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**The examination of supply chain pressures**  
**and worker agency in job quality:**  
**The case of Scottish Spirits Industry**

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À minha mãe (dedicated to my mother). Also special mention to my father and brother.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the impact of supply chain pressures and workers' agency on job quality in the Scottish Spirits Industry. The examination of these issues is achieved through exploring how supply chain dynamics influence employers' behaviours, and how these in turn shape job quality at the workplace level. Moreover, this thesis looks at the active role of workers, through collective and individual means, in shaping job quality.

The empirical evidence draws on qualitative research from three organisational case-studies, in Scottish Spirits Industry, that operate in the same production network. This study reports on 67 semi-structured interviews and three focus groups with senior managers, supply chain managers, site managers, line managers, HR staff or managers, shop-floor workers, and union representatives. Moreover, document analysis and long hours of workplace observation were key methods applied during fieldwork.

The research evidence highlighted that supply chain pressures deeply impacted job quality in all three case-studies. The power and control dynamics stemming from product and capital markets were decisive actors which impacted the ways in which employers used specific work and employment patterns in order to cope with these pressures. As a result, there was a clear and marked deterioration of job quality. At the same time, the data demonstrated a latent determination from workers, across all three case-studies, to recast this condition. This was examined, firstly, by examining the ways in which supply chain pressures influence workers' capacity to mobilise; and, secondly, by exploring the ways in which worker agency, through collective and individual forms, was able to regulate and shape job quality.

This research study contributes to our understanding of the factors that shape job quality by examining the dynamics happening at the sectoral and supply chain level, by considering the power and control dynamics stemming from product and capital markets, and the dynamics played within the employment relationship between managers and workers. This thesis, then, develops the argument that job quality analysis is strengthened by the examination of factors happening within the national institutional, sectoral, and organisational settings.

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# **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This thesis seeks to address the impact of supply chain pressures and workers' agency on job quality. Job quality has attracted a substantial academic attention since the European Union introduced the concept. In particular, in the last two decades, job quality has been viewed as a key policy aspiration within the European Union employment agenda (European Commission, 2001). Such focus has gained momentum particularly with the recently published Taylor Report (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2017). The understanding of job quality has been informed by various studies and reports measuring and tracking its development. However, only recently researchers have started to investigate job quality under the highly competitive context of supply chains (Wright and Kaine, 2015). The increasing prominence of supply chains as defining features of contemporary forms of production and service provision, have generated increasing calls for the investigation of its impacts on job quality (Drahokopil, 2015; Knorringa and Pegler, 2006; Taylor, 2010; Wright and Kaine, 2015). Indeed, as Grimshaw et al. (2005) argue, although supply chain pressures are most apparent in firms' organisational strategies across the chain, they may also generate dynamics that end up influencing job quality at the workplace level. In addition, other scholars suggested that job quality literature has fallen short in addressing the active role of workers in shaping job quality (Simms, 2015). As Simms (2015) argues current research on job quality often conceptualises workers as passive recipients of institutional and managerial forces. This thesis adds to these arguments, (1) by examining the dynamics of job quality within a unique context of inter-connected firms, which are subject to intense product market and supply chain pressures. Furthermore, (2) this research focuses on the active role of workers in regulating employers' behaviours and shaping job quality. In doing so, this thesis provides an important empirical contribution to the job quality debates as it seeks to understand the drivers of job quality, and workers' experiences of job quality.

## **1.1. Thesis rationale**

There are both conceptual and empirical contributions for the study of job quality. The following sections will address each of the rationales that have driven the elaboration of this research study.

### **1.1.1. Job quality – a multi-level and multidisciplinary concept**

At the turn of the millennium, the European Union argued that the challenge confronting Europe was to develop more and better jobs (European Commission, 2001), and the issue of job quality began to move up the policy agenda. Arguably, the advent of job quality in the employment agenda would create politico-economic conditions to boost economic productivity, better social integration and individual well-being (Eurofound, 2012; European Commission, 2001; European Commission, 2007; Marginson and Sisson, 2004). Job quality has therefore played a crucial role in the employment agenda aspirations of many countries across Europe (Eurofound, 2012; European Commission, 2007; Green, 2013). In the UK, the Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices has recently placed job quality on top of the policy agenda with the aim to establish clear “steps towards fair and decent work” (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2017: 110).

The importance of the concept has attracted academic interest from a wide range of disciplines. For instance, at an individual level, psychologists tend to engage with job quality by measuring workers’ satisfaction or commitment with their jobs (De Cuyper and De Witte, 2007). More recently, they have started to focus on whether jobs can influence workers’ psychological well-being (Butterworth et al., 2013; Probst, 2002; Quick and Tetrick, 2003). Sociologists tend to examine jobs at organisational level in order to understand how managerial practices can be beneficial or detrimental for the quality of working life. This approach leans towards understanding how levels of skill, autonomy and more recently job security are affected by objective structures implemented in the workplace (Kalleberg, 2011). Economists and political scientists emphasise the macroeconomic level and analyse job quality through national and cross-regional comparisons (Green, 2013). These perspectives are argued to be explanatory of how good or bad a job is (Kalleberg, 2011).

Moreover, the analysis of job quality can also fall into two distinct approaches. On the one hand, there are those who analyse the concept through European- or nation-wide datasets at the “macro” level of a particular economy – or a group of economies – in order to track and understand changes in job quality over time. These macroeconomic studies argue that organisations are embedded in institutional frameworks that shape job quality outcomes (Gallie, 2013; Green, 2006; Munoz de Bustillo et al., 2009). On the other hand, job quality is analysed on “micro” or workplace levels. These studies aim at

investigate job quality through the lenses of specific types of workplace regimes (Taylor et al., 2002; Thompson, 1989; Warhurst and Thompson, 1998). Both approaches have strengths and weaknesses. For instance, although the first provides the analysis of job quality with clear measures of job quality and representative data sets, it is limited in connecting directly with the concrete work experience of workers (Sengupta et al., 2009). The second approach provides strong accounts in relation to the context in which job quality is analysed allowing for a fine-detailed picture of its shaping dynamics. At the same time, the approach is limited in conceptualising and measuring job quality (Sengupta et al., 2009). As a result, there has been increasing calls from industrial relations scholars to bring sectoral analysis back in, partly as a corrective to what has been referred to as the “methodological nationalism” (Crouch et al. 2009; Lloyd and Payne, 2016; Grimshaw and Lehndorff, 2010; Sengupta et al., 2009).

Although both approaches look at job quality through different lenses, what is common between them is that its findings point to low or decreasing levels of job quality, suggesting that the reality runs contrary to the European aspirations for increased job quality (Eurofound, 2012; Gallie, 2013; Green, 2006; Holman and McClelland, 2011). This in itself does not automatically warrant further investigation, but macroeconomic data lacks detail in understanding the full picture of drivers of such changes and the outcomes in terms of job quality experience. Therefore, further investigation is required on the specific ways in which institutional dynamics create pressure on job quality, how employers and workers respond to such pressures, and how workers experience job quality.

The most predominant approaches investigating job quality through macroeconomic lens are Varieties of Capitalism (VOC) (Hall and Soskice, 2001) and Employment Regimes (Gallie 2007, 2013). These theories argue that despite any meso or micro influence, organisations and individuals do not exist in a vacuum, and are embedded in national institutional regulations to different extents, which produces different job quality outcomes (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Gallie 2007, Holman, 2013). These theories seek to agglomerate countries that share political-economic characteristics through which one cluster of countries is compared against another as a means of evaluating the influences that the type of capitalism or employment regime has on job quality (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Gallie, 2007). Although similar in its purposes, VOC and Employment Regimes approaches offer two different frameworks for understanding job quality based on

different premises. These are relevant to discuss here in order to understand their limitations.

The VOC framework (Hall and Soskice, 2001) clusters countries according to the type of interrelation between their production and institutional systems: the production regime signifies “the organisation of production through markets and market-related institutions” (Soskice, 1999: 101). Therefore, countries are clustered in two different categories: liberal market economies (LME) and coordinated market economies (CME). This variation of institutional frameworks is claimed to have a profound impact on job quality. For instance, countries categorised as CME are more prone to depend on continuous skill development, giving the opportunity to workers to experience more autonomy and responsibility. In contrast, countries within the LME category are more likely to depend on low and general skills combined with more flexible labour market that allows workers to explore other job opportunities. These completely different strategies of skill formation are argued to have important implications for the quality of jobs. Where employers opt for high and specialised skills, employees are given greater discretion over their work and management adopts practices aimed at retaining the workforce. Where employers rely on more general skills, employee discretion is lower and the priority is given to ease of hiring and firing to save costs in times of economic difficulty (Hall and Soskice 2001).

Moreover, Gallie’s (2013) approach aims at understanding how job quality has changed over the years and “enables us to begin to explore a range of arguments about major determinants of work quality and their relative importance” (*ibid*: 3). Gallie (2013) proposes to investigate in his study two main objectives: the first is reporting what has happened to job quality over the years, and the second is explaining the changing nature of job quality. Similar to VoC (Hall and Soskice, 2001) this is made through institutional comparison. The main difference between the two perspectives is that Gallie (2013) gives a more detailed distinction between institutional frameworks across European countries, and his perspective is rooted in welfare regime theory.

The argument that institutional forces influence job quality is sound, and the studies resorting to macroeconomic data sets are valuable in the task of mapping the development of job quality over time in different national institutional contexts. However, recently increasingly accounts have also highlighted the importance of investigating the role of role of capital to transcend borders and impact on work

organisation. Scholars have highlighted that countries, either being highly or loosely regulated, are not exempt from market pressures (Thompson, 2013; Thompson and Newsome, 2004). Although Thompson and Newsome (2004: 154-155) agree that the national state plays a significant role, “trends in product and capital markets are making the world a smaller place and the extent of institutional distinctiveness is diminishing”.

The recent literature focusing on global value chains and production networks have demonstrated how capital can influence work organisation across borders and across national regulations (Coe et al., 2008; Cumbers et al., 2008; Gereffi et al., 2005). Gereffi et al. (2005) argue that the mechanisms of global capital are nowadays built in supply chain systems, which operate through a value chain of production and services across countries. In the last decades, firms have been increasingly able to utilise information technology and close inter-firm relations, in order to monitor organisational performance of workplaces that are detached geographically. This constrains the management at a local level to act autonomously. Although a separate series of recent studies have studied the impact of product market and inter-firm dynamics on working conditions (see Newsome et al., 2015; Wright and Kaine, 2015), more detail is required on exactly how employers cope with such pressures impacting on organisational strategy at a local level.

This thesis is particularly concerned with the role of supply chains and product market pressures have in shaping job quality. Thus, in addition to the macroeconomic studies, which sought to examine national institutional contexts, this thesis is aimed at complementing them by providing fine-detail accounts on how organisations are impacted by market forces that are generated at supply chain level. Thus this thesis follows Vallas and Prener (2012: 348) argument that the analysis of job quality is about grasping the forces that explain the emergence and reproduction of forms of work organisation, beyond the national economic and regulatory frameworks. These accounts are supported by Grimshaw and Lehdorff (2010: 24) argument that job quality analysis should also consider product and capital market pressures, as well as sectoral analysis. These, they argue, are “shaped by the core institutions that are constitutive of each national model, but also retain distinguishing features”. In other words, what may apply to core firms in the German manufacturing sector, may be very different from the retailing or IT sectors (Lloyd and Payne, 2016).

This thesis follows these calls, and proposes that more fine-detailed analysis in the form of case studies is required if one is to investigate job quality within a specific context and

the ways in which individuals recast and reshape job quality. This level of detail extends the analysis on how employers respond to institutional derivatives (which relate to inter-firm dynamics), and the way in which this behaviour impacts on job quality. Therefore, this thesis focuses on supply chains as the institutional force shaping job quality, which allows the study to connect with sectoral dynamics and explore how these impact on managerial practice, work organisation, and ultimately job quality. In this way, this thesis seeks to examine the reasons why employers engage in particular behaviours in response to product market derivatives that may increase or decrease job quality. Through analysing the behaviour of particular firms within an inter-firm dynamic, this thesis is able to understand the ways in which other firms may also shape job quality.

At the same time, this thesis is equally concerned with the workers' capacity to regulate the employers' behaviours, and in that sense reshape job quality. The thesis is particularly interested in adding to the literature in two ways. Firstly, by investigating the ways in which supply chains dynamics can hinder or nurture workers' agency. Secondly, by examining workers' agency beyond its collective form, and add to the analysis of job quality the ways in which individual worker agency is an effective (or not) mechanism is shaping job quality.

Similar to recent accounts, this thesis is concerned with the impacts that fragmented production structures, such as supply chains or production networks, may have on workers' capacity to exert agency (Drahoukopol, 2015; Jackson et al., 2013). A wide number of research studies have highlighted this issue, by suggesting that employment patterns generated by dynamics produced on inter-firm level are used by capital to circumvent employee representation, and to constrain trade union demands and actions during negotiations. In arguing in this way, this thesis is able to place workers' agency at a politico-economic level, which is being shaped and changed by forces beyond the point of production.

In addition, researchers tend to focus on the role of management as the critical agent of job quality. This is most notable in Osterman's (2013: 740) work where this view is summed up: "job quality is determined by decisions made by employers regarding the range of working conditions". This thesis wishes to place workers' as a central and active factor in shaping job quality. Similarly, Simms's (2015) study also points to workers' agency as a potential important factor for standards of job quality. She argues that collective actors such as trade unions have a central role in resisting downward pressures

on job quality, and can even extend representative institutions in an effort to attempt to regulate job quality (*ibid*: 17). Therefore, the analysis presented in this thesis is a counterpoint to a conceptualisation of job quality that considers workers as passive, in favour of a more active role in shaping their own job quality.

These arguments set the terrain for this thesis. The thesis follows Grimshaw and Lehndorff (2010) proposed framework, which can advance the understanding of the drivers and aspects that shape job quality. This thesis provides a careful examination of the dynamics generated by social actors, product and capital markets, and features of the workforce, that exist within specific sectors. In doing so, it resorts to different levels of analysis, by examining the supply chain and sectoral level, the employer's behaviours in response to supply chains, and workers as active contributors to shaping job quality. The following discussion aims at bringing focus of analysis by explaining the chosen job quality dimensions.

### **1.1.2. Defining the job quality dimensions**

Contrary to institutional theories, this thesis does not aim at suggesting a universally consensual job quality definition; rather its main aim is to explore and understand job quality in a specific context. Nevertheless, this study follows the quantitative macroeconomic studies' systematic approach to the analysis of job quality by using a set of explicit job quality dimensions. The following discussion provides a rationale for the definition of dimensions that will be addressed in this study.

Over the years, job quality has emerged as an umbrella concept covering a number of dimensions (i.e. job characteristics), becoming increasingly prominent in the investigation of whether a job is good or bad. In essence, job quality is argued to encompass a wide range of dimensions that allow researchers to examine the quality of a job in a more precise and less biased manner (Munoz de Bustillo et al., 2009). These dimensions often involve: job security, skills, autonomy and task discretion, working time and work-life balance, and opportunities for collective and individual voice (Coats, 2009; Gallie, 2007). Within job quality debates there are as many means of measuring the quality of a job as there are researchers (Gallie, 2013; McGovern et al., 2007; Munoz de Bustillo et al., 2011). However, all of them consider the way in which workers evaluate particular aspects related to their jobs rather than seeking to know if the individual is satisfied with them. Job quality surveys provide the help needed to identify the dimensions under most pressure in contemporary workplaces. The following



discussion examines why some job quality dimensions were considered relevant to this study and others not.

The process of choosing what dimensions of job quality to investigate is a process that may raise doubts, and usually is not very well defined in the literature concerned with such matters. Therefore, one could argue that the researcher could focus its investigation in a wide range of dimensions, such as the ones related to economic aspects (wages, benefits, pensions) (van Wanrooy et al., 2013), the ones that workers find more relevant to rate their job with low or high quality (Green and Tsitsianis, 2005), or health and safety (Lloyd and James, 2008). These are all sound. For instance, the latest evidence suggests that workers' satisfaction levels have risen between 2004 and 2011 in most analysed dimensions (excluding job security) (van Wanrooy et al., 2013). Satisfaction with pay has also been on the rise between the years 2004 and 2011 regardless of stagnation and pay-freeze policies being held in both private and public sector (van Wanrooy et al., 2013), and a markedly gap rise in pay inequality levels (Green and Whitfield, 2009). Health and Safety is also argued to be an important indicator of job quality in the workplace. As intense and increasing pressures are placed on British workplaces to become more productive and efficient, the pressures on health and safety may be threatened as some safe practices may be overlooked at the expenses of doing things faster or efficiently (Lloyd and James, 2008).

However, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine all aspects of job quality. Indeed, it is the aim of this thesis to maintain focus of analysis, and to provide an examination that considers the most prominent dimensions referred in the literature. Therefore, the dimensions have been chosen considering the ones that are currently deemed by the literature as being in danger of deterioration due to recent economic trends; as well as, the ones that are most appropriate to the context in which this study is undertaken. These two criteria are briefly reviewed in relation to the dimensions of job quality chosen for this thesis.

The study conducted by van Wanrooy et al. (2013), drawing on Workplace Employment Relations Study (WERS), indicates that insecurity at work has risen since 2004. Indeed, in similar vein, other researchers point to job insecurity as one of the most prominent consequences of recent economic patterns (Gallie, 2013; Standing, 2011). For instance, Gallie (2013) indicates that in Europe there has been a clear trend in the rise of atypical forms of contract, where in 2007 one-third of employees were working in at least one

sort of atypical job. These accounts are sound if we consider the growing concern about the detrimental impact of flexible working arrangements on job quality (Caroli et al., 2010; Holman, 2013; Kalleberg, 2011). For instance, the issue around zero-hour contracts in the UK has been at the centre of public and academic debate (Herod and Lambert, 2016; Pyper and McGuinness, 2013).

Skills have also been reported as one of the main areas of concern, with 59% of workers indicating that the required skills in their jobs is lower to those that they can provide, entailing a mismatch between workers' skills and the skills required to do the job (van Wanrooy et al., 2013). In addition, Felstead et al. (2013) report that although skill requirements on the job are higher, training and learning times have shortened inside the workplace representing a cause for concern. On top of this trend, task autonomy has been in steady decline since the 1990s, entailing that although workers are required to have more skills, they are given less chances to utilise them (Felstead et al., 2007).

Another widespread perception relates to heightened pressures at work, which researchers consider to stem particularly from control conducted by supervisors, customers, and performance and absence management systems (Taylor, 2013). The percentage of workers reporting that their jobs require them to work very hard increased from 2004 to 2011 in all occupational groups and sectors. This perception from workers mirrors other reports showing an increasing account of workers "never having enough time to get their work done" (van Wanrooy et al., 2013: 103). In sum, work and the way it is organised, has been changing in a complex and subtle manner, affecting specific dimensions of job quality.

Moreover, the chosen job quality dimensions are discussed within the literature concerned with inter-firm relations and production networks a great deal of attention has been placed upon specific aspects of job quality. Researchers have been specifically concerned with job security, skills and task discretion, and the way in which market pressures bring workers' performance and attendance to the forefront of managerial preoccupation (Flecker, 2010; Grugulis and Vincent, 2005; Marchington et al., 2005; Newsome et al., 2013; Taylor, 2013). By focusing their analysis on inter-organisational relations and its impact on the quality of work, Marchington et al. (2005) highlight the detrimental bearing that these forms of production and service provision have for the job security, skills, control and discipline within the workplace. Flecker (2010) gives weight to the previous account by arguing that workers' job security has become the clearest

casualty in production structures organised around supply chains and inter-firm relations. At the root of such deterioration is primarily management's effort to exactly match the labour needs to market demands (Caroli, et al., 2010; Kalleberg, 2011). Another aspect of work that has been detrimentally impacted by the employer's efforts to control labour costs is employees' working hours. This dimension has recently been given increased attention in the academic literature. For instance, Henly and Lambert (2014) highlight that the rise in nonstandard employment arrangements includes a growth in nonstandard work hours that require early morning, evening, overnight and weekend hours, as well as unpredictable changes in working hours' patterns. This is particularly relevant to this study because these variations in working hours have been reported in sectors and workplaces that are highly exposed to product market fluctuations, such as retailing or manufacturing (Golden and Wiens-tuers, 2005; Lambert, 2008; McCann, 2007; Perlow, 2012; Rubery et al., 2005a). Grugulis and Vincent (2005) also emphasise the role of supply chains pressures in influencing the direction of skill required on the job. Arguably, pressures to become increasingly profitable lead firms to disregard skill related aspects, such as skill development and utilisation. More recently, Newsome et al. (2013) associate retailers' supply chain pressures to augmented work pressures via the restructuring of performance management systems. Similarly, Taylor (2013) argues that workplaces are coming increasingly under pressure as firms intensify performance and absence management systems in order to better cope with highly competitive market conditions in which they are embedded.

The way in which these accounts inform the content of job quality analysis of this thesis is that supply chain and inter-firm debates are not short of examples showing its impacts on specific aspects, such as job security and working time, skills and task discretion, and work pressures. It is precisely these dimensions that are of interest in this thesis. All these different disciplinary perspectives and concerns over specific job quality dimensions, offer a potentially pertinent starting point for the definition of the relevant dimensions to study job quality in the specific context of inter-firm relations. Thus, following a multidisciplinary approach that is characteristic of job quality studies, this thesis will assess the following dimensions to examine job quality within a specific production context: job security and working time; skills and task discretion; and work pressures.

## 1.2. Research objectives and structure of the thesis

Given the rationale for this thesis, the following research objectives are to be examined:

- The impacts of inter-firm pressures on job quality.
- The way in which collective and individual labour agency are able to regulate and shape job quality under conditions of supply chain and inter-firm pressures.

This thesis aims at answering these research objectives through an intensive empirical research. In order to achieve this, the thesis will analyse job quality within a specific politico-economic context – which in the case of this thesis is the supply chains and inter-firm relations. Chapter 2 and 3 provide the theoretical and conceptual framework around which the research study is structured. Chapter 2 sets the politico-economic context to the study by assessing and examining the ways in which product market and inter-firm dynamics are becoming increasingly prevalent in contemporary production structures. This is followed by the understanding of how such pressures are cascaded down to the organisational level, and the ways in which management responds to these by adjusting organisational strategies, and work and employment patterns. This chapter ends by assessing each of the deemed relevant job quality dimensions in the light of such politico-economic context. Chapter 3 turns then to examining the literature around the role of collective and individual forms of worker agency, and its impacts on shaping job quality.

Chapter 4 discusses the research design, providing a critical realist perspective on the subject and context of study. In doing so, it discusses the reasons why critical realism is the appropriate ontological background to better achieve the objectives set in this study. This chapter then discusses the way in which the research strategy and approach are appropriate for answering the research questions. The research was conducted within a specific production network operating in the Scottish Spirits Industry in order to better identify the inter-firm dynamics that influence job quality. Within this production network, three case-studies were selected: SpiritsCo; MaltCo and TranspCo. SpiritsCo is the “lead-firm” within the production network, and MaltCo and TranspCo are its suppliers of goods and services. Within SpiritsCo three workplaces with different types of production were included in the study, which varied in terms of different exposure to market pressures and different levels of unionisation. The three SpiritsCo workplaces are a bottling hall, a distillery and a cooperage site, which were the most representative and important within Scottish spirits production process. The design of the research is

structured in multiple stages to ascertain the inter-firm behaviours and dynamics before analysing the case studies to allow contextual depth. Within the workplaces, semi-structured interviews were conducted with management, workers and union representatives. Long hours of observation and document analysis were conducted. Focus groups were also conducted within the spirits manufacturer. This triangulation of data sources through a qualitative approach allowed all relevant topics to be discussed with a high level of depth.

The examination of job quality in the unique context of inter-firm connections starts in the empirical Chapters 5 to 7 by providing a description of the findings. The intensive phase of the study investigates more deeply in explain job quality outcomes and the way workers experience it. In doing so, it explores: (1) the ways in which management responds to supply chain pressures by changing structures of labour process; (2) the ways in which new structures aimed at responding to supply chain pressures influence job quality, and how workers experience such changes; and (3) how such structures impact on workers' capacity to exert agency and reshape job quality.

The analysis of inter-firm relations is presented in Chapter 5. The findings demonstrate the way in which supply chain pressures stemming from the product market (retailers) are cascaded down to SpiritsCo suppliers. The ways in which the three case studies cope with supply chain pressures are considered as the root for labour process change, and the need for organisations to change their work and employment patterns.

Findings related to job quality outcomes are presented in Chapters 6 and 7. In Chapter 6 findings for unionised workplaces are presented, and non-unionised workplaces are explored in Chapter 7. In both chapters, for each workplace, all three job quality dimensions are analysed by, firstly, presenting management's role in shaping job quality, and secondly, how (and if) workers respond by regulating employers' behaviour and reshaping job quality.

Chapter 8 summarises and discusses the findings in the light of the conceptual and theoretical framework for each of the research questions. Logically, the discussion of the conceptual themes relates to the different levels of analysis that were conducted throughout the study. By exploring shaping drivers of job quality in each workplace the chapters illustrate the close relation that changing aspects of job quality dimensions have with supply chains pressures. The analysis illustrates how job quality and the way in

which workers experience job quality, differs from unionised to non-unionised workplace. Understanding these underlying forces and the complexity of shaping job quality allows a more comprehensive conceptualisation of job quality. The findings enrich understanding of job quality as being a concept that is dynamically shaped by product market and inter-firm relations, as well as the ways in which the collective definition of workers' interests can be hampered by contemporary structures of production (Kelly, 1998). The thesis explores paths in which job quality is shaped and reshaped, and how these are actively formed by both employers and workers.

Chapter 9 presents the conclusions drawn from the discussion in Chapter 8. The discussion within this chapter focuses on highlighting the complexity of job quality as a concept, the various forces that impact beyond the national institutional frameworks, and the way in which workers are actively and passively able to shape their experience of job quality. Thus, this last chapter considers conceptual, theoretical and practical contributions of the study, ending by outlining limitations and potential areas for future research.

## **Chapter 2: Inter-firm pressures and job quality**

### **2.1. Introduction**

This chapter aims to analyse the way in which market pressures may inform and contribute to a more comprehensive analysis of job quality, specifically on three job quality dimensions. The complex debates of inter-firm relations, and the process through which these pierce into the organisational level is of crucial importance to understand the relevancy of market pressures on job quality analysis. Currently, inter-firm relations can be seen as market driven clusters of firms that will attempt to act in an increasingly concerted way to reach an objective. Although highly concerted inter-firm relations and supply chains have long characterised manufacturing and construction industries, they “are now ubiquitous in the global economy, found in every industry, and every continent” (Ruggie, 2013: 6). What is more, these concerted forms of production and service provision structures are increasingly driven to act beyond national boundaries and regulatory constraints (Coe et al., 2008; Gereffi et al., 2005) making it critical for job quality analysis in contemporary workplaces. By establishing the current trends, demands, and dynamics of networked forms of production, the appropriateness of focusing in three job quality dimensions is established in this chapter.

Thus, this chapter examines dynamics at a political economy and sectoral levels and relates them to the impacts at a workplace level in three specific job quality dimensions: job security and working time, skills and task discretion, and work pressures. The discussion of the political economy of supply chains allows job quality at the workplace level to be framed in a broader context. This chapter concludes that analysing the dynamics created by inter-firm relations and supply chains on different levels allows a more comprehensive understanding of shaping drivers of job quality, as well as the processes through which they impact on individuals.

### **2.2. Inter-firm relations**

The first issue to be addressed refers to why is important to frame job quality around inter-firm relations literature as well as how does it inform the arguments of this chapter. The increasing trend of inter-firm relations has been subject of public policy and academic debates in the last decades (Coe et al., 2008; Dicken, 2015; Gereffi et al., 2005;

Grimshaw et al., 2005; OECD, 2007). The interest demonstrated by scholars and policy makers originates from researchers considering that contemporary organisations are nowadays, to a large extent, defined by dynamics generated by complex inter-firm relationships (Dicken, 2015). As Wright and Kaine (2015) argue, many firms have engaged in a structural shift in the nature of production, where they went from internal hierarchies to flat networks stretching across multiple firms. As a result, researchers have focused on how such shift has impacted organisational practices and labour standards at the local level (see Coe et al., 2008; Gereffi et al., 2005; Newsome et al., 2015; Selwyn, 2011). However, this focus is yet to receive warranted scholarly attention when analysing job quality.

There is general agreement that decisions and strategies of one firm can influence outcomes on other firms at local level. As Buchanan et al. (2006: 188) argue, “no workplace is an island. Rather production and service provision are increasingly organised on a network and supply chain basis”. Practices of externalising or outsourcing some parts of production activities are seen as organisational strategies to keep up with competition and to become more cost-efficient (OECD, 2007). Raworth and Kidder (2009) also argue that organisations seek performance success by centring their resources on the core aspects of their business and externalising the rest, possibly with the best value for money. It is this trend that Rainnie et al. (2011) claim to result in coordinated production and trade activities, with complex linkages and interdependencies between firms. As a result, most contemporary forms of production cannot any longer be divided between activities managed within the firm and those contracted from the outside on the market. Many firms are ever more integrated with one another, and these relations are focused on mutual and concerted ways to increase performance and productivity gains (Grimshaw et al., 2005).

Therefore, despite differences in terminology (Gereffi et al., 2005; Maloni and Brown, 2006; Marchington et al., 2005), there is increasing accounts illustrating that contemporary production of goods and services are gradually becoming organised around the concept of network (Coe et al., 2008). Flecker et al. (2013) point to two main forms of inter-firm relationships. The first follows the model of core and peripheral, where core production units are maintained in-house, and the peripheral are outsourced to other firms; the second follows the model of networks, which points to the dynamics of production units moving up and down the value chain hierarchy, and gaining more or



less relevance in the overall production network. While the first entails a certain outdated level of stagnation, the second provides a more flexible explanation of how firms compete between themselves to gain more prominence in the inter-firm relation. Recent and important conceptualisations of inter-firm relations have moved towards the latter model. For instance, Coe et al. (2008: 272) suggest the concept of “network” to highlight the “structural” and “relational” natures of the way in which production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services are organised. The concept of network is important for this thesis, as it emphasises the existence of synergies and the possibility of transactions between organisations (Grimshaw et al., 2005).

Furthermore, what is important to this thesis relates to recent conceptualisations of inter-firm relations highlighting that the production network is not solely concerned with the production of a good in itself (Coe et al., 2008). Instead, it is also concerned with all aspects related to the production of that good, such as transport, storage, and marketing. What this means, is that all firms involved in the production network have to be highly-concerted in order to achieve a highly-efficient production process. The objective is to create value through the transformation of material and non-material inputs within the network, so that the *network of organisations* becomes the profitable entity and not just the individual organisation (Coe et al., 2008: 274). In short, some arguments emphasise the development of inter-firm relations evolving from loosely connected cluster of firms, to a vision where relationships between firms are defined in ever-more concerted ways of producing goods.

Another important development within inter-firm conceptualisation, which is critically relevant to this research study, relates to recent arguments emphasising the importance these have for the study of contemporary forms of work and employment (Newsome et al., 2015; Rainnie et al., 2011; Selwyn, 2011). Indeed, while the consequences of supply chain pressures are most apparent in firms’ organisational strategies across the chain, they may also create heightened pressure felt at the organisational level. Although, some studies have demonstrated ways in which improvements in working conditions can be attained (Womack and Jones, 2005), the vast majority have found that this type of production structure creates pressures on organisations, often leading to decreasing levels of job quality (Barrientos, 2013; Flecker et al., 2013; Newsome et al., 2013). This has been evident in several recent prominent international cases. For instance, the inter-firm pressure exerted by lead firms such as Apple on suppliers such as FoxConn was a factor

contributing to the poor labour standards practiced in that workplace, resulting in the suicide of workers (Chan et al., 2013). Therefore, the inter-firm relations and supply chain debates are used in this thesis to analyse the diffuse impacts of market pressures on job quality. This allows this thesis to focus on specific market forces to demonstrate how these can affect job quality; and at the same time allows the thesis to go beyond the debates around national institutional framework. In this way, the thesis complement macroeconomic or workplace (micro) job quality studies, which usually focus solely on national politico-economic frameworks or the single organisation to understand job quality.

The following section aims at discussing how dynamics of governance within supply chains are forged, so that later it can be discussed its impacts on organisational level. The literature has identified many forms of power and control stemming from inside and outside the network (Coe et al., 2008; Gereffi et al., 2005; Raworth and Kidder, 2009). As Grimshaw et al. (2005) emphasises, it is these influential inter-firm dynamics that will affect organisational strategies of other firms, and in turn impact on job quality. Therefore, the following discussion shows how the dependencies – related to power and control – are generated within networks.

### **2.3. Power and control in inter-firm relations**

Researchers have often linked power and control within inter-firm relations with ownership and contractual arrangements between organisations (Gereffi et al., 2005). Grimshaw et al. (2005) argue that various contractual arrangements can be possible in networks, which makes its conceptualisation complex and problematic. Researchers have observed that contracts between firms are seldom conducted between equal parties, meaning that one firm is frequently in a position of power to dictate the contractual terms and conditions to the other firm (Coe et al., 2008; Grimshaw et al., 2005; Gereffi et al., 2005). These terms of contracts are conventionally related to aspects such as price, form of payment, commitment to the contracting party, and quality standards (Gereffi et al., 2005). However, this thesis will not develop a discussion on the types of contractual relationships between firms. What is interesting to explore is the ways in which firms assert their dynamics of power and control within a production network. This will help to locate the loci of control within inter-firm relations, and allow this study to move

forward in understanding how dynamics of power and control between capitals are mechanisms of production and labour control.

Early theories of inter-firm relations argued that control and power was mainly concentrated in two points (or nodes) of the relationship: the buyer or the producer (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994). What Gereffi and Korzeniewicz (1994) meant is that buyer-driven chains were dominated by branded products and large retailers, whereas producer-driven chains were dominated by multinational manufacturing companies. This paradigm focused on a vertical relationship between buyers and sellers, where the degree of power and control between the two was of crucial importance. However, contemporary conceptual developments of inter-firm relations challenge this theory by illustrating that networks are made of a multitude of relationships between firms (Coe et al., 2008). These, Coe et al. (2008) argue, are not made only of vertical relations between buyer and producer, but are also horizontal and diagonal, where suppliers and subcontractors are embedded. Moreover, firms have different degrees of power and control with each other, which ends up affecting the embeddedness and cohesion of the network (Coe et al., 2008).

Gereffi et al. (2005) also recognises that organisations occupy different positions of power and dependence within the network. The different positions of power are important to understand how productivity and performance pressures are distributed within the network. These pressures can arise due to practices such as externalisation of risks to a subcontractor, or creating a strong and exclusive relationship between firms that are aimed at controlling the supplier. For instance, it has been reported that large firms may externalise risk to smaller network members (Flecker, 2010); or a powerful cluster of private organisations may lock the state into complex outsourcing deals (Marchington et al., 2005); or firms may even externalise part of the workforce to temporary work agencies in order to reduce fixed labour costs and avoid strict labour regulations (Kalleberg, 2001). Therefore, pressures to achieve performance gains seem to be crucial within inter-firm relations. Control over firms (lead firms, suppliers or subcontractors) are at the core of such strategy – however, how in fact are these achieved?

Robinson and Rainbird (2013: 97) argue that inter-firm control is not exclusively “exercised through ownership but through governance: the capacity to exercise control through specification of the product, quality standards, quantities, delivery dates and prices”. Governance is, therefore, argued to be the ability of one firm to exercise power

within the network by allocating resources; setting rules over specific aspects of production (Robinson and Rainbird, 2013); and coordinating the overall inter-firm relations (Gereffi et al., 2005). Gereffi et al. (2005) explain this form of control over inter-firm relations. They suggest that buyers and producers are seeking to tighten chains of production, in order to control important aspects of production, such as costs, and predictability of product quantity and quality. However, the question remains on whom and by what means the control over production is exercised. Therefore, in order to fully explore how pressures stemming from the market and production networks impact on the organisational level, one has to focus on where such pressures originate from according to the literature.

### **2.3.1. Locus of pressures and the “New Production Model”**

Recent debates have suggested a dominance of supermarkets as the key actors in governing their inter-firm relations. This dominance is achieved through their capacity to control who has access to the consumer market. Using complex governance structures retailers have provided a “new production model” that seeks the integration of production, distribution and consumption. This model suggests that inter-firm relations are dominated by firms that have direct access to the consumer market and dictate suppliers’ organisational strategies so that required market specifications are achieved (Lichtenstein 2006, 2009). What is problematic is that in the effort to achieve this, firms may alter work and employment patterns, which in turn will affect job quality conditions.

Dynamics associated with this model have been identified in a wide range of sectors and industries, such as warehousing, logistics, and manufacturing (see Bonacich and Hamilton, 2011; Mulholland and Stewart, 2014; Newsome, 2010). At the centre of this model is the shift identified by Bonacich and Hamilton (2011). They argue that point of control within the inter-firm relations has moved from the manufacturer (producer) to the retailer (buyer). This is mainly because retailers have the ability to predict the consumer demand, and consequently organise their supplying demands accordingly. Retailers rely on the new ICT (point-of-sale and electronic data interchange software) and management strategies to make decisions about future production of goods, specific product mixes for specific locations, delivery schedules, inventory flows, and quality standards. In practice, this new system has allowed retailers to determine what, when, where and how manufacturers produce goods (Bonacich and Hamilton, 2011). As a result, manufacturers

are required to adapt their production to the buyer's requirements, and the control over production is then shifted to the retailer.

The way in which control and power is operationalised by retailers is suggested in the literature to be predicated in cost, quality and delivery dates/reliability. Retailers tend to increase sales through strategies of low cost and promotions, which creates a tendency for prices to become progressively more important for consumers. It is through price competition (such as promotions and cost-cutting strategies) that retailers achieve competitive advantage (Raworth and Kidder, 2009). This leads to increasing demands for lower prices, and drives retailers to search for different ways of reducing costs (Burt and Sparks, 2001). Bonacich and Wilson (2008) argue that retailers often need to consider the whole supply chain as a unit of competition, where value can be extracted from all points of the supply chain such as production, warehousing and distribution (see also Lichtenstein, 2009).

Nevertheless, in deconstructing these complex dynamics it is understood that these are inflexibly inflicted by the requirements of retailers (Glucksmann, 2006). Gereffi et al. (2005) argues that the pressures to achieve retailers' requirements may have consequences for supplying firms in two different levels. Firstly, failing to meet retailers' requirements may result in firms being in danger of losing their access to the consumer market, which in turn can result in their insolvency. Retailers may threaten supplying firms of being unlisted if they do not meet the exact requirements in terms of pricing, quality and delivery dates (Bonacich and Hamilton, 2011). The highly competitive environment in which firms are embedded makes them vulnerable to retailers' decision of cancelling contracts and shifting their buying focus to other manufacturers. At the second level, supplying firms' endeavours to meet such requirements have an impact on labour, leading them to engage in practices that may undermine the quality of jobs. A wide number of studies have pointed to ways in which job quality is challenged through flexibility practices, extended working hours, and through the dominance of performance targets in the workplace (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008; Glucksmann, 2006; Mulholland and Stewart, 2014; Newsome, 2010). Although Wright and Lund (2006) argue that such dynamics may affect second tier suppliers, there has been limited research investigating if this is the case.

Retailers are key determinants in shaping the inter-firm connections and dynamics. For retailers, this over-capacity to control the inter-firm relations presents the opportunity to

manage and extend risk across the different aspects of the supply chain, which inevitably impacts practices at the workplace level. Therefore, job quality and labour standards cannot be explored and understood as a phenomenon divergent from the wider market pressures; rather, the market pressure is the driver of the relationship between firms that moulds and influences the quality of jobs. It would then be beneficial to further explore how requirements along the supply chain can impact on a more concrete level the organisations and particularly on job quality.

#### **2.4. Inter-firm relations and labour process control**

Researchers have recently focused on the reconfiguration of labour as a way of restructuring the production process (Cumbers et al., 2008). For instance, Hammer and Riisgaard (2015: 88) suggest that the “ability to organise the labour process is crucial not only for firms’ competitiveness, but also for their ability to develop inter-firm cooperation”. In other words, if firms within the same supply chain wish to be coordinated, then firms need to align forms of work organisation. Hammer and Riisgaard (2015) use the example of how fragmentation of production (such as outsourcing and offshoring) rearranges the foundations on which labour processes are connected. Firms contract out production parts or services, expecting these to be provided in a more cost-effective manner. In turn, workforces become increasingly segmented and separated, either geographically or because suppliers utilise more precarious forms of employment. Thus, what arguably distinguishes production rooted in supply chains from preceding forms of work organisation is not related specifically to pressures and derivatives. Rather, what is significant is the conditions it creates for a new social organisation of labour to emerge, which is initiated and controlled by management. The new social configuration of labour is then used to reduce the indeterminacy of labour so that continuous flow of production can be achieved (Hammer and Riisgaard, 2015). In essence, the pressures stemming from other firms result in organisational strategies that are geared towards complying with those same pressures. These are argued to be forms of managerial control that stem from supply chains, which have great impact on the workplace level, with detrimental effects on job quality. As Wright and Kaine (2015) suggest, decisions affecting production and labour process motivated by cost-reduction and flexible practices, generally involve the engagement of suppliers with minimal capacity and resources to develop good quality jobs, who instead opt for ‘low-road’ strategies.

What these last accounts suggest is that the way production is organised aims at influencing well beyond organisational productivity. This is in line with Littler's (1982) early argument that production systems (such as the concerted and integrated inter-firm relations) are not simply related with the way production is organised, but also with systems of control over labour and labour process. The following discussion addresses debates within the literature that discuss the ways in which inter-firm control over the labour process reconfigures specific dimensions of job quality. Thus, this chapter specifically follows Taylor's (2010) request for more research on linking the inter-firm dynamics and labour process analysis, in order to gain a better understanding of how wider contemporary market dynamics influence the quality of work.

### **2.5. The configuration of labour process and job quality under the influence of inter-firm relations**

Rubery et al. (2005b) argued that little attention is paid to the consequences of fragmented networks of production for the quality of employment and work. Therefore, what is important to highlight and clearly understand here, is how the specificities and requirements happening at the inter-firm level, such as flexibility, cost-effectiveness and quality, can affect job quality. As Robinson and Rainbird (2013) argue, the link between inter-firm pressures and the workplace lies in exploring and explaining the imposition of control by firms over the labour process through the constraints they place upon systems of management. Therefore, if inter-firm relations are forms of managerial control grounded on downward pressures on the workplace (Durand, 2007; Robinson and Rainbird, 2013), then the question arises on what the exact consequences on job quality are.

The consequences for job quality discussed in the literature are mostly divided in two strands: the optimistic and the critical. The optimistic account argued that generally work environments have developed to a type of work organisation, which fosters a multi-skilled and multitasking workforce, and replaces the monotonous work environment characteristic of Taylorism (Womack et al., 1990). In addition, fostered by inter-firm dynamics, there have risen novel opportunities to organise work rooted on cooperative and flat organisational structures, which grants low-skilled employees the opportunity for skill development by taking responsibility of a wider range of tasks (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996, in Rubery et al., 2005b). These optimistic forms of work organisation

have long been identified in manufacturing and construction industries, but its conceptualisation has been transferred across other low end jobs in a wide range of industries and sectors primarily under the banner of lean production (see Moody, 1997). However, the critical account claimed that these work features follow a mechanistic employment paradigm, using employees as dehumanised parts of the machine operation (Garrahan and Stewart, 1992). Raworth and Kidder (2009) suggested that pressures stemming from inter-firm dynamics and supply chain pressures result in three kinds of outcomes in the workplace. The first is related to time and speed, such as the pressures to deliver faster, reduce production lead times, and shorter design cycles. Secondly, firms are pressured to create conditions for more flexibility and adapt to seasonality, such as demands for quick changes in order, size, and the ability to switch rapidly between product designs. Lastly, the third outcome is related to the demands of cost and risks, where markets require higher quality at lower prices. In turn, Raworth and Kidder (2009) argue that in order to ensure these outcomes, workers may be impacted by a plethora of ways. Firstly, there is the need for increased labour flexibilisation. This is often achieved by reconfiguring the labour process where employee numbers and working time patterns have to be adapted to the market demands. As a result, a wide variety of contracts is used and variation in shift patterns is introduced. Secondly, greater routinisation and standardisation of job tasks is paramount to increase efficiency and meet the demands of accuracy and speed at the lowest cost possible. Thirdly, they allude to the emergence of tighter supervising and monitoring practices to ensure that targets set by client firms are achieved (Raworth and Kidder, 2009). Indeed, many researchers have reinforced that low end jobs in contemporary workplaces are grounded on Taylorist features, with standardised work tasks, tight control systems, extension of working hours, and proliferation of atypical forms of contracts. Such characteristics bring tremendous pressures on job quality at organisational and individual levels, particularly where low-skilled and low-paid workers operate. Therefore, there is the need to further investigate the impacts of supply chain on different dimensions of job quality. As it was outlined earlier, supply chains may pressures managers to finely match labour costs to production demands, which may encourage employers to use atypical forms of contracts with lower job security and higher levels of working time flexibility (Flecker, 2010; Henly and Lambert, 2014; Kalleberg, 2011). Moreover, supply chains pressures may influence skill development, as the search for achieving performance targets may inhibit training, skill



utilisation and task discretion (Grugulis and Vincent, 2005). Similarly, the need to comply with performance targets may create conditions to the restructuring of performance and absence management systems (Newsome et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2010).

### **2.5.1. Job security and working time**

Job security and working time have been central to debates of job quality across most influential studies (Gallie, 2013; Munoz de Bustillo et al., 2009). The concept of perceived job security can be understood as an individual dimension involving a cognitive and affective factor – estimation of likelihood of losing one’s job, and worry about losing one’s job (Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt, 1984). However, job security is also linked to numerical flexibility, which can limit the ability of firms to hire and fire workers in order to respond to market uncertainty (Kalleberg, 2011). Similarly, flexibility of working time has been understood in contradictory ways by different researchers. For instance, Holman (2013) approaches it as the worker’s capability to indicate their own working hours, whereas Lambert (2008) uses it to refer to the unpredictable working time patterns that are forced on workers. This section will first discuss trends and debates of job security, and then the debates around working time – both in relation to supply chains.

Work restructuring and technology advancements associated with globalised product and labour market trends are argued to have legitimized insecurity and flexibility in low-skilled contemporary workplaces (Flecker, 2010; Marchington et al., 2005). Tightly managed supply chains on manufacturing sector are claimed to have amplified this trend by pushing firms to strictly match labour costs to production demands, in order to produce goods at a higher end-value (Caroli et al., 2010; Flecker et al., 2013; Kalleberg, 2003). Rubery and Earnshaw (2005), argue that variations in production demand, as well as variations in the inter-firm dynamics, directly impact on how management uses contractual flexibility to adjust to the supply chain requirements in terms of employee numbers and costs. For instance, their study demonstrates how subordinated firms, such as suppliers, help large companies to save costs and achieve flexibility by employing contingent labour. Suppliers are then obeying to the supply chain logic of attempting to add value in all aspects of the production process. In essence, as firms seek to increase flexibility to adapt to supply chain fluctuations and demands, jobs with lower levels of job security increase. However, in Marchington et al.’s (2005) view, inter-firm relations

can also bring positive implications for job security. For instance, stable and long-term inter-firm relations may generate contractual security enjoyed by workers within the supplier firm.

These dynamics have contributed to a segmented workforce. Barrientos (2013) argues that as management responds to supply chain pressures, the workforce is divided in differing tiers – the core and peripheral. The literature has discussed this trend by characterising the core workforce as enjoying high levels of job security, and the peripheral workforce being particularly vulnerable to product market fluctuations and supply chain pressures due to their contingent contractual status (Atkinson, 1984; Kalleberg, 2001). The workers in the core group are associated with full-time and secure contracts, with benefits such as training and promotional opportunities; whereas, the peripheral workers are often contingent workers, with low levels of job security, inferior contractual terms, and fewer access to training and skill development (Harrison, 1994; Rubery and Wilkinson, 1994).

Segmentation can be understood as an organisational strategy where workers in the periphery, with lower job security, are used as cushions so that permanent workers can maintain higher levels of job quality (Atkinson, 1984). This argument is particularly present in debates around working time, where peripheral employees are used by firms to increase working time flexibility. For instance, in examining suppliers' strategies to cope with retailers demands, Caroli et al. (2010) demonstrate the strategic adjustments of employee numbers through flexible contractual statuses. Such strategies allows suppliers to benefit from wage budgets and control of labour costs. They argue, that in the UK, due to the weak employment protection legislation, firms are nevertheless prone to utilise high numbers of workers on atypical forms of contract. In Caroli et al.'s (2010) argument, contingent workers themselves provide the required flexibilisation by means of adjusting employee numbers, but also by utilising working time flexibility. In turn, core workers are safeguarded from the harmful flexible working time practices. The study emphasises that casual workers are affected not only by their precarious employment statuses, but also by the variations of working time patterns brought to the workplace to cope with market fluctuations, i.e. through long working hours (overtime) in the UK. These contracts relate to the type of flexibility conceptualisation termed by Korczynski (2002) as "labour-stretching", where contingent workers frequently experience work extensification in periods of high market demand.

However, such accounts understate the importance of changes in working time patterns, as strategies adopted by firms to adapt to supply chain demands. Rubery et al. (2005a) suggest that flexibilisation of working time may represent a new regulation of work that has spread far beyond contingent work. In their account, the pressures for working time variation suggest that workers with typical and permanent contracts are also becoming increasingly more exposed to such pressures. In the same vein, Wood (2016) demonstrates the increasing occurrence of temporal flexibility across permanent and temporary employees in the retail sector, so that employers can accurately adjust labour costs to market demands. Lambert (2008) also shows that practices of working time flexibility have increased in the USA, because employers are increasingly unwilling to pay for labour that exceeds demand on an hourly basis. This was particularly acute in jobs belonging to the retail industry. Similarly, in the UK, Eurofound (2012) found that 30% of workers report experiencing changes in their work schedule made by the employer. This may reflect the unique approach of the UK to working time directives. Although the UK has been made to accept the European Directive of Working Time limiting to 48 weekly working hours (Freatly and Sparks, 2000), companies are still able to utilise mechanisms such as derogation of working time directives. Such directives allow employers to adjust working hours to market demands, or to other firms' requirements (Lambert, 2008; Rubery et al., 2005a). As research studies indicate, this practice is widely used in low-end jobs, where firms are increasingly pressured to match labour costs to market demands (Caroli et al., 2000; Newsome et al., 2013; Mulholland and Stewart, 2014; Wood, 2016).

Therefore, segmentation of the workforce does not completely act as a protective cushion for core workers from flexibility. Few accounts have argued that contracting workers on atypical forms of contracts is designed in part to bring external competition within the boundaries of the organisation. The cost-effectiveness accrued to contingent labour places increased competitive pressure on the internal core workforce (Ackroyd and Proctor, 1998; Cappelli, et al., 1997). This may be particularly critical in workplaces under tight supply chain derivatives. For instance, Flecker et al.'s (2013: 16) demonstrates that as "value chains grow longer, and network relations widen, demands for flexibility at the core arise and tend to be strengthened through the back door". Such findings demonstrate that flexibility applied to the peripheral workers, who supposedly acted as cushions to the core workforce, ends up also being enforced on the latter. The

working conditions of peripheral workers serve then as *the ideal situation* from the company's view point. As a result, core workers feel increasingly pressured to accept flexible working practices, such as temporal flexibility (Flecker et al., 2013).

What is arguably critical for job quality at the individual level is the detrimental impacts of insecure jobs, and the variations of working time patterns have on individual well-being. For instance, some researchers emphasised the negative consequences of job insecurity for employees' physical and mental health, as it can lead to psychological distress (De Cuyper and De Witte, 2007; Vander Elst et al., 2012). More recently, Vander Elst et al. (2014) found that job insecurity is related to higher levels of poor general health. Researchers have typically focused on workers with low levels of job security to investigate the impact of their employment status on mental health. However, the seminal work of Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt (1984) drew attention to forms of insecurity that may be experienced by workers other than those in atypical forms of contracts. The perception of job insecurity in this group of workers may not involve an automatic job loss, but a threat to valued job features (Hellgren et al., 1999; Sverke et al., 2006). Therefore, it is important to extend the investigation of how supply chain pressures promote perceptions of job insecurity in both core and peripheral groups of workers, and how this in turn affects their job quality experience.

Moreover, Taylor (2013) claims that fear of losing jobs forces individuals to comply with increasingly demanding managerial mechanisms, resulting in employers relying on insecure labour market conditions to extract more effort from workers. Researchers have argued, that workers in atypical forms of contract, who experience more job insecurity, are prone to be more vulnerable to flexible managerial practices (Henly and Lambert, 2014; Wood, 2016). This can be observed in the workplace, with employees increasingly accepting variations in working time patterns (McKenzie and Forde, 2009). Besond et al. (2003) argues that the increasing numbers of precarious forms of contracts and diminishing wages are gradually pushing workers to involuntarily accept working hours that often interferes with their social and family life. In job quality terms, this means that working excessively long hours and in different shifts can be disadvantageous to workers' physical and mental health, and produce negative impacts upon individuals' balance between work and personal life (Besond et al., 2003).

### **2.5.2. Skill and task discretion**

In recent studies, skill and task discretion have been considered key dimensions for job quality analysis (Eurofound, 2012; Gallie, 2013; Inanc et al., 2013). Particularly task discretion and control over work tasks have been highlighted as critical aspects for high-quality jobs (Holman, 2013). Thompson (1989: 92) defines skill as “a knowledgeable practice within elements of control”. This definition leads the focus of analysis onto the way work is organised and jobs are designed, and the extent to which they allow employees the scope to both develop and use knowledge and skill within the job (Lloyd and Payne, 2016). Thus, within this section skills is considered as a requirement of the job. In other words, the skills that a specific job requires someone to have in order to undertake that job appropriately. This conceptualisation of skills is related to the structure of work, and the way the labour process is organised (Grugulis et al., 2004). Littler (1982) argues that this approach requires an examination of forms on control and the nature of employment relationship as means to understand the level of latitude that workers have to utilise their own skills when undertaking their work tasks.

There are two main accounts presented in the literature that discuss the development of skills in the workplace. The first indicates that the introduction of technology in labour process leads to upskilling (Blauner, 1964). The technological advancements can be used to replace labour process activities premised on standardised and routinized work tasks, which do not require high skill levels. The introduction of new technology demands workers to acquire and develop new skills in order to cope with the new nature of the labour process. These, in turn, create the conditions to reconnect mentally the worker to their jobs. Likewise, Womack et al. (1990) argue that new configurations of work stemming from contemporary demands of production, such as higher flexibility and continuous search for quality improvement, result in the enhancement of workers' skills. This is made by involving workers in the labour process, through means of team working and problem solving. Womack et al. (1990) argue that such involvement results in workers developing their skills in three areas. Firstly, workers would have to increase their skills in terms of variety, and the ability to undertake a wide range of work tasks. Secondly, in order to meet the customer quality expectations, the organisation would emphasise on skills concerned with the product quality. Lastly, workers would be have to develop new problem-solving skills (Womack et al., 1990).

What is arguably critical for the upskilling thesis is the reported trend of skills in the UK. Studies demonstrated that skills are being subject to both upskilling and deskilling developments (Inanc et al., 2013). Gallie (1994) argues that this is primarily related to occupational variants. Even though optimistic views could expect that new technology and forms of organising work would increase skill requirements for workers, leading employers to emphasise training and skills development (Blauner, 1964; Womack et al., 1990), this is only true for certain occupational groups, such as white-collar workers (Gallie, 1994).

The second account present in the literature argues that there is a deskilling trend in the labour market. Such deskilling trend is being driven by technological developments, and the implementation of production systems that increase control over the labour process and the workforce (Braverman, 1974). Braverman (1974) argued that management control over the labour process is always grounded on efforts to deskill the workforce. In particular, he argued that management historically attempted this through the means of work standardisation and routinisation. The standardisation of work arguably results in the labour process being separated from the skills of the workers. Furthermore, when worker collaborate with managers it is argued that the former tend to lose control over the labour process. Thus, employers attempt to monopolise the conceptualisation of work by increasing control over the organisation of work (Braverman, 1974).

Within the conceptualisation of skill relevant to this thesis – skills in the job – there are two significant criteria by which upskilling and deskilling trends may be assessed. The first relates to the amount of skills a job needs to be undertaken, i.e. job complexity; the second is task discretion (Grugulis et al., 2004; Felstead et al., 2004). Although the complexity of the job in terms of skills and task discretion are two different concepts, in the industrial sociology tradition they are often seen as correlated, because they underpin the idea of quality of work itself. The two concepts are connected because workers must have the capability to understand the labour process if they are to make decisions about their own work tasks (Green 2006). For Spenner (1990) it is when the labour process is more controlled and workers have less scope for skill utilisation and decision-making (discretion) that the job becomes less skilful and complex. Therefore, to explore skills in the job, one has to consider the complexity of the job on the one hand, and the task discretion on the other hand.

Felstead et al. (2004) argue that job complexity can be defined in terms of the level and scope of skills found within a job. They state that the measure of skill encompasses four dimensions:

... the qualifications needed to undertake the job and the importance of particular activities to the work (i.e. the required skills to perform specific tasks to the job); the length of training workers receive from their employees; and the length of time it takes to the job well or acquire proficiency (*ibid*: 150).

This definition derives from what individual workers state as important factors, in order to conduct their own work. Spenner (1990) adds to this by arguing that the variety and repetition of tasks within a job is a significant indicator of job complexity. The job is more skilful if it intrinsically encompasses more complex tasks, rather than repetitive tasks, which in turn requires the development of more mental, manual and interpersonal skills from workers. What this argument suggests is that the direction of skill is associated with the way work is organised, and the way management utilises workers' skills accordingly. Felstead et al. (2004) indicates that the increasing automation and computerisation of the workplace over the past three decades has significantly increased the level of job complexity. They argue that indicators such as qualifications required, the time devoted for skill development, and the amount of the time to acquire proficiency have been increasing, which suggests a rise of skill levels. In a more recent study, Felstead et al. (2013) report the same trends, although training and learning times have shortened in the workplace. According to this study, required skills on the job are still on the rise; however, the training and development of skill within the workplace has decreased during the period from 2006 and 2012. Moreover, what Felstead et al. (2004) also claim is that although skill has risen in relation to job complexity, what has not increased is the level of task discretion.

Task discretion is the degree to which workers have the capacity or latitude to undertake their work tasks (Felstead et al., 2004). Therefore, task discretion can be conceptualised as to what extent workers have the autonomy for decision making in relation to their own work tasks. A reduction in the level of workers' discretion, coupled with increasing level of effort expended by the workers, would entail deskilling. In other words, when labour process is more controlled and workers have less scope for discretion, then skills are not required and thus not utilised (Spenner, 1990).

Therefore, if the direction of skill development, either upskilling or deskilling, is related to control of the labour process, then the way in which firms organise work, resulting from market pressures and inter-firm relations, comes into question. Indeed, an overlapping concern between job quality and supply chain literature, is the influence of the latter on the ability of firms to foster skill development (Gallie 2013; Ramirez and Rainbird, 2010). Little research on inter-firm relations has focused on how skill is impacted by dynamics generated by inter-firm relations (Ramirez and Rainbird, 2010). Some results of empirical research have led to an acknowledgement that inter-firm features have become important vehicles for nurturing the development knowledge and skills (Ernst and Kim, 2002; Gereffi, 1999; Humphrey and Schmitz, 2002). For instance, part of the upskilling capacity of suppliers results from the know-how and experience acquired by their need to achieve the required demands for their client firms. Therefore the main incentive for the sharing of technical, market and managerial knowledge by lead-firms, stems from the need of ensuring that suppliers meet the requirements of the lead firm (Gereffi, 1999; Ernst and Kim, 2002).

Notwithstanding these accounts, empirical research on inter-firm relations has also highlighted existing complex inter-firm relations, between the lead-firms and the capacity for suppliers to meet such requirements and absorb external knowledge. Thus, a critical strand of literature suggests that upskilling, because of inter-firm dynamics and networked forms of production, is not automatic or guaranteed. For instance, Grugulis and Vincent (2005) finds that in such production models, firms are typically subject to constant pressure to increase efficiency at the lowest cost possible. As a result, they use tighter forms of labour process control through task routinisation and standardisation to respond to such pressures. Moreover, they argue that inter-firm relations increase risk, which as a result increases the need for stricter practices of performance monitoring. These implemented systems reduce skill in the job by limiting an employee's discretion. Similarly, Mullholland and Stewart (2014) illustrate that in inter-firm relations, the pressures to be cost-efficient are pushed down the chain. In turn, labour process is divided into a multitude of small simpler tasks, allowing for tighter forms of managerial control where workers' autonomy and discretion is reduced to a minimum. The authors conclude that workers end up having to undertake more tasks, but with lower levels of skills.

Moreover, another dimension that is deeply affected by pressures cascading down from supply chains is the increasing pressure to manage workers through results. Such targets



are usually set internally. However, Taylor (2010) argues that targets may arise from terms set by external client firms, such as the Service Level Agreements in call centres.

These requirements arising from supply chains and inter-firm relations are likely to create conditions for work task to become more standardised. As a result, autonomy can be severely curtailed by the pressure of achieving performance targets. This is illustrated in Holman et al.'s (2012) study. By investigating food retailers and two suppliers, Holman et al. (2012) reports that the service level agreements established at supply chain level, which were particularly focused on product cost and the responsiveness to unpredictable calls for order, resulted in lower skilled jobs with workers having little scope for exercising task discretion. This is supported by Stewart et al.'s (2009) study in retailing warehouses, who argue that workplaces under strict market pressures are only successful by relying on removing job elements, that are considered by management as unproductive.

Therefore, on the one hand, firms involved in productions organised around networks are arguably required to increase skills in the interests of the whole group of firms. Whilst, on the other hand, the inter-firm relations are being pressurised to standardise and routinize job tasks in order to get more efficient and predicable production. What is arguably problematic with job quality in workplaces, that curtail workers' scope to utilise and develop their skills, is that it ends up impacting negatively the well-being of the individual. Kalleberg and Vaisey (2005) argue that autonomy is the main factor which workers considered when assessing the quality of their jobs. Other studies have also emphasised the importance of autonomy over work tasks as crucial for the individual's well-being. For instance, Karasek and Theorell (1990) emphasise the negative impacts that lack of control has for job satisfaction and health outcomes.

### **2.5.3. Work pressures**

Work pressures have been central to debates in industrial sociology for the greater part of its history. The view that there has been a long-term trend towards more intense and more stressful patterns of work has remained consistent in industrial sociology studies (Gallie, 2005). Work pressures have been defined as the perception of high job demands that never seem to diminish, which can include tight control mechanisms at the workplace and over the labour process, that workers struggle to keep up with (Carayon and Zijlstra, 1999).

Delbridge et al. (1992) argue that as the work environment becomes more efficient and leaner, any disruptions become proportionally more visible. A critical review of the academic literature brings forth two main specific managerial mechanisms that aim at keeping disruptions to the minimum, which can have huge detrimental effects on job quality – performance management and absence management (Gallie, 2005; Newsome et al., 2013; Taylor, 2013; Taylor et al., 2010; Taylor and Bain, 2001). For instance, by investigating the call centre industry, Taylor and Bain (2001: 448) demonstrate that managerial mechanisms that assure targets are achieved are “perceived to contribute either to a great deal, or to some extent, to feeling pressurized”. In the same vein, Taylor (2013) argues that controlling for sickness absence, or “sickies”, has become an increasing crucial problem that employers want to tackle, usually by pressurising workers to come back to work as soon as possible, resulting in people returning to work while sick or still recovering.

The intensification and emergence of specific managerial mechanisms may be particularly acute in production systems, where performance and staffing levels are tightly monitored, so that targets are achieved at the cost, quality standards and time forecasted. If these aspects are not fulfilled in a tightly managed workplace, there is the potential for serious disruption of the work process (Taylor et al., 2010).

In a context with high levels of competition – such as those promoted by retailers in production supply chains (Raworth and Kidder, 2009) – suppliers may be pressured to intensify managerial mechanism to keep disruption to a minimum, and reliably comply with supply chain demands. For instance, it has been argued that organisations may respond to market demands by increasing levels of expected performance and intensifying performance targets. In this way, management’s intention to keep production flow efficient, in order to reach targets set by client firms (Wright and Lund, 2006), makes management of workers’ effort a major concern for the overall organisational and supply chain performance. Newsome et al.’s (2013: 12) study illustrate that in relationships between retailers and suppliers:

(The) nature and the contours of the linkages between these firms are predicated upon more exacting key organisational performance indicators that include stringently monitored processes to ensure perpetual, reliable and efficient production flow across the supply chain.

What this entails is that in today's production politics, the management of workers' behaviours – being performance or attendance at work – is of crucial importance to ensure a predictable and constant flow of supply throughout the chain or network.

There are different stages as a firm transfers market imperatives into the shop-floor workers. The influence is not always immediate, but Taylor (2013) argues that there is an identifiable direction, where internal mechanisms of control are justified by the external market conditions. In other words, the emergence and intensification of managerial practices in a specific firm may be related to external requirements stemming from other firms. According to Rubery and Earnshaw (2005), firms within supply chains can take direct or indirect forms of supervision. In terms of indirect supervision, the need to verify and control requirements established in service level agreements, leads to tighter forms of internal supervision over workers' performance and absence levels. The inter-firm dynamics are also likely to lead to the multiplication of layers of control, where both client firm and supplier control workers' behaviours. In relation to direct forms of inter-firm supervision, Rubery and Earnshaw (2005) highlight that the presence of multi-employers within a production network means that lines of supervision and control will cross organisational boundaries. Thus, inter-firm relationships may entail distinct levels of influence over client firms' performance and absence systems. This latter argument is supported by other empirical research. By focusing on performance management systems, Newsome et al. (2013) demonstrate that different management practices emerge in supplying firms according to the level of intervention from retailers. In supplier firms, where indirect pressures from retailers were present, the actual managerial practices remained underdeveloped. In contrast, a more direct intervention from retailers on supplier firms resulted in more rigorous stipulated targets, which workers were expected to comply with (Newsome et al., 2013). These studies show that, as supply chains and inter-firm relations become more integrated, the higher the need there is to control the other firms' managerial systems.

In such contexts, the intensification of performance and absence management systems are taken to a new level, where individual behaviour is made increasingly visible and individually accountable (Mulholland and Stewart, 2014). In turn, work becomes more intense, with an accelerated work flow and increased demands over workers (Taylor, 2013).

There are two main interpretations of why workers agree to the increasing pressures at work stemming from performance management systems. For McGovern et al. (2007), workers' compliance is linked with the low levels of job security coupled with market uncertainty. In other words, firms attempt to extract more effort from workers or make them comply with attendance requirement by highlighting the volatile market conditions, as McGovern et al. (2007: 141) summarise from their study:

Overall, the results provide reasonably good evidence that employers exert high levels of effort in insecure conditions. This appears both when personal job loss appears imminent, so that anxiety about insecurity is likely to be acute, and still more clearly in the medium-term aftermath of wider workplace reductions. The longer-term background of insecurity seems to provide motivational 'stick' since the effect on effort is persistent.

Another understanding is also suggested by McGovern et al. (2007), based on the argument that increasingly more internal systems of control and incentives are applied by firms to achieve market demands.

However, Taylor (2013: 34) argues it is more likely the interplay between "market discipline" and "bureaucratic control" may be in use in contemporary workplaces. For instance, in circumstances of adverse economic conditions firms may use insecurity within the workplace to unlock workers' consent to achieve performance targets required by other firms. In addition, market pressures may also be transferred into more measurable and visible mechanisms of control over workers' performance rate and absence (Taylor, 2013; Taylor et al., 2010). This is in line with Burawoy's (1979: 27) argument that "coercion must be supplemented by the organisation of consent". Taylor's (2013) assessment about the interplay between market discipline and what is referred to as bureaucratic control in the workplace seems to be of crucial importance to the analysis of work pressures. Therefore, the following sections discuss respectively the two managerial mechanisms aforementioned: performance management and absence management.

### Work pressures and management of performance

Gallie (2005) argues that performance management can create conditions for a pressurised work environment and can significantly affect the quality of jobs. There are

two main strands of literature that discuss the purposes and outcomes of performance management. Although the HRM literature points to a series of practices regarding the measure of performance using agreed key performance indicators and targets (Armstrong, 2009; CIPD, 2015), the critical studies reveal that these practices are geared to unlock the workers' discretionary effort (Newsome et al., 2013; Taylor, 2013). Thus, this section discusses debates around performance management in the context of supply chains, and how these can be a source of work pressures that undermines the quality of jobs.

The debate in the academic literature on how to manage performance at a local level is divided into an optimistic and a critical approach. The mainstream HRM literature claims that performance management is about creating a culture that encourages the continuous improvement of business' processes and of individuals' skills, behaviour and contributions (Armstrong 2009; CIPD, 2015). Armstrong (2009) claims that managing performance should be a systematic process of evaluation, aiming at increasing organisational performance by focusing on the performance of teams and individual workers. In the context of high competition and product market pressures (such as in the form of supply chain or inter-firm relations) performance management is argued to be the management of workers' effort during the labour process, in order to achieve organisational performance indicators that are in turn harmonised with supply chain derivatives (Newsome et al., 2013; Taylor, 2013).

However, critical studies, focusing on low-skilled and routinized work, have questioned whether more optimistic accounts are actually concerned with improving individuals and the organisation as a whole, and whether such forms of performance management are still possible in today's economic context. Taylor (2013) argues that the current economic context, where cost-effectiveness and production efficiencies are paramount, gears performance management systems to become increasingly stricter. In such marketised contexts achieving the planned organisational targets becomes the most important concern in the workplace (Taylor, 2013), and management is directed to establishing standards of required effort from workers by instigating more standardised and tighter monitoring of performance management practices (Newsome et al., 2013). A competitive market environment may result in uncertainty in the workplace as workers may feel their jobs are being placed at risk, either by dismissal or through the loss of job aspects that

they may value (Taylor, 2013). However, competitive market conditions may also resulted in heightened controlling and monitoring practices at a workplace level.

One main outcome of such practices is the rigorous identification of underperforming individuals and their subjection to perform to the required standards (Taylor, 2013). For instance, Taylor (2013) reports that practices related to performance evaluation have been increasingly built around objective criteria in comparative metrics and scales, in order to ease the measurement of individuals' performance against the required criteria. Different scales and methods have been adopted in British workplaces, but one method based on a forced distribution is regarded as particularly important. Within this method, it is crucial for managers to comply with required distribution of ratings between the different percentage quartiles. Although CIPD (2011) reports that only eight percent of workplaces have stated that this system was used, in the USA there is a much more widespread use of forced distribution methods. What is problematic with these forms of performance evaluation is that regardless of how well individuals are performing, a certain proportion of employees will be squeezed in advance to lower percentiles, and be deemed as underperformers (Taylor, 2013).

These forms of tighter performance management systems have been criticised for the negative impacts they produce for individuals' health. In related studies, Mulholland and Stewart's (2014) examination of non-unionised warehousing workplaces, under direct control from retailers, illustrates that the imposed strict performance management systems are suggestive of a form of labour subordination with high levels of pressure. Therefore, it is unsurprising that a wide range of literature has focused on investigating the impacts of these performance management systems on individuals. For instance, in Green's (2006) study of contexts geared towards performance targets, workers had fewer opportunities to recover mentally and physically before the onset of the next demand, which in turn resulted in experiences of overwork, work strain and stress. Likewise, Deery et al. (2002) associated performance management practices with emotional exhaustion, while Baldry et al, (2007) and Taylor et al. (2003) demonstrated work stress being a widespread experience amongst workers.

#### Work pressures and management of absence

The literature also points to absence management as one of the major foundations of work pressures in contemporary workplaces (Taylor et al. 2010; Taylor 2013). The terminology relating to absence is rather unclear in the literature, and researchers tend to use absence and absenteeism interchangeably, disregarding the different connotations that both terms imply (Blyton and Turnbull, 2004). However, Blyton and Turnbull (2004) provide clarity by stating that absence indicates a justifiable non-attendance at work, whereas absenteeism implies deliberate non-attendance to work. The following discussion addresses the reasons why absence is important in workplace embedded in supply chain context, and how it can be a source of increasing work pressures that undermines the quality of jobs.

Absence becomes particularly acute in workplaces where pressures to keep labour costs low are high and staffing levels become leaner (Taylor et al., 2010). The effort to keep the exact required number of workers to do a specific job makes absence a major disruption and obstacle for the production flow, resulting in unforeseen costs. In this way, according to Taylor et al. (2010), management sees absence as a crucial aspect when firms try to keep costs down. For instance, Edwards and Whitston (1993) report in their case study that attendance was the increasing focus of management, because of the associated costs of absence behaviours, and the strong competitive pressures that the firm was subject to. Likewise, Huczynski and Fitzpatrick (1989) conclude that managing absence, with the aim of keeping cost at low levels is a key ingredient in the search of increased productivity and competitive advantage.

The debate in the academic literature on how to manage absence at the workplace seems to be divided between two contrary approaches: attendance management and, in contrast, absence management. The distinction, Edwards (2005) suggests, lies in the former implying a more positive approach to reduce absence levels, in an effort from management to encourage attendance rather than punish absence. Edwards (2005) argues that this approach is based on a consensus within the employment relationship. In Edwards and Whitston's (1993) study management uses mechanisms of consent and informal negotiation to obtain better organisational results. In their study, absence was managed between formal discipline and daily informal negotiations, which contributed to lower levels of absenteeism. Therefore, the way management uses different terminology to tackle absence implies certain practices that encourage attendance, or in contrast punish absence. Encouraging attendance may involve practices such as return to

work interviews, regular contact with absent employees, and the involvement of line managers (Edwards, 2005).

By contrast, Edwards and Whitston (1993) argue that strategies in dealing with absence vary between different workplaces. For instance, in Taylorised workplaces where cost is a major pressure, absence is more prone to be tightly managed (Edwards, 2005), and operationalised by adopting a disciplinary approach (Edwards, 2005; Taylor, 2013). For instance, Edwards (2005) reports that practices related to punishing absence involve assigning negative points to employees when absence occurs, which can result in disciplinary processes, and ultimately in dismissal. Taylor (2013) adds to this debate, by reporting that practitioners have widely adopted tools such as the 'Bradford system' in order to operationalise the penalisation of absence based on trigger points. Taylor's account entail that there is a relationship between the quality of jobs and the mechanisms that management uses to deal with absence. However, such systems have been criticised for indiscriminately punishing employees for their absence. What is problematic here is that these types of systems unjustifiably punish employees that have a justifiable reason for being absent. Nevertheless, according to CIPD (2008), this is a widely used practice. Linking absence policies to disciplinary action is the second common intervention in the UK, and for many organisations is their main or even sole system of managing absence (CIPD, 2008). This brings into questions the pressures that can impact on the quality of jobs and on individuals in the workplace.

Although some authors suggest that absenteeism can be interpreted as a resistance mechanism, others such as Edwards (1986) found that employees not attending work can reflect a coping mechanism for dealing with the pressures at work. Similarly, Hopkins, et al. (2015) suggest that absenteeism can be used by employees as a mechanism that helps them deal with stress. The feeling of being pressured from the constant demands of being present and focused at work was reported by Hopkins et al. (2015) to result in employees needing extra days off work to recover from strains and stress caused by work. Likewise, Edwards and Whitston (1993) report from their case study that absence often reflects tiredness with long working hours resulting from overtime work. In contrast, Thornhill and Saunders (1998: 282) argue that higher levels of absenteeism may derive from workers perceiving their job to be insecure, due to higher levels of mental stress and intention to leave. These accounts imply that absence is a crucial coping mechanism



to deal with work pressures. This is interesting when reports demonstrate that overall absence levels in the UK are historically at an all-time low (CIPD, 2014).

Indeed, a wide variety of research accounts have confirmed that many employees attend work even when they are not fit for the purpose. According to Taylor et al. (2010) and Taylor (2010), this trend is particularly acute in low-end jobs, where workers are pressured to attend work in order to minimise disruptions in the production process. This is argued to be a result of workers being fearful of disciplinary action or even of losing their job (Taylor et al., 2010; Taylor, 2013). For instance, Taylor et al. (2010) note that employers often use competitive economic pressures in the market and workers' feelings of insecurity to make the latter to comply with managers' requirements for regular attendance. This links back to the previous discussion of the interplay between the market discipline and the bureaucratic control. Indeed, Taylor (2013) reports that increasing numbers of workers are attending work when ill, either through habit, fear of sanction, or simply because it is expected. He argues that three main reasons are at the forefront of such behaviour. First, employees report the pressure inflicted by managers and supervisors as the most significant cause of their 'presenteeism'. Second, the Sickness Absence Policy has precipitated workers to return prematurely to work activity. Third, the fear of disciplinary action has compelled workers to attend work when ill. What is problematic according to Taylor (2013) is that workers enter in a vicious circle, which does not contribute to their well-being. He concludes that such practices are contributing to increasing levels of pressure at work, which in turn are responsible for poor individual well-being, and physical and mental ill-health. Therefore, the question arises whether absence is more strictly managed in workplaces involved in inter-firm dynamics, which ends up affecting job quality at an organisational and individual level.

## **2.6. Chapter summary**

This chapter has shown how supply chain pressures stemming from an increasing widespread "new production model", may produce downward constraint on organisational practices and job quality. These were specifically discussed in relation to the labour process and to three job quality dimensions: job security and working time; skills and task discretion; and work pressures.

Within inter-firm debates, the chapter has recognised an increasing trend of firms obeying to supply chain derivatives in an effort to produce goods, or to deliver services

at a higher end value. The chapter has identified the “new production model” as a trend stemming from retailing behaviour, which is pressuring firms to increasingly integrate different aspects of production, warehousing and distribution. These different aspects are made to obey to strict supply chain requirements, rooted on costs, quality and delivery times, at the expenses of firms losing their access to the consumer market or important inter-firm contracts. In turn, firms adopt low-road organisational strategies in order to better cope with the strict supply chain requirements, created by retailers and the “new production model”. The main argument of this chapter is that the employers’ tactics to comply with market and supply chain pressures lead to pressures affecting the standards of job quality. Although these issues have been discussed at the organisational level, limited research has been conducted in relation to job quality. Thus, the question emerging from this discussion is to explore the impacts that inter-firm pressures may have on job quality. The first step to respond to this is to understand how inter-firm dynamics imposed by supply chains influence managerial decisions over organisational strategy, as well as work and employment patterns established within the workplaces. Thus, the first question to examine this enquires to which extent pressures emanating from market and production networks impact organisational strategies, and work and employment patterns at the local level.

This chapter also discussed in detail the potential impacts that inter-firm and supply chain dynamics may have on three different job quality dimensions. For the job security and working time dimensions, the chapter has identified market fluctuations and supply chain pressures rooted in costs as the main propeller of flexible working practices. Although the literature mostly discusses peripheral employees as the most affected group of workers by flexible working practices, recent research has emphasised the impacts these practices may have on “core” permanent workers. Because the literature has underplayed the role of market and supply chain pressures in flexibilisation of working arrangements and the impacts it may have on different groups of workers, the question in this section looks into the ways in which market and supply chain pressures promote flexibilisation practices, affecting job security and working time.

For skills and task discretion, this chapter has identified two main debates that discuss the direction of skill in relation to supply chain derivatives. On the one hand, researchers have defended that inter-firm relations foster skill development and the transfer of knowledge; whereas, on the other hand, studies have highlighted the role that supply

chain pressures have on introduction of technology and standardisation of work tasks, which affect the opportunities for skill development. Thus, the question arising in this section aims at exploring whether pressures emanating from market and production networks inhibit or foster skill development and task discretion.

Finally, this chapter discussed work pressures in the light of inter-firm relations. Previous research has argued that workplaces tightly constrained by cost derivatives may result in firms intensifying two particular organisational practices: performance management and absence management. The two managerial practices have been identified as being crucial for firms to ensure they achieve supply chain requirements in terms of costs. In this way, both managerial mechanisms are analysed through the interplay of the bureaucratic control and market discipline. It is then aim of this section to question whether pressures emanating from market and production networks result in the introduction of tighter performance and absence management regimes

However, this thesis does not consider workers as passive from forces beyond their control, and therefore the following chapter discusses the ways in which workers regulate employers' behaviours, and attempt to recast job quality. This discussion is set on a politico-economic level by discussing the ways in which workers' agency can be influenced by supply chain pressures. This thesis also considers workers' agency integral part of shaping job quality, and therefore it will discuss it in both collective and individual forms.

## **Chapter 3: Worker agency and job quality - the evolution of worker agency, its roots, and its contemporary forms**

### **3.1. Introduction**

This chapter aims to address the capacity and the role of workers in shaping the quality of their own jobs. Following recent examples (Hoque et al., 2014; Simms, 2015), the main objective of this chapter is to explore debates of workers' agency through collective and individual forms, in order to understand their active role in shaping job quality. Currently, this debate is two-fold. One strand of the literature argues that workers' agency has naturally refrained through individualised societal processes (Brown, 1990; Guest, 1989); whereas other researchers argue that individualisation within the workplace has been propelled by the withdrawal of state intervention within employment relationships (Hyman, 2001; Kelly, 1998). Next, the chapter introduces Kelly's (1998) mobilisation theory and discusses the role of supply chains in constraining stages in workers' capacity to mobilise and exercise agency. Mobilisation theory is introduced in the analysis in order to better appreciate the social processes of interest definition and worker action and inaction. Finally, despite supply chain constraining mechanisms, the chapter follows Littler's (1982) argument which states that workers are not passive recipients of forces beyond their control and discusses current debates on workers' collective and individual forms of agency in shaping the standards of quality of their own jobs.

### **3.2. The importance of workers' agency in job quality debates**

Hancké et al. (2007) argue that job quality is a complex and dynamic process of agents looking after their interests, particularly within the employer-employee relationship. Similarly, Simms (2015) also highlights workers' agency as a potential important factor for establishing good or bad standards of job quality. This thesis follows the previous arguments by emphasising that job quality is not only shaped by "powers" stemming from the product and capital market (Coe et al., 2008; Gereffi et al., 2005). Rather, job quality is also shaped by dynamics rooted in the workers' power resources. Therefore, this chapter aims at exploring the debates around workers' efforts in regulating employers' behaviours.

Studies have long emphasised the role of workers' in shaping the quality of jobs. For instance, Simms (2015) examines how trade unions have sought to actively regulate job quality, through representing new interests within institutions, and by extending institutional regulation to new groups of workers. Bryson et al. (2013) illustrate through quantitative evidence that in workplaces where trade unions are present, some aspects of job quality are improved. Likewise, Hoque et al. (2014) conclude that active trade union representatives at a shop-floor level are crucial for workers' job quality perception being better, than the ones where trade union representatives are not present in workplaces.

Moreover, another strand of literature has focused on how trade unions' effectiveness at a workplace level is dependent on institutional backing. By studying data from call centres and data from the European Working Conditions Survey, Holman (2013) finds that trade unions are more prone to influence job quality in countries where there is sufficient regulation backing trade union activity. This finding is supported by a previous study on service employees across different institutional frameworks. Within this study, Doellgast et al. (2009) suggest that trade unions are dependent of their institutional strength to influence job quality. These previous studies bring a valuable contribution to the argument that trade unions' effectiveness depends on institutional backing, in order to produce any outcome in terms of increasing job quality. This thesis follows the previous studies by focusing on the role of collective forms of agency in shaping job quality.

However, as it is explanatory from these studies, the investigation range of worker agency is limited to collectivised and organised forms of agency. As Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu (2011) emphasise, the forms in which workers oppose to management can vary from formal to informal, collective to individual, spontaneous to goal oriented, and sporadic to sustained. What is relevant to this research is that such forms may affect the effectiveness of workers' opposing actions. Thus, in addition to examine formal and collective forms of agency, this study is also concerned with the extent to which individualised and informal power resources shape the quality of jobs.

Another crucial point in the importance of studying individualised forms of worker agency in shaping job quality relates to the erosion of collective action and the declining influence of trade unions in the workplace. For instance, some past studies have focused on advantages that trade unions present in the workplace may create for worker in monetary terms and overall working conditions (Bryson et al., 2004; Doellgast et al.,

2009; Holman, 2013; Waddington, 2013). However, these positive accounts have always been complemented by arguments pointing to a significant decline of trade union power to regulate employers' strategic decisions in British workplaces (Charlwood and Forth, 2009). Similarly, studies by Terry (2003) and Kersley et al. (2006: 124) have also showed concerns as to whether unions still have a relevant role in workplaces, as workplaces are becoming increasingly individualised. Researchers have suggested that this declining influence is mainly due to a pacified employment relationship grounded on new formulations of societal paradigms (Brown, 2009), or due to contemporary workplaces searching for win-win resolutions (Guest, 1989).

Thus, the following section discusses debates around workers' agency. It first discusses trends of de-collectivisation and then it explores the theories that attempted to explain such trends. Secondly, in acknowledging the increasing trend in the displacement of worker agency from a collectivised to an individualised form, the following section is as concerned with the collective as it is with the individual form of worker agency in shaping job quality. In this way, the chapter contributes to the extant literature that has called for more effort in understanding the workers' role in shaping job quality (Simms, 2015).

### **3.3. Declining influence of trade unionism – explanatory accounts**

Trade union density and influence in Europe and the US has been notoriously decreasing over the past decades (Bamber et al., 2016). The causes of declining union membership and collective action are complex, involving a number of circumstantial dynamics. These relate to the intensification of market competition, the structural composition of the workforce and the responses of the state, employers and trade unions. These causes of union membership decline have been widely addressed in the literature (Hyman, 2001; Kelly, 1998; Brown, 1990; Guest, 1989). This section does not attempt a comprehensive review of the theoretical developments of IR research in Britain; rather it aims at presenting key theoretical points in the development of the contemporary IR environment, which will help this discussion to move forward to understand what is beyond and entails the contemporary worker agency. In essence, it aims at understanding the reasons for decreasing levels of collective worker agency (in the form of trade unionism), and in turn the increasing prominence of individual worker agency in the workplace and academic literature.

Currently, it has been argued that even in workplaces where trade unions are recognised, their power is diminutive and dependent on employers' will (Simms, 2015). Marchington et al. (2001) argue that the number of matters to which trade unions have still a decisive role during negotiations fell over the last years. Increasingly, management regards trade unions as consulting rather negotiating partners (Danford et al., 2005). Quantitative empirical studies also can give a picture of trade union influence in the workplace. For instance, Bryson and Forth (2010) report that the percentage of union representatives involved in collective disputes declined from 29 per cent in 1980, to 18 per cent in 2004. This form of negotiating has been reportedly replaced by a more individual approach, where manager and employee negotiate problems directly between them (Brown, 1990). However, critical literature highlights that there is little evidence that individualised and company-related forms of representation are an effective alternative (Hyman, 2001).

In the literature concerned with such issues, researchers have theorised the declining trend of union membership, under the argument that conflict has been extinguished from the workplace. For instance, Brown (1990) emphasised the change of societal paradigm from collective to a more individualist one. Moreover, Guest (1989) argues that the rise of HRM meant that an employer-employee relationship based on conflict was outdated, and therefore trade unions had no longer relevancy in the new contemporary employment relationship that sought "win-win" situations. However, Hyman (2001) highlights that neither there is convincing evidence that "individualism" has changed workers' attitudes towards trade unions, nor a significant improvement in relations between management and workers. He argues, "the suggestion that there is no conflict within modern industry cannot be taken seriously" (1989: 113). Likewise, Collinson (1994) suggests that resistance in the workplace is still part of the everyday contemporary workplace. Indeed, the idea that employment relationship is now pacific and workers' agency have lost purpose in today's workplaces have not convinced critical studies (Taylor, 2010; Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995), particularly for researchers that investigate the role of trade unions regulating working conditions (Simms, 2015; Stewart et al., 2009).

"Mobilisation theory" is Kelly's (1998) response to the analysis above, which is important, as it brings clarity and sound theoretical underpinnings to the discussion. Kelly's (1998) account brings together the influence that the state, employers and union themselves have in explaining the decline of trade union membership, rather than the accounts of societal shifts that are being reflected in the workplace. Kelly focuses on

social processes of worker mobilisation, highlighting the constancy of conflicting interests in the employer-employee relationship, and workers' struggle to acquire power resources to express them. In order to refute empirically and theoretically theories arguing the increasing societal individualism (Brown, 1990), Kelly delineates the conditions under which workers come to define their interest and act collectively to express them. The main concern of mobilisation theory is to understand "how individuals are transformed into collective actors willing and able to create and sustain collective organization and engage in collective action against their employers" (p.38). Mobilisation theory essentially argues that "collective organisation and activity ultimately stem from employer actions that generate amongst its employees a sense of injustice or illegitimacy" (Kelly, 1998: 44). Kelly summarises a subset of ideas and concepts from social movement literature (Tilly, 1978) to theorise collective action as the result of a sequence of interrelated processes involving five crucial elements: interests, mobilisation, organisation, opportunity, and action (Kelly, 1998: 24-38). This approach sets out the conditions in which workers define their interests and act collectively to defend them. Particularly important within this analysis is the definition of interests, which in Kelly's account can be collective or individual, and the degree in which the subordinate group, the employees, sees itself as similar, different from, or opposed to the ruling group or groups. One important factor in this facet is the definition of interests, which in this thesis relates directly to the degradation of job quality. Workers may define their common interests, and these may emerge from feelings of injustice due to low job quality. Secondly, the concept of organisation is related to the way in which a group is structured, which in turn will impact on the workers' ability to mobilise for collective action (Kelly, 1998: 25). Third is the mobilisation, which relates specifically to the ways in which group obtains collective control over the power resources required to take action. What is arguably important here is the way in which workers and its representatives are able to utilise power resources in order to mobilise workers to take collective action. Finally, the prospect to mobilise and the way in which action takes form can be influenced by imbalanced power relationships between management and workers. Divisions in the workforce may affect a balance of power, either through different trade unions present in the same workplace, or by different groups of workers (Kelly, 1998). What is interesting in Kelly's (1998) argument is that it defends that the five aspects for collective action are aim of repression by employers rather than extinguished, and



therefore the collective interests remain unaltered. This account is important to understand that the declining trends in collective worker agency (such as union membership and strikes) is not significant to conclude that workers do not share collective interests and passively accept the working conditions determined by employers (Behrens and Pekarek, 2012). On the contrary, Kelly's (1998) account points to an active process of de-collectivisation to better explain the decline of collective forms of workers agency.

Kelly (1998) argues that de-collectivisation is an active process propelled by the withdrawal of state intervention within employment relationships. Therefore, the question is posed - how the state has withdrew their participation on regulating the employment relationship in the UK. Hyman (2001) helps to answer this question by emphasising the withdrawal of institutional support to understand the decline of union influence. Hyman (2001: 54-55) identifies two main points that were key in order to weaken trade union presence and influence in the workplace. Firstly, alteration of the legal framework in 1980, which aimed at weakening the legal protections available to individual workers, as well as ending the tradition of trade union "immunities", together with imposing complex procedural requirements. This gave the employer the power to control and determine the terms and conditions of the employment relationship, together with major difficulties for trade unions to oppose legally (namely through collective actions) the managerial attempts. Secondly, the changes within the labour market, leaning towards liberalisation and de-regulation of its structure, where there was an explicit emphasis on a flexible workforce with temporary and part-time workers, rather than full-time permanent employment. Arguably, this shift was required to respond to the fast growing needs of a rising new economy, based on service jobs and white-collar staff, which contrasted with long-term decline of manufacturing and manual jobs (Hyman, 2001). This argument is important to understand that the withdrawal of institutional support leaves a void, where employers have increasing discretionary control over the employment relationship. Another important change to industrial relations in the UK is related to the right of employees to participate in industrial actions. Rubery et al. (2005b) highlight that the changes in legislation brought by the Conservative governments in the 1980s increasingly narrowed permitted action to a single employer and a single workplace. From that moment on, workers were only allowed to picket in their own place of work: "a trade dispute in respect of which lawful industrial action may be taken is

confined to a dispute between workers and their own employer” (*ibid*: 73). Moreover, statutory recognition procedures are also predicated on a single employer.

What is relevant for this thesis is that these arguments do not take into account the difficulties that inter-firms situations may present for collective bargaining (Rubery et al., 2005b). Specifically relevant to this thesis is the argument that supply chain pressures and inter-firm dynamics bring many constraints in union representation across boundaries. For instance, the legal framework surrounding employment relationship shows that the traditional focus lies on regulation within the confines of a single organisation. Rubery et al. (2005b) suggest that there is a disconnection between the employment law and the reality of working patterns in a growing number of companies. They contend that the employment framework has become inappropriate because with the rise of networked forms of production, many employees find themselves working under the influence of more than one employer (*ibid*: 73). Indeed, legislation has been introduced to stop workers from other firms picketing in firms where they do not work. This raises a series of questions in production systems that are increasingly linked and synchronised, where workers may be affected by other firms that are not their direct employer. Therefore, not only the withdrawal of the state in regulating the employment relationship (Hyman, 2001), but also the inappropriateness of legal framework to cover contemporary forms of production (Rubery et al., 2005b) have created conditions for workers to become more vulnerable to employers’ will.

### **3.3.1. Mobilisation theory gaps – the role of supply chains and the individual form of worker agency**

Mobilisation theory makes a key contribution by clearly defining a theoretical framework that aims at explaining union declining and the workers’ willingness to take action in a setting that is increasingly repressive towards workers’ collectivisation (Kelly, 1998). Indeed, framing workers’ agency around Kelly’s mobilisation theory can help this thesis to move forward in understanding the workers’ role in shaping job quality. However, Kelly leaves two main gaps in the understanding of contemporary workers’ agency in today’s workplaces.

Firstly, Kelly (1998) argues that the process of de-collectivisation comes from an active process of institutional withdrawal, in which employers are allowed to determine the

terms of the employment relationship. This is interesting, as it allows this thesis to frame supply chains and inter-firm relations as having consequences for social relations between capital and labour at the workplace level. Literature from industrial relations have recently emphasised the importance of understanding how the new structural forms of production and work organisation act as suppressing mechanism of collective action. Researchers argue that in doing this, it should be considered the ways in which workers are be represented in supply chains (Jackson et al., 2013). By centring the mobilisation theory on a macro level and bringing those consequences directly to the micro level (Behrens and Pekarek, 2012), Kelly (1998) may have left explanatory gaps. Specifically, in explaining how important structural changes of production and employment, stemming from increasingly concerted and fragmented inter-firm relations and networks, might hamper workers' agency. Attempts to connect the role of networked forms of production and the workers capacity to collectively mobilise have been recently undertaken (Newsome et al., 2015). However, such attempts have not framed their argument through Kelly's mobilisation framework to understand the way in which supply chains and inter-firm relations produce on worker agency and the processes of defining interests. In this way, this thesis adds to the discussion by bringing the application of mobilisation theory into the workers' role in shaping job quality. Therefore, this thesis frames inter-firm relations as a structure that can create conditions for de-collectivisation, and draws on mobilisation theory to explore in what ways workers' capacity to exercise agency is affected by such dynamics, which may have consequences on the quality of jobs through the lack, or not, of agency.

Secondly, the argument that there are specific aspects that need to be triggered, in order for workers to defend their interests and act collectively is important for the main contribution that this chapter aims to make. As mobilisation theory argues, it is the collective capacity to identify a social problem – in this case, the deterioration of job quality – and the ascription of that issue as being an outcome of specific factors that leads workers to take action to improve their situation (Kelly, 1998). Thus mobilisation theory gives the opportunity to examine the mechanisms through which individuals attain, or not, a collective consciousness of their shared interests as a reaction to employer-driven injustice. However, at the same time that Kelly's framework disregards meso-structures of production to explain de-collectivisation, it also undertheorizes forms of worker agency other than collective ones. It has been argued that alternative paths of worker

agency can emerge in the light of a de-collectivisation process, which may take shape in individualised forms (Hyman, 1972; Moore and Read, 2006). By discussing collective forms of conflict, Hyman suggests that “attempts to suppress specific manifestations of conflict (such as strikes and other collective actions (sentence added)), without removing the underlying causes of unrest, merely divert the conflict into other forms” (Hyman, 1972: 55). This is not to say that individualism within the workplace is on the rise or that conflict is decreasing – rather what Hyman and Kelly suggest is that management’s barriers on collective forms of agency produce a dislocation into more individualised forms of agency.

However, other than the work of Moore and Read (2006), such forms of individualised agency have been given very limited attention within mobilisation framework. Individual forms of worker agency are taken as evidence of continued workers’ discontent and as forms of alleviating and coping with bad job quality (Paulsen, 2013). Yet the organisation and formation of such forms of agency remains in its infancy. This is peculiar as growing individual disputes have been recorded (CIPD, 2011, 2015), and increasing academic studies have addressed individualised formulations of agency (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Paulsen, 2013). Additional engagement beyond collective forms of agency, following Kelly’s (1998) framework, would be beneficial to the job quality literature. Thus, this thesis is also concerned with the individual forms of worker agency, particularly regarding social processes of definition of interests, the capacity to mobilise and organise, as well as the opportunity to take action, in order to improve job quality.

Thus, the work of this thesis is to bring light to what seem two neglected areas in job quality debates, and by extension within mobilisation theory. Firstly, the sectoral and inter-firm dynamics that cascade down to the workplace as a form of de-collectivisation mechanism; secondly, the investigation of two forms of worker agency in shaping job quality, the collective and individual. Following this focus of analysis, the next section reviews existing research on the ways in which supply chains and inter-firm relations may influence workers’ capacity for collectivisation.

### **3.3. Inter-firm relations as a de-collectivising dynamic**

Kelly (1985) argued in due time that employer-employee relations are not only dependent on what happens in the workplace; rather they are also defined through the relations between firms. The translation of workers’ discontents into active collective agency has

always been posed as problematic (Hyman, 1997). For Hyman, traditional forms of solidarity and the definition and pursue of common interests were being eclipsed from new forms of employment (*ibid* 1997: 521). Recent research has highlighted the same problem, by suggesting that employment patterns rooted in increasing fragmented production structures are *de facto* utilised by capital to circumvent employee representation, and to constrain trade union demands and actions during negotiations (Drahoukopil, 2015). These have been discussed in the literature in a number of ways.

Firstly, the concession bargaining based on threats of production externalisation and fragmentation has deeply affected the employment of both the core and peripheral workforces (Huws et al., 2009). This dynamic is well illustrated by Cowie's (1999) study in the manufacturing sector in the USA, which shows how worker resistance through strikes, union formation, and collective bargaining improved workplace conditions, but then lead to shifting the production sites from the USA to Mexico. As Wagner and Lillie (2014) suggest, the externalisation, through outsourcing or offshoring of production has been, widely and for a long time, used by employers in negotiations with trade unions under the argument that labour is cheaper and more flexible elsewhere. Wills (2009) claims that practices of outsourcing and offshoring are not a universal practice. However, it has been long acknowledged that the threatening of production relocation is in fact a pressuring mechanism that can lead to trade unions giving in to employers' willpower. As a result, unions are vulnerable to firms' requirements of flexibility in the expectation that employers can maintain jobs in that region (Wagner and Lillie, 2014).

One of the main consequences that these relocation threats produce on the collectivisation of workers relates to the increasing pressures that trade unions have been facing in the last decades. These relate to the concessions trade unions make, which turn them into partners within the employment relationship rather than an opposing force (Danford et al., 2008). In other words, what is problematic for the effectiveness of mobilisation and collectivisation is that the feat, resulting from outsourcing/offshoring, is often translated in unions accepting being part of partnership deals with the employers. Optimistic studies have claimed that collaborative employment relations can produce mutual gains for both parties. These studies argue that is possible that at the same time that management increases productivity gains, workers can experience rising standards in their employment and working conditions (Donaghey and Teague, 2007; Kochan and Osterman, 1994). However, Danford et al. (2008) argue that the partnership model is

largely a process of weakening trade unions because, as they enter in partnership with management, unions end up becoming closer to management and further from the real problems of the shop floor. Typically, this is because trade unions accept productivity agreements with the employer, which results in managers gaining control over workers (Stewart and Lucio, 1998), producing inner paradoxical dynamics between conflict and consent (Durand, 2007). The degree to which the collective strength of the workforce can resist management within the context of a partnership, reflects in part the degree to which the trade union has the ability to identify management's agenda, as well as willingness and capacity to resist that agenda. As Kelly (1996) argues, forms of partnership with management can weaken the trade union as it can erode its capacity to resist management's attempts to restructure work. Danford et al. (2008) argue that this erosion results from the compromise at the heart of the employment relationship permitted by the trade union, which results in a deterioration of working conditions and further weakening of collective agency at a workplace level.

The second relates to the fragmentation and segmentation of the workforce. Institutions of workers' representation, such as trade unions, are usually formed along organisational and industrial demarcations that are broken by pressures created across inter-firm relations (Altreiter et al., 2015). Such divisions are aggravated and further deepened by a competition between groups of workers belonging to different firms along the production chain (Grimshaw et al., 2005). Studies conducted by Hammer and Riisgaard (2015) and Haidinger and Flecker (2015) show how the interdependencies between the employer-employee relationship and the market pressures produce changing contours of the workforce and, consequently, of workers capacity to effectively exert agency. These two studies focus on the way in which market pressures demand companies to employ workers on different contractual statuses, resulting in fragmented workforces. For Hammer and Riisgaard (2015), fragmentation of the workforce is an effective divide-and-rule strategy as it weakens labour by inhibiting solidarity. It inhibits it because, as Doellgast and Greer (2007) argue, this fragmentation process ends up rendering obsolete some parts of the institutional arrangements of industrial relations. Moreover, fragmentation produces increasing divisions amongst workers. Firstly, because fragmentation rearranges the foundation in which different workplaces are interlinked amongst each other. Secondly, this rearrangement often entails the restructuring and reorganisation of the workplace, producing a multi-tiered workforce, where workers

undertake the same job but are separated due to their contractual status (Barrientos, 2013). As Hyman (1997: 521) argues, such differentiation ends up eroding “egalitarian commitments” as it generates the dispersion of workers’ interests.

At the same time, the dispersion of workers’ interests creates difficult conditions for trade unions to coordinate and organise in workplaces. Trade unions are made to make concessions with the employer, which usually results in outsourcing labour (through temporary work agencies) or employing a bigger percentage of temporary workers in order to keep costs low, and comply with cost requirements agreed with other (client) firms (Altreiter et al., 2015; Kalleberg, 2011). Consequently, trade unions may find themselves having to deal with a fluctuating, fragmented, and vulnerable – in terms of employment – workforce (Altreiter et al., 2015). This vagary of the market generates a segmented and fragmented workforce within the firm, which is challenging for trade unions. On the one hand, trade unions are concerned with maintaining the conditions of their members, which usually are the workers with permanent contracts. On the other hand, it is difficult to organise the temporary workforce due to the short-term contracts and high turnover rates that these groups of workers typically experience (Schmidt, 2006).

Unions face other barriers to the integration of peripheral workforce into their membership. For instance, Lynch et al. (2011) demonstrate that a significant proportion of workers with atypical forms of contracts, consider that trade unions are unable to attract to join them. Similarly, Charlwood (2002) concludes that these types of workers prefer not to join trade unions, due to the perception that their membership will lead to worse working conditions. What these inner and external barriers mean, is that in the end unions are incapable to declare that they speak for the majority of the workforce, which impacts the credibility of union voice (Willman et al., 2007). The literature also suggests that workforce segmentation leads to rivalry among workers, making solidarity difficult. Altreiter et al. (2015) argue that many temporary workers are willing to take jobs with poorer working conditions so that in the future they can hope for a permanent contract. This is claimed to bring into the workplace rivalries between core and peripheral workforce, which are grounded on the perception of both groups having different terms and conditions of employment but performing the same jobs. The divergences in interests create challenging conditions for trade unions to generate solidarity between the different

groups of workers, and consequently organise and mobilise them (Hyman, 2001; Heery, 2009).

The third and last conceptualisation relates to the way in which skill arises from the negotiation of labour power between workers, individually or collectively, and management (Grugulis et al., 2004), which can take place within and outside the workplace. This social construct has been associated with specific members of professional groups and craftsmanship. These groups arguably utilise their skills as the means of resistance to managerial control of the labour process (Buchanan, Watson and Briggs, 2004). Earlier research on labour agency recognised that workers were able to play a crucial role in shaping the conditions under which they are employed (Burawoy, 1979, 1985; Thompson, 1989). Similarly, Doeringer and Piore (1971) go so far as to argue that internal processes of skill development that workers initiate and reproduce are the most important contributor to worker agency. The daily processes of learning occurring in the workplace is made collectively between workers. These are dependent on social relations including observing and experimenting the ways in which the labour process is conducted (Doeringer and Piore, 1971). The social relation between more experienced workers and younger ones, through demonstration and the careful assignment of tasks, promote the contextual learning. It is precisely because skills may have deep impacts on the way work is conducted, organised and played, that skill becomes a crucial tool for agency (Iskander and Lowe, 2013). For instance, Burawoy (1979) explains in his study how workers in an agricultural equipment factory appropriate the productive function by seeing their work as game of “making out”, which then enables them to influence certain aspects of work. Other studies have highlighted how workers can challenge managerial objectives through skill utilisation. The workers’ utilisation of skill stems from the will and effort to improve the organisation of work, or other aspects such as influencing the pace of work, which can be significantly different from management’s expectations (Leidner, 1993). In this sense, skill is a stepping stone for labour process control, which inherently and consequently is a powerful tool for workers’ agency (Burawoy, 1979).

What is problematic for skill and identity (interests) definition under supply chain and inter-firm dynamics is that organisations are increasingly pressured into efficiently responding to pressures, by restructuring labour processes (Hammer and Riisgaard, 2015). Grugulis and Vincent (2005) argue that such dynamics are prone to generate



standardised work tasks so that organisations can achieve the level of efficiency required, which has consequences to the skill formation and development. For Huws (2006), the contemporary ways in which skills are eroded is the basis for the loss of occupational identities, which are argued to be crucial for the definition of common interests. Solid occupational identities, based on established skills, are increasingly giving way to weaker identities (Huws, 2006). It was this social construct, associated with specific members of professional groups and craftsmanship, that generated a number of trade union movements (Grugulis et al., 2004). The study of press workers conducted by Gall (1998) illustrates how the maintenance of skills amongst the workforce was crucial for the revival of a dormant collective form of agency. Gall (1998) asserts that levels of skills and competences are key determinants in providing workers with the ability and capacity to exercise power, in order to either prevent or regulate the employer's initiatives as ways of maintaining or increasing job quality. In turn, the disintegration of occupational identities, and its associated skills, is argued to be an intrinsic part of a de-collectivisation process (Huws, 2006). The craft skills are now being replaced by universal competences, such as proficiency in particular software packages in the case of IT sector, aesthetic competences in the retail industry, or flexible mind-set in the case of manufacturing work (Huws, 2006). Coupled to this trend, the increasing demand for temporary work creates workers that identify themselves less with the occupation that they are performing temporarily. Dahlmann and Huws (2007) illustrate how IT workers, whose jobs were outsourced to a multinational company, reported that their job passed from being stable and skill-based, to uncertain and compliance-based. As a result, instead of being able to see their way forward to a job for life, a growing number of workers now have to negotiate a number of jobs in their working life.

It is then interesting for this thesis to explore whether such dynamics are purposively and actively intended to circumvent or constrain workers' agency. In the context of supply chains, any type of disruption, such as strikes, production stoppages, or delays, may signify damaging consequences for other firms. Lead firms may pressure suppliers to constrain workers' agency, or chose suppliers with non-unionised workforces (Drahokoupil, 2015). Such aversion to workers' agency may generate conditions for lower levels of job quality. As Drahokoupil (2015) argues, the lack of opposition may result in companies engaging in practices that are aimed at solely pursuing productivity gains, at the expenses of job quality and good standard working conditions.

### **3.4. Analysis of forms of workers' agency**

These critical accounts, though well-grounded and relevant, may somewhat overstate the dangers that worker agency faces, and understate the opportunities for resistance. As Littler (1982) asserts, workers are not passive recipients of forces beyond their control. Thus, in theoretic terms, control mechanisms located at the supply chain level may also be subject to workers' agency. Blyton and Turnbull (2004) note that different patterns of control result in different forms of agency. It is then important in this section to succinctly emphasise the different forms of agency strategies that workers may resort to, as a response to control mechanisms located and stemming from supply chains and inter-firm dynamics.

Traditionally, workers were characterised as an oppressed class incapable of shaping the conditions at the point of production and the capitalist system of production itself (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011). What this entails is that workers were regarded as mere production inputs (Coe et al., 2008). The way in which researchers reacted to this gap is something that is still in progress. Recently, a strand of literature concerned with worker agency has made significant efforts in exploring the role of workers in actively shaping working conditions in a context of inter-firm relations (Barrientos et al., 2011; Cumbers et al., 2008; Newsome et al., 2015). What has been argued is that job quality can be seen to involve a dual agency. Firstly, by employers in its restructuring, organising and controlling of workers, in order to ensure that surplus value can be extracted – the processes in which this is done has been discussed in Chapter 2. Secondly, by workers themselves as it acts to regulate and reshape employers' behaviours to maintain, or improve, job quality (Taylor et al., 2015; Taylor and Bain, 2001). Following such arguments, this thesis is also focused on the workers' agency, and seeks to analyse the mechanisms that convert the potential for labour power into actual agency. Thus, the chapter does not explore solely the role of workers in shaping job quality, but also the mechanisms through which these are attained.

Crucial for this chapter to achieve this contribution is the distinction of power resources that Brookes (2013) suggests. Brookes (2013) argues that it is accrued to workers three different power resources: institutional, associational, and structural power. The institutional power is the combination of laws, regulations and other formal and informal rules that persist over time, which aid in channelling interests from one actor (employee) to the other (employer). Associational power is what accrues to workers through

organisation into collective bodies, such as trade unions and political parties. Finally, structural power is the capacity for workers to shape employers' actions due to their strategic position in relation to the economic system. Selwyn (2013) argues that workers positioned in strategic points of the supply chain may have amplified bargaining power when negotiating with the employer. Bonacich and Wilson (2008) argue that supply chains have inherent fragilities that they call "choke points", in which workers can take advantage to their benefit by causing disruptions. Therefore, structural power can signify an advantage to workers based on their position in the production process and their ability to disrupt it (Selwyn, 2013). However, whether or not workers' structural power is exercised, in order to achieve concessions from the employer, depends on the politics of their organisations (Selwyn, 2013). Such structural power can be hindered by high levels of unemployment or underemployment in the labour market, or because the required skills to perform the job are not very complex or rare.

Although Brookes' (2013) framework has been mainly applied in collectivised environments (Hardy et al., 2015; Selwyn, 2011; Wagner, 2015), the sole reliance on traditional and formal collective acts of agency are limiting analytical tools. This is because these leave behind important aspects of worker ability and capacity to oppose managerial derivatives, in order to shape and reshape quality standards of jobs (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). Indeed, it has been widely acknowledged that worker agency as a concept has been under-theorised (Castree, 2010), and "that its usage had simply come to mean any meaningful manifestation of collective worker activity" (Taylor et al., 2015: 10). Thus, a further qualification is required to create an analytical space for the individual form of worker agency. Reflecting on other forms of agency, beyond those of the union as a whole, the union representative, and union member, Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu (2011) stretched the definitional boundaries of worker agency to the informal and individual, which they argue can operate on different scales.

It is important to emphasise that the intention with this framework is not to narrow the job quality and worker agency analysis to the workplace alone; rather is to gain the necessary tools to explore workers' agency beyond the workplace, specifically their capacity to utilise their position within the supply chain as a power resource. Despite this, the thesis will maintain the emphasis on the workplace level in order to analytically examine the observed standards of job quality shaped by workers. By having these aspects in consideration, the following sub-sections discuss the ways in which collective

worker agency – through the form of trade unionism – and individual worker agency, have been discussed at the workplace level by the extant literature.

### **3.4.1. Collective worker agency: trade unionism**

Workers collectivise in order to overcome their vulnerability as individuals, and trade unions act through social power to counter management's attempts to curtail working conditions (Hyman, 1975: 192). Freeman and Medoff (1984) argue that one of the main mechanisms of workers' collective agency is through trade unionism. Wood (2008) suggests that trade unions may represent workers' job quality concerns either via informal communication channels, or via collective bargaining processes. As a result, job quality issues may be brought to management's attention, who will then respond by making changes (or not) within the workplace to address such problems (*ibid*: 154). The effectiveness of this relates to the way in which the union ranges its agency from militant to moderate (Kelly, 1998).

As it was argued, inter-firm dynamics do indeed create challenges and hindrances for trade unions to approach and organise employees (Drahoukopil, 2015). However, researchers have also identified problems inherent to trade unions themselves. For instance, Hyman (1997) refers that unions' capacity to adapt to new structures of production and to effectively mobilise workers has been intrinsically problematic. Hyman (1997) argues that trade unions have struggled to move beyond their stronghold of organising a declining secure and well-paid workforce, to incorporate an ever-increasing group of workers that has been pushed into the peripheries of the labour market, where good quality jobs are difficult to come about. He suggests that the problem of recruiting, and extending solidarity to other groups of workers has become increasingly challenging, as new structures of production push companies to rely increasingly more on casual labour. In a similar vein, Rubery et al. (2005b) state that the historical role of trade union and collective bargaining in the UK has been restricted primarily to the regulation and protection of workers' economic interests, narrowly defined at the sectoral, company, or workplace level. Arguably, this has limited the opportunities to engage with other important aspects of the employment relationship and the overall working conditions.

There are important challenges for unions that are rooted in the way the changing nature of work is accepted as inevitable. The today's economic *status quo* is a good example of

“there is no alternative” mind-set that reigns not only in the society as a whole, but also in today’s workplaces. Arguably, this provides employers a self-preserving veto to any kind of challenge that workers might raise. Similarly, Warhurst and Thompson (1998:10) acknowledge that “lean and mean” is now an accepted part of organisational life. Working intensively and behind standard working hours, as well as beyond organisational boundaries pervading individuals’ personal lives is taken as the expected (Standing, 2011).

As it was illustrated in Chapter 1, job quality literature has highlighted through surveys that work intensification and ‘extensification’, insecurity and autonomy are potential sources of workforce concern (Green and Whitfield, 2009; McGovern et al., 2007). Moreover, it was extensively argued in Chapter 2 that new forms of production structured around networks of firms are particularly straining on job quality aspects such as job security and working time, skill and task discretion, and workers performance and attendance at work (Raworth and Kidder, 2009; Wright and Lund, 2006). This serves to illustrate that new concerns are arising within today’s workplaces.

However, trade unions seem to be struggling to tackle wider job quality problems, as they fail to identify what comprises acceptable working conditions. Adding to the many unions dwindling to the managerial rhetoric of inevitable market derivatives (Danford et al., 2008), the traditional bargaining objectives of trade unions have lost pertinence and credibility in relation to what seems to be the new interests of a workforce (Hyman, 1997). These are partly subject to new sources of pressure stemming from new forms of production and service provision.

It has been argued that throughout decades, unions have focused on negotiating pay in relation to workers’ effort (Thompson, 2003); yet such trends seem to persist in contemporary employment relations. The statistic published in ONS (2013) detect that trade unions continue to focus their bargaining concerns on pay, and on pensions as emergent sources of disagreement with the employer. Empirical studies seem to back these observations. For instance, the empirical study conducted by Simms (2015), which aimed at exploring unions’ effectiveness in actively shaping specific job quality dimensions, illustrates how trade unions in the cleaning sector were not interested in tackling any other job quality aspect rather than pay and pay related benefits. She argues that this is largely attributed to the momentum that the Living Wage campaign is achieving in the UK, and that trade unions often attempt to take advantage of institutional

changes in order to gain support (*ibid*: 2015: 16). Nevertheless, what is interesting and cause for concern is that Simms (2015) concludes that trade unions fall short in controlling the outcomes of the bargaining processes due to constraints placed by employers, as well as failing to exert agency in promoting new interests and new mechanisms for representation, leaving this to employers' discretion. Similarly, by looking at union organisation in call centres, Taylor and Bain (2001) also emphasise that unions have systematically failed to address workplace issues in their bargaining agendas, particularly because they tend to focus on pay issues, rather than addressing workers' concerns with pace and intensity of work. The authors argue that because trade unions tend to focus on pay and bonuses, management gets little opposition when restructuring aspects of jobs that actually changes how workers perform their jobs. Hyman (1972) argues that unions end up focusing more on economic issues, because these are certain unifiers of interests and provide homogeneity in their discourse.

What this entails is that the lack of trade unions' capacity to adapt to changing nature of workers' concerns at the workplace, has also hindered the ability for unions to regulate and oppose objective managerial structures, whether on the inter-firm level or the workplace level. Edwards (2003) argues that management will always pursue objectives of control over the labour process, leading to continuous restructuring of work organisation. The changing structures of production that evolved to become embedded in networks, and thus subject to pressures emerging from outside the point of production, have changed the experience of work in the shop-floor. This is important to unions in order for them to focus on actions that actually reflect workers' real interests. Indeed, Hyman (1998) emphasises that by focusing their efforts on contradictions that changing experience of work produce to the quality of jobs, trade unions have the potential to address the exact problematic areas that management uses to constrain trade union activism and solidarity. He further contends that when trade unions bring together workers' concerns, they must take ownership of employers' notions such as flexibility and control of skill development, to regain and renew forms of collectivism (Hyman, 1998). This is relevant because it has been through these mechanisms that employers have been able to fragment workers' interests, and consequently curtailed the opportunity for mobilisation and action (Kelly, 1998).

Formal and collective forms of worker agency have been limited, and unions have failed to articulate and encapsulate workplace issues. At the same time as an apparent crisis of

trade unionism manifests itself (Waddington, 2016), job quality in the workplace has started to be seen as serious problem. Understanding how job quality manifests in relation to collective forms of worker agency is crucial, as it may reflect important aspects of how the former is shaped and changed. Thus, accepting Kelly's (1998) argument that collective interests are still present in today's workforce, and individuals will mobilise and organise believing that a union will defend their distinct interests and improve their job quality through collective action, it is then worth exploring the role of collective forms of agency in actively regulating and shaping workers' job quality.

### **3.4.2. Individual work agency: resisting and coping**

Studies focusing on individual agency provide a valuable insight into the ways in which job quality experiences can be shaped (Burawoy, 1979; Paulsen, 2013; Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995; Thompson, 1989). Against the background of the decline in the formal and collective forms of worker agency, the analysis provided by this strand of literature allows for a wider and broader conceptualisation of worker agency.

Although there has been a steady decline in organised forms of agency, such as strikes and union membership (Waddington, 2016), this does not mean that "it is all quiet on the workplace front" (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995); it just means that forms of agency are expressed through different channels. In today's contemporary workplace, academic literature has acknowledged that worker agency is not constricted to collective forms, but is more likely to be expressed through informal actions such as absenteeism, sabotage, work withdrawal, and empty labour (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Paulsen, 2013). However, job quality literature has been scarce in bringing into the analysis forms of individual agency. As mentioned previously, the few researchers that have been concerned with job quality and worker agency have limited their analysis to collective forms of worker agency (Hoque et al., 2014; Simms, 2015). However, these have disregarded relations surrounding *innovative* forms of agency in response to contemporary structures of workplace control. In the case of this thesis, these relate to concerted and integrated inter-firm dynamics. Such *novel* forms of agency are grounded within a consideration of the meaning of worker agency and their ends such as coping, escape from tedium or work intensity, regaining dignity (Hodson, 1995), or the re-appropriation of time, product, work and identity (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). Such accounts are valuable to the discussion of job quality in supply chains, because they

provide the opportunity for investigating the impacts on job quality of unorganised and individual acts that involve withdrawing, coping and resisting from “manifestations of oppression” (Hyman, 1972: 53).

Earlier studies have discussed individual and informal acts of worker agency as dynamics structured around “playing games” in order to create conditions for workers to adapt to strains of work (Burawoy, 1979; Thompson, 1989). Burawoy (1979) suggests that the labour process is structured around a “series of games”, whereas Thompson (1989: 160) defines these games as “informal rules and practices aimed at creating space and time, controlling earnings and making work more interesting”. These informal rules are undertaken and obeyed by individuals, and are argued to be directly related to how labour process is organised and aimed at reducing fatigue, passing time, and coping with boredom (Burawoy, 1979: 85). These games are then modes of adaptation and a “source of relief from the (...) capitalist work” as they facilitate adjustments to work and tend to undermine the managerial practices that create the undesirable working conditions (Burawoy, 1979: 270-271).

More recent studies have argued that these games, which are in essence consenting behaviours, can be combined with more overt individual acts of agency. Hodson (1995) essentially defines individual acts of worker agency as “any individual or small group act intended to mitigate the claims by management on workers or to advance workers claims against management” (*ibid*: 80). In the same vein, Ackroyd and Thompson (1999: 164) describe organisational misbehaviour as acts of individuals “doing anything at work that you are not supposed at work”. In Ackroyd and Thompson’s (1999) view, acts such as fiddling and sabotage cannot be taken as surrogates for striking and other acts, which have formal organisation as their basis. Rather, they claim that misbehaviour and individual and informal work agency relate more to concealed ways of “recovering autonomy” through the appropriation of time, product, work and particularly identity. These strategies are forms of improving work experiences under severe and changing controlling regimes (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999: 164). On a similar and more recent position, Paulsen (2013) discusses the concept of “empty labour” as private activities undertaken by individuals at work. In his argument, individuals use different strategies of agency with different purposes. Strategies such as slacking from work tasks, enduring at work, coping from work pressures, or soldiering, are used as coping mechanisms to boredom or as an act of revenge towards management. Thus, in this latter argument,



Paulsen (2013) claims that individual and informal acts of worker agency can encompass more passive behaviours, such as coping mechanisms, or more active behaviours that aim at resisting and challenging managerial objective structures.

The question, however, is whether such individualised expressions of agency are indeed effective in changing and shaping objective managerial structures that end up influencing job quality. The arguments laid above have been criticised for overstressing agency as a framework of analysis that regards any minor act of dissent as resistance (Contu, 2008). Contu (2008) argues that the attempts at broadening the analysis of worker agency have surpassed what Marx entailed with the term resistance. What she emphasises is that the “transgressive actions in liberal workplaces (call centres, factories, insurance companies, etc.) do not seriously challenge the economic reproduction of both producers and consumers” (*ibid*: 368). In her argument, studies such as those by Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) over-shadow issues of worker organisation and mobilisation (to use Kelly’s terms) in benefit of relatively harmless forms of agency, which do not fundamentally challenge the prevailing balance of power in the workplace. Contu (2008) then sees these forms of individual worker agency as “decaff resistance”, due to its inefficacy in changing the *status quo*. Similarly, Stewart (2006) suggests that the analytical field has subordinated concerns with the broad interrelationship of social and material power to discussions of individual subordination, power and identity. Stewart (2006) challenges the forms of worker misbehaviour by arguing that such studies fail to mention the ineffectiveness of these forms of agency in protecting the emergent interests of workers. These doubts over the effectiveness of such actions are even more problematic in the context of supply chains and inter-firm relations, as these are posed as an extra layer of control displaced away from the workplace level.

The arguments presented thus far indicate the need to further explore how structural conditions of job quality, such as those that are relevant to this study, are interpreted in the continuing relationship between management and the individual worker. Analytical tools to connect contemporary forms of production to individualised forms of worker agency, and these to the impacts it can produce in job quality remain underdeveloped (Simms, 2015; Taylor et al., 2015). In stressing the capacity for workers to exercise agency, the respective literature has tended to legitimise a narrow focus and produce “micro-level case studies whose causal chains ends at the office door” (Thompson and Smith, 2010: 923). In addition, when job quality literature focused on the way workers

took part in the changing dynamics of job quality, it has done so by means of collective agency (Hoque et al., 2014; Simms, 2015).

### **3.5. Chapter Summary**

This chapter has introduced the conceptualisation of workers' agency into job quality debates by using the mobilisation theory as a framing theory. This was particularly discussed in the context of supply chains. Thus, this chapter has addressed the ways in which supply chain dynamics may constrain workers' agency and stages for collectivisation and mobilisation. In turn, it was discussed the ways in which workers, collectively and individually, can actively regulate employers' behaviours and shape job quality.

This chapter looks beyond the extant research that merely addresses workers' collective agency in actively shaping job quality. It does so by examining the role of wider political economic forces in constraining workers' capacity for agency, as well as by extending the conceptualisation of workers' agency to its individualised form. Finally, it introduces these debates onto job quality framework. In doing so, the first section of the chapter has discussed the dualised debates about workers' agency, where the mobilisation theory was introduced as an explanatory device to the overall decrease of trade unionism. In discussing this theory, this chapter concluded that individual forms of agency are currently as important to investigate, as are the collective ones. This discussion has set the territory for the argument of the chapter. This chapter has also discussed the ways in which inter-firm relations and supply chain pressures may act as a mechanism for employers to circumvent workers' agency. The last section of the chapter addressed ways in which the literature has discussed the effectiveness of collective and individual forms of agency.



## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

### **4.1. Introduction**

This research is concerned with exploring the impact of production networks and workers' agency in job quality. This chapter outlines the conceptual framework and research questions deriving from the discussion of theory presented in Chapters 2 and 3. This is followed by a discussion of the philosophical assumptions and the critical realist approach, the research design, and the methods applied throughout the research study. The outlining of the conceptual framework and research questions follows the same structure as the one set in the literature review. Therefore, the politico-economic patterns and dynamics generated at inter-firm and supply chain level are considered before addressing its impacts on organisational level that are related to the chosen job quality dimensions; in turn, this process considers the research questions concerned with the role of workers and its effects on job quality. The way in which data was collected, is presented and described in this chapter by also following these levels of analysis. First, this chapter examines the politico-economic dynamics of the chosen context, which is a production network operating in the Scottish Spirits Industry (SSI), through the analysis of primary data from focus groups, interviews with key stakeholders, and analysis of key documents. Secondly, this chapter turns to the case-studies. This examines five workplaces operating in the same production network embedded in the specific context of the SSI. Three of these workplaces belong to the same organisational case-study, whereas the remaining two belong to the other two organisational case-studies. The SSI has been purposively selected due to its exposure to global market forces, by being structured around tightly managed production networks, and due to its variety in workplace typologies (the rationale for choosing the SSI and case studies will be discussed in Section 4.4). These features allow this research study to explore the various levels of analysis and the ways in which job quality is impacted within a specific context. The concerns previously outlined and the suitable tools for collecting the needed data were deemed to be crucial for undertaking the investigation, and are described in the following sections.

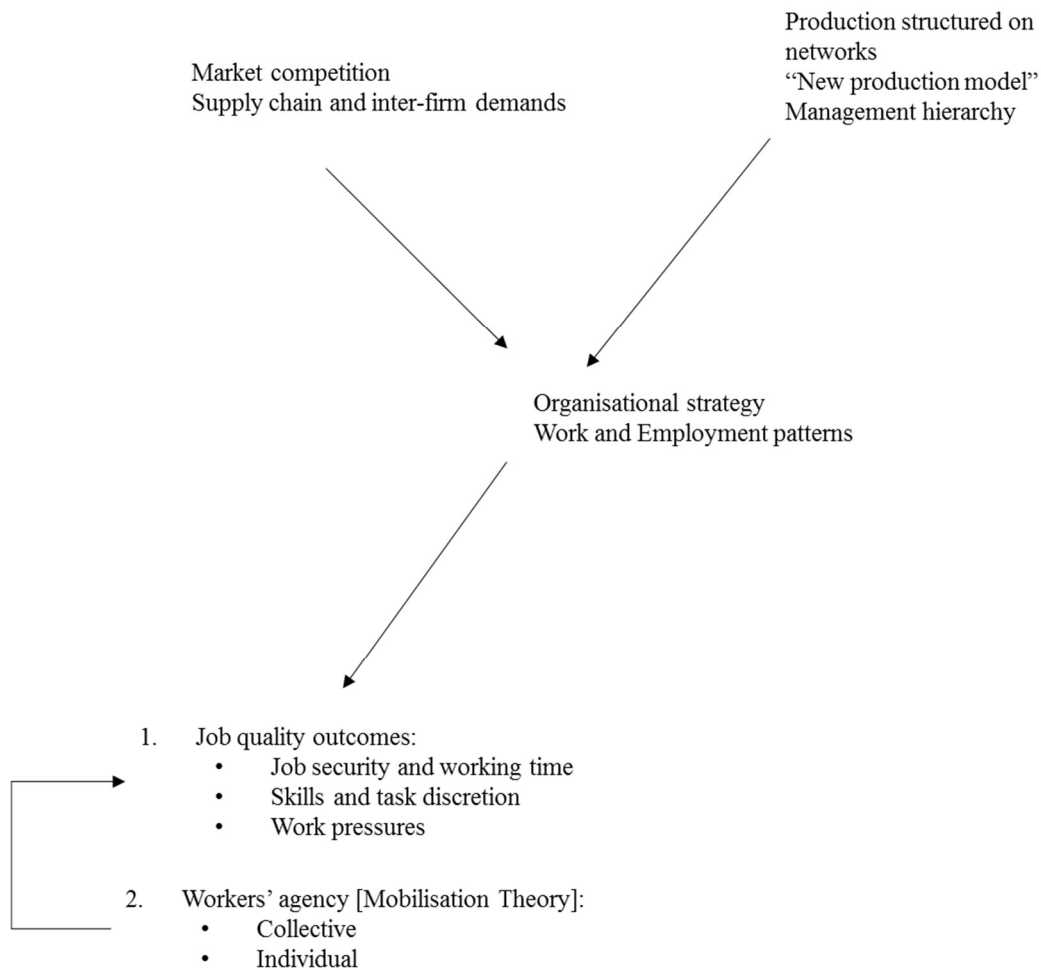
## 4.2. Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

In this section, the conceptual framework and research questions are presented. Firstly, presents the theoretical concepts and research questions that examine the role of supply chains in shaping job quality. Secondly, the section presents the theoretical concepts and research questions focusing on the role of workers in shaping job quality.

This thesis is concerned in examining two research objectives:

- The impacts of inter-firm pressures on job quality.
- The way in which collective and individual labour agency are able to regulate and shape job quality under conditions of supply chain and inter-firm pressures.

The research objectives presented and the conceptual discussion held in both Chapters 2 and 3 drives the development of research questions. Chapter 2 highlighted that the way in which production networks are organised and governed produces downward pressures on job quality at the organisational level. The discussion was informed by an emerging “new production model” that argues that firms are increasingly required to adjust and coordinate different aspects of production and labour to the requirements of other firms (see Chapter 2, section 2.2.1). Previous research suggests that such requirements, rooted in strict cost, quality and delivery times derivatives result in firms seeking organisational strategies that enable them to better cope with such requirements. In turn, previous research has also suggested that firms adopt work and employment patterns that are detrimental to job quality (see Chapter 2, section 2.3 and 2.4). After establishing the impacts of supply chain on organisational level and the consequences for workers’ experiences of job quality, the research considers workers’ capacity to exercise agency over job quality within the context of supply chains. As discussed in Chapter 3, workers’ agency may be hindered by the dynamics generated by supply chains, by creating conditions that are adversary to the capacity of workers to share common interests and collectively mobilise. Within this discussion, this study applies the “Mobilisation Theory” directly to the analysis of both forms of agency in the context of supply chains. Nevertheless, the discussion is also concerned with the power resources held and utilised by workers in order to regulate employers’ behaviours and recast the quality of their own jobs. The Figure 1 presents this conceptual model.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Model**

Taking into consideration the discussed conceptual framework coupled with the research objectives, this research study proposes to investigate the following research questions:

1. To what extent do pressures emanating from market and production networks impact organisational strategy, work and employment on local level?
2. To what extent do pressures emanating from market and production networks promote flexibilisation practices affecting job security and working time?
3. To what extent do pressures emanating from market and production networks inhibit or foster skill development and task discretion?

4. To what extent do pressures emanating from market and production networks result in the introduction of tighter performance and absence management regimes?
5. To what extent do pressures emanating from the market and production networks can create conditions for labour de-collectivisation?
6. In what ways collective and individual workers' agency are able to regulate and shape job quality?

#### **4.3. Philosophical Assumptions – A Critical Realist Perspective**

The research questions seek to examine job quality and its various shaping drivers within the Scottish Spirits Industry. Macroeconomic studies of job quality (Gallie, 2013; Holman, 2013; Kalleberg, 2011) aim at identifying broad and generalisable trends to isolate variables which have particular strong effects in explaining job quality. However, this research study does not assume that causality is uniform across all contexts. Differing reasons for the same social phenomena, such as job quality, may be apparent in different contexts, whilst a single observed phenomenon may have multiple causes and outcomes. The cause of the social phenomena within a specific context may not always be easy to identify or to observe. However, that does not mean that such objective relations do not exist. Research questions accept that various causes may explain job quality in different contexts, particularly in the case of this research study where a richness of contexts is apparent. These questions also seek to capture the perceptions and experiences of the social actors within these contexts. Thus, the study moves beyond the assumption that there is a single best explanation for job quality. In order to understand and explore job quality and the various levels of analysis proposed in the research questions, this research study distances from the positivist approach and instead engages with critical realism.

As Sayer (2000) argues, critical realism provides an alternative to several philosophical approaches and seeks to bring a different perspective to the research of social phenomena. Critical realism was first developed by Bhaskar as the theory to surpass the limitations of the other predominant philosophical approaches. Elger (2010) argues that critical realism brings together the ontological view of naturalism in the way that it also acknowledges the existence of an objective world. Nonetheless, it also recognises that the scientific knowledge is grounded on social constructions. In other words, critical

realism admits the existence of a real world that can be understood and cannot be completely approved or rejected (Bhaskar, 2008).

Williams and May (2002) argue that in critical realism an objective world exists independently from the perceptions of individuals, their language, and their interpretation of reality. There are transitive and intransitive objective of science, and researchers study the transitive ideas of reality in order to understand the deeper objects that form causal relationships in open social systems (Danermark et al., 2002). In other words, individuals (transitive objects) are important in providing information on why, how, and in what ways things happen (intransitive objects). However, individuals are never entirely informed of the whole set of structural conditions that contribute to the social phenomena (Giddens, 1984). This entails that social phenomena can exist even though individuals that are directly embedded in it have not knowledge of them, i.e. the world can still go on independently of individuals' perception and identification (Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000). Thus, as Ackroyd and Fleetwood (2000) argue social phenomena is a dependent concept and socially constructed, although it exists externally to the individual in a way that can actually shape their opinion. Nevertheless, individuals' actions – their interaction with the real world – remain a crucial part for critical realism.

For critical realism, the social phenomena cannot be examined in isolation to the wider complex system in which it is embedded. This is because the social phenomena are invariably impacted by a complex and stratified real world. Therefore, the object of a study does not exist in a closed system and thus cannot be investigated in a vacuum, rather it is always constructed and shaped within social structures (Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000), which in itself is made of multi-layered and interrelated parts of entities that interact over time and space (Bhaskar, 2008). In critical realism, researchers discriminate between three parts of the social phenomena, and these are articulated, internally and externally, to one another over time (Thompson and Vincent, 2010). Therefore, it is the articulation of the whole system, and not of specific parts of that system, that explain the social phenomena. As Thompson and Vincent (2010: 52) put it:

[I]t is the articulation of the production line and not the effort of workers alone that determines the rate of production. And equally, within these external relations within ecosystems, product markets and the like, are vital to making accurate explanations of why matters are as they are and not otherwise.



Therefore, contrasting with positivists that conduct research in closed systems of reality, and postmodernists that defend the existence of several ‘truths’ which are built through discourse, critical realism accepts the complex dynamics that exist in the real world and attempts to understand its stratified structures and mechanisms (Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000). Crucial to this analysis of stratified structures in critical realism is to consider the causation through mechanisms of cause and effect. For critical realists, causation is not only to engage in a process of proof of causation through a deductive approach, rather it is to identify the causal mechanisms through the exploration of the powers created within and beyond the social phenomena (Modell, 2009; Sayer, 2000). Whilst other paradigms use mainly the deductive or inductive approaches to investigate the social phenomena, critical realists engage with retrodution, which allows the researcher to go back and forth in exploring the drivers that generate the social phenomenon (Bhaskar, 2008).

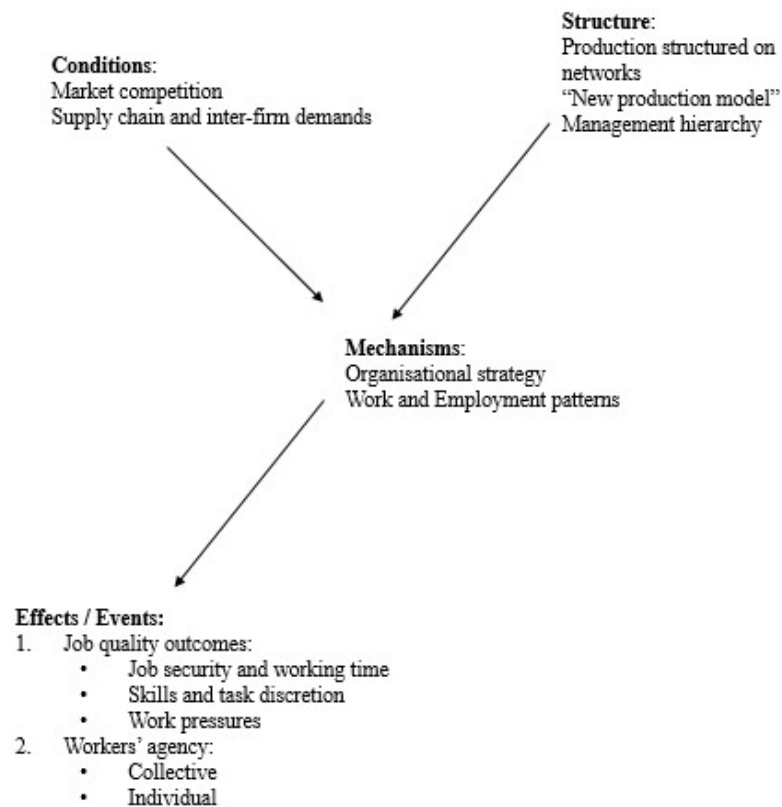
However, the question persists on how exactly such philosophical approach applies to this thesis. For understanding the application of critical realism to this thesis, it is necessary to identify the stratified reality in which the research study is undertaken, as well as identify the structures, mechanisms, and the events that are embedded in it. The social reality is complex and involves different strata, which need to be recognised because they are interconnected.

This research explores job quality within the specific context of production networks in the Scottish Spirits Industry. More specifically, it examines how and in what ways job quality is shaped through pressures of supply chains and production networks, and in what ways workers attempt to regulate such downwards pressures and thus shape job quality. Therefore, two main objectives are within this research study. Firstly, this research aims to understand the politico-economic dynamics and social structures happening between and within firms, and to examine their impact on the workplace in three specific dimensions: job security and working time, skills and task discretion, and work pressures. Secondly, it explores in what ways workers mobilise, organise and take action in order to regulate and reshape the job quality outcomes. Mirroring Thompson and Vincent’s (2010) take on depth ontology, this thesis aims at providing an analysis of the complex reality within which firms operate, in order to understand the ways in which job quality is shaped and workers exercise agency.

Critical realism is deemed to be the most relevant philosophical approach in order to reach this study’s objectives. This research argues that firms and job quality exist within

a materially real world – which in this case is the Scottish Spirits Industry – that has driving mechanisms – which are power and control dynamics within the production network. The firms exist independently from perceptions of the individuals – which are managers, employees and union representatives – but they depend on their actions. It is the emphasis on this stratification and on establishing links and explaining dynamics between wider structures that provides a comprehensive understanding of job quality's shaping drivers.

Therefore, in order to understand job quality at the workplace level in the context of supply chains, this research study needs to explore and comprehensively understand the wider political economy, the conditions, and structures that shape and influence organisational mechanisms. Thus, wider structures and conditions (production network, new production model, management hierarchy, together with market competition and supply chain and inter-firm dynamics) force firms to exercise control over job quality. This is made through mechanisms of organisational strategies and changes in work and employment patterns (see Figure 1). It is these dynamics that may produce effects on job quality dimensions, as well as other outcomes such as workers' collective or individual agency that are aimed at regulating employers' behaviour and reshape job quality.



**Figure 2:** Critical Realism and the stratified reality influencing job quality in the current research study (adapted from Sayer (2000: 15))

The figure above illustrates the stratified reality of job quality and the influential relationships between the wider structures, conditions, and mechanisms that lead to potential effects or events. This thesis acknowledges that it is impossible to provide answers to the research questions proposed in this study within a straight linear causal relationship, as argued by positivists. The analysed social phenomena are complex and involves different interconnected levels of analysis, which require to be acknowledged, studied and analysed.

Taking this into consideration, critical realism offers the reasoning to the development of a suitable methodological framework that is applied in the empirical study (Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000). In analysing the wider political economy of inter-firm relations as an attempt to understand the multi-layered reality, critical realism provides the suitable backbone for a better illustration of the studied social phenomena (Thompson and

Vincent, 2010). Following is the explanation of the research design, which considers the critical realist underpinnings of this research study.

#### **4.3. Research design – an *intensive* approach**

Adopting critical realism as the ontological backbone of this research means that the methodology has to remain sensitive to its social structures and multi-layered reality. Ackroyd (2004) claims that the methodological aim lies in understanding the linkages between the structure and agency through the considerations made by the agents' interpretations, in order to recognise existing structural tendencies. Therefore, by following critical realist underpinnings, this research seeks to link the agents' interpretations of the studied social phenomena with the observable events that are set in the context in which the research is undertaken (Ackroyd, 2004).

Sayer's (2000) theoretical position is relevant when explaining the research design of this research project. Critical realists propose a methodological pluralism, i.e. both quantitative and qualitative methods are appropriate considering the particular objectives of a study (Bryman, 2004). Sayer (2000) argues that critical realists prefer to distinguish between *extensive* and *intensive* research designs. Extensive designs are suggested to be related to quantitative methods, and look for a large number of repeated observations in order to reveal significant relations between variables. Sayer's (2000) argument highlights that such approach tends to overlook the relations of causality within which agents and structures are embedded. Whereas, the intensive approach is suggested to be concerned with the drivers that shape the studied social phenomena at a specific moment in time, or as Sayer (2000: 20) puts it: "with what makes things happen in specific cases". This approach focuses on the individual in order to outline the relationship and understand the meanings in case study analysis through the use of qualitative tools.

Therefore, taking into consideration the aim of understanding the drivers that shape job quality at a workplace level, this research study engages with an intensive approach to understand the social phenomena that this thesis is concerned with. Thus, this study aims at examining and exploring job quality in a wider complex context, while also looking for deeper explanations (Sayer, 2000). The intensive design allows this study to achieve this. The stratification of the reality recognised by this study, and the differing reasons for the same social phenomena, are all features recognised by this thesis. Thus, this research has to follow the intensive approach, while adopting a qualitative methodology

and multiple case study strategy, in order to coherently and appropriately respond to the research questions. Nevertheless, it has to acknowledge that identifying the drivers of job quality in a specific context where the employment relationship is considered a contested terrain is not in any way a linear relationship. The context of supply chain and the multi-layered structural dynamic existing between and within agents is a complex phenomenon that calls for a holistic approach. The intensive approach will allow this study to explore the multiple perspectives and competing claims about the quality of jobs.

#### **4.3.1 Research strategy**

The exploratory and in-depth nature of this research project calls for a broad research approach involving investigation into the politico-economic context, production networks and work organisation, and the impact of these on job quality. Some may argue that combining qualitative and quantitative approaches brings the best of two worlds to bring more validity to the research study (Bryman and Bell, 2007; Zachariadis et al., 2013). Indeed, a quantitative approach would add a more comprehensive account and a more nuanced investigation of the social phenomena, particularly because it could provide more accurate data on specific aspects of job quality. For instance, a quantitative approach would allow a more objective investigation on the changes of employees' working time patterns, or the changes in contractual statuses over time (Bryman and Bell, 2007). Indeed, the quantitative research could bring a number of valuable points to this research study, such as assisting in generalising results, to simplify the presentation of results and discussion, or to assert the causal relationship between two variables. However, it is important to highlight that the aim of this research is to gain a more comprehensive understanding of job quality in today's economic paradigm. The thesis is particularly concerned with the dynamics and the examination of the stratified and complex social phenomena encompassing job quality, rather than establishing causal links, or simplifying the presentation of results. The complexity of this study demands that its approach remains flexible in order to get relevant insights about questions such as what, why and how certain phenomenon happens (Babbie, 2007).

Moreover, although some may argue that choosing a method is simply a question of validity, others argue that it is a choice of understanding the meaning within a social phenomenon. In turn, this enables this study to secure a more comprehensive understanding of the issue that is being investigated (Maxwell, 2012). Nevertheless, what

is more relevant for the purpose of this study that aims at studying multi-layered complex social dynamics is the reliability of a sound understanding, explanation and conclusion, rather than implying the existence of a universal reality that aims at being undisputed (Ackroyd, 2004). Following the critical realist interpretation, this study considers that truth exists, however the social research is imperfect due to its potential subjective nature (Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000). Therefore, due to the difficulty of studying such complex phenomena, some argue that it is crucial to consider a methodological pluralism (Zachariadis et al., 2013).

This research study achieves methodological pluralism by applying a qualitative data gathering approach through tools such as observation, documentation analysis, focus groups and semi-structured interviews. This methodological pluralism will help to create a chain of evidence, increase the reliability of findings, and enable consideration of the meaning of differences (Yin 2003). Qualitative research methods are considered the most appropriate for the purpose of this research, due to its focus on exploratory work to investigate the various causal linkages and explain what creates particular stages, changes and situations (Ackroyd and Fleetwood 2000). Moreover, by drawing from the presented research questions, the most appropriate is to conduct in depth case studies. The in-depth case studies enables this study to understand links and relationships, the interpretation of meanings within the context, and the occurrence of insights into the complexity of structures, social actions, and dynamics within individual settings (Danermark et al., 2002). Moreover, case studies are an ideal methodology when an in-depth research is needed (Feagin et al., 1991).

Research Objectives	Research Questions	Levels of Analysis	Themes of analysis	Objectives	Tools of analysis	
<b>RO1</b> - Impacts of inter-firm pressures on job quality.	1. To what extent do pressures emanating from market and production networks impact organisational strategy on local level?	Political Economic Level	Inter-firm and supply chain dynamics; Organisational and HR practices.	Explain and understand industry dynamics, how product market and supply chain pressures feed into organisational levels and end up affecting the firms' organisational strategy.	Interviews with firms' senior managers, site managers and union representatives [when present]; focus groups at SpiritsCo with senior and middle managers; document analysis such as SLA.	
	2. To what extent pressures emanating from market and production networks promote flexibilisation practices affecting job security and working time?	Organisational and Individual Levels	Organisational and HR practices related to flexibility [of contracts and working time]; individual experiences of job security and working time arrangements.	Examine ways in which organisational strategy shapes the different job quality dimensions. In addition, examining how workers experience the standards of job quality present in their workplace.	Interview with managers to ascertain the ways in which organisational strategies impacted the different job quality dimensions; Interviews with workers and union representatives was used to compare with the data gathered from managers, as well as to examine the individual experiences of job quality. Documents and observation were also used.	
	3. To what extent pressures emanating from market and production networks inhibit or foster skill development and task discretion?		Organisational demands related to job complexity [skill requirements, utilisation and development] and task discretion; individual experiences relating to skill and task discretion.			
	4. To what extent pressures emanating from market and production networks result in the introduction of tighter performance and absence management regimes		Organisational and HR practices related to performance and absence systems of management; individual experiences about these systems of management.			
	5. To what extent pressures emanating from the market and production networks can create conditions for labour de-collectivisation?		Organisational and Individual Levels	Inter-firm and supply chain dynamics; workers' capacity to define interests, collective and mobilise	Explain and understand the ways in which workers' interests and collectivisation may be hindered by job quality conditions generated by supply chain pressures.	Interviews with managers and union representatives [although the research did not disregard workers and line-managers]. Documents such as union recognition, and agreements at an inter-firm level were also used.
		6. In what ways collective and individual workers' agency are able to regulate and shape job quality?		Workers collective and individual agency; workers' capacity to regulate employers' behaviours and shape job quality	Examine how workers, collectively and individually, are able to shape objective structures of the organisation and job quality; examine the ways in which workers' agency improved workers' experiences of job quality.	
<b>RO2</b> - The way in which collective and individual labour agency are able to regulate and shape job quality under conditions of supply chain and inter-firm pressures.						

Table 1: Research strategy in relation to research objectives and questions

Table 1 shows in detail the research strategy of the research study, by considering in the first place the levels of analysis and the research question, and then the research approach and tools that were deemed more appropriate. To each of these levels of analysis and research questions, the researcher applied a specific approach and research tool. These were deemed the most appropriate at the time (taking into consideration multiple constraints that I was subject to by the study's gatekeepers<sup>1</sup> – discussed in detail below) in order to answer the proposed research questions.

#### **4.4. Rationale for Scottish Spirits Industry and case study choice**

The empirical focus of this research was workplaces that operate in the Scottish Spirits Industry. This choice was based on theoretical grounds. To date, job quality has been predominantly addressed at an institutional level, where researchers mapped the outcomes of job quality across different countries according to the institutional paradigm that the country belongs to (Gallie, 2013; Holman, 2013; Munoz de Bustillo et al., 2011). However, such an approach fails to consider the effects of cross-national market pressures (Hancké et al., 2007). As previously argued, inter-firm relations and supply chain dynamics are argued to be one of the main catalysts of such pressures (Gereffi et al., 2005; Newsome et al., 2013; Raworth and Kidder, 2009). Macroeconomic studies on job quality give limited attention to the role that power and control dynamics between firms may have in shaping job quality, which usually takes place at industrial and sectoral level. Indeed, increasingly, manufacturing firms face pressures to become progressively more efficient and flexible, due to new production models and pressures to remain part of production networks (Lichtenstein, 2007; Raworth and Kidder, 2009). One of the contributions of this research is to understand how job quality is shaped by firms managing such pressures.

Moreover, as explained in Chapter 3, job quality literature has been meagre in highlighting the active role of worker agency in shaping the quality of jobs (Simms, 2015). In the same vein, Jackson et al. (2013) emphasise the need for industrial relations

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<sup>1</sup> Yin (2009: 107) distinguishes between informants and respondents. The former, in addition to reporting on the studied social phenomena they also indicate key leads to the development of the fieldwork; whereas the latter only report. I use key gatekeepers to signify these people as respondents that were more than informants, as they were the ones that were “holding the door” for me to enter the company and provided me with enough time to conduct the fieldwork.



literature to understand how the new structural forms of production and work organisation act as suppressing mechanism of collective action. At the same time, it is increasingly important to explore how workers can be represented in value chains and production networks that cut across firms' boundaries, and include actors at different levels with different resources. Undertaking research at a sectoral level allows this study to explore supply chain pressures and what the outcomes are at a workplace level, and thus tackle such gaps in the literature. The choice of undertaking this research in SSI derives precisely from this theoretical rationale. The specific regulations to which this industry is subject to makes it relevant to explore how pressures happening at a supply chain level impact on the employment relationship and in what ways these manifest on the quality of jobs in the workplace. Moreover, the choice of investigating supply firms and not only lead firms, allows this study to further appreciate the implications of inter-firm pressures on work and employment of the former firms, rather than only infer the consequences (Grimshaw et al., 2005: 22).

In addition to this, Gering (2007) argues that it is important to identify contexts that reflect features archetypal from a population, along with those that provide elements of uniqueness on a relevant aspect. This is argued to provide more comprehensive understanding of the studied social phenomena. For instance, archetypal contexts can be seen as representatives of the wider population, resulting in the improvement of applicability and reliability of results. Uniqueness of contexts allows for contrast and comparisons to be drawn (Danermark et al., 2002). The SSI is an archetypal sector in the way that it is a demarcated region<sup>2</sup>. This intersects with the problematic of generalisation of the findings. In other words, authors have been discussing whether the findings of a qualitative research can be generalised and transferable to other research projects (Saunders et al., 2009). Qualitative research has been widely criticised for its lack of capacity to generalise results, mostly from positivist researchers. However, because this research study is placed ontologically within critical realism, generalisation is not approached in the same way that positivists do. Positivists consider that statistical findings are the way to generalise findings, however critical realists argue that findings are generalised through other means such as theory (Ackroyd, 2004). Thus, the aim of

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<sup>2</sup> Demarcated regions are specific regions regulated at European, national, and regional levels to limit the production of a certain produce to the boundaries of the regulated region – Scottish Whisky is one of these, but there are others such as the Champagne region in France (for the production of Champagne), or Douro region in Portugal (for the production of Port wine).

this research study is not to statistically replicate the findings of the wider population employed in all industries in the UK; rather its aim is to comprehensively discuss the theoretical aspects and contribute to the theoretical underpinnings adopted in this research. In this way, by choosing a specific context to analyse job quality, this research study aims at providing a deeper understanding of the social problem.

The selected core case study organisation, the SpiritsCo, owns production sites in which different stages of Scotch whisky production are undertaken. Such sites are distilleries (where the actual whisky is produced), cooperage sites (where the casks for maturation are repaired and reassembled), and bottling and packaging sites (where whisky is bottled and packed in order to be placed on the market). In addition, the SpiritsCo is involved in a network of firms, from where acquires its by-products and subcontracts services deemed necessary for the production of Scotch whisky. In the attempt to answer the research questions proposed for this research study, and to explore in a more comprehensive way job quality, several of the SpiritsCo's production points and suppliers were considered. This eventually became crucial to capture the picture of job quality across supply chains and in contexts reflecting varying levels of unionisation. The following discussion outlines the rationale for a case study approach, and the reasoning behind the chosen organisational case-studies and multiple workplaces.

#### **4.5. Case study approach**

There are a number of reasons to undertake a case study approach in this research project. The first outlined here is generic to case-study research, whereas the other reasons relate to the context and subject of analysis. The case study approach has been defined as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (Yin, 1984 in Yin, 2009: 23), and arguably enables insight into the social phenomenon and dynamics within individual settings (Danermark et al., 2002). Case studies are categorised as being quantitative – which use statistical and empirical methods to indicate relationships and associations across samples of populations –, or qualitative – in order to obtain in-depth, comprehensive understandings of social phenomena (Eisenhardt, 2002). Since this research follows a critical realist ontological approach and aims to examine a social phenomenon on various levels of analysis, the latter category was considered the most appropriate.

A significant amount of literature has discussed case studies as a research design that is crucial for the social science investigation, and at the same time is a coherent and consistent tool within the critical realism ontology (Sayer, 1992). Kessler and Bach (2014) argue that case study research design is increasingly more present within proponents of critical realism due to its capacity to explore and understand the context, causal dynamics, and the drivers that explain the studied social phenomena. Yin (2003) claims that case studies are the preferred approach when the researcher is looking to answer questions such as “how” and “why”. To answer the research questions addressed in this study, an in-depth and exploratory investigation is necessary to disentangle and understand the full range of factors that may influence workers’ job quality experiences. Thus, the case study analysis is the research tool that allows for an in depth analysis of a specific phenomenon, in a specific moment in time, with specific organisational and contextual idiosyncrasies, as critical realism suggests (Yin, 2003).

Moreover, the choice of such approach is argued to be more suitable for research questions that focus more on interpreting contextual dynamics, casual mechanisms, and that aim at creating the basis for a comprehensive explanation of the underlying dynamics of social phenomena (Yin 2003). Therefore, the researcher is concerned with both the direct actors’ perspective, as well as other relevant groups. Moreover, significant to this analysis is the interaction between the two groups. Specifically, this approach provides the capacity for this research study to understand the inter-firm relations and the social dynamics happening between and within them, and its immediate job quality outcomes.

At this stage, it is important to note that a multiple case study analysis is undertaken in this research project. Social phenomena are often dependent on multiple circumstances – thus for this reason isolating the analysis to one case study would be counterproductive (Taylor and Bain, 2004). As Kessler and Bach (2014) argue, critical realism creates the need for case studies to recognise specific contextual and circumstantial factors in a broader context, and the multiple case study approach enables broader drivers to be clearly identified. The researcher that undertakes a single case study is seeking to explore whether specific dynamics go together or not, in order to develop an explanation that can be tested and refined in later cases (Edwards, 2006). In this way, undertaking a multiple case study analysis diminishes the risks of misattributions of explanatory causes. Such approach is seen as leading to more robust knowledge and understanding of action and interaction between agents, and how alterations in the subject of analysis are influenced

by similar or different contexts (Ackroyd, 2009). In this research project, multiple cases were selected to explore and examine job quality in contexts of high and low supply chain pressures, as well as unionised and non-unionised workplaces. This conscious decision allowed the study of theorised idiosyncrasies that can go (or not) together to produce particular outcomes (Yin, 2009). Effective multiple case study research is rooted in carefully selected cases (Yin, 2009). Case studies and workplaces should be chosen not just because they have shown availability or any other practical reason, but because they provide relevancy to the overall theoretical and conceptual framework (Yin, 2009).

Lastly, it is important to highlight that the chosen case studies belonged to the same production network. This was purposively considered, because the structure of production networks provides the possibility to better capture the inter-firm relations and its immediate job quality outcomes. Considering the organisational diversity and complexity in which this research study is undertaken, the multiple case study approach is being used in order to produce more finely grained analysis of job quality. Following Burawoy's (2009) argument that the intersection of politico-economic and labour process analysis has to be addressed through a research strategy termed as "extended case study", this research extends the analysis of its case studies beyond the immediate boundaries of the workplaces. Burawoy's (2009) claim lies in the argument that the detailed study of micro processes at a firm level are not sufficient, and therefore it is crucial to explore and understand the macro drivers of changes and dynamics that shape the micro level. Gathering data that goes beyond the point of production (Kelly, 1985), such as supply chain dynamics, is essential to explore and answer the proposed research questions. The inter-firm relations within production networks entail highly complex dynamics between institutions, firms and individuals, which happen at vertical (multi-level) and horizontal (between agents). Therefore, as Vincent and Wapshott (2014) emphasise, the case study research offers the space to develop a better explanation of mechanisms by exploring the power interactions between structures and agents at different levels. This explains the strategy taken in this research of choosing a specific production network in which the case studies are embedded. By choosing more than one case study, this research study gains flexibility of analysis, which provides a multi-level analysis of the industry's political economy located within the inter-firm relations. This will provide a holistic understanding of the organisational realities, which are crucial to pinpoint the

institutional mechanisms, to develop a framework of analysis to the drivers of job quality and its outcomes (Danermark et al., 2002; Kessler and Bach, 2014).

#### **4.6. Case study methods**

Information was gathered from a number of data sources. Zachariadis et al. (2013) note that the use of multiple data sources within a case study approach have to complement each other through the different data sources. In this research study, the use of multiple data sources resulted in the researcher being challenged from divergent, and sometimes, conflicting evidence that ended up aiding the researcher to confirm or disconfirm a theory (Babbie, 2007).

There is a wide range of techniques to obtain qualitative data described in the research methodology literature (Bryman and Bell, 2007; Danermark et al., 2002; Saunders et al., 2009). However, the choice of research techniques has to be purposive, and respect the framing of specific research questions (Babbie, 2007). This argument calls for this study to justify the reasoning behind the choice of semi-structured interviews, focus-groups and observation as instruments of primary collection, which was combined with documentation analysis as a source of secondary data analysis. This follows the rationale of engaging with retroduction, as this approach suggests that the use of complementary data sources is the basis for understanding in depth the different reality stratifications in which the social phenomena is being studied (Kessler and Bach, 2014). What follows is the description of all used instruments, and the ways they have been used throughout the course of this research project.

##### **4.6.1. Semi-structured interviews**

Interviews were used as the main tool of collecting data, as these are considered crucial in obtaining a deeper insight into the knowledge, perspectives, and experiences of individuals about the studied social phenomena (Bryman and Bell, 2003). It was through the data gathered in interviews that enabled this research study to properly answer the proposed research questions. The data gathered was crucial to provide evidence in constructing the multi-layered reality, which explains job quality in the context of supply chains (Smith and Elger, 2014). Nevertheless, it is important to fully consider whom to interview during the research study so that research questions can be properly answered

(Bryman and Bell, 2003). Interviews were conducted in all case-studies with managerial staff (apart from TranspCo), workers, and union representatives when present.

The process of gathering qualitative data through interviews entailed a dialogue with participants, where emotions attached to explanations were taken seriously throughout the whole research study (Smith and Elger, 2014). The dialogue often took the form of an informal conversation, either during the interview or after the interview, where both parties were involved in sharing ideas and information about the studied social phenomena. These moments became crucial to have deeper access to the interviewee's reality and interpretation of the studied phenomena (Bryman and Bell, 2007). Participants in qualitative research give their own interpretations of the studied social phenomena (Bryman and Bell, 2007). In order to better assess the multi-layered social reality, the researcher in this study did not take these interpretations passively; rather the researcher considered these and jointly constructed into knowledge about the experiences, events and activities happening within the studied context (Smith and Elger, 2014).

Although structured and unstructured interviews were plausible ways into investigating job quality, this research study chose to undertake semi-structured interviews (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The choice was made while taking into consideration the philosophical assumptions of this study, as well as its conceptual framework. These guided the construction of the questionnaire and allowed freedom to explore other insights, as a strategy to ensure the validity of the knowledge constructed in the research study (Smith and Elger, 2014). Therefore, this research study used semi-structured interviews as one of the primary sources of data collection in order to provide this research study a thematic structure in the methodology to understand the studied multi-layered social phenomena (Smith and Elger, 2014). This structure eventually became crucial to ensure comparisons between different and often contrasting accounts provided by the participants (Wilkinson et al., 2004).

In conclusion, the semi-structured interview that this research intends to follow is driven by the theory and adapted to the reality in which the interview is taking place. The researcher undertook the interview with the theoretical framework as the backbone, with the aim to highlight the multi-layered reality that is embedded in the studied social phenomena. As a result, the researcher ensured that relevant data on events, experiences and conditions is collected, that involved the different layers of the social reality (Edwards et al., 2014).

#### 4.6.2. Focus Groups

Focus group as a research instrument has gained increasing popularity in social sciences over the last decades (Wilkinson et al., 2004). Within this research study, the focus groups were used by engaging small groups of participants within an informal group discussion as a way to collect qualitative data on studied social phenomena (Wilkinson et al., 2004). This method allowed this research study to make participants confronted with their ideas by other participants – what has been termed as “dynamic quality” (Jarret, 1993: 194, in Wilkinson et al., 2004). This feature is important as it allows respondents to react to, and build upon the responses of other group members’, leading to the production of more elaborated accounts than the ones generated in individual interviews (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). During the focus groups, the role of the researcher was to moderate, guide and foster interaction between participants. Therefore, the researcher did not aim at asking questions; rather, the research facilitated the discussion and actively encouraged group members to interact with each other (Wilkinson et al., 2004).

This method was particularly applied in the SpiritsCo by gathering managers and senior managers with long tenure in the company and industry. Thus, their knowledge was vast. The constrains in terms of time and accessibility to senior managers and managers made focus groups a very appropriate method of quickly collecting data from a large number of participants (Wilkinson et al., 2004). Moreover, its “naturalistic” feature allowed this research study to have access to a range of communicative processes that are specific to the studied context, such as storytelling, teasing, persuasion, challenge and disagreement, which mimics more an everyday conversation (Bryman and Bell, 2007; Wilkinson et al., 2014). In this way, the focus groups were a window to the everyday language and vernacular used by participants, promoting a “structured eavesdropping”. This allowed the researcher in this study to be familiarised with the way participants usually talk, and also the terminology and vocabulary they typically use (Wilkinson et al., 2004).

However, in the research methodology literature, authors argue that by virtue of the number of participants that are involved in a focus group, the researcher has reduced control over the interaction (Bell and Bryman, 2003; Saunders et al., 2009). Although this feature enables focus groups participants to follow their own agendas, and to develop themes most important to them, it contradicts the ontological underpinning of this research study. By following critical realist ontology, this research study is grounded on a more structured data collection. This enables the study to compare between actors’

accounts, rather than basing its analysis on data collected from an “everyday conversation”. Another important critique relates to the ways in which participants can influence other participants’ opinion. Wilkinson et al. (2004) argues that power relations within the group (i.e. organisational hierarchical factors) may inhibit or encourage an opinion about a specific topic. In this way, participants may only express opinions that are desirable by their hierarchical superior, rather than actually their honest and unbiased opinion. Nevertheless, Sayer (1993) argues that focus groups can be a rich source of data if used and analysed under the study’s theoretical framework, expanding the understanding of the interdependence of the studied social structures and social interactions. Therefore, building question guides for the focus groups during this research study was driven by theory, and made purposively and appropriately to answer the particular research questions deemed relevant for this research study. This follows Silverman’s (2004) argument that data collection tools have always to be driven by what the researcher wants to find and not the other way around.

#### **4.6.3. Observation**

Observation was undertaken with the intent of getting access to the context involving the experiences of shop-floor workers. This allowed for valuable insights into everyday tasks, social interactions, routines and events (Gillham, 2008). Observation become an important source of data, because social settings vary in different ways (Gillham, 2008). Observation is important also because description of social events within a specific social context can fall into a vacuum when there is a lack of awareness of the social setting and everyday social interactions. The observation technique was not used as a confirmatory tool, rather as a complementary source of data to build a richer picture of the overall social environment and social phenomena (Yin, 2009).

Observation was undertaken in all organisational case-studies throughout long periods of hours and, in some workplaces, days. Observation coupled with note-taking, photography and record of sound of the context and environment, proved to be an effective tool of contextualising all of the participants’ insights provided during the interviews. This technique also enabled the researcher to structure the collected data in a more detailed manner (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

The adoption of research methods beyond interviews and focus groups follows a critical realist approach (Edwards et al., 2014). The aim of a critical realist study is to build a



comprehensive understanding of the various structures and social interaction of a particular social phenomenon. This is in line with Edwards et al. (2014) argument that different research techniques should be used to gain access to information that is particularly important in further developing the researcher's understanding. Observation was particularly important for this research study so that interviewees' ideal accounts (for instance, in line to their company's official rhetoric) could be compared with what actually happened in reality. As a result, the introduction of this research method allowed the study to better apply the triangulation of data (Yin, 2009).

The richness of data collected through observation varied across workplaces. This was due to different levels of granted access. Levels of observation depend on overall research purpose and access to the social context (Bryman and Bell, 2007). However, in all case-studies the observation applied was purposively overt, as the role of the researcher was made explicit to individuals through the participatory sheets and/or through the communication of the manager to the workers (Yin, 2003).

#### **4.6.4. Document analysis**

In addition to interviews, focus groups and observation, a variety of documentary evidence was used, such as yearly/annual reports, organisational mission and objectives, press releases; but also private company documents, such as inter-firm contracts (service level agreements), union recognition documents and other employer-employee agreements, surveys, performance management sheets, minutes of meetings, and organisational charts (Bryman 2008; Yin 2003). This allowed the researcher to build a structured analysis on key factors of the organisational case-studies. Specifically, it allowed this study to get access to firms' key performance indicators, specific inter-firm derivatives, the level of engagement of the workforce, and criteria for workers' performance management appraisals. The point was to identify the policies and strategies that companies espouse, and bring out clues to important and relevant data that can be addressed at later stages of the research process, by combining it with other research techniques (Yin, 2009). Thus, the document analysis proved to be a resourceful gathering technique, in order to specifically understand some formal social interactions and practices between and within the analysed actors.

Nevertheless, as Bryman (2008) argues, documents are written with a specific intent and not with the purpose of reflecting reality. Analysing such documentation can provide

valuable insight into the organisational approach, in terms of formal perspectives presented by firms. Thus, following the critical realist ontology, the researcher analysed the documentary data by taking into consideration the context, purpose, producer and recipient, in order to understand underlying themes and perspectives being promoted (Bryman, 2008; Edwards et al., 2014).

#### **4.7. Research fieldwork: the case studies**

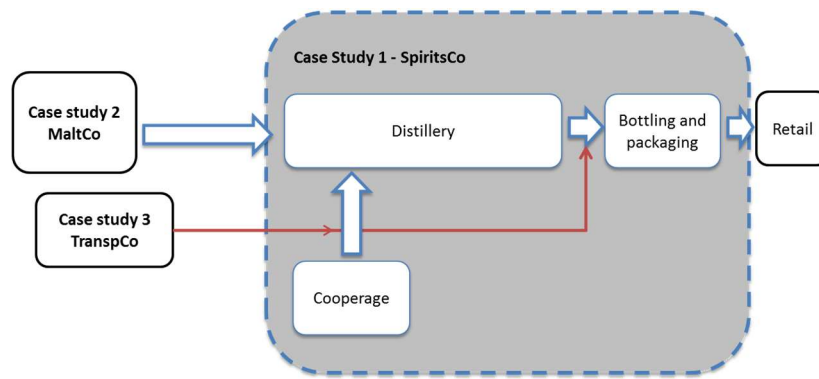
The fieldwork was undertaken between September 2014 and December 2015. Before describing and expanding on the fieldwork undertaken and the practical constraints faced over this process, it is important to note that the unit of analysis in this research study is the shop floor labour process. This allows the exploration and examination of the inter-firm structures and dynamics that shape job quality, and employment relations at shop-floor level.

In order to fully answer the six proposed research questions, it was important for this study to gain access to organisational case studies that were involved in the same industry, and that provided variety in terms of workplace regime, size, and levels of unionisation. First, contacts with gatekeepers in the SpiritsCo helped to identify other relevant case-studies and workplace sites, in order to ensure viability and variability in relation to inter-firm embeddedness, as well as levels of unionisation. The key gatekeepers initially provided important information on the nature of inter-firm relations between the SpiritsCo and its suppliers, as well as the nature of work and employment relations. These key gatekeepers also provided information about the production organisation; which firms supplied products and services to the SpiritsCo; as well as information on levels of workplace unionisation. This was important so that I could expand the “borders” of my research to other workplaces. During this period, a number of different workplaces and firms were considered. Some considered cases were dropped due to high levels of complexity in accessing interviewees, or because they were not embedded enough into the SpiritsCo’s production network. For instance, a bottle manufacturer was contacted in order to take part in the research project. However, the individual deemed as gatekeeper for this workplace only agreed that I could interview managers and line managers, as he was unable to release any workers from the assembly lines. As a result, the only other option would be to interview workers when their shift

was finished, on their way home. However, these constraints would result in a very time-consuming process, in comparison to other cases that provided access more promptly.

Three case-studies were selected with variable levels according to size, market position in relation to the production network, and the level of trade union membership – SpiritsCo, MaltCo, and TranspCo. The SpiritsCo is a large-sized company, with a strong market position in the global spirits industry, employing approximately 2300 people around the world, with 900 people based in Scotland. Within the SpiritsCo, three workplaces were chosen in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how job quality is shaped in different contextual environments. In this way, the inclusion of the three workplaces was driven by the six research questions due to two main reasons: firstly, the level of supply chain varied considerably between workplaces, which could mean different job quality outcomes; secondly, there were very distinct levels of unionisation in all three workplaces, which provided the opportunity to investigate the role of workers' agency in different contexts but within the same case-study. For instance, the bottling site has a unionisation percentage of around 57% (however it can vary due to fluctuation of employee numbers), the distillery has a level of unionisation of 10%, and the cooperage site is near to 100%.

In addition to the SpiritsCo, the two other supplying firms make the remaining two case-studies. The MaltCo is the biggest malt producer in the UK and employs around 200 people; workers do not belong to any trade union. The last case-study is the TranspCo which is specialised in whisky transport, employs 220 workers in which most are drivers, and are strongly unionised with 86% of membership. The MaltCo and TranspCo have an important role in SpiritsCo's production role and in the SSI in general. The MaltCo is involved in producing malt (cereal) for the distillation process, whereas the TranspCo is involved in the transport of varied production components (such as malt, white spirit, casks) across the supply chain. The areas of production involved in this research study are the ones related directly to production. The Figure 2 illustrates the SpiritsCo's production network and the relationships between the three case studies.



**Figure 3:** SpiritsCo’s production and supply network.

Although these firms are independent in terms of ownership, they are closely intertwined because they are placed, not exclusively but relevantly, within the SpiritsCo’s production network. They are not exclusively embedded because they have more commercial ties with SSI or other industries (in case of the MaltCo, the beer industry); but relevantly embedded because the SpiritsCo plays a very important role in both suppliers’ business volume. Rather than focusing exclusively on one case study, this research study aims to broaden the discussion and bring more richness of analysis and results through a multiple case study design (Kessler and Bach, 2014). This increases the “external validity” of this study, as a multiple case study analysis provides the opportunity to explore differences, similarities and inter-connections between cases through the “replication logic” (Yin, 2009).

The following discussion describes specifically for each case study and workplace the process of attaining access, the sampling, and the methods used to collect the data. All case studies, interviews, focus groups and union meetings were recorded using digital recording devices with the full permission of the participants and with a thorough explanation of the recording process regarding confidentiality and anonymity (Saunders et al., 2009). The recording process was useful as it allowed me to focus on the answers given by the participants, to probe and follow up on specific themes of research, and to take observation notes about behaviours, emotions, and the way tasks were conducted. Moreover, data collection was considered complete once I had judged that saturation had been reached. This saturation was analysed by examining whether substantial evidence had been gathered within the data and whether this was enough to answer the research questions deemed relevant to this research study (Yin, 2009). This process is what

Bryman (2004: 403) has named as “conceptual saturation” where new data does not significantly alter the conceptualisation within a study.

#### **4.7.1. SpiritsCo**

The SpiritsCo is a large Scottish-based spirits manufacturer, with headquarters in Glasgow, family owned, and established in 1850. The SpiritsCo is involved in most of the whisky production processes and is divided internally, accordingly to three main production points: distillation and maturation, cooperage, and bottling.

The access to SpiritsCo was difficult to attain and was made of breakthroughs and setbacks. The fact that the HR director (the initial gatekeeper) was retiring and a new HR director was going to take over, delayed the negotiating process for access. Eventually, an agreement was reached for three focus groups with office staff. This would be the only access that the new HR director would grant me. The participants in the focus groups were part of various departments in the SpiritsCo headquarter. All participants in the focus groups belonged to what is termed in this research study as “office staff”, from various departments of the company (such as finance, strategic, or marketing), and their roles were mostly managerial and higher. Their age ranged from 35 to 60. In the three focus groups, there were in total 8 female participants, and 9 male participants. The HR director and Personal Assistant selected the participants and it was agreed that each focus group would have the duration of one hour. The focus groups took place in the SpiritsCo’s premises over the period of two months from December 2014 to February 2015.

In addition to the valuable data gathered in the focus groups, these were also used as an opportunity to establish a relationship with key individuals (who would turn to be key gatekeepers), in order to grant further access to other SpiritsCo’s production sites, and establish contacts with key individuals with SpiritsCo’s suppliers. For instance, one of the participants in one focus group was the bottling hall manufacturing manager. In the end of the focus group I asked directly the bottling hall manager if we could arrange an individual interview. This approach was repeated with other participants from the focus groups. The decision of whom to approach was not a random one. I followed a purposive sampling, seeking key informants that could provide the research study with valuable data and information (Bryman, 2004). This was made by considering the individuals’ role, their insight of the business, or if their position could lead me to other key

informants. Therefore, a random sampling based on statistical principles would not fit the purposes of this research (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The rationale behind this strategy was to purposively select participants that would contribute to answering the six proposed research questions.

It was at this stage that contacts were made with gatekeepers, so that I could have access to other production sites, such as the bottling hall and the distillery. In total, and in addition to the 3 focus groups, 47 semi-structured interviews were conducted across the different sites of production, and at different hierarchical levels, as shown in the table below. This variation in management levels and roles in the workplaces were driven by critical realism propositions for multi-layered analysis in order to comprehensively examine the social phenomenon (Smith and Elger, 2014).

The following discussion describes and analyses the access and data gathering in the three SpiritsCo’s workplaces – the bottling hall, the distillery, and the cooperage site.

		<b>SpiritsCo</b>				
		Focus Group	Semi-Structured Interviews			
			Office Staff	Bottling Hall	Distillery	Cooperage
Senior Managers		4	5	1	-	-
Managers		4	1	2	1	1
Line Manager		9	-	5	2	2
Shop-floor Workers	Permanent	-	-	7	6	6
	Temporary	-	-	4	-	-
Union Representatives		-	-	3	-	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>17</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>

**Table 2:** Participants in SpiritsCo, across workplaces and roles.

### Bottling hall site

SpiritsCo holds one bottling site in Scotland. The plant site is located in Glasgow and employs around 200 workers (which varies throughout the year due to high levels of labour casualisation). The composition of the workforce is mixed in gender, age and tenure. There gender distribution was observed to be balanced within the shop-floor

workers; but with more number of male employees in the positions of management. The nationality of the workforce was predominantly British, as the company tended to employ workers from the area of Glasgow where the bottling hall was located. It is in the bottling hall that the company bottles the spirit and ships it to retailers. The process of bottling and packaging whisky is made mainly on assembly lines, which vary in terms of speed (number of bottles per minute) and machines (technology). However, some high-end quality brands were packed by hand.

The gatekeeper to the bottling hall was its manufacturing manager, who participated in one of the focus groups. After a process of negotiation, a number of visits was scheduled to the site, including observation visits, and interview meetings with managerial staff, workers, and union representatives. These visits and interviews were conducted throughout the year of 2015. The observation visits varied in time and lasted between 5 hours and a full shift (8 hours). The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour depending on individuals' availability and production demands.

In this site, a convenience sampling had to be followed (Bryman and Bell, 2007). There were obvious difficulties that reflected the nature of work, the key ones being production demands and time constraints. Manufacturing regimes are often predicated on maintaining workers continually at work to keep up with the perpetual motion of assembly lines (Beynon, 1984). This makes the access to participants a difficult process. In the SpiritsCo bottling hall, employee numbers were particularly tight and attendance was very strictly monitored.

Being the bottling hall manager my key gatekeeper, he was the one setting the interviews. Although it was a convenience sampling, I asked the manager to purposively vary in terms of gender, age, position and type of contract, so that I could get the most comprehensive sample possible. This process can be considered problematic due to two reasons: firstly, the bottling hall manager could select workers that would give a "good image" of the company; secondly, workers could feel constrained to speak openly and honestly about their experiences. I attempted to overcome these limitations by claiming neutrality to both managerial staff and the workforce. It has been argued that claiming neutrality may jeopardise the rapport and trust of both managers and workers: "the researcher that claims to be neutral (or in between) may be attacked by both sides" (Whitfield and Strauss, 1998: 27). Nevertheless, this tactic resulted to be effective as most participants were open to talk and accepted my genuine approach throughout the

interviews. In total 22 interviews were conducted with managers, line managers, workers and union representatives. These participants varied in age, gender, type of contract and shifts in which they worked. In total, there were 7 female interviewees, and 15 male interviewees.

In addition to the interviews, four visits to the premises of the bottling site were arranged, where I was able to conduct observations. The observation in the bottling site provided relevant insights into the layout of teams, the labour process, social interactions and dynamics between workers, and overall day-to-day events. Attention was paid to the rules and norms operating in the studied social setting. These observations and other relevant experiences, which emerged during this time, were documented in a research fieldwork notebook. The aim was not only to record every day aspect of the labour process, but also to be able to “capitalize on chance remarks or unexpected events that propel a new line of investigation” (Bryman 1988: 138).

### The Distillery

The SpiritsCo holds many distilleries across Scotland. The distillery involved in this research study is located in the north of Scotland and comprises an overall workforce of 35 employees (varying from managerial staff, administrative staff, and operators). The composition of the workforce in the distillery was found to be mainly male dominated in the shop-floor, and female dominated in the administrative roles. The workers in the shop-floor were all native to the north of Scotland; and two were from the Isles of the North Sea (individuals coming from the Isles to work in the mainland are called “ferry-loopers”). The distillery produces a high-end quality whisky, which is sold worldwide. It is considered to be one of the main brands of SpiritsCo, and that reflects in the distillery’s production volume.

The access to this particular distillery was arranged through a focus group participant who facilitated the contact between the distillery manager and me. After the first contact with the distillery manager made by email, it was agreed a date and period of time for visiting the premises and interviewing the workers and supervisors. The fieldwork encompassed “spending time” within the workplace during the shifts, and interviews with managerial staff and workers. After travelling by car to the north of Scotland, I showed up in the location and time agreed to meet with the distillery manager. It was agreed two interviews with the distillery manager, interviews with line managers and



workers, and the presence in four shifts (three day and one night shift) for observation periods. Yet again, I followed a purposive sampling, seeking workers that were in specific positions that I would consider critical in terms of supply chain pressures, and could provide rich information related to the phenomenon under investigation (Bryman, 2004). The interviews were happening as the shift carried on, and many of the times, I was interviewing the workers while they were carrying their daily work tasks. Particularly, I was allowed one hour with workers and line managers; however, in some cases interviews lasted longer. In total nine interviews were conducted in the distillery with participants varying from managerial staff to shop-floor workers. These participants varied in age, tenure in the company, and shifts in which they were working at the time (eventually they had to rotate through all shifts).

During observation throughout the shifts, fieldwork notes were being taken, allowing an understanding of the setting, the machines that workers handled, and skills that were being used. Coupled to note-taking, I was allowed to photograph and record sounds during shifts and interviews. The photographs and recording of sounds provided rich data of the context, labour process, the daily working lives and occasional conversations that workers maintained throughout the shift.

### The Cooperage

SpiritsCo owns two cooperage sites in Scotland – one in Speyside and another in the central belt of Scotland, between Glasgow and Edinburgh. It was in the latter that the fieldwork was undertaken during the period of one month. The cooperage site counts with 16 workers and roles vary from site manager to administrative and coopers. The shop-floor was dominated by male workers, who were native of Scotland.

Access to the Cooperage site was made differently to the previous workplaces. The process involved getting into contact with the Cooperage manager via LinkedIn. It was agreed one interview with the manager and multiple visits to the site would take place during the course of one month. The manager allowed full access to the shop-floor, where I was able to conduct observation and engage with sporadic conversations with the coopers. Although the manager was the key gatekeeper, one of the line managers (a former cooper) also revealed to be an important link between me and the coopers. He introduced me to other coopers throughout my visits to the site, and carefully took me through all aspects of the cooperage labour process.

Due to noise and the nature of coopering work, the interviews were made during tea and lunch breaks in the staff canteen. The time constraints were a problem, which limited the time of the interview to 40 minutes each. A total of 10 interviews were conducted between manager, line manager, coopers and union representative. The semi-structured interview with the manager, supervisor and union representative lasted between one to two hours, whereas the interviews with the coopers lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. This is because the interviews were undertaken during their tea and lunch breaks. All interviews were recorded after full consent being given by all participants.

During the periods in which interviews were not being conducted, I was conducting observation, which was most of the time assisted by the union representative. He would contextualise the observation with explanations about the labour process, the trade, the craft, anecdotal stories, and the overall work organisation of the cooperage site. This observation process provided relevant insights and information to better contextualise the complexities of the coopering trade (made of social norms, history and traditions). Also, much attention was paid to the important rules and norms that typically operate in a craftsmanship social setting. These observations and other relevant experiences during this time were documented in a research fieldwork notebook.

#### **4.7.2. MaltCo**

The MaltCo is a privately owned company that is involved in the process of malting. The company supplies cereal at particular point of germination stage, so that distilleries can start the process of spirit production. Its manufacturing site is the biggest in UK, employing 200 workers, with majority working on the technical and administrative areas. Although the production site is the biggest in the UK, only 19 production operators are employed. The shop-floor workforce was constituted by exclusively men, who were native from England and Scotland.

The decision of including MaltCo in the research project can be justified by two reasons: firstly, MaltCo is the sole supplier of malt to the SpiritsCo; and secondly, MaltCo is a non-unionised workplace. This variability provided the much needed differences to better evaluate job quality in the context of supply chains, which aided the process of answering the research questions.

The access to MaltCo was not an easy process, and can be described in two stages. The first stage, relates to getting access into the company. In order to know which company was the SpiritsCo's malt supplier, I sent an email to the distillery manager (who I had previously contacted for accessing the distillery). The distillery manager replied promptly and gave me the information that I requested. After having the name of the company, I made contact to the MaltCo's HR department explaining the research project and overall aim. The answer was negative. Therefore, I decided to contact directly the production manager through LinkedIn to explain the aims of the research project and ask whether he would agree to an interview. This was the first step to get "a foot in the door". I conducted a long interview with the production manager and it was within this interview that subsequent visits to the workplace were agreed.

The second stage derives from this agreement. It involved the interviews with the production and quality managers, as well as with the shop floor-workers. Interviews took place in the "break room" where operators would come in for their tea or lunch. The sampling approach was by convenience as I would attempt to interview any shop-floor worker directly involved in production who would come in to the break room. In turn, the worker would accept or refuse being interviewed. Due to high levels of time control the interviews with shop-floor workers were limited to 20-25 minutes; whereas with managerial staff there were no time restrictions. Thus, given the time limitations with shop-floor workers, I had to select wisely the interview content with each worker and develop a different interview guide depending on the respondent's tenure and role in the workplace. For instance, the interview with a participant with long tenure at MaltCo was focused on skills, whilst the interview with a participant working night shifts would focus more on working time issues and its consequences. Consequently, I tried to probe for as much information as possible within the limited time with them by using more structured interviews. Nevertheless, following my research design and method, it was given enough scope for participants to express their personal ideas and opinions. In total 9 interviews were conducted at MaltCo with participants varying in age, tenure, and hierarchical position.

Observation was not conducted in this case-study due to the dimension of the plant site and health and safety procedures.

<b>MaltCo</b>	
Semi-structured interviews	
Managers	2
Shop-floor Workers	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>

**Table 3:** Participants in MaltCo.

### 4.7.3. TranspCo

The TranspCo is a haulage company, privately held, and specialised in bulk transport of whisky and casks within the SSI. The TranspCo is based in Glasgow, but holds multiple yards across Scotland. The 220 workers have different roles from administrative to managerial and drivers. However, drivers constitute the bulk of the workforce. The majority of the workforce was constituted by male workers (however, there was one single female driver employed by the company, who worked in the night shift). All drivers were British-born.

Access to the TranspCo was difficult and limited. The first attempt to access TranspCo was made through the Headquarters. An email was sent to the HR manager and his assistant. Access was declined, with the justification that workload was at its peak. However, the unique position in which the TranspCo is in relation to SSI in general and the SpiritsCo production network in particular, made the possibility of including this case study in the research project very valuable. In addition, a key gatekeeper at SpiritsCo had informed me that this was a recently unionised workplace, which made it increasingly more important and relevant for this study to understand what exactly prompted unionisation. These features were crucial for better understanding job quality in this specific location, particularly the role of supply chains and the drivers' job quality experiences and their agency in shaping job quality.

After the TranspCo management declined access, I decided to request access through the union. After a long period of research I was able to get the name and email of one of the union representatives, who I promptly contacted. A meeting was agreed in order to explore the viability and access to respondents. This first exploratory meeting was made throughout a whole day at the end of March 2015, where issues related to the inter-firm relations, job quality, and trade unionism were addressed.

From this point onwards, I got access to the union meetings, which the branch organised monthly. The union representative had agreed for my presence and to record the meetings. I also utilised the meetings to approach the drivers participating in the union meetings. Yet again, one should not assume that the selection of the participants was a random one. Although the sampling was constrained to union members, I followed a purposive sampling, seeking participants who I considered to have relevant information for the purposes of this research study (Bryman, 2004). During the union meeting, I could listen to the issues raised, and understand who was more experienced and knowledgeable of job quality issues. Therefore, at the end of union meetings I approached the drivers who I considered had rich information about the social phenomena that I was investigating. Many drivers also approached me to share their own experiences and overall, they were willing to contribute with their insights to the research study.

To tackle the obvious limitation of having only interviewees belonging to the union or participating in union meetings, I decided to visit one of the yards in the north of Scotland. During my presence in the yards, I would wait for the TranspCo lorries to arrive to the yard, and then approach the drivers directly to ask if they would have time for an interview. This approach gives weight to the purposive sampling and the aim of seeking the most relevant information (Bryman, 2004). Again, the potential interviewees were given the option to accept or refuse to take part in this research study. Although this is not an orthodox way of doing research and interviewing participants, it resulted in getting interviews with non-unionised drivers. Thus, I was able to widen the type of data collection and broaden the data sources, and consequently the experiences of job quality within the particular setting of supply chains. This was crucial to get a more comprehensive picture of the investigated social phenomenon. In total 11 interviews were conducted and four union meetings were attended. The participants varied in terms of age, tenure, union membership, and gender (in fact one woman was interviewed during fieldwork). This choice was driven by the critical realism propositions for a multi-layered analysis, in order to obtain data to better understand the investigated problems. The length of the interviews varied: with the union representatives, they lasted around two and half hours; with drivers, they lasted 40-60 minutes; and with the non-unionised drivers in the yard, they lasted between 20 and 35 minutes. Finally, the union meetings lasted for four hours. Similar to the MaltCo case study, observation was impossible due to health and safety constraints.

	<b>TranspCo</b>
	Semi-structured interviews
Managers	-
Shop-floor Workers	9
Union Representatives	2
Union Meetings	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>

**Table 4:** Participants in TranspCo.

#### **4.9. Analytical strategy**

The following section discusses the way in which methods were used in relation to the case studies and participants in order to purposively address the research questions. In other words, specific methods and data sources are arguably more appropriate and fit better to address certain research questions. Although semi-structured interviews constitute the bulk of the gathered data, the research project also gained depth and richness by combining them with other type of data collection techniques. This allowed a more comprehensive understanding of the problematic, which consequently contributed to better address the proposed research questions. I followed a critical realist ontology which decrees that methods should be fit for the purpose for which they are used. The combination of methods and its usage for specific purposes enable this research study to create a deeper and more defined picture of the processes involved (Bryman, 2004).

For the research questions concerned with the linkages between supply chain dynamics and the organisational level (1, 2, 3 and 4), it was key to understand the employers' behaviours in shaping job quality. In addition, the research questions focused also on mapping job quality across the different workplaces in order to understand the workers' experiences. Thus, for these research questions it was important to: establish links between organisations and the product market and/or the production network; examine the ways in which employers reconfigured the labour process to better adjust to the dynamics stemming from the supply chain; understand the way in which the three different job quality dimensions were impacted by employers' reconfigurations; and examine how the different groups of workers experienced of job quality. Each of these aspects was addressed in different research questions using different data collection

techniques. Research question 5 and 6 were concerned with the ways in which inter-firm dynamics constrained workers' agency was key to understand the workers' collective and individual capacity to regulate employers' behaviours and thus shape job quality. Thus, for these research questions, it was important to: examine the process through which inter-firm relations and supply chain dynamics were used to circumvent workers' agency; the ways in which workers, through collective or individual forms of agency, were still able (or not) to shape job quality; and the workers' perceptions of their capacity to exercise agency.

The following discussion describes the data sources and techniques used for addressing each research question.

### *Research question 1*

To establish the links between inter-firm and product market dynamics with organisational case-studies, the researcher primarily resorted to semi structured interviews with senior managers, managers and union representatives (when present). These actors had the best knowledge of the nature of relations between the specific client and supplier firms, whilst also having knowledge of business and the HR strategies that shaped organisational strategies. The managerial staff were asked about the formal contractual features and informal inter-firm dynamics established between firms and/or retailers on a daily basis. The union representatives were also asked to give their opinion about inter-firm relations and supply chains pressures. These were used as a source of comparison in relation to managerial perceptions, as well as to gain the "workers' perspective" about the problem.

For this specific research question, the focus groups with the SpiritsCo's senior managers and office staff managers become crucial for the first stage of the research project, as the focus group discussions were aimed at exploring the relationship between SpiritsCo with the market and suppliers. Nevertheless, some organisational points were also touched upon, such as the overall SpiritsCo organisational strategy used to adapt to potential pressures stemming from retailers.

The analysis of documents was also used to expand interviewees' views about inter-firm relations. Specifically, access to service level agreements allowed a finer detailed analysis on potential dynamics generated within the SpiritsCo's production network.

#### *Research question 2 to 4*

The research questions 2, 3 and 4 are addressed together, as all were answered using the same sources of data. Semi structured interviews with managers, line managers, union representatives and workers were used to explore the impacts that supply chains and organisational strategies had on job quality. Managerial responses were primarily used to determine the ways in which the three job quality dimensions were impacted by organisational strategies. Indicators, such as the organisational and HR policies, and changes in production and labour processes were used to assess how they affected each of the job quality dimensions. The data gathered through documents was crucial to gain a deeper understanding of the organisational and HR policies, such as firms' "key performance indicators", workers' performance and absence review sheets, the percentage of groups of workers by contract type, employee surveys, and training descriptions. The data gathered from the managerial staff was compared with that gathered from the union representatives and workers to ascertain whether the perceptions of job quality tallied between the two groups. In addition, the stage of interviews with workers and union representatives was particularly important to explore workers' job quality experiences.

Observation coupled with (occasional) photography and recording of sounds, which was particularly useful for these research questions, as it provided the opportunity to contextualise insights given in the interviews. During the observation periods I was able to understand how labour process occurred, the tasks, and social interactions between different actors. The observation also provided me with the opportunity to discern specific organisational and individual behaviours that had not been addressed in interviews. It was then a source of valuable and rich data on the analysis of job quality at an individual level.

#### *Research question 5 and 6*

The semi structured interviews with all participants proved to be crucial for answering the fifth and sixth research questions. All groups of actors were asked about the ways in which dynamics stemming from supply chains influenced the employment relationship, the union role in shaping job quality, and the capacity of workers to shape the quality of their own jobs. Nevertheless, interviews with union representatives and site managers



were richer in data as they were more exposed on a daily basis to issues related to employer-employee relations. This is not to say that interviews with workers and line managers were unimportant; on the contrary, the insights and experiences about the role of the trade union, and their perception about the capacity for the trade union (when present) and individuals to exercise agency was considered equally important.

Observation also played a crucial role in gaining deeper understanding of the problematic. Observation was particularly important during the TranspCo's union meetings. All of the above sources of data were complemented by documents that were made available to me, such as the union recognition agreements, and other agreements made by workers on a production network level.

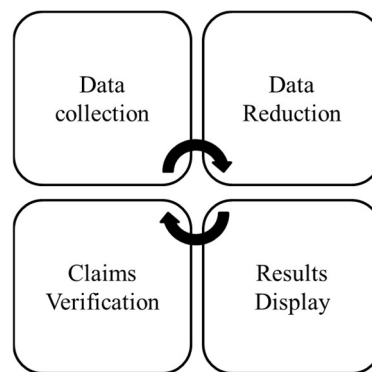
#### **4.9.1. Data Analysis**

The decision to use qualitative data represents the challenge of how to present data in a way that is comprehensive, coherent and relatively easy for the reader to follow the argument (Bryman 2008). Yin (2003) argues that data analysis is one of the least explained processes in qualitative research, as the chosen approaches are often dependent on the research purpose, objective and methods. This creates obvious challenges for this research project. The following discussion presents the way in which interviews were structured and developed, and the process of data analysis was conducted.

Coherent to the method of semi-structured interviews, an interview guide was developed based on three themes: supply chain pressures and inter-firm dynamics, nature of work and job quality, and workers' agency. These three broad themes were then used to develop interview topics and questions. A discretionary approach was taken, in order to adapt the formulation of the interview guides to the different participants depending on their occupation and their role in the organisation. Therefore, different interview guides were developed for senior managers, managers, line management, shop-floor workers and union representatives. This approach was applied to the three case-studies in order to allow for comparisons. In addition to the interview questions being tailored to the participants' features, they were also adapted while considering the organisation and the available time to interview the participants. The interview guide for participants in all spectrums of the organisational hierarchy can be found in the Appendix 1 of this research study.

The three themes were used as a background of the data analysis in this research. The separation of the research and findings into the three themes aided the task of structuring and organising what normally is vague, unstructured and confusing data (Bryman and Bell, 2007). The structure of data into the three themes allowed this research study to move forward to the analysis phase grounded on strong theoretical underpinnings.

Following the methodological literature, this research study considered various strategies for the analysis of data in a qualitative study (Saunders et al., 2009; Bryman and Bell, 2007; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Whilst Miles and Huberman (1994) present an interactive model for analysing data, Saunders et al. (2009) propose a division of strategies according to the approach chosen by the researcher. The former was followed in this research study.



**Figure 4:** steps of data analysis adapted from Miles and Huberman’s (1994) interactive model

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using the NVivo software. Each interview was coded using the abbreviation of the job role, followed by a number, and then the abbreviation of the organisation and workplace (when relevant) to which the participant belonged (E.g. SM3.Sco.BH refers to the Senior Manager 3 in SpiritsCo from the specific workplace Bottling Hall). Tables 5 and 6 show the coding process applied in this research study. However, if the participant were from a focus group, the abbreviation would refer to the participant’s job role, the focus group in which the individual participated in, followed by the company (E.g. SM1.FG1.Sco). For union meetings, the coding was simpler, using only the source, the respective number, and the company (E.g. UnionMeeting1.Tco).

Abbreviation of Job Role		Abbreviation of organisations and workplaces			
Senior Manager	SM	Organisations		Workplaces	
Manager	M	SpiritsCo	Sco	Bottling Hall	BH
Permanent Employee	PE			Distillery	D
Temporary Employee	TE			Cooperage	C
Union Representative	UR	MaltCo	Mco	-	-
		TranspCo	Tco	-	-

**Table 5 and 6:** Coding of interviews – abbreviations for job roles, organisations and workplaces.

The data was then thematically analysed using parental nodes (codes) and child nodes (sub-codes), which were linked to particular topics of interest (Richards, 1999). Thematic analysis – which is argued to be the most used strategy to analyse qualitative data – was employed in order to achieve a deep understanding of the collected data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The nodes emerged from the data, but these were partly shaped by topics addressed in interviews, which in turn were built from the literature review and conceptual framework. This method helped to manage the vast collected data (Bryman and Bell, 2007). Therefore, data reduction was utilised in this study to systematize and analyse the transcripts coming from the interviews undertaken in the three case studies. This process involved unifying participants’ interpretations and the contexts in which they are embedded. Therefore, codes and sub-codes were integrated into the specific case studies in order to make data more organised and ease the process of data analysis. Despite a number of different approaches being discussed in the literature (Saunders et al., 2009; Bryman and Bell, 2007), coding is essentially used to bring commonalities into the data by categorising it and making connections between categories. Thus, following Saunders et al. (2009) proposition, a process of open, axial, and selective coding was used to de-codify data, and identify links and relationships between themes and produce integrative categories. This coding process was subject to revision in order to minimise errors due to the vast amount of compiled data. The revision was undertaken by the researcher after a two-week period gap of not “working with the data”, which allowed

the researcher to distance himself from the data, and undertake the process of coding with a critical view (Richards, 1999).

The analysis of the data started right after the completion of transcription of all interviews. The compiled data was used to understand the social processes and structures that enable or constrain them (Burawoy, 2009), as well as to build a comprehensive picture from the multi-actor processes influencing job quality. The organisation of the extensive data into nodes and child-nodes allowed the organisation of emerging findings, and provided the structure to analyse the data comparing the different actors and cases. By following such process, the analysis conducted in this research study developed a complex matrix of nodes and child-nodes, which identified the conceptual themes across the different case studies and allowed for a theoretical comparison.

#### **4.10. Limitations**

This research study presents limitations in its approach. The first relates to the active role of the researcher as an agent within the process of collecting, coding and analysing data (Smith and Elger, 2014). It has been emphasised the ubiquity of the researchers' influence within its own research study. This study also recognises this. Positivists claim that research bias can be controlled. However, by following a critical realist stance, this research study embraces and welcomes the influential role of the researcher in bringing their personal values, beliefs and dispositions into the research process (Maxwell, 1996). Such influence and bias was particularly evident during fieldwork, as I am not native to Scotland, and English is not my mother tongue. In essence, this may have influenced my capacity to probe the interviewees. This was particularly acute in Glasgow, where some interviewees demonstrated a strong Glaswegian accent. This may have had a particular impact in the fieldwork, if we agree with Smith and Elger (2010) that probing questions are a key strategy to overcome vague answers provided by respondents. However, the researcher attempted to minimise the impact of this problem in two ways. First, the researcher asked the interviewees to clarify their arguments, so that interpretations were clearer. Second, by taking a careful and lengthy approach to the process of transcribing the interviews. Moreover, the interviews had been recorded, which allowed the researcher to go back to the raw data in order to clarify interpretations.

Another limitation of this research study derives from the limited access to the TranspCo, which may have had an impact on fully understanding the nature of work, the supply chain pressures, and the employment relationship within this workplace. Had the fieldwork in this particular case-study encompassed management's accounts, it would most definitely provide stronger evidence for understanding the problematic of this research, particularly in relation to the way supply chain pressures shaped job quality. However, insisting would probably compromise the trust and rapport that had been built with workers and union representatives. In this way, the data gathered in this workplace relied heavily on the accounts provided by drivers and union representatives. The researcher, nevertheless, attempted to minimise the impacts of this issue, by attending the union meetings. During these events, the union representatives presented detailed accounts of managerial intentions and practices, which were recorded and later carefully analysed.

#### **4.10. Chapter Summary**

This chapter has set out the conceptual model and research questions, the philosophical underpinnings of the research study, research design, methods applied in the empirical work, as well as the case studies and analytical approach to the collected data. The stratified approach to the research questions was carefully considered when collecting relevant data to the different levels of analysis proposed in this research study.

The study is driven by a critical realist ontology, leading to a focus on both analysis of macro-level dynamics and subsequent investigation of its impacts on workplace and individual levels. By drawing data from a wide range of informants, which varied in occupation and responsibility within the companies, as well as intensive case-study depth, this research study ensured high levels of data quality. The research methods chosen to this research study are considered fit to the purpose they are used for. These allowed access to rich data ensuring optimal way in which to investigate the stratified reality and of supply chain dynamics and its impact on workplace level.

The previous discussion on the choice of SSI and this production network (section 4.4 of this chapter), allowed a discussion of potential generalisability of research design, methods and results. It is not the intent of this study to generalise results. However, given the specific context supply chains in the SSI (which is regulated under the EU legal framework of demarcated region) it is appropriate to enquire whether the research

methods and findings can be applied to similar settings in other regions of Europe. Conducting research supply chains under different institutional settings, such as in Portugal in the Douro Region (which produces Port wine) or in France in Champagne Region (which produces the sparkling wine Champagne), may be relevant to future research.

## **Chapter 5: The inter-firm relations in the Scottish Spirits Industry**

### **5.1. Introduction**

This chapter is concerned with the first step to answer research question 1 – to what extent do the pressures and requirements emanating from market and production networks impact on organisational strategy, work and employment on a local level. This research question is examined through a detailed overview of power and control dynamics established between the relevant actors for this thesis, as well as their organisational responses to external pressures. Therefore, rather than solely addressing job quality as an isolated institutional or workplace outcome, this chapter approaches job quality as a concept being shaped and subject to market pressures.

The chapter is structured in two main sections. Firstly, it explores the market pressures influence on SpiritsCo and the way in which the company cascades down such pressures to its production network. Secondly, this chapter examines how these dynamics shape the organisational strategies and labour process of the three organisational case studies, which will then link up to the following two chapters (Chapters 6 and 7). It is worth highlighting that SpiritsCo is the “core” case study in this thesis, and thus considerable research focus is spent on this organisation. Moreover, particular attention is given to SpiritsCo bottling hall site. The reason for this is that this workplace has been identified as the central unit of the production network. It is in the SpiritsCo bottling hall where market pressures start to creep in into the production network, and thus is where the consequences of pressures are more vividly observable. Moreover, it is also from the SpiritsCo bottling hall that the market pressures spread across the production network, as it will be made clear in the following sections.

### **5.2. Scottish Spirits Industry context**

Before starting to examine the inter-firm relations between the three case studies, it is important to note that the nature and structure of Scottish Spirits Industry (SSI) has been constantly changing and continues to do so. The SSI employs around 45,000 workers directly and indirectly in the UK, and contributes with £1bn in taxes each year (Scottish Whisky Association - SWA - 2013). The SSI influence in British economy has been

characterised of ups and downs. However, one of the critical periods is pinpointed in 1990s. In this period, the industry was dominated by processes of restructuring and consolidation in order to improve efficiency and flexibility (Marks et al., 1998). This strategy impacted Scottish employment which went from 100,000 in 1970 to just over 10,000 direct jobs in 2012 (SWA, 2012). Throughout the last three decades spirits companies in Scotland have gone through a complex process of mergers and acquisitions, which has caused four main companies to hold the majority of the industry (SWA, 2012; Marks et al., 1998). In recent years, companies have been experiencing a trend of market expansion, particularly in emerging markets, which has enabled them to increase their sales and market value (SWA, 2012).

Moreover, the quality aspect of the product that companies emphasise in the market paradoxically leads to self-regulation in a quite strict way. The production constraints are imposed as part of a certification and guarantee of product quality. These regulations are a guide for producers and bottlers of Scotch whisky and are reinforced by European legislation on demarcated regions of food and beverages (Food (The Scottish Whisky Regulations) Order, 2009). These can have consequences on company level strategy and at workplace level. For instance, high premium quality Scotch whisky is only labelled as such when it meets certain production and quality requirements, such as being matured and bottled in Scotland (Food (The Scottish Whisky Regulations) Order, 2009).

Today the SSI is characterised by fragmented production units involving several sectors, encompassing diverse activities that are directly linked to spirits companies' production networks. These cover more specialised activities such as manufacturing of malt, manufacturing of bottles and cartons, and manufacturing and repair of casks; to more generic services such as transport services, IT services, security and cleaning services. Some of these businesses operate on sub-contracting and outsourcing schemes. However, spirits companies typically centralise certain parts of the production process, such as distillation, bottling and packaging, and warehousing (Marks et al., 1998).

### **5.3. Market and inter-firm power dynamics – imbalanced relationships**

A central question in exploring and understanding the nature of production networks' pressures is identifying the locus of pressures and how these cascade down across the production network. Section 5.2 considers the first step to answer the first research question. Thus, this section focuses on the distribution of contractual power and



dependencies between the market, SpiritsCo and the other two case studies (MaltCo and TranspCo). It is then relevant to start analysing how pressures emanating from market and customers influence SpiritsCo's supply chain strategy. Afterwards, this section addresses how SpiritsCo manages the pressures emanating from their customers by using their purchasing power to push risks and costs down to the suppliers.

### **5.3.1. SpiritsCo and the market – The SpiritsCo's contractual power and dependencies with its customers**

The section seeks to explore the rise of external market pressures and how a lead-firm manages them accordingly. In doing so, two themes emerged from the data: the dependencies and power dynamics of SpiritsCo towards its customers (market); and the emerging consequences to SpiritsCo's relations with its suppliers.

It was mentioned consistently, across the three focus groups, that SpiritsCo operates in an increasingly “competitive industry, (where) companies are notoriously aggressive” (SM1.FG1.Sco). The competition in an “*open-market*” with other more established brand companies. This has led SpiritsCo to develop a more competitive and consumer-driven structure, as one senior manager describes:

(T)he business changed hugely since 2006. We were a production-led company, that didn't have a brand, didn't have international presence. Today the way we present our profit stream is from wholly own our production and distribution. So we went from a production-led business, to a consumer-led business, and that has a massive impact on how things are run, on our day-to-day jobs, on the way whisky is produced, matured and brought to the bottling hall. It has had massive implications for the people that are working on the shop-floor. (...) [T]he market is the ultimate driver of what we are producing. (SM4.FG1.Sco)

Participants in focus groups discussed the high levels of exposure and dependency of SpiritsCo to its customers. The senior manager for the UK market, identified that currently SpiritsCo's low end products, or “power brands” (SM6.Sco), count for 80% of their business in the UK and around 63% in Europe. These numbers illustrate SpiritsCo's level of dependency on retailers.

The dependency towards retailers means that the company has to comply with strict requirements related to product pricing, quality and service reliability. However, interviewees reported that these were grounded on vague service level agreements. The senior manager responsible to the UK market explains:

Contracts (with retailers) do exist but they are letters of intent. (...) you can try to write an annual plan and you can hold each other to commitment (...). So that's when you try to set out the rules of funding if they decide to go further on the discounting your product, but at this point contracts are just purely guidelines that will always be negotiated at the time. (SM5.Sco)

It is through these vague contractual arrangements, that imbalanced power dynamics between SpiritsCo and retailers are more vividly noticeable. It was referred by one supply chain manager that retailers have the scope to “bend some commitments” (SM1.Sco), and thus can become very demanding and unpredictable. For instance, it was discussed highly unpredictable call for orders coming from SpiritsCo customers, both in frequency and in volume. This was particularly acute when retailers “go self-funding”<sup>3</sup> (SM6.Sco). Rarely orders placed by customers at last minute were not accepted, which suggests the prominent level of SpiritsCo dependency in relation to the market, and the disparate power relations with the retailers. Within one focus group, participants highlighted SpiritsCo’s lack of power to refuse orders from their customers. Some participants stated that such behaviour was a result of the “company’s culture” in order to “please the customers” (SM3.FG2.Sco). However, the majority indicated the lack of the company’s control over the markets, as well as the need to sell.

If these unplanned orders were accepted by SpiritsCo, the company was expected to meet requirements for quality, delivery time and cost. Supply chain managers and senior managers reported that the failure to meet the exact supply requirements, would result in fines and it could potentially result in SpiritsCo being unlisted by its customers. These pressures emanating from the market created major difficulties to managers and line managers, as the SpiritsCo bottling hall manager states:

[A]t the moment the focus is on quality, because the focus is on (brand), and the business has to ensure that the quality that made famous the (brand) is

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<sup>3</sup> self-funding – i.e. offering promotions to consumers that were not planned within the service level agreement

continued. But also (!), but also, there is always a big focus on cost. In this day and age retailers are very keen on costs and we have to respond to that in a suitable way. To be honest we have to manage these requirements at all times and that involves huge efforts from down on the shop-floor to the top. (SM3.Sco.BH).

It was identified by SpiritsCo managerial staff in interviews and focus groups, that the impact of such pressures was two folded: firstly, management increasing focused their attention towards more efficient ways of managing workers across SpiritsCo production sites (this will be described in detail further in the section 5.3.1); and secondly, and most important for this section, the pressures emanating from SpiritsCo's customers had a knock-on effect in SpiritsCo's production network. Noticeably, the market dynamics felt by SpiritsCo ended up affecting the relationship with the suppliers, as the company sought to innovate and save on costs through its relationship with suppliers.

SpiritsCo relies on many companies to supply different components for the manufacturing of spirit (such as malt, water, energy, and transport), and for the bottling of spirit (such as bottles, labels, cases and also transport). In this research study, the focus is on the way in which SpiritsCo manages its relationship with its malt supplier (MaltCo) and logistics supplier (TranspCo). The following section discusses the general supply chain strategy taken by SpiritsCo. Only after understanding this strategy, it will be discussed in detail in which ways the other two case studies are affected, in order to understand the impacts it has on job quality.

### **5.3.2. Power and control over the production network**

The section 5.2.2 now examines how market pressures stemming from retailers are cascaded down to the production network, and how power dynamics between SpiritsCo and suppliers are established in order to control the production network. Two main themes emerged from the focus groups and interviews with SpiritsCo managers: the way SpiritsCo unlocked suppliers' compliance, in order to successfully cope with market pressures; and, the coordination of the production network by exerting power over the suppliers.

It was identified during interviews with managers and senior managers that SpiritsCo purposively looks for suppliers that are not supplying the other bigger whisky

manufacturers, so that SpiritsCo can ensure that they are the supplier's biggest customer. According to all supply chain managers, this strategy gives SpiritsCo negotiation advantage:

For instance with cases, we are their biggest customer (...). If supermarkets put (low end product) on offer, as a result we need 50 thousand cases, maybe we have 20 thousand cases in the warehouse but we would suddenly need 30 thousand cases in five days. And if we would go to one of these other suppliers probably they wouldn't throw off (the competitors') product just because of us. Whereas with this supplier it's more fit, we are their biggest customer so if we say "we really need that" they will probably throw off another customer, they will listen to us more than others. (M3.Sco.BH)

The quote by this manager refers to the role that market unpredictability can have in the decision making of choosing one supplier over the other, and the consequences it has for the power relations between SpiritsCo and its suppliers.

Relating to the second identified mechanism, the relationship between SpiritsCo and suppliers is formalised by a service level agreement, which in turn is coordinated by a system of performance evaluation for suppliers – “the suppliers’ rating system”. This system is used to “keep them (suppliers) on their toes” (SM6.FG3.Sco). The suppliers’ rating system evaluates SpiritsCo’s suppliers in relation to indicators such as costs, quality, and delivery service. In turn, a list is produced with all SpiritsCo’s suppliers showing their ranking according to the performance. Points are taken or given according to the supplier’s performance level, which determines the supplier’s position in the league table. SpiritsCo had recently introduced a system of “brownie points”, which aimed at awarding suppliers for being “customer friendly”, i.e. being proactive in suggesting supply chain strategies, or ways of working that result in SpiritsCo saving costs. The non-compliance with such requirements meant that suppliers could ultimately being excluded from SpiritsCo’s production network. This dynamic generated clear power imbalances between firms as one supply chain manager illustrates:

[S]uppliers see that the ones that score at the top of the league get more business. For example, the three carton suppliers are desperate to get more business, so they have to finish above the others to get more service contracts... they panic, some of the suppliers if there's a late delivery they

have their phone up "don't mark us down". It's a case of survival.  
(M3.Sco.BH)

The monitoring of performance also involved practices *in loco*, which were used to tune the coordination between SpiritsCo and suppliers. SpiritsCo's senior managers and managers systematically commented on the need to "consolidate and stabilise" SpiritsCo's supply chain strategy, in order to cope with the "unpredictability of the market". One senior supply chain manager states:

[T]o adapt to the new market needs is where this new (supply chain) system comes in, where we have a very strong reporting and tracking of KPIs (...) and this can involve working with one of the suppliers to literally prioritise their production lines, and how they are going to cope with *my* (!) production plan. (SM1.Sco)

Such practices were operationalised by "aligning ways of thinking" (M3.Sco.BH) with the suppliers to shape "processes and ways of working" (SM1.Sco). Such strategy was mentioned in four of the five interviews with supply chain managers:

We (managerial staff) are taken to our suppliers and we would have a meeting and go around the plant and they would show all the things that they are doing. We encourage suppliers to follow the same kind of production (as us). By aligning businesses it makes everything so much easier, with the same KPIs, they are looking for the same things in terms of quality, in terms of lead time... a delivery on time in here it means that the staff in the shop-floor can finish the order and put it out of the door on time. (M3.Sco.BH)

This particular quote suggests that SpiritsCo was seeking increasing levels of inter-firm coordination, by aligning production practices and work organisation with its suppliers.

Having reviewed the dynamics that shapes the inter-firm relationship between SpiritsCo and their suppliers, it will be now introduced how these dynamics influences the inter-firm relation between the SpiritsCo with MaltCo and TranspCo. Following the data sources from this section, three specific themes emerged: (1) the commercial link between firms; (2) the main supply chain specifications required by the lead firm to the supplier; (3) the way power dynamics are built within the inter-firm relation and how it influences the suppliers' behaviour.

### MaltCo inter-firm relation with SpiritsCo

The use of power in coordinating the inter-firm relationship came across strongly between SpiritsCo and MaltCo. Despite recurring references to “trust”, “close and long-term relationship”, it was reported a strong unequal inter-firm relationship with noticeable consequences to MaltCo’s organisational strategy. The inter-firm relationship between MaltCo and SpiritsCo was done in terms of two contradictory sets of pressures – (1) the attempt to establish trust and informality; (2) and formality through contracts and agreements. Therefore, these two contradictory pressures shaped the power dynamics between the two companies.

It was identified that MaltCo is the sole supplier of malt to SpiritsCo. As a result, SpiritsCo became MaltCo’s biggest and most important customer. Although there is a relationship of exclusivity, interviewees from both companies admitted that specifications had to be conformed rigorously, because the company was under the same evaluation parameters as all other SpiritsCo’s suppliers. The valued requirements were reported by the production manager as being predictability of quality (i.e. SpiritsCo’s distilleries require exact levels of malt quality, in terms of nitrogen and germination, in order to maximise the extraction of alcohol from the cereal<sup>4</sup>, and thus MaltCo have to ensure that such parameters are met). Getting the exact quality was paramount for SpiritsCo, because it would ensure a more cost-effective and high-quality spirit production. Establishing these performance targets was formalised via a contractual agreement, and monitored through the suppliers’ rating system, as well as close formal and informal procedures.

It was highlighted by interviewees in both companies, that informal relationships were crucial and encompassed a constant exchange of technical and complex information about the quality of the supplied malt. These often resulted in relevant cost-savings for SpiritsCo:

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<sup>4</sup> Levels of malt quality in terms of nitrogen and germination, in order to maximise the extraction of alcohol from the cereal, is termed in the industry as “yield”. The malting yield is maximised for whisky production when levels of nitrogen are lower at a specific point of germination. However, nitrogen levels vary considering the type of barley being malted.

We do have an advantage towards the rest of the industry we feel, because they are our sole supplier, because we are able to secure the best barley, at the right price. (M1.Sco.D)

Similarly, MaltCo senior managers acknowledged that the informal approach within the inter-firm relation was crucial for controlling the supply chain specifications.

Even though there was room for informal arrangements, there was an important degree of formality based on strict contractual specifications. The formal arrangements were decisive in shaping the inter-firm relationship and power dynamics. It was in the formal arrangements, between the two firms, that more stringent coordinating and regulating mechanisms emerged, and thus the unequal power dynamics were more acutely visible. For instance, MaltCo's senior managers reported a number of penalties if requirements were not complied. This was confirmed by SpiritsCo's managerial staff, as this quote illustrates:

[I]f the quality is not exactly what was agreed in the contract, what we would do then is to ask for a reduction in cost, or an extra load or something like that. (M1.Sco.D)

Another important formal monitoring practice relates to the visits of SpiritsCo personnel to MaltCo's premises. This was aimed to ensure that quantity and quality specifications of malt were being followed. SpiritsCo's distillery manager and both MaltCo managers confirmed this.

This dynamic appeared to drive MaltCo to continuously improve on production and labour processes and on organisational strategies, in order to achieve the required supply chain specifications. MaltCo's production manager explained, that the company over the years had become increasingly "risk averse". He argued that the risk of failing to quality specifications was high, and involved "great amount of investment, in labs and assets". As a result, there was constant pressure "to continuously improve processes and make them more precise" (SM2.Mco). For both MaltCo managers, ensuring production improvement entailed a continuous introduction of new technology. This strategy was, in their view, key to comply with increasing requirements in relation to quantity and quality reliability.

### TranspCo inter-firm relation with SpiritsCo

SpiritsCo's supply chain managers and TranspCo's union representatives recognised, that the inter-firm relation between both companies was established on a clearly imbalanced dynamic. It was identified that coordination mechanisms within the inter-firm dynamic was established exclusively on formal contractual agreements, which involved close monitoring of performance targets and the enforcement of strict penalties.

By analysing SpiritsCo production network, it was identified that SpiritsCo contracted two haulage companies to undertake their logistics operations. These two companies would be awarded different contractual services (such as cask transport, or whisky transport) according to their performance level.

When considering the TranspCo's supply chain requirements, interviewees from both companies emphasised two main ones: firstly, accurately communicated delivery times; and secondly cost-saving practices. Relating to the first requirement, most SpiritsCo's supply chain managers related it to delays in delivery times as "waste", and "non-productive time". For instance, one SpiritsCo senior manager argued, that communicating accurate delivery times allowed SpiritsCo to effectively manage the company's labour utilisation, as well as to maintain a smooth flowing of supply chain. Thus, TranspCo is specially time contingent, and has to make sure that drivers deliver at certain agreed time. In relation to the second identified pressure, it was mentioned by interviewees, that TranspCo was in constant pressure to suggest innovative cost-saving practices. This strategy would ultimately result in the company securing new contractual agreements with SpiritsCo.

The consequences of poor performance rates, such as delays in delivery times, were discussed with interviewees from SpiritsCo and TranspCo. Both TranspCo's union representatives mentioned that, SpiritsCo recently had tightened its monitoring approach towards TranspCo's KPIs, specially:

(O)n deliveries per day, how many are delayed, and how many are actually not delivered, (and) accuracy of lead times per route (UR1.Tco).

However, keeping with exact delivery times can be difficult due to the unplanned and unpredictable orders that whisky companies (including SpiritsCo) place on a daily basis. They argued that if delivery times were not complied, then it was contractually enforced on TranspCo a number of penalties and fines:



(In a) distillery if (SpiritsCo) have to retain the spirit in the vat because of (TranspCo)... and there's tens of thousands of pound retained there, stopped, going nowhere, they definitely don't want that. And there's penalties and its mega mega money. (UR1.Tco).

SpiritsCo managers and TranspCo union representatives discussed two mechanisms ensuring deliveries were made at the required times: firstly, through direct market competition with other haulage suppliers for more contracted services; and secondly, the relevancy that SpiritsCo had for TranspCo's business. SpiritsCo's supply chain managers referred consistently, that the company relies on TranspCo directly competing with other haulage suppliers, in order to increase organisational performance. These managers further recognised that this inter-firm strategy was established on unequal grounds. This was not presented as a dictatorial approach, but accepted as an economic inevitability, inherent to this inter-firm relationship, as one SpiritsCo supply chain manager explains:

We as a business have to use our position to push (TranspCo). To be honest... we use it because the threat of pulling our business is very scary to some people and we've used this to our advantage. (SM1.Sco)

Regarding the second identified factor, two of four SpiritsCo's supply chain managers reinforced the importance that the purchasing advantage (power) had within the inter-firm relationship with TranspCo. TranspCo's union representatives confirmed this perception:

(SpiritsCo) is one of (TranspCo's) core customers and they (TranspCo management) tends to bend over backwards to please them. They have these core businesses and they've got to keep those. (UR2.Tco)

The impact of such pressures resulted in increasing managerial attention was being directed towards maintaining and extending TranspCo's foothold in SpiritsCo. TranspCo's interviewees consistently emphasised that such efforts influenced many of TranspCo's organisational practices, which aimed at increasing coordination and concertation between the two firms. Such practices ended up influencing the way labour was being managed in the workplace.

## **5.4. Market and Inter-firm dynamics shaping organisational strategy, work and employment**

With the market and inter-firm dynamics discussed in the section 5.2, section 5.3 now turns to consider the impacts that such pressures had on organisational structures of the three case studies considered in this thesis. The discussion in the following section begins with the analysis of firm's strategies in coping with market and production network pressures. The following section addresses the impact that market pressures have on the three SpiritsCo's workplaces considered in this thesis (bottling hall, distillery, and cooperage site), as well as MaltCo and TranspCo.

### **5.4.1. SpiritsCo – the impact of market pressures on organisational strategy, work and employment**

As it was previously highlighted, managerial staff at SpiritsCo was finding increasingly difficult to juggle the contradicting market pressures. In addition to market pressures having a knock-on effect on how SpiritsCo managed its production network, they also influenced the ways in which SpiritsCo organised work across the company's different production sites. The following sections focuses on the consequences that such market pressures had for work and employment in the three different SpiritsCo workplaces (bottling hall, distillery and cooperage site).

#### *The Bottling hall*

Within the bottling hall analysis, interviews with managerial staff, workers, and SpiritsCo supply chain managers were considered. All managerial staff from the bottling hall consistently reported difficulties to manage cost, reliability of supply and quality requirements stemming from SpiritsCo's customers. Such pressures were identified as being key in shaping the organisational strategy, work and employment in the bottling hall. Therefore, these were considered as emerging themes.

Production and labour costs were found to be linked to price pressures stemming from the retailers. The impaired relations between SpiritsCo and retailers meant that SpiritsCo had in most occasions to give in to retailers' will-power. For example, the senior manager responsible for the UK market revealed, that retailers are free – under EU regulation – to set up their own prices. Pricing is one of the most important aspects for retailers when

trying to sell a product. The price-war in which supermarkets find themselves, often leads retailers to over-promote products without these being accounted within the service level agreement. This creates an “unpredictable” behaviour from retailers when setting their own prices. The senior manager for UK market referred that retailers will try at all times to push promotion costs on to SpiritsCo. This unpredictable behaviour from retailers leads to disruptions in forecasted production costs in SpiritsCo. Consequently, when retailers drive down promotional prices, it means the profit for each bottle will be lower than forecasted, which impacts on cost-efficiency – the lower the price of the bottle in the point of sale, the narrower is the profit margin.

According to the bottling hall manager, one of the ways SpiritsCo ensures acceptable levels of profitability is by effectively manage “labour utilisation” in relation to market demands (SM3.Sco.BH):

We are not a profit part of the business, we are a cost centre. So what happens is that when (retailers) are calm the cost centre is quite under the radar, but when they start asking for more and more, we go: "ok how can we cut costs? How can we rationalise in labour, direct overhead costs, indirect overhead costs?" all of that comes into attention - costs, costs, costs. (SM3.Sco.BH).

Adjusting labour costs to market demands was operationalised by management in two ways: firstly, flexibilisation of employee numbers; and, secondly, flexibilisation of workers’ working time. Different contractual and working time arrangements were introduced into the bottling hall, to ensure a cost-effective usage of labour. Managerial staff reported that this was attained by using three types of contracts: permanent full time contracts, permanent flexible contracts (annualised hours), and temporary contracts. An HR member of staff commented that SpiritsCo was able to use sophisticated software to calculate the exact number of staff with different contracts required to each line. The contractual variation strategy was coupled with variation in working time patterns. Managerial staff consistently referred in interviews the need of SpiritsCo to increase working hours, in order to adapt to market demands and diminish overtime costs. Despite some constrains in the usage of working time flexibility placed by the collective agreement (described in detail in Chapter 6), SpiritsCo was able to implement three eight hour shift on week and weekend days.

In addition to costs, interviewees reported on the highly unpredictable call for goods

emanating from retail orders. The imbalanced power dynamics were also acutely observable in this aspect. For instance, once SpiritsCo accepts an “unplanned order”, the failure to meet the exact requirements, in terms of delivery times, could lead to a series of fines, penalties, and ultimately being unlisted from supermarkets’ supplying list. This generated issues with the overall running of the lines, especially related to two aspects of labour management: firstly, workers’ performance and effort levels; and, secondly, workers’ absence rates. As a result, all managers and workers consistently referred that new and more stringent systems were being introduced in the bottling hall. All managerial staff considered these crucial to create a more reliable workforce, both in terms of effort and attendance.

Lastly, quality was also referred as a main specification stemming from SpiritsCo’s customers. Interviewees reported that bottling and packaging were under stringent quality standards due to retail requirements. For instance, a temporary employee discussed how products had “to comply with strict” quality requirements, and if retailers “get any bad packing, they send (it) back” (TE4.Ssco.BH).

The stringent quality requirements, unpredictability of orders, and costs pressures meant SpiritsCo had to constantly consider innovative ways to manage the existing skill pool. This had consequences on the required skill set, skill development and utilisation, and in the way process was controlled.

### *The distillery*

Pressures emanating from retailers were partly constrained within distilleries; however management was also required to ensure a cost-efficient production at high levels of quality. The following discussion outlines how dynamics at inter-firm level shaped work and employment in the distillery case study.

Reliability of supply did not emerge in the interviews with participants as a shaping driver of the distillery’s work and employment. The production of whisky is not compatible with the rapid market fluctuations; rather, spirit production requires stability over long periods of maturation, in order to offer a quality product to the customer<sup>5</sup>. The senior

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<sup>5</sup> According to SWA (2016) it is not possible to lay down any precise age as being the best for a particular whisky. Overall, single malt whiskies require longer to mature fully than blended whiskies. However, UK and European Union law specify that Scotch whisky should be at least three years old

manager responsible by SpiritsCo's "whisky operations" mentioned that the company had to invest in warehousing, in order to allow distilleries to stock production, and counter the intense variations in market demand. The warehouses are responsible for ensuring that the spirit is supplied to the bottling hall. As a result, these logistic points (the warehouses) acted as buffers between the demands of the market and the distilleries. The senior manager argued that this strategy allowed for more stability in the supply chain between the distillery and the bottling hall, which prevented direct impacts from market fluctuations.

Nevertheless, SpiritsCo's recent change to a consumer-led business had impacted the distillery's organisational strategy. The main concerns within the distillery's production was: firstly, related to the cost-effectiveness; and, secondly, related to the reliability of quality standards. Cost was consistently highlighted in all interviews with managerial staff and workers because of "squeezed profit margins" (M1.Sco.D) on the sale side of business. The most striking example relates to the KPIs required by SpiritsCo headquarters, which changed in configuration and periodicity. The distillery manager explains:

Every month now we get cost account figures that are produced in Glasgow, that's hmm pounds per litre of alcohol produced hmm litre of alcohol per tonne of malt processed and the energy used per litre of alcohol. (M1.Sco.D).

These KPIs are partly achieved through production efficiencies. In short, distilleries are required to produce more spirit with the same level of purchased malt, i.e. more spirit at the same cost. It was emphasised by the distillery manager that the distillery was at an all-time high in terms of production cost-effectiveness. Other participants, during interviews, confirmed this trend:

[T]hey (management) have become obsessed of how much you can take in alcohol of a ton of barley, because if you go back 15 year you would never get 450 litres of alcohol from a ton. (PE4.Sco.D).

In relation to quality reliability, the distillery manager mentioned that it had always been paramount for SpiritsCo. As a result, the company sought ways of improving production reliability and "maintain(ing) spirit quality standards - nosing, assessment" (M1.Sco.D).

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(Food (The Scottish Whisky Regulations) Order, 2009). Nevertheless, data gathered during fieldwork point to longer periods than the legal minimum practiced within the SSI.

The distillery manager revealed that maximisation of production at lower costs, coupled with increasing pressures to achieve reliable results of quality, entailed two different, but complementary, work and employment strategies: (1) introducing high-end technology to guarantee high levels of required quality standards; and (2) running the distillery round the clock, in order to maximise production, labour, and asset utilisation.

Managerial staff referred that technology was key to the successful running of the business. For instance, one line manager mentioned that over the last decades the introduction of computers and high-tech machinery was pivotal to reliably get the “exact required levels of yield and quality” (LM2.Sco.D). Interviews in the distillery with managerial staff and workers referred that the automation of production process had a knock-on effect on the way work was being organised. Workers commented that the introduction of technology had dramatically impacted the operators’ skill levels, and scope for task discretion. It was emphasised that technology had taken over the production process, leaving little scope for workers to apply their skills and knowledge of “mashing” and “distilling”.

The second organisational strategy (working time flexibility) derived in part from the introduction of new technology. The bottling hall manager highlighted the company’s need to reorganise the shift planning into 24/7 cycles. This would ensure a more cost-effective production, and maximisation of asset and labour utilisation. Indeed, although it was identified that individuals employed by SpiritsCo to work in distilleries have full-time permanent contracts with long tenures, their contracts specified a high level of temporal flexibility. The temporal flexibility entailed three eight-hour shifts during the week, and two twelve-hour shifts during the weekends.

### *The cooperage site*

While in the previous two SpiritsCo workplaces, work and employment were clearly affected by market derivatives, the case with the cooperage site was rather different. The cooperage managerial staff and coopers reported increasing pressures from how the business should be structured in order to better accommodate market requirements. However, they also highlighted the role of the union present in the workplace in countering such pressures. As a result, the influence of market pressures in shaping

organisational strategy, work and employment, was reported by all interviewees to be diminutive and highly constrained by the union.

Although all managerial staff made several references to the need of “tightening up” managerial practices in order to better adjust to market derivatives related to cost, supply reliability and quality, in practice these were not observable in the workplace. It was reported several incidents illustrating that market derivatives were consistently ignored by the coopers during their daily tasks, or obstructed by the union in order to protect coopers’ interests.

In relation to costs, there was clear disparity between managerial staff and coopers’ perception on how important it was for the running of the business. On the one hand, managerial staff made constant references to the need of “adapting the cooperage site to the market needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century”. Such adjustment should be considered by taking into account all “labour, asset and material costs” (M1.Sco.C). For instance, the cooperage site manager emphasised how the market was demanding cooperage sites around the SSI to be increasingly cost-effective, and to adapt its exact employee numbers to the market and production needs. The manager argued that such business strategy, present in competitor firms, contrasted to what could be observed in the SpiritsCo cooperage site. This was illustrated in all aspects of running a cost-efficient workplace, as the manager argues:

I explain to these guys that something will save like five minutes a day and they go "what's five minutes, why should I be bothered about five minutes?". Well five minutes, is twenty minutes a week, ten hours a year, so in ten hours you can repair another forty-four casks, and if I got eighteen coopers all of the sudden that's five hundred casks. That's me getting a cooper for ten weeks for free. (M1.Sco.C)

Through the cooperage manager’s narrative, it was clear that cost should be the most prevalent aspect when running the business. However, coopers frequently emphasised the quality standards, in order to challenge the managerial cost-driven approach. The most striking example related to the ineffective use of material, such as gloves. Most participants mentioned that labour-management tensions escalated due to coopers discarding gloves without having any consideration for the costs. The following encapsulates the coopers’ resistance towards a cost-awareness culture:

In here they don't recognise that they are now working in the modern 2015, they still think they can do what they want. They can't understand why I'm talking about cost all the time, how much the gloves cost, because they'll say "we need that to work". (M1.Sco.C)

The same disregard towards supply chain demands was reported in relation to reliability of supply of casks. For instance, the cooperage site manager reported that the company production demand for repaired casks was far lower, than what was being supplied by the cooperage. Although SpiritsCo is aware of the need to diminish the number of repaired casks, in order to adjust to supply chain demands, they have been impeded to do so by the union. This aspect was challenged by the workers because it would result in a "radical restructuring" of the cooperage site, where "lower employee numbers and wages" had to be considered, as well as implementing flexible working practices, in order to diminish the production output (LM1.Sco.C).

The quality of service was reported by all interviewees to be the market derivative that most shaped the organisational strategy, work and employment in the cooperage site. Such influence had driven both management and workforce to implement control mechanisms. For instance, recently, management implemented a practice that highlighted the parts of the casks that needed repair, in order to increase production efficiency. The focus on quality was also coupled with a quality checking area. In this area, casks are subject to tests "to see if there is any leakages, any porous wood, and then will also check if there is any broken wood" (LM1.Sco.C). Nevertheless, coopers viewed such practices as managerial intromission in the labour process, driven to efficiency rather than quality. In essence, for coopers, managerial practices diminished their skills and their self-discipline:

My entire life I've been repairing casks, I came into the trade when I was 15. I think I know what needs to be done. I don't need some manager telling me what needs repairing. (PE1.Sco.C)

Indeed, the coopers' argument was grounded on their ability to do the job with high standards of quality. Therefore, coopers' references to quality were frequently coupled to their own skills, or disdain towards any managerial practice that would hamper coopers' skills set, utilisation, and development.



#### **5.4.2. The impact of production network pressures on suppliers' organisational strategy, work and employment**

##### MaltCo

Managers from SpiritsCo and MaltCo reported that imbalanced power dynamics occurring between the two companies deeply impacted the way MaltCo's business and organisational strategy was structured and, consequently, on work and employment patterns. The organisational strategy at MaltCo is structured around fostering the exclusive and long-term relationship with SpiritsCo. Therefore, the two MaltCo managers reported that the company had increased their predisposition to: firstly, implement new technology, in order to accurately control quality requirements; and, secondly, tightening inter-firm ties with SpiritsCo.

Technological upgrades were evident in MaltCo, and were pivotal in granting reliability of malt quality. The constant investment in technology was aimed at managing risk in relation to quality variation, by reducing the number of human errors and its consequences:

The thing here, I know it sounds stupid, but we are trying to absolutely automate everything around the operator so we don't have any human errors anymore... we still get a bit of errors, but we already have a list of automation that we want to do next, to improve... to make sure that there isn't human error involved.  
(SM2.Mco)

In addition to the introduction of up-to-date technology, MaltCo managers mentioned that the close inter-firm relationship contributed to a variety of joint problem solving groups, and introduction of "innovative ways of working". The production manager at MaltCo illustrates:

(Name of SpiritsCo Manager) has some interest in taking a closer look at certain periods of the malting process (...) So we have several joint problem solving meetings involving me, the senior quality manager, and (SpiritsCo) research and development group. (...) it's useful because they always suggest new ways of doing things. (SM2.Mco)

It was acknowledged by MaltCo senior managers that this inter-firm cooperation contributed for production and labour process changes. It was identified in interviews with MaltCo's managers and workers that this had three outcomes in terms of work and employment. Firstly, it had consequences in furthering working time flexibilisation. All interviewees in MaltCo reported the recent need to extend working hours and achieve a 24/7 production, which was achieved through three 8-hour shifts during week days, and two 12-hour shifts in weekends. Secondly, on workers' skills and task discretion levels. It was emphasised by all interviewed workers how work had been transformed from being highly skilled into a "*cleaning job*". The required skill set to do the job influenced skill development and utilisation, as well as the scope for task discretion. Lastly, the strict level of inter-firm supervision meant that the management of workers performance and absence was becoming harsher. Five of the seven interviewed workers pointed to the gradual tightening of performance and absence management mechanism. It was commented that performance management had been revised in the last years, in order to establish visible levels of work effort. Moreover, absence management had been recently linked to pay with the aim to discourage workers to skip work.

### TranspCo

In terms of inter-firm dynamics the power imbalance between firms, resulted in TranspCo becoming increasingly exposed to SpiritsCo's will. The imbalanced relationship assumed great significance for the shaping of work and employment at the local level.

It was consistently found in interviews with nine of the eleven interviewees in TranspCo that the company's organisational strategy was grounded on securing and extending as much contractual agreements with SpiritsCo as possible. One of the union representatives argues:

[I]n renewing contracts with (whisky producers) (...) they'll do everything they possible can, even if that means that we'll have to put on overtime, to come to work on weekends... we'll get fuck all but (SpiritsCo) will be all happy. That's (TranspCo's) survival strategy. (UR1.Tco)

In order to secure more contracts, TranspCo sought to be increasingly integrated into SpiritsCo supply chain. TranspCo aimed at achieving this by assuring better

organisational performance rates (through ensuring reliability of delivery and lead times), and by increasingly adjusting the company's work organisation to SpiritsCo.

The need for TranspCo to comply with delivery times, and accurately communicate them, resulted in increasing monitoring over drivers' working day. After negotiations between TranspCo management and the union present in the workplace, the company decided to implement a new monitoring system. This included a tracking system installed into lorries, which could be connected into head offices. It was through this system that management was able to monitor the movement of lorries. The utilisation of such technology by TranspCo was not new. The novelty was the integration of the tracking system into SpiritsCo's supply chain management system, allowing its staff to co-monitor TranspCo's drivers through "sat-navs". One manager from SpiritsCo describes:

For instance, if I'm in warehousing and I'm expecting a van to come at 10 o'clock, I'll get my team waiting a couple of minutes earlier than ten. I'll look at my satnav and the van would be actually 30 minutes away, so I can get these guys to do something else other than waiting. So I'm able to increase labour utilisation. (M1.Sco.C)

This integration was discussed by TranspCo's union representative has means of the company to "provide more transparency to customers (...) (that) now can control more closely (drivers') positions and calculate exactly the delivery time" (UR2.Tco). Thus, through this system, TranspCo and SpiritsCo were able to track the movement of the lorry and cargo through the supply chain. As a result, TranspCo was able to further the integration into SpiritsCo production network.

The second consideration relates to the pressure that TranspCo was under, to increasingly adjust their work organisation to SpiritsCo. SpiritsCo's supply chain managers and TranspCo drivers reported an increasing pressure to adopt a more "customer friendly" behaviour, as well as becoming more "proactive in suggesting cost-saving strategies" (M3.Sco.BH). A SpiritsCo's senior manager emphasised the importance of being proactive for getting more points in the supplier's rating system:

So if we make business with (TranspCo) we expect them bringing things to us and being proactive... it's basically making things easier for us. Innovation and new ideas to improve processes has a lot to do with cost reduction. (SM2.Sco)

However, these two organisational strategies had noticeable impacts on TranspCo's work

and employment. Firstly, it had consequences on drivers' skills and task discretion levels. TranspCo union representatives and drivers consistently referred to the negative impacts that the new system of control had for drivers' skills and task discretion. Based on evaluating the tracking information, TranspCo management was able to impose strict guidelines for how long a route may take, in order to optimise the labour process from the company's point of view. Secondly, the new organisational strategies also impacted on drivers' working time. The union representatives consistently commented the further flexibilisation of drivers' working time as strategy to adjust shift patterns across the industry.

## **5.5. Chapter Summary**

The data above evidenced the creeping in of market and supply chain pressures into the analysed workplace and how it changed particular structures of organisational strategy, work and employment. Evidence showed that SpiritsCo was under strict and intense pressures due to its recent change in strategy. The company primarily coped with such pressures by managing its production network through practices that aimed at synching suppliers' ways of organising production and work. The inter-firm power dynamics were found to be imbalanced and to take different shapes, yet with consistent attempts centred on regulating suppliers' behaviours within production network. It was showed that the value of market and supply chain pressures for management comes from the way it is used to control suppliers within the production network, and consequently certain aspects of production. This control system involved strict requirements aimed at increasing the integration of firms and organisational performance. These were found to be stringently monitored. Non-complying with imposed requirements could result in suppliers being unlisted from SpiritsCo production network. Suppliers, such as MaltCo and TranspCo, adjusted their organisational strategies to better accommodate supply chain requirements, which in turn impacted directly on labour. In SpiritsCo bottling hall and distillery, in MaltCo, and in Transpco, identical work and employment strategies have been adopted, based on flexible working schemes, introduction of technology, and strict managerial monitoring practices. Each of these outcomes is consistent with a marketization of the political-economic context where the logic of the market dominates how work should be organised and performed. The only exception was the cooperage site, where a strong union was able to keep most supply chain derivatives from piercing and drastically

influencing work and employment patterns. The analysis in this chapter provides confirmatory evidence that dynamics happening at an inter-firm level have direct influence on the way management reacts accordingly and the impacts on work and employment. It is within this context that the analysis in the next chapters (6 and 7) explores the impacts it had on job quality, and examines how job quality is part of a contested employment relationship.

## **Chapter 6: Job quality in unionised workplaces**

### **6.1. Introduction**

The Chapter 6 is concerned with the way in which the inter-firm pressures impacts on work organisation, and thus shape job quality in unionised workplaces. Therefore, in this chapter, it is explored how job quality is shaped by management, who attempts to cope with market and supply chain pressures; and how workers counter such pressures in workplaces, where trade union is present. The discussion on workers' agency in unionised workplaces within this chapter will focus exclusively on collective agency in the form of trade unionism. This is not to say that in unionised workplaces, individual forms of agency do not take place. Indeed, individuals in unionised workplaces may attempt to improve the quality of their own jobs, by resorting to individual forms of agency (such as absenteeism, or individual negotiations with management). This may be particularly acute when individuals perceive that the union is not protecting workers' interests in an effective way. However, the specific purposes of this chapter, is to analyse the capacity for workers to shape job quality through collective mechanisms (i.e. trade unions); whereas, the next chapter will look at workers' capacity to shape job quality through individual mechanisms. Thus, although this thesis accepts that this is an artificial distinction of both forms of agency (as individual agency can occur in collectivised workplaces), it helps the thesis to present results in a structured way, so that the research questions are appropriately answered.

This chapter aims at addressing the research questions 2, 3 and 4. Within these, it is proposed to explore the ways in which supply chain and production network dynamics impact on job security and working time, skills and task discretion, and work pressures. Secondly, this chapter also examines research questions 5 and 6, which aim at exploring the ways in which market pressures produce conditions for de-collectivisation, and how collective worker agency is able to regulate and shape job quality. As it was identified in the methodology chapter, there are three workplaces whereby the trade union is present – the SpiritsCo bottling hall, the SpiritsCo cooperage, and TranspCo. What union representatives were unable to respond to a specific theme, or acknowledged not having addressed, may be similarly crucial to the understanding of the union's role in shaping and regulating job quality.

Therefore, the first section of each dimension demonstrates that rather than solely addressing job quality in terms of a fixed institutional outcome, job quality needs to be viewed as a concept dynamically shaped by a political-economic framework.

## **6.2. SpiritsCo bottling hall's job quality and the market pressures**

The historical context for this case is critically important to understand the processes of job quality shaping. The bottling hall site is located in Glasgow, close to the river Clyde, where shipyards and other industries were active in the past. Therefore, the area was traditionally relatively abundant in manufacturing jobs. Over the years, those industries closed down or relocated elsewhere, which impacted on job availability in the area, contributing to social and economic deprivation. Nevertheless, SpiritsCo bottling hall maintained business, and the company actually hired some workers from the extinguished shipyards nearby, offering workers relatively good wages and terms and conditions.

After a long period of past militancy, the union signed a partnership deal, and since then the union-management relationship has been characterised as unequal, and offering little gains for workers. There was a strong sense among the respondents that had been a dramatic change in the nature of employment relations, with less open confrontation and more friendly relations. One HR member in the bottling hall explained the way in which SpiritsCo regards the partnership:

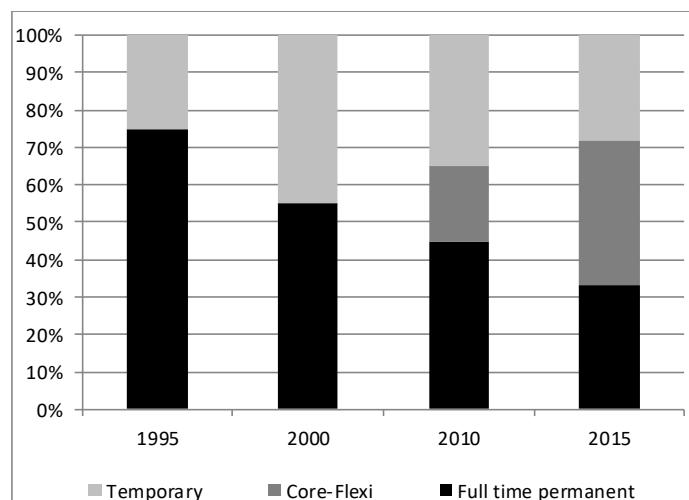
(SpiritsCo) doesn't want the trade union to take ownership of the problem. We want the dialogue to keep flowing so that (SpiritsCo) can be upfront on issues that might be happening. It also helps (SpiritsCo) to assess the mood of the employees, 'are they happy about things, or not happy about things?' (...). So it's a really good barometer to assess the temperature of the workforce. (SM8.Sco)

The shaping of job quality in this company involved several interrelated factors. The first (described on Chapter 5) involved the downward pressures emanating from the supply chain. However, job quality was also shaped by the employment relationship at the workplace level.

## 6.2.1. Job security and working time

### 6.2.1.1. Management’s role shaping job security and working time

Within this section SpiritsCo’s HR members, and bottling hall’s managers and workers were asked about flexibility aspects related to job security and working time. Managers reported that SpiritsCo was using three types of contracts to cover for their labour needs in the bottling hall – permanent full time, permanent core-flexi, and temporary contracts. One HR member of staff reported a rising trend in flexible contracts, which resulted from a policy that blocked hiring workers on full time contracts, allowing only the recruitment of individuals on flexible contracts. As the graph below<sup>6</sup> indicates, such policy resulted in a sharp decrease of permanent full time workers. The flexible contracts have risen over the years to a level that dominated the bottling hall, and all interviewees consistently stated that this was due to one main purpose: to effectively adjust labour costs to sales demands.



**Graph 2: Development of ratio over the years (1995 – 2015) between different types of contracts used in SpiritsCo bottling hall.**

The permanent full-time workers were considered by management as part of the core workforce, and the majority had been working for the company for 15 years or more. Most managerial staff showed mixed feelings towards “full-timers”<sup>7</sup>, as they were generally considered not showing “right attitude” in terms of flexibility. This perception

<sup>6</sup> The graph was produced based on an interview with a member of HR staff and HR internal documents.

<sup>7</sup> Full time permanent workers are often referred within the bottling hall context as “*full timers*”.



was supported by an engagement survey provided by the company's HR department, which indicates low levels of engagement from this group in relation to the company's working practices. A collective agreement present in the workplace protected full timers from most flexible practices. Union representatives and managerial staff revealed that full-time workers were employed on fixed 38 weekly hours, with overtime being voluntary and upon an increased hourly rate. The collective agreement further granted full-time workers the choice on which shift to work. Although there were some restrictions, the permanent workers were indeed subject to nonstandard working time patterns. Nevertheless, the permanent nature of the contract gave a consensual feeling of individuals being unchallenged and high levels of job security.

In relation to the two types of flexible contracts, SpiritsCo management consistently mentioned that its *raison d'être* was to adjust labour costs to market demands. Both temporary and core-flexi contracts, entailed different levels of flexibility, which allowed management to adjust employee numbers in the shop-floor in different ways.

Temporary contracts were not new in SpiritsCo, and senior managers reported that these were in principle utilised to cope with the predictable seasonal fluctuation inherent to the Scottish Spirits Industry. The contract of employment could last for a couple of weeks to six months. However, the stringent cost pressures and unpredictable market fluctuations pushed SpiritsCo's managers and line managers to constantly juggling with periods of employment. In discussing such topic, one manager illustrates how temporary contracts obey to market imperatives:

When they're brought in here (we) give them two week contracts, and then again two weeks and then we look at the business, like how is it going to progress over the year. (LM1.Sco.BH)

Despite this system of uncertainty, most of the temporary workers would come back to SpiritsCo "year in, year out" (SM3.Sco.BH). The company, due to obvious financial gains, fostered this type of relationship. However, it was also welcomed by the workers, due to the lack of labour market alternatives in the area. Illustrative of this returning dynamics is that from the interviews made to temporary workers, the majority of them had more than ten years of (broken) service with the company.

In relation to working time, it was reported that management had total control over individuals' shift patterns and overtime work. Managerial staff and workers consistently

reported that the control was attained through the power imbalances between management and temporary workers. For instance, one HR member of staff reported that power imbalances were nurtured right from the recruiting process: management would only hire individuals that showed the most availability to work in the three different shifts. By confirming this level of compliance, the bottling hall manager stated that workers showing greater availability for the day-shift, would have less probabilities of being hired. This was because the company's needs lied primarily on the twilight and night shifts. In relation to overtime, a high level of compliance was also observed. All workers and some line managers reported that "temps" were expected to adjust to the company's needs, as the individual could risk being overlooked when a permanent vacancy would come up, or not coming back next year as a temporary worker.

These practices impacted temporary workers' experiences of job quality. All interviewed temporary workers reported being affected in terms of life planning and mental health. The experiences of job quality were mostly related to the short nature of contract: "you are living in constant fear that next week they will pay you off" (TE4.Sco.BH). Naturally, this dynamic of breaking service affected individuals' ability to plan for a structured family and social life. This aspect was reported to be particularly impactful on female workers. Half of them coupled the previous with feelings of distress and depression.

The core-flexi contractual scheme was fairly new to the organisation, and was aimed at bringing further flexibility to the workplace. This was particularly acute in terms of working time, as this group of workers was employed on "annualized hours". The individuals were on permanent contracts, but their working hours were reviewed on a yearly basis to adjust to sales forecasts. Overall, managerial staff considered this contract to be highly valuable in the day-to-day run of the business:

[N]ow with this system of the flexi it all changed... because now we have a lot more flexibility. We don't have to use the full workforce at all times, we just put them at home when there is not enough demand and we bring them when needed. (LM4.Sco.BH).

The real value of core-flexi contracts lies in the capacity it provided management to adjust the individuals' working hours by the minute. Workers could be brought to work and sent home in the same day, depending on the supply needs of the business. Union representatives reported that core-flexi workers were also covered by the collective

agreement. For instance, management had to give a 24-hour notice period when management enquire them about “availability to work”<sup>8</sup>. However, in practice the collective agreement was not being followed by managerial staff. It was observed during the course of one interview the line manager interrupting and asking to the (“core-flexi”) interviewee to extend his shift. This practice was later reported to be frequent. This practice was reported to be crucial so that management could respond swiftly to unplanned orders or an absence.

As a result, the nature of the contract based on annualised hours brought to the forefront experiences of uncertainty, fear and distress. The general feeling reported by most core-flexi workers was related to stress “because they review your contract every year, it's quite nerve wrecking” (PE2.Sco.BH), and fear of not getting enough hours to “make ends meet” (PE6.Sco.BH). Although management referred that core-flexi workers had always work guaranteed, this was a contested view by all core-flexi workers. This uncertainty, impacted workers’ job quality experience, not only because of uncertainty related to working hours, but also because of wages that were indexed to the amount of hours worked. Family issues were also reported, specifically relating to working time aspects, such as availability for work and shifts. The majority of core-flexi workers mentioned that unplanned shift changes and overtime had a serious impact upon workers family responsibilities. One employee mentioned that he was “changing everything around at last minute” (PE2.Sco.BH) so that he could meet management’s expectations.

In sum, the SpiritsCo’s attempt to maximise flexibility in the workplace is clear by this evidence. This flexibility was found to be driven by cost control practices propelled by the market. The flexibility clearly brought clear divisions and different managerial treatment between groups of workers with different contracts, particularly in the way job security was used to attain increasing working time flexibility. Therefore, the site’s flexibility was not limited to flexible forms of employment contracts, but also to the various types of working time schemes.

#### 6.2.1.2. Prospects of workers’ agency in shaping job security and working time

Two main themes were identified in the analysis of data related to the capacity of trade union to regulate managerial intents to flexibilise the workforce. The first confirms the

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<sup>8</sup> I.e. if they could come to work in the following day on a particular shift.

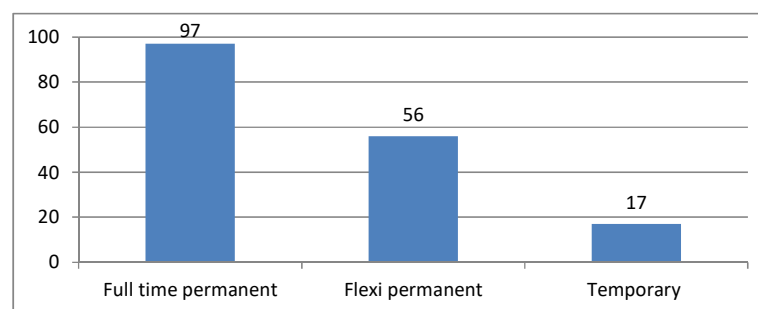
internalisation of market pressures rhetoric into the trade union’s discourse. The second was the lack of capacity to harmonise the different interests existing in the three-tier workforce, and a focus on economic issues.

Relating to the first theme, the union representatives frequently legitimised management drive to introduce flexible practices by claiming: “it’s the nature of business” (UR1.Sco.BH). It was consistently acknowledged during the interviews with union representatives that the fluctuation of market demands was an imperative to which the company could not avoid, and thus had to adjust to it. During interviews, it was clear the assimilation of the company’s logic by emphasising organisational objectives:

We’ve got to be part of the company structure, we’re not self-sufficient...  
hmm (we) can’t influence everything, we don’t have a say on everything  
because in the end of the day the company has to be profitable. (UR2.Sco.BH)

This approach directly clashed with flexible workers’ interests. Illustrative of this was the general idea that the union was more of a “business partner, than protecting workers’ interests” (PE1.Sco.BH).

This acceptance of market derivatives intersects with the second identified theme – the union’s lack of capacity to harmonise the existing three-tier workforce, and their different interests. Considering the Figure 2<sup>9</sup> it can be seen a clear division of union membership rates between groups of workers: the membership amongst permanent full time workers is close to maximum (97%), whereas the other two groups of workers the percentages are significantly lower. These figures partly illustrate the fragmented nature of worker agency in the bottling hall.



**Graph 2: Union membership per type of contract at SpiritsCo bottling hall.**

<sup>9</sup> The graphic was produced taking into account the data gathered from interviews with managerial staff and union representatives.

This distribution impacts on the union's strategy in defending the workforces' interests. This detachment meant an increasing inability to protect workers real interests and an increasing focus on pay-related issues. In relation to temporary workers, all union representatives explained that despite acknowledging that temporary workers do need greater union support, the contractual nature and individuals' victimisation hampered this support, as one union representative argues:

Relationship can be slightly stranded, and lot of it comes down to the fact that these temporary workers when they come back, they are in here for short(er) periods of time (...) it is difficult to engage with these people to become part of the union. The union struggles a wee bit with that. (UR3.Sco.BH)

Moreover, he continued to discuss that owing to the intimidation of jeopardising temporary workers' chances of getting a full time job, or not being hired back next year, it meant that workers regularly felt vulnerable and fearful of taking a more militant stance by engaging with the union. This was reported to be related to temporary workers' dependency on SpiritsCo "to boost their finances from the wages they get in here, even for a short period of the year" (UR2.Sco.BH). Temporary workers who highlighted subtle threats by management supported this:

you are often told that we get much better conditions than in other bonds (...) people with zero hour contracts and employed through agencies. (...) we get told "wake up and smell the coffee" (TE3.Sco.BH).

Nevertheless, it was emphasised during interviews with union representatives that the union was attempting to reduce temporary forms of contract. One of such attempts relates to the implementation of core-flexi contracts. The union representative mentioned that these contracts were allowed by the union, because they recognised the company's needs to maintain levels of flexibility, but at the same time could also meet the needs of individuals by offering more stable contracts. However, in practice, this furthered divisions and segmentations amongst the workforce. In turn, the union had become innocuous in preventing and regulating the abuse in the usage of these forms of contracts. The segmentation of the workforce brought further divisions between the groups of workers, and these towards the union. Most temporary workers highlighted the lack of capacity and willpower from the union to bring their terms and conditions closer to the ones enjoyed by the other groups. As a result, the union increasingly saw their scope of

influence being reduced to the point of economic related issues such as wages and pensions. It was referred by union representatives and workers, that the union tended only to have a negotiating stance when pay and pensions were being considered. It was clear the union had not made a successful transition from representing a largely integrated workforce, to adopt new strategies that protected members from being used as part of a process of flexibilisation. The union's acceptance of market derivatives, reflected in the way it accepted flexible working practices, resulted in the weakening of collective agency.

## **6.2.2. Skills and task discretion**

### 6.2.2.1. Management's role in shaping job skills and task discretion

#### *Required skill set*

Most interviews with managerial staff and workers reported that the introduction of new machinery had had deep impacts on the required skills set in the workplace. The bottling hall manager reported that the need to bring new up-to-date machinery was crucial, so that the company could respond effectively to market demands. The most illustrative example was the newly acquired assembly line (named by workers as “the robot cop”) that had an output capacity of 600 bottles per minute. Both managerial staff and workers reported that the implementation of new technology was driving changes in skills: firstly, because tasks were becoming more standardised; and, secondly, because there was the need to develop “softer skills – teamwork, communication, multitasking” (SM3.Sco.BH). Data from interviews with managers also suggested that whilst the significance of new skills related to technology was paramount, the level of required complexity was often limited. This was noticeable in both menial and more complex tasks.

The market pressures were resulting in a more quality-driven business, with stricted quality checks. The drive to quality was changing workers skills from technical, to more softer-type skills, as one manager explains:

(Introduction of new machinery) means that needs to be a change in the profile of the workforce. (...) we need to replace with a different kind of

worker, a slightly more flexible worker, with more communication skills, with a different mind-set. (M2.Sco.BH)

This shift entailed an emphasis on aspects related to “anticipating” errors, being “proactive”, communication, and having the right “mind-set”; rather than, the more technical skills related to quality checks and “asset care”. Managers referred that the involvement of workers in problem solving, was aimed at creating better working environment, with less stress, and where workers could feel part of the business.

### *Skill development and assimilation*

All managers referred that the bottling hall had a clear structure and plan for training, as well as an allocated budget. Interviewees reported that the general trend was to reduce the length of training periods for both temporary and core-flexi workers. Therefore, the length of training was dependent on whether the individual was a temporary worker, and thus was “hired to do a specific job” (LM1.Sco.BH); or a permanent core-flexi worker, which was “hired to do a wide variety of jobs” (LM1.Sco.BH).

Workers and managerial staff referred to the reduction in the length of training regarding the new entrants, such as temporary workers. As discussed previously, SpiritsCo fostered a long-term relation with “temps”, with many returning to work in the bottling hall year after year. These types of temporary workers would usually come back to perform the same job of the previous year, which meant that individuals were already skilful and the company could save on costs. One line manager explains:

So the moment that the temp comes to my line I have to give them a refresh and talk them through anything that’s new. (...) It depends, usually is 20 minutes (LM2.Sco.BH).

By fostering “long-term relations” with the temporary workers, the company ensured individuals could start performing at the required performance rate, which was crucial to maintain the line efficiencies and reach targets. Workers also confirmed this perception:

I've been here for 15 years (as a temporary worker) so I know a lot about the ins and outs of the company, of the job (...). Every time I come back I integrate really easy. I just come in and start working. (TE1.Sco.BH)

Although some of the training was in-house, line managers and workers consistently

referred to recent practices, which were aimed at externalising and individualising training responsibilities for temporary workers. Temporary workers were being asked to develop more skills while not working for SpiritsCo. The expectation was that “temps” would have more chances to come back the next year and for longer periods, or even getting a permanent job. One line manager, discussing training for temporary workers, reported that SpiritsCo encourages them to “get training outside in machines and other things like fork lift truck driving” (LM2.Sco.BH).

Relating to core-flexi workers, it was identified the same trend of reducing time for training. Workers revealed that training offered to core-flexi workers was most of the times insufficient and inadequate. On the one hand, the inadequacy of the training was directly linked to the system of annualised hours. In practice, management accounted the annualised hours mostly as working hours, disregarding other needs such as training. On the other hand, skill development and assimilation was reported to be highly constrained by the need to achieve performance targets. As a result, core-flexi workers were being rushed through the training process. One core-flexi worker discussed that sometimes the training he was getting was “just a formality” to “tick the box for the bosses”. He continued to discuss that although he felt he did not have enough training time he was placed in the new job and told by the line manager that “you’ll pick it up as you go along” (PE2.Sco.BH).

Overall, it was consistently identified during interviews that workers were being trained in very specific tasks, in order to reduce the length of required time to train and assimilate information. The approach to assimilation of skills by management showed that a narrowly defined or more complex tasks required a considerably shorter period of time for assimilation. One line manager proudly discussed that once a job that would require long periods of time (two weeks) to achieve proficiency, was now being achieved in less than one hour, or a couple of days to more complex tasks. Line managers consistently related this with performance targets:

People come in here and I or their colleagues have to go and say "right you do like this and that" and in 30 minutes I have a temp working at the pace that I need. (...) Everything is so fast right now that you just have to go and hit the targets that you have for that day. (LM1.Sco.BH)

The trend was to restrain to a maximum the time of training, even on those jobs that



required some higher level of skills. Thus, this trend of decreasing time for skill development and assimilation was identified across all groups of workers present at the bottling hall. Similar to temporary and core-flexi workers, the individuals on permanent full-time contracts were also subject to the same restrictions.

### *Skills utilisation*

It is now relevant to explore the task variety to which workers were being subject. Six main tasks were identified that workers were required to undertake: quality checks, packing, palletising, fork-lift truck driving, picking up bottles, and keeping the area clean and tidy. Management had implemented job rotation with the aim at diversifying the workers' task scope, as well as to minimise issues related to boredom and physical strains. However, during interviews with managers and line managers, data revealed that job rotation was being hindered by the need to keep "line efficiencies" and to "get the orders out of the door" (LM1.Sco.BH). This vision was consistently reported across all interviews with line managers. One line manager explains his struggle:

I need to put the people I know they are going to deliver the exact standards at the exact period of time that we need, I need to get the best people in the crucial positions that I think will ensure the order is out in the set date.  
(LM5.Sco.BH)

This entails that workers were provided with a very limited range of work tasks. Workers were also asked about skill utilisation and job rotation. Most respondents supported management's view of limited scope for task variety.

However, the reduction in job rotation among temporary workers was in most cases much more noticeable. As a result of temporary workers being hired to do specific jobs, the scope for task variety and skill utilisation was very limited. The bottling hall manager exemplifies this by acknowledging the problem in the bottling hall:

[Y]ou see temps coming in and actually having five or six different skills and they are actually thinking "I'm stuck here". I'm sure they would like some rotation of the job. (But) it's not really up to them of course to decide where they can go. (SM3.Sco.BH)

The lack of job rotation often meant “continuous bending, stretching, and packing” (PE1.Sco.BH). As a result, the most prominent job quality outcome related to skills and task discretion was related to physical and muscular strains experienced by workers. One temporary employee discussing the effects of the repetitive nature of the job commented: “the boys in the back of the line, they are putting carton on all day. Their shoulders and arms can get sore because they have been doing it constantly” (TE2.Sco.BH). It was clear the frustration amongst workers during interviews. One long-serving employee, discussing some tasks undertaken within the bottling hall, started describing the labour process around packaging. During a specific point of the conversation, the long-serving employee expresses his frustration over that particular task together with the lack of job rotation:

I hate packing. I hate it, I hate it! Because you are standing in your feet all day, and your back goes... It's very harsh, it's probably the worst task you can get around here. I don't know a guy in here that enjoys packing. A lot of them (workers) are doing it days on end, and they have been doing for a quite lot of time. (PE1.Sco.BH)

The ways certain aspects of the skill are shaped and stalled have effectively a relationship with the market derivatives. It was revealed that management reacts to market pressures, such as urgent orders and line efficiencies, and utilises skills in the best fashion way that suits the business. Thus, the costs and shipment pressures take over the shop-floor and dictate skill utilisation and the scope for task variety.

### *Task Discretion*

Task discretion discussed here relates particularly to the discretion of workers being able to reach decisions. Task discretion within the context of a bottling hall was argued by management to be paramount. However, the recurrent experience from workers (and some line managers) was that task discretion was influenced by standardisation of tasks and the level of supervision.

Tasks, such as quality checks, that were potentially subject to workers' subjectivity were aim of standardisation. Although management referred that the workforce had freedom to highlight low quality aspects of the product, most workers argued that the standardisation and bureaucratisation of the production process was preventing them to

have any scope for discretion. For instance, one long term full time worker mentioned that the increasing levels of “*paper work*” was linked to the standardisation of the labour process, which would then be used by management to diminish the scope of workers’ subjective interpretations, curtailing individuals’ scope for decision making:

Well there are processes and procedures in place and I'm expected to follow them, I don't have any latitude to change. (...) And that's about every station where is a process quality report to be filled in. (PE4.Sco.BH)

Another factor curtailing workers’ task discretion was directly related to the control over the labour process. Participants in interviews identified that management had implemented two practices that had an immediate implication on workers’ task discretion. The first was through direct supervision; the second was through the setup of a “quality team”.

Relating to the first implemented practice, most managers and line managers mentioned that it had been introduced a new performance target for line-managers based on hitting quality requirements at “first time” (LM6.Sco.BH). This target aimed at reducing costs with quality checks and with delivery returns from retailers, resulting in workers’ discretion being inhibited:

Maybe if they have to pick up a bottle and see if the label is slightly out, and your idea can be subjective to (SpiritsCo’s) standards. So what we’ve been asked to do is to make sure... They'll say "that's fine" and then I'll go and say "no, that’s too much to the side". It’s my job to make sure shipments are out with required quality standards. (LM4.Sco.BH)

At the same time, management had decided to implement a new programme directed at “systematise the supervision over quality requirements” (SM3.Sco.BH). This programme entailed the setup of a “quality team” that would “trial on some stock to check x, y and z with a spirit” (LM5.Sco.BH). A temporary worker talking about how quality requirements are ensured explains how the quality team takes over the process:

[T]hen that's monitored (by the quality team) through a different person that comes on the line to check for (quality) sheets, first time hits, and other targets of course. (TE4.Sco.BH)

The workers’ experiences of decreasing levels of task discretion was mostly related to increasing lack of motivation, which was acknowledge by most line managers as well as

workers. The evidence relating to the exercise of task discretion indicates a significant level of influence from the market. The exercise of discretion during quality checks was being steadily bureaucratised and standardised, to the point that narrowed the workers' scope for decision making.

#### 6.2.2.2. Prospects of workers' agency in shaping skill and task discretion

The collective response by the union regarding market pressures on skills' development and task discretion was found to be practically non-existent. Although the union representatives acknowledged that market pressures curtailed the skill development, they were unable to identify measures undertaken by the union to curb such pressures. Indeed, union representatives further suggested that the union played a diminutive role in training-related issues. The lack of capacity to influence training issues became a dominant theme during interviews with union representatives and union members. It was consistently identified examples of cases where the union was ignored by management. One union representative reflecting on the union's role in training-related issues opined:

The thing is that management doesn't really want us too much involved in training, we have takes on pay, pensions, redundancies and the way things are managed around here like absence. But in terms of training we are not allowed a lot of saying. (UR1.Sco.BH)

Most workers (and some managers) mentioned the loss of power in training-related issues by the time that SpiritsCo started to become more market-driven and pressures started to predominate in the bottling hall. Another union representative expands on this idea:

[W]e have to embed our approach to training into the company's needs. I can reckon that we need to consider the company's needs. (UR2.Sco.BH).

### **6.2.3. Work pressures**

#### 6.2.3.1. Management's role in shaping work pressures

##### *Performance management*

There is considerable evidence that some of the cost imperatives and unplanned orders stemming from retailers were enhancing the management of labour performance in the

bottling hall. Statements from interviewees, referring to the company's need of controlling costs and achieving reliability of supply for unplanned orders, were consistently coupled with the introduction of stricter performance management paraphernalia. This enhancement was being attained by management, through a number of consenting and coercive practices, which were aimed at unlocking the discretionary effort of shop-floor workers. The main identified themes were related to the role of technology, supervisors and contractual statuses.

Given the cost pressures emanating from the market, monetary incentive schemes in order to foster performance rates were inexistent. Consequently, management had to put in place alternative mechanisms to ensure that performance rates were achieved. One of these entailed the display of targets in screens. Some workers referred to the screens as an ignored prop of the bottling hall, yet others denoted its effectiveness in motivating people:

(The screens) on top of the lines, I quite like it because if you look at them in the beginning of the shift you see that (workers during the) day shift produced X number of cases and you want to beat them. (PE3.Sco.BH)

Despite such mechanisms based on technology, there was also considerable dependence on managerial direct supervision. The role of the line manager, in ensuring required effort levels are achieved, is made through direct and close supervision on the line, and managing labour in order to prevent idle time.

Most managers and workers highlighted that work effort was being regulated through decreasing the porosities of the working day. During observations it was noticeable the constant movement of workers across the bottling hall. The most illustrative example was observed when a line stopped. The minute after the stop there was a call from the speaker commanding workers to go from one line to the other: "line 24, goes to line 13". This observation was confirmed during interviews. One line manager argued that the need to secure required effort levels from workers had resulted in the need of a working regime based on continuous motion. The bottling hall manager also acknowledged this by mentioning that senior managers passing by the bottling hall<sup>10</sup> would immediately question why there was one worker apparently doing nothing.

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<sup>10</sup> The bottling hall has an upper level that is a corridor made of glass. This passageway overlooks the whole hall, and office staff constantly passes through it to go to meeting rooms and the canteen.

Given the range of managerial paraphernalia to ensure the required levels of individual performance, workers were still under a performance management system that evaluated the individuals' effort levels. In the case of permanent workers (full-time and core-flexi workers), these were evaluated once a year. In relation to temporary workers, they were assessed at the end of the period of contract. Full time workers were virtually immune to negative performance evaluations, and their pay was not linked to their performance.

However, this rather inoffensive approach towards full time workers contrasted with the strict approach applied to the group of flexible workers – the temporary and core-flexi workers. It was mentioned without exception by interviewees, that performance rating was directly related to workers guaranteeing their job, or guaranteeing enough working hours the next year. Line managers assess workers' performance in the end of their contract, and according to their score, they are placed in a "matrix". The matrix is a rigid mechanism, aimed at distributing in quartiles all flexible workers, in relation to their performance throughout their employment period with SpiritsCo. It was explained by managerial staff and workers that the higher the individual ends up in the matrix, the more chances s/he had to be hired back again (in the case of temporary workers) or being granted more working hours (in the case of core-flexi). The ones that would end up in the bottom end of the matrix would most certainly be overlooked in terms of employment and working hours.

It was consistently mentioned by all participants that this system resulted in workers showing higher levels of effort, as "they are probably more willing to do things because they are under the pressure of getting a bad report" (M2.Sco.BH). Managers made positive references to flexible workers in their display of a "committed", "enthusiastic" and "engaged" workforce. The workers during interviews also highlighted increased levels of effort. Without exceptions workers referred to their level of effort and performance, using expressions such as "performing on top of the tree", "keep my head down", "making myself busy all the time", in order to be on "top of the matrix".

Such dynamics were reported to have detrimental impacts on workers' experience of job quality. Workers associated the way performance was managed, with individual outcomes such as stress, anxiety and demotivation, as well as physical strains. Interestingly, these perceptions were backed by managerial staff. For instance, line managers consistently linked stress to the arrival of new and unplanned orders from customers:

The order can come in and they give a week to turn it over, but then they can come back a day later and say that needs to go with the shipment two days early, so the deadline gets cut, which can be very very stressful for the folks. (LM1.Sco.BH)

Everybody is running around, and trying to deal with things that were not planned, that means that people have to put in more effort, not so much physically but mentally it brings more strain on them. (LM4.Sco.BH)

### *Absence Management*

All participants in interviews recognised that in the last two years the company had gone through a process of tightening the management of absence. The value for SpiritsCo to control levels of absenteeism related to cost control and reliability of delivery. More specifically, controlling absence meant a more reliable workforce, which reflected the company's capacity to reliably deliver orders to the customer at the agreed set time. The bottling manager argues:

[If] the person may fancy taking two days (off), in the universal scheme of things it has a huge effect on the shipment planning - you could miss running a line because that person decided not coming in that day. (SM3.Sco.BH).

The bottling hall manager discussed that recently absence rates had dropped to just under 4%. Interviewees identified two main reasons for this drop: the first relates to the newly implemented sophisticated absence policy; the second was the consequence of increasing rates of workers on flexible contracts. Nevertheless, beforehand it seems relevant to explore the reasons for absence that were most highlighted in interviews with managerial staff and workers.

Most line managers and workers consistently identified the main reason for absence to be related with the bottling hall having "an aging workforce" with increasing medical needs, and less capable of quickly recovering from the rising work demands. Indeed, there was a strong sense among the respondents that the current pace and demand of work was producing physical strains on workers. However, line managers highlighted that not all absence was genuine, and workers skipped worked because they were bored. A line manager commented that the nature of work in some jobs, such as packing and palletising, and the lack of job rotation could be "monotonous" (M1.Sco.BH).

Relating to the first emerging theme, the approach taken by management was aimed at discouraging workers to go absent and to bring them as earlier as possible, so that absence rates could decrease. Most workers identified these two aspects as being the main source of pressure.

Management aimed at preventing absenteeism via two systems of absence monitoring, and by linking them to disciplinary procedures. One system was based on a percentage, which calculated absence based on the length of absence over the contracted hours. The other system was the Bradford System<sup>11</sup>. The dual system had two independent trigger points, which when triggered by a worker would lead automatically to a warning. After triggering the points of either the systems, if the worker incurred again in absence behaviour, it could lead to a written warning, and then disciplinary, and ultimately dismissal. The general feeling by workers and union representatives was that the “rigid” nature of the policy was placing increasing pressures over an aging workforce who had genuine health problems.

Nevertheless, it was the practices related to bringing workers back to work that were reported to be “excessively harsh”. Participants tended to highlight during interview the management’s attempts in shortening the absence periods by providing lighter working alternatives to the workers, less working hours, different shifts, and being monitored by the company’s occupational physiotherapist. A union representative talking about this practice mentions the pressure placed on workers:

[T]hey just feel that the absenteeism, now, there is more pressure to get back to work because of (absence policy). (...) There was people coming in with a broken arm, which was never known. Before you just take your time off to let it heal. (UR2.Sco.BH)

The second emerging theme, to explain the drop in absence rates, relates to the company’s emphasis on using flexible forms of contracts. Most interviewees reported

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<sup>11</sup> The Bradford Factor is calculated with the equation:  $B = S \times S \times D$ .

B is the Bradford score; S is the total number of instances of absence of an individual over a set period; D is the total number of days of absence of that individual over the same set period. For example: 1 instance of absence with a duration of ten days ( $1 \times 1 \times 10$ ) = 10 points; or 3 instances of absence; one of one, one of three and one of six days ( $3 \times 3 \times 10$ ) = 90 points.



workers on flexible type of contracts being less prone to absenteeism because their employment was directly dependent on having a “good record”. Document analysis of the performance assessment form for temporary and core-flexi workers revealed that the “absence rate” was a parameter for performance evaluation. All workers and some managerial staff later confirmed this observation. The following quote highlights the importance of absence for a flexible worker:

Wow if you are a temporary worker, you really don't want to take time off. Your absence is one of the things that you really don't want to... Absence is even more important than how good a worker you are. Big bosses may be not seeing who is a good worker, but they will see who is here who is not.  
(LM1.Sco.BH)

Workers consistently supported line managers' views. Evidence from interviews showed flexible workers being more prone to come to work when sick, because individuals' perception on absence playing a key role in contractual renewal. Indeed, there was a wider perception across the bottling hall that good attendance provided a certain level of job security.

#### 6.2.3.2. Prospects of workers' voices in regulating work pressures

It was found divergent evidence in relation to the union's role in regulating management intents towards performance or absence.

Relating to performance management, the interviewees consistently reported that the presence of the union was effective in regulating some aspects concerned to managing performance, which was subject of ongoing consultation. For instance, the union representatives mentioned that the union was able to ensure that performance targets were not individualised. The union was able prevent management to incentivise individuals' effort through performance relate pay. In addition, union representatives also reported that, although performance management was becoming increasingly linked to disciplinary action, the failure to meet the required times for orders was not automatically followed-up with individualised disciplinary actions.

In relation to absence management, the interviewees consistently mentioned that the union was “committed” in decreasing the absence rates within the bottling hall, as one union representative explains:

The thing is that the union is also engaged in decreasing the absence rates. We understand is a problem for the company in terms of production and in terms of costs. We cannot keep employing people for them to be sick and not coming to work. (UR2.Sco.BH)

Nevertheless, the majority of workers mentioned that union representatives provided important support on an individual level with grievances and disciplinary procedures:

They definitely give you support when there is a disciplinary or something like that; they are very good at that. Supporting individual workers in here they are very good at that, because they know a lot of the laws, the rights and the company's policies. (PE1.Sco.BH)

In relation to work pressures, although the union was impotent to act at the supply chain level, and counter market imperatives, it was able to meliorate specific aspects at an individual level by providing thorough support to workers.

### **6.3. Job Quality in SpiritsCo Cooperaage site and the market pressures**

One year prior to the commence of the cooperaage site fieldwork, a new manager had been appointed by SpiritsCo with the clear objective of bringing more “up to date” ways of working, and adapt the cooperaage site to the demands of the supply chain. This was a new reality for the coopers, as until very recently they have controlled the workplace without opposition:

I mean, I'm the first site manager that isn't a cooper, the last manager was a cooper, the director was a cooper, I mean he would just give them whatever they wanted. (M1.Sco.C)

The new relationship was found to be grounded on managers attempting to introduce practices geared to overall effectiveness of the production, and adapting them to the supply chain demands. This clashed with workers attempting to maintain certain aspects of work, which they perceived as important.

Overall the union had a strong presence in the workplace (100% union membership), which was translated into high levels of militancy. Coopers' narratives entailed a strong belief in the union's capacity to maintain the overall working conditions. Whenever there was an issue, coopers would resort to the union. Management's perception was similar:

The shop steward in here, who's a cooper as well, brings all together and they collectively think what are the consequences of a change, they will champion things that will affect them first, and they are less vocal that they are not so interested in. (M1.Sco.C)

The associational power was coupled with economic structural power, which was grounded on two factors: firstly, on SpiritsCo's necessity to have high quality cooperage service, which prevented casks to leak<sup>12</sup>; and, secondly, due to the lack of appropriate coopering skills in the labour market. The shaping of job quality in the cooperage site involved several interrelated factors. However, contrary to the previous case study, the market factor was less influential.

### **6.3.1. Job security and working time**

#### 6.3.1.1. Management's role in shaping job security and working time

The manager, line manager, coopers and the union representative were enquired about the status of job security and working time in the workplace. From the collected data in the interviews, two main themes emerged. Firstly, coopers were not faced with issues of job security. Secondly, it was not found any evidence of working time flexibility.

Relating to the first theme, all interviewees reported that coopers were contracted on a full time and permanent basis and there was a low threat of dismissal. Moreover, it was reported by most coopers that they would be able to find another job in any other cooperage in Scotland, because coopering skills were scarce.

Nevertheless, the cooperage site manager made reference to the lack of contractual flexibility as a problematic aspect, as it unable a cost-effective run of business:

The problem is we have peaks and drops in our requirements, and our manpower is always up there, stable. (...) and the obvious thing to think is "do we need so many coopers?" The honest answer is no. (M1.Sco.C)

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<sup>12</sup> Leakage is a potential huge cost to whisky producers as when casks start leaking whisky – worth sometimes millions of pounds – can be lost in minutes.

He further argued that ideally SpiritsCo should outsource the cooperage activity, as this would result in drastic cost savings. However, such aspirations were reported to be obstructed by the union and its membership.

The lack of flexibility reported in relation to contractual variation, was similarly evidenced in relation to working time. The working time in the cooperage site functioned on a four working days (Monday to Thursday) from 7.30am to 5.30pm. It was reported by interviewees that there was no shifts, and all coopers worked during the same working days, performing the same exact working hours, in the same workplace. Therefore, similarly to job security, management was not able to attain flexibility through working time.

#### 6.3.1.2. Prospects of worker agency for job security and working time

The collective response by the union in relation to management's attempts to decrease job security levels was found to be strong. The evidence from interviews with managers and coopers suggest that job security was under control of the union and its membership.

The union's main argument for preventing management to externalise production, or bring in casual labour, was grounded on production quality standards. The union representative and most coopers consistently reported that external workers would not be able to provide the same quality of work, as coopers with "years of experience" can provide. Coopers perceived that such strategy would result in higher costs for the company on a long-term period, as casual labour would entail a drop in quality in work. The drop in quality of work is crucial for the successful run of the business, as low quality in coopering would mean more leakages in the casks and profit losses. The following quote highlights the link between coopers' identifying their job as *conditio sine qua non* to preserve *quality* within the production process:

(Senior Manager name) asked myself what I think about it (bringing casual labour), and we were totally against that, and the obvious reason, really two reasons: first you don't want to see yourself without a job; but, the main reason, is not everyone can see a leak. This is a cooper's job; it takes years of experience to identify a crack and how to repair it properly. If you give this job to another company you don't know who's repairing casks. These companies normally use general workers, that don't have has many skills.

(SpiritsCo) can think that they can do that, and they would save money on that, on short-term. But see the phone call we've got from (distillery) last week (complaining that one cask had leaked) they would get a lot more of that I would say. (UR1.Sco.C)

Regarding working time issues, the collective response was found to be unnecessary due to lack of management's intent in altering it.

### **6.3.2. Skill and Task Discretion**

#### 6.3.2.1. Management's role in shaping skill and task discretion

##### *Required skill set*

All managers and coopers were enquired about the skill set required to be a cooper, and if these have changed over the years. Overall, the skill set were those necessary to “*strip down*” casks, “repair the wood from cracks and porosity”, and manual skills to work with wood and fire. The interviews with coopers and managers showed very little evidence of managerial influence on the skill set of coopers. Rather, the interviews with coopers consistently revealed elements of craftsmanship. This was particularly evidenced in the complexity of tasks performed, and consequently on the required skills. One aspect that evidences the lack of management influence in the set of skills, relates to the absence of standardisation of tasks, as one cooper states:

Everybody is slightly different in the way they do their work, is not like you have a standard way of doing things, you don't. Yes there is fixed steps but you do it in a different way, more relaxed or more strong, its individual.  
(PE1.Sco.C)

What the lack of task standardisation signifies is the conservation of task and skill complexity required to undertake a coopers' job. During interviews, long-term coopers frequently mentioned the complexity of their skills: “it's a trade that takes years to master, it's not overnight (...) or just because you're seating in an office” (PE2.Sco.C).

Without exceptions, the participants (managers and coopers) reported that the skills have remained the same throughout the years. One cooper discussing how *work* has changed “pretty much everywhere” describes the untouched skills required to undertake *work* in

a cooperage, and interlinks them with the past, present and future, implying that coopers' skills will be an everlasting reality:

Those days (of craftsmanship) are gone, and yet in a cooperage there is a strong sense that those days are never really gone. These casks can last a century or more. They are made from trees which were centenarians themselves. And we work them using tools and skills that stretch back generations (just like the trees). (...) All that history and experience is locked to every cask. (PE4.Sco.C)

### *Skill development and assimilation*

All participants in the interviews (managers and coopers) referred that the cooperage had a clear structure and plan for training, which was wholly controlled and provided by the workforce.

The manager mentioned that SpiritsCo had attempted to introduce two different training programmes. The first focused on the company's needs and values, which aimed at bringing the cooperage "to more modern times", and where it was emphasised the supply chain needs, as the manager explains:

[W]e were also showing them (coopers) the process of producing a bottle, and what happens between the guys loading and unloading the lorries. Basically where the cask comes from to where it goes, there's a whole process that shows that everybody in the supply chain is important. (M1.Sco.C)

However, according to the union representative the training programme was too business oriented where,

[T]hey (do) small workshops kind of thing, they give you a booklet on it, a folder, and somebody would do a talk about the values and flexibility, and team working and all that sort of things that really don't apply in here, if I'm being honest with you. (UR1.Sco.C)

In addition to this, the company had also attempted to bring in an "external training programme" that aimed at certifying the workers' coopering skills. However, the manager mentioned that both managerial endeavours were not successfully implemented because "they (coopers) are stuck in the old times" (M1.Sco.C). All interviewed coopers

perceived such “accreditation kind of thing” (PE2.Sco.C) as diminishing their craft knowledge. The craftsmanship element and skill complexity was mostly evidenced on the pride in the skills that coopers develop and train over the years, in order to provide a quality service.

The only training programme that was being currently undertaken in the cooperage site was completely controlled by the coopers. Training was reported to be complex, prolonged in time (four years), and varied according to the individual’s (apprentice) traits. According to the union representative, the coopers’ training structure is crucial for the perseverance of coopering skills, as well as the failure of the manager to completely understand the trade. This is because it is the more experienced coopers that transfer their knowledge and skills to the next generation of coopers. This transfer of knowledge, denies external actors (being managers or training firms) the dispossession of conception of coopering labour process (the details of this are described in detail in the section below).

### *Skill utilisation*

In the cooperage site, it was identified that coopers undertake the job as a whole – from start to finish. Coopers work is undertaken within their individual bench, which encompasses five main tasks: (1) disassembling casks by taking off the hoops that hold the wood together; (2) evaluate the wood for cracks and porosities and repair them; (3) cut wood to replace staves that are unrepairable; (4) assemble back the wood; and (5) burn the wood for the exact required time (which varies according to the type of wood).

Managers and coopers identified practices implemented in the workplace that resulted in barriers to the use of skills. For instance, the manager argued that in order to keep quality standards high, line managers were being asked to highlight cracks in the casks with chalk. As a result, coopers reported that this practice had stripped their scope to assess the amount of required repairing, but also prevented some shortcuts and tricks used by coopers.

The quality of service became the main theme when coopers were asked about their skill utilisation. Arguably, their skills, the capacity to utilise their manual labour together with their individual tools, and their deep understanding of the precise requirements of the labour process, were an integral part for the quality of service. This interlinks back with

aspects of craftsmanship work. For instance, coopers consistently reported that one of the main elements related to craftsmanship is the tools that coopers work with, which are considered “as an extension of yourself (the cooper)” (PE3.Sco.C). One cooper refers to the importance of tools, and interlinks them with the ability to utilise his skills:

It’s a privilege to do the same job (of his grandfather). As a boy, my mother and I used to go to visit him, and he used to hand me a wee tack-hammer and some wood. That was how my interest started. (...) He died and I got some of his tools. In the beginning I didn’t get their true potential, but I loved using them. (...) They are quite unique for each of us. The important thing about a cooper’s tools is if I tried to use somebody else’s, it just wouldn’t feel the same, you know? It’s just pure and old workmanship. (PE3.Sco.C)

It is the uniqueness of making his tools, together with progressively acquiring their *usefulness* applied to the coopering trade, that reflects the deep understanding of the precise requirements about the labour process. Skill utilisation interlinks with this through the individual’s deep understanding of how skills are applied to specific parts of the labour process, and which different tools are to be used.

Despite the variability in work tasks, coopers reported physical strains that affected the thumbs, elbows and shoulders. It was not infrequent coopers having to go through surgery and implant cartilage in the joints. This derived from the highly straining and hard manual labour that coopers were subject on a daily basis.

### *Task discretion*

This section examines issues around control over the labour process and the ways in which task discretion is shaped. Task discretion discussed in here is particularly related to coopers’ freedom to reach decisions.

All coopers reported that the pride they take in their skills and in delivering a quality service was a crucial element in maintaining ownership over the activities undertaken in their work bench. One example reported by the coopers, illustrating the control over decision making, is related to how each cooper used different coopering strategies and techniques. Without exceptions, all interviewed coopers described unique ways of coopering, which each of them had developed over the years. The oldest and most experienced coopers were especially proud of how they have independently developed



new techniques. Coopers highlighted that each individual used their own way of working to deliver the best quality service possible.

#### 6.3.2.2. Prospects of worker agency for skills and task discretion

The prospects for worker agency in relation to skills and task discretion was found to be strong. Workers' collective agency was particularly structured around the union role in challenging management aims at curtailing certain job quality aspects. Without exceptions, all coopers and line managers reported the positive role assumed by the union and its membership in maintaining traditional training structures. In coopers' view, maintaining control over training structures reflected the systematic perpetuation of skills and in preserving control over the labour process. Two themes emerged from interviews with coopers: the way traditional coopering training structures aid in preserving skills within the trade; and the way skills (the craftsmanship), and the drive to deliver quality service, are used by coopers as mechanisms to prevent management piercing into the labour process.

In relation to the first theme, the union representative reported that the preservation of skills in the trade was grounded on coopers being able to exclusively hold the conceptual and practical knowledge of the trade. In turn, such experience and know-how was being passed to the following generational group through a direct relationship between the *apprentice* and the *journeyman* during the training programme. The training programme encompasses three main stages. Firstly, apprentices "start there in the apprenticeship area where they learn how to work with their tools, it's a six month period" (UR1.Sco.C), which is followed by a second stage of two years and half where apprentices are tutored by a "*journeyman*". One cooper explains:

We bring him in and we ask one of the guys if he would be ok to have an apprentice and he says "yeah that's fine, I'll take him" and he starts to work beside him. So he teaches him everything of how to repair casks. He should be teaching him properly how to do the job first, before he starts to know the wee tricks that he can learn to make a wee bit quicker and have he's own input in the job – learn to walk before you can run, basically. (PE1.Sco.C)

This progressive development and acquisition of skills on the job, is what makes an apprentice a *cooper*. It was the commitment in passing skills from generation to

generation, which entails the preservation of labour process conceptual and practical knowledge within and between coopers, that allowed the continuation of an ancient way of working. The absence of external input within the process allows a direct and exclusive transfer of such knowledge.

The second theme relates to the way skills are used as a mechanism by coopers to challenge and repel managerial control. This is grounded on coopers' consistently perceiving *quality* as the most critical (and, basically, only) aspect of the production process, and using their skills as well as their commitment to deliver a quality service. The coopers and the union representative consistently associated the quality of coopering with the survival of the business:

[T]o keep that standard up you still need to have coopers, you still need to be sure of your skills, in control of how's (the) wood being handled. (...) And in my opinion if you are sending a cask out with a crack in it, the chances are it might leak the whole whisky in it. So the way we see it is the company needs the skills and years of experience we've got to keep the (quality) standards up. It's not only about saving money, in the long run this company is about filling up bottles with whisky, if you are losing that whisky you are not doing good for yourself. (UR1.Sco.C)

The coopers' commitment to deliver quality work prevented management to implement practices that would hinder the quality aspect of production. The most long-serving and experienced cooper in the workplace mentioned that there has been various examples over the years of how the union had rejected the introduction of managerial practices. An illustrative example of this was the attempt of management to introduce teamwork into the workplace:

They (management) tried that (team working) once, and we met to discuss it... everybody realised that it wouldn't bring any benefits to the coopering in here, to the standard of work. Because it would be the case of two or three of us doing repetitive small parts (of coopering) (...). They tried to sell it (team working) that it would take the physical aspect (...) but there's no need for it in here, those sorts of things don't apply in here (...) to be completely honest with you Pedro, we never wanted it – how can you finish something if you haven't started it? (PE1.Sco.C)

According to the union, teamwork would result in the compartmentation and standardisation of skills, which would end up driving quality standards down.

### **6.3.3. Work Pressures**

#### 6.3.3.1. Management's role in shaping performance management

##### *Performance management*

There was strong evidence that market pressures were shaping the management's role when dealing with performance management. The manager and line managers frequently reported a mismatch between the market demands, and the production rate in the cooperage site. Therefore, from a business point of view, there was an explicit ambition to decrease output rate. Coopers worked on piecework rate, and management and the workforce had established a maximum set number of 400 units<sup>13</sup> a week. Achieving 400 units corresponds to a specific weekly wage, and to number of casks repaired in one week. The manager considered the overproduction problematic due to two reasons. Firstly, coopers were repairing more casks than what the business actually demanded: "SpiritsCo has about 50 000 casks sitting in compounds, which eventually will get sold for firewood or garden tubs" (M1.Sco.C). Secondly, because coopers were being paid according to what they produced, resulting in overspending on wages.

Since coopers' wages are variable, the cooperage manager attempted to intensify the control over the labour process. The aim was to delay and undermining coopers production rate. The interviews with the manager, the line manager, and the union representative were littered with examples about adjusting the production rate to the production demand. These involved practices such as making lunch and tea breaks mandatory for coopers; or introducing a safety guard in machinery to make it more difficult and time consuming to use it, which impacted directly the production rate:

The perfect example is we have a table saw (...) and I've introduced this guard for safety reasons. Now this has worked very well for (SpiritsCo). They

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<sup>13</sup> Units are measured in relation to small repairs a cooper makes. This varies in relation to type of cask, because there are casks that require more labour and time than others. It also varies in relation to whether the cask requires to be stripped of its hoops so that repairing can be undertaken. Thus the number of units can vary from cask to cask and from type of repair.

don't like that, because it's more laborious, it takes more time, but for us is great because they lose time. They have less time to repair, so I was able to cut some of their productivity that I don't actually need. (M1.Sco.C)

However, the most striking example of management attempts to adjust production rate to market demands is related to tightening direct supervision over coopers' work. For instance, line managers were being asked to distribute casks that take more time to repair, so that coopers' production rate could drop.

### *Absence Management*

There was little evidence pointing to market pressures generating tighter absence management practices. It was discussed with the cooperage managerial staff the frequency and reasons for absenteeism in the workplace. The cooperage manager reported that absence rates are relatively high when comparing to "normal" workplaces. However, the company adopted a "soft" approach to the issue, because according to the manager, coopers "work extremely hard" and have "genuine" reasons to go off sick. All coopers supported the managerial claims of frequent physical strains related to work: "you'll find most guys and my self-included with tendinitis, tendinous elbow, sore neck, sore back" (PE6.Sco.C). Nevertheless, it was discussed with line managers whether supply chain pressures would entail stricter practices to deal with absenteeism. Both line managers reported that coopers' absenteeism was mostly overlooked by management because the current overproduction. Thus, there was no need to "force coopers into work, when (SpiritsCo) in reality doesn't need them" (M1.Sco.C). At the time of the fieldwork the high levels of coopers' absenteeism fit the management's aspirations to decrease production rate.

#### 6.3.3.2. Prospects of worker agency for work pressures

The collective response taken by the workers and the union in relation to work pressures was found to be mixed. The union representative and half of the interviewed coopers reported particular concern over regulating the company's intents to undermine production. Whereas, coopers and the union representative did not show special concern with absence during the interviews, arguing that management had traditionally dealt with absenteeism in the previously described fashion (i.e. hands-off approach). Therefore, this

section focuses particularly on how the union and its membership responded to the way management managed performance in the cooperage site.

The capacity from the union and coopers to oppose management's intents of undermining production was showed through their ability of delivering a quality service, as well as through their associational power. From the interviews with the union representative and the coopers emerged two agency mechanisms. First, coopers made extra efforts to maintain the production rate despite management techniques. Half of the coopers and all line managers spoke of coopers "working very hard", "faster", or "beyond what's required" to maintain the levels of production:

See, they (managers) make all they can for you to work less – they make you seat in the canteen for 20 minutes twice a day, lunch breaks, safety regulations... all they can find (...). So I go and make things a wee faster.

The way I look at it is, "this is our job I'm protecting". (PE5.Sco.C)

Two other coopers described deliberately not performing tasks that their manager had specifically instructed them to do. The manager had implemented a cleaning practice that should be performed twice a day, which both coopers explicitly did not comply, in order to use that time for achieving the established 400 units. They subvert their manager instructions despite the frequent warnings given by the manager, because of their desire to go against the management undermining intents.

A second identified mechanism relates to the ability of providing high quality service. The union representative highlighted that as long as coopers are able to provide quality service to the company, the way work is currently organised is ought to be maintained. The majority of coopers supported such understanding:

I mean I'm here 17 years and I know I repair those (casks) with high standards (of quality). So why punish somebody that gives absolutely everything for (SpiritsCo)? (PE2.Sco.C)

Naturally, not all coopers worked beyond formal requirements, or demonstrated immovable motivation to deliver quality service. Management's undermining techniques provided ample opportunity for coopers to diminish their performance rates and assume a more stress and injury-free approach to work. Yet, despite the many and frequent injuries reported by all interviewees, the data shows coopers' commitment to maintain the ways in which work is organised.

## **6.4. TranspCo's job quality and the production network pressures**

The TranspCo case study is particularly different from the previous workplaces, mainly because the drivers' working activity takes place at various sites across Scotland. Therefore, drivers experienced geographical and organisational disperse settings. The historical context for this case study is important, as TranspCo had been an anti-union workplace. Over the years, TranspCo management disregarded drivers' working conditions, particularly in relation to health and safety, pay, and "dignity at work". The downward pressures of the supply chain have amplified these.

However, six years prior to the commence of the research study the increasing frustration of drivers towards daily supply chain pressures and poor job quality, resulted in drivers coming together and voting for the presence of a union in the workplace. Since its recognition, the trade union counted with a high union membership with figures above 85% of membership. Nevertheless, the company maintained a pragmatic and distant approach towards employment relationship. For instance, one union representative mentioned that the union's agenda is quintessentially opposite to what TranspCo management defends. As a result, the union has adopted a rather militant stance. Union representatives mentioned that the employment relationship at TranspCo were characterised by conflict, especially because drivers were prepared to use industrial action in order to improve and defend certain aspects of job quality.

Nevertheless, collectivisation is limited by individualised and dispersed work settings, as well as by drivers having to conduct an important part of their work in TranspCo's customers' sites. Both union representatives highlighted that regulating and shaping job quality in such setting was difficult, as it is contingent on overcoming the structural constraints. However, union representatives emphasised that drivers' strategic location within the industry strengthened their bargaining power.

### **6.4.1. Job security and working time**

#### 6.4.1.1. Management's role in shaping job security and working time

TranspCo union representatives and drivers were enquired about the status of job security and working time in the company. Although interviewees reported that job security issues

were absent, there was a strong managerial focus on flexibilising drivers' working time patterns.

Relating to job security, all drivers and union representatives reported that they were contracted on a full time and permanent basis, which resulted in the absence of numerical variation. It was explained by both union representatives that individuals with drivers' licence for lorries<sup>14</sup> are scarce in the labour market, and therefore it is the company's interest to retain fully licenced and experienced drivers in its staff.

Management was, nevertheless, able to achieve flexibility through changes of working time patterns. The two interviewed union representatives explained that the flexibility of working time was implemented so that TranspCo could match the staffing working hours to the SpiritsCo (and other whisky producers) service demands. For instance, union representatives repeatedly discussed that TranspCo had reorganised the drivers' shift patterns as a direct response to clients' demands:

While before we were able to start at 7 or 8am in the morning and finish at 5pm... The distillers now made us come to work at the same time as them (6 am), so they adjusted our shifts to their shift patterns. (UR1.Tco)

One union representative further explained that this practice was aimed at aligning working time patterns across the industry, in order to "improve links between businesses" (UR1.Tco). This suggests the increasing coordination within the inter-firm relation between the two companies, which resulted in impacting directly the drivers' working time.

The company achieved flexibilisation and *extensification* of working time patterns with a "derogation request". This policy enabled TranspCo to extend the reference period of 48-hour week to allow workers to exceed the 10 hour a day working time limit. As a result, drivers were required to be highly flexible to ensure that TranspCo was able to accept and finish (once started) the service requirements. Most drivers gave examples of week and weekend days in which they experienced last minute shift extensions, in order to finish deliveries requested by customers. In addition to these practices, it was commented by the majority of drivers that the company had recently introduced new overtime and weekend shift rates. The interviewees' opinions about such practices were divergent in two ways. On the one hand, the two union representatives and two drivers

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<sup>14</sup> The CPC – certificate for professional competence for driving large good vehicles.

argued that overtimes rates and weekend shift rates were introduced, so that the company did not have to employ more drivers to meet the increasing customers' demands. On the other hand, seven of the total interviewed drivers, perceived this practice positively, as it allowed workers to top up their low wages.

#### 6.4.1.2. Prospects of workers' agency in regulating job security and working time

The collective response by the union in relation to job security and working time flexibilisation was found to be reactive and lacking a proper strategy. The union representatives showed concern over the increasing downward supply chain pressures that fomented the flexibilisation of drivers' working time, as it could potentially bring increasing divisions to labour.

Having job security relatively protected by the shortage of certified drivers in the labour market, the union at TranspCo was focusing on the recent developments of working time flexibility. Union representatives acknowledged that further flexibilisation of working time patterns could potentially bring fragmentation into the workforce. Indeed, one union representative recognised that the presence of different types of shifts with different hours in the workplace was creating problems in terms of homogeneity of interests amongst the workforce. For instance, a particular group of the workforce was demonstrating resentment towards the union for its continuing struggle in preventing TranspCo management to expand temporal flexibility in the workplace. The union representative explained that although this group of drivers recognised the hazards of more flexibility in the workplace, they argued that it was an extra source of income to top-up their low wages, as he put it: "it's the classic example of different conditions, different interests" (UR2.Tco). This illustrates how the pressure for implementing flexibility emanating from TranspCo's customers can generate divisions of workers' interests in the workplace.

Although these divisions propelled by the inter-firm relations were starting to be present in TranspCo, the union was alert to the situation. It was identified in three of union meetings, the need for the union to tackle this situation. Union representatives and members agreed that one of the strategies should encompass the negotiation over higher pay rises, which would result in "folks (being) less pressured to take overtime and weekend shifts" (UnionMeeting4.Tco).



## 6.4.2. Skills and Task Discretion

### 6.4.2.1. Management's role in shaping job skills and task discretion

#### *Required skill set*

All interviewed drivers and union representatives were asked about the skill set required to be a driver. Apart from holding the certificate for professional driving, TranspCo required individuals to be focus for long periods of time, a good understanding of health and safety regulations, ability to handling goods, and complete paperwork accurately. The union representative reported that the company had not taken ownership over skill development throughout the years, until the union was recognised in the workplace, as he states:

[T]he skill levels are quite low, I would say. The opportunities given by the company to drivers are very limited, only when the union was recognised and we started to highlight that as a problem. (UR1.Tco)

At the time of the research study, interviewees reported recent changes in the required skill set that derived directly from inter-firm pressures. These related firstly, with the increasing need for TranspCo to provide reliable delivery information; and, secondly, with the drivers being increasingly required to undertake SpiritsCo workers' job as a cost cutting practice.

Relating to the first identified change, it was emphasised by most drivers and the union representatives that TranspCo's management had required in the past three main competencies: (1) deep knowledge of the region's roadmap; (2) the ability to plan for the most efficient routes; and, (3) keep with delivery schedules. However, because of the recent introduction of an upgraded tracking system, interviewees suggested that drivers had been stripped out of these skills. TranspCo's tracking system allowed direct monitoring of the lorry by being connected to software TranspCo's offices, which was then controlled by TranspCo's route planners. This system allowed not only monitoring the position of lorries around the country and calculated how long it would take from point A to point B, but also the speed at which they were going, how long they were stopped, and when stopped if the engine was off or on. The software also aimed at "route optimisation", which computes in real-time the best routes to avoid traffic, which then is

transmitted by route planners to drivers. Therefore, what this system does is removing all the thought process from the job, and inherent practical knowledge of the occupation.

Relating to the second identified change, the union representatives reported that pressures emanating from SpiritsCo (and other whisky producers) were pushing TranspCo to suggest practices that would save SpiritsCo money. One of these practices impacted directly on the required skill set from drivers. During interviews with TranspCo's union representatives, it was commented that the company was making drivers to undertake some of the jobs that once were undertaken by SpiritsCo's workers. At SpiritsCo's production sites, drivers were required to conduct working tasks such as loading and unloading casks, or tipping containers and tankers.

Therefore, drivers were experiencing two contradictory directions of skill sets. On the one hand, inter-firm pressures, through the introduction of ICT systems, were decreasing levels of skill set; and, on the other hand, the same pressures were requiring drivers to undertake more and different working tasks, which required different skill sets. However, what is problematic with the direction of these skills is that whilst the significance of new required skills is positive, the opportunity to develop these through training and its level of complexity is quite limited.

#### *Skill development and assimilation*

Although it was identified in the previous section that drivers were being required to undertake more working tasks, it was reported that training offered by TranspCo was practically non-existent. It is worth noting that after the union recognition the situation changed for the better, as the union took ownership of this issue (this is described in detail in the following section).

All drivers and union representatives stated that TranspCo never had proactively set up a formal training programme, or even allocated resources for a training budget. One union representative associated the lack of investment in training to pressures that the company had felt over the years within the industry to run a cost-effective business. One of the union representatives provided an example by commenting on the lack of consideration that the company had for its staff:

[T]he guys have been complaining about dust in the trucks (...) imagine yourself day in and day out having to breed heavy and high amounts of dust.

Sometimes the guys had to use a hose, to keep the dust down, and it was so dusty that the water would create little balls... just like dropping mercury, you know? (...) It's carcinogenic. (UR1.Tco)

Another illustrative moment was reported during one union meeting, when union members were discussing the accident rates involving drivers and the cargo (such as casks and other heavy material) over the last year. Incidents, such as the following, were reported by interviewees to be frequent, resulting in serious injuries to the drivers:

(Driver) started to open the left hand side door, but when it was open by about a foot, one of the bourbon casks, weighing more than 40kg, fell from the top level of the van and struck (driver) on the head, knocking him to the ground. (UnionMeeting4.Tco)

Drivers consistently reported that these types of examples reflected the company's disregard for basic health and safety training, which affected drivers' health and often resulted in serious safety events.

### *Skills utilisation*

In order to understand skill utilisation it is necessary to explore the task variety to which workers were being subject. The four most frequently reported tasks were: driving; load and unload cargo; completing paperwork; and complying with traffic reports. Throughout union meetings, it was frequently debated barriers to carrying out job duties effectively during the drivers' working day. The tracking system was the cause of most concern for interviewees when asked about task discretion. The new tracking system was reported to have deep impacts on drivers' capacity to apply the practical knowledge of the occupation, such as discerning faster routes and alternative routes, and calculate the timings in order to get the delivery on time.

The only other organisational barrier was reported by five drivers. The drivers reported that one of the main problems was tiredness towards the end of their shifts, which consequently resulted in drivers being less careful on how to handle cargo, such as casks or whisky. This tiredness was caused by the long shifts (sometimes up to 12 hours) that drivers were subject to, so that all deliveries were finished. This also relates to the unexpected *extensification* of drivers' working time fostered by the TranspCo and low wages.

### *Task discretion*

Task discretion discussed in here is particularly related to drivers' freedom to reach decisions. A crucial factor for the capacity for workers to reach decisions relates to the pressures to improve reliability and accuracy in deliveries – failing to provide containers or being late with deliveries was considered the biggest cost within the inter-firm relationship between TranspCo and SpiritsCo. In the union meetings and the interviews emerged one main barrier to task discretion. This relates to the introduction of the tracking system, and its subsequent link to SpiritsCo's ICT monitoring systems. This surveillance stripped out drivers' capacity to reach decisions during their working day. The following statement illustrates this:

Like now, if there's an accident they want us to sit in the road waiting for them to say what is the second best route to the site that we were supposed to go. We don't have any saying any more, it's like... Before we would just rely on ourselves, there (are) men in here that know these roads like the back of their hands. (UR2.Tco)

Recently, TranspCo had connected this surveillance system to SpiritsCo in order to reach better and more integrated inter-firm relations. In turn, SpiritsCo site managers were able to know how long drivers would need to get to their destination. However, it also resulted in tighter control practices. Drivers commented that managers from other companies were now able to hold drivers into account for late deliveries, resulting in an enhanced control and monitoring. The stripping out of mental process and scope for decision making during a working day, was frequently discussed in the interviews as an important job quality dimension. The following quote emphasises the importance of being deprived from planning, and being able to make decisions throughout the working day:

We are at a point that we no longer have any control over work (...). We had control, we had some escapes of our work and even that they want to take away from us, it's like taking away all that it was ours and making us work like machines. (PE4.Tco)

#### 6.4.2.2. Prospects of workers' agency in regulating skills and task discretion

The collective response by the union in relation to issues around skills and task discretion was found to be strong. The themes related to the collective response to skills and task

discretion emerged through the way in which union representatives formed a channel of communication between the union and other firms. This channel of communication produced results at the organisational and the industry levels. Two main interrelated themes emerged from TranspCo and SpiritsCo interviewees' testimony. The first theme relates to the role of the union in creating training structures, so that drivers could develop their skills. The second theme focuses on the union's role in establishing agreements across organisational boundaries, as an attempt to improve drivers' job quality.

Relating to the first theme, both union representatives reported that the union was mostly focusing on increasing "training opportunities around Health and Safety" (UR2.Tco). This strategy was centred on the leverage that the union could have through legal Health and Safety (H&S) directives. The union representatives reported that, through this strategy the union was able to impose a number of H&S practices. The objective was to use H&S training to enhance drivers understanding of the work organisation.

The outcomes identified by drivers and union representatives were two-fold: the first, relates to the results it had in regaining some control over the work; whereas, the second, relates to the extension of union membership within the workplace. Firstly, drivers mentioned that awareness over labour process and work design had given them "authority" and "ability" to assess H&S hazards, which TranspCo management would normally overlook and disregard:

The union is being very good down in Glasgow (...) I'll give you an example, in Glasgow if we come and said "that's unsafe" and then if the manager would come and say "ah no it's ok!", (the union) would go and say "no, no it's unsafe and we are not doing it". So we've got people that look for the conditions, we no longer rely on the managers telling if it's ok, or if it's safe or not. (PE3.Tco)

The second emerging implication was related to the extension of union membership. The training programme was referred to enhance and foster workers' collectiveness, as this union representative argues:

Well this (training courses) is important because it brings us in contact with the boys that normally are not involved in the trade union activity and it's an opportunity for them to understand the nature of what's going on, and for us to understand what are their motivations. (UR2.Tco)

The second theme emerged from interviews related to the union's role in establishing

agreements across organisational boundaries, as an attempt to improve drivers' job quality experiences in TranspCo's customers' sites. For instance, one union representative mentioned "(TranspCo union) branch had put the motion up (to the Scottish Whisky Association (SWA)) to improve health and safety for the drivers and the operators across the industry" (UR1.Tco). As a result, the union has been able to push whisky producers, including SpiritsCo, to sign agreements, which aimed at changing dangerous working practices in distilleries and bottling sites. During one union meeting, it was mentioned by the union representative that the SWA had recently agreed to issue a non-compulsory directive. This directive requested whisky producers to implement a new system to load and unload whisky tankers<sup>15</sup> across the industry until the 2024, which would allow safer working practices for drivers.

Indeed, the H&S awareness generated from the union training programme helped to improve job quality conditions at the local level at TranspCo. However, it also, and most importantly, improved conditions in TranspCo's clients' sites through cross-boundary agreements. This union representative makes the link between these agreements, and the drivers' capacity to influence their own work:

It is only through these agreements that we can have a say on our own work, in our job, in the day-to-day routine of the job... hmm only because (name of rep) got trained on becoming health and safety representative that we were able to negotiate rather technical H&S issues with (whisky producers).  
(UR2.Tco)

This further indicates that the union and drivers' agency was recognised as unified and focused on a common cause, which aided the union to partly attain success in this particular matter.

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<sup>15</sup> This change entails an adaptation in the tankers, distilleries and bottling hall facilities, in order to allow for bottom load rather than from top load. This prevented drivers having to climb up tankers to load whisky, which involved H&S hazards. For instance, there were episodes of drivers falling from the top of the tanker. With this change the loading was made on ground level increasing, in this way, H&S standards for drivers.

### 6.4.3. Work pressures

#### 6.4.3.1. Management's role in shaping work pressures

##### *Performance management*

The pressures in providing customers accurate delivery and lead times, as well as the ability for TranspCo to successfully respond to unplanned delivery requests, has brought to the forefront the management of drivers' performance. TranspCo inter-firm relations was highly time contingent. This meant that the company had to make sure drivers delivered the cargo at the exact agreed time to customers. Two sources of monitoring and control practices were identified from interviews and union meetings. The first relates to technology and close supervisory control. The second relates to the cross-boundary control inflicted to drivers.

Relating to the first theme, one union representative commented that the newly enhanced and upgraded ICT system, allowed for TranspCo to have access to computed information that indicates optimal routes, and "basically how many miles per hour (drivers) should be doing" (UR1.Tco). This allowed the company to control whether drivers were delivering cargo on time. The union representative reported that this was used to monitor any "down time". Therefore, TranspCo was starting to use this system as an additional effort to further strip out unproductive elements of the working day, such as "hanging about in the depot" (UR1.Tco).

The second identified theme relates directly with inter-firm dynamics between TranspCo and SpiritsCo. The nature of drivers' job – conducting working tasks at customers' sites – was reported by all drivers and union representatives to bring tensions, in relation to how, at what pace, and with what directives work should be conducted. One union representative from TranspCo mentioned that control of drivers' behaviour and performance would start once they entered the customers' premises, as he illustrates:

"When you enter their sites you always get a booklet with all the health and safety requirements. The equipment that you need to bring in to be allowed on site; and the task description required from you to do if you are handling the hoses, if you are unloading casks, or if you are picking up a container."  
(UR1.Tco)

In addition, respondents from TranspCo and SpiritsCo suggested that staff from whisky manufacturers tended to directly regulate drivers' work effort levels:

The boys from our customers are there in a supervisory role. They give instructions to us, they are there to ensure that things are done to (SpiritsCo's) standard, to the way they want it. (UR1.Tco)

The task conducted by drivers at client's premises cuts across firm boundaries, creating another layer of authority. This monitoring process went far beyond the drivers' performance levels. Interviewees frequently made reference to strict regulations that drivers had to comply with, such as having to stand in a demarcated area (typically a white square drawn on the floor), in order to "prevent any so called health and safety issue (ironic tone). (PE8.Tco).

### *Absence management*

All participants consistently identified two main organisational mechanisms aimed at ensuring drivers to show up to work: the first was through providing drivers only with statutory sick pay; the second was by coupling absence behaviours to strict disciplinary processes and "bullying". Nevertheless, beforehand it will be described the reasons given by drivers for not showing up to work.

Responses given by union representatives and some drivers suggest that drivers coped with tiredness and fatigue from long working hours, and long weeks by not attending work. One union representative stated: "nine times out of ten people are too tired, and can't be bothered coming into work, to be honest" (UR1.Tco). However, other responses from drivers also reported that many colleagues attended work even when they were not fit for purpose because of financial needs.

The first identified organisational mechanism to prevent absenteeism relates to the company providing solely statutory sick pay to drivers. This strategy was used as a mechanism to discourage drivers not showing up to work. Essentially, many drivers were not able to provide for their family by resorting solely to the statutory sick pay. They argued that being offered the statutory sick pay meant that they had to choose between showing up to work when sick, or not show up to work and "make ends meet with eighty quid a week" (PE2.Tco). The majority of drivers argued that, in applying statutory sick pay, the company was able to ensure it had the appropriate workforce levels to respond



to supply demands. One union representative illustrated this by reporting an ambiguous treatment applied to drivers in comparison to the office staff, who were covered by a full sick pay. The union representative argued that since the office staff “aren’t the front line troops making all the routes (...) (TranspCo management) is not as strict with them as it is with us” (UR1.Tco).

The second mechanism relates to bullying. For instance, one union representative mentioned increasing accounts of drivers reporting to the union “edgy” relations with management at “return to work” interviews. Drivers’ responses varied slightly to the one given by the union representative. Three of the interviewed drivers mentioned that management was only doing their job, whereas the majority reported that power relations tended “to swing too much for their (management) side” (PE6.Tco). One particular driver discussed that bullying practices were rooted within the culture of the company, and that managers did not know how to deal with drivers in any other way. This was particular acute when managerial staff had to deal with absence issues, as this driver comments:

Our transport manager, he just grows at us about anything. And when we are absent because of an injury or something like that, he just phones you and the way they grow at you... I just find all this very abruptive. (PE4.Tco)

#### 6.4.3.2. Prospects of workers’ agency in regulating work pressures

Similarly to the collective action taken by the union in relation to skills and task discretion, the union’s concern over issues around work pressures was also found to be strong. The two themes emerging here showed a collective action using associational power, but also the integration of the economic structural power into the union’s bargaining strategy. The first theme was the role of the union at a local level by regulating TranspCo’s managerial (bullying and unfair treatment) behaviours. The second focuses on the union’s role in using their structural power to counter the strict disciplinary intents of the company.

Relating to the first theme, the union was able to push the company’s senior management into negotiating two agreements that would prevent bullying practices and unfair treatment. Thus, union representatives discussed the successful negotiations with TranspCo management into signing a “dignity at work” policy, which would prevent shop floor managerial staff to verbally abuse drivers. As a result, it was implemented

policies and practices that “prohibited offensive language and other bullying behaviours” (UR1.Tco) directed at drivers. Furthermore, related to absence management, it was mentioned during union meetings and further explained in interviews with union representatives and drivers, that the union was negotiating the extension of the office staff sick leave pay to the drivers.

Lastly, the second theme was identified to be relating with the union’s capacity to use their structural power, and the disparate inter-firm relations between TranspCo and SpiritsCo, as well as other whisky manufactures, in drivers’ benefit. At the time of this research study, the union representatives and membership were considering going on strike, in order to prevent TranspCo sacking two drivers that were under disciplinary action. It was explained by both union representatives, that the need to communicate dissent to management by going into industrial action was to “mark a position”. In order to achieve this, most interviewees, union representatives and drivers, emphasised that the union was not afraid to use their structural power, as one union representative discusses:

So if industrial action would go forward it would threat the whole industry.  
(...) The thing is that they know we are all there (for industrial action) and they know we are not scared to do it, because we have done it 1 year ago and (TranspCo) back down and crap themselves basically. (...) as soon as they (SpiritsCo) know we want industrial action they are right on (TranspCo's) Managing Director "get it sorted or you can give up". (PE2.Tco)

This clearly illustrates the union and its membership consciousness of their associational and structural power within the industry. The union representatives and drivers consistently referred to the power that the union had attained in the last years, which allowed them to challenge TranspCo management and maintain some aspects of job quality.

## **6.5. Chapter Summary**

This chapter has explored job quality in unionised workplaces and provided extensive discussion on the role of management in shaping job quality, as response to market derivatives. In addition, the chapter has also examined the capacity for workers exercise collective agency in a context of supply chains in an attempt to regulate the employers’ behaviours, and its impact on job quality.

The data has evidenced an intense downward pressure from supply chain dynamics on all analysed unionised workplaces. Although the impacts on job quality varied across the three workplaces, it was clear that management attempted to restructure the labour and labour process to better adjust to supply chain pressures. Specifically in SpiritsCo bottling hall, data has shown the way in which supply chain pressures deeply impacted job quality, producing clear changes in the configuration of the workforces, of its skills, and the way in which performance and absence were being managed. Feelings of job insecurity, demotivation, and work pressure were widely demonstrated by workers in this workplace, as workers had no viable alternative options in the labour market. It was also demonstrated that market imperatives permeated the employment relationship at this workplace. This was particularly noticeable in core-flexi workers being pushed into accepting the last minute requirements for extending their shifts, even though the collective agreement stated management had to give a 24-hour notice period.

Although in the cooperage site supply chains were largely stalled by the union and coopers, management demonstrated strong willingness to implement a bundle of human resource practices, aimed at aligning production outputs with the demands from supply side of the business. Nevertheless, these attempts were fiercely opposed by the union, and coopers were able to maintain the job quality intact.

At TranspCo, evidence has shown how a workplace without workers' opposition can succumb to managerial and supply chain derivatives. Before the union's recognition, job quality was characterised by low H&S standards, high levels of temporal flexibility, managerial abuse, and no financial support when individuals were on sick leave. However, after the union's recognition, and resulting from its militant stance, job quality conditions began to improve. The effectiveness of the union was rooted on its strategic positionality within the SSI, coupled with their associational power. Although the downward pressures from supply chains were found to deeply impact job quality, a closer look at the data also suggested that workers' collective response was critically important for maintaining and restoring important dimensions of job quality.

## **Chapter 7: Job quality in non-unionised workplaces**

### **7.1. Introduction**

Chapter 7 is concerned with how the inter-firm pressures explored on Chapter 5 impacts on work organisation, and thus shapes job quality in non-unionised workplaces. Therefore, this chapter aims at exploring how management in response of market pressures shapes job quality, and how workers counter such pressures in workplaces where trade unions are absent. This is key to finish answering research questions 2 to 4. Moreover, this chapter also partly addresses research questions 5 and 6, where it is aimed at exploring and understanding by what processes workers influence on pressures to job quality. In doing so, this chapter addresses the individual forms of agency. As it was identified in the methodology chapter there are two workplaces whereby the trade union is absent from the workplace – the SpiritsCo’s distillery, and MaltCo.

Similar structure of Chapter 6 is used in Chapter 7. For each workplace, the findings for the three job quality dimensions are described. Firstly it is examined the role of management in shaping the analysed job quality dimension, followed by the workers’ agency in regulating management’s practices, and shaping job quality.

### **7.2. Distillery job quality, the absence of union, and the production network pressures**

Interviewees reported that the geographic-sociological context was critically important to understand the existing individualised employment relationship in the distillery (and, thus, of job quality). According to some interviewees, the population in the north of Scotland – the Highlands and Islands – are traditionally more compliant to the employer when compared to the population located in the central belt of Scotland, which is typically more militant. The senior manager for SpiritsCo whisky operations, who progressed in his career from being a “mashman<sup>16</sup>”, discussed the absence of trade unions: “A lot of the guys in the north are not in the union, is just the way it is in the Highlands. As we would say (taking) the cap to the lord” (SM4.Sco). Other interviewees, from other studied workplaces, occasionally made reference to similar interpretations.

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<sup>16</sup> Mashman – A distillery worker who tends to work in the “mash tun”, mostly responsible for the process of mixing grist with hot water to release the sugars which are present in the grain.

In addition to this conventional wisdom, a closer analysis to the data reveals that the reality can be more complex. Interviewees from the distillery identified two main factors for the absence of union in the workplace: the first, relates directly with trade union structures; the second, is associated with the way work is organised.

There was a strong sense among most interviewees in the distillery, that unions, particularly UNITE and GMB, were not eager to engage with remote locations in the north and islands of Scotland. This disconnection between the trade union structures, and the daily routine in the distillery, became a prevalent topic whenever interviewees were asked about trade unionism. The narratives from workers and managers varied from the total absence of the union in the workplace: “I have been in here for three years and I’ve never had an official approach through the union” (M1.Sco.D); to the lack of trust: “Union was crap, it wasn’t any good. I was here for 15 years before I first saw the guy (the union representative). And when he came up here, the manager was side by side to him” (PE1.Sco.D).

Secondly, interviewees referred to the contemporary work organisation in distilleries as a cause of decollectivisation. For instance, workers were placed alone in different departments across the distillery, limiting social relations between them. Another example refers to workers not having a common room or canteen where they could gather. For example, their lunch break were taken individually, so that one worker could cover for another that would leave for lunch. In addition, and most importantly, the presence of three different shifts across a working day limited the extent to which workers were able to mingle, share interests or build up any embedded collective awareness.

As a result, employment relationships in the distillery were predominantly rooted on an individual basis. According to the manager, issues were dealt on a daily basis and mostly through face-to-face meetings with the employee. The individual meetings and the daily encounters with the manager represented the only opportunity for workers to express their voice. This mechanism clearly represented a limited channel for workers to voice their issues or to challenge managerial decisions, which would potentially affect their own job quality. The following discussion outlines the way job quality was, indeed, shaped by management and workers.

## **7.2.1. Job security and working time**

### 7.2.1.1. Management role in shaping job security and working time

It was identified in Chapter 5, section 5.3.1, that SpiritsCo's distillery depended on labour flexibility in order to achieve a cost-effective production process. Flexibility was mostly attained through variations in workers' working time patterns. This section particularly discusses working time flexibility in the distillery, and addresses its impacts on job quality.

The distillery manager reported that all working staff had a full-time permanent contract and with long-tenures. The most illustrative example is that the worker with shortest tenure had been working in the distillery for fifteen years. Nevertheless, in the last fifteen years the distillery went through a process of automation and computerisation, which resulted in the workplace requiring less labour force working in production. This process entailed a process of redundancy – most on a voluntary basis. Illustrating the reduction in staffing levels, one worker reported that the distillery departments in the past required three workers to operate all tasks; in contrast, presently, all departments are operated with only one worker. The manager commented that at this stage the distillery had reached the ideal staffing level in relation to production needs. Nevertheless, despite the permanent nature of their contracts and long-tenures, there was a strong sense of insecurity amongst workers, which related to the uncertainty whether they would be made redundant sometime in the future.

Another consequence of automation and technological advancements relates to the restructuring of working time patterns, particularly the shift patterns. Temporal flexibility had been introduced in order to allow the distillery to run on a 24/7 basis to fully maximise labour and asset utilisation. The 24/7 production cycle had been divided in three eight-hour shifts. Although workers were employed on a fixed thirty-eight weekly hours, they were required to rotate between the shifts every week. This reorganisation of working time contrasted with what had been historically tradition in the industry. For instance, one line manager depicted an image of the “old way of working”. In his account, workers would come to the distillery in the morning to do “their daily shores”, and in after noon they were free to “carry on with their lives (...) some would go back to the fields, some would just go out fishing” (LM1.Sco.D). The line manager contrasted this image with the rigid shift system applied in modern distilleries.

The reorganisation of working time encompassed the complete managerial control over workers' shift patterns and overtime work. The distillery manager suggested temporal flexibility had been imposed to workers in order to "remove any restrains to overtime" and working time flexibilisation (M1.Sco.D). For instance, in the recent past, workers were entitled to an increased overtime rate and weekend shift allowance. However, this regime restrained the temporal flexibility, mainly because overtime rate and shift allowance means higher labour costs, which inhibits the company to utilise these practices at discretion. Thus, the distillery manager referred that the company had sought to remove all these restrains, by unilaterally deciding on a flat rate, as he explains:

They (SpiritsCo headquarters) said "don't want to pay double time, don't want to pay time and half, don't want to pay for bank of hours, don't want to pay for overtime" so the rate and all of these things that happen were taken to a big pot of money, cut it up and a flat rate come out. So what this means is that a Monday is a Sunday, night shift is day shift in this distillery - I work a Sunday night, or I work a Monday morning is the same hourly rate. (M1.Sco.D)

The change in working time organisation was reported by all workers and the manager to impact on the quality of jobs in the distillery. From the workers' perspective, the way in which shift patterns were managed generated strong feelings of frustration and resentment. All workers interviewed mentioned the "toll" that shifts had on their "bodies", and how the company "tie(d) your foot here" due to 24/7 production cycle. One worker describes the imposed working time:

The job... it can be very hard and tiring, because (...) we have to do all the shifts, and we do night shift every third week and your bodies don't know what to expect any more, what shift you are in, you know? It gets you! You feel kind of pissed off because now they have to work out the distilleries as much as possible, so the toll is on us (laughs). All comes with efficiency levels. (PE1.Sco.D)

#### 7.2.1.2. Prospects of workers' agency in job security and working time

The prospects for individual agency was found to be strong in relation to changes in working time patterns. The management's request to adopt the new shift regime at a flat

rate, gave the opportunity to workers to express some level of contestation. Managerial staff reported that consent building towards the new working time regime was attained through strategies of “give and take”, where workers were given the scope to negotiate and swap shifts. All managerial staff consistently reported the struggle to get the most efficient use of skills to cover all departments in the distillery, as one line manager stated, “these departments (mash and still house) are crucial (...) so when there’s the need we cover with overtime” (LM1.Sco.D). Hence, workers could get away from weekend shifts and night-time work. At the same time, the manager was able to run the distillery in the most effective way in terms of functional flexibility. This “give and take” relationship is explained by the manager:

There are ways to make it work for you, and these guys know how to do it. What you do is convince me (the manager) not to work weekends or swap with somebody else... so this year, finishing now, he (one worker) worked nine Sundays and nine Saturdays, and eight overtimes, only. But, in the rate that was negotiated, has many many more (shifts) than that.... So, your salary is bigger than what you are actually working. So, the effort that they’re putting into work, in terms of hours, is less than what their pay covers. I know about this, and what I get out of this is flexibility. I don’t have to worry about any other thing than planning manning for the best result. (M1.Sco.D)

For the workers negotiating shift patterns meant that they were able to secure some balance between work and family/social-life. Workers mentioned the difficulties to manage the new working time regime with family and social responsibilities. Thus, from the workers’ perspective negotiating shifts was crucial. From the workers that acknowledged such behaviour, all referred that they were keen to swap some weekend shifts for some undesirable tasks or shifts (such as the mash and still house). Indeed, some workers frequently used the words “compromise” and “give and take” in order to express the negotiating dynamics between management and the workforce. In return, workers were able to get a better work life balance, in order to spend more time with the family or enjoying the summer months, as this other worker illustrates:

(After two pm) that's when my social life and family life is. When you are working in here in summer time, and its glorious summer, its six o'clock and I could be out fishing, (or) I could be out sailing. (PE4.Sco.C)



However, this “give and take” also created in some cases direct competition between workers. It was referred that shift swapping directly impacted another worker, who had to cover that same undesired shift.

## **7.2.2. Skills and task discretion**

### 7.2.2.1. Management role in shaping skills and task discretion

#### *Required skill set*

The introduction of high end technology, so that the distillery could cope with increasing demands of productivity and quality efficiency, were unanimously reported by interviewees to impact the distillery’s required skill set to conduct the job. Overall, interviewees reported a change from technical skills (“craftsmanship”), to more factory-based skills, which had been driven by automation and computerisation.

All respondents commented the role that technology had on required skill set of workers. They suggested that workers were no longer asked to have deep knowledge about the process of producing whisky; rather they were only required to monitor the production process, as the distillery manager illustrates:

Now, everything is automatised, and they have to monitor the process rather than operate it. So things are controlled centrally by the computer we have in the distillation area and then operators have to monitor if actually things are in motion, rather than actually open the valves and things like that, because that is automated. (M1.Sco.D)

This trend of deskilling was particularly illustrative by the distillery manager referring to the skills a job seeker must have when a vacancy opens, as he explains:

If we are looking for somebody to operate the distillery we look for him to have the experience in monitoring machinery, numbers in sheets, and being able to understand trends, these (are the) sort of skills we look for. (M1.Sco.D).

Similarly, all interviewed workers commented on the impacts that technology had in the required skill set. There was a strong sense among all workers, that the automation and computerisation had “taken over the whole (production) process”, which resulted in

workers being only required to have “attention to detail” and how to “work with the computers” (PE1.Sco.D). One worker, with twenty-five years of service, argued that automation and computerisation had turned the trade into a factory-like environment. Another worker confirms this perception, by commenting on the general idealisation of craftsmanship in whisky production process:

If you watch the advertising for the Scottish Whisky Industry is very romantic, you see a bloke rolling the barrel and looks all really nice. But this is just a factory process. It's just manufacturing whisky, because it's getting automated. You get all that craftsmanship shite in billboards an' all... (But) this is totally different (...) this is factory work. (PE4.Sco.D).

### *Skill development and assimilation*

Concerning skill development in the distillery, it is now examined the existing training and time for skill development and assimilation. The introduction of technology had driven standardisation of tasks, with workers having to follow exact production steps and stages.

All managerial staff at the distillery reported limited emphasis on training, with the workplace lacking an allocated training budget and structured training plan. When asked about training structure and content, most managerial staff acknowledged that “training is mainly done on the job, (and) there is not a structure as such” (LM2.Sco.D). The content of the training varied, with particular emphasis in the last years for SpiritsCo’s values, as well as “whenever there’s a new machine we (management) get the boys trained up” (LM1.Sco.D). Nevertheless, all managerial staff supported claims that workers were offered limited training. For instance, the distillery manager reported that workers have not received any form of training in the last twelve months.

The question of how long the company allows the individual to become proficient was made to all managerial staff. There was a strong sense among the respondents that once workers were instructed on how to operate a machine, or conduct a specific process, there was no follow up, in order to understand if the worker had assimilated the correct instructions. Indeed, the distillery manager illustrates this process:

We (management) instruct people and then sometimes we’ve got to refresh them, and then they make a mistake. Obviously we have to go through it

again, so again a refreshment where you tell them the exact same thing.  
(M1.Sco.D)

Workers were also asked their perception on whether they have been receiving sufficient training, in order to conduct their jobs, with all answering they have not. Workers reported the training that they have received to newly implemented machinery was, typically, very compartmented and standardised, with the exact steps and stages being strictly instructed. They supported management's suggestion that the assimilation of training was insufficient and "refreshing instructions (were) basically repeating what has been said before" (PE4.Sco.D).

### *Skill utilisation*

In order to understand and evaluate skill utilisation, it is necessary to explore the task variety to which workers were being subject. From all interviews, it was identified two main tasks that workers were required to undertake: (1) control of mashing and distilling; and (2) transfer the whisky into to casks. There was a strong sense among the respondents that the drive towards cost-effectiveness and quality reliability had driven the distilleries (throughout the whole industry) towards a modern high-tech work environment. As a result, this had impacted the way workers could utilised their trade skills and knowledge.

Workers were required to rotate between different departments (still house, mash house, and decanter house) every week, in order to minimise issues related to boredom. However, most workers regarded this strategy to be unsuccessful, because throughout the whole workplace the tasks have become very similar. The statement of this worker reflects the lack of task variety despite job rotation:

There isn't much variety, you rotate between jobs, but in the stills and in the mashing department is almost 100% computerised. So, a lot of the time you are just sitting in front of a screen and seeing if you've achieved the levels... you are just sitting, mind-numb like, looking at the screens. (PE1.Sco.D)

Another worker, working in a different department, describes similar job tasks to the previous worker:

In the still house is completely computerised (...) you don't have to be putting all these numbers down. In here we just have to go with start and off buttons,

start and off, start and off. Everything in the still house is run by computer. So you just have to follow numbers on the screen here, so when it comes to 1.8% that's when you have to stop it. (PE5.Sco.D)

Although respondents consistently reported that the production process had been wholly computerised, it was noticeable that employees had deep knowledge about the process of making whisky. This is partly due to most workers having more than twenty years of service in the industry. Thus, they have experienced the job before the full automation and computerisation of the process. Managers referred that this knowledge was useful from the company's point of view in two ways. Firstly, during summer months, SpiritsCo could take advantage of staff knowledge for the highly popular tour guides. Secondly, during night shift, the operators had to work autonomously. Therefore, if "there (was) any problem with the process they had to be able to deal with it" (LM2.Sco.D), having to report the incident in the morning to the manager.

### *Task Discretion*

Task discretion is discussed in here relating to workers' freedom to reach decisions. Managers reported that the cost and quality pressures had created the need to introduce strict production procedures, which were wholly operationalised by the computers. This had a knock-on effect on workers' discretion. For instance, the distillery manager stated that workers just have to follow the various steps outlined in procedural guideline present in all departments.

Workers were also asked about their freedom to make decisions, and all respondents mirrored management's view. One worker commented on the instruction that he had to follow, and the role of the manager in controlling the procedures:

It's called the recipe sheet over there, you just have to follow the instruction in the sheet and you just have to stick to that and that's all. Things are tweaked a wee bit once a while by the manager, to increase the temp(erature) or setting the bar on a different level, but very small tweaks that the manager does. (PE4.Sco.D)

Indeed, workers' responses suggested limited latitude to reach decisions or to change any order of tasks, that conflicted directly with the "recipe sheets" and the computerisation of the production process. This reflects high level of standardisation of the production

process. Moreover, three of the interviewed workers referred to the role of management in curtailing workers' scope for task discretion. Workers highlighted the limited scope for autonomous decision making when incidents arise: "(t)o be honest with you, we don't get autonomy (...) the point that there is an incident, at that moment you must involve a manager" (PE2.Sco.D).

#### 7.2.2.2. Prospects of workers' agency in skills and task discretion

The prospect of workers' agency in relation to skills and task discretion was found to be weak. This was mainly because there was little evidence that workers were able to reshape or regulate management's decisions in relation to training or the introduction of more technology. However, there were many examples of workers engaging in non-related work activities, in order to cope with the boredom and lack of mental effort.

The nature of work, grounded on monotonous working tasks, provided the opportunity for workers to engage in activities that would distract them from the boredom of the day-to-day work. Workers and line managers mentioned various behaviours aimed at avoiding the job process. One line manager argued that some workers "(were) not that interested in the job" and often engaged in other activities such as "walk(ing) about (...) wasting time" (LM2.Sco.D). This was also evident from the workers narratives in the interviews. Five of the interviewed workers mentioned that taking time to "unwind" was necessary, due to the highly monotonous working tasks, such as starring at screens. Overall, there was a general view that such behaviours were a common practice in the workplace.

Despite the various examples and references to non-related work practices, the most illustrative one was bird-watching. One worker mentioned that, during the summer months, workers would excitedly wait for the arrival of the migratory birds coming from Africa or other European countries. One worker makes the "birds" a central theme of the interview:

(...) it's part of my job, the wee birds (swallows), they bring luck. There's nests here, we have a nest up there, a nest up there... see it in the pipe. We come in at five in the morning and they are sitting up there in that wire, and they are not scared of us. You could be close to them as this (arm's length) and they would be chirping like wee wee wee canaries. And then you see the

chicks on test flights (...) we see the chicks growing, some make it, some don't, but that's life. It's just different when they come in here to nest and they have a lot of chicks, and it's something that makes us smile during the time in here. (...) (Q: And you guys talk about it?) Yes, it's just a way for the boys to pass time. It's nice when they come in; they make the day for the boys in here. (PE1.Sco.D)

The detail and structured narrative about the birds' life cycle and everyday behaviours that this worker demonstrated during his interview, suggests a deep knowledge of the day-to-day living of the birds, which confirms the centrality of such activity amongst workers.

### **7.2.3. Work pressures**

#### 7.2.3.1. Management role in shaping work pressures

##### *Performance Management*

There was mixed evidence on whether supply chain pressures were enhancing the management of performance in the distillery. On the one hand, managerial staff reported requirements from SpiritsCo to apply more systematic and formal human resource practices geared to performance outcomes. On the other hand, both managerial staff and workers emphasised that, in practice, performance was managed on more informal basis. Similarly to other analysed workplaces, technology and supervisory control also emerged from the interviews as key to performance management.

The distillery manager commented that increasing visibility on workers' performance rates was crucial for SpiritsCo to calculate precise productivity levels, and the costs per litre of spirit. One line manager explained that now all managerial staff was required to hold meetings with workers in order to set yearly KPIs. The distillery manager also discussed extensively the new system imposed by SpiritsCo headquarters. He highlighted the new system was being introduced to measure more transparently the workers' KPIs. This were "around hitting a certain number or percentage of kilns right first time" (M1.Sco.D). The computerisation and automation of production present in the distillery, gave management the opportunity to make the workers' KPIs more visible and measurable as he explains in the following quote:

So that's really easy to gather statistics on (workers' targets), because it's all computerised, everything then gets recorded in the data basis, and then when the time come it's easy to look at the numbers and create a chart that tells you how many of these have been hit at first time and at the exact time. (M1.Sco.D)

Although this formal system of performance management had been introduced, most interviewees mentioned that there was still a considerable dependence on informal supervision. The lack of performance-related pay as an unlocking mechanism for workers' discretionary effort meant that the company had to resort to more direct methods of control. For instance, the small nature of the workplace gives management the opportunity for close and frequent interaction with workers:

(U)nlike a manager in a bottling hall where he doesn't see and have time to interact with the staff, in distilleries usually we have that time, this is such a small place that I can get around all of these people pretty easily. (M1.Sco.D)

All workers supported this view and commented on the direct supervision from management, in order to correct behaviours or to monitor efficiency levels. In short, workers reported that their effort levels were becoming more visible and easily scrutinised, which lead to more accountability for error and mistakes. However, workers reported that relations were not tense, and were based on mutual respect. As a result, the typical experience reported by workers relates to the relatively relaxed environment in the workplace, and cordial relationships between management and workers.

### *Absence management*

In relation to absence management, it was discussed with managerial staff whether supply chain pressures would entail a tighter management of workers' absence behaviours. Although, managerial staff acknowledged that absenteeism would have a negative impact on the overall running of the distillery, the approach towards absenteeism had been traditionally informal. The distillery manager reported that the current attendance within the distillery was standing just under 99%. These claims were supported by evidence coming from interviews with line managers. For instance, one line manager commenting on absenteeism stated "It's not too bad in here, it's not anywhere near the bottling hall numbers" (LM1.Sco.D).

It was further discussed with managerial staff whether there were absence management mechanisms in place to prevent absenteeism. All managerial staff reported that there was no clear structure of absence management. The distillery manager illustrated this by comparing the absence management structure used in SpiritsCo bottling hall with the one used in the distillery. The manager argued that the focus in the distillery is on preventing absence, rather than manage it through more formal or disciplinary procedures. This was reported to be made primarily through offering workers alternative options to absence. In this way, workers were able to ask for “shift-swaps”, holidays or “late-starts”, instead of calling in absent. The most illustrative example of this was the distillery manager acknowledging such situations and explaining, “in this way the distillery’s operations are not disrupted” (M1.Sco.D).

Workers were also enquired about the way in which absence was managed, and if this contributed to heightening levels of pressure in the workplace. One worker suggested that the informality in dealing with absence issues was beneficial for both management and workers. While, on the one hand, managers were able to prevent absences from occurring, on the other hand, workers had more flexibility to accommodate their individual circumstances. This managerial approach impacted workers’ job quality experience, with the majority highlighting how the informality allowed them to individually balance their personal and working life:

[Y]ou know that if you need (to go absent) you go "(supervisor name) can I swap with (worker name)?" and stuff like that (...). You don’t abuse it, and to be honest you don’t need to abuse it. (PE3.Sco.D)

Overall, the informal managerial approach and tolerance towards absenteeism behaviours evidences low rates of pressure experienced by the workers.

#### 7.2.3.2. Prospects of workers’ agency in work pressures

The prospect for individual worker agency in relation to work pressures was found to be mixed. In relation to performance management, most workers reported the lack of ability to oppose any new managerial practices instructed by SpiritsCo headquarters. Although, managerial approach to this issue was rather informal, workers reported that there was little they could do if management decided to adopt a formal approach. Nevertheless, workers’ overall attitude towards performance management was of disregard. For



instance, two of the interviewed workers reported that the way performance was managed “(was) not too much trouble” for the workers.

In relation to absence management, workers supported management’s view that absenteeism could be individually shaped. The data gathered in interviews with workers and managers did not suggest a clear and overt resistance mechanism from workers towards the way absence was being managed in the distillery. Thus, there was no evidence that workers tried to express discontent through the mechanism of absenteeism, either by being frequently late to work, or by taking disingenuous days off sick. Rather, most workers reported that the management willingness to keep absence rates low, together with the general cordial relations existing between the two sides, resulted in overt individual negotiations.

### 7.3. MaltCo

The final case assesses the shaping of job quality in MaltCo. The company has gone, throughout the years, from a unionised to non-unionised workplace. This relates to two factors: firstly, the constant restructuring of work organisation over the years; secondly, the evolution of the malting trade from craft work, to highly automatized and computerised, which was driven by supply chain pressures. Moreover, managers referred that the company gradually went from employing large number of individuals working on production, to become less dependent on manual labour. The most illustrative example is that, despite MaltCo having the biggest production site in the UK, it only relies on 19 production operators.

In such situation it was likely trade unionism would decrease, and indeed it did. Managers discussing the lack of unionisation in the workplace emphasised the unnecessary presence of a union due to the *pacified* relations between management and workers:

This is a family company so you actually know everybody, and the (the town) is very small, and you do know everybody. Most people would go out at night with other people. (...) this is a proper family business. (SM1.Mco)

However, for workers, the lack of unionisation, shared interests, and common identity, related more importantly to the way work was organised, rather than the pacified employment relationship. For workers, lack of unionisation related to three aspects: the *low employee numbers* working *individually* on a large plant site, which were divided in

three different shifts. Interviews confirmed that there was little sense of collectiveness in the workplace:

We don't necessarily mix. Even though we work in the same company, there's not much mixing. Of course if you are friends with somebody else... but I've just got here and it has been quite hard to meet people. (PE1.Mco)

Another individual, working for MaltCo for almost 2 years, commented: "I think there's a bloke who deals only with hoses, but I'm not sure" (PE5.Mco). This quote evidences a lack of awareness of his colleagues' roles and responsibilities in the workplace.

Although there was some factors that could have facilitated some level of collectivisation, such as workers performing their activities in the same working site, sharing working tasks (such as induction training, as it will be described in detail further on), or sharing a canteen, the reality was that this did not seem to have materialised. Thus, with the absence of the union and common identity/interests, workers were mostly left to themselves to individually express their voice, in order to try to shape and improve job quality experiences. It was clear in the interviews that this context provided few opportunities of agency for the workers: "In here is difficult to get around what management wants, it's pretty much their call" (PE3.Mco). It is under this employment relationship, and supply chain pressures (described in detail in Chapter 5), that job quality will be analysed.

### **7.3.1. Job security and working time**

#### 7.3.1.1. Management role in shaping job security and working time

MaltCo's staffing levels, as it was previously described in the methodology, was around 200 employees. However, both managers reported that the company had only nineteen shop-floor workers, who were all on full-time permanent contracts. Despite contractual stability, management and workers reported some level of turnover, and an overall proneness for workers to be dismissed. Managers and workers reported two main ones triggers for dismissal. First, if workers did not entirely comply with management's requirements in terms of effort. Secondly, the changes in work organisation frequently resulted in less required labour force – the most recent was reported to be related to the restructuring of shifts, allowing management to gain significant amount of working

hours, which meant better labour utilisation. Indeed, there was a strong sense of fear amongst workers for losing their jobs. For instance, five of the interviewed workers (the ones with shorter job tenure) reported that they were worried they would be dismissed. Therefore, although contracts were permanent and full-time in its nature, the overall experience was that it was relatively easy for management to dismiss workers.

Moreover, despite managers suggested that the business did not required numerical flexibility, it was consistently reported the need for high levels of temporal flexibility. As it was previously described (Chapter 5, section 5.3.2) the company had changed workers' working time patterns, in order to adjust to the new 24/7 production cycle in response of inter-firm pressures. The 24/7 production pattern created extra working time, which meant that management had to re-organise the working shift patterns. The two managers discussed that by shifting to a 24/7 production cycle the company was able to gain a great amount of working hours. Moreover, management had reorganisation the shift pattern to three eight-hour shifts during the week, and twelve-hour shifts during weekends. This allowed the company to gain one hour every weekday day, plus all the hours during weekends. Thus, management was able to run the business on a perpetual motion by operating 24-hour a day, as the production manager states:

There's different shifts now, because before there was one hour between shifts that was not being used and now we've introduced a different rota and those hours are now filled as well (...). Now what we do require from them (workers) is understandingly more flexibility. We were not getting that from (the previous) rota. (SM2.Mco)

The low numbers of shop-floor workers at MaltCo meant that all the extra working hours had to accommodate amongst the 19 shop-floor workers. As a result, workers were required to take the weekend shift every two months – one worker would work five week days, plus two weekend days, and followed by another five weekdays. Thus, every two months, workers had to show up to work twelve days in a row, which was followed by a four-day break. Moreover, flexibility of working time also entailed that workers could be placed in any shift depending on the company's needs.

Workers and both managers reported that the workforce were willing to accept the new working time patters because: firstly, there was a lack of employment alternatives in the area; and, secondly, due to the financial gains resulting from extra working hours.

Participants mentioned that workers were happy to “opt out” from the regular working hours, and all operators joined the new working time schedule voluntarily. The managers discussed that although the new shifts were “rather demanding” the financial gains for the workers were rewarding, as they were able to top-up their monthly minimum wage. Confirming managers’ views, workers also denoted the shifts to be “straining” and “exhausting”, but they were pleased that these extra working hours were available to them in order to increase their monthly income. Nevertheless, all workers reported that stringent working patterns generated extreme fatigue and feelings of exhaustion:

So you might have seven days of continuous work, physical, hard work, and every now and again you have to do 12 days (...) there’s a moment you think: "just quit! There’s no point of taking this, it’s just too much" because you are just being pushed all over. (PE3.Mco)

[I]t works like you are working for 12 days and then you don’t have enough time to recover and you actually come back (to work) knackered... all that sort of thing, it’s hard. (PE4.Mco)

#### 7.3.1.2. Prospects of workers’ agency in job security and working time

The prospects of workers’ agency for job security and working time was found to be weak. All workers mentioned that management had complete control over working time and was inflexible in allowing any changes in shift allocation.

Due to the lack of union presence, workers were asked about covert strategies and tactics to express displeasure and/or to cope with the high demands stemming from the working time regime present in MaltCo. Workers mentioned that showing up late to work and skipping days of work, was once used to manipulate working time and recover from highly intense shifts. The production manager also reported that such behaviours were present, and that management was aware of them: “I think everybody was getting that once in a while – the duvet day, showing up late...” (SM2.Mco). However, this had been promptly addressed by management. The production manager discussed the need to swiftly tackle such behaviours, as they were very disruptive for production. Management was able to tackle absenteeism by implementing a number of HR policies. However, linking absence to performance management and pay was the main one (this mechanism will be described in detail in the absence management section). Workers also discussed

the autocratic style of management in relation to any attempt of altering shifts. Six workers reported that at least once they have enquired management to alter or swap shifts. However, they referred that such requirements were always refused. Another worker mentioned that he had never attempted as he “*knew the answer*” (PE2.Mco).

### **7.3.2. Skills and task discretion**

#### 7.3.2.1. Management role in shaping skills and task discretion

##### *Required skill set*

As it was previously explained in Chapter 5, MaltCo was under increasing pressures from SpiritsCo to comply with malt specifications, which the company coped by upgrading its technology. As a result, interviewees consistently reported the knock-on effect on the workers’ skill set.

Both managers and most workers reported that *malting* was once considered a craftsman trade. Malting had changed progressively over the years with the introduction of technology. Nevertheless, it was only ten to fifteen years ago that full automation and high-end computerisation took over the production process. When asked about the role of operators before full automation and computerisation, the quality manager mentioned:

[D]efinitely, there was more skill involved... well they would have to know pretty much everything about the process of malting the grain, and turning the grain, and moving it around. It required a lot more skill. (SM1.Mco).

However, through observation and interviews, it was clear that the skill had dramatically changed. Managerial staff identified that the skill set required nowadays from shop-floor workers was: “what is called strip and cast, which is basically cleaning (...) they don’t have actually to do much, just clean” (SM1.Mco). Likewise the production manager described operators’ job as “basically cleaning, (because) there is no actual technical or any relevant skills involved no more” (SM2.Mco). Similarly to the distillery, in this case the technology had full control over the production process, pushing workers to do the menial jobs “because everything has been automated around them” (SM2.Mco).

##### *Skill development and assimilation*

Managerial staff and workers were enquired about existing opportunities for skill development in the workplace, and how long the company allowed the individual to become proficient in a specific task. Interviewees reported that MaltCo had a training plan. However, it lacked a proper structure that aimed at consistently developing workers' skills. Training was always made on the job, and occurred whenever an individual was hired or a new machine was introduced.

Management discussed that the training for newly entrants ("the induction") was made typically in half a day, and it was conducted on the job by more experienced workers. Induction covered the basic tasks and familiarisation to the areas of the workplace, as well as introduction to other members of staff. It was reported that the length of induction training had been reduced due to the tight staffing levels present in the workplace. The quality manager mentioned that because "manning is so low, we've got to get them (workers) performing as soon as they come in" (SM1.Mco).

Management's views was partly supported by workers. For instance, one worker suggested that new workers would just become proficient in doing the job, because other more experienced workers would occasionally guide and instruct them while carrying out their jobs. Indeed, workers' experience was mostly related to the inadequacy of induction training, as one worker explains:

When I started in here, my induction lasted for two hours, and everything else I've done myself. In the end, it worked out fine because I had to dig and look for stuff and introduce myself to people that probably I wouldn't be introduced otherwise. It has been helpful but that shouldn't be how it is, there should be a formal induction. (PE4.Mco)

Management also discussed training needs whenever new machinery was introduced into the production process. Both managers mentioned that length of training would vary according to whether the new procedure would bring significant efficiency benefits to production. Both managers highlighted that "ideally (workers) should take as much time as needed" (SM2.Mco) to become proficient in the job. They argued that the gains in terms of production efficiency were worth the time spent in training.

This was supported by workers' interviews. Two workers mentioned that training was driven towards efficiency rates, and to make individuals perform faster. In doing so, training had become exclusively geared towards efficiency and, as a result, workers were

being trained in exact requirements of a very small part of the production process. One of the two workers commenting on how training is linked to its ultimate goal of increasing production efficiencies, stated “once management gets new timings just right (for performing the new task), they’re off” (PE1.Mco). He further mentioned that this was problematic, because workers would often have to face unexpected problems that were not addressed during the training period.

In sum, there was little evidence that training was used to develop skills. Rather, training was perceived to be geared towards production efficiencies. Moreover, the introduction of new technology instead of triggering training needs it diminished the workers’ scope for properly developing their skills.

### *Skill utilisation*

It is now relevant to evaluate skills in relation to the scope provided by management for workers to exercise different skills in different tasks. During interviews it was consistently identified three main tasks that workers were required to undertake: “brushing off from tankers the leftovers (of cereal)”, as well as “cleaning dust, and strip and cast the kilns and tankers” (SM1.Mco). Management reported that workers were required to rotate between jobs in order to minimise proneness to errors, prevent disruptions in case of absence, and to introduce diversity of tasks in workers’ working day. Both managers reported that job rotation happened on weekly basis and it was required to be strictly followed.

Workers supported management’s view in regards to job rotation, and regarded it as useful and needed. However, all workers highlighted that job rotation only involved rotating between worksites, such as going from the tanker to the GVK, and then to the kilns. They suggested that despite job rotation was structured and occurred regularly, the work itself was repetitive and involved exactly the same type of tasks, as one worker states:

In here basically you’ve got to be able to handle the different types of tanks – the GVKs, the steeples and so on. But the job is the same; the work you have to do is the same, there’s not much more than stripping and casting.  
(PE1.Mco)

This entails that workers were subject to very limited range of work tasks, which resulted from the managerial strategy to fully automatize the workplace.

The way workers experienced such aspects of work was consensual. Workers reported experiencing repetitiveness of tasks, which created frustration, muscular and joint aches. One worker, commenting on the automation and lack of task variety present in the workplace, states “is just purely automated, mechanised movements (...) It really is frustrating, depressing really” (PE3.Mco). Moreover, interviews with workers were also filled with references to their ability to cope with physical strains because they were “fit and young” (PE2.Mco); or, on the contrary, “I’m not young anymore (...) it’s hard” (PE4.Mco).

In this sense, the skill utilisation and task variety were stalled by the constant introduction of technology. The evidence shows that technology was being introduced and used by management until the point that workers were left out of the production core, being only required to perform menial jobs.

#### Task discretion

There were obvious organisational constraints on workers scope to exercise discretion over their own work. Managers openly explained that the company’s aim was indeed to remove any scope for workers decision making, so that risks of human error would be minimise. The increasing pressured to deliver higher quality malt at lower costs, resulted in the company having to introduce more technology and consequently diminish workers’ scope for task discretion. In turn, this would result in less errors, as the production manager states:

[W]e still get a bit of errors. What I mean is that despite all this they still make the errors, and that’s because they have to decide on the spot, in the moment, and that’s not good (...). In a way, I know it sounds bad, but they do that stuff every single day, they might even do that stuff every single day twice a day. So it’s uncontrollable, we’ve got to make automated to deal properly with it.  
(SM2.Mco)

Nevertheless, in addition to the latter identified mechanism, half of the workers also highlighted the role that strict procedures had on eliminating the ability for discretion, as one worker explains:



You have to follow the procedures and processes that they hand in the beginning of your shift and that's it. Well there's always ways you can do your work, but you are always told how to do it. The procedures are there for you to follow and you just have to go with it. (PE3.Mco)

The management's intention to fully automate the production, and the workers' evidence of strict procedures, clearly indicates a significant level of influence from external pressures emanating from supply chain requirements. Workers' task discretion was being deliberately removed from the production process in order to prevent any errors that would jeopardise the organisational and production network's performance objectives.

#### 7.3.2.2. Prospects of workers' agency in skills and task discretion

Workers did not report any strategy or mechanism that overtly aimed at reshaping or regulating managements' intents of deskilling the workplace. Nevertheless, the prospects of workers' agency was found to be mixed: on the one hand, workers demonstrated capacity to cope with mental strains stemming from work organisation; on the other hand, workers were not able to shape, regulate or alter, in any way, the *status quo* relating to skills and task discretion.

The lack of workers' agency over labour process and management's behaviours was illustrative in the complete disregard that managers showed to the workers' opinion about changes happening in the workplace. Two of the interviewed workers, who have long tenure at MaltCo, reported they have never been consulted by managers in regards to changes in work organisation. Three other workers mentioned that they were often "unaware" and/or caught by "surprise" if any changes happened in the workplace. This evidence illustrates the lack of involvement and participation on the process of decision making, in relation to matters that would ultimately impact on skills and task discretion.

In addition, workers were asked about covert strategies to cope with the experiences of boredom in the workplace. Most of the interviewed workers mentioned that work is so intense that "you don't even have time to think about your life outside here" (PE1.Mco). However, other workers mentioned tactics of withdrawing from the job process. For instance, workers discussing the repetitive nature of the job mentioned that they would think about anything else but work: "there's days I'm not even thinking what I'm doing anymore" (PE4.Mco). Nevertheless, the most illustrative example of workers

withdrawing from the job process was reported by one worker and the production manager. Both participants reported that it was common practice for the workers to listen individually (with hear plugs) to music while working, even during the busiest hours of the day. Whilst the manager referred to this behaviour as relaxing time for the workers: “They all put their ipods and wash it for three hours – they can relax” (SM2.Mco); the worker referred to this as an excuse to avoid the repetitiveness of working tasks.

### **7.3.3. Work pressures**

#### 7.3.3.1. Management role in shaping work pressures

##### *Performance management*

There is considerable evidence that the pressures to comply with lead times and quality requirements have generated the need for implementing stricter performance management practices. One of the main factors for this was related to SpiritsCo’s role in suggesting managerial practices that aimed at ensuring expectable levels of performance from workers. Both MaltCo managers mentioned occasions where SpiritsCo managers visited MaltCo’s premises, in order to tackle issues with work organisation, as the quality manager discusses:

SpiritsCo only has one malt supplier, which is us, so they look at every detail and want perfection (...) (name of SpiritsCo manager) comes and may decide that he wants to go around the site. He may see a cycle (of production) that is not meeting the exact timings, and he immediately wants to know why. Eventually, we’ll have a seat, and he may say "have you tried to do this, have you made that" (...) (which) can involve going through all measures of performance, making them (workers) more aware how they can do their job better. (SM1.Mco)

This external interference ended up having a clear impact on the workers’ expected performance and the measurability of effort during a day’s work. The following two mechanisms aimed at monitoring and unlocking workers’ efforts derived from the inter-firm relation – the first relates to automation of the labour process; the second relates to the performance management system.

Relating to the first, MaltCo had been able to measure the exact timings of completion within production cycles for each production department. For instance, disruption in the production process was easily linked up to individuals, as work was performed individually. As a result, management had clear information on which department each individual was working:

For every operator we know exactly what was their work rate because we know the timings of (production) cycles and if (these) were completed or not. (SM2.Mco).

The production manager reported that having this tractability was now crucial for the successful running of the business, as this information was later discussed in meetings with SpiritsCo managers. Therefore, the inter-firm relations functions as a discipline and control mechanism for managers, which directly affects workers.

Secondly, another key instrument to unlock workers' effort relates to the direct link between performance management and pay. According to the production manager, workers would see their minimum wage topped-up by a bonus if performance assessment achieved a certain level. The quality manager, supporting this view, reported that within the company's performance management system "what works the best is that is salary related" (SM1.Mco). He further emphasised pay as a key aspect "making operators perform" as there was clear difference between the good performers and lower performers:

I think that between the best operator we have and the worst operator we have it's a about two quid and half in one hour, which you know times forty hours, times fifty two weeks that's quite a bit of money. (SM1.Mco)

Despite the organisational success of such practice, workers' reports indicates deep impacts on job quality experience. Five workers highlighted that the recent link of performance to pay is based on a "random" system, where workers see their wages dramatically decrease if they do not perform "top of the game, week in week out" (PE3.Mco). One worker recognised that there was a strong sense of duty and obligation among most workers to comply with targets and criteria. Two of the interviewed workers coupled this feeling with the need to top-up their salary to cope with family responsibilities, which was easy to lose because of strict performance control:

(...) if you do a mistake, if you are down on that day and you miss a timing,

if you forget to use the boots, if... anything to be honest, you've lost it. You'll lose your bonus for nothing. (PE1.Mco)

One worker mentioned that very few actually lose their bonuses during the evaluation, as most workers were performing relentlessly according to what the company required.

### *Absence management*

MaltCo managerial staff and workers were asked about formal and informal organisational structures adopted in the company to control absence rates. Managerial staff reported that, due to tight staffing levels, the company was very dependent on workers to show up to work so that production could be carried out smoothly. According to three workers and both managers, there was two main reasons for skipping work: firstly, they considered it a coping behaviour to deal with stringent work pressures; secondly, it was also recognised that sometimes they “couldn't be bothered” showing up to work, suggesting that some workers used absenteeism to demonstrate some of their discontent.

Similarly to performance management, both MaltCo managers made reference to SpiritsCo as an influencing actor in tightening control systems over absenteeism. They argued that the value for MaltCo to control levels of absenteeism was related to the need to minimise major disruptions in the production cycles, labour costs, and to avoid delayed orders.

Both managers discussed the recent drop in absence rates, which related to linking absence to performance evaluation, and consequently to pay. Absence had recently become one of the most important aspects in performance evaluation. The production manager referred that if one worker would fail to show up to work three times over the course of six months, the top-up bonus would be withdraw. The production manager explains the thought process behind the approach to absence:

So I don't doubt that people are actually sick, I can't doubt that. But what I have to say is that you are here to satisfy your contract of employment. The fact that you are not here is not disputable, you don't need to discuss it, you are not here to here to perform, to do your job. (...) if we have a line from a doctor, we can't question that, but what we can question and what we are

questioning, is if you were here or not here to satisfy your contract of employment. (SM2.Mco)

This quote highlights the effort from the company to remove the subjectivity in absence-related issues. By objectively defining whether a worker is or is not at work, managers were able to remove any potential discussion whether the absence had been genuine or not. The most illustrative example was both managers implying that there was a culture of intolerance towards absence in MaltCo. The production manager admitted that he would ask someone who called in sick to take painkillers and come into work. This clearly shows that behaviours of presenteeism were encouraged by managerial staff, as for managers was preferable to have the right staff numbers, even if that meant workers would not be able to carry out their work to the full of their capacity.

The stringent approach to absenteeism obviously deterred workers to skip work. Without exception, all interviewed workers mentioned times that attended work when ill. Indeed, all workers reported that there has been many occasions that they would have stayed at home if that did not result in losing the topped-up wage.

#### 7.3.3.2. Prospects of workers' agency in work pressures

The prospect of workers' agency in relation to work pressures was found to be weak, and often curtailed by managerial practices. In both performance and absence related pressures, management was always able to block workers' behaviours to cope with stringent work pressures.

Three workers discussing absence and performance management acknowledged that in the past, staff was able to cope with the stringent working conditions, by taking days off sick, or showing up late for work. Moreover, absenteeism was also used as an overtly resistance mechanism. For instance, two workers, mentioning they "couldn't be bothered" showing up to work, argued that this behaviour was a way of proving themselves they were in control of their lives: "it was about having that feeling that you are in charge of your time" (PE2.Mco).

However, what is interesting in this data was that managers and workers acknowledged the company's capacity to immediately curtail behaviours, which were considered disruptive for the overall production process efficiency. For instance, managers were aware of workers listening to music while working (as it was previously described). This

behaviour was generally tolerated, as it did not bring any visible disruption to the overall production process. However, this approach starkly contrasts to the workers' absence behaviours. Because absenteeism was considered a major disruption, management decided to immediately deal with it by making absence one of the major criteria of performance related pay. The data from interviews with workers showed the lack of agency to counter these managerial practices.

#### **7.4. Chapter Summary**

This chapter has explored job quality in non-unionised workplaces, and provided extensive discussion on the role of management in shaping job quality as response to market pressures. In addition, the chapter has also examined whether supply chain dynamics constrained workers' capacity to exert individual agency, in an attempt to regulate the employers' behaviours and its impact on job quality. In this way, this chapter contributed to respond to the research questions, by analysing the ways in which job quality is dynamically shaped by contradicting forces happening at different levels of analysis.

The data has revealed that in workplaces where the union is absent, managers deploy their prerogative when implementing technology and practices in order to respond to supply chain pressures more efficiently. Specifically, in both SpiritsCo distillery and MaltCo, management resorted to high-end technology in an attempt to increase reliability in production outcomes, such as costs and quality; and had restructured labour and labour process to better accommodate demands from the production network. As a result, job quality in both workplaces had gone through a process of deep dilapidation, where trades, once rooted in craftwork, were now based on menial and monotonous jobs, and with intense working time variations. In turn, workers were feeling increasingly trapped in these degraded roles, where management imposed its will and workers had increasingly less scope to oppose it.

Data has also revealed that supply chains have had a deep impact on workers' capacity to exert agency. Specifically, the changing nature of work in the analysed workplaces, coupled with intense supply chain pressures, limited workers to share interests and mobilise. Although workers showed initiative to demonstrate dissatisfaction towards low job quality by individually attempting to shape their job quality experiences, these were only allowed whether management perceived them to not cause major disruption to

organisational and supply chain efficiencies. Nevertheless, whenever possible workers showed willingness to resort to individual acts of coping and insurgency, in order to improve their work experiences rooted in highly intense jobs.

## **Chapter 8: Discussion**

### **8.1. Introduction**

This chapter discusses the findings in relation to the proposed conceptual model and the previous theory reviewed in Chapters 1 to 3. The chapter, first, briefly reflects upon the overarching argument on job quality – how job quality has been conceptualised in previous literature, and the way in which this thesis conceptualises job quality. Next, this chapter discusses more explicitly the research questions in relation to three key themes of this research project, which are as follows: (1) inter-firm relations and supply chains, and its impacts on the organisational strategy, and the work and employment patterns; (2) the job quality outcomes in the three relevant dimensions; (3) and finally workers' collective and individual agency. Finally, the discussion chapter provides a brief discussion on the way in which research can move forward and how it can better understand the drivers shaping job quality.

This thesis proposes that job quality is a concept that is dynamically shaped through negotiating processes taking place at the workplace level. In recent years, job quality has been conceptualised and investigated by macroeconomic studies (Gallie, 2013; Munoz de Bustillo et al., 2011). Although these studies have been important for many reasons, such as for generating clear measures and for evaluating the quality of jobs in specific countries, the nature of these investigations largely overlooks sectoral and workplace context. On the contrary, other studies analysed job quality at micro or workplace level, providing fine detailed accounts of the consequences that job quality has on individuals. Although such approach may provide strong accounts in relation to the context in which job quality is analysed, it is limited in terms of job quality conceptualisation. Moreover, its approach is often restricted to the workplace, overlooking the dynamics beyond the point of production (Sengupta et al., 2009). As a result, there is a need to provide more empirical data on how job quality is shaped by forces other than those created by national regulatory frameworks or at workplace level (Hancké et al., 2007; Vallas and Prener argue, 2012).

Following Grimshaw and Lehndorff (2010) framework, this thesis examines job quality taking into consideration social actors (managers, workers, and trade unions), product and capital market rules, and the features of work organisation and workforce. In doing



so, this research study is able to support the importance of product and capital market dynamics, as well as the role of workers in shaping job quality. Inter-firm relations and workers' agency have been identified in Chapter 1 to 3 as particular areas of empirical and theoretical scarcity within job quality debates. This approach is important, as it enables this thesis to move towards the understanding of job quality as an outcome of power dynamics happening at sectoral and workplace levels (Hancké, et al., 2007; Grimshaw and Lehndorff, 2010). Moreover, the approach also allows to bring together important factors studied by both macro and micro studies.

In addition to understanding job quality as a concept embedded and shaped by inter-firm dynamics, this thesis has identified debates highlighting the need to understand how such production structures may affect the quality of jobs at the workplace level (Cumbers et al., 2008; Taylor, 2010). The literature review identified that countries either tightly or loosely regulated are not immune to market derivatives (Thompson and Newsome, 2004). In addition, the widespread prevalence of such structures (Dicken, 2015) has major implications for conventional understandings of work and employment (Grimshaw et al., 2005; Rubery et al., 2005b), and consequently of job quality. In relation to more specific academic debates, this thesis has found evidence pointing to an increasing integration of different points of production throughout the supply chain. This integration follows the argument of the "new production model", where firms are made to obey to strict supply chain requirements rooted on costs, quality and delivery time (Lichtenstein, 2007).

An argument made in this thesis is that the tactics applied by employers to comply with market and supply chain pressures lead to organisational, work and employment dynamics that affect the standards of job quality. The problematic, as Hammer and Riisgaard (2015) argue, is that supply chains and inter-firm relations generate conditions for a new social organisation of labour to emerge, which are initiated and controlled by management that seeks to reduce the indeterminacy of labour, so that continuous flow of production can be achieved. The pressures imposed by supply chain dynamics are in essence forms of managerial control that have deep impacts on workplace level and the quality of jobs. As Wright and Kaine (2015) argue, supply chain pressures, such as costs, gear management to make organisational decisions that are characterised by those found in "low-road" strategies.

Consequently, job quality is more than an outcome of national institutional frameworks, but also a product of strategies pursued by employers at organisational and workplace levels to deal with market pressures. The relation between capitals becomes critical to the understanding of the ways in which job quality is shaped at the workplace level. This is in line with Littler's (1982) early argument, which states that production systems, such as inter-firm relations, are not simply related with the way production is organised, but also with systems of control over labour and labour process. Emphasising the relevancy of supply chain pressures in relation to job quality is indeed important. Thus, in order to better decipher the ways in which supply chain impacts job quality, a more thorough and structured approach capable of translating different dynamics is precisely what is needed. This thesis has, therefore, analysed how inter-firm dynamics influence different dimensions of job quality.

Another specific and important problematic surrounding the conceptualisation of job quality, pinpointed by few researchers, relates to the little attention given to the active role of workers in shaping job quality (Simms, 2015). Researchers have argued that macroeconomic studies often overlook and/or simplify the role of workers because their analysis, based on national institutional frameworks, downplays the employment relationship dynamics happening at workplace level (Crouch, 2005; Hancké et al., 2007). Similarly to this critique, Simms (2015) highlights the lack of attention given to the role of workers as collective actors in shaping job quality. Moreover, in relation to more wide-ranging academic debates, Kelly's (1998) approach to capital-labour relations is strongly rooted in considering processes of interest definition involved in the process of job quality negotiation, as opposed to merely counting and describing their appearance or position. This is the approach followed by this thesis, which allows a counterpoint to a conceptualisation of job quality that considers workers as passive, in favour of a more active role in shaping their own job quality.

Although sound arguments have been previously made by pointing to the importance of collective agency and trade unionism in shaping job quality (Hoque et al., 2014; Simms, 2015), this thesis has widened the analytical scope by addressing individual forms of worker agency. The widening of workers' agency is relevant as we find arguments of increasing workplace individualism (Waddington, 2016). Some researchers argued that this individualism is due to harmonious workplace relations and an increasing societal individualism (Brown, 1990; Guest, 1989). Others, more convincingly, have showed that

trade unions, as the organisers of collective agency, have declined due to a systematic withdraw of the state from post-war pluralism and collective bargaining (Hyman, 2001; Kelly, 1998). However, the argument that de-collectivisation reflects the withdrawing of the state may fall short in fully understanding the dynamics that propel de-collectivisation. An argument holding more weight and proposed by this thesis is that a combination of factors have led to little capacity for workers to collectivise and define common interests. Coupled with the withdrawing of the state, this thesis acknowledges accounts that have pointed to the increasing ubiquitous supply chain structures in influencing workers' capacity to exercise collective agency in the effort of improving job quality (Jackson et al., 2013). Such dynamics make relevant the investigation of the impacts of supply chains on workers' agency, as well as the ways in which workers attempt to actively regulate employers' willpower and shape the quality of their own jobs, either by means of collective or individual agency.

Research is beginning to show that workers' agency is a crucial driver of job quality (Hoque et al., 2014; Simms, 2015). This has also been featured in the context of supply chains, with influential accounts calling for more empirical evidence (Newsome et al., 2015; Taylor, 2010). Yet, we know very little about the dynamics in workplace contexts embedded in inter-firm relations, which influence not only job quality but also workforce configurations and their ability to exercise agency. The following sections discuss these topics in more detail by following the proposed research questions. In doing so, this chapter proceeds by abstracting key findings and discussing them in relation to the literature review, whilst demonstrating that both research questions have been addressed and answered.

## **8.2. Discussion of Research Questions**

### **8.2.1. Research Question 1: To what extent do pressures emanating from market and production networks impact organisational strategy, work and employment on local level?**

Grimshaw et al. (2005: 22) makes an important point when claiming that more attention should be given to the embeddedness of other firms in the whole system of production, if researchers want to comprehensively analyse the implications of its pressures on work and employment. This section does exactly that by discussing the repercussions that

inter-firm dynamics, embedded in a competitive environment, have for work and employment patterns. Lichtenstein (2006, 2009) argues that an emerging “new production model” is driving inter-firm relations to be ever-more concerted and integrated. This “new production model” provides the framework with which to examine the nature of links between product market, production networks and organisations.

The new production model is the dynamic that shaped relations between retailers, SpiritsCo and its suppliers (MaltCo and TranspCo). The analysed production network is embedded in a highly competitive globalised market, where retailers are the channel for companies, such as SpiritsCo, to place their product in the consumer market. Similarly to other studies, the evidence clearly shows the need for SpiritsCo to comply with retailers’ requirements in order to place the product in the consumer market (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008; Newsome, 2010).

What is interesting in this study is that findings clearly illustrate the pressures stemming from retailers affected directly not only the SpiritsCo, but also its production network. In line with previous researchers, who argued that much of retailers “success” relies on bullying practices within the supply chain (Bell et al., 2004; Sparks, 2010; Tilly, 2007), the evidence in this study suggests that the impacts of retail behaviour were not solely constricted to the SpiritsCo inner organisational strategy, but to its whole production network. The strategy of spreading risk across the supply chain was crucial for SpiritsCo competitive survival. In short, for SpiritsCo, the continued survival of their contract with retailers was not only dependent on strictly complying with their requirements, but also mimicking KPIs to control the supply chain. Evidence suggests that market derivatives rooted on cost, reliability, and quality pressures were being integrated into SpiritsCo’s production and distribution processes (Lichtenstein, 2006, 2009), and used as governance tools with suppliers. This was particularly evidenced through SpiritsCo’s supplier rating system, where the company demanded high levels of integration and coordination between the suppliers and themselves. This confirms accounts arguing that production networks are concerned with jointly working together to achieve productivity and profitability in more efficient manners (Coe et al., 2008).

As Robinson and Rainbird (2013) argue, the governance within inter-firm relations entails the capacity of a firm to exercise power within the network through the allocation of resources and to set rules over specific aspects of production. The findings of this study show that SpiritsCo controlled its production network by generating imbalanced

dynamics, where the supplier always felt compelled to comply with the lead firms' rules and demands over specific aspects of production. In this study, the evidence illustrates that this was achieved by generating a feeling of fear in the relationship between SpiritsCo and suppliers, where the former held excessive power and compelled the latter in order to better adjust its production to retailers' requirements. Thus, this mechanism is not only constricted to the retailer-supplier relationship as suggested by Seth and Randall (2005), but it is also observable across the chain of production. Therefore, the way in which SpiritsCo's suppliers are impacted by retailers' requirements gives weight to Wright and Lund (2006) argument, which states that second tier suppliers are affected by downward pressures in chains where retailers are dominant.

One of the main contributions provided by this thesis is to demonstrate the link between supply chain dynamics and the impacts they have at more concrete organisational level, particularly in relation to work and employment patterns (Grimshaw et al., 2005; Rubery, 2006). Changes in work and employment patterns were perceived by many of the respondents as being crucial for the coordination of the production network. For instance, SpiritsCo bottling hall was dealing with cost pressures stemming from price promotions made by retailers by finely matching labour costs to market demands, which, in turn, affected the type of employment contracts used by the management. Also, SpiritsCo directly influenced MaltCo's managerial practices by suggesting a direct link between workers' pay and performance and absence management. Another example relates to TranspCo changing the drivers' shift patterns in order to better suit the distilleries' opening hours. This confirms previous researchers, who argued that the aim of networked production systems is to generate value through the transformation of non-material inputs into demanded goods and services throughout the production chain (e.g. Coe et al., 2008).

These findings are consistent with the literature, which argues that work and employment patterns are not only outcomes of the employer's direct control, but also of the employer's client organization (Rubery, 2006). Thus, SpiritsCo purposively have stepped beyond the typical management of suppliers' organisational performance, and have directly dictated patterns of labour organisation and usage. This clear link between what is happening at the workplace level and the market dynamics shows that changing patterns of employment and work are predicated in forms of inter-firm power and control (Grimshaw et al., 2005; Hammer and Riisgaard, 2015).

The first research question has illustrated the way in which organisations and their work and employment patterns were influenced by wider forces, such as supply chains and product market derivatives. This finding is in line with Littler's (1982) theoretical argument that production systems, such as the coordinated and integrated production networks, are not simply related with the way production is organised, but also with systems of control over labour and labour process. In this way, the changes in work and employment patterns in the three case studies supports Kelly's (1985) argument that analysis of job quality transformation should in the first place consider examining the articulation of different actors outside the employment relationship. The following contributions, which relate to the three analysed job quality dimensions, give weight to this argument. The link between inter-firm dynamics and the changing features of job security and working time, skills and task discretion, and work pressures at a workplace level helps this thesis to analyse job quality in relation to product market and supply chain pressures.

### **8.2.2. Research question 2: To what extent do pressures emanating from market and production networks promote flexibilisation practices affecting job security and working time?**

As argued above, changes in work and employment were rooted in product market and inter-firm pressures. The findings from this thesis strongly suggest that variations in market demands and inter-firm dynamics influenced the way in which flexible working schemes were implemented at the workplace level. Indeed, managers and workers across all case studies discussed the domination of flexible working schemes as key determinants in successfully coping with cost derivatives and demand fluctuation. This confirms Flecker's (2010) claim that labour flexibility has become the norm in chains of production in the past years. Similar to other studies, this research shows evidence of variations in market demand and inter-firm dynamics as important factors impacting the way management uses numerical flexibility to adjust to supply chain requirements (Rubery and Earnshaw, 2005). However, as it will be discussed below, this thesis shows working time playing a key role in companies' capacity to adjust to market and supply chain demands.

Previous literature argued that in an effort to adjust to supply chain requirements, firms would hire individuals on different types of contracts resulting in a segmentation of the

workforce. For instance, Barrientos (2013) argues that management often responds to tight interrelated firm dynamics by creating a core-periphery workforce to better adjust employee numbers to market demands. This segmentation has been used as an organisational strategy, where workers in the periphery, experiencing lower job security, are used as ‘cushions’ so that permanent workers can maintain higher levels of job quality (Atkinson, 1984). For instance, Caroli et al. (2010) discuss how workers with atypical contracts provide firms the required flexibilisation by means of adjusting employee numbers, as well as through working time flexibility. In turn, core workers are safeguarded from variations of working time patterns.

Findings in SpiritsCo bottling hall mirrored the previous research on segmentation (Atkinson, 1984; Barrientos, 2013; Caroli et al., 2010). In particular, it was found that the workforce was extremely divided due to the company’s strategy based on employing individuals on three different types of contracts. Management at SpiritsCo bottling hall utilised temporal and core-flexi workers to cover their needs in terms of flexibility. The segmentation was expressed in the decreasing numbers of privileged full-time workers, who were strongly protected from flexible working schemes, in favour of more precarious workers, who experienced significant high levels of flexible working practices (in terms of contractual status and working time). The precarious nature of the temporary and core-flexi contracts was what allowed management to take advantage of the working time flexibility. The deregulation of contractual statuses and working time in the UK allowed the utilisation of such mechanisms (Freathy and Sparks, 2000). Workers were asked at a short notice to work beyond their working shift and at a flat rate in order to cover the needs of production in terms of shifts, overtime work, as well as to cover for absentees. These contracts relate to the type of flexibility, termed by Korczynski (2002) as “labour-stretching”, where workers frequently experience work extensification in periods of high product market demand. In SpiritsCo bottling hall it was the precarious nature of the contract together with market derivatives that allowed management the adoption of a similar mechanism to Korczynski’s (2002) concept of “labour-stretching”. However, in this study, organisational policies were going beyond the workers’ willingness to accept the changes in working time patterns. Therefore, the flexibility of working time evidenced in this thesis relates more to Lambert’s (2008) approach, where unpredictable working hours are imposed upon workers, rather than Holman’s (2013) view in which workers are able to choose their own working hours. This contribution

lays particularly on the temporary and core-flexi contracts, where individuals experienced frequent and short notice changes in their working hours. The working time flexibility applied in SpiritsCo bottling hall is different from the typical flexible employment scheme described in the literature, where flexible contracts are used to adjust employee numbers and increase momentarily the number of shifts (Caroli et al., 2010; Kalleberg, 2011). Rather, in this study the firm secured flexibility to cope with market fluctuations through workers' perception of job insecurity, and forced both temporary and core-flexi workers to extend shifts and accept overtime work. This forced availability for work was indeed a widespread practice of controlling the labour costs in the bottling hall. The control of labour costs was made by the amount of money that a "minute of work" entailed.

Findings relating to working time illustrate a complex picture. The findings evidenced in this thesis show core workers in SpiritsCo bottling hall and distillery, MaltCo and TranspCo being also subject to intense working time flexibility. For instance, there was a clear evidence of variations in working time patterns of full-time permanent workers in the bottling hall. Although these variations were not frequent, unexpected and involuntary, the evidence indicated permanent workers having to work on twilight and night shifts, so that the company could cope with sales demands. In the other studied workplaces, the incidence of flexible working time among permanent full-time workers was much more pronounced. In SpiritsCo distillery and MaltCo all permanent staff was subject to intense and compulsory nonstandard working hours, where individuals had to rotate between the three shifts on a weekly basis. At TranspCo, drivers were often required to extend their shifts, take nonstandard shifts, such as in the weekends, and do overtime work on an involuntary basis, so that the company could cope with orders stemming from their clients. In particular, the evidence showed that TranspCo was dealing with last-minute delivery requests by requiring drivers to extend their working hours without prior notice.

Thus, this thesis demonstrates that such flexibilisation is also extensively used in relation to permanent full-time workers. This supports Rubery et al.'s (2005a) study, which showed that the management of working time patterns is being increasingly generalised across employment statuses, and particularly in relation to permanent standard contracts. In this way, the flexibilisation of working time emerges as an important factor in the regulation of work that is not only used within contingent labour, but also with permanent



workers. Therefore, although Rubery and Earnshaw (2005) argue that inter-firm dynamics have implications primarily on job security, this discussion has shown working time flexibility being crucial to increase inter-firm integration, to cope with labour costs, and to respond to 24/7 production demands.

For the workers, these findings suggest that the typical job quality experience was associated mostly with job insecurity and the incapacity to manage the extended and unpredictable changes in working hours. As Besond et al. (2003) argues, the reason to work long hours can be voluntary or involuntary. The majority of workers in the analysed organisational case studies felt compelled to accept the unexpected changes in working hours, because of financial gains or the fear of losing their jobs. This corresponds with McKenzie and Forde (2009), who claim that workers' consent to work long hours is often locked to the need to earn extra money or to have a job. What is problematic in terms of job quality outcomes is that working excessive long hours and in diverse shifts (Besond et al., 2003) is dangerous for workers physical and mental health, and can produce detrimental impacts upon the individuals' balance between work and personal life. The findings in this thesis highlighted the way in which working time pervaded individuals' personal life by preventing them to enjoy their time off; by making them "change everything around" in their lives to accommodate an unexpected call for work; or by simply preventing individuals to be present in their family lives. The majority of the participants and particularly those with families, highlighted the impact that working long and extended shifts had on their work-life balance. Thus, although working extra hours was in some cases seen as positive, this was mostly due to the individuals' insecurity in terms of pay and jobs (McKenzie and Forde, 2009). For some workers, accepting the unplanned working hours meant enhanced wages to "make ends meet", and for others it symbolised more and better chances of prolonging their employment period.

This section has contributed to answering research question 2, which enquires whether pressures emanating from market and inter-firm relations promote flexibilisation practices affecting job security and working time. The discussion within this research question highlights the clear influence that market imperatives and supply chain demands have on organisations adopting flexible working. The supply chain derivatives did not only foster conditions for workforce segmentation in terms of job security but also in terms of working time (Hammer and Riisgaard, 2015, Rubery et al., 2005a), which in turn produced detrimental job quality conditions for workers. This analysis has shown

that flexible practices affected job security and working time applied across different groups of workers, with implications for workers' health and well-being. It was discussed that permanent full-time contracts can be subjected to intense and unpredictable changes in working time patterns. This investigation on supply chain impacts on job security and working time allows this thesis to reflect on the implications it has for workers' experiences of job quality.

### **8.2.3. Research question 3: To what extent do pressures emanating from market and production networks inhibit or foster skill development and task discretion**

There are four fundamental dimensions in the conceptualisation and measure of skills and task discretion employed in this thesis: the required skill set; the development and assimilation of skills; skill utilisation; and task discretion (Felstead et al., 2004). As it was noted in Chapter 2, discretion is a key component of skill, with jobs that are seen to involve greater discretion considered as higher skilled (Felstead et al., 2004; Green 2006; Spenner, 1990). Having examined each component part that constitute skill on the job, this section will seek to analyse the direction of skill in relation to the pressures stemming from market and inter-firm relations. This analysis provides the opportunity to place the direction of skill in a wider political-economic context.

In contrast to data drawn from large scale quantitative surveys (Felstead et al., 2004; Felstead et al., 2013; Gallie, 1994), and proponents of the upskilling thesis (Blauner, 1964; Womack et al., 1990), the evidence in this thesis shows significant deskilling in four of the five analysed workplaces. These studies indicate that despite polarisation trends (Gallie, 1994) the skill levels are generally considered to be rising, in part due to the increased automation and computerisation in the workplace (Felstead et al., 2004). These studies ground their argument on evidence that workers should need more training and more time to acquire proficiency in order to meet the requirements of new computerised and automated workplaces, which suggests a rise of skill levels. Moreover, it is argued that technology is typically introduced with the intent to replace standardised work tasks, leaving the more complex tasks for the workers to perform. In terms of task discretion, however, the large-scale studies indicate a reduction in workers' scope to make their own decisions and to exercise autonomy over their own work tasks (Felstead et al., 2013; Felstead et al., 2004).

The data drawn from the SpiritsCo bottling hall and distillery, the MaltCo and the TranspCo case studies provide evidence of the uniqueness of this results. In terms of skill requirement, workers reported that they had to hold different skills and undertake more and different tasks than what they used to do. This was indeed propelled by automation and computerisation of the workplace as Felstead et al. (2004) claim. However, the additional tasks often resulted from the standardisation of the way work was organised, which divided the labour process into smaller and simpler work tasks, allowing management to better control and monitor organisational and individual performance. In turn, workers were required to perform repetitive and routinized tasks. Thus, in these specific cases, the evidence from this thesis shows that introduction of technology constrained the development of technical skills.

Additionally, the manner in which work was organised had a bearing on workers' time devoted to skill development and to skill utilisation. For instance, in SpiritsCo bottling hall, skill development was highly conditioned with individuals being rushed in training programmes to get back into the assembly line, as well as through temporary workers being asked to develop their skills elsewhere while out of work. This partly explains Felstead et al.'s (2013) recent quantitative study, where it is reported that employers have significantly diminished time allocated for training. A further manner in which deskilling was evidenced relates to the barriers to effective skill utilisation. It was consistently mentioned that there is a need to keep the best performing workers in the most critical work tasks in order to reach the required targets. In essence, workers and skills were managed in a way that better fit the organisation and its objectives.

However, it was the evidence on the impact on workers' discretion that the pronounced deskilling trend was more noticeable. Discretion is argued to be a key component of skill, with jobs that involve greater discretion seen as higher skilled or at least associated with higher skills (Felstead et al., 2007; Green, 2006). Braverman (1974) centres his argument on the assumption that the removal of discretion from work leads to the reduction in skill levels. The evidence from four of the five workplaces indicate high levels of control with limited scope for workers to use task discretion, which according to Spenner (1990) means skills are not being required and utilised. The evidence shows high numbers of managerial paraphernalia in SpiritsCo bottling hall, which limited workers' scope for task discretion. The lack of discretion experienced by SpiritsCo bottling hall workers relates to both – the introduction of technology and rationalisation (guided scripts), as

well as stricter monitoring practices. In SpiritsCo distillery, MaltCo and TranspCo, workers' lack of discretion was mostly constrained by environment that relied much on technology and automation. The lack of scope for workers to exercise task discretion coupled with high levels of work effort, entail a degree of deskilling (Spenner, 1990).

However, what is critical in terms of this research is the placing of the direction of skills within a political-economic framework. The focus of this thesis on inter-firm relations provides the explanatory background for the direction of skill. Researchers have mentioned the need to fully understand the impact of market pressures on skills (Ramirez and Rainbird, 2010), and argued that inter-firm features may become important vehicles of knowledge and skills diffusion (Ernst and Kim, 2002; Gereffi, 1999; Humphrey and Schmitz, 2002). For instance, Ernst and Kim (2002) argue that some of the upskilling capacity of supplier firms, stems from knowledge and experienced acquired by local suppliers having to achieve targets demanded by client firms. Thus inter-firm relations are viewed by these researchers as being drivers of upskilling, presenting a vision of a new system of networked production, where workers' discretion and ability to share technical knowledge is paramount for increasingly improving organisational performance.

However, there is evidence in this thesis that market pressures and inter-firm relations had a significant influence on constraining skill development in four of the studied workplaces. Although some nuances were shown, particularly in the way inter-firm dynamics affected the direction of skill in the three organisational case studies, workers experienced a drastic and direct change in the way skills were managed. Similarly to other studies (Grugulis and Vincent, 2005), systems of monitoring and managing these pressures were encouraging management to create isolated job tasks.

In both SpiritsCo bottling hall and distillery, the strategy to cope with strict quality and cost requirements stemming from the product market (retailers) led the company to introduce high-end technology and strict monitoring practices. In these workplaces, the demands made within supply chain were strongly associated to the introduction of automation and computerisation, which led to high levels of standardisation of work practices, with strict guidelines that needed to be followed by workers; or through tight monitoring practices that directly impacted on workers' scope for task discretion. As examined before, workers in SpiritsCo bottling hall had to undertake tasks with lower levels of skills, which constrained skill development. This clearly contradicts Ernst and

Kim (2002), who argue that demands from client firms result in new experience and thus more skills in order to properly meet the client firms' requirements. In the case of TranspCo and MaltCo, the nature of inter-firm relationship also had an impact on skill direction in the workplace. Particularly because managerial staff had to share labour process information, and be willing to adopt working practices suggested by SpiritsCo. The evidence has shown that SpiritsCo directly advised its suppliers on ways of organising work, and on implementing up-to-date technology in order to “*align ways of working*”. What is interesting is that the diffusion and sharing of knowledge, that other authors proclaimed to be the basis for upskilling (Ernst and Kim, 2002) was what produced organisational conditions that led to pronounced deskilling in MaltCo, and, to some extent, also in TranspCo.

When examining the workers' job quality experiences related to skill, it became apparent the impact that the lack of skill utilisation and task discretion was having on workers. In four of the analysed workplaces, sources of dissatisfaction and frustration were repeatedly associated with workers' lack of control over their own tasks, and the increase of control and monitoring mechanisms. Workers primarily associated physical health issues with lack of job rotation (skill utilisation). Workers' in SpiritsCo bottling hall reported high levels of physical strains due to the repetitive nature of the work. Whereas, SpiritsCo distillery, MaltCo and TranspCo reported primarily boredom and frustration over the standardised, routinized and monotonous nature of their work. These issues reaffirm the hegemony of supply chains in shaping work organisation at the shop floor level, which in turn were associated to impacts on workers' health (Green, 2009; Karasek and Theorell, 1990).

This section has contributed to examining the research question 3, which enquires whether pressures emanating from market and production networks inhibit or foster skill development and task discretion. At the heart of the issue is the way in which the labour process is subject to pressure in the workplace, which stems from supply chain dynamics. The labour process is restructured, so that management can successfully run the business in relation to the market and supply chain demands. As a result, there is the need to impose control over the workforce, which raises a multitude of barriers for skill utilisation, development and task discretion. Thus, these pressures stemming from networked forms of production are in this thesis a critical contributor to deskilling either through the conjugation of barriers to skill development and of task discretion.

#### **8.2.4. Research question 4: To what extent do pressures emanating from market and production networks result in the introduction of tighter performance and absence management regimes**

In every workplace there are numerous sources of pressures, which are for the most part accepted, resisted, or negotiated by the workforce. Researchers often discuss these at the workplace or organisational levels, disregarding the drivers that shape the pressures affecting workers (Armstrong, 2009; Edwards, 2005). The critical review of the academic literature in Chapter 2, highlights the management of workers' performance and absence as organisational mechanism to keep supply chain disruptions to the minimum. However, these can also increase pressures at the workplace level and impact job quality (Gallie, 2005; Newsome et al., 2013; Taylor, 2013; Taylor et al., 2010; Taylor and Bain, 2001). The evidence points to an interplay between coercive and consent managerial mechanisms, so that companies can successfully control supply chain requirements (Newsome et al., 2013; Taylor, 2013; Taylor and Bain, 2001).

Rubery and Earnshaw (2005) mention that analysing the emergence of managerial practices can be complicated in the context of inter-firm relations, as multiple stakeholders may attempt to exercise control over the work of other firm's employees. For instance, their study specifically demonstrates that lead-firms' supervision over client firms' organisational performance indicators is inherent to the inter-firm relationship, which is crucial to ensure the smooth functioning of the supply chain. The level of inter-firm or supply chain influence and supervision can be made through more direct or indirect mechanisms, which in turn can nurture the development of more or less complex managerial practices (Newsome et al., 2013).

The SpiritsCo distillery and the cooperage site were the workplaces where lower levels of supply chain influence were present. These workplaces illustrate managerial and labour power resources mediating some of the downward supply chain pressures. Therefore, given that in both workplaces there was less influence from market derivatives, managerial practices remained partially undeveloped and informal. In the case of the distillery, a managerial mechanism prevented the workplace to be impacted by the market fluctuation and its unpredictability. As a result, the local management did not felt the need to tightly supervise workers' effort and absence levels. Although the Taylorised environment with high cost derivatives and low employee numbers meant that absence had to be managed (Edward and Whitston, 1993), the evidence showed managers

adopting a cooperative approach to absence. This pattern contradicts the view that in Taylorised workplaces absence is managed through disciplinary practices (Edwards, 2005). These findings are in line with Edwards and Whitston's (1993) study, which claims that management may use mechanisms of consent and informal negotiation to obtain better organisational results. In their study, absence was managed between formal discipline and daily informal negotiations, which contributed to lower levels of absenteeism.

In relation to the cooperage site, workers and the union were the main countering force to market pressures. Although the cooperage manager was keen to apply innovative performance management practices, workers were able to regulate some of the managerial intents. The union centrality within the cooperage site meant that workers, rather than management, maintained high levels of control over their labour. This finding resonates with other studies that have highlighted the role of the union in preventing market derivatives to freely influence the workplace (Newsome et al., 2013). The workers' discipline and the policing of collective agreements were crucial for coopers to hold control of performance management systems. In relation to absence, it was not regarded by management as a problem, and thus was loosely managed. The excessive production output meant that the site manager welcomed any employee behaviour that reduced the overall production rate.

In contrast to this evidence, intense work pressures were found in workplaces such as SpiritsCo bottling hall, MaltCo and TranspCo. The data from these workplaces suggest a double approach to performance and absence management, with firms focusing on an interplay between bureaucratic control of managerial practices, and the market discipline through feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. This is in line with seminal studies of Burawoy (1979: 27), where the author argues that "coercion must be supplemented by the organisation of consent".

The findings suggest that the heightened pressures were directly or indirectly linked to supply chain demands. These demands were often operationalised through service level agreements or through a "suppliers' rating system", that geared companies to reliably comply with requirements such as costs and delivery dates. Similar to other studies, management formulated organisation-wide targets, such as comply with quality and costs requirements, or delivery dates, which were then cascaded down to the workplace level. These targets were tightly monitored through the emergence of complex performance

and absence management systems in order to ensure the wider organisational performance indicators were being met (Taylor, 2013).

This dynamic was particularly observable in SpiritsCo bottling hall. At this workplace, retailers did not have a direct saying on how the company should organise labour, or set their own performance and absence indicators. Yet, the imposed requirements functioned as a form of governance, which precipitated the tightening of managerial practices (Newsome et al., 2013). The tightening of such practices was crucial for SpiritsCo to ensure that organisational performance targets were achieved. Indeed, similarly to other studies, the specification of production requirements by the retailers was then translated into rigorous stipulations of expected employee numbers and performance levels (Newsome et al., 2013; Taylor, 2013; Taylor et al., 2010).

At MaltCo and TranspCo direct forms of influence over organisational performance indicators were evidenced in the data. The inter-firm relations with SpiritsCo rendered tighter performance and absence management systems (Newsome et al., 2013). In MaltCo, the sharing of knowledge at an inter-firm level involved SpiritsCo directing MaltCo on how to make their workforce comply with targets, make fewer mistakes, work with higher levels of effort, and reliably show up to work. In relation to the TranspCo's case study, there was evidence of direct influence of other firms in driving performance and effort levels. Attendance was also crucial for the company as orders were only delivered if drivers "were on the road". In relation to performance management, drivers were directly and individually monitored not only by the company that they were employed for, TranspCo, but also their client firms.

The way in which both managerial mechanisms were operationalised at the workplace level is rather complex. This thesis shows that it was the interplay between two mechanisms that allowed companies to extract the required levels of effort and attendance from the workforce. Thus, companies did not resort exclusively to the intensification of internal systems of control in order to achieve the stipulated organisational performance (McGovern et al., 2007), nor solely to workers' feelings of insecurity, either in terms of job security or pay (Cappelli, 1999; McGovern et al., 2007). Rather, workplaces under strict market pressures operationalised performance and absence management through an interplay between coercive managerial practices and the nurturing of uncertainty inside the workplace. The firms in this research study were using a combination of "market discipline" and stringent "bureaucratic control" to ensure the



relatively smooth operation at the organisational and supply chain levels (Taylor, 2013: 34). This dualistic approach typically encompassed high-end technology to monitor and direct the pace of workers' tasks; direct supervision through strict guidelines and rules in relation to attendance; as well as on harnessing the motivation of insecurity (McGovern et al., 2007), either through job insecurity or wage insecurity. The evidence in this study supports Taylor's (2013) view that both market discipline and bureaucratic control are connected, and market imperatives are directly transferred to the shop floor, and in turn to the workforce. It is this dual relationship that increases pressure on workers to comply with organisational and individual performance requirements.

In terms of workers' experiences, the findings illustrate how physically and mentally demanding work was in SpiritsCo bottling hall, MaltCo and TranspCo. It was the combination between the bureaucratic coercive control and the employment vulnerability that contributed to heightening levels of pressure experienced by most workers. Taylor (2013) argues that rigid systems, such as the Bradford System, indiscriminately punish employees for their absence. In the same vein, Taylor and Bain (2001: 448) demonstrates that managerial mechanisms that assure the targets are achieved are "perceived to contribute either to a great deal, or to some extent, to feeling pressurized".

On the one hand, bureaucratic controlling mechanisms were giving very narrow scope for workers to recover from shifts, to unwind or even to stretch their limbs during work. The typical experience was that workers should be in continuous motion and without any down time. In the bottling hall, workers reported not having time to rest, even when lines unexpectedly stopped, as they were quickly directed to another working line so that targets could be achieved. In MaltCo, workers were required to strictly comply with cycle timings, which meant that often there was no resting time between the cycles. The imposed intensity, so that firms could achieve performance targets, was associated with workers feeling overburden with working tasks. This confirms Green's (2006) argument that in highly pressured workplaces, workers may have less recovering time between work tasks, leading to physical strains and experiences of overwork.

On the other hand, the fostering of insecurity in these workplaces were associated to stress and anxiety (few workers reported depression/depressive states). This was particularly evident in behaviours of wanting to excel in their work on a daily basis, with many reporting a strong sense of duty and obligation to comply with targets and criteria. However, perhaps the most significant finding relates to reports of presenteeism in all

three workplaces. Although this thesis supports Taylor's (2013) argument that fear of disciplinary action as the most significant cause for "presenteeism", it also adds by suggesting that this can also be due to the feelings of fear and insecurity in relation to employment and lack of pay. As a result, most workers reported showing up to work when not fit for purpose, or when they had other responsibilities, such as family, which may explain the CIPD (2014) report of absence levels being at an all-time low. It was these types of behaviours, such as working beyond what was expected and showing up to work regardless of the physical condition, which provided workers with the illusion of a hypothetical employment security.

Thus, this section contributes to answering the research question 4, which asks whether supply chain pressures result in the introduction of tighter managerial mechanisms related to performance and absence. It was this dual interplay between the two mechanisms that allowed companies to decrease absence rates and unlock the required effort from workers (Taylor, 2013). It was also the conjugation of these two aspects that generated experiences of poor job quality.

#### **8.2.5. Research question 5: To what extent pressures emanating from the market and production networks can create conditions for labour de-collectivisation**

This thesis adds to Kelly's theory by framing supply chains as structures that can create conditions for de-collectivisation in the workplace. What is interesting in this thesis, and similar to what is suggested in other studies, is that the dynamics generated between the product market and the workplace, produce changing contours of the workforce and, consequently, of workers capacity to effectively exert agency (Drahokopil, 2015; Hammer and Riisgaard, 2015; Haidinger and Flecker, 2015). As mentioned earlier, The impacts that supply chains may have on the workers' capacity to collectivise will be analysed taking into account two points: (1) how ever-more integrated and concerted supply chain pressures displace the control over the labour process out of the workplace; and (2) the precise way in which workers' agency is marginalised.

The rise of the management prerogative, legitimised by supply chain, allows management to restructure and reconfigure the workforce, concurrently creating conditions for de-collectivisation. In this thesis, supply chain pressures and inter-firm relations became a new layer of control over labour and labour process in the workplace. In practice, requirements at the supply chain level, led to the control over the labour and

labour process being shifted from the workplace level onto an inter-firm level. This shift in the locus of control was being disguised or imposed by logics of the “market” that management presented as requiring no justification other than its own existence. In this way, the significance of supply chain and inter-firm pressures lies as a managerial system, that seeks to control the labour process and by-pass disruptions such as workers’ agency, for instance through strikes or absenteeism. As the control of labour process was shifted away from the production point, workers found it difficult to regain that control, and consequently exert agency. These findings are in line with previous studies. For instance, Hammer and Riisgaard (2015) argue that the viability of inter-firm governance depends on the degree to which the labour process can be coordinated within supply chain derivatives, as well as the social relations and agency exerted by workers at the local level.

A number of studies suggested that spatial and functional reconfigurations, such as outsourcing and offshoring, may inhibit associational power and pose intrinsically major challenges for workers’ agency (Cowie, 1999; Drahoukopol, 2015; Grimshaw et al., 2005). The evidence in this thesis shows that de-collectivisation was primarily attained through the coordination and integration of labour and labour processes into the requirements of the supply chain. This was particularly evident when SpiritsCo bottling hall preferred casual contracts to control the cost pressures and market fluctuations. At MaltCo and TranspCo it was evident in the way the labour process was being dictated by SpiritsCo, so that the former companies could successfully respond to the latter’s supply chain demands.

The latter discussion takes this thesis to the second point of the de-collectivisation analysis – the precise ways in which supply chains mechanisms marginalised workers’ agency. The requirements and pressures stemming from the supply chains and the consequent restructuring of work organisation highlights two main interlinked processes of de-collectivisation. Firstly, the segmentation of the workforce as a response to cost and flexibility requirements; and secondly, the challenges that supply chain requirements pose to management, which result in restructuring of the labour process into standardised and routinized work tasks.

Haidinger and Flecker (2015: 75) argue that segmentation of the workforce into different groups of workers is an effective “divide-and-rule strategy”. However, although researchers have argued that this strategy was achieved through the fragmentation of the

workforce in terms of job security (Altreiter et al., 2015; Doellgast and Greer, 2007), this thesis highlights that variations in working time also catalyse de-collectivisation. In all three case studies there was evidence of workforce segmentation, either through job insecurity or working time patterns, as a direct managerial response to supply chain pressures. This collides directly with the precondition of power balance that Kelly (1998) identifies as crucial for workforce mobilisation. According to Kelly, the balance of power may lean towards the manager if there are divisions in the workforce created by the existence of different groups of workers. Participants in this thesis confirmed a tiering of the workforce or the separation of workers through different contracts and working time patterns.

The most striking examples of these relate to the SpiritsCo's bottling hall, distillery, MaltCo and TranspCo. In particular, SpiritsCo bottling hall management was using three types of contracts to employ workers so that could adjust more effectively to costs requirement and market demands. This was clearly evidenced in the case of the SpiritsCo bottling hall, where management was using three types of contracts to employ workers so that could adjust more effectively to costs requirement and market demands. In SpiritsCo's distillery, workers competed with each other for not taking undesired shifts, which illustrates rival interests. What is more, in MaltCo the division of the workforce into different shifts in a large plant site was associated with few opportunities to get together, share interests and a common identity. In addition, TranspCo's drivers also demonstrated concerns over the flexibilisation of working time practices as threats to a collective sense and common interests amongst drivers. This prevented the union and workers to engage in acts of agency. The reasons were mostly coupled with feelings of fear – that in joining the union their chances to be hired back again could diminish, or they would not get as many working hours as they needed to “make ends meet”. Indeed, many of these workers perceived themselves as privileged to be employed at all – a status that they did not want to jeopardise.

In Kelly's (1998) terms this affects the first stage of mobilisation theory - acquiring a sense of injustice by workers towards the managerial behaviour is difficult if a worker feels fortunate to be doing a specific job. This finding confirms that one of the main problems of collectivism is to deal with a fluctuating, fragmented, and vulnerable – in terms of employment – workforce (Altreiter et al., 2015; Lynch et al., 2011; Schimdt, 2006). As a result, the incapacity to attract other groups of workers means that unions are

incapable to declare that they speak for the majority of the workforce, which impacts workers' capacity to mobilise and organise (Kelly, 1998), as well as the credibility of the collective voice (Willman et al., 2007). When trade unions lose credibility in speaking for the whole workforce, they are prevented to acquire the complete control over collective resources required to exercise agency, which consequently affects their capacity to organise collective actions (Kelly, 1998).

The second identified process of de-collectivisation exists in the nature of supply chains, which pressures management to juggle between different and contradicting requirements. In this thesis, the evidence has shown that one way in which management coped with supply chains pressures was through standardisation and rationalisation of the labour process, which resulted in clear deskilling of the workforce (Grugulis and Vincent, 2005). For Huws (2006) this process is the basis of de-collectivisation. The problematic issue is that the disintegration of skills hinders workers common identity and consequently their capacity to share commons interests, as it affects the extent to which workers see themselves similar to other workers (Huws, 2006) – a critical aspect in Kelly's (1998) mobilisation theory relates to the first stage of how workers define common interests or identities. The most striking examples of deskilling were observed in SpiritsCo distillery and MaltCo and to some extent in SpiritsCo bottling hall. The evidence has shown that in both of these two workplaces deskilling had resulted in the removal of craft-based skills from the labour process. This finding is in line with the increasing trend in contemporary workplaces of removing technical- and craft-based skills, which ends up affecting workers structural power (Huws, 2006). When skills are removed from the job, workers can be easily replaced, which results in diminished bargaining power. As Flecker et al. (2013) argue, workers' in-demand skills have a stronger sense of collective labour agency due to their marketplace bargaining power; in contrast, workers with less sought skills see their bargaining capacity dramatically reduced.

It is argued that the separation of conception and execution also involves the loss of the labour process control in the workplace (Braverman, 1974). Early studies have shown the importance of skill (development and utilisation) in the process of agency (Burawoy, 1979; Doeringer and Piore, 1971; Thompson, 1988). For these early researchers, skill is the precondition for the labour process control, and thus for the capacity to shape and change job quality. The contrasting case of SpiritsCo's cooperage site explored in this thesis gives a prominent comparative leverage to this argument. The evidence in the

cooperage site has shown that a strong identity was based on craft skills and their capacity to perform quality work, which prevented management to fully control the labour process. This was a key factor, which allowed for maintaining a strong sense of collectivism amongst the workforce.

This discussion reaches, therefore, the specific analysis of the research question 5, which aimed at exploring the mechanisms in which de-collectivisation happened, the evidence in the present study highlights the key role that the supply chains have in taking the control of the labour process further way from the production process. When arguing in this way, this thesis contributes to theory by framing inter-firm relations and production networks as a regulator of the employment relationship. Although Kelly (1998) argues that the process of de-collectivisation comes from an active process of institutional withdrawal, in which employers are allowed to determine the terms of the employment relationship (Hyman, 2001), this thesis suggests that also important structural changes of production, stemming from concerted and fragmented inter-firm relations, may hamper workers' agency. Thus, the work of this thesis brings light to what seems a neglected area in mobilisation theory (Kelly, 1998), by framing production networks as a structure that can create conditions for de-collectivisation. The constant organisational restructuring and change in response to supply change derivatives placed pressure on workers collectivism. This was mostly illustrated in supply chain dynamics continuously challenging workers' shared interests, their capacity to mobilise around common objectives, as well as their attempts to recruit new members (Kelly, 1998). Thus, what arguably distinguishes production rooted in supply chains and tight inter-firm relations from preceding ways of organising work is not particularly related to pressures and derivatives. Rather, what is significant, is that it creates conditions for a new social organisation of labour to emerge. This organisation is initiated and controlled by managerial staff that attempts to constrain workers from acting in a collectivised manner to regulate managerial behaviour.

#### **8.2.6. Research question 6: In what ways collective and individual workers' agency are able to regulate and shape job quality**

Any analysis of workers' agency must ultimately be placed in the context of the employment relationship and the way management and workers contest frontiers of control (Taylor and Bain, 2001). Similar to other studies, workers' responses found in

this thesis ranged from spontaneous and individual acts, to organised collective actions (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu, 2011). In this study, although the separation between collective and individual agency may seem artificial (as there is an individual agency in collectivised workplaces), both are analysed respectively in unionised and non-unionised workplaces. In addressing both collective and individual forms of agency, this thesis aims at contributing to the literature by going beyond the usage of worker agency as simply a manifestation of collective activity (Castree, 2010; Taylor et al., 2015). The mobilisation theory is used in an interlinked way with Brookes' (2013) framework of workers' power resources, which will aid this thesis to frame workers' agency in relation to the specific context of supply chains.

The key issue in this section is to analyse whether workers' agency shaped job quality. The capacity to control certain aspects of jobs has been highlighted as one of the main components of good jobs (Holman, 2013). Thus, this analysis is a counterpoint to a conceptualisation of job quality that considers workers as passive, in favour of a more active role of workers in shaping their own job quality.

#### Unionised workplaces

As Kelly (1998) argues, the response of the union is influenced by the degree to which the union ranges from militant to moderate. The inclusion of unionised workplaces allowed this study to examine the way in which trade unions were capable to shape job quality, according to the degree of its militancy together with their position within the supply chain.

#### *The SpiritsCo Bottling hall*

The SpiritsCo bottling hall has a relatively high union density, but rather passive approach to the employment relationship. The case of this workplace, where hegemonic supply chain forces deeply shaped social relations at a shop floor level, may help explaining Taylor and Bain's (2001) and Simms's (2015) argument that unions often fail to include wider job quality issues in their bargaining agendas and leave such issues to managerial discretion.

The commitment to avoid de-recognition and to safeguard full-time employees' interests have led the union to accept a partnership agreement. The constant references by union

representatives to the company's productivity needs, and the consent approach towards labour flexibility, reflect the moderation stance that the union had adopted. As a result, the local union was finding it very difficult to counter management practices that impacted on workers' job quality. This supports Danford et al.'s (2008) and Kelly's (1996) studies whom found unions were taking a moderate stance when in partnerships. Contrary to other studies, which argue that collaborative employment relations produce mutual gains (Donaghey and Teague, 2007; Kochan and Osterman, 1994), the findings in this workplace have shown that the sharing of interests have actually contributed to low job quality outcomes.

The partnership deal meant that the local union seeking to pursue its cooperative nature found itself most of the time in the paradoxical position of conflict and consent (Durand, 2007). The union frequently showed a two-faced approach, where on the one hand it protected the interests of full-time permanent staff; and on the other hand it allowed management to further increase the flexibilisation and segmentation in the workplace. This examples reflect the consequences of unions' struggles to move beyond their stronghold of organising a declining secure and well-paid workforce, to incorporate an ever-increasing group of workers that has been pushed into the peripheries of the labour market, where good quality jobs are difficult to come about (Hyman, 1997).

The effectiveness of the union's associational and structural powers to shape job quality was mitigated by its incapacity to deal with the restructuring of the workforce. In the end, the aspects related to pay and pensions have become a symbolic unifier because they provided the much needed homogeneity (Hyman, 1972), whereas other job quality issues were reported to be difficult to aggregate and negotiate. For instance, training courses and absence monitoring systems were being introduced by management without negotiation. In turn, the union was mostly left with pay-related issues and the moderation in disciplinary procedures. This is in line with national statistics which claim that trade unions are mostly focusing their bargaining concerns on pay and pensions (ONS, 2013).

#### *The SpiritsCo's Cooperage site*

At SpiritsCo's cooperage site, workers had considerable power, a status which was enhanced by their capacity to keep homogenous interests amongst the whole workforce, and a strong sense of common identity (Kelly, 1998). Workers power also stemmed from



the importance that their work had for the overall success of the business – the quality in work was crucial so that cask leakages were avoided, which minimised costs for the employer. These two power resources equipped coopers with associational and structural powers (Brookes, 2013).

The union showed awareness of crucial aspects of the labour process in order to maintain relatively good standards of job quality. The key issue for the union and its members was the control over the labour process. In reality, and contrasting to the other workplaces, the control of work has never been fully shifted from the coopers' bench to management or the supply chain. Coopers and the union have achieved a baseline of control over the labour process and most importantly of supply chain derivatives piercing into the workplace. In this study, the supply chain derivatives were inimical to reasonable service quality, and thus workers' collective agency served to preserve minimum production quality standards. As extensive research into call centres demonstrates, there is a potential tension in the quality of work delivered by workers and the time it costs to deliver (Taylor et al., 2002). This reaffirms Edwards (2003) views that management will always pursue objectives of control (in this case to better cope with supply chain derivatives).

One of the key factors for such an effective opposition relates to the ability to maintain and recreate an identity that was grounded on a high skilled workforce. Similarly to other researchers, the evidence in this thesis shows that the internal processes of skill development, which workers were able to maintain and reproduce, were the most important contributor to their agency and to their capacity to provide a high quality service (Burawoy, 1979). The capacity to maintain high skill levels and high level of quality work was proportional to the capacity to preserve a strong sense of common identity, which was critical for coopers to define common interests (Kelly, 1998). This enabled the workforce to maintain relative control over how work was organised, its pace, as well as its value. The appropriation of productive function and the subsequent influence over work, as argued by Burawoy (1979), was achieved in this workplace by the collective utilisation of skill.

Although prior studies have discussed issues of control and agency through examples of workers resisting by producing good quality work (Davidson, 1992) and skills (Gall, 1998), this type of worker agency has not been closely studied (even more so within a job quality framework). Earlier research has focused on individualised forms of agency, especially the ways in which workers distance themselves from the production processes.

These have been approached by discussing misbehaviour (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999) and slacking (Paulsen, 2013). However, the craft-based agency rooted on strong sense of common identity provides a complementary argument to the debate around workers' influence on job quality. In this case, management attempts to undermine job quality were blocked by coopers' *subversive* collective activities. This finding adds to the extant literature because it provides the illustrative example of skills being at the centre of worker collective agency. In relation to the job quality literature, this case study brings a valuable contribution. While in macroeconomic job quality studies skill is seen as something extrinsic to the worker (Gallie, 2013), the SpiritsCo's coopeage site highlights the capacity for workers to use their as way of amending and recasting job quality.

### *The TranspCo*

Contrary to other case studies, TranspCo management had recently recognised the union. This case study has clearly shown the operationalisation of mobilisation theory – the process by which workers acquired a collective definition of their interests in response to employer-generated injustice (Kelly, 1998). Early in the research, a picture emerged from TranspCo data on how collectivisation was expressed in response to poor job quality issues such as skills development (in terms of H&S) and dignity at work. In this case study the evidence showed low levels of job quality were crucial for the process of mobilisation, organisation, and creation of opportunities for trade unionism action (Kelly, 1998). Thus, the evidence from this case study supports Hyman's (1998) view that by focusing on job quality issues, trade unions have the potential to address the exact problematic areas that management uses to constrain trade union activism and solidarity. Hyman (1998) emphasises that when trade unions bring together workers' concerns, they must take ownership of employers' notions to regain and renew forms of collectivism (*ibid*: 14). The data from TranspCo evidenced the recapturing process of issues that usually are under management's control, which were crucial for the process of shaping job quality. The most successful example relates to the training courses on H&S provided by the union to the workforce. Similarly to other studies, the union was able to draw on institutional support (H&S statutory rights) to build a structured framework of skill development (Holman, 2013; Kalleberg, 2012). These training courses produced numerous outcomes. Firstly, the courses fostered a closer relationship amongst drivers,

and between them and the union, which was reported to be an important aspect for the capacity to share interests and mobilise new membership (Kelly, 1998). Secondly, the training courses allowed for skill development, particularly on what tasks are safe and unsafe, which was the basis of workers' capacity to exercise agency (Doeringer and Piore, 1971). This finding supports Hyman's (1998) argument that it is the interpretation of the workforce's concerns that allows the union to bolster their mobilisation and collectivisation capacity within the workplace. What this indicates is a clear process of the union regulating the employer's behaviours and requirements, which resulted in improved job quality (Simms, 2015; Hoque et al., 2014).

Another interesting aspect in this case study relates to the union's structural power. The evidence has shown that the union was able to understand the strategic position in which the company was in relation to the supply chain. The capacity for the union to take advantage of this position enhanced their collective bargaining power. Despite drivers' collective agency being limited by geographical and organisational separation, drivers' strategic position within the circulation of capital in SSI revealed to be a key determinant in shaping job quality (Selwyn, 2011). The most illustrative example of this strategy relates to the union's ability to establish inter-firm agreements, that were setting new H&S practices, and which were being followed by TranspCo's client firms, including SpiritsCo. These new H&S practices would not benefit only TranspCo drivers but also other workers in the industry. Thus, although literature often focuses on how supply chains and inter-firm dynamics weaken labour in a multitude of ways (Altreiter et al., 2015; Doellgast and Greer, 2007), this case study shows the way in which workers' collective agency is also able to take advantage of the inherent fragilities, which are present in highly integrated inter-firm relations.

This is an interesting case study as it shows that agency at the workplace is not solely constrained to simply management-labour relations, as it also has implication for the supply chain structures and, consequently, the product markets (Hammer and Riisgaard, 2015: 97). The case study also illustrates that strong institutional and associational powers, coupled with a strong feeling of collective injustice (in Kelly's terms), are key factors in countering the supply chain pressures that are used by management to decollectivize the workforce.

### *Summary*

Central to the sixth research question is to understand the circumstances in which unions were able to promote workers' interests relating to job quality. As Kelly (1998) argues the response of a union is influenced by the degree to which the union ranges from moderate to militant. In this study, both unions in SpiritsCo's cooperage site and TranspCo showed levels of militancy through their willingness of using the power resources, which accrued to them in terms of associational and structural powers. Therefore, although Simms (2015: 17) argues that overall effectiveness of unions in regulating job quality depends at least in part on the employer, this study partly contradicts that argument. The evidence has shown unions present in SpiritsCo's cooperage site and TranspCo being effective and active in reshaping job quality. Moreover, the evidence has shown that where there is a strong associational and structural power, either through robust shared interests (in the case of TranspCo) or through common identity (in the case of SpiritsCo cooperage), unions are able to create a solid baseline from which to pursue better job quality conditions.

As Simms (2015) argues, unions are rarely explicitly studied as actors within the context of job quality debates, and therefore this analysis extends the understanding of the varied dynamics taken by unions to create and pursue shared interests in order to regulate job quality. These case studies provide evidence of how unions are indeed important actors in regulating job quality, either through their effectiveness in providing opportunities for improving job quality, or through their ineffectiveness in countering employers' damaging behaviours.

### Non-unionised workplaces

In non-unionised workplaces, it was observed an alternative trajectory of workers' agency in regulating employers' behaviours and shaping job quality. These took the form of individualised and informal means of agency (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu, 2011). Mobilisation theory contends that collective agency is rooted upon a shared sense of injustice (Kelly, 1998). In this study, the overall lack of shared interests, capacity to collectively mobilise, and structural and associational powers were features consistently identified as absent in SpiritsCo's distillery and MaltCo. Yet, this did not mean that "it (was) all quiet on the workplace front" (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995).

### *The SpiritsCo distillery*

In the SpiritsCo's distillery, the process of deskilling and the division of the workforce in different work shifts impacted negatively their collectivisation (Kelly, 1998). However, workers still had room for agency within the employment relationship, in order to improve their job quality experiences – these were particularly related with time, attendance, and work. In the same line as other studies (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). The evidence in this thesis has shown that poor working conditions can be tolerable when individuals are able to regain (temporarily) control over some aspects of job quality. Although this form of agency does not alter structures of work organisation at the workplace level (Contu, 2008), it was reported to be crucial for workers to cope with family and civic responsibilities, as well as the boredom of the labour process.

The way in which individual agency was expressed and formulated at SpiritsCo's distillery revolved around issues such as the effort bargaining, particularly in relation to working time (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999), and by mentally withdrawing from work (Burawoy, 1985). In relation to the first, workers often engaged with management in order to negotiate unwanted shifts and absence. It was this strategic appropriation of time and effort that allowed workers to individually improve their work-life balance. This type of agency, which was to some extent tolerable by the employer (Simms, 2015), allowed individuals to maintain a sense of job quality control by the manipulation of working time (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999).

However, the most illustrative example of individual agency relates to bird watching. The monotonous and factory-like work generated deep discontent amongst workers. Yet, workers expressed ways of formulating agency by mentally withdrawing and engaging in activities unrelated to work to cope with boredom (Burawoy, 1978; Thompson, 1989). Earlier studies have identified and defined such activities as games, where “informal rules and practices aimed at creating space and time to make work more interesting” (Thompson, 1989: 127). Others have noted that such activities are a “source of relief from the (...) capitalist work” which allows workers to absorb frustration and diffuse potential sources of conflict (Burawoy, 1978: 271). In this research, the way workers went off of work to watch the “*wee birds*” to escape from the boredom of a routinized and standardised work, were clear strategies to improve job quality experiences.

By frequently coupling the common non-work related activities with reports of boredom, the data from workers' interviews suggest that activities, such as bird-watching, are not necessarily stemming from management pressure. However, they are also, and mostly,

emerging from the supply chains' imperatives that drove work into a meaningless activity, whereby workers were dispossessed of the knowledge of production and constrained in using their skills. These activities connect to Thompson's (1989) conceptualisation of agency, where tensions in the employment relationship are experienced by workers as barriers, which accentuates experiences of poor working conditions.

### *The MaltCo*

Job quality analysis in non-unionised workplaces becomes theoretically interesting when the latter case study is contrasted with the reality at MaltCo. Although the employment relationship was also based on an individual basis, workers had much less scope for improving their job quality experiences. As it was described previously, control mechanisms through coercive forms of management coupled with job insecurity were present in this workplace. This is not to say that workers did not attempt to engage in agency to escape from poor job quality. On the contrary, workers in MaltCo reported willingness to engage in individual and informal agency actions, such as going absence or actively withdrawing mentally from work. However, management was always able to curtail workers' coping mechanisms because these were considered to be disruptive for the smooth operation of the business in relation to supply chain requirements. Similarly to SpiritsCo's distillery, the evidence from the MaltCo's case study has shown workers attempting appropriation of work and time by listening to music while cleaning the tanks, as well as by skipping or arriving late to work (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). This type of agency is similar to Paulsen's (2013) study, where the author discusses different forms of shirking work and empty labour as private activities used in different manners by individuals as coping mechanisms to boredom and pressures. Paulsen's (2013) study is an interesting conceptualisation of workers' individual agency as it explains the workers' motivations for engaging in activities. However, Paulsen (2013) utilises this form of agency as unrestricted, and therefore fails to recognise that management will attempt to implement mechanisms to control individual forms of agency.

In this thesis, the MaltCo's case study provides the opportunity to analyse the way in which management attempts to counter the individual forms of agency. In MaltCo, management acted promptly to control different forms of workers' agency that were perceived as counter-productive to the requirements of the supply chain. The most

illustrative example relates to the way in which management swiftly prevented workers' using absenteeism and showing up late for work. Absenteeism and lateness were distinctive agency strategies, which allowed workers to cope with intensive shift pattern and work pressures related to performance and absence management (Edwards, 1986). Similarly to other studies, management in the MaltCo considered absenteeism as disruptive and thus it had to be tackled (Taylor, 2013), which in this workplace was made by linking workers' absenteeism directly to the workers' top-up wages. The management hegemony within the employment relationship meant that in fact the employer was able to prevent the formulation and proliferation of workers' behaviours, which were perceived as disruptive. However, in doing so management did it at the expenses of job quality, where workers were feeling pressured, exhausted, and mentally drained due to the draconian working conditions placed on them.

### *Summary*

The findings from these two workplaces (SpiritsCo's distillery and MaltCo) indicate that despite the lack of shared interests and formal collective actions (Kelly, 1998), agency is not absent from the workplace (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). Indeed, the findings highlight that workers generally demonstrate willingness to exercise agency and to shape the quality of the job that is imposed by management. However, the lack of resource powers (Brookes, 2013) and clear definition of collective agency (Kelly, 1998) results in its effectiveness being considerable reliant on employers and the form of control pattern present in the workplace (Blyton and Turnbull, 2004; Simms, 2015) – which in this case relates to the significance that supply chain pressures and inter-firm relations have for the overall run of the business. It was clear that looser management control evidenced in SpiritsCo's distillery due to less strict supply chain derivatives, meant that workers were able to exercise individual forms of agency. Whereas, in MaltCo, where regimes of supply chain pressure were demanding and under tight inter-firm supervision, management felt the need to curtail individual acts that could potentially disturb organisational and supply chain performance indicators. This had a bearing on how workers experienced job quality in their respective workplaces.

Thus, although the reactive behaviours from workers similar to Contu's (2008) "decaff resistance" concept did not shape objective structures of job quality, these were considered to be crucial to improve job quality experiences through the appropriation of

time and work (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). This is an important aspect for job quality inasmuch if we consider Holman's (2013) point, who states that control over various aspects of jobs is one of the main components of good jobs. In this sense, the control that workers may exercise through forms of individual and informal agency is typically not present in macroeconomic studies, and thus this study provides unique findings by highlighting the importance that individual agency might have for experiences of job quality.



## **Chapter 9: Conclusions**

### **9.1. Introduction**

The final chapter draws together the key themes of the thesis. The conclusion will highlight important new insights into the conceptualisation of job quality, as well as the processes in which the concept is being shaped and reshaped by looking at a set of factors. The chapter will also elaborate on the empirical contributions that this research study has been able to provide by analysing job quality in the context of supply chains. Moreover, the chapter discusses the typicality of this study, particularly in relation to the choice of industry, production network, in order to draw conclusions for other contexts. Lastly, drawing on the limitations of the thesis, this chapter proposes potential areas for further research.

The findings from this thesis suggest that in order to fully appreciate job quality, it is necessary to consider the various factors that are located at the institutional, organisational and workplace levels. The levels of importance which participants in this study accredited to inter-firm dynamics in shaping the different job quality dimensions, revealed that the analysis of the concept required deeper and more comprehensive examination to that proposed by macroeconomic studies (Gallie, 2013; Green, 2006; Munoz de Bustillo et al., 2009), and micro or workplace studies (Taylor et al., 2002; Thompson, 1989; Warhurst and Thompson, 1998). This thesis has proposed to follow an approach that includes looking at the ways in which product and capital market pressures (in the form of supply chains), the social actors, and the features of the workforce in a specific sectoral context influence job quality. This integrates both macro and micro approaches.

This research has contributed to the conceptual understanding of job quality. The main new insights are, first, locating the discussion of job quality in the context of inter-firm relations; and second, considering job quality being influenced by workers' agency. Examining these issues is important because it leads this towards the understanding of job quality as the outcome of different dynamics happening at supply chain, organisational, workplace, and individual levels that influence job quality.

## **9.2. Conceptual contribution**

### **9.2.1. Job quality in the context of supply chains**

Job quality has been extensively discussed by macroeconomic studies (Gallie, 2013; Green, 2006; Munoz de Bustillo et al., 2009). These have been very important for the process of mapping the changes of job quality across time and across different employment and capitalist regimes. However, the process of understanding drivers beyond national regulatory framework and individual outcomes have remained largely understudied (Bernhardt, 2012; Hancké et al., 2007; Madrick, 2012; Valas and Prener, 2012). The evidence from this research study has provided an important contribution to understanding how job quality is influenced within inter-firm and supply chains contexts. Across the different inter-firm relations that have been explained in all three organisational case studies, the evidence has shown that the trajectory of job quality was largely associated to variations of supply chain pressures.

There is a widespread consensus that firms are looking to increasingly integrate different parts of production and service provision, in order to benefit from higher levels of efficiency and productivity (Coe et al., 2008). The evidence in this thesis supports this view, by demonstrating that SpiritsCo was looking to coordinate its suppliers' production processes in order to better respond to retailers' demands. The new production model seems to be pervading and influencing organisational strategies in a more widespread manner than what has been accounted in the extant literature. The perceived relevancy of the new production model in today's supply chain strategies has already been discussed in the literature (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008; Lichtenstein, 2006, 2009; Newsome, 2010). However, this study provides further evidence to this, by illustrating that retailers' behaviour was being mimicked by its suppliers. SpiritsCo used strict requirements and close monitoring practices, that aimed to better coordinate different aspects of the supply chain, such as production, distribution, and warehousing. In this way, SpiritsCo was able to shape its suppliers' behaviours in order to better accommodate and cope with demands stemming from the product market. This illustrates pressures stemming from the product market, in this case the retailers, having an impact on second-tier suppliers. This empirically confirms what has been theoretically argued elsewhere (Wright and Lund, 2006).

Researchers have also raised concerns that integrated forms of production and service provision may have detrimental impacts on work and employment patterns (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008; Glucksmann, 2006; Newsome, 2010). There was extensive evidence in this thesis that MaltCo and TranspCo experienced high levels of pressures, resulting from the way in which SpiritsCo managed its supply chain. In turn, it was confirmed that this involved the reconfiguration of work and employment patterns. This study's participants perceived the introduction of new forms of work and employment as a key determinant for firms to coordinate production processes such as manufacturing, distribution, and consumption across the supply chain (Lichtenstein, 2006, 2009). The significance of supply chains derivatives for management in the three organisational case studies was that it demanded variations in the organisation of production. In turn, supply chain requirements were utilised by management at the workplace level to change work and employment patterns. These changes were then crucial for management to better cope with those same pressures stemming from the supply chain.

It is the ability of firms to control supply chain requirements, such as costs, quality and delivery, through the reconfiguration of work and employment, that reflects the ultimate goal in creating value through the transformation of non-material inputs (Coe et al., 2008). Thus, the drive towards profitability at the production network level not only affects the processes of production (Womack and Jones, 1998), but also reconfigures patterns of work and employment (Raworth and Kidder, 2009). These findings are in line with other studies undertaken in industries as diverse as construction, manufacturing, health care, and call centres (Hoque et al., 2011; James et al., 2007; Kellner et al., 2014; Mori, 2015; Soltani and Wilkinson, 2010; Walsh and Deery, 2006).

The main aim of this thesis was to analyse the processes through which inter-firm relations and supply chain dynamics impacted on three different job quality dimensions, such as job security and working time, skills and task discretion, and work pressures. Relating to job security and working time, researchers have shown that supply chains often produce segmented workforces (Barrientos, 2013), where there is an increasing incidence of job insecurity and working time flexibility (Caroli et al., 2010; Kalleberg, 2011). In relation to skills and task discretion, researchers have suggested that inter-firm relations create conditions for individuals to share information and techniques, leading to upskilling of the workforce (Ernst and Kim, 2002; Gereffi, 1999). In addition, relating to work pressures, some researchers have also argued, that supply chains focused on cost-

efficiencies bring the management of individuals' performance and attendance to the forefront of managerial preoccupation (Gallie, 2005; Newsome et al., 2013; Taylor, 2013; Taylor et al., 2010; Taylor and Bain, 2001).

The evidence from this thesis has highlighted that, while some job quality features were retained partly as a result of workers' agency (Brookes, 2013), it was also clear that employers' drive to adjust organisational structures to supply chain derivatives, was impacting job quality and workers' experiences.

Job security and/or working time flexibilisation were present in all three case studies. These flexible practices were used to enable cost-effectiveness and accommodate the fluctuations in supply demand, stemming from the product market and supply chain. Researchers have argued that supply chains primarily impact workers' job security, as it creates segmented workforces. It is within these segmented workforces that the peripheral insecure workforce is subjected to high levels of flexible working practices, so that a decreasing number of core secure individuals can be protected from these practices (Atkinson, 1984; Caroli et al., 2010; Kalleberg, 2011). However, respondents in this study have highlighted the importance of working time flexibility for companies to cope with supply chain demands. The evidence has shown that just as the peripheral workforce, the core and secure workers were also being subjected to intense forms of temporal flexibility. The two groups of workers – peripheral and core – reported low levels of job quality experience, with detrimental impacts on their well-being. Thus, this analysis contributes to the literature by evidencing that in specific conditions, workers with permanent full-time contracts also experience high levels of flexibility (specifically in relation to working time), problems in balancing their work-life with family/social-lives, and may perceive their jobs as insecure (Hellgren et al., 1999; Henly and Lambert, 2014; Sverke et al., 2006; Wood, 2016).

The capacity for inter-firm relations to enhance and foster the knowledge transfer and upskilling has been considered in this thesis as a potential driver of better quality jobs (Ernst and Kim, 2002; Gereffi, 1999). However, a first rebuttal to this point is provided by the evidence that in the four of the analysed workplaces, supply chain demands created barriers for skill formation and utilisation, as well as workers' discretion. Skills and task discretion were often constrained in its development and scope, so that management was able to meet the arbitrary performance targets. Particularly in SpiritsCo bottling hall and the distillery, MaltCo, and TranspCo, the supply chain and inter-firm dynamics were

driving the disassociation of skills and task discretion from the local labour process into higher levels of control, producing a widening gap between the conception and the execution of work (Braverman, 1974). The presented evidence of workers' experiences in relation to skills and task discretion confirms the extant literature (Green, 2009; Karasek and Theorell, 1990). The immediate impact on workers' experiences relates to negative influences that these dynamics had on workers physical health. The lack of job rotation and scope for task discretion, in order to achieve performance targets, was invariably coupled with musculoskeletal strains, as well as mental fatigue.

The increasing pressures for workers to perform and attend work was another important aspect considered by management to effectively run a business predicated on high cost pressures. Managers in workplaces under strict supply chain demands perceived the workers' compliance towards managerial performance and attendance requirements as key determinants to cope with supply chain demands (Newsome et al., 2013; Taylor, 2010). However, this was not attained by solely implementing strict and coercive managerial systems (McGovern et al., 2007), or by fostering workers' consent via feelings of insecurity (Cappelli, 1999; McGovern et al., 2007). Rather, it was the harnessing of both mechanisms through an interplay (Taylor, 2013), which ensured workers would dispense the required levels of effort and attend work reliably. This interplay enhanced mental health issues due to feelings of insecurity. What is more, it also pervaded the individuals' family lives, and often meant behaviours of presenteeism.

All these concerns point to highly marketised environments, such as those rooted in inter-firm dynamics, having an impact on job quality at the workplace level. What was particularly important is that the data suggested supply chains having a bearing on job security, skills, and work pressures. This thesis argues that where work was regarded as a crucial point in the overall coordination of inter-firm relations, there was conditions for restructuring of work organisation and the labour process. Management will adapt and adopt any work and employment practices that most fit the market and supply chain infrastructure (Littler, 1982). To restate, the way that job quality is used and reconfigured at the local level, is influenced by the condition in which the supply chain dominates the workplace. Thus, this thesis is able to show that job quality is shaped by dynamics stemming from a number of factors operating at different levels. The thesis was able to demonstrate the ways in which job quality was shaped obeyed to a set of dynamics

stemming from product and capital markets (supply chains), national and regional regulations, and a set of social actors (managers, workers, and trade unions).

### **9.2.2. Job quality and workers' agency**

The second part of the conceptual contribution to the discussion of job quality relates to the capacity of workers to regulate employers' behaviours and shape job quality. The analysis of this discussion has focused on the workers' agency at the workplace level. Moreover, the analysis also considered the workers' vulnerability and strength in relation to their positionality within the wider supply chain and inter-firm arrangement.

The contribution builds on an ongoing effort of reconceptualising job quality as being labour-centric, i.e. stressing the importance of workers' agency in the regulation of job quality (Hoque et al., 2014; Simms, 2015), rather than looking at workers as passive subjects in the process of shaping job quality. This thesis provides three interconnected contributions. The first contribution relates to the role of workers in shaping job quality. This is made by embedding the discussion in a framework that allows examining the social processes of interest definition and worker action and inaction (Kelly, 1998). The second contribution examines whether low levels of job quality, fostered by supply chains, hinder workers' capacity to exercise agency. This contribution provides empirical evidence to an increasingly wider body of research, which called for the examination of how fragmented and highly concerted inter-firm relations may constrain workers' agency (Jackson et al., 2013). Lastly, although critical studies have examined workers' agency in shaping job quality, they have done so by solely focusing on collective forms, particularly unions (Hoque et al., 2014; Simms, 2015). In addition to addressing collective forms of agency, this thesis has extended its analysis to individual forms of agency.

In relation to the first contribution, by framing workers' agency using mobilisation theory as a framework of analysis within the specific context of supply chains, this thesis has provided the opportunity to explore the definition of workers' interests and identities, and its impacts on job quality. Undoubtedly, the evidence in this thesis is in line with the extant literature that points to increasing constraints for workers to exercise agency (Altreiter et al., 2015; Doellgast and Greer, 2007; Lynch et al., 2011; Schimdt, 2006). However, the evidence has also shown that workers are still important actors in shaping job quality, especially in workplaces where institutions of collective regulation exist

(Kelly, 1998). In some workplaces, the low levels of job quality was the central factor which helped to define workers' interests, and ultimately the trigger for collectivisation and mobilisation. Moreover, job quality was also found to be a key determinant in the process of extending the union's influential scope and recapturing (even if momentarily) some aspects of the labour process. At TranspCo, the union's recapture of specific and important features of job quality, allowed workers to develop skills that positively impacted job quality. It was the process of going beyond pay-related issues that enabled the unions to oppose employer's practices, which were considered as harmful to job quality (Hyman, 1972). This evidence provided valuable insights on the ways in which workers are able to become active members in regulating employers' behaviours, and shape job quality in the context of supply chains. This evidence has also shown that contrary to other accounts (Brown, 1990; Guest, 1989), a sense of collectivism still pervades in workplaces subject to intense supply chain pressures.

The discussion of the second contribution derives from the ways in which supply chains promote work and employment patterns that constrain the collective organisation of workers. This thesis suggests that, what arguably distinguishes forms of production rooted in supply chains from previous forms of organisation, relates not exclusively to inter-firm governance (Gereffi et al., 2005). Rather, the evidence in this thesis partly suggests that, what is significant in supply chains and inter-firm relations, are the conditions it creates for new configurations of labour to emerge. These new configurations seek to reduce the indeterminacy of labour, so that continuous flow of production can be achieved. Thus, what is interesting in this thesis, and similar to what is suggested in other studies, is that the interdependencies between the workplace and market dynamics produce changing contours of the workforce and, consequently, of workers capacity to effectively exert agency (Drahoukopil, 2015; Haidinger and Flecker, 2015; Hammer and Riisgaard, 2015). It was when the control over the labour process was displaced from the workplace into the supply chain, that the subordination of the workforce was completely attained (Kelly, 1985). This was particularly demonstrated in SpiritsCo's distillery, and MaltCo; and partly in the process evidenced in SpiritsCo bottling hall. It was indeed in these workplaces that job quality was subject to tighter pressures, which impacted on workers.

In relation to the third contribution, the discussion focuses on the analysis of individual forms of worker agency. In addition to considering workers' collective agency, this thesis

has addressed the role of worker agency in its individualised form. The broadening of workers' agency was relevant, because it allowed this thesis to examine the flexibility of agency, and to contrast the effectiveness of workers' opposing through individualised actions, with the ones that performed by the union (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu, 2011). Also, it provided the opportunity to examine how its formulations mirror the objective nature of definition of interests, as well as its immediate job quality outcomes (Kelly, 1998). The expectation of this thesis was that job quality would vary in relation to the level of collective agency in the workplace, with more collectivised workplaces having in general better job quality, than less collectivised ones. In general, this was congruent with the data evidenced in this thesis. Particularly, because the former showed more capacity to alter organisational structures than the individual forms of agency. Although this supports Stewart (2006) and Contu (2008), that most individualised forms of worker agency found in this thesis are not powerful enough to actually produce changes in organisational structures, these were nonetheless revealed to be critical for workers to improve *their own* job quality experiences. This was particularly demonstrated in the distillery, where workers' individual negotiations of working time patters improved their work-life balance. Although workers in MaltCo were highly constrained in exercising agency, they were nonetheless consensual in acknowledging that behaviours, such as absence, would be crucial to better cope with low levels of job quality. In this way, this thesis evidenced that, similarly to collective forms of worker agency (Simms, 2015), individual forms of workers' agency are also a key part in regulating job quality experiences. Thus, going beyond existing explanations rooted in pacified workplaces, this thesis has shown that worker agency is a ubiquitous component influencing job quality. However, how the collective forms of agency differ from the individualised ones, is that the latter tend to produce narrower outcomes, because workers lack the collective means to address underlying job quality issues.

### **9.3. Empirical contribution**

Parallel to the conceptual contribution, this thesis also provides a unique empirical contribution by analysing job quality within a specific sectoral context and highly integrated cluster of inter-connected firms (Grimshaw and Lehndorff, 2010; Grimshaw et al., 2005). The three factors contributing to this empirical contribution derive from the way in which this thesis was empirically set and are as follows: (1) the empirical research



conducted within firms that are tightly interconnected; (2) the different and varied social actors involved in the research study, and thus the in-depth nature of the study; and lastly (3) the typology of workplace regimes.

So far job quality has been mostly studied at an institutional level, where researchers map the outcomes of job quality across countries and/or according to the institutional paradigm that the country belongs to (Gallie, 2013; Holman, 2013; Munoz de Bustillo et al., 2011). Parallel to this approach, micro-level studies have sought to understand the ways in which job quality is shaped at workplace, as well as how it is experienced by workers. However, as Grimshaw and Lehndorff (2010) argue, job quality analysis should also consider product and capital market pressures, as well as sectoral analysis. These, they argue, are “shaped by the core institutions that are constitutive of each national model, but also retain distinguishing features” (*ibid*: 24). This thesis has attempted exactly that by focusing on the dynamics generated by inter-firm relations and the impacts it has on the organisations, in the specific context of SSI. Thus, the empirical approach conducted by this thesis at the sectoral and workplace levels, where inter-firm power dynamics are studied, allows for new insights in relation to the understanding of job quality drivers (Grimshaw and Lehndorff, 2010). Similar to recent studies (Lloyd and Payne, 2016), this thesis then concludes that to understand the interaction of institutions, markets and the workplace, it is necessary to bring the sector back into the analysis of job quality.

Moreover, the wide range of social actors that this thesis was able to involve within the study was also a valuable factor for the empirical contribution. Studies are often limited in their access to different actors, due to their gatekeepers or other organisational constraints; or, specifically to macroeconomic job quality studies, which are constrained by limited secondary data sets that limit these studies to macroeconomic patterns and trends. The inclusion of various social actors allowed this study to analyse job quality from different perspectives and at various levels of analysis. A key contribution made by this thesis to job quality is that the important role of workers’ agency in shaping job quality must be interpreted using a framework that recognises the complimentary role of factors beyond national and sectoral regulatory frameworks, and capital markets. The capacity to involve all social actors (in SpiritsCo and MaltCo) was crucial for this study to be successful in understanding that job quality is influenced by a variety of levels. The variety in terms of unionisation and inter-firm embeddedness, found within the chosen

case studies, provided the opportunity to examine the power interactions between structures and agents at different levels..

Finally, the empirical context was very rich in its idiosyncrasies, as the analysed case-studies and workplaces provided different levels of unionisation, inter-firm embeddedness, exposure to market pressures, and forms of work organisation. This research study purposively selected a specific production network to examine job quality, which provided the possibility to better capture the inter-firm relations and its immediate job quality outcomes. This allowed the study to examine job quality using an “extended case study” and therefore the politico-economic context with the labour process analysis. According to Burawoy (2009), the detailed studies of micro processes at the firm level are not sufficient, and therefore it is crucial to explore and understand the macro drivers of changes and dynamics that shape the micro level. By focusing on a specific production network, this thesis was able to enhance and maximise Burawoy’s argument. Moreover, this research study is unique in the way that it included in the research design not only the lead firm, but also its suppliers. The decision to investigate supply firms and not only lead firms, allowed this study to further appreciate the implications of inter-firm pressures on work and employment of the former firms, rather than only infer the consequences (Grimshaw et al., 2005: 22).

Thus, this thesis is original in that it has examined job quality by looking not at a single workplace or organisation, but unlike most studies, it compared a number of inter-linked workplaces where various actors were involved, which as a result contributed to better understanding of the multi-layered structures that shape job quality. Therefore, this thesis provided the opportunity to study job quality in a specific context and in a variety of different workplace regimes that were subject to different pressures and dynamics. This allows this thesis to contribute to our understanding of the factors that shape job quality by examining the dynamics happening at supply chain and sectoral levels, and considering the active role of workers.

#### **9.4. Practical implications for the study of job quality**

This research study was conducted in the specific context of supply chains in the SSI. The regulatory framework that covers this industry makes difficult to draw conclusions for other industries or sectors. However, at the same the idiosyncratic context makes the

findings and conclusions all the more relevant. As discussed previously, companies operating within this industry are constrained by regulations imposed at regional and European level. For instance, Scotch whisky is only to be branded as such, if meets certain quality criteria, such as being distilled and matured in Scotland. Such regulations can constrain the potential for outsourcing or offshoring production units, such as bottling and packaging. At the same time, this limitation of externalising production units, may enhance workers' structural resource power (as discussed previously in section 8.2.6).

As Gering (2007) argues, it is important to identify contexts that reflect features archetypal from a population, along with those that provide elements of uniqueness on a relevant aspect. The context in which this research study was conducted does exactly that. The SSI is an archetypal sector in the way that is a demarcated region and creates unique conditions for studying job quality. Archetypal contexts can be seen as representatives of the wider population, resulting in the improvement of applicability and reliability of results (Gering, 2007). The choice of industry and production network to undertake the fieldwork is indeed atypical to most of sectors and industries in the economy. However, uniqueness of contexts allows for contrast and comparisons to be drawn (Danermark et al., 2002). This is to say, that the unique set of pressures and constraints to which the selected industry and production network are subject, makes the comparison with other contexts all the more relevant. Therefore, sectors that are under the same sectoral regulation framework (EU demarcated regions), under different national institutional contexts may be of interest for further research.

Moreover, researchers have highlighted the few studies and many gaps when considering cross-sector research on job quality (Lloyd and Payne, 2016; Grimshaw and Lehndorff, 2010). Indeed, as Lloyd and Payne (2016: 57) argue, the explanation as to why there is variation within countries in the way that job quality shaped is yet under-developed. Overall, the evidence base for examining the effects of national institutions, sector dynamics, and organisational approach on job quality is limited, where there has been a lack of attempts to develop an explanation for the relationship between these different elements (Lloyd and Payne, 2016: 58). At the same time that this thesis contributes to this gap, it also highlights the need to extend research onto other sectors and contexts.

## 9.5. Limitation and further research

Despite rigorous and thorough research approach, the present study still possesses limitations, which need to be considered and can inform future research. The clearest limitation relates to the national boundaries in which this research study was limited. This study was undertaken in the UK, which has a specific institutional framework. The study identified issues regarding the organisation of work, the usage of different contracts of employment, absence and performance regimes, as well as the capacity for workers to exercise agency – all of which impacted job quality. However, the UK illustrates a specific type of capitalism, and therefore further research in different countries could provide important insights regarding job quality in supply chains, as well as whether the same patterns are visible. For instance, macroeconomic data report similar employment frameworks in Portugal and Spain, and draws similarities in its impact on job quality (Eurofound, 2012). However, our knowledge is limited on how supply chains influence job quality in these countries, where different institutional regimes are present. Thus, cross-national analysis, especially within countries where international supply chains are prevalent and have different institutional frameworks from that of the UK, is necessary to understand the changing drivers of job quality.

A further apparent limitation was the lack of scope in terms of sectors. Although the research study investigated job quality in manufacturing and logistics, these were geared by the manufacturing regime imposed by SpiritsCo. The Taylorised regime in the manufacturing sector is well recognised by researchers, who have examined extensively the job features and the impact on job quality. However, limited research has discussed job quality using similar methodological approach to the one undertaken in this research study. As it was demonstrated in this thesis, job quality is negotiated at the workplace and individual levels, and the agency of workers was proved key to maintain and improve standards of quality within jobs. However, what happens in sectors and industries where agency is becoming increasingly individual is still a rather unexplored area. One interesting case study would be investigating job quality in what has been termed the “gig-economy”, which is growing fast in today’s economic paradigm. Companies that operate within this paradigm are undeniably looking for an increasingly individualised employment relationship, where the contact with the employer is minimal and made exclusively through technology (smartphones, primarily). A relationship that is almost virtual, poses new challenges for workers’ agency and capacity to shape job quality.

Investigating different sectors and industries would be a new window into understanding the ways in which job quality is shaped.

Moreover, as previously discussed, there is yet comparative research to be undertaken between sectors and countries, which should interrogate the challenges facing sectoral dynamics in diverse country contexts. As Grimshaw and Lehndorff (2010 and Lloyd and Payne (2016) suggest, the literature would benefit from cross-sectoral and cross-country research in order to improve our understanding of the factors that shape job quality.

A final identified limitation that can be translated into further research relates to job quality being explored in different workplace regimes, with different levels of unionisation. Workers' and union representatives' accounts were specifically taken into consideration to examine the dynamics of the employment relationship and the forms of worker agency. This analysis included forms of "game playing", "empty labour", and "misbehaviour" whenever they arose in interviewees' narratives. These were crucial to illustrate the extent of "politics of production" (Burawoy, 1985), and forms of worker agency (either collective or individual) in the specific context of manufacturing in the Scottish Spirits Industry. However, a further contribution to job quality should focus and investigate worker agency taking into account aspects such as gender, race and country of origin. Although references to such aspects were occasionally mentioned by interviewees (particularly relating to migrants), these on the one hand, were not defined by respondents as key issues within the politics of production either on workplace or supply chain level; and, on the other hand, such topics were not previously defined as key to the development of the research project. However, investigating job quality taking into consideration factors such as gender, race and country of origin, would entail a significant contribution to the job quality literature. For instance, job quality research is rather limited when considering the EU migrant population in the UK. Migrants from European Countries often face practical issues in terms of recognition of qualifications, which channels this population towards a secondary labour market, where low job quality prevails. Moreover, paralleling with supply chains of commodities, migrant workers are also often a result of push and pull mechanisms propelled by the employers (Rodriguez, 2006). Relating to this, migrant population is often regarded by employers as a "good" or "vulnerable" worker (McKinzie and Forde, 2009), who are typically more compliant, less of a trouble maker, and perhaps not demanding the same working conditions as those workers that are native to the country. These aspects would arguably impact the

capacity for this population of workers to exercise agency. However, limited research has examined job quality within this population. Particularly the impact that supply chain pressures, and an apparent lack of worker agency, would have on job quality and for the well-being of migrant workers.

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## Chapter 11: Appendix - interview guides and focus groups discussion guides

### Senior Managers Interview Guide

#### Themes of Discussion:

#### 1) Globalisation and expanding markets

- a. From where comes the main focus pressures? (probe about customers and retails)
- b. And in what forms are those pressures? (probe about quality standards, lead times and costs)
- c. How do you comply with those requirements?
- d. How you cope with growing levels of demand by customers? (probe about functional and numerical flexibility).

#### 2) Work organisation

- a. How these changes affect the nature of work and how work is organised?
- b. How much labour (the number of employees and the way work is organised) plays an important role in maintaining those requirements?
- c. How do you plan the exact number of people you need for a specific period of time? (probe about the process that gets them to reach a conclusion about the number of temps needed etc)
- d. How do you keep workers' head down? What are the main mechanisms you use in the plant? (probe about performance management, necessity to comply with orders)

#### 3) Performance Management

- a. How are workers assessed and which criteria are used?
- b. Is it the same for temps and core workers? Why not and the differences between one and the other?
- c. Do you feel you take more out of temps than core nowadays?
- d. Are temps now more able to do more tasks than core workers?

#### 4) Working time

- a. What are the systems of shifts here?
- b. Who does which shift and why? (probe about core workers doing night shifts rather than temps)
- c. What are the benefits of doing night shifts? (probe about better pay and more autonomy)
- d. Why isn't in place a 24/7 system? (probe about union/employees role on this?)

#### 5) Absenteeism

- a. How important is absenteeism levels for maintaining the efficiency of production and why?
- b. With what mechanism you keep these levels low? (probe about Bradford Score)
- c. What does entail the 'back to work interviews'?

#### 6) JOB QUALITY

Job quality Dimension	Sub Indices	Question
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Job Security and Working Time	Employer dependence on employee	How difficult or easy is to replace employees if they leave? Probe for permanent positions, and for temporary positions
	Employment Contract	Why is the reason you need temporary employees?
	Job security and Work Restructuring	During the last 4 to 5 years was any major restructuring or reorganisation of work happening in this workplace? Did it involved laying off people?
Task Discretion	Supervision	How closely is the supervision conducted with shopfloor workers? How does it actually work?
	Influence over working time	Who decides on the shift patterns? Probe about if workers can demonstrate preference over some shifts? Probe about if temporary workers can do it as well?
	Training	Is training conducted regularly in order to improve skills or not? Probe about who decides the training, management or workers? Probe about differenced between temporary and permanent workers?
Work Pressures	Driver of work intensity	What are the main sources of work pressures in the shopfloor? And when exactly this pressure manifests it self? Probe about assembly line; customer orders; supervision; fellow workers; pay; performance management;
	Pay	What are the pay systems you have implemented in here? Probe about performance related pay; profit sharing schemes; probe about influence on individual performance?
	Time Pressure	How does pressure manifests and in what conditions? Probe about time pressures and tight deadlines.

	Work Effort	Do you feel workers go the extra mile often in their job? Do you think they do this willingly? Probe also about how often this is and specific times that this is mostly experienced, for instance because of some order;
	Working Time	What are the shifts in practice? And how are workers allocated to them?
Collective Representation and Employee Involvement	Keeping employees informed	Do you keep workers informed in major changes in the overall running of the plant site and business? Probe about work organisation; staffing levels; budgets and profits
	Employees involvement by managers	What are the ways you involve workers in matters of the plant site? Probe about if suggestions are heard; do workers have a saying in final decisions?
	Employee involvement	Do you hold meetings in which workers can express their views about what is happening in the organisation or is very much left to the relationship with the union? If so how would you rate the involvement of the union in this negotiations, easy to negotiate or they give you a hard time?
	Collective representation	How much influence do the trade unions in your establishment have over the way work is organised? Does the union takes notice of workers complaints and problems?

### Line Managers Interview Guide

- 1) **Work organisation**
  - a. If you have a customer order that is urgent how do you assure you achieve that target?
  - b. How do you plan the exact number of people you need for a specific period of time? (probe about the process that gets them to reach a conclusion about the number of temps needed etc)
  - c. How do you plan how many temps you need for a specific time?
  - d. What are the main control mechanisms you use in the plant? (probe about performance management, necessity to comply with orders)
- 2) **Performance Management**
  - a. How are workers assessed and which criteria are used?
  - b. Is it the same for temps and core workers? Why not, and the differences between one and the other?
  - c. Do you feel you take more out of temps than core nowadays?
- 3) **Working Time**
  - a. What are the systems of shifts here?

- b. Who does which shift and why? (probe about core workers doing night shifts rather than temps)
- c. What are the benefits of doing night shifts? (probe about better pay and more autonomy)
- d. 24/7 system? (probe about union/employees role on this?)

**4) Absenteeism**

- a. How important is absenteeism levels for maintaining the efficiency of production and why?
- b. With what mechanism you keep these levels low? (probe about Bradford Score)
- c. How efficient is this absence system?
- d. What does entail the ‘back to work interviews’?

**5) Job Quality**

Job quality Dimension	Sub Indice	Question
	Employer dependence on employee	How difficult or easy is to replace employees if they leave? Probe for permanent positions, and for temporary positions
Job Security and Working Time	Employment Contract	Why is the reason you need temporary employees?
	Job security and Work Restructuring	During the last 4 to 5 years was any major restructuring or reorganisation of work happening in this workplace? Did it involved laying off people?
Task Discretion	Supervision	How closely is the supervision conducted with shopfloor workers? How does it actually work?
	Influence over working time	Who decides on the shift patterns? Probe about if workers can demonstrate preference over some shifts? Probe about if temporary workers can do it as well?
	Training	Is training conducted regularly in order to improve skills or not? Probe about who decides the training, management or workers? Probe about differenced between temporary and permanent workers?
Work Pressures	Driver of work intensity	What are the main sources of work pressures in the shopfloor? And when exactly this pressure manifests it self? Probe about assembly line; customer orders; supervision; fellow workers; pay; performance management;

	Pay	What are the pay systems you have implemented in here? Probe about performance related pay; profit sharing schemes; probe about influence on individual performance?
	Time Pressure	How does pressure manifests and in what conditions? Probe about time pressures and tight deadlines.
	Work Effort	Do you feel workers go the extra mile often in their job? Do you think they do this willingly? Probe also about how often this is and specific times that this is mostly experienced, for instance because of some order;
	Working Time	What are the shifts in practice? And how are workers allocated to them?
Collective Representation and Employee Involvement	Keeping employees informed	Do you keep workers informed in major changes in the overall running of the plant site and business? Probe about work organisation; staffing levels; budgets and profits
	Employees involvement by managers	What are the ways you involve workers in matters of the plant site? Probe about if suggestions are heard; do workers have a saying in final decisions?
	Employee involvement	Do you hold meetings in which workers can express their views about what is happening in the organisation or is very much left to the relationship with the union? If so how would you rate the involvement of the union in this negotiations, easy to negotiate or they give you a hard time?
	Collective representation	How much influence do the trade unions in your establishment have over the way work is organised? Does the union takes notice of workers complaints and problems?

### Union Representatives Interview Guide

#### 1) Themes of Discussion:

How would you describe the relationship you have with management here?

Partnership – what is exactly that?

What is the difference between the current status and what some workers would like to see here – the ones that have the ‘shipyard mentality’?

#### 2) Topic of discussion – Relation Union / Management



- What are the main issues raised by operators?
  - Probe about work intensity, lack of autonomy/discretion, different working conditions between workers such as pay, pensions, and type of contracts (staff v operators)
- How would you describe management's general attitude towards trade union membership among employees at this workplace.
- Do managers keep you informed in major changes in the overall running of the plant site and business? Probe about work organisation; staffing levels; budgets and profits
- What are the ways managers involve you in matters of the plant site? Probe about do they hear your suggestions; do you feel you have a saying in final decisions?
- Does management hold meetings in which you can express your views about what is happening in the organisation or is very much left to the relationship between union and management? If so does the union inform you correctly about the decisions?
- How much influence does the trade union have over the way work is organised? Does the union takes notice of workers complaints and problems?
- What is the Union's approach towards Temporary workers? Do you feel Edrington should cap this? Or it is necessary to have the percentage that exists?

### 3) Job Quality of the Operators

Job quality Dimension	Sub Indice	Question
Job Security and Working Time	Employer dependence on employee	How difficult or easy is to replace employees if they leave? Probe for permanent positions, and for temporary positions
	Employment Contract	Why is the reason you need temporary employees?
	Job security and Work Restructuring	During the last 4 to 5 years was any major restructuring or reorganisation of work happening in this workplace? Did it involved laying off people?
Task Discretion	Supervision	How closely is the supervision conducted with shopfloor workers? How does it actually work?
	Influence over working time	Who decides on the shift patterns? Probe about if workers can demonstrate preference over some shifts? Probe about if temporary workers can do it as well?

	Training	Is training conducted regularly in order to improve skills or not? Probe about who decides the training, management or workers? Probe about differences between temporary and permanent workers?
Work Pressures	Driver of work intensity	What are the main sources of work pressures in the shopfloor? And when exactly this pressure manifests itself? Probe about assembly line; customer orders; supervision; fellow workers; pay; performance management;
	Pay	What are the pay systems you have implemented in here? Probe about performance related pay; profit sharing schemes; probe about influence on individual performance?
	Time Pressure	How does pressure manifest and in what conditions? Probe about time pressures and tight deadlines.
	Work Effort	Do you feel workers go the extra mile often in their job? Do you think they do this willingly? Probe also about how often this is and specific times that this is mostly experienced, for instance because of some order;
	Working Time	What are the shifts in practice? And how are workers allocated to them?
Collective Representation and Employee Involvement	Keeping employees informed	Do you keep workers informed in major changes in the overall running of the plant site and business? Probe about work organisation; staffing levels; budgets and profits
	Employees involvement by managers	What are the ways you involve workers in matters of the plant site? Probe about if suggestions are heard; do workers have a saying in final decisions?

Employee involvement

Do you hold meetings in which workers can express their views about what is happening in the organisation or is very much left to the relationship with the union? If so how would you rate the involvement of the union in this negotiations, easy to negotiate or they give you a hard time?

Collective representation

How much influence do the trade unions in your establishment have over the way work is organised? Does the union takes notice of workers complaints and problems?

### Shop-Floor Workers Interview Guide

#### 1) BACKGROUND

- Could you outline your previous employment, experience and training?
- How long have you been working at Edrington?
- What is your job title and could you briefly summarise your job description at Edrington?
- When you started at Edrington, what sort of induction and training, if any, did you receive initially?

#### 2) ORGANISATION OF WORK

##### Overall

- Do you work in formal teams? Where i.e. assembly line, distribution?
- Within your team, is there any formal meetings? (follow up question: What is the reason for these, and the frequency?)
- Teams are usually composed by many workers? (follow up question: what are the factors that determine where place people?)
- Are the nature of tasks a determinant of the configuration of a team?
- How would you describe the role of your supervisor? (follow up question: do they tend to make your life easier or harder?)
- How workers are represented at Edrington? E.g. unions, employee rep meetings, informal
- How you would describe your level of influence in areas such as (i) staffing levels, (ii) people recruited, (iii) allocating people to work, (iv) changes to working practices? (Intensity)
- Do you think this influence has varied since you work at Edrington, and how? (Intensification)

##### Tasks

- Could you describe a typical day at work? (follow up question: Do tasks vary? What is the frequency of that variation?)
- Is there tasks that you usually have to undertake that are not directly related to your work? (follow up question: do feel that these have an impact on the intensity of work?)
- Can you think of any team members which roles are more or less intensive? (follow up question: why?)
- What do you like and dislike most doing here at Edrington?

##### Escaping from Work

- Do you have any type of freedom to take the breaks you need?
- How many breaks during the day are you allowed to take? (follow up question: To what extent does this affect the intensity of your work?)

- Do you have any time or freedom to socialize with your colleagues during a work day? Can you give us your thoughts about how the intensity of your work affects socializing with them?

**Discretion at Work**

- How would you describe the control that you have over how you can do your work and setting the pace of your work? (Intensity)
- Has this control changed since you work at Edrington? (Intensification)
- Do you have any control or type of influence in establishing your targets?
- To what extent do you think the targets set impact the intensity of your work? (Intensity)
- Do you think these targets have changed over time since you work at Edrington? (Intensification)

**Performance Measurement**

- How are these targets measured by your manager/supervisor (e.g. performance appraisal)?
- How long have these measurements been used at Edrington, and have they been changing over time? Do you feel that these are becoming more or less demanding?
- Can you give us your thoughts about how these impact the intensity of your (or others') work? (Intensity)

**3) INDIVIDUAL FACTORS**

**Staffing Levels**

- To what extent do you think staffing levels impact on the intensity of your work?

**Effect of teams on individuals**

- Are teams specialized on specific areas, ie engineers who deal with maintenance? (Follow up questions: Do you get access to that knowledge? An then are you required to perform such tasks deemed firstly to engineers?)
- To what extent this access (access or no access to knowledge) impact on the intensity of your work? And in other teams or any case you are aware of?

**Skills and competences**

- What skills do you think are needed to perform your job?
- As any type of particular skill been emphasised by your supervisor or manager in the past years?
- What kind of opportunities do you have to develop your competences?
- How would you consider the career development at this company? i.e. how easy it is to move to other functions or occupations?
- To what extent does fulfilling these aspirations impact on the intensity of your work? Do you consider you have to work more, and/or go through more training programmes outside your working schedule? (follow up question: if not, can you think about other people?)

**4) CONTEXTUAL/MARKET FACTORS**

**Overall Market**

- Do you think the product you are allocated to has any influence on the intensity of work? (e.g. packaging/bottling different products – premium brands contrary to mass market ones – for different markets) If so, how?
- Do you think market demands play any role in the intensity of your work and if so, how?

**Clients**

- How much influence do you think clients have on the deadlines? i.e. on the time that is set for you to finish packaging a lot (Intensity)
- Can you compare the influence that clients had in the past related to now?

(Intensification)

Overall, how much would you say that clients have an influence on your, and your colleagues, work intensity?

### 5) CONCLUSION QUESTIONS

Overall, do you feel you experience intensity at work? (Follow up question: If no, why? / If yes, what causes it? What contributes to intensity for you?)

Do you think the spirits industry has changed over time and if so, how?

Do you think workers' roles and tasks in the spirits industry have changed over time and if so, how?

### Focus Groups Discussion Guide

- What is exactly the Edrington way and what does it mean to you all? *Probe for:*
  - i. *Probe about the differences to other companies in the industry?*
  - ii. *In what ways?*
  - iii. *Probe about engagement levels and what are the practices used by management to increase these?*
  - iv. *Probe the reasons and thoughts about trust levels being low in a particular group of workers?*
- Can you talk about *What is the position of Edrington in relation to other companies in the industry?*
  - i. *Pressure to restructuring and centralisation of production (namely moving production units to the central belt of Scotland such as cooperage)?*
  - ii. *How these industry features affect Edrington's relation with customers?*

**Topic of discussion:** Moving on the discussion to issues related to **market pressures and relations with suppliers.**

*Questions and probes for discussion*

- Can you give us your opinion about the major market pressures Edrington is subject to? *Probe for:*
  - i. *Where do they come from, niche markets or retailers?*
  - ii. *Which type of market is more important for the company? Retailers/niche.*
  - iii. *Probe about requirements from retailers to maintain prices low.*
  - iv. *Probe for specific terms and conditions that are imposed in the contracts by customers.*
  - v. *How does the client company control requirements?*
  - vi. *What are the consequences of not complying with customers' requirements? And how do you ensure that these requirements are met?*
- In what ways these later discussed requirements affect the relation with your suppliers? *Probe for:*
  - i. *Are specific requirements cascaded down to other companies? Such as specifications about quality, prices and exact moments when you need certain products?*
  - ii. *What are the major problems you face with your suppliers? Probe for issues related to prices, quality standards, and lead times.*
  - iii. *How do you control the requirements you set to your suppliers, on barley for instance?*
  - iv. *What are the consequences for suppliers by not complying with these requirements?*
- In what ways customer's requirements are noticeable in the way work is managed in the shop floor? *Probe for:*

- i. *Through which processes work is managed in response to customer's requirements?*
  - 1. *Probe about how you use temporary work to cope with demands; and functional flexibility, multitasking?*
  - 2. *'Change management' (restructuring) strategies? In what way?*
    - a. Probe about working hours and shift patterns restructuring, tasks and the way work is organised, maybe more effectively?
  - 3. *Clear key performance indicators and how are these controlled (digital screens, production reports, team meetings)?*
    - a. Which KPIs would you say are more emphasised by management ?
    - b. What is the role of the line-supervisor in assuring targets are met?
    - c. Is there any study on the optimal capacity of the plant? If so, how is this followed?

**Topic of Discussion – Job Quality**

**. Of the Staff - Probe for:**

- i. In what ways your job is affected?
  - 1. *Work intensification (WORK PRESSURES)*
    - a. Do you feel you are more under pressure to perform?
    - b. When exactly do you feel more pressure?
    - c. How does that manifest and in what condition? Probe about lack of time, and tight deadlines.
    - d. Probe about intensification; are the pressures becoming increasingly difficult to manage?
  - 2. *Work autonomy*
    - a. Probe on the influence over your work tasks?
    - b. Influence on the pace of work?
    - c. Probe about the scope on using their own initiative on work tasks?
    - d. The order of work, which tasks come first? How are these structured? Probe about customer influence.
    - e. Overall involvement in how work is organised
  - 3. *Skills usage and development*
    - a. To what extent skills are used in your tasks?
    - b. Opportunities to develop skills?
    - c. The training available?
  - 4. *Temporary work*
    - a. Is any temporary work used in the departments?
    - b. If so, probe about when and to which tasks are temps used? How long do they usually stay?

**. Of the Operators - Probe for:**

- ii. *In what ways their job is affected?*
  - 1. *Work intensification (WORK PRESSURES)*
    - a. How does that pressure manifests?
    - b. When do you think operators are under more pressure? Probe for typical seasons.
    - c. Probe on operators' work intensification?
    - d. How pressures are dealt?
      - o Usage of any temporary/part-time work to compensate? Where are temps mostly allocated, to which production point?
      - o Usage of internal flexibility? Probe about more working hours; about multitasking and skills?
  - 2. *What are the consequences for operators if targets are not met?*
    - a. Probe about disciplinary actions;

- b. And if workers achieve these? Probe about compensation/bonus schemes?
- 3. *In order to maintain a smooth production process, what major disruptions management usually faces from workers?*
  - a. What has been done to tackle these?
  - b. Probe about absence levels, turnover, and grievances? And how is this tackled?

**Topic of discussion: the relationship with unions.**

***Questions and probes for discussion***

- What are the bigger challenges when talking with unions? *Probe for:*
  - i. Grievances – within grievances, what are the major issues that tend to arise more often?
  - ii. Understanding the business needs?
- Is there a difference between relationships considering different production units, such as distilleries, plant site or cooerage? *Probe for:*
  - i. Reasons?
  - ii. Why and how different is it?