

Research Paper

Young people's views and experiences on entering the workplace

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This report contains the views of the authors and does not represent the views of the Acas Council. Any errors or inaccuracies are the responsibility of the authors alone.

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Foreword

Concerns about youth unemployment have led to a body of important work seeking solutions to key questions: what employers want from young people in terms of employability skills; how access routes into work for young people can best be structured and improved; and how more employers can be encouraged to engage with young people. There has, however, been less focus on the important issue of employment relations with young people when they enter the workplace and how employers might be supported in making workplaces more receptive to young people to ensure that they can transition successfully into work.

We know that early work experiences are core determinants of career outcomes and that effective employment relations lead to an engaged workforce and the associated benefits of improved performance and productivity. So getting these employment experiences right is critical for young people, employers and the economy as a whole.

To achieve this, we need to understand both what employers need and also what young people themselves are looking for when they enter the world of work. Yet previous Acas research identified a gap in the evidence-base and limited research on young people's own perspectives of how they experience that transition: what worries and excites them; what can demotivate or inspire them.

This exploratory study offers a contribution to filling that gap. In giving voice to the views and experiences of young workers, it finds that – whilst 'young people' are, of course, a very diverse group, entering work through a variety of routes and from a range of backgrounds – there are some common themes that emerge across the board. It also finds, crucially, that getting these issues right or wrong can have a direct effect on the so-called 'psychological contract' between young workers and their employers: employers who get these issues right tend to create a positive sense of loyalty and attachment in their young worker; those who get it wrong can foster negative feelings of disappointment and resentment.

This study therefore provides some valuable insights and helpful pointers for employers for effectively managing young people in the workplace. But more needs to be done – both to address this research gap further and to turn these insights into positive action.

Moving forward, Acas will be looking at ways in which we can provide practical guidance and support to employers to help them implement the lessons that can be drawn from this study. We also hope that interested bodies will take up the challenge of listening to and learning from young people's experiences of their transitions to work, and we welcome discussion with stakeholders.

Our thanks to the Institute for Employment Studies for their work in carrying out this study.

Gill Dix

Head of Strategy, Acas

1 INTRODUCTION

This report summarises the findings of a small-scale exploratory research study on young people entering work¹, carried out in March and April 2013. The main aim of this study was to gather data directly from young workers to inform the development of Acas guidance for employers on employing young workers and those with relatively limited labour market experience. It is based on qualitative data exploring the views and experiences of the employment relationship amongst young people in Great Britain.

Acas has carried out previous work looking at young people's expectations of work, the challenges they face in starting work, and the means by which their transitions into the workplace can be improved (Oxenbridge and Evesson, 2012²). That research found much available material on employers' views of the skills required by young people entering the workplace, but found that there was a lack of information and some significant gaps in the literature in relation to both:

- employer strategies for easing young workers into first jobs
- young adults' perceptions and thoughts about the journey into work, their expectations of jobs and employment prior to obtaining work, and how young people experience working life in their first jobs and early employment.

Acas has also found, in earlier work (Oxenbridge, S. and Neathey, F. 2012³), that young workers (aged 16-24) are more likely to face problems at work but less likely than older workers to take actions to resolve workplace problems (due, for example, to lacking the confidence or knowledge on how to articulate their problems or seek advice within the workplace), and are more likely to respond to problems by leaving jobs.

Though small in scale, this study provides some new insights into young people's expectations and experiences of working life and the employment relationship, and provides some corresponding pointers for employers on strategies for effectively managing young people in the workplace.

1.1 Research questions

The approach we took was based on an interest in the formation of the 'psychological contract' between young workers and their employers: the implicit and explicit reciprocal *expectations* and *obligations* that individuals have of both

¹ According to Eurofound, Dublin, the definition of a young worker depends on the policy context: EU legislation aiming to protect young workers defines a young worker as under the age of 18, while statistics cover the 15-24-year age group and EU policy initiatives aimed at young workers can be broader, covering workers up to the age of 30 (European Industrial Relations Dictionary). The research project reported on here involved workers in the age range of 19 to 24, see section 1.2 below.

² Oxenbridge, S. and Evesson, J. (2012) *Young people entering work: A review of the research*, Acas Research Paper 18/12 (www.acas.org.uk/researchpapers).

³ Oxenbridge, S. and Neathey, F. (2012) *Young people's awareness and use of sources of advice and information on problems and rights at work*, Acas Research Paper 19/12 (www.acas.org.uk/researchpapers).

themselves and their employers pre- and post- job entry. It is these, unwritten, elements of the employment contract that potentially create the greatest challenges for both employees and employers in establishing the boundaries of behaviour and responsibilities for both parties and the mutuality of the relationship. These challenges are likely to be greater for those with less work experience.

In order to explore these issues, we carried out a mixture of focus groups and individual face-to-face interviews with young people aged between 19 and 24, asking them about their general background, their education, their route into the labour market, and their expectations and experiences in areas such as pay, working conditions, skills development, fair treatment, and personal and social development, in addition to details of support received, any problems experienced, and how these were tackled.

In these focus groups and interviews, we attempted to address the following questions:

- What do young people anticipate about the employment relationship prior to obtaining employment?
- What are their actual experiences of the relationship once they are in work?
- What types of issues and problems do young people face at work? What actions are young people likely to take to resolve these problems and how do employers respond?
- How can employers ensure that young people are given the support necessary to enable them to integrate fully and effectively into the workplace culture, and to ensure that young people can, if necessary, tackle any problems that they may encounter at work, in order to make the employment relationship mutually effective and beneficial?
- What can policymakers and employers do to improve the transitions of young people into working life through effective management at the workplace?

The discussion guide for these interviews and focus groups is contained in the Appendix.

1.2 Profile of respondents

We spoke to a total of 18 young people between the ages of 19 and 24. We conducted two focus groups, one with three respondents, and another with five, with the remainder taking part through individual interviews. Of these, four were interviewed over the telephone, with the rest taking part in person. The research was carried out during March and April 2013. Details of the sample are given in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Details of the sample (18 individuals)

Gender	
Female	12
Male	6
Ethnicity*	
White	9
BME	5
Education level	
Educated to GCSE standard	7
Education to A-level standard	9
University graduates	2
Sector/area working/have worked in	
Retail	7
Care sector/for the health service	4
Universities	2
Warehousing	1
Police force	1
Broadcasting media	1
Local government	1
Manual labour	1
Age at time of interview/focus group	
19	2
20	5
21	3
22	3
23	3
24	2

*We did not ask for the ethnicity of the four participants interviewed by telephone.

The sample provides a small cross section of young people aged 19-24. Those interviewed had a relatively wide range of labour market experiences. Among this group there were some differences, as to be expected, in terms of expectations, job content, career prospects and in some cases treatment by superiors, between those with relatively low levels of skills and qualifications, and those with high levels of qualifications, including university or college degrees. For example, we found that, in general, those with lower levels of skills and qualifications had lower expectations in terms of working conditions, training, promotion and career development than those with higher levels of skills and qualifications. It should be

noted, then, that the 'graduate/non-graduate' divide is likely to play a role in the differing experiences of young people on entering the workplace, as is, linked to this, the route of the young person into the labour market. However, our research sample only contains two graduates (see Table 1 above), making it difficult to draw any firm conclusions about this factor from this exploratory research.

Nevertheless, most of the interviewees had worked in more than one job, especially if part-time work is included. Therefore, although issues such as level of qualification and route into work did appear to play a role in shaping work experiences, we found that there were many common expectations and experiences of work across this small sample, as well as common themes of reflection amongst participants as to how employers might effectively approach the task of easing young people's transitions to the workplace through effective management strategies.

Overall, in selecting participants, we prioritised those with permanent full-time work, but we also heard many accounts of part-time and temporary work, which are an increasingly prominent feature of the UK labour market at the time of writing, particularly in the case of young people⁴.

It should also be noted that the interviews took place in a time of economic uncertainty and high youth unemployment, which might have influenced the responses from the young people interviewed for this study.

⁴ IPPR (2010) *Trends in part-time and temporary work*; ONS (2013) *Statistical bulletin: Labour Market Statistics*, February 2013

2 EXPECTATIONS OF WORK

For the young people who took part in this research project, one factor in the formation of the 'psychological contract' with their employer was the way in which their pre-employment expectations were either met by, or contrasted with, their experiences on entering the workplace. It can, however, be difficult for young people to have realistic expectations about work when they have little or no experience of what it is like to be in a workplace – and, indeed, many of the participants in this research confirmed that it was difficult for them to imagine the detail of how the job would be and what they would be doing. One interviewee noted:

'I don't know what I was expecting because it was my first job. I couldn't imagine what it would be like, but I didn't expect to be doing as much as I am.'

Another interviewee, working in retail, reported being rather overwhelmed at first, but soon getting to grips with the job:

'It's quite overwhelming, the first couple of weeks, when you have to remember where everything is and what to do. It does click after a while, though.'

Nevertheless, many of our interviewees said that the job that they took was as they expected it to be.

For those whose experiences differed from their expectations, some did so in a positive way. For example, for some, their initial expectations in terms of type of job and degree of control over choice of job were exceeded. One said that her warehouse role exceeded her expectations in relation to promotion, content of tasks and levels of responsibility, in that she was quickly transferred to other parts of that company's operations and enjoyed greater responsibility in the work she was given, which also resulted in higher pay than initially agreed. Another was pleased to have applied for a job as a checkout assistant, but to have been given a job restocking the fresh produce section in the same supermarket.

Conversely, for one interviewee, on a graduate scheme, her actual experience of the job fell below her initial expectations in terms of support, development and encouragement. She had taken on the role with little prior experience and found that she was moved from being observed, to solitary working, with little transitional support. Overall, the challenges of the job exceeded her expectations; which in turn fed into a sense of being undervalued.

The experiences of other interviewees, who were undertaking apprenticeships in business administration, also indicated that work experience, or a lack of it, can influence expectations of employment. One interviewee described how she was initially reluctant to pursue a career in business administration, in part due to being unsure and sceptical about the prospect of office work. With no prior knowledge of the sector, or of any type of work, it was difficult for her to form impressions about the job before starting. She eventually decided to take the apprenticeship, however, and when interviewed was extremely positive (and surprised) about her experiences there. By way of contrast, another interviewee had gained relevant work experience during her summer holidays as an A-level

student, which she reflected had enabled her to sample the office environment and prepared her for the general expectations around conduct and appearance that are usual in such workplaces.

The data in this section suggests that young people often had some expectations about their job before it began, although these were not always realistic. In general, those with lower levels of skills and qualifications tended to have lower expectations concerning issues such as job content, degree of control over tasks, support and promotion, while those with higher levels of skills and qualifications tended to have higher expectations in these areas, in addition to specific expectations in terms of career development and feeling valued. When the young people started in their jobs, reality often differed from many of these expectations, and this impacted on their view of their job, their employer and the employment relationship.

Given the fact that expectations are likely to differ from experience, especially for those with little or no previous experience of work, the impact that this difference can have on the 'psychological contract' suggests that – in addition to taking steps to help young people adapt to the workplace when they start a job (see section 3 below) – it can be beneficial for employers to give as much information as possible to young people even before they start their job, in order to give them a realistic picture of the workplace they will be entering. When given at as early a stage as possible, practical guidance in areas such as general employment rights, tax, pay, working time, breaks, working conditions, performance, duties, probation and appraisal, before a young person joins the workforce, may help avoid misplaced expectations and disappointment. These issues are explored later in the report.

3 ADAPTING TO THE JOB AND THE CULTURE OF A WORKPLACE

Starting a new job can be a challenging experience for many people. For young people entering the labour market for the first time, or who have limited experience of work, working out how to fit in to a workplace can be a particularly difficult challenge.

Factors contributing to the culture of a workplace will include a range of both written and unwritten codes. Most workplaces will have written terms and conditions which cover issues such as taking breaks, starting and finishing times, and line manager supervision arrangements. However, there are also a range of unwritten rules in a workplace which can include, for example, implicit codes of conduct governing interpersonal demeanour, relations with colleagues and managers, dress and language. Even individuals with relatively substantial work experience will take some time to adapt to the specific culture and unwritten codes of a new workplace. For those with little employment experience and unaccustomed to a working environment, recognising relatively intangible factors such as these can be especially difficult.

How individuals are expected to dress in the workplace is an area that attracted considerable discussion among those individuals interviewed for this study. For example, one young woman described some initial concerns about how she would fit in to her workplace:

'I thought it would be difficult because I'm younger and dress differently, talk differently, but it's been fine. When I started, I never used to say anything, but I get on with everyone now. My manager warned me about a few things, which really helped.'

It is notable here that the guidance from her manager was helpful, but was only available once the job was started and was perhaps not given as early on in the employment as it could have been.

Other participants expected a smart dress code to be enforced, and also only realised that the policy was more relaxed once they started work. This experience may be common to many people starting work in a new workplace, not just young people, although we are not aware of specific research on this topic. However, the young people we interviewed did appear to be particularly lacking in confidence about appropriate dress and/or were especially concerned about abandoning an expected formal dress code. One interviewee said that she took a few weeks to be comfortable enough to wear more casual attire, despite seeing colleagues doing the same every day. Nevertheless, this was not a universal experience, as another interviewee, who also initially expected to dress more formally, described how she abandoned this idea on the first day after seeing colleagues dressed more informally.

There was also some discussion amongst participants about language customs in the workplace, with some of the young people we interviewed remarking that only after starting work did they recognise that colleagues cannot always be addressed in the same way as peers. One interviewee told how a previous job in a call-centre had made him appreciate the need to adapt his speech according to the situation, so that in his current job he had made a conscious effort to modify

his language to ensure both that co-workers would understand him and that he would not be considered rude. As he put it:

'I had to tone down my slang.'

3.1 Relations with colleagues

Interviewees for this research did not, in general, recall expecting any significant difficulties related to how they were going to get on with co-workers. Overall, this was also not perceived as an area in which challenges or problems had been encountered, although in some cases this was because initial concerns over integration into the workplace were assuaged by the efforts of colleagues.

For some interviewees, relations with colleagues turned out to be much better than originally expected. For example, one interviewee, employed on a business administration apprenticeship with the NHS, said that her expectations in terms of how well she got on with her colleagues were significantly exceeded. Although she had initially found the prospect of working in an office environment thoroughly unappealing, she was pleasantly surprised at how office relations turned out:

'I thought it would be bitchy, but everyone is really nice. They introduced me to everyone and made sure I was settled in. I'm the youngest there, and the newest, so they look after me. I thought people might take the mick and tell me what to do, but they make me feel comfortable.'

While this interviewee's initial reservations must be seen in the context of her reservations about the job itself, the fact that staff had made an effort to welcome her seems to have been important in helping her to settle in.

Another interviewee had worked as a shop assistant at a health food store, at which she found that most other employees were 'hippies'. She expected at first that she would have to become 'a bit more like them' in order to fit in, and spoke of feeling the need to 'seem interesting'. However, when it turned out that everyone was amicable to her; she quickly understood that her own appearance and personality was not a problem.

A further interviewee working in retail said that all of her colleagues were very friendly and welcoming, and mostly in the same age group, which meant that she enjoyed her work. However, she had also had some difficulty at first in knowing how to interpret her colleagues' behaviour:

'The first couple of weeks were a bit intimidating, as people are quite extrovert, but after that, things were fine. Everyone is really friendly and I can ask them anything.'

This interviewee also noted that because the sales staff were working on the basis of commission, this could lead to minor disagreements between staff about who should serve which customer and receive the commission; but, on the whole, she found that these issues were resolved relatively easily and she did not feel that this was a problem.

In this section, we have seen that, while young people entering a new workplace may have initial concerns about integrating with fellow employees, those in our sample reported no particular difficulties once they had started work. The fact that many recognised the attitude and efforts of their colleagues in helping them overcome initial anxieties and to feel comfortable in the workplace suggests the value of employers creating a welcoming and reassuring environment in the workplace to help young workers settle in to a job.

3.2 Relations with managers

Learning to work in a hierarchy, and specifically relating to 'senior' or more 'junior' colleagues, are all important features of working life, although clearly the 'hierarchical nature' of organisations will differ dramatically depending on workplace culture. None of the young people in this study considered that they had any problems in relation to taking direction and reporting to managers. However, some reported experiencing what they perceived as unfair treatment, a lack of communication, unclear or conflicting instructions, and a lack of support from senior staff, while others reported experiences of what they regarded as much more positive treatment.

One of the interviewees who spoke positively about their managers at work was employed as an outreach worker by her university. This interviewee commented that while her boss expected staff to use their initiative, support was always available when needed. Moreover, she appreciated the fact that she received regular feedback and that this was always given in a constructive manner. Another interviewee, who was undertaking a business administration apprenticeship, reflected that her close relationship with her manager was pivotal in convincing her that this career path could suit her, despite previously having doubts about working in that field.

An interviewee working in retail also spoke very positively about her manager's flexible but firm style and his general approachability:

'My manager speaks to us as a friend, but he's a good boss too. If you're late, he's fine with it, but if you're late three times, he'll take you aside and talk to you about it. I speak to my manager more as a friend than a manager – I find it easy to tell him about problems or issues. It's quite relaxed.'

In each of these examples, the positive relationship with the manager increased the individual's sense of attachment and loyalty to their workplace, particularly where the initial expectations of treatment at work had been relatively low.

However, other young people in the study had more negative experiences and described complaints about managers they had encountered. In almost all cases these negative experiences related to communication from management within the workplace. The complaints ranged from perceptions of generally poor communication – for example, one interviewee who had worked as a shop assistant claimed that communication from managers to staff was always poor, with employees usually the last to hear news of changes in workplace policy and procedure – to more specific experiences of conflicting, inconsistent or confusing instructions from management.

One interviewee, working in a catering role in a department store, said that conflicting orders from different people above him in the hierarchy could leave him confused when he was simply trying to follow orders, as his availability would sometimes not be confirmed before he was delegated to different duties. This treatment resulted in frustration for this individual and, in time, contributed to a sense of distance from the workplace.

Another interviewee recalled a previous job as a sales assistant in a health store, which was run as a co-operative, so there were several people in equal positions of authority. She was sometimes given different orders by different superiors, such that it was difficult to know the correct course of action as none of these senior colleagues was officially ranked above another. The issue of the unclear command structure occasionally erupted into overt disputes conducted openly on the business premises, making her feel uncomfortable in the workplace and also undermining her perception of the authority of her employer.

Other participants working in retail also noted that confusion arising from orders issued by multiple superiors made their job difficult, but in one case it was recounted that even a single manager caused problems of this nature:

'My manager said that when I'm on the till, ring the bell when it's full. I rang it when it was full and nobody came. I waited two hours and did it again. She came down and started having a massive go at me! I was only ringing the bell as she said... They take things out on me because I'm the new guy.'

For this interviewee, there was moreover a perception that the treatment deemed to be unfair came about essentially on the basis that he was young, inexperienced and had no power and authority in the organisation.

A further participant, who had also worked in retail, recalled occasions when she felt confused and belittled as a result of what she regarded as confusing management instruction. The store had company fleeces which were intended for staff to wear during colder days and, as she was working on the cash register situated close to the entrance door, she therefore expected to be able to wear one when operating the till throughout the winter. She was, however, denied permission by managers who objected on the grounds that it made her look scruffy, which left her frustrated as she knew her employer had warm clothing which she felt should have been made available to her.

Instances of rules being broken arbitrarily, or promises not being kept, were also recounted by other interviewees and these, again, were clearly experienced as unfair and as demonstrating the lack of power that the young individual had in the workplace, particularly when they were new to the job. For example, one interviewee claimed that rules surrounding working hours and break allowances were broken without explanation:

'There was an argument the other week. I was supposed to start at 1pm, but I turned up at 12.30. The rules at my work are that if you come in early, you can have a break. I came in early and asked for a break, and they said that I couldn't have it today, but maybe tomorrow. I asked the next day and she said why do you think I owe you a break? I said because I came in early, and she said that's your problem, go back on the till.'

A further type of negative experience was described by one interviewee on a graduate programme, who expressed dissatisfaction with supervision arrangements in her post. She had participated in numerous placements during her first six months and, while there had been an overall manager throughout this time, in each placement she had been under the direct management of a different individual and this had left her feeling unsupported and undervalued on the whole. She felt that as a young person entering a new role, it would have been better for her if communication between her managers and the co-ordination of her training programme had been clearer.

Overall, these experiences show the effect that treatment by managers, and in particular management support, or lack of it, can have on young people at work. In those instances where the participants felt supported by their superiors and valued by the organisation, this was experienced as having a positive impact on their attachment to their workplace and their overall loyalty to the organisation for which they worked. Conversely, in those instances where participants felt they were given confusing or conflicting instructions, or otherwise felt treated unfairly on the basis of being new and inexperienced, this tended to have the opposite effect of disillusioning and distancing those young workers, not least because they felt unable to challenge such behaviour.

This suggests that establishing a clear chain of command, providing clear and effective communication channels, encouraging questions and providing information and reassurance about how to voice concerns, will all benefit inexperienced workers who are new to the workplace and improve their sense of attachment to an organisation.

3.3 Mentoring and buddying

In addition to support from superiors, providing a designated 'buddy' or mentor in the workplace, to whom a new individual can turn to answer questions and for support, is a recognised practice in many organisations, and particularly those offering apprenticeships. Interviewees were therefore asked specifically about their experiences in this regard, although few had had experience of an organised buddying or mentoring relationship.

One interviewee who was undertaking an apprenticeship, where the same college acted as both employer and training provider, said that she was assigned a mentor but that the mentor was based in another office and was engaged in a different area of work. This meant that the mentor was not always available when needed, so that when the interviewee's line manager was not at work there could be no point of contact for her if she had any queries. Moreover, there were occasions when the mentor, even when available, was unable to answer her questions as there was simply not enough overlap between their work areas. This led to the interviewee experiencing difficulties in responding to customer enquiries.

Other participants reflected that, although they had not been designated a formal buddy or mentor, they had experienced benefits from having colleagues, who were not superiors, to turn to informally. One interviewee, working in retail, told how she had a short induction followed by a period of shadowing a colleague. She also felt she could ask any of her colleagues if there was an issue with which she needed help, and this allowed her to feel adequately supported as all her

colleagues were very approachable. Another interviewee considered that she had been fortunate in beginning her job in a warehouse at the same time as two others who had previously held similar jobs. This meant she was able to consult these other newcomers for help, which gave her a boost in that she was able to feel secure and supported at the workplace by aligning herself with peers who had more experience than she did.

These experiences suggest that support from buddies and mentors, even where informal, can be valuable in helping young people to feel comfortable in the workplace and to boost their confidence in terms of both learning the job and adapting to the workplace culture. However, the evidence implies that employers should also ensure that any buddy or mentor is both suitably experienced to be able to constructively help the young worker, and also that they will be available when required or that restrictions on availability should be clearly communicated and explained to the young person.

3.4 Induction

Most interviewees had been given some kind of induction, although there was variation in the formality, structure and timing of these. As with the related themes above, some had positive experiences in this regard and felt that their induction was beneficial in helping them adapt to both their job and the workplace culture. Others, however, had more negative experiences and reflected that more could have been done to help them adapt more quickly.

Of those who had the more positive experiences, one interviewee told how she was appointed to a position as a pharmacy assistant as a direct replacement for an outgoing member of staff. There was an overlap period when both worked together, which provided an opportunity for the role to be explained by the colleague that was leaving. She reflected that this arrangement had enabled her to enter the job with a realistic idea of what to expect.

Another interviewee recalled that in his first job, as a labourer on a construction site, he was introduced during the first week to all colleagues, each of whom explained their specialist role. This made him feel comfortable in approaching fellow staff, despite being a newcomer within a team that had worked together on multiple projects. He also reflected that it had been helpful for him to join this team at the beginning of that particular job, and work with them until completion, which helped to improve his wider understanding of the business' operations. Overall, he considered that these factors meant that he found his time in that post more rewarding.

A more negative experience was recalled by one interviewee who had been offered an apprenticeship at a college where she had previously been a student. All her other co-learners were working in other organisations and, although she received an induction, it was not given until two months after starting work as they were only held at fixed times twice per year. While she found the induction helpful, she considered that it would have been better to have it at the start of her employment and that there had been a misplaced assumption by her employer that she was familiar enough with college systems and processes due to her background as a student there. She also told how, by the time she was given the induction, she already knew most of what was covered, as she had eventually

picked most of it up as she went along. As a result, the induction was less helpful than it would have been at the outset.

The findings reported in this section suggest that induction is generally found to be helpful by young people in learning the job and adapting to the workplace. The opportunity to meet colleagues, learn procedures and ask questions makes them feel more comfortable and improves their sense of attachment to the workplace. Inductions can be particularly beneficial if they introduce the young workers to a 'holistic' understanding of the organisation, beyond just the young person's own role. Although it may seem obvious, it should also be noted that the experiences of the participants in this study suggest that inductions must be timely to be most effective, and are best delivered very soon after an employee begins a new role.

3.5 Performance management and feedback

Young employees may need more careful monitoring and feedback during their initial time at work, in order to help, support and guide them and enable them to perform effectively. The expectations and experiences of the participants in this study varied substantially with regard to the support they had received in this regard, owing perhaps to the wide variety of occupations and sectors in which they had worked, although there were also differences between those who had worked in the same sector.

It was generally agreed by participants, however, that constructive criticism was crucial and this had been welcomed by those participants who had received it. A business administration apprentice, for example, was happy with how her feedback had been handled:

'People check your work before it gets sent off. If you make mistakes, they point out where you've gone wrong. They're not horrible though, they show you how to do it right. It's good, the way that they criticise you.'

Another interviewee, working in retail, described how during a three-month probation all salespeople had regular performance assessments based on observation, and that many people did not make it through this period.

'You're being watched like a hawk. You've got to remember so much – there's no room for slacking. If you're not on top of things, you won't get through the probation.'

This interviewee was happy with this situation, saying that she liked to know how she was performing, that the close attention paid to her work was appropriate and that the constructive criticism could be motivational.

Overall, the experiences and views of the young people in this study suggest that if employers provide support and guidance, in terms of formal and informal assessment, constructive criticism and frequent meetings with managers, this will help young people to perform well and enable young people to discuss any issues they may have. Our research suggests that such support is generally welcomed by young people and, indeed, seen by them as an important part of their adaptation to working life, so that employers who take the time to do this can expect not only better performing young workers but also to foster a positive sense of attachment and commitment amongst their young recruits.

4 WORKING CONDITIONS

Working conditions are an important part of any individuals' experiences at work. Issues such as pay, working time, rest breaks, training, health and safety, work-life balance and career development play a significant role in shaping the experience of employees at work.

The young participants in this study were asked about various aspects of their working conditions, including whether the working conditions in their jobs had matched their general expectations and how this affected their experience of the employment relationship and their sense of attachment to the workplace. In general, participants felt that working conditions had met their expectations and that the tasks they performed at work were as they had envisaged. However, even within that context, some interesting observations arise from some of the accounts that were recounted in connection with this theme, from which some lessons and policy indications can be drawn.

4.1 Job autonomy

Overall, it is perhaps to be expected that young people with limited work experience would generally have lower levels of autonomy at work than colleagues with more experience. Among the participants in this study, job content and the level of autonomy varied considerably, partly according to type of job and sector, although even within some sectors there was some considerable variation. Levels of satisfaction with autonomy and task variation also varied according to individual preference. For example, among the interviewees working in retail, one individual recalled that she was often moved around between tasks, which she found annoying. Another in the same situation, however, found that she enjoyed the 'change of scenery'.

One interviewee who had applied for a post as a warehouse operative found that, to begin with, her duties were consistent with expectations. However, she was soon moved into other departments of the workplace, where she worked on tasks of greater responsibility. She told how she was pleased to take on this work, which she found more interesting. Overall, her experience exceeded her expectations in this regard and she enjoyed the fact that, within the organisation, she was never in one place long enough to become bored with it.

Another interviewee, working in domiciliary care, recalled how her study of the field before finding a job, along with her induction programme, which included a month of shadowing more experienced colleagues, prepared her well to expect to work independently. Conversely, a graduate trainee who was interviewed said that, whilst generally happy with the flexibility she enjoyed, she was surprised at the level of bureaucracy involved, which she sometimes found to be overly restricting.

In terms of drawing lessons from this spectrum of responses, it would seem logical to infer that jobs with initial induction or training may create more realistic expectations of the level of autonomy and variation within a role.

4.2 Pay and Working Time

Overall, interviewees reported no problems with their pay, with rates being agreed prior to starting work. However, one interviewee expressed surprise that she had been taxed. Her situation was somewhat ambiguous as she started a full-time role halfway through the tax year, and had spent much of the previous 12 months out of the country, and she told how she would have liked more guidance on how her previous employment and travels would affect her take home pay.

Although this interviewee's situation was perhaps not typical, her example can serve as an indication that young people, and especially first-time workers, cannot necessarily be expected to understand how their pay will be taxed, or even that the gross rate of pay they may have seen advertised, or stated in their contract of employment, will not necessarily be their take-home pay. This is therefore an issue that could usefully be explained to young people by employers and managers, to avoid misunderstandings and potential disappointment with regard to what more experienced workers can be expected to know are the usual deductions from pay.

Working hours had caused some problems for some of the young people taking part in the study, with perceived inconsistency in terms of the hours that their employers offered or required being the main concern.

In some cases, unexpected changes to shifts and to the amount of working hours that were available caused frustration. One interviewee had worked part-time stacking shelves at a supermarket. Her contract was for 20 hours per week and she had expected that she would always work the hours that she was initially given. The job initially met her expectations in this regard; however, a few months later management altered her shifts so that she was working late into the evening. She subsequently discovered that her contract did not guarantee set times within the 20 hours, but she felt let down that she had not at least been informed that working later hours was a possibility when taking the job, so that she could have anticipated that her hours might change.

Another interviewee, working in retail, reported that she would be sent home if the shop was not busy. She found this frustrating, not only as it meant that she would lose money, but also because she felt that she had not been made aware that this could happen when she first joined.

Such experiences of scarce or irregular hours were not confined to jobs without training, as similar problems were experienced by those with qualifications as well as those with low levels of qualifications. One interviewee, who had completed two years of health and social care at college, gaining an NVQ, found work immediately in a domiciliary care role. She expected to work around 25 hours per week, but told of her frustration when she ended up working an average of one hour per day, despite receiving more work to begin with. Another interviewee said that when he was undertaking a web design apprenticeship the hours changed daily, with no advance notice ahead of the previous day. Again, this young person had expected that the apprenticeship would entail a consistent work pattern along with a structured training framework. Both of these young people told how they had expected to be taken seriously as a result of their commitment to working in these sectors, but that the unexpected irregularity in

their working hours left them feeling disappointed and not valued by their employer.

Conversely, several other participants described their frustration when they felt they had been forced to remain at work even while there was no work to be done, similarly recounting that this was not something that they had expected.

As well as suggesting the importance of a clear communication and transparency of terms and conditions relating to working hours, of notifying workers of any changes as far in advance as possible, and of explaining the reasoning for such changes, these accounts suggest also that, when taking on young workers, employers should be aware that young people can not always be expected to understand that it is important to read and understand all the terms of their contract, including those relating to working hours. Given that unexpected changes in working hours can have a negative impact on young people's sense of loyalty to their employer, this suggests that employers should consider the value of both ensuring at an early stage that young workers understand their terms and conditions of employment, and ensuring that managers clearly communicate what employees can expect in terms of working time patterns.

4.3 Opportunities for training

Expectations of training opportunities among our interviewees varied substantially. Many were working or had worked in relatively low-skilled jobs where training was not expected to be a major feature and where no mention of training had been made at application or interview stage. When the provision of training exceeded expectations in these instances this had a positive impact on how the employee felt about their workplace.

For example, one participant, who was undertaking a business administration apprenticeship, described how she was pleasantly surprised at the range of training options her employer offered her, and particularly how she enjoyed the freedom to choose courses as she saw fit:

'Didn't expect so much training, but it's been good. If I go out for training, I don't have to make up the time. I choose my own training even if it involves going offsite. We have a list we can pick from. I had an induction, which helped.'

Conversely, despite having few expectations about training, one interviewee, who was working as a shop assistant, bemoaned what he perceived as a lack of adequate training in his job, lamenting the fact that the limited duties to which he was assigned left him unable to deal with basic customer enquiries:

'Another thing that annoys me is that I do the same thing – I go on the till. Customers ask me where the paracetamol is, but I don't know, I've never been out there! They asked me to put stock away at the end of the day, but I say I don't know where it goes and they say 'go and find it, you need to pay more attention'. I think it's really unfair.'

Another participant expressed surprise at discovering that her workplace was using an outdated version of Microsoft Excel, which took some time for her to get accustomed to. She expected to use this package in the job, but had expected to

use a more recent edition. She was frustrated that little support was given in helping her to adapt to the older version and she felt this could have been handled better by her employer.

Another point of note is that, in general, the young people we interviewed conveyed that they were realistic about the difficulties in preparing them for all eventualities, recognising that practising on a training course can be useful preparation but cannot fully convey all the pressures that may be involved in actually performing a task – for example, that in jobs that involve engagement with the public, interactions with people are difficult to predict.

Overall, the participants' accounts suggest that training and development is an important aspect of working conditions, not only in that it helps individuals to develop in their role and increases their overall skills levels, knowledge and general employability, but moreover because it can have an impact on how the employee feels about their workplace. Training can be taken as a sign that the employer values the individual enough to invest time and effort in training them. Conversely, a lack of training can have the opposite effect, potentially contributing to a feeling of alienation from the workplace.

5 DEALING WITH WORK-RELATED ISSUES

Most employees will, sooner or later, come up against work-related issues that they need to resolve. This could cover all manner of questions, ranging from legal entitlements and rights, to difficulties in getting on with colleagues. Most of the interviewees in this study said that they had not experienced any major issues at work and felt that they would know who to consult internally if there was an issue that they needed to resolve. However, those participants who did recall experiencing problems at work often told either how they had been frustrated in their attempts to resolve the problem, or how they had decided against attempting a resolution.

One participant on a graduate programme described how, on her first placement, she was unsure of what her exact role was and also felt that she was being supervised by someone who was not qualified for the role. She raised this with colleagues but none of these appeared to know her exact role either. She then went to her manager with her grievance, but she was not happy with the way it was handled. Initially, she was told just to deal with the situation herself but felt unable to do so as this would have meant challenging a superior, and as a relatively inexperienced young worker she was not sufficiently confident. The problem remained unresolved and she ultimately left the placement as a result of frustration over perceived insensitivity to what she believed were legitimate concerns regarding the suitability of her supervisor for overseeing her work.

Another interviewee, who had experienced a problem with entitlement to rest breaks, told how he had ultimately decided against raising a grievance about this, fearing the impact that this could have on his position at work.

'I was going to go to the Citizens Advice Bureau because I wasn't getting breaks and it was making me ill. I thought about going, but I thought that they might have a go at my boss and it would get resolved, but it would make things awkward for me at work.'

These examples support the findings of earlier Acas research (Oxenbridge and Evesson, 2012 and Oxenbridge and Neathey, 2012) that young people can be both reluctant to take actions to resolve workplace problems and more likely to respond to problems by leaving jobs. Young people with little labour market experience may find it more difficult than colleagues with more experience to find the confidence to speak out, or may be reluctant to complain for fear that this might jeopardise their position at work.

However, these difficulties and lack of confidence were not universal amongst participants. One interviewee recounted an experience of beginning work in domiciliary care where it was procedure for new staff to accompany more experienced colleagues on client visits, with the aim that the former could observe good practice and attempt to perform the required tasks under supervision before working independently. While agreeing that in general this 'shadowing' system was a good idea, this interviewee described how she felt she had been treated unfairly in this arrangement:

'When you go out on double call, you go out paired with more experienced people and they can take advantage. They're supposed to show you how to work, but you end up doing the work. They're saying 'can you go faster',

but when you're dealing with vulnerable people you have to take your time. That didn't go well, and at one point I had to report it to my manager. She got told off, but we're cool now. I'm happy with the way it was dealt with. I've been out shadowing with other people and it's been OK, it was just that one.'

This interviewee felt that the demands placed upon her were unreasonable, but also knew where to go with her complaint and had the confidence to approach her manager to resolve the situation. Her employer had a formal grievance procedure, covered during induction, and a clear hierarchy, so she felt able to voice her concerns and confident that the necessary action would be taken.

As the examples above show, however, others may work in organisations where procedures and channels for making a complaint are less clear, or where management take such issues less seriously, and some simply might not have the confidence to speak out without the provision of some reassurance by their employer.

Overall, the experiences of participants in this study suggest, therefore, that establishing and publicising clear channels for resolving issues may be particularly important with regard to young workers. Young people should be made aware, at an early stage and before any problematic issues arise, of the channels through which they can talk about any issues they may have – either informally or more formally – and be reassured that their concerns will be dealt with appropriately. This can help to reduce both instances of issues in the workplace going unreported, as well as instances of young employees deciding to leave an organisation to escape from difficulties that they have encountered.

6 ADVICE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND EMPLOYERS

Interviewees were asked what advice they would give to young people starting out in the labour market and what advice they might give to employers with regard to effectively managing young people.

In the case of advice for young workers, a common response was that young people should try to gain as much work experience as possible and not refuse work even if it is only temporary, or where it is of lower pay, skill and status than the young person would ideally prefer. As noted at the beginning of this report, this view could be a reflection of the economic situation at the time of the interviews and focus groups, which generally made interviewees currently in work grateful for having a job when they knew many other young people are unable to find one. Thus, for example, one interviewee, who had experience of jobs only in temporary roles, said that young people should take any job they can since temporary positions are 'all there is'. Other respondents in entry-level retail jobs, whilst being aware that their job stacking supermarket shelves is not work which brings high status and high pay, were also generally appreciative that they had the chance to earn some money and gain some experience. Others also agreed that seizing any available opportunity is sensible, expressing the view that experience in a post which may not seem ideal can open doors to further opportunities in the same organisation or elsewhere.

Other advice for young people included following the rules and working hard 'with a good mindset' as being the best way to get on and work one's way up an organisation; as well as not being afraid to ask questions – including asking questions at interview and finding out about rights around pay, contracts and working hours.

As regards advice for employers on how young staff should be treated, a recurring theme was training and day-to-day support, with many of the participants agreeing that, on the basis of their own experiences, they could see substantial scope for improvement in this regard:

'More training would help people understand the job better. With the shadowing, people can take advantage if it's your first time, so more training can show you how to do things. Shadowing is good though, because it comes under teamwork, you have to work together. Training would help more. I had problems to begin with. You can't expect a new person to move at the same pace.'

'Some people don't have very good GCSEs or A-levels, but that doesn't mean that they can't learn or that they can't learn the skills for a job. If employers offer the right training for the right person, that would help.'

Other suggestions concerned the provision of feedback and tools to help young people map their progress, such as a document stating timetabled milestones so that progress could be measured against agreed objectives. Input to the development process from the employee was also suggested, on the basis of the view that this would make employers aware of what the young person hoped to gain from their role and what they could contribute. Frequent meetings during early stages were also seen as important, along with clear points of contact for resolving difficulties.

Respondents who had had their shifts altered were worried that employers could impose changes on workers without regard to their other commitments. These respondents suggested that consistency and clear communication should be maintained in the interest of staff morale.

Finally, another theme was that candour from the outset concerning longer-term employment prospects would be appreciated. One participant told how, in his first job, a telesales role, he was working hard to surpass targets, having been led to believe that a permanent job was a possibility, only to be disappointed later when none of the temporary staff were in fact offered permanent positions. His advice to employers:

'If it's a temporary job, be honest. Tell them the truth, and don't pretend that it could be permanent, because misleading the staff can really affect their performance.'

On the other hand, other responses showed that flexibility can also be valued by young employees. For example, one interviewee said that he was using a fixed term contract as a stepping stone to further employment and had no intention of working for that company beyond the agreed period. This interviewee commented that a key factor in the relationship between employer and employee was that both parties were honest about their respective plans.

Overall, the participants' views perhaps suggest that flexible working, which is a prominent feature of contemporary labour markets⁵, particularly for young people, can be mutually desirable and beneficial. However, their views can also be summarised as suggesting that good employment relations, and the associated benefits of improved performance, discretionary effort and productivity, are all more likely if all parties are in possession of the facts about the nature of the employment relationship as fully as possible. According to the young people we interviewed, these facts include the terms of employment being clearer, the employer's expectations of how tasks should be performed, who to take orders from, working conditions (including hours and breaks), and whether the job realistically offers the prospect of permanent employment.

⁵ CIPD (2012) *Flexible working provision and update: survey report*. Available online from: <http://www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/survey-reports/flexible-working-provision-uptake.aspx>

7 POLICY POINTERS

This small piece of exploratory research enables us to draw some conclusions and to list some policy pointers for employers in terms of how they can help and support young people in their first experiences of work. Whilst there are some differences, in terms of expectations and experiences of young people, according to level of skills and qualifications and type of job, and although the limits of our sample hinder us from exploring this more fully, there are nevertheless some overarching themes suggesting some general guidelines on actions that employers can put in place to ensure that young people receive the support and guidance that they need in the workplace. In many cases, this advice revolves around good management practices, which can be tailored in some respects specifically with regard to the challenges young people face and their specific employment relations needs. These pointers are set out below.

- 1. Offer clear guidance and information to young people as early as possible.** Young people may often not know what to expect when they first start work and may be less likely to know about their basic employment rights and responsibilities than their older colleagues. Practical guidance – in areas such as tax, pay, working time, breaks, working conditions, dress codes, performance, duties, probation and appraisal – given, where possible and appropriate, before a young person joins the workforce, or as early as possible after they start in a job, can therefore be a big help in allaying fears about fitting in to the workplace culture. Adequate guidance and information can also reduce the chance that the young person will feel that the job is not living up to expectations. Honesty about job prospects will also foster realistic expectations and help avoid later disappointment which can affect both morale and performance.
- 2. Ensure appropriate support at the workplace.** Providing a formal induction can help to settle young people into their new role and the wider workplace culture. This provides an opportunity to cover in more detail many of the issues listed at point 1, as well as to invite and answer questions. Inductions carried out at the beginning of the employment relationship are the most effective and are generally welcomed and appreciated by young workers. A young worker's wellbeing and confidence can also benefit greatly from having a designated buddy or mentor who can show them the ropes in the first weeks and months and to whom the young person can turn with questions that they may not want to ask of a manager, supervisor or other formal superior. Ideally, this should be someone in a relevant work area and who will be available to answer queries.
- 3. Establish clear lines of authority.** Young people may not have much experience of hierarchies in the workplace and be unsure about the network of relationships in which they find themselves on entering work. They may become confused if they receive conflicting orders from different managers or supervisors, and feel less able to challenge this or know how to clarify what is required of them. Establishing a clear chain of command can help avoid such confusion, as well as reduce the chances of colleagues taking advantage of a young person's inexperience and lack of confidence.

- 4. Put in place ongoing feedback, guidance and assessment.** Where young people lack experience, they may be keen to know how well they are performing and how their early efforts in the workplace are perceived by their employer. With little against which to benchmark themselves, young people will not necessarily be able to assess how well they are doing in a job. Providing support and guidance in terms of informal and formal assessment, constructive criticism and frequent meetings with managers, can enable a young worker to discuss any issues they may have and help them to learn and develop and to perform better. Constructive communication about the young worker's contribution can also help them to feel noticed and valued, contributing to a stronger sense of attachment to the workplace.
- 5. Try to involve young people fully in projects.** As young people will tend to have less experience and lower skills levels than some of their older colleagues, there can be a tendency to give them simple tasks to do and restrict their contribution accordingly, which may make them feel that they are on the periphery of the organisation. Involving them, where possible, in complete projects will increase their sense of engagement in the organisation by improving their understanding of the wider business aims and activities, how their own role fits in to those, and the possibilities for development and progression within the organisation.
- 6. Establish clear channels for resolving issues.** Young people will usually have less power and authority in an organisation than their more well-established and senior colleagues. If they encounter a difficulty, either in terms of rights and entitlements, or connected to the behaviour of colleagues or their superiors, they may be less inclined than more experienced colleagues to take steps to address their concerns, due to a lack of confidence or knowledge, or due to a fear of jeopardising their position in an organisation. Establishing and publicising clear channels for resolving issues is therefore important, as is reassurance that those channels are there to be used and that concerns will be dealt with appropriately. Young people should therefore be made aware at an early stage of the channels through which they can talk about any issues they may have – either informally or formally. Emphasising that all employees have a right to be treated fairly, that unfair treatment by other colleagues will not be tolerated, and that there will be no detriment to the person who makes a complaint, can provide the reassurance that young workers may need, and reduce the likelihood of concerns remaining unvoiced and festering, or of the organisation losing a young worker who finds it easier to leave than to raise a concern that might be easily resolved.
- 7. Ensure communication reaches all parts of the organisation.** Young people will generally be in roles towards the lower end of the hierarchy in an organisation. If communication does not filter down to all parts of the organisation, young people are therefore more likely to feel excluded. Conversely, ensuring that an organisation has inclusive communication strategies in place can help the morale of all employees, and particularly young people. Additionally, employers should also bear in mind that managers may need to spend a little time explaining to young people how the communication channels in the organisation work, as well as more broadly why things are as they are in their workplace. Doing so can help foster commitment, develop a sense of inclusion within the organisation, and achieve the many associated benefits that can flow from having a committed workforce at every level.

Appendix: Discussion Guide for Focus Groups

Researcher to introduce the project – IES is carrying out these focus groups as part of research for Acas, in order to find out more about what young people think about work before and after they have some experience of employment. Acas is an independent government-funded body that provides impartial information to employers and employees on good practice and fair treatment at work. It is carrying out this research to help inform its advice to young workers and employers of young workers.

Background

Ask all members of the group to (a) introduce themselves by name and (b) say if they're working or not working currently. Then ask each person in turn to say a bit about:

- What type of education/training they have had?
- Where are they living now (i.e. at home, or independently)?
- What previous job(s) they have had? Where have they worked, in what sort of organisation, in what role, and for how long?
- How did they find the job they are talking about? Was it through formal channels (job centre, careers service, company recruitment initiative, web/newspaper ad), or was it through people they know (who and how?)

Expectations and experiences of work

Ask participants to describe what they expected from work **before** they started working and how this compared to their **actual** experiences of employment, and how their experiences affected their perception of their relationship with their employer. This should cover the following areas:

- Pay (level and perceived fairness: were attitudes to work and behaviour influenced by pay/perceptions of pay?)
- Working hours/conditions/equipment/tools (how easy/hard to fit in with employer expectations of hours of work, start/finish times, pace of work, opportunities for breaks? How easy/hard to use any tools/equipment? Any other concerns, e.g. health risks?)
- The nature of the work (did participants feel that their expectations of work were the same as those of the employer in terms of how well they were doing the work, how fast they could do it, the quality of their work, the variety of tasks and how much guidance they needed from colleagues? Did this change over time?)
- Induction and ongoing support (was there an induction process? Were participants given a 'buddy' to help them in their initial days or weeks? Was there anyone that participants could go to with questions that they didn't want to ask a manager or supervisor?)
- Chances to train/learn new things (how much/easy/hard/interesting? How much help from colleagues/tutors/managers? Fitting learning in alongside job?)

- Relations with colleagues and managers (how did participants expect/experience that other colleagues/managers would speak to them – as an adult, a junior, a learner, an equal, a skivvy? Were they asked for ideas and opinions on how to do things? Did others discuss and feedback on how they were finding the job? Would this differ depending on the type of colleague / manager e.g. those of the same age, those who were older, line managers and senior managers?)
- Performance management (how did participants think they would find out how they were doing in their job and how it would be measured? What did they think 'good' and 'bad' performance would look like? Did they receive feedback and have discussions about how they were doing with their boss / manager / tutor (if apprentice) / mentor / appraisal?)
- Workplace culture (what was required to 'fit in' in the workplace, e.g. what to wear, how to speak, how to act? Were these things explained to participants or were they expected to know/guess/learn? What were participants' impressions of the first day/week/month?)
- Dealing with work-related issues (did participants experience any particular issues or problems at work? Did they know how to take steps to resolve any such issues / where to get advice inside/outside the organisation, and did they have the confidence to do so? Were such problems resolved to their satisfaction? Anything learned from such experiences?)
- Job prospects (what were participants' expectations / hopes / opportunities to get another/permanent job/ earn more/ get promoted?)
- Job autonomy (how much of a say did participants have / expect they would have about their job – whether they could choose what to do, how to do things and in which order?)
- Any other expectations / hopes / experiences?

Final questions

- Overall, did participants think that they got enough help from people in the organisation? If not, is there anything that their employer could have done to improve their experience of the job?
- Did participants think that the current financial climate (e.g. difficulty of finding work) had an influence on their attitude to work and behaviour in the workplace?
- Would participants do anything differently the next time, in terms of how they approach a job and work in general?
- What advice would participants give to other young people who are moving into work for the first time?
- What do participants think employers could do to help young people who are moving from school/college/uni into work for the first time?
- If there anything else that participants would like to add?

