The restructuring of career paths in large service sector organizations: ‘delayering’, upskilling and polarisation

Damian Grimshaw, Huw Beynon, Jill Rubery and Kevin Ward

Abstract

Drawing on detailed case studies of four large service sector organizations this paper finds little evidence of training provision that links skills development with incremental career progression. Past policies of ‘delayering’ have opened up a ‘gap’ in the job ladder and this has both increased the organizational costs of formal training and reduced the likelihood of informal on-the-job training being seen as the basis for promotion to the next level. Managers are thus faced with the challenge of how to establish a new set of premises upon which to strengthen the workforce’s loyalty and commitment to the organization, in the context of problems of high staff turnover and low job satisfaction. What we find is a greater emphasis on certificated training provision. However, in the absence of a transparent career path employers rely on more intensive techniques of appraisal and selection of workers for a ‘winner-takes-all’ career path. Given the importance of skills acquisition as an important building block of the ‘learning society’, our findings suggest that policymakers in Britain cannot rely solely upon the employer to bridge the skill gap evident in large service sector organizations.

Introduction

It has become common to understand the contemporary period as one involving the de-industrialisation of the advanced capitalist economies. This change – associated with an extended down-turn of employment in manufacturing and extractive industries – has been a pronounced one in its effects upon people’s lives and upon the ways in which social scientists have come to theorise contemporary society. Most generally there has been discussion of the rise of a ‘service economy’ as more and more employment opportunities have become concentrated in the non-manufacturing sectors. For example, studies of the great Northern cities of the UK have focused upon their emergence as financial and retail centres, or as the locus of cultural industries (Beynon et al., 1994; Taylor et al., 1996). In a way which reflects the earliest accounts of post industrial societies, these studies have also been linked with
ideas about skill and knowledge which emphasise the rising educational and technical requirements for workers within a contemporary economy (see Bell, 1978; Kumar, 1988, 1995).

In this context, the role and function of the large corporation – especially service sector organizations – becomes increasingly central to any discussion of strategies that can build upon and develop the skills and knowledge of the workforce. Historically, through apprenticeship schemes and detailed training programmes, companies operating in a diverse range of activities systematically enhanced the skills of the people they recruited. In many of these sectors, on-the-job training combined with day release schemes and meshed with internal job ladders (Lovering, 1990; Harris and Fevre, 1988). Together, these practices enabled low skilled entrants to learn a trade and also to progress from one job to another within a range of manual, clerical and supervisory work. As such, in sectors like engineering, coal-mining, steel-making, banking and local government employees customarily spent their working lives with the same employer or in the same trade (Roberts, 1993). During those times through skill acquisition, tacit knowledge and seniority rules, they would work though a number of different positions within the organization. This did not involve dramatic patterns of social mobility – it was not a ‘rags to riches’ experience. Rather, in the post-war period, it involved patterns of progression that provided a consistency to the experience of employment in the UK.

The decline of many of these basic industries and the dramatic changes in others, raises questions about the new role of training and skill in the experience of contemporary employment. This is all the more important given the growing emphasis placed upon ‘knowledge’, ‘knowledge management’ and a ‘learning society’ (DfEE, 1995; DTI, 1998, 1999; Fryer, 1997). This approach is built upon accounts of contemporary society that emphasise transition (industrial divides, post Fordism, service economies and so on). As such, management gurus have joined forces with academics and policy makers to construct a view of industrial policy which stresses the importance of skills acquisition as the major criterion for competitive success and for the creation of a flexible and socially mobile society.

This view has recently been subjected to critical assessment. Research has questioned the veracity of the ‘learning society’ model and the evenness of ‘learning’ across UK society (see, Ashton and Green, 1996; Coffield, 1997). Other research has given substance to the belief that increased emphasis upon formal qualifications has involved little more than ‘credentialism’. Thirty years ago in the USA it was suggested that formal training schemes represented a ‘Great Training Robbery’ with people routinely operating in jobs that required few of the skills for which they had been certificated (Berg, 1970). Recent research in the UK has suggested that 30 per cent of graduates take employment in jobs that were previously done by non graduates (Keep, 2000). Findings such as these have urged that more attention be paid to the kinds of jobs available as well as the kinds of training and educational programmes
that exist. In this context, Keep (2000) and others have taken issue with the viability or appropriateness of the ‘high skills’ strategy for the UK economy. In these views, historically low investment levels in research and development make a ‘low skill’ strategy more important in many sectors.

This emphasis upon the kinds of jobs and the kind of work being developed within the UK has switched attention from the trainers and the training programmes toward the dynamics that operate within employing organizations and the major industrial and commercial sectors of the economy. Detailed studies of corporate training programmes, skill acquisition, latent skills and the operation of jobs are rare. However, studies have pointed to a level of sectoral variation in skill acquisition and organizational adaptation to the new ‘deregulated’ economy. For example, in the early nineties comparisons within the service sector (between sub-contracted cleaning and catering services) indicated quite different managerial approaches to training and skills development in different industries (Rees and Fielder, 1992).

What has been absent in this critical literature is a careful examination of the ‘new managerialism’ that systematically evaluates the implications of these new forms of work organization for worker motivation, training and skills acquisition. Simply stated, the new model emphasises the ending of formalised hierarchical structures. In their place we have flatter, non-hierarchical, networked forms of organization (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Castells, 1999; Saxenian, 1996; Sullivan, 1999). Within these organizations, workers will have greater autonomy, they will often work creatively in teams, adapting quickly to change and consumer demand (Despres and Hiltrop, 1995; Frenkel et al., 1995). Together these elements have been seen to contribute to the emergence of an ‘innovation mediated’ system in which ‘intellectual and physical labour’ become mutually integrated around a dynamic production process (Kenney and Florida, 1993: 14).

However, it seems possible that under certain conditions, the elements of this new model could be mutually contradictory. Paradoxically, features of the contemporary workplace may operate in ways that upset important underpinnings of a ‘knowledge-based’ organization and a learning society. For example, the management literature has given central place to the ways in which the modern organization has become ‘delayered’ (Collinson and Collinson, 1997; Harrison, 1994; Heckscher, 1995). This process of flattening the traditional organizational pyramid has been achieved by removing a variety of different middle order jobs and functions within the company. Linked to this has been the powerful pressure to outsource many of the activities that are not central to the main function of the corporation. These activities may be located in other firms in other places or the employees of other firms may perform them on the main site (Allen and Henry, 1996). Either way these two processes in combination can be expected to have removed many of the rungs from the internal job ladder. More worrying may be the extent to which they have opened up a vertical gap among layers of the workforce.
Such a gap could potentially undermine the linkage between training and career advancement, both by increasing the organizational costs of formal training and reducing the likelihood of informal on-the-job training being seen as the basis for promotion to the next level. Such a process could increase the incentives for managers ‘to buy’ rather than ‘to make’ skills. For workers, the size of the gap could affect the motivational process that is critical to any successful training and development programme.3

As such, and as a direct result of changes in the organizational form, it is possible that workers entering the contemporary large organization with few educational or vocational credentials will face major obstacles to pay and career advancement due to a lack of firm-based training provision. The removal of organizational job ladders could well give rise to new structures that redefine prospects for internal advancement and development. Such a change might accompany conditions where management faced external pressures and where the weakened power of trade unions gave them greater freedom to reshape and restructure the employment relationship (Grimshaw et al., 2001; Purcell, 1991).

There are other problems with these theories of the new ‘networked’, non hierarchical organization. Warhurst and Thompson (1998) have pointed to an apparent paradox of ‘delayering’ taking place within companies while at the same time the aggregate numbers of managers working in the economy increases. They argue, with some force, that the delayering process is associated with team work and ‘horizontal linkages’, which can best be understood as a shadow division of labour. In their view, organizations are increasingly characterised by a dual structure which, on the one hand, attempts to encourage innovation and change, whilst retaining detailed financial and operational accountability:

Methods of co-ordination and accountability therefore become more complex, but vertical structures remain the backbone of organizations (op. cit.: 17).

What is left unexplored is the impact of this duality upon the experience of workers, their attitude toward their work and organizational training programmes. How do the potential conflicts between these structures impact upon the stated strategies of innovation, empowerment and retraining?

This article considers evidence of changing policies of training and skills development, which points to a transformation in internal job ladders. Based on detailed case studies of four large service sector organizations, it identifies both internal and external pressures that have shaped new forms of work organization and training provision. The cases produce evidence of delayering and flattened hierarchies within each of the organizations. We document the reactions of managers and employees to the emergence of vertical gaps between the various layers of these organizations. The presence of these gaps is seen to have critical effects upon both training provision (the skills gap) and

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also upon the flexible movement of staff upward though the organization (the promotion gap). The problems created by this (such as high staff turnover, low morale and absenteeism) are seen to underpin new management strategies that involve a greater emphasis on certificated training provision and individual staff appraisal.

1. The case-study workplaces

The research draws on interviews with managers and staff at four large organizations operating in the banking, local authority community-care, food retail and telecommunications sectors. These organizations are referred to as Bankco, Councilco, Retailco and Telecomco throughout (Box 1). At each organization, two or three workplace sites were visited in order to capture local differences in work organization and management initiatives (Table 1).

At Bankco, the three workplaces include two telephone banking centres within the Personal Banking division and one within the Corporate Division. The three Councilco workplaces represent different sites of the department of community care providers, providing both an outreach service to patients in their homes and care within a nursing home. The three Retailco workplaces include a 24-hour store (Retailco1), a medium-sized suburban store (Retailco2) and a city centre store (Retailco3), ranging from a workforce size of 201 to 482. Finally, the three Telecomco workplaces are all call centres dealing with customer queries.

Each of the organizations has transformed considerably in recent years in a context of rapid technological change, new competitive pressures and strong

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<th>Box 1 The case study organizations</th>
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<td>• ‘Bankco’ is a major clearing bank in the UK. While constrained by a relatively high ratio of infrastructural costs to income, it has a reputation for introducing new financial products in the sector and has been quick to exploit the new technologies in information and telecommunications systems;</td>
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<td>• ‘Councilco’ is a large urban city council. Operations stretch across a range of activities, including school and civic catering, community care, environmental health and indoor and outdoor leisure services;</td>
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<td>• ‘Retailco’ is one of the leading food retail chains in the UK, supplying a range of around 40,000 products across over 600 stores;</td>
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<tr>
<td>• ‘Telecomco’ is one of the largest providers of telecommunications services in the UK, providing a number of business and customer services in addition to maintenance of the telephone network. Development of mobile telephone services and the internet has contributed to high profit margins.</td>
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### Table 1 The case-study workplaces

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<tr>
<td>Number of workplaces</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average workplace size</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of interviews (with managers and staff)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of product or service</td>
<td>Consumer and business telephone banking services</td>
<td>Community care provision</td>
<td>Inner-city, suburban and 24-hour stores</td>
<td>Telephone enquiry call centre services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workforce profile</td>
<td>Skills segmented between banking and customer services</td>
<td>Mix of low level and professional, predominantly female staff</td>
<td>Predominantly female, part-time, low pay</td>
<td>Some specialist IT skills, but predominantly customer services</td>
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pressures to cut costs, leading to new systems of production and new forms of work organization, as well as the delivery of new products and services.

In banking and telecommunications, rapid advances in technologies in information technology and telecommunications systems have created opportunities for radical restructuring of the work and production processes. The introduction of Automated Telling Machines and the shift to telephone banking has accompanied a large-scale closure of bank branches (Cressey and Scott, 1992; Leyshon and Thrift, 1993; Tickell, 1997). Information regarding new products, bank account details and loans, which was traditionally delivered by staff working in bank branches, has now been reallocated to call centres. Bankco has been at the forefront of these developments. It has reduced the number of processing jobs (such as cash handling or cheque processing) through out-sourcing of bulk activities to specialist firms. In addition it has substantially increased the number and proportion of ‘customer-facing jobs’; between 1993 and 1998, the proportion of the Bankco workforce working in call centres increased from 9% to 38%. At these call centres, much of the information and knowledge needed for dealing with customer inquiries can be programmed into sophisticated information technology systems. This may well reduce the incentive for the bank to invest in new banking skills. Similarly, at Telecomco, the computer systems are designed to display scripts and prompts in order to reduce the technical knowledge previously acquired by telecom staff through formal training.

In the food retail sector, while there have been major advances in technologies (Burke and Shackleton, 1996), changes have been more influenced by the nature of competition in the sector. Alongside price competition and expansion into new products and services, such as financial, pharmacy and photography services, Retailco has invested large sums of money in establishing a brand, or identity, in an effort to attract a loyal and expanding customer base. Emphasis on the ‘brand’ nature of service delivery may increase pressures to deliver a homogenised quality of service (through increasingly detailed induction training). These pressures are likely to be exacerbated by the recent arrival of the US-owned Wal-Mart, which is widely seen as the champion of standardised services delivery.

Finally, in the public services case study – Councilco – the restriction on government public spending is perhaps the most important factor shaping the external environment, since it forces Councilco managers to find annual cost savings. Since 1994, Councilco has operated under the Treasury straitjacket of funding annual pay rises from existing budgets by achieving so-called ‘efficiencies and other economies’ – a euphemism for cost cutting through early retirement and increased work intensity (Cutler and Waine, 1994; Ackroyd and Bolton, 1999). The introduction of ‘quasi-markets’ transformed local government organizations into ‘cost centres’ and, as service ‘providers’ to bid for funds from ‘purchasers’. This process has brought them into competition with the private services sector, whittling away any shelter from competition that had existed for public service occupations.
2. Delayering and ‘the gap’

As a consequence of these different kinds of external pressures, each of the four organizations introduced strategies for organizational change that involved the ‘delayering’ of job positions within the middle of the hierarchy. The intention of these policies seems to have been to improve and make more direct the pattern of communication between low level and managerial employees. In addition, however, these changes also seem to have ruptured a ‘natural skills progression’ that had previously enabled different groups of staff to move from one level of the internal job ladder to the next. The interruption in the established order of things differed between each of the organizations but the pattern was a consistent one. Transformation in the job ladder at Bankco was associated with a shift from branch banking to call centre banking. As a result the internal labour market principle of steady acquisition of banking skills was replaced by a relatively flat structure of clerical, supervisory and managerial positions. At Councilco, the broad and complex range of job grades that had once been associated with community care (and other departments) were removed. At Retailco, disbanded categories include ‘general assistant supervisor’, ‘assistant department manager’, and ‘department manager’, while at Telecomco, restructuring of operator grades in 1988 removed positions of ‘assistant supervisor’ and ‘supervisor’ as intermediate ranks between operator and team manager.

Evidence of a flattened job structure is provided by data collected on workforce composition at each of the workplaces visited. In general terms each of the workplaces was characterised by a three-tier structure of job bands. At the base were low skilled assistants or operators, line managers occupied a middle tier and high-level managers above them. Large gaps (of skill, responsibility, qualifications and salaries) existed between the low-skilled and managerial positions. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the distribution of staff across these broad bands is highly skewed, with a remarkably high proportion of the total workforce employed on the lower grades and few employed in line management and senior management positions. The distribution is particularly skewed at the three Retailco workplaces and the two Councilco workplaces, where between 94% and 95% of all staff are employed as ‘general assistants’ and ‘home care assistants’, respectively. At Retailco1, for example, just 23 employees are in supervisory or managerial positions compared to 459 employees working as general assistants – with 412 employed on the bottom three out of five grades. The majority of general assistants work part-time (335) with three in four of these jobs taken by women, whereas all managerial positions are full-time. At Councilco1, there are six managers (working in a supervisory or co-ordinating role) and 108 staff employed as home care assistants.

At the two Telecomco call centres, 85% and 92% of the workforce work in non-supervisory or non-managerial positions, as operators. At both workplaces this group is strongly female dominated, despite differences in the role
of part-time work; 152 of the 184 operators at Telecomco1 are part-time, compared to just 35 out of 176 operators at Telecomco2. Finally, the highest proportion of management to staff occurs at the two Bankco workplaces, with 72% and 82% of the workforce employed on clerical grades. Unlike other workplaces, there is a similarity in composition of employees (by sex and by full and part-time) across the three broad bands of job positions at Bankco (see Appendix).

Figure 1 Workforce structure in the case-study workplaces
Notes: Workforce composition represents an average of the workplaces visited for each of the four organizations; the figure does not indicate horizontal delineations for the different groups (divided by occupation or by function or division) in order to emphasise the features that characterise the vertical segmentation of the workforce structure.
Source: see Appendix for data.
The skewed distribution of staff generates an obvious limitation in pro-
motion opportunities for lower skilled staff. At the Retailco workplaces,
where general assistants can progress from any of the five grades (A to E) to
a section manager position, there is just one section manager for every 27
general assistants at Retailco1 and Retailco3 and a ratio of 1 to 23 at
Retailco2. Opportunities appear less limited at Bankco workplaces where
ratios of middle-level (‘appointed’) managers to clerical staff are 1 to 3 and 1
to 6 at the two workplaces.

3. Perceptions of change

All of the people we talked with were aware of these changes and had thought
about the ways they had affected their lives at work. People seemed to agree
that they had improved communication and that the weakening of direct and
intense supervisory surveillance was associated with a greater sense of job
autonomy. All of this was welcomed. At Retailco, for example, one of the
‘general assistants’ remembered how:

When I first started at [Retailco] the managers were all Mr this and Mr
that, Mrs such a thing. Then all of a sudden you could call them by their
first names and they decided that they would listen to the staff more and
ask their opinions (Retailco1, No. 6).

At Telecomco, it also seems that for some staff delayering represented a
loosening of supervisory control and an increased autonomy. One of the team
managers put it like this:

When I first came, a lot of people seemed to just watch other people work,
like the supervisors. They didn’t have a proper job really, they just watched
the operators working. But now, people are encouraged to think for them-
selves and not to need somebody looking over their shoulder (Telecomco1,
No. 1).

However, alongside these views were other, more negative ones. Across the
four organizations we encountered a deep and general dissatisfaction with
the ways in which the flattening of the organizational hierarchy had widened
the gulf between layers of managerial and non-managerial staff. Such distance
between ‘staff’ and ‘manual’ grades has always existed of course, and it was
associated with a formalisation of status and the formalisation of terms of
address. The social distance involved in such a hierarchy was mediated
through a range of intermediary positions (change-hands, progress chasers,
assistant supervisors and so on). These are the positions that were removed
through delayering. As a result in the new hierarchies (constructed around
separate and distinct horizontal clusters of positions) people relate to each

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other across a wide divide; a gap they try to bridge though a new and developing informality of address.

Staff in each of the organizations expressed concern about these developments. At Retailco and Bankco, worries were not restricted to low level workers. Managers also recognised the limited prospects for promotion opportunities (created by the size of the gap between layers) and the implications this might have for morale. A store manager at Retailco explained to us that in the new delayered store:

The promotional leap is too harsh for many general assistants . . . a lot of staff get frustrated with this leap . . . few staff feel they can do it (Retailco2).

At Bankco, 40% of respondents in a staff survey considered ‘lack of opportunities to progress’ as the worst feature of the bank (Bankco staff survey, 1998). A Centre manager acknowledged these sentiments:

[Bankco] now seeks to overcome retention problems by putting in place a clear career ladder through the centres. This should overcome the boredom problems of today, as well as keep hold of the managers of tomorrow . . . (However,) one problem that persists is the gap between team leaders and team members (Bankco2).

For low level staff, knowledge of limited promotion opportunities was often accompanied by a conscious questioning of their ability, confidence, or suitability to make the leap to the next level. In some cases, this was linked with a deep sense of resignation, a feeling that there was no escape from the current job. Others questioned their own worth and capacities in the face of a changing set of job descriptions. A support worker in the community care division of the council felt that:

I haven’t got a lot of ambition . . . I’m not motivated enough to want to be a co-ordinator [the next level up] . . . I wouldn’t like the responsibility, it’s not suitable (Councilco1, No. 6).

For others, the expression of dissatisfaction was much more pointed. At Telecomco it was made clear to us that delayering had not been achieved without pain. The removal of ‘layers’ involved the removal of jobs and the relocation of their occupants – often to lower positions within the company. An operator who had been demoted from the abandoned supervisory post following delayering in 1988 told us:

I was very bitter at the time. It upset me a lot. It sort of knocks your self esteem and you think I’m not good enough. But then I used to think there’s a purpose behind it . . . I think [team managers] are under a lot more pres-
sure than the old Operator Supervisor job was. There are more responsi-
sibilities. I’m thinking at my time of life, do I really need that. The money
would be nice, but we can manage quite well on what I’m being paid. . . .
I’m not bothered. We can manage quite well. Why should I have more grey
hairs, there’s no point. I’ve lost all that drive if you like that I used to have
(Telecomco1, No. 5).

In these ways, therefore, the flattened hierarchy, far from unlocking the
creative capacities of the workforce, contributed to the debasement of
workers. By presenting a structure characterised by enormous inequalities
in income and status, these new organizational forms have the capacity to
diminish any sense of self-value experienced by people at the bottom.
Paradoxically, and in ways that echo Keep (2000), many of the ‘higher level’
activities draw upon limited amounts of skill and formal knowledge. Thus,
when we talked with a general assistant at Retailco who had been selected
for the company’s training development plan, we asked whether advancement
to a section manager post was a big step. The reply was interesting:

I don’t think so, no. I think a lot of it is on-the-job training. You know most
of your skills anyway because you have already developed them. Basically,
listening, learning to talk to people and putting your point across
(Retailco1, No. 4).

This points to the difficulties of characterising the problem as either a ‘skills
gap’ or as a ‘promotion gap’ in the context of delayered organizations. Here,
when people considered the appropriateness of training and their own needs,
they tended to argue that the real obstacle was a lack of opportunity for grade
advancement, rather than inability to carry out the work at the next higher
job level. This is the context within which new managerial policies have
emerged, and in which programmes of ‘training and skills acquisition’ have
been folded into others concerned with the development of corporate loyalty
and new forms of sociability. The pattern of response (to a common problem)
varied across the four organizations.

4. Formalised skills acquisition

At three of the four organizations, pre-existing informal practices of on-the-
job training have been replaced by formal programmes of skills acquisition
(Table 2). At the Retailco workplaces, the range of job tasks carried out by
general assistants are carefully specified and set out in staff ‘Workmate’
instruction booklets. These booklets include a general description of the role
of the general assistant and details of the different tasks, divided into units
and elements, with a small certificate corresponding to each unit. The idea is
that each member of staff has their own booklet, and works through it at their
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<td>(i) Formalisation of on-the-job training</td>
<td>More formalised training (NVQs in customer care, not banking); accompanied by new finely divided job ladders and pay scales</td>
<td>‘Workmate’ certificates for general assistants (NVQs introduced unsuccessfully); devolution of assessment among general assistants; individual learning packages for staff to manage their own career progression</td>
<td>NVQ training for operators in customer services; devolution of training and assessment among operators</td>
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<td>(ii) Restructuring through changing the job</td>
<td>New technologies and forms of work organization designed to expand job variety among operators; low level of job discretion compared to traditional banking jobs</td>
<td>Retraining of home carers to broaden range of job tasks; team-working; unsocial hours premia abolished</td>
<td>Routinisation of work by separating job tasks according to skills required; attempts to create team atmosphere to offset strategy of deskilling</td>
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<td>(iii) Appraisal and selection for the ‘winner- takes-all’ career path</td>
<td>Team managers responsible for regular appraisal of advisors</td>
<td>Regular appraisals of team-working home carers by co-ordinators; temporary promotions common (with higher pay); promotions require longer and more flexible hours</td>
<td>Team managers responsible for regular appraisal of operators; temporary promotions common (with wage supplement)</td>
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own pace. Experienced general assistants act as ‘training sponsors’, and it is their role to train staff and to sign the small certificates. Hence, on-the-job training has been systematised and fully devolved to lower level staff, lessening the need for mid-level managers to invest time in classroom training or hands-on supervision.

However, Retailco general assistants seemed unconvinced of the need to formalise the learning process in this way. In our interviews they emphasised that knowledge of these tasks had traditionally been passed on informally by staff with greater experience and that this system of task-based learning was still adequate. They stressed that the booklets themselves were pitched at a very low level and that their completion did not lead to an increase in pay, or bring them any closer to promotion. As such, in the views of the workers, the ‘Workmate’ booklets did little to enhance skills or pay and career development within the organization.

Similarly at Telecomco workplaces, skills that were traditionally picked up through informal on-the-job training had been re-framed within a formalised system based on NVQ assessment. Again, the long-term aim is to devolve the positions of trainer and assessor to experienced lower level staff. Team managers were quick to point out the difficulties of assuming additional responsibilities.

To me, it is a bit of a hassle because I’ve got to fit it on top of everything else that I do. I find it hard to fit in (Telecomco1, No. 2).

This ‘hassle’ often meant that managers were unwilling or unable to prioritise time devoted to NVQ training. As a consequence, operators were often stuck in a drawn out period of assessment. In one case, the planned six month period of assessment took 18 months to complete; as the full-time operator explained:

Perhaps I am criticising her. But she (the team manager) must be under pressure to do other things besides see to her team, because they have projects of their own to get through. Like NVQ is a good example. She started us off and then that that was it. It was forgotten about (Telecomco1, No. 5).

At Bankco, the formalisation of training was linked to small incremental progressions through the pay range of the job grade. This detailed codification of job tasks and pay increments was the result of a radical restructuring that had taken place in the banking career ladder. Following the switch from a strong branch network to call centre operations, technical banking skills have largely been replaced with ‘generic’ customer service skills. Typically the new training courses include topics such as ‘customer care’, ‘dealing with angry customers’, ‘Bankco culture and values’ and so on. Many of the staff we talked with viewed such training with a mixture of amusement and disdain. At best,
the training was seen to be appropriate for horizontal movement within a limited job grade. It was seen to contain little that related to the ‘banking knowledge’ that could link lower level to mid-level job positions. As a consequence these people were suspicious of the new job-based earnings profiles and the re-codification of job tasks that had accompanied the new training scheme. Their suspicions related to ‘the gap’, and the feeling that the new arrangements were little more than a smoke screen devised to keep them where they were. One advisor explained the situation as follows:

Maybe that’s just an excuse not to give you upgrades just giving you extra levels within your grades so it takes you longer to get an extra grade in full. . . . Say I’m a grade five now; if I do well and I apply for a grade six I’ve got a whole new grade. What they can keep saying is ‘you don’t know this, you don’t know that, let’s just give you one more level within your grade.’ It might slow things down a bit, it might be a bit of a rip off at the end of the day (Bankco1, No. 6).

Within all this there was also a dissatisfaction with the kinds of jobs they were being required to perform and the ways in which training, job task and job progression failed to link together in a coherent whole. People reflected upon the lack of overall job structure in ways that echo Sennett’s (1998) discussion of The Corrosion of Character. One Commercial Officer with eight years of experience at a building society was keen for a new challenge in the changing world of financial services, but was disappointed by what she found.

You are given extra responsibilities. But again, to me, it’s, it’s difficult for me to explain but I find it’s bitty. It’s bitty jobs. It’s not anything you can actually get your teeth into . . . You just come in and you’re given pieces of work to do and you just get your work done and then go home at the end of the day. . . . I can’t actually say I’m responsible for any particular thing. (Bankco1, No. 1).

Perhaps as a consequence, management’s discussions of training also became linked with discussions of changes in the job.

5. Changing the job

In attempting to deal with issues of morale and also to legitimise new training programmes each of the organizations had developed policies aimed at building upon the employee’s commitment and corporate loyalty (Table 2). Retailco was the least radical of the four building upon a traditional practice of ‘welfare provision’ (Jacoby, 1984) within the organization. One general assistant spoke for many as she explained to us:
To be honest, it’s the benefits that have kept me here. When I was shelf-filling, I thought god I can’t go on doing this and I did look round at other jobs. But when you think you get 10% knocked off every shopping bill and the pension is quite good. . . . Things like, not just profit-related pay, but we get shares as well. You also get the save-as-you-earn schemes for shares. In the five years that we’ve had them we’ve doubled our money. . . . When I say I’d like to move, my husband will just say – hang on, we’ve got this save-as-you-earn that’s going to mature – and so on. It’s like golden handcuffs really (Retailco1, No. 6).

Two of the other organizations (Bankco and Councilco) made some efforts to introduce policies that would create multi-skilled teams of workers and with it greater job satisfaction. However, the implementation of multi-skilling – whether designed to address problems of frustrated skills development, or lack of promotion opportunities (skills and promotion gaps, respectively) – met with a number of difficulties.

Within the Community Care Providers division at Councilco, a new group of home care workers were set up in 1997. The aim was to integrate the traditional tasks of home carers (home visits, patient care) with the new task of more effective patient assessment in liaison with Care Managers from the Community Care Purchasers division. Incumbent home care assistants were selected for the new post and trained during a twelve-month, one-day release programme (organised and paid for by Councilco), which covered topics of assessment, monitoring and how to write reports. This scheme came out of a strong corporate commitment to the upskilling of care workers through well developed training, backed by positive expectations among care workers of a move to more multi-skilled work.

In practice, however, the new multi-skilled jobs came at a price. Premium payments were removed and working-time arrangements were less agreeable. In place of a Monday-to-Friday, schedule, multi-skilled carers have the right to just one out of three weekends off, and are expected to rotate across early shifts (8am-2pm) and late shifts (4pm-10pm). With teams organised into groups of three, swapping of shift times is very difficult. This has not only required staff (mainly women) to renegotiate the balance between work and home responsibilities, it has also prevented staff pursuing activities that might assist in their career development. For example, one care worker who had begun an evening class in counselling had to quit once the rotas changed:

Because of the way the rotas were, it wasn’t possible for me to finish the course, which was very disappointing (Councilco1, No. 1).

In spite of the identification of management with ideas associated with ‘investing in people’, the financial pressures on the organization impacted upon the lives of employees in ways that were counter-productive.
At Bankco, multi-skilling involved integrating certain telephone operations with administrative work. At the business customer calls centre (Bankco1), advisors divide their time between answering telephone queries and dealing with related and additional paper work. Moreover, teams were reorganised to deal with telephone queries and administration on a geographical basis, rather than a division of labour by function, again enhancing the potential variety of job tasks encountered. The principle of multi-skilling was generally welcomed among telephone banking advisors. As one Commercial Officer told us:

Everyone’s multi-skilled now rather than just being trained in one area . . . I think it’s a better thing really because people have had more training, more opportunities, people are more skilled at different things. You can say you know more so there’s more opportunities (Bankco1, No. 6).

Here, however, multi-skilling was implemented with limited employee discretion over how to vary and control the timing and division of tasks. Ironically, therefore, expansion in the range of job content was associated with increased pressure and a strong loss of autonomy. Division of tasks between telephone and paper work is predetermined by team managers, which can create difficulties due to the uncertainties of length of telephone calls and the volume of associated paper work. As another advisor in the same call centre explained:

People feel quite harassed in that they have the phone work to do and they have what they call ‘the pap’, which is paper work. And the paper work will build up and if you get say two hours on the phone and you have half an hour break where you could get some paper work done your last caller in a two hour slot could take 20 minutes . . . And so you lose that time and then you’re back on the phone again and so work builds up like that. I’ve noticed one or two people who seem to be quite stressed and I can recognise it because I was very stressed when I first came here (Bankco1, No. 8).

This change was particularly upsetting for those who had been moved to call centres after an experience of branch banking. These employees were accustomed to a relatively high degree of autonomy, including the ability to follow through particular job tasks and to organise their daily activities. In the case of Bankco therefore the new organizational model seems to have produced an impact upon jobs, the pattern of skills acquisition and career development that is predominantly negative.

Telecomco represents a similar pattern, but through a different, and less laudable, route. Faced with persistently high levels of labour turnover in its call centres managers attempted to routinise rather than enlarge work tasks in order to minimise the associated costs. In ways that matched Taylorist practices the work process was redesigned to reduce the need to provide costly
programmes of job training. Alongside these policies of job routinisation, team-working was introduced, but without a programme of multi-skilling or job rotation; instead ‘team-building’ was designed to instil a new ‘atmosphere’ in the workplace. Here in the context of routinised job tasks and limited opportunities for either promotion or significant acquisition of skills a spurious informality was injected into working life. At each of the call centre workplaces, team managers are charged with involving staff in a monthly social activity called ‘the buzz’ – examples include the ‘Country and Western day’ and the ‘Caribbean day’. These are activities in work time that are set aside for sociability and are organised around special food, fancy dress and quizzes. The aim is to encourage an informal working atmosphere that breaks the monotony of call centre work, forges a link in social relations between operators and managers and gives the idea of a unity of purpose among the workforce.

However, both team managers and operators at Telecomco expressed cynicism and dissatisfaction with what they saw to be the American-inspired corporate manipulation. As one operator put it:

[‘Buzz days’] are only fun for certain people, if you’re that way inclined . . . there’ll be so many people that like doing it and get on with it and the rest of you are all left to do the work . . . . You’re really treated like children. They expect you to be doing adult jobs but they’re treating you like children. So if you’re late coming in they have you crawling round on your hands and knees and barking like a dog or stand on the table and wave a rattle . . . . We said to our Mother [the team manager] when we had our meeting, we said let’s have a ‘come to work to work day’, let’s have a normal day instead of all these things (Telecomco1, No. 3).

In early 1999, dissatisfaction among managers at workplace level led to efforts to experiment with strategies of multi-skilling. Discussions with trade unions in 1999 involved the idea – similar to that carried out in Bankco – of merging work groups currently separated by function in order to expand the variety of telephone queries. However, in the absence of some degree of worker autonomy, multi-skilling is unlikely to achieve the outcome of greater worker satisfaction or commitment. One operator at Telecomco put it like this:

Our daily job really consists of once you come in the morning, you log onto your computer, your calls just come in. So you just take whatever calls come to you. It’s what the customers want. You’ve not got a set routine of things to go through. It’s just what comes along. There’s nothing specific I can tell you really about it (Telecomco1, No. 3).

And another told us:

I miss thinking I’ve got to do this today, I’ve got to do that. Whereas now I just sit there. The work comes in. I just get on with it, go home, forget it
...You go brain dead really... You could teach a monkey to do that really. If they could talk that would be it. Just plonk one down, they’d be on with it. Very boring really (Telecomco1, No. 5).

Certainly strategies of multi-skilling and team working at the three organizations do not appear to have offset the adverse impact of delayering on workers’ expectations and attitudes towards employment within the workplace. Strategies of multi-skilling have either exacted a high material price on the part of the workforce (in part, perhaps, as a cost saving for employers to recoup training expenditures), or have introduced polyvalency with little worker autonomy. At Telecomco, team-working strategies have relied on a ‘low-road’ approach to ‘culture change’ in a way that complements long-standing practices of job routinisation.

6. Appraisal and the ‘winner-takes-all’ career path

All four organizations provide new recruits with some form of induction training. However there is a general rationing of access to further training. The processes of rationing vary, involving a number of distinct methods of appraisal and screening of low level staff. In each organization a policy of continuous individual appraisal of low level staff is in place through which candidates for further staff development are identified.

For example, at Retailco, each general assistant is appraised every six-to-twelve months by a section manager, and at Councilco, new multi-skilled teams of home care assistants are appraised by the co-ordinator of the team at monthly intervals (Table 2). However, a number of problems potentially undermine the effectiveness of this process of staff appraisal. One problem concerns the frequent job rotation among mid-level managers who carry out the appraisal. At Retailco, there is a greater rotation of section managers across different divisions and workplaces than among general assistants, since career advancement to the next managerial level is contingent upon rotation. At Councilco, staff in the coordinator post are rotated at six-week intervals, again with the aim of maximising experience across different forms of work activity as a basis for career progression. In both cases, therefore, the effectiveness of continuous staff appraisal is undermined by the discontinuities of staff-manager relations.

Where staff appraisals are designed to identify candidates for further training and eventual promotion, a further problem involves the simultaneous trend towards a reduced transparency in the internal career path and an increased use of individual staff appraisals. This increases the opportunity for individual managers to exercise discretion in the process of selection for career development. At Retailco, for example, one might expect some form of ‘natural skills progression’ at least among general assistants, involving rotation across divisions, the acquisition of a range of skills and advancement up
the limited job ladder (grades A to E). In practice, however, selection for further training for a section manager post is largely dependent on managerial appraisal, with candidates selected from each of the five grades, A to E, from different divisions and with different levels of work experience. The apparent formalisation of the selection procedure is thus undermined by a belief among staff that the process relies too much on subjective judgement. One general assistant who had moved to the store after losing his job as a section manager at another store through delayering told us:

I’ve asked since [about selection for the development plan] and they say we don’t know where you stand on it. So I’ve given up on it. If your face fits you get it. If it doesn’t, you don’t. . . . I’ve already done the First Line Management course, which I thought would be enough. So they obviously don’t think I’m good enough, so I’m not going to push it (Retailco1, No. 7).

Also, at Telecomco, where training for operators is provided in-house, there is a sense that the opportunities for skills development are constrained, not by individual potential, but by the particular outlook of the team manager. A female full-time customer service advisor described the situation as follows:

I think it depends which manager you have. Some will push you. It depends how secure the manager feels – if they don’t feel under threat with what you are doing. Others say ‘Sit there. You do your job and I’ll do mine’. My first manager pushed me for courses. But others say ‘I don’t know why you’re bothering’. It depends how motivated they are (Telecomco2, No. 3).

Accusations of favouritism are often exacerbated by an increasing sense among low level staff that selection for further training requires agreeing to undertake additional responsibilities as proof of commitment to managerial goals. Again, Retailco provides the extreme case. General assistants may be informally requested to cover for section managers when absent, although with no additional payment made. For managers, practices of shadowing higher level staff provide a convenient screening mechanism of an employee’s capabilities. For the general assistant, however, there is a difficult balance between meeting the informal requirements for selection for further training and promotion and the need to avoid expending additional energy, where additional payment is unavailable and the time period for career advancement is highly uncertain. A part-time general assistant working in stock control had the following story:

They do a development plan, but half the time they just use you for a mug. One of the girls, she’s just told them where to stick it because they were mucking her about. She was coming in doing extra hours for them, going on different departments, helping them out and everything. And when the
big shake up came round of moving people around, they just left her (Retailco3, No. 4).

At Councilco and Telecomco, in contrast, shadowing of higher level staff is remunerated at a higher rate as part of a temporary employment contract which regulates cover for vacant senior posts, due either to absence or a recruitment freeze. Generally, we found that staff welcomed the opportunity to earn additional income and to work in a higher level position. However, the temporary nature of the post carries with it the risk of returning to the lower paid position at an unspecified point in time. This was often a demoralising experience. At Councilco, one employee had worked as a home care officer on three occasions, always returning to her previous position as home care assistant once the period of temporary cover ended:

It means that I can go back at any point from whence I came . . . You don’t know where you’re going to be in the future. You’re here today and gone tomorrow (Councilco1, No. 2).

Similarly, at Telecomco, a number of team managers described their position as ‘non substantive’, moving backwards and forwards from customer service advisor to team manager posts.

It’s demoralising isn’t it? You do it for two years, then you’re thrown back into your original job. Then six months later ‘We’re stuck, can you come back and act?’ Then you do it for another two years. How many times do you take being kicked in the teeth? (Telecomco2, No. 3).

They continue to accept this situation in the hope that one day their temporary status will be made permanent. They know that in the absence of a transparent career path, managers increasingly rely on individual discretion in the appraisal process and expect low level staff to demonstrate their commitment through working longer hours or working for a temporary period in posts with greater responsibility (with or without additional pay). This twin focus of managerial policies on individual control of performance (through staff appraisal) and encouraging commitment to the organization (through temporary promotions) has had a number of consequences. Undoubtedly, the transformed structure of the job ladder in the wake of delayering has increased the pressures and responsibilities associated with mid-level positions. As a result, staff with ambitions to ‘move up’ the organization (especially those with experience of ‘acting up’) know that they face an ‘all-or-nothing’ effort in time and energy to make the transition to a mid-level post. They also know that if they are successful they will be faced with an enormous increase in the responsibilities they face and associated pressures on their working time.

At Telecomco, for example, the now abandoned position of ‘supervisor’ used to have responsibility for motivating team performance; the broader
‘team manager’ role now also incorporates responsibility for a range of HR practices, such as arranging cover for absent staff and staff appraisal. While the evidence illustrates a rise in work volume, opinions regarding the consequences are often mixed, as in the following case of an ex-supervisor turned team manager:

We’re expected to do an awful lot of work and a lot of different work. . . . They get their pound of flesh really. But it is challenging. Personally, I quite enjoy change and I enjoy a challenge. So yes, I prefer it the way it is. But sometimes I do feel that I’m going under with the pressure (Telecomco1, No. 1).

Promotion from low level to mid-level positions is associated not only with a rise in pay, but also with a significant transformation in work intensity, responsibility and working hours. For example, at Councilco, one home care assistant was very concerned about the one-off adjustment that was required to balance work and family life in the leap from home care assistant to the position of home care officer (Councilco1, No. 4). In fact, one of the coordinators at a different Councilco workplace argued that the gap in the job ladder was less a problem of skills development than an issue of working time adjustment:

It was the staff who were prepared to work flexibly as home care assistants who saw this [promotion to coordinator] as a step up and more of a challenge (Councilco2, No. 4).

Similarly, at Retailco a woman working as a part-time general assistant was attracted by the prospects of a change of job level and additional income, yet was concerned that the two-year skills development programme required as a gateway to possible promotion involved too many additional hours of work. A more attractive solution, she suggested, would be the availability of regular small-scale training programmes, so that eventual selection would not require a large one-off adjustment in time and commitment (Retailco1, No. 1, Night shift).

The sheer magnitude of the gap between lower and middle layers in the workplace means that the employee’s decision to move up the organization typically involves a major effort of commitment and determination in response to the employer’s ‘all-or-nothing’, or ‘winner-takes-all’, approach to training and career development within the organization. It is not surprising that many end up rejecting this new approach to a working career.

**Conclusion**

Drawing on evidence from four large service sector organizations, this article demonstrates the difficulties facing managers and employees in the aftermath of policies of ‘delayering’. Managers are faced with the challenge of how to
establish a new set of premises upon which to strengthen the workforce’s loyalty and commitment to the organization, in the face of problems of high staff turnover and low job satisfaction. Employees working in low level positions face a widening of the ‘gap’ to the next broad band of mid-management positions and a withdrawal of the organization from programmes of skills development necessary to bridge the gap.

Overall, albeit to varying degrees across the four organizations, the internal path of career progression is characterised by a process of selective upskilling and workforce polarisation. Within the workplaces we visited, traditional job-based earnings profiles, which encouraged steady progression – by skill, pay and status – up the ranks of the occupational group within the organization, have been weakened, or abandoned altogether. They have been replaced by a mixture of relatively flat, more finely differentiated, and isolated clusters of job-earnings profiles, on the one hand, and, fast track, merit-based progression for a selected few who are able and willing to display sufficient commitment, on the other.

At three of the four organizations, strategies to codify the informal acquisition of skills appear removed from efforts to plug the career gap between low-level and mid-level broad layers within the workplace. The creation of finely divided increments within grades was often associated with the need for low-level staff to complete formal documents as new tasks are learned. This can be best understood as a policy to enhance job variety and progression among lower level staff, rather than one aimed at creating an effective platform for successful career advancement through upskilling. As Burawoy (1979) argues, the fact that the choices involve undemanding jobs ought not to obscure the fact that such policies may provide workers with an interest in the preservation of the internal labour market, and, crucially:

\[ \ldots \text{it is precisely that interest that draws workers into the bidding system and generates consent to its rules and the conditions they represent, namely, a labour process that is being emptied of skill (op. cit.: 108).} \]

For employers, therefore, the restructuring of the job ladder among lower skilled staff maintains one of the important principles of an internal labour market, that of providing choice to individual workers, with the aim of fostering consent and commitment. In the absence of the hierarchical, transparent career path, employers rely on alternative, more intensive, techniques of appraisal and selection. Employers expect low level staff to demonstrate their commitment through working longer hours or working for a temporary period in posts with greater responsibility (often without additional pay). Also, employers rely on individual control of performance (through employee monitoring and appraisal). Thus, we have the ingredients for the apparent paradox that although there has been a dismantling of the internal career structure and a lessening of supervisory control, workers are more likely to experience greater monitoring and appraisal of their performance. Reflecting
on the results of a nationally representative survey of workplaces in Britain, Gallie et al. state:

It seems that many employers have pressed ahead with the chief instruments of bureaucratic control even in a period when chances of progression were in decline (1998: 69).

Hence, despite a collapse of the vertical career ladder, a vertical division of labour is still present in our organizations. While delayering may have been accompanied by a shift to horizontal forms of co-ordination and work organization, this may still represent a ‘shadow division of labour’ that supplements vertical hierarchies of control (Warhurst and Thompson 1998).

This pattern of change has served to render the structures of these organizations much more polarised than they were hitherto. Such changes would suggest the increasing relevance of collective forms of understanding and of protest. This touches upon the most ironic (and tragic?) feature of these research findings. In each of the workplaces the workers on the lowest grades in the organizations, employed on the lowest wages and worst conditions, clearly shared a common condition. They spoke about it in similar ways, often using the same kinds of language and expression. Yet their responses to it were almost entirely individualistic – through senses of resignation, feelings of inadequacy and distancing from the job and the organization as evidenced in high rates of staff turnover. Others, encouraged by the formalised training schemes, the appraisal systems and the increasing informality of relationships across the hierarchy, attempted to progress and obtain promotion, with outcomes that were often painful and unfulfilling.

Undeniably the findings that we have presented fit uneasily with government papers on the ‘knowledge economy’ and others that emphasise the importance of ‘investing in people’ and in a society than is built around ‘life-long learning’ (DfEE, 1995; DTI, 1998, 1999; Fryer, 1997). In the workplaces that we visited, there was little evidence that an accredited system of knowledge acquisition was firmly in place, or that this was superior to the more informal ‘on the job’ training schemes that it had replaced. What is clear is that the people we talked with did not experience the organizations they worked for as ‘learning organizations’ within which they played a full and active part.

**Notes**

1 This article draws on research findings as part of a larger project on ‘Managing Employment Change’, involving all four co-authors and funded by the Leverhulme Trust between 1997 and 2000.
2 Crouch et al. (1999) argue that the problem of credentialism is not simply a short-term matter concerning the slow adjustment of demand and supply for skills: ‘If systems of corporate governance and finance and the pressures of global competition exercise independent pressures on the demand for skills – as is very likely – equilibrium might still not be reached. There might continue to be an oversupply of skills and an indefinite continuation of the short-term problem of credentials being used solely for zero-sum competition’ (op. cit.: 17).

3 While the focus of this paper is on the implications of delayering for career paths of low level workers, there is mixed evidence on how organizational restructuring has impacted upon professional and managerial employees. Some studies suggest that middle managers face a worsening of career opportunities and job security due to the collapse of the internal career ladder (McGovern et al. 1998; Savage et al. 1992; Scase and Goffee 1989). There is also evidence, however, of the emergence of a new career model, where managers assume responsibility for developing their own careers (Arthur and Rousseau 1996; McGovern et al. 1998, for a review, see Martin et al. 1999).

4 The collapse of traditional career paths also appears to be associated with managerial practices of encouraging ‘empowerment’ among workers. The idea is that the path to self-fulfilment and individual liberty is a sufficient objective for the workers of the new workplace; a focus on the objective of ‘self-realisation’ enhances both the productivity of employees as workers and their commitment to business goals as individuals (Champy 1995, Kanter 1990, see Du Gay 2000 for a review). But there is considerable scepticism regarding this new agenda of ‘winning hearts’, or ‘mobilising subjectivity’. Rather than job enhancement, employees may be more likely to experience adverse ‘normative controls’ on personality at work (Warhurst and Thompson 1998).

5 This points to one of the major absences in our account and in the workers’ discussion of their experience of work – the trade unions. The changes discussed here were introduced into workplaces in a period when the power of trade union organizations was severely weakened and constrained by statute. Nevertheless the trade unions were recognised in each of the four organizations and had been involved in discussions over the re-grading processes. At both Bankco and Retailco, the trade union was a partner to the new education and training programmes.

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## Appendix

Workforce composition by job level and grade in the case-study workplaces

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