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Temporary Services and
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Randall W. Eberts
Executive Director

Susan Houseman and George Erickcek

Temporary Services and Contracting Out Effects on Low-Skilled Workers

Temporary help employment grew dramatically over the last decade, accounting for 10 percent of net employment growth in the United States during the 1990s. Evidence from case studies and business surveys suggests dramatic growth in the outsourcing of functions to contract companies as well (Abraham and Taylor 1996; Houseman 2001). Through case studies in a representative manufacturing, service, and public sector industry, we examined why employers are increasing the use of these nonstandard employment arrangements and the implications of this increased use for wages, benefits, and working conditions in low-skilled labor markets.

Temporary help and contract company workers perform work for a client, usually at the client's work site, but they are the legal employees of an agency or contract company. Because workers in these arrangements often receive lower compensation than they would if they were employees of the client organization, the growth of temporary help and contracting out generally is viewed as inimical to workers' interests. We find, however, that the story is not that simple. Our case study evidence points to circumstances in which workers are likely to be adversely affected by the

outsourcing of jobs to agencies or contractors. In other situations, however, the effects on low-skilled workers appear to be minimal, and in some situations they may even be beneficial.

Incidence of Temporary Help and Contracting Out

We studied the use of temporary services and contracting out in five Midwest automotive supply establishments, six hospitals in Michigan and North Carolina, and seven Michigan public school districts.¹ Low-skilled jobs comprise a large share of employment in all three of the industries studied. The majority of auto supply workers are in low- or semi-skilled production positions. Hospitals have shifted work away from high-skilled, high-paid registered nurses to low-skilled, low-paid nurse assistants. Moreover, hospitals utilize a large number of workers in low-skilled clerical, food service, and housekeeping positions. Typically, 15 to 20 percent of a public school's staff is in low- and semi-skilled noninstructional positions in such areas as food service, cleaning, and transportation.

The use of temporary agency help in low-skilled functional areas was common in our auto supply and hospital case studies. Contracting out low-skilled

functions was prevalent in hospitals and public schools. Four out of the five auto supply plants utilized temporary agency help in production positions during the period of our interviews. Among the two unionized plants in our study, the use of agency temporaries was strictly limited at one and prohibited at the other. In two nonunion plants, temporary employment accounted for over 20 percent of production employment.

Although most hospitals in our study kept poor records of their use of agency temporary help in support functions, they reported using agency temps in many low-skilled clinical, clerical, housekeeping, and food service positions. Data from the hospitals that did keep good records suggest a moderately high level of temporary employment. For instance, in one hospital, agency temps worked 11 percent of hours in food services, 5 percent of hours in housekeeping, and 14 percent of hours in clerical functions.

We observed several cases in public schools where noninstructional support services, including custodial, transportation, and food services operations, were entirely contracted out. Interestingly, however, it is quite common for hospitals and public schools to contract out only management functions and to keep workers on their payroll. Whereas all of the hospitals we studied contracted out the management of food services or housekeeping services, none contracted out the entire operation. Among public schools, two districts contracted out their entire food services operation, but three contracted out only the management function.

Implications for Workers

In several instances, management decisions to use agency temporaries or to contract out functions appeared to have a direct, adverse effect on the wages, benefits, or other working conditions of low-skilled workers.² These cases involved the substitution of agency or contract company staff for regular employees on a long-term basis. Sometimes, contracting out entailed loss of union status and benefits, for affected workers, such as due process in grievance

procedures. The contracting out of an entire low-skilled function in public schools was always associated with lower benefits and sometimes lower wages for workers in these occupations. By law, public school employees received pension and other benefits, which were considerably more generous than those typically offered in the private sector to low-skilled workers. In addition, wage levels of contracted workers tended to be lower than those paid to school employees, who were often unionized. A 1994 Michigan law precluding union bargaining over the contracting out of noninstructional services, coupled with financial pressures on public schools, have led to a recent surge of contracting out of these services.

In only one case—that of an auto supplier—did an employer use temporary agency workers on a long-term basis. This auto supplier screened all new hires

Unless an organization's low-skilled employees are earning above market compensation, management will have little to gain in terms of wage and benefits cost savings from the use of agency temporaries and contractors. Where we observe such use, the organization's motivation is something else.

through a temporary help agency and offered them permanent positions after six months to a year or more—far longer than other auto suppliers using temporary agencies for screening purposes. This nonunion supplier paid its regular workers wages and benefits comparable to unionized plants in the area, a strategy designed to improve the quality of its employees and to avoid unionization. However, in prolonging the probationary period in its hiring through a temporary agency, the company acknowledged substantial savings in wage and benefits costs.

Interestingly, the human resources directors at the unionized auto supplier plants also indicated that they would like

to be able to use temporary agency workers more to save on labor costs. However, unlike the situation in public schools, unions in this sector were able to prohibit or greatly restrict the use of temporary agencies through collective bargaining. These examples underscore the importance that laws governing collective bargaining have on the incidence of outsourcing and ultimately on compensation and other working conditions in an industry.

Although outsourcing is often associated with the substitution of agency or contract company workers for higher-paid regular workers, evidence from our case studies suggests that outsourcing typically did not involve such substitution on a permanent basis. Agency temporaries usually were hired on a short-term basis to fill in for an absent employee, to staff a temporary project, or to screen workers for permanent positions. Particularly in hospitals, agency temporaries' compensation was similar to that of regular staff in comparable positions; in a few cases, they even earned more.

Only the management function was contracted out in almost all of the instances of contracting out in hospitals and in about half of the instances in public schools, so the wages and benefits of low-skilled workers in these functional areas were unaffected. In these cases, schools and hospitals believed any wage and benefits cost savings from contracting out the entire function were non-existent or relatively small: the motivation for contracting out the management function was to achieve product or productivity improvements and cost savings in other areas.

The simple but important point is that unless an organization's low-skilled employees are earning above market compensation, management will have little to gain—and workers will have little to lose—in terms of wage and benefits cost savings from the use of agency temporaries and contractors. Where we observe such use, the organization's motivation is something else.

A caveat to this conclusion is that compensation among regular employees

likely depends on the existence of competition from staffing agencies and contractors. It will be difficult for low-skilled workers and their union representatives to raise compensation if employers have the option of using low-cost third parties. We observed this sort of dynamic in one of our public school case studies. The previously mentioned state law, which precluded collective bargaining over the contracting out of noninstructional services, paved the way for this school district to contract out the custodial services in some of its buildings. The union was able to continue operating in half of the buildings, but only because it agreed to steep pay cuts for its higher-paid custodians and to the disciplining of poor performers.

Potential Benefit: The Case of Temporary Agencies and "Risky" Workers

When can workers actually benefit from a temporary agency or contract arrangement? Some workers, of course, prefer temporary positions. Workers may benefit from superior management skills provided by a contractor. More interesting is the use of temporary help agencies for screening purposes. Here, we argue, agency temporaries may benefit from the arrangement, even when they desire permanent positions and receive lower wages than direct hires.

The use of agency temporaries for screening purposes increased during the late 1990s among employers in our case studies as labor markets tightened and the average quality of job applicants dropped. Some of these employers began hiring workers for certain low-skilled positions exclusively through temporary agencies. Others used a mixed hiring strategy. For instance, one auto supplier directly hired applicants with good work histories while hiring others through a temporary agency at lower wages and lower cost to the company.

By lowering compensation and firing costs, temporary help agencies made it more attractive for companies to try out workers with criminal records, poor work histories, or otherwise "risky" characteristics. Because many of these workers might not otherwise have had the opportunity to audition for a permanent

position, they potentially benefited from the temporary employment arrangement.

At the same time, by lowering the companies' costs of trying out riskier workers, temporary help agencies effectively expand the supply of potential labor to a company. In this way, companies may avoid raising wages in order to attract more qualified candidates. Furthermore, because increases in wages for new workers are almost always accompanied by increases in wages for existing workers, the more general use of agency temporaries may relieve upward wage pressure in tight labor markets.³

Conclusion

Sometimes an organization's motivation for outsourcing low-skilled jobs is to substitute lower-paid temporary agency or contract company workers for regular employees. Often, however, an organization's motivation for outsourcing is unrelated to wage and benefits cost savings. Workers in low-skilled positions may already receive relatively low pay, and outsourcing involves no permanent substitution of temporary or contract company workers for regular employees. Except to the extent that the existence of an outsourcing option inhibits compensation gains among low-skilled workers, contracting out and the use of agency temporaries has little apparent effect on low-skilled workers.

The growing use of temporary agencies to screen workers for permanent positions illustrates the complexity of assessing the impacts of temporary agency work on low-skilled workers. Our case study evidence suggests that often workers hired through agencies are deemed riskier than those hired directly, rendering simple wage comparisons between these two groups invalid. Moreover, the fact that temporary agencies sometimes lower compensation costs and facilitate dismissal may be the very reason some employers are willing to try out certain workers. The potentially more important impacts of temporary employment are on workers' subsequent employment and earnings. The extent to which temporary agencies help open doors to good jobs for low-skilled, risky workers or instead channel them into low-

paying, dead-end assignments is an important topic for future study.

Notes

1. We conducted extensive interviews with each organization's managers, temporary agency or contract company representatives, and workers. We also collected data on employment, wages, and benefits by occupation for regular, temporary agency, and contract workers from each organization.

2. An obvious caveat to the conclusion that lower wages and benefits adversely affect workers is that lower compensation may increase employment and reduce unemployment in the long run. While these long-term impacts are hotly debated in the economics profession, we do not consider such macroeconomic effects here.

3. We develop these arguments, including why employers may need a third party to lower the costs of trying out risky workers, in Houseman, Kalleberg, and Erickcek (2001).

Suggestions for Further Reading

Abraham, Katharine G., and Susan K. Taylor. 1996. "Firms' Use of Outside Contractors: Theory and Evidence." *Journal of Labor Economics* 14(3): 394-424.

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Erickcek, George A., Susan N. Houseman, and Arne L. Kalleberg. 2002. "The Effects of Temporary Services and Contracting Out on Low-Skilled Workers: Evidence from Hospitals, Automotive Supply, and Public Schools." Working paper, W.E. Upjohn Institute, Kalamazoo, Michigan. Available on the Web at www.upjohninstitute.org.

Susan Houseman is a senior economist and George Erickcek is a senior regional analyst at the Upjohn Institute. This study was funded by the Russell Sage and Rockefeller Foundations. More extensive discussions of the study and its findings are provided in Houseman, Kalleberg, and Erickcek (2001), and Erickcek, Houseman, and Kalleberg (2002).

John S. Earle

Evaluating Labor Market Performance

Employment Reallocation and Productivity Growth in Russia

The Russian transition from socialist planning toward market-based allocation provides an interesting opportunity to measure the role of the labor market in generating economic growth. A common but relatively little examined assumption of economists is that employment (or labor) allocation in market economies responds to productivity differentials across alternative uses, with labor tending to flow away from lower-valued uses and toward those that are higher-valued. During the Soviet period, however, jobs were allocated across industries and enterprises according to the dictates of central planners, who were in turn guided by the political leaders' preferences for developing some sectors and types of firms rather than others. For instance, the mining, heavy manufacturing, and public transportation industries received many resources, as did larger firms and those connected with the military, while the consumer goods manufacturing and service sectors, as well as smaller firms, tended to be neglected.

How well did the Soviet planners do, measured as the contribution of job reallocation across firms to increased productivity? And how has the relationship between job and productivity growth by industry changed since the dramatic liberalization of markets and the privatization of much of the economy in the early 1990s? To what extent have the patterns of job reallocation come to more closely resemble those found in the United States, and what factors tend to

increase the degree to which job reallocation is productivity-enhancing?

Analysis of recently available data on Russian firms provides some answers to these questions. The data cover all industrial enterprises in Soviet Russia in 1985–1991 and all medium- and large-sized industrial enterprises since the breakup of the Soviet Union in late 1991. Firms with fewer than 100 employees are excluded. The data, which provide information similar to that in the U.S. Annual Survey of Manufacturers (except that they pertain to firms rather than establishments), are well suited for investigating the job reallocation process

in the old industrial sector that was established during the socialist period. The behavior of the old industrial firms—where socialist planning resulted in a large concentration of capital and skilled labor, and where the price, technology, and competition shocks of transition have been particularly severe—is of particular interest in Russia and other transition economies.

Labor Market Developments in Russian Industry

Figure 1 displays information on the evolution of industrial production, employment, labor productivity, and the real wage in Russia from 1990 to 2000. Although the large magnitude of the output decline in the early 1990s must be taken somewhat cautiously (chiefly due to problems in measuring inflation), the broad trends are well accepted. The “output shock” was especially severe in Russia, where official industrial production fell by more than 50 percent in just the first four years of the 1990s. The employment decline was also quite drastic by international and historical standards, with a fall of nearly 40 percent by 1998. Nevertheless, the drop in employment was more gradual than that

Figure 1 Production, Employment, Productivity, and Wages in Russian Industry, 1990–2000

SOURCE: Russian State Statistical Committee (Goskomstat).

of output, resulting in a large initial decline in labor productivity followed by a partial recovery. Measured real wages, here deflated by the official CPI, also fell in the years to 1995 and have been volatile since then.

The aggregate data show a clear picture of an industrial sector in deep depression during the 1990s. This raises questions concerning the nature of the decline. Does the rapid deindustrialization reflect a process of Schumpeterian creative destruction, whereby the economy gets rid of its over-built, inefficient elements? Or does the aggregate industrial decline reflect a depression in which all economic activity declines simultaneously and roughly proportionately? A final possibility is that the decline is actually more severe in the more productive sectors of the economy, suggesting sclerosis in an excessive preservation of inefficient jobs and unhealthy pressures on more productive firms and sectors. Sclerosis is quite plausible in Russia, where governments (particularly local and regional governments) may protect weak enterprises, successful firms are subject to public and private predation, and stripping of assets—most likely from productive firms with valuable assets—is notoriously widespread. Addressing these questions requires an analysis of firm-level data that permit an assessment of differences across firms and sectors in employment and productivity growth.

Firm-Level Job Flows

The firm-level analysis follows standard methodologies used in the United States for measuring job creation and job destruction, as the sources of growth and decline in employment at the firm level, respectively. The creation rate is defined as the ratio of employment growth in all expanding firms to total employment, and the destruction rate is the ratio of employment decline in all contracting firms to total employment. The reallocation rate—a measure of the total movement of jobs across firms—is defined as the sum of the creation and destruction rates. Figure 2 contains calculations of these rates on an annual

Figure 2 Job Creation and Job Destruction in Russia

SOURCE: Brown and Earle (2002).

basis for the Russian industrial sector from 1985 to 1999.

Job creation is low in this sector throughout the period, but it does rise significantly in the later years. If the years are grouped into a rough “pre-reform” period (1985–1991) and a “post-reform” period (1992–1999), the creation rate rises from an average of 1.4 percent in the first period to 2.4 percent in the second. Note that the grouping of years is defined around 1992, the year of the “big bang” liberalization in Russia.

Job destruction exceeds creation in every year, and it rises even much more in the early 1990s, reaching the typical range of the U.S. economy by 1992–1993. The gap between destruction and creation widens substantially, confirming the net employment decline in the official aggregate data. Comparing the pre- and post-reform periods, the average job destruction rate more than doubles, rising from 4.5 percent to 10.3 percent. As a consequence of the rise in both creation and destruction, the reallocation rate also rises, from an average of 5.9 percent in the pre-reform period to an average of 12.7 post-reform.

Job Flows and Firm Characteristics

How do the patterns of job flows relate to observable firm characteristics? In research on the United States, a principal focus has been on variables that may be associated with costs of labor adjustment, such as size, capital intensity, average wage, and labor productivity. The general finding has been that each of these variables tends to reduce the magnitude of job reallocation. Analysis of the Russian data shows that these characteristics had an inconsistent relationship with these variables in the pre-reform period; however, all of these relationships moved strongly toward negative. This suggests that economic reforms have produced patterns of job flows more akin to those in market economies, and that Russian firms have become more sensitive to adjustment costs.

Of particular interest in the Russian transition are the effects of market competition and firm ownership on job reallocation. Employment movements may be taken as a measure of restructuring, which the policies of liberalization and privatization were intended to promote. The data, however, show no systematic tendency for firms of private ownership or those operating in

less concentrated product markets to engage in higher levels of reallocation.

Productivity-Enhancing Job Reallocation

How is job reallocation related to productivity differentials across firms? Do less productive firms tend to lose jobs while the more productive tend to gain them? Or is there no relationship, or even possibly a negative one, between job flows and relative productivity levels?

These questions can be addressed using a decomposition of aggregate industrial labor productivity growth. Our analysis of the data suggests that while average firm productivity was falling in the post-reform period, which may be an artifact of overstated inflation, changes in the composition of Russian industry partially offset this effect. The changes in the relative employment shares of different industries and of firms within industries each worked to increase productivity by more than 2 percent per year, on average, in the post-reform period. Taken together, the two types of job flows produced nearly 5 percent annual productivity growth.

These results contrast starkly with those for the pre-reform period, when the estimated contributions of job flows to

productivity growth are actually negative. The magnitudes are tiny, implying that the reallocation of labor under Soviet planning was largely unrelated to productivity differentials.

Finally, what is the impact of firm characteristics, particularly ownership and competition, on the job flows and productivity growth? While private ownership and market dispersion have no tendency to raise the level of job reallocation, the analysis finds that they have strong positive effects on the relationship of reallocation with productivity differentials. This suggests that privatization and liberalization policies worked to focus job destruction in the firms and sectors that were the least productive in the Russian economy.

Conclusion

Basic economics teaches us that a primary function of the labor market is to allocate labor to its highest valued uses. In the simplest textbook case of homogeneous labor and perfect competition, efficiency requires that the marginal productivity of labor be equal in all firms and all sectors of the economy. In response to changes in the environment (such as shifting consumer demand, increased competition, or technological

innovation), an "efficient" labor market is supposed to facilitate adjustments that reallocate labor to raise productivity.

This study of the Russian labor market finds that prior to reforms, when Russia was governed by Soviet planners, the labor market functioning was not consistent with this textbook model. The movement of jobs across firms and sectors was largely unrelated to productivity differentials. After reforms, however, Russian labor market performance changed drastically, and job reallocation worked to raise productivity growth.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Brown, David J., and John S. Earle. 2002. "Gross Job Flows in Russian Industry Before and After Reforms: Has Destruction Become More Creative?" *Journal of Comparative Economics* 30(1): 96-133.

Davis, Steven J., and John Haltiwanger. 1999. "Gross Job Flows." In *Handbook of Labor Economics*, Orley Ashenfelter and David Card, eds. Amsterdam: Elsevier, pp. 2711-2805.

John Earle is a senior economist at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research

2002 Grant Awards

This year's research grant recipients and their projects are:

David Fasenfest and Heidi Gottfried, Wayne State University: "New Economy Employment Relations in an Old Economy Region: Temporary Employment and Low-Wage Labor Markets"

John A. Turner, AARP: "Public Policy Towards Defined Contribution Pensions: A Comparative Analysis"

Nan L. Maxwell, California State University, Hayward: "Entry-Level Jobs: What Employers Want and What Low-Income Workers Have"

Trond Petersen, University of California, Berkeley: "The Impact of Family Adaptions on Careers and Wages"

Mark D. Partridge, St. Cloud State University, and Dan S. Rickman, Oklahoma State University: "When Does Local Economic Growth Reduce Poverty Rates? A Comparison of the 1980s and 1990s." Western Michigan University: Department of Economics Guest Lecture Series 2002-2003.

Five mini-grants were also awarded this year. They are:

Paul Devereux, University of California, Los Angeles: "The Effects of Industry Growth and Decline on Earnings and Wages"

David J. Jaeger, The College of William and Mary: "Contracting and Job Stability in Spain: 1987-2001"

Laura Peck, Arizona State University: "Using Cluster Analysis to Create Experimental Subgroups and Measure the Impacts of Social Programs on Key Subgroups"

Arthur Sweetman, Queen's University, and Peter J. Kuhn, University of California, Santa Barbara: "Use It or Lose It: Alternative Skill Atrophy and the Earnings of Displaced Workers"

Erdal Tekin, Georgia State University: "Child Care Subsidies, Welfare, and Nonstandard Employment of Mothers"

New & Recent Books on Welfare Reform

Rural Dimensions of Welfare Reform

Bruce A. Weber, Greg J. Duncan,
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Approaching the Limit, Sheldon Danziger

Rural Labor Markets in an Era of Welfare Reform,
Robert M. Gibbs

Rural America in Transition: Poverty and Welfare at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century, Daniel T. Lichter and Leif Jensen

Reducing Food Stamp and Welfare Caseloads in the South, Mark Henry, Lynn Reinschmiedt, Willis Lewis Jr., and Darren Hudson

Seasonal Employment Dynamics and Welfare Use in Agricultural and Rural California Counties, Henry E. Brady, Mary H. Sprague, Fredric C. Gey, and Michael Wiseman

Location and Low-Income Experience, Helen H. Jensen, Shao-Hsun Keng, and Steven Garasky

Small Towns and Welfare Reform, Cynthia Needles Fletcher, Jan L. Flora, Barbara J. Gaddis, Mary Winter, and Jacquelyn S. Litt

Where All the Counties are Above Average, Ann Tickamyer, Julie White, Barry Tadlock, and Debra Henderson

The Impact of Welfare Policy on the Employment of Single Mothers Living in Rural and Urban Areas, Signe-Mary McKernan, Robert Lerman, Nancy Pindus, and Jesse Valente

Welfare Reform in Rural Minnesota, Lisa A. Gennetian, Cindy Redcross, and Cynthia Miller

Will Attainable Jobs be Available for TANF Recipients in Local Labor Markets? Frank M. Howell

Whose Job Is It? Employers' Views on Welfare Reform, Greg Owen, Ellen Shelton, Amy Bush Stevens, Justine Nelson-Christinedaughter, Corinna Roy, and June Heineman

The Short-Term Impacts of Welfare Reform in Persistently Poor Rural Areas, Mark Harvey, Gene F. Summers, Kathleen Pickering, and Patricia Richards

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Economic Conditions and Welfare Reform

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