Living Wage: a UK perspective

The living wage is gaining momentum in the UK. The number of companies committed to paying their workers the living wage has doubled during 2014 and now numbers 400. The living wage topic has relevance across the globe; however, in this note we focus on the UK. We assess the associated costs and benefits of paying a living wage, which sectors have the most exposure to this issue and the impact it has on margins.

Political pressure puts the UK living wage on the agenda

There are several reasons why the living wage debate is gaining momentum in the UK, and political pressure is one of them. London’s mayor, Boris Johnson, has stated that he wants the living wage to become the norm across the city and ahead of the May’s general election, the Labour Party has committed to a national minimum wage of £8 an hour by 2020 and tax breaks for companies paying the living wage (currently £9.15 an hour in London and £7.85 elsewhere in the UK).

In addition, there has been a greater focus on income inequality in the media. Shareholders are increasingly using voting rights to highlight employee-related issues such as workforce diversity, and the living wage could be the next area matter to grab engaged shareholders’ attention.

Finally, in a global context there is rising awareness of living wages. In the US, several major retailers including Wal-Mart and T.J. Maxx have committed to increasing wages ahead of potential legislation that would take the federal minimum wage from $7.25 to $10.10 an hour. In emerging markets, there has been a significant increase in the minimum wage in both Bangladesh and Cambodia in response to large scale employee strikes. It should be noted that many UK companies sourcing from emerging markets have a commitment to paying a living wage along their supply chain, however, very few companies are able to demonstrate that this has been achieved.

The current living wage in the UK

Globally, there are many different definitions for a living wage; in general it should enable the earner to afford shelter, food, clothing, transport, healthcare and basic necessities.

In the UK there are two official living wage levels, which are re-calculated annually and take into account issues such as housing costs, council tax and a regular shopping basket. As at November 2014 these were set at:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UK living wage¹: £7.85 an hour</th>
<th>London living wage²: £9.15 an hour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UK national minimum wage: £6.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is a relevant issue for UK companies as there are currently 5.24 million workers (21% of the UK workforce) that are paid a wage below the living wage. However, it is important to note that there is a significant difference between full-time and part-time workers. Within London, 87% of full-time workers earn a wage equal to or greater than the living wage, but this drops to only 51% of part-time workers.

Costs and benefits of the living wage

Why should UK-listed companies consider introducing a living wage? Below we summarise the costs and the benefits of this practice.

¹The UK living wage is calculated by the Centre for Research in Social Policy at Loughborough University and is a weighted average of the wages required to cover basic living standards across nine different household categories. The increase is capped.

²The London Living wage is calculated by the Greater London Authority (GLA).
Costs

- Cost per employee
  UK-listed companies are facing increasing stakeholder pressure to pay a living wage. There are clear financial costs to implementing this practice. Some estimates suggest that moving from the national minimum wage to the UK living wage, including the increased pension, national insurance and tax contributions would cost £2,400 a year, per employee.

- Impact on corporate earnings
  ShareAction\(^3\) has calculated the impact of introducing a living wage on a company’s earnings per share (EPS). Their analysis shows that the greatest impact will be to the retail sector, where there is a larger number of sub-living wage earners.

Figure 1: The impact of the living wage on corporate earnings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjusted Anonymised Outputs</th>
<th>Services Co</th>
<th>Industrial Co</th>
<th>Retail Co</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Share Price</td>
<td>1202p</td>
<td>2055p</td>
<td>2256p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current EPS</td>
<td>93.25p</td>
<td>131.01p</td>
<td>126.66p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted Current EPS</td>
<td>90.92p</td>
<td>129.46p</td>
<td>117.33p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPS Difference</td>
<td>-2.5%</td>
<td>-1.2%</td>
<td>-7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current P/E(^4)</td>
<td>9.02x</td>
<td>10.98x</td>
<td>6.23x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted Current P/E</td>
<td>9.25x</td>
<td>11.11x</td>
<td>6.73x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required P/E Expansion</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


- Maintaining wage differentials
  Paying a living wage may also create an additional cost if a company wishes to maintain wage differentials across the whole workforce.

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\(^3\) A group promoting responsible investment across the pensions industry

\(^4\) The price to earnings ratio of each company
Benefits

Companies such as Barclays, SSE and Accenture, all of whom have committed to paying a UK living wage, have seen many benefits as a result. These include:

- **Lower employee turnover**
  Studies have shown that paying a living wage has increased employee motivation and loyalty, which is evident from lower turnover rates. While the financial value of these benefits is more difficult to quantify, some sector-leading companies are starting to capture this data. For example, SAP, the German software company, reports that for every 1% improvement in employee retention rates, operating profit improves by €60 million. Meanwhile, Barclays state that its catering staff retention rate increased from 54% to 77% following the introduction of the living wage, and its retention rate for cleaning staff rose from 35% to 92%.

Low staff turnover can have additional benefits such as:

- Lower recruitment costs
- Lower productivity loss
- Lower costs resulting from poor hiring decisions

- **Lower absenteeism**
  A recent study by PwC (a professional services firm) states that employee absenteeism in the UK is higher than rates in both Europe and the US, with UK employees taking an average of 9.1 days off per year. The total absence cost to UK businesses is now at £29 billion a year. The highest rates of absence are in the retail and leisure sectors, which correlates with the highest proportion of sub-living wage workers.

- **Increased productivity**
  Some of the most successful examples of introducing a living wage have been where it has been implemented alongside an up-skilling programme (which can help to increased productivity) and the introduction of skills-based pay. Skills-based pay is a reward structure that aligns higher levels of pay with additional skills, knowledge and competencies. A study looking at the business case for the implementation of the living wage found 61% of respondents now ‘do a broader range of tasks’ after introducing skills-based pay.

Furthermore, the Living Wage Commission suggests that paying a living wage could close the gap in productivity levels in the UK compared to other G7 countries. Professional services company KPMG reports that the UK’s output per hour is 21% lower than the average for the USA, Germany, France, Italy, Japan and Canada. Another study showed that worker productivity is higher when staff were viewed as an asset by retailers, rather than an area for cost cutting.

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6 SAP Annual Report 2013
7 The Case for the Living Wage, ShareAction, 2014
9 The Business Case for the Living Wage, Jane Wills with Nathalie Kakpo and Rahima Begum Queen Mary, University of London, January 2009
10 Living wage research for KPMG, Markit, 2014

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Case study: Halfords and Pets at Home

For specialty retailers, such as Halfords and Pets at Home, the level of employee product knowledge directly correlates with sales, so there is a clear business case for linking pay increases with up-skilling. However, the business case may be weaker for general retailers. Both of the above companies saw an increase in employee productivity and better customer service after implementing an up-skilling programme, which have fed through to significant increases in like-for-like sales growth. The graph below demonstrates the employee retention and customer engagement improvements at Pets at Home resulting from the up-skilling programme, and the growth in sales over the same period.

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**Figure 3: Improvements in customer engagement scores and employee retention**

![Graph showing improvements in customer engagement scores and employee retention](source: Pets at Home IPO Prospectus, 2014.)
– **Better customer service**  
UK employers who introduced a living wage also witnessed an improvement in customer satisfaction and lower complaints. This is especially true of the more specialist retail and leisure sectors where there is potential for significant motivational and productivity gains amongst the workforce. Companies such as Halfords, have seen a significant improvement in customer service since implementing an up-skilling programme that links the living wage with the level of training achieved.  

– **Attracting and retaining talent**  
In increasingly competitive markets, employers are in a race for talent. In Wal-Mart’s recent announcement to raise pay for 40% of its US workforce, its chief executive officer (CEO) attributed the decision to attracting and retaining talent, saying that “today’s cashiers will be tomorrow’s store or club managers. Today’s managers are tomorrow’s vice presidents. Tomorrow’s CEO will almost definitely come from inside our company.”  

– **Multiplier effect**  
Given that means-tested benefits, including council tax benefits and working tax credits are already incorporated into the living wage calculations, living wage earners will see an increase in disposable income. Studies have shown that when lower income workers receive higher pay, they are more likely to spend it rather than put it into savings. For example, research by the Bank of England showed that for every pound lost in income for lower income households, spending is reduced by 78p. For higher income households, the reduction is just 45p. The businesses that introduce a living wage are best placed to benefit from this increased spending power, notably the retailers, restaurants and bars. While there is strong evidence of the benefits from paying a living wage, the time horizon for these benefits is unclear. If the living wage becomes standard practice, then benefits such as attracting talent and lower turnover may decrease over time. However, introducing up-skilling along with a living wage may be one way for employers to differentiate themselves from their peers and ensure that the benefits continue. Considering time horizons also highlights the potential benefits of a first mover advantage. The companies who introduce a living wage ahead of sector peers are more likely to see greater benefits over the short term.  

**Retail sector most exposed in the UK**  
So far, the majority of companies that have signed up to the UK living wage are in the financial services, insurance and banking sectors. These sectors tend to have a lower proportion of sub-living wage workers, and subsequently the cost of increasing salaries represents a much smaller proportion of total employee-related costs. Beyond the financial sectors, there have been a number of companies listed overseas with UK operations that have signed up to the living wage, including Nestle and Google. Research from KPMG suggests that the hotel, restaurants and leisure sub-sector employs the largest proportion of sub-living wage workers. For example, the graph below highlights that 90% of bar staff earn less than the living wage, but the retail sector employs the largest absolute number of sub-living wage workers with 760,000 UK-based workers. So for investors, this may mean a higher level of employee turnover and lower productivity per employee than other sectors.  

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Figure 5: Occupations with greatest number of people below living wage: all UK

- Sales and retail assistants (760k)
- Kitchen and catering assistants (370k)
- Care workers and home carers (320k)
- Other administrative occupations (170k)
- Bar staff (170k)
- Elementary storage occupations (160k)
- Waiters and waitresses (130k)
- Retail cashiers and check-out operators (110k)
- Receptionists (100k)
- Teaching assistants (100k)

Source: Living wage research for KPMG, Markit, 2014.

**Savings partially offset the costs in UK retail sector**

We conducted some analysis on the potential costs and benefits of introducing a living wage in the UK. Our proprietary research highlights a material cost in reaching living wage, ranging between 1 – 2% of UK revenues. However, the potential savings achieved through lower absenteeism and lower turnover offsets between 16% to 36% of these additional costs.

While the range of potential benefits is broad, we note that specialty retailers are best placed to benefit from introducing the living wage. With higher margins, it is more feasible to invest in staff, and the resulting improvement in customer service is likely to have a greater impact on sales, as demonstrated by the Halfords and Pets At Home case study.

**An important part of Schroders’ engagement strategy**

As part of Schroders’ engagement strategy, we have spoken to a number of different companies across the consumer sector on the topic of living wage. While very few consumer companies have become accredited living wage employers, there is some evidence of pay increases and up-skilling programmes. Some employers monitor the proportion of the workforce that is paid a living wage, but they don’t disclose it publicly. Others are struggling with the definition of the living wage, and while in the UK there is a clear sterling number attributed to both the London and UK living wage, this is not the case in all countries.

Another trend identified in the consumer sector is the use of zero hour contracts. While this approach has been the centre of much debate, companies note that this flexible working solution can suit certain segments of the workforce, such as students and semi-retired workers. Schroders will continue to engage with companies to better understand the costs and potential benefits that can be gained from introducing a living wage on a case by case basis.

**Investment conclusions**

There is increasing pressure from a broad range of stakeholders on companies to pay a living wage. While there are clear direct costs, it is estimated that these will impact EPS by between 1 – 7%\(^{13}\) depending on both the sector and individual company. However, while difficult to quantify, and the underlying assumptions may vary, it appears that the benefits are significant. Both the costs and benefits are greater for the retail and leisure sectors. Potential benefits include increased employee productivity, higher retention rates, lower employee turnover, the ability to attract higher quality candidates and improved customer service.

All of these factors could have a positive impact on sales and reduce costs in the long run with lower training, recruitment and employee absence costs. However, the cost and benefits differ not only between sectors, but also within sectors. Within the retail sector for example, it may be more feasible to pay a higher wage amongst specialty retailers where margins are larger and the potential benefits are greater. Improvements in customer service are likely to be more material when selling a speciality, one-off good, rather than everyday items. While there are clear benefits of introducing a living wage, this issue should be considered on a case by case basis.

\(^{13}\)The Case for Living Wage, ShareAction, November 2014
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