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Racing to a Staffing Solution: An investigation into the current staffing crisis within the UK horseracing industry

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Abstract

The British Horseracing Industry has been experiencing a labour shortage since the 1970's and despite recent improvements reported in staff retainment, the industry still reports high staff turnover. We investigated staffing challenges experienced by UK horseracing employers and employees, to formulate strategic targets to address any issues identified. Thirty UK trainers and staff (12 staff, 9 senior staff, 9 trainers) participated in semi-structured inductive focus groups lasting on average 39 ± 9 minutes. Questions explored staff background in racing, perceptions of the current staff challenges, retention and recommendations for improvement. Thematic analysis revealed four higher order themes; 1) lack of skills, 2) differences in perceived work ethic, 3) job conditions, and 4) media portrayal. This study concluded that there are dedicated staff working in the industry, but significant skills gaps, high workloads, poor work-life balance and a lack of training and career progression negatively influence retention in the horse racing industry.

KEYWORDS: horseracing, retention, training, skills, management, staffing

Funding: This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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Introduction

Horseracing encompasses a mix of business, sport and leisure, and is the second most watched sport in the United Kingdom (UK) behind soccer (Turner et al., 2002). The racing industry is worth approximately £1.1bn, and contributes £3.45bn/year to the UK economy but anecdotally has struggled with staffing retention, career progression and job satisfaction leading to concerns that the industry is experiencing a "staffing crisis" (Public Perspectives Ltd, 2016, 2018; Frontier Economics, 2016). In 2019, there were 6,734 registered racing employees, 4428 of whom were full time, working in 586 licensed race yards responsible for the care and training of 23,599 horses registered with the British Horse Racing Authority (BHA) in the UK (British Horseracing Authority, 2018a). Of these yards, 75% of trainers currently hold a combined training license (licensed for both National Hunt and Flat racing), 10% hold a permit license (licensed for amateur national hunt racing only), 8% of trainers hold licenses for jump racing only, whilst 7% hold a flat racing license only (British Horseracing Authority, 2018a). The staffing structure within most racing yards is that of a pyramid: with 'shop floor' workers represented by the highest numbers, middle management (head lads and lasses) and assistant trainers present in fewer numbers and the trainers themselves at the top of the pyramid. Each 'level' of employee may be considered to experience different stressors that could affect job satisfaction and retention (Sear, 2018; Speed & Andersen, 2008). Trainers report staffing problems as a key stressor in the workplace (Sear, 2018; Speed & Andersen, 2008) whilst stable staff suggest pay and hours are common issues leading to decreased job satisfaction and reluctance to remain to stay in the sector (Sear, 2018). The differences identified between staff levels may indicate that there are multiple complex factors that are contributing to the staffing crisis, that have yet to be explored.

The British Horseracing Industry has been described as having a labour shortage since the 1970s (Filby, 1987). During this time, the national minimum wage for racing staff was introduced, followed by the abolition of the indentured apprentice system, that had once provided a source of cheap labour for the industry. Therefore the employment landscape within the racing industry changed significantly (Filby, 1987). A report carried out by Public Perspectives Ltd. for The Racing Foundation, in partnership with the British Horseracing Authority (BHA), in 2016 (Public Perspectives Ltd, 2016) identified that 24% of all permanent posts in racing yards needed to be recruited on an annual basis due to staff turnover or business growth, identifying instability within the racing workforce. The report identified that 48% of permanent job vacancies in racing were 'hard-to-fill' due to a lack of suitable applicants, this was considerably higher than the national figure of 33% across all sectors of the economy (UKCES, 2015). A recent follow up report showed a reduction in the need for annual recruitment within the industry to 21%, demonstrating a more stable workforce (Public Perspectives Ltd, 2018), however the high turnover of staff remains a priority for the industry to address. Employee retention is critical for an organisation as employees are the driving force to achieving the organisations goals (Aguenza & Som, 2012b). Trainer surveys have reported 19% of trainers experienced difficulties in retaining staff compared to 8% poor retention across the national job market in 2016; this figure had reduced in trainers to 17% by 2018 (Public Perspectives Ltd, 2016, 2018). Despite this, more trainers are reporting recruitment, skills and retention issues as key challenges for their businesses (38% vs. 40% trainers; 2016 to 2018) suggesting improving recruitment alone is not sufficient to mitigate staff retention issues in the racing industry.

Although a national sport, approximately one third of racehorse trainers are based in recognised training centres, such as Newmarket, Lambourn, Epsom, Malton and Middleham, whilst the remaining two thirds are located outside of the centres, some in clusters or in more singular

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isolated locations (Deloitte UK, 2013; Sear, 2018), both of which pose challenges for staff, including access to training, isolation and lack of progression opportunities. Staffing difficulties have been reported to be higher in the East of England (which encompasses Newmarket, a global centre for UK flat racing) and the Midlands (which includes Lambourn and the Cotswolds, key national centres for NH race yards), with 27% and 25% of trainers reporting retention difficulties respectively in these areas (Public Perspectives Ltd, 2016). Some natural staff turnover is considered healthy for any business as it can lead to fresh ideas and approaches within a given team improving profitability (ACAS, n.d.). However, turnover, employment stability and retention are also all closely related to workforce stability (Hayes et al., 2012). Within any industry sector, understanding the reasons for high levels of staff turnover is important to prevent a reduction in staff morale and damage to the organisation's reputation (ACAS, n.d.).

The title 'stable lad/lass' was replaced with 'racing groom' in 2017 (British Horseracing Authority, 2018a). This was an attempt to rebrand the role and highlight its skilled nature, which may have contributed to the increase in recruitment observed since 2016 (Public Perspectives Ltd, 2016). Stable staff have a multifaceted role within the industry, acting as care givers, skilled athletes and equine experts (Dacombe, 2012; Speed & Andersen, 2008), resulting in a role with inherent high emotional labour, physical and mental demands (Cassidy, 2002; Dacombe, 2012). Current research proposes that jobs with increased demands and limited job control can be classified as high strain roles. These high strain roles increase physiological arousal that cannot be actioned due to limited job control, commonly resulting in mental fatigue and physical exhaustion (Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2003). Job control is defined as the feeling of autonomy in the workplace, through control over work shift patterns, hours, and responsibility for management and timing of daily tasks and is often limited in high risk roles due to health and safety (Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2003). Racing grooms are required to work long hours, with increasing weekend shift work due to the expansion of the fixture list and anecdotal reports of struggling to access doctor's appointments or co-ordinate calendars for off-work activities due to ever changing schedules (Dacombe, 2012; Sear, 2018; Speed & Andersen, 2008). In a recent study, trainers reported long work hours as one of the sources of stress in their profession (Sear, 2018), whilst over 85% of stable staff surveyed in Australia reported working more than 40 hours/week averaging 46hrs/week in full time staff (Speed & Andersen, 2008). The National Association of Racing Staff (NARS) report that no employee should work more than 48 hours on average over a 7-day period in the UK (NARS, n.d.), however limited research is available to confirm this.

Employees in this industry are also required to demonstrate stringent management practices to ensure high standards of horse welfare, which often results in low job control, contributing to its proposed classification as a high strain role. Recently, racing staff highlighted a low sense of control over their work supporting the definition of racing as a high strain role (McConn-Palfreyman et al., 2019). Employees in high strain occupations may also lack the ability to physically and mentally recover from stressors, if annual leave or days off are limited, or if off-work situations are directly linked to job role, i.e. in employee housing, such as is seen in the racing industry (Dacombe, 2012; Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2003). This inability to recover can lead to accumulation fatigue, or burnout, which can impact coping mechanisms and lead to poor decision making (Landolt et al., 2017). As a result individuals may decide to drop put of the industry due to the poor mental and physical health they are experiencing. Recently, a survey of UK stable staff highlighted 72% of training yard staff have experienced stress, anxiety or depression in the last 12 months, whilst less than 23% reported no health concerns (McConn-Palfreyman et al., 2019). Yet despite this, limited research has explored the factors which underpin staff retention in horseracing to date.

Recruitment and retention challenges not only have a negative impact on workplace stability, that can affect trainers economic success, and staff health and job satisfaction, but can also affect horse welfare. Historically, staff looked after two or three horses and were responsible for their care, in addition they rode two or three horses each morning (Butler et al., 2019). Since 2014, the number of racehorses in training has increased by 7% from 21,996 to 23,599 horses (British Horseracing Authority, 2018a), however the number of staff employed has not increased proportionally. This has led to the number of horses being cared for by an individual member of staff increasing from 2-3 up to 5-6 (British Horseracing Authority, 2018a; Butler et al., 2019). These increased demands are further compounded by the increased number of race meetings as additional staff are needed to go racing which can often result in remaining staff '*working round'* to care not only for their allocated horses but to also be responsible for management of all the horses as quickly and efficiently as possible. Issues of poor horse welfare can also arise when staff are not as engaged and connected emotionally to the horses they are caring for (Butler et al., 2019), which may result from a high level of physical and mental fatigue, impacting the ability to maintain the high standards required when working with racehorses.

In other animal care industries, high reports of compassion fatigue (a type of burnout) exist (Figley, 2002; Potter et al., 2010). Compassion fatigue is defined as "an overlapping term, used to describe the physical and emotional signs associated with occupational stress in a chronic form" (Foster & Maples, 2014) and has been linked to those working in the animal care industry due to long working hours, high job strain roles and a need to put the animal's wellbeing and needs before oneself (Bennett & Rohlf, 2005; Foster & Maples, 2014). High levels of compassion fatigue can result in decreased productivity, higher number of sick days and an increased staff turnover (Potter et al., 2010). Although issues with staff turnover have been highlighted in the sector, the number of sick days in the racing sector is low (38%) (McConn-Palfreyman et al., 2019). Anecdotal reports of staff unwilling to take sick leave or continuing to work despite injury or illness are common (British Horseracing Authority, 2018a; Dacombe, 2012; McConn-Palfreyman et al., 2019; Sear, 2018). This approach to sick leave is referred to as 'presenteeism', where employees report a love of the job, moral or ethical obligations (for example to animal welfare), or concerns for job security as reasons for not taking adequate time off (Johns, 2011; McConn-Palfreyman et al., 2019). Further work is warranted to determine levels of presenteeism within racing staff and to evaluate the impact of this on horse and human wellbeing.

The aim of this study was therefore to collate opinions from UK horseracing employers and employees regarding the current staffing challenges and to formulate strategic targets to address the issues identified.

Materials and methods

Participants

A total of 30 participants were recruited for the focus groups based on their job role in the racing industry, and geographical location; 12 staff (40%), 9 senior staff (30%) and 9 trainers (30%). Participants were divided in to 3 distinct peer groups: staff, senior staff and trainers for focus groups (see Table 1). This enabled specific priorities and issues to be identified from different levels of seniority within the racing industry and ensured participants did not feel unable to vocalise their true feelings on the subject matter being discussed (Sim, 1998; Smithson, 2000). All participants were recruited through a combination of convenience, opportunistic and snowball sampling utilising the researcher's (EJ) contacts within the horseracing industry and through colleagues and employees of these contacts (Lamperd et al.,

2016). This approach ensured participants represented employers (racehorse trainers) and employees (two tiers of staff) and were recruited across the geographical areas targeted (Newmarket, Lambourn, Cotswolds) (Field et al., 2013; Kitchenham & Pfleeger, 2002). Participants were over 18 years of age and consent forms were read and signed by all participants prior to participation in the study.

Table 1: Inclusion criteria for focus groups

Category	Description
Staff	Members of staff who have worked in racing for at least 2 years and are 18+ years of age
Senior Staff	Staff in a senior role i.e. head person and 18+ years of age
Trainers	Licensed racehorse trainers or assistant trainers (Flat/NH); aged 18+ years of age

Procedure

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Hartpury University Ethics Committee. Semi-structured focus groups led by a facilitator were used to maximise the opportunity for people to talk to one another, exchange anecdotes and discuss experiences and points of view related to the focus of the study (Kitzinger, 1995; Tong et al., 2007). Groups were restricted to people of a similar age and level of experience to minimise the concern that staff may have not felt confident to raise issues of importance to them due to intimidation by the other participants who may have been their managers (Sim, 1998; Smithson, 2000). An interview guide was developed from previous literature into recruitment and retention, and the author's experiences of the racing sector (EJ) (see Table 2). Personal details of participants, recordings and transcripts were stored securely adhering to GDPR regulations, with data anonymised for the purposes of analysis. Focus group length varied between 27 and 57 minutes, with an average duration of 38 ±9 minutes, and were all carried out from 12:00pm onwards. The running order varied between locations dependent on the availability of participants on the particular days. All locations were located in neutral environments away from participants' place of work, were comfortable, provided refreshments and toilet facilities, and were centrally located within the geographical areas concerned. Given the potential sensitive nature of discussions, participants were signposted to industry organisations such as National Association of Racing Staff (NARS) and Racing Welfare for help and support, where appropriate.

Table 2: Interview Guide*

Interview Guide
1. What attracted you to racing as a career? Background?
2. Do you feel proud of your work and position in the UK horseracing industry? Y/N and why?
3. Do you believe there is a staffing crisis? Y/N? • If yes, can you identify the main causes of the current staffing crisis in the UK horseracing industry? • If no, why do you feel there is no crisis?
4. Have you experienced effects of the staffing crisis?
5. Have you considered leaving the industry? Y/N? If yes, for what reasons and why have you stayed?
6. How could these issues be resolved?

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7. Would you recommend racing as a career to others?
8. How do you see your future in racing? Where do you want to be/what would you like to be doing in 5 years?

** Designed by EJ*

Data analysis

A six step analytical approach adopted from Richardson, Collins and Williams (2019) and Lamperd et al. (2016) was applied to prepare and analyse the data: 1) digital audio files were transcribed verbatim; 2) transcripts were read and reviewed for familiarity to facilitate accurate analysis; 3) direct quotes were divided into the categories of the question framework; 4) an inductive content analysis was performed using tags to create themes which were organised under key areas of discussion (skills, work ethic, job conditions, media); 5) validation and triangulation processes were undertaken with the supervisory team to ensure all coded data were placed under appropriate themes and 6) a peer debrief was undertaken to debate validity and reliability of the thematic models developed.

Results and Discussion

Thirty participants participated in the focus groups; 12 staff (40%), 9 senior staff (30%) and 9 trainers (30%). Newmarket focus groups comprised on average three participants, whilst this increased to an average of four people for the groups in both the Cotswolds and Lambourn. Groups had a male to female ratio of 1:3 for stable staff (n=12), 1:2 for senior staff (n=9) and 8:1 for trainers (n=9).

The majority of participants (92%, n=11 stable staff; 100%, n=9 senior stable staff; 100%, n=9 trainers), regardless of staff level, articulated that they believed the racing industry was experiencing a staffing crisis. Both staff and senior staff were asked if they had considered leaving the industry with 67% (n=8) and 56% (n=5) respectively, answering yes to this.

Despite the high numbers of participants who had considered leaving the racing industry, the majority (83%; n=25) would still encourage young people to enter the industry. Through analysis of the stable staffs' and trainers' perception of the staffing crisis in UK racing, four higher order themes emerged: 1: skills, 2: work ethic, 3: job conditions, and 4: media (Figure 1).

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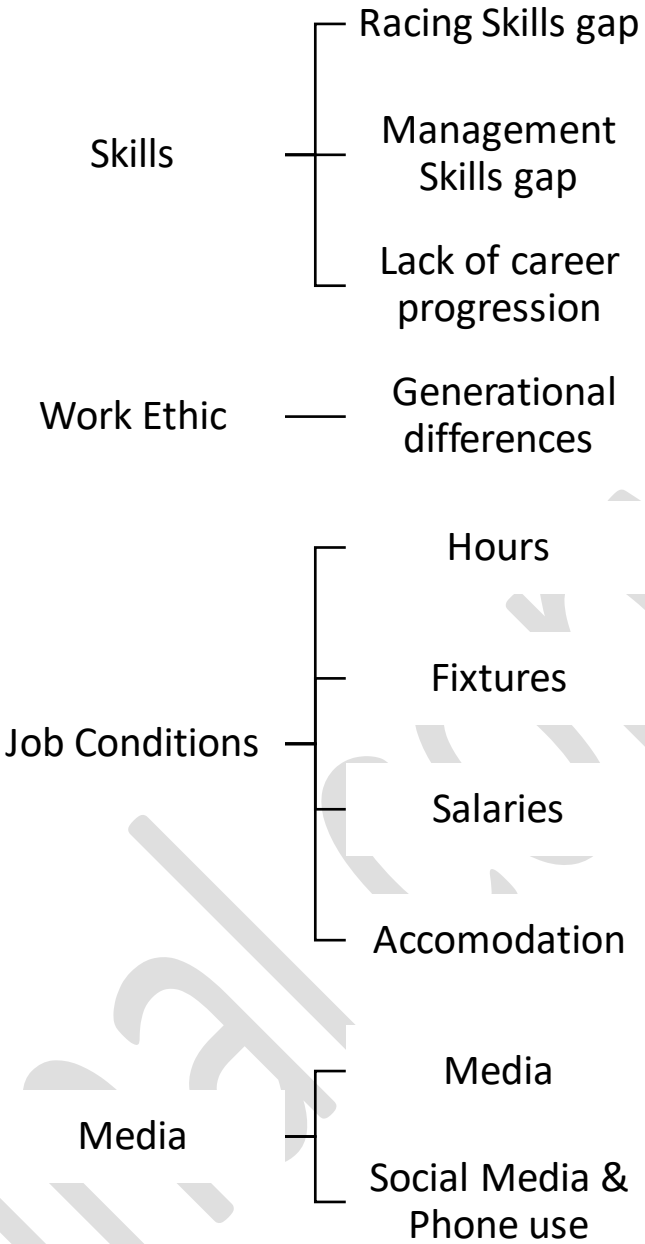

Figure 1: Higher and lower order themes from focus groups

Theme 1- Skills

The first theme presented was an identified skills gap. This was subdivided into concerns over lack of racing skill in employees, lack of management skills, and lack of career progression opportunities (Figure 2).

Racing Skills Gap

A lack of core practical skills in the workforce entering/within racing was identified as a key driver for concern from participants, including riding ability and general horse care.

"I think the trainers feel the pressure of the lack of riders and the lack of skilled riders" Newmarket Staff 1

Entrants in to the UK racing industry aged 16-18 years are required to attend the British Racing School or Northern Horseracing College, where they undergo an approved curriculum of studies designed to prepare them for working in racing, both practically and regarding the lifestyle of the sector (British Racing School, 2015). Despite this, staff were still concerned about the lack of 'employment ready skills' new entrants to the industry had. Anecdotally, 'natural talent' has been linked to rider ability (Lamperd et al., 2016), however 'natural talent' at a young age is usually attributed to enhanced physical maturation, which may result in increased strength or balance, making someone appear to be a 'better rider' (Viru et al., 1999) but unable to withstand the rigors of performance once in the industry.

The perception of a lack of skill in less experienced staff articulated by senior staff and trainers, may also partly reflect the additional pressures within a changing racing industry, compounded by poor staff retention. Senior stable staff discussed how increased numbers of horses and race fixtures had increased workloads across the yard, with staff required to work harder and with a higher level of skill at an earlier point in their career:

"There are not enough people that are coming through the system, coming through the racing school and coming through any which way to be perfectly honest that are going to be able to function at that level for a sustained amount of time. It's just impossible." Newmarket Senior Staff 1

In response to the Public Perspectives Racing Industry Recruitment, Skills and Retention Survey (Public Perspectives Ltd, 2016) report, regional training initiatives were implemented by the BHA and the Racing Foundation. These courses are designed to provide bespoke on-site training to racing staff in yards; in 2018, over 35,000 training days were delivered (British Horseracing Authority, 2018b). Plans for Regional Staff Development programmes, similar to the Jockey Coaching Programme, aim to reach over 2400 staff in the next three years, with training underway to produce rider coaches aimed at improving riding skill on race yards (British Horseracing Authority, 2018b). Anecdotally these additional opportunities have been positively received so far, but recent research (current study, McConn-Palfreyman et al., 2019) identified that staff skill levels and lack of development programmes for stable staff were still a concern for those working in the industry. The BHA's plans to develop this area are ongoing, and the impact of this training on staff skill levels may take some time to see an effect. Further research into the efficacy of these programmes should be undertaken once they have been implemented into the industry.

A move to more freelance working practices has been identified across many employment sectors including horseracing (Massey & Elmore, 2011). Whilst employing 'rider-outers' was highlighted as a hugely positive practice in some yards, it caused division between staff in others.

"they've started this culture of people just riding out and not doing the horses…… everyone else then expects to do that and it's very difficult." Newmarket Trainer 1

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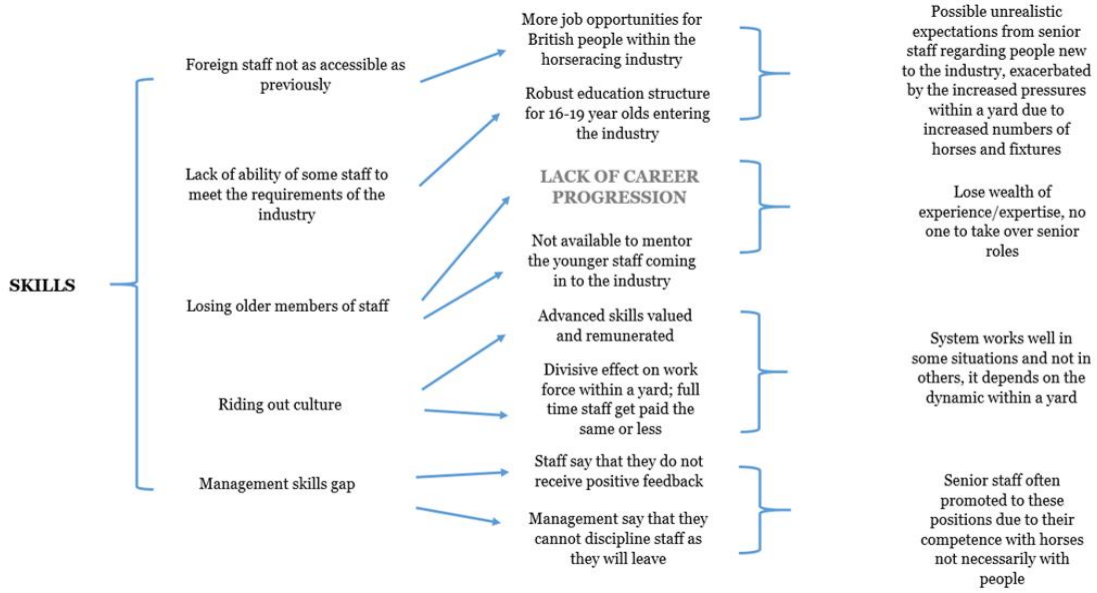

Figure 2: Themes: skills and lack of career progression

Employing 'rider-outers' was considered a response to a lack of skilled riders/staff in general within the industry and involves part time staff being employed to ride out only in the mornings. This approach can have a divisive effect when full time staff are paid the same or in some cases less than the 'rider-outers' but are working more hours. An additional consequence is that more skilled staff may often choose this work over full time employment as it offers financial and work life balance benefits. The effects of the use of freelance staff is yard specific, to fully encourage or discourage its use is not possible, and further research is warranted to fully elucidate its impact on the racing sector.

Management Skills Gap

Across the focus groups, frustration associated with a lack of management skills in peers and the friction that can subsequently result within a team were apparent:

"There's a lot of trouble with management staff knowing what they're doing and knowing horses quite well, but not knowing how to manage people." Lambourn Staff 3

Succession planning is a vital tool in human resource management (Groves, 2006; Rothwell, 2002). Common criticism across businesses is that employers often fail to utilise existing managerial personnel effectively to develop future leaders through succession planning (Rothwell, 2002). Successful succession planning involves employees with management potential being identified and a plan established. Candidates often enter the racing industry as they have an interest in racing or an aptitude for horses (Dacombe, 2012; McConn-Palfreyman et al., 2019). They are then often promoted due to their competency working with horses, characteristics which do not automatically make an individual a good 'people' manager. Poor management leads to decreased morale and reduced job satisfaction, and has been highlighted as a key contributor to employee burnout (Newell & MacNeil, 2010), which could explain the high staff turnover and poor retention rates reported in the sector.

Being appreciated and thanked for doing a good job were highlighted by junior and senior staff as something that did not happen very often or indeed enough in horse racing. Within effective management practices, the importance of praise is widely established (Sveinsdóttir et al., 2016). Gaines et al. (2005) identified that feelings of satisfaction follow praise being received

by staff members and providing that praise was realistic and timely, it acts as a cost effective, time efficient way to enhance staff wellbeing (Sveinsdóttir et al., 2016).

"…..kind of just saying thank you-it does hit you, and my boss has said well done, thank you a couple of times and it does hit you. That's the respect you want, between you and your boss and you and the other staff, that will make you go a long way, and it will keep you there." Lambourn Staff 1

Whilst praise was highlighted as a limited occurence in the horse racing industry, a reluctance to discipline staff was also noted. Within sporting teams, staff in 'middle management' roles, or captains of teams who have a dual role can experience a division of loyalties, a 'us vs. them' scenario, which can lead to a lack of clarity about expectations, and may also lead to a reluctance to effectively manage staff (Collins et al., 1999). This may in fact be happening in the racing sector, where 'good' staff were appointed into management roles and are now experiencing conflict due to their new role as a manager and shared loyalties with their old colleagues.

"You've got enough to carry on with on your own, without having to worry about managing staff." Lambourn Senior Staff 2

Senior staff admitted to relying upon a core of the more capable committed staff on a yard rather than discipline less effective members of their team. As a result, these *good* staff felt that they become victims of their own conscientiousness and were asked to do more, while weaker staff did less, highlighting the importance of fairness in management practices and suitable praise;

"One thing that's annoying about that is because it's always like the people who wouldn't be as capable back at home get to go racing, and like the more capable people have to stay at home to keep the yard ticking over, and then it's not fair to them." Cotswolds Staff 3.

Conscientiousness is considered a personality trait (Costa & McCrae, 1992), and would be characterised as self-determined, self-disciplined, hard working, and an internal striving for achievement and success (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Lin et al., 2015) and as such, managers may prefer to rely on these individuals rather than distribute workload evenly. Senior staff have previously reported that staffing issues and people management are key stressors in their job role (Dacombe, 2012; Sear, 2018; Speed & Andersen, 2008). Ineffective strategies, such as overreliance on key staff, could result in long term damage to the business, and poor health of the employees. Amabile et al. (1996) and Glynn (1996) suggest that highly skilled employees tend to appear to be more involved and more committed to the organisation than non-skilled employees, which may further promote the tendency to rely on certain staff, based on their work ethic and task rate (Aguenza & Som, 2012a). High levels of conscientiousness, such as reported by some staff, should increase resilience to stress. However in reality often results in an employee who, due to a strong desire to excel in working performance, has dedicated all their personal resource to the job role and left little to support coping with their own psychological stress (Lin et al., 2015). This may result in high levels of stress in conscientious individuals and decreased coping strategies to support long term psychological and physiological health. Targeted, specialised management training should be devised and offered alongside rider coaching, to address the specific management skills gap identified in this research. Management training should be aimed at staff who have been promoted to senior positions with limited experience and training regarding the management of staff and should address innovative problem solving, ongoing appraisals, review, feedback and goal setting along with discipline. This should be targeted to the racing yard environment with practical working examples given on how staff and work pressures can be alleviated.

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Lack of career progression

A lack of opportunities for progression, and decreased visibility for progression pathways were also highlighted in the focus groups as a concern.

"I don't think there is really a career path as such for them. I think the biggest problem is that you come in and you're – well, a stable lad – a lot of them get stuck in a rut because there's nowhere else for them to go, there's no sort of path where you can sit down with them and say, right, these are your three options, where do you want to go? And a lot of them just get stuck at that one spot." Cotswolds Senior Staff 3.

"I think the structure of the staffing pyramid within individual racing yards is quite tricky, because you have the senior management and then you have everyone else, and I suppose we are all individually trying to structure our businesses where people can work up the ladder, but ultimately it's hard because you have senior management and the rest. And are trying to fill in the middle ground." Lambourn Trainers 1.

Motivation is the interaction of both conscious and unconscious factors such as intensity of desire, incentive and reward of a set goal and the expectations of the individual (Ganta, 2014). A lack of recognised and promoted career progression could be responsible for a lack of motivation in employees such as observed here within racing. Ganta (2014) identified motivation as the key to performance, citing rewards based on job performance, setting realistic goals, effective discipline and fairness in the workplace as vital components in staff retention. Organisations that do not recognise an employee's need to grow cite 'development or lack of [this]' as primary reasons for resignation. Aguenza & Som (2012a) and Allen et al. (2003) found that opportunities offered by employers for growth reduced staff turnover intentions, suggesting a need to focus on investing in people to keep them in the sector. Improvements in this area within racing in the form of ongoing training and recognised career pathways may therefore result in better future staff retention. Awareness of these pathways should be a key focus of education for employers to ensure career opportunities are disseminated to wider stable staff.

Further discussions identified that leavers from the industry are often in their mid-twenties to thirties, at a time when employees are established in their roles, which may further confound the issues with skill development.

"Highly skilled people that can teach young people, they're not there anymore." Newmarket Senior Staff 2

The attrition of staff in their mid-twenties fractures the cyclical nature of teaching and skills sharing which the industry has historically been built on, as invaluable expertise leaves the sector and experienced staff members cannot pass their knowledge on to the next generation of staff (Butler et al., 2019). This increases the skills gap between senior and new stable staff which could increase the perception of generational differences in work ethic, and could be impacting the retention of staff in the industry. Incentives targeting racing employees in their mid-twenties may increase retention, but further work is required to assess the efficacy of such a scheme.

Theme 2- Work ethic

The second higher order theme identified was societal influences on staff. This was subdivided into the desire amongst some employees for instant gratification, combined with unrealistic

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expectations and the impact this has on the ability to discipline and influenced employees' overall work ethic (Figure 3).

Perceptions of Work Ethic & Generational differences

A commonly held belief highlighted by participants in the senior staff and trainer groups was that younger members of the racing workforce were lacking in work ethic and were often termed 'lazy'. The majority of the racing workforce are aged between 16 and 34 (Public Perspectives Ltd, 2016) and therefore reflect the generation associated with these characteristics. The current racing workforce come predominately from the Millennial (people born between the early 1980s and the mid/late 90s) and Generation Z (people born after 1995) age groups. Generation Z and Millennials are anecdotally thought to be less focused or hard working by previous generations (Ng et al., 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2008; Velasco & de Chavez, 2018).

"The younger generation are so lazy, and don't want to get outside, they don't want to get their hands dirty, all they want to do is sit in front of a computer, and I think that's the biggest part of it." Newmarket Trainer 2.

Multigenerational workforces are recognised as challenging in terms of recruitment, training and retention of staff (Stanley, 2010). Every generation possess a unique set of characteristics and values dependant on their life experiences, this leads to differences in attitudes to work and team working (Gursoy et al., 2008). Stanley (2010) states that factors that drive and motivate each generational group within a workforce need to be understood in order for any workforce team to succeed. Millennial employees are often referred to as self-focused and desiring of recognition for their work (de Hauw & de Vos, 2010; Deal et al., 2010) which is not always seen in older generations, and may account for a lack of praise in the racing industry.

Young adults are often referred to as the snowflake generation, a derogatory term used widely in the press (Rudgard, 2017), and mentioned during the focus groups. This label, given to people becoming adults in the 2010s, suggests that young adults are lacking resilience or a strong work ethic, and are prone to taking offence easily. Such characteristics are unlikely to thrive in the 'crisis management' situation that many racing yards find themselves in currently, where there is little opportunity for training, and can leave members of the workforce feeling undervalued.

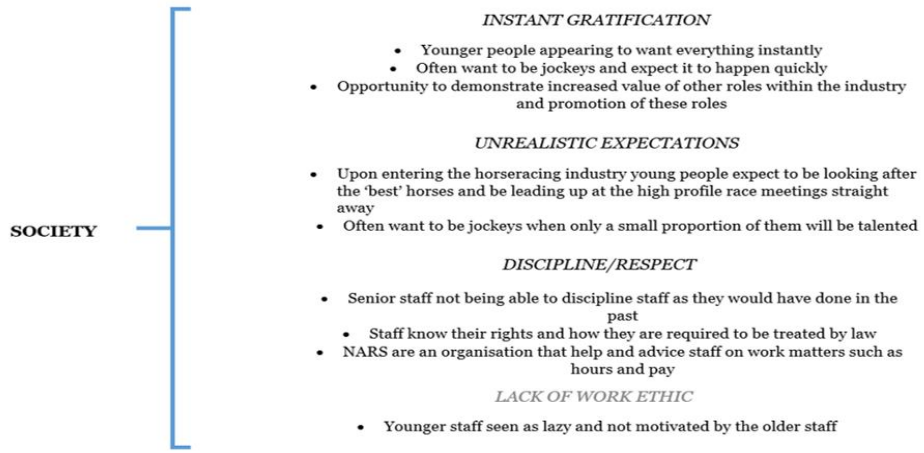

Figure 3: Themes: society and work ethic

An additional comment made by senior staff and trainers was the expectations of new staff being high with regards the type and calibre of horse they are given responsibility for.

"When they walk in and you give them their five horses or whatever they get, they expect a good horse, and then it's almost the point where, well that's a crap horse I'm not going to bother with that one. And I just think well, hang on a minute, like no!" Cotswolds Senior Staff 2

"That sort of drive for it …you know, they all want to be on TV leading up at Cheltenham. It's just not going to happen." Cotswolds Senior Staff 2

Ganta (2014) highlights the importance of realistic goal setting within a work environment, however these goals should be clearly understood by all. Realistic goals and the expectations of staff appeared to differ between management and staff in the racing sector regarding initial entry into the role, and 'paying dues'. Some younger staff were described by senior staff and t rainers as only wanting to look after the 'good' horses. This suggests that entrants to the industry know what they would like to achieve and are keen to progress, which are attributes the industry wants to enhance, however may be impatient and unprepared for time and work commitment that is required to reach their goals. Additional training for both managers and employees is warranted here, to ensure expectations are understood by all parties, and clearer job specifications and interview processes may allow for increased understanding of job roles upon arrival, leading to increase satisfaction and retention.

Theme 3 – Work-life balance

Participants agreed that their work-life balance was of concern, with several lower order themes identified as influential to this including work hours, fixtures, salaries and provision of accommodation (Figure 4).

Hours

Staff stated they are working long hours and experience long days away from the yard on race days (British Horseracing Authority, 2018a). Working time regulations coupled with an attempt by employers to ease the work burden have seen many yards introduce an afternoon off during the week for those staff who have worked or are due to work at a weekend (NARS, n.d.), however this raises challenges in an already understaffed industry:

"In a perfect world, in an ideal world, if you had an ideal world you'd have just weekend staff. People who would come in a Saturday afternoon, Sunday morning, Sunday afternoon. Five or six of them to do the yard and all your staff would have every weekend off." Cotswolds Trainer 1.

"Which would be great. However, you'd have two sets of wages to pay, because they wouldn't accept a wage cut if they weren't working weekends, they'd want the same money. So you've got to find more money, which means more training fees, and then it's a vicious circle. It's impossible." Cotswolds Trainers 2.

The National Association of Racing Staff report that no employee should work more than 48 hours on average over a 7-day period in the UK (NARS, n.d.), however perception of long hours and inflexible working weeks is still a concern. In a recent study, trainers reported long work hours as one of the sources of stress in their profession (Sear, 2018), whilst over 85% of stable staff surveyed in Australia reported working more than 40 hours/week averaging

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46hrs/week in full time staff (Speed & Andersen, 2008) suggesting previous problems with working hours. Increased hours have been reported to link to higher levels of fatigue and psychological distress, which can increase the risk factor for injury in a number of occupations, including veterinary, nursing and construction industries (Chau et al., 2008; Trimpop et al., 2000). Mandatory overtime reduced perceptions of job control, which is a stressor for burnout, can result in an increased number of sick days for the same injury compared to those taken by staff who did not work overtime (de Castro et al., 2010). On race days, with a reduced number of staff, there may be a need to work overtime or on days off simply to get the horses done, resulting in higher demand on those staff left behind:

"I feel sorry having to send the lads racing on their weekends off, or their afternoons off, but that's what it's come down to because otherwise there's not enough people to work on the yard." Lambourn Senior Staff 1

The lack of opportunity to make private appointments such as for the G.P. or dentist were a particular challenge for senior travelling staff, as the relentlessness of their role leaves them with little free time outside of work:

"Silly little things, like I can't ever forward plan anything or book an appointment for anything, whereas if I know there's definitely no jump racing every Monday, fifty two weeks of the year, then I'm fine, on a Monday…!" Cotswolds Senior Staff 1.

This finding has previously been reported, with staff struggling to access doctor's appointments or co-ordinate calendars for off-work activities due to ever changing schedules (Dacombe, 2012; Sear, 2018; Speed & Andersen, 2008). Casual staff in other sectors experience similar demands, whereby a lack of control over hours, regularly changing schedules and variable day to day activities means they lack the routine to be able to make plans, resulting in work-life conflicts and lowered job control (Bohle et al., 2004). Whilst there are more permanent staff in the racing sector than casual staff, the unpredictability of horses means the day to day planning is often disrupted due to equine injury, or changes in race planning, reflecting the demands experienced by casual staff in other sectors (Bohle et al., 2004; Filby et al., 2012; Sear, 2018). There is a need for flexibility within the employers and employees attitudes and working practices in order to overcome these challenges, with considerations of weekday/weekend shift work to support more rural racing staff in accessing healthcare or personal appointments, which could improve perception of work-life balance.

Racing fixtures

The relentlessness of the racing fixture list was consistently cited by senior staff and trainers as a contributory factor to the pressures felt by managers and staff, corresponding with previous research by Sear (2018). Fixture numbers have increased by 6% to a current figure of 1,511 planned race days for 2019 compared to 1,429 in 2014 (British Horseracing Authority, 2018a), suggesting the problem is only becoming more significant.

"There is the pressure of having too much racing and there are just not enough staff." Newmarket Senior Staff 1

"You're fine until you have runners." Lambourn Senior Staff 2

"You think you're alright for staff, but when you get to the middle of the season and you've got like three meetings with two runners at each, it's a different story." Lambourn Senior Staff 3

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Evening fixtures appear to be of particular concern with several participants highlighting the long and unsociable hours involved:

"I hear more and more people moaning about evening racing than anything else." Lambourn Senior Staff 3

Whilst staff highlighted issues with the sociability of the hours, working long hours, or unsocial hours can also disrupt circadian rhythms, interfere with regular sleep patterns, increase fatigue and delay recovery time from injury (de Castro et al., 2010; Dembe et al., 2005). Staff are therefore more likely to be injured as a result of these physiological changes during unsocial working hours, with risk of injury increased by up to 84% in some sectors (Dembe et al., 2005). In addition, there are typically less staff per shift than comparable shifts during the day, which therefore can increase risk of injury due to poor staffing, and higher workload. Injury rates are already high in the racing sector, with core stable staff (track riders, racing grooms) reporting 82% of accidents and over 60% experiencing soft tissue injury or contusions (Figley & Roop, 2006). The increased risk of injury could further diminish the workforce, and result in increased staff leaving the industry due to long term injury (Dacombe, 2012; NARS, n.d.). Recommendations for reviewing the fixture list have been already been made by industry stakeholders, with propositions of clear race weeks for both the NH and Flat calendars, or a day without racing per week, however financial losses to racecourses limit the feasibility of this approach. The results of this study would suggest that further work between the BHA race planning department, Racing Welfare and Trainers is needed to review the physical, psychological and occupational impact of the current fixture list on stable staff.

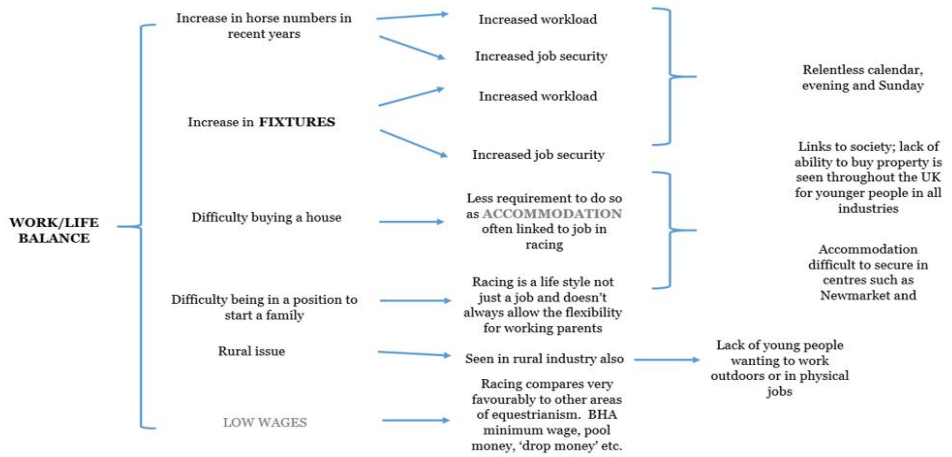

Figure 4: Themes: work-life balance, racing fixtures, accommodation and low wages

The memorandum of agreement between the National Trainers Federation (NTF) and The National Association of Racing Staff (NARS) states that staff returning from racing after midnight will not be required to start work before 9.30am the following day, but trainers often said that this was difficult to facilitate, and staff identified this as a major issue for them on a day to day basis (British Horseracing Authority, 2018a). Travelling staff appeared most affected by this:

"I did something like nine weeks this season without a day off. But when am I supposed to get my stuff ready, like if I get home …. That's the only knock-on effect for me personally, is getting kit ready for the next day. And when I get home from racing at night, I don't like doing it then, I just get up half an hour earlier in the morning and do it in the morning. Because if you've been on the road all night, you can't concentrate properly, you can't think about what it's

wearing, what weight it's got, what girth am I sending, you can't concentrate so you just get up early and do it then." Cotswolds Senior Staff 1.

The tendency to work in spite of recommendations for time off has been seen in other professions working with animals, including veterinarians and animal shelter workers. Figley & Roop (2006) reported that animal care givers tend to prioritise the needs of the animal over their own welfare, and they worry that no one can replace their level of care, therefore having a tendency to work themselves to fatigue. This can be seen in the quote above, whereby racing staff are prioritising the needs of the animal above their own health. Challenges to the presenteeism culture in racing need to come from senior staff and trainers, working to focus on positive mental and physical health as a primary concern for staff.

Salaries

Salaries were mentioned but were not a major theme identified by staff or senior staff. Work-life balance, time off and ability to progress in the industry appeared to be more important to facilitate retention and job satisfaction. However, the perceived injustice of the wages not being linked to the level of skill required was identified by some senior staff:

"….in racing you are meant to be a highly skilled person but you're paid a minimum wage. You're asking someone to be extremely skilled and extremely knowledgeable in the aspect of dealing with an animal, but you are paying them nothing for their skill." Newmarket Senior Staff 2

Whilst financial rewards are a key extrinsic motivation for job retention, it is not the most prioritised reason for dissatisfaction based on previous research (Aguenza et al., 2012). The Institute for Employment Studies in the UK stated only 10% of employees who left posts gave dissatisfaction with pay as a the main reason for leaving (Aguenza & Som, 2012a; Bevan, 1997). Similar to the viewpoints of staff in this study, Higginbotham (1997) reported that perception of 'fair' salaries was more indicative of retention than higher wages, suggesting that staff understanding of salaries is important, and something that should be discussed with managers.

Although salaries were identified as a concerning factor, when compared to other areas of equestrianism, one participant stated;

"money, pool money, best turned out money……I wouldn't want to work with horses in any other place bar racing." Cotswold Senior Staff 1

Some participants still suggested that racing was the best industry to work in with regards to pay. Within a cross section of workplaces, 31.8% of staff surveyed by Aguenza & Som (2012a) said fair pay was a contributor to retention in their current role, highlighting its importance to staff. The advantage of all licensed trainers having to pay at least the minimum racing wages as dictated by the BHA (British Horseracing Authority, 2018a) and that the additional 'pool'[1] money payments were compulsory was highlighted as an industry specific advantage and incentive to remaining in racing:

"I think people are quick to blame it on wages, but it's actually all these other things we're talking about other than wages. I mean, probably wages could be an issue, but prize money is an issue, so it stems from that at the end of the day." Lambourn Trainers 3.

[1] pool money is a proportion of the yards winnings that must be divided between all registered members of staff at that yard

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Accommodation

A high proportion of participants in Lambourn and Newmarket highlighted securing affordable accommodation as challenging. The inability to be in a financial position to buy a house and difficulty in renting accommodation were key issues which influenced staff retention. There are plans within both of these centres to build additional staff accommodation, but these are long term initiatives that require planning consent and funding.

The last 20 years have seen a substantial fall in the number of young adults owning their homes. In 1997, 55% of 25-34 year olds were home owners, this had reduced to 35% in 2017 (Cribb & Simpson, 2018). The Institute for Fiscal Studies (Cribb & Simpson, 2018) stated that the average property price in the same period had increased by 173% compared to an increase in income of 19% for 25-34 year olds. Racing staff are required to live within a relatively close proximity to their place of work to facilitate their working patterns, however this often places them in geographic areas where house and rent prices are high, and salary levels provide a barrier to home ownership.

"with Lambourn being fifty miles away from London, twenty five minutes away from Didcot train station, it's a commuter into London kind of village……and that's going to push rental prices and house prices through the roof." Lambourn Senior Staff 3

Within racing many roles will be advertised inclusive of onsite accommodation options (NARS, n.d.). Whilst initially this benefit may appear advantageous to entrants to the industry, there could be negative side effects to mental health and job satisfaction. Employee housing has been seen to affect physical and mental recovery in high strain roles, such as racing (Dacombe, 2012; Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2003), where employees can subsequently experience accumulation fatigue, burnout and long term illness (Landolt et al., 2017). The impact on staff can affect not just that staff member, but also the wider team, who may need to cover for staff or result in yards running at sub optimal staffing capacities to cope. Budgeting support is currently offered to stable staff by Racing Welfare as support workshops and telephone advice, and this should be continued to ensure staff are educated on expectations for fair salaries and housing/mortage schemes available.

Theme 4 - Media

Media was highlighted by the staff in focus groups as a predominately negative stressor for staffing concerns, creating a wider perception of the industry to incoming staff (Figure 5). Staff also highlighted specifically the persistent need to use mobile phones and engage with social media in young staff as concerns for staff retention.

Media

Media framing is defined as the means by which media information is organised, presented and interpreted, often setting an agenda (Sieff, 2003). Throughout the focus groups, trainers highlighted the negative portrayal of racing as a career choice in the media. Sieff (2003) reported that the frequent use of negative framing can lead to negative beliefs that are difficult to change.

"I think sometimes the press have fuelled the fire, so yes there probably is a staffing crisis, and yes, we always have to look forward and address what we have, but sometimes people, you know – I personally haven't got a staffing crisis at the moment." Lambourn Trainers 1

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Trainers felt this occurred across television and newspaper coverage, and through the strong racing presence on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram (Playle, 2017; Towers, 2019). They voiced the concern that new starters to the industry embarked on their careers with a negative mind set thinking that the work is hard and badly paid, which did not support engagement and long term retention in the industry:

Social Media and mobile phone use

Participants, senior staff and trainers in particular, identified social media as a concerning element of modern society. This concern was firstly due to the distractive nature of the social media phenomenon with staff appearing to have a need to be constantly in touch with associates online.

*"The Instagram life is not real life. People do not put on Instagram a picture of themselves looking really miserable, freezing cold and p**s wet through." Cotswolds Trainer 2.*

Barker (2009) identified that communication with peer group members through social network sites is of significant importance to older adolescents. Participants felt that staff spent a considerable portion of daily life interacting through social media, phones and social network sites and this formed an integral part of life for the young racing workforce, with these being used to replace real-life interactions for staff members who felt negatively about their peer social group (Ahn, 2011; Barker, 2009). Studies have found that teenagers spend up to nine hours a day interacting through social media of some description (Ahn, 2011; Barker, 2009), something that is often seen as a frustration to older generations when managing younger staff.

"But you tell them, 'do not bring your phones onto the yard' and it's like – I almost feel like, actually, legally am I allowed to say that to them or not. It's become such a thing, just that it's constant." Cotswolds Trainer 2.

An additional impact of constantly being in contact with their peers on social media appears to lead staff into comparing their lives, jobs and achievements. With the current staffing issues being faced by the industry and ample vacancies needing to be filled, staff can use social media to gain employment elsewhere with ease. Young adults in particular are vulnerable to the feeling that the 'grass is greener' and that work would be better at a different yard, often where a friend works (Pfeffer et al., 2014). This leads to increased movement of staff between yards and less stability within the overall workforce:

"Again, that's a social thing, a generation thing. Especially for our kids, is that they don't know life without phones. It's easy for us because we've known life without phones, but they just don't know life without a mobile phone." Cotswolds Trainer 1.

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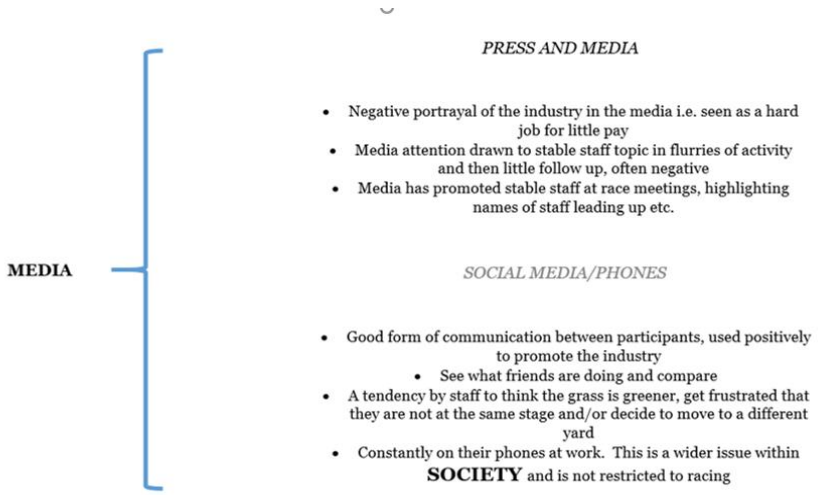

Figure 5: Themes: media and social media / phone use

This study identified that the majority of staff perceive the industry to be in a staffing crisis, and they perceive working hours, salaries, the volume of racing fixtures and skills gaps, in both entry level and senior management staff, to be mitigating variables in retention. In addition, generational differences in work ethic and the use of social media to portray the industry may be increasing the likelihood of staff leaving the industry, or frequently changing job role.

The skills gaps identified in this study highlighted concerns over a lack of practical horse skills, as well as management skills and communication in senior roles. Lack of practical skills could be considered both a reason for, and a consequence of, poor retention in the industry and could negatively impact racehorse welfare. On the job skill development and training may be lost due to a lack of mentoring from more experienced staff who have left the industry, leading to decreased skills transference to new staff (Butler et al., 2019). In addition, a lack of skills in entry staff may result in management considering those employees as less effective, and therefore not giving them additional responsibility or opportunity (Glynn, 1996). Un-skilled employees who feel undervalued are significantly more likely to leave a post than skilled employees (Aguenza et al., 2012). Management practices have been reported to have a direct impact on employee turnover; scheduling off-duty employees to work, limited training time, non-competitive pay rates and poor communication are cited as significant contributors to reduced retention (Aguenza et al., 2012). All of these aspects can be seen in racing, and have been highlighted by staff in this study, suggesting management practice may play a significant role in the current retention problems. Overall, poor management skills when coupled with high workloads and poorly established career pathways, result in an increased risk of staff leaving the racing industry (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016; Gursoy et al., 2008; Ng et al., 2010).

Working conditions have previously been reported as significant contributors to staff stress levels, retention, job satisfaction and physical and mental health (Bohle et al., 2004; de Castro et al., 2010; Sakurai et al., 2013). Employees in the racing sector across all levels of staffing reported concerns over long working hours, ever-changing work and fixture demands and disparity in benefits, including salaries. A recent review of racing staff mental health also advised that the racing industry should invest in adaptations to working patterns to improve the work-life balance of staff, advising innovation may be required to protect racing employees from work-related psychological strain (McConn-Palfreyman et al., 2019). However research by (Jason M Newell & Macneil, 2010) Newell and Macneil (2010) suggests that simple

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practical measures, such as coffee breaks, clear workload goals and positive relationship building with colleagues can also improve coping mechanisms without changing working conditions, which industry should consider to support work-life balance.

Staff in more senior roles in racing also highlighted concerns about generational attitudes relating to work ethic, dedication and use of mobile phones and social media, which could entice staff to leave their posts, citing a perception of the 'grass is greener' in younger staff. The issues of generational differences in the workplace has been widely explored within research in the last decade (Lyons et al., n.d.); recent research has found managers perceive intergenerational differences in work values, similar to the findings of this study (Foster, 2013; Lester et al., 2012). In spite of this, much of the workforce currently working in the racing sector are Millenials or Generation Z, and little evidence exists to suggest actual work practice differences between generations, despite perception that it does (Lyons et al., n.d.). Most research concludes that Millenials are more dedicated, work harder and value more intrinisic aspects of the job such as mentoring and training (Lyons et al., n.d.) compared to the prior generation (Generation X 1965-1977), who are often reported to have decreased organisational loyalty (Beekman, 2011). It has been proposed that better understanding of the generational differences in working values, and perceptions between staff and how to effectively manage them, for both generations, would lead to better recruitment, retention, succession, employee engagement and communication (Dencker et al., 2008).

There are limitations to consider in this study. It should be recognised that focus group members elected to participate in the study and therefore there is the potential for either positive and engaged staff, or negative and disengaged staff to take part in the group discussions, which may have resulted in different experiences discussed. Every effort was taken to ensure participants felt comfortable to voice their feelings and concerns and that conflict was avoided (Heary, 2002) however some may not have fully spoken their minds due to concerns about job security. The focus groups were centred on key racing centres in the UK, however to gain a fuller perspective of the entirety of the UK racing industry undertaking focus groups across the country would have been beneficial.

Conclusion

Whilst the UK racing industry has a strong team of dedicated employers and employees who are passionate about working in horse racing, there appears to be significant skills gaps identified (racehorse management and human resource management) that are contributing to the staff retention issue. High workloads, poor work-life balance and a lack of training and career progression are also negatively influencing retention in the racing industry. A reduction in the number of race-day fixtures could be one strategy that may ease the day to day pressure within racing stables. Supporting senior staff to do their jobs effectively through the implementation of improved management training would enhance their job satisfaction and by association should be beneficial for the workforce they manage. Ongoing issues such as the lack of job satisfaction and motivation voiced by racing staff here also need to be addressed. The value of training implemented should be evaluated and reviewed to measure efficacy. Whilst retention will remain an issue for the racing industry in the short term, an opportunity exists for the racing industry to consult with all stakeholders to formulate and implement a strategic plan to address the underpinning themes identified here to improve the long term perspective and safeguard the future of racing and the staff who work within it.

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