

## **‘The fracturing of work and employment relations’**

### **Abstract**

*This article presents an argument that work and employment relationships are increasingly ‘fractured’ and ‘fragmented’. The argument first reviews the changing contexts of investor-capitalism (financialisation), which shows that a market ontology and an excessive individualistic ideology is pervasive in employment regulation. The expansion of financialised capitalism is then related to contemporary employment practices about ‘pay inequality’ and ‘talent’ selection. These serve to eschew collective structures of collaboration and fragment labour standards. The result is a series ‘protective gaps’ about worker voice, legal regulation, technology and labour control. A number of challenges and opportunities for the way the subject area is taught and researched in mainstream business schools are outlined.*

### **Key words:**

Employment relations, power, inequality, regulation, deregulation, remuneration; talent management, business school education

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## 1. Introduction.

I was honoured to be invited to deliver a keynote for the 32<sup>nd</sup> conference of the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand, held in Adelaide in February 2018. I was first introduced to AIRAANZ at the 17<sup>th</sup> annual meeting in Melbourne in 2003. I have participated in a few meetings since then, and always found the culture and spirit of AIRAANZ to be special and rare: long before the obsessive metrics of ‘impact’ and ‘rankings’ many AIRAANZ papers would challenge conventional knowledge, tackle real world employment issues, and offer contributions concerning public and organisational policy debates. Thankfully, AIRAANZ is one of a few academic spaces where people do not speak of ‘where’ they published, but instead debated the issues arising from research. It is also about serious scholarship with a human face, buttressed at the end of a few days of reasoned disagreement with the sounds of the AIRAANZ choir, conducted by the forever jovial Professor Peetz – whom, after a few AIRAANZ meetings, I would find myself tactically dodging in order to evade choir conscription<sup>1</sup>.

In this paper I summarise an argument from that keynote, drawn from on-going work with colleagues in Manchester, and due recognition and thanks to collaborators is acknowledged (Dundon et al., 2017; Dundon and Rafferty, 2018). The argument runs thus: systemic contextual factors of investor-capitalism (financialisation) promote an almost exclusive marketized value perspective, which reinforces an ideology of individualism. Consequently, the trust and reciprocity that is necessary for sustainable employment relationships are increasingly ‘*fractured*’ and ‘*fragmented*’.

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<sup>1</sup> In the interests of protecting delegates from my dulcet of scouse tones, of course !

While the analysis paints a somewhat pessimistic picture because of growing employment inequalities, there are plenty of reasons to be optimistic: the subject area is rich, dynamic and engaging of policy challenges; and labour agency is creative, with mobilising forces showing signs of challenge to structural inequalities.

In tracing the overall argument, the article is structured as follows. First, the context of financialisation and neo-liberalism is reviewed as a lens upon which to discuss subsequent employment relations issues of fragmentation (e.g. pay, talent, selection). In section 3 two practice areas are reviewed which illustrate the dominance of market value and hyper-individualism in employment systems: ‘pay inequalities’ and ‘talent’ management. These are selective contemporary issues and chosen to show connections between increasing marketization and individualism as forces fracturing employment relationships. Other areas could have been used such as worker voice, work-life balance, technology or supply chain labour relations. Section 4 brings together the context review and practice areas of pay and talent to pattern the trajectory of fractured employment relations. The conclusion points to the risk of inferior educational pedagogy that advances the same marketized individualism over collective or collaborative endeavours that could otherwise engage with wider social systems of inclusion across business school curricula.

## **2. Context, reciprocity and the threat of investor-capitalism**

The reciprocal nature of the work relationship between employer and employee has preoccupied scholars (and practitioners) for centuries. Issues of trust, motivation and control remain enduring issues of importance that are central to market-based transactions. Among others, Adam Smith’s (1776) *Wealth of Nations* informed us that markets are socially-constructed institutions with exchange relationships determined by human interaction, rather

than predicated on some benign view of nature or scientific law, as some economists might have us believe. Although Smith is often viewed as a founding father of free market ideas, he actually explains much: in particular, that markets have both ‘allocative’ and ‘productive’ functions. The former is the provision of goods or services (e.g. work tasks) in a market system, which has inbuilt exploitative tendencies; for example, how much is shared in wages to workers or kept as a surplus by the employer. At the same time, the ‘productive’ function serves to mitigate the degree of allocative exploitation. For example while owners want workers to be loyal and cooperative, workers also expect to be paid and seek security of job tenure. To this end a degree of ‘reciprocity’ is often expected by both parties to a labour market transaction (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005)

Labour market exchanges are further shaped by changing global forces (McCann, 2013). A contemporary development here is the expanding shift towards financialised incentives, financial transactions, actors, and the role of financial institutions (Epstein (2005). One effect is a corresponding shift in power from managers to owners and investment shareholders (Dore, 2008). Increasingly, companies are diversifying from their core business activity and seeking rents and returns from financial investments. For example, although Enron was a well-known fuel and energy conglomerate before its corrupt downfall, most of its returns were obtained from speculative money trading. Likewise, General Motors earned more than \$800 million in 2003, not from manufacturing vehicles, but from diversifying into financial services including mortgages and finance loans. The core business activity of making cars and trucks earned GM only \$83 million in the same year (Rubery, 2015).

Contextual changes such as investor capitalism certainly bring new challenges to work and employment relationships. Some claim the future of work is being shaped by advances in technology which extend leisure time: robotics and artificial intelligence can be used to replace poor or dangerous jobs as people acquire more sophisticated technological skills for new job

demands (Brynjolfson and McAfee, 2014). Others argue work in the gig-economy presents opportunities for a new entrepreneurial and independent labour class to engage in free market exchanges via digital platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, Uber or Deliveroo (Botsman 2015).

On the other hand, however, the realities can be very different. Many digital platforms are actually large monopoly corporations that control the technology which eliminate notions of a new sharing-economy based around small business entrepreneurs (Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2018). In terms of employment relations, debates continue about the legal status of gig-economy work. Particular concerns include the ambiguous nature of the relationships between workers and intermediary platforms, with people who work in the gig-economy denied basic protections (Stewart and Standford, 2017). There is a persuasive narrative that much gig work is based on a 'sham contract' of 'bogus self-employment'. As a result, Batt (2018) argues that with these waves of investor capitalism and financial diversification, owners have little incentive to nurture cooperative employment relations with workers. Indeed, it is feasible that regardless of new digitalised business models and automation, employers utilise cheap sources of labour rather than invest in expensive technologies. Importantly, the future of work and the uses of technology are not based on some natural or neutral (deterministic) force: they are shaped by hierarchical and socio-political relationships affecting work and employment conditions.

Of course it is not evident that the context of investor or financialised capitalism means all corporations seek to exploit workers by re-defining employees as self-employed gig-contactors or replace jobs with automation. Unilever, for example, actively seek to upgrade labour standards and have a corporate responsibility goal to minimise precarious and temporary labour contracts across its global supply network (Wilshaw et al., 2016). However, financialisation has deeper and often unseen spill-over implications affecting work and employment relations

in various ways. It may be, for instance, that exemplars such as Unilever become targets for hostile corporate take-overs which damage employment standards and job security through ownership change (McCann, 2013). Moreover, the shift to investor-capitalism has led to pressures to seek greater surplus value from squeezing labour costs, in both the private and public sectors (Cushen and Thompson, 2016).

It is this nuanced understanding that shows how senior management have become more closely supervised by shareholders and private equity consortia. One issue is whether managers become trained to ‘champion labour cuts’ by imposing austerity, reducing peoples’ pensions or enabling restructuring for hostile takeovers (Palpacuer et. Al., 2011). The broader socio-economic and political framework is that of neo-liberalism: defined as an ‘ideological doctrine’ that seeks value by ‘liberating individual entrepreneurship through strong property rights, free markets and free trade’ (Harvey, 2005:2). Neo-liberalism provides the ideological basis for greater individualism in work and employment, inspired from the market deregulation by the likes of Thatcher in the UK and Reagan in the US. These espoused self-interest and individual greed as the route to success, with an active suspicion of any institutions that protect workers (e.g. minimum wage legislation, trade unions, or unfair dismissal laws). In the work relations sphere, developments include the coming of age of modern consumerism where the promotion of greater ‘individualism’ is epitomised with a fusion of workers as consumers, all bounded by some faith in market values that also dovetail into employment relations (Donaghey et al, 2014).

The context of financialised capitalism and greater individualism is not inherently correct or incorrect. Empirical security and wider societal engagement is necessary to understand how these contextual forces affect peoples’ employment situation. Employers change their values over time and managers, as agents of owners, devise practices which can reinforce a preferred individualism to work premised on market rationality or their own vested interest concerns for

control. As Smith (1779) reminded us earlier, markets are ‘socially constructed’ and modern management ideas (say, for instance, for things like ‘talent acquisition’ or ‘individual performance-pay’) are not based on some condition of evolutionary principles or quasi-scientific economic laws: these are, first and foremost, employment conditions that are socially constructed and historically determined.

The ideological dominance of market values and individualism in employment and management studies scholarship has not gone unchallenged (Harley, 2015; Rubery et al, 2016). Even Hayek (1988), a leading market ideologue, recognised that society is often based on collective structures for the purposes of collaboration and cooperation and free markets help to break-down community tribal instincts. In the next section, two contemporary employment relations practices are critiqued using lens of financialised capitalism (namely ‘talent management’ and ‘performance pay’). These both illustrate a strong ideological undercurrent of individualism and market-based value in shaping employment relations. There are of course many other issues which could have been examined using this approach (e.g. employee voice, gender, employment contract status, gig-work, unionisation, the role of technology, bogus self-employment etc), which may be the basis of future research.

### **3. The ideological drive to individualize labour**

#### *Pay inequality*

Hardly a week goes by without some news report or review of the gross inequalities around ever widening gender pay gaps; or how out of sync chief executive remuneration is compared to average worker wages. In the UK, for example, around 78 per cent of firms pay men more than women (Britton and Wyatt, 2018). In Australia, CEO salaries are often a multiple of 30-

times the average worker wage, with executives reported as receiving 12 per cent pay rises with annual bonuses exceeding 18 per cent of their salary (Davies, 2018).

And here is the ruse: these gross salary awards are premised on a view of market rationality when in fact they are self-reinforcing and socially-constructed. The shift to investor-capitalism and neo-liberal doctrines has witnessed a move away from collective bargaining as a mechanism to allocate and distribute rewards, to a view premised on some notion of individual choice and market value. Importantly, pay for effort has always been shaped by perceptions of fair reward: distributive (how much) and procedural (how allocated) justice values (Gelens et al., 2013). Pay can be based on market comparison criteria of referent groups, which has some objective perception. However, it also has a huge subjective component (Hofmans, 2012), and for many senior executives it appears that an air of superiority legitimises their huge pay premium based on social hierarchy (Kaplan, 2012).

Under investor-capitalism, issues of wider societal poverty are typically seen as the remit of government welfare policy; removed from organisational managers and shareholders who do not share any responsibility. Yet there are now over 8 million people defined as living in poverty in the UK who reside in working households (Schmuecker, 2018). In other words, ‘in-work poverty’ is a growing issue affecting more and more workers and businesses. Arguably, it is no coincidence that the two countries that have witnessed the largest increases in income inequality, the UK and US, are those where ideas of performance pay and individualised employment regimes prevail, with the rise of so-called ‘super-managers’ justifying huge executive pay packets (Piketty, 2014).

While it has been argued that market conditions may justify high earnings for so-called top executives based on their unique expertise (Dicks, 2012), the validity of such is highly questionable. It may be more realistic, given unregulated corporate governance regimes, that executives define their market value as corporate insiders through self-justified remuneration

packages. Pay-for-performance decisions are political and socially constructed and a managerial discourse of market justification hides the true privilege of an executive corporate class. These issues about pay inequality signal deeper implications for the field of work and employment relations; namely, how to objectively attribute value to labour effort, particularly in higher discretion roles or under conditions of advanced technological development which may render certain skills redundant. Such issues remain central to the future of work and how pay can be regulated and allocated in more just and equal ways. One option to regulate pay is via Wage Boards which comprise representatives of all sides of industry, including an independent chair (Hughes and Dundon, 2018). These can be public bodies who regulate pay levels (including ‘living wage’ variations) in defined low paid sectors (e.g. health care, gig-economy, hairdressing, retail, hospitality, cleaning etc). Indeed, it is probable that such policy debates and considerations will be high on the research agendas of future AIRAANZ and other similar conferences.

Running alongside pay inequalities premised on false idea of market rationalisation is the ideology of individualism, which can be illustrated further when reviewing the contemporary development of talent management, considered next.

### *The cult of ‘individual ‘talent’*

‘Talent management’ (TM) is reviewed here because of its ideological orientations of individualism and ideas of market value, which link to the debates about the fracturing of reciprocity in employment relations. TM is defined as *‘efforts to attract, select, develop and retain key talented employees ... with the greatest potential to impact on value generation in an organisation’* (Collings et al., 2018). A core issue here is the aspect of finding and selecting ‘key’ employees who hold particular ‘positions’ to add to corporate performance. TM emerged

in the early 2000s, initially offered as a product by McKinsey Consulting with their strapline the ‘War for Talent’ (McDonald, 2013). Academic curiosity and practitioner interest in TM has burgeoned with special issues of academic journals devoted to the topic along with new textbooks (Scullion et al., 2010; Farndale et al., 2010; Al-Ariss et al., 2014; Collings et al., 2017). It seems the topic is likely to grow and be around for some time to come.

The critique of TM as part of the fracturing of employment is four-fold: TM is mostly ‘atheoretical’; it can be exposed as little more than a ‘hollow shell’ of home-spun wisdom; the managerialist discourse of talent sustains wider ‘societal inequalities’; and finally TM literatures are mostly ignorant of known ‘knowledge paradigms associated with managing employment systems’.

The first concern is the apparent lack of a distinct theoretical lens for TM (Lewis and Heckman, 2006:140). For example, TM literature is reminiscent of well-established work and human resource management concepts that privilege a unitarist and individualistic orientation: the psychological contract, human capital, strategic value, or ability-motivation-opportunity to enhance corporate performance (Collings, 2014b). To this end it has been noted that the talent narrative may be little more than ‘old wine in new bottles’ (Collings, 2014a).

Second is the ‘hollow shell’ thesis of a discourse that views labour as individualised talent for market value. In reality, people display talent in many ways and most of these have very little to do with the pursuit of corporate profit. To some extent the discourse of ‘talent’ seeks to colonise management studies for its own culturally manipulative ends (Willmott, 1993). For example, an act of resistance to improve intolerable working conditions is often inspired by groups of employees and their unions, yet such creativity and innovation is outside the biased managerialist agenda of talent for corporate value. Thus arguing talent is only about competitive advantage is misleading and inaccurate. Indeed, the TM agenda seeking to portray the drive to be the top talent can be seen as an act of aggressive or macho competition among

rival firms. When translated to workplace relations, such a discourse serves to undermine employee-employer cooperation by engineering the language of warfare '*between*' workers as being normal (Bunting, 2011). Importantly, there is plenty of talent where profit or rival warfare is not the guiding purpose of an organisation; in public service, charities and NGOs. The result is that the TM literature espouses little more than simplistic homespun pockets of wisdom (cf McDonnell, 2018).

A further concern is the implications that affect the lives of workers and their families. On the positive side of TM there is what can be defined as an 'inclusive' talent pool (Collings et al., 2018). Under this system it is implied that all employees may be included for their various roles and contributions. Notwithstanding good intentions, however, there is no reason to assume that all workers want to be defined as 'key' talent and moved into some defined talent pool. Inclusivity in this regard is set and determined unilaterally by managers alone.

More problematic, however, is the contrasting 'exclusive' labour pool. Under this model, employees are separated according to management defined criteria for 'top' talent (Meyers and van Woerkon, 2014). Under the McKinsey 'War for Talent' strapline, for instance, organisations were encouraged to introduce a system of 'forced ranking' to create segregated employee talent pools. At the peak of the hierarchy are those employees in key positions who are deemed as the *top-performers* (so-called 'A' star players), and they are highly rewarded (see previous section). Next are *average-employees* (the 'B' league players) who need to improve. At the bottom is *poor-performers* (the 'C' grade players) who are actively managed out of a firm.

The selection into the exclusive labour pool is premised on managements' view of work roles which directly link to value and market performance. A consequence is an engendered culture of increasing materialism based on market value of so-called talent individuals, with the role of other groups of workers deemed to be less talented. The result is organisations

following the fad of talent management may end up with less diversity, as managers recruit like-for-like premised on very narrow interpretations of talent criteria (Marchington, 2015:177). Arguably, therefore, 'exclusive' TM pools end up devaluing those employees who occupy unseen yet nonetheless important back-office roles, perhaps resulting in low morale, poor self-esteem, worker alienation and deepening inequalities.

Finally, the TM literatures fails to recognise the known issues associated with work and employment systems, especially difficulties of ensuring labour reciprocity and collaboration. Various knowledge contributions that span decades are mostly absent in much TM literatures, including areas such as employment rights, voice and engagement, union bargaining, equal opportunities, power and labour indeterminacy, legislation, the role of the State and other labour market institutions, or emotional work debates, stress and issues of dignity, respect and well-being (Thunnissen et al, 2013:330). In other words, TM is considerably underdeveloped as a distinct knowledge paradigm in its own right.

In sum, the context of finalisation and neo-liberalism has promoted a distinct privilege for market-based rationalisations over and above other stakeholder or wider social inclusion concerns. The posture for marketization and excessive individualism is evidenced in selected employment relations practice areas reviewed above; namely pay and talent. In the next section the result is considered to be the fracturing of employment relationship reciprocity and regulation.

### **3. The potential fracturing and fragmentation of employment relationships?**

The above reviews of ‘pay inequalities’ and ‘individualised talent’ are illustrative of a marketised ontology affecting work and employment relationships. These have purposely been reviewed and critiqued against a contextual framework of increasingly financialisation and neo-liberalism. In this section, links between the aforementioned context factors are used to outline the extent to which employment relationships are ‘*fractured*’, ‘*disjointed*’ and ‘*disconnected*’ across different levels and between multiple actors.

*Fragmentation* can be evidenced across various employment practice areas such as voice, bargaining and consultation. On the one hand, it may be viable that non-union forms of voice may combine to offer complementary synergies with other institutional governance mechanisms, say with union bargaining or the co-existence with European Works Councils (EWCs). A recent development in this area is that of ‘double-breasting’ voice, whereby management choose to develop non-union employee representation (NER) channels at one plant, while simultaneously recognising unions at another company location (Cullinane et al 2012, Dundon et al 2015). In this regard, double-breasting fragments employment relationships, as employers chose to play one group of workers in a certain location off against another set of workers in a different plant. Examples seem to also be prevalent where employers seek to attract foreign direct investment (Lavelle et al 2010). A further fragmented aspect of NER is that worker influence can be quite brittle and susceptible to change. For example, it has been reported that NER voice arrangements have multiple ‘faces’, which cannot be shoehorned into any one single or specific typology (Marchington and Dundon, 2017). The capacity for non-union employee voice to influence management action is often absent or marginal, particularly in liberal market contexts, as outcomes can depend on various factors including national business systems, context, location, product and job market, occupational mix, and whether managerial strategy or ideology is to avoid or resist unionisation in hostile or other

ways (Marchington and Dundon, 2017). Unaided, non-union voice may fragment and disconnect bargaining from a unions' membership constituency.

*Disjointed* and *disconnected* employment relationships are also important, including the actions of the State and how deregulated rights can disenfranchise many workers and consolidate managerial power. Globally, there has been a growing disconnection between collective rights which are in decline, and an emphasis on many fragment individual rights (Howell 2005). In liberal market regimes dominated by investor-capitalism the role of the State has typically shifted away from collective bargaining, towards more and more individual soft regulations to support people at their workplace (Williams and Scott 2016). For example, the waves of European legislation as part of the EU's wider social model provide rights to individual workers, not collective based systems of employment regulation or representation. In addition, governments of various political persuasions have sought to reduce social and welfare provisions with a diminished ability of the State to counter corporate influence, which has prompted a fragmented mass of disconnected individual workers (Howell 2005). The ongoing political agenda for deregulating labour markets, as an alleged attraction for foreign and multinational investment, has impacted on groups of workers by undervaluing their status in the labour market, such as women (Karamessini and Rubery 2013). Weakened employment conditions may be witnessed also by the extent to which the State opts-out of being seen as a 'good model employer', and instead uses harder and more unilateral regulatory approaches (Inversi et al., 2017).

These issues of disconnection and fragmentation can be found in growing labour market insecurity and work precariousness (Kalleberg, 2011; Standing 2011). Workers on atypical or non-standard employment contracts (for example gig-economy workers) become fearful of losing their job, or worried about managerial reprisals should they activate limited voice rights for information and to speak-up (Cullinane et al., 2017). Grimshaw et al (2016) show how work

and employment conditions are increasingly affected by the extent to which workers encounter one or more of four ‘protective gaps’, which further reflect the market ontology and hyper-individualism discussed previously in sections 2 and 3: i) gaps in employment standards such as minimum rights; ii) voice and representation, including gaps that disallow for union membership; iii) structures to enforcement gaps, such as reduced access to resources and monitoring agencies; and iv) social protection gaps, including reduced access to pensions in old age and unemployment benefit.

A particular contemporary issue is the potential fragmentation arising from technology and new business models such as the gig-economy. Importantly, issues of ‘contract status’ and technology can undermine trust and reciprocity in work relationships, with a shift of risk from a business to the individual (McCann, 2014). In addition, the intermediary agencies running digital labour platforms tend to control finance flows and can often delay paying the worker until the end-user is satisfied, or until the intermediary is paid first. There have also been legal cases which cast doubt on the validity of self-employment under such conditions. In the case of *Szilagyi*,<sup>2</sup> for example, a British Court of Appeal decided that a so-called ‘partnership relationship’ was in fact a sham and in reality those engaged were employees. Further, in the US the Californian Labor Commission determined that Uber drivers are not independent contractors and are in fact employees (Kaine, 2015).

However, legal judgements are contestable and rights remain uneven from case to case and across jurisdictions. Even though decisions have favoured Uber workers in the UK and California, in Australia the Fair Work Commission ruled that Uber drivers are not employees but ‘independent contractors’ (Guzman, 2018). Likewise, Deliveroo in the UK persuaded the Central Arbitration Committee (CAC) that riders are self-employed and therefore the company

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<sup>2</sup> *Protectacoat Firthglow Ltd v Szilagyi* [2009] EWCA Civ 98 CA.

did not have to provide holiday pay (Butler, 2017). The effect is a further extension to the idea of individual responsibility and market-based justifications as sources of influence on worker rights.

A final point of discussion from work fracturing issues includes the implications for the way the subject area is taught (and researched) in mainstream business schools. Briefly, issues of fragmentation may be found in educational approaches that seem to serve managerial interests (Barry and Wilkinson 2015; Kaufman, 2015). For example, Morrison (2011) argues that employee grievances are not formal employee voice channels because they divert from supporting organisational goals by the act of complaining. Problematically, under such a perspective employee interests are somehow assumed to be aligned with employers and all parties are united by a common objective, aligned to market-based justifications and the unitary idea of individual talent discussed earlier.

When translated to education and student learning, the risk is of an inbuilt bias towards the same sort of market value principles and individualistic ideology. For example, Fernández-Rodríguez (2014: 186) argues that such approaches are dominated by a particular ‘American way of business’ that favours free market ontology, to the neglect of other social science paradigms of knowledge and learning. The outcome may be that students of business, employment or management may be taught in ways that favour market and individual principles which ignore collective systems of voice and employment regulation that are as equally legitimate, and which offer the opportunity for students to consider critical issues and important debates about the role of business and management in wider society (Bridgman et al., 2016).

The overall analysis need not be viewed as a pessimistic message. To be sure workers show creativity in how they mobilise and organise to address inequalities and managerial biases, as unions are doing in the gig-economy (Wood et al., 2018) and elsewhere (Gall and Kirk, 2018).

Other agency movements in social and political spaces are addressing protective gaps with positive supports for marginalised groups of workers; for example, LGBT societies and groups supporting ethnic minorities (Heery et al 2012; Perrett and Martinez Lucio 2008). Importantly, these insights make for a richer and more informed learning experience supporting the person and their journey through education and life, rather than teachings which do little but reinforce even further corporate greed or support some other exclusive market-led interest group.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper has summarised an argument suggesting that work and employment relationships are in part fractured and fragmented: that is peoples' rights, as workers and citizens, are disjointed and uneven. In short, the reciprocity and trust required for sustainable employment is potentially broken. The argument was traced to global context factors of financialisation, suggesting that local employment practices are increasingly focused on individualism and a desire for market value. Pay inequalities and a cult of individualised talent were used to illustrate these points in some detail. Other examples were evidenced around *disconnected* employee voices, *fractured* equalities and *disjointed* rights owing to a series of protective gaps (Grimshaw et al., 2017). As a result, wider societal issues of equality and inclusion may be neglected in how the subject area is taught in mainstream business schools, with a potential crisis of irrelevance to the world of work and management.

While the analysis may be seen in part as pessimistic, there is in fact a sanguine future when recognising the creativity and agency of labour to challenge inequalities. I also opened the paper by noting the rich traditions of AIRAANZ with its reasoned disagreements of social science scholarship, which offers a degree of optimism for better engagement through policy-

informed research agendas that support critical engagement across curricula for the future of learning.

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