

Migrant workers

James MacNamara, Research Officer, Asset Skills

Headlines

- Within the Asset Skills footprint migrant workers play a particularly important role in the cleaning industry. There are believed to be as many as 136,000 migrant workers employed in elementary cleaning occupations in England.
- Employers of migrant workers frequently have to invest in ESOL training due to the fact that many enter the workforce without a good grasp of English.
- Whilst the recession looks to have led to a slight drop in the number of migrant workers entering the UK, those already part of the workforce are likely to continue to play an important role in the coming years, particularly in the cleaning sector.

Asset Skills is one of 22 Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) licensed by Government. Each SSC has responsibility for improving the skills of workers in its particular industries.

Asset Skills covers facilities management, housing, property and planning, cleaning and parking. Businesses in these industries share the goal of ensuring the environment in which we work, live and play is developed, managed and maintained to the benefit of all.

For more information contact the research department on 01604 233336 or visit www.assetskills.org/Research

It is generally accepted that migrant workers now play a significant role in the UK economy across a number of different industries. This paper focuses on migrant workers that have entered the UK at working age and examines the profile of these workers. The paper focuses on the role migrant workers play in Asset Skills industries in particular and examines issues such as what they bring to the workforce and the problems they both solve and create for employers.

Who are migrant workers?

It is not easy to pin down migrant workers into a narrow profile. The age range of employees is often diverse with workers coming from a wide range of countries. However, a substantial proportion are between 20 and 40 years of age and a significant proportion come from countries that are part of the European Union. In recent years high proportions have entered the country from Eastern European areas - a report from the Office for National Statistics in the autumn of 2007 for example found that 64% of new migrants in the UK came from Poland¹.

The size of the migrant workforce

The number of migrant workers employed in the UK has been growing steadily for a number of years. In 2008 it was reported that the number of foreign workers entering the UK had reached two million for the first time². The impact that this has had on the makeup of the Asset Skills workforce has been significant, particularly within the cleaning sector. Recent research shows that there are as many as 136,000 migrant workers employed in elementary cleaning occupations in England³ with a high proportion of migrant workers located in London and the South East (See Figure 1). There is also evidence that immigrants are now beginning to spread into other areas of the country with recent figures claiming that, in 2009, over 13,000 migrants arrived in central Lancashire looking for work⁴.

Why Cleaning?

Within the Asset Skills footprint the vast majority of migrant workers are based in cleaning jobs. Positions within the other sectors,

¹www.news.bbc.co.uk – Migrant workers settle across UK (October 2007)

²www.personneltoday – Number of migrant workers in UK hits 2 million mark for first time (February 2008)

³Skills for Jobs: Today and Tomorrow. The National Strategic Skills Audit for England 2010

⁴www.lep.co.uk – Thousands of migrant workers arrive in Lancashire (January 2010)



namely property and housing and facilities management, often require more developed skills as well as the ability to speak English fluently, making migrant workers unsuitable for the roles. Recent research suggests that migrant workers that have entered the UK at a younger age and gained qualifications in the UK do play a crucial role in other sectors, with as many as 53,000 migrant workers reported to be employed in real estate activities⁵. However, for the majority of migrant workers that enter the UK at working age, a lack of recognised qualifications is a major obstacle to gaining employment. Only 13% of workers in the facilities management sector do not hold any qualifications and this drops to just 6% when focusing on housing and property employees⁶. In contrast, 37% of the cleaning workforce do not hold a qualification, and, as a result, it is easier for migrant workers to find employment in this area. Employers within the cleaning industry are still

often faced with a number of issues, particularly around communication and their ability to speak English. Whether language acts as a barrier for employers when it comes to employing migrant workers tends to depend on the nature of the contract and the specific requirements of the client⁷.

Skills implications

Skills gaps most frequently exist amongst migrant workers in the areas of communication and, specifically, their grasp of English. It is often perceived that migrant workers opt for a job in cleaning in particular due to a lack of skills. However, migrant workers often possess a variety of skills but are held back in England due to their inability to speak the language.

The need for an acceptable level of English is vital, particularly when it comes to providing good customer service. The ability of migrant workers to speak English has been highlighted as a particular concern amongst Asset Skills employers⁸. Within the cleaning industry it is important that workers are not only able to speak English but have the reading skills required

for the job. Cleaning companies have, in the past, specifically mentioned a shortfall in reading skills amongst migrant workers and potential issues this causes in terms of health and safety⁹. If a migrant worker's ability to read English is limited, even if they are able to speak the language, then areas of the job such as handling chemicals can be potentially dangerous. In order to deal with these skills gaps employers are using several methods or 'coping strategies' such as employing a bilingual supervisor or using special pictogram operating instructions. However, such methods rarely get around the need to invest in ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) training. Whilst most companies do not provide this training some may support workers in undertaking it by directing them to a local college or even giving them the time off that they require to complete it.

The benefits of migrant workers

The UK has an aging population and, as a result, migrant workers are needed to ensure that

there are enough people to fill all jobs. Migrant workers can be particularly valuable in their willingness to fill positions which British workers are unwilling to take. Recent research from Asset Skills also highlighted staff turnover as a problem to cleaning companies. When asked to comment on the reasons that may lead to poor levels of staff retention employers cited a number of factors such as an employee's career aspirations and poor wages¹⁰. Migrant workers often prove valuable in providing employers with a solution to these problems. Positions vacated in the cleaning sector can be difficult to fill due to the low wages offered and the unsociable hours that employees are often required to work. However, workers arriving from other countries are often willing to take employment which British workers would consider unappealing.

Employers within the cleaning industry tend to have a positive attitude towards migrant workers due to the personal qualities they possess – they are often seen as harder working than British-born staff for example¹¹.

⁵Skills for Jobs: Today and Tomorrow. The National Strategic Skills Audit for England 2010

⁶Annual Business Inquiry, 2008

⁷ Sector Skills Assessment for the Cleaning and Support Services Industry, Asset Skills, 2010

⁸ Sector Skills Assessment for the Cleaning and Support Services Industry, Asset Skills, 2010

⁹The role and importance of migrant workers in the cleaning industry, Asset Skills, 2007

¹⁰Cleaning barometer, October 2009, Asset Skills

¹¹The role and importance of migrant workers in the cleaning industry, Asset Skills, 2007

Issues associated with migrant workers

The main drawback cited by many when it comes to migrant workers is the potential threat they pose to British jobs.

In response to some of these concerns a points-based immigration system for foreign workers entering the UK from outside the European Union was introduced in 2008. In 2009 the UK government announced that even stricter rules would be introduced in an attempt to protect British workers.

As part of this change it has been suggested that the way in which skills shortage lists are used would also be modified.

Whilst they were previously used to identify where labour was needed from abroad, it is now thought that they may be used to establish where greater training is required for British workers, greatly reducing the need for migrant labour¹².

The impact that migrant workers have in terms of easing staff retention is also one of potential debate. Whilst it is true that migrant workers often ease issues within the cleaning industry to do with staff

turnover they do, on occasion, also contribute to it. In October 2009, 77 cleaning organisations took part in the Asset Skills barometer survey. Several factors were cited as contributing to high staff turnover, including migrant workers returning home due to homesickness or a family crisis. However, on the whole, it is generally accepted that migrant workers do more to ease this issue than increase it.

Illegal Immigration and Exploitation

When hiring a migrant worker companies need to consider more than just whether the person is capable of doing the job. Whether someone entering the UK is legally entitled to work here is something which companies need to be sure of before hiring them and, as a result, the decision to employ a migrant worker is not one which should be taken lightly by any employer. If a person is found to be working in the UK illegally then their employer can face a number of serious consequences. Checking if a person is working in the UK illegally is sometimes overlooked, however, as attempts to clamp down on companies employing illegal migrant workers have increased so have the penalties for those

found to be doing so. It was announced in February 2008 that any company found to be employing migrant workers illegally could face a fine of up to £10,000¹³. When such harsh penalties are coupled with the number of people working in UK illegally (believed to be in the hundreds of thousands) it is not surprising that this is a serious concern for employers when it comes to considering the issue of migrant labour.

Migrant workers also face risks themselves when taking up work in the UK, most notably through potential exploitation from their own employer. It can be difficult for a migrant worker that doesn't speak good English to be clear on exactly what their rights are and whether they are receiving a fair level of pay and holidays. Employees in the cleaning sector also need to beware that they are not being asked to work unreasonable shifts or do more than one job for no more pay.

Organisations such as the Trades Union Congress offer help and advice to migrant workers who feel that they are not being treated fairly. If an employer is found to be guilty of exploiting a worker then charges may be



brought against them.

The impact of the recession on migrant workers

According to reports, the initial impact of the recession on the number of migrant workers in the UK was significant. In October 2008 it was noted that, according to estimates from the Home Office, at least 100,000 Polish workers had left over the past year, with predictions that as many as 400,000 would leave in the following 12 months¹⁴.

Since the onset of the recession there is reported to have been a slowdown in the number of migrants entering the country and a rise in the number of migrant workers leaving. This, at least in part, is likely to be a natural drop after the initial surge several years ago. However, the economic situation - most notably the drop in the value of sterling against other currencies, has certainly contributed to this fall.

Despite this, migrant workers are expected to remain an important part of

¹²www.aboutimmigration.co.uk – Stricter new rules for migrant workers

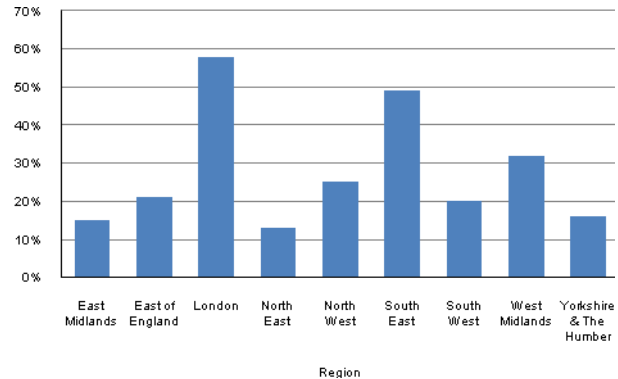
¹³www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk – Penalties for employing illegal migrant workers

¹⁴www.telegraph.co.uk – Recession will send 1 million immigrant workers home (October 2008)



poor staff retention and also helps employers meet increasing demands from customers at a lower cost is likely to ensure that they continue to be of great value to employers in the UK. An illustration of the value that migrant workers can continue to bring to the UK is seen in the fact that a number of employers in the cleaning industry have suggested that, far from discouraging immigration, the UK government should be more open about the benefits that workers from other areas bring to the economy.

Figure 1: Migrant workers as a proportion of the cleaning workforce in England by region



Source: Asset Skills migrant workers survey, 2007

the workforce in the future within sectors such as cleaning. Recent research suggested that almost one in ten employers across all sectors in the UK intended to recruit migrant workers in the third quarter of 2009¹⁵. However the Trades Union Congress suggested that cases of migrant workers such as cleaners being exploited, by being asked to undertake more jobs per day for the same wages, were likely to increase as a result of the downturn¹⁶.

Whether migrant workers continue to return home as a result of the recession is difficult to predict and is likely to depend on a number of factors, such as the economic situation in their own country.

The Future

Migrant workers are likely to be of importance to industries in the UK such as cleaning for some time to come. The Institute for Public Policy Research noted that, 'even during a prolonged economic downturn, the UK will need to attract migrant workers into key sectors'¹⁷. The fact that migrant labour eases issues like recruitment and

Conclusions – The Asset Skills viewpoint

- Migrant workers enter the UK from a variety of areas. In recent years a large number have arrived from Eastern European areas like Poland. How long these workers choose to stay can depend on a large number of things from personal reasons to what the economic picture is like in the East UK compared to their home country.
- Despite forecasts from some areas that many migrant workers will leave the UK as a result of the recession it is likely that they will continue to play a vital role within the cleaning sector in future.
- Whilst many entering the country possess limited communication skills, their positive attitude and willingness to fill potentially unappealing positions make them a valuable asset to the UK workforce.
- Due to a lack of qualifications and issues around communication it's likely that migrant workers entering the UK at working age will continue to play an important role in cleaning but their presence within the facilities management and housing and property sectors will be limited.

¹⁵www.personneltoday.com – UK unemployment soars to 2.43 million.

¹⁶The impact of the recession on migrant labour, Local Government Association, January 2009

¹⁷The impact of the recession on migrant labour, Local Government Association, January 2009