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The Briar Patch

This case study was based in a major business unit of a large public limited company, to which we have given the pseudonym ‘Britscope’. At the time of the research, the organisation employed over 100,000 workers across the United Kingdom and had a history of turbulent industrial relations. The organisation had faced substantial external pressures in recent years and responded with a significant programme of ‘modernisation’ which included organisational restructuring, substantial reductions in the labour force and the introduction of new technologies to bring about efficiency gains. Senior management acknowledged that bullying and harassment, particularly the sexual harassment of women employees, was a particular problem for the organisation.

Britscope employed people in various locations across the United Kingdom in a number of different workplace types, and the employees we interviewed worked in sites scattered across the United Kingdom, but all were employed in workplaces with between 50 and 400 people. Aside from the managers and union representatives we talked to, all interviewees were working in semi-skilled manual jobs that often required a demanding level of physical work. They worked in small teams, overseen by line managers, in distribution centres, and often undertook shift work. The rhythms of the working week could vary substantially, depending on the day and the time, with highly frenetic and pressurised periods separated by periods of relative calm. In some workplaces, there was a considerable amount of noise and dust from the machinery used in the job, and during the summer especially, temperatures could be quite hot.

As mentioned in the introduction, the organisation had a long history of industrial relations problems. A single national union represented a high proportion of its manual employees, and another union represented managerial and administrative staff. There had been periodic industrial action during the past decade, with major episodes during 2007 and then again in 2009. Conversations with management and union representatives suggested these periods of industrial unrest were related to attempts by the organisation to ‘modernise’ in the face of declining revenues relating to growing external competition and falling market demand more generally. Union officials also referred to an established organisational culture of suspicion between management and workforce, and problems in communication

and management style. One union representative reported to us that until relatively recently, the union was more or less on constant 'war footing'. Both employee and management representatives were keen to point to improvements in this situation and highlighted attempts to develop a more constructive partnership between management and unions.

Both sides agreed that the external pressures faced by the organisation had played a significant part in triggering the industrial disputes of recent years. The organisation faced the twin problem of a general fall in demand across the board for its products and services and increasing competition from other providers within this reduced market. Lower cost, smaller competitors could significantly undercut Britscope, and during the early years of the new millennium it was reported to be making huge losses. The organisation was seen to be relatively strongly reliant on old-fashioned manual methods of work organisation, offered relatively generous sickness and pension benefits, and was highly unionised compared to some of its market rivals. In addition to days lost to industrial action, it had a major problem with relatively high levels of sickness absence and staff turnover. The major programme of modernisation that was introduced included a substantial package of labour shedding through a combination of natural wastage and voluntary severance. Many thousands of jobs had been lost in the six years running up to our interview programme. Substantial investment in automated technology had taken place in order to improve efficiency and productivity levels. These changes seemed to be having some effects with the organisation as a whole moving into profit by the time we undertook the interviews in 2009/10.

Britscope remains distinctive in its relatively low proportion (15 per cent) of female employees and relatively high proportion of older workers (almost half the workforce at the time of our interviews was in the 40–55 age range). At the time of the research, the proportion of BME workers, at almost 9 per cent, was comparable to that in the working population as a whole, although it varied very considerably by region and by workplaces within a region. In recent years, the organisation had invested a significant degree of effort and resources in addressing problems of bullying and harassment, and in particular, the sexual harassment of female employees. The formal policies that arose from this official concern are considered below, but in general, this concern was sparked by a number of developments. Most important of these was the fact that the organisation was subject to a formal investigation following a high number of reports of sexual harassment by women employees. In addition, the arrival of a new chairperson for the company as a whole, and a major organisational restructuring, provided new impetus to attempts to improve employee relations with a particular focus on 'diversity' issues. The policies discussed below were, in part, agreed as part of a three-year 'action plan' that led to the suspension of the formal investigation into sexual harassment in Britscope.

Britscope's formal approach to trouble at work

In late 2003, Britscope and its sister 'business units' had reviewed existing policies and practices in the light of problems raised by the investigation and organised employee focus groups across the organisation. The review and the focus groups had highlighted a number of findings about existing policies and practices: low levels of awareness of formal policies amongst both management and staff, different policies and practices in different business units across the organisation, a general desire for informal resolution where possible, confusion about what precisely was meant by the terms 'bullying' and 'harassment', and the problems of including bullying/harassment under the generic set of grievance procedures.

This led to the establishment in 2004 of a distinct bullying and harassment policy – reviewed and refined in 2005 – that covered all business units in the organisation. This 21-page document included formal definitions of 'bullying' and 'harassment', along with details of a '12-step' investigation process to be followed in cases of reported bullying or harassment. Further documentation and policy initiatives included an independently operated bullying and harassment 24-hour helpline (to which employees could make anonymous reports of bullying/harassment and seek advice and support); a national programme of 'diversity training' which was compulsory for every member of the workforce and a programme of workplace discussion groups (with specially trained facilitators operating according to a detailed set of guidance notes) aimed at discussing issues relating to 'dignity and respect' in the workplace. Britscope also commissioned an independent survey company to undertake a quantitative survey of women employees to explore their workplace experiences which led to a detailed report on women employees. All this formed part of a wider package of publicity and training materials, which, on the surface at least, suggested a very impressive level of commitment on the part of the organisation, not least in terms of the investment of management time and resources.

As part of the many formal policy statements relating to this push on respect at work, the management, unions and other employee representatives agreed a general statement of principles that was intended to reflect the core 'business values' of the organisation. The moral tone of this statement was echoed in interviews with senior managers who stressed the importance of the business ethos of the organisation and deployed the metaphor of a family to capture what they wanted working relationships in the organisation to be like. The following statement, from a senior HR manager, was a specimen of this kind of discourse:

We're all people. We all work together. We're here every day ... we need to have a framework against which to behave so that we all know what we're supposed to be doing so that there's a common understanding of, in a very broad sense, what's right and what's wrong ... We have a framework, we have a common theme, and it's about respect and it's about dignity.

The formal policy defined 'harassment' as 'inappropriate and unwanted behaviour that could reasonably be perceived by the recipient, or any other person, as affecting their dignity' and noted that such behaviour could be based on age, creed, disability, race, sex and sexual orientation. 'Bullying' was defined as 'intimidation on a regular and persistent basis or as a one-off which serves to undermine the competence, effectiveness, confidence and integrity of the person on the receiving end'. A number of specific examples of harassment were provided, including such things as suggestive remarks, graffiti, offensive comments or jokes and so on. Part of the motivation for a concrete definition was to clarify for staff that reasonable requests by managers – regarding performance issues, for example – should not necessarily be defined as harassment, and that managers should retain the 'right to manage'.

The 12-step investigation included the exhortation to the complainant to resolve the issue informally if possible with, at each stage, opportunities for informal resolution to the satisfaction of the complainant. There was a clear statement of time limits for response and action on the part of the company (response to formal complaint within one working day; if the case proceeded to a higher level of formality, the complaint to be interviewed within three working days). Key management personnel were given responsibility for different levels of investigation in the formal process. For example, regional 'case managers' were to lead the initial investigation once the case was formally processed and, should they be unable to resolve the case, it would be referred to an 'investigating manager' if the complainant wished to press their case. The latter steps set out the process and timescales for interviewing the complainant, alleged perpetrator and witnesses; the basis on which the decision should be made about whether the complaint should be substantiated ('reasonable belief'); and finally, the communication of the outcome to all involved parties. Various 'remedies' were to be deployed in the case of substantiated complaints, ranging from informal mediation/conciliation (such as informal apology and 'air clearing' meetings), formal written apology, redeployment to different section or workplaces, and formal disciplinary action up to and including dismissal for gross misconduct. In the case of formal disciplinary action, the case would be handed to another manager to deal with the conduct code case.

The central HR department of Britscope coordinated and monitored the operation of this formal policy, recording the nature and outcome of cases reported via the formal process. Formal complaints of bullying and harassment in the organisation had fallen in recent years, from an annual total of over 1,000 in 2004 when the new policy was introduced to something like two-thirds of this level four years later. The proportion of complaints that were substantiated grew over this period, from 60 per cent in 2006/7 to 77 per cent in 2007/8. These trends were interpreted by management as some indication of the success of encouraging the informal resolution of relatively minor incidents at an early stage and the concentration of the formal system on the more serious complaints.

However, falling numbers of complaints might signal a lack of awareness of, and confidence in the organisation's formal procedures, rather than a reduction of problem behaviour. One objective of our employee interviews was to assess levels of awareness of and confidence in these formal procedures.

In practice, it was organisational policies regarding sickness absence, rather than bullying and harassment, which were the focus of many of our employee interviews. Following consultation with the unions, the company had implemented a disciplinary system for sickness absences (self-certified or certified by a doctor) deemed too frequent or lengthy by the company. Employees whose absences exceeded the allowable levels set by the company were subject to two warnings (Stages 1 and 2) and then dismissal (Stage 3). This needs to be borne in mind in the discussion that follows.

Ill-treatment

Figure 2 on p. 33 confirms the overlap between the constituent factors of ill-treatment – unreasonable treatment, incivility and disrespect, and violence – in the BWBS. Analysis of interviews with Britscope employees suggested that the most widespread type of ill-treatment in Britscope would come under the general category of unreasonable treatment, although there were also a striking number of reports of behaviour that constituted incivility and disrespect. Reports of violence were rare, although this was by no means unheard of in the organisation. There was little difference in the ill-treatment experienced directly by the interviewees and the ill-treatment of other employees that they witnessed.

Unreasonable treatment

The most frequently reported forms of ill-treatment experienced by our sample of employees concerned the perceived failure of employers to follow proper procedures, employers ignoring staff views and opinions, and being treated unfairly by the organisation. Less frequently reported, but still of interest, were employee reports of being given unreasonable workloads and a perceived lack of communication from the organisation.

The interviews suggested that disputes over sickness and injury were a major source of tension between management and staff, and it was complaints of this sort that constituted almost all the reports of employers failing to follow proper procedures. Other disputes surrounding procedures concerned attempts to change shift patterns, requests for annual leave (or other forms of special leave relating, for example, to family caring duties), and requests for reasonable adjustments relating to disability or illness. We noted above the perception of the high sickness rates within the organisation and the stated determination

of management to address what it saw as a culture of absenteeism among some staff. Our interviews reported some very heavy-handed approaches to illness or injury to employees. For example, during one shift some months prior to the research, a worker suffered crushed fingers on one hand (resulting in considerable bleeding, swelling, bruising and pain). Although employed on manual work requiring both hands, her manager ordered her to continue working with one hand only:

So I struggled for three, four hours and ... another first aider ... said well I should have gone to the hospital, which I should have done anyway. And then after work I went to the hospital, and they had to drain the blood because there was a lot of damage to the finger.

When this employee subsequently developed a back problem and had to take time off work, she was repeatedly ordered to return to work by her shift manager who refused to recognise the (diagnosed) back problem and continually accused her of taking time off on grounds of her injured finger. During her eight-week period of sick leave, she experienced a number of contacts from managers, including telephone calls and letters, which requested her to make herself available for an interview to help her return to work. This was experienced by the employee not as help but 'more like harassment'.

There seemed to be a considerable degree of discretion open to local managers about the implementation of the sickness policy, in particular, regarding the circumstances when an employee should be placed on a formal 'stage' of the policy. As one employee (who had been placed on a Stage 2) told us, she was informed by a union representative that the manager who had taken this decision was known for not being 'lenient' in his application of the company sickness procedure. Local managers' implementation of the company sickness procedures was also a particular feature of the interviews with employees covered under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). Their accounts underlined the arbitrary nature of managers' interpretations of the rules, particularly regarding what constituted 'justifiable' absenteeism. Although still recorded, absences which were considered to be related to a disability recognised under the legislation could be excluded from the count of absences triggering staged warnings if the manager concerned thought this justifiable. In fact, interviewee transcripts provide evidence of managers placing employees covered by the DDA on the disciplinary system, resulting in the disciplined employee experiencing anxiety and a sense of victimisation. For example, one employee was placed on the disciplinary stages after several illnesses resulting from a damaged immune system, following radiotherapy for cancer. She remarked,

They issue them, they just issue them and I just think it is *totally* wrong. You live in fear; you're frightened to be ill ... [The managers] are most definitely under pressure to issue the warnings. I'm quite friendly with some of the managers and they tell me about it.

Rather than applying objective criteria as to what constitutes justified disability-related absenteeism, it would seem that their own subjective viewpoint was guiding managers' assessments. Several interviewees suggested that local managers often lacked the skills necessary for the job, typically because many had no prior managerial experience. Another employee observed,

In the past I've had incidences when I've been in a stage interview and issued with a stage [disciplinary warning] for things that come under DDA. The company's own DDA helpline gave me advice, but the managers [saw] fit to overrule this.

A further example of problems with the management of DDA issues occurred with regard to one employee who had a history of serious breathing problems relating to asthma aggravated by dusty working conditions or being in the vicinity of cigarette smoke. She reported this to management 'on numerous occasions' and requested that the working area be cleaned more frequently and thoroughly. The response from management was that there was no significant dust problem in the building, and therefore no need to clean more frequently. Furthermore, the employee was told by her manager that asthma was not a recognised condition under the DDA, even though the opposite was later confirmed by the organisation's own occupational health department.

Another relatively common type of unreasonable treatment reported by staff concerned excessive monitoring or surveillance of particular employees. A number of employees felt that they were singled out by managers, for example, querying them about the time taken for a toilet break or accusing them of not working quickly enough. This was perceived as particularly upsetting when the employees concerned felt that other workers who were not pulling their weight remained unchallenged by managers. As one employee told us,

To say, 'well why aren't you working harder', when there's people, two, three or four, just chattering through the shift and not doing a lot of work at all and they are never questioned. Where is the, you know, fairness in that?

Sometimes this inconsistency was perceived as being influenced by racial bias. This particular employee (who was white) felt that line management did not intervene where Asian workers were chatting or away from their workstation for a while.

Incivility and disrespect

One of the striking themes that emerged within this category of behaviour concerned quite extensive accounts of perceived sexual harassment and discrimination, ranging from inappropriate sexualised 'jokes' directed at female employees to more serious forms such as unwanted touching. Seven of the interviews (two white and five BME) reported examples of such behaviour

which they felt were clearly discriminatory. The perpetrators were male colleagues or managers, and often the victims reported that they were in a minority of women in their workplaces. Examples of comments that exuded casual sexism included the following:

I got in the lift, they were like ‘oh, you’re not so glamorous now are you?’ ... I never used to wear make-up or anything but it was that sort of comment – they hated women being there.

He started on me outside the manager’s office about something, and that was when it was harassment because he was going on about females, time of the month, that kind of thing, and I thought ‘okay, I’ve had enough now.’

The behaviour some interviewees experienced was more overtly sexual, in the form of sexual comments and suggestions, and sometimes rumours being spread around about them. The following example was typical:

He used to say to me ‘oh, them thighs’ and he used to always rub his hands and that ... he once said to me ‘oh, whip out your tits ... oh let me bite that bum of yours, let me squeeze it, I really want to smack it hard’.

Whilst these comments came from one male colleague in particular, this employee reported that other male managers followed suit, making comments about her breasts and on one occasion touching her inappropriately whilst she was working.

Other forms of inappropriate behaviour included sexual gossip and rumours, such as the following:

And later on, one of the girls came to me and said ... the manager is going around showing people that I’ve sent him a text message that I’m desperate for him, I want him to sleep with me ... I want sex with him ... It was a nasty text message.

One interviewee had to take sick leave to undergo surgery and post-operational convalescence. During her absence, her manager decided to pension her off against her wishes. While convalescing, she learned from her sister, also working for the same employer, that the manager had a meeting with her sister to discuss the details of her illness. Not only did the interviewee rightly consider this a breach of her privacy, but also she discovered later that the manager had made a sexist comment about her illness. She explained,

I had to have an emergency operation because they found this cyst growing, and he said, ‘oh well, if she was not having so much *jiggy jiggy*’ – that is slang for sex – ‘then, she wouldn’t need an operation like that’.

Another set of issues relating to disrespect and denigration related to tensions between different ethnic groups. A (bare) majority of interviewees reported ethnic tensions and conflicts in the workplace. The majority of these reports came from BME interviewees, although four white interviewees also reported

ethnic tensions. One black former union representative painted a stark picture of the ethnic tensions between the various groups in her workplace:

[White East European workers] get resentments from the Asians, because Asians don't like them because they see them as immigrants but they are going to be better off than the blacks and the Asians because they are white. So it's a lot of, I can't explain it, put it this way, I used to have a chip on my shoulder before I became a union rep, now I've become a union rep I'm like, oh the world has gone mad because everybody has got a problem with somebody and really comes down to culture, tribalism, we've got tribalism in [Britscope]. 'I'm Asian, you're white, I'm black' – that is what we have got.

The seven BME interviewees who did report such tensions came from a range of backgrounds, including employees of Indian, Afro-Caribbean and African origin. The Indian interviewees cited poor workplace relations between themselves and white British workers. The majority of the black interviewees cited poor relationships between black workers (regardless of origin) and British South Asians, particularly, British Pakistanis. Where workplace conflicts existed between black and South Asian workers, the number of white workers employed was few with the exception of some East European contract workers. In these contexts, mainly in the South-East, the majority of the local management was South Asian, typically, British Pakistani. It is important to note, therefore, that the ethnic dynamics of inter-group animosities within Britscope were complex and multi-directional. In many cases, it seemed that, rather than reflecting generalised animosity between different ethnic communities, underlying workplace tensions (job insecurity or rapid workplace transformation, for example) played themselves out in terms of competition between different groups in particular workplaces. In particular, there appeared to be strong perceptions amongst some employees that one particular ethnic group acts as the gatekeeper to the accessing of workplace privileges and benefits.

Despite these tensions, only a few interviewees reported experiencing disrespectful language or comments relating to ethnicity. However, those that did report hearing such language reported some quite extreme cases. Both black and white employees cited as a focal point of workplace friction South Asian co-workers (particularly, British Pakistanis) conversing with each other in their first language. Non-South Asian employees feared, whether correctly or not, that Pakistani workers conversed in Urdu in order to speak derogatively about co-workers without their knowledge. An extreme example reported by a black respondent (a husband of an interviewee, working in the same workplace) highlighted these fears. He was shocked to discover that the nickname given to him by male Pakistani co-workers – which he had assumed was a harmless nickname – was in fact the Urdu equivalent of the word 'nigger'.

As noted previously, some white interviewees alleged that local management facilitated inter-group animosity by ignoring misdemeanours by BME workers, for fear of being accused of racism. The following quote summed up this viewpoint:

They can do what they like, they can come and go as they like, [and] they don't get pulled. If they get pulled it's racial – you are pulling them because they are Asian. 'I am going to have you in the office, (and) tell the management; I'll have you fired.' That's how it goes, [so] management leaves them alone.

One employee who made a formal grievance against her manager reported that the escalation of her complaint resulted in her husband – who was also a co-worker – becoming the target of strong verbal, racial abuse in the workplace from white workers whose sympathies lay with the nightshift manager against whom the complaint had been lodged.

Aside from disrespect and denigration relating to sex and ethnicity, the interviews also provided examples of more generalised behaviour of this kind, usually delivered by immediate line managers. The majority of these reports came from white employees and referred to such things as 'snide comments', sarcasm and being spoken to, and looked at, 'as if I was a piece of dirt on the bottom of their foot'. There was no clear indication of what lay behind this kind of behaviour beyond poor personal relationships with particular managers. A particular subset of disrespectful behaviour involved supervisors losing their temper and shouting at employees. Eight of the interviewees reported experience of such behaviour, which was most usually perpetrated by managers and usually revolved around work-related disputes. The behaviours reported included shouting and swearing, and sometimes physical intimidation as well. The following example was particularly striking:

He [the manager] starts following me to the toilet, he would have a go at me on the floor, like screaming at me on the floor ... he came screaming at me, and I could feel his saliva spraying into my face.

A substantial proportion of the interviewees reported experiencing intimidating behaviour from people at work. In general, the more serious forms of threats and intimidation involved co-workers. Some notable examples revolved around workers who had not supported the union in the recent industrial actions. One interviewee reported feeling intimidated by a union representative when she did not participate in the most recent strike: 'You get heckled anyway, but if you are in the union and you don't go on strike, you get heckled even more ... I had someone follow me around one day, that was while I was in the union.' Other examples of threats and intimidation were connected to particular workplace disputes. The employee mentioned earlier, who suffered from asthma, heard indirectly about a vague threat against her relating to her reporting the presence of cigarette smoke in the ladies' toilets, which had resulted in a colleague being spoken to by a manager

(who identified to her the source of the complaint): ‘I had heard through a third party that she ... had told me to watch my back, and I felt intimidated.’

Violence and injury

Three interviewees reported experiencing actual physical violence or injury in the workplace as a result of the behaviour of male co-workers. One reported that she fell into a machine after a white male co-worker rubbed his groin up against her – apparently as a joke – resulting in her hospitalisation and prolonged absence from work. Another interviewee reported an attack by a co-worker who jostled her in a workplace argument and pushed her to the ground. A third interviewee reported that her shoulder had been dislocated as an accidental result of some workplace high jinks. Reports of violence to others (witnessed or heard about) were more common in the interviews than direct accounts. For example, a local branch manager reported to us that workplace grievances occasionally ‘spill over’ into physical violence outside the immediate work area. Two male co-workers who had become involved in a dispute at work had recently arranged to meet for a fight in the car park. The case was still being considered by the company, but the assault was relatively serious: ‘He beat the other bloke up in a nutshell. He battered him’ (local branch manager). Two other interviewees claimed that they had heard about violent incidents in their workplaces, but they had not directly witnessed them.

Factors influencing ill-treatment

There was clearly a wide pattern of ill-treatment experienced by employees in Britscope workplaces, which were likely to be the product of a range of factors. We shall discuss the most important explanatory factors discussed by interviewees.

Poor management

As noted above, the bulk of the negative treatment discussed in the interviews could be broadly categorised as unreasonable treatment, with the perpetrators mainly being managers or supervisors. There were numerous complaints of unprofessional, under-confident, poorly informed management that resulted in managers ill-treating employees. In cases where bad behaviour was between co-workers, managers were criticised for being either too afraid or unconcerned to intervene. There was a perception that local line managers did not have the skills required to do the job. The majority of the interview discussions of the individual characteristics of management perpetrators therefore focused on incompetence of various kinds, rather than personal maliciousness. Indeed, a number of interviewees expressed some sympathy for managers because of

the pressures that they understood them to be under from their superiors. For example, there was a clear perception that the tough enforcement of the company sickness policies was a result of edicts from the most senior management in the company. Some accounts emphasised perceptions of the pathological personalities of the perpetrators, which highlighted deviousness, a lust for power, rudeness and aggression, amongst various other unsavoury personal characteristics, but these were in the minority.

Discrimination

Many of the interviewees reported that they felt the ill-treatment they experienced amounted to discrimination. The discussion so far included a number of incidences of quite serious sexual harassment, and, despite the considerable efforts devoted by the organisation towards addressing this problem, it seemed that there was, in some workplaces at least, an entrenched culture of sexist behaviour. A number of the examples reported to us appeared to be unlawful, including clear examples of sexual harassment and, in one or two cases, sexual assault. A number of interviewees discussed the sexualised nature of workplace relations with reference to the historical dominance of older males in most workplaces, with women (especially ethnic minority women) considerably outnumbered. A union representative accepted that the employment of women, and growing proportions of ethnic minority workers, had challenged the previous dominance of older white men in the organisation, and was experienced as threatening by some more established staff.

In terms of ethnic tensions, our analysis suggested that inter-group animosity often revolved around disputes about workplace favouritism and the perception of unequal treatment. This favouritism manifested either as racial discrimination, actual racist behaviours or favouritism to co-ethnics from particular managers. One white employee reporting inter-group conflict alleged that the white management ignored or downgraded the workplace misdemeanours of young 'Asian' workers for fear of the offending workers branding them racists. Another white worker at a different site alleged quite the opposite, asserting that the disciplining of young 'Asian' workers by the management led to inter-group conflict. It is important to note at this point that these claims of favouritism are wholly reliant on interviewees' personal accounts, and we cannot verify the claims. Nonetheless, the high level of reports of inter-group animosity by interviewees does point to significant levels of workplace conflict and resentment within the organisation.

Workplace reform and modernisation

It is impossible to understand the sometimes fraught workplace relationships discussed here without reference to the broader challenges faced by the

organisation. The already difficult historical climate of industrial relations was exacerbated further by major workplace changes, including performance pressures, job losses, mechanisation and work restructuring. Past disputes had left a bitter legacy of mistrust between workforce and management, but also simmering resentment between workers who supported the strikes and those who did not. The increased pressure to reduce costs and improve productivity had led to an experience of work intensification, which almost certainly fed into the wider climate of social relations in the workplace. As one employee told us,

It was a much more sociable time when I first started. You had time to chat to people; there was a social club which now there isn't because nobody wants to do it. But now, you go in at quarter to eight, and you hit the door running and you have got to keep going for most of the time because you have got to get the work done and there is no time for hello, what did you see on TV last night or anything like that anymore.

Linked to this process of work intensification in the organisation is increasing job insecurity. Interviewees covered by the DDA were particularly worried about employment insecurity, feeling managers would single them out for redundancy, especially as the physical tasks they could perform were limited. Even long-serving employees on full-contracts reported that they felt insecure, a feeling justified by the significant programme of job cuts referred to earlier. This insecurity appeared to have had a knock-on effect on the official reporting of negative workplace behaviours via the formal bullying and harassment procedures, especially against managers, as will be discussed further below.

The characteristics of our interviewees

Although, in a few cases, the interviewees reported that they felt some responsibility for what happened to them, the clearest theme of the interviews was their self-perception as strong personalities. Most of the employees interviewed made reference to themselves in such terms as 'fighter', 'strong' and so on, and many of them prided themselves on being able to speak out and stand up for themselves, and presented their self-image as relatively robust. Some suggested that without such strength of character they would not have survived as long as they had within the organisation. Another striking feature of the interviews concerned the expression of positive commitment to their work, which was somewhat surprising given the nature of some of the workplace experiences that they were reporting. One reported that she was extremely positive about the actual work, but it was the workplace 'atmosphere' that she found difficult. Other employees described themselves as hard working and conscientious, and a number of them reported a strong reluctance to take time

off work. It was interesting that several complaints about poor management related to managerial reluctance to tackle fellow workers who were not pulling their weight. The following quotes are indicative of this positive attitude to work:

I still give my 100% because as I said I am from the old school and we go in and we work.

All I wanted to do was a good job.

I'm that sort of person, that will go to work regardless, whereas somebody would say, 'oh I've got the flu I'm staying home' and it might only be a cold. So I've always been used to going to work.

Most interviewees reported that they enjoyed their jobs, and some went so far as to say that they loved the work and felt 'proud' to work for the organisation. Indeed, interviewees recounting the most awful episodes of harassment or discrimination continued to enjoy their jobs. For example, one employee, who reported that she had been bullied by a manager, was asked if she would consider leaving her job or pursuing constructive dismissal. Her answer was unequivocal: 'I wouldn't, no. I love my job, I do. I love the people. No, I think [the perpetrator] would feel that he had won. I don't want him to feel that, because he would only get stronger.' Her comments encapsulate the sentiments expressed by most of the interviewees. They had a strong sense of working-class pride in their work and comradeship. This set of values seemed to act as something of bulwark against negative workplace behaviours, even though co-worker relationships were often strained and confrontational. According to our interviewees, however, this sense of affiliation is increasingly under threat from poor management and the constant rationalisation of the business. Despite continuing to enjoy their jobs, interviewees also commonly expressed the feeling that a golden age of employment security and job benefits had long passed.

Responses to ill-treatment

Complaints procedures

Only three interviewees had not filed a grievance of some kind, whether formal or informal, with the management of the company. Even though two of these three told us they had experienced negative workplace behaviours in some form or other, they had been able to negotiate satisfactory changes in their working environments without recourse to procedural solutions. Four interviewees pursued informal grievances, making an unofficial complaint to the local management, three of which had satisfactory outcomes in the viewpoint of the interviewee. What the three successful informal grievances did have in

common was the fact that a third party was able to negotiate the positive outcome. In two of these cases, this third party was a union representative, and, in one case, it was an enlightened manager. What is not known is whether the perpetrators actually reformed their behaviour as a result of the informality of the complaint. With regard to the unsuccessful informal grievance, the BME respondent concerned felt her complaint was merely 'brushed under the carpet'. This is hardly surprising given her complaint was made to the local management about their own discriminatory practices.

Of the 12 interviewees pursuing formal grievances, four respondents considered that their complaint resulted in a positive outcome; however, only two of the positive outcomes were a direct result of the company investigation procedures. The other positive outcomes were actually the result of the complainants leveraging the outcome using supplementary actions of some kind. In the one case, the complainant successfully organised a petition among BME co-workers and, in the other, the complainant threatened to take her case to the Equalities and Human Rights Commission if her case did not get a positive outcome. She subsequently took the company to an employment tribunal. However, the tribunal was cancelled when the company finally acquiesced to her demands. Three other formal grievances were ongoing at the time of the interviews. In one case, the complainant had taken her grievance against a manager's bullying to appeal and, in the second case, the complainant was taking the company to an employment tribunal for racial discrimination. In the third case, the complainant was still awaiting the outcome of the grievance investigation.

The remaining complainants either failed to have their grievances upheld or the company offered a solution that the complainant considered unsatisfactory, such as reconciliation with the perpetrator of the ill-treatment. A number of the interviewees who had submitted formal complaints via the organisation's bullying and harassment procedures reported that they found the process of getting involved in the complaints system stressful in itself, and many complained about the length of time that the investigation took to be completed. Twelve interviewees who had raised a complaint of some form reported that the organisation had not responded satisfactorily, and they suggested that the issue had been swept under the carpet. Three complainants expressed a level of distrust in the formal procedures, arguing that their cases had been undermined by management collusion with the alleged perpetrator or the appointment of a person who was insufficiently independent to investigate the case. For example, one complainant reported that a 'friend' of the perpetrator was appointed as investigating manager.

We outlined above the very significant amount of organisational effort that had gone into developing and promoting formal policies at work to improve awareness and behaviour surrounding diversity issues and, in particular, to address perceived problems of bullying and harassment (of which sexual

harassment was a key issue for the organisation). Overall, there was a mixed response about the effects of such policies. Some employees reported that things had improved since the policy drive and acknowledged that Britscope was making a real effort to improve things at the policy level. Less positive was the fact that few of the interviewees reported experience of the workplace discussion groups that had supposedly been introduced across the organisation, and a number of respondents clearly felt that the policies were, at best, window dressing. The following comment was typical of such respondents: 'They put all these leaflets or whatever, these big plaques up and say "stamp out bullying and racism" – load of rubbish.' One union representative that we interviewed accepted that the company had put all employees through its 'diversity training', but he questioned the impact of such approaches, dismissing the training, in particular, as 'sheep dipping'.

Trade union support

In general terms, interviewees were positive about the support they received from their trade union regarding bullying and harassment complaints, though some interviewees had problems with grievance claims when the perpetrator was a union official or a close colleague of a union official. The study found no evidence that union officials in regional offices or HQ were complicit in subverting grievance claims, however. Rather, it would seem that, when the union command became aware of these problems, they disciplined the troublesome representative. In one case, for example, the union removed from post a union representative accused of bullying, even though the management's investigation of the grievance proved inconclusive. This outcome appeared to have been the result of an accumulation of similar complaints against the representative over a number of years.

Despite the history of poor labour relations in Britscope, there was little evidence that the union had politicised the issue of bullying and harassment. Rather, the interviews suggested the union's response to the issue was generally measured. Employees' ideas about what actually constituted bullying and the labelling of negative workplace behaviour had more to do with the company's communication of equality issues to its employees, and pre-existing public discourses about bullying in society, than overt union activism on the issues.

While the union generally seemed supportive of women's grievances, some interviewees felt that, at the grass roots, union representatives often fail to take into consideration women's viewpoints. As mentioned previously, this would seem to be the consequence of the male-dominated gender cliques in many of the company's workplaces. For example, one interviewee, a black, former union representative, reported that she gave up her union work because the local union often failed to understand the difficulty that women had balancing family commitments with the demands of the job. One point

of issue was recent industrial action, when she upset local union organisers by supporting black and Asian single mothers who remained at work throughout the strike. As she argued,

I am not going to tell a single mother to strike, right! Or someone who is divorced from an Asian husband ... The single mothers walked across the picket line. Now, the men – because the union, obviously, it's very male, very white; old angry white men, right! – [claimed I was] telling people to walk across the picket line. [Her co-workers] stuck up for me and they said I did not.

This employee obviously took her union work seriously. Unlike the other union representatives, she attended college in order to learn how to do the work professionally, but the way the male union representatives treated her eventually convinced her to give up her official union work. She told us, 'because I am professional and they are unprofessional, they don't like me. That's all I can put it down to, and I'm a woman, and I am black and mouthy.' Although she had given up her union work, female workers continued to ask her for advice rather than consulting the male union representatives.

Other interviewees provided similar evidence of tense relationships with union representative arising from their working through the strike action. One Asian single mother recounted the treatment she received after the strike finished: 'They gave me dirty looks, they just kept blanking me; it was horrible and there were so many whispers about me. I just ended up in tears.' From the other side of the fence, a regional HR manager had a mixed perception of union representatives' role in grievance processes, sometimes being supportive of management and at other times being perceived as antagonistic:

I mean, union reps are sort of funny things. Doing an investigation, they can be your best friend or your worst enemy. They can be a complete nightmare and make your life really difficult, or they can be fabulous and really help with the process and help everybody involved in the process. It just depends on what the personalities are, realistically.

Occupational health

The majority of our interviewees reported some contact with occupational health during their experiences of ill-treatment. The majority of these contacts concerned seeking advice about medical conditions relating to the provisions of the DDA. Occupational health professionals sometimes gave advice that contradicted the position of local management, for example, on which conditions or illnesses came under the DDA. One interviewee, who suffered from chronic asthma, reported that, although her line manager rejected the argument that asthma came under the provisions of the DDA, the occupational health department of Britscope had provided clear advice to the contrary. A small number of employees had been examined by occupational health specialists with regard to physical problems, such as back strain or shoulder

problems, which restricted their abilities to perform some kinds of manual work such as heavy lifting. Occupational health representatives were able to support employees' requests to be put on light duties due to such health conditions.

The consequences of ill-treatment at work

Representatives of management were clearly concerned about some of the negative impacts of such behaviours on the organisation, including increased staff turnover, sickness absence, lower productivity and the opportunity costs of tying up employees, union and management representatives engaged in formal investigations. From the viewpoint of our individual interviewees, the personal costs of ill-treatment in the workplace were considerable. There was substantial evidence of strong emotional responses on the part of employees to their experiences of ill-treatment, and self-reported levels of mental illness were high among the sample of people interviewed. Several of the interviewees appeared to be visibly upset when discussing their workplace experiences. A number of the respondents had received some form of counselling and/or antidepressant medication directly following ill-treatment at work. Some of the interviewees were still receiving antidepressant medication at the time of interview.

Interviewees reporting a strong emotional or psychological response divided into two broad groups based on the specific causes of the stress. One group of respondents clearly experienced strong emotional responses, or indeed mental illness, as a direct result of the ill-treatment they experienced at work. The second group reported experiencing stress or mental illness due to a toxic combination of workplace situations and factors outside work which were difficult to disentangle.

In the first group, two interviewees experienced mental illness which was, in their view, a direct result of co-worker or manager bullying and harassment. For a third employee the mental illness was the result of exposure to harassment from customers, although the company was not seen as without blame. Not only had they demonstrably failed to uphold a duty of care for their employees, they also seriously contravened health and safety legislation. In this case, the interviewee worked in a public liaison role which often involved dealing with annoyed and frustrated customers who were complaining about the service they had received. These customers were often confrontational and abusive; yet, despite a health and safety report advising the company to protect employees through the use of protective counter screens and barriers, and cautioning them against making employees work alone in such roles increasing their vulnerability to attack, this interviewee continued to work on her own in a relatively unprotected office. After a

number of confrontational encounters, she began to suffer from panic attacks. Recounting her experiences, she noted,

I wondered what the hell they were. I had this shaking. I just went to the doctor, eventually, and she said they were panic attacks. She put me on beta blockers and I stood it for a few more weeks. But, then, that was it: one morning, I had the keys in my hand to open the [office] door and I just broke down. I said, 'I can't go in, I can't do it, I cannot do this on my own anymore' ... It was just a build-up, a build-up for asking for help and not getting it. And not being listened to at all by anybody; it was horrid.

Diagnosed with stress and anxiety, the employee took six weeks' sick leave and on return to work, she took up a different work role. The company continued to make her replacements work solo.

In the second group, six interviewees reported experiences of stress and depression. As noted above, these experiences were concurrent with either a physical disability or a pre-existing mental illness that was exacerbated by workplace ill-treatment. For example, two of the respondents were experiencing depression following the death of a close relative, and this became compounded by ill-treatment in the workplace; one respondent became the victim of serious sexual harassment, and following a dispute over working hours, the other respondent filed a grievance against a manager for harassment.

One employee claimed her stress was work related and the company disputed this, fearing widespread compensation claims. Nevertheless, 26 years of physical labour had taken its toll on this employee's body, and she suffered from osteoarthritis and a hernia. Yet, despite these disabilities and advice from her GP to give up work, she continued to work in a physically demanding manual job. She struggled to keep up with the demands of the job, and the management increasingly criticised her performance. Following her husband's advice, she went on a sick leave for a week. As the company allows self-certification for illness of up to seven days, the employee submitted a sick note, writing that the illness was due to 'stress from the management'. On return to work, the sick note triggered a tirade of abuse from her manager:

When I went back to work after a week, he was waiting for me. He came out, threw it down. He says, 'how, f***ing hell, f***ing, do that.' He was swearing; he was using the F word and everything. He said, 'you can't put stress on there.' I said, 'you caused my stress, that is what's on the form, that's what I've got to go with.' He blew his top, everyone around me was listening, f'ing and blinding he was ... Everybody around me said, 'well I don't know how you really just stood up to him, and stood your ground, and said what you said without swearing.' Because I don't use the F word; it's not a word I like using. And they said have him for sexual harassment.

This employee filed a grievance against the manager and the company censured him for using abusive language in the workplace, though not for sexual harassment. The manager himself reported that he was suffering from stress

and took sick leave, eventually leaving the organisation after being offered voluntary redundancy.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have learnt much more about what lay behind some of the main findings of the BWBS, but we only have space to pick out a handful of examples here. We now understand the way in which health conditions became the cause of conflicts over workplace norms, leading to both unreasonable treatment and incivility and disrespect. In addition, we have found out how psychological or emotional conditions featured as both causes (where conditions were affected by events beyond the workplace) and effects of ill-treatment. We have also learnt more about the causes of incivility and disrespect between employees. The reports of sexual harassment, and even sexual assault, by co-workers, supervisors and managers confirm our expectation that it was within inter-employee incivility and disrespect that we would be more likely to find repeated, perhaps escalating, ill-treatment. This kind of ill-treatment may have a great deal to do with why the analysis of the troubled minority in the BWBS suggested that women in troubled workplaces were particularly likely to be insulted.

In some cases, incivility and disrespect between employees appeared to have been caused, or at least exacerbated, by the legacy of bitter and repeated industrial disputes. The disputes were part of the wider context of the case study which featured the company's attempts to respond to external pressures. Throughout the chapter, we made mention of the changes which the company was trying to introduce to this end, but the reports of associated ill-treatment, and particularly unreasonable treatment, do not appear to have been the result of conflict over change *per se*. Rather, change was related to ill-treatment where employees experienced a loss of control and super-intense work. Was conflict the fault of the trade union which was urging its members to hang on to outdated practices, thereby forcing managers to assert their right to manage, and demand higher productivity, which were then interpreted as ill-treatment?

This interpretation sits uneasily with what we heard about the pride employees expressed in their work. Moreover, their complaints about unfairness often centred on managers' failure to act consistently to address problems of *under*-performance. Some of these complaints were indeed wrapped up in perceptions of ethnic conflict in the workplace, but the employees we talked to were deeply concerned with issues of fairness and respect (as measured by the FARE questions asked in the BWBS). If Britscope could be described as a troubled workplace, the major causes of its problems were not the behaviour of the public to whom the organisation provided face-to-face services. They were,

rather, employees' lack of faith in the reasonable behaviour of their employer and, sometimes, their fellow employees.

The employees we talked to were not at all sure that Britscope would not, without good reason, dismiss them, or make them redundant, or demand more work of them than was humanly possible. Nor could they count on fellow employees to treat them fairly and respectfully. Britscope's attempts to deal with these latter problems were well-meaning, but our interviewees did not seem to have much faith in their efficacy. In Chapter 9, we shall return to some of the things Britscope might have done to turn this situation around. For now, it is enough to conclude that the considerable effort that had been put into the policy drive on dignity at work did not appear to have (yet) wrought the changes in day-to-day behaviour which were desired. As for remedies for ill-treatment, the policies designed to deal with ill-treatment by managers seemed particularly ineffective, and there was reason for some scepticism about the complaints procedure. In particular, what counted as success at the conclusion of such a procedure might be debatable, and falling numbers of complaints might have been influenced by employees' perceptions of heightened job insecurity.