Executive Summary of Article

A pilot study involving 90 people aged 18-25 revealed that cleaning is perceived negatively by this age group, and less favourably than most other general occupations. This article considers if such attitudes and perceptions will result in recruitment and retention issues for the cleaning industry, and if anything can be done to remedy it.

Models from organisational psychology are discussed with a view to making the working environment and organisation for manual cleaners more attractive and satisfying. Issues of person-environment fit, effort-reward imbalance, and job-demand-control are described, along with potential solutions and considerations that could be applied to make more psychosocially-friendly environments for workers. The results of the pilot study are discussed in more detail, and the argument for improving the image of the cleaning industry is also put forward.

This article therefore suggests that by improving the psychosocial aspects of the organisation and working environment, employee retention could improve within the industry. Coupled with imaginative use of existing staff, more varied training, increased control over their work, and the introduction of multi-skilling, a culture of “zest for work” could be fostered. Zest for work and ambassadorship among employees is a seriously under-used resource, the utilization of which could result in increased worker satisfaction, improved attitudes and better public perception of the industry.
What is it about Cleaning?

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In the occupational health department of a university that I occasionally visit, staff recently had their photographs taken, and placed on a board for visitors to see. Upon seeing the photographs for the first time, I remarked to a colleague, “Even Irene the cleaner is up there”. Of course, as soon as I said it, I realised it was a stupid thing to say. After all, why shouldn’t she be? Besides, Irene was not so much “up there” with the rest of them, but actually at the bottom of the pyramid of photographs, on a row all to herself. This example speaks the obvious all too clearly, and poses some interesting questions. Why do we place cleaning personnel at the lower end of organisational hierarchies. Why do we view such workers as appendages, and blanket them with the term “support staff”? I suspect it is because it is inherent in human nature to never want to be at the bottom of the pile, and if there are cleaners, domestics, and other staff below us ordinary workers, then why should we question the system? If we do not begin to address the question soon, there may be a large–scale problem awaiting us all.

The historical aetiology of this present situation is still present today. Manual cleaners have often been marginalized in workplaces, required to perform their work very early or very late, outside of the working day, before or after the majority of personnel are on the premises. Such marginalization was made easier because such work was done by poor and lower class females – “marginalized tasks performed by marginalized people” according to Horsfield (1997). Daytime cleaning in workplaces may result in greater noise, disturbance and an increased risk-potential of accidents, while night time cleaning poses the added costs of heating, lighting and security for such staff. Keeping cleaners out of the way of other staff, and thereby making them an invisible workforce has naturally resulted in cleaners being viewed by people working regular hours personnel as being markedly different. Working such short hours at extreme ends of the working day may perpetuate the contract cleaning industry to continue employing part-time (National Insurance exempt) workers. However, if recruitment and retention problems continue in the cleaning industry, sourcing of a new labour force different from the traditional cleaning workforce may become a reality, and this may involve a majority of more costly day-workers and males who
may not be willing to work under current conditions. A more sensible option must be to use the currently available workforce more effectively.

Can organisational or occupational psychology help in this task? There is unfortunately little research looking at the well-being of manual cleaners. What there is usually concerns issues of musculoskeletal problems, respiratory problems from chemical and dust exposures or ergonomic principles. This picture does not appear likely to improve while such occupations are described as being “difficult to access” by research-funding bodies and academic researchers alike (Jackson and Kobrosy, 2003). Research investigating any psychological effects of cleaning work are even harder to find, yet this is surprising, as cleaning work appears to be an occupation that could be psychologically harmful – requiring hard work based around antisocial working hours, with little task variety.

As this book has clearly demonstrated, cleaning and the maintenance of impeccable hygiene is a central need in all layers of society. Maintaining hygiene standards will not be possible if there is nobody available or willing to do such work. And therein lies one of the first problems facing society - having people available to do cleaning work is not the same as having people who are willing to do such work. Upon closer inspection, this large scale problem is in fact several problems masquerading as one: Recruitment, Retention, and Skills.

That manual cleaning is hard and tiring work is not in contention, although the implementation of ergonomically tested equipment and standardised working practices can certainly make such work easier. There are many other demanding and tiring jobs, yet there does not appear to be recruitment or retention problems in those industries on par with those facing the cleaning industry. The application of some well-known models of human behaviour, used widely in organisational psychology can perhaps illuminate why such problems exist for the cleaning industry, and more importantly, what can be done to remedy the situation. These models can explain how psychological distress or unhappiness arising from some jobs has the capacity to create harm, either physical, psychological, or both. Important factors to remember are the demands that are placed upon workers, how much control and freedom they then have to meet those demands, and how much support they receive.
(i) Person-Environment Fit Model
This model focuses on the particular characteristics of individual workers – such as personality type, behavioural responses or even likes and dislikes – and aspects of their work environment, and how the two interact. More importantly, this attempts to ensure that the demands of work are appropriately matched with employee’s vocational and health abilities. Not matching workers’ abilities with the right job has been demonstrated to have detrimental effects to productivity and workplace contentment (Kristoff-Brown, 2000). The goal of this model is to create cohesive work organisations made of workers who feel their abilities are understood and valued – but actually getting this to work in a practical setting can be a paradox for most modern management styles. How can job-person fit be encouraged while also attempting to maximise worker variability and mixing of skills?

(ii) Reward-Effort Imbalance Model
Siegrist’s model of effort–reward imbalance (ERI), relates to the perceived balance between effort spent by workers and the reward they receive. Work environments which require high effort from employees relative to a low level of reward (high cost vs. low reward) are shown to increase the likelihood of worker ill-health (1996). It is also sensible to believe that such high-effort and low-reward jobs reduce the likelihood of recruitment and retention. The concepts of effort and reward can be hypothesised to work separately from each other, and that other psychosocial factors such as social support from colleagues and employment grade may reduce any negative effects of such work.

(iii) Job Demand, Control and Support Model
Karasek’s (1979) models of stress, and subsequent updates, are still relevant to contemporary workplaces today. Working environments make demands of workers, and those workers need to meet those demands as best they can with the tools they have access to, and their own abilities. Psychosocial stress is usually low in workers who have a fair balance between the demands placed upon them and their abilities to meet those demands, and this usually results in optimum productivity and worker satisfaction. Should such demands outreach workers’ abilities, stress is usually one of the results – with the amount or severity of stress experienced usually comparable with the size of the imbalance between what workers are required to do and what they
can actually do. Individual differences among people often moderates how well some workers do or do not cope with such stress, and why not every worker is affected by stress in the same way. It must be remembered that workers are not always aware when they may be suffering the effects of any such demand-related stress, and they may be “soldiering on” unaware of a drop in their efficiency or abilities. Importantly for the cleaning industry, it must be remembered that monotonous or repetitive work can also result in stress among those workers who are easily able to cope with such demands – and that as such, boredom and lack of challenge can be just as stress-inducing as not being able to cope with pressure.

It is important to also acknowledge that for workers, having enough control and freedom in deciding how to meet demands is integral to their coping. Traditionally, highly demanding jobs which allow workers little choice in how to do their work are those which have higher levels of psychological distress and physical illness. However, a further distinction in this concerns how much support workers feel they have from colleagues, management and their peers. This concept acknowledges that the most psychologically stressful workplace scenarios usually involve high demands, limited worker control, and little support. There will always be individuals in any occupation and organisation, for whom particular demands can be too much, but on the whole, allowing workers greater levels of autonomy can help them tolerate greater demands.

**Zest for Work**

Many studies focus on the relationship between poor psychosocial working conditions and health problems in various workforces. Ways to counter any negative effects of poor working environments can also be directed directly at the workforce – increasing positive thinking and happiness among workers can have benefits in reducing health complaints and sickness absence. Employee-targeted interventions have a better chance of succeeding if the workforce is receptive to such interventions. Receptive workers tend to have what is known as a “zest for work”, are young, recent recruits, often college educated, and are happy to be ambassadors who speak well of their job and employers. Some evidence suggests a link between company size and zest – with larger companies being more likely to have employees who are “ambassadors” (Global Employee Commitment Report, 2002). It is estimated that 35% of the
workforce admit to low levels of commitment to their job and employer, suggesting
more than a third of companies fail to get the most out of their workforce. It is
generally accepted that workers in the cleaning industry tend to be from the less
educated and career motivated sectors of society, and if staff entering the cleaning
industry do not fit the typical profile of workers who have a zest for work, could a
way be devised to foster a zest for work in this occupational group? Improvement of
the job would seem to be the likeliest option.

**Improving the lot of Cleaners**

So in essence, the cleaning industry has two distinct problems. First, how to improve
recruitment into the industry, not just in terms of numbers of people entering, but also
their skills and abilities. Second, how to retain the most skilful and robust of workers.
The answer to these two distinct issues both lie in making the jobs done by manual
cleaners more interesting, varied, autonomous and dignified. Adherence to the
principles of (i) person-environment fit (ii) effort-reward balance, and (iii) demand-
control-support can provide a tangible and perhaps long-lasting difference to
recruitment and retention into the industry. It is not always possible or even practical
to modify working environments and organisations in order to make them
psychosocially-friendly for workers, but whenever it is feasible, it should be seriously
considered. Factors understood to be important in worker satisfaction (and ultimately
retention) include:

- Reasonable possibility of career progression and loyalty rewards
- Ergonomic design of spaces and equipment
- Fair and sympathetic organisational structure
- Useable and reliable technology and equipment
- Consultation about workplace changes
- Ability to balance work-demands with home-demands
- Reduction of perceived dangers
- Comfortable temperature, noise and lighting levels
- Ability to commute (times, distance, cost, fit in with home-demands)
- Job task variability, control, choice and even artistry
- Positive and supportive work relationships with colleagues and managers
- Clearly defined work roles, free of conflicts or ambiguity
Below are some evidence-based suggestions that could help cleaning work meet the principals of the three organisational models (Crawford and Jackson 2002):

- Change worker perceptions about the importance and value of their work
- Make job and core skills more varied
- Give greater range of skills (beyond basic training)
- More support from managers
- Encourage peer / colleague support and cohesion
- Give workers feelings of greater control (can cope with greater demands)
- Match demands carefully to individual abilities when possible (person-job fit)
- Encourage / recruit workers with positive personalities and zest for life & work
- Encourage worker consultation for any workplace change

**Attitudinal Survey Towards Cleaning**

Why does there seem to be a shortage of people, especially younger workers, entering into the manual cleaning trade? The Labour Market Assessment recognised a recruitment problem emerging within the cleaning industry as early as 1996. Evidence also suggests that part-time positions are also becoming harder to fill (Cleaning Industry NTO, 2001).

This could be summarised by saying that fewer people are prepared to do cleaning work – especially in industrialised societies captivated by image and glamour, and in a celebrity-obsessed pro-teenage society, there is less cache than ever before in cleaning for other people. But exactly how unpopular is cleaning with younger workers?

According to some small-scale pilot research conducted with this the 18-25 age group, it appears that the manual cleaning industry is facing a growing problem; image. Ninety individuals were asked their opinions about cleaning work by a researcher. Individual respondents were sampled on an opportunistic basis, in a busy city-centre district of Birmingham, in July 2003. Of the sample, 66 (73%) were female, and 24 (27%) were male. The mean age of the sample was 22.5 years ± 2.2
years. The minimum age was 18 years, and the maximum was 25. Females were on average 22.5 years old, and the males were on average 22.8 years old, with no significant difference in age between the sexes (P=0.45).

The analysis of the pilot data revealed that cleaning, as an occupation, is perceived negatively by the under 25 year old age group. In comparison with other occupations, it is perceived less favourably than work as a shop or sales assistant, supermarket work, and even care home / care assistant work. However, cleaning work was perceived as being preferable to working as an undertaker or bus driver. Such negative perceptions did not vary between males and females, or between those who were above or below 21 years of age in the sample. As the age of respondents increased, no change in their perceived undesirability of cleaning was observed.

The reasons given why cleaning work was perceived as undesirable were: badly paid (76%), other peoples’ attitudes (69%), the image (63%), dirt and grime (49%), hard work (49%), antisocial hours (38%), no job security (38%), no job freedom (34%), the locations (27%), the uniforms (20%), other cleaners (18%), and injury (17%). That injury should feature less than all other potential negative attributes is interesting. This could either be a reflection of perceived invincibility of the young age group who may not consider occupational injuries to be of concern to them, or due to a genuine lack of knowledge in the sample concerning the potential health hazards involved in some manual cleaning work.

Job-specific reasons such as “dirt and grime”, “hard work”, “antisocial hours”, and “no job security” were only the 4th – 7th most popular reasons of undesirability; this suggests that the actual work conditions of cleaning are not as undesirable to respondents as the image and status of the job, which were more common sources of undesirability.

Some sex differences were observed concerning those factors which make cleaning undesirable. Males indicated significantly more than females their concerns about being “Badly paid”, “The uniform” and “No job security”. The difference in these three factors between the sexes may be reflective of general male attitudes in society towards gender-specific occupations. The pay-off for males performing a traditionally
held female role may have to be greater (than for females) in order to compensate for doing such work. With regard to cleaning work at least, it could be argued that males may require improvements in these three key areas before cleaning work could be considered as an occupational choice as equally as other jobs.

In summary, cleaning work suffers from a negative image among the 18 to 25 age group, and is viewed especially poorly in comparison with other general occupations. Perceptions of poor pay, the all round image of cleaning personnel and the value of the work they do could be improved as a way of combating the negative image of cleaning as an occupation.

**Changing Attitudes to Cleaners**

The results of the small-scale pilot study reported here have shown clearly that under 25’s rate cleaning work extremely negatively, irrespective of sex. The most frequent reasons given for the undesirability included perceptions of being badly paid, other peoples’ attitudes, and the image of cleaning. It could be suggested that the frequency of such reasons may equate to young people being extremely image conscious and placing large value on the opinions of peers and other people. This may represent a paradox for recruitment into the cleaning industry – How is it possible to recruit sizeable numbers of young people into an industry with such low status, when those potential recruits place high value on status and prestige? The answer to this problem lies somewhere in the realm of attitude change – making cleaning a better profession will be of limited value if the public perceptions of the occupation do not change accordingly.

Can cleaning be “spun” into a profession that possess societal cache and dignity? Changing the job titles of cleaning staff to more fanciful ones is a post-modern trick that the public are wise to, and such manoeuvres often meet with derision in a spin-saturated and savvy society. Changing attitudes involves more than merely changing names and labels. A more in-depth re-evaluation of cleaners and the work they do is required. In Japan, cleaners go door to door, and offer their services (for free) to anyone who needs them. Although an economic impossibility, the idea of going door to door and cleaning for people is a good abstraction, also adding a quiet dignity to
the profession, but more importantly it shows that different attitudes to cleaning do exist and can perhaps be achieved in the West.

Another important point that the cleaning industry must address is the sexual equality issue. As long as cleaning is seen by society to be women’s work, there will be a recruitment and retention issue, to some extent, for some male employees. Such views are deeply entrenched and plainly inaccurate, as anyone with cleaning experience will testify that it is hard labour, requiring some strength. This deeply entrenched view of what society thinks is women’s work was highlighted by Rafkin (1998) “Many days I’ve questioned why there's no space for a vacuum between the toilet and the wall. Is it because men like women on their knees?”.

Why should the profession stay marginalized and unseen? Doing so certainly does not help the professional cause of the industry. The best way to change public attitudes would be to make cleaning staff more visible and present in peoples’ consciousness. Increasing the everyday awareness of cleaners and the importance of what they (can) do would certainly be at the heart of any attempt at changing public perceptions. Perhaps the key to this lies within zest for work and ambassadorship as discussed earlier. Satisfied and content cleaners who are multi-skilled and who can multi-task would certainly be good ambassadors for the industry. Such personnel would be more highly visible, be more readily utilised, and be more useful by virtue that they are responsible for more than cleaning, but also maintenance and janitorship. According to Chris Cracknell of OCS “there has always been some element of multi-skilling in the cleaning industry, but now we’re trying to push it forward”. A contract army of such multi-skilled staff would surely be recognised as a benefit to any company, rather than a necessary expense. In deliberately “blurring the boundaries” between cleaning and other tasks, multi-skilling holds a very important role for OCS.

A trivial point perhaps, but why have cleaning uniforms remained so un-evolved, when other professions routinely seem to develop their worker apparel. Of course the answer lies in marginalization. But is it about time that the high-visibility jacket or coat should be introduced to cleaning personnel – as it has been with almost every other profession that interacts with members of the public. Why stop at visi-jackets. Cleaning personnel require Personal Protective Equipment, which can serve the
double purpose of protecting the worker but also promoting his or her professionalism to members of the public. With approximately 800,000 people working in the cleaning industry, according to Martin Vesey of the Cleaning and Support Services Association (CSSA), this would be a large-scale advertisement for the profession.

The idea of high visibility professional cleaning could certainly be systematically be employed as a tool to aid in the slow erosion of the publics’ negative, or at best, neutral perceptions of cleaners. Chris Cracknell again, “Daytime cleaning gives the cleaner a face and they are no longer invisible.” An army of 800,000 or more highly visible full-time ambassadors would be a credit to the industry.
References


Labour Market Assessment – Cleaning and Support Services Industry, CSSAITO. 1996.


