"Real" managers don't do NVQs: a review of the new management "standards"

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The search for the most effective means of improving the quality of management practice in Britain has been (and remains) a recurrent theme in the literature on training and development. Managers, it is argued, may well represent the critical resource that holds the key to unlocking potential in the other elements of production (Storey, 1989). Not only do managers have a significant impact on corporate performance through their own work, but they also influence the level of training available to others, since it is often managers who arrange training for their subordinates. Under- or un-trained managers are unlikely to place a high priority on training those who work for them (Hyman, 1992). As a result, this occupational group merits special attention not only because of the direct benefits that better management might bring, but also for the impact a well-trained population of managers could have on training and development in general.

This concern has inspired enquiry into the provision of training and education for managers (Ascher, 1983; Constable and McCormick, 1987; Handy *et al.*, 1987; Leggatt, 1972) as well as active intervention (MSC/DES, 1986). The most recent of which involved the development, marketing and institutional support of a series of new, nationally recognised management qualifications, management NVQs (National Vocational Qualifications) by the Management Charter Initiative (MCI). NVQs are a radical new form of vocational education and training, replacing syllabus, curriculum and tuition with lists of behaviours that competent workers are expected to display in the workplace. They were heralded, at the end of the 1980s, as the answer to all Britain's educational ills (Fletcher, 1991; Jessup, 1991). Yet, despite considerable official support in a variety of forms (formal recognition; the repeated extension of "pump priming" funds; official grants; tax relief for individuals taking the new qualification and strong encouragement of public sector employers to take up these new certificates) the management NVQs, in common with almost every other NVQ, won surprisingly little support from employers. Few ever adopted the NVQ framework (Callendar and Toye, 1994; Robinson, 1996). Official reviews of the NVQ system were all highly critical of the qualification's design, structure and implementation (Beaumont, 1995; CBI, 1994; DfEE, 1995; 1996a; 1996b).

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In response to this criticism, the management NVQs were revised and re-launched in 1997 (MCI, 1997a; 1997b; 1997c; 1997d). Here, the new qualifications are reviewed and some predictions are made of the impact they will have in the workplace. In addition to this, this article attempts, by drawing on the literature on managerial work, to link the MCI's management certificates to the work managers actually do. This is a crucially important link. The management NVQs, as with all other NVQs, consist of a list of behaviours (known variously as "standards" or "competences") that is intended to be an accurate representation of the behaviour a competent manager of several years standing should display. Since these qualifications have no syllabus, no attendance requirements and no supporting tuition, they stand or fall by the accuracy of this description of work.

Yet it is not clear that such an attempt to set out an exact description of managerial work can ever succeed: a managerial title represents a point in an organisational hierarchy and a step in an individual's career rather than a specific job description (Watson, 1994). Moreover, by focusing on the functions managers perform and the actions they can be seen to do the MCI has committed two very serious errors. First, it has assumed that it is both possible and desirable to synthesise the work of all managers everywhere. Yet people operating in different environments with varying responsibilities may be required to undertake very different tasks. Second, and more seriously, by concentrating only on what managers do, it neglects to engage in any reflection on what management is. This article is an attempt to remedy that omission.

NVQs: difficulties and dilemmas

To set the scene, the discussion starts with a brief consideration of some of the problems observed in the "first generation" of NVQs. First, and most importantly, it is by no means clear that it is either possible or desirable to distil the essence of worker behaviour to a series of sentences. Even apparently simple actions may involve far more local "knowledge" than is apparent from a disaggregation of behaviour (Warhurst and Thompson, 1998) and it is difficult to specify in advance the skills and behaviours that serve to make up "competence", in the broadest sense. This should come as no surprise to students and practitioners of industrial relations. In this subject area it is well known that, unlike many other forms of legal agreement, the employment contract is "incomplete" in that it is impossible to state in advance precisely what will be required of an individual employee. Accordingly, descriptions of work are consciously kept out of written contracts and, in practice, the tasks to be undertaken are negotiated on an ongoing basis. This is seen as a natural part of the employment relationship where worker co-operation and commitment is valued and

mechanistic procedures are never sufficient to capture the complexities of the workplace (if they were, the threat of "working to rule" would hold no fears).

Second, despite the assertion of NVQ proponents that, once written down the "standards" would specify behaviour so clearly that even novice assessors would be able to evaluate "competence" unproblematically against the NVQ model, depth of knowledge and level of ability are far from clear from the competences. As Wolf (1995) notes, with reference to one element of the old management NVQ at level 5 (the most advanced level covered by NVQs and intended to certify the competence of the most senior managers), the behaviours set out are so broad, and provide so little indication of the level of skills required that they could as easily describe the work of a night porter as of a senior manager (see Table I).

Assessment, it seems, is a complex area and conducting it well requires a high level of support from other assessors, subject expertise and tacit knowledge (Wolf, 1998; Wolf and Silver, 1993).

Nor were these the only criticisms of NVQs. The process of functional analysis from which NVQs were derived is more likely to produce a consensus (socially constructed) view of a particular occupation than any real indication of what those particular job-holders actually do (Gibb, 1995); and going through this process proved so problematic that subject experts were rapidly replaced by those with knowledge of the NVQ system itself (Wolf, 1995). Unsurprisingly, the standards, once derived, failed to describe workplace behaviour accurately (Grugulis, 1997; Senker, 1996) and attempting to implement NVQs tended to result only in high levels of

The Management NVQ level 5 Unit II 9 Element II 9 obtain and evaluate information to aid decision making	
(a)	Information requirements are identified accurately and re-evaluated at suitable intervals
(b)	Information is sought on all relevant factors affecting current or potential operations
(c)	Information is relevant and is collected in time to be of use
(d)	A variety of sources of information are regularly reviewed for usefulness, reliability and cost
(e)	Opportunities are taken to establish and maintain contacts with those who may provide useful information
(f)	Methods of obtaining information are periodically evaluated and improved where necessary
(g)	When normal information routes are blocked, alternative methods are tried
(h)	Information is organised into a suitable form to aid decision making
(i)	Conclusions drawn from relevant information are based on reasoned argument and appropriate evidence

Source: MCI (1991b)

Table I. What level of work do these "standards" describe?

formalisation and bureaucratisation in the workplace (Hyland, 1992, 1993, 1994). Each of these factors militated against the successful implementation of the new qualifications. Even according to the National Council for Vocational Qualification's (NCVQ's) own figures, few of the candidates registering for their management NVQs ever gained their certificates (Houston, 1995).

The new "national standards"

Given the degree of criticism these qualifications had faced and the structural problems inherent in the NVQ system, the MCI's attempt to re-work the Management NVQs was a difficult task and it was hardly surprising that the deadlines set for publishing the new qualifications were repeatedly deferred. Eventually, in 1997 the new certificates were published (MCI, 1997a; 1997b; 1997c; 1997d). Here, this article will focus on the NVQ level 4 qualifications, aimed at junior managers. This qualification has two parts, the first is a list of "competences", the behavioural standards described above, and a development of the MCI's "personal competencies" model, a list of the qualities and attributes that managers at this level should display. The competences, as the best-known aspect of NVQs, will be considered first. Unlike its predecessor, the "first generation" management NVQ, which presented nine compulsory "units of competence" with which candidates had to conform, the new level 4 adopts a "core and options" approach (see Table II). Candidates must still provide evidence of competence for nine elements, but only five of these are compulsory (the confusingly numbered A2, A4, C2, C5 and D4, which are italicised in Table II). They are then free to choose one of the next two units (B2 or B3) and three of the next 16.

This "core and options" approach is welcome, since it may capture more workplace activities, but a closer look at the qualification is less comforting, principally because the NVQ structure has been preserved in its entirety. Here again precise behavioural descriptors, an emphasis on observed activity and formal evidence, together with an assumption that this qualification exactly represents managerial work, are retained.

To date no independent assessment of these qualifications exist, but reviewing the standards as they are published it is easy to anticipate two separate, but related, sets of problems. The first is that keeping the existing structure is likely to propagate all the problems associated with the "first generation" of NVQs. The second is to do with the nature of managerial work. Earlier in this article it was argued that most occupations are too rich and complex to be contained in lists of competences, an argument that has particular resonance for management.

Management as an activity

This is not to argue that there have been no attempts to construct a generic description of managerial work before. On the contrary, the notion that

The new management NVQ level 4	
A2	*Manage activities to meet requirements*
A4	*Contribute to improvements at work*
B2	Manage to use of physical resources
B3	Manage the use of financial resources
C2	*Develop your own resources*
C5	*Develop productive working relationships*
C8	Select personnel for activities
C10	Develop teams and individuals to enhance performance
C13	Manage the performance of teams and individuals
C15	Respond to poor performance in the team
D2	Facilitate meetings
D4	*Provide information to support decision making*
E3	Promote energy efficiency
E5	Identify improvements to energy efficiency
E6	Provide advice and support for the development of energy efficient practices
E8	Provide advice and support for improving energy efficiency
F2	Provide advice and support for the development and implementation of quality policies
F4	Implement quality assurance systems
F6	Monitor compliance with quality systems
F7	Carry out quality audits
G1	Contribute to project planning and preparation
G2	Co-ordinate the running of projects
G3	Contribute to project closure

Note: Compulsory units are italicised

Source: MCI (1997a)

Table II. The new management NVQ level 4

managerial work is a heterogeneous activity that may be unproblematically abstracted from its context has a long and influential pedigree and its two principal proponents, Henri Fayol and Frederick Taylor, both trained engineers, adopted an engineering approach to managerial work and each proposed their own model. Fayol(1949, pp. 5-6), contended that:

> to manage is to forecast and plan, to organise, to command, to co-ordinate and to control.

Extrapolating management principles from the world of engineering has certain attractions. By imposing a positivist discipline on studies, complex areas could be reduced, simplified, generalised and (by implication) solved (as Jacobs, 1990, critically notes). Moreover, management itself could be (and was) unproblematically defined. While Taylor and Taylorism have been largely discredited (see, for example, Doray, 1988) both the positivist research traditions and Fayol's definition of management retain their popularity. Carroll and Gillen (1987) reported that, of 21 management text-books published between 1983 and 1986, 17 used at least four of Fayol's five functions to organise the book itself; three of the remaining four books used three and all mentioned Fayol himself. Indeed, such was the influence

of the positivist tradition that any failure on the part of organisations and theorists to live up to it was seen as a defect on their part; problems were simply a sign that management as a subject was immature. As Koontz (1964) argued, any apparent confusion would soon evaporate once work progressed and "the answer" emerged.

Yet despite the consensus among the classical writers and their followers that management is an activity capable of accurate definition (and indeed that such definitions are readily available); the one "correct" definition has managed to elude commentators for almost a century. Even those writers who agree that management is definitely generic disagree over exactly what its generic features consist of, and no task-based definition has, as yet, accurately described management as it is understood and practised across the economy. Each individual definition is problematic. Parker Follett (Fox and Urwick, 1973, p. 55) maintained that management was the art of "getting things done through people" and that, consequently, managers were those with staff reporting to them. While this aphorism was adopted by several generations of management writers (among them Urwick, 1964a and Stieglitz, 1964) it crucially neglects managers without line responsibilities and makes it difficult to differentiate between supervisors and managers. Decision making, highlighted by Cyert and March (1963) as the key element of management assumes that decisions are a managerial prerogative. Moreover, the optimal, mechanistic, decision making models they put forward are difficult to equate with "human" organisations. Other authors provide models of managerial work that include a range of functions. As noted above, Fayol (1949) offers one of the earliest variants of these. Others can be found in Barsoux and Lawrence (1990), Gulick (1937, cited in Watson, 1994), Adair (1988; 1990) and the MCI's own models of management (MCI, 1991a; 1991b; 1997a; 1997b; 1997c; 1997d). The existence of each of these competing alternatives might suggest healthy debate were it not for the positivist assumptions inherent in each, which deny the legitimacy of any of the others.

Thus far, surprisingly little evidence has emerged to support the premise that there is a concrete (and, by implication, correct) definition of management "out there" waiting to be discovered. Indeed, it is possible that these universal templates of management are little more than the self-fulfilling prophecies of the writers who believe in them, since several start both their analysis and their research by clearly defining what is, and what is not, management. Salaman (1995), Mintzberg (1973; 1975), Sayles (1964) and Moonman (1961), following Parker Follett (Fox and Urwick, 1973) all restrict their work to managers who manage people. Mintzberg (1973), in his famous study of managerial work, took this re-conceptualisation one stage further, restricting his study to people in charge of a defined area, but extending it beyond the confines of titular managers: his work was based on diary studies of senior and middle managers in business; observations

of street gang leaders, hospital administrators and production supervisors; analyses of the working records of US Presidents; activity sampling of foremen's work; and structured observation of the work of chief executives (p. 4).

So, in defence of a narrow definition of "management" the definition of "manager" was extended considerably beyond its traditional boundaries. Foremen and production supervisors, for instance, are generally classified as "supervisors", a role that is distinct from, and (in status terms) inferior to, that of a manager. While street gang leaders, relevant as they are to Mintzberg's conceptualisation, are not managers. Informative as Mintzberg's study may be on the work of those in charge of an occupational area, it does not necessarily contribute to our understanding of what managers do.

Every one of these attempts to describe management functionally as problematic. Employing broad, portmanteau terms makes the description so vague that it is difficult to see how it might be used in practice, this use of general terms may also unify, quite misleadingly, very disparate achievements. To draw on a sporting analogy, playing games might be described as a "generic" skill, yet, as Hirst (1973) points out, playing cricket has very little to do with playing tiddlywinks.

Equally, producing a tight definition of managerial work inevitably excludes many practising managers. Mintzberg's (1973) study includes street gang leaders and US Presidents yet by defining a manager as someone in charge of a distinct occupational area, would exclude many who enjoy the title but are not in overall command of their designated department. It is difficult to justify a conceptual category that deliberately ignores a large section of the population it seeks to classify on the somewhat tautological grounds that they do not conform to the classification and are therefore not "real" managers. Moreover, as Hales (1986) points out, these problems are compounded in the literature by a reluctance to identify what is specifically managerial in each of the models, either conceptually, or through some form of empirical comparison with non-managerial jobs.

The implications of this for the management NVQs are clear. Even the most cursory review of the literature reveals the plethora of different models of managerial work that exist, a discovery that must open to question the resilience of many (if not all). Few of these models are grounded in empirical research and fewer still put forward any conceptualisation of the managerial element of their models. Simply adding another generic to this collection, with no reference to any of its predecessors and no engagement in reflection or debate, is unlikely to make much of a contribution to management development.

Management as a virtue

However, it must be remembered that these "standards" were not the only aspect of the new management NVQs, a list of personal competences was also presented, ten of which are applicable to candidates at level 4 (Table III).

As with the behavioural "competences" these personal "competencies" are broken down into detailed "behavioural indicators" so that Influencing others (one of the shortest competences) can be demonstrated by (Table IV).

Such a collection of individual attributes is useful if the reader accepts the assumption that the individual qualities and attributes necessary to succeed in management are consistent and that, further, these can be identified and used to recruit, promote and develop present and future managers. This concentration on virtues is a variant on the functional generics considered above, if much more fashionable and the MCI is not alone in generating skill lists (see Boyatzis, 1982; Cockerill, 1989; Glaze, 1989; and Greatrex and Phillips, 1989).

However, this defence of "uniform" management qualities is also problematic. Not only do the four references cited above produce very different suggestions of the qualities good managers should possess, but so does almost every other organisation and writer in this field. Hirsch and Bevan (1988, p. 31) who surveyed 40 firms to discover the criteria against which they selected, promoted and developed their managers, found nearly 1,800 different skills, attributes or behaviours. While many of these mirrored one another, there was little to suggest that the shared vocabulary

Table III. The new Management NVQ level 4 personal competences

Acting assertively	Focusing on results
Acting strategically	Influencing others
Behaving ethically	Managing self
Building teams	Searching for information
Communicating	Thinking and taking decisions

Source: MCI, 1997a)

Table IV. Influencing others: behavioural indicators

Develops and uses contacts to trade information and obtain support and resources
Presents onself positively to others
Creates and prepares positively to others
Creates and prepares strategies for influencing others
Uses a variety of means to influence others
Understands the culture of the organisation and acts to work within it or influence it

Source: MCI, 1997a

extended to consensus on meanings and several indications that the aims some of the companies had for these models were unrealistic. One organisation claimed to measure its managers against no fewer than 71 different criteria and the authors commented that:

> It is difficult to know whether the length of skill lists is determined by personal taste, theoretical considerations, the tolerance of managers or the size of a sheet of A4 paper.

Just as it was difficult to see how "decision making" in companies might be peculiarly managerial, so these exhortations to practise specific virtues are almost equally applicable to everyone in the organisation, since many of the qualities described are clearly aspirational rather than descriptive. Indeed, Bevan (1990) specifically rejects observed managerial attributes in favour of ideal qualities. In view of this, it is not clear what light these lists shed on management or managers. As Mangham and Silver (1986) observed, when they tried to establish a consensus on the optimum skill-list, few respondents agreed on which attributes were important and most, when prompted, would change their minds and agree wholeheartedly with qualities ignored in their earlier responses. Given how positive all these attributes are, it is difficult to see how Mangham and Silver's respondents could have rejected any of them, Lewis and Stewart (1958, p. 100) commented prophetically that:

> Listing the qualities of a good manager makes an excellent parlour game in business circles. Soon all the main virtues will be mentioned and who is to say that any of them, except chastity, is not desirable?

Again, the existence of many different templates must raise questions about whether any one list of "meta-qualities" could be produced. Even then it is doubtful that a common terminology with a shared meaning could be developed, or that objective means could be devised for measuring the attributes in isolation (Furnham, 1990; Herriot, 1988; Jacobs, 1989). As Cleverley (1971, p. 114) argues:

> For one, we do not know enough about the qualities that make an individual a successful manager (if indeed there are any particular ones) to define them. Secondly even if we did have that much knowledge, our psychological equipment is not adequate to discern them.

Neither functional- nor attribute-based models of managerial work are entirely satisfactory and producing a generic definition of management seems more likely to confuse, by adding to the plethora of different "generics" that already exist, than inform. The suggested definitions that abound in the literature are problematic and contentious. What is more, there is little evidence to suggest that considering management via these lists is either helpful or informative. Indeed, considered reflections on the nature of managerial work consistently draw on elements that are neither functional nor attribute based in their attempts to define management (as can be seen in Anthony, 1977; Child, 1969; Storey, 1980; and Urwick,

1964b). Moreover, the "heroic sagas" of exemplary managers that emerge from the practitioner literature provide little support for either of the generic models (see, for example, Abodaher, 1986; Harvey-Jones, 1989; and Semler, 1994).

The reason a definition has proved so elusive may be because management itself is a reification, socially constructed, so that there is no one true definition to discover. As Drucker (1989, p. 59) says in a different context:

> 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.

This conclusion has been obscured by the constraints of locating the study of management within an engineering paradigm (Reed, 1989), one of the legacies of Taylor and Fayol, and the problematic nature of management studies as a discipline. As Storey (1985a) argues, it is difficult to see whether the area exists to provide a critical assessment of practice, popularise specific techniques or act as an apologist for managerial ideology. Rather than sensitising observations of managers, these two last orientations may have focused interest away from addressing any substantive issues. So, the literary traditions of management studies may have encouraged writings to be couched in terms of celebrations of individual careers or prescriptive models, yet such publications do little to increase our understanding of what management is.

Here, this article will go on to draw on some of the empirical research into managerial work and argue that, far from being a generic activity or set of qualities, management covers a wide variety of tasks, roles and specialisms which may differ from workplace to workplace and individual to individual.

An agnostic approach to managerial work

Considerable support for this heterogeneous construction of management is found in the empirical work. Pollard (1965, quoted in Reed and Anthony, 1992) conducted a historical study of managers between 1780-1850 and argued that they constituted a highly diffuse, fragmented group with no distinctive identity, class, profession, occupation or body of knowledge.

Stewart (1976; 1988), in her work on more contemporary managers, took a very open approach. Rather than restricting her survey to those who matched her preconceived notions of what a managerial job was, she deliberately sought out respondents who were managers and asked them what they did. This agnostic view meant that her survey covered a wide range of both people and functions and Stewart argued that a manager was "anyone above a certain level, roughly above foreman whether ... in control

of people or not" (1976, p. 4). As Bamber (1986) points out, this (non-) definition produced an occupational group that was vertically narrow but horizontally broad, spanning engineers, scientists, accountants, personnel specialists, administrators and marketing experts.

In her conclusions, Stewart (1988) argued that the results showed not one, but five different types of manager with very distinct and incompatible, work behaviours. The *emissaries* were the organisational ambassadors. They spent most of their time away from their own companies travelling, visiting others and entertaining. The writers, by contrast, spent more of their time in the office engaged in paperwork. Unlike other managers, writers spent little time in groups and most of their contact was on a one-to-one basis. *Discussers,* as their name suggests, spent far more time with colleagues and superiors, though little with subordinates and Stewart described their activities as closest to the "average" of the respondents in her study. *Trouble-shooters* were called in to deal with crises and run teams dealing with exceptional circumstances, so their work was far less predictable than many other managers; and finally the committee-men, as might be expected, spent a great deal of time in contact with other people but, unlike the emissaries, their contacts were largely internal and seldom met with representatives of other organisations. These categories described such a range of responsibilities, activities and priorities that Stewart concluded (p. 77):

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

In her later work Stewart went on to conduct further empirical studies, develop other classifications (1975; 1991) and consider the impact that a changing organisational environment (1992), individual choice (1981), and managers' perceptions of their own work (Marshall and Stewart, 1981a, 1981b), might have on these conclusions. However, the diversity inherent in managerial work remained a constant theme of her writings. Others reinforce this (Bamber, 1986; Watson, 1994; Whitley, 1989) to the extent that some queried the necessity for making so obvious a statement. As Scase and Goffee point out (1989, p. 20):

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

Such diversity has led several commentators to conclude that management itself is a largely meaningless term.

Certainly, in one sense the term "management" is used to describe so wide a variety of different sorts of actors and tasks (Marchington, 1995) that attempting to extrapolate a job description or a list of individual qualities from it will inevitably end in frustration. However, while this heterogeneity may make the prospect of developing a single, straightforward, homogeneous and functionally-based definition of

managerial work remote, it does not justify abandoning all attempts to describe managerial work. The redundancy of the popular, positivist constructions does not mean that no definition is appropriate. At the risk of using a double negative, management is not "nothing".

Re-defining managerial work

Willmott (1984, p. 349) suggests that a clearer view of management can be obtained by extending the discussion to the radical literature:

> the conventional images and ideals of managerial work may, paradoxically, be of less value in appeasing and exploiting the tensions in the capitalist labour process than the insights provided by a more radical approach.

This school rejects the notion that the distinctive element of managerial work can be functionally determined. As has been argued above, attractive as these work-based definitions are, they do not unproblematically segregate managers from non-managers. Radical theorists concentrate instead on the power and authority that management exercise, and so arrive at a conception of management and managers which is inclusive rather than exclusive. They argue that all managers, whatever their actual job specification, are involved in running businesses on behalf of the "owners" (although occasionally, as Wright, 1995, points out, such owners may be both invisible and uninfluential).

This insight provides a definition of management which successfully contextualises it, and incorporates the dimensions of power, authority and status so neglected in most models of management and so vital a part of management itself. This effectively shifts the debate on management since, if management is context-bound, success in management is local rather than transferable (Scase and Goffee, 1989, p. 5):

> styles of management which are considered effective at one point in time may cease to be seen as such when the prevailing values and assumptions change during a subsequent era.

Nor is it only styles that vary between organisations. The tasks, responsibilities, work and status of those employees who enjoy the title "manager" vary greatly both between and within organisations in ways that may not easily be understood by outsiders. Watson's (1994) study highlights the titular inflation which led to the term "manager" being applied to more lower-level posts and neglected at the higher levels of the organisation (see also Burrell, 1992) as old "section leaders" rejoiced in their new titles and more senior employees considered themselves to have been promoted beyond management, an attitude Watson queries. If managers are understood to be those with status in an organisation who may affect and influence decisions, this diversity is not only understandable, but also necessary. As Armstrong notes in his critique of the attempts to construct a generic model of management (1989, p. 311):

> 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".

Moreover, this agency view of management portrays managers as those with power and authority over others, a construction long understood by some commentators (see, for example, Storey, 1980; 1985b) but curiously slow to be acknowledged in the wider literature. Yet it is this power and authority which is one of the key elements distinguishing the managerial from the non-managerial.

It may be that the official, "managerialist" literature on management sought to minimise these elements since, in a democratic society, they might be thought politically most contentious, looking instead to emphasise those technical aspects of the managerial role which might legitimise their status through expertise. Certainly, the theorists of the right have been traditionally far more modest about the power wielded by managers than their counterparts on the left (Anthony, 1986). Whatever the provenance, reorienting the definition of management towards technical skills and away from organisational control was in serious danger of distorting the nature of managerial work by focusing attention away from the managerial elements of that work. However, depicting managers as agents captures both that aspect of managerial work that differentiates managers from non-managers and preserves enough flexibility to incorporate the variety of functions and specialisms managers may engage in. Indeed, it almost demands that management is heterogeneous and subject to local norms, to the extent that the diversity of managerial work stops being something that needs to be simplified or explained away and becomes instead a key facet of the nature of management itself.

Evidence of this heterogeneity is not hard to find. Not only do empirical studies of managerial work emphasise it, but also organisations themselves acknowledge it in practice. Whatever public rhetoric of the technical skills of management is used, promotions are seldom dictated by technical merit. Managers operate in a high-trust environment (Kanter, 1977) with few objective indicators of their performance, which means, in practice, that a key criterion influencing managerial assessments and careers is not an individual manager's performance but the impression of performance he or she conveys to others (Gowler and Legge, 1983; Heller, 1996, p. 14):

> there is no absolute criteria [sic] of managerial achievement. A manager is good and a company efficient only because others consider the results of their work good: their so-called goodness endures only as long as this good opinion holds.

Jackall (1988) draws a parallel between the managerial world of favour and privilege and the courtiers who served powerful monarchs. In both cases preferment could derive as easily from the gift of a more powerful courtier (or the monarch themselves) as through the Calvinist discipline of virtue and hard work (see also, Lee and Piper, 1988, for a study of promotions

within a British clearing bank). This means that, while the rhetoric of organisational life emphasises the puritanical virtues, the reality is more complicated. Hirsch and Bevan (1988) noted that, even where well-defined lists of "official" skills and attributes were available, promotions were most often based on other, "unofficial" criteria and the characteristics commented on and assessed in practice were not necessarily those that were officially recorded (pp. 68-9):

> one organisation (which had come to believe most of its managers were rather "stodgy") actually looked for "sparkle" in making appointments – an attribute which appeared on none of its ... public lists of skill requirements! Another organisation which had staff posted all over the world had well developed formal ... languages for both managerial and professional skills. However, its [informal] language spoke of "gin and tonic" people (suited for jobs in developed countries or large cities) versus "bush" people (who could function in much less well supported environments). These distinctions were well understood and clearly relevant to the organisation, but had only a vague linkage to listed attributes used in performance appraisal.

While both Barnard (1962) and Kanter (1977) suggest that physical attractiveness was also a factor in managerial promotions. Nor is this world of politically fraught impression management restricted to managerial promotions. As Sayles (1979, quoted in Willmott, 1984, p. 391) argues:

> only naïve managers assume that budgets get allocated and key decisions are made solely on the basis of rational decision making.

Most aspects of managerial life need to be considered in the light of these conclusions; budgets are not simply the resources necessary to achieve the corporate goals, they are symbols of individual power and occasionally individual empire-building; training courses do not only convey useful information and skills, they represent investment in, and confidence in, an individual, and are an expression of support; and written records are not only the factual narratives of events but also corporate propaganda and individual "weaponry" in the managerial competition (Jackall, 1988, p. 88):

> most written documents in the corporate world constitute simply official versions of reality that often bear little resemblance to the tangled, ambiguous, and verbally negotiated transactions that they purportedly represent.

It also means, to return to the original theme of this section, that, bereft of objective indicators, managers may be measured and assessed only against the impression they convey of themselves, and norms established by other managers. Since managers can influence the direction their company takes (Watson, 1994), employing them becomes an exercise in trust and to mitigate the risks the company might run, conformity and "being known" become key conditions of entry into management (Dalton, 1966; Kanter, 1977); criteria which result in the phenomenon that Moore (1951) termed "homosexual reproduction". This has important implications for the nature of management itself. Several authors have noted that, since managers tend

to be male, managerial norms are male norms, which means that women have great difficulty winning admittance to the managerial ranks, and even greater difficulty securing appointment to those posts that carry highest prestige (Collinson *et al.*, 1990; Larwood and Wood, 1978; Marshall, 1984; Root, 1984).

Far from being rational, neutral and objective, management is a social activity which is heavily influenced by local norms, ideals and prejudices. As a result, the behaviours and attributes organisations encourage in managers may be very different to the lists of virtues published by management authors. The rhetoric of performance and meritocracy is preserved in order to legitimate their status but the way individual managers succeed in organisational terms may be less rationally determined in practice than much of the material suggests.

Conclusions and discussion

This literature review will contain few surprises for practising managers or students of the process of managing. In essence, it simply re-affirms Watson's (1994, p. 51) argument that:

> 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.

The activities managers undertake, the responsibilities they claim and the status they enjoy can (and does) vary from organisation to organisation and department to department. Moreover, individual managers may further complicate this variety by exercising discretion in the tasks they perform (Stewart, 1981). In seeking to capture this complexity and distil it down to one simple formulation, the MCI is chasing an unachievable goal (CNAA/BTEC, 1990, p. 7):

> managing at almost every level is a complex, holistic occupation which cannot easily be disaggregated into objective, explicit and unambiguously measurable elements of competence.

More seriously, in that it presents its "standards" as the "benchmarks" of managerial work, it is actively distorting the national perception of managers and managers' perception of themselves. The behaviours contained in the management NVQ are intended to describe "real" management, yet "real" management (if it exists at all) should surely involve a far higher appreciation of the organisational context than is permitted by a centrally derived set of "standards". Indeed, re-defining management to focus on the authority and influence managers exert as well as the context they operate in, might actively assist the management process as Watson (1994) argues in his criticism of functionally-derived models of managerial work (p. 38):

> It leads managers to see their job as managerial because they are "in charge" of a number [of] people, of certain resources or of a department. What needs to be recognised, instead, is that a job is a managerial job in so far as it is concerned with "shaping" the activities of the work organisation as a whole to bring about its long term survival.

These conclusions have important implications for the development and training of managers. If the function is heterogeneous, locally determined, based on status rather than task, involves the exercise of authority and is problematic to assess and measure, then these factors need to be taken into account in the training process. Storey again states (1990, p. 5):

> the implication of this variety for the study of management development is that, far from persisting with the overwhelmingly universalistic tenor of most of the conventional literature on management development, there is an urgent need to re-direct attention to different contexts.

Regrettably the MCI chose not to heed this advice. Had they done so, their qualifications might perhaps have looked very different and been more warmly welcomed by British managers. As it stands, the wealth of publicity that attended the launch of the original management NVQs in 1991 was barely even a memory in 1997 when few, not immediately concerned with this form of vocational qualification, realised that the new standards had been published. If the first set of standards, given all the support they enjoyed, could not make a significant impression on vocational education and training it seems unlikely that their successors will fare better. Extrapolating from the "old" qualifications it seems likely that the new management NVQs are likely to be restricted to a small group of candidates (mainly from the public sector and armed forces), and are likely to be ineffective even there. Yet simply predicting that a poorly designed qualification will be unsuccessful does little to help the development of British managers. It is to be hoped that, long before the next wave of concern in management education, training and development, those responsible for the qualifications learn the lessons of the literature.

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