**

The advent of the fifth British Workplace Employment Relations Survey in 2004 offered a unique opportunity to examine how the nature of the British workplace changed in the period between 1980 and 2004. It was a period of unprecedented change. When the first British Workplace Industrial Relations Survey was undertaken the country was experiencing high levels of both trade union membership and industrial conflict. There was in office a new Conservative Government with a sharply different approach to economic management and industrial relations reform to its predecessors. Unemployment was rising to levels unknown since the 1930s. By contrast, the fifth survey followed a period of historically low disputation, a Labour administration, and low unemployment.

The nature of the British workplace changed markedly over this period. The changes can be charted using the five WIRS/WERS cross-section surveys (1980, 1984, 1990, 1998, 2004), the related panel surveys, and surveys that covered territory that overlapped with the WIRS/WERS series. The Economic and Social Research Council funded a research project enabling investigators who had been closely involved in the WIRS/WERS series to work with internationally known specialists in different fields to analyse this change. The result is a book entitled “The Evolution of the Modern British Workplace” that will be published by Cambridge University Press in May 2009.

The aim of the symposium is twofold. First, to summarise and outline the key findings in the “Evolution” project. These will be presented by the four principal investigators – William Brown, Alex Bryson, John Forth and Keith Whitfield – and those members of the “Evolution” project team who will be attending the conference, including Andrew Pendleton, Stephen Bach, and Linda Dickens. They will take the form of short (four/five minute) presentations followed by a general discussion of how the British workplace has evolved during the WIRS/WERS era. The second aim is to provoke a discussion with those from both the UK and other countries who have sought to understand the rapidly changing world of employment relations.

Among the key findings are:

- The collapse of collective bargaining in Britain can largely be explained as a response to the tightening of product market competition, and retreated fastest in sectors where profitability was squeezed most.
- Personnel specialists are more likely to be associated with traditional industrial relations practices rather than human resource practices; where human resource practices are in place, performance is more highly rated, but where personnel specialists are present, performance tends to be poorer.
- Compositional change in British workplaces only accounts for one-third of the decline in unionization; the remainder is ‘within-group’.

- There has been a diminution in union effects on workplace industrial relations and workplace performance.
- Although there has been substantial shift in the origination of voice – from workers through unions to employers - throughout the period, around four-in-five workplaces had two-way communication mechanisms that provided for worker voice.
- Union voice has been associated with poorer climate, more industrial action, poorer financial performance and poorer labour productivity than non-union voice and, in particular, direct voice, but union-based voice regimes have experienced lower quit rates than non-union and “no voice” regimes.
- The use of high involvement practices has risen, albeit unevenly, and is no more prevalent in a non-union than a union setting.
- The evidence on high involvement management’s impact on organizational performance is mixed, but the strongest evidence suggests that it is associated with higher productivity.
- The massive growth in foreign ownership has underpinned an increasingly ‘international accent’ for both the British and foreign owned workplaces.
- There has been an increase in the incidence of group forms of contingent pay, but not individual forms.
- The adoption of more than one form of contingent pay at a workplace has increased markedly.
- Women tend to feel a greater degree of stress and work intensity than men.
- The employee experience in smaller workplaces and organisations is significantly better than in larger workplaces and organisations.
- Workers in workplaces with recognised unions tend to have a more negative experience of work.
- The experience of work is generally somewhat worse in the public sector than in the private sector, with the important caveat that private sector workers feel more insecure.
- Non-union workplace representatives are now as numerous as union shop stewards in British workplaces, although this is primarily due to the decline in unionisation rather than any marked expansion of non-union representation
- Shop stewards continue to have more direct influence than non-union representatives, and employees are more likely to think that shop stewards make effective representatives.
- Collective disputes have declined significantly, whilst Employment Tribunal claims have increased significantly.
- The climate of employment relations was at its worst in the early to mid 1990s, with some improvement since then.
- There has been a progressive increase in the prevalence of equal opportunities and work-life balance practices.
- Job segregation within the workplace is still extensive, and in a majority of workplaces, at least three-quarters of employees are of the same gender; fewer than half of all workplaces have any minority ethnic employees; and fewer than one fifth have any disabled employees.
- Public sector employers have responded to a more efficiency-oriented context by strengthening their performance-oriented practices, whilst modifying some of their welfare practices, but these changes do not amount to substantial

convergence with the private sector or a transformation of the public sector model of industrial relations.

- Public employees have substantial concerns about aspects of the employment relationship, as evidenced by the increase in industrial action in recent years.
- Legal regulation has played an increasingly significant role in the evolution of the modern workplace and the line between individual employer, union autonomy and state control has shifted substantially towards the last.