

COMMENTARY

Redefining the Field: Work and Employment Relations in an Era of Deregulation

*'Shuffling the deck of cards': the implications of the field of
industrial relations for human resource management*

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The central question of the chapter by Russell Lansbury and Grant Michelson is 'Is Industrial Relations (IR) in Crisis'. Their first conclusion is that in the area of research, IR remains 'relatively healthy and continues to address a range of contemporary issues' and that 'the intellectual apparatus of industrial relations is becoming broader in Australia to explore work and work relations'. Their second conclusion is that in the area of teaching IR is at a crossroads as the focus on human resource management has increased in recent years. This has resulted in the contraction of the 'identity of industrial relations as a unique and differentiated subject'. However, Lansbury and Michelson are careful to stress that industrial relations shows signs of adapting to such developments.

I must lay my cards on the table before I begin.

My first card. I teach human resource management in a graduate school of management and have been doing this for more than 10 years. My students are men and women with extensive employment experience usually in medium and large organisations. Recently, however, more students are from small organisations, or are working for themselves. These students have very different concerns than the students I used to teach at the University of Sydney and University of New South Wales. They were committed to the ideals embodied in the field of industrial relations. The students I teach today are committed to learning about how to improve the way they can manage and how to further their careers. Most of them also have a thirst to learn in a wide range of areas and most acknowledge, once the pain has worn off, the benefit of learning to think differently.

This workshop is designed to examine the various issues relevant to the economic and social outcomes in the operation of the deregulated Australian labour market. The outcomes and processes involving trade unions and industrial tribunals are addressed in other chapters. My second card is that I want to take a different and broader perspective on the theme

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balancing short-term and long-term outcomes for shareholders, employees and communities.

An integral part of this awareness is the recognition that people, particularly people in service and knowledge work create current and potential value for organisations. This recognition has sparked interest in the measurement of the value of the non-financial aspects, such as the people of an organisation. This recognition and the predicted shortages in skilled labour could have an impact on the management of people.

Rather than view industrial relations as 'in crisis', I think once again we need to view industrial relations as in transformation. This is after all the history of industrial relations. However, at the same time, we need to allow the ideals and desired outcomes in the field of IR to inform how we think about the workplace and the labour market.

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