

Flexible friends: why employers hire eastern European migrants in order to grow

lse.blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/06/15/flexible-friends-why-employers-hire-eastern-european-migrants-in-order-to-grow/

15/06/2016

*Why do recruiters hire eastern European migrants? The answer is not that they have a better work ethic, writes **Heather Rolfe**. The employers surveyed by the NIESR say they are seeking flexibility and want to recruit people on temporary and zero-hour contracts, which British workers are often unwilling or unable to accept. But this flexibility enables businesses to grow and prosper in a way that would otherwise be impossible.*

There is now little doubt that immigration will be the issue that will decide the referendum result. But it is danger of being decided on fiction rather than facts about its impact. We have never needed evidence about migration more. We do know a lot. We know that [any statistical effects of migration on jobs and wages are very small](#). But statistics are often mistrusted. People's lived experience tells them that something has happened to the labour market and the world of work and they believe migrants have played a part. They believe the availability of new workers from Eastern Europe has allowed employers to lower the bar, keeping pay levels down and offering temporary jobs or zero hours contracts. But what's the evidence that migration has been instrumental in a process which finds an [estimated 4.5 million people in insecure jobs](#)? Through research involving 24 employers in the construction, hospitality and food and drink sectors, we set out to assess the evidence that migrants have changed our jobs.



Photo: [therobedscribe](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

Migrants are not targeted

The first and very clear message from our employers was that they have no active preference for migrants. They recruit them because they apply, because they are available. They are not, as the media often portrays, [shunning 'lazy Brits'](#) who prefer to live off our 'broken' welfare system rather than take on low skilled work. Employers said they do not tailor their methods to recruit either migrants or local worker but to maximise applications. Our employers rarely targeted migrants and did so only when shortages were most severe, typically by using agencies with EU migrants on their books.

The other clear message was that the shortages which lead employers to recruit migrants are often not skills based. Employers need people for low skilled tasks such as room cleaning, serving coffee and baking. As Martin Ruhs at the Migration Observatory has said, [skills and shortages are slippery concepts](#). Shortages of low skilled labour can affect business operations as much as higher skills gaps, for example of welders or chefs, which our employers also experienced. Many of our employers relied on being able to recruit at least some migrants to fill low skilled roles.

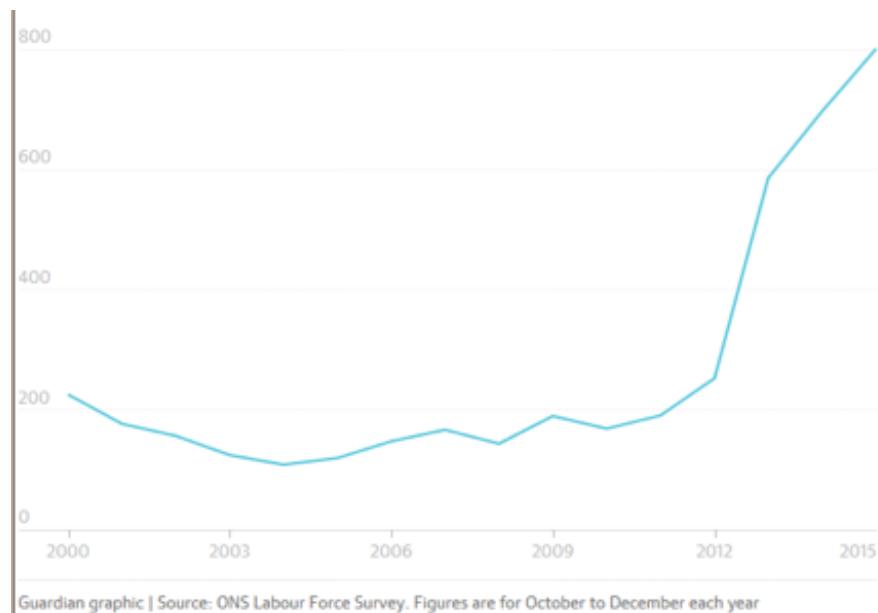
Why don't locals apply?

Employers say they want to employ locals but they encounter barriers. Unemployment nationally is around five percent and employers in areas of low population, including holiday destinations and food factories lack a pool of locals of working age. Low pay and intrinsic features of work in low skilled sectors also make local recruitment difficult, including the arduous nature of the work – and in construction and factory jobs, the work environment.

The widespread use of temporary and zero hours contracts is also likely to discourage British workers from applying for work in these sectors. Employers in all three sectors used these contracts and, in construction, the ultimate form of flexibility – self employment. As Jon Ingham of the jobs and careers site Glassdoor recently told [the Guardian](#):

"The most common reason that unemployed people turn down zero-hours contracts is the need for a guaranteed level of income to make this a viable alternative to receiving unemployment benefit".

Employers knew these were less acceptable to local workers than to migrants but said that their business model demanded labour flexibility: in the food industry to cope with the demands of supermarkets and customers; in construction with an uncertain supply of work; and in hospitality with seasonality and unpredictable customer demand. [The use of these contracts has increased](#), particularly in the last 5 years, driven by competitive pressures, not by migration.



(source: [theguardian.com](#))

EU migrants have flex appeal

Employers report little difference between migrants and British workers on measures such as productivity, work ethic and commitment. But there is one important difference between some EU migrants and British workers. Their mobility and short term goals make them more flexible. They can adjust their hours up and down in a way that British workers either can't or aren't willing to do. Such arrangements are more acceptable to migrants, particularly recent arrivals, than to British workers because they are less likely to be

seeking stable employment, at least in the short term.

Flexible migrant labour has enabled businesses in low skilled sectors to grow. Jobs in low paid sectors have changed alongside the growth in EU migrant numbers, not because of it. A number of case study employers said

they would not have been able to expand their businesses without access to EU migrants, and that they formed part of their future plans for growth. Where migrants form a minority of the workforce, which they most often do, this has helped to create employment opportunities for British workers. Employers need low skilled workers as much as they need higher level skills. For this reason, [as our report concludes](#), ending free movement and restricting low skilled immigration is likely to damage business and threaten jobs in some of our key sectors.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE.

See also [Heather Rolfe: How to cope with Brexit – an employers' guide](#)

[Heather Rolfe](#) is Principal Research Fellow at the NIESR.

- Copyright © 2015 London School of Economics