

“Hey GRINGO!”: the HR challenge of graduates in non-graduate occupations

Abstract

Research paper

Purpose of this paper

This paper examines the phenomenon of growing numbers of graduates in non-graduate occupations (GRINGOs), and explores the HR issues and complexities that arise as a consequence and suggest avenues for future research.

Design/methodology/approach

A case study methodology was used to gather data from four companies employing significant numbers of graduates in non-graduate jobs.

Findings

The case studies suggest that GRINGOs can bring significant benefits to organisations, but are also challenging to manage: organisations which cannot offer them opportunities for career development risk having an able but resolutely uncommitted group of staff.

Research limitations/implications

The research is based on a relatively limited sample, and the respondents were in management, so the findings were not triangulated with the perceptions of GRINGOs within the organisations. There is a paucity of literature examining the consequences of the GRINGO and the challenges that they pose for organisations, and this paper seeks to explore these issues and prompts further research in this area.

Practical implications

The paper suggests that organisations are not fully utilising the potential of their GRINGO staff, and identifies ways in which HR departments might respond to this issue.

Originality/value

The article makes an original contribution to the literature on graduate under-employment, by examining the issue from an organisational perspective.

Keywords: Graduates, GRINGOs, career, under-employment, HRM

Introduction

This article examines a growing issue in graduate employment, namely the rising numbers of graduates in non-graduate occupations (GRINGOs). We suggest that GRINGOs represent both a well-educated workforce and a group whose ambiguous career status provide a challenge to HR practices aimed at engendering commitment. The unusual position of GRINGOs arises in part because many are employed in full-time, permanent posts yet view their current job as a temporary stopgap pending the launch of their ‘career’. This oddly ambiguous situation can only be understood in

the context of changing patterns of employment amongst younger workers generally, and students and graduates in particular.

Younger workers are typically defined as those aged 16-24 years old, an age range which spans some key developmental signposts and transitions for most people – certainly leaving school, but also perhaps leaving home, going to university or taking training, starting work and graduating. There are clearly significant differences within this age group in terms of their relationship to employment and it is important to clearly distinguish between these different ‘groupings’ due to the inherent differences in their labour market participation (Madouros, 2006a). The role of younger workers is both changing and increasing in importance in today’s business environment. Official statistics, however, indicate that young people’s participation in the UK labour market; current projections suggest that participation of those between 16 and 24 is due to fall by approximately 4.9% by 2020 (Madouros, 2006b). The current and projected decline in labour market participation is a reflection of the increased participation in Higher Education.

This expansion of higher education is seen to have impacted on the young work force in three ways. Firstly, it has meant that a lower number of school leavers are entering positions (Alpin *et al*, 1998). Secondly, there has been an increase in the number of ‘student workers’ participating in the labour market (Canny, 2002), and thirdly, there has been an increase in the number of graduates in non-graduate occupations (GRINGOs) as employers substitute graduates for non-graduates as a reaction to the increased supply of graduates within the market (Mason, 1995; 1999; 2001; 2002; Nove *et al*, 1997). As a consequence, today’s organisations face a different ‘type’ of young worker, the majority of whom are either studying for, or possess a higher/further education qualification. However, despite significant debate surrounding over-education, over-qualification, skills and the nature of work there is a lack of research on the HR issues and complexities that arise as a consequence of these changes.

The ‘student worker’

In this section we will provide an overview of the role of student workers. This is important for three reasons. Firstly, it maps out why employment of students can represent a key strategic decision. Secondly, it identifies a degree of ambiguity in the employment relationship. Thirdly, it suggests that this ambiguity, apparently understood on both sides, can nevertheless provide for a functional employment relationship which meets the needs of both parties.

The total number of full-time undergraduate students in the UK now stands at 2.3 million (HESA, 2006). Over the same period, the proportion of students working has risen from 30% in the early nineties (Ford *et al*, 1995) to 70% today (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006). These two trends have produced a huge increase in the number of students working. The TUC (2004) suggests that from the 1980s onwards the UK has seen a shift from a labour market in which student labour was a marginal to one where it is a major feature, and the Office of National Statistics (Madouros, 2006a and 2006b) suggest these trends are set to intensify over the next decade.

From their traditional stereotype as the standard source of recruits for bars and restaurants, student workers have become a significant segment of the labour market,

and are now employed by a much wider range of organisations, in a wide variety of jobs. Yet despite their popularity amongst employers, student workers are nevertheless a relatively atypical part of the workforce. Primarily focused on their studies and associated social life, students workers take employment largely to support their finances – despite the rhetoric of ‘valuable work experience’ there is little evidence that they choose part-time work with future career in mind. The main criteria are therefore pay, convenience and flexibility: work should fund their social life and studies, and should not interfere overly much with either. Full-time students working in part-time jobs therefore represent a workforce which is inherently transient and relatively uncommitted. Yet organisations in a number of sectors have opted to build a substantial part of their operations around just such a workforce.

The retail sector offers a good example. Having to deal with the traditional UK perception of retail employment as low status work, employers in this sector actively targeted student workers, developing flexible working practices which allowed them to attract these ‘high calibre’ staff (Huddleston and Hirst, 2004). Student workers helped employers plug an identified skills gaps in the sector, redressing shortages through using this source of part time labour. In the process, the roles in which students are employed have become far more structured and require specific skills. Perhaps surprisingly, students represent a ‘good bet’ in terms of the investment of training time. They are able to learn quickly and, providing the employment package is appropriately flexible, the employer can expect to retain them until their studies are completed. A student recruited in the first term at university might work there for almost three years: this would make them something of a veteran in a sector with high labour turnover. Paradoxically then, although employers know students are inherently ‘temporary’, student workers may nevertheless be the smart recruitment choice for employers seeking to reduce labour turnover and retain key skills.

The GRINGO

We can now turn to a consideration of GRINGOs, a segment of the younger workforce that has grown in size in recent years and who have been at the centre of many debates surrounding the impact of Higher Education expansion on employment. As Scurry (2005) notes, there is considerable debate about what constitutes a non-graduate job, as the boundaries between jobs where a degree is necessary and those where it is not are very unclear (Nove et al, 1997; Rigg et al, 1990). One argument is that, objectively, a much greater range of jobs can be viewed as ‘knowledge work’ and require the intellectual ability which will most typically be found amongst graduates. However, this does not mean that the nature of the job requires a university education, more likely it reflects a trend to specify a requirement for a degree as a crude yardstick by which employers can simplify the shortlisting process. Alternatively, as many of our respondents indicated, it may be the case that employers are not looking for graduates, they simply find that graduates form the bulk of the (best) applicants.

Some commentators have stressed that many jobs previously considered to be non-graduate have evolved and changed in nature (Battu et al, 1999; Pearson et al, 1999; Pitcher and Purcell, 1998; Purcell et al, 1999). This ‘upgrading’ of what were traditionally viewed as non-graduate jobs has been seen to occur partly due to the “desire and enthusiasm of graduates to ‘grow’ jobs” (Harvey *et al*, 1997:1). Mason (1995) points out that many factors have resulted in job content changing at all levels

of the organization and as a result one must be careful not to assume those positions previously considered non-graduates jobs are still the same: he suggests they may in fact have changed radically. Battu *et al* (1999) also suggest that although there are increased levels of mismatch within the graduate labour market there is still the opportunity for some graduates to change the nature of their jobs. Yet, in later work they found little evidence of any upgrading of these jobs (Battu *et al*, 2000); the scope for such upgrading is limited, and where it occurs is very much down to the individual graduates themselves (Mason, 2001).

Whatever objective criteria might be used to evaluate whether a job is a ‘graduate job’, it seems clear that graduates themselves continue to have fairly clear perceptions of what constitutes a graduate job, perceptions which hark back to an earlier era when graduates were a small minority of the workforce and a degree carried promise of a better career. Writing in 1994, Brown and Scase suggested conventional wisdom “among politicians, parents and students alike” was that education remained “a form of investment” that would “deliver the economic ‘goods’” (Brown and Scase, 1994: 16). Our research suggests that, despite greater cynicism today about the benefit of becoming a graduate, the basic assumption that it will be a source of career advantage remains very much in place, and indeed Sturges *et al* (2000) suggest graduates’ have surprisingly traditional career expectations. One illustration of this is the attitude of managers and HR staff in our case study companies – despite their greater understanding of the workplace and the labour market, they nevertheless understand and tacitly accept the GRINGOs’ view that they are not in ‘graduate’ careers.

The term ‘graduates in non-graduate occupations’ includes a very broad range of individuals and occupations, some of which fall outside of our analysis. In figure 1, we offer a provisional typology of GRINGOs. We classify them in terms of whether their GRINGO status is voluntary or involuntary, following a distinction originally proposed in the literature on underemployment (Glyde, 1977), and by the nature of the work. Both, it must be acknowledged, are to some extent based on the individual’s perception. We have classified the nature of work into traditionally non-graduate white collar work, traditionally student work and niche/high demand occupations. The first two are reasonably clear, but the latter refers to occupations where labour market demands create a perception of current and ongoing need for such work. We might suggest that this includes any occupation which might, in popular perception, be used to end the phrase ‘there’ll always be a need for...’. GRINGOs may be particularly likely to be drawn to occupations which appear to offer long-term employability. There are a range of occupations which were not typically undertaken by graduates, and over the last few years there has been interesting press coverage of how labour market shortages for certain key skills have encouraged graduates to retrain for jobs such as plumber or child minder.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

It will be recognised that there is some fluidity to the six types proposed, for example, as already discussed the nature of student work is changing, with students undertaking a greater range of occupations, some of which are fairly skilled and responsible roles. One example of movement within the types might be individuals who initially enter a niche/high demand occupation for purely financial reasons, but come to enjoy the nature and/or lifestyle of the work (involuntary to voluntary). Another might be an

individual taking traditional student work who sees opportunities for career progression and reframes and/or develops the role (traditional student work to traditional non-graduate work). Given that Battu et al (2000) found limited evidence of GRINGOs being able to develop their role, we might expect this shift will generally be confined to reframing, for example, coming to view an entry level role as a good apprenticeship for a supervisory role in the future.

Having set out a typology of GRINGOs, in this article we are focused largely on the involuntary column: those graduates who did not get onto graduate training schemes, did not find (nor perhaps actively seek) jobs which matched their pre-graduation expectations, and instead have taken employment which they treat as a short-term stopgap. Yet they are often in posts which are full-time and permanent, and thus implicitly treated by the employer as core. We suggest that many GRINGOs occupying core posts, but perceive themselves as peripheral workers, and that employers in a sense 'sanction' this perception. They might be pejoratively termed lumpen GRINGOs: individuals presently in a non-graduate occupation perceived by them to be a non-career post, that is to say, a post which does not fit into any substantive or even notional career plan. In our original development of this research, career matters did not loom large, but as we began to tease out the issues, it became clear that the GRINGOs' ambivalent perception of whether their current occupation is 'job' or 'career' is a matter on which a great deal hinges. Although the issue of graduates in non-graduate jobs has been identified (e.g. Battu et al, 2000; Elias and Purcell, 2004; Keep and Mayhew, 1996; Mason, 2002) there is a paucity of research on this issue and none on how HR departments and employers are dealing with it.

HR issues with GRINGO employment

From its emergence in the 1980s as an academic topic and a management approach, HRM has exhibited a degree of schizophrenia. It was Storey (1987) who coined the term 'soft' and 'hard' HRM to distinguish the very different prescriptions for management coming out of Harvard and Michigan respectively. Whilst the distinction can be useful, it can lead to an unhelpful assumption that HRM practice (in any given organisation) will be either/or. As Watson (2003) notes, all HRM practice is directed towards 'the employment of human beings as a means of furthering corporate purposes' and so at best, there is a choice between taking a 'hard-hard' approach ('applying tough and direct controls to serve corporate interests') or a 'hard-soft' approach ('applying developmental and indirect controls to serve corporate interests'). It does not take a leap of imagination to realise that most organisations will do both, adopting the different approaches at different times and/or towards different sections of their workforce (Keenoy, 1997).

In his highly influential analysis of HRM, Guest (1987) originally suggested that the goals of HRM were integration, commitment, quality and flexibility. In later empirical work he and colleagues sought to identify linkages between HRM policy and practice and organisational outcomes, suggesting that the key outcomes were commitment, competence, and flexibility (Guest et al, 2000). Similarly, Tsui et al (1997) examined employee response to different types of employment relationship and found that investment in employees was associated with greater performance and positive attitudes, leading them to conclude that approaches such as quasi-spot or underinvestment can be seen as a trade-off of lower performance for greater flexibility. This echoes the classic 'core' and 'peripheral' worker distinction proposed

by Atkinson (1984), and certainly many posts filled by student workers can be seen as peripheral. Those filled by GRINGOs are less obviously 'peripheral', so if employee commitment is a key goal (and outcome) of successful HRM, then GRINGOs represent something of a conundrum.

As a strategic choice, the employment of student workers might appear to be self-evidently 'hard' HRM. The appeal of student workers to employers is obvious. Although typically inexperienced, they will be intelligent, reasonably literate and numerate, and able to learn. They are relatively cheap to employ, both in terms of direct pay, and because they will have few expectations about benefits (e.g. sick leave, pension). The fact that they are inherently transient is a potential disadvantage, but it does mean that employers can afford to take some risks in terms of staffing – over-recruitment or poor selection decisions will be fairly rapidly corrected through labour turnover. There is also a curious reliability to student employment – although the actual people will change, the regular influx every autumn of a new intake of undergraduates constantly repopulates the labour pool. For GRINGOs however, the picture is less clear-cut. Student workers have a definite time horizon (graduation), but GRINGOs have no such time limit: their time in post ends only when they take action to end it. So, perhaps surprisingly, this may mean that GRINGOs have less organisational commitment than student workers, as they treat their employment as instrumental and short-term. The reason for this is linked to the way in which they appear to make sense of their careers.

GRINGO career orientations

Examining the experiences of GRINGOs, Scurry (2005) identified a reluctance amongst her participants to classify their work in career terms. Their prime motivations were what Pitcher and Purcell (1998) term as 'hedonistic': in essence, they wanted the lifestyle of their student days to continue. They needed employment with which to fund this lifestyle, in many cases they also wanted to remain living in the city where they'd studied, this being the location of their social network. Nevertheless, they also had aspirations to develop their careers, and thus needed to offer an 'account' which located their current jobs within some form of longer term 'game plan'. Scurry (2005) notes that the 'standard' account ('I'm only doing this for now, it's not my career') became progressively less credible the longer they remained in a recognisably non-graduate post. In other cases, GRINGOs' motivations may be concerned with debt, restricted geographical mobility, or simply a need to get the best job they can in an unpromising labour market. Whatever the reasons, they share a problematic post-graduation career identity: as graduates, they are expected to be 'careerist', yet their current job gives no suggestion of a career.

Weick (1996) suggests a tension between individuals and organisations on the issue of career management, in that the individual is likely to see to create weak career situations, which allow for improvisation and choice. GRINGOs may therefore actively pursue a practice of disengagement in order to eschew any attack on their identity – they need to preserve their 'just a job' narrative. This is clearly not a healthy state of affairs for the organisation, and as we will see below, this problem may potentially be compounded by organisations tacitly accepting their lack of commitment. Ironically, Canny (2002) suggests that the very essence of being a graduate (from an employer's perspective) is being seen to demonstrate a 'sense of commitment' lacking in those who have terminated their education. Weick (1996)

suggest that organisations might be expected to seek to create strong career situations, which allow for planning and control. In the case of GRINGO employment however, our findings suggest that some employers are not actively seeking to create these strong situations, instead they tacitly accept the GRINGOs 'weak' definition of their career situation.

Case Studies – the HR response to GRINGOs

As noted, there was a lack of prior empirical research upon which to base our selection of case study companies. However, the second author had conducted an extended field study of the GRINGO experience in a financial services company. Although this work focused on the individuals' perspective, through the access obtained it was possible to gain considerable insight into the organisational response to these workers, and we therefore selected this organisation (Landseer) as our first case. The information provided allowed us to identify some companies which might be expected to offer a contrast, and also shaped our data gathering. We gained much more limited access to these companies, and the information on the remaining three cases was gathered through interviews with key respondents. It seems unlikely that the four companies chosen exhaust all possible HR responses to GRINGOs, and certainly we would not seek to offer a typology of responses on the basis of our findings. Though the study is not quite exploratory in nature, it can be seen as an initial attempt to scope the issue, setting out possible avenues for future research.

Landseer

Call Centre A (CCA) is part of Brownfille, a direct insurance organisation that has several call centres located around the UK. In 2003 Brownfille was taken over by an international finance group, Landseer. Located in the centre of a university city in the East Midlands, the majority of CCA workers are drawn from the large student population of the city, with a significant proportion of these individuals continuing to work for CCA after graduation.

Staff are not recruited directly, agencies are used and individuals are initially employed for 3 months on agency contracts. At the end of this 3 month 'probationary' period the individuals are taken on by the organisation. Student workers and GRINGOs have featured prominently in the workforce of CCA for some years and at one point it was the call centre of choice for students, mainly due to its short shift pattern and high levels of commission. This pool of labour was not explicitly targeted by the organisation and was seen by the organisation simply as a 'bonus' of the location. The prevailing view amongst managers was that these individuals would ultimately leave to pursue 'their career', a view which appears to have a negative impact on the behaviour of these staff, with many of them showing little regard for their job or the organisation. However, since the acquisition of Brownfille by Landseer in 2003, managers have begun to recognise the potential of GRINGOs and the benefits that their employment brings to the organisation. They (and student workers) are seen as bright, articulate individuals, who are IT literate, flexible and have the potential to move up within the call centre and the wider organisation.

As a consequence steps are being taken to introduce a "student contract". This contract allows students, where possible, to transfer to call centres near their home towns during holidays or, if this is not possible or required, to have a post held open for them until they return at the start of the academic year. Landseer hope such a

contract demonstrates a level of commitment from the company which will help to redress some of the turnover issues that they have experienced as a result of the academic calendar. The development of the “student contract” is likely to have a knock-on effect on GRINGO employment, since it facilitates the retention of student workers after graduation. Although still in the early stages, steps are being taken to encourage the training, developing and promotion of these individuals, both within the call centre and throughout the group.

FarmCo

FarmCo is a restaurant chain with premises in most towns and cities. Although always more typically an employer of school pupils (aged 16-18), FarmCo does employ a number of university students, and was one of the first to introduce the practice of enabling school leavers to transfer from their local restaurant to one near to their chosen university, as a means of retaining experienced staff. FarmCo jobs have become a byword for low status, low skill work – the sort of work young people end up doing when they fail to pursue their education diligently – and they are thus not an employer of choice for most student workers or GRINGOs. University students who do work at FarmCo tend to be locals i.e. students who have not ‘gone away’ to university. They tend to have worked for FarmCo whilst at school, and continue to work there as a matter of convenience. Few university students apply to work at FarmCo, perhaps unsurprisingly given its low status and relatively low pay. The exception is overseas students, who have more limited choices, and FarmCo now employs them in increasing numbers.

FarmCo has a graduate training scheme, and some of FarmCo’s student workers do apply successfully to join the scheme. In principle there is also an internal route onto the scheme: this is effectively for GRINGOs, student workers who remained working for FarmCo after graduation and eventually apply to join the graduate training scheme as an internal applicant. Our respondent suggested that such applications were not viewed very favourably. Scurry (2005) found that GRINGOs’ friends and family had a somewhat negative opinion of their ‘career’, viewing it as evidence of a degree of inertia, a lack of dynamism. It is somewhat ironic that FarmCo seems to share this view of its GRINGO staff: the company assumes that a graduate of any calibre would either have left already or applied directly to the graduate training scheme whilst still at university. FarmCo appears to see little benefit to employing GRINGOs, and this may be due to the nature of the work: the additional education and ability of GRINGOs will make little difference to performance in the frontline jobs, and for managerial posts, they have their graduate trainee intake.

Axminster Industrials

Axminster provides business to business services for heavy industry. Amongst a range of activities, they run a call centre business, referred to as CC7. CC7 provides a service to their industry customers, in addition some of these customers have outsourced their own call centre activity to Axminster. Although located close to a university town, CC7 employs no student workers, but it does employ a number of GRINGOs. There is a relatively high turnover of staff within CC7 (though no higher than the average for call centres) and this means it is one of the biggest recruiters within the business, other departments having very low staff turnover. As a result, it is one of the main avenues through which graduates are recruited into the company, although the jobs to which they are initially recruited are definitely seen as non-

graduate jobs. The graduates are perceived to bring a number of benefits to CC7 and the wider company. Firstly, although CC7 always needs a balance of workers, there is a need for succession planning and the graduate employees offer a good source of potential team leaders and managers. Secondly, unlike many call centres CC7 is strongly linked to the rest of the organisation – for example, it is on the same site as the main business, all CC7 staff are directly employed by Axminster on permanent contracts, the same HR department deals with all staff on site etc. This means that there are opportunities for graduates to develop up and out of CC7 and into other areas of the business. These opportunities are open to all CC7 staff, but in practice it has tended to be the graduates who actually make such transitions. Thirdly, the graduates have slightly lower turnover, which our respondent suggested is linked to their willingness to remain and bide their time for promotional opportunities or opportunities to move to other roles within the wider business. Overall, the HR team for CC7 are keen to have more graduates apply, for the reasons outlined above. Although there is no formal career planning, the company can point to possible future career paths for their GRINGO staff, and clear evidence that these opportunities have been realised.

DeliverCo

DeliverCo are a national company specialising in parcel delivery for business and domestic customers. Their main sites are in the Midlands, but they also have large sites in the Northeast and Northwest of England. The Northeast site is the location for a large call centre operation, which employs large numbers of graduate in non-graduate jobs. The selection criteria for the posts in which they are employed specify only a good standard of literacy and numeracy, with experience being seen as desirable. As the role requires individuals to gain a certain amount of technical knowledge and be able to work ‘off-script’ a lot of the time, graduates make for potentially strong candidates, though the posts are definitely seen as non-graduate jobs by both management and the graduates themselves. Almost all posts are full-time, and DeliverCo does not employ any student workers.

DeliverCo pays well – salaries are several thousand pounds higher than the going rate for call centre work within the region. This has allowed them to attract experienced staff from other call centres, and is also cited as an explanation for their low turnover. There are some opportunities for progression, but they are relatively limited – a team leader heads up a team of 9 staff, one of whom is a designated deputy. Given the low turnover, graduates would be playing a very long game in career terms if they envisaged the call centre offering opportunities for promotion. Our respondent suggested this is not what they are doing: his discussions with his staff indicate they see the DeliverCo roles as a good ‘mark time’ job, something which pays well while they look for other opportunities and/or decide what they want to do next. DeliverCo have considerable opportunities for graduates to move out of the call centre work into more recognisably graduate jobs in other parts of the business. However, all such opportunities are in the Midlands. Most of the GRINGOs working in the Northeast call centre are not geographically mobile, and so cannot take advantage of these opportunities.

Discussion

Several themes emerged from the four case studies – the influence of student workers on the management and identity of GRINGOs, the role of career opportunities (and

their absence), and geographical mobility. To take the influence of student workers first, it was noticeable that the two companies with the most positive attitudes towards GRINGOs do not employ student workers. There are two obvious interpretations of this finding, both of which seem likely. Firstly, there is something of a blurring between student workers and GRINGOs. Although it is apparently straightforward to make a clear distinction between students workers and GRINGOs, in practice they are not so easily to separate. The kind of jobs, the individuals employed, the attitude of employers, and of the workers themselves, may serve to produce a degree of blurring between the two groups and their jobs – as managed and experienced. It is probably easiest to express it in these terms: there is a subset of student employment which maps quite closely to GRINGO employment – in simple terms, many graduates end up doing similar work to students, but on a full-time basis. Organisations which employ student workers and GRINGOs in similar roles are unlikely to observe any significant distinction between the two groups, and are therefore likely to manage them in a similar fashion. GRINGOs become ‘damned’ by association, and may find it difficult to establish a positive identity. Secondly, the GRINGOs themselves will be affected by the presence of student workers. They are both a reminder of their own limited progress, and a reference group in terms of their work norms. GRINGOs entering organisations without student workers are likely to experience their new employment at least as being different from their student days, even if it falls short of their earlier career aspirations. In addition, the reference group for their work norms are other ‘grown ups’ and they are therefore perhaps more likely to take work and themselves seriously. (This is couched in pejorative terms, but we suggest the phrasing aptly captures the attitudinal adjustment encouraged by this situation).

The second theme is whether or not there are potential career routes from the GRINGO post. We noted above that GRINGOs have a difficult career identity, and to some degree resist accepting their current post as being part of a ‘career’. The ambiguity of the GRINGOs’ situation leaves them in a state of ambivalence, torn between interpretations of it as ‘just a job’ or ‘part of a career’. Whilst the career interpretation might seem more appealing, if day to day experience appears to confirm the accuracy of a ‘just a job’ interpretation, the GRINGOs are likely to prefer the latter narrative, as they ‘defend’ their situation to family and friends. We can capture the ambivalence in two phrases:

“It would be good if this was more than just a job...but then again, I’d hate to do this for the rest of my career.”

“I didn’t go to university to end up doing this kind of thing...although to be honest, nothing else seems to be coming up on the horizon.”

This is the tension for GRINGOs – they would like to hold on to their pre-graduation notions of a potentially brilliant career (and so reject any notion their current post is part of this career), yet at the same they are constantly reminded that (so far) this *is* their career, this *is* what they do for a living. Scurry (2005) noted that newly appointed GRINGOs in the call centre tended to have little respect for those GRINGOs who had been there for some time, and even less for those who had sought to progress their careers within the company. The long-termers and the careerists undermined the new arrivals confident ‘just a job’ identity.

Weick (1996) noted that careers ‘rise prospectively in fragments and fall retrospectively in patterns’, and sensemaking is of considerable relevance to the GRINGO experience. Given the job versus career tension, it is useful to consider how their situational cues might impact on their sensemaking. DeliverCo’s attractive pay rates provide a ready made non-career explanation: ‘I work here because it pays better than anywhere else’. Similarly the attitude of Brownfille’s managers whose view of the GRINGOs as an ‘unexpected bonus’, just passing through, confirms the GRINGOs’ interpretation of their situation. By contrast, Axminster’s very positive attitude towards GRINGOs, and the presence of genuine career opportunities provides cues for more career-oriented sensemaking. We might suggest that there is a ‘tipping point’ for GRINGOs, such that their sensemaking comes to emphasise career over job, and furthermore, that getting GRINGOs to this tipping point might be a legitimate aim of employers seeking to engender commitment.

Finally, geographical mobility appears to be a key factor for many GRINGOs. Within the UK, unlike many countries, there was a strong tradition of ‘going away’ to university – young people were actively encouraged to choose a university at some distance from home, the experience of living away from home being viewed as part of the overall student experience. A range of factors such as the expansion of Higher Education, its increased cost to students, and the greater numbers of mature students, has led to an increasing trend for students to study at universities somewhat closer to home. The prevailing assumption of graduates’ mobility may no longer be accurate. Graduates may become increasingly ‘immobile’ because a) they prefer to stay in the location where they studied, b) they are local, studied locally, and want to continue living locally, or c) they went away to university but ‘chose’ to return home after graduation.

Conclusion

Within the US there is growing evidence that young people are taking longer to ‘launch’ their careers (Feldman and Whitcomb, 2005). For the UK, Elias and Purcell (2004) found almost 50% of graduates are GRINGOs immediately after graduation, this reduces to 25% after 18 months and eventually plateaus out at about 15% after five years. This delay can be viewed as positive – exploration in early career is generally seen as beneficial and leading to better career choices. However, there are more negative interpretations. It may reflect a degree of aimlessness – the delay may not reflect career exploration, simply a lack of career thinking. Alternatively, in the face of considerable post-graduation debt, but with limited career opportunities, graduates may be ‘forced’ into GRINGO posts: their need is to find the best possible paid work, as quickly as possible. This limits their time for exploration, but also locates their current employment as a stopgap response to a short-term financial pressure. GRINGOs may easily become locked in to these posts, as per Becker’s (1960) notion of ‘side bets’, even whilst they and their employers continue to treat as short-term what might become long-term.

On the part of the employer, this is reflected in an apparent passivity in the attitude towards GRINGOs. Their chronic disengagement with the organisation is seen to ‘go with the territory’ and to some extent we can see that HR implicitly treat GRINGOs as an outcrop of the student workforce – bright, articulate, reasonably flexible, but ultimately not likely to be here for the duration and therefore not worth investing in. We recognise however that this apparent passivity may be due to the relatively rapid

rise of the GRINGO. Many GRINGOs are filling posts which until very recently would have been held by workers for whom these jobs were likely to be their long-term occupation, who would generally have been less well qualified and able, which limited how employers were able to develop and deploy them. Even where attitudes towards GRINGOs are positive, there is a sense that employers perceive them as an ‘unexpected bonus’: the managers expect the GRINGOs will eventually move on to a ‘graduate job’, but also they appear to assume that a labour market in which posts like this can be filled by graduates is a short-term phenomenon. It may be that HR functions are enacting policies and practices which were highly appropriate for the previous postholders, but which are not appropriate for GRINGO employees.

We argue that as GRINGOs become an ever larger segment of the workforce, acceptance of their lack of commitment will become increasingly untenable, as will the apparent failure to utilise fully their potential. The most successful organisations will be those which manage to develop an employment relationship which engenders employee commitment. We suggest that this will be one based on a career deal in which the individual accepts the reality of the GRINGO job but can realistically look forward to genuine career development: not old style career management, but equally not the ‘guaranteed lack of opportunity’ apparent in some posts. As GRINGO posts lie far from the graduate career ‘ideal’, organisations may need to work hard in the recruitment and subsequent management of GRINGOs to persuade them to ‘come over’ to the notion of building a career upon their present post (whether in situ or elsewhere). We suggest that smart organisations will work towards a neat segue, encouraging their student workers to become their graduate trainees (where possible) and positively orientated GRINGO employees (where not). However, further research is needed that explores these issues in more depth.

Firstly, we need a clearer understanding of the nature of GRINGO employment, initially through a cross-sectional snapshot of current patterns. In light of shifting patterns of participation in Higher Education, a number of obvious questions present themselves. To what extent are factors such as degree subject and classification, institution, family background, age on graduation etc. predictive of subsequent GRINGO employment? Useem and Karabel (1986) suggest that university education bestows human capital on graduates, in the form of scholastic capital (knowledge acquired), social capital (personal contacts, network ties), and cultural capital (the value society places on symbols of prestige). We can see that degree programmes and institutions vary in the level of human capital they bestow, and with the expansion of Higher Education outstripping the growth of ‘graduate jobs’, a pessimistic reading of this variation would suggest that some undergraduates are ‘GRINGO fodder’. This raises the question of whether a university education adds value for these individuals – as we have noted, it may be that it has become necessary to obtain a degree simply because employers are asking for the qualification, rather than because the qualification has intrinsic value to the individual or employer. We need to understand the reasons for being in a GRINGO role – are these reasons quite specific to the individual, or do they reflect broader trends, such as a reduction in graduate mobility, more mature students, greater student debt?

There is also a need for longitudinal research aimed at following graduates through an extended period of their careers. We noted the US evidence of a delay in launching career (Feldman and Whitcomb, 2005) and it is important to understand whether

GRINGOs merely reflect this trend – perhaps these graduates are merely taking longer to get started, and we will find a large proportion of current GRINGOs getting into graduate jobs eventually. This is certainly what Elias and Purcell (2004) suggest the labour market data shows. However, this may be misleading – it is equally possible that GRINGOs make career progress based largely on their experience. An example might be those promoted into supervisory roles at our case study companies, who might well have achieved similar or even earlier career progress had they joined straight from school. Such individuals might appear on a labour market survey to be in graduate jobs, but the reality is rather different. This longitudinal research would also serve to test our proposed typology of GRINGOs, and the assertion that individuals may move between the various categories.

A second area of research would be to understand the organisational context of GRINGO employment. If the very newness of the GRINGO phenomenon has left employers unsure how to deal with this section of the workforce, we can be confident this state of affairs will not last long. Identifying those organisations, such as Landseer, who are starting to grapple with the issue will allow researchers to examine how HR departments have tailored policy and practice to this growing element of the workforce. Through in-depth case studies in such organisations, looking at the multiple perspectives of new recruits, GRINGOs, student workers, graduate trainees, colleagues, managers etc. we could gain insight into the different perspectives on the GRINGO ‘problem’ and a better understanding of how HR might respond.

Figure 1: A Typology of GRINGOs

		Reason for GRINGO status	
		Voluntary	Involuntary
Nature of GRINGO work	Traditional non-graduate work	↑	←-----→
	Traditional ‘student work’	↓	←-----→
	Niche/high labour market demand occupations	↓	←-----→

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