Dignified work, dignified workers and dignified workplaces:
exploring dignity at work as promising practice

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Dignified Work, Dignified Workers and Dignified Workplaces:
Exploring Dignity at Work as Promising Practice

Dignity at work is a complex phenomenon that is related to various important organisational issues such as mismanagement, over-long hours, bullying and harassment or poor working environments (Hodson, 2001; Rayman, 2001; TUC, 2003). Contributors to over a century of social and organisational analysis have variously talked loosely about dignity at work under headings such as citizenship, job satisfaction, mutuality, pride in work, responsible autonomy and ontological security. Essentially, dignity is universally accepted as a fundamental human right which is enshrined in international constitution (United Nations, 1948). This has been recognised, to a certain degree, by businesses and policy makers who have introduced initiatives such as work-life balance, the management of diversity and schemes to ensure workers are employable. However, though valuable initiatives in themselves, the focus on management practice has moved the concentration away from dignity at work as a fundamental human right and to one of best practice people management (BPPM) and its link with performance. Due to the emphasis on performativity, dignity at work remains an under-researched area and, despite the obvious need to engage with this important topic, there is, as yet, no available conceptual understanding of what dignity might mean to managers and workers in their day-to-day working lives and how this impacts upon their experiences of work and how an organisation may carry itself with dignity in the local community and the global marketplace. An understanding of these experiences is fundamental to the health and well-being of workers, managers and companies and the consumers of their goods and services and yet dignity at work is not viewed as a desirable end in itself and is not the focus of attention, unlike BPPM, which as a means to the desirable end of increased company performance, receives excessive, and often unjustifiable, interest from many different quarters.

This paper seeks to invigorate the debate on dignity at work by investigating the notion of dignity in contemporary organisations and introducing a new conceptual lens through which dignity at work might be understood. The focus of the paper will be an empirical exploration of the concept of dignified work, dignified workers and dignified workplaces. That is, dignified work linked with the notion of ‘good work’ and dignified workers associated with how we are perceived and valued as a person in the workplace, set within the context of how the organisation may be perceived as a dignified workplace. Drawing on secondary data derived from The Sunday Times Top 100 Best Companies to work for 2005 survey (UK), BPPM will be examined through the lens of dignity at work and new insights into structures and practices that impact upon the experience of dignified work, dignified workers and dignified workplaces will be offered. Interrogation of the Times Top 100 list through the conceptual outline of dignity at work highlights some fundamental gaps in BPPM in action; not least its general lack of recognition of the socio-economic frameworks in which employment relations must operate. The analysis presented will suggest it is more helpful to talk of ‘promising practices’; a pragmatic approach that recognises the difficulties of delivering on the promises of BPPM within the structural constraints of a capitalist economy. Thus the notion of promising practice overcomes the, at best delusional and, at worst, deceitful prescriptions of BPPM that hold little real promise of delivering the ‘best’ for employees within the vagaries of a vigorous capitalism.

Defining Dignity: Dignified Work, Dignified Workers and Dignified Workplaces
Concerns centred on issues of human dignity have been at the heart of moral and political philosophy for centuries: for Aristotle dignity is a matter of formal recognition and honour; for Pico della Mirandola, as a theologian, and for Hobbes, as a philosopher, it represents free will and, for Kant, dignity is defined as respect for people as being intrinsically valuable in themselves. Such issues also form a core concern for the founding figures of the social sciences. In different ways, and relating their concerns to different eras, each conceptualise
increasing industrialisation as entailing a possible denial of dignity. Marx considers Capitalism to be a threat to our ‘species being’, Durkheim believes the relentless drive toward economic efficiency leads to a state of *anomie* (normlessness) and Weber expresses concern for the individual trapped in excessive bureaucratic rationality. Throughout all of these analyses dignity is closely associated with work. As Hodson, and many others, point out, work is a crucial means of attaining dignity: ‘working with dignity is an essential building block for a life well-lived’ (Hodson, 2001: 4 ILO, 2005; Rayman, 2001; Westwood, 2002).

Nevertheless, despite this common association, there is little doubt that dignity at work remains an elusive subject. There is general consensus, though originating from many different perspectives, that dignity is an essential core human characteristic. It is overwhelmingly presented as meaning people are worth something as human beings, that it is something that should be respected and not taken advantage of and that the maintenance of human dignity is a core contributor to a stable ‘moral order’. However, when entering the realms of work and the complexities of exchanging labour for a wage the definitions become much less clear. In selling one’s labour does one also relinquish autonomy, freedom, equality and, often, well-being – the very ingredients of life that have been most commonly associated with human dignity? Or, is it the case that paid work can provide the means for all of these core elements of a quality life to be realised? For Marx the selling of one’s labour leads to alienation and loss of dignity and yet he, and many others, suggests there is a fundamental dignity in labour. Hodson’s insightful analysis of classic workplace ethnographies attempts to deal with these complexities within a framework of the ‘four faces of dignity’. He suggests there are four principle challenges to the achievement of human dignity in the workplace: ‘mismanagement and abuse, overwork, limits on autonomy and contradictions of employee involvement’ (Hodson, 2001: 5). Similarly, Rayman proposes that there are ‘three pillars of dignity at work – livelihood, self-respect, and social responsibility’ (Rayman, 2001: 4). From this it becomes apparent that dignity at work is a multi-faceted phenomenon. Hodson, as many others, talks of meaningful work as a major source of dignity at work. However, he also adds economic and political dimensions to the topic when he talks of democracy, justice and equality. Likewise, Rayman (2001) speaks of a ‘dignity spectrum’ where people are placed depending on their ability to survive in conditions of global capitalism. It is therefore important to see that it is not a mere case of dignity existing as a core human characteristic that is realised through fulfilling labour but that various organisational structures and practices will impact on how dignity is realised and that the over-arching structural relations of a capitalist economy in which organisations must operate and survive will, in turn, impact on how these organisational practices are shaped and implemented.

Building on this foundation it might be suggested that dignity can be more clearly explored if its multi-dimensional character is highlighted. It is suggested that rather than talking in general terms of dignity at work it would be helpful to delineate different dimensions. Fig 1. outlines the two suggested dimensions of dignity, which, it is proposed ultimately lead to an organisation being recognised as a dignified workplace. Hence, dignity in labour via interesting and meaningful work with a degree of responsible autonomy and recognised social status may be understood as *dignified work*. Structures and practices that offer equality of opportunity, collective and individual voice, safe and healthy working conditions, secure terms of employment and just rewards would lead to workers attaining dignity at work, thus *dignified workers*. The strength of such a multi-dimensional analysis is that some of the complexities involved in understanding dignity at work are clarified and the role that BPPM might play is given far greater transparency. For instance, many people enjoy dignified work but may not be dignified workers in the sense they do not enjoy good terms and conditions of employment and yet others may carry out mundane and monotonous work but be dignified workers in that they benefit from a healthy working environment and secure terms and conditions (Lamont, 2002; Toynbee, 2003 Westwood, 2002). Evidence suggests that a consequence of achieving at least some elements of these two dimensions of dignity is that organisations are seen as good corporate citizens, employers of choice and, hence, *dignified workplaces* (DTI, 2004b; Leary-Joyce, 2004; Work Foundation and Future Foundation, 2002). Lists such as the Times Top 100
companies to work for are evidence of the desire of organisations to be seen as ‘best’ in their employment practices and, in the terms introduced here, as dignified workplaces.

Fig 1.

Promising Practices and Dignity at Work

Dignity at Work and Best Practice People Management
Despite the apparent importance and universal acceptance of the ‘inherent dignity of the human person’ (*The International Bill of Rights* in Perry, 2005), it is not something that is generally referred to within management texts. When the word dignity is used it tends to be deployed in very loose terms with little conceptual rigour. Early writings on the human aspects of management briefly refer to the possibilities of dignity at work via a recognition of the ‘logic of sentiment’ and, later, impassioned pleas for the ‘humanization of work’ are early precursors to new softer management practices leading to job enlargement, teamwork etc (Gremill, 1977; Ryan, 1977). Very recent prescriptions from high profile management gurus mirror early human relations writings and call for management practice to create the conditions for dignity at work (Peters, 1998). It would seem that, though only ever referred to loosely, dignity at work is closely associated with management (or, conversely, mis-management – see Hodson, 2001) practice; its design, implementation, effect on the workforce and, ultimately, its impact upon performance.

A relatively direct leap from this would be to look to BPPM as a means of valuing and respecting people at work, hence offering the opportunities for the creation and maintenance of dignity at work. And this is precisely what ‘best companies’ proclaim lies at the heart of their success. BPPM is seen as setting a benchmark for companies to follow thus leading to best practice organisations who are defined by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) as those who:

- Recognise and reward employees’ contributions
- Encourage equal opportunities for all
- Promote learning
- Instigate internal communication systems
- Ensure effective employee consultation arrangements
- Empower employees
- Maintain constructive relationships with trade unions
- Provide as much employment security as possible.

(adapted from DTI, 2004)

There are clear similarities between this list and the defining features of what constitutes dignity at work – empowered workers; recognised and respected within a culture of diversity. BPPM, therefore, appears to propose organisational structures and practices that offer opportunities to create the conditions for the attainment of dignity at work. The list the DTI offers is certainly far more comprehensive than many advocates of BPPM, and its close cousin High Performance Work Systems (HPWS), would suggest (Guest, 1997; Huselid, 1995; Pfeffer, 1994; Sung and Ashton, 2004) and offers more room for optimism as it goes beyond the mere change of organisational culture and the tweaking of reward packages and involvement systems to deal with issues of collective voice, security and equality. Yet there is something of a dilemma here. Though emphasising people-centred practices, BPPM’s motivations are not to create dignity at work but to realise the corporation’s instrumental objectives, i.e. increase employee performance and, therefore, productivity. The popular assumption is that best practice = best performance and the DTI is very clear what the motivations for striving for BPPM are:

- Become more competitive
- Increase sales and develop new markets
- Reduce costs and become more efficient
- Improve the skills of your workforce
- Use technology more effectively
- Reduce waste and improve quality
- Respond more quickly to innovations

(From DTI, 2005)

These objectives, in themselves, are what a company operating in a competitive environment would need to strive for. However, what is notable in its absence in this list of core objectives is any reference to direct benefits for employees. Granted, other reports do briefly mention possible outcomes for employees, though this is one point at the bottom of a list of many other objectives identical to those mentioned above. Where increased levels of job satisfaction, increase in skills, and/or personal achievement in work are highlighted, they are seen as a happy by-product of the central objective of increased performativity (Guest, 1997; Huselid, 1995; Sung and Ashton, 2004). This starkly highlights that the creation of dignified work and dignified workers is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. ‘Best’ management will be introduced when it is in the company’s, not the employee’s, best interests to do so. Many commentators would suggest that this has to be the case in a free market economy but that ultimately employees will benefit from an organisation’s success. There is little doubt that in conditions of modern capitalism organisations have to continually strive to be competitive and that people might be a central source of competitive advantage. However, to rely on a business case to invest in good management practice is to rely on the equation that best practice management equals best company performance. As this link is theoretically sound but empirically unsupported (Wall and Wood, 2005; Watson, 2003) there is no guarantee of the win: win situation promised by the gurus of BPPM and HPWS (Huselid, 1995; Pfeffer, 1994 Sung and Ashton, 2004). In fact, this analysis goes so far as to suggest that the gurus of BPPM have set themselves an unachievable task, concentrating as they do on bundles of best practice that are firm specific and focused on the change of corporate culture. Not only does this assume a high trust, reciprocal relationship with employees but also a closed system approach where the ‘bundles’ of practice offer no link with the structural realities employees must face in the shape of insecurities and inequalities (Thompson, 2003). As a means of retaining the best of

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1 Though there are some obvious and important contemporary workplace issues not addressed in this list – work-life balance, decent financial rewards (including issues such as pension provision etc).
BPPM but situating it within a more credible context, a more productive way to think of best practice management may be via the concept of *promising practice*.

**Dignity at Work and Promising Practice**

The term promising practices is used to define the potential and possibilities for various management practices to encourage, create and maintain dignity at work. Unlike other uses of the term (Leseure et al., 2004a), promising practices are not necessarily new or previously tried and tested as ‘best’, neither do they endorse the best practice = best performance equation. They are promising precisely because they hold the promise of offering opportunities to support dignified work and dignified workers. The extensive debate concerning the HR performance link will not be entered into here but it is assumed, contrary to popular belief (Guest, 1997; Huselid, 1995; Leseure et al., 2004b; Pfeffer, 1994; Sung and Ashton, 2004), that this link is a tenuous one. Promising practices that promote dignity at work may or may not improve company performance, though ample studies (and a measure of common sense) do suggest that there is a significantly enhanced prospect that improved working conditions and interesting and autonomous work increases discretionary effort, most especially in the intangibles involved in creative industries or the service sector (Bolton and Houlihan, 2004, 2005; Isles, 2004; Marks, et al. 1998; Watson, 2003; Westwood, 2002; Work Foundation, 2005). However, this is not a linear relationship and any potential for promising practices to either create dignity at work and/or increase performativity will depend upon a myriad of other factors, not least the vagaries of a vigorous capitalism. Thus, promising practices are promising, and not ‘best’, precisely because, as the examination of the Times Top 100 helps to highlight, the ‘best’ is yet to be achieved. They are also hesitantly promising as, in proposing that dignity at work should be an end in itself rather than a means to higher performance, promising practices may not hold enough appeal to business and policy-makers, and certainly none of the arrogant surety of ‘best practice’, meaning that the very real potential and promise for dignified work, dignified workers and dignified workplaces may never be realised.

**The Times Top 100: Background and Methodology**

The Times Top 100 Companies is a large scale survey that gathers core information from nominated companies known for their exemplary approach to people management. Top 100 companies are defined by their approach to key areas: ‘well-being’, work-life balance issues; ‘leadership’, the integrity and involvement of the senior management of the company; ‘belonging’, team work and immediate colleagues; ‘giving something back’, whether the company contributes to society and/or the local community; ‘personal growth’, opportunities to learn, grow and be challenged; ‘immediate manager’, day-to-day management issues; ‘fair deal’, pay and associated benefits, and ‘my company’, the company and the overall impression of how it treats its staff (Sunday Times, 2005). Clearly this list represents the expected attributes of BPPM which tends to focus on the ‘soft’ approach to managing the human resource and, as such, is widely recognised as firmly making the link between ‘best companies: best practice’ (DTI, 2004a and b) and is described by the British government as a ‘key benchmark’ (Kearns, 2004).

The Sunday Times 100 Best Companies to Work for List 2005 is the fifth in the annual series. It represents 100 Best small companies, 100 Best large companies (employees 250-5000) and 10 Best big companies. The analysis here focuses on the large company list as they represent the ‘typical’ company in the UK. Companies who appear on the list must be at least five years old. A total of 218 companies applied to be on the list. The Top 100 is decided on data collected from employees (90%) and company input (10%). Interpretation of the data in this analysis relies heavily upon only that which is published by the Sunday Times. The complete data sets are not made available and not all questions are published and some answers are only published by top 10 scores. In addition the data does not reveal any information concerning some very important workplace issues such as race, bullying and harassment, sickness policies, absenteeism rates, average salaries or trade union involvement. Some of the
gaps in the data have been filled by investigating corporate websites or contacting individual companies for extra information.

Like other ‘best companies to work for’ lists, it is not expected that the Times survey will directly address the concept of dignity at work. But what they do talk about is BPPM and companies who achieve a position in the best companies list use the brand of the Top 100 to firmly place themselves as good organization citizens via their ethical approach to people management and as ‘employers of choice’ in a competitive labour market. It therefore offers valuable information on working conditions, health and well being, organisational diversity and why and how companies are perceived as ‘the best’ and the type of people employed. Hence, the data that is available has been fully utilised to create a list of the top 15 companies with data arranged under the headings of the dimensions of dignity framework detailed above (Fig. 2). Interestingly, issues linked with the notion of dignified workplaces is a large feature of the Times Top 100 and the data available helps to build an interesting picture of how a dignified workplace might be perceived and which promising practices promote the conditions in which dignity might be experienced.

**Promising Practice and the Best Places to Work For Dignified Work**
Understanding dignified work as a combination of social status attached to particular work, the opportunity to feel one’s work makes a valuable contribution and is, therefore, meaningful, to enjoy interesting and intrinsically rewarding work and to be able to be involved in a continuous process of learning and development highlights some interesting features of work for people employed in the Top 15 companies.

**Learning and Development**
Almost all of the top 15 companies are also featured in the Top 25 list for personal growth which refers to opportunities to learn, grow and be challenged. Practices that employees highlight in their responses are a strong tradition of internal promotion and internal training and development via teamwork. Only two companies, 11 and 12, report opportunities for externally funded programmes of training. Learning and Development in the Top 15 companies confirms the growing emphasis on training for personal, rather than technical, competencies with the focus on induction events, team building days and ‘cascade’ style customer service training. Though many employees of the Top 100 report these activities as ‘fun’ they add little to an employee’s CV and their ability to compete in the labour market (Bolton, 2004; Grugulis and Bevitt, 2002; Thompson et al., 2001).

**Interesting Work**
Rather patchier is the amount of employees who report experiencing interesting and autonomous work. The top 15 contains 7 of the top 10 companies for stimulating work with something of a mismatch occurring where companies such as Beaverbrooks (3), Sandwell Community Trust (6), Hfs Group (7), London and Quadrant Housing (12) and Flight Centre (14) reporting top personal growth but not an intrinsic satisfaction with work. This data would tend to support research carried out by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions which reports that sales and service workers ‘have experienced a sharp decline in control over their work’ (Merlié and Paoli, 2001: 4). It is also predictable that the skilled ‘core’ workers employed by W.L.Gore (1); St Ann’s Hospice (2); Data Connection (5) and Pannone and Partners (4) report the highest levels of ‘stimulating work’ endorsing the notion of the autonomous professional.

**Status**
It is also interesting to note that those who report stimulating work are either highly skilled professionals (engineer, lawyer, IT), caring professional (nursing), or within lower skilled but high profile work in a fast-paced environment (recruitment consultancy) or working for a company that reports high levels of involvement, security and faith in leadership (Line Operator, Bacardi-Martini, no 9). As the data unravels the notion of the status of work...
becomes ever more revealing and confirms recent studies that suggest dignity at work is not universally available and can depend a great deal on occupation and its related opportunities (Abrams, 2002; Bolton, 2004; Lamont, 2000; Rayman, 2001; Taylor, 2002; Toynbee, 2003).

**Meaningful Work**
Most revealing is that none of the Top 15 companies feature in the Top 10 for employees feeling they make a valuable contribution to the success of their organisation. Without being able to talk to employees as to why this might be the case it is difficult to explore this further. However, recent studies suggest that there is a sharp decline in people’s commitment to their employers (Taylor, 2002; Westood, 2002). It is also possible to conjecture that this lack of sense of meaningful contribution in their work is due to the lack of involvement mechanisms and the high turnover figures of the Top 100 companies. The nature and extent of this will vary between occupational groups with professional workers retaining an allegiance to their profession rather than the company and groups such as call-centre workers receiving little incentive to feel loyalty and commitment to their company. Issues which are explored more closely in the next section and ensuing discussion

**Dignified Workers**
To ensure conditions exist where employees may achieve the status of dignified workers require that employees are able to experience a combination of individual and collective voice, health and well-being, a sense of security, levels of just reward in the shape of pay and benefits and equal opportunities. Data from the Top 100 offers insights into all of these aspects.

**Voice**
8 of the Top 10 of employees who believe managers listen to them are in the Top 15, signifying an element of individual voice. However, from information available, non report recognised Trade Union activity and only two offers a share option scheme (Gore (1) and Flight Centre (15)) indicating a lack of collective voice in the ‘Best’ companies to work for.

**Well-being**
An important issue that emerges from the Times Top 100 is that long hour cultures appear to be the norm. In the top 15 companies only St Annes’s hospice features in the Top 10 list for least overtime; the Flight Centre (14), Data Connection (5) and Pannone and Partners (3) get a special mention for their long hour cultures and Loans-co.uk report ‘workload issues’. The Times highlights that there has been a rise in the number of companies where people work between 40-50 hours a week from 32.7% in 2004 to 37.9% in 2005.

'The evidence revealed by our survey tallies with that found by other leading analysts, but perhaps the most alarming fact is that these results are from staff of the 100 most supportive employers in the UK’ (Sunday Times, 2005: 54).

Moving accounts which appear in Madeleine Bunting’s book ‘willing slaves’ (2004) show people working for so called ‘best’ companies cracking under the strain of long hours, intensified work and various performance management systems. As the Times data confirms ‘the UK long hours problem is a well-paid problem’ (Isles, 2004), as long hours are either attached to performance based payment systems, as is the case with Loans.co.uk and the Flight Centre, or to young, exciting and creative work, as is the case with Data Connection and Pannone and Partners, where the typical employees are software developers and lawyers. Evidence that appears to confirm that ‘core’ workers feel they have to continually defend their privileged positions through personal strategies of presenteeism (Bunting, 2004; Grugulis, 2000; Perlow, 1998; Thompson, 2003).

**Just Reward**
The most extensive data presented details an array of material benefits available to employees. In the Top 15 only W.L. Gore (1) offers a complete reward package including at least 25 days annual holiday, more than the statutory maternity pay, and a non-contributory pension. The
levels and availability of these benefits are not as high or as universally available across all the companies as one might expect of a Top 100 company list. Many workplaces report a bonus payment system – some more extreme than others. This is not just a bonus on top of a decent basic wage but a reliance on bonuses to reach the decent wage. Loans.co.uk workers report on bonuses to make up at least 25% of their salary. The Flightcentre, (14) is the most extreme example, a company that encourages ‘entrepreneurial attitudes’ (Leary-Joyce, 2004: 132), employees are actually self-employed. Bonuses are taken once the ‘cost of seat’ is covered and sales agents basically run their own business (Leary-Joyce, 2004:132). This is described as a ‘fair deal’ by the Top 100 and its supporters (Leary-Joyce, 2004) but it does bring the issue of well-being and equality of opportunity onto the agenda. It would be difficult for people with family ties and mortgages to work the long hours demanded, successfully balance home life and also bear the inherent insecurity of such a system.

Equality
Some of the most illuminating data centres on the notion of equality. Though data is not available concerning race or disability there is enough data to allow an insightful analysis into age and gender. Companies in the top 100 are keen to proclaim ‘equality of opportunity for all’. As the Loans.co.uk web site proclaims:

‘At Loans.co.uk we are proud of our equal opportunities policy. Ageism, racism and sexism are not tolerated and promotion within the company is based on ability, output, commitment, hard work and loyalty.’

And yet the employees of Loans.co.uk do not represent age or gender diversity: 51% of employees are female, but less than 33% of senior managers are female and 90% of employees are under 35 years old, and 0% are over 55. Data for Beaverbrooks reveals a more startling picture. Classed as the best retail employer for 3 years running, its web site proclaims opportunities for ‘sparkling careers’ for all

‘Everyone has the opportunity to apply for our Management Development Programme and given our extension plans and the fact that 100% of our Management positions are filled internally, the opportunities for a sparkling career are excellent’

The figures, however, tell us something very different: 84% of employees at Beaverbrooks are female, but at less than 33% of senior management, women are no where near reaching proportional representation in the senior ranks. Particularly striking is the fact that internal promotions are the norm and yet they appear to be promoting solely from the ranks of young male employees, who are a minority group at Beaverbrooks. One also wonders what happens once promotion takes place as there are only 5% of employees over the age of 55 and 69% under 35.

Security
Job security is cited by Rayman (2001) as a major factor in achieving a sense of dignity at work. Turnover is exceptionally high in some companies: 54% at Office Angels, (8) and 40% at Kwik Fit (15). There are also only 5 companies in the Top 15 who have over 40% of the workforce with 5 or more years service. In some cases it simply reflects the various industry standards. Those with long service tend to be in the professional groups and call-centres, for example, have an average turnover of 30-35% (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002). In many cases the high staff turnover appears to represent people’s dissatisfaction with work life balance issues and reward packages (Swan, 2005). Kwik-fit, for example, do not offer interesting work, do not feature in the top 25 for learning and development, report no individual or collective voice, do not offer a competitive package of just rewards and are not endorsed by their employees as a dignified workplace, but they do report an above industry standard for staff turnover.

The Top 15 as Dignified Workplaces?
From the analysis so far, it would appear that the majority of the Top 15 best companies to work for would have difficulty in qualifying as dignified workplaces. Whilst fulfilling some
elements of the two dimensions of dignity only W.L.Gore offer a range of promising practices that support dignified work and dignified workers. Their long history and reputation as a ‘good’ employer places them firmly in employees’ minds as a dignified workplace as they proclaim they are proud to work for Gore, believe the company has strong values and that their organisation makes a positive difference to the world. Looking at the companies through the lens of dimensions of dignity highlights the different reasons why organisations may be cited as Top 100 companies when they are obviously lacking in some regards.

For instance, St Ann’s Hospice ranks 2nd but has relatively poor pay and conditions offering no contributory pension scheme or paid maternity leave (despite this being a dominantly female workforce) and only 34 out of the 298 workforce earn more than 25k a year and only 8 earn more than 35k. Their high position in the Top 100 relies a lot on high returning scores for community, colleagues, positive difference and stimulating work. The people who work for St Ann’s find their work rewarding and feel they contribute something special to their clients and society as a whole. As Randy Hodson (2001) points out, people seek out their own paths to finding dignity in work and clearly we see this from the voices of the people who work in these sectors. But it is not necessarily the company that offers this – more the nature of the work itself. Though it does seem from comments made by workers that St Ann’s does foster ‘caring’ as a valued attribute.

Similarly, Beaverbrooks ranks highly as the 3rd ‘Best’ company to work for and yet they do not offer the vital ingredient of dignified work: interesting work. Though qualitative accounts from workers report that they feel they have some discretion in how they deal with customers. Beaverbrooks also offers slightly above average salaries for the retail sector and also a non-contributory pension, thus apparently offering opportunities to attain the status of dignified worker. However, they are not alone in the Top 100 in not dealing with issues of age and gender equality. Women make up approximately half of the workforce in Top 100 companies but they are more often to be found in peripheral positions or in the feminised professions both of which do not offer the opportunities for ‘dignity at work’. Similarly, people over 55 are clearly not welcome in the ‘Best’ companies. Where they do appear they are settled into managerial and professional groups but remain a very small minority of the Top 100 workforce. Given the constant references to the aging workforce, a demographic time bomb and growing structural inequalities (Hope, 2005; Taylor, 2002) this seems to be a neglected aspect of best practice for many Top 100 companies.

The multi-dimensional analysis of dignity at work also highlights the interrelatedness of many management practices and how the long hours cultures deny opportunities for dignity at work to many groups – women who cannot balance domestic responsibilities with work hard/play hard cultures and both men and women over 35 who seek to value their family lives and therefore cannot and will not work for ‘best practice’ companies. However, we need to be careful of painting too positive a picture for those under 35’s who enjoy their work and receive high material rewards; they appear to have no other life – ‘willing slaves’ as Madeleine Bunting (2004) describes them. In return for autonomy and value in work they have lost the chance for autonomy and freedom in their personal lives. Where, we must ask, is the dignity in that?

The Promise of Promising Practice?
The analysis of the Top 100 in terms of the conceptual framework offered here highlights how many people, even in the Top 15 companies to work for in the UK, achieve either dignified work or the status of dignified worker; rarely both. Within the micro-framework of many labour-processes, people are often able to create conditions in which they can achieve dignified work but rarely do they have sufficient voice to change their status as dignified workers; with poor terms and conditions of employment prevailing in the Top 100 companies. The high staff turnover of the majority of these companies perhaps indicate employees’ active agency as they continually attempt to seek the ‘best’ from work.

The lack of coherence in the achievement of dignity at work serves to confirm one aspect of the BPPM prescriptions – that is the notion of ‘bundles of practice’. Those companies who offer the conditions for dignified work and dignified workers have the lowest staff turnover and also the most faith expressed in the company overall. Of course this is not to suggest that there
is a universally applicable set of promising practices, but what the conceptual framework presented here shows is that there are some fundamental requirements (see fig 1) that are remarkably similar to the comprehensive list the DTI uses to define BPPM. An analysis of the Top 100 highlights that some practices will achieve one form of dignity but that overall progress towards dignified work, dignified workers and dignified workplaces is, at best, patchy. However, many companies may not be ‘best’ but they are moving in a promising direction and to use this phrase overcomes the sense of complacency that seems to surround the list of ‘best’ companies. The notion of promising practices builds on the DTI list of BPPM and emphasises the need for a holistic approach – small bundles of discrete practices which focus too much on organisational culture and do not deal with structural issues such as collective voice, equality of opportunity and security of employment will not hold the promise for dignity at work. Nevertheless, there is every reason to believe that promising practices that create and maintain dignified work and dignified workers have very real potential to create a dignified workplace that is held in esteem in society and the global marketplace. If a business case must be made for dignity at work, and it appears that it must, then clearly dignified workplaces offer an employer brand as they are seen as employers of choice attracting and retaining high calibre employees, good organisational citizens gaining a reputation that supports good relationships with suppliers and as ethical producers of goods and services that attract a loyal customer base (Future Foundation and Work Foundation, 2002; Leary-Joyce, 2004; Willmott, 2001).

However, there has to be a note of pessimism injected into the idea of ‘promise’. In promising the possibilities for dignity, not performance, promising practice is establishing dignified work and dignified workers as ends in themselves not as a means to an end. In doing so, promising practices is assuming there is an inherent dignity to be derived from work when the pressures of global capitalism suggest this may not be the case. This inevitably means that when a business case can no longer be supported, in time of an economic downturn for instance, promising practices are abandoned and the notion of dignity discarded along with it (Baxter, 2002; Thompson, 2003). Ample evidence exists to suggest that, despite the high profile of BPPM, there are, as yet, no comprehensive ‘bundles’ of effective HR practices, that Human Resource Management remains a third order strategy and that there is no ‘mutually acceptable trade-off between the needs of companies and the demands of their employees’ (Milkman, 1998; Purcell, 1998; Taylor, 2002: 7; Thompson, 2003). A conclusion which is supported by the analysis of the Top 15 Best Companies to Work For presented here, where it appears that the Times Top 100 and associated claims of BPPM are more of a public relations exercise than a representation of companies who have an effective ‘bundle’ of HR practices (Kearns, 2004; Pass, 2005). This is not a naming and shaming exercise or an attack on practicing managers; companies can, and do, strive to change management practice and make things better for employees. Nevertheless, the culture of capitalism is pulling in a different direction to human dignity meaning that the potential of promising practice will only ever be partially fulfilled.

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