“Between Desired Performance and Actual Performance”: the Method and Meaning of Training Managers at Eaton’s and Labatt’s from the 1950s to the 1990s

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The title of this paper comes from an internal training video used by the T. Eaton Company in early 1990s that was used by managerial staff.¹ The management function, in its many forms, proliferated in Canada in the post-World War II decades, much as it did across all developed economies in the same period. This paper will discuss how managers were educated and trained at two major Canadian-owned firms from the 1940s to the 1990s. The companies were John Labatt Limited and T. Eaton Company. Labatt is a brewing firm that was initially founded by in 1847 in London, Ontario by the Labatt family. T. Eaton Company was founded in Toronto, Ontario by Timothy Eaton in 1869. Labatt is now a subsidiary of Anhesuer-Busch/InBev, and Eaton’s went bankrupt in 1999. Both firms historically occupied important socio-economic positions in post-war Canada because of the scope of their operations and because of the ubiquitousness of the products that they sold.

This analysis will particularly focus on the years when both firms were Canadian owned and operated. It will substantially be based on archival sources found the Archive of Ontario and the Archive and Research Collection Centre at Western University Canada, and will situate management education and training at Labatt’s and Eaton’s within existing historical literature on management. This paper employs an analytic framework based on historical materialism as the intent is to reveal what managers at the major corporations were taught about their roles and what that experience meant within a wider social context. Management is often an amorphous term. It can mean someone who is a shift manager at a fast food outlet and another person who is the CEO of a large corporation. This analysis of Eaton’s and Labatt’s management will focus more on front-line and middle level management. Both companies provided training to managers however, this training was principally about adapting to the culture and organizational needs of the firm rather than developing skills needed to guide the strategic direction of the organization. Furthermore, the cases of Eaton’s and Labatt’s both show that being in a more front-line managerial role was a vocational experience that was predicated on a practical learning

in the work environment. The impact of changes in training methods, especially the use of technology, also significantly guided the management experience.

Management Education and Training in Perspective

Management is often viewed in monolithic terms, especially by people who are not actually working in managerial roles. Much of the research that has been done on management education and training differentiates between the experience of front-line, middle, and upper management. For example, Khurana’s research on graduate business schools focuses on the top tier of the management education hierarchy.² In contrast, Jacoby’s research on management at Kodak, Sears, and Thompson Products examined how lower-level managers were trained in techniques that fostered employer paternalism and welfare capitalism.³ Further, as Moss-Kantor revealed, corporation want managers to have skills to engage in such things as “people development” (what are now called soft skills).⁴ The range of skills that would be considered helpful for corporate managers were described in the early 1950s by Mills when he noted that being on track for an executive job required “training on vocational skills, but also in social mannerism”.⁵ Being able to adapt to the norms and values of an organization was as important as having specific knowledge required to perform a job. Being in management at Eaton’s and Labatt’s partially reflected the experience of managers described by Jacoby, Kanter, and Mills. Fitting in well also mattered at both firms as much as it did a company like Kodak, or Bell Canada.⁶ What Eaton’s and Labatt’s training programs show, much like Jacoby illustrated, is that lower level management training was principally done in conjunction with daily work tasks. It also represented a form of employer paternalism as managers became the disseminators and monitors of company policies and practices, and familiarity with company policy formed a key part of training programs.

T. Eaton Company

The T. Eaton Company, so named for founder Timothy Eaton, was commonly called Eaton’s and was a social institution in Canada as much as it was an economic one. For instance, the annual

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Eaton’s Santa Claus parade in Toronto was a holiday fixture for many decades. Settlers working farms in the Canadian west usually did so with a copy of the Eaton’s catalogue close at hand. Successive generations of the Eaton family exercised control over the company, although their personal interest in retailing waned as decades passed. The Eaton family were adroit users of employer paternalism. Eaton’s, as the firm was ubiquitously known, employed tens of thousands of employees over its long history. The company, although based in Toronto, Ontario, had extensive retail operations across Canada. However, regardless of where they were based, long-service employees viewed themselves as Eatonians. As Phenix described in her book on Eaton’s employees, former workers continued to send Eatonian memorabilia to John Craig Eaton after the firm closed.7 There is a village called Eatonia in the province of Saskatchewan and, as shown in Figure 1, a Timothy Eaton United church in Toronto.8 The Eaton family name is consequently part of collective Canadian memory.

Eaton employees fought during both world wars with the assurance that they would be able to return to their jobs once the conflicts were over. The Canadian government sought to increase the size of the militia, or army reserve, in 1938 in preparation for anticipated hostilities in Europe. Approximately 1,500 Eatonians volunteered for militia service in 1938 and over 5,000 went on active duty when Canada entered World War II. The company permitted them to serve while securing their jobs, and also supplemented their wages while they were in the military. Eaton’s arranged fund raising events for the war effort and sent gifts to company employees serving overseas.9

Returning veterans formed an important group within the post-World War II T. Eaton Company. The company supported an internal veterans’ association. It was described as a:

Great meeting place for all Eatonians and their friends; it would fill a long-felt need for a centre for the men’s activities; it would be a great force in cementing employee and management relations; promoting customer and employee goodwill; it could be a forum for the better training and education of employees that desired advancement; for the development of greater interest in the arts and

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Participating in the veterans’ association would have been a good idea for any men seeking to enter management roles. Internal groups like the veterans’ association played a key role in helping with career advancement, and management levels were clearly delineated. Management was divided between in-store personnel across Canada and people working in administrative functions in the Toronto head office. All new employees in the 1950s and 1960s were provided with an orientation booklet that outlined the company’s mission – “our business is selling” – and their other obligations and benefits.11 Store managers across the country were involved in developing orientation materials before they were printed and given to new employees. For example, a Vancouver store manager was advised in 1954 about how he worded language on

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employee lunch breaks in case employees – in this case female clerks – took breaks in such a way that sales were interrupted.\textsuperscript{12}

Returning veterans likely continued to be an important part of the Eaton workforce into the 1970s, when some of them would have begun to retire. Staff who had served overseas in the war – only eight had been women – were invited to a reception at the Eaton family residence north of Toronto in 1946. The Eaton family cultivated an aristocratic demeanor at a time when Canadians felt themselves more closely linked to the United Kingdom than they would in subsequent decades. The reception was a carefully planned affair, and veterans surely felt it an honour to attend a reception hosted by Lady Eaton. The influence that veterans in leadership roles had over time on the retailer is not evident in the available sources, but it is unlikely that they forgot their military experience and it probably shaped at least some of their attitudes toward dealing with staff and running the corporation.\textsuperscript{13}

Eaton’s convened internal personnel management conferences in the 1950s and 1960s. The idea of hiring and promoting people through the ranks was favoured during that period. The agenda materials for a 1954 personnel management conference lamented the fact that there was still too much emphasis on filling vacant roles with people who were “the most suitable candidates at hand” and that there needed be better efforts made to “search within the house” when filling jobs. There was also considerable concern about staff turnover, despite the fact that Eaton had many long-service employees. For example, Eaton’s surveyed their new staff hires in Toronto in 1953 and found that, of 671 people that had been hired in the city of the preceding sixteen-month period, 504 had left the firm. This rate of turnover clearly alarmed Eaton’s management, and personnel managers were advised to emphasize the generosity of the company’s benefits and other programs when dealing with employees.\textsuperscript{14}

The materials used to educate people on both front-line supervisory roles and middle-management positions were principally in paper form in the 1950s and early 1960s and stressed Eaton’s role as a major Canadian retailer. It was also designed in such a way that referencing it could be part of everyday work tasks. As shown in Figure 1, 1960s brochure titled “Your Career

\textsuperscript{12} AO, T. Eaton Fonds, F229-170, B253182, Loose binder Welcome to Eaton’s, 1950 to 1964, letter to F.G. Peskett, 15 October 1954.

\textsuperscript{13} AO, T. Eaton Fonds, F229-170, B253184, Military Service – Employee Participation, Military Service Summary, 1939 to 1948.

\textsuperscript{14} AO, T. Eaton Fonds, F229-170, B25318, Personnel Managers’ Conference, November 1954.
at Eaton’s” was clearly meant to be slipped into the inside pocket of a suit jacket for easy reference. Eaton’s managers and other new hires, except those in senior manager roles, were apparently not enrolled in full-time training sessions that took them away from their job duties. They instead received information on company policies and procedures and relied on the Personnel Office to guide employee policy.

Eaton’s produced enough loyal Eatonians to ensure that the company successfully operated into the 1960s, and Eaton’s training materials began to change by the late 1960s and into the early 1970s as audio-visual materials became much more commonly used. This method of training provision also continued with the company’s preference to integrate training into the daily tasks of supervisory staff rather than devoting a lot of dedicated work time to in-class sessions. The messages conveyed through the training materials and internal memoranda from the 1940s to the early 1960s reveal much about how management viewed the Eaton’s workforce.
Managers were supposed to be male; there is no evidence of female managers being hired and promoted. On the other hand, it was anticipated that sales clerks would be female. This was a highly-gendered division of labour.

The company’s retail mission was emphasized throughout the new training media. A 1974 film talked about how most of the people portrayed in Eaton commercials were in “their late twenties and early thirties, have children, and live in the suburbs” even though “not all of our customers are like that.” The moving images in this film and other like it featured stylishly-attired actors of western European descent, and reflected little of the diversity that was increasingly evident in Canadian society. The film also emphasized the idea that women were principally consumers. The fact that Eaton’s operated on a seasonal buying and selling cycle was also shown in sales promotion films, which also reinforced the company’s long-standing view that it was in the sales business.

The films shown in the 1970s and 1980s did not reflect the challenges faced by Eaton’s. For example, competition with other retailers was not discussed in much detail in internal training materials. This was a common theme from the late 1940s onward. Indeed, in the 1950s and 1960s, internal company communications could have led someone to the conclusion that Eaton’s was possibly the only retailer in Canada. The need to maintain discipline within the workforce was presented in internal communications from the Personnel Department, but there was little nuance on how to deal with problem employee situations or any form of conflict. The supposition appears to have been that workers would be treated in a benignly paternalistic manner, but that they would be expected to do what management wished. This included what happened when workers attempted unionization.

Eaton’s was not alone among major Canadian employers in its preference to remain non-union. None of the major Canadian banks, trust companies, or insurance firms had ever been unionized. Many major retailers had also avoided it, although grocery stores were unionized in the 1970s and 1980s. Canada experienced two major waves of unionization from the mid-twentieth century onward: industrial organizing from the 1930s to the 1960s and public sector organizing from the late 1960s into the 1970s. Public sector organizing involved bringing hundreds of thousands of women into the labour movement. Canadian unions, many of which

were part of American parent unions and federations, actively sought to organize retail workers. However, as Sufrin has shown, Eaton’s furiously resisted unionization in the late 1940s and early 1950s.\textsuperscript{16}

A second major effort at unionization was made in the mid-1980s at several Eaton’s stores in the Toronto area and the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union that led the ensuing strike cooperated with a film-maker to create a documentary called \textit{No Small Change: The Story of the Eaton Strike}. The film was highly critical of Eaton’s management. Company management was described as being a “dynasty”.\textsuperscript{17} The strikers were overwhelmingly female, and ultimately were able to achieve union certification in one Toronto-area store. A copy of the film was included along with other internal training materials used by company management. There are possible reasons for this decision. One is that senior management thought that they had achieved a major victory as the union was only able to organize one store. Alternatively, management may have viewed the film in cautionary terms and as indicative of organizational culture problems that needed to be rectified.

An internal training film developed after the strike that provided direction on how to conduct meetings suggested that meetings must be used to help motivate employees and that all concerns raised in meetings must be recorded and responded to by management.\textsuperscript{18} This film also showed women in positions of managerial authority. The film also stressed that a manager must always take meeting minutes. Another film made in the years following the strike called \textit{One Minute Manager Excerpts} advised managers on how to set a goal in one minute, give praise in one minute, and reprimand in one minute.\textsuperscript{19} This was all based on a book called \textit{The One Minute Manager} by Kenneth Blanchard. This was a more popular management book and not a work of managerial theory equal to work like Drucker’s.

Events leading to the ultimate bankruptcy that Eaton’s experienced are not discussed in internal training materials, but there are some signs that suggest why the firm faced challenges. The Eaton family, despite not being especially interested in the retail industry, was determined to exert direct managerial control over the company. A 1989 interview with then-company chair

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\textsuperscript{16} Eileen Sufrin, \textit{The Eaton Drive: the Campaign to Organize Canada’s Largest Department Store, 1948 to 1952} (Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1982).

\textsuperscript{17} AO, T. Eaton Fonds, “No Small Change: The Story of the Eaton Strike” (DVD), F229-421, DVD 24.

\textsuperscript{18} AO, T. Eaton Fonds, “Meetings: Taking the Minutes”, F229-417, DVD 657.

\textsuperscript{19} AO, T. Eaton Fonds, “One Minute Manager Excerpts”, F229-417, DVD 660.
Fredrik Eaton revealed a senior executive who proudly carried the family name but appeared to know little about how the company operated. For instance, he declared that most of the company’s stores and facilities were of post-World War II construction. He did not comment on the fact that forty-four years had elapsed since the end of the war. Fredrik Eaton correctly noted that the retail market was “saturated” but he also predicted that the company would expand by the year 2000. He did not preside over the company’s bankruptcy in 1999; his brother George had succeeded him by that point.20

Training at Eaton’s was taken seriously, but it entirely meant to align staff with the objectives of senior management. The company was concerned with employee turnover, and clearly saw Eaton’s as having a socio-economic role beyond simply selling retail goods. The term Corporate Social Responsibility was not used in internal Eaton’s documents, but senior management and the Eaton family obviously felt that they were responsible for keeping the firm going as a Canadian institution. Many of the thousands of Eatonians who spent their careers at the firm seem to have agreed with them, even if some tried to organize unions. John Labatt did not have a name for its employees equivalent to Eatonian, but the company was also highly involved in training its management.

John Labatt Ltd.

Labatt’s, as the John Labatt Brewing Company became commonly known in post-World War II Canada, was different from Eaton’s as it was primarily a producer of consumer products and an industrial rather than service sector firm. London, Ontario was the location of the Labatt head office before key functions began to move to Toronto in the 1970s. The company operated a network of breweries across Canada, and was known to produce some well-known national brands including Labatt Blue and Labatt 50. Labatt’s maintained an extensive marketing function, but did not directly retail beer. Labatt brewery workers were represented by the Brewery Workers Union, and labour relations was an important internal management function. The company also considered itself an important socio-economic part of London, and members of the Labatt family were active in philanthropy. As Figure 3 shows, the company wanted to present itself as being modern. There were additional perquisites offered to employees beyond

compensation and benefit packages. Most notably, workers from the 1960s to the 1980s were well-known to be regularly provided with free cases of beer.

The management training materials that are available from the Labatt Brewing Company Collection begin in the early 1970s and go up to the late 1990s. Audio cassette format was gradually followed by use of films and video tapes. DVD format was being introduced by the mid-1990s. The Labatt training materials used in the 1960s frequently focused on dealing with routine management difficulties. A 1975 collection of six cassette tapes focused on Management by Objectives (MBO), a management approach pioneered by Peter Drucker. The tapes advised that “the world of capitalism breeding too many administrators and not enough managers” and warned about a “general malaise of middle management” that was inculcated by “risk free job security.”

The development of management was important to the future of the organization. Labatt managers who listened to the MBO tapes were advised that “case study method causes a manager to alter his way of thinking” and that it was “preferable to have training sessions near the job to fit schedules, nearness to work process, etc, makes training feel customized.” The tapes did not talk about “her” way of thinking. Training involved incurring expenses and training must be part of a “harmonious network of activities” that are all part of MBO. Skill development was linked

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21 Archive and Research Collection Centre (hereafter ARCC), Labatt Brewing Company Collection, AFC-101, “Managing By Objectives” (six cassette tapes) LA00920.
to compensation, and the MBO tapes recommended that compensation for top managers should be dependent on what they contributed to the organization. The need to make management training part of the everyday work processes, be mindful of cost, and link it to compensation were all key points. Managers were cautioned from the beginning about complacency and essentially told to expect that they were not guaranteed job security.  

New managers in the 1980s were instructed on the range of the Labatt operations in Canada. The company was diversified at that time and included ten businesses such as Catelli Pasta, Chateaugay Wines, and ownership interests in The Sports Network (TSN), and the Toronto Blue Jays baseball team. While the link to the Catelli and Chateaugay was through a wider framework of food and beverage products, the broadcasting and sports links were clearly intended to help promote Labatt’s core beverage business. The Labatt’s organization was described as decentralized and entrepreneurial. The company’s history in the brewing industry was usually referenced in educational and promotional materials, but the Labatt family was not present except for references to founder John Labatt.  

The need for ongoing education and training to further career aspirations was emphasized in Labatt’s training resources for management. A 1988 film called *Going Places* described the transformational impact of education on low-wage workers, especially women and people of colour. This film was made in the United States and, like many of the training resources used by Labatt’s from the 1980s onward, featured much more employee diversity than had been evident in earlier materials. The film specifically described a training program for high school drop-outs. It was presumably intended to foster a learning culture within the firm, both among lower-level managerial staff and production workers.  

Labatt’s senior management evidently felt that the firm operated in a highly competitive environment in the 1980s and 1990s and devoted resources to educating managers on the changes faced by the brewing industry. In 1996, the company convened an internal leadership conference and brought in a succession of guest speakers who described changes in the industry, but also more broad socio-economic change. The proceedings were filmed and disseminated across Labatt to serve as a training resource. Topics such as the coming rise of craft brewing

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22 ARCC, Labatt Brewing Company Collection, AFC-101, “Managing by Objectives” (six cassette tapes) LA00920.
were noted. The impact of the “wired world” and enhanced micro-processing was the topic of another conference session. Overall, managers attending the 1996 conference were advised that their industry was changing, customers wanted more choice when it came to buying beer, and technology was rapidly advancing. It is noteworthy that Labatt paid to bring highly-paid managers away from their jobs to Toronto to spend time in a conference setting. It was likely that people in more senior management roles attended. Lower-lever supervisory staff probably viewed the video proceedings at their home locations. Enhancing the skills of senior management was also thought about by Labatt’s leadership. For instance, a video promoting the executive education programs offered by the Business School at the University of Western Ontario was circulated internally in 1990.

Internal Labatt’s training sources recognized the presence of a union in the workplace, but efforts were made to promote cooperative labour relations. In the late 1970s, managers were shown a video that described a collaborative labour-management initiative that was developed in Labatt’s London, Ontario plant. It included segments quoting Canadian Labour Congress representative Ray Murray and Peter Boffa, who was the Industrial Relations Manager for Labatt in Ontario. The joint initiative, which revolved around Quality of Work Life (QWL) was judged a success by both labour and management. A second segment in the same film looked at a similar joint labour-management initiative at a British Columbia (BC) Forest Products Plant. BC Forest Product supervisors felt “quite a bit of relief” as they did not feel a need to deal with so many problems by themselves, although some supervisors felt anxiety because of feeling a loss of status as a result of involving the union in decision making in the plant.

The Labatt’s training materials tended to reflect broader social change. There was greater diversity shown – both racial and gender – as decades passed. Senior management continued to be white and male, but women and people of colour were increasingly shown in roles beyond simple administrative jobs. While probably not satisfying the aspirations of people who wanted to see more diversity in Labatt’s managerial ranks, the company’s management training materials still reflected progress in terms of attitudes on race and gender. In contrast, Labatt’s

27 ARCC, Labatt Brewing Company Collection, AFC-101, “The Western Executive Experience” – VHS, LA00898
used a training film for sales staff called *The Professional* in the early 1970s. It starred Hollywood actor Van Johnson as a salesman facing an identity crisis when he wonders if his job actually made him a professional person, and it is a remarkable historical artefact. Toward the start, Johnson’s character refers to a receptionist as an “uppity little chick” and states that “if it wasn’t for salesmen like me, she’d be pressing pants in Bernie’s tailor shop.” This dialogue was part of a song and dance routine. Johnson’s character, along with others, is shown consuming alcohol while travelling on business. This film sent highly sexist messages to anyone viewing it, and it probably reflected attitudes prevalent among at least some management at Labatt at the time that the company used it for training.  

**The Meaning of Management Training**

Unlike the experience of managers at Bell Canada in the 1950s and 1960s, managers at Eaton’s and Labatt’s did not spend much time participating in classroom training sessions of extensive duration. Instead, their training was deliberately intended to fit around their other work commitments. They were learning how to manage as they progressed with their firms. While not necessarily described as apprentices, they were nonetheless apprentice managers although their training did not have a fixed conclusion and they were not awarded licenses confirming that they were qualified managers. They were managers because Eaton’s and Labatt’s employed them in different managerial positions.

Labatt’s was clearly more concerned with maintaining at least respectful relations with the union representing its production workers, while Eaton’s leadership was determined to avoid unionization. The Labatt family, though still shareholders, did not run the company. In contrast, successive members of the Eaton family led the firm until it shut down. Management in both firms was overwhelmingly male and white. This should not have perhaps been a surprise at Labatt’s since brewing has historically been portrayed as a male industry, and the Labatt’s workforce was overwhelmingly male. Eaton’s stores were full of female sales staff who were directed by male managers. This gender division was remarkably not noted in Eaton’s training materials until the 1970s.

Cities like Toronto, Vancouver, and Montréal became much more multi-cultural in the post-World War II decades but that diversity was not reflected in Eaton’s training materials.

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Whereas Bell Canada at least produced internal communications in both English and French, Labatt’s and Eaton’s seem to have been more Anglo-centric. Eaton’s notably remained wedded to its Anglo-Saxon roots. Training content used at both companies reflected a lot of American influence. This was particularly true of video sources. Many of them were distributed through Canadian firms, but originated with American producers. The widespread use of video sources that began in the 1970s meant that training could be quickly conducted around other work duties. Recording events such as senior management conferences then distributing the proceedings across an entire organization meant that company policies and goals could be more clearly communicated than was likely possible with print resources.

Labatt’s training materials reflected much more willingness to think about the challenges facing the firm, especially from other existing and emerging brewers. The content of training materials reflected differing views about how the leaderships of the two companies viewed their respective industries. The beer industry in Canada was dominated by two major firms, Labatt and Molson, until the late twentieth century but was then changed as more foreign competition arrived and craft brewing grew. Both brewers recognized the growing competitiveness of their industry. Eaton’s did not respond quickly enough to changes in retailing. The differing margins of brewing and retailing also surely impact the extent of the resources devoted to training. In contrast, a utility like Bell Canada operated in a less competitive environment during the post-war decades and would have been able to include the cost of any training programs in its regulated cost base.

Eaton’s and Labatt’s devoted enormous resources to advertising and managers were expected to be conversant with their company’s public mission and persona. Managers at both companies were also expected to align their personal career objectives with those of their firms. Not being a “company man” was not an option. On the other hand, many Eaton’s employees were willing to devote themselves to the firm and proudly called themselves Eatonians. It is unclear if offering training made a substantial difference over time to the comparative success of the two firms. Managers who participated in internal training of any type were not involved in strategic decisions about company policy and planning. Labatt’s did not go into bankruptcy but,
as Matthew Bellamy has discussed, it was one of the major Canadian brewing firms that were subsumed into larger multinational corporations.\textsuperscript{30}

Both Eaton’s and Labatt’s senior leaders sought to create management identities and beliefs that were specific to their firms. Doing so would ensure that the people actually overseeing daily operations would adhere to overall policies. Both firms surely had expectations about desired performance among managers, and sought to promote it. The training materials used by both firms did not extensively refer to management theory. Management thinkers like Peter Drucker were noted through the use of such methods as Management by Objectives, but in a practical rather than theoretical way. Management was presented as an applied function. Eaton’s and Labatt’s senior management obviously saw value in providing management training as they devoted resources to it in the post-war decades. The archives are silent on what lower-level managers who participated in training thought of the experience. If nothing else, it helped them form internal networks and the experience of going through training, even of a tertiary manner, meant that a manager represented an investment for an employer. The training that they experienced aligned them with the broader objectives of their firms, but it did not devote much attention to how Eaton’s and Labatt’s fit more broadly into Canada in socio-economic terms. Management, in the cases of these two firms, was a vocation practiced within specific organizational spheres.