



Industry Forum

Business Excellence Through Inspired People

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UK Teamwork & Problem Solving: On The Decline

How the UK economy is developing in terms of jobs, skills, training and management is much clearer with the recent publication of two major surveys. The 2011 Workplace Employee Relations Survey (WERS) looks at the experience of managers and employees and is part of a series stretching back periodically more than 20 years so that trends can be determined.

The 2011 WERS returned to those workplaces that participated in the previous wave in 2004 to establish which were no longer in existence. Some 17% had closed down - the rate was 19% among private sector workplaces and 7% in the public sector. The overall closure rate during this time was in fact no higher than that observed between the two previous WERS surveys (1998 and 2004).



Employees were asked to what extent their workplaces had been affected by the current recession. 47% responded 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' – the figure for manufacturing was the same as the national average but other sectors were different. Construction (72%) and public administration (65%) recorded high figures in line with other evidence of the impact of the recession. At the other extreme the figure for Energy, Gas and Water was only 18% and in this sector 70% of employees said the recession had impacted on them 'just a little' or with 'no adverse effect'. Surprisingly in the Wholesale and Retail sector 37% of employees reported 'just a little' or 'no adverse effect' of recession.

The most common impact of the recession reported was the freezing or cutting of wages (42%) and not filling vacant posts (28%). 16% of respondents said that training spend had been reduced. Overall about 30% of employees thought their workload had been increased. The percentage of employees feeling that their job was secure had fallen from 67% in 2004 to 60% in 2011 – not as much as might have been expected.

Nearly half (47%) of employees are located in a workplace with at least one on-site representative (union or management). The amount of time spent on representation revealed by the 2011 survey is the same as 2004 but the range of issues involved has expanded and includes recruitment and selection, performance appraisal, staffing levels, pension entitlements, discipline and grievances.

Generally there is evidence of more effort to engage employees in 2011 than in 2004. All employee meetings are the most popular method and in 2011 they were used by 80% of workplaces compared with 75% in 2004. It is a matter of concern that problem solving groups are only used by 14% of workplaces in 2011; this is a fall from 17% in 2004.

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The WERS found that training has been extended to more employees in the workplace since 2004 but the duration of training is shorter. Employee satisfaction with training has nonetheless increased over this period. Some managers have cut training in response to the recession, and as a result satisfaction levels in these workplaces are lower. The proportion of workplaces offering training to 80% of their workforce or more (i.e. the most intensive trainers) increased to 41% in 2011 from 35% in 2004. The proportion of workplaces offering training in quality control increased slightly from 35% to 37%. Unfortunately the proportion of workplaces training in team working fell from 40% to 36% between 2004 and 2011.



It is also a matter of concern that only 31% of manufacturing workplaces offer training to more than 80% of their workforce – 10 points behind the all sectors average and three points worse than Wholesale and Retail. Sectors who are above the national average on this measure include Electricity, Gas and Water, Public Administration, Education, Health and Social Work.

In 2011 more employees reported that they are required to work very hard in 2011 compared to 2004. Even so job satisfaction increased during this period. It has been suggested that this partly reflects increases in the autonomy given to employees over key aspects of their jobs.

The other major survey to report is the 2012 Skills and Employment Survey. The final section of this project is being launched later this month and we hope to cover these results in a later article. Nonetheless the WERS suggests an alarming picture as far as the aim to rebalance the economy is concerned. Across the economy too many workers are required to work harder rather than increasing the output of work groups. Training in team working and problem solving is present in too few workplaces and the percentage has fallen. The number of firms training in quality control has increased slightly but there must be concern about the quality methods used.

Industry Forum has extensive experience of improving workplaces using team working and problem solving as a foundation. This approach improves the quality of output and the total output relative to the size of the team is also significantly enhanced. It is a matter of concern that on the evidence of the WERS too few firms are following this approach. The success of the automotive sector in the last decade reflects significant investment in this approach.

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