

Skill in the Job

Ask anyone what they mean by skill and most of the time the answer you will receive will focus on the individual and their abilities, competence, expertise, experience, qualifications or training. Such descriptions cannot be faulted. Skill is indeed about individual expertise and experience and economists do measure it through qualifications and training. But that is not the whole story. Skill is also present in the job a person does.

Take McDonald's. One of the most widely known, and successful, fast food companies in the world. They compete on the basis that a Big Mac bought in Madrid should be identical to one bought in Manchester, or Munich, or Milwaukee. As a result, they attempt to remove every last vestige of skill, discretion or decision making from the employees who make the Big Macs. McDonald's famously and relentlessly standardise every aspect of their product. The Operations and Training Manual (known to staff as "the Bible") provides detailed prescriptions for every aspect of working life. Its 600 pages include full colour photographs illustrating the proper placement of ketchup, mustard and pickle on every type of burger, set out the six steps of counter service and even prescribe the arm motions that should be used in salting a batch of fries. Kitchen and counter technology reinforce these instructions as lights and buzzers tell workers when to turn burgers or take fries out of the fat, ketchup dispensers provide measured amounts of product in the requisite 'flower' pattern and lights on the till remove the need for serving staff to write out orders as well as prompting them to offer additional items (Leidner 1993; Ritzer 1996; Royle 2000).

So working in McDonald's involves following orders. Staff are not expected to know about food, storage, local labour market conditions or advertising. They are expected to know what the rules are. Contrast this with a chef running their own restaurant. He or she may select meat and groceries and choose from a range of different suppliers. They may devise their own recipes and use their professional judgement to decide when meat has been cooked or a sauce is ready to be served. They may choose who to hire to work with them, write choice and appetising descriptions of meals on the menu and advertise their services as widely as possible. Yet put an experienced chef into a McDonald's kitchen and the rules would prevent them using these skills.

Why does this matter? Surely it is up to each organisation to decide the basis on which they want to compete (and each individual worker to decide whether they wish to work in that way). Yes, at one level it is. But one of the British government's ambitions is to change the way the country competes, to reduce the numbers of people engaged in low-skilled work and become a 'knowledge economy' with a well-paid and highly skilled workforce undertaking interesting and challenging tasks to produce high spec, customised goods. In order to achieve this it has been putting considerable resources into both education and vocational education and training. Much of this has been successful. The number of people with qualifications has risen dramatically (Felstead et al. 2007). But has this increase in the *supply* of skills also caused an increase in the *demand* for skills or do firm-level decisions to increase control and reduce discretion mean that the rising levels of qualifications are irrelevant?

This is a problem. Governments of all political persuasions find it difficult to tackle what goes on *inside* firms (all now seem to believe that this should be left to the invisible hand of the market) whereas it is easy, and laudable, to encourage education and training. But with over a third of workers already complaining that their skills are not used at work (Felstead et al. 2007) we would be naïve not to be concerned about what will happen to those who are about to enter the labour market. It is of course possible that things will turn out well. Jobs which require skills still exist and capable and educated employees can ‘grow’ these jobs, taking on additional tasks and responsibilities. So the supply of skilled workers creates its own demand. However, there is also a negative scenario. This grass roots revolution is only possible when jobs are flexible. When they are not, when the skills in the job are strictly defined and limited then it does not matter how capable the workers are, they will have no opportunity to demonstrate their talents. Educating young people for these jobs will only result in frustration and discontent. If we are lucky such rigid occupations will form only a small proportion of twenty-first century work but the growing numbers of fast food chains, call centres and coffee bars do not support these hopes.

Taken from Grugulis, I. (2007) *Skills, Training and Human Resource Development* Basingstoke:Palgrave

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