This article builds on recent critiques of the knowledge economy to argue that key growth areas in future employment will be in low level service jobs rather than knowledge work as currently understood. The article discusses the knowledge, skills and competencies involved in interactive service work. It suggests that knowledge which is contextual, social or tacit has been taken to be of lesser value in relation to competitive advantage. It highlights the contrast, therefore, between the growth in interactive service work and the focus of the knowledge management literature on a small sub-set of total employment. Two case-studies of interactive service work, one drawn from a range of service sectors and the other from a call-centre setting, provide empirical material which highlights the skills required by employers in this area. Technical skills were seen as less important than aesthetic and social skills. These cases highlight the management of social skills and competencies as critical to interactive service work. Workers need to develop an understanding of themselves that allows them to consciously use their emotions and corporeality to influence the quality of the service. This leads to the conclusion that the interactive service sector should not be conflated with knowledge work. Rather, it is more important to focus on the broader need for knowledge-ability in work, and so broaden understanding of labour in the contemporary workplace.
Two linked issues currently concern policy-makers and academics. The first is the promotion of the knowledge economy. This economy is one ‘where economic value is found more in the intangibles, such as new ideas, software, services and relationships, and less in the tangibles like physical products, tonnes of steel or acres of land’ (Scottish Enterprise, 1998, p. 3). Secondly, policy-makers and academics alike (Byers, 1999; DTI, 1998; Reich, 1993; von Krogh et al., 1998; Vickery, 1999), endlessly repeat the mantra that knowledge work offers a rationale for the development of skill, learning and human capital in the workplace.

It has become axiomatic among policy makers that what needs to be developed are the ‘thinking’ skills associated with work in research, sales, marketing, management and information technology (Scottish Enterprise, 1998). The linking of services and knowledge, and the conflating of their skills bases, is most stark in the recent pronouncement by the DfEE that

Knowledge is critical because at the cutting edge of innovation in the new economy are knowledge producers: universities and businesses whose fundamental products are the ideas and research which provide the engine for change in goods and services. Sectors such as biotechnology, optoelectronics, and IT, are at the vanguard of the knowledge economy . . . large parts of the economy are now dependent on the management and processing of knowledge and information. Service industries, in particular, have been transformed by technological advances. The demand for skills needed to understand and operate complex systems and to deliver more sophisticated choices to customers has grown substantially. (DfEE, 2000, p. 4)

The promotion of knowledge and services as an inseparable pairing is hardly surprising given that it echoes themes prominent in academic analysis (see, for example, Barley, 1996). Intangibility and variability, leading to difficulties of measurement and prescription, are regularly seen as among the key distinguishing features of service work (Korczynski, 2001). The situation of interactive service work is of particular importance. As Frenkel et al. (1999, p. 6) argue, ‘the front line worker has become a central figure in the workplace of contemporary capitalism’. That centrality is part numerical: the category is used to encompass professionals, technical employees, services and sales workers, among whom the largest projected occupational increases will occur. It is also conceptual, in that front-line work embodies analytical skills facilitated by information technology, and the creation and processing of knowledge as a central activity. The demands of more complex, customized service work that cannot rely on standardization and direct control are, ‘reducing the demand for lower-skilled jobs and increasing the demand for jobs with higher-level competencies’ (Frenkel et al., 1999, p. 27).

This article challenges the way that link is presented and understood. Building on existing critiques of the idea of a knowledge economy (Warhurst and Thompson, 1998), it argues that key growth areas of services will not be based on knowledge work. Rather, it will be located in low level service jobs or routine interactive service work. These are either outside the framework of any conceivable notion of a knowledge economy, or bear little resemblance to the dominant model.
in that such work draws primarily on broader social competencies and aesthetic qualities possessed by potential employees.

Two case studies of interactive service work in central Scotland constitute the empirical focus. Scotland generally has a larger proportion of service work than the UK as a whole, and is making concerted efforts to promote this sector. In the country’s largest city, Glasgow, 80 per cent of the city’s GDP and 84 per cent of its jobs are now provided by services, and the trend is upwards (Glasgow Development Agency, 1999a, 1999b). The three industries that are particularly prominent – tourism, retail and financial services – feature in the first case study. Call centres are now a characteristic growth area across the central belt of Scotland with a total of 17,000 employees as a whole, and it is this work that features in the second case study.

**KNOWLEDGE AND SERVICES: INTERROGATING THE CONNECTIONS**

The importance of the service sector cannot be denied. Of the three sectors of the economy in Britain, agriculture now accounts for 1.3 per cent of employment, manufacturing 17.5 per cent and services 76 per cent (Labour Market Trends, 2000). To varying degrees, much the same pattern can be found in countries throughout Europe and North America as well as Japan and Australia. We need, however, to interrogate knowledge and service work, disaggregating them conceptually as well as empirically.

*Employment Trends: What Kind of Services, What Kinds of Knowledge?*

Our starting point is the need to exercise caution about the nature of contemporary service work and employment. Of course there have been and will continue to be knowledge workers with ‘thinking skills’ who identify and solve problems by manipulating symbols and ideas. However, the extent of such employment will be limited. In the UK, only 10 per cent of new jobs can be classified as knowledge work and its contribution to the country’s GDP might rise to 10 per cent at some stage in the future (DfEE, 2000). Even in the USA – the imputed model of economic transformation – current trend predictions suggest that those occupations that could be classified as knowledge work will account for only 13 per cent of employment growth (Henwood, 1996). Although the numbers of computer analysts and programmers will grow significantly to 2005 in the USA – up 737,000 – the largest growth areas are in ‘mundane’ public sector teachers – up 773,000 – followed by nursing – up 765,000 (Economist, 1995). This is similar to the UK, where much of the current growth in those jobs that might be regarded as ‘real’ knowledge work is in the public sector (Warhurst and Nickson, 2001).

Most actual and forecast job growth in both the USA and the UK has occurred outside ‘high tech’ or knowledge intensive sectors in routine jobs (Hatch and Clinton, 2000; Labour Market Trends, 2000, respectively). Over the past 30 years, most service sector growth has occurred in low skill, low wage jobs such as serving, guarding, cleaning, waiting and helping in the private health and care services, as well as hospitality industries (Crouch et al., 1999). For example, in the USA the number of home-health workers will grow most, by almost 140 per cent. Travel agents and childcare workers will rise by over 60 per cent and guards and restaurant cooks around 50 per cent each. In terms of ‘absolute numbers, janitors’ and

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cleaners’ jobs will also expand greatly – an increase of over half a million (Econo-
mist, 1995). Much the same pattern is true for the UK. Employment growth has
been focused on low-end service jobs in fast food and retail (Bannister, 1997). In
Scotland the largest single area of job growth between 1996 and 2006 will be in
sales jobs within distribution, hotels and catering (Scottish Enterprise, 1997). The
next biggest increase will be in personal and protective service jobs, again mostly
within the public sector. As a consequence, it is not thinking or even technical skills
which are of increasing importance to most employers in the country but ‘person
to person’ skills. Most of these jobs are expected to be filled by female, part-time
workers.

Beyond the numbers, for many employed in the expanding service sector, the
content of their work remains highly routinized and stringently monitored (see,
for example, Leidner, 1993; Ritzer, 1998; Taylor, 1998). Part of the problem, noted
by Braverman (1974) over 25 years ago, lies in official classifications of the occu-
pational structure which focus upon the form of jobs rather than the content of
labour. For example, Frenkel et al.’s (1999, pp. 8–9) category of front line work
contains far too many different service, professional and support occupations to
make their interpretation of US occupational growth data meaningful. In other
accounts, occupations such as librarians and musicians have become relabelled
as knowledge workers (Barley, 1996; Handy, 1995). There is insufficient sensitivity
to the heterogeneity of work and employment within the service sector – not just
between knowledge work-type ‘iMacJobs’ on the one hand and more routinized
‘McJobs’ on the other, but also the heterogeneity that exists within similarly clas-
sified employment within the service sector.

Conceptualizing Knowledge in Work

It is useful to begin by specifying something of the conditions and character of
knowledge in work. The implicit model of the traditional knowledge worker is
someone who has access to, learns and is qualified to practice, a body of knowl-
edge that is formal, complex and abstract. Knowledge work requires employment
relationships and task structures that allow for creative application, manipulation
or extension of that knowledge. However, the ‘knowledge’ here is not a collection
of abstract theories and facts but resides in part in the person (it is ‘embrained’
to use Blackler’s term), and partly in a profession or occupational community
that polices its content and boundaries. Professional intellect has, then, been
assumed to be coterminous with knowledge work (Quinn et al., 1996). This
privileging of abstract knowledge and its association with professional occupations
can be traced back to the early knowledge economy arguments of Daniel Bell
(1973). However, many contemporary commentators continue to assert that
such professional and scientific-technical labour is becoming the characteristic
feature of the service-based, information-driven economy (Barley, 1996; Frenkel
et al., 1999; Handy, 1995). Knowledge work with its distinctive labour process
and employment relations is thus seen as inherent to contemporary economic
development.

If we move from conceptualization of knowledge work to knowledge itself, a
different emphasis emerges. The most basic distinctions between tacit and explicit
knowledge date back to Polanyi (1958, 1967). Tacit knowledge is based upon the
‘indwelling’ of awareness and understanding by individuals – ‘we know more than
we can tell’ (1967, p. 4). By analysis of action, other individuals can make this tacit
knowledge explicit or stated in the form of rules and procedures. Theorists who have recently attempted to update and extend taxonomies of knowledge in work (Blackler, 1995; Blackler et al., 1998; Fincham et al., 1994) largely reproduce traditional polarities, though often in new languages. There is knowledge that is abstract and pertaining to concepts, theories and formula. In contrast there is organizationally-specific knowledge relating to that which is non-generalizable tacit, technical or formal, but which can be systematized in procedures, policies, routines and roles. Then there is societal or social knowledge derived from broader shared understandings, values and beliefs; or tacit knowledge that comes from practice and experience and that can be shared among work colleagues.

While there is recognition of the importance of tacit knowledge, knowledge work has been based on that which is theoretical, technical (connected to tangible or intangible products and techniques) and explicit. In contrast knowledge which is contextual, social and tacit has been taken to be of lesser value, significance or centrality to work. Competitive advantage for firms is still believed to lie in developing abstract rather than practical knowledge, and in encouraging knowledge derived from shared understandings and values rather than that related to procedures and policies. Underlying this argument is the explicit or implicit notion that the conditions of traditional knowledge work are spreading to ever increasing categories of workers. Routine work is either being abolished, upgraded or marginalized through such developments.

This is evident in the review of the knowledge management literature undertaken by Blackler et al. (1998). These authors suggest that in the global economy it is ‘embrained, encultured and encoded knowledge [that] is of growing significance compared with knowledge that is embodied or embedded’ (p. 72). In other words, abstract knowledge, shared understandings and information conveyed by signs and symbols are displacing knowledge that is dependent upon employees’ physical presence, sentience or person-to-person interactions, or that which is built into systemic routines.

It is true that key texts in the field recognize the value of tacit knowledge and the need to capture and convert it for successful problem solving and innovation (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). As a consequence, every employee becomes ‘a knowledge worker – that is to say, an entrepreneur’ (cited and quoted in Blackler et al., 1998, p. 70). Such an approach appears to be reinforced by the idea of ‘communities of practice’, a term popularized by Brown and Duguid (1991). Such workplace or occupational communities are seen to ‘monopolise knowledge about how work is actually done’ (McKinlay, 2000, p. 13); therefore management needs to understand and appropriate these informal exchanges.

However, there are two limitations to the treatment of tacit knowledge in this literature. First, in some studies it is actually more concerned with product than process innovation. As such, practices intended to efficaciously manage the knowledgeability of workers tend to be quickly bypassed in the organizational pursuit of knowledge from customers, more specifically information about customers’ product preferences and experiences, as the case studies of Nonaka et al. (1998) exemplify. Second, and of more significance for the purposes of this study, these are conceived overwhelmingly as communities of professional practice, as ‘multiple communities of specialized knowledge workers’, that management engage with in order to ‘reconfigure the knowing of experts’ (Hayes and Walsham, 2000, p. 71). As McKinlay’s (2000) excellent case study of Pharma demonstrates, such recon-
figuration relies predominantly on attempts to convert what is tacit and ephemeral into that which is formal and explicit.

The best of the knowledge management literature is at least addressing the realities of work in the new economy, but it remains work done in knowledge intensive industries by a small minority. To take the argument further, we need to distinguish between knowledge workers and knowledgeable work, for workers are, of course, knowledgeable about their work – and always have been. But for most of this century management lost the capacity to effectively utilize that resource. Before we look at how organizations are trying to rectify that situation it is important to start with some historical re-evaluation of how knowledge went ‘into the shadows’.

INTO AND OUT OF THE SHADOWS: RE-CONCEPTUALIZING KNOWLEDGE AND KNOWLEDGEABILITY

At the turn of the twentieth century owner-managers were keenly aware of the task knowledge possessed by workers and how important that knowledge was to the development of their companies, as Jacques (1996, p. 2) reveals in his historical account of management knowledge: ‘It is an important part of [the manager’s] duties to find out what [the workers’] ideas and opinions are . . . and thus to make capital out of their originality and their suggestions’.\[1] What Braverman (1974) charted in Labor and Monopoly Capital was the attempt, through the techniques of scientific management, to appropriate this knowledge and thus effect in management and labour a ‘complete mental revolution’ (Taylor, 1947, p. 27). As McKinlay (2000, p. 113) observes, arguments about knowledge management and communities of practice echo classic Taylorism. Codified and hence abstracted from workers, this knowledge both enabled a rationalization of work and functioned as a source of legitimacy and power for managers.

This ‘knowledge transfer’ is part of the forgotten history of the workplace for popular management theory that prefers an ill-considered contrast between the modern ‘educated employee’ and the ‘stupid worker’ of earlier times. In the past, organizations apparently had to be organized like military units, because, ‘People were poorly educated and required precise direction. They were reluctant to work and poorly self-disciplined, so they needed close supervision’ (Quinn Mills, 1993, p. 14). In contrast the modern employee is well educated and motivated, capable of developing ‘his’ own activity. This polarity is endlessly repeated. Pascale (1990, pp. 94–5) argues that Taylor’s industrial bureaucracy was built upon a semi-skilled, semi-literate workforce that was not offered and did not ask for any influence over the labour process. It is difficult to imagine a more historically inaccurate picture and the problem does not stop there. Even when Taylorism is ‘remembered’ it is often assumed to be a finished and unproblematic process with respect to managerial appropriation of knowledge.

Interestingly, however, even Taylor lamented how, even after instruction from ‘teachers’, workers would quickly return to their own working practices (Taylor, 1947, p. 61). If disparaged by Taylor, such informal practices have been accepted by managers throughout this century as a form of innovation which enabled the job to be done more speedily and effectively than officially recognized and prescribed. In this process of ‘making out’ workers possess considerable ingenuity, ini-
tiative and intimate knowledge of their work. This is consistent with other arguments that workers retain and management need tacit skills, which are in turn grounded in informal and practical task knowledge (Manwaring and Wood, 1985). Even though management had tried and often succeeded in formally separating conception and execution, skill could be retained in part through ‘knowledgeable practice’ within ‘elements of control’ (Council for Science and Society, 1981, p. 23). Moreover, management have also often recognized that toleration of, or accommodation to, informal working practices can facilitate labour consent and cooperation – the necessary other side of the coin to control and compliance (Cressey and MacInnes, 1980).

However, though tacitly accepting the initiative and informal intervention of workers in the labour process, management have generally attempted to avoid the formal intervention of workers. Noting that even in the most ‘Taylorized’ job, operatives have to think about their work, Lipietz (1992, p. 4) notes that, ‘this conscious “involvement” . . . has to remain “informal”, “hidden” and even “paradoxical” – the engineer or the supervisor will deny that the operative has to think . . .’. For these reasons then, workers’ task knowledge has been pushed into the shadows during most of the twentieth century; that is, manifest as informal working practices and behaviour which, whilst yet vital to efficacious production, is not formally encouraged and only begrudgingly accepted and then accommodated by management. As a consequence, a valuable source of knowledge was left underdeveloped by management. A notable study of assembly workers quoted one employee: ‘I had lots of ideas I could suggest but I have given up. If management doesn’t want to draw on my many years of experience, I will say nothing. I’ll do just the least amount I can get away with without being disciplined. I’ll take my paycheck and forget about the job’ (Guest, 1983, pp. 148–9).

The knowledgeable worker is therefore not a post-industrial phenomenon but rather, as Jacques (1996) notes, an integral part of the development of industrial capitalism. However, if throughout this century management has attempted to appropriate workers’ task knowledge or accommodated any residual knowledge in the form of informal working practices now, in pursuit of the ‘high performance workplace’, management is keen to introduce organizational structures and practices which facilitate initiative and innovation in the form of creativity and continuous improvement on the part of workers.

The idea that the 1980s was a crucial period for this transformation is a half-truth. As Coriat (1995, p. 133) observes, three convergent waves of innovation combined at the end of the 1980s – technology, work organization and firm structure – to create the conditions for new production regimes and industrial relations arrangements. The weak half comes in the theoretical baggage associated with paradigm shift arguments. If we scale the claims down, we can recognize the increased competitive pressures on management to improve the quality and quantity of labour’s input. This has led many companies to put into question aspects of the traditional Taylorist division between thinking and doing, as well as the rigidities characteristic of a Fordist production regime.

This argument has been around since the mid-1980s, if not earlier, but the practice did not necessarily match the rhetoric. For example, quality circles and employee involvement were characteristic of early stages of work transformation, but were not intrinsically built into a different technical division of labour. The introduction of team working in a context of an expanded array of lean produc-
tion techniques, facilitates a much more substantial restructuring geared towards innovation and continuous improvement. As a result, employees are increasingly drawn into what Milkman (1998) refers to as the ‘micro-management of production’. Though such arguments largely reflect the experience of manufacturing, we can identify an equivalent direction for interactive service work. Increased competition in expanded, heterogeneous and de-regulated markets has led companies to focus their attention on the management of front line work (Frenkel et al., 1999). Though the form varies according to the work context, attention focuses on controlled and cost-efficient environments in which employees are selected and trained to deliver consistent service quality and required to take on expanded, delegated responsibilities. As Korczynski (2001) observes, in the new service management literature, this is dubbed ‘empowerment’. Firms are seeking to ‘add value’ through the identification and utilization of tacit and social competencies, in a largely contextual knowledge framework.

**INTERACTIVE SERVICE SECTOR WORK**

Leidner (1993) defines interactive service sector work as involving face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction with customers. Unlike manufacturing work where employees produce products for sale in the marketplace, in interactive service work the employees, and the way they look, sound and act, are themselves part of the product. Two examples of this type of work, which form the case studies, are retail and call centre work. The latter form the basis of Frenkel et al.’s (1998, 1999) case studies of front line work and these provide a contrast to the argument laid out here. While they formally acknowledge variations in work complexity and therefore levels of skill and knowledge in their own cases and beyond, it appears to have little effect on their general analysis. Customer service representatives (CSRs) are seen as part of the trend towards knowledge work. For example, in criticizing labour process accounts of front line work, they argue that the growing importance of knowledge work is likely to alter the character of domination (1999, p. 15). CSRs must master products and processes, and gather intelligence to aid the development of a customer base. As a result, ‘CSR work is, in the short term, becoming more demanding and hence becoming more like that of professional employees’ (1998, p. 8).

In contrast, our case studies show that although some of the work of these two sets of front liners requires the use of technical or product knowledge, it is characterized largely by reliance on tacit social competencies, standardization and limited discretion. Furthermore, as we shall return to later, this is consistent with the dominant trends in the industry.

**Case One: Aesthetic Labour**

Within the shift to services in the Glasgow economy, the creation of ‘style labour market’ jobs is at the forefront. In conjunction with documentary analysis, a qualitative research methodology was adopted involving a series of interviews and four focus groups of male and female managers and employees predominantly in the 20–30 age bracket, who were involved in fact-to-fact or voice-to-voice customer interaction. The primary research, fully reported in Nickson et al. (2001) examined the retail, hospitality and banking industries. Three areas of interest were...
analysed within these industries: recruitment and selection; training, working and management practices; and the service encounter.

Aesthetic labour is defined as a supply of embodied capacities and attributes possessed by workers at the point of entry into employment. Employers mobilize, develop and commodify these capacities and attributes through processes of recruitment, selection and training, transforming them into competencies and skills which are then aesthetically geared towards producing a ‘style’ of service encounter deliberately intended to appeal to the senses of customers, most obviously in a visual or aural way. Aesthetic labour encompasses individual attributes and task requirements to produce a favourable interaction with the customer, and complement social and technical skills.

The importance of employee aesthetics has long been a feature of ‘exotic’ and entertainment organizations, as Hochschild (1983), Höpfl (2000), Holland (1987), Henkoff (1994) and Van Maanen (1990) illustrate. However, when these aesthetics are recognized, they tend to be underplayed – too readily subsumed within debates about emotional labour and the management of feeling (see, for example, Hochschild, 1983; Taylor, 1998) or conflated with sexuality and more particularly the commodification of sexual difference as it relates to the female body alone (see, for example Tyler and Taylor, 1998) and in the latter case certainly not remunerated or trained (Hancock and Tyler, 2000).

Employer demand for aesthetic skills and competencies is becoming more prevalent because of its perceived commercial utility: ‘Unlike the labour force of many large industrial corporations, retail sales assistants [for example] are constantly “on display” to purchasers of their products . . . the employment of particular types of individuals to “front” the retail store is essential . . . the retail assistants . . . increasingly comprise the actual product on sale’ (Lowe and Wrigley, 1996, p. 24). Having aesthetically appealing staff either crudely attracts more customers or, more strategically, helps distinguish one organization from another as competition becomes more intense. Not surprisingly, the research reported here indicated that although the use of aesthetic labour was sophisticated in the style labour market it was also being increasingly sought in more prosaic interactive service outlets.

The research affirmed that management was looking for a matrix of skills from their employees: aesthetic, social and technical. Evidence from employers indicated that technical skills could be developed with training once employees were in the organization. At the point of entry it was the former two skills that were desired. Social skills – for example the communication and teamworking skills – were important. Only once employed were technical skills and product knowledge addressed: how to present food, take orders, use equipment, etc. In most cases this training was provided at a very basic level and often on-the-job, with new employees shadowing existing employees.

Thus, it was in the area of recruitment and selection that aesthetic labour had the most obvious resonance, as this process allowed for the filtering out of ‘inappropriate’ people.

On paper her application was fine [and] she’d been interviewed by our personnel people . . . [but] . . . this woman walked in . . . How she looked and how she spoke . . . it was even the way she wore her uniform, the way her hair and her make up was . . . my manager took an instant dislike to her and the woman lasted seven weeks . . . I mean she was brilliant at [bank telling] but because of
the way she looked and the way she spoke he took an instant dislike to her and it all went against her. (Focus group respondent)

Each firm had a ‘model’ employee that management sought to recruit. Sometimes this ideal was informal and implicit, in other cases it was formal and explicit. In the recruitment literature of the hotel within the study, it was a person description, not a job description that featured, asking prospective employees to assess themselves by the 14 words that were claimed to characterize that company’s ‘personality’, ‘stylish’ and ‘tasty’ for example. A number of the participants in the focus groups also suggested that there had been a distinct shift in what organizations were now seeking in the potential employee. In particular, they noted the need for applicants to have the ability to present a certain type of personage that encompassed many of the ‘dispositions’ suggested by Bourdieu (1984): language and dress codes; manner; style, shape and size of the body.

Consequently, organizations were looking for the ‘right’ sort of appearance and dispostion. For example, the personnel manager of the hotel, in discussing the recruitment of staff for a new café within the hotel, commented that: ‘we didn’t actually look for people with experience . . . because we felt that wasn’t particularly important. We wanted people that had a personality more than the skills because we felt we could train people to do the job’. The hotel was ideally looking for male and female graduates between 19 and 25 years old. ‘There is probably a Hotel Elba look’, said the manager, ‘not an overly done up person – quite plain but neat and stylish . . . young, very friendly . . . people that look the part . . . fit in with the whole concept of the hotel’. For other companies in the hospitality industries, employees had to be ‘well groomed, smart, clean and tidy . . . well spoken . . . trendier people . . . ’ (bar manager).

Corporealness was not the only desired aesthetic in recruitment. In relation to customers’ aural aesthetic, the voice and accent of employees was important. In the hotel, the personnel manager was adamant: ‘We didn’t want someone who spoke in a very guttural manner.’ In the banks, again, one respondent claimed that having a ‘clear accent’ was an absolute essential.

Once past the recruitment and selection stages, a common theme that emerged was the extent to which organizations, through training, continued to seek to mould people into the desired personage. This moulding was most obvious in the ‘style’ hotel. After the telephone interview, application with CV and then face-to-face interview to be selected as waiting staff, there was a full-time ten day induction in which extensive grooming and deportment training was given to the staff by external consultants. Such sessions encompassed hair cuts/styling, ‘acceptable’ make-up, individual makeovers, how men should shave and the standards expected in relation to appearance.

Regulation of appearance and adherence to company standards was, in one company, overseen by the ‘grooming standards committee’, or in the words of one of the employees, the ‘uniform police’. Their function was to monitor things such as the employees’ skirts, shoes, stockings and jewellery to ensure they all conformed to the company ideal. Role-playing was a recurring feature of employee training. Such methods sought to impress upon employees the importance of their own aesthetic capacities and attributes from the customers’ perspective and also then develop and mobilize these capacities and attributes as knowledges, skills and competencies so as to be able to differentiate and better serve customers. The com-
panies instructed their employees in how to approach customers by ‘reading’ those customers’ signifiers such as body language, for example. ‘You’ve got a person in front of you’, said one respondent, ‘and you assess them’. This assessment then effects employee self-presentation to the customer. An employee of an up-market fashion retail company, Donnatella, related how ‘the supervisors do a wee act kind of thing and pretend they are a customer and say “This is a bad example” and “This is a good example”, and the good example is when you smile at them as soon as they walk in.’ Working for Leviathan, another respondent claimed, ‘is a bit like acting. I mean it’s like being in drama school being taught how to stand and how even to look at customers.’

Echoing Van Maanen’s (1990) comment about employees as ‘taking statues’ at Disney, dressed in company clothing, employees in one retail outlet, when not serving or replenishing stock were required to stand at 40 degrees near to the entrance of the store, smiling invitingly at prospective customers. Posture here was also prescribed. In another store, employees were required to stand in front of a mirror and go though a prescribed appearance checklist before entering the shopfloor. Many of the retail employees talked of the ‘performance’ involved in their work, not only managing their emotions, as Hochschild (1983) has noted, but also their appearance. ‘I think that we’ve all got the qualification how to present ourselves. I mean that how we’re getting training, part of your training is actually how to perform’, said one such employee, continuing ‘...we’ve all got to present the company now’.

Practices are frequently justified with reference to the customer. Within a well-known restaurant chain a respondent recalled how a colleague was dismissed for being ‘too common’, although the ostensible reason was poor performance. In questioning the decision the respondent (an assistant manager at that time) was told that, ‘She wasn’t what they considered right for the company, what the customers were expecting’. An interesting variant on whether employees may reflect the required image was found, again, in an up-market fashion retailer. In this organization employees were constantly entreated to use words such as ‘exquisite’ and ‘luxurious’ instead of more prosaic terms such as ‘nice’ and ‘lovely’. In part this was a reflection of the fact that ‘There’s a type of customer who would really like that language’. Failure to use this and other similar elaborate language in the customers’ presence was again a source of sanction and disciplinary action from management. Employee appearance featured as a formal element in regular staff appraisals in other companies, as well as part of day-to-day supervisory monitoring.

Interestingly, the employee who described the operation of the ‘uniform police’ in her company found it largely unproblematic: ‘But I think it’s necessary for someone who is in uniform, you know the fact that they have to have their hair tied back or whatever. What’s the point in giving somebody a corporate image and then having big bits of hair everywhere’. It was ‘a good thing’, she insisted. Moreover several participants, representing a range of service industries, suggested that peer pressure would also ensure conformity to company standards on appearance and deportment as individuals who did not comply were felt to be letting their colleagues down. This socialization was reflected in the view of one participant when she explained how she had confronted management on this issue: ‘I said that I feel as though I’m being watched and they said “Well it’s making sure the Leviathan standards are being kept up. If someone fails, the whole shop is effected by it.”

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And it’s true’, she reflected. Thus, it is that companies in the style labour market sought employees with knowledge of aesthetic appeal and who can utilize that knowledge to affect favourable service encounters.

**Case Two: Call Centre Work**

Call centres represent important new forms of work; both in terms of the actual and forecast number of employees and through the nature of the labour process. It is estimated that 2–3 per cent of the UK’s working population will be employed in call centres by 2002 (Datamonitor, 1998). There are many different types of call centre, with the differentiating factors being whether calls are inbound or outbound, the degree of product complexity and variability, and the depth of technical knowledge required to deal with the service interaction.

This variability in the type and nature of call centre work has been recognized by some authors. Batt (1999), for example, contrasts mass production strategies that maximize sales and minimize costs with ‘relationship management’ that seeks to maximize sales by providing good service. Each invokes different patterns of skill and work organization. Reflecting the varied and complex demands of the work in Batt’s case study of a US telecom’s operation, customer service representatives (CSRs) require customer interaction skills, keyboard skills, knowledge of procedures, products services and legal regulations, and technical proficiency in programming languages and databases.

However, it is not obvious how generalizable such conditions are. The traditional signifiers of skill formation are largely absent or inverted in much of the UK call centre industry. For example, a recent study in Scotland (Watson et al., 2000) showed that 22 per cent of telephone sales staff possessed a degree compared to 7 per cent of clerical workers and 3 per cent of sales. In their case studies, the figure was even higher at almost 40 per cent (though this included management grades). Yet even the most generous interpretation of call centre work would find it hard to see a connection between such qualifications and the nature of work or opportunity structures. Indeed it is highly likely that in many call centres, graduates will be working alongside co-workers with no qualifications at all.

Telebank, the case study research site, offers an example of call centre work which requires minimal technical or professional knowledge but does demand an awareness of social competencies and the knowledge and confidence to work on and apply these competencies during customer service interaction. To briefly summarize the case study: Telebank receives around 20,000 incoming calls a day, and is one of four integrated call centres throughout the UK (although all four are part of the same organization, here Telebank will refer only to the Scottish call centre site). In total these call centres employ 2000 people, 500 of whom work (in teams of 12) in the case study call centre. In line with a qualitative methodology, data collection took the form of taped semi-structured interviews with 24 CSRs and 14 managers. In addition there was non-participant observation of recruitment, training and the labour process. Repeat visits were made to the research site (a large open plan office located in an industrial park) over a period of nine months. Finally a research diary was kept, containing additional observations and contextual comments.

The work that Telebank CSRs do is heavily influenced by the automated call distribution system (ACD). This system receives inbound calls, automatically allocates them to customer service representatives (CSRs), places calls in a queue and
(in conjunction with other software) offers sophisticated management information packages. Telebank’s system operates over the four sites, creating a virtual ‘super group’ of CSRs within which calls are spread. CSRs take on average 120 calls a day with each call lasting around 180 seconds. Calls are split into two main parts: talk time (160 seconds) and post call wrap-up time (20 seconds). The time between calls is also measured and, reflecting its non-productive nature, is known by management as ‘white space’. CSRs aim to deal with 80 per cent of all incoming calls, with the remaining 20 per cent being passed on to branches or other areas of the bank. Of the calls dealt with by CSRs, two thirds relate to requests for specific account information (such as balances), requests for simple actions (moving money between accounts) and charge queries. Most of the calls, then, are similar and simple: CSRs have limited power over customer accounts, with scripts and screens determining what they can see and do.

Yet, despite such routine work Telebank uses a sophisticated recruitment and selection process: a job and person specification are designed; appropriate recruitment channels selected; application forms collected and analysed; telephone interviews given; role plays assessed; two person structured interviews undertaken; references and credit checks collected; and, finally, job offers made. We argue that this process reflects the centrality of social skills and competencies to the nature of the tasks in even routine interactive service work. Managers are not looking for people who have comprehensive banking knowledge but for those with confidence and concentration – informal but important abilities.

Reflecting these priorities Telebank assesses applicants in three areas: personality traits; communication (especially verbal) skills and, with less emphasis, technical skills. On technical skill, Telebank managers look for keyboard skills, basic numeracy and the ability to move around a system. More time and thought, however, is put into assessing social characteristics and competencies:

I think the communication skills are the most important, very important. The difference between what they do and what the people on the phones in other banks do, is down to their personality, their communication skills. That is the only substantive differentiator between the banks – the personality of the individuals on the telephone. That’s the highest skills. Their guys know all about banking products, my guys know all about banking products. Their guys will have to know about systems, my guys will have to know about systems. That’s all roughly the same. The differentiator is how they communicate with that customer. It is the overriding skill that they’ve got to have. (Manager 6)

Management want people who can continually communicate with energy and enthusiasm, who can recognize nuances in conversations with customers and vary their voice accordingly. Such abilities draw on broader social knowledge: the skills of active listening and patience, about knowing when and how to speak that are part of a more common understanding of communication norms and values. These are tacit skills, informal abilities which are embodied within individuals. Reflecting this, Telebank state in recruitment literature that they are looking for people with ‘life experience . . . for example running a house and raising children requires many of the skills we are looking for’. Such skills are more difficult to identify and quantify than technical knowledge but are crucial to interactive service work.
CSRs also thought the job required social rather than technical skills, but also placed emphasis on the ability to survive stressful and repetitive work:

Patience with the customer . . . to let them go through it at their own pace . . . weeding it out with probing questions to find out what they want. It’s patience and knowing where to direct it. (CSR 13)

In my opinion the main skill you need is patience in abundance. You can get some people on the phone who are a bit vague about what they want, you get people on who are very angry, obviously you’ve got to be patient with them. The main thing is definitely patience, to give them time to get the information over to you, and sometimes to give them time to let them let off steam. If you’ve not got patience you could get in an awful state working in a service centre. (CSR 21)

Such predispositions are built upon and formalized during Telebank’s six week full-time training programme. The main emphasis is on communication skills, which are split into two parts – managing a conversation (techniques of conversational control) and managing yourself (control over energy and enthusiasm). Together these begin to give trainees an awareness and influence over the regulation and management of feelings – categorized as acting:

Tone gives away just about everything that’s going on in your mind . . . if a customer is stupid you need to become quite clever in your acting abilities . . . enthusiasm and tone give away your mood, if you are five minutes from the end of a shift, or having a bad day . . . you’ll have to fight these reactions, shut them out, push them out. The good thing is if you can do this eventually you will be able to change yourself. Or on the ‘bad days’ unless it is very serious, you put up with it. (From non-participant observation)

Telebank not only recruit attitude, they try to shape and dictate it. Trainees are encouraged to make the necessary changes to their ‘state of mind’, and told that by consciously working on levels of enthusiasm they can ‘change themselves’. They are told that sufficient concentration will improve sincerity – once rapport is built ‘you’re there’. Such attitudes reveal that management are encouraging CSRs to change their underlying feelings and values, to provide emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). Evidence for the existence of ‘deep acting’ has also been found by Taylor (1998, p. 98) who, in his research into a telephone sales operation of a British airline, commented: ‘. . . service sector employers are increasingly demanding that employees deep act – actively work on and change their feeling to match the display required by the labour process’.

Telebank’s training programme systemizes the competencies identified during recruitment to ensure workers can provide the consistent (and convincing) customer service required in routine interactive service work. CSRs are aware of the need to manage their emotions:

It’s inside certain people. We build it up. I’ve worked in four call centres so far, from Sky, right through BT, Virgin, to this place, over a period of four years. We used to get emotional on Sky especially, but now I don’t. Whatever situation I’m in, I can stop what I’m doing and put on a face. (CSR 3)
This illustrates the way that ‘knowledge’ exists in such routine interactive service work – not so much abstract, theoretical or technical knowledge as social and tacit knowledge; workers must be able to consciously and continually manage their emotions. Such work also offers a space for CSRs to articulate their agency: management demand both quantity and quality, but not only can workers adopt strategies of call avoidance (Bain and Taylor, 2000) they can and do vary their emotions. As one Telebank employee said, ‘I sit on the phone and put a face across to the public’, the ‘face’ chosen might not be the one management want, but the existence of choice shows the continuing presence of indeterminacy in the labour process. Interactive service work requires the presence of social and tacit knowledge, but the profitable practice of such knowledge is still a matter of negotiation between workers and managers.

CONCLUSION – KNOWLEDGEABILITY AND ITS MANAGEMENT

Both case studies allow an analysis of labour that moves beyond traditional conceptions of knowledge and skill by exploring how service employers are defining, eliciting and developing social and aesthetic skills and competencies in their workforce. In call centres the emphasis is almost exclusively on the quality of vocal communication, with customer satisfaction being strongly influenced by the energy and enthusiasm of the call centre operative. Product knowledge has a role, but in all except the most specialized call centres, managerial focus is on the use of empathy to create rapport with the customer. Likewise in retail work the aesthetic capacities and attributes of employees – language, dress codes, manner, style, shape and size of the body – are deliberately used to appeal to the senses of customers, most obviously in a visual or aural way. Again detailed product knowledge may play a part, but in most cases management want the comfort and trust which are supposed to accompany a pleasant manner and appearance. The ostensibly intangible – whether in the form of qualities of ‘good’ appearance or personality, can be made tangible, standardized and controlled.

Nevertheless, the management of social skills and competencies cannot be confined to the labour process itself – there are implications for recruitment and selection. In order to identify workers with the personal characteristics likely to make them interact spontaneously and perform effectively – to choose people with intangible qualities such as sociability, drive, honesty, adaptability and a sense of humour that make them ‘the right kind of person for the job’ – many managers have devised intensive recruitment and selection processes. Such applicants are screened in rather than unsuitable ones screened out. The training that follows takes these embodied capacities and attributes and shapes them into conscious tools for use in the service interaction.

The existence of such work complicates the discussion surrounding skills and human capital. Traditionally this discussion focuses on technical knowledge, with people studying to gain a theoretical or practical understanding of a specific field of learning which is, importantly, publicly and privately recognized, most usually through a qualification. The labour process of interactive service sector work, however, draws on capacities and attributes located (often unconsciously) within each worker. These workers draw on limited technical knowledge during their work, but they do have to develop a consciousness of their social skills and an
awareness of when and how to deploy these. It is possible to see this personal awareness as a kind of tacit knowledge, where workers develop an understanding of themselves that allows them to consciously use their emotions to influence the quality of the interactive service sector product.

Such a view is consistent with Becker’s (2000) work on call centres. He reports that two factors shaped competency requirements – the dominant role of information technology determines the ‘what’ of the process, while routinized scripts, reinforced by training determine the ‘how’. Anything that does not fit in has to be referred to the supervisor. As he argues, the skills of the CSR are, therefore, of a basic human character that are ubiquitous in their everyday lives. This is also consistent with growing evidence that employers rank information technology skills very low as a criterion of employability generally (Hesketh, 1998). It is often the ‘person to person’ skills that determine employee selection at the point of entry to, and are crucial in, interactive service work (Keep and Mayhew, 1999). What our case studies suggest, however, is that these skills must encompass both social and aesthetic qualities for some interactive service work.

We now turn to making comparisons within our two cases. There were considerable continuities of managerial intent and employee experience; particularly in the kinds of social competencies required and the recruitment and training mechanisms initiated. However, in call centre work employee attributes are less embodied, despite the emphasis on voice and accent, and more focused on performance as output. Not surprisingly, therefore, management rely more on traditional targets and controls. In the style labour market, it is the performativity of the work that is salient, and as an emergent form of work, management still operate relatively crude controls, even if the mobilization, development and commodification of employee aesthetics is more sophisticated. Perhaps the key difference is in the response of employees. Though call centre workers identify with the goals of service quality, there is little evidence from this or other cases that they are ‘seduced’ by product or process. In style labour market jobs people recruited for their appearance appear to embrace the image and the means of policing it more readily. Although not unreflective of their working practices and management, they do appear more accepting – perhaps because of the potential cultural capital (Crang, 1994) that can be gained from employment in boutique hotels, designer retailers, and style bars, cafés and restaurants.

It is important to note that both aesthetic labour and call centre work are not homogeneous. High-end call centre work, for example, selling complex financial products, is likely to require quite different working knowledge, and therefore employment conditions. Similarly, if organizations wish to use employee aesthetics to help distinguish those organizations in highly competitive markets, then there will exist variations in the form of aesthetics desired. Our purpose has been to raise critical questions about the spread and significance of knowledge work, not to ignore its importance in some sectors.

To that extent we can agree with Frenkel et al. (1998, 1999) that there are a variety of workflows and therefore types of work organization and skill utilization. Our disagreement has been over the dominant trends and, therefore, conceptualization of them. Frenkel et al. are determined to locate front line labour within the growth of professional, knowledge work. We have disputed this proposition in terms of data on occupational growth and our own case studies. Other data show that employment growth in call centres has been concentrated in high volume...
operations, characterized by large workplaces and routine work, with for example, 47 per cent of Scottish call centres dealing only with inbound calls (Datamonitor, 1998; Taylor and Bain, 1998).

For substantial numbers of service workers it is more important to focus on the broader growth of knowledgeability in work. Though it takes particular forms in interactive services, employers more generally have been trying to address some of the limits of Taylorism and bureaucracy through accessing what had traditionally been tacit, informal knowledge. This is a form of ‘knowledge management’, but bears little resemblance to attempts to lever additional creativity from expert labour in ‘communities of practice’.

That is not to say that service sector employers and policy-makers would not like to move towards ways of formalizing social and aesthetic skills and competencies. Discussions, so far without progress, have been taking place in the call centre industry about a formal qualification for CSRs. A Glasgow-based charity and training agency, the Wise Group, has recently attempted to initiate a programme intended to offer formal training for the long-term unemployed, providing them with aesthetic skills to enhance their employability. But it has struggled to secure continuous funding because of the lack of formal accreditation of such skills – although Tessa Jowell, the UK minister responsible for the New Deal, has endorsed the need of such skills for the unemployed (Warhurst and Nickson, 2001). Given the inherent constraints to formalization of social competencies, the most generous spin that could be put on the situation of CSRs or employees in the style labour market is that they are developing or enhancing a set generic, transferable social skills that make them more employable in other call centres or service settings.

NOTES

*The authors gratefully acknowledge the contribution of Anne Witz, Dennis Nickson and Anne Marie Cullen in the research of the first case study reported here.


[2] An attempt to explore more comprehensively the conceptualization of aesthetic labour, and its composites, can be found in Witz et al. (1998), as can a typology of aesthetics and organization.

[3] Pseudonyms for the case study companies are used throughout the paper.

REFERENCES


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