

High Performance Working: Developing a Survey Tool

Executive Summary 5
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Project Context

The development of a longitudinal employer based survey tool is one of three linked sub-projects commissioned by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills within a project concerned with Skills Utilisation in the UK. The concept of skills utilisation encompasses a range of high performance work practices with a focus on creating a working environment in which employee talents can be deployed for the optimal mutual benefit of themselves and their employer.

As such it implies a particular concern with identification of workforce talents, designing work in such a way that employee talents are optimally used and offering opportunities for employees to contribute to shaping the broader development of the organisation beyond the confines of their job descriptions.

Concerns about adequate deployment of workforce skills derive from broader concerns about the role of skills in contributing to the UK's economic performance. The UK 'skills problem' is multi-faceted, well documented and has a long history. Our stock of skills and their optimal deployment fare relatively poorly when compared internationally according to Skills Utilisation measures such as labour productivity and levels of qualifications among different workforce groups. Access to opportunities for skills acquisition is uneven as are their impacts and a number of reasons are provided for this, often deriving from Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964).

For organisations, underinvestment in skills may appear to be a rational response in the face of risks such as poaching of trained workers and payback time on investment. Equally organisations may be keen to invest in developing workforce skills, but lack capacity or capability to manage the process, or simply find it difficult to source appropriate training or lack broader knowledge of how skills utilisation can be optimised. It is within this context that this survey tool has been developed.

Project Objective

The UK evidence base has suffered deficiencies in the past around the issue of more effective skills utilisation and organisational performance. There are few large scale, representative, economy-wide surveys in the UK. Research tends to focus on the most successful, large employers and to focus on best practice. There is limited cross sectional analyses (e.g. sector, size, geography) to show how practices differ amongst firms of varying characteristics. Little longitudinal data is available on high performance working (HPW) and organisational performance, which might more effectively identify any causal link between skills and the bottom line and to precisely understand 'what is driving what'. Therefore the aim of this project is to develop a common, longitudinal, employer based survey tool on HPW capable of providing results comparable by: nation; sector; size of firm and organisational strategy.

Developing the survey tool content

The development of the survey tool content was informed by:

- Developing an extended version of the 4A model to enable us to capture the causal processes between organisational contextual influences such as product market strategy, culture and choice of technology, selection and implementation of HPW practices, employee perceptions of their implementation and impact on employee performance outcomes.
- Undertaking a scoping review to identify what researchers, academics and policy makers think are the key unanswered questions concerning skills utilisation and HPW. This enables assessment of which measures and themes are most important and which evidence gaps can be filled.
- Evaluating existing surveys including the Workplace Employer Relations Survey 2004; the National Employer Skills Survey 2007; the Skills for Business Network Survey 2007; the

People and the Bottom Line Survey 2007; the Future of Work survey 1999 and the Investors in People Employer Survey Tool. It considers the extent to which each survey covers relevant issues related to HPW, skills utilisation and organisational performance.

Where there are gaps or difficulties we gave particular attention to the design implications for a new survey to capture the relevant information.

The findings from the initial scoping exercise were used to develop a generalised framework for examining skills utilisation and HPW, against which we considered appropriate measures, variables and question development.

This second stage generated a framework to capture areas of required evidence and was used to assess the potential of adapting existing surveys against developing a new cross-sectional and/or panel survey.

A detailed series of questionnaire modules was then developed which map onto each of the sections of the 4A model covering organisational context, measure of incidence and implementation of HPW practices, employee perceptions of implementation processes and outcomes. In particular, our research indicated a need for more detailed exploration of employee perspectives on HPW practices. This should include measures to explore attributions of why managers adopt HPW practices, measures of informal training provision and assessments of the quality of management and leadership by employees.

Survey tool development process

We also drew on the expert consultations and a review of the literature to consider the most appropriate methods for conducting the survey including its size and scope, the mode of application (face-to-face, postal etc) and who the respondents should be. The report considers a number of options for the UK Commission to evaluate. These include the extension of the WERS survey (which is rejected due to pressures on its existing content), the commissioning of a bespoke survey, and the addition of questions to NESS. The report also stresses the need for complementary case study based research to capture the reasons why managers decide to adopt business strategies which demand deployment of HPW practices and to test out the take up and impact of appropriate kinds of policy support. Such complementary research has been conducted by the UK Commission through its HPW case study project. Along with this, the Policy Review project has examined the policies

available to support HPW and identified gaps in policy, and a synthesis paper has presented evidence on the issues surrounding HPW. Together, these constitute the outputs from the UK Commission's Skills Utilisation project. Preceding this was a Skills Utilisation literature review produced by the Scottish Government.

Executive Summaries present the key findings of the research and policy analysis generated by the Research and Policy Directorate of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills. More detailed analytical results are presented in Evidence Reports and all outputs are accessible on the Research and Policy pages of the UK Commission's website www.ukces.org.uk

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