



Contact Email for April 2018

How valued is the work that we do? This last week or so the employment of the disabled has been to the fore. With the death of Stephen Hawking, aged 76, who was written off when he was born but, with great determination and luck, was able to demonstrate that despite the medical model's view of his condition, he was one of the greatest thinkers of our times. The ABC ran its series on the employment of the disabled, and boasted how their new ideas were changing lives.

Yet, in 1976, I was commissioned by the Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration to undertake a study of the employment of the disabled (it was actually called "the Handicapped" back then) as part of its overall study of how the Australian Government did things. In the report of the commission, they have eight pages of quotes from my study, together with seventeen of my recommendations; much of which covered issues that the ABC Programme has put forward.

In 1977, together with Edwin Knight, I did a study of ways of helping employers assess the true abilities of disabled people so that they could be placed in satisfying and productive employment. This was followed up in 1980 with a book called "Square Pegs, Square Holes", which I know was used as a text book in at least two Australian Universities. At the suggestion of staff at one of these Universities, the assessment procedure set out in the book was incorporated in the Victorian Work Safe legislation, as the way to assess the ability of injured workers to return to work and the sort of work they would be able to do. Whether it is still there I don't know.

Yet it seems that all of this work has fallen from view, and people go on reinventing the wheel. Out of the thousands of research projects completed each year, how much of it is used and how much of it is remembered for use in the future?

Steven Poole's book "Rethink" (2016), examines how good ideas come and go. One illustration he uses is:

*"The electric car was invented by Robert Davidson in 1837, by the end of the nineteenth century, fleets of electric taxis - known as 'hummingbirds' - were on the streets of London, Paris, Berlin, and New York, and by the turn of the century there were more than thirty thousand electric cars registered in the US. They were much more popular than gasoline-powered cars. They were less noisy and had no polluting exhaust. The twentieth century was obviously going to be the electric century. Yet in little more than a decade, the production of such vehicles stopped. The drivers of horse-drawn cabs had mounted vigorous campaigns pointing out breakdowns and accidents in their electrically powered rivals, in addition the price of petrol dropped and Ford produced its cheap cars and the effect all this had was to put the London Electric Cab Company and other electric car makers, out of business."*

When I was growing up I had never heard or thought about an electric car. As the illustration above shows, one of the powerful brakes used to stop other ideas is not value but vested interests. So can we, should we or how can we, keep ideas alive so they can be used as and when they are needed? In most spheres, history is not a major focus. However, as it has been said by a number of people over the years, if you don't know your history you cannot really understand the present or predict the future. We will still need research on new issues, but can we stop the waste on repetitive studies?

*Alan Scott*, Continuing Education Officer