

FLEXIBLE ROUTE TO PRECARITY?

A comparative study on temporary agency work and its consequences on employee wellbeing

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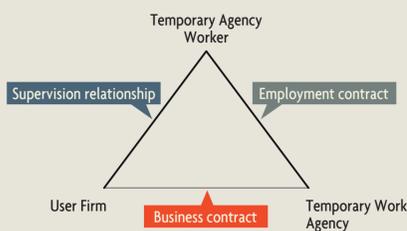
ITN CHANGING EMPLOYMENT THEME 3: EMPLOYEE WELLBEING AND WORK LIFE QUALITY

Background

Trends in the globalizing labour market lead towards marketization of employment relationships, weakening social dialogue, shifting responsibilities in the employment relations, deepening of the dualistic labour markets and increasing inequalities (Kalleberg, 2011, Standing, 2009).

EU has chosen the policy of **flexicurity** as the tool to modernize European labour markets - the national mixes of measures of flexibility for employers and security for employees should lead to economic growth, more and **better jobs** and **greater social cohesion** (European Commission 2010). Temporary agency work, seen as a measure for achieving flexicurity (European Commission 2008), is a rapidly growing form of work, regulated in the EU by the 'protective equality' directive 2008/104/EEC but is rising concerns on the effects it has on the quality of work and its further **precarisation** (Standing, 2009).

Quality of work in temporary agency work sector



★ **'Employment risk management'** through the temporary work agencies reflects conflict of interest between safety and business

★ Higher risk for exposure to physical and psychosocial risks and unclear responsibilities in terms of risk management

★ Great variety in working conditions due to differences in regulatory frameworks (Håkansson, Isidorsson & Strauss-Raats, 2013).

According to the network theory, one's position in a social network is an important determinant of their constraints and opportunities (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2013), rising the question of how are the working conditions and wellbeing of agency workers shaped by the differences in their work-related support networks and how are these networks defined by regulatory frameworks.

Project objectives and research questions

There are two leading interests carrying this project - **translation of a policy into practice and social relationships at work.**

★ The first policy-focused aim is to look at how the wider flexicurity-led regulatory and institutional framework is translated into organizational practices and policies, which in turn shape the working conditions of both temporary agency workers and their user firm counterparts.

★ Secondly, the project will look at how if and how the above frameworks are reflected in the way employees relate to one another at work by analysing work-related support and communication networks. Could possible differences between employee groups help to explain the differences in perceived learning and development opportunities and social support?

★ Finally, the role social relationships play in perceived insecurity will be looked at - could or should the inability to form secure and lasting social relationships at workplace be considered as another defining dimension of 'precarity of work'?

Research design

The research project will be an internationally comparative multilevel case study, using a mixed methods approach. Data is collected in three locations, characterized by relatively equal work settings under different national regulatory frameworks:

- one multinational company (MNC)
- similar type of production process
- similar type of work tasks (blue collar)
- three different national backgrounds under 'the umbrella' of EU.

First stage of the project will investigate regulatory regimes shaping working conditions of temporary agency work in **Sweden, Belgium and Poland**, paying attention to standard-setting and enforcement activities of both state and non-state actors.

Secondly, interviews will be carried out in the three subsidiaries of the one MNC in three countries to investigate their flexicurity-related practices at organizational level.

Third, a survey using the network analysis approach will be conducted on the working conditions, wellbeing and support and communication networks of blue collar employees in the three locations, including both agency workers and direct hire employees.

Implications

This project aims to fill the gap in research regarding multi-disciplinary international comparative analysis on national flexicurity systems and in-depth analysis into how the flexicurity practices are designed, implemented and maintained and what are the effects of these on employee wellbeing and quality of work.

Given the continuous popularity of flexicurity policies and the lean of these towards flexibility at the expense of security, there is a need for evidence-based studies of the consequences of these trade-offs for individuals, organizations as well as societies as a whole. The results of this study could be useful in policy design at both national and organizational level for achieving the flexicurity objectives - improving social cohesion and creating better jobs for improved employee wellbeing.

References

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