Rural Location and its Impact on the employment relationship

This paper aims to examine the impact that the geographical location has on the employment relationship, with particular focus on rural locations in the North of England. The intention is that the research will form the foundations of a wider piece of comparative research which will seek to analyse the impact that geographical location has on the employment relationship, initially within the rest of the United Kingdom (UK), but expanding to include Europe and Western Societies in general at a later stage.

The interest in this area evolved through the recognition that rural communities within many developed Western societies have undergone “tremendous economic and social transformation in recent years” (Atterton and Affleck 2009:10) and the belief that this will have had an impact on the employment relationship within organisations operating within different geographical locations. Atterton and Affleck (2010) add that changes in traditional approaches to organisational structures and the nature and context of work have allowed businesses to become increasingly ‘footloose’, in the sense that they are much more mobile and flexible than they once were. This in turn has facilitated and encouraged the geographical movement away from urban centres to rural locations during the last couple of decades. The data analysed to date, suggests that these changes have altered the balance of power within the employment relationship, although not consistently throughout all economic industrial sectors. Some of the changes have empowered management in that they are able to ‘dictate’ the wages and terms and conditions of the workforce, in particular in relation to low skilled, immobile rural workers, while other factors have empowered the more skilled and mobile workers who are able to move between jobs and geographical locations more easily. This, together with the fast changing pace of technology and increased employee flexibility, has impacted on the employment relationship within many contemporary organisations.

This study, however, focuses on rural locations and their workforces rather than urban centres, as the author believes that this area has been under represented within the employment/industrial relations research, and is a sizeable omission from our knowledge and understanding of a significant part of the UK’s economy. Anderson et al (2009) for example, have highlighted the importance that these communities have on the national economy in that the performance of rural businesses plays a significant contribution to the general social wellbeing of society. For example, 28% of all businesses in the UK are located in rural areas generating £211 billion to the national economy in 2010 (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 2014). Therefore, analysing the impact that geographical location, in particular in rural areas, has on the employment relationship is an important factor in the economic development of the country.

The author, acknowledges that there is a large body of multi-disciplinary literature which has informed and supported this present research and has enabled the identification of a range of the challenges faced by a number of stakeholders, including the employers, employees, policy makers...
and, to some extent, trade unions which consequently shape and influence the employment relationship in many rural areas.

The importance of, and need for this study, has been reinforced by a claim made by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in England (2014) that rural economic growth was central to the sustainability and development of the UK:

“Economic growth is our top priority. We want rural areas to contribute to and benefit from this growth, even though they face particular challenges”.

Research carried out for the Government Office for Science by Foresight (2013:37) suggested that the shift from urban centred businesses to rural location has been stimulated by successive European Union (EU) rural development initiatives. These have been introduced by the European Network for Rural Development to support the EU rural 2020 strategy. This Network argues that the aims and objectives of the EU is to ensure that economic growth within the EU should be Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive. It highlights that 14% of the population of the EU is based in rural locations, which present different challenges to economic development than urban centres. They stress that policy makers should seek to intervene in three main areas:

1. “Facilitating diversification creation of new small enterprises and job creation.
2. Promoting local development in rural areas.
3. Enhancing accessibility to, and use and quality of ICT in rural areas” (Rural Development Gateway 2014).

They warn, however, that this shift in focus from urban to rural has been diversified especially within the NE of England. They state that although this has had a positive impact on organisational development, as it has been a “multi-layered activity” which encompasses individuals, businesses, supply chains and rural communities, the fact that these activities are mutually supporting must be acknowledged and supported by all stakeholders.

Keeble (2000) suggested that this shift began in the second half of the twentieth century as there was increasing evidence that employment was moving away from urban centres towards rural locations within the United Kingdom (UK). This is also supported by the statistics presented by Foresight (2013:40) in their study of micro-economic trends in the manufacturing sector within the UK. The same period saw an increase in rural wages which Keeble (2000) suggests is directly linked to a growth in productivity, especially within the small to medium size enterprises (SME).
Although many economic sectors have seen a movement away from urban centres to rural locations, manufacturing has been highlighted as one industry which has seen a significant shift from urban. For example, the Annual Respondents Database (ARD) in the UK indicated that large urban centres have seen a decrease in manufacturing from 41.71% in 1973 to 25.57% in 2009 with a corresponding increase in manufacturing in small rural areas from 33% in 1973 to 50.26% in 2009. This movement was further reinforced by the fact that small rural locations saw an increase in employment in manufacturing increase from 33.08% in 1973 to 50.53% in 2009 while large urban centres saw a decrease from 40.07% in 1973 to 25.91% in 2009.

This movement from urban manufacturing towards rural was not uniquely confined to the UK; Terluin (2003) reported a similar shift in the same period in Europe as did Acs and Malecki (2003) in the United States. This was further supported by Rizou and Walsh (2011), who conclude that organisational growth and development has been much quicker in rural areas rather than urbanised centres during the last 20 years. However, Webber et al (2009) have rejected this, and argue that their research indicates that the Twenty First Century has seen this trend dramatically reversed, and that at present, rural economic development and growth has declined to the benefit of peri-urban growth1. An investigation into this trend and its impact on the employment relationship is at the heart of this research. The analysis will include an examination of the ability of management to develop an environment where employee performance can be supported and developed and organisational business strategies can be achieved.

Although the literature suggests that structural organisational change is significantly affected and shaped by regional variation (Huiban 2009; Robson 2009), very little research has been undertaken with regard to the impact this has had on employment, management or the employment relationship within the United Kingdom (UK) (Massey and Miles 1984; Southall 1988; Massey and Painter 1989; Martin, Sunley and Wills 1993, 1994, 1996; McGrath-Champ 2002) or indeed many Western societies. Robson (2009:275) argues that during the last thirty-five years the UK has witnessed significant changes in the structure of the economy in the sense that it has shifted from a traditional manufacturing base to become focused on the service sector (Romero 2009). For example, in 2011 only 9% of employees were employed in manufacturing with 81% working in the service sector. This shows a decline in manufacturing employment from 2001, where 15% of the workers were engaged within the sector and an increase in those employed in the service sector, which in 2001 was only 76%.

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1 The term peri-urban evolved from the French word ‘periurbanisation’. It is used to describe an area which provides the benefits of an urban lifestyle while also benefiting from many rural characteristics. It is the area which forms the bridge between town and country living.
This, together with the technological advancements and societies increasing reliance on mobile phones and flexible working patterns, mean that many organisations have had to adjust and change the way in which they do business as well as the way in which they manage their employees. However, it has also allowed them to become more flexible in where to locate their premises. Unfortunately, the increasing reliance on ICT could be a constraint on the geographical location of some industries. There is therefore a need for policy makers and rural growth networks to stimulate rural economic growth by investing in rural communities. For example, investing in the development, coverage and expansion of broadband services, mobile networks, public transport provision and addressing the training and development needs within many rural communities in rural locations (Culliney 2014:46; Spieldofer et al 2010). Patterson and Anderson (2003) for example, have highlighted the fact that some of the service sector business struggle to recruit skilled and/or professional employees and suggest that access to training and development also constrains their ability to operate in rural locations. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (2014) has stated that they are addressing some of these needs, for example, an investment package of £165 million has been announced in order to improve internet connections and mobile networks. The Office for National Statistics (2013) has also suggested that the improvements and developments in technology have enabled organisations to change the very nature of the work that they undertake, as well as the location within which they can operate, in order to become more economically competitive.

It should be noted, however, that the impact of these changes has not been evenly distributed throughout the various geographical regions. Robson (2009:2) argues that “inherited differences in industry structure mean that the impact and effects of structural change have been different for different regions”. This in turn has led to changes in the nature and structure of work, as well as the way people are managed and behave within the workforce. However, what is also very clear is that certain regional locations influenced the employment relationship through their pre-existing cultural and historical traits which the data suggests has influenced the workplace relationship. This present study acknowledges the structural changes which have occurred, however, it examines the employment relationship not through industrial sector lenses but through regional perspectives on the nature of work and the employment relationship. It has reviewed the literature from a range of disciplines including sociology, industrial relations, employment relations, industrial location theory, geographical economics, economic growth and urban and rural economics. It thus adopts an interdisciplinary case study methodology to the collection and analysis of the data during the period September 2010 till May 2014.

Based on this perspective, the case study methodology was identified as offering the framework and ‘tools’ it was felt necessary to undertake the research. Hartley (1999:211) states that the “case study is an important method in industrial relations” research as it enables the “complicity of the processes of conflict and co-operation ... to be described and analysed in ways which have not predetermined what constitutes conflict and co-operative for particular groups”. It is a methodology which is “tailor-made for exploring new processes or behaviours” (Hartley 1999:213).
As the epistemology perspective of the study suggests, knowledge is gained through people interacting with each other as well as the external environment and making sense of it through conceptualisation and language. The chosen methodology therefore provides the opportunity to observe, read and speak to individuals in the workplace.

Thus, the research aims were identified as follows:

- To explore the impact of a rural location on the working practices of one steel manufacturing organisation based on a number of rural sites.
- To identify and analyse the cultural, educational, technological, transportational and socialisation challenges which influenced the employment relationship within these small rural communities.

The study has drawn in part on the literature around geographical mobility which has its roots in the work of Blumen et al (1955). Blumen et al (1955) argue that employment mobility is constrained by the ties individual workers have to their location. They highlight that these ties strengthen over time. McGinnis (1968) agrees and states that workers with a close number of friends were less likely to move away in search of work. Granovetter (1985) and Spilimberg and Ubeda (2001) adds that geographical mobility which affects the efficient allocation of labour and housing is embedded in friendship and family affiliations. Therefore, Belot and Ermisch (2009) suggest that although geographic movement can “generate increases in income” it does so at the expense of friendship and family relationships which is a sacrifice that some employees are unwilling to make. Bryden and Bollman (2000:191) add that although globalisation has created an environment where capital has become increasingly mobile the workforce has remained relatively immobile. They add that workers especially within small communities become ‘tied’ to the location by various external factors which include family, friends and life style (Bryden and Bollman 2000:191). This impacts on the employment relationship through the downwards pressure on wages especially if the individual workers are low-skilled which Bryden and Bollman (2000) highlight form a higher percentage of the available workforce in rural locations. They also add that many organisations that are located in rural areas do not invest enough capital into the organisation which ultimately restricts their ability to grow. From an employer’s point of view, however, labour expenditure within rural areas tends to be low, however, evidence suggests that it tends to be reliable and generally un-unionised which shifts the balance of power within the employment relationship clearly towards management.

Donovan, Pilch and Rubenstein (2002) argue that each year on average 10% of households move, however, only 1% move any distance and very few leave the geographical area. They add that the United Kingdom has a low rate of mobility when compared to the US and many other European countries. They conclude that skilled unemployed are more likely to move than the employed, however, they highlight that mobility breaks up social networks and lessens social contact between friends and family which could have a detrimental impact on individuals. Although this appears to reflect the data gathered within large urban locations this is not reflected within rural communities.
who on the whole appear to retain their population. Bryden and Bollman (2000:193) acknowledge that rural communities are increasingly becoming less self-sufficient and contained and are having to react more frequently with the wider external forces which shape the environment within which they live and work. For example, the economic climate, the changing social landscape and the political context all have an impact on the economy and culture of rural environments. Bryden and Bollman (2000) have argued that new values are emerging within rural locations within Western culture which may ‘threaten’ the identity of the local community and thus cause potential problems for both management as well as the workforce. For example, ‘in-comers’ may be attracted to the area through opportunities such as a cleaner and safer environment in which to bring up their children, the idea of a community and social integration which will improve their own personal lifestyle, time and space for sporting and leisure pursuits, a more attractive landscape and the lower cost of housing being some of the many examples that individuals have described.

Donovan, Pilch and Rubenstein (2002) add that new jobs and a higher level of education achievement are key reasons why people move between regions, concluding that people in professional occupations are almost twice as likely to move as unskilled blue-collar workers. As the literature suggests people living in rural locations are far more likely to have lower levels of education and skills which again reinforces the fact that employees who are born and brought up in rural locations are far less likely to re-locate in order to find work than their higher qualified counterparts in urban centres (Black, Kolesnikova and Taylor 2009). As MacDonald, et al (2005) have argued, ‘destructive social capital’ has led rural communities become insular and less likely to seek alternative educational opportunities outside their location or look for employment opportunities outside their immediate vicinity in order to improve their prospects than those living in urban locations.

Spielhofer et al (2010) attribute quite a lot of this immobility, not to lack of ambition, but to the fact that transportation in these rural areas is inadequate. Glendinning et al (2003:151) have concluded that public transport, if it exists, is limited and expensive. They highlight that employees in rural areas are unable to access affordable transport, either public or private, which could enable them to access jobs and careers that would allow them to become more geographically mobile. They add that the cost of transportation restricts the distance that employees in rural location can travel and therefore, limits their employment opportunities. Culliney (2014:50) also suggests that the motivation to move is stronger for those with higher levels of education as there are fewer opportunities in rural location which would match their talent. Culliney (2014) argues, that in particular, unskilled youths are generally unable to relocate in order to obtain employment which works as a disincentive. He highlights that rural youths do not get the same opportunities at gaining employment as youths from urban centres. These findings dispel New Labour’s claim that equality of opportunity would be addressed by the Government and that young people from rural locations would be empowered to access employment opportunities (Social Exclusion 2001:8). Rizou and

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2 Destructive Social Capital has been described as a situation in which cultural insularity and industrial and economic decline has resulted in individuals within a certain location becoming reluctant to seek education or employment beyond their own immediate location.
Walsh (2011) have argued that business growth has occurred faster in rural locations, rather than urban locations, which suggests that businesses in rural locations are relying heavily on unskilled labour which is unable to access career development opportunities and higher skilled knowledge based employment. This in turn has a negative impact on the national economy in the sense that many young people will be unable to fulfil their potential which is a loss to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Belot and Ermisch (2009) suggest that it is very difficult to identify a single homogenous group of workers who are prepared to become mobile geographically in order to find employment, as there are numerous factors which influence migration decisions. However, what is clear is that the number of family and friends living in a particular location significantly influences this decision. Those who have large numbers of friends, family and strong kinship ties in a geographical area are much less likely to migrate than those with only a limited number of such relationships. Thus, the consensus within the literature appears to suggest that these influential relationships together with the local community ‘spirit’, educational opportunities and transportation issues determine migrant mobility and, as a result, shape the way in which individual employees react to management and the employment relationship itself (Clark 1989).

The data gathered from this early case study indicates that employment relations vary from one geographical area to another, however, the variance is less between rural locations than their urban counterparts. The data further indicates that this variance is not solely a result of the economic environment within geographical location. Factors such as levels of unemployment without doubt influence the employment relationship, however, other external issues play an equally important role in shaping the employment relationship in these rural locations. These factors include personal relationships such as kinship and friendship as well as the availability of and cost of public and private transport and educational opportunities as well as potential job opportunities. In fact, the research to date suggests that these strong personal relationships play a significant part in the behaviour and attitude of both the employees and the employers and, as such, shape the employment relationship especially within these rural locations. For example, the employees within the case study organisation, which was composed of three sites based in the rural North East of England, generally accepted employment terms and conditions which were lower than their colleagues in a more accessible urban locations. They cited the fact that they were, on the whole, happy to accept these employment contracts as it enabled them to continue to live and work within the same area and maintain a ‘healthy’ relationship with their family and friends.

The primary data, collected through the semi structured in-depth interviews, indicated that the employees were reluctant to travel to find alternative employment in urban centres for a number of reasons. Firstly, there seemed general agreement that the employees felt “happy where they lived and worked” and that a constant theme that ran through nearly all the interviews was that they considered their family and friendship ties more important than any possible economic gains. One stated:
“Why would I leave my family and friends for the sake of a few pounds extra? I can’t say I love my job but I do enjoy the camaraderie that we have within the factory. These are my mates and my relatives …… much more important”.

Another strong theme was that of the availability of transport. Many of the employees highlighted that the low availability of public transport and its high cost meant that, if they were to travel the 45 miles to the closest urban centre, they would need to purchase and maintain a private vehicle which many felt they could not afford to do. During the actual period of research, the local authority in the remotest location in the investigation actually announced that it was going to stop all public transport, effectively preventing those on low incomes from having the opportunity to travel and find alternative employment outside the rural location, without having to actually move their homes. Culliney’s (2014) research supported these findings as he claimed that the cost and availability of transport in many rural locations had a negative impact on the ability of those living there it generally prevented them from seeking work beyond the community in which they lived.

A third theme which emerged through interviews with management in particular but also identified by some of the employees, was the level of education and training which was available in the area. Management highlighted that they struggled to find employees with education and training above the level of compulsory education. This in practical terms meant that a majority of the workforce joined the organisation at 16 with little or no experience or skills. The chief executive of the organisation highlighted that they had recently been given the opportunity to expand but the organisation was finding it difficult to recruit or even identify employees from within the area who had the skills and competencies that could be used to support their international expansion plans. Midgley and Bradshaw (2006:12) also highlighted that rural locations rarely provided sufficient training and development opportunities to support the development and expansion of organisations. This is a matter of concern as if we are to accept Rizou and Walsh (2011) that in the West, in particular the UK, there is a shift from urban focused organisations to rural then it seems important that the policy makers ensure that education and training are in place to support this movement otherwise the economy will be negatively restrained. Another matter of concern, which occurred during the period of data collection, was that the County Council for the remotest rural area in the study announced that it was considering closing the secondary school. This, potentially, is a matter of great concern, as without the area being able to provide secondary education families may be forced to migrate to locations closer to accessible secondary education for their children. Ultimately, this could reduce the available workforce from which the companies can draw.

Culliney (2014:50) suggest that if the policy makers fail to invest in the required education and training then those who aspire to attain higher educational levels will leave the area. This could again cause problems as, statistics indicate, that once these categories of potential employees have moved away they are unlikely to return, generally because of the perceived low career development opportunities within these rural communities.
These three central themes appeared to have a significant impact on the population of the rural locations involved in this research and the conclusions drawn were that employees/potential employees changed their aspirations in relation to work as they were, on the whole, unwilling or unable to seek employment beyond the confines of the towns included in the research. The study at this stage concludes that very few people within these rural locations were prepared to consider moving away from their homes due to the reasons outlined above. This, in the opinion of the author, has limited their ‘power’ within the employment relationship in the sense that management generally knew that the employees would accept the terms and conditions offered as they had very few, if any, alternatives. These employees also generally accepted that career development would be restricted as training and development opportunities would be limited due to the rural location and the availability of training providers in the area. Transport also provided a challenge to both management as well as employees in relation to training and development. Management, in the sense that organising and facilitating training and development was hindered by the lack of public transport together with the limited number of employees who required the training and development having access to private vehicles. Employees who could not access public transport due to availability and cost, together with not having enough funds to purchase and maintain a private vehicle in order to attend training and development opportunities.

Another issue that management highlighted was the perceived lack of ambition within the workforce in these rural locations. They suggested that the workforce in general seemed reluctant to develop their own personal skills and competencies which management considered showed low levels of ambition in relation to career progression. However, the author believes that it could also be the result of the lack of opportunity to engage with training and development opportunities. This, combined with the workforce perceiving that there were very few career progression opportunities available to them could have had a de-motivational impact on the workforce; ie) that they could not see any rationale as to why they should engage in training and development opportunities if at the end of the day there was no opportunity to use these ‘new’ skills and climb the organisations hierarchy. The author, considers that better communication channels need to be established between senior management and the ‘shop floor’ employee in order to address some of these issues which will otherwise ultimately restrict organisational development and perhaps even constrain organisational performance.

Another factor that became evident through analysing the data was that the behaviour of both management and employees in these rural locations was influenced and to some extent shaped by the historical industrial relations of the location. In the case of this study the areas were predominantly historically mining areas, whose industrial relations traditions is well documented within the UK and is generally described as adversarial (Lewis, Thornhill and Saunders 2003:28). This historical past was identifiable within the employment relationship at all three sites although trade union membership was not strongly evident (despite trying to gain access and interview the sites trade union representatives they refused to be interviewed). Despite the limited influence of the trade union, it was still evident in the interviews that this historical past was still influencing the
employment relationship. This adversarial culture has probably been passed down through the last few generations via the process of socialisation (Swap et al 2001:96). As Martin, Sunley and Willis (1994) highlight:

"Places differ, not only in their economic structures and functions, but also in their inherited cultural, political and social value systems. Local context plays an important role in shaping the existence and persistence of local variations in trade union traditions and industrial relations".

The study, therefore, indicates that there is no single factor which influences the employment relationship within rural environments. It shows that a number of issues have combined together with the result that an adversarial relationship has developed between management and workers. This has to a certain extent become dominated by suspicion on the part of both parties to the employment relationship.

To conclude, the evidence illustrates that factors such as the economic climate, changes in competition levels, employment legislation and political ideology have influenced the way British employment relations has evolved. However, the study suggests that issues such as the geographical location, personal relationship and kinship ties, transportation and training and development have been far more significant in shaping British industrial relations within these rural settings. The data, although restricted in quantity at present, indicates that local communities have differing historical and cultural norms and beliefs and as such react to the employment relationship differently than those living in urban centres. For example, it was found that the rural workforce were on the whole less skilled, held less prestigious jobs, had less job security and limited opportunities for career progression than their urban counterparts. This created what Culliney (2014:55) has argued is a “distinctive rural labour force” which in the opinion of the author requires targeted management practices that support and encourage the development of the workforce in relation to the strategic business objectives and an improvement in the employment relationship. As Thissen et al (2010:9) suggest today social progression is increasingly linked to an individual’s ability to and desire to become geographically mobile. They also highlight, what the present study has indicated, that there is concern that unless some of these issues are addressed soon, rural areas could experience a “youth brain-drain” (2010:9) which would present an economic threat to the development and reputation of rural areas and may reverse the movement of organisations from urban centres to rural regions. Ultimately, it could have a negative impact on the regional and national economy of the UK.

The study has highlighted that these rural areas face a range of problems which directly influence the employment relationship and that these problems are very different from the issues faced in urban centres. For example, issues such as access and availability of cheap public transport or the ability and opportunity to engage in further education and/or skill development opportunities is
reduced in rural areas. Also organisations in urban centres tend to struggle less to identifying talented employees due to the much larger pool of available skill that live within the vicinity of the organisation. However, it should also be noted that if rural employers manage to identify talented employees they are more likely than their urban or even peri-urban counterparts to retain these employees (Huiban 2009).

However, the author does not want this study to appear negative in the sense that it has identified a number of areas which will/have caused concern for the employment relationship within the rural locations investigated. What the author hopes is that she has highlighted a number of themes that policy makers as well as organisational leaders need to recognise and address in order to ensure continued economic development and increased organisational performance. One of the challenges for organisations is how do they persuade those living within the rural location to engage with their own personal development? At the same time they may need to consider how they encourage individuals with the skills that they need to migrate to rural areas? Another major concern is that at present the policy makers are failing to effectively address some of the structural requirements of rural areas. These policy makers need to reflect on how they can, for example, improve the physical accessibility of many rural areas both through transportation as well as roads and rail improvements. They also need to consider how they can invest in and support the development of an infrastructure, which would include broadband and wireless provision and speed which are required to support most contemporary organisations. In the opinion of the author, it is in the national interest for all stakeholders to ensure that all employees both young and old are able to fulfil their potential and therefore contribute positively to the regional and national economies.

Finally, as the author has outlined above rural locations do present barriers to employment and the development of an effective and efficient employment relationship, however, she believes that these can be effectively bridged if recognised by all stakeholders which operate within these rural areas.
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