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**THE MANAGEMENT NVQ:
A CRITIQUE OF THE MYTH OF RELEVANCE**

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ABSTRACT

The Management NVQs were (according to their proponents) designed to provide a new mechanism for certifying workplace competence. Centred on descriptions of practice in the workplace they offered a qualifications route that could be accessed by all. This article draws on an in-depth study of the implementation of NVQs in three private sector organisations. It argues that, in practice, this competence-based format is highly problematic. Candidates are required to work towards criteria that may not match their roles and responsibilities, developmental work is systemically discouraged and work is routinised. The article concludes by arguing that these flaws are structural ones which may be expected to continue as long as NVQs continue to attempt to distil the essence of occupations into 'standards'.

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Introduction

In 1986 the NCVQ (National Council for Vocational Qualifications) was established to introduce a nationally recognised system of vocational qualifications into Britain. These NVQs (National Vocational Qualifications) were intended to remedy the chronic skills shortages in the workforce at every level of achievement (see for example MSC/NEDO, 1986) extending qualifications into areas where none had existed before and rationalising those that did exist by providing a universally recognised framework against which attainment could be measured. To encourage participation some government subsidies were made available for employers who chose to take the NVQ route and individuals paying their own fees could claim tax relief, a concession not extended to any other qualification until 1996 (*THES*, 19 January 1996).

Management was one of the first “higher level” NVQs developed (MCI, 1990), the Management Charter Initiative (MCI) published the ‘occupational standards’ for management at NVQ Level 4 (MCI MI) in 1990 and by September 1997 15,137 managers had been certified competent at that level and a further 4,449 had qualified for the Senior Management Standards at Level 5 (MCI MII) (*DATANews*, 1998). When the qualifications were launched a regular series of publications by the MCI (*The Management Leader*), the NCVQ (*The NVQ Monitor*) and (the then) TEED (*Competence and Assessment*) presented a uniformly enthusiastic picture of success. According to the CBI, NVQs (1994:5):

represent a fundamental change for the better in the way that competence in an occupation is defined, measured and recognised.

The aim of all NVQs was to make training more attractive to employers by making it more relevant. In theory, standards were “employer-led” that is, they were to be designed and implemented by employers. Educationally, this switch of emphasis was revolutionary. As Jessup (1991) argued, traditional qualifications were ‘input’ oriented. Standards, by contrast were ‘outputs’; each occupation was described in its own dedicated NVQ and once this core job description was provided individual employers and training organisations would be free to tailor their own tuition and assessment to it. During one interview a senior manager at the Employment Department said:

Previously knowledge was in the gift of the Universities - they defined what was required. Now its in the gift of everyone because the Standards are open.

Proponents of a competence-based system argued that this design would actively assist individual development. Candidates would no longer be restricted to dedicated routes to qualifications, employers could accurately assess the capabilities of their employees and training could be targeted to areas where it was most needed (Jessup, 1991; Breed, 1993). In fact, NVQs were felt to be so admirable that several writers suggested they become the exclusive national training mechanism (Fennell, 1993; Mathews, 1992).

So ambitious a goal is seldom uncritically received. Although the national framework was set in place in 1986 all early discussions were restricted to a small group of those who were “close to the policy makers and implementers (sometimes they *are* the policy makers and implementers)” (Jessup, 1989:x) so that the main concern expressed in the first few years was how to foster

implementation (Warwick, 1992). The debate did not fully reach the public domain until the end of the 1980s and since then the key assumptions behind, and the structure of, NVQs have both been widely challenged (see, among others Barnett, 1994; Smithers, 1993; Hyland, 1994; Collin, 1989; Wolf, 1995). The proponents have two stock answers to all of these criticisms. Firstly that, since NVQs are a *practical* qualification they are resistant to judgement at a theoretical level since all the problems identified by (impractical) academics will prove to be illusory once the Standards are implemented. The qualifications are designed *by* practical people *for* practical people and no other forum is appropriate for judgement (Marsh and Holmes, 1990). The second main argument is that, even if the criticisms are correct, they are only the result of inexperience and any minor mistakes can be amended within the existing framework. This is the 'bicycle' argument of NVQ implementation in which anything is acceptable as long as the cyclist carries on pedalling and the bicycle keeps moving.

In order to move this debate forward there needs to be a more soundly based appreciation of what NVQs actually involve, the processes and procedures candidates follow, and the advantages and disadvantages inherent in each. Without such enquiry there is a grave danger that either all criticism will be subsumed in the linear goal of implementing these new qualifications regardless of merit, or that NVQs may be unceremoniously discarded and the education system lose something that is potentially valuable.

This article considers the results of a study that was intended to contribute to that objective. It focuses on the Management NVQ at Level 4 (see Fig. 1) and

is based on a series of more than 120 semi-structured interviews and observations. Groups of NVQ candidates from three organisations were followed through the NVQ process over a two year period. The aim of the study was to provide a more robust appreciation of what was involved in higher level NVQs, from which an empirically based assessment could be constructed.

THE MANAGEMENT NVQ LEVEL 4	
<i>Key Purpose: To Achieve the Organisation's Objectives and Continuously Improve its Performance</i>	
Key Roles and their associated Units of Competence	
Key Role: Manage Operations	
Unit 1.	Maintain and improve service and product operations.
Unit 2.	Contribute to the implementation of change in services, products and systems.
Key Role: Manage Finance	
Unit 3.	Recommend, monitor and control the use of resources.
Key Role: Manage people	
Unit 4.	Contribute to the recruitment and selection of personnel.
Unit 5.	Develop teams, individuals and self to enhance performance.
Unit 6.	Plan,. allocate and evaluate work carried out by teams, individuals and self.
Unit 7.	Create, maintain and enhance effective working relationships.
Key Role: Manage Information	
Unit 8.	Seek, evaluate and organise information for action.
Unit 9.	Exchange information to solve problems and make decisions.

Fig. 1 The Management NVQ, Level 4

Managerial work: function or social construct?

The MCI's model presents management as a politically neutral, value-free, function in which responsibilities are both clear and rational and an individual's contribution is largely dependent on their position in the hierarchy

(see NVQ Level 3 for supervisors; Level 4/MI for first line managers; Level 5/MII for middle managers and MIII for senior managers). Far from being atheoretical, it is a view which corresponds exactly with the earliest writings in the field (see for example, Taylor, 1947; Fayol, 1949). Management, to these writers, is both objective and tangible. Recording it is simply a matter of accurately reporting and interpreting the facts.

During the last forty years, this view of management has been increasingly called into question. No universally agreed model has ever been produced, nor does it seem likely that one will be developed in the future, since authors who argue that management is a generic activity disagree about exactly *which* activities are generic. Most of the insights provided by attempts to rationalise the whole occupation either provide only partial views or are couched in such general portmanteau terms that it is difficult to match them to the everyday activities of the work (Thompson and McHugh, 1992).

Although the term *management* is tightly defined in a vertical sense, including only those above a threshold rank (generally that of supervisor, Stewart, 1988) horizontally it is far looser and includes a wide range of diverse activities (Bamber, 1986). As Watson (1994:51) points out:

A managerial appointment is a stage in a person's hierarchical career in an organisation, rather than an entry into an immediately distinctive and clearly identifiable, occupational activity.

While analytically a category that includes everyone above a certain rank within an organisation is a useful tool, when that same category is used to

facilitate recruitment, selection, training and development, its value rapidly diminishes. After all, as Scase and Goffee (1989:20) argue:

It is self-evident that the duties and responsibilities of sales managers, for example, differ from those engaged in personnel, production or market research.

The few empirical studies that exist reinforce this picture of management as a heterogeneous activity. Hirsch and Bevan (1988) in a survey of 40 employers discovered nearly 1,800 descriptions of managerial skills. As Stewart (1988:77) concludes in her work on managers' diaries:

The variations were so great that it is misleading to talk, as much of the literature does, about *the* managerial job, or how the *average* manager spends his or her time. [Emphasis in original]

The best studies either take one, distinct, managerial group and explore the nature of that group (Edwards, 1987; Watson, 1977) *or* they agnostically include all who hold the title manager (Stewart, 1988; Watson, 1994). Those that try to combine these two approaches and distil the essence of management itself from a plethora of different practices are rarely successful. Drucker points out that (1989:59):

Most of today's lively discussion of management by objectives is concerned with the search for the one right objective. This search is not only likely to be as unproductive as the quest for the philosopher's stone; it is certain to do harm and to misdirect.

As Storey (1994) has argued, this debate between the contingent and generic views of managerial work is far from trivial. In order to train managers, there

needs to be some understanding of what it is that they are being trained *for* (Earl, 1983). Managers' jobs differ both from one another and from organisation to organisation. Individual managers may also choose to do different jobs in different ways (Stewart, 1988). Faced with such a rich diversity of practice there is a danger that students of management theory are forced either to produce an arbitrary and contentious definition of the occupation (that then leaves the problem of what to do with the newly *non-managers*) or to conclude that management is a heterogeneous set of tasks, talents and responsibilities without ever really knowing why.

The key to understanding management may lie in the writings of the more radical commentators (Willmott, 1984). Rather than pursuing an elusive and generic recipe of functions, skills and attitudes the radical critics argue that management is essentially an agency relationship and as such inherently diverse, since an agent's duties are prescribed by their principal (Armstrong, 1989:311):

Thus the qualities and abilities required of managers depend heavily on the priorities and prejudices of whoever appoints the agent, rather than some theoretical specification of 'the managerial task'.

This construction is far more resilient than the rational, task based manager of earlier writings. It caters for an occupation that can include anyone from computer specialists with no staff to chief executives with all staff and escapes the problems that would be posed by drawing the line *within* the ranks of titular managers. It also incorporates the debates on control (Thompson and McHugh, 1992), morality (Singer and Wooton, 1976) and organisational

politics (Sayles, 1964; Moss-Kanter, 1977) that are so important a part of working life and so neglected by the rational models of work.

What this suggests is that the model of managerial work constructed by the MCI is problematic. It describes a well-defined function, the constituent parts of which may be readily disaggregated into ('correct', 'benchmarked') 'standards' and which is, both in whole and in part, readily susceptible to judgement. By contrast the literature offers a description of a position in the organisational hierarchy, rejecting the notion of a generic managerial job description across the economy.

Research design

In addition to examining competence the fieldwork needed to cater for this diversity (if it existed) and the possibility that different employers might have very different requirements of their managers. The contentious nature and minority status of the subject matter also raised several methodological issues. Researching into a 'typical' firm (assuming that such an organisation did indeed exist) could potentially contribute almost nothing to the debate. Newspaper reports (see *The Observer* 27 March 1994; *The Observer* 3 April 1994 and *The Independent* 6 October 1994 among others), surveys (Houston, 1995) and anecdotal evidence from both the Awarding Bodies and the NCVQ all suggested that the majority experience was less than satisfactory; yet observation of poorly resourced and inadequately tutored programmes might result only in the somewhat tautological conclusion that poorly resourced and inadequately tutored candidates tended to have experiences that were less than satisfactory. The study was less concerned with recording an accurate *history*

of the management NVQs than with testing the relevance of competence and the model of Management tasks the MCI supplied. The central question was not, could NVQs fail, clearly they both could and did; but rather, could NVQs *work*?

Accordingly all three private sector companies that were involved in the case studies were chosen because they were examples of good practice. Each was prepared to, or had already, committed a great deal of time, effort and resources to their programmes. Two had been used in official MCI and NCVQ publications as exemplary organisations and the third was commended by a senior official involved in NVQs. It was hoped that observations of a professionally run NVQ programme would reveal a great deal about the nature of the standards and, together with a critique of the theory, would enable an evaluation of the NVQ to be constructed (see Edwards, 1992 and Hammersley and Atkinson, 1992 for a discussion on the value of the critical case study).

The three companies were very different, both structurally and culturally. The largest was a privatised utility, PrivatPLC (the names of both organisations and individuals have been fictionalised) which had a large, formal, bureaucratic structure and a strong training record. Financially it was successful but, in common with many other industries, it had implemented rigorous restructuring exercises that had seen its workforce halve. Employment practices and expectations of employees had changed dramatically and managers had to cope with the conflicting threats and challenges posed by radical changes in both technology and the corporate structure.

The second case study company (SupermarketCo) was the Head Office of a large supermarket chain. In contrast to PrivatPLC, SupermarketCo was expanding. New stores were being built or taken over, supply systems were improved and up-graded and head office staff found themselves with more responsibility and increasing opportunities. The management systems within the head office still reflected the hectic small company that SupermarketCo had once been; where PrivatPLC staff had prescribed forms and guidance notes, actions in SupermarketCo were rarely so rigidly formal. SupermarketCo had little or no history of training. The firm was aware of this and had adopted its new role with enthusiasm. The external trainers hired were capable, experienced with NVQs and popular with the candidates.

The final company was ConstructionCo, a subsidiary of a FTSE-100 company that supplied and ran construction sites around the country. Much of its revenue came from contracting out construction equipment, chiefly scaffolding, and the recession in the construction industry had hit the company badly. Non-compulsory training had been suspended and a series of redundancies implemented. As the recession ended and ConstructionCo started to resurrect its interest in training it began to run NVQ programmes. ConstructionCo also hired outside trainers and, after problems generated by their first training company going into liquidation, deliberately sought out experienced advice.

In every company training was being used to reward good performance. PrivatPLC candidates had been nominated by line managers, in the other two companies more senior staff had hand-picked participants. All were highly regarded by their superiors and many were promoted during the course of the

study. Sainsaulieu (1974, cited in Hogarth, 1979) argues that management training is such an expensive and valued commodity that as a manager, simply to be nominated is a mark of favour, regardless of any intrinsic value the training itself may have (see also Keep, 1989). Since such knowledge will colour candidates' experience of any training programme and training only an élite almost presupposes success, there was a distinct danger that the study would be unfairly biased *in favour of NVQs*.

Since the research itself was ethnographic the individual managers' commentaries together with their praise or criticism has been recorded verbatim but, as Robson (1993) and Eisenhardt (1989) argue, people are notoriously poor information processors and each of these managers had potentially good reasons for giving or withholding praise and blame. In addition to recording each individual's comments, in a series of repeat interviews over time, I watched them progress (or drop out), studied their completed units and portfolios (or noted their absence or tardiness) and saw the sections they found most difficult and those that were simplest to prove. By triangulating a variety of different forms of evidence in this way it was hoped that conclusions would be more robust (Yin, 1989). As Smircich (1983) suggests, it may be harder to lie to the qualitative interviewer, since they have more potential sources of evidence.

A core group of eighteen managers were chosen from the case study companies. Since an NVQ is a potentially open-ended commitment, and it was possible that some candidates might not complete their work in the time available for fieldwork, five interviews were also conducted with a group of

PrivatPLC managers who had taken the NVQ some six months before to ensure that every aspect of the process would be considered.

The Management NVQ

At the start of the process the reality of training as a reward mechanism was most marked. Being chosen to attend this course was a good thing for candidates to mention in internal interviews, a mechanism facilitating the next step up and public acknowledgement of being a capable manager. At worst they had nothing to lose. One manager from SupermarketCo pointed out that:

It's not costing us anything, it's costing the company something. Our careers don't ride on it. I think we'd have been daft to turn it down.

This reaction would have been true of almost any training course. Indeed few of the candidates knew anything about NVQs (and the few that did were generally the least enthusiastic about attending), most took their cue from the trainers' enthusiasm and, after the early sessions, expected that the qualifications would be both intrinsically valuable, because they were relevant to real managerial work, and instrumentally useful, because they would provide a portable and prestigious qualification. As one manager said:

I've got seven 'O' levels and one 'A' level and I'd really like to get a qualification to do my job.

Subsidiary to these two goals but still important to candidates was the idea of using the NVQ as opportunity to *learn* something and grasp elements of work that had been obscure or problematic. Two managers from PrivatPLC commented that:

I thought “at last, someone is actually going to tell me *how* to be a manager”.

and:

[take] - a combination of someone who’s got good academic training and a lot of common sense and you’ve got a very powerful manager. I think there’s quite a high standard on this course who’ve come in.

Finally there were candidates who were included on the course as a prelude to promotion. Only three of the core candidates in this study were not managers at the start of the NVQ process. One, a technician in PrivatPLC, had been an acting manager for several years, held a Certificate in Management and was promoted four months into the NVQ. The other two, a marketing executive and a supervisor from ConstructionCo, had both been highly recommended for promotion and the NVQ was intended to give them an opportunity to test their managerial skills in a safe environment.

Portfolio building: photocopying with a purpose?

In theory, candidates can specify their own choice of route towards accreditation (Jessup, 1991). In practice ‘evidencing’ competence invariably takes the form of a written portfolio (in 1995 the MCI decided to report on alternative methods of gaining its qualifications; the researchers had great difficulty in finding anyone to contribute to their study and repeated requests for information went out). So while the programmes varied from study to study, the task that faced each candidate was the same, constructing a portfolio of documents that met the requirements of NVQ Level 4. As Gibb (1995) has pointed out, all NVQs are job descriptions. To qualify, (in NVQ terms, be

deemed 'competent') managers must supply evidence that they perform all the tasks involved, to the appropriate standard, within an occupational context. Essentially, a portfolio is an audit trail. For example, to prove competence for Element 9.1, *Lead meetings and group discussions to solve problems and make decisions* a manager might include memos calling a meeting, room booking forms, agendas, minutes, witness testimonies from others present and evidence that the points raised had been followed through. This process of 'evidencing' is inordinately time-consuming and very paper-intensive. A 'typical' portfolio from one of the case study companies filled two large A4 ring binders and contained well over 200 individual pieces of evidence. The shortest portfolio filled one large ring binder and one smaller file. Many managers were appalled at the amount and nature of the work involved. One, from a public sector company described an induction course for the standards.

The next day [*a manager in the same company who had recently gained his NVQ at Level 4*] went through his evidence. That could have been a mistake. He really took it to heart. He made the NVQ his hobby. He had 16 volumes of evidence three feet high. He did it every night between 9 and 11, he bought himself a PC, every night and weekends he worked on his NVQ for nothing. Now he's doing NVQ level 5. Some of us have a home life. A lot of managers feel they should do more than they're able to do. One of the managers works from 7 am to 9 pm. That's the sort of pressure that's on managers.

Though some did discover unexpected benefits from searching through their filing cabinets for evidence:

It's been very handy if I've been looking for something because I know where to look for it rather than looking in the filing cabinet. If there's a doubt about what I could have filed it under I just look in my portfolio.

Managerial work or just the work that managers do?

Because of the NVQ's focus on evidence, discussions in the training workshops typically revolved around 'housekeeping' elements of candidates work. A conversation at PrivatPLC on evidencing Unit 3, *Recommend, monitor and control the use of resources*, illustrates this well:

AD: What about ordering new equipment?

FH: Yeah - from the others' [portfolios] it can be as simple as that.

SM: Footstools.

PC: People being encouraged to contribute.

SM: Ask people who wants a footstool.

AD: What about organising this - I got everyone lunch for less than £2.50 a head....

Yet ironically, in both SupermarketCo and PrivatPLC where the groups met regularly, these 'NVQ discussions' were in dramatic contrast with the informal chats managers had during breaks. Over coffee or buffet lunches candidates would share information about competitors and discuss the changes occurring in the business as a whole. In PrivatPLC the managers discussed at length the implications of the increasing numbers of temporary agency staff within the

teams they managed, explored innovative ways of dealing with teams, including means of keeping them motivated when their manager was absent; shared experiences of corporate bureaucracy that needed altering; offered tips on courses, videos and training; found out about each others' work environments and internal structures and saved each other from potentially costly mistakes. As a manager from SupermarketCo said:

When you get [SupermarketCo] people outside the office they often lose sight of what they're here for - we had a bloody good discussion - people say you can tell we care about our company because we always talk about it - work, work, work and forget the course. Throw your ideas in the mixing pot.

For these groups it seems, working towards the NVQ was a *distraction* from developmental learning, rather than a *contribution* towards it.

Collecting evidence was, of necessity, a paper chasing exercise and the demands of the NVQ that made several assumptions about the nature of the employing organisation. Most units presupposed the existence of specialist departments, formal reporting lines and set procedures. In PrivatPLC many of these assumptions were justified: accustomed to constant record-keeping the candidates were able to use as evidence some of the numerous pro-formas and company guidelines that formed their experience of management. In their Claims to Competence they pointed out how they had fulfilled the guidelines' demands. Elsewhere, where the emphasis was less on 'management by memo' this caused problems. SupermarketCo, though large and growing rapidly, retained many of the attributes of a small organisation. Its head office was small and tightly staffed, all the managers knew each other, and record keeping

was kept to a minimum wherever possible. The NVQ trainers appreciated and praised this aspect of the company's systems and were anxious that candidates should formalise their working practices only when this would add value. Genuine efforts were made to preserve the informality, some managers submitted photocopied diary pages or hand-written notes as evidence, but after some months most reluctantly admitted that without a series of memos and minutes it would be difficult to demonstrate their competence.

ConstructionCo's managers came under exactly the same pressures and in both organisations work practices changed during the course of the NVQ, invariably moving towards the formal record-keeping that characterised PrivatPLC. Occasionally this was felt to be advantageous: a site manager at ConstructionCo replaced his entire team during the NVQ programme and found that, once he no longer had experienced staff, memos, minutes and formally documented procedures were necessary. Others saw the NVQ practices as the 'proper' way of doing things. One manager commented:

it just makes you review your working practices and there's some things you don't do that you should do. You put it down to time but it's not - it encourages you to do more than you would.

'Richard Blackwood', an IT specialist at SupermarketCo had more mixed feelings about the evidence he produced. Occasionally the increased bureaucracy he adopted for the NVQ was for the better. He reorganised his records, documented calls more often and kept written records of the majority of his conversations; but most of the time Richard resented the increasing bureaucracy the NVQ obliged him to complete. He "engineered" meetings to

generate more evidence, sent memos rather than using the telephone and, together with one or two other managers from his NVQ group, spent a great deal of time in writing witness testimonies for each other, certifying that tasks had been done competently. All of this generated more work, without any compensatory advantages. Most frustrating was the triviality of the actions Richard documented and witnessed. To be certified competent on Unit 1.2, *Create and maintain the necessary conditions for productive work*, Richard recorded that the files on his PC and in his filing cabinet were easy to access while he was on the 'phone because he had arranged them to be within reach of his swivel chair. An office plan, a photograph and a copy of the Health and Safety Legislation were included. All of the information was true and exactly conformed with the requirements of the NVQ to the satisfaction of the assessor, yet none of it could be described as managerial. To qualify as a competent manager in NVQ terms, Richard had to abandon the *managerial* aspects of his work. His disillusionment was hardly surprising:

There must be something wrong with a system that
lets garbage like this through.

In addition to everyday activities, a number of unusual events were also specified in the NVQ and managers needed to provide evidence that they were involved in recruitment, selection, disciplinary and grievance cases. Many managers had no experience of any of these. Two ConstructionCo managers argued that many were the responsibility of the specialist function. In practice a manager involved in selection or recruitment would involve the company's personnel office and an NVQ unit which failed to acknowledge this did little to prepare a manager for, or test them on, the realities of organisational life.

This was true of PrivatPLC as well, where a clear line existed between the responsibilities of the human resources department and those of the line managers. Occasionally, even where managers had been involved in the personal problems of their staff, documentary evidence was hard to obtain. One manager at PrivatPLC dealt successfully with a difficult situation, then realised that there was no signed, official record of it.

That happened here [in an open plan office] and some-one at the next desk listened in, you know, because it was a bit interesting and I almost asked her for a witness statement but now, because it's just my word against his, it's not evidence.

One manager in ConstructionCo successfully worked round this by getting a colleague, who was also doing the NVQ, to provide a witness testimony. The statement read:

A situation at work was affecting my personal and family life. I brought the situation to 'Paul' and the discussions he and I had changed the organisation of our work. The counselling 'Paul' gave me was very useful.

In SupermarketCo an alternative route was suggested:

RB: Oh, there was a suggestion earlier today that we hold a meeting to discuss something and Susan and I are scrapping it out to run the meeting.

Tutor: You should have got Alan to sort it out for his portfolio.

RB: Yeah - then someone could counsel us, then we'd have to go through the Disciplinary and Grievance procedure - errr - who's going to sack us?

Tutor: You could take it in turns to sack each other.

More worryingly, satisfying the criteria said little about a candidate's ability, since good evidence did not necessarily equate to good practice. As one manager said, "The fact that people *do* it doesn't mean to say they're *competent*." Though the primary justification for introducing NVQs had been their direct relevance to work (see for example Docking, 1991), the emphasis on portfolio based assessment effectively rendered this argument redundant. There is no evidence to suggest that the skills and aptitudes required to put together a good portfolio are in any way related to those necessary for good management, nor does compiling such evidence necessarily show on-the-job 'competence'.

Theoretical knowledge that might potentially have been used to support the photocopied evidence was largely absent. 'Claims to competence', the summaries of each unit that most candidates produced and which offered a potential outlet where knowledge could be displayed, would often be as short as one paragraph and were rarely more than two pages long (PrivatPLC set a maximum of one page). In theory these could provide an opportunity to reflect, abstract and generalise, but in practice, because it was necessary to précis the photocopies that followed, claims to competence were descriptive summaries. The closest these documents came to contributing theory to practice was for Element 4.2, *Contribute to the assessment and selection of candidates against team and organisational requirements*, for which a knowledge of the Sex Discrimination and Race Relations Acts was demanded in the NVQ. Candidates would mention the legislation in passing but display no substantive knowledge of it (or any other piece of relevant legislation). In

contrast one candidate submitted as evidence for an element an assignment that he had completed for an Open University Certificate in Management some two years before. This displayed both theoretical knowledge and practical results and received one of the most enthusiastic tutor comments observed during the study.

This lack of interest in the theoretical grounding of management notwithstanding, two of the companies were running a joint Certificate in Management and NVQ programme. In PrivatPLC while the NVQ was a recent development, a separate Certificate programme had been running for some years. Several managers who had participated in the academic certificate *only* were interviewed. Each of their files contained more substantive evidence, both of work performed and knowledge gained, than any of the NVQs in this study. Altering the programme to fit the requirements of the NVQ meant that tuition time was taken up with problems in collating and indexing portfolios rather than substantive questions about work or theory. The development aspect of the programme had *decreased* dramatically. One candidate on the NVQ said:

We all seem to be so heavily NVQ-biased that we're not doing anything for the Certificate in Management. It's got a little bit clearer with the NVQ but I don't see where the Certificate comes in and I think if you asked everyone else in the group they'd be fine on the NVQ but they wouldn't know anything about the Certificate.

Incompetent managers?

A small minority of candidates reacted very positively indeed to the NVQ process. Generally their work tallied with the Occupational Standards (sometimes it was of a lower status and as a result of enrolling on the NVQ they were allowed to take on more responsible work) and they had had little previous experience of training and gained few formal qualifications. Given ready and unlimited access to a photocopier and a wordprocessor such candidates benefited enormously. One, from SupermarketCo, said:

NVQs aren't a substitute for the real thing. They are the real thing.

To them, the NVQ provided both reassurance and recognition of a job well done. It was a benchmark that they had complied with. However, the satisfaction felt by this minority contrasted starkly with the reactions of those candidates whose work did not match the MCI's model. Because of the focus on compliance, and despite some pre-course filtering by PrivatPLC and SupermarketCo, there were managers who could not qualify. The impact on these individuals was dramatic. Several candidates reported crying at their inability to meet criteria; one said that he would turn down a "managerial" (*sic*) role in the future since he was obviously incapable of filling it.

'Michelle Lawrence', a marketing executive at ConstructionCo, realised after twelve months working towards her NVQ that her role would not allow her to complete. She said:

I know it's meant to really pull out the real information but it's - I don't know - this is more specific, but it's so specific it's trivial almost. I hate them.....I think they're so over the top. Satisfy the performance criteria, range statements - it's beyond

a joke really. I probably wouldn't feel this way if I could do them. They're easy - they're not difficult to understand but you've got to have been seen to have gone through that situation and have reams and reams of paper to prove that. Chances are you make a call and you get up to do something about it. I was just the wrong person for this course really. It'll throw a more unfavourable light on my ability. Even if people say no, I don't think that's the way it is.

And again later:

[With the NVQ] - you're digging your own grave - people will look at it and say you're not a manager, you haven't got the potential. . . . This just like stamps me "Michelle is not a manager" and that's it - I'm not really given a chance to prove otherwise.

Even managers who gained their NVQs grew frustrated with the emphasis on photocopying. One said forcefully that the process was:

Awful. It takes such a long time and the constant referencing is unbelievable - part of it I don't even think is necessary - I mean the Personal Competence Model is pretty obvious - it seems a pointless operation to do it.... I can understand what they're trying to achieve - I've fairly strong feelings on how they do it - I don't like it at all. Pointless is the wrong word. What I don't like is - you're not actually learning anything, and all that's in there is what I do adjusted to suit the performance criteria, and in some cases you need quite a bit of lateral thinking to do it. Certain bits of it I don't do and I don't think any manager would do.

His portfolio contained more than 200 separate pieces of evidence. Compiling it had taken him over a year and a half and considerable effort had been put into collating, recording, indexing and describing each section. At the end of the process he received his award but felt that he had not developed in any way. Despite this apparent success, he felt demoralised at putting so much time into something he did not consider worthwhile.

Conclusions and implications

Despite the time, effort and expense that was invested into each of these three programmes, none can be said to have met expectations. In ConstructionCo only four managers finished their portfolios (from an original group of eleven) and all four took almost eight months longer than the company had originally anticipated. In SupermarketCo 22 candidates, after experimenting with compiling one unit, were chosen to take the NVQ. Twelve months of tuition and support were timetabled. When that expired very few managers had made any significant progress at all and the support was extended. Six months later half a dozen were almost ready to submit their portfolios. PrivatPLC started a twelve month course with eleven managers. The course itself was well established and had only recently been adapted to the requirements of the NVQ. Because of the competition for places and the fact that the managers met regularly with the same group there was a great deal of pressure on individuals not to drop out and anyone expressing doubts was urged to stay by their peers, the group tutor and their line manager. Before adaptation, drop-out had been minimal. Despite this, six months into the newly adapted NVQ programme, three had formally dropped out; three more had attended only *one*

of the monthly sessions and three of the remaining five had requested a longer timescale over which to complete their qualifications.

This result is disappointing, but hardly surprising. If anything, these figures are atypical because they present too positive a picture. Nationally only 25% of managers registering with Awarding Bodies for the Management NVQ are certified competent (Houston, 1995). This figure needs to be treated with caution. NVQs are open-ended qualifications, and most managers do require far longer to complete an NVQ than to complete most traditional qualifications (a factor that can present practical problems to those in control of training budgets). However, it almost certainly *overstates* the success rate, since a candidate must, by definition register with an Awarding Body to obtain an NVQ but need not while compiling the portfolio itself (and may find the fees a significant disincentive). This figure includes all the successes and excludes some of the failures.

Introducing a qualification which few people gain hardly provides an appropriate reward mechanism, particularly since failure (or what the NCVQ calls being “not yet competent”) had a devastating effect on the candidates. Although NVQs were universally seen by employers as *training*, the language they employ (‘performance’, ‘competence’, ‘standards’) is that of *benchmarks* and that is how the NCVQ, the tutors and the candidates saw them. One tutor said, “The standards are the best practice of managers in the UK”. This is more than a question of semantics. Managers who fail to meet ‘benchmarked’ standards send an entirely different message to their employers than those who fail an exam. Many greet this performance indicator with enthusiasm. One

spokesman from the (then) Employment Department who was himself experienced in implementing Management NVQs said:

*Now the NVQs and the Standards provide evidence for performance interviews rather than [the] previous subjectivity [of not using a model at all]...If you've done an NVQ you've been through a rigorous process of evidence collection *proving* that you are competent in your work.*

While benchmarks could (and did) offer reassurance to the minority who gain their NVQs, that reassurance is bought at the price of demoralising the majority. As Furnham (1990) points out, despite the verbal dexterity of the NCVQ, someone who is not yet *competent* may be regarded as *incompetent*. Given the emphasis managers traditionally place on their careers (Pahl and Pahl, 1971; Moss-Kanter, 1977), not meeting occupational standards is a serious indictment. Unsuccessful candidates had to come to terms with both failure on a training course and a public acknowledgement that they could not do their jobs or had failed to display management potential. Iles and Salaman (1995) report that, when assessing and selecting staff on the basis of competences and competencies, many employers provide counselling for unsuccessful candidates who feel not only that they have failed a test but that they have somehow revealed a lack of key, deep qualities. Something similar was badly needed by the unsuccessful candidates.

The occupational standards may have originally been intended to be descriptive but in use they have become normative and prescriptive. The common response of NVQ practitioners, when told of the problems experienced by the majority, was to blame the victims. This was either for

accepting the training at all (in the words of the spokesperson of a major Awarding Body):

They should have pulled out. If you or I had been there we would have pulled out. They should have pulled out.

Or for simply not being a ‘manager’ since their work did not conform to the MCI’s model and the MCI’s model described management. Watson (1994) in his ethnographic search for management argues that managers are those who *influence* the organisations they work in. The NVQ, by its preoccupation with the *what* of management seems to exclude this *why*. As a result, substantive, influential work is abandoned for the purposes of the qualification and managers spend a great deal of time evidencing ‘housekeeping’ issues. Hirst (1973) points out in a discussion on the nature of teaching, all teachers will at some stage in a lesson clean the blackboard but this does not mean that cleaning the blackboard is in itself teaching nor can we assume that improving blackboard cleaning competence would in any way raise teaching standards. Defining any occupation rigidly runs the risk that the fundamental aspects (say, enthusing students or conveying information, in the case of teaching) will be subsumed by those that are more readily observed, and that, as a result, the meaningful element of the work, is lost.

Using Watson’s definition it would be possible to distinguish between work that is *managerial* and work that managers do. The danger inherent in any behaviourally based assessment system and the “NCVQ’s rigid and doctrinaire adherence to the principle that competence can only be assessed in the

workplace” (*Financial Times*, 17 January 1996) is that such distinctions are not possible.

In practice, NVQs have failed to have the impact on vocational education and training that their supporters predicted. Despite the movement’s claim to be ‘employer-led’, and despite the fact that by 1995 some 92% of employers (and 98% of large employers) were aware of NVQs (Spilsbury *et al*, 1995:16) few have chosen to use the qualification (Callendar and Toye, 1994; Robinson, 1996; Spilsbury *et al*, 1995; Sims and Golden, 1998).

The most recent quantitative study into these qualifications (Sims and Golden, 1998) tries to predict how NVQs’ unpopularity can be overcome by focusing on ways of targeting employers. The evidence from NVQ implementation in this article suggests that the qualifications’ problems are rather more fundamental than inadequate marketing. Competence-based qualifications’ claim to relevance is based on a bureaucratisation, routinisation and documentation of what is often the less important elements of work. A joke popular among practitioners asks how many NVQ assessors it takes to change a lightbulb; the answer is eighteen, one to actually change the lightbulb and all the others to complete the paperwork and certify that the job has been done. In the largest organisations this focus might be acceptable (though even here one had stopped all Management NVQ programmes after deciding that it demanded more of its managers than mechanistic, functional competence), but elsewhere it is doubtful whether insisting on formalising procedures will bring any business benefits.

The rhetoric behind the NVQ movement is powerful and deservedly receives a great deal of attention. British vocational education and training is, in the words of Handy *et al* (1987) “too little, too late and for too few”. NVQs were intended to remedy that and, over the last ten years, advocates of this system have demanded that NVQs be judged as they judge others, only on performance. While independent, critical research is still badly needed in this area, the initial results of the assessment are clear. The Management NVQs, if assessed against their own criteria, would not be certified competent and given the nature of the problems experienced, it seems unlikely that they can ever be.

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