

Episode 85

Emotion at Work in Emotional Exploitation of your people in the Hospitality Industry

00:10

Phil Willcox

Hello, and welcome to the Emotion at Work podcast, where we place emotion at the heart of the people, the processes and the place of work, creating environments where people feel safe, where they feel optimistic, and when they feel confident as well. And our...today, we're focusing on a topic that we've explored on the podcast before. So we did it on episode 21, when we looked at employee experience with Lara Plaxton. We also did it on episode 26, where we looked at emotional exploitation with Joe Wainwright. And our guest today is kind of bringing both of those things together.

So our guest is a psychology student at Nottingham Trent Uni who wants to get into organisational psychology and has been working with the team at Emotion at Work for the last year or so. With lived experience in the areas that we're going to be discussing today. And with an infectious positivity, our guest is passionate about her future and making a difference in the world by helping other people become the best versions of themselves, which is a wonderful thing to have. So welcome to the Emotion at Work podcast Molly Whiteside. Hi, Molly.

01:18

Molly Whiteside

Hello.

01:20

Phil Willcox

How are we doing today?

01:20

Molly Whiteside

Are you okay?

01:21

Phil Willcox

Yeah, thank you.

01:23

Molly Whiteside

Yeah, I'm excited.

01:25

Phil Willcox

It's lovely and sunny where you are.

01:27

Molly Whiteside

I know it's a bit cloudy outside. It looks a bit grey, but it's bright, so it's fine.

01:32

Phil Willcox

Okay. It's bright and it's fine. We'll take that. We'll go with that. And as always with the Emotion at Work podcast then, we will open with an unexpected yet innocuous question. So my unexpected yet innocuous question for you, Molly, is what kind of person makes a good seat companion on an aeroplane? So, you know, the person, like, if you're in the middle and you've got somebody to your left and somebody to your right, what makes, like, a really good seat companion?

01:56

Molly Whiteside

Oh, we've had a similar one with travel buddy. So I feel like it's. Yeah. Feel like going off that as well. Oh, a good seat companion. I like on an airplane, I just like being focused. So I just put my headphones on, I watch a film maybe for like, half of it, and then the other half, I'll have a little chat with someone next to me. So I feel like I'm not that fussy. I'm not that fussy. My friend, last time, she was on the different road to me and there was two men next to her and she was chatting their ear off the entire time with anything that came to mind. So I feel like maybe if I was them then that wouldn't be as fun, but for me it was fine.

02:53

Phil Willcox

So a bit of focus in terms of watching a movie and then also a bit of chit chat with someone as well.

03:00

Molly Whiteside

Yeah, yeah, someone that knows when to be quiet and someone that knows when to be chatty.

03:05

Phil Willcox

Yeah. Okay, nice. I like that. Yeah, I like that. Yeah, I think it's for me it's just, it's about somebody being considerate so that, you know that person being considerate in terms of kind of how...yeah, just thinking about the person next to them and you know, if that person wants to chat then being aware of that and if they also don't seem to want to, then they can. I was on a train recently. My family and I went down to London for a long weekend and there used to be a thing I would do on Twitter called train crimes, which is where like people would do stuff on a train that you just like, why are you doing that? And we had like three different people in our carriage who were all watching videos or reels out loud with their phone playing for everyone to hear.

03:51

Molly Whiteside

Oh no, I hate music as well.

03:56

Phil Willcox

I was like, what is that about? So and for me that's not considerate. So I think, I mean, I was doing my best to be considerate. I'm sure that they, you know, this is a really important video and I'm sure these are really important things that they need to watch and there's a reason why they have to do it. And at the same time I was like, please be quiet if you can. That'd be lovely. I never wanted to be in a quiet coach more, I think.

04:15

Molly Whiteside

No, I get that. And people putting the seats back at one o'clock in the afternoon. Like if everyone's

asleep and like it's time for everyone to go to bed and the lights go off, then fine, but on a three hour flight at one o'clock in the afternoon, if you're putting your seat back, I'm like, secret side eye.

04:36

Phil Willcox

I love that. I love that, secret side eye. And the risk of making like a bit of a tenuous link. When we first started to look at the results from your research, I think there was maybe not a bit of secret side eye, but there was certainly a bit of side eye from some of the findings that came out from the research that you did. So let's start a bit broad and then maybe we'll get into some of the specifics, if that's okay. So what prompted you to choose the area that we did for your...I suppose I should maybe set some context first. So for the listener then, we are in September 2025 and we are about to publish Molly's research report called Am I Being Served? Which is all about emotional exploitation in the hospitality industry. So what prompted you to choose that as your research area, Molly?

05:30

Molly Whiteside

Well, it was kind of a transitional process that just bounced onto different ideas. So in my gap year, I started off just knowing that I wanted to do psychology at uni, but wasn't or into like which area I wanted to do. But something that I found myself doing was I learned a lot of theories and practices during my A levels that I applied to real life as I was going through like day to day without being in education. And obviously something that I came across a lot was that in the workplace, as I was working full time, and something that really interested me in like being in hospitality and being in the restaurant industry was the lack of psychological safety. And I always thought about, as you said before, like, I'm interested in like helping people become the best versions of themselves. And in psychology it kind of relates to Maslow's Hierarchy. So people always have that like, bottom, like physiological safety. But then in the hospitality industry often just stop to even being safe and having like a safe and clean working environment, never mind people being all the way at the top at like self actualisation and especially with young people being so vulnerable and having managers kind of take advantage of that and seeing it with me and seeing it with my friends, I wanted to actually look into it and match the qualitative data with the quantitative data and see what kind of trends that I could find and see if anything could be done about it to help those people that were feeling undervalued and overwhelmed in their work.

07:26

Phil Willcox

Yeah. And it's obvious to hear your passion for it when you talk about it as well. And one of my favourite things to ask people that do research, especially if they've already got like a bit of lived experience that goes into it. Because often I think sometimes researchers can be accused of just trying to find results that they've experienced themselves. So was there something in the findings which surprised you in particular?

07:51

Molly Whiteside

Yes. So the first thing that surprised me was with the background research that I did, so it was actually around 70% of people that had experienced some form of exploitation at work, there was...

Phil Willcox:

Wow, that's really high.

Molly Whiteside:

Yeah. So there was around 50% that was economic exploitation, around 50% that was verbal exploitation. And 32% had unsafe working conditions, which, like I said before, is only like the second thing of just being somewhere safe and somewhere clean. So that really surprised me and the background research. And then in the actual survey that I conducted, it was mainly in the qualitative answers that I saw that these values kind of lined up with what people were saying. There was people saying, like, they couldn't get time off during their GCSEs. There was people saying that they were scared about how people would react to them getting pregnant at a young age. There was people saying that they weren't getting paid the same as the male counterparts as a female. And just small things like that you would never find in huge organisations that had all these policies put in place. So it really just went to show that the root of the issue was a lack of policies within the hospitality industry and that small businesses that are in, especially the food and beverage industry, that think they can get away with, finding the cracks in these policies and having those unfair disadvantages to people just because they're younger or just because they fit in with a certain demographic that can be more easily taken advantage of.

So that's something that surprised me, the prevalence of it and people's actual lived experience of experiences of describing it, because it's something that you hear about. But within my survey of around 100 people, I think it was, that's in comparison, it's quite a small pool compared to all the people in hospitality. So hearing the prevalence of it within that group of people was quite surprising to see.

10:22

Phil Willcox

Yeah, absolutely. And what was the age? So we talked about young people. What was the, you know, when we think about some of the demographic elements. Who are we? Yeah. What was the age range of the respondents that we had in the survey?

10:34

Molly Whiteside

So my survey was focused between 16 and 25 year olds. I think the main cohort of people were between 18 and 21. So even though it did cover that whole range, the main people were 18 to 21, which I think personally is the main group that it kind of affects anyway, especially on the younger side. And I know in my research, I looked between the people that were like 16 to 18 and the people that were 24 to 25, and even then you could see a difference in treatment and how people were paid.

11:15

Phil Willcox

And because I think that is the age range in particular. Because if you think about 16 to 18, you know, somebody who isn't legally an adult yet is potentially, you know, going into the world of work for the first time so that their experience may shape what kind of affects them going forward. And then 18 to 21, you've got that kind of the age where you've officially, I guess, you legally you're an adult. And at the same time, from what you were describing, you got the risk of that unsafe working environment and you know, unclear working environment, that kind of stuff. So I think this research is really important and I love a bit of qualitative and quantitative data, so I love a bit of the kind of narrative as well as the numbers. What similarities or differences did you find in kind of what the qualitative and quantitative data told us?

12:10

Molly Whiteside

Yes, so with the quantitative and qualitative data, that was actually one of the most revealing parts

about the research and one of the most intriguing parts that I looked into because it wasn't something that I initially expected to see a big difference in. But then when you think about it with things like pay, that's kind of something that can be based on a number and can be based on a quantitative scale. Like you think you're either paid fairly or you don't. And then the qualitative answers was kind of seeing what factors contributed to what people thought was fair of their pay. So that was quite interesting to see and took up a section of my report was what people saw as equality in their pay and getting it with people that were like the same age or the same role versus equity and pay, where people took into factor like the personal considerations and reasons why they believed that they should be paid more than others if they had more responsibilities or if they were younger than one of the counterparts, but they were getting paid higher because of their age, even though they were in a higher position or there was like transport to work, things like that. But again, with pay, it's something that can be based on a more binary scale, whereas with treatment, depending on how long people had been in the jobs and been in the place that they were working, that can span across years. So obviously it's very hard to label that to a specific number. So I found with a lot of the treatment ones, it was kind of middle of the road for a lot of the quantitative answers because people like, oh, well, I've had really good experiences, but I've also had really bad experiences. So let's meet in the middle. But then that kind of dismisses all of the bad experiences that they had have.

14:10

Phil Willcox

Yeah.

14:12

Molly Whiteside

So yeah, like if someone rated treatment from the managers as a five, then the open-ended data was a lot more rich and in depth in terms of well-being. And that was the other thing that we looked into was the different demographics. So there was like different ages and gender and people being treated differently in like the personal experiences. So I feel like the qualitative data within the treatment was a lot more telling than the quantitative data. It was a lot more events and then it kind of just met as an average in the middle.

14:56

Phil Willcox

And then what was some of the qualitative data that really stuck out for you, would you say Molly?

15:04

Molly Whiteside

The qualitative data for the treatment, something that I found was really interesting was the difference between the genders. So with girls, when they were discussing treatment, they were talking about how they'd been harassed by customers, they'd been spoken down to by the managers, they'd been belittled. Yeah, they'd been like verbally harassed, sexually harassed. Like there was a whole range of different things and I know it's important to take into account that there was a lot less men that took part in the survey. Whether that's because they were just less that took part in the survey or less in the industry. But a lot of the things that males talked about in forms of the exploitation was just factors regarding pay and they were getting paid differently to the counterparts that were older. It wasn't necessarily different forms of treatment that they'd experienced and that's something that I found a lot more in girls. And when I was doing my background research there was qualitative research that Newcastle University in Australia explored and that was a big factor in theirs as well, was that the girls had experienced a lot more emotional exploitation than the men. I thought that was really interesting to see in the data.

16:26

Phil Willcox

Yeah, it was, yeah, it was really interesting to see and I guess so we'll put a link to the full report in the show notes so that people can, you know, get hold of it and download it so they can read everything within it. So what I think might be really useful Molly, we've talked about some of the qualitative data. What are some of the statistics that really stuck out for you?

16:52

Molly Whiteside

So within the quantitative data, something that I found was really interesting was about the job security. So on that question where I asked, I feel confident I won't be unfairly dismissed or replaced in my job role. That was most rated five. So 35% of the participants rated that as a five, but it was also the most rated zero. So it was around 10% of the participants that had rated that zero. And I thought that was really interesting because it goes to show that it's purely based on the employer and how they go about dismissing people and how they keep their employees and there's no like real policies put in place. So I thought that was quite interesting because something else that was rated really high was that people knew who to talk to if they had issues in the job. So it just goes to show if employers did go to their employees and say, oh, we've noticed that you're struggling with this, or we think your areas for improvement are this, instead of just dismissing them straight away, then the really fast turnover rates would actually be a lot more stable and people would feel more comfortable talking to their managers. Because something else that was quite high was that 63% of workers felt comfortable talking to the colleagues and it was actually quite low compared to the managers. So people are comfortable talking about their emotions in the workplace, but it's just the fact that they feel like they can't because of that fear of a fast dismissal which can quite easily be solved.

And then one of the other things that I found quite surprising was it was around 30% across a few of the prompts around pay was that people didn't think it reflected the daily expenses and their responsibilities. So people are putting a lot more effort in than what they're getting back. So it's just this like culmination of things where people are putting a lot of their energy in, they're putting a lot of their effort in, they feel like they're not being compensated for the amount of work that they're doing. And then they do one thing wrong and they're just dismissed and they're not getting that chance to have that two-way feedback of them saying to their employers, here's what you can do better for me. And employers saying to them, here's your areas for improvement and what you can do better for us.

So I feel like a big thing is just communication and just people actually having that open conversation between what they can do better and it would actually really help the industry as a whole and what big corporations do have with the customer service and like the people experience and what keeps people on board. Whereas with hospitality it's just come and go all the time.

19:57

Phil Willcox

Yeah, definitely. Wonderful. Thank You, Molly. So if I put myself in the listener shoes then Molly, what kind of actions or recommendations would you have for them? And maybe we could break it down into recommendations for young people for managers and employers.

20:13

Molly Whiteside

Yeah. So I feel like for young people the main thing is just educating yourself and being familiar with

what policies there are and what rights that you have. So if you know you're being unfairly paid, unfairly treated, you don't feel secure in your job, you've been unfairly dismissed, then you know what routes you can go down to be able to get compensated for that. Feel comfortable talking about your issues if anything does arise. I feel like as young people, even if you do have a really nice manager that you're able to speak to, sometimes being in your first workplace you can just feel a bit shy and a bit hesitant towards speaking about your issues that you have and if anything is worrying you or is causing you any issues.

So just knowing that there is someone to speak to and then in terms of the employers, just knowing how to create psychological safety in the workplace, prioritising the well-being of your employers and not you as a business, I feel like something that's really important that I've seen a lot is a lot of people are very money focused and they're like, obviously you are, you're a business. But putting empathy on a similar line to money. And then also something that people noted in the qualitative answers in the survey was they felt unfair when delegating tasks to people, when making rotors. So just making sure like you don't let your internal biases control the way that you treat employees. It's something that we've seen in the pay, it's something that we've seen across the ages and the genders.

Even just if you like someone more than someone else, like it's just a difference of personalities, it doesn't necessarily mean that they need to be treated any differently in the workplace and they need to feel left out or isolated. I think that's something that's really important. And then in terms of the industry, I think in big corporations like football stadiums, in world renowned restaurants, they do have mandatory training modules and it's heavily based on health and safety and they've got a lot of stuff on diversity, equity and inclusion, but I feel like they do lack in that terms of well-being and mental health. So that's something that they should include. And then also that whole range of things to be implemented into every small business. Like a lot of places don't have that at all.

And as well with the employers just educating young people on the legal rights, having accessible websites and being consistent with laws. I know they've put a new law in place regarding zero hour contracts and that will help the job security a lot. And helping people with having consistent hours and not just having them when necessary to have that sense of stability, but then just being consistent with those laws and making sure there's no loopholes so that people can get out of that. Making sure it's actually implemented and put into place rather than just being presented as a show just to make themselves look better.

23:38

Phil Willcox

Yeah, definitely. Thank you, Molly. So having completed this research then, and your work experience with us, what's next for you? What's next for you on your journey to helping people be the best versions of themselves?

23:52

Molly Whiteside

I'm doing marketing for Women in Business Society next year. So I'm doing all of their social media, so I'm doing their LinkedIn, Instagram, maybe Tik Tock. So I'm throwing myself into the digital marketing world, which is a bit scary, but I'm looking forward to that. I've really enjoyed it so far, just getting to grips with Canva. So that's fun. I am being a Consent is Everything workshop facilitator. So it's a mandatory workshop for year one students, educating them on consent in university, presenting that to groups of people. So I'm really excited to do that. And then me and my friend Esther are actually planning on starting our own podcast.

24:46

Phil Willcox

Exciting.

24:47

Molly Whiteside

This isn't something I've told you about yet. But yeah, we plan on starting our own podcast of business leaders and aiming it at the Nottingham Trench students, or aimed at any students really. Just educating them on the world of business and getting people from all different areas to talk about their experiences and the paths between how they became successful. So hopefully I'll be able to see you on that Phil.

25:18

Phil Willcox

I'd love to be on the show, Molly. That'd be amazing. Yeah, yeah, that'd be brilliant. I love that.

25:22

Molly Whiteside

But yeah, I'm very very excited and I have a good feeling about it. The girl that I'm doing it with, she's very similar to me. So I've got a good feeling about it. I feel like it'll do well and I feel like it'll be really beneficial for students to educate them more. I feel like the main thing is education and people don't know where to look and they want to do all these things but they don't have the knowledge or the resources and something that I'm really passionate about doing in the future is making like a hub for young people to know where to look and be able to think, I want to do this. Going to a place and being like, oh, here's the resources and the knowledge so that I can just go and do that and they've not got any barriers holding them back. So, yeah, really excited.

26:13

Phil Willcox

Love it. That sounds brilliant. Thank you so much. Well, and yeah, I'd love to be on the show, Molly. And yeah, it sounds like you've got, you've got some exciting things planned for you. All right, in that case, then, I just need to wrap up and say, Molly, thank you so much. Thank you so much for being on the podcast episode today and for bringing the research that you've done for us to life. And I can't wait for the paper to be available for people to download. And also just want to say thank you so much for working with us, for choosing to come and do your work experience with us and for being part of the team.

You threw yourself into all the different elements and challenges that we had along the way and it's just been wonderful to have you as part of the team along the way. So, yeah, thank you so much, Molly.

27:00

Molly Whiteside

Thank you. I've absolutely loved it, honestly. I've had such a nice time and I feel like I couldn't have asked for a better company to do my work experience for. I feel like it's such a good match in the way that you think and how I think and with the other employees that you've had, like, I feel like it's a really good, strong team and yeah, I've really liked it. So thank you.

27:30

Phil Willcox



Good, wonderful. That's great to hear. Thank you so much. Okie dokie. And we'll wrap it up there then. So, fair listeners, if you're in one of those organisations that want some help in terms of creating that psychological safety and thinking about the wellbeing of your colleagues and your staff, then remember that we are the place that puts emotion at the heart of the people and the processes and the place of work, so you can get in touch on hello@emotionatwork.co.uk and then we can give you a hand and we'll say, Molly, thank you so much. Have a wonderful rest of your day.

28:00

Molly Whiteside

Thank you.