Using skills as the key mediator of meaning in labour market services of the future

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1.   Introduction

The genesis of this paper was a feeling that it was worth investigating further the 'final thought' of Hanna Shapiro in her proposed keynote paper on 'Skills for the future.' Her examination of the impact of new information and communication technologies, the role of organisational knowledge creation and transfer, tacit knowledge, team working and organisational learning focused upon the 'gap' between individual skill development and attempts to create learning organisations. Hence the interplay of individual and organisational learning was investigated from the perspective of those already working in an organisation. The 'final thought' though was:

> "one key issue, which has not been discussed in this paper, is whether there should be a shift in labour market services from a crisis model to one of universal entitlement. A system of lifelong employability where job guidance and counselling takes place on a programmed basis has many attractions in the current climate of discussions about lifelong learning and the learning organisation" (Shapiro, 1997, p15).

Now a shift in the timing of job guidance and counselling (so that it occurred primarily during the periods of employment rather than prior to entry into the labour market and just before or after someone became unemployed) would also require a fundamental shift in the orientation of careers guidance interviews. In particular, it would make little sense to continue to operate with a traditional 'matching' perspective, which sought to align individual interests with opportunities in an occupational structure largely based upon how the world of work was described in the past. The most obvious way forward would seem to be to get the individual to reflect upon the range of skills he or she currently possesses and to be able to present the world of work in terms of the skills likely to be required in future, rather than being tied to how they were described in the past.

At a cerebral level it might be possible to get broad agreement that such an approach might be appropriate at an unspecified time in the future. However, to make progress towards the implementation of such an approach four challenges have to be met. The first is can a suitable language of skills be constructed: this task is not as easy as it initially appears, as the corpses of failed attempts at specification of the 'skills of the future' testify. The second challenge is whether the language of skills can be used to underpin models of guidance practice: that is, is it possible to get guidance professionals believing that their primary task is to engage in dialogues about skill development and (changing) skill requirements, rather than helping in the matching of individual interests and opportunities to exercise these interests within different occupational and organisational environments. The third challenge is the pragmatic one of whether it is practicable to start to shift guidance practice in this direction, The final challenge is perhaps the most interesting: can a shift to a language of skills fit most guidance contexts, not just the special circumstances of the career development of highly skilled employees in learning organisations.

I am just one member of a team which is just about to start a project which will engage with these issues, so I welcome the opportunity to discuss some preliminary thoughts on the first two challenges with members of the Forum. I emphasise, however, that these thoughts represent initial ideas, and as such I would welcome their exposure to robust critical scrutiny.

At the moment we believe that benefits would accrue to clients if 'skills' were central to discourses in and about careers guidance. Over the next two years we propose to test this belief, and to see whether 'using skills as a key mediator of meaning' in careers guidance with unemployed adults does deliver substantive benefits to clients.

2.   Can an appropriate language of skills be constructed for use in careers guidance

It is clear that it is possible to get individuals to define the skills and qualities they possess to fit a number of different skills classifications or skills profiles. However, in order to be really useful in guidance contexts a skills-based approach has to be able to analyse work activities in a broadly similar way. Our initial approach will therefore be to seek to analyse work activities by the level of essential skills required, such that the level, range, complexity and integration of skills required can be signalled for different types and levels of work.

The 'essential skill requirements' of (about 300 common) jobs will be categorised according to:

- communication skills
- information processing skills
- technical or occupational skills, knowledge and understanding
- intellectual skills
- special skills
- skills associated with autonomous working

The 'essential skill requirements' owes some lineage to core skills/key qualifications debates. However, the inclusion of technical and intellectual skills allows for recognition of the process skills involved in the mastery of recognisable disciplinary or occupational bodies of knowledge, skills and understanding. The 'special skills' cover a range of different sets of skills and attributes. The aim here has been to construct a language which will accommodate richness of description rather than analytical rigour. Hence there is a degree of inter-dependence and overlap between skill sets, and skills may be at different levels of aggregation and complexity. The test of the value of the classification in this context though is primarily a utilitarian one: does it help individuals look beyond traditional job classifications at what types of skills are required in different (and changing) organisational and occupational contexts, and does it help them reflect critically upon the nature of the skills they themselves possess.

2.1   Communication skills

Communication skills can be described according to the demands they make for different types of skill (oral communication; written communication; listening; foreign language; networking skills; inter-personal skills). However, it is also necessary to take account of factors leading to increasing significance of communication skill demands: for example:

- nature of audience

- purpose/meaning/value
- complexity
- unfamiliarity
- extent of cognitive demands
- ability to work with others (including the ability to fulfil a variety of roles depending on circumstances).

While this may be seen as complex the categorisations are intended to lead to 'rich descriptions' of work activities, which help people think of jobs in terms of the skills required. For comparative purposes, and in order to aid searching and retrieval, it may be sufficient to offer a simple scoring system, which utilises say three levels. The test for inclusion at a particular level would then relate to the extent to which the skills required are broadly typical (or in certain cases critical) for a particular set of work activities.

The actual scoring system will be devised in consultation with careers guidance specialists and be subject to review dependent upon how well it works in practice. However, it is currently envisaged that the scoring system would start at a fairly high level: equivalent perhaps to key skills level 3 according to NCVQ criteria. [The development of key skills within education and training serves a different purpose, related to policies of upskilling, curriculum entitlement and individual empowerment.] Thus my scoring of different types of work activities would be:

Level 1:   active selling of products or services, which makes significant communication skill demands, including, for example, highly developed customer relations skills; project team work.

Level 2:   production of project reports; public performances; school teaching.

Level 3:   simultaneous foreign language translation; guidance.

2.2. Information processing skills

The range and type of activities could be developed from a variety of listings of IT skills, although processing of information from non-IT sources may also be important. The scoring could perhaps be organised as follows:

Level 1:   where significant skills were required in relation to word processing; spread sheets; databases; information retrieval; computer control; computer conferencing systems control.

Level 2:   work activities requiring significant interpretation and integration of material from different sources; production of major reports.

Level 3:   systems analysis and control.

2.3   Technical or occupational skills, knowledge and understanding

Any set of skill requirements grouped according to and underpinned by recognisable disciplinary, technical or occupational bodies of knowledge, skills and understanding may be included here. Thus the skills could relate to disciplinary bodies of knowledge, whether from mathematics, science, art history or law, or to occupational bodies of knowledge, such as nursing, car maintenance, pharmacy dispensing or insurance. The scoring could follow this type of pattern:

Level 1:   work activities primarily involving single 'occupational' skills of a traditional type (carpenter; car mechanic; hairdresser).

Level 2:   work activities requiring multi-skilling, ability to operate in multi-disciplinary environments, or combination of training or supervisory responsibilities with technical expertise (specialist nursing; Meister etc.) or graduate level knowledge base (statistician; teacher, etc.).

Level 3:   work activities requiring application of high level technical skills across a range of contexts or possession of a post-graduate knowledge base (e.g. surgeon; barrister; financial analyst; university researcher).

2.4   Intellectual skills

To some extent intellectual skill development aligns with development of mastery of occupational, technical or disciplinary bodies of knowledge. However, while intellectual skills can be demonstrated in the operation of specific occupational or technical activities, they may also be required in a range of contexts where specialist technical knowledge is not required: for example, when dealing with problems outside a technical domain; when acting in a multi-disciplinary context; when acting as a member of a project team or task force; or when carrying out a range of managerial duties.

The other key difference is that occupational, technical or disciplinary expertise is by definition built up within a specified domain. Hence intellectual skill development and application may be relatively confined. This means that whether an individual can transfer and apply high level intellectual skills to other contexts is an open question.

Intellectual skills may comprise:

- conceptual skills
- research skills
- analytical skills
- critical thinking
- problem-solving
- reasoning
- critical reflection
- ability to make good judgements
- application of learning strategies

These (high level) intellectual skills can be demonstrated in technical contexts (research chemist) , in the complexity of tasks to be performed (as in complex project management), or in the extent to which skill integration is required (as when technical, conceptual and inter-personal skills are linked as in prototype development and demonstration). The scorings could therefore follow this type of pattern:

Level 1:   work activities involving problem-solving (maintenance; departmental budget forecasting) or critical reflection (case review).

Level 2:   work activities involving skill integration (multi-skilling); working in multi-disciplinary teams (e.g. social worker); banking advice involving cross-selling products.

Level 3:   work activities involving complex product design; complex system management; research and development; economic forecasting; complex tax/legal casework; project management.

2.5   Special skills

The use of the term 'special skills' was to try to convey a sense in which these skills revolved around something 'extra' or some particular flair. These skills could encompass the following range:

- initiative
- creativity
- innovation
- entrepreneurial (business sense)
- aesthetic (art/craft practical skills)
- motivation/commitment
- empathy

It may be that some types of work activity (for example, those with a strong creative, artistic or innovative dimension) require particular combinations of such skills. It may be argued that motivation or commitment is not a skill. However, it is included here because the ability to succeed in creative and artistic settings so often depends upon high levels of commitment (in the face of adversity) as well as talent. Work activities could be scored along the following lines:

Level 1: skilled 'craft' work; acting as an independent consultant; counselling; scope for initiative in how work is undertaken.

Level 2: aesthetic design and implementation (fashion; furniture; architecture; painting; marketing; product design).

Level 3: creative and original work; major innovation (new product development).

2.6 Skills associated with autonomous working

Work activities differ greatly in the extent to which they require workers to work independently. However, the skills associated with autonomous working have become significant in an increasing number of work contexts. Skills associated with autonomous working include:

- self-management
- self-direction
- responsibility for own learning
- ability to transfer skills, knowledge and understanding between contexts
- ability to integrate skills
- capacity for self-reflection

Work activities could then be scored along the following lines:

Level 1: any work activities which are essentially self-directed (includes many forms of skilled work).

Level 2: work activities which explicitly encourage a model of the 'reflective practitioner' (with the worker able to reflect upon, and 'theorise' about, her or his own practice).

Level 3: work activities which include scope to go beyond current practice (expertise in practice is coupled with the ability to integrate concepts and ideas which can be influential in 'changing' existing communities of practice).

3. Can the language of skills be used to underpin models of guidance practice

The above section showed that it is possible to construct a plausible 'language of skills' that could be used in the construction of individual skills profiles and of rich descriptions of the skill requirements underpinning different types of work activities. However, existing job titles have to be capable of being accessed, even if a more open job classificatory system is used. The underpinning a model of much guidance practice is a psychological differentialist approach, as exemplified by Holland (1985). In Holland's model the intention is to attempt to **match** personal orientations against modal occupational environments, which can both be categorised as one of six types (realistic; investigative; artistic; social; enterprising; conventional). Perhaps the major problems with this model are that it reinforces stereotypical images, and looks backwards to a (1970's) highly differentiated model of occupations and world of work, and that only a limited number of people make career decisions in such a technically rational way.

This means that if a language of skills is to be used it has to be situated in a context where many people make 'pragmatically rational' career decisions (Hodkinson et al, 1996), in the light of the constraints operating upon them and the opportunities available to them. A further implication of this is that clients need to look more widely across a variety of occupational environments rather than narrowing their focus to very particular areas.

Focusing attention on how people make career decisions in practice (using pragmatic rationality rather than technical rationality) means that a more open classificatory system should be judged by its utility rather than its analytical rigour. So overlap between categories is possible, and the categories themselves may be of different types.

We believe that the language of skills can be situated within a client-centred model of guidance which supports clients making career decisions in terms of skill development rather than through a matching process to facilitate 'choosing a career.' Much less emphasis is therefore given to looking for a lifelong career: 'progress' can be informed by more immediate concerns and reviewed at regular intervals.

A model of guidance practice, which believes careers are made up of a series of 'pragmatically rational' decisions, could itself be much more pragmatic in how it groups work activities. In particular, it could seek to help clients consider possibilities which challenge stereotypical patterns of careers thinking. To this end, my initial template for an overarching grouping of work activities would be as follows:

- practical activities with special features that often prove attractive
- applied activities, requiring attention to detail and an emphasis on following plans and task completion
- activities involving established analytical ways of working dealing with materials, concrete activities, verifiable facts, but with scope for change and a degree of freedom of action
- abstract, problem-solving activities: responding to ideas, with variety in the problems to be faced
- responding to people in structured ways: people-oriented activities, but with an emphasis on established patterns of behaviour
- working with and responding to people in a variety of different ways

3.1 Practical activities with special features that often prove attractive [special practical]

I chose this as the first category precisely because it best illustrates the pragmatic nature of the grouping. These contain a variety of different sets of activities, which are linked primarily through the sense of attachment that individuals often have with wanting to do work in one of these areas:

- 'working outside': post; refuse collection; lorry driving; construction.
- 'working with living things': agriculture; horticulture; working with animals.
- entertainment: sport; media; music.

3.2 Applied activities, requiring attention to detail and an emphasis on following plans and task completion [detailed applied]

These types of work activities are found across a wide range of occupational and organisational contexts. Such activities can be undertaken by a wide range of people, but some people (of a particular personality type) like detail, order, established routines and following things through to completion. The occupational contexts include: accountancy; word processing; financial management; stock control; law; security; police; administration; clerical; supervision; and management. The organisational contexts include: supermarkets; hotels; business; manufacturing; and installation.

3.3 Activities involving established analytical ways of working, dealing with materials, concrete activities, verifiable facts, but with scope for change and a degree of freedom of action [analytical applied]

These type of work activities include skilled trades; maintenance and repair; statisticians; auditors; marketing; police (detection); sales; and fire brigade.

3.4 Abstract, problem-solving activities: responding to ideas, with variety in the problems to be faced [abstract problem solving]

These type of work activities include: science; research; telecommunications; computing; financial planning; social science; marketing; artists; photographers; lawyers; technicians; financial analysts; forecasters; and transportation management.

3.5 Responding to people in structured ways: people-oriented activities, but with an emphasis on established patterns of behaviour [structured social]

These type of work activities take place in the following contexts: health and social care; librarians; service; (early years) teaching; beauticians; secretaries; office managers; receptionists; office managers; tourist guides; travel agents; sales; ambulance service; sales; public relations; and musicians.

3.6   Working with and responding to people in a variety if different ways [open social]

These type of work activities include: artists and entertainers; clergy; social workers; teachers; psychologists; editors; consultants; customer advice; sports coach; translator; counsellors; journalists; nursing; and medicine.

4.   Conclusion

Now it might be felt that the classification of work activities still retains a strong 'matching' element, but there are two major differences from differentialist models. Firstly, the groupings are more open and, secondly, the emphasis upon skills development may mean that certain work activities are chosen to give experience in that aspect, rather than the list of occupations forming a set from which a lifelong career may be chosen. It is unlikely that the ideas presented here will not be subject to revision, but I hope the ideas presented here show that it is feasible to use skills as the key mediator of meaning in labour market services of the future.

5.   References

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