SYMPOSIUM:
WORK INTENSITY

Towards a Theory of Work Intensity  
David Fairris

Shorter Work Time, Hours Flexibility, and  
Labor Intensification  
Philippe Askenazy

Work Intensification, Discretion, and the  
Decline in Well-Being at Work  
Francis Green

Gender and the Intensification of Work:  
Evidence from the European Working Conditions Surveys  
Brendan Burchell  
Colette Fagan

Forms of Work Intensification and Economic  
Performance in French Manufacturing  
Antoine Valeyre

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Introduction

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Despite accumulating evidence from case studies and isolated worker surveys that work in the U.S. has become more intense during the past two decades, economists in this country have devoted little energy to documenting the phenomenon or trying to understand its origins. Such is not the case in Europe, where economists are more interested in the physical conditions under which workers work, and where better data exist to analyze these features of the workplace. The papers in this symposium are the product of the two-day conference, “Organization, Intensity of Work, Quality of Work” held in Paris, France, in November of 2002, at which scholars from around the world gathered to present research results on the intensity of labor effort.

The first two papers in the symposium are theoretical. Fairris argues for a richer theory of the workplace, one that moves beyond the determination of work intensity by labor market forces (as in neoclassical theory) or the domination of labor by capital (as in Marxian theory). He urges the incorporation of institutional features—such as informal work groups and the goals and behavior of supervisors—as important causal determinants of work intensity. Viewed from within this richer institutional framework, work intensity outcomes are more likely to be socially inefficient, implying that current levels of labor effort may not be socially optimal and that the evolution of labor effort outcomes may not have been socially beneficial.

Askenazy presents a bargaining model of the joint determination of work intensity, hours of work, and workplace organization. His model suggests that recent legislation establishing a shorter workweek in France be seen in a wider context, where increased work intensity is substituted for reduced hours of work in an environment where labor becomes a more flexible input in the organization of production. An upshot of the model is that, despite a reduction in the average workweek in France, well-being at work may well have declined due to the accompanying increase in labor effort. Askenazy offers some empirical evidence to suggest that, indeed, the reduced hours of work have yielded no discernable increase in well-being at work for workers.

The final three papers in the symposium offer empirical evidence on various features of rising work intensity in Europe. Green’s paper touches, in an empirical way, on the very same themes raised in Askenazy’s theoretical model—work intensification, workplace reorganization, and well-being at work—but in the British case, where work hours have not declined as they have in France. Green shows that work intensity has risen during the 1990s in Britain, and that this, in combination with declining discretion over work tasks, has led to declining job satisfaction.

These are, in fact, common themes across a variety of countries, all of which appear to be linked to new systems of production—new technologies and especially new organizational practices, such as just-in-time production methods and total-quality management techniques. In countries, such as France, where labor is strong, these features are accompanied by the “carrot” of reduced work hours. Elsewhere—in the U.S. and Britain, for example—fewer carrots seem to accompany the new production systems.
The Burchell and Fagan paper extends the empirical findings on increased work intensity beyond the case of France and Britain, to the wider European Union. They document the rise in overall work intensity during the period of the 1990s in EU countries, but also show that increased labor effort—and the increased “speed” of work in particular—has been more dominant for women than for men. Indeed, by the end of the decade, there was no discernible gender difference in reported work intensity. Burchell and Fagan also document an important link between rising work intensification and declining health outcomes at work.

Both the Green and the Burchell and Fagan papers offer evidence to suggest that increases in work intensity may have ended by the close of the decade, suggesting a natural limit beyond which further increases in labor effort become unprofitable for firms.

The final paper in the symposium, by Valeyre, focuses specifically on the impact of work intensity on firms. It begins by examining the systemic determinants of increased work intensification over the 20th century: 1) the machine pacing, specialization of tasks, and incentive pay schemes associated with Taylorism in the early part of the century; 2) the push to reduce and deal expeditiously with the inevitable breakdowns in automated production processes following the mid-century; and 3) late-century efforts to establish greater labor flexibility in production, with “made to order” product variety in a just-in-time production environment. Valeyre documents pressure from all three systemic sources in the rising work intensification in French manufacturing over the last twenty years. He then proceeds to link these to rising firm productivity and profitability, suggesting that improvements in the bottom line of firms may emerge not only from superior production processes but also by simply driving workers to work with greater intensity.