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PART THREE

The process of selecting and recruiting organisations for the case studies discussed in Part Three was exhaustive and lasted for two years. In some cases, we spent several months building relationships with potential partner organisations but were not able to proceed. For example, we spent significant effort negotiating with a government agency but were unable to meet their requirements for data control without compromising the confidentiality of our interviewees. The search for potential partners led us to spend several months travelling the length and breadth of the United Kingdom to undertake meetings with organisations in the public, private and third sectors. These meetings typically involved HR directors and sometimes trade union representatives. Several national and international companies pulled out of the project at the final stage, often when the approval of a CEO, or equivalent, was required. Our search for organisation partners was taking place at the height of the credit crunch in 2008 when the UK economy was entering recession and organisations were particularly sensitive to employment relations issues. We were often told our project did not fit an organisational agenda, or that there were concerns that findings might influence negotiations with trade unions on things like redundancy and pay.

Each participating organisation was offered a report on the results of the research we undertook with their employees, presentations of the results to an audience of their choice, bespoke training sessions based on our findings, and critical reviews of organisation literature, policies and processes. Nevertheless, given the difficulties we had in securing the partnerships, it is well worth asking why those organisations which did take part were willing to cooperate. Britscope had particular reasons to be concerned about the ill-treatment of its female staff (see Chapter 5) and was keen to have the assistance of independent researchers to help them understand the problem and whether company efforts to improve matters were working. As part of our partnership with Banco (Chapter 6), we undertook a confidential survey of 2,700 employees which provided a range of information on ill-treatment. Banco used our report from this survey to inform policy and practice improvements and drew on our data to evaluate their HR strategies on dignity and fairness at work. Although we did not undertake surveys in Britscope or Westshire NHS (Chapter 7), these organisations used the reports we produced for them on the qualitative research we undertook in their organisations in the same way. Westshire had already instigated significant developments on fairness, dignity, bullying and harassment but judged from staff engagement surveys that there remained significant problems to address.

Our engagement with their specialist health and well-being team was seen as a critical next step. With resources within the NHS at breaking point, the no-cost option of working with us was seen as a prudent way of accessing independent research.

Our gatekeeper at Strand Global Systems (Chapter 8) was particularly interested in the experiences of BME staff and hoped to use our research to understand better the company's difficulties in recruiting BME employees. It was often the input of such individuals that drove the successful negotiations and subsequent final approval. They also provided us with unrestricted access to organisational literature where policies, procedures and processes were described. Our research could not have been undertaken without such champions, but we also relied heavily on the support of Acas and the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in brokering meetings and introducing us to key decision-makers. General ethical approval for the qualitative stage of the research was provided by the Cardiff University research ethics process, although we also had to negotiate the protracted NHS research ethics procedure in order to undertake the research at Westshire.

Our eventual engagement with over 100 interviewees and key informants was achieved in different ways in each case study organisation. At Banco, the survey of 2,700 staff allowed us to ask for volunteers whom we then sifted and screened. At Westshire NHS, we used an intranet and poster campaign distributed via the health and well-being team, followed by telephone interviews, to select participants in the face-to-face interviewing programme. At Britscope we were given unrestricted access to the responses from the company's own very large survey of female employees. We were then able to screen a very large number of respondents to reach our target audience of women who had disabilities or long-term health conditions, or who were from ethnic minority backgrounds, and who had reported exposure to workplace ill-treatment. Potential volunteers who had indicated their willingness to take part in further research were then asked by the survey organisation that had gathered the original data if they would be interviewed. At Strand Global Systems, we used a series of briefing meetings with employees to publicise the research and encourage employees to volunteer for the interviewing programme.

We knew from our previous work with people who had suffered workplace ill-treatment that the interviews would require careful management. We spent considerable time and effort informing the employees who were selected for interview (usually in an initial telephone call) in order to make sure they understood the nature of the research they were committing themselves to. We followed principles of good practice by seeking written consent and providing participant information sheets, contact information and the telephone numbers of agencies such as Acas, the EHRC and anti-bullying charities

should someone feel upset by disclosure of their experiences. We also provided specialist training with a workplace counselling team for Martyn Rogers, our researcher who conducted a significant number of our interviews, to prepare him for dealing with sensitive topics. Some of our interviews took place at the workplace but the majority did not. Interviews were often conducted at home and at times that were always convenient for our interviewees. Sometimes this meant our researcher travelled hundreds of miles only to be told the interview was not possible and to come back on another day. We are, of course, extremely grateful to Martyn Rogers for his invaluable contribution to this phase of the research.

The accounts of ill-treatment presented in the following chapters illustrate the brutal, unpleasant and downright miserable experiences that some employees face when they have a bad day at work. We also present the thoughts and observations of a number of key informants who, by the nature of their roles, were likely to have indirect experience of ill-treatment and direct experience of company policies and processes. These included HR officers, trade union representatives and managers.

Our case studies are intended to help us answer better the questions raised by the BWBS, in particular why some workplaces are more troubled than others and what can be done to reduce trouble at work. To this end, we explore the leads which the BWBS has given us, particularly the importance of sector, loss of control, super-intense work and the characteristics of organisational culture as measured by the FARE questions. For example, Westshire NHS was dogged by political interference in the form of patient waiting times, referral processes and constant budgetary pressures which sometimes placed intolerable pressures on managers and staff in a way which seemed neither logical nor sensible. The other three case studies also had their share of reduced autonomy, super-intense work and cultural shifts. Banco seemed to have undertaken a strategic change of direction away from customer relationships built on trust and respect. Britscope had been engaged in a long battle with the trade union over its efforts to change working practices. Strand was making the transition from a UK champion to a global corporation with significant implications for its future relations with its UK employees.

In all four case studies, we saw people coping with the demands of intensive work demands whilst maintaining what they saw as fair and decent treatment. For many managers, troubles at work were rooted in a constant struggle to cope with super-intense work. For managers and others, productivity ultimatums from their superiors might be coupled with systems and processes which placed excessive demands on them. We saw these pressures in all our case studies; for example, sickness absence monitoring, management returns using online systems, customer call-waiting times in call centres and excessive checking and monitoring were all leading to problems. We also saw how workplaces seemed most troubled when people felt they were not treated as individuals

and where people felt they had to compromise their principles. By the same token, our study of Strand Global Systems suggested that organisations that were able to maintain some sense of fairness and respect were better able to cope with situations which might lead to escalating trouble at work elsewhere.

Not very long ago, it would have been far-fetched to consider any of the organisations we researched to be candidates for troubled workplaces. All four of the organisations had been able to rely upon an extraordinarily high level of commitment from their employees and had enviable public reputations. Banco and Strand have not suffered the decline in commitment and damage to reputation that had occurred in Britscope and Westshire. We do, however, wonder whether the sense of malaise in Britscope and Westshire would be quite so strong if they had not been held up to be exemplary employers alongside the likes of Banco and Strand not so long ago.

In each of our case studies, it was possible to observe a range of trigger points for both virtuous and vicious spiralling effects. In many cases, managers were involved and they were often at the heart of troubled workplaces. Problems with poor communication, lack of awareness of employment rights as well as ignorance of management responsibilities were implicated in a pattern of actions and reactions that often led to prolonged absences, and periods of sustained ill-health, as well as fractured workplace relations. In some cases, these appeared to be exacerbated by the very policies designed to help rid the workplace of these kinds of troubles. For some managers there was an appeal for common sense and a genuine fear that policies and practices often made things worse rather than better. Trade union representatives often explained their frustrations with the way relatively minor troubles could escalate leaving organisational damage that often became irreparable. This could lead to protracted trench warfare where individuals refused to see the right or wrong in their own and others' actions. This, in turn, led to frustrations for HR and trade union representatives, as well as managers who were charged with finding amicable and acceptable solutions. The ultimate effects of these troubles could mean retraining, relocating and reorganising individuals, teams and structures in an attempt to return to harmonious working.

Our case studies also revisited those who might be most at risk of trouble at work, for example, younger workers. Our interviews with a number of ethnic minority employees revealed how racial abuse, and workplace practices, left them feeling isolated outside the work team. In Britscope, managers apparently favoured their own ethnic groups to the detriment of other minorities. Our interviews also revealed how many people with disabilities and long-term health conditions suffered appalling treatment at work, often because of the ignorance of their line managers and supervisors. Simply speaking out was itself a major emotional challenge for many of these employees. For some, recounting their

experiences was upsetting and brought back unhappy memories; yet they still chose to speak to us. As one interviewee told us,

I'm glad I did this because ... I don't think I've told maybe two people what I've told you today, out of 20 years. So it's just nice for somebody else to come in from outside and listen to it, and just me babble on for an hour.

As we noted at the beginning of this book, the contributions of our interviewees afforded us an opportunity to better understand the nature and causes of trouble at work, and we are also extremely grateful to them.

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