

Finding value in work



Work to live or live to work? According to research by Dr Jane Bryson from the Victoria Management School either philosophy is valid so long as workers perceive that they are living lives of value.

Jane is the editor of a book due out in June, *Beyond Skill: Institutions, Organisations and Human Capability*, published by Palgrave Macmillan, which explores the conditions that are required to develop optimal human capability in the workplace. It includes chapters from leading workplace researchers in New Zealand, Australia and the UK.

“Human contributions to society are not solely through work, and organisational contributions to society are not solely economic,” says Jane.

“Workers aspire to live lives they have reason to value, that is to be capable humans—not just skill sets for the workplace.”

Jane’s chapter examines the findings of a five-year research project, funded by the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology and hosted in the Industrial Relations Centre at Victoria Management School.

“The research demonstrated that other than legal compliance, there is no accepted set of principles guiding employers. Management and human resource management practices are

largely buffeted along on the tide of ‘best practice’, personal beliefs or meeting the demands of a business strategy, where the needs of business survival and shareholder prosperity often outweigh other considerations.

“Hence, good managers and supervisors sometimes find themselves in the situation of being ‘custodians of bad practice.’”

One component of the study involved more than 200 interviews carried out across 30 organisations, which asked participants about the drivers and barriers to being able to develop capability in the workforce, with the aim of influencing employers.

Results indicated that to develop human capability it was more advantageous to be in a permanent job, which offered more stability and a willingness of employers to invest in development opportunities. Organisations that took a long-term view rather than prioritising short-term gain also got the thumbs up.

“Human capability as a notion looks at learning, not just qualifications; the utilisation of skills, not just the development of them; and the utilisation of other knowledge and attributes that people bring to the workplace.

“One of the interesting things we found going into factories were those that had, say, invested

in literacy and numeracy training for their staff, were actually getting much more loyalty and productivity from their staff—so, even though on the face of it these staff are easily replaceable, it still makes sense to invest in their development.”

The book includes recommendations on how to design jobs and work processes to provide good-quality jobs and experiences. It also advocates enabling workers to take part in decision-making and creating a workplace environment that encourages development.

The research findings have been used to develop a framework, which Jane hopes will stimulate discussion between parties with different interests, particularly unions and employers.

“The framework is a tool for examining the institutional and social structures within and around the workplace in order to determine whether they facilitate or constrain individuals from achieving their potential.

“Through the provision of good-quality jobs and work environments, organisations can improve upon their role as capability-enhancing institutions in society.”

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