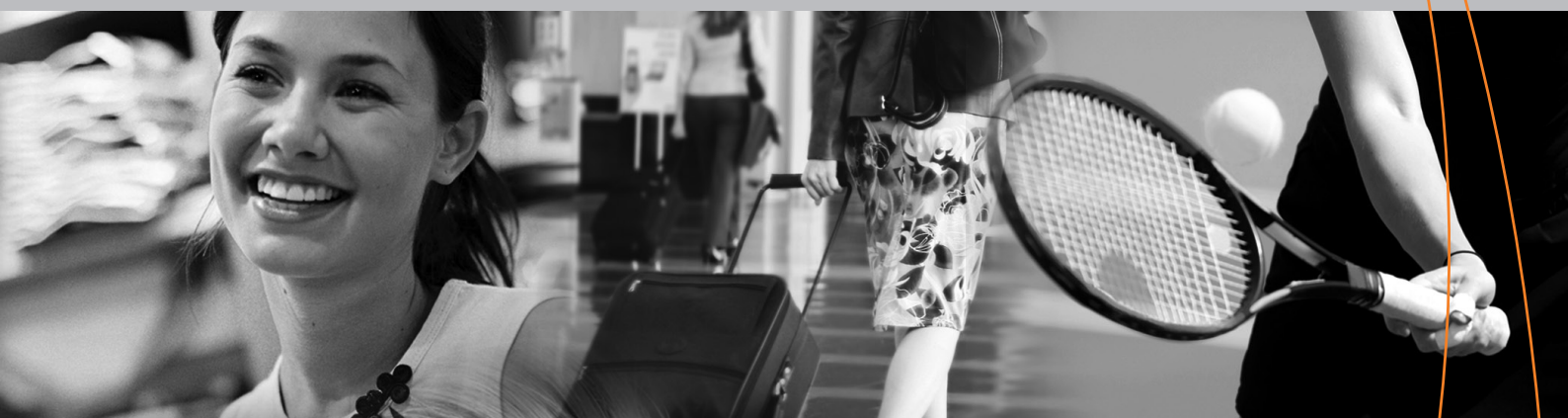


WAYS OF SEEING: RECONCEPTUALISING SKILLS

Prepared for Service Skills Australia by
Prof. Erica Smith and Prof. Julian Teicher

University of Ballarat
Learn to succeed



August 2011

Table of contents

1	Introduction.....	1
2	Literature review	5
3	Findings from stakeholder interviews.....	9
4	Case study and validation findings	16
5	Conclusions and recommendations.....	20
	References.....	25
	Appendix 1: Interview and case study questions.....	28
	Appendix 2: Case study reports	32

About the authors

Erica Smith is the Professor of Education at the University of Ballarat. She is co-chair of the International Network on Innovative Apprenticeship (INAP), the Associate Editor of the journal *Education + Training* and makes regular contributions to professional journals such as *Campus Review*. She is also the Immediate Past President of the Australian VET Research Association (AVETRA) and was previously the convenor of the Australian VET Teacher Educators' Colloquium (AVTEC). Erica's own research has received grants from the Australian Research Council Linkage program and from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) and covers apprenticeships and traineeships, accredited training in workplaces, competency-based training, VET policy, school-to-work transition, and part-time student working.

Professor Julian Teicher is currently the Head of the Centre of Commerce and Management at RMIT University Vietnam. Prior to his recent relocation, Julian was Director of the Graduate School of Business at Monash University. He has received Australian Research Council Discovery grants and has expertise across a range of areas, primarily in industrial and workplace relations and public sector management. Julian's recent research has been in e-government, employee voice, workplace privacy, privatisation and contracting out, skill formation/training, equity and diversity, and Australian industrial relations and law. He has published widely including ten books and monographs and more than fifty journal articles.

1. Introduction

This project is the first step for a new way of looking at skill in Australia. It considers why people think some jobs are skilled and others are not, and moves towards a superior way of looking at skill by developing a conceptual framework for examining and analysing skill in jobs specifically for the service industries. It suggests some ways in which skills and perceptions of skill in the service industries may be improved.

This involved a 'multiple-frame' approach that includes different ways of looking at skill. The approach used has led to the development of a conceptual framework for looking at skill in jobs and a draft practical tool for trial use in policy and practice.

The rationale for the project was the need to realign the way that Australian policy makers, analysts and industry stakeholders think about skill. The scope of the study covers jobs which do not require a university qualification, i.e. those jobs for which the vocational education and training (VET) system caters. The term 'skilled work' is often used to describe only those jobs which have traditional apprenticeships attached to them. But this is clearly a narrow and outdated way of looking at skill.

Assumptions about skill underpin several areas of national policy, for example:

- Funding for apprenticeships and traineeships (Both Commonwealth and State). Funding for some traineeships in the service sectors has been withdrawn because, it is argued, the jobs are not skilled and do not need training.
- Migration policy and what jobs are on the 'skilled list'. The recent debates over migration and international students, for example, show that it has been easy for influential commentators to affect government policy in ways detrimental to the service industries.
- The Australian Qualifications Framework. Despite revisions, the AQF still refers in its descriptors of qualification levels to preparation for 'skilled work' without any attempt to define what this means.

There are many other implications of unexamined and inaccurate assumptions about skill. Current perceptions about skill adversely affect certain groups such as women and service sector workers (Smith, 2004). For individuals, location within 'unskilled' occupations leads to low self-esteem, limited career prospects, limited access to qualification pathways and low wages (Smith, 2006; Somerville, 2006). Concepts of skill operate to perpetuate existing patterns of social and economic stratification. A new way of seeing skill may increase the valuing of lower-status jobs, and improve training and career paths; improve targeting of training expenditure to occupations; and improve career prospects for lower-paid workers (Rainbird, 2007).

The aim of this small pilot project was, within the service industries sector, to produce a report that:

- Provides an initial critical account of the attitudes towards skill that are held by different stakeholder groups in the training and workplace relations systems.
- Involves stakeholder groups in the development of an evidence-based multiple-frame model that can be used to examine skill.
- Validates the multiple-frame model in a range of jobs and service industry areas and verifies its utility for policy development.
- Shapes the multiple-frame model into a practical tool for trial use in policy and practice as well as a theoretical model.

Current skills and training policies in Australia are based on concepts of skill that focus on an elite of traditional trades occupations. These concepts have, arguably, led to an over-resourcing of training in the trade occupations (which may not, for example, necessarily require the long training times associated with them) and an under-resourcing of training in the occupations found in the faster-growing service sectors of the economy. They have impeded processes of organisational and job redesign that are needed in a rapidly changing world economy. There is also gender bias, privileging 'male' over 'female' occupations, because of the favouring of traditional craft jobs over more recently-established and service sector jobs. In fact, the three largest industries in Australia (in terms of numbers employed) are service industries, with retail first at 14%. Manufacturing is now fourth at only 10%, having fallen from 14% over the past decade (ABS, 2008: 3-4). The retail and hospitality industries form the largest sector in Australia's economy. In 2009 the retail and wholesale sector contributed \$111 billion to Australia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (9.6% of GDP), with almost a quarter of a million enterprises operating in the sector (Service Skills Australia 2010a). Hospitality had 56,500 enterprises with 740,000 people employed in accommodation and food and beverage services; its contribution to GDP in 2007-8 was \$40.6 billion (Service Skills Australia 2010b). Internationally, western economies continue to move from primary and secondary towards service industries (Triplett & Bosworth, 2004).

The multiple-frame approach we have used is adapted from organisational theory (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; subsequently popularised by Bolman & Deal, 1991). It proposes a number of ways of examining a phenomenon and that each perspective contributes to a fuller understanding. We began our research with four 'frames', or ways of looking at skill, each of which has a number of possible constructs. Jobs can be examined through each frame, giving a more rounded view of skill than a single-frame approach.

Research method

The research approach is qualitative, as perspectives are best explored in this manner (Maxwell, 2002), particularly in relation to skill (Attewell, 1990); it involved interviews with key stakeholders in three service sector industry areas and case studies in four companies. The company case studies enable the issues to be seen in context (Yin, 2003); as skills are always practised within company settings it is particularly important

to use a case study approach. Case studies are useful for building theory (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

At Service Skills Australia's request we covered three service industries: retail, hospitality, and hairdressing. Hospitality was used as an opportunity to research both a trade (commercial cookery) and non-trade occupation, while retail and hairdressing were used to research non-trade and trade occupations respectively.

Key stakeholder interviews

For each of the three industry areas, five key stakeholders were interviewed:

1. Employer association CEO or delegate;
2. Trade union representative;
3. Service Skills Australia representative from the industry area;
4. Senior TAFE practitioner; and
5. Senior practitioner from non-TAFE RTO.

The stakeholders were nominated, and access negotiated, by Service Skills Australia; they included participants from three different states and several with national roles. In one case, the same respondent was interviewed for two industry areas (trade union representative – retail and hairdressing), so the total number of interviewees was 14. Interviews, undertaken by phone, lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were taped and transcribed, with permission. The interview questions are at Appendix 1a.

Case studies

Four case studies were carried out (Table 1). One company in each industry area was sought, but due to accessing two volunteer companies for retail after a long period of difficulty in finding a site, it was decided to carry out case studies in both. This proved a valuable move as the companies were quite different.

Table 1. Case study sites

Industry	Trade occupation	Non-trade occupation	Company pseudonym	No. of interviewees
Retail		✓	Fine Foods	3
		✓	Sportsco	5
Hospitality	✓	✓	Catering Co	6
Hairdressing	✓		Coiffeur Hair Design	4
				18

Case studies were undertaken during August 2010. In each case study we sought the following participants:

- a senior line manager,
- senior HR/training manager,

- union official (where appropriate),
- one supervisor,
- two workers in the occupations being studied (ie four workers in the hospitality case study).

There was no workplace union presence at any of the sites, and in the case of Fine Foods and Coiffeur, the company was too small to have a person with a specific HR/ Training role. The other levels of interviewee were accessed in all cases, except that at Catering Co it proved impossible to access two workers in the same non-trade occupation so two workers in different non-trade occupations were interviewed. While this was a disadvantage in terms of comparability, it did provide further richness to the data.

In all interviews the focus of the discussion was on the particular occupation being studied in that industry area. Interviews were carried out on-site except that in the case of Sportsco two corporate staff were interviewed by telephone. Most interviews were quite lengthy (many lasting nearly an hour) and it proved difficult to complete the detailed interview protocol (Appendix 1b).

Validation

We were originally intending to return to the original case study workplaces and seek confirmation of the findings, as well as testing in different workplaces, but on reflection realised that it was necessary to do more than just reflect back what had already been found in that company. Therefore the only companies to which we returned for a second visit were the two retail companies as it was possible to seek feedback on the other retail company's findings. Should this project be repeated on a larger scale it would be advantageous to have two case study companies in each industry area, for this purpose. For each of the other two industry areas we validated the framework in one other workplace. In hospitality this was a major entertainment venue with a number of catering outlets ('Leisure Co'), and in hairdressing it was a suburban salon in a different regional city that was pitched at the upper end of the market ('Pamper Palace'). The total number of validation visits was therefore four; and in each workplace we interviewed one manager and one worker. In all cases the focus of discussion was the job we were studying.

Appendix 1c shows the questions that we asked in each validation company. It should be noted that we did not reveal the identity of the companies to each other; we merely gave brief descriptions.

Analysis of data and production of models

Themes were drawn out from the interview transcripts and the data were coded and analysed using data reduction and display techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The conceptual framework was developed progressively through the three stages of data collection.

Production of draft tool for use in policy and practice

The draft tool was developed following a workshop with Service Skills Australia stakeholders and is based around the functionality of the conceptual framework in policy and practice settings. The proposed tool appears in the conclusions section of this report (Table 4).

2. Literature review

It is necessary, before developing a new conceptual framework, to document the nature of the current concepts of skill and the reasons why these concepts have taken root, and to consider the most effective way to challenge those concepts.

The concepts of skill which underpin the training and workplace relations systems in Australia have their foundation in the interests of different stakeholder groups as well as in the Australian popular consciousness. In Australia, powerful vested interests such as trade unions, employer groups and intermediary organisations form a loose coalition that sustains a definition of skill born in a time when the Australian economy was based on primary industries and manufacturing and operated a centralised industrial relations system (Gospel, 1994). In other countries, such as the UK, these institutional barriers to change have been less durable and a new approach to skill formation has emerged, less hampered by the past (Smith & Smith, 2007). Thus, while the need to have a firmer grip on the meaning of skill is international, Australia suffers particularly from a relatively ossified vision of skill that is rooted in what Littler (1982) and Spenner (1990) call 'romantic' notions of skill based on nineteenth century craft occupations. Beliefs about skill are transmitted from generation to generation of workers through training both on and off the job. Many major stakeholders in skill formation policy, such as trade union leaders and those managing employer associations, have working lives rooted in the old skills culture and find it difficult to accept new notions of skill that are outside this personal 'habitus' (Colley, 2002; Bourdieu, 1977). Such entrenched positions can clearly be seen in transcripts and reports of Australian government inquiries such as the 2003 Skills Inquiry (Senate EWR&E Committee, 2003).

Concepts of skill affect the perceived worth of different occupations and of individual workers and the ability of national economies to respond to change. Recently, Australia has moved through a sustained economic boom to recession and back to boom again. From 2000 until 2008 the main skills focus was on shortages (Australian Industry Group, 2006) which replaced an earlier debate, begun in less favourable economic circumstances, about the imperative for a 'high skill equilibrium' system (Finegold & Soskice, 1988). Along with such fluctuations in the *demand for labour*, underlying changes in the *nature of work* (Buchanan *et al.*, 2000) also affect demand for different types of skill; newer occupations contain new forms of skill that did not exist a century ago and occupations become fluid as jobs combine skills that were in the past separated into different occupations (National Research Council, 1999). These two strands of attention to skill have proceeded without a fundamental examination of the nature of skill, meaning that the rhetoric of policy 'means very different things to different people' (Borghans, Green & Mayhew, 2001: 376)

One reason why an overarching conceptual framework for skill has not yet been developed is that the skills literature is typically highly 'siloed' among a range of disciplines including economics, occupational psychology, management, industrial relations and human resource development as well as education (Sawchuk, 2006). Another reason is the presence of divergent approaches to the nature of skill (Esposito, 2008). The four major approaches are detailed below.

1. **Positivist/technicist approaches** view skill as an unproblematic, measurable 'quantity' (Attewell, 1990, Felstead *et al*, 2005) based on indicators such as complexity and autonomy (Adler, 2007); skills relating to working with people are generally seen as less important than skills relating to working with things. The Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT) was widely used for many years in the US (Spenner, 1990). It is based on a number of 'objective' measures; these have been critiqued (Steinberg, 1990) as gendered and racialised.
2. **Proxy measures of skill**, such as length of training, wage rates (Spenner, 1990) or , in Australia, the ABS's ASCO classifications, are often used to measure skill (Esposito, 2008). However it is argued that they may be problematic (Young, 2004; Grugulis & Lloyd, 2010) and are used primarily because of a lack of other data (Gatta *et al.*, 2007).
3. **Social construction** theory centres around claim-making by interest groups and explains how beliefs about skill and the job hierarchies are operationalised through industrial relations and qualifications (Steinberg, 1990: 455). Labour process theorists (Littler, 1982: 10-11; but challenged by Adler, 2007), assert that so-called 'skilled' jobs gain the 'skilled' label because of collective organisation by workers. Feminist literature (eg Healy, Hansen & Ledwith, 2006) has extended this labour process approach, arguing that 'male' jobs have gained the reputation of being skilled at the expense of 'female' jobs.
4. **Soft skills.** Over the past thirty years there has been an increasing emphasis internationally on 'generic' or 'soft' skills (Gatta *et al*, 2007), such as emotion work and aesthetic work. These have been operationalised in Australian training policy as 'key competencies' or 'employability skills' (BCA & ACCI, 2002). Some scholars claim that soft skills are no more than personal attributes (Grugulis, Warhurst & Keep, 2004); others argue that soft skills are as real as 'technical skills', acknowledging underlying gender issues since 'female' jobs are more likely than 'male' jobs to incorporate soft skills (Gatta *et al.*, 2007).

Key actors in skills policy such as governments, employers, unions, skills councils and training organisations take their favoured approach to skill. The apprenticeship and traineeship system has been a battleground in the skills debate with traineeships (often in newer industries and occupational areas, and more likely to involve women) under constant attack and governments 'rewarding' traditional, apprenticed occupations with longer training times and greater funding whilst leaving those in low-status occupations vulnerable. A recent research project on traineeships (Smith *et al*, 2009) surfaced some of these issues. For example, the study indicated that the quality of training provided by registered training organisations (RTOs) for an occupation is partly dependent on the perceived inherent skill of the work.

A recent review of apprenticeships and traineeships in Australia by a government-appointed ‘Expert Panel’ (McDowell *et al*, 2011) is a classic example of some of the above constructs. This report uses proxy measures for skill (wages and length of training, as expressed in a list of jobs that was devised for migration purposes but which the report proposes for wider use) and socially constructed concepts such as a ‘valued career’ and qualifications that have ‘tangible and enduring value’ (ibid: 56-57). McDowell *et al* also refer to qualifications that can be ‘traded in the market place’—however, it is not clear from the report what basis was used for these views about skill. Finally, largely comprising authors representing traditional male trades, this report goes on to use these constructs of skill to argue that certain financial supports should be removed from service industries and other jobs that do not fit the traditional male model.

Since the scholarly literature on skill is siloed, the major theoretical approaches tend to be mutually exclusive and of different ‘orders’. Previous attempts to incorporate a broad range of skill indicators into a coherent framework such as the O*NET model developed to replace the DOT (www.onetcenter.org) have not been successful (Mumford and Peterson, 1999; Gibson, Harvey & Harris, 2007). It is suggested therefore that rather than trying to achieve a single ‘measure’ of skill, it is better to recognise the different frames through which we can look at skill. Table 2 illustrates our initial proposition, based on the existing literature. Each of the four frames has associated with it a number of constructs which are featured in the bodies of literature.

Table 2: Frames and associated constructs (initial proposition)

Frame	Possible constructs
Positivist approach	Autonomy; complexity; sophistication of tools used; body of knowledge
Social constructionism	Gender composition; level of unionism; historical tradition.
Proxy approach	Level of education required; length of funded training; licensing; pay.
Soft skills lens	Employability skills content; degree of interaction with clients.

This multiple-frame approach is adapted from organisational theory (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; subsequently popularised by Bolman & Deal, 1991). It proposes a number of ways of examining a phenomenon and that each perspective contributes to a fuller understanding. Jobs can be examined through each frame, giving a more rounded view of skill than a single-frame approach.

In essence these approaches to skill can be summarised in the following diagram (Figure 1).

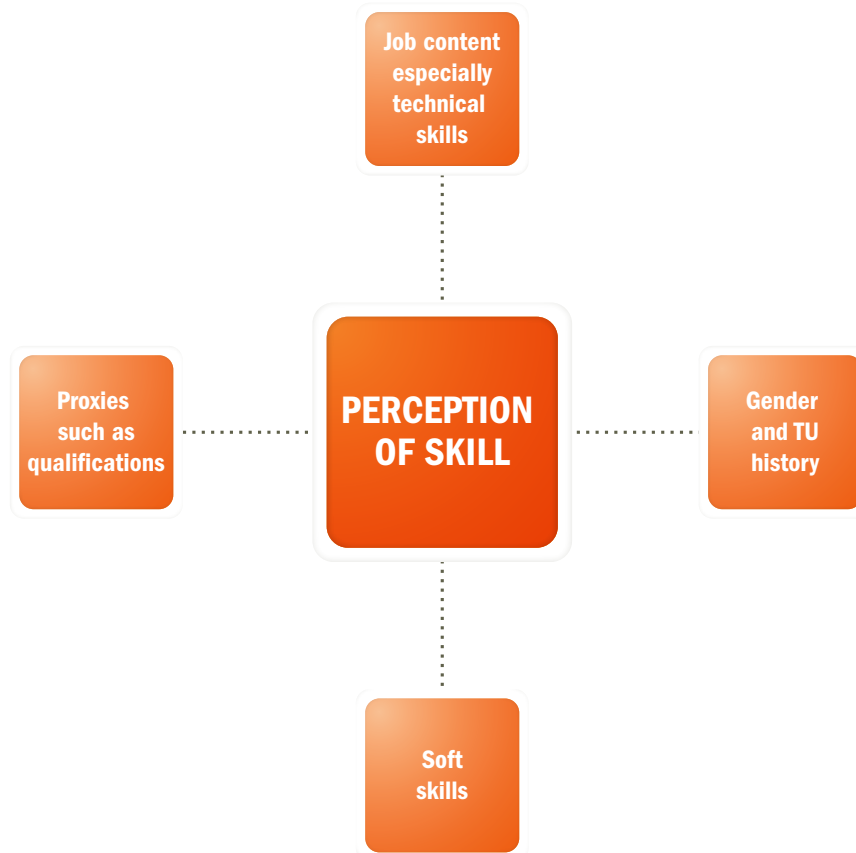


Figure 1: What the literature tells us about perceptions of skill

In general, jobs which have a high degree of technical content especially working with tools, which are generally undertaken by males, which have a strong blue collar trade union history, which have had a long history of qualifications and which do not contact much soft skill content, are regarded as skilled. In contrast, jobs with high soft skills content, which involve working with people and relationships rather than tools, whose workforce is usually female and weakly organised into trade unions, and which have only recently attracted qualifications, are regarded as unskilled.

Yet even scholars who subscribe to the traditional view of skills are puzzled by what they find when they research in companies. For example a large American study (Maxwell, 2006) into what the researchers called 'low skilled' jobs found that employers told them that such jobs did contain skills, were subject to skill shortages just as 'skilled jobs' were, were subject to wage loadings to attract better people, and offered promotion possibilities (Maxwell, 2006: 2-3). Maxwell's definition of low-skilled jobs was those 'requiring workers to have no more than a high school education and no more than one year of work experience' and she relies heavily on O*NET data. Maxwell concludes by suggesting that perhaps these measures are not accurate descriptions of skills.

3. Findings from stakeholder interviews

For each of the three industry areas, five key stakeholders were interviewed:

- Employer association CEO or delegate;
- Trade union representative;
- Service Skills Australia representative from the industry area;
- Senior TAFE practitioner; and
- Senior practitioner from non-TAFE RTO.

The stakeholders were nominated, and access negotiated, by Service Skills Australia; they included participants from three different states and several people with national roles. In one case, the same respondent was interviewed for two industry areas (trade union representative – retail and hairdressing), so the total number of interviewees was 14. Interviews, undertaken by phone, lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were taped and transcribed, with permission.

Interviewees were asked some background information about themselves and their own industry and education background; and about the organisation for which they worked. They were then asked a series of questions which are detailed in Appendix 1a.

The questions were based on the four approaches to skill in the literature as represented in Figure 1 in this report, but the questions were left open so as not to lead interviewees in their answers.

All participants had rich and varied working experiences, many in a range of industry areas as well as that and about which they were being interviewed, and brought these to bear on their responses to the questions. There were some commonalities among responses but also some differences, which, for these interviews, were not primarily along industry lines.

The following overview of the findings is based on the questioning areas. In each instance one quote, or summarised comment, which is typical of other responses is provided.

What is a skilled job and what is the basis for your view?

There was a strong view among the interviewees that a skilled job **has to be learned** – ‘something that you have to learn and be trained how to do it’ (retail RTO co-ordinator). In addition skill involves performance **at a particular standard** – ‘the ability to perform a task or a role to a specified standard to meet task requirements and outcomes’ (retail employer association). A skilled job has to involve a **‘degree of difficulty’** (hairdressing TAFE co-ordinator); it has to have an element of **complexity** (hospitality employer association) and **autonomy** (hospitality employee association). In addition a skilled job should involve **prioritising tasks** (hospitality employee association) and a **level of responsibility** (hospitality private RTO co-ordinator). It could also involve issues of **health and safety** (hairdressing RTO co-ordinator).

The interviewees had derived their views from a variety of sources. Some referred to their working and educational experiences (nationally and internationally) and some referred to observations of people performing jobs. Others referred to views derived from their roles in the vocational education and training (VET) sector:

Obviously working in the training sector we are constantly thinking of skills and knowledge and how we structure programmes around them... Those skills initially to me is something that is observable because that leads to how we often assess skills is through observation of them, but for other skills like I said, like competency skills aren't observable, so you are probably observing the outcomes of the use of those skills. (retail RTO co-ordinator)

What jobs in the industry are skilled and what jobs are unskilled?

Generally, respondents felt that all jobs in their industries were skilled to some extent. 'Every single job has got skill' (hairdressing employee association). Some jobs had 'small skills' (retail RTO co-ordinator) or 'varying degrees of skill' (TAFE co-ordinator). One interviewee went further than this and said:

I am a bit uncomfortable about creating a kind of sliding scale of skilled occupation. I think I retain that view that all these jobs are skilled to a lesser or greater extent. Some of them are accompanied by formal qualifications, some aren't and some of the skills are described or recognised better than others. (hospitality employee association)

Another view presented was that there were no jobs that were unskilled; **'it just means the person in the job is unskilled'** (retail RTO co-ordinator). One thing that differentiated a skilled person in a job from an unskilled person in a job was their ability to plan for contingencies and the fact that they did not 'wait for the next thing' (hospitality TAFE co-ordinator). A further nuanced view of skill, albeit mentioned by only one respondent, was that a skilled job in an industry was one that 'generated revenue'; it was not a 'support service' job (hospitality TAFE co-ordinator).

How are jobs in the industry regarded in relation to jobs in other industries? What effects do these perceptions have?

Most participants thought that jobs in their industries were undervalued. Some responses from retail, for example, were:

- *If you are talking from an outsider's point of view then I think they are largely undervalued. They are dismissed fairly quickly as the job on the way to going somewhere else. The job you get when you can't get anything else, a fill in, that sort of thing.* (RTO co-ordinator)
- *I think it is just generally undervalued and sometimes surprisingly people who think, well, it doesn't take any skill getting into retail and actually absolutely struggle.* (RTO co-ordinator)

- *The under valuing of those skills I think has to do with the fact that they don't fit under traditional models of education.* (employer association)
- *I see it all the time where retail gets bandied around as the job you have until you're waiting to get a real job. The job you have while you're at university just to earn money and that sort of thing. It's regarded as not a real job or not a skilled job.* (Service Skills Australia representative)
- *I think the general public generally don't think about skill levels in retail until they actually have a bad experience and then they talk about poor skill level... Unless you're in my business where you're training people in that sector, (the) general public don't analyse it. So I think they think that it's a relatively unskilled job.* (TAFE co-ordinator)
- *I think part of it is that everyone goes into a shop and everyone thinks, oh yes, I could do that. At one level that's probably true, but to do the job properly and do it well, I think requires skill. I'm not sure people who don't really know the nature of the work in the industries understand that.* (employee association)

Several respondents said that to some extent sections of the industry had themselves to blame as they did not train properly. This was said to be particularly true of small and medium enterprises:

Put a person in – plonk a person in front of the customer and hope it works out. If that person doesn't work out, then they just get somebody else to plonk in front of the customer. (TAFE co-ordinator)

The hospitality employee representative suggested that such actions led to high turnover and a concomitant reluctance by employers to invest in training because they expected staff to leave after a short time – a vicious cycle.

Similar issues were raised in all three industry areas. The arenas in which views of service industries were depicted as unskilled were stated to be: union meetings, VET researchers' presentations, TAFE college staffrooms and, very importantly, careers teacher sessions. It was pointed out that perceptions were culturally specific; two respondents suggested that in Europe front-of-house hospitality jobs were well respected.

Respondents suggested some reasons for perceptions of low skill. These included a devaluing of customer service and a low level of pay (hospitality employer association). The fact that the job could be done without qualifications meant that people viewed it as unskilled, as on-the-job learning was undervalued compared with college-based learning (retail employer association). Also, it was suggested that managers devalued their own skills and by extension the skills in the workers' jobs, because they themselves entered the job when no qualifications were expected (retail RTO co-ordinator).

However it was pointed out that the skills developed in service work were actually highly valued:

These skills are very transferable and a lot of other industries, if they see on your resume that you worked for a company like McDonalds or something like that, they actually look interested because they will know that you have been working directly with customers... I think it's a bit of a peculiar situation really where it's not necessarily seen as a skilled job, but there is an acceptance in many quarters that there are a range of skills that are developed that are of value to a range of different industries. (retail RTO co-ordinator)

What are the effects of the perceptions of skill?

Participants agreed on some major effects of perceptions that service sector work was low skill. People did not enter the industry as a first choice. Because 'brighter kids are encouraged into other areas' (hairdressing employee association) skill levels in the industries were depressed. Qualifications were not valued; governments did not fund training to the same extent as other occupations. The workforce itself felt undervalued. Workers could feel they were 'caught in the industry but disillusioned because they feel they're not recognised and they're not appreciated' (hairdressing employee association).

What should be included in a framework for examining the skill in jobs?

Some suggestions from interviewees include the need to:

- Focus on integration of skills (retail RTO co-ordinator);
- Focus on the development aspect of acquisition of skill (hairdressing employee association);
- Consider workplace outcomes as indicators of skill (hairdressing TAFE co-ordinator);
- Benchmark skills against other industry areas (Service Skills Australia representative, retail);
- Recognise issues of workplace stress and overload (hospitality employee association);
- Accord more respect to soft skills (retail RTO co-ordinator).

Each of these suggestions was proffered by more than one interviewee, in more than one industry area.

What can be done to improve the skill of jobs in the industry?

Some suggestions were to:

- Provide better entry level training and clearer developmental pathways;
- Increasing government funding for training so that it could be carried out to higher standards;
- Improve the skill levels of managers so they can train staff better;
- Encourage employers to recognise the skills in their workforce as an asset;
- Improve the quality of assessment.

What can be done to improve the perceptions of skill in the industry?

Some suggestions to do this revolved around greater public awareness of the skill in the service industries. Greater foregrounding of the importance of soft skills in work (hospitality employer association) and greater emphasis on the career paths in the industry (retail RTO co-ordinator) would assist. It was also suggested that media campaigns would be helpful:

- *I guess it'd be great if there was a lot of money for a big national advertising campaign to take the really high profile hairdressers in this country.*
(hairdressing RTO co-ordinator)
- *Showing case studies and examples of great service and examples of very poor service and very sort of poor product can be very - show people how things can go wrong or can go really, really well.*
(retail TAFE co-ordinator)
- *Things like MasterChef, you know, as kitschy as it is, it is doing a lot to change the views of what a chef is. Recipe books and course enrolments always go through the roof when there's something like MasterChef on the TV because people see how difficult it is and how highly skilled it is and go, you know, I can do that. Things like that are really seen as a career whereas if a waiter, for example - it's a shame there's no reality show about being a waiter.*
(Service Skills Australia representative, hospitality)

Conceptual framework

During the conceptualisation of the research project, we had derived a categorisation of the literature on skill into four main approaches (Table 2) each with associated constructs.

The matrix showed a number of constructs that could be derived from the different frames through which most literature on the nature of skill looks. It was interesting to note that the stakeholder interviews bore out the literature, with most participant comments falling within the constructs covered by the ‘positivist’ and ‘proxy’ approach frames. For example there was discussion of complexity, of qualifications and of pay. Some examples of comments mapped against the matrix follow (Table 3):

Table 3: Examples of stakeholder comments by frames and associated constructs

Construct	Comments
Positivist approach	
Autonomy	‘A level of autonomy that requires some form of decision-making’
Complexity	‘A number of different tasks having to be done simultaneously’
Sophistication of tools used	‘Cutting, colouring, foiling, hair extensions, chemical curling, chemical straightening, blow waving, setting, styling hair’;
Body of knowledge	‘A knowledge of the menu as far as what sauce goes with what.. and the ability to recommend a bottle of wine’
Social constructionism	
Gender composition	–
Level of unionism	–
Historical tradition	‘They don’t fit under traditional models of education.’
Proxy approach	
Level of education required	‘I sometimes wonder whether the term ‘unskilled’ is just to put people in another bag that aren’t in the qualification bag, so to speak’ ;
Length of funded training	‘Something that you have to learn and be trained how to do’;
Licensing	‘When we’re talking about the men’s trades ...safety issues form some regularity’
Pay	‘Careers teachers... will always make judgments based on relative wages of different jobs’
Soft skills lens	
Employability skills content	‘Things like teamwork, interpersonal skills conflict management...’
Degree of interaction with clients.	‘Retail is about connecting with people and the face-to-face interactions all the time’

The ‘social construction’ area was less alluded to, and within that the level of unionism was not mentioned, nor was gender. There were quite a substantial but smaller number of mentions of soft skills but these were confined to a few interviewees.

However there were some comments providing insights that had not been alluded to in previous literature. The most powerful are described below. It should be noted that the points listed are interconnected.

- The everydayness of the work – i.e. the fact that people see some of these jobs being performed most days of their lives and undervalue the work because of this;
- People might imagine that the ‘entry level’ of the work is all there is;
- The jobs are sometimes done badly – and thus give the public the impression that the work is unskilled;
- Some of the work can be performed without training – albeit not well.

The conceptual framework at this stage of the project can be illustrated as follows (Figure 2). ‘Everydayness’ refers to the degree to which the general public sees the work being done and is familiar with it. High visibility may lead to assumptions that the work is straightforward because it is so familiar. ‘Hidden’ work such as that performed by an electrician or car mechanic also carries with it technical language which is not shared with the public.

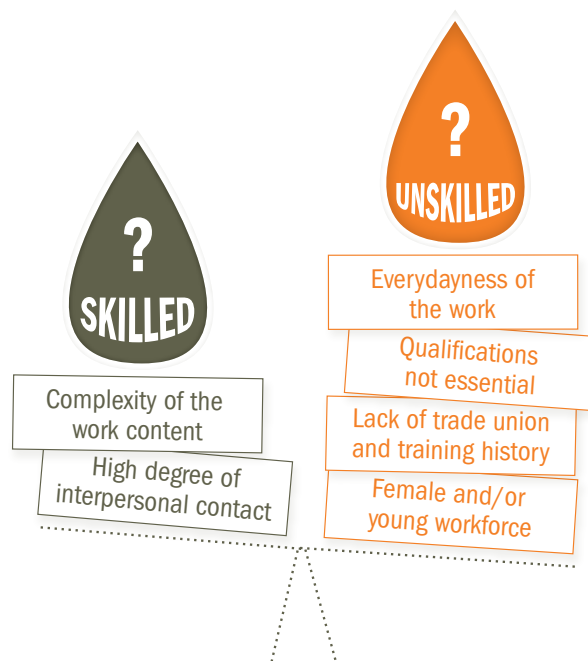


Figure 2: The balance of perceptions about skills in service sector work

Figure 2 illustrates the fact that the stakeholders were somewhat pessimistic about how skill in their industries was viewed. They thought that the factors on the left-hand side of the fulcrum although extremely important did not outweigh, in the public perception, the factors on the right-hand side of the fulcrum.

4. Case study and validation findings

This section reports on the findings from the four case studies and the four validation visits to companies.

Case studies

The interview questions can be found at Appendix 1b; as can be seen, the way these were organised was that one overall set of questions was developed and the questions were asked of the different respondents as appropriate to their level of job. Individual case studies can be found at Appendix 2. It has been explained earlier that for particular reasons, two retail case studies were carried out.

Within each company the following people were interviewed in each of the four companies:

- a senior line manager;
- senior HR/training manager;
- one supervisor;
- two workers in the occupation(s) being studied (i.e. four workers in the hospitality case study).

However in the hospitality case study, it was not possible to access two workers in the non-trade occupation and so two different non-trade occupations were examined.

The occupations which were the focus of the interviews were therefore:

- Retail sales assistant (at Fine Foods and Sportsco);
- Hairdresser (at Coiffeur Hair design);
- Chef (at Catering Co);
- Kitchen-hand (at Catering Co);
- Catering delivery driver (at Catering Co).

Unlike in the stakeholder interviews, there were some differences within and across industry areas. Where 'all-round' perceptions (i.e. different levels within the organisation about a particular occupation) were able to be accessed, it seemed that those in trade occupations – hairdressing and chef – viewed their jobs as more skilled than those in non-trade occupations. They tended to imagine a hierarchy of jobs with their own near the top. It was also interesting to note that the interviewees in the retail case studies appeared more optimistic than those in the other two industries.

However, it was also the case that managers' view of skill levels in the non-trade occupations was higher than the views of the occupants of those jobs. It was suggested by several participants that low self-esteem resulted from entering jobs commonly regarded as 'low skill' and that this self-evaluation could be the result of that. In one case (Sportsco) one sales assistant said that he would almost be embarrassed to say

that he worked in retail, and yet he enjoyed his job and would not consider returning to a previous career.

As in the stakeholder interviews, few participants were willing to entertain the notion that any jobs in the economy were without skill.

Participants had different bases for their perceptions of skill in the occupations that we studied. Their perceptions were variously based on the amount of training required to do the job, the 'good' that workers provided to people, the physical demands of the job, the amount of time they spent interacting with people, and the potential risks if the job was performed badly. Product knowledge emerged as being extremely important; a skilled sales assistant for example was regarded as one who could match the product to the customer's needs. In almost all cases in retail and hairdressing, interviewees felt that the job being studied was undervalued by the public and felt that this was because the public did not understand what was involved with it. Although the public saw the job being performed, they did not comprehend what was needed to do it well.

We used three scales to gain specific data:

- the extent to which the different employability skills were required by the job;
- the apportioning of skills in the job by percentage across technology, customer service and cognitive skills; and
- the placing of the job on a 'skill scale' of 1 to 10.

While we could not get answers to these questions in all cases, where we did, the responses provided interesting answers. The interest resided as much in the reasoning that the participants used for their decisions as in the actual 'scores' that they gave. The individual case study reports (Appendix 2) provide rich detail in this area.

Some of the reasons for public perception of low skill in the jobs researched seemed to be:

- Experiences of the public in being served by less-skilled and/or younger workers;
- Lack of understanding by the public of the detail involved in the job;
- The interconnection of customer service skills with workers' personalities (which meant the skill was tacit and hence undervalued);
- Low self-esteem of workers causing them to downplay the skills they used;
- Management or work organisation structures which did not encourage autonomy.

Factors which increased or could increase perceptions of skill included:

- The need for workers to have qualifications;
- Displaying skills and knowledge to customers;
- Changing work practices to employ more full-time staff;
- Working with careers teachers to improve the image of the jobs provided to school students;
- National media campaigns.

It was clear from the case studies that individuals, because of their personal attributes, could perform at high levels in jobs, thus making the job more skilled for that person. For example a manager could provide one worker with more discretion and autonomy, but another worker might be given much less. A good example was of the delivery driver in Catering Co. While his job was complex and varied, the level of skill involved was partly a function not of the job as originally constituted, but of his long experience and innate abilities.

Validation visits

The validation was useful in securing additional insights into the data gathered in the case studies and in emphasising the importance of context to the concept of skill. The validation questions can be found at Appendix 1c; they sought comparisons between the case study findings and the validation site, and insights into the case study findings.

In retail the two validation sites (which were also case study sites, as previously explained) provided the following insights. At Sportsco, the senior managers regarded the job of sales assistant as much more skilled than did the incumbents (job holders). The Fine Foods staff suggested that could be because the senior managers could see the importance of sales staff to the business outcomes whereas the incumbents did not see this. Another factor shaping these different perceptions of skill levels, they thought, could be that the incumbents might be commenting on the job as they did it, while the senior managers might be imagining the 'ideal' sales assistant. Fine Foods staff also commented on Sportsco staff's apportionment of skills among the different elements of the job, suggesting that the job incumbents valued technology skills more highly because they were still learning them. They also noted that the job of sales assistant appeared to be different at Sportsco from at Fine Foods and that this might be a reflection of the greater size of the former company. They noted Sportsco's emphasis on being accountable for performance and reflected that it was an issue that they themselves should take more seriously at Fine Foods; however they noted that Fine Foods had something of an 'alternative' flavour and that a performance orientation might not quite be an appropriate culture.

The Sportsco staff when looking at a summary of Fine Foods responses, commented mainly of the fact that as a smaller store, Fine Food might not need to demand such high performance standards and might not be under so much time pressure. Customers at Fine Food, the Sportsco staff surmised, not have such high expectations as at Sportsco. They also suggested that in a smaller store the job of sales assistant was likely to be more diverse. As a simple example of this, the Fine Foods sales assistant cleaned and worked the cash register; at Sportsco the sales assistants did neither of those two things.

It was interesting that on returning to these two stores, both sets of interviewees commented that they had discussed the project among themselves since the first visit and that it caused them to reflect on their work. The manager at Sportsco noted that she treated her sales staff with more respect since the visit, because she understood more about what the job involved.

In hospitality, the validation visit to Leisure Co affirmed the importance, which had emerged at Catering Co, of broad experience in building skills within the occupation of chef. The size of the business meant that it was possible for skills to be segmented unless rotation was practised. Leisure Co staff placed a greater importance on food technology skills than did Catering Co staff. There was a strong emphasis on passion in the job and on the need for speed; these two factors had not emerged so strongly at Catering Co. The reason for this difference could be that at Catering Co there were peaks and troughs in the workload, whereas the job design at Leisure Co demanded continuous production pressure, being a 24-hour operation.

In hairdressing, Pamper Palace staff did not differ greatly in their estimation of the skill level of the job of hairdresser from the Coiffeur Hair Design staff. There was however some disagreement with the Coiffeur Hair Design staff about the apportionment of skill among the three domains of technology skills, customer service skills and cognitive skills. The Pamper Palace manager thought that cognitive skills were more important (50% of the total skill component) than the other two types of skill because there was a need for good literacy and the ability to learn continuously. The hairdresser thought that customer service skills were more important (50% of the total) because the ability to understand what a client wanted and to build trust was paramount in giving good service.

The main additions to the conceptual model from the case study and validation phases of the research were:

- The addition of the physical demands of the job as an indicator of skill (this is consistent with Maxwell, 2006: 8);
- The issue of risk if the job was performed badly;
- The importance of context;
- The fact that the public did not understand the complexity of the work.

Levels of performance emerged as being important. These seemed to be linked to two factors:

- The importance of individual attributes and abilities, and the desire to do the job well.
- The importance of work organisation structures. If work organisations was overly 'Taylorist' (i.e. divided into small component parts), then the work could not be performed in such a skilled manner.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

It is necessary to begin this section with a statement of the limitations of the project. The research project was small and can only be regarded as an initial exploration of this large topic. Only three industry areas were examined and within those industry areas the nature of the case studies and validation sites meant that we cannot claim that the project's findings are universally generalisable. So, for example, within hairdressing, both the case study site and the validation site were essentially suburban hairdressers rather than major city centre salons; within retail both case study sites (which were also the validation sites) were speciality stores rather than department stores or supermarkets. Within catering, the case study site was a catering company and the validation site was a major venue with a large number of outlets. These limitations were partly a result of the difficulty in accessing sites; however it does need to be emphasised that each site provided valuable data. Moreover, the interviewees in many of these sites had broader industry experience which contributed to their responses; and the stakeholder interviews provided rich industry-wide insights.

During the project the understanding of the perceptions of skill in occupations developed from the initial model derived from the literature (Figure 1) to Figure 2 which was augmented by the data from the stakeholder interviews and takes account of the following interconnected points

- The everydayness of the work – i.e. the fact that people see some of these jobs being performed most days of their lives and undervalue the work because of this;
- People might imagine that the 'entry level' of the work is all there is;
- The jobs are sometimes done badly – and thus give the public the impression that the work is unskilled;
- Some of the work can be performed without training – albeit not well.

The case studies provided further insights into skill and the perceptions of skill.

- The addition of the physical demands of the job as an indicator of skill (this is consistent with Maxwell, 2006: 8);
- The low self-esteem of workers;
- The issue of risk (to worker or customer health and safety and/or business performance) if the job was performed badly;
- Levels of performance, which seemed to be linked to two factors: The importance of individual attributes and abilities (and their 'fit' with the work), and the desire to do the job well.

The notion of levels of performance has recently been explored by Hampson & Junor (2010). They identified five levels of expertise in service sector work (defined broadly), with an emphasis both on soft skills and on the integration of disparate skills. They have not, however, explored the matter of motivation, i.e. the desire to do the job well.

Conceptual model

The findings from the project suggest a refined conceptual model of skill and perceptions of skill (Figure 3). Within this model all points derived from the data collection have been added.

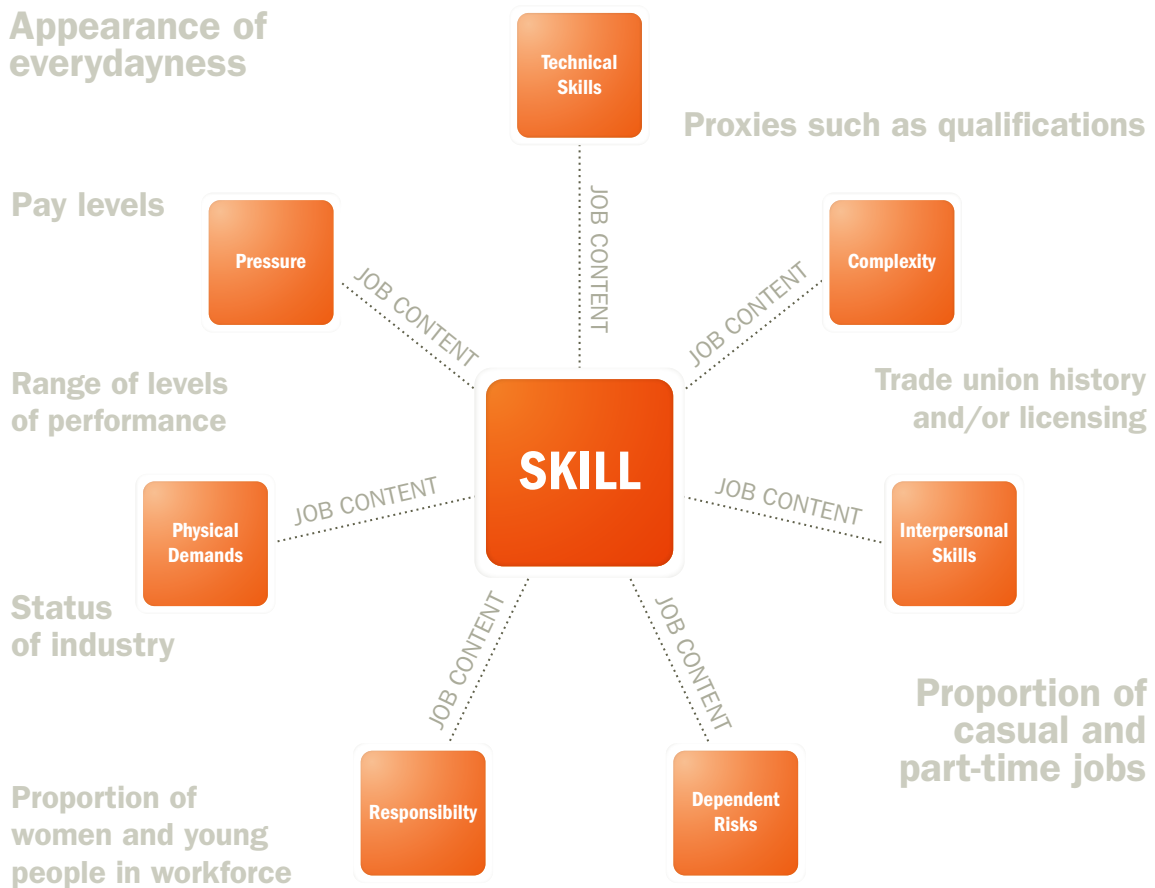


Figure 3: Factors affecting skill and perception of skill in service sector work

In this model, the circles surrounding the centre reflect the actual job content. The features within each circle represent elements in any job that contribute to its skill level, but also to the perceptions of skill in the job. For example, high safety risks or other types of risks, may add to skill levels or may simply add to the perception of skill. Nothing in this diagram is simple. For example, the 'job content' features may carry a different attribution among occupations; interpersonal skill content seems to attract a low regard at lower levels of job, while in managerial jobs it is interpersonal skills that are often the most well-regarded. The same may apply to physical demands. The relative regard attributed to interpersonal skills at different levels of seniority may relate to the extent to which they are visible and part of the specified job role. For example in a retail assistant role, the interpersonal skills are evident and 'everyday'; in managerial roles they are 'hidden' from the public.

The 'cloud' in the background contains 'proxy' and 'social construction' factors that affect people's perceptions of skill but that may have no connection with the actual nature of the job. For example, the presence and activities of a strong and vocal blue collar trade union may convince an audience that a job is skilled; a low level of pay may convince an audience that a job must be unskilled. The model was derived from people within the industry but in many cases their comments were related to how they thought the general public thought about skill in the relevant occupations.

This model operates within a framework of the exercise of skill. The exercise of skill is what is required and desired by both the individual and the employer. The dependent variables are as follows:

Individual worker – ability and motivation;

Employer – size and the way in which work is organised.

Our case studies clearly showed the importance of context to the level of skill in a job and the level at which it was performed.

Practical tool for trial use in policy and practice

While Figure 3 is helpful for understanding the way in which skill is talked about, it needs to be operationalised for use. The items in the Figure have been adapted to form Table 4 which is a tool that could be used in a variety of settings. In Table 4 the items in Figure 3 have in some cases been 'reversed' so that a 'High' score represents high perceived skill, in each case.

Table 4: Tool for evaluating skill and perceived skill in an occupation

Item	H	M	L
Job content factors			
Technical skills			
Complexity			
Interpersonal skills			
Dependent risks			
Responsibility			
Physical demands			
Pressure			
Factors affecting perceived level of skill			
Low proportion of casual and part-time jobs			
Strong trade union history and/or licensing requirement			
Status of industry			
Requirement for a qualification in order to practice			
Proportion of men in the workforce			
Proportion of young people aged less than 25 in the workforce			
Little variation in levels of performance of a recognised worker			
Pay levels			
Occupation is not 'everyday', i.e. is not highly visible in a routine way to the public			

Note: H=High, M= Medium, L=Low

This checklist can be completed relatively quickly, so long as it is understood that an element of judgement is involved. Once completed, the checklist will provide, through visual inspection of the clustering of highs, mediums and lows in each half of the table, an impressionistic comparison of the job content and the 'social construction' of skill in that job. If the possible effects of social construction in thinking about the level of skill in an occupation are systematically examined, and compared with the job content, then it is less likely that an occupation will be accepted uncritically as skilled, or alternatively dismissed without thought as unskilled.

Possible activities in which this tool could be used include:

- Training Package development;
- Professional development for careers teachers;
- Human resource management;
- Submissions to government on skills-related issues;
- Industrial relations negotiations;
- Development of recruitment strategies for occupations.

It should be noted that this proposed tool is initial in nature and would need piloting and further refinement.

Recommendations about improving skill levels and the perceptions of skill in the industry

Although not a primary focus of the project, we sought and gathered suggestions about improving skill levels and improving the perceptions of skill in the three featured industries, and present them in Table 5. It will be apparent that not all apply to all occupations studied. Table 5 indicates where the major responsibility for implementing the recommendations could lie. In several cases, responsibility could be shared.

Table 5: Participants' recommendations for improving skill levels and improving perceptions of skill

Primary responsibility	Improving skill levels	Improving perceptions of skill
Employers and employer bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Require a qualification to work in the industry. • Improve the skill levels of managers so they can train staff better. • Recognise the skills in their workforce as an asset. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media campaigns similar to that undertaken by the CPA; • Television shows akin to MasterChef rather than confining competitions to within the industry. • Talk to customers more about the skills being used in providing the service. • Educate the public into paying higher prices for better service. • Create 'better jobs' (eg full-time, better working conditions) where possible that might attract a greater variety of workers¹.

1. This is a complex issue, as it needs to be recognised that part-time jobs are valid for groups of workers and types of occupations.

Primary responsibility	Improving skill levels	Improving perceptions of skill
Industry Skills Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide better entry level training and clearer developmental pathways; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with careers teachers more systematically, focusing on the skills needed. • Produce case studies showing the difference between good and bad service, that could be used for a variety of purposes. • Showcase high achievers, especially those who are young. • Name and promote the skills inherent in service sector work, to give workers a language to describe their work.
Policy developers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase government funding for training so that it can be carried out to higher standards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional development for careers teachers about the inherent skills and career pathways in different types of work.
Registered Training Providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the quality of assessment. • Improve trust between employers and training providers • Ensure that learners are trained in all aspects of the industry. 	

Some of the suggestions to improve skill levels would also improve the perceptions of skill. For example, if it was necessary to have a qualification to work in retailing then naturally it would attract greater prestige.

In effect the two issues of skill in the industry and perceptions of skill feed off each other because while perceptions of skill are low, high quality applicants may not be attracted and those who are attracted may display or develop low self-efficacy and may therefore have lower performance levels.

Future research

The project indicates the need for further research. Some fruitful areas could be:

- Perceptions of skill among the general public, utilising some of the constructs and findings from this project. Findings could be analysed by age as there may be generational differences, due to the increasing proportion of young people starting their working lives in service industries, which have yet to emerge.
- An international comparative investigation of perception of skill in service sector occupations.
- Analysis of occupations where perceptions of skill have increased over time, to find out what it was that changed perceptions.
- Content analysis of media items about skill, over a specified period of time.

References

- Adler, P. (2007). The future of critical management studies: A paleo-Marxist critique of labour process theory, *Organization Studies*, 28, 1313-1345.
- Attewell, P. (1990). What is skill? *Work and Occupations*, 17:4, 422-448.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2008). *1301.0 Year Book Australia, 2008*. Canberra: ABS.
- Australian Industry Group (2006). *Manufacturing futures: achieving global fitness*. Australian Industry Group, Sydney.
- Bolman, L and Deal, T (1991) *Reframing organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Borghans, L., Green, F. & Mayhew, K. (2001). Skills measurement & economic analysis: An introduction. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 3, 375-384.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Buchanan, J. et al (2000). *Beyond flexibility*. Sydney, NSW Board for Vocational Education and Training.
- Burrell, G and Morgan G (1979). *Sociological paradigms & organisational analysis*. London: Gower.
- Business Council of Australia & Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (2002). *Employability skills for the future*, Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training,
- Colley, H., James, D. & Tedder, M. (2002). Becoming the 'right person for the job': Vocational habitus, gender & learning cultures in further education, *6th Annual Conference of the Learning & Skills Research Network*, Warwick Uni., Dec.
- Eisenhardt, K. & Graebner, M. (2007). Theory building from cases: Opportunities & challenges, *Academy of Management Journal*, 50:1, 25-32.
- Esposito, A. (2008). Skill: An elusive & ambiguous concept in labour market studies, *Australian Bulletin of Labor*, 34:1, 100-124.
- Felstead, A. et al (2005). *Applying the survey method to learning at work: A recent UK experiment*. Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester.
- Finegold, D. and Soskice, D. (1988). The failure of training in Britain: Analysis and prescription, *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 4, 21-53.
- Finegold, D. & Wagner, K (1998). The search for flexibility: Skills and workplace innovation in the German pump industry. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 36:3, 469-487.
- Gatta, M., Boushey, H. & Appelbaum, E. (2007). High-touch & here-to-stay: Future skills demands in low wage service occupations. Paper commissioned for a workshop organised by the National Academies Center for Education, May.
- Gibson, S., Harvey, R. & Harris, M. (2007). Holistic versus decomposed ratings of general dimensions of work activity, *Management Research News*, 30:10, 724-734.

- Gospel, H. (1994). Whatever happened to apprenticeship training? A British, American & Australian comparison, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 32, 505-532.
- Grugulis, I. & Lloyd, C. (2010). Skill and the labour process: The conditions & consequences of change. In P. Thompson & C. Smith (Eds). *Working life: Renewing labour process analysis*, 91-112.
- Grugulis, I., Warhurst, C. and Keep, E. (2004). What's happening to skill? In C. Warhurst, I Grugulis and E. Keep (eds) *The skills that matter*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 1-18.
- Hampson, I. & Junor, A. (2010). Putting the process back in: Rethinking service sector skill. *Work, Employment & Society*, 24:3, 526-545.
- Healy, G., Hansen, L.L., and Ledwith, S. (2006). Still uncovering gender in industrial relations, *Industrial Relations Journal*, 37:4, 290-298.
- Littler, C. (1982). *The development of the labour process in capitalist societies*. London: Heinemann.
- Maxwell, J. (2002). Understanding & validity in qualitative research. In M. Huberman & M. Miles, *The qualitative researcher's companion*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 37-64.
- Maxwell, N. (2006). The working life: *The labour market for workers in low skilled jobs*. Kalamazoo, Mich: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.
- McDowell, J. et al (2011). *A shared responsibility: Apprenticeships for the 21st century*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia
- Miles, M. & Huberman, M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook (2nd edn.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mumford, M. & Peterson, N. (1999). The O*NET content model: Structural considerations in describing jobs. In Peterson, N., Mumford, M., Borman, W., Jeanneret, P. & Fleishman, E. (eds). *An occupational information system for the 21st century: The development of the O*NET*. Salt Lake City: Utah Department of Employment Security.
- National Research Council, Committee on Techniques for the Enhancement of Human Performance (1999). *The changing nature of work: Implications for occupational analysis*. Washington: National Academies Press.
- Rainbird, H. (2007). Can training remove the glue from the 'sticky floor' of low-paid work for women? *Equal Opportunities International*, 26:6, 555-572.
- Sawchuk, P.H. (2006). 'Use-value' and the re-thinking of skills, learning and the labour process, *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 48:5, 593-617.
- Senate Employment, Workplace Relations & Education (EWR&E) References Committee (2003). *Bridging the skills divide*. Canberra: Senate Printing Unit.
- Service Skills Australia (2010a). *Floristry, retail & wholesale services: Environmental scan 2010*, Service Skills Australia, Sydney.
- Service Skills Australia (2010b). *Tourism, hospitality & events: Environmental scan 2010*, Service Skills Australia, Sydney.

Smith, A & Smith, E. (2007). The development of key training policies in England and Australia: A comparison, *London Review of Education*, 5:1, 51-67.

Smith, E (2004). Political construction of skill: The effects of policy changes in entry-level training in Australia on participation rates & on the perception of 'skill', *7th Australian VET Research Association Conference*, Canberra, March.

Smith, E. (2006). A women's work is never certificated? How the implementation of nationally recognised training helps women get qualifications, *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 58:4, 531-550.

Smith, E. *et al* (2009). *High quality traineeships: identifying what works*. Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER)

Somerville, M. (2006). Becoming-worker: Vocational training for workers in aged care. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 58:4, 471-481.

Spenner, K. (1990). Skill: meanings, methods and measures. *Work & Occupations*, 17:4, 399-421.

Steinberg, R. (1990). Social construction of skill: Gender, power & comparable worth. *Work & Occupations*, 17:4, 449-482.

Triplett, J. & Bosworth, B. (2004). *Productivity in the U.S. services sector: New sources of economic growth*. New York: Brookings Institution Press.

Yin, R.K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods* (3rd edn.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Young, M. (2004). Conceptualizing vocational knowledge: Some theoretical considerations. In H. Rainbird, A. Fuller & A. Munro (Eds). *Workplace learning in context*. London: Routledge, 185-200.

Appendix 1: Interview and case study questions

Appendix 1a: Stakeholder interview questions

Remind interviewee: This research aims to provide an indication of the attitudes towards skills held by policy people, managers, trainers and workers in the service industries. We are looking at non-graduate jobs, i.e. those covered by the VET system.

What is your role in relation to the XX industry? How long have you been in this role and how long have you been associated with the XX industry? In what other industries have you worked? What is your own history of education/training?

What do you think a skilled job is?

What basis/bases did you use to form that definition? From where did you derive your views?

What jobs in the XX industry do you regard as skilled? What jobs are unskilled? Why? Do others in your industry share your views?

How do you think jobs in the XX industry are regarded in relation to jobs in other industries? Can you give specific examples? Who holds those views, and how, and to whom, are they expressed?

Thinking about perceptions of skill in XX industry compared with jobs in other industries, as discussed in the previous question...What are the effects of these different perceptions of skill?

(Prompts: status of jobs and remuneration, people wishing to enter careers in the industry, self-esteem of workers, nature and quality of training, desired and available career paths, government funding for the industry and/or for industry training)?

As appropriate to interviewee (and if not covered in response to previous question)

- How do you think perceptions of skill have influenced the current Australian Qualifications Framework revisions?

As part of this project we are developing a conceptual framework or model for examining jobs with a view to describing the skill in them. If you were carrying out this project what sort of things would you build into this framework?

What do you think can be done to improve the skill of jobs in the industry (if you think it's necessary) and/or to improve the perceptions of skill levels of jobs in the XX industry (if you think it's necessary)?

Appendix 1b: Case study questioning framework

(NB we would like if possible to interview full-time workers or at least permanent part-time)

The actual words used will be adapted to suit the participants

Specific questions

	Senior line manager	HR/Training Manager/ Union rep	Supervisor	Workers, x 2 for each job being studied
About yourself				
Job role	■	■	■	■
Length of time in company	■	■		■
Previous job history	■	■	■	■
Previous/current education/training history	■	■	■	■
About the company				
Activities, history, size, no of sites,	■			
Labour: turnover, special features	■	■		■
Level of unionism in general and for the job being studied	■	■		
How typical is this company of the industry, points of difference				
About the job being studied				
What is your role in relation to this job?	■	■	■	
Have you ever done this job?	■	■	■	
Why did you enter this job?				■
Level of difficulty in attracting people/suitable people	■	■	■	
What sorts of people do this job? (age, gender etc)	■	■	■	■
Is there a PD? Can we see it?	■	■		
Training provided/quals required or delivered	■	■	■	■
Career path (internal, external)		■	■	■
Pay rate relative to other types of work	■	■	■	■
About the skill in the job				
What are the major tasks involved in the job as carried out by X and Y worker?	■	■	■	■
How do you know if the job's being done well?		■	■	■
What are the OH&S, regulatory and other risk implications?	■	■	■	■
Can you do this job without a qualification, without formal training, without on-the-job instruction? Can you do it well without any/all of these?		■	■	■
Employability skills – rate extent to which each needed (show list and scale)		■	■	■
Level of complexity, level of autonomy, level of judgment/discretion (show list and scale)	■	■	■	
Interactions with other workers including whether supervise or responsible for team output/QA		■	■	■
Level of hand skills, creativity, use of and 'fixing' technology		■	■	■
Amount of knowledge needed and what type, other cognitive skills eg problem-solving		■	■	■
Level of customer service skills		■	■	■
What is the balance between 'hard skills, customer service and cognitive skills?		■	■	■

Specific questions

	Senior line manager	HR/Training Manager/ Union rep	Supervisor	Workers, x 2 for each job being studied
About the skill in the job continued				
How do the skills combine or fit together?		■	■	
AQF level (show Cert II to IV descriptors)	■	■	■	■
Can the job be done at different levels of skill? If so, what's the difference?	■	■	■	■
This job compared with other jobs				
How does this job compare with the same job in other workplaces? (nature, skill level)	■	■	■	■
What are the least skilled and the most skilled job you can think of – how does this job compare with those and why? (on a scale of 1 to 10)		■	■	■
What is the least skilled and the most skilled job in this company – how does this job compare with those and why? (on a scale of 1 to 10)	■	■	■	
Final questions if time				
What do you think can be done to improve the skill of jobs in the industry (if you think it's necessary) and/or to improve the perceptions of skill levels of jobs in the industry (if you think it's necessary)?	■	■	■	■
Please comment on the issues which the literature suggests influence or reflect perceptions of skill (show original proposed framework)	■	■		

Appendix 1c: Validation visit questions

Validation visits

- **Purpose:** test what we found in the other company against this company
- **Interviewees:** one (or more) manager, one person (or more) in each job being considered

Background questions

1. **About yourself:** job role, length of time in company, previous job history, previous/current education/training history
2. **About the company:** activities, history, no. of sites, labour turnover /special features, level of unionism if any, how typical is this company of the industry?
3. **About the job:** role in relation to this job (for manager), have you ever done it (for manager), why did you enter it (for worker), what sorts of people do the job, internal career path?

About the skill in the job

This is what they said at the other company: XXX

Skill division between technical skills, customer service skills, and cognitive skills: XXX

In terms of your knowledge and understanding of the industry,

- Is this right in general?
- Why do you say that?
- Is it applicable to this workplace and the job we are discussing?
- If not, how does it differ and why do you think this is?

Employability skills – how do YOU rank them?

Skill comparison of this job with other jobs

This is what they said at the other company about how the job compared with other jobs: *The skill level out of 10 for the job is YYY; examples of positive and negative comparisons*

In terms of your knowledge and understanding of the industry,

- Is this right in general?
- Why do you say that?
- Is it applicable to this workplace and the job we are discussing?
- If not, how does it differ and why do you think this is?

What can be done to improve the skill of jobs in the industry (if needed) and what can be done to improve perceptions of the skill level of this job?

This is what they said at the other company: XXXX

In terms of your knowledge and understanding of the industry,

- Is this right in general?
- Why do you say that?
- Is it applicable to this workplace and the job we are discussing?
- If not, how does it differ and why do you think this is?

Appendix 2: Case study reports

Case studies are in the following order: retail, hospitality, hairdressing.

Fine Foods

Introduction

Fine Foods (pseudonym) was a company which had been in operation for about 20 years, that operated a small chain of shops selling coffee beans, homewares, coffee machines, fine foods and ethical and fair trade products in inner city Melbourne, It also owned a chain of toy shops. One interviewee described it as ‘an eccentric business... it is not by any means a stock standard sort of shop.’ The case study was carried out in a store in a suburb with a large alternative and student population. This store also operated a small café. The store had three full-time staff, one part-timer and four casual staff who were all university students. Two staff members worked at two Fine Foods stores. Staff members were not unionised.

The staff members interviewed were committed to the company’s ethos and its products, and enjoyed working with the customer base. The sales assistant said, ‘It’s like people are just visiting us a lot of the time, even though they do need stuff.’

Research method

The case study involved face-to-face interviews with three full-time staff including the store manager over one day in August 2010. Participant details were as follows:

Table 1: Interviewees: Fine Foods

	Job title	Gender	Age	Approx length of time with company
1	Store manager	F	30	2.5 years
2	Assistant manager/ Sales assistant	F	?	2.5 years 0.5 years as assistant manager
3	Sales assistant	F	Early 30s	Almost 2 years

The manager and sales assistant had extensive prior retail experience and all three interviewees had worked in hospitality. One interviewee was completing a degree, another had Year 12 education, and the other had been educated overseas, had not completed formal schooling but had travelled extensively in several countries.

A detailed interview protocol was utilised, in common with the other case studies. The protocol included asking participants to rate the demands of the job against the national employability skills and asking them to apportion the content of the job across three fields: customer service skills, technical skills, and cognitive skills. Each interview took between 30 and 45 minutes. The interviews were taped, with permission, and transcribed, and then analysed to draw out themes.

The job role

The occupation that was discussed in this case study was retail assistant. All three interviewees undertook that role as part of their duties, although the manager spent least time in this role.

The retail assistants employed at Fine Foods were mainly female because males tended not to apply for the role. It was said that males were more interested in barista work.

I think it's partly an ego driven thing. I find that I get a lot of young males that want to make coffee but they don't want to do the other stuff. It becomes quite egotistical as well.

The sales assistant had a similar view:

It (barista work) has a sort of status I suppose but generally people who are like that don't appeal to us anyway as potential people to work with. I don't know what would appeal to them about it (working here). Making coffee's fun for starters and also generally if you're making coffee you don't have to be cleaning or doing the dishes and so it is like a hierarchy. In cafes more so that I've worked in I've found it's very - like the person on the machine doesn't have to do anything that really sucks, and barely has to serve customers.

In general, though, it was not difficult to find good staff because of the location and because coffee was an attractive business to be in. However the manager said

It is hard to find full-time employees that are actually here [local] and motivated to sell product and view it as a serious profession.

The sales assistant noted that it was difficult for the company to find appropriate staff in its store in a large suburban shopping mall.

It is like an intelligent company and we do sell fair trade and organic and it's important that people are able to explain those sorts of concepts and then with the home wares side of things, to understand and be able to explain a bit about the origins of things. At XXX (mall), in a way it seems like - it's just really like the youth, really young people, applying for the jobs so it does take a certain level of maturity and knowledge to be able to explain.

The manager held a Certificate III in retail gained in another job and the assistant manager had studied retail at vocational college in Sweden. The manager did not look for a retail qualification when recruiting staff. The company did not offer nationally-recognised training; training focused mainly on product knowledge. This was informal training offered by senior staff or by the company directors. The manager said that she felt that the small size of the company was a reason for the company's non-engagement to this point with nationally-recognised training. The sales assistant was currently attending a formal short course at TAFE in merchandising but she was the first person in the company that had been sent on a course of this nature: 'I feel pretty privileged to do that.'

The manager was working on assembling induction folders for new staff as she found that there was no system in place for people to know what the requirements were of them. She noted that this seemed to be characteristic of retail workplaces.

There were few career paths within the company because of its small size. The manager was well aware of careers within retailing, while the other two staff did not have firm aspirations within retail.

The skill in the job

The components of the job were described by the interviewees as:

- 'Saying hi to customers';
- Replenishing stock and making sure that the displays looked tidy and appealing;
- Cleaning and dusting;
- Making customers feel welcome;
- Knowing the products;
- Matching customers' needs with products;
- Closing sales;
- Receiving stock and entering into the system;
- Occasionally ordering stock;
- Money handling;
- Gift wrapping;
- Making coffee; and
- Giving information and advice to tourists..

The requirements were described as:

- Outgoing personality;
- Able to take initiative;
- Being kind to customers;
- Reliability;
- Not afraid of hard work;
- Efficiency;
- Speed;
- Juggling competing demands; and
- Artistic flair to mount displays.

Some of these components and requirements did not emerge until later in the interviews when the interviewees reflected further on the job. In one case the interviewee even returned later in the day to find the researcher, to add a point that she had forgotten.

There were fairly low health and safety risks. Staff serving coffee needed to know basic hygiene rules; and there was some risk in putting stock away as there was a lot of lifting and there were steep and narrow stairs. Also the café furniture needed to be lifted.

The staff in the store had outgoing personalities and customers expected to be engaged with. The manager said that an important part of the job requirements was

Being able to be nice to everyone regardless of what your mood is, which can be quite a difficult thing to do. Even when you're having a bad day you've got to come to work and be nice.

Performance of staff was monitored by customer feedback (in person or by email) and by the amount of sales that were made. Teamwork was very important as it was a small store and people's contribution to the team was very visible.

Interviewees were asked about the employability skills requirements of the job of sales assistant. Unfortunately the researcher forgot to take the employability skills matrix with her and had an imperfect recollection of the list and so these data are incomplete. The shaded skills were omitted.

The following legend is used: M=Manager, A= Assistant manager, S=Sales assistant; and the placement within the box, where not central, indicates the relative importance attributed to each employability skill.

Table 2: Extent to which participants believed that each employability skill is required by the job of retail assistant

Skill	L	M	H
Communication skills			M S
Team work			A S M
Problem solving			
Initiative and enterprise		S	M A
Planning and organising			
Self management			
Learning skills		M A S	
Technology skills	M A S		

Note: H=High, M= Medium, L=Low

All interviewees said that good communication skills were essential not only with customers but also with other staff. The assistant manager said that with a high proportion of casual staff it was vital to find systems of communicating things to staff who were not at work on a certain day. The manager noted that initiative skills were required to be higher in this business than in larger retail workplaces. With such a small team, workers need to show initiative for the store to run properly:

Other places I've worked, you've got more employees, people can fly under the radar so to speak where they can just cruise along and not really have to prove themselves.

The sales assistant said 'We all work together most of the week, so we function as three parts of same brain basically.'

Interviewees were asked to say how the components of skill within the job of sales assistant were distributed among three main areas; technology skills, customer service skills and cognitive skills (Table 3).

Table 3: Apportioning of elements of job of retail assistant across three major fields

	Technology skills	Customer service skills	Cognitive skills
Manager	20	60	20
Assistant manager	30	40	40
Sales assistant	15	50	35

The manager said that she thought customer service skills were the most important field because customers would make a purchase based on those, even if product knowledge was not high, 'as long as you are honest'. It was more important now than a few years previously. The internet had changed the way people thought about shopping as they could probably get goods as cheaply elsewhere 'so we need to work a lot more to close a sale'. The assistant manager rated cognitive skills quite highly, particularly with relation to product knowledge.

That is really important because, like, you've really got to remember a lot about the products and make sure you give the right information to people. Because a lot of things that people come and shop here for, like the coffee machines, it's one of those things that friends keep telling each other information, and you know, when they're interested, coffee's a hobby for people. Then you've got friends say, he heard something his friend said - and a lot of things are misunderstood in this industry, I think.

Selling itself was an important skill but it could be viewed in one of two ways. The assistant manager said.

There is a skill in selling, though. Like, you do know that - like being comfortable about selling to people. That is definitely a skill and sometime, maybe, I don't know, some people will see it as they just want to sell as much as possible. Then other people will just try to provide what they think the customer needs, because sometimes the customer might not be saying that they want something bigger but you're helping them make that decision.

Two interviewees said that it was impossible to view the three fields of skill as separate entities because they were all intertwined.

Perceptions of skill in this job compared with other jobs

Two of the interviewees found it impossible to imagine a job that was not skilled. The manager said

I think to do any job you need some form of skill to be able to, number one, focus, and commit to that job. For a lot of people that is a skill in itself. No, I don't think

- it's a tough one. I think all jobs have processes and standards that you need to comply to so in that sense there are certain skills that relate to all industries regardless whether you need a university degree or a TAFE qualification to do them, there are levels that you need to adhere to which are set out for each industry.

The sales assistant said,

We all used to think that garbage men were the unskilled labourers, but actually I don't understand how the hell they drive those trucks and how they hook them on to the garbage bins... I can see that any job has its own complexities and stuff.

The ratings out of ten given by each interviewee for the sales assistant job were as follows: manager: 4, assistant manager: 3, sales assistant: 2 to 4. The assistant manager gave the job a lower rating because she thought that some parts of the job were just common sense. An interesting discussion ensued, revolving around the fact that she talked about the job in a way that highlighted the inherent skills, and yet she herself perceived it as being not very skilled. For example, making judgments about a customer and what they might buy was, she thought, very important but she did not regard that as a skill as such, because:

I don't think that you could do that or go to any course to learn that. That's body language and I guess it depends on how observant you are. So I guess (it's) natural skill.

A similar discussion ensued with the sales assistant. She said,

The skills that you use in this job are sort of personality-based, so it kind of feels like you haven't developed anything, but you're just who you are.

How can levels of skill and perceptions of skill in the job be improved?

I guess if retail required the staff to be qualified, to have a retail qualification, not so much by law, but that you had to have some formal qualification to work in this field, that would lift it up as a whole, because there would be a standardised qualification that you'd need to have. A lot of retail staff do have qualifications in other fields, whether they're university qualifications or there're things that they've picked up along the way, but I think that's what you would have to do to maybe raise the status of the skills that you need to have to work in this profession. You obviously need to have basic mathematic skills, things like that, to be able to use money every day. (Manager)

When asked whether requiring qualifications might make it possible to put more into the job to make it more skilled, the manager said:

I think it would regulate the retail industry a lot more and it would help bring back retail being more of a career-based job.

The assistant manager agreed that formal training would add more skill into the job. She said that the sales assistant was currently undertaking a merchandising course which would add more skill into her display work. She said of herself:

I think that if I would have gone to school properly [retail school in her home country] and I had spent those three years actually reading and learning about

(retail), I could have probably had a lot more input into how to increase the sales here because I would have the right information in that sense.

With relation to training, the assistant manager said:

I think that people would see it ... if you knew that people had been trained to do it - I don't know. I guess I see a hairdresser to be skilled and they have to do training to get there. You know, you can't just like sort of jump into a salon and start cutting hair whereas you can jump into a shoe shop and start selling shoes. I don't know; should there be shoe training? You know? I don't know. Will that change people's perception about whether they're skilled or not?

In essence she thought that because many people worked in retail when they were young and not focused, that made them and others see the job as unskilled: 'It's something that you don't think is worth making a career out of'. Also she thought that because it was female-dominated people thought it was unskilled

It's the feedback that I will get sometimes from older customers that it's, you're a girl who works in a shop. I think that's very interesting, and I know males don't really think of retail as a career.

The following were strategies that interviewees said might improve perceptions of the job:

- A requirement for qualifications;
- Sub-qualifications in specific areas such as merchandising;
- More full-time rather than casual staff;
- An advertising campaign that highlighted the challenges of customer service;
- Displaying skill and knowledge.

The latter referred to a comment by the sales assistant who noted that when customers asked a question about a product and received a detailed and confident answer they seemed to be impressed.

However, the manager said:

I think, because retail has been viewed this way for so long, for so many years, that it would be a really difficult thing to change the perception of.

Key points/unique findings

This case study was interesting as the participants were articulate young women who were able to discuss their work in some detail. There was a difference between the two more junior staff and the manager in that the manager had a retail qualification and was able to express her conceptions using industry-specific language in a way that the others, who had learned on the job, were not able to do so. She also had a more business focused attitude.

Despite their ability to describe and explain the skills in the job, the staff rated the job of sales assistant quite low on the imagined skills hierarchy - between 2 and 4 out

of 10. Their low rating seemed to result primarily from what may be termed the ‘soft’ and ‘everyday’ nature of retail skills, which they described variously as ‘common sense’ or ‘personality’.

The interviewees attributed the low perception of skill in retail by the public as being primarily due to the lack of a requirement for qualifications, the fact that it was a female industry, and the fact that it was a job that young people did while studying. They had a number of suggestions for improving perceptions of skill, which were to increase the requirements for qualifications, to offer specialised short programs, and advertising campaign, encouragement for retailers to provide a greater proportion of full-time jobs, and displaying skill and knowledge to customers.

Sportsco

Introduction

Sportsco (pseudonym) was an Australian company owning 140 stores that sold sporting goods and sportswear. Sportsco employed 6,500 staff nationally. Sportsco had set up an enterprise RTO two years previously and offered Certificate II through to IV in retail as well as business qualifications.

The emphasis in stores was on profit margins and there were various incentives to sales staff to improve their sales and to focus on high-profit items. Store managers had a fair amount of autonomy although there were corporate guidelines on some issues. Stores each included three areas: footwear, apparel and hard goods (sports equipment). The store at which the case study was undertaken was a very busy city-centre store with the highest turnover in the company. The customer base was mainly people who worked in the city centre and so was busiest at lunchtime, and there was a higher male customer base than in suburban stores.

Research method

The case study involved face-to-face interviews with three full-time staff in a central city store and telephone interviews with corporate staff, during August 2010. Participant details were as follows:

Table 1: Interviewees: Sportsco

	Job title	Gender	Age	Approx length of time with company
1	Floor manager hard goods	F	Mid 20s	7.5 years
2	Department manager hard goods/ recently sales assistant	F	Early 20s	1 year
3	Sales assistant just promoted to department manager apparel	F	Early 20s	1.5 years
4	National learning & development manager and RTO manager	F	–	6 years
5	General manager, strategic and business development	M	–	10 years

The two corporate managers had extensive prior retail experience and one had also worked in marketing. Of the store-level participants, the floor manager (who was in charge of 'front of house' for hard goods) had worked for Sportsco through school and university, and had decided to stay with the company rather than move into the professional field of her degree. The other two store staff had joined Sportsco after school having worked for other retail and fast food jobs while at school. One had a qualification in sports management in hospitality.

A detailed interview protocol was utilised, in common with the other case studies. Each interview took between 30 and 57 minutes with most taking almost an hour. The interviews were taped, with permission, and transcribed, and then analysed to draw out themes.

The job role

The occupation that was discussed in this case study was sales assistant. All three store-level interviewees undertook that role as part of their duties, although the floor manager spent least time in this role. The department manager had each been promoted only a matter of weeks previously. At Sportsco, sales assistants did not handle money; they worked with customers to effect a sale, and then the customer proceeded to a checkout. They were also responsible for displays in their area and for stock management once the stock was on the shop floor. Other staff were responsible for receiving and recording stock.

The nature of the goods sold in footwear and hard goods particularly meant that a great amount of detailed product knowledge was required. Sales assistants were matched, where possible, to areas where they could use their expertise and enthusiasm for the sporting area. There were serious health and safety implications should customers be sold something that was not suitable for their needs. All sales could be traced back to the responsible sales assistant, both for accountability and for the purpose of analysing sales figures, and some staff were reluctant, particularly because of safety accountability, to advise a customer on purchase of items outside their area of expertise. Safety was also a concern in the stockroom areas.

Suitable sales staff were not difficult to recruit, because the nature of the goods sold made the work highly attractive to young people who were interested in sport. Apart from the small number of full-time staff in the store, most sales assistants were university students working part-time. Being allocated shifts depended on sales (people were expected to make at least two sales an hour, and above that they received commission), and the company encouraged a competitive attitude towards sales in individuals and also to encourage inter-store rivalry. Some students kept their job for a day a week at weekends after they had moved into the full-time work force in a different occupational area, because they enjoyed the work. More staff were male than female, and there was generally a gender segregation between the apparel department and the other departments. The floor manager commented that at suburban stores more staff were school students, who she thought tended to lack commitment to the jobs because they did not need to support themselves.

As an RTO, Sportsco provided qualifications-based training for staff. The floor manager for example had undertaken Certificates II through to IV in Retail and was grateful that

Sportsco had paid for all the training. She commented that the assignments were intimately connected with day to day work and that this assisted her development as a manager:

Those courses explained to me what I was doing and why I was doing it. What you're doing in these assignments is you're growing because it's teaching you how to do what you're going to do when you get to the end point.

The national learning and development manager explained that the nationally-recognised training incorporated in-house training modules which included extensive product knowledge training. There was an expectation that store staff completed the latter; the on-line training system recorded participation and monitoring of this was part of performance management of staff. There were also regular visits from sales representatives who provided information about their wares.

Staff in the stores appeared very well informed about career paths within the company. There was a career structure within branches, beyond floor manager to assistant store manager and store manager, and staff also transferred between branches for more senior jobs. The store staff were aware of career opportunities at head office, such as product co-ordinator or buyer. Sportsco had national steering committees, which included branch staff, for different product areas; the floor manager was a member of the national tennis steering committee.

The skill in the job

The components of the job were described by the interviewees as:

- Greeting customers;
- Replenishing stock and making sure that the displays looked tidy and were within company guidelines;
- Trying to sell older stock before newer stock;
- Knowing the products;
- Explaining product features and matching customers' needs with products;
- Closing sales;
- Knowing the profit margins of each product.

The requirements were described as:

- Outgoing personality;
- Able to take initiative;
- Being kind to customers;
- Reliability;
- Juggling competing demands;
- Being accountable for performance and sales; and
- Being competitive and wishing to improve performance.

Performance of staff at Sportsco was monitored primarily by the amount of sales that were made.

Interviewees were asked about the employability skills requirements of the job of sales assistant. The following legend is used: F= floor manager, D= department manager, S= Sales assistant, and L= learning and development manager.

The placement within the box, where not central, indicates the relative importance attributed to each employability skill.

Table 2: Extent to which participants believed that each employability skill was required by the job of sales assistant at Sportsco

Skill	L	M	H
Communication skills			F D S L
Team work			F D S L
Problem solving	F →	S D	L
Initiative and enterprise		F S L D →	
Planning and organising	F	S D →	L
Self management		F	D S L
Learning skills		D →	F S L
Technology skills		F D L	S

Note: H=High, M= Medium, L=Low

The employability skills question was not put to the corporate general manager

Table 2 indicates some areas of general agreement and other areas where there was quite a divergence of opinion. Communication skills were said to be extremely important, both with customers and between the team. As the floor manager said, 'You've got to know what each other is doing: "I'm going to put out these boxes and can you do that?"' Team work was vital too; again the floor manager said;

In a business this big if you aren't a team player you're in the wrong place. If you're playing for yourself, which we sometimes do see, we do talk to the people who don't seem to be putting in the same effort. There are people who lag behind and don't put in the same effort and you notice them right away - it's like a bad apple. Everyone else is following the game. Teamwork is huge because everyone has got to help teach other out. We're all here for the same goal. We're all here to get that merchandise or we're here to make that look better, or we're here to put the sale up.

However there was less agreement on matters like problem solving, initiative and enterprise and self-management. The floor manager tended to believe that sales assistants were basically employed to carry out pre-arranged tasks while the lower-level staff had a view that higher levels of these generic skills were required. The department manager said:

Self-management? I would say high. I would hope that any of my staff members... have the sense to go and do the stock, go and serve the customers instead of just walking around blind, waiting for someone to tell you what to do. If I found anyone was doing that I'd be furious. There is always something to do. If you can't find something to do you definitely need to ask. But there is always something to do.

Comments about learning skills related primarily to product knowledge, and about technology skills to the computer system.

Interviewees were asked to say how the components of skill within the job of sales assistant were distributed among three main skill areas: technology skills, customer service skills and cognitive skills.

Table 3: Apportioning of elements of job of sales assistant at Sportsco across three major fields

	Technology skills	Customer service skills	Cognitive skills
Floor manager hard goods	25	50	25
Department manager hard goods/ recently sales assistant	20	40	40
Sales assistant just promoted to department manager apparel	33	33	33
National learning & development manager and RTO manager	10	60	30
General manager, strategic and business development	10	80	10

There were interesting differences between the shop floor staff and the senior managers in this matter. There was a very clear progression in the perceived importance of customer services skills in the job of sales assistant, the higher the organisational position of the respondent. The corporate managers expected a complete focus on customer service while the other staff talked about issues to do with stock, display as and so on. The general manager said:

After three months, after six months, after 12 months, after 18 months, they still have that same zest to get out there and be just as nice to a customer, to the last customer on a Friday night as they were to the first customer on Monday morning.

While the company focused heavily on sales targets, staff in their discussion of their interactions with customers showed that selling people items to suit their needs was just as important as selling more goods. There appeared to be a strong ethos of integrity in interactions with customers.

As with other case studies, the store staff remarked that the sets of skills went 'hand in hand'. Product knowledge underpinned customer service because the interaction with customers was focused on discussion about products, even relating to very simple products. As the department manager said:

Swimming goggles would be probably be one good example. People just pick up a pair of swimming goggles and leave. Ninety per cent of those people will be picking up the wrong goggle... Then they would get in the pool and they're got goggles that would leak and they would bring them back.

Perceptions of skill in this job compared with other jobs

The ratings out of 10 given by each interviewee for the sales assistant job were as follows: Floor manager, 5; Department manager, 5; Sales assistant 4-5; National learning and development manager 8-9; General manager, strategic and business development, 7-8.

It was noted by two interviewees that the job of sales assistant could be done at different levels of skill, so that there could be a different score for different sales assistants. The floor manager said that the outcome of differing skill levels was that the more skilled person would be given more autonomy in his or her work. One reason why the department manager put the job at a skill level of only 5 was that he saw there was opportunity to move up the career ladder and that the job of sales assistant was a starting point. The corporate staff rated the job at a very high skill level, because of its interactivity with people. . The general manager said:

I think it is frustratingly undervalued by people who don't understand the profession. If you are in a mine, you are dealing with dirt and rocks and you're driving a truck, and I'm sure that that requires a lot of skill, but at least it's predictable. In the retail world you are opening those doors every day and there's no sign there that says only nice people are allowed in. You open those doors and everybody from A to Z in the same book in the region you serve are welcomed into the store. People are complex characters and so the skills required to be a good sales assistant are immense. They need to be able to read body language. They need to be consistent. They need to leave their tired minds at the front door of a morning. They need to leave their headaches. They need to leave any issues they've got. They need to be incredibly consistent, but they also need to be able to treat XXX differently than YYY because they're different. They need to be able to read that, understand that, use different language. They need to understand the balanced expectations of their business in terms of selling etc.

The sales assistant, on the other hand, said:

My belief of a high skilled job would be like engineering. It [the sales assistant job] definitely would be like four or five because it is nowhere near that technical, but there are a lot of trades and university degrees that will get you a lot further in skills than this job. This job would be the lower end definitely because you don't require a lot of training but if you have the skills then you can definitely do that.

And yet the same interviewee also said:

It's hard. Especially at this time; it's hard to make people spend money. It's hard to force their wallets open. You've got to be able to be skilled to do that.

There was general agreement that the public perception of the job of sales assistant was quite poor. Two interviewees mentioned that poor experiences as a customer in a range of retail situations contributed to this perception. The floor manager said:

It comes back to the youngsters that people employ or the people who aren't interested. A 15 year-old approaches you blowing bubble gum and is like "You want a hand?" or stands there looking at a magazine while you're in the store, you're going to be like "This is bullshit. What the hell, this person has got the easiest job in the world."... People have a perception of retail because of these lower places.

The department manager felt that one contributory factor to the low image of retail was as that it was rarely depicted in television and movies, unlike other occupations: 'It's shown that work in a big building is a desirable job.'

There was differentiation in the minds of the store staff between Sportsco and other retail work. The floor manager said:

From my understanding a lot of my staff are pretty happy to say they work in Sportsco. When you're young it's cool, you're working in a sports store. You're surrounded by footies and soccer balls. It's pretty relaxed as long as you work correctly.

However one interviewee was in two minds:

I'm almost - maybe sometimes embarrassed to say what I do. I did - I keep saying I had a better job in XXX. But I wouldn't go back to it.

How can levels of skill and perceptions of skill in the job be improved?

There was a general belief that because the general public were customers in shops so frequently, they focused on the customer side of the transaction and did not consider the role of the sales assistant. As the sales assistant put it, for example, 'They're worried about the new stock, whereas we're worrying about the old stuff that's becoming too old and we need to get rid of.' In addition, the general manager pointed out that people 'think they are in control of what they buy' and do not realise that sales assistants help to shape their buying behaviour. Thus more education about the retail industry would assist in improving perceptions. This could be undertaken through TV shows or other media (eg featuring successful retail entrepreneurs or 'the day in a life of a retail person') particularly since, as one participant pointed out, there were several TV programs about poor customer service. More simply, education could be undertaken by sales assistants themselves displaying their knowledge to customers. The department manager said:

I suppose what does happen is when we do sell, I don't know, a tennis racket to a guy in a suit and he sees we really know what we are talking about and a bit more passionate about it. They might walk away saying wow he really knew what he was talking about. You would hope that they say that to people if anyone ever said this guy worked at [Sportsco]. Well, he served me and he really knew what he was talking about. That is all you can hope for I suppose.

Training was seen as very important in improving levels of skill and perceptions of skill. While Sportsco was heavily involved in training itself, interviewees thought that there was also a need for better training across retail as a whole, because in the eyes of the public all retail experiences were linked. The general manager noted that a general rise in the education levels of the population led to higher quality people being employed in retail which also helped to lift perceptions. The learning and development manager mentioned the new retail degree being offered as part of a Service Skills Australia initiative in Sydney and that it would help to lift public perceptions of retailing.

Several interviewees noted that people often did not think about higher-level careers in retail; they saw only the lower-level jobs. They noted that senior managers in retail companies earned large amounts of money at very young ages. Two people suggested that as this fact became better known, the public perception of retail would improve.

Key points/unique findings

The case study was based in a company which had a very strong product identity and some of the findings were shaped by the way in which interest in sports affected the perceptions of staff and customers about the job of sales assistant.

There was an interesting dichotomy between store staff and head office staff about the relative importance of customer service skills in the job of sales assistant. The former attributed less importance to these skills than the latter, as a proportion of the components of the job. There was also a divergence in the perceptions of skill with head office staff again seeing the skill in sales work as higher than store staff did.

The interviewees attributed the low perception of skill in retail by the public as being primarily due to poor service provided by inexperienced staff in other retail outlets. Sportsco's nationally-recognised training programs were seen as very effective in lifting and maintaining the skill levels of its staff and there was a need to spread such training to other retail companies. A number of suggestions for improving perceptions of skill included marketing of retail as a desirable, skilled and highly-paid occupation and displaying product knowledge to customers. There was also a belief among senior managers that perceptions of retail work were gradually improving and this was due to improved education levels of its workers and to greater understanding of the importance of service work

Catering Co

Introduction and background

The company was founded almost 50 years ago to provide catering for parties and later, boardroom functions. Over time this family owned firm had grown and developed a range of other operations including venue catering, cafeterias, function catering and retail outlets.

The heart of the business, the production kitchens, and all the other support functions were located in inner suburban Melbourne. The kitchens were the site from which food is prepared for distribution, cooking and serving at diverse locations including parties, board room functions, major events such as the Grand Prix and the Spring Racing Carnival, and also functions at managed venues such as sporting locations. There were

also a range of cafeteria operations, for example private schools, all of which have their own kitchens. Operations at these locations were linked to the main site, particularly from the point of view of menu development, quality assurance and training. Training of staff for all locations also originated from the main site.

The production kitchen was a large industrial kitchen where on an ordinary day, perhaps two kitchen hands worked with ten chefs but where on a busy day, perhaps five kitchen hands and more than twenty chefs. For each job there was a specific menu which has been developed by the executive chef in consultation with the other chefs. Some menus were standard, but even these menus evolved over time, but other menus were developed to meet the specific requirements of the client. In this company there was a pride that they would develop a menu for a client and that the preparation and cooking of food fully utilised the skills of the chefs. Like all parts of the industry, some food was partly prepared, but it remained, for example, that meat still has to be prepared in the sense of being trimmed and otherwise made attractive and palatable to the diners. Similarly the making of sauces and desserts was a key feature of the operation. Some food was fully cooked in the production kitchens but a major focus is on preparing food for cooking and plating on location. Depending on the size of the order food preparation could be a production line operation where a chef spends the whole day making the same thing, so there can be a considerable amount of repetition even in what are trade skilled jobs.

This case was instructive because it drew out an important characteristic of the hospitality industry, its diversity. While this remained a family-owned business, it had a large and varied set of operations. For the most part, it operated in a premium market segment with a considerable degree of variation in menus to meet customer demands. This point was elaborated by the executive chef:

They're treated well, they're respected, the food they're doing, there's no shortcuts to it, they're not - they're using the best quality food they can. We change the menus like every day's different, every day's a different day there's no - it's not like the repetitiveness of it being in the restaurant where you do the same six dishes, six entrees, six mains, six desserts for six months, then you're changing it for - that's what it is. But here, it varies every day...

Like much of the industry the core work force in the production kitchens was quite small, but ranges from 40 to 500 depending on the time of year. Thus the company was heavily reliant on agencies for drawing in labour at peak periods. Unlike much of the industry the core labour force exhibited a high degree of stability, because, comparatively the working hours were shorter (approximately 40 hours for much of the year) and there was little evening work. A good snapshot of the kitchen was provided by the executive chef:

Unlike a lot of the industry, we're very lucky. As I said, I've been here 10 years and I'm one of the younger ones. I've got the Head Chef that runs the floor for me, he's been here 17 years, the Executive Sous Chef's been here 15 years, the Pastry Chef's been here, I think 9 years. I've got, I think the average for the full-time is about 7 years, which is fantastic. But, it's a production kitchen. They start work at five or six o'clock in the morning, they finish three, four o'clock in the afternoon, busier times, quiet times, they can finish one or two o'clock.

For the purposes of this case study, the focus was on the staff involved in food preparation and the interviews included both low and high skilled workers ranging from chefs to the delivery van driver. At the time this study was undertaken the company had undergone considerable growth and was placing increased attention on developing the skills of its workforce. Significantly, the company had taken on two apprentices in the last eighteen months after not having done so for the preceding eight years.

Research method

Six interviews were conducted over two days in August 2010. The interviews ranged in length from 40 to 80 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed and the interviewer also made rough notes. The interviews were content analysed with a view to identifying themes and distinctive features of individual experiences/roles. Interviewees participated with guarantees of anonymity which means that the name of the company cannot be disclosed. Participant details are in Table 1.

Table 1: Interviewees: Catering Company (pseudonym)

	Job title	Gender	Age	Approx length of time with company
1.	Executive chef	M	>50	12.5 years
2.	Pastry chef	M	40-50	8 years
3.	Apprentice chef	M	18-21	1.25 years
4.	Kitchen hand	M	30-40	1 year
5.	Delivery van driver/	M	30-40	8 years
6.	Learning and development manager	M	40-50	1.5 years

Brief comment on the participants may be helpful in understanding the ensuing discussion:

- The executive chef had worked in the company in various roles for 12.5 years having been to his present role in 2002.
- The pastry chef had been with the company 8 years having previously worked with an iconic Melbourne cake shop. His present role includes larder, that is, sauces and pastries.
- The apprentice chef had joined the company 15 months ago and has worked in a variety of jobs, including back of house and deliveries, but had only commenced his apprenticeship 5 months prior to the interview.
- The kitchen hand had worked in the company for 1 year, having been recruited through an agency but had spent 10 years in the Navy as a chef. He is seeking a career change and was about to be moved to another role in the company.
- The delivery van driver had been with the company for 8 years in a casual job but effectively working near to full-time and was combining this with his chosen career as a sculptor.
- The learning and development manager had been with the company for 18 months but had a 9-year relationship with the firm having placed students with

the company in his previous job at a TAFE college. He was brought into the company to develop the training function, particularly traineeships.

The job roles

In this case, trade and non-trade jobs were considered; hence three chef roles (trade) were considered along with the van driver and the kitchen hand (non-trade). The learning and development position provided additional and complementary information to the other interviews.

'Non-trade' jobs

Both the delivery van driver and the kitchen hand considered their jobs to be low skilled; indeed, the kitchen hand described it as 'unskilled'; he continued: "I'm pretty sure a lot of supervisory chefs will tell you differently but in reality that's the way it is. Kitchen hands just stand around and wait until they're told to do something.' The kitchen hand role lacks variation with typical tasks involving scrubbing pots and pans and cleaning up any mess left by the chefs. The work was repetitious and was physically and mentally demanding:

It's physically demanding, you get treated in a way which is not very good. You basically get told to do whatever the chefs don't want to do and if the chefs are in a bad mood, they will literally just throw things around the place and expect you to clean it up for them.

The kitchen hand explained further:

The difficult part of the job is that on a busy day, on like a really, really busy time, like as I've said which is coming up, you'll stand at the sink and you'll scrub pots and pans for ten hours and that's it, that's all you'll do...it doesn't sound like much but you get home and you're just gone, absolutely physically gone. You get the guys in the warehouse here for instance, you always seem to see them standing around having a joke and having a laugh and everything else and their job is difficult, but they seem to always be able to find that 15 minutes or so to just have a relax.

From the perspective of the delivery van driver, with the recent growth of the company and the development of the management function the job had become more routinised:

In the past it was a very idiosyncratic sort of workplace and a lot of the jobs that they did here would require a particular type of ribbon and then a particular kind of this and a particular kind of that. These things were never really properly organized so things would fall and meld together and you had to be quite creative in a way or you had to be on the ball and sending people here and there.

As the above quotation suggests, the position of delivery van driver emerged as considerably more complex in practice. This person was responsible for assembling all the elements required for a function, and this included much more than safely loading, driving and unloading the prepared food and drink at the designated location. It also involves ensuring that all the collateral things arrive on site, whether it was cutlery, decorations or tablecloths. At the same time the role spilled over into getting whatever the chefs required to prepare a job. If a particular ingredient was not held in store or a unique ingredient is required, the delivery van driver had the task of going out and securing it.

The position of this delivery van driver might be unique due to his longevity with the firm, his personality and also that he performed the job of the warehouse manager during his absences:

When it's at its messiest, it's like a boutique logistics type role...Having said that, though, when you're running, when you're working as the warehouse manager then it can be quite complex because you really are having to respond to requests from - the vast majority of the company will come to you for some part of whatever function they've got on, whether it's the beverage equipment and packing the van with the food and everything else in it to be picked up or if it's the sourcing of just one element that's needed.

As noted above, the delivery van driver worked near to full-time hours but he also enjoyed considerable flexibility to pursue his preferred career. This flexibility appeared to be important for another reason; he saw it as providing protection from unreasonable treatment:

When you look and see the full-timers and you think you're being taken advantage of, I think a lot of the full-timers would probably agree with you. Then I think that from a management point of view when they look at the staff breakdown, I think that they look at the full-timers as workforce that can be used however.

Due to the variable nature of demand, the job of delivery van driver was performed by a casual workforce depending on the number of functions occurring over a given period of time. Further, over the course of a day, the work had peaks and troughs, a point also noted by the kitchen hand.

An observation common to both interviewees was that the chefs tended to treat them in what was perceived to be a demeaning way, though this was generally regarded as part of the culture of the industry. This point was picked up by the kitchen hand, who drawing on his experience in the Navy, commented on the lack of what he called 'man management' and he noted that in the Navy the job design was such that the kitchen hand functions were covered by the chefs. In terms of management skills he commented also:

The four senior chefs here, they have around about probably getting close to 60 years experience with this company alone and yet every time we have something unexpected or a busy period you can see the house of cards are just about to come down. There's panic, there're mistakes, there's just - and I just stand back and because I'm just the kitchen hand, I do have the opportunity just to stand back on the outside and look in, and it's scary to watch.

The concern being evinced by the kitchen hand was that highly qualified and experienced chefs do not have good supervisory or management skills, and that this problem is an industry-wide one. Moreover, in the case of this company, each large event seems to unfold without there being any learning from past experience. People work under great pressure and get the job done, but then go on repeat the same process of management by crisis day after day.

On the issue of training, it was evident that the company provided training in areas including manual handling and food safety but for the low skill positions, the very nature of the job design limited the potential for training. The kitchen hand could not recall any

specific training other than having been shown how to do the job by his predecessor. He attributed The lack of specific training to his possession of industry experience obviating the need for instruction.

Career paths in the industry were problematic, particularly from 'low level' jobs like kitchen hand and delivery van driver. In this case, the company behaved like much of the industry, drawing on casual labour, largely recruited through agencies. In the case of these two interviewees, they were not seeking a career path. For one, the sculptor, the job was viewed as a source of steady income as he prepared for the next phase of his life. This had not precluded his role evolving to include the more challenging role of warehouse manager on a relieving basis. In the case of the kitchen hand, there was no career path as such, but after 12 months in a casual role he was about to move into a second in charge role in the warehouse. This internal career path was also referred to by the Learning and Development manager who explained that recruiting casuals was a mechanism for selecting staff for permanent employment. This was also supported by the experience of the apprentice chef.

'Trade' jobs

This work revolved around the role of a chef even though the three relevant interviews involved people in different job roles. As noted above, the work was varied and the focus on quality provided considerable scope for chefs to both develop and retain their skills. It was however a production kitchen with all the pressures that this involves:

Yes, production side of it is a different arm and, although I speak it up and say they do different things each day, for the pure numbers that we can do and we do - for functions for 800 - that that chef may stand there all day doing the same repetitive job; and it's got to be accurate and it's to be speedy as well. Because you know, the guys want to do the best job they can in the immediate time they've got. So, it can be on a repetitive job that is not that exciting at times.

While the work had repetitive elements, new menus were constantly being developed and all the chefs had input into this process. Then in implementing new menus, there was still a need for judgment. A recurring theme was the importance of tasting and varying a recipe to achieve the right flavour. Taste was something that, according to the interviewees, comes with experience and of course working under the supervision of well-trained chefs.

An insight into the nature of the job of a chef was provided in the following exchange:

Interviewee: **Yeah, we look at the menu the day before. So if there's anything peculiar we can order it or ensure it's coming in. Then we finish off the morning's jobs, 'cause there's some things which have to be finished fresh on the day.**

Facilitator: Does that mean like baking, chilling...

Interviewee: **More like freshly baked muffins and cakes and sandwiches and stuff like that, or some meringue-based deserts have to be all finished or cut on the day.**

Facilitator: There's a lot of mixing and preparing different kinds of - whether it be a filling for a savoury or preparing a filling or different layers or a sweet.

Interviewee: Yeah. We then move on to - we work a day ahead because if we don't we can't keep up with it. So we then start the pick - you look at your list and the ideal way is it to the biggest and trickiest things, which take longest time to do first. So if they've got to bake for a while, you then know if you put that in, then you can do other things at the same time.

Facilitator: What's the most complex thing that would come out of your kitchen? Your part of the kitchen. You know, as a dish.

Interviewee: Tasting plates. We do tasting plates. Like on last year's menu, we did a French tasting plate which had the mille-feuille - like the old vanilla slice - a brûlée...

In common with much of the industry, there was considerable reliance on on-the-job training and, some of this is of a formal nature. As noted above, the company was placing increased emphasis on training. The learning and development manager referred to a company training program:

What we do is we actually move the workshops every month and we move them around the company so that we actually show everyone within the company the bigger picture of the company.

The training program referred to above consisted of two courses, Certificate III Catering Operations and Certificate III in Hospitality Operations. This program was a recent initiative led by the learning and development manager who explained:

It's actually designed basically around a lot of what our role in commercial sites do. So they get to do a bit of cooking, they get to do retail, money counting, coffee making, talking to customers, that kind of thing. It's an entry level.

In the interviews, predictably, the apprentice demonstrated the greatest awareness of training. He was spending one day a week at TAFE and then spending approximately 38 hours a week at work: Consistent with the explanation of the rotational training regime provided by the executive chef, the apprentice explained:

At the moment the majority of time here is spent in our pastry section. Do a lot of desserts and little quiches etc. After Christmas I think we go for three months each at the Museum and the National Gallery.

Follow up questions revealed that the apprentice was gaining experience in each area of food preparation and would also cover the full range of company operations.

The pastry chef had undertaken a four-year apprenticeship having gained industry experience before joining the company. Two training courses he could identify having completed while working for the company were HACCP, Hazard Analysis of Critical Control Points, an internationally accredited food safety program and a food handling course in the last year. The former is an internal quality assurance scheme for food production.

For chefs, career paths existed both internal and external to the company, though they emerge informally. The internal career path within the company does not appear to be a conscious development, but the longevity of staff and the family ethos lend themselves to internal movement. As was observed by the executive chef:

We've got a couple that's come through and we've trained up from scratch, they've started off as kitchen hands and worked their way through, so we had a couple of those. Majority I'd like to have is qualified chefs that have done their time out in the industry, that know how - they know their way around the kitchen and they've got some passion for food still.

From the perspective of the pastry chef, the scope for advancement was limited by the lack of labour turnover. Still he could see the scope to move within the firm into working on 'major events' as a chef. There was also some suggestion of a career path beyond the role of chef, for example, in events management.

External career paths tended to be horizontal and linked to skill development. Working in a single establishment, particularly a small restaurant, may lead to a high level of skill development but would tend to be involve one style of food and, by definition, the incumbent develops knowledge only in relation to that part of the industry. Movement between situations and even into self employment appears to be part of the career path of those who remain in the industry in the long term. According to the executive chef:

One of the head chefs that's been here, [XXX], he was the head chef on the floor, he's now does basically - he managed the National Gallery in terms of the manager there, he's the manager at the museum, he's done a lot of outside job for commercial, he's set up businesses...

In a similar vein the pastry chef saw an external career path within hospitality but it seemed a somewhat distant prospect:

Not really. I think once you get to a certain point, you can either open your own place - 'cause you could get to a certain level and then they tend to filter out and start doing other things. The old CEO,,,, was a chef. He then went on to...he ran the Sofitel. I think he did other places. Went to the casino, came here. Now he's doing a project management, which he's helping set up restaurants. Just troubleshoot restaurants and stuff like that.

Unsurprisingly, the apprentice chef could see a career path in the industry: 'Yeah they can go up the ranks and become the executive chefs or where instead of cooking, they go into the office jobs'. For himself he envisaged a career in terms of travelling overseas to work as a chef and 'in the long term I would like to own my own restaurant. But whether that's realistic, I don't know'.

Skill in the job

As above the discussion is in two parts, non-trade and trade jobs, normally categorised as 'low skill' and 'high skill' jobs.

“Non-trade’ jobs

In the case of the kitchen hand the job components were:

- Cleaning pots and pans
- Cleaning range tops
- Maintain fridges in a clean condition
- Cleaning spills
- Emptying bins
- Cleaning floors
- Other tasks as required

The associated job requirements were:

- Perseverance in undertaking repetitive and physically demanding tasks
- Capacity for working under close direction

As noted previously, the job involved manual handling and some exposure to chemicals involved in cleaning so there was scope for training.

For the delivery van driver the job components consisted of:

- Sourcing items external to the warehouse in a timely fashion
- Locating and loading/unloading all items required for a particular job
- Loading and unloading all food and beverage required for a job
- Driving the product to the site safely and in a manner which does not detract from the serving of the food
- Working with other staff at the delivery point to unpack and set up

The associated job requirements of this position included:

- Willingness to work flexible hours
- Literacy and numeracy
- Basic computer skills; eg email and spreadsheets
- Problem solving skills
- Ability to work with minimal supervision
- Able to interact well with other people and particularly responding to their needs
- Driver’s licence and demonstrated capacity to deliver product in good condition

Table 2: Employability skills – Kitchen hand and van driver

Skill	L	M	H
Communication skills		kh	kh vd
Team work		kh	kh vd
Problem solving	kh	Vd	vd
Initiative and enterprise		kh vd	vd
Planning and organizing	kh	kh vd	vd
Self management	kh	vd	vd
Learning skills	kh	kd	
Technology skills	kh vd		

Note: H=High, M= Medium, L=Low

In the case of the ‘non-trade’ jobs, the assessments of employability skills drew on the incumbents’ assessments, their text comments and the opinion of the learning and development manager, who is a qualified industry trainer and a highly experienced industry participant. The rankings by the kitchen hand were generally lower and the incumbent tended to accord lower rankings than the learning and development manager. This was in keeping with the kitchen hand’s view that the job largely entailing working under direction and enduring rather authoritarian treatment. In this context the ranking of communication skills as medium to high was unexpected. By contrast the unpredictable nature of the van driver role readily explains the high ranking accorded to communication skills, initiative and problem solving.

“Trade’ jobs

As explained above, discussion centred around the role of a chef and the following non-exhaustive list of job components emerged:

- Menu design
- Ordering
- Ingredient picking
- Task and time allocation
- Mixing ingredients
- Trimming and preparing meat
- Cooking product
- Preparing product for cooking on site; eg placing in shrink wrap
- Assembling orders for delivery
- Ensuring food safety and quality
- Monitoring food temperatures

The associated job requirements included:

- Problem solving
- Capacity to organise working space
- Well developed sense of taste
- Product knowledge
- Basic numeracy and literacy
- Biochemistry
- Developed sense of taste
- Knowledge of food quality assurance systems
- Basic computing skills
- Teamwork
- Initiative
- Speed
- Accuracy

Repeated probing with all interviewees elicited the impression that occupational health and safety issues were not a major concern. Reference was made to safe design of the machines and surprisingly knife cuts and manual handling did not emerge as issues, even with repeated probing. Similarly chemical handling was not a major concern. Appropriately food quality and safety was a preoccupation though there was confidence that with basic rules, this could be managed. In addition quality accreditation like HACCP and electronic monitoring of temperatures of fridges and other equipment contributed to effective management of quality. It should be noted that the company was in the process of recruiting an occupational health and safety officer.

Discussions with the interviewees revealed a high degree of consensus on the issue of employability skills; this is reflected in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Employability skills – Chef’s job

Skill	L	M	H
Communication skills		■	
Team work			■
Problem solving		■	
Initiative and enterprise		■	
Planning and organizing			■
Self management			■
Learning skills		■	■
Technology skills		■	■

Note: H=High, M= Medium, L=Low

Communication skills were rated as high. The apprentice provided a simple example of this: 'Say for instance we don't have something in stock and there is a job already packed on the shelf and we pinch something off it to use'. More tellingly, the pastry chef explained how a customer requirement for a particular dessert may be interpreted quite differently by the customer, the sales person and the chef.

Teamwork was ranked high because, in spite of the hierarchy of the kitchen, in a production kitchen 'different sections of the kitchen do different components' (executive chef). Similarly the pastry chef commented: we all move round when needed to be'.

Problem solving was categorised as medium because the hierarchy of the kitchen allowed for the intervention of the head chef or executive chef as appropriate in resolving issues. Nevertheless, it was apparent that few jobs were entirely standard and unanticipated events arose; eg a customer wanted a lemon delicious pudding but this is a dish that really needed to be served when cooked and not re-heated. In the discussions it was difficult to separate initiative and enterprise from problem solving, so both were rated medium.

Initiative and enterprise were rated as medium again due to the way the hierarchy of the kitchen operates. In the case of the apprentice, initiative was limited; once they have seen how a particular problem is resolved by the qualified chefs, they can replicate the approach.

Planning was accorded a high ranking due to the requirements of producing large volume and complexity; for example the pastry chef said: 'Big jobs have to be pre-planned..You get a heads up, so therefore you know in your own mind what you need' and move on to communicate with the other areas to arrange ingredients, equipment, staffing and such.

Self management seemed to be focused around managing time so that the various constituents of a dish or a menu came together in a timely fashion. In effect this was about managing time efficiently.

Learning skills were rated medium to high because of the premium placed on adaptability; there was a need to develop new menus and produce different food, sometimes on a one-off basis for a particular event.

Technology skills received a medium to high rating reflecting the differing views of the respondents. Technology tended to be regarded as information technology and not the equipment in use, yet manifestly there was a range of newer equipment such as blast chillers and cryovac machines. Similarly, chefs needed to understand biochemistry from the perspective of food safety and flavour.

Perception of skill in this job compared to other jobs

It was difficult for most respondents to rank jobs on a scale of 1-10 first in terms of society at large and then in the context of the company. Not all respondents were willing or able to complete the rating task.

The kitchen hand ranked his job as 3 in the abstract and in the context of the company he placed it as the lowest job with the executive chef at the top of the hierarchy. In arriving at this assessment he did not other roles outside the kitchen. The van driver

rated his role as 2 to 4 on a scale of 10 but in the company context he scored the role as ranging from 4 to 6. The low end assessments reflected the van driver job in isolation and the higher rankings, the role of warehouse manager.

The evaluation of chef roles varied among respondents. The apprentice ranked the role as 6 in the abstract (8-9 in the company), the executive chef as 6 in the abstract (8 in the company). The pastry chef and learning and development manager gave in-company evaluations only with the former rating the chef as 7. The learning and development manager scored the van driver and kitchen hand at 3 with the executive chef at 10.

The most interesting observation to emerge from this area of inquiry was that few jobs were regarded as lacking in skill, and this was not a self-serving bias. Hence the pastry cook said that the kitchen hand was the least skilled job but continued:

Delivery drivers, they just drive the food but therefore you have got to know how to drive if you want to – and there's procedures in all jobs.

Under questioning he explained that even low skill jobs involve food handling:

They still need to know the basis of food handling and all that type of stuff. And chemical awareness...Even the basic level jobs still need to have some level of training.

How can levels of skill and perceptions of the skill of the job be improved?

The key to improving skill in the industry appeared to centre on an almost unanimous but spontaneous observation: that the job of the chef was performed at different levels in different parts of the industry. In effect this comment was about market segmentation and the aspiration of some businesses to produce a higher quality product.

The delivery van driver provided an insightful comment, recognising that the company operated at a high level of skill for the most part; he thought this was not the industry norm:

I think it comes back to the end product that you are striving for and I think I'm probably thinking about my broader experience in restaurants, cafes. Here, the kind of quality of product that they did strive for here as to what they do now. There's a definite drop away from that level of quality. As a result of that, the level of training, the level of skill required, comes down because you're much more repackaging food that's already been prepared. You're pumping out, and they went and filleted 360 quails in there today, a couple of the chefs. Not a lot of the chefs in there can do that. That's more of a skill thing.

Everything else that's going to go through on that job is going to be on that increased level. If more of the jobs were aiming for that then yes, I think you would want more training, you would want more skills across the board through your company.

In these comments and the observations of other interviewees, a recurrent theme was the impact of mass production to satisfy the demand for mass consumption. Even in this case, where the focus is on quality, large volume jobs dictate the introduction of lower skilled casual workers and in turn a greater reliance on purchasing of partially prepared foods. Other respondents emphasised a related issue, the customer's willingness to pay and in turn that few people had the capacity or willingness to pay for fine dining. In essence this problem reduces to the fact that for most segments of the

market the ultimate customer was a single person or family and not a corporation which might have the ability to pay for quality. Thus we can reasonably infer that different markets demand food service at different price points and this has implications for the demonstrated level of skill of chefs and other kitchen and related staff.

A related issue which elicited some comment was whether the job could be done without training. In the case of both low skill jobs, the incumbents considered that training was required, though not in their specific cases. The van driver had worked across construction and the restaurant sector for a long period of time and the construction sector has a high orientation to safety. In the case of the kitchen hand he was formally qualified as a chef and had extensive experience. The same issue was examined in relation to the role of a chef with there being agreement that formal training and work experience are essential to learning the trade. As the executive chef commented:

There's so called qualified chefs out there that would never see – they'd never see a steak before because it all comes in portions. All sauces already come in made for them. All cakes already come in made for them, you know its understanding the basics of how to get there first. There's got to be some formal training...done properly

Certain elements are only able to be learned formally, eg biochemistry and occupational health and safety, but other elements, such as taste can only be developed with experience. Interestingly, it emerged that a key element of the job of a chef is taste, something which can only be developed with experience, and even then experience in quality establishments; as the pastry chef observed: 'If you only learn takeaway food, as you're young and you work in a café. You then move up – if you don't move on, you stay at that level, that's what your taste is going to be'.

Even accepting the points made above about the requirements for achieving a skilled workforce, we are left with the problem that most establishments require long and unsociable hours which ultimately lead people to change jobs, and typically to leave the industry in their early 30s as they form families.

Key points and unique findings

The hospitality industry covers a vast array of employment settings with the present case being unusual. Although the company commenced with private parties and built a reputation for quality, it retained a reputation as a premium provider except that it now had a diverse set of operations which ranged from fine dining through to cafeterias and everything in between.

In keeping with the nature of the industry, employment levels were highly variable, but, unusually its permanent chefs were both highly experienced and had been employed with the company for a long period of time. In part the retention of staff could be explained by the lack of unsociable hours but also by the attraction of varying menus and the capacity to utilise a wide range of skills. To some extent this approach had alleviated the training task of the firm. Casual employees recruited from agencies enabled the workforce to grow rapidly to meet peaks though at the cost of variable labour quality and possibly the need to adapt the production process to achieve high volumes. Traditionally, the use of agency labour had also provided a mechanism for screening potential permanent employees, This approach had been used to recruit

workers at all levels and hiring casual labour at base levels had formed part of the internal career path of the company. This model now appeared to be less viable, with some gaps in the workforce having emerged, for example, for a second pastry chef. Growing demand and changing labour market conditions had led the company to become more involved as a training provider including recruiting apprentices and providing training at Certificate III level.

The case confirmed certain important points about skill development in the hospitality industry. The tendency to view the industry as a whole tends to obscure the fact that the work of chefs in particular can be performed at different levels of skill depending particularly on the price point in the relevant market segment. Other important findings are that skill development is also affected by the range of food styles and food service operations in which a person can work. The diversity of this company is such that it can provide both a diverse and interesting work experience but also a challenging set of learning opportunities. The greatest limitation of working for the company is that the stability of the workforce and the small size of the core staff limits opportunities for workers to have an extended career path within the organisation.

A interesting and perhaps troubling feature of this case was the acceptance of the traditional hierarchical nature of the organisation of the kitchen. This is premised on the existence of 'low skilled' workers with limited prospects of advancement in the industry and an authoritarian supervisory style. If the goal is to build a skilled workforce there may be scope for job redesign to eliminate low skill jobs as kitchen hands but also to enhance management skills.

Coiffeur Hair Design

Introduction

Coiffeur Hair Design (pseudonym) was a small salon on a main road in a large Victorian regional centre. The manager had owned the salon for 23 years and prior to that had worked in other salons in the same city. Coiffeur catered to a range of clients; as the senior stylist said, sometimes people thought it was a 'nana salon' because of its suburban location, but its clients were varied, and the manager and assistant manager were active in hairdressing associations, the State Industry Training Advisory Board, and national and international hairdressing competitions. About 20% of the clients were men; the proportion was gradually increasing. The company had four full-time staff with two part-timers who worked at busy times. Staff members were not unionised; according to the manager this was normal for the industry.

The company had employed many apprentices over the years. It had recently been involved with school-based apprenticeships and one of the interviewees had begun employment at Coiffeur in this role. The company always participated in school work experience programs and indeed had a work experience student on-site at the time of the first visit.

Research method

The case study involved face-to-face interviews with all of the four full-time staff including the salon manager over two half-days in July and August 2010. Participant details were as follows:

Table 1: Interviewees: Coiffeur Hair Design

	Participant Job title	Gender	Age	Approx length of time with company
1	Salon manager	M	50s	23 years
2	Senior stylist and assistant manager	F	42	Nearly 4 years
3	Final year apprentice	F	21	5 years
4	First year apprentice	F	18	9 months

A detailed interview protocol was utilised, in common with the other case studies. Interviews took between 25 and 58 minutes. The interviews were taped, with permission, and transcribed, and then analysed to draw out themes.

The job role

The occupation that was discussed in this case study was hairdresser. All four interviewees undertook that role as part of their duties although the salon manager spent least time in this role.

The hairdressers employed at Coiffeur as in most salons were usually female although some males had been employed over the years. It was reported that it had become quite difficult to find good staff. Sometimes the salon recruited through advertisements and sometimes through word of mouth; but the quality of applicants for qualified positions was not usually good. Hence the engagement with apprenticeships. The salon manager attributed this to a decline in the standard of teaching at TAFE and other RTOs; the curriculum was more limited than it had been. He sent his apprentices not to the local TAFE college but to one about 75 km away.

As with most hairdressing salons, all of the staff were qualified with a Certificate III in hairdressing, but none had any higher qualifications. The manager said that his father and grandfather were also hairdressers, but working in men's hair. The assistant manager's father had several relatives who had been hairdressers and her father had managed hairdressing schools in TAFE in another State. The salon manager and assistant manager were very active in the broader industry and encouraged their staff to attend training on particular aspects of the industry and to take advantage of courses offered by supplying companies.

While within the salon, career paths were limited, there were many career paths externally, for example with suppliers, make-up artist in the movie industry, working with fashion labels and so on. The manager mentioned former staff who had gone on to do some of these things. The senior stylist said:

I always remember ... my cousin was desperate to do hairdressing and my aunty and uncle actually said to her, there is no way you're doing hairdressing. There is no future in a hairdresser. But there is. You can have your own business, you can manage businesses for other people. You can work for companies. Yeah there is, there's huge (opportunities) - you can do freelance, you can do an apprenticeship, work somewhere for a long time, you can go and do freelance working for magazines. You can go and do work with fashion labels. It's endless.

Participants agreed that many entrants to hairdressing had wanted to be hairdressers for many years, but that this was not always the case.

The skill in the job

It was agreed that the main skill groups were cutting and colouring; one staff member thought that it was acceptable to have a particular strength in one area rather than the other. The manager said that he would be prepared to take on a staff member with some deficiencies in one area but would send him or her for external training to remedy the deficiency. The other 'technical' skills were washing and drying hair, perming, and putting up long hair. There were also tasks such as 'Sweeping, dusting, cleaning the toilets, making tea, washing towels' – which all staff members were expected to contribute towards.

Customer-related skills were extremely important. As the senior apprentice said, 'Customer service is the most important factor-people remember the service but might forget a poor haircut.' These skills were described by the different staff members as 'listening', 'being concerned for a client's welfare', 'building trust', seeing the client as a whole person and suggesting a haircut to suit that. It was noted that clients attach themselves to a particular hairdresser so building rapport was really important.

Finally it was viewed as important that the hairdresser displayed fashion sense and style. This was both related to their keeping up to date with fashion changes so that they could provide clients with an up-to-date haircut, as far as was appropriate for the client, but also in the sense that in their own appearance and demeanour they needed to display fashion sense. These requirements meant that there was a need for continuous learning as fashions and styles changed so quickly and new hair fashions required new techniques. As the senior stylist said:

I think every year of my hairdressing career, there's always been short courses where there'd be days or lots of evening seminars, maybe after work things. A lot of shows, whether they be companies or put on by organisations that [the manager] is actually involved in and I'm involved in.

Participants were asked about the risks associated with the work. Health risks with relation to cutting and to chemicals were mentioned, and the junior apprentice also mentioned the risk of losing clients because of poor service. She also said:

If you were a bad hairdresser, you could turn someone's hair the wrong colour with the wrong toner. You could cut it too short. You could cut it crooked. You could not think while you're mixing up the colour, and mix it all wrong

The hairdresser's job was described by the manager as being very visible; everyone in the salon – staff and clients - could see her skill. The job could be done with differing

levels of skill and expertise. Some of the factors that were included in these levels were consistency of performance, precision, and speed which was also important although only when accompanied by precision and consistency. As the junior apprentice said:

Some (hairdressers) take extra long - like too long - like worrying too much. Well, you don't really need to worry that much because it probably works better if you don't worry.

It was stated by the manager that feedback on whether the hairdresser was doing a good job mainly came from customers. Dissatisfied clients might phone and complain or might simply not return. The manager said that hairdressers would not keep their jobs if they did not maintain a client list.

Interviewees were asked about the employability skills requirements of the job of hairdresser. The results are shown in Table 2. The following legend is used: M= Manager, A= Assistant manager/senior stylist, S= Senior apprentice, J= Junior apprentice; and the placement within the box, where not central, indicates the relative importance attributed to each employability skill.

Table 2: Extent to which participants believed that each employability skill is required by the job of hairdresser

Skill	L	M	H
Communication skills			M A J S
Team work			M A J S
Problem solving			M A S J
Initiative and enterprise		J	M A S J
Planning and organising			M A S J
Self management			M A S J
Learning skills			M A S J
Technology skills			M A S J

Note: H=High, M= Medium, L=Low

All participants believed that very high levels of employability skills were required for the job of hairdresser. The only variation in the answers was that the junior apprentice thought that only medium levels of initiative and enterprise were required. The senior apprentice differentiated slightly at the high end of the scale, rating communication and teamwork as 'very high'. Communication with others in the team was important as well as communication with clients. The situations in which these were important included:

- Noting if others were falling behind and needing assistance;
- Asking others for assistance eg with advice to customers about colours (junior apprentice);
- Maintaining good relationships with other staff by, for example, asking if anyone wanted anything brought back when going out for lunch.

The senior apprentice gave an example of problem-solving skills:

If somebody else (another salon) has done a colour and they (the customer) don't like it, how are you going to reduce how dark it is or how gold it is, what you're going to do to fix it, how much you can actually do without destroying the hair, all that sort of stuff. There's a lot of thinking and if you're going to put that on, what's going to happen and how is the hair going to actually still feel.

Interviewees were asked to say how the components of skill within the job of sales assistant were distributed among three main areas; technology skills, customer service skills and cognitive skills.

Table 3: Apportioning of elements of the job of hairdresser across three major fields

Participant	Technology skills	Customer service skills	Cognitive skills
Manager	33	33	33
Senior stylist/ assistant manager	33	33	33
Senior apprentice	30	50	20
Junior apprentice	50	25	25

The senior apprentice provided an interesting insight into the thinking behind her answer:

With your thinking, there's a lot of scientific (knowledge) - like, so with your colours; if you put the wrong colour on you're going to get the wrong results so there's a lot of scientific behind that and a lot of knowledge to learn what's - if you put what product on you're going to learn what is going to come out of that. So that's with the thinking... The technical would probably - no, like learning how to do - like, a specific thing. Like with your foil work, make sure that you get it all even the whole way through. Being really precise; making sure that you actually get all the regrowth... Customer service is probably the most important one... Yeah. You can always - like if you sit a client down and give them a book and a drink and sit there and actually acknowledge them and make them feel like they're the only person in the salon, they're always going to come back to that. It doesn't matter if the colour wasn't quite right or the haircut wasn't exactly what you wanted. But they're always going to come back because they felt like they were the most important thing in the salon.

The participants found it quite difficult to separate out the three domains; as the senior stylist said, "they all combine to make one."

Perceptions of skill in this job compared with other jobs

Staff at Coiffeur gave the following views about how the skill in hairdressing compared with that in other jobs. The following table provides information about the respondents, their views about the comparative skill level, and a quotation from each to illustrate the reasoning behind their answers.

Table 4: Position of hairdressing on a 'skill scale' from the least skilled (1) to the most skilled job (10)

Participant	Response	Indicative quotation
Manager	8	'You would have to be highly skilled to do what you're doing. But how you deliver that skill is where the importance lies. It's like any brain surgeon or any doctors. Some doctors are really good at what they do and they're the ones that are booked so full. ... Hairdressers are exactly the same. The highly skilled ones which are booked all the time, as compared to the person who's pretty well skilled, but hasn't got the initiative and the push to create that clientele base.'
Senior stylist/ assistant manager	5	'We're maybe in the middle... Our job is just as meaningful as theirs (a surgeon) but just in a different way. We're making people feel better.'
Senior apprentice	8-9	'You're not just going to go and start cutting somebody's hair or chucking colour on it just because you want to. You're going to do it because you've got the skills behind you and you don't go through three years of trade school and the rest of your life learning stuff about it for no reason.'
Junior apprentice	5-6	'It's pretty hard work... A lot of concentration needs to go into it. This job's hard but I'm sure there'd be harder jobs out there, like miners and stuff.'

The table indicates that the bases for the judgment were quite different in each case, which perhaps partly accounts for the disparity in the answers.

When thinking about the perceptions of skill in the job in comparison with other jobs, people gave varied responses. One respondent said that the perception of skill must be high because people keep swapping hairdressers till they find the right one; and another that 'everyone is interested in hairstyles' and therefore they admired hairdressers.

However most agreed that the perceptions of skill in hairdressing among the general public were not favourable. It was suggested that people do not understand the skill because they do not understand what sits behind what a hairdresser does. Much of the skill, for example, in cutting hair was invisible. The junior apprentice said:

Because watching (the manager) cut, it looks easy, but there's a lot more to it. Like the angle of your hair, how your scissors sit, what colour, what angle it's on, how far away from the roots it is, all that stuff.

Another respondent said that a lot of young people undertake work experience in hairdressing salons and find the job is not very interesting, because on work experience only a limited range of tasks is possible. The senior stylist thought that the rise of '\$14 a cut' hairdressers had severely damaged the industry because the service that people obtained at such salons was poor and therefore they thought that hairdressing was unskilled.

Careers teachers had a 'poor press': it was suggested that careers teachers guide poorer students into hairdressing and therefore that hairdressers think they themselves are 'dumb' and therefore they undervalue the job they do. The senior stylist said:

A lot of kids actually think they're dumb a lot of the time and again that's too where they think, oh well I'm dumb, so I'll just go do hairdressing or they think that other jobs, if you don't go to university are quite meaningless. It's just a job. It's like no, it actually can be your career.

How can levels of skill and perceptions of skill in the job be improved?

The manager and assistant manager both put forward the view that the job had in fact become less skilled: there was no final external examination at the end of trade school and the range of skills taught was narrower than formerly. One of the apprentices also suggested that the content in the TAFE course was a little thin and that there was not enough practice time. It was suggested that salon owners and colleges sometimes blamed each other for poor outcomes and that skill levels would improve if they worked together better. It was also suggested that poor outcomes were to some extent inevitable with the calibre of people entering hairdressers, because of the poor image of the job as discussed above.

The following were strategies that interviewees said might improve perceptions of the job:

- An advertising campaign such as that recently mounted on television by the CPA;
- Talking to the public about the skills involved and about the training programs and competitions in which staff engaged;
- Talking to young people about the extent and depth of the training required;
- Taking part in competitions;
- Being realistic in charging for services.

Key points/unique findings

While all participants were clear about the nature of the skills involved in the job, they were also realistic in their appraisal of the place of hairdressing in the general public's 'skills hierarchy'. It was very clear that they believed that the low esteem in which hairdressing was held was very much tied up with the attitudes of school teachers. The two senior participants' views of the skill in hairdressing were affected by their belief that skill levels had in actual fact declined across the industry and that this needed to be addressed.

There was a varied perception of the relative level of skill in the job of hairdresser which partly seemed to reflect people's different perceptions of what skill meant. This further indicates the need for a better shared understanding of the notion of skill.

Thus while the suggestions for improving the public perception of skill in hairdressing were very useful, it seems that a shared understanding within the industry might be necessary before attempting to convince the general public.



Published by Service Skills Australia 2011