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Fulfilled Life or Policy Chimera?**

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## **EMPLOYABILITY IN THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY: LIVING THE FULFILLED LIFE OR POLICY CHIMERA?**

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This paper examines the processes through which the obligation of continued individual development—captured by the notion of ‘employability’—is being increasingly rearticulated and transmogrified by policy makers, managers and organizations in both the UK and US as a means through which individual and social (economic) fulfilment can be obtained. It suggests that, for all the celebratory discourse which surrounds the notion of employability, the concept itself represents little more than a policy chimera: a thinly veiled attempt to relocate the responsibility for lifelong and economically relevant learning at the door of the workforce itself, whilst at the same time naturalizing the social, cultural and economic factors which either facilitate or preclude differential access to and the management of learning inside organizations. The paper concludes with the suggestion that employability is better understood in terms of its capacity for offering an individual with a self-defence mechanism within a volatile labour market as opposed to a new mantra for how we should work and live.

Key words: employability, lifelong learning, learning organization, eudaimonia

### **1. Introduction**

‘Labour isn’t working’; this phrase, taken from a Conservative Party billboard during the 1979 general election designed by Saatchi & Saatchi is enshrined in UK political folklore. The depiction of a queue of unemployed workers so long that it disappears far into the horizon appealed to the insecurities of literally millions of the electorate: the Conservatives seized power with a large majority, leaving the Labour Party to reflect upon the redundancy of its social and economic policies during a political exile which was to last almost two decades. New Labour returned to power in a blaze of glory in 1997 under the slogan of ‘education, education and education’, uniting the importance of education and economic policy in a way like never before. ‘Education’, proclaimed Prime Minister Blair, ‘is the best economic policy we have’. This intensification of the unification of education policy with economic performance is not unique to the UK: the current President of the USA has wasted little time in carrying on where his predecessor left off, setting up a ‘Presidential Council on the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Workforce’ with the primary responsibility of ‘assessing the need for new and enhanced skills for workers, employers, and other related sectors of society’ (U.S. White House, 2001: 26). In Australia, too, there has been a concerted move to bring education into line with the requirements of employers (e.g. Bagnall, 2000; Kenway, 1999), a trend also being replicated in Canada (e.g. Taylor, 1998), Singapore (e.g. Brown et al., 2001), Japan (e.g. Sakamoto-Vandberg, *et al.*, 1998), Germany (e.g. Cook, *et al.*, 2000), Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa (e.g. Goldstein, 2002) and France (e.g. Ashton & Sung, 2001), to name just a few other nation states.

This paper examining the claims made by policy makers, and the supporting evidence for their proposals, is split into four sections. The first section examines the processes through which the obligation of continued individual development—captured by the notion of ‘employability’—is being increasingly rearticulated and transmogrified by policy makers in both the UK and US as a means through which individual and social (economic) fulfilment can be obtained. The second section suggests, for all the celebratory discourse which surrounds the notion of employability, the concept itself represents little more than a policy chimera: a thinly veiled attempt to relocate the responsibility for lifelong and economically relevant learning at the door of the workforce itself, whilst at the same time naturalizing the social, cultural and economic factors which either facilitate or preclude differential access to learning inside organizations. The third section of the paper questions the efforts to date of management to facilitate a new sense of fulfilment through learning inside organizations, suggesting the recent upturn in the advocacy of informal learning constitutes a largely unsuccessful attempt by organizations to extract yet more productivity gains from their workforces in the name of offering opportunities for living a fulfilled life in what ultimately remains the insecure labour market of the new knowledge economy. The paper concludes with the suggestion that employability is better understood in terms of its capacity for offering an individual with a self-defence mechanism within a volatile labour market as opposed to a new mantra for how we should work and live.

## 2. Employability as the fulfilled life

The new ‘worker-citizens’ of the evolving ‘knowledge-driven economy’ find themselves under a new obligation. This is an obligation that seeks from each individual constant improvements in performance, greater efficiency gains and ever increasing levels of knowledge and skills acquisition in order to, in the words of the British Prime Minister, ‘exploit our most valuable assets: our knowledge, skills and creativity [to] compete more effectively in today’s tough markets and to prosper in the markets of tomorrow’ (Blair, 1998: 5). Constant individual improvement, or to use the jargon of the day, lifelong learning, represents today’s *eudaimonia*: what ‘makes life worth living, and lacking in nothing’ (Aristotle, 1999: I, 7, 1097b14-20). In his recent examination of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Hughes (2001: 22) clarifies the meaning of *eudaimonia* pointing to Aristotle’s claim that it ‘is achieving one’s full potential [being] closely connected with what one has made of oneself and one’s life.’ The point – or *telos* – of what we do is ultimately to contribute to achieving *eudaimonia* – living the fulfilled life. Working towards *eudaimonia* in the present day, however, is increasingly reflected by the effective usurpation of a *telos* increasingly defined in economic terms. In British policy circles, to take just one example, *telos* is represented by the pursuit of continually enhanced economic performance:

‘Stability comes first. But stability is not enough. We need to produce more, better and to a higher value to raise our earning power and to meet our ten-year goal of faster productivity growth than our main competitors. We must make Britain the

best place to do business in Europe – a dynamic economy, founded on skills and knowledge, developing the talent of all our people, and contributing to sustainable development. That means investment by private and public sectors in infrastructure and skills, and the right competitive framework to support enterprise, small and large, manufacturing and services.’

(Labour Party, 2001: 8)

It is no longer enough to tread water. In the new global, knowledge-driven economy you have to run just to stand still. The value of education and learning ‘are reduced to – calculated and constructed as – assessments of their contribution and cost to individual, local, national, regional or global *economic well-being*’ (Bagnall, 2000: 21, my emphasis). We are now in the full throws of a normative utilitarianism that compels individuals not just to participate in economic activity but one which also obliges them to regularly improve themselves or suffer the consequences. Moreover, such consequences are not merely shouldered by the individual: failure to recognise one’s responsibilities in enhancing one’s productive capacity also carries implications at societal level. The opportunity to live the fulfilled life can only be achieved by the recognition and adoption of a collective responsibility of the *telos* to develop one’s contribution to economic life – productive or consumptive. And develop we must. Following on from the pro-education Democrats, the Republican government wasted little time in re-affirming the scale of the threat posed by the failure to embrace the rising requirements of the fast-evolving, knowledge-driven economy:

‘Our economy is making a huge transition into high-skilled, information-based industries. If our workforce isn’t ready, then the “macro” effect will be a lower GDP and lost productivity. [...] This cuts at the hope that lies at the heart of the American dream – the belief that honest hard work will always open doors of opportunity.’

(Chao, 2001a: 3)

The notion of honest hard work and its role in creating opportunity has also been captured on the other side of the Atlantic where the British Labour Party’s 2001 election manifesto championed the principle of a ‘something for something’ welfare state in which *active* participation in the economy comes first ‘with rights and responsibilities balanced at every stage [and where] the contract is simple: quality opportunities for real responsibility’ (Labour Party, 2001: 26). In short, the quality of opportunity available in modern economies now correlates closely with the degree of responsibility demonstrated by individuals in enhancing their knowledge, skills and productive capacity, represented by the notion of individual *employability*: the ‘extent to which an individual is likely to find it relatively easy to obtain and keep a job within an active labour market’ (DfEE, 1998: 15).

Significantly, employability is no longer seen to be merely a sequential and front-loaded investment in education and training through which access to a professional career is achieved by the prior acquisition of suitable credentials or human capital. Rather, according to the British Government’s latest policy

declaration, 'lifelong learning and continuous reskilling are essential to enable people to cope with change, achieve security in their lives and benefit from growing prosperity' (DTI/DfEE, 2001, para 2.1: 20). Participation in the labour market of the knowledge-driven economy therefore represents a lifetime commitment to continuous learning. Gone now are the certainties of a position-based career replaced by a system based more on skill, competence and experience. Employability is symptomatic of a world of work which is 'more decoupled from specific organizations, more proactive and enactive, more indistinguishable from organizing, more portable, more discontinuous, less predictable, and more reliant on improvisation' (Weick, 1996: 41). Continuous professional development through lifelong learning tempers the insecurity of outdated knowledge and obsolete skills; it represents the new signalling device to employers of individual worthiness (Rosenbaum and Miller, 1996). And yet, perversely, with the premium on knowledge and learning at an all-time high, the demand for and supply of lifelong learning in our organizations hardly lives up to the policy rhetoric. On the contrary, according to one national study:

'[I]t remains true that many individuals do not have sufficient access to productive learning opportunities through their work. This in part reflects an uneven distribution of opportunity resulting from less training activity by smaller employers and less provision for those with lower levels of foundation qualifications. *It also reflects the fact that many adults appear to be reluctant to participate in education and training, even when employers offer it.*

(DfEE, 2000: 17, my emphasis)

Enhanced employability through lifelong learning, certainly as a universal hegemony within the new knowledge-driven economy, then, remains stubbornly elusive. And yet those in policy circles continue to advocate the *telos* of enhanced employability as the ultimate vehicle for individual *eudaimonia*, pointing to 'ample evidence that higher levels of skills and education have benefits for the life of families and future generations, helping to ensure that young members of these families learn more effectively themselves and benefit from increased awareness and expectations' (DfEE, 2000: 14). You can run but you cannot hide. Returning again to the USA and Secretary Chao, failure to continually invest in one's employability may result in 'people who work so hard in a job for years, only to lose it and find that the economy has passed them by' (Chao, 2001a: 3). The issue now facing leaders in organizations is how to ensure the enhancement of individual employability through lifelong learning is adopted by today's knowledge-workers as their new *eudaimonia*.

### *Towards an economic telos and the transmogrification of eudaimonia*

Strategies to instigate workforce development adopted by governments and business across the globe are remarkably uniform, adopting a crude combination of a "carrot-and-stick" method. The carrot is represented by an appeal to the economic incentives on offer to those who continue their education and learning. In order to operate in the echelons of the high value-added market place that allegedly typifies the new knowledge-driven economy individuals require

correspondingly high levels of education and training. With higher levels of education come correspondingly higher individual economic returns. Moreover, the differential return to investment in human capital is a trend that is alleged to be *increasing*, not decreasing, as some commentators would have us believe (e.g. Collins, 1979; Murphy, 1993). The latest data available in the U.S. estimates the typical earnings gap between a high school and college graduate to be increasing, now over 70 per cent compared to 38 per cent in 1979 (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2002: 2). This differential is estimated to be smaller in the UK, but there is still plenty of contemporary evidence pointing to the increased returns to on-the-job and especially off-the-job training, as well as to the differential between those who leave school at 16 and those who continue their learning in further and higher education (e.g. Machin & Vignoles, 2001). Education, then, is fast becoming the only feasible means to increase one's economic standing and live the fulfilled life, not just *without*, but also *within* our working lives. But whereas the Aristotelian notion of *telos* was to serve as a means of realising human fulfilment – which for the most part lay outside the realms of work – the means have now become the end; we no longer work to live. For the current US Secretary of Labour the reverse is now true in the knowledge-driven economy. Work, and work-related development now represents an opportunity to 'build a more rewarding and fulfilling workplace for all Americans' (Chao, 2002: 1). 'Productivism', and its concomitant economic returns, which were once the *telos* of individuals, has been transmogrified, upgraded and, crucially, deified into the new *eudaimonia* typified by:

'... an ethos where work is autonomous and where the mechanisms of economic development substitute for personal growth and for the goal of living a happy life in harmony with others and with nature.'

(Giddens, 1994: 247)

Secretary Chao's 'Message' to the voluminous *Report on the American Workforce* amplifies this very point (Chao, 2001b). Not only is workforce development described as "venture capital" for the 21<sup>st</sup> century' (p. 2), but Americans are also informed that they are compelled to adopt an increasingly sagacious approach to the balance between their work and home life:

To succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, our Nation must be prepared to *embrace* the changes in our economy—in how we work, and how we balance our professional and family lives.'

(Chao, 2001b: 1, original emphasis)

Increased productivism is in part related to the stick wielded at their citizens by nation states – and to a lesser degree, by organizations at their work force – to instil the new *eudaimonia* of continually enhanced employability. Arguably the defining hallmark of the knowledge-driven economy is the inherent insecurity of its labour force (e.g. Beck, 2000). According to Rosenbaum and Miller (1996: 350), 'the company man, if not entirely extinct, is a rapidly dying species'. Indeed, ours is not the same economy as that experienced by our parents. In the U.S., for example, the average 32 year old has worked for no fewer than nine

different companies (Chao, 2001a: 2). In the period between 1980 and 1995, thirty-nine million Americans were affected by various corporate downsizing programmes (Sennett, 1998). In the UK, 78 starter graduates in the management consultancy division of Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC) were sacked in the summer of 2001 before they had even taken up their new posts because of 'the current economic climate' (The Daily Telegraph, 2001). In their 'new lexicon for a new organizational era', the career analysts and gurus Michael Arthur and Denise Rousseau suggest that employment is no longer 'a regular occupation or business' but 'a temporary state, or the current manifestation of long-term employability' (1996: 373).

Being successful is not just the ability to find a job and succeed in it; 'it now also applies to keeping one's resume current, knowing when to leave, and knowing how to find the next job' (Rosenbaum and Miller, 1996: 351). Ironically, the latter researchers observed that 'Americans strongly believe individuals are responsible for their own destiny' (p. 351). And yet the rhetoric of employability suggests otherwise, utilising as it does the spectre of insecurity brought about by the invisible hand of the global forces which shape the new knowledge-driven economy – and those which propel the obligation of the new *eudaimonia* which can defend individuals from, but not eradicate the threat of, unemployment. Far from representing the new fulfilled life, our existence within the new knowledge economy is an inherently insecure one. A major government policy document released in the UK by the all-conquering Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) wasted little time in pointing to the global imperatives that underpin the need for individuals to continuously improve themselves, or to suffer the consequences:

'UK productivity, however measured, lags behind that of other major industrialised economies. The challenge for Government is to achieve its long-term economic ambition to have a faster rise in productivity than its main competitors and so close that gap. To be successful, it is even more important for businesses and individuals to learn new skills and to use their knowledge to produce higher value added goods and services.'

(DTI/DfEE, 2001, para 1.14: 14)

Similarly in the U.S., former Vice President Gore outlined the obligation facing Americans in a report bringing together the collective will of the U.S. Departments of Commerce, Education and Labor with the National Institute of Literacy and the Small Business Administration:

'America's competitiveness and the prosperity of our people in a changing economy depend increasingly on high-skill high-wage jobs. Realizing our potential will require investing in education and learning for all of our people throughout their lifetimes.'

(Gore, 1999)

Following this logic the exponential rise in the size of post-compulsory education and training has reached record levels in many nation states through the combination of increased demand for higher level learning from potential

students, employers and nation states, with an apparent political mandate to finance such levels of expansion in their higher education sectors (Hesketh, 2000). And yet policy makers, fuelled by the calls of business leaders, still demand more. It is not preparation enough to spend roughly the first third of one's life in full time education preparing for participation in the knowledge-driven economy. Continuous development represents the clarion call of modern knowledge-workers; the search for *eudaimonia* continues in the workplace, the new focus of recent policy developments.

### 3. Employability as policy chimera

'Lifelong learning has come of age. It is no longer just a 'movement' (Wain 1987: 35), a 'brave and proper vision' (Sargant 1995: 47), a 'unifying principle' (Knapper and Cropley 1985: 17), a 'policy for education' (Lawson 1982: 97), or the 'master concept for educational policies' (Faure et al. 1972: 182). It is now featured in practically every imaginable agenda for social change, educational policy preamble and mission statement. Its subject may have transmogrified from education to learning, but there it is *lifelong*, and still recognisable in all its glory. What more could the early advocates and theorizers of lifelong education have hoped for? Their creation has become a social signifier; a measure of organizational progressiveness; a cultural necessity; a touchstone of all good educational policy; an imperative of educational management; and a criterion for assessing the life trajectories and plans of individuals. [...] We would seem to be, at last, at the dawn of a new age, in which society is truly a learning society (Cann 1995, Williamson 1995) and is truly good in, and through, being so.'

(Bagnall, 2000: 20-21, original emphasis)

Providing a dissenting voice against the tide of policies introduced by various nation states to augment the development of lifelong learning within contemporary organizations represents a forlorn task. And yet there is arguably a greater need now for such an undertaking than ever before. It is almost as if governments have run away with themselves in promoting the seemingly positive and inevitable consequences of embracing the new *eudaimonia* of continuous learning and employability building by our workforces. Ironically, perhaps, it is not so much the advantages that are bestowed upon individuals by continuous adherence to the development of their employability. Rather, it is the disadvantages individuals attempt to sidestep through enhanced employability that forms its attraction to today's workforce. But even here, our faith in employability may be misplaced. Employability appears to create the aura of economic wellbeing, and ultimately a passageway to *eudaimonia*. In reality, however, things are not quite as they seem. The potential of employability has ethereal like qualities which, when placed under closer scrutiny, look less convincing. There are at least three glaring examples: the promise of full employment; the role of employability in creating a democracy or 'meritocracy' in the new knowledge economy; and universal access to learning at work. I will deal with each of these in turn.

*The chimera of full employment*

So great is the faith in following the fulfilled life that it is now presented as the possible means through which unemployment—the greatest threat to the development of the *telos* of increased economic performance, and by implication, the new *eudaimonia*—can be eradicated. The UK Labour Party's 2001 election manifesto outlined the case for full employment thus:

'After years of mass unemployment, full employment is now on the agenda. Our ten-year goal is to sustain a higher percentage of people at work than ever before. [...] Our ambition is full employment for every region – good for the economy and good for social justice.'

(Labour Party, 2001: 24,26)

Raising the stakes of Labour's historic second term still further, the government wasted little time in launching its programme designed to move the UK *Towards full employment in a modern society* (DfEE/DSS/HMT, 2001). The 'modern' definition of full employment offered in this document, however, falls somewhat short of the long-standing commitment to full employment so painfully and publicly dumped along with Clause IV by the Labour Party at the end of 1994. In the new modern knowledge-driven economy, the aspiration of *actual* employment is replaced by a provision of the *opportunity* of employment:

'*The goal is to provide employment opportunity for all, the modern definition of full employment.* The Government considers that our economic interests go hand in hand with the demands of social justice: a successful economy depends on making the most of the talents of people. We simply cannot afford to leave people on the margins of society and dependent on benefit. *Instead, the Government wants to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to make the most of their skills and talents, to lift themselves and their families out of poverty, and to improve their living standards.*'

(DfEE/DSS/HMT, 2001: 19, my emphases)

And herein lies the power of the policy discourse surrounding the new *eudaimonia*. The onus of responsibility for the *opportunity* of employment has, with a deft sleight of hand, been shifted away from one of the state's obligation to provide an economic environment conducive to *employment*, to an obligation on the part of "responsible citizens" to 'lift themselves' up to be *employable*. This gradual increase in the responsibility of individual employees and their employers for the continued development of the workforce represents the first characteristic of the policy chimera of employability. Far from being an equal investment on the part of all involved, the responsibility of the state is slowly being tapered out to 'enable people to have a personal stake in society [and] greater control over their personal development' (DfEE, 1999: 3), without reference to whether individuals have the resources, know-how, or desire to take this control over their own labour market destinies.

Of course, such a transfer in responsibility needs to be qualified, and in the UK the Labour administration has done exactly this, seeking to re-define the obligations of key stakeholders in honouring their roles in the development of workforce employability. The policy discourse now is of a 'new partnership' that

demands commitment from all involved in the inculcation of the new *eudaimonia*. To underline the centrality of this new partnership, the UK Government has firmly stated its intention to contribute to the extensive costs involved:

'Realising the vision demands commitment in making the necessary investment in learning from all those who will benefit from higher levels of skills among the workforce. Government (representing wider society which reaps the rewards of economic and social benefits accruing from an employable and competitive workforce) must invest in learning.'

(DfEE, 2000: 15)

The contributions from individuals and employers to the development of employability to enable the pursuit of the fulfilled life are also set out in clinical detail. As recipients of enhanced employability and future earning power, 'individuals must review and renew their own skills regularly to ensure their long-term employability' (DfEE, 2000: 47). Employers have a duty to articulate more clearly their skills requirements, and because of the additional competitiveness of the workforce brought about by additional skills development, employers should not overlook their 'commitment to investing in their people' (DfEE, 2000: 47). Indeed, the government suggests employers should take 'the greater share of the [costs if] learning is related to the specific requirements of a particular job and the needs of the employer' (DfEE, 2000: 47). Significantly, (potential) employees are not exempt from the obligation of meeting the costs of enhanced employability, especially if their new skills are 'more general and transferable ... and [of] less direct benefit to the employer' (DfEE, 2000: 47). The new *eudaimonia*, then, comes at a price. It is now individuals' 'responsibility to invest in their own employability through the acquisition of portable skills' (DfEE, 1999: 10). The state, therefore, is no longer implicated in this process, save those lacking the most basic of skills, who, seemingly cannot look after themselves, and for whom the government in the UK is currently piloting schemes to both support the costs of individuals' training and compensation for their employers (see HMT, 2002: 21-9).

This redrawing of the boundaries of responsibility for the continued enhancement of employability is a significant development and one that pervades all of the major government documents published since New Labour took office. Reference to the new partnership is present in the *Renaissance* Green Paper (DfEE, 1998b: 25-7), the *Competitiveness* White Paper (DTI, 1998, para 2.57: 29), the outline for the (then) new Individual Learning Accounts (DfEE, 1999: 1), the *Opportunity for all* White Paper (DTI/DfEE, 2001: para 1.3: 12), the *Full Employment* Green Paper (DfEE/DSS/HMT, 2001: 44), the Treasury's *Workforce Skills* programme (HMT, 2002: i), and its accompanying *Adult Skills in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* Report (PIU, 2001: 4), and all four of the reports released by the *National Skills Task Force* (DfEE, 1998a: 5; DfEE, 1999a: para. 4.9: 57; DfEE, 2000a: *passim*; DfEE, 2000b: 64). These documents capture the contemporary policy architecture through which many commentators (e.g. Rose, 1999; Griffin, 1999; Field, 2000) claim the state is 'now less concerned with providing services

for populations than in mobilizing those concerned to help themselves' (Edwards, 2002: 353). No better an example of this can be found than that of the UK Secretary of State for Education's new skills development programme for the low skilled, which 'encourages' individuals to 'get on' with it themselves:

'The results show that where adults are given the opportunity to learn literacy and numeracy skills that they can "Get On" and improve their lives.'

(DfES, 2001: 1)

### *Employability and the chimera of meritocracy*

The relocation of the responsibility of 'getting on with it' away from the state and firmly with the individual is in part related to the second policy chimera of employability. The discourse of employability encourages individuals to view their personal characteristics—be they social class, gender or race—as irrelevant. For Taylor, the ramifications of this 'ideological effect' may possibly 'lead to a "blame the victim" scenario, as existing inequalities become "naturalized"' (Taylor, 1998: 155). The blame for failing to secure employment no longer resides with government provision of education and training or of suitable economic opportunity. Attention has been shifted away from state control of labour market trends and opportunities and relocated as a problem with the supply of irrelevant education and/or individual failure. Returning again to the launch of the 'Get On' campaign in the UK, the Secretary of State for Education was supported by television's *Big Brother* celebrity Helen Adams who performed her brief of illustrating the individual role in the generation of a discourse about the new *eudaimonia* admirably:

'This is a really important issue and I'm pleased to have been invited along today to show my support for the 'Get On' campaign. I have dyslexia and it does affect my everyday life. People who find reading and writing difficult should not be embarrassed or afraid to admit it. They should do something about it and a great way to start is to phone 0800 150 650. *If you don't 'Get On' you could really lose out. If you make the effort it can make a real difference to your life.*'

(DfES, 2001: 1, my emphasis)

There it is again. Far from being the responsibility of employers to plug the training provision gaps so evident in the workplace, the state has turned to the arguably much more cost effective way of sponsoring third party providers who offer training to those individuals who are, in the words of Helen Adams, prepared to 'make the effort'. *Eudaimonia* awaits those prepared to seize the opportunities now available to them on the supply side of the workforce training market. This raises other important questions concerning the dynamics of learning markets and access to employability: the provision of learning at work.

### *The chimera of universal access to learning at work*

According to the US Secretary of Labour 'workforce development is synonymous with economic development [and] about jobs and growth and building the tax

base' (Chao, 2001a: 1). In the UK, too, living up to one's full potential 'is a social as well as economic imperative' (c.f. DfEE/DTI, 2001: 16). The industry that has grown up around the notion of the 'learning organization' has mushroomed in size as business leaders seeking to 'truly excel in the future ... discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at *all* levels in an organization' (Senge, 1990: 5, original emphasis). And yet statistics on work-based learning appear on the surface to suggest the workforce at *all* levels has still to fully embrace its collective social and economic responsibilities brought about by the new *eudaimonia*.

Peeling away the patina of the claims of democratic participation in workforce training pointed to by policy makers reveals a dreary picture. This harsh reality is the same on both sides of the Atlantic, with just under half of the workforce engaged in some form of work-related training during the previous twelve months in the US (DOL, 2002: 17; Creighton & Hudson, 2002, Figure 1: 13), a pattern mirrored in the UK (DfEE, 2000a: Table 2.2: 23). The latest available data from the comprehensive *Labour Force Survey* of 147,000 individuals in the UK reveals that less than one in five employees had undertaken any formal training or learning in the four weeks immediately prior to the survey (LSC, 2001a, Fig. 8: 7). Even stretching the length of analysis over the previous twelve months, as the *Learning and Training at Work Survey* does, we can estimate that just one in four employees receive *off-the-job* training (LSC, 2001b: 13).<sup>1</sup> This hardly represents the renaissance of learning the UK Government was hoping for when originally articulating its thinking behind why learning was 'the new key to prosperity' (DfEE, 1998b). There are two primary causes for concern here for those advocating the new *eudaimonia* through access to learning in the workplace.

First, the *provision* of training opportunities is not the problem, at least not on the surface. The *Learning and Training at Work Survey* in the UK referred to above reports that over three quarters of all employers offer either on-the-job or off-the-job training to their workforce (LSC, 2001b: Fig. 1.1: 13). American employers appear to be even more generous, at least on the basis of the 1995 *Survey of Employer-Provided Training*, which found no fewer than 93 percent of businesses offered or financed formal training programs for their employees in the previous twelve months (Creighton & Hudson, 2002: 5). Of course it is not all sweetness and light. One recent investigation of employer training provision in the U.S. observed:

'U.S. employers, on average, are more likely to provide job skills training programs for managers, computer technicians and sales workers than for production or service workers. So skill begets skill. In other words, workers who have a lot of skills when they enter a firm are more likely to receive additional skills. But workers

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction between off-the-job and on-the-job training is an important one. Whereas off-the-job training can involve highly specialised forms of work-related learning and development (e.g. studying a specific curriculum away from work for an MBA), on-the-job training can incorporate a whole host of activities ranging from specific training through to discussions with a foreman on an assembly line. It goes without saying the more costly forms of off-the-job training carry more prestige, and thence greater economic returns, within labour markets (e.g. see Keep, 1999).

that are “skill deficient” when they enter a firm are less likely to get training from their employers.’

(Donahue, Lynch and Whitehead, 2000: 24-5)

The third report of the UK Government-sponsored National Skills Task Force devoted especially to workplace learning also alluded to ‘the unequal distribution of opportunity’ inside organizations (DfEE, 2000: 22). Individuals in organizations with more than 200 employees are *four* times more likely to be provided with opportunities to train than their counterparts working in organizations with less than 25 employees (DfEE, 2000, Fig. 2.4: 24). This statistic is even more compelling when it is acknowledged 70 per cent of UK employees work in organizations with less than 200 employees (SBS, 2000).

The provision of training is one thing: employees taking up the offer is quite another. According to the same report just cited, more than four out of every five employers (82%) provide training opportunities for their employees but only just over a third (39%) of employees receive training every twelve months (DfEE, 2000, Tables 2.1 & 2.2: 21, 23). These patterns of data are remarkably similar to those recently reported in the United States. Despite nearly all employers surveyed offering training to some of their employees, just 46 percent of employees actually engaged in some formal type of learning activity during 1999 (Creighton & Hudson, 2002, Figure 1: 13). The question now is whether this ‘one-in-every-two-rule’ is attributable to a lack of demand from employees or differential opportunity across the workforce? Strangely, this is a question that remains largely unanswered. Innumerable reports across the globe point to the continuing weakness in the demand for training by workforces (e.g. Campbell, *et al.*, 2001, Table 4.9: 122).

Herein lies the second barrier to the imposition of the new *eudaimonia* into twenty-first century organizational life. An alarmingly simplistic dichotomy has emerged between those who are seen to embrace the new *eudaimonia* and those who do not. Continuous reference is made to the choice by individuals of whether to live the fulfilled life of *philomathic* employee, and those who turn away from one’s individual responsibilities to the *telos* of the twenty-first century economy in order to follow the unrighteous path of *mathophobic* employee. *Philomathia* represents the contemporary idyll of the twenty-first century worker currently being deified by the American initiative of the same name and for whom the *eudaimonia* of lifelong employability through learning allegedly awaits. Such individuals are ‘appreciative of the need to learn and engage in a conscious and active learning process to improve themselves beyond the boundaries of the context in which they operate’ (Antonacopoulou, 1999: 223). *Mathophobia*, on the other hand, is characterised by those employees who:

‘... are aware of the need to learn, yet they are reluctant to learn (that is, would deny taking responsibility). Mathophobic [employees] tend to be risk-averse in their learning approach. They tend to go by the book, to wait passively for the organization to provide them with the necessary resources to learn and on the whole lack personal initiative and are apathetic about their self-improvement. On

this basis, an individual would be described as being mathophobic if they lack confidence in their ability to learn, if they lack ambition to progress, if they refuse to take personal responsibility in developing themselves or they have no determination or clear sense of direction and are unwilling to explore different learning avenues.'

(Antonacopoulou 1999: 223)

This argument is ultimately a teleological one. Statistics which continue to demonstrate how disproportionately less likely those with lower qualifications are to participate in training within their organizations conflate an *aversion* towards training with the paucity of *opportunity* to train. The latter can manifest itself in a number of different ways. Recent evidence from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicates that, depending on nationality, anything between 1:10 and 1:3 of those employees not undertaking job-related training would have liked to have done so but were precluded by a combination of situational, institutional or dispositional barriers (OECD, 2000: Table C.7.7: 204).

Training offered to employees with an educational biography that, frankly, they would rather forget, therefore, has to be more than simply *offered*. To succeed it needs to embrace their uncertainty with learning, renew if not introduce for the first time a confidence in individual learning and, above all, be simply provided in a way that enables employees to learn, taking into account the various barriers hindering their participation. Nevertheless, the evidence recently collected for the Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) in the UK reporting directly to the Prime Minister's own private secretary echoes the U.S. findings outlined above, concluding, far from overcoming barriers to learning, 'training tends to follow higher-skilled employees':

'Training is *distributed* unevenly among employees. Those with higher skills, those working in large firms and younger people are more likely to participate in training. The range of participation varies from 24% of those with degrees falling to 5% for those with no qualifications. This pattern is reflected in the distribution by occupation; almost 30% of employees in 'professional' occupations participate in training, compared to 14% in clerical and secretarial, 12% in craft & related and 7% for plant and machine operatives.'

(PIU, 2001: 11-2, my emphasis)

Much turns on the italicised word in the previous quotation. The PIU's use of *distributed* appears to be adjectival, certainly on the basis of the preceding discussion in the analysis paper. As a verb, however, the word means something completely different. Moreover, there is ample evidence to suggest employers do indeed distribute training unevenly across their workforce. Taking education biography as a proxy, one recent research project has highlighted how those adults with lower qualifications experience higher levels of disadvantage including engagement in learning activities (Hobcraft, 2000). Likewise in the United States, where the latest statistical report for the NCEES concludes 'the highly educated and high status groups that have been the traditional beneficiaries of adult education and training remain the main beneficiaries today

(Creighton & Hudson, 2002: 53). Indeed, for all the paraphernalia surrounding the new so-called 'learning society', very little appears to have changed in the minds of those in charge of organizational human resource development since Finegold and Soskice's (1988) now infamous observation that a perception amongst employers of a low supply of skilled workers leads to a corresponding strategy adopted by organizations of low-skilled methods of production: the so-called 'low-skills equilibrium'. The latest available data exploring why employers do not provide employees training does little to sway us away from this conclusion. Three out of every four UK employers who do not provide training suggest the 'existing skills of employees meet our needs so training [is] not needed' (DfEE, 2001, Table 58: 68). Far from demonstrating a self-referential aversion to the new *eudaimonia*, those with low skills appear to be excluded from the training opportunities of their highly qualified contemporaries busily living the fulfilled life in the same organizations. Education, at least that offered inside organizations, more often than not goes to the educated.

#### **4. The continuing weakness of the management of *eudaimonia***

Managers in organizations have hardly embraced the new *eudaimonia* with open arms. Far from being a coherent strategy, Robert Reich's account of the shift by U.S. organizations into high value-added business paints more of a picture of employers being dragged, kicking and screaming into a knowledge-driven economy first through a wave of protectionism, then price cutting, followed swiftly by takeovers, and then finally into embracing the idea of a high value-added skills business strategy against the backdrop of a knowledge economy. (Reich, 1991: 69-77).

But for all of the paraphernalia around the new economy, it is not a job-creating phenomenon, at least certainly not in terms of high value added skills. On the contrary, whilst Reich suggests the proportion of high value-added workers—or "symbolic analysts"—grew rapidly from a base of just 8 percent in the 1950s, 'the pace slowed considerably in the 1980s—even though certain symbolic-analytical jobs, like law and investment banking, mushroomed' (1991: 179-80). It has been far from an exponential rise during the last decade. Nor are things set to improve over the next. Whilst Reich estimated the proportion of the U.S. workforce classified as symbolic analysts to be at 20 percent, recent raw data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that this figure had risen by just six percentage points ten years later, and, worse still, would remain stagnant at 26 percent of the American workforce by 2010 (Carnevale & Deschroders, 2002, Figure 9: 12). The fulfilled life of high value added work not only remains available to the lucky few but the promise—or perhaps threat—of a switch to the high value added skills, knowledge-based economy predicted by so many hardly seems to be materialising. The dichotomy within the knowledge-based economy between those who do "knowledge work" and those who support them (e.g. refuse collectors, office cleaners) is as poignant as ever.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Steve Fleetwood for making this observation.

The stagnation in the growth of the knowledge economy has not led to a corresponding slow down in the demand from organizations or workers for human capital. On the contrary, one major research project in the U.S. has recently observed that, on average, truck drivers in 1995 have two more years of education than those driving trucks in 1972. Sawing machine operators now enjoy an average of nearly three more years' education before doing the same job, and janitors and cleaners of today's knowledge economy have an additional 1.83 years worth of education compared with the janitors and cleaners of 1972 (Pryor and Schaffer, 2000, Table 3.2: 55). For the researchers, 'the case of educational upgrading is apparent, not real, and little or no occupational upgrading occurred' (p. 54). Of course, we may not need more highly educated symbolic analysts if we all turn out to be more economically productive through our enhanced employability brought about by more education and training.

The consequences of this clamouring of organizations to recruit the best of the best—note again the relativity of employability—have a number of detrimental effects. The more employable are attracting war-like strategies from organizations to recruit them rather than growing the own talent within the organization. Casting doubt over the merits of the so-called “war for talent” Jeffrey Pfeffer (2001) lists at least five negative consequences. First, the emphasis on individual performance is wholly at odds with the ethos of teamwork required in a knowledge economy that celebrates shared learning and reciprocation. Second, the constant deification of the talents of those *outside* whom organizations would like to recruit simply reiterates the downplaying of the skills of those *inside* the company, hardly representing the most focused of motivation strategies. Third, the process of management and its impact is downgraded as enhanced performance is seen merely as a matter of recruiting the right people with the right talent. Fourth, companies that think they are wining the war for talent are often blessed with an elitist, arrogant attitude. Finally, and most significantly for the discussion in this paper, Pfeffer points to the invidious and divisive self-fulfilling prophecy which ensues from the adoption of a war for talent strategy:

'[I]dentify the top ten and the bottom ten percent. The top ten percent of your people should be lavished with rewards, interesting job assignments, fast-track opportunities, and special training and mentoring. The bottom ten percent should be either removed from the organization or helped to improve.'

(Pfeffer, 2001: 11)

Regardless of the outcome of the battle of recruiting the right talent, the war for increased productivity appears to be beyond most management capabilities in the knowledge economy. The financial data of the fledgling knowledge economy is starting to paint a picture many organizational leaders, not to mention investors in their organizations, might flinch at. One of the US's leading gurus on productivity has ventured so far as to suggest that two-fifths of the productivity spurt in the US economy between 1995 and 2000 is entirely attributable to the

usual increase that comes at the end of an economic recovery (Gordon, 2000). Data on UK productivity still suggest that 'labour productivity lags behind other developed countries' and accounts for this dismal relative performance via 'historic choices about business strategy and poor management' (PIU, 2001: 17). The same report does not dwell on the observation that the UK has a greater proportion of individuals participating in workforce development than workers in Germany as this stands in contradistinction to the claim made in the same report that investment in skills leads to a workforce which can cope better with change, is more flexible and adaptable and better at implementing and getting the most from new technologies. Of course, the Germans train those at the lower end of the human capital league table more and better than in the UK (e.g. Cooke, *et al.*, 2000). The new solution to this problem hardly inspires confidence.

Faced with the reluctance from organizations to foot the bill themselves to invest in what is arguably the real "war for development"—the upgrading of the abilities of those at the lower end of the skills hierarchy within organizations—policy makers have been increasingly drawn to the 'new' work practices and their associated processes of informal learning. The UK's National Skills Force, despite noting the inherent difficulties associated with measuring the frequency of informal learning (hereafter, IL) still pointed to its key advantages, namely its flexibility, specificity, immediate productivity gains, and, naturally, cost effectiveness (DfEE, 2000a, 42). Naturally, the responsibility for the promotion of IL in organizations is placed upon managers and individual workers themselves:

'In short, informal learning is a fundamentally and increasingly important route by which adults learn and develop skills and knowledge which make them more productive in their jobs. Managers and key workers are critical in ensuring this route is exploited fully. One way they can do this is by adopting new work practices which facilitate and encourage informal learning and ensure it complements and enhances more formal training provision.'

(DfEE, 2000: 43)

## Conclusion

This latter policy prescription serves only to highlight again the main case offered by this paper, namely the location of the responsibility of enhanced skills development, and ultimately the promotion of individual employability, away from the state, and even organizations, and situated firmly with individual workers. Moreover, this new obligation is being reconceptualised in such a way as to represent the *only* means through which workers in the new knowledge economy can enjoy happy and fulfilled lives: what I have labelled the new *eudaimonia*, access to which is highly differentiated depending primarily upon the location of an individual inside his or her place of work (e.g. Rainbird, 2000). This structural relativity has been almost entirely overlooked by policy makers intent on raising the stakes for those who do not actively seek to continuously develop their economic selves. The change in emphasis to the informal learning opportunities represents nothing more than an attempt by organizations to rearticulate and reconfigure new ways to enhance the productivity of individuals less well placed

to capitalise on the formal learning opportunities made available to those located in the upper echelons of today's knowledge economy.

Crucially, a tension lies at the heart of the new *eudaimonia*, a tension that threatens to expose the recent applicable policy developments on either side of the Atlantic as nothing more than a chimera. The new master narratives of "lifelong learning" and the "learning society" represent nothing more than the subjugation of the workforce of the new knowledge-based economy to new processes of self-improvement in a bid to increase productivity on the one hand, whilst committing the imposition of a dominant cultural arbitrary on the other. As the discourse shifts to one of dreams, hopes and aspirations and the ultimate prize—the new *eudaimonia*—awaiting those who embrace the *telos* of economically informed lifelong learning, a corresponding corollary of symbolic violence emerges in which:

[S]ocial structures are turned into spatial structures and thereby *naturalized*. They organize and designate as ascent or descent (to "go up to Paris"), entry (inclusion, cooptation, adoption), or exit (exclusion, expulsion, excommunication), what is in fact closeness to or distance from a central, valued [position, and is] [...] inscribed at once in the mental structures that are partly produced by the incorporation of these structures ... where power is asserted and exercised, and, no doubt in its subtlest form, as symbolic violence that goes unperceived as violence.'

(Bourdieu, 1999: 126, emphasis in the original)

The objective of securing a genuine *eudaimonia* has, then, been substituted for the objective of attempting to inculcate—in many cases, unsuccessfully—the false *eudaimonia* of economically relevant lifelong development, representing nothing more than a *telos* increasingly defined in economic terms. Thus, the sin of ignoring on the one hand the poststructuralist argument, that what constitutes fulfilment is at best highly diverse and contested, whilst, negating the realist argument on the other, that a state of *eudaimonia* does in fact exist beyond the level of identification, is currently being perpetrated by policy makers and the endless list of "airport books" on both sides of the Atlantic (e.g. Gratton, 2000; Mayo, 2001; Ulrich, 1997). The challenge for radical political economists in this new era of results-based human resource management in a knowledge-based economy is to move the lifelong learning and learning society debates beyond a narrative of self-defence to a new moral economy of labour that recognizes increased economic production and higher levels of skill are nothing but the by-products of a larger goal—that of Aristotle's self-realization. But that is another story.

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