

Temporary Employment and Security

By Lynn Beaton

The permanent full-time job can hardly be called the 'norm' any more. Increasingly these jobs are disappearing and are being replaced with a whole host of employment types. The new non-standard jobs differ from the traditional jobs in that they are not permanent but temporary or they involve a different or shorter arrangement of hours. There are different issues associated with hours worked and temporariness. They each bring with them a different range of issues that need to be addressed as people arrange their lives around their working practices. Often people think that because a job is part-time it is automatically casual, but this isn't true. Part-time jobs, or rostered hours jobs can be permanent and full-time jobs can be temporary. This article will focus on the implications of temporary employment for young workers.

There are a number of forms of temporary employment. It includes casual employment, fixed-term employment, agency work and self-employed contract work. The big question to ask about temporary employment is what does it do to people's sense of security, even their sense of identity. This particularly true in a society like ours where things like maturity, responsibility, success are often linked to having a full-time permanent job. The most blatant example of this is that as Australians most of our housing is through home ownership and buying a first home is considered a definite sign of having 'made it' - yet mortgages are almost impossible to get unless you have permanent employment. These issues effect everybody but have particular impacts on young people who are starting out on life and finding their identity and making their space. It is also very significant for young people because the amount of them who have temporary work is phenomenally high.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics undertook a special survey of employment arrangements between April and June in the year 2000 (ABS, 2001). An analysis of the results shows that 30 per cent of all jobs in Australia were temporary. For young workers the proportion was much higher. An enormous 69 percent of 15-19 year olds who work have temporary jobs and 40 per cent of people between the

ages of 20 and 25 have temporary jobs (Beaton, 2002).

The situation is significantly worse for females than for males. In the 15-19 age group 76 per cent of women's paid work is on a temporary basis and in the 20 - 24 group it is 43 per cent.

It is often assumed that most of the temporary or casualised workforce are young students, neither of these beliefs are true. That is, while most young workers are temporary, most temporary workers are not under 25. In fact 69 per cent, or nearly two million (1,801,600) temporary workers were over 25.

Nor is it true that most temporary workers are students. Interestingly 15 per cent of all workers were part-time or full-time students. A much higher proportion of temporary workers, 24 per cent, were full-time or part-time students but this is by no means the majority of temporary workers.

Whilst the numbers of temporary workers, particularly the increase in casual employment has been greatly debated there has been very little discussion about what the effects of temporary employment on quality of life. The relationship between temporary employment and quality of life is linked by the level of insecurity that exists in the

employment. Insecurity is perhaps better related to a notion of precariousness and not all temporary jobs are precarious. For example if temporary work is in an industry where there is a shortage of the particular skill sets there is objectively no precariousness and neither is the worker likely to feel any more precarious than a worker with a 'permanent' job. However the greatest growth area of temporary work is of casual employment and this is most likely found in industries and occupations that don't require specialist skills.

In the middle of the twentieth century it was assumed that quality of life and well-being improved automatically alongside economic growth or development. Poverty was considered to be the domain of the 'third world' and development was expected to eradicate it. However the spread of 'development' across the globe has shown that this confidence was not warranted. For not only have we seen the spread of hardship and misery accompanying 'development' in many parts of the world, but we also see it growing in the so-called developed world. In fact the term standard of living was once used synonymously with quality of life, but the meanings have diverged - the one being understood as an indicator of levels of economic spending but this has been separated in ideas from concepts of happiness. Now we talk about measuring quality of life if we want to include aspects of the overall physical, emotional and spiritual health of an individual. This has also become known as well-being. The well-being of a community or of individuals is a bit of a buzzword at the moment but comes from attempts to measure or evaluate what the quality of a persons life is in the current circumstances.

The question with regards to temporary employment is what effect does it have on our quality of life. Security involves the knowledge that the basic material requirements for living, that is food, shelter

1.3 million without work

The Australian Council of Social and Community Services (ACOSS) has just completed a major research project into unemployment and underemployment in Australia. Their report, released at their national congress in Canberra, shows that the unemployment figure has been understated by as much as half. They estimate that there are around 1.3 million unemployed and underemployed people in Australia - more than double the official figure.

ACOSS found that while official figures for unemployment stands at 5.6%, the actual extent of enforced joblessness is over 12%. ACOSS estimates that around 716,000 people who are unemployed are excluded from the official figures. These 'hidden unemployed' are excluded because they want to work but have given up looking, or are not available to start work immediately, or already have some part-time work but want more (they could be working as little as one hour per week according to ACOSS).

ACOSS President Andrew McCallum said:

"This confirms what many have suspected. The standard unemployment measure the Government relies on grossly understates the extent of joblessness and underemployment in Australia."

"ACOSS conservatively estimates that 716,000 'hidden unemployed' people are excluded from this standard measure. Most of these people would be on social security payments. They include:

- Mothers who want to work but can't afford or find enough child care
- People with disabilities who need more accessible transport and workplaces
- Mature-age people who want to work but have given up looking because they face employer discrimination or need more skills and training
- Young people with tiny amounts of part-time or casual work

Women comprise two-thirds of the number of the 'hidden unemployed', showing a clear gender imbalance with regards to the figure. ACOSS also found that in rural and regional Australia - particularly in places like South Australia and Tasmania - many jobseekers have given up looking - a fact not captured in official figures.

Source: ACOSS

and clothing are available today and will be available tomorrow and next year as well. Temporary employment can deny us that security. Security also involves the knowledge that we are 'functional' in our own society - or that we are able to live full lives in whatever sense that is accepted by the society in which we live. For example, we may not feel insecure, or 'dysfunctional' if we send our children to school without shoes in a society where no-one wears shoes to school. On the other hand in Australia where everyone wears shoes to school, we would feel very disadvantaged and subsequently insecure in our social being, if we couldn't send our children to school wearing shoes.

So the question here is what does it mean to have temporary employment when the 'norm' is considered (even if unrealistically) to be permanent employment. More importantly, what does it mean to be unsure as to whether you will still have a job next week, next month or next year. These questions are particularly daunting with persistent unemployment, particularly for young people.

One other aspect is worthy of discussion here. The high proportion of young people who are

temporary workers leads some research to assume that this is only a bridge to a permanent employment. In other words there is a picture that as you get older you are more likely to get permanent employment. The trouble and the worry about this view is that it takes no account of the movement of change in time. When we consider this movement we see a different picture. Most of the new jobs created are temporary and the higher proportion of temporary workers among young people is because it is young workers who are most likely to take up new jobs. Whether these jobs will turn into permanent ones as these workers become older, or whether there will be a boom in permanent jobs in the future for workers who have done their 'time' in temporary ones is another story. Of course there are some circumstances in which a 'temporary start' might lead to a permanent job. But these instances are not enough to change the trend. The worry is that as temporary work is growing at the expense of permanent those who are now young and in temporary employment, will stay in temporary employment.

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ABS (2001) Employment Arrangements and Superannuation, Australia, April - June 2000, ABS Catalogue 6361, ABS.

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