



Maximising women's potential in the UK's retail sector

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Received September 2006
Revised January 2007
Accepted January 2007

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to show that a defining characteristic of the UK retail sector is the high number of women it employs but there remains an enduring under-representation of women in its management positions. The majority of women in the industry work part-time and this paper aims to explore the factors that impact upon the career progression.

Design/methodology/approach – In the paper, 1,000 questionnaires were completed by store staff in three leading retailers, supported by interviews with store staff and SME retailers in the UK's East Midlands region.

Findings – The paper finds continuing barriers to career progression for women working part-time in retailing. Despite family friendly employment policies becoming an increasingly important feature of modern work organisations, career progression was informed by a traditional concept of a career based on full-time working.

Research limitations/implications – The paper was limited to one sector. There is a need for further studies into women's career progression in other sectors reliant on female employment.

Practical implications – The findings in the paper have implications for promotion policies, training and development provision and line management practices if retailers are to maximise the potential of the women they employ.

Originality/value – The paper suggests that retailing is an industry where a significant number of women are working below their potential despite organisational policies supportive of diversity and equality of opportunity.

Keywords Women, Careers, Part time workers, Retailing, United Kingdom

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This paper examines women's career progression in retailing and particularly explores the position of part-time workers drawing upon findings from a study funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) as part of EU initiatives to improve the position of women in the labour market. The aim of the research was to identify those factors that constrain and support female career progression in a sector which is the UK's third largest employer of female labour (Begum, 2004) but, whilst women constitute 71 per cent of its work force, only a third of them are classified as working in managerial roles (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2005). In terms of occupational segregation, Labour Force Survey data (ONS, 2005) reveals that sales and retail assistants are the largest occupational group for female employment in the UK labour force with some 884,000 women working in such roles compared to 359,000 men.

As a major employer of women in lower paid jobs, the retail sector provides an ideal opportunity to examine the employment experiences and career aspirations of women in such roles. The reported findings are drawn from a combination of quantitative and qualitative data provided by over 1,000 store employees who worked for three of Britain's leading retailers and ten small, independent retailers in the East Midlands.



Although the purpose of the research was to examine female employment, men were included in the study to provide a comparison with women's responses. Issues relating to female career progression were explored from the perspective of all levels of store employees but the focus of the discussion will be the experiences of women who work other than full-time permanent hours, frequently referred to in the literature as "atypical hours". As a sector, retailing employs significant numbers of part-time workers, the vast majority of whom are female (McIntyre, 2000). In all but a few instances the atypical working arrangement operating in the retail companies was part-time work; short-term temporary workers widely used in retailing were not a focus of the study.

Labour market segmentation theory provides an explanation for the continuing segregation observed in the retail industry comprising a primary labour market with more men than women in full-time managerial and supervisory roles and a secondary labour market largely consisting of women employed on a part-time basis (Freatly and Sparks, 1995). Yet this is a secondary workforce, which is working predominantly in front line service roles and who retail employers are heavily reliant upon for the quality of customer service (Marchington, 1995). Demographic pressures and the growth in women's participation in the labour force are also leading to the demarcations between primary and secondary labour markets becoming increasingly blurred which Rubery and Grimshaw (2003, p. 100) argue "means that it is impossible for policy makers or human resource managers to ignore issues of gender in today's labour markets".

Changes in the composition of the UK workforce have led to increased social pressures for "family friendly" working arrangements to enable individuals to combine employment with the care of others (Lewis, 1996). The issue of work/life balance has become part of the government policy agenda (Kodz *et al.*, 2002) as a means of encouraging employment opportunities through the development of "flexible and dynamic workplaces" (Taylor, 2002, p. 7). Part of the policy objective has been a narrowing of the gender gap between men and women in the work place and this has been supported by the implementation of a range of "family friendly" legislation. In arguments reminiscent of those made for the benefits to employers of greater work force diversity (Robinson and Dechant, 1997), there has been the emergence of a business case for adopting family orientated flexible working arrangements. The essential rationale is that such arrangements not only support legal compliance but also lead to higher productivity and employee engagement through increased employee morale, motivation and organisational commitment (Robinson *et al.*, 2004).

For the first time work/life balance featured as an area of investigation in the UK's 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey (Kersley *et al.*, 2004). Whilst this may be an indication that the availability of work/life balance arrangements has come to be regarded as an important feature of modern work organisations (Woodland *et al.*, 2004), Hyman and Summers (2004) observe that there remains a lack of convincing evidence demonstrating that a real shift has taken place in employers' practices; for example, through the provision of more career opportunities for part-time workers and the availability of suitable affordable childcare (Lindars, 2003).

Working part-time

Part-time working is increasingly an important means of work force participation, particularly for working mothers, across the UK (Bonney, 2005; Department of Trade

and Industry, 2003) and much of the European Union but as Rubery and Grimshaw (2003, p. 101) point out it is not a universal form. The extent of participation for working mothers is highly dependent on the age of their youngest child and women in Ireland, Germany, The Netherlands and the UK are reported to be the most likely to work part-time to balance work and family commitments (ISER, 2006). Our study reinforced the EOC's finding (2006) that women in the UK prefer to work on a full-time, rather than a part-time basis, once their children are over 16 years old and that their hours of work increase as children become older. Women respondents with children aged 11-16 years reported working longer hours, with 48 per cent working between 31 and 40 hours per week compared to only 13 per cent of those with children aged under the age of five.

Part-time work is a model of employment which provides employers with the flexibility to accommodate fluctuating customer demand, longer opening hours and control costs but also meets the needs of individuals seeking to combine work with their family commitments (Penn, 1995). Whilst there is now, arguably, a greater convergence between men and women's economic activity rates and work histories than hitherto, Purcell (2000) observes that the relationship between paid employment and unpaid work in the home remains stronger for women than men.

This has led to the growth in female employment being accompanied by increasing concerns that the potential of many women working part-time is overlooked (Darton and Hewell, 2005) and the Women and Work Commission's report (2006) identified this as a priority area for attention by employers and policy makers responsible for skills development. In addressing the issue it is important to take account of the marked differences observed between women in the nature of their labour market participation (Dex *et al.*, 1996; McRae, 2003). Hakim (2000) addresses this most specifically in the form of preference theory, which proposes that women exercise work-life preferences in their employment patterns. Hakim classifies these into three main groups of women; "work-centred", "adaptive" and "non career-oriented". According to Hakim, the estimated 20 per cent of women who are "work-centred" are more likely to be childless and their commitment is to work. In contrast, "home-centred" women (again an estimated 20 per cent) have lives that revolve around their families and prefer not to work. The remaining 60 per cent of women are described as "adaptive" in that they want to work and, although not fully committed to a career, are identified as the most responsive to employment, social and family policies of the three groups.

In a critique of preference theory, McRae (2003, p. 319) observes that it is based on a premise that "women have choices about employment denied to men" which leads not only to the "marked heterogeneity among women in preferences and lifestyles" but also explains the unequal outcomes for men and women in employment. Based on an examination of women's work histories, McRae argues that the labour market choices made by women with children depends as much on the constraints upon them as their personal preferences. Whilst the findings from our study support Hakim's categorisation, as McRae argues, there was little evidence of genuine choice for many part-time women in the hours they worked. Whilst working part-time might well be voluntary it is heavily constrained by caring responsibilities which continue to impact more heavily on women than men; the price paid for such working arrangements being widely acknowledged as the loss of career opportunities. Almost all the respondents in the retail companies perceived the combination of a career and part-time work as not an

option in an industry where full-time availability was viewed as essential to working in a supervisory or managerial role due to the long hours of work and dynamic nature of the retail environment (Broadbridge and Parsons, 2005).

In a study of women's roles in retailing undertaken at a time when the industry was facing extended opening hours and the wider work/life policy agenda had not yet developed, McIntyre (2000, p. 648) argued for the introduction of "part-time management structures". Yet, despite the labour market changes that have led to an increase in organisational policies supporting flexible working, regulatory intervention and a more "inclusive" work place rhetoric, our findings suggest that many of the conflicts for both employers and employees in balancing the tensions between family work and employment remain unresolved (Pott-Buter, 1993).

Research design

The research team for the study was a multi-disciplinary one consisting of both retailing and human resource specialists which provided a broader perspective on the employment issues and supported the interdisciplinary approach advocated by Marchington (1995) as the way forward in retail research. It also encouraged the use of a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods for the study undertaken in three major British retailers to gather insights into women's experiences of working in retailing with the aim of establishing the factors that encouraged or limited their career progression. Since small retailers form a significant part of British retailing (Byrom *et al.*, 2002), an additional qualitative study of employment in ten small independent retailers was incorporated on the advice of various agencies working with smaller enterprises in the East Midlands region.

A total of 1,000 questionnaires were completed by store staff working across 31 outlets in three leading retailers within key retail sectors: supermarket, DIY and health/beauty retailing. In addition to the questionnaires, sixty interviews were conducted with employees working in ten of the 31 surveyed stores. Participating stores were, in general, the flagship stores in six cities/towns chosen for their distinctive labour market characteristics. The questionnaires and interviews included responses from store managers, HR managers, departmental supervisors, general sales assistants as well as cashiers, security and warehouse staff. Areas explored with respondents included why they worked in retail, their working arrangements, career histories, family circumstances, career aspirations, what they saw as important for career progression, training and development provision, company policies as well as the elements of their retail jobs that they liked and disliked.

The sample was selected to accommodate different patterns of working, age ranges and, where possible, ethnicity with a proportion of responses collected from male staff to provide a comparison with those of female staff. Of the 1,000 completed questionnaires, 74 per cent of the responses were from women, just over half of whom worked part-time rising to 79 per cent for women with children under 11 years of age. A total of 98 per cent of all respondents worked on a permanent basis and 93 per cent of all the women in the sample were of "white British" origin. Most of the interviewees were female, worked as general sales assistants, were aged in their 30s and had children. Only a quarter of all respondents had trade union membership although membership was slightly higher for women (28 per cent) than men. An overview of the sample profile according to the gender of respondents and other key variables is

provided in Table I. those referred to as being on “fixed hours” worked the same hours each week.

The ten SMEs represented a range of retail sectors such as clothing, gifts and food. In depth interviews were held with the owner/managers and employees with respondents being asked the same questions as those posed to employees working for the large retailers but adjusted to reflect the small business context. Given the small number of SMEs involved in the study, the reported findings and discussion largely reflect the experiences of those working for the large retailers.

Findings

Although half of the women working part-time were not seeking promotion, 37 per cent of all women and 29 per cent of those working part-time said they would welcome promotion if it were possible. Table II summarises the reported attitudes to promotion

	Male (%)	Female (%)
Work full-time	72.5	46.4
Work fixed hours each week	67.8	83.1
Temporary employees	3.8	1.9
<i>Age</i>		
up to 18 years	7.8	7.4
19-24 years	22.9	16.6
25-34 years	24.8	19.6
35-44 years	21.3	28.2
45-59 years	17.8	26.3
60 years and older	5.4	1.9
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
White British	91.2	93.2
Indian	3.8	4.3
White and not British	1.9	0.7
Other	3.1	1.8
<i>Employment status</i>		
General assistants	63.9	77.2
Junior and supervisory managers	24.2	17.8
Senior store management	11.9	4.9

Table I.
Questionnaire sample –
gender profile

	Want promotion in this store	Want promotion and expect to move	Like promotion but circumstances prevent	Happy and don't want promotion	Hope to leave	None of these/other
Full-time males	23.3	22.2	4.4	26.1	21.1	2.8
Full-time females	27.0	17.9	4.4	35.8	12.6	2.2
Part-time males	14.5	1.4	5.8	37.7	36.2	4.3
Part-time females	15.9	4.7	8.5	50.4	16.4	4.1
All women	21.1	10.8	6.6	43.6	14.6	3.2
All	21.0	12.3	6.1	39.8	17.5	3.2

Table II.
Full-time and part-time
employees' attitudes to
promotion

and their expectations about progression in the retail organisations among our sample of employees.

For part-time employees there were a number of interrelated themes relating to their career progression which were a dynamic and complex interaction of personal and job related factors. The most frequently identified were first, how part-time work was perceived by managers and employees, second, issues concerned with the hours worked and the family network utilised by parents to arrange childcare, third, training and development provision and finally, formal HR policies and their application at store level.

Perceptions of part-time work

Whilst working part-time enabled women to manage their family and domestic commitments, it was widely perceived by employees across the range of store job roles that part-time staff were disadvantaged in terms of career opportunities compared to full-time staff. This was largely attributed to the difficulties they and their employers faced in balancing the needs of the business with those of individuals typified by the comments of this part-time general sales assistant:

I only work part-time which suits the family but I do feel I could offer a lot more than is asked of me in my current role. I recognise that working part-time makes it difficult for the company.

There was a widespread assumption that, in order to progress, part-time employees would need to move to full-time working. This view was less frequently articulated by store management who were more likely to identify development opportunities as being available to everyone, their view was part-time staff self imposed limits by not applying for job opportunities. Part-time employees felt such opportunities were not intended for them as illustrated by this general sales assistant,

Oh yes, there are real career opportunities if people want them but they aren't really aimed at people like me who work part-time.

Notwithstanding their more positive view of the inclusive nature of the organisation's career development opportunities, managers acknowledged the particular issues facing part-time staff, for example one manager commented

... my till ladies in the week, they're all part-time and have family lives ... the perception is, and it's probably a correct perception, that if they do go upwards that this involves changing their hours and taking more responsibility at work and less responsibility at home.

Only 15 per cent of women working in senior store management positions in the large retailers worked part-time compared to 63 per cent of female general sales assistants. The lack of female senior staff working part-time reinforced the perception that store management roles required full-time working. The absence of part-time career role models was an important missing factor as role models were reported by both male and female managers to have had a significant influence on their careers. In total, 35 per cent of all female staff compared to the 25 per cent of all men who were interested in pursuing a career in the large retail companies, identified that seeing "people like me" progress would help them "a lot", suggesting that factors such as ethnicity, domestic circumstances, personality as well as gender were of importance in providing role models.

Domestic circumstances

Leaving aside perceptions of career progression for part-time workers, the ability to move home, child care constraints and partners' jobs were the most commonly identified barriers to career progression as illustrated by Table III.

Of these domestic circumstances, as anticipated, childcare commitments for women with children under 16 was regarded as the major constraint on career progression whether they worked full-time or part-time with 45.5 per cent of part-time female general assistants identifying it as the key constraint on career progression. In common with other studies (Francesconi and Gosling, 2005) the age of the youngest child was a significant factor affecting women's attitudes towards career progression, and this figure rose to 59 per cent of all women who had children under school age.

Although childcare was identified as a major issue, the availability of a family support network, such as grandparents and partners, emerged as an important influence in the hours of working mothers and on those women who had progressed within the organisation or in the retail industry. The value of well-developed support within the family was illustrated by this female manager who had moved from full-time to part-time working upon having children but had remained in a managerial role:

He [my husband] works just across the road so we look after the childcare between us plus I've got my mum only two doors down from me . . . I couldn't have stayed in this job without them.

The interviews revealed that the working hours of those in the family network were often pooled to ensure that childcare was managed effectively. For example, nearly half of those reporting working on Saturdays were women part-timers with children because family members were then available to provide childcare.

The role of the family support network also affected the woman's availability to work in other ways. Women who relied on their partner as the main wage earners showed a particular loyalty to the store where they worked. Women's loyalty to their store also stemmed from the products they worked with and the extent of personal support they felt they received from their managers. This was as much a characteristic of the part-time female retail worker as the full-timer; 55 per cent of all women and 57 per cent of those working part-time hoping to work at their current store for a long time. Strong loyalty to a particular store could be at odds with company policy and even restrict their career development, as women were frequently reluctant to move stores to progress. In all three large retailers, staff promoted to managerial roles were expected to transfer to another store which could create particular problems for

Table III.
Female employees'
perceptions of domestic
factors as a constraint on
career progression

Identified key factors	All female employees	Female employees with children under 16	Female general assistants with children under 16	P/T female employees	P/T female general assistants with children under 16
Ability to move home	21.3	25.5	18.5	14.7	15.7
Childcare commitments	16.2	43.1	43.9	23.5	45.5
Partner's job	12.6	24.2	24.5	15.6	28.8

part-timers when proximity to home and child care were major considerations. The rationale for the policy was that it encouraged a healthy level of staff turnover which prevented “a blocking” of the store career ladder, introduced “new blood” to stores and helped a newly promoted employee’s credibility if they supervised staff that they had not previously worked alongside. In the past, some individuals had experienced problems making the transition from working as an equal with colleagues to becoming their manager and moving promoted staff to a new store appeared to alleviate this problem. Nevertheless, the impact of such requirements on women’s career progression did not go unnoticed as identified by this female manager:

I could have fast-tracked my career a lot quicker during these 24 years if I had been prepared to move anywhere in the country but I had to think of my family, it was never the right time.

Training and development

Part-time staff identified a particular barrier to their progression: training and development provision designed for full-time staff which took insufficient account of the constraints they faced. They reported that frequently it was difficult for them to attend training events because these were either held at times when they were not working or took place at another store, which presented problems in terms of accommodating family commitments. Any training undertaken had to be incorporated into the hours they worked and combined with their day-to-day job responsibilities. Respondents also commented on the problems surrounding self-directed learning which formed a considerable part of the large retailers’ formal training for career progression. This relied on individuals having the time within their working hours to undertake the training modules either outside their hours or incorporate the training into a busy working day. This proved particularly problematic for part-timers, already working less hours, in terms of gaining support from their managers to leave the shop floor. As one HR manager pointed out:

We do expect people to go through different levels of learning . . . but if you’ve got someone on an eight-hour contract and you’ve got this lengthy learning programme to do, it can prove quite difficult for them.

More generally, 44 per cent of all respondents felt their progression depended more on having the right “personality” than possessing formal qualifications (identified by 19 per cent) in the retailing environment. Personality traits of self-belief, confidence and assertiveness were singled out by both male and female respondents as characteristics that male employees demonstrated more readily than female employees, which meant they were more likely to take advantage of development opportunities when they arose. The reported lack of self-belief and confidence of many female staff, other than those in managerial roles, was not addressed either in organisational approaches to employee development or in the content of formal training provision but was commented on routinely by managers and employees. Their higher level of self belief was given as the explanation for men being more proactive in seeking out individual progression which this male team leader promoted some ten months earlier put in the following terms:

The opportunities are there but you’ve got to be prepared to have “a go”. I think a lot of the women who I’ve come across don’t want to take the chance unless they are 100 per cent in the job they are doing.

Policy reach

Similar inclusive career schemes and HR policies relating to family friendly and flexible working were in place in the three large retailers and employees' overall awareness of the existence of these policies being relatively high. Typically these included policies relating to parental, maternity and paternity leave and career breaks. None of the retailers provided childcare facilities for their staff. The take-up of flexible working and family friendly policies was limited amongst staff, 92 per cent of all women reporting not having taken advantage of any family friendly policies offered by their organisation. The exception to this were working mothers with a child aged four years or less (44 per cent) who were more likely to have taken maternity leave whilst working for the organisation although data on the exact numbers was not available at store level. The interview responses revealed that whilst employees were aware of the presence of HR policies, knowledge of their content was in fact very limited, needs driven and highly reliant on line managers communicating how policies could help them. Furthermore, information about company policies was often provided at briefing meetings at times when part-timers were not at work. As a result having a proactive line manager who was a good communicator was pivotal in individuals being aware of what was available and closing the gap between policy and practice (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003) just as managerial support was also revealed as a significant influence in building female part-timers' self confidence and self belief. To give one such example, a part-time female general assistant interested in a long-term career in retailing explained how her supervisor had recommended her for the necessary development programme:

It was nice that my supervisor put me forward. They obviously have confidence in my ability which helps me have the confidence to pull it off.

The interviewees revealed that there was a difference between the rhetoric of official HR policies relating to balancing work and family commitments and the "lived experience" at store level. This reflected a more widespread problem identified in the stores, which was the ability of local management to successfully implement policies created at head office. Typically the success of such HR policies, and indeed the ability to meet all other requests made of stores by head office, was heavily dependent upon the engagement of the line manager and the performance targets they were personally measured on. Interviews with senior store management indicated that they were supportive of the company policies that helped women with caring commitments and, where possible, tried to accommodate individual employment related needs but had to balance these demands with operational requirements, which sometimes created conflicts. As one female senior manager pointed out:

We can be flexible . . . however, we do have a business to run and we can't fix a manager's hours around her childcare all the time.

Not only did the sometimes contradictory nature of the official policies and operational realities create tensions for managers, it also created difficulties for some employees, one such example was managing employee absence. Although no hard data was provided by the store managers in the study, the interviews revealed that a common performance indicator for stores was a reduction in absence levels. For example, if an employee was away due to their child's illness it was recorded officially as an absence

and, with the exception of a few stores, staff did not have an opportunity to make up their non-attendance at a later date.

Discussion

One of the findings from this retail study is that more account needs to be taken of variations in women's work orientations not only between those working full-time or part-time which has been the focus of earlier research studies (Hakim, 1997; Thompson, 1995) but also between different groups of part-timers. Even though the study revealed the presence of a significant group of women working part-time who would have welcomed the opportunity to progress provided they could combine this with the demands of home and child care, observed practice meant that the majority of women working part-time and their full-time colleagues just did not associate part-time work with career progression. Applying Hakim (2000) classifications this group of women can be categorised as "adaptive" but our findings reveal that their selected pattern of work was dominated, not by personal preference, but rather by family responsibilities which limited them more than men. It is argued that these women would be better described as "aspirational but constrained" in comparison to women identified as "career orientated" or "not career orientated".

Women not looking to progress were as concerned as more ambitious women that part-time work could continue to place women at a disadvantage and identified that more needed to be done for women with talent and ambition. Put another way, practices that reduced any gender inequality were supported regardless of the hours worked as Davis and Robinson (1991) found in their comparative study of women in the USA, Great Britain, West Germany and Austria. Although there was a widespread acknowledgement that development opportunities did exist in all three retailers, these were not seen by employees as accessible to part-timers unless they were able to move to full-time work and attend the required training.

Despite the presence of work/family policies and a work/life balance rhetoric among store management in the large retailers in this study, the reported experiences of employees illustrated why working part-time is a form of work associated with career penalties (Raabe, 1996). In an industry characterised by long hours, the evidence suggests that for women interested in career progression working part-time continues to place them at a disadvantage despite regulation such as the part-time worker (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations (2000) and the presence of company policies promoting the concept of equality of opportunity for all members of the workforce. Actual productivity and commitment whilst at work were obscured by an enduring concept of organisational commitment that is linked to the hours of work an individual makes available to an employer. Our findings suggest that moves away from a culture of productivity defined in terms of hours spent in the store are highly dependent on the presence of a supportive line manager sympathetic to the situation of female employees seeking to balance work and home. This was made more likely when the managers were themselves working parents. The lack of opportunities for women working atypical hours to progress suggest that line managers and policy makers need to explore alternative ways of protecting career opportunities for "aspirational but constrained" women, such as job sharing or reviewing full-time jobs before seeking a full-time replacement, practices which would attempt to restore a level of work/life

balance and challenge assumptions about the long working hours culture within retailing (Maxwell, 2005).

It is argued that at the centre of the difficulties experienced by the part-timers was the almost universal perception of a career in terms of a traditional full-time, continuous employment model based on staged progression (Mavin, 2001). This informed approaches to career development and the provision of training and development, which were often impractical for the part-time worker. The lack of female part-time managerial role models for women generally, regardless of their organisational status, also reinforced this notion. In the supermarket chain, which had developed a more inclusive approach to employee progression, there were few examples of part-timers in managerial roles but these were seen as unusual. As a result they were constantly referred to where known to staff and identified as a strong influence on women who wanted to pursue their own personal development. Promoting alternative resourcing models through, for example, part-time female role models, emerged, as a powerful means of showing that there are real career possibilities for women working in lower level retail jobs. It is worth noting that the few reported instances of women in managerial part-time work were those who had established themselves in full-time roles before moving to part-time work upon having children which lends further support to the penalties associated with being regarded as a "part-time worker" identified by Francesconi and Gosling (2005).

Despite the existence of an open access approach to career opportunities, limitations were imposed upon women with family responsibilities by other organisational policies. For example, the relocation requirements for managers even though store location was a key consideration for most female staff but particularly for those working less than full-time hours. A further issue in terms of pursuing promotion opportunities, which emerged, from the study was the marked difference in the levels of confidence in their abilities between male and female staff which was not specifically addressed in any development programme.

This study suggests the need for a more inclusive dynamic approach to career development which reflects the realities of female employment, including those working part-time, and is not based on a "one size fits all" approach. An argument that is increasingly relevant in the light of the ongoing shift within the UK towards part-time working patterns which continues to have a disproportionate impact on women's careers as it occurs at a time in their working lives when men are employed full-time in the labour market (Women and Work Commission, 2006).

It is argued that by not addressing the specific development and promotion needs of part-time female staff interested in progression, particularly those working part-time, the retail sector is failing to maximise the contribution such employees can make to organisational performance (Grant *et al.*, 2005). The general perception amongst managers and many staff in this study suggests that, despite the increasing promotion of a work/life balance and family friendly agenda, part-time work continues to be primarily viewed in terms of the cost and time benefits it offered with little account taken of Pfeffer (1998), in their argument, that an important element of high performance management is not to focus solely on cost; for employers this would involve shifting the evaluation of the contribution of part-timers away from cost and cover to what they do.

In summary, this study reveals that there are particular obstacles facing part-time female staff who might wish to progress but feel constrained from doing so largely due to their pattern of work. As a major employer of women, career paths are required in retailing that do not overlook those who work part-time working patterns that meet the industry's needs for flexibility but who have the desire and ability to progress.

It is recognised that the findings from this research, whilst based on the attitudes and opinions of a large number of women working in different retail roles, are limited to one sector. There is a need for further studies which provide insights into the constraints for women working part-time in alternative industries such as the health and caring sectors, industries which also rely heavily on female employment (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2005) but where there may be a greater requirement for formal qualifications as a requirement for progression.

Conclusion

This study of women in retailing reveals that, despite the presence of formal policies and regulation aimed at encouraging the participation of women in the work force, they continue to pay a price for working part-time not only in terms of their earning capacity but also in their personal progression. It is argued that this is largely attributable to an enduring perception of a career based on a traditional pattern of a full-time working force and continuity of employment. This was evident in the lack of career opportunities, female part-time role models, HR policies and training and development provision which took account of the particular constraints facing part-time workers interested in personal progression. Our findings suggest that that retail employers need to be more proactive in ensuring that the skills and abilities of a significant number of women in their work force who work part-time hours are used to full effect. By maximising the contribution of these female employees and making the most of the particular loyalty they have to the store where they work, the time consuming and costly loop of continuous recruiting, training and developing can be reduced. In this the role of the immediate line manager was again found to be pivotal (Purcell *et al.*, 2003) as identified by the women who participated in the study. Maximising the potential of women working other than full-time hours will not only demonstrate a genuine organisational commitment to work life balance and greater diversity at all levels of the organisation but will also help employers to maximise an area of employee potential this study's findings suggest continues to be overlooked.

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