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The human side of skills and knowledge

Irena Grugulis

The goal of decent work is best expressed through the eyes of people. It is about your job and future prospects; about your working conditions; about balancing work and family life, putting your kids through school or getting them out of child labour. It is about gender equality, equal recognition, and enabling women to make choices and take control of their lives. It is about personal abilities to compete in the market place, keep up with new technological skills and remain healthy. It is about developing your entrepreneurial skills, about receiving a fair share of wealth that you have helped to create and not being discriminated against; it is about having a voice in your workplace and your community For everybody, decent work is about securing human dignity (ILO 2001:7 - 8 cited in Green 2006:19 - 20).

Attempting to capture the human side of work is a fascinating, if fraught process. Workers' relationships with their employers, their colleagues and their customers, the way that work is designed as well as how (and how generously) it is rewarded all play a part in (among others) whether workers are treated with dignity and respect, whether their wages and working conditions are decent and whether they have a voice in workplace issues. Skills and knowledge are central to these issues. They can provide individual workers access to interesting and more highly rewarded work as well as equipping

collective groups with bargaining power, status and a basis on which they may influence workplace decisions. But it is not clear whether these elements, desirable as they may be, are what makes work human nor whether it is their absence that dehumanises.

This chapter explores skills, the growing emphasis on soft skills and emotions in work, and knowledge work from the perspective of what each contributes to, or detracts from, the humanity of workers. It is not a straightforward debate. Work is a social process and workers may take pleasure in forming friendships in unpromising environments or find themselves alienated by work that is high status, well rewarded, intrinsically interesting yet all consuming. But it is an important one and one that is generally neglected by most commentators on employment (though see Green 2006 for an exception to this).

Given this focus on humanity, a key issue underlying some of these discussions is the extent to which things are getting better. After all, in many developed countries people are living longer and their general health and standard of living is far better than that previous generations might have expected. It does not seem unreasonable to assume that work too should mirror these advantages. And to a certain extent it has. Work is less dangerous, less immediately threatening to health and well being (a result, perhaps, of the shift from manufacturing dominated economies to ones where most jobs are located in the service sector), while both wages and working conditions have improved in most countries (Green 2006).

All of which are to be welcomed. However, acknowledging these changes for the better does not necessarily mean that we enjoy the best of all possible workplaces in the best of all possible worlds. Work is, after all, a negotiated order with negotiations that are permanently ongoing (Edwards and Wajcman 2005). Employers' interests only partially coincide with those of their employees and power relations are unequal. This means that changes in the type of work undertaken or the location in which it is conducted or the product or service being produced may well alter many work processes but they do not necessarily do anything to change workplace relations. This tension between employer and employee, an ingrained peculiarity of the nature of work, is central to the way that organisations function. It is also a key mediating factor in the way that the general trends noted above are introduced into workplaces and experienced by individual workers and when we seek humanity, it is that experience that is key.

This chapter considers the nature of skilled and deskilled labour, the impact on work of 'new' soft skills and personal qualities, working with and through emotions, and knowledge work. These are all topics that are central to any discussion of employment but are rarely reviewed from the perspective of the human. Doing so gives rise to some interesting tensions and raises questions about the standard assumption that discretion is inevitably and 'good thing'. It also considers the issue of power, particularly the way that different interpretations of skill or ways of working may confer advantage on either the employee or the employer. This does not mean that power is necessarily synonymous with humanity but rather, in a relationship that is already asymmetrical, it is unlikely that *powerlessness* is compatible with human working conditions (at least in the long term).

Throughout the chapter the social nature of work is acknowledged, both with respect to the way it complicates discussions on skills and as a very significant factor in the way that work is humanised or dehumanised. These discussions are not easy ones and not conducive to simple or universal answers but hopefully starting to set them out may help to focus attention on the human side of work and encourage judgements that go beyond economic rationale.

Skills and deskilling

Traditionally skill has required some form of thoughtful or competent input from workers, it has incorporated knowledge and expertise, discretion over aspects of the way work is done or job design as well as some form of decision making power (see, for example Cockburn 1983; Littler 1982). Essentially, skilled work involves the worker in some way. Because workers can exercise discretion over how tasks should be arranged, or what exactly constitutes a job well done, work is more likely to be meaningful. And, since their input is necessary for satisfactory completion, workers gain negotiating power, status and money. In Ainley's (1993) words this is the "workmanship of risk" as opposed to the "workmanship of certainty".

Such discretion, decision making power and (occasionally) autonomy contrast markedly with the alienating and dehumanising effects of *deskilling*, when all task and job based decisions are taken away from the worker. Frederick Taylor's (1949) mythical labourer Schmitt, for example, was told how to hold his shovel, raise it once loaded and transfer

its contents elsewhere; while Charlie Chaplin's unfortunate character in *Modern Times* was trapped working on a conveyor belt, tightening bolts as they travelled past him at speeds he could not control. Nor are such examples historical relics: the work undertaken by staff at McDonald's is regulated by buzzers and lights, buns arrived pre-sliced and burgers pre-prepared, while dispensers take away any need to exercise judgement over even such minutiae as the amount of ketchup which should go into each burger (Royle 2000; Leidner 1993; Ritzer 1996). Elsewhere modern factories use sophisticated time management systems to time activities down to a tenth of a second (Delbridge 1998; Garrahan and Stewart 1992). These are workplaces where errors can often be traced back to the individual worker who made them but where that worker has little opportunity to adjust the pace of their work, amend the quality of products or redesign the job itself. In the words of one member of a typing pool, "Janey gives us the work and I sit down and type all day" (Webster 1990:51).

In deskilled work people are simply a routine part of the production process, cogs in the machinery who perform their instructions by rote. There is nothing individual or distinctive they can add to the process to make it better or to make it peculiarly their own. Indeed, one of the central ideas behind deskilled work is that labour and labourers are interchangeable; homogeneous products mass produced by homogeneous workers. This can provide firms with competitive advantage: a customer who buys a McDonald's burger in Madrid can feel reasonably confident that it will be the same as those on sale in Montreal, Milan or Milton Keynes. It also has implications for productivity. Adam Smith's (1776/1993) description of pin manufacturing estimates the capacity of

individual craft workers at less than twenty pins a day. Ten workers, each endlessly repeating one part of the manufacturing process could produce between them some 48,000 pins a day. Work is completed more quickly and satisfactory outcomes are no longer dependent on workers making the right decisions. Workers are not expected to know about the product they are producing, or to make decisions on how they might best work or to judge the quality of their own labour. Their role is simply to follow orders.

Designing work in this way effectively dehumanises it. As Marx (1964) noted, being employed on tasks over which they have no control alienates workers from what they produce, the process of production, themselves and their fellow workers. Personality cannot be expressed through work and work is transformed into a process where workers' humanity is denied. Adam Smith (1776/1993) having put forward his model for productivity went on to comment on the devastating effect it would have on those engaged on such numbing and repetitive tasks. Interestingly, his solution was to offer them further education, not as a means of escape from routinised labour but to rehumanise them after alienating shifts at work.

So far, it seems, so simple. Craft work, which engages workers' expertise, where they may exercise their judgement and in which they may take a pride in a job well done is set against routinised and repetitive actions which require employees only to follow instructions and where they have no control over even the pace and intensity of work. And yet in focussing only on these aspects of work and, crucially, in neglecting research accounts which explore workers' perspectives we risk missing other human and

humanising aspects of employment. Work is, after all, a social process and the quality of a job cannot be judged simply and solely by the skills required of workers. Employees may also value pay, status, friendships, security or responsibilities. Admittedly, many of these elements move in tandem with skills (or skills may move in tandem with them). These variables are not independent ones. Certainly perceptions of skill are linked to status, both by external observers and workers themselves, so that those with high status will be deemed to be highly skilled and those with low status low skilled (Gallie 1994; Burchell et al. 1994). Moreover securing status and control over work can enable workers to increase skills (Turner 1962) and, through these, pay.

Nonetheless, even the most apparently degraded and simplified tasks may require worker familiarity, dexterity or competence, often at speed. Delbridge's (1998) account of electrical assembly reveals how important it was for workers to work quickly; Rainbird, Munro and Holly's (2004) research into work in a cook-freeze centre reveals how women became "experts at putting 80 grammes of meat into the containers"; while Sennett's (1998) description of working at McDonald's shows how, when equipment broke down, employees would prove unexpectedly adept at running repairs.

Then too, routines and routinisation are not universally condemned. Leidner's (1993) study of trainee insurance people whose sales patter, from descriptions of the product to pauses and jokes, was scripted by their employers, reveals how much they appreciated the reassurance of knowing they had robust information to work with which had proved to be successful. These scripts may have taken away their opportunity to shape the

majority of the sales task but they also provided security. Finally the social elements of work, friendships and collegiality can occur in even the most unpropitious of settings including noisy factories (Burawoy 1979; Pollert 1981; Delbridge 1998); slaughterhouses (Ackroyd and Crowdy 1990) and call centres (Korczynski 2002; Wray-Bliss 2001).

It seems that worker input is still required even from 'unskilled' workers, that deskilling and routinisation may help as well as alienate, and that for those who value friendships rather than work, degraded work environments are no bar to satisfaction. This should be no surprise. After all, workplaces are not laboratories where potential sources of satisfaction or dissatisfaction can be reduced to a small number of variables. In complex social systems real humans may take pleasure from a range of factors. However, it is also dangerous to conclude on the basis of these studies that skill or discretion or autonomy do not matter. After all, simply because some workers have discovered pleasurable, human elements in certain types of workplaces does not mean that those workplaces are pleasurable places. The fact that friendships are formed should not excuse poor treatment, low pay or degrading work conditions (though for the individual worker it can make these far more bearable). And the security that trainees feel in routine might be contrasted with the frustration it engenders in workers who are already skilled (Felstead et al. 2006). It is still useful to consider skill when assessing the 'human' side of work. From the perspective of work design alone (and clearly work should not be judged solely against this criterion) deskilled work is, by definition, not intrinsically satisfying and would play no part in a humanised workplace.

The changing nature of skill

This then, is what might be described as the traditional idea of skill: knowledge, expertise, experience, job design or social status that confers some sort of power in the labour market and that may make work more human. But as Payne (1999; 2000) notes, both work itself and employers' definitions of skill are changing and these changes have consequences for employees. Some thirty to fifty years ago 'being skilled' involved technical capabilities or distinctive occupational knowledge, today the emphasis is on soft skills and personal qualities, although *which* soft skills and what exactly they involve actually varies widely. According to Hillage *et al.* (2002:33 - 36) the skills currently most sought by employers are communication, customer handling and teamworking. Keep (2001) drawing on a range of studies, found many suggestions including positive attitudes towards change, self-confidence, self-promotion, exploring and creating opportunities and political focus. Research in the 'style labour markets' of the hospitality industry reveals a demand for a persona that is "passionate, stylish, confident, tasty, clever, successful and well-travelled" (Warhurst and Nickson 2001:14; Nickson *et al.* 2001). Government documents recommend the development of positive attitudes to life and work, getting on with work mates, working as a team and getting information and advice (Payne 1999). While in the USA employers seek work attitude, punctuality, loyalty (Lafer 2004); friendliness, teamwork, ability to fit in (Moss and Tilly 1996); and dedication to work and discipline in work habits (Cappelli 1995). The lists are lengthy and bring together a confused morass of personal traits, attitudes, qualities and pre-dispositions (Brown and Hesketh 2004).

Given that this book focuses on the human side of work, such a shift in emphasis might well be considered positive, as an indication that work is breaking down the old bureaucratic straitjacket to become a legitimate site for human feelings and emotions. As Bolton (2005a) notes, organisations are starting to prescribe emotions rather than proscribe them. It is certainly true that emotions can bring a great deal of pleasure to workers. According to Wharton (1996) workers who work with their emotions are more likely to be satisfied in the workplace than those who do not. Pierce (1995; 1996) emphasises how hard pressed paralegals coped by personalising the relationships they had with the lawyers they worked for. Even in the most regulated and alienating of jobs, nice customers, positive emotional exchanges and being able to actually help another person can boost employees' spirits enormously (Korczynski 2001, 2002). Leidner's (1993) account of McDonald's employees shows how much pleasure they gained from interactions with customers. As 'Steve' and 'Theo' comment (p. 136):

It's just fun, the people are fun! . . . They make my day, they really do. I mean, sometimes, I can come to work – like yesterday, I wasn't really happy. I was somewhat in the middle. This guy came in, he was talking real low, and his friend said, "Why don't you talk up?" . . . I told him to turn his volume up [I laugh], and he said something . . . and I just started smiling. Ever since then, I've been happy. . . . The guests out here, . . . they're friendly and fun. I just love to meet them, you know? I mean, it's nice working for them, it's nice serving them. Some, you know – well, I'd

say one out of ten guests will probably try to give you a bad time. But the rest of them, they'll just make my day.

Well, I enjoy working with the public, 'cause they're fun to be with. Some of them are a trip. So I enjoy it, find it very amusing.

This is the positive side of emotion work. Interacting with pleasant people, helping customers and receiving thanks and appreciation in return and it is small wonder that workers enjoy this side of the process.

But this is not an untrammelled emotional arena in which employees are free to display the feelings that spontaneously occur and the emotions they are required to express are not necessarily those that are most enjoyable, psychologically valuable or therapeutic. Rather, they are the ones their employers consider most useful in the workplace, whether the requirement is for warmth, anger, calm or empathy (Hochschild 1983; Mann 1999; Bolton 2005a; Putnam and Mumby 1993; Callaghan and Thompson 2002). Conformity to emotion rules is not novel, nor is it restricted to employment. As Goffman (1959) notes, many social responses are enacted with others in mind (as opposed to pure and 'authentic' emotional reactions). So people will look mournful at funerals and happy at weddings, quarrelling couples will postpone their argument rather than fight in front of strangers and young people on dates will attempt to create a good impression. However locating these emotions in the workplace imposes an additional dimension on them since the act entered into is one that the employer, rather than the employee has chosen.

This is a key point and should materially affect our assessment of workplace emotions. It is management who decide on the feelings employees should display and the ones they should attempt to generate in their customers. In the words of Colin Marshall, an ex-chairman of British Airways: “We . . . have to ‘design’ our people and their service attitude just as we design an aircraft seat, an in-flight entertainment programme or an airport lounge *to meet the needs and preferences of our customers*” (cited in Barsoux and Manzoni 1997:14 emphasis added). The issue then, is not that of re-emotionalising the workplace but of introducing (occasionally compulsorily) feelings that the employer requires demonstrating in specific and specified ways. Work is not designed to fit workers, rather workers are redesigned to conform to the needs of work (Putnam and Mumby 1993).

What this implies, just as work itself involves the sacrifice of time, or independent action, or activity, or freedom of movement is that (if only during working hours) employees relinquish control of their emotions. But noting that workers’ emotional freedom is limited does not necessarily mean employers are able to exert total, hegemonic control over what employees feel (Bolton 2005a, 2000). After all, workers do not leave their humanity or their capacity to feel emotions unprompted by managers at the factory gates. Colleagues and customers may inspire genuine emotional responses. The call centre workers described by Callaghan and Thompson (2002) gave freely of their time to late night callers because they felt empathy for them, not because they were told to do so by management (see also Bolton and Boyd 2003). Then too, Bolton’s studies of nurses

reveal professional and protective feelings to patients and anger or irritation at the increasing bureaucratisation of the health service rather than emotional dupes mindlessly following ‘feeling rules’ (Bolton 2005a, 2005b).

Moreover, there are great variations in the way that different firms put their emotional demands into practice from the degrading suggestion to Harvard university clerical staff to “think of yourself as a trash can. Take everyone’s little bits of anger all day, put it inside you, and at the end of the day, just pour it into the dumpster on your way out the door” (Eaton 1996:296) to the professional socialisation required of lawyers (Mann 1999). Hochschild (1983) usefully calls on Marx to distinguish between work, over which employees have some control, and labour which is almost entirely regulated. So to a certain extent the potential problems and pitfalls here repeat the issues of control considered with technical skills.

But these soft skills and emotional demands also raise issues that technical skills did not. Soft skills are not certified and, unlike technical skills which were often judged by occupational and professional peers (or their professional bodies), many soft skills exist largely in the eye of the beholder and are valuable only when authorised and legitimated by employers (Brown and Hesketh 2004). Since different employers may have very divergent ideas over which particular traits are desirable and how they should be demonstrated (Rees and Garnsey 2003) and even a shared vocabulary of soft skills may not translate into common meanings (Hirsch and Bevan 1988); soft skills may not be particularly portable.

Ironically, while judgement about the possession or otherwise of desirable qualities is assumed by the employers, responsibility for demonstrating them is devolved to the individual workers. They are accountable for making sure that they are sufficiently loyal, punctual, teamworkers, effective communicators, self-confident, friendly or whatever else it is that employers claim to want. Ehrenreich's (2006) study of unemployed middle and senior managers in the USA reveals just how hard many of them tried, generally without success, to demonstrate whatever personal traits and dispositions were required. Yet as Lafer (2004) points out, many of these are not individual qualities and listing them as such neglects their reciprocal and relational aspects. Teamworking, communication and friendliness are not activities carried out in isolation. More fundamentally a great deal of workplace behaviour, from strikes, absenteeism and turnover to active co-operation and commitment, reflect heavily on workers' relationships with their employers. Lafer (2004) draws on research by Moss and Tilly (1996) in two warehouses in the same district of Los Angeles both of which employed present and past gang members. While managers in one complained of high turnover, laziness and dishonesty, in the second, which paid several dollars per hour more, managers had few complaints and turnover was a modest two per cent. These are issues that, in the past, would have been considered industrial relations or personnel problems and for which management would have considered themselves at least partially responsible. Today they are labelled skills and responsibility is located firmly on the individual worker (Keep 2001).

This means that training which focuses on soft skills may be a problem rather than a solution. It can detract attention from dull and alienating tasks, in the words of a call centre supervisor interviewed by Kinnie, Hutchinson and Purcell (2000) it could provide “fun and surveillance”. But, it may not actually be able to change an employees’ soft skills and, when all training focuses on behavioural qualities, may deprive them of opportunities to learn technical skills which might provide more career advantages. Soft skills based programmes in Canada and the USA designed to get people into work generally mean that even the successful attendees gain jobs which pay only just over the minimum wage and which participants are likely to leave quite quickly (Lafer 2004; Butterwick 2003).

An emphasis on soft skills may also result in gendered and racialised stereotypes being used to make judgements. So, women are hired for call centre jobs because they are women rather than as a result of anything they did in their interviews (Taylor and Tyler 2000) or confined to customer care, front line roles and denied access to higher paying, high status career track work (Skuratowicz and Hunter 2004; Hebson and Grugulis 2005) while black men are rated as less loyal and ambitious than their white colleagues (Maume 1999). This is not to argue that discrimination in the labour market is in some way a new phenomenon. On the contrary it is firmly established (Moss-Kanter 1977) and power and status in the labour market has long been equated with skill (Gallie 1994). Rather, it is to express concern that these ‘new’ skills are themselves so vulnerable to discriminatory judgements.

Soft skills, it seems, carry with them few of the material advantages that technical skills confer on workers, at least at the disadvantaged end of the labour market. Despite repeated claims by employers that these skills are in short supply, pay rates for the sort of jobs in which they dominate are seldom high (Bolton 2004), perhaps because such work is predominantly undertaken by women, perhaps because even when social interactions are reasonably complex they are such a common feature of human interaction that these skills are considered ‘natural’ or at least widespread (Payne 2006). Even the emotional pleasure workers get from engaging in emotion work can be questioned. After noting workers’ exceptionally high levels of satisfaction with work Korczynski (2001:92) goes on to observe that the turnover figures in the call centres he studied were high and to note, wryly that “[w]orkers, it seems, were so satisfied with the job that they were leaving in considerable numbers.” Workers who already possess high levels of technical skill or educational qualifications have a different experience of soft skills. The traits demanded are likely to advantage them as much as their employers (or can be used against their employers), demand for technical skills is rarely diminished and soft skills may provide access to more interesting work (see, for example Grugulis and Vincent 2004; Brown and Hesketh 2004).

It seems that even given the enduring aspects of emotional freedom at work it would be disingenuous to assess employer demands for emotions in the workplace against the same scales and criteria as ‘personal’ feelings. Going further, classifying personal traits and qualities as soft skills creates a whole range of problems. It is not that employers have not before demanded a particular personality or character from those they hire, these are

long established practices (see, for example Beynon 1975; Grugulis, Warhurst and Keep 2004). Rather, labelling these personal qualities ‘skills’ inappropriately individualises responsibility for them, reshapes work based training in ways that may confine those at the bottom of the labour market to a narrow range of jobs on the same horizontal job grade (Grimshaw et al. 2002) and may institutionalise discrimination.

Knowledge work and knowledge workers

If emotion work and soft skills contain few grounds for optimism it may be that knowledge work provides more promising prospects. After all, if, as suggested above, skills and knowledge make work itself more intrinsically interesting and also mean that employers are likely to treat employees better then increases in the skills and knowledge that workers can exercise at work may well be a positive development. And there are numerous commentaries and predictions suggesting that in the future nations will aim to be ‘knowledge societies’ gaining competitive advantage through the innovation, creativity and input of their specialised ‘knowledge workers’. It is a model of the market which sets the individual worker centre stage and one which has been taken up with enthusiasm by policymakers (see, for example Department for Education and Skills/DTI/H M Treasury/Department for Work and Pensions 2003).

Since these workers are (both individually and collectively) important to their firm’s performance and since the knowledge that they possess is often tacit (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995), knowledge work is peculiar to the individual, not readily codifiable and

knowledge itself is often extended when it is shared. As a result, research into enclaves of knowledge workers shows that managerial effort is put into making work a pleasant place to be and eliciting commitment from the workers. Social support systems, good environments and excellent working conditions take the place of tight supervision and rigid control routines (Alvesson and Karreman 2001; Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003) to the extent that Hackley (2000) compares managing knowledge workers to wartime submarines on “silent running” where everyone knows what to do and no-one gives orders. Colleagues needing help arrive bearing cookies or coffee (Starbuck 1993), even virtual teams simulate social interaction through videoconferencing (McKinlay 2000), and workers have extensive freedom and the flexibility to determine their own schedules or places of work (Grugulis, Dundon and Wilkinson 2000). Not only are conditions in these workplaces excellent, the perks are also generous – in one workplace including biscuits from Harrods or Fortnum and Mason, weekend shooting parties and a chauffeur driven Mercedes (Robertson, Scarbrough and Swan 2003).

As with emotion work however, this is not a freedom from control but a shift to a different type of control. Rather than regulate or prescribe employers encourage normative control (Etzioni 1961), a moral orientation to the organisation, so that employees do what will benefit the firm, not because they are coerced or bribed but because they are genuinely working to its benefit. Social activities encourage gift exchange, rather than economic exchange between colleagues so workers may be more generous with advice, or time or support (Grugulis et al. 2000). And this form of control too comes at a price. The first is that work may be so interesting that it is all consuming.

The type of professional workers observed here frequently work long hours and this can be carried to the extent that friendships, marriages, family ties and individual health suffers (Kunda 1992; Kidder 1981). Indeed, one of Kunda's (1992) interviewees joked that their freedom effectively meant , "you can choose which twenty hours of the day you work". Normative control also involves a great deal of conformity with freedom in work offset against the acceptance of social and cultural norms. In the organisation observed by Grugulis *et al.* (2000) workers were predominantly white, male and aged between twenty and forty and the extensive calendar of social events, paid for and hosted by the firm, were only notionally voluntary (one woman, who preferred not to join in the company socials was sacked on the basis that she was not a "people person"). For those who enjoyed this form of control (and many did and wanted more rather than less of it) it was clearly preferable to be managed through friendships, funded socials and generous salaries and benefits than extensive regulation or supervision but this was still a form of control and employees were required to conform to it.

More fundamentally though, there is little evidence that this type of knowledge work is likely to dominate any economy in the foreseeable future. Indeed, many of the numerous knowledge management initiatives are simply a modern variant of traditional deskilling and a separation of conception from execution since they carefully map out work activities and strip workers of their decision making and discretionary powers so that services or production become more efficient (see, for example Davenport and Klahr 1998). As Brown and Hesketh (2004) point out, knowledge *work* does not invariably require knowledge *workers*. The scientists, consultants, researchers and lawyers, whose

working practices are described above are not the vanguard of the 'typical' organisation of the future (Thompson 2004) but a self-conscious elite, a group of experts with impeccable academic credentials, recruited against almost impossibly demanding selection criteria from top institutions (Starbuck 1993; Blackler, Reed and Whitaker 1993). Even organisations with more mixed workforces have very different recruitment processes for their knowledge elite and seem to operate on the assumption that only a small number of staff will ever be able to aspire to such roles (Brown and Hesketh 2004). At his most optimistic Reich (1991) estimated that only a minority of workers would be symbolic analysts with most confined to more routine 'routine production services' or 'in-person services' (pp. 174 – 182). His figures are reflected in job growth. The booming service sector in Britain and the USA certainly includes knowledge workers, scientists, architects, consultants, lawyers, academics and the like. But it also covers, and in far greater numbers cleaners, carers, security guards, waitresses and receptionists. Such person-to-person services, while often low status, poorly paid and unskilled, are difficult to automate and likely to remain a significant feature of the labour market for the foreseeable future.

It seems then, while knowledge workers themselves are likely to enjoy extremely good working conditions, we cannot rely on working conditions for all (or even many) becoming more human through the spread of knowledge work. These people are an important group but also an elite one (Thompson 2004) and it is little surprise that the elite are treated well or that they are treated differently to other workers.

Discussion and Conclusions

Where then does this take us in our journey to humanity through skills and knowledge and in search of humanity in skills and knowledge? Technical skills perhaps provide the clearest answer, not because they are necessarily inevitably good but because deskilling is necessarily bad. By its very nature deskilling extracts the human, personal, crafted elements from work and reduces workers' input to actions learned by rote. They may still take pleasure from friendships formed at work, Delbridge's (1998) account of factory life paints a vivid picture of the camaraderie and the shared enjoyment of 'Our Tune' on the radio; from the financial independence work grants; or from the few spaces for expertise or speed of performance that work allows but welcome as these are, they should not detract from the fact that the deskilled work itself dehumanises those who undertake it, encouraging them to "go into robot" as Hochschild's (1983) flight attendants did, 'switching off' and just doing the job in hand.

Emotion work and soft skills present a slightly more complex picture. Many workers take pleasure in the emotional aspects of their employment, after all, providing comfort to those who are seriously ill may be taxing but it is a worthwhile occupation (James 1993); and even serving burgers with a smile (Leidner 1993) or assisting those who telephone call centres (Korczynski 2002) can provide those who do the work with a 'buzz'. This is not to deny that the emotions deployed are those that management prescribe and workers in these situations often have very little official freedom over their responses. As Callaghan and Thompson (2002) note, even dropping your voice inappropriately during a

sentence can result in additional (remedial) training. Yet in reality workers in front line roles may carve out spaces of freedom, misbehaviour and resistance. Engaging genuinely with those they come into contact with, joining with colleagues and customers to mock official systems and scripts or simply going through the motions of whatever acts are required for the sake of the pay packet (Bolton 2005a; Taylor and Bain 2003; Weeks 2004; Hochschild 1983).

Perhaps it is most helpful here, since dehumanising work should not be excused on the grounds of ineffectiveness, to distinguish as Hochschild (1983) does between *emotion work*, over which the employee has some degree of control and which is itself intrinsically interesting, meaningful or pleasurable and emotional *labour* where control rests firmly in the hands of others and workers simply follow orders. This is also reflected in the extent to which workers are expected to accept hostility and abuse from customers as a natural part of their lot. As one trade unionist pointed out, if the customer is always right, those who serve them are always wrong (Eaton 1996:304). Emotion work can be an unequal exchange that strips employees of their dignity and their right to consideration or it can be a means of asserting the mutuality of courteous treatment. The route chosen materially affects how human a workplace is.

Soft skills, meanwhile, are remarkable for the relative powerlessness workers have when assessing them. They are personal qualities and traits that may well reflect how well employers treat employees but which are likely to be judged by the employer and assumed to be the responsibility of the employee. As a result, they are vulnerable to

prejudice. For workers who already have high levels of skill or excellent educational qualifications the issues are rather different. Many of the soft skills required may bring additional (and often interesting) dimensions to their work and many of these workers can use those skills to carve out areas of influence which benefit them and not their employer (see, for example Grugulis and Vincent 2004; Brown and Hesketh 2004). For those at the other end of the labour market and even workers with intermediate skills, an emphasis on soft skills seems to ensure that they have less influence rather than more. Given how key an element of control is, in both the discussions on technical skills and emotion work, this is an important point.

Of all three areas considered here knowledge work seems to offer the best prospects. Knowledge workers are experts who are crucial to the successful functioning of their organisations and who, in consequence, are treated with every consideration. But that consideration is due to the fact that they are members of an elite and it is neither surprising, nor a harbinger of better treatment for the majority, when those at the top enjoy special privileges. Moreover these experts are often more than capable of dehumanising their work themselves. Kunda's (1992) interviewees spoke of work as something that was fascinating, wonderful, all consuming, but also contaminated, "shit" and "crap". Work invaded their home lives to the exclusion of all else, marriages, relationships and individual health failed on a regular basis and there was often little sign that those who had suffered one divorce or breakdown had changed their behaviour sufficiently to avoid another. To qualify as human work must necessarily be limited so

that it allows space for workers to take pleasure (and time) outside their workplaces, to enjoy good health and to form satisfying relationships.

This influence on the world outside work is an issue that has only briefly been touched on in this chapter but it is an important one and one that has been taken up by other authors. Brown (2001) and Lloyd and Payne (2004; 2005) in particular have argued that, in order to achieve genuine improvements in skill in the workplace there must, and should, be genuine changes in the way firms compete and the way society is organised. At firm level Brown (2001) argues for co-operative competition, positive high trust labour relations and a view of human capability which permits contributions to work decisions from more than a small minority of workers. Lloyd and Payne (2004; 2005) point out that such steps are likely to be ineffective unless accompanied by broader social change including a more equal distribution of income, labour and social rights, access to health, welfare and education and relatively high wages.

This link to the world beyond the workplace is an important one. Just as workplaces are social spaces and work should be judged on its social effects as well as the skills and knowledge needed in and for employment, so too are work and workplaces part of a broader society. The injustices, inequalities and discrimination found in that wider society are likely to be reflected in work. As a result, the analytical boundaries of any study of humanity in work need to be defined very broadly.

But such breadth should not be taken as an excuse for inaction. Granted, many workplace problems (racism, sexism, educational and health problems) are unlikely to have originated in employment but work can be a means of (at least partially) addressing them, of introducing or restoring dignity, of providing a route out of poverty or a source of pride. Just because we acknowledge that society as a whole may be racist or sexist it does not follow that we should accept with equanimity the racism and sexism that occur at work. It is, of course, rare to find those in charge of workplaces to be primarily motivated by issues of social justice, but it would be nice to see these and other aspects of the human, regularly deployed in discussions of work and work design.

Humanity in work is a complex area and there is no single element that can be pointed to with certainty as the dividing line between human and degrading treatment. Even discretion, probably the closest pivotal element from this discussion on skills and knowledge, is no cure-all. But noting that an area is complex and that there are no easy answers should not be considered an admission of defeat. Because there is no one definition of humanity does not mean there are no ways to improve workplaces and asking ourselves that question, rather than how to make work absolutely human, might provide an easier route to improvement.

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