Abstract: For more than a decade a distinct stream of scholarship in employment relations has been drawing on the analytical tools of geographers. These studies have been animated by the claim that employment relations are necessarily spatial, as well as social, relations whereas other disciplines are held to see geography as simply a physical phenomenon and merely contextual. Space, place and the ‘spatial fix’ are among the key concepts that have been developed, underpinning fruitful ways of thinking about familiar questions in employment relations. Perhaps surprisingly, little attention has been paid to labour processes themselves, to addressing the question of where work (literally) ‘takes place’. Does geography ‘matter’ in this specific sense and, if it does, what might a spatial reading of the labour process look like when framed by these concerns? Focussing particularly on the questions of ‘mobility’ and ‘spatial embeddedness’, this paper takes a geographical approach to work in addressing the familiar question of what happens when a strategically vital element of a labour process is automated. The case examined here is change in the railway system in the Pilbara operations of one of the world’s largest transnational mining companies, Rio Tinto. The aim in the argument here is not to contribute to debates about skill and control – as important as they are – but to put the spatiality of the changes in the labour process at the centre of analysis and to show how spatial questions such as these merit further investigation.

Presenter: Bradon Ellem is Chair of the Work and Organisational Studies Discipline in the University of Sydney Business School. Bradon teaches in the undergraduate and postgraduate programs, in the fields of employment relations, industrial relations policy and comparative studies. He has supervised over two dozen research theses in these and related fields.

His research draws upon his interest in history and geographies of work to explore several inter-related areas: the nature of trade union power and purpose; the impact of globalisation on work; government industrial relations policy. His particular areas of research at the moment are: union strategy; comparative studies of mining; employment relations in Australia’s iron ore industry. Bradon’s research has been published locally and in major international journals such as: the British Journal of Industrial Relations; Work, Employment and Society; Labor History; Industrial Relations Journal; Economic and Industrial Democracy; Labor Studies Journal; the Journal of Organizational Change Management.

Since 2006, Bradon has been Co-Editor of the Journal of Industrial Relations. He is also an Associate Editor of the journal Labour History. He is Co-Convenor of the Union Research Group at Sydney University, a body designed to build research links between universities and unions. He is member of the Executive Committee of the Industrial Relations Society of New South Wales and a Visiting Professor at the Curtin Graduate School of Business.

Date: Friday 11 October 2013
Time: 12:00-1:00pm followed by Sandwich Reception
Venue: BUSN 142 Sir Rod Eddington Case Study Room
Registration: Siew.Wade@uwa.edu.au by 7/10/2013
For more information: Trish.Todd@uwa.edu.au on 6488 2881