

**‘A minute’s a life-time in fast-food!’: Managerial job quality in the quick service  
restaurant sector**

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**Abstract**

The fast-food sector remains significantly under researched relative to its size and importance. Drawing on qualitative data this article explores the nature of managerial work in a market leading organisation. The research speaks to important contemporary debates vis-a-vis managerial job quality in routinised service sector work and the compatibility of such jobs with key quality of working life criteria (e.g. opportunities for skills development, decision latitude, voice and meaning). The theoretical contribution of the article lies in the rigor of the analytical lens and exploration of how objective QWL criteria are coloured by subjective expectations and social processes to produce nuanced and unanticipated outcomes e.g. accounts of rewarding, interesting and meaningful work notwithstanding severe structural constraints and bureaucratic rigidities.

**Key words:** Fast-food, Job quality, work organisation, routinised work, bureaucracy, management, agency.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that the structural relations of a capitalist economy in which firms operate impacts on how organisational practices are shaped and implemented (e.g. Bolton, 2007: 8). Sociologists thus tend to view changes in job quality as reflecting the outcomes of long term structural features of the labour market (Kalleberg (2016: 119) e.g. cost cutting as a competitive strategy, job design that limits autonomy and a neo liberal policy environment (see Carré et al. 2012). Vital questions concern whether high job quality is inherently restricted to certain contexts and occupations (Grote and Guest, (2017: 158) and if the acuteness of such pressures precludes others. The manner in which structural pressures intersect with job quality is especially severe in certain sectors of the economy – significantly those where success depends on price leadership allied to uniformity in the provision of the product or service. Fast-food – the focus of this study – represents the prototypical service sector example (see e.g. Leidner, 1993), the corollary being the requirements for efficiency, calculability, predictability and control (Ritzer, 1998). The ubiquity of the fast-food phenomenon has inevitably attracted academic scrutiny and references to neo-Fordist regimented, assembly line techniques (e.g. Leidner, 1993; Royle, 2002: 61) have become an enduring cliché. Indeed, there is a lineage of accounts stretching back to Garson (1988) depicting quick service restaurants (QSRs) – the industry’s preferred terminology – as the apogee of Braverman’s (1974) ‘degradation of work’ thesis, manifest in a deskilled and alienated labour process. Job quality is however a multi-dimensional phenomenon reflected in diverse understandings of what constitutes a ‘good’ job (Kalleberg, 2016: 112) involving both objective and subjective components

(e.g. Brown et al., 2012; Kalleberg, 2016). Within the fast-food literature the analytical gaze has for the most part however fallen on 'crew' members i.e. customer facing shop-floor personnel (e.g. Allan et al. 2006; Lam and Zhang, 2003). Surprisingly, while various authors (e.g. Royle 2002) have highlighted the presence of pervasive bureaucratic controls, 'restaurant' managers have not hitherto formed the principal focus of any study. This article accordingly investigates front-line managerial work in 'QSRco' – a multi-national fast-food organisation with a long-standing presence in the UK. The research speaks to important debates vis-a-vis managerial job quality in front-line service sector work (e.g. Grugulis et al., 2011; Lloyd and Payne, 2014) and whether 'meaning' can be derived from routinised (Brannan et al.; 2015) and stigmatised work' (e.g. Bailey and Maddan, 2017). The theoretical contribution of the article lies in the rigor of the analytical lens and exploration of how objective quality of working life (QWL) criteria (e.g. Grote and Guest, 2017) are coloured by subjective expectations and social processes (see Brown et al. (2012) to produce nuanced and indeed unanticipated outcomes.

### **ROUTINISED MANAGERIAL WORK AND JOB QUALITY: THE FAST-FOOD SECTOR**

The notion of job quality includes a number of characteristics including fair pay, skills development and opportunities for employee representation (Grote and Guest, 2017). Fast food work with its inevitable 'McJob' ( Etzioni, 1986) connotations sits uneasily with this construct. More recently there has been an acceptance that ostensibly 'bad jobs' can possess a mixture of good and bad characteristics (e.g. Sengupta et al. 2009). Sengupta et al. (2009: 49), for example, observe how discrete product and labour market influences can produce variegated outcomes e.g. job security allied to

low pay in food manufacturing. Consistent with this more sensitive approach Gould (2010: 780) usefully cautions, 'fast-food work is a more nuanced phenomenon than has been previously suggested'. This work highlights the need to disentangle the dimensions of work organisation and human resource management as such jobs may have repressive task features allied nonetheless to supportive HRM practices e.g. flexible working hours and opportunities for training. Of course, there are limits to this 'modular' (Gould, 2010: 784) view of jobs. Almost any work will have certain redeeming features and there is a danger of resorting to a crude reductionism via a 'fragmented perspective' (Grote and Guest, 2017:155) at the expense of a more holistic analysis. The above body of work is nonetheless useful in cautioning that the QWL phenomenon needs to be operationalised as a multi-faceted construct – an approach this article responds to.

Models exploring the characteristics of job quality (e.g. Grote and Guest, 2017; Walton, 1973) stress a number of factors. A common denominator is the development of human capacities e.g. through jobs that promote skills development and decision latitude (Grote and Guest, 2017:156). This aligns with sociological theory (e.g. Marx and later Braverman) which has long emphasised the importance of non-economic aspects of work (Kalleberg, 2016: 113). Such attributes are perforce not typically associated with routinised front line managerial service sector work. Grugulis et al's (2011: 203-209) study of retail managers, for example, points to 'small discretionary spaces' and 'trivial freedoms. Lloyd and Payne's (2014: 475) investigation into the UK café sector echoes this and similarly highlights how a significant part of the managerial function involved the performance of 'routine tasks'. QSR managerial work offers an extreme example of such shortcomings given the activities of line management have been documented as being heavily regimented through bureaucratic mechanisms

(Royle 2002: 65) that, for example, set detailed standards for each task and criteria for evaluating workers (Leidner, 1993:133). It would nonetheless be disingenuous to suggest this necessarily gives rise to 'an arena of arid, impersonal, formal rationality' á la Weber (Korczynski et al., 2006: 16). As Leidner (1993: 29-30) has convincingly argued, there are limits to routinisation; not least because this 'requires stable and predictable working conditions that cannot be guaranteed when people are the raw materials'. That is, managers in such settings ultimately have to 'manage' i.e. coax workers into an optimum level of performance within a finite budget. The demands are acute because the workforce will often comprise employees with very limited skills, qualifications and overall employability 'washed up' (Royle, 2000: 82) by the local labour market. The challenges and complexities of regulating effort i.e. transforming erstwhile 'sullen' and 'listless' (Leidner, 1993: 80) recruits into an 'enthusiastic energized group' should not be underestimated.

Studies routinely paint this aspect of the QSR managerial function in negative, 'hard' HRM terms. Allan et al. (2006: 411; see also Leidner, 1993: 78) note how fast-food managers 'hustled' front line workers 'to make them work faster' and expected employees to work unpaid overtime. Royle (2000: 72) similarly refers to managers cutting back on employees' hours as a standard way of demonstrating displeasure for poor performance and 'negative' attitudes. Parallel research, often by the same authors, however, suggests a 'softer' more developmental managerial role, stressing the importance *inter alia* of communication, recognition (e.g. Royle, 2000: 66) and advancement opportunities (Gould, 2010: 799). These varied findings indicate managers ultimately possess a degree of agency and 'operative control' (Reed, cited in Bolton and Houlihan, 2010: 383) within a wider framework of centralised 'allocative control', which can be used discretionally to shape the nature of the managerial role.

The key issue here is whether the scope for personal initiative is sufficient to drive a sense of wellbeing, meaning (e.g. Bailey and Madden, 2017) and indeed dignity (e.g. Hodson, 2001). Research in this area is underdeveloped (Rosso, 2010: 92) and the extent to which those working in highly routinised (Brannen et al., 2016) and stigmatised (e.g. Bailey and Madden, 2017: 4) occupations can derive meaning remains controversial. Meaning is acquired in a number of ways e.g. the perception that work invokes the provision of the greater good and temporal autonomy within the labour process (Bailey and Madden, 2017:4-12). There are longstanding concerns regarding the compatibility of meaning and dignity with the rigid bureaucratisation that accompanies routinised work (e.g. Beynon 1973: 187). The realisation of meaning under inhospitable structural conditions will depend at least partly on the creative agentive activity of the workers under consideration (Hodson, 2001: 4) – a proposition the current study is well placed to explore.

It is generally established that job quality is a complex, multidimensional construct (Kalleberg, 2016:123). It has accordingly been acknowledged that the experience of low discretion work depends on a range of factors including how such work is supported (Houlihan (2002: 70). That is, any evaluation of job quality needs to consider the characteristics of the organisation in which the tasks are performed as well as the intrinsic nature of the job. Developing this line of analysis Grote and Guest (2017:156) list a range of QWL criteria derived from human resource management (HRM) supports e.g. fair compensation and opportunities for flexible working and representation. At an operational level there is evidence of organisations seeking to ameliorate certain of the problems of routinised work through the ‘co-mingling of control and HRM commitment strategies’ – the low discretion high commitment (LDHC) phenomenon (Houlihan, 2002: 68). Such an observation appears paradoxical

given high commitment management (HCM) is typically associated with high-scope flexibility work environments (Houlihan, 2002: 68). However, as Houlihan (2002: 69) advises, commitment strategies (strategic recruitment and selection, performance based pay, training, communication and so forth) can be implemented in both a comprehensive and superficial manner. The utilisation of an approach skewed towards the latter has been identified in the fast-food sector aligning with Houlihan's (2002: 75) notion of a LDHC 'containment' orientation involving a 'patchy' 'overlay' of HCM practices. Gould's (2010) study of McDonalds (Australia) indicated aspects of job security via the use of an internally skewed labour market, a rudimentary system of performance management and aspects of workplace flexibility. Studies similarly point to opportunities for advancement (Royle, 2002: 64) and the possibility of career (Gould, 2010: 799) for those with poor academic backgrounds (Gould, 2010: 799; Royle, 2002: 64). The issue of occupational mobility is especially pertinent to the managerial population – a theme developed in the findings.

Job quality assessments do not solely reflect formally imposed managerial job and working conditions. Sociological analysis highlights the need to explore agential capacity and its role within the structural constraints (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2014: 871) imposed. Sociologists have similarly long noted the role social processes and conventions play in influencing the experience of work (see e.g. Brown et al., 2012: 1013). Ethnographic studies have highlighted how fellow workers and occupational communities provide the 'social fabric' that is often crucial for the derivation of meaning in ostensibly challenging conditions (e.g. Hodson, 2001: 18). This may involve social diversions, friendship or the provision of a bulwark against managerial fiat (Hodson, 2001: 18). It is likewise important to note that job quality is a construct that contains subjective aspects (Kalleberg, 2016: 123) and workers' expectations thus play a

crucial role (Galván, 2012: 173). Any credible examination needs to consider the characteristics of the worker highlighting the salience of class and a socio-demographic line of analysis. There is of course a danger in relying too heavily on subjective interpretations (see Brown et al., 2012: 1011) – the realm of psychological theorists. Job satisfaction ratings say little about the quality of jobs (Perales et al. 2016: 701) and the fact that disadvantaged workers may become habituated to injurious job characteristics does not render ‘bad’ jobs ‘good’. Kalleberg (2016:124) usefully reminds us that while it is clear job quality depends on the characteristics of both jobs and people, we do not yet have unanimity on a model of what comprises good jobs. What is thus crucial is how the subjective data are interpreted and this requires an analysis of the full social context that shapes attitudes (Brown et al.(2012: 1015-16). Drawing on such insights, and using fast-food as the empirical platform, this article systematically dissects the nature of managerial job quality in front line service sector work. The central issue addressed is whether such highly routinised work can deliver a positive QWL experience. The remainder of this article is structured as follows: initially a synopsis is provided of the means of data capture. The main body of the article then explores the job attributes of the managerial function. Context is provided via a discussion of salient workplace features vis-a-vis HR processes, the individual characteristics of the managerial respondents and the social setting of work. In the concluding section the various empirical observations are afforded theoretical scrutiny.

## **RESEARCH STRATEGY**



This article is concerned with the theme of job quality in an ostensibly inhospitable environment. There are subtle social processes at work and the study accordingly adopted an in-depth, qualitative approach to extract intricate details about important phenomena including agential capacity, work expectations and social ties. The extraction of such data concerning 'feelings' and 'thought processes' lends itself naturally to a qualitative approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 11) given its sensitivity to the lived experience of individuals. The subsequent presentation and analysis of data draws on conversations with thirty-nine managers and support staff in 'QSRco', a fast-food organisation employing over 10,000 UK workers – further contextual information is provided in the empirical section. The data were gathered via a combination of one-on-one semi structured interviews, joint interviews and small focus group discussions (three to five respondents) held between August 2015 and April 2017. The spacing of the sessions over a two year period lent itself to an iterative approach which involved the checking and building of knowledge in key areas e.g. work processes, relationships and HR systems. The sessions – twenty-three in total – took place at various locations including the UK head office and a recently opened 'drive-thru' restaurant. The vast majority, however, were convened at an off-site training venue operated by an independent third party. E.mail addresses were provided by the organisers and the respondents were selected through a form of random sampling. All interviews/focus group sessions were conducted by one or other of the research team. Given the highly sensitive nature of the material, standard BSA ethical guidelines were adhered to regarding informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity and data security.

The respondents comprised a vertical slice of the restaurant management hierarchy i.e. representatives of the team leader, assistant manager, manager and area

manager grades (demographic information is provided in the next section). The vast majority worked in the 'corporate' division of the business i.e. restaurants owned and operated by QSRco. This article draws on responses from those in franchised units where they refer to matters determined centrally e.g. training and H&S. Testimony was also gathered from staff providing a local support function (mostly training) all of whom had recent restaurant managerial experience. The interview/focus group sessions were wide ranging. Questions related to personal characteristics, job content (e.g. the pace and intensity of work and areas of autonomy), HR support (terms and conditions, training and development opportunities, voice and so forth) and organisational culture. That is, a combination of the objective, subjective and social influences that have been identified as influencing the experience of work (e.g. Brown et al., 212; Galván, 2012). To further probe emergent themes additional discussions were held with senior HR managers in various functional areas i.e. staff development, reward and resourcing. These were used to verify important details relating to performance management, communication and organisational structure etc. The discussions varied in length from forty minutes to one hour twenty-six minutes.

Epistemologically, this article falls within the sphere of inductive theory building research. Consistent with this, there was a need for fine-grained data analysis. Accordingly, the interview/focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. An amalgamation of *a priori* and emergent codes was utilised to scrutinise the transcriptions. Because elements of extant output (e.g. Grote and Guest, 2017) were used to guide the initial research, certain of its constructs were adopted as *a priori* codes e.g. ('decision latitude'). As analysis progressed inevitably certain categories and descriptors could not be readily categorised into the coding system

and emergent codes were explored and added. There was thus an iterative relationship between data analysis and theory.

## **FINDINGS**

### **The characteristics of the managers**

Of the 31 respondents with operational managerial experience 13 were female. The age range was 21 to 62 – the average being 35. There were four broad patterns of career mobility. The first group, ‘externals’ had worked in other parts of the hospitality industry, often the coffee bar sector, entering QSRco as assistant managers. These were often attracted by the developmental opportunities on offer given the myriad of restaurant formats and sizes. The second grouping, ‘insiders’ – the clear majority – had entered as crew members on a part-time basis while studying. None had originally contemplated a career in fast-food. For some education had not resulted in the anticipated outcomes i.e. entry into their chosen field and QSRco was providing a surrogate career. Consider here, for example, a twenty-nine-year-old restaurant manager who had initially joined as a crew member to fund a programme of study which culminated in a Master’s engineering degree from a top-ranking university. The aspiration to follow his brothers into a technical profession was unfulfilled notwithstanding a stream of applications to graduate training schemes. Managerial opportunities within QSRco were subsequently highlighted, something not previously considered. For others, the motivation was proactive rather than reactive. Several had exited full-time education at various stages attracted by the possibilities of combining training with managerial experience and a salary to boot. Informal social processes were a crucial influence – line managers, who had typically navigated a similar path,

were often closely involved as mentors, signposting the openings on offer. The decision to quit full-time education was based on a rational, often carefully considered, cost benefit analysis – a choice not always condoned by friends and family. As one thirty-one year old female restaurant manager recalled,

The stigma was ‘oh my god, it’s QSRco!’... So I remember going home to my mum and saying ‘that accountancy job that I want to do and the accountant I want to be is no more, I’m going to be a team leader at QSRco!’ It wasn’t until I hit restaurant manager that my mum actually apologised because I could have gone to university in my teens, early twenties, and racked up a huge [debt] and then not had a job at the end of it.

A third group, ‘drifters’, typically in their early twenties, had joined after moving from job-to-job e.g. other parts of the hospitality industry, factory work, plastering and plumbing. Fast-food was typically viewed a stop gap until something better came along. These fit Royle’s (2000:82) depiction of those ‘washed up’ by the labour market due to inadequate qualifications. Finally, five of the respondents, the most educated of the sample, were migrants. Examples include a female who had a law degree from Poland and an Egyptian male economics graduate who had worked as a journalist prior to the Arab Spring. Consistent with other interpretations of the career trajectories of migrants, all originally viewed entry level positions in hospitality as a ‘stepping stone’ (e.g. Wickham et al. 2009: 93) to better paid, more prestigious employment. Another Polish respondent, for example, trained’ in physical education had originally joined to save for a car but subsequently moved through various rungs of operations

management into a head office training function. Given such mobility QSRco was increasingly viewed as a career 'escalator' (Fielding, 1992) rather than temporary point of entry. Indeed, there was a feeling the low status attached to fast-food managerial work was advantageous, reducing competition from British graduates.

## **Job characteristics**

### Working hours and work intensity

Any systematic analysis of job content needs to consider a range of criteria including consideration of the total life space (Grote and Guest, 2017: 156). Previous fast-food research (e.g. Royle, 2000: 69) has indicated the presence of a long-hours culture, a finding endorsed by the current study. QSRco managers were formally contracted to work forty-four hours per week but many worked significantly in excess of this – sixty to seventy hours being far from uncommon. Indeed, for new managerial appointees long-hours were regarded as a rite of passage. External managerial recruits typically found the initial immersion into this punishing schedule demanding. Indeed, long-hours allied to the physically taxing nature of the work was cited as a factor behind very high levels of attrition amongst 'externals' and the modest (40%) retention rate. For those that progress internally the team leader function was viewed as a crucial proving ground. While such workers have managerial responsibilities (e.g. running shifts and handling deliveries) the level of pay is only marginally above that of crew members resulting in a high degree of attrition. One recalled working sixty to seventy hours a week for three years before being rewarded with his own store. For one sub-set of respondents – so called 'fixers', i.e. trouble-shooters – long-hours went with the territory. Theirs was a nomadic existence, being appointed to underperforming units

for a relatively short space of time – one year to eighteen months – the task being to improve culture and operational standards. Re-educating, training and upskilling crew in a ‘broken store’ was viewed as an extremely demanding and time consuming task. As one experienced ‘fixer’ noted,

The work life balance is tough when you are a ‘fixer’ because you’re in the ‘shop’ 24/7. You can do seventy hours plus; ninety hours even in a week...Even when you go home [for a break] in the evening, you’re thinking oh, I’ve got to go back in another couple of hours.

Levels of stress were elevated because of the ability to access real time data (e.g. sales) via smart phone devices and the resultant blurring of the home-work boundary. The upshot for some was a form of (virtual) management via text messaging,

The company do say take days off; have time away from work; turn off your phone; don’t engage in work – ‘WhatsApp’ and all those sort of things. But we can’t help ourselves, we’re our own worst enemy (restaurant manager).

Nonetheless, for the most part the respondents did not experience such demands as significantly burdensome – there was little evidence of acts of outright resistance to create personal space. Long-hours, punctuated by periods of significant and pressurised activity were simply a side effect of working in ‘a faced paced environment’. Such findings chime with Bozkurt’s (2015: 488-489) observation that periods of high work intensification can imbue ostensibly mundane work with pride and meaning – a theme developed in the next section. As one manager opined with evident zeal, ‘you just sort of fall in, you enjoy the hustle...I just like the speed it runs at’.

## Autonomy, decision latitude and 'meaning'

The *sine qua non* of efficient fast food delivery is the requirement to control and enforce adherence to centralised standards, protocols and processes. As anticipated – and consistent with other studies (e.g. Gould, 1999: 552) – the latitude of decision making was restricted via tight bureaucratic controls through extremely detailed rules and procedures vis-a-vis training, H&S, food hygiene and cleaning. One respondent remarking on the presence of over 2,000 standards and procedures quipped, 'it's so process driven – we even have processes for processes!'

The most immediate day-to-day concern was the requirement to adhere to a matrix of performance indicators – 'the scorecard'. This device, which influences both reward and career progression, operationalises the need for tight cost control allied to strong sales performance. The labour component was especially contentious. Recent time measurement studies had indicated deficiencies in labour capacity. According to one manager, cooks were required to compress seventy minutes' work into one hour. Difficulties were compounded because of the perennial problems of staff turnover, sickness and 'no shows' – there was in effect no buffer against such contingencies. The sales metric was similarly contentious. Hot weather and snow were known to reduce revenue significantly. One interviewee grumbled her superiors would 'freak out' and 'panic' when sales dropped, complaining she was 'judged by figures that were not necessarily correct'.

Be this at it may, the implications of underperformance were coloured by the social cohesion afforded by a strong internal labour market. The conventions generated within the operational management hierarchy tended to moderate the potential

harshness of the centrally imposed performance management system. Outcomes were dependent upon the approach of the managers' direct report – the area manager. Most of these had moved through the corporate ranks and there was thus a high degree of affinity between the two groupings. Indeed, some claimed they endeavoured to 'shield' those below them 'to take the pressure off'. Restaurant managers accordingly thought their direct report took a fairly lenient approach to any shortcomings, believing it unlikely they would be 'managed out' – at least in the short term.

Centralised processes were thus not totally determinate. Indeed there was a complex interplay between structure, social factors and agential capacity. In terms of the latter, there was belief that centralised controls afforded room for the leverage of discretion and autonomy and the emergence of individual managerial styles. Moulding and motivating an effective team and 'generating fun' throughout 'the daily grind' was viewed as immensely challenging, yet satisfying. Interviewees alluded to a multiplicity of soft skills practices indicating a 'pick and mix', rather than standardised approach to leadership and motivation. Certainly some used techniques gleaned from formal corporate training e.g. communication, mentoring, goal setting and recognition techniques – i.e. putting crew members' 'names in lights' via notice boards and the corporate intranet. However, others sought to deflect the stigma and condescension attached to fast-food work by more innovative and bespoke measures. One manager irked by the low-skill, no qualification stereotyping of crew work, whose own team comprised staff undertaking study in highly skilled areas, distributed name tags indicated the relevant field of study (e.g. medicine). Significantly, the data indicate the overall level of activity went beyond mere incidents of 'micro emancipation' (Fleming, 2013) – some exhibited a degree of freedom in the way the managerial role was



conceived and interpreted. One experienced manager pointed to a distinct form of task separation suggesting 'junior managers' (i.e. team leaders and assistants) tended to do 'the managerial [i.e. operational] things' leaving her 'to be creative'. In other words, the mundane workaday activities of monitoring adherence to procedures were delegated leaving this respondent free to focus on the leadership and behavioural components of the job – a division of labour not centrally scripted.

The respondents uniformly relished the day-to-day interaction with crew members and several interpreted this in terms of a broader public good beyond the interests of the firm. As such it was evident some conceived of their work as *meaningful* in terms of societal benefits (See Bailey and Madden, 2017:4). There was a suggestion some young recruits had been let down by both the schooling system and society and it was therefore incumbent upon organisations employing workers on the periphery of the labour market to instil social skills and a work ethic. As one manager succinctly observed, 'if our target market is minimum wage work, then it's our duty to have an impact on minimum wage work'. Developing this point an area manager stated,

What I really like [is] people and having impact... The kid that is coming in at 16 when he goes to college at 18 he is going to be able to have normal relationships with people that he wouldn't of...A better quality of life because of his experience within QSRco. So we will have taught him how to come into work on time and to be presentable - all those things that society isn't teaching.

## **HR Support**

Career mobility, Compensation and Development

QWL criteria that fall under the umbrella of HR supports include adequate and fair compensation and opportunities for development (Grote and Guest, 2017: 156). The vast majority of the sample had originally joined as crew members, a striking facet being the very high degree of upward career mobility (1600 promotions per year according to one senior HR manager), early exposure to the demands of the managerial function and deep succession planning. Those that successfully navigate the path from team leader, to assistant and then restaurant manager have the opportunity to move through ever larger units with added responsibility and in so doing take advantage of the very tall pay structure – £25,000 to £45,000 per annum, plus bonus (up to *circa* £65,000). The level of pay is especially noteworthy given the labour market disadvantages noted earlier e.g. limited experience of higher education and history of ‘job hopping’. Several ‘insiders’ drew favourable comparisons with peers who had racked up debt attending university with no eventual job. This was complemented by systematic training that sought to instil both practical skills (e.g. forecasting and employment relations matters) and those of a softer nature (e.g. leadership) – a recent initiative here included a workshop in emotional intelligence provided by a specialist consultancy firm. This fastidious attention to training compares favourably with that reported in routinised managerial work in other parts of the service industry e.g. the café sector (Lloyd and Payne, 2014) and retail (Grugulis et al., 2011). Career mobility extended beyond restaurant management; some had moved rapidly and successfully into support i.e. training and head office functions. Slow career mobility, where evident, was typically the result of procrastination i.e. managers not originally seeing fast food as a career path. Such ambivalence was related to the stigma surrounding the sector — ‘who goes to school and thinks when I’m older I want to work in fast food – you don’t!’ (assistant manager). Early career mobility up to the team leader/assistant

manager grades level was generally related to happenstance allied to the example line managers set as successful role models again underscoring the importance of informal social processes.

### Voice

The principal frustration surrounding HR systems centred on the QWL criteria of employee representation (Grotte and Guest, 2017: 156) or 'voice'. Disquiet for the most part focussed on the inability to influence brand standards. One corollary was a feeling that head office personnel were out of touch with logistical demands. Certainly there had been experimentation with recent innovations i.e. employee access to an annual staff survey, head office hotline and information feed through *WhatsApp*. However, the 'promise of participation' (Hodson, 2001: 38) was unrealised, highlighting the ultimately pervasive nature of centralised control. Reflecting Boulton and Houlihan's (2010) depiction of front-line managers, the respondents were often not directly controlling events but 'reacting to a series of moment by moment demands'. Consider here the introduction of new menu items. One area manager bemoaned the promotion of 'complicated' lines during the busy Christmas period, not least a burger that took a minute to prepare – 'a lifetime in fast food' – giving rise to bottlenecks and frustrated customers and staff alike. Senior managers were certainly aware of such concerns. The flow of information however remained dictatorial and top down and unit managers accordingly complained about the absence of roundtable discussions, trials and ability to provide feedback on proposed initiatives.

## **DISCUSSION**

While academic research into job quality has waxed and waned (Grote and Guest, 2017:150-151) recent years have witnessed a renaissance of interest in this field. In the title to a recent text, Warhurst et al. (2012) provocatively pose the question, '*Are Bad Jobs Inevitable?*'. The current article has sought to address the closely related issue of whether highly routinised front line managerial work can deliver – on balance – a positive work experience. The answer would appear to be a qualified yes. The data suggest the relationship between job quality and routinised work is complex. Notwithstanding significant bureaucratic rigidities, fast-food managerial work was viewed as both interesting and indeed meaningful for some. Kalleberg (2016:112) usefully reminds us that 'job quality is a multidimensional phenomenon'. Accordingly, any attempt at explanation for this apparent disjuncture needs to consider objective job characteristics and organisational supports as well as subjective expectations and the social milieu within which these sit.

Objectively, the constraining influence of a myriad of processes and procedures and limitations around the scope of decision making were clearly evident. Managers were frustrated in their powerlessness to influence the nature of the food offering and in this sense they were classically alienated from the products of their labour. There were also frustrations around work *processes*. Certainly, the rational efficiency of the system was accepted but the labour budget nourishing this was viewed as blunt and overly restrictive. Managerial work in QSRco nonetheless cohered *positively* with several other QWL attributes (e.g. Grote and Guest, 2017: 156) – not least adequate and fair compensation and opportunities for career mobility (see below). This juxtaposition opens up the possibility of 'compensating differentials' (see Kalleberg, 2016: 114), the 'summative view' of job quality being that that a job can be good on some dimensions but not on others. Certainly in this respect objectively bad task related characteristics

were at least partially offset by aspects of the HR system as reported in other studies (e.g. Gould, 2010).

Beyond work organisation and HR supports there is a need to consider the full range of objective organisational factors that may influence job quality. Fast-food appears to offer distinct career advantages when contrasted with routinised work in other sectors. In Lloyd and Payne's (2014) study of the UK café industry, for example, salary levels were significantly lower and little evidence is provided of internal occupational mobility. Importantly, the restaurants of the major fast-food players are heterogenous in their spatial layout, size, revenue and numbers employed. These vary significantly depending on the specific 'asset type' e.g. food court, high street location and out-of-town 'drive thru' etc. This variability and layering appears to facilitate systematic career progression e.g. via movement between different brand concepts. Similarly, the size and dominance of the global brands affords a myriad of career opportunities including lateral moves into support functions which may not be evident in less concentrated sectors. In sum, work design and HR supports are of course crucial but contextual influences i.e. the size (e.g. Sengupta., et al. 2009: 49) and structure of a firm (and sector) ultimately exert an important mediating influence on job quality.

As Kalleberg acknowledges (2016: 123), job quality includes both objective *and* subjective aspects of work. The latter line of analysis calls for an evaluation of expectations and experiences (Grote and Guest, 2017: 157). A good job for workers is partially about how job characteristics stack up against alternatives (Galván (2012: 173) and the concept of class can accordingly aid understanding. Crucially, in labour market terms, most of the sample were disadvantaged in at least one of several respects, e.g. lacking experience of higher education, a propensity for job hopping or, in the case of migrants, limited English language abilities on entry. For such workers

high routinisation allied to physically demanding, long-hours work plausibly represented an acceptable trade-off for the relatively high material rewards. The above is a partial and simplistic re-statement of Goldthorpe et al's (1967) affluent worker thesis where for working class manual workers high material rewards were compensation for long working hours in unpleasant circumstances. Contra Goldthorpe et al's (1967) study, however, there were overtures of 'embourgeoisement' in that QSRco provided an unexcepted point of entry into front-line managerial work and hence the semblance of aura of professional status along with opportunities for personal development and career. A notable feature was the systematic use of training feeding into a regime of deep succession planning which afforded a high degree of internal career mobility and pay progression within both managerial and support functions. While these were regarded overall as good jobs, the managers' initial 'restricted field of possibilities' (Bourdieu, 1984) in terms of their labour market position plausibly coloured attitudes to this type of work. Certainly, they were employed in a stigmatised sector of the economy and the work had various negative intrinsic traits not inconsistent with their socio demographic backgrounds. However, this was counterbalanced by generous material benefits and opportunities for social mobility not originally envisaged.

Any systematic and sociological analysis of job quality also calls for consideration of the opportunities for agential capacity. At one level the earlier analysis of job characteristics suggests the omnipresence of micro management through processes, procedures and performance management tools. The structural conditions the managers faced while pervasive were not however totally determinate. The respondents acknowledged the day-to-day constraints but they similarly suggested space was ceded for autonomous and deliberate action. In this regard the very

indeterminacy and daily challenge of the people aspect of the job was the key attraction i.e. eliciting a high degree of customer service from a young, often transient, minimum wage workforce, engaged in a low-status occupation. Certainly, the managers lacked 'allocative control' (Reed, cited in Bolton and Houlihan, 2010: 383) and were frustrated by the strictures of the labour budget and shortcomings vis-à-vis voice. Nonetheless, contra studies of front-line managers in other service sector settings they were not totally 'locked in by procedures and targets' (Bolton and Houlihan, 2010: 398; see also Lloyd and Payne, 2014; Grugulis et al., 2011). That is, the parameters of 'operative control' around the orchestration of people issues including recruitment, training, leadership and so forth were not inconsiderable and actually viewed as sufficiently capacious to facilitate the emergence of individual managerial styles, suggesting some potential for an element of agency through 'job crafting' (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001). The belief that the managerial role encompassed the provision of a social good beyond the needs of the firm and the aptitude some displayed in purposively (re)conceptualising their function in broader societal terms was especially striking. Several highlighted their role in affording disadvantaged young workers with basic, transferable workplace skills. In this regard they were creative in seeking to recast work in a stigmatised sector as meaningful through the provision of extra-organisation i.e. societal benefits (Bailey and Madden, 2017:4). These intrinsic rewards may be modest by other occupational standards but in *this* setting for *these* workers they were a source of pride and even dignity.

Such findings chime with the emphasis the major fast-food employers have placed on their role as providers of generic competences e.g. reliability, punctuality and diligence (Allan et al. 2006: 413). A critical reading of the data might conjecture managers were not engaged in any significant job shaping; rather they were buying into the corporate

brand as a distraction from the realities of mundane work (Brannan et al., 2015: 29). At an empirical level this is disingenuous because the improved material position of most of the managers was – at least in part - a function of their acquisition of such competencies when occupying entry level positions. A more sympathetic reading might conceive of this in terms of ‘use values’ (Belanger and Edwards, 2013) i.e. the extent to which workers generate value for the users of the services they provide. Within the context of front-line service sector work Belanger and Edwards (2013) discuss this in terms of the relationship between workers and consumers. In settings where work is highly routinised, such as fast food and call centres, use values (and by implication job quality) are likely to be low because workers are not engaged with customers on a continuing basis reducing the degree of rapport. Interestingly, in the current study several managers believed they were generating use values from their interactions with subordinates, not least in terms of developmental opportunities and the provision of societal benefits. One implication hitherto overlooked is that the management of highly routinised work can offer meaning from the creation of ‘use values’ providing the conception of this is expanded beyond the confining consumer nexus.

A final empirical issue that warrants comment is consideration of co-worker relations. Internal labour markets are a long-standing feature of the fast-food sector (e.g. Gould, 2010: 795) and QSCco was unexceptional in this regard. The resultant informal social ties appeared to foster a significant degree of camaraderie which was an important mechanism through which structural pressures were attenuated. The affinity between restaurant managers and their direct reports served as a crucial support mechanism. There were no reported examples of outright opposition to centrally imposed processes and procedures. Nonetheless, the lenient attitude taken by area managers to short-



term deficiencies acted as a partial bulwark against invasive performance management and as such the social climate was an important factor rendering the experience of work broadly positive.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings suggest routinised front line managerial work can under certain circumstances be both materially rewarding and indeed meaningful notwithstanding the bureaucratic rigidities that are a feature of this type of work (Grugulis et al., 2011; Lloyd and Payne, 2014). There is thus a need to recognise the substantial variability that exists within such roles. The variegated data outlined in the study have important theoretical implications beyond its immediate context and echo Sengupta et al's (2009:49) observations regarding the multifaceted nature of job quality and the potential coexistence of 'good and bad features' (Sengupta et al., 2009:51). The data similarly lend support to Grote and Guest's (2017: 160) assertion that less skilled work can have positive QWL attributes. This sociologically based approach needs to be contrasted with psychologically orientated analyses of job satisfaction (and by inference job quality) that rely on purely subjective evaluation of jobs rather than the capability workers possess to meet work related needs (see Brown et al. 2012). Evaluations of the quality of working life clearly require consideration of multiple criteria. Indeed, the findings indicate desirable and positive work experiences can be derived even within an ostensibly inhospitable context. Scholars could usefully turn their attention to examining more closely the trade-off ratios (Cotti et al. 2014) or weightings that exist between job characteristics as some attributes appear more important than others for certain groups of workers. Indeed, the recent Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices (2017: 15) highlights the need to understand such trade-

offs, noting 'people value different facets of work'. Further sociological analysis of how objective work characteristics intersect with subjective expectations and the social climate of work will further aid understanding.

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