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'It's all hands-on, even for management': Managerial work in the UK cafe sector

human relations
1–24

DOI: 10.1177/0018726713496297
hum.sagepub.com
SAGE

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Abstract
The growth in managerial jobs is often presented by policy makers as evidence of the UK's success in developing high-skilled, well-paid employment. At the same time, concerns have been raised that the lack of higher level qualifications in the managerial workforce has a detrimental impact on productivity and performance. This article focuses on the relatively neglected figure of the first line manager in private services through a study of the UK cafe sector. It explores the content and quality of the cafe manager's job, and interrogates the purported benefits of upskilling through graduate level qualifications. The findings indicate that these jobs leave much to be desired in terms of pay and work content, and that managers are highly constrained by the degree of centralized control wielded by head office. Limited autonomy and, in many cases, poor job quality raise crucial questions about the ability of lower level managers to influence performance, even allowing for higher level qualifications.

Keywords
autonomy, job quality, line managers, performance, service sector

Introduction

The proportion of managers in the UK workforce is close to 10 percent and is forecast to rise to over 11 percent by 2020 (UK Commission for Employment and Skills [UKCES],

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2011). This figure remains substantially higher than the equivalent figures in both France (8.7%) and Germany (5.7%) (Eurostat, 2012).[1] The growth in the managerial workforce is often cited as evidence of the UK's transition towards a knowledge economy and as support for the view that graduate jobs are still expanding (UKCES, 2009: 84). However, while having 'manager' in one's job title might suggest knowledge work, status and high pay, commentators have pointed to the heterogeneity of managerial roles, together with considerable variability in skill levels, discretion and autonomy. As Keep and Westwood (2002: 5) note, management is a 'catch all' phrase, where the 'range of activities, spans of control, levels of seniority, bodies of expertise and knowledge, and broader managerial skills, remains very wide'. A manager can be a chief executive of a multinational company or an individual responsible for a section in a supermarket. The lower managerial job category that this latter person would fall into is identified as the second highest occupational group in terms of social class (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2010). Studies on social mobility (e.g. Hills, 2010) assume that these positions, if taken by individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, represent evidence of social mobility regardless of levels of pay or actual job content.

The catch-all nature of the 'management' term is also pertinent, given that managers (in general) have long been held partly responsible for the UK's 'productivity problem' (Porter and Ketels, 2003). Some regard productivity improvements as having been hindered by poorly qualified managers who are less likely to implement good management practices (Bloom and Van Reenen, 2007), while concerns are regularly raised about the lack of skills and capability of line managers (see Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS)/CIPD, 2009). The UK Commission for Employment and Skills notes that '[t]he UK has, compared to other countries, a relatively long tail of managers who are not well qualified and do not apply accepted management practices' (UKCES, 2009: 138). The problem is felt to be particularly acute in the hospitality sector (the focus of this article), where the productivity gap with the European Union is estimated to be over 60 percent (UKCES, 2009: 26). Lack of qualifications is seen as a critical issue in the sector as only a quarter of managers hold a higher level qualification[2] (People 1st, 2009: 6; UKCES, 2009). There are around half a million managers in retail, hospitality and leisure services in the UK (ONS, 2013), yet there has been surprisingly little discussion as to whether many of these jobs actually require higher level qualifications or, indeed, how far their holders are given opportunities to use the skills they already have.

Although much has been made of the enhanced role afforded to lower level managers in terms of the devolvement of budgets and responsibilities for performance and 'leadership' (Dopson and Stewart, 1990; Grugulis et al., 2011; Hales, 2005), these managers remain somewhat neglected in the service work literature (Lopez, 2010). Recent studies have sought to address this gap by exploring 'the realities of managerial work' in retail and hospitality (Bolton and Houlihan, 2010; Felstead et al., 2011; Grugulis et al., 2011: 193). A central theme is the 'powerlessness' of front-line managers in relation to the extensive controls wielded by head office, their lack of real autonomy and the competing demands they face from senior management, service workers and customers.

These insights are extended in this article through research into the new expanding sector of coffee shop and sandwich outlets (collectively referred to as cafes throughout), and by adopting an approach that focuses on both the nature of the role and job quality.

The article draws initially upon a conceptualization of managers as agents of capital (Armstrong, 1989), and explores the contradictory demands managers face in the service sector (Bolton and Houlihan, 2010). Comparative case studies of 10 organizations are used to examine the extent to which lower level managers are able to exercise discretion, autonomy and initiative within different elements of their role and, within these constraints, what scope they have to influence store performance. The research also considers the linked issues of status, rewards and skills, and the potential benefits of upskilling through graduate level qualifications.

The article begins with the existing literature on the nature of management roles and discusses its relevance to line managers in the hospitality sector. A brief background to the cafe sector is then provided, followed by a description of the research methods. The main part of the article presents the findings from workplace interviews before concluding with a discussion of the nature of managerial work in the sector, and the potential implications for skills policy.

Service work and the first line manager

The first issue that needs to be addressed is how to conceptualize the role of the first line manager? The group of interest in this article are those whom Hales and Nightingale describe as unit managers responsible for 'managing a single, definable, unit operation' (1986: 8). Unit managers are somewhat different from departmental managers in a supermarket or first line managers in a large workplace as there are no higher level managers present and their areas of responsibility are clearly demarcated in terms of the unit and the staff they manage. Cafe managers are likely to have far more in common with managers of a small retail outlet, making it difficult to locate their position within much of the existing research, given its focus on larger workplaces.

Two main areas of literature potentially provide a useful starting point for conceptualizing their role and the central tensions within it. The first begins from a critique of those who theorize 'management' as another form of wage labour within the labour process. Armstrong (1989) argues that managers operate in an agency relationship with capital, employed primarily to control labour and secure the conditions for valorization and accumulation. It is this unique positioning that defines the 'generic character to managerial practices' (Thompson, 2005: 165). 'Management', however, is not a monolithic entity, being comprised of different levels and strata with competing and varied access to decision-making power and resources. Lower level managers, claims Edwards (2010), may share interests with those they manage, in that their jobs are dependent on decisions made higher up in the organization (see also Lopez, 2010), but they also have a different set of interests. As managers, they are 'driven by their ability to meet, as agents of other managers, their performance targets by controlling the work of others' (Edwards, 2010: 34).

For those at the top of the hierarchy a key problem is how to ensure that managers lower down 'make decisions which are in the interests of ownership' (Armstrong, 1989: 311). A central contradiction, argues Armstrong, is that the resources required to sustain the trust and loyalty of managers (and, therefore, performance) throughout the hierarchy can be expensive. These costs provide incentives for senior managers/owners to seek out partial alternatives based on tighter forms of control and performance management. This

type of analysis might suggest that as we see greater numbers drawn into lower level managerial roles in the UK, the traditional rewards and status associated with these positions are likely to come under increasing pressure. Shifting to tighter control mechanisms, however, has its own set of problems insofar as it can lead to unsatisfying roles and reduces the ability of lower level managers to respond to local challenges and opportunities. As Hyman (1987: 30) stresses, 'there is no "one best way" of managing these contradictions, only different routes to partial failure'.

It is also useful to draw on recent developments in the critical service work literature. Here, the focus of analysis has been on highlighting the difficulties that organizations confront in balancing a different set of contradictions around efficiency/cost and service quality, and its implications for front line workers (Korczynski, 2002; Taylor and Bain, 1999). With the customer entering the labour process as a 'third' party alongside the worker and manager, these tensions are played out during everyday service exchanges (Leidner, 1993). In many of these studies, Bolton and Houlihan (2010: 379, 381) claim, the first line manager is treated as a rather 'ghostlike' figure and little more than a 'proxy for organisation'. Emphasizing the need to come to terms with their 'lived experience', Bolton and Houlihan appear to conceptualize the role, less as an agency of capital, and more as a 'mediator of the often divergent interests of employees, senior management and customers' (2010: 378). Hales and Nightingale (1986: 10) similarly stress the 'mass of competing, often contradictory or conflicting demands and expectations' arising from senior managers, co-managers, supervisors, workers and customers. In addition, for Bolton and Houlihan (2010: 388), first line managers are distinctive in that they are 'more intimately involved in "production" – especially the *co-production* of customer satisfaction'.

This article draws on both of the above approaches to explore the role of the unit manager in the cafe sector. In addition, there are a small number of empirical studies that highlight the pressures on many middle and lower level managers for performance improvements and consider whether their work is being routinized (Ritzer, 1993). Computer information systems and the standardization of processes across a range of manufacturing and service industries has helped to render the performance of individual units more transparent, with local managers held accountable for results (Dopson and Stewart, 1990; Sisson and Purcell, 2010). While some evidence across manufacturing and local government organizations indicates a widening span of control, increased responsibilities and the need to acquire broader knowledge of the business (McCann et al., 2008), others have stressed that greater accountability has been associated with limited authority (Delbridge and Lowe, 1997). Hospitality managers, for example, perceive that increased competition and more demanding customers are requiring them to 'be more productive and efficient and control costs' (Gilbert and Guerrier, 2006: 122).

Concern over declining managerial autonomy is a feature of a number of retailing and hospitality studies. Gilbert and Guerrier (2006: 123) argue that more rigid branding has led to 'less scope for managers to demonstrate personal initiative and decision making', while standardized processes have meant 'greater rigidity' and 'control'. Commenting on managers in one major supermarket, Storey et al. (1997: 202) note that it is difficult to say whether they are more tightly controlled than before as 'the whole mode of control has changed'. It has become 'more considered, more sophisticated and perhaps more subtle; it has, in short, been rationalized and routinized'. Similarly, Hales (2001: 53)

claims that much organizational change has 'entailed an *intensification* not a departure from bureaucratic controls', as 'centrally-imposed rules' on managerial behaviour are replaced by a stronger focus on 'results rather than processes'. However, Keep and Mayhew (1999: 11) argue that processes have not escaped centralization:

> In much of the service economy the core organisational competences . . . are located in the purchasing, logistics and marketing functions within the head office. Store managers . . . are reduced to ciphers with minimal discretion who implement detailed plans and formulae created by a small band of high level experts.

Bolton and Houlihan (2010: 388), drawing upon interviews undertaken in a range of service contexts, stress the 'powerlessness' of front-line managers, as their ability to resolve structural failings and problems pertaining to service delivery is frequently undermined by lack of resources, limited budgets and the centralization of decision-making within head office. Although these managers may lack power, they are not without 'agency' as their role involves 'the enactment of local knowledge: the negotiation and mediation of worker frustrations, the improvisation in the ways of managing the customer, and the expert balancing of competing priorities' (2010: 397–398).

Empirically-based studies of retail have also drawn attention to the limited autonomy afforded to lower level managers. Grugulis et al. (2011: 194) provide a graphic account of how even managers of large supermarket outlets are afforded little scope for discretion, 'with ordering, product ranges, stock levels, store layouts, pricing, special offers and staffing policies all set out by respective functional divisions at head office'. Individual managers' performance is also intensively monitored in respect of 'sales, profit and customer service scores'. While managers would revel in the exercise of 'small freedoms', such as ordering more salad items on a hot day, in most cases such practices 'were heavily discouraged officially and many were formally denied' (Grugulis et al., 2011: 204). In another study, Felstead et al., (2011: 41) report some scope for supermarket managers to use their locally 'situated knowledge' to make effective adjustments to the ordering process, provided they could convince head office of its efficacy. Ultimately, however, there were few ways 'in which hierarchical relations can be influenced, challenged or resisted' (Fuller et al., 2009: 116, 118).

While these studies support the 'powerlessness' argument, Grugulis et al. (2011) found a somewhat different story when it came to people management. Many of the supermarket managers in their study bought into the 'leadership rhetoric' espoused by head office, accepting that it was their role to enthuse employees by 'driving the right attitude' (2011: 204–208). Nevertheless, much of the role came down to following rules and traditional forms of staff monitoring, although store managers could hire and fire (see also Hales, 2001), and lower level managers had responsibility for deciding the distribution of hours. Indeed, the allocation of hours and contracts has been seen as one area in which managers can 'performance manage' their staff. Leidner (1993: 62) showed how McDonald's' managers used hours as a mechanism to reward or punish workers. More recently, a study by Lambert and Henly (2012) found that outlet managers of a major US retailer had some 'discretionary space' when it came to the allocation of hours and contracts, which could be used to improve work schedules for employees. However, cost-containment pressures

limited this space, leading to almost all managers giving the 'the best schedules to workers with a record of strong performance and wide availability' (2012: 152).

Although the depiction of managers as a mere 'cipher' of higher-order decisions (Keep and Mayhew, 1999) has been questioned by these findings, their fundamental 'powerlessness' in relation to higher level management remains an abiding theme. For lower level managers, a 'trust and loyalty' approach (Armstrong, 1989) appears to have been largely marginalized in favour of rigid performance management and control systems. Furthermore, if it is the case that lower level managers have little space for the exercise of high level knowledge, judgement and analytical skills, then serious questions arise about the performance benefits that could be achieved by government and industry bodies' recommendations for more graduate level employees (People 1st, 2009; UKCES, 2011).

First line managers, as noted above, are a heterogeneous group; a manager of a supermarket with 200 employees indicates a different scale of responsibilities and relationships with more senior management to a cafe manager with only 20 staff. Therefore, it is only through detailed empirical research that we can develop a fuller picture of the tensions and contradictions within low level managerial work as it manifests itself within particular service contexts. The cafe sector is largely unstudied and an area of growing employment particularly amongst the large chains. Using new empirical data, the research focuses on the levels of discretion available to cafe managers and how arrangements in different organizations may impede or encourage localized performance improvements. This article also examines broader aspects of managerial job quality by probing the status and rewards associated with these positions. Even if these jobs were to make few demands in terms of higher level skills, there is still the question of whether they might offer reasonably well-paid employment and opportunities for social mobility.[3]

The UK cafe sector

The UK cafe sector comprises 'branded coffee chains', such as Starbucks, Costa Coffee and Caffè Nero, alongside cafes operating within supermarkets and department stores and a mass of small, independently-owned establishments. The branded sector expanded rapidly from the mid-1990s, with the number of outlets growing from around 800 in 1999 to over 3000 in 2011 (Allegra Strategies, 2010), and currently accounts for 87 percent of the specialist coffee shop market (Keynote, 2012). These chains are becoming large employers, with the top four brands having over 2500 outlets (Mintel, 2011) with close to 20,000 workers in 2010. While the sandwich bar sub-sector remains more fragmented with large numbers of independents, the big chains, such as Greggs, Subway and Pret A Manger, have experienced rapid growth. Greggs, the market leader, has over 1240 outlets and 19,000 employees, while Subway, which is operated on a franchise-basis, has around 1100 stores.

As with retail and hospitality in general, the cafe sector is characterized by low pay, relatively high levels of labour turnover, and a workforce comprised mainly of students, migrants and 'women returners' (People 1st, 2009). The growth of the big chains has seen a decline in the numbers of owner/managers and an expansion of outlet managers who are at the lowest level of managerial hierarchies. A brief examination of job

advertisements provides an insight into companies' depictions of what is expected from those undertaking these positions. Most emphasize responsibilities in terms of leading a team, maintaining service standards, meeting targets and ensuring the financial success of the unit. An advertisement for a manager with Costa Coffee expects the successful candidate to be 'almost fanatical about driving your store forwards'. It goes on to promise 'freedom' and 'autonomy' in the role, adding:

> Although we'll give you support, you'll have the freedom to suggest and implement your own ideas, taking into account your customers, team and shareholder targets. We'll give you the chance to work in a high performance environment with clear balanced targets and the autonomy to achieve excellence.

Subway, a franchise sandwich chain, looks for managers who will 'maintain a high quality of store operations, analyse financial performance, ensure customer satisfaction, and maintain sandwich quality. You will lead and motivate the team to ensure the financial success of the business'. However, an online advertisement for a store manager in East London hints at the more mundane aspects of the job, stating that the person appointed 'must be able to work in any area of the restaurant when needed', and that 'the position requires bending, standing and walking the entire workday . . . and the ability to lift 10 pounds frequently and up to 30 pounds occasionally'. Greggs, the largest bakery/sandwich shop chain, adopts more paternalistic language, referring to store managers as 'the head of our little family', adding that 'this is management at its most practical': 'you'll need to roll your sleeves up, get involved in food preparation and make sure the shop is clean, hygienic and welcoming. Of course, that's on top of all the admin jobs you'd expect a manager to have.' These job adverts provide a short illustration of the dual nature of the managerial role that is presented; leadership and influence on the one hand, but also hard manual work on the other.

Research methods

The research aimed to examine the role of the unit manager in the UK cafe sector, focusing on issues of autonomy, status and job quality. A qualitative research method, designed around multiple case studies and semi-structured interviews, was seen as a particularly appropriate way of exploring these issues in depth. The selection of sites was based on units located in the Midlands that sold food and non-alcoholic drinks, primarily sandwiches and tea/coffee, with a seated area for onsite consumption. While access was occasionally arranged via direct contact with headoffices, in most cases it was negotiated with local managers through 'walk-in' requests.[4] The research for this article draws on 10 organizations,[5] comprising outlets from four leading branded coffee shops (Coffee1, Coffee2, Coffee3 and Coffee4); a large sandwich chain (Sandwichco); an outsourced department store cafe (Retailco); an airport cafe (Airportco) operated by a multi-national company; two cafe/bakery chains (Bakery1 and Bakery2) and a newly established cafe opened by a small regional supplier of high-end bread products (Newcafé).

The research was designed to examine managerial work within the context of the specific unit and organization, through a multiple perspectives method aimed at eliciting

the views of both unit managers and the individuals they managed. In each case, interviews were conducted with the outlet manager (with the exception of Coffee4) and a selection of assistant managers, supervisors and cafe assistants. While much of the data reported here was provided by managers, their staff were also able to give their own assessment about the rules stemming from head office and the scope for local discretion. They also contributed to a more rounded picture of the 'people management' aspect of the cafe manager's job so as to avoid taking managerial accounts at face value. Details of interviews are provided in Table 1. The interviews took place either in the public area of the cafe or in a separate room, such as the manager's office. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed in full and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes with managers, and between 20 and 30 minutes with non-managerial staff. This was supplemented with unstructured observation during periods spent in the cafe prior to, and in-between, the formal interviews. The article reports on data from 45 interviews conducted between April and June 2010.

Semi-structured interviews were based on separate interview schedules for managers and other grades of staff. Interviews with outlet managers covered personal histories of entry and progression in the sector, the nature of the company, product, competitive environment and labour market, job role and tasks, issues of performance management, and relations with staff and head office. The interviews focused on the extent of managerial autonomy available at unit level over a range of issues relating to product, service delivery and staffing. Interviews with workers explored their experience of the job, including their relationship with management and levels of unit autonomy, with their responses used primarily to assess the validity of managerial accounts. The data were analysed thematically in accordance with the central research questions.

The next two sections report on the key findings from the data. First, some background information on the managers is provided, including their qualification levels and time within the industry. The article then turns to examine their pay levels and the composition and balance of tasks that make up the role. Second, a more detailed analysis is undertaken of the scope available for managers to exercise autonomy and influence over decisions relating to their unit.

The managers and their jobs

Of the nine managers interviewed (see Table 1), six were women, all but one were aged over 35, and all worked full time. Seven of these managers were white British-born, one was a relatively recent migrant from New Zealand and only one was from a minority ethnic group, born in Pakistan, and having lived in Britain for 12 years. Typical of the hospitality workforce, only two managers (both from overseas) had degree-level qualifications, and five had no or low-level qualifications. Tenure as a manager ranged from less than a year (Airportco) to over 10 years (Bakery1). Managers, regardless of qualification and background, had all progressed from entry level positions in the hospitality industry, before working their way up. Four were recruited internally, while the other five had moved from managerial positions in other organizations within the industry.

In terms of pay, all managers except two were salaried. The lowest paid manager, at Sandwichco, received an hourly wage of £6.25, just 45 pence above the National

Table 1. Case study organizations and manager characteristics.

Company	Market	Interviews	Profile of manager interviewed	Qualifications	Years in post	Years in hospitality industry (UK)
Coffee1 (3 outlets)	Branded coffee chain	1 manager 2 assistant managers 2 supervisors 3 cafe assistants	Woman mid-30s UK born	A Levels HND (arts)	2	6
Coffee2	Branded coffee chain	1 manager 1 supervisor 1 cafe assistant	Woman late-20s New Zealand born	Degree	2	4
Coffee3	Branded coffee chain	1 manager 1 supervisor 2 cafe assistants	Woman 40s UK born	11 CSEs	3.5	20+
Coffee4 (2 outlets)	Branded coffee chain	2 supervisors 2 cafe assistants	NA	NA	NA	NA
Airportco (2 outlets)	Branded coffee chain	1 manager 2 supervisors 3 cafe assistants	Man 40s Pakistan born	Degree	0.7	12
Sandwichco (2 outlets)	Franchise sandwich bar	1 manager 2 supervisors 3 cafe assistants	Man mid-30s UK born	None	9	11
Bakery1	Large bakery/ sandwich chain	1 manager 1 supervisor 2 cafe assistants	Woman 40s UK born	CSEs Basic cookery certificate	13	20+
Bakery2	Medium-sized bakery/ sandwich chain	1 manager 1 assistant manager 1 cafe assistant	Woman 50s UK born	None	10	20+

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Company	Market	Interviews	Profile of manager interviewed	Qualifications	Years in post	Years in hospitality industry (UK)
Newcafé	Independent up-market cafe	1 manager 2 cafe assistants	Man 40s UK born	NVQ 2 butchery	0.6	20+
Retailco	Subcontracted cafe large department store	1 manager 1 assistant manager 2 cafe assistants	Woman 40s UK born	A Levels NVQ 3 management	5	20+

Minimum Wage, while the other hourly paid manager at Bakery2 was earning £8. Most other managers received a salary of between £16,000 and £18,000 depending on the size of operations, with the highest pay found to be £25,000 for an experienced manager at Coffee1, with a potential bonus of £5000 on top. Seven of the 10 organizations used performance-related bonuses, which could typically increase annual earnings by two to three thousand pounds.

Management pay in these cafes was mostly towards the lower end of pay rates for managers across the restaurant and catering sector, where median pay for full-time establishment managers and proprietors was £20,908 in 2011 (Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings [ASHE], 2011). Median pay rates for managers in the sector compare poorly with the average UK wage for all full-time employees of £26,095, placing them in the bottom third of the earnings distribution (ASHE, 2011[6]). Nevertheless, evidence from the managers interviewed indicates that there is substantial variation in pay rates, even within fairly similar organizations. Pay was unrelated to qualifications, which, irrespective of whether these were academic or vocational, were generally seen as irrelevant to securing a managerial position.

The cafe manager's role typically included ordering, checking stock levels, receiving deliveries, cashing up/banking money, handling customer complaints, giving refunds, meeting targets, liaising with senior management, recruiting and helping to train new staff, managing the team, completing staff rotas, undertaking performance reviews, serving customers, cleaning and generally overseeing the operation of the unit. These activities are not dissimilar to those identified by Bolton and Houlihan (2010: 387), where a comparable picture of 'multi-tasking, intensity and competing priorities emerges'. However, the precise 'job spec' varied across different organizations, both in terms of the specific tasks included within the role and the proportion of working time spent on them. The manager of the independent cafe, as would be expected, had the greatest variety of tasks and responsibilities, while the manager of the franchised sandwich chain had the least as even the recruitment, promotion and disciplining of staff was undertaken by the owners. The size of the workforce they managed also varied, ranging from five to 24 (see Table 2), although staffing levels do not necessarily reflect the turnover of the cafe due to the different mix of full-time and part-time workers.

Nevertheless, despite this array of tasks, a significant part of the job involved performing many of the same *routine* tasks as those whom they supervised. In the branded coffee shops, running the shift and opening/closing was generally the responsibility of the supervisor, but managers would often step in and help out with service during busy periods. The amount of time that all the managers worked 'on the bar' was considerable and usually accounted for the bulk of their working time. The most extreme case was the manager of Coffee2 who claimed she was spending:

> . . . probably 95 percent of my time . . . on the bar working as a member of staff, the other 5 percent is like staff management, recruitment, training, financial, the financial side of the business, so stock takes, keeping records, checking everything. (Manager, Coffee2)

The manager of Bakery2 explained how, in addition to recruiting, training and managing staff and having overall responsibility for the store, she would spend the majority of

Table 2. Cafe managers, pay and performance.

	Manager pay (typical or actual* 2010)[1]	Key targets	Mystery shoppers	Manager recruits unit staff	Manager influence on pay	Number of staff in outlet
Coffee1	£18–£25k + bonus	Sales, hours, health and safety	Yes	Yes	None	6
Coffee2	£16k*	Hours	No	Yes	None	8
Coffee3	£17k + bonus	Sales, wages labour turnover	Yes	Yes	Limited	11
Coffee4	£23k + bonus	Sales, profit	Yes	Yes	None	12
Airportco	£16.5k + bonus	Sales, hours, profit	Yes	Yes	None	14
Sandwichco	£13k*	Output/head	Yes	No	None	15
Bakery1	£19.5k + bonus	Sales, hours	No	Yes	None	25
Bakery2	£16.5k*	Sales, hours, wastage	Yes	Yes	None	6
Newcafé	n.d.	None	No	Yes	None	7
Retailco	£18k + bonus	Sales, wages	Yes	Yes	None	14

[1]bonuses range from £0–£7k per year; n.d. = not disclosed.

her time cooking pasties, serving customers, cleaning and washing-up by hand (as there was no dishwasher). At Sandwichco, the manager was responsible for ordering, checking-in deliveries, training and supervising staff, but added: 'We all do the same job . . . You are still serving people, you still sometimes have to prep stuff, the washing up still needs doing, and then you've got to clean the store in the evening.' Even for those managers who spent more time on managerial tasks, it was still the case that 'everybody does everything' (Manager, Bakery1), a view confirmed by a cafe assistant who explained that 'it's all hands-on, even for management'. This was graphically illustrated when the researcher sought out the manager at the end of the visit to thank her, only to find her busy mopping the floor!

In addition to undertaking many similar tasks to the staff they managed, managers were responsible for the performance of the outlet. In all but one case (Newcafé, the independent), the main priority was to meet a specific number of targets set by head office, normally reported weekly, but in two cases daily. The two most important targets were related to sales and labour (see Table 2). Six managers had sales targets to meet in terms of revenue, while at Sandwichco the focus was on selling a specified number of sandwiches per worker per hour. Labour costs were targeted in a variety of ways; as a fixed percentage of sales revenue, an allocation of hours based on sales figures or a specific labour cost target. Other common targets included scores received from 'mystery shoppers', wastage levels and hygiene standards. Managers were generally expected to meet sales targets that were at least as high as the previous year, leading to a widespread feeling that higher level management did not take into account changing conditions, such as the effects of the recession or new competitor stores opening up close-by. The consequences for managers of not meeting targets could be loss of bonus, 'a ticking-off' and cuts in staff numbers or hours. For one manager (Bakery2), the threat was that the shop would close.

As these managers have overall responsibility for a range of performance indicators, how far are they in a position to affect the performance of their unit and over what issues can they exercise managerial control and influence? The next section examines levels of managerial discretion and autonomy in relation to store layout and products, the organization of service delivery and the management of staff.

Discretion and influence

Store layout and products

With the exception of Newcafé, all equipment was purchased, serviced and maintained by head office, and all supplies were ordered from the centre. Store layouts were dictated by the company as part of the 'brandscape', with managers across the chains reporting that this was an area over which they exercised virtually no control. As one commented, 'you can't touch that' (Manager, Coffee1). At Coffee4, even the background music was decided centrally: 'we have a special team of people that are dedicated to putting the CDs together' (Supervisor). In Bakery1 and Bakery2, 'planograms' specified how particular items were to be laid out, including the number of cakes to be placed on each tray and how they were to be positioned and aligned. The manager at Airportco explained how

even the very slightest change to the unit's layout, right down to what went in each fridge and their precise location within the unit, had to be signed-off by their 'brand manager'.

This did not mean, however, that managers always complied with the letter of these prescriptions, occasionally making minor adjustments:

> They give you a plan . . . this is how it should be laid out . . . But in the real world it doesn't necessarily always flow . . . you'll know what works and what doesn't and you'll adjust. (Manager, Coffee3)

The manager of Retailco commented, 'we play with it so that it looks nicer. We move things around a bit but we have, yeah, a standardized [layout], this is how we like our sandwiches to look, this is how we like our counters to look'. While there was some scope to make certain adjustments, such changes were always fairly trivial, with anything more substantive needing to be sanctioned by senior management.

For most managers, it was a similar story with regard to menus and drinks/food preparation, where pricing was set by head office. In three coffee shops, food items were brought in 'pre-packed', with managers only in a position to vary the quantity ordered. At the other outlets, where sandwiches were made on-site, the offering was set by the company with cafe assistants required to abide by extremely strict guidelines, right down to the exact amount of cheese and number of slices of tomato or cucumber that had to be used. At Sandwichco, only if the customer made a specific request were staff permitted to depart from the prescribed formulas specified by the parent company.

There was little opportunity for staff to customize drinks or to try out new ideas of their own, although they were free to forward suggestions to head office. In coffee shops, head office prescribed exactly how the drinks should be made, leaving no opportunity for local variation. As one manager noted, 'Somebody couldn't say "oh I think this drink would work really well, let's try it", we couldn't do that' (Manager, Coffee3). Asked whether staff would be allowed to come up with a new sandwich idea, one manager commented: 'It would make the job more interesting but . . . I don't think they would allow you to do it.' When the manager of another outlet (Airportco) informed the brand manager that there was no vegetarian sandwich on offer, they were promptly provided with a 'spec for cheese and tomato – five slices of tomato and four slices of cheese, two slices cut in half'.

The only organization where there was slightly more opportunity for managers and staff to shape the menu was in the department store cafe where there was 'hot food' available. In this area, they could 'put on new meals . . . making our own stuff in the kitchen' (Manager, Retailco). However, this did not extend to items such as sandwiches or baguettes, where again both the product range and content were centrally prescribed. For the most part, managerial discretion across all but Newcafé (the sole cafe owned by the company) was restricted to deciding which items sold best and how much to order in from a range of fixed options determined by head office.

Some managers were prepared to ignore head office instructions where they felt there was a sound case for doing so. The manager of Bakery2 explained how, together with her

team, she had taken the decision to sell hot turkey and stuffing rolls during the Christmas period, knowing that this risked disciplinary action:

> We knew it, 100 per cent, that they'd go [sell]. The person in head office said 'no you can't do it'. So I just, we tried it . . . I was really naughty like, you know, it doesn't happen often because you will get into trouble but because we proved it, that we could do it, that we cleared it and sold it.

However, such overt breaches of the rules were rare. The manager at Coffee2 had a number of ideas for increasing sales through the promotion of 'trial' drinks but had never suggested them to head office as she believed they would be turned down. Another manager (Coffee3) explained that money could probably be saved by sourcing some supplies locally, but this was not permitted. While managers understood companies' concerns around cost and the need to have a uniform product range with consistent quality across the brand, some also recognized the restrictions this placed upon their own ability to accommodate customer preferences or increase sales.

A number of managers felt they were able to voice their opinions to head office and that these were generally respected. One branded coffee shop manager commented: 'We have an open door policy in head office. You can ring up the chairman of the whole company if you want and just walk into his office and sit down and talk about your problems . . .' (Manager, Coffee1). A couple of managers identified instances where they could negotiate changes with senior management, usually by building a relationship with their area manager. However, the scope to do so was often limited. Elsewhere, there was a feeling that senior management was more distant and largely unreceptive to the ideas of both management and staff. The manager of Bakery2 explained how it could 'take months' before head office would come to a decision, while the chances of 'them' listening to 'our' suggestions were considered remote.

The organization of service delivery

In the branded coffee shop chains, service delivery is as much a part of the 'brandscape' as the layout and decor of the store, the menu or the uniform worn by its employees. In most cases, when the cafe is busy, 'the bar' is operated as a 'line', with one member of staff taking the order and serving food items, another preparing drinks and someone else taking the final payment at the till. In some cases, head office had simply determined that this is the way service must be delivered on grounds of speed and efficiency (Coffee2, Coffee3 and Coffee4). Staff were only allowed to switch to one-to-one service during quieter periods. As one manager commented, 'it originally came from head office. I know when I was trained that was the way I was trained and it was in the manuals that we had' (Coffee2). In one of the other branded chains (Coffee1), the model was for a member of staff to serve the customer throughout the entire process. The expectation was that they would serve 'two customers at once' by taking the next order while finishing up the previous one, thereby offering an efficient but 'more personal' service.

A key mechanism for control of both managers and cafe assistants in service delivery was through the use of 'mystery shoppers' directed by head office. In a number of cases, these scores affected the bonuses of the managers, but also shaped the nature of the service that was required. Although the use of set phrases or scripts was avoided,

typical requirements included greeting the customer, asking them about both food and drink products, upselling and ensuring that promotional items were offered. The attitude of the staff, the length of the queue and speed of service were also crucially important, with one cafe having targets on the maximum time any customer should wait. These regular 'spot checks' also ensured that managers were following the brand requirements and service standards. The monitoring enacted through 'mystery shoppers' was not generally considered to be a problem, however, with comments from the managers, such as: 'somebody coming to see if you are doing your job correctly' (Coffee3), 'a good thing, it keeps the staff more alert' (Bakery1).

Some managers referred to situations where lack of resources or support from senior management could impede their ability to meet targets and deliver the kind of service they wanted. The manager of Coffee1, while believing passionately in the company's one-to-one service model, acknowledged that the company was simply 'too tight' on staffing for it to function properly:

> . . . it would work fantastically well, if we always had a third person on . . . we're stretched yeah . . . they [the company] don't take account that one is going to be left on the bar when another person goes and has a break . . . which affects customer service, then there's cups all over the tables.

The manager at Coffee2 also complained that it had become very difficult to grow the business because there was not enough staff.

An assistant manager at Bakery2 referred to system failures that impeded their ability to meet customer demands, in particular the way the till was programmed and the lack of flexibility when it came to giving customers what they wanted, even if this was a simple request for a jam sandwich:

> I mean you are told you can only do this or you can only do that, but when you've got customers coming in and they ask for things and you've got to keep saying 'I'm really sorry, I can't do that'. We haven't got the facility to be able to change anything because our tills are programmed from head office.

While some managers emphasized the quality of the equipment and the speed of repairs, others faced long delays and machinery that was not up to scratch. At Coffee2, the manager referred to the shabby decor and the scratched wooden floor, which made it more difficult to attract customers. A leaking pipe in the downstairs area meant that staff were 'having to work in and mop up water all the time'. With head office responsible for these issues, the manager lacked any budget to resolve them, but was still expected to deal with the consequences.

Managing staff

The one area where cafe managers did exercise some control was over staffing issues. Across the case studies, all but one manager confirmed that this was where they felt they had most freedom and responsibility. The one exception was the manager of Sandwichco where recruitment, pay, promotion and dismissal were undertaken by the franchise owners, labour management issues having been effectively 'outsourced' by the multi-national

parent organization. Generally speaking, managers could hire who they wanted, although only one claimed to have any influence as to where employees could be placed on a pay scale:

> If I was to go to my RDM [regional district manager] and say this person is worth £7.50 an hour [for an assistant manager] and I don't care what you say, this is how much I want to pay them, this is the reason why, he would trust my judgement. (Manager, Coffee3)

For three of the branded coffee chains and Airportco, training was relatively systematic with company 'workbooks' detailing the various areas new staff needed to learn, and managers expected to 'sign-off' these components when completed. There was more input into developing and mentoring those in assistant manager and supervisory positions who were looking to take up a managerial post. At the other cafes, managers had a more hands-on approach to training new staff alongside other more experienced workers. Again, this mainly took the form of fairly rudimentary on-the-job training, such as showing staff how to operate equipment or make up food items. At Bakery1, even the training had to be signed-off by the area manager. In addition, an online company test had just been introduced for applicants, reducing the unit manager's discretion over recruitment. The manager explained that while she was required to undertake regular reviews of the service provided by individual members of staff, only the area manager could give the highest grade. Although managers generally had some oversight over or role in training, they did not hold a training budget, and any external courses required prior approval from head office.

Managers exercised very limited control over staffing levels. Typically, forecasted sales were used to determine the budget available for staffing during a given period. One manager explained how she could 'stretch it a bit, if I speak to my area manager and say look we are guaranteed to take this much if I can have more staff' (Manager, Coffee1). However, normally when sales were up managers could use additional staff hours, but when sales dropped hours had to be cut accordingly. While hours were generally fixed, managers were responsible for recruiting workers, as well as deciding on the type of contracts provided and the subsequent allocation of shifts and hours. The use of part-time contracts for non-managerial staff was common practice within many of the companies and given both to workers who wanted these hours and to those who would have preferred more. In some of the cafes, nominally full-time workers were on 15 or 20 hours contracts, allowing their hours to be reduced if sales slowed.

The distribution of shifts and hours provided managers with a means to both reward and punish staff members. Some managers sought to accommodate individual needs, attempting to fit shifts around childcare arrangements, educational and other commitments where possible. Others appeared to vary individual staff hours to meet more directly their targets: two managers (Coffee1 and Sandwichco) stated that they regularly sent individuals home if the cafe was quiet. The manager at Coffee3 claimed that having people who 'can up and reduce their hours' is 'ideal for me' and that the staff 'are quite happy'. Two cafe assistants on short-hours contracts, however, described a far from happy experience. One complained of regularly being given fewer hours than the 30 that were promised when recruited and that they fluctuated on a weekly basis. She also had concerns about the way her manager treated the staff in front of the customers and her lack of respite from lifting duties following a work-related injury. However, she felt that if she complained her hours would be cut, insisting 'nobody has a say, we have to do as

we are told and get on with it'. Another staff member commented that 'keeping in' with the manager was crucial: 'I couldn't get the sack, but she will do it in a kind of way of minimizing my hours, that's how it works here'.

As with Grugulis et al.'s (2011) supermarket managers, most of the cafe managers felt they had considerable autonomy when it came to how they managed their team: 'I've got a lot of autonomy with my style of managing' (Manager, Coffee1). Some appeared to buy into their organization's leadership rhetoric, accepting that it was their role to lead and motivate their team to provide excellent service. This approach was particularly apparent for those seeking, and hoping to achieve, advancement within their organization (e.g. Coffee1, Coffee3, Airportco). The manager at Coffee1 took it upon herself to bring along a bottle of wine to a monthly team meeting and 'give like a £30 voucher to the barista who had been fantastic that month'. A number of managers emphasized the importance of 'mucking in' and leading by example as they undertook the same tasks as the cafe assistants.

Consistent with Bolton and Houlihan's (2010) findings, cafe managers often had to mediate between head office and their staff. For some, the company was supportive in building a positive relationship (such as Coffee1, Coffee4 and Bakery1). In the case of Bakery1, successful sales promotions could see staff rewarded with bottles of wine, chocolates or gift vouchers. However, in other companies, staff felt they were simply not valued by senior management (Coffee2, Coffee3, Retailco, Airportco, Sandwichco). The job of the outlet manager is certainly made more difficult when there is a general inability of higher level managers to praise staff, thank them for their efforts or simply provide a Christmas bonus or present (beyond a cheap box of chocolates from Poundland as was offered in one case!).

There were a couple of cases where the managers found the relationship with more senior management particularly difficult. The manager at Sandwichco had 'given up' after becoming disillusioned with the pay and the way he had been treated by the owners. Another (Baker2) explained how some evenings, after 'receiving a ticking off from head office', she would go home feeling 'I can't do it again . . . you can't do nothing right'. It was her commitment to the team that made her continue in the job. The lack of trust placed in herself and the staff by head office was graphically illustrated by the assumption that if their 'cogs were out' (i.e. the alignment of sales, supplies and waste figures) this was because staff had, as the company spreadsheet pinned to the wall stated, 'nicked' (stolen) the ingredients.

While many of the staff interviewed were supportive of their local managers, this does not imply that the relationship is always unproblematic. In several of the study sites, tensions were clearly apparent. At Retailco, following just one poor mystery shopper score, the manager formally disciplined the worker concerned causing resentment about the process and response. In other cases, workers were unhappy that managers were given bonuses for the group's success while they received nothing. There were also a few issues of 'favouritism' in promotion and lack of fair treatment. For most managers, people management revolved around old-fashioned 'performance-oriented supervision' (Hales, 2005), ensuring that staff were pulling their weight, 'making sure they were doing the right thing' (Manager, Airportco) and, at their best, supporting their 'team' in what can be a busy and pressurized environment.

The cafe managers in this study, with the exception of Newcafé (the sole company outlet), exercised limited discretion in relation to layout, products, pricing, pay and staffing levels, all of which were determined centrally by head office and/or the outlet owners. The main area of control was over issues relating to the management of staff.

Discussion and conclusion

The article has explored the design and quality of cafe managers' jobs in the UK in order to probe the purported benefits that industry bodies argue would derive from a managerial workforce endowed with graduate-level qualifications. The research found a number of similarities in the job tasks of cafe managers and the nature and extent of discretion, as well as some variation across organizations, particularly in relation to rewards, prospects and relations with head office. Although none of these jobs could be considered 'high paid', there are some significant contrasts. One only has to compare the emerging 'star manager' of Coffee1 with a salary of £25,000, who was on a 'fast track' to promotion and who believed she could voice any concerns to head office, with her equivalent at Sandwichco. He earned little more than the minimum wage, felt he was trapped in a job with no progression and had learnt to keep quiet and do as he was told. Similarly, there are differences in the balance and composition of tasks and how much time is spent on managerial duties relative to working 'on the bar'.

A distinctive feature of these jobs is that the managers are involved directly in the labour process of cafe work, taking on a position of 'worker' in relation to the customer. However, even for those managers who appear to be little more than 'glorified baristas',[7] they are not co-workers in the sense of operating in the same relationship with other workers, as they continue to perform a monitoring role even when undertaking the same tasks. While some other studies (e.g. Lopez, 2010) emphasize the potential for 'interest coalition' between line management and workers against senior management, and there is some evidence of this, for most of the managers in this study, worker performance was central to their role. Most identify with the company and their position as a 'manager', even if there are some disagreements over the approach of senior management and limited evidence of trust and rewards (Armstrong, 1989) traditionally associated with managerial positions.

Conceptually, is it helpful to view these jobs as 'management' or are they better classified as non-managerial positions with some supervisory roles? The variation across the organizations suggests that drawing a boundary between managerial and non-managerial jobs is far from easy. For those 'managers' who do not hire and fire, nor have their pay and prospects linked to the performance of those they manage, they would be better described and analysed as non-managerial employees in all but name (e.g. in Sandwichco). At the other end, there are those who recruit and promote, and who are completely responsible for performance managing staff, delivering budgets and meeting targets linked to their own bonus payments and progression opportunities. It is hard not to conclude that they are managers, and that it is helpful to theorize their role in terms of the contradictions in the agency relationship, even if their scope for discretion and local decision making around products and processes is extremely limited. There are other jobs in-between that are more difficult to categorize, made more complex by the sheer amount of time they spend undertaking the same tasks as those they manage.

What might be said about the scope available to these managers to impact on performance? The main finding from the research is that cafe manager jobs are extremely limited in terms of autonomy and decision-making influence. Built around mass standardization, the system resembles Mintzberg's (1983) 'machine bureaucracy' and is essentially designed to be innovation proof at workplace level. Key strategic decisions are concentrated in head office, with scant space for managers or workers to make incremental improvements in either products or processes in the workplace. The widening 'span of control' and increasing knowledge and skill requirements that have been reported for some managers in sectors such as manufacturing and engineering (see McCann et al., 2008) do not apply in the case of these cafe managers who have overall responsibility for the unit but lack control over key decisions. These findings resonate with the more recent work in the retail sector, where store managers are required to meet a range of performance targets yet have limited local autonomy (Felstead et al., 2011; Grugulis et al., 2011).

Unsurprisingly, a common complaint from cafe managers in this study is that 'the system' is too rigid, and does not allow sufficient scope to accommodate individual customer preferences or local differences. Some managers believe that they could improve the performance of their cafe if they were allowed greater control over, for example, supplies, products, service delivery and staffing levels. The frustrations felt by these managers point to a central contradiction in the hierarchical relationship. Affording managers more control over resources and decision making could potentially yield performance gains for the organization. However, the risk is that while some managers might be successful and use this space to boost profit, others may simply increase costs and risk damaging the brand. In addition, more autonomous local managers might expect commensurate improvements in rewards and would be more difficult and costly to replace. The benefits of local flexibility, therefore, appear to have been over-ridden by the desire to ensure consistency of performance and ease of measurement of individual units, alongside a uniform customer experience. These considerations make it unlikely that organizations will experiment with more autonomous local management as long as the prevailing model continues to yield reasonable profits. Senior management did not form part of this study and further research from their perspective would be useful to explore the relative importance of these different factors.

These findings do not suggest, however, that these managers are completely devoid of any ability 'to make a difference' in the workplace. Similar to Grugulis et al.'s (2010: 16–17) supermarket managers, cafe managers have more freedom in respect of people management issues, with some (but not all) buying into the rhetoric of leadership. The importance of a 'well-functioning team' is echoed throughout the interviews with managers, supervisors and cafe assistants. The way in which cafe managers interact with and motivate their team, and the difference between a 'good'/'fair' manager and 'bad'/'unfair' manager, is one that is acutely felt by their staff. It certainly makes a difference to the quality of human relationships and the actual experience of work. The extent to which a 'good' people manager impacts upon overall unit performance remains unclear, and is difficult to disentangle from other factors shaping workers' behaviour, such as pay, working time and progression opportunities (see also Lambert and Henly, 2012). Furthermore, work effort can also be achieved through punitive as well as supportive means.

These findings have important implications in terms of whether raising the qualification levels of these managers is likely to be an effective way of delivering performance gains. With little in these cafe manager jobs that can be considered 'strategic' or that involves autonomous action, it is difficult to envisage what a higher level managerial qualification for this group would consist of, let alone how improving their overall qualifications profile could have a major transformative effect upon productivity and performance. The way in which these jobs have been designed around ensuring the smooth functioning of organizational rules and procedures certainly questions the difference that would be made were all of these managers suddenly to become graduates. As a result, it is hardly surprising that qualifications are not a significant factor when it comes to securing managerial positions in hospitality (see also British Hospitality Association, 2010). These managers' skill needs would appear to be rather basic, such as the sort of personnel management training that is provided in a number of organizations for first line supervisors and that was already included in some of their training. Policy debates, therefore, need to become more nuanced, if the role of skills in relation to productivity and performance is to be understood in its full complexity (see Delbridge et al., 2006; Keep et al., 2006).

This research also raises wider questions about what the catch-all title of 'manager' implies in today's service economy. The continued growth in 'managerial, professional and technical occupations' is often cited as evidence of a general trend towards skills upgrading and as a 'proxy' for the transition to a more knowledge-based economy where increasing numbers of workers have high-skilled, high-paying jobs affording substantial scope for autonomy, creativity and 'authorship'. This study suggests that lower managerial jobs in the cafe sector fall far short of such expectations, and that the label 'manager' can be a misleading one. The proliferation of low-grade managerial jobs, such as 'bar manager', 'train manager', 'petrol station manager' and 'school catering manager', serves only to underline the need for caution when interpreting occupational trend data (see e.g. Holmes and Mayhew, 2012). The picture is certainly variable, but there is evidence that many management roles leave much to be desired in respect of job quality and pay. Further empirical studies that focus on the realities of managerial work on the front line may help to shed light on how far this observation applies to other parts of the mass service economy.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Associate Editor Kim Hoque and the anonymous referees for their comments and advice on earlier versions of this article.

Funding

This research was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (Grant number RES-557-28-5003).

Notes

1. Comparative data are problematic due to differences in the use of job titles and categorizing. Revisions to the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) in 2010 in the UK revised down the proportion of managers from 15 percent. As the Office for National Statistics (ONS)

reported: 'The title "manager" . . . is frequently used in the UK to denote what would be regarded as supervisory or administrative positions in many other countries' (http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/classifications/current-standard-classifications/soc2010/soc2010-volume-1-structure-and-descriptions-of-unit-groups/index.html#7, section 4.4).

2. Level 4 or above (i.e. at least a degree, higher national diploma or equivalent).
3. The British Hospitality Association (2010: 16) argues: 'We want to see the industry held out as a great vehicle for social mobility . . . it is a huge engine for recruiting people with few or no qualifications and giving the chance to progress.'
4. Around two in five 'walk in' requests were turned down usually on grounds of insufficient time. These refusals were more likely to be in independent cafes, leading to an underrepresentation of these types of organizations.
5. Pseudonyms are used in all cases.
6. ASHE 2011 is used for comparative purposes as it is based on SOC2010, which introduces a specific occupational group for unit level managers and proprietors. The data were collected in February of that year. Given that pay increases are often made in April, the figures are unlikely to be out of line with salary data collected in the field from April to June 2010.
7. In 2004, two US Starbucks outlet managers filed a law suit against the company in Florida for failing to pay overtime when working in excess of 40 hours a week. The plaintiffs argued that they spent the majority of their time performing 'the same routine tasks' of making coffee, serving customers and cleaning up as non-managerial employees, that they were, in effect, 'glorified baristas', and were entitled to such payments in accordance with Department of Labor legislation. The case was settled in 2008, for an undisclosed amount (see Lindblad, 2011).

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