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## Employee commitment

The building trade has always used colloquialisms for various jobs - brickies for bricklayers, sparkies for electricians and chippies for carpenters. But a builder I met the other day used a collective noun for all his contracted employees that was new to me. He referred to them as "skins".

The terminology sounded impersonal and somewhat distasteful, in its assumption that employees could be shed and renewed as easily as the skin of a snake. But the more I thought about his description, the more apposite it seemed in today's workplace. At least the builder was being honest. People are employed because they are useful and so long as they are useful they remain employable. Once their use becomes questionable, impaired or uneconomic they can be replaced.

People know this. They can see that much employment is a numbers game, where the head count fluctuates depending on the strength of the economy. According to newly published research from Aon Consulting\* this may be the main reason for steadily falling levels of employee commitment.

Much has been written in recent weeks about low levels of British productivity and most studies tend to blame British managers, comparing them un-favourably with their US counterparts. Aon's latest research on workforce commitment in the UK, based on interviews with 1,500 employees, broadly reflects the findings of other surveys. But what makes the research more interesting is that when Aon ran the same kind of survey among 1,700 workers in the US, it produced similar results.

This means that, although the US has higher levels of productivity than the UK, both countries have workforces that appear to be losing both confidence in their managers and pride in their employers. A brief surge in commitment after the World Trade Center attack in 2001 was not sustained, according to the US research.

A common complaint in both reports was that employers were doing little to make their workers feel secure. One in four of the UK employees was pessimistic about job security for the year ahead and not much more than half thought they would benefit personally from any improvements in their company's performance. A slightly higher proportion in the US saw no sign that their top management regarded the retention of the existing workforce as important. Both reports highlight this lack of engagement with employees as a serious failure in leadership but we can see that it is corporate leadership generally, not "British" or "American" leadership that is at fault.

Some of the most revealing findings in Aon's UK research showed that employees with the strongest levels of commitment were those without any formal qualifications. The next most committed employees were those with PhDs. The findings look surprising at first glance but they probably reflect the characters of these different types of employee. Unqualified employees may feel it is in their best interests simply to hold on to their jobs. The PhDs, by their nature, may be uninterested in jumping ship for bigger salaries if they have sufficient intrinsic reward in their existing work.

The research also showed a much higher commitment to their jobs among unionised workers than in those outside trade unions. This may reflect the traditional role of unions in job protection. Employees may feel they are less likely to be "picked off" for

redundancy if they have trade union representation.

The publication of Aon's UK study coincided this week with the release of a study from the Future of Work Programme run by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The report, *Managing Workplace Change*\*\* by Robert Taylor, the programme's media fellow, is based on interviews with 2,000 human resources managers between July and September 2002.

Mr Taylor says that the research supports the view that the traditional employment model of full-time work is far more robust than some commentators would suggest. More than half the larger employers, for example, had recorded a net increase in their workforces since 1999 and a third expected their workforces to be larger in a year's time than they are now. But almost one in 10 managers revealed that some employees had become self-employed in the past three years, what the report concedes is a "significantly high" shift towards more flexible workplaces.

Trends in the use of agency workers and subcontractors are difficult to discern, since some sectors report decreases while others have experienced increases. A comment that "contrary to much speculation, the use of outworking by establishments remains uncommon" may be true - but it is unhelpful because it ignores the inconclusive evidence of the research.

The report is equally dismissive of teleworking, noting that "a mere 10 per cent of managers said a policy had been adopted to encourage staff to work more from home than at the workplace". Given that teleworking is informal and does not, by its nature, tend to be part of company policy, this proportion could be quite revealing. Yet it leads to the surprising conclusion that "these statistics heavily qualify the sweeping assertions that are often made about the new world of work being characterised by a decline in the full-time, permanent job and rise in the virtual business organisation and new forms of flexible working in a so-called 'new economy'."

The study may have a point but it does not help to substitute one sweeping assertion for another. In pointing out that there is no collapse of the full-time permanent job or rapid growth of subcontracting, it is playing with the evidence. A fifth of the managers questioned in the survey said they would be outsourcing more work in the next 12 months. This does not look like an insignificant figure. We may be talking about the relative speed of change rather than change itself.

Craig Lydiate, director of organisational measurement at Aon Consulting in the UK, believes that many workplaces have lost the social cohesion and sense of community that once existed, even among large employers. This suggests that the knowledge of employee concerns in too many big companies these days is no more than skin deep. This is a pity, because employees are human beings, not simply machines or commodities for making money.

*\*Both reports can be obtained by emailing: <mailto:charlotte.mandel@aers.aon.co.uk>*

*\*\* The report can be viewed at [www.esrc.ac.uk/esrccontent/downloaddocs/workplace.pdf](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/esrccontent/downloaddocs/workplace.pdf)*