



Hurrell, S. A. (2016) Rethinking the soft skills deficit blame game: Employers, skills withdrawal and the reporting of soft skills gaps. *Human Relations*, 69(3), pp. 605-628. (doi:[10.1177/0018726715591636](https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726715591636))

This is the author's final accepted version.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/115247/>

Deposited on: 06 January 2017

Rethinking the soft skills deficit blame game: Employers, skills withdrawal and the reporting of soft skills gaps

Abstract

Soft (e.g. interpersonal and social) skills are receiving ever more attention with employers frequently reporting that employees lack these skills. The 'blame game' for these skills deficits is frequently directed at the individual, family or government. Scant attention has been paid to the possibility that people may possess soft skills but decide to withdraw them because of disaffection with their employer. Taking a critical perspective and drawing on three case study establishments, this paper finds that some managers blamed soft skills gaps on skills withdrawal. The employee data did not, however, reveal greater employee disaffection in the establishment worst affected by soft skills gaps. Investigation of withdrawal instead revealed more about employees who had left the organisations and the propensity for employers to blame employees for soft skills gaps. The study affirmed that organisations may still be to blame for their own soft skills gaps through not contextually integrating selection, induction and training practices with their skills needs.

Key words: Skills withdrawal, employer behaviour, soft skills, skills gaps, HR practices.

Author: Scott. A. Hurrell

Subsequently published in *Human Relations* (2016), volume 69(3), pp. 605-628.

Introduction

There has been much debate in recent years, across many developed economies, concerning skills deficits. Employers report problems with filling vacancies because applicants lack the required skills (skills shortages) and/or that current workers lack proficiency in their jobs (skills gaps) (see for example Handel, 2003; UKCES, 2014). These problems are, however, not confined to hard/technical skills and deficiencies are frequently reported in 'soft' interpersonal and social skills (also called 'non-cognitive' skills in the U.S. (Handel, 2003)). Within the UK a significant minority of employers report that potential recruits or current workers do not possess these soft skills, with soft skills gaps much more widely reported than soft skills shortages (UKCES, 2014).

The question arises, as to whether the soft skills gaps employers identify are primarily attributable to the employee. Soft skills gaps materialising inside the organisation may reflect poor recruitment, selection and training practices. A further potential explanation, however, is that negative reactions to job quality may lead disaffected individuals to withdraw soft skills. Managers may blame employees for such withdrawal, where they witness a deterioration of soft skills over time, when the skills gap is actually attributable to poor quality employment. As soft skills are central to labour processes reliant on emotions (Vincent, 2011), these may be especially prone to withdrawal caused by negative reactions to the employer.

This study develops the concept of soft skills withdrawal and links this to wider debates on the causes of soft skills gaps. The empirical work reported in this paper explores three workplace case studies with differing reported levels of soft skills gaps. The paper starts by outlining the importance of soft skills and the incidence of soft skills deficits in the UK. Building and expanding upon previous debates within this journal, the role of the employer in reporting skills deficits is then addressed, before considering where the blame for such deficits is generally

directed. The discussion then considers how employers may contribute specifically to their own internal soft skills gaps through causing workers to withdraw skills. The research method and findings are then presented, before considering what the empirical work revealed about the causes of soft skills gaps and how managers attributed blame for these. Finally, implications for policy, practice and research are highlighted.

The importance of soft skills and soft skills deficits in the UK

It has been noted by a number of commentators that the notion of skill is expanding from technical and cognitive conceptualisations to include ‘soft’ interpersonal and social elements (Handel, 2003; Lloyd and Payne, 2009). Soft skills may be defined as: ‘non-technical and not reliant on abstract reasoning, involving interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities to facilitate mastered performance in particular social contexts’ (Hurrell et al., 2013: 162). Examples of soft skills include oral communication, team working, customer handling and self-presentation. Despite disagreement within the academic community as to whether soft skills *are* skills, (Hurrell et al., 2013), they are increasingly demanded by employers. Although seen as essential for emotional and aesthetic labour within customer service work, soft skills are important throughout the occupational spectrum, for example in highly educated professional service workers (Grugulis, 2006). There is also growing recognition of the role of interpersonal skills across occupations due to high performance work systems that, in theory at least, rely on greater interdependency and teamworking (Vincent, 2011). Finally, soft skills are seen to contribute to greater leadership effectiveness in management (Riggio et al., 2003).

The extent of skills shortages and skills gaps in the UK (as defined above), are determined by employer responses to national Employer Skills Surveys (ESS) (UKCES, 2014). These surveys are conducted at the establishment level and completed by an HR representative

or manager responsible for HR issues. The latest UK ESS revealed a far greater proportion of establishments reporting skills gaps (15 per cent) than skills shortages (four per cent), a similar pattern to previous years (UKCES, 2014). Soft skills (such as customer handling, teamworking and oral communication), although secondary to 'job specific and technical skills', were a widespread constituent of skills gaps. Approximately half of all establishments with a skills gap, and also a third to 40 per cent of establishments with a skills shortage, reported that these were in soft skills.

Employer identification of skills deficits is, however, not unproblematic. Prior work within this journal describes how managers are affected by biases and organisational politics when reporting skills deficits (Watson et al., 2006; Bryant and Jaworski, 2011). Bryant and Jaworski (2011: 1363) conclude that where Australian employers reported skill shortages these were 'bound to organizational practices, which in turn are shaped by place, industry needs and assumptions in relation to gender and class'. Focussing on gender stereotyping, these authors report how views on skills shortages were related to *who* was believed to be suitable for particular jobs, with women frequently overlooked for certain positions. Watson et al. (2006) examined how those usually responsible for reporting skills deficits in UK surveys (personnel specialists) may be affected by influence costs. Their employer-level survey data revealed that personnel specialists were less likely to report skills gaps in current workers than other managers, but more likely to report present and anticipated future external skills shortages. They attribute this finding to personnel specialists justifying their training and recruitment budgets, concluding that, '[skills deficit] statistics based solely on employers' perceptions should be treated with care' (p.40). Employers may thus not accurately report what is and is not a skills deficit and may make incorrect attributions regarding whether and why individuals lack skills.

Given some managers' bias and frames of reference in reporting skills deficits, the true causes of such deficits may thus not be adequately identified. The blame for where skills deficits lie may also, therefore, be misappropriated.

The skills deficit 'blame game' and skills withdrawal

The 'blame game' for skills deficits is typically directed at the supply side: (i.e. individuals, the family and/or education system), rather than the demand side (i.e. employers) (see for example Handel, 2003). When looking specifically at soft skills, the perceived role of individuals and the family are seen as especially important as many of these skills are learnt outside of the workplace (Heckman, 2000). Policy debates surrounding employability in the UK have also very much put the onus on the individual, relegating the employer role in the process (Devins and Hogarth, 2005). Given that many employers (wrongly) conflate soft skills with personal attributes, work ethic and commitment (Handel, 2003; Hurrell et al., 2013; Lloyd and Payne, 2009) the risk of such skills being attributed to individual deficiencies is especially acute.

UK employers have been particularly adept at transferring the responsibility of skills development to government. Gleeson and Keep (2004: 50) note how the dominant ideology in skills discourse is the 'deficit view' where employers 'blame and shame' the education system for not providing job-ready candidates. The authors further argue that employer voice comes 'without responsibility', with employers escaping scrutiny on how workers' skills are developed and utilised (Gleeson and Keep, 2004: 37). Similar trends in employers locating skills deficits as 'something for governments to solve' have also been noted in other neo-liberal economies such as Australia (Bryant and Jaworski, 2011: 1348) and the US (Handel, 2003).

Nevertheless, the manner in which employers may contribute to their own skills deficits has also been highlighted. Generally these accounts focus on skills shortages (e.g. the inability to

attract recruits) rather than skills gaps, and there has been little explicit focus on soft skills (see for example Devins and Hogarth, 2005; Handel, 2003; Adams et al., 2002). As respondents to the UK ESS report greater problems with soft skills gaps than shortages, this extant focus needs to be expanded. The relatively high level of soft skills gaps compared to shortages may be because employers fail to correctly identify soft skills in job applicants, with problems only materialising once they are hired. A second possibility is that employers are reluctant to train in soft skills (perhaps because such skills are considered transferable) or that training is not forthcoming where soft skills gaps are reported. There is, however, little evidence for this training-based interpretation (see for example UKCES, 2014). A further possibility is that employees with the correct soft skills are hired, but subsequent employer behaviour causes soft skills gaps as employees withdraw skills in response to negative aspects of the organisation. Such a possibility, effectively turning the blame game on its head, has received insufficient attention, a lacuna addressed by this paper.

A general phenomenon that may drive skills withdrawal is the reaction of workers to poor quality jobs. Job quality may be measured through elements such as pay, working hours/work-life balance, job security, intensity of work effort, the work environment and the quality of the work itself (including elements such as skills use, autonomy, and task complexity) (Green et al., 2013; Clark, 2005). Evidence prior to the 2008 economic crisis revealed stagnating or declining job quality within the OECD, alongside declining job satisfaction in many countries (Clark, 2005). The same study revealed that British workers showed particular dissatisfaction with the quality of work. Reporting on more recent EU data from 1995-2010, Green et al. (2013) report that the UK experienced the sharpest decline in the quality of work itself, particularly in relation to autonomy. These authors also reported the UK as in the top third of EU countries for work

intensity in 2010. Concomitantly, the number of 'high strain' jobs (combining intensive work effort with low autonomy) is rising in the UK (Green, 2009). Ultimately where employees experience poor job quality this can lead to low levels of job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Green, 2009), creating an environment in which soft skill withdrawal may occur. In contemporary parlance, poor job quality may lead to attitudes that indicate poor employee engagement, leading to reduced effort (Harrison, Newman and Roth, 2006). Managers may interpret such withdrawn effort as a skills gap.

Soft skills withdrawal is related to the concept of 'emotional misbehaviour' in the workplace (Vincent, 2011: 1374). Although not focussing on soft skills gaps, Vincent (2011: 1374) defines emotional misbehaviour as where employees withdraw from labour processes reliant on emotions, leading to 'emotional displays (that) are perceived as relatively misaligned with "higher" organizational interests'. Given the social nature of soft skills, these may, therefore, be particularly susceptible to withdrawal caused by negative feelings toward the employer. If employers construe worker behaviour as 'misaligned' with their interests this may be reported as a gap in soft skills, even though this 'gap' may be primarily due to the employee's response to the employer. Indeed, as Smith (2006: 393) notes, managers may have the assumption that 'individuals make discontent not social situations' and thus any blame for soft skills withdrawal, caused by discontent, may be passed on to workers.

The empirical work that follows investigates the soft skills withdrawal thesis in case studies with contrasting experiences of soft skills gaps. The research establishes whether managers may blame individuals for soft skills gaps that may instead be attributable to disaffection with the employer. Given that skills deficits could also be attributable to recruitment,

selection and training, these elements of organisational practice are considered as competing causes of soft skills gaps. The study answers the following research questions:

1. How far do managers within the case study organisations report soft skills gaps?
2. Are the soft skills gaps that managers report attributable to workers withdrawing soft skills due to disaffection with their employer?
3. Can the existence of soft skills gaps be attributed to deficiencies in organisations' recruitment, selection and training practices?

Method

Research design and case study selection

The skills withdrawal thesis was investigated via three contrasting case study establishments. The case studies were all located within Scotland, which has historically suffered from higher than average incidences of soft skills gaps than the UK as a whole (see for example Scottish Government, 2011). Multivariate analysis of Scottish Employer Skills Surveys (SESS)¹ confirmed that Scotland's soft skills gaps were concentrated in lower paid (e.g. customer service and elementary) occupations, with the hotels and restaurants sector especially affected by customer-handling skills gaps (Hurrell, 2014). Two hotels were thus selected as case studies, one affected by soft skills gaps and one not. Conversely the business services sub-sector was amongst the least affected by soft skills gaps, and a case study establishment (without soft skills gaps) was selected from within this sector (Hurrell, 2014). These case studies were selected to allow inter- and intra- industry investigation of the occurrence of soft skills gaps. Specifically, the design allowed investigation of whether establishments with differing experiences of soft skills gaps differed on the factors considered here to be possible causes of such gaps.

The hotels and restaurants sub-sector was a particularly pertinent context as jobs within the sector are often characterised as low quality, with conditions such as: low pay, close supervision, poor career progression, low unionisation, long/anti-social hours and intense work (Martin, 2004; Frenkel, 2005). Such conditions could cause the dissatisfaction that is hypothesised to precede soft skills withdrawal. Indeed, the low power and status of front-line service workers means that any resistance to managerial regimes is likely to be covert and take the form of emotional withdrawal or poor customer service, i.e. soft skills withdrawal (Frenkel, 2005). Hoque (2000), however, questions the caricature of universally poor management in hotels, finding evidence of sophisticated practices, especially within larger hotels. Considerable variation therefore exists between hotels and any observed differences in employment practices and job quality could help to elucidate upon the operation of the soft skills withdrawal mechanism, hence the need for comparative cases.

Three case study establishments were thus selected from the 2004 SESS, on the basis of their experience of soft skills gaps. Of the two hotels selected, 'Fontainebleau' reported soft skills gaps in the SESS and 'Oxygen' did not. The business services establishment that was selected and which had no soft skills gaps, 'Silex', provided geological services. Only establishments employing 100 or more who were part of multi-site operations throughout the UK were considered for selection, excluding small and/or independent hotels. This allowed comparison between the hotels and Silex. Fontainebleau employed approximately 130 staff, and Oxygen and Silex approximately 220. All establishments were located in central Scotland. Oxygen was a five star hotel and Fontainebleau four star. Silex provided geological services to the public and private sectors, including: cartography, volcanology, seismography, palaeontology, and petrology (a branch of the scientific study of rocks).

Table 1 summarises the establishment characteristics in terms of number of employees, labour turnover in the previous 12 months and the proportion of part-time employees in each establishment. It can be seen that both hotel's workforces were approximately 2/3 part-time, and that turnover was considerably higher in the hotels than Silex. Turnover was especially high in Fontainebleau, approximately 80 per cent and 19 times higher than Oxygen and Silex respectively.

Qualitative and quantitative methods were combined within the case studies. Interviews with managers and interviews and focus groups with employees were conducted, with a survey distributed to all in each establishment. Surveys were distributed in paper rather than electronic form, for consistency, as the majority of hotel workers did not work at a computer. The survey response rates were 22 per cent in Fontainebleau, 23 per cent in Oxygen and 47 per cent in Silex. The breakdown of respondents and demographics is given in Table 1. The lower survey response rates in the two hotels may be explained by the high proportion of staff who were not native English speakers, and the fact that respondents did not typically have workstations where they could complete surveys. The hotel respondents were noticeably younger (see Table 1), although part-time staff were under-represented, especially in Fontainebleau. This may have affected the raw results but effects were ameliorated by multivariate analysis and the qualitative sample (see below).

To answer research question (RQ) 1, management interviews asked about the importance of various skills to the establishment and the existence of soft skills gaps. The definition of skills gaps was consistent with the ESS and included elements from the surveys which were defined as soft skills, such as team working, oral communication and customer service. The interviews also allowed managers to elucidate upon their answers (which the ESS did not) and included soft

skills not included in the ESS, such as self-presentation. Managers were then asked whether soft skills gaps were ever attributable to employees' skills deteriorating over time and *why*, to establish whether soft skills withdrawal was occurring (RQ 2). The existence of soft skills withdrawal was teased out from managerial responses regarding the deterioration of skill, as the concept rests on employees first possessing soft skills and then withdrawing them. Furthermore, it was considered that managers were not likely to know whether their employees had consciously *withdrawn* skills. The questions were, therefore, asked in such a way that managers could directly relate to what they had witnessed in their employees (i.e. a perceived deterioration of skill over time).

In the literature review, it was theorised that skills withdrawal will follow negative reactions to the employer caused by poor job quality. Such negative reactions were reported to manifest themselves specifically as poor job satisfaction, low commitment and reduced effort/disengagement (see above) (RQ2). It was, therefore, essential to establish any differences in job satisfaction, commitment and work effort between establishments. As soft skills gaps were themselves (necessarily) reported by management at the establishment level, direct links could not be made between employees' attitudes and soft skills gaps at the individual level. Any differences in employee attitudes between establishments would, however, show whether employees in establishments worst affected by soft skills gaps displayed greater levels of disaffection with their employer. Details of the survey measures and analytical strategy are reported below.

In terms of other potential causes of soft skills gaps (training, recruitment and selection) (RQ 3), the employee survey asked whether employees had been trained in the previous year and, if so, in what. The employee interviews enquired about experiences of recruitment, selection

and training. The management interviews also asked about the incidence and content of employee training and how employees were recruited and selected.

Data collection methods, measures and respondents

Employee survey. Commitment and work effort were measured through ascending four-point Likert scales, developed by Guest and Conway (1997; 2001)². These measures were chosen due to their use in representative, high profile, studies of work attitudes for the UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (professional association for HR specialists). The scales included the items: *How much loyalty would you say you show towards the organisation you work for, as a whole? When people ask, how proud are you to say whom you work for?* (commitment); and *How hard would you say you work (for whatever reason)?* (work effort). There remain issues of social desirability bias in such self-report measures as people may try to increase their 'moral worth' or show they are 'doing the right thing' (Sayer, 2007: 31/32). Nevertheless, as the main goal was comparison of employee attitudes and behaviours between establishments, there was no reason to believe that such bias was unequal across research sites. The effort item was also modified to include the clause 'for whatever reason' to reduce the perceived risk to individuals' self worth, of reporting that they worked less hard.

Hackman and Oldham's (1980) job satisfaction measure was used as it included detailed items on various job satisfaction facets (pay and rewards, the opportunity for growth, job security, supervision and social relations in the workplace). The measure was considered comprehensive as it covered a number of relevant elements of job quality. Other measures were considered including the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) the Job Descriptive Index (JDI) and Spector's Job Satisfaction Survey (JSS) (Price, 1997; Spector, 1997). These were rejected due to length within a multi-issue survey, the relevance of the measures to the study and

also, in the case of the JSS, concerns over the reliability of some sub-scales (Spector, 1997). All job satisfaction facets were measured on ascending seven-point Likert scales, developed by Hackman and Oldham. Average scores were calculated for each facet (n items for each sub-scale shown in Table 3), with a composite job satisfaction measure also created. All survey scales had Cronbach's alpha values of 0.70 or above.

The use of job satisfaction surveys to measure job quality is, however, contentious. Brown et al. (2012) report how workers may report high subjective job satisfaction even in jobs that are objectively low quality. These authors suggest that qualitative evidence is needed regarding *why* workers report job (dis) satisfaction, which also takes the social context into account; an approach adopted here.

Differences between the establishments in commitment, job satisfaction and work effort were first investigated using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Tukey or Dunnett's T3 post hoc tests were used, depending on Levene's test for equality of variance. Multivariate regressions were then performed to control for various individual factors which may have confounded any apparent differences between the establishments. The commitment and satisfaction measures were investigated using OLS regression. The single item work effort measure was investigated through an ordered logit model, using the complementary log-log linking function, due to the concentration of answers in higher categories of the variable. These analyses controlled for age, gender and employment status (whether respondents were full time/permanent, vs. part-time and/or temporary) alongside establishment dummies. The chosen controls are known to influence commitment and job satisfaction (see for example Brown et al., 2012; Clark, 2005; Sinclair, Martin and Michel, 1999).

Qualitative stage. Within each case study a HR representative was interviewed, alongside line managers representing the major functional areas of each establishment. More functional managers were interviewed in Silex due to the complexity of the hierarchy and the variety of job roles within the organisation. In total four managers were interviewed in Fontainebleau, five in Oxygen and seven in Silex (for details see Table 1). In both hotels line managers covered front and back of house employees whilst, in Silex, line managers covered scientists, technical and administrative staff. The relevant areas of questioning are reported above. The HR representatives considered all employees within each establishment, while line managers answered for their departments only.

Seven interviews with customer-facing employees were conducted in Fontainebleau. Four individual interviews and a focus group of eight customer-facing employees were conducted in Oxygen. Three non-supervisory employees from Silex departments participated in a group interview (see Table 1). The greater representation of part-time respondents compared to the survey was a strength of the qualitative sample, especially in Oxygen. As with the self-report measures of commitment and effort discussed above, it is accepted that employee reports of their roles and experiences may be biased. Such bias did not, however, negate making comparisons between establishments. The multiple data sources also covered both employee and management viewpoints, reducing bias associated with considering only one group's point of view.

Insert Table 1 about here

Results

Research question 1: How far do managers within the case study organisations report soft skills gaps?

Managers were asked about soft skills gaps in their departments, using the ESS definition of employees not being fully proficient at their jobs. Managers reported how many employees in their departments were not fully proficient, or provided a percentage estimate if they could not recall individuals (e.g. if in a large department). The results were similar to the 2004 SESS, on which the establishments were selected, but also revealed subtle differences in how managers reported soft skills gaps. All Fontainebleau managers reported soft skills gaps, affecting 25-30 per cent of the hotel's total workforce in aggregate. Gaps in customer handling were particularly widespread across customer-facing and housekeeping staff, whilst team working was also cited as a common cause of soft skills gaps in customer-facing staff, chefs and housekeepers. Oral communication was also a reported cause of soft skills gaps in chefs.

In Oxygen only the Head Chef reported soft skills gaps; oral communication gaps in approximately 20 per cent of chefs and 40 per cent of kitchen support staff. The Front Office Manager originally reported that three of his 19 staff needed to improve their customer handling and self-presentation skills. He then, however, reflected that all were actually proficient apart from one employee who did not always follow Oxygen's appearance guidelines (thus not constituting soft skills gaps). The HR representative also reported that some new employees needed to improve their oral communication and customer handling skills, but they were not considered to have soft skills gaps, as, 'It will take time to adjust to our culture ... Because they're new, some of them would never have done the job before'. In contrast, when discussing new staff in Fontainebleau, both the HR respondent and Front Office Manager did classify a lack

of proficiency as soft skills gaps (whilst understanding why these staff were not fully proficient). Managers thus differed between the hotels in how soft skills gaps were reported in new staff.

No Silex managers reported soft skills gaps. The Senior Scientific Manager did report that, 'If I was looking for areas that need improvement, those are the ones, (soft skills), team working in particular'. He nevertheless reported that all staff remained fully proficient. The three establishments can thus be ranked from most (Fontainebleau) to least (Silex) affected by soft skills gaps, with customer handling and teamworking skills a particular issue in Fontainebleau and oral communication skills affecting kitchen staff in both hotels.

It may, however, have been that managers did simply not report soft skills gaps where such skills were less important. Managers in both hotels emphasised that soft skills were integral for all employees, especially customer service, followed by team working and oral communication. Technical and practical skills were considered to be of greater importance in kitchen staff. Silex managers prioritised technical elements such as practical skills, specialist knowledge and IT. The importance of soft skills, especially customer handling and teamworking for project work, was, however, reiterated by Silex managers, 'Just because I haven't picked them (soft skills) out as being the three most important, that doesn't mean to say either that we don't place importance on them' (Senior Scientific Manager). Additionally, in Silex's administrative staff oral communication, customer handling and teamworking were rated as the most important skills. The importance of soft skills to each establishment alone cannot, therefore, explain Fontainebleau's position. The question of whether soft skills withdrawal could explain the establishments' differing positions is considered next.

Research question 2: Are the soft skills gaps that managers report attributable to workers withdrawing soft skills due to disaffection with their employer?

Table 2 summarises whether managers in each establishment reported that soft skills withdrawal sometimes occurred and why. Every manager reporting that some employees' soft skills deteriorated attributed this to withdrawal, with no managers reporting factors such as training or workplace changes. There were, however, differences between establishments in whether soft skills withdrawal was reported as a skills *gap*, and whom managers blamed for withdrawal.

In the hotels, the perception that employees sometime withdrew soft skills was shared by most managers and attributed to behaviours such as 'demotivation', 'deteriorating enthusiasm', 'boredom' and 'disinterest' (see Table 2). Of those not definitive about soft skills withdrawal, Fontainebleau's Head Chef was unsure, witnessing deteriorating communication skills in some but believing all could still communicate to some extent:

'They (employees) might be more enthusiastic at the beginning but they're still... it's still so necessary. They wouldn't be able to do their job. There would be problems. (but) I have certainly come across that (deteriorating communication skills), you know'.

Oxygen's Head Housekeeper was the one respondent who had not witnessed soft skills withdrawal. Although witnessing deteriorating satisfaction and motivation in some employees she did not classify this as a deterioration of skills, unlike her colleagues, differentiating between the two phenomena.

What was revealing, however, was the manner in which the attribution of blame for skills withdrawal differed. Fontainebleau managers tended to place particular emphasis on the role of the individual and no Fontainebleau manager explicitly recognised elements of the *job* that could cause withdrawal. Individual blame was particularly evident in the Front Office Manager, 'They (employees) can obviously get lazy in their job. Lose interest in their job'. Some Fontainebleau managers also blamed workers' colleagues or other managers for skills withdrawal. The HR

respondent and Front Office Manager, respectively, noted that co-workers could cause withdrawal through 'bringing people down' or if people had 'fallen out' with colleagues. The HR representative attributed some instances of soft skills withdrawal to managers as, 'sometimes they (employees) don't feel appreciated'. The Food and Beverage manager more explicitly blamed the organisation as well as the individual, believing that boredom occurred due to, 'Us selling exactly the same thing every day and not being more market driven'. Fontainebleau Managers did not report some soft skills as more prone to withdrawal than others, but sometimes framed responses in terms of particular gaps within their departments.

In Oxygen whilst managers did still place some blame for soft skills withdrawal on the individual they were much more likely to emphasise the role of the job or organisation. Four of the five Oxygen managers reporting withdrawal emphasised the nature of the job. The HR representative, for example differentiated 'can't do's' from 'won't do's'.

'(Soft) skills worsen because people have particularly hard jobs or things go particularly wrong on a week then that's when they worsen. And that's when it becomes an "I can't do" because of another factor, not "I won't do" '

She gave the example, of housekeeping stating that it was an intense job '...which you couldn't get any more disenchanted with if you do it'. Oxygen's Food and Beverage manager also believed that jobs could be repetitive and affect people's job satisfaction over time and, subsequently, their soft skills; 'it could just be that they're stuck in a rut...you can have less motivation because you've been doing the same job here for four years and expected to move two years ago'. The Head Chef echoed this sentiment. The HR respondent reported that the way people were managed could cause individuals to withdraw soft skills. Her view was supported by the Food and Beverage Manager, who also noted that personal issues could (in his view

understandably) affect soft skills in the workplace. Only one Oxygen manager (the Front Office Manager) attributed soft skills withdrawal predominantly to the individual. Like the Food and Beverage Manager he believed that being in the same job for too long caused withdrawal. He framed this, however as lost 'ambition' within Oxygen's 'nice' and 'relaxed' work environment; 'people can just get a bit lazy and a bit laid back ... and the standards that the person is used to delivering have slipped'. Oxygen managers did not report some soft skills as being more prone to withdrawal than others.

The apparent contradiction in many Oxygen managers reporting that soft skills withdrawal sometimes occurred, without reporting current soft skills gaps, was because many withdrawing skills had subsequently left the organisation. The Front Office Manager's recall of skills withdrawal was not discussed in terms of current employees. The HR respondent reflected the Food and Beverage Manager's view about people feeling 'stuck in a rut'. She reported that those with deteriorating soft skills often '...go somewhere else to do the same job, because although it's the same job it's somewhere different, and that makes it seem different'.

Only two of the seven Silex managers believed that soft skills withdrawal could be an issue and, even then, that it was rarely encountered, with no current reports of soft skills gaps due to withdrawal. The first of these (Head of Administration) believed that: '... communication where you're interacting with your team and how you mix with other people' had been the subject of withdrawal in the past. Where this had occurred he primarily blamed the individual attributing deteriorating soft skills to, 'Complacency. I think the focus might change'. The second manager reporting that soft skills withdrawal sometimes occurred, for both individual and organisational reasons, was the Senior Scientific Manager:

‘Soft skills, yeah people become less able to do them. Sometimes the stereotype of the scientist who ages and becomes grumpy and uncommunicative ... A combination, personality and I think if we don’t manage them well enough over a very long time and make sure that they get out and about enough as it were’.

This manager had also reported that soft skills were in need of the biggest improvement, despite noting that all remained currently proficient. Whilst four of the remaining five Silex managers identified circumstances in which soft skills may not always be present they did not classify these instances as a deterioration of soft skills or as soft skills withdrawal, seeing these as rare but natural occurrences. One scientific Head of Specialism, for example stated that, ‘everybody has their moments of got out the wrong side of bed ... but that’s just any work environment really...’

The Head of Cartography stated:

‘Certain people... they just get on with their work and they don’t seem to be sort of mixing etc. with other colleagues as much as they have... maybe it’s the type of work they’re doing and there could be other reasons as well. It’s never caused a problem’.

The HR respondent summarised the view of the majority of Silex managers.

‘... I guess everybody goes through periods of time when perhaps they get a bit bored or there could be other factors outside work affecting their performance and they may not carry out their duties as well as normal. Skills themselves shouldn't get worse it could just be the performance. You're not going to lose the skills, are you?’

Insert Table 2 about here

Differences between establishments in employees' work attitudes

The findings above reveal that managers in all establishments witnessed soft skills withdrawal but in Fontainebleau management were most likely to blame the individual. Given these findings it might be expected that employees' job satisfaction, commitment and work effort would be lowest in Fontainebleau. The ANOVA analysis (see Table 3) did not support this assertion, revealing generally positive levels of employee attitudes and effort in each establishment. The only measures that displayed significant differences were satisfaction with social relations at work and work effort. Post-hoc Tukey tests revealed no significant differences between Fontainebleau and the other establishments on these measures, instead Oxygen fared significantly better than Silex.

When controlling for sex, age and employment status in the multivariate analyses, the few significant ANOVA results became non-significant. As in the ANOVA Fontainebleau (used as the reference category) did not fare worse than the other establishments. The only significant difference between the establishments in any of the analyses was pay satisfaction, where Silex fared worse than Fontainebleau (β -0.08; p 0.02). The quantitative employee data do not, therefore, suggest that greater employee disaffection in Fontainebleau could account for the establishment's worse position in terms of soft skills gaps. Indeed, marginally worse results were witnessed in Silex, the least affected by soft skills gaps.

The qualitative employee data supported the picture of general contentment in each establishment. The most widely satisfying element in the hotels (reported by every respondent) was social relations with colleagues, managers and guests, 'Everyone here is great, I get on with every department, we have fun' (Receptionist, Fontainebleau); '...we go out socialising with management as well. They all come out on night outs and get as drunk as us' (Restaurant

Employee, Oxygen). Hotel employees also widely held the belief that management treated them well (e.g. were supportive when customers complained) and discussed non-pay benefits, such as discounts (e.g. reduced stays within the chains worldwide) and recognition schemes (e.g. 'employee of the month'). Silex employees reported particular satisfaction with the terms and conditions of employment (e.g. job security, flexible working, holidays and pensions), with one employee noting 'you won't find better (terms and conditions) anywhere else'. The intrinsically interesting work was also widely reported as a key satisfier.

Pay was the most commonly reported area in need of improvement in the hotels, although employees still felt pay levels were broadly reasonable. Fontainebleau's Receptionist, for example, stated that her pay was '...fine for the work I do'. Silex's slightly worse position regarding pay satisfaction, reported above, may therefore be explained by differing expectations between the establishments. Another common cause of dissatisfaction in the hotels was shift and staffing patterns. Employees in both hotels noted that tiredness caused by these issues could impact upon their ability to display customer service, highlighting a potential barrier to soft skills display.

'Sometimes after like when you're getting towards the night and you're tired so you feel a bit sort of worn out by then as well because like it's quite short-staffed a lot of the time as well so we don't get a break even though we should'. (Events employee, Fontainebleau).

Silex employees reported issues with how project work was organised with one employee stating that, 'It's very difficult to prioritise (projects) sometimes because you don't know the bigger picture' with another adding, 'Some (managers) think that their projects are more important than others and the other projects are more important'. Their biggest complaint,

however, was with the bonus and promotion system with all employees reporting an apparent lack of fairness and transparency; deemed ‘farcical’ by one respondent and ‘unfit for purpose’ by another.

Employees thus reported issues of dissatisfaction most relevant to their establishments and occupations. Fontainebleau employees’ work attitudes and effort were, however, no worse than the other establishments, as would be expected if the greater levels of soft skills gaps in Fontainebleau were primarily due to skills withdrawal. Alternative explanations for the establishments’ positions are thus needed.

Insert Table 3 about here

Research question 3: Can the existence of soft skills gaps be attributed to deficiencies in organisations’ recruitment, selection and training practices?

The discussion now turns to other organisational practices that might have led to the different observed levels of soft skills gaps between the case study organisations. A high proportion of surveyed employees reported that they had received training in the past year (93% in Fontainebleau, 86% in Oxygen and 89% in Silex). In Fontainebleau interviewees unanimously agreed that they had received induction and that training had prepared them well for their jobs. Customer service and brand training were regarded as especially important and repeated regularly. Fontainebleau had a similar proportion of employees reporting they had been trained in customer service to Oxygen (41 vs. 42 per cent) and was going through customer service ‘refresher’ training at the time of data collection. Training in Silex focussed more upon technical

skills. These data suggest that Fontainebleau's worse relative performance regarding soft skills gaps was not due to a reluctance to train.

There were, however, differences in the style of training. Fontainebleau took a prescribed approach to customer service training, rigidly enforcing brand standards, whilst Oxygen allowed employees greater agency in discovering the brand and service style for themselves, for example through free stays in the hotel during induction. These differences transferred into the organisation of work. Fontainebleau's customer service was highly prescribed (e.g. the steps to go through when serving a customer): '...some days you feel like a robot because you're saying the same things all the time' (Receptionist). Oxygen allowed their employees far greater agency in deciding how to serve customers:

'I noticed that greatly when I came here because at my last work I worked in a café ... they wouldn't allow you to make any decisions, you weren't allowed to say anything. But in here... our management won't come over and say that you shouldn't have given them, like you were wrong to say that, and they don't, they stick by you... So it's really good the fact that you've got the ability to do that (act autonomously) here' (Restaurant employee).

The prescribed and low autonomy approach to training and work organisation in Fontainebleau appeared to contribute to skills gaps as managers reported that employees could not always engage in the 'quick thinking' (Front Office Manager) required for customer service. The Food and Beverage Manager supported this assertion: 'We're looking for staff to be able to try and solve problems without having to take further, use a bit of common sense and take ownership of customer problems as well.' Where this manager reported customer service skills gaps, these activities could not always be carried out.

Some issues were also raised with induction and the subsequent need for on-job training in Fontainebleau. Although all employees were supposed to receive an induction prior to commencing employment (including brand standards and customer service training), this did not always occur:

'... If you've got a new waiter starting, they come in and they kind of shadow someone and they just try and pick it up, you know... They get a hotel general induction on the first day they start. But that's just running them through health and safety, not actually job specific training.' (Food and Beverage Manager)

This was in contrast to Oxygen's Food and Beverage Manager and HR Representative who stated that extensive customer service training was covered during induction, albeit in a way that gave employees 'guidelines' (HR respondent) rather than prescriptions. Fontainebleau's Front Office Manager also reported that some customer service skills gaps were caused by a lack of familiarity with the brand standards but was more sympathetic than the Food and Beverage Manager: '... obviously she (the HR Manager) can't go through them all (the brand standards)...it's too much to take in on the one day'.

There were also apparent deficiencies in Fontainebleau's selection practices. Fontainebleau had developed standardised competency based situational interviewing for all positions. The HR respondent reported that these competency-based interviews had been developed (and managers trained in their use), because managers often hired indiscriminately, 'based on the fact that "OK that person's willing to do the job" and not necessarily concerned with what skills they have'. However, Fontainebleau managers still reported emphasising traits such as reliability, work ethic and a wish to avoid 'trouble makers', rather than applicants' specific soft skills. Evidence for the implementation of the stated interview policy was varied.

Some employees reported that they had received situational interviews but almost half reported a process whereby managers were willing to take people on if they were happy with the conditions on offer. One employee reported that her manager was 'just looking for a pair of hands' whilst an events employee reported his experience having been recommended by his sister's friend.

'I came in and he's (the manager) like you've basically got the job then. So it was just a sort of... he says, "I have to give you an interview for the record", so we just sort of sat down and it was more of a chat'.

The HR respondent had realised the deleterious effects of Fontainebleau's selection policy, introducing a two-interview process a few months prior, to 'pick up on anything that they've (line managers) missed out on'. The Front Office Manager reported following this process. The Food and Beverage Manager, however, whilst following this process for more senior positions, believed front-line positions required only one interview. As the two-interview process was a recent development, it was unclear whether this belief had caused conflict with the HR specialist.

Oxygen's stated interview policy (supported by employees' experiences) was less formal than Fontainebleau, although managers had 'check lists' so that core areas were covered. Informal interview 'chats' were used to get to know the applicants and gauge their soft skills but, unlike Fontainebleau, managers were looking for a specific manifestation of soft skills consistent with the hotel's brand. The selection process also included a tour of the hotel and the opportunity to ask questions so that candidates could see whether their expectations 'married up with reality' (Front Office Manager). There was thus a more strategic emphasis on soft skills and 'fit' during selection in Oxygen. All Oxygen managers emphasised the need to concentrate on applicants' skills and not hire simply because a position was vacant, 'we try to be as selective as possible at

the interview stage. So softer skills we concentrate on ...' (Food and Beverage Manager).

Silex relied upon a formal panel interview with questions structured around job descriptions and applicants' technical knowledge. Presentations and work samples were also sometimes used for senior and technical support positions, respectively. The candidates' prospective line manager also sometimes conducted a second, informal, interview. All candidates received an informal tour of the department in which they were hoping to work, in some cases conducted by the line manager and combined with the informal interview. Applicants could ask questions during the informal tour in a similar way to Oxygen. Managers reported that the informal tour was an especially good way to gauge soft skills and establish person-team fit. Although the formal interview took precedence, the person conducting the tour fed their overall impression back to the interview panel. There is thus evidence that Fontainebleau's worst position in terms of soft skills gaps was (at least in part) due to indiscriminate and unstrategic selection processes, problems in induction and the manner in which training and job design may have inhibited customer service.

Discussion and conclusions

This study set out to question the conventional model blaming individuals, families and/or the education system for skills gaps (as discussed by Heckman, 2000; Handel, 2003, Gleeson and Keep, 2004 and Bryant and Jaworski, 2011). With a specific focus on soft skills gaps, this paper considered whether the 'blame game' could be turned around to instead consider whether employers caused such gaps via skills withdrawal. This withdrawal was theorised to occur because of elements of poor job quality that could reduce job satisfaction, organisational commitment (Green, 2009) and subsequently reduced engagement and work effort (Harrison,

Newman and Roth, 2006). Whilst other authors have noted how workers may withdraw from labour processes reliant on emotions (i.e. involving soft skills) (Frenkel, 2005; Vincent, 2011), the concept of soft skills withdrawal is a novel contribution.

Management in the establishment worst affected by soft skills gaps (Fontainebleau) were most likely to blame individuals for skills withdrawal and least likely to reflect on elements of job quality that may cause withdrawal. Nevertheless, the employee data did not suggest that the skills withdrawal mechanism accounted for Fontainebleau's higher levels of soft skills gaps. Questions therefore arise as to why the theorised withdrawal mechanism was not apparent; what investigation of skills withdrawal has contributed to our understanding of soft skills gaps; and how the establishments' differing levels of soft skills gaps may be better explained. These elements are now addressed in turn.

Contrary to the skills withdrawal thesis there was not widespread disaffection in Fontainebleau. There were, however, elements of poor job quality in both hotels such as low pay, antisocial hours and intense work (Clark, 2005; Green et al., 2013). Fontainebleau, in particular, could be categorised as a low quality 'high strain' environment due to the low level of autonomy given to staff (Green, 2009). The data thus support Brown et al. (2012) that workers may report high levels of job satisfaction alongside objectively poor conditions. One explanation as to why skills withdrawal did not occur in the way theorised is that the hotels' younger part-time workforce may have had lower employment expectations, for example because of a focus on non-work commitments (Conway and Briner, 2002). A further prominent qualitative finding was the high degree of satisfaction that the hotel workers obtained from workplace social relationships. This 'solidaristic orientation' has been found to explain high levels of hospitality worker satisfaction even in objectively poor quality work (Martin, 2004). Job quality may also

act as a barrier to skills display without causing disaffection. Some Fontainebleau employees, for example, reported that working patterns caused tiredness and inhibited customer service, but did not hold negative attitudes towards their employer.

Despite the withdrawal mechanism not operating as proposed, managers in all organisations (and especially the hotels) did witness soft skills withdrawal. In many cases, however, (most explicitly in Oxygen) it was noted that those disaffected and withdrawing skills had left the organisation. The withdrawal thesis may, therefore, reveal more about those leaving organisations, rather than how soft skills gaps are caused by current employees' emotional withdrawal and misbehaviour (Frenkel, 2005; Vincent, 2011). Indeed, turnover rates mirrored the relative job quality of the three establishments with Silex lowest and the high strain Fontainebleau highest.

Reports of skills withdrawal, whether in current or former employees, also revealed differences in how managers attributed blame for skills problems. In the organisations where withdrawal was most widely reported (the hotels), Oxygen managers were highly cognisant of how the nature of work could cause withdrawal, even in their high autonomy environment. Fontainebleau managers were, however, more likely to blame individuals. The propensity for employers to blame workplace discontent on individuals rather than organisations (Smith, 2006) thus differed, even between those employing workers with ostensibly low labour power. The tendency for Fontainebleau managers to blame individuals rather than reflect on the organisation was, however, highly salient as organisational practices were found to be especially germane in explaining this establishment's higher levels of soft skills gaps.

The data did, therefore, reveal that soft skills gaps may be blamed on employers rather than purely individuals, the family or the education system. This was, however, due to deficient

organisational practices. Whilst extant literature has considered difficulties in employers' recruitment and retention strategies (Adams et al., 2002; Devins and Hogarth, 2005; Wilton, 2006) this study revealed how organisations' resourcing practices may cause internal soft skills gaps. Fontainebleau suffered from an ad hoc and reactive approach to selection. Furthermore, training practices did not appear to furnish the organisation with the required customer service skills. The prescribed approach to training conflicted with managers' needs for employees to show initiative. There were also issues in induction (where this was received), possibly because the tightly defined brand standards were too onerous to cover at this stage. Oxygen, however, had a more informal, less prescribed approach to training and work organisation. Here employees were allowed greater agency in customer service provision and Oxygen's practices mirrored the organisation's service requirements. The findings reaffirm that UK employers are not reluctant to train in soft skills (UKCES, 2014). However, simply considering training incidence as a means to reduce soft skills gaps is insufficient. Thought needs to be given to how the nature and style of training aligns with the organisational context, to elicit the desired manifestation of soft skills. This alignment of resourcing practices with organisational requirements extends to selection, with management needing to strategically reflect upon the kinds of soft skills they require. Although Fontainebleau's HR representative was clearly aware of some issues, especially regarding selection, the message appeared to have been lost on some other managers.

The findings regarding the organisational practices that may inhibit soft skills gaps chime with some elements that have been identified as constituting strategically integrated high performance work systems. Such elements include jobs that are designed to allow autonomy, rigorous selection and systematic training (Appelbaum et al., 2000). However, rather than simply

supporting a universalistic ‘best practice’ approach, the organisations performing well in terms of soft skills gaps tailored their practices to their needs in a manner also consistent with ‘best fit’ (Boxall and Purcell, 2008). For example, Oxygen and Silex both departed from psychometric best practice in some selection practices, relying on more informal methods. These methods were, however, successful in hiring employees with skills that fit the organisation (for a discussion of how the hotels’ practices differentially enabled fit between skills and their service brands, see Hurrell and Scholarios, 2014).

Whilst the skills withdrawal mechanism did not operate as conceptualised, the investigation nevertheless has policy implications. Some managerial regimes blame soft skills gaps on employees either lacking or withdrawing skills when these gaps are, in fact, not due to an inherent lack of skills but rather inadequacies in organisations’ HR practices. This reinforces the importance of managerial attribution in reporting soft skills gaps, and the need for more in-depth policy understanding of why these gaps actually occur. Such understanding can enable better targeted policy interventions. Soft skills gaps caused by deficient HR practices do not, for example, require the changes to skills and education policy that employers frequently demand (Gleeson and Keep, 2004).

The findings also have implications for how managers should reflect upon their organisational practices, rather than placing too much blame for soft skills gaps on individuals. The notion of strategic fit between selection, induction, training and organisational goals is supported. Such fit can enable the desired manifestation of soft skills within particular organisational settings. There is, perhaps, no uniform best practice solution to reduce soft skills deficits, as the exact design of practices should reflect organisational needs. Principles such as

the strategic internal alignment of HR practices, however, remain as a best practice recommendation (Boxall and Purcell, 2008).

The current study possesses caveats in terms of only examining organisations in two service sub-sectors and it would, for example, be interesting to extend research into other relevant sectors such as retail and business consultancy. The research also concentrated on large multi-site hotels and a further potential area for future research is to see whether the withdrawal mechanism operates in smaller hotels, which may be less likely to display sophisticated employment practices (Hoque, 2000). Finally, a key future research direction is to extend this investigation into a large-scale qualitative project, running parallel to the Employers' Skills Surveys. Such a project can elucidate upon the reasons for skills gaps, and help to disentangle where the blame for managerially reported soft skills deficits really lies.

Endnotes

1. From 2003 until 2010 a separate Employers' Skills Survey was conducted in Scotland. Now the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) conducts a UK wide survey.
2. These studies were particularly concerned with the psychological contract. Given the highly subjective nature of this contract, however, it was ultimately considered an inappropriate resource for explaining differences at the establishment level.

References

Adams J, Greig M and McQuaid RW (2002) Mismatch in local labour markets in Central

Scotland: The neglected role of demand. *Urban Studies* 39(8): 1399–1416.

Appelbaum E, Bailey T, Berg P and Kalleberg AL (2000) *Manufacturing Advantage: Why High*

- Performance Work Systems pay off*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Boxall, P and Purcell, J (2008) *Strategy and Human Resource Management*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Bryant L and Jaworski K (2011) Gender, embodiment and place: The gendering of skills shortages in the Australian mining and food and beverage processing industries. *Human Relations* 64(10): 1345-67.
- Brown A, Charlwood A and Spencer DA (2012) Not all that it might seem: Why job satisfaction is worth studying despite it being a poor summary measure of job quality. *Work, Employment and Society* 26(6): 1007-1018.
- Clark A (2005) Your Money or Your Life: Changing Job Quality in OECD Countries. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 43(3): 377-400.
- Conway N and Briner R (2002) Full-Time versus Part-Time Employees: Understanding the Links Between Work Status, the Psychological Contract and Work Attitudes. *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 61(2): 279-301.
- Devins D and Hogarth T (2005) Employing the unemployed: Some case study evidence on the role and practice of employers. *Urban Studies* 42(2): 245-56.
- Frenkel S (2005) Service Workers in Search of Decent Work. In: Ackroyd S, Batt R, Thompson P and Tolbert PS (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Work and Organization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gleeson D and Keep E (2004) Voice Without Accountability: The Changing Relationship Between Employers, the State and Education. *Oxford Review of Education* 30(1): 37-62.
- Green F (2009) *Job Quality in Britain*. Wath-upon-Deerne: UKCES
- Green F, Mostafa T, Parent-Thirion A, Vermeulen G, van Houten, G, Biletta I, Lyly-Yrjanainen,

- M (2013) Is Job Quality Becoming More Unequal? *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 66(4): 753-84.
- Grugulis I (2006) *Skills, Training and Human Resource Development: A Critical Text*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Guest DE and Conway N (1997) *Employee Motivation and the Psychological Contract; The third annual IPD survey of the state of the employment relationship*. London: Institute of Personnel and Development.
- Guest DE and Conway N (2001) *Public and Private Sector Perspectives on the Psychological Contract: Results of the 2001 CIPD Survey*. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.
- Hackman JR and Oldham GR (1980) *Work Redesign*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Handel MJ (2003) Skills Mismatch in the Labour Market. *Annual Review of Sociology* 29: 135-65.
- Harrison DA, Newman DA and Roth PL (2006) How Important are Job Attitudes? Meta-Analytic Comparisons of Integrative Behavioral Outcomes and Time Sequences. *Academy of Management Journal* 49(2): 305-325.
- Heckman JJ (2000) Policies to Foster Human Capital. *Research in Economics* 54(1): 3-56.
- Hoque K (2000) *Human Resource Management in the Hotel Industry: Strategy, Innovation and Performance*, London: Routledge.
- Hurrell SA (2014) Critical Realism and Mixed Methods Research: Combining the Extensive and Intensive at Multiple Levels. In: Edwards PK, O'Mahoney J and Vincent S (eds) *Studying Organizations Using Critical Realism: A Practical Guide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Hurrell SA and Scholarios D (2014) The People Make the Brand: Reducing Social Skills Gaps through Person-Brand fit and HRM Practices. *Journal of Service Research* 17(1): 54-67.
- Hurrell SA, Scholarios D and Thompson P (2013) More than a 'Humpty Dumpty' term? Strengthening the conceptualization of soft skills. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 34(1): 158-179.
- Lloyd C and Payne J (2009) 'Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing': Interrogating new skill concepts in service work – the view from two UK call centres. *Work, Employment and Society* 23(4): 617-34.
- Martin E (2004) 'Who's kicking whom?' Employees' orientation to work. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 16 (3): 182-88.
- Price JL (1997) Handbook of Organizational Measurement, *International Journal of Manpower*. 18(4/5/6): 305-558.
- Riggio RE, Riggio HR, Salinas C and Cole E J (2003) The role of social and emotional communication skills in leader emergence and effectiveness. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research and Practice* 7(2): 83–103.
- Sayer A (2007) Moral economy and employment. In: Bolton, S C and Houlihan, M *Searching for the Human in Human Resource Management*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Scottish Government (2011) *Skills in Scotland 2010*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.
- Sinclair RR, Martin JE, Michel RP (1999) Full-Time and Part-Time Subgroup Differences in Job Attitudes and Demographic Characteristics. *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 55(3): 337-357.
- Smith, C (2006) The double indeterminacy of labour power: Labour effort and labour mobility.

Work, Employment and Society 20 (2): 389-402.

Spector, J (1997) *Job satisfaction: Application, assessment, causes and consequences*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

UKCES (2014) *UK Commission's Employer Skills Survey 2013: UK Results*. Wath-upon-Deane: UKCES.

Vincent S (2011) The emotional labour process: An essay on the economy of feelings, *Human Relations*, 64(10): 1369-92.

Watson D, Webb R, and Johnson S (2006) Influence costs and the reporting of skills deficiencies. *Human Relations* 59(1): 37-59.

Wilton N (2006) Strategic Choice and Organisational Context in HRM in the UK Hotel Sector. *The Service Industries Journal*, 26 (8): 903-19.

Table 1: Establishment details, demographics of survey respondents and details of interviewees in each cases study

	Hotel 1	Hotel 2	SciServe
Establishment characteristics			
N. employees.	130.	220.	220.
Labour turnover in past 12 months.	75%.	42%.	4%.
Proportion of part-time staff (reported by HR respondents).	Approx. 60 – 65%.	Approx. 65%.	< 20%.
Survey respondent demographics			
Response rate.	22%.	23%.	47%.
Age profile.	15-30: 59%. 31-40: 31%. 41-50: 10%. 51 plus -	15-30: 86%. 31-40: 8%. 41-50: 4%. 51 plus: 2%.	15-30: 14%. 31-40: 21%. 41-50: 28%. 51 plus: 37%.
Average tenure in organisation.	3 years 11 months.	2 years 3 months (hotel only been open for 3 years 6 months).	16 years 7 months.
Employment status.	Full-time: 83%. Part time: 17%. Temporary -	Full-time: 72%. Part-time: 26%. Temporary: 2%.	Full-time: 89%. Part-time: 12%. Temporary: -
Interviewee details			
Managers.	5 respondents: HR respondent 1; HR respondent 2 ¹ ; Head Chef; Front Office (Reception); Food and Beverage (F and B).	6 respondents: HR respondent; Deputy General Manager (DGM); Head Chef; Front Office; Food and Beverage; Head Housekeeper ² .	7 respondents: HR respondent; Senior Scientific Manager; 2 Heads of scientific specialisms; Head of Cartography; Head of IT; Head of Administration.
Employees.	7 interviews with customer facing employees in reception, F and B and events positions. 3 interviewees part-time, 2 female and 1 non-UK national.	4 individual interviewees and a focus group (8 employees) with customer facing employees in reception, F and B and events positions. 9 of the total respondents were part-time, 6 female and 1 non-UK national.	3 interviewed as a focus group from professional, technical and support positions. All worked full-time, 1 female, all UK nationals.

Notes: ¹In Hotel 1 a second HR respondent was interviewed it had been planned to interview the General Managers (GMs) or DGMs in both hotels but as the F and B manager was also the DGM they had already given an interview regarding F and B staff and the GM was not available.

²Hotel 1's Head Housekeeper was unable or unwilling to participate in the study.

Table 2: Managers' perceptions of skills withdrawal in the three establishments

	Soft skills ever deteriorate over time	Examples of why soft skills did/did not deteriorate over time.	Withdrawal identified (Y/N)? If so who was to blame (Most important factor highlighted in bold)
Hotel 1			
HR respondent 1	Yes	Demotivation; 'bad' co-workers 'bringing people down'; lack of appreciation by managers.	Y. Individual/colleagues/managers
HR respondent 2	Yes	'Complacency'; 'demotivation'; having to constantly tell subordinates what to do.	Y. Individual/managers/subordinates
Head Chef	Yes	'Worsening enthusiasm'.	Y. Individual/HR department
F and B Manager	Yes	'Boredom' (because of company being 'not dynamic' and staid); people getting into 'comfort zones'	Y. Individual/organisation
Front Office Manager	Yes	'Laziness'; loss of interest/morale; 'falling out' with co-worker(s).	Y. Individual/colleagues
Hotel 2			
HR respondent	Yes	People stop enjoying jobs; because of stressful periods at work; repetitive nature of jobs; poor treatment by managers; employees wilfully not engaging.	Y. Individual/job/managers
Deputy General Manager	Yes	People 'disinterested and bored'; turnover in department causing pressure; dissatisfaction with terms and conditions; dissatisfaction with direction of business; the way that people are managed.	Y. Individual/managers/job/organisation/wider life
Head Chef	Yes	Repetitiveness of job; boredom; may be fault of department head.	Y. Individual/job/management
F and B manager	Yes	'Motivation'; events in personal life; being 'stuck in a rut' in hotel for too long; repetitiveness of job and training activities.	Y. Individual/job/organisation/personal life
Front Office Manager	Yes	People become 'a bit lazy and laid back' letting 'standards slip' because of lack of ambition stemming from too much time in same job. NOT directly because of <i>dissatisfaction</i> with job/organisation.	Y. Individual.
Head Housekeeper	No	Skills don't deteriorate BUT people do get into 'bad habits' because of lack of interest/motivation partially caused by job.	N. N/A

Table 2: Managers' perceptions of skills withdrawal in the three establishments (cont...)

	Soft skills ever deteriorate over time	Examples of why soft skills did/did not deteriorate over time.	Withdrawal identified (Y/N)? If so who was to blame (Most important factor highlighted in bold)
<i>SciServe</i> HR respondent	No	<i>Performance</i> may vary over time but skills remain in individual.	N. N/A
Head of Administration	Yes	'Lack of focus'; 'Complacency'; Issues in personal life.	Y. Individual /personal life
Head of Specialism 1	No	People may occasionally act 'out of character'. NOT a skills issue.	N. N/A
Head of Specialism 2	No	'Everyone has their off moments'. NOT a skills issue.	N. N/A
Senior Scientific Manager	Yes	Scientists can withdraw and become 'grumpy and uncommunicative' partially because of personality, partially because managers don't get them 'out and about' enough.	Y. Individual/management
Head of ICT	No	Skills are identified during recruitment and selection and remain with the individual over time.	N. N/A
Head of Cartography	No	Workload may cause less 'interaction' with colleagues but these skills remain even if not always able to be used.	N. N/A

Table 3: Descriptive statistics and ANOVA analysis of organisational commitment, job satisfaction and work effort by case study establishment

Variable	Establishment	Range ^a	Mean	Std. dev	ANOVA F value /significance
1. Satisfaction with job security (3 items).	Hotel 1	4.00 – 7.00	5.68	0.94	0.11 (NS)
	Hotel 2	2.50 – 7.00	5.77	1.07	
	SciServe	1.00 – 7.00	5.67	1.22	
2. Satisfaction with pay and rewards (2 items).	Hotel 1	1.50 – 7.00	5.14	1.41	0.71 (NS)
	Hotel 2	1.00 – 7.00	4.94	1.52	
	SciServe	1.00 – 7.00	4.79	1.43	
3. Satisfaction with amount of growth allowed on the job (4 items).	Hotel 1	3.25 – 6.75	5.22	0.95	0.24 (NS)
	Hotel 2	1.00 – 7.00	5.42	1.29	
	SciServe	1.50 – 7.00	5.36	1.23	
4. Satisfaction with social relations at work (4 items).	Hotel 1	2.33 – 7.00	5.70	0.95	3.62*
	Hotel 2	3.33 – 7.00	5.92	0.91	
	SciServe	2.67 – 7.00	5.49	0.94	
5. Satisfaction with supervision (3 items)	Hotel 1	2.00 – 7.00	5.56	1.19	1.79 (NS)
	Hotel 2	1.00 – 7.00	5.76	1.24	
	SciServe	1.00 – 7.00	5.36	1.25	
6. Overall job satisfaction (composite of facets 1-5).	Hotel 1	3.52 – 6.86	5.46	0.88	1.02 (NS)
	Hotel 2	2.07 – 7.00	5.58	1.01	
	SciServe	2.57 – 6.86	5.35	0.94	
7. Commitment (2 items)	Hotel 1	2.00 – 4.00	3.52	0.57	1.94 (NS)
	Hotel 2	2.50 – 4.00	3.62	0.45	
	SciServe	1.50 – 4.00	3.43	0.63	
10. Work effort (1 item).	Hotel 1	1.00 – 4.00	2.96	0.88	3.34*
	Hotel 2	1.00 – 4.00	3.33	0.77	
	SciServe	1.00 – 4.00	2.99	0.77	

Note: Base N = 180; Hotel 1, N=28; Hotel2 N =49; SciServe, N =103 ^a Maximum scores for each variable: Job satisfaction facets and overall score = 7.00; commitment and effort =4.00.