

# Employer briefing: **SUPPORTING WORKERS IN INSECURE JOBS**

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Research partner:



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## INTRODUCTION

Currently one in five workers (6.2 million) in the UK are in severely insecure work. While insecure work is not inherently good or bad, some forms of insecurity can contribute to higher risk of job loss, lower financial wellbeing, poor health outcomes and lower access to important employment rights.

At a time of staff shortages and record levels of long-term sickness, a healthy and happy workforce can be a competitive advantage. Analysis by the Work Foundation at Lancaster University and the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) demonstrates that good management practice can play a critical role in people's experience of insecure work and that specific management choices and behaviours can mitigate some of the negative impacts of insecure employment.

Individual senior leaders and line managers will face different opportunities and challenges in supporting employees in insecure jobs depending on their organisation, its sector and business model. Our research shows that certain groups are more likely to be affected by the negative impacts of insecure work – such as women, young workers, disabled people, and people from ethnic minorities – and insecure work is more prevalent in certain sections such as social care, hospitality, retail and construction.

Building on findings set out in recently published research – [Managing Insecurity: The role of good management](#) – this employer briefing aims to provide advice to support insecure workers in your organisation. It includes:

### Advice for senior leaders

1. Monitor and evaluate the scale of job insecurity in your organisation
2. Engage with your workforce through listening and consultation exercises
3. Introduce policies to improve predictability of shifts and working hours
4. Invest in training your line managers to support workers in insecure work.

### Advice for line managers

1. Offer as much certainty around working hours and shift patterns as possible
2. Improve communication with colleagues
3. Use your managerial oversight to support your team
4. Look for opportunities to improve your management skills.



At the Work Foundation, we are interested in tackling structural inequalities in the labour market and job insecurity is an area we are undertaking research on. We would be keen to hear from senior leaders and line managers who are interested in the ways they can support their workforce. Please feel free to get in touch with us at [info@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:info@lancaster.ac.uk).

## How to use this briefing

This briefing offers practical actions for senior leaders and managers to help them implement managerial practices that support workers on insecure contracts.

The term 'manager' can have many meanings for different people. In our research, we use the following definitions:

- **Line managers:** Junior to mid-level managers who supervise more than one insecure worker and who have contact with them on a daily basis, but who do not have the power to shape an organisation's policies or strategies.
- **Senior leaders:** Individuals that have the power to influence organisational policy, such as departmental heads or directors.

We note that organisations vary significantly in size, sector, and business model, and in smaller organisations an individual may be both a line manager to insecure workers and a senior leader who shapes organisational policies. Nonetheless, the recommendations provided have been designed to be relevant to a wide variety of organisations. We encourage senior leaders and line managers to adapt these recommendations to suit the needs of your organisation.

The recommendations in this briefing have therefore been split into two sections:

- **Section 1** is aimed at 'senior leaders' and describes the policy changes they can take to improve job security in their organisation.
- **Section 2** is aimed at 'line managers' and describes the actions they can take to improve the experience of insecure work for individual workers.

## What do we mean by insecure work?

The Work Foundation has developed a theoretical framework based on the three dimensions of contractual insecurity, financial insecurity and workers' rights insecurity. It defines an insecure worker as someone who experiences one or more of the following:

- Temporary work, particularly involuntary temporary work
- Involuntary part-time work, meaning that people want to work full-time but are unable to do so
- Zero-hours, seasonal, casual, or on-call work
- Having low pay (below £343 per week)
- Having unpredictable pay
- Being solo self-employed as a freelancer or contractor, without employees.

Some worker groups are more likely to be in insecure work such as women, young people, disabled people, and people from ethnic minorities. Whilst insecure jobs tend to be concentrated in certain sectors, such as social care, hospitality, retail, and construction – they exist across the economy.

## BUSINESS CASE FOR ACTION ON JOB INSECURITY

Organisations that actively support their employees reap big rewards.<sup>1</sup> Insecure work is associated with low morale and motivation, stress and burnout, poor mental and physical health, and can harm performance. Insecure workers may also prioritise tasks which are clearly visible to their line manager, and potentially neglect more valuable ones that are less noticeable.<sup>2,3</sup>

There are a range of business imperatives for improving how you employ and manage insecure workers in your organisation:



**Reducing sickness absence:** UK employees were absent for 7.8 days on average over the last year, the highest level in over a decade.<sup>4</sup> This trend should be especially concerning for organisations that use insecure contracts, as evidence from the Health Foundation and others show these workers are more likely to suffer from poor mental and physical health.<sup>5,6,7</sup>



**Improving financial wellbeing:** Nearly two thirds (65%) of workers surveyed in our research said their wellbeing is affected by personal or household finances. Poor financial wellbeing not only affects workers but can also impact their job performance.<sup>8</sup>



**Increasing retention:** It is more difficult for a person to settle into a role and commit to their organisation when their employment contract is uncertain, and they are facing other challenges such as low pay or irregular shifts.<sup>9</sup> Insecure work, often temporary by nature, leads to high turnover rates.<sup>10</sup> Job insecurity also increases the likelihood of employees seeking alternative employment.<sup>11</sup>



**Improving worker performance:** Insecure employment can harm a worker's wellbeing, which is linked with lower workplace performance.<sup>12,13</sup> Job insecurity can also diminish a worker's commitment to their employer and the likelihood they will put in extra work to help their organisation.<sup>14</sup>

### Good management can help attract, keep, and develop talented workers

Our research highlighted the importance of using good managerial practices to support workers on insecure contracts. We found insecure workers who feel they are treated well at work are 7.5 times more likely to be satisfied with their job. And many of the workers we interviewed told us of the transformative effect of supportive management on their personal and professional lives.

Research by the CMI has found that organisations which invest in leadership and management programmes will, on average, benefit from a 23% increase in organisational performance.<sup>15</sup> The same research also found that employee engagement and productivity are improved by 32%.



## ADVICE FOR SENIOR LEADERS

### A. Monitoring and evaluating the scale of job insecurity in your organisation

As a senior leader, a pivotal way you can tackle insecurity experienced by your workforce is by facilitating their transition to more secure employment contracts. Our research showed that:

- **Approximately one in three (30%)** of the insecure workers we surveyed expect to lose their job in the next 12 months. Many of the workers we interviewed said that the insecure nature of their job harmed their wellbeing and resulted in stress in the workplace.
- **Almost half of workers in insecure jobs (49%)** could not personally pay an unexpected bill of £300 if it was due in the next seven days.
- **More than two thirds of workers (65%)** said their wellbeing is affected by personal or household finances.

Some organisations are proactively looking to provide greater security for their workers, in part as a way to gain a competitive advantage in the labour market. For example, Wetherspoons, one of the largest pub chains in the UK, has moved away from the use of zero-hour contracts by offering guaranteed hours for its entire workforce.<sup>16</sup> And Salford-based removals company Anchor Removals has become accredited as a Living Wage and Living Hours Employer, pledging that its employees are guaranteed a minimum of 16 hours a week.<sup>17</sup>

### Begin by gathering detailed information about the nature and prevalence of insecure contracts within your organisation

Mandatory gender pay gap reporting, which was introduced in 2017, shows the impact that data collection can have on improving employment standards. Since its implementation, the pay gap between men and women has narrowed.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, organisations can benefit from gathering data on contractual security and from increasing transparency in terms of data collection and reporting. This data can enable organisations to:

- make more informed decisions about salaries and the quality of jobs on offer.
- ensure that talented staff are not being overlooked,<sup>19</sup> and
- be better prepared for changing procurement requirements<sup>20</sup> that may place greater emphasis on equality, diversity and inclusion metrics.

To make informed decisions about job security in your organisation, it is important to evaluate:

- **Contract types:** How many people are employed on temporary, zero-hours or part-time contracts?
- **Contractual terms:** How many people have access to sick pay and annual leave?
- **Pay levels:** How many people are paid below the National Living Wage?

This exercise can reveal the extent of insecure employment in your workforce and identify the characteristics of those who are most affected. Understanding these details is crucial for developing targeted strategies to improve job security and overall employee wellbeing.

As a senior leader you can look to improve the job security of your workers through:

1. **Minimum hours guarantee:** Explore offering a guaranteed minimum of hours per week
2. **Permanent contracts:** Employ staff on secure and permanent contracts
3. **Fair pay:** Assess whether you are providing your staff with a fair pay offer.

### Recommended resources:

- Check out the [CMI guide on effective action plan](#)
- Review CMI resources on [Gender equity in the workplace and closing gender pay gap](#)
- Check [Living Wage Foundation's website](#) to learn more about their work
- Learn about how the [Good Business Charter's work](#).



## B. Engage with your workforce through listening exercises

Engaging with and listening to your workers is crucial to understand their perspectives on their contractual arrangements and how these could be improved. As a senior leader you should actively seek input from workers, trade unions or other representative groups on a regular basis, with an explicit aim of continually improving and strengthening employment conditions where possible.

This is particularly important as certain groups – such as women, young workers, disabled people, and people from ethnic minorities – are disproportionately impacted by insecure contracts and their voices are not always listened to. The aim here should be to gather detailed insights into the challenges faced by all worker groups in your organisation, paying particular attention to those who might be disproportionately affected.

It is important to note that actively listening to your workforce should complement, and not replace, the need for strong worker representation and engagement with trade unions.

Engaging your workforce can make a big difference. For example, when faced with high levels of turnover and low staff satisfaction scores, Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust responded by introducing new initiatives to help ensure employee voices were being heard.<sup>21</sup> These included appointing Freedom to Speak Up Guardians, that support workers to share their views when they feel unable to do so. Implementing the 'Just Culture' approach which promotes a culture of openness and seeks to make staff feel confident to speak up when problems arise.<sup>22</sup> And making employee voice a standing item of the trust's board agenda.

Similarly, it is vital to communicate with your line managers about changes in your organisation and ask for their views on what improvements could be made to the running of your organisation. It is important to recognise line managers play a significant role in supporting staff during times of change or difficulty and are usually better placed to understand the viewpoints of their team. If managed well they can act as an effective liaison between senior management and their team, helping to ensure that communication flows both ways.

To gather this information, there are a range of approaches that could be adopted:

- **Larger organisations:** Conduct comprehensive staff surveys, allocating resources to develop, administer, and act on the findings.<sup>23</sup> If regular staff surveys are already in place, you might consider adding questions to understand the extent and impact of job insecurity and learn more about your workers' priorities. You can also consider establishing staff representative bodies if you don't have those in place, whilst making sure staff are aware of existing trade union forums and agreements in place to represent the views of the workforce.
- **Smaller organisations:** Opt for more informal appraisals, such as talking to managers and workers directly. You might raise this topic in a team meeting or ask your managers to discuss issues that can be sensitive in one-to-one meetings. You might hold all-staff meetings or create an anonymous form to receive questions and comments. This approach can provide more nuanced and personal insights into how job insecurity affects your staff.

### Recommended resources:

- Read this CMI resource on [Employee Engagement](#).
- This resource by CIPD on [working with trade unions](#).

## C. Introducing policies to improve predictability of shifts and working hours

Once you have collected the relevant information, you can begin understanding the opportunities and potential constraints your organisation faces around improving the contractual security of insecure workers.

One place you can start is improving the predictability of working hours. Often insecure workers have irregular shift patterns, are informed of shifts at short notice or have shifts cancelled at the last minute, which can make it challenging for them to plan their finances and personal lives. Our research found that:

- **Over one in three (34%)** workers reported having at least one of their shifts cancelled with less than two days' notice in the past month.
- **Nearly a third of insecure workers (57%)** wanted more predictable hours.
- And worryingly, **half of workers in our survey (51%)** said their mental wellbeing is affected by sudden changes to their work, schedule or weekly hours.

### Some employers across the UK have already taken steps to provide more predictable hours.

SSE PLC are one of the largest electricity network companies in the UK and employ approximately 10,000 people. They became a Living Hours Employer in 2021. SSE provides its employees with at least four weeks' notice for every shift, with guaranteed payment if shifts are cancelled within this period.

**"Providing workers with stable, guaranteed hours alongside decent pay is essential not only for workers and families, but it makes sense for businesses too. It encourages longer-term thinking and careful planning, and it ensures a healthy and motivated workforce. That's why SSE is proud to be a Living Hours employer: it's the right thing to do for our workers and our business, and we hope our commitment will help show others the way."** <sup>24</sup>

**JOHN STEWART, HR DIRECTOR, SSE PLC**

As an organisation you can help provide more predictability to your workers through:

- 1. Adequate shift notice:** Provide a minimum of three weeks advance notice about shifts.
- 2. Predictable hours:** Provide workers with regular shift patterns.
- 3. Remuneration for cancelled shifts:** Pay workers for any cancelled shifts.

### Recommended resources:

- [This ACAS website describes how zero-hours contracts should work](#)
- Check this CMI guide on [flexible working and why it makes business sense to make it more widely accessible](#).



## D. Invest in training your line managers to support workers in insecure jobs

Line managers are the backbone of an organisation, acting as a direct link between the workforce and senior management. Their role is pivotal in implementing company policies, driving performance, and fostering a positive work culture. However, without proper training, even the most talented people might struggle in fulfilling their responsibilities effectively.

Training your line managers is crucial for several reasons such as developing effective leadership, improving communication, conflict resolution and enabling better decision-making. Through training, they can gain the skills to set clear expectations and address the needs and concerns of team members. Moreover, line managers can play a significant role in implementing organisational changes, improving staff wellbeing and ensuring compliance with legal and ethical standards.<sup>25, 26</sup>

To act on addressing job insecurity in your organisation, it is important to invest in your line managers and their skillsets. When it comes to training line managers, an organisation can implement several practical measures:

- 1. Comprehensive leadership training:** Providing managerial training that covers essential skills such as effective communication, conflict resolution and performance management can take your organisation to the next level. This training can be delivered internally or through sectoral bodies or organisations accredited by organisations such as the CMI.
- 2. Coaching and mentorship:** Establishing a system where line managers receive regular feedback on their performance not only on their tasks but also on the way they support their team can help them develop the skills needed to get the best out of their people.
- 3. Mental health and well-being awareness training:** Equip line managers with mental health and wellbeing awareness. This will enable them to recognise signs of stress or burnout in their team and respond appropriately.

### Recommended resources:

- Read this CMI research to [learn about the top five traits of good and bad managers](#)
- Look at this CMI resource to [gain practical guidance and advice for managers and leaders](#)
- Check this toolkit from Evolve Workplace Wellbeing to learn [about ways to support your business](#).



## ADVICE FOR LINE MANAGERS

### A. Offer certainty around working hours and shift patterns

As a line manager of insecure workers, you may be aware of members of your team who struggle with the uncertainty around their working hours and shift patterns.

Over one in three (34%) workers we surveyed report they had at least one of their shifts cancelled with less than two days' notice in the past month. Worryingly, half of workers in our survey (51%) said their mental wellbeing is affected by sudden changes to their work, schedule or weekly hours.

It is also important to remember that an individual's personal circumstances will impact what shifts best suit them, for example, a parent of young children may prefer not to be at work during school pick-up or drop-off time. While a person's religious beliefs may impact what days of the week they wish to work. This is an important factor to consider when agreeing shifts with a member of staff.

#### Recommended actions:

- **Advance shift notices:** If you oversee your teams' working hours, where possible, try to provide a minimum of four weeks advance notice about shifts. Providing early notice helps staff members plan their lives outside work more effectively. Consider how an individual's personal circumstances may impact what shifts are suitable for them.
- **Regular shift patterns:** Wherever feasible, provide your team with regular shift patterns, as this will give them more certainty and improve their work-life balance.
- **Follow company guidelines and union agreements:** If your company has rules about when you should contact workers before their shift, which may be part of an agreement with a recognised trade union, make sure to respect these. If you have feedback from your line reports that could improve current working arrangements – and you do not have authority to undertake these changes – inform senior leaders.

## B. Improve your communication

Organisations that hire workers on more insecure contractual terms often have a higher turnover of staff more generally... This can create challenges for good communication and engagement across the whole organisation, and often those on temporary or short-term contracts feel left out or excluded.

Workers and managers we spoke to told us that insecure workers were often not included in important communications such as organisation-wide emails and as a result missed out on opportunities for personal development. If you notice that new staff are regularly missing out on important communications, such as organisation-wide emails, you could highlight this issue to HR and recommend they are included.

In addition, the nature of insecure work means that workers may face difficulties in their role, but opportunities to raise concerns with line managers and senior leaders may be more constrained.

### Case Study One: Good management can make a big difference

As a manager it may sometimes feel like you lack the power to improve workers' lives. However, workers we spoke to as part of our research told us that even relatively small actions from their managers had made a big difference.

Kelvin, a 28-year-old, works part-time in the Midlands as a technician in a detergent factory, on an insecure contract. Kelvin told us about how the support from his manager had improved his career prospects and helped him overcome some of the challenges of being on an insecure contract.

He started at his current workplace soon after leaving school, when he took up an entry-level position with the employer because he needed money, and the factory was in a convenient location.

Kelvin quickly developed a "very good relationship" with his manager, who encouraged him to take a more proactive approach to his job. Kelvin's manager helped him to secure internal training that allowed him to gain a promotion to factory technician, which was a higher paid role. He was then encouraged by his manager to attend college to achieve a diploma that would allow him to progress even further in the company. Kelvin told us:

**" [My manager] helped me to decide a path for my career and that's why I'm doing engineering college."**

To support his studies, Kelvin's manager has made sure he can work flexibly, with shifts that fit around his college work. Without the support of his manager Kelvin felt he would have been less likely to progress in his job or to return to education.

### Recommended actions:

- **Organise regular team meetings:** Organise regular catch ups that are available to all members of staff, regardless of contract type
- **Include all staff in team communications:** Make sure that non-permanent staff are aware of organisational updates and opportunities to provide feedback
- **Tailor communications:** Directly engage with members of staff on short-term contracts to understand their preferred communication methods
- **Create a safe environment:** Focus on making sure that your staff feel comfortable approaching you with their concerns.

### Recommended resources:

- Check out this CMI resource to find out [how to boost your communication skills](#)
- Read this useful CMI resources to learn [how to get your staff to trust you](#).

### C. Use your managerial oversight to support your team

As a line manager you will likely have a more detailed understanding of the challenges faced by your team than senior leaders in your company. It is also likely that you will have some level of oversight that you could use to help support the insecure workers you oversee. Don't underestimate how your knowledge and behaviours can improve the working lives of your team.

Consider how you might use your powers to benefit your team:

- **Career advancement opportunities:** Can you offer training to someone who wants to progress in their career?
- **Permanent employment recommendations:** Could you recommend to a manager that a dedicated member of your team is hired on a permanent contract?
- **Increased working hours:** Maybe you could offer more hours to a member of staff who needs them?

It may not always be obvious how you can use your oversight as a line manager to make a positive difference. To get started, the best approach is to talk to members of your team about how they are finding work and any challenges they might be facing. Even a small change can make a big difference to someone on an insecure contract. Be sure recognise the power you hold as a manager and that you use it responsibly. And that those on more insecure contracts may feel more reluctant to raise any issues or concerns with you.

There will be cases where you do not have the necessary power to help support your team. If a worker approaches you with an issue, you may need to speak to HR to seek advice. You could also approach your manager or a senior leader and explain why having some additional support would allow you to help your team and improve their performance. However, this may not always be possible. You might have a challenging boss who is not open to new ideas. If this is the case, the CMI has useful tips to help you ['manage your manager'](#).

#### Recommended resources:

- This Acas resource gives pointers on [how to support disabled people at work](#)
- Read this CMI resource to learn [how to support your staff during a difficult time](#).

## D. Look for opportunities to improve your management skills

All line managers, whether you are just starting out or have decades of experience, can benefit from management training. However, managing insecure workers on complex contracts can be especially difficult. As a result, you may need to develop an additional set of management skills to help support insecure workers in your team.

To effectively support your team, including those on insecure contracts, it's crucial to continuously seek opportunities for improving your management skills.



### Recommended actions:

- **Engage in formal training:** Look for both internal and external programmes, particularly focused on your sector or managing workers with fluctuating shift patterns. These programmes can help you with targeted skills and tools to better support your team
- **Informal learning:** You might want to consider approaching colleagues experienced in management to deepen your understanding of how best to handle challenging situations involving insecure workers. Get yourself a mentor – someone who has trodden this path before. It may benefit you professionally as well as improving your ability to manage others. You could also read up on the employment contracts of your team
- **Direct feedback:** Ask those you manage how you are doing? They may give you some useful insights that will help you to better understand their needs and work towards improving skills that can benefit you, your team, and your organisation.

### Recommended resources:

- This CMI resource will help you assess [your management skills and knowledge](#)
- Check out this CMI resource that explains [how to give feedback constructively](#)
- Read this helpful CMI resource that will teach you [the five things to consider when giving feedback to sensitive staff](#).

## ABOUT THE WORK FOUNDATION

The Work Foundation at Lancaster University is a think tank focused on improving working lives across the UK through applied research and new ideas. For over a century, we have worked to break down the barriers individuals and communities face in accessing good work.

We believe everyone should have access to secure, rewarding and high-quality work. By engaging directly with workers, employers, policymakers and leading academics, we deliver rigorous applied research to tackle structural inequalities in the labour market and improve working lives across the UK.

We are part of Lancaster University's Management School, and work with a range of partners and organisations across our research programmes.

## ABOUT THE CHARTERED MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE (CMI)

The Chartered Management Institute (CMI) works with business and education to inspire people to unleash their potential and become skilled, confident and successful managers and leaders. With a wealth of practical qualifications, events and networking opportunities on offer throughout the UK and Asia-Pacific, CMI helps people boost their career prospects and connect them with other ambitious professionals in any industry and sector. In fact, CMI has more than 100,000 people training to be better managers right now.

Backed by a unique Royal Charter, CMI is the only organisation allowed to award Chartered Manager status – the ultimate management accolade, and Chartered Management Consultant status which sets and maintains the highest standards for the management consulting profession. CMI's thought leadership, research and online resources provide practical insight on critical issues for our 200,000+ membership community and anyone looking to improve their skills, nurture high performing teams and help pave the way for the next generation of managers and leaders.

## CITATION

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For further information, please contact: [info@theworkfoundation.com](mailto:info@theworkfoundation.com).

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Research partner:

