

Australia's new industrial relations



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The so-called globalisation of trade in the 1990s has been used as justification for almost all the changes now affecting work in Australian enterprises. Some commentators have described globalisation as a notoriously slippery concept. Others have used the term either as a basis from which to push arguments for economic liberalisation or as an exemplar of everything they consider wrong with contemporary society.

Beyond philosophy, in the real world of work, it is easy to see two clear results. One is the decentralising of our industrial relations laws and systems. The other is the national training reform agenda. Both involve major change. Both impact directly on all employees, within library and information services and beyond. But they seem stubbornly determined not to converge.

Researchers Hugh Guthrie and Kate Barnett try to engineer a confluence with their recent report *Training and enterprise bargaining: enterprise-based approaches to training*, NCVR, South Australia 1996, ISBN 0 86397 375 2. But, despite their best endeavours, the essential picture remains one of a national training system which is not well linked to industrial relations or wage fixing processes. In fact, the report suggests plausibly that the overwhelming emphasis on individual enterprises, which is now emerging in Australian industrial relations, calls into question the training reform agenda's focus on national recognition of competencies and, more broadly, challenges the whole notion of nationally consistent competency standards.

Other research (by, for example, the Federal Department of Industrial Relations and the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training) reveals that, while references to training are common in registered enterprise agreements, most deal only with proposals to investigate future training policies, rather than specifying firm rights and practices now. This latest report confirms these findings. Evaluation of almost 2000 agreements shows only a quarter make provision for a genuinely planned and structured training system.

Given the emphasis on competency-based training (CBT) in the national training reform agenda, it is not surprising that this is the form most often mentioned in agreements. Far too often, however, organisations are not doing enough to define what constitutes competency in an actual sense within the enterprise context. National standards are a useful general framework, but the characteristics of individual enterprises are often so different that the link between them and real training needs is inevitably tenuous. In practice, national competency standards can only ever be broad guidelines. A needs profile based solely on them can, indeed, become quite unrealistic in

real workplaces, unless they are underpinned by detailed enterprise-specific training policies and procedures. Fundamentally, this demands that the needs analysis horse be put before the competency standards cart, rather than the reverse. The mere tailoring of organisational skill requirements to pre-determined national standards — which seems to be the basis for some organisational training programs — is really little more than a back-to-front bureaucratic compliance process. As such, it is highly unlikely to lift the real skill levels of organisations or of Australia's workforce.

The report argues strongly that the role of training in micro-economic reform is critical. But, it says, the relationship of workplace training to the core business of enterprises and to the wider and more formal training structures set up by governments is poorly understood in most organisations and industries. In this, the authors mirror concerns previously expressed by other specialists about the training reform agenda. For example, an earlier analysis, *Delivering training reform: the critical role of employers and the workplace*, Marilyn Bryce (ed), ACIRRT 1995, ISBN 0 86758 888 8, says of it: 'The major problem has been a failure to conform to some of the basic principles of strategic planning ... in which aims and objectives are distinguished from the means chosen to achieve them ... In implementation of education and training reform, we have lost sight, at a policy level, of the aims of reform. These were simply to increase the quality and quantity of skills available within the community ... [they] have become confused with specified methods to achieve [them], such as CBT, competency standards ... ASF Levels and imposed national qualification and curriculum frameworks' (p25).

ALIA has for some time been mindful of the need for clear linkages between national competency standards and workplace requirements. For that reason, among others, the Association has directed considerable resources to publishing its *Library industry competency standards workshops* series. Four volumes have been produced to date. They are available from the National Office and are an invaluable resource for all organisations which want to develop their own workforce skills profile within the overall framework provided by the National Standards.

Proper identification of the real skills which individual enterprises need is a vital labour market issue. Without it there will not be effective training. Nor will the skill levels of employees, or the relative value of their work, be properly assessed for wage fixing purposes. And Australia's 'new industrial relations', on the one hand, and a reformed vocational training system, on the other, will continue to be ships that pass in the night. ■

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