Agency workers and their experience of job insecurity in social care. Preliminary evidence from two case studies in Local Government.

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Abstract

The increase over the last decades in contingent work has been associated with increasing job insecurity. Agency work is one form of contingent work that has routinely characterised as insecure. To consider the level of insecurity experienced by agency workers it is helpful to look at different types of workers within a single sector. The different experiences of social workers, care workers and administrative workers in my two public sector case studies suggests that the experience of insecurity in agency work is not the same across occupational or professional boundaries. Rather, some workers experience high levels of labour market security or employability, whilst others do not. To understand the different experiences of agency workers within the case studies it is necessary to break down the concept of job security to look at post, employer and labour market security because without this differentiation it is impossible to understand the different perceptions of these workers. The findings challenge the view that agency work is uniformly insecure work and suggest that rather than simply contractual status a variety of factors influence perceptions of security at work.

Introduction

Agency work is one form of contingent working that has almost always been characterised as insecure work. Few studies have sought to differentiate between different groups of agency workers, rather the contractual position of agency workers is seen as the factor that determines their job security. This overlooks the importance of the experience and perceptions of agency workers themselves. This study focuses on the perceptions of job security of agency workers and seeks to explore whether they view job security differently to other workers and whether the characterisation of agency work as uniformly insecure matches with the perceptions of agency workers within social care in 2 local authorities.

This paper forms part of a thesis focused on representation of agency workers. In particular the main themes of the research revolve around access to voice at work. During
the course of the fieldwork it became clear that job security was important to these workers and was relevant to their ability to voice problems at work and to their decisions as to whether to unionise. Job security is analysed here in order to assess its impact on voice and unionisation.

This paper commences by considering temporary agency work within the UK context, setting out the scale of agency work and the limited employment protection afforded to these workers followed by a brief discussion of the relevance of job security to agency workers. It will move on to the methodology used, and of how this qualitative case study based exploration of job security is incorporated within the wider research project. Then the different experiences of insecurity identified within the case studies are explored by reviewing the answers to interview questions around feelings of insecurity, job loss and availability of work in the local labour market. The paper finally concludes with some discussion of the diverse experience of job security expressed by agency workers within the study.

**Temporary agency work in the UK**

Change within the labour market has been well documented over recent years. The move from standard full time permanent employment to a plethora of contingent working arrangements has been the subject of much academic interest. With in the UK, contingent work has often been considered poor work and it has been related to a variety of factors indicative of bad jobs such as low pay, and lack of access to benefits like sick pay, occupational pensions and promotions (McGovern, Smeaton et al. 2004). The number of contingent workers in the UK labour market is difficult to measure as estimates vary greatly. The labour force survey indicates almost 1.5 million contingent workers, around 20% of these workers are temporary agency workers. Temporary agency workers make up a distinctive part of the contingent worker group because they do not have a single direct relationship with one employer like most employees and workers.

Temporary agency workers (TAW) account for around 4% of the UK labour force (Sisson and Marginson, 2003; 167), they are engaged in a triangular relationship where
an agency hires them for the purposes of placing them at the disposal of a third party (Bronstein 1991). Work placements for agency workers can be for long and short periods ranging from 1 day to several years. Most agency workers within the UK work in settings where most of their colleagues are directly employed on open ended contracts (Purcell, Purcell et al. 2004) (707). These workers are placed by temporary work agencies (TWA) who act as a labour market intermediary finding work for work seekers across the occupational spectrum.

The majority of research around agency workers if focused upon the flexibility that the use of this type of labour can offer employers beginning with the concept of the flexible workforce and the core periphery model of the workforce (Purcell, Purcell et al. 2004). However there is increasing interest in agency workers themselves, their experience of work and representation at work (Forrier and Sels 2003; Casey and Alach 2004; Davidov 2004; Druker and Stanworth 2004; Heery 2004; Stanworth 2004; Finegold, Levenson et al. 2005; Forde and Slater 2005; de Ruyter Forthcoming).

Within the UK, agency workers fall outside the scope of much protective employment regulation because their triangular relationship with their two employers means that they are generally not considered to be the employees of either the user organisation or the agency. Without employee status, less protective legislation applies to these workers. Other groups of contingent workers have been recognised as needing additional employment protections. Both part time workers and fixed term contractors have recently been given the same employment rights as their full time permanently employed colleagues as a result of EU equal treatment directives. Heery (2004) notes that the extension of employment rights to groups of workers that were previously unprotected (Fixed Term Contractors and part time employees) has acted as a lever for collective bargaining and as a stimulus for the inclusion in the Trade Union agenda of these non-standard employees. Agency workers in contrast have neither employee status, nor the right to equal treatment. Legislation assist contingent workers accessing trade union support in two key ways; firstly, it provides a range of rights on which employees can be represented. Secondly, it provides an incentive for employers to negotiate with trade
unions around their treatment. The lacuna in employment protection leaves temporary agency workers without a statutory floor of rights, and in so doing without the lever for union representation that those rights give other contingent workers.

**Temporary Agency Work and Job Security**

“Besides insecurity, and less predictability of employment, temps are also typically subject to inferior pay and conditions compared to employees.” (Stanworth and Drucker, 2004:69) Although agency work is found in a variety of sectors and occupational groups in general it is associated with lower pay, economic insecurity and lack of access to training or career development opportunities (Manchester Low Pay Unit, 1996, Heery et al 2004). These workers rarely join trade unions and their terms of employment are rarely set by collective bargaining. Delsen (1990) suggests that a cause of the continuing weakness of the labour market position of these workers may be their historical rejection by trade unions as in the main trade unions do not bargain for them. Set against this general analysis of agency work is the evidence from sectors where professional agency workers are paid a premium for their labour. Nursing and IT are two sectors that have been identified as having highly paid agency workers and in the case of nursing supportive professional associations (Stanworth 2004; Tailby 2005). It cannot be assumed that agency work means poor work, though undoubtedly for many workers it does, for others it may offer benefits that outweigh any perceived insecurity.

It is the legal and contractual position of agency work that generally leads to the characterisation of agency workers as insecure workers. White and Gallie (1994) note that a serious limitation of this understanding of job security is that it fails to account for the insecurity that can be felt by workers on standard contracts. Furthermore it fails to consider the perceptions of *security* of some agency and other contingent workers. Even when looking beyond the contract insecurity is often viewed though the prism of full time, permanent work. Traditional conceptions of job security relate to the probability that a worker will cease to work for their current employer, or their perception of the same (Guest 2004). Whilst recent years have seen an increase in literature on ‘employability’ it is still the norm to consider job security in relation to a single open
ended contractual arrangement with one employer in a defined post. This definition is problematic when one considers agency workers because it will inevitably position all agency workers as insecure whether or not workers themselves perceive this to be the case.

The traditional view of job security fails to appreciate the different positions that agency workers may be in. The position in the labour market, the level of transferable skill and the level of additional remuneration for working as an agency worker should all be considered because they all contribute to workers perception of their own security or lack thereof. The concept of job security and insecurity is problematic for agency workers because of the triangular relationship that they have with their dual employers. Even the term employer can be very challenging; for agency workers it may refer either to the workplace employer or the agency with a cessation in work for one sometimes but not always synonymous with cessation of work for the other as workers move between workplaces and/or agencies. For agency workers the experience of job or employment security or insecurity can differ vastly dependant not only in terms or their security in their current placement but also the prospects for future employment. The contractual insecurity may be mediated by the labour market situation of workers or individual employment arrangements. The traditional definition is too narrow to understand how agency workers perceive their own job security so it is important to look to expand this definition in order to fully understand different types of agency worker and their differing perceptions of job security. By problematising the concept of job security and considering its components it is possible to understand why some workers feel more secure than others despite the fact that their contractual position is the same.

In order to investigate their perceptions of job security it is important to look at what lead them to view their role as secure or insecure. Rather than considering their contractual position or the likelihood of them losing their current job the aim is to investigate their own views on how secure they feel in work. Such views generally incorporate the workers perception of the likelihood of job loss, previous experience of insecurity and their ability to find a new job should their current placement cease. Each of these areas were explicitly mentioned by agency workers in relation to job security and it is their
consideration of the importance to their overall feeling of security that is key to this research.

Rather than relying on a traditional definition of job security that narrowly focuses on the individual role a broader definition is needed. Charles and James (2003) refer to different types of job insecurity as relating to post, employer and labour market. So perceptions of insecurity can related to changes of post, employer and likelihood of work in the labour market in general. This framework is very helpful when considering the perceptions of security held by agency workers. It was designed as a conceptual framework to understand job security for directly employed workers on fixed term and open ended contracts. This means that applying it to agency workers is somewhat problematic. Whilst labour market job security can be readily identified the concepts of post and employer job security are more difficult.

Post insecurity relates to a workers perception that their post may no longer be needed (even if their employment may continue with the same employer in a different post) or that they may not be needed in that post. Employer security relates to the likelihood of continuing to be employed by the current employer albeit in a different role. The difficulty of identifying the employer for agency workers has already been explored, however for the purposes of this we will assume the employer to be the user organisation. Labour market security means the likelihood that a worker will be able to continue to work within the wider labour market. During the fieldwork workers explicitly refer to post and labour market insecurity so this framework reflects the experience of the workers within my study well.

**Research methodology**

This paper on job security comprises a small part of the wider research project aimed at understanding what mechanisms of collective and individual voice are available to agency workers. Whilst job security was not explicitly mentioned in the research questions it became apparent during the fieldwork that it was important for a number of
reasons. Firstly it as a substantial impact on the experience of agency work, second it affects the reason that agency workers chose to take agency work and third it has implications for the potential for collective voice and representation of these workers. It was apparent that the characterisation of agency workers as insecure had different implications for unions and unionisation than if there were substantial differences in perceptions of security between different groups of agency workers. It is important to note here that it is ‘felt’ job security that is important to the unionisation decision rather than any ascribed insecurity based upon contractual status and as such it is the perceptions of the workers that are key to this research.

This research focuses on the subjective views of agency workers about their own job related security. In order to access their views it is important to locate them within their sector and their experience of work. To gain a good understanding of the wider work environment the case study method is helpful. The phenomenon investigated are related to values and perceptions, and therefore require a research method that is “able to access a range of information sources and so assist in making sense of the subjective elements of social and economic life” (Kitay and Callus 1998)(101). Within the case studies a mixed methods approach was taken using both in depth interviews and questionnaires. Because the initial research was not aimed to address the question of job security the data contained here comes solely from interviews.

Most previous research in the area has been either undertaken as case studies or surveys. While surveys are able to accurately describe institutions and structures it is more difficult to establish information about social processes because of the necessary crudeness of the survey method (Kelly, 1998). To get information about what people believe and why they have come to these beliefs interview data is very important. It yields deep contextual information and allows people to explain their experiences in their own language.

The research is located in 2 local authorities in the local government sector. Two cases within the same sector were used so that experiences of different user organisations and
agencies would be identified. Worker experiences in similar positions could be compared across the two organisations to see the impact of the different user organisations and different agency arrangements. There are a number of reasons that Local Government provides an ideal sector for this research. It is a highly unionised sector with a very diverse workforce and has a higher than average use of agency workers in a variety of roles. Social care was selected as the area to research because of the heterogeneous nature of workers and the high level of agency work present. The use of agency workers in professional, care and administrative roles allows comparisons to be drawn between different types of worker within the same workforce which is essential to this research. As with the UK as a whole agency workers in social care are generally located in teams dominated by fixed term and permanent local authority staff, this is important because the experience of work and propensity to unionise may be different when workers are working predominantly with other agency workers. The primary research is around voice and unionisation of agency workers and the case study was conceived as a best case scenario given the support for unions within the public sector. In addition at the time of the research there was a national dispute and strike in local government over changes to the local government pension scheme, this strike increased awareness of the trade union and in some areas increased participation and membership. The high profile of the unions at the time of the research generally made workers aware of their presence in the workforce.

Within the sector the research has been based in 2 local authorities, one in London (Met) and one outside London (City). Both local authorities had higher levels of unionisation than the UK average with Met having around 50% union density and City having around 80% density. A total 50 interviews have been carried out comprising of 10 interviews with union representatives, 15 managers, 5 agency managers, and 20 agency workers. Both local authorities made use of both internal and external agencies. Internal agencies were centralised and in both authorities care workers and administrative workers were employed as casual workers and deployed to assignments throughout the authority. External agencies provided all types of staff, managers were expected to use the internal agency if possible before looking for external agency staff. Within Met there was a
master vendor arrangement so agency staff were provided through a third party who managed the process, within city agencies were used at the discretion of the line managers with no standard procurement or recruitment process.
Findings

The experience of job security and more generally of agency work tended to differ more for workers in different occupational groups than for workers in the different case study sites. Individual workers within occupational groups did have different experiences of work and job security, however this tended to relate more to their individual line manager than the end user organisation that they worked for.

There was a dichotomy between internal and external agency workers. Internal agency workers generally only signed up with the local authority agency, saw that agency as their employer. The external agency workers that I spoke to were all on long term placements, in contrast to the position of workers depicted by Drucker (2004) these workers expressed loyalty to the user organisation rather than the agency. Most had signed up with a number of agencies to give themselves the best chance of getting work before this placement and most intended to again at the end of a placement.

Perhaps the most clear difference between agency and permanent work, other than the complications of two managers and managing organisations, is the difference in the job or employment security of agency jobs are compared with permanent or fixed term direct jobs. Much of the literature about the contingent workforce in general and in particular agency workers points to inherent insecurity present in non-standard working arrangements as previously discussed. Here the review of perceived or ‘felt’ job security will follow Charles and James (2003) typology of post, employer and labour market insecurity. Whilst this typology is very helpful in identifying differences between types of felt job security it needs to be extended in places because of the complexity involved in the employment of TAW.

Post insecurity for TAW is difficult to conceptualise because of the transitory nature of agency work. Such workers will be occupying a post within the organisational structure of the local authority that exists on a temporary or permanent basis. Whilst an individual
Workers role may be ‘casual care worker’ or ‘agency social worker’ the post that they are occupying will be specific to a particular workplace and generally shift pattern. Thus while these workers have a defined role that doesn’t change their post may change on a day by day basis.

Of all the agency workers internal agency care workers within City had the most frequent changes of post with many changing homes every shift. Whether these workers were continuously employed is difficult to judge, though some had worked through the internal care agency for over 7 years. They worked varying shift patterns that were flexible to meet the needs of the care home that they worked in and their own personal situations. They worked a non standard week in every sense with the number of hours worked, the times of shifts and the place of work varying day to day. Despite this high level of post insecurity they perceived the lowest level of employer insecurity and were generally confident that they would continue with their employer with very little chance of long periods of unemployment despite contractually having no guarantee of work. The experience of these workers was that work was almost continuously available:

“"I can’t see how they can do without us because I know how many hours I do a week and we are always in demand so I would have said they couldn’t do without us really.” (internal agency care worker, City)

Another worker referred to everyone’s jobs being insecure and suggested that her position was really no different to her colleagues on permanent contracts:

“I don’t think that anyone’s job is secure these days, but no, I don’t think that I am more likely to lose my job than the girls in the care homes, they will always need us to cover sick and holidays...yeah, I’m sure the work will still be here for us in 12 months time”(Internal agency care worker, city)

In short post and contractual insecurity experienced by these workers did not lead to perceptions of employer or labour market insecurity because of the circumstances of their
employment. They saw the role they performed as essential to their employer. They were well aware of the statutory requirements for staffing of care homes and believed that their services would always be needed to meet those requirements. These workers relied on the internal agency rather than individual posts or care homes to provide them with job related security. They were very loyal to the internal agency, none of those interviewed said that they would consider working for another agency, and it was the internal agency that they considered to be their employer. In this way, despite their contractual status they perceived a high degree of employer security.

Internal agency administrative workers provide a contrast to internal agency care workers. These workers tended to stay in post for a period of months with some being in the same post for up 6 months. These workers were very aware of post insecurity; they some felt secure up until the end of their current placement but very insecure following it:

“As a casual there isn’t really job security as such…I know exactly how long this placement is lasting, I have a month to go, and my job is secure until the end of it but after that I don’t know.” (internal agency admin, city)

For them, post insecurity for them also meant labour market insecurity. Most of the workers I spoke to indicated that they had experienced long periods (weeks to months) of no work between placements and the agency managers of administrative staff indicated that there was no guarantee of work with many workers being inactive between placements. Internal agency workers tended to see the internal agency as their employer. They were not allowed to remain in one placement for beyond 26 weeks and so they were reliant on the internal agency to find them work at the end of that placement. Their links to the workplace employer tended to give them a perception of employer security for the duration of the placement but the fact that they were required to change placements after 13 or 26 weeks meant that this security was short lived.

For internal care and administrative agency workers post insecurity was inherent within their working lives, however the degree of employer and labour market security that they
experienced differed. On the face of it their positions were very similar, being engaged on the same terms, with the same ‘employer’ albeit working in different roles and environments. Their employment status was certainly the same, both groups were employed on a ‘as and when needed’ basis, however their perceptions and experience of employer security were very different. Internal care agency workers perceived that the agency coupled with the demands of the care homes offered them a high degree of employer security. In contrast administrative workers experienced post and employer security during a placement but were not at all confident that they would remain in work beyond the current 13 or 26 week placement.

For external agency workers post insecurity was synonymous with employer insecurity as a change of post nearly always meant a change of employer. The big division here was between professionally qualified workers and those without professional qualifications, primarily care workers.

While all the external agency workers expressed feelings of post, employer and labour market insecurity the degree of insecurity they felt depended largely on their line manager and his/her communication with the worker. Some workers were told on a weekly basis about the finance for their jobs and the likely duration, others were given information in monthly supervisions. Some said that their managers had told them that they would be given between 1 and 4 weeks notice. Workers that were regularly updated on the likely length of their engagement perceived their positions to be more secure than those that were told that they would be given a number of weeks notice even where these workers were aware of ongoing recruitment campaigns.

Like the internal agency workers discussed external agency workers were aware of their post insecurity. All acknowledged that as agency workers the user organisation could replace them should it wish to. External agency care and admin workers were concerned about their security in their present placement:
“It is not secure...I am working here but they might decide they don’t need me anymore and there is nothing I can do about it because I am only agency. But if I am permanent staff my job is secure... I do worry because you have to start from scratch again.” (agency care worker, Met)

“Because you are agency if people don’t like you they are going to bring in someone else, especially if you say there is a problem.” (agency care worker, met)

Most of external agency care workers said that they were taking agency work in order to get a permanent job and were concerned about having to prove themselves all over again with a new employer if they were no longer required as well as the problems associated with finding work. All the external agency care workers that I spoke to expressed concerns about post and labour market insecurity. They identified the ease with which an employer could dismiss them and the difficulty in finding work.

Social workers and occupational therapists were in high demand at the time of the research, though for occupational therapists this situation was changing as NHS trusts were making redundancies. The agency social workers and occupational therapists interviewed had each assessed of their future employability based upon their professional qualifications and the current state of the labour market. Their assessment was generally that there was plentiful work available in their sector and that they wouldn’t be out of work for long (most indicated that they could get a new job within a week). Even managers of these workers felt that while roles were not always secure, the state of the labour market meant that work was available:

“[agency workers] are secure in terms of work, they are not secure in terms of location I don’t think, because if my agency worker finished tomorrow she could get a job somewhere else Monday because there is a lot of work out there. So they are secure in terms of work but I don’t think they are so secure in terms of where they work.” (SW manager, Met)
This concern about the temporary nature of roles was expressed by many agency social workers, but few expressed feelings of labour market insecurity.

“I do worry about the transient nature of [agency work] sometimes but that is counter balanced by the climate at the moment.” (Agency SW manager, City)

“I suppose my biggest fear in coming in to agency was that it was that temporary nature and you could be gone at a moments notice, and at the end of the day I have still got the bills to pay and the mortgage to pay. However looking at the market and the demand for agency workers I thought I am not going to be out of work. Even if I get sent on my way one week I can find a job within a few days with the way the market is at the moment. So I am not concerned I will be out of work and so financially I know there is going to be an income.” (Agency SW manager, City)

“If it was to finish tomorrow it wouldn’t make any difference. Agency work gives you more options. I have been asked here to be a team manager, I have also had calls from agencies with different positions. Various posts have been offered to me.” (Agency SW, City)

In fact the agency consultant I spoke to that provided City with agency social workers said that recruitment for these workers worked backwards from standard practice of the recruitment industry. In general for other areas of agency work a role was identified and then workers were selected from a pool that may be interested in the role. In the case of social work, if an agency worker became available a number of posts would normally be open to them. This view was backed up by managers at both authorities citing the difficulty in recruiting good agency social workers. The difficulty was normally in identifying workers and not posts which is a measure of the tightness of the labour market.

For professionally qualified workers, the state of the labour market in both local authorities meant that concerns about job insecurity only related to remaining in the same
post or with the same employer rather than being able to find a job. As it is clear that agency social workers do not rely on the user organisation to provide job security one may expect that they relied on agencies instead, this was not the finding here. Agency workers generally expressed little loyalty to the agencies that found them work and paid their wages. In the main when a placement was ending they would register with at least 3 agencies with a view to finding a new job. Social work agency workers relied on neither the agency nor user organisation to provide them with job security, rather their own skills, the tightness of the labour market and their ability to sign up to multiple agencies gave them a perception of job security. None of the social workers and occupational therapists interviewed were concerned about long periods of unemployment.

Many agency social workers clearly expressed weighing up the various advantages and disadvantages of agency work, and in particular the insecurity related to being an agency worker. Most saw the insecurity and lack of benefits of agency workers as big disadvantages, however the insecurity in terms of the individual role and employer was to a very large degree counterbalanced by the perception of security within the wider labour market. For the most part they considered the biggest disadvantages to be the lack of sick pay, pensions and annual leave and saw these as impacting on their level of personal financial security. These workers were relying on their skills and qualifications, as well as tightness in the labour market to ensure their future employability. Rather than seeing job security in the traditional way they regarded employability as key and conceptualised security in a way that focused on the likelihood continuing to work within their field and in many cases the future likelihood of being able to pay the mortgage and bills.

It is important to note that the employability assessment of agency social workers and occupational therapists was not just based around their skills but also the level of demand for their skills. One agency occupational therapists provides a case in point in this regard. He was in the process of transferring to permanent work. He thought that there were fewer agency jobs available as a result of funding problems in both the NHS and local authorities and that he wanted to be in a secure job. He said that he would have been happy to continue as an agency worker if he had been sure about always finding a new
job once a placement ended, however he no longer felt able to be sure that was the case. The premium paid for his labour as an agency worker was attractive to him for as long as he perceived the risk of being unemployed between placements as low, however as he perceived the labour market to be less tight and the risk of labour market insecurity to be rising the balance shifted for him and a permanent job became more attractive. For this worker traditional understandings of job security are not sufficient to understand his actions, his agency placement was as secure as all previous agency placements, however by understanding the differences between role, employer and labour market security it is possible to understand how labour market security can impacted upon his selection of employment status.

**Discussion**

The division of the concept of job security into post, employer and labour market security allows the perceptions of agency workers to be understood. The fact that contractually these workers have similar levels of job security belies their diverse perceptions and experiences. When agency workers and job security are discussed the characterisation tends to depict those vulnerable workers that do not possess any form of job related security. Within this study administrative and external agency care workers did fit into that category. For those workers the vision of vulnerability, poor pay, limited legal protection and insecurity that is depicted as the norm for agency work does apply. That is certainly not the case for the other agency workers for whom post insecurity is not always synonymous with other forms of job related security. Internal agency care workers and agency social workers both experienced much higher levels of job related security. Professionally qualified social workers and occupational therapists who had limited role and employer security nonetheless felt secure within the labour market where their skills were in short supply. Internal agency care workers experienced a high level of post insecurity but perceived that they had a high degree of employer security because of the level of demand and the fact that there were rarely periods where no work was available.
It seems that part of the attraction of agency work for workers in professional roles is that the risk of being out of work that is associated with ‘temping’ is much lower for. Such workers have little post and employer security but they have the safety net of marketable skills in a tight labour market. A key disadvantage of agency work is generally the financial insecurity that can result from being given very little notice of a placement ending and difficulty in finding a new placement. This disadvantage does not apply to either occupational therapists or social workers in the current labour market climate because they believed that a new job would be easy to find, particularly if they were geographically flexible which nearly all the social workers that I spoke to were. Paradoxically whilst these workers said that they had chosen agency work and that they believed that they would be able to get a permanent job if they wanted to, nearly all of them said that in the long run they would prefer a permanent job.

Guest (2004) suggests that ‘knowledge’ workers may be less concerned with job insecurity than lower skilled temporary workers. This does not appear to be the finding from this research for professionally qualified workers I interviewed. Rather than having less concern for insecurity than lower skilled workers they conceptualise security and insecurity in a way that gives them confidence in their long term work prospects. Rather than traditional idea of job security a wider view is taken on the prospect of remaining employed within their profession. It is employability rather than narrow role based job security that appears to be how these workers understand the security of work. As such rather than being less concerned with job related security than their lower skilled counterparts, they have valuable skills that make them highly employable and face less labour market insecurity than workers without professional qualifications.

Within my wider research the concept of job security or insecurity is relevant to considering the prospect of unionising agency workers. There are numerous debates on the reasons for unionisation some of which may be affected if agency work is intrinsically less secure than work undertaken directly for one employer on an open ended or fixed term contract. Currently two of the three representative trade unions within local government are allowing agency workers to join, though there is no
recruitment activity. Both cited cases of having workers made permanent employees of the local authority before allowing them to join the trade union. Their main focus in representing agency workers is to have them made permanent, rather than to represent them as agency workers. The level of job security perceived and the satisfaction with employment status are both important in the decision to unionise, particularly where the trade union is vocally opposed to the use of agency workers. For agency social workers the perceived utility of the trade union may be reduced if its main arc of representation aimed at them is making them permanent. Few agency social workers wanted a permanent job at the time of the research, and those that did were in the process of transferring without the need for union support. If the aim of the union is to mobilise these workers they need to find a collective agenda attractive to them, the diversity in their perceptions of job security may prove a challenging when identifying collective interests.


