

# **The Use of Short Term Labour in Low-Skilled Manufacturing Jobs in the UK**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper investigates the use of short term labour in low-skilled manufacturing jobs in the UK. It attempts to address the problem of conflicting findings of some quantitative studies that group together many different types of short term work by instead concentrating on this one specific type of short term work. The investigation of low-skilled short term work in five food manufacturing firms forms the author's PhD on this topic. In keeping with the conference's focus on "The New World of Work", this paper concentrates on one key new finding, namely the effects of the expansion of the European Union in 2004, and the influx of workers from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries taking short term manufacturing jobs in the UK.

## **EXISTING LITERATURE**

The most recent data from the Labour Force Survey show that in the fourth quarter of 2007 over 1.5 million workers in the United Kingdom were classified as 'temporary'. This figure had grown rapidly from 1.2 million in 1990 through the recession of the 1990s to a peak of 1.8 million in 1998, after which it has levelled out to the current figure. Investigations into the use of short term workers have been dominated by those using quantitative research methods, which in the UK have used datasets such as the Labour Force Survey (Forde and Slater 2001, 2005, 2006), the British Household Panel Survey (Booth et al 2002), and also British WIRS/WERS data (Uzzi and Barsness 1998). Internationally, the Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey (Drago 1998), American Bureau of Labor Services data (Marler et al 2002, Wenger and Kalleberg 2006), or other national data sets (Campbell and Burgess 2001, Holmlund and Storrie 2002) have also been used. Despite the dominance of quantitative work in this area, studies have found conflicting results, and even researchers using the same datasets have found different results by using different statistical techniques. For example, Golden and Appelbaum (1992) and Golden (1996), using BLS data, found that the increase in the use of short term labour was being driven by demand side factors. However, these findings were disputed by Laird and Williams (1996) who, using the same data set, argued that it was the supply side that was increasing the use of short term labour. Similarly, studies that have attempted to link organisational characteristics with propensity to use short term workers have produced conflicting findings, such as Davis-Blake and Uzzi (1993), Magnum et al (1985) and Uzzi and Barsness (1998) finding that larger organisations use more short term workers, whereas Abraham (1988) finds that it is smaller organisations that use more short term workers. These conflicting findings are due, in part, to investigations grouping together many different types of short term workers, or by looking at the level of 'non-standard' workers which also includes groups such

as part time workers. Although some qualitative studies have attempted to remove these issues by investigating different types of short term work, there still remains a significant gap in the literature. Case studies tend to be concentrated in the service sector, with studies such as Barker (1998), O'Riain (2000) and Rogers (1995) looking at high skill jobs, and Cohen and Haberfeld (1993) and Parker (1994) looking at low skill jobs. In the manufacturing sector, work has concentrated on high skill jobs as seen, for example, in work by Geary (1992). However, no studies have been found that look exclusively at short term work in low skill jobs in the UK manufacturing sector, and in-depth case studies of low and semi skilled manufacturing firms in the UK, such as Scott (1994), Delbridge (1998) and Thursfield (2000), have not looked primarily at the phenomenon of short term work. Instead, these studies have investigated 'core' semi-skilled workers, with Scott's chocolate factory case study investigating higher-paid enlarged production jobs. In order to address this gap, this research aims to investigate short term work in low skill jobs in the UK manufacturing sector.

A noted feature of low skilled jobs is the reduced training time that they require for new starters (see, for example, Foote and Folta 2002). This has allowed companies with low skilled jobs to use short term workers when faced with variable demand for their products, rather than using other methods to meet fluctuating demand, such as overtime or stock accumulation, or attempting to control demand through methods such as price promotions. These jobs are often so deskilled that workers can be visually shown the tasks, rather than having the jobs explained to them, which makes these jobs particularly attractive to migrant workers, the numbers of which have increased in the UK since the EU expansion of May 2004 to include the A8 expansion countries which include, amongst others, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Current research into the effects of A8 migration remains at an early stage as it is only five years since these countries joined the EU, and little academic material is available. It is difficult even to currently measure the exact number of migrant workers in the UK, a fact reported upon by much of the popular UK media (Pillai et al 2007). Over six hundred thousand people had registered on the Worker Registration Scheme by the time research for this project started in July 2007 (Cooley and Sriskandarajah 2008), a figure far higher than the government's original predicted figures of between eight and thirteen thousand (Dustmann et al 2003). The largest group of workers on the WRS are Poles, who make up 58% of all registrations (Gilpin et al 2006). The main reason cited for moving to the UK by CEE workers is high levels of unemployment in their home countries, for example almost 20% in Poland at the time of accession (Drinkwater et al 2006), a finding echoed in Grzymala-Kazlowska's (2005) account of Polish workers in Belgium. The majority of these workers have taken low skill jobs (Gilpin et al 2006, Green et al 2005) paying an average wage of £5.94 an hour (Anderson et al 2006), as compared to the minimum wage of £5.35 at the start of the research period in July 2007. This was despite the CEE workers' relatively high levels of education (Drinkwater et al 2006). This means that the jobs investigated by these case studies had a high proportion of workers from the A8 countries.

## **THE CASE STUDY COMPANIES**

The case study companies are all food manufacturers, and this sector was chosen as the companies are affected by variations in both the supply of their ingredients and also in the demand for their products. The five companies used for this study were all based in England and were ChocCo, a chocolate manufacturer operating in the Midlands; BeerCo, a brewery also from the Midlands; ReadyCo, a ready meals manufacturer operating in the East of England; SpiceCo, a spice company operating in the West of England; and TurkeyCo, a turkey slaughterhouse and processing

facility in the East of England. Despite producing different goods, the manufacturing techniques on the lines studied were broadly similar, with workers placing food products into containers on a moving belt. Although these jobs had once required higher levels of skill, for example with ChocCo handmaking its assortment chocolates, advances in technology meant that jobs at the companies tended to be low-skill, repetitive and monotonous. The jobs required no previous experience and had short training times

Research took place from July 2007 to December 2008 and consisted of 88 semi-structured interviews conducted with operations managers, HR managers, permanent workers, and both directly-employed and agency short term workers. These semi-structured interviews were conducted through an interpreter where the interviewee did not speak basic English. Those interviews that were conducted in English are reflected in this paper verbatim, in order to demonstrate the English language proficiency of respondents. These interviews were enriched with informal interviews, and time was also spent on each company's induction programmes for new starters. There was also lengthy observation, for two to three weeks at each site, in both work and social settings. Observational data were used to compare people's perceptions given in interviews, which often included discussions about sensitive issues such as race, with the reality of the shop floor.

#### **WHY DO THE CASE STUDY COMPANIES USE SHORT TERM WORKERS?**

Quantitative studies have produced conflicting findings in whether it is demand side or supply side factors that lead to an increase in the use of short term work, and this section investigates the particular factors that drive demand for short term workers in low skill manufacturing jobs. The case study companies were all using short term workers in order to cope with variable demand for their products, such as the increases in demand seen for TurkeyCo's products in the run up to Christmas. However, it was the deskilled nature of the jobs in the factories that allowed for the companies to use short term work as a response, rather than using other methods of coping with variable demand, such as overtime or stock accumulation, or by attempting to control demand, such as with price promotion or new product development. One contrasting case could be seen in the Boilings department at ChocCo, which used highly skilled labour to make products such as fudge and rock. As ChocCo could not use short term labour because of the higher skilled nature of the job and thus the increased training time for new starters, for products made in this department ChocCo attempted to flatten demand rather than react to it. Methods of achieving this included three for two price promotions during quieter periods, and also new product development for the quieter summer months, such as strawberry and cream fudge.

Although short term work was usually the cheapest way to respond to variable demand, some managers had previously been reluctant to use short term workers because of their perceived lower quality. However, as more CEE workers had entered the UK labour market, the quality of short term workers was felt to have improved:

*Four and five years ago people from the agency were drug addicts who didn't want to work, but now you get someone from the agency and they will be really good. All the Poles have made quite a lot of difference, they are really highly motivated, because they have come here to earn money. I think they have moved the benchmark up of what agencies can offer, because all the indigenous English people have had to step up a bit as well. So in the past the people you got coming in were just pathetic, but*

*now whoever you get in from an agency are generally quite good.*

*British Manager, SpiceCo*

This perceived improvement in short term worker quality, coupled with the cost benefits as compared to other options, meant that the case study companies had become increasingly reliant on short term work as their main response to variable demand.

### **WHY DO THESE WORKERS TAKE SHORT TERM JOBS?**

As compared to Golden and Appelbaum (1992) and Golden (1996), Laird and Williams (1996) have argued that it is the demand side that has led to the increase in short term jobs. This qualitative study has found that the reasons for workers choosing a short term job over a permanent one were dependent upon where a worker came from. For many British workers, the decision to take a short term job was influenced by the jobs available to them, with some of the case study companies only offering short term work, often as a form of trial basis, rather than immediately offering permanent work. Some older British workers, particularly those who had moved from higher skilled jobs as a result of redundancy, found that they could not even get a directly-employed permanent job, and felt that their age was a contributing factor. Instead, they used an agency to circumvent the interview process, but resented the loss of status and security that this brought to them.

*I was in charge of the stationery department in the warehouse, it was a team of five so I had four blokes under me, and I was a team leader. That was good, that was enjoyable that was, because you were in the thick of it. It is strange having to go from there to agency, because what you're doing is starting again, you are starting all over again from the bottom.*

*British Worker, SpiceCo*

Some of the British workers, and noticeably the older ones, resented both the fact that they were now taking temporary jobs and that the competitors for these jobs were coming from outside of the UK.

*We should be more entitled to the jobs before the Polish and this lot...The British people feel let down because of people coming in and taking their jobs who can't talk English. People have generally thought 'I can't get a job and they [migrant workers] come and go to an agency and go straight into a job'. I think if you put a questionnaire out to the Brits here about what you think the worst issue is they will say all these immigrants taking our jobs... I used to read in the papers they are all coming in taking our jobs, but until I came here I didn't know. Where I used to work there was no immigrants at all. I mean Poles, not coloured people. If you didn't talk English you wouldn't get through the door.*

*British Worker, ChocCo*

CEE migrants were also using an agency to circumvent the interview process; in their case because they felt that their standard of English was not good enough to pass an interview. However, the de-skilled nature of the jobs meant that once they got a job at the company they could be physically shown the task rather than having it verbally explained to them in English. Although they were working in low skilled jobs, many of the CEE workers were highly educated, either holding or working towards Bachelor's degrees or higher in their home country (see also Drinkwater et al 2006). A key motivation for them was to make as much money as possible during their stay, as found by studies in other European countries such as Grzymala-Kazlowska (2005), and for this reason they used an agency to get a job quickly, with many CEE

migrants being able to start work within a week of arriving in the UK. Some agencies catered almost exclusively for CEE workers, and could provide them with other information such as how to open a bank account, providing the extra services also noted by Spencer et al (2007). Newcomers were often introduced to these agencies by friends or family who were already in the UK, and these workers' choice of location in the UK tended to be based on the earlier experiences of their friends or family, and the availability of accommodation through these contacts. CEE workers were generally satisfied with their jobs because, although mundane and low skilled, the wages were higher than they would receive at home.

## **WHAT HAS BEEN THE EFFECT ON THE WORKPLACE?**

The reliance on short term work at the case study companies meant that they had been particularly affected by the expansion of the EU and the increased numbers of CEE migrant workers taking low skilled short term jobs. Managers at all three companies were complimentary of workers from Central and Eastern Europe, echoing the findings of Green (2007), and praised their work ethic.

*Having an all Polish team everyone said "How are you going to do?" but they are brilliant...It has just been good, they are a really good team.*

*British Manager, ReadyCo*

Interestingly, the only negative comments towards CEE workers came from Polish managers who had worked in the UK for several years, and who believed that newcomers did not share their work ethic.

*Now we have a lot of Polish people here, and three years ago they came here very energetic, the Polish people want to work because they know they get a chance and they have to do everything the best that they can. Now they come very lazy people because they are coming because of their family or they are coming because of somebody else and they know that if they lose this job they can find another job, and they don't care about the job now.*

*Polish Manager, ReadyCo*

Although most British managers felt that CEE migrant workers in general had a good attitude towards work, there were often communication problems. The low skilled nature of the work meant that people could be shown the job visually without having fluency in English, and this meant that many of the migrant workers could not communicate with the English-speaking managers.

*We have had agency in before who couldn't speak a single word, not even yes or no, which is no good to us. If we are trying to explain to somebody what to do, and why we are doing it that way, they are not going to understand what we are doing, such as you must go here if there is a fire alarm, so they need to have basic [English]. They don't need to speak fluent English, but just so that they can say a few words.*

*British Manager, ReadyCo*

*I am not racist or anything, I am half-caste myself, my mum is white and my dad is Pakistani, but these Polish people that work here, a lot of them speak very good English, but a lot of them have just come over and they are learning. They have got jobs here but when you explain to them something after 10 hours you get pissed off because they don't understand.*

*British-Pakistani Manager, ReadyCo*

This presented problems for managers as it is a requirement for workers to understand Health and Safety rules. Managers had been assured when they took on agency workers that the agencies would be responsible for explaining these rules, in the workers' native languages if necessary. However, informal interviews with workers confirmed that this was not always the case, and some migrant workers claimed that they were unaware of hygiene rules, instead just mimicking what they had seen permanent workers doing. Language problems were not, however, confined to those who had come from outside of the UK:

*It is the same with Scotland, turnips and swedes and parsnips are all the same thing there, they call them neeps or something. Here we have a turnip, a swede and a parsnip. Once they understand that they are three different components that do different things we are fine.*

*British Manager, ReadyCo*

Many of the British managers felt uncomfortable with workers not speaking in English:

*When they're stood there yacking in their own language I find that most ignorant. And it is upsetting to others to listen to it, because they're very loud when there's a good bunch of them.*

*British Manager, ChocCo*

*I am not prejudiced or anything, but I can walk in in the morning and I am probably the only one what's speaking English. With different bus loads coming in, you feel "God, am I in the right country"?*

*British Manager, ChocCo*

The language barrier was an area of tension for the British workers as well as the British managers. If they were on a line with migrant workers who were all from the same country they could find themselves excluded from the conversations.

*If they are coming over I think they should know the English, it is only fair... I am not taking sides but if you can't understand someone, it is hard work isn't it?... You can get through on the basics, but so metimes when they look at you, you say "Can you do that?" and they go "Huh"? But that is the way it is going now, and Mr Blair let them all in didn't he?*

*British Worker, SpiceCo*

Some of the British workers, particularly older ones, resented the migrant workers clustering together at breaktimes. At break times in each factory the whole line would be stopped and people from the same department would go to the canteen or smoking hut together. However, within these lines noticeable subgroups could be seen, with workers tending to keep with people from the same country as themselves. Amongst British workers there were separate tables for managers and line workers which, although not officially designated to each group, reflected a more traditional hierarchy. However, migrant line workers were excluded from the British line workers' tables, reflecting the new informal hierarchies in these workplaces. This meant that nationality had become an issue for some British workers not only on their work line, but also in the canteen and social settings, where divisions between the workers could clearly be seen.

*When I first started here I thought I was at [local airport], there were so many different people here. I didn't know the country was in such a bad state... I think they tend to keep all to themselves. They have their own little groups. I wouldn't go and sit*

*on a table of Polish, I would be lucky if I got out.*

*British Worker, ChocCo*

### **DO THE CASE STUDY COMPANIES FOSTER THESE DIVISIONS?**

At all the case study companies the agency workers, who were usually migrants, received poorer treatment than permanent workers, explicitly placing them below permanent workers despite them performing the same tasks. Agency workers at all the factories received lower wages than their permanent counterparts, and received poorer treatment in other ways, particularly with job security. Work could be ended almost immediately, with workers at ReadyCo only guaranteed work for four hours. If their shift was finished early then they would have to wait in the canteen for up to two hours for a bus to take them home. Even if agency workers made their own way to work on public or private transport they still had to pay their bus fare to the agency. The bus fares charged could be higher than the public transport cost, for example at ChocCo the agency bus fare was £5.50 a day as compared to £4.20 on the local public bus service. In addition, agency workers were often marked out or excluded because of their contractual status. At ReadyCo, for example, agency workers were made to wear bright orange hats to distinguish them from permanent workers, whereas at ChocCo they were given blue plastic overshoes instead of white steel toe-capped shoes. In this way, the 'hidden hierarchy' noted by Smith (1994) based upon contractual status becomes a visible hierarchy. Even those methods that did not mark out temporary workers visually could be unpleasant – at ReadyCo agency workers were not issued with their own Wellington boots, instead having to share them from a communal pile. Agency workers were also excluded in ways such as not being invited to the evening Christmas party at SpiceCo. At ReadyCo a Christmas lunch was provided during the time of research, to which permanent staff, and also the author of this paper, were invited, but to which the agency staff were not. With no provision being made for the agency workers, they instead had to eat vending machine food or packed lunches in the corridor.

As well as these obvious exclusions, it was noticeable in some work areas that agency workers were given less pleasant jobs. For example, on the cauliflower cheese line at ReadyCo it was interesting to note the clustering of orange hats around the heavy manual racking jobs, whereas the permanent white-hatted workers did the easier weighing jobs. This was in contrast to the views of the managers:

*[Agency workers] are the same like a permanent, they don't have the same colour of head, that is the only difference.*

*Polish Manager, ReadyCo*

This provides an example of agency workers being victims of both the visible hierarchy as they were made to wear differing uniforms, and of the informal hierarchy where they were bumped to heavier jobs by the permanent workers. British permanent workers would often use their ability to train new workers to give agency staff the heavier and more unpleasant jobs, keeping the easier jobs for themselves. As well as getting some of the worst jobs, migrant workers were often underutilised and could not use all their skills, reflecting the findings of Kreyenfeld and Konietzka (2002) and MacKenzie and Forde (2007). A key barrier to this was again language, as those workers with skills could not easily express these to the managers. In the case of ChocCo, this had led to a Polish master confectioner being put on a job putting lids onto boxes. However, tensions around nationality were not just aimed towards CEE workers. There was also a great deal of tension between the CEE workers and the Asian and Middle Eastern workers, particularly at ReadyCo, which had a large Asian contingent within its workforce.

*There have been a few fights in my area... The biggest difference that I have seen is between Polish and Pakistanis and Indians. There is a big, big difference because the Polish are just not used to it. In Poland, from what I know from speaking to them, you don't get many Asians or Pakistanis in Poland. When they come over suddenly there are loads, and they have never really encountered it... The Polish see the Pakistanis and the Indians as quite lazy. So me of them are, but I have had to tell them a lot of the time that you can't generalise. You can't do it, you can't be racist, and a lot of them are. A lot of the m are actually racist, and you talk to the m about it and they will say "That Pakistani whatever" and they will refer to them like that.*

*British Manager, ReadyCo*

This shows that, in addition to the divisions created by the companies between the mainly British permanent workforce and mainly migrant short term workforce, there were also divisions within the migrant workforce based upon nationality.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This study has shown that in the case of low skilled manufacturing jobs both demand side and supply side factors have contributed to the increased use of short term work in the UK. On the demand side, manufacturing companies with low skilled jobs use short term work as a response to variable demand as training times for these jobs are so short. The low skilled nature of these jobs, which means that workers can be visually shown tasks rather than having them verbally explained to them, has meant that these jobs have been particularly affected by the expansion of the EU. There has been an increased supply of A8 migrant workers moving to the UK who can only take short term agency jobs owing to their inability to pass an interview to get a directly-employed job. This study found that British managers generally had positive feelings towards CEE migrants' work ethic, reflecting the views of earlier studies such as Green (2007), and thus had further increased their demand for short term workers as they felt that the quality of the section of the labour market taking these short term jobs had improved. Interestingly, the main criticism of CEE workers came from some Polish managers who saw newcomers as lazier than themselves, reflecting an internal hierarchy amongst one group of migrant workers. The main difficulty experienced by British managers was the language barrier with the CEE workers, and this problem was exacerbated by the low-skill nature of the jobs which meant that people with very basic English language skills could take the jobs.

Unlike quantitative studies, this in-depth qualitative study has been able to investigate the effects on the workplace of the changes in the workforce. As previously noted by writers such as Smith (1994) there was an informal hierarchy based on contractual status between permanent and short term workers. However, changes to the workforce since the EU expansion of 2004 have created new informal hierarchies between workers. British workers were generally found to be hostile to migrants, as they felt that there was more competition for their jobs forcing them into short term employment, and also that migration created a worsened work environment where it was difficult to talk or find similar cultural reference points. Interestingly, more hostility tended to come from older workers, particularly those who found themselves in low-skill or short-term work for the first time, perhaps reflecting a traditional view that migrant workers were 'taking their jobs'. These divisions between workers were often fostered by the case study companies, who treated the mainly British permanent workforce and mainly migrant short term workforce differently. However, even amongst migrant workers there were tensions both within groups of CEE migrants, such as those seen between managers and line workers, but also from the CEE migrants towards Asian and Middle Eastern workers.

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