

# The New "Office Temp": Alternative Models of Contingent Labour

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the working lives of temporary female clerical staff, usually known as 'temps'. Temps are commonly displayed as 'victims', who have poor pay and conditions, and are marginalised, economically insecure and socially isolated. Thirty-one temps recruited through agencies in Auckland were interviewed. While they acknowledged some negative features of temping, most were temps by choice and remained so even when temp work was scarce. They reported that temping provided them with control over their time and work, enabling them to give priority to non-work interests such as family, leisure pursuits, vacations, business start-ups, and study. Temping was also valued for its variety, learning opportunities, and avoidance of long-term commitment to employing organisations. While marginalisation and exploitation remain the reality for many temporary workers, these findings show the contemporary possibility for workers with valued skills to be proactive in exploiting apparently insecure employment arrangements to their own advantage.

## Introduction

This paper focuses on the working lives of temporary female clerical, secretarial and administrative staff, commonly known as 'temps'.

### *The growth of temping*

Recent reports suggest that, stimulated by forces such as globalisation, increased competition, economic uncertainty, restructuring, and the desire for flexibility in the workforce, the use of temporary workers has become an integral human resource practice in many businesses (Richards, 2001). Commentators observe a structural shift in the way temporary labour is utilised (Carre, 1992; Nollen, 1996; Richards, 2001). Temporary

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## 38 Patricia Alach and Kerr Inkson

workers are no longer used just as 'fill-in' labour or as a stop-gap measure related to changes in the business cycle. Nowadays they are often placed in responsible positions that are critical to business success (Brogan, 2001). Furthermore, while administrative and clerical work continues to be a major locus of temporary employment, the practice is diversifying. Temporary assignments are now commonplace in non-traditional labour markets such as healthcare (Carre, 1992), information technology, sales and marketing (Richards, 2001) and high-level 'executive contracting', reported to be the biggest growth area in temporary employment (Richards, 2001; Shopland, 2001).

As a result, analysts observe an increased demand for temporary staff and a rapid expansion in the temporary recruitment industry (Appelbaum, 1992; Peck and Theodore, 1998; Richards, 2001). In the USA recruitment through temporary agencies accounted for one-fifth of all new jobs created since 1984 (Peck and Theodore, 1998).

### *Effects on temporary workers*

In the past decade, concerns have been raised over the outcomes of the increased use of temporary staff for the staff themselves. These concerns relate both to their material conditions and to the social and psychological implications of their temporary status. Most authors report that temping is typically an employment arrangement involuntarily entered into and that the majority of temps are seeking full-time, permanent employment (Gottfried, 1992; Hardy and Walker, 2003; Henson, 1996; Rogers, 1995; Smith, 1993; Vosko, 2000). Concerns have been raised over the way in which temps are marginalised, isolated and exploited.

It is reported, for example, that temporary workers are typically paid less than permanent employees and receive fewer benefits (Nollen, 1996; Segal & Sullivan, 1997). Entitlement to benefits such as health insurance and pension plans is often tied to eligibility requirements based on length of service (Garsten, 1999; Henson, 1996; Nollen, 1996). Because social and labour legislation continues to be premised on the assumption that the worker is full-time, permanent and with a single employer, temps may have reduced protection (Appelbaum, 1992; Carre, 1992). Turnover in the temping industry is high (Henson, 1996; Nollen, 1996; Peck & Theodore, 1998). Moreover, many temps are unaware of their eligibility for benefits, and lack access to independent advice on their rights (Gottfried, 1992; Nollen, 1996).

In addition to concerns about the material conditions of temping, many commentators have drawn attention to its social and psychological costs. They report that negative attitudes to temps are still apparent in contemporary organisations and contribute to a climate of distrust between permanent and temporary staff (Smith, 1993; Rogers and Henson, 1997; Richards, 2001). They argue that temps are often spatially separated from permanent workers (Smith, 1998), socially isolated, or rendered "interactionally invisible" (Rogers, 1995, page 151). Critics are concerned about individual temps' sense of self

worth when they are continually identified and interacted with as "just a temp" (Henson, 1996). Pejorative notions of the temps as sub-workers may become internalised by temps, exacerbating their alienation from self and others at work (Rogers, 1995, 2000).

Although some temps obtain work by direct contact with a client organisation, many find their assignments through recruitment agencies. For example, on any given day, members of the New Zealand Recruitment Services and Consulting Association (RCSA) employ approximately 8,000 agency-affiliated temporary employees (RCSA, 2000). Concern has been raised that temps are therefore required to function in a relationship of dependency, relying totally on agencies for employment. Observers argue that they are marginalised in the placement process because they are not consulted over how placement decisions are made, and their preferences are seldom taken into account (Gottfried, 1992; Henson, 1996; Rogers, 1995). Typically, they are monitored constantly by their agency, usually by means of regular phone calls from agency supervisors to clients, and end-of-assignment reports. Temps are seldom privy to this feedback and a 'good' report typically has to be inferred by continued offers of work (Alach, 2002).

### ***An alternative view***

The current study builds on work begun in 2001, as part of a Masters' thesis, looking at the experiences of women clerical temps in New Zealand (Alach, 2002). That thesis was based on in-depth interviews with twelve women working as clerical temps. Key findings in the thesis disputed the dominant discourse, outlined above, of 'temp-as-victim', and questioned whether temping is necessarily experienced as isolated or marginalised. The study posited emerging alternatives including 'lifestyle temps' who choose temping as a way of securing income and flexible free time for family and leisure commitments, and 'entrepreneurial temps' who choose temping as part of an overall career strategy. However, because the way in which participants were sought in the thesis study (word-of-mouth 'snowball' sample) may have led to biases in the results, the current study sought to gather interviews from a broader range of clerical temps.

### ***Agencies***

This study focused a wider sample, of temps employed through agencies. Accessing temps through agencies enables end-user firms to utilise temporary staff as and when required without having to employ them directly, without having to advertise, interview and select a suitable individual, and without incurring the long-term commitment to, and costs of, permanent employees. The agency screens, tests and recruits potential candidates on an on-going basis and sometimes trains them in order to ensure that they are suitably skilled and ready for immediate deployment to client organisations.

The temp is legally employed by the agency, which invoices the client organisation for the hours she has worked, and pays her wages and other associated benefits. Hourly rate, conditions of work and length of assignment may all vary across assignments. Agencies

## 40 Patricia Alach and Kerr Inkson

are not required to give any guarantee of on-going work. Because of this, many temps co-register with multiple agencies and may be technically employed by different agencies across a variety of assignments during time they are temping (RCSA Report, 2000).

### Objectives

The current study had as its objective to create a descriptive account of the orientations and attitudes to work and employment of office temps working through agencies in the Auckland area. The researchers sought to establish the extent to which temps conformed to the 'victim' stereotype or to alternative types. For example was temping involuntary or voluntary, reactive or proactive, central or peripheral to identity? In addition, the researchers considered other matters such as the role of temping in career development, and the implications of temp attitudes for agencies, for client organisations, and for workforce members considering temping. A full report of the study is available elsewhere (Alach & Inkson, 2003).

### Methodology

In order to access as wide a range of experiences as possible, the researchers approached twenty recruitment consultancies in Auckland and asked for permission to send a letter to women temping in clerical and secretarial roles for their agency, inviting them to participate in the study. Additionally, the researchers secured support for the project from the Recruitment and Consulting Services Association (New Zealand), which placed in its quarterly newsletter an invitation to member agencies. Eight agencies participated in the study. Interviews, each lasting about an hour, were carried out with 31 temps and nine agency representatives.

The interviews were all conducted by the first author. Those conducted with the temps were semi-structured, with questions designed to draw the participants into discussion about their experiences of temping. The sequencing of the questions was varied to accommodate participant preferences and to allow participants to pursue the topics most salient to them. The questions asked the participants about their reasons for temping, their experiences of temping, and their relationship/s with temping agencies. Additionally they were asked for their age, marital status, family situation and living arrangements. The interviews were tape-recorded and summarised (typically 3-6 single-spaced pages per interview, including key verbatim quotations).

Subsequent to the interviews, and based on scanning them, the second author prepared category systems, with definitions of each category, for three domains of comment by temps:

“positive features of being a temp”

“negative features of being a temp”

“comments on temp agencies”

To provide a content analysis of the interviews, a research assistant then read carefully through each summary interview, endorsing categories when she considered the person had used words denoting the category. Each category could be endorsed only once per interview.

The agency representatives were interviewed in order to gather background information and insights into current and future trends in the temping industry and their perceptions of temps' lifestyles, attitudes, and manner of working.

## Results

### *Background data*

The temp participants ranged in age from 21 to 61 years. The median age was 40, and 20 of the participants (65%) were aged between 30 and 49. Seventeen were single, divorced, or separated, but many of these were living with children or parents. Fourteen were married or living with a partner. The length of time participants had been temping ranged from two months to over fifteen years. Participants had worked in a variety of temp assignments ranging from simple data entry to high-level executive PA roles in public and private sector organisations and industries. The average hourly rate paid to the temps ranged from around NZ\$15 to \$22.

### *The benefits of temping*

In contrast to other studies which have reported that most temporary workers would prefer a permanent job, this study found that nearly all the office temps interviewed preferred not to have a permanent job, if they could be sure of regular, on-going temping work.

Why did participants have this preference? What did they find attractive about being temps? The positive features are indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1. Positive features of being a temp (n mentioning)**

<b>Feature</b>	<b>n</b>
Flexibility, autonomy, control over time	25
Learning and self-development opportunities	24
Variety of work and contacts	21
Ability to escape and "walk out of the door"	15
Avoidance of permanent commitment, company politics	14
"Something to fall back on" in one's career	12
General enjoyment	9
Opportunity to take "time out" to rethink career	6
More secure – more temps jobs available	6
Fast source of cash, income	4
Other	3

## 42 Patricia Alach and Kerr Inkson

This table demonstrates the benefits of temporary work: flexibility, control over one's time, self-development opportunities, variety, and the avoidance of ongoing commitment to an organization. Of these the critical ones were the first two, flexibility and learning.

### *Temping and flexibility*

**Table 2. Positive features relating to flexibility, autonomy, control over time (n mentioning = 25)**

<b>Feature</b>	<b>n</b>
allows time for vacations	12
ability to accommodate family life, children's commitments	10
allows time for hobbies	10
allows time for career development or set-up of own company	8
allows time for study commitments	4
allows time for voluntary community work	3
other	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>

Table 2 provides a breakdown of responses by the 25 participants (81% of the sample) who mentioned flexibility, autonomy, and control of time as positive features of temping. The perceived benefits were largely related to the non-work settings and interests of the participants: temping afforded flexibility in respect of family, leisure, educational or business activities. For example:

"It lets me be here for my son and basically keeps me in the workforce."

"I bet there are mothers out there who wouldn't mind the opportunity to go temping two or three days a week."

"Working temporarily has allowed me the flexibility to attend meetings and conferences around the world."

"I enjoy making art as a creative expression but I'm not interested in doing that as my sole type of work."

"I could see myself working at least two or three days a week while I do my study."

"I'm temping at the moment because it allows me to do set-up stuff for my own company."

For many of these temps, the decision to temp had come out of a desire to reposition paid work in their lives. Temping was associated with a sense of being freed up to devote more time to family or leisure activities. This was brought about not just by the flexibility offered by temping, but also by a shift in the way the women felt about their work. In particular,

the references in Table 1 to "escape", "walk out of the door", and "avoid commitment", showed a common desire, as one temp put it, to "retain a certain distance from the work which you can't do as a permanent worker."

"I don't like being tied down, I like being a free agent."

"You don't really have to put your whole self in and you can just walk away at the end of the day and not be worried about it...and if I compare this job to my permanent job where you were just expected to stay late and put in the hours, I'm really enjoying the fact that at 5 o'clock I'm out the door, there's no waiting around for another ten minutes to do something, I'm just gone and that's very cool!"

The temps' desire for autonomy was apparently allied in many cases to a rather negative stereotype of permanent employment in a single organisation (see Table 1).

"That's probably what's stopping me from getting a permanent job because if you don't like a job temping you think 'oh it's only for 2 days or 3 weeks or 6 months' but you think 'gosh if this was permanent I wouldn't want to be stuck here'...so I'm a bit hesitant to take the plunge."

"I don't know about permanent, because that's sort of a scary thing. I can't imagine being with one company forever, I don't think people do that any more."

Additionally, many participants made use of the on-off flexibility that temping afforded them and cited as a major benefit the opportunity to decide, sometimes on a day-to-day basis, whether they wanted to work.

"It suits me, I can work when I want. If I don't want to work I can say no."

"I like temping, it gives me the flexibility to go off to the States for three months. If I had a permanent job I'd probably have to resign and lose my job if I wanted that length of time off, but with temping I can just give a few weeks' notice and I'm free to go."

### ***Temping and development***

Permanent work is popularly believed to provide employees with greater opportunities for development through their organisation's training and staff development programmes. In contrast, the professional development of temps is not seen as a company responsibility. However, as shown in Table 1, over three-quarters of the present sample mentioned learning and self-development opportunities that related specifically to their status as temps. Table 3 provides a further breakdown of this information.

#### 44 Patricia Alach and Kerr Inkson

**Table 3. Positive features relating to learning and self-development  
(n mentioning = 24)**

<b>Feature</b>	<b>n</b>
learning to learn	15
professional and/or technical development	15
learning to start quickly in new situations	9
gaining insight, experience, contacts	8
gaining self-confidence and interpersonal skills due to variety	7
learning to cope with uncertainty and insecurity	4
other	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>59</b>

These temps reported that the ability to 'move around' had contributed to new insights due to the range of situations. Typically, they had overcome shyness and 'firstdayitis', developed self-confidence in dealing with different and novel people and situations, and were better able to cope with uncertainty and to learn from each new situation.

"As a temp you're always learning new things, not just about one thing but about different companies and different people, policies and everything."

"Temping teaches you how to learn, how to get to know things and about being flexible, about being more confident, coping with being in new situations and how to ask for help."

"You lose your fear of first days because you have so many first days. You don't get nervous and that's a good thing."

"Now I can stroll into a new place, no worries about meeting new people or learning new processes at all...lay it on, I can totally handle it!"

"I can go into all different kinds of companies and each time I learn a little bit more. It's enriching my life and my vocabulary and my experience."

Such development seems especially valuable in the increasingly dynamic workplaces of the twenty-first century, for these require the skills of versatility, responsiveness, and coping with novelty and ambiguity which the temps report are most developed. This is likely to benefit both employing organisations and the temps themselves.

In addition, several temps recognised the networking opportunities provided by temping.

"It's a good way of getting around a lot of different companies and getting your nose in the door, meeting lots of different people."



Exposure to a range of workplaces also provided the opportunity for temps to gain experience of a range of different processes, industries, types of people, software packages, etc. These were of likely benefit to the temp, both in securing future assignments or even permanent jobs, and to subsequent employers.

"Temping is a really good way to pick up extra skills and give you variety – different assignments, different work to do ... a good way of getting experience and developing transferable skills quite quickly."

**Temping and security**

According to the 'temp-as-victim' stereotype, the main disadvantage of temping for the temp is her marginalised position compared with permanently employed workers, particularly her inevitable economic insecurity, her poorer pay, fringe benefits, personal development and progression, and social relationships. The stereotype is supported to some extent by the data shown in Table 4.

**Table 4. Negative features of being a temp (n mentioning)**

Difficulties in social relationships	24
Financial insecurity	16
Poor or inequitable pay	8
Unreasonable expectations of immediate effectiveness	7
No pay rises	6
Given jobs no-one else will do	6
No benefits/have to provide own resources	6
No respect/looked down on	5
Boredom	4
Stress of new situation	4
Employers' prejudice against temps	4
Limited progression	4
Other	6

The problems reported were often financial in nature. In particular, the uncertainty of on-going work meant that the temps couldn't rely on a specific level of income every week. However, most had found ways of minimising this financial uncertainty. Several reported that temps need to live within their means, to plan for the 'peaks and flows' of temping work, and to "keep money aside for a rainy day when there is no work".

"there's the freedom factor but then there's also the not-knowing factor where you don't know if you are going to have work next week or if you go on holiday whether there's going to be work when you come back."

## 46 Patricia Alach and Kerr Inkson

“I think the only disadvantage would be if you had mortgage payments or rent because you can’t guarantee the permanent income coming in.”

Two respondents reported that they had had to get a permanent job in order to assure other people, namely ‘the bank’ that they were a viable risk.

“I want to buy a house and the bank has laughed hysterically at me.”

Surprisingly however, barely half the sample mentioned financial insecurity, which was rather part of a cluster of extrinsic work conditions, including pay levels and fringe benefits, in which temps felt disadvantaged.

### *Temping and work relationships*

The supposed lower status and social isolation of the temp have also been cited in the literature as disadvantages. This view is supported by some of the data in Table 4. The category “difficulties in social relationships” (Table 4) is further sub-categorised in Table 5.

**Table 5. Negative features relating to personal relationships (n mentioning = 24)**

<b>Feature</b>	<b>n</b>
social isolation when starting a job	15
having to cope with moods of co-workers	10
having to leave good relationships, social situations	3
no chance to build relationships	2

Although social isolation problems were reported, they tended to be confined to the first day or so of an assignment. Overall, the temps reported that most of the people they had met on assignment had been pleasant and helpful. Exceptions to this were generally experienced in short-term, one-day reception roles, which were overwhelmingly reported as the ‘least favourite’ of temp assignments.

Table IV also shows that stereotypes of temp work were perceived to be maintained by others – employers and co-workers – in their interaction with temps. Temps reported being looked down on as having lower status, and being given the “jobs that nobody else in the office is willing to do.” Yet they were also expected to be able to perform at a high level, typically from a ‘standing start’ in terms of their knowledge of the organisation and job.

***Temps' preferences***

As in the Alach (2002) study cited earlier, the results go some way towards providing an alternative to the dominant discourses which position temps as victims. The assumption that temping is always involuntary is challenged by these data. The temps recognised both advantages in their status – primarily autonomy, lifestyle and self-development opportunities - and disadvantages – economic insecurity, social difficulties and negative stereotypes. However, the overwhelming majority maintained that they were temps *because they preferred to be temps* and were not seeking permanent work.

Interestingly, and perhaps surprisingly, several participants (see Table 1) reported that they preferred temp work because they perceived it to be *less* risky than a permanent job. Temp work was perceived as relatively easy to get: most participants reported that they had been given their first assignment within days, if not hours, of registering with an agency. Several participants contrasted this with the length of time it can take to get a permanent role and concluded that in this sense, temping can often be a *more* reliable and secure source of income than many permanent jobs, which under current employment conditions are often at risk of being made redundant.

"The main benefit is that it should be more sort of stable than permanent work because they should be employing you straight away whereas if you were a permanent person and you lost your job you'd have to spend a few weeks trying to find a new one."

"I can get temping work quickly and easily. I'm experienced in it. It's just the easy option really for me."

This was particularly so for some participants who were attempting to make a career in some of the more volatile industries, such as television.

"Temping's definitely been critical .... because if it hadn't existed I would have had to choose an alternative profession, or gone back to study, or compromised a lot in what I wanted to do..."

Even in New Zealand, the events of September 11, 2001, created an immediate loss of business confidence which translated into a relative slump in the 'temp' market. This affected many interviewees in the present study, which was conducted in 2002, who at the time of their interviews were experiencing or had recently experienced the downturn. The timing of these interviews in comparison to similar interviews undertaken in the earlier study by Alach (2002) provided comparisons between the experiences of those temping in a relatively buoyant or depressed market.

Pre September 11th 2001, the temps interviewed by Alach (2002) reported plenty of work, and the ability to pick and choose assignments. In many cases they had a problem

## 48 Patricia Alach and Kerr Inkson

of having 'too much work' and found it difficult, because of constant demands to work, to achieve the lifestyle improvements they had anticipated when becoming a temp. Such experiences of being in 'too much demand' were confirmed at that time by industry representatives who reported on a severe shortage of 'good temps' in the local market.

In contrast, respondents in the current study overwhelmingly reported that post September 11th the market for temps had dried up, with many temps experiencing a severe shortage of assignments, particularly in the fourth quarter of 2001 and the first quarter of 2002. This was experienced by the temps both in terms of having no assignments for weeks, or in some cases months, and in terms of being offered a different type of assignment - typically shorter-term, lower-level and paid at a lower rate. Agency representatives confirmed this trend, reporting that client organisations had become much more conservative in their 'temp spend' and were seeking to provide temporary cover through internal reshuffling rather than through using agency temps. Despite this, *very few participants had actively looked for permanent work*, and of those who did, the majority cited as their primary motive a desire to seek a more exciting and challenging role, rather than any financial imperative. The adherence of most temps to their current status despite adverse labour market conditions provides strong evidence that some temps temp by choice.

### ***Temping and careers***

The majority of participants had made a conscious decision to start temping, for a variety of reasons. Several participants, who were looking, ultimately, for permanent 'career' jobs, found that temping enabled them to make unhurried decisions about the types of role they were considering (see Table 1).

"I'm going through a non-committal work phase at the moment but do plan to look for a permanent job. I plan to be really fussy about it...so that's what I'm going to do and see what happens and if it doesn't happen and I'm still temping in a year, well, so what?"

"I'm keeping an eye out for a permanent job if something really appeals to me but I'm not willy-nilly applying for any old thing."

Despite the subjectively-experienced positive features of temping, the public and employer perception that temping is involuntary and not a 'proper' job appears to continue to prevail. Participants reported their sense that the decision to temp continues to be viewed by others as a bad or non-career choice. This was expressed particularly by those temps looking to move into permanent jobs, who were wary of how an extended period of temping might be interpreted by prospective employers.

"I'm having difficulty getting the job I want because I'm seen as slightly erratic, slightly unreliable and unfocused."

“all of my work history has been temping and I think that makes it difficult because I don’t have a solid history in one place.”

However much temping may suit those who do it in their current circumstances, most considered that if they wanted eventually to move either to permanent work or to positions carrying higher responsibility, they needed to avoid letting too many years go by in temporary positions. However, they attributed this more to employer and societal prejudices than to any inherent defect of the temping experience or those who do it.

### ***Temping and agencies***

When a temp is recruited and assigned by an agency, the nature of the employment relationship is unconventional. Client organisations handle only the supervision of her day-to-day work. Her assignments, pay, and longer-term welfare are negotiated with agencies, and temps are typically available to more than one agency. Asked about agencies, participants made it clear that they had transferred many of the expectations permanent employees have of their employers to their agencies. The key expectations that the temps had were that the agency would:

- find them regular assignments;
- find them assignments appropriate to their interests and skills;
- keep in touch with them when on assignment;
- provide information, feedback, recognition, and training;
- care about them.

While some agencies – seeking perhaps to retain the loyalty of especially valuable temps – clearly went to some lengths to meet these expectations, the prevailing opinion among the temps concerning the agencies was more negative than positive. There were specific complaints about agency performance in all the above areas, particularly that agencies provided inappropriate assignments and didn’t care about the temp. Another common complaint was that the turnover of agency staff was frequently so rapid that these staff were often unaware of the temp’s specific skills and interests. It was clear, too, that the splitting of responsibility for the temp’s development between clients, agencies, and the temp herself was a difficult issue.

## **Discussion**

As in the Alach (2002) study, the results go some way towards providing an alternative to the dominant discourses which position temps as victims. In this research, the assumption is challenged that temping is always involuntary and always results in disadvantage.

In contrast to reports which find that the majority of temporary workers would prefer a permanent job, this study found that most of the office temps interviewed were temporary

## 50 Patricia Alach and Kerr Inkson

by choice and preferred *not* to have a permanent job. This was true even in conditions of reduced demand for their services.

These workers found that temporariness provided them with flexibility, autonomy and control over their days and hours of work, enabling them to fit paid work in around other priorities such as vacations, leisure pursuits and family commitments. The variety of assignments also provided a range of learning opportunities which were perceived to be unavailable in permanent work. Participants were wary of committing to a permanent job, mainly due to fears of getting bored and/or stuck in a specific situation. Against the advantages of temping, the disadvantages - relative economic insecurity, inequitable work conditions, occasional social isolation, and the prejudices of co-workers and employers - were perceived as minor. For many temps, the condition of contingency employment had become the preferred backdrop to their lifestyle, regardless of external labour market forces. They had indeed found a way to fit work in around their non-work lives rather than fitting non-work pursuits around a permanent work commitment.

These findings may have been caused in part by the 'volunteer' nature of the sample, and we do not suggest they are characteristic of all, or even most, temporary workers. However, they are strong and consistent enough in the present group to raise questions about the universality of the conventional model of contingent workers. While we acknowledge that many temporary employees are indeed disadvantaged, in some cases temporariness is a choice made by individuals who have a range of employment options available to them.

However, many respondents, both temps and consultants, reported that an extended period of temping "doesn't look good on paper." Apparently some employers still think of 'career' in a narrow, permanent-employment-focused way. Moreover, conventional associations such as equating 'length of time served' to 'value of contribution', appear to prevail, much to the chagrin of temps. This presents an interesting paradox, because contemporary workers are increasingly called upon to display an ability to adapt and 'embrace change.'

It may also be that the nature of office temping, i.e. still predominantly low status female-dominated clerical work, mediates the image of those who choose to do it. We suspect, for example, that male leased executives and contract software developers are perceived as having a healthy desire for change and new challenges rather than the lack of commitment for which employers apparently criticise clerical temps. Does an unconscious sexism inform these different expectations?

The extension of temporary forms of work to larger numbers of people and a wider range of occupations - particularly occupations requiring technical and professional skills - is doubtless important in enabling more qualified and proactive individuals to choose temporary work and to frame it to suit their needs rather than seeing it as 'employment

of last resort'. Recent accounts of professional workers in temporary and contingent situations and portfolio careers echo many of the phenomena reported in this paper (Cohen and Mallon, 1999; Fenwick, 2003; Gold and Fraser, 2001; Inkson et al., 2001). It is the extension of the phenomenon of 'lifestyle temping' from these groups to relatively lower-level administrative, secretarial and clerical workers which is of interest here. Casey and Alach (2004) provide a further discussion on temping by preference, which results from a choice to re-prioritise other activities over participation in conventional full-time paid employment. The phenomenon may be another manifestation of the phenomenon of 'downshifting' in pursuit of a more balanced lifestyle (Drake, 2001).

The possession of highly valued skills in a competitive labour market is doubtless a characteristic of 'volunteer' contingent workers, and this study results suggest this may nowadays be true for at least some workers in relatively subordinate roles. We believe that research into 'contingency' in relation to paid work should seek to understand not just the ways in which the availability of work is contingent on economic and organisational imperatives, but also the ways in which individuals make decisions about whether to take on such work and the rationality of such decisions in relation to their wider priorities. It should therefore focus on the subjective experience of those involved, and recognise the complementarity of individual agency with social structure in determining employment patterns.

## Conclusion

This study presents a challenge to conventional wisdom about the motivations and experiences of temps. Nowadays, we suggest, more organisations are choosing to utilise temporary labour, and more people are choosing temporary work as a preferred way of working and living. These shifts have resulted in a new set of issues for employers and workers. Both groups have to consider the implications of the three way employment relationship (employer, employee, agency), the redistribution of responsibilities such as allocation/choice of work, and training/personal development, and the challenges this presents to all parties. Workers have to consider whether temporary options suit their aspirations and lifestyle, and recognise its difficulties as well as its advantages: temping is not for all (Alach and Inkson, 2003: 55-59). And employers need to ponder anew how to engage to mutual advantage with members of the workforce who are proud of their professionalism and their reputation, and who have valuable skills, versatility and flexibility, but who make a virtue out of *lack* of commitment to the current organisation.

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## 52 Patricia Alach and Kerr Inkson

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