

The essential structural issue which stands at the fulcrum of our inability to meet our needs for skilled trades is not dissimilar to the problem that exists within the predominance of advanced industrial economies that have developed out of the Second Industrial Revolution of the mid to late nineteenth century, and the Information Age of mid to late twentieth century; that is, the formulation, theory, and practice of scientific management, with its rote focus on the statistical analysis of Return on Equity, is more suited to a managerial corporatized organisation in a state of stasis or decline, than the human and technical aspirations that power a growing capitalist economy.

For an ideal description of this phenomenon in action, observe the inability of Telstra to provide elementary unified communications services outside of Australian urban centres during the last decade, compared with the extraordinary proliferation of communications services throughout both peaceful and conflict-torn areas of Africa.

The central issue driving this disconnect in developed advanced industrial economies is the fact the primacy of production of physical materials and resources during a transition from developing to developed industrial economy dissipates when the economy evolves towards production of information services. How do people engaged in such an economy see their self-interest best advanced – given that managerial hierarchy in large information organisations relies on front line staff making decisions based on the value of information products which have a constantly evolving value or currency to an organisation. There is a fundamental disconnect between management hierarchies and information hierarchies in most advanced corporatized service organisations.

Why this disconnect, and the drive of self-interest, is essential to understanding the underlying perpetuation of a shortage in skills required to drive prosperity in a complex economy, is that corporatized managerial self-interest inherently seeks over time to ensure that skill development does not destabilise the corporate memory of institutions with a constant flow of skilled people in and out of jobs that require substantive investments time and money to get the most out of. What this produces is the politicisation of skills development; and this drives an institutional devolution of confidence in management from technical staff; should this becomes regarded as a universal aspect of a corporate culture, the phenomenon of workforce “churn” has typically already eroded enough of a company’s institutional memory to be able to ameliorate and reverse without a profound shift in how the company’s employees are valued.

Many companies have successfully challenged the complex issue of skills valuation by tying career skill development to contractual obligations using a flexible mix of financial incentives and penalties, and minimum tenure requirements with distinct similarities to age-old apprenticeship and traineeship models, with considerable levels of success. Ask any skilled employee whether they would prefer higher salary or access to skills that can maintain their employability in a constantly shifting skill environment, and the majority will point to access to skills.

This brings me to the conclusion of the structural conflicts in our civilisation’s industrial architecture. I would like to focus on several concrete changes that can be made in our current workplace participation governance that will have a significant impact on productivity, increase

job seeker participation in the economy generally, and without any need to resort to punitive governance measures being inflicted on working people whose industries are in decline and find themselves, in Prime Minister Chifley's eloquent phrase, no longer "protected from the shafts of fate which leaves them helpless and without hope".

These are direct, quantifiable, easily administered measures within the Job Services platform, developed from a variety of sources since the establishment of JSA within the contractual jurisdiction of the Department of Workplace Relations, which can effect a considerable structural improvement in workplace participation, and the goal of maintaining and increasing the value of a highly skilled economy.

1) The Stream 1 through 4 assessment structure requires urgent change. Simply removing the Stream 1 designation will ensure that basic skill requirements for trades oriented work e.g. OH&S White Cards, can be distributed to all and any trade areas requiring them. The Stream 1 concept takes eminently employable people and makes them unemployable through its restrictions on skills access.

2) Remove employer acceptance requirements for obtaining compulsorily required training in all areas. If a trade requires particular tickets for a potential employee to start, administer them without qualification. The present system uses far more administrative resources to produce a net negative result, merely for the purpose of governance reporting. The required courses for basic negotiation into trade work are constantly available, but never at the capacity they could be due to onerous and counterproductive governance requirements.

At present, Employment Service Providers regard the Department of Workplace Relations, with their substantive administrative demands inherent in meeting the parameters of their government contracts, as their chief client. Skilled Job Seekers are a product to be packaged and presented to DEWR. This has produced the situation wherein the resources available for engaging effectively with business in getting people back to work unfortunately rate a distant second.

The above proposed changes can effect substantive, meaningful change, without the need of contractual reform involving long timeframes and legal jurisprudence, that will have a profound impact on the many Job Seekers who are currently finding struggling with a Kafkqaesque system of denying skills and training access that keeps them in the dark and makes simple tasks of retraining burdensome obstacles to maintaining and improving their employability.

Luke Downing