

The New Unskilled Worker

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This article examines the phenomenon of downward occupational mobility. In this case we are specifically concerned with the movement of employees from a skilled occupation to an unskilled occupation,¹ and the consequent impact of this underutilization of skill, education and training. The findings are the result of a survey undertaken during 1978 amongst 400 male employees in three N.S.W. state government instrumentalities.

Downward Occupational Mobility - A Neglected Issue

While both Economists² and Sociologists³ have written extensively upon the subject of occupational mobility, research in both disciplines has adopted a rather narrow perspective. Economists have invariably focussed on the implications of mobility for the flexibility in the supply of labour. Sociologists for their part, have looked at occupational mobility in the context of the broader issue of social stratification. Both have tended to assume that occupational mobility is most often intergenerational, invariably upward and voluntary.⁴ The effect of this research bias has been to legitimise the existing socio-economic order and present a rather myopic and distorted picture of the operation of the labour market. While the research orientation has concentrated on voluntary and upward mobility, the extent and effect of movement of workers from skilled to unskilled jobs remains largely unexplored.

The current economic recession has revived interest in labour mobility studies. The focus of attention today is principally on the movement of workers from employment to unemployment (or an inability to even gain initial entry to the workforce). The media, economists, sociologists and some politicians have responded to the current unemployment levels with a variety of explanations as to its cause, extent and effects.⁵ The current level of debate on the issue of unemployment cannot be explained in terms of its absence from industrial societies at other times,⁶ nor in a belief that today's unemployment and its effects on the individual is unique. Current interest is firmly grounded in the scale and visibility of the problem. This recent focus, on unemployment, has diverted attention from a number of less obvious, yet possibly equally pervasive effects of the current economic recession. In recent years Australia has witnessed the growth of part time work, increased use of contract labour, early retirement and the movement of workers down the occupational hierarchy.

This downward occupational mobility, a feature of the labour market's operation which the American literature refers to as 'skidding',⁷ is particularly evident during periods of economic contraction. Skidding occurs when employees, in order to retain their employed status, must search for and accept jobs which do not require the use of skills and training they may possess. Skilled workers, particularly those retrenched or displaced through economic conditions (or technology), will after a period of fruitless job searching for work appropriate to their training and experience, often modify their aspiration and seek any available employment.

Although downward occupational mobility can be seen to be linked to economic conditions, its presence in the Australian labour market has been evident since Australia initiated its programme of large scale immigration following World War II. Studies⁸ have pointed to the existence of many overseas born employees forced to seek unskilled employment because their skills and qualifications, obtained overseas have not been recognised in Australia.

This study addresses itself to the process of involuntary downward occupational mobility. On the basis of interviews conducted amongst workers in the three N.S.W. State Government instrumentalities: The Department of Main Roads (DMR), The Electricity Commission of New South Wales and the Metropolitan Water, Sewerage and Drainage Board (MWS&DB), an attempt is made to gauge the extent, causes and effects of skidding in the labour market.

Background to the Study

The research that forms the basis for this article was undertaken for the N.S.W. Government during 1978.⁹ The initial purpose of the project was to identify the employment conditions and attitudes of overseas born employees and document any work related problems they may have.

The workforce in each organisation studied was principally involved in unskilled or semiskilled employment. In the Waterboard 53.1% of the workforce engaged in construction work were born in non-English speaking countries, principally Italy, Greece, Yugoslavia and South America. It was estimated that 35% of the DMR's construction and maintenance employees were from similar sources. The Electricity Commission had a smaller proportion of overseas born employees (11%), the majority having joined the commission in the 1950s after arriving from Malta and Northern Europe. Details of the sample interviewed are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Interview Sample by Country of Birth and Instrumentality (percentage)

	DMR	Electricity Commission	MWS&DB
Australia	25.0	46.5	29.4
UK/NZ	5.0	11.9	3.5
France/Germany	1.0	9.9	-
Yugoslavia	43.0	3.0	17.4
Greece	5.0	-	11.4
Spanish speaking	2.6	1.0	16.4
Italy	14.0	9.9	(x)
Malta	-	11.9	0.5
Other	5.0	5.9	4.5
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0

(x) included in other category.

Total sample = 400.

Source: See footnote 9.

Interviews were conducted in the native language of employees, using a standardised questionnaire which covered such areas as work history, education, induction, welfare, supervision, health and safety, worker relations and attitudes to unions.

Traditionally, research in the area of migrants at work had adopted a methodology which concentrated on the observable differences between the indigenous and overseas born workforce. As such, conventional research saw language, cultural differences and welfare needs as being problematic to the migrant worker, employed in an organisation unable to meet their special needs. This approach, we felt, was in many ways too restrictive and neglected important characteristics of work that were a product of being employed in semi-skilled and unskilled occupations. Research had commonly ignored the fact that employment characteristics of work were often a source of dissatisfaction amongst migrants who were overwhelmingly concentrated in jobs at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy. We believed that many of the problems facing migrants at work were not so much a product of ethnicity but rather a consequence of being concentrated in certain occupations - characterised by oppressive work conditions, poor amenities, physical discomfort and hazards, and low pay.

In addition, when designing the research project, less emphasis was given to the question of socialisation into the work environment. This issue was frequently seen as problematic to new arrivals at the time much of this initial research was undertaken during the early 1970s. As the majority of the overseas born being studied had been in Australia over 5 years and had considerable local work experience, we believed it was now important to identify how migrants had fared after a sustained period of employment in terms of promotional opportunities and on-the-job rights.

For these reasons, the questionnaire was extensive and broad in its coverage of workplace issues and the attitudes of those interviewed.

The Downward Mobile Worker

Our survey findings confirmed that language, integration and welfare related issues were not the major problems facing overseas born employees in the three instrumentalities. This can largely be explained by the fact that 91.5% of workers who were overseas born had been resident in Australia for over 5 years and in almost continuous employment. The data obtained from the interviews did however reveal a feature of the workforce that was largely unknown to employment officers and supervisors. In all three organisations there was a significant proportion of the workforce (both Australian and overseas born) that were employed in unskilled jobs yet claimed to possess trade or technical skills. These employees were in fact 'skilled labourers'.

Twenty-seven per cent (N = 109) of employees interviewed had formal skills that were in effect being wasted. Further investigation revealed that there were two identifiable groups affected by the non-utilization of skills. First, of all overseas born workers, 29% claimed to have trade skills or qualifications that were not being used in their current employment. The fact that 93% of this group had obtained their qualifications overseas and only a minority (27%) had been in skilled employment prior to joining their present employer suggests that non recognition of qualifications accounts for the downward occupational mobility that has resulted from migration to Australia. While many workers had not even attempted to have their qualifications assessed in Australia, 53% of those

claiming skills had been unsuccessful in having these skills recognised.

The fact that the bulk of the migrant workforce in the DMR and MWS&DB were from countries that have traditionally supplied unskilled labour to Australia would suggest that skidding is uncommon amongst overseas born employees. This picture has changed as the source of immigrants to Australia has been widened over the years. The more recently arrived South American employees had skills and a level of education uncommon amongst the longer serving employees. Few of these had been successful in utilizing their skills since their arrival. The Electricity Commission study did however confirm that skidding amongst some groups of migrants has in fact been a long term feature of the Australian labour market. For these employees, principally from Northern Europe and Malta, downward occupational mobility has been a fact of life since their arrival to Australia in the 1950s. For this group skidding has been a result of non recognition of skills rather than the effects of economic fluctuations.

There was however a second, quite different, group of workers that had also experienced downward occupational mobility. For this group, who were largely Australian born, the cause of skidding was dissimilar to that affecting migrant workers.

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While our study indicates there has been a process of downward occupational mobility inherent in our labour market since the advent of immigration, and affecting principally migrants from a number of non-English speaking countries, the survey also revealed a more recent aspect of this skidding. This present outbreak of skidding stems from quite different causes, and affects a different segment of the labour force.

It was noted that in both the Water Board and the Department of Main Roads there had been significant changes in recent years in the characteristics of the workforce in each organisation. Although traditionally the majority of the unskilled labour force in these instrumentalities were overseas born, (predominantly from Greece, Yugoslavia and Italy), in the last five years there had been an influx of Australian born workers into jobs that historically they had shunned. While both organisations had always experienced high levels of labour turnover, it was only in recent years that there had been such a dramatic increase in Australian born applicants for unskilled positions. In the case of the Waterboard 49.4% of recent recruits were Australian born (while only 34% of total sampled workforce were Australian born). One third of the employees with less than 1 year's service claimed to have skills or qualifications and 42.9% of employees with less than 2 years service made similar claims. The fact that this recent influx of skilled employees to unskilled positions is a relatively recent phenomenon is confirmed by the fact that 61.1% of all those claiming skills that were not being utilized had less than 5 years service. A similar picture to that in the Waterboard was also found in the DMR. This organisation had in recent years also experienced an uncharacteristically large influx of Australian born employees into unskilled jobs. In total 56% of Australian born employees at the DMR claimed to possess qualifications and 35.7% of these were not in jobs that utilized their skills.

The survey found that 21% of Australian born workers employed in the three organisations had skills that were being wasted. There is strong evidence to suggest that the incidence of skidding amongst the Australian born employees has

largely been involuntary.

First, it was found that in the Waterboard, all but one of the 'skilled' labourers interviewed stated that their last job had been a skilled one.

Second, the recent influx of Australian born employees into unskilled positions in recent years cannot be explained in terms of a sudden shift in job preference. This is a new phenomenon amongst this group, quite uncharacteristic of earlier employment periods. Evidence on the segmentation of the Australian labour market, by Lever,¹⁰ indicates that Australian workers have long abandoned any desire to work in jobs at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy. Their sudden return to these positions can only be explained by reference to the present economic climate and labour market position. The fact that 88.9% of new employees stated their last job had been in private industry, traditionally the most vulnerable and economically responsive sector, suggests that high levels of redundancy and a lack of appropriate alternate employment opportunities are responsible for the observed influx of Australian born labour in recent years.

Third, the data revealed that the indigenous workers who were not using their skills had also experienced significantly longer periods of unemployment than had employees with no skills. Only 12.8% of the unskilled claimed to have been unemployed for four weeks or more prior to commencing their current employment, in contrast 21.5% of the Australian born with skills had been unemployed for over eight weeks immediately prior to commencing their current job. This indicates that skilled workers, generally, spent longer in job search, seeking work that was appropriate to their training and experience. As predicted by the labour economics literature, as this search proves fruitless, workers lower their job aspirations and seek out jobs such as those being offered by the instrumentalities under study.

Finally, it is difficult to explain why a significant number of skilled workers would, quite suddenly, voluntarily abandon skilled work and seek an unskilled job. While the work of Goldthorpe et al, amongst car workers in England, found that skilled workers with an instrumental orientation to work had sought more remunerative unskilled jobs on the production line,¹¹ such an explanation is inappropriate in the Australian context. Skilled workers in Australia with an instrumental orientation would find such job change unwise. Because of Australia's wage structure, unskilled work is invariably lower paid than a skilled position. While unskilled employees may 'boost' their earnings by allowances earned by undertaking shift work, piece-work, etc., these 'extras' were generally not available to the unskilled employees interviewed. Any voluntary downward occupational mobility by skilled workers with an instrumental orientation would in fact be quite irrational in the Australian context.

While the 'skilled' Australian born and 'skilled' migrant worker differed in regard to the reasons behind their mobility, interviews also indicated a difference in the type of skills possessed. Australian born workers often stated they had qualifications in fields quite different to those employed by the particular organisation. Amongst the declared skills were spray painter, teacher, shoemaker, greenkeeper, confectioner and glazier. In contrast, 'skills' claimed by overseas born workers were often more closely allied to those employed in the particular organisation, i.e. electricians, carpenters, mechanics, etc.

Attitude and Behaviour of 'Skilled' Labourers

It may be posited that 'skilled' workers in unskilled positions have attitudes and patterns of work behaviour quite different to those of employees with a work history of unskilled employment, or those that have become 'socialised', over time, into unskilled jobs. Negative sentiments about one's work can be expected from workers who have been 'forced' into unskilled positions and who may have a high level of attachment to their trade.¹²

Our survey revealed that few of the skilled labourers were content with their present unskilled job, 54.1% expressed a desire for 'another job' in the organisation. In contrast, only 43.4% of unskilled labourers (those with no claims to skill) expressed an interest in 'another job'. Invariably, workers with skills not being utilized expressed a desire for a job appropriate to their training or if this was not practical or possible, simply a 'better', easier and higher paid position.

While desiring more interesting or challenging work, 'skilled labourers' as a group were not easily distinguished in attitude and behaviour from their unskilled counterparts. Responses for these two groups on issues such as health and safety, supervision, work relations, conditions and facilities were very similar.

The findings did however indicate that the 'skilled labourer' has suffered from the experience of downward occupational mobility. Although better qualified and educated than his fellow workmates, the 'skilled labourer' was found to be less confident about his prospects for promotion. Only 32.1% of 'skilled labourers' felt there were any chances of promotion. In contrast, 38.4% of unskilled workers felt confident of promotion.

For those that had recently experienced unemployment this had also taken its toll. Although all three organisations studied had a 'no retrenchment policy' and unions had ensured that dismissals were rare, 21.2% of 'skilled labourers' indicated they did not feel secure in their job, yet only 13.5% of 'unskilled workers' had similar fears.

While 22% of employees not using their skills stated their current employment compared unfavourably with their last job, only 7.6% of unskilled labourers made similar claims. The majority (59%) of skilled labourers did however see their present employment as more favourable than their previous employment. This apparent paradox is explained by the fact that for many workers their last job had also resulted in retrenchment. While for the migrant 'skilled labourer', with a history of unskilled jobs in Australia, public employment offered many advantages¹³ over employment in private industry, in which most had previously been employed.

The 'Skilled Labourer' Phenomenon - Disaggregated

The above account suggests that the worker who has skills that are not being utilized has quietly joined the ranks of the unskilled, it seems with little protest, save a desire for a more interesting job. In the process, they have adjusted their work behaviour and attitudes.

Such an account would however be misleading as it fails to highlight the real differences in attitudes and behaviour between the two distinct occupationally mobile groups that have been identified: the skilled migrants, whose qualifications

have not been recognised, and the more recently recruited economically displaced skilled Australian workers - 'forced' to undertake unskilled employment. In the case of the downwardly mobile migrant workers there seems little doubt that few see any hope of again practising their trade. This group has become almost indistinguishable from the unskilled labourers in the workforce.

While research has shown that language difficulties are often problematic for the migrant at work, a popular misconception is that language difficulties play an important role in accounting for migrants under-utilization of skills. The survey's findings cast serious doubt on this assumption. 61.2% of employees who were not using their skills were judged as having only fair to bad English language ability, however of the migrant workers that had skills that were being utilized at work, 62.6% were also judged as being fair to bad in English ability. A significant proportion (22%) of migrant skilled labourers attributed their lack of opportunities in promotion, to language difficulties. In contrast, only 7.9% of migrants that were in skilled jobs felt language was a barrier to further promotion, despite their obvious language difficulties. Similarly, of the migrants not using their skills, 65.3% felt a lack of English had been a handicap at work, while only 38.5% of migrants using their skills at work expressed a similar sentiment.

Rationalising their employment status in terms of language difficulties, many migrants with skills that have been 'wasted' simply accept their fate and the role of an unskilled labourer.

Closer examination of the Electricity Commission findings, where the majority of downwardly mobile workers were long term migrants, indicates how these employees have passively accepted their position. Few of these employees expressed any desire for another job (18.2%), most felt their relations with their boss was very good (54.8%), amenities provided were good (64.7%), and all felt secure in their job (100%). Few saw any opportunity for promotion (27.3%). There seems little doubt that these workers saw themselves as unskilled employees. The majority were simply content with the advantages public employment offered over similar jobs in private industry.

A more disturbing and quite different picture emerges when responses and the behaviour of the more recently recruited 'skilled labourers', particularly the occupationally displaced Australian born employees, are investigated.

Employment officers, engineers and job supervisors all expressed 'difficulties' with these new employees. It was felt that these employees exhibited an anti-work attitude and that their workplace performance was below that expected from labourers. Management often 'explained' this attitude as characteristic of the young (57.1% were under 34 years of age) or in terms of ethnic stereotyping, ('Australians don't like this work'). Few supervisors realised that many of these employees had skills that were simply being wasted in their current position.

Although our research indicated that Australian born workers generally received the easier, less physically exhausting jobs at the DMR and Waterboard, few saw this as compensation for having to undertake the sort of work that they had previously deemed unacceptable. There were complaints and expressions of dissatisfaction on many issues from this group of workers.

A large number (50%) of these workers expressed a desire for another job in the organisation. A significant proportion (21.5%) described relations with their boss as only fair to bad. (Only 11.3% of migrant 'skilled labourers' made similar

claims.) Australian skilled labourers felt amenities could be improved (78.6%). Migrant 'skilled labourers' were less demanding (55.6%), while unskilled labourers were the least critical (51.4%).

A need for improved safety clothing was another source of dissatisfaction amongst the Australian born (35.7%), while only 13.9% of migrant 'skilled labourers' and 25.6% of unskilled workers expressed similar views.

Perhaps the most disturbing characteristic of the Australian 'skilled labourer' was their apparent non-acceptance of migrant workmates. 26.9% expressed a preference for working with fellow Australian born rather than in gangs of 'mixed' nationalities. Only 13.7% of migrant 'skilled' and unskilled labourers expressed a similar preference for gangs comprised predominantly of workers of their own nationality. While an amicable working arrangement existed between Australian born and migrant employees, it was clear that many Australian born employees did not consider their overseas born workmates as equals. There is no doubt that many Australian born 'skilled labourers' found it difficult to adjust to working in jobs that had for years been seen as the preserve of migrant workers.

In their attitude to the unions Australian born 'skilled' labourers also differed markedly from the migrant 'skilled labourer' and from the unskilled workers. The Australian displayed a far more active interest in unions and an attitude not dissimilar to that expected from skilled union members. All the Australian born workers interviewed knew their union by name, and 59.3% knew their union delegate, (51.7% of unskilled labourers were aware of their delegate). While the migrant 'skilled labourers' and unskilled workers saw the union's major role in terms of 'responding to members' wishes', and overall only 23.2% saw the unions' active role confined to more traditional areas of wages and conditions, the Australian 'skilled labourers' were much stronger on these traditional roles for the union (40%).¹⁴

While this finding, in part, reflects the fact that the unions were better able to cater to their English speaking membership, the survey did reveal a high level of union involvement and activity amongst the 'skilled Australian born labourer'. 25.4% of 'skilled' Australian members claimed to always attend union meetings (14.5% for unskilled labourers) and 59.3% of the Australian born indicated having voted in union elections (47.3% for unskilled workers). The 'skilled' Australian worker, not hampered by language difficulties, has largely retained the involvement and interest in union affairs so often characteristic of craft conscious skilled workers.

While committed to unionism, Australian born 'skilled labourers' shared a lack of any real commitment to their present job or the organisation. 26.7% indicated that if offered another job that paid more, they would abandon their present employment. Only 15.5% of unskilled labourers expressed a similar propensity to change jobs.

Conclusions

Our findings have highlighted two forms of involuntary downward occupational mobility. The first, occurring amongst migrant employees, is a long term feature of the Australian labour market. Few of these employees have ever been in skilled employment since arriving in Australia. This skidding reflects the bias in Australia's immigration programme. During the postwar period immigration planners placed a deliberate emphasis on recruiting skilled and professional labour from the

UK and Northern Europe. Southern Europe and the Middle East were viewed as primarily being sources of unskilled labour. This bias was reflected in the propensity of government, employer, union, and professional institutions to recognise the qualifications of migrants from particular regions. Our survey evidence suggests that language difficulties were not the primary reason for non-recognition. To all intents and purposes the skilled migrant labourers, in time, are indistinguishable, in work attitude and behaviour, from their fellow unskilled workmates. To most, the only real alternative is another unskilled job and as such public employment offers many advantages over similar jobs in private industry.

The second, and more recent, form of downward mobility that was identified has its source in the current economic downturn. Its victims, who were largely Australian born, have had a history of skilled employment and as such are more critical of their present unskilled jobs and accompanying employment conditions. Many remain committed to the ideals of unionism and actively participate in union affairs. A significant number of 'skilled' Australians are simply unable to accept working alongside migrant employees in jobs their fellow nationals have shunned. No doubt most see their position as only temporary. Few have any commitment to the job or organisation, they rationalize their current circumstances as a compromise to tide them over. Being in public employment has made their 'wait' till they can return to their trade relatively easy to bear. Yet the possible introduction of new technology and other changes taking place in the Australian manufacturing industry make it quite possible that, even given an economic recovery, there will be little increased demand for labour. In this situation 'skilled' Australian labourers may have to become resigned to their fate and accept their new role. An alternate scenario is that Australian workers, faced with the prospect of being locked into an unskilled job for an indefinite time, may resort to more militant on the job action. These workers may seek to regain 'lost' earnings and seek other improved employment conditions. Should such a wave of on the job action occur, it is likely that many unskilled workers will also, for the first time, feel confident to press their own grievances, that for so long have been ignored by management and their own unions. The result may well be the development of a new consciousness amongst Australian and foreign born employees in unskilled jobs. The present 'lull' in organized conflict in most organisations could well change once the new unskilled workers realise that their predicament is not temporary.

This paper has sought to demonstrate an aspect of modern capitalism that has been largely overlooked; that of downward occupational mobility. While 'skidding' is an ever present feature of the Australian labour market, the current economic situation has extended this to groups that have traditionally been insulated from this process.¹⁵ The implications of this mobility will only become apparent should workers, deprived of their craft status, and with a tradition of union involvement, seek to redress the losses in wages and conditions that accompany a move to unskilled work by more militant on the job action.

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