MAURI TU: THE TOMOANA RESOURCE CENTRE – AN INTERVENTION FOLLOWING JOB LOSS

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Abstract

Job loss has been an all too frequent part of the New Zealand economic landscape in the past two decades. Job loss is also associated with risks to the well-being of individuals, families and communities. Central to this relationship is that employment represents more than income. It represents a shared community outside of the family and access to a degree of control over one's life.

The experience of the Tomoana Resource Centre promotes the need for a facility that assists former workers to adjust to job loss by respecting their contribution to community, supporting them to maintain control over their lives and valuing their humanity.

INTRODUCTION¹

Job loss has been a particular feature of the employment landscape in New Zealand since the mid-1980s. In the prevailing economic climate it is tempting to see employment primarily as a pathway to income. However, we find this approach is too simplistic. Literature, both local and international (Dooley et al. 1996, Mather and Schofield 1998, Morris and Cook 1991), describes the importance of employment as a source of social support, self-esteem, identity and community, above and beyond its role as a source of income.

In New Zealand, the economic policies of the past 15 years have resulted in significant job loss, sometimes manifested as large-scale group redundancies. There is mounting evidence of downstream effects of job loss in both health and social cohesion (Shortt 1996). Whether or not one accepts the economic policy directions of the past decade (and many, including the authors, would dispute their wisdom), the possibility of continued significant job loss still exists. An urgent policy task is, therefore, to seek strategies that minimise the harm associated with job loss.

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This study describes an intervention developed by a community in crisis following a large factory closure. It notes the history, the environment, the collaboration between key participants, the support of various agencies, and the needs of redundant workers, their families and community. It focuses on the humanity of those made redundant, their interconnectedness, their sense of family and their demand to be treated with respect.

While their journey and challenges show patterns similar to those described elsewhere in the literature (Morris and Cook 1991), they highlight local realities and should inform policy regarding the needs of New Zealand communities, families and workers.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

There is a long-acknowledged association between poverty and ill-health which continues to be described today (National Health Committee 1998). Within poverty, several parameters have been studied, including income (Mowbray and Dayal 1994, Te Puni Kōkiri 1998), education (Wadsworth 1997, Benzeval et al. 1995), housing (Jamieson 1998, Public Health Association 1992) and employment (Department of Statistics 1991, Statistics New Zealand 1993, Ferrie et al. 1998), together with their relationship to ill-health (Ministry of Health 1996).

Researchers have asked whether unemployment creates a risk to mental and physical health. While reviews of the literature often note the debate on causality (Barnett et al. 1995, Jin et al. 1995, Mather and Schofield 1998, Shortt 1996), the evolving consensus acknowledges the need to manage the associated risks. One such review noted:

Policy planners must face the reality of the relationship between unemployment and ill-health and develop a response to it. (Shortt 1996:581)

Recent reviews have drawn attention to the diversity of people who are termed "unemployed" and note the difficulty official statistics have in capturing this diversity (Ezzy 1993). Examples include differences between those who have never been employed and those previously employed, differences between men and women facing unemployment, differences between situations of low unemployment and high unemployment, and differences between voluntary and involuntary job loss.

To understand the impact of job loss, it is important to consider the role of employment for individuals, families and communities. Jahoda (1979) describes employment as a social institution that meets many human needs:

First among them is the fact that employment imposes a time structure on the

working day. Secondly, employment implies regularly shared experiences and contacts with people outside the family. Thirdly, employment links an individual to goals and purposes that transcend his own. Fourthly, employment defines aspects of status and identity. Finally, employment enforces activity. (p.494)

Understanding how a job fulfils these needs helps one to understand why there is a motivation to work beyond earning a living, and why work is valued even when working conditions may be less than satisfying. It also sheds some light on the effects of job loss as distinct from the effects of unemployment. Hill (1978) describes the psychological effects of job loss in terms of bereavement:

But as with bereavement individual responses vary according to the relationship to the lost object. Thus much depends on the quality of the relationship which an individual makes with his work and on how far he has established a satisfactory occupational identity through it. (p.119)

Swineburne (1981) notes that "the more central was occupational identity to the self concept and the purpose of life, the greater the experience of loss" (p.53). The loss of a job can be traumatic, especially if it comes at the end of a long period of employment with the one company or firm. This trauma relates not just to the loss of employment and the economic disruption that entails but also to this fundamental relationship between self-identity, occupation and the social community provided by employment. Interventions have tended to focus on retraining and re-employment, but a few published studies have complemented these with self-esteem, assertiveness and mental fitness skills (Poikolainen 1995).

Many countries with western-model social security systems have not recognised the risk associated with job loss and have not implemented comprehensive interventions that address the dual reality of loss of job and loss of identity/family. It is this duality that underlies the risk associated with job loss and the risk that policy planners must manage. One way of informing policy development is to examine initiatives that have grown out of local needs and experiences. The Tomoana Resource Centre was one such initiative. Within the context of this paper we examine what it was about this initiative that was successful and what lessons can be learned.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

This research was conducted within a kaupapa Māori methodology, that is, a methodology that is consistent with a Māori world view and attempts to retrieve a space where Māori voices and realities are legitimate (Cram et al. 1997). In practical terms, this

means that tikanga Māori is imbedded in the research processes, in particular the principle of whānau centred on the values of trust and reciprocity in the research relationship.

This project is a case study of an intervention, the Tomoana Resource Centre (TRC), initiated to provide support for Tomoana freezing workers made redundant in August 1994. This study sought to provide a dense description of this intervention and the lessons it can teach about the needs of workers made redundant and how those needs may be met.

A qualitative approach was taken. This included 22 key informant interviews with clients, community leaders, management team members, volunteers and government agency representatives. Informants were recruited through personal networks of the researchers and those referred to the researchers by TRC. Primary question areas were how people became involved, their expectations and perceptions of the Centre and what they felt the Centre had achieved. Key informant interview transcripts were typed and returned for correction and editing. Other sources of information included a review of minutes of meetings, contracts and work reports. An in-depth media analysis was also conducted, as well as personal observation and participation in programme activities by researchers.

Analysis consisted of reading and re-reading transcripts and other data to identify and group together important themes in order to paint a picture of the ethos and activities of TRC. In particular, researchers sought to capture the social and collective aspects of the work that might otherwise not be recorded in detail in contractual reports.

Analysing minutes of meetings, reports and contracts provided valuable information in understanding the administration, management practices and policies of the Centre.

HISTORY OF THE TOMOANA FREEZING WORKS AND ITS CLOSURE

Some say that the presence of the Tomoana Freezing Works has contributed much to the history of Hastings (Heretaunga Intermediate School 1961). Tomoana played a major role in the meat processing industry over its 115-year existence in both Hawkes Bay and in New Zealand. In 1921, Vesty owned Union International. By the 1980s Union International had merged with the Crown Corporation to form Weddel Crown, later Weddel New Zealand, which ran Tomoana and four other plants.

Tomoana was New Zealand's largest meat plant and the only one that slaughtered sheepmeat, beef, veal, goatmeat and pork on the same site. However, a number of local single-species plants competed with Tomoana for a dwindling number of stocks. In 1993, in an effort to keep Tomoana viable, management announced sweeping workforce reforms and increased on-site meat processing. This attempt failed to keep Tomoana open

and, with its closure, Hawkes Bay not only lost jobs but also a significant historical link with its pioneering past.

On 19 August 1994, Weddel New Zealand went into receivership and forced the closure of Tomoana and four other operations around New Zealand. At the time of the closure, there were 1,214 workers at Tomoana and a further 690 were expected to begin work in November of that year.

"When we got everybody together we told them what had happened and informed them that they'll be hearing it over the radio as the night goes on." (key informant)

Weddel New Zealand was Hawkes Bay's largest single employer with some whānau having contributed workers for up to five generations.

"The closure will affect vast families whose fathers, sons, brothers and cousins all worked at Tomoana." (key informant)

The immediate effect of job loss was compounded by learning there was to be no redundancy payment and further that a "stand-down" period would be enforced before government assistance could be accessed.

THE TOMOANA RESOURCE CENTRE

Community leaders mooted the concept of a resource centre immediately after the announcement of the closure. Two days after the closure, a support group was established to lobby for resources to provide assistance for Tomoana workers and their families. A meeting was convened with key people, including representatives from government, voluntary and local agencies, as well as social service providers and Tomoana workers. This collaboration would prove to be crucial in the functioning of the Centre.

On 25 August, five days after the closure, the Tomoana Resource Centre opened. Born out of the support group, the Centre worked in a voluntary capacity for over six weeks. Timeliness, location and resources were key factors in establishing the Centre.

• **Timeliness.** The team recognised the need for a physical facility to be opened as soon as possible to provide a place for their former colleagues to meet, to seek support and provide support for others, to identify issues and plan strategies. The Centre, in terms of its physical presence, reflected the seriousness of the closure to the local community and workers, and in turn established and reinforced its credibility with its community.

- Location. The location of the Centre was felt to be integral to its success. Being easy to find, in town, close to where most workers lived, on transport routes and close to a car park were important. Previous experience had shown that starting a resource centre adjacent to the site of the closed factory was not a successful choice (Ormsby and Keefe-Ormsby 1996). TRC experience speaks of the need to be "visible" to the local community.
- **Resources.** The Centre received support from a number of agencies due to the intersectoral collaboration established immediately following the closure. The Hastings District Council waived the rent, rates and power of the Centre's building for three weeks and provided free car parking in the adjacent car park. During this period, a proposal was submitted to the Community Employment Group (CEG).

Initially the Government had offered \$50,000 to each of the communities affected by the Weddel New Zealand receivership. This was rejected as "tokenism" on the reasoning that the Government would be spending less than \$34 on each of the Tomoana workers (*Hawke's Bay Herald*, 3 September 1994). Advocates reminded the public and the Crown that Tomoana had suffered the largest number of redundancies and that ripple effects were beginning to be felt in local support industries such as truck drivers and maintenance tradespeople.

By the end of September, TRC signed a contract with CEG with funding increased to \$80,000. The contract was to establish a centre for redundant Tomoana workers and their families. The purpose of the Centre was to provide support, advice, assistance, guidance, training and re-employment options under "one roof". While two satellite centres were also proposed in Napier and Flaxmere, this idea was abandoned after consultation with former workers, who said that they preferred to travel to TRC in Hastings as they enjoyed the fellowship.

In March 1995, the contract was extended for a further year to maintain the support, training and employment function of the centre. However, the funding level was reduced by half and the client base extended to include other workers made redundant in Hawkes Bay. CEG contracts totalled \$120,000 over two years. The Hastings District Council contributed \$20,000 and other donations were received.

RESOURCE CENTRE MANAGEMENT

Key components in the functioning of TRC included both the people and the processes they employed. A management team became collectively responsible for providing services such as social support, advice and counselling, assistance in re-employment, retraining and career development to ex-Tomoana workers and their whānau. The management team comprised a coordinator, portfolio managers, community leaders, a CEG representative and interested individuals. The positions of coordinator and portfolio managers were advertised and appointments made.

"Yeah we had CEG coming up saying, 'as far as we're concerned we only want one manager here and the rest of the people can be volunteers'. We just said straight up, 'no we've come in as a team and we've set up as a team and that is the way it's going to go otherwise we'll walk away', and they agreed to it." (key informant)

The management team was supported by volunteers, the "unwaged heroes and heroines" assisting with various activities, including administration, the food bank and providing collegial support. Voluntary work at the Centre gave some former workers a sense of purpose and other people who had previously worked at Tomoana also offered support.

"Well it gave me something to do – I was unemployed and on the sickness benefit and it was also like rehabilitation for me – it was a change from working as a labourer to doing reception work – yeah I just stayed on it was only voluntary work." (key informant)

The needs of workers made redundant by the closure of Tomoana evolved over time and with this came changes in the Centre's role. The immediate needs included income security, social support and reviewing future employment options.

Income Security

The loss of jobs led to financial disruption for many families. While kin networks had provided Tomoana with a stable workforce over generations, the closure meant the loss of more than one income for many families.

"The other thing about it is that you'd have mum, dad, daughter, son, daughterin-law, son-in-law all working in this one industry and when it went it didn't just wipe out one household it wiped out five." (key informant)

With no redundancy, within the first few weeks many families were experiencing financial difficulties, with ongoing debts such as mortgages, rent, hire purchase, as well as providing the basics of food, power and rent. Financial difficulties were further compounded by legislative and policy requirements. Two examples of such policies

included the vulnerability of workers' allowances, and the stand-down period between the date of redundancy and eligibility for income support.

The creditor status of workers under the Companies Act (1993) meant that many were vulnerable with respect to unpaid wages and allowances as the receiver may set a cap on payments to workers. The local MP, Mr Rick Barker, introduced a bill into Parliament proposing that workers owed redundancy payments, along with wages and holiday pay, be treated as secured creditors in the event of receivership. The bill was defeated in 1998 by a combined vote of National, ACT and former New Zealand First MPs.

Many workers still felt resentful and bitter that there were no redundancy payments made by the receiver. They also felt the system betrayed them with the \$6,000 cap on final payments. Many lost holiday and service pay amounting to thousands of dollars as a result of the legislative limit. (The Daily Telegraph, 19 August 1995)

Tomoana workers were penalised by the policy requirements of a stand-down period before being eligible for income support.

"A lot of them had huge debts and that was due to the stand-down period from Income Support. It was the stand-down period that killed a lot of them. Like any job when you earn good money you tend to put it towards a new car, your family or to buy a house – so four-fifths of your wages are committed there and then all of a sudden that wage is not there anymore and you're left with all these bills and that's what hurt a lot." (key informant)

Those workers who experienced a stand-down period found it extremely difficult because they faced ongoing financial commitments. At the end of August, the workers were told that the Government had ruled out any reduction to the stand-down period for the unemployment benefit.

"The Government wouldn't waive it even though they had heaps of delegations going down to Wellington, letters written, MPs come and visited and that was the one thing that Government would not do – that wasn't just Tomoana that was all the Weddel field." (key informant)

This response created an outrage among the community. The Government's refusal was described as a "mockery", because the Government had been allowing its subsidised work schemes, such as Job Plus, to be used by new companies in the meat industry. While the

work schemes were being used to help the long-term unemployed, they were also effectively assisting new players into an industry suffering from over-capacity and providing them with a competitive edge.

An important TRC initiative sought to coordinate various government agencies and community groups under one roof and to assist workers with enquiries in a "one-stop shop". This demonstrated the common sense of having workers participate in the planning and decision-making process of TRC. As they were also living through the experience of job loss, most understood the needs of their colleagues. Furthermore, people who directly understood the workers staffed the one-stop shop and it was based in an environment that was conducive for former workers.

Social Support

The Centre recognised the Tomoana workforce as a whānau, and the fellowship and comradeship that accompanied their employment. It foresaw the need to support workers through the stresses of job loss, anxiety due to financial insecurity, concerns about future employment options and the stigma of being unemployed.

The portfolio manager for social support was responsible for the coordination and facilitation of services such as counselling and budgeting advice. The Centre also undertook a major exercise of telephoning workers on its database to advise them about the Centre's activities and to provide support and advice. If requested, usually by whānau members, home visits were made to workers.

A concern was that some people and their families would "just curl up and stay at home" (key informant). The Centre offered support to many families. In one case it provided support to a young man depressed after the closure.

"Henare's team knew who his friends were and he made sure that his friends went around to see him and so on." (key informant)

Some months after the closure, the Centre repeated the telephone survey of workers and noted the high number of disconnected telephones and the number of workers who had changed addresses. It was concerned about how family relationships were faring with the stresses following redundancy.

It was aware that the family of the unemployed person usually becomes the main source of social contact and therefore the major social setting within which stress is experienced and dealt with. "My main concern was the families. The rest of the family would suffer because of the bitterness." (key informant)

Some relationships had started to disintegrate with the stress of job loss and the diminishing confidence of those unable to find other employment. As noted by Hill (1978:120), "sometimes stresses of unemployment threaten the marriage itself". Within some relationships, roles had to be renegotiated, with husbands staying at home and wives going out to work.

Some husbands were drinking too much; some had no idea what to do with their time. Much of the pain was due to lack of communication. On the grapevine they would hear that "so and so" had split up, but couldn't do anything about it unless they wanted help. (*Hawke's Bay Sun*, 12 June 1995)

Moreover, patterns had started to emerge at the Hastings Foodbank with families coming forward for assistance. The unusually high number of food parcels needed was attributed to Tomoana workers and their families accessing the Foodbank. The Centre decided it was necessary for it to provide some relief to former workers during the stand-down period. The organising of the foodbank was another major project undertaken by the Centre. The community was generous with food donations and volunteers provided the extra support required for the foodbank.

TRAINING AND RE-EMPLOYMENT

Without doubt, unemployment is best dealt with by creating or finding a new and satisfying job. However, there have been very real changes in the employment market in recent decades and more changes are likely. Retraining workers into different employment areas and upskilling workers have become significant priorities.

TRC sought to provide a diverse range of training sessions for former workers to enhance skills, to maintain morale and social support and to create a time structure for the day. However, before ex-Tomoana workers could become eligible for a training subsidy from the then New Zealand Employment Service (NZES) they had to be registered with NZES for 26 of the previous 39 weeks. A priority status existed for those with low qualifications or those referred by NZES after a work-focus interview.

"The Resource Centre could put people straight into training. We organised everything ourselves instead of having to go through a lot of red tape. Virtually the way the system works you're not eligible for anything unless you've been unemployed for six months which is of no great help to some people because by then they begin to lose their motivation you've got to physically get them up and get them into something – they just can't be bothered because they've been sitting doing nothing for six months." (key informant)

Once again, efforts to support redundant workers were hampered by policies designed for the long-term unemployed.

The Centre had major networks within the meat industry and it was no surprise that many workers found re-employment within that industry. However, when the season wound down the following winter, those workers were without work again. Some workers who regained employment within the meat industry chose to relocate on a temporary basis. However, some workers have described radical changes in the working conditions within some meat plants. They reported that new jobs within the meat industry meant lower pay, longer hours and less safe working conditions. It is important not to forget that employment can also be a cause of injury, sickness and death.

DISCUSSION

The reality of a job loss can create a personal crisis that can lead to sadness, anxiety and a sense of helplessness. Feelings of betrayal and resentment acknowledge that workers felt powerless and had lost a degree of control over their lives. The kaupapa of TRC was to provide a facility to help Tomoana workers to adjust to life after Tomoana by allowing them to maintain power and control over their lives. The Centre's approach was to provide a range of services within an integrated framework that valued people. The concept of whānau underpinned the work of the Centre. Whānau has a pragmatic function, in that it is a way of sharing and distributing tasks, incorporating people with particular expertise, and developing networks, norms and trust that enable participants to act together to pursue shared objectives in the life of their community.

In the event of job loss, this human element would seem to be fundamental. Those who would advocate a technical solution (like an internet connection to a help desk) in future situations of job loss, should be reminded of the experiences of Tomoana. Technology should not be seen as an adequate replacement for resource centres and the humanity of staff.

In situations of job loss it is important to recognise the role of employment in terms of both financial security and social/whānau support systems. Some interventions tackle one of these aspects but the strength of TRC was its recognition of both these threads. While the job at Tomoana had been lost, and with it financial security, TRC provided a mechanism

for the whanaungatanga of Tomoana, the comradeship and social community, to continue as a mutual support mechanism.

The key element within TRC was people's aroha for each other as part of the Tomoana whānau. Urged on by this aroha, TRC identified a number of policy issues that require review if redundant workers are to be recognised with dignity. These include:

- having discretion and flexibility about a stand-down period before income support becomes available;
- making workers fully secured creditors in the event of receivership;
- enabling prompt access to subsidised employment training,
- active advocacy by community leaders, unions, government agencies and other key stakeholders on behalf of the redundant workers; and
- participation of redundant workers in the development of economic and social policies.

The fundamental platform of TRC was recognition of the mana and the dignity of workers. This was a key component underpinning the activities of TRC. Workers, paid and unpaid, are the backbone of our society and deserve to be respected. Redundancy is not dignified. While companies going into receivership may be a reality, workers deserve to have early warning, as much notice as possible, and support and encouragement with access to counselling, skill development and retraining. This is current day best practice. Workers need support from employers, government and financial institutions to insist on best practice standards and ensure situations of "no notice" become confined to the past.

Many communities are poorly prepared to cope with the problems faced by sudden job loss. Support services are not in place, job training or job relocation programmes do not exist and community and health workers have a limited understanding of the impact of unemployment and how best to intervene. As communities are supported in training for civil defence emergencies and natural disasters, the experience of Hastings is that communities could be better prepared for economic disasters and employment emergencies. This would help manage both health risk and economic risk at a community level, ensure preparedness among various sectors and mandate a team to follow up with policy proposals to prevent or minimise harm associated with job loss.

We have experienced economic policies that accept unemployment and job loss as integral parts of the economic environment. Despite some conceptual constraints, policy planners must face the reality of the association between job loss and ill health and formulate a response to it. Policy development ought to focus on the best practice guidelines that aim to ameliorate the adverse effects of unemployment and job loss. Firstly, it is necessary to recognise that jobs and a person's relationship to employment are often complex social mechanisms which reflect identity, self-esteem, and social community as well as financial security. If job loss occurs, both aspects, economic and social, need to be addressed.

Secondly, it is important to recognise that the employment market is changing in response to technology and the globalisation of world markets, especially labour markets. New Zealand cannot afford to overlook prevention of job loss with attempts to enhance lifelong employability by promoting lifelong learning both at the workplace and outside it.

Finally, it is acknowledged that the remedy for job loss is a new and satisfactory job. However, there is also a need to acknowledge that employment can be a cause of mortality and morbidity, and therefore, the answer does not lie with "a job – any job". People want to work, they need the categories of experience that employment provides, but they need them under conditions that do not diminish their humanity. The greatest challenge will be to review work, paid and unpaid, together with its distribution and role in the 21st century.

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