



Worker Voices in the Hand Car Wash Sector

Director of Labour Market Enforcement

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Contents

1	Introduction and method	4
	Background and research objectives	4
	Characteristics and trends	4
	Methods	5

2	Worker voices in hand car washes – case studies	8
3	Summary	21

Disclaimer:

This article represents independent research that was commissioned by the Director of Labour Market Enforcement in February 2020, to inform his Annual Strategy 2020/21.

Fieldwork took place in March 2020, during the very early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and prior to its full impact on the labour market. Nevertheless, issues raised in this research continue to be pertinent and provide an important insight into worker voices in this sector.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the official views, policy or position of the Director or any agency of HM Government.

1 Introduction and method

Background and research objectives

This report presents case illustrations from research commissioned by the Office for the Director of Labour Market Enforcement (ODLME) to explore experiences of working in the hand car wash sector today. The accounts given in this research are intended to help inform the evidence base for the Director's Labour Market Enforcement (LME) Strategy 2020/21. This research, alongside three complementary studies on the agriculture, social care and construction sectors, capture the stories and perspectives of workers in sectors at risk of exploitation.

The hand car wash (HCW) industry is a key area of focus for the ODLME. In the Director's 2019/20 LME strategy, the sector was identified as having a high risk of labour market exploitation, with workers at risk of experiencing issues such as low pay or other non-compliance on the part of their employer. The sector has been described as one in which "vulnerable workers are being exploited, in some cases indicative of modern slavery. Many more in the sector are also not receiving National Minimum Wage (NMW)".¹

While the ODLME has evidence to suggest that workers in the hand car wash sector are at increased risk of exploitation, they wanted to better understand the experiences of workers in the sector. IFF Research were commissioned to carry out qualitative research, to speak to a small number of workers in depth about their experiences of working in this sector. The evidence derived from this work complements information received from other sources to feed into the Director's 2020/21 annual Strategy. Specifically, the research explores:

- How the worker first got into the sector (including what their lives were like when they sought employment in the sector, where they got the idea from to work in this sector, who found them employment etc.);
- What their job is like day to day (e.g., in terms of hours worked, pay, conditions, what they like/don't like about the work, how they feel about working in this sector);
- Awareness and understanding of their employment rights and whether or not they have suffered any labour violations in current or previous roles and, if so, have sought recourse to justice, or whether they were aware of other workers who had had such experiences; and
- How they view their future (for example, whether they are planning to remain working in this sector).

The results presented in the report are not designed to be representative, but instead provide case studies and real-life examples of the reality for people working in the sector.

Characteristics and trends

There is currently no business population data that accurately records the number of hand car washes in the UK, as there are many unregistered businesses. There has been an increase in cheap unskilled labour with the expansion of the EU into Eastern Europe and many hand car washes are understood

¹ODLME (2019) *UK Labour Market Enforcement Strategy 2019 to 2020*

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/819014/UK_L_about_Market_Enforcement_Strategy_2019_to_2020-full_report.pdf

to be owned and operated by Eastern European migrants.² The structure and composition of the UK car wash industry has changed drastically over the past ten to fifteen years. Many hand car washes have opened on disused or derelict sites along the road in derelict petrol stations, car washes, pubs, closed restaurants or disused land.³ They are frequently found near roundabouts or supermarkets where there are high volumes of traffic.

The business model relies on cash transactions and informal employment relations which can outcompete machine washes on price. It is likely that HCWs undercut mechanised washes. The Safe Car Wash App has identified HCWs charging as little as £5 for an exterior clean which is half the price of a mechanised wash.⁴ There are however some more expensive hand car washes that offer a more luxurious service, as demonstrated by our interviews with workers in the sector. The cost of these can be much higher, one worker indicated costs can reach up to around £65. Among our interviewees these were one-person business with the ability to travel to customers.

Methods

Qualitative interviews were conducted with workers in the hand car wash sector to explore their experiences of working in the sector. This section outlines the approaches taken and challenges recruiting and interviewing workers in the hand car wash sector.

Identification of and access to workers in sector

We partnered with an experienced recruitment agency, specialising in the recruitment of harder to reach groups, and this was used as the primary recruitment method to source workers to take part in the research. Our recruitment partner was tasked to recruit a range of HCW workers, including a focus on non-UK workers.

A recruitment screener was used to ensure workers were suitable to take part in the research and to monitor the demographic and employment profile of participants. Any significant quotas would have impacted on our ability to recruit, therefore we aimed for the best mix of worker types possible, with respect to the following:

- Age (16+), gender, UK/EU nationals
- Mix of contract type and hours worked
- Type of HCW – official vs. unofficial

Whilst we had some initial success through our recruiter (recruiting four of our interviewees), the workers we were able to recruit were primarily UK workers working in official HCWs or who were self-employed. Whilst these workers had a valid and genuine experience of the HCW sector, it was within a narrow segment of the sector. Therefore, the recruitment approach was widened aiming to capture the experiences of non-UK workers, and those working in “unofficial” HCWs.

² University of Nottingham Rights Lab and the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (2018) *Labour exploitation in hand car washes*. <https://www.antislaverycommissioner.co.uk/media/1238/labour-exploitation-in-hand-car-washes.pdf>

³ Clark, I. and Colling, T. (2019) New insights into informal migrant employment: Hand car washes in a mid-sized English city, *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, Vol. 40 (3), p755-775. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0143831X16669840>

⁴ University of Nottingham Rights Lab (2019) *The Safe Car Wash App Report*. <https://www.theclewerinitiative.org/s/Safe-Car-Wash-App-FINAL-March-2019.pdf>

Desk research was undertaken to identify the location of HCWs in London, with recruiters then calling sites to see if interviews could be arranged. This approach, however, was unsuccessful, with sites either not answering the phone or not having any interest in taking part.

Recruitment was also supplemented by social media posts (by a trusted individual) in several local community groups (Swindon, Bracknell, Reading and Oxfordshire) popular with Hungarians. This led to one interview with a worker originally from Hungary, however it was felt that a further push for recruitment among these social media groups wouldn't be useful based on the feedback given by group members that HCWs tend now to be controlled by Albanians and Romanians.

'Snowballing' techniques were also attempted, whereby workers who had agreed to participate were also asked whether they knew of any friends or relatives working in the HCW industry. Unfortunately, this did not lead to any interviews. Our non-UK worker did not provide further contacts despite initial indications this was possible, and our UK workers had no crossover in their work with non-UK workers working in the sector.

We also pursued a "warm lead" provided by ODLME in the hope of providing access to HCW workers, but this was ultimately unsuccessful. As was seen with the agriculture research, warm intermediaries can help play an important role in getting an initial "footing" in the relevant communities for research with niche worker groups, which will warrant consideration for any future research in terms of how stakeholders can be engaged to help facilitate access.

Critically, recruitment and data collection took place in late February and March, which coincided with the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, with lockdown beginning on the 23rd March 2020. During the later stages of recruitment we had planned to follow up the earlier desk research and visit a number of sites in person to see if any workers could be recruited face-to-face, and from there snowball (as was done for the Clark and Colling study⁵). However, as 'social distancing' was introduced and lockdown began, it was unfeasible to pursue this approach.

For all respondents who did participate, an information sheet was developed to inform potential participants about the research and provided a point of contact for queries or to confirm participation.

All potential participants were offered a financial incentive of £40 for their time and participation in the research.

Topic guide

A semi-structured topic guide was developed and agreed with ODLME in advance of fieldwork. The topic guide was built on existing research into worker experiences in the warehousing⁶ and restaurant⁷ sectors, and covered the following themes:

- Background, current living and family situation;
- How they first got into the hand car wash sector and their current employment situation;

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ IFF Research (2019) *UK warehousing sector and the worker-employer relationship*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/814589/Warehousing_Sector_Director_of_labour_market_enforcement_July_2019_IFF_research.pdf

⁷ IFF Research (2019) *UK restaurant sector and the worker-employer relationship*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/814592/Restaurant_Sector_Director_of_labour_market_enforcement_July_2019_IFF_research.pdf

- Their experiences at work;
- Understanding of their employment rights;
- Understanding of potential sources of information and support; and
- Aspirations for the future.

The topic guide also included a list of resources and helplines, should the participant raise any concerns and request any advice or support.

All interviews were carried out by experienced qualitative researchers.

Interview format and length

Participants had the option to take part in the qualitative interview either by telephone or face-to-face. All participants chose to take part via telephone, it is not clear if this was down to respondent preference or concerns around COVID-19 and 'social distancing'. Of the 5 interviews completed, all were carried out in English.

Interviews lasted up to 60 minutes and were recorded with the consent of the participant. Interviews were written up by the interviewer from the recording. An analysis session took place with the research team to discuss the findings.

Participant profile

Overall, interviews with 5 HCW workers were completed. The demographic profile is shown below in Table 1.1, all workers were male, with a mix of ages. One non-UK worker was interviewed for the project.

Table 1.1 Demographic profile of participants:

Respondent	Gender	Age	Nationality	Employment type	Main source of household income	Raised an issue about working conditions
Simon	Male	47	UK Citizen	Self-employed	Yes	No
Russ	Male	Unknown	UK Citizen	Self-employed	Yes	No
Ben	Male	37	UK Citizen	Self-employed	Yes	No
Charles	Male	Unknown	UK Citizen	Uncontracted	Yes	No
Zoltan	Male	Unknown	EU Citizen	Uncontracted	Yes	No

The following section provides detailed case studies of the experiences of each worker from the hand car wash sector. To protect the anonymity of research participants, each person has been given a pseudonym and some details have been altered. As noted earlier, there were a number of challenges to recruitment during this project. Therefore, due to the limited number of interviews achieved, no summary of key themes is provided in this report.

2 Worker voices in hand car washes – case studies



Simon – Mobile car valeter

Age: 47

Nationality: UK Citizen

Time working in sector: 12 years (intermittently)

Status: Self-employed

Getting into the sector

Simon is in his mid-40s, he grew up in the North of England, and now lives in the South East with his wife and two teenage children. He left school without any qualifications, and initially worked in the rail industry before working in the hand car wash trade. Simon has worked in the hand car wash trade on and off, for about 12 years.

Simon runs his own mobile valeting firm which he set up on his own. Prior to setting up his own mobile business, Simon worked in a warehouse hand car wash. His previous boss suggested that he join him in his own car valeting business, which he did for a while. Simon found the cost of renting the van to be too expensive, so he decided to set up his own mobile car valeting firm.

Working in the hand car wash sector

Simon's role involves servicing business and private residential cars. During the week, he typically services business cars on trading estates and business parks. On the weekends, he services private residential customers, on site near their home.

Simon travels to the client's location, whether that be at their workplace or their home. Depending on the location, he may move the cars so that there is more space for him to carry out his work. Simon provides set services, such as a mini valet or a wash. Work tends to include the following: washing and cleaning the inside and outside of cars, vacuuming, and shampooing.

The working day typically starts between 7am and 9am with a typical finish time between 3pm and 5.30pm. Travel time varies on which clients he is servicing each week; on average he travels about 10 to 20 miles per day. As a self-employed worker, Simon sets his own holiday days. He takes time off for holidays and public holidays which in total is about 2 to 3 weeks off a year. He also works around his family commitments.

Simon is often provided with access to the facilities on his clients' site for business clients, for example they will give him the keys to the business so he can use the bathroom and make refreshments.

Simon enjoys working for himself, as he can set his own hours and work at his own pace, which he feels offers him a good quality of life. Simon also likes working outdoors in the warm summer months (and less so in winter).

"I can please myself; I can relax and do the cars how I want to do them; I don't have a boss looking over me."

Employment status, pay and conditions

Simon is self-employed. He does not have a written contract with any of his clients, although he does have a verbal agreement in place about how often he will service the cars and what service he will provide. For his regular customers, particularly business clients, he will service their cars on a two- or three-week basis. Simon has received health and safety information from his business clients, covering health and safety while on their premises.

Simon feels safe in his line of work and feels comfortable to decline any work he does not want to do. He reports a positive relationship with his clients, some of whom he has known for a long time. He notes that some clients can sometimes like more to be done to their car than what they have agreed for the price, for example cleaning the seats. However, he feels that it works out even, as sometimes he does less for them and still gets paid the same amount. Simon feels if there was an issue, for example, if a client claimed he had damaged their car, he would feel comfortable seeking advice, although he notes he has not encountered this.

“I don’t feel unsafe, it’s a good job to be in, when you’re self-employed, if you don’t like doing a job you can put it off and do it later, not forced to do things I don’t like, get your set customers, do all my regulars before any new work.”

Simon is aware that the pay can be low in the hand car wash industry, especially in settings such as old petrol stations. For example, the business may not receive enough custom in order to pay their staff members the minimum wage.

Simon said that a lot of workplace rights do not currently apply to him, such as paid holidays, as he is self-employed. However, when working previously as an employee in a car wash firm, Simon’s boss asked him to set up his own company so he would have to manage his own tax and then go through his boss’s account: *“it was like ‘you pay me this and I will give you this’*”. At this workplace, he didn’t have a contract to cover this, so the rules could be subject to change over time.

Simon is aware of hand car washes nearby that have multiple sites and staff are asked to move at short notice, working in London some days and then Hertfordshire the next. However, he thinks the employees are told in advance that they will be moving around and know where they are going to be.

“For example, if they have 20 people working in a car wash with only 5 cars [serviced] so they are not all going to get paid a lot, and there’s a lot of that in different areas, but I don’t know enough people to know this for sure.”

The future

Simon is positive about his role as a mobile car valet and can see himself doing this line of work for the next 10 years. In the future, he would like to build up his business and employ another person.

“I think it’s quite a good one, for me I get my own independence, get hours to suit to me, I don’t know about other car washes but I’m flexible with time off. I think it’s a great industry to be, you know where you are going each week and what you will get paid, in the summer it’s a beautiful job to be in, all in all I love it.”



Russ – Hand car washer

Age: Unknown

Nationality: UK Citizen

Time working in sector: 30 years

Status: Self-employed

Getting into the sector

Russ grew up in West Yorkshire and has lived there all his life. After leaving school at 16, he briefly took a job in sales before taking on full-time work at a Ford dealership as a valet. After a year working at the dealership, Russ decided to set up his own business and has now been self-employed for 30 years running his car valeting service. Russ lives alone currently, with his two children now studying at university.

Russ' decision to get into the sector was of his own accord, and he has no friends or family who work in hand car washing in his local area.

Working in the hand car wash sector

Russ' business consists of providing car washing and valeting services with his own equipment that he carries in the back of his car. He offers a mobile service and drives to clients who have booked him, which are all generally based locally to his home. Over the years, he has built up a regular client portfolio and visits some weekly or monthly. He is a sole trader and completely in control of the hours he works: there is no typical day, which he thinks keeps things interesting. Generally, his first client will be booked in from 9am and he will go from job to job until around 4pm to 5pm, depending on where his last booking is located.

Russ enjoys getting to know his clients, and although he has set up his own website, he tends to get new clients via word of mouth recommendations from his long-standing and loyal customers. He likes meeting different types of people and the fact that he is not stuck in one place every day like a unit or garage. As he drives from client to client, he also has plenty of times for breaks.

Russ' business offers internal and external valeting, with different levels of service provided dependent upon the clients wishes. A full valet can take between 3 and 4 hours, which would include a full polish of the car, so it looks "*as good as new*", whilst a partial valet takes around an hour.

Russ has noticed that the service his customers want has changed throughout his time in the sector. Whilst when he first began his own business "*everyone wanted a full valet*". The rise in hand car washing companies has meant that the rates charged are getting cheaper and cheaper in order to beat the competition. Russ knows companies that offer a £5 valet but believes that his clients value the quality of his work and so he will spend at least an hour on each car, for a £25 mini valet. He charges £65 for a 3-hour full valet, and more if the job takes longer than 3 hours.

Given Russ' focus on quality, his clients often are quite wealthy, and he enjoys working on "*posh cars, which are nice to clean*". Although overall, he likes the work he does, Russ finds he gets much more enjoyment working with repeat clients who tend to care about the condition of their car. He gets satisfaction from making a visible difference to the car and finds that it's difficult to do that with more 'ad-hoc' clients.

“With a one-off valet booking where someone has found me on the internet and it’s a run-of-the –mill car with kids, dogs, smoking etc. It is hard to make these look like new.”

Russ also finds that working in all weather conditions can be the most difficult part of the job. When the weather is really bad, he has an arrangement with a car dealer to support him with some of the work.

As a self-employed sole trader for over 30 years, Russ hasn’t experienced any issues of mistreatment at work, and cannot remember if this occurred when he was employed. Thinking about the hand car wash industry overall, Russ hasn’t heard about workers being mistreated by their employers but does know that there are a lot of Polish workers in the industry, and they may have a different view.

He feels that if a client had an issue with the work he had done, that he *“would keep on doing it till they were”*. He’s heard of people *“trying it on”* to get a free car wash, but this has never happened to him. Russ thinks if he ever had an issue with a client, he would feel comfortable addressing it with them personally, and wouldn’t seek any external support.

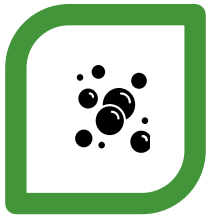
Employment status, pay and conditions

Although Russ’ hours are flexible, he tends to work around 38 to 40 hours a week, including travel, Monday to Friday and from 9am to 1pm on Saturday. His hours vary seasonally, and he will work longer hours in the summer to account for days he had to finish early due to poor weather in the winter.

Russ pays himself from client fees at an average rate of around £20 an hour. Being self-employed Russ provides his own personal protective equipment, but as he does not use any chemicals to clean cars, he feels overalls are the only thing he needs for his personal safety. Any electrical equipment he owns is fully tested, and he has his own business insurance and personal liability insurance. Russ acknowledges that he *“could wear goggles”* for his work, but thinks ultimately, they are unnecessary as he’s not spraying water near his face.

The future

Russ likes his job and is happy continuing as a sole trader. Over 15 years ago, Russ did take on another employee but had issues with them not turning up for work, and in general he was worried about getting enough work to account for having an employee. Since that point he decided to work alone and will continue this way.



Zoltan – Car washer and valeter

Age: 47

Nationality: UK Citizen

Time working in sector: 5 years (2007-2012)

Status: Employee (no written contract)

Background

Zoltan currently works in a factory in Berkshire where he lives with his wife and son. Qualified in a skilled trade he worked for a large company in Hungary before deciding to join a friend who was very keen to move to the UK and had heard that work was available. He first came to the UK in 2007 and spent the first five years of his time in the country working in hand car washes. He did not have a positive experience and moved away from the sector as soon as he was able to after years of poor pay and poor treatment.

Getting into the sector

Zoltan's friend had heard of a contact who would be able to organise transport to the UK and put them in touch with employers. After meeting the contact in Hungary, they paid her £150 and she made all of the arrangements. They flew from Budapest to London then took a train to Suffolk. Here they were met by the Albanian owners of a car wash. There were no rooms available, so Zoltan slept on the sofa in a hotel. He asked why there was no room for him, as had been promised, but no answer was given.

Working in the hand car wash sector

Zoltan started work straight away and was paid £25 for a working day that ran from 8am to 7pm but with limited English or knowledge of the country, he didn't know what was fair.

“When you move to England first you don't know how things work so you go along with it.”

Some days, if the weather had been bad and business was slow, workers would be sent home and not paid, even if they had washed some cars. On other occasions they would be paid £12.50 for half a day if they went home early or started late.

After a chance meeting with Lorik – a man planning to open a new car wash in East Yorkshire – Zoltan agreed to move nearby to Hull to be part of it. He was given a room in a three-bedroom house with four others and paid what he deemed a fair rent of £110 a month including bills. The house was owned by Lorik, something that Zoltan found to be typical.

“These car wash guys normally have a house or something nearby that they can put you in. It's quite cheap but they get five guys in there so they're still making money.”

The car wash itself was in an old petrol station near a roundabout. Zoltan noticed that this was a common location for car washes and was aware of several very similar enterprises. Zoltan was part of

a team of five workers who would wash and valet cars from 8am to 7pm and would typically wash or clean around 30 cars a day in the busier periods. Customers paid £5 in cash that was passed on to Lorik at the end of the day.

The workers were paid every Sunday, and Lorik was consistent and punctual with this. He would, however, fine workers for mistakes: if a customer returned to say that a spot had been missed or there was a problem, the responsible worker would be docked £5. Zoltan was aware of other cases where payment wasn't as punctual as his or where bosses would withhold payment as a way of ensuring workers did not leave.

“They’re just lying to you, but you have no choice because it’s hard to get a job without English. If you don’t speak English, you believe the first person you meet because they’re nice to you and they are nice to start with.”

Zoltan’s English improved and he began to learn that aspects of his employment were unacceptable. Having settled into Yorkshire life and having a better understanding of the lifestyle and the cost of living, he realised he was being taken advantage of, something that took a while to register because he was originally just grateful to have a job at all.

“When you’re new to the country, £25 is enough for you but after three months or six months, you realise that it isn’t and that basically it’s slavery. Working ten or eleven hours a day.”

Workers were allowed to rest briefly if there were no cars in the queue but if people were waiting, they were expected to be working. They were not given adequate lunchbreaks either: Lorik had a camera installed in the waiting area to monitor how long the workers took to eat lunch and ensure that nobody was sitting around.

“He’d shout if you took more than five minutes eating a sandwich... He’d watch the camera and tell us to get back to work and call us lazy even though we’d washed 170 cars.”

There was a toilet in the customer waiting room that was in reasonable condition – Zoltan was aware of other car washes with much more basic and unhygienic facilities. The car wash felt safe and there were never any accidents. Staff were provided with gloves and high visibility jackets, but were responsible for everything else. There were new gloves every day, but the rigour of washing cars meant that the gloves didn't last very long. Some workers reacted badly to the chemicals used and were forced to stop working.

“Some guys had issues with their skin because the protection wasn’t good enough. The chemicals started burning their skin and two or three people had to leave after a couple of months because their skin just couldn’t cope with it.”

The jackets were dirty, and it wasn't clear how many people had previously worn them. Zoltan argued regularly that they needed new and clean items but Lorik refused as he was always extremely reluctant to do anything that would cost money.

As the treatment at the car wash got worse, Zoltan tried to leave but found it difficult, partly as he did not know how to find work and partly due to his confidence being undermined by his employer.

“He treated us like dogs... every time I wanted to leave; I was told I'd have to come back because I wouldn't get a job anywhere else because you're not good enough. It was totally destroying your confidence and belief in your future.”

Once he was able to open a bank account, Zoltan joined an agency and they were able to find him some factory work. Unfortunately, they were unable to provide him with regular enough work and after a while he was forced to return to the car wash. Eventually he was able to find regular work away from the car wash and has not needed to go back.

Employment status, pay and conditions

Zoltan had no awareness of his employee rights when he first came to the UK, which is something he thinks is extremely common for people in situations like his. Pay was always cash in hand and there were no payslips, nor written contracts. Zoltan recalls one day when an official from the Home Office visited the car wash, Lorik produced payslips for everyone to show the official but the workers were never given them.

“He had loads of payslips with an NI number even though we didn't have one. He said not to worry about it – he'd sort it. The Home Office looked at them, but we never even had them in our hands. I'm sure it was dodgy paperwork.”

As he learned more about the law, Zoltan realised that they should be paying National Insurance if they worked more than 16 hours. He noticed that the payslips said 16 hours even though it was normal for them to work more than 50 and even over 70 hours in busy summer periods.

Workers would give their passports in when they started working and were told that this was to get them a work permit, but nobody ever got one. Zoltan suspected that, instead, the names were used on water bills and council tax bills. The name would be changed on a regular basis and if a person of authority came to chase an unpaid bill, the car wash owner would feign ignorance and say it was a new company to avoid paying.

Zoltan found it difficult to move on because with no utility bills or bank card he wasn't able to provide enough proof of identity to be able to get a job. He felt that his employers and those of his friends used this to make it difficult for workers to leave.

“You don't have a contract. They give you nothing but there's nowhere to go and they make it hard to leave by withholding money...they use the fact that they're giving you somewhere to live too. They remind you that you pay cheap rent you couldn't get somewhere else.”

The future

Zoltan has a more stable job now and has no desire to go back to car washing. He has a great deal of sympathy for those in the situation that he used to be and feels nothing has changed since his time washing cars.

“I think most of the car washes are like this. I’ve met so many people who come in from Romania mainly. They get stuck there because there are people threatening you not to leave. If you leave, they’re going to find you and I hear that story so many times...I can’t describe it better than to say, they’re absolutely using you.”

Charles – Hand car washer



Age: Unknown

Nationality: UK Citizen

Time working in sector: 2 years

Status: Employee (no written contract)

Background

Charles grew up in Yorkshire, before moving to Ireland with his family. He undertook all his secondary school education in Ireland (completing the equivalent of A Levels), before returning to Yorkshire in his twenties. He lives with his partner and primary-aged daughter and is expecting another child. His partner is currently studying for a degree and so his job is the sole income in the relationship currently.

Getting into the sector

He enjoys working outside and has *“always been in manual labour.”* His previous jobs have involved plastering, general labouring and delivery driving, although he had been doing an ‘office job’ in telesales just before he took on a job in the hand car washing sector. Charles got into the sector almost by accident, as he originally applied online for a vacancy in handling website inquiries for the business. However, it quickly became apparent to his manager, after watching him help out his colleagues with valeting, that Charles’s skills lay elsewhere, and he was more suited to the hands-on side of things:

“I saw the process of valeting the cars and helped out; the boss realised I was in the wrong position and that was it...”

Charles enjoys the job: he takes pride in seeing a car come to him in a bad state and ensuring it leaves *“like it was brand new”*. The job is a little different to those that he’s done in the past: previously he had mainly worked in a group environment, but he likes the ability to get on with the technical work on his own, with the added responsibility for the work of others. He is directly responsible for another employee, in a supervisor position.

“[What do you like about your job?]...not [working] in a group environment, which I like and the fact I supervise another; I love the responsibility and I get pride in my work...a car comes in dirty and leaves spic and span...I really like the job satisfaction.”

Working in the hand car wash sector

Charles is employed directly by the business and is one of two valeters (the other he supervises). There are another 20 employees in the organisation, but they work in other parts of the business; the organisation also sells and services cars. Charles works from 9am to 6pm Monday to Friday, with an hour for lunch. In the past he has worked the occasional Saturday but chooses not to do this anymore.

Although Charles thinks he's generally treated fairly by his employer, he sometimes questions whether his seniors see the value of his role in the company, and he does feel underappreciated at times.

"You are still on the bottom rung and considered the underling of the company..."

He has also observed that employees who do not speak English as their first language are treated worse than those who are English-native. He's noticed that this occurs both in terms of the disrespectful tone that his employers take with these employees, and in terms of them being asked to carry out jobs that have *"nothing to do with valeting"*. In the past he has made efforts to stand up for his non-English speaking colleagues, where he has seen them possibly being mistreated:

"English is my first language, so I'm lucky but I have seen it first-hand where if [you are] ESOL then people talk to you like crap, there doesn't seem to be a massive amount of respect for the non-English speaking community which isn't right – I saw this first-hand at another dealership I worked at... I've stood up for them...the guy didn't understand what was going on and probably thought the boss was asking him to do something... I have a feeling if I wasn't there, he would have been coerced into doing something that wasn't his job; he was just seen as a pawn."

He has twice experienced not being paid on time which he found stressful because *"the bills were still coming out of my account"*. After raising the issue with the director of the business, it was resolved and there have been no further issues with his wages arriving on time. In the past, he also worked on a Saturday, for which he was offered an amount in cash that he did not feel was sufficient for the hours he had worked. He objected and was paid a higher amount through BACs as usual, though he has decided to no longer work Saturdays as a result.

Personally, he feels no issue about broaching the issues around payment with the director, but he felt that this could be difficult for other workers, especially those for whom English is not a first language. He is aware that the environment can be dictatorial, and management do not welcome employees raising issues if they are unhappy:

"It was like they [the management] removed manners out of the conversation and barked orders."

As Charles works alone, other than occasionally checking in on the other valet he supervises, he is unsure of the extent to which his other colleagues may have faced issues in dealing with the employer. However, he imagines that this issue could be prevalent in the sector, and that from what he's heard from other people in the industry, his company is better at paying employees on time compared with other companies.

"...I think it probably is an issue for a lot of people [not being paid on time]. This business [the organisation he works for] is quite structured, but what I've heard from others who have done similar jobs elsewhere they have been taken advantage of and not been paid in full or don't have a contract."

Employment status, pay and conditions

Charles works 37 hours a week, but was not given a written contract, although his role is classed as a permanent contract. He is paid monthly via BACs transfer and receives around £1,500 per month after tax. Charles has heard about the National Living Wage though he doesn't know what it is; however, given his salary, he doesn't think it's relevant to his pay grade. In terms of holiday pay, he thinks he received between 23 and 25 days paid holiday although he isn't exactly clear on this.

Charles gets wage slips from Accounts if he asks for them, but they aren't given to employees as a matter of process.

Facilities at his workplace include toilets, a canteen with tables, microwaves and a kettle, and some protective equipment. Overall, Charles feels that he has the equipment he needs to do his job; however, he does not use a face mask. Workers can ask for personal protective equipment such as face masks to protect themselves from breathing in chemicals, but they are not provided as standard by the employer.

From memory he doesn't remember receiving any information around employment rights or health and safety, and again thinks this would be something he would need to ask for rather than being told by the company without prompting. He feels that there is a general culture that employees need to ask for information, rather than his employer proactively providing it.

The future

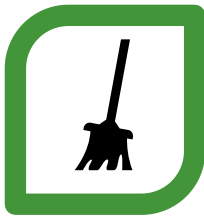
Ideally in the future, Charles wants to work for himself doing hand car washing to a higher customer specification, which he sees as a way of potentially earning more money.

Charles does not feel that working in the hand car wash industry is given enough credit by those outside of the sector. He feels that a vocational qualification would help to boost its status, as well as more emphasis on processes and upholding standards, including tighter rules around protective equipment being used.

"I think it needs an NVQ level; there are lots of elements to the sector that could be promoted from a vocational point of view. It's the equivalent to being a bin man in the 70's and 80's!... I think it's a great hands-on industry with a lot of reward, but it needs to be better paid with PPE being a key factor."

He also feels that the sector needs to do more in general to protect migrant workers.

"There doesn't seem to be any protection for migrant workers... they may get manipulated or abused in a certain situation."



Ben – Hand car washer

Age: 37

Nationality: UK Citizen

Time working in sector: 15 years

Status: Self-employed

Background

Ben was “*born and bred*” in North Yorkshire and lives and works there now. Most of his family and friends are nearby in the area. He left school at around 16 or 17 and went straight into full-time employment, initially taking on a wide range of jobs, including working in food processing and a removal business. He now lives with his children and has been working in the hand car wash industry for the last 15 years, running his own company for the last 12.

Getting into the sector

Ben first found out about a hand car washing job through a recommendation from a friend. He had no particular interest in staying in the industry for a long time but found that he quite enjoyed the work compared to his previous roles. After 3 years of employment he decided to set up his own hand car washing company.

Working in the hand car wash sector

Ben is self-employed and employs 5 other staff at his business. The work has two main operations: a static car wash unit, where 3 staff work, and 2 mobile vans that work remotely in the Leeds area. His employees ‘mix and match’ between the sites and so he’s able to resource depending on what is needed on the day. Both Ben and his employees tend to work from 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday, but during the busier months of the year everyone is expected to work much later to deal with the demand.

He enjoys the responsibility that working for himself brings, and likes the idea that he can see the direct financial reward for the hard work he puts in:

“I like the satisfaction of it and making money for myself rather than someone else.”

He also feels that being self-employed gives him more flexibility around the hours he works, and he likes that he can always choose not to work one day if he feels like it.

Before becoming self-employed Ben doesn’t think he was treated unfairly at work and that generally he had no issues. He does think however this may have been because his colleagues were all ‘British guys’, and that things could have been different if this wasn’t the case, though did not provide details as to why he felt this would be so. Thinking about his own company, Ben acknowledges that it is difficult to be objective about these things, and that his staff may have different views to him. He thinks that he is open to his staff bringing any issues to him and would look into them as soon as possible (he had no examples of this occurring though). Ben does expect his staff to work through their breaks at busy times and has not received any push back on this.

Whilst it doesn’t happen at his own company, Ben does remember receiving late payments in his previous job and thinks that this is a common problem in the sector, especially amongst the larger

hand car wash companies. In general, he feels that people who work on the sector can often struggle financially, and may be more likely to accept a late payment from their employer because they know that their job is 'replaceable', and that a late payment is better than not having a job at all:

"I think it's quite common [late pay]; there quite a few people [employers] who will try and get away with what they can and if they (the employee) don't like it then they will be replaced...[it's an] easy job to fill and lots of people [are] unemployed."

In the past Ben had a bad experience on a contract job and was owed £900 from a client that was never paid. Since then, he has stopped doing contract work and requires that all payments are delivered by BACS. This is the only time he has experienced not being paid for the work his company has done.

Employment status, pay and conditions

Ben works between 30 and 40 hours a week. Whilst he receives approximately £250 to £300 a week, he doesn't pay himself if the week has been particularly slow. All his workers have written contracts and are classified as 'self-employed', so they book their own time off work when needed (unpaid). Ben provides all uniforms and training for staff personally, as well as personal protective equipment. He put up all health and safety requirements on posters on walls in the car wash unit and says that *"all necessary precautions have been taken to cover the insurance requirements."*

Facilities at the workplace include toilets, a sit-down area, and the unit itself where his staff clean the cars.

Ben thinks he pays his staff at about the minimum wage. However, Ben has not heard of the National Living Wage, so he isn't sure if the pay is at or below this.

The future

Thinking about the sector as a whole, Ben thinks that there are variable standards in hand car washing and lots of companies that don't do the best job. He prides himself on the standards he sets at his company and feels that his business' pricing reflects this.

"It's something that I enjoy; if you get your head down and graft then its enjoyable but I know a lot of people who are useless at it and get complaint after complaint and then have to do it all over again. It's all about your standard. I've heard about scratches on cars but if you pay cheap then you'll get a cheap job done."

In the future, Ben would like to set up his own removal business and pass over the running of his hand car wash business to a couple of his current staff.

3 Summary

Despite the difficulties recruiting participants, we were still able to uncover a variety of experiences faced by those working in hand car washes. For some of our participants, the sector offered a positive, flexible and fulfilling opportunity. For others, their work was characterised by poor treatment, negative experiences, and what may amount to labour exploitation.

This research has also provided the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of recruiting participants and undertaking research within a more informal sector with a potentially hard to reach population. In particular, it highlighted the importance of gatekeepers and other “warm leads” to provide an initial foothold into the sector. Snowballing can be a valuable tool to reach further into the community, however, this research found that workers in the sector had limited crossover beyond their own demographic. Identifying gatekeepers or other seeds from across the relevant spectrum of demographics of the population may be relevant for this type of research going forward. By building on this learning, further research may be able to delve deeper into the experiences of those working in the hand car wash sector.

“

IFF Research illuminates the world for organisations businesses and individuals helping them to make better-informed decisions.”

Our Values:

1. Being human first:

Whether employer or employee, client or collaborator, we are all humans first and foremost. Recognising this essential humanity is central to how we conduct our business, and how we lead our lives. We respect and accommodate each individual's way of thinking, working and communicating, mindful of the fact that each has their own story and means of telling it.

2. Impartiality and independence:

IFF is a research-led organisation which believes in letting the evidence do the talking. We don't undertake projects with a preconception of what "the answer" is, and we don't hide from the truths that research reveals. We are independent, in the research we conduct, of political flavour or dogma. We are open-minded, imaginative and intellectually rigorous.

3. Making a difference:

At IFF, we want to make a difference to the clients we work with, and we work with clients who share our ambition for positive change. We expect all IFF staff to take personal responsibility for everything they do at work, which should always be the best they can deliver.



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