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The future of professional work? The rise of the ‘network form’ and the decline of discretion

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The future of professional work? The rise of the ‘network form’ and the decline of discretion

This article explores the implications of ‘networked’ and ‘flexible’ organisations for the work and skills of professionals. Drawing on material from four different case studies it reviews work that is out-sourced (IT professionals and housing benefit caseworkers), work done by teachers contracted to a temporary employment agency and work done through an inter-firm network (chemical production workers). In each of these cases work that was out-sourced was managed very differently to that which was undertaken in-house, with managerial monitoring replacing and reducing employees’ discretion. New staff in these networks had fewer skills when hired and were given access to a narrower range of skills than their predecessors. By contrast, the production staff employed on permanent contracts in the inter-firm network were given (and took) significant amounts of responsibility, with positive results for both their skills and the work processes. Despite these results, out-sourcing and sub-contracting are a far more common means of securing flexibility than organisational collaboration and the implications of this for skills is considered.

The future of professional work? The rise of the ‘network form’ and the decline of discretion

A recurrent theme in both research-based and ‘futurollogical’ accounts of corporate change is the decline of the vertically integrated bureaucratic firm and the corresponding rise of more flexible forms of organising work. The names of these new organisational forms vary, as does the way each is organised, but the best known models include: ‘flexible firms’ (Atkinson, 1984), ‘shamrock organisations’ (Handy, 1990), ‘network firms’ (Castells, 1996) ‘boundaryless organisations’ (Ashkenas *et al.*, 1995), ‘flexible specialisation’ (Piore and Sable, 1984) and ‘flexible capitalism’ (Sennett, 1998). In these, temporary workers, contractors and inter-organisational alliances provide an effective extension of ‘core’ functions and staff. The incidence and efficacy of these ‘networks’ has been the subject of considerable criticism (see Pollert, 1988; Rainnie, 1988 and Thompson and McHugh, 2002, among others). Whether the ‘network forms’ imagined by the more optimistic writers exist in practice or not, the last decade has witnessed a dramatic growth in both sub-contracting services and non-standard contracts for employees. Indeed, according to the Workplace Employee Relations Survey some 90 per cent of organisations sub-contract one or more services and about three-fifths use both contractors and one other form of non-standard labour (Cully *et al.*, 1999:35).

The form that much of this sub-contracting takes is prosaic with cleaners and cooks dominating the list of out-sourced services (Cully *et al.*, 1999). This has some worrying implications for skills. It has become increasingly fashionable to

individualise responsibility for acquiring and maintaining skills; yet those people likely to be best informed about particular qualifications and most able to appreciate the advantages of education and certification are the ones who have already gained qualifications. People engaged in unskilled work who possess few or no qualifications are less likely to be funded in training by their employers (Cully *et al.*, 1999), less likely to have information about qualifications, most likely to take qualifications with little or no rate of return (Bennett *et al.*, 1992) and, as Rainbird *et al.* (this issue) show, may not be allowed to use their newly acquired skills in the workplace since the jobs that they are doing may be significantly de-skilled.

The more optimistic accounts of network organisations counter these concerns with idealised images of professional workers for whom the move to contracting combines the best elements of organisational flexibility and individual freedom. Handy (1990) describes liberated individuals enthusiastically developing their own skills in the intervals between enjoying time with their families and engaging in highly paid, interesting work. While this is (at best) naïve it is not unreasonable to argue that people who are already highly skilled are far better placed to develop themselves in the absence of organisational support. Indeed, Finegold's (1999) analysis of the 'high skills ecosystem' that exists in Silicon Valley, California captures a group in which cutting edge tasks, the proximity of educational institutions and effective networking support the development of a highly mobile labour force.

This article seeks to provide empirical evidence of the impact that different networked organisational forms have on skilled and professional workers. It explores the influence that flexibility had on work processes in four different case studies. The

workers studied are IT specialists, teachers, housing benefit caseworkers and production workers in a specialist chemical company, and this article's focus is on the way individual skills were supported and developed. Its conclusions are not comforting. In every case, work that was out-sourced was more tightly codified and controlled than that undertaken in house. As a result the discretion traditionally exercised by employees was (often heavily) circumscribed, skills were more rarely exercised and new staff had (or were assumed to have) fewer skills. The only network that proved the exception to this rule was the specialist chemical company's series of alliances with customers and suppliers. Here, staff were employed on permanent contracts and the long-term relationships built up within the network of firms resulted in a very different form of co-operation than that which characterised the other networks. The article concludes by considering the implications that each of these different forms of organising work has for skills.

Research methods and methodology

This paper draws on research funded by the ESRC's *Future of Work* programme on *Changing Organisational Forms and Organisational Performance* under which work was conducted into eight case study companies over three years. Around forty interviews and observations were conducted in each (often more for research on multiple sites). Four cases, 'TeacherTemp', 'FutureTech', 'Total Customer Services' and 'Scotchchem' are taken from this wider study for discussion here (the names of both case study companies and individual respondents have been fictionalised). TeacherTemp is a temporary employment agency that specialises in providing supply teachers for schools. This is a rapidly growing market (DfEE, 2001; Forde and Slater,

2001) and TeacherTemp is one of the largest agencies. It represents over 10,000 teachers and support staff, providing more than 13,000 teacher days each week to some 15,000 schools. This area of operations is both fast growing and extremely profitable. TeacherTemp's educational staffing business grew by 53 per cent in 2000 and provides a disproportionately large share of its parent group's profits.

FutureTech has a ten-year contract with a Government department to provide computer services. The department is large and bureaucratic, employing 60,000 people in more than thirty divisions. Its employees use some 40,000 computer-terminals on a daily basis, which require both programming and maintenance. FutureTech is a large multinational software company that has experienced rapid growth in the USA and UK largely through out-sourced IT development and support. The UK division of FutureTech has grown from just a few hundred employees at the start of the 1980s to more than 20,000 today.

Total Customer Services (TCS) specialises in business operations outsourcing. With a turnover of over £200 million per year and more than 3,000 employees TCS is one of the largest players in this emerging market and has a strategy of rapid expansion. It took over the management of the housing benefits office of a London borough as a loss-leader in order to break into an expanding area of outsourcing business. This housing benefits office had previously been under performing and was identified as one of the worst boroughs in London. Here, claim processing was out-sourced to improve the quality of service provided.

Scotchchem, the last case study, is a pigment manufacturing plant. It is one of several UK based chemical production facilities owned by Multichem, a large European multinational that specialises in developing and producing industrial chemicals. Pigments have been produced on the site for over 75 years and Scotchchem is Multichem's centre of excellence in pigment manufacture. The company employs over 650 people on its unionised site and produces around 24,000 tonnes of pigment. A regular feature of this production process is that Scotchchem collaborates with customers and suppliers in order to develop both processes and products for specific orders (Marchington and Vincent, 2001).

Each of these four networks is organised, and gains its flexibility, in a slightly different way. In the first it is the individual supply teachers with whom TeacherTemp contracts. The length of their contact with schools varies from as little as one day, to cover unexpected absence, to an entire academic year when a teacher is on maternity leave or suffers long term illness. Supply teachers receive neither holiday nor sick pay and most earn only when they work, though some favoured temps are guaranteed work and paid around 55 per cent of their daily earnings when this is not available. Essentially supply teachers provide schools with numerical flexibility.

The council's contract with TCS is rather more complicated. Claim processing has been contracted out for seven years and initially contact between the two firms (with the exception of contract negotiation at senior level) took the form of council staff monitoring claims processed by TCS caseworkers. However the original contract also set performance levels for TCS and these have not been met. As a result the council

have set a new series of targets and weekly meetings are held with senior TCS staff to discuss performance.

Contact between FutureTech and its government department is both regular and detailed. Computing developments are notoriously difficult to predict and both parties were anxious to gain the benefits of increasing processing power during their contract term. Equally, government work is regulated by policy and may change in response to national directives. As a result, FutureTech and the government department were anxious to establish a 'partnership' rather than a tightly regulated contract. Regular meetings are held at all levels, payments for work undertaken may be negotiated retrospectively and profits exceeding an agreed amount are to be shared between the two parties.

But it is Scotchem, which has the most flexible network, at least in terms of its relations with customers and suppliers. Since it produces chemicals in bulk and can both place and fill orders on a very large scale many of its suppliers and customers are long-term with twenty or thirty year relationships not uncommon. Formal contracts tend to be short-term, with quarterly negotiations used to set prices and agree approximate levels of consumption in order to manage work in progress. However, these agreements are part of very long-term relationships. As a result, a series of alliances and friendships have built up between various staff members with informal contacts and tacit knowledge supplementing official agreements about co-operation.

Contracts, control and the decline of discretion

In theory, outsourcing only changes the responsibility for completing a task, not the task itself. In theory too, such a change may improve efficiency and effectiveness. The organisation that out-sources may gain numerical flexibility, hiring staff only when needed (as the schools do) or secure access to expertise that it lacks internally (as with TCS and FutureTech). Yet these theories focus on organisational experience or expectations and assume that the way work is managed does not affect the way it is carried out. In practice, in each of these networks, outsourcing required a change in management structure which fundamentally altered the work processes. Such adjustments might have been predicted. There are, broadly, two distinct ways of controlling staff, 'status', in which employees are trusted to perform often ill-specified or 'extra-functional' activities (and through which they may gain certain rights) and 'contract' where tasks tend to be clearly specified and tightly controlled, completed at the order of employers (Streeck, 1987). Most employment relationships tend to be a fluid mixture of both, influenced by organisational structures, individuals and contexts. According to the prescriptive literature, liberation from bureaucratic control should increase an individual's autonomy; in practice, in FutureTech, TCS and TeacherTemp, the reverse was the case. Each of these three case studies moved from work being conducted in-house, by permanent staff who were often expected to participate in wider organisational activities, to contracting individual tasks to external suppliers. In every instance the process of contracting meant that tasks were more strictly defined and monitored and employees were able to exercise less discretion.

In one case at least, the removal of the requirement to participate in wider organisational tasks was a key motivator for workers to stay on contract. Many of the supply teachers we spoke to welcomed the opportunity to *teach* rather than participate in the paperwork and administration involved in running a school (Grimshaw *et al*, 2001). Most viewed this as liberation from an onerous burden, but the price generally paid was the loss of an opportunity to control *what* was taught. Part of the paperwork that teachers are required to complete is lesson plans which include learning objectives and outcomes. Supply teachers, unless on long term contracts, no longer have to write up lesson plans but, since lesson plans must both exist and be followed, they are required to conform to plans drawn up by others. Since learning outcomes tend to be written in general terms they can be very difficult to interpret and, for many, much of the pleasure of class contact was lost.

I thought I would have more freedom to [do] certain things. I thought, I will be able to decide I am here for a day and we will do a project on that and at the end of the day we would have produced a book about so-and-so and they would go home thinking, right it has been a whole day with a different person who has been really nice to us because you can afford to be friendly with them and you decided what they are going to do and you have got their co-operation, they are excited about the topic and they go home with a piece of work that they have done and finished and you cannot do that. So that is a bit disappointing. (Janet, supply teacher)

In TCS and FutureTech the reduction in discretion had no positive consequences. Housing benefit staff had previously been responsible for seeing an entire claim

through from start to finish, ensuring that the documentation was complete and correct and often exercising their professional judgement to condone minor omissions. Since forms were complicated and demanded repeated pieces of evidence these omissions were reasonably common. Under TCS, once the work was contracted out, processing was re-organised so that caseworkers 'specialised' in one part of the claims process or worked in the newly set-up call centre for extended periods of time (instead of part of a shift, as had been the case under the local authority). Housing benefit is a complex area and regulations are subject to change so this specialisation not only made processing claims less pleasurable by taking away caseworkers' feelings of 'ownership' and making their work less interesting; it also meant that skills declined. Staff were no longer aware of changes that occurred outside their own narrow remit. Their power to make decisions was also lost. Caseworkers were required only to ensure that the paperwork was complete before passing the form back to the local authority, rather than approving it as it stood.

In theory, the 'partnership' between FutureTech and the government department had been designed to avoid such a narrowing of tasks. This decision owed more to the desire to avoid a costly and public IT failure by being overly prescriptive about processes than to a wish to provide employees with interesting, skilled work. However, before the contract had been set up, FutureTech's government department had conducted an audit of the tasks undertaken by their computing staff. These extensive investigations attempted to codify the work done so that FutureTech knew what was required and the government department knew what it was contracting out. One consequence of this was that work, which had previously been discretionary (since few civil servants had expertise in IT), was now subject to active management.

Furthermore, whilst internally IT development staff had had relative freedom to pursue technological innovations and experiment with new software, FutureTech's tight budgetary controls meant that, once out-sourced, software development was restricted to pre-tested technologies.

To a certain extent, this decline in discretion was an inevitable part of the contracting process. After all, tasks may be contracted out, but responsibility remains with the original organisation. This institutional separation of execution and authority has implications for work processes. While in-house staff might be controlled through trust, work undertaken by external bodies was regulated by 'contract' and the high levels of discretion that IT experts within the civil service had been allowed ceased once these same tasks were out-sourced to FutureTech. For the local authority and each individual school, monitoring existed to meet government regulation as much as to ensure they were receiving the services contracted for. Because school inspectors demand lesson plans, permanent staff were required to draw these up and supply teachers to follow them. Because local authorities must validate claims, council staff checked every detail of every form before authorising it. Permanent teachers' work was intensified and the in-house experts retained by both the council and the government department found that the monitoring was as time-consuming and tedious for them as it was for the ex-colleagues they monitored. The changes in organising work introduced by TCS were countered by this additional layer of control.

Changing skills, changing workers

In all three case study companies the contracting out of work and the decline in employees' discretion was matched by changes in personnel. In FutureTech, part of this change was conscious. The company had sought to keep many of the old civil service staff since it needed their knowledge of systems and procedures and 1,700 were transferred over when it won the contract. However, it also wished to reduce costs and a voluntary redundancy programme was set up which many of the more experienced staff took advantage of. In addition to this, agreements with individual contractors were terminated when they came up for renewal (one of the major incentives behind out-sourcing work to FutureTech had been the desire to reduce the number of costly contractors). In the hope of retaining many of the contractors' skills, graduate trainees were instructed to 'shadow' them. Even with the full co-operation and consent of the contractors it is unlikely that anyone could have made the transition from raw recruit to expert in the time available and the inexperienced graduates required considerably more direction than the contractors they replaced. In FutureTech, just as the work itself was increasingly subject to monitoring so too did those employed increasingly require supervision and, after the audit, this supervision was managerial rather than professional. Service targets were set for the first time and FutureTech was expected to meet them.

Similarly, supply teachers often had little experience of the subject area or the age group that they were providing cover for. For some, who had trained to teach senior school pupils but preferred younger children, this was an advantage. For others, who wished to focus on their own area of expertise, it was less welcome. In every case,

this lack of experience provided an additional reason for higher levels of managerial control.

In TCS, as in FutureTech, the initial work group was of skilled staff who had transferred over from the local authority, but these were supplemented by agency staff (25 from a workforce of 110) whose levels of skill and experience varied. Further, TCS itself hired and trained new recruits but these were less well qualified than the existing caseworkers and the training that they were given was greatly shortened.

Such increasingly active management was more a product of the sub-contracting process than a reflection of changes in the skills base. The audit systems were imposed on all workers and even the most experienced and skilled staff who had been accustomed to exercise discretion when working 'in-house' were subjected to higher levels of control as sub-contractors. In these three case studies there was a reduction in the skills base that had existed prior to contracting out, but in each this reduction was a consequence, rather than a cause of, the increasing emphasis on audit. This reduction in skills was partly because the temporary nature of the agreements provided fewer incentives for organisations to develop and maintain employees' skills. TCS, which had a seven-year contract with the council, introduced a caseworker training programme, but this equipped workers with fewer technical skills just as its re-designed work processes demanded fewer skills. Supply teachers were almost never included in school development activities and there was little incentive to provide even individual feedback and coaching with schools responding to unsatisfactory performance simply by asking the agency to send some-one else next time. In FutureTech, staff who were given training and development tended to move

away from the government agency contract (though the recession in the IT labour market has recently limited this).

This reduction in employees' discretion was almost universally frustrating for the workers concerned. Supply teachers certainly took pleasure in not participating in the management of the schools they taught in but the lack of control over their classroom activities was not welcomed and both TCS caseworkers and some FutureTech computing staff disliked the detailed monitoring of their work. At an aggregate level, outsourcing seems to inevitably *increase* the number and extent of managerial and audit systems since there must be proof that a contract's terms have been complied with. It seems that, contrary to the optimistic predictions of management futurologies, contracting out tasks reduces the skill and discretion that even able professionals can exercise as well as taking away institutional and individual incentives to train and develop.

Scotchchem and 'learning networks'

Scotchchem's network was qualitatively different to the three described above. Since it is one of the largest multinationals engaged in producing chemicals and pigments, several of its relationships with suppliers and customers were long term. Specific contracts for services could be short, but they were repeated and inter-firm relationships could and did last twenty or thirty years. Many of these companies were competitors but the size of their orders and the duration of the contacts meant that, here at least, market dependency resulted in the growth of trust. Officially contact took the form of contracts for particular services, unofficially it came close to a

contract for service, allowing trust and status to develop. Even the seven and ten year agreements held by TCS and FutureTech could not match this. There, there was no guarantee that agreements would be renewed, inter-firm relationships revolved around monitoring and control, and performance measures tended to be short term.

By contrast, in Scotchem, individual employees held permanent contracts and staff at all levels were expected to exercise responsibility and engage in ‘extra-functional’ activities. When a new plant was set up one of the operatives commented that:

We’ve been left with quite a free role to priorities ourselves, and sort our own team out, what we do and who does it, left to out own responsibility for that. . . . We know our responsibilities, we organise ourselves. I think the ownership has come from - because we understand the business and the needs of the business.

These expectations were extended to work with other firms. Orders for pigment would often involve developing products or improving delivery and, to achieve this, Scotchem employees at all levels were required to collaborate with customers and suppliers, a working arrangement which included shop floor employees who would test new processes and equipment before developments were finalised. Two of the most recent results of such inter-organisational collaborations were a complex automated loading facility for part of the Scotchem site and larger and tougher bags for the powdered chemicals. Extensive collaboration with one preferred supplier in producing bag specifications had maximised benefits for both parties by significantly reducing leakage which might foul the loading equipment.

Each of these collaborations was formally governed through contract and the information that could be revealed to competitors was restricted. But the long-term relations between the firms and the friendships that often existed between employees meant that contracts were honoured more in breach than in observation. Exchanges generally went beyond permitted limits and several people commented that projects would not have succeeded were it not for both sides' generosity with information. Significantly too, contracts set out the aims of each collaboration and little attempt was made to specify or monitor detailed tasks.

Discussion and Conclusions

Many of the enthusiastic predictions and prescriptions for organisational flexibility have seen little discrepancy between the move to networked firms and the rise of the 'knowledge worker'. Yet, as three of the case study companies reviewed here demonstrate, the pursuit of flexibility may require forms of control that automatically reduce skill and discretion; and this is as true of professional and skilled workers as it is of the unskilled (Rainbird *et al.*, this issue). This has some worrying implications since sub-contracting and the use of temporary workers is a far more common means of securing flexibility than the sort of network described at Scotchem. It should be noted (for we have no desire to replace one myth with another or suggest that Scotchem had access to a magic not shared by other firms) that it was also a form of flexibility that took place within Scotchem. Here a number of low skilled tasks (including cleaning and security) were out-sourced on short term contracts and these

were monitored through tightly defined (and ever lengthening) audit lists to the frustration of the workers employed.

It seems that the management and control of sub-contracted tasks is necessarily different to that of work completed internally and that this monitoring makes much of the work less pleasurable, less discretionary and more frustrating. A conclusion that may explain part of the substantial reduction in discretion observed by Felstead *et al.* (2002) and Gaillie *et al.* (2002; though see also Power, 1997). Nor does it seem likely that this increase in monitoring improved performance in our three case studies. The council's detailed supervision made benefit claims more time consuming than before and vulnerable claimants were often forced to wait for payment, while FutureTech staff complained repeatedly that the targets they were set did not fairly reflect either their capabilities or performance levels pre-transfer.

More broadly, given the substantive increase in contracting, it would be better to appreciate the limitations that this form of networking may have than rely on enthusiastic predictions of increases in skill and freedom. The increasing regulation that characterises these studies is simply a modern form of Taylorism with many of the disadvantages that this implies (Streeck, 1987; Doray, 1988). Under these forms of work organisation, tasks are completed well only to the extent that they can be rigidly specified and policed. Developing new processes and managing uncertainty, as the contrast between FutureTech and Scotchem shows, may be more effectively achieved under conditions of trust. The implications for training and skill development are also worrying. Britain has few intermediate organisations that effectively develop skills. There are few collectives of employers to plan for

occupations (and fewer still where employers combine with either educationalists or the other parties to the employment relationship). As a result, the onus of responsibility for developing skills (and sometimes designing training) falls on individual firms. In contractual networks, this responsibility seems to diffuse among each member of the network with little incentive for any to accept it.

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