Strategic Alliances and the New World of Work

Dr Christine Owen
Helen Bound
University of Tasmania

ABSTRACT

There are dramatic changes occurring to the nature of work as we know it (ACIRRT 199l; De Ruyter 1997; Valmai 1998; Waterhouse, 1998). Firms are becoming increasingly reliant on the outsourcing of labour functions in an attempt to more effectively manage supply and costs of labour, whilst focussing on their own "core" activities. These changes have resulted in substantial changes to the Australian workforce. For example, the conventional view of work in the form of a permanent full-time job is now out of date. Downsizing, outsourcing, and contracting-out are leading to situations where more and more people are responsible for finding their own work, not in stable organisations but, through temporary working arrangements, such as that found in contracting-out. Where individual contractors work with other contractors to form strategic alliances, the additional skills of working collaboratively are just as important as the specialist skills of the individual contractors. This paper will outline the literature and methodology for the NREC funded project 'Strategic Alliances and the New World of Work'. The aim of the research is to investigate this emerging group of the "new" workforce, to better understand: their skill requirements; where they acquire the skills to operate effectively to manage their own work and to work with others; the degree to which the existing VET structures are meeting the needs of the new workforce; and, how the VET system can be tailored to meet their needs.

The arrangements under which many people work are undergoing radical transformation. Indeed, it is contended that the conventional view of work -- in the form of a permanent full-time job within a formalised work organisation -- is no longer relevant for many working people (Curtain 1996). More and more people are responsible for finding their own work, not in stable organisations but through temporary and short-term working arrangements (ACIRRT 1998; VandenHeuvel & Wooden 1999). Sometimes these new forms of working arrangements can involve either working alone as an independent contractor, and/or joining up with others in what can be called 'loosely coupled strategic alliances' (Owen & Bound 1998). These alliances are usually short-term arrangements and the participants in the alliance may (or may not) be formally recognisable as small businesses. We have called these workers, externalised contingent workers: external because they are outside the organisation that is utilising their services and contingent because they are not permanent, rather their relationship with the organisation is unpredictable. We have defined external contingent workers from the perspective of these workers. That is, as those who are responsible for identifying their next source of income and provide goods and/or services for a specified period of time.

Little is known about the characteristics of an externalised contingent workforce or the elements that enable people to work successfully and enjoy a relatively stable income. What is it like to work with others in securing short-term externalised contracts of goods or service in such a way as to enjoy a continuity of working life? What tensions arise for externalised contingent workers working alongside relatively permanent employees? What attributes are needed to successfully operate in these turbulent conditions? And how do vocational and education and training systems prepare (and support) people to operate within these new working arrangements? It is contended that the research conducted to date sheds little light on these important questions. Given the growth in the externalised contingent workforce, this research is significant.

Our research will investigate the knowledge required to operate effectively when workers are responsible for their own work, work externally to contracting organisations and in collaboration with others. Knowledge is here defined broadly to mean skills, understandings, attitudes and values needed to work successfully. The following research questions guide the study.

1. What knowledge do people need to operate effectively in these new working environments?
2. How do they get this new knowledge and how do they maintain the existing skills of their occupation?

3. Where do they get the knowledge needed to operate successfully within loosely coupled strategic alliances?
4. What kind of VET structure/arrangements would best support people working in these environments?

This paper will explore what is known and develop some tentative indicators of knowledge externalised contingent workers require.

THE CHANGING SHAPE OF WORK ENVIRONMENTS

The increasing trend for organisations to outsource work and to use contingent workers (whether external or internal) is explained in the literature as an answer to the search for organisational responsiveness and flexibility. Globalisation (the organisation of production and its related activities organised on a global scale Castells 1997), rapid changes in information technology and subsequent changes in consumer demand, have led to a greater demand for organisational 'responsiveness' (Ford 1990). These changes have led to "the intensification of competition, particularly international competition; changes in the demand for goods and services; and the general increase in uncertainty and in the pace of change in technology, production processes and markets" (Bailey 1990, p.19). In this context, many organisations engage in restructuring work to create more flexible production systems in order to cope with this changing external environment. Thus there has been a shift from work organisations designed for mass production to those designed for "flexible specialisation" that is, responding to niche markets, adapting and changing quickly to meet consumer demand.

Two types of flexibility are commonly referred to. The first refers to "functional" flexibility and is based on human resource management (HRM) strategies to increase involvement of workers and, so increase flexibility of production. Functional flexibility involves work innovations "premised on securing the deeper engagement of core workers, on continually training them, and on exploiting their accumulated knowledge and experience" (Smith 1997 p.316). The second form of flexibility Smith (1997) calls 'numerical flexibility'. It is aimed at increasing flexibility of work organisation by downsizing the workforce to a core business and increasing the number of workers that are peripheral to the organisation. The HRM strategies utilised here enable employers to expand and contract the size of the workforce to accommodate fluctuations in demand. Numerical flexibility signals the ascent of 'contingent' jobs and the 'decline of the permanent employment model' (Smith 1997, p.326). Organisations are downsized and non-core activities are undertaken by a peripheral workforce that is either employed utilising internal HRM mechanisms (e.g., part-time, temporary and casual work) or outsourced and therefore external to the organisation.

What is outsourcing/contracting-out?

The terms 'outsourcing' and 'contracting out' are used interchangeably in the literature and refer to the business practice of choosing to have goods or services provided externally rather than produced in-house (VandenHeuvel & Wooden 1999, p.7). According to VandenHeuvel and Wooden (1999, p.7) 'in common law the key difference between contractors and employers is that the former involves contracts *for* service, whereas the latter involves contracts *of* service' [authors' emphasis]. By externalising the employment relationship, the contracting body shifts responsibility for award/enterprise bargaining agreement entitlements (e.g. leave entitlements, wages, grievance procedures, union stewards) and common law rights (e.g. the provision of a safe working environment, the contractual obligations of an employer to an employee) between employer and employee, to the contractor. Such strategies are claimed to provide economic advantage through improved service delivery and savings in costs (e.g. superannuation payments, workers compensation coverage) (Spriggs 1998; Benson & Ieronimo 1995; Marcum 1998; Gordon & Walsh 1997).

ACIRRT (1999, p. 4) concluded that the extensiveness of outsourcing activity has led to 'an identifiable 'outsourcing industry' comprised of firms whose sole activity is the provision of particular services to other companies'. Contracted services may involve the contractor being part of an in-house organisational team working on a project, or it may involve the contractor working autonomously, either on-site or at another location. People working externally to an organisation may be employed by a labour-hire company, work for an outsourced supplier or operate as an independent contractor by working for themselves or with others (ACIRRT 1999). It is this latter group — those people operating as independent contractors working with others to supply a product or service — that are the focus of this study.

It is contended that there are similarities in demands placed on contingent workers and those in contemporary organisations (Smith 1997). This is because in contemporary work organisations changes in work structures have resulted in workers employed on a permanent basis also being expected to "act like subcontracted workers" (Smith 1997 p.331). According to Smith (1997) "the strength of this normative system, in which 'everyone is subcontracted', depends greatly on decentred organizational systems in which self-monitoring is essential (DiTomaso 1996 in Smith 1997, p.331).

Reasons for outsourcing

The reasons for contracting out of services — in all industries — are manifold. According to the literature (ACIRRT 1999; VandenHeuvel & Wooden 1999) reasons include a combination of the following:

- To achieve better access to skills
- To respond to changes in demand for labour
- To reduce costs
- To focus on strategic initiatives and outcomes rather than inputs.

In some industries in particular (for example, the IT industry), outsourcing enables an organisation to import needed skills rather than "growing" them within the company. In a number of surveys (Gordon & Walsh 1997; Pearce 1998) outsourcing was primarily used to respond to market demands and to ensure the company was not left with a large workforce in times of low demand for services. In other cases (see ACIRRT 1999) outsourcing has been linked to reducing costs, since sometimes other firms can complete a task more cheaply than in-house production. There is some evidence to suggest (see Hall, Harley and Whitehouse 1995) that some organisations use outsourcing as a means of avoiding higher costs associated with unionised labour or paying employee entitlements, such as superannuation, leave and providing training. The benefits of outsourcing are also contested. The study by ACIRRT concluded that for every study that showed the advantages of outsourcing, there was a study pointing to its failure or actually increasing costs. Pearce & Jones (1998, p. 39) for example, claim that 'the use of contingent workers to gain flexibility in the hiring and firing of workers can directly impede the organisation's flexibility to adapt to changes' (1998, p.39).

Who uses outsourced workers?

VandenHeuvel & Wooden (1999, pp. 21-23) examined the AWIRS database and identified the following:

- Since 1989 growth in contracting out has been concentrated in large firms and workplaces (though it should be noted that the AWIRS database comprises only firms of 20 employees or more and there is also evidence to suggest that smaller firms find outsourcing attractive - see Abraham & Taylor, 1996);
- Private sector firms are more likely to use contractors;
- Growth in the incidence of contracting out has been in firms that operate on a commercial basis, regardless of whether they are public or private;
- Contractor-related employment has gown rapidly in firms less than five years old;

The role of competition as impetus for contracting out appears equivocal. On the one hand, firms in less competitive industries (defined by the number of competitors) are more likely to use contractors. On the other hand, those firms most exposed to international competition in the export sector have most rapidly expanded their use of contractors.

Features of the externalised contingent workforce

From our analysis of secondary data it can be concluded that people responsible for their own work are more likely to:

- Find such work within industries such as electricity, gas and water supply; construction; education; mining, and government administration;
- Work with firms operating on a commercial basis, and that are relatively new.
- Deal with firms that vary substantially in size;
- Develop working relationships with individuals in middle management;
- Are not a homogenous group in terms of the skills they have and the conditions they can demand.

- Put less value on formal training programs and when they do participate in VET, do so independently.

Given the limited research that has been undertaken and to gain an appreciation of what knowledge these worker's require, it is important to also examine what challenges externalised contingent workers face when being responsible for their own work.

THE CHALLENGES FACING PEOPLE RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR OWN WORK

Workers responsible for creating and managing their own work, face a variety of challenges. These challenges may be specific to this form of working arrangement, or, as the literature indicates, these challenges may be generic to many people working in contemporary work environments (see for example, Waterhouse, Wilson and Ewer 1999; Barratt-Pugh 1998; Moy 1999). Externalised contingent workers are required to:

- manage relationships, situated within a variety of organisational cultures and market contexts (State Training Board of Victoria 1999; Gordon and Walsh 1997);
- apply their knowledge across differing organisational processes, strategies and cultures (Caroli, 1998);
- be responsible for their own development and so be prepared to actively seek feedback (Allan & Sienko 1998; Harris & Greising 1998) and to manage this development (Doyle, Kerr and Kurth 1999; Kerka, 1997).

Managing Relationships

Managing relationships to achieve successful outcomes inevitably involves building trust; identifying client need and the potential intersections between client and provider interest (State Training Board of Victoria 1999, p.18.); being clear about roles and expectations (Finkel 1998) and managing tensions (Smith 1994; Cappelli 1997). Sometimes successful outcomes are influenced by personal and structural tensions that are built into the working arrangements (ibid.). On the one hand, these new work systems depend on loyalty, best practice and innovation (which in turn depend on job security), yet, on the other hand, these systems encourage workers to focus on their immediate self-interest, rather than build trust on the expectation of long term relationships (Cappelli 1997). As a consequence, tension is built into the structures governing working arrangements.

Smith (1994) specifically refers to sources of tension in relationships that externalised contingent workers need to manage. 'Where 'enabled' or permanent workers work alongside 'restricted' or contingent workers there are consequences for conflict and organisation of control' (Smith 1994, p.296). This is the case if permanent workers feel threatened by externalised contingent workers, who may be employed for less money and have fewer conditions than their permanent counterparts. Similarly, contingent workers may recognise their disadvantage in comparison to those more permanently employed. Managing tensions is an important area of building effective working relationships. For the externalised contingent worker understanding their own strategic context may be a means not only of managing tensions, but also of building effective relationships.

The State Training Board of Victoria (1999) emphasises the importance of establishing areas of mutual strategic interest in the context of building partnerships. They explain that all parties need to be clear about long term strategic interests and specific outcomes. To work towards building an effective working relationship, externalised contingent workers need strategic skills to:

- Assess needs;
- Understand and articulate outcomes and assess progress against them;
- Constantly build "intellectual capital" in order to be able to respond to the market; and,
- Develop organisational solutions and nurture and manage relationships (State Training Board of Victoria 1999).

Applying knowledge across organisations and contexts

Externalised contingent workers work across organisational structures and cultures. Constantly changing work environments are an everyday reality for these workers. Mulcahy and James argue that the capacity to deal effectively with changing environments requires strategic competence (1999,

p.18). This is a skill attributed to high levels of performance and expertise (ibid.). In the United States, the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) (1991) reported on qualities required to succeed in high-performance workplaces, characterised by high-skill, high-wage employment. The SCANS report found that school leavers and workers required:

- A solid three part foundation, or 'fundamental skills' comprising: basic literacy and computational skills; thinking skills (including creative thinking, decision-making, problem solving, learning to learn and reasoning); and personal qualities)responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management and integrity/honesty)
- Five 'workplace competencies': the ability to manage resources, to work amicably and productively with others, to acquire and use information, to master complex systems, and to work with a variety of technologies (in Moy 1999, pp.10-11).

The terms high-performance, high-wage appears to correlate with the term 'global' workers (Hobart 1999). Hobart states that 'global' workers need flexibility, problem-solving and decision-making ability, adaptability, creative thinking, self-motivation, and the capacity for reflection (ibid., p. 42).

> People with global mindsets have the ability to look at the broader context, accept contradiction and ambiguity, trust processes rather than structure, value diversity and teamwork, view change as opportunity, and strive for continuous self-development (ibid., p.43)'.

Such requirements suggest that these workers are continuously immersed in work environments that expose them to challenge and to meet these challenges they constantly need to construct knowledge.

It is contended that the knowledge and skills required in these work contexts are also the knowledge and skills required by externalised contingent workers working across differing organisational contexts on a regular basis. The knowledge and skills referred to above (e.g. working with others, adaptability, flexibility, reflection) are often termed 'soft' skills (Hobart 1999). As Moy (1999) outlined, such skills are necessary for environments requiring "flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness" (Moy 1999, p.12), features already demonstrated to be important in externalised contingent work. The authors contend that these skills are increasingly required across all forms of working arrangements.

Feedback, reflection and self-development

Acquiring knowledge and skills occurs formally in VET programs and informally through everyday practice. As discussed, there is a tendency for "soft" skills to be acquired informally in particular contexts. Such learning processes require reflection on experience, the capacity to abstract from those experiences to other contexts as well as the capacity to act as a result of reflection and feedback. Externalised contingent workers are more likely to obtain feedback related to job performance from specific events, rather than from the verbal or written statements typically associated with employee-related performance management and review sessions. According to Harris & Greising (1998), such feedback is also likely to be more indirect. Feedback will include a contracting body referring the worker to other jobs, choosing the worker for projects over his or her competitors, and offering additional work. Such feedback is of a very general nature, lacking specific content for reflection and assessment. This indicates that externalised contingent workers are required to be proactive agents in their self-development. Rather than uncritically accept and internalise, these workers need to 'reflect, assess and evaluate' (Confessore & Cops 1998).

In summary, a number of indicators for people working as externalised contingent workers can be identified. Externalised contingent workers need to:

- Manage multiple relationships, and build trust;
- Understand contracts;
- Have a high degree of interpersonal skills and to manage expectations;
- Be able to identify the client's needs;
- Be able to identify how workers can advance the value of their own knowledge and skills base;
- Keep up to date with their technical knowledge;
- Utilise a range of strategies to acquire and use information, understand complex and contradictory systems and to 'read' individuals, organisations and markets;
- To have metacognitive skills to be able to critically reflect and to use multiple methods of gaining feedback on performance.

A common thread in all these requirements is the ability to use knowledge to problem solve (both routine and non-routine) and to transfer knowledge across settings.

METHODOLOGY

The new working arrangements are complex, often multi-layered and what is known about them is limited. Accordingly a qualitative research design has been chosen in order to gain an overview of the context of the arrangements and the kinds of work people do.

The qualitative design is based on a case study approach. Six strategic alliances have been selected across three states and across different industries. Face to face interviews of alliance members will be conducted and followed up by tracking alliance members weekly for a period of one month using telephone interviews. Alliance members will be asked to keep a diary if participants feel this would enhance their recall for the weekly telephone sessions. In addition a contracting body will be interviewed as will other relevant organisations/bodies such as training providers, ITABs, professional bodies and so on.

Case studies have been selected in each of the following states (two in each): New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania. Purposeful sampling was used to identify strategic alliances for participation in the research. The criteria developed for including the alliances in the research included:

- a mix of industries where the use of contractors is high (for e.g. construction) and industries where contracting is said to be not so prevalent (for e.g. health and community services) - see literature review
- alliances across three states to provide a range of perspectives provided by different economic climates and state VET policies and their implementation.

Alliances that have been approached to participate in the research are set out in the table below:

Table 1: Selection of case studies

Industry/Activity	State
Information Technology	Tasmania
Community Services	Tasmania
Education and Training	Victoria
Horticulture	Victoria
Construction (painting)	NSW
Environmental assessment	NSW

This research will identify issues requiring further research into these new working arrangements, about which there is limited Australian literature. It is an introductory, exploratory study, and as such will not be able to report in any depth about competencies utilised by those working in these arrangements.

In line with this understanding, we have developed the following interview questions for the initial interview with strategic alliance members. The questions cover contextual information about the individual, their background and experience including current study; an introduction into the work they are undertaking by inviting discussion about current or past projects; a number of questions exploring the working arrangements — structural and cultural — of the group; processes and skills used to handle tenders/contracts and learning experiences as a result of undertaking this kind of work. These questions are listed below - without their prompts.

1. Would you please tell me a little about yourself:

2. Would you tell me about the current project you are working on?

3. Can you tell be about how working with this group actually works?

4. How did the group make the decision to put in for this job/tender?

5. Can you tell me a little about the highs and lows of this kind of work?

6. Would you describe what its like to work with this group? Atmosphere/levels of support/access to resources/opportunities for learning

7. Can you think of a problem or task you had to learn (e.g., something might have gone wrong). How did you go about solving it? Who else was involved?

8. VET. Have you been involved in any formal learning or training recently? If yes, what were you learning? Has this helped do this kind of work? Is there any formal learning you think you need but haven't undertaken? Why?

9. Have you or the group used any training providers? Why?

10. What is your relationship like with the contracting organisation?

11. What do you think are the elements needed for a group of people such as this one to work successfully together?

12. Are you a member of any professional bodies?
    Does your professional body provide support/training/learning opportunities? Do you receive or attend any training through your ITAB or other organisations?

13. Your future
    How long been doing this [kind of work] for, do you see this as a permanent way of working for you and why?

CONCLUSION

The literature explored above on externalised contingent workers suggests that these workers are frequently challenged. As such they require, not only the skills of their trade or profession, the 'hard' skills, but a range of 'soft' skills and most importantly the ability to 'negotiate meanings with the environment' and construct knowledge across a variety of settings. We would further argue that these abilities are increasingly required for a growing number of workers across working arrangements as they move from one 'team' to another. The literature also suggests that current arrangements within VET and the emphasis on outcomes rather than learning processes may not meet the learning challenges faced by these workers.

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