

Mind the gap: United Kingdom: Employee perspective

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MIND THE GAP

United Kingdom



EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE

Matthew Flynn

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we present information about people's views on what constitute quality work in the United Kingdom. The information presented has been selected from four datasets: the European Working Conditions Survey; the International Social Survey Project; the World Values Survey; and the UK Labour Survey.

Organizations that want to remain employers-of-choice must periodically assess how shifts in the business environment might affect the effectiveness of their talent management strategies, policies and programs. Globalization and changes in the age composition of the workforce - two important 21st century trends that have affect today's businesses - make it important for managers to consider:

- How does age affect employees' preferences for an idealized job and their assessments of their employment experiences?
- Do employees' perceptions of their employment experiences vary from country to country?

What does "mind the gap" mean?

Train stations across England play recorded messages to remind passengers that they should "Mind the Gap." These words of caution urge train travelers to pay attention to the space between the door of the train car and the platform in the station for safe commutes and travels.

For this series of our research publications, we have adopted the phrase, "Mind the Gap." The Mind the Gap series aim to remind employers to pay attention to any gaps that might exist between employees' priorities and need and employers' allocation of workplace-based resources. Our Mind the Gap papers also aim to help our readers to such gaps in quality of employment in other country contexts.

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The Sloan Center on Aging & Work in Boston, in collaboration with the Middlesex University Business School in London, created the Mind the Gap series to provide employers with basic employment-related information country-by-country. There are two types of papers in the Mind the Gap series.

Employee Series: This series examines the perspectives that adults of different ages have about employment and the assessments that they make about their employment experiences. These papers focus on one central question: *Does age affect employees' preferences for an idealized job and their assessments of their employment experiences?*

Employer Series: This series examines the prevalence of human resource policies and programs at workplaces in a selected country. Because most talent-management strategies and programs are age-neutral, we compare the availability of selected human resource policies in practices in the targeted country with the availability of similar policies and practices in a small number of countries with approximate economic circumstances. These papers focus on one core question: *How does the availability of human resource policies and programs in the targeted country compare with other countries?*

Although papers in both series focus on a single country, when the information contained in two or more papers are considered in tandem, it is possible to consider whether employees' perceptions of their employment experiences vary from country to country.

Quality of Employment: Dimensions of a “Good Job” and a “Good Place to Work”

Most people would agree that “good jobs” are a “good thing.” High quality jobs offer benefits to employees and to the organizations where they work.

- **Benefits for Employees:** The quality of employment affects the health and wellbeing of employees. Research confirms that poor-quality jobs (such as jobs requiring extreme work hours or jobs that are very demanding—particularly those where employees do not have access to the resources they need to meet those demands) are associated with negative outcomes, including high stress levels and physiological reactions such as cardio-vascular problems.¹
- **Benefits for Employers:** Employers often connect the quality of employment they offer to employees to their employer-of-choice strategies. There is some evidence that the adoption of policies and practices that promote the quality of employment available to employees is related to positive outcomes for organizations, such as customer satisfaction and organizational performance.² Employer-of-choice strategies can result in enhanced employee engagement which, in turn, can be linked to organizational outcomes, including financial measures. For example, higher employee engagement can reduce costs such as those associated with unwanted turnover. One study found that 59% of highly engaged employees report that they intend to stay with their employers in comparison to the 24% of disengaged employees who “intend to stay.”³ A number of studies have linked employee job satisfaction with positive performance indicators. *Fortune* reports positive relationships between being recognized as a “great place to work” and stock indices.^{4, 5}

In this paper, we focus on eight important dimensions of the quality of employment:



- Fair, Attractive, and Competitive Compensation & Benefits
- Opportunities for Development, Learning & Advancement
- Wellness, Health & Safety Protections
- Opportunities for Meaningful Work
- Provisions for Employment Security & Predictabilities
- Workplace Flexibility
- Culture of Respect, Inclusion & Equity
- Promotion of Constructive Relationships at the Workplace

The following sections of this paper use the quality of employment framework as a structure to discuss the perspectives of employees about their employment situations.

QUALITY EMPLOYMENT IN THE UNITED KINGDOM:

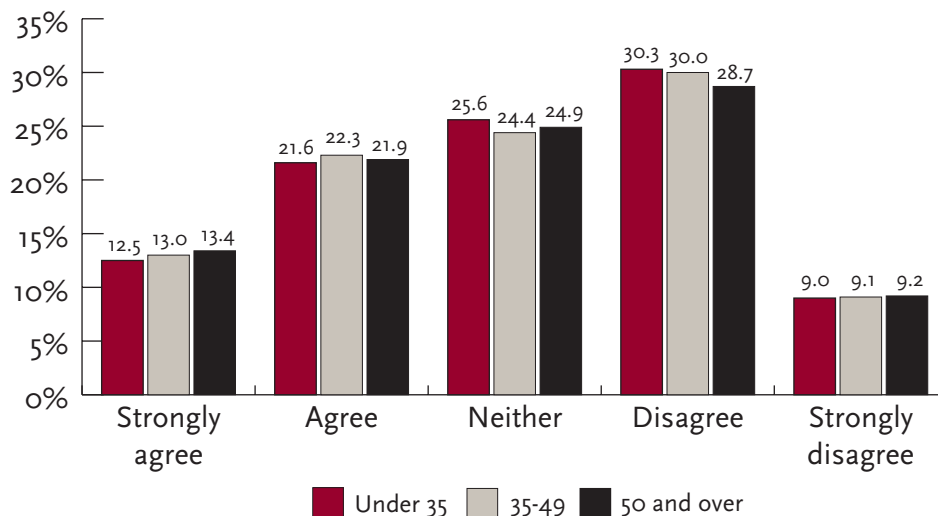
I. Indicators of Fair, Attractive, and Competitive Compensation & Benefits

- *Compensation and benefits are distributed in a fair and equitable manner, meeting most of employees' basic economic needs.*

- Over a third of UK employees agreed with the statement “I am paid well for the job I do.” However, almost four in ten workers disagreed. Younger people are slightly more likely to be dissatisfied with their pay than middle-age or older workers.⁸ (See Figure 1).
- In 2009, the median UK income was £489 per week. This varied geographically, with London being the highest paid (£671) and the North East the lowest (£436). However, cost of living also varies significantly. In London, a highly publicized network of community and trade union activists have run a “Living Wage”⁶ to pressure employers to pay at least £7.44 above the current national minimum wage of £5.90. Public sector employees are better paid than private sector ones (£539 and £465 respectively), although this varies by occupation.
- According to the World Values Survey (2006),⁷ one-third of UK workers rank “a good income” as their main priority when looking for a new job. Younger workers are more likely to rank it highest (37.5%), compared with middle age (34.5%) and older workers (29.1%).



Figure 1: Response to “I am well paid for the work I do”



As suggested by the findings presented in Figure 1, middle aged people are most likely to be satisfied with their remuneration.

Source: EWCS (2005)⁸

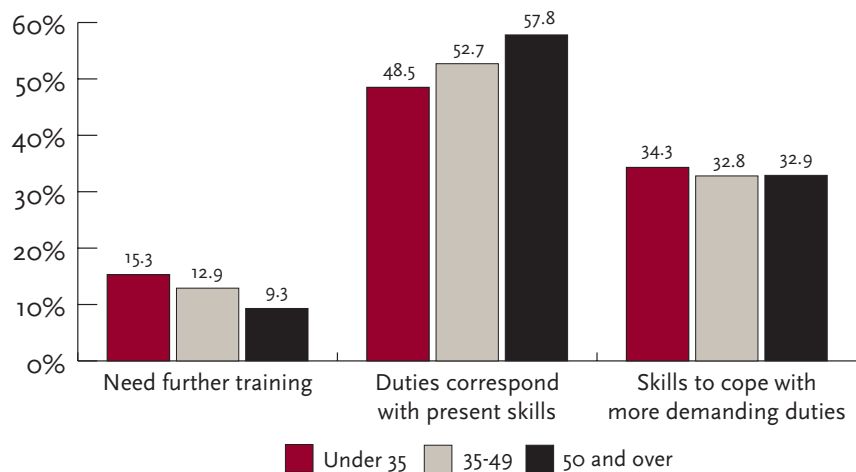


II. Indicators of Opportunities for Development, Learning & Advancement

- *Opportunities for the development of expanded skills and responsibilities are available.*

- Overall, UK workers see themselves as having the right level, or even better, skills than are required for their jobs. Over half (52.7%) say that “my duties correspond well with my present skills” and a further 32.7% say that “I have the skills to cope with more demanding duties.”⁸ (See Figure 2)
- Research for the Nuffield Foundation suggests that, among older people, there is a significant cohort who believe that they are significantly over-skilled for the jobs they are doing.⁹
- According to the Labour Force Survey (2009),¹⁰ around a quarter of UK workers have been involved in on the job training within the past thirteen weeks. Younger people are more likely to be involved in training (30%) than middle age (26.4%) or older people (20.6%). According to the EWCS (2005), UK workers are four times more likely to participate in employer provided training than to pay for training themselves (27.9% to 6.9%). Middle-aged workers are the most likely to participate in employer sponsored training (30.5%) than older (25.6%) or even younger people (26.7%).⁸ (See Figure 3)
- Promotion and career advancement are strong drivers for UK workers. According to the ISSP (2005),¹¹ 31.5% of younger people say that career advancement is “very important” to them. While the importance of work promotion declines somewhat with age, three-quarters of older workers consider it important.
- As people age, opportunities for advancement decline. When asked to name the main reason for their last job change, just under half of workers in their twenties cited career reasons. Only 18% of workers in their fifties cited the same reason.¹²

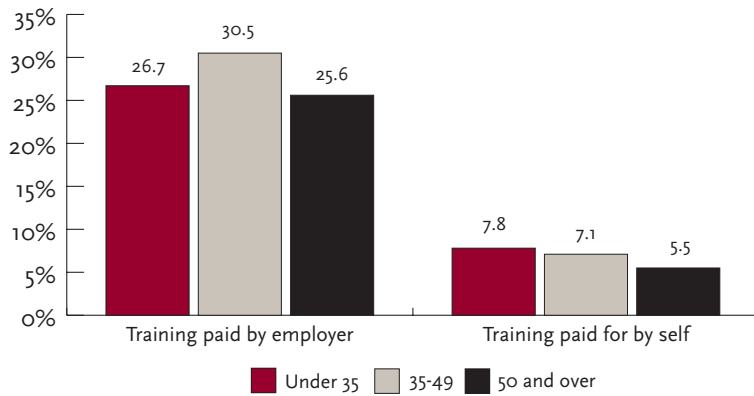
Figure 2: Training needs



As suggested by the findings presented in Figure 2, few UK workers feel that they are in need of training to carry out their jobs.

Source: EWCS (2005)⁸

Figure 3: Training provision



As suggested by the findings presented in Figure 3, middle aged workers are most likely to receive employer provided training.

Source: EWCS (2005)⁸

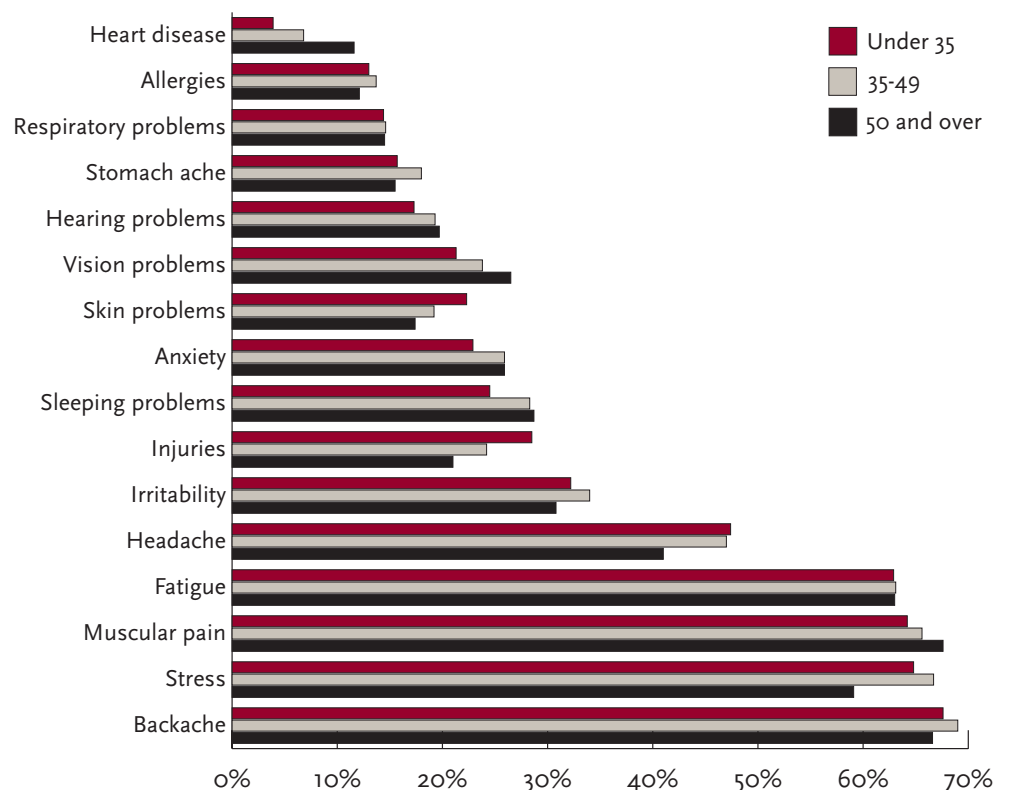


III. Indicators of Wellness, Health & Safety Protections

- *Well-being is promoted through workplace policies, and social protections are offered in case of illness.*

- Over three in ten UK workers feel that their jobs pose a health and safety risk to them. Over four in ten have said that their work has affected their health.⁸
- Among all UK workers, the most frequently reported health problems were backache (68%), muscular pains (65.8%), fatigue (64%), stress (63%), and headaches (45.5%). Injuries were reported by a quarter (24.5%) of people in work.⁸ (See Figure 4)
- Most UK workers reported being either very well informed (39.2%) or well informed (42.6%) about health and safety risks at their job.⁸ (See the UK public policy brief for information on the role of health and safety officers in disseminating information.)¹³
- According to a Health and Safety Executive report, 10.5 working days per UK worker are lost through stress-related illnesses.¹⁴ A study for the Equal Opportunities Commission¹⁵ suggested that measures to increase productivity such as performance related pay and team working may also be leading to higher levels of workplace stress.

Figure 4: Health problems at work



Source: EWCS (2005)⁸

As suggested by the findings presented in Figure 4, backache, stress, and muscular skeleton problems are the most frequent workplace health problems.

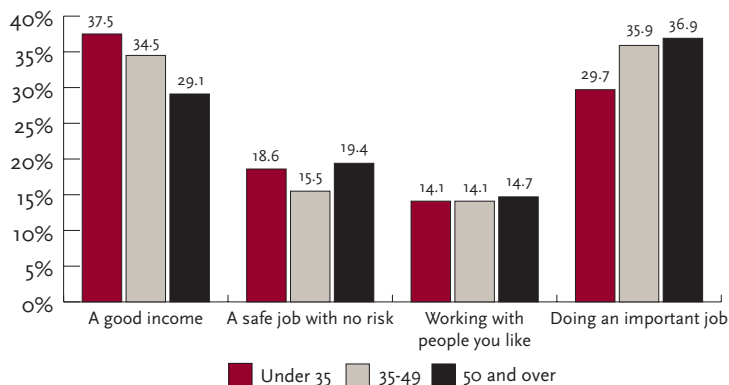
IV. Indicators of Opportunities for Meaningful Work

► Opportunities for meaningful and fulfilling work are available.

- UK workers consider meaningful job content as among the most important aspects of work. As people age, the importance of job content rises. When looking for a job, younger people look first to the pay they would receive (37.5%) and second to “doing an important job.” By mid career, the two priorities are broadly the same, while older people consider “doing an important job” as more important than having a good income (36.9% to 29.1%).¹¹ (See Figure 5)
- ISSP further explores people’s perceptions of meaningful work. Having an interesting job is considered very important by the majority of UK workers. Fewer UK workers prioritize finding jobs which “help other people” or are “useful to society.”¹¹ (See Figure 6)
- Nevertheless, there is serious concern in the UK over workers’ sense of fulfillment in work. The Towers Perrin Global Workplace Survey suggested 23% of UK employees feel disengaged from their workplaces.³ A recent government report (known as the McLeod Review) recommended that employers adopt measures such as lifelong learning and job rotation in order to make work more enjoyable, leading to workers feeling greater loyalty to their workplaces.



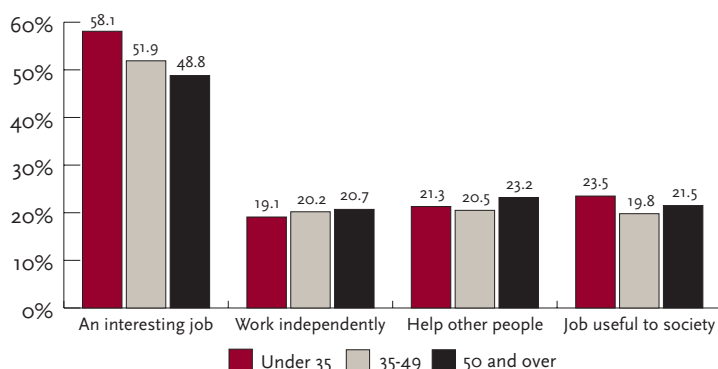
Figure 5: What people look for in a job (ranking very important)



Source: ISSP (2005)¹¹

As suggested by the findings presented in Figure 5, doing important work is as important to UK workers as the income they receive.

Figure 6: How job importance is defined (ranking very important)



Source: ISSP (2005)¹¹

As suggested by the findings presented in Figure 6, a majority of UK workers feel that doing an interesting job is very important.



V. Indicators of Provisions for Employment Security & Predictabilities

- *Terms of employment are communicated clearly, with an emphasis on smooth transitions through jobs and careers.*

- According to the ISSP(2005),¹¹ a majority of UK workers (50.9%) consider job security as a very important dimension of working life. Middle age workers are slightly less likely to consider this a priority than older or younger people.
- According to the EWCS (2005),⁸ 15.2% of workers expected that they might lose their job within six months. Young people were most likely to be concerned about job loss (17.9%) compared with middle age (14.6%) and older workers (12.9%).
- It is important to remember that the EWCS survey was conducted in 2005. In 2009, in the midst of a recession, concerns about job security are likely to be much higher. In April 2005, 2.9% of young people were identified as ILO unemployed,¹⁷ meaning they were actively seeking work and considered part of the labour market. Comparatively, 2.6% of middle age workers and 1% of older workers were ILO unemployed. By April 2009, these figures increased to 4.7%, 4.5% and 1.7% respectively. This could partly reflect an increase in older workers' activity, and indeed the number of workers over the age of 65 is increasing. However, the decline in unemployment amongst older workers is being matched by an increase in the inactive and retired, reflecting older people permanently leaving the labour market.
- According to the Labour Force Survey data,¹⁰ in 2005 33.2% of the young unemployed were out of work for more than six months. By 2009 this increased to 40.8%. For middle age unemployed, these figures increased from 39.3% to 46%. The length of unemployment for older workers has actually decreased. In 2005, 53.1% of older unemployed were out of work for over 6 months, decreasing to 48.9% in 2009.

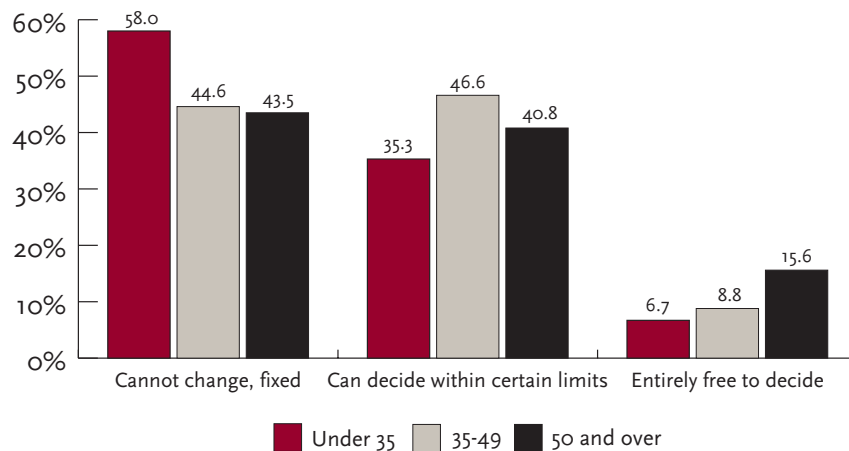
VI. Indicators of Workplace Flexibility

- *Options, choice, and control over work conditions and hours are available.*

- UK workers have among the longest working hours in Europe. 18.9% of UK workers are working over 40 hours per week. Middle-age people have the longest working hours (mean 33.71 hours per week) compared with younger people (32.79) and older (32.90).¹⁸
- According to the UK Labour Force Survey, 27.3% of UK workers are in part-time employment. Older workers are most likely to be working part-time (32.4%) followed by younger workers (26.9%) and middle age (23.6%).^{10, 18}
- Most middle-aged and older part-time workers are working part-time hours out of choice (84.2% and 87.5% respectively). 42.3% of younger workers work part-time in order to care for children, and a further 17% work part-time because they are unable to find full-time employment.^{10, 18}
- A majority (53.2%) of UK workers say that being able to choose their own working hours as either a very important (13.2%) or important (40.4%) aspect of work.¹¹
- Older workers have more control over their working hours than younger workers. One in six are entirely free to choose their working hours and a further four in ten can decide their working hours within certain limits. (see Figure 7)⁸



Figure 7: Control over working hours



Source: EWCS (2005)⁸

As suggested by the findings presented in Figure 7, older workers have the most control over their working hours.

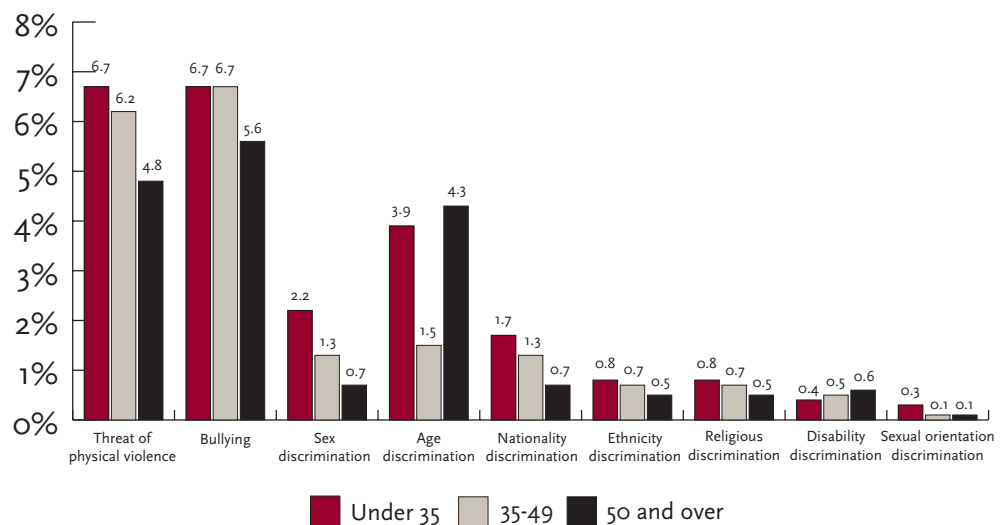
VII. Indicators of Culture of Respect, Inclusion & Equity

► Diversity, inclusion, and employee personal growth are valued.



- Younger people are most likely to be subject to threats of violence or bullying (6.7% compared with 4.8% of older workers). Older workers are most likely to be subject to age discrimination (4.3%), but younger people have been as well (3.9%).⁸ (See Figure 8)
- Generational changes are reflected in attitudes toward gender equality, although views on nationality are age neutral. Older people are three times as likely than younger ones to say that, in times of job scarcity, men should be given priority for jobs over women. However, young people are almost as likely than older ones to agree that UK nationals should have priority for jobs over immigrants.⁷ (See Figure 9)

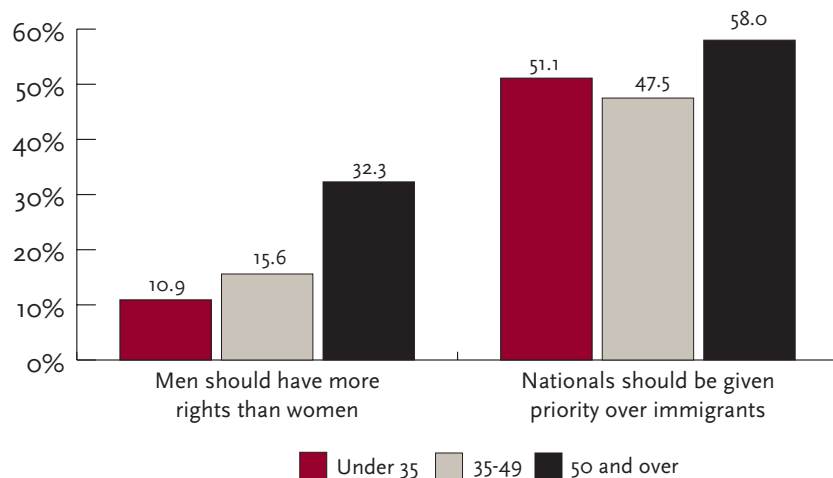
Figure 8: Experiences with discrimination



Source: EWCS (2005)⁸

As suggested by the findings presented in Figure 8, bullying and threats of violence are the most common forms of harassment. Interestingly, younger people are almost as likely as older ones to have felt that they have been subject to age discrimination in work.

Figure 9: When jobs are scarce, who should have priority?



Source: World Values Survey (2006)⁷

As suggested by the findings presented in Figure 9, only one in ten younger people feel that men have more claim to jobs than women. A majority feels that UK nationals should have priority over immigrants.

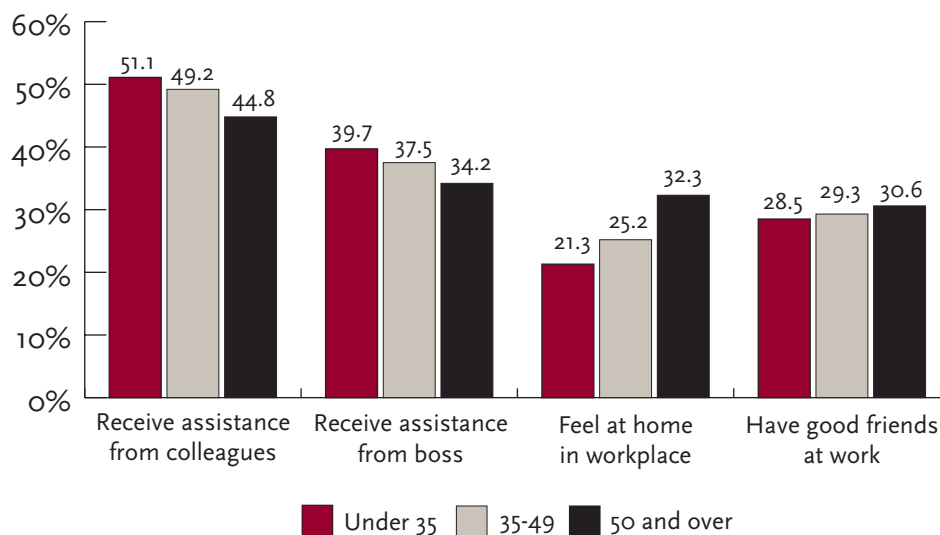
VIII. Indicators of Promotion of Constructive Relationships at the Workplace

- *Interactions with supervisors and coworkers are professional and respectful.*

- Younger people are more likely to say they can rely on their workmates and managers for assistance. Over half (51.1%) of younger people say that they “almost always” receive assistance from colleagues, and 39.7% say they almost always receive help from their superiors. By comparison, 44.8% of older people say the same in relation to colleagues, and 34.2% in relation to their superiors. On the other hand, when asked whether they feel “at home” in their workplaces, older people are more likely to strongly agree (32.3%) than younger (21.3%) or middle aged (25.2%) ones.¹¹ (See Figure 10)



Figure 10: Assistance at work



As suggested by the findings presented in Figure 10, younger people are more likely to receive help at work.

Source: ISSP (2005)¹¹

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION:

MINDING THE GAP

Eight dimensions of the quality of employment were examined among workers in the UK using primarily the European Working Condition Survey (EWCS) 2005; the International Social Survey Project (ISSP) 2005; the World Values Survey (WVS) 2006, and the Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2009.

Employers and government are particularly worried about employee engagement, as reflected in the MacLeod Review.¹⁶ While good pay is one driver for UK workers, the demand for interesting and purposeful work is a stronger one, particularly for older workers, according to the ISSP.¹¹ Opportunities for flexible working and lifelong learning are also important. As work becomes more intense, employees are looking for ways to better manage stressful working conditions.

The UK has long faced a skills shortage,¹⁹ and most new jobs in the future will be filled by people who might now be classified as contingent: older workers, migrants and working mothers. As the UK workplace becomes more diversified, the population's expectations for quality work are changing as well.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

Established in 2007 by the Sloan Center on Aging & Work, the Global Perspectives Institute is an international collaboration of scholars and employers committed to the expansion of the quality of employment available to the 21st-century multi-generational workforce in countries around the world.

The Global Perspectives Institute focuses on innovative and promising practices that might be adopted by employers and policy-makers.

The Institute's research, publications, and international forums contribute to:

- ▶ a deeper understanding of the employment experiences and career aspirations of employees of different ages who work in countries around the world;
- ▶ informed decision making by employers who want to be employers of choice in different countries; and
- ▶ innovative thinking about private-public partnerships that promote sustainable, high quality employment.

In addition to the Mind the Gap series, the Global Perspectives Institute publishes a Statistical Profile Series that highlights workforce demographic trends in different countries and a Global Policy Series that focuses on selected workforce policy in certain country contexts.

For more information on SCAW publications, please visit us online at:
www.bc.edu/agingandwork

The Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College promotes quality of employment as an imperative for the 21st-century multi-generational workforce. We integrate evidence from research with insights from workplace experiences to inform innovative organizational decision making. Collaborating with business leaders and scholars in a multi-disciplinary dialogue, the Center develops the next generation of knowledge and talent management.

The Sloan Center on Aging & Work is grateful for the continued support of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

Matt Flynn is a senior lecturer at Middlesex University. His research focus is on workplace age diversity. He has carried out work for the European Union and UK government on the subject. He has written the age diversity good practice guide for the UK Trades Union Congress and Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development, and is currently conducting a study for the British Council comparing the experiences of older workers in the UK and Japan. His work can be found at www.agediversity.org.

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4 Great Places to Work Institute. *What makes a great place to work: Financial results*. Retrieved from <http://www.greatplacetowork.com/great/graphs.php>

5 Unfortunately, most of the research linking employer-of-choice strategies with business outcomes tends to focus on correlational relationships. Such studies do not definitively establish that being a “best place to work” causes positive organizational performance; indeed, it also might be true that high profits and strong financial growth cause higher employee engagement and foster perceptions that a particular workplace is an employer of choice.

- 6 Living wage. (n.d.). Retrieved February 20, 2010, from www.livingwageemployer.org.uk
- 7 The World Values Survey is an ongoing academic project by social scientists to assess the state of socio-cultural, moral, religious, and political values of different cultures around the world.
- 8 European Working Conditions Survey has been monitoring the working conditions of European workers on a periodic basis. The survey has been carried out four times by the Eurofound(the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions): in 1990/91, 1995/96, 2000 (extended to cover the 10 new member states, Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey in 2001/02) and 2005 (31 countries).
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- 10 The UK Labour Force Survey is a statistical survey conducted to capture data about the labour market. All European Union member states are required to conduct a Labour Force Survey annually.
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Mind the Gap Series:

MTG01: United States, Employee
MTG01: United States, Employer
MTG02: Japan, Employee
MTG02: Japan, Employer
MTG03: South Korea, Employee
MTG03: South Korea, Employer
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