

**A global workforce in a global city:
The skills, experiences and aspirations of a group of
contract cleaners in London, UK**

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Introduction

Since it rose from the ashes of the old docks over 20 years ago, Canary Wharf has become an important centre for financial services in London. There are now something like 80,000 people employed at the site. While many of these are members of a highly skilled and richly paid global elite, the business environment also depends upon hundreds of sub-contracted workers who are employed to clean, cater and secure the premises. This report concerns a group of such support workers who were employed by one contract cleaning company to clean an office building at Canary Wharf in 2006.

Managers at the contract cleaning company commissioned this research in order to better understand the existing skills-base, experiences and aspirations of their staff with a view to their future career development. In a competitive market place, staff development and related improvements in service delivery are becoming increasingly important to economic success. This research was conceived to advance this agenda and the contract cleaning company teamed up with researchers from Queen Mary, University of London, to do this research. In so doing, the research was also designed to meet the information demands of ongoing academic research.

This report introduces the research and its findings. It focuses on cleaners' feelings about work; staff representation; skills, labour market experiences and aspirations; and domestic circumstances. The report ends with a set of conclusions.

Setting the scene: research methods and a profile of the respondents

Between September and November 2006, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 54 of the 105 staff employed to clean one particular building at Canary Wharf. A questionnaire was used to guide confidential 30 minute-long interviews that were conducted during work time. Anonymity was guaranteed to all participants and no names were documented at the time of the interview or subsequently, in any written reports. Participation was voluntary and because more of the staff working during the day than the night elected to take part, the research covers almost all the day staff (22 from 26) and less than half of the night staff (32 from 79). The sample was divided between 26 men and 28 women. Interviews were also conducted with four managers at the site to explore their experiences of the cleaning industry, staffing issues,

workload management and the scope for staff development. These encounters were recorded and transcribed, and although it is not always possible to anonymise the responses made by these respondents, the quotes used in this report have been agreed with the participants concerned.

At the time of the research, staff were paid £6.20 an hour for their work. A bonus of 30 pence an hour was also paid if and when staff achieved unbroken attendance at work for the previous two weeks. This put the wage rate up to £6.50 an hour, which was well above the minimum wage (£5.35 an hour at the time of the research), but still less than the London living wage of £7.05 an hour (GLA, 2006). Staff were paid at the same rate for overtime working, night shifts and day shifts. Team leaders were paid at £7.20 an hour, and supervisors were paid slightly less. All staff were entitled to 20 days paid holiday in addition to 8 bank holidays. At the time of the research there was no sick pay scheme in operation on site.

A small number of the staff interviewed (11 people or 20% of the sample) had worked in the building before the company won the contract but only one worker had been employed since the building was constructed. A further three respondents had been employed by the four subsequent contractors. Two respondents had been employed by three different contractors, and a further five cleaners had worked with one previous contractor. Owing to TUPE regulations¹, four of the longest serving of these staff had slightly different terms and conditions of work. Those who started working with the first or second contractor were paid for their lunch hour and they had retained this benefit with each subsequent change of employer. All other staff had to sign in and out for their lunch hour and were not paid for this time.

For most respondents (80% or 43 people), this was their first and only employer at this particular building. The majority of the sample had worked for the company for less than two years (56% or 30 people) and only one person had transferred with the company from another building. Labour turnover was high and company records at the time of the research indicated a monthly churn of about 4 or 5 people. Over a 12

¹ The Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment (TUPE) regulations date back to the 1980s and ensure that staff terms and conditions of employment are protected when they transfer from one employer to another as a result of contracting out or the re-tendering of contracts.

month period the turnover rate was between 30 and 40% and as a result, managers spent a lot of their time interviewing and recruiting new staff.

The majority of the staff interviewed (41 people or 76% of the sample) were born outside the UK. The age profile of the foreign-born workers was slightly different to that of the British-born group. As many as a quarter of the foreign-born workforce were aged between 18 and 34 with another third (35% or 14 people) aged over 45. In contrast, only 2 of those born within the UK fell into the younger cohort with almost half of the British-born workers (6, or 46% of the British-born population) being aged over 45. This suggests that the British-born workforce is ageing and being replaced by foreign-born workers who are joining the workforce at a younger age. This said, the research did include two younger British-born men who were both 24 at the time of interview, one of whom was white and the other of Asian descent. When asked if the employment of younger British-born staff was a growing trend for the future, one manager said not, arguing that the younger British-born workers who came to work were often “not reliable” and didn’t stay very long (interview, 4.12.06).

Of the 13 British-born staff who were interviewed, two had lived outside the UK for most of their lives, one in Nigeria and the other in Trinidad. The remaining 11 British-born staff comprised three ethnic minority workers (two of African Caribbean and one of Asian parentage) and 8 white British staff. The remaining cleaners interviewed were born in one of 20 different countries, with significant concentrations from Colombia (5), Ghana (5), Angola (4) and Lithuania (4). A surprisingly large number of workers were the sole representative of their national group, including a Brazilian, a Cameroonian, a Dominican, an Estonian (who was actually a Russian with Estonian citizenship), a Gambian, a worker from the Ivory Coast, a Latvian, a Filipino, a Portuguese worker, a Somalian and a Tanzanian. In total, 35% of the sample (19 people) were from Africa, closely followed by Western Europe (including the UK with 32% or 17 people), Latin America and the Caribbean (20% or 11 people) and Eastern Europe (with 11% or 6 people). Data collected from company records for the whole workforce indicate that cleaners actually came from as many as 29 different countries of birth (including the UK, see Figure 1 and Table 1).

Figure 1: Map showing the country of birth of cleaners employed at the building in Canary Wharf



Source: analysis of 105 anonymised company records (3 cases did not have country of birth recorded)

Table 1: Cleaners by place of birth

Country	Numbers	Country	Numbers
		Jamaica	2
Algeria	1	Latvia	1
Angola	5	Lithuania	7
Bangladesh	5	Nigeria	10
Brazil	2	Philippines	1
Cameroon	2	Poland	1
Colombia	4	Portugal	3
Congo	3	Russia	1
Ecuador	1	Sierra Leone	4
Equatorial guinea	1	Spain	5
Estonia	1	Tanzania	1
France	1	Tunisia	1
Gambia	1	Uganda	1
Ghana	14	UK	20
Ivory coast	1	Zaire	2

Source: analysis of 105 anonymised company records (3 cases did not have country of birth recorded)

This international diversity was overlaid by a complicated pattern of citizenship. Indeed, the research highlighted a number of different routes cleaners had taken to secure both British and EU citizenship. As many as 15 of the foreign-born workers had taken up British citizenship, and as might be expected, these were people with longer-term residence in the UK. As many as 7 of the 8 respondents who had arrived in or before 1990 had elected to become British citizens. In contrast, only a quarter of those who arrived between 1991 and 2000 were British citizens and none of those who had arrived since 2000 were British. The majority of the foreign-born workers in the sample (33 out of 41 or 80% of those born abroad) had come to the UK in the relatively recent past (since 1991) and as many as 31% of this group (13 people) had arrived since 2001. This reflects recent demographic trends as increasing numbers of immigrants from a wider range of countries are coming to live and work in the UK (Kyambi, 2006). It might also reflect the fact that some longer-term immigrants have been able to progress in the labour market and move out of cleaning into other employment.

Those foreign-born workers who had British citizenship had acquired this by various means. One Ghanaian woman, who had arrived in the UK to see her sister in 1987, leaving eight children at home, worked illegally for a while before meeting a white British man who subsequently became her husband. They had two further children, and despite their subsequent separation, she was able to secure British citizenship. A Ghanaian man in his 40s had similarly arrived in 1991 leaving three children at home before marrying a British citizen and having two more children in the UK. Although he too had worked illegally when he first arrived, he was a British citizen at the time of the research. A Nigerian woman who came to the UK in 1999 had left a 4-year-old child at home and then met her husband while working on a tourist visa in London. Since marrying and having a baby, she too has taken up citizenship. Several other Ghanaians, a Jamaican, a Sierra Leonean and a Tanzanian reported doing the same.

A Filipino woman was more unusual in securing her citizenship by marrying a British man before she moved to the UK. Her ethnically Filipino husband had grown up with his parents who had previously migrated, and once married, the couple came to live with his parents in London. A number of workers from the Caribbean similarly reported that they were able to access the UK labour market by virtue of their parents'

earlier migration. Once here in the 1950s and 1960s, these earlier migrants were able to bring over close family to live in the UK, transferring the benefits of citizenship to a new generation. Beyond marriage and earlier migration, however, one Colombian man in his 50s reported being able to secure a work permit to come and work in the Scottish oil industry in 1979. This man had subsequently married, had a child, moved to London and taken up citizenship.

When asked about their present immigration status, those workers who had not taken up British citizenship (26 people in total) gave a variety of answers to explain their presence in the UK. As many as 14 were European nationals, including those from Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Portugal and Spain. In addition to acquiring EU nationality by birth, a considerable number of workers had also acquired this status through marriage or previous residence elsewhere. As examples, one Gambian woman had married a Swedish man and her children were growing up in Sweden while she worked in the UK. A Brazilian and two Angolans had lived in Portugal and acquired Portuguese citizenship before coming to live and work in the UK.

The remaining 12 workers who were not British or EU citizens had largely entered the UK as asylum seekers. For example, a man in his late thirties had arrived from Angola in 1995, applied for asylum and then waited six years for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR). Three Colombian workers had also claimed asylum during the 1990s and all had subsequently had children in the UK. A Cameroonian man in his 50s, an Angolan man in his 50s and an Ecuadorian man in his 30s had also successfully claimed asylum in the UK. While the former left four children at home, the latter had both had children since arriving in the UK. A Somali man in his 40s told a remarkable story of travelling to Tanzania, buying a passport, travelling to Zambia and Zimbabwe, and spending six years outside Somalia before arriving at Heathrow airport and claiming asylum from a detention centre in 1988. This man had a grown up son who was born in Somalia but had since married and had two more children in the UK. While his wife and children were British citizens, he had retained his ILR. A woman from the Ivory Coast in her 40s reported coming to the UK to join her husband who had claimed asylum from political persecution when he arrived. She left her four children, three of whom were grown up, to join her husband who had subsequently died here in the UK.

The remaining workers who did not have either British or EU citizenship appeared to have been regularised through having children in the UK. One Ecuadorian man who arrived on a tourist visa in 2000 had subsequently stayed in the UK and at the time of interview, he had a three-year-old child who was born in the UK. His older child had been born in Ecuador but they were both living with him in London and he had paid a lawyer to secure him ILR on the basis of the child born within the UK. Likewise, a Colombian man had also secured ILR after having four children in the UK. A Tanzanian woman had done the same after being on both tourist and student visas while having three children, with a Jamaican woman also having done this while having two children in the UK. The latter two women were both separated from their husbands and at the time of interview, it was not clear if they had secured their ILR on the basis of their marriage or having children in the UK.

Due to the way in which the client demanded that all the paperwork provided by potential employees was closely scrutinised, cleaning managers argued that they were very unlikely to be employing anyone without the legal status to work and perhaps as a consequence of this, only one Nigerian worker refused to answer this question. Indeed, one manager reported that it could take as long as three months to get the security clearance needed to start employing a cleaner. A potential cleaner would need to demonstrate proof of address for three years, immigration status, credit worthiness and previous employer references before their appointment would be confirmed. In some cases, these requirements made it difficult to recruit the cleaners required and put the cleaning contractor at a disadvantage compared to other employers.

The research demonstrates the complexity of managed migration into the UK and its labour market. Important entry points for new migrants to Britain include the EU, marriage, childbirth and asylum (and data for the whole workforce is summarised in Table 2). Moreover, it is clear that patterns of migration are changing very rapidly. As white British and African Caribbean workers have moved out of cleaning, new groups have arrived to replace them. As this manager put it when reflecting on how the industry had changed since the early 1990s:

How it's changed, the main thing is ... the flow of which ethnic backgrounds, because in 1991 it was predominantly Jamaicans cleaning ... and that has gone and ... I see it as they got educated, they educated themselves and they stopped cleaning. And now you've got the South Americans and you ... [have] the Eastern Europeans coming in. So it's just a wave and now the South Americans have settled here, their children won't clean, you watch, they won't, they'll get educated and then they'll do ... other things (interview, 4.12.06).

Managers reported the need to manage the rich ethnic diversity of the workforce. They sought to 'balance' teams of workers to avoid particular groups being dominant, as this respondent explained:

It's like teams, we look at the teams, and you can't have a Nigerian supervisor and then maybe five Nigerians in that team because you wouldn't get any work done, they'll talk all night you know? We're very selective and we look at their nationality before they're put into a group ... They're all mixed, every single one, very mixed ... and that is because, from our point of view, we want more work from them and also it stops conflict because when there is a big group, not only do they chat but they fight as well and argue (interview, 4.12.06).

This manager went on to talk about the need to manage the different cultural expectations that cleaners brought to their work, citing the particular importance of gender relations for many workers from the developing world:

In the culture of say, Nigerians, [if] you've got a female team leader, you can't put a dominant male Nigerian with her because she could not control him ... he would probably sit and watch her do it for him because of their culture (interview 4.12.06).

Thus, even though workers tended to socialise with those from the same nationality during their break times, they were employed in ethnically mixed teams to clean.

Table 2: Routes into living and working in the UK

Place of birth	Visa/citizenship	Number of staff
Britain	N/A	20
Born in the EU	Estonia (1), France (1), Latvia (1), Lithuania (7), Poland (1), Portugal (3), Spain (5)	19
Outside the EU	Obtained EU passport Angola – Portugal (3), Brazil – Portugal (1), Equatorial-Guinea-Spain	9

	(1), Nigeria- Netherlands (1), Sierra Leone – Netherlands (1), Gambia – Sweden (1), Tunisia- Sweden (1)	
Outside the EU	British	23
	Family visa to join spouse	2
	Indefinite Leave to Remain	19
	Limited Leave to Remain	1
	Residence permit	4
	Right of residence	4
	Settlement visa	1
	Students' Dependent visa	2
	Working holiday visa	1
Total		105

Source: analysis of 105 anonymised company records

Attitudes to work: Likes, dislikes and aspirations

When asked about what they liked and disliked about their work, respondents gave a wide variety of answers and their initial responses are indicated in Tables 3 and 4. A solid minority of staff (18 people or 33% of the sample) enjoyed cleaning. They liked keeping the building clean and tidy, they took satisfaction in the work and the high standards achieved. People also enjoyed the fact that they were earning money and getting out of the house. Others appreciated the chance to work at night as this allowed them to look after their children while their partner worked during the day. A considerable number of staff also mentioned the social contact they had at work. They valued the chance to meet other people and to get to know people from all over the world. Some respondents said that they found the work relatively undemanding and that suited them well. Others liked being given autonomy at work, and as examples, one cleaner appreciated being left on her own in a separate building to get on with her work and another similarly liked being left on his own to compact all the rubbish collected on site.

For a sub-set of the sample, however, their experiences of cleaning were less positive and 15 people or 28% of the sample did not have anything positive to say about work. Some respondents felt that they couldn't get better work due to their poor English

language skills and others felt restricted due to their age. This group of cleaners were there because they needed the money and had no better or alternative sources of work.

Table 3: What do you like about your job?

	Numbers	%
The work and job itself	18	33
Social contact	12	22
Other	9	17
Nothing	15	28
TOTAL	54	

Note: this was an open-ended question and the first responses given have been summarised here. The ‘other’ category includes several workers who said that they liked the night manager and the company.

When asked about the things they disliked about their work, respondents gave a wide variety of responses (see Table 4). The main group of answers concerned the nature of the job itself (24 people or 48% of the sample). This included things like the repetitive and potentially demeaning nature of cleaning. As an example, one respondent said they didn’t like: “cleaning toilets on 8 floors, 4 times a day.” As might be expected, people also particularly objected to cleaning dirty toilets. Some respondents found the work physically tiring and complained about carrying towels, toilet rolls and rubbish around the building. A number of respondents disliked having to cover for absent colleagues, without additional pay, and the regularity with which this occurred.

A quarter of the sample (12 people) also mentioned the low level of pay as their first complaint about work. A number of cleaners particularly objected to the attendance allowance of 30p an hour, arguing that this punished them for being sick. Some respondents felt that the work they did was under valued, and they were aware that they were paid less than cleaners in other buildings at Canary Wharf. A smaller group of staff also complained about having to sign in and out for their lunch breaks and they thought they should be trusted to take their own breaks. A group of the night staff felt that they should be paid more to reflect the anti-social hours involved. Long serving staff were keen that their commitment was reflected in pay, and they argued that they should be paid a loyalty bonus to reflect their service. Other cleaners also wanted a company sick pay scheme to support them when they were ill.

The final group of complaints centred on the treatment of staff by managers (with 8 people or 16% of respondents citing this first). People reported feeling undervalued and overlooked. As an example, one long serving cleaner said that the previous contractors used to give staff an extra week’s pay at Christmas as a ‘thank you’ to staff, but this had been dropped when the new company took over. Others said that company were willing to “sack people too quickly even if they have been here a long time” and a number of respondents said they were frightened of managerial discipline. A number of cleaners objected to the way they were searched leaving the building and were not allowed to have their mobile phones with them during work time. Rudeness was also attributed to some of the staff working for the client who were argued to “look down on cleaners” in the belief that “cleaners are the lowest of the low.” One manager also argued that the male staff often found it particularly difficult to come to terms with being a cleaner due to its low social status. As she put it: “I think guys find it hard: they don’t like admitting to their latest girlfriend that they’re a cleaner” (interview, 4.12.06).

Table 4: What do you dislike about your job?

	Numbers	%
The work and job itself	24	48
Low pay and lack of benefits	12	24
Employer’s practices	8	16
No complaints	6	12
TOTAL	50	

Note: this was an open-ended question and the first responses given have been recoded here. Please note that four respondents did not make any response to this question.

Respondents had much less to say about working for the client. As many as 42% of the 48 people who answered the question said they liked working at Canary Wharf. People appreciated working near home and the fact that Canary Wharf is easy to reach by public transport. Others said that they liked the quality of the local environment and the security provided when going to and from work. A number of respondents (11 people or 23% of those who answered) found the client staff friendly, pleasant and polite. However, a number also felt excluded from the workplace team. As this

respondent put it: “this place is all about making money. You don’t feel like this is your place of work, you always feel like it is temporary ... You don’t feel like they are taking care of you.” Another respondent argued that cleaners were not generally trusted, and he justified this by saying: “Look at this shirt we wear – with a big bold ****[company name] on the back so the camera can pick us up ... They couldn’t tag us anymore if they tried.”

When people were asked about their ideas for changes and improvements at work, many respondents found it difficult to think of anything that would make their work more interesting or efficient. As one worker said: “you can’t make cleaning toilets more interesting!” Many respondents reiterated their desire for more pay, a different managerial culture and/or a different form of employment. A number suggested that paying better and treating people with more respect would increase productivity and make people stay with the company for the long term. Several said they would be more motivated with higher levels of pay. Another member of staff thought the company could do more to foster cohesion amongst the workforce and to this end, he suggested using the canteen to serve communal meals from around the world. Several other cleaners also mentioned that the company needed to manage the workload more efficiently, and recruit additional staff to cover absences. As one cleaner put it, this would avoid the “chaos” and the demand to “run round like a headless chicken” when people were off. One cleaner mentioned that they could have better quality bin bags and cleaning materials, and this would help them at work. Five respondents also said that they were keen to move into supervisory positions, or at least take up training to explore the possibility of supervisory work.

Staff representation

At the time of the research the cleaning contractor had recently introduced a staff forum to allow cleaners to raise concerns, issues and ideas for improvement with managerial staff. Cleaners were asked if they knew about this staff forum and if so, what they thought about it. Surprisingly, only 15 staff (28% of respondents) knew about the staff forum and this was consistent across the day and night shifts. When it was given, opinion was divided between those who were pleased that the staff forum existed, seeing it as a positive opportunity to raise issues with the company, and those who thought it was too weak to represent staff interests over questions like pay.

Indeed, as one worker said: “when it comes to money, they [the managers] don’t want to know, so the forum’s job is not fulfilled.” Another said: “they are not doing anything about our demands like sick pay so colleagues go but it is a waste of time.”

A sizeable minority of staff (20 people or 37% of respondents) were members of the Transport and General Workers’ union (T&G). Remarkably, however, all the union members were born outside the UK and none of the 13 British-born staff belonged to the union. As many as 49% of the migrant workers belonged to the T&G whereas the five minority-ethnic British-born staff (including those of African-Caribbean, African and Asian heritage) and the eight white British-born staff had all elected to stay out of the union. One man of African-Caribbean parentage had previously belonged to the T&G and he thought the union could have benefits, but in this job, he wanted to speak for himself. This man also resented having to pay union dues from such meagre wages and mistrusted some of the union officials involved. A young Asian British man was much more hostile, arguing that unions were “a haven for people who are lazy or just complain and it is easier to carry on without them.” Some of the white British workers complained about the poor local leadership of the union, and the cost and poor return for the dues. Moreover, although four of the white British workers did have more positive views about the union, recognising the role it played in the negotiation of wages and disciplinary hearings, they felt no imperative to join. Indeed, it is telling that one of these respondents argued that the union was better for migrants as they “need representation.” Reinforcing this view of the union as a non-British organisation, another respondent argued that trade unions have “too many coloured people” in membership and it was not something for someone like him.

Those who were positive about the trade union cited pay rises, increases in holiday entitlement, personal representation, a reduction in the number of sackings and information exchange as a result of union organisation. A small additional group said they supported the union but had not got round to signing up. Those who were actively involved said that it was hard to overcome people’s fear of joining the union and the pressure on cleaners’ time also made it hard to win active support for things like meetings, demonstrations and ongoing campaigns.

Cleaners' skills and labour market experiences

As indicated in Table 5, the research highlighted a sharp difference in the educational backgrounds of the UK-born and the foreign-born populations. While the majority of both groups had some form of education up to secondary level, none of the UK-born group had university level training and only one worker had some form of advanced vocational training. In contrast, 12% of the foreign-born workforce (5 people) had university degrees and a further 12% reported higher level vocational training. This suggests that by tapping migrant labour supply, the cleaning contractor is securing a better-educated workforce. However, this can only be turned into an advantage if such skills are recognised, developed and deployed. Moreover, it is also clear that the educational experiences of the migrant population is more differentiated than the UK-born group, and as many as 10% of respondents (4 workers) reported having no official education or only primary level schooling. This suggests that the contractor also faces the challenge of managing and developing workers with very limited educational experience.

Table 5: Cleaners educational experience

	Born in the UK		Born outside the UK	
	Number	% of group	Number	% of group
No official Ed	0	0	1	2
Primary	0	0	3	7
Lwr Secondary	8	62	13	32
Upp Secondary	4	31	14	34
Degree	0	0	5	12
Vocational	1	8	5	12
TOTAL	13	100	41	100

Note: Respondents were asked about the highest level of education they had received.

As might be expected, almost all the foreign-born workers had worked in their home country before moving to the UK. A considerable number had been employed in service industries such as hospitality, taxi driving, hairdressing, postal services, sales and security. A small minority, however, had worked in professional jobs. One woman had 22 years of primary school teaching experience in eastern Europe. Another had been a medical assistant in Latvia. One man had been a manager in a

palm oil factory in Nigeria and one woman had accounting and data entry experience in the Philippines prior to coming to the UK. These workers had university level experience and/or vocational training in education, agricultural science and accounting. Three other workers had degrees, one in international relations (Angola), another in Computer Science (Nigeria) and another in political economy (Somalia). Another worker was also studying for a degree at the time of the research. These workers felt that their English language skills and their personal situation (having children or getting older in the case of the women) held them back. English language skills training and further assistance would help these workers to re-use their professional skills.

The older British-born workers had all had long periods of labour market experience before coming to work at Canary Wharf . Almost all had experienced redundancy at some point during their previous work, and the men in particular, had no prior experience of the cleaning industry. As examples, one white British man aged 54 at the time of the research had worked fixing pallets for a long time before being made redundant and claiming benefit for almost ten years prior to working at Canary Wharf; another 59 year old white British man had a long career as a market trader (30 years) and running a café (12 years) before coming to work at Canary Wharf early in 2006; a white British middle-aged man had previously worked as a road sweeper and warehouse man; and a 47 year old white British man had gone to work at a sugar refinery for 16 years and then Ford's car assembly plant in Dagenham for a further 5 years before being made redundant again and getting a job with the contractor. This latter respondent said his experience of industrial work was better than cleaning, arguing that he had enjoyed the social life in the previous jobs. Although this worker had made a couple of new friends at Canary Wharf, he argued that his age, lack of qualifications and the paucity of alternatives made it difficult to find other work.

As a final example of this downward mobility and sectoral shift in the career-trajectories of British-born men, a man describing himself as 'a black cockney' who was 48 at the time of the interview, recalled doing at least 10 previous jobs before coming to work at Canary Wharf in 2005. After leaving school at 16 he had worked as a panel beater, a gear box mechanic, an engineer, a delivery man, a labourer, a window-fitter and a traffic warden – and although his ideal job would be in the music

business (having belonged to a music collective for 32 years) – he had ended up in cleaning after a spell in receipt of unemployment benefit.

In this regard, gender emerged as being very significant in that the research found that cleaning was less of a contrast for the small number of British-born women who were also found working at Canary Wharf. Women's previous jobs, from which most had taken time out to look after children, were mainly in the service sector including jobs such as retailing, administration, hairdressing, catering, school meals and cleaning. As an example, a white British woman who was 46 at the time of the interview had left school at 16 in 1976. She had worked in a variety of administrative jobs (including a solicitors office, imports-exports and an insurance company), interspersed with periods of training and unemployment for 10 years. After this, she had worked in a laundry and dry cleaners for 2 years, before moving to a meat factory for 4 years. Here she was made redundant again, and then returned to the laundry for a further 6 years before moving to Canary Wharf via a friend's introduction in 1998. In her thirty-year career, this woman had been made redundant at least twice and had often found it hard to find work. In contrast to the British-born men in the survey, she argued that the pay and conditions at Canary Wharf were better than those provided at her previous jobs. She said that she really liked the job when she first started in 1998, and although she found the changes associated with re-contracting difficult, and liked some of the managers better than others, she still quite liked the work.

It is highly significant that this woman's Mother had also worked as a part-time cleaner and cleaning was something she had grown up with. Likewise, a manager reported how she got into the industry through her Mother who worked in cleaning. When her second child was born she could no longer afford to pay for childcare and worked as a cleaner at night in order to look after her children during the day. In contrast to the British-born men in the sample, the British-born women had not necessarily experienced downward mobility at work. And although both genders had experienced redundancy and periods of labour market turbulence since the 1980s, the collapse of manufacturing and traditionally masculine work had hit the male respondents much harder than the women surveyed.

In this regard, the research highlighted the similarity between the trajectories of British-born women workers and migrant workers of both genders in London. Most of the foreign-born workers interviewed had worked elsewhere in the UK before starting at Canary Wharf and, as in the case of British-born women, these jobs were almost all in the service sector, or related factory work, such as bread and sandwich making. A considerable number of both men and women had worked in hospitality (as housekeepers or food preparation staff), security, child-care, home care and cleaning. Those who had worked in hotel housekeeping all said that they preferred working the contractor, and the comments made included: “this is better, the supervision is better ... the pay and conditions are better;” “hotel is hard work, tiring, very busy job: this is much less stressful and easier;” “the hotel workload is very heavy.” Likewise, a woman who had worked as a school cleaner said: “school cleaning was more rushed and harder; this is a better job, I don’t have to rush so much.” Similarly, a foreign-born man who had worked in security said of his previous job: “there was too much standing, knees in pain, [this is] better than security.” Only one migrant worker appeared to have had a job outside the service sector or low paid manufacturing before coming to work at Canary Wharf. This Colombian man had worked for 11 years in the oil industry in Aberdeen but subsequently moved to London after the birth of his son.

The foreign-born workers who said that they preferred their previous jobs to their current employment cited extra pay and benefits, sometimes through tips paid in restaurants, or having more satisfaction at work as the reasons for this. A number of those who had worked for different cleaning companies also said that they preferred the managerial culture at their previous jobs.

Only five workers said that they had additional jobs at the time of the interview, and this may, in large part be a product of their domestic circumstances (as outlined further below). One man worked for Sky TV, another three did extra cleaning and one worked in a bar. These jobs were fitted around their main work at Canary Wharf, and for day staff the extra work took place in the evenings and weekends, and for night staff, it was completed during the day and at weekends. The research also identified very few staff who were involved in additional vocational or other training outside their workplace at Canary Wharf. Two workers said they were taking IT courses, and

a further two workers were studying English in their spare time. Another worker was taking a professional accountancy course and another was studying for a degree. These workers aside, however, cleaners' employment at Canary Wharf provided the most significant opportunity for the possible upgrading of skills. For most of the workforce, the training they received at work was their only chance to learn new skills, reinforcing the importance of the cleaning company's initiatives to invest in their training activities.

In relation to the employment aspirations of the cleaners, the research highlighted the fact that most cleaners expect to stay in the service sector. When asked about their 'ideal job,' as many as 52% (27 people) of those who answered said they would like to work in various types of customer services work. Suggestions included secretarial work, bookkeeping, retailing, catering, tourism, child-care, bus driving and taxi driving. Almost 20% of those who answered (10 people) said they would like to pursue professional work such as teaching, accountancy, journalism, mental health nursing and agricultural science. A further 12% (6 people) would have ideally liked to have their own business or work for themselves, and ideas included fostering children, decorating, having their own cleaning company, being a musical technician or being a religious pastor. These data highlight the impact of previous experiences in the service sector, and in the main, workers' aspirations were to stay in this kind of work. However, a sizeable minority did aspire to take up more professional work; in some cases this reflected experience in their home countries, or the plans they had for further education in the UK. As an example, one woman from the Philippines who was interviewed had been training for accountancy qualifications in the UK before having to stop to look after her first child and then needing to work to support herself and her family. Once her children were old enough, she planned to go back to her course.

The workplace in context: cleaners at home in the city

The research highlighted very high rates of single adult households, many of them with children, amongst the cleaners at Canary Wharf. The data in Table 6 indicate that as many 55% of the sample (30 workers) did not have a live-in partner or spouse. Rates of single-adult households grew even higher amongst the British-born cohort, and 62% of these workers lived on their own in contrast to 54% of foreign-born

workers. As almost half the sample (26 people or 48% of the total) were responsible for children under 16 in the UK, the research also revealed very high numbers of single parents employed in this case. However, while just 23% of British-born workers (3 people) were responsible for children under 16 in the UK, this figure rose to as many as 56% (23) of the foreign-born workers. Only one of the British-born workers was a single parent while as many as a quarter of the foreign-born workers were in this position. Moreover, a surprisingly high number of the foreign-born workers with live-in spouses or partners and children reported that they did not work (4 from 13). The research thus highlighted the significance of the wages earned for a considerable number of adults and children, particularly amongst the migrant group.

Table 6: Workers with children and/or partners, by place of birth

		Kids <16	% group	No kids <16	% group	TOTAL
Foreign-born	No partner	10	24	12	30	22
	Working partner	9	22	5	12	14
	Non-working partner	4	10	1	2	5
British-born	No partner	1	8	7	54	8
	Working partner	2	15	3	23	5
TOTAL		26		28		54

In addition, it is important to note that a considerable number of those households with children and working partners or spouses, were sharing the childcare through back-to-back working. One man from Nigeria, for example, worked at night while his wife was at home with the kids. In the daytime, he stayed at home and looked after the children (a 2-year-old and a baby aged 11 months) while his wife worked as a cleaner for £6.50 an hour. In addition to short naps during the day, the only time he slept was between 4 and 6pm when his wife got home from her job. A woman from the Philippines did the same by working at night while her husband, a cleaning supervisor, went to work during the day. One British-born white woman also chose to work during the night in order to have the time to take her 5-year-old to and from

school during the day. Rather than pay for childcare, which is often prohibitively expensive in London, these workers appreciated the chance to work in the day or night in symmetry to their partners or spouses, in order to look after their children and take an interest in school.

As a downside of this, however, some cleaners came to work very tired and this posed major challenges to managerial staff. Arguing that some of the black African staff in particular were “difficult to motivate”, one manager said:

A lot of them have other jobs, a lot of them are up during the day either collecting the children from school or they’ve got a young one that keeps them awake and they can’t sleep, so they come tired to work, and that makes them look lazy ... [especially] compared to the east Europeans that come in buzzing. They come in buzzing (interview 28.9.06).

As would be expected, a very large number of the foreign-born workers were also actively involved in supporting their family living ‘at home’. As many as 33 (80% of the foreign-born workers) were remitting money abroad, and of these, 21 were also supporting children in the UK. Only 8 foreign-born workers did not send any money abroad and a significant number of these had been in the UK since the 1970s, suggesting that with time, remittance sending declines. Indeed, three-quarters of those who arrived in the UK before 1981 were not sending money abroad. The remaining 80% of foreign-born remitted an average of £100 a month.² The precise amount sent ranged from £10 to £250 a month and respondents spoke about sending money to care for children they left at home and to their Mothers, especially at times of sickness or special occasions. One worker was sending money for her children who lived in Sweden, and another was putting a nephew through college. One of the managers argued that the need to remit put great strain on the foreign-born workers:

They’ve got to send money home to educate the other children and if they don’t they constantly get phone calls, we need money, we need money ... Over there, they think that it’s easy ... to get loads of money here and earn a living (interview, 4.12.06).

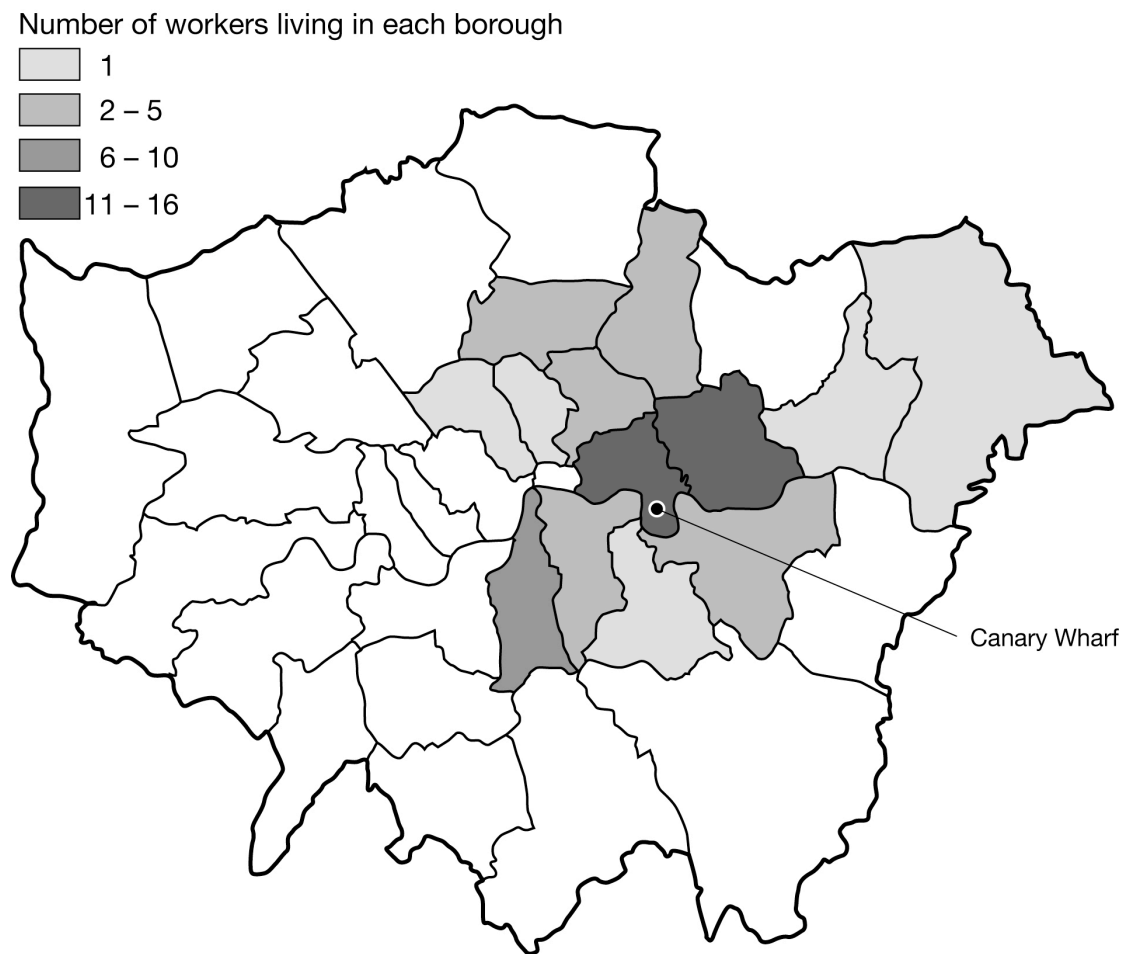
² This figure is remarkably similar to that found in larger scale survey work conducted amongst migrant workers in low paid employment in London, see Datta et al., 2006.

Thus cleaners were found to be struggling to survive in London while also sending large amounts of money abroad.

The research found that almost 70% of the British-born workers were living in Local Authority (LA) or Housing Association (HA) accommodation. A further two British-born workers owned their own homes, and only two were renting in the private market. About half of the foreign-born workers (49% or 19 people) were also living in LA/HA properties and only two respondents (5% of the foreign-born population) owned their own homes. The rest of the foreign-born workers were living in private rented accommodation and this is known to be more expensive and less secure than the LA/HA sector. Indeed, 4 workers (10% of the foreign-born population) were renting a room in a shared house with other adults, sharing communal space in the house.

As indicated in Figure 2, the largest concentrations of workers were found to be living in the London Boroughs of Newham and Tower Hamlets. In these cases, workers had good transport connections between home and work, and these Boroughs have large volumes of social and private rented accommodation. However, it is also important to note how far other cleaners travelled to work. Boroughs like Camden, Islington, Havering and Haringey are much further away and the contractor was found to be recruiting from a very large potential labour market right across London.

Figure 2: Cleaners' residence in London



The research also explored respondents' affiliations to faith, social and community organisations in London. As in the case of trade union membership reported earlier, the research highlighted a very sharp difference between foreign-born and British-born staff. Whereas 81% (33 from 41) of foreign-born workers belonged to a faith organisation, this rate fell to just 15% (2 from 13) of the British-born staff. Membership of the Catholic Church was especially significant with as many as 20 people belonging to Catholic Churches in London. A number of respondents identified particular churches where services were held in their own language, including the Lithuanian mass given at a Church in Bethnal Green, a Spanish mass given in Vauxhall twice a month and others in Spanish at the Elephant and Castle and Forest Gate. Of the two Muslims identified, one attended a Nigerian mosque in Old Kent Road. In contrast, the research revealed very low rates of affiliation to any other civil society organisation amongst staff. One worker belonged to an Angolan-focused and another to a Tanzanian-focused organisation, but no one else reported any kind of

organisational link. The research thus illustrates the importance of faith organisations for foreign-born workers and their potential role in representing the interests and serving the needs of migrant workers in the UK.

Conclusions

The professionalisation of the cleaning industry is further advanced at a prestigious office complex like Canary Wharf than anywhere else in the UK. Over time, large clients for cleaning services have centralised the tendering and management of their contracted services such as catering, cleaning, grounds, maintenance and security. With each round of tendering they have set new standards and used competition to demand more from contractors. As a result, cleaning companies have had to respond. As one manager put it when commenting on how the industry had changed since she started working in the sector in the early 1990s:

A cleaning manager [then] ... would sit down, have a cigarette, it [was] very low key. Now ... [the clients are] facility managers and quite high up and they want the world. ... It's not like it used to be no ... It was very informal but now it's very professional and they're very ... educated as well. Facility managers are usually graduates (interview, 4.12.06).

In the context of increased competition, cleaning companies have had to improve cleaning standards while also cutting costs and this has prevented the industry from improving its employment offer in any significant way. Cleaning has retained its image as an unskilled, un-accredited and low paid industry. Although conditions at Canary Wharf represent the top-end of the cleaning industry in the UK, high rates of labour turnover bear testament to the relatively low wages and low status of cleaning. At least partly as a result, the industry is now also increasingly reliant upon those born outside the UK for their labour supply. The research has highlighted the diversity of this workforce, and in this case, there were as many as 29 different countries of origin represented amongst 105 staff.

In this context, the research has highlighted the complexity of the immigration regime and the importance of Government policy in this area. While a significant number of the cleaners were born in the UK or the EU – a growing number of them from Lithuania - the research also identified a number of different channels through which

those born outside Europe could secure the right to live and work in the UK including asylum, marriage and/or having children. As many as a third of the workforce did not have citizenship status in the UK or EU, and company records identified 9 different possible immigration criteria for these cleaners including indefinite leave to remain, right of residence and family, student and working holiday visas. Government policy in relation to matters of immigration is thus critically important for the industry, and although present policy looks set to increase the flow of migrants from eastern Europe while squeezing access to those from outside the EU, this may change under future regimes.

The research highlighted the extent to which the heavy deployment of migrant labour might be a route to corporate advantage. Although poor language skills can cause problems, the vast majority of the foreign-born workers had previous employment experience and a significant number (6 of the 41 foreign-born workers surveyed) had university degrees and/or experience in professional jobs before coming to the UK. With more careful identification of people's educational level and prior experience at the time of appointment, it might be possible for the contractor to do more to recognise, deploy and develop these skills. Indeed, it might also be possible to employ those staff with better English language skills to teach their colleagues during work time, improving communication and understanding at work. One manager argued that poor language skills were the main difficulty in employing those born outside the UK, and access to language training at work could make a significant difference to their workplace performance. As she put it: "I suppose the obvious challenge is the language barrier" (interview, 28.9.06). Improved communication would assist managers and also foster better relationships between cleaning staff.

It is also important to acknowledge that those workers – from the UK as well as further afield – who did not have higher level educational and/or vocational training were also committed to working in the service sector. Indeed, when asked about their career aspirations, as many as 52% (27 people) of respondents aspired to work in various types of customer services work. This implies that staff are comparing their employment at Canary Wharf with that on offer in sectors such as administration, catering, childcare, driving and retail. These data also suggest that given a competitive

employment offer and a supportive employment regime, it could be possible to increase rates of retention.

At the time of interview, very few respondents said that they were undertaking any additional training beyond that provided by their employer at Canary Wharf. The most popular choices were IT and English language classes and only two respondents were studying for higher level qualifications (in accountancy and for a university degree). The cleaning contractor could support such activity, chart the progress of staff taking such courses and consider providing flexible working hours and help in securing work experience. More generally, however, the research also highlighted the importance of any training provided on site. In most cases, in-work training represented the only opportunity afforded to low paid workers to develop new skills. This emphasises the importance of ongoing efforts being made by the cleaning contractor to improve in-house training for staff. At the time of the research, all cleaners and their supervisors were being given access to a comprehensive one day course on the ten main cleaning tasks assessed to BICS (British Institute of Cleaning Science) standard level 1. Supervisory staff were also given regular 2 hour training seminars to explore issues such as team management, dealing with conflict and time management. At the time of the research the company was also developing a more ambitious programme of training including a more advanced level of training for cleaners, a course to learn about responses to flu pandemics, the opportunity to gain expertise in managing bodily fluids and in-house English language training. The company were also planning to run workshops for those cleaners who expressed an interest in promotion and taking on supervisory work. The broad aim was to improve succession planning and to demonstrate a clear career path to staff who want to pursue cleaning as a career. In this regard, the research suggests that this training could impact very positively on employee satisfaction and retention, not least because very few cleaners were found to be accessing training opportunities further afield.

When asked about their ideas for improvements at work, most of the responses made focused on the pay and conditions of work. Staff made requests for night working and long service premiums, an increase in the basic rate of pay and the introduction of a

sick pay scheme. They were also keen to scrap the hourly attendance bonus and to employ additional core staff to cover absences.

The research highlighted the extent to which migrant workers were living in one-parent families. While 56% of foreign-born workers (23 people) on site were parents, as many as 43% of these were single parents. Furthermore, almost all of the foreign-born workers were also sending money back home, adding to the financial pressures they faced. When added to the cost of paying for private sector accommodation, childcare and transport, foreign-born workers were found to face particular difficulties in making ends meet.

In sum, the research has identified the extent to which the cleaning industry in London depends on foreign-born labour. Although it is incidental to the work of the contractor, the research has highlighted the extent to which the cleaning industry plays a critical role in integrating new migrants into London's labour market and fostering good relationships between individuals from a multitude of different national and ethnic groups. The research has highlighted some possible advantages of this labour supply, but it has also pinpointed the additional pressures faced by at least some of these staff. While some foreign-born workers had more educational experience than their UK-born counterparts, language skills, childcare responsibilities and financial pressures also raised additional challenges for managerial staff. The research revealed the potential importance of the workplace as an arena for the training and development of staff, and in so doing, the cleaning industry can play a key role in developing talent from all parts of the world.

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