

# PERMANENT NIGHT WORKING: PATTERNS AND PROBLEMS

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## INTRODUCTION

The advent of the 24 hour society has resulted in a need for greater flexibility in working time patterns and, in many cases, an increase in night working (Kreitzman, 1999). In the twentieth century, night working was associated with manufacturing in larger plants where three eight hour shifts tended to be a typical pattern with full time employees alternating between early, middle and late shifts. Similar rotational shift patterns were also characteristic of public sector activities such as the health service and the police service (for example, in the health sector, Brooks, 2000 and, in the police service, Richbell et al, 1998). The problems rotational shift working presents for employees have been widely researched (see Muecke, 2005 for a review relating to medical care).

In the twenty first century, the increase in night working has been characteristic of a number of service sector organisations where, for example, contact centres providing advice and help 24/7 have grown considerably in importance. Further, over 10 years ago Warr (1996, cited in Ritson and Charlton, 2006) suggested that 10 per cent of European workers engaged in banking and finance work spent at least 25 per cent of their time working at night. Shoppers too, especially in grocery retailing, expect 24/7 service (Richbell and Kite, 2007). A feature of these more recently developed 24/7 services is that, rather than providing night services through a rotational shift system, employees are contracted to work permanently at night. Such permanent night workers are perhaps the group of employees who are most different from those who work day time hours from Monday – Friday.

The purpose of this research is to both establish the significance of permanent night workers and to explore the challenges faced by the HRM function in ensuring that employees on permanent nights in a 24/7 service organisation are both highly committed and able to maintain the quality service levels expected of the day staff. Despite the extensive research on shift working, workers on permanent nights do not appear to have been examined in any detail. The original contributions of this paper are two. First, it presents new data on the extent of permanent night working in the UK and second, it draws on evidence of shift working at night in the retail sector which has received surprisingly little attention in the literature despite its increasing importance.

The paper is in five parts. The first outlines the main issues surrounding permanent night workers whilst the second outlines the methodology. The third presents a new analysis of some Labour Force Survey (LFS) data whilst the fourth provides new survey evidence on permanent night workers in the retail sector. The fifth and final section highlights the wider HRM issues resulting from the findings.

## SHIFT WORK AND PERMANENT NIGHTS

### *Shift work*

The term 'shift work' has a number of interpretations but conventionally shift workers are part of that group of employees who work outside the standard working day and standard working week. The standard working day/week is usually associated with the Western office-centred practice of the mid twentieth century, assuming a working week

of Monday-Friday, eight hours per day, predominantly during daylight hours (McOrmond, 2004). Although the term 'standard working day' is commonly used, Wilson et al (2007, 163) argue that 'non-standard working hours such as shift work...are becoming the norm in industrialised Western societies'.

Shift working takes a variety of forms. As noted in the introduction, shift working is normally associated with rotational shifts within which individual employees work at different times in different weeks. For example, in 2002, 45 per cent of shift workers in the UK worked two shift and three shift systems. However, the available data suggest that many employees, undertaking shift work, work at the same (non-standard) time each week (Labour Market Trends, 2002, 506). The particular interest here is in employees who work on permanent nights which would typically include the hours between 22.00 and 06.00.

The different forms of shift work can be either compulsory or non-compulsory. Ritson and Charlton (2006, 133) draw attention to this distinction and observe that often 'employees have no choice as to the shift allocated to them...(but)...where employees can opt for different shifts the situation is different—but the literature does not emphasise this aspect'. Much permanent night work is non-compulsory and the individuals in such jobs can be characterised as 'self selecting night workers'. Jobs are advertised and those who wish to work permanent nights (or indeed, for example, weekends) apply for them. The possibility of working non-standard hours provides an opportunity for those who might otherwise withdraw from the labour market (Watson, 1994) as well as work opportunities which might match the work life balance of particular individuals. Admittedly, a critical perspective might argue that, from an individual employees viewpoint, working permanent nights might be regarded as compulsory because personal circumstances did not allow them to work standard hours or they were unable to find a job appropriate to their skills within a normal working day. However, from an HRM perspective, they are employees who choose to work at night and most permanent night workers probably fall into this category.

A final and important distinction is that between full-time and part-time permanent night workers. There can be marked variations in demand within consumer services available 24/7 and a typical HRM response to these demand variations is to hire permanent part time staff to cope with peak demands or to provide a service outside the standard day. Typically, permanent part time work at night would involve three or less eight hour night shifts (i.e. less than 30 hours per week). Working less than 30 hours is the definition of part-time working used by the UK government.

### ***Permanent nights and HRM***

Permanent night shift workers can present particular difficulties for human resource management in terms of integration and the development of commitment to an organisation as they are often without the opportunities of day workers for contact with the senior management team or with HRM managers and facilities and they are sometimes perceived as distant from the company's mainstream operations. Brewster (1998) points to the difficulty of communicating with a work force which came to work after general management had finished their duties and has emphasised the need for management to realise that twenty four hour working creates different employee groups who require different managerial approaches.

From a managerial perspective, permanent night shifts have a number of advantages. They avoid the need for complex rota systems and allow the organisation to offer individuals a wide choice of hours in which to work. The work force have chosen personally the times at which they wish to work and, where hours are self selected in

this way, the work force may be more committed and motivated than those forced to work nights on a rota system. Since in many service sector activities demand is less at night, the small self selected group can provide a reliable team of employees who enjoy working together at night on a regular basis.

However, permanent night workers do need to be managed carefully. It is possible that that managerial control is less (senior staff may not be duty); the group may be isolated from the day activities and fail to pick up on change and development in the wider organisation. Further, where permanent night worker numbers are small, it is difficult to provide for training and development in a cost effective manner.

From an employee perspective, the advantage of permanent nights is the fit with the employees' wider work-life balance. Most critically, compared with rotational shift systems there is no need to change family support arrangements from week to week which is necessary with rotational shifts. Against this advantage, employees on permanent nights may lack a full understanding of the wider roles within which their tasks are set, lack opportunities for development and training and, more practically, have inadequate canteen and social facilities (Harrington 1978).

Recognition of the special nature of permanent night workers is essential to ensure that they receive training, appraisals and access to organisational resources. These may impose costs but these are often the hidden costs of a twenty four hour service. One suggestion, that it might be helpful to ensure that at least some time should be spent on standard day work, can perhaps be dismissed as this would tend to disrupt life styles tied to the permanent night pattern. Further, there are also health issues identified for shift workers as a group which are relevant to those on permanent nights. Sleep difficulties can be a major problem as the quality and quantity of day time sleep is poorer than night time sleep (Monk and Folkard, 1992; Di Milia, 1998). These sleeping difficulties feed through to other health problems such as loss of appetite and disturbance of digestive functions where an individual's circadian rhythm is disrupted (Kreitzman, 1999).

Empirical evidence of the performance, expectations and problems of permanent night workers as distinct from shift workers in general is sparse, although some of the issues have been discussed by, for example, Ritson and Charlton (2006).

Clearly, there are both positives and negatives in working permanent night shifts. In the analysis below we provide one of the first profiles of permanent night workers in the retail sector and illustrate the challenges they present for HR managers.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology involved two stages. First, the analysis of a secondary data set (the UK Labour Force Survey) and second the collection of a new set of primary data from a sample of permanent night workers.

Limited data on permanent night workers were published by ONS until late 2002 but, after that date, analysis depended on extraction of the raw data from the ONS data files. In the first stage, special tabulations were abstracted from the Quarterly Labour Force Surveys undertaken by ONS. The counts of permanent night employees in the ONS data tend to underestimate numbers of permanent night workers since, as defined here, they exclude the self employed, those working permanent nights outside their main employment and participants in the black economy.

The second stage of the research was based on data collected through a self completion questionnaire by workers employed on permanent nights between 22.00 and 06.00 in a large retail supermarket (part of a national chain) which had an 'open 24 hours policy'. However, because of UK government restrictions on Sunday trading, the store did not open on Saturday or Sunday nights. The supermarket is located in a suburban area of Sheffield (UK), a city of over 500,000 inhabitants and the fifth largest in the UK. Overall, it employed 510 staff of whom nearly 77 per cent were working part-time. The night-shift of 73 employees was a full eight-hour shift from 22.00 – 06.00. On any one night about 30 workers were employed, the number rising on the busier nights towards the weekend.

Having outlined the methodology and the context of the case study, we now turn to an analysis of our results.

### PERMANENT NIGHT WORKERS: A PROFILE

Permanent night workers are part of a group of employees who undertake shift work (Table 1). Our new estimates from the LFS indicate that in the UK, in 2007, just over 12 percent of people in employment undertook shift work 'most of the time'. In view of the increasing moves towards a 24 hour society and a demand for 24 hour services, it is not surprising to find that the proportion of employees undertaking shift working had increased by three percentage points from 9 per cent in 2002. What is most striking is the net changes in employment show a major increase in shift working and little change in employees working standard days

Table 1 Employees who work shifts most of their time in their main job: United Kingdom, Spring 2002 and Spring 2007, not seasonally adjusted

	2002	2007	Change	% change
	000s	000s	000s	
Shift workers	2583	3607	1024	+39.6
Other Employees	25199	25376	177	<1.0
Total employees	27782	28983	1202	+4.3
Shift as % total	9.3	12.4		

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In mid-2007, it was estimated there were 385,432 persons in employment who met the LFS definition of a permanent night worker (Table 2), representing just under 11 per cent of all shift workers. These data exclude employees working at night as part of rotational shift systems. However, although permanent night worker numbers increased by almost 30 per cent between 2002 and 2007, this was, as Table 2 shows, at a slower rate than that of other shift workers and therefore their share of shift worker employment fell slightly (less than one percentage point)

Table 2 Employees who work night shifts most of their time in their main job: United Kingdom, Spring 2002 and Spring 2007, not seasonally adjusted

	2002	2007	Change	% change
Night shift	296942	385432	88490	+29.8
Other shift workers	2286058	3221568	935510	+40.9
Total shift workers	2583000	3607000	1024000	+39.6
Night Shift as % all	11.5	10.7		

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Approximately two thirds of permanent night workers were male and one third were female. Amongst the male employees the vast majority (92 per cent) were full time employees, whereas amongst females the mix of full-time and part-time employees was more evenly matched (52 per cent and 48 per cent respectively). Overall, just over three quarters of night workers (77 per cent) were on full time contracts. In sum, the typical permanent night worker in 2007 was a male employee on a full time contract.

A breakdown by gender, sector and employment contract is available only for manufacturing, wholesale, retail and motor trade and health and social work because of disclosure problems. Male employees dominate amongst night workers in manufacturing and wholesale/retail (86 per cent and 80 per cent respectively) but females account for 83 per cent of the night work force in the health sector. Indeed, female employees in the health sector account for 69 per cent of the overall female night work force. The second most important sector for female night workers is wholesale/retail with a mere 9 per cent

Amongst male employees, in all three sectors, full time contracts are the norm, however such contracts are less important in health than in the other two sectors for which we have data for both males and females. In manufacturing, the females, who make only 14 per cent of the permanent night workers in the sector, are characterised by full time contracts. In health and wholesale full and part time contracts are seen in almost equal numbers, reflecting the patterns amongst female night workers as a whole.

The number of night workers increased by 30 per cent between 2002 and 2007. Over the five year period, male permanent night work was increasing faster than female (35 per cent compared with 22 per cent). Virtually all the female employment increase in night work was amongst the full time workforce, whereas amongst male employees the increase was concentrated in the part time workforce.

Overall, this new data set confirms the increasing importance of permanent night work which we would argue presents a challenge for HRM. Some of the specific problems presented are examined within the context of twenty four working in a large supermarket. It is worth noting that the wholesale, retail and motor trade sector was the sector which had seen the largest increase in permanent night working over the last five years.

## **EMPLOYEES ON PERMANENT NIGHTS IN RETAILING**

Turning now to our survey evidence it is appropriate to begin by outlining the characteristics of the employees in our sample.

The vast majority of these night workers were female. The balance of part time to full time night workers was, however, closer to the national pattern for the sector. Two thirds of the employees were working part-time, compared with 55 per cent nationally. Although part-time working is often associated with temporary contracts and a lack of job security, in this case almost all the night workers were on permanent contracts (93 per cent). Analysis of age and family characteristics showed slightly over half were aged between 30 and 39 years and had children of school age. It is in this age range

and with responsibility for children that financial incentive becomes paramount and maintaining standards of living is of vital concern.

### ***The self-selecting night worker***

In almost every case the employees were self selecting night workers. The company had a clear policy of recruiting specifically for night shift working. It did not attempt to allocate day workers to what they might regard as undesirable hours of work. Night shift workers were a self selecting group. They had not been told to work at night; they had actively chosen to work at night. For them, night working provided for an acceptable work-life balance. The most frequently cited reason for selecting night working was that it facilitated child care arrangements as it released the employee (usually the mother) during the day. Two other sources of attraction to night shift working were that it enabled a better fit with the spouse's/partner's working pattern in terms of other family commitments and that it commanded higher pay than day working. Both received an almost identical frequency of citations. Analysis of the reasoning behind the choice of night shift working displays a strong tendency for values relating to the work-family interface to influence the choice. Night shift working, in this case, was predominantly part-time but the proportion of part-time workers was lower than amongst the other employees of the store. Overall, working permanent nights (whether full time or part time) was seen as an opportunity to combine the fulfilment of family commitments with some paid employment on a regular basis.

It was noted earlier that self selecting night workers are more amenable to night working. Indeed 90 per cent of the staff enjoyed working nights. Further there was strong evidence here of the 'camaraderie' or team spirit among the permanent night staff. Over 80 per cent described their working relationships with other employees as excellent (23 per cent) or very good (63 per cent). Not surprisingly, overall satisfaction levels were high. Using a Likert scale, it was established that the majority of respondents considered themselves satisfied (67%) or very satisfied (13%) with working permanent nights. This evidence would suggest that the overall positive assessment of night shift working was influenced by the high importance placed on personal relationships at work and the ability to combine home and work responsibilities.

Not all aspects of night work were positive. Whilst the work was not mentally difficult over half found the work physically demanding. Further, although approximately half the employees were prepared to describe the work as interesting, the other half did not. In part these responses must be a reflection of the nature of the night work. Whereas day workers would have higher levels of interaction with customers, the night staff were predominantly associated with shelf stacking.

Perhaps some of the problems associated with permanent night workers may have been less in this organisation as three quarters of the respondents had actually experienced working days for this particular supermarket chain. Problems of induction, training and learning the 'corporate culture' would be less as, it is to be hoped, much would have been absorbed whilst working days. Despite the potential for employees to have learnt from earlier experiences with the company, there were some important issues which needed resolution concerned with health, the work environment, training/promotion and the flows of information within the organization. Pay was not a problem.

**Health:** As noted earlier, research into the impact of night working on health has been considerable. In this case among the night shift workers, the most common health - related problem was difficulty sleeping (67%) with nearly one third (31 %) of workers claiming some difficulty in staying awake during the night shift, particularly in the last

three hours of the shift. The majority (73%) slept less than 6 hours daily. Other common problems, although at a lower frequency, stemmed from a disturbed diet as over a quarter of these night shift workers also experienced digestive problems (27%) and loss of appetite (30%). These health problems concur with those found in earlier studies

**Work environment:** The most striking cause of dissatisfaction expressed by the respondents was over inequalities in the level of facilities provided for day and night workers. Three quarters (72%) of these night-shift employees felt they received unfavourable treatment. Certainly, this was a major source of discontent here as the substitution of vending machines for the canteen facilities enjoyed by day workers lead to feelings of unfair treatment. Nevertheless, from a management perspective, the cost of providing all night canteen facilities must be prohibitive. In the retail environment, these facilities can be open to the public but customers between 24.00 and 06.00 are few and, certainly, very low indeed at the time of a main night shift break at around 03.00 hours.

**Training and promotion:** Important adverse perceptions were discovered in relation to promotion in that over half these night workers felt that they had fewer opportunities for promotion than their day colleagues. However, they did agree that they were less aggressive in their careers, citing their domestic responsibilities as the reason. Such evidence supports the argument of Gregory (1995) that, to these workers, convenient hours is far more important than promotion and training prospects.

**Information:** In each section of the store, on both day and night shifts, all members of a particular department gathered together with their supervisor, at the beginning of each shift for a "Huddle". These regular meetings provided all night workers with an opportunity to discuss operational issues and raise questions at the start of their work. Messages and information concerning incidents which happened on days and specific issues concerning the workplace were drawn to the attention of all night-shift workers during the "Huddle" meeting. Equally important, these regular huddles provided an opportunity of developing a group and, indeed, company identity among workers who, because of their night and predominantly part-time status, might traditionally have felt and indeed been perceived as peripheral to the organisation

Nevertheless, analysis of employee involvement revealed feelings of relative deprivation when comparisons were made with the work experience of day workers. Although the established mechanism for giving information and fostering involvement through daily team meetings or 'huddles' extended to employees working nights at this supermarket chain, about two fifths (42%) of the latter employees considered that they were not as well informed as the day workers about current issues within the store and a higher proportion (50%) regarded themselves as less well involved in the general running of the company. It must also be remembered that three quarters of these respondents had had experience of working days with this supermarket before being employed on permanent nights and so comparisons did involve first hand experience.

## **CONCLUSION**

In view of current trends in lifestyles it is likely that demand for 24/7 services will grow and the proportion of workers on permanent nights will increase. In retailing itself there is no option to outsource overseas.

The paper has provided some new data which provide a count of permanent night workers in the UK and has measured a number of their key features. It has demonstrated how their numbers have increased over the last five years (admittedly rather more slowly than other forms of shift work).

The case study evidence from a firm within the wholesale/retailing sector, has shown that there can be particular problems associated with employees on permanent nights. It is evident from these results that, despite the strong emphasis on HRM practices to generate high levels of involvement and commitment in this particular company, there remained feelings of isolation among a considerable proportion of the night-shift workers. Our results indeed confirm the feelings of isolation experienced by permanent night workers as was noted by Kerr, Wilkinson and Cunningham (2008). They confirm the inadequate nature of social facilities, an issue also observed by Harrington (1998). Indeed the problem's management is facing in communicating with employees who have come to work after many of the senior management have finished work for the day is highlighted by Brewster (1998).

To take this research forward it would be useful to explore three aspects. First, it would be valuable to make a comparison between two different sectors (perhaps retailing and call centres). Second, it would be helpful to know whether the experiences of those employees on part-time permanent nights differ from those on full time permanent nights. Finally, a much larger scale study would make a direct comparison between the experiences of those employees on permanent standard days with those on permanent nights.

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