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### **Career development, continuing vocational training and careers guidance in the workplace**

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports on research currently underway which is investigating employees' responses and strategies as they are required to cope with flexible employment patterns, changing skills requirements and instabilities in labour markets across Europe. Particular foci are the relationships between job profiles, career development and occupational mobility, together with an investigation of whether the mobility and flexibility of the workforce (in terms of job changes) has increased. In addition, the research is exploring: how individuals make decisions about their career progression; barriers to career progression in the labour market; differing orientations and responses to work-related transitions; and the value of careers guidance in supporting learning and career progression. The research (2008-2010) is funded by the European Union and builds on the findings of a five year qualitative, longitudinal case study in England (2003-2008) which has evaluated the effectiveness of career guidance for adults in supporting workplace transitions.

Given the emphasis placed by governments internationally on the importance of lifelong learning for increasing economic competitiveness, one of the issues to be scrutinised will be the extent to which individuals have learned how to manage their careers actively and progress their future career plans, as well as the most effective forms of support needed to facilitate this process.

## **Introduction**

In 2000, the European Council adopted the Lisbon strategy, which aims to make the European Union the most competitive economic area of the world by the year 2010. This was modified in 2005 to make the creation of additional and more qualified employment the paramount goal. The strategy designates general education and vocational training as key factors for attaining this overall goal: education and training are the essential foundations for producing innovations and improving competitiveness, which are considered decisive factors for attaining social integration and economic growth for all European member countries. Attainment of the strategy has, however, tended to focus on enhancing vocational training, by increasing offers of, and access to, continuing learning. That is, the focus has been on the supply side. Yet an examination of participation levels in continuing learning indicates that what is offered does not always match the demands of individuals - the very individuals most likely to benefit most from participation in lifelong learning often do not appear as a major group of participants. Education systems tend to favour self-directed action for gaining access to learning, with known barriers to participation (that is, gender, race, age, poverty and ill-health) remaining prevalent.

In general, however, a shift is evident with employees shaping their individual careers more actively and engaging in a processes of learning. Factors bringing about this shift are increased labour market flexibility, demands for employability and higher job mobility. However, it is important not to overstate the degree of change in the labour market regarding occupational mobility. Large numbers of people, once they find what they regard as career-related employment, continue to remain in a single career or have, at most, one or two major shifts in career direction (although the number of jobs and amount of time it takes for different people to find career-related employment varies). Alternatively, there are other people in industries, contexts or careers who do engage in frequent changes of direction. Whilst this latter group is increasing, this is not at an exponential rate.

Linking individual career trajectories and individual's work biographies to their attitudes towards continuing vocational learning will help to gain new insights and better understanding of the learning patterns and strategies of individuals, together with the ways in which individual needs and interests can be better accommodated by offers of continuing vocational training. Complex linkages exist between different aspects of learning, careers and workers' identification with their work and performance. Where career guidance and

counselling is provided, adults are more likely to engage in learning, gain qualifications (or improve existing ones) and progress into work or within work. Additionally, individuals who experience major career shifts or prolonged transitions into the labour market tend to use various strategies to continue to make progress. Some will be examined in this paper.

### **Aims of the research**

The aims of the European research currently underway include an exploration of:

- the relation between job profiles, career development and occupational mobility (that is, to investigate the mobility and flexibility of the workforce and whether individual mobility, in terms of job changes, has actually increased).
- the role of, and dynamics between, traditional and newly emerging occupational profiles and how this impacts on the skills acquisition and competence development of individuals.
- Workers perceptions and responses to flexibility demands (positive or negative responses, like fostering or hindering their individual career development) and whether those demands result in systematic disadvantage of particular groups of workers, such as the low skilled.

### **Research methodologies**

The research will essentially be based on two components. The first involves a feasibility study for implementing a survey to assess individual career development in connection with individuals' continuing vocational learning. The second will be to implement a limited survey in selected European countries, partly to test the methodology, and partly to produce first research results on the basis of quantitative data. An examination of existing qualitative and quantitative data, together with a review of relevant theory, outcomes and experiences from existing surveys will be used to develop the feasibility study.

Overall, the project applies a combination of different research methods. These include:

- a literature review;
- implementation of a small-scale survey in approximately ten European countries; and
- consultation with individual experts, expert institutions and other organisations to validate the work in progress and findings.

This methodology builds on, and extends, a longitudinal case study into effective guidance that has been undertaken in England (2003-2008), which was funded by the Department for Education and Skills. The methodology for the longitudinal research was designed to evaluate the effectiveness of career guidance and counselling (Bimrose, Barnes, Hughes & Orton, 2004) and also captured the developing career biographies of participants over five years. Full details of the research phases, the career guidance contexts from which data were collected, the process of negotiating access to organisations and individuals, questionnaire construction and sampling methods detailed elsewhere (Bimrose *et al.*, 2004).

In summary, fifty in-depth case studies were undertaken in 2003-2004. Data sources for each case study included digital recordings of career guidance and counselling interviews, semi-structured questionnaires collecting background data on the client and perceptions of the interview and data on the context in which data were collected. For the follow-up studies, the initial 50 clients were contacted by telephone for each of four consecutive years (2004-2008), approximately one year after the case study interview. Telephone interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Overall, 45 of the 50 clients were successfully contacted for the first follow-up (2004-2005); 36 for the second (2005-2006); 30 the third (2006-2007); and 29 for the final follow-up (2007-2008) (Bimrose, Barnes & Hughes, 2005; Bimrose, Barnes & Hughes, 2006; Bimrose & Barnes, 2007a). These follow-up studies tracked clients' career trajectories, their retrospective views of the value of the career guidance and counselling received and its role in their career progression. Key findings relate to the barriers to progression and career decision-making styles (Bimrose & Barnes, 2006; 2007b).

The complex interaction of a number of variables in each guidance intervention became evident as the research progressed. These included: the way in which clients varied in respect of their personal circumstances (i.e. gender, age, ethnic origin, disability and attainments); the contexts in which they operated (e.g. their domestic situations, geographical locations, mobility and labour market status); and the nature of the career counselling and guidance services available (e.g. the intensity and duration of the intervention(s); the nature of client needs; and the experience and training of the practitioner). From the original fifty cases in the longitudinal study, just two individuals (both followed up over a five year period) are discussed below, each exemplifying different responses to the challenges faced and differing degrees of success in accomplishing a successful career change, including one case where an

individual becomes progressively disengaged from any work-related learning and development.

### **Reskilling within the workplace**

At the time of the first research interview, Robert had been out of work for about ten months after suffering a stroke caused by job-related stress. As a consequence, his medical consultant recommended a career change. The client was very unsure about his abilities to return to full-time employment and his future employment options. He needed a similar level of earnings as in his previous employment in floor laying to pay his mortgage and household bills. His wife was due to go into hospital because of a serious medical problem, which was imposing further financial strains. Consequently, Robert felt an urgent need to get back to work. He enrolled on a training course in computing, because he was advised this would increase his employability, and decided to apply for a part-time job in a supermarket in parallel.

When Robert was followed up one year later, he had applied for the part-time supermarket job and had also enrolled on a computer course. His application for part-time work had been unsuccessful and he left the computer training course, because he just ‘couldn’t get on with it’. Because of financial worries, he had then secured two part-time jobs in social care, working, in total, over seventy hours per week across two employers. One was helping care for people suffering from dementia and the other providing support to people with learning difficulties. One of his employers had immediately supported him in studying towards a work-based vocational qualification. Two years later, Robert was still working long hours across his two jobs (on average fifty five hours a week), but was unconcerned about the long hours as this brought his pay up to an acceptable level. He had successfully completed his initial work-based learning course in care work and was very keen to progress to the next level of accreditation. Three years later, Robert was now in full time employment supporting people with learning difficulties, but also continuing to work twenty hours a week in his other job. He had started to work towards a higher level work-based qualification and his employer had asked him to consider a future role in management in social care. Four years on, he had successfully completed the next level of his work-based learning. He had settled into his new occupational identity – having made the switch from floor laying to social care, through learning while working and completion of work-based qualifications.

Robert's career change was serendipitous in the sense that he had not anticipated suffering from ill health and had certainly not planned to move into social care. Rather, his career change was a result of opportunism – he was unemployed, needed money and the jobs were available on a part-time basis. However, having found himself in a situation where opportunities for work-based learning were available, he embraced every chance. The process of learning helped him to develop a completely new occupational identity, to which he now feels committed.

### **Disengagement from learning and development**

Mike had been made redundant after twenty six years with a telecommunications company at the time of his first interview. He had specialised in electronics, also with experience in quality management, but recognised that opportunities in the telecommunications industry were now very limited. Losing his job had had a profoundly negative impact and he was still struggling to cope with being made redundant. Despite various attempts at applying for similar jobs, he had been unsuccessful. He had researched the requirements for different occupational areas in which he was interested (occupational therapy and accountancy), but had found that they would require too great an investment in time and training. He lived near his ageing parents, who were requiring an increasing level of support. Mike was unsure about his career direction but realised that this was an opportunity to make changes in his life. However, rather than attempting to re-skill, he decided to seek employment based upon his existing skill set. Within a month or two of the first interview, he had secured a job in retail, but did not find it rewarding and resigned after six months. So at the time of his first follow-up interview, he was unemployed again. Two years on, Mike was still unemployed and increasingly involved in providing care for his elderly parents. His whole life had become focused on applying for jobs and going to interviews, though the applications were constrained geographically, because of care commitments. Three years on, Mike had found a job. He had become a self-employed decorator for a short period. Then he secured a part-time job with the local authority in the printing and photocopying department (twenty five hours a week). Although it was not ideal and the pay was not good, he was actually enjoying being in employment again. The job was close to home so he could continue to care for his parents, his colleagues were pleasant and he had no responsibilities. He was, however, conscious that he was more highly qualified than those for whom he was working and this caused him some concern. At the start of his employment, he received some very basic job-related training and had made no connection with his occupational role in terms of identity formation. It simply

represented a means of surviving – paying the bills and caring for his parents. Four years on, Mike had suffered health problems, which had required an operation. So he had been off work for a few months, but had returned to the same job with the local authority. He no longer saw himself as having any sort of options for career change.

This is the territory explored by Sennett (1998): there is an initial high commitment to work with a large company, where there is major engagement with learning through work, with the expectation that the company will look after you. However, when circumstances change, individuals can find themselves locked into work identities in decline. Then both work identity and work commitment start to slip away. Personal circumstances, age discrimination and being tied to a particular geographical location made it very difficult for Mike to recover from a major career set-back. From then on, work was always about short-term adaptation rather than identification. Other events in his life reinforced a feeling that he was a victim of events he could not control. This case illustrates how where demand for existing skill sets changes, then individuals who have become, for whatever reason, disengaged from work-related learning and development for a significant period of time find themselves in a vulnerable labour market position.

### **Career attachments as anchors or chains?**

The complexities related to attachment to work emerge from the cases. Robert was successfully reskilling and exhibiting stronger attachments to their new occupations than they had to their former work, while Mike had drifted downwards and was now feeling trapped in undemanding work that was much less skilled than his work in the telecommunications company. In most circumstances strong attachment to work brings considerable benefits, including a sense of career stability and having a career ‘anchor’. Dewey (1916) saw an occupation as giving direction to life activities and as a concrete representation of continuity: a ‘home’ with clear psychological, social and ideological ‘anchors’. ‘Home’ in this context refers to a ‘familiar environment, a place where we know our way around, and above all, where we feel secure’ (Abhaya, 1997, p2). Viewed in this way, it is easy to understand the sense of loss and dislocation that people may feel when they are made redundant, with little prospect of regaining their former occupational identity (Sennett, 1998).

However, there is the question as to whether a strong commitment to current work can also act as a ‘chain’. In such cases, a careers guidance intervention in mid-career may be helpful to



alert the individual to the possible dangers, as well as the potential benefits, of staying in their current job role. Yet religion, literature and film abound with stories of people ‘breaking free’ and “loosening attachments to ‘homes’ of many kinds, be they psychological, social or ideological” (Abhaya, 1997, p.2). In this sense, after a period of stability, an occupational identity may come to be viewed as a confinement from which the individual longs to escape. That is, what is initially experienced as interesting and exciting may, with the passage of time, lead to ‘a sense of profound dissatisfaction with the comfortable limits’(Abhaya, 1997, p.8) of the existing way of life. In such circumstances, an external stimulus, like a careers guidance and counselling intervention, again may be useful in helping individuals manage possible career transitions.

What should be of concern, therefore, is the process for some individuals where the 'anchors' become progressively perceived as 'chains' that hold individuals close to their current roles, even where these are in decline. Interestingly, a strong attachment to a current work role could act as a career ‘anchor’ from which it was possible for individuals to continue their career development (e.g. through their willingness to engage in ‘upskilling’ activities). However, where attachment was acting more as a ‘chain’, an external stimulus, such as a careers guidance and counselling intervention, could help individuals to manage their career transitions more effectively - in some cases by viewing aspects of their current skill sets as ‘anchors’ that could be taken with them on a journey and utilised in a new setting, even if other aspects of their occupational or organisational identities were left behind. Indeed, this may well involve viewing aspects of current skill sets as ‘anchors’ that are transferable to a new setting, even where other aspects of occupational or organisational identities are left behind.

In addition to organisational attachment, the career decision-making style espoused by individuals will be important in understanding an individual’s career development and the role of continuing vocational training in this process.

### **Career decision making styles**

Career-decision making has been the focus of various research studies. For example, the cultural dimensions of career decision-making difficulties (Wei-Cheng, 2004); career maturity in career decidedness and career decision-making (Creed & Patton, 2003); the role of values in the career decision-making process (Colozzi, 2003); and levels of confidence as predictors

of career decision-making ability (Paulsen & Betz, 2004). Without a clear understanding of the different ways in which adults approach the career decision making process, there is a danger that those supporting their progression into professional learning will give inappropriate guidance. One influential study of career decision making, carried out by Harren (1979) with college students, identified three styles of decision making: ‘rational’, where individuals adopted a logical and systematic approach to decisions; ‘intuitive’, where there was more reliance on internal affective states in decision making processes; and ‘dependent’, where decisions are contingent upon the reactions of friends, family, and peers. The first two styles (rational and intuitive) involve individuals taking personal responsibility for decision making, whereas the third (dependent) involves projection of responsibility onto significant others (e.g. parents, partner, etc.). However, the sample from which this typology was derived was restricted to college students and was conducted over three decades ago. The longitudinal study referred to above has provided the opportunity to collect and analyse data from a sample of adults of different ages, gender, ethnic origin and academic levels making transitions in different circumstances, both into and out of education, employment and training over a five year period.

A four-fold typology of career decision making has emerged from the analysis of data collected from participants in the longitudinal study (2003-2008). The four career decision-making styles are: evaluative; strategic; aspirational; and opportunistic. The stability of these styles has now been examined over a four year period. In only one case was the style initially amended as a result of scrutiny of data from subsequent phases of the investigative (from a strategic style to evaluative). Additionally, two clients who were experiencing barriers to progression in the second phase of the study are now espousing distinct career decision making strategies as a result of changed circumstances (both demonstrating opportunistic styles). Given the nature of the qualitative data from which these styles were derived, they remain tentative and require further validation – though two emerging from this research (that is, strategic and opportunistic) correspond closely to two of the three styles developed by Harren (1979).

Whilst the fourfold typology that has emerged from this study so far is tentative, it provides powerful insights into the different approaches adopted by clients in their attempts to navigate their way around the labour market. It is also useful to reflect on some implications for the practice of careers guidance for adults (Bimrose & Barnes, 2007b).

## Conclusion

There is a prevalent policy view that adults either do not need this type of support, or that they require it only in a crisis situation (e.g. redundancy). Ten years before Mike was made redundant he was in skilled employment, but his skill set was in decline and he did not engage in any substantive learning and development. An intervention at that time may have stimulated him to position himself to engage in a new career. This might have seen him productive through to retirement, instead of the subsequent ‘downward drift’ into unchallenging work. Career guidance and counselling aims at getting people in mid-life to consider career changes and this approach might actually extend people’s productive working lives, bringing considerable benefits to the individual and society, by avoiding later under-employment and a drift into semi-retirement or detachment. Reshaping careers, learning and identities is a daunting challenge for individuals and research evidence indicates, strongly, how career guidance and counselling can play a major role in facilitating attempts to construct a new coherent career narrative that can help drive these processes.

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