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‘Lean’ in the UK Civil Service: from the theory of improvement to the varied realities of costs cutting

Abstract

With major cuts in public spending, the UK Civil Service has increasingly used ‘lean’ as a means of organizational restructuring. Two large central government departments used a variety of ‘lean’ techniques and tools to improve the efficiency of the workforce. Departmental management supported the use of lean with an apparently consistent and standardised approach to the restructuring of work. By contrast, lean was used in an inconsistent fashion at workplace level. Using data from civil servants in local government offices, four different variants of lean were evident. The variations in practice show how lean was used to systematise work to achieve performance targets in the context of reduced resources. The significance of lean relates to the extent that its use can be embedded, abandoned, adapted or replicated to achieve performance targets against a background of significant cuts in staff.

Key Words: lean, public sector, UK Civil Service

Lean: from manufacturing to the public sector

1. The United Kingdom Civil Service has in recent years increasingly attempted to use lean production systems to restructure the organization of its work. This case study will examine the ways in which the UK Civil Service has used an approach to work restructuring historically associated with manufacturing. This research evaluates the nature of lean within the political-economic context of an important part of the British public sector. The research focuses on the implementation of lean in two of the largest central government departments, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC).

2. For its advocates, lean is a business improvement system based on eliminating waste and inefficiency from the production processes of a firm or organization as a means of continuous improvement (Womack et al., 1990). The workforce is central to the success of lean as it is through utilising employee knowledge and skill that gains in productive efficiency are realised. Lean working therefore devolves a significant amount of responsibility for work tasks to the workforce as a means of adding financial value to the production process of the firm. Womack and Jones (1998) argue that lean is based on five principles: the specification of value of a product; the identification of the value stream of the product; how the product can be made to flow without interruption through the productive process; the concept of “pull” whereby component parts of the product are brought through the process just as these are needed; and the

pursuit of perfection. Benders (1999) also contends that lean is premised on effective and immediate ways of identifying defects and problems; using comprehensive information systems to generate and understand factory-wide problems in the production system; new forms of team working that support problem solving; and creating reciprocal obligations between firms and their workers. Lean systems are premised on high levels of standardisation, but under lean its advantages as a system of working are realised by the employees themselves becoming contributors to the creation and enhancement of the operating procedures (Womack et al., 1990).

3. Lean, however, has been subject to significant critique. The empirical evidence upon which lean's efficiency was promoted has been subject to challenge (Coffey, 2006, Williams et al., 1992). The use of lean as a system of production neglects the ways in which it is rarely applied in a uniform manner (Benders and Morita, 2004). Its variation in use reflects the political economy of work at national, sectoral and workplace level (Pardi, 2007). The extent to which lean is used at a workplace or micro level of analysis is integrally linked to the political economy of work at a national (macro) level or sectoral (meso) level. Boyer and Freyssenet (2002) argue that the 'productive organization' of any firm, in tandem with the product policies and the employment relationships, are in part constrained by the political-economic architecture found at national or macro level. Lean systems rely on tight supply chains linking the organization of work in the workplace closely to the productive organization at the sectoral level (Durand, 2007). Accounts of lean also fail to address the ways in which lean working are used, not as a means of increasing workforce participation, but as a means of control over the labour process using worker knowledge against their own interests (Stewart et al., 2009) resulting in significant work intensification.

4. However, this research examines lean in the public sector, a very different arena from car manufacturing. Since the election of the Thatcher government in 1979, the Civil Service has been subject to constant organizational restructuring. This restructuring has been underpinned by a marketised approach to the delivery of state services premised on a belief in the inherent inefficiency and waste found within the public sector (Fry, 1985; Theakston, 1995; Chapman and O'Toole, 2010). Attempts by successive governments to restructure the public sector, originally under the epithet of New Public Management, have witnessed the adoption of private sector business models as a solution to the supposed waste prevalent within such areas as the Civil Service (Barzelay, 2002; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011; Hood, 1991). The global economic crisis of 2008 and the election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010 witnessed renewed efforts by central government to reorganise Civil Service work (Greener, 2013, Hood, 2013). In tandem with this restructuring of work, the Civil Service saw significant reductions in the number of staff employed within the organization. Between 2006 and 2009, the number of staff employed in the Civil Service fell from approximately 554,000 to 524,000. It rose by 3000

in 2010, but thereafter fell to around 498,000 by 2011. By 2014, this number has fallen to approximately 440,000 (Office for National Statistics, 2014).

3. Since 2004, a number of government departments have used 'lean' to implement programmes of work restructuring initially in response to cuts in public spending arising from the Gershon Report (2004), a government commissioned report into Civil Service modernisation. Government departments have attempted to roll out lean throughout their network of offices including those which deal with the delivery of state services such as social security benefit and tax assessment.

4. Radnor (2010) argues that the application of lean into the UK Civil Service is not without difficulty, but contends that the principles of lean working are as applicable to the public sector as they are to manufacturing. She contends that recent government policies that seek to increase efficiency in the delivery of state services resonate with lean's emphasis on the reduction of waste and the concomitant improvement of productive efficiency. Techniques such as visual management and problem solving groups have as much capacity to generate efficiency savings in the Civil Service as they have within manufacturing. For Radnor, the issue is one of Civil Service management failing to fully comprehend the principles of lean working rather than any fundamental problem with the lean concept. She argues that the failure of lean working derives from its use solely as a means to cut costs rather than view lean as a system where its value derives from workforce knowledge to enhance state services for the benefit of the public.

5. Transferring a set of principles and techniques from the manufacturing sector to the public sector is, however, problematic. The British Civil Service has historically been premised on the bureaucratic foundations of hierarchy, expertise, objectivity and adherence to rules allied to the ethos of public service probity (Robson, 1956; Campbell, 1965) and not, as in the private sector, the production of manufactured goods for profit. The political economy of work within the Civil Service is therefore distinct borne in part of its historical antecedents. Furthermore, work within the Civil Service also reflects the context of the neo-liberal state agenda whereby the provision of public services within the UK is subject to increasing commodification (Moody 2011). Fairbrother (1994) argues that although civil servants are agents of the state, they are also employees of the state and as such subject to the demands of capital. Civil servants are consequently, through this state labour process, no less susceptible to the restructuring of work and management attempts at control through lean working than employees in the manufacturing sector. The issue for this research is in what ways, what Stewart and Martínez Lucio (1998) describe as the new politics of production, impact on the restructuring of work within the specific context of this part of the public sector.

6. Previous research, within HMRC for example, has shown that lean has resulted in work intensification, deskilling and the adoption of increasingly Taylorised forms of work (Carter et al., 2011). Integral to the restructuring of work was the increased use of computerisation and the delivery of state services through the use of telephony centres (Gershon, 2004). With this greater reliance on information technology, it allowed Civil Service management to increasingly centralise work in large processing centres remote from the public they served (Fisher, 2007).

7. How senior civil servants approach organizational change is subject to a variety of political and economic influences derived from the state's agenda of reducing public sector spending. To that extent there are clear pressures on senior Civil Service management to restructure the organization of work throughout the areas over which it has responsibility. The issue for this article is to examine in what ways lean systems of working were operated at the workplace level under the pressures exerted by senior management and to explore the extent to which departmental aims of implementing lean are realised in practice. The inconsistency with which lean, a business improvement method premised on the benefits of standardised work practice, is implemented at workplace presents a paradox. This article explores the inconsistencies in implementation to give a more nuanced understanding of lean in the context of reduced resources in the public sector.

8. With many private sector practices exported under the auspices of New Public Management into France (Bezes, 2009), the issues raised in this article may have significance for the French public sector. The French state apparatus has historically differed from its British counterpart with some evidence of reluctance to experiment with new business methodologies (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). Although there is little evidence that the term 'lean' has the same currency in the French public sector as it does in Britain, the French state sector has not been immune from such techniques as benchmarking (Bruno and Didier, 2013). Increasingly the public sector has begun to resemble the UK sector in terms the approaches used. Although the conclusion will focus on the experience of civil servants working in the UK Civil Service, the article will pose some questions for the French context.

Methodology

9. The research for this article is primarily drawn from data collected from trade union members and stewards from the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), the main Civil Service trade union. The data was drawn largely from PCS members working for DWP and HMRC. At the point of data collection around 40% of all civil servants in the UK were employed in these two departments (Office for National Statistics, 2016). The main functions of DWP are to administer social security benefits and pensions, and assist job seekers find employment (Gov.UK, 2016a) whilst the function of HRMC is the administration

and collection of taxes (Gov.UK, 2016b). Both departments have increasingly organised delivery of services along functional and segmented lines basing work in large centres remote from the public they serve rather than the previous model of delivery based on a network of smaller local offices dealing with the local population. Trade union membership density in the Civil Service is currently around 67%. In certain government offices, membership density exceeds 90% (Carter et al., 2012). Union density in the Civil Service is significantly greater than the public sector average of 56% (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2013).

10. A total of 56 people were interviewed regarding lean. Although forms of organizational restructuring in the Civil Service had been prevalent for some considerable time, lean was the focus for the interviews. When questioned, interviewees said the lean was the only approach used by management: interviewees were unfamiliar with such terms as Business Re-engineering or Total Quality Management. Thirteen interviews were undertaken with full time union officials and senior stewards as a means of facilitating access to PCS members and gaining a wider overview of lean in the Civil Service. Over the period May 2010 to June 2011, semi-structured interviews were used to get data from a total of 43 people. This represented 25 staff working in 17 DWP offices, and seven staff working in four HMRC locations. Four additional interviews were also undertaken with PCS members delivering Civil Service work in three other locations. Only eight of the semi-structured interviewees did not currently hold any form of union post. Gaining access to 'ordinary members' was problematic due to the legal restrictions on the information civil servants are able to disclose to the public (Civil Service, 2011) and a culture of secrecy within British central government that militates against disclosing internal matters (Gregorszuk, 2005). There was correspondingly a need to rely more extensively on the views of union stewards rather than union members. In terms of job roles, around 45% of those interviewed were clerical staff members undertaking routine administrative work and simple decision making on social security or tax matters. Around 55% held junior managerial positions. Their work included line management responsibility for clerical staff and complex decision-making. Interviewees were representative of the workforce insofar as they worked on a broad spectrum of jobs ranging from those based in small local offices dealing with the public face to face to those working in the large telephony or processing centres. Only 14 of the interviewees were female which does not reflect the gender balance of the Civil Service which is 53% female (Office for National Statistics, 2016). It does reflect, however, that historically within PCS union stewards have tended to be male rather than female (Fairbrother, 2000). Most of the interviewees had worked for the Civil Service for ten years or more, some in excess of 30 years. Only three people had less than five years' service within the Civil Service.

11. Although Civil Service management declined to participate in the research and very few materials have been released into the public domain relating to the

use of lean, the researcher located a limited amount of departmental documentation. An external consultants' report into the operation of lean (Radnor and Bucci, 2007) was also used in evaluating work restructuring in HMRC.

Lean 'visions': how new systems of work are presented

12. The discussion is divided into two parts. The first part of the analysis examines a range of documentary material produced by DWP and HMRC. A proportion of the material was found in the public domain, but much of it was written for internal use. Whilst much of the material is prescriptive in tone, an examination of the documentary evidence has value in understanding the rationale for using lean that local office managers had to interpret and apply at the workplace level of analysis in the context of significant reductions in staffing. The documentary evidence also provides information on the techniques and tools of lean working apparently demonstrating how their successful application in other locations could be used throughout the departments. The second part of the analysis examines how lean was applied at workplace level using data from PCS members and officials. This will allow an assessment of the extent to which lean was applied in a consistent fashion and its impact on working conditions.

13. The rationale underpinning the restructuring of work organization in DWP and HRMC was broadly similar. The DWP Lean Vision (2007) stated that in introducing lean working it sought to use "sources of expertise" drawn from both private and public sectors to enable it to use lean to achieve significant efficiency savings. The Lean Vision cited Siemens, HRMC and Sainsbury's as exemplars of good practice upon which it could draw. DWP management through the use of lean aimed to increase productivity by 15% in the first year of the Lean programme and 5% annually thereafter to 2017. The central tenet of lean around the elimination of waste was summed up thus:

All our people to be obsessive about waste – not producing it, not passing it on onto others and not accepting it from others

(Lean Vision, page 2, "2011 and beyond")

The document however was silent on the issue of staffing cuts. References to what extent lean could generate staff savings were absent from this document and from other internally produced material written to promote lean working among the workforce.

14. In HMRC, the report into the Pacesetter programme of which Lean was a main strand had a broadly similar rationale to that found in DWP. This report did however highlight that the context of Pacesetter was one where central government required HMRC management to achieve 30% efficiency savings in 'headcount' in the period 2006-2008. Radnor and Bucci (2007, 11) recorded that achieving organizational change was based on a "three pronged approach:

Redesigning service delivery processes so as to eliminate waste and variability and maximise flexibility. This will improve productivity, quality and reduce lead time.

Changing current management processes to create appropriate management infrastructure to sustain improvements.

Changing mindsets and behaviours of leaders and front line staff to support the new systems and deliver continuous improvement.

Organizational change was premised on creating a new “infrastructure” as a vehicle for continuous improvement in operational practice; the emphasis on parsimony and discipline through the elimination of waste; and the use of targets as a measurement of quantitative and qualitative efficiency.

15. In terms of the implementation of lean techniques at a workplace level, the documentary evidence from DWP and HMRC presents a largely similar picture. Both departments ostensibly used a similar range of lean tools and techniques in pursuance of greater organizational efficiency. Through the DWP staff intranet, employees were provided with information explaining how lean had been successfully applied in other parts of the department to encourage staff members to undertake similar activities in their locations. The DWP Lean Lite Newsletter, a publication on the staff intranet dedicated to promoting lean working, encouraged employees to continuously improve the performance of the organization thus:

People know their suggestions will be listened to, tested and, if successful, taken forward. For example one colleague identified a way to improve maternity allowance.¹ Three weeks later it was part of the official process guidance. The improvement shaves just 30 seconds off each application but multiply this by 800 claims a week and you get a better idea of the impact. (DWP Lean Lite Newsletter 1)

Other examples from the same Intranet source described how lean had reduced the number of steps required to make social security claims increasing the average number of claims someone could assess per day from 10-12 to 15-16 generating quicker payments to the public. Trialling in excess of 100 staff ideas including repositioning a printer and removing unnecessary scrutiny checks reducing the time needed to process an attendance allowance² claim by 11% and increasing employee productivity by 21%. In effect, the problem solving skills of the workforce were presented as one of the main reasons for improving the chain of work processes. The involvement of the workforce was presented as a critical factor in improving productivity by the elimination of wasteful or unnecessary activity.

¹ A state welfare benefit paid to women who were pregnant.

² A state welfare benefit for people with care needs.

16. The external consultants' report on lean within HMRC (Radnor and Bucci, 2007) confirmed the existence of several key lean techniques that supported the internal flow of work. The report referred to the use of business diagnostics to calculate where work could be most effectively done; increased standardisation of work processes to meet 'key performance indicators'; and the use of performance boards and structured problem solving. DWP endorsed the use of specific techniques and tools to realise the lean principles. The DWP Lean Lite Newsletter described how visual management techniques could be used:

Visual management techniques

Visual management is about making visible to everyone, at a glance, the way we are working. Some key visual management techniques are:

Information Centres

An information centre is a clear and visual representation of the current state of your part of the business. It allows you to make decisions using the full information available

Key information is shown on easily visible display boards with visual triggers to show any problems

(DWP Lean Lite Newsletter 1)

Staff members would contribute to problem solving activities by the completion of 'concern strips' recorded on the visual management display board. Short term solutions to problems (described as 'containment') could be raised by staff, while problems that required a longer term solution would follow the 'countermeasure' process whereby issues would be recorded on the display board, escalated to a more senior level and their progress tracked until a final resolution was received thereby allowing these issues to be removed from the board.

17. The documentary evidence presents, on the face of it, a largely consistent picture of two departments both using broadly similar approaches to achieve similar ends. The DWP Lean Vision had a target of achieving a fully leant organization by 2017, while the aim of HMRC was to ensure that 95% of its activities were being operated through lean working by 2013 (National Audit Office, 2011). However the next part of the discussion highlights that whilst efficiency savings were a significant driver of work restructuring at the workplace level, the application of lean was inconsistently applied. Lean tools and techniques were operated in significantly different ways to those described in the documentary evidence.

Lean in the workplace: standardisation and inconsistency

18. The empirical evidence taken from civil servants working in DWP and HMRC suggests that there were four different ways in which lean was applied reflecting significant inconsistency on the part of local office management. Unlike some

previous studies where lean is viewed largely as a unitary entity, this research drawing upon a comparison of different departments and different types of office indicates that local office management systematised an adapted lean to reflect the specific requirements of the work even where the jobs were broadly similar.

19. The evidence indicates, first, that in some areas of work lean was “embedded” into the organization. However in other areas, lean was introduced and then abandoned. The third variation was where lean was used instrumentally with management only giving it ‘lip service’. Finally, there were parts of the organization where lean was “replicated”: the lean epithet was not specifically used by management, but the approach and techniques implemented had marked similarities to what was described as ‘lean’ elsewhere. These variations in practice are now explained in more detail.

20. In certain parts of HMRC and DWP, it was apparent that lean was widely and extensively used. Lean was therefore “embedded” in some parts of the organization. One senior union steward reflecting on his experience negotiating with management at a regional level described its use as “endemic. It’s everywhere”. Included within the embedded form of lean working was the use of process standardisation, variously described as Standard Operating Models, Standard Process Descriptions or Standard Work Instructions. These types of instruction which in some cases predated the adoption of lean (Aylen et al. (2007) typify the approach to standardisation where management sought to ensure processes of social security and tax assessment were consistently applied. This was particularly noticeable where organization of work was reliant on computerised systems where staff members worked geographically remotely from both colleagues and members of the public where their method of interacting with colleagues in other offices was largely by transferring blocks of work electronically from one location to another. These standard work processes were often created through piloting a work process in one location and then rolling the process out to all other offices in the UK. Once national management had decided that a process was to be used, local managers were allowed little scope for varying any part of the process. A senior union negotiator in DWP stated that any attempt by a local manager to unilaterally amend a process was “frowned on”.

21. Lean working was premised not only on the standardisation of instructions needed to carry out work processes, but also in the standardisation of how workers interacted with these instructions. One interviewee was asked to contrast how he had previously processed social security claims with how his management had changed the system under lean working. Prior to the introduction of lean, he and his colleagues could organise their work in whichever way best suited their individual preferences. This allowed staff members to, for example, spend a morning previewing work on a number of cases, and then making final assessment decisions in the afternoon. Under lean, his local management instructed staff members that cases needed to be done

end to end with all required processes completed before starting on a new case. He stated:

And you now, as I say, have to take three cases and they have to be done end-to-end, you can't preview and then allocate as such. Under the Lean model, you're supposed to do every single case individually from start to finish [in my office], but you still take a bundle of three, simply because it's easier to take three than get up and go for one case, but the idea is that even though you've got three cases on your desk you must do one case at a time. So there's no flexibility over how you do your day's job

This embedded form of lean standardised the work and limited the autonomy of the workforce to structure their day. Briefly stated, this embedded form of lean was not simply about *what* people do: it is about *how* they do it.

22. Civil servants working in a lean embedded environment commented unfavourably on how the jobs they did became increasingly repetitive and fragmented. The expectation of local managers was that with a narrower range of duties to perform that employee would be able to work quicker and more efficiently. The reality, as one administrative officer in HMRC described it, was that the increased pace of working and the shift away from 'whole case working' (the previous way of working where one officer dealt with all aspects of a tax case from start to finish) created errors in tax assessment:

if you're not 'whole case' working, so many things can slip through the net and so all these people [are] out there with the wrong tax code

The reality in this office was, as another interviewee highlighted, whereas previously before the introduction of lean having mail lying unanswered for in excess of 28 days was a "crisis", managers were now congratulating themselves on getting that figure down to 65 days.

23. The other major impact arising from the use of lean embedded was the impact that this had on the numbers of staff required to undertake the work. One steward in DWP reflecting on his knowledge of an office whose management team regularly volunteered to conduct lean pilots stated:

the [office] that's doing all this work is gradually getting all its core work shipped out because it's a self-defeating prophecy because they're doing all of this stuff and "we'll volunteer for this and we'll volunteer for that" and while they're all doing this, their core work is getting sent out. And as their core work is getting sent out, their staffing's reduced

Reflecting on his experience of lean in HMRC, one steward stated:

Well, [management] were unapologetic in that they said right at the beginning "Lean will save us twelve and a half thousand jobs in processing. So they reverse engineered it. They knew the number was

twelve and a half thousand. They brought in Lean and tried to drive it to deliver these savings while still doing the work. What it's proved that they've cut the jobs, the amount of work on hand's gone through the roof, but they still claim that Pacesetter's a success

24. This 'lean embedded' contrasts, however, with those parts of DWP where the lean tools and techniques have been abandoned or neglected. Local office lean practitioners were perceived as having no clear role. One junior manager described them as people who sat in a room to no apparent purpose. The visual management boards were installed and then not used. In areas of DWP where civil servants engaged in telephony call centre work, the techniques of lean such as the regular team meeting to discuss performance were abandoned by managers in order to concentrate on achieving those performance targets. One interviewee, a clerical officer and union steward in a Job Centre stated that in her office she had not had a lean meeting for around six to seven months. She added:

we're at the coalface, so we can't come away at nine or half nine or ten o'clock for even it's for five minutes, we can't all get away at the same time

Reductions in staffing within her office precluded any engagement with lean techniques in any meaningful fashion. Local managers' need to meet performance targets constrained their use of lean techniques. It was noticeable that very intense work areas such as telephony were especially subject to the abandonment of certain lean techniques. The abandonment of lean did not result in the improvement of service to the public, but a diminution in quality with instances reported during the research interviews of shortcuts in the legal processes and manipulation of the performance results. This included dissuading callers from making claims and shortening telephone calls on often "spurious" grounds. One example was where a call was terminated because a member of the public misquoted a home post code. Management was ultimately willing to dispense with certain tools once these had achieved its central objective of work reorganization: as one senior steward in HMRC stated when he was told that management had agreed to dispense with 'white boards':

it never was about white boards [...] that was part of the game. It was about breaking the staff down into units that were where they wanted them

The reduction in service quality challenges the assumptions made by public sector management that performance standards can be maintained in a working environment where there is significant reductions in staffing Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011, p.191).

25. The third category is where lean was used in an instrumental way. Lean techniques were given lip service by local management. One line manager stated

that he was supposed to hold a 15 minute meeting each week with his team of 26 clerical assistants. He did not hold this meeting stating that his own manager was complicit in this decision. This line manager said that provided he gave an assurance that meetings were held on a regular basis that he was allowed to dispense with this lean event. Despite senior departmental management's requirement to engage with the lean process at a local level, local managers pretended to undertake lean activities, because as the interviewee stated, his staff members had no interest in engaging with lean failing to see its relevance in relation to their basic administrative duties.

26. Even where lean techniques and tools were used, there existed an instrumental approach to lean. One interviewee, a clerical officer who provided administrative support for visiting officers, described the conduct of lean meetings in her office. Rather than a focus on the substantive content of what might be of benefit from lean working, her office management was more concerned over the process of the meeting. Her team was told that all staff members had to stand during the lean meeting. She stated:

Now the Lean board was literally right behind my desk, but you had to get up and stand in front of it, [because] you're not allowed to sit which again is pointless bureaucracy from my point of view

Lean techniques in effect provided a further means to managers to exercise control over the workforce rather than provide the opportunity for staff members to contribute their ideas as a means of work improvement. Even where the lean meetings potentially provided the opportunity to raise issues through the concern strip mechanism identified as the vehicle for dealing with issues, a number of interviews expressed reservations about the effectiveness of this procedure. A social security benefits processor stated that the concern strips were used, but issues were often left unresolved and were seen by staff members as a means by which management could ignore problems. This interviewee stated that, where previously staff members could raise issues as they arose, the use of lean meant that the workforce could only effectively raise issues in the formal setting of the lean meeting. To this extent, 'lean instrumental' acted as a barrier to the resolution of issues.

27. Any objections raised by the workforce around lean techniques could be rebutted by local office managers: managers could use the standardised instructions as a justification for enforcing control over the workforce under the guise of lean. Even where lean ostensibly provided a degree of process improvement, these improvements were not sacrosanct with local management prepared to amend standardised procedures if those procedures proved problematic in attaining the efficiency savings that they wanted to achieve. What one interviewee described as "guerrilla lean" was used by management to circumvent lean procedures decided at national departmental level to try to squeeze even greater efficiency savings from organizational change processes.

Staff-led meetings previously held to discuss ideas for improving the organization of the office were superseded by meetings that were held to specifically develop the lean agenda with workforce ideas on process improvement subservient to that agenda. Where reduced numbers of staff prevented the application of better quality interaction with the public, management re-engineered lean procedures to fit the resources rather than use lean to determine the most effective means to achieve a quality service. One adviser in a Job Centre noted that once his local management realised that lengthening the interviews for new job seekers could be not sustained in terms of the staffing resources available the local lean expert reduced the time allocated to each interview. Despite the benefits of a longer interview as a means of assisting job seekers back into work, these revised procedures acted against improving quality of service. Lean procedures were often only used instrumentally to the extent that they achieved performance targets sacrificing elements of service to fit an agenda underpinned by reduced resources. Efficiency, defined largely in terms of cost efficiency, was on that basis on management's terms.

28. Even within HMRC and DWP where management did not specifically use the 'lean' epithet, the approach to organizational change replicated the types of activities and techniques that were branded as 'lean. One junior manager in HRMC in a small specialised area of taxation work described how her office was not yet fully integrated into the Pacesetter/Lean programme. Yet the way that she and her colleagues engaged in problem solving activities was akin to the lean ideal of using workforce knowledge to improve work processes. More commonly, interviewees referred to the increasing trend of standardisation and management attempts to identify ways in which process efficiency and the removal of waste could be achieved. Interviewing staff members in departments other than DWP and HMRC provided the opportunity to confirm the existence of standard operating procedures in other government departments even where lean had not been formally adopted by their senior management. One interviewee in DWP reflected on what his local management had said to the workforce about his social security processing centre. The management in his work area at the point of interview had not explicitly used the term 'lean' in relation to his office. However, he stated:

[Lean has] always been threatening and always been looming and we're always being told, it's always being mentioned "Lean will come to us as some stage, it's probably on its way, we're [going to] get it at some point" [...]. But what [management] have said to us is they kind of do in our office a lot of what Lean's about anyway. They're constantly reviewing and looking at work processes and workloads and trying to put in measures to streamline it (PCS trade union steward and benefits processor in DWP)

Lean replicated shared many of the same features as other parts of DWP and HMRC with fragmentation of work, work intensification and a reduction in

resources. The degree to which 'lean replicated' is simply a precursor to the more structured forms of lean working is to some degree speculative albeit that management's intentions to extend lean working were clear.

Lean: a consistent approach?

29. Against a background of state cuts to public sector funding and reductions in staffing, DWP and HMRC have on the one hand apparently chosen to adopt a structured approach to improving organizational efficiency. The lean approach is premised on a number of universal principles that could be applied throughout these government departments. Yet on the other hand, its implementation at workplace level by local management has been neither wholly coherent nor consistent. There was a clear rationale from senior departmental management that lean was to be used to improve organizational efficiency, but its implementation at workplace level failed to fully match the idealised accounts of lean working presented by management either in terms of organizational efficiency or in terms of the tools and techniques used. The evidence drawn from different parts of the Civil Service allows for a more nuanced view of lean working. The four categories (embedded, abandoned, instrumental and replicated) provide the basis for understanding organizational change within DWP and HMRC where lean is more than the sum of a set of techniques or tools.

30. The rationale for lean working is that work can be redesigned for greater organizational efficiency using a strategic, consistent and coherent approach that can improve the running of the Civil Service in the same way that lean has improved such sectors as manufacturing. On the one hand, senior department management has sought to use lean as an approach to work redesign based on common principles such as the removal of unproductive processes and the use of employee knowledge as a means of facilitating changes. There is no indication in the documentary evidence produced by DWP or HMRC that lean is capable of variation: lean can be used in every situation in an identical fashion even within the context of the cuts of resources to the public sector. Yet the elements of consistency that emphasise the legitimacy of making changes, based on the removal of unproductive and insufficient working practices with employee knowledge of the work central to lean working, are in contrast with the heterogeneity of the implementation of lean at workplace level. The variations in types of lean working derive from the way that management had to systematise work at local level. Local management needed to adapt work practice to achieve performance objectives within the financial constraints and subsequent staffing reductions. In areas of work where 'lean embedded' was dominant, its use was seen by management as central to achieving its objectives. In 'lean replicated', managers copied techniques used elsewhere in the Civil Service without the need to give the process a name. However in 'lean instrumental', local management often found the techniques and tools an impediment to achieving their performance aims and only used them to the extent that their use could be manipulated. With reduction in staffing, lean had to be used in an *ad hoc*

fashion. 'Lean abandoned' was reflective of the pressure on office managers where use of lean techniques were an impediment to achieving work performance targets. The effectiveness of lean for local managers appeared to be determined by the extent to which it delivered their performance targets and not to whether the techniques or tools were themselves beneficial. The workforce was largely excluded from decisions on how lean was used and were subject to significant work intensification often related to the reduction in staffing levels and the pressure exerted by local managers of staff to achieve performance targets. Targets were undoubtedly achieved, but often at the expense of service quality, some of which would not always be apparent to management.

31. Developing a new typology of lean provides the opportunity to address the inconsistent ways in which local office managers tried to restructure work in the context of cuts in resources. Local managers adapted lean to the extent to which it aided or hindered the achievement of management objectives rather than use it as unitary system of organizational restructuring. Lean had a unity of approach that was premised on increasing efficiency through the use of a series of techniques within the political-economic context of reduced resources. The rhetoric of lean working consistently sought to emphasise the role of employees in improving the running of the organization. Yet, despite seeming improvements in performance, the apparent effectiveness of lean may relate more to staff members having to increase the tempo of work to reflect significant reduced staff levels and a political-economic agenda of state cost cutting. Variations in lean reflect the extent to which local managers need to control how work is systematised rather than a homogenous package of tools that can fit every situation. The variations in technique reflect the political-economy of work at the workplace level rather than represent a wholly consistent set of practices that can be uncritically applied in every situation. Local managers were faced with the need to react and interpret lean for their locations, but their response was limited within certain boundaries, for example, by performance targets, standardised computer systems and most critically the number of staff they had to manage the workload, all factors determined by senior management who themselves faced limited resources. Lean working allowed managers to adapt systems to their locations utilising a seemingly coherent set of tools. Ultimately provided results were achieved or seen to be achieved, specific techniques could be manipulated to control the performance of work. The contribution of employees to lean working was treated in identical fashion where its use was manipulated, use or ignored to the extent that it aligned to the reduced resources. Lean, as one contributor said, was subject to a form of 'reverse engineering': processes were made to fit the reduction in resources. Lean then becomes a form of *post hoc* rationalisation of work restructuring: a system made to work in the face of reduced staff numbers and a heightened emphasis on getting more out of less.

32. With an increase in the number of private sector techniques already prevalent, this article provides opportunity to consider whether in an era of austerity French public sector management might supplement its existing range of techniques with lean. What may be the more line of useful enquiry is the extent to which lean may be adapted in the similar fashion to the UK within the agencies of the French state in response to cuts in resources as waves of these techniques are used over time.

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