

# More Than a Feeling: Using Hotel Room Attendants to Improve Understanding of Job Quality

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Recent research by Adler and Adler reveals contradictory claims about the job quality of hotel room attendants; suggesting that an objectively ‘bad’ job can be perceived as subjectively ‘good’ by workers. This contradiction resonates with wider issues about how job quality is conceived – objectively and/or subjectively. Drawing on empirical research of room attendant jobs in upper market hotels in three cities in the UK and Australia, this paper addresses the contradiction by examining both the objective and subjective dimensions of job quality for room attendants. In doing so it refines Adler and Adler’s work, constructs a new typology of workers and a new categorisation of job quality informed by workers characteristics and preferences. This categorisation improves conceptual understanding of job quality by enjoining its objective and subjective dimensions.

## 1. Introduction

The importance of job quality is gaining traction among academics, think-tanks and governments in many advanced economies (e.g. ILO 2010, Osterman 2008). Interest is increasing because it is recognized that job quality affects employees’ job satisfaction and well-being (Clark 2005); in turn affecting organizational performance and national economic outcomes (EC 2002, Siebern-Thomas 2005). While the potential benefits associated with improving job quality are increasingly recognized, the definition of job quality remains the subject of debate (e.g. Appelbaum et al. 2003, Batt et al. 2003, Clark 2005, Handel 2005; Findlay et al. 2013, Green 2006; Kalleberg 2011; Osterman and Shulman 2011). A key issue, Findlay et al. (2013) note, relates to the inadequate conceptualisation and use of objective and/or subjective indicators of job quality. This lack of agreement is a significant problem as it hampers understanding of what constitutes job quality and, with it, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ jobs. As a consequence, generating greater understanding of job quality is a task highlighted as important though unfinished (Green et al. 2010; Holman 2013). This paper addresses this task and in doing so it advances existing understandings of job quality by demonstrating the importance of both objective and subjective dimensions of job quality and how they might be enjoined to more effectively conceptualise job quality.

The paper takes as its starting point contradictory claims about job quality in hotels, particularly for room attendants (or chambermaids/housekeepers). Room attendants

clean and ‘make up’ rooms in hotels for guests’ use and their job is said to be essential to hotels (Mitchell 2007). According to Adler and Adler (2004), housekeeping jobs are highly satisfying for workers, who are portrayed as overwhelmingly contented in their jobs. Yet, such jobs are low paid, low skilled and offer poor working time flexibility and limited training and career opportunities; subsequently described by Wood (1997: 95) as the ‘lowest of the low in hotel work’. These jobs are so bad that they are claimed by Bernhardt et al. (2003: 36) to be ‘the archetype of low-wage, dead-end service jobs’. To resolve this contradiction, and from it develop better conceptual understanding of job quality, we analyse objective dimensions of job quality by examining characteristics of the job and subjective dimensions of job quality by examining the experiences and perceptions of the job-holders/workers informed by their characteristics and preferences. Our empirical basis is research examining room attendants in upper market hotels in three cities in the UK and Australia (London, Glasgow and Sydney). This selection is not intended to be a representative population of room attendants, rather it is used as a purposive sample from which a new typology of workers is generated that helps explain how the same job can be experienced as both good and bad by different job-holders and which addresses the apparent contradiction in room attendant job quality. Our findings allow us to revise and refine Adler and Adler’s work in order to create a new typology of workers; this typology explains workers’ different, even positive, subjective experiences and perceptions of the same objectively ‘bad job’. Based on these insights we devise a new categorisation of job quality informed by workers’ characteristics and preferences. Doing so enables better conceptual understanding of job quality more generally by more satisfactorily enjoining the objective and subjective dimensions of job quality; and which promises to facilitate and propel future research efforts seeking to operationalise and enhance job quality.

The next section of the paper provides an overview of both the debate about job quality in hotels and for room attendants specifically, and the gap in current understanding of job quality more generally. The paper then briefly outlines the research methods before presenting the findings. These findings outline the characteristics of the job and the characteristics and preferences of the job-holders, which enable us to revise and extend Adler and Adler’s work and develop a new typology of workers. The discussion and conclusion section re-examines the articulation of the objective and subjective dimensions of job quality, offering a new categorisation of job quality mediated by workers’ characteristics and preferences. This job quality categorisation proposes a new way of conceptualising and understanding job quality (and its outcomes) based on both objective and subjective dimensions. The final section also outlines the practical and policy implications of this categorisation and proposes a future research agenda for job quality.

## **2. Literature Review**

The long-standing consensus amongst researchers in the field is that hotel jobs generally are ‘bad jobs’, providing low pay and low skills combined with poor training and career opportunities (e.g. Baum 2007, Bernhardt et al. 2003, Lucas 2004). Moreover, working conditions involve unsociable and often unpredictable working hours and increasing work intensification, driven by a cost minimization business strategy – even for upmarket 4-5 star hotels (Baum 2007, Iverson and Deery 1997,

Timo and Davidson 2005). Subsequently, for workers in the industry, the outcome is a 'poor' employment experience (Lucas 2004).

For the most part, such research has focused on front-of-house jobs such as those in food and beverage in which employees interact directly with customers (e.g. Fine 1996; Kelliher and Perrett 2001), whilst ignoring back-of-house jobs including those in housekeeping. More recently back-of-house jobs have become the focus of research. In this respect, research examining room attendants' jobs has revealed them to be the least skilled and lowest paid in the hotel industry in Europe, the US (Vanselow et al. 2010) and Australia (Knox 2010). These jobs offer minimal rates of pay, usually at the wage floor; at times this pay may even be beneath national minimum wage rates. Low pay is the result of the low skill requirements associated with housekeeping as well as its feminisation (Dutton et al. 2008, McDowell et al. 2007). Overall, the 'skills' required of room attendants are more concerned with personality, amenability to the required working hours, attention to detail and the ability to work hard. The work is routine, heavy and repetitive, requiring little formal training or qualifications; with training typically occurring on-the-job (Vanselow et al. 2010; Wood 1997). Further training opportunities (such as customer service skills) can be constrained because of work pressures (McPhail and Fisher 2008) and progression opportunities are limited as housekeeping departments tend to be small, with flat structures and little internal occupational differentiation. Working time is aligned with patterns of guest departure and arrival, and working hours are therefore inflexible (Knox 2010). In addition, US, European and Australian case studies reveal how increasing competitive pressures have led employers to intensify the work of housekeepers, requiring them to work harder and faster to complete their allocated duties (Vanselow et al. 2010, Oxenbridge and Moensted 2011). Not surprisingly, housekeeping jobs are archetypal 'bad jobs' according to Bernhardt et al. (2003) and Holman's (2013) recent job quality taxonomy allocates room attending to the low-quality jobs category.

Whilst there is consensus that hotel and room attendant jobs in particular are objectively bad, research by Adler and Adler (2004) contradicts claims that these objective characteristics result in a poor employment experience. In their research, the majority of workers in hotels were fulfilled by their work. Their research in luxury resort hotels in Hawaii reveals different types of workers in the hotel industry with different subjective experiences and perceptions of their jobs. Four distinct types of workers are identified: managers, seekers, locals and new immigrants. Within these worker types, workers are characterised by either being trapped or transient in their jobs, and as having differing attitudes and experiences – positive or negative – of those jobs.

Managers and seekers were transient workers from more affluent socio-economic backgrounds than locals and were predominately from North, Central and South America. Managers were hospitality professionals who had chosen to develop their careers in the industry. These managers were simply passing through Hawaiian hotels as part of their broader career development and usually had little or no time for leisure pursuits. Seekers were also migrants to the Hawaiian Islands and, as with managers, did not intend to remain permanently. Many seekers moved to Hawaii to experience the available leisure opportunities rather than for work. Seekers worked in a variety of front-of-house positions directly meeting guests, for example at the beach and pool, as

servers or in guest services such as bellmen or valets. New immigrants and locals made up the majority of the workforce in Adler and Adler's hotels. Locals were workers born and raised in Hawaii. Most also worked in front-of-house jobs in guest services and food and beverage. Whilst some locals were unwillingly trapped in their jobs – frustrated with the limited opportunities on the Islands and forced 'to accept the meagre offerings available to them' (p.59), the majority were willingly 'trapped in paradise' (p.68). Locals' jobs were at a level immediately above the new immigrants. The latter occupied the lowest rung of the occupational ladder, often filling the most menial positions such as housekeeping, stewarding and landscaping. Nevertheless, Adler and Adler again claim that these new immigrants were happy in their jobs because they were living the 'American dream' (p.48). As a consequence, they invested in their work and had long job tenures. All of this type, including housekeepers according to Adler and Adler, were 'willingly trapped by choice' and 'approached their work with pride and diligence' (Adler and Adler 2004:44) despite long hours and low pay.

Whilst it is accepted that jobs in the hotel industry are generally poor, and that room attendants' jobs can be the poorest, it is clear from Adler and Adler's typology that there can be different types of job-holders in the hotel industry with different experiences and perceptions of their jobs. Although Adler and Adler's typology is useful, we believe that it is limited and in need of revision. Moreover, revision is needed, in order to develop understanding of how job-holders subjectively experience and perceive objectively 'bad' jobs, opens to wider debates about job quality more generally in which there is tension between the articulation of objective and subjective dimensions of job quality that hinders better understanding of job quality.

Further developing understanding of job quality is important because it affects individuals' job satisfaction and well-being, organisational productivity and performance as well as national/regional economic competitiveness (Clark 2005, Clegg 1983, Freeman 1978, Kalleberg 2011, Siebern-Thomas 2005). Policy-makers across the advanced economies now agree on the importance of job quality, and there are demands to create good jobs, improve bad jobs or simply encourage decent work (e.g. Grimshaw et al. 2008, ILO 2010, Osterman 2008). Within this context, existing research highlights the critical roles that government policy (Zuberi 2006) and employer strategy play in shaping job quality (Bernhardt et al. 2008) and the means through which improvements in job quality can be levered. However any such interventions are dependent on how job quality is defined, and definitions of job quality vary, sometimes based on simple expediency. This issue is made explicit in the Russell Sage Foundation's international comparative research of job quality. In the book's Foreword, Solow and Wanner (2010: xvi) state that 'It is impossible and unnecessary to give an exhaustive list of the components of job quality'. Others however recognise that the lack of a commonly agreed definition of job quality is a problem and one that should no longer be sidestepped if job quality is to be properly understood, let alone improved (e.g. Appelbaum et al. 2003, Batt et al. 2003, Clark 2005, Findlay et al. 2013, Green 2006).

Disagreement frequently centres on whether job quality should be based on objective and/or subjective indicators. Objective indicators focus on the characteristics of the job, whether economic or non-economic. For example, Osterman and Shulman (2011) focus on pay as their measure of job quality. In comparison, other studies that rely on

non-economic but still objective measures focus on task-related characteristics of the job. For example, Hackman and Oldham's (1975) seminal job diagnostic survey consists of skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback. In comparison, Kalleberg (2011) includes both economic (pay and benefits etc.) and non-economic indicators (autonomy, control over work, scheduling and job termination etc.) in order to provide a more holistic assessment of the objective aspects of job quality.

Because of data availability limitations, it is argued that it is often simply easier to use objective (as opposed to subjective) indicators (e.g. Osterman and Shulman 2011). Other researchers however, are trenchant about their use, arguing that economic and non-economic objective 'characteristics of the job are the constituent elements' of job quality (Eurofound 2012: 10, also Muñoz de Bustillo et al 2011).

Yet, Kalleberg (2011) suggests that there may be individual, subjective differences in how job quality is experienced by job-holders. As he stated in earlier research: 'It is workers, however, who ultimately judge job quality, and they may consider a job to be bad for many reasons' (2000: 259). Subjective indicators focus on the reported attitudes and experiences of the job-holder in relation to the extent to which that job meets the worker's needs (Brown et al. 2007, Eurofound 2012). It is recognised that this subjectivity is affected by workers' characteristics such as sex, age, ethnicity, qualifications and socio-economic background (Brown et al. 2007, Sledge et al. 2008). Thus perceptions of good and bad jobs can vary, coinciding with job-holder characteristics. Holman (2013) also suggests that the experience of a job may vary in accordance with an individual's personal and contextual circumstances. Whilst he creates a taxonomy of job types across 27 European countries (Holman 2013) based on five objective indicators (work organisation, wages and payment system, security and flexibility, skills and development, and engagement and representation) that are both economic and non-economic, he validates these indicators by assessing job-holders subjective experiences. Other studies have also sought to span objective (economic and non-economic) and subjective indicators. Among such studies, Handel (2005) argues that the dimensions of job quality consist of: pay, job security, promotional opportunities, job variety/interest, job autonomy, stress, work load, physical effort, danger, management-employee relations and co-worker relations. Similarly, Green et al. (2010) use (economic and non-economic) objective dimensions of job quality, including pay and training opportunities, and subjective dimensions, including satisfaction with pay, hours and the job.<sup>1</sup> These measures are used to assess the 'subjective characteristics of the employment environment', reflecting job-holders subjective attitudes and experiences of the job (Green et al. 2010: 617; also Brown et al. 2007, Eurofound 2012). Importantly, the potential significance of both subjective indicators and the characteristics of job-holders are gaining traction in debates about job quality (e.g. Holman 2013, Holzer et al. 2011, Kalleberg 2011). Relatedly, the potential importance of job-holder preferences has also been noted (Brown et al. 2007), though further empirical analysis/support remains absent.

Despite such recognition, the articulation of objective and subjective dimensions remains analytically under-developed and warrants further exploration: it is a task signalled as important but as yet unfinished. It is, Green et al. (2010: 605) state, 'a complex task ... open for evaluation'. As Holman (2013: 496) argues, future studies should be 'conducted to examine *how* personal and contextual factors shape employee

experiences of job types'.<sup>2</sup> This call has merit. Although job-holder characteristics are now recognised as important factors, the preferences of these job-holders remain relatively under-developed analytically (Brown 2007). By more comprehensively incorporating these preferences into the analysis we believe that the contradiction in objective and subjective accounts of hotel housekeeping jobs can be explained and, importantly, provide a route into better understanding job quality more generally. In other words, what needs to be explored is how subjectively perceived objective dimensions shape job quality outcomes, and worker characteristics and preferences are the bridge.

In contrast to Adler and Adler's (2004) research, the findings from our research, based on in-depth analyses of housekeeping work in London, Glasgow and Sydney, include a wider range of workers. This wider research base offers a more nuanced depiction of room attendants' characteristics and preferences and their experiences and perceptions of their job, allowing us to refine the work of Adler and Adler and develop a new typology of workers. The resulting revised typology explains how objectively bad jobs may be perceived positively by different workers. This approach not only makes understandable the apparent contradiction in accounts of job quality in the hotel industry, it also enables the development of a new categorisation of job quality based on objective and subjective dimensions, mediated by worker characteristics and preferences. This new categorisation advances existing (inadequate) conceptualisations of job quality and subsequently promises to propel future efforts directed towards operationalising and enhancing job quality.

### **3. Research design and methods**

The research data are drawn from two studies of the hotel industry in the UK and Australia and enveloped middle and upper market hotels. To control for the potential influence of market segment differences and align with the research of Adler and Adler (2004), only the data from the upmarket case study hotels are examined here. The case studies focused on larger hotels; that is those with a minimum of 30 staff to allow exploration of room attendants' progression opportunities not generally available in smaller establishments. In the UK, there were four upmarket hotel case studies, two London-centred and two Glasgow-centred. In Australia, three case study hotels were drawn from Sydney (see Table 1).

[Table 1 here]

Although statistical data were gathered about each country's hotel industry and financial and performance data, the research was largely qualitative involving non-random selection of case studies based on labour market and product market segment. This design enabled deep understanding of concepts and relationships in specific contexts as well as theory-building (Flyvbjerg 2011, Yin 2003). In the internet age in which more data are readily available, Savage and Burrows (2007) argue that the task of social science now is to provide better description and classification. Typologizing is a valuable tool in this task. Amidst research into 'bad jobs', case studies, particularly those using qualitative research methods, provide greater understanding especially when using a broad selection of interviewees across different organisational positions to provide a range of perspectives (Grimshaw 2005). To this end, we

interviewed room attendants, various managers, and significant others related to the industry.

In the UK, interviews were conducted with general, operations, human resources and housekeeping managers as well as housekeeping supervisors and room attendants in hotels. There were also interviews with representatives from two temporary work agencies (TWA), a contract cleaning company and a number of organisations related to the industry: a sector careers promotion organisation, a trade union and two low wage campaign groups. In total, 76 interviews were conducted, including 19 room attendants across the four upper market hotels. In Australia, 30 interviews (including 15 room attendants and six supervisors) were conducted in total, with a mix of room attendants, managers, the directors of a TWA, the industry's employer representative group and the trade union. Hotel and individual participants in both countries are anonymised.

Interviews were semi-structured to enable questioning in line with the research aims whilst allowing interviewees to discuss additional issues. This approach enables the interviewer to elicit interviewee viewpoints more effectively than a standardized interview or questionnaire (Flick 1998). Interview schedules ranged over both objective and subjective dimensions of job quality. We used both economic and non-economic objective indicators to determine the characteristics of the job holistically (e.g. Holman 2013, Kalleberg 2011), including: work organisation; skills and training; progression opportunities, and pay and benefits. We also examine workers' (subjective) attitudes and experiences in relation to their working environment (Brown et al. 2007, Green et al. 2010, Holman 2013, Sledge et al. 2008). Our subjective indicators consisted of: job-holder attitude towards doing the job (willing or unwilling) and job-holder tenure (trapped or transient), informed, however, by workers' characteristics and preferences (e.g. Brown et al. 2007, Kalleberg et al. 2000). This approach is consistent with Adler and Adler's (2004) research while also integrating the worker characteristics identified by Kalleberg et al. (2000) and Sledge et al. (2008). In exploring these characteristics the importance of workers' preferences (Brown et al. 2007) became clear, as outlined below. The data were content analysed by the research team to identify common trends and relationships within and between key concepts (Yin 2003) using an iterative thematic process (Corbin and Straus 2008).

It is important to note that analysis of the seven case study hotels from the two different countries is not comparative but integrative – creating a combined workforce that encompasses a varied/diverse range of worker characteristics and preferences, necessary to develop a deeper understanding of how worker characteristics and preferences mediate the objective and subjective dimensions of job quality.

The data are used to characterise housekeeping jobs and job-holders, and build a typology of worker types. Our analysis included data from both non-managerial and managerial participants because we consider managerial implications and outcomes, including performance standards, productivity, absenteeism and turnover. In accordance with Adler and Adler's research, job-holders' tenure was coded/categorised as 'trapped' if job-holders possessed long-term tenures (typically in excess of three years) and intended to remain in their job. Job-holder tenure was categorised as 'transient' if job-holders possessed short-term tenures (less than three years) and did not intend to remain in the job. Generally, a tenure in excess of three

years usefully distinguishes long-term job-holders from their short-term counterparts who frequently relied on work visas of between one and three years. Using Adler and Adler's definition, we categorised job-holder attitudes as 'willing' if they held a positive attitude towards doing the job and 'unwilling' if they held a negative attitude towards doing the job. This framework of analysis is consistent with Holman's (2013) overall definition of job quality, which, he argues, involves the extent to which the job includes factors that foster positive subjective assessments by the employee, including positive attitudes.<sup>3</sup>

We examined room attendants' characteristics in order to help explain any differences in their subjective experiences compared to Adler and Adler's 'willingly trapped' room attendants. Our analysis revealed five key characteristics that shaped job-holders attitudes and tenures: qualifications (low-level or high-level); employment options (limited or broad); life-stage (early or mature); life-focus (career, family or pleasure); and status (local and/or (im)migrant) and, relatedly, job-holders' preferences, which shaped attitudes and tenures. Subsequently, our findings examine how workers' characteristics and preferences shaped job-holders experiences and perceptions.

#### **4. Findings**

Findings about the objective and subjective job quality of housekeeping work are presented sequentially. The latter sub-section includes our new, revised typology of workers, which provides insight into how worker characteristics and preferences mediate the objective and subjective dimensions of job quality.

##### ***4.1 Housekeeping Work and the Objective Dimensions of Job Quality***

The objective dimensions of job quality accord with the key themes identified in the literature: work organisation; skills and training; progression opportunities; and pay and benefits, which structure the presentation of findings in this sub-section.

###### ***4.1.1 Work Organisation***

In the UK and Australia, room attendants typically worked alone for long periods of the day. Room attendants' core task was the servicing of rooms, which involved vacuuming and dusting, cleaning bathrooms, re-stocking towels, tea and coffee, etc. and changing bed linen. In addition to core daily tasks, there were often additional tasks to be undertaken weekly by the room attendants. These tasks included cleaning bathroom doors or skirting boards, deep cleaning of bathroom tiles, pulling out and cleaning behind the beds, washing the paintwork and cleaning windows. Hotels had strict and detailed operating procedures for the servicing of rooms.

The target number of rooms to be cleaned varied across the UK hotels. In H4 and H1 the room attendants were expected to clean 14-16 rooms in an eight hour shift. Generally, room attendants stated that 14 rooms per shift was a tight target and messy and departure rooms required more time to clean, which disrupted their work schedules. In the Australian case hotels, room attendants had quotas of 12-14 rooms per 7.6 hour shift. The Executive Housekeeper at H5 indicated that 12 or 13 rooms formed the old standard used by five star hotels but many were increasingly pushing



quotas up to 14 rooms in order to reduce labour costs. On average, attendants required 30-32 minutes to clean a standard room.

#### *4.1.2 Skills and training*

Across the UK and Australian hotels it was recognised that there was little formal skill involved in working as a room attendant: ‘you don’t need skills to dust or Hoover you know’ said one room attendant (H4). Instead, it was suggested that it was more important to find somebody with the right personal qualities to do the job: good attention to detail, a good sense of hygiene and cleanliness, and physical stamina. A number of managers also highlighted that attendants require some interpersonal skills that allowed them to be friendly and polite if they met guests. All of the hotels offered training to new attendants, usually consisting of a half day or day. Training was on-the-job and consisted of technical elements and behavioural elements. New employees would either shadow or work alongside a more experienced room attendant, akin to a ‘buddy system’. Generally there was an expectation that room attendants would be competent within four weeks of starting; some were competent within two weeks however. In Australia, where TWA staff were used, they were trained by the TWA. This training abided by the brand standards and relevant policies of the specific hotel chain.

#### *4.1.3 Progression opportunities*

The departmental structure within hotel housekeeping was relatively flat in all hotels. The entry-level position was that of room attendant and most workers remained at this level. Supervisory positions existed in some but not all hotels and even in the largest hotels there were only between one and four supervisors. The executive housekeeper or manager was responsible for the department and it was rare for any other positions to exist in housekeeping. Given these flat structures, progression was limited in housekeeping but workers could transfer into other departments and front-of-house departments, such as food and beverage or reception, which tended to offer increased opportunities as more varied positions and job levels existed. As one general manager (H2) noted:

... if you’ve got absolutely no qualifications, you probably come in as a room attendant, and then most people if you are personable enough and have the skills to be front facing then you can easily transfer to front house and progress from here.

However, the reality was that few room attendants across the case studies were interested in advancement because of their domestic responsibilities. Others lacked the language skills that would enable them to cross departments and work in front-of-house jobs and their work availed little time to take up language training that would enable them to make that cross over.

#### *4.1.4 Pay and benefits*

In the UK, pay rates were similar across all of the hotels, typically at or just above (and increasingly driven by) the UK National Minimum Wage (NMW), which was £5.05 per hour at the time of data collection. The highest rates were paid by H1 (£6.20

per hour) because the parent company had a policy of paying above the NMW. This policy was developed in order to attract higher quality staff who would also be less inclined to leave. Room attendants were largely dissatisfied with the pay rates received: ‘the pay is crap’ one said bluntly. This problem was also acknowledged by the head housekeepers who highlighted the low pay, poor work and alternative opportunities:

I think it’s difficult to get the right people now ... people don’t want to come into the hotel industry ... I think it is all down to pay ... if you can sit in Tesco’s for £4.85 [the NMW in 2004-05] on your bum putting food through a scan then people are going to do that rather than physically bending down and moving beds and washing floors and stuff like that. (H1)

In Australia, the reactions of room attendants with respect to pay and benefits ranged from ‘the pay is terrible’ to an acceptance that it is ‘enough to live off’. The room attendants in the hotel sites examined received award-based rates of pay in accordance with the Federal hospitality award. The basic rate of pay was \$14.18 per hour for permanent staff and \$17.72 per hour for casual staff. While managers claimed that all of their staff received award-based rates of pay, some staff indicated that the use of room quotas could impact upon pay rates in some hotels relying on TWAs, pushing pay below the award rate if staff took longer to clean their allocated rooms than scheduled. At these hotels, 32 minutes was allowed for the cleaning of a standard room, so permanent and casual staff received \$7.56 and \$9.45 per room cleaned, respectively.

Other benefits offered to room attendants in the UK and Australia included membership schemes entitling staff to discounts on accommodation and food and beverage in their hotel chains various sites around the world. While staff recognised the value of such benefits they questioned their capacity to take advantage of them. In addition, the majority of hotels had an ‘employee of the month’ scheme that offered gifts or monetary rewards. Room attendants did sometimes receive tips and gifts from guests but such gratuities were minimal and infrequent. Non-financial benefits included provision of uniforms, free food and staff parties.

Overall, housekeeping jobs in upmarket hotels are thus objectively bad: involving hard work, low skill, little progression and low pay. These findings are consistent with those in existing literature on job quality within hotels’ housekeeping (e.g. Bernhardt et al. 2003, Vanselow et al. 2010, Wood 1997). Moreover, as with the literature, we found little variation in the objective dimensions of job quality across different national contexts as international hotel chains use standardised policies and procedures (for an explanation of consistency across national contexts see Vanselow et al. 2010). The next sub-section outlines workers’ subjective experiences and perceptions of these putatively ‘bad’ jobs and how differing subjective assessments were associated with different worker characteristics and preferences.

#### ***4.2 Housekeeping Workers and the Subjective Dimensions of Job Quality***

Based on Adler and Adler’s concepts of job-holder attitude towards doing the job (willing or unwilling) and job-holder tenure (trapped/long-term or transient/short-term) our analysis of housekeeping samples from London, Glasgow and Sydney

revealed four different categories of room attendant: ‘willing and trapped’; ‘willing and transient’; ‘unwilling and trapped’; and ‘unwilling and transient’. Given that room attending jobs are objectively ‘bad’ we attempt to explain why these jobs are experienced differently, even in some cases to be perceived as good jobs, by our different categories of workers. From this analysis we develop an understanding of how workers characteristics and preferences shape their subjective perceptions and experiences of room attending (see Table 2).

[Table 2 here]

#### 4.2.1 *‘Willing and Trapped’ Workers*

Job-holders with a willing attitude towards doing the job and a long-term tenure were ‘willing and trapped’ in room attending jobs. In London, these workers were local and (im)migrant women with young children and low-level qualifications. Housekeeping was a desirable job because it allowed working mothers to fit their working hours around childcare responsibilities. For example, one room attendant who had previously spent much of her working life in care work now worked in the hotel because in her previous job she was expected to do night shifts whereas at the hotel her working hours were aligned with her son’s school hours. In Glasgow, workers were also local, older female returners, often with limited education and little or no prior experience of working in hospitality. A number had previous work experience in factories or care work for example. As well as the hours suiting many interviewees because of childcare responsibilities they also talked about the nature of the job suiting them, ‘you are on your own basically ... and well you have got a time limit but it’s not like in a factory were they are over your shoulder all the time’ (H3). Thus, attendants valued the job autonomy offered.

In Australia, ‘willing and trapped’ workers were composed of (im)migrants and locals with similar characteristics to those in London and Glasgow. Again the job allowed these workers to prioritise their family responsibilities while also gaining enjoyment from their work, in this sense they were willingly trapped:

It is quick money and you don’t need a hell of a lot of experience and there is no stress. I go home and I don’t have to think about it again. I don’t really want extra responsibilities. Also, there is always something interesting going on here. My partner comes home from work and nothing ever changes but I always have something new and different to tell him about my day at work. I like that. (H6)

In effect, such workers were what Warhurst et al. (2009) term ‘prisoners of love’, constrained in internal and external labour markets by their domestic responsibilities. For example, one such worker described her work thus:

‘Willing and trapped’ workers tended to have very low rates of turnover. They were diligent workers who took pride in their work and paid attention to detail, and they were much sought after by housekeeping managers. Illustratively one Executive Housekeeper (H5) stated: ‘My ideal worker is 28 plus, married with children and a mortgage and they have to work because they have commitments.’

A mix of locals and (im)migrants, these ‘willing and trapped’ workers were women who viewed housekeeping as a desirable job, they possessed long-term job tenures and a desire to retain their job. These workers displayed distinct characteristics marked by minimal, if any, qualifications and employment options that were restricted to low level, elementary jobs. Additionally, such workers were at a settled, mature life-stage that was strongly family-focused, and they desired work that aligned with this focus.

#### 4.2.2 *‘Willing and Transient’ Workers*

Job-holders who had a willing attitude and a short-term tenure were ‘willing and transient’ workers. Such workers obtained jobs in housekeeping with the hope of being upwardly mobile into better jobs in internal or external labour markets. For example, a room attendant from Poland working in London who had a degree in economics was typical in recognising that ‘if I spend half a year in housekeeping I can move to another department ... my aspirations are much higher ... I don’t want to be cleaning for the rest of my life’ (H2). Having previously worked in a bank in Poland, she wanted a similar job in the UK. Often the reason given for working in London hotels was to improve their English and earn more money than they could in their home countries, which were frequently in Eastern Europe. The accession of their home countries to the EU enabled these workers to migrate easily to work in countries that offered higher wages. In addition to obtaining higher wages, these job-holders were willing to work in housekeeping because it would be for a finite period of time before returning home. Housekeeping work was easy to find, it had low entry requirements in terms of skill, and the job was relatively straight forward requiring little training. In some cases, room attendants took up such work as a means to further their career within the hotel industry. For instance, a Slovakian worker had moved from housekeeping to the bar, then to reception and, at the time of the research, was about to re-join housekeeping as a supervisor. Such workers regarded their jobs in housekeeping as a good opportunity to gain initial experience in the host country and a useful stepping-stone into the host labour market.

Similarly, in Australia ‘willing and transient’ workers consisted of relatively young workers seeking entry level jobs. The (im)migrant workers largely consisted of international students with visas that allowed them to work up to 20 hours per week while studying in Australia. Less commonly there were also domestic students. Housekeeping provided low entry and exit barrier jobs and ready income whilst completing university studies before returning home and/or gaining better, graduate-suitable work. Generally, these workers were unmarried and without dependents, making them highly mobile. They came from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. While some were working to support themselves during their studies (and sometimes also sending money home to support parents and/or siblings), others came from very wealthy backgrounds, with room attending being their first experience of work.

Generally, ‘willing and transient’ workers were motivated and hard-working, making them attractive to managers. However, their aspirations made them transient, which increased their turnover rates.

These workers had a range of qualifications. Some had low-level qualifications and a small proportion had high-level (tertiary) qualifications from their home country. Others were in the process of completing high-level tertiary qualifications, and/or improving their English proficiency, which would expand their employment options and facilitate career progression in the internal and external labour markets. Willing and transient workers were at an unsettled/mobile, early life-stage and they were career-focused. They were typically (im)migrants, though some were locals. Housekeeping was perceived to be attractive in the short term because it facilitated workers' transition into other work, which was their preference over the longer term.

#### 4.2.3 *'Unwilling and Trapped' Workers*

Workers who had an unwilling attitude and a long-term tenure were 'unwilling and trapped' in room attending jobs. It was common for these workers to express a preference for other, and particularly better, job opportunities but their employment options were restricted because they lacked recognized qualifications and experience. Full-time work, domestic commitments and a low income meant that it was near impossible to gain the additional qualifications or experience required to move into better jobs. Many of these workers had become resigned to the fact that room attending was their only option. Illustratively, a London room attendant (H2) described the unwilling and trapped predicament of her counterparts:

I know the people who are still working in the housekeeping ... they're still just speaking Polish between them and they just can't take another job because [of] their English and they are here already three years and you know nothing changed, they're complaining about the work and they're unhappy and upset ...

In both London and Sydney, 'unwilling and trapped' workers consisted of middle-aged (im)migrant women, typically married with children. In Australia, some possessed superior educational achievements and professional qualifications obtained in their country of origin but not recognized in Australia. These workers were unable to upgrade their qualifications in Australia because of the time/money involved: 'some of the women intended on upgrading their qualifications for Australia but they just get stuck in housekeeping, they get used to the job and never leave' said one Executive Housekeeper (H6). In other cases, women were working to support their families while their husbands upgraded their qualifications so that they could work in their chosen profession in Australia.

These workers were relatively hard working but their dissatisfaction with being unwillingly trapped affected their motivation and performance in relation to service quality standards. Consequently, compared to their 'willing' counterparts, they required more monitoring to ensure that quality standards were maintained. However, they were a relatively stable group of workers because they lacked alternative employment options.

'Unwilling and trapped' workers had minimal, low-level or unrecognised high-level, tertiary qualifications obtained in their country of origin, which restricted their employment options. They were at a mid-life stage and were career-focused but unable to progress their careers because of their family commitments and full-time

working hours. As a result of being ‘trapped’, they developed dissatisfied and unwilling attitudes towards the job. All of these workers were (im)migrants who expressed frustrated desires to obtain work consistent with their career-focused aspirations.

#### 4.2.4 *‘Unwilling and Transient’ Workers*

Job-holders who had an unwilling attitude and a short-term tenure were ‘unwilling and transient’ workers. These transient (im)migrants consisted of young people travelling around Australia, frequently gap year backpackers who were combining work with travel in order to fund further travel and adventure. Such workers were generally European or North American. Unwilling and transient workers tended to be relatively uncommon and have short tenures in housekeeping because they pursued more pleasurable, sociable jobs in other parts of the hotel/hospitality industry. These workers recognised that room attending was a ‘bad job’. As soon as they were able, they transferred to better jobs in hotels’ front-of-house or into other hospitality jobs in the external labour market. In almost all instances, they acquired work that paid more than room attending and offered superior conditions of employment. Since most of these workers were native or highly proficient English speakers and typically well-presented, it was not difficult for them to move on and find these better jobs front-of-house. These workers were also able to work the non-standard hours often required in other hotel/hospitality jobs as they did not have child-rearing responsibilities.

According to managers, ‘unwilling and transient’ workers were unreliable and lacked commitment, being far more interested in ‘partying and drinking’ (Executive Housekeeper, H7). Subsequently, these workers’ performance standards were less than ideal. Moreover, such workers inflated hotel absenteeism and turnover rates.

‘Unwilling and transient’ workers perceived housekeeping as an undesirable job and their tenures were short. Although they (currently) had low-level qualifications, they easily found better quality jobs in hotel front-of-house areas and other hospitality jobs, as a result of their early life-stage/lack of child rearing responsibilities and their ability to work at night and/or weekends, as well as their presentability and English proficiency. All of such workers were (im)migrants and they sought jobs that better aligned with their pleasure-focused lifestyles.

In sum, the four worker types illustrate how objectively bad jobs can be experienced differently. Subjectively, for ‘willing’ workers, housekeeping jobs are good because they align with their characteristics and preferences. For ‘willing and trapped’ workers room attending was perceived subjectively to be a ‘good job’ because it aligned with their life-stage and family-focus. For ‘willing and transient’ workers, room attending was also experienced positively because it was a transitory, short-term job that indirectly aligned with their career-focus by providing initial experience and/or an opportunity to improve English proficiency, thereby widening their longer-term employment options. In contrast, ‘unwilling’ workers subjectively perceived the job to be bad because it did not align with their characteristics or preferences. For ‘unwilling and trapped’ workers, room attending was subjectively a bad job because it blocked their longer-term career aspirations; they did not have other employment options or the opportunity to improve their qualifications because of their work and family commitments. For ‘unwilling and transient’ workers, room attending was

subjectively experienced as a bad job because it failed to align with their pleasure-focus. However they could obtain better jobs because they were mobile and in an early life-stage; they did not have family commitments and were therefore available to work during non-standard hours in other jobs that aligned more closely with their characteristics and preferences.

## **5 Discussion and Conclusions**

In the context of renewed interest in job quality, the starting point for this article was the contradiction in accounts of job quality in the hotel industry, particularly for room attendants. A consensus has emerged that these jobs are bad, with workers having a poor employment experience (e.g. Baum 2007, Lucas 2004, Vanselow 2010, Wood 1997). Research by Adler and Adler (2004) however offered these jobs as fulfilling, with contented workers. This contradiction resonates with accounts of job quality more generally. Existing research is frequently marked by dichotomous analyses that focus on either objective or subjective dimensions of job quality (Kalleberg et al. 2000). Some research attempts to enjoin the two but recognises that the potential mediator – thought to be worker characteristics – has yet to be adequately explored: it remains an important but unfinished task (Green et al. 2010, Holman 2013). Our research has attempted to address this task and provide better understanding of the articulation of objective and subjective dimensions of job quality and, with it, a new categorisation of job quality based on worker characteristics and, importantly, their preferences.

Our research in the UK and Australia confirms the dominant account of job quality in that room attendant jobs are objectively bad, as indicated by: work organisation; skills and training; progression opportunities; and pay and benefits. Our research also confirms that subjective experiences of these jobs can vary. Different workers in the same job can perceive that job to be bad or good. In the latter cases, therefore, our research also resonates with that of Adler and Adler (2004) and indicates that subjective assessments are informed by workers' characteristics and preferences. The significance of worker characteristics has been suggested as holding for job quality more generally (e.g. Holman 2013) and our findings provide valuable support in this respect. At the same time, we also reveal that worker preferences matter because they help explain how personal and contextual factors shape employees' experiences and perceptions of job types. The potential importance of preferences has been signalled by Brown et al. (2007) and our findings provide the valuable empirical support for their suggestion, while bringing together worker characteristics and preferences. Based on our findings for example, young female workers with similar potential and actual qualifications can have different experiences and perceptions of the same jobs because they have different needs from that job. In our sample, some workers expressed a preference for the job because it fitted around their family commitments; other workers expressed an aversion to the job because it did not complement their pleasure-focused social lives. Subjective assessments of job quality therefore depend on workers characteristics and preferences: who workers are as well as what they want.

This approach is useful for developing better understanding of different types of workers. In an attempt to incorporate workers' characteristics and preferences into their typology of workers, Adler and Adler combine and repeat categories. Their

typology includes four worker types: managers, seekers, locals and new immigrants. Some types, such as locals, combine unwillingly trapped and willingly trapped categories, while other types, namely new immigrants – which includes housekeeping staff – consists of a single willingly trapped category. As a consequence, and as our research demonstrates, their typology of workers is a useful but limited starting point. In contrast, our data focused specifically on housekeepers and include more diverse worker experiences and perceptions. This diversity allows us to reframe and revise Adler and Adler's typology by creating worker categories based on worker attitudes towards doing the job (willing or unwilling) and tenure (trapped or transient). The result is four discrete worker types/categories: 'willing and trapped', 'willing and transient', 'unwilling and trapped' and 'unwilling and transient'.

[Table 2 here]

Using this revised typology, we found workers who were 'willing and trapped' because their characteristics and preferences aligned with their work. These workers had low-level qualifications, limited employment opportunities, working hours that fitted around their caring responsibilities and low job-related stress/responsibility, which suited their settled, family-focused stage of life. Comparatively, 'willing and transient' workers were willing to do housekeeping because it served an important purpose for a limited period of time. Critically, they knew that they were not trapped; the job was, for them, transitory, and it suited their needs at a particular time in their life. These workers often had or were completing qualifications and housekeeping allowed them to earn 'easy' money and gain experience and/or improve their English. They saw housekeeping as a short-term job that enabled them to widen their employment options in the future and consequently it supported their career-focus. By contrast, 'unwilling' workers' characteristics and preferences did not align with their work, leading them to view their jobs in more traditional terms – as 'bad'. 'Unwilling and trapped' workers had jobs that they did not want to do and could not escape because of their characteristics and preferences. While these workers were career-focused their low-level or unrecognised (often high-level) qualifications, family responsibilities and long working hours blocked their ability to gain qualifications and progress their careers, which was their preference. In comparison, 'unwilling and transient' workers recognised that housekeeping was 'bad' work ill-suited to their pleasure-focus but they were able to move into 'better' jobs. Compared to their 'trapped' counterparts, these workers had more employment opportunities, they were at an earlier life-stage and lacked family responsibilities so they were willing and able to work non-standard hours in other ('better') hospitality jobs.

This revised typology is useful as it extends understanding of job quality generally. Although there is recognition that worker characteristics and, we have revealed, worker preferences, can subjectively mediate the experience and perceptions of objective job quality, conceptual development of the articulation has remained limited. As Savage and Burrows (2007) might suggest, through development of a broader descriptive typology, our research shows how the unfinished task of enjoining the objective and subjective dimensions of job quality can be achieved. This enables us to develop a new categorisation of job quality with wider application. Reconceptualising job quality in the way we propose illustrates how objectively bad jobs, including housekeeping jobs, can be assessed subjectively as fulfilling or unfulfilling, depending on who workers are and what they want. Thus, 'fulfilling bad



jobs' are objectively bad but they align with workers' characteristics and preferences, they are therefore 'fulfilling' jobs as a result of who workers are and what they want, as illustrated by our 'willingly trapped' and 'willingly transient' workers. In contrast, 'unfulfilling bad jobs' are objectively bad and they inadequately align with workers' characteristics and preferences, these jobs are therefore 'unfulfilling' because of who workers are and what they want, as illustrated by our 'unwillingly trapped' and 'unwillingly transient' workers. This categorisation of job quality provides a more nuanced and comprehensive account of job quality because it rightly maintains and incorporates the objective and subjective dimensions and shows how worker characteristics and preferences mediate the two.

This framing of job quality is inductive, generated from empirical research. As such, its predictive powers need to be tested empirically through deductive research. This future research, presumably of jobs beyond housekeeping, might thus test the categorisation above and, by extension, jobs which are objectively good and characterised as 'fulfilling good jobs' (subjectively and objectively good) or 'unfulfilling good jobs' (subjectively bad but objectively good) (see Figure 1).

[Figure 1 here]

These job quality categories – current or furthered – might be used to analyse and predict job quality outcomes, producing useful implications for managerial practice. We noted in our findings that the articulation of objective and subjective dimensions of job quality, mediated by workers' characteristics and preferences, impacted workplace practice – employee task application, manageability and turnover for example. Illustratively, 'willing and trapped' workers, who would be characterised as holding 'fulfilling bad jobs', are associated with more diligent working, low monitoring costs and low turnover and absenteeism, while 'unwilling and transient' workers, holding 'unfulfilling bad jobs', are associated with less diligent working, high monitoring costs and high turnover and absenteeism. Based on such evidence, it is possible to develop predictions regarding job quality and its outcomes – including employee performance/productivity, organisational performance and national economic indicators. More specifically, our findings lead us to predict that 'fulfilling bad jobs', which entail negative objective assessments and positive subjective assessments, would be associated with better outcomes than 'unfulfilling bad jobs', entailing negative objective and subjective assessments. By extension, we predict that 'fulfilling good jobs', which entail positive objective and subjective assessments, would be associated with better outcomes than 'unfulfilling good jobs', which entail positive objective assessments but negative subjective assessments.

As we suggest above, future research should operationalize and empirically analyse the robustness of our job quality categories across a wider range of jobs and job-holders. This research should include analysis of both objectively good and bad jobs as well as job-holders with different characteristics and preferences and subjectively positive and negative experiences and perceptions of these jobs. Drawing on quantitative methods and outcome measures such as job satisfaction, productivity, absenteeism, and turnover, future research should examine how our job quality categories affect outcomes in two ways. First, research must establish that there is a robust relationship between job quality categories and outcomes, for example, whether 'fulfilling bad jobs' are associated with better outcomes than 'unfulfilling bad

jobs' and whether 'fulfilling good jobs' are associated with better outcomes than 'unfulfilling good jobs'. Moreover, this research should examine if there is a clear and consistent relationship between each of the job quality categories and outcomes. For example, whether 'unfulfilling bad jobs' produce the worst outcomes, followed by 'fulfilling bad job', then 'unfulfilling good jobs' while 'fulfilling good jobs' produce the best outcomes. Second, research should examine how the job quality categories contribute to outcomes, including whether direct, indirect and/or interaction effects exist as well as the power/significance of these effects. To date, only correlations, not causations, have been established (e.g. Siebern-Thomas 2005). This research will extend the existing literature considerably by theoretically and empirically articulating the importance of the objective and subjective dimensions of job quality and their relative effects.

From this baseline research, there should then be further examination of the implications for managerial practice. Future research using the categories should examine how management responds to the problems and benefits inherent within each of the job quality categories. More specifically, research should seek to identify the different control strategies deployed, for example whether management imposes direct control or offers autonomy to employees (cf. Friedman 1977). This research should also examine how hiring strategies might be developed in order to maximise job quality outcomes. There is a well-developed literature of employee selection that signals the importance of person-job fit (e.g. Kristof-Brown et al. 2002). However this 'fit' literature has yet to be adequately applied to job quality research. Our findings suggest that greater analysis and integration of the person-job fit literature may prove beneficial in understanding and enhancing job quality and its outcomes in an applied manner by aligning job-holders and jobs.

Moreover ideas and initiatives centred on improving job quality and its outcomes (e.g. Osterman and Shulman 2011, Grimshaw et al. 2008) should use the information on objective and subjective assessments within the job quality categories to provide more targeted interventions. Illustratively, policy-makers and employers could enhance job quality and its outcomes by creating jobs possessing good objective characteristics and/or redesigning jobs with bad objective characteristics in order to improve work organisation, progression opportunities, and pay and benefits for example. Moreover, managers could play a stronger role in enhancing job-holders' subjective assessments of job quality by ensuring that workers' characteristics and preferences better align with the characteristics of the job. Within the hotels in our research for example, managers would realise superior work effort and outcomes, and reduced turnover costs if they paid greater attention to hiring workers with characteristics and preferences that align with the job.

Beyond these managerial implications and potential interventions, there is further conceptual development to be undertaken in relation to the subjective dimensions of job quality. For example, across all of our worker types, our findings suggest that life-stage plays a strong role in shaping subjective perceptions and experiences of job quality. The prominence of life-stage or life-course is an emerging theme in research of job quality (e.g. Cooke et al. 2013, Pocock et al. 2012) and our findings add further weight to this research direction. As yet however, this area of study has not been systematically researched. Application of our job quality categories would enable

more systematic analysis of workers' life-stage in order to extend knowledge of job-holders experiences and perceptions of job quality.

Our research has resolved the apparent contradiction in accounts of job quality in housekeeping/hotel jobs and, in reaching that resolution, refined Adler and Adler's work and developed a new typology of workers that illustrates and explains workers' differing subjective experiences of the same objectively 'bad job'. Subsequently, our article critically enhances understanding of job quality by creating a new job quality categorisation that takes account of the importance of both objective and subjective dimensions mediated by workers' characteristics and preferences. As a consequence, we have been able to develop a new understanding of housekeeping work specifically and job quality more generally and in doing so we have developed a new way of conceptualising job quality. The 'unfinished task' in understanding job quality is therefore now more complete though we appreciate that more research is still needed, and we have signalled what a new research agenda might comprise.

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**Table 1: The case study hotels**

Case study hotels	
UK	Australia
H1 Central London International chain	H5 Sydney International chain
H2 Greater London Independently owned group	H6 Sydney International chain
H3 Central Glasgow International chain	H7 Sydney International chain
H4 Greater Glasgow International chain	



**Table 2: Typology of Room Attendants**

<b>Worker Type and where found</b>	<b>Job-holder Attitude</b>	<b>Job-holder Tenure</b>	<b>Job-holder Characteristics and Preferences</b>
Willing and Trapped (Sydney, London and Glasgow)	Willing	Trapped	Low-level qualifications; Few employment options; Settled, mature; Family-focused; (Im)migrant and local Preference for work that aligns with family-focus
Willing and Transient (Sydney and London)	Willing	Transient	Mix of qualifications; Widening employment options; Mobile, young; Career-focused; (Im)migrant and local Preference for work that facilitates transitions over longer term
Unwilling and Trapped (Sydney and London)	Unwilling	Trapped	Low-level or unrecognised qualifications; Few employment options; Settled, mid-life; Career-focused; (Im)migrants Preference for work that aligns with career-focus
Unwilling and Transient (Sydney)	Unwilling	Transient	Low-level qualifications; Wider employment options; Mobile, young; Pleasure-focused; (Im)migrants Preference for work that aligns with pleasure-focus

**Figure 1: Job Quality Categorisation**

		Subjective Job Quality	
		+	-
Objective Job Quality	+	Fulfilling Good Jobs	Unfulfilling Good Jobs
	-	Fulfilling Bad Jobs	Unfulfilling Bad Jobs

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> It must be noted here that while job satisfaction is often used as a proxy for job quality, it is not the same thing (e.g. Green e al. 2010, Kalleberg 2011). The existing conflation of job satisfaction and job quality lends further credence to the importance of deepening understanding of job quality.

<sup>2</sup> Our emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> We note that Holman (2013) also included objective assessments, including employee health/wellbeing. We were unable to obtain objective measures of worker health/wellbeing as they were deemed by managers to be personal and confidential.