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**Empowerment by Control :  
Workplace Change in the New Zealand  
Income Support Service**

**A thesis presented in partial  
fulfilment of the requirements**

**for the degree  
of Master of Arts  
in Sociology at  
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## Abstract

This paper reports the results of an ethnographic study of the experience of employees in three Income Support Service Offices in 1996. An open-ended question: "What is the workers' experience of change in the organisation of work and the employment relationship?" was used to guide the collection of data and to explore the employees' experience of empowerment and control at work.

In these workplaces employees were presented with a managerial argument that the introduction of teamwork, multi-skilling, new technology and performance management would lead to greater job satisfaction and personal development. I argue that the techniques of job redesign that promised to "humanise" the workplace and empower workers were incorporated into systems of employee management and control that were more exploitative than traditional employment practices. In Income Support, the process of workplace re-organisation facilitated a continuous and complex process of job re-design and work intensification. Work flexibility, the development of new technology and individualised employee management practices, enabled management to integrate a wide range of occupational tasks into one role, that of Case Manager. Employees had limited promotional and pay opportunities. Their productivity and behaviour were closely monitored and controlled by a system of performance management. Their empowerment was defined as conformity to managerial demands; employees who ~~did not~~ conform were managed out of the organisation.

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