Managing the ‘hidden’ workforce: an ethnographic study of workplace cleaning and its implications for management practice

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This research attempts to contribute to the discipline of management practice by studying the behaviour of a specific group of low paid workers. Evidence has been gathered, via an ethnographic study of three groups of cleaners in three different types of organisation – clinic, school and hotel, about the employment relationships enjoyed by these cleaners and their employers; and the extent to which their psychological contracts contribute to their performance. Findings suggest that, not only do employees in each case study demonstrate diverse behaviour, but also certain facets of performance are unlikely to be obtainable from the employees studied. The research concludes that some issues facing the organisations in this study can be generalised beyond cleaning the workplace to other low-paid types of work and that using a management strategy, which ignores the present reality of such types of work and ignores the idiosyncrasy of the psychological contracts of the people to whom it is applied, could be unwise.