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Wellbeing in project-based organisations: The experience of project workers

Abstract

The rise in project-based organisations (PBOs) is a key trend affecting the way employees are managed and how they experience wellbeing at work. Wellbeing is a key human resource management (HRM) area which can lead to individual and organisational performance. Yet less in known about the impact of the temporary nature of project work in PBOs on worker perceptions of wellbeing. In this paper, we use Guest's (2017) analytic framework of HR practices leading to wellbeing to empirically examine (i) the project workers' perceptions of their wellbeing and (ii) their experience with wellbeing-related HR practices implemented in their organisations. Using a qualitative methodology, we interviewed 21 project workers employed in PBOs. Key concerns that our study reveals include stress, bullying/harassment, reduced opportunities for career development/progression, and reduced opportunities for voice. We contribute to HRM theory and practice by providing an insight into how project workers in PBOs perceive their own wellbeing and by highlight wellbeing-related areas of HR practice that require further development in order to yield a positive impact on the worker experience.

Keywords

Wellbeing, project workers, project-based organisations, human resource management

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Introduction

Changes in work and employment bring risks to work-related wellbeing with harmful consequences for employees/workers and organisations (Guest, 2017). Industries are increasingly becoming 'projectified' (Burke & Morley, 2016), meaning that they carry out their core operations mainly, or even exclusively, in project mode (Melkonian & Picq, 2011) and by reducing and devolving functional structures (Bredin & Söderlund, 2010). It is a change of organisational structure, slowly moving the firm from having strong functional units where projects have played a subordinate role, to projects playing a primary role with functional units acting as labour pools (Midler, 1995). What makes PBOs attractive in the current market is the fact that they can reduce traditional barriers to organisational change and innovation, as each project is presented as a temporary and relatively short-term phenomenon. As a result, it does not pose the same threat to vested interests as would the creation of a permanent new department (DeFillippi 2002). Currently, project work in advanced economies equates to roughly a third of all business activities and 22% of the world's gross domestic product (Schoper et al., 2018). Industries increasingly becoming 'projectified' include construction, defence, aerospace, engineering, power, pharmaceuticals, information/communications technology, research/development, art/culture/creative industries, and service industries (Lundin et al., 2015).

This projectification trend has meant that temporary work modes in these industries have been normalised. This has consequences for the HRM function (Huemann et al., 2007; Keegan et al., 2018; Keegan & Turner, 2003), HR strategies/practices (Cheng et al., 2007; Ekrot et al., 2016; Keegan & Den Hartog, 2018; Matthews et al., 2018; Prouska & Kapsali, 2020), working conditions and employee/worker wellbeing in these industries (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011a, 2011b, 2010, 2007; Qian et al., 2019). Yet, research on wellbeing shows serious inconsistencies caused by the divergent characteristics of the 'wellbeing' concept, as

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well as the type of organisations and employee/worker groups studied (Imhof & Andresen, 2018). Wellbeing is key to all organisations as it can lead to individual and organisational performance (Guest, 2017). Given the trend of projectification across industries (Burke & Morley, 2016), it is important that we study the implications that such temporary work modes in PBOs have on project workers' perceptions of their own wellbeing and on their experience with wellbeing HRM practices implemented in their organisations.

PBOs undertake projects characterised by uniqueness, uncertainty, and complexity, and are, therefore, different from other business organisations in many respects (Ajmal & Koskinen, 2008). PBOs refer to various forms of organisations that involve the creation of temporary systems for performing project tasks (DeFillippi 2002; Lundin & Söderholm 1995). In fact, the term PBO seems to be umbrella term used for different types of organisations which organise most of their internal and external activities in projects (Hobday, 2000). These types of organisations can be: (i) stand-alone companies that make products for external customers, (ii) subsidiaries of larger firms that produce for internal or external customers, or (iii) consortiums of organisations that collaborate to serve third parties (Sandhu & Gunasekaran, 2004). In this paper, we focus on studying PBOs that fall within the first type. It is worth mentioning that PBOs are not necessarily born and founded as PBOs but rather develop from traditional organisations into PBOs to meet the highly distinct and customised nature of demand, where clients negotiate and interact with project organisers over the innovative design of products and services (Sydow et al., 2004).

We particularly focus on employee wellbeing in such PBOs because of the temporary work processes these organisations use to deliver products and services to clients. This creates pressures on project workers, such as fluctuating workloads with high workload periods, uncertain requirements, multiple role demand and time pressures with implications for physical, psychological and social wellbeing (Turner et al., 2008; Sang et al., 2007; Zika-

Viktorsson et al., 2006). Our work is guided by the following research questions: *How do project workers in PBOs perceive their own wellbeing at work? And how do they experience wellbeing HR practices in their organisations?* The paper uses Guest's (2017) analytic framework of HR practices leading to wellbeing at work, which we explain next.

Wellbeing at work

Grant et al. (2007: 52) define wellbeing at work as "the overall quality of an employee's experience and functioning at work", having three main aspects: psychological (job satisfaction, fulfilment of potential, finding meaning and purpose at work), physical (subjective feelings of health) and social (interpersonal relations, levels of social support, perceived trust and fairness of treatment). Along these lines, past research has explored the antecedents of work-related wellbeing. For example, earlier work by Walton (1974) indicated core conditions for quality of working life (QWL): a safe and healthy working environment, the development of human capacities, growth and security, social integration, rights and representation, the social relevance of work, consideration of the total life space and adequate and fair compensation. A few years later, Warr's (1987) review identified the following antecedents: opportunity for control, opportunity for skill use, variety at work, opportunity for interpersonal contact, externally generated goals, environmental clarity, availability of money, physical security and a valued social position. Research by Dickson-Swift et al. (2014) studied the characteristics of workplaces promoting health and wellbeing and offered a framework consisting of the following factors: personal relationships, rewards, flexible work, two-way communication, management support for health and wellbeing, and physical environment.

More recently, Guest's (2017) review work on wellbeing provides an analytic framework of HRM, wellbeing and the employment relationship, and performance. The

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framework offers a provisional outline of HR practices and their link to (i) wellbeing (psychological, physical and social), (ii) to a positive employment relationship (trust, fairness, security, fulfilled psychological contract, high QWL), and (iii) to individual and organisational performance. The HR practices leading to wellbeing, as proposed by this research, are investing in employees, providing engaging work, offering a positive social and physical environment, enabling employees to have a voice, and offering organisational support to employee issues (see Table 1). These HR practices are "offered as a basis for research to be confirmed, extended or amended" (Guest, 2017: 30).

--Insert Table 1 about here--

Characteristics of PBOs: Temporary work modes

Although the common understanding of projects as temporary organisations might create the perception that the project workers involved in the project are working on a temporary contract, this is not always the case. Projects are a combination of human and non-human resources pulled together into a temporary organisation to achieve a specified purpose (Cleland & Kerzner, 1985). These temporary organisations are however agencies which are established by a parent organisation (the principal) to achieve specific objectives (Turner & Muller, 2003). The principal will need to appoint a manager (the agent) to manage the project on their behalf. The parent organisation (the principle) will also need to create structures to monitor managerial decisions to ensure they are aligned with the owner's objectives of profit maximisation. They will also need to provide the team members who will carry out the project. These resources can be internal to the organisation (e.g. full-time, permanent employees) or external resources specifically hired for this job (e.g. temporary workers, freelancers, subcontractors), who will leave the organisation upon the closure of the project.

The element of temporality in PBOs is, therefore, not specifically related the type of contracts between the parent organisation and the project workers, but rather the temporary nature of the work which is carried out during a project. This perspective is explained by Turner and Muller (2003) who argue that a project is a temporary organisation to which resources are assigned to undertake a unique, novel and transient endeavour managing the inherent uncertainty and need for integration in order to deliver beneficial objectives of change. In this study, the element of transience is not related to the employment contracts of project workers, but to the nature of the work that project workers perform, regardless of the type of agreement they have with the parent organisation. Figure 1 presents an example of a PBO where projects are conducted within specific time frames and scope.

--Insert Figure 1 about here--

Within a project setting, the project workers' perceptions of working conditions are affected by two main elements: motivation and stress. Although project work can be motivating due to clear goals, they are also often time pressured. Incidents like the loss of resources, changing preferences or priorities, or project closure might provoke changes to the set goals, to which individuals have committed. This could hinder effective goal fulfilment as well as create stress among the people involved (Gallstedt, 2003). Such incidents highlight one of the boldest characteristics of project work which is the high level of uncertainty. This uncertainty coupled with the uniqueness of projects, is in contradiction the human need for stability and continuity. Although the degree to which different individuals rely on such stability differs, the need to satisfy this need is common to all workers. Incidents and events which disrupt stability might be perceived as stressors and can create feelings of inadequacy, decrease self-confidence and, thereby, cause negative health effects for project workers. One might argue that this is the nature of work in every context, however the level to which project workers are exposed to stress and uncertainty is much higher than other work contexts (Gallstedt, 2003).

HRM and wellbeing in PBOs

There is growing literature surrounding HRM in PBOs (e.g. Bredin & Söderlund, 2011a, 2011b, 2010; Keegan et al., 2018; Keegan & Turner, 2003). Research has studied how the characteristics of project work in PBOs bring challenges for managing project workers. The increase of 'project intensification' (Bredin & Söderlund, 2007) has several implications for the practice of HRM, including increased requirements on individual employees, dealing with long-term competence development, high levels of work intensity and handling compensation/evaluation. When it comes to career development in PBO contexts, Arthur et al. (2001) state that it does not take place within the traditional firm, but rather career capital is accumulated through mobility of workers between and across projects.

Academic research on how HRM is performed in PBOs is steadily increasing (Martinsou et al., 2006; Turner et al., 2008; Huemann, 2010; Bredin & Söderlund, 2011a, b; Wickramasinghe & Liyanage, 2013). Research by Turner et al. (2008) demonstrates that in PBOs, the HRM function is too focused around ensuring the recruitment of competent and fit-for-purpose employees/workers to deliver the projects, and much less on caring for these employees/workers. This is derived from the need for profit and responding to client demands which often takes priority over employee wellbeing. It is also due to the inherent problems that PBOs face with respect to resourcing and change/discontinuity of skills (Prouska & Kapsali, 2020). First, PBOs face a resourcing challenge because of the high project worker turnover they face (Lee et al., 2017). This means that PBOs continuously scout for talent in external labour markets (Ekrot et al., 2016). Second, PBOs experience a continuous change and discontinuity in the demand for certain skills, and this means that they do not invest in a stable

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internal labour market, but rather have a rather short-term/reactive HR strategy (Prouska & Kapsali, 2020).

Empirical evidence also indicated that because PBOs adopt temporary work processes to deliver products and services to clients, this creates a dynamic work environment, where additional pressures are imposed on project workers from fluctuating workloads, uncertain requirements, and multiple role demands (Prouska & Kapsali, 2020). These pressures negatively impact on project workers' wellbeing (Turner et al., 2008). For example, Sang et al. (2007) particularly refer to the construction industry in their research, and how the culture of long working hours, high workload, time pressures, and poor work-life balance, can lead to poor psychological wellbeing among construction professionals.

In addition, project work in PBOs and the risk of excessive workload can result in lesser time for reflection, learning, and recuperation between the projects. These effects lead to stress reactions and might hamper competence development (Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006). Role strain, project overload, and competence deterioration are other challenges faced by project workers (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011a). These pressures are particularly high in small to medium sized external projects, where project workers work on more than one project at each time, and projects are unexpectedly added on to the workload (Turner et al., 2008). Further, PBOs often leave little room for formal training and staff development (Prouska & Kapsali, 2020). The lack of structures and mechanisms for cross-project coordination can lead to a severe problem for the long-term effectiveness and learning of PBOs due to a "lack of incentives for human resource development" (Hobday, 2000: 885). Table 2 provides an overview of the characteristics of PBOs in comparison to traditional organisations (non-PBOs).

--Table 2 insert about here--

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Research Methods

Our aim was to capture employee perceptions and experiences of workplace wellbeing within PBOs. Therefore, an interpretivist approach was most suited as this approach has the purpose to understand human actions, motives, feelings and experiences from the perspective of organisational members (Bell et al., 2019). We used an exploratory qualitative research design to collect data through semi-structured interviews because we wanted to flexibly collect data (Wengraf, 2001).

We conducted interviews in mid-2020 with 21 project workers. Most participants were working for PBOs based in Europe and held a full-time employment contract (except of three participants who were on a fixed-term contract). Small-scale interview-based research is common in exploratory studies (e.g. Bardoel, 2016; Perera et al., 2016) if research is intentionally conceptually generative (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). The project workers were holding various professional specialisations in their organisations. The PBOs were operating in a range of industries, such as construction, manufacturing and services. The sample of companies was obtained from the researchers' professional network. Table 3 provides an overview of the study participants.

--Insert Table 3 about here--

Data Collection and Interview Protocol

Each participant was interviewed by one of the authors. The interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and were conducted via telephone/Skype due to COVID-19 restrictions. All interviews were conducted in English, were tape-recorded and then transcribed. Each interview started with a brief description of the study and an assurance to participants that all personal

information would be kept anonymous and confidential. The interview questions were organised in three sections:

1. Participant/organisation background information (age, gender, current position/key responsibilities, length of service in the organization, organisation's line of business);

2. Reflections on employee experience with wellbeing (meaning of 'workplace wellbeing', general concerns over wellbeing);

3. Reflections on employee experience with wellbeing related HRM practices (investing in employees, provision of engaging work, social and physical environment, voice, organizational culture and management support for wellbeing, rewards)

Data Analysis

We used thematic analysis to analyse the data, a method independent of research theory and epistemology, making it a flexible method which can potentially provide complex accounts of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method of analysis is often framed as a realist/experiential method (Roulston, 2001) that can be used for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. We followed a rigorous process to thematic analysis in order to ensure trustworthiness of the analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Details of this process follows.

First, we engaged in an inductive process of developing and refining a coding scheme (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Both authors independently engaged in the coding process. Themes identified were strongly linked to the data themselves (Patton, 2015). We reviewed the transcripts for themes relating to wellbeing without paying attention to the themes that previous research on the topic has identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006) because we wanted to code diversely. Second, we checked for replication of themes to ensure inter-rater reliability as is appropriate with semi-structured interviews (Belotto, 2018). Third, the analysis moved from

description to interpretation (Gilgun, 2015). At this stage, we focused on patterns, their meanings and implications in relation to previous literature. The key themes that resulted from our analysis are presented in Table 4 below.

--Insert Table 4 about here--

Findings

Meaning of wellbeing from a project workers' perspective

Participants described various aspects of wellbeing when they were asked what wellbeing meant to them. They discussed the *physical* aspects of wellbeing both in terms of physical space, such as office and equipment (E18), as well as in terms of physical health and safety (E1, E3, E10, E11, E17). They further mentioned *psychological* wellbeing related to mental/emotional wellbeing (E1, E3, E6, E10), such as having a good working relationship with colleagues and the manager (E18). Closely related to physical and psychological wellbeing was having *balance/flexibility* (E2, E7, E9, E12, E20), such as being happy with the workload, not feeling stressed or being put under pressure to deliver, and having managers considering personal flexibility needs (E4, E5). *Respect for equality/diversity* also featured as a key aspect of wellbeing, such as not being treated differently because of nationality (E4) and having managers that give the opportunity to project workers to be themselves at work (E15). *Team integration/collaboration* was also deemed as important by some participants, such as feeling close and integrated to the team (E4) and working within a collaborative and understanding culture (E9, E13, E19). A key theme also revolved around *happiness/satisfaction/enjoyment* at work, for example being in a happy workplace which provides a suitable environment physically, mentally and socially where everyone is feeling

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happy and satisfied (E7, E14, E16, E20). Training and development opportunities and rewards were also specifically mentioned by participants (E19).

Wellbeing concerns among project workers

Less than half of the participants did not raise any specific wellbeing issues when asked (E1, E3, E9, E11, E12, E15, E17, E20), some putting this down to the offered flexibility which enables them to maintain physical and mental wellbeing. But most participants did raise important issues around the *high/unequal workload* (E2, E5) and the *stress/pressure* associated with the workload and tight deadlines (E2, E6, E10, E17). Participants noted that projects are "toxic environments" (E10), with high labour turnover (E2) and with many challenges around creating working environments of psychological safety (E6).

Other wellbeing concerns included regular *conflict* because of a lack of clear authority and clashes with colleagues and managers (E10). Such conflict was arising from the organisational structure, as well as from toxic leadership styles (E19). A *lack of appreciation* for the work performed in this industry (E4) was also noted as an issue, as well as insufficient *physical space* to work (E2, E6, E13, E17). One participant noted a *lack of an internal HR function* for overseeing employee wellbeing, with the function being outsourced and the policies being inconsistently applied (E19). Table 5 presents indicative quotes in relation to this theme.

--Insert Table 5 about here--

Experience with wellbeing HRM practices

Organisational practices for a positive physical and social environment. There was an overall high level of satisfaction among project workers in terms of their physical and social environment, with both themes strongly demonstrating high satisfaction. In terms of the *physical environment*, some participants noted the presence of ergonomic equipment in their workstations (E4, E7, E11, E12, E14, E16, E18), flexible spaces for teamwork (E5) and yearly checks conducted by the organisation on the suitability of the physical space (E8). Equipment and IT was not lacking from workstations (E3, E9). However, open plan offices are not always perceived as being effective workspaces offering limited space for work (E2, E6, E17) and limited opportunities for teamwork (E19). The physical environment was also perceived as positive by participants because of the availability of kitchens for use by staff and food, snacks and beverages available (E1, E3, E4, E5, E7, E11, E12, E13, E14, E18). Some workplaces also offered personal hygiene facilities, such as shower facilities (E5, E6, E7, E12, E13) and rest rooms (E21).

In terms of the *social environment*, most participants agreed that their organisations offered numerous opportunities for social connection between co-workers, for example staff away days and trips (E17, E20), social activities (drinks, birthday celebrations, lunches/dinners) (E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, E7, E8, E9, E11, E14, E16, E17, E18, E20, E21), cultural programmes and community get-togethers (E21) and sport activities (10km run, skiing, cycling, tennis, table tennis, sports teams) (E2, E9, E13, E14, E16). The particular nature of project work means virtual collaboration for some project workers, but even in these cases social interaction is high.

Organisational practices supporting wellbeing. Some organisations were offering a range of wellbeing schemes and organisational support groups to promote wellbeing. Examples

included gym membership and gym facilities offered (E11, E16), cycle to work schemes (E3, E5, E7), counselling services (E1, E7, E11, E12, E19), mental health scheme (E3, E6, E9, E12, E15, E18), wellbeing classes (i.e. yoga, pilates) (E15), occupational therapy (E9), support networks/groups (E1) and employee assistance programmes (E3, E17, E19). Wellbeing surveys were used by some organisations to measure aspects of wellbeing across the workforce (E4, E5, E9).

Some other examples of how management support the project workers' wellbeing were provided by participants. In the case of participant E4 in Denmark, working hours in the organisation were highly flexible allowing staff members to prioritise family commitments. Any employee struggling in their private life was given possibilities to reduce their working hours and workload. There was a general feeling that management genuinely cared about the project workers' wellbeing. Other participants provided examples such as active management intervention in the case of burned-out colleagues (E7, E15), regular meetings with management to discuss how things are going and how people are feeling (E16) and email policies for out-of-hour emails (E17). Table 6 presents indicative quotes in relation to this theme.

--Insert Table 6 about here--

Equal opportunities/diversity and bullying/harassment policies and practices. The majority of participants acknowledged the existence and implementation of equal opportunities and diversity policies and networks in their organisation (E1, E3, E9, E13, E17, E19, E21), training for equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) (E18) and LGBT programmes (E15) in place. But one participant noted gender inequalities in the industry (E14). Policies were sometimes not in written form (E4) or implemented with limited success (E6, E19). Management attitudes

towards equality and diversity were also highlighted by one participant (E10) who argued that such policies need the support of management in order for them to effectively work.

An interesting discussion arose when participants were asked if they have witnessed or experiences bulling or harassment at work. A minority of participants had not witnessed or experienced bulling or harassment (E1, E5, E8, E9), however most participants acknowledged that they had witnessed or experienced bulling or harassment (E2, E3, E4, E10, E11, E15, E17, E19) and this included both female and male participants.

Some participants mentioned that strict rules existed for dealing with bullying or harassment (E13, E16, E18), that mandatory training available existed (E15), and that HR played a role in facilitating any such issues (E14, E15) with yearly surveys on employee satisfaction, including experiences with bulling or harassment (E16). However, some other participants noted that project workers do not always feel able to take action (E6) or that processes for dealing with such issues where not always followed through (E19). Table 7 presents indicative quotes in relation to this theme.

--Insert Table 7 about here--

Job design practices. Most participants agreed that the nature of their project work provides them with adequate engagement in terms of autonomy (E3, E9, E10, E16, E17) and variety (E4, E15, E19) because of the results-driven nature of the work (E2). The high level of autonomy provided to project workers was explained by one participant (E7) as being due to the trust the organisation is demonstrating towards project workers. However, work autonomy and variety largely depend on the project team set-up according to some participants (E8, E13) and is not always present in all teams.

Flexible working practices. Flexible working was enabled because the nature of work meant working with colleagues in multiple locations and at varying shift times (E21), making online communication and working from home important strategies (E8). But flexibility did not only come in terms of physical flexibility, but also in the work pattern (E15). Most organisations actively promoted flexible working (E12, E20) but in some cases project workers had to ask for it (E11). Working parents were also supported with maternity/paternity leave (E12), and childcare facilities onsite (E9, E16). The majority of participants agreed that flexibility was frequently offered in their workplace (E3, E4, E5, E6, E13, E14, E17) although it was often dependent on the type of work involved (e.g. no flexibility was available when working at clients' premises) (E1, E16), on the role project workers have within the project team (E2) and on the management style (E18). Table 8 presents indicative quotes in relation to this theme.

--Insert Table 8 about here--

Training/development, mentoring & career support practices. Most participants were content with the level of investment in training and development by their organisation, pointing out the many opportunities they received for generic training (E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, E9, E17, E20, E21) which was often seen as an industry requirement (E1). Global organisations seemed to invest heavily in training and development (E15). Such training included training on software/IT, finance, legal matters and first aid. Some received job-specific training depending on their role, such as technical training and consultancy training (E14, E17, E18, E21).

Mentoring schemes were also available to some participants (E3, E8, E12, E17). Some other participants also had access to external training, such as through university courses and external certifications (i.e. Prince 2) (E6, E9, E11, E11, E14, E16) when a strong business case could be made (E19). However, some participants noted limited training available (E10, E19)

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due to limited or no available budgets for training and development activities in smaller organisations (E4, E13).

In terms of investing in *career opportunities and support* for career-related activities, some participants discussed available career pathways for them (E1, E2, E7, E8, E11, E12, E15, E16, E21). However, one participant noted the organisation's "up or out" culture (E15) pressuring project workers to progress or leave the organisation, with other participants also noting the difficulties in progressing in the organisation and the need to be proactive to progress (E1, E11).

However, other participants discussed a lack of clear pathways for career development (E3, E13) and limited opportunities to move up the corporate ladder (E6) or having to wait for opportunities as the organisational structure is not there to support progression (E14) due to the small size of the organisation (E19). Table 9 presents indicative quotes in relation to this theme.

--Insert Table 9 about here--

Employee voice practices. There was less overall satisfaction among participants with respect to communication and opportunities to voice ideas or concerns to management via direct or indirect (unions) channels, with only one participant mentioning the presence of a union (E8). There are some voice mechanisms present, such as suggestion boxes and WhatsApp groups (E21). But employee voice is dependent on having a good relationship and open communication with the immediate line manager (E1, E9, E11, E12, E14, E18, E21) and with colleagues (E2).

Although open door policies did exist (E2, E11), they were not always perceived as effective. Project workers felt that, although there was freedom to express ideas at work and a supportive culture in this respect (E5, E14, E15, E16, E18, E19), managers did not seem to

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really listen to any ideas or suggestions (E2, E9, E13). On another occasion a participant (E17) noted that when issues were formally raised, they were not always effectively acted upon and this made project workers feel less supported.

Although participants felt that they could make decisions related to the project they were working on, there was limited scope for being involved in wider decision-making (E1, E2, E11) due to the position of the project worker in the organisation, with one participant feeling that they were being 'shushed' in meetings (E10). Voice was also dependent on the level of the employee in the organisation (E6) which did not always allow for involvement in decision-making, with one participant commenting on how senior authority stifles the voice of junior colleagues (E10).

Organisational culture and structure were also found to affect voice and ivolvement in decision making. When the type of organisational culture was supporting dialogue and communication (E5, E7, E15), project workers felt more empowered to speak up. In terms of structure, flat structures were noted as enabling voice from project workers to senior manager (E4, E8, E16, E18). On the other hand, matrix structures created uncertainty over responsibility/authority and did not make voice easy (E6). Table 10 presents indicative quotes in relation to this theme.

--Insert Table 10 about here--

Employee reward practices. Rewards were a big aspect of project workers' wellbeing and one of the strongest themes in the analysis with all participants noting a range of reward strategies available to them. Participants reported a range of financial and non-financial rewards received. Examples included health insurance and private healthcare (E1, E6, E7, E12, E14, E16, E18, E21), pension scheme (E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, E8, E11, E12, E13, E14, E18, E19, E21), annual

bonus (E1, E7, E12, E13, E18, E21), bonus based on performance (E2, E6, E11, E19), generous annual leave/parental leave (E3, E5, E7, E8, E15), life and travel insurance (E4, E7, E8), company car (E20), sick pay (E4, E7) and profit sharing (E11, E14). Other benefits included employee discounts (E3, E9), bills payment (E8, E16), career development sponsorship (E12), free passport (E12) and discounted mortgage payments (E16). However, two participants mentioned that overtimes were not paid (E2, E4) and one participant explained that such rewards were available to full-time project workers only, with colleagues on a temporary contract not having access to the same rewards beyond their salary (E10).

Discussion

Our study found that participants often found themselves working in 'toxic environments' characterised by stress due to the high/unequal workload and tight deadlines imposed, regular conflicts and a lack of appreciation from managers. This created challenges around their perception of psychological safety at work. This finding is in line with previously published work around the nature of project work which creates high level of stress (Gallstedt, 2003) and burnout (Pinto et al., 2014).

However, when looking at the physical and social environment, there was an overall high level of satisfaction among project workers. An internal HR function was almost always present to oversee employee wellbeing, with most participants feeling satisfied with the HR practices in place to support wellbeing. Research has been conducted on the form the HR function takes in PBOs (Bredin & Söderlund, 2011a). It is positive to see in our findings that HR practices included a range of wellbeing schemes and organisational support groups to promote wellbeing, as well as active line management support to specific wellbeing issues the participants faced at times.

Specifically looking at the existence of equal opportunities and diversity policies, most participants acknowledged these, but also noted that these were not always in written form or implemented successfully. This was evidenced, for example, in the underrepresentation of women in project management positions which has also been noted by past research (Baker et al., 2021).

Connected to the above issue was the acknowledgement of participants that they had witnessed or experienced bulling or harassment. Although it was reported that strict rules do exist for dealing with bullying or harassment, mandatory training is available, and that HR plays an active role in facilitating such issues, some participants noted that processes for dealing with such issues where not always followed through. In male dominated sectors, such as construction and engineering, women are more prone to bullying and harassment (Powell & Sang, 2015), with implications for a higher labour turnover rate (Jalili et al., 2019). There is also evidence that the gender bias in such sectors has severe consequences for mental health and well-being particularly of female workers (Jones et al., 2014). Bullying and harassment may originate from project managers because the nature of PBO work generates tensions that transfer to the employment relationship (Martinsuo, 2011); the project manager is the person with the responsibility to implement rigid standards and controls in the project processes, meaning that leader–member exchanges (Kong et al., 2017) and the manager's leadership style (Duan et al., 2017) becomes central to the way they manage their team.

Most participants agreed that the nature of their project work provides them with adequate engagement in terms of autonomy and variety because of the results-driven nature of the work. However, work autonomy and variety largely depend on the project team set-up according to some participants and is not always present in all teams but is largely dependent on the specific 'team culture' (Prouska & Kapsali, 2020).

Flexible working was enabled because the nature of work meant working with colleagues in multiple locations and at varying shift times, making online communication and working from home important strategies. Flexibility did not only come in terms of physical flexibility, but also in the work pattern. Most organisations actively promoted flexible working, although in some cases project workers had to ask for it. Working parents were also supported with maternity/paternity leave and childcare. Most participants agreed that flexibility was frequently offered in their workplace although it was often dependent on the type of work involved (e.g. no flexibility was available when working at clients' premises), on the management style and on the role project workers have within the project team. It is not uncommon to find evidence of flexibility in working patterns in project work (Hyman et al., 2005), however this is dependent on the work environment climate and the team climate, as Prouska and Kapsali (2020) argue.

Most participants were content with the level of investment in training and development by their organisation, pointing out the many opportunities they received for generic training, job-specific training and external training. However, there was a clear difference in the experience of full-time vs. temporary project workers in this respect, with an indication that training and development opportunities where ring fenced for the former. But there were also instances where full-time project workers enjoyed limited training and development opportunities, due to limited or no available budgets for such activities in smaller PBOs.

In terms of career development in PBOs, this was often seen as being the workers' own responsibility; project workers rely on their own knowledge to create market niches for themselves and it is for this reason that they are oriented toward external labor markets (Dwivedula & Bredillet, 2010). Alternatively, they may look at opportunities within the operational sections of the organisation (Crawford et al., 2013) or by increasing their mobility between and across projects.

It is not a surprise, therefore, that while some participants discussed available career pathways for them, others noted the difficulties in progressing and the need to be proactive about this. In smaller PBOs, it was noted that the structure cannot support progression; PBOs often have a flexible organisation structure that does not offer hierarchical career ladders in the traditional sense (Huemann et al., 2007; Keegan & Turner, 2003). Career growth within the context of project work is often defined as moving from delivering/managing smaller projects to larger projects (Agyekum et al., 2020). Naturally, the career growth is limited in smaller PBOs where the size and complexity of projects is limited.

An important area of concern related to opportunities to voice ideas or concerns to management. Some voice mechanisms were present, such as suggestion boxes and WhatsApp groups. But employee voice was found to be largely dependent on having a good relationship and open communication with the immediate line manager and with peers (Prouska & Kapsali, 2020). Although open door policies did exist, they were not always perceived as effective. Project workers felt that, although they often experienced a supportive culture and freedom to express ideas, managers did not seem to really listen. Also, when issues were formally raised, they were not always effectively acted upon and this made project workers feel less supported. Although participants felt that they could make decisions related to the project they were working on, there was limited scope for being involved in wider decision-making due to their position in the organisation. Voice was also dependent on the employee status in the organisation, which included their employment status. Although flat structures facilitated voice, matrix structures created uncertainty over responsibility/authority and did not make voice easy. Voice was also dependent on organisational culture and the extent to which it was supporting dialogue and communication. Previous research has indicated that voice in PBOs is influenced by and dependent on the structure of the PBO, the fragmented nature of the

employment relationship, the work environment climate and the team climate (Prouska & Kapsali, 2020), and we also found evidence of this.

Finally, rewards were a big aspect of project workers' wellbeing and one of the strongest themes in the analysis with all participants noting a range of reward strategies available to them. However, some participants mentioned that overtimes were not paid, and one participant explained that such rewards were available to full-time project workers only, with colleagues on a temporary contract not having access to the same rewards beyond their salary. This is in line with research that has demonstrated that the employment climate is not homogeneous in PBOs; project workers have different perceptions of the value of their contract deal (Prouska & Kapsali, 2020) and these perceptions depend on their employment contract and status in the project (Dainty et al., 2009).

Conclusion

Our work is addressing the call to contextualise research to capture the experience of workers with work in a variety of occupations (Kossek & Perrigino, 2016). We particularly add in the growing literature surrounding the HRM function (e.g. Bredin & Söderlund, 2011a, 2011b, 2010; Huemann et al., 2007; Keegan et al., 2018; Keegan & Turner, 2003), HR strategies/practices (e.g. Cheng et al., 2007; Ekrot et al., 2016; Keegan & Den Hartog, 2018; Matthews et al., 2018; Prouska & Kapsali, 2020) and wellbeing practices in PBOs (Turner et al., 2008; Sang et al., 2007; Zika-Viktorsson et al., 2006). We offer a project worker perspective. Our study is bound by some limitations, such as the diverse nature of participants both in terms of industry and geographical location. A larger sample size focusing on specific industries and national contexts could have enabled us to draw further comparison. Our findings indicate some variance in the experiences of female vs. male and of temporary/fixed-

term vs. permanent workers. Further research could capture more targeted samples to uncover how such workers experience wellbeing in PBOs.

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Table 1. HR practices for employee wellbeing

Investing in employees	∨ Recruitment and selection
	∨ Training and development
	∨ Mentoring and career support
Providing engaging work	∨ Jobs designed to provide autonomy and challenge
	∨ Information provision and feedback
	∨ Skill utilisation
Positive social and physical environment	∨ Health and safety a priority
	∨ Equal opportunities/diversity management
	∨ Zero tolerance for bullying and harassment
	∨ Required and optional social interaction
	∨ Fair collective rewards/high basic pay
	∨ Employment security/employability
Voice	∨ Extensive two-way communication
	∨ Employee surveys
	∨ Collective representation
Organisational support	∨ Participative/supportive management
	∨ Involvement climate and practices
	∨ Flexible and family-friendly work arrangements
	∨ Developmental performance management

Source: from Guest (2017: 31)

Table 2. Characteristics of PBOs

PBOs	Non PBOs
Organic/flexible	Hierarchical/bureaucratic
Structured around delivery of a specific project with multi-disciplinary teams. They can be departments within functional organisations, matrix organisations or projectified organisations (Thiry, 2007)	Divisional or functional
No real hierarchy	Clear chain of command with every employee reporting to a specific line manager
Employees can feel "homeless". Career development does not take place within the traditional firm, but instead career capital is accumulated through member mobility between and across successive temporary teams and firms (Arthur et al., 2001)	Employees can specialise in a particular skillset, market or area of business
The work is subject to uncertainty and ambiguity (Burke & Morley, 2016) thus creating higher level of instability and stress (Gallstedt, 2003)	The work is rather predictable and stable
Project workers often work in different project simultaneously (Gallstedt, 2003)	Specific tasks are defined under each function/division and work is done in predefined sequences.

Authors: Rea Prouska & Sara Hajikazemi, LSBU Business School; paper accepted for presentation at the British Academy of Management conference 2021.

Table 3. Summary of interview participants

Participant code	Country	Industry	Gender (M/F)	Age	Position	Employment contract	Tenure
E1	UK	Construction	F	28	Assistant project manager	Full-time	3
E2	UK	Construction	F	52	Director	Full-time	3
E3	UK	Public sector/economic development	M	42	Programme manager & senior project manager	Full-time	9
E4	Denmark	Consultancy (traffic and transportation)	M	39	Traffic planner & certified noise analysis expert	Full-time	4
E5	UK	Technology	F	25	Project coordinator and crowd success lead	Full-time	0.5
E6	UK	Consultancy (management)	M	40	Principal consultant	Full-time	2.5
E7	UK	Financial services data	M	39	Quality manager	Full-time	1
E8	Norway	Consultancy	F	30	Senior safety advisor	Full-time	1
E9	UK	Education	F	35	Project manager	Fixed-term	3
E10	UK	Construction (rail)	F	35	Project assurance manager	Fixed-term	0.5
E11	UK	Infrastructure projects	M	35	Project manager	Full-time	2
E12	UK	Construction (rail)	M	42	Project manager	Full-time	1
E13	Switzerland	Energy	M	35	Technical lead & engineering manager	Full-time	1
E14	Netherlands	Manufacturing	M	39	Project manager	Full-time	3
E15	UK	Professional services	M	34	Programme manager	Full-time	6
E16	Norway	Applied research	M	37	Research manager	Full-time	1
E17	UK	Arts and culture, property and sport	M	49	Director	Full-time	28
E18	UK	Global science, technology and product development	M	45	Senior consultant & project manager	Full-time	1
E19	UK	Education	M	35	Project executive officer	Fixed-term	3.5
E20	Sri Lanka	Construction	M	26	IT consultant / project manager	Full-time	0.2
E21	India	Mining & energy	M	55	Director	Full-time	5

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Table 4. Key themes and associated open codes

Core Themes	Open Codes
1. Meaning of wellbeing	"physical wellbeing", "psychological wellbeing", "balance/flexibility", "team integration/collaboration", "respect for equality/diversity", "happiness/satisfaction"
2. Wellbeing concerns	"high/unequal workload", "stress/pressure", "lack of appreciation", "conflict", "physical space", "lack of internal HR function"
3. Support in T&D	"generic training", "job-specific training", "external training", "mentoring", "limited training", "no training"
4. Career opportunities/support for career-related activities	"clear pathway", "no pathway/limited"
5. Provision of engaging work	"autonomy", "variety of work", "no engaging work/limited"
6. Physical environment	"workstation", "equipment/IT", "physical space: food/kitchens", "personal hygiene facilities"
7. Social environment	"social space", "social activities"
8. Wellbeing facilities & support	"support groups", "wellbeing schemes"
9. Psychological environment	"bullying/harassment"
10. Equal opportunities & diversity	"strong", "weak", "non existent"
11. Employee voice opportunities	"limited voice", "relationship with immediate manager", "informal/formal voice channels", "structure facilitating/inhibiting voice", "management approach & culture facilitating/inhibiting voice"
12. Organisational culture & management support for wellbeing	"supportive", "limited support"
13. Flexibility	"childcare support", "flexible work options/policies"
14. Rewards	"health insurance/private healthcare", "pension scheme", "annual bonus", "annual leave/parental leave", "life/travel insurance", "sick pay", "profit sharing", "extra benefits"

Table 5. Wellbeing concerns – indicative quotes

I think the way the industry works is quite uncertain. You're only as good as the work you're bringing in. So that is really stressful... at the other end, there are the zero hour contracts. It's really bad for people's mental health. Uncertainty, insecurity... if you're not bringing in the work, you can get fired... Mental health wise, it's actually a really, really bad way of working. (E2)
... project environments can be stressful. It's that undue pressure that can lead to physically unsafe behaviours and can be mentally taxing. (E10)
...They've got a much higher staff turnover than where I was working previously, and that's because people are unhappy and stressed. (E2)

Table 6. Organisational practices supporting wellbeing – indicative quotes

They do surveys, once in a while... they just want to see how we are experiencing the organisation, the culture and the wellbeing, questions are like: "Do you feel like your manager is supporting you enough?", "Do you feel as if you could go to your manager?", "Are there any issues?"... in general, it is a very open culture where if there is anything that is bothering you or if you have any issues, the first thing that you do is talk to your line manager... (E5)
For example, one of my colleagues, he was somewhat burned-out because of his manager... then the upper manager jumped in and tried to solve the issue. (E13)
There was a period when I was under a particular pressure and [...] I requested a leave of absence... I expected it to be very complex and bureaucratic and to require a number of weeks to go through the process but to my great surprise, one week later I received the approval email from my managing director. (E15)

Table 7. Equal opportunities/diversity and bullying/harassment policies and practices – indicative quotes

We are in manufacturing and this is not a very popular line of business when it comes to gender equality. The production floor for example, if you put out a job advert for people to work on the production floor, maybe only one applicant will be a female or maybe none. So what you see, HR, Finance is all filled by ladies, and the production floor all by men, the engineering area, men... (E14)
… I do feel we are an inclusive organisation, from a HR perspective. I don't know necessarily how visible that inclusion facility is. For example, we had a couple of training sessions on inclusion and equality in the past, but there is not a lot. There are clearly things happening, but they're not really talked about... A lot of the work happens on individual initiative... (E19)
…it kind of felt like when they spoke about diversity and inclusivity, it was a buzzword. They didn't really want to talk about it... I remember one experience. I've been in the office and one of the senior managers came in. He was the most senior manager in our team and he got an email from his company about gay pride. And he came into our office and he was like, oh gosh, they've sent me this email. And he was making jokes about it. And he was kind of quite derogatory... And I remember kind of being quite shocked about some of the things that were being said and, you know, by a senior person who didn't know if anybody in our team was an LGBTQ person... (E10)
…I have experienced this... and some of the younger staff have actually mentioned it to me as well, it's been noticed. Construction is a very small industry, if you raise anything, everybody knows... Problems don't come from outside, they come from management, with sense of entitlement... big egos. So part of it is the personalities, at the top they are quite bullish anyway and you know quite aggressive by nature sometimes... I'm the only female director in my company. And the HR director was only made a director last year I think it, but there were no senior women, which speaks for itself really. (E2)
…it's part of the environment, but yes it [bullying/harassment] happens quite a lot. I don't think people would necessary feel like they can take action... [bullying/harassment policies] have been implemented with limited success... I think a lot of organisations are way behind where they're ought to be. (E6)

Table 8. Flexible working practices – indicative quotes

No, our job is always work from office... There is a strong belief in top management, they think our nature of work needs work from office. And that's mostly because of the concept that we should talk. When we are around each other, we basically brainstorm ideas easier... So it's kind of brainstorming methods, they think it should be physical and we should be in the office. (E18)
It [flexibility] depends on the type of work you are doing. So working on-site is not that flexible. When I worked on-site it wasn't that flexible but that is due to circumstances, not due to mentality. It really depends on the type of project you are working on. I think it is obvious for people that work in construction that if you are working on-site, you can't be that flexible. (E1)
It depends really, between the cost side and the project management side. The cost side [workers]... turn up at 9 and leave at 5:30... In the project management side, we're literally in a different part of the office. There's a lot of us again disappearing by 5:30. But you more often see people working late... (E2)

Table 9. Training/development, mentoring & career support practices – indicative quotes

I believe the organisation could provide more opportunities for training for me. However, since the cost of absence of workforce to attend training sessions is quite high, it is understandable that the company is not very keen to send off key staff for training. (E4)
...no, they don't have that many [training opportunities]... they don't have a budget... the economy is not good. So the company will not spend that much on training. (E13)
...there is a career path and the expectation in terms of progression... our corporate culture is known for a concept called 'up or out', which means that people are expected to progress, or find alternative ways to reposition themselves within the organization... if people are not progressing, they will be encouraged to leave the organisation. (E15)
...it depends on the circumstances and the project you're in. It's a combination of the company offering it, but the employee to ask for it as well. (E1)
There isn't a clear pathway for career development... there's no pathway where you can see the steps required for you to get to a senior level... The progression is based on vacancies and to be successful when you apply for those vacancies. There's no kind of team management in terms of preparing individuals so that they apply for those vacancies... There's no competency pathway to allow you to get to Senior Director. (E3)
...they claim that yes, but I have not seen even one small light in this tunnel... I've been fighting for the past year for any opportunity. But one after the other, they said, no... (E13)
It is difficult to move up. It is possible to move across, but this is also difficult. (E6)
In the sense of promotion we are a little bit behind. I think once of the reasons is because we are not a corporate head office so we are like a child company. If I compare the way in which employees are promoted in a corporate area, it is different from the child company. (E14)

Table 10. Employee voice practices – indicative quotes

They [managers] hear, but they don't listen... unfortunately, there is a huge amount of managers... unfortunately, more than 90% of the managers are reactive managers, not proactive... They care more about business rather than the people. (E13)
Anything that was formally raised by the individual, certainly would go through a proper process involving [...] HR professionals within the organisation. That said, I can think of examples where individual people have felt that they've been harshly treated by a client on a project... And then I can think of examples where that hasn't been dealt with particularly well. So it's been sort of brushed under the carpet or that person's been moved on to another project rather than addressing the problem and that does lead people to feel not well supported. (E17)
At one meeting, one of the senior managers, I was sharing my point in the meeting and he shushed me. I was kind of really shocked by that because I was like, wow, you are kind of paying me to be present and share opinions and share views... I found myself crying kind of regularly in this project. (E10)
...silencing happened because this person felt like he knew best, he's got 40 years' experience. He doesn't need a young person, a young woman telling him there's a better way of doing things or different way of doing things. So there was that kind of ignorance of, well, you know, "I know it all"... (E10)
That [communication] is not very... it is not easy at all. It's not a typical line management structure, because we work in a matrix structure, my line manager works in a different part of the firm, works with different types of clients and his role tends to be mostly process focused. (E6)

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Figure 1. Example of a PBO and the nature of temporary project organisation within the PBO