



'I am not a number': Exploring the wellbeing of seasonal farm workers in the UK

What is the challenge?

To minimise production costs, modern food supply chains depend on a 'flexible' workforce. In recent years in the UK, this has been largely provided by Eastern European workers.

However, the difficulty of the work, global labour shortages and Brexit-related changes make it hard for farmers to find workers to harvest their crops.

Despite being crucial for food production, little is understood about what encourages workers to remain on, or return to, a particular farm for subsequent harvests.

This is important because there is a moral imperative to support workers' wellbeing and because those with accumulated expertise and knowledge are highly valued by farmers. They require less supervision and training and are typically more efficient and productive than newly-recruited workers.



What is this research?

Seasonal workers from countries including Poland, Latvia, Bulgaria and Romania, working on farms in Yorkshire, England, contributed to this research. The workers harvested and packed highly-perishable food stuffs, including soft fruits, asparagus and pumpkins. Data was collected through informal conversation, photographs and observation of workers engaged in paid work. The research sought to understand what on-farm factors affected seasonal workers' wellbeing, and how their cumulative effects might influence workers' decisions to return to a particular farm for subsequent harvests.



What are the key findings?

What supported or detracted from workers' on-farm wellbeing was typically an aggregation of many interacting and often mundane factors. At some point, these caused an increase or decline in workers' satisfaction with their workplace; for example, inter-worker conflict in conjunction with too much or too little work, inconsistent volumes of work, or inadequate privacy in their accommodation. Each might be tolerable in isolation but unbearable in combination. Many of these issues would be rectifiable with simple, low-cost measures.

Workers preferred to work on farms with person-centric workplace cultures which considered their wellbeing. Whether a farm was 'good' or not was determined by factors other than the wages it paid, with some workers actively choosing to work where they felt safe and valued, rather than where they did not yet had higher earnings. The on-farm factors identified for workers' wellbeing were loosely categorised as psychosocial or material, with workers' wellbeing apparently affected more by the former than the latter.



Workers' decisions about accepting work on a specific farm took account of:

- Being referred to by name instead of worker-number. The latter reduced workers to anonymous commodities or units of human labour. Commodification has previously been identified in relation to seasonal workers yet not explicitly associated with their wellbeing, nor has it previously been noted that commodification influences workers' willingness to return to a farm.
- Being explicitly and personally invited to return for subsequent work indicated that workers were valued as people first and labour second. This encouraged mutual loyalty, with farmers looking after workers, and workers more likely to return.
- A workplace in which workers' needs were habitually considered and helped to feel central and important to the farm's business. This included living and cooking facilities exceeding mandatory standards, which was interpreted as a gesture of respect.
- Knowing their employer would intervene to manage inter-worker conflict and resolve complaints.
- Being supervised in ways that felt supportive, not like surveillance.

- Space and opportunity for respite, reprieve and privacy, including being able to leave the farm without relying on their employer for a lift.
- Feeling able to decline work, including overtime, without reprisal.
- Easy access to healthcare and dental care, including without having to rely on someone else for transport.

This research found working on a 'good' farm benefited workers' wellbeing whilst also protecting them in future work, because 'good' farmers appeared more willing to help workers find follow-on employment on other farms with person-centric cultures. Working on one 'good' farm seemed also to protect workers by shaping their expectations about seasonal farm work, including what they should and should not tolerate.

Brexit-related legislation has significantly reduced the number of seasonal workers recruited from Eastern Europe, with farm labour shortfalls at least partially addressed by UK and non-EU temporary workers. The findings of this research are applicable to these workers too, and relevant for farming employers seeking to support their workers' wellbeing.



What are workable recommendations for the future?

Despite the extent to which on-farm practices are shaped and constrained by outside forces, farmers have scope to implement simple, relatively low-cost changes which would support workers' wellbeing and which may encourage their return to that farm for subsequent seasons of work.

- A person-centric culture, requiring employers to consciously think of workers as people, not labour, and identify them by name, not number.
- A commitment to seek workers' opinions, preferences and expertise, and properly consult workers about the implementation of material changes. These might include free internet and/or free laundry services.
- Farm efficiency requires many skills, including financial and business acumen, crop, soil and asset management. Yet leadership and management skills, for which lengthy courses exist in other industries, are often overlooked. Additionally, many farmers have limited access to good advice and support about resolving staff-related issues. This can cause stress for farmers and reduce their farms' efficient operation, because their workers' wellbeing remains compromised. It therefore seems logical to explore the provision of training and support for farmers who require seasonal workers, including informal, sector-specific forums for the exchange of ideas and solutions relating to leadership and management.
- Respite and relief are important for workers' wellbeing, including the material means to 'escape' the farm, preferably without relying on farmers for transport. But psychological escape is also important, including autonomy about how to do various tasks, which tasks to do and whether to choose piece rate or hourly rate work.
- Free or very heavily-subsided dental treatment whilst on farms would reduce workers' physical suffering and allow them to work at full capacity. It might help to reduce their anxieties about forfeiting work to attend appointments and have sustained effects, as workers would continue to benefit even after leaving the farm to return home.