Employers' use of low-skilled migrant workers: assessing the implications for human resource management

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Aims

The study aims to explore the human resource management [HRM] implications of employers’ use of migrants in low-skilled jobs. Notions of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ HRM are considered. This case study is taken from a wider project examining the social and economic experiences of migrant workers, asylum seekers and refugees in Barnsley, United Kingdom, conducted between 2005 and 2006.

Methodology

The paper employed a case study of a UK-based employer based in Barnsley, South Yorkshire who uses large numbers of migrant workers. Ninety per cent of the 225 strong workforce are migrant workers, mostly from the EU accession countries. The paper draws on data from a survey of migrant workers in the firm conducted in 2006, and from interviews with managers and migrant workers within this firm, conducted between 2005 and 2006. The research adopted a multi-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research data in the form of 10 semi-structured interviews with production workers who were migrants and the management of the company [the Managing Director, the General Manager and the training manager]; and a survey with 113 asylum seekers, migrant workers and refugees. Interviews were also conducted with representatives from key local support agencies and labour market actors, including trade unions.

Key issues

The study highlights that the use of migrant workers is likely to be associated with a 'hard' rather than ‘soft’ approach to HRM, which emphasises the disposability and interchangeability of what is assumed to be homogenous units of labour. Other HRM implications that arise from the use of migrant workers in low-skilled jobs are:

- employment conditions

- recruitment issues
- progression opportunities
- retention of workers

The researched company’s ability to maintain a 'low wage long hours' strategy, using a hard HRM strategy has been facilitated by the expansion of the European Union and the increasing availability of migrant workers.

Conclusions

Given that low skilled employment constitutes the largest component of the total of jobs taken by migrant workers, there is a need for more attention towards the strategies of employers using migrants for low-skilled work. The research highlights that for many migrant workers, the type of work undertaken in the UK is of lower skill than their experience in their home country, suggesting that there is a considerable underutilisation of the resources of migrant workers in the UK. Migrants’ wages usually do not exceed the minimum wage whilst working hours are long and often unsociable. The article also points to the importance of informal recruitment strategies for attracting migrant workers.

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