Considerations on the realization of corporate social responsibility in temporary agency work – restaurant work in focus


Abstract

As temporary agency work (TAW) becomes more common, many actors have entered the industry, not all of them strive to act responsibly. An expanding market easily attracts irresponsible activities in the hope of making big profits. In this activity, the employee might be left in a harmful position. TAW has been criticized for delegating decision-making power between an employee and an employer to an intermediary. Similarly, the focus of the arguments used in marketing temporary work also depends on the point of view. For example, Flexibility looks quite different depending on the actor’s perspective. Most research in the area of TAW focuses on the viewpoint of the agency and the effects of TAW on end user company’s processes is neglected. In the earlier research of TAW, it has been concluded that temporary agency workers suffer more drawbacks than normal employees. This has been known for years, since the beginning of the 2000’s, but still there seems to be very little signs of improvement of the situation of temporary agency workers. On the contrary, literature and practice has shown the emergence of new ways to avoid regulations and to evade corporate social responsibility actions.

The key concepts in this study are Corporate social responsibility and Temporary agency work (TAW). Socially responsible activities are sometimes viewed as an unnecessary burden because they can be costly and do not always produce immediate monetary benefits. Managers should, however, consider it as a long-term objective promoting the sustainability of their business rather than mere a source to spend money. TAW is characterized by a triangular working agreement. It means that work employment relationship includes three parties: the end user company that uses the workforce, the temporary work agency that supplies the workforce and the worker’s official employer, and the worker who performs the work tasks. The following research questions were formed to examine CSR in this context:

RQ1: How the corporate social responsibility is realized in temporary agency work?

RQ2: How do different actors experience different aspects of temporary agency work?

CSR in TWA was studied in a restaurant context. Semi-structured theme interviews were conducted in five case restaurants. Managers of the restaurants (n=5) and temporary agency workers (n=6) working there were interviewed. Interview questions were formed from a widely used Conditions for work effectiveness questionnaire-II (CWEQ-II). In addition, expert interviews were conducted as group interviews. The experts represented a trade union for people working in private service sectors, a pension insurer that is a pioneer in work ability management in Finland as well as a temporary work agency. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and notes were taken during the interviews to support the analysis. (Total n=17).

This study was qualitative and interpretative by nature. Qualitative research design
allowed in-depth exploration of subjective understandings of the phenomena of the temporary agency work. Corporate social responsibility viewpoint set focus of research questions and analysis was conducted in two phases. On the first phase Nvivo-research program was used to categorize the initial data as NVivo provides an organized and structured approach to analysis. On the next phase iteration of the data and results of the previous phase were searched for units of significance again to bring forth the pertinent points for research questions. Finally, the units of significance were combined in a relevant way to obtain a uniform piece of explanatory material. Transcripts were kept for tracking and they were reviewed throughout the research, notes were made of emerging ideas and progress was constantly monitored.

The results, that are still in their analysis phase showed signs of common methods that are implemented in TAW and they were considered ambiguous depending on the point of view. Repeating concepts highlighted in the interviews, were for instance flexibility and larger companies operating in chains. Different forms of ownerships for the businesses like franchising and chains were seen to support or detract much from CSR of companies using TAW and many of the methods were argued, depending on the perspective, to be in use for the needs of agencies and end user companies, while they weaken the workers’ ability to manage their work, future work possibilities and free time.

To this rich material a good line-up of interviewees has been obtained and the topic has been discussed from many angles. This research opens the debate on CSR of the restaurant industry by identifying potential challenges and problem areas from the perspective of several different parties.