MONASH UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS

LABOUR MARKET INFORMATION AND THE EMPLOYMENT COMPLEX: INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF RISK AND TRUST

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ABSTRACT

This paper formulates a conceptual model that makes it possible to describe how systems of work adapt to changes in the environment and maintain internal cohesion in the face of potentially conflictual interests and goals within a work community. Two institutional structures are described: 'labour market information' which performs the function of reducing uncertainty originating in the economy and thus enables risk to be calculated; and the 'employment complex' which reduces normative uncertainty, enabling actors to invest commitment into the system and thereby operate on the basis of trust. The capacity to define risk and to reproduce trust are claimed here to improve the system's survival capability through the conservation of resources.

Four institutionalised forms of information are identified: prices of wages and salaries; labour market projections; corporate prestige; and demographics. The bases of systemic trust are proposed as: the employment contract; career paths; industrial citizenship; and credentialling systems.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the mechanisms that manage the linkages between the labour market and the employment complex.

1. Introduction

This paper describes components of a conceptual model of the organisation of work. Its concern is with the question of how work in modern societies displays enduring and persistent patterns (i.e. a degree of stability) in the face of continually changing demands and pressures that derive from social and economic development. 'Work' is defined generally as the transformation of the effort of workers into production. Following Marshall (1958), this implies two components: the availability of a supply of labour; and a willingness on the part of workers to release effort. The particular focus of this paper is on the supply of labour, examining two types of structure in societal-level systems of work: those that enable adaptation to qualitative and quantitative shifts in demand for labour (posed as a problem of the management of 'risk'); and those that provide for the co-ordination and control of a complex social division of labour (posed as a problem of the management of 'trust').

The model builds on three key premises. First, the focus of the paper is on the *institutional* mechanisms rather than on underlying forces or on concrete activity. Second, that work constitutes a *system* of inter-related structures, processes and activities. Third, conceptualising work as a system of institutionalised practices requires an understanding of the external conditions (such as the mode of production) that impact on the organisation of work. A final point is that the paper is concerned with a conceptual rather than theoretical model. Therefore, the paper concentrates on the specification and refinement of concepts with the aim of achieving adequate description of the complex phenomena of work rather than on the development of a substantive theory of the evolution of various forms of work in modern societies.

This paper is concerned with the *institutionalised* forms of the system of work.. That is with the well-established, persistent and relatively stable features that can be said to shape or determine work activity. For example, the price of wages is the institutionalised form of information about the value of labour; or the 'work role' is defined by institutionalised expectations with respect to the uncertainties of work performance. This institutional level is distinct from empirical or observable events (Bhaskar

1978). For example, a mode of production (such as 'capitalism') may impose generic demands on organisations which are managed through the institutionalisation of work roles.[1] While the work role may define patterns of expected activity there is always deviation between the role and the observable behaviours displayed by the role-incumbent in their performance of role.[2] Similarly, competition favours enterprises that are able to extract profits that reflect the true value of the factors of production. Information about the true value takes a particular institutionalised form – price.

Thus, a system of work is defined here in terms of the internal components and the boundary between the system and its environment. The environment is proposed to comprise systems that, in a sense, contain the system of work. Because the environment is itself made up of dynamic systems, the survival of systems of work depend on their capacity to continually adapt to external changes and to maintain a degree of internal stability and integration.

The environment of work comprises four independent systems that, together, establish the boundaries of a system of work. These are: the economy; organisations; an industrial relations system; and what might be called 'lifeworlds' or the various patterns of lifestyle characterising a society at a particular time and place.[3] These external systems can be seen as generating demands that are reflected in the way work is organised – more specifically, imposing the need to maintain a degree of stability with respect to: motivation (in the context of competing demands within the individual's lifeworld); task performance (given demands created by the pursuit of organisational goals); social trust (the need for normative consensus in collective bargaining); and entrepreneurial risk (given uncertainty and unpredictability of labour supply).

The concern of this paper is with the effects of two of these containing systems and the institutional mechanisms whereby systems of work adapt and maintain internal integration: the economy and industrial relations systems. However, demands imposed by organisation and lifeworlds need to be discussed briefly [4] In modern societies, work is typically located in organisational contexts that shape work behaviour, as evidenced by the effects of bureaucratisation. The nature of work is in part determined by organisational properties such as complexity, formalisation and the centralisation of authority; by organisational goals, for example in the differences between firms, government agencies, lobby groups and cultural organisations like universities; and organisational conditions such as the differences between industries and between markets. Also, work represents a specific domain within the lifeworlds of workers and beliefs, and attitudes formed outside of work will influence workers'

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1 Institutionalisation must be thought of as a dynamic process in that organisations are in continuous interaction with their environments and so roles themselves are continually re-defined. However, roles are institutional forms in that they are relatively enduring, interpersonal structures – they are features of the social context (i.e. the organisation, in this case) rather than the individual performing the role.

2 A further level of analysis is that of experience – in this case the sentiments and perceptions evoked in the individual by virtue of their occupancy of role. This suggests that the four levels (real, institutional, empirical and experienced) require concepts of different degrees of abstraction and generality, with concepts at the 'real' level being more abstract and general, while those at the level of lived experience need to be more concrete and specific.

3 This is a much narrower, more restricted use of the concept of the lifeworld than is usually used. See, for example, Berger et al 1973; Schutz 1972; and, especially, Habermas 1987.

4 An analysis of the relation between organisation and lifeworlds is currently being undertaken in parallel with this paper. Developments in this analysis are sketched out in Reed (1995a and 1995b).

involvement and engagement with work (see Blauner 1964 and Goldthorpe et al 1968 for pioneering research on this issue).

The economy creates demands for particular forms of labour. For example, industrialisation theory posits continuous technological innovation as a major feature of industrial development as producers seek to improve the efficiency of labour. According to this view, technological innovation fosters an increasingly differentiated technical division of labour with a greater emphasis on work that requires complex knowledge and human judgement (e.g. design, planning and maintenance). Consequently, the content of work tends to change over time, becoming both more specialised and more complex. This requires the availability of better educated and trained workers – a requirement met by the growth and extension of the educational and training system. The result is a workforce with higher skill levels performing specialised and complex work (see, for example, Kerr et al 1964).

The most extensive argument along these lines is developed by Bell (1973). He argues that the direction of social change is towards a 'post-industrial' society characterised by, among other things, the increasing substitution of human mental labour by computers. As a consequence, work activity becomes focused more on face-to-face interactions in service-oriented economic activity, with services oriented more to non-material needs. This shift is associated with higher levels of education in response to the demands of work, with a consequent increase in skill and education and a growth in the number, size and importance of professional groups (Zagorski 1984). Thus, the economy impacts on work primarily through the differentiation of forms of labour and results in increasing quantitative and qualitative variation in demand.

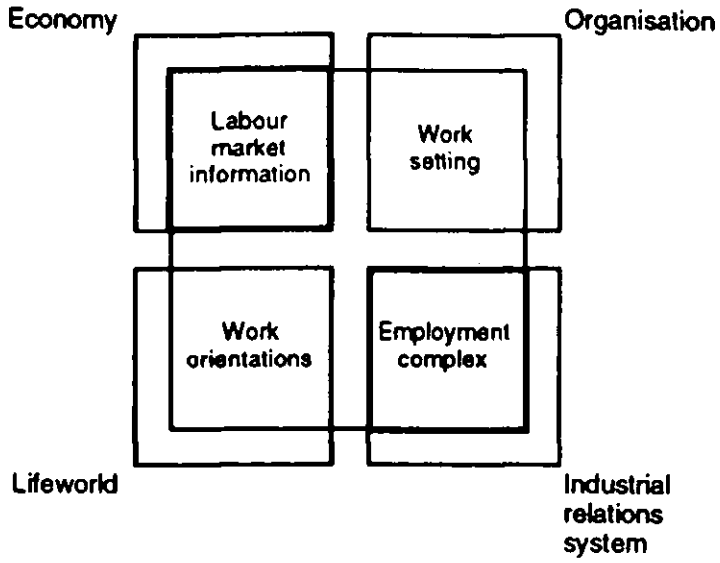
However, work also occurs within an industrial relations system, and therefore is affected by a range of collective actors and institutions: for example, the State, labour unions, the legal system, employer associations. These all influence the organisation of work through laws and regulations, collective bargaining processes, skill monopolies and various attempts to define the rights and obligations entailed by employment. In addition, changes in work occur in a context of historical traditions and customs that vary from society to society but that influence employment practices through normative frameworks that more or less regulate employer-employee relations.

These external systems can be seen as posing four general threats to the coherence of work activity, imposing the need to manage motivation (in the context of competing demands within the individual's lifeworld); performance (given organisational goals); trust (the need for consistency with societal norms); and risk (given the uncertainty and unpredictability of the economy).

Thus work can be conceptualised as a system of activity constrained by limits imposed by the dynamics of economic competition and evolution; by the capacities and values sustained by the lifeworlds of individuals; by the emergence and distribution of particular organisational forms; and by the legal and regulatory systems characterising particular societies.

To summarise, the nature of work is the outcome of the institutional forms that develop to respond to exigencies that originate in the environment – that is, a set of systems that are exogenous to the work system itself. The institutional forms that survive do so by virtue of their capacity to increase the work system's capacity to manage these environmental demands. Thus four generic institutional forms are proposed and displayed in Figure 1. These are: 'labour market information' and the 'employment complex' managing change in the economy and the industrial relations system, respectively; and 'work orientations' and 'work settings', which are not discussed in this paper.

Figure 1: The System of Work and its Environment



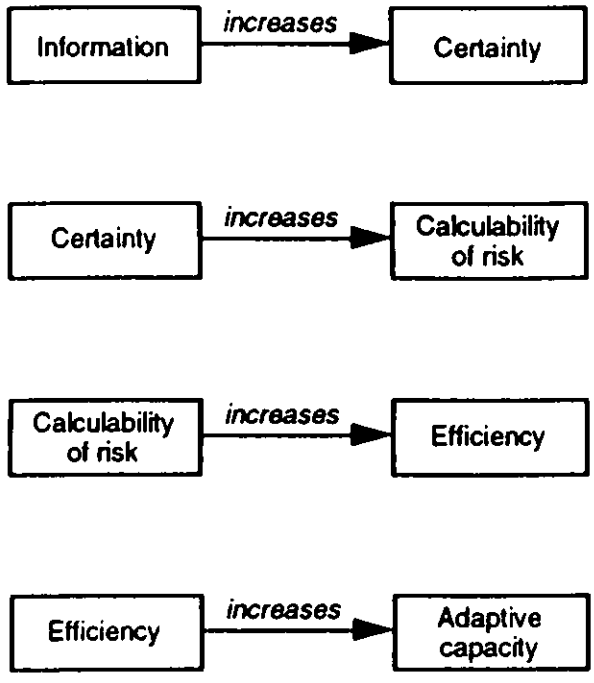
Definition of Risk and Labour Market Information

Modern economies are complex, dynamic and change rapidly, with competition imposing a requirement for the constant search for more efficient ways of organising production. However, practical judgements about the economy are characterised by a high degree of uncertainty. For example, buyers and sellers in a market operate with imperfect information. Similarly, no matter how well understood is the current state of affairs, the future is always unpredictable. This implies that decisions do not occur with direct knowledge of the real or objective state of affairs, but rather on the basis of information that is available but always imperfect. For example, decisions about capitalisation, outsourcing, recruitment and training depend on estimations of current need and predictions about future requirements. These decisions are instances of responses to potential risk. The 'risk' problem is that of a sub-optimality that results from a labour supply that is inadequate for the demands of the economy – for example, an oversupply of unskilled workers, or a shortage of telecommunications engineers.

The capacity to calculate risk improves efficiency because it conserves resources by reducing waste and redundancy – perfect calculation of risk would enable the deployment of only those resources needed for the activity, deployed only where and when they are needed. By contrast, zero calculation of risk (i.e. random activity) increases the likelihood of system failure (through inability to respond to environmental exigencies) and renders useless some resources that could be servicing other system needs.

This means that increasing the capacity to calculate risk increases the efficiency of the system. Efficiency has high adaptive value for a system in relation to its environment because it conserves resources. This is why bureaucratic forms and market systems dominate modern societies – they are very efficient ways of making collective decisions and distributing scarce resources. The capacity to calculate risk is improved by information because it increases certainty about what elements need to be taken into account in the current situation, what elements will be there in the future, and the relative importance of situational elements, both now and then (suggesting a temporal and a figure-ground dimension). The causal connections between information, certainty, risk, efficiency and adaptation are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: The Relationship Between Information and Adaptive Capacity



In sum, then, adaptation to dynamic environment (such as modern economies) depends on establishing relevant informational categories. Risk information is categorised by two dimensions: a temporal dimension (current-future) reflecting the tension between the need to secure resources for immediate use and the potential this creates for shortages or opportunity costs in the future. The second is a proximity dimension (foreground-background) with information concerned with the extent to which environmental features constitute a general backdrop to economic activity rather than the specifics of detail for particular decision contexts.

Four basic informational categories can be identified:

- prices of wages and salaries (current-background)
- labour market projections (future-foreground)
- corporate prestige (current-foreground)
- demographics (future-background)

Prices of Wages and Salaries

The most evident and widespread institutional form of labour market information is conveyed in the prices of wages and salaries – the 'market price' of various types of labour. The key issue is that of the complexity of price structures (and uncertainty) associated with occupational and sectoral differences. Such information provides the basis for obvious decisions like the appropriate level of remuneration to offer, particularly concerning above-competitive wages (Bulow and Summers 1986; Katz 1986). It also provides important information in decisions concerning investment in capital equipment, outsourcing and about the skill/technology mix. In many instances, the estimation of 'market price' has emerged as a specialised business – for example, management consultants run remuneration surveys to inform organisations of the 'going rate'; and the task of salary packaging is a growing area of accountancy.

Labour Market Projections

Labour market projections are primarily produced by government-supported manpower planning, labour research or policy research centres (e.g. see Dunlop 1983). The main informational function they perform is the reduction of uncertainty about future surpluses and deficits in the supply of labour. Such information has relevance to issues such as immigration policy, labour markets programs and training schemes.

Corporate Prestige

Apart from wages offered, some organisations are deemed more desirable to work for than others. For example, Fortune 500 companies, Ivy League universities or, in the public sector, departments of foreign affairs all have a prestige advantage. The notion of 'corporate prestige' refers to assessments of the relative standing of organisation, providing information with respect to variations in demand between employers, independently of wages and salaries. The concept of the 'dual economy' reflects a dichotomous strata of prestige, but the combination of inter- and intra-sectoral variation suggests a more complex set of ratings. Information on corporate prestige provides the possibility for analysing the labour market in terms of a set of market niches – work within the population ecology approach on the measurement and analysis of organisational niches has laid the foundation for realising this possibility (see, for example, Freeman and Hannan 1983).

Demographics

The last informational form is that of demographics, a category of central importance to the classical economists (Heilbroner 1986). Most obviously, demography describes the size of the population but demographic models provide estimates of the future pool (rather than the actual supply) of labour. Demographics describe underlying contextual trends within which more specific surpluses and deficits of particular occupational and skill combinations are likely.

These four informational forms have the capacity to produce a dynamic picture of the labour market. Prices and assessments of corporate prestige describe the stratification and distribution of labour supply throughout the market, with price distributions describing the background contours and corporate prestige the fine detail. By contrast, demographics and labour market projections add temporality and dynamism to the picture with evidence of how things will be in the future.

Reproduction of Trust and the Employment Complex

The industrial relations system constitutes a terrain in which the conflicting interests of key institutional actors (labour unions, employers and government agencies) are manifested. The integration of these players into the system of work requires the establishment of bases on which such conflict can be negotiated. In a modern, complex society work cannot function if collective bargaining entails nothing more than the exercise of naked power or force. Ultimately, such conditions drain resources from the system. Integration depends on two factors: the establishment of normative understandings that represent basic agreements about what can be taken for granted (or 'rules of the game'); and a commitment to such norms on the part of those involved. Norms survive when they make possible the production and reproduction of trust through consensus about forms of conduct – in this sense, they

provide an efficient alternative to the use of power. If parties in a bargaining encounter are confident that all are committed to shared norms, then trust is increased and uncertainty is reduced.[5]

At the system level, institutionalised trust refers to what Fox describes as "...the notion that trust and distrust – or .... differing degrees of trust – are perceived as being embodied in the rules, roles, and relations which some . impose on, or seek to get accepted by, others" (Fox 1974, pp.67-68). Thus, trust derives from high levels of normative certainty – agreements about the meaning and significance of rules, regulations and custom within the employment relationship. By corollary, disruptions to trust (e.g. through changing industrial regulations) require increased resources to elicit new commitments to maintain cohesiveness.

A major function of an industrial relations system is precisely the generation of norms that govern the relations between members of a 'work community' (e.g. employers, unions, workers, governments):

> Every industrial-relations system creates a complex of rules to govern the workplace and work community. These rules may take a variety of forms in different systems – agreements, statutes, orders, decrees, regulations, awards, policies, and practices. The form of rule does not alter its essential character: to define the status of the actors and to govern the conduct of all the actors at the work place and work community (Dunlop 1970, p.viii).

In contrast with the role of information in structuring environmental uncertainty (external uncertainty), trust structures uncertainty between components of the system of work itself (internal uncertainty). Norms perform this function by establishing more or less reliable ways of dealing with actors in a system in a manner that provides guidance for potential dilemmas in interactions. This can be explained with a simple analogy of relations within a school as an example of a small scale community.[6] First, relations within a school are *school*-relations. That is, members are expected to treat each in a way which is consistent with the context rather than, say, how they treat family members. For example, in the case of a teacher who has a son or daughter in the class, the expectation is that the child is treated as a pupil rather than son or daughter.[7] In this sense, norms provide guidance about 'same' and 'different' – pupils should all be treated the same, pupils should be treated differently from sons and daughters. However, members of a school should not all be treated the same way – teachers are treated differently from pupils, principals from class teachers, senior and junior pupils and so on. This indicates the existence of potential institutionalised solutions to the normative problem of discriminating between members of a common category. This solution has two aspects: that of appropriateness for members of the community as members ('inclusion'); and distinction between members ('discrimination').

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5 This is probably easier to grasp by thinking about how doubts that others will 'play by the rules' provoke distrust. Thus, distrust will be high when normative uncertainty is high and/or when commitment to norms is low.

6 The analogy is not intended to represent a system of work, nor even a work community, but rather to highlight the function of norms in governing relations between members of any community.

7 This example risks confusing norms and roles. Roles are normative expectations associated with a position or location (such as a job). Norms refer more generally to expectations of conduct within a particular situation (situational norms) or community (social norms). The point in this analogy concerns social norms and requires viewing a school as a type of community.

A second dilemma concerns the qualities taken into account in normative judgements. Pupils and teachers share membership in a school but with entirely different bases for membership. Pupils are members because they are children, and so the basis for membership is that of the *status* of childhood. By contrast, teachers are members because of imputed expertise or, more generally, their *potential capacities* to teach.

These two pairs of concepts (inclusion-discrimination, status-potential capacities) describe basic possibilities for managing relations between members of a community. It can be summarised as the problem of whether to judge inclusion and discrimination in terms of status or potential capacities. These highly general and abstract categories can be specified for a work community:

- the employment contract – *inclusion/potential capacities*
- career paths – *discrimination/status*
- industrial citizenship – *inclusion/status*
- credentialling systems – *discrimination/potential capacities.*

Together these define an 'employment complex'.

The Employment Contract

A core basis of trust in modern complex societies is that embedded in the contractual relationship, where the specific nature of transactions are defined in terms of exchanges – i.e. time for money. The employment contract is the legal (or quasi-legal) basis for invoking commitments to carry out the duties of office (or the tasks of the job) and the rights to compensation and remuneration. The employment contract establishes a basis for inclusion within the employment complex – for example, it establishes a different normative basis in the relationship between employer and employed from that of spouses in a marital relationship. Inclusion is established in terms of potential capacities – the critical feature of an employment contract is that what is actually 'purchased' is labour time and so the contract is premised on potential capacity.

Career Paths

Career paths define bases for discrimination within the employment complex, most obviously in terms of experience, seniority and position. Career paths are most evident in the bureaucratic organisational form although they also existed in the medieval craft system in the statuses of apprentice, journeyman and master craftsman. It is important to note that it is the existence of the paths as a structured sequence of hierarchical stages rather than individual's careers that establishes the institutionalised form of trust, in that location at a particular stage marks out distinctions, and thus the basis of claims for privilege. Such stages are manifestations of discrimination on the basis of status.

Industrial Citizenship

Industrial citizenship is the second basis for defining the rights and obligations for inclusion within the employment complex. However, in contrast to the employment contract, industrial citizenship refers to the universal rights and obligations that flow from membership in what Dunlop (1958) refers to as the 'work community' as opposed to the exchanges defined by the specific employment contract. These include basic rights such as work accident insurance, but also Equal Employment Opportunity. Industrial citizenship also defines *exclusion*, for example, through laws which prevent children from entering into employment contracts. The extension of industrial rights to women and to minority groups, on one hand, and child labour laws, on the other, exemplify aspects of industrial citizenship which establish boundaries that mark out who is included within the employment complex and who is

excluded. Industrial citizenship is an instantiation of the rights attached to membership – inclusion and status.

Credentialling Systems

Lastly, credentialling systems provide the certification of mastery of skills (e.g. apprenticeship systems) or expertise (university degrees and professional awards). Trust, here, is the capacity of a credential to 'guarantee' that claims for privilege or remuneration are founded on actual capacity – i.e. that the employee will be able to do what they say they can do. Again, it is important to note that it is the credentialling system itself, and the confidence that the community can have in that system, that establishes the basis for trust (while the credential itself may establish the quantum of trust in a specific instance). For example, a medical degree would elicit low trust if it originated in a system where degrees could simply be purchased. Thus, the credentialling system contributes to a trustworthy system for discrimination within a work community, based on reducing uncertainty with respect to claims about potential capacity.

The Integration of Labour Market and Employment Complex

The final issue addressed in this paper is the question of the relationships between the labour market and the employment complex. The problem is that labour markets and employment complexes are dynamic, subject to independent pressures – originating in the economy, in the case of labour markets, and in the industrial relations system, in the case of the employment complex. Therefore, systems of work theoretically face the threat of *dis*-integration if each institution follows an independent logic of change that takes the labour market and the employment complex along incompatible development paths. Clearly, a work system would not survive if this were to happen – that work systems do survive indicates the existence of mechanisms that provide for a degree of system integration. The question is, what mechanisms manage the linkages between the labour market and the employment complex and therefore enable system integration to occur?

Four mechanisms can be identified by linking each form of labour market information to the relevant component of the employment complex. The four mechanisms are:

- market exchange (prices → employment contracts)
- manpower planning (labour market projections → career paths)
- labour market segmentation (corporate prestige → industrial citizenship)
- training and education (demographics → credentialling systems).

The most identifiable mechanism for the integration between the labour market and the employment complex in a market economy occurs through market exchanges linking specific prices (wages and salaries) to specific contracts (in jobs). The importance of this mechanism increases as a function of the de-regulation of the labour market.

A second linkage is given in manpower planning which provides a basis for fitting labour market projections to career paths through industry training schemes, subsidises funding of vocational programmes, group apprenticeships systems and so on. Thus there is a political form of integration, in addition to the market form.

The potential disjunction created by variation in levels of corporate prestige and the inability of particular groups to claim the rights of industrial citizenship is managed through labour market segmentation which allows for gradations of citizenship in peripheral domains of industry. Segmentation creates sub-communities within the community of work.

Lastly, the link between demographic change and the credentialling system is handled through revisions and modifications to the training and education system. This constitutes a cultural mechanism in the sense that it is based on the transmission of technical, vocational and scientific knowledge as an element in the individual's socialisation into a society's culture.

Table 1 sets out those mechanisms that enable a degree of stability to be achieved within the system of work in the face of continuous, exogenous change.

	Employment complex			
Labour Market Information	Employment contract *inclusion-capacity*	Career path *discrimination-status*	Industrial citizenship *inclusion-status*	Credentialling system *discrimination-capacity*
Prices *current-background*	Market exchange			
Labour market projections *future-foreground*		Manpower planning		
Corporate prestige *current-foreground*			Labour market segmentation	
Demographics *future-background*				Training & education

Conclusion

This paper has set out to formulate a set of related concepts that make it possible to describe how systems of work adapt to changes in the environment and maintain internal cohesion in the face of potentially conflictual interests and goals within a work community. Two institutional structures have been described: labour market information which performs the function of reducing uncertainty originating in the economy and thus enables risk to be calculated; and the employment complex which reduces normative uncertainty, enabling actors to invest commitment into the system and thereby operate on the basis of trust. The capacity to define risk and to reproduce trust are claimed to improve the system's survival capability through the conservation of resources.

Finally, a set of mechanisms that link the labour market and the employment complex are described. In addition to providing a degree of theoretical closure, these concepts offer the potential for the comparative analysis of systems of work, by providing a four-dimensional model of the socio-economic context of work.

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