

# **Another Step up the Ladder or Another Foot in the Grave? Re-evaluating the Role of Formal and Informal Training in the Career Development Process within Barclays Bank, 1945–80**

## **Introduction**

For much of the twentieth century, a job with one of England's major joint-stock banks was widely considered to be amongst the safest and most secure employment prospects available. Dismissals were relatively rare (McKinlay, 2002: 604); salaries, whilst not lavish, did generally increase incrementally each year (Ackrill and Hannah, 2001: 343; Crompton, 1989: 144); and, thanks to the banks' preference for recruiting internally, opportunities for promotion were fairly plentiful (McKinlay, 2013: 433; Storey et al., 1997: 30). As a result, it was widely assumed that those young men fortunate enough to be recruited out of school or college by one of England's major joint-stock banks during this period were gaining not just a new job, but also a 'safe and steady career for life.'<sup>1</sup>

From a historical perspective, there are a number of potentially interesting aspects to this tightly defined career framework. One such angle that has attracted a considerable amount of attention from historians in recent times is the issue of how exactly, and on the basis of what criteria, the individuals employed by these banks were able to progress and move along these clearly demarcated career paths. Alan McKinlay (2002; 2013), for example, has written extensively about the role that internal inspections played in determining who did, and who did not, get promoted up these predefined career ladders.<sup>2</sup> Other studies, meanwhile, have looked at the relationship between length of employment and seniority (Heller and

Kamleitner, 2013; Seltzer, 2010) and the degree to which gender biases affected promotional prospects (Crompton, 1989; Halford and Savage, 1995; Parker et al., 1998)

One factor that has not really been considered in this burgeoning literature on the banking ‘career’, however, is the role played by formal and informal training in determining the promotion prospects of the individual bank worker. From a theoretical perspective, this oversight is somewhat surprising given the emphasis that previous works on closed internal labor markets have placed on training and examination when seeking to understand how the promotion processes in these markets actually work (Althausen, 1989; Baron et al., 1986; Pfeffer and Cohen, 1984; So, 2015; Townley, 2014). Our aim in this following paper, therefore, is to make a start at redressing this specific gap in the historical literature by using Barclays Bank as a case study through which to explore, and better understand, the role that training played in the post-World War II banking career. To achieve this goal, we will focus our inquires around two key questions: first, did the undertaking of training exercises play any role in enhancing an individual’s promotion prospects within Barclays Bank and, second, did the provision of greater training opportunities within Barclays at this time in any way change the format or nature of the traditional career development process?

In terms of its structure, the remainder of this article will unfold in the following way. In the next section, a brief overview of the changing workplace practices in the British banking sector will be provided, along with a more detailed analysis of the historical literature relating to the banking career. Following on from this, some background information about the methodology employed in this article will be provided. In the next sections, the focus will then switch to looking at the external and internal training provisions available to mid-twentieth-century employees in Barclays Bank and the relevance that these courses may or may not have had to the career prospects of these individuals. Finally, the article will move on to assess the impact that unofficial and informal learning practices continued to play in the

career trajectories of those employed within Barclays and conclude by drawing together the main findings from the preceding discussion.

### **Background: The Banking Career**

In England at least, the notion of embarking upon a ‘career’ in banking would have made little sense prior to the second half of the nineteenth century as most banks up until this point tended to be small, family-run enterprises with few members of staff (Cassis, 2013; Collins, 1988: 65–74; Michie, 2016). However, following the repeal of the 1844 Joint-Stock Bank Act in 1857 and the passing of the Companies Acts of 1858 and 1862, England’s main clearing banks began to rapidly increase both in size and scale (Bond, 2016; Newton, 2007; Taylor, 2014). Naturally, this expansion also meant an accompanying increase in staff numbers and, from the latter years of the nineteenth century onwards, England’s ‘big five’ clearing banks began employing growing numbers of salaried workers (Collins, 1995).<sup>3</sup>

In the vast majority of cases, those recruited by one of the ‘big five’ during this period would join the bank either straight from school or at a relatively young age and then try to work their way up the career ladder (Stovel et al., 1996: 363–4). Indeed, aside from a few special cases (typically involving family members), there were no real alternative or later ports of entry (or exit) where ‘the bank’s internal labor market intersected with the external market’ (McKinaly, 2013: 433). As a result, almost all senior clerical and management positions within England’s major clearing banks were filled from below by employees who typically had many years’ experience working for the bank (Cassis, 1994: 115–21; Seltzer, 2004: 239–40).<sup>4</sup>

To be considered for admission into this closed and highly stratified career pathway, prospective applicants had to demonstrate not only a basic grounding in arithmetic and

English, but also some evidence that they were ‘respectable’ and ‘upright’ members of society (Ackrill and Hannah, 2001: 75–7). As a result, when bankers and writers of the time sought to define the ‘ideal’ recruit, they often emphasized personal qualities such as manners, frugality, exactness, and steadfastness over specific skills or expertise.<sup>5</sup> The inevitable upshot of this emphasis on character and personality was that most banks had remarkably homogenous workforces, made up of young, diligent men who mostly came from the same sorts of backgrounds (Stovel et al., 1996: 362–3).<sup>6</sup>

For both the banks and the individuals they employed, this closed and rigidly defined career structure brought with it a number of practical advantages. From the point of view of the banks, its standardized and lengthy design was beneficial in that it helped to ensure that all future managers were ‘socialized’ into the traditions and rituals of the bank from an early age (Ackrill and Hannah, 2001: 63). Moreover, as McKinlay (2002) notes, it also fulfilled a disciplinary function in the sense that it provided all bank employees with a clearly-demarcated yardstick against which to judge and measure their own personal development. For those employed by the banks, meanwhile, the obvious advantage of this closed internal recruitment system was that it provided both a high degree of job security and the promise of potential promotions and salary increases in the future (Crompton, 1989: 143–4).

Although the disruptions caused by World War I and World War II necessarily resulted in some upheaval for Britain’s major banks, the basic suppositions underpinning this ‘traditional ascriptive, status-based’ employment model continued to hold strong throughout the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the standard belief continued to be that those who joined one of Britain’s major banks out of school would likely have a safe and steady job for life (Stovel et al., 1996; Savage et al., 1995). From the 1960 and 70s onwards, however, the dominance of this model gradually began to decline as social and economic changes slowly eroded the foundations upon which the classic ‘career-for-life’ concept had been based. In its

place, there gradually emerged new and more flexible types of career paths, characterized by greater levels of openness, transferability, and personal initiative (Booth, 2004; Cressey and Scott, 1992; Hannan, 1988; Heinz, 2003; Wilkinson, 1995). Nowhere were these changes more keenly felt than within the local branch, where enhanced levels of automation and an increased emphasis on retail customer banking resulted in a notable shift away from the ‘uniform career for the standard rounded “banker”’ and a greater move towards ‘recruitment for specific and specialized roles’ (Storey et al., 1997: 34). Particularly notable in this respect was the increase in the number of IT and legal experts that were hired by the banks during this period to fulfil specialist tasks.<sup>8</sup> Equally as significant, there was also a discernible shift in the demographics of the workforces of the ‘big five’ banks, with women and mature workers making up a far bigger proportion of the total staff numbers (Taylor, 1980: 66).<sup>9</sup>

In acknowledgment of these major shifts in employment practices, one of the key issues that we want to explore in the next few sections is the role that formal and informal training practices played in this transformation. Did they serve to accelerate the decline of the traditional employ-young-and-recruit-from-within model? Or, conversely, did they actually help to preserve the sort of paternalistic personnel policies that had dominated for so many years prior? Previous historical works on banking careers in the UK have tended to remain fairly quiet on this issue, preferring instead to focus on the outward manifestations of these changes rather than their internal drivers. By focusing specifically on the role played by formal and informal training in determining the promotion prospects of the individual bank worker, we hope to not only make a start at redressing this gap in the historical literature, but also to contribute to our deeper understanding of this important transitional period in British banking history.

## **Approach**

In terms of its methodology, this article uses a mixed-methods approach, combining archival research and oral history interviews to assess the role of training and informal learning in the career prospects of Barclays' employees between 1945 and 1980.<sup>10</sup> From an empirical perspective, it is argued that these two approaches complement each other well. On the one hand, the archival material utilized in this article (notably, files from Barclays' archives and primary material from the Institute of Bankers) provides a detailed and chronologically accurate account of both the content and the role of training within Barclays during this period (Rowlinson et al., 2014b). On the other hand, the oral testimonies offer the personal perspectives and experiences of bank staff on training and shed light on interpretations of events, relationships and personal roles not generally covered in archival material (Seldon and Pappworth, 1983).<sup>11</sup>

The oral interviews that we conducted were semi-structured, conducted face-to-face and lasted between one and two hours. In terms of content, they broadly covered the interviewee's careers and how they experienced the developments in banking that took place during their working lives. In total, 10 former employees of Barclays were interviewed (Table 1).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Collectively, the careers of those interviewed spanned from 1953 to 2000 and as branch managers from 1971 to 1995. The sample covers most of England and Wales. All the interviewees were male, which reflects the fact that the banking profession at the time was heavily male-dominated, with women largely restricted to working in clerical roles with limited prospects for promotion to management positions (Crompton, 1989; Halford and Savage, 1995). The sample was a self-selecting sample; nine responded to a call issued

through the editor of Barclays' staff retirement magazine, *Connections*, and one was recruited through an acquaintance. From a historical perspective, the career paths of those interviewed closely match those outlined in the historical literature on banking careers (Halford and Savage, 1995). With one exception, they each entered banking after completing school around the age of 16, starting in junior clerical positions and then working their way up the career ladder. As such, the training they received will have been broadly representative of training for bank entrants in Barclays more generally during this period.

### **External Training**

Though concerns about standards of professionalism within the banking industry were frequently voiced during the early and middle years of the nineteenth century (Perkin, 1990; Seal and Croft, 1997; Taylor, 2014), it was not until the late nineteenth century that serious moves were made to introduce some kind of professional qualification for the banking industry (Collins, 1988: 87–8). In England, the body that assumed responsibility for hosting these examinations was the English Institute of Bankers (IoB), which was set up in 1879.<sup>12</sup> Although their attempts to introduce some kind of formal qualification were initially met with some hostility from the major joint-stock banks (Green, 1979: 56–9), they continued to persevere and, by the early years of the twentieth century, most of England's largest banks had reconciled themselves to the idea of an external organization administering professional qualifications (Collins, 1988: 88; Green, 1979: 79–85).

In terms of the historical literature on this subject, the current consensus amongst those who have written about the career process in the banking sector seems to be that, though the sitting of these exams might have become increasingly common during the twentieth century, the qualifications themselves actually had relatively little impact upon the promotion

prospects of the individual worker. For instance, in her work on women in British banking, Crompton (1989: 147) argues that ‘personal qualities’ counted far more than qualifications when decisions over promotion were being made, suggesting that ‘although men wishing to be promoted had always been encouraged to take the banking examinations, it was nevertheless not unusual...for men to achieve managerial grades without them.’ A similar case has also been forward by McKinlay (2013: 433) in his study of the ‘typical’ banking career before 1939, in which it is suggested that ‘performance in professional examinations was not translated into the ranking of a cohort, and examination success did not necessarily accelerate individual progress.’

The purpose of this next section is to assess the validity of these sorts of statements by looking in more depth at the role played by the IoB’s examinations in the English banking profession’s post-World War II employment setup. To do this we will investigate not only the nature of the relationship between the IoB and Barclays bank, but also the views of those who actually sat these exams. In this way, we aim to get a much fuller and a more nuanced understanding of the part played by these external qualifications in the career development process within England’s major joint-stock banks between 1945 and 1980.

As mentioned previously, despite some early difficulties, the IoB had eventually been able to establish itself as a relevant and legitimate body within the banking industry by the start of the twentieth century. Though it did fulfil a range of roles (such as organizing lecture series and taking an interest in bank employees’ welfare), its chief function was the teaching and examining of entrants for the IoB’s own banking qualification.<sup>13</sup> Initially, the syllabus for this qualification consisted of eight separate question papers in general or applied business education (Commercial Law, Political Economy, etc.) and two in practical banking.<sup>14</sup> To gain the certificate and become an ‘Associate’ of the IoB, participants had to pass all the question papers (failure in any one of the papers meant having to take them all again).<sup>15</sup>



From a purely numerical perspective, it is undeniable that more and more people started taking the IoB's qualification during the twentieth century. Indeed, aside from the years that were lost to the First and Second World Wars, the number of entrants for these exams increased almost year-on-year, with the period under scrutiny in this article experiencing a particularly prominent surge in numbers (see Figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Whilst, of course, this dramatic surge in participants does need to be contextualized against the changes taking place within the banking industry at this time — notably, the increasing number of people working for the 'big five' clearing during this period (106,000 in 1959 to over 203,000 by 1976) — the numbers alone do indicate the extent to which these qualifications had become an established part of the career development process for many within the English banking sector (Green, 1979: 169; Vik, 2014: 105). This was also something that was verified by the interviews we did, with the respondents all stating that the undertaking of the IoB's examinations towards the start one's career (the average age for completing the IoB's Banking Diploma at this time was 28) was considered to be fairly typical.<sup>16</sup>

What is less clear, however, and what previous studies into the banking career have failed to really explore, is how significant a factor the completion of these exams was for the career prospects of the individual bank employee (and why). Predictably, the surviving material from the IoB gives the impression that their exams were essential to an individual's career prospects, with the 'official line' being that the qualification provided the 'foundation on which a banking career can be built.'<sup>17</sup> In part, these were sentiments that were also echoed by a number of the former employees we interviewed:

‘...we were encouraged to get professional examinations, Institute of Banker’s examinations. And it was said that if you didn’t, you didn’t get on. To a point I think that was true... I think that if you didn’t have your exam it probably held you back rather than pushed you on.’ [Robin, 1953–1988]

Nevertheless, as the caveat at the end of the passage suggests, there was also an acknowledgement amongst some of those we interviewed that, whilst definitely disadvantageous, failure to complete the IoB’s exams did not necessarily represent the ‘end of the road’ for one’s career prospects.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, despite the fact that most of the individuals we interviewed stressed the importance of the exams in the career development process, there was little sense that the course itself provided them with a great many useful skills for their future advancement.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, amongst those we interviewed, the completion of the IoB’s exams tended to be seen more as a box-ticking exercise that simply had to be got through, rather than a valuable learning experience in its own right:

‘...It’s a bit like the--. It’s a bit like the driving instructor. The pupil has to pass their theory test and their hazard perception test both at the same time. Otherwise they can’t take their driving test and they have to pass both. If they don’t pass both, they have to take them both again, so it was that sort of thing.’ [William, 1964–2000].

Yet, just because the undertaking of the IoB’s qualification might have occasionally felt like something of a bureaucratic exercise, this did not in any way mean that the process of actually passing the exams was an easy one. Indeed, for a number of the individuals that we interviewed, the process of trying to obtain the qualification actually turned out to be an extremely taxing one:

‘I was trying to take them, but I wasn’t having much success...I’d do something like pass one and fail one so I had to start again...I think I finally qualified, oh I don’t know, I probably qualified when I was about thirty. It took me a long time to get the exams.’ [William, 1964–2000]

Part of the reason why individuals like William found it so difficult to pass the IoB’s exams was because, during this period, it was the policy of the major English clearing banks not to give candidates any time off to study for the qualification (Seal and Croft, 1997: 67). As a result, those studying for the exams had to somehow fit their studies in around their full-time jobs with the banks. As one of the interviewees [Barry] recalled, this typically meant that most evenings and weekends had to be devoted to studying and revising for the exams. Equally problematic was the fact that, in 1947, the ‘big five’ clearing banks had unanimously agreed not to allow IoB candidates a day off work on the day of their exams (Green, 1979: 155).<sup>20</sup> This, in turn, meant that it was often very hard for candidates to actually get to their exams on time, as the following interviewee recalled:

‘...[there was] no incentive, in fact when I did my exams I had to go to the National Provincial Bank, as it was called then, and exams would start at six o’clock but if you hadn’t balanced your till you couldn’t leave the office. So on more than one occasion I’d gone to my exams at quarter past six...there was no help whatsoever.’ [Brian, 1962–1996]

From a critical point of view, the fact that banks such as Barclays continued to make the actual process of studying for the IoB’s so difficult says a lot about how they perceived these qualifications. In particular, it suggests that, for them, the undertaking of the IoB’s qualification was as much a learning process as it was a chance for candidates to publicly demonstrate their desire to succeed and rise up the career ladder. This was certainly the

stance taken by Derek E. Wilde, then Senior General Manager in Barclays, who suggested that the value of the IoB's examinations for the banking industry was that they provided an 'objective yardstick by which a young banker could demonstrate his ability — and his determination to succeed.'<sup>21</sup> Likewise, it was also the view of John Tonkyn, then Assistant General Manager, who believed that an unwillingness to take the IoB's exams was a sign of laziness and 'poisonous' cynicism on the part of the employee.<sup>22</sup>

Viewed in this way then, the IoB qualification perhaps comes to be seen less as a test of a candidate's intellect and more of an institutional 'rite of passage' (Trice and Morand, 1989) that all ambitious young workers had to pass through in order to be considered for promotion up the career hierarchy. Indeed, given the obstacles that those who wanted to obtain this certificate had to overcome simply to sit the exams, it is perhaps best to think of the IoB's qualification more as a test of a candidate's diligence, self-discipline and, above all else, their commitment to the 'very idea of the career' (McKinlay, 2002: 597). In this respect, therefore, the IoB's qualification can be regarded as important component of the traditional, paternalistic career-for-life employment model described previously in this article.

## **Internal Training**

Prior to the outbreak of World War II, England's 'big five' clearing banks typically devoted little attention to the provision of systematic internal training opportunities for their staff.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, even when some form of internal training was provided, it was generally done in a fairly haphazard manner and usually had little impact upon the career prospects of those who participated (McKinlay, 2013: 433; Storey 1995: 40–1). As a result, most occupational learning tended to take place informally, with the expectation being that staff would just 'pick things up' on the job.<sup>24</sup>

All this began to change, however, from the late 1940s onwards as the ‘big five’ to gradually reconsider their attitudes towards the provision of internal training opportunities (Hollow, 2017a).

Numerous reasons can be put forward to explain this shift in attitude. On the one hand, this was a period in which the general quality of British management — and management training — was coming under increasing scrutiny in the face of stiffer competition from overseas firms (Granick, 1972; Millar, 1979; Raven, 1989). Equally as important, the cozy, bureaucratic and protected monopoly that the ‘big five’ clearing banks had previously enjoyed, was coming under increasing scrutiny as neo-liberal free-market thinking increasingly began to dominate economic and financial policy (Bellringer and Michie, 2014; Hollow, 2017b; King and Wood, 1999; O’Higgins, 2014). Finally, this was also a period in which Britain was slowly moving towards a generally more meritocratic employment, with professional qualifications and transferable experiences starting to count for more than personal connections and company loyalty (Reed and Anthony, 1992; Robinson and Manacorda, 1997; Storey, 1995).

Within Barclays, evidence of this shift in attitude was reflected by the decision to set up a series of ‘refresher’ courses during 1946 and 1947 for employees returning from armed service in order to reacquaint them with the basic skills of banking and to help ease their transition back into working life (Ackrill and Hannah, 2001: 127). A new permanent residential training center was also established at Wimbledon (SW London) in 1946, with further facilities at Ashdown Park (Sussex) and Teddington (SW London) also set up in the following years.<sup>25</sup>

At first, the range of courses on offer at these training centers was fairly limited, with one course on routine bank work and one on securities procedures being the only options available (Ackrill and Hannah, 2001: 350). However, as the number of training facilities

increased, so too did the number of courses, till by the 1970s Barclays was running a full range of internal training courses, including: Principles of Lending, Senior Management Development, Senior Securities, International Advanced Corporate Financial Analysis, Corporate Finance, Farming Finance, Industrial Relations and Audio Typing.<sup>26</sup> In most cases, these courses would last a number of days (a number of the more intensive courses actually lasted for four weeks), with participants expected to stay overnight in the residential facilities provided at the different training centers operated by Barclays.<sup>27</sup>

Initially, the teaching philosophy adopted on the internal courses set up by Barclays was fairly conservative and ‘by-the-book’, with instructors expected to stick rigidly to the training manuals that they were provided with.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, there was even a joke within Barclays that one could walk from one classroom to the next ‘without missing a word of the identical lectures’ (Ackrill and Hannah, 2001: 350). By the start of the 1970s, however, the teaching methods used on the courses had started to become a bit more varied, with films, case studies and scenario-based group work all utilized to assist in the learning process.<sup>29</sup> In addition to this, there is also evidence that, on some of the more senior-level courses, attempts were starting to be made to replicate some of the more innovative group-based teaching methods that were increasingly being used in the burgeoning management and leadership training industries (Wilson and Thomson, 2009: 161–4):

‘I was away for about three weeks doing all sort of stupid things that they do on management courses, you know, building a raft, floating over a canyon, all sort of stupid--. We used to have a tournament called the royal tournament where navy crews would dismantle guns, carry the parts over a wall, re-assemble the guns and fire it and we had to do that.’ [William, 1964–2000]

Content-wise, the focus of the courses that Barclays ran during this period varied quite considerably. For the foundation courses, the emphasis tended to be directed towards teaching participants the skills that they would need in order to be successful in their specific roles within the bank, as the individuals we interviewed recalled:

‘...they’d teach you all the basics in banking, how to operate these accounting machines, how to [do] all the jobs that you were learning to do.’

[Barry, 1959–1997]

‘...basically [they’d] teach you how to lend, what you should do and what you shouldn’t do...’ [Robin, 1953–1988]

By contrast, in the more senior-level courses, the content tended to become a bit more theoretical, with the hope being that students would come away with an appreciation not only of *how* to do certain things, but also an understanding of *why* they did them in that way.<sup>30</sup> As a result, these courses tended to involve greater levels of reading and discussion than the more ‘hands-on’ foundation courses.<sup>31</sup>

How effective these different kinds of courses actually proved in terms of imparting knowledge to those who participated in them is, of course, difficult establish with any degree of certainty. Unsurprisingly, the Barclays’ hierarchy was firmly of the opinion that these courses were highly effective at teaching employees a range of new skills, boasting in one publication that ‘...at least nine out of ten young students leaving Wimbledon do so uplifted by the fact that now they know a good deal which hitherto was dark to them.’<sup>32</sup> However, based upon the interviews we conducted, there did seem to be a sense that a lot of what was taught on these courses was content that participants were already familiar with:

‘...a lot of it was stuff you’d learnt already, but it was cementing the knowledge and confirming that what you’d learnt on the ground was

actually what the bank wanted to do with some twists that changed your view.’ [Barry, 1959–1997]

Whatever the actual educational worth of these internal training courses, however, it is clear that they were beginning to play an increasingly important role in the career development process within Barclays Bank during this period. Recruitment booklets started to outline how different training courses could help ‘fast-track’ people along different career routes, whilst details of the training courses that an individual had attended also started to appear on the standard Annual Staff Assessment forms that were produced for each Barclays’ employee.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, during annual staff appraisal meetings, members of staff began to be pushed into thinking about whether they might ‘benefit from any course or instruction’, suggesting that this was starting to become a key factor in decisions about career progression.<sup>34</sup>

Yet, despite these changes, it is fair to say that many of the assumptions that had underpinned the ‘traditional’ Barclays’ career model continued to remain the same. For one thing, the fact that so much of what was taught on these courses was specific only to Barclays, inevitably helped to support the sorts of closed internal labor markets that had dominated prior to World War II, as employees continued to find it hard to move between banks or into other industries (Seal and Croft, 1997: 69–70). Moreover, despite their seemingly meritocratic façade, there was still a distinctly ‘disciplinary’ element to the courses put on Barclays, with the expectation being that instructors would make note of the levels of enthusiasm and ‘corporate pride’ shown by individual students.<sup>35</sup> Finally, though career mobility was certainly enhanced by the options provided by these courses, it was still the case that those with family connections and/or the right sort of contacts were able to largely bypass these sorts of training requirements and enter the organization at a more senior level.

Overall, then, what seems to emerge from this section on the impact that the internal training courses provided by Barclays had upon the standard banking career is a somewhat muddled



picture. On the one hand, the degree to which Barclays began to invest in internal training provisions over this period does seem to suggest that, like many of their competitors (Storey et al., 1997: 34), they were starting to recognize the value of providing more transparent employment structures that would allow those with the necessary drive and intellect the chance to rise up the career ladder faster than they might have previously done. However, at the same time, the simple fact that so much of this training remained in-house and job-specific, inexorably meant that banks like Barclays were still able to preserve a great deal of autonomy and maintain their authority over the working lives of their employees — just as had been the case prior to World War II (Seal and Croft, 1997: 70).

### **Informal Learning**

In the previous two sections, the emphasis has been centered on the role(s) that formal training played within Barclays during the post-World War II era; by contrast, in this following section, we will now focus our attentions on the extent to which informal learning continued to play a role in the career development process within Barclays. According to Marsick and Volpe (1999: 4), informal learning can be defined as: ‘learning that is predominantly unstructured, experiential, and noninstitutional.’ In contrast to formal training, informal learning happens spontaneously in everyday activities, rather than deriving from planned exercises (García-Peñalvo and Conde 2013; Marsick and Volpe, 1999). The route and pace of informal learning is also set by the individual, whereas formal learning tends to be pre-planned and the same for all (Cross, 2007). Naturally, different roles require different forms of informal learning and different organizational settings will, to varying degrees, be conducive for informal learning. For instance, at a role-level, task variation, engagement with experts and the extent to which employees encounter new situations will condition the extent

to which they engage in developmental learning (Ellström, 2001; Skule 2004), while, at an organizational level, incentives, promotion criteria and job security can incentivize informal learning (Ellinger, 2005).

From a historical perspective, the subject of informal learning is one that has generally received little attention in the emerging literature on the banking career. One reason for this might be because historians have generally found it quite difficult to build up a picture of the informal working practices undertaken by employees from standard archival sources (Hansen, 2012; Rowlinson et al., 2014a). Our research has sought to overcome this epistemological obstacle by adopting a mixed methods approach that utilizes oral testimony in order to get an insight into some of the undocumented practices that took place within Barclays during this period.

Before turning to look at the role of informal learning in the Barclays' career development process, however, it is first necessary to briefly discuss the centrality of business lending to the banking career (Vik, 2014: 91–6). This was something that was clearly highlighted during the interviews we conducted, with most of the participants voluntarily bringing up the subject of business lending and the status it was afforded inside Barclays:

‘I don’t say this in a self-satisfied way, but when I retired I had a discretion of a million pounds. I could lend a million pounds to anybody I chose.

There were conditions, but I could do that.’ [Lance, 1956–1995]

As the above passage indicates, for those employed by Barclays, the act of lending came to be seen as both a source of authority and a ‘badge of distinction’ that distinguished one from one’s peers (Sennett, 2008: 245). Indeed, in many respects it signaled the extent to which bank staff were trusted by the bank, with the assumption being that the greater the lending discretion, the more the bank trusted in your skills: ‘...the individual was entrusted...I was

trusted to lend' [Brian, 1962–1996]. Conversely, being granted only modest lending discretionary limits or, worse, having such discretions removed were seen as signs that the bank did not have confidence in your skills:

'If you were a manager who lost lots of money, you know, particularly within your discretion, as it was called, then, er, you were likely to be in big trouble and would never be promoted again. You'd be probably moved to a less challenging branch or moved out of branch banking all together and sent to a remote corner of stationery department [laughs].' [Carl, 1968-2000]

The fact that business lending was considered to be of such importance had clear implications for the skills and learning that ambitious employees required. As noted in the section on in-house and external training, some of these skills could be acquired through formal training methods, such as: management accounting, cash flow projections and loan appraisal methods (e.g. PARSER). However, the skills required in the underwriting of loans could not solely be acquired through formal training. Employees had also to develop tacit skills such as the ability to make instinctive judgement calls, as suggested by the quote below:

'I mean you try and get a feeling of the person and from that basically I suppose, "do I trust he has the ability to repay?", because so often you'll find that people have got into troubles with their debts... Some of it is a gut feeling, but a lot of it is based on experience.' [Robin, 1953-1988]

As illustrated by the above passage, the ability to lend effectively depended on accumulating a catalogue of first- and second-hand experiences of different lending scenarios, as well as skills in judging and managing interpersonal relationships. These sorts of skills are indicative of so-called 'tacit' knowledge. According to Eraut (2000: 121) such knowledge is especially

important in terms of understanding people, which in turn conditions how one deals with situations: ‘...one does not often have to put knowledge of people into words unless it is a specific part of one’s job, and one might find it difficult to do so.’

Within Barclays, the learning of these skills was heavily embedded within the standard banking career trajectory. As mentioned previously, there was a strong emphasis in Barclays on promoting from within, with the expectation being that individuals would enter Barclays as junior clerks and then work their way up to branch management and above (Seltzer, 2004: 239–40). As a result, most employees got to experience and observe a wide range of different roles within the Bank:

‘...one of the main jobs for the junior was...the remittances. That’s the cheques that have been paid in that aren’t drawn on your branch that have to be sent to clearing. After that, you would then go on the counter and you worked your way up and then became a first cashier responsible for all the cashiers. And so then you worked your way through from a junior securities role to a senior securities role and after that you would get your first appointment as a manager or a manager’s assistant, which was the norm.’ [Henry, 1965-1997]

In addition to this linear mobility, a number of the interviewees also recalled working in roles external to the branch involving controlling and supervising branch activities, including working on inspection teams and in regional lending control:

‘Then I was called to work in our regional office as a--. Well, today the title would be credit analyst. So you’d look at all the advances which had come to the local head office. The big ones you’d take down to the directors with your comments and your analysis and then they’d frequently tell you to do

the report and you'd do the report and they'd sign it. So that was a great place for training and learning the skill of banking which is quite complex.'

[Brian, 1962-1996]

Of course, as Wilkinson (1995) notes, one reason why banks such as Barclays favored job rotation was because of the diverse and varied nature of branch work at this time. In addition to this, it also helped to indoctrinate employees into the culture of the Bank (Ackrill and Hannah, 2001: 63). However, by far and away its most valuable contribution was the extent to which it equipped Barclays' employees with the sort of informally-acquired skills that they would need to move up the career ladder.

Another important source of informal learning that was also mentioned by some of the interviewees was learning under the tutelage of more senior managers:

'I learnt a lot there because of the variety [of] industry that there was there and because of a really excellent boss. He was one of the best bankers I know in terms of his judgement. Judgement of people, judgement of a lending proposition. I realised that I've said a lot about lending, but you got to bear in mind that until comparatively recently, the process of, the business of lending money was the big money earner so it figured large. It was all done or intermediated at branch level. Because even if it was a large advance beyond the branch manager's discretion he was the guy who actually negotiated it and he had to recommend it.' [Lance, 1956-1995]

Thanks to such experiences, employees were able to acquire skills from more senior managers by reading their loan applications and associated correspondence, discussing lending decisions and reasoning behind them, and receiving feedback and advice.<sup>36</sup> Historically, this kind of informal learning would have been the main way that banks

educated their staff, especially prior to the wave of consolidations at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century (Green, 1979).

For the purposes of this article, the fact that these sorts of practices continued to play such an important role in the standard career trajectory within Barclays is revealing for a number of reasons. Firstly, it suggests that, despite the increased emphasis that was coming to be placed on formal training, ‘on-the-job’ experience was still regarded extremely highly. Secondly, it indicates that, whilst greater efforts were being made to introduce more open and transparent performance review procedures, there still remained a great deal about the Barclays’ career model that was ad-hoc and organized on an informal basis. And, finally, the fact that so much importance was attached to knowledge that was gained through lengthy practical experience, suggests that the assumption continued to be that a career with Barclays meant a career for life.

## **Conclusion**

As the preceding paragraphs have outlined, formal training clearly played an important role in the post-World War II careers of those employed by Barclays. In terms of external training, it was widely expected that those employees with any ambitions beyond clerical posts would undertake and complete their IoB exams. At the same time, far more emphasis also came to be placed on internal training, with more and more employees undertaking a variety of different courses in the various new training facilities established by Barclays during this period. Whilst the educational value of these external and internal training courses may not always have always been up to the highest standards, they nonetheless still played an important role in the career development process by virtue of the fact that they allowed ambitious individuals to simultaneously distinguish themselves from their peers and get

noticed by their superiors. For this reason if nothing else, they ought to be treated as important components of the post-World War II banking career.

Yet, at the same time, it is also clear that formal training, on its own, did not decide who and who did not get promoted within Barclays. Likewise, it is also apparent that not all the skills that an ambitious employee required were acquirable through formal training. A large part of the reason for this was that considerable emphasis continued to be given to informal learning activities, such as on-the-job learning and mentoring by more experienced colleagues. In particular, there continued to be a great deal of importance attached to acquiring the sorts of tacit and non-standardized skills considered necessary to engage in the job of business lending. Part of the reason for this was that business lending was generally considered to be amongst the most prestigious of the tasks undertaken by the branch (Crompton, 1989: 145); partly, it was because this was a task that continued to rely heavily upon personal judgement and was therefore difficult to codify, routinize and standardize (as per Ellström, 2001). Either way, the fact that informal training continued to occupy such an important role meant that many of the assumptions and norms that had underpinned the traditional banking career model continued to hold sway (Ackrill and Hannah, 2001; McKinlay, 2013; Savage et al, 2001).

Taken together, then, what emerges from these findings is an attitude towards training that can best be described as piecemeal or fragmented. On the one hand, there is clear evidence that moves were being made within Barclays to modernize and formalize their staff development program in accordance with the organizational and administrative shifts that were taking place in a great many other industries at this time (Faulkner, Pitkethly and Child, 2002; Poole and Jenkins, 1997; Russell, 2015). However, on the other hand, there are also ample indications to suggest that Barclays still sought to protect and preserve the socially conservative, paternalist career-for-life model that had been dominant in the years prior to

World War II (Crompton, 1989; McKinlay, 2002; Storey et al., 1997). That these two strands of thought co-existed alongside one another suggests that the organizational and cultural transition that Barclays went through during this post-World War II era may not have been as smooth or as straightforward as previously assumed.

Though more work remains to be done to fully understand the wider applicability of these conclusions, it does appear as if some of the shifts and trends identified in this study of Barclays might have been mirrored by some of the other British banks during this period. For instance, we know that, between 1945 and 1948, all but one of the UK's major clearing banks opened their own internal training colleges and that staff training became far more organized during this post-World War II era.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, we also know that far more bank employees began undertaking degrees and other higher education qualifications during this period, both with the IoB and with other educational institutions (Cressey and Scott, 1992; Vik, 2016; Wilkinson, 1995). What remains to be investigated, however, is how far these transformations in training provisions actually impacted upon the career paths and promotion prospects of those working in the British banking industry during this period. Our hope is that this paper will act as a springboard for further research in this area.



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<sup>1</sup> National Board for Prices and Incomes, *Salaries of Midland Bank Staff*, Report No. 6, Cmnd. 2839, London: HMSO, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Similar issues — albeit within the context of Australian banking — have also been explored by Diane van den Broek (2011).

<sup>3</sup> The 'big five' clearing banks being: Barclays, Lloyds, Midland, National Provincial and Westminster.

<sup>4</sup> By contrast, the more senior managerial roles generally continued to be filled by relations of the big families within the banks or those with the right sort of connections.

<sup>5</sup> G. V. Bramley, "Recruitment", in *Bank Management — Recruitment and Training* (Based on the Institute of Bankers' Seminar held at Christ's College, Cambridge, 23-29 March 1969), (London: Institute of Bankers, 1969), pp. 19–20.

<sup>6</sup> Women comprised a small proportion of this workforce and were purposely not afforded the same advancement opportunities as their male counterparts (Crompton, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> The most significant changes that took place related to female employment, with the banks having to turn to women to cover for their absent male staff.

<sup>8</sup> M. T. Wilson, "Bank Management in the 1970s", in *Bank Management — Recruitment and Training* (Based on the Institute of Bankers' Seminar held at Christ's College, Cambridge, 23-29 March 1969), (London: Institute of Bankers, 1969), pp. 7–12. See also, Bátiz-Lazo et al. (2014).

<sup>9</sup> To give some indication of this change, in 1959 women comprised 40% of all staff employed by the 'big five' banks; by 1976, this proportion had increased to 55% (Taylor, 1980: 66).

<sup>10</sup> In this way, it can be seen to be answering the recent call by Colvin (2015: 3) for banking historians to 'acknowledge and draw on social science approaches to history.'

<sup>11</sup> In addition, given that the literature has shown that employees resist and sabotage formal policies in a number of ways (Knights and McCabe, 1998), there is also a chance that the interviews might shine new light on the actual implementation of policies and procedures.

<sup>12</sup> The Institute of Bankers in Scotland was established in 1875; the Institute of Bankers in Ireland, meanwhile, was established in 1898.

<sup>13</sup> *The Institute's future role as a qualifying association: A report by the Wilde Committee, Chairman: D.E. Wilde* (London Institute of Bankers, 1973), p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> The Arithmetic, Commercial Law, and Bookkeeping papers were replaced in 1921 with papers on Economics, The Practice of Law and Banking, English Composition, Commercial Geography, and Foreign Exchange. Optional papers in five foreign languages were also added. See: *Journal of the Institute of Bankers* (June, 1922), p. 259.

<sup>15</sup> Those who were successful were allowed to distinguish themselves from their colleagues by writing the initials 'AIB' (Associate of the Institute of Bankers) after their names (Green, 1979: 81).

<sup>16</sup> F. J. Peacock, "Management Training and Development", in *Bank Management — Recruitment and Training* (Based on the Institute of Bankers' Seminar held at Christ's College, Cambridge, 23-29 March 1969), (London: Institute of Bankers, 1969), p. 59.

<sup>17</sup> *The Institute's future role as a qualifying association*, p. 15.

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<sup>18</sup> R. R. Amos, "The Development and Career Development of the Branch Banker", in *The Branch Banker: Today and Tomorrow (Based on the Seminar held at Christ's College, Cambridge, 6-12 September, 1975)* (London: Institute of Bankers, 1975), p. 53.

<sup>19</sup> Concerns about the relevance of the exams for the modern-day banking profession were, in fact, also picked up upon by the IoB themselves during this period. In the early 1970s, they commissioned Derek E. Wilde, then Senior General Manager in Barclays, to lead an inquiry on the makeup of the IoB's qualifications and how they might be improved in the future. His subsequent (critical) Report proved important in helping to reshape the content and structure of the IoB's qualification. See: *The Institute's future role as a qualifying association*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>20</sup> Though Barclays did start to offer diploma candidates part-time day release from the mid-1960s onwards to assist them in their studies (Green, 1979: 169).

<sup>21</sup> *The Institute's future role as a qualifying association*, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> "Staff Management and Training" by John Tonkyn, Assistant General Manager (19<sup>th</sup> April, 1955). Barclays Bank Archive, 0300-3977. Similarly, in one report for the Westminster/Victoria district, the inspector had written: 'it was most disappointing to hear from a number of young bearded Secretaries Clerks that they had no intention of completing their examinations.' See: "Directors Inspection: London Southern District" (23-26 June, 1980), p. 5. Barclays Bank Archive, 0300-1017.

<sup>23</sup> Barclays, for instance, did not have any kind of formal, bank-wide training scheme until 1946 (Ackrill and Hannah, 2001: 79).

<sup>24</sup> Peacock, "Management Training and Development", p. 38; *Journal of the Institute of Bankers* (November, 1927), p. 495.

<sup>25</sup> "Staff Training Centres Report" (1979). Barclays Bank Archive, 0300-1017.

<sup>26</sup> "Guide to Training Services" (June, 1980). Barclays Bank Archive, 0300-1017; "Staff Training Centres Report" (1979). Barclays Bank Archive, 0300-1017. The numbers of staff attending these courses also increased dramatically during this period, from approximately 2,000 per-year in the early 1960s to over 16,000 per-year by 1980 (Ackrill and Hannah, 2001: 350-1).

<sup>27</sup> "Staff Training Centres Report" (1979). Barclays Bank Archive, 0300-1017.

<sup>28</sup> "Staff Management and Training" by John Tonkyn, Assistant General Manager (19<sup>th</sup> April, 1955). Barclays Bank Archive, 0300-3977; "Materials for Machinist and Cashier Course, Staff Training Centre, Wimbledon" (1965). Barclays Bank Archive, 1888-0001.

<sup>29</sup> In addition, there were also some tentative moves towards outsourcing some of the bank's training provisions to other higher-education institutions, with the Henley Business School being used for some of the more senior-level courses. See: Amos, "The Development and Career Development of the Branch Banker", pp. 63-5.

<sup>30</sup> "Staff Management and Training" by John Tonkyn, Assistant General Manager (19<sup>th</sup> April, 1955). Barclays Bank Archive, 0300-3977.

<sup>31</sup> "Staff Training Centres Report" (1979). Barclays Bank Archive, 0300-1017.

<sup>32</sup> "Staff Management and Training" by John Tonkyn, Assistant General Manager (19<sup>th</sup> April, 1955), p. 24. Barclays Bank Archive, 0300-3977.

<sup>33</sup> Bramley, "Recruitment", pp. 19-22; Interview with Harold; "Annual Staff Assessment: Revised Edition" (1974). Barclays Bank Archive, 1214-0138.

<sup>34</sup> "Annual Staff Assessment: Revised Edition" (1974). Barclays Bank Archive, 1214-0138.

<sup>35</sup> "Staff Management and Training" by John Tonkyn, Assistant General Manager (19<sup>th</sup> April, 1955), p. 24. Barclays Bank Archive, 0300-3977; Amos, "The Development and Career Development of the Branch Banker", p. 63.

<sup>36</sup> The informal learning literature identifies mentoring as a means of informal but intentional learning (Conlon, 2004: 287).

<sup>37</sup> See: "Education and training in banking: Report of the conference held at St. Andrews, 9th-19th Sept., 1950", Institute of Bankers in Scotland (1950).