

EMPORIUM

Transforming work in Australia

A discussion paper by

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1. Summary

Economic pressures are forcing a separation between traditional ‘jobs’, with connotations of long term continuity and high overhead costs, and ‘work’, activity to achieve outcomes which can in principle be done by anybody anywhere who has the capability required. As a result, work is becoming institutionalized in new ways, which can potentially benefit both those doing it and those paying for its outcome.

For the benefit to be fully realized, a new culture will need to emerge, one which encourages a workforce no longer expecting to be told what to do, but far more proactive, engaging creatively to find new ways to add value.

The paper envisages a network of local centres emerging throughout Australia (the ‘Emporium’ of the title) in which a variety of independent individuals, committed to a wide range of outcomes from small tasks to large programmes, configure into teams that deliver a good outcome to their clients while enabling their members a lifestyle of their choosing.

It further envisages a computer based infrastructure facilitating this activity which, as it is successfully implemented, will deliver a major boost to the computer services industry in Australia.

This is a massive change with far reaching implications for the type of society that emerges, and it is going ahead in one form or another in Australia and the rest of the world, as a result of countless decisions being made by businesses and individuals everywhere. But it is going forward with little visibility or shared understanding of what might be achievable.

This proposes the initiation of an adult education process to allow those interested in this subject -- businesses, entrepreneurs, work seekers, academics, IT and Communication suppliers and others – to have access to the best information and support that can be provided to the decisions they make.

2. Background

Work is a huge aspect of our lives, and it is in a state of radical transition. Everyone is aware that the notion of a ‘job for life’ is now almost entirely a thing of the past. Everyone can also see that a lot of traditional workplace practices are being superseded; we are now familiar, for example, with many people doing some of their work from home. Technological developments and the new possibilities they keep on opening up both for doing new things and for doing old things in faster and cheaper

ways have fuelled this whirlwind of change, which the actions of governments in freeing up global markets only amplify.

One thing seems not to have changed, however. People still hold to the notion of 'having a job' as the gateway to the dignity of contributing to society through work. And a very powerful notion it is, with deep roots psychologically, socially and economically. Governments measure unemployment levels and fret about getting more people into work, and to most of us a job is integral to our identity and self respect. Australia now finds itself in a position in which there are barely enough people to fill the jobs the economy is creating, and those available are often in the wrong place, so a crisis in productivity looms, and the threat of inflation hovers over the economy. But there are troubling aspects to being so locked into the ubiquitous paradigm that sees jobs as the key to a productive economy and a successful society: it suggests a relationship between employer and employee which draws on the past and which may well be wholly inappropriate going forward into the world that is fast emerging. Coping with the future will call for a quite different form of psychological accommodation.

At a time when most industrial work involved mass production, it made sense to assemble a group of experts to design work processes to be carried out by others. But much of the world has moved on from such an approach to defining jobs. Customers are now more demanding and want their precise needs met, both in products and in service. Instead of mass production, manufacturing process often now has to be tailored to a unit of one. Successful businesses know this and organize to deliver it. Yes, there are still many areas in life in which mass production thinking survives, and in which rearguard battles are being fought to protect old privileges but the direction is clear – people on the whole know what they want and they will not tolerate paying ten dollars for something that they could get for nine or eight, let alone under one.

To meet the demands of this marketplace, the need is growing for workers who, rather than obediently waiting to carry out orders, show high levels of flexibility, adaptability and independence,. And if this is true now, it is getting even more true with every passing month and quarter -- the time cycle of change itself is rapidly compressing. A different attitude and outlook are called for from that encouraged by the traditional idea of a job. The most valuable things an employee brings to her work now are her independent judgement and her commitment. And these are often the first things to be extinguished by the culture of the workplace and the behaviour of its management. If it made clear to people that all they need to know is what they are told, they soon check out mentally and keep any useful ideas they have to themselves.

This paper proposes a programme to encourage the evolution of a new gateway into the economy of the future. It foresees new forms of social and financial benefit that result as people play their full part, adding value in more ways in places and at times to suit their plans and lifestyles. It is looking to a world not of bosses and subordinates, but of self confident, highly productive, independent people creating a world class economy of the future. This paper outlines a vision and strategy that could allow Australia as a country to lead the way to this new world.

3. The cost of relying on ‘jobs’

In many parts of the Australian economy, the workforce is excessively amenable to a culture of power dominance. Put in terms of Transaction Analysis, acceptance of a child-parent relationship towards the employer seems to be a widespread condition of entry into the workplace, and a naturally assumed condition once there. Given the widely publicized official efforts to silence whistle-blowers, and the brutal way in which people can be sacked for not carrying out instructions, this is perhaps not surprising. Its consequence, however, is that most of the time employers do not have 100% of an employee working for them, or the 110% or 120% they might have when an employee is really committed, but something more like 50% reducing -- potentially falling below 0% as trapped, disgruntled employees turn passive-aggressive and look for ways to do harm that they can get away with. A strategic shift towards adult-adult interaction in the workplace would be of huge benefit to productivity.

A consequence of this managerial dominance is that the workplace is no longer an arena in which managers and workers get on with their business, but rather it is also the preserve of several specializations, or special interest groups, often brought in by management. Recruiters have a bigger and bigger role in who gets in and how. Trainers largely shape how the work is done, often getting their direction from other outsiders – consultants. Where there seem to be problems (or ‘opportunities for improvement’), coaches are called in to ‘develop’ people. All the above are employed at the behest of the HR department. Beyond all these, the government and the unions both make it their business to oversee what is going on, hungry for opportunities to involve themselves. And then there are the academics, tabulating, analyzing, reporting on and theorizing about all these matters. It is noticeable that if you see anything about ‘work’ in the media (and you see a lot), the voice is never that of an actual worker, but rather that of some professional spokesman or commentator.

The world of work is built on the ubiquitous assumption that it runs on ‘jobs’. ‘Working’ has become equated with ‘having a job’, which means having an employer, and hence often, regrettably, being treated as somebody’s chattel (the power relationship again). The situation is somewhat reversed, of course, when an employee has capabilities that are at such a premium that the employer is afraid of losing her services. (This should be the aspiration of every employee.) What employers actually need are results, and results are achieved by carrying out tasks. The notion of a job, albeit that it is deeply entrenched and often entirely appropriate, can be a tendentious and bureaucratic encumbrance loaded on top of what could be a simple contract to deliver results for payment.

Today’s work environment is obsessed with competition. Competition for jobs, competition for money, competition for approval, competition can distort the matter of simply getting on with doing a good job. You get what you measure. If you measure processing times in hospitals’ accident and emergency departments, you get ambulances driving round the block to avoid turning up at the hospital too soon. Competition can be useful and even essential at times, of course, but it can also be toxic to trust and good working relations, derailing a well running system of work and creating problems where none existed before.

All this adds up to the fact that the worker taking up a job today is often entering a kind of artificial reality – a reality defined by the employer and her acolytes. From the language of the job specification, to how the job is done and the ethics of how the business is conducted, the message is the same – ‘all you need to know is what we tell you’. The employee determined to hold onto her adult perspective can find herself constantly battling pressures to conform.

4. An example of future work: ‘Emporium’

Come forward twenty years and visit a country town in Australia to see how it is faring economically. We have chosen this particular town because it is supposedly doing well. Much interest is focusing on its ‘Emporium’ facility, a node within a network now present in most towns with populations upward of 10,000. What is Emporium, and how did this one become successful?

Emporium is basically an adult learning programme. Its aim is to support people in developing robust skills and the ability to leverage their personal capabilities, judgement and commitment into the workplace. It is sometimes spoken of as leveraging ‘their personal truth’, a rather mystical phrase but one which may help make the distinction that underlies the philosophy. Emporium exists to assist people make a difference not just by doing something someone else has defined, but by entering into situations fully themselves. It seeks to offer an environment that consistently reinforces this message and help people to respond to it. Emporium encourages people to think of themselves not as subordinates, carrying out the instructions of some superior, but as peers cooperating with others for the success of whatever enterprise they are engaged upon.

Persuading the rather authoritarian workplaces commonly encountered to embrace these practices and attitudes is often quite a challenge and calls for acute social awareness. Members of Emporium think about the situations they approach more as proprietors than as run of the mill employees. When they have assessed those situations and committed to deliver some result that is needed, their honour and the reputation of Emporium are on the line. Nobody forced them into the position. They chose it, and they have to deliver.

If that is the aim, how did this Emporium start and go on to become successful? In this town, it all began when a small group of people became interested in a discussion paper one of them had come across which described the Emporium concept, and set out its philosophy. It seemed good for people to engage more fully but it was obvious that the concept had to be shown to be practical. It had to have a story to tell or it was going nowhere. If they wanted to make progress, they had to start by making a real intervention somewhere, and drive it to a successful outcome.

They had a series of meetings around the pub table. Everybody came with ideas, and everybody joined in the spirit of taking a positive view, while testing any ideas very hard. It would mean failure at the outset -- no seriousness of purpose -- if anyone were to appear to support an idea in the meeting and then express a different sentiment elsewhere, so candour was an element of the culture that developed from the start.

They were keen to get beyond the commonplace, and take an initiative that would be interesting and bold, and also clearly of value to the community.

At the time, a number of niche local farming and agricultural businesses were starting to do well, getting recognition through local farmers' markets, and were looking for ways to expand their reach. There were also a couple of high tech start-up companies that had opened up in the town, while existing manufacturing firms had begun to struggle. Talking to the people responsible for these businesses, it emerged that there was a general interest in understanding more about how to go about doing business in Southern Asia.

Meetings generated more clarity on a wide range of issues people wanted to understand more about and meetings were arranged with the appropriate embassies in Canberra.

Embassy staff were interested and happy to offer advice and introductions, and a local education process was quickly underway. As events moved forward, it became clear that the needs felt by people in Australia were also felt strongly by people in the countries with whom they were now making contact. There was scope to develop ways of meeting the needs of people with a variety of interests in several countries.

In due course this led to the 'Southern Asian Centre' you see today in the town, a resource that attracts people from across Australia and specializes in giving people the grounding necessary to do business in Southern Asian countries. The real strength of this centre is not just its location in Australia but the fact that it is networked to similar, highly effective resources in other countries. The high tech startup businesses have thrived and many more have now opened, confident that they can maintain contact with their markets.. The manufacturers are rejuvenated and have diversified in ways that could never have been foreseen. A wide range of cottage industries has emerged in farming and catering. A younger age group has been attracted back into the town, and, there are now ten full time members of Emporium, supported by over twenty part time assistants, teaching English online.

At one level this can be seen as an entrepreneurial initiative that has developed successfully, but there is a more important message: this worked because people took the time and trouble to get a real understanding of each others' situation and needs. It was the stuff of salesmanship of the highest order: getting to know the customer, getting to know what the customer needs, being committed and creative in meeting the need, and using this as the basis on which to build trust. This is what Emporium is about: people working with people, with the benefit of support, not a huge bureaucratic system in which humanity quickly gets lost.

This was the story of one example of the kind of initiative that Emporium exists to promote. It is trying to offer a way into productive participation which circumvents the obstacles in the way of the job market. And above all, it is showing that people working together in a human way can create value in ways bureaucratic systems could never approach.

5. What Emporium offers people

The business of Emporium is built on its reputation for accomplishing tasks it undertakes. These could be anything from cutting somebody's lawn to taking responsibility for substantial areas of work from government departments large companies or similar institutions. Emporium thrives because of its reputation: if you want a job done well for a competitive price, your best deal is probably to persuade Emporium to take it on. Its resources are self-employed and commit independently. They can be relied upon because they know what they need to do before they commit, and there is a great deal at stake for them, particularly the opportunity for growth they see through participation in the environment Emporium provides. They are very effective at working together, and also with the employees of client organizations. One of Emporium's goals is that other institutions strive to work with it because they want their own people to become 'super employees'.

The day to day business of Emporium is the delivery of outcomes committed by people who knowingly embrace the responsibility involved. But the way in which this is carried out is informed by its particular vision and strategy. These are aimed at the emergence of people with the skills to thrive in the emerging workplace – 'super employees'. Super employees have the capabilities to get results in the modern world. They have a good basic grasp of technology, and an understanding of the workings of organizational life and business life in particular. They will have skills in some areas, but are accustomed to acquiring new skills when they need them. They are composed, and skilful at conducting themselves in a calm and effective manner. They never fail to meet the commitments they make. But above all, super employees maintain a focus on a good outcome for the business while maintaining objective, adult relationships with everyone they have to deal with..

At one level, Emporium performs an administrative function of connecting supply and demand within the legal and financial context in which it is operating -- managing its own finances while doing so. At a more strategic level, the real reason Emporium offers its associates four forms of support:

1. It aims to help people become aware of their own skills. We all have value locked up in our experience we are not aware of. In Emporium, people are on the lookout for whatever can add value, so feedback and encouragement are very much to the fore. We would never expect much of someone who saw themselves as just there to do as they were told, but are amazed by what can happen when people suddenly decide to offer their real thoughts.
2. It aims to maintain adult interaction as the norm. This means not talking down to people and telling them what to do. It also means not allowing them to put themselves down by failing to take proper responsibility. Emporium will seek to make available any form of support its associates need, but only when it is asked for.
3. It aims to offer people participation in the full life cycle of projects, from scoping ideas to framing what could be done, planning the approach to take, execution and follow up. Thus whatever their particular strengths,

people see it all, and this is a richer experience than being shut away as a 'junior' (see points 1 and 2 above).

4. It places great importance on people being able to acknowledge each other's realities on a human level. The importance of this point may be best shown through its opposite, an environment in which people seem to only ever see each other transactionally, as instruments, and frustration builds up because 'nobody will ever listen'. Even if it is only for short times, we hang on to the idea of simple 'presence' – finding the mental space to take on board where another person is coming from without judging.

In summary, Emporium provides an opportunity for people to develop skills they may never have known they had while collaborating with others on tangible projects.

6. Where Emporium leads

Emporium is based on the insight that treating work as simply the activity necessary to achieve some desired outcome is a world away psychologically from the currently entrenched practice of packaging up work into jobs. Some work can only sensibly be done by people who hold jobs. Society needs people to play a central role over a long time to give continuity and permanence to the institutions we depend on and this should be recognized by their having permanent jobs. . But much of what has to get done does not depend on such a subtle and complex understanding, but rather on straightforward competence, commitment and common sense. Employing people involves carrying too much overhead for institutions to keep activities on their payroll that could be outsourced. This demand enables Emporium to offer individuals the possibility of being paid for doing what they do best wherever they happen to be, without getting involved in the trials and tribulations involved in getting a job. In Emporium, the individual's relationship is as likely to develop with the facility she uses as her base and which supplies her with opportunities, support and social contact than with particular clients for whom she is doing work.

The long term picture is of a demand for the services of Emporium generated by outsourcing from institutions of everything that they can safely pay others to do for them. This will be supplemented by demand from small businesses and private households or individuals with a need for service of some sort. To meet the demand, Emporium will offer a network of facilities, perhaps with one in every large town and several in cities, which associates of Emporium use as their base. The facilities will

provide places for people to work, and to meet informally either socially or in developing new initiatives.

The infrastructure to administer Emporium will present a challenge to IT services in various ways: its complexity will be enormous; it will have to be able to cope with the need humans will have for highly elusive and nuanced considerations (such as people's trust in one another, or faith in one another's capabilities); and the absolute requirement that it evolve to meet the needs of its users rather than seek to impose a solution on them. (These all require investigation with various expert disciplines and with the IT industry)

A key in the success of this will be the quality of the relationship developed between Emporium and its clients. Sitting back passively waiting for work will fail totally. It is essential that associates of Emporium understand their clients' needs as broadly as they can and look keenly for ways to add value, proposing to clients improvements and possibilities that they may not have considered, always focused on the client's good. In this way, not only does Emporium become an outstanding supplier to its clients, the example its 'super-employees' helps to develop the staff of its clients.

It would be natural for specialization to develop between large clients and the towns where they are based. As these develop, particular locations will become attractive to people with required skills and experience, and new possibilities may emerge in community life. Overarching relationships and understandings between the managements of big clients and the places where they are getting a lot of work done will become important in strengthening the links between business and community.

7. Strategy to develop Emporium

To get Emporium rolling, this proposes one fundamental principle and four strategies. These will set the scene for the scheme to be piloted..

The **fundamental principle** is that it be seen as a human project to meet human needs. It is about people becoming all that they can be, not training people to accept what someone else wants them to be. If it is not seen in this way, it will deliver very little, and that just a variant of how things work today.

In practice, this mainly means two things: bringing people on board, whoever they might be – clients, associates, hosting locations, suppliers, expert advisors, in a way that benefits them; and introducing IT in a way that serves the human project and does not covertly dominate it. Both these need careful thought and investigation.

The **four strategies** are:

1. Learn what is happening now that is relevant.

Countless initiatives are taking across Australia, for example strategies to 'empower' workforces, creative strategies to draw into the

workforce members of disadvantaged groups, striking initiatives driven by local communities, innovative arrangements to provide accommodation to startup businesses and new forms of business rapidly developing through Internet. A vast amount more is happening in the rest of the world. If the programme sought to know about all of this it would never do anything else, but it needs to develop a sensitivity to what is relevant, and a facility both to understand opportunities when it comes across them, and to make activities that could learn from them aware of them. Thus a learning process needs to be instituted at the core of the programme.

2 Develop the demand side.

The programme needs to develop belief in large scale outsourcing in the minds of decision makers in large organizations, and sell the benefits of the Emporium concept. In doing this, the above learning strategy will have a big contribution to make. How to bring the demand side on board needs very careful consideration.

3. Develop the supply side.

Sell the benefit to town councils or others associated with promising sources of people who might be interested. Where there is some interest, work on ways to make it easy and attractive for people to become part of the discussion and help carry the programme forward.

4. Engage IT.

This means finding out the service providers' ideas on how to support this, but it also means engaging the mindset of an industry that always and only see itself providing solutions.

With these four strategies taken a step or two forward, the possibility of real **pilot projects** starts to emerge, based around the presence of three key factors: a client willing to make work available, a location keen to undertake it, and people willing to commit to the project.