

IWER: Selected Doctoral Theses

“Terrible Timing: The Causes and Consequences of Problematic Work Schedules”

Author: Alexander Kowalski (2022)

Committee: Erin L. Kelly (chair), Thomas Kochan, Susan Silbey

Abstract:

In an attempt to mitigate uncertainty stemming from volatile customer demand while keeping labor costs low, organizations in a host of industries frequently adjust when work occurs without taking employee input into account. The practices they use to do so often produce problematic schedules, or unstable and unpredictable hours that workers feel are out of their control and that negatively impact their lives, on and off the job. Drawing on a mix of quantitative and qualitative data from a multi-year study of a large U.S. retailer’s supply chain division, this dissertation shows that the consequences of problematic schedules are real but not inevitable. In Chapter 1, I use detailed time-keeping records from 20,000+ hourly workers across multiple business functions to construct a multidimensional measure of schedule quality. I find variation in workers’ exposure to problematic schedules, even after controlling for job, workplace, and worker characteristics, which I attribute to variation in the scheduling practices used by frontline managers. A crucial facet of job quality, schedules thus stratify workers in the same organization, and this is due not only to the work they perform but also to managerial discretion. In Chapter 2, I use interviews and fieldwork to document how frontline managers in the retailer’s e-commerce fulfillment centers (FCs) go about the complex task of scheduling. I find that despite pressures for conformity, management teams in each FC use distinct bundles of scheduling practices, which each have predictable consequences for FC performance. The bundles emanate from and reinforce the local organizational cultures in which managers are embedded, making some FCs better places to work than others. In Chapter 3, I combine my measure of schedule quality with workers’ employment histories, finding that problematic schedules are associated with substantial increases in job exit. As a whole, I show that scheduling practices that at first appear cost-effective actually raise turnover and reduce performance. At the same time, managers are not totally constrained by industry, technology, or company policy in how they schedule work hours—even in highly uncertain environments, they can implement scheduling practices that are better for workers while remaining competitive.

“Essays on Workplace Practices in Different Institutional Settings”

Author: Duanyi Yang (2020)

Committee: Thomas A. Kochan (co-chair), Erin L. Kelly (co-chair), Greg Distelhorst

Abstract:

This dissertation consists of three essays investigating how organizational policies operate within different institutional contexts and in the face of migration, demographic shifts, and globalization. The first essay examines why, given apparent widespread violations, some migrant workers choose not to pursue remedies. Using survey data from China, I find only one fourth of surveyed workers who experience labor law violations interpret their experiences as labor rights violations, and workers’ social relationship with the employers prior to migration explains some of this gap. This essay extends worker grievance research tradition within labor relations by drawing on research from the sociology of law and immigration to understand how these subjective interpretative processes and social identities outside of the workplace influence grievance behaviors.

The second essay investigates whether flexible working time policies reduce the likelihood that individuals leave their employer. Using linked employer-employee data from Germany, I find that by addressing mothers’ needs at a critical period in their lives, flexible working time policies encourage women of young children to both remain in the labor force and continue building their careers in a given establishment even in context with extensive state policies that support work-family reconciliation. Further, I find flexible working time policies reduce young workers’ likelihood of turnover. It suggests the policies can play an important role in helping young workers develop their human capital and advance their careers.

The third essay studies an international self-regulatory initiative—the SA8000 social responsibility certification—focused on labor standards. Using industrial microdata from China, we find firms that self-regulated exhibited higher average wages than non-adopters even in context without effective surveillance and sanctions. To explain this puzzle, we theorize about self-regulation in pursuit of reputation-sensitive buyers. These buyers privately monitor their suppliers, making up for deficiencies in the broader institutional environment and reducing the expected returns of low-road firms bribing their way into self-regulatory institutions. Consistent with our theory, we find exports increased markedly after adopting self-regulation and domestic sales did not. This essay also provides further specification of the challenges of improving labor standards privately through supply chain standards.

“Tasks, Stratification and Occupational Change: Evidence from the Legal Profession”

Author: Christine Riordan (2019)

Committee: Paul Osterman (chair), Thomas Kochan, Emilio Castilla, Susan Silbey

Abstract:

This dissertation consists of three essays on change in the legal profession, specifically focusing on the organization of legal tasks and implications for occupational trajectory of lawyers in large corporate firms. The first essay develops a theory-based argument for conceptualizing occupational change through market dynamics and task organization. I show how incongruities in law firm business models and the changing nature of firm-client relationships affect the division of labor within law firms, leading to work and task reorganization that eventually extends beyond firm boundaries—as evidenced by the growing use of third-party suppliers (e.g., temporary staff, outsourcing firms) by law firms and their corporate clients. This reorganization of legal tasks is associated with changing occupational trajectories within law firms as well as the broader profession.

The second essay investigates how the organization of tasks drives occupational change and stratification among entry-level lawyers in large firms. An emerging model of task-based stratification in work design and organizational scholarship posits that through their technical, social and subjective characteristics, tasks underpin divergent outcomes among those who perform them. I draw from qualitative data collected in the New York City and Boston legal labor markets to show how the disaggregation of tasks, and their allocation to distinct groups of lawyers, shapes divergent opportunity structures along these dimensions. Specifically, these include opportunity structures related to skill, social resources, and nuanced signals of professional status, such the demonstration of professional expertise and autonomy. This reinforces existing patterns of stratification among lawyers, albeit in new ways.

The third essay builds upon the aforementioned qualitative findings, assessing task-based stratification through qualitative and quantitative data. Using a nationally-representative survey of lawyers in large firms and their work, I test the relationship between tasks that differ by status—a key predictor of task-based stratification—and the accrual of social and relational resources that are crucial for professional advancement in law. My findings show that certain high- and low-status tasks are associated with three forms of social resources, mostly in the expected direction. Yet exceptions and nuance in these relationships suggests further refinement and new conditions of the model. These findings raise implications for task-based stratification and stratification in the legal profession more generally.

Essays on Job Search, Unemployment and Regulatory Compliance”

Author: Gökçe Başbuğ (2017)

Committee: Roberto Fernandez (co-chair), Thomas Kochan (co-chair), Emilio Castilla, Paul Osterman, Ofer Sharone, Susan Silbey

Abstract:

This dissertation is composed of four essays, each studying limits to the means that are famously known to be effective. In the first essay, I investigate the effect of using social ties on the quality of opportunities pursued in job search. Using fixed effects models, I show that when the job seeker uses contacts, she pursues jobs that pay less than the jobs she pursues through formal methods. In addition, the analysis show that networks limit the geographical and occupational diversity of jobs pursued.

In the second essay, using a mixed methods approach I examine how the negative emotional toll of long-term unemployment (LTU) is shaped by the interaction of gender and marital status. The interviews reveal a pattern with more marital tensions that exacerbate the emotional toll of LTU reported by married men than married women. The analysis of survey data show that overall marriages are helpful to the wellbeing of both unemployed men and women. Yet, for married men but not for married women, the analysis revealed that the significance of the benefits derived from marriage disappears once household income is controlled.

The third essay examines whether introducing choice into a mandatory training program makes any difference in Unemployment Insurance recipients' job search performance. Using a field experiment design, I compare job search outcomes of individuals who have unconstrained workshop choices to others who only have a constrained option. Analyses show that providing the option of selecting which workshop to attend does not improve outcomes for unemployed. In the fourth essay, using data from safety inspections in laboratories at a large university, I investigate whether conducting semi-annual inspections and reporting findings back to responsible constituencies decreases the number of violations. The analyses show that the Environmental, Health, and Safety Management System did not reduce the number of violations. Rather, the results show a widening gap between compliant and non-compliant scientists. Using both lab-level quantitative data and interviews with inspectors and EHS personnel, I delineate the factors that impede the success of the system.