

Good Job or Bad Job? Fast Food Employment in Australia¹

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Since the 1970s, there has been significant growth in fast food consumption and employment. Despite the importance of fast food to teenage employment, employment relations in this industry is still under-researched. Fast food work is generally seen as either 'good' or 'bad' in the literature. First, critical scholars tend to see fast food work as a dead-end form of employment characterised by lowly paid, repetitive work and harsh labour management. Second, the business press, in contrast, tends to describe fast food work as a transitional form of employment where teenagers acquire valuable work skills and discipline that prepares them for future employment in the adult labour market. In this article, we report on the results of a survey of university students' experiences in fast food. Our results indicate that the reality is more complex. On balance, employees when working in fast food have negative and positive experiences.

Introduction

Before the 1970s, most meals were prepared and consumed at home (or elsewhere, for example as sandwiches). For many Australians, the cuisine was derived from Anglo/Celtic traditions of a hot breakfast of bacon and eggs, a cold lunch of sandwiches and a hot evening meal of meat and boiled vegetables. Sunday lunch was a special meal for the family of roast chicken or red meat with baked vegetables. Much less common was the purchase of takeaway or eat-in meals such as fish and chips, 'ethnic' food, or café or hotel meals. Dining-out at a restaurant was unusual for the average family and was reserved for special occasions, if at all.

Since the 1970s, though, food consumption patterns have changed dramatically. It is now estimated that about a third of every dollar Australians spend on food, is spent on fast food (Lyons, 1999). For the year 2000, the fast food takeaway food market is valued at \$6.5 billion. This is comprised of 1.4 billion fast food meals sold from some 17,000 outlets - 3,000 of which are fast food chains (BIS Schrapnel, 2000). The fast food market has experienced on average annual growth rate of 6.5 per cent representing the most rapidly growing sector of the food retailing market (Lyons, 1999). By the end of the twentieth century, fast food employed more than 166,000 people in Australia (ABS, 2000: 23). Employment in the fast food sector is twice that of mining and equivalent in scale to communication services (ABS, 2000: 40).

In this article we explore employment relations in this expanding sector of the economy. Do employees like working in fast food? Alternatively, what aspects to this type of work do they dislike? How many hours a week do they work and on what basis are they employed? Are there differences between the experience of male and female employees? Do their views differ according to age? Based on the results of a survey, we seek to identify the main employment experiences of students in fast food. This is worthwhile because students constitute a large portion of the fast food workforce.

This article is divided into four sections. The first section summarises the fast food literature and explores differing views about the character of fast food employment. Second, the methodology section provides details on the survey undertaken. In the third section we present our main findings. The fourth section draws together our conclusions.

The Character of Fast Food Employment

Over the past two decades, fast food has attracted a degree of notoriety. Eric Schlosser (2001) in his book *Fast Food Nation* has portrayed fast food as a culinary abomination threatening health and wellbeing. Whilst there is discussion about such possible implications of fast food, the role and experiences of employees in fast food is relatively still a neglected area of labour market research. There is much more published research on work in car factories, even though these constitute a much smaller proportion of the workforce.

Fast food work can be seen from either a negative or a positive perspective (Dale, 1999; Royle, 2000). The negative view of fast food work is commonly associated with critical work organisation and labour market scholars. From such a point of view, fast food work is described as a dead-end job where workers suffer from stress, underemployment and reduced job and life opportunities (Munro, 1992: 26). Fast food work is seen as a form of secondary labour employment characterised by low pay, poor working conditions, little training, little chance of advancement, high turnover and arbitrary and capricious supervision (cf. Edwards et al., 1973; Doeringer and Piore, 1979; Reeder, 1988). Employers are seen as recruiting younger workers into these secondary jobs because they are compliant, flexible and prepared to tolerate high levels of management control (Lucas and Raison, 1996; Lucas, 1997; Curtis and Lucas, 2000).

Work in fast food is seen as routine, dull and largely deskilled (Leidner, 1991). Some authors see fast food work as an exemplar of modern mass production methods: McDonaldisation. These 'McJobs' are constructed according to the management principles of efficiency, rationality, calculability, predicability and control (Ritzer, 1993). As such, jobs are based on a minute division of labour, a separation of conception and execution and short repetition cycles (Reeder, 1988: 148). Preparation and assembly work is highly routinised as is customer service work where:

workers' interactions are directly controlled by employers, who may use scripting, uniforms, rules about proper demeanour and appearance, and even far-reaching attempts at psychological reorientation to standardise service encounters (Leidner, 1991: 156)

This type of employment is thus viewed as demeaning, alienating and not big enough for the human spirit (Munro, 1992, paraphrasing Studs Terkel).

In contrast to this pessimistic interpretation, there is a range of commentators who hold more optimistic views about the fast food sector. Some authors report that employees enjoy various aspects of fast food work such as the job tasks and responsibility, training, management style, and social relations at work (Barron and Maxwell, 1998). The fast food industry is seen as a challenging and engaging work environment that promotes wholesome and worthwhile values (Gould, 2000: 3).

Some observers contend that large fast food employers, such as McDonalds, represent some of the best companies to work for in Australia. One of the strengths of McDonalds is seen as the strong culture promoting friendliness, fun at work as well as efficiency, high quality standard and warm customer service. Career opportunities and development are considered to be excellent for those wishing to pursue a long-term career in the organisation (Corporate Research Foundation, 1999: 103). In addition, these large employers are also regarded as having highly developed training and human resources systems (Solomon, 1997), and as providing a good experience of work.

There are, then, disparate interpretations of the nature of fast food employment. In the following discussion we aim to consider such interpretations by directly asking fast food employees about their views on the nature of fast food work. By surveying these workers directly, we aim to get a much clearer picture about the work experience of fast food employees. While there are limitations with this approach, these results should shed important new light on this under-researched area. These results may also be useful in teaching about the character of employment relations in Australia as well as about this particular sector.

Methods

Our survey instrument was based on an extensive review of the literature on fast food employment. We piloted the survey among a focus group of students with fast food experience. The instrument was then refined and administered to university students. The survey was administered to 269 students at Griffith University and Queensland University of Technology at campuses in Brisbane (63% of responses) and the Gold Coast (37%).

We gained permission from heads of school and subject convenors to allow us to administer the survey at the start of lectures. We chose to administer the survey to large classes and therefore we surveyed large first and second year classes. This is reflected in the age structure of our sample shown in Table 1. The majority of people surveyed were eighteen or nineteen years of age, although there was a proportion of older or mature-aged people in our sample as well. A large proportion of students surveyed were studying commerce or business. We surveyed students currently working in fast food as well as students who no longer worked in fast food but had done so in the past.

Results

We sought to establish some basic details about respondents and their entry into the fast food industry. Our sample comprised 44 per cent men and 56 per cent women. This over-representation of women probably reflects the general over-representation of women in higher education in Australia and also, perhaps, the greater diligence of women in attending classes in the later stages of the semester when the survey was administered.

In the survey, we explored the basis upon which these students were employed in fast food. Our results, shown in Table 1, indicate that the overwhelming majority of respondents reported that they were employed on a casual basis, with only 16 per cent employed on a permanent basis. Permanent employees are engaged on a continuing basis, receive superannuation and other benefits and are provided with at least a week's notice of termination of employment (except in cases of serious misconduct). Casual employees, in

contrast, are employed on a daily basis and are normally engaged for a minimum of two hours and can be sent home without notice. Casual employees receive fewer entitlements than permanent employees, but in compensation, they receive a 19 per cent 'loading' on the base pay rate. The data from Table 1 indicate that employment in fast food is highly casualised with only a small minority of people enjoying employment on a permanent full-time basis.

Table 1: A Profile of the Fast Food Workforce (per cent)

Item	Total
Age	%
<18	5
18	31
19	25
20	11
21	6
>21	23
Total	100%
Employment Status	
Permanent Full-time	5
Permanent Part-time	11
Casual	83
Don't know	2
Total	100%
Work Regular Hours	
Yes	45
No	31
Sometimes	24
Total	100%

Despite the casual nature of fast food employment, almost half of our respondents indicated that they worked regular hours (see Table 1). Further, some 24 per cent of respondents also indicated that they sometimes worked regular hours with only 31 per cent stating that they do not work regular hours. The number of hours worked, though, varied between holiday periods and school/university term periods. As shown in Table 2, students tend to work more hours during the holidays than they do during semester periods, as might be expected. Indeed, a feature of the fast food industry is that the supply of student labour tends to match the pattern of product demand. That is to say, nights, weekends and holidays tend to be peak demand periods and this corresponds with when many students are available to work. This is part of the reason why employers recruit student labour.

As can also be seen in Table 2, a significant proportion of students are working reasonably long hours while studying at the same time. During semesters, a majority of respondents worked nine to sixteen hours a week with approximately a third of students working more than sixteen hours per week. The average number of hours worked during semesters was fifteen hours with the most common working periods each week being ten hours (18%), twelve hours (15%), fifteen hours (14%) and twenty hours (13%). These four working periods accounted for 60 per cent of responses.

Table 2: Hours Worked (hours)

Hours Range	During School/University Term/Semester	During Holidays
1-8	19	8
9-16	51	23
17-24	16	21
25+	14	49
Total	100%	100%

During holidays, hours worked increase markedly. More than two-thirds of respondents worked in excess of sixteen hours per week, with 49 per cent of respondents working in excess of twenty-four hours per week. The average number of hours worked was twenty-two hours with the most common working periods per week being twenty hours (19%), thirty hours (14%), fifteen hours (10%) and twenty-five hours (10%). These four working periods accounted for 53 per cent of responses.

We also asked students about their reasons for working in fast food. These responses are shown in Table 3. Overwhelmingly, respondents indicated that the most popular reason for commencing employment was for financial rewards for themselves. Approximately half of students responded that they wanted income either to spend on themselves or for specific purposes such as to purchase a CD player. It was rarely the case (8%) that students responded that they commenced employment because their family needed the money - although, there may be some reluctance to disclose on this issue. Another common reason for working in fast food was to gain work experience to put on their résumé (3%) or to improve career prospects (23%). Few students, though, indicated that they wanted to pursue a career in hospitality (10%). Most students saw the fast food work experience as a transitional form of employment which satisfied their immediate needs for income and/or provided them with work experience that would improve their employability in the future.

Table 3: Reasons for Starting Work in Fast Food (per cent)

Reason	Total
I needed the money	61
I wanted more money to spend on myself	56
I wanted to save money for a specific target (e.g. to buy a CD player etc)	49
I wanted to get any kind of work experience to put on my résumé (CV)	39
My friends were working, so I thought I should as well	27
I thought fast food work experience would improve my career prospects	23
I thought it would be fun	23
My parents thought it was a good idea	20
I wanted to pursue a career in hospitality	10
My family needed the money	8
Convenient hours or location	4

Note: multiple responses possible, so tally greater than 100 per cent.

Aside from their rationale for working in fast food, we also sought to establish how respondents found their employment in fast food (Table 4). There were two main methods. The first was by direct contact with employers either by personal approach (35%) or in response to a newspaper advertisement (13%). Second, employment was also often gained by

word-of-mouth from friends (25%) or from family members (13%). These results suggest that while fast food has a relatively open labour market with few barriers to entry, informal networks also represent a relatively important, although secondary, means of gaining employment.

Table 4: How Job was Obtained (per cent)

Item	Total
I approached employer directly either by phone or in person	35
Word of mouth – friend	25
I saw an advert in a newspaper and applied for the job	13
Word of mouth – family	12
Knew manager	8
I saw an advert in a shop window and applied for the job	7
Job agency	5
Through school/university noticeboard or announcement	2

Note: multiple responses possible, so tally greater than 100 per cent.

Table 5 shows the starting ages for employment in fast food. Perhaps surprisingly, the starting age for employment is relatively young, with three-quarters of respondents reporting that they commenced employment in fast food at the age of sixteen years or younger. Almost half of respondents were fifteen years of age or younger when they commenced working in fast food.

Table 5: Starting Age for Employment in Fast Food (per cent)

Year	Total
<15	16
15	31
16	29
17	10
18	7
19	2
20	3
21+	2
Total	100

We asked students how long they had worked for fast food employers. These data report employees' employment duration in the fast food industry generally, not with individual employers. The results are displayed in Table 6. As can be seen, only a fifth of respondents had less than one year's work experience in fast food. The vast majority of respondents had at least one, two or three years' experience in the industry. More than 50 per cent had more than two years' experience. These data suggest that most people remain in the industry for several years before taking up other employment options outside the industry. While our data shows that employees do tend to stay in the industry for several years, they may have worked for several different employers over that period. Whether the employment duration data reflect the desirability of working in this industry or the scarcity of other youth employment options is an open question.

Table 6: Length of Service (per cent)

Years	Total
<1	21
1	19
2	25
3	23
4	6
5+	6
Total	100%

Union density in fast food is low. Our survey (see Table 7) indicates that only 9 per cent had been unionised. Further, some 9 per cent were unaware of their union status and another 9 per cent did not respond to the question. A large majority, though, indicated that they did not belong to a union. To probe the issue of unionisation further, we asked two other questions. First, as fast food workers, it appeared that 24 per cent of them had wanted to be a member of a union (see Table 8). Second, only 14 per cent responded that managers at their workplace discouraged employees from joining unions. These results suggest that, despite opposition from some employers, there may be further scope for unions to intensify their efforts to organise the fast food industry.

Table 7: Member of a Union (per cent)

Item	Total
Yes	9
No	73
Don't know	9
No Response	9
Total	100%

Table 8: Unionism (per cent)

Item	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	Not Applicable	Total
As a fast food worker, I want to be a member of a union.	24	38	30	9	100
Managers/supervisors at my workplace discourage employees from joining unions.	14	46	29	12	100

Note: Totals may not be 100 due to rounding

To gain more insight into employees' work experiences, we asked respondents a series of questions about their fast food employment. For purposes of presentation, we group the responses to our questions, first, into those relating to the potentially 'negative' aspects of working in fast food and then, second, into the more positive aspects, as heralded earlier in this article.

Table 9 displays our findings on the negative aspects of working in fast food. Our results suggest that generally employees do find fast food work boring, relatively low paid and don't like working at weekends. Further, employees also report that fast food managers commonly 'hustle' them to make them work faster, send them home without pay when business is slack and withhold work from employees as they get older and become eligible for higher rates of age-related pay. Nearly one third of respondents also report working extra hours without extra pay. A quarter of employees report getting injured at work although only a small percentage take time off work as a result. While the majority of employees reported always being allowed to take scheduled work breaks and rest periods, a third indicated that they had not always been allowed to do so. Employees' views of night work are mixed although more like it rather than dislike it. These results indicate that, overall, employees tend to see several negative aspects of fast food employment.

Table 9: 'Negative' Aspects of Working in Fast Food (per cent)

Item	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	Not Applicable	Total
Managers 'hustle' us at work to make us go faster in our jobs.	68	12	19	2	100
I have noticed that as employees get older, they are offered progressively less and less work.	50	25	20	2	100
When business is slow, managers find an excuse to send staff home, without pay, before their shifts are due to end.	45	20	30	5	100
I find fast food work boring.	40	36	23	2	100
I like working on the weekend.	29	30	40	2	100
Employees are relatively well paid for working in fast food, compared with some other jobs.	23	25	52	1	100
I have been injured at work.	25	11	40	23	100
I had to take time off work because of an injury at work	8	10	51	30	100
Managers will deduct some of my wages because of problems I have been alleged to cause at work.	11	19	59	11	100
I am always allowed to take my scheduled breaks and rest periods	54	15	31	1	100
I dislike working at night.	33	26	41	1	100
I work extra hours and do not get paid for this work.	29	13	54	5	100

Note: Errors due to rounding

By contrast with the negative aspects of fast food work, we also tried to identify the potentially positive aspects of such work as well. Our results, shown in Table 10, indicate that employees were overwhelmingly positive about numerous aspects of fast food work. Respondents enjoyed the social aspects of work such as working in teams, working with other employees, interacting with customers by being nice and smiling and even wearing a uniform.

They also were generally very positive about the performance of supervisors or managers in that they felt management could be approached about work problems, was concerned about their health and safety and treated employees fairly at work. Respondents were also positive about fast food work to the extent that they considered they were well trained to do their jobs, were given a lot of responsibility in the job and had acquired valuable skills from working in fast food.

Table 10: 'Positive' Aspects of Working in Fast Food (per cent)

Item	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	Not Applicable	Total
I like working in teams.	76	20	4	0	100
I enjoy being nice and smiling when dealing with customers.	66	21	11	1	100
The best part of fast food employment is working with other employees.	62	27	10	1	100
If I have a problem at work, I know that I can speak to the managers or supervisor/team leader.	66	14	19	1	100
The health and safety of employees is a high priority with my employer.	55	19	24	2	100
Fast food managers and supervisors treat me fairly at work.	59	22	20	0	100
I am well trained to do my job.	68	19	12	0	100
I am given a lot of responsibility in my job.	50	24	25	1	100
I have learnt valuable skills from working in fast food that will help me in my career	59	19	21	1	100
I dislike wearing a uniform.	25	31	42	3	100
I like working in fast food	24	36	41	0	100

Note: Errors due to rounding

Age and Gender

As part of our analysis, we sort to establish if there were any major differences according to age or between the opinions of men and women we surveyed. In terms of age, there were no major differences in responses. In terms of gender, the main differences are shown in Table 11. We only show those items where the views of men and women were different. As can be seen in Table 11, there are only a small number of items where the views of men and women differ markedly. In terms of the negative aspects, men were more likely to find fast food work boring, to state that their managers had discouraged workers from joining unions and that they worked extra hours for no pay. In terms of the positive aspects, women were less likely to dislike wearing a uniform, more likely to enjoy dealing with customers and to consider that their jobs entailed a lot of responsibility. Part of the gender difference may reflect women's higher propensity to work in customer service roles rather than in food preparation, where relatively more men tend to work. As such, the women may be more likely to be involved and to enjoy the social aspects of work.

Table 11: Gender Difference in Perceptions of Working in Fast Food (per cent)

Item		Strongly Agree/ Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree	Not applicable	Total
Negative aspects						
I find fast food work boring.	Female	31	38	30	1	100
	Male	50	34	14	2	100
Managers/supervisors at my workplace discourage employees from joining unions.	Female	6	48	32	15	100
	Male	23	43	26	9	100
I work extra hours and do not get paid for this work.	Female	26	10	60	3	100
	Male	32	17	45	6	100
Positive aspects						
I dislike wearing a uniform.	Female	19	30	47	4	100
	Male	32	31	36	1	100
I enjoy being nice and smiling when dealing with customers.	Female	75	17	7	1	100
	Male	55	27	17	2	100
I am given a lot of responsibility in my job.	Female	61	22	16	1	100
	Male	36	27	36	1	100

Note: Items are only shown if there is a 10 percentage point difference between males and females on both the strongly agree/agree item and the strongly disagree/agree items, or there was a 15 percentage point difference in either of these items.

Conclusion

Fast food is an important area of employment - particularly for young people who may start working in the industry at a relatively early age. Yet, there is a polarisation of views about fast food employment. Some scholars portray fast food work as a dead-end form of employment characterised by lowly paid, repetitive work and harsh labour management. Alternatively, other writers usually describe fast food work as a transitional form of employment where teenagers acquire valuable work skills and discipline that prepares them well for future employment in the adult labour market. The aim this research was to gauge directly the perception and views of employees on their experiences in fast food.

Our results suggest that employees were polarised in their views about working in fast food. On the one hand, respondents noted several negative features of fast food work. Some employees reported working extra time unpaid and being hustled in what they considered to be boring and low paid jobs. But on the other hand, employees also reported several positive aspects of fast food work. Employees enjoyed the social aspects of work, felt they held responsible jobs, acquired valuable skills, were well trained and were generally well treated by managers.

This research can serve as a reminder that it is not appropriate to describe fast food work in simplistic terms either good or bad.

Employees' views about their work situation may have several dimensions that can appear to be contradictory, and their expression may depend on the context (cf. Fox, 1971). Well-informed practitioners in human resources and employment relations recognise that people's attitudes to work should not be seen in such simplistic terms. Our results suggest that the fast food employment experience is a complex one. On the surface at least, the negative aspects of fast food work should provide an ideal recruiting ground for unions; but few employees are union members. It may be that the enjoyable social relations of work tend to counterbalance the negative work features as most employees remain in the industry at least for a few years. It could be that these young people are new to the labour market and as a result are more tolerant or naive about employment rights and expectations than other workers. As Curtis and Lucas (2000) argue, perhaps there is a 'coincidence of needs' in fast food between the preferences of employers and employees. These are tentative conclusions, therefore, if we are conducting more research to explore further the dynamics of employment relations in fast food.

Endnote

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12 *Cameron Allan, Greg J. Bamber, Anthony Gould and Nils Timo*

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