

Contract Research staff Online Survey (CROS)

Summary analysis of 2002 results

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Summary

CROS 2002 survey data revealed a wide range of UK practice. This data is particularly interesting when compared to Research Council end of grant questionnaire data, collected by the Research Councils since 1997. It should be noted that CROS respondents include Contract Research Staff (CRS) that would not have previously been surveyed by Research Councils and Research Council surveys also include HEIs that have not taken part in CROS 2002. As a result, survey comparisons are not made on a 'like for like' basis, and should be viewed with that in mind. However, a number of interesting commonalities, and some differences do emerge.

Themes from the surveys provide HEIs with a body of information that can be used to steer, and later evaluate, their HR strategy in relation to this crucial group of staff.

Some flavours from the surveys are as follows:

- Take up of staff review at 32%, lower than 2000 Research Council survey result of 49%
- Staff Review found to be a useful process by 82%
- Only 45% take part in an induction process, 53% of these find it useful
- Only 26% think they are treated fairly (as compared to their perception of permanent academic colleagues treatment), in relation to departmental decision making processes. Significant variation to Research Council data that suggests this is 43% (2000)
- Only 45% receive careers advice from their Supervisor, 89% find it useful
- Development of 'transferable skills' 'on the job' very useful (90%), but not widespread (41%)
- Opportunity for 'off the job' training in research specific areas very useful (91%), but not widespread (25%)
- Opportunity for 'off the job' training in 'transferable skills' areas very useful (88%), but not widespread (14%)

In line with Research Council findings, where positive practice takes place in institutions it is generally of a fairly high quality. This positive practice is however not widespread.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Report objectives and structure

This report has two objectives:

1. To summarise areas where the sector seems to be performing well in CRS employment practice, together with areas that may require further development
2. To compare Research Council figures since 1997 with those obtained from CROS 2002, with a view to highlighting areas that CROS data suggest may be different to Research Council data.

CROS provides a vast amount of data that can be analysed in a number of ways. This relatively short report highlights UK 'themes', and as such does not attempt in-depth analysis. Further analysis of key areas, together with disseminated advice could be delivered, on the basis if a larger pilot, after CROS 2003.

In order to address objectives, the report is split up into the broad subject areas of the CROS survey. The report refers to CROS figurework that is found in appendix 2 and 3.

Appendix 2 aims to provide comparison between the questions asked in Research Council questionnaires and those in CROS surveys. While the sources may not be strictly comparable the similarities are sufficiently close to warrant review.

Appendix 3 highlights the areas in which the sector seems to be performing well, and not so well, by examining the 'highs' and 'lows' across the sector, against each of the performance areas. The data illustrate the best and worst performing institution (not by name), along with the UK average figure. This range of responses helps to highlight where one part of the sector seems to be performing better than another. This range is important, where a range exists there clearly will be techniques to learn from an organisation that is performing very well.

1.2 The CROS survey and survey tool

CROS asks a series of questions around 5 'themed' areas of personnel management, training, communication, career development, and University HR administration processes. In January 2002 CRS from within the 17 participating pilot organisations (see Appendix 1) were given the opportunity to comment on the performance of their organisation, against these areas.

In addition to receiving and displaying live data from CRS at a particular University, CROS technology allows participating institutions to see survey results from each institution as part of a benchmarking club, with a view to sharing and learning from the best practice in the UK.

The annual issue of CROS will provide an opportunity for individual Universities to evaluate the impact any change in practice, or new initiative, may have had on the working lives of CRS.

CROS is a tool to facilitate local performance improvement. Whilst UK comparisons are clearly beneficial, CROS does not specifically highlight areas of good, and not so good, UK wide practice. This paper will highlight the areas where an improvement of UK practice could have a beneficial impact on CRS.

Further information on CROS is available from the Web site at <http://www.cros.ac.uk>

The development of CROS technology has received independent praise by being shortlisted in the Personnel Today Awards 2002 (HR journal), in the category of 'Excellence in HR through technology'.

2. Project background

2.1 The Concordat

In 1996 the Research 'Concordat' was agreed by bodies representing Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Research Councils, the British Academy and the Royal Society. Its key commitments were:

- Terms and conditions in line with those for established staff
- Provision of specialist or general training and career guidance for contract staff
- Greater continuity of funding and employment where the research justified this

2.2 The Research Careers Initiative (RCI)

In 1997 the Concordat signatories set up the Research Careers Initiative (RCI) to take forward implementation of the Concordat and to identify, encourage and disseminate best practice. The RCI is chaired by Professor Sir Gareth Roberts, members of its steering group (1997 – 2000) were drawn from across the sector.

The RCI produced its first report in October 1998. A new Steering Group was established in early 1999 with a stream-lined membership and Secretariat provided by the CVCP and OST. The second report was published in May 2000.

A new RCI Strategy Group was established in autumn 2000 with the support of the Minister for Science, replacing the Steering Group. Membership was drawn from research funder, employer and staff interests at the highest level. Its terms of reference were to advise the Minister and other interested parties on progress by institutions and funding bodies in implementing the recommendations of the RCI report (May 2000), and on any further actions necessary.

2.3 Research Council Surveys of CRS opinion

For many years research staff on Research Council grants have been invited to return questionnaires about their employment experience towards the end of grants. These questionnaires have been the main source for the RCI to gauge the success of the recommendations made by the Concordat. Whilst this process provides 'UK opinion' information, the generic nature of the data is of limited use to individual HEIs.

Since 1997 this data has been gathered centrally by the RCI and produced for the sector. CROS was developed with comparison in mind so that similar, and in some cases the same, questions were asked. As a result CROS 2002 is able to build upon the pooled results from Research Council questionnaires. The 'themed' area of CROS are also in line with the framework areas outlined in the Concordat. This comparison is important and allows CROS to build upon earlier data rather than replace it.

The overall return rates from CROS are higher than Research Council end of grant questionnaires. As a result the data should represent a more accurate reflection of the opinion of UK CRS. The quantity of data will be significantly increased as a result of CROS 2003 during which around 45 HEIs will take part. CROS 2003 will provide an opportunity for the majority of the UK research staff to provide their opinions, including those not directly funded by research councils.

2.4 CROS project management and participants

CROS was developed during 2001. The project was managed and implemented by the University of Bristol (Personnel Services and the Institute for Learning and Research Technology), with advice from the CROS Steering Group made up of representatives of the participating institutions, HEFCE, HESDA and the RCI. Seventeen Higher Education Institutions took part in CROS (Appendix 1). These institutions launched on-line surveys to their Contract Research Staff (CRS) during January 2002.

3. Survey respondents

3.1 Survey return rates

The overall response rate to CROS 2002 was 24 %. When compared to the Research Council return rates of 2% (2000), as a percentage of total UK CRS, this is an improvement. It should be taken into account here that CRS not funded by Research Councils also had the opportunity to provide their opinions as part of CROS. It could be suggested therefore that CROS provides a more broad representation of CRS views by including no-research council funded staff.

There are a number of factors that we may hypothesise have had an effect on the different response rates, however one obvious difference is the use of Web technology to obtain data. The range of response rates by institution was significant, the lowest response was 13%, whilst the highest 56%. Institution size will not always have an impact on return rates with some of the largest institutions performing as well as some of the smallest. If CROS is issued without a co-ordinated effort to communicate with CRS (e.g Web sites, e-mail lists) it is likely to attract a smaller response rate. Examples of how institutions can communicate better with CRS before, during and after the issue of CROS, is provided on the CROS Web site.

3.2 Gender

CROS seems to produce a greater number of responses from female CRS than any previous Research Council survey. Female responses ranged from 29% in 1998, to 37% in 1999. CROS produced a response rate from female CRS of 51%. However we should remember that all CRS in participating institutions had the opportunity to take part in CROS, including those that are not funded by Research Councils.

4. Induction and Progress

4.1 Information

When CRS start employment at an institution the quality of the information they receive about the University (a 'welcome pack') is clearly important to them. In the best performing CROS institution 80% said that it was useful, however responses generally indicate that some institutions could improve the distribution of this information.

4.2 Induction

CROS data in the Induction area suggests that this is a lost opportunity in some institutions. Responses suggest that a quality induction process is extremely useful to CRS. This is influenced by the fixed term nature of their contract requiring them to 'get up to speed' as quickly as possible. In one institution 80% of CRS found the Induction a useful process. However across the UK only an average of 45% of CRS said that they received any form of induction.

In all of the induction areas (institution, department, role), CRS found it a useful process, however quality rates varied. For example those that found induction to the institution a valuable process ranged from 43% to 80%.

Clearly the sector needs to learn from quality induction processes at all three levels (institution, department, role), with a view to improving local practice where possible.

4.3 Progress meetings with Supervisor

CROS suggests that these are absolutely crucial to CRS, with an average of 92% responding that they are useful. Whilst an average of 82% respond that they take place, the range was as low as 74%.

5. Careers Advice

A series of questions were asked about careers advice, its quality, and source. These questions produced some of the most unequivocal and positive responses. In all careers advice areas (supervisor, careers service, colleagues), 100% of CRS in the best performing institutions found it to be a useful process. The most popular sources for obtaining careers advice were from the Supervisor and colleagues in the department. Clearly accessibility and subject knowledge have an important influence on this. It is useful to note however that where the University Careers Service offers advice (presumably not specialised) an average of 65% of CRS find this helpful.

Anecdotal evidence from HR practitioners connected with CROS suggests that more institutions are recognising the importance of non-subject specific careers advice. Some are actively recruiting dedicated CRS careers advisers. This practice is in line with the advice given in the 'Roberts Review', produced by Professor Sir Gareth Roberts earlier this year, in which he examined the supply and career paths of researchers in Science. This report suggested that institutions should be providing timely advice and development opportunities to all CRS, including those that may not remain in the sector long term.

The role of the Supervisor in providing time for careers advice (perhaps as part of the staff review process) is also crucially important as an average of 89% of CRS find this a useful process.

Whilst the usefulness of careers advice is positive, the opportunity for CRS to take advantage of this is not widespread. For example an average of just 45% of CRS receive careers advice from their Supervisor, and just 15% from the University Careers Service.

CROS reveals that more people seem to be receiving careers advice from departmental colleagues (50%), than is illustrated in previous Research Council surveys (high of 30% in 1999). CROS figures are broadly the same as Research Council figures around the number receiving this advice from the University Careers Service.

6. Training & Development

6.1 Information

The accessibility of information on training & development opportunities for CRS ranged from a high of 93% rating it as 'excellent' or 'good', to 58%. Clearly this will be influenced by an organisation having CRS training activity in the first place to promote to their CRS. The vast majority prefer to receive information about training and development opportunities via e-mail (68%).

6.2 Staff Review

Staff Review is a tool that, where done well, can achieve so much for CRS in the majority of the areas outlined in the Concordat. This is evidenced by CROS data that illustrates 82% of CRS find it a useful process in some way. This figure is broadly in line with the 'usefulness' feedback received via Research Council questionnaires.

The process was particularly useful at highlighting problems (a high of 80%, and an average of 65% found it useful). It is encouraging to see that in a high of 63%, and an average of 41%, solutions were

also found to these problems as a result of the Staff Review process. However the average figures were pulled down by poor quality in a number of institutions. For example the range of responses 'yes' to the question 'did staff review find solutions to problems' varied from 63% to 18%. Could this be influenced by the skill of individual reviewers, or their ability to implement change as a result of the reviewer / reviewee relationship in some institutions?

However the real issue is that Staff Review is not widespread enough across the UK to allow many CRS to take advantage of these benefits. An average of just 32% of CROS respondents have taken part. The range of institutions offering and encouraging this opportunity is of interest, with at best 73% taking part, and at worst just 11% taking part.

Some institutions may have offered Staff Review and CRS have chosen not to take part, but this in itself is an issue for the institution. The benefits illustrated in CROS suggest that it should be actively encouraged rather than simply offered. The usefulness responses, whilst positive, also suggest that the quality of the process can also be improved at some institutions.

Anecdotal evidence from HR practitioners suggests that development may need to take place at a number of levels in the staff review process, such as the paperwork, marketing and appraiser/appraisee training.

Response rates suggest that a number of areas of good Staff Review practice exist in the UK. However this assumption is made on the basis of responses rates only. This is one example of how a more in-depth analysis, and best practice dissemination, of some key areas (such as Staff Review) may be useful to HEIs after CROS 2003.

Unfortunately CROS suggests that the problem of participation in Staff Review may be worse across the UK than was previously thought. The last Research Council data in 2000 put the take up rate at 49%, whilst CROS suggests it is just 32%. However this may be due to a greater degree of 'encouragement' to take part in staff review coming from the research councils, than other funding bodies?

6.3 'On the Job' Training

The numbers responding to CROS that they had received 'on the job' training specific to the area of research was 46% lower than all previous Research Council surveys (56% in 2000).

When asked if CRS had been given the opportunity to gain wider experience 'on the job' in a range of transferable areas, CROS responses was slightly lower than previous Research Council Questionnaires. The most useful area was exposure to staff and team management that 92% described as useful, however only an average of 31% were given the opportunity to learn from this experience, with a UK high of just 53%. In every transferable skill area, the opportunity to learn from experience on the job was described as being useful. In fact the area that achieved the least useful percentage was still useful to 82% of those that had the opportunity.

The opportunities are not widespread enough, with the best performing institutions offering the opportunity to just 50% of CRS.

6.4 'Off the job' training

CROS data around the take up and usefulness of 'off the job training specific to the area of research' is in line with Research Council data. With just 25% being given the opportunity to train. This is unfortunate as the data suggest that where it does take place 91% find it a useful process.

CROS data suggest that opportunities to take part in 'transferable skills' training 'off the job' are not as widespread as previously thought. In all of the transferable skill areas identified, the number of those that have been given the opportunity to take part is lower than Research Council figures. 'Off the job' training has been available to an average of just 14% of CRS (across the areas questioned).

However where it took place 'off the job' training was extremely positive with an average, across the subject areas that found it useful, of 88%. The most useful areas were 'writing reports' and 'making formal presentations'. However all areas were useful to at least an average of 77% of respondents. The range of positive responses was also significant. Those given the opportunity to take part in

training around 'writing reports' ranged from 57% to 12%, and 'making formal presentations to an audience' ranged from 47% to 10%.

Certain institutions have clearly identified that 'off the job' transferable skill development is useful to CRS, and as a result have provided more commitment to it than others. CROS clearly suggests that it is an extremely important area to CRS, but the opportunities are not widespread across the UK.

Training and Development, particularly in the transferable skills areas, was also an area identified in the Roberts Review as being important.

7. Communication

7.1 Fair treatment compared to that of permanent colleagues

The 'fair treatment' of CRS compared to their perceptions of treatment of permanent colleagues, revealed that generally treatment was considered to be fair around access to training opportunities, and University facilities. However many CRS felt that the organisation was not treating them fairly in relation to decision making processes, and opportunities for promotion. The fixed term nature of their contract will clearly have an influence on promotion opportunities. Whether the new fixed term contract legislation (Oct 2002) will influence this perception, or reality, is yet to be seen.

However as far as decision making processes are concerned some institutions seem to be including CRS more than others. The range of CRS that responded that departmental decision making processes were fair ranged from 55% to 21%.

CROS data on fair decision making processes was different to Research Council data that suggested that an average of 43% (2000) found it to be fair, CROS data suggested this could be as low as 26%.

7.2 Communication systems

The range of responses around the communication of relevant policy and guidance on the part of the University was large. The best performing institution was rated as 'good' by 70% of CRS, at the other end of the scale just 36% of CRS rated the processes as 'good'. Perhaps not surprisingly 'colleagues' were described as providing the best communication of such guidance.

8. Conclusion

CROS has highlighted that there are pockets of very good practice across the UK in many of the 'key indicator' areas. This good practice is not to be found exclusively at one institution, with certain HEIs clearly better in some areas than others. However a number of 'lost opportunities' do appear to exist in many institutions around areas of HR practice that CRS elsewhere report are useful to them. This can be found particularly in the areas of Induction, Staff Review and Training and Development.

The real power of the CROS tool is that the areas of good practice are highlighted. All participating institutions have agreed to share information on local processes and procedures with other members of CROS. This sharing of information should be encouraged, and could be analysed and disseminated further after CROS 2003.

At least another 25 institutions will be able to benefit from CROS in 2003. For the 17 original institutions they will be able to assess the impact of any local improvement they have made.

CROS is a tool that can not only shape, but also evaluate, the impact of a University HR strategy in relation to this group of staff. Institutions that are particularly reliant on the quality of their research output, clearly need to be listening to the views of the staff that have a disproportionately large impact on this part of the 'business', the contract research staff.

Appendix 1: CROS 2002: Participating HE Institutions

1. Bradford
2. Bristol
3. Cambridge
4. East Anglia
5. Glasgow
6. Institute of Education
7. Leicester
8. Loughborough
9. Manchester
10. Napier
11. Oxford
12. Paisley
13. Sheffield
14. Southampton
15. Strathclyde
16. Ulster
17. University College London

Appendix 2: CROS 2002 survey compared with Research Council (RC) Questionnaires

It should be noted that CROS respondents include Contract Research Staff (CRS) that would not have previously been surveyed by Research Councils and Research Council surveys also include HEIs that have not taken part in CROS 2002. As a result, survey comparisons are not made on a 'like for like' basis, and should be viewed with that in mind. However, a number of interesting commonalities, and some differences do emerge.

RC & CROS questions	Response Option	1997	1998	1999	2000	CROS 2002
Gender	Male	68	69	62	65	49
	Female	32	29	37	34	51
Participated in the University's Staff review/appraisal scheme?	Yes	43	48	51	49	32
	Was it useful?	80	83	82	83	82
Received 'on-the-job' training specific to research?	Yes	52	57	56	56	46
	Was it useful?	99	96	98	96	97
Received 'off-the-job' training specific to research?	Yes	20	23	25	23	25
	Was it useful?	97	97	96	95	91
Have you been provided with the opportunity to gain wider experience (on-the-job) in any of the following:						
Staff/Team Management	Yes	33	36	30	31	31
	Was it useful?	97	97	97	96	92
Coaching others	Yes	67	72	60	62	48
	Was it useful?	96	98	98	94	92
Managing Budgets	Yes	29	27	25	23	24
	Was it useful?	95	97	98	95	88
Demonstrating	Yes	49	49	46	46	27
	Was it useful?	92	93	94	92	80
Collaboration with Industry	Yes	32	31	30	28	25
	Was it useful?	98	99	97	93	89
Explaining work to non-scientists	Yes	45	39	46	48	42
	Was it useful?	86	97	97	93	93
Writing and presenting	Yes	87	89	89	87	61

RC & CROS questions	Response Option	1997	1998	1999	2000	CROS 2002
	Was it useful?	97	97	96	96	94
Has 'off-the-job' training been available in any of the following:						
Legal and procedural aspects of IP	Yes	6	9	15	16	8
	Was it useful?	70	63	43	44	36
Teaching	Yes	18	22	34	31	18
	Was it useful?	72	78	63	46	58
Project or finance management	Yes	9	13	19	18	12
	Was it useful?	83	62	53	38	49
Information Technology	Yes	29	35	50	50	32
	Was it useful?	85	80	65	61	67
Have you received careers advice from departmental colleagues?	Yes	21	28	30	26	50
Have you received careers advice from the University Careers Service?	Yes	N/A	14	14	16	15
Do you feel the University has treated you on an equal footing with established (permanent) staff in relation to:	Participation in University/departmental decision making?	N/A	44	43	43	26
	Access to University facilities	N/A	81	94	95	91

Appendix 3: CROS 2002 High, low and average response figures

Main Question	Response Option	Follow-On	High	Low	Average
Overall Response Rate (17 surveys)			56	13	24%
What is your Gender?	Male		67	25	49%
	Female		75	33	51%
Did you receive general information about the University when you first started	Yes		95	69	85%
		If 'yes' was this information useful?	80	56	65%
Did you receive any form of induction when you started with your current employer	Yes		70	34	45%
		If 'yes' did you find the induction to the Institution useful?	80	43	53%
		If 'yes' did you find the induction to your department useful?	75	50	65%
		If 'yes' did you find the induction to your current role useful?	68	33	58%
Do you have regular meetings with your supervisor to discuss the progress of your research?	Yes		93	74	82%
		Are they helpful?	98	88	92%
Have you received careers advice from the following sources					
	Supervisor / manager	Yes	68	21	45%
		Was it helpful	100	67	89%
	University Careers Service	Yes	23	0	15%
		Was it helpful	100	20	65%
	Careers Adviser	Yes	9	0	50%
		Was it helpful	100	0	63%

Main Question	Response Option	Follow-On	High	Low	Average
	Colleagues in department	Yes	72	35	50%
		Was it helpful	100	80	91%
	Colleagues outside department	Yes	50	27	44%
		Was it helpful	100	80	92%
	Funding Body	Yes	8	0	4%
		Was it helpful	100	0	73%
How far has your employment with this institution improved the prospects of achieving your career aspirations?	A great deal or partly		95	75	84%
How would you rate the accessibility of University information on training and development opportunities for research staff	Excellent or good		93	58	72%
How easy is it to attend training activities	Easy or fairly easy		80	50	61%
Have you participated in the University Staff Review / Appraisal Scheme	Yes		73	11	32%
	Did you find the process 'useful' in the following areas				
		Leading to Training	67	16	39%
		Leading to changes in work practice	68	8	31%
		Highlighting problems	80	40	65%
		Finding solutions to problems	63	18	41%
		Helping you focus on your career aspirations	63	29	50%
Following your appointment have you received any 'off the job' training specific to your area of research?	Yes		53	17	25%
		If 'yes' was it useful?	100	75	91%

Main Question	Response Option	Follow-On	High	Low	Average
Following your appointment have you received any 'on the job' training specific to your area of research?	Yes		53	32	46%
		If 'yes' was it useful?	100	91	97%
Have you been provided with the opportunity to gain wider experience (i.e on the job) in...					
	Staff / Team Management	Yes	52	14	31%
		Was it useful			92%
	Coaching others	Yes	64	23	48%
		Was it useful			92%
	Managing budgets	Yes	47	18	24%
		Was it useful			88%
	Project & Resource planning	Yes	57	36	45%
		Was it useful			92%
	Teaching	Yes	58	30	42%
		Was it useful			88%
	Demonstrating	Yes	50	13	27%
		Was it useful			80%
	Information Technology	Yes	78	45	50%
		Was it useful			93%
	Collaboration with industry	Yes	57	3	25%
		Was it useful			89%
	Explaining work to people outside your field	Yes	58	36	41%
		Was it useful			93%
	Writing proposals or grant applications	Yes	72	37	44%

Main Question	Response Option	Follow-On	High	Low	Average
		Was it useful			91%
	Writing for reports and publication	Yes	92	63	71%
		Was it useful			95%
	Making formal presentations to an audience	Yes	88	57	70%
		Was it useful			95%
	Legal and procedural aspects of IP	Yes	30	0	11%
		Was it useful			79%
Has "off the job" training been available in...	Staff / Team Management	Yes	25	7	15%
		Was it useful			84%
	Coaching others	Yes	17	0	10%
		Was it useful			89%
	Managing budgets	Yes	13	0	7%
		Was it useful			83%
	Project & Resource planning	Yes	32	0	12%
		Was it useful			88%
	Teaching	Yes	39	9	18%
		Was it useful			87%
	Demonstrating	Yes	20	3	8%
		Was it useful			85%
	Information Technology	Yes	53	16	32%
		Was it useful			89%
	Collaboration with industry	Yes	16	0	6%
		Was it useful			91%
	Explaining work to people outside	Yes	18	3	10%

Main Question	Response Option	Follow-On	High	Low	Average
	your field				
		Was it useful			93%
	Writing proposals or grant applications	Yes	31	11	18%
		Was it useful			93%
	Writing for reports and publication	Yes	57	12	21%
		Was it useful			92%
	Making formal presentations to an audience	Yes	47	10	22%
		Was it useful			93%
	Legal and procedural aspects of IP	Yes	13	0	8%
		Was it useful			77%
Do you feel the institution has treated you on an equal footing with established (permanent) academic staff in relation to...	Participation in departmental decision making processes	Yes	55	21	34%
	Participation in faculty / school decision making processes	Yes	42	0	22%
	Participation in University decision making processes	Yes	38	9	19%
	Access to University facilities	Yes	100	86	91%
	Access to training and development	Yes	100	69	80%
	Opportunities for promotion	Yes	100	69	80%
	Terms and conditions of employment	Yes	70	36	64%

Main Question	Response Option	Follow-On	High	Low	Average
How would you rate the effectiveness of the following at communicating policy and guidance relevant to you as a contract researcher	The University	Very good / good	70	36	51%
	Faculty / School	Very good / good	50	25	36%
	Department	Very good / good	64	37	55%
	Colleagues	Very good / good	83	66	72%