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The decline of the temporary worker: A regional perspective

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The decline of the temporary worker: A regional perspective

ABSTRACT

Employment of temporary workers has been affected by new legislation in 2002 and the stabilisation of the economy in the early 21st century. These factors are hypothesised to reduce the overall level of temporary employment in the UK economy. To confirm this hypothesis, data from 28 Labour Force Survey (LFS) studies, carried out between the periods of December 1997 and November 2004 were analysed alongside turnover data for the Employment Agency Industry. The results revealed a reduction of over a quarter of a million temporary workers in the UK Economy over 6 years. Qualitative interviews with ten large temporary worker employers confirmed that legislation and employers' preference for permanent workers reduced the demand for temporary workers. Nonetheless, regional differences were apparent with some regions such as Northern Ireland and Wales increasing their employment of temporary workers.

Key words: Labour Force Survey, temporary workers, permanent workers, regional analysis

INTRODUCTION

During the 1980s and 1990s, an unprecedented increase in temporary employment was observed (Cully, Woodland, O'Reilly and Dix, 1999; Sly and Stillwell, 1997; Tremlett and Collins, 1999). Sly and Stillwell (1997) analysed data from the UK nationally representative Labour Force Survey (LFS) and found that temporary employment rose to 7% of all workers in Spring 1996. This increased use of temporary workers was also reflected in a number of independent employer surveys where in the 1990s at least 61% of UK organisations used agency workers, with indications that a higher percentage used temporary workers in general (Cully, et al., 1999).

Temporary workers can be divided into four main types consisting of: fixed-term contractors, who have a contract of employment limited to a pre-determined period of time; casual workers, who undertake work of short duration; seasonal workers, who are engaged to meet seasonal peaks in demands; and agency workers, who are employed by an employment agency for the use of a third party employer (Casey, 1988; Cully, et al., 1999; Tremlett and Collins, 1999). Golden and Appelbaum (1992) investigated the increase of temporary workers in the US and concluded that it was the demand for temporary workers by employers rather than the willingness of more people to become temporary workers that accounted for this increase. The need for a disposable workforce to match peaks in demand during volatile economic cycles was also found as a key reason for employing temporary workers in the UK (Atkinson, Rick, Morris, and Williams, 1996; McGregor and Sproull, 1992). Indeed, maintaining labour market flexibility is a commonly cited reason for utilising temporary workers (McKinsey and Company, 2000).

In the UK, the economy has steadily grown since the recession of the early 1990s. Unemployment rates have dropped during this period as indicated by a number of sources including the LFS and the UK Government's claimant counts (Heckley, 2005). The LFS is

representative of the UK Population and measures those who are economically inactive, self-employed, employed and unemployed. Since the 1990s, the LFS demonstrated a drop in unemployment from just fewer than 9% in 1995 to just fewer than 5% in 2005 as shown in Figure 1.

Given the prosperity of the economy, it seems likely that fewer temporary workers would be employed as they are needed to a lesser extent to control fluctuations in demand. Indeed, in examining key economic and social indicators research has shown that the use of temporary workers has declined both in the US (Morris and Vekker, 2001) and in the UK (Biggs, Burchell and Millmore, 2006).

INSERT FIGURE 1 IN HERE

In the UK, legislation from the European Parliament has been adopted giving temporary workers greater employment protection. The most notable of this legislation includes the Fixed Term Employees Regulations (2002) and The Agency Worker Directive (AWD). The Fixed Term Employees Regulations gives all temporary workers, with the exception of agency workers, the equivalent employment protection rights as permanent workers in that they cannot be treated less favourably than permanent workers (Macdonald, 2003). The AWD also gives the same rights to agency workers and is currently under review in the European Parliament (Biggs, 2005). This legislation may improve the employment prospects of temporary workers as they cannot have less favourable treatment compared with permanent workers, which may increase their costs to organizations.

Given this lack of economic uncertainty and greater cost for employing temporary workers, it seems likely that this would discourage employers from using temporary workers and explain a decline in their use. This article seeks to extend other research by confirming the declining use of temporary workers in the UK economy. Previous research has shown that there are

differences in the regional employment of temporary workers in the UK and USA (Biggs, 2003; Peck and Theodore, 2001; Theodore and Peck, 2002). Thus, it is important to assess any overall decline in the temporary workforce at a regional level.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Both the LFS and Employment Agency Industry (EAI) turnover figures were used as economic indicators of temporary workers between 1998 and 2004. Data were extracted on 1.5 million workers from 28 individual Labour Force Surveys covering the period of December 1997 to November 2004 (Office for National Statistics, 2005). This quantitative data was selected and analysed through SPSS and trends plotted in MS Excel. EAI turnover data were provided by the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC) and collaborated with other sources.

Two LFS surveys were selected from the Spring Quarters of 1998 (SN3898) and 2004 (SN4998) to provide regional data six years apart. Regions were summarised into distinct geographical areas defined in the LFS comprising of South East (Inner London, Outer London and South East), South West, Midlands (East Midlands, West Midlands Metropolitan County and the Rest of West Midlands), Wales, East of England, Scotland (Strathclyde and the Rest of Scotland), Northern Ireland, North East (Tyne and Wear and the rest of North East), North West (Greater Manchester, Merseyside and the Rest of North West) and Yorkshire and Humberside (South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire and the Rest of Yorkshire and Humberside).

Qualitative data was collected from employers after the quantitative surveys had been analysed. A sample frame of 5,334 organizations was gathered from a business marketing database from across the UK and from both the public and private sector. Thirty organizations from this sample frame were randomly chosen and contacted. Eleven of these employers agreed to take part in the research, although only ten employed temporary workers and were subsequently interviewed. Interviews were semi-structured in nature allowing participants to discuss topics in depth lasting up to an hour. Topics covered in the interviews included: types of temporary worker employed, utilisation of temporary workers, changes in the use of temporary workers over the last few years, changes to the number of temporary

workers, strategic reasons for hiring temporary workers, recent legislation effects and major human resource issues involved with managing temporary workers. Interviews were digitally recorded and analysed using qualitative analysis software (ATLAS-ti) enabling thematic codes and interpretations to be made from the transcripts of the qualitative data.

RESULTS

A decrease in temporary workers from 1,828,000 to 1,577,000 people was observed in the Labour Force Survey (LFS) between 1998 and 2004 (See Figure 2). This reduction was most dramatic between the Spring Quarters of 1998 and 2003 where temporary workers dropped by a quarter of a million people.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Reductions were seen in all categories of temporary workers, which included: fixed term contractors, agency workers, casual workers, seasonal workers and other types of temporary workers. The turnover data for the recruitment agency industry is shown in Table I. This data is divided into turnover in supplying agency workers and total turnover that includes the supply of agency workers in addition to the placement of permanent workers. Both of these sets of data were gathered by the REC who are the professional representative for the recruitment agency industry. Data was also gathered from the Office for National Statistics, as a comparison, which demonstrated the accuracy of the REC data within a 4% margin of error since 1998 (Intel, 2004). Based solely on the supply of agency workers, there was a slight decrease from £22.8 billion in 2001/02 to £22.6 billion in 2003/04.

INSERT TABLE I ABOUT HERE

Regional patterns of the employment of temporary and permanent workers expressed as a percentage of all workers are shown in Table II. The North East, Wales, Scotland, Northern

Ireland and South East regions employed more temporary workers than all other regions. This may suggest the need for greater flexibility within these regions compared with other regions such as the North West that employed fewer temporary workers. Differences between the Spring 2004 and Spring 1998 data are shown in brackets in the employment of permanent workers, temporary workers and types of different temporary workers. Interestingly, all the regions, except Northern Ireland and Wales, reduced their numbers of temporary workers.

Regional variations in the employment of different types of temporary workers expressed as a percentage of total workers are also highlighted in Table II. Scotland employed the largest number of fixed term contractors and the least agency workers and the South West region employed the largest amount of seasonal workers. Northern Ireland employed the most casual workers and more agency workers were employed in the Midlands than in any other region. Differences between the Spring 2004 and Spring 1998 data are again shown in brackets. Many regions such as the South East decreased their use of temporary workers and this is in line with the types of temporary workers employed. Scotland and East of England reduced their levels of contractors, the North West decreased casual workers and the South West decreased seasonal workers. Interestingly, some regions increased their level of temporary workers most notably Northern Ireland, which increased agency, seasonal and casual workers. Wales and the Midlands also increased the levels of agency workers and the North East increased seasonal workers, casual workers and agency workers to a lesser extent.

INSERT TABLE II ABOUT HERE

Industrial and occupational data was also analysed from the Spring 2004 Labour Force Survey. Temporary workers were employed in all of the major industry sectors listed by the LFS as displayed in Table III. One of the largest industry sectors of temporary employment was the Public administration, education and health sector where over 44% of all temporary

workers and 61% of contractors were employed. 36% of seasonal workers were employed in distribution, hotels and restaurants although surprisingly only 4% were employed in agriculture. 29% of agency workers were employed in the banking, finance and insurance sector and 41% of casual workers were employed in the distribution, hotels and restaurants industrial sector. Temporary workers also dominated all of the various Socio-Economic Classifications as shown in Table IV. Over 54% of Contractors were employed in the higher and lower managerial and professional occupations whereas 65% of agency workers tended to be in the intermediate, semi-routine and routine occupations. Casual workers (41%) were most likely to be unemployed although overall temporary work does show a more precarious occupational status whereby 15% were unemployed during the LFS compared with 4% of permanent workers.

INSERT TABLE III ABOUT HERE

INSERT TABLE IV ABOUT HERE

The broad results of the qualitative interviews with employers are given in Table V. None of the organizations reported that tasks given to temporary workers had changed over the last five years. Three organizations reported that they felt that the employment of temporary workers had declined within their organization; however, five organizations had not decreased their levels of temporary workers. Employers were asked about the Fixed Term Employees Regulations (2002) and five organizations stated that the legislation had not influenced non-agency temporary worker employment. Three employers stated that it did effect their decision although only one of these organizations reported a decreased use of temporary workers.

Legislation affecting agency workers was discussed and five employers stated that the introduction of the Agency Worker Directive would not alter their hiring policies.

Nevertheless, three employers stated that they would reduce their reliance on agency staff if this legislation were brought into practice. Reasons for the decline of temporary workers were also specified and these included; the impact of new legislation, the greater benefit of permanent workers over temporary workers and temp-to-perm recruitment practices whereby temporary workers would be given full time permanent contracts thus reducing the number of temporary workers.

INSERT TABLE V ABOUT HERE

DISCUSSION

The results of this study demonstrated two key findings. Temporary workers continued to decline in the overall economy as found in other studies (Biggs, et al. 2006; Clinton, Budjanovcanin, and Guest, 2006; Morris and Vekker, 2001). Regional differences in temporary worker usage are apparent with some regions actually increasing the number of temporary workers employed.

The overall decline in temporary workers was reflected in some of the employer interviews. Three employers stated that they had reduced the number of temporary workers in their organization. Two of these employers were fairly clear on the reasons for the decrease in temporary work, stating:

“Yes, our organization has reduced casual workers due to the legislation on Fixed Term Contractors [that also covers casual workers] and cost constraints.”

“We are reducing temporary workers due to the new legislation coming in for temps [agency workers] and part-time staff. We just use contractors for bid for work that is guaranteed.”

This implies that legislation may have had an impact on the decisions made by employers to hire temporary workers. Two organizations were unsure if temporary workers had increased or not, primarily due to the size of the organization. However, both of these employers understood the impact of the temporary worker legislation, with one stating:

“The new regulations means that we have to include them [temporary workers] in all sorts of things like development opportunities, training etc, whereas before we did not need to.”

This demonstrates the effect of the legislation may be positive in providing temporary workers development opportunities. Nevertheless, legislation may also influence the number of temporary workers employed by discouraging employers to use a contingent workforce due to the additional costs this may incur (Stratman, Roth and Gilland, 2004).

Other reasons for not using temporary workers were given. One employer favoured permanent workers over temporary workers due to their perceived greater commitment to the organization and stated they would where possible convert temporary workers into full-time employees of the organization; by outlining the fact that:

“When contracts are renewed these [fixed term contract] workers tend to be made permanent members of staff.”

This employer perceived no advantage of retaining contractors and would convert them into full permanent members of staff at the appropriate time. This type of arrangement is known as temp-to-perm recruitment and can provide employers a ‘try before you buy’ method of appointment (Bauer and Truxillo, 2000). Other employers suggested that permanent workers were superior to temporary workers as they understood their employer to a much greater extent:

“We prefer to employ permanent workers only as they understand the wider organisational issues, which is essential when delivering services”

This organization did use temporary workers but primarily as a buffer against excessive workloads rather than as a replacement for permanent workers, common in other organizations (Atkinson, et al. 1996; Houseman, Kalleberg and Erickcek, 2003; McGregor and Sproull, 1992).

The overall reduction in the temporary workforce was reflected in the LFS data but not particularly well in the employment industry turnover data that indicated only a slight decrease in turnover. One reason for this may be due to the increasing wages of agency workers, whereby the gross hourly rate for agency workers had increased from £5.63 an hour in 1998 to £7.78 in 2004. Indeed, a major role for employment agencies is to negotiate the highest rate of pay for agency workers (Druker and Stanworth, 2004). This increase in agency worker wages may have therefore offset the overall reduction of agency workers in the labour market and account for the turnover figures in the recruitment agency industry.

Regional variations in temporary worker use were apparent from the LFS data. Northern Ireland employed the lowest proportion of temporary workers in 1998 (Biggs, 2003). Since that date, Northern Ireland has caught up with the rest of the UK in employing temporary workers. Indeed, 6% of the Northern Ireland workforce were temporary workers in Spring 2004 making it the fourth largest regional employer. Wales also had a slight rise in temporary workers primarily in terms of agency workers who increased in number in the region.

All other regions had reduced the number of temporary workers overall. The largest decrease in temporary worker employment was observed in Yorkshire and Humberside, the North West and South East. The North West had no increases observed in any of the temporary worker types. Yorkshire and Humberside did have a slight increase in the number of seasonal workers and the South East also had a slight increase in casual workers. Nonetheless, the trend for all of these regions was to decrease the usage of temporary workers.

As with all research some limitations require comment. The researcher was dependent on the Labour Force Survey (LFS) for most of the analysis conducted, which may have limitations. Many of the responses gathered in the Labour Force Survey are by proxy and thus may not be wholly accurate especially in terms of employment status being temporarily or permanently

employed. The LFS User Guide states that individuals that live in shared accommodation and in accommodation supplied by an employer may be underrepresented (Office for National Statistics, 2004). Nonetheless, many temporary workers such as seasonal agricultural workers often live on the employer's premises during their employment and as such may not be included in the LFS. Rising agency worker wages in addition to rising employment agency fees may have restricted the effect that a reduction of agency workers has had on the industry turnover data. Thus, it was difficult collaborate the employment agency industry turnover data with the LFS finding that agency workers had been reduced in the Labour force. The qualitative data was carried out after the LFS data had been analysed and was restricted by the number of individuals that could be interviewed. Thus, the qualitative data may only be indicative of the organisations interviewed as opposed to a representative sample of all UK firms. Further independent research in this area is proposed to address these limitations and extend the findings of this study.

CONCLUSION

The research confirmed the overall decline of temporary employment in the UK economy between 1998 and 2004 by using two economic indicators, the LFS and Employment Agency Industry turnover data. Qualitative research explored the context of these findings from an employers' perspective indicating that legislation and the preference of permanent employees over temporary employees was important when hiring a contingent workforce. The introduction of new legislation where temporary workers cannot be treated less favourable than permanent workers and the stabilisation of the economy are conjectured to have led to this decrease in the temporary workforce. Further legislation, such as the Agency Worker Directive that may be adopted in the future may further decrease the use of temporary workers especially if no qualifying period for equivalent rights is adopted in these regulations.

Examining the LFS data according to region was beneficial, as regional differences were apparent. A number of regions employed specific types of temporary workers. Scotland, for instance, employed a large number of contractors and the Midlands a large number of agency workers. The decline of temporary workers generally reflected this preference in the type of temporary workers employed. Nonetheless, not all regions had decreased their level of temporary workers. Indeed, in Northern Ireland and Wales an increase in temporary employment was observed. These results highlight the importance of taking regional variations into account in temporary worker research; whereby results at a national level, in this case the decrease in temporary employment, may not necessarily apply at a local regional level.

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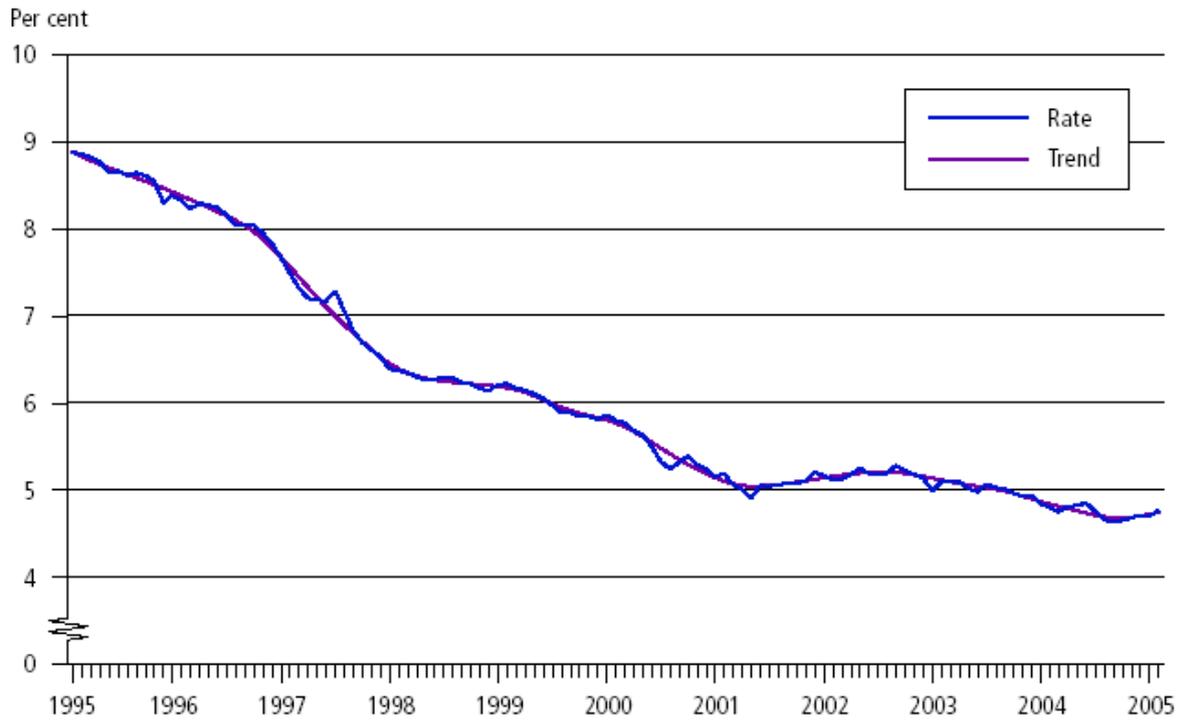
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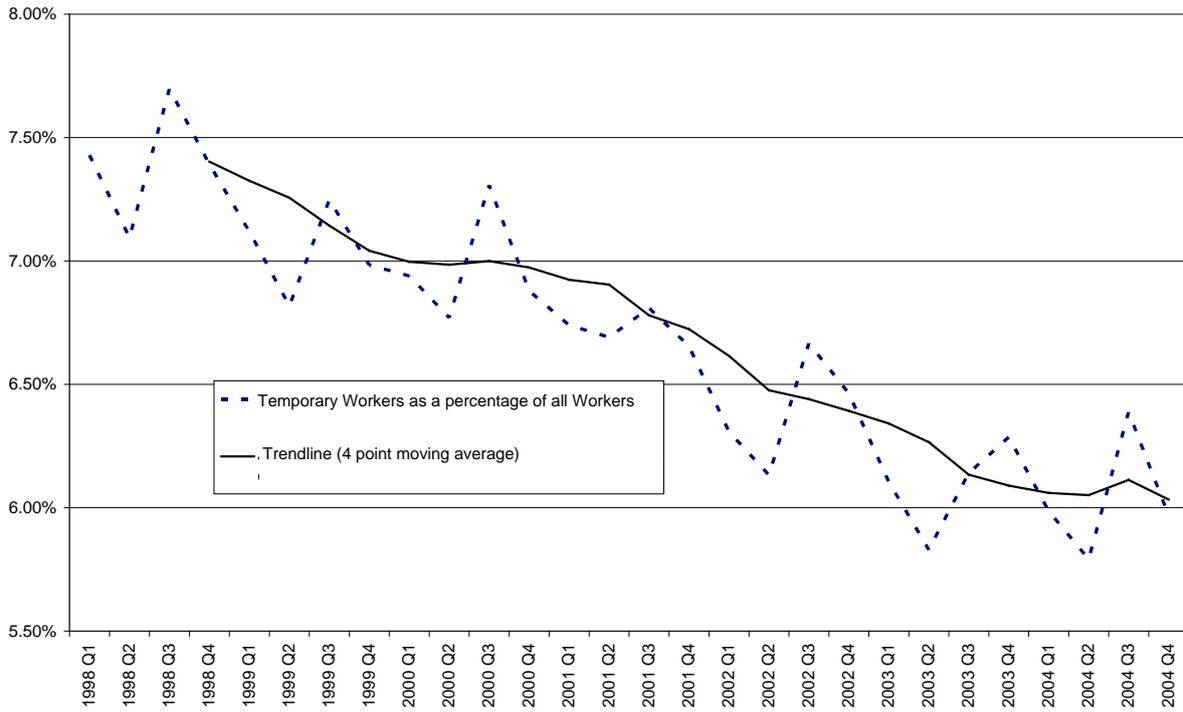
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Figure 1: Unemployment Rate determined by the LFS.



Source: Heckley, G. (2005)

Figure 2: Temporary workers as a percentage of all workers



Source: Office for National Statistics (2005)

Table I: Employment Agency Industry Turnover

Period	Turnover for supplying agency workers only in £bn (Source: REC)	Total Turnover in temporary worker industry in £bn (Source: REC)	Total Turnover in temporary worker industry in £bn (Source: ONS)
2003/2004	22.6	24.5	NA
2002/2003	21.4	23.0	22.3
2001/2002	22.8	24.2	23.4
2000/2001	17.1	22.9	22.9
1999/2000	NA	18.4	18.6
1998/1999	NA	NA	15.7
1997/1998	NA	NA	13.3
1996/1997	NA	NA	9.8
1995/1996	NA	NA	8.1
1994/1995	NA	NA	6.8
1993/1994	NA	NA	4.8
1992/1993	NA	NA	3.9
NA = Data not available			
Source: Biggs, D.M. (2005)			

Table II: Regional patterns of employment (LFS Spring 2004 and Spring 1998)

	Permanent workers	All temporary workers	All temporary workers divided by type				
			Seasonal worker	Contractor	Agency worker	Casual worker	Other temporary worker
South East	23% (+2%)	1% (-2%)	0% (0%)	1% (-1%)	0% (-1%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)
South West	8% (+2%)	0% (-2%)	0% (0%)	0% (-1%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)
Midlands	15% (+1%)	1% (-1%)	0% (0%)	0% (-1%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)
Wales	4% (0%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)
East of England	9% (+1%)	1% (-1%)	0% (0%)	0% (-1%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)
Scotland	9% (+1%)	1% (-1%)	0% (0%)	0% (-1%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)
Northern Ireland	3% (0%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)	0% (-1%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)
North-East	4% (+1%)	0% (-1%)	0% (0%)	0% (-1%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)
North-West	10% (+2%)	1% (-2%)	0% (0%)	0% (-1%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)
Yorkshire and Humberside	9% (+2%)	1% (-2%)	0% (0%)	0% (-1%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)	0% (0%)
Total	94% (+1%)	6% (-1%)	0% (0%)	3% (-1%)	0% (0%)	1% (0%)	1% (0%)

* - Difference between Spring 2004 and Spring 1998 shown in Brackets

Please note that not all percentages add correctly due to rounding

Source: Office for National Statistics (2005)

Table III: Industry of temporary workers (LFS Spring 2004)

	Permanent workers	All temporary workers	All temporary workers divided by type				
			Seasonal worker	Contractor	Agency worker	Casual worker	Other temporary worker
Agriculture & fishing	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Energy & water	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Manufacturing	14%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Construction	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Distribution, hotels & restaurants	19%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%
Transport & communication	6%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Banking, finance & insurance	14%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Public admin, education & health	29%	3%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%
Other services	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Workplace outside UK	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Total	94%	6%	0%	3%	1%	1%	1%

Please note that not all percentages add correctly due to rounding
Source: Office for National Statistics (2005)

Table IV: Occupation of temporary workers (LFS Spring 2004)

	Permanent workers	All temporary workers	All temporary workers divided by type				
			Seasonal worker	Contractor	Agency worker	Casual worker	Other temporary worker
Higher managerial and professional	12%	1%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%
Lower managerial and professional	28%	1%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%
Intermediate occupations	13%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Lower supervisory and technical	12%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Semi-routine occupations	15%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Routine occupations	11%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Unemployed	4%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%
Total	94%	6%	0%	3%	1%	1%	1%

Please note that not all percentages add correctly due to rounding
Source: Office for National Statistics (2005)

Table V: Summary qualitative interview results

Region	Organization Type	Types of temporary worker employed	Recent changes in tasks performed	Have temporary workers declined	Has legislation affected your decision to hire contractors, casual or seasonal workers	Has legislation affected your decision to hire agency workers	Reasons for decline in temporary workers
Midlands	Large Manufacturer	Agency workers	No	Yes	Not Applicable	Yes	Don't know
Midlands	Large Financial Institution	Agency workers and contractors	No	No	No	Not sure.	Better to have permanent workers
North East	Large Government Department	All	No	Didn't know	No	No	New legislation
North West	Large Energy Producer	Agency workers and contractors	Not Known	No, but may decrease in the future	Yes	Yes	temp-to-perm practices
Scotland	Large Engineering company	All	No	Didn't know	No	No	Couldn't say
South East	Local Government	All	No	No	Didn't know	Yes	Have advantages that work for and against them
South East	Local Government	Casual workers	No	Yes	Yes	Not Applicable	No reasons stated.
South East	Large Toy manufacturer	All	No	No	No	No	Better to have permanent workers
South West	University	Agency workers, casual workers and contractors	No	Yes	No	No	New legislation
South West	Large Defence supplier	Agency workers and contractors	No	No	Yes	No	Don't know