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**Workplace transitions: learning to manage change**

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### **Introduction**

Changes in the labour market (like globalisation and the development of information and communication technology) have challenged the relevance of the established, narrow view of career transition as a one-off event at an early stage of an individual's development, replacing it with a broader understanding of how transitions into education, training and employment are more complex, more prolonged and often span lifetimes (Young & Collin, 2000). Across Europe, career guidance is increasingly regarded as vital for mediating successful educational and training outcomes (European Commission, 2001). Three policy priorities have been identified within Europe for career guidance: skills growth, individual development and social integration (Bartlett *et al.*, 2000). These policy priorities have been more recently endorsed in the UK by the final report from the Government commissioned Leitch Review of the UK's long term skills' needs, which identified the optimal skills mix for 2020 (DfES, 2006). This particular skills mix, subsequently also identified in the Implementation Plan from this review (HM Government, 2007) is needed, it was argued, to maximise: economic growth, productivity and social justice. Report recommendations included a new universal adult careers service for England, together with a national network of one-stop shops for careers and employment advice, to be achieved through close and collaborative working relationships between the new service and Jobcentre Plus.

In the UK, the policy focus for guidance has, therefore, emphasised the 'skills growth' model for guidance, requiring individuals in transition to be matched with the 'right' education, training or job opportunities as efficiently as possible. However, the evidence-base for the framework (trait and factor) informing this type of 'matching' approach to guidance is flawed. Scharf (1997) argues that there is little research supporting or refuting this as a viable theory of career development. Rather, the large amount of research that has been undertaken has related traits and factors to one another or has established the validity and reliability of measurements of traits and factors. Its usefulness in fluid labour market conditions has also been questioned, since matching assumes a degree of stability (Mitchell and Krumboltz, 1996). The shortcomings of this theory in its application to women (Farmer *et al.*, 1998) and minority ethnic groups (Leong *et al.*, 1998) have also been highlighted.

A primary purpose of this longitudinal research, therefore, is to investigate the nature of effective guidance in England that adds value to post-compulsory learning and enhances employability, and to disseminate practices that enhance this guidance. The study began with a detailed investigation of 50 in-depth case studies across varied guidance contexts (2003-2004). Each case study included a detailed examination of a guidance interview from the perspectives of the client receiving guidance, the practitioner giving the guidance and an independent third party. The purpose of the four follow-up phases of the research, scheduled over the period 2004-2008, is to track the career progression of clients who were the recipients of vocational guidance in the original 50 case studies. These interviews also reveal contrasting approaches to work-related learning and development.

## One and two years on: initial findings

The professional contexts in which the case studies were carried out included: further education; higher education; charitable/voluntary organisations; adult guidance organisations; and the workplace. Immediately after their vocational guidance interview, the majority (98%, n=49) of the original participants evaluated their interviews as 'useful'. These clients regarded their guidance positively because it had: provided challenge and direction; given access to relevant resources; could be accessed over a period of time; brought about positive change(s); and provided support and safety. In addition to recording the perceptions of clients about the usefulness of their guidance intervention, data gathered during the first phase of investigation permitted a typology of 'guidance in action' to be generated from practitioner interventions across the forty-nine interviews evaluated as 'useful' by clients.

Data collected one year after the initial guidance interview indicates further evidence of the positive impacts of guidance (Bimrose *et al.*, 2004). The attrition rate for participants was extremely low, with 45 of the original 50 clients (90%) successfully followed up one year after their case study interview. These follow-up interviews tracked the achievements and aspirations of clients, providing rich insights into contrasting career trajectories. Clients were found to be in a range of occupational settings, whilst some were unemployed. Career guidance had acted as a catalyst for positive change, even where agreed action had not been implemented or advice followed. Seventy eight per cent (n=35) of clients who were followed-up felt that guidance had resulted in direct and positive change (such as: a change in their situation, thinking, and/or future plans; being pointed in the right direction; given alternative options/ideas to consider; or had ideas affirmed). Thirty-one per cent (n=14) of clients felt guidance had resulted in indirect positive change (such as: increased confidence or motivation).

One year on, over half of the clients (53%, n=24) were improving their occupational competence, by engaging with education or training (Bimrose & Barnes, 2006). They were involved variously with up-skilling, re-skilling or training for re-entry to the labour market. Four barriers to career progression were identified, which had prevented clients from implementing the action plans agreed during the case study interview. These comprised: financial constraints; childcare commitments; health issues and local labour market conditions. Many clients who had recently completed higher education were experiencing prolonged transitions into the labour market. They were using various strategies to progress their careers, including testing out various options, 'buying time' and actively trying to clarify values. One year on, 87% (n=39) of clients still regarded their guidance as 'useful', whilst 11% (n=5) were less sure of its value. One client still felt that her guidance had been of no value. Five strong themes emerged from the data indicating how clients found their guidance useful when it: gave access to specialist information; reduced confusion; motivated or provided new insights; confirmed ideas and built confidence.

Findings from this research emphasise the importance of incorporating the concept of 'distance travelled' by the client in and evaluation of the impact of career guidance. Even where no direct relationship was found between agreed action and subsequent career progress, guidance was found to have played a crucial role. Career transitions are often complex and lengthy, with quantifiable outcomes (like placement into education, training or employment) alone inadequate indicators of whether a client has, actually, made progress towards a longer term career destination.

The attrition rate for participants in the second year follow-up (three years into the study) continued to be low, with 36 clients successfully interviewed. 72% (n=26) of these 36 clients still regarded their guidance interview as useful. However, 14% (n=5) of clients were now unsure of its usefulness, whilst 14% (n=5) of clients could no longer recollect the guidance they had received. The one client who had not found their case study interview useful recognised, two years on, that some aspects had proved to be of some value. Clients reported that they had found their career guidance useful when it: provided valuable insights; helped to focus ideas; improved self-confidence, provided opportunities to reflect and gave access to expert information.

A small number (n=7, 19%) were navigating what they regarded as significant barriers to their career aspirations. These clients regarded their problems as insurmountable, typically felt immobilised in their career progression and some felt marginalised from the labour market. Barriers to progression included: ill health (prolonged and deteriorating); structural unemployment; and childcare responsibilities. However, findings also highlighted varied strategies used by the 29 clients progressing in their careers to maximise their opportunities in the labour market. Four styles emerged from the analysis: evaluative; strategic; aspirational; and opportunistic. These will be briefly described next.

### **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); the link between vocational decision styles and career decision making (Amir & Gati, 2006); the role of relationships in career decision-making (Hargrove, Creagh & Burgess, 2002; Phillips, Christopher-Sisk & Gravino, 2001); self-efficacy in career decision making (Barry Chung, 2002); and levels of confidence as predictors of career decision-making ability (Paulsen & Betz, 2004) and self-esteem (Creed, Patton & Bartrum, 2004). Four different styles emerged from data analysis: evaluative; strategic; aspirational; and opportunistic.

#### ***Evaluative***

Six clients (16%) had engaged with a process of self-reflective evaluation that had aided their career decision making in some way. This typically comprised a period (sometimes prolonged) of review, evaluation and reflection, eventually culminating in decisions that potentially contributed to a longer term career goal, though with a characteristic degree of uncertainty and ambiguity built into the process. One client, for example, whose marriage had recently ended, had been thwarted in achieving her primary goal of attending a particular type of vocational training, because of its lack of availability locally. Consequently, she has opted to enrol on an adult education course. Although this was not her first choice, she recognised that it was having a positive impact on her self-confidence, with the result that she is now aiming higher with her educational achievements:

*It's brilliant because I actually realise that, you know, I love to learn... ..it has shown me what I'm capable of and what I like doing. So I have applied for that [Access] course.*

In the longer term, however, she remains somewhat vague about her career goal.

### **Strategic**

In contrast with this rather open-ended, self-reflective, evaluative decision-making process, nine clients (25%) had engaged proactively with more focused strategic career decision-making. Here, clients had identified their ultimate career goal and were making conscious, strategic career decisions related to formal employment, designed to contribute to that long term objective. For instance, one had speculatively approached various companies at a careers fair for graduate employment, arranged interviews and accepted one of the three job appointments offered. She regarded this employment experience as necessary preparation for realising her ambition of running her own business:

*...basically they put me on their finance team...and I decided it was a lot more interesting than doing the IT side of things which (another company) had offered me...and yeah I'm really, really enjoying it... ..It sort of came down to looking for what I wanted out of a job, which was to be fairly autonomous, to sort of have the ability to progress quickly and to earn a lot of income, to develop clients... It's almost like running your own business in a way, which is what I would like to do eventually...*

### **Aspirational**

For other clients (14%, n=5), an aspirational decision-making process is based on focused, but distant career goals. Unlike clients engaged in strategic career decision-making, interim goals currently being pursued seem almost tangential to the ultimate career aspiration – yet represent essential preparation. These interim goals are not necessarily related to formal employment; rather they often relate to personal circumstances. One client, established in a highly successful career, is dissatisfied and determined to change direction. However, before she is ready to re-train for her aspirational career goal, other important issues in her life need resolution. Currently, for example, she is focused on securing her financial future. Then it appears likely that she will start a family, before applying herself to re-focusing her career:

*I just thought, you know, I'm only in my early 20s, work, work, work, you know...so we got the house and financially we're a lot better off now, because of working last year and putting our noses to the grindstone...I feel like at the moment I'm sort of at a turning point where if I step back, if you wait a couple of years, you have a child and then maybe sort of tackle something completely different. I think in my head I've sort of got quite excited about that aspect of, you know, my work life changing completely once I get past that point.*

### **Opportunistic**

The final process of career decision-making included those clients whose choices and direction over the last two years have been based on the opportunities available to them (25%, n=9). One client who graduated two years before the second follow-up interview is still unsure of her career direction, but is currently engaged in both full-time and part-time employment – taking every opportunity to train and / or gain work experience. She has several ideas about what she would eventually like to do, but is unsure of how to get there and is waiting to see if an opportunity presents itself:

*I'm not very happy and my routine job...don't really know where I'm going at the moment... ..I've decided to have more of a challenge. It's just very monotonous, that's all, but we'll see.*

## Discussion

In the economy as a whole, workers may be faced with changes in the patterns of employment, transformation of some occupations and changes in the organisation of work. For some of our interviewees, their work remained essentially the same and the extent of change could easily be accommodated within normal patterns of learning while working. For others, even though their work changed considerably this might be easily accommodated by means traditional to the organisation or occupation, particularly if the job itself requires considerable learning while working. For a third group whose careers develop with increasing responsibility and challenge then engaging in substantive learning is a central component of their career.<sup>1</sup> From this perspective it is important not to pathologise the problems that workers, especially older workers, face learning new skills: many older workers do this as a normal part of their job or through their developing career. Indeed problems are most likely to arise in two particular contexts. First, when demands at work change suddenly after a long period of relative stability and workers feel they have not engaged in substantive learning for some considerable time. Secondly, learning new skills can seem challenging when workers are faced with a major career transition, particularly if they are not in work or are about to be made redundant.

The cases demonstrated again and again the value of learning while working in helping individuals, not only keep their skills, knowledge and competences up-to-date but also in helping them keep a positive disposition towards learning. So access to opportunities for learning and development is important, and to some extent these opportunities were more likely to be given to individuals showing a strong commitment to work, for example in being chosen for project teams. However, it was also clear that some individuals were much more pro-active than others in taking advantage of these opportunities. Further, those who were pro-active in this sphere seemed more likely to take advantage of other learning opportunities too. Even those who had not engaged in much substantive learning for some time could find that when they were involved in substantive learning and development this often acted as a spur to a transformation in how they perceived themselves and what they believed they could do.

Upskilling could come through work that comprises a series of highly challenging work activities (for example, project-based activities) or through involvement in 'normal' work activities, together with formal training, where the work organisation is changing. Upskilling could also be associated with career progression within one company or through development of a strategic career (switching companies, sectors and occupations). However, it is also possible to develop work-related learning, careers and identities through education-based upskilling. The value of substantive mid-career development, for example through the completion of a Master's

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<sup>1</sup> The second data source, that supplements the first set of 50 participants, comes from the 'strategic biographies' collected from 50 individuals through a series of narrative interviews with workers carried out across a number of projects undertaken by IER focusing upon the development of learning, careers and identities at work. The biographies were constructed from the following individual or group interviews:

- two group interviews with nurses and radiographers in health care
- individual interviews with workers in engineering, IT, telecommunications and healthcare
- individual interviews with workers who had undertaken mid-career professional development (Master's programmes)
- individual interviews with workers in permanent relationships where the worker or their partner were involved in long-distance commuting.

programme, was also demonstrated in some cases, not only in terms of positive career development, but also in a negative sense in that downward career drift seemed associated with those individuals not having engaged in any substantive updating since their early twenties. Substantive upskilling was not always necessary to maintain a career, or re-enter the labour market after a break, but the absence of engagement in any substantive learning or development certainly left an individual doubly vulnerable to any change in their career prospects, in that both getting a new job or reskilling could be much more difficult.

Development paths of individuals' learning, careers and identities following redundancy in sectors that were contracting were much more varied. Reskilling was sometimes achieved through self-directed learning, formal retraining or a return to education, but individuals also responded by switching to part-time working, becoming self-employed or going into semi-retirement (particularly, if they were in receipt of a pension). Some individuals' careers, however, did drift downwards as they struggled to overcome a career setback caused by redundancy or health problems. They might switch to less skilled work and, although this was usually viewed as a negative outcome, in some cases this work was seen as very rewarding.

For workers engaged in major career shifts two things stand out. First, recent experience of substantive learning and development, coupled with a positive disposition to learning, meant that taking on new challenges were just seen as part of 'normal' career progression. Secondly, those who received professional career guidance almost universally valued the experience. However, those working in the NHS raised another issue: because of feelings of burn-out some people feel that working 30 – 35 years in a stressful occupation is long enough and often sought to retire 'early' in their late fifties. With more people being encouraged to work to 65 or beyond might there be a case to offer people the chance to retrain after say 20 - 25 years, and then there might be some prospect of those people being able to make it through to 65 – 70 in work that they enjoyed. A change of career direction does give some people a 'new lease of life' and others get jaded if they stay in a single occupation for twenty or thirty years. Getting people to consider career changes earlier might actually extend people's working lives.

Some people were experiencing prolonged transitions into the labour market and were using various strategies to continue to make progress. The evidence of the positive impacts of guidance (complementing evidence collected during the initial stage of research<sup>2</sup>) included having helped people with upskilling and reskilling but also in managing a range of career transitions and support in trying to maintain a positive self-image even when transitions were not working out favourably. It follows that the measurement of the impact of guidance needs to take account of 'distance travelled' by clients, in a way that focuses on the process of effective guidance as well as its quantifiable outcomes.

From our interviews with people in employment, out of work and making career changes it was clear that many were active in their own learning and development, although this was easiest if this was directly linked to learning while working. Most of our interviewees had 'successful careers', but even some of them pointed out that it

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<sup>2</sup> Participants identified five ways in which they had found their guidance useful. Guidance was useful when it: gave access to specialist information; reduced confusion; motivated or provided new insights; confirmed ideas and built confidence. Guidance had resulted in direct and positive change (such as: a change in their situation, or thinking, and/or future plans; being pointed in the right direction; given alternative options/ideas to consider; or had affirmation of their ideas). Guidance had acted as a catalyst for positive change, even where agreed action had not been implemented or advice followed.

was possible to find your skills were no longer in demand and that with increasing age it became more difficult to overcome a career setback.

Finally, the issue of employees' attachments to work is relevant. Most of our interviewees exhibited a strong sense of attachment to their work, although many others had found it was possible to continue in work as a form of short-term or long-term adjustment. In most circumstances strong attachment to work brings considerable benefits, including a sense of career stability and having a career 'anchor', but there is the question as to whether a strong commitment to current work also acts to hold you in 'chains', preventing you from attempting an appropriate career transition until it becomes more and more difficult to achieve. One way of considering an occupational identity, to which adjustment has been made and that is relatively stable over a period of time, is as a psychological 'home'. 'Home' in this context is 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). On the other hand, 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.

Dewey (1916) had seen an occupation as giving direction to life activities and as a concrete representation of continuity: a 'home' with clear psychological, social and ideological 'anchors'. However, what should be of concern is the process for some individuals where the 'anchors' become progressively perceived as 'chains' that hold individuals close to their current roles, even if 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', it often required an external stimulus such as a guidance intervention to help individuals to manage their career transitions, 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.

## **Conclusion**

Overall then, the cases outlined highlight how individuals are actors who shape important aspects of their own occupational trajectories and careers, with many individuals taking an active role as coordinators of their personal work biographies. They were often actively shaping their individualised work orientations and commitment patterns, which a few decades ago were often more collectively shaped. However, employers too shape work-related identities, for example as in their demands for workers with 'modern' skill sets, including abilities to work in teams and communicate effectively (Davis *et al.*, 2000). There were, however, some cases where individuals were actively engaged in processes of learning, remaking work practice and shaping work in the direction they wanted in order to align their sense of self with dimensions of their work-related identity. Individuals' biographies often involved elements of growth, learning, recovery or development as individuals moved between images of what they were, had been in the past or thought they might



become, thereby emphasising biographical continuity. While major dislocations in individual careers could obviously be traumatic, where individuals had been able to construct coherent career narratives and 'move on' this proved to be psychologically valuable and career guidance often played an important role in that process.

In terms of the role of career guidance to transitions, four distinct career decision-making styles emerged from the data: evaluative, strategic, opportunistic and aspirational. Findings indicate that whilst some clients have been pro-actively managing their careers and making progress with future plans, others are content to leave things more to chance. Current guidance practice tends to place an emphasis on the importance of clear career goals and planning to achieve these goals. A key challenge for guidance practitioners is how to respond effectively to the needs of clients who prefer not to plan their careers and are happy for their futures to develop according to happenstance. These findings also have broader implications about the importance of continuing to support work-related learning and development of workers in their mid-career and of investigating whether one way to extend working lives is to give employees the opportunity to think about career change before they become locked into a frame of mind of just biding time in their existing career.

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