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# 1

## Beyond Skill – An Introduction

*Jane Bryson*

This book discusses things of importance to many of us: work, employment, pay, work environments, learning, participation and voice. It discusses the impact of government policy, other institutional arrangements, organisational practices, collective and individual behaviour, on all these things. The chapters in this book are based on a series of invited papers given at an International Symposium on ‘Developing human capability, in and for, the workplace’, in June 2008 at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. This symposium marked the end of a five year research programme investigating the impact of institutions, organisations and individuals on the development of human capability. The core task of the book is to critically analyse recent policy and practice pertaining to work and skills. It does this from a variety of perspectives, and it introduces (in Chapters 2 and 10) the concept of human capability as a way to constructively reorient our considerations of work, skill, and productive societies.

### **Why move beyond skill?**

Labour market, work and economic development policy visions in many developed countries have been dominated in recent years by a fixation on skills. However, skill and skill development alone is not enough to harmonise societies, transform economies, galvanise organisations, and fulfil individual aspirations.

The whole notion of skill has become fraught. In recent years discussions of skill have experienced both a broadening and a narrowing of focus. On the one hand new institutional meanings of skill

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have extended to, for example, aesthetic skills (e.g., the skill of looking good) particularly in the service sector, and a greater emphasis on soft skills (interpersonal) over technical skills (see Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). On the other hand there has been a narrowing of policy views on skill acquisition, for instance that it largely occurs through training episodes or formal qualifications. This view fails to acknowledge that skills, knowledge and other attributes are also developed by 'doing', that is through the performance of work and engagement with the work environment and the design of the work (see Eraut and Hirsh, 2007).

The skill narrative tends to reduce discussion to short-term actions (training, recognition of prior learning, employer determined competency frameworks) but does not clarify policy objectives. Skill, whilst important, distracts attention from a more complex bigger picture. That picture includes society as whole, the place and aspiration of the individual (and groups) within it, the role of work and employment, and the influence of capitalist and democratic institutions. Thus reality is far more complex than the somewhat linear vision of the high skill pathway.

### **Challenges of moving beyond current notions of skill**

We live in societies, not just economies. We aspire to live lives we have reason to value, that is to be capable humans not just skill sets for the workplace. This bigger picture has been the traditional concern of academic debate. Philosophers, political economists, sociologists, and others (from Marx and Weber to Giddens and Sen) have reflected and theorised on the connections between humans, work, society and well-being. The academic and policy challenge in moving beyond current notions is, as it has always been, to generate better or different understanding of the settings in which we operate.

Our current settings also present challenges. Globalisation, mobility and migration, have made our communities and economies more complex. In many developed countries changes to collective bargaining (such as: lower coverage, decreased union density) and minimum employment standards, and changed modes of employment (such as: non-standard, low paid, precarious, contractors and non-employees) have undermined more traditional views of citizenship and industrial citizenship (Fudge, 2005). As a result some have observed tension in

developed economies between ‘the promise of citizenship equality and the harsh inequalities generated by capitalist markets’ (Brodie, 2002, cited in Fudge, 2005, p.635). There are two recent examples of attempts to rethink the big picture in order to respond to growing tensions. One is work in the European Union (EU) which links human capabilities, economic policy and social policy (see Salais and Ville-neuve, 2004). The EU work drew on the human capability approach of Amartya Sen, and likewise in this volume Bryson and O’Neil and the research project they report (Chapters 2 and 10) employ capability to reconfigure understandings. The second example is the skills eco-systems approach. First explored by Finegold (1999) this approach acknowledges the broader institutional context and the inter-dependency of a network of factors that underpin business success. It’s starting point and central focus is skill and workforce development across an industry or region. Buchanan et al (2001) recommended adopting a skills ecosystem approach in Australia, noting that ‘policy on work and skills needs to be repositioned. While skills are not “the answer”, there can be “no answer” without skills...this requires opening up the policy system...and accommodating the “cross-cutting” character of policy initiatives on work and skill’ (p.1). In Chapter 3 of this volume Buchanan and Jakubauskas revisit skill eco-systems in the light of the developing human capability research.

### **Beyond skill**

The chapters in this book take the debate and critical analysis another significant step forward by: i) looking beyond current notions of skill, and ii) acknowledging the complex interaction of institutions, organisations and individual behaviour in shaping our societies, workplaces and ourselves. The chapters report new research from New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States of America. They provide a series of insights to the complexity of creating work institutions which allow people to be capable.

In particular several chapters introduce and explore the notion of developing human capability. Human capability, described by Sen (1999) as the ability to lead lives we value and have reason to value, provides a much needed counterpoint to the largely organisationally instrumental and human capital assumptions that have dominated debates on work and skills. Workplaces, employers and workers are complex and unique, but all exist within a larger social system. This

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collection of chapters reflects on the complex range of influences on experiences of employment impacting on human capability. Connections are drawn between government policy, institutions, organisational practices and individual experiences.

Whilst acknowledging the high skills visions of economic development favoured by many western economies, this book takes a critical stance reporting on practical issues encountered by employers and workers in pursuing this vision. It also takes a broader alternative view by connecting to notions of human capability and by exploring the range of influences on societal, organisational and individual outcomes.

The lot of today's worker is not just a function of acknowledged or accredited skill, but is a complex mix of institutional arrangements, organisational strategies and practices, and human responses. Hence the book is organised in three parts.

Part I comprises chapters which address a range of institutional influences and workplace effects. The first of these, Chapter 2 (Bryson and O'Neil), draws on the work of Sen to introduce the concept of human capability for use in reconfiguring prevailing views of skill and work. Sen's (1999) original formulation of the capability approach provided a different way to examine economic development in developing countries. This approach placed positive freedoms and the capabilities to function at the centre of analysis and policy consideration rather than economic outcomes. As Bryson and O'Neil point out, translating this approach to the world of work permits a systemic analysis of the impact of the social arrangements which facilitate or constrain human capability development. In addition, significantly, it reorients focus onto human capability – how people can achieve lives of value to them – (for instance, as citizens, community members, workers or family members).

Drawing on several recent large scale Australian studies John Buchanan and Michelle Jakubauskas in Chapter 3 reflect on changing conditions of labour supply and demand, and processes of matching them. They use the concepts of transitional labour markets and of skill eco-systems to aid this reflection. They combine their insights with those of the Developing Human Capability framework (Chapter 10), in particular the observation in the framework that 'good people are (often) custodians of bad policy/practice'. In conclusion they propose a reconceptualisation of occupation and vocational streams as public goods which may provide a better way to aid human flourishing.

In Chapter 4 Ken Mayhew reports on research examining low end work in five European countries – the UK, France, Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands. He discusses major differences between these countries and also America. He shows how the dismantling of various institutional protections in the 1980s stimulated the growth of low paid work in the United Kingdom. Comparison to changing practices in other countries provides convincing evidence that the differences in their low pay profiles are due to the nature of their pay setting institutions. Mayhew also explores the role of skill acquisition in ameliorating misfortune in the labour market.

In Chapter 5 Paul Spoonley explores the impact of the significant growth in various forms of non-standard work. Using the New Zealand context he examines the changing institutions that have underpinned and reflected this growth, for example, changes in: labour markets, labour market engagement, employment contracts, and the organisation of the labour process.

The chapters in Part II focus on organisational influences and individual effects. The first of these, Chapter 6 by Ewart Keep, reports on workplace learning research and its implications for national skills policies across the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Keep reflects on recent research acknowledging the embeddedness of learning in workplace practices, hence the complex connection between good jobs, good learning and positive economic performance, rather than an overly simplistic path between qualifications and economic growth. In the final analysis he concludes that recognising this complexity suggests the need for a more holistic approach which reconnects skills policy with employment relations policy.

Moving further into the ‘black box’ of the organisation Boxall and Macky in Chapter 7 investigate high performance work systems and employee well-being. They discuss the issues associated with assessing organisational performance and with quantifying the managerial practices of high performance work systems (HPWSs). They note that some of the HPWSs lauded in the US are basic institutional requirements in other countries (for example through labour laws or policies), and thus in those countries they are not recognised as sources of high performance. They argue for greater emphasis on high involvement work processes and report on research in New Zealand workplaces looking at worker responses to such processes. Central to worker experiences are good reported levels of empowerment but these are

not matched by their experiences of information, rewards and training.

In Chapter 8 Paul Dalziel examines employer-led channels for helping young people make good education to employment linkages. The chapter reviews economics literature in the area, and in particular recent research which has adopted dynamic choice modelling techniques to understand youth transition. It also introduces research into education employment linkages that Dalziel and his team will be conducting over the next few years. Key to that research programme is the recognition that young people do not make a single, static career choice at one point in time. Rather, that decisions change, are sequential, and are influenced by information available and other factors. Young people are in the process of discovering capabilities, discovering the things they value, the lives they do and don't want to lead. Dalziel comments on potential weaknesses in the employer-led channels in New Zealand's system of helping young people make good education employment linkages.

Leda Blackwood in Chapter 9 provides a social psychological perspective on workers and their capability as expressed in collectives such as through trade union membership. The chapter highlights the individualised nature of discourse around workers, and the employment relationship. In particular she argues that the dynamic interactions between individuals, organisations, and the institutions that structure the employment relationship give rise to our aspirational goals and so to the requisite capabilities. She challenges the thinking about the role of unions in developing human capability, both at work and in society.

Part III presents the final chapter concluding discussions on developing human capability. Chapter 10 by Jane Bryson and Paul O'Neil reports on the findings of empirical research into the conditions for the optimal development of human capability in New Zealand workplaces. The analysis of these findings operationalises Sen's capability approach in a framework aimed to assist workplace practitioners in shaping social arrangements which develop human capability. It also serves to remind us that skill and work are just one, albeit important, part of the fabric of our lives as capable humans.

Individually these chapters each tell an interesting story. Collectively the themes they have in common are far more powerful. First, they demonstrate the importance of institutions – and not single insti-



tutions but the multiple overlapping regulations, policies, practices, customs and habits. How the labour market and work environments are regulated matters (refer Buchanan Chapter 3, Mayhew Chapter 4, Spoonley Chapter 5). Second, the specific strategies and practices of industries, organisations, and unions, also matter. And finally, the practices and behaviour of managers, supervisors, and workers matter – they impact work environments, aspirations and opportunities (refer Keep Chapter 6, Bryson and O’Neil Chapter 10).

Indeed, the time is ripe to move beyond skill to envision societies that enhance human capability.

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Early accounts identified institutional effects as concerned principally with social stability, drawing attention to reproductive processes that function as stable patterns for sequences of activities that were routinely enacted (Jepperson, 1991:144-145). Institutionalization was defined in terms of the processes by which such a practice in the field of employment regulation and workplace rights. This attention to internal influences and the heterogeneity of responses increased concern with the role of agency in institutionalization. It also heightened recognition that institutionalization is a political process, and the success of the process and the form it takes depends on the relative power of the actors who strive to steer it, as DiMaggio argued in 1988. IMF Working Paper Monetary and Capital Markets Department. Towards Effective Macroprudential Policy Frameworks: An Assessment of Stylized Institutional Models. Prepared by Erlend W. Nier, Jacek Osiński, Luis I. Jácome, and Pamela Madrid. Authorized for distribution by Jan Brockmeijer. November 2011. A number of countries are reviewing their institutional arrangements for financial stability to support the development of a macroprudential policy function. In some cases, this involves a rethink of the appropriate institutional boundaries between central banks and financial regulatory agencies, or the setting up of dedicated policymaking committees. In others, efforts are underway to enhance cooperation within the existing institutional structure. Only RUB 220.84/month. Chapter 9: Power and Influence in the Workplace. STUDY. Flashcards. inoculation effect. a persuasive communication strategy of warning listeners that others will try to influence them in the future and that they should be wary about the opponent's arguments. legitimate power. an agreement among organizational members that people in certain roles can request certain behaviors of others.