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# 1

## Work Attachment, Work Centrality and the Meaning of Work in Life

### **Introduction: aims of the book**

In recent times, a new orthodoxy has become established, claiming simultaneously to describe, explain and indeed shape contemporary economy and society. Concepts associated with the knowledge economy now permeate academic, populist, policy maker and practitioner thinking, to such an extent that they have become axiomatic nostrums informing government agendas (e.g. DTI, 1998; 2004a, b). Accordingly, it is widely accepted that we are living through a new and distinctive epoch, in which the dominant principles organizing human society have changed fundamentally and dramatically. Yet, the 'big picture franchise' (Thompson, 2003) of the knowledge economy is but the latest in a succession of paradigm break theories proclaiming the end of industrialism and Fordism, meta-characterizations themselves fraught with definitional and conceptual difficulties (Williams *et al.*, 1987). Since the 1980s, post-Fordism, post-modernism and the surveillance society have been advanced as models, each successively claiming to provide *the* indispensable framework for understanding socio-economic phenomena of all kinds.

Although incorporating core assumptions derived from these earlier models, the contemporary knowledge economy variant can claim key distinguishing features which demarcate it from its immediate predecessors, whilst drawing upon longer-established antecedents. Various social theorists in the post-war period asserted the increased importance of knowledge in contemporary society. Aaron, Dahrendorf, Kerr, Bell and Giddens all emphasized the increasing relevance of codified and theoretical knowledge to social development and work organizations (Ackroyd *et al.*, 2000). However, the continued influence of such ideas also owes much to the work of Drucker (1968) who, as early as the mid-1960s, was suggesting the importance of the 'knowledge industries' to the 'knowledge economy'. Notwithstanding continuity with earlier theories of information society, the novelty of the pre-millennial versions of the knowledge economy, or

'informationalism' as propounded by Castells (1996), lies in the claimed emergence of the network society, where the widespread dissemination of information technologies is facilitated by, and contributes to, economic and cultural globalization. This claimed shift to an information-based society brings into sharp focus the actual nature of work undertaken in contemporary society, with expected decline in the demands for 'old economy' physical and unskilled labour and the growth of knowledge-intensive work within an information based and networked economy. In turn, these networked processes are forecast to dominate the execution, direction and experience of work for the foreseeable future.

In this book, we look at two contemporary sectors, call centres and software development, where information and communications technologies (ICT) are a dominant feature of the labour process. With ICT at the productive core, the main aim of this book is to provide a comprehensive account of a major Economic and Social Research Council-funded research study designed to explore connections between changing forms and conditions of employment and the meaning of work at the beginning of the twenty-first century. A central premise of the project was that examination of work should focus not only on the workplace but also on the significance of work in people's wider lives (and *vice versa*).

A glance at the burgeoning future of work literature confirms that there is no shortage of predictions of end-of career, portfolio working and even doomsday, end-of-work scenarios (see for example, Aronowitz and Fazio, 1995), but few of these proclamations have been located in empirically-grounded research (and even fewer have yet to be realized). By contrast, the prime aim of this book is to present an in-depth investigation of the actual experience and meanings of work to participants engaged in two different growth sectors in the so-called new or knowledge economy, in order to provide an analytically constructed and theoretically informed basis for examining the nature of work in the early twenty-first century. Our choice of two contrasting but information-based sectors, call centres and software, allows us to examine continuities and disjunctures from earlier analyses of the significance and experience of work. In particular, a significant intention is to return to earlier sociological examinations of work meanings within broader contexts of family and community attachments.

Debates about the nature of work have always been central to and suggestive of debates about the nature of society and, by a sort of converse logic, it has been periodically claimed that perceived changes in the nature of society and economy will or must have consequences for how work is organized and experienced. The starting point is to ground our enquiry in the intellectual traditions and legacies that have informed studies of work and its meanings, and then to reunite these with present concerns.

## **The classical legacy**

A contemporary philosopher has observed that work 'is not only a kind of activity but a set of ideas and values related to that activity' (Ciulla, 2000: 25). Whilst the underlying values and meanings of physical, spiritual and mental work have always attracted debate (Donkin, 2001), it was the rise of industrial society with its routinized and disciplined production schedules which elevated the institution of paid work to one of the fundamental foci of social analysis. Clearly any book which lays claim to examine the meaning or meanings of work needs first to confront the contemporary relevance of ideas of personal deprivation which the classical social theorists associated with paid work more than one hundred years ago.

One of the longest running themes in social science has been the dialogue between the observation that work can be a dehumanizing or alienating experience and the assertion that this need not be the case. As early industrialism began to reveal its true characteristics, observers such as Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson through to Marx came to the conclusion that employed work in capitalist industrial society seems to divorce us from our true selves as human beings. For the first time, work became abstract and separate from intrinsic human nature, a factor of production that could be measured and combined with technology, land and money to create products with market value. And here was the paradox for, in Kumar's words:

With industrialism, work is placed at the centre, not just of man but of history. Work is the means by which man makes himself... The question 'who am I?', which would formerly have been answered almost everywhere in terms of religion, family or place of origin, could now really be answered only in terms of the occupation a man worked in (Kumar, 1984: 8–9).

Essentially, it was held that the nature of capitalist employment, centred on the cash nexus, denied the worker control over and access to his or her own creativity as a human being, the common factor which linked the critiques of the classical social theorists. The starting point for our exploration, therefore, commences with the works of Marx, Weber and Durkheim, who each arrived at different pathologies in their analysis of work and its meanings under capitalist forms of organization and production.

Marx essentially believed in the redemptionist value of meaningful work performed under worker control. In contrast, capitalism alienated workers both from the end products of their labour and from the labour process itself. Labour power is sought at minimum cost by owners of capital, whose sources of profit rest in cost-minimization through worker exploitation, division and domination, work intensification and ever-increasing control

over production. Under these conditions, work has little meaning other than of oppression:

[The worker] does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery rather than well-being, does not develop freely his mental and physical energies but is physically exhausted and mentally debased (Marx, 1982: 15).

Under capitalism, Marx argued, work becomes an instrumental means for employed workers to acquire money but has little intrinsic value or meaning for them. Neither is the system *expected* to offer meaning or satisfaction and consequently workers' motivations are based on limiting the level of exploitation through reduced effort, by collective action and seeking higher pay, all vigorously contested by their masters. Concepts of alienation, consciousness and class relations between owners of capital and propertyless workers have provided a central theme of subsequent Marxist analysis and the impetus for continuing analysis of the meaning of work under different technological and productive conditions (see, for example, Gorz, 1967; Mallet, 1975; Poulantzas, 1975).

Whilst Marx contended that the system of exploitation could only be overturned through revolutionary means, Durkheim, writing at the end of the nineteenth century and also preoccupied by societal instability provoked by tensions between privileged (owners) and exploited (workers) groups (Salaman, 1981: 42), believed that capitalist oppression could be overcome through reform rather than revolution. He argued that growing economic and social disparities between owners and workers resulted in a state of *anomie* or normlessness, which could be resolved through establishing a new, and shared, moral order based on organic solidarity (Durkheim, 1984). This order would promote societal stability through uniting the different interests reflected in the increasing division of labour found in capitalist societies. Organic solidarity between different interest groups would be sustained through establishing voluntary collective occupational associations which by binding and uniting group interests through shared norms would 'give direction and meaning to work and ... provide safeguards against abuse, exploitation, and overwork' (Hodson, 2001: 27).

Max Weber's ideas developed from his analysis of large organizations, which he saw as operating as rational hierarchies or bureaucracies, bound together by shared beliefs in the legitimacy of the control system which both ensured efficient operation and shared rewards. These bureaucratic organizations also operated according to the rationality of increasing specialization at work and the use of profit and loss accounting procedures leading to 'more systematic, rational and intensive use of labour' (Salaman, 1981: 49) in which 'all the workers become "hands"' (Weber, 1964: 259). According to Hodson, in his development of a theory of dignity at work, it

is this 'formal economic rationality that displaces shared values and sentiments and that undermines meaning and dignity at work' (2001: 27). Consent is given to subordination and domination through the legitimacy proffered to the formal rules associated with each level of the bureaucratic hierarchy, and the allocation of legitimate rewards which derive from the office. The technological accomplishments of the 'iron cage' of bureaucracy carry a cost, however: 'already now ... in all economic enterprises run on modern lines, rational calculation is manifest at every stage. By it, the performance of each individual worker is mathematically measured, each man becomes a little cog in the machine' (Weber, quoted in Hodson, 2001: 28).

### **The meaning of work in the workplace**

From these classical accounts, two factors emerge which are highly relevant for the present enquiry. Firstly, in the early years of industrialization, owners and their managers ruled by imposed control and rarely by consent. Secondly, it was believed that work had little intrinsic meaning for workers other than to satisfy economic needs in this world or to serve as a possible means of salvation in the next. To these we could add a third element that needs to be considered when addressing the issue of work centrality, namely that of context: in other words, meanings of work can be mediated according to different micro (for example organizational) or macro (for example societal) influences. An important and underlying theme of this book, therefore, is the extent to which these twin aspects, control and consent, have been continuously re-enacted and applied through succeeding decades and in different socio-economic contexts.

Early management approaches to work organization took the idea of alienated labour and turned it on its head. At the turn of the nineteenth century, F.W. Taylor's prescriptions were based on the doctrine of the 'rational economic man', in which workers are represented as isolated individuals seeking income maximization. Taylorism was not just an assault on craft control (Braverman, 1974) but also on the craft workers' values of pride in the job. Taylor argued that if workers only want money from work then jobs should be so designed as to eliminate any other bond and to offer the promise of monetary gain in return for enhanced performance.

In return, through the process of scientific management, all discretion and autonomy were to be stripped from work tasks and located in the management function which alone was to determine the ways in which work could be rationalized and conducted to provide the 'one best way' of performing tasks (Rose, 1988; Ritzer, 1996: 24). Arguably, scientific management and its assembly line derivatives are still reflected in wide areas of work organization today. Recent studies suggest that fast-food restaurants demonstrate both elements of Taylorist rationality and of assembly-line technique (Ritzer, 1996: 26). Work in call centres, one of the prime subjects

of our enquiry, has been portrayed metaphorically as 'an assembly line in the head' (Taylor and Bain, 1999).

Drawing upon the Workplace Employee Relations Survey (WERS) 1998 findings and demonstrating continuity with the labour process of an earlier industrialized era (see Baldamus, 1961), Cully *et al.* (1999: 106) also pointed to the presence of another stark and enduring feature of the nature of latter-day capitalism: 'at its heart, the employment relationship is an exchange of effort for earnings'.

From these perspectives, it would appear that work is unlikely to possess intrinsic meaning for those who undertake it. Nevertheless, these consistent but pessimistic conclusions have provoked equally regular responses offering the possibility of replacing such alienating labour with work which is creative, psychologically rewarding and self-fulfilling. These responses have either been pitched at the level of societal change or at the level of organizational reform. For all the historic impact of Marx's revolutionary response, requiring the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement with a more humanistic system, far more numerous have been the evolutionary hopes for a better future. As we shall see in the next chapter, these are usually based on detecting in current socio-economic changes the signs of a new societal epoch, such as post-capitalism (Dahrendorf, 1959), post-industrialism (Bell, 1974), the Information Society (Stonier, 1983; Bell, 1976) and latterly, the knowledge economy (Reich, 1993) and network society (Castells, 1996), under which new socio-economic regimes work would be intrinsically more creative and rewarding.

At the sub-societal level there has been a reiterated theme that capitalist work itself is not intrinsically bad but that it has been, in the past, badly designed and organized. Although, as we have seen above, such a perspective can be traced to Durkheim, it is the human relations school developed by Elton Mayo and his successors that has consistently advocated the redesigning of work in order to enhance its intrinsic satisfactions. Whilst the human relations movement arose to serve managerial interests in response to the perceived failings of Taylorist prescriptions, it did so on an understanding that workers can derive substantive meaning and satisfaction from social relationships and from the intrinsic value of work tasks, expressed in autonomy, praise and fulfillment. The idea that appropriate management strategies can provide satisfying conditions of work was taken up by the neo-human relations theorists such as Maslow (Rose, 1988), in the ubiquitous depiction of whose hierarchy of needs model we find words like vocation, calling, mission, duty, beloved job, even oblation, to describe the sense of dedication and devotion to their work experienced by self-actualizing people. In response came Braverman's (1974) seminal reminder that jobs can be, and frequently have been, deliberately designed to offer *little* intrinsic or extrinsic task satisfaction and that this was not a regrettable by-product of any given phase of technological

development but a conscious organizational strategy to maximize surplus value.

Job re-design, when it has occurred, has always been within the limits of managerial rationality, that is to say the goal has been to increase efficiency rather than create optimally satisfying jobs. There is, nevertheless, in the human relations approach the recognition that there *can* be intrinsic rewards from the performance of work tasks, the closer these get to non-alienative labour; for example, in the greater control the worker has over the whole job. Also, many of the meanings attached to work are not necessarily a direct reflection of either an individual psychological state or the quality of the jobs that people do, but arise from the context in which the work is performed. In this sense, it could be argued that there has been a shift in context over recent years, as increasing numbers of so-called knowledge jobs (it is claimed) depend upon marshalling employees' non-physical cognitive, attitudinal and emotional attributes to contribute to organizational success. In response to perceived cumulative failings in the post-war industrial relations settlement (MacInnes, 1987) and a putative shift at company level towards quality-based competition, there has been a neo-neo human relations reaction proposing a shift from a managerial strategy based on control to one aimed at gaining commitment, in which operational controls over employees are exerted in less direct and visible ways through value-based normative means.

Furthermore, the pre-eminence of Japanese companies in the 1980s generated not only the 'excellence' literature typified by Peters and Waterman (1982), but also led to efforts by many Western companies to emulate the customer-orientated employment practices perceived to have contributed significantly to Japanese economic success (Oliver and Wilkinson, 1992). As the cult of the customer has deepened (du Gay and Salaman, 1992; du Gay, 1996) so management have increasingly publicized their ambitions to seek to win workers' hearts and minds as a critical element in their proclaimed mission to provide high levels of service, quality and efficiency – all at low cost. These ideas were incorporated into the agenda of the new philosophy of human resource management (HRM), which aims to promote direct links between employee feelings of well-being and productivity. Thus, central to every model of HRM is the concept of employee commitment to the organization, with the underlying 'assumption that committed employees will be more satisfied, more productive and more adaptable' (Guest, 1987: 513).

The 1998 Workplace Employee Relations Survey found that differences in employee commitment were 'most closely related to job influence' a factor which 'more than any other indicator ... appears to have captured the essence of the implicit aspects of the employment contract' (Cully *et al.*, 1999: 191). In other words, management have the option to exercise the potential 'to expand the realm of worker power and autonomy' (Hodson,

2001: 198), at least over individual tasks and jobs, and in so doing, contribute positively to workers' orientations toward their employer and to their work. Similar benefits are also anticipated by Heller *et al.* (1998: 190) who point out that participation by employees in organizational decision-making 'works', at least, in the authors' words, 'if conditions are appropriate'. Gaining this commitment, therefore, can be seen as the key to, if not guarantor of, organizational success and has been favourably contrasted with the 'resigned behavioural compliance' exhibited by employees in other (or Taylorist) work regimes. According to Walton (1985), adoption of a strategy of employer-employee 'mutuality' necessitated a radical break with traditional control-orientated approaches to managing the workforce. Instead, managerial style had to move decisively and visibly from a philosophy of seeking to exert control over the workforce to one of developing positive feelings of commitment to the organization by employees.

In his influential article, Walton summarized the essential features of such a 'high commitment work practices' (HCWP) strategy:

Jobs are designed to be broader than before, to combine planning and implementation, and to include efforts to upgrade operations, not just to maintain them. Individual responsibilities are expected to change as conditions change, and teams, not individuals, often are the organization units accountable for performance. With management hierarchies relatively flat and differences in status minimized, control and lateral coordination depend on shared goals. And expertise rather than formal position determines influence. (Walton, 1985: 80)

From this HCWP perspective, work itself is (re)defined and viewed exclusively in relation to the objectives of the organization and to its perceived measures and criteria of success. While the worker is seen as making an important or crucial contribution to these outcomes, and may gain skills and rewards in the process, these potential developments are predicated upon his/her identification with the need for the organization itself to be successful (however this may be measured). Thus, workers' previous formal compliance with work regimes is to be replaced by positive attitudinal and behavioural commitment to the employing organization (Guest, 1987). This expression of worker commitment is reciprocated by management's abandonment of low trust control strategies as they, in turn, exhibit an approach towards the workforce 'expressive of an individualistic "high trust" organisational culture' (Legge, 1995: 175). Nevertheless, contradictions (and continuities) remain: the perennial question of how to materially reward worker commitment has been widely perceived to lie in some form of individualized performance related pay scheme, but:

...with the rise of other ideas, it [incentive pay] became for a time regarded as old-fashioned. Now the pendulum has swung back and

incentive pay is widely seen by management theorists as an essential part of high performance work systems (White *et al.*, 2004: 49)

Whatever the incentive link, it can be seen that the concept and operational framework of mutual commitment is unitarist in character, aimed at not only fusing together the previously discreet interests of employees and employer in 'win-win' work and employment practices and policies but, in the process, banishing conflict from the workplace as well. Images abound of the workforce and management as a team, ship crew or even as a family, with 'senior management as parents and employees as children – at worst rebellious adolescents' (Legge, 1995: 205). For employees, the meaning of work is expressed exclusively in terms of commitment to the organization, which was privileged over any other rival affective source, whether it be trade union, family, craft or profession (Legge, 1995). Organizationally and ideologically, under such a regime, the workplace is transformed into a community in which all have the same interests. The organizational embrace of the 'complete person', in Flecker and Hofbauer's (1998) words, anticipates beyond-contract commitment complemented with deep emotional inputs (Hochschild, 1983). The effects of these can penetrate into all aspects of living, ascribing a dedicated meaning to work which is all-consuming, and epitomized by the 'organization man' first propounded by William H. Whyte Jr. (1956) fifty years ago.

A radically different re-definition of the meaning of work has been proposed by Cappelli (1999), against the background of sustained economic boom and growing labour market supply problems in the USA in the late 1990s. This perspective bears certain similarities to earlier notions that work was being increasingly characterized by those pursuing 'portfolio careers' (Handy, 1994), and that few people would be in long-term salaried employment (Reich, 1993). Cappelli argued that the traditional (and 'psychological') employment contract between employer and employee had been torn asunder by the pull of market forces, and the rise of the labour market had been 'perhaps the most important development in the world in the past generation' (Cappelli, 1999: viii). While the traditional career-based employment relationship was like a marriage, the new one 'is like a lifetime of divorces and remarriages' (Cappelli, 1999: 2). Accordingly, long-term commitment by either employer or employee should be accepted as a thing of the past: 'the old goal of HR management – to minimize overall employee turnover – needs to be replaced by a new goal: to influence who leaves and when'. (Cappelli, 1999: 9) Nevertheless, some form of employee commitment was clearly still necessary, and this was to be achieved through careful selection of new employees, and by encouraging 'ownership' of the project and identification with team rather than with the organization (Cappelli, 1999: 11).

The optimistic view of free worker choice predicated on strong and secure labour markets may then be contrasted with an alternative

perspective in which labour market fragmentation is actively promoted and pursued by employers unwilling or unable to offer employee security in a competitive economic environment. For peripheral employees and marginal groups, employment stability and progression can be jettisoned as employers turn to labour market flexibility, whilst contemporaneously and one-sidedly seeking loyalty and commitment from their workers. Here, the meaning of work becomes infused with potential ambiguity, as workers attempt to come to terms both ideologically and practically with their apparent disposability and short-term value whilst confronted with senior executive rhetoric about their worth as their company's valued assets.

Arguably, it is in those areas where employees possess sought-after skills and qualities that commitment approaches may be most eagerly applied by employers. One might also anticipate that knowledge workers would be recipients (and promoters) of such high trust initiatives. Emerging from this analysis, the central linked questions which this book raises concern both the extent and depth of application of these commitment initiatives. We also ask whether under contemporary managerial commitment-seeking regimes operating in changing socio-economic conditions, employees do find greater meaning to their work than in earlier epochs, or simply respond to management initiatives on pragmatic and defensive grounds. Certainly, the omens to date have not been too encouraging. The response of the 'human resources' themselves to the plethora of high commitment techniques, not to mention the ascendancy of HRM practice in management circles generally, has been, in the main, to exhibit few of the characteristics associated with greater commitment to work (however this was defined or measured). Contrary to what might have been expected after almost twenty years of HRM and latterly the application of bundles of high commitment practices, 'workers reveal no widespread belief in any sense of obligation to the firms who employ them' (Taylor, 2002a: 11). People may be working harder (Green, 2001), but the reasons for this may not necessarily derive from greater employee attachment to their work (see for example, Ramsay *et al.*, 2000: 521). Our analysis in later chapters takes us further, however, as the very concept of organizational commitment, a prime objective of modern management and their advisors, begins to dissolve when placed under analytical scrutiny.

Hence, a related area of our enquiry centres around organizational contexts – the work group, the craft or profession, the employing organization – all of which offer sources of meaning and identity which are not necessarily intrinsic to the work tasks themselves. In addition to its economic reward, work has always been looked to for opportunities for social interaction and a source of personal identity (du Gay, 1996: 10). Hodson (2001: 203) identifies four principal ways in which co-workers can offer significant layers of meaning to work: socialization to occupational

norms; solidarity and mutual defense; resistance to authority and role distancing; and affirmation of occupational, class and gender identities. Occupational norms are sustained through a combination of interaction with group members, self-regulation and internalization of informal rules which, by competing with managerial (or indeed other work group) definitions of occupational boundaries and limits of control, serve to provide distinctive meanings to work. These meanings can also be deepened through association with specific occupational qualities such as exposure to danger, traditions of loyalty to co-workers and expectations of fairness of treatment.

Hodson points out that group identity, solidarity and mutual defense can arise from potential challenges from managers or other workers and is based on Goffee's (1981) formulation of 'the sense of involvement and attachment' which arises from 'shared experiences of work' (Hodson, 2001: 204). Working groups can create the potential to resist management through the social sabotage of undermining authority (see Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999) and at the same time create personal bonds which can serve to add meaning to otherwise meaningless labour. This latter point is ably demonstrated by early ethnographic work accounts such as those by Terkel (1974) and more recently in a participant study by Cavendish. When asked why she stuck with dirty work conducted in highly uncongenial assembly line conditions, one of Cavendish's female colleagues replied simply: 'because they are such a wonderful crowd in here'. Cavendish (1982: 147) reported that 'everyone pulled together, and looked after each other – otherwise she [her colleague] would have left long ago. She hadn't a bad word to say against any of them, and she thought that was the reason they all stayed'. Similar sentiments can be found in Ehrenreich's (2001) contemporary account of low-wage labour in the US. These comments link in directly with Hodson's (2001: 205) fourth point, that co-workers 'provide a forum for affirming group identities, including class and gender identities'. The case study conducted by Cavendish examined women working on an assembly line. Other studies have demonstrated that gendered workplace norms can be mobilized to emphasize masculine qualities embedded in and protective of prestigious occupations and tasks (Ledwith and Colgan, 1996). As is examined in later chapters, gendered work can therefore add a substantial layer of subjective meaning to work.

These contextual perspectives, where social and group identity can offer meanings to work which prevail over mundane or even oppressive work conditions, possibly help to explain the reasons why nearly fifty years of asking variants of the Morse and Weiss (1955) 'lottery' question have provided repeated demonstrations that a majority of employees would wish to continue working even if they had the financial means to exist without it.

## The meaning of work in social life

In examining the meaning of work in the contemporary economy, the contextual interface between work and domestic life is also a vital factor. As we saw above, the Marxian concept of alienation is key to any attempt to answer questions concerning the role that work plays in the worker's life. For Marx (1982: 15) 'the worker therefore feels himself at home only during his leisure time, whereas at work he feels homeless'. It is significant that Marx, in demonstrating alienation within capitalist employment, was also demonstrating the sharp distinction that had arisen between work and non-work life. The industrial era consolidated a social and geographical separation of work from all other areas of social life and from the sets of social relationships which characterized family, household, community, leisure, politics and religion.

Yet, although work under capitalism is not imbued with the intricacies of meaning it may possess in societies where these areas of social action are less functionally specialized, work and non-work do impinge on each other in ways that, because they are seen as nominally separate, can be problematic. For Marx, for example, the worker is also physically exhausted and mentally debased by wage-labour. For workers under early industrialism, work was undoubtedly a central issue in their lives not least because it occupied such a large amount of their waking time. It is important though to distinguish between such quantitative work centrality and situations of qualitative centrality where people may find the endeavour of work to be intrinsically important and meaningful. The 'meaning of work' for the individual, as a combination of both of these dimensions, is the part that work plays in the totality of his/her life. Thus, the non-work part of our lives, including family, class, educational background, position in the life-cycle, local community structures and values, is another mediating and meaning-creating context for attaching meaning to our work. These issues are addressed in the central empirical chapters of this book.

One of the major contributions of British post-war sociology of work was to move away from a narrow concern with job satisfaction and explore the meaning which work held for employees within this wider social setting. This was pursued through a series of classic occupational studies of miners, steelworkers, shipbuilders, dockworkers, farmworkers and fishermen (see for example, Brown *et al.*, 1972; Dennis *et al.*, 1956; Newby, 1972; Bulmer, 1975). The early single-industry community studies seem to demonstrate, in retrospect, that the cash nexus basis of the employment relationship could, under specific historical circumstances, be overlain with orientations of collectivism and occupational identity which permeated not just work, but community and social life, to the extent that work could become a central life interest (Dubin, 1956) even though that work might be hazardous and performed under unpleasant conditions. Focusing on the inter-

actions between work and wider social life inevitably involved engaging not just with contemporary forms of work organization but with the more elusive concepts of community and class, whose traditional patterns appeared to be challenged at the time by the growth of newer industries and related emergence and expansion of technical, white-collar and professional workers (Armstrong *et al.*, 1986; Smith, 1987).

This concern with the role of work in social life reached its culmination with the *Affluent Worker* studies of workers' orientations to work and life in the 1960s (Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1968). Goldthorpe, Lockwood and their colleagues found that, for the car workers, engineers and chemical workers of Luton, the traditional attitudes of 'solidaristic collectivism' had been replaced, not by middle-class identification as was widely claimed at the time, but by a working-class privatized orientation in which employees related to work instrumentally in order to support household based social and economic activities. As had been concluded earlier by Dubin (1956), most industrial workers, outside a few atypical occupational communities, did not see work as a 'central life interest'. Instead, work seems to provide the basis for social and domestic consumption but workers' prime focus of loyalty now lay with home and family. Family structures were nuclear rather than extended and there was little coincidence between patterns of socializing and workplace relationships.

These classic studies of the interaction between workplace and household were carried out in an era of Fordist industrialism, characterized by big workplaces, with predominantly male manual employees, high levels of trade union membership, extensive collective bargaining coverage and full and secure employment. Ironically, however, the publication of the *Affluent Worker* studies coincided with the beginning of the twilight of the post-war consensus; the next few years would see the end of more than twenty years of full employment, and the abandoning of a shared belief in Keynesian demand management allied to a redistributive welfare system. At the same time, the profile of the labour market would shift away from manufacturing towards services (the Vauxhall plant at Luton finally ceased car production during this research project). Observers of the remaining decades of the century again claimed to see a time of structural and attitudinal change.

When examining the meaning of work in the lives of employed people in the early twenty-first century, it is useful to compare the characteristics of mid-century industrialism, above, with the currently widely disseminated models of the 'information society' or 'knowledge economy', where 'economic value is found more in the intangibles, such as new ideas, software, services and relationships, and less in tangibles, like physical products, tons of steel or acres of land' (Newell *et al.*, 2002). Economic activity is held to be characterized by different organizational forms and trends towards geographically dispersed smaller scale workplaces, a more

feminized workforce, a far wider range of contractual employment arrangements, flexibility of work organization resulting in significant variability in such fundamental conditions of employment as patterns of working time, and the almost universal use of information and communication technologies. This is also, as we have seen above, the context for propagation of the HRM agenda, stressing employee commitment to the organization.

Nevertheless, the extent to which this all-pervasive model is found in organizational settings may be diminished by the uncertain and pressurized reality of people's working and domestic lives which, in turn, points to more instrumental and contingent meanings extended to work. On one hand, employees may recognize more readily their insecure and commodity status under tight and dynamic economic conditions, under which employers are unable to extend to employees the institutional and behavioural commitment (in terms of security, career, development, progression etc) which can provide the reciprocal context for employee attachment to their work (Thompson, 2003). It has been persuasively argued that recognition of one's career vulnerability in the contemporary organization may be accompanied by profound and disturbing effects: disillusionment and fragmentation of occupational *and* personal identities leading, in Sennett's (1998) words, to an inevitable 'corrosion of character'. At the same time, the meaning of work to employees is likely to be affected by complex interactions between work and non-work influences, such as child-rearing and domestic responsibilities. Labels such as 'working Mum' and 'part-time Father' testify to the potential identity tensions lurking in the contemporary economy, tensions which may be exacerbated by Hochschild's (1997) claimed contrast between the relative order and continuity associated with paid labour and the disorder, frustration and lack of control experienced in coping with domestic life, such that 'work becomes home and home becomes work'.

An invisible, and more subtle, mediating and legitimizing context which contributes to the meanings we attach to work and employment is provided by the wider society and its hegemonic or 'taken for granted' values, more usually referred to as the 'work ethic'. The changes in the societal work ethic which accompanies the industrial separation of work from life have been the subject of historical analysis by Weber (1992), Tawney (1926), Bendix (1967) and Anthony (1977). The Protestant Work Ethic, as interpreted by nineteenth-century employers, legislators and educationalists, emphasized the moral significance and value of effort, obedience and duty, and paid work became both symbolic of this ethic and a universal moral obligation for everyone (Anthony, 1977). Similar manifestations of a culturally-shrouded duty-based work ethic abound across other countries, including those where its assimilation has been stimulated through trade, commerce, conquest and more recently, through globalization (Castells, 2000: 132). For example, in a popular text, Donkin (2001:

212–13) argues that: ‘the background to the Japanese work ethic is not so very different to that of the West. There are strong parallels between the rise of the work ethic in western Nonconformism and the way that different social classes under the Tokugawa Shogunate drew on elements of Confucianism and Buddhism to deal with a strictly imposed social order’.

Whilst a work ethic may be embedded in the cultures of industrialized and post industrialized countries, its existence can also be promoted to serve the practical and political purposes of ensuring that sufficient labour is available to meet the needs of the economy. Hence in a recent report, it was pointed out that ‘the [UK] Department of Trade and Industry emphasized the need to encourage more women to participate in the labour market in order to help improve the country’s competitive performance’ (Taylor, 2002b). One consequence of this has been, through a combination of incentives and sanctions, to attempt to inculcate labour market awareness and heightened sense of social responsibility into single non-employed mothers and other disadvantaged groups:

The paid work ethic lies at the core of the Government’s social and economic policies. Employment opportunities for all has become one of its favourite mantras... It is widely argued that it is only through active and paid participation in formalized labour markets that men and women as worker citizens can achieve both increased prosperity and personal salvation... Integration into active participation in paid work has become a crucial test for the Government of what it constitutes as social citizenship. (Taylor, 2002b: 7–8)

Notwithstanding any tendencies toward universal conformity, there can still remain significant national cultural differences in the values attached to work (Hofstede, 1991). This was shown by the international *Meaning of Work* survey in which work centrality was defined as ‘the degree of general importance that work has in the life of an individual at any given time,’ (MOW, 1987: 81). Although the study did not find work as *the* most important activity in respondents’ lives, it did find that work came second only to family (40 per cent placed family as most important as opposed to 27 per cent who placed work as being most important). In this early cross-national study, British workers were apparently found to be less work focused than other countries, particularly Japan. Nevertheless, more recent studies paint a different picture, suggesting that British employees work longer hours than most (Green, 2001), although they may express rising levels of dissatisfaction at doing so. Their application and commitment to work are demonstrated in the ways in which work impacts upon the daily lives of workers and managers in both qualitative and quantitative ways (Hyman *et al.*, 2003).

It is not external contextual factors alone that shape meanings attributed to paid work. The international *Meaning of Work* survey (MOW, 1987)

found that age, nationality and gender had an impact on work centrality. Work centrality appears to increase with age, which may provide one explanation as to why older people believe that their work ethic is greater than the next generation. Work centrality also appears to be affected by gender, with men attaching greater importance to work than women (Harpaz and Snir, 2003; Hakim, 1996). Clearly this may reflect divisions of domestic labour in society and the higher representation of women within the part time labour force. One of the factors that the MOW survey did not examine was the impact of 'newer' societal structures on work centrality. A recent US study indicated that between 1970 and 1997, a major shift took place from male-breadwinner to dual-earner couples. During the same period, total working hours for men and women increased, and in a growing number of cases substantially, raising concerns both about the 'over-worked American' and the consequent capacities of these employees to undertake domestic responsibilities (Schor, 1991). High growth in working hours was further concentrated in higher-educated workers, a demographic trend also found in the UK (Jacobs and Gerson, 2001; Dex, 1999; Wolf, 2002).

These factors may also mediate between feelings about work. As we saw above, high proportions of respondents to the *Meaning of Work* survey placed family as their most important activity. If work is hardening both in its intensity and number of hours worked whilst demands are made upon employees from domestic commitments, it is clear that heightened tensions between the two domains may emerge. This may be especially relevant for women, who are participating more in the paid labour market, whilst still continuing as the major contributor to domestic labour in the 'second shift' (Newell, 1993).

### **Structure of the book**

It is clear from the above, necessarily concentrated, overview that, when an employee talks about 'the meaning' of his or her work, they can be referring to a complex amalgam of values derived from a number of different levels of experience. There can be an element in paid employment which is something to be sought after for ethical as well as for economic cash nexus reasons. Additional meanings may be derived from the role which the work plays in wider family or community life, and the degree to which the particular job is part of an identity-sustaining professional or occupational community. How work is actually experienced will be influenced by the managerial style of the organization, the intrinsic and extrinsic reward systems in place, the structure of work organization (such as team work or assembly line) and the content and design of the actual job, tempered by prior dispositions of the employees themselves.

These different perspectives form the basis of our research objectives which are addressed in subsequent chapters. Following our opening exploration in this chapter of the contexts and meanings of work identified in earlier and more recent theoretical and empirical accounts, Chapter 2 follows thematically and analyzes in more detail the changing terrain for work and employment, focusing on the key conceptual and empirical contexts that frame and influence our study. In Chapters 3 to 8 we develop our empirical analysis to present different manifestations of working in our chosen sectors of call (or contact) centres and software development. Chapter 3 looks at the organization of work and nature of working in these two sectors. Chapter 4 focuses on a key ascribed management ambition related to working in the new economy, that of capturing and utilizing the commitment of workers, and the role of human resource management in these dynamic sectors of the economy. Chapter 5 portrays the occupational infrastructure of the two sectors by analyzing and contrasting differences in skills profiles, qualifications and career ambitions and trajectories. Chapter 6 widens the focus from the workplace to the household and community, contrasting the experiences of both sets of workers and their families in attempting to establish a measure of control and meaning to their lives. Chapter 7 builds upon this theme by analyzing the working lives and experiences of women and men in the different sectors and considers the prospects for gender equality. The final substantive chapter, Chapter 8, examines the evidence for class differentiation, based on background, experience and attitudes, in posing the question of whether class is still an issue and framework for self-location and identity in contemporary Britain. The concluding chapter draws on our empirical evidence to indicate the extent to which the experience and meaning of work in the new economy represents a departure or continuation from previous interpretations of orientations to work.

### **Research setting: Scottish call centre work and software development**

The study is based in Scotland, which provides an excellent opportunity to explore connections between changing forms and conditions of employment and the meaning of work at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Its transformation from a base of traditional manufacturing and heavy industry provides a suitable prism for the broader study of work and change in the contemporary economy and society. Not only has Scotland been a major location for new employment sectors, but the relative compactness and self-contained nature of its labour market make a focused analysis of employment trends more feasible than in more diffuse economies. The resonance of Scotland's industrial heritage during this transition to new employment settings therefore provides an appropriate

backdrop for the examination of changes in the meaning of work. Thirty years ago, Scottish society and economy was still dominated by the presence of coal, steel, shipbuilding and heavy engineering. As these large-scale industrialized workplaces declined, they were replaced by jobs in new manufacturing areas such as microelectronics and in new areas of service-sector employment. These were often held to be characterized by geographically dispersed smaller workplaces, a more feminized workforce, a diversity of employment contracts, work organization and working time flexibility and widespread use of flexible information technologies.

On the basis of ICT-based research undertaken prior to the commencement of the reported project (Taylor and Bain, 1997; Beirne *et al.*, 1998), two sectors of the Scottish economy which we would expect to epitomize the characteristics of new work are call centres and software development. Previous studies indicate that call centres display important features of the archetypal contemporary organization: for example, the workforce is composed of a majority of women, often young and who work on a variety of temporally flexible work arrangements (Taylor and Bain, 1999). Although organization of work is arguably based on Taylorist principles, it also reflects a contemporary emphasis on flat management structures, team-working and management attention to gaining employee commitment. Moreover, both numbers of call centres and aggregate employment have expanded spectacularly, extending to virtually every economic sector and rooted in their key role in the cost-effective transformation of the processes and loci of interactive customer servicing. In Scotland, the sector grew from 16,000 employees in 1997 to 46,000 by 2000 and continued less dramatically thereafter to 56,000 by 2003 (Taylor and Bain, 2003b: 1). Financial services, media/telecommunications, travel, information technology and utilities employed the largest numbers, and outsourcing accounted for 1-in-5 call centre jobs.

Software, at the time of the study, was the largest global knowledge-based industry. In 2000, the European market was growing at 10 per cent per annum, and even faster in Scotland (15 per cent) (Ramsay, 1999). The UK market was estimated to be worth some £32 billion (ONS, 2000a) with a further £632 million for computer services activities by other firms. The Scottish software supply industry typifies the diversity of organizations employing IT developers. These include independent houses, often owner-managed, providing customized packages for other organizations. Large concentrations of software engineers are also found in organizational subsections of finance, public service, telecommunications and other sectors. The Labour Force Survey 2000 estimated some 9,000 computer systems managers, 14,600 software engineers and 19,000 computer analysts employed in Scotland, with software divisions of large organizations representing 45 per cent, and individual contractors and sole traders accounting for 17 per cent of the workforce (ONS, 2000b).

Software supply was seen as representing the archetypal knowledge work, seeking employees with good academic qualifications and technical proficiency within a context of rapidly changing skills demands, and providing working environments with responsible autonomy and flexible employment conditions, including sub-contracting and project work (see Beirne *et al.*, 1998). Nevertheless, little was known about the management and control of these workers or their attachment to work and organization.

## **Methodology**

Four call centre and four software operations were originally selected as case studies for this project. The study commenced in December 1998, with fieldwork conducted between September 1999 and February 2002. During this period, there were considerable changes in the external market, and to the nature and volume of the product/service in both sectors. Actual and planned changes in ownership, through mergers and takeovers, as well as significant and continuous management reorganization and turnover, were characteristic of the extremely volatile situation in the case study organizations. This wider context, as well as a detailed description of each case study organization, is described below.

There were three principal design phases to the project. The first phase involved producing descriptive background profiles of both sector and community. Together with product and labour market statistics, this background information allowed us to identify an appropriate sampling strategy. The sampling strategy was to represent, as far as was feasible, the overall profile of the two sectors, distinguishing between city and non-city locations, establishment size and type of product or service. Owing to the diversity and large population of small software houses, the number of software case studies was expanded from four to six.<sup>1</sup>

Teams of four or five researchers were designated to each of the companies, with each member of the full project team participating in at least three case studies, providing researchers with exposure to both software and call centre settings. Each team was responsible for gathering key company information from documents, statistics and records, attendance at meetings, observation of work and training sessions and through guided conversations with key groups of informants. This process yielded substantial data on company history, structure, environment, key developments, employment policies, work organization, arrangements for employee voice and key themes emerging from managers' and employees' experiences of their workplaces.

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1 The sixth company, Kappa, ceased trading during the period of the fieldwork and for this reason is not included in the subsequent analysis.

Toward the end of this data-gathering process, which typically required three or four months in each organization, a detailed written questionnaire was distributed to structured samples of respondents in call centres and whole populations in the software houses. This process was usually extended over some weeks to account for different shifts, holidays and absence. The questionnaire was designed to capture perceptions and attitudes toward the job, the company, representation, work-life linkages and biographical details. Structured information on working hours, shifts and career history was also gathered. Sections were standardized to allow cross-company comparability and questions were constructed from established scales (for example job control, satisfaction indices) or designed specifically for the project (for example on social and family networks). In total, 1,183 questionnaires were returned with a high overall response rate of 62 per cent. Further details of the survey can be found in Appendix A and B.

Employees' and managers' work experiences were investigated further through semi-structured interviews, drawing on issues that emerged from the earlier phase. Representative groups of employees were each interviewed at their workplaces, with recorded interviews lasting about 90 minutes. These interviews probed work and educational histories and their relationship to the present job; experiences of working in the company; work-life linkages and future plans; and perceptions of society, class and status. Between 17 and 26 of these interviews were conducted in each company, except for the small software start-up (Lambda) where three were undertaken. Details of these interviews can be found in Appendix A, Table A.3. To obtain further information on software workers, where the dynamics of the labour process are less accessible than in call centres, small cohorts of software workers were also asked to complete work and home diaries for one week.

The final phase of the study comprised off-site interviews conducted with a sample of respondents selected from the company interview phase. Four companies were chosen, split equally on the basis of city and non-city location. The subject-matter of these interviews shifted beyond the workplace to provide short biographies and to engage with issues of work-life boundaries, domestic and community life and non-work identity. In all, 26 of these in-depth recorded interviews were conducted.

## **Case study organizations**

### **The call centre companies**

The four call centre organizations, operating in financial services, travel, telecommunications/entertainment, and outsourcing, were selected to be representative of the sectoral locus of call centre work in Scotland, although the choice of industries was representative of the wider UK call centre market. The companies were also differentiated by their city and small town

locations. Table 1.1 summarizes these features of each call centre case study. In addition to product diversity, the case studies exhibited other features – differing managerial emphases on quality and quantity, inbound and outbound call handling, a variety of shift arrangements – which underlined the fact that, despite common defining characteristics, call centres and their workflows are not uniform. For example, at one end are centres/workflows where simple, straightforward servicing and selling transactions predominate (‘volume’ operations are the most common) while, at the other, customer interaction is more complex (‘value’ operations).

Notably all four case studies commenced operations between 1995 and 1998, during the period of the UK call centre sector’s swiftest expansion. Call centres promised significant cost savings and enhanced revenue generation as a result of the centralization of hitherto geographically dispersed front office servicing or sales operations, or through the creation of entirely new operations. In the UK the potential for economies of scale, overheads reduction and new selling opportunities was first exploited in the finance sector through the successes of branchless banking (First Direct) and insurance (Direct Line) (Bain and Taylor, 2002a; Taylor and Bain, 1999), which then acted as a catalyst for the diffusion of the call centre model through diverse economic sectors. Wherever customer servicing could be conducted remotely the call centre emerged as the dominant model.

Centralization of function and process lies at the very heart of the call centre. Thus, activities at our case studies were concentrated on single sites and conducted by sizeable workforces, from 170 to 530 employees. It should be noted, additionally, that the mean size of a call centre in Scotland was 235 during our period of study (Bain and Taylor, 2002b) and almost three-quarters of the sectoral workforce were employed in establishments of 250

*Table 1.1* Profile of call centre case studies

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Sector</i>	<i>Services provided</i>	<i>Year opened</i>	<i>Workforce size</i>
Entcomm	Non-city	Telecomms/ entertainment	Customer service, sales, transfers	1998	530
Holstravel	Non-city	Holidays/ travel	Sales, enquiries, some customer service	1997	340
Moneyflow	City	Financial services	Sales, customer service	1995	170
Thejobshop	City	Various/ outsourcer	Customer service, sales, IT/technical support, telemarketing	1998	320–400

or more staff. The majority of call centres, therefore, our case studies included, are very much gathered organizations (Handy, 1985).

The financial services company Moneyflow, which specializes in mortgages, insurance and unsecured loans, employed 170 at its Glasgow call centre at the time of our research. Two discreet types of work, or workflow,<sup>2</sup> could be distinguished, and these reflect distinct telephonic services providing non-secured and secured loans respectively, which corresponded to the 'unregulated' and 'regulated' sides of the business.

Thejobshop is an outsourced call centre located in Glasgow whose on-site employment levels fluctuated between 320 and 400, as operations conducted on behalf of clients expanded and contracted. The core, preferred clients provided the greatest revenue and promoted Thejobshop's quality reputation, while smaller business clients took advantage of low start-up costs realized through the utilization of spare capacity, and the exploitation of a flexible internal labour market. Contractual agreements between Thejobshop and clients, closely allied to the type of service or product offered, influenced the nature of work organization. Contracts included Service Level Agreements (SLAs), a universal feature of the call centre sector, which stipulate the volume and percentage of calls to be answered within set time limits, plus variable combinations of performance criteria.

Entcomm, a large US multinational employing 530 people located in a small ex-industrial town near Glasgow, provided its UK customers with a range of services related to its cable-delivered telecommunications and entertainment products, including inquiries, billing, payments, booking or changing packages, repairs and maintenance. Holstravel is a large, long-established travel and holiday organization. At its call centre in a former industrial area in Central Scotland, 340 were employed, of whom 86 per cent were call handling staff, known as Travel Consultants.

### **The software companies**

The five software case studies were selected to be representative of the diversity of the software supply sector. Two of the four Scottish-based firms studied were small (Pi and Lambda); one was medium (Gamma); and one medium-large (Omega). Our final case study was represented by a large division of a UK-wide organization (Beta). Four offered systems integration options to clients and all offered a combination of software maintenance and custom applications, and with on site support. Three

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2 The use of the term 'workflow' follows that of Frenkel *et al.* (1999: 36) where it is defined 'as a structured set of tasks (work) leading to a specified output (defined to include services) oriented toward a particular market', acknowledging that workplaces often embrace multiple forms of work organization.

(Pi, Gamma and Lambda) were essentially single product companies offering a full package from installation, integration and support; Omega and Beta offered a range of custom applications, although Omega tended to use established software platforms whilst Beta was involved in more cutting edge and long-term developments within the telecommunications sector. Both Omega and Beta were multi-location organizations with a combination of company-located and virtual teams, although the latter were more evident in Beta. These features of the five case study organizations are summarized in Table 1.2.

Although at the time of the research, Scotland had a growing software industry, there were still few large indigenous firms. This has a significant impact on Scotland's ability to participate in an international market, and to attract and retain skills. Approximately 38 per cent of all software employees in Scotland were employed in indigenous software firms (the largest of which, Omega, employed about 200 people). The remaining workers were employed within autonomous software divisions of large organizations (45 per cent), sole traders (2 per cent), and individual contractors (15 per cent) (ONS, 2000b).

The software houses were selected to represent a range of employment contexts in the sector. Beta was the software arm of a former publicly owned utility and provided mainly internal support to the large established telecommunications company of which it is a part. Following some restructuring and substantial job losses in the late 1990s, the software centre had moved to a new high-tech office building in 1999. A significant proportion of the 275 employees were based at the main office in Glasgow with the remainder in a satellite office in Edinburgh.

Omega was a fast-growing software house, established in the 1980s to become one of the largest independent Scottish software houses and was still directed by one of its founders. It operated from its main office in Edinburgh and another site in southern England with 137 permanent employees and 111 contractors (not all of whom were working at any one time) based in Scotland. There were 50 employees at the southern site, mainly working on AS400 technology and combination of new build and maintenance work generally for commercial sector clients. The Edinburgh office generated much of its work on the basis of long-term links with government, the health service and some financial sector organizations. A significant proportion of Omega's work was undertaken on client sites. At the time of the study the satellite office in England had just undergone restructuring and a number of employees had been made redundant. This was the only experience of redundancies within the history of the organization.

One medium-sized and two smaller independent firms (Gamma, Pi and Lambda) employed 150, 50 and 20 employees respectively. Pi was founded in 1977 as a one person business in Aberdeen, establishing the current head

Table 1.2 Profile of software case studies

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Primary market</i>	<i>Product/Services provided</i>	<i>Year opened</i>	<i>Workforce size</i>
Beta	City	Telecommunications; internal clients	Bespoke telephone operations; robotic tools; database integration; financial systems	Former public sector utility; restructured software centre 1999	275
Gamma	Non-city	Major database users, initially manufacturing, but in recent years financial and business services	Systems integration of front/end operations; open systems development; bespoke CRM systems; subcontractor linking major platforms for clients	1986	150
Lambda	Non-city	Insurance; IT multinationals	Health and safety recording software	1996	20
Omega	City	Public sector, health services, financial services	Applications development, resourcing, testing, client support; AS400 technology	1985	248
Pi	City	Law firms	Legal and business software development, testing, support, training & maintenance.	1977/1999	50

office in Edinburgh in 1999. Pi had around 50 employees at the time of the study, with intentions to expand. The business was divided evenly between England and Scotland with additional clients in Wales, Eire and Nairobi. The nature of the work for the organization had changed considerably with the introduction of the personal computer and recently there had been much more investment into the software side of the organization. The organization also had a large development department to make sure that the software was kept up to date.

Gamma was located across five sites in the UK and with outposts in Sydney and Jakarta. The Head Office (and focus for the fieldwork) was located on the outskirts of Glasgow. The company had grown quickly in recent years, developing and providing software for front-end business solutions, principally for call centres and small and medium-sized clients. Consequently, over half of the work was outplaced to client sites, both in the UK and overseas. The owner and chief executive had designed a flat organizational structure, where staff would not be confined by formal job descriptions, job titles or reward structure. About 150 staff were employed in commercial, development and deployment teams.

Lambda was established in 1996 as a four-person management buy-out of a local engineering company's health and safety recording system, which they had developed. The software produced by Lambda filled a perceived gap in the market, and was essentially a management tool for reviewing and prompting risk assessments and recording and analyzing accidents, which could also be bolted on to personnel and training files. The company initially experienced rapid growth and, by 2001, employed twenty staff in their Scottish office. Lambda also part-owned an Australian software firm, and had also opened an office in Hong Kong. The managing director claimed that Lambda had not been making big profits, but had re-invested heavily in order to grow the company. While health and safety expertise had been their focus, the company emphasized that their skills were in software generally. As with other smaller software case studies, the organizational structure was flat, with few specialisms, and largely project-driven.

All five surviving software organizations were located in Scotland's central belt, almost equally distributed between the greater Glasgow and greater Edinburgh areas. With the exception of Beta, all were Scottish owned start-ups, still run by the founder or founders. Their demographic characteristics generally matched the profile of the software sector in the UK and Europe – a young professional workforce with over two-thirds aged between 21 and 40. The general dominance of men in software work was reflected particularly in Beta (where four-fifths of survey respondents were male) but less so in Omega (two-thirds male) where the founder was a woman.

## **Summary**

Having outlined the historical and theoretical background to our exploration of meanings of work in the contemporary knowledge economy and provided a framework for the context and descriptions of the case study companies operating in this economy, the next chapter looks in closer conceptual, empirical and critical detail at the changing socio-economic contexts in which employment relationships are located. This leads to an examination of the impact of key distinguishing features of the knowledge economy, in terms of heightened competition, globalization and information and communication technology on work organization and working patterns.

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