

# **Putting the process back in: Rethinking service sector skill**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Service skill definitions have been over-extended, by equating compliance with skill, and under-developed, by not recognising service jobs' invisible social and organisational aspects. Existing approaches to determining service skill levels draw on occupational qualifications and capacity for labour market closure, on knowledge worker/knowledgeable emotion worker dichotomies, and on the conceptual conflation of labour process deskilling, unskilled jobs and unskilled workers. The theoretical and empirical basis for a new framework identifying hitherto under-specified 'work process skills' is outlined. This framework allows recognition of the integrated use of awareness-shaping, relationship-shaping and coordination skills, at different levels of experience-based complexity, derived from reflexive learning and collective problem-solving in the workplace. Political struggles over the use of combinations and levels of these 'skills of experience' may result either in jobs designed to reduce autonomy, or in improved skill recognition and development, enhancing equity and career paths.

## **KEY WORDS**

articulation work/ emotional labour/ service work/ skill/ work process knowledge/ workplace learning/ equity

## **Introduction**

The growth of service sector employment has problematised the meaning of ‘skill’ (Hilton, 2008). Employers have overextended the concept to include required employee attributes and attitudes (Keep and Mayhew, 1999), defining skill to reflect their preferences for compliant workers (Lafer, 2004). However, employers also say they need human capacities for independent problem-solving, self-direction, collaboration in self-managing teams, ethical judgment, and the capacity for negotiation and empathetic interaction – qualities that sit uneasily with submissiveness. When employers recruit on the basis of ‘maturity’ or ‘experience’, for what life or work skills may these be proxies? When care-workers expostulate that they earn no more after ten years than on entry, or than their offspring earn at a supermarket checkout (Richardson and Martin, 2004: 26-7), are they perhaps expressing a conviction that their work involves a range of skills, based on experience acquired in the process of working? Such real practical expertise is often under-recognised and unrewarded (Gatta et al., 2007), and one reason for this is lack of a vocabulary to register certain tacit skills and the levels at which they are applied. Pay and employment equity are advanced only through political contestation, but an adequate skill vocabulary may be part of such contestation (Hall and Reed, 2007).

One of the future scenarios for the service sector is the development of an ‘hourglass’, or ‘barbell’ shaped distribution of skills. From this perspective, a ‘relatively small minority’ of knowledge workers will have ‘thinking skills’ but many more will rely on social competencies now defined as ‘low level’ (Autor, 2007; Thompson, 2007: 89). Nevertheless, the skills required in service occupations, whether defined as ‘low’, ‘middle’ or ‘high’ level, need further examination. Some see these skills as ‘natural’ attributes, ‘that anyone would want to have’ (Autor, 2007, in Hilton, 2008: 13); as ‘mundane accomplishments’ in plentiful supply (Attewell, 1990: 423; Payne, 2009: 355; Lloyd and Payne, 2009: 12). Others argue that many social competences are forms of skilled emotion management, that not all workers will have (Bolton, 2005). It is argued here that a multiplicity of forms of service sector work may be performed at varying levels of proficiency, and that these require capacities that include, but

extend beyond, the emotional. These include awareness of contexts and consequences, capacity for moral and aesthetic judgment, rapid contextual evaluation, intercultural competence, and organisational ability. These human capacities are skills, and the article explicates an attempt to develop an empirically grounded taxonomy, designed to allow identification of their use at a range of levels.

From 2006 to 2008 the authors were part of a team funded by the New Zealand (NZ) Department of Labour Pay and Employment Equity Unit, working to develop new techniques for identifying service skills (New Zealand Government, 2009). The skills framework that arose from this project, outlined here, has been used successfully in public and community sector trials, to help pinpoint the exercise of hitherto under-specified capabilities, bringing a new rigour to the identification of levels of expertise in their workplace application. The framework is not an exhaustive list of service skills. Rather it provides a conceptual basis for investigating the use, in specific work contexts, of three broad sets of skills that are central to service sector work. It also provides a way of identifying five learning stages through which these skills are developed by reflective practice, both individual and collective. While this conceptual taxonomy is now starting to be used in practice in parts of the NZ community care sector to help define under-specified job content and worker capabilities, the focus here is on its theoretical implications for debates over service sector skill.

First the emerging range of service industries and occupations is examined, and it is noted that employers report some service skills to be in short supply. Next the article overviews the concepts on which the research drew, based on labour process theory (LPT), interactionist insights and a theory of workplace learning. The third section describes the empirical project, explaining the methods of gathering and analysing data from a cross-section of service jobholders, cross-referencing theory and data analysis. The final section outlines the resulting taxonomy of process skills, illustrating how it aids the naming of more specific skills at a range of levels. The conclusion explores the potential contribution of the findings to LPT.

## **Who are Service Workers?**

Across UK industry groupings, in March 2009, 81 per cent of employees were located in service jobs. The largest grouping was administration, education and health (33 per cent), followed by distribution, hotels and restaurants (20 per cent), and banking, finance and insurance (16 per cent). NZ, where we undertook our empirical research, had a very similar industry distribution (Office for National Statistics, 2009; Statistics NZ, 2007).

Occupational evidence gives only qualified support to the thesis that service skills are distributed hourglass-fashion. In the UK in March 2009, 29 per cent of employees overall were assigned to managerial or professional occupations and another 15 per cent were defined as associate professional or technical employees. A middle 22 per cent were evenly divided between clerical/administrative staff and skilled trades. The lower end (34 per cent) comprised four groupings: personal service workers (mainly health and child care) (9 per cent), sales and customer service workers (including call centre staff) (7 per cent), process, plant and machine operatives (7%), and elementary employee groups including hospitality workers, hospital porters, cleaners and security staff (12 per cent) (Office for National Statistics, 2009). NZ had a roughly similar occupational distribution (Statistics NZ, 2007).

This distribution was hourglass-shaped only if we assume that all health and child care workers were low-skilled. True, a 2008 Statistics NZ survey of over 25,000 organisations indicated that, at the point of recruitment, skill shortages were greatest in trade, professional and managerial occupations. But it also indicated that, owing to ‘*lack of experience*’ half of all existing employees did not have the skills required to do their jobs well: and that skills in customer service, team working and oral communication were most lacking (Statistics NZ, 2008). These findings provide support for our thesis, that entry-level qualifications may not certify the work process skills required for effective work performance, and that such skills are acquired only through workplace practice. The shortage of these skills questions their designation as mundane accomplishments in plentiful supply. Applying the analogy of Brown et al. (2001: 36), they are not ‘plug and play’ capacities that workers bring to the job and immediately ‘switch on’ and use. Rather, they are like a ‘flat pack’: they need to be built up and integrated with the requirements of their surrounds. Conceptualising the ‘skills of experience’ in this way helps explain why apparently abundant ‘low level’

skills in the community require workplace learning and in some cases formal training, before they can be applied at the required level of expertise. Paid community care work is a case in point.

## **Theorising service skills**

### **Insights from Labour Process Theory**

The fundamental LPT problematic is the quest to manage commodified but indeterminate labour power to secure valorisation and safeguard accumulation (Thompson, 1989: 241-243). Thus the indeterminacy of labour power is the problem, control is the solution, and deskilling is the most fully realised form of control, resulting in subordination, and involving erosion of both autonomy and task complexity. LPT has been extended to commodified work that is not low-skilled: professional, associate professional, public sector and even managerial work (Ackroyd, 2009). Whilst not defined as low-skill in terms of qualifications, and less likely to suffer loss of task complexity, these occupations are formally subordinated to other managerial control and work intensification systems such as responsible autonomy (Friedman, 1990), high performance work systems (Danford, 2003) and individual performance target-setting. For these reasons, macro-analysis suggests that task complexity and worker autonomy may be trending in opposite directions (Felstead et al., 2004).

Hochschild famously extended the loss of employee autonomy to the managerial regulation of feeling within service work. She saw emotional labour as ‘no small part of what trainers train, and supervisors supervise’ (1993: xii) – thus defining it as both learned and political behaviour. She extended her analysis beyond airline cabins, debt collection, department stores and hospitality, to health, welfare and education. But subordination is a tendency never fully achieved, and Korczynski (2002) and Bolton (2005) in particular explore areas of contradiction within emotional labour. Bolton, in describing flight attendants and call center workers as ‘skilled emotion managers’, emphasises both moral agency and adroit management of self, others and situations. Thus across a range of occupational levels, micro-analysis of the intangible cognitive

and affective elements of the service labour process reveals that the relationship between autonomy and complexity is not clear-cut.

It is perhaps the parallels with technologically-controlled factory production that have made areas of retail and telemarketing a focus of LPT analyses of service work, although these are a minority of service jobs, and entry to them requires uncharacteristically low levels of educational qualifications and life/work experience. Even so, much customer service call centre work undoubtedly demands uncodified 'skills of experience'. Thus Taylor and Bain (2004: 17) argue that call centre work is '...repetitive, routinised, and dominated by short cycle times ...' but at times it requires 'deeper skills' (2004: 28). However, a vocabulary to name these skills is missing. Callaghan and Thompson (2002: 248) similarly see some call centre workers as '...active and skilled emotion managers...', whilst allocating them to 'low level' status. These writers propose the concept of 'knowledgeability'<sup>1</sup> to encapsulate how interactive service workers display

consciousness of their social skills and an awareness of when and how to deploy these. It is possible to see this personal awareness as a kind of tacit knowledge, where workers develop an understanding of themselves that allows them to consciously use their emotions to influence the quality of the interactive service sector product (Thompson et al., 2001: 937-8).

The concept of 'knowledgeability' needs elaboration, lest it become a 'carpet sweeper' term for capacities, the basis of whose differentiation from skill is incompletely defined.

The historical strand within LPT has tended to define skill as employees' capacity to retain control of facets of the labour process. In particular there has been a focus on unions' power to turn skill recognition, based on entry qualifications, into occupational closure, thus gaining a defence against role fragmentation and skill dilution (Thompson, 1989: 46-53). It is within this analytical tradition that Payne (2009) challenges the claim that emotion work is skilled. He warns against the over-extension of skill claims, satirising the view that 'we are all skilled now' and critiquing attempts to define 'non-technical' activities, however complex, as skilled (also see Lloyd and Payne, 2009).

Yet skill cannot be equated simply with labour market strategies based on occupational closure. Workplace learning theory points to the importance of the ongoing development of the situated, tacit and often collective capacity to carry out work processes (Lave and Wenger, 1991). For strategic reasons, employers may recognise the development of uncredentialed skills for some employees, through internal job ladders, and refuse such recognition to others (Osterman, 1987). Workers, however, may be able to claim skill through legal or industrial campaigns. The managerial tool of job evaluation has been used with some success to gain skill recognition in feminised jobs (Hall and Reed, 2007; Steinberg, 1998). In Australia, the industrial relations system, which allows collective skill assessments based on work value claims, is a potential pay equity vehicle. The majority report of a recent parliamentary inquiry recommends a system for pursuing job or occupational revaluation through claims that skill and responsibility have been historically undervalued on a gender basis (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). Many submissions to this inquiry argued the undervaluing of service skills, linked to ‘the invisibility of women’s skills’ (eg. p.7); the perception of women’s skills as ‘natural attributes or social skills, rather than industrial or workplace skills’ (eg p.55); and failure to specify skills ‘relating to caring, communications and personal interaction’ (eg p.57).

The rest of this article outlines the stages of an empirical study we undertook for the NZ Department of Labour, precisely to identify and classify such service skills, starting with the theoretical derivation of our research and interview questions.

### **Theorising service skill content**

One starting point was Bolton’s (2005) innovative combination of LPT with interactionist concepts, particularly those of Goffman, to analyse work processes involving ‘skilled emotion management’. As Bolton and Houlihan (2005) point out, service work cannot be fully routinised, since work on other people involves ethical juggling, and subtle judgment of effects. Another interactionist, Strauss, provides an extensive typology of the content of ‘sentimental’ (emotion) work, as well as a sense of how it is interwoven with various other forms of work in time (Strauss et al. 1985: 133-139). Based on studies of hospital work, these researchers identify: negotiative,

composure, rectification, awareness-context, and ‘dirty’ work (the latter involving ethical conflicts, as well as emptying bedpans), which embrace both emotional and cognitive domains. ‘Awareness context work’ refers to the shaping of one’s own awareness and that of others. For example, staff withholding information which they believe will be difficult for a person to handle are involved in a subtle interplay of personal ethics, will and identity, as well as negotiating the ‘compulsion’ of political and economic structures.

Central to the analysis was the Straussian notion of work as a process, with workers collectively and individually coordinating disparate components of work into a smooth flow. Strauss et al. (1985) referred to this process as ‘articulation work’, a ‘supra’ type of work, involving the coordination of tasks *in time*, in individual ‘lines’ and collective ‘arcs’ and ‘trajectories’ of work (Strauss, 1985: 2, 8). Articulation work *skills* are the ‘second order’ or reflexive skills of integrating ‘lower’ levels of skill, and interweaving lines of work. They include situational awareness, relationship management and interpersonal negotiation (Strauss, et al., 1985: 87). Extending this analysis, service work in health, education, community services and administration also required linking activities (follow-through, follow-up), and continuity of awareness in the management, establishment, maintenance and termination of relationships that extend well beyond the one-off ‘transactions’ on which analysts of interactive frontline work seem to focus. Coordination and ‘ethical juggling’ come together in managing the conflicting demands of clock time and clients’ ‘process time’ (Davies, 1994): time management goes beyond scheduling, to include the accommodation of diverse temporalities.

Beyond ‘content’ analyses of service skill, the research sought a way of conceptualising skill *levels*. ‘Mainstream’ occupational and job analysis techniques, which like LPT use the dimensions of ‘autonomy-control’ and ‘substantive complexity’ proved to be of limited help in identifying service skills at different levels (Spenner, 1990). By taking the task as their basic unit, they overlook the skills required to link tasks up into *processes* (Forfás, 2007: 24). Moreover, the formal vocational qualifications that define occupational skill levels tend to anatomise task skills, with less attention to dynamic ‘work process’ skills (Boreham, 2002).

## Theorising service skill levels

This shift of focus to integrated work processes has implications for LPT. The managerial routinisation of complex processes may rely on workers being sufficiently skilled to work automatically, incorporating contingency and linking together activities into smooth sequences. If so, there is no automatic fit between deskilling processes, unskilled jobs and minimally-qualified workers. LPT, in focusing on contests over autonomy and complexity, has paid rather little attention to skill development, and articulation work theory does not help in theorising skill levels, beyond its concept of ‘supra work’ (Strauss, 1985: 2, 8). To identify levels of proficiency in the exercise of tacit service skills, is to begin to move beyond the ‘skilled/unskilled’ dichotomy toward a concept of workplace skill formation as the staged assimilation of practical learning, resulting in expertise achieved over time.

Individually-focused learning theory describes how, after repeated practice, a novice acquires the proficiency to carry out a process (like keyboarding) automatically, releasing cognitive resources for other activity (like composition) (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986; Shuell, 1990). In time, the worker can apply experience at a level of automaticity, and is cognitively freed to focus on solving new problems. Activity theory (Leont’ev, 1978; Sawchuk, 2006) similarly describes how novices build a base of experience through iterations of practice, reflection and problem-solving. Thus our first three skill levels were derived: *familiarisation*, *automatic fluency*, and *proficient problem solving*. To take account of the collective basis of workplace learning, however, the analysis was deepened and extended to a fourth learning level of *creative solution sharing*, where experienced workers informally pool their work process knowledge. The knowledge, and the collective learning process, may be tacit or explicit, involving both verbal, and less explicit and more fleeting, information exchange. Learning takes place, knowledge is transmitted, and identity is shaped, through steadily increasing participation in communities of interaction/practice (Sandberg, 2000; Brown and Duguid, 1991). This analysis moves beyond the Anglo-liberal view of competence as something that is always individual (Boreham 2004). It is congruent with the theory of ‘work process knowledge’ (Boreham et al, 2002), which reinforces the importance of situational and process awareness as foundational skills and informed our empirical study of service skills.

## **Empirical evidence**

### **Methodological basis**

Workplace interviews, conducted in the latter part of 2006, focused on service employment in the NZ core public service, health and education sectors, which accounted for approximately 15 per cent of the total workforce or a little over 20 per cent of the service sector. Occupationally, jobs in the NZ core public service workforce are 50 per cent managerial, professional and associate professional, 34 per cent clerical and administrative, and 13 per cent community and personal service based (State Services Commission, 2007). Relative to the total service sector, the research sample was therefore skewed to more highly qualified occupational levels. In 2008-2009 further research tested the wider relevance of the taxonomy derived from such jobs, through validation studies in the community care sector. The addition of more low-status jobs tended to confirm the relevance of the approach to approximately one-third of service jobs – those in non-profit sectors.

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The original study took the form of semi-structured interviews, averaging 90 minutes in duration, with workers in 57 different jobs, ranging in level from administrative assistant to senior policy adviser; from education support worker to senior lecturer; and from patient receptionist and care assistant to director of nursing. A quarter of the jobs were in predominantly male occupations, a third were in gender mixed occupations and a little over half were in jobs that were over 70 per cent female. The interviews produced completed questionnaires and 1,600 pages of transcripts

containing discussions of critical incidents and workplace learning trajectories. To this data set we added 94 position descriptions and job evaluation reports. Iterative coding, based on the NVivo software program and the Strauss-Corbin (1998) abstraction technique, was used to group and condense similar work activities, from which we drew a matrix of irreducible under-specified work process skill elements and learning stages. Collaborative discussion of many iterations of this coding finally narrowed it down to nine skill elements grouped into the three skill sets of *shaping awareness*, *interacting and relating*, and *coordination*. The final condensation of 150 activity examples from which these skills were abstracted was found to be readily organised into the four skill levels outlined above, plus a fifth level, drawn mainly from accounts by official and unofficial experts and leaders, of how they actively *shaped solutions*, embedding them in work systems.

Table 1 sets out the resulting framework of skill sets, elements and levels. Each skill is an individual capability for participating in a collective work activity. We turned the 150 activities, classified according to the skill elements and skill levels they illustrate, into a checklist that could be used to map job skill requirements and workers' skills. In 2008 we tested various uses of this framework – as an aid to position description writing, selection, individual development planning, job sequencing and career pathing, in a two day workshop with public, education and health sector managers, and then with 100 workshop participants from community sector organisations. In 2009, one-on-one trials with community sector workers have shown the effectiveness of the framework in building integrated individual profiles of skills and developmental targets. In the rest of this article, we illustrate how this taxonomy can be used to analyse the skills underpinning work activity and processes, concentrating on front-line 'reception' work, low-paid 'support' roles, and several middle level jobs such as IT support and casework.

## **TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**

### **Applying a new service skills framework**

The analysis develops two arguments. Firstly work involving responsibility for the care or development of others, or for the negotiated maintenance of work systems, is likely to involve some complexity in the integrated use of non-mundane, and often tacit, skills of awareness-management, inter-relating and coordination. Second, autonomous proficiency in deploying these skills develops with experience. As a result, further theorisation is needed of the relationship between two types of skills: those acquired through formal learning and certified in qualifications, and those gained through collective workplace learning.

Exemplifying the use of work process skills in low level personal service occupations, an Occupational Therapy Assistant (OTA) worked in a job classified at a lower level even than hospital-based Personal Care Assistants. She commented:

We're undervalued I think by the hospital system ...[I]t's not recognised, the skills or the values ...The care assistants have got formal training; the occupational therapy assistants haven't got that paperwork behind us. (OTA, NZ, 2006)

After two years nursing training, this informant turned to OTA work for its more 'holistic' approach: '[Y]ou can work with families ... not just dealing with the injury or the condition'. The job had three components: daily reception and administrative work, handling phone calls and mail relating to clients, families and equipment suppliers; and unpacking, cataloguing and assembling rehabilitation equipment: This required contextual awareness skills ('So yes, you have to know what the equipment is and what it's about'), as well as an understanding of the work of the rehabilitation team (the OTA minuted regular cross-disciplinary team meetings).

The second aspect of the work involved both daily rounds of the hospital ward, providing ADL (assistance with daily living) and frequent home visits, assembling and adjusting equipment and coaching in its use. Teamwork was involved ('You're working with a physiotherapist, you're working with the speech therapist') and work with clients required finely-tuned communication and boundary-management skills:

Learning how to encourage people to do things for themselves without being condescending. My communication skills have certainly picked up... The hardest thing I had to learn was let the patient do it for themselves rather than you do it. (OTA, NZ, 2006)

The third aspect of the job was to accompany therapists one day a week, on house calls in a regional community, providing safety backup through contingency management. The job involved the negotiation of both subordination and autonomy:

I think it is something you learn as you go...There's a lot of independence: you have to make decisions [but] ...there is a line there and you have to refer to a therapist... Especially the younger therapists, I feel because I'm a little bit older, you're imparting your knowledge to them because they haven't had the experience. You've got to be very diplomatic, if that makes sense? (OTA, NZ, 2006)

To integrate the job's three 'lines of work', and fold them into the hospital's ongoing 'arc of work', required coordinating and negotiating skills:

Time management was one of my hardest ones and it's something I've been working on with the team leader. . . .[B]ecause I cover different areas, I'm learning to say no, and work in with the other therapists. [They] ask you to do different things, because there's only a certain amount of time that you have in the day and being able to say 'No, I can't do that now, but I can do it at such and such a time'. So you're planning all the time and then being able to adjust your day – because they're little emergencies and things that pop up all the time, so you've got to fit those in. (OTA, NZ, 2006)

This example illustrates the integrated use of many of the elements identified in Table 1 – management of the awareness of self, others, situations and impacts; negotiation of boundaries, communication across class and culture, and integrated maintenance of work flows.

Similarly low in occupational status and paid close to the minimum wage are an estimated 20,000 NZ school support staff working in roles such as teacher aides, administrators, and resource co-coordinators. Special Education Support Workers (ESWs) are assigned, often on a one-to-one basis, to help children with disabilities integrate and learn in preschool and school classrooms. Low-level post-school qualifications are increasingly being gained, often after years in the job. The tacit

skills involved in this work can be gleaned from accounts of apparently mundane incidents such as the following (relating to a three-year old Māori child with spina bifida):

...I'd been playing around the theme of 'this is a spoon', 'this is a drawer'...Then it's clean-up time...I said, 'Could you put it in the drawer?' and she did it. It's just a little thing but she did it. She understood ... So those sorts of thing are the little steps they make all the time. (Special Education Support Worker, NZ, 2006)

This example illustrates the use of verbal and non-verbal communication cues, and a fine-tuned awareness of the significance of incidents within longer-term changes in the child. A detailed developmental program was discussed daily with teachers and parents and regularly within a multi-disciplinary care team. The skills required included a subtle awareness of reactions and impacts; interpretative non-verbal communication, and activity-sequencing and interweaving. Vigilant to small warning signs, the ESW routinely managed problems ranging from constant risk of falls to dealing with epileptic seizures without disturbing other children or the flow of activity in an open-plan classroom. The work required skills in 'managing up' and advocacy at the level of problem-solving: the ESW has previously needed to draw on strategic negotiating skills to persuade a teacher to abandon her enthusiasm for a new approach, because of its detrimental effects on one child. She had picked up on the emotional exhaustion of a mother of autistic twins, and used silent empathetic listening to avert the risk of family trauma. Another ESW, responsible for up to six older children in a special needs centre, had trouble naming the non-verbal communication skills she used in 'quietly encouraging' school-refusers into the classroom, blocking out the screaming and maintaining a reassuring firmness. She described how through experience she had learned to maintain a stable working environment with children likely to respond to any frustration by biting and kicking, and the wisdom needed to manage grief at the deaths of frail severely-disabled children. Such skills of insight into self and others that underpinned this work of social integration are unlikely to be in plentiful supply 'off the street'.

The tacit skills of experience identified in Table 1 were also seen as important in jobs requiring tertiary-level occupational qualifications:

[H]aving the qualification got me the job, but now I'm doing stuff that the qualification didn't show me ... You actually need someone with great listening skills, and a qualification's not going to give you that. You do have to have a certain amount of knowledge, and the tertiary qualification will give you that, but it also asks for skills that a qualification is not going to give you. (Information Technology Helpdesk Officer, Polytechnic, NZ, 2006)

This example raises the question of whether the tacit experiential skills identified in Table 1 were similar at different occupational levels. Certainly, beginning workers in jobs at different occupational levels all had to start by using Level 1 familiarisation skills. For the IT support workers, this involved contextual awareness and boundary management skills:

Territory would be a big issue ... And that's almost like that political context as well ... I have a couple of what I consider to be almost mentors, and I'll pick their brains. Yes. Finding someone who knows. It can take a while sometimes, can't it?

Yes, especially when you talk to the wrong people.

Misinformation...It's also asking the right person, and that is a trick of the trade as well. (Two IT Support staff, Polytechnic, NZ, 2006)

The reflective and self-reflexive aspects of assessing information and people in context entitle these capabilities to be labelled skills. Such skills may be exercised at varying levels within jobs at all qualification levels. We use the example of administrative assistant/reception work, to illustrate the progression from skill Level 1 (familiarisation) to Level 2 (automatic fluency) and Level 3 (problem-solving). The example is based on work in a rehabilitation outpatients' clinic, involving the follow-up of discharged patients, administration of pain-management programs, and coordination with welfare and accident compensation agencies, as well as management of client queues. This front-line worker built her awareness of contexts and consequences, and used the interpersonal skills of boundary-setting and 'reading' people to enable her to maintain a smooth workflow. She quickly learned to manage her own awareness of situations and people, as importunate pain-sufferers tried to gain immediate access to doctors:

They quite often ring you and try to seek a lot of information out of you, which I wasn't prepared for. And because I hadn't worked in a medical environment before, I wasn't quite

sure of what those boundaries were. So.... I had to go back and check with people that I was offering ... the right level of information – what the limitations were. (Administrative Assistant, NZ, 2006)

It proved necessary to build up a lay understanding of medical terms, which our informant did by maintaining a notebook. This ambiguously authorized knowledge was necessitated by the unofficial triage element of the work, one of whose main goals involved the use of coordinating skills to ensure that the doctors' workflow proceeded without interruption. Self-awareness and boundary-management skills were required at the problem-solving level (level 3):

...you've got to try and second guess how important these things are, before you can interact ... And you're building up your medical knowledge about how important something is. And not getting so emotionally involved and realising there's a limit to what you can and can't do. (Administrative Assistant, NZ, 2006)

This example illustrates the cognitive element in emotional labour: '[i]t's sort of stepping back from the situation and having a look at the big picture'. It also illustrates why such skills may be in short supply in the workplace: only by combining contextual understanding with job-specific learning can evaluative, interpersonal, and coordinating skills become translated into effective practice and problem-solving.

An interview with a Health Care Assistant (HCA) provided insights into the interplay of experiential and formal learning in care work, and suggested the advantage of qualification structures that provide for a two-way movement between reflection and practical experience. This informant commented that, through experience, she was better able than many 'new grad nurses' to 'read the signs if somebody's going to die'.

And on more than a few occasions, they have been going to die, and I've been able to let the nurse know and they've been able to call the family to get them in. (HCA, NZ, 2006)

She identified the tacit skills required for two-way communication with stroke patients: 'And when you've got something right...you can understand what they're saying back to you'. She and her colleagues had collectively developed techniques for providing behavioural cues to a developmentally-delayed fifty-year old patient, using

the patient's doll to model what was required. Such collective development of these skills (classified at level 4 in Table 1) was often informal. Indeed, highly-qualified professionals might learn from care assistants in the cross-disciplinary team meetings that the hospital has systematised. Such practical communication skills, gained through trial and error, are becoming codified: for example there is now standard training available on communicating with Alzheimer's sufferers, and on de-escalating aggression.

Our final example comes from the higher-level frontline job of caseworker, engaged by a public sector benefits agency to work with people judged to need assistance with personal and social issues if they were to make effective use of employment services and welfare assistance. Normal caseworker qualifications were a generalist degree or relevant life experience. Case management involved the building of ongoing relationships through a combination of telephone and face-to-face interviews. Caseworkers found themselves rapidly progressing through the experiential skill levels in Table 1:

...technologically we get five weeks training in the systems and applications. I've been here 20 months and I still don't know how to use them all ...They cannot train you on how to use all the systems entirely; that is impossible. Just the enormity of those systems and their relationships. (Caseworker, NZ, 2006)

Nevertheless, the work required very rapid progression to the use of problem-solving skills (Level 3):

From day one, you are expected to use discretion. It is the job essentially. You are to make the decisions. You learn by trial and error ... Of course after a period of time, there's a familiarity, even though every day there will be a circumstance we haven't run into before... (Caseworker, NZ, 2006)

Unrecognised skill requirements meant that caseworkers tended to create informal teams to learn from each other:

You identify very quickly who the people are that you work with, that are prepared to be involved in your learning process, and who isn't. ... (Caseworker, NZ, 2006)

Awareness shaping and coordinating skills were thus being used at the level of creative solution-sharing (Level 4): ‘So it’s on the job training; reliant on your team mates’. The Level 5 skills of experience, relating to formal ways of bringing about system change (Table 1) were more accessible to people in managerial positions, who also had higher-level formal qualifications.

The focus here has been on establishing the existence of under-specified skills of experience in lower-level jobs – evidence that is currently being used to revisit such jobs’ value and career path potential. Trials in May and June 2009 highlighted the utility of our framework in providing a vocabulary for establishing skills required to work in community organisations - skills whose scope extended to system-building (NZ Department of Labour, 2009).

### **Conclusion: New Contradictions of Agency and Control**

‘Skill’ needs some rethinking, putting an analysis of process back into conceptions of work. Concepts such as communication, problem-solving or teamwork represent work activities and *processes*, not ‘skills’ as such, although the skills enable such work processes to take place. ‘Skill’ is the human *capacity*, individual or collective, to perform work processes, and it entails *learning*. A way has been outlined of conceptualising three sets of invisible, hard-to-define-service sector skills– those involved in awareness-shaping, interaction and relationship management, and coordination. These skill sets underpin to varying degrees the demands of service jobs that require the management of emotion, self and time.. Five skill levels mark increasing levels of participation in work processes, resulting in workplace learning through shared practice and problem-solving.

Whilst the descriptors above may call forth an impression of itemisation, even fragmentation, each descriptor registers not a task, but an aspect of a process. As Figure 1 suggests, the taxonomy provides a menu for the identification of nine skill elements, exercised together at varying levels, each contributing to the ability to combine discrete tasks into ongoing work processes. The integrated control of a work

activity is ultimately in the hands (or the soul) of the person performing it, expressing worker's individual and collective identity, itself partly embedded in the workplace. Claiming 'skill' is therefore, in part, claiming 'identity', and is a recognition of agency.

There are tensions in this analysis which are interesting as well as troubling. First, individual service sector workers should have their skills and competencies recognised, developed, rewarded and valued. This requires fine grained apprehension of work processes. However, making 'invisible' work process 'visible' is a two edged sword. A more accurate understanding of what employees are really doing can facilitate employer control. On balance, the advantages of recognising hidden skills may outweigh this danger, although justice in remuneration requires more than visibility. Recognition of skill has two aspects: 'seeing' the skill, as well as giving its 'possessor' respect and dignity – and paying for it. Second, although skill recognition and remuneration are focussed on the individual, higher levels of individual competence were found to be tied up with collective learning and practice. This finding returns the analysis to the work process, the collective worker and, ultimately, the question of identity.

Our analysis of skill development highlights the hidden injuries of routinisation. With growing experience, workers may encounter an ever-widening gap between restrictive job design and skills that are required yet thwarted, exercised covertly but under-recognised. In attempting to clarify some of the theoretical issues that still bedevil the concept of 'skill', the analysis has sought to put the *process* (both of work and of learning) back into labour process concepts of service sector skill.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A concept first used in a manufacturing context, cf Thompson 1989: xii, 82, 92

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**Table 1 Framework for indentifying under-specified work process skills and skill levels**

<b>SKILL SETS AND THEIR ELEMENTS</b>	<b>SKILL LEVELS</b>				
	<i>Breadth or depth of skill required for increasing levels of participation</i>				
	<b>Level 1. Familiaris- -ation</b>	<b>Level 2. Automatic fluency</b>	<b>Level 3. Proficient problem- solving</b>	<b>Level 4. Creative solution sharing</b>	<b>Level 5. Expert system shaping</b>
	Build experience through practice & reflection	Apply experience independently & automatically	Use automatic proficiency while solving new problems	Help create new approaches through shared solutions	Embed expertise in a system
<b>The SKILLS OF:</b>	<i>Examples of activities using these skills</i>				
<p><b><u>A. Shaping awareness:</u></b> Capacity to develop, focus and shape your own and others' awareness, by</p> <p>A1 Sensing contexts or situations A2 Monitoring and guiding reactions A3 Judging impacts</p>	<p><i>Be alert to job's contexts &amp; impacts of your reactions</i></p>	<p><i>Automatically pick up on small warning signs</i></p>	<p><i>Handle conflicting levels of awareness and disclosure needs</i></p>	<p><i>Exchange situational updates and new solutions with colleagues</i></p>	<p><i>Use an understanding of systems in order to influence them</i></p>
<p><b><u>B. Interacting and relating:</u></b> Capacity to negotiate inter-personal, organisational and inter-cultural relationships by</p> <p>B1 Negotiating boundaries B2 Communicating verbally and nonverbally B3 Connecting across cultures</p>	<p><i>Learn to interact respectfully and easily across cultures</i></p>	<p><i>Gain cooperation of people outside your authority</i></p>	<p><i>Pleasantly deflect distracting requests whilst picking up subtle signs of real need</i></p>	<p><i>Give unobtrusive guidance in unequal power situations</i></p>	<p><i>Crystallise views of diverse group with apt or memorable language</i></p>
<p><b><u>C. Coordinating:</u></b> Capacity to organise your own work, link it into the overall workflow and deal with obstacles and disruptions, by</p> <p>C1 Sequencing and combining activities C2 Interweaving your activities with others' C3 Maintaining and restoring work-flow</p>	<p><i>Learn to sort and sequence own activities &amp; work in with others</i></p>	<p><i>Automatically address what needs fixing up or following through</i></p>	<p><i>Maintain workflow whilst problem-solving, assessing the urgency of competing issues</i></p>	<p><i>Build informal information exchange or contingency support network</i></p>	<p><i>Contribute to sustainable work systems by coordinating backup plans</i></p>

