

## Skill

Skill can be thought of as goal-oriented behavior that is well-organized and learned through practice, rather than being an automatic physiological response, argued Proctor and Dutta in 1995. Conceived of in this way, skill has been a topic of interest to organizational theorists because of its relationship to economic performance at individual, organizational, and national levels. It is also of interest because of its implications for the organization, control, and reward of work. Likewise, temporal changes in levels of skill have also been the object of study. From a more critical perspective, the social and political dimensions of skill have also attracted attention and called into question many apparently commonsense assumptions about the concept.

### **Conceptual Overview**

Conceptualizations of skill have reflected the influence of different traditions of academic inquiry, each with a different focus and a different approach to the topic. A useful starting point is to distinguish between approaches that take skill to be an attribute of the individual and those that see it as an attribute of a work role.

#### ***Skill as an Attribute of the Individual***

The idea of skill as something inherent in individuals, and which individuals bring to their jobs, characterizes much research into skill. It is typical of, for example, psychological studies of skill and skilled performance. Early instances of such research, dating back to the 19th century, examined skill acquisition and the improvement in performance that comes with practice. Subsequent research has led to a number of models of skill acquisition and has investigated other aspects of skilled performance, such as transfer of learning and situational influences. It has also been extended to include cognitive skills, as well as the perceptual-motor skills, that were the focus of many early studies. An overview of the psychological approach to skill is given by Proctor and Dutta.

Human capital theory, as proposed by Becker in 1994, presents another influential, methodologically individualist approach to skill. At its heart is the idea that human capacities are developed through “investments” in formal and informal education and through training and experience in the workplace. The determinants and the consequences of such investments can then be analyzed in relation to economic outcomes at different levels; for example, in terms of the relationship between schooling and wages or training expenditure and firm productivity. Though rooted in economics, human capital theory has also attracted attention within organization studies, as shown by attempts to measure such intangible assets as workforce skills.

#### ***Skill as an Attribute of the Job***

The view of skill as an attribute of the person can be contrasted with the view of skill as an attribute of the job, which focuses on the work tasks and responsibilities of a particular role. The idea of *job skill* can be further refined into substantive complexity and autonomy control, suggested Spenner in 1990. This complexity-discretion distinction is also widely used in the literature.

Substantive complexity captures the degree of manual, cognitive, or other skills required by the job. One useful approach developed by Rolfe, in 1990, distinguishes three dimensions of substantive complexity: the complexity

of specific tasks, the knowledge required, and the range and variety of tasks involved. The second dimension of job skill focuses on the issue of autonomy-control, which refers to the amount of discretion or judgment involved in the way in which work tasks are carried out. Again, three dimensions can be identified: decision making and judgment over product/process, control over the organization of work, and supervision. The decomposition of jobs into the component skills required to carry them out has relevance for both activities such as recruitment and training. It also underpins labor-market categorization frameworks such as the ISCO88 (International Standard Classification of Occupations).

### **Measuring Skill**

Skills tend to be measured either via the person or via the job that a person holds. Specific measurement techniques can be classified in different ways, but one useful taxonomy suggested by Spenner in 1990 divides measurement strategies into three types: nonmeasurement, indirect measurement, and direct measurement. Nonmeasurement strategies involve using occupational groupings, such as ISCO88, as proxies for skill levels. The key question is whether occupational data provide a good proxy for skills, particularly in the face of changes over time in skill levels within occupations. Such changes may take the form of increased skills requirements within a single task or increased skills requirements due to multiskilling of the workforce. Occupational data must therefore be treated with caution.

Indirect measurement strategies go some way to addressing these problems but still use proxy measures. Educational qualifications, often used as an indicator of human capital, are a typical example of such a measure. They are not without their problems, however. The qualification levels of particular jobs, for example, reflect both demand and supply factors, and it is difficult to untangle the two.

Credentialism, which arises when the qualification requirement for a job changes but the job itself does not, can also mean that qualifications demanded may bear little relationship to the skills actually needed. Additionally, formal qualifications neglect informal training and work experience. Another indirect measure of skill is wage data. The conceptual basis for this approach lies in the theory of competitive labor markets. Wage data have also been used to assess the value of human resources at firm level, as Flamholtz demonstrated in 1999. Earnings are at best, however, an indirect measure of skill. High wages may reflect high skills but they may also reflect current skill shortages, with adjustment occurring more slowly than economic theory might predict. More important, wages may reflect institutional factors both inside and outside the firm (such as gender discrimination), rather than the operation of a perfectly competitive labor market.

In the light of the potential shortcomings with other measurement strategies, researchers have attempted to measure skills more directly. One class of direct measures uses employee self-reporting through surveys or interviews. A well-known direct measurement instrument is the *Position Analysis Questionnaire* (PAQ) of McCormick, from 1979. An alternative to the self-report is direct testing using tools such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's *Program for International Student Assessment* (PISA), which assesses reading, mathematics, and science skills at age 15. Currently, however, such measures are limited in the range of skills assessed, and their application is restricted by their high administration cost. Similar limitations apply to direct observation as a measurement strategy, as used, for example, in ethnographic studies of skill and in work study. The final category of direct measurement approaches involves the use of experts, such as employers. One of the potential risks in this approach, however, is that senior managers may not have much direct knowledge of the skills actually used in specific jobs. Because of such challenges, it is increasingly recognized that multiple measures of skill are useful, as suggested by Stasz in 2001.

### **Critical Commentary and Future Directions**

The approaches discussed so far typically treat skills as having an objective character existing independently of human apprehension of them. It is clear, however, that the domain of activities to which the word *skill* is applied has shifted from a relatively narrow association with technical and craft skills to embrace such concepts

as soft skills, generic skills, and even aesthetic skills. Moreover the word *skill* has both descriptive and evaluative dimensions: to refer to an activity as skilled is both to categorize it and to judge it positively, as Barnett identified in 1994. As well as calling into question the adequacy of any simple definition of skill, such considerations imply the need to examine the process by which the label *skilled* becomes attached to particular individuals, groups, or types of work.

A useful starting point is the labor process theory debate, re-ignited by Braverman. Basing his analysis on Marx's notion of surplus value, Braverman saw the central problem of management as one of ensuring capitalist control over the labor process. He argued that the separation of the execution of work from its planning and the transfer of the latter to management were key strategies in achieving such control. The result, for the working class, was the degradation of labor and the lowering of skill levels. Labor process theory in this form is thus strongly associated with the autonomy/control dimension of job skill and has been an important theme within the upskilling/deskilling debate.

### ***The Social Construction of Skill***

The Marxist roots of labor process theory draws attention to the possibility of contested definitions of skill. Rather than being objective, social facts, conceptions of skill can be seen as the outcome of political and social negotiation and reflect the interests of different power groups, suggested Noon and Blyton in 2002. To those occupations that secure it, skilled status can offer power and prestige. Groups seek monopoly power in the labor market through such strategies as restricting entry, limiting competition among members, and exercising disciplinary power over other workers. The enforcement of lengthy apprenticeships or training can also build the perception of exceptional skill requirements, whether such requirements exist or not. Other techniques include secrecy, special language or jargon, the prevention of other groups from carrying out the work, the use of internal hierarchies (e.g., apprenticeships), or delegation to subordinated occupations (e.g., nurses). This is the process of social closure, originally defined by Max Weber, which can be used to understand how skilled status is achieved and maintained, as Attewell did in 1990.

Social closure and the construction of skilled status occur on a gender, as well as a class, basis. In a well-known article from 1980, Phillips and Taylor argue that skill definitions are replete with sexual bias and that work done by women may be deemed inferior simply because it is women who do it. For example, in a 2002 investigation of the globalized textile industry, Collins found evidence that women were portrayed as being "naturally" suited to sewing and learning such skills through early socialization. This "naturalization paradigm" hindered female sewing operators in establishing their claims to be doing skilled work. Similar findings have been made regarding female social skills, which have been characterized as "natural feminine characteristics," and as a result neither recognized nor remunerated, by Belt and colleagues from 2002.

Examination of classor gender-based conceptions of skill do not, however, reveal much about how social actors, be they workers or managers, male or female, conceive of skill. In 1993, Steiger, for example, investigated what he describes as "commonsense notions" of skill and craft in the U.S. construction industry. In another study, from 2000, Sandberg used an interpretivist approach to identify and describe competence at work in terms of workers' own conceptions of their work. Such research can aid further understanding of the construction of skilled status, but overall this is an area of skills research that has received less attention.

Another less intensively researched topic is the role of discourse in the social construction of skill. Discourse analysis typically emphasizes the constitutive power of language and sees natural objects, such as skill, as discursively produced. The work of Michel Foucault, with its concept of discourse as constituted by complexes of power/knowledge that position human beings within historically specific forms of subjectivity, is particularly relevant. For example, Brewis's 1996 analysis of a management competency program draws attention to how its discourse constitutes self-regulating subjects. Discourses of skill, far from reflecting the prior-existence of natural categories of skilled workers or skilled work, actually bring those categories into being and render them

measurable and governable. Although such studies have not engaged the problem of skills head on, they show how discourse theoretical perspectives and the techniques of discourse analysis might be used to examine the topic.

Skills studies are an eclectic field, with contributions from psychology, economics, and sociology, as well as from organization studies. It seems unlikely, and perhaps undesirable, that a unified approach will emerge within the field. It is to be hoped, however, that future research will be informed by a greater awareness of the multidimensionality of the topic.

—Nigel Spinks

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## Further Readings

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**Entry Citation:**

Spinks, Nigel. "Skill." *International Encyclopedia of Organization Studies*. Ed. . Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007. 1415-19. *SAGE Reference Online*. Web. 30 Jan. 2012.



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