

Research Paper

Young people's awareness and use of sources of advice and information on problems and rights at work

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Fiona Neathey (Acas Research and Evaluation Section) and Sarah Oxenbridge (Employment Research Australia)

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**Young people's awareness and use of sources of advice
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**Fiona Neathey (Acas Research and Evaluation Section) and
Sarah Oxenbridge (Employment Research Australia)**

FOREWORD

This report explores knowledge and awareness of Acas amongst young people, and in particular, young workers.

It draws together evidence from a number of data sources and summarises both the extent to which young people experience problems and what actions they take. Whilst young people may well turn to informal contacts first, they often subsequently seek external help in dealing with issues at work and it is important that they are aware that Acas is there to help. Awareness of Acas amongst this section of the population is not as high as it could be – though for those who know Acas, the brand is trusted. We are currently seeking strategies to improve knowledge and awareness of Acas among young people, both those in work, and young people transitioning to the workplace.

Susan Clews

Director of Strategy, Acas

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research indicates that young workers (aged 16-24) are more likely to face problems at work, but less inclined to seek information and advice on workplace issues, than older workers. In order to explore these issues further, this report profiles and reviews data from four sources: an Acas poll of young workers (2010); a survey of awareness of Acas (2008); a qualitative study on access to Acas services (2010); and the BIS Fair Treatment at Work Survey (FTWS - 2008).

Knowledge of potential sources of information and advice

Compared to older workers, young workers are less likely to feel informed about their rights at work and to know where to find out about their rights; and they are more likely to feel that they could do with knowing more about their rights. Under one half of young workers felt “very confident” that they would know where to find out about rights at work.

When asked about information and advice sources they might potentially use, research indicated that young workers are more likely than older workers to say that they would seek out **‘at work’ sources of information or advice** on work-related issues, most commonly from line managers or supervisors. A majority would also use other sources at work (most frequently the internet). Young workers are more likely than older workers to turn to the internet as a first source of advice and information.

A majority of young workers would also approach someone they knew personally **outside of work** as a first source of advice on work-related rights - usually a parent or friend. However these sources were recognised to be partisan and often not well informed.

The internet was the most common source of information used by young workers outside of work. High levels of internet access among young workers meant that web-based sources were viewed by young workers as the ‘first port of call’ in the search for information. Only a small minority would seek advice from a telephone helpline.

Young workers are considerably less likely than older workers to say that they would approach **organisations outside of work** (such as Acas) for help. Just over a half of young workers would use such organisations to source work-related information or advice, most commonly Citizen’s Advice Bureaux (CAB) and trade unions. Acas was mentioned by only a small minority of young workers.

Despite high levels of web-based information-seeking among young workers, roughly equal proportions would seek help from external organisations either through face to face contact with the organisation, or by accessing the organisation’s website. A smaller proportion would make contact by telephone.

Organisations with high levels of awareness amongst young workers, and workers generally, were Citizen’s Advice Bureaux (CAB), the Health and Safety Executive and Directgov. A much smaller proportion of young workers had heard of Acas. With the exception of Directgov, young workers were less aware of all external organisations providing information and advice on work-related problems than older workers.

Dealing with problems at work

Younger workers were more likely than those in older age groups to report having experienced a problem or problems, and unfair treatment and discrimination, at work. Just under one-half of young workers had faced one or more of the work-related problems listed in the Acas poll. The most common problems experienced related to pay, unfair treatment, and taking breaks at work.

Young workers are less likely to take actions to resolve workplace problems than older workers. However, most young workers reported seeking to inform the employer of their grievance or to resolve the issue – most commonly by discussing the problem with a supervisor, line manager or senior manager. Almost one fifth of young workers who had experienced a work problem had left their employer as a result of this problem and a similar proportion had taken no action in response to the problem.

Qualitative research found that workers of all ages were reluctant to deal with workplace problems due to fears regarding job security, and a lack of knowledge about how to handle the problem or find advice. Young workers lacked the confidence to articulate their problems to advice sources. They were also more likely to respond to problems by leaving jobs as they felt less attachment to jobs and had fewer financial commitments than older workers.

There was a high degree of congruence between workers' potential use of sources of advice and information and the extent to which they accessed such sources in practice, in response to workplace problems. Young workers were highly likely to seek advice and assistance from line managers and supervisors at the workplace and friends and relatives outside of the workplace, as anticipated. However they were less likely in practice to seek assistance from unions than initially envisaged. Moreover, while some research indicated that the internet was an important first source of information accessed by young workers, other research indicated a low level of actual use of the internet to obtain information and advice among workers of all ages who had experienced problems.

Workers of all ages who sought to **address workplace problems** were found to follow a sequence of steps. They would: talk to someone close to let off steam; seek information from an external source; approach their employer; and, if the issue was not resolved, ask a third party to intervene.

With regard to **seeking information** from external sources, workers of all ages tended to follow a sequence of steps. Online information was often sought first, with telephone contact used second (to discuss the problem and get support), and face to face contact being the final stage of advice-seeking.

The primary advice or information sources actually used by workers of all ages to help them resolve their work-related problems were **at-work**, the range of which increased with the size of the employee's organisation. Line managers, HR departments and business proprietors were seen as variable sources of help and advice. Some were helpful, while others were difficult to approach, preoccupied with the business, could not be trusted, or were the source of the problem.

Around one in ten young workers sought union representation in resolving workplace problems. While unions were generally felt to be well-informed and to provide weight in a dispute, some representatives were found to not be knowledgeable about workplace matters, or were felt to sometimes prompt a confrontation when employees sought a milder approach.

Workers (of all age groups) used **external third parties** in tackling workplace problems in cases where in-house sources of help such as managers, were the origin of the problem or where employees had concerns that at-work sources would not respect their confidentiality.

Benefits of using third party sources included their independent, objective perspective on problems; their professional or expert status in providing accurate information; and their ability to maintain confidentiality. Free sources of advice, such as the CAB, were more likely to be sought.

Disadvantages of third party intervention as cited by the research participants included: the possibility that outsiders might not understand the workplace culture and thus make errors in the case; that they might seek to extend the dispute at the employee's expense; or that their intervention might 'raise the stakes', intensify the dispute and worsen relations between the parties.

Trust in Acas and views on the Acas Helpline

Young workers are much less likely than those in older age groups to have heard of Acas and a majority of young workers felt that they knew only a little or nothing about Acas. Some assumed that Acas was a trade union, or that it provides services only for adults, or for groups of employees in disputes.

Although there was a low awareness of Acas among young workers, the majority of young workers surveyed trusted Acas

The Acas telephone Helpline was not widely known among qualitative research participants of all ages. Nevertheless, participants expected the Helpline to provide objective, accurate, independent, confidential and detailed advice, free of charge. They also expected Helpline staff to be informed employment law experts, to be understanding and easy to talk to, and to be able to provide honest assessments of employees' situations and clear guidance on 'next steps'.

Participants in the qualitative research felt that the Acas Helpline came across as more specialised and easier to access than a generalised service such as the CAB, more trustworthy and reliable than internet sources, less partial and less interventionist than unions and free, unlike solicitors. However, some associated Acas with large industrial disputes and doubted the Helpline would deal with individual problems.

Younger workers were found to be averse to using helplines in general as sources of advice and support because: they lacked confidence in articulating their problem; they were reluctant to talk about personal problems to strangers; and they had concerns about making calls in private when helplines operated during business hours only.

In qualitative research, younger workers expressed a number of viewpoints which might prevent them from accessing the Acas Helpline: they believed it was a formal advice line and/or aimed at white collar workers; again, they would feel uncomfortable and tongue-tied if they called the Helpline; staff would be much older than them and "not on the same wavelength"; and the Helpline would not be set up to deal with younger callers, who would not be taken seriously.

1. INTRODUCTION

This research report was commissioned and written by the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) research team and independent researcher Dr Sarah Oxenbridge, with the aim of contributing to the understanding of differential patterns of information and advice seeking in respect of problems in the workplace, with a particular focus on the age of workers.

Acas' Mission is to improve organisations and working life through better employment relations. Acas was established by Statute in 1976 to provide independent and impartial help to employers and employees in resolving workplace disputes. Since that time, Acas' role has expanded to include support to prevent disputes from escalating, as well as resolving those that do. To this end, Acas offers information and advice to employers and employees through its website, publications and Helpline.

The 2007 Gibbons review of workplace dispute resolution recognised the value of Acas' work and recommended that the Government should devote resources to

... Increase the quality of advice to potential claimants and respondents, through an adequately resourced helpline and the internet, including as to the realities of tribunal claims and the potential benefits of alternative dispute resolution to achieve more satisfactory and speedier outcomes.¹

As part of its response to the Gibbons review, the Government allocated additional funding to Acas to enhance its capacity in this area. Findings of a customer survey conducted in the first year of the enhanced Acas Helpline indicated that both employer and employee users of the Helpline valued the service and that the Helpline can have a substantial positive impact on dispute resolution behaviour in the workplace.²

However, this evaluation data, together with operational data on the Helpline, shows that some groups are less likely than others to use Acas as an information source in respect of workplace issues. One group which is both less likely to seek help from Acas (or other sources), and is more likely to face problems at work, is workers aged 16-24. Data from the Acas Helpline Evaluation Survey shows, for example, that 18-24 year olds make up 13 per cent of the labour force but only 4 per cent of callers to the Acas employment rights Helpline, indicating a low use of the Helpline by young workers.³

The Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) Department's Fair Treatment at Work Survey (FTWS) generated data profiling the nature and degree of problems experienced by young people in the workplace.⁴ Findings from this survey indicated that younger workers (aged 16-24) were more likely to report having faced a specific employment

¹ Pg 10 of Gibbons, M. (2007) *Better Dispute Resolution: A review of employment dispute resolution in Great Britain*, Department of Trade and Industry: London.

² See Thornton A. and Fitzgerald N. (2010) *Acas Helpline Evaluation 2009*, Acas Research Report 3/10. Available at www.acas.org.uk/researchpapers

³ Carter, J. (2010) *Access to advice and problems at work from a gender perspective: a review of Evidence*. Acas internal publication.

⁴ Fevre, R. Nichols, T. Prior G. and Rutherford, I. (2009) *Fair Treatment at Work Report: Findings from the 2008 survey*. BIS Employment Relations Research Series No 103. Available at <http://www.berr.gov.uk/files/file52809.pdf>. The Fair Treatment at Work survey dataset is also lodged at the Economic and Social Data Service (SN 6382). Available at <http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=6382>

problem or problems relating to their employment rights in the last five years than were older workers. They were also more likely to report having experienced unfair treatment and discrimination, and to mention age as a reason for unfair treatment, than older workers. The survey data further indicated that younger workers were less likely than older workers to take actions to resolve workplace problems, and to have had a positive resolution outcome of the most serious problem they encountered.⁵

These findings are of concern for two reasons:

- They indicate that one of the more vulnerable groups in the workforce is not receiving the help that it needs to deal with workplace problems; and
- They signal a missed opportunity to promote the early resolution of workplace problems encountered by 16-24 year olds; and in doing so, to reduce the proportion that escalate and result in an end to the workers' employment and/or the submission of an Employment Tribunal claim.

This paper draws on four data sources, described in the following section, in order to explore young workers' access to information and rights in the workplace. The aims of this paper are to examine:

- Sources of information and advice young workers would potentially use if faced with problems in the workplace;
- Young workers' actual experiences of problems in the workplace and actions taken to address these problems; and
- Awareness of and trust in Acas and its services.

The data profiled in this paper allow us to better understand the reasons why some young workers do not access Acas' services, and in doing so, should provide Acas and other organisations with guidance on how to offer support to young workers.

⁵ Fevre et al (2009)

2. DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

Four data sources are used in writing this report, all of which are profiled below:

- a poll of young workers commissioned by Acas conducted in 2010;
- a survey of awareness of Acas amongst workers of all ages carried out in 2008;
- a qualitative study on gender and age differences in access to Acas Services, undertaken in 2010; and
- the BIS Fair Treatment at Work survey conducted in 2008⁶.

2.1 Acas young workers' poll

The findings of the BIS FTWS, as well as research undertaken by Acas on differential use of Acas services, indicated a need for further research on young people's access to and use of Acas services. Hence Acas commissioned research to explore: the kinds of problems faced by young workers; their awareness and use of sources of information and advice on employment rights; and their awareness and use of Acas.

The Acas poll of young workers aged 16-24 was conducted as part of the British Market Research Bureau Ltd (BMRB – now TNS-BMRB) face-to-face omnibus survey. The omnibus is a weekly survey comprising 2,000 in-home interviews conducted with a nationally representative sample of adults aged 15 and over across Great Britain.

In order to obtain a sample of sufficient size to provide the potential for meaningful sub-group analysis, the Acas poll questions were asked in five consecutive waves of the BMRB survey. The fieldwork was undertaken between 4th March and 14th April 2010. A total of 577 young workers were interviewed over this period. Findings were weighted to reflect the broad demographic profile of the wider population (the weighted sample being n=619). Tables 1 to 3 provide information (in the un-weighted columns) on the profile of young workers who took part in the Acas poll.

Table 1: Gender composition of Acas young workers' poll sample

	Unweighted %	Weighted %
Men	52	54
Women	48	46
<i>Base</i>	<i>577</i>	<i>619</i>

Source: Acas young workers' poll 2010

Table 2: Age composition of Acas young workers' poll sample

	Unweighted %	Weighted %
16-17	6	6
18-20	35	35
21 to 24	59	59
<i>Base</i>	<i>577</i>	<i>619</i>

Source: Acas young workers' poll 2010

⁶ Fevre, et al (2009)

Table 3: Employment status of Acas young workers' poll sample

	Unweighted %	Weighted %
Full-time (30+ hours)	48	51
Part-time (8-29 hours)	42	40
Part-time (under 8 hours)	10	9
<i>Base</i>	<i>577</i>	<i>619</i>

Source: Acas young workers' poll 2010

2.2 Acas brand awareness survey

In 2008, Acas commissioned Ipsos MORI to include a series of questions in the regular Ipsos MORI telephone Omnibus survey. The questions related to prompted awareness and knowledge of Acas and trust in Acas to deliver services. The fieldwork was undertaken over the period 17th – 23rd October 2008 and generated a random sample of 1,105 people aged 18 and over who were in work at the time that the survey was conducted. This report primarily reports findings relating to n=90 18 to 24 year olds who were included in the sample. Data were weighted to reflect the composition of the broader population.

2.3 Acas qualitative research on access to Acas services

Acas commissioned researchers Cragg Ross Dawson to conduct qualitative research to explore in depth the reasons for differences in usage of its services between men and women and between individuals in different age bands⁷. This research generated data relating to: how people go about getting help when workplace problems arise; what they make of the Acas Helpline; perceptions of other courses of action and other sources of information and advice; and differences in behaviour and attitudes between men and women and between workers of different ages. The report described courses of action taken by workers as well as anticipated or intended courses of action pursued by respondents in relation to seeking assistance.

The research involved eight focus group discussions and ten individual interviews among employees in a range of organisations which varied by sector and size. The focus groups comprised a mix of employees with experience of a workplace problem who *had* and who had *not* sought third party help in dealing with it. The individual interviews were conducted with people with experience of a workplace problem who *had* sought third party help. The sample included both male and female employees from across a range of age groups and a mix of social classes. Fieldwork was conducted in the South East and North of England and Scotland between 20th April and 5th May 2010.

The study gathered data relating to employee responses to both non-work and work problems and found clear parallels in the way employees dealt with both sets of problems, especially in relation to the hierarchy of help used, the roles played by different sources of help, and differences by age and gender. Whilst some findings pertaining to workers across all age groups are used in this report, the bulk of the data

⁷ Cragg Ross Dawson (2010) Acas: qualitative research on gender differences in access to services Acas internal publication

reported relates specifically to young workers' views and cites verbatim quotes from young workers in the study (aged 25 or younger).

2.4 BIS Fair Treatment at Work Survey (FTWS)

The BIS FTWS is Britain's first large-scale official survey of employees' experience of unfair treatment, perceived discrimination, bullying and sexual harassment in the workplace.⁸ The fieldwork for this survey of 4,010 current and recent employees across Britain, aged 16 or over, was conducted between September and December 2008. The main aims of the survey were:

- to assess people's general awareness of their rights at work and whether this had changed since the 2005 Employment Rights at Work (ERWS) survey;
- to determine knowledge about specific rights at work (the National Minimum Wage and holiday entitlement) ;
- to find out which sources of advice people would use to find out about their rights at work;
- to measure the proportion of individuals that have had problems at work in the last five years; and
- to determine how people go about resolving the most serious problems they have had.

The FTWS collected a range of data relating to young workers' use of information and advice in the workplace, although not all of these are reported in the FTWS report. This paper draws on findings set out in the FTWS report (Fevre et al 2009), whilst also reporting findings from analysis of the FTWS data file conducted by Acas' Research and Evaluation Section.

⁸ The survey was commissioned by the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) which in June 2009 merged with the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) to form the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). The FTWS instrument combined two earlier surveys; the Employment Rights at Work Survey, 2005 (ERWS) and the Fair Treatment at Work Pilot Survey, 2005-2006. For details of the research methodology used, see the Survey Report: Fevre, R. Nichols, T. Prior G. and Rutherford, I. (2009) *Fair Treatment at Work Report: Findings from the 2008 survey*. BIS Employment Relations Research Series No 103. Available at <http://www.berr.gov.uk/files/file52809.pdf>

3. SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND ADVICE: AWARENESS AND ATTITUDES

Research findings from the four data sources are synthesised and reported in the following three sections. This first section assesses the level of knowledge held by young workers about sources of information and advice relating to rights at work and examines their potential use of these sources. It then reports data on their awareness of organisations offering advice and information. As a means of gauging their awareness, this initial section reports data detailing young people's responses to 'hypothetical' questions about sources of information and advice that they might potentially use, should they need them. Section four then examines young workers' *actual* experience of problems at work and actions taken in response to problems, and assesses these actions in light of their intended actions described earlier. The next section (section five) goes on to review data relating to young people's attitudes to and awareness of Acas, with a particular focus on the Acas Helpline and trust in Acas. The final section of this report provides conclusions on the implications of the research findings.

3.1 Perceived knowledge of sources of information and advice

Individuals are only able to exercise their employment rights if they are aware that their employer is in breach of the law, and they know where to get information and advice on experiencing a problem relating to their rights at work.⁹

The FTWS found that:

- Young workers aged 16-24 are less likely to say that they feel very well informed or well informed about their rights at work than are workers aged 25 or older (70 per cent compared with 79 per cent);¹⁰
- They are more likely than older workers to feel that they could do with knowing more about their rights (48 per cent as compared to 40 per cent of all workers, and 32 per cent of workers aged 50 years or older);¹¹
- Young workers feel less able to find out about their rights at work than workers across all age groups: 77 per cent of workers aged 16-24 stated that they would know where to find out about their rights at work if they needed to, compared with 85 per cent of all workers in the survey¹²; and
- Workers aged 16-24 are also more likely than older workers to choose a first source of advice or information on the basis that they "didn't know where else to go for advice" (24 per cent compared with 12 per cent of older workers).¹³

The Acas young workers' poll provided further opportunities to explore how young workers might address their need for information on workplace rights. It asked young workers a similar, though not directly comparable, question to that asked in the FTWS: "How confident are you that you would know where to find out about your rights at work

⁹ Casebourne, J. Regan, J. Neathey, F. and Tuley, S. (2006) *Employment Rights at Work – Survey of Employees 2005*, DTI Employment Relations Research Series Report No 51. Available at <http://www.bis.gov.uk/files/file27222.pdf>

¹⁰ Acas analysis of FTWS datafile; Fevre et al (2009) Table B3.4.

¹¹ Fevre et al (2009) Table B3.4.

¹² Fevre et al (2009) Table B4.1.

¹³ Fevre et al (2009) pg 133.

if you needed to?”. Nearly half (47 per cent) described themselves as “very confident”, and another 44 per cent said that they were “quite confident”. At the other end of the scale, only nine per cent were “not at all confident” that they would know where to find out about their rights at work.

In the Acas poll young men were more likely than young women to feel “very confident” that they would know where to find out about their rights at work (53 per cent as compared to 41 per cent); while young women were more likely to say that they were “quite confident” (50 per cent as compared to 39 per cent of the young men in the poll). Similar proportions of male and female respondents were “not at all confident”. Work status also seemed to be a factor in perceived confidence about obtaining information about employment rights: 54 per cent of full-time workers were very confident that that they could access this information as compared to 40 per cent of part-time workers.

3.2 Potential use of sources of information and advice

The Fair Treatment at Work survey¹⁴ asked questions aimed at gauging respondents’ knowledge of sources of information on rights at work. One way that this was done was by asking all survey respondents “Who or where would you go to first in order to get this information?” [about rights at work]. They were then asked a follow-up question, “And assuming you couldn’t get the information you wanted from [original source], how else do you think you might try to get general information about your rights at work?”. A range of sources – both internal and external to the workplace – were categorised.

Young workers were more likely to say that they would use someone in the workplace either as their first port of call or subsequently, than were those aged over 25 (82 per cent compared with 74 per cent). Line managers were the most common potential source of information, mentioned by 44 per cent of young people (but only 24 per cent of older workers).¹⁵

The Acas poll further drilled down on the issue of where (hypothetically) young workers would go to get information or advice on rights at work if they needed it. Young workers were asked: first about people at work; then other sources of information in the workplace; next about someone they know personally outside of work; then external information sources; and finally, about organisations outside of work. Young workers’ anticipated use of each of these sources is examined in the following sub-sections.

Acas poll data indicated that young workers are more likely than older workers to say that they thought they would seek out information or advice from ‘at-work’ sources (mainly line managers or supervisors), but are less likely than older workers to anticipate seeking assistance from external organisations. Other sources that young people anticipated accessing, if needed, included friends and family and the internet (accessed from work, or outside of work).

¹⁴ Fevre et al (2009)

¹⁵ Acas analysis of FTWS datafile.

3.2.1 At-work sources of information and advice

The large majority (84 per cent) of young workers in the Acas poll felt they would go to someone at work for information and advice on work-related issues. Those who indicated that they would seek help at work were asked who they would approach first. Responses are categorised as follows:

- consistent with the FTWS results, around half (49 per cent) would first go to their supervisor or line manager;
- 16 per cent would approach a personnel or Human Resources (HR) manager;
- 14 per cent would go to a senior manager;
- 11 per cent to another colleague; and
- 7 per cent would seek help from a trade union or staff association representative.

The Acas qualitative research found that line managers were seen as variable in what they were able to offer as sources of help and advice in the event of a workplace problem, and they were not always the most suitable person to approach if a problem arose. Much depended on their individual personality and management style. Some employees said their line managers were accessible, approachable, easy to deal with and generally helpful; others had line managers who were more difficult to approach and not always effective at handling problems. There were also differing views about whether line managers could be trusted.

"No, if I was being bullied at work the first person I would go to is our head office and speak to the HR department and discuss the issues with them and if they don't help you, then phone a helpline." [Male 16-19]

"I wouldn't mind going to see a line manager but they might just do you over... I don't know if I would trust someone in the company." [Male 16-19]

"If your line manager was any good then he would probably sort the problem out for you if it's not a serious problem. But if there's confrontation, if you don't get on well then you may have to miss him out completely." [Female 20-25]

Use of at-work sources varied substantially according to the size of employees' workplaces. Generally, those employees working in smaller workplaces had few options for sourcing information or guidance in-house: they could approach a colleague, their immediate superior, or the proprietor of the business. Depending on the culture of their workplace, this might be satisfactory, or it might leave them feeling that they needed outside help: for example, if the problem was too difficult to discuss or resolve with any of these sources, or if they felt the organisation lacked the necessary resources.

"I used to work for a very big company and now I work for a very small company, and now there are not straight policies in place which I think is harder. So if I did have an issue then I would probably need to go outside the organization to find some answers rather than find them internally... It is a very small company and they have one person who deals with HR and she is also the office manager and other roles. And they have a folder in a file about the information that you need to look at. And I am used to coming from a company that has websites and telephone lines and what to do." [Female 20-25]

The Acas poll explored use of other potential sources of information at work. Seven in 10 young workers said that they would use another source at work to get information or advice on their rights at work. The most common source – cited by a quarter (24 per cent) of all respondents and 33 per cent of those who said that they would use another source – was the internet accessed from work. Taking just the forty-four per cent of all respondents with web access in the workplace, 38 per cent said that the internet accessed from work was the source of information that they would go to first and a further 28 per cent of this group would use the work intranet.

Fevre et al (2009) found that young workers are more likely than older workers to find information about specific employment matters by doing a web search.¹⁶ Alongside this, Acas qualitative research indicated that the internet was a primary information source used by employees (of all ages) in tackling problems at work. Young workers interviewed as part of this study described how they viewed the internet as “the first port of call” when seeking information on employment issues:

“I would go and check on line before I spoke to my line manager just to check and find out what my rights are.” [Female 20-25]

“I’d lean more towards the internet. It’s a great tool to find out absolutely anything ... It’s usually the tool I use, it’s the first port of call.” [Female 20-25]

“When we first heard that we were probably going to be made redundant, we were just searching the internet for everything. ... We were scouring the internet for anything we could find.” [Male 20-25]

3.2.2 Sources of assistance outside the workplace

The Acas poll collected in-depth data about young workers’ propensity to use sources of assistance located outside of the workplace. Young workers in the poll were asked if they would go to someone they “know personally outside of work to get information on your rights at work”. Eight in 10 (81 per cent) said that they would do this. When asked who they would approach first, the largest group of these (51 per cent in total) would go to a parent: either a parent who had specialist knowledge (35 per cent) or did not have such knowledge (15 per cent). A further 28 per cent would first seek the help of a friend – most commonly one who they felt had some specialist knowledge - while the remainder would go to another relative (15 per cent), or an acquaintance (7 per cent).¹⁷

Respondents in the Acas young workers’ poll were also asked whether there were any information sources outside of work that they would use if they wanted to find information or advice on their rights. Three-quarters (75 per cent) indicated that they would access these sources. The majority - 90 per cent - of young workers in the poll said that they had access to the internet at home and 51 per cent had internet access via their mobile phone. Only 4 per cent had no internet access at all outside of work. So it is perhaps unsurprising that for those who would use an external information source, the most commonly cited first port of call was the internet (mentioned by 58 per cent). A

¹⁶ Fevre et al (2009) pg 49.

¹⁷ Section 4.2.2 of this report profiles qualitative research showing how employees of all ages with workplace problems will often approach family or friends, and close work colleagues, as the first stage in resolving the problem.

telephone helpline was given as the first place that they would go by 15 per cent of young workers seeking external information sources and a library was cited by 6 per cent. Just 3 per cent would refer to a guidance booklet or publication and 18 per cent mentioned other (unspecified) sources.

The FTWS found that the 16-24 age group were much less likely than older workers to say that an *organisation* outside of work would be their first port of call to obtain information about their rights at work (56 per cent as compared to 91 per cent of older workers).¹⁸ The Acas young workers' poll similarly asked whether respondents would go to "an organisation outside of work", to get information or advice on rights at work if they needed to. Reflecting the FTWS findings, roughly the same proportion of young workers in the Acas survey (61 per cent) stated that they might use such a source. Certain external organisations were cited by respondents, unprompted. Of this group, almost half (49 per cent) said that they would first go to a Citizen's Advice Bureau and nearly a quarter (23 per cent) anticipated first seeking the help of a trade union. Other organisations were cited by small proportions of respondents: a Jobcentre/Jobcentre Plus or benefits office was mentioned by 6 per cent; Acas was cited by 5 per cent; a solicitor by 5 per cent; and another government department (4 per cent). Other organisations mentioned by just a few respondents included Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC); the Employment Tribunal Service; and Connexions.

Several of these organisations were suggested by researchers to qualitative study participants (of all age groups) as possible sources of information and advice; however none was thought to have much relevance in this arena. Directgov was not widely known and among those who had used it, it tended to be seen as too generalist because it covered an exceptionally wide range of topics, though a few knew that it provided links to specialist sources, including Acas. HMRC was believed to be limited to disputes about tax matters and was not an obvious port of call for disputes about any other issues. Jobcentre Plus was associated largely with looking for work and not with employment disputes.

All young workers in the Acas poll who said that they would seek help from an external organisation were asked *how* they would attempt to get that assistance. The largest number either thought that they would go to the organisation concerned and speak to someone face-to-face (42 per cent) or that they would access the organisation's website (40 per cent). Just over a quarter (28 per cent) would make contact via telephone.

3.3 Awareness of organisations offering information and advice

As described above, FTWS data indicates that young workers are significantly less likely than older workers to say they would seek information or advice from an external organisation. To explore this issue further, young workers in the Acas poll were asked whether they had heard of a series of external organisations, including Acas, which could provide assistance in dealing with problems at work. Table 4 summarises their responses, as well as those from the FTWS, although Acas (and the Pay and Employment Rights helpline) were not included in this question in the FTWS.

The FTWS results indicate that young workers were generally less likely to have heard of most of these organisations than older workers. There were some exceptions: young

¹⁸ Acas analysis of FTWS datafile.

workers' awareness of the Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate was equal to that of all workers (around three in ten); and in respect of Directgov, which 60 per cent of young workers knew of - a higher proportion than for the survey as a whole. The FTWS report authors speculate that this higher level of knowledge about Directgov among younger workers relates to them being "more attuned to the internet" (Fevre et al 2009:49). The Acas poll also shows a very high level of stated awareness of Directgov among young workers (87 per cent).

Table 4: Awareness of organisations offering assistance

Source	FTWS*	FTWS [#]	Acas poll
Organisation	% of <u>all</u> workers who had heard of organisation	% of all young workers who had heard of organisation	% of all young workers who had heard of organisation
Citizens' Advice Bureau	96	91	88
Health and Safety Executive (HSE)	88	74	64
DirectGov	57	60	87
Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate	30	30	32
Department of Business Innovation, Skills (BIS)	43	22	26
Acas	not asked	not asked	28
Pay and employment rights helpline	not asked	not asked	27

Sources: Acas young workers' poll 2010. Base: All young workers (n= 577, unweighted); BIS Fair Treatment at Work Survey. *Base: all respondents asked question (n = 2623, unweighted) #Base: all workers aged 16-24 (n=302, unweighted)

Organisations with the highest level of awareness amongst young workers, and workers generally, were Citizens Advice Bureau, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and Directgov. Around nine in ten 16-24 year olds had heard of Citizens' Advice Bureau. The HSE also had high awareness amongst young workers, with around two-thirds to three-quarters saying that they had heard of the organisation. Nearly one third of young workers in both surveys had heard of the Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate; and just over a quarter had heard of each of Acas, the Pay and Employment Rights helpline and BIS. Analysing the Acas poll data from the perspective of those who had experienced problems in the workplace and those who had not, there were few differences in awareness of the different national bodies that might provide support in these cases. The one notable exception was in respect of Acas: whilst only 23 per cent of young workers with no experience of workplace problems had heard of the organisation, 33 per cent of those who had been through a problem in the workplace were aware of Acas.

4. PROBLEMS AT WORK: EXPERIENCE AND RESPONSES

This section of the report profiles research findings indicating the relatively high degree to which young people experience problems at work (*vis a vis* older workers), and the reasons why they are less likely than older workers to take action in response to problems. It then compares intended advice-seeking behaviour with actual behaviours and outlines the sequence of steps taken in the process of resolving problems. Later subsections detail workers' assessments of the advantages and disadvantages of using particular sources of advice and assistance during the problem resolution process.

4.1 Experience of problems at work

The FTWS found that younger workers were more likely than older workers to have experienced a specific problem or problems relating to their employment rights in the last five years. They were also more likely than workers of other ages to report having experienced unfair treatment and discrimination and to mention age as a reason for unfair treatment.¹⁹

Young workers in the Acas poll were asked whether they had ever faced a series of problems at work (see Table 5 for problem areas). Just under half (46 per cent) of respondents had never faced any of the problems listed in the poll. However, the remainder had faced at least one problem and of these, 44 per cent had experienced problems under two or more of the headings given. Ten per cent reported having faced problems under six or more of the categories explored in the poll.

Table 5 reports the proportions of all young workers in the Acas poll who had experienced problems relating to each of these categories. The poll data suggests that the most commonly experienced problems among young workers are those relating to pay, with 24 per cent stating a problem of this nature. Young workers reported facing a range of other problems with employers:

- Nearly a fifth (19 per cent) felt that they had been treated unfairly compared to others in the workplace;
- One in 10 (9 per cent) had been discriminated against at work and 10 per cent had been bullied or harassed;
- Working time issues were cited as problems faced by young workers, including problems relating to: taking breaks at work (18 per cent); the number of hours or days they were required to work (17 per cent); and holiday entitlements (13 per cent);
- 17 per cent said that they had had problems with their line manager and 13 per cent had experienced issues relating to criticisms of the way that they did their work;
- Sickness absence or sick pay problems were cited by 15 per cent of young workers;
- 12 per cent had had difficulties to do with obtaining a formal contract or written terms and conditions; and

¹⁹ Fevre et al (2009) Tables B7.1 and B8.1, pp 117, 101.

- Just over one in 20 (7 per cent) reported problems to do with being unfairly dismissed from a job.

Table 5: The nature of workplace problems experienced by young workers

Problem	% of young workers who had experienced this kind of problem <i>Base: All young workers. n=577 (unweighted)</i>	% most serious issue for young workers experiencing more than one problem <i>Base: All experiencing more than one problem at work. n=219 (unweighted)</i>
Problems to do with pay	24	13
Being treated unfairly compared to others in workplace	19	10
Taking breaks at work	18	9
The number of hours or days required to work	17	7
Difficulties with line manager	17	13
Taking time off sick or sick pay	15	5
Holiday entitlement	13	8
Criticisms about the way you do your work ²⁰	13	1
Obtaining a formal contract or written statement setting out the terms and conditions of job	12	9
Health and safety at work	12	5
Being bullied or harassed at work	10	6
Being discriminated against at work	9	6
Being unfairly dismissed	7	6
Other problem	6	1

Source: Acas young workers' poll 2010

Poll participants who cited problems relating to more than one issue were asked to specify which of these they felt to be the most serious. As Table 5 above shows,

²⁰ This question was only asked in waves 4-5 of the poll (n=231).

responses were fairly evenly distributed across the list of potential areas, with difficulties with a line manager and problems to do with pay being the most likely to be cited.

4.2 Responses to workplace problems

The Employment Act 2008²¹ removed the statutory code on discipline and grievance which set out the processes that employees and employers should follow when dealing with problems in the workplace. Under the new legislation, guidance on appropriate procedures was provided in the *Acas Code of Practice on Disciplinary and Grievance Procedures*²². This advises that an employee with a grievance about their treatment at work should first let the employer know about the nature of that grievance. The research findings reported in this section indicate that most young workers do seek to raise their problem with someone in the workplace, although they appear less likely to do so than older workers.

The FTWS explored in detail how problems in the workplace were resolved, looking at both initial advice and information on the problem and any subsequent actions taken. In terms of the latter, younger workers were considerably less likely than those in older age groups to have taken a series of actions to raise the concern with their employer or to proceed to try to resolve the issue (see Table 6). The only exception here relates to applications to an employment tribunal, where there was no significant difference by age group and where proportions were similar to the Acas poll (3 per cent of young workers in the FTWS had made an employment tribunal application as compared to 4 per cent of respondents to the Acas poll – see Table 7 below).

In all, 27 per cent of young workers had taken *none* of the actions set out in Table 6 as compared to only 17 per cent of those aged 25 or over, indicating that young workers were less likely than older workers to inform the employer of their grievance or to resolve the issue. However, viewing the FTWS findings from another perspective, it was still the case that three-quarters (76 per cent) of young workers had done one or more of the following: trying to resolve the issue informally; putting their concerns in writing; discussing the issue with the employer; and taking part in a formal meeting about the issue.

The FTWS also found that, with the exception of workers in the 25-32 age group, younger workers aged 16-24 were less likely than workers in older age groups to report having a positive resolution outcome of the most serious problem they encountered, and were more likely to report experiencing negative resolution outcomes.²³

²¹ Employment Act 2008 Chapter 24

http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/24/pdfs/ukpga_20080024_en.pdf

²² Acas (2009) *Code of Practice 1 Disciplinary and Grievance Procedures* www.acas.org.uk

²³ Fevre et al (2009) Table B10.2. Positive resolution outcomes include, among others, an employer taking action to address the problem, or the employer and employee coming to a compromise. Negative actions include, among others, the employee leaving the job or being dismissed.

Table 6: Dealing with work problems: FTWS findings

Did you , or anyone acting on your behalf . . .	% 16-24 year olds taking this action	% 25+ year olds taking this action	% all taking this action
<i>Base: All who had experienced a problem at work. n=1,300 (unweighted)</i>			
. . .Try to resolve the issue informally	42	55	52
. . .Put your concerns about the issue in writing to your employer	23	31	29
. . .Discuss the issue that led to the problem with your employer either face-to-face or by telephone	58	68	66
. . .Go to a formal meeting where you and a manager or senior person at the place where you worked sat down together to discuss the issue that led to the problem	21	35	33
. . . Make an application to an employment tribunal about this problem	3	3	3

Source: *Fair Treatment at Work Survey 2008*²⁴

The Acas poll, which had a differently worded set of questions, also suggests that the most common action taken by young workers faced with a problem is that of informing, or attempting to inform, their employer about the issue, as shown in Table 7.

The Acas poll found that young workers are most likely to deal with a work problem by discussing it with their line manager or a senior manager. Nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) of poll participants who had faced a problem had discussed the issue with a supervisor or line manager and nearly half (49 per cent) had done so with a senior manager. In addition, 41 per cent had had a formal meeting with a manager or their employer. Speaking to a human resources or personnel manager was less common – cited by a quarter of respondents – and only one in 10 went to see a union representative.²⁵

²⁴ Acas analysis of FTWS datafile.

²⁵ These results will be influenced by the presence or otherwise of human resources facilities and of trade union representation in the young worker's workplace. However, the poll did not collect information on the availability of such resources due to limited question space.

Table 7: Dealing with work problems: Acas poll

Action taken in relation to most recent work problem	% taking this action
<i>Base: All who had experienced a problem at work. n=301 (unweighted)</i>	
Discussed the problem with a supervisor or line manager	64
Discussed the problem with a senior manager	49
Had a formal meeting with a manager/employer	41
Went to see someone in human resources/personnel	26
Left employer as a result of the problem	18
Brought a formal grievance	12
Went to see your union representative	11
Considered making an application to an employment tribunal	10
Actually made an application to an employment tribunal	4
Other action	11

Source: Acas young workers' poll 2010

Table 7 showed that only 12 per cent of young people had taken action by submitting a formal grievance. One in 10 had considered making an application to an employment tribunal as a result of the issue and 4 per cent had actually done so.

Nearly one fifth of those who had experienced a problem at work (18 per cent) had left the employer as a result of this problem. A total of 17 per cent of young workers who had experienced a problem had taken no action at all in response to that problem. When asked why this was, the majority (62 per cent of those taking no action) said that it was because the problem was not serious enough to warrant any action.

4.2.1 Willingness to deal with workplace problems

The FTWS and Acas young workers' poll data suggested that young employees are relatively proactive in seeking to address workplace problems. This differed somewhat from the findings of the Acas qualitative research, which reported a reluctance to deal with workplace problems among employees of all age groups.

The qualitative research found that several factors mitigate against employees taking action. There was some tendency among employees to downplay problems for fear of attracting attention at a time when there were concerns about job security: if the employee was perceived by managers to be causing trouble by raising the issue, they might be targeted for redundancy if the organisation needed to shed staff. Moreover, many employees gave the impression of not knowing how to handle the problem at first and feeling unsure of where to look for advice.

Acas poll data showed that 18 per cent of young workers had left their jobs as a result of problems experienced at work. The qualitative research offered some explanation for the relatively high level of 'exit' behaviour among young people in response to workplace problems. The research found that young people tended to feel less concerned about jobs than workers in other age groups. In comparison to older workers, they had fewer responsibilities and less to worry about in the short term, especially if they were living at home with parents and did not have high outgoings. This meant that they had lower expectations and needs in relation to work. At the same time they seemed to have greater confidence about finding other work in the event of losing their current job.²⁶

Accordingly, young workers who had encountered a problem at work seemed willing to leave the job rather than tackle the problem, or (hypothetically) considered leaving a job if faced with problems. This was not only because they did not want to deal with the problem, but because they tended not to regard jobs as for the long term and expected little difficulty in finding work elsewhere.

"Once I'm in a full time job I will take it more seriously because I will be relying more on the money. At the minute I can rely on the education maintenance allowance. Once I was in a full time job I would care more..." [Male 16-19]

"I think at the end of the day it was just a . . . bad working experience and am I really that bothered that I want to go back, like? I don't want to go back, I really don't want anything more to do with them" [Female 20-25]

4.2.2 Routes taken to resolve problems

The qualitative research revealed that where workers (across all age groups) did seek to address workplace problems, they typically followed a sequence of steps. They would firstly talk to someone close to let off steam; next, seek information from a third party, online or in person from a union, CAB or solicitor; then approach their employer; and if the issue was still not resolved, ask a third party to intervene. Often employees would resolve their dispute without going through all of these stages, or went through them in a different order.

The FTWS found that, in seeking help to resolve the most serious workplace problem they had encountered, younger workers (aged 16-24) were more likely than workers of other ages to first contact a friend or relative without specialist knowledge (17 per cent compared to 5 per cent of all workers).²⁷ The Acas qualitative research also described how, in the first instance, employees of all age ranges discussed – or anticipated discussing - issues concerning them with family or friends, or close work colleagues, and then came to the view that it was a problem. Generally, the immediate need was to air the problem and get their grievances off their chest; dealing with the emotional component of it meant that they could then tackle the issue in a more rational way and in a calmer frame of mind. These were people they could seek support from, and ask for guidance on sources of help and next steps.

²⁶ It should be noted that this research was conducted in early 2010, when youth unemployment in the UK had not yet reached levels recorded in later years.

²⁷ Fevre et al (2009) pg 129.

*"I'd probably tell my mum and see what she thought and do what she said."
[Female 16-19]*

"Your first port of call is ... a rant to get it off your chest. Rant, advice, action. You don't want to go looking for advice at the Citizens Advice Bureau, or any external party, with anger and frustration because you're never going to get the advice you want. They're just going to tell you to calm down. So the first this is an informal rant, then seek advice." [Female 20-25]

"I always ask other people's advice, i.e. work colleagues, and then I would go online." [Female 20-25]

However whilst these individuals were seen to play a valuable role as sources of sympathy and support, some respondents also said that they tended not be well informed, as they knew little about the employees' organisations and less still about employment laws and rights.

"They won't judge you and if you have done something wrong they will still be on your side." [Female 16-19]

"If I wanted to know more I would ask an older person. ... mum or dad or granddad." [Male 16-19]

"It depends. A lot of the time I like to do my own research. I think I would trust other people for advice if it was kind of professional advice but if you go to mates you just know it's a lot of rubbish they come out with a lot of the time." [Female 20-25]

"One thing you've got to remember is that when you rant to a family member or a friend they're not going to go 'nah I think you're wrong'. They're always going to go 'yeah that's terrible' – it's not really advice, it's just them going 'yeah I like you, we're friends, I think you're right.' That's kind of why you don't seek advice from family. You seek advice externally." [Female 20-25]

After discussing it with someone close, some employees reported going direct to the source of the problem. This generally involved approaching the line manager or boss to register the problem and ask for something to be done. If the manager or boss was perceived as the problem, or part of it, which was sometimes the case, the tendency was to talk first to someone from the HR department (large employer) or a director/proprietor (smaller employers), to make a formal complaint or enquiry.

In parallel with this sequence, respondents described seeking information to arm themselves with the facts about their position, their employer's policies and their own rights. Information sources included those profiled in Section 3.2 - the internet, the employer's intranet (large organisations), the relevant union or professional body representative, the CAB and Acas.

The qualitative research suggested that there was a trajectory or prioritisation in terms of channels and sources of information when employees (of all age groups) used outside sources of information. Typically the behaviour was to use online information first, to

explore the law and their own rights; next, use the telephone to discuss the problem, confirm what they had found on the internet, and get support and information; and last, face-to-face interaction to get into the problem more deeply.

"Once you've sourced externally, you know your rights and you know what you can and can't say. Then you can go back and take up the issue internally with all the ammo that you need from the external sources." [Male 20-25]

"I think I would see that [telephone helpline] as stage two. The internet is stage one and if the information is not there then I would then phone and double check, and level three would be to go and speak to someone face to face." [Female 20-25]

Involving a third party to intervene directly with their employer generally happened only if no other sources had provided the requisite help, or if the problem was so serious that intervention and/or formal legal representation was required. The qualitative research uncovered a range of views relating to both at-work and third party sources, as discussed in the following sections.

4.2.3 Tackling problems: use of at-work information and help

The FTWS found that 72 per cent of respondents sought advice or information from a range of listed sources to help them resolve the most serious work related problem they had encountered.²⁸ The FTWS data indicated that the highest proportion of workers sought information from workplace sources (82 per cent). Workplace sources most likely to be accessed included a manager (38 per cent); a personnel or HR manager (24 per cent); a work colleague (23 per cent) or a workplace union representative (21 per cent); a staff handbook (10 per cent) and a work intranet (4 per cent).²⁹ Workplace sources were chosen as the first point of contact by 71 per cent of respondents.

Respondents in the FTWS were less likely to access sources outside of the workplace (42 per cent). These sources included a trade union (23 per cent) or friends or relatives without specialist knowledge (13 per cent) or with specialist knowledge (11 per cent). A total of 7 per cent of respondents contacted Acas, with 2 per cent of respondents going first to Acas for information and advice. Only 1 per cent of respondents reported doing an internet search to seek information and help.

The FTWS found that the only significant differences in assistance-seeking behaviours relating to age were that younger workers (16-24 years) were less likely to contact a union representative work or trade union than older workers aged 40 or above (10 per cent compared with 25 per cent); and - as noted earlier - younger workers preferred to first contact a friend or relative without specialist knowledge (17 per cent) compared with workers of other ages (5 per cent).

A comparison of workers' intended and actual behaviours in regard to seeking assistance and advice in response to problems indicates a high degree of congruence. Most young workers anticipated that they would seek advice or information from at-work sources, particularly line managers or supervisors. The Acas poll and qualitative research data

²⁸ Fevre et al (2009) pg 126-129.

²⁹ Access to the internet at work was not a code provided in the FTWS survey but may have yielded response if included.

indicated that a majority of young workers did in fact discuss their problem with, or seek advice from, supervisors or line managers. Likewise, young workers were more likely to express a preference for seeking advice from parents or friends, and this was reflected in their actions, in the course of seeking to resolve problems.

However there were some incongruities between workers' intentions and practices. The Acas poll indicated that 23 per cent of young people considered contacting a trade union for information or advice. However the poll data also revealed differences in actual behaviour, with only 11 per cent of young workers reporting that they went to see their union representative in response to their most recent problem. Similarly FTWS data found that 10 per cent of workers aged 16-24 contacted a union to help them resolve their most serious work-related problem.

In addition, the internet was identified as a potential source of information by a substantial proportion of young people and was used, in practice, as a first point of contact for many respondents in the Acas qualitative research. However the FTWS data relating to workers of all ages showed a very low use of the internet as an advice or information source, with only 1 per cent of all workers reporting having accessed the internet outside of work, in response to a problem.

The Acas qualitative research provided further insights into workers' use of advice and information sources in assisting them to resolve work-related problems. As noted above, consistent with the Acas poll data on potential use of such sources (reported in section 3), the qualitative research found that most employees (across all age ranges) tended to use at-work or in-house sources of information and help if they existed. In part, this was because seeking help internally meant tackling the problem without raising the stakes. However, in-house sources were also used widely because employees felt that it was expected. The assumption was that if the dispute worsened and they were seen not to have used the appropriate in-house procedures, this would count against them.

Human Resources departments played a major role in responding to and managing workplace problems encountered by employees in the qualitative study, but again employees were not always keen to use them. In their favour, HR departments and staff were regarded as being generally well informed, particularly about the organisation's policies and procedures. As people, HR staff tended to be seen as approachable and likely to be sympathetic. Some were apparently prepared to play a third party role if the dispute involved a personal falling-out or personality clash with another employee.

Against this there was some concern that HR departments and staff can be close to management; for some, the belief was that when push came to shove the HR department would prioritise the employer's interests over those of employees. They did not entirely trust HR, and would not always see HR as an obvious source of help and advice.

"Some companies I've worked for have had an awful HR Department and you know for a fact that they don't know what they're talking about. They could just feed you misinformation to try and keep you quiet, keep everything on a level ... If you tell 101 workers that they're not going to get any money, they're not going to be very pleased. So the HR Department are not necessarily going to tell you what you need to hear. They're going to tell you what you want to hear, not the truth." [Male 20-25]

In small enterprises, proprietors were another key source of help and advice. Like line managers, their effectiveness in being able to deal with problems depended on their individual style and personality, but also on the balance they achieved between carrying out the work of the organisation and managing staff. Employees in some small organisations gave the impression that their bosses, who were the proprietors of the business, were often too preoccupied to pay full attention to staff concerns, or were too close to the company to see the bigger picture of what was going on, and other perspectives on how problems should be tackled.

Data from the qualitative study indicated that views of union representatives as a third party to help tackle workplace disputes were mixed across all age groups. Some employees felt bound to use them, or at least to try them, because they had paid their subscription, often for a number of years, and a dispute represented a chance to get something back from the union and get their money's worth. Beyond this, unions were believed to be fairly well informed, with some exceptions. There was a feeling that their presence can provide 'muscle' in the event of a dispute: employers will take notice if the union becomes involved and will be more likely to use the correct procedures. For some employees, union representatives were also work colleagues, and so were easy to approach.

"I went to the union rep ... (who is) a colleague, and she works in the same sort of job as me and I asked her for advice one time and that was just like asking any other colleague so it wasn't a big thing for me at all. It was about a holiday dispute I think and she advised me what to do." [Female 20-25]

There were also disadvantages to getting a union representative involved. A few employees who had asked their union to intervene on their behalf had found that their union representative was not fully knowledgeable about employment matters generally or about the specific dispute concerned; this had caused problems in dealing with their employer. There were concerns that unions were almost bound to be partial in tackling a problem: they would make too much of the employee's case, and prompt a confrontation with the employer when a gentler approach might work better. Some also had experience of union representatives, in their role as fellow employees, being indiscreet and telling other staff or management about the problem.

"I am a bit sceptical about the whole union thing as I went to a union rep when I was new in the company and they told the manager that I went to them and so I don't trust them at all." [Female 20-25]

4.2.4 Third party advice and assistance: benefits and disadvantages

The qualitative research found that in some circumstances workers (of all age groups) who had experienced problems at work felt that they had no alternative to using an external organisation or third party in seeking to respond to their problem. Workers tended to use third party sources if in-house sources of help such as line managers were the origin of the problem, or part of it, in which case it would be difficult to discuss the problem internally. In other cases, workers opted for external help where they held concerns that line managers or HR staff might not respect confidentiality, or that colleagues might gossip about the dispute and make the situation public.

Employees perceived three main benefits to using a third party. First, they offered an independent, objective perspective on the problem, unlike anyone close to it. Second, if the third party was a professional or expert in the employment and/or legal fields, then their information was assumed to be accurate, and based on knowledge of employment law and rights, not on hearsay. And importantly, confidentiality was maintained as the third party source had no connection to the employer.

"When you go externally, they're unbiased. They don't need to hide facts."
[Male 20-25]

"There were a hundred and one different stories. But when you go to someone like Acas or the CAB and you tell them what the situation is, they will tell you exactly. They have the knowledge." [Male 20-25]

"I didn't really think of it at first and then I thought they would be unbiased and they would be completely non-judgemental and they would do exactly what they knew they should do." [Female 16-19]

A significant element of this use of different channels was the importance of having access to free help. The more information that could be gleaned without having to pay for it the better, especially for the less well off; this counted against the use of solicitors, and tended to direct people towards CAB, which everyone knew or assumed is free.

Qualitative research indicated that the CAB was almost universally known among workers of all ages and generally perceived as well informed about individual rights across a range of topics, including employment. Experience of using the CAB was typically positive and staff were seen as helpful, authoritative and reassuring. Several respondents had asked CAB to help them draft letters to employers, or to other organisations for non-work problems, and had found them willing and able to write letters that had produced positive results. CAB was also thought to have a certain amount of weight, in that a letter from CAB was likely to elicit a reaction from an employer, and could be persuasive in getting them to deal with a problem.

Less positively, there was some feeling that CAB is a generalist source of help and not a specialist in employment, and so is not necessarily expert in employment matters, unlike some sources, including Acas. In addition, respondents had found that CAB is often busy, which made it difficult to get appointments.

"Citizens Advice, I found them quite blunt and a bit, not necessarily blunt but very formal, because they have got to be haven't they? But they gave me the advice and information we needed which reassured me." [Female 16-19]

Qualitative research respondents raised a number of problems relating to the use of third party organisations more generally. There was some concern that a third party intervening in a dispute did not always understand the workplace culture and consequently got things wrong about the facts of the case. Alternatively a third party might have a vested interest, for example in extending the dispute, at the employee's expense.

Many who had initially contemplated seeking their assistance in resolving workplace problems saw the involvement of a third party as being likely to make the problem seem more serious to the employer. This could raise the stakes, and make the repercussions seem greater, especially if it was not successfully resolved. Work relationships could become strained during and after the dispute resolution process. Ultimately it could leave the employee feeling that they were under more pressure at work.

"I thought, 'I don't want to get anyone else involved' and like, it's already a bigger deal, and I've already got meetings and HR ringing me and letters from the director and stuff, and I just thought for me to go in and ask another person about it and say, they will be just like 'Are you getting a solicitor and is this actually going to court?' or whatever and I couldn't be bothered with the hassle almost." [Female 20-25]

5. EXPLORING ATTITUDES TOWARDS AND AWARENESS OF ACAS

This section provides an analysis of young workers' somewhat variable awareness of Acas and the services it provides, which may in turn be linked to survey data indicating lower levels of trust in Acas among younger people. This is followed by qualitative data exploring workers' perceptions of telephone helplines as a source of support, with a particular focus on views on the Acas Helpline. Research reveals that the Acas Helpline meets respondents' expectations, but that a range of barriers relating to confidence and age are preventing young people from accessing the service.

5.1 Young people's awareness of Acas

Research commissioned by Acas has found that young workers are much less likely than those in older age groups to have heard of Acas. Moreover, even when young workers have heard of Acas, they may see it as a service for older workers, or limited in scope to collective disputes.

The 2008 Acas brand awareness survey indicated that 62 per cent of all workers had previously heard of Acas. Awareness of Acas was strongly associated with age: 87 per cent of those aged 65 and older had heard of Acas, compared with only 14 per cent of 18-24 year olds. In the 2010 Acas poll, this figure was higher, at 28 per cent of 16-24 year olds (as reported in Table 4).³⁰

Those in the 2010 poll of young workers who had heard of Acas were asked a series of questions designed to explore their level of understanding of the services that Acas provides. Only 7 per cent knew "a great deal" about Acas' services and another one in five (21 per cent) knew "a fair amount". Just under half (48 per cent) felt that they knew "a little" about what Acas does and nearly a quarter (23 per cent) indicated that they knew nothing. Young women were twice as likely as young men (32 per cent as compared to 16 per cent) to say that they knew nothing about Acas.

The knowledge of those who said that they had heard of Acas was tested by asking respondents to say whether each of a series of statements about Acas were true or false (they were told at the outset that some of the statements were true and some were false). The correct answers are in bold in Table 8. This indicates that at least six in 10 were correct in their assessment of the accuracy or otherwise of the statements relating to Acas' services. Young people were most likely to correctly say that Acas has a helpline which provides advice on employment rights with nine in 10 replying correctly to this question. The proportions aware of Acas' role in employment tribunal cases and in resolving disputes between employers and trade unions were somewhat lower at around three-quarters.

³⁰ Comparisons of results from the two polls should be undertaken with caution as the 2010 poll of young workers included workers aged 16-17 and was delivered face-to face, while the 2008 poll surveyed workers aged 18 years and older and was conducted via telephone.

Table 8: Knowledge of Acas

Statement about Acas	% True	% False	% Don't know
<i>Base = all who had heard of Acas. n= 156 (unweighted)</i>			
Acas has a helpline which provides advice on employment rights	89	4	7
Acas has a website which provides information on employment matters	85	7	8
Acas can help individuals and employers involved in an employment tribunal case reach agreement	77	13	10
Acas tries to sort out disputes between employers and trade unions	73	16	11
Acas can help job seekers obtain work	28	62	10
Acas manages applications to university courses	28	64	8
Acas has a website where you can complete your tax return online	25	64	11
Acas gets involved in settling disputes between countries	17	72	11

Source: Acas young workers' poll 2010

Taking all of these answers together, 66 per cent of young workers who were aware of Acas gave a correct response to six or more of the above questions, with a quarter getting all the answers right. A comparison of these answers with those to the question "How much do you know about Acas and the services that it supplies?" suggests that there may be little relationship between expressed confidence in knowledge about Acas and the accuracy of that knowledge.

Qualitative research of workers across all age groups found that awareness of Acas was somewhat variable. Acas did not have a high profile generally, and this was especially the case among workers aged 25 or under. Almost all respondents in Scotland had heard of it and knew a little about it; elsewhere many had heard the name but had little idea of its function. Some had not heard of it at all, especially young people. It was sometimes mis-named or mis-remembered as Ucas.

Acas was occasionally mentioned as a source of information and advice by qualitative research participants who had encountered workplace problems, but was not widely known as a resource for individuals and not seen as a likely choice for those seeking help in response to problems. Where Acas had been used, it was seen to have the advantage of having a website which provided easy access to information.

"[If I'd wanted more information] I'd have probably gone to Acas because I wouldn't have had to arrange an appointment. I could just go straight on the website." [Male 16-19]

A few respondents had seen a poster advertising Acas services in their places of work. Several had been on the Acas website, typically looking for information in response to a workplace dispute. Those who had seen the website had either been directed to it by someone with whom they had discussed a work-related problem (a friend or union representative) or found it by entering keywords which described their problem into search engines (e.g. 'redundancy'). Perceptions of the Acas website were generally favourable among young respondents.

"We looked at the website, but by then we'd already sorted it [workplace problem] out. It looked like a pretty helpful site. ... [It] looked quite nice and colourful, whereas Directgov website was quite bland and with legal writing. I think Acas would have been more personal." [Male 20-25]

"It seemed quite a professional organisation when I looked at the website." [Male 16-19]

Acas was known for providing advice on employment matters, and was regarded by some as experts in this field.

"They really know all about legislation and stuff ... depending on whereabouts in the law you stand." [Female 16-19]

"I know that they are there to support employees and that is all I know about them." [Male 16-19]

However, even amongst those who knew a little about it, understanding of Acas' role and activities tended to be limited and often inaccurate. The few study participants who had direct experience of using Acas were better informed, but not always clear about its remit. Many respondents believed its role was entirely to do with arbitrating in major industrial disputes. Others assumed it was a union of some sort, or that it provides a service only for groups of employees in disputes and does not provide services for individual employees or employers. A minority regarded it as a source of generalised legal advice on employment matters.

"I went home and said 'Dad, what's Acas?' and he said 'It's like a union', but it's not." [Female 20-25]

"It is more like a union thing for all workers, that is, for all people who are working in society, if they are treated unfairly or for unfair dismissal then they can go to Acas for back up." [Male 16-19]

"I don't know a lot about them. I wasn't on it [the Acas website] for long. They're just there for advice for people in our situation, people who have lost their jobs or are having disputes with companies." [Male 20-25]

A few under 21 year olds thought that Acas was a service for 'adults' and not for people of their own age, because it is not actively advertised and is not current among their peers: parents talk about it, not young people.. There was other misinformation. Other respondents felt that Acas would not really be interested in individual problems.

"It doesn't sound like it's aimed at our age. It sounds more like it's aimed at more adult people." [Female 16-19]

"Well like your friends don't know about it or anything. I mean I had only heard it from my parents and it seemed like it's nothing our age group really talks about." [Female 16-19]

5.2 Trust in Acas

In addition to having less general awareness of Acas, young workers may also be less likely than older people to say that trust the organisation as a provider of accurate information. However, the Acas young workers' poll shows that young people had high levels of trust in other areas related to Acas.

Respondents in the Acas young workers' poll who had heard of Acas were asked about the extent to which they trusted Acas against a range of criteria. The scale used in these questions was 1 (do not trust Acas at all) to 10 (trust Acas completely). Taking all those giving a score of 6-10 as an indication of trust in Acas, Table 9 indicates that the majority trusted Acas to: provide impartial advice on employment matters; to not unfairly take sides with managers or employees; to seek ways to solve disputes in the workplace; and to provide accurate information on employment matters.

Table 9: Trust in Acas

Proportions trusting Acas to:	Young workers' poll 2010 <i>Base for 2010 poll: All who had heard of Acas = 156 (unweighted)</i>			Acas brand awareness survey 2008	
	Men %	Women %	Total %	Workers 18-24* %	Total# %
Provide impartial advice on employment matters	61	69	64	53	71
Not unfairly take sides with managers or employees	49	61	54	NA	NA
Seek ways to solve disputes in the workplace	60	64	62	51	74
Provide accurate information on employment rights	65	69	67	74	72

Sources: Acas young workers' poll 2010; Awareness of Acas Poll, 2008 (unpublished)

*n=90 (unweighted) 18-24 year olds, 14% of whom had heard of Acas – thus caution should be taken in interpreting these results as cell sizes are small; #n=1105 (unweighted)

Looking across age groups, the 2008 poll found that those aged between 18-24 trusted Acas the least. The proportion of young workers in the 2008 poll who had heard of Acas was small (14 per cent of 18-24 year olds), and thus results relating to this group may not be statistically representative and should be treated with caution.³¹ However, comparison of data from the young workers' poll with that relating to trust among all workers in the 2008 survey indicates lower levels of trust among younger workers. It may be that a lower level awareness of and knowledge about Acas among younger workers means that they are less likely than workers in older age groups to trust Acas.

Table 9 also shows differences in reported trust between men and women in the young workers' poll. In all cases the findings would suggest that young women were slightly more likely to trust Acas than were young men.³² This finding is in contrast to the 2008 poll where – taking all age groups together - women workers tended to be less likely than male workers to trust Acas.

5.3 General attitudes towards telephone helplines as a source of support

Employees (of all age groups) who participated in the Acas qualitative research were asked initially about their use and views of help lines in the resolution of non-work problems. One perceived benefit of using helplines which was voiced by younger people was that there was less anxiety in having a telephone conversation than a face-to-face discussion. However, workers across all age groups criticised helplines in general, saying that: they provided no written record of what was discussed; confidentiality was not assured - there might be others listening in, at home or at work; and responses were often impersonal.

Younger workers in particular felt that they could not talk coherently on the phone and had difficulty explaining what had happened, particularly if the problem was complex.

"If it was a simple question I could just get a yes or no answer, or if I just wanted them to verify something that I'd maybe already knew or I wasn't sure, then I'd ring them. But the more complicated it was, I really wouldn't use the phone. I just would rather speak to someone about it face to face who was actually listening to my problem." [Female 20-25]

Younger people were sometimes reluctant to talk about personal problems on the telephone to strangers. This was exacerbated by operating hours: it could be difficult to call in private if help lines were not open in the evenings or at weekends. Another concern among workers of younger ages was uncertainty about how seriously they would be taken: they expected help lines to be staffed by people who were older, and wanted to feel they could speak to someone of a similar age, who could empathise with them.

"I think you would always want to speak to your own age, like if you were ringing you would want the person on the other end to sound your sort of age." [Female 16-19]

³¹As noted earlier, comparisons of results from the two polls should be undertaken with caution as the 2010 poll of young workers included workers aged 16-17 and was delivered face-to face, while the 2008 poll surveyed workers aged 18 years and older and was conducted via telephone.

³² Small cell counts mean that these findings should only be treated as indicative.

"I would rather go and see people and talk to them. I don't like phones at all. ... You don't phone up someone on the other end of the phone and tell them all your problems. ... You don't know who you're talking to, do you?" [Male 16-19]

5.4 Perceptions of the Acas telephone Helpline

Consistent with the low level of knowledge of Acas and its services, the Acas telephone Helpline was not widely known among qualitative research participants. Many respondents said unprompted that the Helpline needed to be better publicised. Awareness of the Helpline came from the Acas website, union representatives and friends. The majority were unaware of the Helpline, but when told of its existence, many were interested. Those who had seen the Acas website generally had high expectations of the Helpline, as described in this section. This section also profiles findings relating to workers' concerns about using the Helpline, with a focus on factors preventing young workers from accessing the service.

5.4.1 Expectations of the Acas Helpline

Qualitative research participants across all age ranges were told that Acas runs a Helpline, but not given any detail on it. They were then asked what they would expect and want of a service of this type in specific terms. Employees' expectations of the Helpline, in terms of how it should operate, were often in line with what Acas sees as the characteristics of its service, as follows:

- It would be independent of any other body, and not profit-making, enabling it to offer entirely objective advice that was not slanted towards either side in a dispute.
- The service would be confidential in the sense of the employer having no knowledge of the employee contacting Acas.
- Helpline staff would be measured and considered in responding to questions and offering advice, not inclined to rush to a view, and prepared to find out more and return the call with more information if necessary. Staff should be honest and direct, and be willing to make it clear if they felt the employee had a weak case. They would be knowledgeable, authoritative and informed experts on employment law.

"If they are Government funded they are going to have like intelligent people who know what they are doing." [Female 16-19]

- It had to be impartial, in the sense of even-handedness and ultimately accuracy of information, in contrast to some sources they might find on the internet.

"Impartial advice is a big one, so you can maybe see both sides of the story." [Female 20-25]

- Helpline staff would be able to tell callers precisely what their rights and entitlements were in relation to their particular case; what support they might get from other sources; and clear guidance on what to do next. This would provide

employees with material with which to be armed when taking up workplace problems with line managers or HR.

"I think they would be quite friendly and they'd know the experiences you have been through, supportive, give you all the information you need, like advice on how to go about getting things back or who to go to." [Female 16-19]

- Calls would be answered promptly; staff would be approachable and easy to talk to (they would not use jargon or overly technical terms in explanations of legal matters); they would be friendly but with the gravitas to instil confidence; and would be understanding, patient and able to gauge the need for support.

"I'd want to know that they'd tell you the information without it being all technical so that you could understand it." [Female 16-19]

- Several respondents said they would consider using the line if it were free; this was clearly a significant aspect in their assessment of it.

"If it's a free phone line. Because a lot of these help lines can cost you an absolute fortune. Just knowing that you're going to speak to someone that you can get the right information from." [Female 20-25]

Reactions to a brief statement describing the Acas Helpline were generally favourable. The Helpline was described to research participants in terms of its provision of *confidential, independent and impartial advice to assist employees and employers in resolving issues in the workplace*. This description was said by participants to match their expectations of how a Helpline run by Acas should operate. In comparison with other sources of help, qualitative research participants felt that the Helpline came across as more specialised and easier to access than CAB, more trustworthy and reliable than internet sources, less partial and less interventionist than unions and free, unlike solicitors.

5.4.2 Concerns about the Acas Helpline amongst potential users

Alongside these largely positive views, some respondents raised questions and uncertainties about the Acas Helpline. Some of those who associated Acas solely with involvement in mediating in large industrial disputes assumed the Helpline would not be interested in individual problems. Even if it were presented to them as a service for individuals, they still had doubts that it really could deal with their disputes.

There was also some uncertainty about how far Acas would and could go in helping resolve problems. In particular, since Acas was best known for mediating in employment disputes, respondents wondered whether the service involved, or was linked to, intervention by Acas staff on behalf of the caller. Some anticipated Acas effectively taking over the handling of the case and dealing directly with the employer; others imagined it would simply point callers in the direction of information and/or guide them on next steps. Related to this there was concern that as a helpline, it would inevitably be limited in the breadth of help it could give: it might be able to offer information, advice and support, but not the means to resolve a problem entirely.

"You kind of see them as a white knight type of thing who you want to take control and just go 'right sit back and we're going to do this for you'. Reassuring you. Not like 'you've got to do this, you've got to do that'." [Female 20-25]

5.4.3 Why are young people less likely to use the Acas Helpline?

Research participants expressed a range of views relating to differential use of the Acas Helpline by workers of varying ages. Workers in the study aged 25 years or older felt that younger workers are less likely to call the Helpline because they are generally less likely to seek help to resolve workplace problems.

Younger people themselves acknowledged that they would not be keen to call the Helpline, and gave several reasons for this. There was some feeling among 16-21 year old workers that the service was a formal advice line and/or aimed primarily at people in white collar jobs. This tied into general fears outlined above that some young people had about using helplines of any kind for advice and support; they anticipated feeling uncomfortable and tongue-tied.

Younger workers described other factors which might prevent them from accessing the Helpline, many of which were espoused as concerns about using helplines more generally: that Helpline staff will be older than them and won't be on the same wavelength; that the Helpline would not be set up to deal with younger callers and young callers will not be taken seriously; that they will find it difficult to articulate their problem; and that the whole experience will be daunting.

"I don't think I would have the confidence to do it at this age whereas in 30 years' time you wouldn't think twice about it ... I think they take you more serious when you're older as well. Like if I went they probably wouldn't take me seriously and they'd go 'oh she's only 16'." [Female 16-19]

"[It's more likely to be used by] slightly older people than me. People in their late 20s with more experience of work. Most people my age are a bit naïve about work." [Male 16-19]

Young people in the study seemed to perceive Acas as part of the establishment and the authorities, and consequently as not from their world. Some respondents also saw it as a body, and that individuals took a parental role in dealing with callers, which they predictably resisted. These perceptions probably made the Helpline less inviting and appealing to them than it was to older employees.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The research profiled in this report shows that, compared to older workers, young workers are more likely to face work-related problems. However, they are also less likely to feel informed about their rights at work and to know where to find out about their rights, or to seek to resolve problems. These research findings point to a need for greater access to information among younger age groups to provide them with the opportunity to assert their rights at work.

Where young workers *do* seek information and advice, the main sources used are workplace managers, family and friends, and the internet. A key theme emerging from this analysis of research relates to the high degree of engagement with the internet among young workers. While they reported little use of telephone sources of advice, and fairly negative views of telephone helplines in general, young workers were characterised by a high level of internet access and use. Online information sources were popular with younger people, who appeared to be more internet 'savvy' than workers in older age groups.

Younger workers were found to be reluctant to use telephone sources due to concerns about privacy (conversations being overheard) and a lack of confidence in articulating the issues concerning them. It may be easier, less stressful, and more private for a young worker with a problem to seek information from the internet at work, or from their mobile telephone outside of work, than to call a helpline. However, whilst the degree of accessibility to web-based information may encourage use of internet sources, some qualitative research participants raised concerns regarding the quality and accuracy of information found on the internet.

A second theme that emerged from the research related to differential levels of confidence among workers of different ages. Younger workers were shown to lack the confidence to raise and articulate problems with helpline staff, with their employers, or with external support organisations. Older workers were more likely to belong to trade unions and to seek representation from third parties in the resolution of workplace problems. Younger workers were less likely to attempt to resolve workplace problems. As a vulnerable workforce group, they may have lacked the confidence to tackle problems due to fears that this may result in loss of jobs or other sanctions. However, qualitative research revealed that young workers are also less likely to seek to remedy problems – and more likely to exit the organisation - due to weaker attachment to jobs and a high degree of confidence that they will be able to find other work. It should be noted, however, that a young worker's decision to exit the organisation in response to a workplace problem brings with it a number of costs: for the worker concerned (in terms of lost income, and job search costs); for the employing organisation (costs pertaining to scheduling and recruiting replacement staff); and for the economy at large (in terms of reduced productivity).

The qualitative research findings suggested that existing sources of help and information do not entirely fulfil young employee needs. Information sources are seen as unreliable (the internet), generalist (CAB), partial (unions) or expensive (solicitors); and third parties offering intervention – solicitors, unions – are treated with caution because they can be confrontational.

This suggests that there is a gap in current provision of help and advice to deal with workplace problems. This might be filled by an easily-accessed and reliable advice service offering independent, informed, objective specialist employment help alongside the offer of talking through work problems. If it is available as a confidential service and does not come across as partial or interventionist it could fill a significant gap in current provision. Research on the experiences of people who use the Acas Helpline indicates that it generally meets these criteria.³³

Yet the qualitative research identified several barriers that prevented workers from using the Acas Helpline, or using it more. The central problem was a lack of awareness and salience: few people appeared to know of the Helpline, and even those who know of it and/or have used it are not certain of its role and regard it as low profile. There are also problems of inaccurate expectations around the Helpline deriving from misleading perceptions of Acas. There was a feeling that 'it's not for me' because the Acas provenance means the Helpline, like other Acas services, is only for employees acting in groups, not individuals; and because, for under 20 year olds, there was a view that Acas only serves, and is only suited to, older adult employees. For some the Acas name also suggest that involving Acas, even via a helpline, will sometimes escalate the problem, because Acas is associated with large and serious disputes. This means that it is important that Acas communicating effectively with young people about what Acas' true purpose is, to challenge incorrect views that some young people hold which may prevent young people from benefiting from Acas services.

³³ Thornton A. and Fitzgerald N. (2010) *Acas Helpline Evaluation 2009*, Acas Research Report 3/10. Available at www.acas.org.uk/researchpapers

