HR[N] Paper

2019: a totally rewarding year?

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IES Perspectives on HR 2019

January 2019

Member Paper 143

ies institute for employment studies

> *'I should grow up some day 'cause I got bills to pay*
> *I can't be waking up at someone else's place*
> *I know I drink too much, can't pay my rent this month*
> *I should be saving up, but…*
> ***I just got paid!'***
>
> Sigala, Ella Eyre and Maghan Trainor Feat. French Montana – Just Got Paid [Ministry of Sound]

Whatever the Cassandras might be saying about the new year being another '9' year of crisis (Elliott, 2018) – something like a cross between the 1929 and 2009 financial crashes, 1939 international relations, and the opposite of the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 occurring in the Channel – 2018 ended with headlines of 'wage rises accelerating to their fastest pace since 2008' (BBC News, 2018).

December's Office for National Statistics employment figures did indeed show unemployment continuing at a record low of four per cent and average earnings up by 3.3 per cent, the biggest rise since the collapse of the financial markets in November 2008 (ONS, 2018).

So, can the UK workforce look forward to a totally rewarding 2019 and can IES confound the doom-mongers?

Much as we would like to spread some New Year cheer, IES' review of the research evidence leads us to suggest that with real wages up by barely one per cent, you shouldn't expect your eternally grateful employees to come showering their well-remunerated bosses with praise and gratitude anytime soon.

A tough decade on pay

In truth, the last decade has, on some measures, been the worst for UK wages and living standards for 200 years.

The inflation-adjusted median rate of pay still sits almost £5,000 a year lower than when Lehman Brothers ceased trading, with workers earning a third less in some parts of the country (£20,000 less in London, for example) than in 2008 (TUC, 2018). According to United Nations data (ILO, 2018), Britain ranks bottom of the G20 nations in terms of real wage growth since 2008, being the only country which has seen (admittedly insipid) economic growth since then, combined with real-wage decline.

This has been a 'lost decade' for pay, according to the chief economist at the Bank of England, Andy Haldane (2018). He believes the growth of insecure and poor-quality work in the gig economy has contributed to the shocking pay performance, while the decline of trade unions and sluggish growth in productivity has also had an impact.

At IES, we have been celebrating the remarkably positive impact of the first year of compulsory gender pay reporting (more than 90% of companies are now taking action to close their gaps (CBI, 2018)) and we are contributing to helping the government repeat this trick with ethnicity pay.

Despite this positive news, the UK still has one of the highest median gender pay gaps for hourly wages amongst the biggest economies in the world (ILO, 2018). It ranks third-worst behind South Korea and Estonia, partly because it has a low share of women among those high-paid, top one per cent of earners; and, at the other end of our income scale, some two-thirds of the lowest paid workers are female.

Millennials, mental health and (lack of) money

Given this scenario, it is hardly surprising that the UK has seen a shift over the past decade towards a low skills, low paid, low engagement, low productivity workforce.

Meanwhile, HR continues to fret about skills shortages (reported by almost three-quarters of employers (CIPD, 2018a)); and we see a plethora of conference talks and 'grey literature' articles on how to overcome the difficulties of recruiting and retaining millennials.

Yet, Sigala's anthem for the millennial generation emanating from my daughter's bedroom is less a celebration of the return to real-wage increases than an expression of the general ennui and lack of cash, and hope, held even by her well-qualified contemporaries.

> *'I'm broke, but I'm ballin'*
> *Don't know where we're going*
> *We go in when we go out*
> *I just got paid'.*
>
> Sigala, Ella Eyre and Maghan Trainor Feat. French Montana – Just Got Paid [Ministry of Sound]

For those of you preferring more factual analysis (Piskorz, 2018):

- Lower real incomes and the lack of pay progression mean that millennials are now spending almost a quarter of their income on housing, three times more than the pre-war generation.
- Flatlining house prices still represent a historic high of more than nine times average earnings, meaning that half of UK millennials will rent rather than own their homes into their 40s and one-third will rent into retirement.
- More than one fifth of millennials still live with their parents, compared to 17 per cent in 1996. Not much use really telling them the usual corporate financial education spiel, then, that a 25-year-old needs to set aside £800 a month over 40 years to retire with a £30,000 a year income.

This might admittedly be a somewhat less socially-threatening response than that of the gilets jaunes violent protests at a similar situation in France, but it is hardly great for those chief executives and HR directors trying to re-engage their workforce to higher performance.

For all the jokes about millennials still being able to afford their daily avocado on toast despite their 'quarter-life crises', the worrying rise in mental ill health which accounts now for 70 million days of absence per annum amongst UK employers is also particularly acute amongst young people; three-quarters of all mental health problems are already established by the age of 24 (MFH, 2015).

Indeed, while the historically unusual combination of low pay awards and high skills shortages has had the counter-productive effect for many employers of having to award higher wages to newly recruited staff (with the typical pay rise for someone switching jobs around 2.5 times higher than that of someone remaining in the same job); the wider social impact of low pay and low pay awards is, if anything, even more worrying.

The most concerning research report we saw in 2018 was the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's (JRF) *UK Poverty 2018*. With more than six million UK workers earning less than the living-costs-determined real living wage, and the well-publicised difficulties of implementing the new Universal Credit benefits regime (Toynbee, 2018), in-work poverty has been rising even faster than employment, driven almost entirely by increasing poverty among working parents. According to JRF, four million British workers now live in poverty and the majority of children living in poverty are in families with parents in work, rather than unemployed. So much for a 'totally rewarding' present, and future, for these parents and their children.

Engagement through total rewards?

Total rewards: easy and attractive to say and promote, fiendishly difficult to deliver and do.

The boardroom and recruitment website rhetoric has never matched the shop floor reality on total rewards. The practical impact never lived up to the policy intent.

Rather than being genuinely motivated by delivering higher levels of choice and perceived value to employees in an increasingly tight and diverse labour market, too often the concept was used – as trade unions often alleged – as an alternative to decent pay levels and increases (Brown, 2015) and, even worse, as a front to cut pension and benefit costs and shift risk from employer to employee (Paton, 2014).

Today, the same plain-vanilla, copycat benefits choices and platforms are rolled out – supposedly to appeal to a more diverse workforce – even among well-meaning and genuinely 'good' employers. Too often, this over-complexity and poor communications combine to confuse employees and obscure:

- real pay declines experienced by most of the UK workforce since 2008 (TUC, 2018);
- poor and flatlining engagement levels across the UK workforce; and
- the shocking pay gaps between the genders and ethnicity groups in the UK.

Total reward is failing once again

As with many HR concepts, the implemented reality is often very different from the policy intent.

The terminology may appear to have shifted to 'the employee experience'. For example, one major benefits provider claims that 'experiences are the reward and recognition success story of the year: experiences bring people happiness, happiness increases productivity (by around 12%), thus experiences increase productivity – that's simply science'. This relationship is apparently reinforced by such wonders as 'ceramic creative workshops' and 'camaraderie cocktails' (People Management, 2018).

Yet, all the signs suggest that the problems of the last decade will be repeated over the next one unless we seriously change course.

There is an irony of glitzy employer marketing of the employee experience. Many engagement surveys show employee ratings for their workplace and experience declining, and the growth in poverty and homelessness appears evident to far more of us on our walk to and from work. Nonetheless, this irony seems to be lost on many HR functions. Aon Hewitt, for example, in its annual study of global trends in employee engagement, notes that:

> *'Populist movements like those seen in the United Kingdom and the United States […] have made discussions about erecting borders and walls more common. […] anxiety is permeating the workplace […] rapid technology advances that could make many jobs obsolete are no longer the subject of science fiction […] These changes present new challenges for CEOs and Human Resources leaders […]. Left unaddressed, will create further angst in organizations and will cause the work experience and employee engagement to decline even more.'*

Our own research with workers in the gig economy found that many of them were far more negative about the perceived horrors of ever going to work for an employer and 'bully-boss' than working for themselves with only limited social provision or protection.

A more rewarding year ahead? Six lessons for moving to real total rewards

> *'Well it feels like every day's a holiday*
> *So I can't take my cheque to the bank*
> *And I know, know, know I should be worried*
> *But I work, work, work to the bone, baby'.*
>
> Sigala, Ella Eyre and Maghan Trainor Feat. French Montana – Just Got Paid [Ministry of Sound]

So, what does 2019 hold? Is there any chance of reversing this grey-January HR and reward ennui?

With the belated return in the economy to real-pay growth, we believe that there are indeed real opportunities and signs of hope amidst the gloom and Brexit uncertainty.

We would offer these six key areas to focus on in your 2019 reward strategies. They are all concerned with the subject of total rewards and making a reality of it for our people.

1. Recognise that any effective total rewards package is based on a secure foundation of a decent base pay level, combined with providing all your employees, especially the lowest paid, with real pay and career progression opportunities. Join the growing band of over 4,700 employers who guarantee at a minimum to pay the level of the real living wage. There is an even-faster-growing body of research evidence that the escalation in the level of the National Living Wage has not in fact encouraged layoffs, and that the additional pay costs of £1.27 per hour up to the £9 per hour real Living Wage (£10.55 in London) pays off for the employer as well as for the employee (Living Wage, 2017). This difference between the two rates for one worker for a year is roughly equivalent to a FTSE-100 chief executive sacrificing an hour of their pay.

2. We expect to see signs of the return to considerations and the establishment, and re-establishment, of base pay progression we detected in 2018, evident across more and more sectors and employers in 2019 and beyond. IES has written elsewhere on the mutual benefits of providing all employees with pay and career progression opportunities. The issue emerging from our evidence is not whether to do it, but how, with skills and competency-based pay rightly rising up the HR agenda once again. As the Treasury recognises in its guidance to government departments on this year's pay round (HM Treasury, 2018), 'capability based reward for growth in competence through development in the role is a way to achieve higher workforce productivity'. This is perhaps the only way we will, as a nation, be able to fund the re-establishment of the two per cent per annum average real-wage growth levels we saw in the 20 years prior to 2008, compared to the 0.2 per cent average since then (Clarke and Gregg, 2018).

3. Employers should join up pay and reward policies with other HR, talent and diversity management practices. In their review of the growth of competency-pay applications for professional staff, Heneman and Ledford (2018) note that performance-related pay 'was often developed as an isolated human resource practice and in many cases it failed because it was not created in the context of human resource goals for the organization'. In contrast, paying for skills and competence must 'be applied consistently across a variety of human resource systems and in alignment with the other systems of the organisation' if it is to support organisational effectiveness and productivity.

Training is key. Nationally, we need to re-imagine female-dominated professions such as caring as valuable, higher-skilled occupations, with many more opportunities available and more training provided for care workers to become social workers, healthcare assistants to become nurses and teaching assistants to progress to become teachers.

HR needs to re-learn the benefits of providing internal development and progression over making expensive and often less-effective external hires, and re-enfranchise the rest of the workforce with its talent management policies, which are too often misguidedly restricted to supposedly 'top talent'. The authors of the latest *UK Skills and Employment Survey* argue for the need to reverse the trends their research identified of 'workplace learning and training continuing on a downward path' (Glendinning, Young and Bogdan, 2018), which also helps to explain the UK's under-payment problem.

And similarly, as IES' case studies have highlighted, those unacceptable national and employer gender and ethnicity pay gaps will only be closed if we address the full range of HR practices, not just the pay and reward ones. The key is to recognise and effectively redress all of the points at which discrimination and differentiation unwittingly kicks in – in recruitment, promotions, performance appraisal and management, and so on.

4. Real total rewards mean the government and employers better joining up their employment and pay policies, supported by research organisations like IES. Lack of pay and career progression makes for lack of social mobility.

One of the most enjoyable events I participated in last year was a seminar in Cardiff, organised by the Welsh Centre for Public Policy (2018), helping to encourage this type of joint working, so as to foster and fund job-, skills- and pay-progression in low-paying sectors of the Welsh economy. We need more initiatives like this right across the UK.

As Professor Paul Sparrow has argued, HR needs to relax its 'vertical' boardroom obsession with business strategy alignment and play a wider 'horizontal' role once again to contribute to major social and political challenges, such as the impact of technology, skills and education, and migration and the labour supply.

Similarly, I heard the head of the Migration Advisory Committee, Professor Alan Manning, telling employers at an Eversheds Sutherland conference (2018) late last year that, in low-paying sectors (eg agriculture), rather than protesting at any migration controls that might be implemented on low-paid workers, they need instead to re-invigorate their pay progression and training policies, so as to better attract and enable their workforce.

For the lowest paid, the system of universal credit originated from the recognition that, as the Work and Pensions Select Committee put it (2016), 'enabling progression in work is central to transforming people's lives and increasing labour productivity'. So, simplifying that transition and ensuring that 'work pays' was a key objective. Yet, as IES Director, Tony Wilson, argues, we have seen a major 'policy/practice' gap opening up here too, with its implementation requiring not just more time and resources, but also more fundamental reforms to the system, as the Scottish government is in the process of implementing.

While we would have preferred to see the government's Good Work Plan (BEIS, 2018) introduce a statutory right for all workers to a more predictable, stable contract (rather than just the right to request one), many more employers will hopefully respond positively to this and follow the example of those, like McDonalds, who are already operating such arrangements, to mutual benefit.

5. Employers and their HR leaders need to do more to link their reward policies for their most senior-, middle- and lowest-income employees. To some extent, point four, above, means HR will have no choice but to address this.

New regulations make it a statutory requirement (as of 2019, reporting in 2020) for companies listed on the London Stock Exchange with more than 250 staff to disclose the ratio of their chief executives' remuneration to the median pay of their UK employees every year, and to justify the difference. They will also need to explain how directors take staff and other stakeholder interests into account when they decide on salaries and bonuses.

The early research (Helmore, 2018) on the implementation of a similar requirement in the United States suggests that it is already pushing these other priorities more prominently onto boardroom agendas. The heads of FTSE-100 companies that are not accredited living wage employers were paid an average of £4 million last year, and those companies' combined profits added up to over £85 billion.

Whilst average earnings have risen by barely one per cent, the (overwhelmingly white male) bosses running FTSE-100 companies at the top of the earnings ladder have seen their remuneration escalate by a remarkable 11 per cent, to 167 times the median UK salary of £23,474 (Kallina and Shand, 2018).

The Prime Minister is not the only one worried by the huge escalation in pay differentials and the growth in low-paid and insecure work. There is much research to support Dan Lyons contention in his new book *Lab Rats* (2018) that 'dignity, respect, stability and security still matter'. Lyons argues for a shift from the shareholder to a wider stakeholder model of capitalism.

IES agrees with Matthew Fell, policy director at the Confederation of British Industry, that it is 'important […] that all businesses make progress toward fair and proportionate pay outcomes'; but also that 'the new legislation will help develop a better dialogue between boards and employees'.

We've been working with employers on these related agendas and would like to see more employers recognising the research evidence on the positive effect of all-employee profit and share ownership schemes, and implementing such arrangements, so that it is not just their executives that share in their business' success.

Again, the devolved nations appear to be leading the way, with Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon supportive on the basis that 'all the evidence tells us that employee ownership delivers benefits to business performance, the people who work in them and the places in which they are located' (Roberts, 2018).

6. Finally, for employers genuinely seeking to address real employee needs, rather than what the major benefits providers are offering them, we would highlight two areas for greater emphasis in 2019…

Mental health support and employee financial wellbeing

Twenty-three per cent of all NHS activity is explained by mental ill health and yet it attracts only 11 per cent of total NHS spending (Brown and Triggle, 2018).

Similarly, in employment, while recent years have seen a welcome extension of employer total reward packages to focus on their employees' wellbeing, alongside growing evidence that it can have major productivity as well as health benefits, we are seeing a similar over-emphasis on physical, to the neglect of mental, health.

Work by IES' Stephen Bevan (2018) found that over 60 per cent of UK manufacturers surveyed intervened to assess the risk of physical injury and to promote better physical safety, but the majority of investment remained in traditional areas of risk assessment, prevention and rehabilitation for those exposed to physical hazards. Fewer than 15 per cent assessed the risk that work will damage mental health and only one in five invest in measures to promote it. Yet, the productivity impact is most pronounced when the mental health of employees is positive and when employees operating in 'lean' production environments are given appropriate support, training and a 'voice' in the way production processes are run.

In the civil service, a variety of new measures have been introduced to better support this, including the provision of mental health champions and trained mental health first aiders. More employers in 2019 need to follow the lead set by examples like this.

A contributor to the worrying rise in reported mental ill health has undoubtedly been the growth in financial and debt concerns, with research by IES and CIPD (Cox et al, 2017) highlighting how poor financial wellbeing contributes to psychological and physical ill health, and higher levels of stress and anxiety, which is now the biggest cause of work absence in the UK (CIPD, 2018b). One third of employees report that financial worries are their biggest concern, affecting their work performance and sleep.

So, while employers obviously need to focus on what they pay their employees, far fewer currently assess or attempt to address their financial wellbeing and whether or not they use their financial resources to best effect. At the moment, any support of this nature tends to be focused on both their best-paid employees, who probably have the least to worry about, and those approaching retirement, for whom, if they haven't planned appropriately, remedial actions may be too late.

As my colleague Catherine Rickard suggested, a worrying feature of our recent case-study research, funded by the Money Advisory Service, was senior management opposition to providing any assistance of this type for a variety of reasons. These included a misplaced fear of being held liable for providing inaccurate financial advice. They may not need such financial support, but a wealth of research evidence now backs up the case for auditing and intervening to support their less-well-off employees. The employer risk is in not acting, rather than taking such action.

Taking responsibility to actively support employees means going beyond just providing Employee Assistance Programme phone lines – which are increasingly handling high volumes of debt queries and concerns – and auditing or helping employees much more broadly with financial education, be that through online financial tools, debt management support, pensions' guidance, budgeting support and so on.

In 2019, with the new Single Financial Guidance Body hopefully providing improved tools and back up, we would hope to see far more employers giving all of their employees help with their financial wellbeing and providing them with the financial education and support they require.

Conclusions: get real, and personal, on total rewards

Employee engagement to high performance through total rewards is ultimately an individual and personal decision by each of your employees, based on how they feel about working for you.

A friend of mine's daughter recently qualified as a radiographer and received job offers from three leading hospitals. The NHS has a good national pay and rewards package offered by all three, including, in some cases, workplace nurseries and, in one of the hospitals, help in finding accommodation. This can be a huge differentiator for most young people today. While in no way a leader in glitzy benefits packages, relying instead on the traditional core of fair pay and a good pension, the NHS has slowly been extending the range of its benefits choices and has provided total rewards statements for some years now.

So, how did she decide? All were busy hospitals with good reputations and the national pay and benefits package. But, in one hospital, she was welcomed immediately in reception by one of the senior clinicians, met the colleagues she would be working with; given lots of time. They discussed not only her initial work and training but the longer-term career opportunities available to her. She felt genuinely listened to and engaged with, and had mentally signed on the dotted line before she left the premises.

Total rewards is about what potential recruits and employees perceive and receive, not what employers promote, provide and 'push' onto them.

It's about taking, not abdicating, responsibility for your people and their reward management and the wider society we are all a part of. It is about best fit, not best or supposedly 'leading-edge' practice, 'carefully matched to the goals, culture, and political realities of the organization' (Heneman and Ledford, 2002).

I just got paid
I just got paid
Come on and gimme that money…

Sigala, Ella Eyre and Maghan Trainor Feat. French Montana – Just Got Paid [Ministry of Sound]

Duncan Brown, head of HR consultancy at the Institute for Employment Studies, has more than 25 years' experience in HR consulting and research, with firms including Aon Hewitt, PricewaterhouseCoopers and Towers Perrin. He also spent 5 years as Assistant Director General at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD).

If you would like to discuss your approach to total rewards or any of the subjects raised in this paper, please get in touch.

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