

The Educationalising of Work? - Changing Attitudes to Education amongst the Skilled Working Class

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Most studies of the education, training or career needs of young people and adults concentrate on the illiterate or socially excluded. This paper uses the findings of three empirical studies of the attitudes of aspirant skilled workers to redress the balance and to provide an accurate picture of the attitudes of ordinary people to education. These empirical studies have been followed up with interviews and discussions with policy makers. The results will overturn many of the assumptions made by educational researchers and policy makers. The research indicates several things. There is no evidence of a skills gap or a need for IT training. However, there is a gap between what educational policy makers and providers want to offer and what might be taken up. There is a desire for traditional forms of education. But the most striking result of the surveys is that in the workplace itself education is everything. The vocationalising of education has been paralleled by the educationalising of work.

Introduction

This paper is a discussion of the attitudes of skilled workers to work and education. It is based on interviews with five hundred skilled workers carried out in Basildon during the

summer following the general election of 1997 and subsequent discussions with local policy makers, focus groups and individuals (Hayes & Hudson, 2001a). It draws upon a previous survey by the same researchers of a similar group of five hundred skilled workers carried out in Basildon during the summer following the general election of 1992 (Hayes & Hudson, 2001b). We began in that year with what we thought was a one-off visit to see if there was any empirical evidence to support the sociological claims being made about the existence of a 'new working class' that had adopted Thatcherite values. We returned to Basildon to review our original conclusions and to broaden the survey. Our original focus and concerns had been narrowly political. In the intervening five years they seemed to us strangely outdated. In a post-political period we had to ask a different set of questions to enable us to understand what people really thought. Education now figured more centrally in this new set of questions. This second survey also gave us the opportunity to repeat and explore further questions we had asked in another survey of 1000 workers (Hudson, Hayes & Andrew, 1996). A third survey is planned for the period after the next general election.

A methodological note

Our intention is not just to reproduce empirical material. Ian Christie (1999) has criticised sociologists and others for widening 'the gap between theory and empirical research' Sociology, he argued, no longer registers with the public, despite its theoretical insights. This paper is part of an attempt to bridge that gap by testing theories, opinions and assumptions by uncovering what people really think. In 1992 and still in 1997 this was

something also neglected by the majority of sociologists. Our aim was to go beyond the related but entirely untheoretical world of market surveys and make a serious attempt to explore and analyse the views of our public, the aspirant skilled workers of Basildon.

Why Basildon?

Basildon was the seventh and last of the post-war new towns. In 1999 Basildon saw its fiftieth anniversary. There is much that makes Basildon typical of many towns today: the shift to home ownership; the demographic changes; and the move from manufacturing to service industries. Indeed, as it matures, Basildon is much more representative of Britain than it used to be as a new town. This is a good enough reason to study Basildon, but while it is becoming more representative, it is still unique.

The sociological uniqueness of Basildon lies in the sheer numbers of workers who are classified as skilled. Basildon simply has a higher percentage of skilled workers than any other town in England. Everyone from Basildon Council to Sun journalists emphasise this point: '30% of workers are in professional/managerial posts and 51% hold skilled/semi-skilled jobs – higher than the national average' (Basildon Fact File, The Sun 9/12/96).

But data that interests sociologists is not sufficient to explain popular interest in and caricaturing of this group of workers. The special feature that shines through in the attitude of Basildon's skilled workers is aspiration. Therefore, we can best categorise this group as seeking to better itself. This group will, if found in sufficient numbers in a geographical place, be the testing ground for political ideas and voting patterns. For this reason, shifts

in attitudes to education and work are more illuminating if studied in this group than in any other. Policy makers and educationalists today tend to concentrate on those who need basic skills or are socially excluded rather than the aspirant worker. The danger of these pre-occupations is that the policy initiatives that flow from them may become increasingly irrelevant to many ordinary people.

Overview of the provisional findings

We found that education rose in importance to the people of Basildon over the 1990s. There are two ways in which this desire for education comes out strongly in our survey. It is, alongside health, the most prioritised area for increased government expenditure and it is the factor people identified as the most important in promoting their personal and career development. This latter and more individualised desire for education is clearly linked to work but it not always purely vocational. There is some emphasis on the value of something resembling a traditional liberal education.

We found the desire for education vague in that it was not linked to any particular policy demands in the way that the first generation of Basildonians argued for comprehensive education. Nor did people mention any particular remedial measures that were necessary to improve the existing state of schools. Where criticisms were made, it was often teachers who were the target. Again these criticisms were vague. Teachers were held to have 'let people down' or to 'be against change'. Education was also vague as an individual aspiration in the sense that no-one in our sample mentioned a particular course or training that they want to undertake. The closest we could get was a 'degree' or a 'college course'.

What were the real concerns of Basildonians?

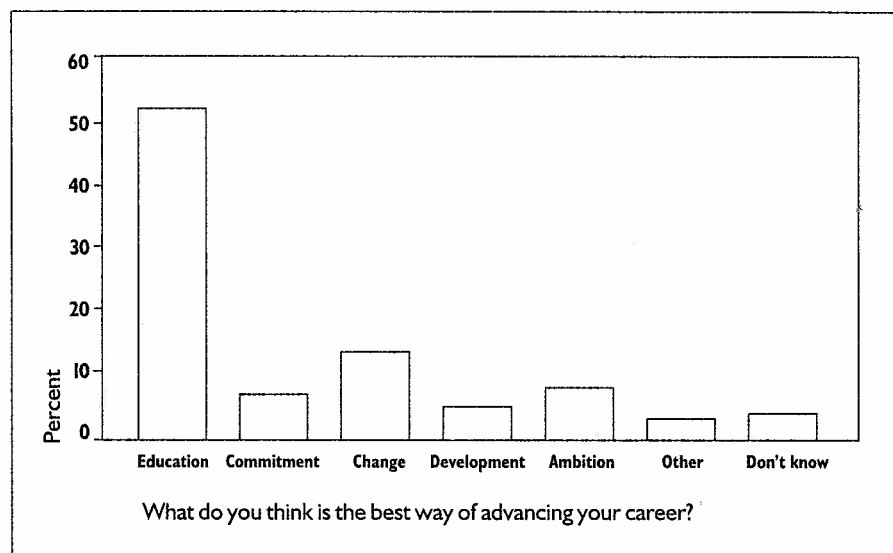
When asked to identify their real concerns by choosing up to three, 60%

included 'health' while 45% identified 'education'. Education came behind health, unemployment and crime as a choice. In 1992 it was only mentioned by 27% of respondents. This increase of 18 percentage points is the largest we identified and is matched only by an increase of 15 percentage points in worries about health.

When asked what the government should spend more money on, health and education are the first and most significant choices, but a gap appears between the two. In the case of health it is a major concern for 60% and a choice of 49% to increase spending on. Education is a concern for 45% but only 22% of respondents want to spend more money on it. Do these gaps of 11 percentage points and 23 percentage points respectively reflect a sense that more spending means better health care but not necessarily a better education? Our qualitative interviews and discussions confirm that this is the case (see below).

Education at work

When asked 'What do you think is the best way of advancing your career?' 52% said education and training. This was an increase from 31% in our national survey of attitudes to work (Hudson *et al.*, 1996). If we add 'Staff Development' to this we get 56% compared with 37% in the earlier findings. A change of job is still quite the positive choice of 15% of respondents. This latter response shows some confidence in our respondents' individual abilities to get on. But so does the faith in education and training. It is important to stress how new and individualised this response is.



In the fifties and sixties education was hardly mentioned in studies of the skilled worker. In the classic study of embourgeoisement, *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour* (Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1968), education and training are discussed solely in the specific context of the possibility of becoming a foreman. In distinct contrast with our group of skilled workers in Basildon, all of who had undertaken training, Goldthorpe *et al.*'s sample of semi-skilled and skilled workers, 85% left school at 14 or under and only 15% had any subsequent part-time vocational training.

Lifelong learning

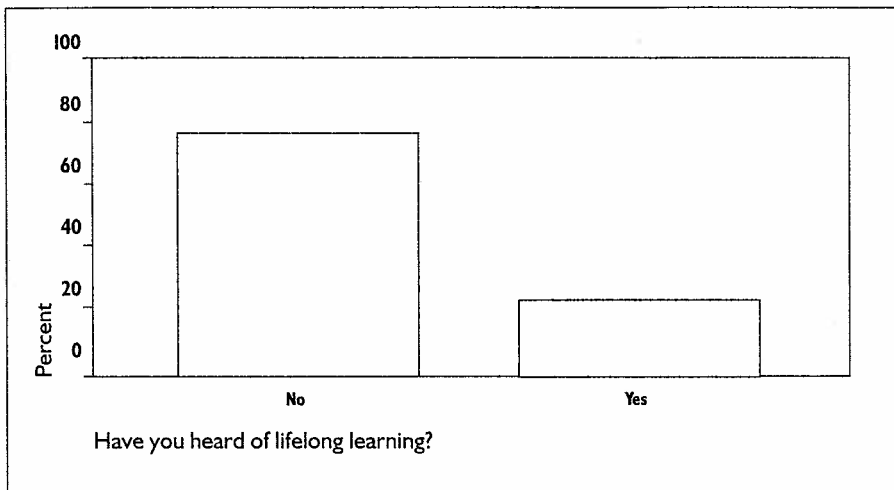
The year before our survey was the European Year of Lifelong Learning. It was discussed and celebrated at conference after conference and in report after report. Both the Conservative government and New Labour argued for the necessity to create a culture of lifelong learning. The emphasis placed by Basildonians on education as a way to develop their careers might be considered support for just such an idea. However, this concept had no impact at the time of our survey.

Only 23 per cent of respondents claimed to have heard of the phrase 'lifelong learning', and when asked to specify what it meant, most formulated a response that referred to past experience or suggested they did not have a clue. They made comments like 'going back to college' or 'to keep on learning'. Of course, this may change and the terminology may become more commonly understood, partly as a consequence of DfEE and other government publicity campaigns.

Policy implications

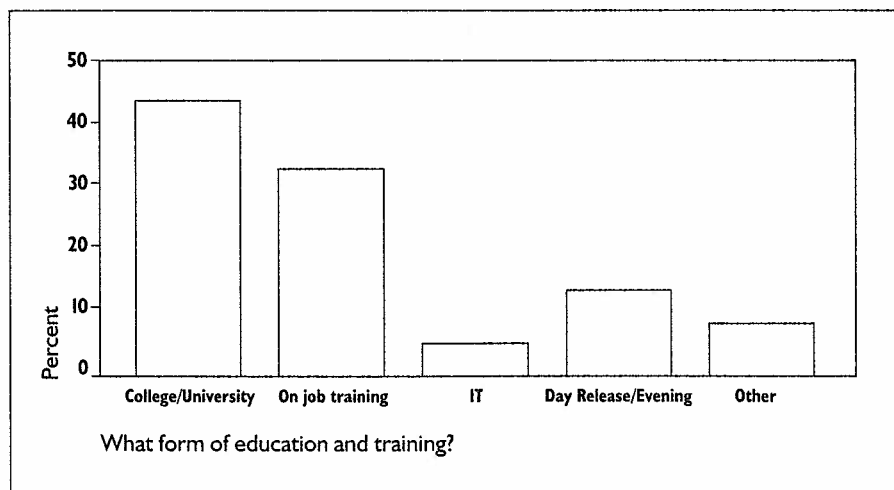
The increasing concern with education is not based on anything substantial. No strong view of crumbling and failing schools, of the need for youth training and qualifications for entry to the labour market, or of the need for 'lifelong learning', came across from our respondents. Not a single respondent identified the need for 'basic skills' teaching. In our in-depth interviews, technical IT or engineering skill updating was held to be either unnecessary or easily achieved through workplace training. Recognising the particular nature of our sample of skilled workers, this presents a problem for national and local educational policy makers who continue to emphasise policies aimed at those who need literacy and numeracy skills as well as those associated with employability. We claim not that these policies are wrong but that the majority of Basildonians are already committed to education and therefore these policies have no application to them.

The emphasis put by the local council on the East Basildon Education Action Zone (EAZ) indicates that there are others in Basildon for whom raising of basic educational standards is a priority. Education Action Zones aim to be innovative in tackling disadvantage and to raising standards through a partnership approach involving the schools, local authority and parents, but above all it prescribes a central role for business. There is hope among policy makers that this will have an effect in a relatively deprived area of Basildon, but early research indicates that zones bring little in the way of innovation; rather you get a repackaging of what provision already exists (Pye, 1999). This may, however, achieve one desired end in promoting a re-alignment of professionals with an interest in improving educational provision. Given that it is the attitudes of teachers and others that are criticised by Basildonians (see below), the EAZ may initiate some welcome change. A minimum requirement for this would be a willingness to address these criticisms in other than a defensive



What form of education and training do they want?

When asked what form career advancement would take, 43.7% of those responding suggested College or University, and 32.5% on-the-job training (44.4% if we add day release and evening classes); only 4.8% sought IT training. There is a considerable endorsement of on-the-job training here. The low demand for IT training might relate to this being a unique sample of the skilled working class. It may be that they already have this training. Some 10% of our sample were working as specialists in work related to statistical analysis, design or IT. IT can be seen as part of an 'upskilling' or 'reskilling' trend in the work place. It certainly has implications for employers and education/training providers, because further training will have to be at an advanced level to attract these workers.



There remains a strong commitment to traditional forms of education but there is substantial support for training at work. The former may be evidence of the shift towards the demand for 'soft' skills in the new customer-oriented workplace, while the latter might be considered recognition of the reality of 'credentialism' – the need to have a certificate to show that you have the skills to do the job.

fashion. Whatever the result of this initiative in Basildon, it is situated in an area where educational need may match existing policy. Our argument would be that the area where the EAZ is based is atypical and that to win general support policy must meet general aspirations such as the need for more committed teachers.

The emphasis on education carries little information for policy makers if considered in purely material terms. More money spent on school buildings, equipment and more teachers would not necessarily remove the concern. Our evidence for this is mostly negative although it was a possible explanation of the statistical gap between education as a concern and as a spending priority discussed earlier. Information from the teachers we talked to and our visits to schools and to Basildon College did not leave the impression of a decaying and under-resourced educational environment. Like the town, the schools are relatively new even if their architecture is now unfashionable. Our respondents spoke in very specific terms about the state of houses and shops and roads and did not mention any specific educational needs. The only concerns that came out in our interviews were with the failures of teachers as a group. This appears to be a concern across the generations and may have something to do with the difficulties of attracting good teachers to the area. One respondent articulated a not uncommon assessment of teachers:

'They're not properly educated. They don't know anything. Especially those that come to Basildon. They despise the kids. They say things like "What can you expect from the kids from round here!" It's not the kids that are the problem: it's the teachers'.

Another respondent told us 'They will live anywhere but Basildon'. Good teachers and positive experiences were the exception amongst our respondents.

The real policy challenge would be to give content to their desire for that college course or degree. It may be that

the issue is simply that what is needed is something like a re-packaging of a liberal education. The vagueness of the Basildonian desire for education and the absence of any clear notion of the content of it is unsurprising after two decades of government policy that subordinated the education system to a narrow economic vision we know as the 'new vocationalism'.

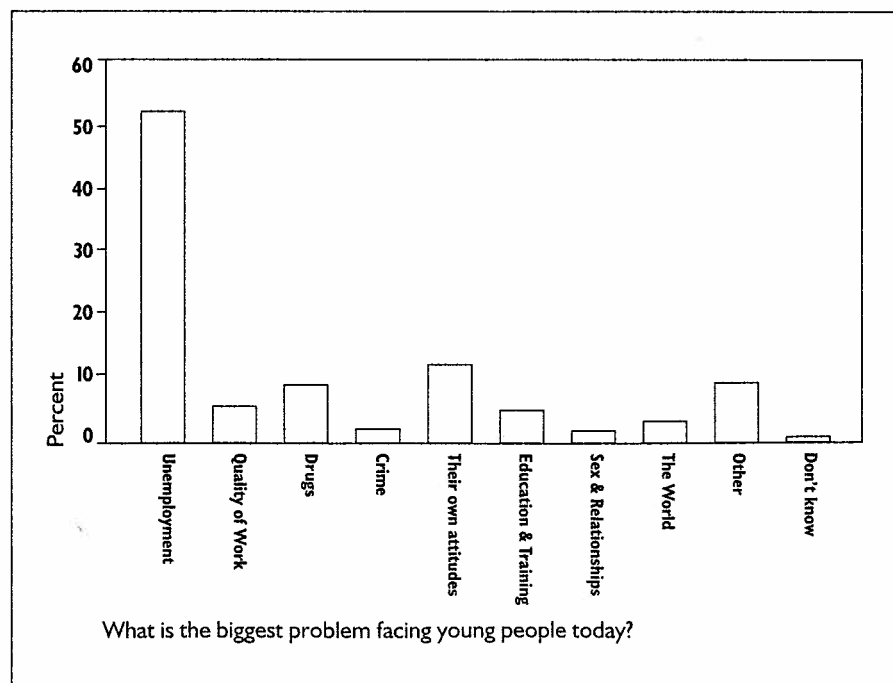
Our sample of skilled workers are, by definition, trained and educated beyond a basic level. This means that policy solutions must reflect a higher level of educational need. The issue is not one of *meeting* complex needs but of *determining* those needs.

There is evidence based upon workplace initiatives (see below) that a direct grant to adults would encourage immediate participation in a new liberal education, although the absence of a grant would not preclude it. Participation might be facilitated by a university annex being set up in the town. Such innovations are happening elsewhere. Policy makers might like to consider these options. However, on the basis of our evidence and experience, Basildonians can be left to, and will, make their own choices about their education.

Unemployment and training

The major concern in our 1992 survey was with unemployment. 58.7% of our respondents mentioned it. In 1997 concern with unemployment remained high. There was a decline of just 6.1% in 1997, with 53% of respondents citing it. However, this relatively small decline in concern is at variance with the reality of (un)employment in present day Basildon. Unemployment in 1992 was higher than the national average at 10%. It peaked at 12% in 1993 and declined to 4% in 1998. At the time of our second survey it stood at 6%. Long-term youth unemployment is virtually non-existent in Basildon. At present there are only 61 young people falling into this category.

Basildonians' worries about unemployment may seem to be an expression of the residual fears and memories of the Thatcherite years and of a generation that experienced a relatively jobless youth. 53% of our sample indicated unemployment as a major concern. Surprisingly, given the facts, 62% of young people are worried about the prospect of unemployment. This is matched only by the concerns of the 45-plus age group. The fear of unemployment was further confirmed when we asked the direct question 'What is the biggest problem facing young people today?'



Unemployment is seen as the main problem for youth (53%) followed by minor concerns about 'their own attitudes' (11.4%), drugs (8%) and the quality of work (6.4%). These perceptions are shared across the generations. These are surprising findings for policy makers. In the town where Leah Betts died, drugs are not perceived as a major problem for youth. Nor is crime. Youth themselves are less than half as likely to be worried about crime. The overwhelming fear is of unemployment.

There was little evidence that this was a problem related to young people's training needs. Only 2% of our respondents felt that the government should spend more money on youth training. Only 4.8% identified education and training as a problem for youth. The view was expressed that this sort of training came with a job. There was no concern that a lack of basic job training would actually bring about unemployment.

There was some indication that the attitudes of young people might be a problem. 11.4% of respondents mentioned 'their attitudes' as the biggest problem. This could be related to the perceived absence of the social skills required for new forms of flexible working. Nor is it just the older respondents who make such criticisms. Young people are just as likely to criticise their own generation for attitudinal problems. These criticisms are often strong and are directed against those few young people who lack the normal aspirations of Basildonians. The reality is that these are mythological figures. There are just too few young unemployed people.

A more likely explanation for the concern with unemployment could be that in the changing world of work anxieties traditionally associated with young people, such as short-term working, with periods of unemployment and job searching, are now generalised across all age ranges. As with almost all of our findings, there was no significant difference between generations. Older, more experienced and skilled workers now have the same anxieties as youth. However, we found that Basildonians' attitudes to the new flexible workplace and to frequent job changes was positive. The prospect of the changed workplace was accepted, not feared.

All our respondents were employed and it appears that the concern with unemployment is just given or is a residual fear of the return of what Basildon life is supposed to guard against through the opportunity the town offers to get a decent job and better yourself.

Individuation: the collapse of collectivity

Fear of unemployment may also be the result of the decline of traditional institutions associated with the welfare state and the labour and trade union movement. Our belief is that a more hazy or vague desire for education is, in part, a natural consequence of the individualisation of the skilled workers of Basildon.

If advancement at work is now sought primarily through education this, in part, reflects the collapse of the trade union movement as an active force in determining workers' pay and conditions. Our findings show a dramatic decline through the generations. Only three of the under 25s in our sample were union members. Union membership has been relatively more stable in the late 1990s, after a dramatic decline. This is due to unions recreating themselves as victim support and insurance agencies. This orientation around individual needs bears no relation to the collective role they once performed. In the past, if no individual advancement was possible within a firm, it was the force of collective action that secured material advancement. The result of the downplaying of the active side of trade unionism is precisely the increasing emphasis on the importance of

education. There is no other way of advancement at the present time.

Work and education

We found evidence in our survey that that there is a growing interconnection between work and education. Why is this? Our answer to the question related to the absence of collectivity. Education is essentially an individual enterprise and is a way of bettering oneself. Given the aspirations of Basildonians and the absence of other ways of improving themselves, they have come to believe that education is everything.

There are other possible explanations that could be advanced to explain the concern that skilled workers have with education. The most appealing to educationalists is that popular idea that we now live in a new knowledge based 'e-society' or are entering a new 'creative age'. Most of the literature that discusses the relationship between work and education is usually concerned with the so-called 'knowledge economy' or 'knowledge capitalism'. A detailed discussion of whether there is any reality behind the claim that we are now through a knowledge revolution or whether this is just self-flattering rhetoric of government departments and human resource managers is beyond the scope of this paper. However, there is evidence that the potential of the new technology is being squandered. Studies of the performance of the US economy show that, whatever the claims, the 'knowledge revolution' does not appear to have impacted on productivity statistics. It is far too early to declare a new era. We can, therefore, put aside the mechanistic view that changes in the economy have affected worker attitudes in some direct and simple way.

It has been also been argued that education has come to the fore as a result of management attempting to counteract the impact of corporate downsizing on employee commitment and morale. The aim was, from the

moment of recruitment, to get employees to internalise management values and attitudes. This involved continuous learning so that employees could 'work smarter' and a recognition by managers that they could do this best if they taught others.

This almost therapeutic process involved several strategies including the use of employee assistance programmes (EAPs). When these began in the 1970s in the US, they aimed to tackle alcohol and drug-related problems. They soon expanded to a wide range of programmes aimed at tackling personal problems that were not related to work. They 'focussed on the individual, emphasising the importance of physical and mental fitness and the improvement of personal lifestyles' (Poynter, 2000, p.42). By the time such a programme was implemented by an international company in Basildon, there was a focus on educational improvement.

The success of the Ford Employee Development and Assistance Programme (EDAP) is instructive in relation to the argument that the concern with education results from management initiatives. Launched in 1989, it was expected that only 5% of employees would take up a grant to study a non-vocational course. As one adult education teacher who was associated with the scheme told us:

'The take up came as a surprise as almost a third of the work force applied for grants. Ford workers were cynical about this as part of their employment package but took the opportunity because it was about personal development, about education. They could study what they liked as long as it was not work-related. This changed later on. It had a great impact on the local colleges and on adult education.'

This scheme soon became directed towards meeting basic skill needs and achieving target numbers of training qualifications. But it does show the weakness in identifying management initiatives as being responsible for their employees' increased interest in education. Management were taken aback by the willingness of large numbers of employees to take advantage of the programme. Educational opportunities were something workers clearly wanted.

A further explanation is that work has changed for reasons that derive from outside the workplace:

'Work is being made to perform or fulfil additional social roles which have nothing to do with the prime function of work as a place for value creation. Work has become more important because of the way the other parts of social life are not working as well as they used to: everything from the family and personal relationships to politics' (Mullan, 2001).

We must recognise that this is a paradoxical relationship. Work is often blamed because, for example, overwork and increased working hours seem to threaten family life, to damage personal relationships and to leave little time for active political involvement. Nor can we assume that, from a personal point of view, work has not become more fulfilling. It is less a source of identity than it once was, but it is all that is left after the collapse of collective welfare state and community institutions. People look to work for self-development opportunities and self-fulfilment because the rest of life is less satisfying. Education is one of the demands now put on work because of changes outside of work.

What we discovered in our survey of skilled workers was a concern with education that supports this wider analysis of the restructuring of work. Basildonians put their faith in education as a way forward at work often because of their unhappy

experience of local authority education, but more importantly because it fills a gap left by the collapse of older methods of work advancement, whether collective (TUs) or individual (changing jobs). But our conclusion should not give heart to employers that their employee development strategies will merge with worker aspirations to create a new harmonious workplace. Education is an individualised self-centred concern. The more workers take responsibility for their personal development and achievements, the more that even the residual elements of workplace collectivity and co-operation will be undermined. The result can only be more fractious relationships at work.

Note

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