

# Management of employment relations

Business, Management



There is evidence suggesting that, " Despite attempts to modernise the National Training Regime by aligning it with the needs of industry and making it more flexible and portable, there are doubts about the ability of the regime to meet the skill requirements necessary to sustain a competitive and modern economy". The National Training Regime is a regime that has been created to put all qualifications into a framework and make people's qualifications portable. The National Training Regime/Strategy states the vision and five objectives for the National VET

( Vocational Education and Training) system, as agreed by all Commonwealth, State and Territory governments, and strategies to achieve the objectives.

These objectives are to equip Australians for the world of work; enhance mobility in the labour market; achieve equitable outcomes in vocational education and training; increase investment in training; and maximise the value of public education and training expenditure. The National Training Regime is managed by ANTA (The Australian National Training Authority). A Commonwealth statutory authority providing a national focus for vocational education and training. ANTA's mission as stated in ANTA (1998), *Bridge to the Future: The National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training 1998-2004*.

Is " To ensure that the skills of the Australian labour force are sufficient to support internationally competitive commerce and industry and to provide individuals with the opportunities to optimise their potential" (<http://anta.gov.au/dapstrategy.asp>.) Pickersgill (2001) made the point that due to the great pressures of globalisation, great importance has been placed on improving skill formation processes and increasing labour flexibility, thus

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improving productivity. Current Australian Vocational Education and Training policies are intended to create firm specific training. It is suggested that a radical revision of VET policy is required if effective skill formation practices are to be developed.

Increased flexibility in Australia has not been marked by increased levels of skill as hoped by the 1980s proponents of skill based career paths. Rather, labour flexibility has largely been achieved through increased hours of work amongst full time employees and the expansion of non-standard employment relationships. In terms of the reproduction of skill, the overall shift to non-standard forms of employment, increased service sector employment, and small firm size in Australia are all predictors of the decreasing propensity of employers to invest in training. In general, in a response to forces of globalisation, Australian employers have responded to the need for flexibility by adopting numerical or temporal forms of labour flexibility.

Notwithstanding the hopes of a 'new industrial relations of skill', there is no evidence of a major shift to the functional flexibility options that underpinned the multiskilling proposals of award restructuring. With the imposition of Competency Base Training (CBT) the development of skill formation processes, based on assumptions of 'multi-tasking' and 'just-in-time' training has been seen. As Toner (1998) has shown for NSW, the government contribution to the training of skilled trades declined from over 10 per cent of the total in 1986/7 to less than 2 per cent ten years later. Toner has

indicated that the cause of this decline has been corporatisation/outsourcing. ( cited in Pickersgill, 2001, p. 125)

The restructuring of the economy and the workforce have highlighted the importance of skill acquisition as a means towards employment and product market competitiveness. The industrial composition of the workplace has profoundly changed over the past quarter of a century. As summarised in the report *Towards a Skilled Australia* (cited in Connell & Burgess, 2001, p. 9) " Workplace skills are intensifying. Technical skills are no longer sufficient. At all occupational levels, employees need more generic [soft] skills (such as the ability to communicate effectively). Employees no longer merely perform repetitive tasks. They often work in teams; they take greater responsibility for quality; they solve problems; they work with advanced technologies".

In today's dynamic ever-changing world, where technology is rapidly growing, it is indispensable to be highly-skilled and multi-skilled. There is a further imperative for IT skills as all industries and occupations become computerised. Technology can enhance skills, make old skills redundant and lead to new types of skills emerging. Computer skills are becoming an important attribute for job entry and career progression. Computers and IT are an important part of the process of upskilling. Training itself can in turn be transformed through the availability of on-line and self-learning packages. Changes in the occupational composition of employment in Australia are strongly favouring those jobs defined as high skill and low skill, while jobs in the three middle skill levels have declined relatively.

Another classification of occupational change is presented by Maglen and Shah (1999). Their classification uses categories that have a particular focus on globalisation and rapid technological change. They build on the analysis of Robert Reich (1991) who identified three broad sets of skills that underpinned the global knowledge economy. These set of skills are, symbolic analytical services, which involve the manipulation of symbols: numerical, visual, scientific, musical and electronic. They include problem identifying, problem solving, and strategic brokering activities. These services can be traded globally and are open to competition from foreign providers and even their own domestic market; In person services, which refer to services provided on a person-to-person basis.

The market for these services is in the domestic economy; and lastly, Routine production services, which entail so called blue, white and pink collar work that is repetitive and done at one step at a time. Workers providing these services are often employed in high volume enterprises whose finished products are traded on the global market (cited in Curtin, 2001, p. 104-105). Employment restructuring has also taken place. There has been a gradual feminisation of the workforce, and an expansion in non-standard employment arrangements, especially fixed term, part-time and casual jobs.