

WHAT DO LOW-PAID WORKERS THINK WOULD IMPROVE THEIR WORKING LIVES?

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This report presents the findings and conclusions from qualitative research conducted among low-paid workers in the retail, hospitality and care sectors.

The mounting challenge of in-work poverty, combined with public scrutiny over employment practices, including zero-hour contracts, has turned the spotlight on employers of low-paid workers. But how do low-paid, low-income workers themselves feel about work, and what do they think would most improve their working lives?

The report explores:

- the realities of low-paid work;
- the challenges experienced by workers in the three sectors;
- ideas for improving work for low-paid workers that go beyond pay rises; and
- conclusions for employers of low-paid workers.

CONTENTS

Executive summary	03
1 Introduction	06
2 Workers' perspective on what makes a 'good' or a 'bad' job	09
3 Exploring perceptions by sector: hospitality	22
4 Exploring perceptions by sector: care	26
5 Exploring perceptions by sector: retail	32
6 Exploring initiatives to improve low-paid work	36
7 Conclusions and recommendations	48
References	54
Acknowledgements	55
About the author	55
List of tables	
1 Employment conditions in the six fieldwork locations	07
2 Initiatives tested among workers	38
List of figures	
1 Hierarchy of day-to-day challenges identified by hospitality workers	25
2 Hierarchy of day-to-day challenges identified by care workers	31
3 Hierarchy of day-to-day challenges identified by retail workers	35
4 Spectrum of initiatives selected by workers	47

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report draws on qualitative research exploring attitudes to low-paid work among low-paid workers themselves, including their perspectives on what makes a 'good' or a 'bad' job, and ideas for improving work. The research was conducted through a series of focus groups with low-paid employees of major employers in the hospitality, care and retail sectors, who also live in low-income households. The report highlights commonalities across the three sectors, as well as sector-specific findings.

Context: the 'lens' through which low-paid, low-income workers viewed their jobs

In listening to low-paid, low-income workers describe their jobs, it was evident that, for many, the experience of low-paid work was considered transitory. In particular, those working in retail and hospitality commonly reported 'falling in' to their jobs because they needed a flexible job to 'pay the bills'; and even older or long-standing workers could be reluctant to accept their current position as permanent. This perception can be reinforced by the high staff turnover low-paid workers see all around them (especially with students and migrant workers taking jobs in the sector). Subsequently, retail and hospitality jobs are often seen as a 'quick fix' rather than a long-term career.

Low-paid workers also often described apparently rigid hierarchies and structures within their employer company. They tended to be deeply conscious of their place at the bottom of these hierarchies, far apart from the company's senior decision-makers, and feeling powerless to change anything beyond their specific workplace. This often influenced low-paid workers' attitudes to progression. For many, progression was deemed to be either out of reach or undesirable, because of the perceived increase in stress and accountability for very little additional pay and much less flexibility than in shift work.

This feeling of powerlessness was reinforced by the lack of information available to many low-paid workers about their rights and opportunities. Awareness of workplace unions was markedly low, as was an understanding of the mechanics and benefits of workplace pensions. For those who had poor relationships with their on-site managers, making their voice heard – even at a micro level in their specific workplace – was felt to be impossible.

Low levels of knowledge, combined with the feeling that their jobs were transitory and hierarchical, had left many low-paid workers feeling precarious in their position and that they were lucky to have a job at all (especially in the context of low- or zero-hour contracts and staff churn). As a result, their expectations of employers taking any action to improve their working lives tended to be low. A common attitude for dissatisfied low-paid workers was to accept their 'lot' and think about surviving from week to week rather than looking ahead into the future.

Factors perceived as making a 'bad' job in low-paid work

Low-paid workers identified challenges that tended to be very consistent across sector, gender, age and region. They largely focused on pay, and within this, not only their low base rate of pay but also how they were remunerated for their time, including unpaid breaks, overtime, sick leave and (for community carers) travel time. These workers also often identified poor relationships with their managers as a major driver of dissatisfaction at work. Many highlighted the stress and physicality of their jobs, particularly in periods of understaffing.

Within this context, a number of unique, sector-specific challenges were identified. Hospitality workers, for example, reported inequalities in pay between waiting staff, kitchen staff, and bar and hotel staff, because only waiting staff tended to receive tips. For care workers, these unique challenges included a lack of support in coping with death and aggressive residents or service users, and also the status of the industry in the context of recent media coverage.

Ideas for improving low-paid work

Of all three sectors, workers' expectations that employers would take action to improve work were by far the lowest in retail. Retail workers tended to have a strong understanding of the financial pressures facing companies on the high street, and recognised that most employers are looking at reducing, rather than increasing, staff costs. In contrast, hospitality and especially care workers could more readily consider ideas and initiatives for improving work.

Irrespective of the perceived likelihood of their employer ever taking any of these actions, the most welcomed ideas for improving work among low-paid workers were those that offered greater security outside the workplace. Pay increases were perceived as being the most immediate way of making employees feel more secure. However, workers also wanted employers to recognise their time 'more fairly', through paid sick leave or offering support with the additional costs of work including transport and childcare.

Suggestions for improving low-paid work within the workplace often focused on addressing some of the perceived problems with communication, particularly between employees and their immediate, on-site managers. Workers also welcomed having an opportunity to feed back ideas and play a role in decision-making at a macro, company level. Critical to workers feeling a part of the company was that employers should communicate not only the outcomes of decisions from the top but also the reasons behind these decisions. They also stressed that management needed to understand the realities of working on the front line.

Across the sectors, low-paid workers unanimously responded best to the business case for positive change, arguing that 'happy staff equals happy customers'.

Summary of the implications of this research

- Inevitably, money matters to low-paid employees, and any serious attempts to improve the well-being of low-paid workers must take this into account.
- 'Pay' is not just about the base rate of pay, but also about how low-paid workers are recognised and recompensed for their time.
- For low-paid workers, improving 'work' is often about initiatives that will improve their lives outside work, for example, by offering them greater flexibility or security.
- In the wider societal context of low levels of trust in private companies and government, low-paid workers needed to understand the rationale behind any changes that were being introduced.

1 INTRODUCTION

The number of working families living below the poverty line – 6.7 million in 2012/2013 (MacInnes, *et al.*, 2014) – has now outstripped the number of workless and retired households in poverty, pointing to some serious challenges surrounding pay, security and the quality of work in the labour market. While the existing evidence base indicated the scale of the problem, there have been relatively few attempts to explore the realities of low-paid work, and workers’ perspectives on how they might be better supported by their employers.

Background to this research

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) is developing a broad anti-poverty strategy to sustainably reduce poverty for people of all ages and in all parts of the UK. Part of this work involves thinking about the role of employers in reducing poverty, including that of JRF and Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust (JRHT) as an employer.

This report presents the findings and conclusions of a qualitative research project designed to consider what the role of the employer might be in reducing poverty, according to low-income employees themselves. While increases in the National Minimum Wage (NMW) and the continuing campaign for the Living Wage will inevitably be very important in tackling in-work poverty, an important aim of this work is to highlight the role that other initiatives designed to improve work can play.

Specifically, this research set out to:

- explore attitudes to work among low-paid, low-income workers;
- highlight the day-to-day challenges experienced by low-paid workers, as well as the factors that make them feel more satisfied and supported in their jobs;
- test a range of different workplace initiatives to improve work for low-paid workers, and gauge the perceived impact of these initiatives, compared with higher wages.

Research approach

The research focused on three of the most prevalent sectors in which jobs were paying within 5 pence of the NMW (set at £6.31 per hour for workers aged 21+ at the time of the research, and raised to £6.50 per hour on 1 October 2014). They were:

- retail – 18.7% of the total NMW jobs in the UK (Low Pay Commission, 2014);
- hospitality – at 21.7% (Low Pay Commission, 2014);
- social care – at 5.0% (Low Pay Commission, 2014).

In March and August 2014, 98 low-paid workers across the three sectors were convened across 14 focus groups. To ensure that we captured a wide range of views and experiences, fieldwork was spread across six locations in England with differing employment conditions based on rates of unemployment and economic activity (ONS, 2014).

Table 1: Employment conditions in the six fieldwork locations

Fieldwork location	Employment market*	Unemployment		Economic inactivity	
		Per cent 16–64 yr olds Apr. 2013–Mar. 2014	Per cent point difference, compared with UK average	Per cent 16–64 yr olds Apr. 2013–Mar. 2014	Per cent point difference, compared with UK average
UK average	N/A	7.2	N/A	22.7	N/A
Preston, Lancs.	Lagging	8.8	+1.6	28.7	+6.0
Stockport, Cheshire	Buoyant	7.0	-0.2	20.3	-2.4
Grimsby, North East Lincs.	Lagging	12.7	+5.5	25.3	+2.6
Slough, Berkshire	Lagging	9.5	+2.3	22.2	-0.5
Harlow, Essex	Buoyant	8.7	+1.5	16.4	-6.3
Eastleigh, Hants.	Buoyant	2.6	-4.6	16.7	-6.0

*For the purposes of this research, employment markets were characterised as relatively 'buoyant' or 'lagging' to ensure that the sample included a good spread of low-paid, low-income workers experiencing different employment conditions.

Each research participant was carefully screened to ensure that they earned less than the Living Wage – set at £7.65 at the time of the research (Living Wage Commission, 2014) – and came from low-income households, defined according to the Minimum Income Standard (MIS). The MIS is based on what members of the public think is needed for a minimum acceptable standard of living (Davis, *et al.*, 2014). The research produces income and earnings thresholds for different types of household. Rounding minimum income standards thresholds to the nearest hundred, low income was defined as:

- earnings of £17,000 or lower for a single person living alone;
- earnings of £25,500 or lower for a single parent with dependent children;
- household earnings of £26,000 or lower for a couple without any dependent children;

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- household earnings of £30,800 or lower for a couple with one dependent child;
 - household earnings of £36,000 or lower for a couple with two dependent children.

All participants working in the retail and hospitality sectors were employed by private companies, with 500+ employees in the UK, while care workers were drawn from across private, for-profit care homes and domiciliary (or community) care providers, with 50+ employees in the UK. More than 40 employers were represented across the sample, including ten companies in the FTSE 250.

Employer names were kept anonymous during the discussion groups to ensure that participants felt able to share their honest views, and employers are not named in this report to protect participants' anonymity.

Each focus group included a combination of group-based discussions and individual exercises, including:

- a short questionnaire upfront to gauge participants' individual attitudes to their jobs;
- a group-wide discussion about the positive and negative aspects of participants' day-to-day work;
- an exercise conducted in small groups in which participants sorted through a wide range of possible initiatives to improve their work (adapted from a set of initiatives identified by Philpott in 2014);
- a final discussion about potential names that participants would give to employers who introduced the most popular of these initiatives.

The results from these individual written exercises were recorded and analysed by question to look for common themes across responses from low-paid workers overall, and differences between the three sectors and types of employee. Audio recordings from the focus groups were transcribed into qualitative code frames and analysed in the same way.

Throughout, the research findings are supported by anonymised, verbatim quotes from focus group participants. This report also includes a number of 'pen portraits', which draw on the combined experiences of several participants to portray a typical viewpoint from a low-paid, low-income worker in a particular sector, rather than one individual experience.

2 WORKERS’ PERSPECTIVE ON WHAT MAKES A ‘GOOD’ OR A ‘BAD’ JOB

This chapter explores the common, cross-sector factors that low-paid, low-income workers themselves identify as making a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ job in hospitality, care or retail. Importantly, it also sets out the factors that low-paid workers do not tend to identify spontaneously as making a good job in their sector.

To understand what factors are important to making a job good or bad in the eyes of low-paid workers, it is critical to understand the lens through which low-paid workers tended to view their jobs.

First, many low-paid workers, and particularly those working in the retail and hospitality sectors, described purely functional relationships with their work. While work might take up a significant proportion of their time, none said that they felt that their jobs were central to their life or their identity – even care workers, who do tend to describe getting a sense of worth from their jobs – and many were balancing work with raising a family and other commitments. Strikingly, when low-paid workers were asked to describe their jobs as part of a pre-questionnaire, the most common responses centred on work as simply ‘necessary to pay the bills’.

As a result, many low-paid workers judged whether a job was good or bad by the extent to which it fits around their lives and other responsibilities. In general, low-paid workers put a great deal of emphasis on factors such as flexibility as making a good job in their sector:

When low-paid workers were asked to describe their jobs as part of a pre-questionnaire, the most common responses centred on work as simply ‘necessary to pay the bills’.

“We don’t do this job because we want to, it’s because we have to. I’m a jack of all trades, master of none.”

Male hospitality worker, Eastleigh

“The pay is crap but at the minute the hours are suitable, the location is suitable and the staff are nice, so it’s OK for now.”

Male hospitality worker, Stockport

Second, rather than having made any conscious choice to work in the industry, retail and hospitality workers commonly reported ‘falling in’ to jobs in high street shops, supermarkets, restaurants, cafés and pubs because they were convenient and accessible. While carers were more likely to describe attachment to their jobs, even they tended to say that, in starting work, they had felt that there were relatively few employment options available to them locally. This was especially true of workers from areas with ‘depressed’ employment markets such as Grimsby.

Importantly, if they had not set out in low-paid work with any kind of plan, low-paid workers found it difficult to think ahead to the future, instead focusing on the present. Day-to-day challenges that low-paid workers might associate with their jobs – for example, understaffing or poor relationships with managers – tended to be more frequently mentioned as making a bad job than issues that felt ‘far away’, such as limited opportunities for career progression:

“The job is alright. It was meant to fill the gap when I got back from travelling.”

Male retail worker, Slough

“Round here, I could be a cleaner, work in a shop or serve at McDonald’s. No offence, but at least in my job I can say I’m making a bit of a difference.”

Female community carer, Grimsby

“I took a job in a pub to pay off my debts after uni and somehow I never left. I call it a ‘necessary evil’.”

Male hospitality worker, Eastleigh

Last, most low-paid workers were considering their jobs in the context of the recent recession. While levels of knowledge about the specific impact of the recession on their employer company and sector tended to be mixed – with retail workers much more conscious of wider financial pressures than those from the hospitality and care sectors (see Chapter 5) – low-paid workers tended to be acutely aware that jobs with predictable hours had been ‘harder to come by’ in recent years, and that there was increased competition in the jobs market.

As a result, at least some low-paid workers were of the belief that ‘I’m lucky to have a job at all’ (and limited their expectations of their employers – ‘why would they worry about how I feel when they’ve got people queuing round the block to take my place?’) – while others were looking for greater security in their jobs to overcome feelings of precariousness and vulnerability.

To summarise, low-paid workers based their assessment of what makes a job good or bad on three metrics.

- Does it fit in with my life and my other commitments?
 - This included childcare, caring for older relatives and, for a minority, part-time studies.
- When I'm at work, what's the balance between aspects of my job I like and aspects of my job which I don't or which cause me stress?
 - Often, this is much more about finding a job that will 'do for now' rather than a job that's part of a clear career path or plan.
- Is it secure (for now)?
 - Does it meet the ultimate goal of working, which for many low-paid workers is 'paying the bills'?

Low-paid workers' perspective on what makes a good job

Importantly, while many low-paid workers hold mixed views of their jobs, very few, if any, viewed their jobs in a purely negative light. In focus groups, almost all low-paid, low-income workers were able to identify aspects of their jobs either that they enjoy (including interacting with people) or which they felt complement their lives better than non-shift work. The most commonly identified factors are discussed below.

Flexibility with shifts and hours

Valued by most low-paid workers and perceived to be one of the main attractions of the job compared with (potentially better-paid) office-based work, flexibility is particularly important to parents, and essential to single parents trying to fit around school times and struggling to pay for childcare. However, the extent to which workers felt that they had a say over which hours they work, and whether they were able to work as many or as few hours as they would like, depended heavily on their relationships with their on-site manager and their colleagues (on whom they relied to be able to swap shifts, sometimes at short notice).

"If they put you on the rota and you can't do a shift someone else will probably do it and swap with you. We have a Facebook page for that."

Female hospitality worker, Essex

"I get to do less days but more hours. They are very flexible if they know you've got kids."

Female care home worker, Eastleigh

"Because it's a week by week rota you can always switch with someone else or chat to your boss about it."

Male hospitality worker, Eastleigh

Interaction with customers (or clients) and colleagues

Effective working relationships, and supportive managers and colleagues, were, unsurprisingly, consistently described by low-paid workers as one of the main features of a good job. Customer-facing retail and hospitality

workers tended to speak favourably about the sociable elements of the job, including being able to have a drink with colleagues and 'regulars' at the end of their shift.

“You get to know people, get to be friendly with people. I love my team. My manager can get humour out of anything.”

Male retail worker, Preston

For care workers, making a difference to residents' and service users' lives by providing not only practical assistance but also companionship and compassion were perceived to be a critical part of the job (particularly in the case of community carers, who were deeply conscious of the fact that they were often the only person many of their service users would see all day). While most care workers reported that they were actively discouraged from forming close relationships with residents or service users, almost all said that they routinely ignore this advice.

“The boxes of chocolates, the stories, the hugs – that makes it all worth working in care.”

Female care home worker, Stockport

“We're not supposed to go to funerals but I have been to one recently. You build a bond with people and you want to pay your respects.”

Female care home worker, Essex

Access to and support with basic training (though not necessarily skills development associated with career progression)

Though a notable proportion of low-paid workers take the view that career progression is not 'for them' – because of family commitments, an aversion to stress or a lack of self-confidence (see below) – most feel that these opportunities should be available *in theory* to those that want them, and that it is important to be able to build and hone their skills in order to feel confident and supported at work.

By and large, most workers across the discussion groups felt that they *did* have access to at least basic training, especially those in care, though the quality of training was felt to vary significantly from company to company, as was the degree to which their employer supported and advocated their training. For example, several care and hospitality workers reported not receiving any pay for the hours or days in which they were in training, despite this being an essential part of their job.

“We can actually suggest training that we want to do. They will listen to us and help us. They are really hot on the NVQs at the moment and they will help us fund it.”

Female, care home worker, Eastleigh

“I would say that the opportunity is there but you have to go off your own back and do it. I tried to do some training but they wouldn't pay me for it.”

Male hospitality worker, Eastleigh

“During the induction training, mine was spread over three months and I didn't get paid for any of it until I had been with the company for three months.”

Female community carer, Essex

Low-paid workers' perspective on what makes a bad job

Similarly, low-paid workers were also quickly able to identify the features of a bad job in low-paid work. The following were most consistently mentioned across the three sectors, by both genders, and across the six fieldwork locations.

Low base rate of pay

Unsurprisingly, being paid on or close to the minimum wage is front of mind for most low-paid workers in the retail, hospitality and care industries. As well as impacting on workers' incomes – many described 'struggling with the cost of living' – a low base rate of pay was also felt to reflect the social status or value of their work, and their position within their employer company ('at the very bottom of the chain'). Care workers found this particularly difficult to accept given the importance they attribute to their work.

“We're paid less than bin men, that's how much society values what we do.”

Female community carer, Grimsby

“We know that they're paying us as little as they can possibly get away with.”

Male hospitality worker, Eastleigh

Unpaid overtime

Similarly, being expected to work unpaid overtime if they had not completed all the tasks required by the end of their shift, or if colleagues covering the next shift had not yet arrived at work, were identified as major drivers of dissatisfaction at work across all three sectors. Low-paid workers also recounted receiving the same rate of pay on bank holidays and Christmas (though most said that they received 'time and a half' or double pay).

“If the next staff don't turn up then you can't leave. You have to wait for them to come and keep working”

Female hospitality worker, Essex

“My boss would have to pay me for all of my overtime before I could ever like my job. Apart from Christmas Day, I’ve never been paid any overtime or extra pay. Except for the night of the millennium when I got triple pay.”

Male hospitality worker, Eastleigh

Unpaid and regularly missed breaks

Employees in all sectors, and particularly those in care and customer-facing roles in hospitality, reported commonly feeling too overstretched and understaffed at work to take their allotted breaks. At best, this left workers feeling tired and stressed and, at worst, it was felt to lead to health problems (including gallstones and urinary infections from missed toilet breaks).

In addition, there was real resentment that breaks, which are often missed anyway, are unpaid, and there were perceptions that colleagues who smoke use smoking as an ‘excuse’ to take a break.

“You have absolutely no time. There is no allocated time for breaks. I go home at the end of the day and my partner asks me what I’ve had to eat today and I realise I’ve not had anything”

Female community carer, Essex

“At my place we don’t get paid for our breaks and we have allocated breaks but you obviously can’t just leave somebody if you are taking them to the toilet or something. You can’t leave them but you don’t get paid because you should be on your break.”

Male care home worker, Eastleigh

Unpaid sick and compassionate leave

Consistently, low-paid employees reported surprise and resentment that they are entitled to only statutory sick pay. Care and some hospitality workers, who are barred from coming to work for several days to avoid making residents or customers unwell, viewed this as an injustice. Additionally, anecdotes about delaying medical treatment and operations, and being refused compassionate leave after family deaths, were relatively common in discussion groups. However, experiences were perceived to vary dramatically, depending on the approachability and attitude of on-site management.

“What we do is exhausting. When I’d done it for three months I came down with the ‘flu and I had it for eight days. But I just couldn’t afford it. I didn’t get paid for that whole time I was off work.”

Female community carer, Essex

“If you are sick, the kitchen needs you to be off for two days afterwards. Even if you feel better after one day and you can’t afford it, you have to be off for a second day. It seems really unfair when it’s just not your fault.”

Male hospitality worker, Eastleigh

“I had gallstones but I couldn’t face taking the time off work and losing pay to get it sorted, so I left it for two years and eventually the pain was so bad they had to rush me in and I ended up taking longer off work.”

Female hospitality worker, Essex

Poor relationships with managers

Perceptions of distant, unapproachable or unhelpful management and descriptions of an ‘us and them’ mentality were common – but by no means ubiquitous, with clear exceptions to the rule – among low-paid workers from all three sectors. Unsurprisingly, the quality of workers’ relationships with their managers was felt to have a major bearing on a number of different aspects of their work, including their ability to raise issues and effect positive change in their company.

“I think the management should be taught people skills, because most of them don’t know how to handle people. They talk to you like you’re nothing, like a kid or something”

Male hospitality worker, Stockport

“I don’t feel supported a lot at all. For my first day, I just got given my rota and told to go. I was extremely lucky that my cousin works for the same company so she came out with me on my first shift and didn’t get paid for it.”

Female community carer, Essex

Often, these poor relationships were blamed on the perception that managers are not only distant but different – dismissed as ‘business people’ and ‘administrators’, with little understanding of the realities of working on the front line. Crucially, the fact that managers were felt to act and prioritise so differently from front-line staff made some low-paid workers sceptical as to how many employees in their position genuinely ‘rise through the ranks’.

“They sit in their ivory towers saying ‘do this, do that’ when you’re only three people in the shop.”

Male retail worker, Preston

“Managers in care aren’t carers – they’re business people who don’t know the first thing about what we do.”

Female care home worker, Eastleigh

Poor relationships with managers were viewed as extremely damaging by all low-paid workers, but none more so than by care workers, several of whom cited examples of feeling unfairly blamed or scrutinised by managers, especially in cases where residents’ relatives were involved.

“If anything goes wrong, they’re quick enough to blame the carer to take the blame away from themselves”

Female care home worker, Essex

“The difference between care and other sectors is with care, if something is wrong, the relatives would complain and then whoever is in charge, the nurse, the manager or the senior carer, would come directly at you. Whereas in hospitality, if someone complains about their burger being cold, they would complain to you and then the manager would [respond], which takes away the pressure from you.”

Female care home worker, Stockport

The physicality of the job

Workers in all three sectors commonly described their work as physically demanding – many are on their feet all day, breaks are often missed, and they reported regularly having to lift or move heavy items (or, in care, service users themselves). This is a particularly pressing challenge for older workers, many of whom lack information and advice about alternative, less physical jobs that might be available to them and find themselves only just starting to think about their prospects for the future.

“I’m in my 50s and I can’t physically imagine doing this job much longer”

Female hospitality worker, Grimsby

Zero- and low-hour contracts

These type of contracts were felt to give the employer the ‘upper hand’ and accepted by many as the norm in low-paid industries. Employees who were themselves on zero- or low-hour contracts expressed concern that they have no guarantee that they would be offered the 30–40 hours a week they felt they needed to be able to afford their bills. Some workers reported their employers using zero- or low-hour contracts to force out staff members (by giving them the minimum number of hours permissible, forcing them to look for work elsewhere).

“No-one, except for managers, has more than a 10-hour contract where I work. We have one barman who is really, really slow and you have to be really fast to keep up with the flow of customers. He’s been here six months and he still can’t even make a cocktail. So now he only gets 10 hours a week.”

Female hospitality worker, Essex

Some low-paid workers also suspected that zero- or low-hour contracts make them ineligible for certain benefits and rights, including workplace pensions, though they often lacked the information and tools to be able to act on this. For example, one retail worker – who had not previously identified any drawbacks to her 4-hour contract because she had always been offered 30 hours a week by her employer – discovered that this meant she had reduced maternity pay entitlements, but only after she had had her baby.

“My contract is 4 hours a week but I do 30 hours a week ... so I don’t get a pension, and when I went on maternity leave I couldn’t take my full leave because of my 4-hour contract.”

Female retail worker, Slough

High staff turnover

Workers from all three sectors described the challenge of building effective working relationships with colleagues – which they identify as a key driver of satisfaction at work – with temporary, often younger staff who openly considered the job to be a short-term ‘fix’ between studies or as a stepping stone to a job in their chosen field.

“All these 19 year olds come in to work in the restaurant and they treat it like it’s a joke – they spend more time looking in the mirror than they do working when I’m slaving my guts out”

Female hospitality worker, Essex

“They have a very high turnover of staff. Good team morale makes a difference: if you are constantly hiring and firing staff, it affects not just the staff but the whole home, because the residents are not getting the care they deserve, people are not happy, the managers are not happy, it’s just really bad. It’s already a hard job but it makes it that much harder.”

Female care home worker, Stockport

Related to high staff turnover, workers across all three sectors spontaneously described feeling ‘disposable’ and believed that their employers viewed them as easily replaceable, particularly in areas with high levels of immigration. Foreign workers are perceived as willing to take on any conditions or pay, and as a particular threat to those working in the care sector.

“The trouble is in care you find that a lot of the places are minimum wage, and I think it boils down to the fact that they know the foreign people coming in will work for that. Companies seem to get away with it.”

Female care home worker, Essex

“I feel completely unable to change things. I feel we are seen as a commodity and if we get a bit too bolshie or whatever, we could just be got rid of and they will find someone else to pay minimum wage to instead.”

Male hospitality worker, Eastleigh

Constantly changing targets and goalposts

Across all three sectors, targets and employer expectations were felt to be becoming ever more unrealistic, whether meeting sales targets (for retail workers) or being expected to cover a certain number of customers or clients in a set number of hours (for hospitality and care workers). Many

low-paid workers described feeling constantly stressed or behind at work, and rarely in control.

“There will be a new target from head office every week and it feels like it’s actually impossible to keep up, like you’ll always be behind”

Female retail worker, Slough

Insecurity associated low-paid work

Low-paid, low-income workers identified the combined effect of several of these factors – and particularly high staff turnover, seemingly ever-moving goal posts and zero- or low-hour contracts – as making them feel insecure and precarious in their jobs. While this was a clear source of worry for many low-paid workers, it also had clear implications for their expectations of their employers, with several taking the view: ‘I suppose I’m lucky to have a job at all – there are loads of people out there who are way worse off than me.’

Factors not identified as important to making a good or bad job

Within these discussions, there were a number of factors that low-paid, low-income workers were, on balance, much less likely to identify as important to making a job good or bad than the factors identified above. Notably, such factors – particularly prospects for progression – are those which are often assumed to be important motivators for most people when thinking about their job. These are discussed below.

Opportunities for progression and development

As set out above, while low-paid workers tended to perceive basic training as an important part of a good job, they did not necessarily view career progression in the same light. Low-paid workers across all three sectors tended to hold mixed views of progression at best and, at worst, actively negative perceptions.

For hospitality and retail workers, more senior roles and management positions are often viewed as within reach, but as offering very little benefit and poor recompense for the additional responsibility. In particular, a common perception among low-paid workers from these sectors was that greater seniority results in more regular hours. Consequently, seniority is felt to result in much less flexibility, compared with the shift working that first attracted them to the industry. Several hospitality and retail workers reported giving up more senior roles with management or supervision responsibilities because of the associated stress and impact on their family life.

Low-paid workers across all three sectors tended to hold mixed views of progression at best.

“I stepped down from a management role because it was too stressful for me at the time.”

Male retail worker, Preston

“Before I was a manager at a [high street restaurant] and that was stressful. The limited responsibility I have now is quite nice. Flexible hours suit me better.”

Male retail worker, Slough

Similarly, most care workers could also identify routes to progression, including NVQs and opportunities for promotion to senior care assistant or senior support worker. However, in the private care sector, greater responsibility is felt to translate not only to more stress for very little additional pay, but to greater accountability, particularly in giving service users medication. In a climate of low public trust in the care sector and poor relationships between care workers and managers, this meant that some care workers were not only averse to, but actively afraid of progression.

“It’s about 20p an hour more to be a senior care assistant, but you could get sued or go to prison because you’re giving out medication, which you don’t do at my level.”

Female care home worker, Grimsby

“There are opportunities for progression but I wouldn’t want to do it. It’s the responsibility, it’s 24/7 and I’m not prepared to do that for hardly any extra money.”

Female care home worker, Essex

“We can do NVQ levels 1, 2 and 3 but you only get 20p more an hour and you get so much more responsibility and hassle. I’d die if I was a manager. I’d spend all my time crying.”

Female care home worker, Essex

Notably, low-paid workers across all three sectors consistently interpreted ‘progression’ solely in terms of promotion and increased seniority, as opposed to developing their skills and gaining new responsibilities in their existing role. Several carers, for example, talked about being shadowed by new care workers as part of their induction, but almost always framed this in terms of another source of day-to-day pressure rather than in terms of providing training to others or developing a colleague’s skill set. Others reported limited opportunities to build their skills within their current role without being promoted, for example, undergoing the same training courses on an annual basis, without any updates or developments.

“Our training is now e-learning, so just on a computer, and you do the same courses every year.”

Male care home worker, Grimsby

Support in planning for the future (such as pension savings)

While low-paid workers tend to know a lot about how their particular company operates, especially in relation to pay, rotas, holidays and any kinds of support or benefits that might be available, they tend to know much less about their rights and potential opportunities, particularly in relation to planning for the more distant future.

“It only makes sense for me to work part time because I get working tax credits. If I was to try to work full time and keep up with everything I’d have to work 60 hours a week, and I’d never see my children. I only do 24 hours a week but I would love to do more because I feel like a right part-timer.”

Female community carer, Essex

Though some workers were aware of auto-enrolment (which they tended to describe as ‘opt-out’ pensions), most were uncertain as to whether they had been enrolled in the scheme, or whether they would be in the future. Moreover, several of the younger participants across the three sectors questioned the value of workplace pensions, saying that they would rather receive the money contributed by their employer in their pay now. Some took the view that they are ‘struggling’ enough with household bills now as it is, without having to worry about putting money aside for the future.

“I don’t even know if I do get a pension you know.”

Female community carer, Essex

“I know this sounds bad, but if I’m honest, I don’t really get the point of having to put money away when some extra cash would really help now.”

Female hospitality worker, Grimsby

“I’m two months behind on my mortgage repayments because I’ve just split up with my husband so if I got more help from my employer, I’d need it now.”

Female hospitality worker, Essex

As a result, only a minority of older low-paid workers – who were themselves starting to find the physicality of working in retail, hospitality or care taking its toll – identified support in planning for the future as something that might characterise a good job.

Opportunities to effect change in an employer company

While, for some workers, the ability to make an impact on their wider company was of little personal interest – ‘I’m just there to do my job and get paid to be perfectly honest, keep my head down’ – others tended to struggle to imagine how this would ever happen in their company.

Strikingly, most workers were unable to answer the question: ‘If you wanted to improve something in your company [beyond your specific workplace], how would you go about doing it?’ For many, raising the issue with someone more senior who would then escalate it was their default response, but for those who had very poor or distant relationships with their supervisors, there were perceived to be very few options.

“Giving feedback only works if you get on with your team leader. I had a team leader who I was just too frightened to say anything to. She was really intimidating”

Female community carer, Essex

“I’ve been trying to get internet access at our home. I’ve just raised £800 fundraising at the summer fete and I wanted to buy iPads for the residents because you can do quite a lot on them. But I was told ‘no, we can’t have internet access’ and I wasn’t allowed to go to head office about it.”

Female care home worker, Essex

Those who worked in companies with employee surveys or feedback schemes tended to be very sceptical either that their ideas would be taken seriously, or that their responses would be genuinely anonymous. Of all three sectors, this was of particular concern to care home workers, who felt that the size of their workplace and a tendency for gossip between colleagues meant that any criticisms would be quickly attributed to a specific individual.

Union membership or representation

Levels of awareness of workplace unions were low across all sectors, with many younger low-paid workers unable to even guess what benefits or protection a union might offer. Those who were previously aware of the role of unions tended to regard them with suspicion, fearing that if they joined, they might be forced into certain kinds of actions (e.g. taking strike action and in the process sacrificing pay that they felt they could ill afford to lose). Others simply felt that paying for union membership is a very low priority when they are struggling to cover household bills on the minimum wage.

“I’m in that Unison thing and I don’t know what it does.”

Female care home worker, Essex

“I was a member of a union for four years but I had to give it up because I just couldn’t afford it.”

Male retail worker, Preston

Conclusions

- In thinking about what makes a good job, on balance, low-paid, low-income workers were more likely to think about how their work fitted around their life and their responsibilities than they were about the job itself. This was particularly true of parents and older workers.
- Consequently, flexibility tended to be seen as the most important factor making a good job in the retail, care and hospitality industries.
- The most commonly identified factors making a bad job generally related either to how effectively a job met the ultimate goal of ‘paying the bills’ (including low pay and poor recognition of time), or to day-to-day sources of stress that made low-paid, low-income workers’ lives more difficult (including missing breaks, the physicality of the job and poor relationships with managers or colleagues).
- Factors relating to the prospects offered by a job in retail, hospitality or care in the long term (such as prospects of progression and support with saving for the future) were viewed as less important than factors relating to the ‘here and now’.

3 EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS BY SECTOR: HOSPITALITY

By exploring the views of hospitality workers in greater depth, this chapter builds on the factors identified by research participants as important in making a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ job across all three sectors. This includes an overview of how hospitality workers tend to think and talk about their jobs, the factors making a good or a bad job that are specific to working in hospitality, and how hospitality workers tend to experience and prioritise these factors.

Overview

In common with retail workers, low-paid, low-income hospitality workers invariably described themselves as ‘falling in’ to the sector because of its convenience and accessibility. As a result, many of the younger hospitality workers in the sample framed their jobs as a ‘stopgap’ that fits with their life and pays the bills for the time being; it does not provide them with longer-term career prospects (at least partly, because of the anti-social hours and low pay).

This was particularly true of front-of-house staff, but slightly less so of kitchen staff, who were more likely to say that they were building their experience or thinking about working towards a career in catering. By contrast, older low-paid, low-income hospitality workers tended to indicate feeling resigned towards working in the sector. A typical perception was, ‘I like chatting to the customers and I know what I’m doing, and it’s too late to change now anyway.’

Factors identified as specific to making a good or a bad job: hospitality

As for low-paid, low-income workers in the retail and care sectors, the flexibility of shift work and the opportunity to interact with customers and colleagues tended to be the most consistently mentioned factors making a good job in hospitality. Similarly, low pay and perceptions of poor recognition of time (including missed unpaid breaks and overtime) were commonly raised as factors making a bad job in the sector.

In addition, hospitality workers also highlighted a number of challenges specific to their industry.

Dealing with drunk or aggressive customers

In discussion groups, this was more likely to be raised spontaneously as a challenge by female than male staff, and most hospitality workers of both genders tended to shrug off some degree of rudeness or aggression from customers as 'just part of the job'. However, a minority of workers (particularly bar staff and employees at fast food outlets late at night) reported being verbally or physically attacked at work.

"I've had quite a few people try to take a swing at me when I've refused to serve them because they are just too goddam drunk ... It isn't very good, but it is part of the job,"

Male hospitality worker, Eastleigh

Examples also included a female bar worker who had been sexually assaulted by a customer during a cigarette break late at night.

"He'd been chatting to me a bit in the bar and he must have seen I'd gone out to the back for a fag. It was really dark and he came out of nowhere and there was only one other girl serving so there's nothing she could have done. I got a whole lot tougher after that"

Female hospitality worker, Grimsby

Perceived inequalities in pay

For waiting staff in restaurants and some pubs, though unpredictable, tips are seen as a crucial source of additional income for workers living on the minimum wage. Kitchen staff and bar staff tended to believe that they were meant to be paid higher wages or receive a share of tips for this reason, but felt that this rarely happens in reality for more junior kitchen staff or bar staff.

"Especially in a restaurant base, the tips are so good. It doesn't matter that you are on the minimum wage because you can top it up with tips."

Female hospitality worker, Essex

"I think the bar suffer. The kitchen are meant to get paid more and we get tips but the bar really misses out."

Female hospitality worker, Essex

Hot working conditions

Almost all hospitality workers who are based in the kitchen rather than front-of-house mentioned (unprompted) very hot working conditions in kitchens – often in excess of 30°C. Most coped with these conditions by taking matters into their own hands, for example, by keeping a back door open at all times. Awareness of legislation and regulation to protect against very hot working conditions was universally low.

“Hot kitchens makes the job a whole lot harder, you need air conditioning but it’s never working.”

Male hospitality worker, Stockport

The pen portrait below is based on an amalgamation of quotations and comments from across the focus groups, and is designed to bring to life the experiences and challenges associated with low-paid, low-income work in hospitality.

Pen portrait 1: ‘David’

David works in the kitchen of a pub in his home town, washing dishes, helping the chef and occasionally serving behind the bar. He has a degree in marketing, but after struggling to find a job in the recession and falling into debt, he heard from a friend that some part-time work was available at his local. It seemed like a convenient stopgap and David liked the fact that he could socialise after work, but a job he expected to tide him over for a few months has now lasted nearly six years.

He was renting a flat locally with some friends, but found it impossible to make ends meet and has moved back in with his parents, ‘for the time being, I hope’. David says that he prefers to live in the moment rather than think about the future because he never expected to be nearing thirty, living at home and working in a ‘dead end’ job where he doesn’t know how many hours he’s going to be working one week from the next.

Sometimes he thinks that he might like to be a chef but says he doesn’t really know how to go about making this happen: ‘I like the chef in my current place, we have a laugh, but we only really microwave stuff so I’m not learning anything ... and maybe I wouldn’t be any good at it anyway’.

Conclusions

Overall, hospitality workers were able to identify a hierarchy of day-to-day challenges that they saw as most pressing in their work (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Hierarchy of day-to-day challenges identified by hospitality workers



4 EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS BY SECTOR: CARE

By exploring the views of care workers in greater depth, this chapter builds on the factors that were felt to be important in making a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ job across all three sectors. This includes an overview of how care workers tended to think and talk about their jobs, the factors making a good or a bad job that they considered specific to working in care, and how the care workers participating in the research experienced and prioritised these factors.

Overview

Care workers in the private, for-profit sector (rather than not-for-profit care homes or charities) are generally more likely than those working in retail or hospitality to report a sense of worth from their work. Almost without exception, care workers in discussion groups cited ‘making a difference’ as the factor that they enjoyed most about their jobs. This was equally true across those working in care homes and carers in the community (as they tended to describe themselves, rather than ‘domiciliary carers’).

For many care workers, this seems to translate to a greater attachment to their jobs, or at least to the sector. When asked where they would most like to see themselves in five years’ time, care workers were most likely of all three sectors to say that they hoped to be working in the same or a similar job. Several – though not all – described making an active decision to work in care, in stark contrast to the majority of employees in the retail and hospitality sectors.

“I love that I’m making someone smile, making their day better.”

Female community carer, Grimsby

“My ideal job would be to run my own little home one day.”

Female care home worker, Eastleigh

A small number of care workers had previously worked in other low-paid sectors, including retail and hospitality, and had chosen to work in care because they wanted a job in which they could have the satisfaction of helping people. In addition, a notable minority of low-paid workers currently employed in hospitality or retail said that in five years' time, they hoped to work in care.

Of all three sectors, care workers – and particularly those working in care homes – were also most likely to talk about the ‘career ladder’ in their industry (though they didn’t describe it as such). A small number of younger care home workers were working as care assistants or support workers to gain relevant experience, and to support themselves financially while they undertook nursing degrees.

“It’s really important that good people go into care because there are a lot of people who start off there and move up to being district nurses, nurses, midwives and so on. I think it is like a basis, a starting point for a lot of people, and it’s not recognised and not enough money is put into it.”

Female care home worker, Stockport

However, for the majority, while progression in the sector might be possible in theory, the role of senior care assistant is often viewed as a glass ceiling that is very difficult to progress beyond in practice. Nursing and management roles were largely viewed as being out of reach, reinforcing impressions of hierarchy and distance.

The role of senior care assistant is often viewed as a glass ceiling that is very difficult to progress beyond in practice.

“Once you have done your NVQ3 or NVQ4 you would probably move on because there isn’t any more you can progress to.”

Male care home worker, Eastleigh.

This seemed to be the product of myriad factors, including low levels of self-confidence in their abilities among some carers, a lack of information about what financial support might be available to help with nursing degrees among others, and widely held perceptions that nursing and management roles are stressful and do not lend themselves to flexible working.

“District nurses are paid at least twice what we are – £14 an hour I think. And in some ways we have just as much experience.”

Female community carer, Grimsby

“I’ll get my NVQ3, but after that it gets a lot harder and I’m not sure I’m up to it.”

Female care home worker, Eastleigh

Factors perceived as specific to making a good or a bad job

As for low-paid, low-income workers across all three sectors, care workers tended to say that they were first attracted to the job because of the flexibility associated with shift work. The opportunity to interact with residents and service users was also taken as a clear positive factor toward what made a good job in care.

Also, in common with retail and hospitality workers, the most consistently cited factors believed to make a bad job in care centred on pay. This was seen to reflect the value of carers in society and blamed as the source for many of the perceived ‘problems’ in the sector, including poor standards of care.

However, for care workers in particular, there were felt to be a number of day-to-day challenges specific to working in the sector that make a bad job in care. These are discussed below.

Mixed experiences of support and training to cope with aggressive service users or residents

Without exception, physical or verbal abuse at work as taken as ‘part of the job’ for anyone with any contact with people with disabilities such as schizophrenia or dementia. There was not felt to be any way of avoiding this, and all care workers had received at least basic training in safety. Nevertheless, they reported mixed experiences of how well prepared and supported they felt about coping with these challenges in practice. This was perceived as a particular area of concern for very young or inexperienced community care workers visiting service users in their homes on their own.

“You can’t take it personally. You’ve just got to accept that it’s an illness and they don’t really mean it. Most of them are quite old and frail so their punches aren’t too painful.”

Female community carer, Essex

“As much as I love my job and I love my work, they are taking everything and anything to fill the rooms. You are getting bitten and punched and hit, and we don’t have any support.”

Female care home worker, Eastleigh

“I’ve only just had my dementia training to cope with their needs and I’ve been on a dementia ward for two years.”

Female care home worker, Essex

Variable experiences of support in coping with death

All care workers regarded experiencing the death of a service user as a difficult but inevitable part of the job. In discussion groups, almost all care workers talked about death openly and pragmatically. This was particularly true of care home workers, who tended to have colleagues around them, should they be the first person to identify a resident as having died.

For community care workers working alone, however, support from managers – for example, office staff travelling to the service user’s home to wait with the carer until the police arrive, or allowing carers one or two days’ paid leave – is felt to be very important. Several community carers felt that they were missing this support and were especially concerned that this support

might not be available to very young carers experiencing their 'first death' – and reported experiences of being rushed on to their next appointment.

“I’ve been promised to go on a bereavement course for ages, and nothing ever happens.”

Female care home worker, Essex

“I sat with someone once for two hours whilst he was dying and it was really hard. And afterwards my manager didn’t ask me how I was at all.”

Female care home worker, Eastleigh

“There was a new girl with us and her ‘first’ [death] was in her first month or so. No one from the office came to wait with her in the poor person’s house for the police, instead I heard they were just ringing her up to chase her on to her next appointment. I saw her later on and she looked so shaken up.”

Female community carer, Grimsby

Lack of time at work and constantly feeling rushed

This was mentioned almost unanimously by care home workers and community carers alike as a major day-to-day challenge for those working in care. Two major implications were identified:

- their work is exhausting and very physically demanding – a particular challenge for day staff, compared with night staff given that residents or service users tended to be asleep at night, and for older care workers, compared with younger carers;
- more importantly (in their eyes), carers felt that they rarely if ever have enough time to talk properly to residents or service users and to provide care with the full degree of compassion and care that they would like.

The root cause of this challenge was generally believed to be care companies that tried to cut corners as much as possible by reducing staff costs – stimulating resentment towards managers and head office – and a perceived proliferation of red tape and paperwork.

“We’ve got 16 residents and then we have two, or sometimes three, staff. You don’t get time especially with all the bloody paperwork you’ve got to do now.”

Female care home worker, Essex

“There’s a lot of red tape. It’s all rules, rules now. And half of them don’t apply to what we do. If they were on the floor and saw what we were dealing with then they would understand.”

Female care home worker, Eastleigh

Time issues

While challenges surrounding safety and the daily emotional strain of working in care are invariably accepted as inevitable and ‘part of the job’, care

workers tend to find it much more difficult to accept that either no travel time or unpaid travel time should be the norm in community care.

Community carers also reported mixed experiences in relation to receiving any financial support to cover travel costs. In discussion groups, only some carers reported having a petrol or public transport allowance. Others described some awareness of being able to claim back work-related expenses as part of their tax return, but tended to say that they would not know how to go about doing so in practice.

Unpaid travel time and seemingly illogical rotas were taken as further evidence of managers' distance and lack of understanding of the realities of working in community care.

“If I've been out for an appointment I normally can't spare the petrol to drive back across town to go home, so I'll just sit and wait in my car for two, maybe three hours. I spend my life in my car.”

Female community carer, Grimsby

“I'll get my rota and I'll start really early but then with a whopping great gap in the middle. So I'll have to get the kids up at the crack of dawn to go to school but then I'm sat there twiddling my thumbs by ten. At the office they know I've got kids – it's like they almost can't be bothered to understand.”

Female community carer, Grimsby

Lack of trust in carers and the 'bruised' status of the industry

The issue of trust was highlighted by a minority of care workers as a major challenge facing care, and particularly as a barrier to attracting people to the job. Strikingly, rather than describing anger about portrayals of the care sector in the media, most care workers who were concerned about the status of the profession alluded to embarrassment and helplessness.

“Sometimes when people ask me what I do for my job and I say I'm a carer I feel a slight bit of embarrassment, because of things in the news. It's not the kind of job where someone would think, 'Oh, they're a care worker, brilliant.'”

Female care home worker, Eastleigh

“It's people outside the care industry that tend to look down on you and think, you just wipe people's bums for a living, but there's a lot more to it than that, there's rules, regulations, policies, procedures to follow, it's a lot more difficult than people think.”

Female care home worker, Stockport

Pen portrait of a low-paid, low-income care worker

The pen portrait below is based on an amalgamation of quotations and comments from across the focus groups, and is designed to bring to life the experiences and challenges associated with low-paid, low-income work in care.

Pen portrait 2: 'Sandra'

Sandra has worked as a community support worker for the past 20 years. She first went into the job because she had young children and wanted some flexibility with her hours and to work close to home. While the day-to-day realities of Sandra's job are tough – 'sometimes I'll just go home at the end of the day and cry because it's so hard' – she says that she loves feeling like she's helping people, and that she could never leave because she'd be 'letting down' her clients, who have come to really know and trust her.

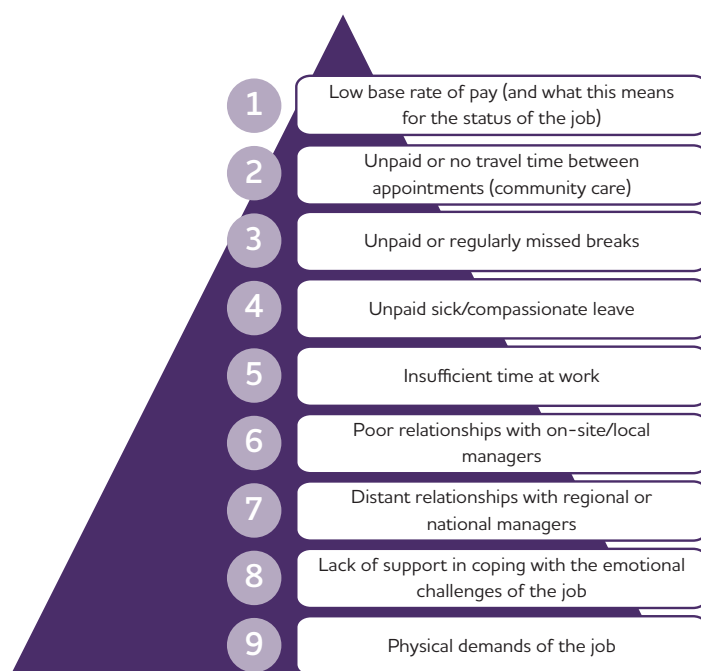
She also can't imagine doing anything else: the only next step she feels she could take is to become a senior support worker, but she says this isn't worth it 'for a 20p pay rise and a chance you'll go to prison if you mess up someone's medication'. Nursing feels totally out of reach – Sandra isn't sure she'd be up to the qualifications, let alone about whether she'd get any help to pay for them. She does feel like she receives a lot of training, which is helpful, but this is about refreshing her current skills rather than helping her progress: 'We'll do the same course every year.'

Sandra says that she feels that she does an important job, but that this isn't reflected in the way the job is viewed by other people. She's acutely aware that she is paid the minimum wage, and is under the impression that 'we're paid less than bin men'. She believes that this has a direct impact on the calibre of the people who decide to work in care, and says she hates doing double-ups (an appointment in which she has to work alongside another carer rather than on her own) because she's never sure if the other carer she's sent to work with will know what they're doing.

Conclusions

Overall, care workers were able to identify a hierarchy of day-to-day challenges that they saw as most pressing in their work:

Figure 2: Hierarchy of day-to-day challenges identified by care workers



5 EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS BY SECTOR: RETAIL

This chapter focuses on what factors retail workers considered to be important in determining a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ job. It includes an overview of how they experienced and prioritised these factors, and how they thought and talked about their jobs.

Overview

Describing their overarching attitudes to work, in common with those working in hospitality, low-paid, low-income retail workers frequently framed their jobs as a convenient, flexible way to pay the bills and support their families. Very few retail workers reported much attachment to their job or their employer company beyond this, particularly those working in supermarkets or in other retailers that tend to sell low-cost items in bulk. Perhaps unsurprisingly, across the sample, the retail workers who tended to be most passionate about their jobs and their employer company’s brand generally worked for retailers selling luxury or high-end items, such as clothing and cosmetics.

Unlike hospitality workers, and particularly carers, however, retail workers were more conscious of their employer company’s financial performance. In focus groups, they were keenly aware of the current pressures facing the industry, which they attributed to two major factors: the impact of the recession on consumer spending, and the impact of the growth of online retail on high street shops. Employers in the sector were seen to communicate these challenges directly to their staff, on top of media coverage about the ‘decline of the high street’.

Without exception, low-paid retail workers could describe how their employer company is performing financially – with many perceived to be struggling – and most were conscious of the significance of staff costs to the company’s bottom line.

“I work at a camera shop so we’re competing with the internet. People come in and ask us to price match.”

Female retail worker, Preston

“People’s shopping habits have changed. The economy might be getting better but people are looking for bargains.”

Female retail worker, Slough

“The problem is that when sales aren’t good everything else is scrutinised heavily. Wages are the biggest cost for a retail company, so cutting these will have the biggest impact.”

Male retail worker, Slough

However, awareness of these challenges did not necessarily leave staff sympathetic to their employers, especially as most were feeling the impacts directly. Almost all participants in discussion groups had seen reductions in shifts and staffing, leaving them with fewer hours per week (and consequently less pay), and more stress when they are at work. They had also noted an increase in the number and difficulty of targets set by head office and area managers, including sales targets and customer service scores.

“My company say that they have done really well but they’re not giving us anything. Some months I barely earn anything extra because they’ve taken more off the list of things we can get.”

Female retail worker, Preston

Factors identified by workers as making a good or a bad job in retail

In common with hospitality and care workers, retail workers also tended to focus on flexibility and interaction with others as one of the key factors making a good job in their sector, with low pay, being on their feet and poor management as intrinsic to a bad job.

In addition to the factors identified by low-paid, low-income workers across the three sectors, retail workers also specified the following.

Unachievable targets set by employers

Retail workers were acutely aware of the pressures facing the high street and their respective employer company. They perceived the setting of increasingly difficult targets – to be achieved by fewer and fewer staff – as employers’ response these challenges. In conversations with retail workers about off-site management, it was evident that this response tended to fuel an ‘us and them’ mentality.

“All they want is their targets and they don’t know how hard that is.”

Female retail worker, Slough

Boredom at work

Retail workers were also the most likely of all sectors to mention feeling bored or unfulfilled as part of their day at work, particularly those without any personal interest or connection to their employer company's brand or products.

"I work in a shop selling like stationery and office supplies. It's not something you can really get passionate about."

Female retail worker, Slough

Pen portrait of a low-paid, low-income retail worker

The pen portrait below is based on an amalgamation of quotations and comments from across the focus groups, and designed to bring to life the experiences and challenges associated with low-paid, low-income work in retail.

Pen portrait 3: 'Rachel'

Rachel has worked in a fashion retailer on her local high street for the past three years. While it's not what she imagined she'd be doing – at school she always saw herself as doing beauty or going into hairdressing – it's 'just a job' that pays the bills and gives her a great company discount. Rachel has so much going on as a single parent, trying to keep up a busy social life (whenever her mum can look after her toddler daughter), work feels like a minor part of her life. 'I care about my little girl, my family, my mates and having fun, in that order. Work would be way down the list.'

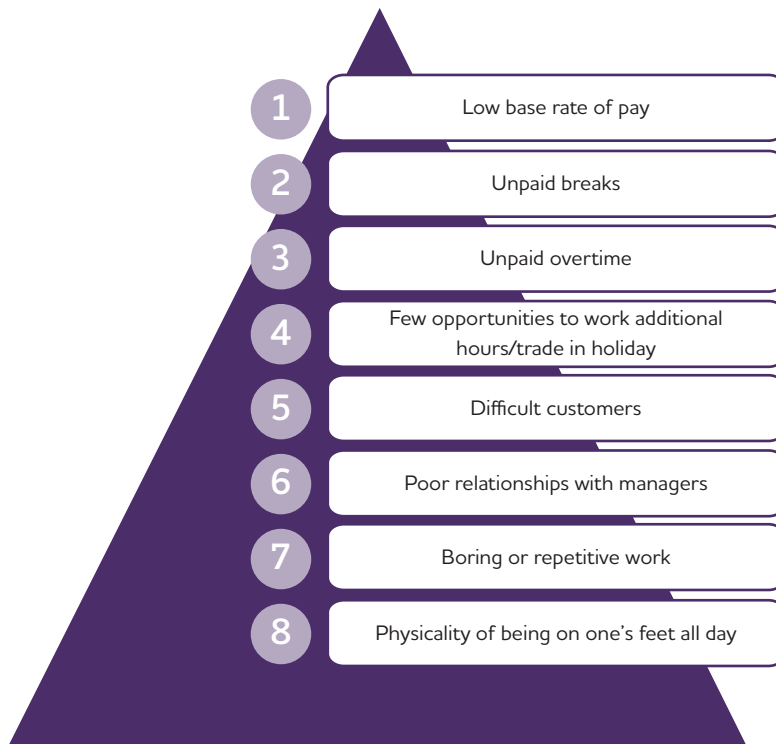
Rachel likes to switch off from work because day-to-day, it can be really stressful. She and her colleagues keep hearing that her company is doing worse every year – from social media and the internet, but also from her manager, who she feels is becoming obsessed with meeting targets. These seem ever harder to achieve when there are often only two or three members of staff to look after the shop floor; this means that Rachel is always on her feet and that she only really gets a break if she sneaks out for a cigarette. She says, 'I don't know how they in their castle in the sky come up with these crazy targets when there's barely enough staff to serve the customers and pick clothes up off the floor. It's like they've never seen what it's like on a typical day here'.

She's worried that she seems to be getting fewer shifts than when she started, but Rachel still always gets more than the 10 hours a week for which she's contracted. Besides, with the high street like it is, Rachel tells herself, she's lucky to have a job at all, and she's only going to work in a shop until she finds something 'proper' to do. That's what she always tells herself when she walks past the phone shop next door that's been empty since it went into administration a couple of months ago.

Conclusions

Overall, retail workers identified a hierarchy of day-to-day challenges that they saw as most pressing in their work (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3: Hierarchy of day-to-day challenges identified by retail workers



6 EXPLORING INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE LOW-PAID WORK

This chapter explores low-paid workers' spontaneous ideas for improving work, their reactions to a wide range of tested initiatives to improve work, and their thoughts on how employers should communicate positive change to the low-paid workforce. It also sets out a number of case studies from low-paid employers, highlighting potential areas of best practice in the hospitality, care and retail sectors.

Spontaneous ideas for improving work

For workers across all three sectors, when asked what would most improve their working lives, an increase in pay was usually front of mind. However, retail workers in particular tended to be very sceptical that this would ever happen, given the current pressures facing the high street. Notably, while awareness among low-paid workers that they were paid on or close to the minimum wage was very high, none was aware that the NMW was due to increase in October 2014.

Only a small number of low-paid workers had heard or read about the Living Wage in the media. Even among those who had, there was considerable confusion: several believed that the Living Wage applied only to London, while others assumed it was a government initiative. Once low-paid workers were introduced to the concept of the Living Wage, engagement with the concept was high, universally. Many workers who had not previously heard the term before the discussion group were using it freely in their conversations about what would make a good employer.

Once low-paid workers were introduced to the concept of the Living Wage, engagement with the concept was high, universally.

“So the Living Wage must be the government saying that, actually, the minimum wage isn’t enough for people to live on and get by at all.”

Male hospitality worker, Eastleigh

Strongly related to pay, recognising and recompensing low-paid workers’ time more fairly was also felt to be extremely important in improving work. In most groups, the issues of paid breaks and overtime were raised spontaneously, as was paid sick leave (beyond statutory pay). Community care workers consistently mentioned paid travel time as one of the most immediate means of improving work.

Almost all low-paid workers’ ranked pay a top priority when they thought about ways in which their work could be improved. In discussion groups there was also a significant appetite for improvements in relationships and communication. Strikingly, in almost every single discussion, workers across all three sectors suggested, unprompted, that ‘people from head office should come and spend a day working with us’ in order to understand the realities of working on the front line.

“Management should be made to work on the floor more. They are always quick to complain but they need to come on the floor and see what is actually happening. The people that manage care homes should train to be carers.”

Female care home worker, Eastleigh

However, beyond pay and a more hands-on and understanding management, workers struggled to identify initiatives that would most improve their working lives. For care workers and hospitality workers, this tended to reflect low levels of knowledge about what might be available to them beyond their specific place of work. For retail workers, a major barrier was their deeply ingrained scepticism of employer motivations – particularly in a recession – and a cynicism that things would ever change.

Tested initiatives for improving work

In each discussion group, as well as asking low-paid workers to think spontaneously about what might improve their working lives, a number of potential initiatives for improving work were tested and explored. These initiatives were developed from a set of recommendations in Philpott’s 2014 report *Rewarding work for low-paid workers* and *John Kennedy’s care home enquiry* (2014) and are set out in Table 2 below.

In the discussion groups, low-paid workers sorted through and discussed each of these initiatives in groups of two or three, before sorting the ideas in order of preference. Each group fed back on their preferred initiatives, explaining their reasoning and the perceived potential impact of these ideas, including feeling more secure and confident in their jobs and, by extension, their personal lives.

Table 2: Initiatives tested among workers

Initiative	Sector	Description
Pay the Living Wage	All	Raising wages to the Living Wage (set at £7.65 an hour in the UK at the time of the research)
Work-related training	All	Training that gives employees new skills to enable them to apply for promotion
Job rotation	All	Allowing employees to try out different jobs within their organisation to enhance their skills
Flexible working	All	For example, part-time working, term-time working, annualised hours
Staff discount	All	Either in-store products or other services, such as supermarkets, clothes shops, DIY, holidays
Assistance with childcare	All	Such as on-site crèche or vouchers to help with childcare costs
Financial advice	All	For example, offer advice on money/debt/benefits
Financial assistance	All	This might include salary advances, low-cost loans or saving schemes (such as help saving for Christmas)
Assistance with transport costs	All	For example, giving access to a company car scheme, discounted train and bus passes or season ticket loans
Medical	All	Offering extra days, paid sick leave, death in service/life assurance, access to a medical insurance scheme, assistance with dentist or optician costs, access to a counselling service
Holiday	All	Either extra days holiday or the option to buy/sell holiday
Maternity/paternity	All	Better maternity/paternity/care leave
Pensions	All	A more generous pension offer
Involvement in decision-making	All	Involve employees in decisions about the future of the company and their job/department, through a trade union, staff council or some other means
Employee support	All	Schemes to provide peer support, such as employee support networks or mentoring arrangements
Free or low-cost meals at work	Hospitality and care home workers only	Provide low-cost or free food at work
Promoting the profession	Care home workers and community carers only	Improve trust in, and status of, the profession so it is recognised as an important job
More time at work	Care home workers and community carers only	Increase the amount of time carers are able to spend with their clients/service users so that they have enough time to care for them without feeling rushed or overstretched
A positive working environment	Care home workers and community carers only	Establish good working relationships with managers/supervisors, so carers can share problems and know that a mistake will not automatically be seen as 'evil'
Pay for travel time	Community carers only	Pay for all the time carers are working, including travel between appointments

Retail workers' responses to the tested initiatives

Of the three sectors, low-paid retail workers were markedly the most cynical towards the tested initiatives. This seemed to reflect:

- retail workers' deeply engrained cynicism of their employers and their motivations;
- their strong understanding of the financial challenges facing the high street.

They considered it highly improbable that retail employers would ever spend resource on introducing initiatives that were unlikely to bring any immediate benefit to company finances. This often proved an insurmountable barrier to considering and discussing initiatives to improve their work.

"I would not want [financial advice] from work, because I'd be worried that if I said something that it would be leaked to somebody else."

Female retail worker, Preston

"On the high street they are so struggling that they are not bothered about trying to motivate their employees and get them to stay. They are just trying to grow as fast as they can and cut costs as much as they can. It's a bad cycle. People just want to move on and leave."

Male retail worker, Slough

For retail workers, initiatives tended to fall into four categories.

- 1** *'Hygiene' factors – basics expected from any retail employer* This included staff discounts, which are viewed as standard practice in retail, and flexible working, which was usually one of the key reasons why they worked in the retail sector to begin with. Retail workers also tended to include employee support schemes, such as mentoring, in this category, saying that it is common practice to be paired up with a 'buddy' when first starting in a new job in the sector. There was little acknowledgement of the concept that mentoring or networking schemes would bring any benefit to a retail worker who had been in the job for some time.

"There's other things that would make me want to work somewhere more. The discount is a nice perk but it doesn't necessarily make my working life better."

Male retail worker, Slough

"The best thing about my job is flexibility. I do the school run in between shifts, then in my lunch hour I pick them back up."

Female retail worker, Slough

- 2** *Positive factors appreciated and expected from 'fairer' retail employers* These included work-related training beyond induction, which was

particularly welcomed by younger, more ambitious retail workers. While most felt that they did receive training in their workplace at the moment, several were not paid for hours spent in training, and others were wary of ‘training’ as means of employers shifting further responsibility onto staff in order to cut hours further.

Within this category, retail workers also talked about job rotation, which they often viewed in terms of reducing boredom at work rather than necessarily building their skills. They also welcomed flexibility around ‘cashing in’ holiday for additional hours – a source of contention between several retail workers and their employers – and, some said, in the decision-making at a micro level (e.g. in store). Having a say at a macro (company) level was popular with some workers as a way of tackling employee dissatisfaction with ‘poor’ decisions made by head office. However, retail workers were very clear that this should not result in additional workload or stress.

“Any holidays we don’t take, we don’t get paid for. It just goes. I like the idea of selling it. Twenty-eight days is enough.”

Male retail worker (1), Slough

“It could make you feel like you’re part of the company. If I came up with something and it went worldwide, I would feel great.”

Male retail worker (2), Slough

3 *Initiatives workers would appreciate but cannot imagine being offered*
Paying the Living Wage was perceived to be the strongest example of this, but retail workers also tended to be sceptical that employers would ever provide assistance with childcare, maternity or paternity leave beyond any statutory requirements (irrelevant to those on zero- or low-hour contracts), and assistance with transport costs, much as they would appreciate these additional forms of support.

“Private companies would have to dip into their own pockets. They are not going to do that.”

Male retail worker, Slough

“There was a long time ago when a lot of companies had that [free or low-cost, on-site childcare]. It was free and the kids got free food. You don’t get anything for free now.”

Female retail worker, Preston

4 *Support not wanted from any employer*
Reflecting very low levels of trust in their employers, and cynicism about their motivations. Low-paid retail workers regarded several initiatives as being potential attempts by an employer to gain sensitive information about their employees (including information relating to their finances and health) or to ‘tie them down’ to the company. Initiatives included in this category included financial advice, financial assistance, pensions and medical insurance.

“What’s the point of going to employers for help when you have Citizens Advice?”

Female retail worker, Slough

“That’s getting too involved in the personal side of your life. It’s too much for your employer to know. You wouldn’t want your employer to know that you are in debt.”

Male retail worker, Slough

Hospitality workers’ responses to the tested initiatives

In comparison with retail workers, low-paid employees of major hospitality companies were much more open to the tested initiatives. However, as for retail workers, and unlike care workers, most hospitality workers had already benefited from some of the tested initiatives and so were able to dismiss a minority as ‘hygiene’ factors.

For hospitality workers, therefore, initiatives tended to fall into four categories.

1 *‘Hygiene’ factors: absolute minimum expected, which do not afford the employer company any particular goodwill*

As for retail, this included flexible working – again, viewed as one of the clear benefits of the job and shift work in general – but also a staff discount, free or discounted meals at work, and workplace training.

However, some hospitality workers did see scope for improvements in the training they received at work, including, for example, training in ‘soft skills’ such as communication and people management.

“We do get training which isn’t too bad but not in dealing with people. We need communication skills. Training for calming people down even”

Male hospitality worker, Eastleigh

“The discounts that we get are not really helping you. It just means we get a discount if we are going shopping and we can get a free meal at work. Something like giving you a discount towards your heating bills would be much more useful I think.”

Male hospitality worker, Eastleigh

2 *Initiatives that would directly impact on workers’ lives, and elevate an employer to going ‘above and beyond’ for its employees*

In this category, low-paid workers talked primarily about an employer paying the Living Wage, but also paid sick leave, being able to sell holiday, financial assistance with travel costs and financial support with childcare.

Of all the initiatives tested, these were consistently the most popular among hospitality workers.

“We get four weeks’ holiday and because we are on rotas, it’s usually really hard to find a time when you can even take the holiday. I would way rather go to work and get paid.”

Female hospitality worker (1), Essex

“Or they could have it that if you are ill you could take it off from some of your holiday. We can’t do that at the moment because holiday needs to be signed off.”

Female hospitality worker (2), Essex

“The Living Wage one is the one that we need most. It would mean that you didn’t need any help or topping up from the government. That’s the one that would make a really big difference to my life.”

Male hospitality worker, Eastleigh

3 *Forms of support that could have a positive impact on workers’ lives, but which would only be accepted from a trusted employer*

While low-paid hospitality workers tended to say that financial advice, assistance and employee support could make a major difference to their lives, some retail workers were suspicious as to the kind of personal information their employers might be able to gather were they to apply for these initiatives. Hospitality workers tended to say that the potential compromise of their privacy was unlikely to be ‘worth it’ in the long run.

“I don’t get who would actually give you the advice? There’s only so many things your manager could do or be trained in. And wouldn’t they need to know lots about your personal business to help you? Who knows what they would do with that information.”

Male hospitality worker, Stockport

“There’s no advice they could give me that I haven’t looked for already. When you’ve got a mortgage, no-one helps you at all. I haven’t paid my mortgage in two months because I can’t afford to pay it and I get no help at all. If I was renting then they would help you. I would get paid more if I signed on.”

Female hospitality worker, Essex

4 *Initiatives not regarded as having any direct or immediate impact on workers’ lives, so not particularly valued in an employer*

These included initiatives surrounding pensions and access to private medical insurance, neither of which employees could imagine yielding any direct benefit.

Hospitality workers also found it difficult to conceptualise having a greater role in decision-making beyond their specific workplace (i.e. at a company level), but welcomed the idea of being able to feed in more of their own ideas at a micro level. More opportunities for job rotation also tended to be placed in this category: in particular, hospitality workers in the kitchen generally valued the fact that they had built up an area of expertise, and could not see the value in rotating to front-of-house roles.

“I just can’t afford to put my money into a pension. I’m struggling enough as it is now.”

Female hospitality worker, Essex

“The NHS is perfectly good, never had any problems, so why on earth would I need this medical insurance?”

Female hospitality worker, Grimsby

Care workers’ responses to the tested initiatives

Of the three sectors, care workers were most open to the idea of receiving support from their employers. Notably, they were also least likely of the three sectors to benefit from any of the tested initiatives in the workplace already. This was particularly true of employees from private, for-profit care providers, which represented the majority of the sample.

For care workers, initiatives tended to fall into the following three categories:

1 *Initiatives that would offer them greater security in their lives outside work, and which they would welcome most from an employer*

Paying the Living Wage topped this list, but assistance with childcare, paid sick leave and, for community carers, paid travel time, were also very popular. These were almost unanimously chosen by care workers in their top three initiatives, and were felt to address the greatest inequities faced by those working in care, as follows:

- that they receive the same pay as jobs that they consider to be less skilled and less emotionally draining, such as cleaning and retail work;
- that care workers are required to take time off work for even relatively minor illness, but do not receive any more than the statutory sick pay for the first few days for doing so;
- that some community carers are not paid for travel time in between appointments – and often not supported with travel costs – even though this is a major, inevitable requirement of the job.

“If we were actually paid when we were off sick that would be such a huge weight off my shoulders. I panic if I can tell I’ve got even a cold coming on because I cannot afford not to work.”

Female care home worker, Eastleigh

“Getting paid for travel time doesn’t feel like a bonus or a perk from our employer, it feels like a basic human right. But nine times out of ten in care it doesn’t happen. So that’s definitely the one I’d pick.”

Female community care worker, Grimsby

2 *Initiatives to make carers feel better supported at work, which formed a second tier in care workers’ priorities*

This included having more time at work, better work-related training, more involvement in decision-making and a more supportive working environment. These four initiatives were considered to be valuable

in helping care workers to do a better job, though they usually failed to make it into workers' top two or three initiatives when up against initiatives related to pay.

“If we had some say in decision-making that would make me feel more involved, more valued in the workplace”

Female care home worker, Stockport

“Having that kind of relationship with my manager where I don't feel scared to talk to her and I can even come up with ideas for things we could do better would make me feel a lot happier at work. At the moment I'm considering leaving because she makes my life so difficult.”

Female care home worker, Essex

3 *Forms of support which do not appear to provide any short-term benefit to care workers' lives, either in or outside of work*

These included pensions, financial assistance and financial advice. This also included initiatives such as a staff discount and free meals at work, which care workers struggled to imagine working in practice.

“I didn't pick pensions because that just feels way, way too far off to me”

Female care home worker, Eastleigh

“I'm not sure why I'd want a free meal at my work. They really don't look all that nice and when would I actually get to eat it? I'm on my feet from the minute I arrive till the minute I leave.”

Female care home worker, Essex

Communicating initiatives

When asked to think spontaneously of ways of describing an employer that introduced their top-ranking initiatives, low-paid workers consistently used positive positioning. Many suggestions focused around fairness or an employer simply being 'better', for example, 'understanding', 'empathetic', 'caring' or 'human'. Positioning around work-life balance was also popular.

“It's about being compassionate, not treating your workforce as a commodity, And people-focused. Someone who says that they're going to do something and then they do it.”

Male hospitality worker, Eastleigh

For retail workers in particular, whose cynicism means that they tend to struggle to engage with ideas to improve low-paid work, communicating 'why' is likely to be as important as communicating 'what'. Many felt that they would need to know their employers' rationale and motivations for

introducing initiatives to improve the workplace, and felt that making the business case that ‘happy staff lead to happy customers’ was far more credible than one that simply focused on improving on workers’ well-being ‘for the sake of it’.

“When you’re recognised for doing a good job, that’s worth more than money sometimes. The customers feel that off you.”

Male retail worker, Preston

Best practice case studies in improving work and communicating support for employees

Importantly, across the discussion groups, several low-paid, low-income workers were vocal about the fact that they did feel supported by their employers and, consequently, invested in their jobs. Their experiences are highlighted below as possible case studies of best practice employers.

Case study 1: ‘Matt’

Matt, 21, works in a clothes retailer in Windsor. He lives with his partner and his one year old child.

Having left school at 16 he’d worked in a number of different shops, without really enjoying any of them, and joined his current company because he loves the clothes.

Matt couldn’t be more positive about working at his current company – since joining, he’s found out that the company is still owned by its three founders, thinks they’ve created a brilliant, fun atmosphere across the company and says they treat their staff amazingly well.

‘From area managers and the owners themselves we got a lot of feedback as a store. There are 2,000 stores across the world but they still have time to give feedback to each one. A lot of companies don’t have time for the little guys.’

He loves that they employ and promote from within the company, that they provide high quality residential training (all paid for) and that head office suggests new policies to stores rather than demanding that everyone works in the same way.

His pay still isn’t great, but he’s already been promoted to a shift supervisor in the two years he’s been there, and is optimistic about his chances of continuing to progress within the company.

‘When I joined, I didn’t know how good a company it was to work for. I just liked the clothes and I wanted the discount. But now I can actually see a career for myself there.’

Case study 2: 'Sue'

Sue lives in Preston and is in her 50s. She's recently divorced, has worked in retail for as long as she can remember, and has jumped around across quite a few different companies.

She's had jobs she's enjoyed in the past, but recently she joined a high-street pharmacy as a make-up advisor and has never been happier – she loves her job, advising customers on what make-up suits them best.

Shortly after joining the company, Sue confessed to her manager that she had got into real money troubles – falling behind on her rent and struggling to keep up with debt repayments. Her manager told her about the employees' benevolent fund, through which the company helped Sue to pay off her debts, helped stagger her rent repayments and advised her on managing her finances and dealing with the stress of her situation.

Sue was astonished that an employer could be so generous, particularly to a new member of staff, and plans to stay working at the company for as long as possible.

'For a company to look after its employees like that – it really makes you feel valued. I can't thank them enough, and it's meant that I work harder at my current job, even now I'm in my 50s, than any job I've ever had before.'

Case study 3: 'Ben'

Ben is in his early 30s, with a young family, and works at a pub on the outskirts of Manchester. When he applied for a job there he just considered the pub to be his 'local' and never really thought about who owned it, but soon after joining became aware that the pub is part of a major chain, and of the benefits that being employed a big company can bring.

Ben wanted to work in a pub because of the flexibility of shift working, especially as he now has to share childcare duties with his partner. In his first few weeks, he asked a colleague if he could swap a shift on his rota, and they told him about the pub chain's Facebook page for employees.

The Facebook page had started out as an informal way for colleagues to contact each other about swapping shifts, but had soon grown in size, with members from all over the country.

What really impressed Ben is that a representative from his employer company themselves was a regular contributor to the page, and that they used it as an opportunity to tell their employees what was going on in the company, and to ask for feedback about what was working well and what was working less well.

'Talking to you all here today [in this focus group], it sounds like you have no idea what your employer is thinking. Credit to [my company], they do get off their high horse and actually talk to the staff in a way that we all feel comfortable.'

Of the three sectors, care workers were least likely to share these kinds of experience of best practice, partly because they were much more reticent than workers from other sectors to name and identify their employers. However, those who were more positive about their jobs tended to describe having opportunities to give honest, often anonymous, feedback that resulted in action by their employer, and their employer taking action to make their lives easier. For example, one care home worker described being able to start her shift half an hour later than everyone else so that she could take her children to school, and another had moved from monthly to weekly pay, making her household budget much easier to manage.

“We’ve just changed from monthly pay to weekly pay. That side of things I can’t fault. It’s much easier that way”

Female care home worker, Essex

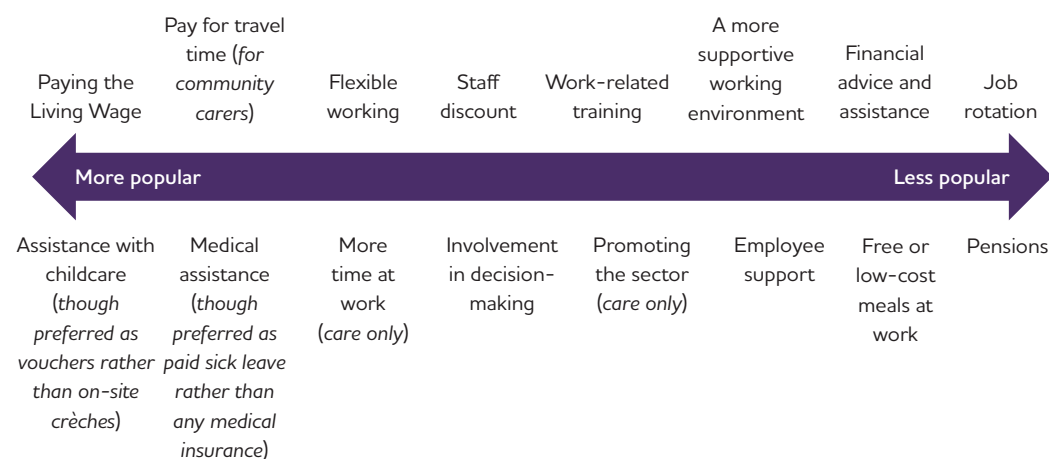
Conclusions

Looking at the spectrum of how workers across the three sectors tended to characterise the tested initiatives – and irrespective of how likely or unlikely they feel that their employers are to introduce initiatives to improve work – the most popular initiatives spoke to a greater need for security in their lives outside work, and resonated strongly with the precarious day-to-day experience of low-paid work. In particular, these included paying the Living Wage, support with childcare, paid sick leave and (where appropriate) paid travel time.

Meanwhile, initiatives that focused on improving well-being at work, rather than in workers’ personal lives, were consistently rated as second tier ‘nice to have’ rather than ‘need to have’ initiatives. This reflects the fact that for many low-paid workers, work is often just one small element of their lives and very rarely central to their existence or identity. For workers across all three sectors, initiatives which were perceived as providing a long-term, rather than immediate, benefit such as pensions were least popular among all but older low-paid workers. These workers tended to regret that they had only started to think about saving for the future now, pointing to a potential opportunity for awareness-raising about the benefit of pensions to low-paid workers.

The most popular initiatives spoke to a greater need for security in their lives outside work, and resonated strongly with the precarious day-to-day experience of low-paid work.

Figure 4: Spectrum of initiatives selected by workers



7 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this final chapter we set out some conclusions and potential recommendations to explore what these research findings mean for employers of low-paid, low-income workers, policy-makers and society at large.

Conclusions

The experience of low-paid work is insecure and precarious

For low-paid, low-income workers across all three sectors, the combined effect of a whole host of factors common in low-paid work, including high staff turnover, low- or zero-hour contracts (even if workers aren't on these contracts themselves) and constantly changing targets and 'red tape', is a feeling of insecurity and precariousness in their work.

This has important implications for the way in which low-paid workers tend to think about their jobs and their lives. Many actively describe themselves as 'living in the moment' and coping with day-to-day or week-to-week challenges rather than thinking ahead to the future. This means that factors such as progression do not tend to feature spontaneously in conversations about what makes a 'good' or a 'bad' job, particularly in the retail and hospitality sectors. Moreover, when probed on their attitudes to progression in the workplace, many low-paid workers say that they see themselves as 'better off sticking where I am' because of the stresses and inflexibility associated with promotion for what is perceived to be very little additional pay.

Money does matter to low-paid workers

While pay is not the 'be all and end all' and certainly not the only factor driving satisfaction at work, for all low-paid workers it is the element of their jobs that they like least, and the one they would most like to change in order to feel happier at work. This is because, inevitably, pay has a huge impact on workers' lives, their emotional well-being and their relationships with others. While low-paid, low-income workers would never self-identify with living in 'poverty', most do readily admit that they are seriously struggling with

the day-to-day cost of living. Most low-paid workers put their family above everything else in life, and had often opted for shift working because they were having to balance family demands, such as caring responsibilities; doing the best for their family with limited funds was a real source of worry for many.

Most low-paid workers considered pay to be a reflection of their status, both within the sector and in society more broadly. Low-paid workers tended to be acutely conscious of the fact that they are paid on, or close to, the minimum wage, which they took as evidence of their employer putting as little economic value on them and their work as possible. Not only did this make low-paid workers feel undervalued, but also they believed that this had a major bearing on the kind of people that their employers were able to attract to the sector. Care workers – who tended to have little conception of the financial pressures facing private care providers and believed that care companies should select carefully the kind of people that work in care – found this particularly difficult to accept.

Pay was not just about pay, it was also about 'fair' recognition of workers' time

Importantly, increasing employees' base rate of pay was not perceived to be the only way in which low-paid workers could be paid 'better' or 'more fairly'. Some of the most commonly mentioned challenges across all three sectors included unpaid breaks (which are often missed anyway), unpaid time in training, unpaid overtime and no paid sick or compassionate leave beyond the statutory minimum. For community carers specifically, unpaid travel time was also included among these challenges.

The initiatives for improving work that had the most resonance were often about improving low-paid workers' lives outside work

For most low-paid workers, work was a means to an end and often relatively peripheral to workers' lives and identities. This was particularly true of retail and hospitality workers, who were less likely to report an emotional attachment and sense of worth from their work than care workers. Notably, therefore, the most popular initiatives for improving work among low-paid workers themselves tended to be those that offered greater security in their lives outside work, usually financially, through increased pay, paid sick leave and support with childcare.

Importantly, however, low-paid workers tend to look for more security from their work without having to reveal personal information to their employers. Trust in employers to provide financial advice and assistance was very low, even though many low-paid workers said that this would make a difference to their lives, because they assumed that their employer would have a vested interest in finding out more about their circumstances or in trying to 'bind' them to the company. Consequently, an employer seeking to go above and beyond by supporting its employees in this way would need to communicate carefully its motivations for providing this support (see below), and reassure employees of anonymity or confidentiality should they take up such support.

Improving low-paid workers' lives at work was most often about improving communication

Low-paid workers across all three sectors reported their relationships with their immediate, on-site supervisors or managers as one of the most important factors driving satisfaction or dissatisfaction at work. Those who have poor relationships with on-site managers tended to feel powerless to

change anything in their workplace let alone their employer company, and their response to this challenge was often to say that they were looking for another job in the sector. Consequently, opportunities to have a greater say in decision-making and to work alongside their managers as colleagues rather than employees tended to be universally popular.

At a macro level, most low-paid workers felt that they had no relationship with company management beyond area managers. Consequently, there was a tendency to attribute a whole host of challenges at work – particularly understaffing, targets and paperwork – to senior management failing to understand how they work at the coalface.

Low-paid workers employed by companies with direct channels of communication with their employees – either on-site through very regular meetings or off-site through more informal channels such as social media, and who communicated the reasoning behind major decisions – tended to speak in very different terms about their jobs and their employers.

Low-paid workers responded best to the business case

Low-paid workers across all three sectors were passionate proponents of the argument that ‘happy staff equals happy customers’, believing strongly that their well-being at, and outside, work translates directly into profit (in retail and hospitality) or the quality of care (in the care sector). Moreover, some low-paid workers in the retail sector said that they would be actively suspicious of an employer who tried to introduce initiatives to make workers feel more supported. As a result, it will be critical for an employer seeking to introduce any initiatives to improve low-paid workers’ well-being in or outside work to communicate clearly the case for change in the business terms, which low-paid workers recognised as driving the company.

Recommendations

These conclusions point to some clear opportunities for employers across all three sectors to address low-paid work by starting from the priorities and perceptions of their front-line staff summarised below.

Assessing the base rate of pay in relation to the minimum wage

The low base rate of pay was prominent in employees’ minds, and that better pay translated to ‘better’ work. It could be extremely difficult for an employer in the retail, hospitality or care sectors to demonstrate that they are taking the well-being and concerns of low-paid workers seriously without some attention to remuneration. First and foremost, this is about the base rate of pay, and also about how time is recompensed.

Evaluating how time is recompensed

Low-paid workers were resigned to the fact that low pay was a common factor in the retail, care and hospitality sectors. They found it much harder to accept that they should not be paid for overtime or for breaks when their contracts and shifts were based on working a certain number of hours, rather than completing a certain amount of work. The first step to ‘fair’ pay could be about addressing unpaid overtime and breaks.

Exploring options for paid sick leave

For all low-paid, low-income workers, but particularly those who worked in care or hospitality, for whom hygiene and the well-being of service users and customers has to be paramount, unpaid sick leave (beyond initial statutory

pay) was a real source of worry. Might there be opportunities to enable employees to exchange unused holiday for sick leave, or a support fund for workers who need to take time off for medical treatment?

Assessing whether zero- or low-hour contracts are being used in the 'right' way

Low-paid employees across all three sectors were clear that they really value the flexibility offered by their jobs, and saw some mutual benefits in low-hour contracts. However, there is also a strong belief that some employers use low-hour contracts to their advantage; for example, as a way of forcing out underperforming employees. Is there a potential opportunity to match employees to the kind of contract that is likely to fit best with their lives and best with the needs of the business?

Sense-checking targets and other internal communication

Across all three sectors, one of the biggest drivers of mistrust and distance from off-site management was the perception that targets were unrealistic and that the goalposts were always moving. Are targets set internally 'sense checked' for feasibility, for example, with a clearly broken down action plan or 'path to success'? Are missives from the top tested or piloted to understand how they will be interpreted and received by a member of staff on the front line? There could be real scope to improve internal relationships and build trust from the bottom up by re-focusing communication on the way that front-line employees think.

Rethinking or reframing what progression can look like

For companies for which internal progression is desirable, there is work to be done across all three sectors to reframe progression in a positive light, rather than as a pathway to more stress and less flexibility. Are there opportunities to communicate progression as about a staff member building and developing their skills in their current role (e.g. reframing being shadowed by a new member of staff as assisting with colleague training), as well as about promotion? Are the options for progression currently structured and communicated with a focus on what actually matters to employees (i.e. fitting their job around their lives and having a job that is secure)?

Communicating why

Low-paid, low-income workers' expectations of their employers were relatively low. In the retail sector in particular, mistrust of employers means that well-intentioned initiatives – such as financial support – can be misinterpreted. Therefore, any significant change in how employees are treated would need to be accompanied by a clear explanation of why new initiatives are being introduced; communicated directly but also potentially through the channels that some low-paid, low-income workers use and trust most, such as social media. Employees are likely to respond best to the business case arguments surrounding investment in staff to improve retention, and treating colleagues in the same way that customers or service users should be treated.

Considering what role employers should play (if any) in supporting staff in planning for the future

Low-paid, low-income workers tend to think in the present rather than ahead to the future. Plans for the future, and particularly financial planning and pensions, tend not to be priorities. For employers to play a role in supporting ageing employees (given the physicality of working in care, retail

and hospitality), then this support is likely to focus not only on providing workplace pension schemes but also on providing information and advice. For employers currently without pension schemes in place, auto-enrolment presents a clear opportunity to talk to staff about how and why they should be saving for the future.

Within the above context, there is also a clear role for policy-makers and unions to support employers in these areas, and also to consider:

- the striking lack of information available to many low-paid workers about alternative opportunities that might be available to them, and their rights in the workplace;
- how any future policy changes related to low-paid work – for example, around zero- or low-hour contracts – can be balanced with the need for flexibility, which was so important to many low-paid workers;
- the very mixed levels of knowledge about the role of unions and the benefits of union membership, particularly when low-paid, low-income workers often felt that they had very little money to spare.

Finally, there are some specific considerations to be drawn out for each sector:

Hospitality

- Evaluating whether higher base rates of pay to offset tips received by front-of-house and waiting staff are being extended to bar staff and all kitchen staff, including at junior levels.
- Assessing whether regulation on working conditions (including temperature in kitchens) is being upheld and, if not, better supporting staff to do this.
- Looking at safety training and support available for staff working in small teams or outlets late at night.

Care

- Introducing paid travel time for community carers where it is not already provided, and ensuring that this travel time is broadly reflective of the time they are likely to spend travelling in practice.
- Assessing the visibility and profile of off-site management to front-line staff, for example, by spending more time with carers on their rounds (though this will need to be positioned carefully as a company-wide ‘way of better understanding how things are working’, rather than as an inspection or a review).
- Assessing training and support provided to cope with physical or verbal aggression and with death, particularly for community carers visiting service users alone.
- Exploring opportunities to work collaboratively as a sector to defend the reputation of working in care and attract the right talent.
- Providing opportunities for carers to give genuinely anonymous feedback to improve the way things work, and to report any behaviour or actions they may be concerned about.

Retail

- Focusing attention on rebuilding trust in the employer brand and the company by assessing how news, change and targets are communicated within the business.
- Identifying opportunities to build engagement with the brand and the products to overcome challenges related to boredom at work.

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- Creating or building on opportunities for employees to feed back, with the aim of having an impact on the wider business – front-line staff often felt that they had a lot to offer, in terms of insight into customers and products, and can feel undermined when this does not seem to be taken into account in ‘orders’ coming from head office.
 - Recognising that initiatives, such as staff discounts, are welcomed but are considered the ‘norm’ in the sector. Employee discounts should not be viewed as evidence of an employer engaging with, and appreciating, its employees.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are very grateful to the participants in the research for giving up their time and for speaking so openly and honestly about their experiences.

Many thanks too go to Zoe Tyndall and Lucy Morrell who played an instrumental role in research design, moderation and analysis.

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BritainThinks is a young research consultancy set up by Deborah Mattinson, Viki Cooke and Ben Shimshon in 2010. BritainThinks' client base spans the public sector including government bodies and regulators, major corporates including McDonald's and British Gas, and leading charities such as Shelter.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has supported this project as part of its programme of research and innovative development projects, which it hopes will be of value to policy makers, practitioners and service users. The facts presented and views expressed in this report are, however, those of the author and not necessarily those of JRF.

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© BritainThinks 2015
First published 2015 by the Joseph
Rowntree Foundation
ISBN: 978 1 90958 674 1 (pdf)
Project managed and typeset by
Cambridge Publishing Management Limited

Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead
40 Water End
York YO30 6WP
www.jrf.org.uk