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What's Happening to 'Skill'?

Irena Grugulis, Chris Warhurst and Ewart Keep

Introduction

Policy-makers and academics keenly debate the importance of skills as a lever for boosting individual employability, firm productivity and national competitiveness. In these debates it is a 'high skills' model that is favoured, driven by desires for a knowledge economy or at least an informational, networked one. As a consequence, in the UK and throughout the OECD countries, a general consensus exists about the importance of 'thinking' and technical skills, the latter related to advanced ICT. The future is one of Californian-style freewheeling cyber workers with high skills, high incomes and high job satisfaction.

In this approach, active government intervention in shaping the labour market focuses on supply. Emphasis is placed on more young people achieving more and better qualifications (see Symon; and Hampson both in this volume). This improved labour supply stimulates demand for more and better jobs from employers (Layard 1997). The underlying assumption, as Keep and Mayhew (1999: 9) point out, is that 'boosting the supply of skilled and educated employees will, of itself, act as a catalyst for economic change and enhanced productivity and competitiveness'.

So far, so simple. The picture becomes more complex, however, with recognition of the difficulties defining, measuring and increasing 'skill'. This complexity is more than a question of semantics. If more skills is the target (and it usually is) then the size and shape of the target, and the distance between it and the current situation matters considerably. So too do the means by which the target is reached. Training someone to become proficient in arc welding or web design may require very different forms of instruction and involve different problems from ensuring that those who present themselves for interview project a persona that is 'passionate, stylish, confident, tasty, clever, successful and well-travelled' (Warhurst and Nickson, 2001: 14).

Accordingly, in this chapter, we seek to explore the nature of skill and highlight the way that definitions have changed and are changing, and the consequences for how that skill is (best) formed. For an academic work this is a very practical exercise. The pragmatics that drive policy-makers privilege definitions of skill that can be more readily achieved or measured. Activity within the VET system that cannot easily be judged by its ability to generate numerical outcomes (qualifications or parts thereof) is highly problematic.

An example of these problems comes with the fate of the three 'softer' key skills (problem solving, teamworking, and improving one's own learning and performance). Because the UK's QCA adjudged that these skills were not amenable to simple and rigorous assessment through written tests, their importance in curriculum reforms in colleges and schools and the work-based route (via Modern Apprenticeships) was downplayed. Indeed, the DfES announced that the three wider key skills would henceforth be regarded as non-essential for employability (*Times Educational*

Supplement, 2001). Paradoxically, survey evidence suggests that teamworking and problem solving are two of the skills most prized by employers (DfEE 1999). It is these issues that make understanding skill so vital. And, before policymakers, practitioners and academics intervene further in this area, it would seem appropriate to consider these issues.

Upskilling, Deskilling and Back Again

Once it was much simpler. As both Westwood and Buchanan *et al*. in this volume note, a single, linear trajectory of skill was assumed. By the 1960s, there was a growing acceptance that work was getting better, or if it was not, that was of little consequence because there was a 'flight from work' as leisure and consumption gained importance (Dubin 1956; Goldthorpe *et al*. 1968). If work was getting better, so too were the skills used in that work. The reason for these improvements was clear: new technology was eradicating routine and deskilled assembly-line work (see, for example, Blauner, 1964). This technology required employees to use diagnostic skills and have considerable discretion and initiative in their work to identify and solve problems. Conception was coming back home and skills were being regained.

This 'upskilling' theme was commonplace. Following Aron (1962), Bell (1973 and 1974) too embraced technology as that which progresses and transforms society. The old industrial order was passing, not just because of the shift from manufacturing to services, or because white-collar workers out-numbered blue-collar workers but because power derived from property and position had been usurped by power derived from knowledge and theoretical knowledge in particular. Entrepreneurs were

being displaced by scientists, engineers and technicians. The 'major institutions of the new society' were 'the intellectual' ones (1974: 103). Education was important as it provided 'access to the attainment of technical skill' (1973: 115). Moreover, if jobs did require 'perceptual and conceptual skills', as Trist (1974: 112) and the knowledge underpinning these skills had to be continually updated for employability to be maintained, then 'the "learning force" [was] already greater than the workforce' (p.112).[1]

Braverman (1974) was familiar with this literature, and its optimism puzzled him. He believed that it contradicted his and others' perception of the development and organisation of the contemporary capitalist workplace, and that, as a consequence, two incompatible views were emerging about work and skill (pp.3-4):

> [This literature] emphasised that modern work, as a result of the scientific-technical revolution and 'automation' requires ever higher levels of education, training and the greater exercise of intelligence and mental effort in general. At the same time, a mounting dissatisfaction with the conditions of industrial and office labour appears to contradict this view. For it is also said . . . that work has become increasingly subdivided into petty operations that fail to sustain the interest or engage the capacities of humans with current levels of education; that these operations demand ever less skill and training

If the optimists believed that new technology required, or at least resulted in, upskilling, for Braverman the opposite seemed more evident. He argued that it was deskilling not upskilling that characterised the capitalist workplace, both at that time

and throughout the twentieth century. Scientific management rationalised work, deskilled employees and enabled managerial control. Quoting Taylor he notes that the latter's instruction to management was to 'gather[] together all of the traditional knowledge . . . possessed by the workmen . . .' and remove 'brain work' from the shopfloor (pp.112-3). Braverman believed that this deskilling was 'fundamental to all advanced work design' (p.112).

Initial post-Braverman research confirmed this pessimistic view of the skill trajectory. Zimbalist (1979a) noted that such trajectories could be cyclical. Deskilling in one sector might occur at the same time that new skills were being developed in another. Nevertheless, despite localised increases, over time, work is rationalised and through this, deskilled. Kraft's (1979: 17) study of computer programming was a case in point: 'Programming is still very much an occupation in process … It is clear, however, that programming has experienced a steady process of fragmentation and routinisation while programmers as a group have experienced a rapid deskilling.' Not surprisingly, with some nuances, the overall conclusion from the contributions to Zimbalist (1979b) was supportive of Braverman's thesis. Subsequent research sought to address some of the conceptual and empirical limitations and omissions to Braverman's work but the acceptance of deskilling remained. Although providing a cogent summary and critique of Braverman's thesis, Thompson (1989: 118), for example, concurs with its main thrust: 'Deskilling remains the major *tendential* presence within the development of the capitalist labour process.'[2] More recent research continues to indicate that deskilling persists as a feature of work in the UK and US, both in services and manufacturing (see, for example, Baldry *et al*. 1998; Beirne *et al*. 1998; Milkman 1998; Ritzer 1998). This newer research is interesting

because some of it encompasses ICT and knowledge-intensive work – call centres and software development for example.

This pessimism needs to be tempered. Deskilling is certainly agreed to be a feature of capitalist workplaces in the UK and US (Thompson 1989; Bellamy Foster 1994), perhaps reaching its apotheosis in McDonaldisation (Ritzer 1998). But Thompson (1989: 216) does recognise that different and 'distinctive national and historical traditions' create different 'cultures' that can also affect skill patterns and trajectories. Indeed, research on work in countries other that then UK and US indicates that employers can be less likely to engage deskilling and more likely to offer employees more and better vocational education and training. In this volume, Clarke and Herrmann illustrate this point in their comparison of the skill and skill formation systems of the construction industry in the UK and Germany.

Despite the evidence that many UK and US firms remain wedded to the low road (Milkman 1998; Warhurst 2002) of low skill, low wage, low trust work, or perhaps because of it, policy-makers are once again being seduced by the potential of new technology and the upskilling that many associate with it. Resonating with earlier work from the 1960s and early 1970s, Castells states that, in what he terms the 'network society' founded on 'informationalism', a highly skilled, creative and increasingly autonomous labour force becomes the fundamental source of productivity and competitiveness', concerned with 'the generation and processing of knowledge and information' (1999: 40). In their examination of ICT-intensive workplaces, Frenkel *et al*. (1999) seem to confirm this development. They conclude

that 'work is becoming more complex . . . reducing the demand for lower-skilled jobs and increasing the demand for jobs with higher-level competencies' (p.27).

Despite a number of measured critiques, this explanation is so influential that a 'cult of Castells' is evident in the UK and US, according to Crabtree (2002: 50), who suggests that Castells is becoming a 'guru's guru'. Not surprisingly then, this view has become orthodoxy amongst policy-makers throughout the advanced economies. 'new economy' is said to be emerging dominated by ICT and knowledge intensive companies. This 'de-materialising' new economy is replacing the 'old', with wealth created by manipulating intangible inputs, ideas and knowledge, to produce intangible outputs, services and know-how (Leadbeater 2000). A causal effect on work and skills is then assumed. For example, the Scottish Executive (2001: 1) moves without pause from arguing this to be an 'age where knowledge is a key competitive weapon' to stating 'a high skill, high wage economy' to be subsequent government policy. Similar pronouncements about the importance of knowledge, the new complexity of work and employers' demand for workers with higher order 'thinking skills' emanates from across the government of the OECD countries (Byers, 1999; DfEE, 2000; DTI, 1998; Reich, 1993; Vickery, 1999).

Skill Polarisation or Skill Expansion?

Many of the academics involved in the upskilling/deskilling debates have tended to talk past each other, and certainly have avoided direct debate. Their work, however, has enabled a consensus of approach to defining 'skill' (see Cockburn 1983; Noon and Blyton 2002; Felstead *et al.* 2002; Thompson 1989). Firstly, there is the skill that

resides in the worker. This approach tends to be adopted more by economists concerned with productivity issues and assumes that enhancing workers' human capital, by increasing their skill levels, positively affects firms' productivity (Becker 1964). Secondly, there is the skill that is required of the job. It is this issue that stimulated Braverman. This approach, sociological in orientation, requires an examination of job design, forms of control and the nature of the employment relationship as well as the task at hand (Littler 1982). Thirdly and also sociological in approach, there is socially constructed skill arising from negotiation between economic actors, collectively or as individuals. This social construction occurs within and outwith the workplace and may advantage members of particular groups (such as professional bodies or craft unions) or a gender (generally men) - a point highlighted in past skill formation in Australia, for example, by Buchanan *et al*. in this volume.

Because 'skill' is difficult to quantify proxies are used. That which is accreditable becomes the focus, with the proxy most used being 'qualification' - an especially useful device for policy-makers concerned to encourage and demonstrate upskilling. By encouraging greater participation in education and the accumulation of qualifications, the workforce is assumed to be more skilled. As a consequence, the *possession* of skills (or rather their proxies) rather than their use in work takes precedence in both policy-maker and academic debate and analysis (contrast this with the chapters by Brown and Kirpal; Symon; and Lloyd and Payne in this volume). To complicate this issue further, the proxies are not always reasonable substitutes for the skills they are intended to represent (Young 2001; Grugulis 2003).

Although the early upskilling and deskilling theses, were empirically informed, both lacked the benefit of large-scale representative data, according to Gallie (1991). This deficit was remedied by the UK's ESRC Social Change and Economic Life Initiative (SCELI), which indicated that a pattern of skill polarisation existed in the UK, advantaging those who were already the most skilled (Penn *et al*. 1994). Completed during the 1980s and concerned mainly with employment, SCELI concluded that for most occupations in the UK upskilling was occurring. Jobs at the bottom end of the labour market were not being deskilled but this was because, as Rose *et al*. (1994: 8) note, 'some low-skilled jobs cannot be further deskilled simply because they already call for so little skill'. Again this experience had a clear gender dimension, for it was women, predominantly in part-time work, who tended to occupy jobs at this point of the labour market.

Such patterning resonates with more recent research, though this time it is argued that an 'hourglass economy' is emerging in the UK (Nolan 2001) with an expansion of high skill, high wage, high value added work at the top end of the labour market while, at the same time substantial numbers of low paid, low wage, low value added work exist at the bottom end. The second Skills Survey indicates that the overall proportion of jobs in the UK economy requiring no qualifications was 27 per cent (Felstead *et al*. in this volume). In other words there are 6.5 million jobs that require no qualification at all. This imbalance is particularly significant since it arose, not because of an increase in the number of unskilled jobs, but because of a reduction in the numbers of unskilled people. So, increases in workers' skills are not being matched by inflation in demand. Often these jobs are in the same sectors associated with the so-called 'new economy', financial services for example. Given these

developments – high skill top end, low skill bottom end, it is easy to understand why skill polarisation is again suggested: upskilling for the former, deskilling or stagnation for the latter.

Importantly, although jobs have become more complex and most jobs have typically become more skilled, employees' control over their work has not risen over the past 15 years in the UK. In fact, employees' task discretion has declined (Felstead *et al*. in this volume). It seems that employers still want obedient rather than enquiring employees.

These results provide grounds for concern. Instead of the empowered and talented majority anticipated by the 1960s sociologists or the 'knowledge workers' predicted by their more recent descendants, skills are polarised. Moreover, the decline of discretion (see also Grugulis *et al*. 2003; Rainbird *et al*. 2003) casts doubts on the extent to which skills as 'knowledgeable practice within elements of control' (Thompson, 1989: 92) may be exercised. It may still be possible to retain grounds for optimism. Several of these studies rely on traditional, technical defintions of skill which may have been superseded (Keep and Mayhew 1999; Payne 1999). However, it is difficult to argue that this expansion charts the development of new skills for a new economy; that as technical skills subside, others, more relevant for work and more advantageous to workers, take their place. Many of these 'new' skills are familiar and most are problematic.

The Changing Meaning of Skill

Attitudes and appearances: the new skills?

One of the most fundamental changes that has taken place in the last two decades has been the growing tendency to label what in earlier times would have been seen by most as personal characteristics, attitudes, character traits, or predispositions as skills. Examples include leadership, motivation, positive attitudes towards change and authority, politeness, compromise and respect. It is not that employers in times past have not wanted such qualities. As Reeder (1979: 184) reports, evidence to the 1906 government investigation into Higher Elementary Schools, 'indicated that what employers wanted from these more advanced schools for the children of the working class was a good character, qualities of subservience and general handiness'. It is just that managers then would not have thought of these as skills *per se*, they were attitudes, characteristics or predispositions.

As Oliver and Turton (1982) show, by the early 1980s employers had moved to describing behavioural characteristics such as reliability, stability of work record, and responsibility (what Oliver and Turton call the 'Good Bloke Syndrome') under the banner of skill, and a lack of job candidates possessing such qualities constituted, from an employers' perspective, a skill shortage. Today these qualities, in some cases slightly re-labelled, are indeed believed to be skills (usually generic) and are increasingly treated as such by policy-makers (Lafer in this volume). This broadening of what the term skill encompasses also has profound implications for the way that work is controlled and the way that people are 'developed' in their roles.

Overall, there is an increasing tendency for organisations to manage the way their employees *feel* and *look* as well as the way they behave, so that work is emotional and aesthetic as well as (or instead of) productive (Darr; Bolton both in this volume; Hochschild 1983; Macdonald and Sirianni 1996; Warhurst and Nickson 2001). This development is particularly true of interactive services, such as retailing, where recruitment and training both focus on the emotions and aesthetics of the labour force deployed to deliver the service (Thompson *et al*. 2001). In the 'style' labour market of fashionable hotels and bars the appearance, deportment, accents and general stylishness of the bartender, waitress or retail assistant are part of what makes the service being offered trendy and upmarket (Nickson *et al*. 2001). But it is not only in this environment that grooming, dress-sense, deportment, manner, tone and accent of voice and shape and size of body become vital. Workplaces as diverse as call centres, training consultants, investment banks and accountants all recruit, train and promote staff on their emotional and aesthetic 'skills' (Thompson *et al*. 2001; Trethewey 1999; McDowell 1997; Anderson-Gough *et al*. 2000). Many of these characteristics, as

Warhurst and Nickson (2001) argue, are open to development and improvement through instruction, and their possession is a new facet of what it can mean to be 'skilled'.

At the same time, this development also provides new routes to deskilling. While people who work with their emotions report higher levels of job satisfaction and take significant pleasure in the emotional aspects of their jobs (Wharton 1996; Korczynski 2001; Leidner 1993), many workers have little discretion about the form such emotional and aesthetic labour should take. Managers can and do seek to control employees' moods, their tones of voice, the way that they feel about customers, their language and body posture, the length of their skirts and their hairstyles, their weight and the size of their bust, hips and thighs, the make up that they wear, the way that they shave (both faces and legs), their jewellery and shoes and the colour of their hair (Hochschild 1983; Paules 1991; Nickson *et al*. 2001; Thompson *et al*. 2001). This list is not exclusive nor is it uncontested. Employees can and do resist, misbehave and ignore these instructions, as much as they enthuse, co-operate and comply with them (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; Paules 1991). Nonetheless such detailed demands suggest that it is not only the changing *definition* of skill that is problematic but the site of its control. In emotional and aesthetic labour, employees' feelings and appearance are turned into commodities and re-shaped to fit their employers' notions of what is desirable (Putnam and Mumby 1993; Thompson and McHugh 2002). This process may be enjoyed by employees and may equip them with skills that advantage them both in and out of the workplace (Nickson *et al*. 2001; Leidner 1993). But it may also lead to exhaustion, burnout (Hochschild 1983; Kunda 1992), an inability to

accept or engage with emotions in the private sphere (Casey 1995) and high levels of turnover (Korczynski 2001; Leidner 1993).

Accrediting generic skills and competences

While employers are primarily interested in skills from the point of view of recruitment, development or control, governmental focus tends to be on accreditation. Here, both the practical limitations of the assessment process and changes in the definition of skill create problems. In the two areas of 'new' skills that are of particular concern, generic skills and competence, rhetorical appeal is coupled with intractable implementation difficulties. Generic skills, it is argued, form a universal foundation for success in the labour market, transcend the individual subjects being studied, and are applicable across a wide range of situations. However, one of the most significant problems is the extreme inexactitude of nomenclature adopted by many of those who seek to label and define different types or forms of generic skill. Generic, key and core skills represent, broadly speaking, the same general category or sub-division of skill, but at different times and in different places the exact list of what constitutes a core/key/generic skill differs as does the degree to which these lists reflect or diverge from the literature on emotional labour. It is also the case that some authorities are willing to include worker attributes and traits (such as motivation, judgement and leadership) within their definition of core/key/generic skills, while others maintain that these are not skills but personal attributes (Keep and Mayhew, 1999). [3]

Whatever system of categorisation is used, no matter how the items on the shopping list are labelled, the existence of generic skills is now widely accepted as the basis for VET policy. The UK government has chosen six key skills – IT, numeracy, communication, problem-solving, improving own learning and performance, and teamworking – as the basis on which to proceed and has sought to imbed them in education and training for the young. It should be noted that, while some generic skills are amenable to being treated as being quite 'hard' and technical (for instance, IT and numeracy), others occupy a different end of the spectrum and are quite 'soft' and refer to the exhibition of desired behavioural patterns and mental dispositions (for example teamworking).

If the idea of generic skills provides one new conceptual framework for thinking about skill the second, and the one so far most influential on theory and practice in the UK, was that evolved around the notion of competence (Jessup, 1991). It has shaped debates about skills in a range of ways. To begin with, as Payne (1999) demonstrates, it claimed to provide the means to achieve a comprehensive, universalistic mapping system whereby all that the word 'skill' might mean could be neatly and exactly delineated, described and catalogued. Yet, while it is clear that a national and readily understood hierarchy of awards could materially assist participants in the labour market by making credentials comprehensible it is by no means certain that cataloguing competence in behavioural terms is so efficacious. Regrettably, it is in the latter activity that most progress has been made. Competence-based approaches have also reinforced two seemingly contradictory tendencies in ways of visualising skill. First, they have encouraged the Anglo-Saxon 'practical man' approach, which discounts the value of underpinning theory and knowledge. NVQs, as originally

specified, lacked any explicit element of theory, on the grounds that this was embedded in performance. The result has been a tendency towards narrow courses of training and qualifications, and a neglect of general education in contrast to the rest of Europe (Green 1998). Implicit in the competence-based approach is a belief that a competence is a competence is a competence – it is wholly generic and can be utilised with equal efficacy and effect whatever the organisational circumstances or environment. In this it is diametrically opposed to Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of communities of practice or of situated learning. The competence-based approach implicitly denies the importance and specificity of organisational culture and firm-specific skills. The underlying belief is that competences are held by the individual, they exist and can be demonstrated more or less independently of context and environment – from prison camp to baked bean factory.[4]

The main feature that drives this interest in key skills and behaviourally defined competence is a concern with measurable outcomes. Through qualifications, competences and key skills, policy-makers can check the activities of the bodies that report to them and measure increases in 'skills'. But these proxies are problematic. Definitions of key skills are contested, not all are readily susceptible to measurement and they may or may not be transferable. NVQ-style competence is susceptible to measurement (or, at least, is frequently measured) but is based on descriptions of actions that leave little space for a thoughtful use of 'skill' and which may themselves distort the nature of work. If anything, the problem of the gulf between what can be measured and therefore counted and therefore planned and funded, and the broadening definition attached to skill may be getting worse. The UK Learning and Skills Council has set new National Learning Targets in the UK (LSC, 2001).

Unsurprisingly, all the targets set so far relate to the achievement of qualifications or skill standards, and what is easy to count gets counted and what is not gets ignored.

Some Implications of the Changing Meaning of Skill

The implications of these developments are serious. To begin with, as Ainley (1994), Payne (1999) and Nickson *et al*. (2003) point out, some aspects of the current trends in redefining skill have significant and potentially far from benign implications for the reinforcement of advantage in the labour market for those from middle class backgrounds. Ainley argues that 'at rock bottom, the real personal and transferable 'skills' required for preferential employment are those of whiteness, maleness and traditional middle-classness' (p.80) and Nickson *et al*.'s study of aesthetic labour suggests that many of the particular skills in personal presentation, self-confidence, grooming, deportment and accent that Glaswegian service sector employers are seeking are liable to be linked to the parental social class and educational background of the job applicants.

Moreover, given the generally successful resistance of competences by professional bodies (Raggatt and Williams 1999) and their existence in universities largely as audit mechanisms to be used on staff rather than vehicles for educating students, competence-based qualifications are most likely to be undertaken by people already disadvantaged in the labour market (Grugulis 2003). Since there is reason to believe that the learning and skills demanded is both different to and much narrower than that supported through 'traditional' or educational qualifications (Young 2001),

competence-based awards may act as a ceiling on advancement for these groups, not a springboard to future progress.

In a country where the social class of one's parents remains the prime predictor of educational achievement and there is some indication that opportunity for upward social mobility is now more restricted (Toynbee 2003), policy-makers should be concerned at any development that might further reinforce the tendency for people from different classes to follow very divergent and distinctive labour market trajectories. If 'corporeal capital', in the form of deportment, accent and ability to dress appropriately is becoming the determinant of what gets young people a job in some parts of the service sector, the potential for further reinforcement of class divides presents itself (Nickson *et al*. 2003).

At a general level there is a potential for the new conceptualisation of skill and of skill levels in the economy to become trapped in an inflationary spiral. The problem goes thus. Workers and employers are seeing a gradually widening conception of what skill is, which in turn has the tendency to redefine the degree to which more and more jobs can be seen as being 'skilled'. At the same time, policy-makers are endlessly claiming that skill levels are rising and that the economy needs to invest in far higher levels of skill and qualification than ever before. Individuals, whether consciously or unconsciously, absorb these messages, and, report themselves as using higher levels of skill, thereby reinforcing policy-makers' belief that economic activity is being transformed into a knowledge economy. Policy-makers then recalculate their projections of future skills needs and redouble their pronouncements that skill levels are rising and will rise further. There is great potential here for the creation of a self-

fulfilling prophecy. Take the example of a sales assistant in a chain store - say Woolworths. Twenty years ago the general consensus would have regarded this job as a low skilled non-manual occupation. Today, the evaluation would be different, stressing the inter-personal and customer service skills that make the job more skilled than hitherto.

The problem is that it is not clear that the actual content of the job has changed. Sales assistants have always had to interact with the customer and to provide service. It is open to question whether this aspect of the work has fundamentally changed in terms of the quality or complexity of the interactions required. Product knowledge in many UK multiple retailers remains close to nil. The use of what might broadly be termed IT has increased somewhat but, at the end of the day, operating an electronic till and passing sale items over a barcode scanner does not seem dramatically different in skill content from entering the price into an earlier mechanical/electric till. Indeed, modern electronic tills strip out some intellectual exercise, telling the assistant what change to give; older mechanical and electro-mechanical tills left this calculation to mental arithmetic. As Dench *et al*'s (1999: xv) study of the use of key skills suggests, the importance of IT skills can be overplayed. They report that:

> Few employers reported any need for elements of the IT (key skills) unit in less skilled occupations, including a range of sales, personal and protective services, operative and other manual jobs. . . . Most employees do not need a detailed understanding of how and why technology operates. They basically have to use an established set of routines and applications.

Does this matter? At one level it might be argued that such a process is either harmless or even benign – jobs previously under-valued due to the social construction of skill are now being re-valued upwards. It is certainly true that many of the areas of work that are seen as being upskilled are those undertaken by women and those who have traditionally held relatively low levels of formal qualification. However, before anyone gets too excited about the emancipatory effects of these trends, it is as well to remember that this apparent upskilling of hitherto low-status jobs does not mean that their holders will necessarily be paid more for doing them, or that their overall status will rise in the occupational hierarchy. This is skill as a rhetorical device that carries with it no material benefits. Social skills, though demanded by employers, carry no wage premium (Felstead *et al*. 2002). Relative positions in the hierarchy probably remain unchanged and inflation may even damage the currency of 'skills' itself. Payne's (1999: 42) warnings on this point are apposite:

> We are all skilled now, regardless of the type or quality of the job we do and the level of personal control, autonomy or power we enjoy. This, then, is the most fundamental difference in how skill is officially conceptualised today compared to the past, when to be skilled implied some level of real market power and personal discretion over one's work.

Widening the meanings attached to skill and rising assessments of the skill required to perform jobs also deflects attention from the underlying fact that, compared to their counterparts in most other OECD countries, UK employers' skill requirements, in terms of educational attainment remain both very narrow (Green 1998) and low.

If redefining skill does not produce labour market advantage for employees, it does shift the responsibility for developing them. The definition by some employers and policy-makers of what might in other times have been seen as attitudes or personal attributes has already been mentioned. One example of this tendency has been the designation of motivation as a skill. What many might regard as a central objective of managerial activity (Legge 1995) - the creation of a motivated workforce – has, to some extent at least, been sub-contracted and outsourced to the education system. By changing the meaning of skill to embrace attitudes and behavioural traits or by increasing the emphasis placed upon the possession of such characteristics, employers have been able to shift responsibility for the creation or reinforcement of some of these attitudes and traits away from their role as managers and motivators of their employees and onto the education and training system.

In times gone by, it might well have been argued that if employees did not appear to have the 'right' attitudes towards work this might be taken to reflect failings in job design, work organisation, people management systems, reward structures, and communication and involvement systems. In other words, it might be symptomatic of problems with poor industrial relations or personnel management policies and practice. Instead, great efforts have been made to shift the focus of attention away from the workplace and those who manage it, onto schools, colleges and universities, all of which have failed, it is alleged, to have imbued their students with the appropriate skills. This phenomenon has distinct advantages for management, particularly at a moment when a range of evidence suggests that the high-commitment, high-performance model promised by human resource management, and promoted by the OECD and EU, has failed to materialise (Bach and Sisson 2000).

The bulk of research, from both case studies (Dench *et al.* 1998; West and Patterson 1997; Ackroyd and Procter 1998; Guest 2000), and from surveys such as the DTI/ESRC's 1998 Workplace Employee Relations Survey (WERS) (Cully *et al.* 1999) shows that highly routine, relatively lowly skill jobs, offering very limited opportunities for trust, creativity or discretion remain prevalent in the UK economy. Indeed, WERS suggests that the percentage of UK firms that have well developed high performance work systems is very small - probably no more than two per cent of the sample.

Despite this evidence, public debate about the current state of workplace employee relations in the UK is, much like the crew of the *Marie Celeste*, noticeable mostly by its absence. In some ways this absence is remarkable. In former times, the results of WERS would have created comment and concern, and formed the point of departure for speculation and debate among policy-makers and practitioners about the quality of managerial strategies and actions and about the need for change and reform. On the whole, no such debate has been forthcoming. Instead, there are the reports of the National Skills Task Force pointing to the existence of skills gaps and deficiencies and the need for all to work together to remedy these problems.

Plainly, a range of reasons underlies the absence of workplace issues as a major focus for public debate, of which the re-labelling of some problems as skills issues, is but one. Other contributory factors include government reluctance to intervene inside the 'black box' of the firm or be seen to become engaged in conflict with business interests, a fear that such state interventions might be seen as 'old' Labour, a widespread belief in the managerial prerogative to manage and dispose of labour as

they see fit, and an apparent faith that the forces of globalisation and competition are enough to ensure the near universal adoption of best practice employment relations sooner or later. This stated, the shifting of the focus of attention onto skills and skill formation as the answer to what might otherwise be seen as industrial relations issues does resonate with the government's predilection for treating education and training as one of the few areas where direct state intervention is now acceptable (Keep 1999a).

Concluding Remarks

The foregoing underlines the extreme complexity of seeking to unpack the simple words 'skill' or 'skills'. Both come with what in bomb disposal terms might be called 'anti-handling' devices. Attempts at deconstruction, particularly within neo-rationalistic and reductionist frameworks of the sort often deployed by those wedded to competences, are liable to come to grief. Skill is a socially constructed phenomenon, and the developments of the last twenty years have, by moving beyond, 'hard' technical skills and manual dexterity, tended to promote the practical importance of precisely those elements of the concept that are least amenable to simple, objective, quantifiable description and analysis. The concept of skill has become bigger, broader and much fuzzier round the edges. More than ever before, skill is a subjective as well as an objective phenomenon.

Leaving to one side the problems inherent in attempts to define 'knowledge workers' (see Thompson *et al*. 2001), the number of such workers using 'thinking skills', such as software engineers, will increase but not to the extent envisaged by policy-makers

and mainstream business writers. In fact, they do and will continue to comprise a clear minority of workers. Real job growth will occur in more routine interactive service work. During the 1990s, job growth was most evident in part-time services sector, especially in personal services: hairdressing, waitering, guarding, cooking and cleaning (Warhurst and Nickson 2001).

Whilst a high skill economy is eminently desirable, it is not necessarily a logical management strategy. A low skill, low value added, simple product/service option is one strategy by which employers can both enter and compete in a market. Rationalising and simplifying - or deskilling - the work process, has been a feature of both much of assembly and batch production and is increasingly evident in retail and business services. The incentives for employers to move out of the low skills equilibrium that characterises sections of the economy is by no means evident. Employers perceive a low supply of skilled workers, the costs of training have to be set against other concerns and the threat of competitors poaching the skilled labour. A cycle develops of available workers being utilised in low skill work processes producing low value added products. This 'low skills equilibrium' reinforced and reinforces related concerns about employability and social exclusion. As Brown and Keep (1999: 85) argue, the demand for low level skills 'bumps against the demands for universal upskilling for all'. Attempts to promote employability and social inclusion through training are thus weakened. Currently, therefore, there is too little pressure for firms to upskill. Indeed, upskilling would threaten some firms' competitiveness in existing markets. For upskilling to occur then would require changes beyond the workplace (Keep, 1999b; though see also Rainbird *et al*. in this

volume). So although skills matter, their order of importance might not be primordial in the melioration of work, employment and the economy.

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Endnotes

[1] Like Bell, Trist also argues that financial-industrial elite is being replaced by a professional-scientific elite. He also suggests that the 'new world of work' also involves interpersonal skills but does not elaborate on this point.

[2] Emphasis in the original.

[3] For examples of different, and probably mutually irreconcilable typologies and categorisations of generic skills, see NSTFa (2000), CBI (1989) and Whiteways Research (1995).

[4] It is worth noting that more recent and sophisticated notions of competence have moved away from this de-contextualised viewpoint, and now argue that competence can be viewed as being held collectively (within a workgroup) and created and sustained by particular work environments (Mills and Tyson 2000; Sandberg 2000).