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## **An Exploration of Working Conditions for Grooms within the UK Equine Industry - Evidence or Apocrypha?**

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### **Abstract**

#### **BACKGROUND:**

The Equine Industry – encompassing the Olympic disciplines of Dressage, Showjumping and Eventing, as well as other competitive and recreational activities as represented by membership of the British Equestrian Federation (BEF) (15 member bodies and 4 associates) – represents a significant sporting interest within the UK. Approximately 3.5 million people rode during the year 2010-11 (Lantra, 2010), of whom more than 2 million rode at least once a month (BHIC, 2010) and there are estimated to be in excess of 1 million horses in the UK. The equine industry was estimated by the British Horse Industry Confederation (BHIC) to be worth approximately £4.6bn in 2009. The very nature of equestrian activity is labour intensive with over 41,000 people directly employed in the industry in more than 19,000 businesses (Lantra, 2010). Thus, it is considered to be second only to football in economic importance in the UK sport industry. Horse racing is specifically excluded from this study and these statistics.

Employment within the industry is wide-ranging, from highly-educated veterinarians and international standard coaches and riders, through ancillary professions such as farriers and saddlers to instructors in riding schools and grooms. The ‘supporting’ sector of the industry is huge as clothing and equipment for both horse and rider is an ever-growing market, and there is also an associated building, engineering and manufacturing industry through requirements for equine housing, fencing and transport, amongst other needs. Including such ‘indirect’ employment, the industry may be responsible for 250,000 jobs in the UK (BHIC, 2009).

#### **AIMS AND PROCEDURE:**

This paper reports the results of a survey of employment conditions in

the equine industry which was conducted in January and February 2014. The target group was people employed to care for horses (“grooms”) and their employers. The research sought to explore the issues behind anecdotal evidence of poor employment practices in the industry, with an aim of understanding exactly what ‘normal’ working conditions might look like for grooms, and to identify appropriate interventions to bring working conditions toward a more ‘normal’ standard – whilst recognising the unique constraints of working with horses. It was conducted in conjunction with the British Grooms’ Association (BGA), a social enterprise founded to provide help and support for grooms and their employers. Access to respondents was secured through the BGA’s social media activity, press releases and website, as well as through the BEF and its member bodies themselves. The industry’s leading magazine in the UK, Horse & Hound, also promoted the survey and reported initial findings in April 2014 (Horse & Hound, 3 April 2014, p4-5).

1100 grooms and 160 employers responded to the survey which was conducted through internet-based survey software provided by the BGA. There are no exact figures for the total size of the population of interest, although ‘best guess’ figures as cited above suggest approximately 41,000 people working in the industry – not all of these are classed as ‘grooms’ and therefore we have no accurate measure of the potential sample size for this survey. Nineteen thousand businesses suggests 19,000 business owners, but many of these are not the kind of business which directly employs grooms – again, we have no knowledge of total numbers and therefore no real idea of the potential sample. Based on responses to previous research, we conclude that the response rate to our survey is fairly high – however, this lack of information is one of the reasons this survey was necessary and the results are worth reporting. Results were analysed and reported by the authors of this paper, first to the Board of the BGA and then more widely through media coverage to the industry as a whole.

#### RESULTS:

The results showed that conditions within the industry are, on the whole, in need of improvement, with many respondents working for salaries well below the National Minimum Wage. Furthermore, more than half of respondents claim to be working without an employment contract, long hours are normal and expected - the average working week is more than that prescribed in the EU’s Working Time Directive and scarce provision of Personal Protective Equipment in a job which can be dangerous due to the unpredictable, flight nature of even the most well-trained horse. Responses from employers supported the findings from grooms’ responses, suggesting that these results are reliable and representative of the wider industry.

#### IMPLICATIONS:

In our presentation, we We will explore the implications of the results of

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this research for the equine industry and more widely for sport management as a whole. The equine industry is unusual in the labour-intensity of its sporting activity and supporting structure, considering that the focus of the sport is not only a human, but it is not unique. Using a theory from Human Resource Management theory and the framework of emotional labour (Hochschild 1983), Wwe will show how and why these findings are of interest to the wider sport management community and suggest ways in which best practice might be shared between professionalised sports to ensure continuing growth of participation and economic value.

### **References**

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