What Can Railway Organisations Learn from Railway Cultural Traditions?

Ian Gray

Abstract
New South Wales’ railway staff and supporting organisations changed extensively during the last twenty years involving attempts to create a new culture of work. This paper traces change in railway work culture from the 1920s to the present by analysing the various staff magazines to find indicators of what has been valued as ‘the good employee’ and so to trace change in perspective and definition. The ‘good employee’ over time is set out against current organisational and managerial cultures and the distinguishing characteristics, cultures and objectives of railway work. Rather than eschewing their past, railway organisations should use their past to interpret their present, and project their own worth to the national economy and society.

Introduction
Railway work practices and the working life of railway employees have been sources of controversy in public debate and sources of conflict in the railway organisations. Technological change and change in the status of railways as transport media have brought change in work and work relations. The change from a labour intensive industry with a near monopoly of land transport and a huge labour force to a much smaller, technologically transformed, relatively minor player in land transport has been accompanied by enormous changes in people’s working lives. The forces of change have not abated. Increased efficiency has been the goal in the last ten years, including the formation of National Rail, reorganisations, privatisation and continuing technological change.

The decline in the status of railways for transport has frequently been attributed to their slow pace of change. Sometimes lack of investment has been cited as the main retardant. Interference from governments and politicians has also been blamed, but so too have the people of the railway. At various times both managers and unions have been blamed for shortcomings. Unfortunately, we probably hear more about the shortcomings, with less emphasis on achievements. This has been exacerbated in recent years by tragic accidents which have sharpened the focus of public attention on management and work practices. Continuing public demands for railway change make tradition a particularly sensitive point in a very controversial area. Along with the focus on work and management have come calls for the total replacement of the older ways of working.

What can railway organisations learn from railway cultural traditions? The answer may be nothing, either because there is nothing worth learning or because there is no way of learning whatever might be thought worthwhile. Or the answer could be that there is much which is at least worth knowing about, possibly worth learning about, in designing railway systems for the twenty-first century. This paper takes a small step towards looking for answers from railway work cultures.

Culture, managers and employees

What Is Tradition?
Tradition can be visible in the form of symbols or practices which people have valued and adhered to for a long time. It refers to historical objects, practices or sets of beliefs about the past but importantly, it defines the present and is a yardstick by which change can be identified and measured. It may be an invention of the present claiming to represent the past. The notion of a historical process involving the handing down of practices through the generations is the only essential element. A culture of working practice is one kind of tradition. Forms of organisation should be differentiated from tradition but traditions can include practices and beliefs about them, and institutions and perceptions of them. Sometimes perceptions are more significant than practices and institutions.

Work cultures are embedded in tradition. Where particular work is carried out in an organisation, that may be seen as organisational culture. The organisation may be a large corporation, government agency or a small one, even a family. The culture of an organisation extends to all members, employers or managers and employees or workers. Railway organisations and railway work has its cultures and traditions which are shared among all railway organisations, with differences depending on historical and geographical location.

Tradition in this view is an organising medium for collective memory (Giddens 1994). This means that anyone who is able to organise collective memory is placed in a position of power. Organisation leaders may find themselves, or seek to place themselves, in such positions. Tradition can be intentionally constructed, or invented (Holbawm 1984). Giddens argues that what is deemed authentic is more important than what is authentic. Shils (1981: 14) acknowledges that:

the recipients of a tradition are seldom adequate judges of the length of their chain of tradition… Conversely, tradition might undergo very great changes but its recipients might regard it as significantly unchanged.

The possibility of struggles over the meaning of tradition must emerge.

The main importance of tradition lies in its capacity to explain process, but the possibility of creating and recreating it adds to its significance. Tradition can be seen to provide motivating ideals, but this is dangerous because attention may be drawn toward the ways in which culture helps an organisation to function and away from change to the specifics. Identity is constructed and reconstructed through such struggles. In all societies the maintenance of personal identity, and its connection to wider social identities, are a prime requisite of identity. This psychological concern is one of the main forces allowing traditions to create such strong emotional attachments in the ‘believer’. The cultural traditions of workplaces have become foci of attention for organisation managers, and points of conflict, for these reasons.
Why is work/organisation culture thought to be significant?

Management research has provided much analysis of organisational culture. Some of the interest in it arose from observation of international differences and the necessity for managers of trans-national corporations to deal with a range of national or ethnic cultural traditions (Weinshall 1977). During the 1980s, a lot of interest sprung from the apparent success of Japanese corporate culture (Cummings & Worley 2005). More recent research has explored the cultural distinctiveness of organisations which, from the outside, might appear similar. This deeper analysis requires careful specification of what can make up a culture, Reigle (2001) listing the elements of organisation culture as language, symbols, patterns of behaviour, values and assumptions. In their popular (American) management textbook, Bolman and Deal (2003) suggest more expansive content, including symbols and values, but also myths, vision, heroes, stories, ritual, ceremony, metaphor, humour and play. All of these phenomena are parts of the work culture in an organisation.

Much management literature emphasises the importance of its culture to an organisation's capacity to develop and grow. Development and growth are often cited as the key indicators of organisational success. Success can depend on innovation, and innovation for which ‘staff must be favourably predisposed towards the organisation’ (MacKenzie 2004: 142).

Why would managers want to change a work culture?

Managers seek to change a culture when it appears to hinder innovation or fails to promote it. Thus culture can be seen as a serious problem, and so Cummings and Worley (2005: 485 & 486), ‘diagnosing’ culture, see its strength as a liability. They acknowledge that it might not be possible to change a culture at all. Changing a culture can be a formidable task. They argue that the only way to do so may be by replacing the workforce.

Calls to change the Australian railway work culture have been heard frequently during the last twenty years, and longer. Since the 1980s, the challenge has been seen as one of moving away from the ‘public service’ ethos of the government railway systems. This ethos was said to be retarding innovation and change, and possibly discouraging hard work. For example, an address by the chairman of Australian National in 1990, as reported in Network (Anon. 1990), emphasised the importance of people as it referred to:

… creation of a sound corporate culture. Our success depends on people, people who are proud of the railway, fulfilling in their work, and understand the corporate goal and are thereby motivated to work harder. We also need people who understand that we are measured by the reliability of our services, and who consider themselves part of a successful, self-supporting business — and not employees of a public service activity. This hints that the railway’s difficulty in finding financial self-sufficiency was attributed by the organisation’s leaders to a problematic work culture, based on a tradition of ‘public service’. There is also a hint, however, that the problem was not entirely with the workers as they evidently need a railway of which they can be proud.

More recently, after the reorganisations and privatisations of the last fifteen years, Baggott (2004: 56) writes that ‘the task of leading for the reformed railways will be sharper and clearer’, because objectives are more clearly defined by government and business imperatives.

Given the enunciation of those objectives and the change in culture of those organisations, many employees will make up their own minds about whether they want to be a part of the reformed railway. This in turn will make the leaders’ roles easier. Managers may at least have employees who come to work willingly and can see the direction of the organisation. Hooray for clearly defined objectives!! (Baggott 2004: 56)

Here we see implicit that willing workers are replacing adherents of traditional culture, but again the process of change depends on the availability of an apparent clearer direction. Presumably now objectives derive from a profit motive being applied to all railway systems, government as well as private. Managers seek change in the culture to facilitate application of an organisational profit motive.

The management of the government railway system of New South Wales had identified ‘the railway problem’ as lack of profitability, even cost recovery, in the past. For example, the first volume of the staff magazine, NSW Railway Budget, reported in an item titled ‘The Railway Problem’: ‘The Railway Problem [capitalis in original] of the time in this colony is how to make our branch lines pay working expenses and interest on the capital expended’ (1893: 28). However, profit is not the only objective for changing cultures. Safety is also prominent (see, for example, Erdos 2005).

Is there a distinctive railway work culture?

The successful replacement of one workforce/work culture with a modern one presupposes the availability of an effective replacement and that the workforce with a modernised culture will establish and maintain such a culture. One of the problems likely to arise when replacing a workforce or a culture occurs when there is a distinctive work culture. Obviously, this is so because there would be no ready acculturated workforce available to replace the workforce of tradition. Acculturation depends heavily on training. Railway work may well be in Cummings and Worley’s (2005) difficult category.

There is evidence of a distinctive railway work culture, with variations such as those in safeworking between the British and North American traditions. A distinctive culture is most readily apparent in train operation and safeworking. But even in areas like workshops there are signs of distinctive cultural traditions associated with railway organisations (see Taks 1998 & 2000). The most obvious indicator of a distinctive railway culture is its language. ‘Safeworking’ is one among a multitude of words which have a particular meaning on railway systems. Operational railway work can have its own cultural realm, even in the more constricted and apparently routine work areas, and can make railway people different (see, for example, analysis of the work of London Underground drivers by Heath et al. 1999). According to Gamst (1980: 3), the rules of railway work become part of the worker’s ‘basic personality’ on or off the railway.

Cultures extend far beyond language, into the full range of attributes listed earlier. If one is changed, the culture is different. Cultural distinctiveness at least provides an identifiable target for change. Moreover, attempts at change would be more likely to succeed if they make sense in the context of an organisation’s history.
Purpose, identity and ethos

What gave railway organisations a sense of purpose?

Railways were constructed with very deliberate, if not always consistent and apparent, purposes. New South Wales’ railways were built, from very early days, by government agencies to hasten the economic growth of the colony, to facilitate control by the government in Sydney and to ensure that the other colonies obtained no opportunities to influence the development of New South Wales. Not so obvious was the intention of Sydney-based merchants and industrialists to ensure that Australia’s squatters were not able to impose the rural traditional model of colonial development (Gunn 1989: 80).

There were also less mercenary aims detectable in earlier commentaries in government reports or policy statements. The railway was developed as an agent of civilisation, for the day after the first train operated from Sydney, as Lee (1988: 28) quotes, the Sydney Morning Herald reported:

The event of yesterday was the triumph, not only of science over natural difficulties, but of the spirit of enlightenment and civilization over prejudice and worldly-mindedness.

The railway brought law and order. ‘Men no longer need arm themselves when they travelled’ (Adam-Smith 1969: 15). Gamst (1980) quotes Thoreau’s Walden when he describes the railway as indicating that humanity could now inhabit the earth.

How was cultural distinctiveness formed?

Railway employees formed two unique populations: Australia’s first large-scale industrial working class in the cities and distinct communities in rural areas. This distinctiveness tightened their differentiated development in both situations. In and around the workshops, strong cultures of work communities thrived involving whole families (Taksa 2000). In the country towns and villages, the railway could be a family operation. Perhaps the best-known illustration is that of Patsy Adam-Smith (1992), who describes the working lives of her father (a fettler), and her mother (a station mistress who was succeeded by Patsy’s sister). This extended into union activities also. The Australian Railways Union formed a Women’s Auxiliary in the 1930s (Hearn 1990). Women have long been employed in Australian railways but railway organisations have remained male-dominated despite indications of slow change (see, for example, Date 1992: 343).

Unlike most heavy industry, railway work has involved much independent activity beyond the sight of supervisors. Strangleman (2004: 28), referring to the UK tradition, emphasises the importance of a ‘profound sense of autonomy over work’. Railway operation depends on teamwork controlled by consistent respect for comprehensive and detailed rules, the primary instrument of management. Gamst (1980) depicts the pervasiveness of rules in American railroading, but the same basic principles apply elsewhere. In line with American culture more generally, Gamst’s account of railroad life indicates a greater degree of freedom for judgement than occurs in traditional British systems. This is exemplified by a practice of train drivers exercising judgement over passing locations within the constraints of a train order system. In both traditions, the work of train operation and safeworking provides a degree of autonomous culture — one accompanied by responsibility. Hearn (1990: 133) quotes a signaller: ‘I liked the work. I was my own boss. I liked the responsibility’. The combination of community membership and relative independence in operating under rules is what has created and maintained the distinctive railway work culture.

Railway culture as management

How were railway management purposes expressed?

The development of a managerial culture completes the railway tradition. As Murtaza (1997) has argued, management styles are part of that culture. In addition to formal rules, management controlled the workforce by discipline tempered by paternalism or ‘welfarism’ (Taksa 1998). But without direct surveillance, management was partly a matter of negotiation as well as the exercise of authority.

Employees exercise judgement — the practical operation of the system sometimes demands it (for a discussion about parallel British experience see Edwards & Whiston 1994). Rules are open to interpretation and are debatable. The report of the Special Commission of Inquiry into the Waterfall Accident reports the Manager of Australian Rail Training stating that there could be ‘hours and hours of debate about the rules’ in safeworking training classes (McInerney 2001: 119). The Commission of Inquiry into the Waterfall Accident reported instances of the rules alone failing to preserve safe working environments (McInerney 2005). The knowledge and skills required to operate a railway are substantially applicable to all circumstances and situations in any particular system, but there are very many situations requiring particular interpretations of the rules within systems. The range of actual procedures is vast. Despite contrary argument, McInerney (2001: 44 & 94) implies that lack of experience driving along a particular section of track — insufficient operating knowledge of “the road” — contributed to two accidents (at Waverton and Hornsby).

This range of knowledge and skill helps to differentiate railway operational work from other heavy industrial work, insofar as the knowledge required is intrinsically different, but also insofar as individual judgement is often called-upon. The culture of railway operating practice, in New South Wales at least, may have traditionally been based heavily on ‘a hard core of knowledge gained over years of experience rather than … what is in the rules’ (McInerney 2001: 132). This contrasts with the centrality of rules in the lives of US railroad workers, as emphasised by Gamst (1980), where rules are clearly depicted as iron hard.

Nevertheless, rules remain essential to discipline. The popular literature contains accounts of larrikin-like behaviour without significant consequences, such as the story about an engine crew regularly avoiding the difficult exercise of turning their engine at the end of a run (Preston 1992). However, there are also stories of dire consequences for those whose larrikin behaviour threatened the integrity of the system by overtly breaking the rules (see Adam-Smith 1971: 101 & Strangleman 2002). Enforcement of rules can also be exercised indirectly. Mutual surveillance is common. Holmes (1991) describes an error in safeworking procedure made by an Assistant Station Master and reported to management. The transgressor was punished with six months labouring work and loss of pay.

The traditional training model on railway systems has also been an important component of the management process. While appearing to facilitate relative autonomy, it also helped to maintain a hierarchy, or at least several parallel hierarchies in...
train driving and signalling. The Manager of Australian Rail Training has described the traditional training system as a ‘mastering model where people had access informally to workplace coaches’ (McInerney 2001: 118). This model involves extensive surveillance of junior employees by more experienced staff. McInerney substantially attributes the accident at Waverton mentioned above to a failure to ensure that a train driver had adequate supervision (McInerney 2001: 100). This is basically the same as described by Stranglem an (2004), training as socialisation into the railway culture and the subcultures of the various crafts, like driving and signalling, in which workers establish and develop their identities as railway people. The ‘workplace coaches’ are superiors who control career progression, certifying skill levels and enabling advancement. The ‘workplace coaches’ can also be, if not actual family, then at least members of a close-knit community. This is a product of the commonality of occupational intergenerational transmission and marks a social differentiation between railway people and others, particularly in country towns. There are also implicit elements of paternalism in this system, in which the more experienced workers take responsibility for training their juniors; a pattern of devolved authority for training within vertical almost military-style chain of command for operation, but with much room for ambiguity in authority relationships across the lines of command of the various craft groups.

This can be problematic in a system which demands teamwork across the parallel hierarchies, recent accident inquiries showing how a lack of teamwork and clarity of responsibilities can have disastrous consequences (McInerney 2001 & 2005). The traditional training system and subcultures are by no means entirely to blame. As Garnst (1980: 69) describes what is perhaps the most difficult relationship between the crafts: ‘authority on a train has always been an intricate problem of relations between the conductor [guard] and the engineer [driver]’. He details the difficulty that a guard can encounter when considering exercising formal authority over a driver (Garnst 1980: 52). This is part of the railway work culture, but as Hearn (1990) points out, they can also work well together.

Garnst (1980) points out that the railway culture has an inherent tendency towards conservatism, as the rules are difficult to change and organisation structures can be tight. Railway managements may not necessarily have wished to eliminate all lines of division, but exercised control over the workforce by a combination of rules and hierarchies reinforced with paternalism, and ‘divide and rule’ tactics, with different crafts having their own union representation, with notorious histories of demarcation issues (see Hearn 1990: 19). Work relations on railways must involve struggles for loyalty among managers, employees and unions, for to obtain and retain loyalty is an important feature of railway management. Morgan indicates the universality of this problem, when he explains how Chinese railways obtained loyalty by rewarding more often than punishing, though punishments could be severe (Ducker 1983: 51 cited in Morgan 2001: 38). A capacity to offer secure employment gave managers a basis for demanding loyalty. The Victorian Railways 1966 Rules and Regulations state, as rule number 2:

> Every person employed by the Commissioners must devote himself exclusively to their service, and conform to all the Rules and Regulations of the Commissioners …

Rule number 1 is a list of definitions. Note too that devotion is to the Commissioners, not the service, and that loyalty is mentioned ahead of obedience to the rules.

**Leadership**

Boards and individual commissioners have variously headed Australian railways. Individuals could become very important personalities and authority figures, if not icons of Australian history. Clapp of Victorian Railways and Webb of South Australian Railways are perhaps the best known. Clapp was famed as a builder and defender of the Victorian system, and had a capacity to create a feeling of kinship among employees (Butler-Bowdon 1991). New South Wales had its prominent commissioners also. Holmes (1991: 85) expresses an employee’s appreciation of the significance of Commissioner McCusker:

> Beginning his railway career in 1923 as a junior porter at Byrock, and working his way up the ladder in the classical manner, the man knew the NSWGR inside out and woe betide the character that attempted to put anything over him.

None of these would likely be known for universal popularity with employees and unions, but they were all powerful figures, almost heroic for their own loyalty to the railway system, reinforcing the symbolic importance of the commissioner and underscoring the loyalty factor between employer and employee.

The commissioners, however, would not have been the only heroes. Legendary train drivers do have real counterparts, and some high-achievers earned wide respect. Garnst (1980) discusses the ways in which workers form loyalties to one another and enforce their own rules of behaviour. He shows how certain behaviours are informally discouraged by personal ridicule or are subject to formal sanction by a union. A capacity to maintain codes of behaviour in a workplace culture outside the direct control of management has created tensions in the organisations. Taksia (1998: 10) sees this element of collectivism as a target for the introduction of ‘scientific management’:

> ... scientific management methods, principles and philosophy aimed to eliminate the ‘mutualistic ethical code’ that workers taught each other informally at specific work sites to facilitate ‘covert forms of collective resistance’ …

This has historical significance to railway industrial relations in New South Wales, as attempts to apply ‘scientific management’ techniques ignited the strike of 1917, with long-term effects on the work culture, after management maintained punitive constraints on employment and advancement for those who were found to have been disloyal. The ‘loyalists’ were given seniority; many of those who struck lost their superannuation or their jobs entirely (Gunn 1989). The struggle for loyalty had become open warfare. The more senior members’ unions however could also place value on loyalty to the Department, implicitly identifying a commonality of interest with management (see Hearn 1999).

**How did management portray the ‘good employee’?**

The ways in which management portrays the ‘good employee’ offers a window on how the attributes of the ‘good employee’ are defined by railway organisations. A lot of the popular autobiographical literature comes from more junior staff, like Holmes (1991). The perspective of management can be harder to find, at least in day-to-day affairs without the drama of
confrontations like strikes. One way to explore these attributes reliably is in the records of the organisations and in the recollections of management, if considered as recollections.

The magazines produced for employees offer a small window. The first magazine for New South Wales railway staff was called the NSW Railway Budget and was published by the Railway Institute. Taksa (1998: 15) sees the Institute as an instrument of management:

A crucial feature of the welfarism adopted by the department was the Railway and Tramway Institute, which was established in 1891 to disseminate technical knowledge to employees and to ensure compliance with management rules by linking training to job promotion. The Institute helped to spread a new technical culture, particularly through the staff magazine launched in 1892, by providing management with an avenue for controlling workers’ behaviour both at work and during their leisure time.

The NSW Railway Budget did not shirk from reminding employees about their allegiances. The second issue titled an item ‘Discipline, its Objects and Advantages’, and another: ‘Industrial Co-operation, by an old co-operator’. As the issue of 7 May 1905 (p.9) reported: ‘employees meet to express sympathy with Commissioners’. In later years, the Department published the staff magazines itself. A range of magazines and issues was examined with a view to analysing this element of railway management and investigating any processes of change. (The magazines examined are listed in the Appendix).

In order to explore the notion of the ‘good employee’ in greater depth, some analysis of the ‘Personal’ column of the 1925 staff magazine, titled simply The Staff, was carried out. This magazine was published for railway and tramway employees, and it was also available for sale to the public. The ‘Personal’ column contains notices of appointments, separations and some obituaries, each with short descriptions of the employees concerned. 1925 is a significant year. New commissioners were appointed following changes to legislation, and a newly elected Labor government lifted the punishments on the 1917 strikers and deregistered the loyalist unions (Gunn 1989; Heam 1990).

For purposes of comparison over time, a similar analysis of the State Rail Authority magazine State Rail The Way to Go was

Table 1: Comparison of indicators of the attributes of the ‘good employee’ in NSW railway staff magazines, 1925 and 1996

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State Rail The Way to Go 1996 — obituary, staff profile, appointments, awards

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Summary comparison

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carried out. 1996 is the year in which the State Rail Authority was broken into separate organisations: State Rail retained passenger services, with Freight Rail, Rail Access Corporation and Railway Services Authority being independent; changes prompted by ‘National Competition Policy’.

As the first issue of the magazine says: ‘this dramatic change is part of the State Government’s commitment to encouraging more competition and the break-up of existing Government monopolies’ (State Railway Authority 1996: 1). One might expect management to be seeking cultural change along the lines sought by the Chairman of Australian National as quoted above. The 1996 magazine has no personal column, but it does have items about staff members covering appointments, awards, ‘staff profiles’ and obituaries. Reflecting approximately the size of the two organisations, the 1925 magazine has twelve monthly issues of about sixty pages each, the 1996 magazine has six issues of eight pages. A content analysis was carried out, looking for attributes of employees who are indicated as praiseworthy.

The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1. The table counts each time a valued attribute was mentioned in the ‘Personal’ column (1925) and across entire issues (1996). As 1925 was the first year of the new Commissioners, descriptions of them with their appointment announcements were also included. The attributes are listed in the order in which they were detected in the 1925 issues. Findings are discussed below in order from most to least frequently occurring attributes in 1925. The 1925 magazine is the focus of discussion. 1996 provides a tiny window on cultural change, and will be considered more closely for some points of interest.

The 1925 magazines

Longevity of service would seem likely to be mentioned frequently, as most notices in the ‘Personal’ column were about retirements. In any organisation, one could expect longevity of service to be mentioned frequently in valedictions. Some quotes are of interest as they indicate a value placed on continuity:

… had a varied experience in railway business … two sons are in the service … (The Staff September 1925: 561)

There is also acknowledgement of past style and the significance of change:

… the link between the old and new [steam and electric] systems of tramway transport has been broken by his retirement. (The Staff September 1925: 559)

I found it remarkable how often civility and popularity were mentioned. Consider, for example:

… has the reputation of being one of the most obliging and unselfish men. (The Staff April 1925: 225)

… During some trying times he had always come to the fore, and his tact with his fellow workmen had been an outstanding feature and had led to really good results. (The Staff September 1925: 559)

The first quote indicates civility valued for its own sake, the second linking it to organisational outcomes, although the nature of those outcomes is not specified. Civility may be valued for its contribution to a smoothly functioning organisation, but it is also worth noting that it is consistent with an organisation which has a mission of pacification and civility present in its tradition.

The last theme is most apparent in community service, the third most frequently mentioned attribute. This praised people for work in their local community and gaining prominence thereby: A good citizen of Armidale and a great worker for the welfare of the men of the depot. (The Staff April 1925: 225)

… readiness to help in any movement for the betterment of the district. (The Staff May 1925: 293)

Or apparently avoiding conflict:

… not a single enemy in the whole district. (The Staff June 1925: 351)

Or apparent popularity:

About 300 residents attended the function [at Grong Grong]. (The Staff November 1925: 683)

Again this is consistent with an organisation which sees itself as an agent of civilisation. It also suggests that the railway was a significant local institution. The first quote of the three above suggests the possibility of an ethic of service to the local community. Other evidence is also available. Adam-Smith (1971: 66) quotes a former stationmaster:

There was an unwritten law in the bush that you had to attend to the customer any hour of the night … They were battlers. We were assisting them to make good.

Railway officers, particularly station masters and other managers, were often accorded high status in country towns, and provided with prominent dwellings symbolising their significance in the organisation and a community.

Skill and knowledge are the next most frequently mentioned. Occasionally, formal qualifications were recognised, but most often, the valued attributes were more broadly defined:

… respected his foresight and judgement. (The Staff May 1925: 289)

Specific skills were mentioned, however, again indicating links with the past:

Men with his knowledge of interlocking were rare in those days. (The Staff June 1925: 351)

Gamst (1980) shows how skill is a criterion by which railway workers judge each other. These specific criteria may, or may not, always be consistent with those applied by management, but they can have significant implications for the social relations of work. Judgement by peers is part of the socialisation process, and hence part of the foundations of craft groups and respective identities.

Loyalty to the organisation and fellow members may have greater significance to the organisation’s culture at the time than its frequency of mention suggests. The divide and rule tactics of management in an occasionally strenuous industrial relationship make for strong competition for loyalty between management and craft-based unions. Loyalty was seen as clearly in relation to ‘the Department’:

… a faithful and just employee of the Department. (The Staff April 1925: 228)

and to fellow employees:

… his self-sacrifice for his fellows. (The Staff June 1925: 353)

… a very genuine friend of any, particularly railway men, in trouble. (The Staff August 1925: 467)

Duty appeared in terms of hard work:

… when cutting in the Tunnel Signal Box, … was on duty without a break from Saturday morning until Monday morning. (The Staff June 1925: 351)
In difficult conditions:

… did considerable pioneer work in the far west. (The Staff September 1925: 557)

It also appeared in terms of the exercise of authority, tempered with responsibility for people:

… a conscientious officer who had endeavoured to carry out his duties with fairness to all. (The Staff May 1925: 289)

He said it had always been a pleasure to do his duty as a guard, and with it to make people as comfortable as he could whilst they were travelling. (The Staff September 1925: 557)

The courtesy theme resonates again, alongside a service ethic. Welfare work could be seen as a subset of community service, but its mention deserves separation to highlight, again, a link to the civilisation theme and a hint of paternalism or at least a connection to the ‘welfarism’ of the organisation (Taksia 1998). Customer relations appear in more mercenary terms than the service ethic mentioned above.

… a zealous and obliging officer, incapable of any action which would bring the Department into disrepute with the thousands of customers to whom he attended. (The Staff June 1925: 349)

There was also a cheque from the Kandos Cement Company [as a gift to the retiring officer]. (The Staff December 1925: 753)

… readiness to oblige everyone who had business at the station. (The Staff October 1925: 642)

There is a lot of evidence that railway work life and family life could form parts of each other. There are well-know examples, like Patsy Adam-Smith’s family as mentioned above. This is partly about inter-generational continuity, but it also indicates the organisation’s paternalism and a foundation for labour organisation at the same time. In small and remote communities, it could also have been a matter of necessity. Safety was mentioned, albeit rarely, in terms of policy and the ‘Safety First Movement’.

… was one of nature’s gentlemen, kindly, considerate and courteous, and at all times a tower of strength in dealing with matters of safety policy. (The Staff April 1925: 227)

… was a member of the Safety First Committee. (The Staff September 1925: 559)

This offers some indication of the presence of a ‘safety culture’, the loss of which some prominent writers have recently lamented (explicitly, by McInerney (2005) and implicitly by Erdos (2005)). The 1925 magazines offer additional insights, in that advertising often carried the ‘Safety First’ emblem. The second quotation adds a measurement not apparent at all in 1925. Skill and knowledge appear in terms which are consistent with the earlier period. Loyalty is mentioned once:

… believes CityRail provides an efficient service for the public. (State Rail The Way To Go 1996: no. 2, p. 3)

Why would any employees not believe that their organisation provides a good service? The enormous quantity of bad publicity, and the Glenbrook and Waterfall accidents among others, may have dented public faith in CityRail, but the beliefs of employees are another matter. This is a clear hint that the culture of the organisation has changed, for the civilising ideal of the 1920s has gone.

**How much can the staff magazines tell us?**

The magazines present a very limited view of an organisational culture and its changing nature. Where some personal recollections of railway life might have become romanticised, these indicators of a culture are narrow in that they represent only the sanitised views of management, though they may be accurate with regard to the employees referred to in the valedictions. There is no mention of the negative sides of the culture, like the demarcation problems identified by McInerney (2001 & 2005). Nor do they mention the popular stereotypes of the railway worker as lazy or petty criminals (as investigated by the Independent Commission Against Corruption in the early 1990s). Both stereotypes have at least some validity, and suggest that railway work was not as satisfying for workers as might be suggested. The magazines examined above only offer a perspective from management. The parallel publications of the unions may be illuminating, particularly with respect to loyalty and the significance of the craft groups. This analysis of the staff magazines only attempts to record the notion of the ‘good’ worker, yet it does offer indications of cultural change. Moreover, it reveals what might be considered the positive elements to be retained. It also does this by aiding observation of the values espoused by management for railway workers, and the purposes of the organisation. This must indicate elements difficult to change.

**New versus old**

**Has the culture changed?**

The brief analysis given suggests that, in New South Wales as best as can be determined from staff magazines, the culture of railway management has changed substantially. The extent of any change by 1996 in the culture of work (or the maintenance of tradition) cannot be determined easily. While there can be no doubt that management change has impacts, and there have been massive structural changes which must have cultural effects, it should not be assumed that the culture of the organisation simply follows the culture of management. McInerney (2005) revealed aspects of relations between craft groups to be continuing and in some ways remaining ‘problematic’. The culture of management may itself be hard to change. Pendleton (2003) has claimed that change in management attitudes, following railway privatisation in Britain, has been overstated.

While it is hard to believe that management’s view of the good worker could have no effect on the workplace this analysis might best serve to point toward elements which are not worth the bother of changing. It could also be worth looking for a perspective from which elements might be developed in a...
more positive way without, as some management literature suggests, resorting to replacing the workforce.

Replacing a railway workforce with one from other industries would be problematic because so much knowledge, skill and procedure are retained in the culture. Strangemian (2004), among many accounts of the recent history of Britain’s railways, issues a warning against discarding collective memory and commitment along with it. Commitment is bound up with identity and status. Railway work has long carried high status, most obviously for train drivers but also for guards and stationmasters. Strangemian also points out that cultures do not stand still — new ones emerge in ways which management might not predict. This research and that of Garnst (1980) and Strangemian (2004), indicate that railway traditions may be very difficult to change and that potentially valuable elements remain in those traditions. Inflexibility may be a product of the strength of industrial structures and the strength of an autonomous culture that has a powerful grip on personal identities.

What of the old tradition still looks good?

The characteristics of the ‘good worker’ identified above still appear reasonable today, though it is hard to see railway management taking such interest now in family and welfare matters. But wanting dutiful, loyal, efficient and skilled workers looks sensible enough. It takes only a little reorientation of the concepts to deem community service, in terms of meeting the needs of the public, and civility, in terms of presentation to the public, as admirable characteristics of the people in the railway business. Safety has been widely identified as a critical element of the culture. All these notions are still valid. Just how to negotiate their reinvention in an ‘autonomous’, ever-evolving culture, in terms which make economic sense, is the core problem.

It is also possible to see tradition as valuable in itself. The Bendigo Bank provides a well-known example of successful application of this idea. It opened branches after larger banks had closed theirs, working with local communities to do so (see Cutcher n.d.). But as the Bendigo Bank case illustrates, the outcomes can be consonant with sets of differing ideals. The Bendigo Bank developed an innovative culture — it did not just recreate an old one.

How can we reinterpret tradition to create the new?

Many writers on organisation cultural change aver that change has to be led from the top, Cummings and Worley (2005), for example, say that effective change must start from clear management vision. But it also happens at the bottom, and in a railway organisation, a lot happens there. Management vision should make sense from all the perspectives available in an organisational culture.

As Hearrn (1990: 192) has argued, one aspect of change that has not made sense from the employees’ perspective is the withdrawal of railway and ancillary services, even where those services have been made profitable. In a tradition in which the great leaders like John Whitton and Harold Clapp were the people who defended and expanded the railway system, giving loyalty to leadership which is seen to do the opposite could be problematic. ‘Loyalty to what?’ becomes a serious question. Perhaps even more serious is the question of identification. Putting the trade group identity problem to one side, it is worth asking: how is identity with, and commitment to, a railway organisation to be formed when the organisation ceases to develop itself as a railway? It becomes increasingly difficult to convince people to dedicate themselves to an institution as a general positive spirit towards it diminishes. A political theorist made this point recently by quoting eighteenth century philosopher Edmund Burke: ‘To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely’ (Dagger 2005: 15).

Railway organisations may well be ‘lovelier’ than popular perceptions of them suggest. The image of the railway as a problem — financial liability rather than an asset — has a long history (see Giddens 1994). This image has persisted despite good performances financially under unfavourable conditions. When the social and national significance of their services is considered, railways still have many more positive attributes than are popularly acknowledged. These are made apparent when one considers the relative impacts of the various transport modes. The overall effects of road and air travel on the environment are well known but seldom considered in planning decision-making. The health impacts of road transport, not just by way of road accidents, are only now being examined in policy-making circles in Australia (see, for example, Bureau of Transport and Regional Economics 2005). The increasing use of cars, in contrast to earlier more common use of public transport and walking, has been cited as contributing to the present alarming obesity among children (see Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2004). By providing a mode of transport which does not have such negative social, health and environmental effects and does not normally raise issues about safety, railways continue to make a positive contribution which, like the civilising effect of their early development, is not merely to be measured in financial terms (although some might argue that it should not be). Here may lie some ideas for the re-creation of the idealised railway, possibly even based on nostalgia for the railway as a new kind of ‘civilising’, or at least a socially and environmentally safe and healthy service.

How can history be used to inform the development of new cultures?

There are two ways in which the past can inform cultural change. One is more direct than the other and it involves examination and analysis of previous attempts at cultural change on Australian railways. The experience of Commissioner Webb in South Australia could be informative (see Jennings 1973). Those interested in safety cultures have an extensive literature about human factors in railway safety to draw on, but the history of the ‘Safety First Movement’ in New South Wales should be compulsory reading. Overarching both of these is the relationship between the cultures of management and those of employees, including the role of the ‘craft groups’ in socialisation by attempting to specify their participation in the work in terms of loyalty and identity.

The less direct ways in which the past can inform the present are needed to ensure that new traditions make sense in the context of history. Programmes for change have to make sense in terms of all available interpretations and understanding of the past of transport and haulage. This requires a sound knowledge of the past and of the range of interpretations which have been made of it in the organisations and outside them.

Conclusion

Tradition is not an absolute. While it can be the keystone of an applied culture, explaining how people make sense of their
working lives and work environment, it can also be reinterpreted and changed. The relative autonomy of much railway work, its substantial historical and nationally symbolic significance, the importance of it to the personal identity of workers and the structures which develop through socialisation amid contests for loyalty all give railway tradition a continuing (potential) significance.

What can railway organisations learn from railway cultural traditions? By giving due regard to their own histories and the distinctive characteristics of railway work and life, railway organisations can learn how to better respond to change. This conclusion is consistent with approaches to cultural change often taken in the more enlightened management literature. Rather than eschewing their past, railway organisations can consider using their past concepts of nation building and service to interpret their present, to see and project their own worth to the economy and society.

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APPENDIX: New South Wales railway (and tramway) magazines read

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