MANAGERIAL WORK AND MANAGEMENT TRAINING: A CRITIQUE OF THE MANAGEMENT NVQs

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CONTENTS

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DECLARATION

No part of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification in this, or any other university, or institution of learning.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a critical evaluation of the Management NVQ at level 4. It draws on two principal sources of literature: accounts and analyses of the nature of managerial work; and observations and critiques of Competence Based Education and Training (CBET).

The Management NVQ is an attempt to set out, in behavioural terms, the activities managers engage in. These may then be used to assist individual development and assess competent performance in managerial work. This study starts by considering contemporary academic accounts of managerial work. Drawing on these, it argues that management may subsume such a wide variety of tasks, roles and responsibilities that attempts to define it in functional terms are unlikely to succeed. Moreover, such attempts do little to distinguish the peculiarly *managerial* aspect of management work. By contrast, the writings of more radical theoreticians, which focus on the power and authority that managers exercise, provide a far more resilient basis for distinguishing managers from their non-managerial peers.

Clearly, this theoretical construction of managerial work is in marked contrast to the model put forward in the Management NVQ and that conflict is explored here. Since this study sought to focus on the NVQ's educational contribution at an individual level, an ethnographic approach was adopted in the fieldwork. Three exemplary case studies were sought out, since in these, the contribution of a competence-based approach to training and development might better be evaluated, and eighteen candidates followed through the qualification.

Throughout the study, in all three organisations, the activities that these candidates engaged in, were driven by the demands of the NVQ. The conduct of the workshops, the increasing levels of paperwork in the candidates' workplaces and the emphasis on systems and procedures were all inspired by the need to supply documentary proof of managerial competence.

Ultimately, most of the candidates observed in this study failed to do this successfully and gain their NVQs, and the nature of NVQ assessment, together with its impact on the candidates is considered. Finally, the thesis concludes by arguing that many of the problems noted here stem from the rigid and performance-oriented way NVQs are constructed and, consequently, many of the difficulties reported in this study may be expected elsewhere.

GLOSSARY

AB	Awarding Body
APL	Accreditation of Prior Learning
C&G	City and Guilds
CBET	Competence Based Education and Training
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CIM	Certificate in Management
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DMS	Diploma in Management Studies
EV	External Verifier
GNVQ	General National Vocational Qualification
IiP	Investors in People
ILB	Industry Lead Body
IM	Institute of Management
MCI	Management Charter Initiative
NCVQ	National Council for Vocational Qualifications
NFMED	National Forum for Management Education and Development
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
SCOTVEC	Scottish Vocational Education Council
TEC	Training and Enterprise Council
TEED	Training Education and Enterprise Department
VET	Vocational Education and Training

THE CANDIDATES

PRIVATPLC	
Pat Walker	Corporate trainer
John Robson	Managed telephone sales desk
Jane Ewen	Managed telephone help desk (supervisor)
Sarah Culbertson	Managed sales team
Alan Senior	Managed team of engineers (supervisor)
SUPERMARKETCO	
Richard Blackwood	IT specialist
Harry Dent	Corporate trainer
Hilary Landy	Administration manager
Stephanie Rigal	Managed telephone help desk
James Green	PA to board director
Colin Segal	Regional trainer/PA to regional director
Peter Bird	Accountant
CONSTRUCTIONCO	
Terry Saunders	Managed regional office
Rachel Flint	Administrator (supervisor)
Michelle Lawrence	Marketing specialist (supervisor)
Tom Hackett	IT specialist
David Beasley	British Standards Inspector
Paul Phillips	British Standards Inspector

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The search for the most effective means of improving the quality of management

practice in Britain has been (and remains) a recurrent theme in the literature on

training and development. Managers, it is argued, may well represent *the* critical

resource that holds the key to unlocking potential in the other elements of

production (Storey, 1989a). Not only do managers have a significant impact on

corporate performance through their own work, they also influence the level of

training available to others, since it is often managers who arrange training for

their subordinates. Under- or un-trained managers are unlikely to place a high

priority on training those who work for them (Hyman, 1992). As a result, this

occupational group merits special attention not only because of the direct benefits

that better management might bring, but also for the impact a well-trained

population of managers could have on training and development in general.

Over the last fifty years, the way in which these worthy goals might be achieved has taken a wide variety of (often highly contentious) forms. During the 1960s Madingley Hall in Cambridge aimed to broaden managers' outlook in the best traditions of liberal education by exposing them to rigorous academic courses in the humanities (Pahl and Pahl, 1971), a format echoed in Reed and Anthony's (1992) wish to educate managers in "reflection, thoughtfulness and reciprocity" (p. 608) through avoiding much of the 'management' literature. More controversially, 'T'-groups or 'sensitivity-training' (Smith, 1972; Harrison, 1972; Drinkwater, 1972; Berger, 1972) sought to focus on individuals' emotional responses (Argyle, 1989, highlights some of the problems that may emerge from this approach). Other forms of development emphasise the (often conflictual) aims of group-work; individual assertiveness and effectiveness; leadership, and net-working, through a variety of different delivery mechanisms (for some examples of these see Cannell, 1997; Anfield, 1997; Hilton, 1993; Boyatzis, 1982; Peel, 1984) and with varying degrees of success (for a more critical approach to some of these initiatives see Grey and French, 1996; Thomas and Anthony, 1996).

Few of these interventions offer their graduates any form of accreditation and the success of two of the best-known forms of management development, the MBA and the DMS, may, in part, be attributed to the fact that completing either of these programmes results in the candidates gaining a certificate publicly acknowledging their achievements. These programmes aim to improve managerial practice by equipping participants with academic knowledge of the

various management disciplines, then linking that theoretical element to the workplace through assignments and projects (as the prospecti of some of the most prestigious programmes show; see for example, Bradford, 1996; Cranfield, 1996; London Business School, 1995 - 96; Manchester Business School, 1996; Open University Business School, 1996; Warwick Business School, 1996).

This thesis is concerned with the latest officially sanctioned attempt to improve management practice in Britain, Management NVQs (National Vocational Qualifications). The first of these was launched in 1990 and offered participants the opportunity to gain a certificate which proved their abilities (or 'competence') in the workplace because it focused, not on what candidates *knew* but on what they *did* (Jessup, 1991). In this way the Management Charter Initiative (MCI), which had designed and launched the qualification, hoped "to improve the performance of UK organisations by improving the quality of UK managers" (MCI, 1993:1).

The development and implementation of NVQs was supported by government funding, and public sector employers were strongly encouraged to offer their staff the opportunity to work towards them, in the hope that this might provide both a critical mass of numbers working their way through these qualifications, and sufficient examples of good practice to inspire private sector organisations to follow suit (interviews with Tom Cannon and Andrew Summers of the MCI and the director of training in a public sector organisation). Case study reports of the way in which the Management NVQ had benefited both individual managers and

their employing organisations were published regularly by the MCI and the NCVQ (the National Council for Vocational Qualifications, which has the remit of monitoring all NVQs); for examples of these enthusiastic case studies see the MCI's *Management Leader*; the NCVQ's *NVQ Monitor*; and the Department for Education and Employment's *Competence and Assessment*. And a national MCI network was established in tandem with the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) with the aim of popularising these new qualifications (Robinson, I., 1990).

However, this wealth of promotional information, description and acclamation concealed a remarkable shortage of independent, empirical research into the implementation and impact of the qualification itself. Surveys, often funded by the official bodies, asked how many firms had adopted NVQs, adapted any of their constituent parts for appraisals, or used them to identify training needs (Smith, 1996; Strebler and Bevan, 1996; Bevan *et* al, 1995; the Cannon and Taylor Working Party Reports, 1994; Tjok-a-Tam, 1991), but none questioned what activities introducing the certificates inspired, assessed how far they had progressed the central goal of improving management practice, or set the more fundamental question of whether NVQs should be instituted at all. It seemed that the urge to introduce these qualifications to as large a population as possible took precedence over any form of evaluative enquiry (Warwick, 1992).

In part, this emphasis on implementation and the tendency to assume that the qualifications were 'good things' which needed only effective marketing, can be

attributed to the dual role of the MCI and the NCVQ. Each had the remit of both popularising and researching into NVQs and each was supported by funding that was dependent on the numbers enrolled on, and successfully completing, each qualification (DfEE, 1996a). Since criticism of NVQs might adversely affect their chances of being widely adopted, this was heavily discouraged both in the officially funded reports (as is argued in Article 26, 1994) and by independent academics (*The Money Programme*, 6th October 1996). The result was, that, until relatively recently, very little independent research has been conducted into this area.

The aim of this study was to contribute towards constructing an empirically based evaluation of these new qualifications. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the University of Warwick, it enjoyed financial independence from the official NVQ bodies and, because three years of funding were obtained, it was possible to conduct a more longitudinal study (with over eighteen months of fieldwork) than was feasible in many other reports. Since the focus was essentially exploratory and evaluative, centring upon the impact the qualification had on those managers working towards it, interviews with the MCI, the NCVQ, TECs and the official Awarding Bodies were conducted only to provide background material and the majority of the fieldwork was dedicated to observing small groups of managers, in three private sector organisations, engage with the NVQ. Through this, it was hoped that an understanding of the processes involved in working towards the qualification could be gained.

Such an exploration could potentially be justified on the sole ground of monitoring the use of public funds, given the government monies invested in the NVQ system both directly and indirectly. Wolf (1996:40) points out that even the conservative official figures, which exclude many of the costs involved in developing and implementing the qualifications, estimate a total spend of around £107 million for 1988 - 1996 (see also *The Independent* 1st May 1997; DfEE, 1995; 1996a; 1996b; CBI, 1994). This form of wide-scale monitoring, however, is a task that can best be tackled by the official audit functions.

Here, the educational issues will be considered, for it should not be forgotten that NVQs were designed to (literally) revolutionise all forms of education and training (Fennell, 1993a; 1993b; 1993c; Burke, 1989). Because they focus on assessment and test how well candidates' behaviour complies with the 'occupational standards' for their jobs, NVQs represent a major qualitative shift away from traditional models of education and training, which seek to first impart and then assess knowledge and skills. In the words of one of the most vociferous proponents of NVQs, these traditional certificates are "input based" whereas NVQs are "outcome based" (Jessup, 1991). Essentially, NVQs were presented as a criticism of, a challenge to, and a potential replacement for, the existing qualifications system. As a result, the issues identified here may be of relevance to many other occupational groups. Even the MCI themselves proposed that the Management NVQs be treated as a case study of all (future) 'higher-level' NVQs (MCI, 1990).

This chapter starts by considering the state of management training in the country as a whole, highlighting the problematic nature of many of the surveys and arguing that, Britain's managers, in contrast to those of her major economic competitors, are relatively *under*-trained. It considers the remedies put forward by Handy *et al* (1987), which led to the establishment of the MCI and notes that after only a short space of time that body was brought under the wing of the NCVQ's wider ranging programme, to become the Industry Lead Body (ILB) for management. This section then briefly considers the implications of that move, given the nature of managerial work and the chapter concludes with a summary of the thesis itself.

Training in Britain: the search for reform

Establishing some element of consensus on the extent of management training and development in Britain is extraordinarily problematic, but there is little to suggest that the wide variety of initiatives cited above has led to particularly high levels of involvement by the majority of managers. Survey estimates of the proportion of managers participating in training vary dramatically (Warr, 1993-4), and include: 88% (Institute of Management Survey, 1992 cited in Warr, 1993-4:32); 56% (Deloitte, Haskins and Sells, 1989:23); 48% (Employment Department, 1990a:55); 15% (HMSO, 1990:11) and "the majority of firms do not train managers for the jobs they hold" (Crockett and Elias, 1984:42).

The lack of a shared definition of training contributes to the wide variation in these figures, Warr's (1993-4) impressive 88% participation rate, for example, includes the somewhat elastic concept of "informal learning activities" (p. 32) which, since it is drawn from a survey of managers who are members of a professional institute and, through that membership alone may be considered to engage in such activities, may be considered surprisingly low. Elsewhere, there may be a systemic bias towards over-reporting the incidence of training, since firms actively engaged in training are far more likely to send back their questionnaires than those reporting zero returns (Mangham and Silver, 1986). Certainly, the annual Labour Force Survey which (by definition) draws on a far wider population, has yet to claim that more than one-fifth of managers receive training.

Moreover, if the numbers participating in training are difficult to establish, the approximate cost of the training initiatives (something which could conceivably be used as a proxy for quality) is almost impossible to calculate. Not only are firms reticent when it comes to discussing pecuniary issues with researchers, but also, attempts to draw comparisons between organisations are generally stymied by the range of different items that companies do, or do not, consider a legitimate part of training budgets. With no consensus (and occasionally no knowledge, Ascher, 1983) over whether the costs of trainers' salaries, trainees' salaries, room hire, travel and subsistence, and programme administration should be (or are) included, it is difficult to compare figures meaningfully (see, for example: Mangham and Silver, 1986; Ascher, 1983). Far from causing concern, many

corporate training departments actively welcome the opaque nature of their budgets. One study pointed out that several of its respondents had said that (Coopers and Lybrand, 1985:10):

> it was better that the full costs of their firms' training
> should not be made known to the board, because if it
> were, the board might want to reduce it.

This lack of concern with accurately recording the extent and cost of training interventions is symptomatic of the general lack of enthusiasm over training in Britain. Despite organisational support at a rhetorical level, in practice, training remains a minority activity, indeed, Mangham and Silver (1986) reported that there was no correlation at all between firms' professed attitudes to training and whether they offered any to their staff.

If training does indeed have a positive impact on workplace performance and the quality of goods produced (Jarvis and Prais, 1989; Steedman and Wagner, 1989) this neglect could be actively harmful. It was the fear of undermining future national competitiveness that led, in the 1980s, to the commissioning of a series of reports to catalogue and examine the state of management training within Britain (Constable and McCormick, 1987 which summarised the work of the Mangham Working Party Report, 1987; the Osbaldeston Working Party Report, 1987; and the Stoddart Working Party Report, 1987); and compare this to the provision available in Germany, Japan, France and the USA (Handy *et al*, 1987). These were published together in April 1987 and the situation they described was

not encouraging. While some companies invested a great deal in their managers, most did not, and Constable and McCormick concluded that (1987:3):

> Britain's managers lack the development, education and training opportunities of their competitors.

Their sister report was more critical (Handy *et al*, 1987:11):

> management training in Britain is too little, too late, for too few. It is finally probably true that most management development is left to chance in a Darwinian belief that the fittest will survive. They probably will, but it is a wasteful process . . . . in this field the British are amateurs competing with professionals.

In terms of quality, exemplary British companies could be praised as animatedly as those elsewhere, but the numbers involved in these excellent programmes were "negligible" (Handy *et al*, 1987:28). Having fulfilled the first part of their role, recording and describing the training available, Handy and his colleagues moved on to the second element, proposing a viable solution. In pursuit of this, they took a conscious decision to abandon the current "cottage industry" (Mangham Working Party Report, 1987) of management training and adopt a 'professional' model based loosely on accountancy training. Accordingly, a combination of academic study and guided work experience was proposed, supported by a minimum number of days each year which employers should make available for staff development. The provision of study leave, reimbursing tuition fees and a formal accreditation scheme would encourage individual

managers to re-enter education, while, nationally, an official information system based on the French model would provide accurate, timely, statistics on the amount of training available.

An integral part of this process was to be a 'Charter Group' of companies, exemplary organisations prepared to inspire others by publicising their own successes, and it was to co-ordinate this that the MCI was set up in 1988. Its original remit was to support the acquisition of 'professional status' for British managers and promote best practice in training and development (Foster, 1988; MCI 1993).

At the same time that these reports started to enquire into the provision of management training and development, a major reform of vocational training as a whole was being proposed. Here, too, concern about the low levels of provision had been expressed for some considerable time (indeed, the critics date as far back as the 1850s: Keep, 1987; 1994; Thomas, 1991). Some commentators were worried that the absence of any system of extensive, high quality training fostered by (and resulting in) increasing numbers of low-skill jobs (Keep, 1992; Keep and Mayhew, 1996) would result in a "low skills equilibrium" (Finegold and Soskice, 1990:215). This was of particular concern, since, if Britain entered such a vicious circle, reform would become more difficult. Firms which competed on price and quantity would have no incentive to offer their workforces training, for these organisations labour is a cost to be minimised. Moreover, individuals would be actively irrational to invest in themselves because there

would be little or no return on their investment (such may already be the case as Bennett *et al*, 1992, argue).

Again, the element of international rivalry had inspired a series of highly critical reports (Coopers and Lybrand, 1985; NEDO/MSC, 1984; *The Economist*, September 1984; NEDC, 1965). Commentators, spurred on by the assumption that good training was inextricably linked to industrial success, argued that the nation would become unable to compete internationally with countries whose workforces benefit from more rigorous preparation for employment (Hutton, 1995; Finegold and Soskice, 1990) and much of the analysis targeted the voluntarist structure of training on which the British (non) system was based. Since organisational participation is voluntary in a 'market model', the extent to which employers engage in training will be heavily dependent on the business cycle and this activity may be radically curtailed during recessions. By contrast, an 'educational' model of vocational training may be less vulnerable to cyclical bouts of alternate enthusiasm and inactivity, either because providing it is the prerogative of vocational schools, which may be less vulnerable to cyclical funding than private sector firms, or because training is heavily regulated so that employers have little discretion over their in-house training activities (for a fuller discussion of this see Rainbird, 1994; Felstead and Green, 1994).

While it is an oversimplification to condemn the British system as purely market based, since such a label ignores elements of regulated training such as Health and Safety (Felstead and Green, 1994), state-inspired 'high level' training

(Report by the Right Honourable Lord Franks, 1963) and the initiative at the centre of this study, it was clear that reform was necessary and it was against this background that the decision was taken to introduce NVQs (MSC/DES, 1986). Although dependent on government funding, this new system was to be run on essentially voluntarist lines, in principle at least (the official intervention was seen only as 'pump priming', needful in the early stages only, and to be phased out as popularity enabled the qualifications to become self-sustaining). The qualifications' advocates sought to gain acceptance for them by making them relevant to employer needs. Access was to be completely open, routes to qualification (or 'competence') diverse, and the assessment process both objective and directly relevant to the real needs of employment. Moreover, all this was to be based around a national system of qualifications spanning every occupation at every skill level. Employees already skilled in their work through years of practice could claim an NVQ just as legitimately as those who acquired their skills through formal schooling. What NVQs assessed was not the way in which candidates acquired their competence, but competence itself (Jessup, 1991; Fletcher, 1991).

Accordingly, in 1986 the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) was established in order to rationalise provision and provide a national hierarchy of certificates covering all levels of attainment. The new system was intended to be radically different from the one it replaced. Its goals were ambitious, for it sought to change both the nature of achievements that were

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certified and the structure through which certificates were issued (Fennell, 1993a:20):

> It is trying to introduce a new, national and comprehensive competence-based system of qualifications on to a landscape littered with a mass of uncoordinated structures. If it succeeds, of course, the landscape will become orderly and clear. If it were only partly to succeed then the complexity would be greater than ever before.

It may have been a coincidence in timing, rather than a commitment to this radical new model of assessment, which led to the MCI being subsumed into the NCVQ. It had embarked on a high-profile revision of management qualifications just as the NCVQ proposed an even more high-profile revision of every vocational qualification and in 1989 it joined this "quiet revolution" (Burke, 1989:1) to become the Industry Lead Body (ILB) for management with the remit of developing, implementing and marketing management NVQs (MCI, 1993).

The developers of this system argued enthusiastically that it had the potential to cure every one of Britain's training ills. It would inspire employers to participate because the training it supported was immediately relevant to their needs, effectively offering a guarantee that new hires *could* do a job; employees with little success in the formal education system could gain certificates for their practical achievements, which would make them more attractive to employers; and these activities would have the additional advantage on a macro level of raising Britain's relative position in the international league tables of educational

and vocational achievement. Furthermore, candidates who excelled at 'practical' skills would no longer be discouraged by the abstract quality of the material they were required to study. Objective assessment systems would help to combat subjective judgements and provide a public record of the skills needed in each job and tutors would have a framework to operate around, ensuring they covered the correct material and eliminating the possibility of bias in the assessment process.

Or so the proponents argued. Clearly, if NVQs genuinely offered all (or any) of these advantages they had the potential to make a substantial contribution to the qualifications system and the power of this vision, together with the influence of many of its advocates, ensured its rapid acceptance as official policy (Jessup, 1989).

The nature of managerial work

This study is not simply about NVQs, it is also about management. Indeed, it would be difficult to construct an assessment of any form of vocational training without some understanding of the vocation it sought to train for. Throughout the text, then, attempts will be made to link an analysis of the Management NVQ to discussions on the nature of managerial work. Such a link is arguably more relevant for NVQs than many other vocational interventions. Most existing management education programmes are based on 'traditional' forms of teaching and learning (what NVQ-practitioners call "input-based" courses; Jessup, 1991).

This means that curricula, texts and cases are designed to convey information, foster certain skills and encourage certain behaviours. Most institutions also place great emphasis on work-based projects, application of the concepts within the organisation and integrating workplace and classroom experience (see again the business school prospecti cited earlier: Bradford, 1996; Cranfield, 1996; London Business School, 1995 - 96; Manchester Business School, 1996; Open University Business School, 1996; Warwick Business School, 1996), but fundamentally, assessment is geared around a mastery of the theories conveyed in the classroom. As a result, it is possible to study successfully without any workplace exposure to the subjects tested; indeed, since some courses actively target the knowledge which (it is assumed) candidates will require in *future* managerial roles, effectively training for stock, a positive match with a student's existing job role is probably both unlikely and unnecessary.

By contrast, NVQs prescribe the behaviours that would indicate competent performance and assessment is geared around a demonstration of those behaviours so that it may be independent from any particular mode of study (Jessup, 1991; Fletcher, 1991). Once the behaviours (or competences) have been demonstrated to the satisfaction of the various assessors, managers are deemed 'competent'. This means that there should be a one to one relationship between competences displayed in an NVQ and those performed in the workplace. Not only does the qualification directly target the work the candidate is doing at the time of assessment rather than activities which might be undertaken after any presumed future promotion, but also, to be assessed competent, the candidate

must be doing the work prescribed by the NVQ since assessment is based in the workplace.

All of this presupposes that the description of management provided by the MCI's occupational standards (level 4 is reproduced in full in Appendix A) is accurate. Every advantage the developers of the standards claim for them holds good only where the standards accurately describe managerial work; if the behaviours listed in the NVQ do not describe 'real' workplace activity, or do not capture the 'managerial' element of that activity, then they lose their central claim to legitimacy. If candidates are being certified competent for behaviours which are neither relevant nor managerial the qualifications, far from certifying competence may distract from it.

This is a important issue since the model of management put forward by the MCI is markedly different to that supported by academic studies. The occupational standards describe a very specific list of behaviours, generic across all sectors of industry and all situations. By contrast, much of the research into managerial work over the last few decades has suggested that management is a heterogeneous activity, encompassing many different job descriptions, spans of responsibility and levels of status in the corporate hierarchy. Far from encompassing any peculiarly 'managerial' functions, the term 'manager' denotes only a certain status (and even that may vary, both within and between organisations). Individual managers may be engaged in any number of tasks and attempts to construct a generic description of these activities, as in Fayol's (1949)

forecasting, planning, organising, commanding, co-ordinating and controlling, are difficult to relate back to individual job descriptions. This diversity is further complicated by the freedom job-holders have to interpret and re-interpret their work in different ways, and the fact that the legacy of successful (or unsuccessful) incumbents may lead to certain jobs being seen as 'good' or 'bad' for an individual's career trajectory regardless of the work involved in those roles (see, for example, Watson, 1994; Stewart, 1988; 1981; Moss-Kanter, 1977). If these analyses of managerial work are accurate, then NVQ-style assessment will be (at best) an irrelevancy and at worst, actively counter-productive.

This contradiction between the occupational standards which make up the NVQ and the construction of managerial work put forward in the literature forms one of the main themes of this study. If the issue of relevance is indeed central to the NVQ's success and legitimacy, then such a contradiction becomes extremely problematic. Does the Management NVQ describe managerial work (real or ideal)? Are the competences set out in the Management NVQ of genuine relevance to managers' workplace performance? Do the new systems, structures and roles prescribed by the MCI and the NCVQ offer a valuable new route to vocational education and accreditation? Alternatively, following the criticisms highlighted in the literature, do the occupational standards represent a bureaucratic diversion from key elements of work? And, are NVQs based on a fundamental misconception of the nature of work?

Accordingly, this thesis sought to focus on this dichotomy between the nature of managerial work as described in the analytical literature and the description of managerial tasks set out in the Management NVQ. It was written between 1996 and 1997, some eight or nine years after the foundation of the MCI and at the stage when both the MCI and the NCVQ were reviewing the progress they had made and considering how to proceed in the future. It attempts to provide substantive, longitudinal information about what happens when an NVQ programme is run, to replace the quasi-hagiographic accounts and optimistic anticipation which has characterised the bulk of the literature to date. Although its focus is critical, when the research was being put together (as will become apparent below) every attempt was made to create an environment where the Management NVQ had the potential to work very successfully. NVQ 'horror stories' and anecdotes of disasters are commonplace among practitioners but, while several such anecdotes will be reported here to contextualise both the practice and perception of the qualifications, they are not the central focus of this research. This thesis is a criticism of NVQs, but of NVQs as their developers would wish to see them. The programmes described here were well resourced, well supported, in-house training initiatives where highly motivated candidates and experienced tutors put a great deal of effort into achieving certification. It is hoped that by deliberately selecting the best provision in this way it will be possible to construct a coherent critique of competence-based qualifications.

The structure of the PhD

Chapter two focuses on the nature of managerial work and, drawing on the literature, explores the various different attempts to discover, define and explain management. It starts by considering the 'classical' school of management of Henri Fayol and his intellectual heirs (including the MCI) who interpret managerial work as something which may be, and is, definable as a series of work roles or behaviours; then it moves on to the 'personal traits' school of management's conceptualisation of managerial work as a mixture of qualities, traits and attributes which distinguish between successful managers and their unsuccessful peers. Each of these views is considered critically and some of the problems inherent in these constructions of managerial work are discussed, before it is argued, drawing on the empirical literature, that management is heterogeneous, locally determined and often dependent on the choices made by each individual manager. Then, using some of the more radical literature, an attempt is made to develop an understanding of managerial work that is *in*clusive, and caters for all titular managers, rather than *ex*clusive, claiming that only a small proportion of these are truly 'managerial'.

This construction of managerial work contradicts many of the assumptions made by the MCI who chose, when developing the Management NVQ, to produce a model of managerial work which specified workplace behaviour in some detail, and the issues this raises are considered, at a theoretical level, in chapter three. This chapter begins by describing the nature of Competence Based Education

and Training (CBET), the basis for all NVQs. It emphasises the shift of focus onto 'outcomes' and 'performance' and away from 'inputs' in the form of classroom based teaching or apprenticeships. It then describes the process of Functional Analysis, through which the occupational standards are developed, and considers some of the main criticisms of this exercise before going on to explore the way NVQs deal with three key areas: knowledge and understanding; the standards themselves; and assessment. The structure of the NVQ system is described and the chapter focuses on the Management NVQ at NVQ level 4, the qualification at the centre of this study. Using the understanding of managerial work developed in chapter two, some of the contradictions and discrepancies between these two approaches are explored, before the chapter concludes by reporting that the Management NVQ has failed to win popularity with employers and describing some of the problems this presents for the MCI.

Chapter four presents the methodology and methods employed to gather the empirical data for this thesis. It starts by considering several of the problems inherent in educational research and the difficulties posed by two of the most common 'yardsticks' of success, corporate profits and individual performance. Arguing that, within organisations, management training is so often used as a reward that any simplistic measure of success is unsustainable, it suggests four headings under which evaluative comment might be structured. Since this study was intended to both explore the nature, and construct an evaluation, of the Management NVQ, the methodology chosen was highly qualitative and ethnographic in style. Small groups of managers in three companies were

observed and repeatedly interviewed over the course of eighteen months and this is described here. Moreover, since many NVQ programmes have met with spectacular failure, efforts were made while negotiating access to restrict the choice of case study companies to those who were prepared to invest a great deal in funds, time, and expertise to support the initiatives and the conscious choice of such exemplary cases is defended. Clearly, the process of research impacts on the activities under observation, in most social settings it is difficult to watch without engaging, and even attempting to achieve so one-sided a relationship might have a negative impact on the results of the study. Here, an attempt is made to consider what impact participating in this research may have had on the groups and the individuals involved and to reveal "the ethnographer's hand" (Watson, 1994:6).

Chapter five introduces the three case study companies in more detail, briefly describing them and the environments they operate in. All three are private sector organisations but each is drawn from different sectors of the economy (construction, retailing and utilities) and consequently, each faces different pressures and makes diverse demands of their employees. Again, by selecting the private sector and negotiating access with companies as divergent as these, it was hoped to both provide the NVQ with the most favourable environment in which to demonstrate what a competence-based system might achieve and also test that system rigorously. This chapter reveals the very different reasons each firm had for introducing the Management NVQ and considers one of the main arguments in favour of NVQs, that they are 'employer-led'. Central to this

notion is the argument that NVQs are flexible enough to be adapted to suit local circumstances. Such 'bespoke' versions of the model should be even more immediately relevant than the standard template. Since one of the case study companies had commissioned the MCI to provide them with their own company-specific NVQ this is considered and critiqued. The chapter also introduces the individual candidates and describes their various experiences of management (for ease of reference the names, roles and organisations of the 'core' eighteen candidates are summarised in a table on page *vi*). It then draws on observations of the workshops to argue that, far from liberating sessions, the competence model constrains them, since to pass the NVQ a great deal of attention must be given to the process of proving 'competence', so imposing a structure on the workshops that diverts attention away from substantive issues and towards trivialities.

Chapter six observes the impact that working through the process had on the candidates' behaviour in the workplace and notes their comments and any changes in their hopes for the programme. It starts by exploring the extent of correlation between the candidates' work and the model of management put forward by the NVQ, and reveals that establishing the degree of 'fit' was not unproblematic. In an environment where the title 'manager' denotes status, individuals are unlikely to welcome any threats to their right to that title, and, since all were told that the MCI's model represented 'management', the attempts to explore the extent to which their work matched it were highly politically fraught. Then, the chapter focuses on the way the candidates' workplace

behaviour changed, since this was, after all, the principal drive behind the development of the NVQ. Here, it is argued that the main impact of the qualification was to inspire a surge of documentation as candidates wrote memos, minuted meetings, and instituted checklists and filing systems. This sudden increase in record-keeping was caused, not by the universal recognition of a fault within their own management styles, but by their need to gain a qualification through providing written 'proof' that actions had been taken. The impact of this behavioural change is discussed.

Chapter seven approaches the impact the NVQ had on the candidates from a different angle. Noting that the jokes candidates told about their NVQ activities were remarkably similar in all three organisations, it considers what light these might shed on this discussion. Organisations are, after all, political environments and the NVQ was not a neutral developmental tool but a means of assessing workplace competence and constructing judgements about candidates. Here it is argued that humour serves a variety of purposes. Candidates used it to challenge the NVQ's model of managerial work, celebrating and reinforcing their own shared identity as practical, practising managers against a bureaucratic, impractical model; through it they challenged the structure without openly expressing hostility and, in the face of negative judgements about their 'competence' they attempted to distance themselves emotionally and prove to their colleagues they were able to cope, by joking about the situation. This chapter uses these jokes as an additional means through which the NVQ may be

evaluated and information gained here is used to reinforce the conclusions reached in earlier chapters.

Chapter eight deals with the crucial topic of assessment. Since NVQs were designed to grant qualifications independently of particular modes of study and provide objective performance benchmarks against which competent and not yet competent performance could be simply 'read off', the efficacy of NVQ assessment is key to their validity. Here some of the main problems of subjectivity, impression management, and triviality are considered, and it is argued that, far from focusing attention on the 'real work' issues, the NVQ structure misdirects in a manner that is actively harmful. Several of the case study candidates are observed as they finish or abandon their NVQs, and the impact on them as individuals is discussed, setting the emotional problems of the 'failures' against the experience of the 'successes'. These results are put into the national context and some of the wider problems which stem from this form of assessment are discussed.

Chapter nine concludes this study, summarising the discussion to date, considering the impact of NVQs nationally, and setting the debates in their wider context. It considers the results for each of these case studies and reports on their reactions to the NVQ programmes. Despite all the problems discussed in this thesis, together with a conspicuous lack of success in gaining accreditation by candidates, only one of the firms was attentive enough to the programmes' impact to consider abandoning the CBET approach as a result. This chapter

reviews that decision then considers the problems inherent in designing a system of VET around individual competences. These assume a replicative certainty which is rarely achievable in practice. Moreover, the emphasis on CBET over the last decade has attracted so much attention that few commentators now explore other forms of vocational education, a development which is regrettable. Finally, the chapter concludes by returning to the notion of a 'professional' manager, propounded by Handy *et al* (1987) and briefly subjecting it to critical review.

CHAPTER TWO

MANAGEMENT, MANAGERS AND MANAGING

This chapter prepares the way for a consideration of the Management NVQs by exploring the nature of management. Drawing on some of the more influential aspects of the literature, it challenges the traditional, positivist writings, which see the occupation as a technical activity that is easily defined and "surprisingly straightforward" (Salaman, 1995:2).

Its central argument is that attempts to construct a functionally-derived model of managerial work are misplaced. Management is (and always has been) functionally broad and most definitions of management try to cater for this by either neglecting many practising managers in order to segregate out those who are 'truly' managing; or by using terms that are sufficiently wide-ranging to include most people but do little to shed light on what management *is*. In preference to constructing another generic template, this thesis draws on both empirical studies of managerial work and some of the more radical theoreticians,

to argue that management describes a broad and heterogeneous range of occupations susceptible to local (and often individual) interpretation, and covering a range of hierarchical levels. Here, it will be argued that managers are agents and that this provenance accounts for both their distinctive position within the employment hierarchy and the absence of any convincing functional or behavioural definition of the occupation.

Throughout this discussion it is important to remember that the MCI, in devising the Management NVQ, chose to adopt a functional model of managerial work, to the extent that appropriate managerial behaviours are listed in detail, together with the range of situations in which managers might engage in them. That model will be considered in more depth in chapter three, here the nature of managerial work itself is explored in an attempt to both locate this study in a broader context and construct an empirically based understanding of the occupation.

Managerial work: generic function or social construct?

The traditional, 'classical' writings on managerial work present an image of management that is clear and unproblematic. However, even Frederick Taylor started one of his first publications, *Shop Management*, with the regretful comment that (1949, Part I:18):

> management is not yet looked upon as an art, with
> laws as exact, and as clearly defined, for instance, as
> the fundamental principles of engineering.

His work, together with that of Fayol, helped to shape the discipline to the extent that Moonman could write (1961:16):

> Today management by hunch or intuition is as obsolete as the farthingale.

The image of management that both Taylor and Fayol propounded was of an occupation that consisted of a generic set of functions and tasks, structured around a clear purpose, stable across all sectors of the economy and susceptible to clear definition. Famously, Taylor was even more ambitious than this, maintaining that (1949, Part II:64), "every single act of every workman can be reduced to a science". Fayol restricted his study to managers and developed one of the best known functional models of managerial work (1949:5-6):

> to manage is to forecast and plan, to organise, to command, to co-ordinate and to control

Extrapolating management principles from the world of engineering has certain attractions. By imposing a positivist discipline on studies, complex areas could be reduced, simplified, generalised and (by implication) solved (as Jacobs, 1990, critically notes). Moreover, management itself could be (and was) unproblematically defined. While Taylor and Taylorism have been largely discredited (see, for example, Doray, 1988) both the positivist research traditions and Fayol's definition of management retain their popularity. Carroll and Gillen (1987) reported that, of twenty-one management text-books published between 1983 and 1986, seventeen used at least four of Fayol's five functions to organise the book itself; three of the remaining four books used three and all mentioned

Fayol himself. Indeed, such was the influence of the positivist tradition that any failure on the part of organisations and theorists to live up to it was seen as a defect on their part; problems were simply a sign that management as a subject was immature. As Koontz (1964) argued, any apparent confusion would soon evaporate once work progressed and 'the answer' emerged.

Yet despite the consensus among the classical writers and their followers that management is an activity capable of accurate definition (and indeed that such definitions are readily available); the one 'correct' definition has managed to elude commentators for almost a century. Even those writers who agree that management is definitely generic disagree over exactly what its generic features consist of, and no task-based definition has, as yet, accurately described management as it is understood and practised across the economy. Each individual definition is problematic. Mary Parker Follett (Fox and Urwick, 1973:55) maintained that management was the art of "getting things done through people" and that, consequently, managers were those with staff reporting to them. While this aphorism was adopted by several generations of management writers (among them Urwick, 1964a and Stieglitz, 1964) it crucially neglects managers without line responsibilities and makes it difficult to differentiate between supervisors and managers. Decision-making, highlighted by Cyert and March (1963) as the key element of management assumes that decisions are a managerial prerogative. Moreover, the optimal, mechanistic, decision-making models they put forward are difficult to equate with 'human' organisations. Other authors provide models of managerial work that include a

range of functions. As noted above, Fayol (1949) offers one of the earliest variants of these. Others can be found in Barsoux and Lawrence (1990), Gulick (1937, cited in Watson, 1994), Adair (1988; 1990) and the MCI's own model of management (MCI, 1991a; 1991b). The existence of each of these competing alternatives might suggest healthy debate were it not for the positivist assumptions inherent in each, which deny the legitimacy of any of the others.

Thus far, surprisingly little evidence has emerged to support the premise that there is a concrete (and, by implication, correct) definition of management 'out there' waiting to be discovered. Indeed, it is possible that these universal templates of management are little more than the self-fulfilling prophecies of the writers who believe in them, since several *start* both their analysis and their research by clearly defining what is, and what is not, management. Salaman (1995), Mintzberg (1973; 1975), Sayles (1964) and Moonman (1961), following Mary Parker Follett (Fox and Urwick, 1973) all restrict their work to managers who manage people. Mintzberg (1973), in his famous study of managerial work, took this re-conceptualisation one stage further, restricting his study to people in charge of a defined area but extending it beyond the confines of titular managers: his work was based on diary studies of senior and middle managers in business; observations of street gang leaders, hospital administrators and production supervisors; analyses of the working records of US Presidents; activity sampling of foremen's work; and structured observation of the work of Chief Executives (p. 4). So, in defence of a narrow definition of 'management' the definition of 'manager' was extended considerably beyond its traditional

boundaries. Foremen and production supervisors, for instance, are generally classified as 'supervisors', a role that is distinct from, and (in status terms) inferior to, that of a manager. While street gang leaders, relevant as they are to Mintzberg's conceptualisation, are not managers. Informative as Mintzberg's study may be on the work of those in charge of an occupational area, it does not necessarily contribute to our understanding of what *managers* do.

Every one of these attempts to describe management functionally is problematic. Employing broad, portmanteau terms makes the description so vague that it is difficult to see how it might be used in practice, this use of general terms may also unify, quite misleadingly, very disparate achievements. To draw on a sporting analogy, playing games might be described as a 'generic' skill, yet, as Hirst (1973a) points out, playing cricket has very little to do with playing tiddlywinks. Equally, producing a tight definition of managerial work inevitably excludes many practising managers. Mintzberg's (1973) study includes street gang leaders and US Presidents yet by defining a manager as some-one in charge of a distinct occupational area, would exclude many who enjoy the title but are not in overall command of their designated department. It is difficult to justify a conceptual category that deliberately ignores a large section of the population it seeks to classify on the somewhat tautological grounds that they do not conform to the classification and are therefore not 'real' managers and do not belong to the managerial population. Moreover, as Hales (1986) points out, these problems are compounded in the literature by a reluctance to identify what is specifically

managerial in each of the models, either conceptually, or through some form of empirical comparison with non-managerial jobs.

Management as a virtue

A variant of the 'generic' school concedes that, functionally, managers embrace diverse roles, but argues that the individual qualities and attributes necessary to succeed in management are consistent. These can be identified and used to recruit, promote and develop present and future managers (see Boyatzis, 1982; Glaze, 1989; Greatrex and Phillips, 1989; and Cockerill, 1989 for accounts of how such skill lists are developed and suggestions on how they might be used).

However, this defence of 'uniform' management qualities is also problematic. Not only do the four references cited above produce very different suggestions of the qualities good managers should possess, but so does almost every other organisation and writer in this field. Hirsch and Bevan (1988) who surveyed forty firms to discover the criteria against which they selected, promoted and developed their managers, found nearly 1,800 *different* skills, attributes or behaviours. While many of these mirrored one another, there was little to suggest that the shared vocabulary extended to consensus on meanings and several indications that the aims some of the companies had for these models were unrealistic. One organisation claimed to measure its managers against no fewer than *seventy-one* different criteria and the authors commented that (p. 31):

> It is difficult to know whether the length of skill lists
> is determined by personal taste, theoretical
> considerations, the tolerance of managers or the size
> of a sheet of A4 paper.

Just as it was difficult to see how 'decision-making' in companies might be peculiarly managerial, so these exhortations to practise specific virtues are almost equally applicable to everyone in the organisation, since many of the qualities described are clearly aspirational rather than descriptive. Indeed, Bevan (1990) specifically rejects observed managerial attributes in favour of ideal qualities. In view of this, it is not clear what light these lists shed on management or managers. As Mangham and Silver (1986) observed, when they tried to establish a consensus on the optimum skill-list, few respondents agreed on which attributes were important and most, when prompted, would change their minds and agree whole-heartedly with qualities ignored in their earlier responses. Given how positive all these attributes are, it is difficult to see how Mangham and Silver's respondents could have rejected any of them; Lewis and Stewart (1958) commented prophetically that (p. 100):

> Listing the qualities of a good manager makes an
> excellent parlour game in business circles. Soon all
> the main virtues will be mentioned and who is to say
> that any of them, except chastity, is not desirable?

Again, the existence of many different templates must raise questions about whether any one list of 'meta-qualities' could be produced. Even then it is doubtful that a common terminology with a shared meaning could be developed, or that objective means could be devised for measuring the attributes in isolation (Furnham, 1990; Jacobs, 1989; Herriot, 1988). As Cleverley (1971:114) argues:

> For one, we do not know enough about the qualities
> that make an individual a successful manager (if
> indeed there are any particular ones) to define them.
> Secondly even if we did have that much knowledge,
> our psychological equipment is not adequate to
> discern them.

Neither functional- nor attribute-based models of managerial work are entirely

satisfactory and producing a generic definition of management seems more likely

to confuse, by adding to the plethora of different 'generics' that already exist,

than inform. The suggested definitions that abound in the literature are

problematic and contentious. What is more, there is little evidence to suggest

that considering management via these lists is either helpful or informative.

Indeed, considered reflections on the nature of managerial work consistently

draw on elements that are neither functional nor attribute based, in their attempts

to define management (as can be seen in Storey, 1980; Anthony, 1977; Child,

1969 and Urwick, 1964b). Moreover, the 'heroic sagas' of exemplary managers

that emerge from the practitioner literature provide little support for either of the

generic models (see, for example, Semler, 1994; Harvey-Jones, 1989; Abodaher,

1986). The reason a definition has proved so elusive may be because

management itself is a reification, socially constructed, so that there is no one

true definition to discover. As Drucker (1989) says in a different context (p. 59):

> Most of today's lively discussion of management by
> objectives is concerned with the search for the one
> right objective. This search is not only likely to be
> as unproductive as the quest for the philosopher's
> stone; it is certain to do harm and to misdirect.

This conclusion has been obscured by the constraints of locating the study of

management within an engineering paradigm (Reed, 1989), one of the legacies of

Taylor and Fayol; and the problematic nature of management studies as a discipline. As Storey (1985a) argues, it is difficult to see whether the area exists to provide a critical assessment of practice, popularise specific techniques or act as an apologist for managerial ideology. Rather than sensitising observations of managers, these two last orientations may have focused interest away from addressing any substantive issues. So, the literary traditions of management studies may have encouraged writings to be couched in terms of celebrations of individual careers or prescriptive models, yet such publications do little to increase our understanding of what management *is*. Here, this chapter will go on to draw on some of the empirical research into managerial work and argue that, far from being a generic activity or set of qualities, management covers a wide variety of tasks, roles and specialisms which may differ from workplace to workplace and individual to individual.

An agnostic approach to managerial work

Considerable support for this heterogeneous construction of management is found in the empirical work. Pollard (1965, quoted in Reed and Anthony, 1992) conducted a historical study of managers between 1780-1850 and argued that they constituted a highly diffuse, fragmented group with no distinctive identity, class, profession, occupation or body of knowledge.

Stewart (1976; 1988), in her work on more contemporary managers, took a very open approach. Rather than restricting her survey to those who matched her

preconceived notions of what a managerial job was, she deliberately sought out respondents who were managers and asked them what they did. This agnostic view meant that her survey covered a wide range of both people and functions and Stewart argued that a manager was "anyone above a certain level, roughly above foreman whether . . . in control of people or not" (1976:4). As Bamber (1986) points out, this (non-) definition produced an occupational group that was vertically narrow but horizontally broad, spanning engineers, scientists, accountants, personnel specialists, administrators and marketing experts.

In her conclusions, Stewart (1988) argued that the results showed not one, but five different types of manager with very distinct and incompatible, work behaviours. The *Emissaries* were the organisational ambassadors. They spent most of their time away from their own companies travelling, visiting others and entertaining. The *Writers*, by contrast, spent more of their time in the office engaged in paperwork. Unlike other managers, writers spent little time in groups and most of their contact was on a one-to-one basis. *Discussers,* as their name suggests, spent far more time with colleagues and superiors, though little with subordinates and Stewart described their activities as closest to the 'average' of the respondents in her study. *Trouble-shooters* were called in to deal with crises and run teams dealing with exceptional circumstances, so their work was far less predictable than many other managers; and finally the *Committee-men*, as might be expected, spent a great deal of time in contact with other people but, unlike the Emissaries, their contacts were largely internal and they seldom met with

representatives of other organisations. These categories described such a range

of responsibilities, activities and priorities that Stewart concluded (p. 77):

> The variations were so great that it is misleading to
> talk, as much of the management literature does,
> about *the* managerial job, or about how the *average*
> manager spends his or her time. [Emphasis in
> original]

In her later work Stewart went on to conduct further empirical studies, develop

other classifications (1975; 1991), and consider the impact that a changing

organisational environment (1992), individual choice (1981), and managers'

perceptions of their own work (Marshall and Stewart, 1981a; 1981b), might have

on these conclusions. But the diversity inherent in managerial work remained a

constant theme of her writings. Others reinforce this (Watson, 1994; Bamber,

1986; Whitley, 1989) to the extent that some queried the necessity for making so

obvious a statement. As Scase and Goffee point out (1989:20):

> It is self-evident that the duties and responsibilities
> of sales managers, for example, differ from those
> engaged in personnel, production, or market
> research.

Such diversity has led several commentators to conclude that management itself

is a largely meaningless term or, as Mant (1977) asks (p. 1):

> Could all these people - the pundits - the professors -
> the managers themselves be on about nothing or,
> more likely, could they be on about so many things
> that it made no sense at all to lump them together
> under the banner 'management'

Certainly, in one sense the term 'management' is used to describe so wide a

variety of different sorts of actors and tasks (Marchington, 1995) that attempting

to extrapolate a job description or a list of individual qualities from it will inevitably end in frustration. However, while this heterogeneity may make the prospect of developing a single, straightforward, homogeneous and functionally based definition of managerial work remote, it does not justify abandoning all attempts to describe managerial work. The redundancy of the popular, positivist constructions does not mean that *no* definition is appropriate. At the risk of using a double negative, management is not "nothing".

Re-defining managerial work

Willmott (1984) suggests that a clearer view of management can be obtained by extending the discussion to the radical literature (p. 349):

> the conventional images and ideals of managerial work may, paradoxically, be of less value in appeasing and exploiting the tensions in the Capitalist labour process than the insights provided by a more radical approach.

This school rejects the notion that the distinctive element of managerial work can be functionally determined. As has been argued above, attractive as these work-based definitions are, they do not unproblematically segregate managers from non-managers. Radical theorists concentrate instead on the *power and authority* that management exercise, and so arrive at a conception of management and managers which is *inclusive* rather than *exclusive*. They argue that all managers, whatever their actual job specification, are involved in running businesses on

behalf of the 'owners' (though occasionally, as Wright, 1995, points out, such owners may be both invisible and uninfluential).

This insight provides a definition of management which successfully contextualises it, and incorporates the dimensions of power, authority and status so neglected in most models of management and so vital a part of management itself. This effectively shifts the debate on management since, if management is context-bound, success in management is local rather than transferable (Scase and Goffee, 1989:5):

> Styles of management which are considered effective at one point in time may cease to be seen as such when the prevailing values and assumptions change during a subsequent era.

Nor is it only styles that vary between organisations. The tasks, responsibilities, work and status of those employees who enjoy the title 'manager' vary greatly both between and within organisations in ways that may not easily be understood by outsiders. Watson's (1994) study highlights the titular inflation which led to the term 'manager' being applied to more lower level posts and neglected at the higher levels of the organisation (see also Burrell, 1992) as old 'section leaders' rejoiced in their new titles and more senior employees considered themselves to have been promoted beyond management, an attitude Watson queries. If managers are understood to be those with status in an organisation who may affect and influence decisions, this diversity is not only understandable, but necessary. As Armstrong notes in his critique of the attempts to construct a generic model of management (1989:311):

the qualities and abilities required of managers depend heavily on the priorities and prejudices of whoever appoints the agent, rather than some theoretical specification of 'the managerial task'.

Moreover, this agency view of management portrays managers as those with power and authority over others, a construction long understood by scholars of industrial relations (see, for example, Storey, 1980; 1985b) but seldom reported outside that discipline. Yet it is this power and authority which is one of the key elements distinguishing the managerial from the non-managerial (elements which there is a pressing need to identify, as Hales, 1986, argued).

It may be that the official, 'managerialist' literature on management sought to minimise these elements since, in a democratic society, they might be thought politically most contentious, and sought instead to emphasise those technical aspects of the managerial role which might legitimise their status through expertise. Certainly, the theorists of the right have been traditionally far more modest about the power wielded by managers than their counterparts on the left (Anthony, 1986). Whatever the provenance, reorienting the definition of management towards technical skills and away from organisational control was in serious danger of distorting the nature of managerial work by focusing attention away from the managerial elements of that work. However, depicting managers as agents captures both that aspect of managerial work that differentiates managers from non-managers and preserves enough flexibility to incorporate the variety of functions and specialisms managers may engage in. Indeed, it almost *demands* that management is heterogeneous and subject to local

norms, to the extent that the diversity of managerial work stops being something that needs to be simplified or explained away and becomes instead a key facet of the nature of management itself.

'Rational' management

This heterogeneity of functions and attributes is only one part of managerial work; a further aspect of the literature deserves particular attention and that is the myth of the 'rational' manager. The positivist legacy of Taylor and Fayol was highlighted earlier in the chapter and, as McGregor (1960) points out, this was compounded by the fact that most of the early research in management was conducted using the Catholic Church and the Army as models. Its emphasis was on the systemic rather than the human aspects of work and the image of management which emerged was one that was rational and hierarchically-driven. In Anthony's words (1986:101) the theory of management:

> is based upon the assumption that management is rational, purposive, goal-directed, and that its organisation is structured so as to facilitate the achievement of business or economic goals.

This technicist orientation depicts management (and managers) as rational and objective (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). Yet, as Storey (1980) argues, there is little real evidence to suggest that managers have emerged as a neutral 'third force' in employment relations or that managerial decisions are arrived at on reasoned, logical grounds.

Assuming that work organisations are rational presupposes that the human elements involved in production can be managed and understood by ascribing rational views to them; in effect they take on the replicative certainty of machines. Considerable academic and managerial effort has gone into devising predictive tools for managing people (as is critically noted in Steffy and Grimes, 1992). However, impressive as many of these theories are, their tendency to generalise and simplify human reactions limits their utility. Cleverley (1971) points out that (p. 2): "People are not rational. Nor are they susceptible to rational control systems". Since the models of management proposed by the traditionalists rely on comparatively inert and rule-following employees (Dalton, 1966), workers who fail to live up to these expectations present difficulties to the effective implementation of these systems (Watson, 1994:5):

> The traditional conceptions of management as an activity involving planning, controlling, commanding and the like had long seemed to me to amount to little more than idealised aspirations of management writers who saw the world as a much more malleable and controllable place than it turns out to be when we actually try to manage aspects of it.

In practice, as Watson points out, organisations and the employees that they consist of, are far from rational. The necessary corollary to 'non-rational' workers of course, is 'non-rational' managers and there is little to suggest that managerial employees are any more capable of subordinating their emotions to the pursuit of profit and the manipulation of those who report to them than their non-managerial colleagues (Watson, 1994; Mant, 1977).

Although, in pursuit of the rational workplace, the rationality of managerial employees remained (and, in some cases, *remains*) an article of faith with many commentators. 'T'-Groups sought to teach managers to control their own emotions, the better to manipulate those of others and even the human relations school allocated controlling roles to managers (Moss-Kanter, 1977:23):

> In Mayo's view workers were controlled by sentiment, emotion and social instincts, and this phenomenon needed to be understood and taken into account in organisational functioning. On the other hand, managers were rational, logical and able to control their emotions in the interests of organisational design.

More recently, the emotive appeals of populist management writers may have served to re-integrate emotion within the corporation (see, for example, Peters and Austin, 1985; Mito, 1990 and McCormack, 1989). Although, while it is now legitimate (and possibly mandatory) for managers to love, enthuse and express commitment, the role of less positive emotions is unclear and these texts may represent no more than a new variant of the traditional emotional manipulation, albeit with an evangelical twist.

A few research-based studies do exist that attempt to depict what managers do as managers without denying the human side of their work, and, as Edwards (1992) says of ethnographies, though these studies are limited in number, they tend to be disproportionately influential. Some, such as Edwards (1987) and Watson (1977), examine specific managerial specialisms; others look at *all* managers and attempt to understand what management is. The earliest of these was Dalton's

(1966) ethnographic account of organisational life; in a similar vein, Barnard

(1962) and Watson (1994) provide rich descriptions of workplace practice,

gained through participant observation. Moss-Kanter (1977) devotes particular

space in her analysis to the role of gender in corporate life and the impact that

different experiences of work have on men and women and Jackall (1988)

describes the tensions and values in corporate morality and organisational

politics.

The image of managers which emerges from these studies is very different to that

propounded by the classical theorists. Managers are concerned not only with the

greater good of the organisation but with their own careers and with the success

of their own departments, Dalton (1966) describes how supervisors tried to

'botch' running repairs to machinery to avoid maintenance being performed on

their own shifts, where it would adversely affect their targets, and ensure that it

was done on other supervisors' shifts. Useem and Gager (1996) take this to a

more strategic level and point out that, as well as acting as the agents of owners,

managers may themselves successfully challenge and replace those owners with

ones they find more congenial; an action which amply illustrates Storey's

argument that managers should not be (1985b:195):

> simply regarded as essentially unproblematic agents
> of capital who dispatch their 'global function of
> capital' in a rationalistic manner.

In addition to this, the public rhetoric used by organisations often presents a very

different view of management to that encouraged by the promotions system.

Managers operate in a high-trust environment (Moss-Kanter, 1977) with few

objective indicators of their performance, which means, in practice, that a key

criterion influencing managerial assessments and careers is not an individual

manager's performance but the *impression* of performance he or she conveys to

others (Gowler and Legge, 1983; Heller, 1996:14):

> There is no absolute criteria [sic] of managerial
> achievement. A manager is good and a company
> efficient only because others consider the results of
> their work good: their so-called goodness endures
> only as long as this good opinion holds.

Moreover, this impression must be made on the right people. Lewis and Stewart

(1958) recount the story of two young naval officers who, on leaving Dartmouth

as mid-shipmen, promised each other that when either heard the other's name

mentioned in conversation they would chip in with the remark "Did I hear you

say old so-and-so? He's a marvellous chap, simply marvellous". Both ended

their careers as admirals.

Jackall (1988) draws a parallel between the managerial world of favour and

privilege and the courtiers who served powerful monarchs. In both cases

preferment could derive as easily from the gift of a more powerful courtier (or

the monarch themselves) as through the Calvinist discipline of virtue and hard

work (see also Lee and Piper 1988 for a study of promotions within a British

clearing bank). This means that, while the rhetoric of organisational life

emphasises the puritanical virtues, the reality is more complicated. Hirsch and

Bevan (1988) noted that, even where well-defined lists of 'official' skills and

attributes were available, promotions were most often based on other, 'unofficial' criteria and the characteristics commented on and assessed in practice were not necessarily those that were officially recorded (pp. 68 - 69):

> one organisation (which had come to believe most of its managers were rather 'stodgy') actually looked for 'sparkle' in making appointments - an attribute which appeared on none of its . . . public lists of skill requirements! Another organisation which had staff posted all over the world had well developed formal . . . languages for both managerial and professional skills. However, its [informal] language spoke of 'gin and tonic' people (suited for jobs in developed countries or large cities) versus 'bush' people (who could function in much less well supported environments). These distinctions were well understood and clearly relevant to the organisation, but had only a vague linkage to listed attributes used in performance appraisal.

While both Barnard (1962) and Moss-Kanter (1977) suggest that physical attractiveness was also a factor in managerial promotions. Nor is this world of politically fraught impression management restricted to managerial promotions. As Sayles (1979, quoted in Willmott, 1984:391) argues:

> Only naïve managers assume that budgets get allocated and key decisions are made solely on the basis of rational decision making

And managers, accustomed to an official language which emphasises virtue, hard-work and meeting objectives and a reality where actual performance has less meaning than perceived performance, grow adept at interpreting organisational symbols (Jackall, 1988 calls his managers "maze bright"). Most aspects of managerial life need to be considered in the light of these conclusions; budgets are not simply the resources necessary to achieve the corporate goals,

they are symbols of individual power and occasionally individual empire-building; training courses do not only convey useful information and skills, they represent investment in, and confidence in, an individual, and are an expression of support; and written records are not only the factual narratives of events but also corporate propaganda and individual 'weaponry' in the managerial competition (Jackall, 1988:88):

> most written documents in the corporate world constitute simply official versions of reality that often bear little resemblance to the tangled, ambiguous, and verbally negotiated transactions that they purportedly represent.

It also means, to return to the original theme of this section, that, bereft of objective indicators, managers may be measured and assessed only against the impression they convey of themselves, and norms established by other managers. Since managers can influence the direction their company takes (Watson, 1994), employing them becomes an exercise in trust and to mitigate the risks the company might run, conformity and 'being known' become key conditions of entry into management (Moss-Kanter, 1977; Dalton, 1966); criteria which result in the phenomenon that Moore (1951) termed "homosexual reproduction". This has important implications for the nature of management itself. Several authors have noted that, since managers tend to be male, managerial norms are male norms, which means that women have great difficulty winning admittance to the managerial ranks, and even greater difficulty securing appointment to those posts that carry highest prestige (Marshall, 1984; Root, 1984; Collinson *et al*, 1990; Larwood and Wood, 1978).

Far from being rational, neutral and objective, management is a social activity which is heavily influenced by local norms, ideals and prejudices. As a result, the behaviours and attributes organisations encourage in managers may be very different to the lists of virtues published by management authors. To win the trust of others, managers must *con*form rather than *per*form. The rhetoric of performance and meritocracy is preserved in order to legitimate their status but the way individual managers succeed in organisational terms may be less rationally determined in practice than much of the material suggests.

Managerial work: conclusions

This chapter has presented a view of management that is largely couched in negative terms, in that it has argued that management is not an identifiable set of functions that can be abstracted from a particular context and readily transplanted, nor is it a set of individual attributes, virtues or behaviours (or at least no more than all human activity is). Nor is it a clearly rational and objective set of activities. Here, it might be more constructive to review the positive elements of this chapter. Rather than catalogue what management is *not,* this section will try to explain what management *is.*

Earlier, it was argued that the definition of management proposed by Armstrong (1989), that of managers as agents, provides a much more satisfactory alternative to the functional generics of the orthodox texts. Firstly, it includes a key element

of the managerial relationship much neglected by the literature, that of power and secondly, it offers a definition which incorporates a variety of different tasks and levels (as is true of practising managers) while being clear and coherent. It also eliminates one of the dangers of the early work on managers which was that (Watson, 1994:38):

> It leads managers to see their job as managerial because they are 'in charge' of a number [of] people, of certain resources or of a department. What needs to be recognised, instead, is that a job is a managerial job in so far as it is concerned with 'shaping' the activities of the work organisation as a whole to bring about its long term survival.

Such a definition is both accurate and useful. It matches the reality of management well (p. 51):

> A managerial appointment is a stage in a person's hierarchical career in an organisation, rather than an entry into an immediately distinctive and clearly identifiable, occupational activity.

Drawing on this conception of managers as agents who perform a variety of different functions, few of which are susceptible to objective assessment and over which they have some degree of freedom and choice (Stewart, 1981), it becomes easier to understand why trust is such a key feature of managerial work and why the emotional commitment (and psychological contract) between managers and their employers is such a key feature of the relationship (Newell and Dopson, 1995; Pahl and Pahl, 1971). Moreover, these conclusions have important implications for the development and training of managers. If the function is heterogeneous, locally determined, based on status rather than task, involves the

exercise of authority and is problematic to assess and measure, then these factors

need to be taken into account in the training process. Storey again (1990:5):

> The implication of this variety for the study of
> management development is that, far from persisting
> with the overwhelmingly universalistic tenor of most
> of the conventional literature on management
> development, there is an urgent need to re-direct
> attention to different contexts.

A conclusion which has particular relevance for this research. As will become

apparent in the next chapter, the Management NVQ is based on very different

assumptions about the nature of managerial work than are suggested here, and

one of the main issues considered during the fieldwork was which of these two

conclusions best reflects the reality of managerial work as experienced by the

managers in this study.

CHAPTER THREE

COMPETENCE BASED EDUCATION AND TRAINING AND THE

'QUIET REVOLUTION'

Chapter two reviewed some of the literature on managerial work, in an attempt to provide a framework against which the implementation of the Management NVQ, and the tensions this generated, can be understood. It considered several of the ways in which managerial work has been described and constructed during the last century and argued that the most agnostic interpretations, which depicted management as heterogeneous, subject to individual choice and ill-adapted to functionally-based definition, were the most helpful.

Here the nature of CBET is considered. Given the undeniable complexities of the NVQ system (Hyland, 1994; 1992), this chapter will be explanatory in tone. Its purpose is not to engage in the more esoteric debates which plague the dedicated journals on CBET, but rather to describe the objectives of the proponents of competence, examine the radical restructuring of vocational

education and training (VET) that resulted in NVQs and consider what was expected of these revolutionary qualifications. Set against this will be some of the criticism which greeted their development. For, while to its advocates, competence represented an exciting step forward (Jessup, 1989a), its critics, concentrated largely in educational establishments, argued that CBET was based on an irretrievably narrow conception of human behaviour and restricted learners' opportunities (Hyland, 1993; 1994). The debate has polarised, with little engagement between the two camps, and much of it is couched in emotional terms (whether evangelical or polemical).

This chapter starts by reviewing the reasons for introducing such a radical form of VET and charts some of the differences between it and the more orthodox educational approaches, before addressing some of the problems which emerged during the development phase. Four key areas are considered: Functional Analysis, the process through which competences are constructed; the occupational standards themselves, the behaviours at the heart of the NVQ model; knowledge and understanding, the reluctance of the CBET developers to construct a hybrid academic-NVQ model; and assessment, through which candidates are certified 'competent'.

Having considered the NVQ model in general terms, this chapter concludes with a section on the Management NVQ at level 4. It argues that the assumptions on the nature of managerial work which underlie this qualification are dramatically

different to those supported in chapter two and that this tension is potentially highly problematic.

Competence: background, introduction and content

NVQs were launched after the publication of a series of critical reports on British training (Coopers and Lybrand, 1985; Peel, 1984; NEDO/MSC, 1984; CBI, 1989). These highlighted the chronic shortage of good training at almost every level. Weaknesses in the formal school system were not compensated for by a strong tradition of vocational training and apprenticeships, and these two deficiencies were mutually reinforcing, effectively establishing a vicious circle of little training. In addition to this, considerable evidence suggested that there was so little financial return available for low level training, that many workers in Britain would be actively economically *irrational* to pursue it, (Bennett *et al*, 1992) so removing the main individual incentive to invest in training (Maguire *et al*, 1993); and that the presence of large numbers of unskilled and poorly-paid jobs in the economy provided an environment where firms competed on cost and spending money on training would detract from organisational performance (Keep and Mayhew, 1996). Several commentators gloomily predicted that the country would decline into a "low skills equilibrium" (Finegold and Soskice, 1990).

In 1986, the de Ville working party attempted to remedy this by suggesting that training (and qualifications) be made more *relevant* to employment (MSC/DES,

1986). They proposed introducing a system of qualifications which would link certificates to the real skills employees used in the workplace. It was hoped that, once vocational training became directly relevant to work, both parties to the employment relationship would actively pursue it, employers to gain a productive workforce and employees to acquire meaningful certificates of genuine use in the job market.

At the political level too, 'vocationalising' education was rapidly coming to be seen as the remedy to the nation's economic ills (Stronach, 1990; Coffield, 1990; Woodhall, 1990; Lauglo and Lillis, 1988). It was an attractive argument, predicated on the assumption that the poor record of training within Britain could be attributed to defects within the training system, and it resulted in the creation of the NCVQ to oversee the development of these new, relevant certificates. Industry- (or occupation-) specific organisations called Industry Lead Bodies (ILBs) were to develop the qualifications, which would be issued and validated by Awarding Bodies, many of which also awarded traditional vocational and academic qualifications (among the best known of these are: BTEC, City and Guilds, the RSA, the Institute of Management and the Open University). The NCVQ had the (somewhat ill-defined) remit of monitoring all these various bodies and qualifications and it, in its turn was funded by, and reported to, the Training, Education and Enterprise Directorate (TEED) in Sheffield (which, during a recent reorganisation, was subsumed into the Department for Education and Employment, DfEE).

Since this formal launch, CBET has rapidly acquired a dedicated vocabulary, which describes 'specialist' concepts; an extensive (if obscure) hierarchy; and proponents who treat all aspects of the system with ideological fervour. This increasing systemic complexity has not been matched by an increasing understanding of NVQs among educationalists or corporate trainers, a fact that would be of little concern, were it not for the considerable ambitions many of the proponents have for these new qualifications.

From the outset, NVQs were intended to first dominate and ultimately replace, all traditional forms of certification (Fennell, 1994; 1991; Mathews, 1992; Oates, 1994). To a certain extent, this "quiet revolution" (Burke, 1989:1) has been successful, certainly NVQs have attracted far more official support than any other forms of VET. Until relatively recently, NVQs were the only vocational qualification which attracted tax relief (Richards, 1996); the only qualification which was marketed through the system of TECs, LECs and the MCI network; and the principal means of gauging other qualifications in the governmental educational and training targets, which have been expressed in terms of NVQ levels or their equivalent since 1990. Further, within companies, broad-based training initiatives such as Investors in People, encourage a greater take-up of the qualifications (IIP, 1996; Hillage and Moralee, 1996; Spilsbury et al, 1995; Rix et al, 1994) and a variant of NVQs, GNVQs (General National Vocational Qualifications) has been launched in schools. Before the qualifications had been either designed or piloted, their advocates intended them to be the major, national, certification system (MSC/DES, 1986).

Yet despite the fact that this new system was intended to provide a qualifications framework for the entire working population, and that, to achieve this, the government and its various agencies invested millions in NVQ-related activities (see, again, Wolf, 1996; *The Independent* 1st May 1997; DfEE, 1995; 1996a; 1996b; CBI, 1994), independent research was actively discouraged during the first few years of implementation (*The Money Programme*, 6th October 1996; Article 26, 1994; *Dispatches*, 23rd November 1993), and the actual development and piloting of the qualifications was conducted so discreetly that it is hard to see how a debate of any sort might have developed.

While the issues CBET was intended to address (those of a poorly skilled workforce, restricted access to certain forms of education and the problems inherent in linking academic and industrial requirements) undeniably needed attention, it was by no means clear that introducing CBET was the most productive way forward. This possibility however, was never raised. The debate tended to be conducted in terms of national needs rather than the viability of the suggested solution (for some examples of this, see, Debling, 1989; Jessup, 1989a; Fennell, 1989a); and even such general discussion was rare, since almost all of the early work was confined to a restricted circle of enthusiasts. Jessup (1989b) acknowledges this proudly in one of the first works on CBET and NVQs published in Britain (p *x*):

> Readers from the world of education may be
> surprised to learn that radically new models of
> vocational education and training are being adopted

with little debate and with seemingly little research
and development.   In fact, much research and
development *has* taken place, but those doing it are
so close to the policy makers and implementors
(sometimes they *are* the policy makers and
implementors) that the many papers and reports
which circulate have seldom entered the mainstream
of research literature. The debate has been confined
to a relatively small group [emphasis in original]

Restricting the debate to such a small clique did little to encourage the use of

independent pilot studies prior to implementation and, even when such pilots

were funded, they were accused of being run in tandem with the official launches

rather than preceding them (Constable, 1990; 1989).   Moreover, since the

decision was taken very early on to make NVQs a national scheme, the main

issue the movement faced subsequently was not whether the qualifications were

useful, it was assumed this would be proved by trial and error (Thompson and

Stephenson, 1991a; 1991b) but how quickly they could be implemented.

Warwick (1992:16):

It appears that the whole competence based approach
is being driven by a political will to firmly establish
the process, and as such the development has been a
linear one

Critics were dismissed as either "powerful interests" irretrievably opposed to the

new system because it threatened their hegemony (Guy, 1991:50) or misguided

people who would soon be "converted" (Thompson and Stephenson, 1991a:7).

The feeling among the enthusiasts was, that it was so self-evident that NVQs

were a better way forward there was no need to pilot them.

Essentially, NVQs aimed to ensure that the skills certified matched those actually employed in the workplace as closely as possible, and that, where such elements were irrelevant, periods of apprenticeship, courses of study and traditional or project-based assignments, formed no compulsory part of assessment. Accordingly, the process of evaluating candidates needed to be radically reconceptualised. Rather than focusing on 'inputs' in terms of training, CBET was designed to measure 'outcomes', and the 'outcome' of a training programme is the 'trained' person. Jessup (1991:3) argued that:

> The measure of success for any education and training system should be what people actually learn from it, and how effectively. Just common sense you might think, yet this is a comparatively new idea.

Moreover, proponents of CBET maintained that these outcomes could be measured independently of the candidates' mode of study. To achieve this, NVQs were presented as behavioural lists. These behaviours ('standards' or 'competences') were intended to describe the standard of performance a competent worker of several years' standing should display (Mitchell, 1989; Debling, 1989). Theoretically, employees who required additional 'inputs' (the apprenticeships, courses or assignments trainees were accustomed to engage in) could identify which areas they needed to focus on and undertake these courses; those who were already able to perform the tasks allotted to them satisfactorily could be immediately 'certified competent'.

By focusing on these performance-based outcomes, training would escape from

the hegemony of the educational system (Stanton, 1992; Jessup, 1991) and

become 'learner-centred' and 'employer-centred' (CBI, 1994:5):

> [NVQs] represent a fundamental change for the
> better in the way that competence in an occupation is
> defined, measured and recognised.

These 'outcomes' (or competences) take the form of 'occupational standards',

statements of the behaviour a candidate is expected to display. Officially

(Debling, 1989:80):

> competence pertains to the ability to perform the
> activities within a function or an occupational area to
> the levels of performance expected in employment.

The occupational standards themselves were intended to be (and heralded as),

objective descriptions of the actions really necessary in the workplace.

But disaggregating workplace behaviours down to precise performance

statements is uncomfortably reminiscent of Frederick Taylor's work. In order to

preserve NVQs against accusations of Taylorism, it was clearly incumbent upon

the developers to avoid too narrow a definition of work. In pursuit of a 'broad'

understanding of competence, (Fennell, 1989a; 1989b; Mitchell, 1989; Jessup,

1989a) the standards' developers devised a system known as Functional

Analysis.

This development of occupational standards is the triumph of the technicist

interpretation of work. Each occupation-specific NVQ aims to define and

publish 'benchmarked' standards for workplace activity. Once these standards have been defined they have many more uses than simple qualification and assessment, and may be employed in appraisal, development and training. Individual competence is displayed in the workplace on real work tasks and proved, repeatedly, under observation (NCVQ, 1995a; 1995b) so that the qualifications have a real as well as a symbolic value; and access to qualification is eased since NVQs are open-ended, so that candidates are at liberty to work towards them over a number of years (and even in a number of workplaces).

Of course, in addition to all these 'competence-specific' advantages, introducing any system of generally understood qualifications has enormous potential benefits: the existence of the qualifications may stimulate an increase of interest in certification in the working population; certificates are readily understandable and clear; recruitment and selection is greatly eased since both parties to the employment relationship find it easier to locate one another (White, 1990); and there are even suggestions that participation in the educational system has a positive impact on participation elsewhere socially (Courtenay, 1992).

However, this thesis is not concerned with the development of a national certification structure *per se,* but with one that is competence-based and, as such, qualitatively different from traditional qualifications. The implementation of NVQs will be considered in detail in later chapters, here some of the main theoretical critiques of CBET are set out.

Functional Analysis

The basis of Functional Analysis is very simple. It involves establishing the primary purpose of an occupation and using that purpose to produce the set of behaviours required for competent performance. This process first seeks out the 'key purpose' of the occupation it is defining (Mansfield, 1989), then, asking, 'what does it take for this to be achieved?', disaggregates it into key roles, units of competence, elements of competence and occupational standards (Miller, 1989; Mathews, 1991) using a mixture of consultants, practitioners and 'desk research' (Pugh and Alcock, 1992; Mansfield and Mitchell, 1991). In theory, by approaching the development of standards in this way and ensuring that each standard stems from, and may be linked hierarchically back to, the occupational 'key purpose' (see Fig. 1), standards keep their breadth; they are derived from a work *function* which is comparatively stable and meaningful, rather than an observed *task* which may be restrictive and transient (Littlefield, 1995; Hillier, 1994; Debling, 1992a).
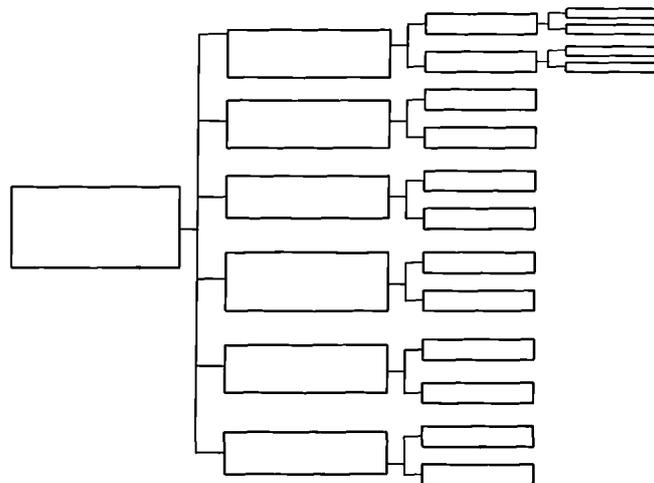

Fig. 1 The derivation of occupational standards

Since the occupational standards themselves are the foundation of every form of

CBET activity (Wood, *et al,* 1989) it is vital that Functional Analysis is seen to

be both scientific and rigorous (Salaman, 1995, argues that this is the main

advantage CBET has).   However, while in theory Functional Analysis is

comparatively straightforward, in practice it is problematic.   Essentially, it

involves drafting a hierarchy of roles and activities which all spring from (and

contribute towards) a single key purpose.   Yet, as Barnett (1994) points out,

reality is often less clear cut than such a hierarchical model might suggest and (p.

73):

> The identification of occupational standards is not
> something that can be settled, and competences read
> off, in any absolute fashion.

Neither the key purposes, nor their associated statements of occupational

competence are unproblematic. The key purposes themselves are generally broad

enough to be almost meaningless, that for both junior and middle managers

(NVQ levels 4 and 5) is exactly the same, *To achieve the organisation's*

objectives and continuously improve its performance (MCI, 1991a:14;

1991b:16).   While this is suitably worthy, and there are certain advantages in

focusing all levels of the managerial hierarchy around the same 'mission

statement', the aim of a key purpose is to provide a basis from which to develop

a list of actions, and this is broad enough to support many such (mutually

incompatible) lists.   Others, like that for retail sales, *Make household goods*

available for sale to domestic customers (Mansfield, 1989a:8) could easily be

exchanged for something else, say, *Serving customer needs for profit* which might inspire a completely different set of elements and competences. This mutability of the occupation's 'key purpose' casts an element of doubt over the concrete and objective nature of NVQs.

Accounts of the processes involved in Functional Analysis repeatedly emphasise the elements of (often arbitrary) human judgement involved at each stage, without ever entirely clarifying the basis on which these judgements were made. Only small groups of people were involved in the drafting process (Micklewright, 1992) and most of these were "small consultancy firms of recent origin" (Eraut, 1994:188). Since the competence movement itself had rapidly evolved into an extraordinarily complex initiative, most of these consultants were hired on the basis of their expertise with CBET and few boasted any subject-specific knowledge (Wolf, 1995). To provide this, groups of practitioners were involved in the process, but this input of expertise was often limited (Emery, 1989) and confused (Fennell, 1989b:20):

> They turn up thinking its a course of some kind -
> perhaps to explain what [the] NCVQ is doing. . . .
> Very rarely do they understand anything about
> Functional Analysis

The judgements exercised over what competences to include (Miller, 1989), at what level the disaggregation process starts and stops, and how each of the standards are worded, are largely "arbitrary" (Gealy, 1989:18).

Nor do the mechanisms through which the standards are validated suggest that the developers were actively trying to produce statements of best practice. Mansfield (1989a) suggests only that competences should be marketable, credible and "look like the kinds of job roles or functions which are common in the industry" (p. 8). James's (1992) description of the pilot programmes is so concise (recording only that they happen) that it is difficult to form a meaningful judgement of these programmes' efficacy. Micklewright (1992) reports consultation surveys which confirm the standards by asking employers whether employees would indeed be expected to perform the actions listed; but, as Gibb (1995) points out, such an exercise is far more likely to produce a politically acceptable list of behaviours than a rigorously tested statement of competence.

Anecdotal accounts of the standards' development process, public statements by some of the developers who distance themselves from the results and descriptions of resignations from the various Lead Bodies (Marsh and Holmes, 1990; Gibb, 1995) serve to reinforce the impression that the occupational standards are little more than arbitrary constructs. Against this, the official studies list impressive amounts of research, but these are accompanied by almost no results or methodological details. The MCI's account of how the management standards were developed (MCI, 1990) lists (among others), seven drafts (p. 44), a postal survey of 198 managers (p. 33), a telephone survey of 220 people (p. 45), 'field trials' (p. 38), 'detailed assessment' of 84 managers (p. 22) and seven months of 'desk research' (p. 15) done by seven project teams and two sets of consultants (p. 50) but offers no information whatsoever on the methods,

methodologies or results of any of these activities. As Gibb (1995) argues, in the absence of any sort of detail their conclusions are difficult to accept with any degree of confidence.

This iterative (Miller, 1989) and arbitrary (Gealy, 1989) process seems far more likely to produce an amalgam of the collective preconceptions and prejudices that are held about any one occupation than the sort of objective and scientific benchmarks the NVQ developers aimed for. As Gibb notes, with reference to one of the standards development exercises (1995:71):

> A project such as that undertaken by the [Personnel Standards Lead Body] will only be successful to the extent that it provides a consensus definition and model of personnel management.

Occupational standards then, are socially constructed. When developing the personnel standards, political lobbying and negotiating led to both the in-and ex-clusion of statements of competence as personnel practitioners used the exercise to increase their own influence (Gibb, 1995). Within management, idealised aspirational competences were rated higher than observed behaviours (Bevan, 1990) and accounts of the development process leave the reader a little uncertain as to whether an aspirational or a descriptive model is being constructed (see, for example, Gealy, 1989). Since much of the legitimacy of CBET's 'relevance' to employers is based on its claim that the standards are scientifically derived benchmarks this criticism is a serious one. Moreover, the reliance on the professional opinions of the developers is in marked contrast to the adherence to the exact letter of the standards demanded at every other stage in the process.

This is an important point. The purpose the occupational standards were being

developed *for* should form a key part of any review of Functional Analysis.

After all, many possible reforms of both education and VET have been suggested

over the years; CBET was supported in preference to these other initiatives

because it offered certain specific advantages. The standards were intended to

reduce the power of educationalists by providing freely available criteria

specifying what candidates should be measured against (Jessup, 1991); they were

to provide a quality assurance mechanism for TECs (Fennell, 1992); ensure

consistency of assessment (Mathews, 1992; Debling, 1992b) and bring

objectivity to fraught and subjective processes (see Hyland, 1994 for a more

detailed critique of this philosophy behind the standards). Indeed, the dominance

of these statements of behaviour is observable at every stage of the NVQ process

from start (Mitchell and Cuthbert, 1989:2):

> The fundamental message is that elements of
> competence. . . determine the evidence to be
> collected and consequently the assessment methods
> and instrument most appropriate for the task

To finish, Warwick (1992:10), "assessment has to be rooted in the standards and

totally derived from them".

The process of Functional Analysis results in a consensual set of standards. This

may be no bad thing, the extensive surveys and political lobbying described in

the developmental literature may help to achieve high levels of both awareness

and acceptance of the new qualifications. However there is little to suggest that a

product of these exercises is objective statements of human performance, yet this

is what NVQs were intended to provide and what they claimed to offer.

Standards, knowledge and understanding

Through this process, the NCVQ aimed to develop realistic descriptions of

workplace activity which would enable even novice assessors to gauge the

competence of the employees they evaluated. This belief in the capacity of the

standards to define performance is a recurring feature of the debates on CBET

and has several important implications for the way NVQs were implemented. As

one of their proponents maintained (Barbara Shelborn Developments Ltd,

1990:1):

> if standards describe work role expectations, then
> standards should be sufficient in their own right

Here, since the focus of this section is the development of the occupational

standards, it is appropriate to consider the impact of this stance on the role of

'knowledge testing'.

CBET was, after all, intended as a criticism of the old, traditional system of

vocational and academic education and its supporters were as vehement in their

condemnation of the old ways, as they were enthusiastic about the new. To

them, traditional qualifications meant subjective written exams with pass marks

of 40 or 50%, didactic teaching methods, abstract theories and restricted access;

whereas CBET promised objective performance benchmarks certifying 100%

competence, 'student-centred' teaching with small groups each working at their own (practical, hands-on) activities at their own pace, immediately relevant practical skills and open access (Jessup, 1991; 1989a; Docking, 1991; Debling, 1989; Stanton, 1989; Shackleton, 1989). Consequently, suggestions that the occupational standards be adapted to incorporate 'knowledge elements', were greeted with hostility. Such additions were not only unnecessary, they would undermine the standards themselves by introducing irrelevant, 'traditional' theoretical elements. Jessup contested that (1991:121):

> If a person performs competently we need not be
> concerned with what he or she knows. Any
> knowledge the individual requires can be inferred
> from their performance.

Using two, somewhat contradictory, arguments, the CBET proponents asserted that firstly, it was impossible to satisfactorily test knowledge. 'Direct testing' (opening up someone's head and measuring) was not feasible and every other form of testing was a less than optimal proxy for direct testing (Wolf, 1989; Mansfield, 1989b). Secondly, discrete 'knowledge testing' was irrelevant anyway since competent performance necessarily demonstrated that the candidate possessed sufficient knowledge (Mansfield, 1990; Wolf and Mitchell, 1991; Mansfield and Mitchell, 1991; Mitchell, 1993:11):

> Human activity is intellect based - it is impossible
> for individuals to meet the outcomes specified in the
> standards without intellect

Even at the lower levels, this ideological emphasis on observed performance is problematic. As Smithers (1993) points out in his cross-cultural critique of

NVQs, the lower level vocational qualifications in France and Holland, and the old BTEC qualifications NVQs replaced, included rigorous knowledge testing which meant that a key aspect of the preparation for these qualifications was that students were taught a great deal of the theory and practice of their chosen discipline. With the advent of NVQs, in which such theoretical components were not tested, but where it was assumed that if they were a necessary part of performance they would be taught, this educational dimension vanished. Prais (1990, cited in CBI, 1994:22) argued that:

> the NCVQ's level 1 qualifications will eventually be
> regarded by the public as showing that the candidate
> has taken a test that requires neither reading nor
> writing, and thus confirms the candidate as being of
> limited ability and certified as such to boot.

Without this additional component it is difficult to see how NVQs might actively 'up-skill' candidates; certifying people's competence in areas in which they needed no further tuition could boost Britain's relative position in the international educational league tables, but if these certificates had no educational content the exercise would be a cosmetic one and, as such, would carry with it few of the other advantages a highly skilled population might boast.

Eventually, after a heated debate on the place of 'knowledge testing' an unhappy compromise was reached and some knowledge requirements were included as additional performance criteria and range statements (Employment Department, 1993). Both performance criteria and range statements were a set-back to the purist interpretation of standards as sufficient in their own right, since they had

been added on to the qualifications to clarify problematic aspects. Although, having accepted this dilution of the standards themselves, the developers successfully confined all amendments, including the knowledge elements, to these performance criteria and range statements. As a result, they rapidly became over-loaded (Wolf, 1995). The Management NVQ level 4 came to consist of 9 units of competence, 26 elements of competence, 163 performance criteria and 338 range statements, all, of course, in the name of clarification.

Assessment

Clearly all of these issues feed into and impact on the assessment process since the style, content and format of a qualification helps to determine the manner in which it is assessed. In CBET, because the qualifications aim to certify competence independent of the mode of study, this impact is dramatically increased, to the extent that some CBET writers have claimed that assessment is the only important aspect of NVQs and everything else flows from it (Fletcher, 1991).

However, as Wolf (1995:25) argues, contrary to the beliefs of CBET's advocates, standards of performance may not be immediately apparent to assessors working from NVQ performance criteria. To illustrate her argument, she reproduces element 9.1 *Obtain and evaluate information to aid decision making* from the MCI's NVQ level 5 for senior managers (Fig. 2).

Element 9.1 Obtain and evaluate information to aid decision making	
(a)	Information requirements are identified accurately and re-evaluated at suitable intervals
(b)	Information is sought on all relevant factors affecting current or potential operations
(c)	Information is relevant and is collected in time to be of use
(d)	A variety of sources of information are regularly reviewed for usefulness, reliability and cost
(e)	Opportunities are taken to establish and maintain contacts with those who may provide useful information
(f)	Methods of obtaining information are periodically evaluated and improved where necessary
(g)	When normal information routes are blocked, alternative methods are tried
(h)	Information is organised into a suitable form to aid decision making
(i)	Conclusions drawn from relevant information are based on reasoned argument and appropriate evidence

Fig. 2: Management, level 5 element 3.2 Source: MCI (1991b)

These behaviours, ostensibly drawn from the activities of middle managers could as easily be used to describe the responsibilities of the porter at an office reception desk (see also Appendix A, element 8.1 of NVQ level 4 which is very similar). To make the assessment process even more complicated, there is even some debate among the proponents over whether competence means being on the threshold of performing the tasks (Hamlin and Stewart, 1994), performing the tasks reasonably (Debling, 1989), or performing the tasks excellently (Jessup, 1991). This means that NVQs suffer from the same difficulties as traditional

assessments, the subjectivity, the problems inherent in one-shot testing (Wolf and

Silver, 1993) and the differences between assessors; but without the mitigating

checks and balances within the system. Within NVQ assessment the main role of

the Awarding Bodies and External Verifiers is not to harmonise practice, that

stems from the standards, but to ensure that the relevant paperwork is complete

and that every standard which should have been assessed has been. As a result,

many NVQ External Verifiers know little of the subject matter they assess and

only one Awarding Body from the 12 most active in management claimed to

appoint External Verifiers with experience in the subject.

NVQs: conclusions

It may be that the contribution CBET makes to the debate on vocational

education is to direct attention to the practical outcomes of work, set out results

candidates might expect to see and specify clearly in advance the elements that

are being tested. If so, this contribution is valuable, but even here there are

problems. NVQ rhetoric notwithstanding, a practical vocational orientation for

VET is not new, indeed, it was (and is) an integral part of most of the traditional

certificates. The distinctive contribution of CBET was to specify these practical

outcomes in precise, behavioural terms.

Several criticisms were publicly voiced once the first discussion papers were

published, but, such was the evangelical fervour of the developers that critics'

findings were rejected with vigour. Early conceptual work was faced with the

reasonable argument that NVQs, as an essentially practical qualification, could only be studied appropriately in practice so that theoretically derived findings were inappropriate and misplaced (Marsh and Holmes, 1990). Later, and more seriously, anecdotes started to emerge of empirical work which was embargoed by the NCVQ and TEED because its findings might hinder their attempts to market the new qualifications and the NCVQ was accused of attempting to influence the design and findings of future research programmes (*The Money Programme*, 6th October 1996). Certainly, few outside the inner circle of 'policy makers and implementors' had much influence on the development and implementation of the qualifications.

This chapter has described the nature of CBET itself and highlighted some of the difficulties involved in developing competence-based qualifications. It has argued that the process of Functional Analysis resulted in a consensual model of behaviour and noted that the faith in the occupational standards as accurate descriptions of workplace practice made NVQ developers reluctant to impose either checks on the assessment process or 'knowledge testing' on the candidates. The implications of these decisions will be considered in more detail in later chapters.

Here, having considered CBET as a whole, this chapter focuses on the new framework's contribution to more complex occupations, the 'higher level' qualifications and, specifically, management. Accordingly, in the next section

the model of management put forward by the MCI is considered, and contrasted with that supported by most recent academic analyses.

MANAGEMENT NVQS AND 'HIGHER LEVEL' QUALIFICATIONS

The Management NVQs were intended to be, and were publicised as, the 'showpiece' of CBET for complex work (MCI, 1990). They represented the NVQ system's attempt to gain popularity, legitimacy and status at 'higher levels'. These were important goals for CBET's advocates since the universalistic relevance of their model was a source of pride. NVQs are arranged hierarchically with the most complex, 'professional' work assessed at level 5 and the simplest at level 1 (Fig. 3) but it is a point of principle in the system that the same format is retained throughout, any other suggestions being considered divisive and elitist (Slack, 1994; Hillier, 1994).

Moreover, progression is definitively pegged at level 5 as John Hillier, the Chief Executive of the NCVQ (cited in Mitchell, 1993:4) maintained:

> there will only be a level 5, there will not be levels 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10. . . something like 85% of the adult workforce is going to be contained in levels 1 - 4 anyway.

Ironically, the MCI's occupational standards breached this ceiling. Four management qualifications were designed, covering supervisors, junior managers, middle managers and senior managers.

Level 1	competence in the performance of a range of varied work activities, most of which may be routine and predictable.
Level 2	competence in a significant range of varied work activities, performed in a variety of contexts. Some of the activities are complex or non-routine, and there is some individual responsibility or autonomy. Collaboration with others, perhaps through membership of a work group or team, may often be a requirement.
Level 3	competence in a broad range of varied work activities performed in a wide variety of contexts and most of which are complex and non-routine. There is considerable responsibility and autonomy, and control or guidance of others is often required.
Level 4	competence in a broad range of complex, technical or professional work activities performed in a wide variety of contexts and with a substantial degree of personal responsibility and autonomy. Responsibility for the work of others and the allocation of resources is often present.
Level 5	competence which involves the application of a significant range of fundamental principles and complex techniques across a wide and often unpredictable variety of contexts. Very substantial personal autonomy for the work of others and for the allocation of substantial resources feature strongly, as do personal accountabilities for analysis and diagnosis, design, planning, execution and evaluation.

Fig. 3: NVQ levels of competence Source: *The NVQ Monitor*

Unlike other Industry Lead Bodies which were dissolved soon after their NVQs had been implemented, the MCI saw itself as having a role in assisting management development in its broadest sense and, partly in an attempt to 'brand' their qualifications distinctively, developed a dual labelling system,

whereby most of the management qualifications were called by 'MCI management levels' as well as by their NVQ equivalent. The supervisory qualification (NVQ level 3) had no MCI level, but junior management was MI, as well as NVQ level 4; middle management MII, as well as NVQ level 5; and senior management only MIII since no NVQ qualifications could exist above level 5. To all outside the MCI and the NCVQ this dual badging system was extraordinarily confusing and anecdotes of TECs, consultants and candidates failing to realise that the MCI was connected with NVQs, were (and are) commonplace.

Abstruse as this multiple labelling was, the equation of MI with level 4 and MII with level 5 had the merit of comparing like with like. NVQs' claim to equal status with traditional qualifications was slightly more contentious, for, while the NCVQ was clear that CBET represented a shift away from orthodox certificates, it was also anxious to establish 'parity of esteem'. As a result, every issue of *The NVQ Monitor* has emphasised the links between vocational and educational achievements (Fig. 4).

So, NVQ level 2/3 is broadly equivalent to 'A'/'AS' levels; NVQ level 3/4 the equivalent of an academic degree, a vocational degree or a diploma; and NVQ levels 3/4/5 at or above the level of post-graduate qualifications. Clearly, on the evidence of this table, NVQ level 3 has a certain breadth, and is the equivalent of anything from 'A' levels to postgraduate study. Since NVQs were designed to be a fully national qualifications system, easily understood by all, some form of

equivalency tables are probably inevitable but they sit ill with the vehement

condemnations of existing qualifications which occur in the NVQ literature.
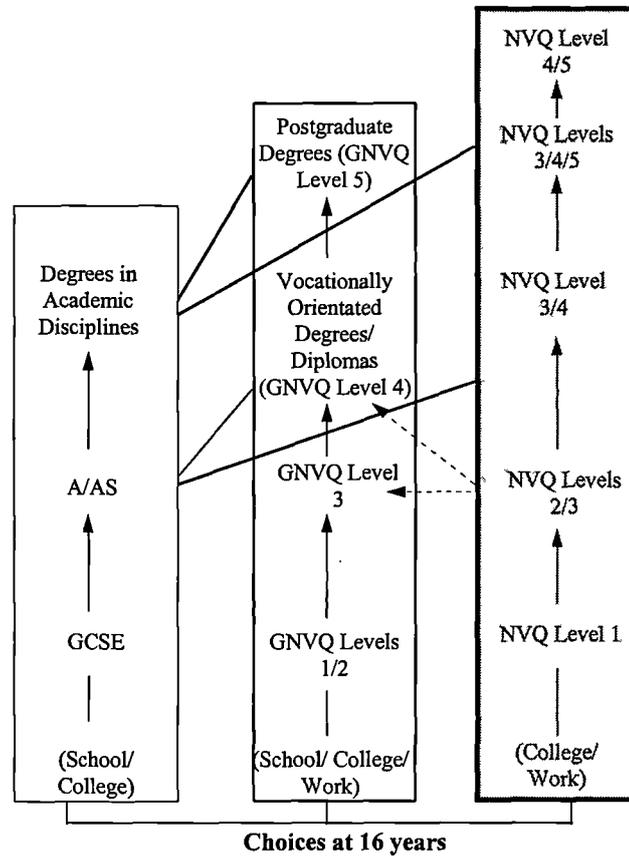
Fig. 4: The NVQ framework Source: *The NVQ Monitor*

In practice a separate, unpublished equivalency table seems to have been adopted

by many institutions which is a little less ambitious than the NCVQ's. Within

management, old style certificates in management (the qualification immediately

below the old DMS and a post-experience rather than a post-graduate

qualification) are generally linked to NVQ level 4, while the diploma is linked to

level 5 (see, for example, Open University Business School, 1996).

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THE MANAGEMENT NVQ LEVEL 4	
Key Purpose: To Achieve the Organisation's Objectives and Continuously Improve its Performance	
Key Roles and their associated Units of Competence	
Key Role: Manage Operations	
Unit 1.	Maintain and improve service and product operations.
Unit 2.	Contribute to the implementation of change in services, products and systems.
Key Role: Manage Finance	
Unit 3.	Recommend, monitor and control the use of resources.
Key Role: Manage People	
Unit 4.	Contribute to the recruitment and selection of personnel.
Unit 5.	Develop teams, individuals and self to enhance performance.
Unit 6.	Plan, allocate and evaluate work carried out by teams, individuals and self.
Unit 7.	Create, maintain and enhance effective working relationships.
Key Role: Manage Information	
Unit 8.	Seek, evaluate and organise information for action.
Unit 9.	Exchange information to solve problems and make decisions.

Fig. 5: The Management NVQ Source: MCI (1991a)

The junior management standards (NVQ level 4, MCI MI) which were the first to

be published by the MCI (MCI, 1990) and are still the most popular Management

NVQ (*The NVQ Monitor,* Summer 1995) form the focus of this study (see Fig. 5

for a brief outline of the qualification and Appendix A for the NVQ in full).

Developed through Functional Analysis, this Management NVQ corresponds well with Fayol's traditional model of management. The occupation is divided into four 'key roles': managing operations, managing finance, managing people and managing information (MCI, 1991a), each of which is sub-divided into units, elements, performance criteria and range statements so that, for example, managing finance (the shortest 'key role') has only one unit (Unit 3) *Recommend, monitor and control the use of resources* which is sub-divided into two elements, 3.1 *Make recommendations for expenditure* and 3.2 *Monitor and control the use of resources*. Each of these is specified in behavioural terms so that competence may be determined. The performance criteria for 3.2 are set out in Fig. 6.

Each of the key roles, units and elements are disaggregated in this way. In addition to this, range indicators are provided to suggest how many different forms of evidence should be produced for each performance criterion, together with statements of the performance evidence required. Some provide even more detailed guidance, nominating the source and forms of such evidence for most of the individual elements. Through this process, the management job is defined and broken down into its component parts. This process is not a one-way street, it influences the way managerial work is understood just as much as the way managerial work is understood impacted on the development of the model. Through this reflexivity (Giddens, 1979) the publication of a definition of managerial work meant that jobs could be (and were) seen as 'managerial' only in so far as they corresponded to each of these component parts. The

occupational standards are what managers do and candidates whose work does

not fit this particular model are not managers.

Element 3.2 Monitor and control the use of resources	
(a)	The contribution each individual can make to the control of resources is communicated in the most effective way
(b)	Expenditure is within agreed budgets, does not compromise future spending requirements and conforms to the organisation's procedures
(c)	Requests for expenditure outside the manager's responsibility are referred promptly to the appropriate people
(d)	Records of expenditure are complete, accurate and legible
(e)	Recommendations for improving the efficiency of operations are passed on to the appropriate people with the minimum delay
(f)	Information on costs and resource utilisation is fully assessed, correctly interpreted and effective action taken
(g)	Prompt corrective action is taken is response to actual or potential significant deviations from plans

Fig. 6: Management level 4 element 3.2 Source: MCI (1991a)

It is not difficult to see why the model produced mirrors the most long-standing

definition of management; indeed, since it was argued above that Functional

Analysis results in standards that are as *consensual* as possible rather than as

accurate as possible, such a result might reasonably have been predicted.

However, in management, particularly in the light of the reflexive nature of this

definition, such an orientation is problematic. Indeed, chapter two criticised the

traditional construction of management for its failure to represent management in

practice and misdirection of the distinctively 'managerial' elements of management in theory and chapter six will go on to consider the impact of this model on practice.

The functional definition of management received little popular support when the MCI's qualifications were launched. Those who had developed the model spoke out in its defence (see, for example, Hornby and Thomas, 1989; Hornby, 1991) and Mathews went as far as arguing that (1992:31):

> Much is pinned on the standards. It is hoped to improve management development processes, and bring about essential changes in the practise of management in UK companies and public administration. Even the act of making the standards *explicit* is believed to have profound implications for the performance of managers. [Emphasis on original]

But few shared his enthusiasm. Several leading management figures whose approbation the MCI would have welcomed were highly critical. Tom Peters, the management guru, called the NVQ the least sensible idea he had ever heard and received a standing ovation for the condemnation (quoted in Silver, 1991a:125). The writers who had criticised British management training in the 1980s were also unenthusiastic, Iain Mangham argued that the competence approach was flawed (*Personnel Management*, news item, November 1989), Charles Handy said that it offered only death by reification (quoted in Silver, 1991a:127; see also Farnham, 1990) and John Hayward protested that in seeking to replace the DMS the MCI had thrown the baby out with the bathwater (1990), nor were they alone in their criticism (see also, Burgoyne, 1990; Pye, 1991). One group of

management educators even formed an alliance with a view to putting forward an alternative non-CBET, non-generic model (*Personnel Management*, news article, February, 1990). As Silver (1991b:*xxiii*) pointed out:

> It is one thing to talk about management education and training, but quite another to define the competences necessary to make a good manager and then deliver the goods

Despite the vehemence of this forthright criticism all four management NVQs were successfully launched (*Personnel Management*, news items, October, 1990; November, 1989) and the MCI retained its official subsidies (NFMED, 1990; 1991; 1992; 1993). However, the qualifications failed to achieve the levels of popularity their developers had aimed for. By the end of 1995 some 2,360 candidates had been awarded their NVQs in Management at level 5; 9,173 at level 4 and 3,803 at level 3 (MCI, 1996). Even the (then, future) Chief Executive of the MCI argued, with reference to a study by academics at Lancaster, that the impact of the MCI had been minimal (The Cannon Working Party Report, 1994).

Conclusions

At best the prognosis for the MCI's model was mixed. In some areas it could legitimately claim victory, it was generally agreed that more management development was necessary; some 350 large firms, including many of the most prestigious household names had signed up to its 'charter' (Day, 1989; Storey and Sisson, 1990) and it had secured considerable amounts of official funding to support its role.

However, each of these triumphs took place at the institutional level where, as was noted above, both the MCI and the NCVQ had identified genuine, national problems. What was less clear, at least initially, was whether these bodies had the capacity to solve these problems. It must be remembered that, while many companies had subscribed to the MCI's 'charter', doing so committed them to little beyond a general statement of good intent. The official funding on which the MCI was dependent was (theoretically) limited to five years only, which meant that, to survive, that body had to ensure the success of the qualifications within three years, a task which was made more demanding by the fact that the framework adopted for those qualifications was contentious.

This study focuses on the problematic aspects of this process. Its central concern is whether the Management NVQ represented a viable solution to the problem of under-trained managers and the fieldwork reported here was designed to assess this qualification's impact. The next chapter, accordingly, goes on to consider the methodological implications of this orientation and describe the methods used.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The issues raised by the literature on CBET are problematic. The debate has

polarised around two camps who can (loosely) be described as the critics, a group

of academics who highlight the conceptual poverty of competence and the

advocates, mainly consultants, practitioners and employees of one or another of

the new system's set of governing institutions, who stress that, as practical

qualifications, NVQs will show their worth only during implementation. This

debate has been, and is being, thoroughly rehearsed but, despite the abundance of

'excellence' anecdotes regularly published in *Competence and Assessment* and

The NVQ Monitor there has been little empirical *research* extending beyond the

perceived effects of NVQs. As a result, the discussion is either conducted in

conceptual terms, dealing with what *might* happen, or enlists arguments that are

based on simplistic and anecdotal evidence. While each of these different forms

of presenting material has its own distinct advantages, their mutual

incompatibility and the number of issues unanswered by both literatures mean that neither can convincingly move the discussion forward.

When the Management NVQ itself is considered the debate becomes even more complicated, for, while the NVQ is derived from a task-centred methodology (Iles, 1993) and focuses on the work managers do, much of the literature on management described in chapter two rejects the notion of a distinctive and homogeneous management function in favour of a definition which seeks to emphasise the aspects of power, status and influence in managerial work. Each of these positions is based on different assumptions on the nature and purpose of management.

The review of the literature in chapters two and three has already set out and discussed some of the theoretical difficulties inherent in CBET, and attempted to construct a definition of managerial work. This chapter considers some of the difficulties involved in evaluating *any* training initiative before going on to describe the methods and methodology employed here. Since this is essentially an evaluation of a process, the fieldwork is qualitative and ethnographic in style. By adopting this research design it is possible to appreciate the way individual managers experienced the Management NVQ, explore the ways in which the case study companies took advantage of CBET's flexibility and draw out shared themes and experiences. In order to further these aims, the case study companies have been deliberately selected as examples of good practice. In this setting, where NVQ programmes are implemented as the MCI would wish them to be,

elucidating and illustrating problematic aspects of CBET is more feasible than in organisations where poor implementation prevents candidates from succeeding. The methods employed in each of the case study companies, and in the background interviews with other organisations, are described in a little more detail before going on to consider the impact of the researcher on the processes being researched.

This impact may be felt in a variety of ways. As Smircich (1983) argues, far from consistently obeying universal laws, the social world is, in part, a product of the people who constitute it and people *enact* their reality rather than passively responding to it. They give it purpose, value and meaning. Designing a research project, involving candidates, interacting in and observing sessions, and discussing issues raised in those sessions may all alter the reality being observed. Moreover, in Eisenhardt's (1989) phrase, social theories and narratives are 'built', they do not emerge as self-evident truths from the research process and it is the researcher who is both architect and site engineer throughout this construction process. This chapter ends with a discussion on the ways in which the research processes may have influenced the activities they were set up to study.

Evaluating training, some issues and concerns

Attempting to judge the results of any training programme is a complex and generally highly subjective exercise and these difficulties are compounded when

the programme is targeted at an area as diverse as management. For, while it is self-evident that an untrained novice will generally perform less well than a fully trained expert, it is by no means clear whether, between these two extremes, training has an effect on performance and, if it does, the degree to which this impact can be isolated (Fraas, 1983). In this area the literature is of little help, for much of it regards the terms 'training' and 'improvement' as tautological and studies tend to be either prescriptive accounts of the best way to introduce a particular programme, or *how* (rather than *whether*) training improves performance (see Hedges, 1993 for one example of this). As was noted earlier, these orientations boast several distinct advantages, but neglect the most fundamental questions. Moreover, even those reports which focus on whether training improves performance often base their conclusions on simplistic measures. In management education specifically, as Hogarth (1979) points out, the few empirical studies that exist focus on ill-formulated questions about evaluation which generally draw on either monetary measures or individual career trajectory to assess the success of a particular programme.

Such tangible yardsticks are attractive, but establishing a clear causal link between them and management practice, and then between management practice and a particular training initiative is highly problematic. Since managers contribute to organisational success, corporate profits (the proverbial 'bottom line') might indeed be cited as a legitimate measure of managerial work. The MCI themselves isolate and exploit this assumed link (every issue of the *Management Leader* highlights companies "using the standards to improve

performance"). Unfortunately, though they are superficially appealing, in practice measuring profit levels proves very little about training partly because, as was highlighted in the contentious debate on managerial pay levels, it makes little sense to use as an ostensibly objective measure a factor over which managers have some control (*The Economist* 29th January 1994) but mainly, as Keep and Mayhew (1988) argue, because the driving force behind this debate is the assumption of causality. Since training is deemed to lead to higher profits the link is powerful and persuasive. In fact, in many cases, the causality may run the other way and companies that make higher profits may be using them to fund training programmes as one form of reward for their staff. When profits decline, the first casualties are generally found in the training department (Anthony, 1986) so that firms with lower profit levels train less. Clearly, it is of little use to point to profits as an indicator of the efficacy of training if higher profits lead to increases in the incidence of training, as opposed to trained staff having a positive impact on profits.

Nor does focusing on individual performance necessarily resolve any of these problems. As both Heller (1996) and Jackall (1988) point out, given the elusive nature of managerial work and the long term impact of managerial decisions, many managers are judged, not on their individual performance, but on the *impression* others have of that performance; so that respect, repute and promotion may be the product of an impression rather than of capability. This means that using high rank as a proxy for success, as Mumford *et al* (1987) do, presents problems, since that rank is not necessarily a quantifiable measure of an

individual's merit. Moreover, to be a viable measure of the efficacy of management training, promotion decisions must be made on criteria that are independent of those used in choosing managers to participate in management training. This may not be the case. As Sainsaulieu (1974, cited in Hogarth, 1979) argues, knowledge and access to resources are key forms of organisational power, and both may be found within a training course. It is difficult for individual managers, selected for development and aware of the investment their employers are making, to believe that their attendance is without significance. Heyes and Stuart (1996) noted that employees who believed their employers valued training, or who had been encouraged by their employers to train, invariably had more positive views of the impact training would have on their own prospects than their peers. This symbolic importance should not be under-estimated. One interviewee in this study acknowledged the link between training and performance with delight:

> Of course training is a reward for performance. I
> think we should be more open about that and say, so
> when we let people come on courses they know why
> and they feel good about it (interview notes).

Causality is as important here as it was when considering using profit levels as an assessment measure; if training is one of the means used to reward good performance, good performance can hardly be used to evaluate training. In addition to this, if candidates are selected for management training programmes on merit, comparison groups become difficult to establish. Indeed, given the complex nature of training itself and the variety of influences on its success

(Keep and Mayhew, 1988) it is difficult to see how any one, single measure can adequately capture its impact.

This is not to argue that it is not possible to assess the worth of a training programme or to differentiate good training from bad; merely that these judgements are unlikely to be unproblematically read off from one single, quantifiable yardstick and that, to formulate them, it is necessary to look beyond the most commonly used measures and resist the temptation to oversimplify the processes involved. This is particularly true of this study, where the aim was to assess, not a full training programme, but the 'competence' aspect of that programme. Since every Management NVQ qualification process observed was structured around a model of tutor contact, workshops and group-work imported from orthodox management development, identifying the distinctive contribution of CBET was undeniably problematic.

Research design

This study aims to explore and evaluate a flexible and open-ended qualification which may be used to prove the competence of people performing a wide variety of tasks in very different contexts. Each of these components: the complexity of the subject matter; the need for more information on the factors involved; the dearth of meaningful quantitative measures; and the possibility of significant variations in practice at a local level, suggested an ethnographic approach (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1992; for a broader consideration of research design

see also Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Strauss, 1990; Bell, 1992; and Rummel and Ballaine, 1963). Moreover, such a research design would have the added advantage of creating a legitimate space for more than one consideration of the NVQs, since ethnographic approaches allow the 'subjects' of the study a voice.

Since Malinowski's renowned studies of the Trobriand islanders, the term ethnography has come to describe a wide variety of practices and principles (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1992) and it is used to describe work ranging from that of Malinowski and Whyte, who lived and worked amongst the people they studied, to those students reported by Sharrock and Anderson (1986) who simply observed social interaction in public spaces. Edwards (1992), in one of the clearest attempts to identify the distinctive characteristics of an ethnography, argues that it is the individual (as opposed to institutional) orientation of the work, and its endeavour to retain the complexities involved in social relations which distinguishes an ethnography from a case study.

Essentially, an ethnography seeks to capture, record and engage with local practice. It accepts (perhaps it relies on) the fact that such practices may be interpreted differently by individual participants, and that these interpretations will colour the participants' actions and language. It is this interaction between different interpretations, the multiplicity of ways of making sense of the world, that is relayed as the ethnographer seeks to meaningfully interpret the social activities they see. So it is that, in his study of managers, Dalton (1966) rejects the official representation of power in the company organogram and describes

how friendships, experience and perceived trustworthiness contribute towards an entirely different chart of the 'real' influence of individual managers, while Watson (1994) considers how the jokes and stories told by managers enabled them to come to terms with the emotionally taxing rigours of corporate life. These attempts to reflect the human side of organisations, understand the processes involved and interpret them, make the contributions of ethnography both distinctive and resilient.

It also means that this methodology has a peculiar affinity with evaluative educational research. Barnett (1994), one of the main critics of competence, argues that much of the value of education rests in its impact at the individual level (p. 110):

> Understanding . . . is active, is an engagement, is a form of agency, and is a form of self-expression. It is an expression of individuality; and it strikes against the conventionalism of competence, insofar as competency is a fulfilment of standards determined in advance.

An ethnographic approach could capture these individual reactions far more effectively than a survey.

But an ethnography does not only seek to describe social interactions, it also engages with them and the theoretical perspective of the study is key to this engagement (Hammersley, 1985; Bacharach, 1989). As Poincaré (1983, quoted in Whetten, 1989) notes, without a theoretical structure there is a danger that

fieldwork is reduced to 'butterfly collection', amassing congeries of data but making little contribution to how that data is understood (p. 493):

> Science is facts, just as houses are made of stone . . . .
> But a pile of stones is not a house, and a collection of
> facts is not necessarily science.

This argument has particular relevance for qualitative research, when the choice of case studies should be influenced by the conceptual contribution the study hopes to make. In this, it differs substantially from those quantitative studies where conclusions are defended through proofs that the population which produced those conclusions is so drawn from its parent population that it precisely mirrors the characteristics of that parent population. Through what J.C. Mitchell (1983) calls 'enumerative induction', quantitative researchers can argue that correlations observed in the sample population will be present in the parent population, because the sample is 'representative'. Qualitative research, however, seeks to *explain* relationships rather than accurately reckon the incidence of correlations, an objective which makes representativeness less important (Rose, 1991). Cases are chosen, not because they are 'typical' but because they may further the debate in some way or shed light on the causal mechanisms involved, so Pollert (1981), in an attempt to illuminate the distinctive nature of working *women's* lives (pp. 5 - 6) chose to conduct her study in a factory where male and female labour was generally segregated. As Edwards argues (1992:23):

> To the extent that developments of analytical
> importance occur in a sector, it warrants study even
> though it may be statistically 'unrepresentative'.

Qualitative information relies on a purposive sampling (Yin, 1989; 1993) of a small number of organisations and, through these, developing conclusions on *analytical* rather than *statistical* grounds (Das, 1983).

The choice of cases

In this instance, theoretically sampling case study organisations did indeed result in an atypical selection, for, despite the marketing efforts of the NCVQ and the MCI, the use of NVQs (and hence the parent population of this sample) was both limited and problematic. Spilsbury *et al* (1995b) argue that, although awareness of NVQs is at "saturation point" (p. 13) only 7% of employers used NVQs, at any level, and even they did so with only a small proportion of their staff (see also Callendar and Toye, 1994). Peter Robinson's (1996) work reinforces this conclusion. Using information from the Labour Force Survey he argues that only 1.9% of employees were working towards NVQs in spring 1995 (p. 7) and goes on to suggest, through an analysis of the NCVQ's own figures, that NVQs have had a minimal impact on the level of vocational training in Britain. Few employers have been sufficiently impressed by the new qualifications to introduce them to their staff, although 794 separate NVQs have been developed only 42 of these (or 5% of the total) have issued over 1,000 certificates. This figure is dwarfed by the 364 NVQs for which, as yet, no individuals have yet gained awards and even exceeded by the 43 NVQs for which only one individual has been acknowledged competent. More worryingly, the qualification, far from

up-skilling British workers, seems confined to the lowest levels of achievement, none of the ten most popular NVQs are above level 2 (p. 14).

Nor was there much evidence to suggest that, within this niche market, NVQs were either well implemented or popular (Smithers, 1993; *THES*, November 17th 1995; NCVQ/SCOTVEC, 1996; Beaumont, 1995). The NVQ system also seemed particularly susceptible to fraud and misrepresentation (see *THES*, March 14th 1997; Article 26, 1994; *The Observer* 27th March 1994; *The Observer* 3rd April 1994 and *The Independent* 6th October 1994 among others) and the NCVQ contacted all Awarding Bodies to warn them, unofficially that there was "far more of it [fraud] than anyone imagines" (interview notes).

To compound this, few of the candidates working towards these qualifications were ever certified competent. Officially the NCVQ did not acknowledge the possibility of 'failing' an NVQ. Candidates were advised that they were 'not yet competent' and, theoretically, continued to work on their performance until it reached an acceptable standard (Wood *et al*, 1989). Nor were any time limits set on qualifying, indeed, potentially, a candidate could work on their NVQ in a number of workplaces over the course of many years (Fletcher, 1991). In practice, few candidates or assessors welcomed such an indefinite and open-ended commitment and no evidence was found of anyone consciously choosing to take advantage of this aspect of the system. However, despite this, the Management NVQs are characterised by extraordinarily high levels of non-completion, something that is of great concern to the Awarding Bodies (interview

notes). While no exact figures are available (and part of this uncertainty is understandable since it stems from the open-ended nature of NVQs), Houston (1995) estimates that only 25% of candidates registering to do the Management NVQ with Awarding Bodies go on to obtain a qualification. Disturbing as it is, in focusing only on registrations, this figure seriously under-states the problem since it includes all the successes and potentially excludes many of the 'failures'. Candidates must register with an Awarding Body to be assessed, but there is no obligation to do so as soon as they start working towards their qualifications and, since fees become payable on registration, several Awarding Bodies suggested that companies deliberately delayed registration to avoid paying fees for employees who dropped out at an early stage in the process (interview notes). To obtain his 25% success rate, Houston uses a base figure of over 20,000 registrations (1995:2). Elsewhere (The Cannon Working Party Report, 1994:14, citing the 1994 White Paper on 'Competitiveness') it was argued that more than 40,000 managers were working towards Management NVQs, effectively doubling the population and halving this success rate.

The inadequacies of tutors, candidates and Awarding Bodies may have contributed to this figure. Anecdotes abound of assessors and verifiers who knew nothing of the NVQ system or the subject matter they were to assess; candidates who were unemployed and unable to prove that they had displayed competence in earlier work or who had enrolled on the NVQ to learn new skills; and employers with little understanding of the NVQ system who provided little support for their staff (interview notes). One head of an Awarding Body who had

been involved in vocationally oriented FE for many years commented bitterly (interview notes):

> When I was Director of Studies with [a prestigious professional institute] I met tutors at the FE colleges - there were a lot of good people and some utter drones and I've met some since very high up in the NVQ hierarchy within colleges. They were utterly useless as businessmen and utterly useless as teachers and these people are utterly intent on preserving the present system.

While most of the stories told of candidates who unjustifiably gained qualifications through these flaws in the system, it is also probable that other candidates dropped out because of these weaknesses.

When this study began, in 1993, these problems were less clear cut, but it was already apparent that much NVQ implementation left a great deal to be desired. This was an important consideration influencing the research design. One of the aims of this study was to evaluate the efficacy of the Management NVQs in order to contribute towards an assessment of CBET; in this context it was not clear that a case in which under-resourced, poorly taught and inadequately prepared candidates fulfilled expectations by failing to prove competence would support any bar the most tautological conclusions. The fundamental question was, not whether Management NVQs could fail, it was clear that they could (and, if the statistics were to be relied on, usually did); but could they *work*?

In order to ensure the case studies could provide good explanatory models (Mitchell, J.C., 1983) organisations with a reputation for 'good' practice were

actively sought out. These did not have to be 'the best' for exemplary purposes since this was not a search for excellence, rather, access was sought where it seemed likely that sufficient talent, interest and resources would be devoted to implementation to give the NVQ programme and the candidates enrolled on it, a fair chance of success (and this research the opportunity to break free of a rather sterile argumentative loop). Since most of the criticism of CBET focuses on internal flaws in the logic and design of NVQs, rather than poor implementation, observing a well-run course would provide a more robust basis for testing this criticism than a more 'typical' programme.

Pragmatically, this resolve also made access easier to negotiate. Two of the organisations approached, a privatised utility (PrivatPLC) and the head office of a national supermarket chain (SupermarketCo), were cited by the MCI in its occasional publication, the *Management Leader*, as excellent providers; the third, which sold and rented construction equipment as well as running construction sites across the country (ConstructionCo), was recommended by a researcher at TEED who had himself seen some of their provision. In every company considerable time, effort and resources went into making the NVQ programmes work and the managers and directors with whom access was negotiated, aware of this commitment, were happy to allow an external researcher in.

Research methods

Each of the three companies provided both tutors (advisers) and workshops to assist the candidates through the process and two (SupermarketCo and PrivatPLC) allowed participant observation of these workshops. In each of the case studies a small group of candidates was selected for particular attention: five candidates from PrivatPLC, six from ConstructionCo and seven from SupermarketCo. These eighteen people are the core of this study and, together with their tutors, proved the most regular source of information. They were repeatedly interviewed and observed over the course of several months, their portfolios of evidence were monitored and examined, and their opinions were sought and given.

Different aspects of the NVQ programme were witnessed in each organisation. In SupermarketCo candidates were observed and interviewed over the course of a full year. When this process of participant observation began, the NVQ programme had been running for one and a half months but, in that timescale, only one introductory workshop had been held in which managers interested in the full qualification had been invited to experiment by working on one element, with the result that the first workshop I attended to meet the candidates and seek their assistance also marked the formal start of the programme. Four months after this official access finished, when a report on the programme was being presented to the senior manager, further interviews were obtained with those

candidates who were still working on their portfolios, so that a more rounded picture of progress might be presented.

In PrivatPLC the interviews and workshop observations were conducted over six months. Here, too, the first access session coincided with the first workshop, although, again, the programme had begun the month before, and in this organisation the programme started with candidates attending a residential course. The PrivatPLC managers were seen only through the first few months of their programme and, while additional information was once more gained after the observations stopped, even at that stage the course itself still had two months left to run. By contrast, in ConstructionCo, the NVQ programme had already been running for twelve months by the time access was finalised and, having attended a series of workshops, the managers were working on their portfolios with periodic tutorial assistance from an outside consultant. The six candidates from ConstructionCo who participated in this thesis were studied and interviewed over the course of the next ten months, a period which saw them through to the assessment stage.

To reinforce the information gleaned here, interviews with candidates outside the 'core' eighteen were sought in each case study company on an *ad hoc* basis. In PrivatPLC, where a pilot NVQ programme had been run, additional interviews were conducted with five of the six managers who had attended that earlier course (the sixth had left the company), four of whom were happy for their portfolios to be examined. In SupermarketCo, three interviews were held with

managers enrolled on the next NVQ group, to record their initial impressions of the programme. In both organisations other attendees at the NVQ workshops were involved in the data collection, either through formal interviews or, much more informally, in chats during breaks. It was hoped that, by deliberately seeking out managers working through different stages in the NVQ process, a fuller picture could be gained. In total, in these three organisations, over 120 different interviews and observations were conducted, the timings of which varied from whole days to less than an hour.

Having secured a wealth of detailed information through the case studies, additional material was acquired from other firms in an attempt to put this information into perspective. In part, this was a fortuitous by-product of negotiating access, since some organisations who did not participate fully in the study (because of changes in personnel, wide-scale redundancies or the abandonment of their involvement with Management NVQs) were happy to grant one-off interviews and offer a brief glimpse of their own experiences. This 'panel' of informants produced interviews with the personnel/training departments of six different organisations and a 'mini' case study in a seventh (one day of participant observation supported by two interviews with candidates, two with tutors and two with senior managers). Such vignettes might, perhaps match Gluckman's (1961, cited in Mitchell, J.C., 1983) description of an 'apt illustration'.

Some understanding of the macro issues was acquired through interviews with the various national bodies and several contacts were made with the MCI, the NCVQ, TEED and NFMED (the National Forum for Management Education and Development, and the ruling body of the MCI) including two MCI chief executives, Andrew Summers and Tom Cannon, as well as Graham Debling of TEED and Tony Houston of the NCVQ. Participant observation at two MCI/NCVQ workshops for external verifiers provided some interesting information on the way portfolios were assessed and the work done by external verifiers, much of which was reinforced in several follow-up interviews. Contact was also established with two people involved in setting up MCI network offices, while interviews with the representatives of twelve TECs (Training and Enterprise Councils), and contacts with NVQ tutors and advisers secured the view from the 'chalk face'. The critics were represented through Article 26, an organisation set up to expose defects in the British education and training systems, and interviews with several unemployed managers who had been on Management NVQ courses to provide them with marketable qualifications. Finally, interviews were secured with twelve of the fourteen Awarding Bodies, representing all the major providers of Management NVQs.

While the three principal case studies consisted almost entirely of face-to-face interviews and observations, the supporting material was secured in a variety of ways. Wherever possible, face-to-face interviews were preferred and, in most cases, obtained. However, budgetary and time constraints meant that it was sometimes necessary to conduct telephone interviews. 'Key' respondents (the

NCVQ, TEED, the MCI and the main Awarding Bodies) were visited, since it was discovered that, in general, interviewees with whom personal contact was established, were often better able (and more willing) to speak openly and at length. This was not invariably true; some telephone interviews were, if anything, too successful. One telephone conversation with an unemployed manager who had had many problems with an NVQ programme, lasted for more than three hours before I broke off, exhausted and recommenced the next day. But such marathon efforts were the exception rather than the rule. Most telephone contacts were a great deal shorter than this and were restricted to additional, rather than primary, sources of information: ten of the twelve TECs, some Awarding Bodies, Article 26, the unemployed managers, several of the (non case-study) tutors and follow-up interviews with the external verifiers.

Only three interviewees (two TECs and one Awarding Body) insisted on receiving a survey before responding, since an interview did not conform to their idea of legitimate research. On the understanding that this was the only means of securing a response, a brief questionnaire was devised and despatched to each of these, together with a covering letter and a stamped, addressed envelope. One was never returned and the two that were, were far less informative than the shortest interview conducted. The Awarding Body that insisted on a survey said its future plans were, "To continue to provide a service to all our customers" (Awarding Body 10), a sentiment which read like a sentence in a marketing handbook. The TEC's response could have been included in an MCI brochure:

> We aim to introduce some of the initiatives suggested
> in the MCI's *Guidance for TECs* and to forge a closer
> connection with the route to achieving IiP. [TEC 9]

This tendency towards 'correct' and 'socially desirable', rather than informative

and truthful answers is a problem tackled by every researcher. Hammersley and

Atkinson (1992) quote Hoffman as a case in point. Interviewing board members,

she found herself confronted with the 'official line', until she discovered that one

interviewee knew her father (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1992:60). From that

moment on the interviewee became both co-operative and informative. Hoffman

re-thought her research strategy in the light of this and started to focus on social

contacts to find respondents. In this study, it was found that, in many instances,

eschewing questionnaires effectively avoided such responses, and, when several

of the interviewees were very conscious of the impression they created, it was

often possible to explore the issue in more depth. This point is considered in

more detail below. Here, it is sufficient to note that, in general the contrast

between the 'survey' responses and the other interviews conducted was stark.

The researcher and the researched

This willingness on the part of the 'respondents' to engage with the questions

they were asked was welcome, but also presented problems. Oakley (1981) is

highly critical of the standard academic way in which interviews are reported,

particularly the way the human element of the meeting is abandoned in the search

for 'objectivity', and the standard assumptions that interviews are simply formal

procedures in which the interviewer elicits data without giving. Indeed,

interviews are generally reported only as 'data' since they are not deemed to have any meaning in terms of social interaction and descriptions of them are confined to their comparability with other interviews. As Oakley argues, far from reassuring the reader that the researcher is indeed suitably objective and detached, this style of reporting simply conceals the personal preferences and biases in the main body of the text. Becker (1967), writing about 'political' bias in sociology, condemns this pursuit of objectivity and maintains that the dilemma faced by many academics over whether to include their own values in their writing is irrelevant, since (p. 239):

> For it to exist, one would have to assume, as some apparently do, that it is indeed possible to do research that is uncontaminated by personal and political sympathies.

As a result of this, the trend in more recent writing has been to acknowledge, rather than sublimate, the research relationship, an innovation most noticeable in descriptions of participant observation, which, as a process, often demands that the researcher involves themselves in the lives of those they interview (Ackroyd and Hughes, 1981). Indeed, both Marshall (1984) and Watson (1977; 1994) begin by revealing the impact their studies had on them. Discovering this literature was an enormous relief, since, having started my fieldwork armed with works from the 'objective' camp, I was distressed to find how easy it was to establish friendships, rather than manipulate 'rapport', with my 'subjects'. I was, as the ethnographic crime-sheet expresses it, "going native" (Strauss, 1990). The implications of this are that, with the loss of its authors objectivity, the study itself loses all claim to scientific status. Yet if detachment is only a

methodological pose, the onus is on the researcher to reveal her own reactions rather than mechanise the processes she is involved in (Frost and Stablein, 1992).

Such an admission is not incongruous emotional self-indulgence but an important part of the research process. Without it, it may be difficult to form the judgements that are an inevitable part of writing up. In Shipman's (1981) words (p. 44):

> Research is deflating, generalising and abstracting. Someone is going to feel insulted, even if others feel comforted. Most researchers have experienced the twinges of conscience as they write critically about those who have allowed them access, answered their questions and taken them into their confidence.

Gans (1991) expands on this. A researcher attempting to combine the two roles of stranger and friend (Jarvie, 1991) may suffer from pervasive feelings of guilt at their own 'espionage' and over-identify with their interviewees to compensate. Revealing the ethnographer's hand (Watson, 1994) may be necessary to prevent the writing up becoming an act of penitence.

This was a very real temptation. All the managers involved in my study sacrificed a great deal of time from their already hectic schedules to answer questions, discuss their portfolios and talk about their work. They made me coffee, gave me lunch and welcomed me into their groups. In the face of so much co-operation and friendship it was very difficult not to give something back and the gift that I had most control over was my research conclusions. Having worked in management, I knew the kudos available to those involved with

successful initiatives and since many of the most populist management books take the form of extended eulogies (the best known example being Peters and Waterman's, 1982, *In Search of Excellence*) there was a great deal of what might be termed 'pressure for excellence'. This was most blatant in the interviews with the workshop tutors, perhaps because their jobs entitle them to tell people what conclusions to draw, and hardest to resist from the managers and senior managers who had given so much of their time to help this research. Had I said that everything was for the best in the best of all possible worlds I would have pleased many people.

Ethnography's claim to a place in the lexicon of scientific techniques does not rest on the super-human ability of ethnographers to resist emotional involvement nor their insightful abilities to segregate 'truth' from falsehood, as Rescher (1978, cited in Hammersley and Atkinson, 1992:17) says, this search for:

> absolutely certain, indefeasible, crystalline truths,
> totally beyond the possibility of invalidation . . .
> represents one of the greatest quixotic quests of
> modern philosophy.

Here, some of the ways in which this study altered the social processes (by failing to conform to the "wallpaper of participant observer fantasy", Porter, 1994:77) are considered; together with the impact that may have had on the conclusions produced.

One major concern is that, in addition to focusing on 'good' case study companies, this study also, inadvertently, monitored primarily 'good' candidates.

Within ConstructionCo access was officially 'edited'. The task of arranging the interviews was delegated to the deputy personnel manager once the personnel director had agreed to the project in principle. Anxious to reveal ConstructionCo's activities in the best possible light, she was pleased to organise repeated interviews with those managers progressing fastest and extremely helpful on the occasions visits were arranged to examine the finished portfolios. However, this support was qualified by her reluctance to permit meetings with candidates who were experiencing difficulties. Such interviews, in her opinion, would be neither "interesting" nor "appropriate".

Fortunately, by stressing the need for a "full, rounded picture" and the need to know why NVQs do *not* work for certain managers, interviews were obtained with some candidates who failed to either assemble or submit a portfolio. The deputy personnel manager's caution may have been justified. On one of these occasions, the interviewee was so upset at her own lack of success that I abandoned much of the planned interview to counsel her. I then found myself emotionally torn, as a researcher the information that interview had provided was invaluable, but as Robson (1993) argues, the researcher's 'right' to know must be balanced against others' rights to privacy, dignity and self-determination. I have used the information and provided pseudonyms for each of the people who assisted with this study. The company names have been fictionalised and their locations concealed, Awarding Bodies and TECs have been numbered rather than named and tutors are described by their function rather than their names.

In the other two case study companies such official intervention was not problematic. Part of this may be due to greater awareness on my part of the type of access I wanted together with less diffidence in negotiating it. It is often forgotten that a doctoral thesis is essentially a learning process, an apprentice piece designed to develop the skills of the researcher as well as to test a series of issues with the assistance of the researched. This tendency to review the research process without the "false starts, dead ends and changes in direction" (Shipman, 1981:8) that often characterise it, produces an unrealistically pristine image. Here, this development was far more iterative. ConstructionCo was the first case study to be conducted and, because only limited access was negotiated, only limited access was given. While the managers working there were friendly, co-operative and openly discussed the research issues, this part of the study is far closer to a standard qualitative case study than an ethnography. It lacks the detailed observations of the everyday that characterise access in SupermarketCo and PrivatPLC.

However, carefully negotiating access is not sufficient, in itself, to avoid 'cherry picked' candidates; for, while in both SupermarketCo and PrivatPLC I had a (nominally) free hand in selecting willing participants, my opportunity to seek help in each company was the NVQ workshops. This meant, by definition, that the participants recruited were those who attended workshops and, throughout the study the core group of candidates I was interviewing were more conscientious attenders than their peers on the NVQ programme. Fraas (1983) points out that 'experimental mortality', the fact that less committed students will

drop out of educational programmes, distorts much educational research. Here that distortion may have been magnified by the selection mechanism involved in setting up the study.

This bias towards a successful programme may be an inevitably part of educational research and is a factor which will be revisited in this study's conclusions. Having secured access, it was then necessary to extract the most benefit from it by assiduously recording the information acquired. Since the human memory is selective (Robson, 1993), the accurate recording of data is key to the rigour of a case study and while, in early interviews with the national governing bodies, interviews were taped, within each company cassettes proved off-putting and were rapidly abandoned in favour of a series of shorthand notebooks. In ConstructionCo I recorded candidates' words, verbatim, when I considered they were of direct relevance to the study. Yet as the fieldwork developed, it became apparent that a far greater range of information than I had initially appreciated was of direct relevance. The jokes the candidates made, about each other, about the NVQ and about me, suddenly seemed important; the questions they asked revealed many more of their concerns than 'official' responses to my questions, as did the anecdotes they chose to repeat or the issues they wished to evade. Again, as I became more experienced I adopted a more catholic approach to recording information, accepting everything for transcription and reflecting on its meaning and relative importance later.

Curiously, this note-taking, far from distracting the candidates, was an ice-breaker and an endless source of interest in almost every group observed. I wrote rapidly, in a highly personalised form of shorthand that was totally obvious to me and apparently impenetrable to everyone else and, as my fieldwork progressed and my own understanding of the topic itself grew, not only could I write faster, having had more practice, but I also found more of interest and my notes became more detailed. The interviewees regarded this at first with surprise and later with amusement. If I left my note-pad anywhere they would use it to send silly messages or draw cartoons.

My position in each group was accepted, but, by its very nature, it was peripheral. In every organisation I was met with as many questions as I myself asked: What was I studying? Why was I interested in their company? Was I one of these eternal students? Did I want a job in their company afterwards? (My "No" was generally greeted with both relief and surprise - why did I want to be an academic?) Who would read my report? What had everyone else said? and so on. After that, while my external status was never forgotten, I never had the impression that my presence inhibited the candidates. During one team meeting in PrivatPLC when a guest speaker was sharing some confidential information with the group, one manager sitting next to me leaned back and murmured, "Now we've told you all this, we're going to have to kill you". Research interviews may elicit data, but they are also human interactions and complying with the rules governing courteous behaviour may have made it easier to be accepted.

I found (as Smircich, 1983, did) that once my status as a research student, particularly interested in managerial work and the Management NVQs was known, the image that was hardest to preserve was that of a 'learner' continually seeking information and that I would be repeatedly cast in the role of 'expert'. Indeed, arriving to observe my first one-day workshop at PrivatPLC after having negotiated access with a senior manager and the tutor, during which process I had explained my research fully (or so I thought) I was greeted with delight by the five NVQ candidates in the room and shown the day's agenda, which included my name in pride of place at 10.30 am as a guest speaker on the Management NVQs.

These demands for information, reassurance and judgement were a running problem but satisfying them meant that I conformed to the normal rules of social reciprocity and would be offered in my turn, more information by the managers I was interviewing. Deflecting questions put to me, while sometimes necessary, was seldom desirable since it encouraged many of the interviewees to deflect my questions when our roles were reversed. The most productive (and pragmatic) solution was to offer factual, balanced information with examples supporting both positive and negative views of the qualification followed by turning the question back on my interrogator and asking them what they thought, or whether they had experienced anything similar. Through this process, demands for information could generally be turned into opportunities to open our debate a little further. My main concern was not that the interviewees should receive no *information* on NVQs but that they should not come to see me as a partial

observer who might be pleased by partisan anecdotes. Empathy also runs two ways and there was a danger that my interviewees would try to please me by reporting what they thought I wanted to hear.

More rarely, the participants attempted to use the research process to convey a particular message. This self-consciousness in the tutors' comments has already been noted. With candidates there was generally sufficient flexibility within the semi-structured interviews to pursue their responses in a little more detail. This format has frequently been criticised for producing impressionistic results (Das, 1983), but the freedom it allows may also provide a more robust basis from which to evaluate individual responses. Smircich (1983) argues that, because qualitative researchers have more information available to them (gestures, body language, open questions) 'socially desirable' responses are not only less likely, they are also easier to identify.

Certainly, repeated interviews and observations which were not confined to pre-set questions permitted a critical assessment of some of the responses obtained (as Robson, 1993, argues, not every respondents' answers should be treated as of equal value). Harry Dent, a personnel and training manager and an NVQ candidate at SupermarketCo was a case in point. His enthusiasm for the programme was contagious:

> I am still 150% totally committed to NVQs and I think they're the only way forward because they bring reality to learning - they're not a substitute for the real thing - they are the real thing.

In one of the early workshops Harry told the group that Element 9.1 of level 4

Lead meetings and group discussions to solve problems and make decisions was

the ideal benchmark, citing the example of a particularly successful meeting he

had conducted with the help of the standards. He repeated these comments to me

in an interview over six months later. The resilience of this, apparently trivial,

incident was interesting, for, by that stage Harry had repeated this same eulogy to

me in three interviews, during two workshops and in telephone conversations. I

had also heard him share it with several of his colleagues. I asked whether he

could think of any other examples when using the standards had helped him at

work. Not only was he unable to think of any other instances, but, some twelve

months into the programme, he had completed no other units for his portfolio, yet

he did not see such slow progress as an inherent disadvantage of NVQs. Harry

Dent had been responsible for persuading SupermarketCo to start using the

management NVQs. He was participating in the first group of candidates so that

he could act as an internal assessor for subsequent groups. Because of this, he

seized every opportunity to convince his superiors what a good decision they had

made in following his advice. In his eyes I was simply another means of relaying

this message.

Such self-consciousness was the exception, rather than the rule. Most of the

respondents were far more open about their reactions towards, and reasons for

taking, the NVQ. One manager in PrivatPLC said, after making a few critical

comments:

Still, I'm giving you a very unbiased view and I'm
being honest - the others might be a bit more guarded.

But again, the artificiality of the process must be stressed. The candidates had

been promised confidentiality, were aware that I was from an outside institution

and may have become habituated to me over the course of the research (Robson,

1993). However, they also knew that I had sought access with their superiors and

was to present a report of my findings to those superiors. It is not unreasonable

to suppose that this knowledge may have influenced their view of me and the

things they chose to share.

So, the candidates who participated in this study may have been 'cherry picked'

from the best institutions and were certainly conscious of the fact they were

participating in a research project; my own inexperience of research certainly

increased the extent of this 'cherry picking' and my belated realisation that

everything was of potential interest in this study led to the loss of much

interesting material which was neither recorded nor transcribed. But, perhaps the

most fundamental way in which the activities being observed may have changed

was the traditional 'Hawthorne effect'. Here, candidates were regularly asked

about their progress, work, feelings and opinions. Their attention was directed

repeatedly to the Management NVQ and they were conscious of the fact that their

workshops and portfolios were of academic interest. These interventions could

almost be seen as extra tutorials, stimulating reflection and providing a constant

reminder that progress was necessary. Not only did each of these case study

companies have a higher success rate than that experienced by NVQ candidates

elsewhere, but also, the core group at the centre of this study were more successful than their peers in ConstructionCo, SupermarketCo and PrivatPLC. It would have been surprising had they not been.

Methodology: conclusions

These elements may have changed the activities being observed, but they do not, necessarily, invalidate this study's findings. Many of the effects of working towards the Management NVQ were common to each of the case study companies, the qualitatively different approach fostered by CBET should have survived this observation intact (and possibly improved). Moreover, despite this additional attention and support, the core group of eighteen still experienced triumph and disaster. Here, too, candidates became discouraged, failed to complete, struggled with the language of CBET and juggled the competing commitments of work, qualification and family. Their experiences still have a wider relevance, even if, statistically, they are an unrepresentative group, and these experiences can be used to contribute towards a broader understanding of the NVQ process.

CHAPTER FIVE

'EMPLOYER-LED' OR 'NVQ-DRIVEN'?

The literature review in chapter three has already provided a flavour of the enthusiastic evangelism and grandiose claims that characterises much of the writing on NVQs. These qualifications are meant to describe 'best practice' in their industry (Breed, 1993); be capable of modification by individual employers to suit local needs (Day, 1988); provide a framework through which competence, knowledge and understanding may be demonstrated (Mitchell, 1993; Employment Department, 1993; Wolf and Mitchell, 1991; Barbara Shelborn Developments Ltd, 1990; Tuxworth, 1989) and ensure that individual training is targeted at the areas in which employees need development rather than at pre-existing skills (Warr, 1993-94; Stanton, 1992). This chapter will critically address some of these claims in the light of the case study evidence.

It starts by introducing each of the three case study companies, considering their different legacies of management development and exploring the reasons why

each became involved with Management NVQs. Then, it goes on to present the candidates. Between them they represented a wide range of managerial experience, job roles and educational achievements. Their reasons for embarking on the course were as diverse as their experiences of management and these too are recorded. Having dealt with the companies and the candidates, the NVQ courses in each firm are described. In line with the flexibility promised by the MCI, these followed very different structures. One company, PrivatPLC, had even had the NVQ format tailored to its own needs by the MCI.

However, although each of these courses was very dissimilar structurally, in practice many of the differences observed were ephemeral. Each candidate was set essentially the same task, producing evidence which proved competence as defined by the occupational standards, and it was this requirement which dominated the way workshops were run. It will be argued that, in each of the organisations, programme content relied far more heavily on the demands of the NVQ than the needs of the business. Rather than being employer-led, the whole process was NVQ-driven.

The suggestion that British vocational training needs to cater for the needs of employers more fully is one of the more popular prescriptions for the difficulties that have long beset the system (somewhat ironically, for, as Armstrong, 1987, points out, this implies that employers hold the cure to an illness they themselves have helped to cause). Many governmental initiatives have stressed the need to pursue this, elusive goal (Keep, 1987) and, in this, NVQ designers were simply

echoing sentiments expressed by almost every other VET initiative (HMSO, 1988). One of the key methods the NVQ system had of harnessing employer enthusiasm was to ensure that the standards were 'employer-led'; that is that they were to be devised, implemented and assessed by employers, to employers' own specifications. In practice, as has been seen in chapter three, the complexities of the NVQ system meant that the dominant voice in the development of the standards was that of the specialist consultants in competence, rather than the practitioners, and this vision of qualifications developed by people working within industry, was seldom realised. However, the lack of a set syllabus meant that firms could still be liberated from the (presumed) irrelevancy of academic qualifications (see, for example, Eraut, 1994). As one senior manager at the Employment Department said:

> Previously knowledge was in the gift of the Universities - [they said] what was required. Now it's in the gift of everyone because the standards are open.
> (Interview notes)

In the words of one of the system's advocates, such flexibility is possible because (Fletcher, 1991:170):

> NVQs have *nothing whatsoever to do with training programmes*. This addresses the common misconception that units of competence are training modules. This is far from correct.
>
> A unit of competence is a unit of *assessment* and *certification*. The standards (elements, performance criteria and range statements) incorporated within a unit of competence, specify the *performance* required in the workplace. [Emphasis in original]

In other words, trainers and employers are absolutely free to implement NVQs by whatever mechanisms they wish. Evidence may be submitted in any form, standards may be tailored to a particular industry and training may be added on as appropriate. Such flexibility is very attractive. Each of the employing organisations in this study is situated in a different industry, each faces different challenges and each exerts different demands on their staff. It is unlikely that one set of principles and one collection of information could meet the needs of all of their first line managers. A programme both nationally accredited and locally defined has much to commend it.

THE COMPANIES

The companies' hopes for their NVQ programmes reflected the whole gamut of the NCVQ's claims for the qualifications. Between them, the three organisations required a qualification that was relevant, developmental, broad, cheap, instrumental and that offered simple accreditation.

PrivatPLC

After nearly half a century of state ownership, PrivatPLC had been one of the first utilities to be privatised in the 1980s. This change in ownership mirrored (and occasionally compounded) the changes the company faced elsewhere. Deprived of its national monopoly, and subject to governmental regulation for many of its core activities (for a consideration of the impact of regulation, see,

for example, Bishop *et al*, 1995.), it was exposed to competition within Britain and (the possibility of) both competition from overseas and competition with overseas, as it moved outside its traditional market. Moreover, technological developments within the company's established area of expertise meant that the way it ran its business needed to be radically altered.

In the face of such dramatic change, it is hardly surprising that PrivatPLC was being totally restructured. Indeed, one of the (possibly *post hoc*) justifications for privatisation was that, as a result, managers would be able to assert their right to manage, unencumbered by civil service intervention, and it may have been that one of the constraints lifted as a result was the onus on the organisation to be a 'good employer', in the sense of shielding its staff from cost-cutting measures (Ferner and Colling, 1991).

Certainly, by 1995, there had been substantial reductions in headcount and the numbers employed had almost halved, to 137,000 (including 38,000 managers). Theoretically, this had been achieved voluntarily, as employees who wished to leave applied for the comparatively generous severance package. The reality was a little different. On many occasions corporate restructuring resulted in entire teams or departments being made surplus to requirements. In the language of PrivatPLC, these were "closed". Staff allocated to closed teams were offered

alternative postings but often these required relocation or demotion. Faced with these undesirable alternatives many opted for voluntary severance.

Even those who knew that their own jobs, teams and departments were safe from closure felt the repercussions of these dramatic reductions in personnel. Applicants for promotions found that they were in competition with candidates from closed teams who were already at the rank they aspired to, as well as fellow hopefuls. This meant that internal appointments were increasingly competitive. Traditionally, once a promotions board had declared an employee suitable material for elevation to management rank, the promotion had followed within three to six months (and the period for which management hopefuls could deputise was capped at six months). Both of these limits had long been broken and it was not unusual for several years to pass before the promised promotion materialised.

If these factors made life frustrating for managers (and would-be managers) within PrivatPLC, the changing nature of the workforce certainly made it more complicated. While tightening up workplace practices, technological innovation and simple intensification of work led to many of the job losses, the changing structure of the workforce was also a major contributor. Adopting the much publicised model of the 'flexible firm' (Atkinson, 1984), PrivatPLC sought to make savings by employing a small, core workforce of "world class" permanent

employees and a larger, peripheral workforce of agency temps who might be hired and fired at will. This framework was gradually being introduced into the organisation and many of the managers now had to face the problems inherent in running teams of people earmarked for 'closure', 'mixed' teams of people employed on a variety of contracts and at various different rates of pay, and 'agency' teams, from whom little commitment or ability might be expected and in which none of the staff were directly employed by PrivatPLC.

This was the, somewhat mixed, background against which PrivatPLC chose to introduce the Management NVQ. Historically the company had a good reputation for encouraging training and development. A wide variety of both accredited and non-accredited courses were run in-house and staff were sponsored on external post-experience, degree and post-graduate courses. Impressive and resource-intensive as much of this provision was, it was also difficult to sustain against a background of on-going redundancies (also, as Anthony, 1986, argues, corporate training staff and initiatives are often themselves at risk in such times). Given this background, NVQs seemed to offer a cheap alternative to its traditional in-house training. Rather than expensive, developmental courses for the few, focusing on accreditation could enable the company to provide simple certification for the many. Ian Crowhurst, a senior personnel and training manager, said:

> I'm not even sure of what benefits we're going to get
> out of it. I believe overall you can get benefits out of
> NVQs even if it's only showing that we care to our
> people. Giving them qualifications to take out - we're

still down-sizing quite extensively - well, it lessens
the pain a little bit.

In the past, this focus on broader training programmes had meant that the

company had run no national NVQ initiatives (though it had been one of the

earliest signatories to the MCI's Charter). Some senior managers, pressured by

local TECs (often because they sat on their boards) had initiated various local

pockets of activity, but these had been uncoordinated and relatively ill-supported.

No figures existed for the total numbers of candidates who had enrolled on these

programmes, but anecdotal evidence in the company's national training centres

suggested that few, if any, of these had gained their qualifications. It was not

until 1994 that, prompted by other NVQ pilots at lower levels, PrivatPLC

decided to try a national pilot of the Management Standards. One group of

managers who had just completed their Certificates in Management (CIM) were

invited to participate in a pilot NVQ level 4 programme and (after selection

interviews) six were chosen. They completed their NVQs in April 1995 and in

June a joint NVQ/CIM was launched.

SupermarketCo

SupermarketCo's background and its objectives for the Management NVQ

programme were very different. Traditionally the supermarket business in

Britain has been stable and secure. Shops, though subject to national

competition, have often effectively been local monopolies and customers are

comparatively loyal. By the end of the 1980s this was changing.

SupermarketCo's largest competitors were building large, out-of-town stores and the car-driving public were starting to desert their local supermarkets in favour of the greater choice and free car parking to be had at the new sites. A greater floor area meant that these super-stores could challenge their rivals in every market segment and luxury goods were sold together with money-saving own brand products. At the cost-cutting end of the market, Aldi and Netto, two continental discounters, secured their first foothold in Britain. To compound this increasing competition in the High Street, innovations in the ways goods were delivered together with tightening up the grocery supply chain meant that supermarket warehousing could now service stores several times a day, with less inventory and shorter lead times (*The Economist* 17th May 1997).

Under pressure from both the out-of-town super-stores and the discounters, SupermarketCo chose to expand its base of High Street shops and, when this study was taking place, had over 900 separate stores. It too introduced warehousing innovations, worked on the image of its existing sites, launched a range of discounted own label goods and introduced a new tier of prime site shops offering a smaller range of goods in the most popular locations.

SupermarketCo was under serious competitive pressure, but was coping with it by expanding into new markets. Moreover, while the NVQ candidates in PrivatPLC came from offices spread around the country, within SupermarketCo they were drawn (with only one exception) from the head office. SupermarketCo was the biggest employer in the region and, once recruited, staff tended to stay.

In the head office a few hundred people worked in reasonably close proximity. Below board level all staff were on first name terms and the managers who enrolled on the NVQ all knew each other, at least by sight, before the programme started. Many SupermarketCo staff socialised together and, despite the increasing pressures expansion brought, conscious attempts were being made to preserve the informality of existing head office practice. This was certainly impressive. The company had a history of eliminating surplus costs from its operations and the favourite analogy used by its employees was that of selling baked beans. At one stage or another this was used by almost every one of the NVQ candidates, occasionally in jest, but more often as a measure against which their activities could be gauged. We're here to sell baked beans, they would say, if it doesn't sell more baked beans, we're not interested. As a result memos were rarely sent where telephone calls or a personal request could be made, few formalised procedures or documents existed and staff at all levels would be invited to offer (and would generally provide) open and honest criticism and comment.

Unsurprisingly, given its tradition of eliminating administrative costs, SupermarketCo had no legacy of staff training. Staff had been expected to cope with any new role they were given. However, the dramatic developments in the marketplace led SupermarketCo's board to reconsider this view and Linda Reese, a senior training manager, was head-hunted to provide them with internal expertise on running development programmes. At the same time, in the retail outlets, SupermarketCo was introducing lower level NVQs. It had initially

brought them in for retail trainees in their first few months of employment, with store managers acting as assessors and advisers, so that successful completion of the store's induction course resulted in a national qualification. Hilary Landy, one of the managers in the core group working towards her own NVQ was the head office co-ordinator of lower-level programmes and she reported that:

> I know from feedback from managers they found the training as assessors useful generally in their way of training and evaluating staff in the store . . . how do you put a value on something like that? But it's definitely a benefit. The staff retention you can put in figures - you can analyse it. You get feedback from the young people and some of the comments are so sweet you could cry - they're ever so proud of it and so grateful to the company for giving them a chance and to the assessor because that's their contact.

Such results were encouraging and it seemed natural to Linda Reese, after experimenting with some short courses for more junior head office staff, to introduce systematic management training. The availability of TEC funding locally prompted her to opt for Management NVQs which she regarded with cautious optimism:

> They fit well with [the company] culture, our managers are generally non-graduates, they lack confidence but they're pretty streetwise. They're good managers, but they've got no paper qualifications. They enjoy working together as a group. VQs are good as a development exercise, but there's been *far* too much attention devoted to APL [Accreditation of Prior Learning] which is untried.

In contrast to PrivatPLC's objective of qualification, regardless of development, SupermarketCo's attitude might have been characterised as development regardless of qualification. The two organisations' dramatically different

employment patterns may have led to this attitude for, while Ian Crowhurst at PrivatPLC anticipated that many of the managers going through the NVQ process would leave shortly afterwards, Linda Reese expected her team to stay and cope with the changing environment. In such an intimate and internal labour market, qualifications were far less important.

ConstructionCo

Curiously, in this study, it was the two organisations with least experience of training who were the most developmental and least instrumental in their expectations of the Management NVQ. ConstructionCo, in common with many other construction companies, had little history of training. It was the subsidiary of a FTSE-100 company and 70% of its business came from contracting. The sites that it ran ranged from fixed operations with several hundred employees around chemical factories or pipe bridges, to small teams of fewer than a dozen people hired on a temporary basis for a single job. This income was supplemented by the hire and sale of construction equipment (principally scaffolding and piping). The company head office in Birmingham supported a network of regional offices of varying size and importance ranging from over 350 people in Manchester to a modest six in Lincoln.

While the 1980s had seen increased competition for SupermarketCo and PrivatPLC they had been the boom years of the construction industry. The collapse in property prices and the recession of the early 1990s had finished that

and led to wide-scale redundancies in ConstructionCo. During this period Ray Fenton, the head of personnel and training, had suspended all non-statutory training. When this study started, ConstructionCo, prompted by instructions from its parent company, had just started to reintroduce training for its managerial staff using the MCI's management standards. A company wide appraisal system based on the standards had been introduced for all non-hourly paid staff (about 400 in total) covering supervisory, as well as junior and middle, management. Two pilot programmes had already been run to test out the Management NVQ at level 4.

Neither of these was particularly successful. The first, in Manchester, which had been well resourced, had seen only two of the original six candidates succeed and these had reportedly done so despite the programmes they were enrolled on, rather than because of them. A later course, with a dozen candidates in Leeds had even worse results and no managers were certified competent.

Perhaps as a result of this conspicuous lack of success, Ray Fenton was cautious in his expectations of the NVQ. As with Linda Reese of SupermarketCo, he too hoped for developmental results, but it was important that this development focused on doing the job in hand better. To him, accreditation was an indirect result. He commented that:

> The thing I really like about the MCI is that every other management training I've seen concentrates on the next job up - the developmental side, whereas MCI looks at the job you're actually doing now. Most people in the company will never be promoted so it's

> great to look at the job they're currently concentrating
> on.

Again, the advantages of a practical qualification for practical (rather than academic) managers was stressed. CBET's emphasis on workplace competence was popular with employers.

Conclusions

As can be seen, these various expectations at an organisational level are sufficiently different to provide practical illustrations of many of the MCI's claims. Ian Crowhurst of PrivatPLC intended the NVQ to provide inexpensive certification for large numbers of candidates, while Linda Reese of SupermarketCo placed far more emphasis on the qualification's developmental potential and Ray Fenton of ConstructionCo welcomed its capacity to focus staff on their current roles. On some points, such as the NVQ's claim to relevance, all three of these senior staff spoke enthusiastically, but, in general, the three companies differed markedly in their hopes and objectives for the qualification. This divergence, compounded by the three organisations' different contexts, businesses and approach, was a welcome addition to the study since, through it, it might be possible to explore these qualifications' sensitivity to local needs. In this study, NVQs were being used to develop managers as people by an organisation apparently prepared to invest heavily in the process and as inexpensive qualifications by an organisation in the process of laying off large

numbers of managers. It seemed as though their flexibility would be thoroughly tested.

THE CANDIDATES

In total, forty-nine candidates were enrolled on the NVQ in the three case study companies; eighteen of whom formed the core group of interviewees on which this study was based (for ease of reference, a table of the 'core' candidates' names and job descriptions can be found on page *vi*). This group consisted of seven women and ten men, five of whom (Pat Walker, John Robson, Jane Ewen, Sarah Culbertson, Alan Senior and Ian Jordain) came from PrivatPLC, seven from SupermarketCo (Richard Blackwood, Harry Dent, Hilary Landy, Stephanie Rigal, James Green, Colin Segal and Peter Bird), and six from ConstructionCo (Terry Saunders, Rachel Flint, Michelle Lawrence, Tom Hackett, David Beasley and Paul Phillips).

No attempt was made to select these candidates from the wider group of forty-nine on the basis of 'typicality', job diversity, (mis-) match of job-description and NVQ or (in-) experience. Their only distinguishing feature as a group was that they tended to attend more NVQ-workshops than the non-core thirty-one and were slightly more conscientious at submitting evidence. Such application, as was argued earlier, might be a systemic flaw within the research design, for most of these eighteen candidates had, after all, been invited to participate in the study in their workshops; alternatively, the fact that they participated in the study and

were repeatedly prompted to reflect on the qualification could have encouraged this degree of commitment. This 'bias towards success' will be considered a little more fully when the process of NVQ assessment is explored, here it is sufficient to re-iterate the conclusions reached in chapter four: that this study deliberately focused on an atypical ('critical') case and that theoretically sampling in this way should make its conclusions more, rather than less, resilient.

In other respects this 'group' of eighteen was diverse and contained managers of various ages, experience, functions and ambition. The candidates' ages ranged from mid-twenties to early fifties; though each extreme was sparsely populated with only one candidate aged over 50 and three aged 26-29. The remaining fourteen were split evenly between the age groups with seven candidates aged 30-39 and seven more 40-49. Their experience of management was equally well spread. Four of the candidates were officially below managerial rank (one each in their twenties and thirties and two in their forties) though two of these (Alan Senior and Jane Ewen from PrivatPLC) had both deputised for their line managers, often over extended periods. Of the rest, five had up to two years' experience as managers (the three titular managers from PrivatPLC were very recent promotees since the course was aimed at first line managers within twelve months of elevation to that rank); five had less than ten years' experience and four managers had over ten years' experience of management work. Colin Segal of SupermarketCo was the most experienced, with an impressive twenty-two years' service as a manager. Educationally, standards were reasonably high with

only two of the eighteen managers having no formal qualifications. Five candidates had 'O' levels, five more, 'A' levels and six held degrees.

Their responsibilities were equally diverse. Between them, the group possessed expertise in IT, accountancy, marketing, engineering and training. They ran telephone help desks, organised sales teams, worked with board directors and took responsibility for both marketing and servicing products.

The process through which candidates had been selected for the qualification varied from organisation to organisation. PrivatPLC's was the most formal, but its systematic approach also succeeded in involving the individual managers in the decision to apply. As was noted above, the programme was targeted at newly promoted first line managers. All PrivatPLC staff were expected to have regular coaching and appraisal meetings with their line managers and the NVQ candidates observed here had all been formally nominated for the course as part of this process. Since this was the first time this particular programme had been run and nominations had far exceeded places, the workshop tutor, in conjunction with colleagues in the training department, had selected the eleven names which she felt represented the "better" applicants and despatched the joining instructions.

ConstructionCo candidates had had far less involvement in their own nomination. Several commented that they first became aware of the course when they were telephoned (generally by a very senior manager) to be told that they were

participating. David Beasley and Paul Phillips were the two exceptions, they were engineers and as such, obliged by their professional association to undertake regular development. They were accustomed to discussing their training needs with their immediate manager and had agreed to participate in the NVQ. SupermarketCo staff were also nominated, generally by Linda Reese the head of training, but, since the head office environment was very informal, most had been aware of the new emphasis on management development and had indicated their willingness to participate and in some cases, actively lobbied for a place.

If the senior personnel people saw the NVQ in developmental terms, their staff were much more instrumental in their view of the process. They saw it as gaining a formal qualification to put on their curriculum vitaes. In addition to this, the faith their employers were expressing in them by sending them on the course was much appreciated: the symbolic value of the course was important. It was only after each of these issues were noted that the developmental aspect of the qualification was stressed, and at this stage, only one manager mentioned this as a factor motivating them to enrol on the NVQ.

Alan Senior of PrivatPLC was very open about what he hoped to gain from the qualification. He was one of the four non-managers in the core group, though he had three or four years of management experience, deputising for more senior grades. He had also completed both a degree and a Certificate in Management with the Open University. When he enrolled on the NVQ, he was an acting

engineering manager with responsibility for a team of 26 engineers. Over twenty years before, when Alan joined PrivatPLC, these specialist engineers had been an élite group, but wide-scale computerisation had diluted their work to the extent that it required little more than technical competence. The declining level of demand for the team's services meant that engineering jobs were particularly liable to downsizing and Alan's own job was due to be 'closed'. The only other vacancy in his region was a managerial job. He said:

> I'll be one of eleven people interviewed in September but there's people sitting in the post. If I don't get the post, I don't know what I'll do. Most guys going for the post are in their mid-30s and I'm 43 and I was late going into management because I was enjoying the job. I've always enjoyed the job - I've had the chances but I didn't take them up.

Given his situation, he was very clear about his reasons for doing the NVQ and the advantages he hoped to gain from it:

> If I'd been a permanent manager I wouldn't have done it because I've got a Certificate in Management and I'm doing it to look good on my c.v. If I fail to get a management job in September or October I don't know - I'll have to reassess what I'm doing - I'm going to have to assess if it's of any benefit to me. I'm doing a lot of travelling and long hours in the office - work, family life and social life - I have got other interests and I want to keep those. . . . - personally I'm fifty-fifty for it [the NVQ] - ten years ago I'd have gone for it but now I'm doing it by the skin of my teeth.

The hope, but not the certainty, that gaining a qualification would be to their advantage, was shared by most of the other candidates and this ambiguity is a reasonable reflection of the peripheral position of management qualifications. The desire to 'professionalise' management has generally found expression in the establishment of (or demands for) a management qualifications system, of which the MCI's Management NVQs is only the most recent.

But the role played by these certificates is problematic. In the 'traditional' professions relevant qualifications are a key aspect of acceptance into the occupational fraternity (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 1994; 1988) and often represent watersheds in an individual's career. Certification may allow someone to apply to work in their chosen field, license them to practice or qualify them for promotion (Turner and Hodge, 1970; Harries-Jenkins, 1970; Perkin, 1990).

Within management this route is not so clear-cut. On one hand, the well-publicised successes of MBA graduates (Ascher 1984; Griffiths and Murray, 1985) show how formal qualifications may advance individual careers. Balanced against this, however, are the lack of a body of management knowledge which could provide a foundation for 'professional' qualifications, the heterogeneity of 'management' itself and the fact that promotions are locally determined without reference to professional bodies and on (arguably) non-rational grounds (Armstrong, 1989; Jackall, 1988; Lee and Piper, 1988; Dalton, 1966). Both Armstrong (1987) and Urwick (1964b) cite examples of employers horrified by the temerity of employees who request promotion on the grounds that they hold a

management qualification. In contrast to the 'traditional' professions, management seems unlikely to adopt certification as the principal rites of passage. Ambitious candidates may hope that their qualifications will convey positive messages about them to their employers, but this symbolism may be the most tangible benefit gained.

If the position of general qualifications in management is peripheral, that of the management NVQs is even more tenuous. Only two candidates were enthusiastic about the fact that they were enrolled on an *NVQ*, and one of these argued that its main advantage was as a stepping stone to more academic awards. This general misgiving sprang from a knowledge of the life-expectancy of national training initiatives (Finegold and Soskice, 1990; Keep, 1987) and from the comparatively low status enjoyed by NVQs. John Robson of PrivatPLC expressed the majority view when he said:

> I was very sceptical at first. I'd always associated
> NVQs with secretarial or typing courses - most of the
> people I was at sixth form college with did an RSA in
> typing and having gone through HE I thought what
> did I need them for? . . . . I wouldn't like to waste my
> time doing it now and in three years time for it to be
> redundant.

In the light of this general lack of respect for the qualifications, several candidates evolved coping strategies. Those in PrivatPLC and SupermarketCo found it better to refer to their Awarding Bodies (the Institute of Management and the Open University) by name, since these were more prestigious than the acronym 'NVQ'. Alternatively, managers would speak of "the MCI", "the

standards" or emphasise the fact that they were enrolled on a joint NVQ/CIM programme. Given the proportion of time that was spent studying the NVQ itself, the linguistic dexterity needed to eschew the term was impressive.

Related to these instrumental hopes, that acquiring a management qualification would boost their careers, was the view that training had a symbolic purpose. It conveyed a message from candidates' employers that they were valued, or intimated that they were being groomed for better things later on. Nor were these beliefs unfounded. Many of the candidates had been contacted by their managers and asked to take part in the course and their views of the symbolic value of training mirrored statements by personnel staff. The SupermarketCo personnel managed cited in chapter four, who believed that the link between training and reward should be made even more explicit, argued that the only function of training staff was to make others feel valued. In ConstructionCo Ray Fenton, despite his contention that most staff would never be promoted beyond their current role, had selected several people for the NVQ to see how they would cope with managerial (or more managerial) tasks and responsibilities, and in PrivatPLC the group tutor emphasised repeatedly in workshop sessions just how competitive the allotment of places on the course had been. Small wonder then, that many candidates concurred with Rachel Flint of ConstructionCo who, after repeatedly lobbying for training felt, once she secured her place, that "something worked".

Developmental objectives, though important to all three employers and well-signposted in the educational literature (White, 1982; Courtney, 1992), were of far less importance to candidates, at least initially. Pat Walker was one of the few to mention it, perhaps because she was a training manager herself:

> As soon as we got there [the PrivatPLC Orientation Week] everyone was really motivated - I thought, this is the answer to my prayers, this is going to tell me how to be a manager and I can't believe they're going to do it in four and a half days!

This lack of emphasis on development is not to suggest that the candidates were in any way cynical about embarking on the Management NVQ. All were pleased to be on the course, all were looking forward to gaining a qualification and all were making spirited attempts to juggle the competing demands of work, study and family. After all, one of the aims of a vocational qualification is to assist the careers of those who acquire it and it is neither unreasonable nor overly manipulative for the candidates enrolled on such a qualification to hope for such gains.

THE COURSES

The three case study companies were each drawn from different industries. Each made different demands of their staff and each had different expectations of the NVQ programmes. In the light of this, it was not surprising that the three NVQ courses run by the case study companies were very different.

Adopting the standards

PrivatPLC went further than either of the others in tailoring the NVQ to its own requirements. Ironically, despite its emphasis on inexpensive, generic qualifications for staff to take with them when they left, one of PrivatPLC's first actions on adopting the NVQ model was to pay the MCI to redesign the qualification to suit the company's own requirements. This flexibility is a dichotomous aspect of NVQs. Occupational standards are said to be, at once, generic benchmarks of best practice across industry sectors (Breed, 1993) and flexible enough to be tailored to local needs (Day, 1988).

Certainly, the 'bespoke' version of the qualification created for PrivatPLC could support either interpretation, since the changes made to the original standards were largely cosmetic. The nine elements of the NVQ were replaced with ten PrivatPLC topics: *Customer Focus*; *Commercial and Business Awareness*; *Performance and Results*; *Leadership, Motivation and People Management*; *Teamwork*; *Effective Communications and Impact*; *Continuous Improvement and Managing Change*; *Financial Awareness;* and finally, *Self Management and Personal Development*. But the performance criteria which appeared these headings were the same as those contained within the standard nine NVQ elements. Occasionally, standards from different NVQ units were mixed and matched. *Leadership, Motivation and People Management* for example, contained performance criteria from NVQ units 5, 1 and 4 respectively; and on three occasions criteria, elements or units were duplicated, though whether this

was deliberate was not clear. These changes may have been meaningful to the MCI consultants who re-drafted the qualification but PrivatPLC staff were less convinced and one of the managers on the pilot programme who was one of the first to experience this locally relevant qualification argued that:

> The MCI charged us an absolute fortune to look at [the standards]. Our tutor was absolutely furious.

SupermarketCo had been tempted to alter the NVQ and had gone as far as setting up a working group to explore the feasibility of doing this in-house, but rapidly found that there were so many disagreements over what form the changes should take, that it was less contentious to adopt the MCI's model. The working group did, however, correct the English employed in the standards to make it a little more grammatical (and a little more coherent) and they added suggestions on the local forms of proof SupermarketCo managers might use to evidence each performance criteria.

Designing the courses

Since NVQs provide qualifications independent of the mode of study (Jessup, 1991), theoretically, there was no onus on any of the case study companies to provide any 'input' at all. Equally, each was free to decide for itself what 'inputs' were most necessary or appropriate for their staff and what form those 'inputs' should take. This freedom has been greeted with both enthusiasm (Thompson and Stephenson, 1991a; Walton, 1994) and concern (Smithers, 1993:9):

Teachers preparing students for NVQ and GNVQ
qualifications have been given little or no guidance as
to what it is they should actually teach. They have
been given no syllabus. . . . Instead teachers have
been given lists of what students should be able to do
after completing the qualification.

The three case study companies took advantage of this liberty and each designed

very different courses. Again, despite its apparent desire to introduce cheap,

mass management education it was PrivatPLC which adopted the most resource-

intensive format. Traditionally the company had run a Certificate in

Management (CIM) programme, based around an initial one-week residential

course where 'learning teams' were formed. Members of these 'learning teams'

then met up once a month (on 'learning days') to work on different aspects of the

CIM, consolidating their contacts with colleagues in other parts of the country

and other departments of the company in the process. Then, once they had

acquired the theoretical knowledge necessary for such a task, they were required

to take on a three-month business project on a 'live' issue chosen by the group

and sponsored by a senior manager.

PrivatPLC was anxious to retain the positive aspects of this model and strengthen

the NVQ with the theoretical elements provided by the CIM. Accordingly, they

decided to run a joint NVQ/CIM. The existing CIM model of a one-week

orientation course and twelve months of learning days was adopted wholesale

and the materials candidates had always been provided with at the start of their

residential week (a course reader on management and a large A4 ring binder

containing introductions to, and information on, management theory) were

supplemented by a copy of NVQ level 4 (suitably tailored). Nine learning days were to be spent working on the NVQ/CIM and three on the management project and, in line with existing practice, each of the nine NVQ/CIM learning days would involve a guest speaker to provide background information and an insight into PrivatPLC practice.

SupermarketCo, concerned to focus on development, also linked its NVQ to a Certificate in Management. No dedicated course materials were produced but two experienced and committed tutors (staff at a local university who also worked as consultants) were hired and a series of half-day workshops was planned. These were intended to guide managers through the accreditation process rather than teach them about management and no syllabus was generated. Originally they were scheduled to run for the first few months, after which periodic support was to be offered to individuals as and when necessary, but, given the lack of substantive progress at the point the workshops were intended to terminate, the company decided to arrange regular, fortnightly meetings so that managers could 'drop in' to discuss problems or use the time to work on their portfolios.

ConstructionCo's course was the least expensive. At the start of the process it hired a firm of consultants to run a series of six half-day workshops on relevant topics (such as Health and Safety, and Recruitment and Selection) and it was not until these half dozen sessions were over that the managers were introduced to the idea of preparing a portfolio. This was to be done in their own time and

supported by periodic meetings with the tutor to check on progress. However, a few months into this process the trainers went into liquidation and the ConstructionCo candidates were left without support for six months. At that stage, shocked at the lack of progress that had been made, ConstructionCo hired another consultancy firm to push its candidates through the final stage of the qualification.

Running the workshops: CBET in practice

Each of these courses was very differently structured. The NVQ format was flexible enough to adapt to CIM programmes where academic input was desired and function as a 'stand alone' when it was not. Syllabi, determined (and sometimes written) by the employers, had the potential to be immediately relevant to their needs and, since the qualifications were open-ended, workshops (where they were held) could be scheduled for as long, or as short, a timescale as necessary.

However, beneath these very real differences in practice, the demands on each candidate were essentially the same. To gain an NVQ, each was required to produce a portfolio of evidence, proving individual competence against the occupational standards. Demonstrating competence in this way was not an intuitive process and every candidate needed a great deal of guidance and support to write their portfolios. In addition to this, the occupational standards themselves were neither well written nor clearly expressed (this fault has been

repeatedly noted by commentators, see, for example, NCVQ/SCOTVEC, 1996; CBI, 1994), so that tutors needed to spend a great deal of time 'translating' the NVQ to their groups. Paul Phillips of ConstructionCo was particularly critical of the language of the standards:

> The English used in the . . . manuals is much too complicated. They need much more explanations and, my god, it must be written by some sort of lawyer.

The need to ensure that the candidates understood the demands of the qualification together with the requirement that they produce a portfolio meant that in each of these case study companies, practice in the workshops effectively converged.

The PrivatPLC learning days were dominated by the demands of the portfolio from the first. Part of every morning (generally between thirty minutes and one hour) was dedicated to the guest speaker and here the managers would learn about different parts of the business, personal experiences of management or specialist disciplines. Several of the guest speakers prepared extensive hand-outs and all were happy to receive and respond to questions.

Once this session had finished the rest of the day was devoted to portfolio building. Often the rest of the morning would be spent with the tutor reading aloud from the NVQ to establish which performance criteria might be satisfied by that day's guest speaker, candidates sharing evidence they had produced, discussing whether certain documents might be suitable sources of proof, or

worrying about competences they could not readily demonstrate. In the afternoons, the tutor would spend twenty to thirty minutes with each candidate on an individual basis, going over the material they had submitted and considering whether it met the requirements of the NVQ. The rest of the group would brainstorm which PrivatPLC documents and procedures might provide fruitful sources of evidence for specific standards. For example, for 5.1 (b) *All individuals within the team are encouraged and assisted to evaluate the team's overall development needs and to contribute to the discussion and planning of how these will be met* the group suggested using photocopies of the coaching handbook, the performance measurement systems, minutes of Quality Circles, annual performance reviews, records of one-to-ones, team briefing records, action points for team meetings, new ideas put forward and suggestion boxes.

The situation in SupermarketCo was very similar, since the tutors in both organisations wanted the managers to pass their NVQs. Every workshop was spent poring over the minutiae of the standards, suggesting forms of evidence that could be used to prove each section, or comparing forms of evidence and considering what might be added to strengthen them in assessment terms. The key question asked was always whether an action was specified by the NVQ and many SupermarketCo managers sympathised with James Green when he complained, after completing one unit, that:

> I was reading and re-reading the standards. It was taking over my life. It could have dragged on for another week.

The basis on which managerial work was considered, was whether it was "*good evidence*" and whether it "*fulfilled the criteria*" rather than whether it was *good management.* Cross reference forms, blank pro-formas for witness testimonies, summary sheets to list the evidence and stickers on which evidence numbers could be written were supplied, explained, used, discussed and repeatedly corrected over the months.

One exchange between Stephanie Rigal and the tutor were typical of this constant emphasis of style over substance. Stephanie controlled no budget of her own and had used another manager's information to provide evidence for her portfolio (something which was acknowledged in her 'claim to competence'). Yet, despite her inexperience of the subject matter, almost none of the tutorial was devoted to discussing budgets. Instead, the tutor praised Stephanie's grasp of the material in the first few minutes of an hour-long session, before going on to spend most the rest of the time discussing 'portfolio management', suggesting how Stephanie might better present her material and referring back to the precise wording of the NVQ itself to gauge how good the evidence was. She talked about the way Stephanie had numbered her photocopied sheets of evidence, discussed an alternative numbering system and considered how Stephanie might cross reference different pieces of evidence. Then the conversation was steered away from indexing the evidence and towards fulfilling the demands of the standards. Stephanie had complied with the performance criteria but not the range statements and needed to go back over her evidence to generate additional proofs and factor those in. Finally, their discussion came full circle, back to the

indexing system, with the tutor suggesting that Stephanie use a cross-reference sheet, a simple grid with the evidence numbers along one axis and the performance criteria along the other so that evidence which fulfilled particular criteria could be 'ticked off'.

In ConstructionCo this emphasis on style over substance may have been compounded by the tutor's own area of expertise. The second firm of consultants hired had an impressive record of successfully guiding candidates through the NVQ process, but little experience of management. The consultant who came to the company had successfully tutored NVQ candidates in customer service, sales, direct care and business administration and was starting to work with nurse managers in the local hospital. Here it seemed that, as in the standards' development process, the qualifications process was so complex that expertise in CBET itself was more important than expertise in the occupational area being assessed. This was not the case in the other two case study companies where the NVQ tutors had experience of management (albeit within one specialist function only). The SupermarketCo tutors had both enjoyed extensive experience of personnel management before taking on lecturing posts in one of the new universities and the PrivatPLC tutor had spent her working life in the company's personnel department before being sponsored on a DMS. However, even here, as has been seen, candidates' attention was focused firmly on the NVQ process.

Anxious to co-operate with their tutors (and gain their qualifications) the workshop groups in both PrivatPLC and SupermarketCo made every attempt to

discipline themselves to stick to the standards. Here, a group from PrivatPLC discuss how they might evidence element 3.1 *Make recommendations for expenditure*:

John:	What about ordering new equipment?
Ian:	Yeah - from the others' [portfolios] it can be as simple as that.
Pat:	Footstools.
Jane:	People being encouraged to contribute.
Pat:	Ask people who wants a footstool.
Jane:	Recommendation presented clearly and concisely in the appropriate format.
John:	What about organising this - I got everyone lunch for less than £2.50 a head . . . .

Such a process was a necessary part of portfolio production. In ConstructionCo, where candidates were given little or no guidance in this method of presenting evidence, several were required to spend a great deal of time re-doing their portfolios at the end of the course, because their indexing systems were poor (one because he had used the same indexing method as the NVQ itself. His assessor described it as "awful").

This focus on the precise demands of the performance criteria and range statements also precluded work on the academic certificates. In SupermarketCo workshops revolved around portfolios to the exclusion of everything else. It was

not clear how candidates were expected to obtain a joint award, nor where any theoretical input was to come from. Candidates were registered for both but assisted towards only one. In PrivatPLC, after the original orientation week, the only references to theory were by the group tutor who urged them to include it. Candidates were expected to learn, master and use the theories on their own and include it *in spite of* the NVQ's demands. Pat Walker queried this:

Tutor:	You haven't got all that background reading for nothing - it's presenting that.
Pat:	I realise that and when I was stuffing it in - I mean posting it to you - but it says in the guidance that it [the Claim to Competence] mustn't be more than a page and I had to make it ten point font to fit it all on as it was.
Tutor:	I'll review that. You're giving evidence for the double award so you need to get it all on . . . .
Pat:	How are we going to use the [NVQ] to help us with the talk? [The group is preparing for a guest speaker, a manager who works on PrivatPLC's management accounts and has been invited to speak to the group about his work.]
Tutor:	This should provide underpinning knowledge and understanding. Take some notes because you might want to use it as background information. It's not just about what you're doing, but *why* you're doing it and do you know what the big picture within PrivatPLC is.
Pat:	Ye-es . . . but that's not what the [NVQ] seems to ask for.
Tutor:	It's what I'm asking for. I'm re-writing the [NVQ].

Yet, while the old CIM programme had devoted whole days to learning about a given subject, NVQ/CIM candidates were expected to be proficient on the same material with no tutorial support. Given that the aim was that the candidates should qualify, these exercises focusing on evidencing their competence, were useful and necessary, but, as a result of them, one part of the qualification was emphasised at the expense of the other. As Alan Senior said:

> We all seem to be so heavily NVQ-biased that we're not doing anything for the Certificate in Management . . . . It's got a little bit clearer with the NVQ but I don't see where the Certificate comes in and I think if you asked everyone else in the group they'd be fine on the NVQ but they wouldn't know anything about the Certificate.

In SupermarketCo, where the 'joint' programme contained no formal provision for support for the CIM the workshops were even more one-sided.

In every workshop which was observed, it was the demands of the standards, rather than the needs of the candidates, or the objectives set by the organisations, that dominated. Essentially, the focus was on "evidence gaps" rather than "learning gaps" (see, for example, Marks's enthusiastic account of proving competence, 1994). Such activities have two principal flaws. The first, which has already been considered at a theoretical level, is that repeatedly deferring to the MCI's model presupposes that it is indeed a description of best practice. If the Management NVQ does represent benchmarked standards, assessing candidates' actions against them could perhaps encourage constructive reflection and behavioural changes that bring 'real' practice closer to 'best' practice. If,

however, the Management NVQ is largely socially constructed, focusing on the standards in this way crucially *misdirects* development.

The second criticism is that the time spent in each of these NVQ workshops poring over the minutiae of the standards could have been spent more productively on other activities. This is not empty speculation since, in these case studies, paradoxically enough, while formal workshop time involved the somewhat mechanistic process of evidencing, breaks were often spent considering managerial problems and practice.

Wasting time over coffee?

A recurrent feature of the training literature is an emphasis on the value of 'networking' where experienced managers can meet colleagues and discuss shared experiences (Mumford *et al*, 1987; Leggatt, 1972). This has become so accepted a truism that many of the formal training structures try to mimic it. All of the tutors spoke of the workshops providing 'networking opportunities' and all encouraged the candidates to establish 'self help' groups and 'mentor' one another between sessions.

Ideally, the managers within the group would use the workshop sessions to exchange advice on management practice and occasionally this did happen, with the NVQ criteria acting as a springboard for the discussions. Once, a group of half a dozen SupermarketCo managers talked about the competing 'low price'

initiatives that they and their competitors had embarked on, after the tutor asked them what journals they read to help them in their professional capacity. However, this was the exception rather than the rule. Supporting the evidencing process was so time-consuming that there was little space in the workshops for any other activity.

Outside the workshops however, managers were free to discuss non-NVQ matters. In PrivatPLC, over coffee or buffet lunches, they talked about the implications of the increasing numbers of temporary staff within their organisation, explored innovative ways of dealing with teams, shared stories of the corporate bureaucracy and suggestions for improving it, considered the legislative pressures on themselves as managers and explained what their departments did. Such exchanges tapped the wealth of resources available within the team. Similarly, in SupermarketCo, the candidates chatted about the changes in the sector nationally, the company's expansion, using new technology and up-dating stores. In line with Linda Reese's new policy on management training, several went on a short outward bound course where, as Richard Blackwood said, they spent the entire evening in the bar talking shop:

> When you get SupermarketCo people outside the
> office they often lose sight of what they're here for -
> we had a bloody good discussion - people say you can
> tell we care about our company because we always
> talk about it - work, work, work and forget the course.
> Throw your ideas in the mixing pot.

In these discussions much attention was devoted to considering whether the incidents, exercises or situations were *good management*. Had the team enjoyed

a certain innovative exercise? What were the legal obligations facing managers? What exactly was this new initiative and did it work? How did the industry regulator view that practice? or, how might the company cope with the increasing level of competition? Ironically, these substantive explorations of management practice, were effectively stopped in the workshops and restricted to recreational times by the demands of the bureaucratic (and often trivial) management standards. The rigidities of the official 'best practice' drove out candidates' own, albeit somewhat unstructured, attempts to improve.

Conclusions: flexibility in theory and practice

A central tenet of NVQ-rhetoric is that NVQs are flexible. They were originally planned to offer open access, open assessment and open inputs. Here, that tenet has been critically addressed. Within the workshops, if no-where else, it was illusory for, despite dramatic differences in the objectives, context, structure and (planned) content of each of these programmes, the onus on every candidate to produce a portfolio of evidence led to a remarkable convergence of practice. The result of this was that workshops and individual tutorials revolved around the process of producing, presenting and suitably indexing evidence. Such rapid convergence, from three very different starting points, must raise serious questions over NVQs' claims to be 'employer-led', if only in the sense that the standards are so inflexible that practice is centrally imposed, rather than locally determined.

Earlier, it was argued that the case studies drawn on for this thesis are examples of good practice and, as such, atypical of NVQ users. This point is of particular relevance here since, typically, an NVQ course will involve *no* constructive input, not necessarily because employers do not think their managers would gain from such a process, but because it is not generally realised that this may (or should) be included. Indeed, several of the Awarding Bodies expressed some concern at the numbers of firms who thought that the NVQ itself *includes* training and development. In fact, the onus of conceiving the syllabus, generating it, conveying it to the candidates and testing it, is devolved squarely onto the employers (though this is rarely stated quite so explicitly). Yet, because the qualifications are 'employer-led' the MCI and the NCVQ are reluctant even to suggest that the employers should include 'inputs'. They assume that employers who wish for inputs will develop them, while the employers assume that NVQs, in common with other forms of training, contain inputs (Littlefield, 1995). As the head of one of the major Awarding Bodies said:

> The NCVQ published a model that had worked at a lower level and didn't revise that as they went up. They never said knowledge wasn't important and shouldn't be assessed. Where it started was with simple tasks - you could get away with defining knowledge broadly and assessing through inference or through performance evidence because the size of the competence itself is relatively small. At levels 4 and 5, all we're saying is that the knowledge needs to be defined - there's more of it . . . . [But] the way it's presented now it doesn't drive companies to think that something should be put in there.

To compound this problem, even where syllabi are designed and both employers and tutors attempt to link them to the NVQ, filling the requirements of the

standards demands so much time and effort, and sits so uneasily with the demands of the other programmes, that the academic 'inputs' are honoured more in breach than in observation.

Much of this can be attributed to an inherent contradiction within the standards. They lay claim to be, simultaneously, a description of 'best practice' and a syllabus-neutral 'black box' into which employers can insert anything that they require. Yet these statements are mutually incompatible. The first one demands a normative interpretation of the standards, viewing them as generic descriptions of management that may be (and are) clearly prescribed and which candidates are simply required to conform to. In contrast, the facilitative interpretation of the second could sustain a multiplicity of different 'managements' all of which would be equally correct.

As has been seen, in practice, the detailed and prescriptive nature of NVQs drive users toward the normative interpretation and, because NVQs deal solely with assessment (Fletcher, 1991), implementing them, not unnaturally, focuses on assessment. In all three companies in this study, this resulted in emphasis being taken from individual improvement and development and put onto accreditation. When candidates experienced difficulties finding evidence for sections of the qualification they and their tutors would discuss where such evidence might be found. It was assumed that managers were on the course to *prove* rather than to *learn*. NVQ courses may actually be resistant to any 'learning' elements *because* they are NVQ courses.

This chapter has reviewed and assessed the 'flexibility' that the Management NVQ offers. Although, theoretically, defining only performance and assessment criteria should liberate teachers and learners to generate the earlier stages of the process in whatever way they think fit, in practice, these earlier stages were simply missed out altogether, even when employers claimed to want a developmental qualification, or (when taught elements were intended to form part of the programme) the learning conflicted with the NVQ elements. To date, NVQ literature has assumed that all other forms of training could be subsumed within the NVQ framework because it restricted its wording to outputs. It may be that that the opposite is true and that other forms of learning experience difficulties within the framework precisely because NVQs specify outputs in the way they do.

CHAPTER SIX

MAKING MODEL MANAGERS

It has already been argued that, since candidates were required to produce portfolios to be certified competent, and, since assembling portfolios is no simple task, NVQ-workshops tend to revolve around the processes involved in generating evidence rather than the tasks and functions of management. In essence, they are NVQ-driven. Here, that evaluation is extended to consider the effect NVQs had on managerial practice, a key aspect of the CBET process and one seldom exposed to critical, empirical scrutiny. As one of the SupermarketCo tutors asserted confidently:

> I don't know of a better mechanism for *changing the way you work*. I think it's very powerful. If you're more or less competent then this gets you there. [Emphasis added]

The NVQ was being introduced to alter and improve the way the candidates approached their work. It was presented to them as a model of best practice and they were encouraged to use it to develop. This chapter explores the ways in

which their work changed, speculates on the reasons for these changes and considers the implications of these changes for CBET as a whole.

It starts by considering how well the MCI's model of managerial work mapped onto the candidates' actual job descriptions. In chapter five, when the candidates were introduced, it was noted that, between them, they possessed a wide range of managerial experience and they had worked in a wide variety of different areas. Then, it was anticipated that, while some would find their work described with reasonable accuracy by the occupational standards, others might struggle to match what they did against the performance criteria. Since the degree of 'fit' could reasonably be expected to colour a candidate's experiences of the qualification, this chapter starts by attempting to measure it.

This issue proved more contentious than had been expected and few candidates were prepared to admit, even where discrepancies were glaringly obvious, that their work failed to conform to the standards. This may have been because the standards themselves were regularly presented as a description of 'best practice' and 'competent management' so that inconsistencies indicated that the candidate was not engaged in managerial work (rather than that the NVQ did not describe managerial work). This notion of 'real' management is problematic and impacted on the way candidates interpreted their own successes and failures in the NVQ, an issue that is considered in more depth in chapter eight.

This chapter focuses on the reflexive nature of the standards, as many of the candidates, having assimilated this description of 'best practice', sought to adapt their working practices to its demands. It is argued that, as with the workshops, the demands of the portfolio and the stress on the qualification, together with the rigidity inherent in the NVQ, all contributed towards the formalisation and bureaucratisation of workplace procedures.

Finally, the implications of these activities for competence-based qualifications in general are considered. Here, it is argued that many of the problems noted stem from the way in which NVQs are structured and that an emphasis on observed behaviour may misdirect attention. The links between CBET and the work of Frederick Taylor and the behaviourist school of psychology are noted, and some of the problems inherent in these approaches considered.

WORKING TO THE STANDARDS

The Management NVQ is a generic description of managerial work and candidates are required to prove that they meet all of its specifications to secure the qualification. Clearly, the degree to which their own job description matched the management standards would be an important factor in their progress. However, this study was designed to focus on the use of the NVQ, and the majority of participant observation was restricted to NVQ workshops. In no company did direct observation of the candidates' work take place and this thesis

is based on evidence gathered through repeated interviews, triangulated with other sources.

As a result, one of the primary sources of material is the candidates' own stories of the way in which their work changed. Occasionally, it was possible to gather other evidence in order to support or refute these narratives, but this does not entirely circumvent the problems involved in using self-reports (see Stewart, 1988, for a fuller account of these). Some sources of evidence could be 'triangulated'. Candidates' accounts could be compared with their own (earlier and later) narratives; the portfolio of work they were developing could be used to stimulate comment and monitor progress; and their experiences could be compared with those of their peers and subordinates. Within each organisation, candidates would often offer information, progress reports or anecdotes about their peers and visits to the candidates' own offices provided additional opportunities to glean evidence.

Could all 'real' managers please stand up?

Initially, (and somewhat naïvely) the need for this triangulation of evidence on the work the candidates did was not predicted. When the research was planned, it was anticipated that the level of 'fit' between the work a candidate was actually involved in and that prescribed by the MCI would be comparatively easy to assess; indeed, it was thought that the candidates themselves could be involved, unproblematically, in calculating this level of 'fit' (and that they would be in the

strongest position to do so); after which, the evaluation of the qualification could then proceed smoothly.

In practice, the process was far more contentious than this. Almost every member of the group emphasised how well their work corresponded to the NVQ, even in cases where there were obvious (and major) inconsistencies. Harry Dent, the training manager from SupermarketCo, spent 60-80% of his time in the classroom, teaching. He taught numerous courses and was involved in designing and buying in materials and tuition from external sources. All of his administration was done by an office manager who, though nominally reporting to him, was largely independent. The office manager supervised a small team of clerks and, on the rare occasions that Harry was back at base, he would sit with them. However, as both he and the office manager freely agreed, he did not get involved in the administration of courses, the office budgets or the people management issues. It seemed that, to all intents and purposes, Harry was effectively a full-time teacher. In spite of this, when asked how accurately the NVQ described his work he replied with great confidence that it was "spot on".

Nor was he the only candidate to do so. James Green had been promoted some six months before this study began, from working as a regional training manager in SupermarketCo to the post of personal assistant (PA) to a director. This shift took him from a job which had some problems matching the MCI model, to one which failed to conform to the standards in almost any way. He controlled no staff and no budgets, letters drafted by him generally went out under the

director's signature and his job description was so vague as to be almost meaningless. Yet he too was anxious to emphasise that his work matched the MCI's requirements.

Such claims, coming as they often did, immediately after complaints about how difficult particular units were to evidence and how irrelevant certain standards were to the candidates' jobs, were puzzling. Candidates would readily highlight massive discrepancies between their own work and the MCI's model when discussing individual standards, yet still maintain that, taken as a whole, the NVQ was an accurate description of what they did. This anomaly is inexplicable if managerial work is only seen in functional terms. Managers must, after all, be aware of what they do in the workplace; if, however, as Storey (1980) argues, management is essentially a political activity, it becomes not only understandable but positively rational.

The NVQ candidates observed here were repeatedly told that the Management NVQ represented the benchmarks against which managerial work should be judged. The standards set out, not only what management was, but how to do it. Their actions were repeatedly checked against the NVQ for 'competence' by the workshop tutors, they were urged to use the standards in the workplace to help them develop, queries were 'checked off' against the performance criteria and the qualification itself was repeatedly praised. The qualifications described 'real' managerial work. Minor discrepancies could be accommodated, but anyone not actively engaged in such work, was, by implication, not a manager.

To put this into perspective, individual managers daily experience the monitoring devices (appraisal, assessment) that the literature tells us are inaccurate and problematic (Randell, 1994; Marchington and Wilkinson, 1996); they are urged to perform to targets in order to win rewards and discover that, in practice, good performance may not be the central criterion employed in considering applicants for promotion (Jackall, 1988; Moss-Kanter, 1977) and they are increasingly required to do all this better, faster or more productively (Guest and Davey, 1996; Vielba, 1995). An ambiguous job description that is altered, adapted and confirmed by superiors is a constant factor of managerial work. Jackall (1988) points out that, as a result of this, managers become very sensitive to the behaviours their employers really encourage, they regularly sift through the rhetoric in search of the 'real' message and adapt their own behaviour accordingly. Given the emphasis placed on the standards, it was clear to even the most obtuse that achieving them was a 'good' thing to do.

Perhaps this reaction should have been anticipated. Had the NVQ been the benchmarks of best practice that it claimed, and if management were a generic set of functions, then an inability to comply with the model would indeed have shown that a candidate was either not a manager or that they were not doing their job properly. This meant that, for an individual candidate, quarrelling openly with the definition, was tantamount to them questioning the legitimacy of their own position. That was a serious step, particularly for those candidates who were new (or non-) managers. Managerial status may be denoted by the title but,

as Child (1969) and Storey (1980) note, it is legitimated by the generic descriptions of managerial work; managers are rewarded for their expertise in 'managerial' tasks. Small wonder then, that titular managers whose work did not conform to the popular definition often felt insecure. Several of Watson's (1994) interviewees questioned whether they were yet (or still) managers and Scase and Goffee found in their study that (1989:26):

> Ironically, perhaps, junior and middle level managers
> are often frustrated because they feel 'excluded' from
> *management.* [Emphasis in original]

Several candidates in this study said that they were doing the course to remind their employers that they were managers. Alan Kempson was one of the PrivatPLC staff who took and passed the Management NVQ in the pilot group before this study started. He had been a titular manager for eight years, yet he saw the NVQ solely in legitimatory terms:

> It should help me get into management - you know -
> prove I am a manager and it should help you move
> around the company at least that's what you hope! It
> keeps you as a manager rather than a professional.

Moreover, conformity to organisational norms, meeting targets and adopting appropriate behaviours are all an established part of managerial mores (Jackall, 1988; Moss-Kanter, 1977). The NVQ was simply another area in which candidates had to comply.

The degree of fit and the hope of development

Revealing as this insight is into the nature of managerial work, it does mean that compiling a table of match and mis-match was more problematic than anticipated, while doing nothing to diminish the importance of constructing such a table. Accordingly, one was drawn up using a combination of interview notes, portfolio evidence, candidates' suggestions, observations and impressionistic evidence; while this cannot (and does not) pretend to represent an objective and robust account of the correlations between the occupational standards and the work the candidates were engaged in, it does provide a rough guide to how easily these candidates could fulfil the NVQ's criteria. Of the eighteen managers at the centre of this study, only *three* were engaged in managerial work that accurately reflected the standards (two at PrivatPLC and one at SupermarketCo). Seven more, on job description alone, could probably work around comparatively minor problems (these seven were divided reasonably evenly between the three case study companies, there were two each at PrivatPLC and SupermarketCo and three at ConstructionCo) a further two (one each from SupermarketCo and ConstructionCo) had a major discrepancy between the description put forward by the MCI and their work, while the work of the remaining six *failed to match the standards in any meaningful way.*

The MCI's key roles: managing operations, managing finance, managing people and managing information, may have successfully captured the popular conception of managerial work. However, at least insofar as this group of

eighteen candidates was concerned, they had failed to describe what individual managers actually did. Nor did any one part of the qualification emerge as particularly problematic. Discrepancies between candidates' work and the NVQ's template were observed in the majority of the units. Most of the minor and major variances were for different elements, or parts of elements; a unit that did not figure in one candidate's experience of management at all, might be the most pivotal feature of another's. Jane Ewen's minor disparity stemmed from the fact that she controlled no budget. She ran a telephone help desk in PrivatPLC and in her area involvement with budgets was so rare that a director's signature had to be secured for all expenditure in excess of £60. Several managers had no involvement in recruitment. Others had extensive experience in this area; Terry Saunders had recruited a whole new team for his office while working towards the NVQ, but the lack of any extensive in-house training meant that he had no evidence of developing his staff beyond the induction process.

Moreover, there was little to suggest that either rank or experience made a candidate more 'managerial' in the MCI's terms, since these correlations cut across the titular boundaries. Alan Senior, although not of managerial rank, was engaged in work which matched the standards very closely indeed; while Jane Ewen, who was also a supervisor, found only minor inconsistencies between her work and the standards. At the other extreme, of the six candidates whose work failed to conform to the model, only one, Michelle Lawrence, was not a titular manager. Tom Hackett, Pat Walker, James Green, Harry Dent and Richard Blackwood were all managers; none had less than eighteen months experience

and Harry Dent had been a manager for over twenty years, yet none were doing the work described in the standards.

Tony Houston of the NCVQ argued that such discrepancies represent the development candidates have to do to improve their management practice (interview notes), a sentiment echoed by the PrivatPLC tutor and many of the candidates. Certainty is an attractive trait in an uncertain world (indeed, Cleverley, 1971, suggests that accountants and management gurus are highly regarded because they provide organisations with this), and publicising the NVQ performance criteria as benchmarks and best practice meant that they were seen to be offering this certainty. It was to be expected that candidates would actively *want* to meet such standards so that, where their actions failed to conform to 'best practice' it was understandable that most made attempts to alter their working practices.

These attempts tended to spring from a genuine desire to become better managers rather than a cynical attempt to gain the qualification at any cost. As the programmes progressed, candidates repeatedly expressed concern in the workshops when tutors seemed to be interpreting the criteria a little too liberally. The managers themselves, despite their willingness to believe their work fitted the description, were reluctant to condone glaringly disingenuous interpretations. Keith Miles, a PrivatPLC manager in his forties and another member of the pilot group, expressed concern when interviewed about the NVQ process after he had completed the qualification:

> If you think long and hard and sit down with the tutors
> then you come up with something. The danger is you
> think you're bending the rules too much and you're
> just twisting them to fit in with your needs and the
> tutors are there and they say no, that's fine, carry on
> down that road. That's really how we got through it.

Richard Blackwood from SupermarketCo struggled with the model provided by

the MCI. His main 'problem' was that, as an IT specialist, he worked largely

independently and had no staff reporting directly to him. This made large

sections of the NVQ difficult to evidence. The tutor, trying to find ways round

this issue, discovered that, when Richard was on annual leave, some elements of

his job would be performed by two junior members of another manager's team.

These clerks would be assigned to printing reports out from Richard's computer

system morning and evening, taking messages and (very occasionally) dealing

with basic queries. They did not report to Richard, nor, except in the most

general sense of instructing them how to print reports off and expressing his

satisfaction (or otherwise) to their line manager, was he expected to take any

responsibility for their annual reports or development and he made this expressly

(and repeatedly) clear to the NVQ tutor. Despite this, the tutor saw these two

clerks as Richard's opportunity to evidence Unit 6 *Plan, allocate and evaluate*

work carried out by teams, individuals and self and spent a long session reading

through the performance criteria with Richard and explaining how each could

link to this situation. After the workshop, Richard joked that he was "a sleeping

people manager - I manage people when I'm not here". But to the tutor, he

expressed reservations:

Richard: I don't like the thought of fudging it.

Tutor: Well I don't think it is fudging it.

Technically the tutor was right. The clerks undoubtedly did do part of Richard's work and an observation of SupermarketCo's head office would have confirmed this. However, extending this observation to argue that Richard *managed* these people was casuitical. He had neither power over them, nor responsibility for their work. It seems that 'sticking to the standards', in the NCVQ's aphorism, can result in emphasis being directed to the letter, rather than the spirit, of the competences.

Management by memo

Most candidates made strenuous attempts to avoid this. In both SupermarketCo and ConstructionCo the work practice of those managers who were enrolled on the NVQ changed dramatically and most of the changes could be traced back to the NVQ and the portfolio of evidence. An NVQ portfolio is a collection of photocopies (memos, minutes, letters and spreadsheets) that prove a candidate has fulfilled all the requirements of the standards. In theory, candidates may prove their competence by any means, but in practice every candidate who enrols on an NVQ at level 3 or above submits a portfolio (NCVQ/SCOTVEC, 1996; Cheetham, 1994). The implications of assessing competence in this way will be discussed in chapter eight, here the impact of collating and generating this evidence on candidates' everyday work is considered. This emphasis on the

written word was particularly unusual in SupermarketCo and ConstructionCo, where managers were not accustomed to document their work to any great extent. SupermarketCo's head office was comparatively small and most managers relied on personal contacts to get things done, in addition to this the company prided itself on not incurring superfluous expense. ConstructionCo managers also ran their offices on a largely informal basis. Several were in charge of construction sites where instructions tended to be verbal, and meetings would seldom involve either agendas or minutes.

If the NVQ's occupational standards were a message being sent to the managers about good management practice, then the portfolios were part of that message. Since the principal element required in a portfolio was documentary proof, good management practice as prescribed by the qualification came to involve formalisation, procedures and paperwork. Several candidates saw the advantages of working systematically. Terry Saunders of ConstructionCo argued that:

> An NVQ records and defines a manager's role. You do a lot informally, you need to manage more effectively - to evidence you need to formalise systems. It's a written role model of what managers should be - all the things you did informally before are not acceptable.

In SupermarketCo both James Green and Colin Segal separately developed interview ticklists for their first NVQ workshop, which was on recruitment and selection; Richard Blackwood devised a new system for recording his contacts with people outside his own organisation; Harry Dent organised a meeting and followed each step prescribed by the standards; and all, without exception,

started sending memos. Reports of loose wiring or cardboard boxes abandoned in the corridor, requests for toner cartridges for the laser printer and snippets of information were all dutifully written down. Whereas before, the candidates would have spoken to the people responsible or telephoned them, after starting on the NVQ they sent memos and established audit trails.

The story in ConstructionCo was similar. Terry Saunders' accustomed one-to-one chats through his office door with staff were transformed into meetings with agendas and written instructions on the way the team was to work that day. David Beasley and Paul Phillips, who were responsible for implementing British Standards on the sites, discovered that they already had sufficient evidence to prove competence against many of the units and all they were required to do was photocopy the contents of their filing cabinets; their less fortunate colleagues spent a great deal of time writing official procedures for their own sections so that they could follow them to obtain the NVQ.

This formalisation and proceduralisation of work had certain advantages. Memos and interview notes can provide a record of actions, aid recollections of events and systematise work so that it becomes easier to move between job roles. Hilary Landy said that:

> Where there's a difficulty in finding information it is a weakness in the process on my own part. When evidence is lacking I asked myself whether it *ought* to exist and the answer was yes. I ought to ensure that I complete the sequence on paper.

Even those managers who had been reluctant to change the way they worked were gradually won over. Here, in an exchange with a tutor, Stephanie Rigal considers the advantages of memos:

Stephanie: [Doing the NVQ] highlighted the amount of verbal communication I do. It's difficult to collect evidence. Should I change, or what? I've got a very 'bitty' job. I 'phone people.

Tutor: Does that work?

Stephanie: It works. A lot of it is verbal, and is verbal safe?

Tutor: Are there ways to change anything you do?

Stephanie: I could change - rather than a verbal update to the director [I could] do a written report. It would take ten to fifteen minutes a week. *I would be doing it purely for the* [*NVQ*. There's a] small advantage - if there were a breakdown in communications there would be proof there. [emphasis added]

By contrast, PrivatPLC, with a staff of 38,000 managers and a legacy of many years of state ownership, had documented, programmed and proceduralised most of the junior and middle managerial roles to the extent that much of a manager's time was spent producing pro-formas, memos and minutes (or responding to pro-formas, memos and minutes). Unusual decisions could be referred to manuals, telephone help-lines or specialist staff. Managers were subject to auditing at any time and company inspectors would examine their paperwork, assessing it and following actions through to check that the appropriate steps had been taken and the necessary documents produced. John Robson realised how advantageous this was:

NVQs again - it's akin to the ISO audit because they're checking the records all the time and because

we're very Quality oriented it will help us with the NVQ because having kept the records and produced them for the audit we should be able to do it for the NVQ - it's the same records at the end of the day. Having said that, a lot of the Quality systems are seen as just a lot of paper-handling and we were hoping to move to using less paper and being less civil-service like.

In PrivatPLC documentation was already so thorough that the main problem managers had was finding enough time to put together a portfolio, or map their work onto the NVQ. In the other two case study companies candidates had to change the way they worked. Every one of them started to write memos, take minutes and document actions.

Problems with paperwork

Managers often described current practice as "informal" or "cutting corners" and saw it as less legitimate than the thoroughly documented equivalent. Portfolios made them focus on the "proper" way of working. But not all experiences with paperwork were so positive. James Green sent a memo to a young clerk who worked on the floor below, requesting information rather than making a telephone call. The memo was intended for his portfolio and the only reason he had chosen to make his request in writing was because he needed evidence of such managerial work for his NVQ. The clerk who received it was so concerned by this sudden change of communication medium that she worried for a week afterwards about whether the company doubted her ability and were instituting personal checks. Given the size of SupermarketCo's head office, James heard

the story a short while later and was able to reassure the clerk concerned. In the interests of good employee relations he stopped generating memos.

Nor was he the only candidate to become disillusioned with the bureaucracy of the Standards. The intensification of managerial work has been the subject of much debate recently (Guest and Davey, 1996; Vielba, 1995) and the managers who took part in this study were all under pressure to work increasingly long hours. As Hilary Landy of SupermarketCo said, "something really crucial will happen - tomorrow!" Redundancies at ConstructionCo and PrivatPLC and expansion at SupermarketCo meant that increasing amounts of pressure were being put onto managers. Contrast Sarah Culbertson's account of managerial work in PrivatPLC pre-flotation when she worked part-time as a clerk for an engineering manager, with her own dramatic rise to management rank in 1995. Her first insight into management had been comparatively relaxed:

> Those were the days when they left everything to the [clerk] - it was a different world in those days - there was nothing like the sort of pressure we have today. The managers would sit in the office eating bacon sandwiches till about eleven then maybe go out and watch somebody doing something. It was brilliant experience for me because I was basically doing the manager's job.

By the time she became a manager herself, the workload had increased:

> They had difficulties in London - there was a change of manager he had a nervous breakdown after eight weeks and he was our manager too so I had to cover the two sites and he didn't return to the office and he was replaced by another manager who also had a nervous breakdown and I was asked to cover for him. It was an opportunity to go to London and prove

myself - the job to me was common sense and easy. Originally I went for one month . . . . I stayed for another month, then for two months and ten months later I was still there - on the eighth month they tried to replace me - I was staying in hotels for the whole time and I was losing touch with family and friends and not stopping working, I was doing eight till seven and they put someone else in to replace me and he lasted four weeks. I don't think he ever took over from me. I know the job well, it helped. Ten months went by, then I came back here and a manager's job appeared in this office and I applied and I was promoted in February this year.

Most of the candidates reported working late into the evening, taking work home or coming into the office at weekends. In such an environment, they had little time to burden themselves with a permanent load of additional administration. The old, informal system may not have been the 'proper' way to manage, but it had worked very effectively and there was little incentive for a candidate to neglect important aspects of their work in order to sustain the procedures they had instituted for the NVQ. The result of this was, that it rapidly became a residual activity, something to be done when work-load permitted and abandoned rapidly when it did not. As Hilary Landy said:

I have reservations about the qualifications. Managers have tight deadlines and two or three hats. Crisis is normal. Lists of best practice and portfolios are not at the top of the list.

Even PrivatPLC, which was already 'managed by memo' was trying to become, in John Robson's words, "less civil-service like". The NVQ did not help. Managers had so little time that all fell further and further behind with their deadlines for submitting units since work always came first. The documentary initiatives they started were very short-lived.

Colin Segal and James Green of SupermarketCo did not have sufficient time to continue their involvement with interviews and never got an opportunity to pilot their 'ticklists'. Stephanie Rigal, who did introduce formal team management structures (minuting team meetings and formalising personal development plans with her staff), said she appreciated them very much and produced copies for her portfolio. However, after one or two months the frenetic pace of her work meant that 'optional' elements were abandoned and the first part of the work to be sidelined was the paperwork involved in the portfolio. Though in principle she still approved of documentation:

> I've hardly called that many meetings to take notes at
> of late because there's been so many work pressures -
> I'm confident I'd keep records [if I did]

Almost every manager reported similar results. Record keeping and audit trails were a useful element in managerial work, they provided memory jogs, proof of work undertaken, legitimised the individual's role in their organisation and, should the worst happen, offered a potential source of legal proof and NVQs compelled candidates clearly and unambiguously towards such formal record-keeping. However, despite many candidates' assertions that the formalisation was 'proper' management, these elements were clearly 'optional' and, after sufficient evidence was generated for the portfolio, documentation generally ceased.

Terry Saunders of ConstructionCo was one notable exception to this, but it seemed that his continued use of paperwork stemmed from something other than a desire to gain an NVQ. Terry was the manager of a northern site office for ConstructionCo and for the last seven years had worked entirely with the same team, the longest serving member of which had been with the company for over twenty years. Everyone knew their work, the problems they might face and the customers they served regularly, very well indeed and procedures were informal. Terry adopted a "hands off" style of management and most developments were passed round the team of five by word of mouth rather than by memo. This informal familiarity with both the team and the task finished when Terry started on his NVQ. The slight buoyancy in the construction market that persuaded his employers to invest in training also contributed heavily to a 100% staff turnover in his office. Three of his team left for better paying jobs elsewhere, one moved out of the area and one left to have a baby. Terry found himself managing a new, inexperienced group of workers. The result of this was that the formal NVQ description of management (as Terry said, "what you should have been doing"), formal meetings, feedback forms, memos and minutes suited the inexperienced team who needed more substantive guidance far better than it might have suited the 'old hands'.

Paradoxically, a qualification which had originally been designed to make vocational qualifications more relevant to real experience seems, from these case studies, less reflective of the realities of managerial work than the 'traditional' certificates it hoped to replace. This extensive documentation, while a

prerequisite for the NVQ, was not (at least, not until the NVQ programme) part of the real work experience of either ConstructionCo or SupermarketCo managers. Was it then, as was claimed, best practice - a benchmark for them to follow? In some respects it was, occasionally candidates were able to use the performance criteria to structure their thinking, or organise work better. Richard Blackwood found his new filing system most helpful; however there is little evidence that the central failing of British management is that it keeps too few records and generates too little paperwork. Nor was there any suggestion that formalisation was the solution required in these instances. Indeed, in PrivatPLC the senior management were discussing how the organisation might become less proceduralised and focus on individual initiative and drive rather than demanding the mechanistic completion of prescribed tasks. While the formal approach undoubtedly has its merits, it is hardly a universal prescription. Moreover, as has been seen, several candidates experienced problems that were *caused* by the increasing emphasis on paperwork. There is little evidence that increasing proceduralisation was an appropriate developmental route, either individually or organisationally.

Formalisation versus development?

In addition to worries that the word-games they and their tutors were playing met the letter rather than the spirit of the standards, candidates were concerned about the absence of individual development. Though few had mentioned this initially,

most felt "cheated" by the focus on assessment. Sarah Culbertson expressed her views temperately when she said:

> I applied for a management course - I wasn't a manager at the time - I was acting and I needed managerial skills and when we got on the course they said this was [an NVQ] . . . . it's possibly not the course I would have chosen because I was looking for instructions or guidance on motivation and team building or leadership which we did cover but only from the point of view of proving competence on that and as a new manager you need some direction.

And, when asked about what they had learned during the process, none could think of anything. David Beasley of ConstructionCo said:

> If I was to be honest, really, it hasn't taught me anything I haven't already known.

This is a surprising statement. As Hogarth (1979) points out, after graduating from any course, candidates have a marked tendency to exaggerate the amount they have learned and for an interviewer to ask candidates what they have learned almost demands that they admit to some development. Again, as in the workshops, it may have been the emphasis on assessment that precluded new information. Curiously, given that few candidates started the course by emphasising that they wished to develop, this absence of anything around which learning activities might have focused was much felt. Perhaps the lack of expectations for the learning process at the start of the course was because, accustomed to traditional qualifications, managers took the 'input' side of the equation for granted. It was not until the learning opportunities failed to materialise that most began to miss them.

It was partly these sort of omissions that made managers begin to question the MCI's model. Initially, dissenting voices were rare. The organisation in which they were expressed soonest was ConstructionCo, here candidates had progressed further with the qualification and experienced greater difficulties than either of the other two case studies. Paul Phillips expressed his views most clearly, perhaps because he was secure enough in his position and sufficiently well-acquainted with management thought not to question whether he was indeed a 'real manager'. A senior engineering manager in his mid-forties Paul was one of the few graduates (and the oldest and most senior graduate in any of the companies) to be enrolled on the NVQ. He had twelve years of management experience (though as he said, "[you] could say I managed myself from the day I started working") and an impressive array of professional and managerial qualifications. He worked with David Beasley, introducing Quality Systems to ConstructionCo branches and had little difficulty adapting his work to suit the requirements of the NVQ but, as he argued:

> it's not geared for engineers. You've got engineering
> managers - you can fit it in - *anything* you can fit in -
> but when you come to engineering management it
> covers a lot more than is in there and lots of other
> stuff that isn't in there.

As they became more familiar with the NVQ and experienced discrepancies between their work and the model first-hand, candidates became less anxious to emphasise how well their jobs conformed and less convinced that the performance criteria represented best practice. The most common criticism was

that an element was not *managerial* work and different candidates said this of different aspects of the process, some saw budgets as non-managerial, others, processing information. Tom Hackett of ConstructionCo was heavily critical of the demand that he recruit staff:

> The NVQ requires you to set up a job advertisement - that's not our job. We have a Personnel Department for that, no manager would do that. I don't know how this NVQ was put together. It's so bad it's incredible.

This criticism was neither confined to candidates whose work did not match the model nor to those aspects where candidates had few difficulties. Indeed, Paul Phillips and Hilary Landy, two of the most senior and experienced candidates whose portfolios both impressed their assessors, were among the qualification's severest critics. Paul described the process itself as:

> Awful. It takes such a long time and the constant referencing is unbelievable - part of it I don't even think is necessary . . . it seems a pointless operation to do it . . . . I can understand what they're trying to achieve - I've fairly strong feelings on how they do it - I don't like it at all. Pointless is the wrong word. What I don't like is - you're not actually learning anything, and all that's in there is what I do adjusted to suit the performance criteria, and in some cases you need quite a bit of lateral thinking to do it. Certain bits of it I don't do and I don't think any manager would do.

Unsurprisingly, given the degree of 'mis-match' between the managerial responsibilities of the candidates and the MCI's model of managerial work, this feeling was echoed by many of the others in the core group.

DEFINING 'COMPETENT' MANAGEMENT

Yet this defence, self-interested as it was, does open to question the way managerial work is described and defined in the standards. This chapter has argued that few of the candidates observed in this study had work which matched the NVQ criteria, that, despite this, most made serious attempts to alter their working practices to fit the MCI's model and that, because of the demands of the portfolio, these attempts inevitably resulted in the bureaucratisation of their work.

To a certain extent this problem is peculiar to management. Chapter two argued that many of the functional accounts of managerial work are misplaced. The activities of forecasting, planning, organising, commanding, co-ordinating and controlling (for example), may well take place at an organisational level, but there is little to suggest that managerial work can be adequately conceptualised by replicating these functions in miniature. As was seen above, using a model which does not describe the responsibilities of individual candidates to segregate the 'real' managers from the 'non-managers' is not particularly constructive. Not only did this division result in supervisors being classified as a great deal more managerial than titular managers, it also focused candidates' attention on activities which were not necessarily meaningful to them.

These anomalies highlight one of the weaknesses in defining management in this way. By contrast, the conceptualisations supported in chapter two provide a more meaningful way of categorising the candidates in this study. James Green,

as was noted above, was PA to a board director in SupermarketCo. His work involved no budgets or staff and most of his formal responsibilities were subsumed into the director's sphere of influence. Yet he was an able manager in his mid-thirties and in his new role was clearly being groomed for high level work. He had eight years of management experience within the company and was highly regarded. John Robson was a much more junior (and more recently promoted) PrivatPLC manager. While James Green was involved in high level negotiations with SupermarketCo's competitors, participated in setting wage rates in the company and had (*de facto*) authority over most of the organisation's retail outlets, John Robson was involved in managing a small telephone sales team. His work was very highly regulated, company procedures dictated the forms he should complete, the targets he should meet and the actions he should take in most circumstances. Clearly, his work had far less discretion and was far less *managerial* than James's. Yet using the MCI's model it is John who is judged to be the manager. Such a division is actively unhelpful. Conversely, Watson's (1994) suggestion that managers are those who *influence* an organisation, would include both candidates and capture their relative statuses accurately.

However, while managerial work is particularly resistant to functional specification, no jobs are centrally determined; each organisation decides, in negotiation with its employees, how work should be divided between employees and the hierarchies of status, titles and roles, so significant internally, may be almost impenetrable to outsiders. Since all NVQs are predicated on job

descriptions remaining stable and generic across firms and sectors it is not surprising to see the problems in matching assigned work to the occupational standards observed in this study being mirrored in Senker's (1996) analysis of NVQs in the engineering industry. He argues that (p. 87):

> Which occupations should perform which function is decided within each organisation. . . . Neither in principle nor in practice are there firm rules of work organisation - the allocation of functions between occupations

Instead of providing benchmarks, the standards described work which candidates did not (and were not required to) do.

In addition to the problems caused by CBET's reliance on generic job descriptions, many difficulties may also be traced back to the behavioural form in which the standards are expressed. As was noted above, the fundamental belief underlying all CBET is that, within each occupation, objective standards of performance exist which may be mapped out into a single, identifiable model of 'competent' behaviour. Standards should be "a complete description of the occupation" (Mansfield, 1989a:9). Such faith in the capacity of lists of actions to provide a sound basis for many assessment activities presents several difficulties at a theoretical level. CBET is not the first system to espouse this ideal but its three best known predecessors, behaviourism, Taylorism and criterion-based assessment have all proved highly problematic.

The most behaviourist aspect of competence, as Hyland argues (1994; 1993), is its reliance on simplistic lists of performance which are intended to subsume motivation, thought processes and future performance; so that complex tasks are refined into simple statements from which causes and effects may be clearly isolated.

> The most prevalent construct of competence is behaviourist. It rests on a description of behaviour (sometimes called performance) and the situation(s) in which it is to take place (sometimes referred to as range statements) in a form that is capable of demonstration and observation. (Norris, 1991:332)

Behaviourism, in reaction to Freudian analysis, had sought to make psychology objective by concentrating on observable (and therefore objectively provable) actions. However, this was achieved at the cost of neglecting the idea of human agency, the context in which the action took place and the meaning of those actions. These ideas are now largely discredited within psychology (see, among many others, Koestler, 1969; Dickinson, 1980; Gross, 1987). Educationally, Tennant (1988) argues that, because not all learning outcomes may be precisely predicted, they may not be susceptible to specification in behavioural terms, or susceptible to accurate measurement. In addition to this, because in learning the process itself is also important, quite separately from the outcomes of that process, behavioural learning programmes are problematic. Workplace outcomes are not necessarily reducible into competences, nor is it particularly helpful to conceive of complex human activities only in terms of stimulus-response relationships.

Within management, this concentration on measurable, benchmarked and disaggregated tasks is most closely associated with the work of Frederick Taylor and when the occupational standards are closely examined it is difficult to argue, as their supporters do, that the problems associated with Taylorism have been avoided through taking a 'holistic' view of work roles in Functional Analysis (see, for example, Hillier, 1994; Mitchell, 1989; Mansfield, 1989a; 1989b). In Taylorism, as in CBET, the execution and planning stages of a task are clearly segregated and workers are expected to conform to the standards laid down by the experts. Such an approach is markedly different to that advocated in the educational literature. Contrast, for example, Gilbert Jessup's argument that NVQ candidates have the freedom to choose which NVQ they enrol on (1991) with one of the ideals of liberal education, which is that students should actively challenge, engage with and question the subject they are studying (Barnett, 1994; White, 1982; Peters, 1973; Warnock, 1973).

The legacy of Taylorism extends beyond the problems involved in atomistic descriptions of tasks. Both Scientific Management and CBET demand a degree of certainty and replication in workplace activities that may not be feasible in practice (Doray, 1988). Both focus on *individual* work effort, yet competence (or the lack of it) may be a product of situational and relational factors and this inter-dependent aspect of work is neglected (CNAA/BTEC, 1990a; 1990b). Moreover, there may be a danger that advocates of CBET are confusing a principle of analysis with a principle of action and that, while the dissection process they have designed may be helpful in exploring the nature of any given

job (or, at least, the commonly held perceptions of what that job entails) it does little to assist in the practice of the occupation as a whole, since this can involve more than the sum of its parts. Collin (1989) uses the analogy of driving a car to reinforce this point. It is, she argues, comparatively straightforward to disaggregate driving into its constituent parts (changing gear, turning the steering wheel, depressing the clutch and so on); and assessing each of these constituent parts is also easily achievable. However, once that has been done, it is difficult to maintain with any confidence that a candidate certified competent on each of these elements could subsequently integrate them and *drive*. The atomistic approach to competence may not be reconcilable with the skills needed to perform the 'whole job'.

Conclusions

Integrating these descriptions of the way in which the candidates' work changed with some of the theoretical critiques of competence makes it possible to offer an explanation for some of the problems experienced. Starting with the wider issues surrounding CBET itself, this section will review the extent to which the work done by the 'core' candidates matched the MCI's template of managerial work. There is little to suggest that the number of problems observed here, with *fifteen* of the group engaged in work that did not match the standards (at least to some extent), is in any way statistically representative of the managerial population. Indeed, given the selection of candidates noted in chapter five, it may be that these candidates experience *fewer* problems than a more statistically

representative group might. Here, it is sufficient to argue that, because of the way work is allocated (locally rather than centrally) and, specifically, because of the nature of managerial work itself, problems correlating work to the occupational standards are very likely to be experienced by other candidates and in other contexts.

These problems may be compounded by assumptions within the NVQ system that competence is observable, individual and readily dissaggregated into discrete criteria. Again, drawing on Collin's (1989) analogy of driving a car, it is easy to see that ostensibly separate 'competences' may be inter-dependent (contrast the impact of depressing the clutch in isolation with that produced by changing gear at the same time). Within the workplace, managers may depend on co-workers or draw on corporate resources. The MCI standards, while acknowledging this, rigidly specify *which* corporate resources should exist. As Marsh and Holmes (1990) argue, in the absence of such systems, competence cannot be demonstrated. The incidents recorded here provide some support for this contention. PrivatPLC candidates, supported by many corporate manuals and required to complete numerous forms, were far more able to comply with the demands of the NVQ because they worked in a bureaucratic organisation, rather than because they were (necessarily) better managers.

Using the presence of these systems as one of the defining marks of competence may not be helpful. Here, although all three case study companies were sizeable organisations (by one measure at least, the FTSE-100 index, among the largest in

Britain), only one of them had sufficiently extensive procedures to support the NVQ unproblematically. There was little to suggest that either of the other two organisations wanted to formalise their own practices to the extent required by the candidates (and some evidence that they did not welcome these developments, the personnel staff in every case study company expressed extreme concern at the amount of paperwork generated on these programmes). The head of one of the Awarding Bodies put the onus of blame for this squarely onto the management standards (interview notes, AB 7):

> The present [management standards] are embarrassing. They're out of date and the only thing they reflect is Shell Head Office who wrote them. It reflects the larger company - not the smaller - it's utterly irrelevant for smaller companies. Well - incongruous rather than irrelevant.

Finally, as was noted in chapter five, these CBET-specific activities are time-consuming. Managers engaged in them may have little time to be involved in other developmental practices. Paperwork, record keeping and information retrieval are all valuable actions, but they are not management and any qualification that concentrates on these elements to the detriment of most others is misdirecting its attention.

This chapter started by noting that the NVQ was introduced with the aim of changing the candidates' behaviour. In many cases it has achieved this objective.

However, in the light of both the workplace observations and the theoretical literature reviewed here, it seems pertinent to question whether this was the direction of change that the senior staff had anticipated and whether the changes which occurred were either necessary or desirable.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE USE OF HUMOUR

In chapters five and six, attempts were made using interview notes, observations, company records, portfolio notes and informal discussions, to construct an account of the way the core eighteen candidates experienced the Management NVQ. Here, that general theme is developed with the assistance of a very different source of evidence, the use made of humour.

One of the advantages of adopting an open, ethnographic approach to fieldwork is that the data collected is often rich enough to provide evidence for themes which formed no part of the original research design. This topic is one such instance. When this enquiry was originally conceived it was couched entirely in 'serious' terms, yet, as the fieldwork developed, it became apparent that, in all three case study companies, candidates told, exchanged and found humour in, the same sorts of jokes.

Little of this was apparent in the early workshops where, as was noted earlier, candidates were primarily anxious to express pleasure at being selected for the programme and speculate on the positive impact participation might have on their careers. However, in chapter six it was argued that, as the courses progressed and candidates became aware of what demands the qualifications made of them, this enthusiasm waned. As this happened the comic exchanges grew more pointed and a specific 'NVQ-humour' began to emerge. Once the candidates shared an understanding of the group task it was reasonable that this should form part of the conversations they enjoyed and that it should be integrated into and eventually dominate their humour.

Most of these exchanges were captured in my fieldwork notes. After the initial unwitting censorship of some of the ConstructionCo interviews, every effort was made to minute and transcribe verbatim accounts of contacts. Jokes were included partly from a conscientious urge to document the process 'properly' and partly to add leaven to the tedious and time consuming process of transcription in the hope that typing up a comic exchange of views might act as light relief. Such passages were never originally intended to be incorporated into the finished document.

Kahn (1989), in his writings on the meanings underlying organisational jokes, argues that 'situational humour' (p. 56) is that which is dependent upon a specific context for its impact. So, Adams's (1996:129) mockery of 'bungee bosses' who are attached to a length of elastic which hauls them back out of the office

(implicitly to another, better assignment) only seconds after it has propelled them in, and arrogant consultants (actually the main character's dog), is funny because it parodies organisational reality where 'successful' managers may, in fact, spend little time on any one level of the corporate hierarchy before winning promotion and consultants with scant experience of particular industries may find their advice given more credence than long-serving employees. Similarly, Dologopolova's (1982) collection of Soviet jokes in which the prisoner can identify the KGB guard's glass eye because "it has a kindly look about it" (p. 33) is amusing precisely because the KGB itself has a reputation for being oppressive and 'unkindly'. In this joke, the 'non-human' part of the guard's body (the glass eye) is considered to possess more 'human' qualities (kindliness) than the rest. As Kahn (1989:48) notes:

> our humour has serious, direct messages hidden -
> consciously or unconsciously - within its playful,
> indirect ambiguity

Each of these jokes strikes a chord with the reader because it identifies and distorts 'reality'. If managers in the USA and Britain remained in post for long periods of time, or, if the KGB genuinely had a reputation for generosity, charitable deeds and kindliness; these jokes would lose their impact. If situational jokes are not, in some form, reflections of reality, then they are not humorous.

If jokes are meaningful, then an exploration of the joke itself and the context which prompted it may not only serve to decipher that joke but also provide

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some illumination of the context. Accordingly, this chapter seeks to use the banter, ironies and witticisms as an additional source of evidence on the implementation of the NVQ. It identifies and draws out three distinct themes in the candidates' banter. Within the groups jokes were used to challenge the NVQ, presenting it as the impractical antithesis of their own, 'commonsensical' understanding of managerial work; to question the value of the evidence (both the viability of collecting it and its function as 'impression management'); and to help individual candidates to cope with difficulties. The jokes the candidates told are explored, in the light of some of the literature on humour, and their significance is considered.

NVQ humour

Clearly, working towards the qualification was not the only source of humour in the groups. Some of the candidates' quips might be heard in any office. Candidates apparently exceeding their peers in productivity would be gently and jokingly chided and those falling behind would be reprimanded under cover of humour (see Bradney, 1957, for an account of parallel instances in a department store). Richard and Lisa's exchange in SupermarketCo, for instance, both distances them emotionally from a potentially serious incident and illustrates 'macho' management:

> Lisa: A girl in my office sat on a secretary's chair and the back broke and she fell.
>
> Richard: Did you bill her for the chair?

When the group considered a trainer's objectives as too 'exalted', these too became 'fair game'. In PrivatPLC Alan Senior added a new twist to the knowledge experienced managers might be expected to hand over to the graduate trainees on the residential course:

> Tutor: From some of the graduate programmes we've got in the business they are one-offs in their units so they're not on any one graduate programme. From my point of view it's worthwhile for them to be with experienced managers - Michelle was an example - for the first few days she wanted to be told what to do and how to do it then she thought for herself.

> Alan: Smoked like a trooper and drank like a fish by the end!

Others were prompted by my presence and these ranged from one manager commenting, after I had introduced myself as "the only non-PrivatPLC person here", "But we still love you!" to another, after I explained why I was taking notes, adding, "She says that *now*, but really she's a spy for [the Chief Executive] and everything we say is going to appear on his desk on Monday morning!" Such comments were a reasonable reflection of my own marginal position in their society and the unfamiliar nature of my work. More seriously, however, it also allowed the expression of a concern that the group was being 'spied on' without a display of overt hostility that might have had a damaging impact on the group itself (for a more dramatic example of the researcher becoming the butt of their own 'subject's' humour see Collinson, 1988).

Challenging the NVQ

The first way in which candidates used humour was to challenge the 'best practice' model put forward in the standards. Earlier it was emphasised that tutors repeatedly deferred to the NVQ in workshops, directed queries to it and used it as a point of reference. In this exchange in SupermarketCo an element of mockery entered the discussion; the group were focusing on unit 1 and their tutor had just read out performance criterion 1.2 (d) *Maintenance frequency and the use of equipment conform to the recommended schedules and procedures* and had started to suggest how the group might comply with it:

> Tutor: The evidence is just substantiating what you say. Are you aware of the regulations for PCs? Looking at the screen? Taking breaks?
>
> Steve: Do you follow them?
>
> Richard: You switch it on at ten to eight, you switch it off when you go home. In between you stare at it.

Here, two interpretations of reality are juxtaposed and the humour comes as the group switches unexpectedly between them. So the 'official' recommendations that guidelines are followed, sentiments with which candidates might be expected to agree, are 'de-railed' by Steve and Richard's mockery. In practice, workplace pressures lead to official regulations being neglected (as Harry Dent ironically noted, "if you want to take this to the 'nth' degree, you'll see that the only place in this organisation that's been ergonomically built is the Health and Safety unit") and the candidates were aware of this. Steve and Richard's exchange

served two main purposes. Firstly, by publicly voicing the shared (and risky) knowledge that corners were cut and that not all regulations were complied with, in a context where non-threatening regulations were being discussed, they reinforced the group's common identity. This less than perfect maintenance was something with which they could all identify and doing this in defiance of the benchmarks they were continually being reminded of emphasised the boundary of the group, 'real' against 'textbook'. Secondly, and relatedly, it challenged the naïve and legalistic interpretation of the world, celebrating the 'commonsensical' activities that replaced mechanistic compliance.

Each of these elements takes advantage of the educationally distinctive nature of the NVQ programmes. As with Fox's (1990) students, these NVQ candidates were in the unusual position of being more familiar with their work than the tutor apparently hired to 'teach' them. Moreover, the qualification for which they were assembling evidence was supposed to describe the work they were doing. When it did not, these gaps were fair game for the humorists. Performance criterion 6.1 (b), for example, was almost universally jeered. It demanded that *Achievement of the objective is practicable within the set period given other work commitments*. As one PrivatPLC manager said, "None of us are going to meet that one!"

Occasionally candidates used humour to articulate criticisms in comparative safety. They were, after all, engaged in the process of being judged. Their abilities in the workplace (literally, their competence) was being measured and,

given that managerial work relies on the impression of performance as much as on performance itself (Heller, 1972; 1996) all were reluctant to be found wanting. Direct criticisms of the NVQ might convey the implicit message that here was an incompetent candidate making excuses, demonstrate a reluctance to develop and improve, or reveal that the critic was not truly engaged in managerial work. Jokes, however, have the capacity for retrospective interpretation (Linstead, 1985). Humorists could challenge the model safely. If the group (and the tutor) accepted the challenge positively and laughed, they would gain the social and emotional rewards of a successful joker; if anyone took the challenge seriously or found the sentiment offensive, the humorist could defuse the situation by protesting that they were "only joking". As Kahn (1989:55) points out:

> By joking we can simultaneously make a statement and withdraw it from serious consideration. Such "hedging of bets" allows organisation members to negotiate systems in which one key to success is to attach oneself to the desirable and detach oneself from the undesirable. Because humorous statements offer the listener the opportunity to take them seriously or not, they also let those making them either take or avoid responsibility for them. If the truth of a humorous statement is welcome, the person making it usually seeks to be held accountable for it; if the truth is unwelcome, the humour distances that person from responsibility for the statement.

Paradoxically, even in ConstructionCo and SupermarketCo where senior personnel staff voiced their reservations about the NVQ openly, it was important for the candidates to comply with the standards when in 'serious mode'. Even if the training was publicly acknowledged as flawed it seemed that, 'getting the job done' was important.

This was even more important in PrivatPLC where, both publicly and privately, the tutor accepted the MCI's model uncritically. The candidates praised most highly were those who produced evidence and anyone who questioned any element of the course was rapidly corrected. This power relationship was compounded by the fact that, while both the other companies brought in external consultants as tutors, in PrivatPLC the group was tutored by a higher-ranking manager who had a degree of authority over the candidates for the duration of the course (for a consideration of the different power-relationships that exist between trainers and adult learners see Al-Maskati and Thomas, 1995; Salisbury and Murcott, 1992) and this authority was emphasised when Ian Jordain voiced criticisms without cushioning them with humour.

PrivatPLC's Awarding Body stipulated that the company should have regular meetings with it to review progress at which both candidates and tutors were represented. Ian Jordain was chosen to attend the first meeting and, unsure of his status there, spent most of the time listening. When invited to contribute by one of the Awarding Body's representatives, he suggested that their initial residential week might be productively lengthened, given the information they had to assimilate on it, and told them of the confusion caused by the personnel department posting incorrect joining instructions to several attendees. His comments were duly noted. At the next learning day, when he gave a brief report to his fellow candidates on that meeting, the tutor criticised him in front of the group for mentioning the confusion and commenting on the length of the course.

She continued this criticism with him privately in their one-to-one session that afternoon. Yet his comments had been comparatively mild and set in the context of a general statement of satisfaction. In the light of this, it was unlikely that any more fundamental challenge would have been welcomed.

Presenting challenges in the guise of jokes (even when only thinly veiled), was much more acceptable. One afternoon, when the tutor was conducting one-to-one sessions in another room and the group were brainstorming possible sources of evidence onto a flip chart, John Robson, annoyed at a particularly poorly worded performance criterion complained that:

> These are not well-expressed - I mean they're telling us to submit evidence and they can't even write this properly.

At the flip-chart, Alan Senior wrote "CRAP" under the offending element's number. Elsewhere, challenges might be disguised as compliance and in SupermarketCo the tutors would even co-operate in mocking humorous exchanges. Here, Richard Blackwood and the tutor subvert the standards' interpretation of reality by conforming to it:

Tutor: [Reads 6.1(c)] *"Objectives are explained in sufficient detail and in a manner and at a level and pace appropriate to all the relevant individuals."* In other words -

Richard: - if they're duffers -

Tutor: - yeah, if they're thick, say it slowly. Which is a very long way of saying you communicate effectively.

Richard: So you get a witness testimony that says "I'm thick so Richard speaks slowly in words of one syllable".

Tutor: So say, I sat down with him for an hour and left him with this and include the instructions and here's a photo of him going into my office-

Richard: - focus on the clock on the wall -

Tutor: - looking perplexed and a photo coming out -

Richard: - looking even more perplexed.

Again, two realities are juxtaposed in a commonsensical appeal against the textbook interpretation of events.

Throughout these challenges it seems that the last court of appeal, claimed by both the NVQ developers and the candidates, is the world of the 'practical manager'. NVQs' attraction rests largely in their professed representation of workplace 'realities'; similarly, this humour lays claim to the same area and it is through this 'more practical than thou' attitude that the managers can celebrate their pride in the 'real' way to manage against the cumbersome bureaucracy of the standards.

Evidence as humour

While the comic potential of 'idealised' job descriptions was readily exploitable, the real, functional discrepancies between the official model and candidates' work was a genuine cause for concern and this mis-match often resulted in problems with 'evidence'. As has already been argued, the portfolios themselves comprised, often, very copious amounts of formal, photocopied material, and a

major candidate concern, even in 'serious' mode, was how to produce this evidence for areas that were (at best) a marginal part of their responsibilities and (at worst) bore no relationship at all to their jobs. While managers might celebrate the 'practicality' and 'reality' of their own, informal ways of working with their colleagues, admitting to such shortcuts in their portfolios was generally considered unacceptable. Officially the illusion that practice as well as function matched the NVQ must be preserved.

Linstead (1985), in his study of the ELS Amalgamated Bakeries, stresses the dissonance between the formal, legalistic (and often legal) interpretation of the conditions employees were deemed to work under and the actual conditions that prevailed. The management, while issuing targets that forced workers to bend or break safety rules, must never officially acknowledge that such rules are broken. Similarly, (though far less physically dangerously) the managers in ConstructionCo, SupermarketCo and PrivatPLC all worked under pressure. Faced with intensified workloads and tough deadlines, most cut corners to hit the targets and all said that they freely admitted this to their bosses (most of whom were reportedly working under similar constraints). However, because the NVQ was seen as 'official best practice' then, at least as far as the portfolio was concerned, candidates must, at a minimum, create the illusion of compliance.

As has been seen in earlier chapters, for most candidates, compliance with the standards was not illusory and, where practice failed to match the benchmarks, genuine efforts were made to change practice. However, these attempts to

conform resulted in 'staged' events and artificial formalisation as often as they resulted in improvements to traditional ways of getting things done. Candidates would all engage in new activities in deliberate attempts to generate material for their portfolios and this consciousness of change was a rich seam of humour.

Formalisation, and an increasing awareness that the mundane could provide NVQ proofs, was one target for jokes. In 'humorous' mode a recurrent source of fun was the opportunities for evidence offered by everyday interventions and sins of omission and commission were highlighted in this way. One manager who tripped over another's briefcase pointed out the breach of the Health and Safety legislation the briefcase owner had committed and suggested that the group write the incident up for their portfolios. Any candidate explaining something to their fellows or claiming experience of an unusual event would find themselves the centre of a chorus of "well, you've proved that, haven't you?" and "would you like me to do a witness testimony?" exaggerating for comic effect the genuine increase in documentation noticed in chapter six. It was nonsensical to suggest that short chats or tripping over a briefcase could prove individual competence against any given unit, but suggesting that colleagues formally record these instances effectively parodied the increased incidence of record keeping. NVQ candidates were minuting and memoing at an unprecedented rate; this made the process humorous.

Alternatively, instead of parodying the forms they were filling out, managers would parody the actions underlying those forms as Andrew Dormer of SupermarketCo did when he suggested taking the tutor's advice one step further:

> Tutor: Be sensitive. If people start to see your counselling as something for your NVQ - but I had a case recently where someone sacked someone and then got a witness testimony on how professionally they'd done it.
>
> Andrew: Yeah, but they only sacked them to get the NVQ!

While in PrivatPLC element 7.3 (f) *Where there are disagreements efforts are made to avoid damaging the relationship with the immediate manager* presented one candidate with an interesting dilemma:

> Jane: But I've never had that - I'll have to go out and fight with him now, then get him to sign something to say that we did that.

These jokes operated on two levels. Superficially they were funny because they diametrically opposed the course's official objectives. The NVQ had been intended to be a developmental exercise primarily aimed at improving each candidates' performance at work and it was that rationale that should be the guiding factor behind whether managers should alter their approach to work. Indeed, SupermarketCo's tutors had regularly urged their group not to change their behaviour just for the sake of the qualification. Claiming that the core values of the exercise should be re-ordered so that working towards the certificate took priority over, and could be used to distort, performance back in the workplace subverted these aims.

But the humour went deeper than that. These statements were also funny because they exaggerated and exposed what actually happened. NVQ candidates in this study genuinely altered their work practices in order to gather evidence for the qualification; systems were formalised, meetings held and documented, memos written and witness testimonies requested. The suggestion that this behaviour be extended to making others redundant or fighting with their line managers was simply a comic exaggeration of existing practice. By stating these 'truths' in 'humorous' mode and exaggerating them for effect, candidates could challenge this without confronting it. The opportunity for retrospective interpretation (and *re*interpretation), and the deliberate ambiguity inherent in the jokes, meant that the risks that might attend an admission that work had changed for the worse, were defused. Moreover, the group's laughter offered reassurance to the joker that they were not alone in changing their work to suit the standards.

In marked contrast, improvements that were felt to be positive were freely shared with the group in 'serious' mode. In Hyland's phrase, these qualifications are "doomed to succeed" (1994:234): praise is inflated and criticism suppressed or rendered ambiguous. In private, candidates would admit to doubts, in public they were rarely so open. Indeed, even admitting to *not developing* was a public embarrassment. One SupermarketCo candidate spent twenty minutes apologising to her group and the tutor for having 'failed' in this way:

> Helen: [Then there was the] question on the bottom. How have you changed/adapted? I felt I was always holding meetings to the standards but I can't say I haven't changed

> because that sounds conceited. I felt the need to say that
> I've changed when I don't think I have. I don't feel I've
> developed.

and again:

> Helen: I contemplated sitting on the fence - hedging my bets.
> Then I thought no, I mustn't do that. I said I didn't think
> I'd altered.

Harry Dent from personnel reassured her and encouraged her to reconsider her

own lack of development and conform retrospectively:

> Harry: Possibly two weeks after you submit you'll feel you've
> developed.

In part this can be attributed to the individualisation of success and failure within

NVQs (Williams and Raggatt, 1996). In such a system, lack of development is

indeed a sign of personal weakness.

Learning to cope

Given this individualisation and the guilt felt by candidates who had not

developed it is hardly surprising that non-completion, work returned marked 'not

yet competent' and obvious 'gaps' in a candidate's job description when

compared to the MCI's model resulted in a great deal of stress. As the courses

continued it became apparent that some candidates, regardless of ability or

commitment, would be unable to complete their portfolios because their jobs

failed to conform to that constructed by the MCI. The impact of being graded

'not yet competent' is considered in more detail later, when NVQ assessment is explored. Here, coping with problems through humour is considered.

The use of humour as a coping strategy has been well documented (Kahn, 1989; Collinson, 1988; Bradney, 1957). Joking can help to 'reframe' a problem, to put it into perspective and reduce its importance, it can be used by the humorist to distance themselves from genuinely troublesome and emotive issues and it can be used to construct a cheerful façade. Because joking about something involves partially dis-engaging from it, it can also facilitate the sharing of problems with work colleagues (as opposed to friends) for, just as outright confrontation may need to be disguised with humour to make it acceptable in the working environment, so those struggling to cope with problems may need to present them as less troubling than they really are. Essentially humour is used to conceal, defuse or distance the group from negative emotions.

Ironically, to distance themselves from their emotions through jokes, candidates often exaggerated those emotions for comic effect. So Richard Blackwood, persuaded by his tutor to lay claim to line management responsibility for the people who covered for him when he was on holiday (as discussed in chapter six), found that when the assessor returned the unit, they were convinced that he had a team but not that he developed them in their roles and had marked him 'not yet competent'. Workplace competence is an emotive subject (and a highly prized attribute) and Richard was genuinely shaken to be 'officially' graded 'not yet competent'. To him it seemed to raise questions about his ability to do the

rest of the job. However, this sentiment was a difficult one to voice, so Richard's

wry comment was, "I'm incompetent, apparently", distorting the result to secure

sympathy and present himself as an amusing manager who could cope.

Similarly, Pat Walker in PrivatPLC also experienced difficulties generating

evidence since her work as a training manager failed to conform to the MCI's

requirements. During one workshop, when the learning team, aware of her

difficulties, asked how she was getting on, she replied, in a mock, high-pitched

voice:

> Yes, I'm finding it all very difficult indeed and I'd
> rather not talk about it now thank you. I'm perfectly
> happy sitting here and having a breakdown. I'll just
> carry on taking the minutes "Breakdown,
> breakdown, breakdown...."

However, for the individuals concerned, these displays of bravado were seldom

translated into a real triumph over obstacles. They preserved personal pride and

dignity in public, but made it no easier to confront the problematic issues.

Perhaps, by distancing these difficulties they even perpetuated them. Pat later

admitted privately that she spent many of her free evenings at home poring over

the NVQ material and trying, with increasing desperation, to think of ways of

providing evidence. Such evenings generally ended in tears. Eventually, despite

pressure from the tutor and help from her peers, she withdrew from the NVQ.

Only joking?

The themes that emerge from the jokes, banter and ironies expressed on the various courses on which these managers were enrolled serve to underline and reinforce several of the conclusions of this thesis. The candidates who joked to disarm possible accusations of failure or stupidity ironically exposed the naïveté and inaccuracy of the model or showed how patently ridiculous events could be employed to satisfy the performance criteria. In this, they were doing no more than unconsciously (or consciously) paraphrasing in humorous terms many of the 'serious' criticisms of competence based learning. Such a link would be an unusual way of empirically testing these critiques, but it is no less valid than many more solemn methods. As Kahn argues (1989:46):

> Each statement contains its own truths. If we attend
> to these statements, and piece together their various
> truths from clues within the contexts of their
> expression, we can tap into a rich source of
> information for understanding the dynamics of
> individual and group life in organisations.

Moreover, in the style of the court jester, candidates could deliver criticism and parody poor practice without either endangering themselves or breaching the rules of courtesy that govern organisational intercourse.

Humour as a tool for exploring meaning, revealing tension and cataloguing anxiety is particularly well-suited to an ethnographic approach to research since, for its comic 'punch' it relies on multiple interpretations of reality (Mulkay, 1988), by implication, of course, it is an apt means of criticising CBET. So, two

different 'realities' are juxtaposed and answers from one are presented in response to questions from the other. Pat Walker (in a more positive mood) had explored some of the problems inherent in evidencing performance criterion 7.4 (c) *Potential and actual conflicts between staff are identified promptly and actions are taken to deal with them as soon as practicable* and, after an unsatisfactory discussion in which the group agreed that proving this would be difficult, she summarised their difficulties as, "so the moral is remember to plug the video in before the conflict starts". Here, two real problems, the need to minimise conflict and the need to produce evidence, are the two conflictual aims. Pat's suggestion of combining them is amusing because it presents as a solution something that would exactly answer the candidates' difficulties while being the worst of both worlds in the workplace. This humour has succeeded by inverting the rules governing 'normal' workplace behaviour. Success is re-defined.

Nor was this mechanism restricted to candidates. The general discouragement of criticism within the NVQ movement has already been noted, including the reported attempts by the NCVQ to prevent independent academics attacking CBET (Auther, 1996; *Financial Times*, 17th January 1996). This repression of dialogue resulted in NVQ jokes by officials too. One of the most popular (and possibly apocryphal) stories of the development of the management standards tells how every working group voted unanimously that the one competence every manager needed was to be a convincing liar, yet despite this consensus, that behaviour was never included in the final, published versions. Another much repeated joke adopts one of the best known humorous formats and asks how

many NVQ assessors it takes to change a lightbulb. The answer, of course, is eighteen; one to change the lightbulb and seventeen to complete the paperwork certifying that the lightbulb has been competently changed. Again, these simply reflect the more academic criticisms in humorous form.

The subversive qualities of humour have been emphasised here. It has been interpreted as a challenge to, and a resistance of, the 'established order' as represented by the NVQ, and humour does indeed subvert the accepted world view, opening taboo subjects to question and ridicule. However, it would be a mistake to exaggerate or romanticise this subversion. Jokes may permit an attack to be made, but they also defuse its impact; humour contains rebellion as much as it expresses it. Collinson (1988), who stresses the role of humour in articulating resistance in his study of joking and banter in the components division of a lorry making factory, captures the complexity of these exchanges when he records that they "contained elements of resistance and control, creativity and destructiveness". This is an incisive point for, the 'resistance' recorded here took on no more concrete form than humour.

Jokes may serve as a safety valve, and release tension, just as they express it. Barsoux (1993) argues that humour actually contributes to organisational stability (and Malone, 1980, suggests ways of using it to do so). Because of this, locating a discussion of humour at either end of this 'rebellion' - 'safety valve' continuum oversimplifies it (see Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995, for a fuller consideration of this issue). As Linstead argues (1985:762):

> To view humour as completely subversive fails to account for its apparent incapacity to change organisations or social institutions, to dismiss it as a mere frivolity underestimates its enormous symbolic power.

The managers in this study were all willing participants in the NVQ process. Most could see instrumental advantages for themselves in co-operation and almost all wanted the qualification, if only to prove that they were capable of completing the course. Even those who fervently criticised the NVQ tried to comply with its demands since 'failure' would have reflected poorly on them as individuals. But this voluntary participation did not mean that they were obliged to accept every aspect of the programme uncritically, just as an element of subversion did not negate active co-operation.

In this environment the humour, parodies and irony that the candidates indulged in often represented genuine concerns and complaints, yet it was never seriously intended as an open challenge, nor was it ever taken as such. As Powell (1983, cited in Linstead, 1985) argues, humour *contains* resistance as much as it *expresses* it. Perhaps significantly, the most fervent critics seldom indulged in humorous exchanges; their opposition was couched in 'serious' terms and presented as an open challenge.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE ASSESSMENT OF COMPETENCE

So far this thesis has followed the NVQ candidates in SupermarketCo, PrivatPLC and ConstructionCo through the NVQ process, highlighting their employers' hopes for the programmes together with their own aspirations and exploring some of the activities the candidates engaged in while working towards the qualification. It has described how the processual aspects of the preparation of portfolios came to dominate managers' development and considered some of the ways they adjusted their approaches to work in order to meet the NVQ's demands.

This chapter moves the debate on to the most crucial (Fletcher, 1991, argues that it is the *only*) element of CBET, assessing candidates' competence. Since NVQs are granted independent of the mode of study, it could be argued that the developmental exercises companies devise to support them are of little relevance. Assessment is the crux of the process, for it is at this stage that judgements of

individual competence are made and the value of the qualifications is critically dependent on the resilience of this verdict.

This chapter starts by describing the assessment process itself and it draws on interviews with Awarding Bodies and observations of external verifiers to consider some of the problems inherent in the process. It then goes on to chart the progress made by the individual managers in the case study companies. It starts by considering the impact that producing portfolios had on the group, the behaviours this encouraged and the activities candidates engaged in, and argues that the dominance of the MCI's model led to the trivial (which matched that model) being emphasised at the expense of the managerial (which did not). The onus on candidates to prove that they were performing the actions detailed in the occupational standards in the workplace to gain their qualifications meant that the degree of fit, rather than the status or capability of any individual manager, dictated their success or failure. Moreover, since the award of an NVQ certifies competence, the impact of failure was severe and this chapter concludes with a discussion on the impact of assessment.

THE NATIONAL PICTURE

In theory, assessing managerial competence for an NVQ is both straightforward and flexible. Candidates submit their claims to competence, by whatever means they choose, evidencing their competence against all nine units of the Management NVQ. These are reviewed by assessors (often higher ranking

employees of the company where the candidates work, corporate trainers or consultants; in both PrivatPLC and ConstructionCo the group's tutor also assessed their portfolios, in SupermarketCo the group were not assessed by their tutors and another consultant in the same company was allotted the role) and each unit is graded 'competent' or 'not yet competent'. Assessors' work is regularly sampled and checked by external verifiers, who are employed by the Awarding Bodies to ensure assessors comply with the system. In their turn, the Awarding Bodies are subject to checks by the NCVQ.

Sticking to the standards

Queries at any stage of this assessment and quality assurance process are referred back to the standards so that an internal assessors' inspection certifies that candidates have fulfilled the performance criteria, while external verifiers ensure that every portfolio has been properly documented on the assessment sheets by the internal assessors and the Awarding Bodies check that the correct forms have been completed by the external verifiers.

Relating all actions back to the performance descriptions in the NVQ is one of the key features of CBET. The 'standards' are intended to represent (exactly) the level and range of performance which 'competent' candidates should display in the workplace. As has been argued earlier, this means that the NVQ's claim to legitimacy rests heavily on the accuracy of this performance model and how effectively actions may be assessed against it. Or, as Wolf puts it (1995:55):

> For the system to deliver on its promises, this domain
> needs to be specified in such a clear and unambiguous
> way that anyone involved in assessment will know
> exactly what to do

Essentially this is a form of criterion-referencing (Jessup, 1991). Unlike norm-referenced assessment where students are compared with their peers, criterion-referencing involves comparing performance against previously established factors (the 'criteria'). As Hyland (1994) points out, the line between these two forms of assessment is somewhat clearer in theory than in practice, since no assessments are performed only by norm-referencing student groups, and any criteria that are developed tend to be produced in the light of the performance of earlier generations of students.

However, in theory at least, NVQ assessment must be centred on NVQ criteria. Because of this, the quality assessment mechanisms are designed to ensure, not that assessors' judgements are accurate, but that all the criteria have been complied with. The proponents of CBET firmly believe that, once these criteria are "right", they specify competence so accurately that parallel judgements about a candidate's competence can be produced by even novice assessors (see, for example, Debling, 1992a; 1992b; 1992c; Wood *et al*, 1989). This assumption is so fundamental to the NVQ system that the series of quality checks exists only to ensure that assessors have seen evidence for each of the criteria. As one external verifier argued (interview notes):

> The role of the EV is to check that the *system* is
> adhered to. You must be careful he doesn't
> pontificate on the stuff the evidence is made of

because he may not be a subject expert on that
particular VQ.

The result of this is that few organisations employ subject specialists to judge

competence. Only one Awarding Body (AB 11) insists that the assessors and

verifiers it recruits have experience in the areas they are accrediting. Far more

typical is the Awarding Body (AB 2) which employed only one verifier to deal

with sixteen separate qualifications including all three management NVQs,

despite the fact that she had neither management qualifications nor experience

(interview notes). In assessment, just as in developing and presenting the

qualifications, it was found that, as NVQs became increasingly esoteric (Hyland,

1992), a language of competence (much visible in this thesis) evolved to cater for

the structures, concepts and institutions of the new qualifications, and expertise

was taken to mean expertise in the internal complexities of the qualifications

themselves, rather than expertise in the subject being assessed (Wolf, 1995).

This belief that assessments could be monitored without reference to, or

familiarity with, an occupational area, became such an integral part of NVQ-

assessment that anything else was regarded as morally suspect and attempts by

certain industries to demand verifiers knowledgeable in their area were treated

with suspicion. Thus, when a naval college approached an Awarding Body with

the request that they appoint an external verifier who was either an ex-navy

person or familiar with the work naval staff did, in an attempt to ensure that

candidates were not passed or failed unreasonably, the Awarding Body staff were

shocked. This request was rejected and one of the Awarding Body's external verifiers argued that (interview notes):

> the system will crumble if people who are being evaluated specify who their EVs are - that's up to the people who do the Quality Audit.

This belief that the ability to assess was totally transferable across the NVQ system was treated with less sympathy by employers. Hilary Landy, in addition to studying for her own Management NVQ in SupermarketCo, sat on an appointments panel when the company decided to recruit some management staff externally and was pleased to note that one of the candidates had 'D' unit qualifications (which qualify an individual to assess NVQs) in retailing. However, her enthusiasm waned when she discovered that he had secured this on the basis of his considerable experience of assessment rather than any experience of retailing:

> - we interviewed one guy and he'd got D32 and D33 in retailing - he had worked as an assessor in hairdressing and catering and he'd never worked in hairdressing or catering so how had he done this? Now how could he judge that if he's not a hairdresser? In catering he watched someone making apple-pie and we said, "Did you taste it?" and he hadn't but he'd watched the apple pie going in.

This emphasis on the systemic, rather than the occupation-specific, aspects of competence was apparent in the 'D' Units, which provided the formal qualifications for NVQ assessors. These were designed to provide only information on the qualifications system and an introduction to its language, paperwork and concepts. Again, because of the existence of the standards, it was

assumed that substantive assessment of skill and performance would be both

objective and unproblematic so that the only area in which checks and balances

were required was monitoring the system itself (Wolf, 1995).

This belief is fundamental to the system of CBET, as Wolf's definition (1995:1,

adapted from Grant *et al*, 1975) makes clear:

> Competence-based assessment is a form of assessment
> that is derived from the specification of a set of
> outcomes; that so clearly states both the outcomes -
> general and specific - that assessors, students and
> interested third parties can all make reasonably
> objective judgements with respect to student
> achievement or non-achievement of these outcomes;
> and that certifies student progress on the basis of
> demonstrated achievement of these outcomes.
> Assessments are not tied to time served in formal
> educational settings.

Yet from the earliest stages of NVQ implementation there were suggestions that

this assessment was not quite as straightforward in practice as it seemed in

theory. Wolf and Silver's work with schoolteachers (1986) suggests that

descriptions of expected levels of performance by themselves are not sufficient to

establish unproblematically the standards required. Teachers are far more likely

to agree on student assessments if they are also supplied with exemplars, set texts

and guidance (see also Eraut and Cole, 1993).

The CNAA/BTEC report on *The Assessment of Management Competences*

(1990a) argued that workplace assessments may be influenced by the relationship

between the assessor and the candidate, the support systems available, general

environmental/situational considerations and gender. Nor does providing observable performance criteria make assessor judgements any more objective. The authors cite an experiment described by Hubbard and Seddon (1989) in which eight teachers observed a group of boys preparing a salt by the action of an oxide with acid (this experiment was specifically chosen because its performance criteria could be stated clearly). The teachers' assessments of the boys were both reliable and consistent. However, when the experiment was repeated with a group of girls preparing a salt the assessments became inconsistent and unreliable. Within management, the authors speculate that these problems would be compounded since (CNAA/BTEC, 1990b:7):

> managing at almost every level is a complex, holistic occupation which cannot easily be disaggregated into objective, explicit and unambiguously measurable elements of competence

Not only was the publication of observable performance criteria not an effective means of ensuring consistency of assessment, the insistence that each component part of an NVQ must be evidenced by material produced in the workplace, which denies the (subjective) judgement of individual assessors a role in inferring competence without proof, effectively limits a candidate's competence to the simplest competence they fail on. Theoretically, this meant that a manager who assembled evidence for recruiting part-time and full-time employees for element 4.2 *Contribute to the assessment and selection of candidates against team and organisational requirements* but had no experience of recruiting temporary staff could not gain a full NVQ because the range statements demanded evidence of each type of recruitment.

Clearly, such an assessment decision would be inequitable and in practice few assessors or verifiers were so rigid in their interpretation of the performance criteria. However, this decision that candidates were not required to fulfil 100% of the performance criteria (Debling, 1992c), and that assessors should use their personal judgement to decide how far the rules might be bent and in which direction, was in direct contravention of the claims made by the NVQ proponents, who argued that developing the standards had obviated this need for human judgement (Jessup, 1991; Fletcher, 1991). As a result, an unhappy compromise developed through which the assessors attempted to satisfy both the ideological rigour of the NCVQ and the needs of the candidates they were assessing by paying lip service to the ideal of 'sticking to the standards' and effectively inferring competence in practice (see Wolf, 1995, for a fuller account of this debate). But effecting the compromise in this way denied the possibility of a shared understanding of the level of work needed to qualify, in cases of uncertainty there was no consensus about the extent to which compromises might be made, and implementation was left entirely to the judgement of the individual assessors.

Assessment in practice

The result of this was that, in practice, there was a wide variation in the way that competence was assessed. Almost all the Awarding Bodies, assessors and verifiers contacted for this study raised the problem of inconsistent assessments.

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One senior training manager worked for a large, nationalised industry that had

started using the Management NVQs some twelve months before with a series of

pilots scattered around the country. Having monitored the results of these he was

feeling increasing uncomfortable about opening the qualification to a wider

audience. As he said, he already (interview notes):

> monitors eight different offices and eight different
> assessors and the standards are so diverse it's
> unbelievable

And, as the head of Awarding Body 4 argued (interview notes):

> Really it's a problem because the MCI has not done
> what it ought to have done and what we suggested
> years ago which is to get a library of portfolios and
> conduct training sessions with the external verifiers
> where they give them the portfolios and say, "Would
> you pass that?", "Would you fail that?" and "*Why?*".
> That's how we train our academic examiners but
> there's a tendency to sniff at academic bodies and
> their expertise.

This picture was reinforced nationally. Eraut *et al* (1996) in their study of NVQ

assessment found marked inconsistencies in practice between assessors and

Awarding Bodies. In a (belated) attempt to counter this in spring 1995, the

NCVQ and MCI co-hosted some external verifier workshops for management

assessors and verifiers, trying to harmonise practice (earlier workshops had failed

to produce the desired result since Awarding Bodies had sent their most senior

representatives rather than their operational staff). These workshops were

observed as part of this study and the differences noted there between verifiers'

expectations of portfolios mirrored the problems predicted in the theoretical

critiques.

These two contentions from the workshops illustrate the lack of consensus well.

While one external verifier could argue that:

> Competence is not a threshold - [it's a] straight line.
> 'competent' and 'not yet competent'. If you are
> competent you land the plane ten times out of ten, not
> nine and not four.

Yet another maintained with equal force:

> You have the facility to infer evidence holistically.
> You never see every 'i' dotted and every 't' crossed so
> you need to infer.

Each of these statements was greeted with approval by the verifiers' discussion

groups, despite their incompatibility. It may be that the amount of freedom

individuals had in the assessment process sustained both of these extremes of

practice. As one external verifier said, "I have a very simple view at my centre -

you do it my way, or else, otherwise it's a nightmare to assess". But this meant

that approved practice in one centre might not be considered competent

elsewhere. One external verifier who took a particularly rigorous view of what

competent performance entailed recalled a particularly heated disagreement with

a tutor:

> I queried one of the candidates' evidences on level 4
> at [*he names the town*] - this person called a meeting
> in which he had given out work to his team and I said,
> "There's only one piece of work here - is one
> enough?" Then the trainer got very defensive and he
> said "This only happens once a year how many do you
> want?" He said, "I'm in the TA and I've been trained
> to kill a man. If you were assessing me for my NVQ
> how many would you want me to kill? How many a
> year?" And I said, "well, if you were being trained as

an assassin, probably about five." But I think with something like that you should warn the person first that he may have to change situations before he gets competent in that area.

The issue of 'simulated evidence' was particularly contentious. Originally barred, it had been incorporated into the standards at a comparatively late stage to 'supplement' workplace practice or provide examples of how a candidate might deal with unusual situations (see the NVQ level 4 in Appendix A for some suggestions on how simulated evidence might be used). However, at best simulations were only reluctantly accepted to cover a minority of the elements (NCVQ, 1995a) and some external verifiers were not prepared to accept them at all:

> The way NVQs have been popularised is the way in which competences started in the US on craft courses where people show they can do something - you can weld something under-water if necessary without putting a battleship out to sea but how do you check out that people can be developed to deal with fire at sea? Do you set a ship on fire? If you do, *that's still a simulation.* The NCVQ must address this.... If say there was a Personnel person who was not allowed to sack anyone - how do you give him a competence on that? You don't. If you knew beforehand that that unit wasn't up to scratch you could warn him beforehand that he won't get all the modules of the thing. It's inherently flawed.

A representative of the forestry commission might have agreed with this analysis. One complained to Linda Reese of SupermarketCo at an employers' workshop that the prejudice against simulation in assessment meant that, for all forestry commission staff to gain NVQs, every tree in Britain would have to be felled. Other Awarding Bodies, who interpreted the qualifications differently, protested

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at the NCVQ's seemingly arbitrary distinction between 'real' and 'simulated' evidence since, as the head of Awarding Body 7 complained, 'simulated' evidence might be both more managerial and more developmental than 'real' work:

> [Two employers] have large numbers of production managers who have no experience of finance and the college who puts them through the NVQ insists that the employers give them experience of finance and personnel for two weeks but if any problems arise they will be distanced from them. Essentially they're not doing managerial work - they're just doing clerical work. But that counts as *real*. But if they could do a project - say on how a different system would affect the work, that would be *hypothetical* . . . . [Then there's] dealing with disciplinary problems - well, since not many managers deal with that, this college - at the behest of the employers - takes the managers to a hotel and gets one of their staff who's a very good actor to fling the door open, taking chunks out of the wall and shouting and he is so good that the people really believe they're in that situation. That is so real that is valuable. I took that whole case to the NCVQ and they said it doesn't match their 'real' evidence, so it isn't evidence so the college has had to stop doing that now. I have a bit of difficulty rationalising the NCVQ position.

Nor did the lack of consensus end here. During the workshops, there were disagreements between those who thought a narrative (or 'claim to competence') should be a mandatory part of each unit and those that did not; whether candidates were required to prove their competence for each performance criterion and range statement or simply for each element; whether an interview should be a compulsory part of the assessment process (no-one openly dissented to this despite the fact that afterwards most reported interviewing only a minority of candidates and none had any plans to extend this); how portfolios should be

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structured and whether a uniform system of indexing should be introduced; how many times competence should be proved; and how the phrase "contribute to" that is so recurrent in NVQ level 4, should be interpreted.

These differences led to significant discrepancies in judgements over individuals' competence. While one Awarding Body (AB 11) reported taking on more than eighty unemployed managers in three separate pilots of whom only four finished their qualifications (and each of those did so after starting work), another gave a level 5 qualification to a woman who had been unemployed for two years and had neither experience of, nor qualifications in, management. This meant that attempts to persuade candidates or companies that they could not be certified competent often resulted in an assessor's Awarding Body losing business to its less rigorous competitors. One external verifier said that:

> I've done this with a college as an EV. There were five unemployed managers going through an NVQ with European funding. I refused to sign - the evidence wasn't current and it wasn't authenticated. Now the college is going down the traditional certificate route. But another Awarding Body took this group on and now they've got their NVQs.

It seemed that market pressures would effectively prevent some of the more rigorous assessors from demanding extensive proofs of candidates.

Moreover, it is perfectly feasible that, in securing illustrative examples of assessment practice from an external verifiers' workshop, rather than from observations of assessment and verification 'in the field' this section exaggerates

the extent to which candidates were required to evidence every performance criterion. In these sessions the external verifiers were subject to the observation of the NCVQ, the MCI and their peers. It may be that awareness of this prompted normative rather than descriptive accounts of their own practice. Indeed, one external verifier, after watching several of his colleagues discuss a sample unit the workshop leaders had given out, and deciding that it was not yet competent, said:

> There's an enormous gap between what people say here and what they say as EVs. We can look at [these case studies] and pontificate. EVs in centres know they will have to fight the centre and fight the NCVQ and fight the Awarding Body if they want to fail somebody. We should talk about this rather than excuse it. We all know it exists.

Although assessment may have been different in practice, it has already been noted that variations in that practice were widely reported and most of these variations may be attributed to the mistaken belief that the standards themselves could provide performance benchmarks.

More worryingly, each of these quarrels concerned issues of *style* rather than *substance*. Every discussion revolved around how portfolios should be constructed, rather than the nature of competence itself. One external verifier exclaimed in frustration at his colleagues:

> You're assessing the top layer without looking at the foundations. There are so many methods of assessment, what is sufficient? What is currency? Who is acceptable as a candidate? These issues are not yet addressed at a national level, yet now you're talking about fine-tuning the portfolio.

It seems that, as with the NVQ workshops and the way managers' work changed to fit in with the standards, the whole process was NVQ-driven with the requirements of the CBET system and the portfolio taking precedence over the subject being assessed.

Assessing the assessors: conclusions

Acknowledging that assessment may be a complex process in which individual assessors negotiate their own understandings of acceptable practice is neither a particularly novel conclusion nor is it in any way unique to CBET. However, many of the difficulties inherent in the assessment process are compounded in the NVQ system. Because of the belief in the occupational standards as a given body of canon law, the way the assessment process was structured differed dramatically from that current in more orthodox forms of VET. With traditional qualifications potential flaws are publicly acknowledged and systems of checks and balances are set in place to mitigate them; continuous assessment of coursework balances timed exams, assessors meet to examine materials in an attempt to harmonise practice, subjectivity is acknowledged and discussed, and questions are examined for bias. Within the NVQ system, so fervent is the belief in the power of the standards, such checks and balances are considered unnecessary expenses (Debling, 1992b). As Warwick points out, this attitude has serious consequences (1992:5):

> Not to be able to make an objective assessment of
> another's capability is one thing, not to be aware of
> one's subjective approach is quite another.

If the standards were the objective benchmarks that their developers believe them

to be, this attitude would be problematic. Since they are politically derived social

constructs it is a major liability. Added to this, as was seen above, attempts to

clarify the occupational standards by supplying ever more detailed, behaviourist

statements only serve to compound the problem. As Eraut (1994) argues (p.

212):

> total uniformity of interpretation is an unattainable
> goal. Trying too hard to produce a fool-proof
> system will only make intelligent people feel they
> are being treated like fools

This faith in lists of observable behaviours is misplaced. Despite the contentions

of the proponents there is little evidence to suggest that assessors' judgements

grow less subjective because they have NVQ standards on which to draw; and

holding the objectivity of the standards up as an ideal effectively deprives the

system's designers of any motivation to introduce a system of checks and

balances to counteract assessment problems.

THE CANDIDATES: PREPARING FOR ASSESSMENT

The problems assessors experienced in ensuring their judgements were consistent

were not made any easier by the use of portfolios to prove managerial

competence. While theoretically, competence may be proved by any means, in

practice for NVQs at level 3 and above, portfolios are the dominant (and possibly

the only) mechanism (NCVQ/SCOTVEC, 1996; Cheetham, 1994). In this section, some of the problems inherent in using portfolios are considered in the light of candidates' experiences in the three case study companies.

Portfolios

A portfolio is a collection of documents (suitably collated and indexed) that prove a candidate has met the demands of competent performance stipulated in the relevant NVQ. The form of proof most often used is documentary and, while all the tutors encountered in this study, together with most of the candidates, were anxious to point out that video and audio tapes could be used to supplement the written evidence, only one example was found of a candidate doing this in practice. Such proofs of performance were highly prized examples of unusual evidence, and in no way typical of portfolio evidence.

In the overwhelming majority of cases, evidence consisted of memos, minutes, company or Awarding Body pro-formas suitably completed, witness testimonies, diary notes and letters, all especially photocopied for the occasion. For clarity's sake, each unit or element provided by the candidates in the three case study companies was introduced by a written 'claim to competence' describing the evidence that followed. This was accompanied by a cross-referencing grid with the numbers of the performance criteria along one axis and the numbers of the candidates' evidence along the other. Ticks in the relevant squares would show which piece of evidence was being used to prove competence against which

performance criteria (for a more detailed consideration of the form and content of performance evidence see Simosoko, 1991; 1992a; 1992b; Arkin, 1991; Brown and Brownlie-Marshall, 1992; Crowley-Bainton and Wolf, 1994; Jessup, 1990).

The function of this formidable array of paperwork was to provide the candidate with a means through which they might prove their own competence. The one feature common to all portfolios was their bulk. The smallest seen in this study filled two ring binders (one large and one standard size) with photocopies. Many more consisted of two large A4 ring binders of evidence (generally over 200 separate documents) and PrivatPLC candidates typically produced double this. In one public sector company, a group of managers enrolled on the NVQ were shocked when, on their induction course, a manager who had been through the process himself talked about his experiences and showed them his portfolio. One said of the talk:

> The next day [names the manager] went through his evidence. That could have been a mistake. He really took it to heart. He made the NVQ his hobby. He had 16 volumes of evidence three feet high. He did it every night between 9 and 11, he bought himself a PC, every night and weekends he worked on his NVQ for nothing. Now he's doing NVQ level 5. Some of us have a home life.

In chapter six, the impact that producing this formidable collection of documents had on candidates was considered. There it was argued that, within the workshops, portfolios tended to take precedence over, and occasionally replace entirely, traditional forms of learning and guided development; and in the workplace itself candidates' desire to pass the qualification led to high (if

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temporary) levels of formal paperwork being exchanged. Each of these was driven by the demands of the NVQ-system and introduced with little regard to organisational or individual need. In the light of this, it is difficult to construct a case for the portfolio as a *developmental* tool. No doubt it had the potential to be so, but in practice this was seldom realised. As one external verifier wryly commented, "weighing the pig doesn't make it any fatter" (interview notes).

This chapter focuses on the use of portfolios as vehicles to demonstrate competence. The language of CBET ('competence', 'standards', 'performance') is used in such a parochial sense that it is easy to forget its wider, emotive, connotations; yet it was that wider meaning which led to its appropriation by NVQ practitioners. Essentially, by demonstrating competence in a narrow sense (complying with the occupational standards) candidates are assumed to also demonstrate competence in a broader sense (confirm their capacity as managers). As one of the SupermarketCo tutors said, it was not the portfolios themselves that were being judged, but their creators:

> It's very much about assessing you as a manager
> rather than assessing the bits of paper. These are your
> ways of proving that you're a good manager.

In marked contrast to orthodox forms of education which grade students' work, not students themselves, NVQs use portfolios only as a proxy for assessing individual abilities. This is at once their greatest strength and their greatest weakness. Reliable and transparent judgements on the real workplace performance of employees are far more likely to address the needs of the labour

market and aid transfer between jobs, than assessments of academic ability or legally constrained references. However, although the proponents of CBET have undoubtedly identified a need and published some enthusiastic speculations on the benefits answering that need would have (see Breed, 1993), there is, as yet no convincing evidence that they have produced a system which meets that need.

Performance evidence is intrinsically problematic (FEU, 1986) and the more complex the task, the more difficulties constructing a judgement presents. Moreover, despite the CBET rhetoric, portfolios are, at best, only an *indirect* demonstration of competence. Accordingly, this section critically addresses the assumption that a competent management portfolio is the equivalent of competent managerial practice. It starts by arguing that official documentation may not, necessarily, be a complete or neutral history of events and that, if it is not, its standing as portfolio evidence is compromised. Then it considers the way witness testimonies were incorporated into portfolios, the problems candidates encountered formally documenting some of the 'softer' sides of their work and the candidates' own concerns that meeting the criteria did not guarantee that they performed well as managers.

Documenting organisational life

The NVQ system assumes that an uncomplicated link exists between organisational events and the documents which record them, so that those documents can legitimately be treated as replicas of the events themselves. This

view may be somewhat simplistic. Formal records do not exist solely to provide a straightforward history of corporate life and several studies have questioned the wisdom of interpreting them either literally or legalistically (see, for example, Dalton, 1966; Lewis and Stewart, 1958; Barnard, 1962).

Quite apart from mistakes which may arise in such records, documents are official accounts of events and the demands of officially representing the organisation, may conflict with the need to write an honest narrative. Dalton (1966) illustrates this point by recounting how the personnel staff of one organisation, when asked for its managers' educational histories, carefully amended the files to present the sort of academic achievements they felt were in keeping with both their managers' and their organisation's, dignity and status. Similarly, while factional in-fighting and petty rivalries may undermine the quality of a manager's work, they are unlikely to be reflected in official accounts of that work. Nor do official records, other than appraisals, offer judgements on the quality of the decisions they describe.

This problem did not go unremarked in the workshops and it was the candidates themselves who were most critical of using documents to demonstrate competence. Ian Jordain protested that "clear, relevant and realistic" evidence might conceal a reality that was somewhat different and Pat Walker said of one unit:

> Well, I can do the elements and I could pass my NVQ
> but I'm not sure that I'm effective . . . . I could do a
> bad job and pass my NVQ and that'd be it.

Colin Segal, who did have a unit certified competent after what he felt was a "bad job", felt uncomfortable as a result:

> Unit 2 - I've just done - if you believe the feedback, reasonably well . . . [Actually] I ran out of time . . . . I mean it doesn't say how much I contributed to the meeting . . . actually my contribution to the meeting was that I had five minutes, the meeting was drawing to an end and certain executives wanted to push off . . . . As it was I had to go after them individually.

This is not to say that Colin was not competent at that element of the NVQ. He had twenty-two years of experience as a manager, in the course of which he had both run and contributed to countless meetings. To complete unit 2 on time he had simply written a claim to competence around the most recent formal meeting he had attended since the minutes were readily to hand. However when, on the basis of this, the assessor was impressed by his performance in meetings, Colin was paradoxically disappointed. He had been told, repeatedly, that the Management NVQ was the most effective means available of distinguishing between competent and poor performance. Yet, in this instance, it failed to do so.

Paul Phillips was a great deal more critical of this reliance on the written word. Part of his job was to inspect building sites run by ConstructionCo and check both the paperwork and the site itself. It was not uncommon to find a case where impeccable paperwork concealed a less than perfect site. Paul spoke with feeling of one occasion when incompetently erected scaffolding, which was unsafe to a

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life-threatening degree, had appeared on the files in the site office as one of the most impressively documented things he had ever audited. Each of the two site supervisors had denied all knowledge of that part of the site and sought to put the blame on the other. In a conscious attempt at irony Paul used this example in his portfolio to demonstrate his competence element 7.4 *Identify and minimise interpersonal conflict.*

Good record keeping is an important aspect of organisational life and meets many operational needs and demands. However, corporate documents may also be partial, politic accounts of actions, which contain little reflection on the quality of the decisions and discussions they record. Moreover, in these three case studies, many of the documents in the portfolio had been generated for the sole purpose of proving competence against a particular unit, an objective which may have made them even more partial.

Witness testimonies

There were mechanisms for including judgements on the quality of work presented in a portfolio, as well as preventing exaggerated claims. As was seen earlier, some assessors and verifiers demanded that every piece of evidence presented was counter-signed. In PrivatPLC workshop tutors, who also assessed the candidates' work, visited the candidates' offices as part of the assessment process (such visits were invariably negotiated well in advance and generally treated by the candidates as 'showpieces'). But by far the most common means

of verifying that candidates' honesty and ability, was the use of witness testimonies within the portfolio itself. These consisted of letters or pro-formas from colleagues, subordinates and line managers.

Occasionally the reports provided a genuine insight into the way a manager worked. In Hilary Landy's portfolio one witness testimony came from a junior member of her team, with their thoughts on what had happened in a team briefing and how they had felt about the way Hilary handled that briefing, but, in general, it was unusual to find such a personal and reflective statement in a witness testimony. Indeed, that particular witness testimony was the only one of its kind in this study. Most were simple confirmations, or brief accounts, of actions. Sometimes, as in the one below, which appeared in David Beasley's portfolio, this reticence was to ensure that sensitive subjects were not made public knowledge.

> A situation at work was affecting my personal and family life. I brought the situation to David and the discussions he and I had changed the organisation of our work. The counselling David gave me was very useful.

> Paul Phillips (Colleague)

In all three companies, collecting witness testimonies for the portfolio was an unpopular activity. Busy managers, often working under pressure, were reluctant to impose additional administration on their equally busy colleagues by demanding that these affidavits were written and several managers determined

not to use any in their portfolios simply to avoid increasing other people's workload unnecessarily (all capitulated after a few months since it was difficult to assemble a portfolio without them).

Even where witness testimonies were provided, the relationship between the 'witness' and the manager being judged meant that it might have been problematic for the witness to refuse to provide a testimony. Many were written by the candidates' subordinates and, as one of the SupermarketCo tutors said:

> You do have to provide witness testimonies for that.
> To be honest, your opinion is not valid. But how
> good are witness testimonies? If you ask your
> member of staff for a witness testimony, are they
> going to write you a bad one? Probably not.

Paul Phillips reinforced this. In common with the managers in Harris's (1996) study he saw influencing, directing and occasionally manipulating his subordinates as an integral part of his work and, having accepted that, found it difficult to accept the weight given to witness testimonies in the assessment process:

> It's not stringent enough - I mean - a witness
> testimony - they'll take a witness testimony to be an
> awfully big chunk of evidence and I don't think that's
> right because as a manager you can manipulate people
> and it's part of what you do - it's not a very nice thing
> to do but there it is.

In addition to the statements made by subordinates, candidates also sought proof of actions from their colleagues. Since the managers in all three organisations worked long hours and since writing these testimonies imposed an additional

administrative burden on colleagues who would gain little from it themselves, most candidates asked for these letters from their peers in the NVQ group. Not only might they be more sympathetic to the request but also, since they would need witness testimonies written as well, it was possible to negotiate a *quid pro quo*. Occasionally this led to numerous witness testimonies from one person dominating an entire portfolio. Element 7.2 *Establish and maintain the trust and support of one's immediate manager* in one portfolio contained eleven witness testimonies, seven of which were from the same person. Several portfolios had 'mirroring' testimonies as candidates cheerfully wrote numerous letters for their colleagues and received testimonies on their own work in return.

On no occasion was there any suggestion that any of these letters described events that had not happened. Most candidates were simply complying with the NVQ's demands in one of the few ways open to them that did not alienate their colleagues. However, repeated statements from the same people and the existence of collegial 'self-help' groups who certified one another, do little to support the use of witness testimonies as either neutral accounts of events or judgements on the quality of work performed.

Managing relationships

While organisational documents provided, at best, a problematic source of proof of individual competence, there were some NVQ units where few documents could be drawn on and these were even more difficult to evidence. Unit 7

Create, maintain and enhance effective working relationships was probably the most difficult of these. Pleasant, friendly and helpful colleagues in co-operative environments are certainly desirable, but may not be easily documented, and an individual contribution to such an idyll is not readily susceptible to isolation and measurement.

It is possible to criticise these competences at two levels. Conceptually, as Collin (1989) argues, it is difficult to argue that these standards are individual attributes. Fig. 7 reproduces one element from unit 7, dealing with a manager's relationships with their colleagues. The behaviours specified here, sharing time, being open, exchanging information and honouring commitments, are largely relational.

7.3 Establish and maintain relationships with colleagues	
(a)	Time is taken to establish and maintain honest and constructive relationships with colleagues
(b)	Open, honest and friendly behaviour is encouraged
(c)	Opinions and information are exchanged and shared
(d)	Advice and help are offered with sensitivity
(e)	Differences of opinion are dealt with in ways which try to avoid offence, and conflicts are resolved in ways that maintain respect
(f)	Promises and undertakings to others are honoured, taking account of other priorities and commitments

Fig. 7 Management level 4 element 7.3 Source MCI (1991a)

While there is some evidence to suggest that much of the work performed by middle and lower level managers depends on relationships, trust and reciprocity

(Watson, 1994; Reed and Anthony, 1992), assessing those attributes in individuals in by no means a straightforward process. Essentially, competence in this instance relies on at least two competent people. One excellent manager would find it extremely difficult to continue to be open and friendly with colleagues who did not reciprocate that behaviour. Yet assessment focuses on the individual and assumes that competence is in- (as opposed to inter-) dependent.

More pragmatically, this 'soft' aspect of managerial work is very difficult indeed to prove. As Paul Phillips said:

> I still don't understand what they're looking for and
> what it means. . . . I don't see how you can evidence
> it.

The mechanistic demands of the portfolio presented candidates with a series of unsatisfactory alternatives. Potentially, actions as trivial as wishing co-workers "good morning" could meet most of the requirements of performance criterion 7.3 (a), but cataloguing that for a management qualification was unappealing. However, examples of workplace friction between co-workers were rarely documented and, even in instances where a formal record of the event was clearly necessary, a fear of exacerbating already strained relationships often prevented managers from writing down anything beyond the most cursory account, as Sue McNeil pointed out:

> Sue: [7.4 *Identify and minimise interpersonal conflict*] I
> had someone walk out on me last week. We've got
> two teams with people having an affair and the
> husband came into work looking for the guy. Also we

had an attempted suicide.

Sarah: I don't know how you'd prove that.

Ian: If someone saw you manage this - witness statement

Sue: I had to be very careful with what they wrote down because I didn't want to inflame the situation.

Yet without some element of 'proof' incidents could not be used for portfolio evidence. Pat Walker, having successfully dealt with a potentially difficult emotional situation realised too late that, since she had handled the incident verbally, she would be unable to include it in her NVQ:

> That happened here [in her open plan office] and some-one at the next desk listened in, you know, because it was a bit interesting and I almost asked her for a witness statement but now, because it's just my word against his, it's not evidence.

Even when evidence was documented and available and a manager's contribution could be highlighted, several candidates were concerned about the ethics of including such material in their portfolios. These issues were often sensitive and had been discussed in confidence. Some submitted copies of the original documents stamped "in confidence", others deleted the names of the staff involved and the most cautious wrote up 'semi-fictionalised' accounts of the events. However, the more steps that were taken to safeguard the identity of the people concerned, the harder it became for NVQ candidates to submit the material as evidence. As Alan Senior said:

> The only back up evidence you've got is that she could go to the individual concerned and ask. I felt a bit wary about something you've discussed with a member of staff - I haven't discussed this [using

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minutes of one-to-one meetings between managers and their subordinates in the portfolios] with the people.

If assessors asked the other people involved for more details the managers would be placed in an uncomfortable situation. If they did not then, as Ian Jordain said, "you could just write anything". As has been seen above, evidence for unit 7 often took the form of witness testimonies written in a manner that disguised (or did not reveal) the details of the incident. It is difficult to see how this satisfies the demands of the qualification or meets the level of proof required.

Organisational systems and individual competence

Finally, finding proof of competence was problematic because the occupational standards made assumptions about the support systems that the companies would provide for their managers, and the way in which managerial work would use those support systems. These assumptions were hierarchical. Theoretically, strategies and policies were conceived at the top of the organisation, then disaggregated so that each subsidiary, department and manager could be presented with their own portion of the wider plan, together with instructions on how that plan might be implemented. Through this process of allocating tasks, the operations of each of the component parts of a business could work in harmony with, and feed into, the wider corporation.

This image of an organisation as a finely tuned machine is popular, but it fails to capture the realities of organisational life. Companies may, or may not, have

strategies. Here, as Marsh and Holmes (1990) point out, such an omission might have very serious consequences, not because a company's business would be damaged by it, but because, for NVQ candidates to contribute to their element of the overall business strategy, that business strategy must exist.

Unless the required systems were in place, managers, regardless of their individual capacity, would not be able to prove competence. Element 2.2 *Implement and evaluate changes to services, products and systems* assumes that services, products and systems within the company will change and that all NVQ level 4 candidates will be involved in every aspect of that change process. Element 6.2 requires that work methods and activities are consistent with "current management priorities [and] organisational objectives" (performance criterion c), which assumes that such priorities and objectives are drawn up and publicised by companies to the extent that every manager is (or should be) exactly aware of how their work slots in to this corporate plan.

Tom Hackett of ConstructionCo had difficulties with many of the units that asked him to follow official procedures. As the company's IT expert it was his role to *produce* rather than adhere to, guidelines and, as he said, to get the NVQ:

> You have to not only prove what you're doing but
> create all the surroundings itself which more than
> doubles the work required and if you haven't got the
> time it makes things even worse.

Since these guidelines were drawn up around whichever system or problem he was working on at the time, they were only of very local relevance and on several

occasions, ceased to be useful, even to him, once that particular problem had been resolved.

Nor was he the only ConstructionCo employee to struggle because the company procedures failed to match those set out in the NVQ. One manager who ran building sites for the company could not be certified competent on unit 4 *Contribute to the recruitment and selection of personnel* despite the fact that a regular feature of his work was to recruit appropriately qualified personnel to work on his sites. Since the people he employed were builders and scaffolders, his selection procedures relied on proof of practical competence rather than written application forms. The range indicators for element 4.2 say that assessing the candidate's competence should include: "use of c.v.s, letters, references; interviewing (as a member of interview board); aptitude and work sample tests". His assessor ruled that the way scaffolders were recruited did not meet these requirements and that the manager was not yet competent on that element.

'Competent' and 'not yet competent'

Assessing competence by means of a portfolio could be problematic. The documents collated might be a political summary of operational needs and demands rather than proof of individual competence, and using witness testimonies did little to mitigate this. Moreover, many of the elements were extremely difficult to provide documentary evidence for, even when managers had experience of them and the requisite organisational systems were in place.

Each of the sections above assume that evidencing actions was possible, if problematic. Yet in chapter six it was argued that only three of the core eighteen candidates observed in this study were engaged in work that accurately matched the MCI's model of management. Since, ideally, all portfolio evidence should come from 'real' workplace tasks that were part of a candidate's regular responsibilities and the NCVQ's attitude to 'simulated' evidence was not encouraging (NCVQ, 1995a), it seemed that, to a greater or lesser extent, fifteen of the candidates needed to provide proof of work they did not do. Their attempts to generate both documentary evidence and the activities that give rise to such proofs have already been considered. Here the discussion will focus on how effective these various attempts were in terms of candidates being certified competent. Since competence here is defined in terms of fitting the MCI's model, this section will go on to consider, in the light of the evidence put forward in the portfolios, how the emphasis on rigid criteria could both accommodate and distort the 'managerial' elements of the candidates' jobs. Finally, the impact of success and failure on the candidates themselves will be discussed.

A great deal of attention has already be paid to the degree to which each of these three case study companies was unrepresentative, the possible atypicality of the core group of eighteen candidates and the effect observation may have had on the individuals concerned. It has been argued that the interviewees cited here were far more likely to succeed in their attempts to be certified competent than their peers. However, while these additional spurs to accomplishment might have

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increased the proportion of candidates qualifying it was not sufficient to ensure that the majority of candidates in the organisations themselves gained their qualifications.

In SupermarketCo, 22 candidates, after experimenting with compiling one unit, were chosen to take the NVQ. Twelve months of tuition and support were time-tabled. When that expired very few managers had made any significant progress at all and the support was extended. Eight months later, ten candidates were almost ready to submit their portfolios. Those who gained their management NVQ included five from the core group of seven, Hilary Landy, Stephanie Rigal, James Green, Colin Segal and Peter Bird. Neither Richard Blackwood nor Harry Dent were certified competent.

In ConstructionCo, only four managers finished their portfolios (from an original group of eleven) and again, all four took almost eight months longer than the company had originally anticipated. Here, all four 'competent managers' were part of the core group of six, which, since the personnel 'gatekeeper' had carefully selected most of that group, was predictable. Terry Saunders, Rachel Flint, David Beasley and Paul Phillips were the favoured ones; the two candidates who did not gain the qualification were Michelle Lawrence and Tom Hackett.

In PrivatPLC the success rate is harder to gauge since the NVQ workshops were still underway when fieldwork for this study finished. However, even at that

early stage in the programme some negative results were apparent. Of the eleven

managers in the learning team, three had dropped out of the NVQ, including Pat

Walker, one of the five candidates in the PrivatPLC core group. Three more

(including Sarah Culbertson and Jane Ewen) had officially requested an

extension to the twelve months officially allocated to the qualification, and three

of the remaining five had attended only one of the monthly learning days, despite

the fact that all candidates were required to be present at 80% of these events.

This was an exceptional drop-out rate and the PrivatPLC tutor was extremely

concerned. The course itself was well established and had been run as a

Certificate in Management programme for some years, before being adapted to

the requirements of the NVQ. Because of the competition for places and the fact

that the managers met regularly with the same group, there was a great deal of

pressure on individuals not to drop out and anyone expressing doubts was urged

to stay by their peers, the group tutor and their line manager. Before adaptation,

drop-out had been minimal and it had been an exceptional occurrence for

candidates not to gain their CIM.

Other evidence from PrivatPLC both cast doubt on, and reinforced, these

negative conclusions. In chapter four it was explained that, while the

organisation was piloting the Management NVQ as this study took place, half a

dozen managers who had participated in an earlier CIM programme had been

invited to spend a few extra months working on NVQ portfolios. Participants for

this, earlier, pilot programme had been selected after formal applications had

been submitted and interviews had been held. Of the six managers chosen, all

were certified competent (although, again, some months after their original target submission date). Less optimistically, while observations and interviews were being conducted with the core group of PrivatPLC candidates, another learning team, formed at the same time, was also working its way through the NVQ (this was the 'south' team; the group which participated in this study was the 'north' team). These were considerably less successful than their northern counterparts. By the joint Christmas party, over six months into the programme, only two claimed to have submitted any evidence at all for their tutor to consider; in contrast, every member of the 'north' team (including Pat Walker who later withdrew from the course) had sent work in. Indeed, the southern team were so concerned at their own lack of progress that one of their number attended the northern group's October learning day in an attempt to learn the secrets of the northern group's success.

Yet in terms of the number of candidates being certified competent, the atypicality of the case study companies may have been as much of a hindrance as it was a help. At the start of this chapter when the external verifiers' responses to portfolios was noted, the picture which emerged was one of extreme variability in practice between both individual assessors and particular Awarding Bodies. There is some evidence to suggest that each of these three organisations were stringent in their assessments. Ian Crowhurst, the senior personnel contact at PrivatPLC, had been told by the company's Awarding Bodies that their NVQs in both management and customer care were demanding too much of the candidates. The consultant employed as a tutor by ConstructionCo had insisted

that Terry Saunders write up an additional claim to competence for element 4.2 *Contribute to the assessment and selection of candidates against team and organisational requirements* because his existing evidence was so good the tutor suspected that Terry had not done the work himself (in fact Terry had had so much experience in recruiting over the preceding twelve months that it would have been surprising had his claim not been extremely strong); and, in both SupermarketCo and PrivatPLC, units were returned to candidates graded 'not yet competent' for the candidate to do some additional work on them.

It is possible that some candidates whose work might have been admitted elsewhere, failed to gain their NVQs because their assessors were unusually rigorous. This marked difference in practice did not go unnoticed in the NVQ groups, and Richard Blackwood complained, after one particularly long session with the tutor which had been devoted to considering how he could be seconded onto work that met the requirements of the NVQ:

> if I did the NVQ at the local technical college - and I
> can do - I can mix and match - I wouldn't need to do
> that

However, frustrating as it was for candidates who were declared 'not yet competent' because their employers were assessing qualifications with a reputation for laxity in a rigorous way, from a research perspective this atypicality was welcome. It is possible that, in another environment, more of these candidates might have been certified competent (although Richard Blackwood never did register at the local technical college) but their tolerance

would have failed to show how performance criteria, applied rigorously and fairly, might distinguish between 'competent' and 'not yet competent' behaviours. One of the most telling means of estimating the contribution of the NVQ system is in revealing which candidates were assessed 'not yet competent' together with the reasons for that assessment.

Competent managers?

Accordingly, it is appropriate to consider whether assessing to the occupational standards successfully differentiated between 'competent' and 'not yet competent' managers in the broadest sense. Did fulfilling the performance criteria set out by the MCI also indicate that a candidate was a capable manager? The candidates were working towards published benchmarks and had the opportunity to use these to structure their own reflections on work, and improve performance. Tutors and assessors could prompt such thought and development by suggesting that candidates focus on particular areas and, since the qualification was designed hierarchically, with every action being linked back to the key purpose of managerial work itself, candidates had an opportunity to focus on the wider picture when assembling their portfolios.

This, at least, was the theory. However, the alternative definitions of managerial work put forward in chapter two and the way day-to-day operations changed in each of the case study companies each suggest that using behavioural standards to judge managerial work might not be quite so straightforward.

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Mention has already been made of how "sticking to the standards" might cause group discussions to focus on ordering footstools or completing paperwork in preference to more substantive debates on the difficulties inherent in managing a team made up of both temporary and permanent staff; and this distortion was echoed in the material assembled for the portfolios. Since the evidence was being judged on whether it conformed to the performance criteria, trivial instances which matched the model were favoured over substantive decisions which did not.

James Green was heavily involved in negotiating pay rates within SupermarketCo, work which he found interesting and developmental, but, since corporate politics dictated that such influential negotiations were conducted in the name of the director, he was unable to prove that he had contributed to these discussions and could not use the material in his portfolio. However, ample written evidence was available to show that he had ordered name badges for SupermarketCo customer service staff and he presented it to prove competence on unit 2 *Contribute to the implementation of change in services, products and systems.* Elsewhere in SupermarketCo, to be certified competent on element 1.2 *Create and maintain the necessary conditions for productive work* Richard Blackwood recorded that the files on his PC and in his filing cabinet were easy to access while he was on the 'phone because he had arranged them to be within reach of his swivel chair. An office plan, a photograph and a copy of the Health and Safety Legislation were included. Unit 3 *Recommend, monitor and control*

the use of resources posed problems for several of the candidates. In the PrivatPLC pilot group, Andrew Swanson demonstrated his competence by showing how he and his wife tackled their household budget while Paul Phillips of ConstructionCo based his on the rather unlikely assumption that every British standard with which his industry was required to comply had changed overnight, so that every single manual needed to be replaced.

Ordering name badges, sitting in a swivel chair and keeping personal bank accounts in credit are only 'managerial' in the sense that they conform to the management standards. If such a tautological definition is abandoned in favour of a conception of 'managerial' work as work which is influential (Watson, 1994) and in which managers contribute towards running the organisation as agents of the owners (Armstrong, 1989) then it would be difficult to justify using any of these pieces of 'evidence' as proof of the competent execution of managerial work. The candidates themselves were acutely conscious of the discrepancy between the work they generally engaged in, and the trivia used to demonstrate competence. James Green was frustrated because his most influential activities were performed in the name of the director he worked for, while Richard Blackwood, on being certified competent for element 1.2 argued that:

> There's something wrong with a system that lets
> drivel like that through.

Contrary to the hopes of the MCI, the discipline of assessing against, and preparing evidence for, a framework which defined competent management, *misdirected* attention rather than focusing it on the important issues.

However, the model could also be extremely helpful. Harry Dent's enthusiasm about element 9.1 *Lead meetings and group discussions to solve problems and make decisions* has already been reported. Peter Bird, though less lyrical, found that unit 8 *Seek, evaluate and organise information for action* described his work as SupermarketCo's management accountant to the extent that he considered simply taking a photograph of his filing cabinet and submitting that as proof of competence. The NVQ's emphasis on accreditation rather than development meant that no participant claimed to learn anything new from the process but several said that compiling evidence had made them very conscious of the way they worked and encouraged them to think about the impact they had on both people and procedures. Colin Segal commented that:

> It made me research and observe myself - self
> appraisal if you like - and monitor what I was doing
> and try and bend my own way of doing things into the
> standards - to improve the way I did things.

However, such positive reactions were only noted for elements which matched candidates' work. 'Mis-fits', of which there were many, presented evidencing problems rather than developmental opportunities.

If "sticking to the standards" was not a reliable means of isolating the managerial elements in a candidate's job, there is little evidence to suggest that it ensured a certain standard of competence had been attained. When evidence was graded 'not yet competent', it was almost invariably because it did not quite meet the demands of the standards and required further proofs, rather than because it was

not sufficiently managerial. Tutors commented on how well evidence was indexed, whether it flowed clearly and whether it provided proof for each of the performance criteria, occasionally requesting more photocopies. Keith Miles was awarded his NVQ with the PrivatPLC pilot group and his portfolio showed that element 1.2 *Create and maintain the necessary conditions for productive work* had been initially marked 'not yet competent' for him to re-work. The tutor's comments were typical of the reasons for which portfolios were 'sent around the loop' again (my emphasis):

> Good start. *Further evidence* of what you do, why and how *is needed to satisfy the requirements of this element.* Performance criteria (a) and (b) are competent. The others are implied but not specific in detail, particularly the safety aspect. Range statements addressed but *limited referencing made.* Good use made of the variety of supporting evidence and appropriate statements.
>
> Not yet competent.

And, as has been seen earlier, if the main consideration for passing was whether the actions met the criteria, the most trivial of information could legitimately prove competence. The PrivatPLC tutor visited Keith at work to confirm his competence in element 1.2 and noted that his work area was tidy. "Strong" units were those which were well cross-referenced to the performance criteria, met each of the range statements, provided several pieces of evidence and (in the words of one tutor) "had plenty of 'I's" in them; "weak" units failed to link the evidence to the performance criteria, did not satisfy every range statement or provided only one example of competence.

Knowledge and understanding

The position of 'knowledge and understanding' was somewhat ambiguous. PrivatPLC, where candidates had actually received folders containing theoretical input (though little workshop time to consider them), actually asked that this be demonstrated in the Claims to Competence. Yet most candidates struggled with this as Pat Walker and Jane Ewen acknowledged:

> Pat: Theories and knowledge. I can get the skills, but it's not easy to provide evidence for Group Theory - Motivation Theory - what does that mean?
>
> Jane: Means get a book and read it.
>
> Pat: But, *any* Group Theory?

Contrary to the expectations of the system's advocates, the knowledge that candidates were required to produce was frequently neither obvious nor capable of conscious articulation even by competent candidates (for a detailed consideration of the position of knowledge and understanding within NVQs and the NVQ assessment process see Barnett, 1994; Hyland, 1994 and Norris, 1991). In PrivatPLC, where managers had most guidance on knowledge issues and were constantly exhorted by their tutor to include evidence of knowledge and understanding, only two candidates did so. Both had already gained 'academic' CIMs and included their assignments and work-based projects with a brief introductory statement linking them to an NVQ element. Despite the NCVQ's conception of a rigid line of acceptability between performance-based and theory-based evidence (Jessup, 1991; Fletcher, 1991; Docking, 1991) these

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assignments were clearly linked to workplace practice and earned far more enthusiastic tutor feedback than any other unit submitted. Alan Senior's Open University assignment on budgets was "more than enough to meet [the] performance criteria".

This lack of emphasis on theory by candidates may be attributable to the lack of support for the academic side of the qualification. Again, the contrast between what NVQs could potentially include and what they actually demand is graphically illustrated here. Potentially, this qualification can contain substantive evidence of academic knowledge (Employment Department, 1990a; Employment Department, 1993), in practice, there is little to drive employers to include this and where they do, the necessity of supporting candidates through the process of portfolio development leaves little space for presenting the academic materials.

Most of these problems stem from the structure of the NVQ. Defining managerial work in behavioural terms is problematic, and, at best, assessing against a competence-framework sits uncomfortably with assessing against actual competence. The portfolios these candidates produced were required to meet the performance criteria and, as has been seen, occasionally this was achieved at the cost of abandoning the 'managerial' elements of their work. Knowledge was neither explicitly taught nor explicitly tested and the documents that were produced generally showed simply that an action had been done, rather than how well.

All 'additional' skills, including knowledge and understanding, had been integrated into the standards by simply writing more performance criteria. Despite this considerable increase in length, many academic commentators were still very unhappy with the way in which the theoretical elements had been incorporated into the NVQ system. Again, in contrast to the liberal model of education, here, knowledge was seen only as something 'underlying performance' (Norris, 1991), it served an informational role (most of the knowledge elements mentioned in the Management NVQ are statutes) and candidates were to be tested on it by answering assessors' questions briefly.

While such testing might well be the most appropriate means for gaining more information from candidates (e.g., 'Which aisle are the baked beans in?', 'What perm solution should you used on coloured hair?') it is a far less reliable method for gauging the ability to perform complex tasks, since it may be too simplistic to demand an immediately visible stimulus-response type relationship between the possession and use of knowledge. Such a system caters poorly for occupations which require a high level of expertise, not all of which will underlie performance and not all of which is readily testable in a question and answer session. It also takes little account of the variety of ways in which many psychologists account for human decision making. Intuitive, heuristic and emotional decision making processes are not particularly amenable to this approach (Collin, 1989).

The impact on the candidates

The impact that both success and failure in the Management NVQ had on candidates stems directly from the way the qualification was presented to them. It consisted of 'occupational standards', had been described as "benchmarks of best practice" by the tutors and was used to judge 'competent managers'. Successful candidates' most common reaction was relief that they had been proved competent, most confessed to being "relieved" and "reassured". Even Colin Segal, with twenty-two years of management experience behind him said:

> It's good - I enjoy it. I get a good feeling out of it, it's confirming the fact that I'm not so bad at my job.

Similarly, Paul Jones, a 46-year old from the PrivatPLC pilot group explained why he was so pleased to gain his qualification:

> I'm an Office Manager - it fits in great. I really enjoyed the NVQ because of that because all the stuff it's asking for is typical day-to-day stuff in the office so though it's a lot of work it's great . . . . I enjoyed doing it because it was proving to myself . . . . it was a feel good factor. In fact, when I'd finished I thought of doing the level 5 but I understand we don't do it yet.

The certificate was a legitimatory device. Despite the fact that the majority of candidates had expressed reservations over many aspects of the process, securing the qualification still offered a great deal of comfort. Curiously, the instrumental career objectives which most had voiced were less common after the candidates had secured their certificates, reassurance having replaced ambition.

It may be that the dearth of meaningful performance indicators for managerial work, cynically noted by Heller (1996), is felt, a little more seriously, by managers themselves. As Watson (1997; 1994) argues, managerial work may also implicate the individual's identity and sense of self. Because of this, a qualification which can penetrate that complexity and certify real workplace competence is very reassuring indeed. Moreover, the public nature of that certification provides a clear and unambiguous message to an individual candidate's own manager about their performance. Under these circumstances it was hardly surprising that these candidates chose to emphasise the legitimatory aspects of the certificate.

Other organisations putting managers through the NVQ had reported the existence of a small minority of candidates who became wholly committed to the CBET process, finding the business of using behavioural lists to assess their work both exciting and developmental. One organisation even reported that this degree of enthusiasm was such that, although the enthusiasts were heavily outnumbered by those with more negative experiences, the company persisted with NVQs in the hope of improving its own implementation of the programme so that more candidates would share these positive experiences. After several years of implementation had failed to increase the ratio of enthusiasts to critics, they had abandoned the use of CBET in their training programmes (interview notes).

Similarly, in this study, one assistant manager in SupermarketCo was extremely enthusiastic about the NVQ process. Lisa Michaels, who was not part of the core group, found the NVQ "the best way to work". She worked for Peter Bird, supervising a small team of clerks in the outer office while he prepared the management accounts. Until she enrolled on the Management NVQ she had had little experience of what she called "real management" and, while she was working on her portfolio, Peter suggested that she represent the department at several internal meetings, take over their small budget and formally counsel staff. Lisa was delighted. She enjoyed the additional responsibility and felt that accepting it, and gaining a qualification which proved that she could do it, would give her career a boost.

Lisa, and several other managers who praised the qualification in much more moderate terms, shared a number of common characteristics. Almost all of them possessed few (if any) formal qualifications. David Beasley of ConstructionCo was the exception to this rule. He already held engineering qualifications and had enjoyed the NVQ since he felt it would help him to move on to other management qualifications. Generally, too, these people were engaged in work which matched the MCI's model well and often, like Lisa, they were supervisors rather than managers, and were new to many of the tasks they were evidencing, so that development was possible. Finally, all the enthusiasts found it comparatively simple to isolate and document their contribution to the activities they engaged in and had ready access to both a photocopier and a word processor.

For these people, the NVQ offered certification, reassurance, legitimacy and the opportunity to prove themselves doing more senior work. However, despite probing, no candidate claimed to have learned anything, though subsidiary advantages were mentioned. James Green pointed out how useful it was to have a folder with a large amount of documentation in it, since it saved him a lot of time going through the filing cabinet; several managers thought that if NVQs became the primary qualification mechanism, learning to assemble portfolios would be a useful transferable skill; many reported improvements in their keyboard skills and typing speeds; and the PrivatPLC managers spoke favourably of the networking opportunities the course provided, but most agreed with Alan Senior when he said:

> It's been interesting - and very challenging. Not so intellectually challenging but challenging from the work point of view - fitting it in with all the other duties you've got to do. That calls for really effective time management which maybe I'm not so good at . . . . Actually from an academic point of view most of it seems to be a bit dreary - you're just gathering information and photocopying it and passing it on but I don't know how you'd restructure an NVQ so that you wouldn't be doing that.

Their more experienced and better educated colleagues on the course were more critical, perhaps because they needed less reassurance, or perhaps because they found solace in a different form of reassurance. Paul Phillips of ConstructionCo condemned the whole qualification as "awful". He had adapted and tailored his work to fit the standards, gained his certificate and felt that his actions had served only to distort the work he was trying to do, in a way which would help him to

gain the NVQ but little else. Hilary Landy disapproved of the time and effort she

and her colleagues had put into documenting their work since she saw this as

actively harmful to the way SupermarketCo was run:

> We've just produced a lot of paper and we're wasting
> a lot of time and it doesn't mean a damn thing to
> anyone including the individual at the end.

It seemed that success did not automatically guarantee approval. Failure

however, did almost guarantee a dramatic reaction, for, just as success, with all

its connotations of competence, provided reassurance, failure was a

condemnation of the way an individual performed at work.

Technically, of course, it is never possible to fail an NVQ. Candidates are

certified 'not yet competent' and may present and re-present units and elements

ad infinitum. There is no time limit to the assessment process, and each

constituent part of any NVQ is totally transferable within and between

workplaces. In practice however, no candidate saw the qualification in this light.

Although in theory units might be separately accredited, in practice this was

interpreted as a 'failed' NVQ. As one training manager said, "what use is four-

sevenths of an NVQ?". The linguistic stigma of 'failure' may have been

removed, but the recurrent use of the word 'competence' more than compensated

for any relief unsuccessful candidates may have felt at this.

In each of the three groups studied, 'failure' was taken very seriously indeed.

One candidate burst into tears during an interview and two more reported

spending long hours at home in the evenings poring over the Standards and crying with sheer frustration over their inability to produce evidence. Michelle Lawrence:

> I know it's meant to really pull out the real information but it's - I don't know - this is more specific, but it's so specific it's trivial almost. I hate them . . . . I think they're so over the top. Satisfy the performance criteria, range statements - it's beyond a joke really. I probably wouldn't feel this way if I could do them. They're easy - they're not difficult to understand but you've got to have been seen to have gone through that situation and have reams and reams of paper to prove that. Chances are you make a call and you get up to do something about it. I was just the wrong person for this course really. It'll throw a more unfavourable light on my ability. Even if people say no, I don't think that's the way it is.

If success sent a positive message to employers and helped a candidate rise through the ranks, failure did the reverse. Indeed it actively damaged career prospects by conveying a message of *in*competence. Michelle went on:

> You take your exams and you take your degree and you don't fail. You fail an exam and you can re-take. This - you're digging your own grave - people will look at it and say you're not a manager, you haven't got the potential . . . . This just like stamps me "Michelle is not a manager" and that's it - I'm not really given a chance to prove otherwise.

She had been nominated for training because she had performed well in the past and was being seriously considered for promotion. The NVQ was intended to offer her a low-risk opportunity to test her prowess as a manager. By the end, she was actively seeking employment elsewhere. Tom Hackett, a manager at ConstructionCo, was so depressed and demoralised that he re-assessed his future

prospects and came to the conclusion that he was incapable of 'real' management.

Their reactions dramatically and emotively mirror the stress experienced by Scase and Goffee's (1989) respondents who felt excluded from 'real' management. The NVQ, in setting up a rigid model of managerial work had drawn somewhat arbitrary boundaries around those who were, and those who were not, managers. Staff not working on budgets, with no line responsibilities and without the aid of regular meetings were effectively excluded from 'real' management. The lack of these key responsibilities somehow made their contribution less valid, and rendered them not competent as managers.

Iles and Salaman (1995) in their account of using competences in selection, report that, for many participants, being found not competent was so stressful that several companies started to offer counselling after assessment centres. Moreover, since CBET's emphasis is on evidencing existing action, rather than preparing for future action, or learning the theory of management, those candidates whose work did not fit the model were effectively denied the opportunity to qualify. Since ConstructionCo was using the course to assess the management potential of some of the candidates and since PrivatPLC was using it to train its most recently appointed junior managers, this was problematic. Moreover, since CBET individualises the responsibility for being declared competent (Raggatt and Williams, 1996) the onus of blame for this judgement is located firmly on the individuals themselves.

NVQ assessment: conclusions

Criterion-based assessment is fundamental to the CBET process, yet, to be implemented successfully it requires that accurate and meaningful performance criteria are readily set against observed performance by neutral assessors. That such ideal states are never likely to exist is not, in itself, problematic. Many educational programmes are attempts to satisfy unrealisable ideals, and here the journey itself is deemed to be more important than achieving the destination (Dearden, 1990; White, 1982). However, within a competence-based system, the emphasis is on the product rather than the process so that, to adapt the analogy of travelling to this context, the journey itself is irrelevant, all that matters is the destination. In practical terms this means, as was noted above, that failing to construct meaningful performance criteria may be actively harmful.

Nor did the individual candidates welcome the emphasis on assessment rather than development. Positive evaluations of the qualification by candidates who had been certified competent revolved around its symbolic value: they were competent managers and had the NVQ to prove it. However, even these were often concerned at the lack of opportunities to learn or develop, while candidates who failed to gain their qualifications not only struggled with the perceived label of 'incompetence' but also railed against a system which assessed without teaching. Tom Hackett of ConstructionCo protested that this meant, "we're given a chance and it was like half a chance", adding:

> [I] would rather do the DMS. To practise something you have to know about it. Here it works exactly the other way round which is illogical to me. I mean when you go to school they don't set you an exam - *first* they teach you, *then* they set an exam.

Each of the organisations studied here had set aside dedicated sessions for the NVQ, including 'academic' input, yet in every case the demands of the portfolio had led to these areas being neglected so that, in the words of one external verifier the process becomes, "an NVQ in portfolio building and not an NVQ in management" (interview notes). This frustration at the lack of conventional 'input' is echoed in Boddy *et al*'s (1994) report of a joint academic/NVQ course in Glasgow in which, given the choice, most candidates actively insisted on participating in the academic side even when they could have gained the qualification without it.

Even in management, where qualifications are clearly used instrumentally, and in companies where most programme participants embarked on their NVQs with the open intention of improving their career prospects, some form of educational content was both expected and desired. Discovering that the system ensured chiefly that actions had been performed and documentation was in place was often a disappointment.

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of this chapter is to review the principal findings contained in this thesis and consider their implications. Accordingly, it is structured around three key debates. It starts by summarising the main findings of the thesis, considering the impact that the NVQ had on the three case study companies and reporting their future management training plans. Then, extending the perspective, it discusses the implications of these findings for the use of competences in vocational training. Finally, it concludes by returning to the original vision of Handy *et al* (1987), the professionalisation of managers, and considers whether structuring management training around such a system is either possible or desirable.

The impact of the Management NVQ

As has been seen, the MCI developed a precise and specific model of managerial work which described 'best practice' in detail. It was hoped that, armed with this portrayal, managers, their bosses and their trainers would be able to target

developmental areas with confidence, appraise performance effectively and publicly acknowledge practical achievements.

These are worthy ambitions and, as was noted in chapter five, the qualification's practical orientation captured the imaginations of the personnel staff in all three case study companies. However, in practice, the model of work propounded by the MCI failed to match the job descriptions of the majority of managers in this study.

Both the MCI and the NCVQ acknowledge the existence of this gap and argue that, in exposing these differences, the standards are essentially serving a diagnostic purpose. Candidates whose current or previous work experience fails to conform to the model are made aware of their developmental needs (those units which describe the work they do not do) and action is taken to provide them with competence in that area. Yet conceptualising development in these terms presupposes that the standards describe all managerial work and all managerial work is described in the standards. Querying that assumption, as this study does, raises questions about the way the model is used and the direction it provides to training programmes. Indeed, such activities could only be construed as improving management practice if management practice were defined (tautologically) as the MCI's occupational standards.

The impact of the MCI's definition of managerial work was one of the central themes of this study and, since in practice, in each of the case study companies,

discrepancies were revealed between the jobs the candidates did and the model of management propounded by the MCI, there were ample opportunities to explore the impact of this 'evidence gap'. In all instances, as the fieldwork chapters have argued, since certification depended on providing evidence that candidates performed the behaviours described in the standards, attention was focused firmly on the NVQ itself and attempts made to mould the candidates' experiences to it.

In the workshops this meant that 'official' teaching time was generally dedicated to making sure the candidates were familiar with the qualification. In both SupermarketCo and PrivatPLC, the two companies where workshops were observed, the overwhelming majority of time was dedicated to reading the standards aloud and considering what actions might constitute reasonable proof of them. In PrivatPLC the group brainstormed lists of the official forms which might be reproduced in portfolios. In SupermarketCo the tutor focused on individual members and encouraged them to suggest sources of evidence. Occasionally these exercises focused on pivotal aspects of a candidates' job, but only if this corresponded to the standards; more often they emphasised trivial actions (because they conformed with the NVQ's occupational standards) over substantive ones (which did not).

The dominance exercised by the MCI's definition of management over the workshops was extended to the workplace as many of the candidates altered the way they worked to meet the qualification's requirements. Such changes

invariably took the form of higher levels of paperwork, an increasing emphasis on corporate systems and a growing tendency for candidates to devise procedures. For the overwhelming majority, these changes represented genuine attempts to find a better way of managing. Some had reservations about the capacity of the standards to improve workplace practice but, like the managers in Watson's (1994) study, who reacted to new corporate initiatives with a mixture of scepticism and faith, were prepared to try formalising their procedures in the hope that it would help. Many others were less equivocal (at least initially) and several had high hopes of what doing the qualification could help them achieve. Nor was their belief entirely naïve. Work in both ConstructionCo and SupermarketCo was often informal and frenetic. For managers operating in such an environment, the prospect of formal, well thought out procedures, had its attractions.

This enthusiasm soon waned and few elements of the newly developed procedures enjoyed anything more than a transitory existence. Busy candidates, after developing and experimenting with systems, would abandon them to focus on more important (or simply more urgent) tasks. Very occasionally, the new procedures were found to be valuable in their own right and, when this was the case, they were retained. But such lasting formalisation was rare.

For the purposes of evaluating the Management NVQ, the rationale behind these changes is of as much interest as the operational success of the formal systems themselves and here again the entire process is NVQ-driven. In the vast majority

of cases it was the need to produce documentary evidence of individual competence, rather than any suggestion that bureaucratisation met a business need, that led candidates to introduce the new procedures. There is little evidence to suggest that this formalisation would have been worth pursuing for its own sake and much to indicate that it was problematic, with staff at all levels in the case study companies voicing concern over both the portfolios and the focus on documentation.

Nor was the individual experience of this qualification any more positive than its impact on the business side. The Management NVQs are characterised by high non-completion rates (Houston, 1995), a result mirrored by the managers in this study, chapter eight considered the emotional impact of this on the individual candidates. There, it was argued that the verdict of 'not yet competent', was inevitably interpreted as 'failure' and often provoked an emotional response. Unlike traditional qualifications which assess submitted work only, NVQs actively implicate candidates' performance and workplace identities in their judgements. The hopefuls who failed to acquire the qualification felt that they had failed *as managers* (interestingly this reaction was as true of the managers as it was of the non-managers in the group). The qualification, which was praised as a legitimatory device by successful candidates, was felt to be a condemnatory one by their less fortunate peers.

Overall, as might be expected in companies with comparatively high rates of non-completion, the candidates' verdict on the NVQ was unfavourable. A small

minority of (successful) entrants enjoyed the experience and one candidate was fired with enthusiasm for the CBET route. A somewhat larger group of both the 'competent' and the 'not-yet competent' emerged as fervent critics, while most veered between satisfaction at having their abilities publicly confirmed and frustration that the process had been so paper-based and had involved so little substantive learning.

Reviewing these conclusions in the light of the MCI's occupational standards, it might be reasonable to expect, if these were indeed more *managerial* than the candidates' actual job descriptions, that attention would be diverted towards meaningful topics. In fact the reverse was true. Not only were the actions described in the performance criteria not necessarily managerial, since managerial work is not readily reduced to functions, but also, the *level* of responsibility that the qualification should certify is not clear. Candidates would discuss, evidence and emphasise the most trivial aspects of their work to comply with the standards. Wolf's (1995) comment that aspects of the occupational standards for middle managers could as easily describe the responsibilities of a porter at a reception desk (quoted in chapter three) is particularly relevant here. Essentially, there is little in the standards themselves to suggest the level of task they should be used to assess and the only stipulation of assessment was that the evidence should conform to the standards. In concentrating on readily available trivial actions candidates were fulfilling the requirements fully.

Feedback to and from the companies

As part of the access negotiations, each of these three companies had been offered feedback on their NVQ programmes and presenting this occasionally offered an additional opportunity to gather information about their reactions to the qualification. This was not true of PrivatPLC, where no feedback meeting was held. Ian Crowhurst, the senior personnel and training manager with whom access had been negotiated, had accepted voluntary severance and left the company in Easter 1996. The report was sent to him before this date to be forwarded on to his successors. In it concern was expressed at the (for PrivatPLC) unusually high drop-out rate from the course and the dominance of the inappropriate model of managerial work used by the MCI. No feedback was received on this report and, given Ian Crowhurst's departure, none had been expected.

When the joint NVQ/CIM programme observed in this study started, PrivatPLC had already incorporated the course into its training manual and made arrangements for future courses to run. In addition to this, other NVQs were being introduced to different occupational groups within the company. This commitment, together with the group tutor's reaction to student comments and criticism, made it very unlikely that the organisation would abandon the CBET route in the short term. Rather, it seemed more likely that, in line with the company's professed desire for qualification- rather than developmental-driven training, the costly aspects of the initiative (the CIM, the 'learning days', and the

'learning team') would be abandoned in favour of an approach geared entirely around evidencing individual competences.

In ConstructionCo the result was a little different, but again, the organisation's approach to the programme was driven by business issues rather than the impact and results of the NVQ itself. During the period in which the majority of the fieldwork was conducted, ConstructionCo was the subsidiary of a FTSE-100 organisation. However, in the summer of 1995 it was acquired by a Scandinavian group. In business terms this take-over involved few changes. The company had always been operated as a stand-alone and its new owners intended to allow the firm's managers a reasonably free rein. ConstructionCo's risks were a little larger, in the sense that incurring any significant losses might have led to it being wound up or sold on (its British parent might, arguably, have been more likely to support it) but the company was in profit and the new ownership was generally welcomed by the managers. In NVQ terms, however, there was a noticeable shift. As was recognised in chapter five, the impetus for ConstructionCo to pursue the Management NVQ came from its British parent company. They had supported the two unsuccessful pilots (which ran parallel to other pilots in their other subsidiaries) and suggested running this third one. In the absence of any parental support for CBET it seemed unlikely that ConstructionCo would pursue the NVQ route, a decision that seemed to have been taken without regard to the results of this particular programme. By contrast, the company's old parent group were still enthusiastic about the CBET

process and had just started a major drive to encourage their middle and senior managers to pursue level 5.

This change of parentage for ConstructionCo meant that, for them, the feedback process was a largely irrelevant activity. In SupermarketCo the picture was a little different. As was noted earlier, Linda Reese, the head of personnel and training, had been recruited from outside with the remit of introducing developmental initiatives. In tandem with this pilot course on the MCI standards, she had organised an unrelated series of outward bound events for managers to improve their personal and team-working skills. Only two groups of managers had been booked on NVQ programmes and Linda regularly reviewed the tutorial provision and the impact on performance in the office.

This process of review was far easier within the head office of SupermarketCo than in either of the other organisations. Of the eleven managers on this pilot programme only two (Colin Segal and one other) were not permanently based at the central head office site, all were on first name terms and most were asked for informal feedback by Linda as the course progressed. She had noted the rise in paperwork with dismay. She regularly attended employer meetings at the MCI (and noted with regret that she was generally the only representative of the private sector) and was trying, unsuccessfully, to persuade them to abandon the portfolio of evidence. When the NCVQ announced that, to systematise assessment, all assessors should gain NVQs to certify their competence in CBET (the 'D' units), these efforts were re-doubled since SupermarketCo had one of the

largest NVQ level 2 programmes in the country. Lower level assessment was carried out in SupermarketCo stores and few of the managers there, while they acted as assessors, either wanted or needed to produce the levels of paperwork which would have made gaining the 'D' units possible.

Linda stressed the problems caused by this emphasis on documentation in the feedback session. Here, she was reinforced by her newly appointed deputy, Ellen Hiron, who had previously worked in the RAF's training department. They too had adopted NVQs and they too had noticed with regret the emphasis on paperwork, bureaucracy and formal procedures. Linda's hope, which was also expressed by most of the personnel staff interviewed for this study, was that this focus on paperwork was somehow anomalous, a product of the pilot programme, which would stop once their organisation and their candidates gained more experience of the CBET system. However, the consistency of this emphasis and the enduring need for evidence, meant such a change was unlikely. Since certification had been far less important to SupermarketCo than either of the other two case study companies, it seemed probable that they would abandon NVQs in the near future, having supported through the remaining candidates.

The lack of responsiveness to the results of ostensibly 'pilot' programmes in two of the three companies studied was disappointing, but perhaps not surprising. Storey *et al* (1997) argue that, for the four large British firms in their study, management development and training was a secondary objective, invariably subordinate to wider business goals. In the light of this, ConstructionCo's

actions (its initial willingness to adopt the NVQ and its rapid desertion of it at change of parentage) are readily explicable; as is PrivatPLC's commitment to providing qualifications to staff vulnerable to down-sizing. For both of these organisations, the focus was on what the NVQ might achieve in business terms, rather than what happened to the individuals on the programmes. Clearly, forging strong links between the wider business needs of an organisation and the training offered to managers, may be particularly advantageous. Here, however, this emphasis on policy level decision making seems to have condoned a comparative neglect of the individual experience of each of these programmes, a result which is far less admirable.

The implications for CBET

The experiences of CBET gained by the candidates in these three organisations were largely negative. The system distracted them from important features of their work, imposed additional loads of paperwork and, for those who did not succeed in acquiring a qualification, often proved traumatic. Here the implications of these results for competence-based qualifications in general are considered.

It must be remembered that this study consciously focused on exemplary providers of CBET. Sufficient official, anecdotal and journalistic accounts of the implementation of NVQs exist to suggest that good providers are unusual, as are exponents of the NVQ model within the private sector, yet it was on these that

the thesis concentrated. This was because, as explained earlier, while this is essentially a critical account of CBET provision, one of the questions it sought to address was whether, when implemented in the surroundings their developers would welcome, NVQs *worked*. Their failings in less salubrious environments were well documented but could do little to progress the debate about the competence model *per se*. What this study sought to address was whether, under *favourable* conditions, they offered a distinctive, and positive, approach to certification and assessment.

In these three instances it is clear that they did not. This section discusses two of the main systemic difficulties inherent in CBET: the assumption that jobs are generic and the construction of competence itself. It then goes on to argue that, for VET as a whole, one of the main problems caused by the NVQ system may have been caused by its hegemony over all other forms of accreditation and training. Although NVQs have had little success with employers, the dominance of the NCVQ has led to its particular construction of competence dominating accounts of educational initiatives, effectively stilting debate on alternative vocational provision.

Firstly, in constructing NVQs, the standards' developers operate on the assumption that occupations are generic and that they are, literally and figuratively, setting the standards for that occupation. Yet, as Senker (1996) noted, this is untrue. No central institute exists for setting out the roles and responsibilities that should be contained in particular job titles and work is

allocated locally and may be susceptible to change over time. Moreover, this elasticity is a familiar feature of the employment relationship. As scholars of industrial relations have long argued, the employment contract itself is incomplete (Fox, 1971), in that the duties an employee will be required to perform are not susceptible to being set out in advance, so that negotiating the form the employment contract should take is a continuous part of workplace life.

Proponents of CBET argue that the system of NVQs is sufficiently flexible to cater for this. Certainly, the recent revisions to the Management NVQ, adjusting the qualification so that it is structured around 'core' and 'optional' units rather than making every element compulsory (Merrick, 1997) were suggested with the aim of making the qualification relevant to more managers. However, even with this additional flexibility, setting occupational standards is still, essentially, an attempt to complete the employment contract and, as such, unlikely to succeed. Moreover, these new NVQs are still couched in behavioural terms, a point that leads on to the second systemic flaw within the CBET system: that precisely defined descriptions of actions neither accurately capture the essence of work nor constitute an appropriate basis for assessing ability.

Human behaviour is not characterised by replicative certainty. Nor, by focusing only on actions, is it invariably possible to accurately assess motivation, knowledge and purpose. This is not to argue that setting objectives, or exploring the relationship between actions, is an unproductive exercise, on the contrary, inviting an individual to describe what they hope to achieve from a certain task in

terms of tangible results, may be very productive indeed. However, for a

national body to prescribe those outcomes in detail, is not only less productive, it

. is also unrealistic.

The results of imposing such demanding descriptions of behaviour on candidates

have been described in earlier chapters and their implications for the assessment

process were discussed in chapter eight. There, it was argued that, far from

offering scientific objectivity, the standards simply imposed an overly rigid and

inappropriate list of behaviours. Not only was there little evidence to suggest

that this list was a suitable mechanism for distinguishing between able managers

and their less fortunate colleagues, but also, the problems caused by this

inappropriate set of benchmarks were compounded by the absence of checks on

assessors' judgements.

Popham, an advocate turned critic of the US system of criterion-referenced

assessment on which NVQs were based, summarised the difficulties inherent in

attempting to set up behavioural performance standards when he wrote that

(1984:39):

> Once upon a time, when I was younger and
> foolisher, I thought we could create test
> specifications so constraining that the test items
> produced as a consequence of their use would be
> *functionally homogeneous*, that is, essentially
> interchangeable. But if we use the difficulty of an
> item as at least one index of the item's nature, then it
> becomes quite obvious that even in such teensy
> behaviour domains as measuring the students ability
> to multiply pairs of double-digit numbers, the task of
> 11 x 11 = ? is lots easier than 99 x 99 = ?. About the

only way we can ever attain functional homogeneity is to keep pruning the nature of the measured behaviour so that we're assessing ever more trifling sorts of behaviour. That would be inane. [Emphasis in original]

His views have been echoed by the British academic community, who are almost united in their criticism of CBET (see, among others, Eraut *et al*, 1996; *Financial Times*, 17th January 1996; *THES*, 28th April 1995; *THES*, 12th May, 1995; *THES*, 19th May, 1995). Nor have NVQs proved to be popular with the employers they were ostensibly designed to assist. Few of these have adopted CBET qualifications within their organisations (Robinson, 1996).

It seems probable, given the factors that caused many of these difficulties, that many of these critical conclusions are equally applicable to other CBET qualifications. Certainly, the small number of empirical studies which have been conducted, suggest that other occupations have found the NVQ framework problematic (for some accounts of these see Wolf, 1995; Hyland, 1994).

The implications of these results are serious. Most of the problems identified originate from systemic flaws within the NVQ framework itself, rather than the inexperience of the candidates or their employers. Human activity cannot readily and meaningfully be captured in the form of occupational standards and there is little to suggest that better resourcing or more experience of CBET will alleviate any of these difficulties. This is not an argument against VET *per se.* At one level, there is clearly a need for subsidised vocational education and training. Indeed, the arguments in favour of developing a rigorous and developmental

system of qualifications which link activities in the workplace with academic study are both powerful and persuasive. Nonetheless, it does not necessarily follow that such provision should be competence based. These conclusions are not new. As was noted in chapter three the conceptual poverty of CBET had been highlighted before many NVQs were launched and the low take up of these qualifications indicate that they are less than popular with employers. It seems that the most advisable decision VET policy makers could make is to abandon this competence based framework and focus their attention, and their resources, on other training programmes.

However, it may be, that the most worrying legacy of the NCVQ's attempt to introduce a competence-based training system to Britain, is one that is far less tangible than many of the problems reported in this study. More than a decade ago, when the notion of CBET was first being constructed in Britain, the terms 'competence' and 'experiential learning' had yet to assume the precise meanings most educationalists would ascribe to them today. Then, the VET literature would support the idea of 'competence' in the widest sense, "the condition of being capable; ability" (Collins English Dictionary, 1979:308). Today, an account of vocational 'competence' is far more likely to define the word in NCVQ terms, interpreting it as meaning compliance with occupational standards, and that definition is reflected in the developmental activities suggested with it. As a result, much discussion of new forms of learning or assessment seems to have been subsumed into a consideration of NVQs. Contrast, for example, Evans's (1987) account of experiential learning, which allows students almost

total freedom to learn from and reflect on, their own experiences, viewing these as a stepping stone to academic enquiry, and using the familiar to encourage inexperienced learners to try the unfamiliar; with the strict focus on assessment in CBET that effectively sets parameters on learning (Walkin, 1991; Ward, 1991; Ecclestone, 1992; Gealy et al, 1990). Or, for more advanced study, compare Herbst's (1973) reflections on university education with accounts of 'higher level' NVQs (Challis et al, 1993; Edmonds and Stuart 1992; Debling and Hallmark, 1990; Mitchell, 1992).

This is a somewhat esoteric point, but nonetheless an important one. Language, particularly specialist language, subsumes a wide variety of concepts, ideologies, frames of reference and priorities. Indeed, part of the process of specialisation often involves becoming sensitive to the nuances of the specialist language, so that these understandings are shared among the specialist community (for a fuller discussion of this process see Gouldner, 1973). It follows, from this, that a language which is conceptually rich is particularly to be commended. A point somewhat dramatically illustrated by George Orwell's idea of 'Newspeak' in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. This language was intended to be so utilitarian and its vocabulary so narrow and so rigidly defined, that Oceania's citizens would have been rendered incapable of articulating any, bar the crudest forms of dissent. They would have effectively been stripped of the linguistic and conceptual tools necessary for rebellion. Clearly, the parallel is an exaggerated one, but its essential message, the significance of a well-developed language, is important. Regrettably, in the VET literature, the prolific efforts of CBET's advocates and

critics may have served only to impoverish the shared understanding of what constitutes competence and the form that assessments based in the workplace might take. By attempting to harmonise all vocational assessments, the commentators have, it seems, succeeded only in reducing the options available to candidates and making it less likely that a viable alternative to NVQs is developed.

In pursuit of the professional manager

This chapter's final task is to return to the idea of 'professionalising' management put forward by Handy *et al* (1987) and consider its merits. Granted, the competence based framework for management qualifications did not work, but this was not the model which was advocated in that report. Indeed, as was noted in chapter one, Charles Handy, together with many of his colleagues, actively condemned the MCI's framework for management development (see, for example, Constable, 1991; McCormick, 1991; Silver, 1991c). Might it then be valuable to return to this notion of professionalisation?

Yet, in seeking to 'professionalise' managers through a system of qualifications, Handy *et al* (1987) may have misinterpreted the nature of professional organisation. After all, the word 'professional' may be used in a variety of ways. It can be almost interchangeable with the word 'good' as a workplace compliment, as in the phrase "a very professional job", alternatively, it can be used to mean that a person is employed, effectively differentiating them from

amateurs, and it can also denote that a person is a member of a certain occupational group and that they have undertaken special training to attain that membership.

As Abbott (1988) notes, the increasing status of these professional occupational groups has led, in recent years, to other occupations pursuing 'professional' status and that, in the course of this, these other occupations are prepared to impose a veneer of training. It is questionable whether this 'professionalisation' would be a particularly meaningful process. The established professions share certain characteristics, principal among these being the possession of a common body of knowledge, into which new members must be initiated.

Managers may be 'professional' in the sense that they perform their work well and it is almost axiomatic that they are of 'professional' rather than amateur status, but they do not share a common body of knowledge and it is unlikely, in the light of the experience gained from the MCI to date, that artificially constructing such a body of knowledge would be a particularly helpful process. Perhaps, as a recent official skills audit suggests, those seeking to improve the performance of British managers should address some slightly more fundamental questions before describing the merits of the professional model (DfEE/Cabinet Office, 1996). Such questions might productively focus on the nature of managerial work and the skills exercised in the workplace, before directing their attention to how such skills might be encouraged.

The positive corollary to this, a reflection on what form of initiative might represent a suitable means for developing managers, is drawn from the literature, rather than the fieldwork. Given the heterogeneity, flexibility and reflexivity of much managerial work, it might be more productive for training initiatives to acknowledge and work with this diversity. Such a conclusion cannot claim to be novel (see, for example, Stewart, 1963; 1993; Storey, 1980; 1990) and several interesting suggestions have already been put forward in the literature using these assumptions. Reed and Anthony's (1992) focus on education has already been noted; Watson (1994) suggests highlighting the contribution that managers make to the organisation as a whole and developing that; and Singer and Wooton (1976) suggest emphasising the moral aspects of managerial work.

It is unlikely that any of these forms of training and developing managers offer the one right answer and it is no part of this study's purpose, having rejected the notion of one "universalistic nostrum" (Storey, 1990:5), to conclude by proffering another. Nevertheless, in that these suggestions maintain an understanding of management as a human and social activity that is both functionally heterogeneous and subject to individual negotiation, it may be that they repay closer analysis, if only because these conceptions are compatible with the construction of management put forward in chapter two. Integrating academic work into developmental models, rather than designing systems which run counter to it, is a welcome development.

APPENDIX A

THE MANAGEMENT NVQ LEVEL 4 (MI)

This appendix reproduces the occupational standards for managers, NVQ level 4 (MCI, 1991a). Many of the spelling mistakes in the original document have been corrected in the interests of clarity. However, the words and phrasing themselves have been preserved verbatim.

The Nature and Format of Standards

Units of competence

The management standards are made up of a number of units of competence. Each unit describes in broad terms what is expected of a competent manager in particular aspects of the job.

Elements of competence

Each unit consists of a number of elements of competence. These reflect the skills, knowledge and abilities that first line managers are expected to possess. Elements are the basis for assessment.

Performance criteria

Each element is described by performance criteria which specify the outcomes which a manager has to achieve in order to demonstrate competent performance. These are the basis upon which evidence of competence is judged by the assessor.

Range indicators

For each element there is a set of range indicators which describe the range of instances and situations in which the element is applied.

Evidence requirements

Each element has a detailed evidence specification outlining the amount and coverage of evidence required to ensure that competent performance is achieved.

THE MANAGEMENT NVQ LEVEL 4

Key Purpose: *To Achieve the Organisation's Objectives and Continuously Improve its Performance*

Key Roles and their associated Units of Competence	
Key Role: Manage Operations	
Unit 1.	Maintain and improve service and product operations.
Unit 2.	Contribute to the implementation of change in services, products and systems.
Key Role: Manage Finance	
Unit 3.	Recommend, monitor and control the use of resources.
Key Role: Manage People	
Unit 4.	Contribute to the recruitment and selection of personnel.
Unit 5.	Develop teams, individuals and self to enhance performance.
Unit 6.	Plan, allocate and evaluate work carried out by teams, individuals and self.
Unit 7.	Create, maintain and enhance effective working relationships.
Key Role: Manage Information	
Unit 8.	Seek, evaluate and organise information for action.
Unit 9.	Exchange information to solve problems and make decisions.

Units of Competence and their associated Elements of Competence			
1	Maintain and improve service and product operations	1.1	Maintain operations to meet quality standards
		1.2	Create and maintain the necessary conditions for productive work
2	Contribute to the implementation of change in services, products and systems	2.1	Contribute to the evaluation of proposed changes to services, products and systems
		2.2	Implement and evaluate changes to services, products and systems
3	Recommend, monitor and control the use of resources	3.1	Make recommendations for expenditure
		3.2	Monitor and control the use of resources
4	Contribute to the recruitment and selection of personnel	4.1	Define future personnel requirements
		4.2	Contribute to the assessment and selection of candidates against team and organisational requirements
5	Develop teams, individuals and self to enhance performance	5.1	Develop and improve teams through planning and activities
		5.2	Identify, review and improve development activities for individuals
		5.3	Develop oneself within the job role

6	Plan, allocate and evaluate work carried out by teams individuals and self	6.1	Set and up-date work objectives for teams and individuals
		6.2	Plan activities and determine work methods to achieve objectives
		6.3	Allocate work and evaluate teams, individuals and self against objectives
		6.4	Provide feedback to teams and individuals on their performance
7	Create, maintain and enhance effective working relationships	7.1	Establish and maintain the trust and support of one's subordinates
		7.2	Establish and maintain the trust and support of one's immediate line manager
		7.3	Establish and maintain relationships with colleagues
		7.4	Identify and minimise interpersonal conflict
		7.5	Implement disciplinary and grievance procedures
		7.6	Counsel staff
8	Seek, evaluate and organise information for action	8.1	Obtain and evaluate information to aid decision making
		8.2	Record and store information
9	Exchange information to solve problems and make decisions	9.1	Lead meetings and group discussions to solve problems and make decisions
		9.2	Contribute to discussions to solve problems and make decisions
		9.3	Advise and inform others

	Unit 1 Maintain and improve service and product operations	
	Element 1.1 Maintain operations to meet quality standards	
	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	All supplies necessary for operations are available and meet organisational/departmental requirements	Operations are all those activities within a manager's line responsibility.
(b)	Operations within the manager's area of responsibility consistently meet design and delivery specifications	Sources of supply (suppliers) are both: - external organisations - internal departments/teams
(c)	Information and advice given to customers is accurate, in line with organisational policy and is within the manager's responsibility	Supplies are: - material - equipment/technology
(d)	All communications with customers are carried out in a manner, and at a level and pace likely to promote understanding and optimise goodwill	- financial - subcontractors/consultants/ agency staff - information
(e)	Information about operations which may affect customers is passed to the appropriate people	Specifications relate to: - customer agreements - operational means for meeting agreements
(f)	Systems to monitor quantity, quality, cost and time specifications for service/product delivery are fully and correctly implemented and maintained	- specific functional duties within the organisation Quality assurance is through systems which are: - formal
(g)	Factors which may cause operations to be disrupted are noted and appropriate measures taken to minimise their effects	- informal Communication with customers is carried out by means of: - correspondence
(h)	Corrective actions are implemented without delay and appropriate staff and customers informed of any changes which affect them	- meetings - telephone conversations Factors which disrupt operations are those affecting:

(i)	Records related to the design and delivery of operations for the manager's area of responsibility are complete, accurate and comply with organisational procedures	- supply - operational resources - quality of materials Corrective actions are consistent with organisational policy and within budgetary constraints
(j)	Recommendations for improving the efficiency of operations are passed on to the appropriate people with minimum delay	Note: organisational staffing is covered in Unit 4

Performance Evidence Required:

Evidence must cover all those operations within the area of the manager's responsibility and include the following items from the range:

Supplies are:

materials
equipment
finance
information

Specifications concerning:

supplies
customer requirements (both external and/or other departments requirements)
organisational requirement and methods

the delivery of the operation against formal and informal quality assurance systems used in the organisation over a period of no less than 6 months

communications - external customers and/or other internal departments

factors causing disruption to the operation

Source of Evidence:

Performance in the workplace over a period of time

Forms of Evidence:

- Outputs and products of performance, direct observation, supporting evidence in the form of witness testimony, questioning and a personal report on actions that have or would be undertaken to achieve the standard

- Some aspects of the range and the contingencies implied in the performance criteria may not be sufficiently demonstrated from performance and its outputs alone. Additional evidence of knowledge and understanding will therefore be required

This should include knowledge of the factors which may cause disruption and the appropriate contingency measures to deal with them and an understanding of the basic principles and methods relating to resource utilisation and control and quality assurance.

	Unit 1 Maintain and improve service and product operations	
	Element 1.2 Create and maintain the necessary conditions for productive work	
	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	The work environment is as conducive to work activity as possible	The manager has responsibility for all areas and conditions within his/her line responsibility.
(b)	A sufficient supply of resources of the necessary quality is established and maintained to meet customer requirements	Conditions are those relating to: - work environment - equipment/technology
(c)	Staff working conditions and the use of resources satisfy current legislation and organisational guidelines	- materials Conditions are those for which the manager is legally responsible under the requirements of:
(d)	Maintenance frequency and the use of equipment conform to recommended schedules and procedures	- Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 - Sale of Goods Act 1979
(e)	Where resources do not meet requirements, the matter is referred to the appropriate person	- Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Act 1989 - Factories Act 1961
(f)	Accidents and incidents are reported promptly to the appropriate people and recorded accurately and completely in the relevant documentation	- Offices, Shops and Railway Premises Act 1963 - other relevant acts related to particular occupational activities
(g)	Recommendations for improving conditions are passed on to the appropriate people with minimum delay	Recommendations are made and information passed, to: - immediate manager
(h)	All necessary records are complete, accurate and legible and available to authorised people when required	- subordinates - colleagues, specialists, staff in other departments

Performance Evidence Required:

Evidence must cover all those operations within the area of the manager's responsibility and include the following items from the range:

conditions relating to:

work environment
equipment
technology use and requirements
materials

applications of the legal requirements detailed in the Health and Safety Legislation applicable to the organisation and the area and conditions for which they have line management responsibility

specific organisational requirements and codes of practice

recommendations and information passed to:

immediate manager
subordinates
colleagues
specialists
other departments

Source of Evidence:

Performance in the workplace over a period of time of no less than 6 months

Forms of Evidence:

- Direct observation and/or outputs/products of performance. Supported evidence in the form of witness testimonies and a personal report of action that has or would be undertaken to achieve the standard.

- Some aspects of the range and the contingencies implied in the performance criteria may not be demonstrated sufficiently by the direct evidence alone. Additional evidence of knowledge and understanding of legal and organisational requirements will therefore be required. If this is the case this may include knowledge of the key features of Health and Safety legislation and indications of breaches of health and safety, procedures for reporting accidents and associated responsibilities

	Unit 2 Contribute to the implementation of change in services, products and systems **2.1 Contribute to the evaluation of proposed changes to services, products and systems**	
	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	Feedback from subordinates, customers and users is assessed and passed on together with a reasoned evaluation to the appropriate people	Proposed changes are received from, and information fed back to: - immediate line manager - specialists - subordinates Feedback is gathered: - formally - informally
(b)	Proposals for improvements are passed to the appropriate people with minimum delay	Proposed changes involve: - personnel requirements/team composition - employment/work practices - nature and availability of services and products - quality of services and products
(c)	The advantages and disadvantages of introducing changes are assessed against current operational standards and the information forwarded to the appropriate people	- methods to reduce waste - new equipment/technology - work methods Change may have an impact on: - profitability - productivity - quality of service/product - working conditions

Performance Evidence Required:

Evidence must cover the following items from the range:

evidence of proposed changes made by:
immediate manager
specialists
subordinates

evaluation to include the impact of changes on:
profitability
productivity
quality of service/product
working conditions
work methods

informal and formal feedback to:
immediate manager
specialists
subordinates

Forms of Evidence:

- Performance in the workplace. Supporting evidence in the form of witness testimony from those providing feedback and assessing proposals and a personal report of actions that have or would be undertaken to achieve the standard.

- Some aspects of the range may not be demonstrated sufficiently from direct evidence alone. Additional evidence from assignments and projects which indicate knowledge and understanding of the principles of assessment and evaluation will therefore be required

	Unit 2 Contribute to the implementation of change in services, products and systems	
	2.2 Implement and evaluate changes to services, products and systems	
	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	Relevant details of implementation plans are communicated in a manner, and at a level and pace, appropriate to those concerned and within agreed time scales	Implementation and evaluation is related to all operations within the manager's line responsibility. Changes involve: - personnel requirements/team composition
(b)	Changes in services, products and systems and monitored in accordance with implementation plans and agreed specifications	- employment/work practices - nature and availability of services and products - quality of services and products - methods to reduce waste - new equipment/technology - work methods
(c)	Outcomes of changes are evaluated against expectations and previous service/production records	Information on the effects of change is obtained from: - customers - suppliers - subordinates Outcomes of change are in terms of: - profitability
(d)	Implementation is suitably modified to resolve any problems arising	- productivity - quality of service/product - working conditions - working relationships - reactions of employees Evaluation methods are: - qualitative - quantitative

Performance Evidence Required:

Evidence must cover operations within the manager's line responsibility and include the following items in the range:

information on the effects of change is obtained from:
customers
suppliers
subordinates

implementation and evaluation of change take account of their effect on:
profitability
productivity
quality of service/product
working conditions
working relationships
reactions of employees

must include examples of the qualitative and quantitative analysis methods employed

Forms of Evidence:

- Outputs and products of performance in the form of records and documentation, direct observation. Supporting evidence in the form of witness testimony from those affected by implementation changes and a personal report on actions that have or would be undertaken

- In the absence of sufficient evidence from performance, questioning and assignments or projects could be used to supplement evidence. However these must be based on real work situations and issues and cover a broad span of the differing circumstances and items covered in the range including evaluative and analytical techniques and methods of communicating and handling change.

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	Unit 3 Recommend, monitor and control the use of resources	
	Element 3.1 Make recommendations for expenditure	
	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	Valid internal and external information is used in developing the recommendations	Recommendations are for items of expenditure within the manager's line responsibility
(b)	Appropriate members of staff are encouraged to contribute to the recommendation	Recommendations are made to: - immediate manager - financial specialists Potential benefits from expenditure include: - profitability - productivity
(c)	Recommendations state clearly the net benefits which should be achieved from the expenditure	- productivity - quality of service/product - working conditions Information used in evaluation is:
(d)	Recommendations are presented clearly and concisely in an appropriate format	- directly related to proposed expenditure - readily available within the course of work (e.g. cost from suppliers).
(e)	Recommendations are compared with actual expenditure and used to improve future practice	Recommendations take the form of: - short written reports - verbal briefings

Performance Evidence Required:	Forms of Evidence:
Evidence must cover all those items of expenditure within the manager's line responsibility and include the following items from the range:	• Outputs and products of performance - estimates for expenditure, reports, inventory requests, budget assessments, cash flow projections and verbal briefings, budget/expenditure proposals including detailed analysis of the options relating to the proposals
potential benefits relating to: profitability productivity quality of service/product working conditions	
	• Supporting evidence from witness testimony from appropriate member of staff relevant to developing the case for expenditure and a personal report detailing the actions that have been undertaken to develop the recommendation for expenditure and what would be undertaken
recommendations made informally or formally to immediate managers and specialists	
	• Some aspects of the range may not be sufficiently demonstrated by performance and the products or outputs of performance alone. In these circumstances, additional knowledge and understanding of the application of the basic principles relating to financial analysis including costs/benefit analysis will therefore be required.

	Unit 3 Recommend, monitor and control the use of resources **Element 3.2 Monitor and control the use of resources**	
	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	The contribution each individual can make to the control of resources is communicated in the most effective way	The manager is responsible for the cost awareness of all those within his/her area
(b)	Expenditure is within agreed budgets, does not compromise future spending requirements and conforms to the organisation's procedures	Communication can be either formal or informal through: - conversation - written forms - practical demonstration
(c)	Requests for expenditure outside the manager's responsibility are referred promptly to the appropriate people	Authority for expenditure is exercised within well defined financial limits and may be restricted to specific heads of expenditure (e.g. overtime payments)
(d)	Records of expenditure are complete, accurate and legible	Expenditure outside the manager's area of responsibility will be passed to: - major budget holder /immediate manager - financial specialists
(e)	Recommendations for improving the efficiency of operations are passed on to the appropriate people with minimum delay	The manager authorises expenditure in accordance with the organisation's financial procedures
(f)	Information on costs and resource utilisation is fully assessed, correctly interpreted and effective action taken	The manager monitors activities and acts on the basis of resource utilisation (human, material, capital) Evidence of costs is obtained by: - direct observation of activities (regular/specific)
(g)	Prompt corrective action is taken in response to actual or potential deviations from plans	- written reports - numerical data Plans relate to: - productivity - costs

Performance Evidence Required:	Source of Evidence:
Evidence must cover the control of resources within the manager's area of responsibility and include the following items from the range:	Performance in the workplace, over at least one complete 'budget' cycle.
procedures for authorising expenditure	**Forms of Evidence:**
organisational procedures for monitoring and control of resource utilisation	• Outputs/products of performance e.g. monitoring records, briefing documentation, control systems and reports. Supporting evidence from witness testimony of the formal and informal briefings given on resource control and a personal report based on the actions undertaken to control the use of resources and those that would be undertaken to ensure that control is maintained
the limits of the manager's authority and actions or recommendations made on resource utilisation to: major budget holders immediate manager financial specialists	
methods and sources for obtaining information on costs and expenditure	• In the absence of sufficient evidence from performance and the outputs/products of performance alone, additional evidence of knowledge and understanding of monitoring and control systems and analytical techniques/methods will therefore be required, and must include understanding of the practical issues relating to controlling resources
	• However, if there is insufficient evidence available from actual performance, simulations/projects and case studies based on real work situations designed to elicit a wider knowledge and understanding of analytical skills may be used to supplement the evidence provided

	Unit 4 Contribute to the recruitment and selection of personnel **Element 4.1 Define future personnel requirements**	
	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	The required competences and attributes of individuals and teams, and the inter-relationship between the two, are clearly identified	The requirements cover posts within the line responsibility of the manager which are: - permanent - temporary - full-time - part-time
(b)	Organisational objectives and constraints which will affect staff levels are clearly identified	The activity is carried out: - when requested - on the manager's initiative
(c)	The views of appropriate members of staff are adequately taken into account	Information on future requirements is given to: - higher level managers - personnel specialists
(d)	Estimates of personnel needs are supported by appropriate calculations, where necessary	Analysis is: - quantitative - qualitative
(e)	Information used is current, valid and reliable	Organisational objectives and constraints include: - financial considerations - staff numbers
(f)	Information is presented on time, accurate to the level required and contains the necessary amount of detail	- equal opportunity policy and legislation - qualifications - succession planning

Performance Evidence Required:

- Evidence must cover posts within the line responsibility of the manager and include the following items from the range:

- defining requirement for full and part-time permanent staff and temporary staff when requested and on the manager's own initiative

- recommendations and information passed to higher level managers and personnel specialists

- quantitative and qualitative analysis of personnel requirements against organisational objectives and constraints including financial considerations, staff numbers, equal opportunity policy and legislation

Forms of Evidence:

Products/outputs of performance, supported by witness testimony and a Personal Report detailing actions that had been undertaken to analyse and define personnel requirements

- For competence to be credited, it is preferable that all the evidence is based on actual performance however case studies and realistic simulations could be used to supplement evidence on the amount and types of analysis undertaken

	Unit 4 Contribute to the recruitment and selection of personnel
	Element 4.2 Contribute to the assessment and selection of candidates against team and organisational requirements

	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	Information obtained from each candidate is judged against specified selection criteria and any additional influencing factors are noted	The manager contributes to assessment and selection as a member of a team Assessment and selection are within the line responsibility of the manager for posts which are:
(b)	Where there is difficulty in interpreting the selection criteria or there appears to be a conflict of criteria, advice is sought with minimum delay from the appropriate people	- permanent - temporary - full-time - part-time
(c)	Unintended deviations from agreed procedures are identified and corrected before selection decisions are made	Assessment includes: - use of cvs, letters, references - interviewing (as a member of an interview board) - aptitude and work sample tests
(d)	Selection recommendations are communicated only to authorised people	Recommendations and decisions are communicated: - verbally - in writing
(e)	Records are complete, accurate and clear	Legal requirements to be met are: - Sex Discrimination Acts 1975, 1986 - Race Relations Act 1976
(f)	Recommendations for improvements to any aspect of the selection process are communicated promptly to appropriate people	Influencing factors are: - first impressions of candidate which may be indicative of assessor bias
(g)	Recommendations on the candidate to be selected are justifiable from the evidence gained and the process used	- shared interests which may be irrelevant - disabilities

Performance Evidence Required:	Forms of Evidence:
Evidence must cover those aspects of assessment and selection which are within the line responsibility of the manager and include the following items from the range: • relate to full, part-time permanent and temporary staff • assessment of Cvs, letters and references • interviewing of candidates as a member of an interviewing board • verbal and written recommendations and decision on selection • take account of the legal requirement of Sex Discrimination Acts 1975 and 1986 and the Race Relations Act 1976 and codes of practice, organisational policy and procedures	Outputs and products of performance such as reports, notes of interviews, letters Supporting evidence from witness testimony from other members of interviewing board, line manager and personal report describing actions undertaken and what would have been undertaken Some aspects of the range may not be sufficiently demonstrated by the outputs of performance alone. In these circumstances, questioning may be used to probe underpinning knowledge of the legislation, employment practice, organisational policy and procedures and the advantages and differences in recruitment, processes for temporary, part-time, full-time and permanent staff.

Unit 5 Develop teams, individuals and self to enhance performance		
Element 5.1 Develop and improve teams through planning and activities		

	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	The strengths and weaknesses of the team are identified against current and anticipated work requirements	The activity is carried out with the manager's team and all individuals who form the manager's work team(s) including the manager him/herself
(b)	All individuals within the team are encouraged and assisted to evaluate the team's overall development needs and to contribute to the discussion and planning of how these will be met	The identification of strengths and weaknesses is against: - technical needs - team roles - interpersonal skills
(c)	Any unproductive friction between team members is minimised	Development objectives and activities cover all areas in which the teams are expected to:
(d)	Team building and development plans contain clear, relevant and realistic development objectives for the team as a whole	- produce results - Meet quality standards Development activities include:
(e)	Development activities optimise the use of available resources	- specifically designed work activities - formal training - informal training
(f)	Plans are reviewed, updated and improved at regular intervals after discussion and agreement with the appropriate people	Approval, if required, for the use of resources is sought from: - higher level managers
(g)	Where development activities prove inappropriate and/or the resources used are unsuitable or inadequate, realistic alternatives are discussed, agreed and implemented	- colleagues, specialists, staff in other departments

Performance Evidence Required:

Evidence must cover all items relating to the development of teams and individuals for whom the manager is responsible including him/herself.

- identification of strengths and weaknesses of team, individuals and self against:
  technical needs
  team roles

- development objectives and activities relating to all areas in which the teams are expected to produce results and meet quality standards

- development activities include:
  specifically designed work activities
  formal training
  informal training

- proposals and recommendations for use of resources

Source of Evidence:

Performance in the workplace as a team leader over a period of time

Forms of Evidence:

Outputs/products of performance, direct observation. Supporting evidence from witness testimony from team members, line managers and specialists

- Some aspects of the range may not be sufficiently demonstrated by performance alone. In these circumstances questioning to probe knowledge and understanding of the basic principles and methods of team and individual development will be required

Unit 5 Develop teams, individuals and self to enhance performance

Element 5.2 Identify, review and improve development activities for individuals

	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	Development objectives and activities are based on a balanced assessment of current competence, potential future competence and career aspirations and are in line with current and anticipated team/organisational requirements	The activity is carried out for individuals both: - within the line responsibility of the manager - determined by the organisation but for whom the manager does not have line responsibility e.g. trainees
(b)	Individuals are encouraged and assisted to evaluate their own learning and development needs and to contribute to the discussion, planning and review of development	Identification and review may take place during: - induction - periodic appraisals - after promotion/relocation - in response to particular requests or suggestions
(c)	Plans contain clear, relevant and realistic development objectives and details of supporting development activities	Development objectives and activities cover all areas in which individuals: - need to develop to meet current and potential organisational objectives
(d)	Development activities optimise the use of available resources	- have career aspirations - have a wider personal interest Development activities include: - specifically allocated work activities
(e)	Plans are reviewed, updated and improved at regular intervals after discussion and agreement with the appropriate people	- formal education/training - informal education/training
(f)	Where development activities prove inappropriate and/or the resources used are unsuitable or inadequate, realistic alternatives are discussed, agreed and implemented	Approval, if required, for the use of resources is sought from: - higher level managers - colleagues, specialists, staff in other departments

Performance Evidence Required:

Evidence must cover all the following items from the range:
- development activities for:
  individuals for whom the manager has line responsibility and for those whom the organisation has determined that the manager has responsibility for development e.g.: Trainees

- development objectives and activities relating to areas in which the individuals need to meet current and potential organisational objectives

- development objectives and activities cover areas in which individuals have career aspirations

- development activities include:
  specifically designed work activities
  formal education/training
  informal education/training

- proposals and recommendations to seek approval for use of resources

Source of Evidence:

Performance in the workplace as a team leader over a period of time

Forms of Evidence:

Outputs/products of performance, supporting evidence in the form of witness testimony from individuals and team members, trainees, higher level managers and specialists and personal report detailing actions undertaken

If necessary, in the absence of sufficient evidence from performance work-based assignments may be used to provide additional evidence of knowledge and understanding of the principles of and methods used in:

- identifying, defining and assessing competences

- learning and skill development

- coaching and counselling staff on development needs

- sources of information relating to data on costs and type of training available, its appropriateness and options evaluated

	Unit 5 Develop teams, individuals and self to enhance performance **Element 5.3 Develop oneself within the job role**	
	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	Current competence and areas for development are identified against appropriate competence/development models	The manager is responsible for developing him/herself within the job role. Competence/development models are any which are applicable to the manager's role, such as: - occupational standards - Personal Competence models - other models used in the manager's organisation
(b)	Objectives are achievable, realistic and challenging in terms of current and anticipated competence and updated at regular intervals	
(c)	Where necessary, personal objectives include areas for development which are required for effective team operation	The manager should forecast all those competences which will be required in the foreseeable future for the current role and other jobs to which he/she is, or expects to be, a candidate.
(d)	Sufficient and realistic amounts of time and resources are allocated to achieve set objectives	Development may take place during both: - normal work time - off-duty time
(e)	Progress and performance are reviewed with appropriate people at suitable intervals and results used to inform future development	Development may be through: - specific work assignments - formal education/training - informal education/training
(f)	Responsibility is accepted for achieving own development objectives	Review on progress and performance would take place with: - immediate line manager - personnel/training specialist - mentor - other members of the manager's team
(g)	Feedback is compared with own perceptions of performance and used to improve future performance	Feedback will be: - verbal - non-verbal (e.g.. gestures, facial expression) - written

Performance Evidence Required:

Evidence must cover the following items from the range:

- assessment of development needs against: appropriate occupational standards, personal competence models

- include development within normal work time and off-duty time

- reviews of progress

- nature of development activity undertaken

- verbal and written feedback

Forms of Evidence:

Personal report describing actions undertaken and what would be undertaken for staff development purposes. Supporting evidence to include development plans, documentation from review, records and feedback from reviews and witness testimony from line managers, colleagues, subordinates and specialists.

- Some aspects of the range may not be sufficiently demonstrated by performance alone, in these circumstances, additional knowledge and understanding of the basic principles, methods and techniques relating to self development will therefore be required

	Unit 6 Plan, allocate and evaluate work carried out by teams, individuals and self	
	Element 6.1 Set and update work objectives for teams and individuals	
	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	Objectives are clear, accurate and contain all relevant details including measures of performance	Objectives are all operational objectives within the line responsibility of the manager
(b)	Achievement of the objectives is practicable within the set period given other work commitments	Objectives apply to teams, individuals and the manager him/herself
(c)	Objectives are explained in sufficient detail and in a manner, and at a level and pace appropriate to all the relevant individuals	Objectives are: - short-term - long term - single - multiple
(d)	Objectives are updated regularly with the relevant individuals to take into account individual, team and organisational behaviour	Setting and updating of objectives involve methods of analysis which are: - quantitative - qualitative
(e)	Individuals are encouraged to seek clarification of any areas of which they are unsure	Objectives are explained: - verbally - in writing

Performance Evidence Required:

Evidence must cover all operational objectives within the line responsibility of the manager and include the following items from the range:

- objectives applying to:
  team
  individual
  manager him/herself

- short-term, long-term, single and multiple objectives

- quantitative and qualitative analysis methods used

- verbal and written explanations given

Sources of Evidence

Performance as a team leader in the workplace over a period of time.

Forms of Evidence

Products such as relevant documentation. Direct observation, questioning supported by personal report of action undertaken and why they were undertaken and witness testimony from teams, individuals and line manager.

Some aspects of the range may not be sufficiently demonstrated by performance alone. Additional evidence of knowledge and understanding will therefore be required. This must include the context in which work takes place and the principles and methods relating to: establishing, defining and reviewing objectives and performance measures including project planning, methodology and resource allocation techniques.

Evidence should also include indications of the candidates ability and flexibility in dealing with different situations and individuals and the principal risks and contingent factors affecting objectives.

	Unit 6 Plan, allocate and evaluate work carried out by teams, individuals and self Element 6.2 Plan, allocate and evaluate work carried out by teams, individuals and self	
	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	The degree of direction required by individuals is accurately assessed and used to best effect in overall work planning	Objectives are all operational objectives within the line responsibility of the manager
(b)	Relevant views are sought in a way which encourages each individual to offer suggestions	
(c)	Work methods and activities are consistent with current management priorities, organisational objectives and legal requirements and include opportunities for individual development wherever possible	
(d)	Work methods and activities optimise the use of available material, capital and people	
(e)	Where legal requirements and organisational/development objectives conflict, the problem is identified and advice is sought from the appropriate people	Advice is sought from: - immediate manager - subordinates - colleagues - specialists
(f)	Where possible, decisions on work and methods include suggestions from those involved	
(g)	Agreed work methods and activities are designed to ensure that organisational objectives are achieved	

Performance Evidence Required:	Sources of Evidence
Evidence must cover all those activities and work methods within the line responsibility of the manager and include the following items from the range: • work objectives relating to the team, individuals and oneself • application of legal and organisational requirements and policies relating to activities and work methods • the materials, capital and staff available • evidence of advice sought from: immediate manager subordinates colleagues specialists	Performance in the workplace over a period of time. **Forms of Evidence** Documentation including reports, work plans, schedules and briefing notes. Supporting evidence from witness testimony, questioning to satisfy the "what if" scenarios implied in the performance criteria and personal report to describe actions undertaken and what would be undertaken to meet contingencies. Some aspects of the element and range may not be sufficiently demonstrated by performance alone. Additional evidence of knowledge and understanding covering the use of analytical approaches to assess and optimise the use of resources and the principal risks and contingent factors affecting objectives will therefore be required.

	Unit 6 Plan, allocate and evaluate work carried out by teams, individuals and self
	Element 6.3 Allocate work and evaluate teams, individuals and self against objectives

	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	Allocations optimise the use of resources and the existing competences of staff	Objectives are all operational and developmental objectives within the line responsibility of the manager.
(b)	Team and individual responsibilities and limits of authority are clearly defined and recorded where necessary	Objectives apply during: - induction - projects - normal working
(c)	Where applicable, work activities allocated to individuals provide suitable learning opportunities for the objectives identified in their development plans	Allocations are made to: - teams - individuals - self
(d)	Sufficient information is provided in a manner, and at a level and pace appropriate to the individuals concerned, and they are encouraged to seek clarification of their allocated activities	Operational and developmental objectives are: - short-term - long-term - single - multiple
(e)	Individuals have appropriate access to, and are supervised by, the people best able to satisfy their agreed work and development needs	Information is given: - verbally - in writing
(f)	Calculations are of a type and accuracy appropriate to the scale and importance of the work being allocated and evaluated	Calculations are concerned with: - time - cost
(g)	Where allocations prove to be untenable or unrealistic or organisational demands change, adjustments minimise impact on time and cost	- criticality
(h)	Previous allocations are evaluated and used to improve current practice	

Performance Evidence Required:	Forms of Evidence:
Evidence must cover all operational objectives within the line responsibility of the manager and include the following items from the range:	Personal report detailing actions undertaken and what would be undertaken in differing situations, witness testimony from subordinates and line managers, documentation and reports relating to work allocations.

Performance Evidence Required:

Evidence must cover all operational objectives within the line responsibility of the manager and include the following items from the range:

- objectives apply during:
  induction
  projects
  normal working

- allocations made to:
  teams
  individuals
  self

- short-term, long-term, single and multiple objectives

- verbal and written information is given

- calculations used concerning time, cost and criticality

Forms of Evidence:

Personal report detailing actions undertaken and what would be undertaken in differing situations, witness testimony from subordinates and line managers, documentation and reports relating to work allocations.

If necessary, questioning will be required to provide additional evidence of flexibility and clarity in:

- dealing with and motivating staff

- using different styles of direction and supervision

- coping with changing situations

	Unit 6 Plan, allocate and evaluate work carried out by teams, individuals and self	
	Element 6.4 Provide feedback to teams and individuals on their performance	
	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	Feedback is given in sufficient detail, and in a manner, and at a level and pace, appropriate to the individual(s).	Objectives are all operational and developmental objectives within the line responsibility of the manager
(b)	Feedback to people is given at an appropriate time and place	Feedback is given: - at appraisal points - when required to maintain motivation, morale and effectiveness
(c)	Feedback provides constructive suggestions and encouragement for improving future performance against work and development objectives	- to support learning and development Feedback is provided: - verbally - in writing
(d)	Feedback recognises performance and achievement and encourages individuals to contribute to their own assessment	Operational and developmental objectives are: - short-term - long-term - single - multiple
(e)	Details of any action taken is accurately recorded in line with organisational guidelines	Suggestions for improvement include: - advice - counselling - training/development - re-assignment
(f)	Individuals are encouraged and assisted to make suggestions on how systems/procedures could be improved	Recognition is in the form of: - praise - warnings - promotion - demotion - financial reward (both positive and negative)

Performance Evidence Required:	Forms of Evidence:
Evidence must cover operational and developmental objectives within the line responsibility of the manager and include the following items from the range: • feedback is given to: individuals teams • feedback given: at appraisal points when necessary to maintain motivation and morales and effectiveness to support learning and development • verbal and written explanations and information given including examples of the types of suggestions given to individuals and teams for achieving improvement in performance	Personal report detailing actions undertaken and what would be undertaken in differing situations when positive and negative feedback is given to different individuals and teams. Witness testimony to ascertain clarity of feedback and establish ability to handle confidential or sensitive situations. In the absence of sufficient evidence from performance in the workplace a series of simulations based on real work situations could be used. These may be supplemented by additional evidence of understanding of the basic principles required and practical ways to maintain morale and motivation.

	Unit 7 Create, maintain and enhance effective working relationships

Element 7.1 Establish and maintain the trust and support of one's subordinates

	Performance Criteria	Range Indicators
(a)	Time is taken with subordinates to establish and maintain honest and constructive relationships	Subordinates are all those within the manager's direct line responsibility.
(b)	Subordinates are encouraged to offer ideas and views and due recognition of these is given	Subordinates include: - staff (permanent, temporary, full/part time) - subcontractors - trainees/students placed with the manager's team
(c)	Where ideas are not taken up, the reasons are clearly given	Communication may be instigated by: - the manager - the subordinate
(d)	Subordinates are consulted about proposed activities within an appropriate timescale and encouraged to seek clarification of areas of which they are unsure	Information giving and consultation takes place both: - formally - informally
(e)	Subordinates are sufficiently informed about organisational policy and strategy, progress, emerging threats and opportunities	Information giving and consultation is through the means of: - team meetings
(f)	Promises and undertakings to subordinates are realistic and are honoured	- one-to-one discussions - telephone conversations - written communication
(g)	Subordinates are given appropriate support in any situations which involve people outside the manager's team	
(h)	Where there is concern over the quality of a subordinate's work, the matter is directly raised and discussed with him/her	

Performance Evidence Required:	Forms of Evidence:

Evidence must cover the establishment and maintenance of trust and support of all those within the manager's direct line responsibility and include the following items from the range:
 	
• communications instigated by
  the manager
  the subordinate
 	
• informal and formal information giving and consultation
 	
• Information giving and consultation through the means of:
  team meetings
  one to one discussions
  telephone conversations
  written communications
	Personal report detailing actions undertaken and which would be undertaken when dealing with subordinates in changing situations. Highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of the approaches undertaken. Witness testimonies from subordinates. Supported by action notes, reports and documentation from team meetings and one to one discussions.
	
	In the absence of sufficient evidence from performance alone - additional evidence of knowledge and understanding of the principles and methods relating to:
	
	• establishing constructive working relationships
	
	• informing and consulting staff about proposals and encouraging them to offer ideas and views
	
	providing praise and constructive criticism will be required

Unit 7 Create, maintain and enhance effective working relationships		
Element 7.2 Establish and maintain the trust and support of one's immediate line manager		
	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	Immediate manager is kept informed in an appropriate level of detail about activities, progress, results and achievements	The manager establishes and maintains the trust and support of his/her immediate superior/boss through:
(b)	Information about emerging threats and opportunities is provided clearly and accurately with an appropriate degree of urgency	- meeting the standards required by the post - passing relevant information to his/her immediate manager - seeking relevant information when necessary
(c)	Information and advice about policy and ways of working is sought from the immediate manager at an appropriate time	- not allowing disagreements to affect the working relationship The manager seeks support, where this is necessary for:
(d)	Proposals for action are clearly presented at an appropriate time and with the right level of detail for the degree of change, expenditure and risk involved	- decisions - proposals concerning new courses of action
(e)	Where proposals are rejected the reasons are, wherever possible, identified and, if appropriate, alternative proposals are put forward	Communication may be instigated by: - the manager - the manager's boss
(f)	Where there are disagreements, efforts are made to avoid damaging the relationship with the immediate manager	

Performance Evidence Required:	Forms of Evidence:
Evidence must cover the following items in the range: • support sought an obtained for: decisions proposals concerning new courses of action • feedback given to the immediate manager on current actions, issues and concerns • information sought from immediate manager relating to operational and developmental objectives, working practices and conditions • verbal and written communications instigated by both the parties	Personal report detailing actions undertaken and what would have been undertaken in differing circumstances. Witness testimony and documentation provided by the line mangers e.g. appraisal reports, letters of validation. Questioning to probe for additional evidence on why certain actions and styles of approach were used.

	Unit 7 Create, maintain and enhance effective working relationships	
	Element 7.3 Establish and maintain relationships with colleagues	
	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	Time is taken to establish and maintain honest and constructive relationships with colleagues	Colleagues are those who are not subordinates in the manager's direct line responsibility and with whom the manager works: - closely on a day-to-day basis - occasionally
(b)	Open, honest and friendly behaviour is encouraged	
(c)	Opinions and information are exchanged and shared with colleagues	
(d)	Advice and help are offered with sensitivity	
(e)	Differences of opinion are dealt with in ways which try to avoid offence, and conflicts are resolved in ways that maintain respect	
(f)	Promises and undertakings to others are honoured, taking account of other priorities and commitments	

Performance Evidence Required:

Evidence must cover:

- relationships with colleagues within the manager's organisations
- external contacts
- information exchanged is:
  formal
  informal

Forms of Evidence:

Personal report including a role set showing priority of relationship and actions taken. Witness testimony and documentation.

In the absence of sufficient evidence from performance alone, additional evidence of knowledge and practical applications of the basic principles of net-working and information exchange with particular reference to the handling of confidential information will be required.

	Unit 7 Create, maintain and enhance effective working relationships Element 7.4 Identify and minimise interpersonal conflict	
	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	Staff are informed of expected standards of work and behaviour in a manner, and at a level and pace appropriate to the individual	Conflict is minimised: - to promote effective working relationships - to prevent disciplinary or grievance procedures becoming necessary
(b)	Opportunities for staff to discuss problems which directly or indirectly affect their work are regularly provided	Interpersonal conflict is minimised between individuals and teams: - within the manager's line responsibility
(c)	Potential and actual conflicts between staff are identified promptly and actions are taken to deal with them as soon as practicable	- outside line responsibility where the manager has a clear influence Conflicts are those due to:
(d)	Solutions satisfy legal and organisational requirements	- differences of opinion on courses of action - personal animosity
(e)	Where records of the conflict and outcome are kept, they are accurate, complete and comply with organisational requirements	- racism - sexism - inappropriate personal habits - non-compliance with organisational norms and values Conflict is minimised: - informally - formally

Performance Evidence Required:	Forms of Evidence:
Evidence must cover the working relationships within the manager's line responsibility and include: • formal and informal actions taken to: promote effective working relationships prevent the breakdown of effective working relationships • the application of organisational procedures and practices relating to potential and actual conflict arising from: differences of opinion on courses of action personal animosity racism sexism and other discriminatory behaviour non-compliance with organisational norms and values	Personal report detailing action undertaken and why and what actions would be undertaken in differing situations. Witness testimony from the line manager, subordinates and colleagues. In the absence of sufficient evidence from performance alone, realistic simulations may be used to ascertain evidence of handling the difficult situations and conflicts described in the range. Supporting evidence in the form of questioning to provide evidence of knowledge and understanding of legal requirements, common practice and effective approaches to minimising conflict may also be necessary.

	Unit 7 Create, maintain and enhance effective working relationships Element 7.5 Implement disciplinary and grievance procedures	
	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	Staff are kept appropriately informed of the current procedures	Disciplinary and grievance procedures take place in a framework of: - statutory procedures - organisational procedures (including joint agreements between employers and employees where appropriate)
(b)	Actions meet organisational and legal requirements and are implemented in a manner which demonstrates impartiality	
(c)	Disciplinary and grievance procedures are actioned with minimum delay	Disciplinary procedures may be initiated by: - the manager - higher level managers - personnel specialists
(d)	Recorded details of the proceedings and outcomes are accurate, complete and accessible to authorised people	Grievance procedures may be initiated by: - the manager - the aggrieved person - an employee representative
(e)	Where statutory and organisational requirements conflict, full details are reported and advice sought from the appropriate people	Procedures are carried out in conjunction with: - higher level managers - personnel specialist - individual concerned - staff representative(s)
(f)	Any recommendations for improvement of disciplinary and grievance procedures are passed to the appropriate people	Recommendations for improvement are passed to: - higher level managers - specialists

Performance Evidence Required:	Forms of Evidence:
Evidence must cover:	Personal report detailing actions undertaken and why actions were undertaken. Reports, notes and briefing documentation. Evidence can also be drawn from experience gained as a functional specialist.
• application of disciplinary and grievances procedures in line with: statutory procedures organisational procedures including joint agreements between employers and employees, where appropriate	
• implementation of disciplinary procedures instigated by: the manager higher level managers personnel specialists	In the absence of sufficient evidence from performance alone, realistic simulations appropriate to the manager's responsibility may be used. Case studies and assignments may be used to provide supplementary evidence against specific performance criteria and give a basis for questioning to probe for understanding of basic principles relating to disciplinary and grievances issues; handling difficult situations and knowledge of legal requirements.
• implementation of grievance procedures instigated by: the manager the aggrieved person an employee representative	
• evidence of when and where procedures are carried out in conjunction with higher level manager and personnel specialists	

	Unit 7 Create, maintain and enhance effective working relationships **Element 7.6 Counsel staff**	
	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	Counselling takes place in a private place at a time appropriate to the type, seriousness and complexity of the problem	Counselling is concerned with matters of a personal nature which affect the subordinate's ability to meet work objectives.
(b)	Counselling practices and processes conform to any relevant personnel policies of the organisation	Counselling is initiated by: - the manager - the subordinate concerned Counselling involves: - effective listening
(c)	All discussions with individuals are designed to encourage and assist them to take responsibility for their own decisions and actions	- questioning - discussion Counselling is carried out, depending on the organisational culture:
(d)	In cases where the manager's personal skills and knowledge are insufficient, an appropriate counselling service is recommended to the individual	- informally - formally Counselling services may be: - Personnel Department - Doctor/Health Services personnel
(e)	Individual cases are sufficiently monitored to make sure that a positive outcome is reached	- Social Services - voluntary organisations

Performance Evidence Required:

Evidence must cost the following items of the range:

- counselling relating to matters of a personal nature which affect the subordinates ability to meet work objectives

- informal and formal counselling

- counselling initiated by:
  the manager
  the subordinate concerned

- evidence of any advice sought from and recommendation made to:
  the personnel department
  other specialists

- evidence of the measures taken to ensure confidentiality

Forms of Evidence:

Personal report detailing actions undertaken and what would be undertaken. Witness testimony or documentation if appropriate or available. Evidence may also be drawn from experiences and practices in non-line manager role.

In the absence of sufficient evidence from performance alone supplementary evidence from a non-work context could be used. Realistic simulations can also be used to provide additional evidence of handling difficult situations if necessary. Questioning to be used to establish the manager's knowledge and understanding of the basic principles and methods relating to counselling approaches and techniques.

	Unit 8 Seek, evaluate and organise information for action

Element 8.1 Obtain and evaluate information to aid decision making

	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	Information is sought and updated on all relevant factors and problems which affect the manager's area of responsibility	Information obtained and evaluated relates to: - day to day operations - resourcing - the quality of services and products
(b)	Information collected is relevant and sufficient	- changes in company policy which may affect operations Sources of information include:
(c)	A variety of sources of information are regularly reviewed for usefulness, reliability and cost	- publications (books, newspapers, journals etc.) - television - contacts within the organisation
(d)	Channels and sources of information are used effectively	Information is both: - quantitative - qualitative
(e)	Opportunities are taken to establish and maintain contacts with those who may provide useful information	Information is: - verbal - written - numerical
(f)	Where information is unclear or difficult to understand, clarification and assistance is sought	Appropriate sources for clarification or assistance are: - subordinates - colleagues
(g)	Where information is inadequate, additional information is obtained	- line manager - specialists Decisions are taken:
(h)	Information is assessed for validity and reliability	- personally - by information being forwarded to others in order for them to make a decision
(i)	Information is organised into a suitable form to aide decision-making	Information which is organised into a 'suitable form' for a decision to be made is:
(j)	Conclusions drawn from relevant information are based on reasoned argument and appropriate evidence	- relevant - clear - sufficiently accurate - supplied with the appropriate amount of detail

Performance Evidence Required:	Forms of Evidence:
Evidence must cover information relevant to the manager's role, department, team and organisational policy and practice and include the following items from the range:	Personal report indicating actions taken, reflection, review and planning involved, supported by reports, data sheets, print-outs, records, spreadsheets. This may be drawn from experience and practice in a non-managerial role.

Evidence must cover information relevant to the manager's role, department, team and organisational policy and practice and include the following items from the range:

- information obtained and evaluated relates to:
  day to day operations
  resourcing
  the quality of services and products
  changes in company policy which may affect operations

- evidence of evaluation processes used

- information recorded and stored is:
  verbal
  written
  numerical

- evidence that sources for clarification and assistance have been used including:
  subordinates
  colleagues
  line manager
  specialists

- evidence that information is relevant, clear, sufficiently accurate and supplied in the amount of detail needed to assist in decision making

Personal report indicating actions taken, reflection, review and planning involved, supported by reports, data sheets, print-outs, records, spreadsheets. This may be drawn from experience and practice in a non-managerial role.

In the absence of sufficient evidence from performance alone, additional evidence of knowledge and understanding of the principles and methods relating to the following will be required:

- assessing and evaluating information in terms of relevance, reliability, sufficiency

- organising and presenting information

- the legal requirements relating to obtaining and holding information

	Unit 8 Seek, evaluate and organise information for action
	Element 8.2 Record and store information

	Performance Criteria	Range Indicators
(a)	Information recorded is accurate, complete and legible	The manager records, stores and retrieves information relevant to his/her department/team.
(b)	Information is recorded and stored using accepted formats, systems and procedures	Recording, storage and retrieval are both: - manual
(c)	Information can be retrieved promptly when required	- electronic Information can be retrieved by:
(d)	New methods of recording and storing information are suggested/introduced as needed	- the manager - immediate line manager - other authorised people

Performance Evidence Required:

Evidence must cover information which is relevant to the manager's department and team and be relevant to the unit as a whole and include the following items of the range:

- evidence of the systems and methods used to record, store and retrieve information, both manual and electronic

- evidence concerning the accessibility of the information to:
  the manager
  his/her immediate manager
  other authorised people

- application of the relevant items of legislation and organisational rules to recording, storing and supplying information.

Forms of Evidence:

Reports, printouts and products from information technology applications, schedules and documentation produced by the manager, supplemented by a personal report detailing actions undertaken.

In the absence of sufficient evidence from performance alone, questioning can be used to obtain additional evidence of knowledge and understanding related to the practical application of manual and computerised information storage and retrieval systems.

	Unit 9 Exchange information to solve problems and make decisions Element 9.1 Lead meetings and group discussions to solve problems and make decisions	
	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	A suitable number of people appropriate to the context and purpose of the meeting are invited and attend	Meetings and group discussions led by the manager involve: - discussion of alternatives - group decision-making - consultation
(b)	The purpose of the meeting is clearly established with other group members at the outset	Problems analysed are to do with operations within the manager's line responsibility.
(c)	Information and summaries are presented clearly, at an appropriate time	Meetings are informal and usually characterised by the lack of detailed minutes, rules of procedure or standing orders.
(d)	Style of leadership helps group members to contribute fully	Those present at the meetings/discussions are other members of the manager's team.
(e)	Unhelpful arguments and digressions are effectively discouraged	
(f)	Any decisions taken fall within the group's authority	
(g)	Decisions are recorded accurately and passed on as necessary to the appropriate people	

Performance Evidence Required:	Forms of Evidence:
Evidence must cover meetings and discussions led by the manager and include the following items from the range: • meetings involving: discussion of alternatives group decision making consultation • evidence of analysis of problems to do with operations within the manager's line responsibility • evidence from informal and formal meetings	Documentation from meetings such as minutes and action notes. Personal report detailing actions undertaken and reasons for such actions. Extensive witness testimony from subordinates, teams and regular attendees at meetings. In the absence of sufficient evidence from performance alone, additional evidence of knowledge and understanding of the basic principles and methods will therefore be required. These relate to: • assessing information for relevance, reliability, sufficiency and implications • managing group discussions • summarising and clarifying discussions to assist progress • Informing and consulting others about problems and proposals and encouraging them to offer ideas, views • handling disagreements and conflicting views

	Unit 9 Exchange information to solve problems and make decisions Element 9.2 Contribute to discussions to solve problems and make decisions	
	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	Preparation is sufficient to make a useful contribution to the discussion	The manager contributes to meetings (with one or more people) which are: - informal - formal Decisions are for the purposes of: - exchanging views - making decisions - making recommendations Others involved in the discussions are: - higher level managers - colleagues, specialists, staff from other departments - suppliers - customers - representatives of other organisations Issues to be resolved will include: - conflict of interest - trade-offs
(b)	The manager's contributions are presented clearly, accurately and at an appropriate time	
(c)	The manager's contributions are directed at clarifying problems and identifying and addressing solutions	
(d)	Contributions from, and viewpoints of, others are acknowledged and discussed constructively	
(e)	Any appropriate department/team views are represented effectively	

Performance Evidence Required:	Forms of Evidence:
Evidence must cover the following items from the range: • informal and formal discussions • discussions for the purposes of: exchanging views making decisions making recommendations • evidence of discussions to solve problems and make decisions with: higher level managers colleagues, specialists and staff from other departments suppliers customers representatives of other organisations	Evidence of the manager's contribution to the meeting gained from extensive witness testimony, documentation relating to the meeting such as minutes and action notes. In the absence of sufficient evidence from performance alone, questioning may be used to elucidate the rationale for the approach taken by the manager and additional evidence of knowledge and understanding of the principles, methods and practical ways of organising and presenting information in a constructive manner.

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	Unit 9 Exchange information to solve problems and make decisions	
	Element 9.3 Advise and inform others	
	Performance Criteria	**Range Indicators**
(a)	Advice and information to aid and assist others is offered and disseminated at an appropriate time and place	Advice and information is offered: - proactively with the manager taking the initiative - on request
(b)	Information given is current, relevant and accurate	Advice is based on: - knowledge - expertise - experience - position in the organisation
(c)	Information is presented in a manner, and at a level and pace appropriate to the receiver	Advice and information is given to: - immediate manager - colleagues, specialists, staff in other departments - customers - suppliers
(d)	Advice is consistent with organisational policy and cost and resource constraints	
(e)	Advice is supported, as appropriate, by reasoned argument and evidence	Advice and information is given: - verbally (either one to one or in groups) - in writing

Performance Evidence Required:

Evidence must cover the following items from the range:

- advice and information offered proactively with the manager taking the initiative

- advise and information given verbally and in writing

- evidence of advise and information give to:
  the immediate manager
  colleagues, specialists and staff in other departments
  customers
  suppliers

Forms of Evidence:

Reports, manuals, news-sheets, articles, videos and audio/visual materials: supported by extensive witness testimony from line managers, colleagues, subordinates, customers and suppliers. This may be drawn from experiences and practices in a role as advisor to decision makers.

In the absence of sufficient evidence from performance alone, personal test/simulations or questioning to be used to gain additional evidence of presentational skills and understanding of the principles, methods relating to:

- seeking and exchanging information, advice and support

- organising and presenting information

- presenting a logical and clear argument which addresses the needs and priorities of recipients in a variety of situations

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