

# Analysing the 'migrant work ethic' – comparing managers' perceptions of local workers and Central and Eastern European migrants in the United Kingdom

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**Analysing the “migrant work ethic” – comparing managers’ perceptions of local  
workers and central and eastern European migrants in the United Kingdom**

Abstract – The 2004 expansion of the European Union saw over one million people from central and eastern Europe register to work in the United Kingdom. Early studies into this phenomenon found a highly qualified migrant workforce taking low skilled roles, and research in regions of high unemployment saw migrant workers viewed favourably by managers as compared to locals.

Using a qualitative case study approach, this paper significantly adds to regional studies of migration to investigate comparisons of migrant and local workers in regions of low unemployment, where managerial views towards locals are not as negative. The paper finds that, owing to low levels of labour market power as a result of basic English language skills and problems of transferability of qualifications, migrants are finding new ways of signalling their higher productivity. These are low levels of absence and a willingness to work longer hours, frequently termed a ‘good work ethic’ by managers, and used to positively distinguish migrant workers even in regions of low unemployment. The paper then investigates what happens to the demonstration of this ‘work ethic’ over time, finding that these behaviours are less likely to be used as labour market power increases.

Key words – migration, employment relations, temporary work, skills, food manufacturing, unemployment

## **Analysing the “migrant work ethic” – comparing managers’ perceptions of local workers and central and eastern European migrants in the United Kingdom**

### **Introduction**

An article recently published in this journal entitled “Bad Attitude?” (Tannock, 2013) investigated the case of Merthyr Tydfil in Wales in order to study managers’ views of the perceived “bad attitude” or poor ‘work ethic’ of local workers as compared to migrants. This study, as with a number of others comparing native and migrant workers (see also, for example, Mackenzie and Forde, 2009) found that managers stated that the work ethic of native workers was felt to be low. This compared with views of migrant workers who, through demonstration of behaviours such as a lower absence rate, were felt to have a superior work ethic. Evidence presented in this paper significantly adds to studies of migration by adding a regional element, investigating comparisons of work ethic between locals and migrants by managers in regions with low levels of unemployment. This is in comparison to previous studies such as Mackenzie and Forde (2009) and Tannock (2013), both of which were located in regions with high levels of unemployment, and where local people were already perceived as having a “bad attitude” (Tannock, 2013).

This paper further builds upon these previous studies which have noted this difference in perception of work ethic to analyse why local and migrant workers exhibit different behaviours considered by managers to be indicative of ‘work ethic’. It shows that upon moving to the UK migrant workers have low levels of labour market power as a result of lack

of portability of qualifications and lower levels of English language skills. This prevents these migrants from obtaining roles that better suit their wider skill sets (see also Datta et al., 2007). As they move into low skilled and often temporary roles (Author, 2016) they need to find new ways of signalling productivity in order to move into roles that better fit upon their wider skill sets. The second key contribution of the paper is then to investigate how changing levels of labour market power affect the demonstration of the behaviours associated with this work ethic over time. This builds upon the work of Author et al. (forthcoming), who use Labour Force Survey data to demonstrate that the absence rate of A8 migrant workers, a key measure used by managers as an example of the ‘migrant work ethic’, assimilates to that of UK workers as they spend longer in the UK. It is shown that, as compared to early movers, new migrant workers to the UK face lower reductions to their labour market power, thus reducing their need to demonstrate behaviours such as lower levels of absence.

### Migration to the UK

The setting for this paper is the significantly altered UK labour market, which has recently seen dramatic changes in the level of migration and in the nationalities of these migrants. On 1 May 2004 the A8 CEE countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) acceded to the EU, together with Cyprus and Malta. Perhaps surprisingly given previously more restrictive policy towards unskilled migrant and immigrant workers, the UK fully opened its labour market to workers from the A8 countries, predicting that there would be an increased inflow of between eight and thirteen thousand workers (Dustmann et al., 2003; Home Office, 2003). In significant contrast to the UK Home Office’s predictions, over 600,000 additional migrants registered to

work in the first three years after the accession of the A8 nations. In total, over one million migrants from the A8 nations registered on the Worker Registration Scheme during the seven years it was in operation (McCollum et al., 2012). Much early research into the phenomenon of the A8 expansion concentrated on examining the demographics of those migrating, the types of jobs that they were moving into, and their qualifications and earnings as compared to native workers. This research found that despite their relatively high levels of formal education (Author, 2009; Drinkwater et al., 2006; Williams, 2009), the majority of recent migrants to the UK were found to have taken low skilled jobs (Datta, 2009; Markova et al., 2013; Perrons et al., 2010; Stenning and Dawley, 2009), often on a temporary or agency basis (Author, 2016). In contrast to previous groups of migrants, those from the A8 nations have moved into both rural and urban regions rather than just the latter, and also into areas with lower levels of unemployment (Green, 2009).

These changes in migration patterns can also be examined at the regional level. For example, in the East Midlands, a site of one of the case studies in this paper, Green et al. (2011) show that there are differences between A8 migrants and those from outside of the EU. In the East Midlands, migration from the latter group has mainly been to the three large cities of Derby, Leicester and Nottingham. By comparison, A8 migrants have moved to town and rural locations, in particular to work in the food industry in these more rural areas. This industry has a higher than average incidence of jobs offered through an agency, and has acted as a draw to migrants from the A8 nations, who use agencies as a route into jobs in the UK (Author, 2009; 2016). Green et al. (2010) argue that, while migration to the UK has always been bi-polar across the very high and very low skill ranges, there has been an increase in the East Midlands of workers at the low skill level during the recession.

### *Labour Market Power And The ‘Migrant Work Ethic’– A Regional Perspective*

The concept of labour market power, and how it varies between different groups, and also can vary for individuals in different national or regional contexts, requires further analysis. Labour market power can be considered as the leverage that individuals can exert when negotiating the employment relationship. This can be positive or negative, and may come as a result of legitimate sources, such as increased levels of human capital, or illegitimate sources, such as prejudice (Author et al., forthcoming). Importantly, this can vary across different groups, for example migrant and native workers, and may also alter when a worker moves to a different national or regional context. The first disadvantage faced by migrants is that their qualifications and skills may not be recognised by organisations in the country to which they are migrating. As a result, they lose one of the key *ex ante* signals of higher levels of productivity that native workers can use (Spence, 1973). As a result, migrants must use other *ex post* methods to signal this (Author, 2014). In particular, this may be in the form of lower levels of absence (Alberti, 2014; Author, 2014, 2015; MacKenzie and Forde, 2009).

The other key factor in reducing migrants’ levels of labour market power are their English language skills, particularly if these prevent these migrants from taking roles that match their wider skill sets. This has been a particular issue in the UK, which significantly under-predicted the rise in migration levels after 2004 (Dustmann et al., 2003) and thus organisations did not have programmes in place to aid with English in the workplace. This is

a particular problem in rural areas, such as those in the East Midlands or East of England, where transportation to English language classes is a further disincentive to study.

Low levels of labour market power as a result of the factors outlined above are leading migrant workers into low skilled and often temporary or agency roles (Author, 2016). But do these workers behave differently to those from the UK once they have taken these jobs? And how does this link to their lower levels of labour market power? Author et al. (forthcoming) have noted the importance of researching the construct of the migrant work ethic, and in particular how this is linked to factors that affect labour market power, particularly portability of qualifications and English language proficiency (see also Datta et al., 2007). In the context of these highly qualified migrants often taking lower skilled roles as a result of lower levels of labour market power (Author et al., forthcoming), it has been noted by many previous studies that managers consistently point to migrants' higher levels of 'work ethic' (Mackenzie and Forde, 2009; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003) when taking these jobs. Green (2009:2) found that managers described these workers as being "hard working/had a good work ethic, were flexible and willing to work longer hours, and that they were reliable and meticulous".

As with Tannock's (2013) investigation of 'attitude', the concept and construction of 'work ethic' and how it is perceived and demonstrated needs to be discussed. The concept of work ethic is certainly not a new one, and has been debated by a number of eminent sociologists. For example, Weber (1904) discusses the 'Protestant Work Ethic', which conceptualises worldly work as a duty both for the individual and society. As noted by Gorz (1989), the demonstration of this work ethic will be affected by production methods, such as the use of

the assembly line. The evidence from contemporary industrial studies, such as those of Forde and Mackenzie (2009) and Waldinger and Lichter (2003) is that managers still value this ‘work ethic’, and point to absence and number of hours worked as the key behaviours that demonstrate this work ethic.

In regions of high unemployment, evidence of the number of hours worked being considered a measure of work ethic is provided by the general manager in Mackenzie and Forde’s (2009:150) study of “Glassfix”, who states that “their [migrants’] attitude to work is tremendous. If we wanted them to they’d work 24 hours a day seven days a week...This is the best the workforce has been since I have been here.” As also found with Mackenzie and Forde’s (2009) study, Tannock’s (2013:7) study finds that overtime is seen by managers as a key behaviour to demonstrate a good work attitude and work ethic – “an employer...wants workers who are willing to work twenty-four hours around the clock, to be available, to work hard, to show a good attitude”. When considering absence, Taylor et al.’s (2010) and Author’s (2014) studies of absence management have found that managers consider A8 migrants to take less sickness absence than their UK colleagues, which is again seen as a measure of work ethic. Absence and the number of hours worked are thus the key behaviours believed to demonstrate work ethic which will be investigated by this study.

In addition to this regional dimension, a temporal dimension to the perception of work ethic must be considered. This is often the result of migrants adopting the norms of their new nation, moving away from what is traditionally seen as the dual frame of reference (Piore, 1979) where migrants consider conditions and pay for work through the lens of those found in their home nation. The language of managers to describe this phenomenon is consistent



across many studies – those in MacKenzie and Forde’s (2009) study in the UK state that some migrants have become too ‘Westernized’, while those in Waldinger and Lichter’s (2003) study in the US suggest that migrants have become too ‘Americanized’. Quantitative attempts to investigate this process are usually based in the assimilation literature (Chiswick, 1978) and use pay to investigate similarities between migrants and natives as migrants spend longer in their host nation. Studies of assimilation of other behaviours, however, are scant. One exception is the work of Author et al. (forthcoming) who, using Labour Force Survey data, found an assimilation of absence rates amongst A8 workers to those of UK workers. Frequently cited as being a key indicator of work ethic by managers, this occurred within 2-4 years of migrants moving to the UK, while absence rates of new migrants remained much lower than those of UK workers. An additional contribution of this paper is to investigate qualitatively how this labour market power changes over time, and how it influences behaviours such as absence which are associated with the ‘migrant work ethic’.

## Methodology

### *Migration in Regions with Low Unemployment*

Research for this paper took place in the food manufacturing sector, and this study presents findings from three case study companies. The food manufacturing sector was chosen as companies are affected by variations in both the supply of their ingredients and also in the demand for their products. This means that they have to use a variety of techniques to cover fluctuations, including temporary and agency work, where there is a higher incidence of

migrant workers (Holgate, 2005; Thompson et al., 2013). The three companies used for this study were all based in England and are given the pseudonyms of ReadyCo, a ready meals manufacturer operating in the East of England; ChocCo, a chocolate manufacturer operating in the East Midlands; and SpiceCo, a spice company operating in the West of England. Despite producing different goods, the manufacturing techniques in the factories are broadly similar, with workers placing food products into pots, boxes or jars on a moving belt. Although these jobs had once required higher levels of skill, for example with ChocCo handmaking its assortment chocolates, advances in technology meant that jobs at the companies tended to be low-skill, repetitive and monotonous.

The factories are situated in three regions of the UK which all have lower than average rates of unemployment. This is in contrast to studies such as MacKenzie and Forde (2009) and Tannock (2013) which, based in the North of England and Wales respectively, have higher levels of unemployment. As previously noted, migration patterns of A8 migrants have not mirrored those of previous migrants, with large shifts towards rural areas as compared to cities, and also into areas with low levels of unemployment. Particular regional stories, such as the tendency in the East Midlands to move to rural locations rather than the three large cities, are also incorporated. By selecting sites based in lower regions of unemployment, it is possible to compare managerial views of migrants in regions where views towards local workers are less likely to be negative. For example, in Tannock's study based in Merthyr Tydfil, which has seen an unemployment rate of over 15% during the recession, frequent mention is made of high levels of migrant work ethic in the context of high levels of native workers' unemployment and, in particular, reference to reliance on state support for the unemployed and the use of JobCentres to find work. The case studies selected for this study,

however, allow for a comparison between local and migrant workers who are both in employment.

### *The Research Process*

The research process was one of in-depth qualitative study, immersed in the case study organisations for periods of weeks. Data was collected during 17 semi-structured interviews at ReadyCo, 20 at ChocCo, and 13 at SpiceCo. Overall, 19 interviews were conducted with senior managers, and 31 with first line managers and operatives. Within this latter group, 15 were local workers, and 16 were migrants. These semi-structured interviews were conducted through an interpreter where the interviewee had basic levels of English language skills. Those interviews that were conducted in English are quoted in this paper verbatim, in order to demonstrate the English language proficiency of respondents. Respondents for these interviews were selected so as to more widely reflect the demographics of the workforce, based on nationality, age, gender, and so on, across each site. ReadyCo had the largest proportion of A8 migrants at around 80% of the full workforce, as compared to around 20% at the other two factories. Based in a small town in the East of England, this was reflective of the local labour market trends. Interviews lasted between one and two-and-a-half hours, and specifically investigated views of labour market power, what managers and workers perceived to be behaviours demonstrative of a ‘good work ethic’, and comparisons between workers who were either local or had moved to the region. All the interviews were fully transcribed, with coding of transcripts being conducted manually using a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006), an approach which has been identified by King (2004) as

particularly suitable when investigating the perspectives of different groups within an organisation.

These semi-structured interviews were enriched with informal interviews, and this was found to be a particularly useful way of gathering people's views of other groups in a non-formal interview setting. This also allowed for interviews to take place with workers who did not wish to participate in a more formal interview setting. Furthermore, induction programmes for new starters were attended where provided. There was also lengthy observation, for two to three weeks at each site, in both work and social settings. This observational data was used to compare people's perceptions given in interviews, which often included discussions about sensitive issues such as ethnicity, with interactions on the shop floor.

### Comparing Migrant and Local Workers in Regions of Low Unemployment

Although unemployment was below the UK average in each of the regions in which the case study organisations was based, managers still drew comparisons not just between local and migrant workers, but between the migrant workers which they had direct experience of and a perception of unemployed locals (see also Tannock, 2013). Native workers' backgrounds and particularly their method of applying for jobs through a JobCentre was a recurrent theme in interviews with managers. Managers at these case study companies linked those workers who came through JobCentres with the welfare system, seeing them as more likely to be poor quality workers as they had applied through this route. By comparison, migrants from the A8 nations were seen as those who had moved as a result of a desire to work, and thus were both

unlikely to have involvement with the welfare system, or to use JobCentres as a route into work. However, by concentrating on this narrative, this deflects attention away from the job quality and work conditions of these roles (Wills, 2009).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the low skilled and monotonous nature of many of the jobs at the case study companies, managers had negative views towards many of the workers from the UK, particularly where the company was in a tight labour market and had used JobCentres as a means of recruitment. This compares to case studies in regions of high unemployment, where there was seen to be a large pool of potential workers available through this route. Recruiters viewed JobCentres as the places where they were more likely to get potential problem workers demonstrating a ‘bad attitude’. Both ChocCo and SpiceCo had placed adverts with JobCentres, but both reported the same problems with people turning up for an interview only to keep their Job Seekers’ Allowance rather than with any real intention of taking the job:

*You get a lot of people if you advertise with the local JobCentre, and we probably won’t do any more, you get a lot of people who just want to fill in their dole regulations. They come and they mess you about and say they want a job when they don’t really want a job. A lot of people interviewed badly so that we don’t give them a job, it is all deliberate... I have found if you go to the local JobCentre, without being rude, you tend to get a lot of people who literally don’t want to bother to work, they just want to mess you about, and fulfil that they have been for an interview, and they don’t want to get the job.*

**HR/Finance Director - SpiceCo**

*They will sit there and tell you that. I have had it in an interview: “Can you tell me why you have applied for this job?” “Yeah, Jobseekers have sent me but I don’t want it. I don’t want you to give me the job.” “So why have you come to the interview?” “Well I get a bonus if I turn up to the interview” ... We have had them walk on the line and they have refused. “No, I*

*do not want this job, but I want you to finish me. If you finish me I would get the dole, if I walk out I'm not entitled to the dole".*

***Process Manager - ChocCo***

Additional problems with UK workers were frequently cited as being issues with absence and time keeping, as well as reluctance to work overtime. Importantly, these behaviours were noted in previous studies such as Author (2014), MacKenzie and Forde (2009) and Taylor et al. (2010) as being those that were linked to a good work ethic, with lack of demonstration of these being a result of a “bad attitude” (Tannock, 2013). These workers were unlikely to be offered permanent jobs with the case study organisations as a result of this perceived poor ‘work ethic’. Despite being sited in regions with lower levels of unemployment, managers’ views towards the native workforce mirrored those found in studies conducted in regions of high unemployment. Local workers, particularly those who had come through JobCentres, were demonised and felt to be, as Tannock (2013) notes, ‘bad workers’, further suggesting that the construction of the rhetoric of the bad native worker deflects attention from problems related to job quality to instead suggesting that the problem is with the workers.

Views towards CEE workers were, by comparison to their views towards UK workers doing similar jobs, overwhelmingly positive. This was based on a perceived high work ethic amongst CEE workers, demonstrated by a willingness to work overtime, and a low absence level, all problems identified with workers from the UK:

*What I notice is the Poles, their absence tends to be very good...some of the English people who come through agencies, usually you have got to be pretty bad not to get a permanent job in England, so sometimes you wonder why the English people are working through agencies. Sometimes it is because their timekeeping is really poor, and you will find some English people just don't turn up, they do a couple of days and then they can't be bothered.*

***Operations Manager - SpiceCo***

Managers frequently pointed to areas such as absence and willingness to work more hours as key behaviours that they considered to be linked to a better work ethic:

*Having an all Polish team everyone said “How are you going to do?” but they are brilliant, because I have got people who understood me well and they can translate for me. I said “We are the lazy ones, they are such a bright lot”. It has just been good, they are a really good team.*

***Operations Manager - ReadyCo***

Migrant workers from CEE countries had further hardened managers’ views towards workers from the UK as they compared UK and CEE agency workers. Indeed, the increase in CEE workers coming through an agency (see also Author, 2009; 2016) had seen the case study companies changing their recruitment practices away from JobCentres, which were seen to provide native workers with a ‘bad attitude’, towards agencies which provided workers from the CEE nations who were felt to demonstrate a ‘good work ethic’:

*Four and five years ago people from the agency were drug addicts who didn’t want to work, but now you get someone from the agency and they will be really good. All the Poles...have moved the benchmark up of what agencies can offer...In the past the people you got coming in were just pathetic, but now whoever you get in from an agency are generally quite good.*

***Operations Manager – SpiceCo***

Again, a willingness to work longer hours and a low level of absence were noted as the key behaviours that demonstrated a good work ethic. As previously shown, once migrants had taken these jobs they demonstrated behaviour consistent with what managers believed to show a good ‘work ethic’, for example low levels of absence.

## *The 'Migrant Work Ethic' and Labour Market Power*

As previously noted, migrant workers experienced issues with the portability of their qualifications, thus requiring an *ex post* rather than *ex ante* demonstration of productivity. A further problem for CEE migrants was that their labour market power was reduced by the level of their English language skills. This was an issue cited by UK managers with CEE workers in each of the case study companies that employed them (see also, for example, Green, 2009; Mackenzie and Forde, 2009). At each of the case study companies UK workers and managers tended not to be bilingual. ReadyCo had a very high proportion of CEE and in particular Polish workers, but none of the managers interviewed could speak beyond a very basic level of the Polish language. However, the low-skilled production jobs in the case study companies did not need high levels of English language skills as these easier jobs could be visually explained, and thus the managers could employ people who hardly spoke any English:

*Most of them they don't speak English, but they are very, very good workers. I think people should give them more of a chance. They could be very, very useful because some of them are really, really good. Some of them just don't get anywhere because they can't speak the language, and I don't think that is fair really. Because of their language a lot of people won't take them on, but they do good work, so people should just give them a chance because they can do the job not speaking the language.*

***Line Leader - SpiceCo***

*The majority [of migrant workers], I would say up to eighty percent have below-average understanding of English. They will understand what you're telling them, but they are not quite sure, so in some cases you have to get someone who is better in Polish to say what you want. In cooking I have got a few Polish speaking employees, when I do get agency I try to buddy them up with them, it makes it easier for communication.*

***Operations Manager - ReadyCo***



In this way language served as a factor in keeping migrant workers in the lowest skilled and lowest paid jobs until they had developed their English skills, regardless of their qualifications. Migrants understood that in order to further progress they needed a higher standard of English:

*Only problem is with English. I have master of economy my degree, and I work still go up, up, up, up, but I am lazy because I'm too tired to go to college and learn English. My wife is learning in college. Me, I would like but I am too lazy, but I know I must because for me is better.*

***Polish Line Leader - ReadyCo***

In addition to English language skills, therefore, it was noted by this respondent, along with many others in informal interviews, that their international qualifications were not recognised by managers in the UK. This was particularly true for those who did not have university qualifications, as the varying systems of secondary education across the A8 nations were not understood by managers. As a result of this, migrant workers were unable to take roles that better utilised their wider skill sets, and thus were ending up in the low skilled roles as found in the case study companies. The tight restrictions of these roles meant that they were unable to demonstrate their potential higher productivity through their output, and thus they could only achieve this through easily demonstrable and measurable behaviours such as a low absence rate. However, this *ex post* rather than *ex ante* demonstration of productivity was a short term response to the problem by these workers. Over time, their labour market power was starting to increase. The next section of this paper adds considerable new findings to the current literature on migrant workers, by investigating what happens to this perceived migrant work ethic over time as labour market power increases. It provides workplace

evidence to augment the findings of Author et al. (forthcoming), who find that absence rates of migrant workers assimilate to those of UK workers the longer they spend in the UK.

### *Changes in Labour Market Power over Time*

Migrant workers had found themselves taking low skilled jobs as they were hampered by a lack of portability of qualifications, and low levels of English language skills. Thus, in order to signal their higher productivity, they attempted to demonstrate a higher level of work ethic, for example by lower levels of absence. But what happens to this labour market power over time? And what is the effect of this on their behaviours that were seen to demonstrate work ethic? Evidence collected in informal interviews suggested that, for CEE migrants overall, limitations on their labour market power reduced as they spent longer in the UK. Firstly, they were able to access networks of migrant workers who were able to provide information about jobs and employers. In addition, employers were becoming more aware of the value of qualifications gained outside of the UK. Perhaps most importantly, a longer period of time spent in the UK allowed for the development of English language skills.

With increased levels of labour market power, it might be expected that the requirement to signal higher productivity through the behaviours linked to work ethic would diminish. As a result, it is important to consider the perceptions of managers towards migrant workers as their labour market power has increased. It has been shown quantitatively that, just as wage rates of migrants tend to assimilate towards those of local workers, so do absence rates

(Author, 2016). This paper adds to these findings with qualitative evidence. The perceived decline of work ethic of migrants over time was noted by managers from the UK:

*That is one thing I have noticed recently in my team...I could rely on certain people and I knew that they would do it, they would do what I asked them to, and maybe now that they have been here longer they are getting a bit more confidence...I think it is the same as anyone who spends more time in a country, you adapt more to the environment around you, you become more comfortable and more confident.*

**Operations Manager - ReadyCo**

The views of one manager at ReadyCo further demonstrated the perceived change in work ethic amongst CEE workers as their increased knowledge of the labour market had increased their labour market power:

*I have noticed that even in my team recently there are people who I know who used to be very hard-working and would do anything but now, maybe it is because they have got more confidence or maybe because they know what they are capable of, and that they can speak the language more they say "Why do I have to do that?" They more talk back to you and become slightly lazy.*

**Operations Manager - ReadyCo**

A further way to examine the effect of increasing labour market power is to investigate the views towards recent migrants of those CEE migrants who had been in the UK for a longer period of time. Interestingly, much of the criticism of new CEE migrants' work ethic came from other CEE migrants who had been in the country for a longer time and had been promoted. This provides a key new finding for this paper, as it is only recently that CEE migrants have been promoted into these positions, allowing for formal hierarchies between CEE workers to develop. These managers felt that new CEE migrants did not have the same commitment to work that they did, even though they felt that later migrants had an easier

move to the UK than they had done as, for example, organisations gained a better understanding of qualifications gained in the A8 nations:

*There come more lazy people, people who don't care about the future, and people who come from the agency now have an easy start to get the work, because before when people came here they were not looking for any help, they have to find everything themselves and make for themselves. Now there are people coming who did not work in Poland so they do not know what is the true life. They come here straightaway after school, they think that work here is heavy but they did not work in Poland, in the situation there. They come here and they have got family, they have all their friends, so when they come they have a place to live in and they find them a job.*

***Polish Line Leader - ReadyCo***

*Now we have a lot of Polish people here, and three years ago they came here very energetic, the Polish people want to work because they know they get a chance and they have to do everything the best that they can. Now they come very lazy people because they are coming because of their family, or they are coming because of somebody else and they know that if they lose this job they can find another job, and they don't care about the job now.*

***Polish Line Leader – ReadyCo***

This shows how the labour market power of different groups can alter over time. With an increased amount of labour market power CEE workers were finding it easier to get jobs in the UK. Also, as there were more CEE workers in companies who could train these workers, and as signage and documentation was provided in languages other than English, English language skills were becoming less of a factor in reducing labour market power. With this increased labour market power had come a perceived lessening of the 'work ethic' of CEE workers in the case study companies. CEE managers found that newer groups of migrants, with fewer limitations on labour market power (Clark and Drinkwater, 2008) did not have to use behaviours linked with work ethic in order to demonstrate their productivity *ex post*. In

this way, managers from both the UK and the CEE nations were found to have comparable views.

The migrant work ethic, therefore, cannot be considered as a fixed characteristic, but instead as one that is inextricably linked with labour market power, and thus can fluctuate over time. The evidence from these case studies, and from both UK managers and CEE managers, is that as limiting factors on labour market power reduce, such as an understanding of foreign-gained qualifications (Clark and Drinkwater, 2008; Friedberg, 2000), then demonstration of the behaviours which are considered to demonstrate this work ethic will reduce. For those workers who were able to develop English language skills and thus have no limiting factors on their labour market power, they were able to leave the sort of low skilled roles as investigated in this study and move to those that better utilised their wider skill sets. For those that remained in these low skilled roles there was now less need to demonstrate these behaviours.

## Conclusions

The EU expansion of 2004 has seen numerous studies of the demographics of migrants as compared to natives, and studies of what types of roles they move into in the UK. Author (2016) finds that, despite higher levels of qualification and longer years of education than UK workers, migrants from the A8 nations have moved into low skilled and often temporary roles. Once in these roles, migrants can find new *ex post* methods of signalling their potential higher productivity, as they cannot do this through traditional *ex ante* signals such as

qualifications (Spence, 1973), as these are not recognised by UK companies. This is frequently demonstrated through low absence levels, indicative of what managers term the ‘migrant work ethic’. Of particular interest for this study is the work of Tannock (2013), who investigated the perceptions of these new migrants as compared with native workers. Building upon Tannock’s work, this study has again found that the perception of migrant workers as good workers has been offset against the perception that native workers have a bad attitude or bad work ethic. While absence levels and a willingness to work overtime were described by managers as the key demonstrations of this work ethic, the perception of native workers as inextricably linked to JobCentres and the benefit system meant that workers who came through this route were demonized. In these regions of low unemployment, as has been found in previous studies in regions of high unemployment, the narrative of local people was also one of JobCentres and benefits. Even in these regions of low unemployment, migrants were aided by comparison to local workers seen as demonstrating a poor work ethic.

Demonstrations of good or poor work ethic were, as in previous studies, found to centre around low levels of absence and willingness to work long hours. This was replicated in these case studies, even where there were low levels of unemployment. Importantly, this study has linked these behaviours to labour market power. This labour market power is lowered for migrants, even in areas of low unemployment, by their low levels of English language skills, and difficulties in transferring qualifications across national borders. When in low skilled roles with tightly controlled production methods that restricted output levels to the speed of the line, migrants needed to find new *ex post* ways of signalling their potential higher productivity (Spence, 1973), which could lead to a directly-employed job and often a pay premium (Author, 2009; Holgate, 2005). A willingness to work overtime and low levels

of absence were easily observable and measurable indicators of this. In this way, these migrants were seen as having a high level of work ethic, whereas the native UK workforce, disillusioned with an alienating production process, were more likely to use absence and an unwillingness to work overtime as a reaction to these conditions (Edwards and Scullion, 1982; 1984) and therefore be seen as having lower levels of work ethic. The narrative of unemployable locals compared to migrants with a good work ethic was found even in these regions of low unemployment, with managers frequently conflating unemployment benefits and routes through JobCentres as demonstrative of the local with a ‘bad attitude’.

Over time, however, levels of labour market power were beginning to change. Managers were more aware of the value of qualifications from the CEE nations, and some workers were beginning to develop their English language skills. Those workers who were able to develop their English language skills to such a level that they did not act as a brake on their qualifications were now moving into jobs that better suited their wider skill set. For those workers that remained in these lower skill jobs, particularly those who had not developed English language skills, the other factors limiting their labour market power had reduced. With an easier route to getting a job in the first place in the UK, or moving into another if they lost the one they had, they were found by both UK managers, and those CEE workers who had moved into managerial roles, as less likely to demonstrate low levels of absence or a willingness to work overtime. As demonstrated quantitatively by Author et al. (forthcoming) absence rates, a key indicator of work ethic, assimilate to local levels. In this way, the ‘migrant work ethic’ cannot be seen as a fixed characteristic, but one which is linked to labour market power, and which can alter over time.

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