Vocational Identity and Flexible Work: A Contradicting or Constructive Relation?

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Summary: Constructing and adapting vocational identity in a frequently changing work environment has become a lifelong challenge. The task of integrating flexible work demands into one's identity accompanies the modern employment biography. A dynamic model of identity construction is introduced in order to illuminate the integration of work experiences into one's self-identity, including resources and various aspects of vocational competence. This model implies that vocational identity cannot be explained only by reference to the context of work, it is rather a subjective accomplishment. The new type of "entreployee" is discussed in order to show the ambivalence of a self-directed shaping of the contingent work life course in uncertain times. I propose a framework for analyzing identity development in the context of VET which includes work conditions and their change, sources of vocational commitment, the options of combining working and learning, and the workers' competence profile. It follows that pro-active competences require work environments with a high degree of freedom for occupational self-socialization. The results of qualitative studies are discussed in order to fill the theoretical framework with empirically grounded data.

Introduction

In changing societies with volatile labour markets and increasing qualification requirements, constructing and restructuring work careers and remaking one's vocational identity is a lifelong challenge. Today, transitions from the school to vocational education and training (VET) and further to employment and subsequent careers are characterized by flexible work and discontinuous employment which may very well challenge and devalue the vocational identity developed during an apprenticeship. Furthermore, there is a decline of collective frameworks supporting vocational identity and the pressure to individually redirecting careers. However, depending on the opportunity of self-direction in VET and work, skilled workers can actively modify, innovate and even reject assignments which do not recognize their capabilities and restrict their life planning.

Is it possible to develop and maintain a vocational identity in a world of deregulated labour markets, multi-skilled jobs, and flexible employment? Does a regulated education and training pathway, like the German VET, still provide comparative advantages for coping with the new brave world of knowledge-intensive and team based work? When does vocational identity become an asset for one's biography, which aspects of work are suitable anchors for constructing identity and how do apprentices and young skilled workers adjust their skill profile to the shifting demands at work?

I begin with a rhetorical question in order to profile the virtues of vocational identity: Do bankers, stock traders, and investment brokers have a vocational identity? Economists tend to explain the global financial crisis as a systemic failure due to the lack of regulative mechanisms. This may be true in an abstract sense; but

there were individual actors, too, who defined their occupation in an extremely egocentric way, driven by the expectation of high bonus payments resulting from high risk speculations. Their identity seems to be organized around uncritical self-esteem and self-indulgence that do not take into account social responsibility and sound moral judgement; after all, they were mishandling immense sums of money belonging to their clients. Vocational identity refers to just the contrasting competences of acting in a responsible manner ("honesty") based on qualifications and work experience that are embedded in a system of quality standards.

There are more questions than empirically sound answers. Nevertheless, I shalll attempt to show possible ways of finding preliminary answers:

First, I review selected social psychological and sociological approaches for understanding identity and present my model of identity construction. Second, by looking at the wider benefits of VET and work experience, the various dimensions of vocational competence for shaping one's work biography are highlighted. Third, the properties of a work-centred life course will be outlined by referring to a new type of the entrepreneurial employee, the "entreployee".

Finally, qualitative empirical evidence for the impact of different occupational contexts on stability and change of work-related identity will be discussed, referring to training and employment experiences which represent various combinations of practical, technical, social and knowledge-based skills. These experiences imply unequal opportunities of self-directed work and of shaping coherent occupational biographies.

Identity as the competence of self-verification

Historically, the notion of having an identity referred to the uniqueness of a person, and the freedom to realize oneself through the autonomous shaping of one's own life. In the last century, many concepts of identity were proposed, most prominent the one's by Erikson (1981) in the tradition of Sigmund Freud, and by Habermas (1976) in the tradition of George H. Mead.

In contemporary sociology and social psychology "identity" refers to the self-localization and self-presentation of the person: the consciousness and feeling of being oneself across all changes in life (figure 1).

Figure 1

IDENTITY MODELS

IDENTITY (Hoff 1990)	**SELF-VERIFICATION** (Stryker / Burke 2000)	**SELF-IDENTITY** (Giddens 1991)
perception of	coordination of	reflecting on
• internal coherence • social embedding • biographical continuity	• identity standard • social expectations • experiences	• incoherence • inequality • discontinuity

Ide   by reference to three dimensions: internal coherence, social embedding, and biographical continuity (Hoff 1990). Integrating these dimensions is a lifelong process

of self-reflexive comparisons of experiences of objective conditions - guided by the claim of self-determination or autonomy. Internal coherence must be promoted by stable living circumstances. In modern society, with its rapid social changes, however, experiences of inconsistency are the rule. Just take the example of tensions between work and family or education and employment, life spheres which are increasingly difficult to reconcile. Social embedding means first of all, to see oneself through the eyes of others, including one's own and the others' working and living models. This dimension highlights the objective and subjective sides of inequality in regard to being socially included or excluded; feelings of solidarity and uniqueness are also implied, in its extreme form of egocentrism. Finally, there is the consciousness of biographical continuity concerning occupational career, family and friendship relations. Nowadays, however, discontinuity is the rule, stemming from life course uncertainty and risky transitions which may lead to psychosocial crises that initiate efforts to restructure identity.

Besides designating a common identification with a social group ("social identity theory", Tajfel 1982), according to the theory of symbolic interaction, identity refers to the meanings persons attach to the multiple social roles they enact (Mead 1934, Stryker and Burke 2000). Persons develop their own identity standards that are guidelines for perceiving situations and responding to social expectations. Self-verification results when self-relevant experiences are coordinated with one's own identity standard. Applied to the relationship between personality and work, active matching of subjective standards with flexible work conditions has become the rule. Mismatches between occupational placement and vocational identity standards will create the perception of discrepancy which may lead to anger, resentment or to the intent of changing one's work circumstances. Integrating changing work experiences into one's vocational identity thus accompanies the modern occupational life course and imposes recurrent challenges to self-verification.

The self-verification model assumes that a person's identification with her or his occupation will be stable across time and space as long as self-perception and job performance are embedded in work conditions that people are committed to. When restructured work requires a redefinition of a person's skills and employment biography, not just vocational commitment is at stake, but also the integrative capacity of self-identity is called upon.

Restructuring one's vocational identity differs from the step-wise sequence of identity development, rooted in childhood. Thus, a model of identity adequate to individualized and highly differentiated society is the one of "self-identity" (Giddens 1991) which highlights the lifelong process of integrating experiences of inconsistency, social inequality, and discontinuity in a self-reflexive manner. For example, when the problem of verifying one's vocational identity persists, there will be a step-wise reduction of occupational commitment and its organizational context.

This raises the issue of resources for maintaining or regaining identification with the content and conditions of flexible work. Occupational experience, learning capacity and the location in the economic structure influence which resources a skilled worker can use for self-verification in a volatile labour market.

A successful adaptation to transition demands and flexible work also depends on the recognition by others, family, peers, teachers, trainers and colleagues and the way they respond to identity claims, and on the individual's competence of performing actions that modify the situation in order to match perceptions with the identity standard. This model implies that vocational identity cannot be explained by referring only to the social context of work, it rather is, following Erving Goffman (1963), the balance of social and personal identity which represents self-identity.

Figure 2

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION
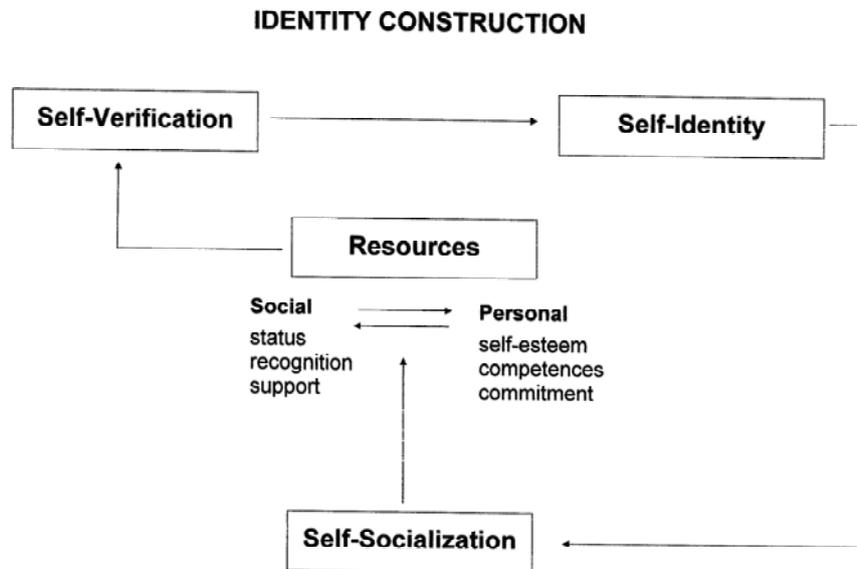
My model of identity construction (figure 2) assumes that in order to manage this balance in response to the changing transition contexts and workplaces across the employment life course, social and personal resources are vital for successfully matching vocational identity standards and employment situations. This matching process is called "self-socialization" (Heinz 2002) because it occurs as a reflexive social learning process when "doing biography" in flexible work circumstances.

A competence model of VET

Among the numerous attempts to construct a conceptual foundation for VET analysis (cf. Fischer & Boreham 2009), the model by Felix Rauner et al (2009) deserves special attention in regard to the implications for vocational identity. Vocational development is designated as an integrated process of developing competence and identity in the course of becoming a skilled worker, associated to a community of occupational practice. This implies that domain-specific knowledge and individual standards are acquired which are basic for occupational action as well as for the shaping of work related decisions. Vocational competence is the capacity to solve multiple work tasks by mobilizing cognitive potential, that is, know-how to act across several work contexts and to deliver results (goods and services) that meet quality standards of customers and the community of practice as well. Rauner et al (2009, 32) distinguish several work process and organizational aspects of vocational competence: "understanding, reflecting and assessing of occupational assignments and their execution as well as the capacity to participate in the design of organizational processes with social, economic, and ecological responsibility, and not just according to instructions".

This definition sets a demanding agenda of vocational socialization: specific and transferable cognitive dispositions as well as occupational and organizational commitment (emotional attachment/devotion) constitute a well rounded identity that qualifies skilled individuals to become and act as agents of their work life. Competence profiles vary by the levels of cognitive complexity, social responsibility and accountability required by an occupation, and by the extent to which these competences are actually used in the work process.

Practising one's occupation as a vocation in the true sense of this notion means to invest in becoming an expert in one's trade and a person who is respected because of the quality of her or his work and responsible role in the community (vocational integrity, "Berufsehre").

Thus, a promising framework of analyzing vocational identity in the context of VET pedagogy includes work conditions and their change, sources of vocational commitment (skill profile, occupational community, company policy, work ethic, etc.), the relationship of working and learning, and its transformation into enlarged competences.

Flexibility demands at the work place (e.g. commuting between projects) and changing employment conditions (e.g. temporary and short-term work) are challenging workers' capacity to adapt or modify their perspectives in regard to the content, organization and security of their job, and may create a role-distance towards job and company: Too much commitment may turn out to be self-defeating during an economic recession.

Therefore, I propose to combine the criteria of work process knowledge with employment process knowledge, if vocational identity is to be maintained by adapting to rising flexibility demands across the work life course: Skill-based employability and career competence must complement each other. This takes into account results of theory and research about vocational socialization (Lempert 1998, Heinz, 2009) which show that VET provides a bundle of skills that constitute not only specific practical, technical and theoretical knowledge, but also communicative and self-reflexive competences. These are fundamental psychosocial resources for a self-directed shaping of employment biographies which is required by volatile labour markets and flexible work circumstances: a combination of initiative and resilience (Schoon 2006).

The rapidly changing work contexts pose the question of how and to what extent vocational self-socialization provides the individual competences for constructing a self-identity that serves employees' efforts to adapt their work orientations and life plans, and not just their career plans.

Shaping a flexible work–centred life course

In the past decade, there have been stimulating contributions of industrial and occupational sociologists, as well as work and organization psychologists that suggested that the relationship between the person and work has become more and more determined by market forces and instrumental rationality. A prominent example is the ideal type of the entreployee ("Arbeitskraftunternehmer"), an identity formation which directly reflects the requirements of flexible employment, of working in a self-directed manner and to individually shape one's career.

The notion of "entreployee" was proposed at the end of the 1990s by the German industrial sociologists Voß and Pongratz (1998) who argued that the structural transformation of work and management has reached a new level of increasing employees' responsibility. In the context of market-driven, service-centred occupations, self-directed performance is expected instead of prescribed and supervised work: regulation and control activities, which formerly were in the hands of management, are gradually shifting to the skilled workers. Employees, especially in the financial, media and ICT sectors are required to think, plan and act like entrepreneurs.

Accordingly, the entreployee is defined by the following three characteristics: competence of self-control (independent planning, regulating and executing of activities), self-economization (calculated marketing of one's skills and

achievements), and self-rationalization (conscious organization of life and the life course according to the rhythms of employment). These properties of modern jobs are not specific occupational qualifications but rather general competences that the working person needs in order to transform vocational skills into a flexible job performance. This kind of work designates a habitus, a form of work, but not yet a type of subjectivity which has the potential of constructing a self-reflexivel relationship with the new employment regime.

Such an ensemble of competences presupposes work environments with many degrees of freedom for executing work and a process of self-socialization that promotes the restructuring of a specific vocational into a quasi-entrepreneurial identity, which is committed to fast track occupational success. The entreployee indicates another relationship between the person and work compared to the skilled worker who used to perform in a more or less supervised environment according to his vocational competences, guided by a specific know-how and quality standards. To what extent do skilled workers orient themselves in their employment according to this type and develop corresponding competences for shaping a new or at least a modified occupational identity?

What are the reasons for the spreading of this type of occupational identity? The accelerating technological innovations and the globalization of ICT-based exchange of products and services; rapid changes in the composition and prospects of occupations (Heinz 2009), permanent renewal of knowledge, dissolution of the separation of working and learning, aiming at lifelong learning, project-based work, and most important, flexibilization of employment, increasing self-employment, free-lancing, and temporary work.

Recent research, in most cases based on qualitative methods, suggests that there is a variety of subjective arrangements with the rising demands of self-responsible and rational job performance (Pongratz and Voß 2003, Kirpal and Brown 2007). It is important to find out which forms of subjectivity are transitional adaptations and which ones indicate a long-term transformation of vocational identity. However, as long as we do not have longitudinal studies that accompany employment biographies of workers in occupational contexts that exhibit the requirements of acting like an entreployee, sound answers will not be possible

Theoretical and empirical analysis (cf. Brown, Kirpal & Rauner 2007) suggests that the market imperatives are impacting on the individual shaping of work deep into the self-marketing of one's competences. The flexible employee has the competence "to anticipate and internalize requirements for continuous adjustments and changes in the workplace, leading to a transitory work attachment and identity for the less qualified, and a highly individualized work identity based on professional skills and competences for the higher qualified" (Kirpal & Brown 2007, 231). It is important to note that the subjective implications of adapting to the changing workplace differ by level of qualification and are related to different identity formations. Employees who are less qualified do not have the resources to adjust to flexibility demands and tend to cling to their conventional vocational identity, whereas the better qualified have socialized themselves to act in a flexible manner and rely on their individual competences.

Though there is more freedom of work behaviour and the choice of means, the setting of goals, occurs in an ambivalent context of self-control and management control at a distance, for instance through agreements concerning the quantity and quality of output in a fixed time ("Zielvereinbarung"). In a growing number of occupations this new work regime results in a colonization of the life world, that is, by dissolving the boundary between work and private life. Furthermore, the flexible

structuration of work also leads to discontinuity of employment biographies which are expected to be shaped in a self-guided way, by taking initiative in switching between tasks, teams, organizations, types of employment, episodes of joblessness, and further training. However, in the present economic crisis, there is substantial tension arising for skilled workers on all qualification levels when attempting to come to terms with flexible work and uncertain occupational futures.

The contingent work life course (Heinz 2003) only provides opportunity of self-direction for those individuals who command the resources of self-reflexive action (Giddens 1991), based on a broad set of resources and skills. Occupational development is not a blueprint of the restructured work, its course also depends on individual competence, pathway decisions and life plans. Motives, competences, and future plans are responsive to the changes in work circumstances (down-sizing, out-sourcing, merging, plant shut-down, company bankruptcy) which lead to a variety of reactions with short- and long-term consequences, unemployment, working for a temp work agency, moving to another region, voluntary shift of jobs and career lines, becoming self-employed, intensifying further learning.

In addition to vocation-based competences, individual reasoning in the sense of biographical accounting becomes a central component of managing the discrepant requirements and unintended consequences of decisions which mirror structurally induced conflicts between the persons and their working contexts and career options (Hoff and Ewers 2002). When autonomy, in the sense of being individually responsible for shaping job and career, is experienced as compulsion, individual goals are at stake, a situation which creates identity-related attempts to strike a balance between maintaining life plans and adapting to short-term demands, e.g. of family life and employment, job improvement and acquiring of new skills, restricting quantity and quality of output.

In our turbulent times, according to my model the idea of a vocation ("Berufung) may serve as a core dimension for integrating the various job demands, training and employment experiences, at the reflexive level of self-identity - at least in societies which operate with a qualification-based employment system, like Germany, compared with organization-based systems, like the UK or the USA.

I agree with the dynamic approach of the FAME project (Brown, Kirpal & Rauner 2007) which regards the acquisition of skills as the root of any kind of work-related identity construction. But, I add: since skilled work is not the end but the medium for realizing individual goals, interests, and biographical orientations, the person's identity standards play a crucial role.

Modes of adapting vocational identity to work flexibility

As argued above, occupational fields differ in the extent to which they demand self-control, self-rationalization and a redefinition of vocational identities. There is little research that attempts to shed light on the complex interdependence between flexible work and changing identities. I discuss results of qualitative studies, which dig deeper than quantitative ones, that document how skilled workers responded to changing jobs, careers and labour markets (figure 3).

Figure 3

VOCATIONAL IDENTITY and FLEXIBLE WORK

ENTREPLOYEE (Voß / Pongratz 1998)	ADAPTING to CHANGE (Raeder / Grote 2007)	BIOGRAPHICAL SHAPING (HEINZ et al 1998)
• self-control • self-economization • self-rationalization	• continuity • job-focus • critical flexibility • self-determination	• status arrangement • career involvement • autonomy gain

RESPONDING to WORK FLEXIBILIZATION
(Kirpal 2009)

Swiss psychologists Sabine Raeder and Gudela Grote (2007) analyzed the process of identity construction of skilled workers who had to come to terms with career changes. The conceptual focus was on the internal dimensions of identity, which resemble the ones delineated by Hoff (1990): ecological consistency (cf. social embedding), self-esteem, locus of control (cf. coherence), and biographical continuity. By analyzing the interviewees' narratives in this framework, they constructed an identity typology that demonstrates that there is a range of sense-making strategies: continuity, job-focus, critical flexibility, and self-determination. These strategies document two different individual modes of dealing with flexibility demands: looking for a flexible work life in order to pursue individual goals or adapting to requirements in order to use one's skills and follow career lines in a self-determined or work-determined way.

Similar patterns were found in our longitudinal study in two German labour market regions about young skilled workers' strategies of shaping their transition into the labour market in the 1990s. In a series of face-to-face qualitative interviews over a period of six years we found several biographical action orientations (BAO) which were related to the workers' respective occupational context and their work experiences (Heinz et al 1998; Kühn and Witzel 2003). Guided by the notion of self-socialization (Heinz 2002), which assumes that persons shape their work-related identity in a process of self-development and self-organized learning from the results of occupational decisions, we wanted to understand how vocational skills and job experiences are transformed into occupational identities and coined the empirically grounded concept of BAO.

Our analysis resulted in distinguishing between six types of BAO: "company identification", "wage worker habitus", "career involvement", "optimizing opportunities", "gaining autonomy", and "self-employment". These types were combined into three categories of biographical shaping: status arrangement, career involvement, and autonomy gain. Because our sample consisted of traditional crafts, manufacturing, and service occupations, we did not discover many representatives of the modern type of entreployee, but in some cases could observe work orientations that indicated an active mode of adapting to, and not just accepting flexible employment circumstances.

Identifying different modes of coming to terms with job requirements means to illuminate how young skilled workers shape their work performance and career and integrate their experiences into a vocational self-identity. For example, both the biographical action orientations of "autonomy gain" and "optimizing opportunities" indicate the subjective competence of self-control in the sense of reflexively adapting to flexible employment, whereas the other types are rather tied to a circumscribed vocational identity or organizational commitment, aiming at an arrangement of skill profile, work circumstances, company policy, and labour market conditions. By no means should these orientations be equated with a passive acceptance of work

conditions and career uncertainty, they rather signal that the young employees attempt to make use of their vocationally based identity also in the light of adverse and disappointing work experiences. Their biographical action orientations are reflecting the ambivalence inherent in modern, high risk employment systems: in order to keep one's job, skills must be applied and improved and career discontinuity be anticipated, in many cases by playing it safe and relying on the company and colleagues, in the sense of a psychological contract. This especially holds in conditions of labour market uncertainty which increase the relevance of job security against the claim of self-direction: some accept self-responsibility for employment problems and initiate job search and continuing training, others attempt to cling to their skill profile as the source of threatened vocational identity and expect the company or government to take care of their employment.

An important variation of BAO is related to the life plans of women who assess labour market and work conditions from the perspective of balancing employment and family life, a perspective which favours social values and contradicts the impersonal rationality of the market. Identifying with the company and postponing skill improvement, and optimizing the opportunity for balancing employment and family life, e.g. by part-time work, are gender related variants which do not indicate self-rationalization but a specific expression of a vocationally based self-reliance.

There are several variations of the BAO "gaining autonomy" on the basis of a vocational commitment. Flexible work may be performed with the interest in shaping everyday life. In contrast to the entreployee, this orientation varies by life phase and gender and signifies a mental distance to work which should fit better with the other life domains. Here, work is not the central life interest, but rather a means for shaping the contingent life course in a self-directed and balanced way. The occupational qualification is used for shaping the employment career without harming the private sphere. The interest in self-determination may also set limits against the competitive marketing of skills in favour of communal and social values which highlight the moral integrity as a central dimension of vocational identity.

Another qualitative study by Simone Kirpal (2009) illuminates how training and employment experience and the subjective work identification interact. Based on the results of the European FAME Project (Brown, Kirpal & Rauner 2007), Kirpal compared the occupational identifications and employment histories of employees in two major service occupations in two countries: nurses and ICT specialists in the UK and Germany. These occupations represent quite different work contexts and vocational traditions: nursing is a well institutionalized semi-profession with clear standards of qualification and career continuity, whereas information and communication technology (ICT) is a new, evolving field with various skill backgrounds and high job mobility.

The results also show that the relationship between vocational identity and flexible work conditions is far more complex than abstract models of skill-based identification with one's occupation tend to assume. Flexibility demands characterized the employment experiences on several levels: in regard to the labour market, organizational restructuring, and the workplace itself. Furthermore, the options and restrictions for balancing work and private life, of job mobility, and further occupational learning are leaving their marks on vocational commitment.

Nursing requires a high level of occupational commitment in order to cope with stressful work circumstances, much responsibility, and little material reward and social recognition. This situation makes it difficult to maintain one's vocational identity which, however, may be transformed by actively engaging in steps of professional development. The restructuring of hospitals into cost-efficient and consumer-oriented

enterprises is directing the skill profiles and career options of nurses towards professionalization. Increasing coordination demands across medical specialities (merging of wards) requires that nurses, like many other service employees, enlarge their skills by integrating administrative and counselling skills: from a specialist to an all-rounder.

In the framework of my model of identity construction, we expect that the individual strategies for coming to terms with the demands of becoming a more flexible and multi-skilled employee are influenced by the nurses' occupational self-socialization (VET or college), work biographies further learning opportunities, and career pathways.

This is confirmed by Kirpal's comparative analysis, there are substantial differences: the nurses trained according to the German VET model are primarily committed to patient care in the context of team work in hospital wards, whereas the UK nurses, educated at universities, combine hospital work with professional development, are open to multi-skilling, and have more options in regard to occupational pathways. A mix of caring, technical, administrative and communicative skills is necessary to take on the enlarged occupational responsibilities. Redefining the scope of job-content and skills requires a restructuring of nurses' vocational identity, a difficult task in view of the biographical investment in the core competence of providing care and a lack of counselling and institutional support to manage such a subjective transformation. It seems that German nurses are less well prepared to adapt to the ongoing rationalization of hospital work than their British colleagues, and thus will develop different strategies for coming to terms with the restructured work organization.

When being confronted with intensified and multi-skilled work, there were three ways of dealing with the subjective conflicts of maintaining or restructuring vocational identity: Leaving the occupation (most often in the UK), changing the work orientation (more often in Germany), and re-directing work by continuing learning. In the UK, job changes and occupational mobility were possible because of a wide range of career options within and outside the hospitals.

Re-directing in many cases meant to initiate a shift from a vocational identity to a professional image of work. This transformation process was easier for the younger nurses because their vocational socialization already included professional elements, while older nurses had problems to redefine the meaning of work. While continuing education and training was a taken-for-granted aspect of the nursing occupation in the UK, in Germany it was more often the case that work dissatisfaction (due to time pressure and routine work) motivated nurses to engage in further training and not primarily the idea to promote employability and career prospects. Another response among many German nurses was a long-term adjustment, a compromise that meant to arrange oneself and resisting continuing learning and skill enlargement. This strategy of conserving vocational identity, however, occurs at the cost of losing touch with job improvement opportunities and career prospects.

As this study highlights, a completely different constellation is represented by the employment histories and work circumstances of ICT workers; this modern service sector employs workers with different qualifications and job histories in highly flexible organizations. ICT work does not link up with specific qualification standards (even in Germany, 80.000 people work in this industry without having job-specific formal qualifications) and thus attracts people (predominantly men) who identify with work in individualized ways with a strong interest in self-directed jobs and careers: the catch-words are self-organization, project work, and goal agreements. Skilled work in this sector depends on the globalization of the ICT industry and rapid technological

development; work-places are relocated, careers short-term, but autonomy at work and the potential for innovative action are high.

Turning to the knowledge workers, there are also differences in the employment strategies and skill-building programmes of ITC companies in Germany and the UK: UK employers recruit workers from a pool of higher education graduates, often without a background in technical matters but with communication and business skills, whereas in Germany many come from IT apprenticeships which provide a certain skill portfolio and a certified qualification; thus with a well defined vocational identity.

In this open and dynamic context, which is a prototype of flexible work, frequent changes of job and employer are the workers' active strategy to accumulate work experience, enlarging skills and exploring career lines. Therefore, attachment to a firm and commitment to a circumscribed set of occupational skills are rare among ICT-workers, they rather identify with their individual competences, their potential of learning and working in a self-directed manner. This work orientation has affinity with the destandardized employment patterns in the ICT industry, working on challenging tasks in changing projects is regarded as promoting learning and career opportunities. As Kirpal (2009) points out, the various levels of flexibility and unpredictability were seen by the majority of respondents as "part of the excitement of working" in this innovative industry.

The dominant type was characterized by a close interrelationship between individual fascination of computer technology and vocational learning. Its representatives perceived their work as self-realization (in the sense of a "vocation") and relied on their competence of self-direction and continuing learning. The majority of ICT workers developed a flexible job commitment and a work identity which was not focused on specific practical skills and technical knowledge.

An orientation resembling vocational identity was shown by another type, characterized by a strong technical orientation with a focus on computing and programming, connected with doubt whether they will be able to master the stressful employment conditions in the long run. The improvement of technical know-how was their guideline of occupational development and not the required multi-skilling and self-marketing. It seems that they stick to their vocational identity and thus are likely to get stuck in their careers. Their identification with technical skills was a mental barrier against moving toward a more flexible, multi-skilled work context which demanded social and organization competence in regard to colleagues and customers.

IT-specific qualification was associated with being committed to the technical dimensions of work, while those with another occupational socialization showed a wider range of work and career orientation and an employment biography with many job changes. This can be explained by an unspecific vocational identity which was found more often among ICT-specialists in the UK. Such an orientation, however, creates rising costs of balancing work and private sphere, working seven days and long hours reduces the time for regeneration, family, partnership, and past-time activities. Therefore, mid-career ICT-experts were thinking of alternative forms of employment in order to find a way of redefining their professional aims in favour of a more balanced relationship between work and private life.

It seems that the extremely dynamic field of ICT is creating work and career circumstances that characterize work regardless whether it is in the UK or Germany. This context creates experiences that are promoting an entreployee-orientation. Though VET and college did prepare workers in this sector with different kinds of identity, their workplaces and professional development are creating a similar

occupational culture which expects a variable identification with jobs and companies in favour of self-direction and autonomy. This identification, however, is ambivalent because the rhythm of life is dictated by the time pressure of work and an unpredictable employment future. Therefore, experienced ICT workers are attempting to gain some control over the pace of working and career opportunities without giving up their keen interest in answering to computer related innovations.

Conclusion and outlook

Does vocational identity conflict or resonate with flexible work? I tried to show that it depends and that answers must take into account a set of aspects that range from national frameworks of education and training, occupational traditions, company human resource management, job and labour market conditions on the one hand, and the skilled workers' vocational self-socialization, skill profile, and future plans, on the other. Moving from a self-identity as a skilled specialist to a multi-skilled generalist is a difficult learning process which implies to leave routine habits behind and to restructure self-identity. Since there are few, though increasing fast-track occupational fields and little institutional support for such a subjective transformation to become an entreployee, the majority of skilled workers cling to their vocationally based competences as long as possible. Their strategies are motivated by the goal of achieving individual coherence, social recognition, and biographical continuity despite of fundamental changes in their work life.

Skilled workers in the personal and ICT service industry are the avant-garde of employees faced with the challenge to re-construct identities connected to their occupation in view of discontinuity of careers and flexible workplaces. Their strategies differ according to the dominant sources of occupational commitment: attachment to the skill profile and the immediate community of practice is related to a low level of job mobility, while a more general qualification facilitates adapting to flexibility by frequent job changes and further learning. The ambivalence of flexible work is met either by re-directing one's career, or by a long-term adaptation. These strategies result from processes of occupational self-socialization, guided by the specific cultural and institutional frameworks of the occupations.

In a globalized economy, the national institutional contexts do not make much difference in the case of skilled workers in the ICT, media and banking sectors who adapted to volatile employment and career conditions by intensifying their psychosocial flexibility and engagement in their professional development. Vocational identities, which are based on specific skills, occupational community and career lines, however, still are embedded in a national framework of institutional regulation and cultural traditions.

In addition to the effort of gaining control over the conditions and results of work, the problem of constructing a work-life balance creates conflicts between occupational identity and the individuals' time budgets. Especially skilled female workers respond to such conflicts by reducing the centrality of work and develop a role distance in favour of a clear separation of occupational and private time. In the fast-track occupations such a strategy is much more difficult because workers' self-socialization makes it possible to organize life in such a way that professional and private sphere can overlap, with a clear lead by the work sphere.

Constructing a continuity of vocational identity under conditions of uncertainty of job and career prospects seems to be possible by engaging in the enlargement of skills and the development of employability in the sense of acting as an agent of one's occupational future. This means learning to shape the work biography as a self-reflexive, but not self-centred venture. Whether such a strategy is successful

depends on the extent to which the respective occupational context promotes confidence in one's skills and work experiences and a community of practice, which is supporting and recognizing the person's competence. In view of increasing labour market uncertainty, a job security has priority as the dominant resource for self-identity.

Though there are limits to generalize from qualitative data, it is obvious that becoming a multi-skilled generalist will reduce the attachment to a more focused vocational identity acquired in the process of VET and during the first years on the job. Among skilled workers there is much reluctance to engage in multi-skilling because they are afraid to lose their vocational focus, the core competences they identified with in their occupational biography.

For the multi-competent entrepreneurial employee we see that if self-determination in the context of flexible work becomes stressful and does not leave time for non-work activities, feelings of ambivalence initiate new arrangements of priorities. The issue of meaningful alternatives, of setting other priorities and lines of action according to one's responsibilities inside and outside of work will gain in importance, whenever achievement pressures are felt to lead to self-exploitation.

In flexible work environments, the competence to self-validate one's past, present and to plan one's future must be guided by biographical reflections about the reasons of success and failure in the world of work and its relationship to private life. Vocational identity is like a moving target and adaptable to flexible work by a lifelong self-socialization when individual and social resources are available. In other words, it will be necessary for skilled workers to overcome taken-for-granted rules, habits, and routines and to get engaged in converting their skill profile into a set of competences that pertain to the work process and their career process as well.

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