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Managing the Contingent Work Force: Lessons for Success

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Executive Summary

Many employers are scaling down their regular full-time, full-year work force and increasing their use of contingent workers to reduce labour costs and meet the fluctuating demands of the global marketplace. But if a contingent work force strategy is to succeed, employers must take steps to alleviate the well-documented negative impact of contingent work on worker health. If employers do not do so, their savings may be offset by a decrease in productivity and in work quality.

- To reduce tension between regular and contingent workers, management must communicate its staffing strategy to regular employees, pointing out, for example, that hiring contingent workers does not threaten regular employees but, rather, enables management to buffer regular employees against job loss during a recession. A proactive message will help core employees accept the role of contingent workers.
- To reduce the stress on contingent workers caused by job insecurity, employers should consider hiring fewer contingent workers, but for longer contracts; they should try to rehire the same contingent workers for additional contracts, when possible. They might also establish a practice of hiring effective contingent workers into the regular work force.
- To minimize the negative health effects of a lack of job control, contingent workers should be given a chance to participate directly in decisions concerning their jobs and responsibilities, and they should be given the same degree of autonomy as regular, core workers.
- To minimize the stress associated with underemployment, employers should try to ensure that contingent workers are not over-qualified. Job rotation among low-skilled contingent workers may provide them with an opportunity to learn new tasks and to minimize the stress of repetitive work.
- Employers should note that the research shows that workers who have chosen to do contingent work voluntarily are more satisfied with the contingent work arrangement than those who would have preferred regular employment. One might perhaps assume that, other things being equal, the voluntary contingent workers would be more productive.
- To avoid the stress created by feelings of inequity between regular and contingent workers doing the same jobs, employers should somehow differentiate the work being done by the two groups. For example, work could be differentiated by function, purpose, and time frame.
- Employers should ensure that contingent workers remain employed only for the specified duration and do not become 'permanent temporaries,' who will begin to feel unfairly treated.
- The author concludes that while several important questions concerning the health effects of contingent work remain to be answered by future research, we already know how to alleviate many of the detrimental effects of contingent work on worker—and consequently, organizational—health.

The Growth of the Contingent Work Force

Increased competition resulting from globalization has forced Canadian organizations to reevaluate their human resource strategies in search of new ways to become more flexible and cost-effective. A number of organizations have addressed this issue by scaling down the size of their core work force and increasing their use of contingent workers. This strategy allows them to expand and contract their work force to meet the constantly changing and unpredictable needs of the global marketplace (Axel 1995, 3).

Although there is no established definition, there is a growing agreement in the literature regarding the defining characteristics of contingent employment, which include a low degree of job security, a lack of ongoing commitment between the employer and worker, variable work hours, and low access to benefits (Nollen and Axel 1996; Polivka and Nardone 1989). Several types of employment are considered to be contingent, including non-regular part-time work, temporary work, independent contract work, dependent contract work (homeworkers), and employee leasing arrangements (Nollen and Axel 1996; Human Resources Development Canada 1994; duRivage 1992; Belous 1989). It is estimated that the contingent work force makes up approximately 30 percent of total employment in Canada (Wells 1996; Betcherman 1995; Betcherman et al. 1994). Only half of all new jobs created between 1979 and 1993 were full time (Human Resources Development Canada 1994, 31); the rest involved some form of non-standard work. Krahn (1995, 41) notes that 'the rates of part-time work, temporary work, own-account self-employment and multiple jobholding all increased between 1989 and 1994.' Most importantly, the growth of the contingent work force is probably part of a long-term trend (Nollen and Axel 1996; Krahn 1995; Economic Council of Canada 1990).

Today, an increasing portion of temporary workers are highly skilled health care professionals, engineers, research and development scientists, and management and executive temps (Coates and Jarratt 1995, 2). Although many professional contingent workers prosper, most contingent work is still characterized by low wages, and workers often adopt contingent work involuntarily, because they are unable to find permanent full-time jobs.

Because contingent employment raises new concerns about the health and wellbeing of workers, this study tries to answer the following fundamental question: Is contingent work healthy work? This is done through an analysis of the literature by identifying conditions of healthy work and judging how contingent work measures up. Structured interviews conducted by the author provide additional information. In conclusion, suggestions are made for how contingent work can be made healthier.

The Nature of Contingent Work

Contingent work differs substantially from traditional work. Contingent workers have very little or no job security, since contingent work is 'on-demand' employment in which an employer hires an individual for a specific task and then terminates the relationship once the work is completed (Polivka and Nardone 1989, 10): there is no expectation of continuing employment or commitment between the worker and the employer.

Contingent Work

- Probably part of a long-term trend
- Characterized by low wages
- Often involuntary
- Variable and irregular work hours

Contingent workers usually have irregular work schedules based on the company's needs. Daily, weekly, and monthly hours of work are variable and unpredictable. Contingent workers do not normally receive the same benefit coverage as full-time employees. In fact, the few contingent workers who do receive benefits are usually limited to the benefits required by legislation (Human Resources Development Canada 1994, 6). Contingent work should be distinguished from other non-traditional forms of employment. Many individuals who work part-time are permanent employees who have regular hours and enjoy the same stability of employment as full-time employees. They may also receive prorated benefits and annual salaries, and they may remain with a company for many years. This form of part-time employment is not considered to be contingent work (Nollen and Axel 1996, 7; Polivka and Nardone 1989, 10).

Differences within the Contingent Work Force

The contingent work force is not composed of a homogeneous group of people with identical characteristics and employment conditions.

Skilled versus Low-Skilled Contingent Workers

Traditionally, part-time and temporary workers have held low-skilled, low-paying jobs, of which a majority were clerical positions (Coates and Jarratt 1995, 2). Although the number of low-skilled contingent jobs is still growing, a new market for highly skilled and professional contingent workers has emerged. A growing portion of the contingent work force includes CEOs, human resources directors, computer systems analysts, accountants, and nurses (Paik Sunoo 1996, 35). Axel (1995, 5) found that approximately 44 percent of the U.S. and European companies she interviewed were using professional and technical contingent workers. In keeping with this trend, large temporary agencies such as Manpower now offer highly skilled technicians such as health care professionals, research and development scientists and biotechnical engineers, in addition to the traditional clerical temporary employee (Coates and Jarratt 1995, 2). Cawsey, Deszca, and Mazerolle (1995, 43) suggest that in response to the changing labour market some professionals are adopting a contingent 'portfolio career' and developing a diverse set of skills and a large client base to ensure employment security rather than job security.

This divergence of skill sets among contingent employees has created two classes of workers—one group 'at the top of skills ladder, who thrive; and the rest, many of whom, unable to attract fat contract fees, must struggle to survive' (Castro 1993, 44). Depending on a person's skill set, contingent work provides drastically different working conditions and standards of living.

Voluntary and Involuntary Contingent Workers

Contingent workers may have different experiences of, and attitudes towards, their work depending on whether or not they are contingent workers by choice. Feldman (1990, 105) suggested that voluntary part-time employees are more likely to be satisfied with their work than involuntary part-time workers. Furthermore, Krausz, Brandwein, and Fox (1995, 227) found that voluntary temporary-help workers experienced greater job satisfaction than involuntary temporary-help workers.

The "Class Structure" of Contingent Work

1. The highly skilled and professional workers who 'thrive'
2. The low-skilled contingent workers who 'struggle to survive'

People choose to become contingent workers for several reasons. Women may find contingent work attractive because it offers a more flexible work schedule to balance their work and family lives (Christensen 1987, 17). Nollen and Axel (1996, 170) suggest, as well, that some may prefer temporary work because it provides time to pursue other interests, such as education. Portfolio careerists enjoy the variety of assignments and the opportunity to build their skills inventory. Since temporary work no longer carries a negative stigma, some workers are choosing contingent work for the flexibility and variety it creates without damaging their prospects for full-time work (Paik Sunoo 1966, 35).

Increasingly, however, individuals accept contingent work because they are unable to secure full-time employment. Betcherman (1995, 91) notes that 'in 1993, the involuntary share of part-time employment reached 35.5 percent, which is more than 5 points higher than the share reached during the early 1980s, when the unemployment rate was at similar levels.' In 1988 a survey of temporary workers in Canada revealed that 41 percent were involuntary temporary workers (Economics Council of Canada 1990, 12). Nollen and Axel (1996, 212) estimate that one-half of the contingent work force is involuntary and is using this work arrangement as a way to enter into the regular full-time work force.

Forces behind the Growth of Contingent Employment

Organizations are using contingent labour for more than just solving immediate problems such as replacing absent or vacationing employees (Axel 1995, 6, 7). Recent findings suggest that the increased use of contingent workers is part of a general strategy in work force redesign. Charles Handy (1989) uses the concept of 'shamrock organization' to explain how organizations are using contingent workers to accomplish their goals. The first leaf of the shamrock is the core work force, which consists mainly of professional knowledge workers who are essential to the success of the organization: they perform work related to the core competencies of the company and are tied to the organization by high salaries and full benefits. Increasingly, organizations are reducing the size of the first leaf and using the second and third leaves of the shamrock, which make up the contingent work force. The second leaf consists of employees who are contracted only for the duration of a specific project and are normally paid based on performance. The final leaf is the flexible labour force, which consists of lower-paid temporary and irregular part-time employees who are hired as needed and used to meet fluctuations in demand for the organization's products and services.

Nollen and Axel (1996, 41) use a somewhat similar 'core-ring model', which consists of a core work force made up of regular full-time and regular part-time employees. Labour flexibility within the core is achieved in the traditional manner through overtime and layoffs. The first ring around the core consists of direct-hire temporaries and casual part-time employees who are employees of the company but whose hours of work and jobs can be changed at management's will. The second ring consists of temporary workers from agencies and independent contractors; they are not employees of the company and they work as needed. The last ring consists of out-sourced or subcontracted work completed by workers of another firm. These workers may or may not work at the company site, yet they still contribute to work force flexibility.

Work Force Redesign

1. Core work force
2. Contract work force
3. Temporary and casual work force
4. Outsourced and sub-contracted work

Two Main Reasons for Using Contingent Workers

- 1) Flexibility
- 2) Labour Cost Savings

The search for greater flexibility, not only in terms of numbers of employees but also in terms of the skills those employees possess, is the main reason reported by companies for the increased use of contingent workers (Betcherman et al. 1994, 49; Axel 1995, 3; Belous 1989, 1; Krahn 1995, 35; Pfeffer and Baron 1988, 273). Organizations require 'just-in-time workers' to match the demands of 'just-in-time production' and meet the fluctuating needs of the global market (Human Resources Development Canada 1994, 29). By decreasing their regular core work force and increasing the use of contingent workers, organizations can save on labour costs by paying for labour only when it is needed, by not having to pay for pension and benefit plans, social security premiums, and certain training costs, and by paying lower wages (Human Resources Development Canada 1994, 30; Axel 1995, 10). Some employers have increased their use of contingent workers to avoid unionization and the higher wages and benefits which unions bring (Barker 1995, 34; Pfeffer and Baron 1988, 288).

Surprisingly, companies have reported that the need to control labour costs is secondary to the need for flexibility (Axel 1995, 6; Betcherman et al. 1994, 49). Although some employers believe that labour cost savings are realized by paying lower wages and benefits to contingent employees, there is considerable controversy over the degree to which the use of contingent workers actually results in labour-cost savings. How an organization's contingent work force is managed determines whether actual cost savings are realized. Factors such as low productivity and training costs can work to erode the cost-savings resulting from lower wages and benefits (Nollen and Axel 1996).

Advantages and Disadvantages for Employers

Ironically, what companies like most about using a contingent work force are often the factors that lead to complaints by management about their contingent employees (Axel 1995, 9). While employers favour the tenuous nature of the relationship and the lower wages, duRivage (1992, 34) points out that organizations may experience lower productivity because they are using a work force with a high turnover and minimal job commitment: motivating contingent workers can be an obstacle for management who cannot use promotions and pay raises as motivational tools. Furthermore, contingent workers often do not have the necessary skills and training, and management faces problems with work quality (Axel 1995, 8). Consequently, short-term savings from lower wages and benefits may be offset by a long-term decrease in productivity. In addition, when contingent workers are used, core workers have less trust in management (Pearce 1993, 1090); employee morale may suffer from unfavourable perceptions of the pay and working conditions of core and contingent workers doing similar jobs (Coates and Jarratt 1995).

Advantages and Disadvantages for Employees

The flexible schedule provided by contingent work gives workers the opportunity to stay in the work force, maintain or enhance their skills, and perhaps manage other obligations such as family or school at the same time (Human Resources Development Canada 1994, 28; Krahn 1995, 35; Christensen 1987, 18). Although most contingent work offers low wages and benefits, some workers are able to earn higher wages than they would as a regular full-time employees by charging high fees for their services and expertise

(Coates and Jarratt 1995, 3). Contingent work can also act as a bridge to full-time employment or provide an income while searching for permanent work.

However, contingent workers are faced with little or no job and income security and an irregular work schedule which may make it difficult to balance work with personal and family responsibilities. Other disadvantages include fewer health benefits or pensions, lower pay for similar jobs, and few opportunities for promotions or advancement. Contingent workers are less likely to be represented by a labour union that provides protection regarding promotions, layoffs, and dismissals, and they are also less likely to be covered by legislation protecting the rights of full-time employees (including the Employment Standards Act) and are likely to have less access to unemployment insurance and the Canada Pension Plan.

Involuntary contingent workers are often underemployed, since their experience, skills, and talents are often not being used to their fullest extent. This may affect their psychological well-being (Sauter, Murphy and Hurrell 1990, 1151). They receive little training or career development from their employers, because they do not stay with the organization long enough for the employers to recoup their investment (Belous 1989). Since training they do receive is usually given on the job and only as needed (Axel 1995, 6), contingent workers must take responsibility for their own skills and knowledge to ensure that they are employable in the future.

Work and Health

Why Is Healthy Work Important?

Research suggests that work can play a critical role in personal health, well-being, and happiness (Novick 1986; Ivancevich, Matteson, and Preston 1982). Work can provide a place where people experience friendship, creativity, responsibility, recognition, and pride (Novick 1986, 3). But stress in the workplace may have an adverse effect not only on the health of the individual but also on the well-being and effectiveness of the organization (Hendrix 1985, 654). It may result in increased costs due to higher absenteeism, lower productivity, higher turnover, and—since workers compensation boards across Canada are increasingly treating stress as a compensable disease (Dolan and Schuler 1994, 447)—higher workers compensation premiums (Dolan 1995, 4). The costs of work-related stress are enormous.

The Components of Healthy Work

Job Security

Job security is central to the physical and psychological well-being of employees (Kuhnert and Palmer 1991). It allows employees to plan financially and to make suitable childcare and eldercare arrangements. Job insecurity, on the other hand, can be a powerful stressor in the workplace, leading to anxiety, depression, and irritation (Hartley et al. 1991, 44, 49); it has been associated with low job satisfaction (Ashford, Lee and Bobko 1989), reduced commitment to the organization and a decreased job effort (Hartley et al. 1991).

Some Effects of Stress on Employee Health

- Elevated blood pressure
- Strokes
- Cardiovascular complaints
- Neurological complaints and headaches
- Anger, hostility
- Depression
- Burnout
- Escapist drinking
- Interpersonal conflicts
- Tardiness, absenteeism
- Quitting a job

Source: Dolan (1995)

Job Control

Job control—defined as the extent to which an employee may determine 'how, where, why, and when to act, the level of access to information necessary to make informed decisions, [the] availability of resources for implementing choices, and the power to bring about desired choices' (Dolan 1995, 9)—is critical to the health and well-being of employees (Sauter, Hurrell, and Cooper 1989; Spector 1986). Lack of job control is especially stressful when an individual has a high degree of responsibility. Perceived control, rather than objective control, has also been found to be important. Spector (1986, 1013) found that individuals who perceived that they had higher levels of control in their jobs experienced less stress and were more satisfied with their jobs in comparison to others who perceived that they had low job control. Employees who perceived high levels of job control were more committed, involved, and motivated, and they performed better at work. They were also absent less often, had fewer intentions of quitting, and were less likely to quit.

Social Support and Interpersonal Relations

Social support helps individuals cope with job stress; support can come from coworkers, supervisors, family, or friends (Gutek, Repetti, and Silver 1988, 156; Dolan 1995, 5). A lack of social support is associated with increased worker stress and job dissatisfaction (Beehr 1995, 87). Although there has been little research addressing this topic, one study did find that interpersonal conflict among colleagues was highly correlated with the intent to quit (Spector, Dwyer and Jex 1988, as cited in Beehr 1995, 147).

Skill Utilization

Individuals who do not have an opportunity to use their skills and knowledge at work may experience psychological strain, including dissatisfaction, depression, irritation, and somatic complaints such as sleeping difficulties and headaches (Sutherland and Cooper 1995; Feldman and Doeringhaus 1992; Beehr 1995). Skill underutilization has been related to absenteeism and turnover (Beehr 1995, 92). In addition, the underutilization of a worker's skills is highly unproductive for organizations, because an overeducated worker is an underutilized factor of production (Karasek and Theorell 1990, 179).

Employment Volition

Feldman (1990) and Krausz, Brandwein, and Fox have confirmed that voluntary temporary-help employees are higher in overall job satisfaction than involuntary temporary-help employees. In addition, Lee and Johnson (1991) have determined that among temporary employees, their preference for their work schedule influences their level of organizational commitment and job satisfaction.

Social Comparison

Research consistently shows that workers who are underpaid in comparison to others in similar situations are less satisfied with their jobs and less productive than individuals who are paid equitably (Stepina and Brand 1986, 29). Moreover, two studies have shown that when workers perceive their pay to be unfair, they are more likely to have higher

absenteeism rates and to permanently withdraw from the organization (Austin and Walster 1974, Evan and Simmons 1969, as cited in Stepina and Brand 1986). Stepina and Brand also found that workers who felt disadvantaged on the components of job complexity, compensation, supervisory behaviour, and security were less satisfied and less intrinsically motivated than the group who felt fairly treated. Furthermore, workers who felt disadvantaged with respect to job complexity (skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback) demonstrated higher turnover and absenteeism and lower performance than workers who felt equitably treated. Sashkin and Williams (1990, 68) found that higher rates of employee sickness and accident compensation costs were a direct consequence of perceived unfairness in organizations. Thus, employees' perceptions of fairness in their organizations can affect both worker health and the organization's bottom line.

Job Content

Hackman and Oldman (1980) developed a Job Characteristics Model to explain how job and personal characteristics combine to affect job satisfaction, motivation, and productivity. Three psychological states—experienced meaningfulness, experienced responsibility, and knowledge of results—affect worker's job satisfaction and motivation. Skill variety, task identity, and task significance contribute to a job's meaningfulness. The degree of autonomy involved with the job affects feelings of responsibility for the outcomes of work. And feedback regarding performance provides a worker with knowledge of actual work results.

The Job Characteristics Model predicts that a job which has high motivating potential will have a positive impact on the quality of work performance, job satisfaction, and absenteeism and turnover. On the other hand, a job which has limited skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback will result in low job satisfaction, high absenteeism and turnover, low performance, and low motivation—and, of course, lower productivity. These outcomes are moderated by individual differences in 'growth-need strength,' defined as 'the degree to which an individual desires the opportunity for self-direction, learning and personal accomplishment at work' (Hellriegel, Slocum, and Woodman 1992, 577).

Role Stressors

Role conflict occurs when a person is expected to fulfill conflicting or incompatible roles simultaneously: it has been linked to job tension, job dissatisfaction (Sauter, Murphy, and Hurrell 1990), psychological withdrawal from the work group (Van Sell, Brief, and Schuler 1981), irritation, and physical symptoms such as high blood pressure and pulse rate (Brett 1980, 108). Research also indicates that role conflict is negatively related to job involvement, job performance, satisfaction with pay, supervisors and coworkers, and positively related to a propensity to leave the organization (Beehr 1995, 79).

Role ambiguity occurs when employees lack clear and consistent information about their work tasks (Hellriegel, Slocum, and Woodman 1992, 470). It has been found to contribute to overall job dissatisfaction, fatigue, and job-related tension. It is negatively related to organizational commitment, job involvement, satisfaction with pay, and satisfaction with promotions—and positively related to feelings of anxiety at work (Beehr 1995, 59, 67) and other indicators of mental ill health.

Characteristics of Meaningful Work

- Skill variety
- Task identity
- Task significance
- Autonomy
- Feedback

Work overload and also work underload, or having too little to do, can be stressful for employees (Hellriegel, Slocum, and Woodman 1992, 286). Work underload has been positively correlated with dissatisfaction, symptoms of poor health and depression (Spielberger and Reheiser 1995, 54).

Predictability

There has been little research on the effects of predictability of employment on individuals or organizations, although some studies have indicated that ambiguity and uncertainty about one's job, career stability, and promotional opportunities at work are related to reduced job satisfaction, self-esteem, job involvement, organizational commitment, and well-being (Beard and Edwards 1995, 116).

The Psychological Contract

The psychological contract in an employment relationship is the employees' perception of the organization's obligations to them as well as of their obligations to the organization: these obligations involve both monetary and nonmonetary rewards and are based on trust, interpersonal attachment, and commitment to certain partners (McFarlane Shore and Tetrick 1994; McLean Parks and Kidder 1994).

Beehr and Newman (1978) note that the perceived psychological contract between employees and their organization is a potential stressor, since employees and their employers may perceive their obligations and relationships differently (Beehr 1995, 88). In addition, if the contract is based only on monetary rewards, employment relationships may be weakened, with negative effects for both the employee and the organization. Weakened employment relationships have been associated with lowered employee trust and commitment and may contribute to lowered job satisfaction and well-being (Beard and Edwards 1995, 118). Rosseau (as cited in Sashkin and Williams 1990, 67) notes that employees experience more than just dissatisfaction and disappointment when they sense that their psychological contract has been broken—they also feel betrayed and experience deeper psychological distress. Their satisfaction with and commitment to the organization declines; they may slack off at work and even from the organization (McLean Parks and Kidder 1994; Robinson 1995).

Is Contingent Work Healthy Work?

This section of the study attempts to determine the potential effects of contingent work on worker health by applying the general findings from the literature to the nature of contingent work and by using the results of interviews with contingent workers conducted by the author. Five professional, or high-skilled, contingent workers and five temporary, or low-skilled, contingent workers were interviewed to gain a better understanding of the differences between categories of contingent workers. Professional contingent workers were defined as individuals who required a university education to perform their jobs, whereas temporary contingent workers were defined as low-skilled individuals who worked for a temporary employment agency performing clerical work. Structured interviews were conducted using a series of questions concerning the nature of their work in relation to the elements of healthy work.

Outcomes of Meaningful Work

- High internal work motivation
- High quality work performance
- High satisfaction with the work
- Low absenteeism and turnover

How Does Contingent Work Measure Up?

Job Security

Workers rank job security as one of the most important job characteristics (Jurgensen 1978, as cited in Hartley et al. 1991, 11), partly because losing one's job may lead to a loss of personal identity (Kuhnert and Palmer 1991, 88). Job insecurity, however, is an inherent characteristic of contingent work: contingent workers inevitably experience total job loss at the end of each assignment (Beard and Edwards 1995, 113) and can go without work for days or weeks. For these reasons, it seems likely that the average contingent worker would experience the negative health effects of job insecurity discussed in the previous chapter. Furthermore, contingent workers do not have a career path within one organization, nor do they usually receive promotion or advancement opportunities. These factors are also associated with low levels of satisfaction and low self-esteem (Sauter, Murphy, and Hurrell 1990, 1150).

Professional contingent workers may find employment security, however, by continually developing a variety of skills and servicing a number of companies. This theory was supported by interviews with two of the five professional contingent workers. Both individuals attributed their feelings of employment security to confidence in their own abilities and to the fact that they were continually developing and acquiring new skills to ensure their employability. Both also indicated that they had more than enough work and often worked eighty-hour weeks. Both claimed that they had the opportunity to earn a substantially higher income than they could earn as permanent full-time employees. The other three professional contingent workers explained that they felt they had employment security in the short term (for the duration of their contract) but no long-term security.

On the other hand, all five temporary contingent workers interviewed claimed that they had absolutely no job security whatsoever. They also indicated that they were paid considerably less than permanent full-time people in similar positions. In fact, three respondents noted that it was very difficult to make a reasonable living on temporary wages alone. The unpredictability of future income was a major concern for many of the temporary workers. For instance, one temporary worker was distressed to find herself without an assignment for almost two months while she still had rent and bills to pay. All ten contingent workers indicated that career and skill development was important and that it was the individual's responsibility to acquire this training, rather than relying on the employer for future development.

Job Control

As we have already seen, lack of control over one's work is an important stressor with negative and costly outcomes. In fact, research shows that 'control is the decisive factor in determining the health consequences of work demands' (Sauter, Murphy, and Hurrell, 1990, 1150). The research also indicates that in general, contingent workers have little control over the length of their assignments, the number of hours worked, the type of work performed, and the receipt of rewards generally associated with good work such as advancement, challenging work assignments, or higher pay (Beard and Edwards 1995, 114). However, professional contingent workers may have more freedom and control

Professional contingent workers can often demand high pay for their skills and experience, while lower-skilled contingent workers have little choice in the type of work they perform.

over their work than temporary contingent workers, because of the specialized skills and expertise they bring to the job. It is assumed that the professional can complete the assignment correctly and on time. Moreover, because many independent contractors are paid based on performance, the client gives the worker complete autonomy over the project, asking only to see the end-result. Professional contingent workers whose skills are in high demand may also have more control over the type of assignments they accept, and since they often work on a project basis, they can influence the length of their assignment and the number of hours they work. Professional contingent workers may also have more control over the rewards they receive than temporary workers: for example, they can demand higher pay for their skills and experience and further their career development by accepting more challenging assignments.

In contrast, one could assume that lower-skilled contingent workers would experience less control over their work. They are brought in to do simple, structured tasks which leave little opportunity to make decisions about how the work is performed. They have limited skills and therefore not much choice in the type of work they perform. And the skills they do have are readily available from others, so they cannot demand higher pay. Similarly, the excess supply of low-skilled workers in comparison to professional workers makes it difficult for temporary workers to control the number of hours they work. Since they usually perform small, fragmented tasks rather than a whole project, it is also hard for them to influence the length of their assignments.

The interviews provided information to support these assumptions. All five professional contingent workers felt that they had control over the number of hours they worked, while only two of the temporary contingent workers felt that they had some control over the number of hours they worked. Interestingly, all these individuals claimed that by working hard and exerting effort, they were able to influence the length of their assignments. In contrast, three of the low-skilled workers reported that they had no influence over their work hours because they were dictated by the company. Four of the five professional contingent workers felt they could choose their own methods and the sequence of their work, while only two temporary contingent workers indicated they had this freedom. The other three explained that while they had some freedom to choose how they worked, it was more often dictated to them or structured in a way that gave them little control.

All five professional contingent workers felt they had the freedom to choose the type of assignments they performed, while only two temporary contingent workers felt this way. The other three indicated that they did not have this freedom because, for financial reasons, they had to take every assignment offered to them. (It is interesting to note that these three temporary workers were also involuntary contingent workers.)

The interviewees were also asked whether they thought that being a contingent worker gave them more control over their work and family lives. Interestingly, the voluntary contingent workers—two professionals and two temporaries—reported that they did have control over their work and family lives as a result of their work arrangements, while the involuntary contingent workers reported working longer hours in order to secure full-time work. For three of the voluntary workers, control over work and family was a main reason for choosing contingent work. On the other hand, one involuntary temporary worker claimed that she was working up to sixteen hours a day just to make ends meet, so that, in fact, temporary work had a

negative impact on her work and family life. Similarly, an involuntary professional contingent worker explained that she put in extra hours in the hope that she would be offered a full-time position. She felt that, as a result, her work and family life had suffered. Two involuntary temporary contingent workers said that contingent work had the potential to help balance out work and family life, but only if it was not a main source of income or if they had a longer contract.

Social Support and Interpersonal Relations

Contingent workers may lack social support from supervisors and coworkers due to their short-term stay and lack of attachment to the company. Belous (1989, 6) notes that 'contingent workers are not considered part of the corporate family' and therefore may not qualify for or be invited to many of the work-related functions which offer a way of building relationships. Feldman, Doerphinghaus and Turnley (1994, 54) also note that temporary workers are often treated in 'dehumanizing and impersonal' ways on the job. Permanent employees, on the other hand, may feel resentful and threatened by the presence of contingent workers, for fear that their jobs might also be replaced by temporary workers. This feeling may be exacerbated if the company shows a trend towards reducing the number of core jobs and using more contingent workers. One study found that almost one-third of core workers felt that contingent workers were a threat to their jobs. The difference in the way core and contingent workers are treated inevitably creates tension between these two groups. Caudron (1994, 58) found that more than 25 percent of both core and contingent workers experienced tension or conflict between the two groups at the worksite.

When contingent workers were asked during personal interviews what was difficult about starting a new contract, the most common concern of all contingent workers was meeting new people and trying to fit in. Similarly, the most difficult thing about leaving a contract once it had been completed was saying good-bye to coworkers and leaving friendships behind at work. This appeared to be a more significant issue for temporary contingent workers, as all five reported this difficulty, while only two out of five professional contingent workers raised this issue. These responses suggest that the contingent workers were in fact able to develop positive relationships and receive social support in the workplace, depending on the length of the assignment. Furthermore, the temporary contingent workers interviewed were more attached to their coworkers than the professional contingent workers: this result may be attributed to the fact that professional contingent workers often work out of their homes and spend less time at their client's worksite.

The majority of contingent workers interviewed felt that they were accepted as part of the team and work group in their organizations, although two respondents (one temporary and one professional) indicated that this acceptance took time. These individuals explained that they did not feel a part of the organization until they had been with the company for a couple of months. They felt that they had to prove themselves to the permanent workers and show they were capable before they were accepted. Furthermore, one contingent worker indicated that she had experienced resentment from full-time workers because they feared that temporary workers might also replace their positions. This situation made the temporary person feel awkward and uncomfortable in her working environment.

Common concerns of contingent workers are meeting new people, trying to fit in, saying goodbye to co-workers, and leaving workplace friendships behind.

The majority of temporary workers also reported that they received more social support from their temporary-help agencies than from their on-site employers. One contingent worker indicated that a person from the agency visited her work location twice a week to discuss problems or answer questions for the temporary employees.

Skill Utilization

Because they are hired to do non-core tasks which require little skill or training, many contingent workers feel underemployed, especially those who are seeking full-time employment and accept contingent jobs involuntarily. Their jobs often require 'significantly less education, skill, and prior work experience than they have' (Feldman, Doeringhaus, and Turnley 1994, 57). Such skill underutilization can result in job dissatisfaction and psychological strains, as we have seen. But the literature suggests that skill underutilization may not be a significant problem for professional contingent employees, since companies typically hire these workers for the specific skills and expertise they possess.

Many contingent workers feel underemployed, which can result in job dissatisfaction and psychological strain.

The interviews confirmed the findings from the literature. Four of the five professional contingent workers felt that their skills were being fully utilized in their jobs, whereas all five temporary agency workers indicated that their skills were not being used to their full potential. The temporary workers reported that their jobs were boring, tedious, and unchallenging. One individual indicated that she had upgraded all her computer skills to make herself more employable as a temporary, only to find that she has not even been able to use these skills in her assignments. However, skill underutilization may not be a stressor for all contingent workers: one voluntary temporary employee explained that even though all her skills were not being utilized, she still enjoyed her job and found it fulfilling. She reasoned that she had worked for twenty-five years in a stressful environment with a lot of responsibility and now wanted to work where she could keep busy, socialize with others, yet escape the stress and demands of her old job.

As we have seen, the literature suggests that employers expect contingent workers to acquire their own training and come to work with the necessary skills. The interviews confirmed that training and skill development was the responsibility of contingent workers themselves, because their employers offered little training, except for orienting them to their new environment and tasks. While most individuals felt they had the proper skills and training to perform their work accurately, they had acquired this knowledge on their own. One temporary worker indicated that although she was going to be working with the company for five months and was assigned an e-mail address, she had to train herself to use e-mail on her own time, whereas full-time employees were given specific training to use the tool. She reported that much of the training at temporary assignments is acquired through the worker's own initiative, and very little time is invested with the temporary worker for on-the-job training.

The literature suggests that for work to be healthy, 'jobs should be designed to match workers' potential skills: they should use all skills available and provide a platform for further skill development consistent with the growth of self-esteem' (Karasek and Theorell 1990, 179). It also shows that temporary contingent workers are more likely to have their skills underutilized than professional contingent workers. Obviously, then, temporary contingent work has the potential to be unhealthy work.

Employment Volition

Feldman, Doeringhaus, and Turnley (1994) note that involuntary temporary workers have poorer attitudes towards their work than voluntary temporary workers. In particular, they are less satisfied with their pay, with life as a temporary, and they are less committed to the organization. Overall, they report a 'very strong sense of deprivation' (55).

The interview candidates for this study consisted of four voluntary contingent workers (two high-skilled professionals and two low-skilled temporaries) and six involuntary contingent workers. The reasons given for choosing contingent work differed between the professional and temporary groups. The professional workers' reasons included wanting more freedom and a more flexible work schedule and wanting to balance work and family life better and to make more money. In contrast, the temporary contingent workers decided to adopt contingent work because it would provide low-pressure work with minimal responsibility, provide a way to make extra pocket money, an opportunity to make contacts for future employment and a chance to socialize and meet people in a low-pressure work environment. They also thought it would make balancing work and family life easier.

It appeared in the interviews that those who were voluntarily employed as contingent workers were generally more satisfied with their work overall than those who were in a contingent job because they were not able to secure full-time employment: all four voluntary workers were satisfied with their level of pay, while four of the six involuntary workers were unsatisfied with their pay. Involuntary contingent workers felt that they had less control over their work lives than did voluntary contingent workers. On the other hand, the issues of job insecurity and predictability of work were not a major concern for voluntary contingent workers, who stated either that they were not working for the money or that they had a contingency fund set up to cover the slack periods. Job security and predictability of employment were important to involuntary contingent workers who explained that they depended on the income to support themselves and their families and to plan financially for the future.

Contingent workers were asked if they would accept the same job they had now but in a full-time position, if it were offered to them. Not surprisingly, each of the voluntary contingent workers said no, while the involuntary contingent workers indicated that they would happily take the job. The reasons voluntary contingent workers gave for not taking the full-time job included wanting to maintain their freedom and flexibility and to maintain the opportunity to make more money (this last reason was given by the two professional contingent workers). In contrast, the reasons cited by involuntary contingent workers for accepting the full-time offer included wanting more job security, a predictable income, a chance for more in-depth learning and longer-term projects, and the opportunity to build skills and grow in the profession. They also mentioned mental-health reasons and the chance to receive more money and benefits. These findings confirm, once again, that voluntary contingent workers are more satisfied with their work life and therefore want to remain in this position, while involuntary contingent workers are less satisfied and would prefer full-time work. Employment volition thus has an important moderating influence on the effects of contingent work on employee health.

Social Comparison

Since the temporary contingent worker is likely to receive lower pay and fewer or no benefits and probably has no job security, the temporary contingent worker will probably feel that she/he is not being treated fairly in comparison to full-time workers, especially if the work is identical. This feeling could be exacerbated if the temporary contingent worker is employed by the organization for an extended period of time, such as one or two years. Professional contingent workers may not experience the same feelings of inequity, however. They often make the same or higher wages than full-time employees, and many have employment security through their skill and expertise base. Although professional contingent workers are unlikely to receive benefits, this may not be a concern if they can afford to purchase their own benefit coverage.

The majority of contingent workers interviewed reported that they felt that they were generally treated fairly at work in comparison to full-time workers. However, when asked specifically about pay, all five temporary contingent workers agreed that they were paid considerably less than comparable full-time employees. This was a major source of discontent for most temporary contingent workers. On the other hand, two of the professional contingent workers said that they made substantially more money than similar full-time workers, while the other three said they were paid the same. Involuntary contingent workers also expressed feelings of inequity concerning job security. In particular, one professional contingent worker was disappointed with the fact that contingent workers are not offered full-time work even though they may work harder and do a better job than some full-time workers. Similarly, one temporary contingent worker found it unfair that contingent workers can be terminated at any time, whereas full-time employees doing the same job have more job security.

The literature shows that the feelings of inequity revealed in the interviews could result in low job satisfaction (Stepina and Brand 1986) and poor health (Sashkin and Williams 1990). In addition, equity theory suggests that workers may act to alleviate these feelings of inequity by reducing their efforts at work (Hellriegel, Slocum, and Woodman 1992). This resulting decrease in productivity should be of concern to organizations.

Job Content

One could assume that when evaluated using Hackman and Oldman's Job Characteristics Model (Hackman and Oldman 1980, 90), the work experiences of the two groups of contingent workers would appear radically different. Since professional contingent work tends to be project-based and since the worker is responsible for completing an entire piece of work, assignments are likely to have a great deal of 'task identity.' Furthermore, there is an opportunity to use a variety of skills, such as project-management and technical skills. Professional contingent workers are likely to experience 'task significance,' because they are able to see how their work has changed or contributed to organizational success, and project-based work provides them with the autonomy to decide how and when to complete parts of the assignment. Professional contingent work is also likely to provide employees with feedback about performance, since they can monitor their progress against project plans, and they can see whether the project results in success.

Feelings of inequity with full-time workers can result in low job satisfaction and, ultimately, reduced work effort.

On the other hand, one might assume that temporary contingent jobs would generally provide little skill variety or task significance: temporary contingent work often involves completing the same tedious task for an extended period of time. Moreover, temporary work is usually a small part of a larger project, which means that the assignments provide low task identity. Temporary jobs are likely to provide little autonomy, because they usually involve doing a specific and structured task. And they provide little feedback, because of the nature of the work itself and because the worker often leaves the organization before the task is completed. Because of these characteristics, we would expect from the literature that temporary contingent work would be associated with job dissatisfaction and poor mental health.

The interviews provided some support for several of these predictions. All five professional contingent workers said their jobs provided a great deal of variety and allowed them to use many of their skills and talents. In contrast, three of the five temporary contingent workers found their jobs provided little variety and were boring and monotonous. All the professional contingent workers considered that their jobs involved a whole identifiable piece of work, because they saw the project from start to finish. In contrast, only two temporary employees felt this way, because they found themselves completing small parts of larger tasks of which they rarely saw the end result.

All the professional contingent workers felt that they had a great deal of autonomy in their assignments, but only two temporary contingent workers felt their jobs provided some degree of autonomy: temporary workers were usually limited to deciding the sequence of their work. Both professional and temporary contingent workers felt personally responsible and accountable for the results of their work, however, and the majority found their work to be important, valuable, and worthwhile. However, two temporary employees sometimes questioned the importance of their work.

The majority of professional contingent workers found that their jobs provided them with direct feedback on how they were performing. For example, one independent contractor claimed that his project plans and timelines let him know how effectively he was performing and if he was on schedule. In contrast, most temporary workers did not receive much feedback from their work itself.

Dolan (1995, 7) notes that verbal or written feedback from supervisors is important for reducing stress, improving motivation, and satisfaction. But one can assume that it would be difficult for contingent workers to obtain feedback on their performance, since they do not receive an annual performance appraisal, and managers may not see the value in discussing their progress with them if they are going to be with the firm only a short time.

The interviews supported this assumption. All five temporary employees found that they received little feedback from their supervisors, unless they asked for it directly. To compensate for this deficiency, one worker developed her own questionnaire, which she gives out to employees in her department at the end of her contracts, so that she can monitor her progress and make improvements where necessary. Another temporary worker pointed out that each temporary worker's time-card includes a questionnaire concerning the worker's performance, but managers rarely take the time to fill them out. Amongst the professional contingent workers, there was no agreement on the amount of

Feedback, verbal or written, is important for reducing stress, motivation, and job satisfaction.

feedback they received. Three of the professionals found that they received ample amounts of feedback from their clients, while two others found they received no feedback and relied solely on self-evaluation.

Role Stressors

Temporary contingent workers employed by a temporary agency may experience the stress associated with role conflict if they receive conflicting demands from the agency and the client. Both temporary and professional contingent workers may also experience role ambiguity, since they change employers frequently and are therefore exposed to different cultures, structures, and managerial styles. Ambiguity may also exist concerning the tasks involved with their new assignments and their employers' expectations. Furthermore, contingent workers may find the drastic fluctuations in their workload, being unemployed one week and working sixty hours the next, to be stressful.

Changing roles, assignments, and expectations can create stress for contingent workers.

During the interviews, approximately half the temporary contingent workers and half the professional contingent workers reported that they frequently had conflicting expectations and demands placed on them. Role ambiguity was a potential problem for temporary contingent workers, but not for professional contingent workers: all five professional contingent workers felt there were clear, planned goals and objectives in their assignments, while only two temporary workers felt this way. When they were asked what was difficult about starting a new contract, temporary contingent workers' responses included trying to determine their new employers' expectations, a lack of knowledge surrounding their responsibilities for the first few days, and adjusting to a new company culture and routine. In contrast, only one professional contingent worker reported similar difficulties.

The professional contingent workers reported that their workloads were either too heavy or about right (but note that one worker found the eighty hours a week he worked 'about right' for him). On the other hand, temporary contingent workers reported that their workloads were either too light or about right. One interviewee who indicated that her workload was normally too light, said that she became bored easily and was always asking for extra things to do at work. She found this situation very stressful, because she did not have the autonomy to say 'I have nothing to do so I'll read a book or play a game.' Two other temporary workers indicated that they regularly had to ask for additional work to ensure they were kept busy, but there was not always work available.

Predictability

Although, there has been little research on the question, it seems likely that the contingent work arrangement could be potentially stressful due to the uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding future work. Contingent workers do not know when they will have work or what the nature of their work will be.

Predictability of employment was a major issue for seven of the ten contingent workers interviewed, primarily for financial reasons. For many, contingent work was their only source of income: they relied on it to meet mortgage and rent payments, as well to support their children. The temporary contingent workers also commented on how difficult it was

to make a living on the low wages they received. One subject reported she was working several temporary jobs, on average sixteen hours a day, just to make ends meet. Another worker found it very stressful when she went almost two months without an assignment and, hence, with no income.

It is interesting to note that employment volition appears to be a moderating factor, since three interviewees who said predictability of employment was not important to them were also voluntary contingent workers. One person said she was working not for the money but rather for the social aspects of work. Another described contingent work as 'feast or famine' and reported that to minimize the problem of unpredictability he tries to ensure that he always has enough money to last him for three months without work.

Not surprisingly, the three workers for whom predictability was not important did not find the job search process stressful. In contrast, the other seven found it very stressful. In fact, one worker said the past two years as a temporary employee had been the most stressful time of her life; another, who had been employed as an involuntary temporary worker for the past year, said she would be ecstatic if she could secure even an eight- or nine-month contract.

Although professional contingent workers did not raise the issue, temporary contingent workers reported that they found the unpredictability of the nature of their work stressful. Not knowing what to expect and the uncertainty surrounding their first day at an assignment made two workers feel anxious. One temporary worker found that even after having worked for twenty different companies, she still felt very nervous and often could not sleep the night before she was to start with a new company. Another temporary worker had experienced panic attacks and doubts about her abilities before starting a new assignment.

Psychological Contract

The interviews with contingent workers revealed that their motivation differed from the traditional full-time workers' desire for pay raises and promotions for good performance. Contingent workers tried to do a good job at work in order to receive verbal recognition, obtain good references, and build a good reputation. Contingent workers felt that if they did a good job, they would be more likely to be asked to work for the organization again. These workers were apparently trying to build a longer-term relationship with the company. The involuntary contingent workers also hoped that they would receive consideration for full-time jobs if they became available.

Surprisingly, the majority of the workers interviewed, especially those in longer contracts or assignments, said they felt a sense of loyalty and commitment to the companies in which they worked. The main reason cited was that they became attached to the people they worked with and felt a sense of commitment to them. In fact, further analysis revealed that they did not feel loyal to the company itself, but rather to one or two people in the organization who had helped them or given them support. When asked if their source of motivation, their expectations, or their sense of loyalty had changed from when they were full-time employees, most respondents agreed that these things had changed. As full-time employees, they had taken their pay

Contingent workers often develop loyalty and commitment to the people they work with.

cheques for granted; as contingent workers, they valued their monetary rewards more, because their income was uncertain. One worker said she resented her employers because she received much less pay as a temporary employee, compared to when she worked full-time, and she felt she was being exploited. Another respondent indicated that as a full-time employee she had expected promotions, raises, and job security, whereas a temporary employee she expected only her pay cheque and verbal recognition for her efforts. However, in contrast to most of the evidence presented here, one individual reported that she feels more appreciated by her employers as a temporary worker, compared to when she worked full-time. She explained that when she was a full-time employee people forgot to praise her and took her efforts for granted. As a temporary employee, she finds that each time one of her assignments expires, she is given feedback and recognition before she leaves.

Is Contingent Work Healthy Work?

What do the Workers Think?

To discover whether the contingent workers themselves thought contingent work was healthy, they were asked to define healthy work; their responses are listed in Table 1. They were also asked if they felt contingent work was healthy work. The main response was that contingent work is healthy if it is the person's arrangement of choice. The four voluntary contingent workers felt that contingent work was healthy for them under their circumstances. In contrast, the six involuntary contingent workers felt that contingent work could have a negative impact on worker health. Furthermore, the respondents felt that it was unhealthy for workers to be trapped in a contingent arrangement for an extended period of time if they would prefer full-time work. Many found the unpredictable nature of contingent work frustrating and stressful. On the other hand, one person commented that contingent work can be healthy because it provides people with at least some opportunity to work: without contingent work, many individuals would be fully unemployed. Another respondent said that contingent work can be healthy if the worker is open to uncertainty and views the work arrangement as a challenge. Contingent workers were also asked what they thought were the advantages and disadvantages of the contingent work arrangement. Their answers highlighted many of the healthy aspects of contingent work, as well as characteristics which can adversely affect worker health (see table 2).

Table 1
Interview Responses to 'What does healthy work mean to you?'

Temporary Workers	Professional Contingent Workers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being challenged • having the opportunity to use all of your skills • working with people you respect • doing enjoyable work • adhering to health and safety standards • having enough work to keep you busy • not being bored • having good people to work with • working in a non-smoking environment • working in a clean environment • getting along with coworkers: conflict is not healthy • feeling comfortable in your job • doing some physical exercise, not having to sit at a desk for 8 hours a day • having some autonomy • having the opportunity to give input; your voice is heard 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • striking a balance between stretching skill sets and being comfortable with skill sets • doing work that is not mundane • working in an environment in which you have a good attitude towards your job and others you work with • working with low stress • doing what you want to be doing • being able to express yourself and use your skills • doing work that makes you happy • having the freedom to perform how and when you want to • striking a balance between work and family life • supporting a healthy lifestyle • feeling comfortable • getting along well with coworkers • having good feelings between everyone • having a supervisor who is approachable • knowing your responsibilities and what is expected of you • working in an organization that takes into account the whole person and realizes that workers have a personal life outside of work • having flexibility in work hours

Table 2
Interview Responses Concerning the Advantages and Disadvantages of Contingent Work

Advantages	Disadvantages
Temporary Agency Workers	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • easier to balance work and family life • flexible work schedule • easy way to find work • nine-to-five job—can leave your job behind at the end of the day—no work to bring home • individuals are matched with employers well through the agency • provides at least some work • way to gain experience doing different types of work and working in different environments • way to make connections • can be a bridge to full-time employment • administration is looked after by agency • forces you to learn how to adapt to change • makes you appreciate what you have 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • temp worker carries a negative stigma • jobs provide little autonomy • future work hours and income are uncertain—cannot plan financially • no job security • low wages • difficult to survive on temporary employment alone—hard to be self-sufficient and independent • no guarantee of obtaining full-time employment • no benefits
Professional Contingent Workers	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • flexibility • allows you to develop your own skill set • gives you control over your worklife • gets you outside of the formal reporting structure • allows you to work from home • opportunity to make more money than full-time employees • more freedom in your worklife • project oriented—never a downtime • better able to balance work and family life • do not have same expectations, responsibilities or stress as full-time employees (e.g. supply teaching) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • uncertainty of the future—no job security • unpredictable hours of work • difficult to obtain feedback • difficult to manage different clients and your time • no benefits • can be lonely being a contingent worker—solitary • negative stigma of being a 'temp' • difficult to plan financially • no guarantee of work—slow periods

Conclusions

The analysis presented here reveals that contingent work can have a negative effect on worker health, depending on the circumstances. Temporary contingent workers experience job insecurity continuously; they feel inequitably treated in comparison to full-time workers; it is difficult for them to establish relationships with coworkers and obtain social support; and they may be underemployed. Furthermore, temporary contingent work may involve poor job content and little job control, as well as the possibility of role conflict, role ambiguity, and work overload or underload. The nature of the psychological contract, in which the employer holds most of the control over the employment relationship may also have negative effects.

However, professional contingent work will probably have fewer negative effects on health than temporary contingent work, because professional contingent workers have employment security through their skills and expertise. Furthermore, there is less potential for skill underutilization; professionals are more likely to have control over their work, to have better job content, and to find that they are treated more fairly in comparison to full-time workers, because they have the opportunity to make more money.

It is clear that employment volition is a key determinant of whether contingent work is healthy work. Voluntary contingent workers seem to deal adequately with the potential health problems of contingent work or not to view them as problems at all. For example, job security was not a problem for one temporary worker who did not depend on her assignments for income but worked only to satisfy her social needs. It did not bother her if she went without work for two or three weeks. On the other hand, involuntary contingent workers seem to experience many of the potential problems and generally are not as satisfied with their work arrangements as voluntary contingent workers.

Minimizing the Negative Impact

Many organizations are scaling down their core work forces and increasing their use of contingent workers to reduce labour costs and meet the fluctuating demands of the global marketplace. But if they do not manage their contingent work forces effectively, their savings in labour costs may be offset by decreases in productivity and work quality. If a contingent work force strategy is to succeed, employers must ensure that contingent work has a minimal negative impact on worker health.

Recommendations

Contingent work must fit into the organization's overall business strategy if it is to be successful: every organization using contingent labour needs to have a contingent staffing strategy which is developed by top management. This strategy 'should be carefully designed to take into account the risks and responsibilities of employing temps, as well as the effect . . . on the company's core workers, its overall productivity, and its long-range goals' (Coates and Jarratt 1995, 5). It should ensure that the organization has the appropriate number and type of contingent workers and is using them productively (Nollen and Axel 1996).

Contingent work must fit into the organization's overall business strategy if it is to be successful: every organization using contingent labour needs to have a contingent staffing strategy which is developed by top management.

Contingent workers should be managed to ensure that both the workers' and the organization's needs are being met. The first step is for top management to communicate its staffing strategy to core employees. They might point out, for example, that hiring contingent workers enables management to buffer regular employees against job loss. During a recession, contingent workers in the outer rings of the 'core-ring' model (discussed above) are of the greatest risk of termination, providing regular full- and part-time employees in the core with some security. A positive and proactive message will help core employees understand and accept the role of contingent workers in the firm.

Management should also revise company policies concerning such things as handling work disputes and sexual harassment charges, to ensure that contingent workers are given the same respect and treatment as permanent employees (Coates and Jarratt 1995, 9). These policies should be comprehensive and fair and should be communicated to all employees. Clear guidelines for the day-to-day management of contingent workers should also be established for managers. For example, managers should be told whether they are responsible for their contingent workers' productivity rate or for performance appraisals at the end of their assignments. Specific hiring practices should also be established to ensure a good fit between the organization and the knowledge and skills of contingent workers. Organizations should also develop an orientation program for all contingent workers to inform them of the organization's policies and familiarize them with its operations. At this time, contingent workers should be clearly told who their supervisors are and what their roles and responsibilities are.

Employers should recognize, as well, that they can take steps to make contingent work more productive and healthier. The recommendations that follow are broken down into the various job elements already discussed throughout this study.

Job Security

Organizations should explore the business case for developing longer contracts and employing fewer contingent workers. At least then, the contingent workers who are hired will feel more secure knowing they have a predictable income for a certain number of months. Employers can also enhance job security by rehiring contingent employees for additional contracts, and they can establish a practice of hiring effective contingent workers into the regular work force by posting jobs internally and making them available to contingent workers. As a result, contingent workers would have an incentive to perform well in the hope of securing additional contracts or full-time employment. However, false hopes among contingent workers concerning full-time work opportunities could have negative consequences for both workers and the organization (Feldman, Doeringhaus, and Turnley 1994, 58). Therefore, it is important for contingent workers to be clearly informed about issues of job security and possible career opportunities with their employers (Sauter, Murphy, and Hurrell 1990, 1151).

Job Control

To counteract the effects of a lack of job control on worker health and organizational effectiveness, contingent workers should be provided with the chance to give input or participate in decisions which directly concern their jobs and the performance of their responsibilities (Dolan 1995, 17; Sauter, Murphy, and Hurrell 1990, 1151). They should also be given the same degree of autonomy as the organization allows its core workers (Coates and Jarratt 1995, 10).

Social Support and Interpersonal Relations

To minimize interpersonal conflict between core and contingent workers, employers should also plan a small orientation program for contingent workers on their first day of work, which should include a tour of the building, introductions to the people they will be working with, and information regarding where their required supplies and equipment are located (Coates and Jarratt 1995, 10). Employers should also identify support persons in the organization for contingent workers, possibly their supervisors. This small step would help contingent workers feel more comfortable in their assignments and give them friendly faces to answer questions or to go to for support. Including contingent workers in work activities such as luncheons will make them feel more involved and more like a contributor to the company.

Organizations who have hired a large number of temporary workers through an agency should ask an agency representative to visit the employer's site on a weekly basis to provide support and answer questions or concerns of their contingent workers. For contingent workers who will be working on a team project, employers should clearly indicate their role, responsibilities, and expertise to permanent workers so that there is a clear understanding of how the contingent workers fit into the overall project.

Skill Utilization

To minimize the problem of underemployment, organizations should ensure that the skills of contingent workers meet the demands of the job and that they are not overqualified. If the organization is hiring through a temporary agency, they should speak to the agency about getting a good match between a worker's skills and the requirements of the job. Organizations should also assess what training will be required for contingent workers to be able to carry out their roles productively. Contingent workers who possess the required skills will still need training to familiarize them with their new responsibilities and surroundings, and they will appreciate any training they receive, because it reduces the stress of their current job and improves their employment prospects in the future (Coates and Jarratt 1995, 10).

However, employers are understandably reluctant to invest in training for contingent workers, because of the short period they have to recoup their investment. Nollen and Axel suggest four ways in which companies can overcome this problem: pay some benefits to keep contingent workers employed slightly longer; convert contingent workers to core employees; give a short-term contract of a specified duration; or give a wage increase after a specific number of hours or months worked. These initiatives may decrease the chance of premature resignation and encourage contingent workers to stay just long enough for a company to recoup its investment in training (Nollen and Axel 1996, 142-3).

Employment Volition

There is little an employer can do to change a contingent worker's preference for full-time employment. However, even the smallest effort to make a person's experience as a contingent worker more enjoyable may help to moderate the effects of an involuntary work arrangement on worker health.

Social Comparison

To avoid the problem of inequity between core and contingent workers doing the same jobs, employers should somehow differentiate the work done by these two groups. For example, work could be differentiated in function, purpose, or time frame (Nollen and Axel 1996, 57). Furthermore, rather than giving core and contingent workers the same pay and benefits, employers might offer contingent workers a premium wage increase as a partial replacement of benefits (140). Another option is for an employer to choose a temporary agency which supplies their workers with some form of benefits. Contingent workers who have worked with a company for an extended period of time, either continuously or intermittently, might also be offered a small raise in recognition of their efforts. Avon is a company which follows this strategy (160).

Job Content

Contingent workers will respond positively, like permanent employees, when they are given interesting and challenging work assignments that 'provide meaning, stimulation, and opportunity to use skills' (Sauter, Murphy, and Hurrell 1990, 1151). Job rotation among low-skilled contingent workers may provide an opportunity for workers to learn a new task and minimize stress related to repetitive work (Dolan 1995, 17).

In addition to feedback from the job itself, employers should ensure that contingent workers receive verbal feedback during their assignments and when their contract is completed. Like permanent employees, contingent workers benefit from recognition and constructive criticism concerning their performance (Coates and Jarratt 1995, 10). Letting contingent workers know how they are performing on the job will help to reduce potential stress associated with uncertainty of performance, as well as indicate to the workers possible areas for improvement (Dolan 1995, 17).

Role Stressors

Problems with role ambiguity can be minimized by defining a contingent worker's roles and responsibilities in clear specific terms (Dolan 1995, 17; Sauter, Murphy, and Hurrell 1990, 1151). This step should be taken both with the agency when a temporary worker is being hired and with the contingent worker on the first day of the assignment (Feldman, Doeringhaus, and Turnley 1994, 60), and it should be integrated into a formal orientation program for contingent workers. This practice would prevent a contingent worker from generating false expectations of an assignment and help to avoid conflicting job expectations (Sauter, Murphy, and Hurrell 1990, 1151). In addition, to improve worker productivity and minimize the stress associated with role ambiguity, employers should make performance standards clear to all contingent workers to ensure that they know what is expected of them (Dolan 1995, 17). Employers should also monitor their contingent workers' workload regularly to ensure that they are not overloaded or underloaded for any period of time. Furthermore, before hiring a contingent worker, employers should be careful to ensure that they have enough work planned so that workers remain occupied throughout the day and do not become bored.

Predictability

As previously mentioned, offering longer-term contracts to contingent workers would help to make their work schedules and income more predictable, at least for a short period of time. Furthermore, providing contingent workers in advance with the expiration date of their contracts would allow workers to start making arrangements for future work immediately and might help to smooth the transition from one job to the next without extended periods of unemployment and unpredictable income.

Psychological Contract

Employers should ensure that contingent workers remain employed only for the specified duration and do not become 'permanent temporaries.' Otherwise, the longer they remain with the employer the more they will expect to be treated like full-time employees: if they remain as temporary employees for several years, they may begin to feel unfairly treated. To solve this problem, organizations should implement a policy stating that contingent workers who have remained in their jobs for at least one year will be hired as full-time employees.

Future Research

The issue of the health effects of contingent work is a new field with limited research, and several important questions have arisen in the course of this study that can only be answered with further research. We need to know more, for example, about the interrelationships between the elements of healthy work to determine which elements have a significant effect on the health of individuals and organizational productivity. Furthermore, we would benefit from a survey of a large population of professional and temporary contingent workers to determine if the predictions made in this paper hold true. Future research should also take into account the individual differences between workers and the organizational contexts in which they work. Individual differences as well as organizational cultures may play a large role in determining an individual's experiences with contingent work. Further research concerning the effects of employment volition and the type of contingent work as moderating variables on worker health would also be beneficial. However, it will be clear to readers of this study that we already know how to alleviate many of the detrimental effects of contingent work on worker—and consequently, organizational—health.

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