

Issues Paper 1

October 2004

The changing meaning of skill

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Summary

The paper highlights a few of the changes that have taken place in the meaning of skill as it relates to the employment context in the UK over the last two decades. It then explores some of the implications for academics, policy makers and practitioners.

Introduction

'Skill' has always been a somewhat slippery concept. In the past, however, skill seemed a much simpler matter than it does today. In the workplace at least, skill tended to be equated with the 'hard' technical abilities and 'know-how' of the skilled manufacturing worker or the analytical capacities of the scientist or technician. Being a skilled worker usually meant some control over one's work, better pay and more secure employment. Today, 'skill' is altogether more baffling. There are 'soft' and 'hard' skills, skills that are 'generic' and 'transferable', interpersonal skills, customer handling skills, emotional skills, aesthetic skills; even certain forms of behaviour such as motivation and discipline now acquire the label 'skills'. Almost everything it would seem is a skill from thinking and problem solving to the ability to smile. The partial transformation that has taken place in the UK in the way that skill is conceptualised and defined has serious implications and is a matter of real importance for policy makers, practitioners and academics. Exploring the new meaning of skill and its implications constitutes, therefore, a central and ongoing strand within SKOPE's research agenda.

between now and 2010 (Frontier Economics, 2005). The magnitude of the likely shortfall against this PSA target provides a strong incentive for the state to intervene further in the training market, but this time ostensibly on the demand side.

The rise of generic skills

One important change has been the rise of so-called 'transferable', 'generic', 'core' or 'key' skills. These are seen as having a wide application across different organisational and employment contexts as well as offering a universal basis for success in the labour market. The exact list of these skills has varied over time with different bodies assembling their own preferred 'check lists'. For instance, the National Skills Task Force chose to group under generic skills not merely the six key skills originally developed by the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) - communication, application of number, IT, team working, improving own learning and performance, and problem solving - but also 'such additional transferable skills as employers may need over time'. The Confederation of British Industry in its 1989 report on youth training also referred to such things as 'values and integrity' and 'positive attitudes towards change'.

While the existence of generic skills is now widely used as a basis for UK vocational education and training (VET) policy, this development has not been unproblematic. Although some of these skills might be considered 'hard' or technical (e.g. numeracy, IT) and relatively easy to measure and test, this is not true of many of the 'softer' skills such as problem solving and team working. Because these skills are not amenable to simple and rigorous assessment in the form of written tests, their importance has tended to be downplayed within curriculum reforms as well as the work-based route, particularly Modern Apprenticeships. Although policy makers have embraced the new meaning of skill, this has created challenges for those wishing to manage the VET system through setting numerical targets that rely mainly on forms of certification which are not able to capture the full range of skills employers now say they want and need.

Personal attitudes and attributes

As Keep and Mayhew (1999) argue, one of the most fundamental changes has been the tendency, by both employers and policy makers, to re-label as skills what in the past would have been seen as personal characteristics, attitudes, character traits, or predispositions. Examples include leadership, motivation and positive attitudes towards change and authority. While debate rages over whether these things really are skills, there is no doubting that employers want them and that this has major implications for policy makers.

New conceptual frameworks for thinking about skill

As Payne (1999) argues, it was the experience of mass unemployment, particularly youth unemployment in the 1980s and 1990s, which began to colour official conceptions in the UK of the skills required in the labour market. Starting out from the premise that unemployed youth lacked the personal qualities that employers were looking for, new conceptual frameworks were developed that began to transform the way in which skill was understood. Perhaps the most influential in terms of theory and practice in the UK has been the notion of competence, particularly as it came to be embodied in the development of National Vocational Qualifications in the 1980s.

Competence-based approaches in the UK have left two abiding legacies in terms of the way skill is visualised. First, they have encouraged an Anglo-Saxon 'practical man' approach to skill that tends to neglect the importance of underpinning knowledge and theory. NVOs, as originally specified, assumed that the ability to accurately perform a particular work task was itself proof that the trainee had already acquired the necessary understanding. The result has been a tendency to design relatively narrow training courses and qualifications, with core/key skills often acting as a substitute for the broad general education normally available within European vocational programmes. The second legacy has been to stress the universality and transferability of competencies, the assumption being that these are generic and can be demonstrated regardless of the wider organisational context. However, it is open to question how generic many 'generic skills' really are. If we take problem solving, for example, the ability to solve any given problem, beyond the most simple, relies on expertise and specialist bodies of knowledge. At the same, it can be argued that their development and productive application takes place within specific work environments and cultures and is bound up with particular routines, procedures and 'ways of doing things'. This suggests that many higher order work skills are likely to contain a firm or company-specific element, with the workplace remaining the primary location for their creation and development.

Aesthetic and emotional labour

A further development which affects the meaning of skill is the emergence of emotional and aesthetic labour in interactive service work. Emotional labour refers to the ability to manage one's own and other's feelings when interacting with customers and clients and can be found in a diverse range of workplaces from call centres to investment banks. Aesthetic labour is broader and includes things like body language, dress sense, grooming, deportment, voice/accent, body shape, demeanour and general stylishness - the new 'aesthetic skills'

which are said to be at a premium within 'up-market' segments of the service economy. Here, it is the embodied attributes of the bar staff or sales assistant that helps make the service being offered 'trendy' or stylish. Research undertaken by colleagues from the Scottish Centre for Employment Research at the University of Strathclyde, and partly funded by SKOPE, indicates a high level of demand for such 'skills' both in the 'style' and 'non-style' retail and hospitality industries of Glasgow - a trend that is likely to be true of other British cities (Nickson et al 2004).

The reinforcement of middle-class advantage

While 'looking good and sounding right' has long been a feature of many people's employment, Nickson et al (2004) conclude that 'aesthetic skills' are fast becoming a 'key skill required for work and employment in interactive service work'. Moreover, those in possession of such characteristics are likely to be at a distinct advantage in the recruitment and selection process relative to those who lack them. Many of these 'skills', such as deportment and accent for instance, can also be linked to social class, family socialisation and educational background. As these skills become increasingly important in the 'up-market' service economy, those from less privileged backgrounds may find themselves at a disadvantage when competing for such jobs with applicants from more middle-class backgrounds. There is the danger, therefore, that the labour market could become even more polarised along class lines than at present. This is recognised by Nickson et al (2004) who suggest that 'self-presentational' skills should become an integral part of training for the long-term unemployed and school leavers entering the labour market for the first time.

We are all skilled now

There is the possibility that as the meaning of skill expands so the presumed skill content of jobs may be artificially inflated. Thus, the sales assistant at an out-of-town DIY store who has learnt to scan a barcode and smile for and be polite to the customer may be said to have acquired new IT and customer service skills. This can be counted as up-skilling even though the worker may now have less need for mental arithmetic than when the old-fashioned electro-mechanical till was still in operation and the customers' change had to be worked out. The changing meaning of skill may, therefore, give the impression that some jobs are becoming more skilled when in fact they may not be (see Payne 2000, Keep 2002).

To some extent, this process may also have an up-side. There is the possibility that some low status jobs, many of them held by women, can have their skills recognised and valued. Some argue that emotional labour, instead of being dismissed as 'personal attributes', can be re-evaluated as a form of skilled work

with front-line service workers recognised as being polyvalent emotion managers. However, as Keep (2002) notes, this does not mean that these jobs will be better paid or that their status in the occupational hierarchy will change. Others have argued that with discipline and respect for authority sometimes being labelled as skills, the concept itself becomes virtually meaningless with no possibility of defining a class of unskilled occupations (Lafer 2004).

'Soft skills' may be changing and becoming more important in a service-based economy but it is vital not to lose track of what is happening to technical skills. In practice, many forms of work will require employees to exercise both. One issue for research, however, is the extent to which an emphasis on customer focus can lead to 'soft', interpersonal skills being valued at the expense of technical skills and knowledge. It is one thing, for example, to have a 'bubbly' and 'friendly' fitness instructor but this may not be enough if they lack the knowledge base and end up giving the wrong advice to someone with a bad back or a 'dodgy knee'. Some of these issues are currently being addressed in work by Dr. Caroline Lloyd of SKOPE looking specifically at the UK leisure and fitness industry (see Lloyd 2003).

Shifting the burden and cost of learning onto education and the state

The changing meaning of skill to include attitudes and attributes that can then be labelled generic also makes it easier to shift responsibility for their creation onto the education system. Since the 1970s, employers have made considerable headway in persuading government and public opinion that schools, colleges and universities should do more to prepare young people for working life. This shift has occurred at a time when pre-existing forms of skills acquisition and structured socialisation into the workplace, such as apprenticeships and graduate training programmes, have been pruned back to save costs.

The belief that the education system can supply 'oven ready' school leavers or graduates equipped with the skills 'to hit the ground running' on entry into the workplace is not without its problems. Skills, such as problem solving and team working, may be generic at a very general level, but, as noted previously, their development and usage takes place within specific work environments and cultures. Asking schools, colleges and universities to pre-socialise students for entry into a multitude of different work contexts may therefore be to present them with a mission impossible.

Much the same conclusion applies to the tendency to regard 'motivation' as a skill that the education system ought to be developing in those about to enter the workplace. In the past, whether someone was motivated at work might have been seen to reflect matters such as the nature of the job, the level of remuneration and the way in which they were managed. Today, the focus of responsibility has shifted away from the workplace and managers, with schools,

colleges and universities increasingly expected to equip students with the appropriate skills and attitudes for work. This shift has to be seen in the context of the failure of many UK employers to adopt 'modern management practices', alongside mounting research evidence suggesting that highly routine, relatively low skill jobs, offering very limited opportunities for creativity and discretion, remain prevalent in the UK economy (Keep 2002).

Conclusion

The broadening definition of skill presents UK policy makers with a host of difficult issues to grapple with. How are these new 'skills' to be taught, measured and assessed? Can they be adequately captured within national learning targets, and what are the wider implications for a model of policy making in the UK that obsesses about boosting the output of qualifications and seeks to reduce skills to simple units that can be tested and certified? Designing training interventions to equip trainees with many of these so-called new skills also raises serious ethical, moral and political issues. Equipping the unemployed with 'skills' such as motivation, the ability to cooperate and respect for authority in preparation for low skill, low wage, 'dead-end' jobs may be seen as tantamount to socialising people simply to 'accept their lot' (Lafer 2004).

Including aesthetic skills as part of the VET agenda is also contentious. Is this a way of equipping the socially disadvantaged with the self-confidence and presentational skills necessary to 'get in and get on' in the labour market, and, therefore, an ethical imperative? Or, alternatively, is this a form of social engineering, a slippery slope whereby the whole 'self' eventually becomes a target for intervention, manipulation and control? Nickson et al (2004) suggest the former, calling for 'sensible and pragmatic' responses that enable people to consider how they present themselves to employers. Even if one accepts the case for such training in aesthetic skills, it is open to question how effective this will be. While it may be possible to teach general self-presentation skills to the unemployed, different employers (and customers for that matter) are likely to have very different views of what constitutes 'stylishness' for example. Furthermore, training of this kind may not be enough if what 'up-market' employers are really seeking is proxies for middle classness and can recruit 'the real thing' in the form of students looking to pay their way through an expanded higher education system. Exploring the way changes in employers' recruitment strategies have the potential to reinforce the advantage of certain social groups in the labour market is a development which SKOPE will seek to address more fully in its future research programme.

Finally, one of the underlying issues running through debates on the changing meaning of skill over the last twenty years is the extent to which skills can be viewed as generic or firm specific. Drawing a clear distinction between them can, however, be problematic. Many generic skills are likely to contain a firm-

specific element. Recognising this is important because it raises issues about the extent to which such skills can be created within the education system as opposed to within the firm. There is a need for clarity in determining what can legitimately be expected of the education system in terms of up-skilling the UK workforce, and where the balance of responsibility should lie as between education and employers. So far a serious public debate around this issue has been lacking in the UK.

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