

The 'transferable skills' paradigm is cover for the creation of transferable people

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The increasingly precariousness of contemporary employment, as well as the demands placed upon education by governments, management and employers have meant that transferable skills – or really, the ability to move between various forms of insecure employment at short notice – are a cover story for the creation of transferable people, says [Nina Power](#).



The phrase 'transferable skills' has been a mantra of education and training for so long, we have forgotten what it refers to and who serves to benefit from its ubiquity. Every school curriculum and every university course outline invokes 'transferable skills' more or less explicitly. These often include: problem solving, critical thinking, working to deadlines, organising and working as part of a team. The National Careers Service [defines them](#) somewhat tautologically in the following way:

“Transferable skills are general skills you can use in many jobs. You gain these skills from previous jobs, projects, voluntary work, sport, your home life, hobbies, and interests. They enable you to be adaptable and flexible in case you need to change your job.”

Transferable skills are thus gained from work and outside work, and help you get work when you have lost work (or, more euphemistically, 'in case you need to change your job') because they allow you to move between jobs: you are transferability itself. We might wonder if they are skills with content or instead the generic capacity to *acquire* skills which in the end turns out to be something slightly different, namely flexibility?

I want to suggest that the increasingly precariousness of contemporary employment, as well as the demands placed upon education by governments, management and employers have meant that transferable skills – or really, the ability to move between various forms of insecure employment at short notice – are a cover story for the creation of transferable *people*.

The blurring of the boundary between life and work (you can pick up transferable skills anywhere and everywhere!) and the generic nature of the skills themselves are geared towards the generation of a workforce trained to accept that it must work [zero-hours contracts](#), be un- or under-employed for long periods of time and adapt quickly to the practical and social demands of agency work or short-term contracts. More worryingly, we can ask what skills are being taught alongside the 'transferable' ones, or whether in fact, skills with content or practical value are less significant in an economy that requires a large people of workers trained not with specialist skills but with the capacity to be replaced at short notice.

Earlier models of transferable skills, such as those outlined by the finance director of Ford and Professor at Chicago School of Business in 1957, are revealing. The 'educated man' according to [Theodore Yntema](#) must have as part of a 'liberal education', among other things, 'the basic ability and skills that are widely transferable and needed in nearly all walks of life'. 'In this category,' Yntema writes, 'I include mastery of the scientific method, understanding people and working with them effectively, communication, organisation – the marshalling of scarce resources for given ends – wholehearted and persistent application to the task at hand, and memory'.^[1] Some of these skills we might recognise in slightly mutated form today – 'people skills', being a team player, communication, organisation – but others are perhaps surprising. How many data entry jobs today require 'mastery of the scientific method'? Of course if we swap this for 'ability to use a computer' we might not be too far away (Yntema states that the rate of change, acceleration, rate of relative change, 'and particularly the conditions for a maximum or a minimum' might be

useful transferable scientific skills for the late 1950s). Similarly, we might wonder about memory, given the outsourcing of facts to the internet. Yntema claims, though, that ‘the importance of perseverance and memory is self-evident. Talented drones and second-rate intellects have succeeded through hard work’. We might wonder whether today’s transferable skills are designed to create the former, or perhaps even the latter.

Crucially, hardened capitalist though he was, Yntema believed transferable skills were there only to flesh out an already deep and rounded education – the other elements being ‘values based on philosophy, religion and experience’, ‘A judiciously selected knowledge of classified facts and relationships’ and ‘joy, satisfaction and well-being in the exercise of one’s faculties in perceiving, hearing, touching, and participating in all the very aspects of life’. Today we might wonder whether these other aspects have gone, or perhaps more worryingly wonder whether some have in fact been subsumed by the dominance of the ‘transferable skills’ paradigm itself. In a service-dominated economy that cares very little about values, facts, relationships, joy, satisfaction, wellbeing we are nevertheless supposed to *be* or *perform* happiness, relationships and values (of the company at least).

When transferable skills come to dominate education and employment above all others, we can be sure that what is really being taught is the ability to *be transferable*. An education that focused instead on values, deep knowledge and intransigence would be an education for a different world.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Featured image credit: [Mike Kniec](#) CC BY 2.0

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[1] Yntema, Theodore ‘Transferable Skills and Abilities’, *The Journal of Business*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Apr., 1958), pp. 91-94