

## **Absence management of migrant agency workers in the food manufacturing sector**

**Abstract** – Temporary workers in low-skilled roles often experience ‘hard’ HRM practices, for example the use of the Bradford Factor to monitor absence, rather than using incentives to reward attendance. However, this peripheral workforce has become increasingly diverse in the United Kingdom since the A8 European Union expansion, which has seen over a million migrants from central and eastern Europe register to work in the United Kingdom. Importantly, there is also heterogeneity within this group of workers, for example between those who intend to migrate for a short period of time then return, and those who are more settled and wish to develop a career. By considering the particular case of absence management, this paper examines how these different groups of migrants respond to HRM practices. The key contribution of the paper is to examine how different groups of migrants experience these practices, rather than simply comparing migrant and native workers as two homogeneous groups.

The paper presents data from the food manufacturing sector in the UK. In total, eighty-eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with operations managers, HR managers, union convenors, and workers on permanent, temporary and agency contracts. In addition, data from informal interviews and observation at five companies are presented.

**Keywords** – Absence, Attendance, Temporary, Agency, Migration

## **Introduction**

In the changing corporate climate of the food manufacturing industry in the United Kingdom (Scott 2013), increasing consolidation of large supermarkets has seen cost pressures and the risk of variable demand passed onto suppliers (Edwards et al. 2009; Newsome et al. 2009). A traditional response to variable demand by these suppliers has been to engage workers on increasingly precarious contracts, including on a directly-employed temporary basis, or through an agency (Atkinson 1985; Forde and Slater 2005, 2006). However, through this increased distance there is raised potential for organisations to lose control of these workers, even if they use hard HRM techniques. Control may be harder to exert as workers are increasingly distanced, notably in the United Kingdom with a diversification of the labour pool for agency work. This has occurred since the A8 European Union expansion which has seen increased numbers of workers from central and eastern Europe migrating to the UK. This paper investigates to what extent these changes have led to a loss of control for organisations, even those that use harder control rather than softer commitment approaches, by examining the particular case of absence management of an increasingly diversified and internationalised agency workforce. Particularly, comparisons are drawn between the experiences of transitory migrants, and those who are more settled.

## **Current Literature**

The use of non-standard forms of work contract have attracted recent interest, both from Human Resource Management scholars and practitioners, and also the wider media. These may include temporary workers (Virtanen et al. 2005), fixed-term contract workers

(Saloniemi et al. 2004; Author A 2009), agency workers (Forde and Slater 2005), and those on zero-hours contracts (Financial Times 2013; Guardian 2014). Commentators and academics have analysed the effects of these types of contract, for example the work of Standing (2009; 2011), who debates whether these workers form a new class called the 'precariat'. However, it must be noted that the use of these types of contract is not a new phenomenon, particularly in those industries with highly variable levels of supply and demand, for example in the food manufacturing sector. Indeed, even during the 1980s, writers such as Atkinson (1985) suggested a formal and strategic division of the workforce into a permanent core, and a non-standard peripheral workforce.

Under this division it was suggested that softer models of HRM aimed at securing commitment should be used for the core workforce, whereas hard HRM methods should be used towards those in the periphery. An example of this would be monitoring and punishing absence from the temporary workforce, whilst rewarding attendance for core workers.

However, key problems with these models include an assumption of a homogeneous group of workers in the periphery, who experience the same employment relationship. However, as noted by Standing (2009; 2011), the peripheral precariat cannot be considered to be an homogeneous group and, as such, will have differing experiences of the employment relationship. For example, workers employed on a fixed term or temporary basis with an organisation still retain a degree of connection as they are employed by the organisation at which they work. By comparison, agency workers find themselves in increasingly complicated triangular employment relationships (Melian-Gonzalez and Verano-Tacorante 2004; Mitlacher 2008; Torka 2011), where an agency sends them on work placements, but does not instruct these workers on a day to day basis.

The effects of these different employment relationships can be seen by analysing the particular case of absence management. In a wider context, Taylor et al. (2010) have argued that, as managerial power has increased, workers are feeling increasingly pressured to attend to work, even when they are ill (see also Aronsson et al. 2000; Dew et al. 2005; Baker-McClearn et al. 2010). This may be a particular issue for directly-employed temporary workers, whose absence is used as a measure by organisations when evaluating their suitability for a permanent position (Author A 2014). However, this may not be the case for agency workers, who experience a more disconnected employment relationship than directly-employed temporary workers. What must also be considered, however, is not just the differing types of work contract and employment relationship, but also the increasing heterogeneity of this agency workforce, particularly as a result of migration.

### *The heterogeneity of precarious workers*

An important factor increasing the heterogeneity of agency workers, which has become particularly important in the UK, is the A8 expansion of 2004, where eight central and eastern European (CEE) nations joined an expanded EU. These countries are the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. The UK government's original predicted figure of increased migration as a result of the expansion was between eight and thirteen thousand (Dustmann et al. 2003), and as such the only requirement for A8 migrants to take work in the UK was to register on the Worker Registration Scheme. However, by the time this scheme was closed in April 2011, seven

years after the A8 expansion, over a million people had registered. Clark and Drinkwater (2008) show that these changes saw the proportion of the total number of migrants and immigrants to the UK from the A8 countries rise from 4.1% of the total in 2000-2003 to 36.5% of the total in 2004-2007. Eade et al. (2008) find that A8 migrants are younger, better qualified, less likely to speak English, more likely to work full time, and less likely to have dependents.

The majority of these recent migrants to the UK have taken low skill jobs (Gilpin et al. 2006; Curries 2007; Datta et al. 2007; Eade et al. 2007; Green et al. 2007; Stenning and Dawley 2009), which may be related to their dual frame of reference of wages (Piore 1979; Krings et al. 2009, 2011). As wages in the A8 nations are low when compared to the UK, migrants may take lower skilled jobs in the UK which actually pay better wages than higher skilled jobs in their home nations. Additionally, despite their relatively high levels of formal education (Drinkwater et al. 2006; MacKenzie and Forde 2007; Wickham et al. 2009; Williams 2009), Clark and Drinkwater (2008) note that managers may be unaware of the value of qualifications earned outside of UK. When considering the importance of qualifications and language skills, Dustmann et al. (2008) state that language is a complementary skill to job-related skills. As a result of low levels of English language skills, many of these migrants are taking jobs through agencies in order to avoid a job interview held in English (see also Author A 2009). Interestingly, Matthews and Ruhs (2007), MacKenzie and Forde (2009), Wills et al. (2009), French (2011) and Tannock (2013) all find that managers prefer migrant workers to natives, citing higher levels of work ethic, manifest, for example, in a willingness to work overtime. Moriarty et al. (2012) note that the expansion of the EU in 2004 has altered the behaviour of organisations with regard to their recruitment – in a booming economy, firms have been able to secure commitment and soft

skills often confined to core workers amongst new migrant workers, but without having to offer job security or commitment in return.

Despite there being some research into the demographics of migrant workers from the A8 nations, a key issue with previous literature investigating A8 migrants is that these migrants have often been considered as a homogenous group. A notable exception is Eade et al.'s (2007) exploratory study of Polish migrants, in which four differing groups of migrants were noted. *Searchers* were those that deliberately kept their options open with regard to mobility, with what Eade et al. (2007) refer to as 'Intentional Unpredictability.' These mainly young and ambitious migrants prefer not to develop connections with organisations and areas and use this as an intentional strategy in order to be able to move wherever offers the best opportunities for career advancement. This can be seen as an economically rational action as these migrants can react to rapidly changing labour markets which may worsen prospects in one area or improve them in another (see also Drinkwater and Garapich 2011). By comparison, *Stayers* are those migrants who have been in the UK for a long period of time and, having developed connections, intend on settling. These contrasted with *Hamsters*, who have long uninterrupted stays in the UK, but intend on eventually moving back, and *Storks*, who spent short amounts of time in the UK and frequently travel between the UK and their home country. Importantly, these different types of migrant agency workers may react differently to Hard HRM practices. It is the aim of this paper to examine what the heterogeneity of this precarious workforce means for the efficiency of hard HRM practices by investigating the particular case of absence management.

In the context of this heterogeneous, rather than homogeneous, pool of migrant workers, this study aims to add to the literature on International Human Resource Management by answering three key questions. Firstly, how are hard human resource management techniques related to issues such as absence management experienced by temporary and agency workers? Secondly, how are these approaches experienced by those migrants who can be considered to be transitory, such as Eade et al.'s (2007) *Storks, Hamsters, and Searchers*. And finally, as some migrants from the A8 expansion begin to settle in the United Kingdom, how are these hard HRM techniques experienced by more settled migrants, who may be considered to be Eade et al.'s (2007) *Stayers*?

#### *Contributions of this study*

This study makes a number of important contributions to the International Human Resource Management literature related to the management of migrant workers, and adds significant value to the existing work in this field. Importantly, by incorporating a case study approach, this investigates not only the views of migrants themselves, which have been investigated by a significant amount of literature (e.g. McDowell et al. 2008; Eade and Garapich 2009), but also their line managers and UK-based colleagues to give a fuller view of the contemporary employment relationship. For example, Eade and Garapich's (2009) study investigates the motivations of workers to move from the A8 nations; this study adds to the international human resource management literature by investigating at a workplace level the human resource management consequences of this migration. Despite the investigation of the workplace level and employer views being noted by a number of authors as critical when investigating the employment of different groups of workers, for example migrant workers

(MacKenzie and Forde 2009) or young workers (Simms et al. 2013), there have been remarkably few qualitative investigations of the contemporary employment relationship at workplace level.

A further key contribution of the paper is to examine migrants as an heterogeneous group. Importantly, Eade et al. (2007:27) note a “preoccupation in migration research with black and Asian minority communities, asylum seekers and refugees”, whilst this paper aims to complement these studies by analysing migrations from central and eastern Europe. In addition, those papers that have investigated the views of managers towards migrant workers have often treated them as two distinct groups – comparing migrants with natives, often finding that managers prefer the former as, owing to lower levels of labour market power, they display a stronger ‘work ethic’ (see, for example, Tannock 2013). However, by in-depth investigation of a larger pool of migrants, it is possible to examine the heterogeneity of migrants to examine differences within this group, rather than simply as one group compared to a, often similarly homogenised, group of native workers. Eade et al. (2008) note the heterogeneity of A8 migration strategies and the need for further, particularly qualitative, research in this area. By using qualitative research, this study also allows for some testing of Eade et al’s (2007) typology of *Searchers*, *Stayers*, *Storks* and *Hamsters* by investigating how migrants fit into these categories and how they respond to different HRM practices, moving from examining migrants as an homogeneous group to explore how different groups of migrants experience the employment relationship.

## **Methodology**



The location for this study is the food manufacturing sector in the UK. The food manufacturing sector is particularly useful to investigate as it has a high usage of non-standard work contracts, and a historical reliance on core-periphery models to cope with changes in demand. More recently, Edwards et al. (2009) have noted the transference of risk of variable demand from increasingly powerful supermarkets in the UK, which have grown in strength as they have consolidated. Newsome et al. (2009) have argued that supermarkets are powerful enough to transfer these risks onto their suppliers. Scott (2013) summarises the five key changes in the food manufacturing sector as being rising supermarket power, manufacturing growth, agricultural decline, purchasing power decline, and rationalisation. Organisations within the food manufacturing supply chain have responded to this with increased use of temporary, and particularly agency, workers to cover fluctuations in demand for products and supply of ingredients (Lloyd and James 2008; Newsome et al. 2009). In order for people to be employed on a short term basis, roles have become increasingly deskilled. These roles are often so low skilled that workers who do not speak English fluently can be visually shown the task rather than having it explained to them (McDowell et al. 2008), meaning that high proportions of migrant workers are found in the sector.

Low skilled production companies provide a particularly interesting arena in which to study absence. Importantly, in a sector with low skilled roles, such as in food manufacturing, absence must also be considered as a form of industrial conflict (Edwards and Scullion 1982; Edwards and Whitston 1993). Workers do not take time off from work only when they are ill, instead they can use it as an escape from the workplace. Edwards and Scullion (1982) found that workers who are most subject to tight managerial control, such as those found in

the food manufacturing industry, were most likely to see absenteeism as a legitimate response to a monotonous and low skilled work process. Edwards and Scullion (1984) further argued that these absence levels should be considered as part of the workplace bargain, with managers willing to accept some absence if it acted as a safety valve in order to prevent more disruptive forms of industrial action. Taylor et al. (2010) have provided a contemporary update of this work, suggesting that absence must be considered in the current context of increased managerial control and the transfer of risk from capital to labour. Also to be considered is the increasing link between absence and disciplinary action as seen, for example, with back-to-work interviews after periods of absence, and the calculation of absence 'scores' such as the Bradford Factor. This undermines attempts to gain commitment from workers, whilst simultaneously linking absence to control.

Taylor et al. (2010:285) argue that when investigating absence management "accounting for workers' experiences is perhaps the single most important dimension of future research". Thompson (2011) suggests that this is best achieved through in-depth workplace study. As such, this research uses an in-depth qualitative approach to investigate workplace experiences of absence management, with a particular investigation into the experience of migrant agency workers. Research took place at five companies, and these can be considered typical of the sector. All had low skilled production methods, as compared to the higher skilled roles taken by A8 migrants investigated by Lett and Smith (2009) and Bahn (2014), or multinational corporations based in A8 nations as investigated by Kahancová and van der Meer (2006). They used significant proportions of short term workers in order to cope with fluctuations in demand for their products, and these were used as a matter of course throughout the year by the companies, rather than the project workers investigated by Tempest (2009). The companies investigated for this study were a confectionery factory (ChocCo), a brewery

(BeerCo), a ready meals manufacturer (ReadyCo), a herb and spice packer (SpiceCo) and a poultry processor (TurkeyCo). Further details about the companies are shown in the table below:

*Insert Table 1 here*

In total eighty-eight semi-structured interviews were conducted. Questions were grouped thematically around the research questions identified, and the interviews lasted from one to two-and-a-half hours. These were conducted with thirty-two operations managers, twelve HR managers, fourteen permanent workers, sixteen directly-employed temporary workers, twelve agency workers, and two trade union convenors. In addition, in-depth observation occurred at each of the case study companies, lasting from two to four weeks. This was a particularly important method of data collection, as it also allowed for informal interviews to take place, which were particularly important for discussing workers' attitudes towards unauthorised absence. Great care was taken when selecting both case study companies and interviewees to gain a representative sample. Eade et al. (2007) for example, in a study utilising fifty semi structured interviews, note the importance of avoiding the 'interviewer effect' by limiting recruiting interviewees through the author's networks and instead choosing those interviewees who best provide a representative sample. Therefore, care was taken at the case study sites to recruit interviewees who matched the wider demographics of the firm.

In addition to interviews with workers, managers at several levels of seniority were also interviewed, from company chairman to line leader. Krings et al. (2011) note the importance of investigating both sides of the employment relationship, stating that papers investigating migration ignore the role of organisations in creating migration flows, both through how they recruit workers, and what they are looking for (see also Moriarty 2012). They convincingly argue that it is crucial to focus at the firm level as migrants do not find employment in “labour markets”, but in organisations that provide employment. Firms, when making decisions about employment, do not decide between individuals, but between different types of labour. All the interviews were fully transcribed, and coding of these transcripts was conducted manually using a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). Using this approach, the researchers construct a set of codes reflecting themes that have emerged through data collection, an approach identified by King (2004) as particularly suitable when investigating the perspectives of different groups within an organisation. This method has been used in a number of articles recently published in the *International Journal of Human Resource Management* to investigate management and workforce experiences of, for example, flexible working (Galea et al. 2004), employee commitment (Jørgensen and Becker 2015) and restructuring (Kelliher et al. 2012), with the latter also being focussed on the food manufacturing industry. As such, this paper investigates managerial views, in addition to those of migrant workers themselves.

## **Findings**

### ***I Absence management of temporary workers***

The first research question identified seeks to understand how hard HRM techniques related to absence management are experienced by temporary and, particularly, agency workers. Short term absence levels in the factories, as provided in the companies' absence reports, were around 8%, with SpiceCo having a lower level of around 5%. Interestingly, none of the companies split their absence reports by contractual status. All of the companies noted that absence was a problem in their factories, and had previously attempted to reduce this through rewarding attendance. For example, workers at TurkeyCo would be rewarded with a bonus of up to £36 a week for full attendance, dependent upon which shift they worked. However, this approach had been found to be unsuccessful as workers who had time off mid-week would take the rest of the week off as they had already lost their bonus. Instead, the case study companies were returning to harder HRM techniques, such as the use of the Bradford Factor, to monitor and punish absence levels, particularly amongst their peripheral workforce.

At each of the case study companies managers reported that the reason they were using short term workers was in order to cover short term fluctuations in demand from the supermarkets that they supplied, using a traditional core-periphery model with both directly-employed temporary and agency workers in the periphery. When considering agency workers, there were noticeably higher proportions of A8 migrants who worked through an agency, which tended to be because migrant workers' English language skills prevented them from passing the interview necessary to get a directly-employed role. Therefore they used an agency to circumvent this issue, as explained by this Lithuanian line worker:

I already knew about [SpiceCo] because I tried to get a job not through the agency, I filled in a form but I didn't get the job. But then I go to the agency and I said maybe you have vacancies in [SpiceCo], I would like to get a job in [SpiceCo], and they say OK...Directly is better but for me they don't think my English language is very well, and maybe they not trust me. Through an agency it is very easy.

*Interview 60 - Lithuanian Agency Worker, Male, 30s, SpiceCo*

The use of agency workers had created some control problems for the case study companies, as individual agency workers' absence could not be easily measured as the firm paid a general fee rather than a specific worker's wage. Also, the high turnover and obstructive Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) made it difficult to notice individual workers and visually check their absence. By comparison, for temporary workers employed on a directly-employed basis, this stage could be used as a probationary period. However, the tightly controlled production method meant that it was not workers' production levels that were measured. Instead, as it was easy to measure absence levels of directly-employed temporary workers, and because absence was an issue in the case study companies, this was the key factor on which workers were evaluated using hard HRM measures such as the Bradford Factor. TurkeyCo, as well as SpiceCo, had introduced the Bradford Factor as a measure of attendance in order to address the issue of short term absence. A report by ACAS (2010) suggests that short term absence accounts for 80% of all absences. This type of absence is particularly disruptive to organisations as it is unpredictable, and the firm often has little time in which to react following the worker notifying them of their absence. ACAS suggest two 'triggers' that organisations may use to monitor an individual's absence – either the Lost Time Rate, which shows absence as a percentage of the total work time available, or the Bradford Factor. The Bradford Factor is based on the formula:

$$B = S \times S \times D$$

where B is the Bradford score, S is the total number of instances of absence in the last year, and D is the total number of days absent. The principle behind the Bradford Factor is to reduce short term absence, a particular problem in the food manufacturing sector. For example, an individual with one absence of fourteen days would produce a Bradford Factor of 14, a worker with seven two-day absences would produce a Bradford Factor of 686, and a worker with fourteen one-day absences would produce a Bradford Factor of 2744. One organisation which provides consultancy services for introducing the Bradford Factor suggests that a Bradford Factor of under 50 requires no action, from 50-124 a verbal warning, from 125-399 a written warning, from 400-649 a final written warning, and over 650 a termination of the individual's contract (Simply Personnel 2010). However, despite this organisation's claim that the "Bradford Factor is about short term unauthorised absence" and "the system in no way seeks to penalise genuine sickness absence", this organisation, whilst removing absence for reasons such as compassionate leave or maternity leave, includes sickness absence as part of an individual's Bradford Factor. Managers at both SpiceCo and TurkeyCo reported that they felt that the use of these harder approaches, monitoring absence rather than rewarding attendance, had a positive impact on attendance. Indeed, short term absence at SpiceCo was around three percentage points lower than in comparable firms.

Despite this perception of success, the impact of these harder HRM techniques may have disparate effects on workers on different types of precarious contract, for example directly employed temporary workers and agency workers. Virtanen et al. (2005), in a review of 27 studies, find that temporary workers are less likely to take sickness absence. However,

Virtanen et al. (2006) note that this lower absence rate may also be related to workers' concerns about losing their job or job quality (see also Bouville and Alis 2014), and therefore attending when ill (see also Aronsson et al. 2000; Dew et al. 2005; Baker-McClearn et al. 2010). Absence cannot only be considered as a result of illness, but also as a form of workplace conflict (Edwards and Scullion 1982; Edwards and Whitston 1993). In particular, directly employed temporary workers may demonstrate compliant behaviour by attending to work even when ill, as they feel that this is the factor most likely to aid them in getting a permanent job:

I definitely would come in if I wasn't well, because I am a fixed-term worker and I have got more to lose than them [permanent workers]. Even if I am not well I still want to be seen to be doing my job and hopefully they will remember that if anything does come up full-time.

*Interview 25 - British Temporary Worker, Male, 40s, BeerCo*

This was noted by managers, who were impressed by their attempts:

You tend to find that the majority [of temporary workers] are more motivated than your permanent people because there is always "If I do a good job I could be brought back again", there is the outside chance that in the future there may become permanent jobs. So you tend to find that people are as motivated, if not more motivated, than the permanent staff.

*Interview 22 - British Operations Manager, Male, 40s, BeerCo*

However, directly employed temporary workers at each of the case study companies reported in both formal and informal interviews that they were fearful of taking absence. This was



because of concern that they could be disciplined and may lose their jobs, or not be able to get a permanent role. Fear of taking time off when ill had even spread to permanent workers:

If your illness starts then you are reprimanded, you are given a warning, then a written warning, and then you are out the door.

*Interview 17 - British Permanent Worker, Male, 50s, ChocCo*

Directly employed workers feared this process, particularly using hard measuring techniques such as their Bradford Factor, as, if they were disciplined, for example by receiving a warning, they felt that this could be the first stage in losing their jobs. A new directly-employed role, even one taken on a temporary basis, took longer to secure owing to the interview process. As a result, the costs of losing a directly-employed job were higher than those secured through an agency, which, although lower paid, could be replaced very quickly. This dilemma echoes the sentiments of Cappelli (1999:130), who notes “it may be that employees are more careful about infractions such as absenteeism when the potential costs of getting fired are greater, as when the opportunities for finding a new job are worse”. When providing an answer to the first research question, it is clear from these case study companies that the use of hard HRM techniques related to absence management are experienced in a disparate fashion by those on different types of peripheral work contract.

## ***II Absence management of transitory migrant workers***

The second research question identified earlier in this paper sought to investigate how hard HRM techniques are experienced by those migrant workers who can be considered to be transitory. Under Eade et al.'s (2007) typology of migrants, here we investigate the experiences of those transitory migrants who could be considered to be *Storks*, *Hamsters*, or *Searchers*. Importantly, migrant workers were also likely to be agency workers (MacKenzie and Forde 2007; McDowell et al. 2008). They had taken agency roles with the case study companies as they were precluded from directly-employed roles by their English language skills. Some hoped that by gaining experience in these jobs they would be able to improve their English language skills and then move into a career that better suited their wider skill set. As a result, many felt little commitment to the jobs they were doing, and were not planning careers:

[Interviewer] Can you see this job as being useful in forming a career?

Such a job here? No, not really. We are sitting and putting those spices in, so what can I learn here? How to measure the weight, that is not so complicated. I am ambitious so that is not the job for me, but I have to earn money, that is why I have to work here.

*Interview 57 - Polish Agency Worker, Female, 20s, SpiceCo*

As they did not wish to build a career at the case study companies, they were unconcerned about the effects of losing their jobs on their longer term career plans. This was in stark contrast to the directly employed temporary workers investigated in the previous section, who reported that they would even attend to work when ill as they were concerned about the potential impact on their career. In addition, as these workers were employed through an agency, they saw that the firm offered little commitment to them, often only calling them in

as necessary, such as with four hour shifts at ReadyCo. This was a direct result of powerful suppliers changing their orders with very little notice, exhibiting the power wielded by supermarkets noted by Edwards et al. (2009) and Newsome et al. (2009), transferring the burden of risk from capital to labour (Thompson 2011). As a result of this, agency workers indicated that they felt little commitment towards the case study organisations, or indeed to the agency that had placed them:

A guy who called me gave me the name of some agencies in [town] and when I went to the first agency it was too busy so I just went over the road.

*Interview 50 - Polish Line Leader, Male, 30s, ReadyCo*

This lack of attachment caused by low commitment from the host organisation (see also Laine et al. 2009) also extended to work colleagues, in contrast to the findings of Koster and Sanders (2007). This lack of commitment was embodied in a willingness to take absence leave, even when not ill, despite the production issues that this could cause for the organisation and their work colleagues.

These disconnected workers could be seen as Eade et al's (2007) *Searchers*, *Hamsters* and *Storks*. Anderson (2010) notes that being an A8 migrant worker, despite having free access to the UK's labour markets, can lead to an 'imagined' state of temporariness, whether or not these workers frequently move between the UK and their home nation, which would be expected from *Storks*. These workers still had the perception of being a migrant who, having moved to a different country, could also move agency, company or area (see also Cook et al. 2010). This can be viewed as a positive feature of being a migrant as this mobility power of

migrants (Smith 2010) allows workers to seek higher paid work, or to move if there was a lack of employment opportunities. By comparison, British workers, who were less precarious as they tended to be directly employed, had more fear because of their inability to move, caused by commitments outside of the workplace that they had accumulated by being in the same place for an extended period of time, such as mortgages or loans. This permanent worker at ChocCo notes how concerns outside of work were paramount when working on a temporary contract:

Before, I was on edge all the time. I wasn't unhappy, but I was like, should I stay and will they set us on, or should I get out now and find a permanent job? People have bills to pay and things to pay on cars. That was a worry, what do you do? But I do feel better now. It was like a weight being lifted off my shoulders when I got a permanent job and I could relax.

*Interview 15 - British Permanent Worker, Female, 40s, ChocCo*

While Dench et al. (2006) note that native British workers are often unwilling to take jobs where they have to tolerate 'unfavourable' conditions, these British workers may have less opportunity to move to a different area or to a different employer as a result of personal circumstances and family commitments. By comparison, new migrants, particularly *Searchers*, could easily move to seek new work, and because of living in rented accommodation and using agency transport to get to work, had fewer commitments keeping them in one area.

It has been previously noted that in-depth workplace studies, particularly the use of informal interviews and observation, can add additional richness to data when investigating migrant

work (Thompson 2011). This approach added considerable additional material to this study, as in informal interviews A8 workers stated that they were comfortable taking time off without informing the company at which they were working. *Storks* would have a break if friends or family were visiting the UK, or if they wished to go home. Importantly, these workers also reported that they needed a break from the long shifts and monotonous and repetitive work process. Notably, however, this was reported by younger migrants who were not planning on spending a long time with the company and, as such, were disconnected from where they were working. These workers believed it would be easy to get another job, and their disconnection meant that they were prepared to move to another company, or even another area, to take it. As such, they were comfortable taking absence, even unauthorised, whenever they wished, as there was little perceived cost to losing their job. Resultantly, we can consider these workers to be Eade et al's (2007) *Searchers*, *Hamsters* or *Storks*; namely younger workers with lower levels of commitment both to an area and to the organisation at which they worked. When considering these transitory migrants, this study has found in response to the second research question that this 'intentional unpredictability' (Eade et al. 2007) meant that hard HRM techniques related to absence, such as the use of the Bradford Factor, had little influence on their decisions to take absence, either when ill, or as a response to their working conditions or a desire to take a break from their work.

### ***III Absence management of settled migrant workers***

The third and final research question identified the aim of investigating the workplace experiences of absence management of those migrants who are becoming more settled. This is a key addition of this study – investigating what happens to migrants once they have been

in one area, and with one organisation, for a longer period of time – which is only now possible as A8 migrants are more settled in the UK following the EU expansion of 2004. This group can be considered as Eade et al.'s (2007) *Stayers*, highlighting the importance of considering the heterogeneity of this group (Standing 2009, 2011; Cook et al. 2010). By comparison to the younger migrants described above, these *Stayers* had been in the UK and with the case study companies for longer. They were also older, unlike for example *Searchers*, who were younger migrants who displayed Eade et al.'s (2007) 'intentional unpredictability' as they tried to build up English language skills before moving on to a higher skilled role. However, by comparison, the *Stayers* who were interviewed were developing commitments in, and to, the area which they had moved to. Pollard et al. (2008) note that only around half of A8 migrants registered on the Worker Registration Scheme have left the UK, a figure also suggested by a recruitment agency in Cook et al.'s (2010) study, indicating that not all migrants can be considered as transitory. In-depth, and often informal, discussions with these migrants found that they were starting to build connections, not just with the company at which they worked, with some getting directly-employed jobs, but also in the areas in which they lived, such as sending their children to local schools, suggesting that they no longer had temporariness outside of work (Anderson 2010). Others had gained promotion and, as such, did not want to leave their workplace and forfeit their pay premium. Although this premium could be quite small, for example fifteen pence per hour at ChocCo for directly-employed workers as compared to agency workers, this differentiated these jobs from other minimum wage roles. This meant that the cost of losing a job was now higher for these workers.

Once involved in a longer term employment relationship, workers may tolerate unfavourable conditions, such as low skilled work processes, and be more compliant towards disciplinary

procedures. Imagined temporariness (Anderson 2010) was dissipating amongst these increasingly connected workers. Indeed, and in a demonstration of the importance of informal interviews when discussing issues such as absence, those workers who had been with the case study companies for a longer period of time reported that they would now no longer take time off as and when they felt like it, even when not ill. This was in direct contrast to those *Storks* who frequently transited back to their home countries. The potential costs of this had now increased as, if they lost their directly employed roles, it would take them longer to get another role. Also, they would lose any pay premium that they had gained. With increased connections outside of work, they also had outside commitments which could not be ignored. In addition, there was more attachment to the area in which they were living, for example through social networks and their children's schooling, and therefore they could not move as easily to another area. As a result of this, and in addition to not taking unauthorised absence when not ill, some of the A8 migrants reported in informal interviews that they were now prepared to attend to work even if they were ill as they were fearful of the consequences of disciplinary action, mirroring the behaviour of UK-based temporary workers. These new findings, amongst migrants who have only recently become settled, and explored through in-depth workplace study, represent one of the key value-adding findings of this study to the current International Human Resource Management literature.

The issue of non-transitory migrants is important to consider, as MacKenzie and Forde (2009) have noted that when workers spend longer in a country, employers report that their 'work ethic', often proxied by their absence rate, diminishes. We would expect to find this behaviour amongst the *Stayers*. Thompson et al. (2012) have found that some organisations will find newer groups of migrants to recruit, hoping they will display what they describe as

“self-disciplining, self-regulating behaviour” (Thompson et al. 2012:3). These newer migrants are noted by employers as having higher levels of ‘work ethic’, influenced significantly by their lower levels of labour market power as a result of, for example, lower levels of unionisation (Fitzgerald and Hardy 2010). These compare to more established workers, who Cook et al. (2010) note have increased labour market power, particularly as their English language skills improve. However, although both Thompson et al. (2012) and MacKenzie and Forde (2009) have both noted that managers suggested that these migrant workers’ ‘work ethic’ diminishes when they have been in the UK for a longer period of time, this study provides some contrast to these studies. This shows the importance of considering the heterogeneity of these migrant workers. It has been shown that when migrant workers became more settled as they stayed with a company for a longer period of time, gaining both pay premiums in work and increased commitments out of it, the cost of job loss became higher. As such, these *Stayers* were less likely to use absence as a response to the work environment, and more likely to attend to work even if ill, using this as a tool to demonstrate their ‘work ethic’. In this way, disciplinary threats for these workers had regained some control for the case study organisations. In conclusion, in answering the third research question, this study has found that when considering more settled migrants, their experiences of hard HRM techniques related to absence management mirror native workers rather than transitory migrants.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The food manufacturing industry in the UK provides an example of a sector that is experiencing changing corporate climates as increasingly consolidated and powerful



supermarkets dominate their suppliers (Newsome et al. 2009; Scott 2013). These suppliers, who tend to have low skilled and repetitive production methods (Lloyd and James 2008), have responded by endeavouring to pass the risk of variable demand further down the supply chain, using workers on a temporary contract or, even more precariously, through an agency (Newsome et al. 2009). However, with the increase in the number of A8 migrants taking work through an agency (McDowell et al. 2008; Thompson et al. 2012), this has led to an increasingly internationalised workforce. These workplaces have traditionally exerted control over their workers, seeking to use low skilled work tasks to control workers, rather than seeking commitment (Lloyd and James 2008; Thompson et al. 2012). Indeed, it is the low skilled tasks that allowed migrant workers with low levels of English language skills to take them. These have been augmented by hard HRM approaches to issues such as absence, with these organisations punishing absence rather than rewarding attendance. For example, some of the case study companies had introduced the use of the Bradford Factor. However, the increasingly international workforce, many of whom see themselves as transitory (Anderson 2010), are becoming ever more diverse, and therefore this paper has investigated whether these increased levels of distance and precarity have actually resulted in a loss of control for these organisations, with threats of disciplinary action meaningless for some of these migrant workers.

It has been shown elsewhere (Standing 2009, 2011) that the precariat cannot be considered as a homogenous group, and that employee experiences of HRM policies such as absence management vary across these different groups of workers. Using the example of absence management, the first research question addressed by this study aimed to investigate whether precarious workers on different contracts had different experiences. It was found that, whereas temporary workers were aware that their absence was being monitored, and thus

would attend even when ill (see also Aronsson et al. 2000; Dew et al. 2005; Baker-McCleern et al. 2010), agency workers were less concerned as they could easily move to another role. This shows the importance of considering absence not only as a result of illness, but also as a response to the work process (Edwards and Scullion 1982; Edwards and Whitston 1993), and also the external environment and ease of getting another role (Cappelli 1999).

Moving on to further examine the heterogeneity of this group, the second research question investigated the workplace experiences of transitory migrants. By using Eade et al.'s (2007) typology of different types of migrants, we can investigate how these differences may affect the ability of organisations to use hard HRM practices, such as tight monitoring of absence. The majority of workers moving from the A8 nations have been found to be young and single (Dench et al. 2006). Being a migrant worker often establishes a perceived transitoriness (Anderson 2010), which workers carry with them. If they have moved from one country to another, then they can easily move from one company to another. These workers can be considered to be *Searchers*, *Storks* or *Hamsters*. Amongst the younger migrants at these case study companies, there was little attachment to the organisations at which they worked. They saw these roles as jobs rather than careers, with the low levels of skill required meaning that they did not wish to pursue a career in these organisations. Instead, they were hoping to build up their English language skills so as to be able to move into a role that better suited their wider skill sets. These were the archetypal *Searchers*. This disattachment continued into other areas; there was no loyalty to the agency which had provided the job, and these migrants reported that they would also move to another area. In addition, *Storks* could return home, either permanently or for a brief holiday. Importantly, they reported that they would also take time off from the production process, showing again that absence must be considered as industrial conflict (Edwards and Scullion 1982; Edwards and Whitston 1993).

As they were not planning long term careers with the case study companies, and as they could easily get another role, they were unconcerned about the repercussions of taking time off from the case study organisation, even if it cost them their job. In this way, the case study companies, even though using hard HRM techniques such as the Bradford Factor, had lost control over these transitory migrants, with their disciplinary policies for absence having very little effect on the behaviour of these migrant agency workers.

The final research question sought to investigate what happens to migrants when they develop attachment, moving towards being *Stayers*. This provides one of the key contributions of this study – using in-depth workplace research to investigate a group of workers who have only recently emerged as being settled rather than transitory. The attachment of these migrants may be to the company at which they work, for example as they get a directly employed role and a small pay rise, or outside of the workplace, such as family or mortgage commitments. As these migrants have become more attached to an area then the threat of disciplinary action for absence becomes more meaningful for them. As such, they were less likely to take absence, and behaved more like UK based temporary workers who were concerned about losing their job. In this way, the case study organisations were starting to increase connection with, and control over, their precarious workers. This shows the issues with previous research which divides workers into two groups, such as core and periphery, or native and migrant, without considering the heterogeneity of these groups. Instead, by using in-depth study and framing these findings within Eade et al.'s (2007) typology, this study been able to illuminate the experiences of heterogeneous groups of migrants.

The findings of this study could provide the basis for additional research into absence levels of migrant workers, how these can be managed by organisations, and how absence management is experienced by workers. A potential avenue of research is to investigate the construct of the perceived 'migrant work ethic', often proxied by absence rate. It may be possible to investigate how this absence rate is linked to other factors, such as qualifications, English language proficiency, or time spent in the host nation. Framed within the assimilation literature (Chiswick 1978), it could be investigated whether migrant behaviour comes to match that of workers from the UK over time. Further, there is scope for mixed-methods research that uses data from in-depth qualitative studies to explain quantitative findings. Finally, the ending of labour market restrictions on migrants from the A2 nations of Romania and Bulgaria in 2014 may allow for further testing of Eade et al.'s (2007) typology with a new group of European migrants.

In addition to the theoretical contributions to the International Human Resource Management Literature outlined above, this study provides practical implications. The evidence from the case study companies suggests that absence management is an issue for companies with low skilled production methods, and programmes aimed at rewarding attendance, such as that introduced at TurkeyCo, have seen little success. By comparison, harder HRM techniques based around monitoring absence such as the use of the Bradford Factor are considered by the companies to be more successful, but can lead to fear amongst directly-employed workers, and even issues of attendance when ill, a clear risk in sectors such as food manufacturing. Additionally, for those organisations with migrant workers, it is clear that these workers cannot be considered as a homogeneous group, and studies that simply compare migrants to natives as two homogeneous groups are not particularly helpful. A key implication from this study, therefore, is that managers in organisations that employ migrant

workers must not consider them as one homogeneous group, but consider their individual circumstances. For example, groups such as Eade et al.'s (2007) *Searchers*, *Hamsters* or *Storks* retain some form of 'intentional unpredictability', and thus their disconnected relationship with the organisation may see the sanctions involved in Hard HRM practices ineffective as a credible threat. By comparison, amongst *Stayers* it may be that the use of systems such as the Bradford Factor aids in reducing absence, albeit with the potential risk of fear of this process and attendance when ill.

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**Table 1 – Company Details**

	<b>ChocCo</b>	<b>BeerCo</b>	<b>ReadyCo</b>	<b>SpiceCo</b>	<b>TurkeyCo</b>
i. Nature of Business	Confectionery Manufacturer	Brewery	Ready Meal and Soup Manufacturer	Spice Packer	Poultry Processor
ii. Location in England	Midlands	Midlands	East	West	East
iii. Max. number of agency manufacturing workers	100	0	150	15	0
iv. Max. number of temporary manufacturing workers	400	50	0	0	600
v. Max. number of permanent manufacturing workers	1000	600	350	80	1200
vi. Sources of agency workers	Local, A8 nations	N/A	Local, A8 nations	Local, A8 nations	Local, A8 nations, Portugal
vii. Short term absence rates	8%	8%	8%	5%	8%