# *Career Research* & Development

The NICEC Journal

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## Aims and scope

Career Research and Development 'the NICEC Journal' is published for:

- Career practitioners working in schools, colleges, Connexions partnerships, higher education careers services, adult guidance agencies, companies, community organisations, etc.

- Trainers, lecturers, advisers and consultants working with career practitioners.

- Individuals working towards qualifications in career education, career guidance and career management.

- Government departments and business and community organisations with an interest in the work of career practitioners.

### It sets out to:

- Promote evidence-based practice by making theory, policy and the results of research and development more accessible to career practitioners in their day-to-day work.

- Encourage discussion and debate of current issues in career research and development.

- Disseminate good practice.

- Support continuing professional development for career practitioners.

- Help practitioners to develop and manage career education and guidance provision in the organisations in which they work.

# The Future of Work and Career: An Overview of the Debate

Marcus Offer, NICEC Fellow

The learning designed and the personal advice given by careers teachers and advisers depends for its validation on accurate knowledge of what is happening in the labour market – both general long term trends and short term and local changes in supply and demand. The relationship of careers guidance to counselling, I have argued elsewhere, is analogous to the relationship of engineering to physics or maths. 'Both have their ultimate test in their effectiveness in creating and maintaining "structures" that have to stand up and survive in a public world' (Offer, 2001, p.76). This edition of the journal revisits the arguments for and against what has sometimes been referred to as a 'paradigm shift' in the nature of the labour market, and hence of work and careers within it – a shift that, if proven, profoundly affects the way we construct our own practice as careers professionals as well as the policy that informs it. The concept of 'paradigm shift' itself is now contested, (e.g. in this journal by **Alan Brown and Ewart Keep**). The arguments are definitely not resolved here but the articles in this issue should stimulate an (overdue) debate and encourage practitioners to review the more recent evidence for and against conclusions they may have come to take for granted. We need to become more critical consumers of research.

## The conventional wisdom

For ten years and more the conventional wisdom among practitioners, managers and policy makers in guidance and careers work has been that the labour market, and with it the traditional model of career, is undergoing, has undergone, or will soon undergo, radical change. The 'new economy', it has been claimed, is characterised by project-based work, insecurity and changing skill requirements. This is not, it has been argued, the sort of gradual change expected over time in any modern economy. There is, instead, a radical move from permanent and full-time jobs to temporary, short-term or part-time work for many, who increasingly become 'contingent' workers of various kinds, including those working from home or at a distance. **Tony Watts** outlines, in the first article below, twelve points that summarise this view. These include the idea that there has been a 'profound change' in the psychological contract between employer and employee, which is now to be based more on economic exchange than traditional loyalty.

**Charles Jackson**, also in this journal, revisits similar arguments made in an earlier report, of which he was co-author. Such views are strongly contested by other contributors.

Jackson *et al.* (1996)) argued that profound changes were happening to careers. Colin and Watts (1996) foresaw the 'death and transfiguration of career' and, with it, of traditional career guidance. **Tony Watts** argues that there has been a shift from what is seen as the traditional 'bureaucratic' form of career, to more fluid 'professional' and 'entrepreneurial' career patterns or a mix of the two. Arthur (2003) has also argued for a new concept of the 'boundaryless career' with equivalently transferable benefits and based on 'relationships, both interpersonal and communal' – relationships 'that endure while employment arrangements change'. **Tony Watts** concludes in his article below that 'individuals now need to take more responsibility for their own learning and career development, whether within, between or outside organisations'. It is the individual's own development pathway through life that remains as the constant in the equation but at the same time, Watts argues, 'this reconceptualisation makes career, in principle, accessible to all. A key task for public policy is to make it so'.

The argument has significant support from other sources: **Watts** cites, among others, Castells (1996, 2000) and Carnoy (2000) – both of whom have provided detailed, statistical data and substantial arguments for aspects of this view. The latter identifies four key elements in the transformation which are similar to those put forward by Watts: (i) work which is not constrained by the traditional pattern of 35-40 hours per week in a full-time job (ii) task-oriented work that does not involve a commitment to future employment (iii) an increasing minority of workers operating outside their workplace for part or all of their working time and (iv) the demise or deterioration of the 'traditional' social contract between employer and employee where the former made implicit commitment among other things to predictable career opportunities in return for a degree of loyalty to the company and perseverance in the job. Castells, in his three-volume treatise on *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (1996, 2000), also argues that we are now experiencing a radically new phase of 'informational capitalism', and charts the rise of the 'network enterprise' and the 'network society'. He sees, as many adopting this view do, new technology (especially the Internet) and economic globalisation as key drivers of these developments. The action of 'knowledge upon knowledge itself' is the main source of productivity.

## The popularisers

This powerful set of ideas has been taken up by a number of more popular writers. Globalisation and technological development are seen by some as almost natural phenomena – and hence beyond the influence even of national governments. The idea of a 'portfolio career' developed by Charles Handy (1989), became a commonplace in careers work. It has also been suggested by some commentators that in future people will typically experience up to eight changes of 'career' in their lifetimes. Others went so far as to suggest that every work-seeker, even the employed, should adopt a 'self-employed' stance, treating employers as customers to whom one needs to sell a package of transferable skills and flexible attitudes (Bridges, 1997). Others developed careers education materials to encourage this (e.g. Vandevelde, 2000). Today's workers needed to look for work that needs doing and then sell themselves as the best way to get it done.

## Implications for guidance

Common to these positions is a more or less general acceptance that radical changes can be lived with, provided individuals manage their lives effectively and 'invest in skills'. While governments should support the development of skills, and adopt policies that minimise social exclusion, it is individuals, above all, who have to take responsibility for their own learning and career development. The idea that security lies in 'employability' and in 'transferable skills' has become a commonplace of policy (e.g. DfES, 2005). Individuals must be helped to adapt to what is a worldwide phenomenon, driven largely by technological development and economic globalisation and beyond the control of nation states.

Such a view has attractions for those in careers education and guidance whose own roles might thereby be secured, albeit at the price of rethinking the allegedly 'traditional' approach of matching people to the 'right' job. Career is a 'subjective' affair in this scenario: a function of guidance is to help individuals make personal meaning out of the disparate events they will have to live/have lived through, rather than select the 'right' option for an uncertain future. Specific and testable labour market information might also be less necessary to practitioners and their clients than coaching or mentoring skills independent of the fluctuating conditions of an inevitably volatile and unpredictable world of work. The focus, **Bill Law** argues in this journal, needs to be as much on *labour market experience* (LME) as on *labour market information* (LMI).

## It ain't necessarily so

As the 1990s wore on, however, it became increasingly clear that aspects of this picture could, and would, be seriously contested: there was even a significant degree of hype in some of the more popular scenarios. In the last five years, evidence from in-depth research has become available which has influenced academics, but has not yet impinged on the consciousness of some in careers work practice. At the very least the conventional wisdom is seriously contested.

The more serious commentators have also begun to modify their original positions to take some account of this. Thus, while **Tony Watts** maintains that the argument for the 'paradigm shift' is still fundamentally sound, he suggests it needs to be presented in more measured terms. For example, non-permanent jobs have increased in the 16-24 and 50+ age groups, but decreased in the 25-49 age group (McOrmond, 2004). If so, changes in work might be particularly concentrated in prolonged and more flexible initial transitions into, and late transitions from, more secure employment.

**Charles Jackson** in this journal also argues that it is misleading to base comments on the average (mean) experience of labour market participants: the standard deviation is just as interesting and we should be more aware of the 'widening diversity' in experiences of different groups. He points out that redefining our concept of what having a career means in a more inclusive and process-oriented way provides a rationale for new approaches to career management.

Indeed, much of the argument can be conducted in terms of definitions – what do we mean exactly by 'paradigm shift', 'globalisation', 'home working' or 'career'? But there are more radical critics. They fall into three main groups.

## 1. The pessimists

Several writers agree about radical change, but focus on what they see as major human costs. Individuals are suffering from its effects in irreparable ways. Sennett (1998) like many such critics takes a qualitative approach analysing a handful of individual cases as key illustrations of his argument. Discussing the purported rise in insecurity in employment, he comments that 'risk is to become a daily necessity shouldered by the masses' rather than simply by venture capitalists or entrepreneurs. However, 'risk-taking lacks mathematically the quality of a narrative, in which one event leads to, and conditions, the next. People can, of course, deny the fact of regression' as the gambler does when on a winning streak 'but this is a dangerous story… Being continually exposed to risk can thus eat away at your sense of character. There is no narrative which can overcome regression to the mean: "you are always starting over"' (Sennett, 1998, p.82ff). Flexibility may be alright for those at the top of the tree, but its elements 'corrode the characters of more ordinary employees who try to play by these rules' (Ibid, p.63).

Mary Sue Richardson (in Collin & Young, 2000, p. 202-3) basically accepts the thesis of change in a flexible labour market, but claims that what we are asked (and, more importantly, are asking clients) to do about it,

constitutes a 'new career ideology'. This derives, firstly from an 'oversaturation of the construct of career with psychological meaning' and hence leaves the individual holding all the responsibility for failure or success in his or her career. It also 'collapses the private and public domains and ignores the differences between them'. She argues that this 'belief in personal self sufficiency … (in which) psychological resources and personal resiliency are believed to compensate for the security, predictability, and safety formerly provided by stable employment … is American individualism at its most extreme … It is as if everyone can or ought to have the characteristics of an entrepreneur'.

Some chart a trend towards 'winner-take-all' markets, a far from optimistic scenario (Frank & Cook, 1994). What happens to society when the majority are 'losers'? Sandage's (2005) history of the idea of failure in America provides a suggestive account. Rather than overall 'upskilling', changes may lead to polarisation with the rich/highly skilled getting richer and the poor/low skilled poorer. Brown & Keep (2003) note 'a slower, less glamorous, but possibly more profound change caused by the increasing bifurcation of opportunities and rewards in the labour market'. **Charles Jackson,** in this journal, (like **Alan Brown and Ewart Keep**) takes up the point about polarisation and the 'hour glass economy'.

Fraser (2001) records the miseries of American white-collar workers caught up in the process: not a purely 'natural' phenomenon but a harsh new management style firmly rooted in the actions of unscrupulous corporations and corporate raiders. The 'new economy' on this account, involves overwork, stress and insecurity – a demanding and unrewarding work life for far too many, while 'public relations campaigns conducted inside and outside the corporate workplace aimed to convince Americans that deteriorating job conditions were essential in order to fuel the nation's thriving economy and soaring equity markets' (Ibid, p.11).

Even Castells (1998, 2000) writes that 'there is a systemic relationship between the structural transformations … characteristic of the new, network society and the growing dereliction of the ghetto' as well as a rise in such problems as the exploitation of child labour and even child prostitution. In his final volume (*End of Millennium*), he comments that the 'rise of informationalism … is intertwined with rising inequality and social exclusion throughout the world'. He also charts the concomitant rise of a 'global criminal economy' (Ibid, 1998, 2000, p. 169). He acknowledges that 'systemic financial volatility brings with it … devastating effects on economies and societies'. (Ibid,1996, 2000: 161)

## 2. Critics of the premises

The second group is critical of the basic assumptions themselves. Bradley *et al.* (2000), drawing on their own fieldwork, began to 'unpick and deconstruct the myths to show which of them have credibility and which do not'. For example, as **Steve Williams,** one of the four authors of this work writes in this journal, advances in technology may bring about new and more effective methods of managerial control, rather than liberation and empowerment for workers, and the dominance of 'knowledge work' has been exaggerated: 'there is evidence that occupational change has been characterised by an increase in the proportion of care assistants and security operatives as well as software engineers'. Broadly in support of such challenges, research within the ESRC Future of Work programme came up with extensive findings fundamentally at odds with the conventional wisdom. 'A disturbingly wide gulf exists between the over-familiar rhetoric and hyperbole we hear daily about our flexible and dynamic labour market and the realities of workplace life. The evidence simply does not support the view that we are witnessing the emergence of a "new" kind of employment relations, seen in the "end of the career" and "the death of the permanent job for life". The shift away from permanent and full-time jobs to temporary, short term or part time work is exaggerated. The spread of employee individualism and the corresponding decline of wider social or collectivist values in the workplace is also much overdone. It is hard to find much evidence of any widespread "psychological" contract or mutually acceptable trade-off between the needs of companies and the demands of their employees' (Taylor, 2004). Moynagh & Worsley (2005) have summarised these and other findings recently for the Tomorrow Project. Many of the major claims made for the 'new economy' are challenged or modified here in some way.

In this journal, **Michael White**, one of the researchers in the ESRC programme, argues that career structures, especially within organisations, have *not* been eroded: over a ten year period there has been considerable stability in employees' views of the availability of internal career opportunities. 'Career opportunities are not shrinking: indeed they have hardly changed for the higher level occupations and have expanded for those at lower levels. But the main growth in opportunities for those in less-skilled jobs has been through in-house promotion'.

**Alan Brown and Ewart Keep** comment that 'we need to build multiple visions of what might be, rather than accepting a single view of the shape of work in the future', especially in relation to the proposed adoption of a 'high skill, high performance workplace model (which) may only be relevant within a limited subset of organisations' (Brown & Keep, 2003). In this journal they argue at length for the abandonment of 'grand narratives' in favour of 'closer attention to the full range of evidence on changing patterns of employment and careers and to construct narratives that represent this complexity …'. They list eighteen items of LMI, which they 'defy anyone to weave into a single coherent narrative'.

Careers practitioners have always used LMI to challenge simplifications, half truths and stereotypes brought to them by their clients and students ('Actually it's more complicated than that …'). If the critics are right, they should not give up the day job just yet.

## 3. Deconstructing the discourse – a political view

A final position – not necessarily incompatible with the others – recognises the rhetorical and 'political' aspects of the subject. Guidance is inevitably a political activity. **Watts** (1996), for example, outlined some of the political dimensions of guidance (not specific to any one career paradigm): in essence, does guidance act to reinforce unequal life chances or to redistribute them?

From another angle, **Steve Williams** argues, in this journal, that employment patterns are not just driven by economics and technology but by conscious policy choices made, inter alia, by national governments. Workers, too, are active agents and can drive changes. There are power relations in employment: if we talk of 'flexibility', it is important to be clear whose terms frame the definition – the employers' need for a more flexible workforce or the worker's desire for a more flexible work-life balance.

Williams and his colleagues (Bradley *et al.*, 2000) have also described 'myths at work' which are 'not so much… deliberately used to mask reality as … particular versions of reality (which) have more "sticking power" than others and so become popularly accepted'. Such 'myths' are not just developed and used within work organisations, but 'also actively "at work" in that they influence future developments within the organisation. This is because they are so widely believed that people use them as the basis for actions and decision-making … Myths inform strategic choices within workplaces which then affect the lives of all within them'. They link this process in some ways to Foucault's accounts of strategies of power and governmentality, but argue that working people 'have their own agendas and often construct selves in ways quite different from the intentions of their superordinates'.

The language framing the 'future of work' is not neutral but part of a 'discourse' or way of thinking, acting as a social boundary defining what can be said, or even experienced, about a topic (Offer, 2001). How the labour market is *talked* about is hard to separate from the reality itself. The 'death of the job for life' has become so commonplace an idea that one regularly hears the phrase not just from policymakers and professionals but reflected back from workers involved in major redundancies, interviewed for the news media. Careers practitioners should be aware that they themselves contribute to its persuasive power: the rhetoric itself can become influential in the minds of job seekers, workers and employers, as well as policy makers and business leaders, and determine how policies are framed and how their consequences are received.

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# The Economic Case for Career Guidance: Has There Been a Paradigm Shift?

A.G. Watts, NICEC Senior Fellow and Life President

In 2004 CeGS and NICEC were commissioned by the Guidance Council to prepare an 'economic case' for career guidance, paralleling that produced in Canada by Phil Jarvis (2004). The outcome of the project has now been published (Hughes, 2004). As part of the project, Tony Watts produced a short paper summarising some key elements of the argument and reviewing some of the recent data in support of it.

## The 'paradigm shift' argument

The 'paradigm shift' as outlined by Jarvis (2003) is based on the need for career management skills within an increasingly flexible labour market characterised by project-based work, insecurity and changing skill requirements. The argument is not presented in strongly analytical terms, and includes a lot of unsubstantiated assertions. But it is broadly congruent with a large literature built around post-Fordist work transformations (Lash & Urry, 1987), the risk society (Beck, 1992), the network society (Castells, 1996), the new economy (Carnoy, 2000), and the boundaryless career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).

In the context of career guidance in the UK, I advanced an argument built on much the same lines (Watts, 1996) and developed it in more detail in a subsequent paper with Audrey Collin (Collin & Watts, 1996). The key propositions were:

1. That the bureaucratic career – as opposed to the professional or entrepreneurial career, in Kanter's (1989) terms – has been the dominant construct of career for most of the 20th century, both in common parlance and in employees' aspirations if not experience.

2. That the bureaucratic structures into which this concept has been embedded are under sustained pressure from two linked processes: the impact of new technology, and the globalisation of the economy.

3. That in order to compete and respond to change, organisations have to be more flexible in how they organise their tasks.

4. That to achieve such flexibility, many organisations have engaged in devolution and decentralisation of decision-making, in 'delayering' and in 'downsizing' – reducing their core workers and operating through a growing contractual periphery.

5. That this latter process has taken two main forms: first, increased outsourcing and contracting out to suppliers, resulting in (a) more employees working in SMEs than in large organisations and (b) more individuals being self-employed; and, second, more flexible working arrangements with employees, resulting in (c) more part-time workers, (d) more 'teleworkers' working from home, and (e) more 'contingent workers' – i.e. casual workers, and workers on short-term contracts (these groups, of course, overlap). These trends are evident in (f) reduced length of job tenure. (UK data were cited to support all of these trends.)

6. That these trends have been linked to other trends within organisations, including more fluid organisational structures, often based on time-focused, task-driven teams.

7. That these changes are having a radical impact on career patterns, with fewer opportunities for set hierarchical progression.

8. That the effect of these trends is a profound change in the psychological contract between the organisation and the individual: from long-term relational contracts, based on security and reciprocal loyalty, to short-term transactional contracts, based on a narrower and more purely economic exchange. Where the relational contract survives, it is based on exchanging job security for greater task flexibility. In both cases, therefore, the contract requires regular renegotiation.

9. That individuals now need to take more responsibility for their own learning and career development, whether within, between or outside organisations.

10. That security for the individual now lies not in employment but in employability.

11. That if 'career' is to survive as a concept that will be meaningful in the 21st century, it is the professional and entrepreneurial forms to which it is likely to refer. It also seems likely that professional careers will become more fluid, so opening up possibilities for bringing these two forms closer to one another.[1]

12. That 'career' needs to be reconceptualised as the individual's development in learning and work throughout life. Whereas the bureaucratic career was by definition limited to an elite, this reconceptualisation makes career in principle accessible to all. A key task for public policy is to make it so.

## The counter-argument

The NICEC tender for the Guidance Council project stated that the paradigm shift outlined by Jarvis 'cannot be applied without revision to the UK, since whereas a number of its main assumptions (e.g. the insecurity of employment prospects and the radical nature of change in the labour market) may be uncontroversial in a Canadian context they are contested by some significant data in recent research in the UK'. In encouraging CeGS to work with NICEC on the project, the Guidance Council noted that the NICEC bid had been 'strong on critical/challenging thinking'.

The notion that the 'paradigm shift' argument may be more sustainable in Canada than in the UK does not seem to be supported by the evidence. A comparative study of 'non-standard' patterns of employment in the two countries showed that although there were some detailed differences between them (e.g. more temporary work in Canada, plus some differences in the distribution of part-time work), the main patterns and trends were broadly similar (Felstead et al., 1999). Any weaknesses in the 'paradigm shift' argument would apply to both countries.

The counter-argument to the 'paradigm shift' has been put forward by a number of writers including the Trades Union Congress (2000), Bradley et al. (2000) and Nolan (2003), and in relation to career guidance issues has been usefully summarised by Offer (2001). It contends that the 'paradigm shift' argument is based on selective evidence and lacks an adequate historical perspective. It also suggests that the argument may be ideologically driven.

In these critiques, particular significance is given to evidence that the length of job tenure up to the mid-1990s had been largely stable since 1975. However, this disguised contrasts by gender: it had risen among women with children, but fallen for men and for women without dependent children (Gregg & Wadsworth, 1999).

Moreover, more recent evidence indicates that there have been overall reductions in job tenure since 1996: the mean average job tenure fell from 93.5 months in 1996 to 90.0 in 2001; and the proportion of employees working for the same firm as 12 months previously fell from 90% to 87% over the same period (Macauley, 2003a).

A further common criticism is that there has been little or no increase in self-employment. Nolan (2003), for example, points out that there has been no growth in self-employment over the past ten years. But over the last twenty years, the proportion has increased from 6% to 8% of the total adult population. Much of the change took place between 1986 and 1990, linked to government incentives and social attitudes in that period. Since then there has been a slight decline, due largely to changes in the construction industry, which have led to construction workers reclassifying themselves as employees (Weir, 2003). But the figure is now increasing again, partly due to changes in the banking, finance and insurance industry (Macauley, 2003b).

An important point made by Weir (2003) is that self-employment is increasingly associated with age, and that there has been a significant spurt in the proportion of those aged over 56 who are self-employed. This links to a broader argument presented by Felstead et al. (1999), who point out that the proportion of the working population in various forms of non-standard employment (part-time work, temporary work, self-employment) increased from 33% to 37% between 1989 and 1994, but that the bulk of both the incidence of and the increase in such forms of employment was concentrated in the 15-24 and 55-64 age-groups (and among women with dependent children). A related point is found in more recent data, which indicate that there was a further small increase between 1993 and 2002 in the percentage of the working population in part-time and temporary jobs, but that whereas non-permanent jobs had increased in the 16-24 and 50+ age-groups, they had decreased in the 25-49 age-group (McOrmond, 2004). This does not invalidate the 'paradigm shift' argument, but suggests that it may be linked to, and its immediate effects concentrated particularly in, prolonged and more flexible initial transitions into and late transitions from more secure employment.

The ideological dimension is certainly pertinent. Doogan (2001) contends that critical roles have been played by the 'manufactured insecurity' induced by the greater exposure of the state sector to market forces, corporate restructuring in the private sector in terms of mergers, acquisitions and sell-offs, and the diminution of social protection systems. But these have themselves been responses to the global pressures that have produced the changes.

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1 More recent support for this latter proposition is provided by the evidence of growth of non-standard employment among professionals (Hoque & Kirkpatrick, 2003). More attention in this argument could also be given to the role of technology in fostering the 'free worker' (Knell, 2000), evident in the concept of the 'e-lance economy' (Malone & Laubacher, 1998).

It is indeed important to note that the changes have not been confined to countries like the UK and Canada. Felstead & Jewson (1999) indicate that non-standard forms of employment have been on the increase world-wide, though the patterns vary from country to country (they define non-standard forms to include part-time work, temporary work, self-employment and multiple job-holding ('moonlighting'), but also – and overlapping with these categories – homeworking, teleworking, agency working, outsourcing, subcontracting, franchising, zero-hours contracts, fixed-term contracts, seasonal work, flexitime and consultancy work). The same point is made, using a wide range of data from OECD countries, by Carnoy (2000).

A further important point to make is that the 'paradigm shift' argument is not solely dependent on increases in non-standard forms of employment, but also covers movements from large organisations to SMEs, plus increasing task and role flexibility within organisations in general. These latter trends may be more pertinent to the 25-49 age-group.

## Towards a defensible position

My own view is that the notion of a 'paradigm shift' is sustainable and defensible, but needs to be presented in more measured terms than in the Jarvis (2003) paper. The concept of a 'paradigm shift' represents a change of pattern, not the replacement of one model by another. The arguments which Audrey Collin and I presented in the mid-1990s were supported by carefully presented evidence, and seem to me to be reinforced by some of the more recent data outlined above. Certainly the changes have been more evident in some sectors than in others. But the notion that the traditional model remains unchanged does not accord either with the facts or with many people's perceptions of the facts. And those changed perceptions are themselves part of the changed reality.

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## Postscript

The paper by Ewart Keep and Alan Brown (this volume) challenges the 'paradigm shift' argument. I acknowledge that in the paper above I adopted the dictionary (Concise Oxford) definition of the term rather than the Kuhnian definition. I hold, however, to the view that there has been a marked shift in cultural thinking about careers, and that this reflects some important changes in patterns of employment and careers. I recognise, of course, that both of these views are based on some simplification of complex realities. I accept, too, that post-structuralism has rendered such binary perspectives unfashionable – though it should be noted that the distinction between structuralist and post-structuralist views is itself binary.

My core contention, as argued above, is that the bureaucratic career has been the *dominant* (though not exclusive) construct of career for most of the 20th century, both in common parlance and in employees' aspirations if not experience, whereas the emergent dominant concepts now are the professional career (in more fluid forms) and the entrepreneurial career. This provides a basis for reconceptualising 'career' and extending it to many more people. My political argument is that supporting such democratisation of career is a virtuous goal for public policy, and that enhanced career guidance has a role to play in this process. In these respects, the finding cited by Keep & Brown, that between 1986 and 2001 (a period which included substantial organisational delayering and downsizing) the proportion of employees seeing themselves as having a career jumped from just under half to over 60%, is both significant and encouraging.

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# Moving Beyond Discussions About Paradigm Shifts – Creating Space for Multiple Meanings and Narratives on Changing Patterns of Employment and Careers

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## Introduction

The contribution of Steve Williams (this volume) highlights the extent to which there are elements of both continuity and change in current patterns of work, employment and employment relations, while the contribution of Michael White (this volume) points to a conditional renewal of organisational careers from the perspective of employers.

The contribution of Tony Watts (this volume) in trying to accommodate counter-arguments to the 'paradigm shift' outlined by Jarvis (2003) moved towards the idea that the 'concept of a "paradigm shift" represents a change of pattern, not the replacement of one model by another'. We have some sympathy with this position as there are indeed changes in patterns of employment and notions of career, but we cannot let pass the idea that, in the UK at least, this represents a 'paradigm shift'. The usual understanding of 'paradigm shift', from the perspective of Kuhn (1962), or even if adapted to apply to Foucault (1972), does indeed mean one dominant model has been supplanted by another. Does agreement of whether or not we should use 'paradigm shift' matter? It probably does in the sense that in this field it encourages others to think of the past, the present and future in overly simple terms, and this does a disservice to guidance practitioners and ultimately their clients.

In this contribution therefore we will initially focus upon an examination of the meaning of 'paradigm shift' in order to show that, in this context, the use of the term is not helpful. Then, after an examination of some evidence about the complexity of the patterns of employment and career, we will conclude that there may be some value in the use of illustrative narratives as a way to convey the complexities in the patterns of employment and careers. These are also valuable because many individuals still find the concept of 'career' useful as a device for making sense of their lives: especially as Moynagh and Worsley (2005) point out that 'between 1986 and 2001, the proportion of employees seeing themselves as having a career jumped from just under half to over 60%' (p. 96).

## What constitutes a 'paradigm shift'?

Thomas Kuhn's (1962) original concept of a paradigm shift applied to situations where stable established scientific ways of thinking are interrupted by periods of scientific revolution after which one dominant way of looking at some aspect of the scientific world is replaced by another. Now what the contributions to this volume have made clear is that the evidence for changes in patterns of employment and careers is contested and, whatever else, this alone is evidence that the way social scientists think about these issues has not, as yet, undergone a 'paradigm shift'. Indeed professional scepticism about the basis of popular claims for the 'learning organisation', 'knowledge society' and the 'skills needed for new careers' would seem to be the hallmark of a critical social scientist (Brown and Keep, 2003; Brown, 1999).

Kuhn's (1962) standard of proof for a paradigm shift of a fundamental change in *scientific* thinking has clearly not been met, but what of the idea that there has been a shift in cultural thinking about careers? Foucault (1972) outlined the idea of how one system of thought, with dominant ways of thinking, replaced another in periods of revolutionary cultural change. At first, this looks as though it could be a more fruitful avenue for those advocating a profound shift in thinking about careers, especially as we are clearly in a time of profound cultural change. The problem for those advocating a 'paradigm shift', however, is that all the changes would have to line up in more or less the same direction and would have to be widely accepted as such. We will show later that the changes in pattern in employment and careers are much too mixed for that to be a sustainable position. However, there is a much more fundamental philosophical objection to the 'paradigm shift' argument: that to describe the world in such binary terms represents an imaginative failure.

A post-structuralist perspective draws attention to how much of our imaginative world is structured in binary ways when there is a much wider range of ways to look at things. Within social science, structuralist or other

binary views emphasised how certain ways of thinking were dominant and constrained how people viewed the world, with culture offering a degree of agency and choice but also circumscribing the range of possibilities. In contrast, post-structuralism sees a much wider range of possibilities, and questions the extent to which people can be represented as sharing one of a relatively small number of ways of thinking about society and culture. The much wider range of options is coupled with a view that cultural 'scripts' are much more open to individual influence. Post-structuralism is concerned with breaking down over-arching narratives concerned with the 'big picture', into a series of smaller narratives that deconstruct the 'structure' as a whole and thereby release more ways of making sense of particular parts of the bigger picture. This we believe is a more fruitful avenue for those with an interest in understanding changing patterns of employment and careers to explore.

In some senses therefore post-structuralism is a tool to sensitise researchers and practitioners to the possibility of multiple meanings and narratives associated with discourse and action in the particular contexts under investigation: in this case changing patterns of employment and careers. The focus upon narrative and meaning offers the possibility of bringing to life the complexity underlying the changing patterns in a way that does not over-simplify the representation of these changes. You can, of course, use other frameworks to achieve similar effects, but the key is to move away from an obsession with grand narratives.

## Some evidence about the complexity of the changing patterns of employment and careers

There is a danger of being seduced by rhetorics that centre on the novelty and alarm inherent in alleged fundamental discontinuities and paradigm shifts in the labour market. The realities of developments are in reality often extremely complex and do not fit neatly into simple change narratives (see Nolan and Wood, 2003). We are thus fortunate in having a major body of recent research evidence generated through the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Future of Work Programme, the work-related projects in the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) and the review of evidence of the human impact of modern working practices produced by Holman, Wall and colleagues (2005).

What the research demonstrates is that many of the apocalyptic notions about economic and labour market change, in the sense of seriously undermining the prevalence of full-time employment, have not happened (Moynagh and Worsley, 2005). While the *Future of Work Programme* has produced a mountain of evidence that could be used to argue exactly how the trends are developing, their key finding for our purposes is that looking at the labour market in aggregate terms is not very helpful – the differences between sectors, people

at different stages of their lives and so on are much too complex to be represented as unambiguous universal trends: 'many of the generalisations of the late 1990s have been unpicked by detailed research, which has dissolved neat trends into a complex picture' (Moynagh and Worsley, 2005, p.1).

The idea of individual responsibility for employability as advocated in official documents (DfES/DTI/HMT/DWP, 2003, p. 11) is subject to a theoretically-informed critique by Phil Brown and colleagues (2003) who highlight that employability should be viewed in terms of the relative chances of finding and maintaining different kinds of employment. This immediately draws attention to the importance of the positional competition with others and the state of the labour market, while Tamkin and Hillage (1999) argue that employers could take a much more proactive role in supporting the development of their staff in this respect.

Similarly, the evidence for the adoption of flatter, less hierarchical structures in organisations employing empowered, polyvalent knowledge workers is mixed. While there are some high profile successes, Holman, Wood and colleagues (2005) cite a range of evidence showing that 'when modern working practices are implemented they can alter work in unintended ways, have deleterious effects on employees and not produce the hoped for improvements in employee and organisational performance' (2005, p. 1). Other empirical evidence (from both surveys and case studies) points to people elsewhere in the workforce facing declining task discretion and autonomy, increasing work intensification, and declining levels of employee commitment – Taylor, 2002; Cully et al. 1999; Felstead, Gallie and Green, 2002; White et al, 2003; Hyman et al, 2003). What is not at issue here is whether some organisations are delayering, but it is an empirical question as to what are the consequences for individuals and their careers.

Perhaps we should address this issue directly: what effect is the introduction of modern working practices having on individual workers? Holman, Wood and colleagues (2005) in their comprehensive review of the evidence draw attention to the importance of having a separate dimension for whether there is a qualitatively different experience of work for employees from the introduction of modern working practices per se, as these can lead to more interesting work and lower stress or to work intensification and reduced well-being. Hence it is less a question of whether it is done than how it is done that influences the outcome. This approach helps those interested in reviewing current empirical findings to reach a more nuanced understanding about the nature of change in the workplace. Interestingly too, for those drawn to binary perspectives there is evidence that the introduction of modern working practices is leading to greater well-being in some cases and reduced well-being in others!

Remember too that workplaces vary enormously in the extent to which they have introduced modern working practices and which (sub-set of) practices they have introduced. This applies to team-working where Cordery (2005) shows it is possible to identify the characteristics of effective teams, but that in practice there are enormous variations in how team-working is implemented, the extent to which it is successful and the implications for individual careers. The variation in implementation and implications of modern working practices comes partly from the need to consider issues of power, control and organisational change in the particular contexts in which new working practices are introduced. Total Quality Management (TQM) can lead to significant high-skill job enrichment for those directly involved in development as demands on problem-solving and data analysis increase, but subsequently may limit employee autonomy in significant respects.

Hence TQM can be both enabling and constraining for employees. Similarly, 'hard' TQM as a technical process can deliver improvements in quality, but 'soft' TQM, including greater Employee Involvement, has most effect on employees (Cooney and Sohal, 2005). The paradoxes continue. The ideal implementation of advanced manufacturing technology (AMT) should lead to more empowered job design, yet in practice implementation of AMT is often poorly integrated with human capabilities (Cooney and Sohal, 2005). Even where successful in some respects, what this means for organisations or employees is not always clear: for example, what if the new organisation of work delivers higher quality, greater flexibility and team consciousness but less job satisfaction? Frustrations at work can also be due to a lack of challenge as well as too much challenge, and the allocation and structuring of work for early career professionals was very varied both within and between professions and this was central to how their early careers developed 'because it affected (1) the difficulty or challenge of the work, (2) the extent to which it was individual or collaborative, and (3) the opportunities for meeting, observing and working alongside people who had more or different expertise, and for forming relationships that might provide feedback and support' (Eraut et al., 2004, p.4).

What are we to make of the development of teleworking and how virtual workers are managed? Again those who review the empirical evidence of the effects of these changes are struck by how not only is there is no one form, but there is also no one best way to manage teleworking, although it is clear that rather than a single focus on outputs it makes sense to manage outputs, context and process (Lamond et al, 2005). In pictures as complex as these it is hard to see an increase in teleworking per se being used as evidence of a single uni-directional trend: rather the spread of teleworking and virtual working is having a range of different consequences.

Batt and Doellgast (2005) in their review of current evidence conclude that more research is required before we can make meaningful statements about the influences on organisational performance of the introduction of modern working practices in the service sector. In contrast, Wood (2005) believes we can draw some conclusions about what research tells us regarding the effects on organisational performance of the introduction of modern working practices in the manufacturing sector. Here prescriptive packages (on, for example, lean manufacturing or integrated manufacture) do offer organisations what for them may be fresh ways of thinking: in relation to operations management, customer-pull on their activities and so on. Such approaches do address some of problems that have plagued Fordist production systems. However, precisely because of the almost universal value of the techniques, there is a tendency to adopt a technocratic approach that underplays the role of Employee Involvement and the problems of implementation (Wood, 2005). In other words, there is a world of difference between rhetoric and intentions and what happens in practice, not least because both managers and workers can be active agents in how working practices, conditions of employment and career patterns evolve.

Wood (2005) goes on to argue that combining technical and human aspects, as with Total Quality Management and Employee Involvement, could offer the most productive way forward. 'If successful, the combined use of modern manufacturing and involvement methods should result in employees being flexible, expansive in their perceptions and willing to contribute proactively to innovation. Their main effect on performance is thus through work restructuring, innovation and learning, not through employee commitment' (Wood, 2005, p. 199). There is nothing inevitable here about the introduction of leading-edge working practices leading to the demise of organisational careers: the whole future is much more open, depending partly upon choices made by the employees themselves. Remember too that for the foreseeable future this vision would only apply to a minority of organisations in manufacturing – other methods of work organisation and seeking competitive advantage could flourish in manufacturing as well as in other sectors.

The evidence on the effect of Employee Involvement in decision making on performance is difficult to read, partly because interest from both employers and employees tends to be cyclical (Ramsay, 1977), and partly because there is the need to implement 'bundles' of practices, rather than single practices, in order to have an effect (Sung and Ashton, 2005). Furthermore, the most effective combination of practices may be industry (or context) specific. That EI has only been strongly embraced by a minority of firms is perhaps as much about organisational choice and values as about effectiveness. This seems to come down to a question of values. If an organisation believes in Continuing Improvement as much as an

expression of values as a technique, then commitment to EI in practice may also appear as a core belief. In this view there is an expectation that involvement, improvement, learning, development and higher levels of performance will be intertwined, but even in such cases the forms these processes take may be very different in different contexts. Once again a comprehensive review of the evidence on the issue of employee participation points to diversity and complexity rather than any simple reading of how work will develop and careers will be affected (Summers and Hyman, 2005).

The notion of the knowledge driven economy (KDE) is equally problematic. As many academics have argued, evidence for the existence of a KDE at any level beyond that of rhetoric is lacking (Crouch, 1997; Crouch, Finegold and Sako, 1999; Thompson, Warhurst and Callaghan, 2001; and Brown, 2003). Indeed, if the KDE is meant to cover the bulk of the workforce then the evidence suggests that its arrival is a very distant prospect indeed. Brown and Hesketh (2004) and Brown (2003) demonstrate all too clearly that even the USA – surely the model for the KDE – does not show many signs of developing a labour market where the bulk of the workforce will require particularly high levels of skill. What emerges is a picture of an economy in which there are islands of high skill (geographic clusters, sectors and a few occupations – see Finegold, 1999) set amidst a sea of low skill (and often very poorly paid) service work (Applebaum et al., 2003; Milkman, 1998: Ehrenreich, 2002; Cormier and Craypo, 2000; and Lafer, 2002). If the USA is not showing any great signs of transforming itself into a KDE, the prognosis for the UK is perhaps even less promising. Future labour force trends suggest increasing polarisation with growth in high skilled professional and managerial occupations, but also extensive demand for labour in low skilled occupations at the bottom end of the occupational spectrum (Campbell *et al.*, 2001): Moynagh and Worsley (2005) see trends towards an hour-glass economy strengthening.

We apologise if our reviews of different aspects of current research on the social, psychological and organisational effects of modern working practices and complementary human resource practices seems rather laboured. However, we did wish to emphasise that there is one common factor in all the reviews: you cannot read across from a single 'global trend' (whether towards team-working, delayering, continuous improvement, employee involvement, teleworking, virtual working, total quality management etc.) in a simple linear fashion to how these are implemented in particular contexts and their consequences for employment and careers. The contexts and processes of implementation vary so widely, especially when used in combination, that the consequences for individuals in terms of patterns of employment and career development are kaleidoscopic rather than capable of being meaningfully expressed in terms of binary narratives.

We hope therefore that we have done enough, along with other contributors to this volume, to draw attention to the increasing complexity of changing patterns of employment and careers. In such circumstances seeking out evidence of more or less part-time workers, contingent workers, teleworkers and so on in the aggregate figures in order to construct grand narratives misses the essential point that these are not homogeneous categories and the changes underway are not uniform nor uni-directional.

## An evolving perspective on complexity of choices, routes and transitions

The foregoing suggests that there are clear dangers in trying to base a case for more and better careers guidance and counselling on simple, futurology-inspired grand narratives. However, this is not to say that there are no grounds for making such a case – indeed we would argue that use of narratives to illustrate the complexity of changes in the patterns of employment and careers do offer the possibility of making a more realistic and sustainable case for high quality career guidance provision.

In England there are a number of developments, in terms of scale somewhere in the middle range, some of fairly long-standing, others more recent, in education more generally, but especially in vocational education and training (VET), that together add further complexity and uncertainty to the changes underway in the labour market and in patterns of work organisation, employment and careers. These changes suggest that without a fundamental step change in the volume and quality of careers advice and guidance that is on offer, both to young people and to adults, well-informed choices will not be achieved and that this will generate significant economic costs to individuals, communities, and the state (whether local, regional or national). Some of these changes are being generated by shifts over time within the structure of the labour market, others are the result of a range of government policies – mostly concerned with vocational education and training (VET), but also aspects of welfare and employment policy. Remember our argument is not that there are not significant changes occurring, but rather that these changes are complex and cannot helpfully be encompassed within simple binary narratives.

Some important items, and we defy anyone to weave these into a single coherent narrative, include:

- The growing polarisation of the labour market, with significant rises in the number of better-paid professional, managerial and associate professional employment; and also slower but still important increases in the volume of low paid, low skill employment (Goos and Manning, 2003). Jobs in the middle of the pay range have been declining in numbers (Moynagh and Worsley, 2005).

- The gap between the employment and people management practices of the best and worst employers appears to be growing (Holman, Wall *et al*., 2005).

- The size of the vocational route within English education has been diminishing. The proportion of 16-19 year olds following the work-based route, plus studying vocational courses (including general vocational qualifications) in schools, VI form colleges and further education was lower in 2002 than in 1989 (Payne, 2003).

- The tendency for the vocational route to be associated with lower prior academic achievement (as measured by examination success at GCSE), and lower socio-economic status (see Payne, 2003).

- The vast array of qualifications on offer in England, particularly vocational qualifications.

- The low (sometimes negative) economic returns to the individual from investment in vocational qualifications, particularly below Level 3 (Conlon and Chevalier, 2002).

- An apprenticeship system and work-based route that provides a very varied picture in terms of quality of provision and robustness of labour market outcomes. Apprenticeship in some sectors produces high quality offerings and high completion rates (e.g. engineering). In other sectors, such as retailing, apprenticeship often appears to be little more than state-subsidised work experience with little or no formalised training content and very low qualification achievement rates (Steedman, 2001; Fuller and Unwin, 2003)

- The not unconnected growth in the scale and impact of 'massified' Higher Education (HE) on all other aspects of VET provision. In this regard, it is worth noting that, in terms of completion rates as a percentage of relevant age cohort, the English VET system will soon have a far larger HE component than the vast majority of other EU countries.

- The fact that, compared to most other developed countries with 'massified' HE systems, England operates with a much lower level of prior educational attainment (as measured by qualifications) – only about 50 per cent of the age cohort achieve the 5 A-C passes at GCSE that normally form the basic platform for subsequent progression towards a course in HE.

- The growing dispersion in the economic outcomes that accrue to successful participation in HE. Different disciplines, courses and institutions produce access to fundamentally divergent labour market opportunities and outcomes – some vocationally specific, others not (Blasko, Brennan and Shah, 2003). Choices across the above-listed dimensions are liable to produce a profound impact on lifetime earning profiles. Many of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to find themselves enrolled in those options that produce lower returns (Brown and Hesketh, 2004).

- The introduction of new offerings within HE, in particular Foundation Degrees, the returns to which within the labour market are untested and unclear, but which will probably be significantly lower than the average returns to three-year degrees (see Keep, 2004). Employer commitment to Foundation Degrees is also uncertain.

- Overall uncertainty about what, in a world of 50 per cent participation in HE, will be on offer, in terms of educational routes, qualifications and employment opportunities for the 'bottom half' who will not be obtaining degree-level education (see Keep and Mayhew, 2004).

- The growth of a range of new occupations, for example fitness instructor, that do not fit into established patterns of occupational identity.

- Evidence that suggests that, overall, the role that qualifications play in the recruitment and selection process is often extremely patchy and limited (see Miller, Acutt and Kellie, 2002; Jackson, 2001; Spilsbury and Lane, 2000; and Nickson, Warhust and Dutton, 2004), and that large swathes of employment have no formal qualification requirements attached to them. In addition, whereas the importance of qualifications in the selection and recruitment process appears to be increasing in some occupational areas (higher managerial and professional work), it is apparently declining in many others (Jackson, Goldthorpe and Mills, 2002).

- The growing importance of social and 'soft' skills, attributes, and personal characteristics – for example, aesthetic labour skills (such as appearance, size, accent, voice, dress sense and deportment) – in recruitment to many higher end service sector jobs (Jackson, 2001; Spilsbury and Lane, 2000; Wahurst and Nickson, 2001; and Nickson, Warhurst and Dutton, 2004). The vast bulk of these skills and attributes are not formally assessed within the current qualifications structure and remain uncertified.

- The large and possibly growing disparities

between different regional and sub-regional labour markets across England. Hepworth and Spencer (2002) note in particular the widely varying potential for the different regions to absorb an increasing flow of graduate labour.

- The tendency for the transition from education to employment to have become longer, more complex and less linear than was generally the case twenty years ago (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996).

- Some traditional purveyors of advice (for example parents) struggle to understand the complexities of changes in education, training and employment, and hence advice can be ill-informed even if well-intentioned, even though personalised advice can be seen by the recipients as 'hot knowledge' rather than more impersonal official information offered by others (Ball *et al.*, 1999, 2000).

Taken individually, many of these developments are liable to have a significant impact on the ability of individuals to ascertain, assess and weigh the opportunities (and their associated costs) that are liable to be available to them. Taken together, they represent a labour market wherein the processes of education to employment transitions are considerably more complex and potentially uncertain than was the case until recently, and where the consequences of incorrect decisions to the individual have increased significantly by an order of magnitude. Both VET provision and the labour market opportunities it may or may not lead towards have become more varied, dispersed and complex. The combinations will vary by potential educational attainment (and many other personal characteristics), social class, geographic location, occupational aspiration (if decided), and desired route of access thereunto. The flows of information needed to support coherent and informed choice of combinations is often unavailable.

Put simply, in the absence of adequate advice and guidance, increased complexity leads to a concomitant increase in the likelihood of a substantial proportion of individuals reaching sub-optimal decisions, which in turn lead to a significant level of sub-optimal outcomes. For instance, undertaking a three-year degree course that leads to a specific occupation that the individual ultimately decides is not what they want, will leave the individual not only with a student loan to repay (as and when their earnings reach the required threshold level), but also in all probability a significant level of personal indebtedness related to supporting a student lifestyle through a degree. Moreover, as suggested above, many options within higher education appear to offer at best uncertain and limited returns, and yet these tend to be the institutions and courses that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds end up in.

In addition, many of the simple certitudes upon which current policies are based are at best questionable. For example, the injunction 'work hard and gain a qualification because this will help you achieve a better job', is not wholly borne out by research. It all depends on which qualification is the goal. If the qualification aimed for is an NVQ Level 2, and the means of acquiring it is some form of government-supported training (GST), current evidence suggests that whereas you may be somewhat more likely to be employed than someone with no qualifications, you are significantly more likely to be earning less than them (Dearden et al., 2000; Conlon and Chevalier, 2002). At a more general level the weak connection between qualifications and the recruitment and selection process suggests that managing the VET system largely through targets specified in terms of general levels of qualification held by sections of the population may also be mistaken.

Despite these developments, many of them relatively unmarked in the official policy discourse, the current VET system is based on the implicit assumption that those using the system, whether young people or adults, will be able to get a clear picture of what is on offer, evaluate the different options that are available to them, and make informed choices that will produce the desired outcomes – not just for individuals, but also for employers and society as a whole. Given current levels of advice and guidance this seems an optimistic reading of the likely results.

Besides the costs of wasted investment, perhaps the largest danger underlying this situation is that of declining social mobility and increasing social polarisation (Keep and Mayhew, forthcoming). Given current patterns of access to HE, and given the way that many of the social skills desired by employers often act as a proxy for middle class backgrounds (see Warhurst and Nickson, 2001; and Jackson, Goldthorpe and Mills, 2002), there is a substantial danger that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds will find themselves largely restricted to lower status vocational routes that produce weak returns in the labour market. The political and societal implications of such a development may not be benign.

## Concluding comments

Our argument can be summarised in six steps. First, that the traditional (bureaucratic) model of career was only dominant for particular groups (mainly middle class men) for relatively short periods of time in the twentieth century (Brown, 1999). Second, the case for considering there has been a major uni-directional shift towards work becoming more peripheral, contingent, flexible, team-based, insecure etc. is unproven. The reality was more complex than that allowed in ascribing dominance to the traditional model, and patterns in employment and career have become even more complex now. Third, this means that the empirical basis for talking in social scientific terms of a 'paradigm shift' is almost completely

non-existent. It could be argued that as a rhetorical device it can be used to argue for more resources for career guidance by aligning this with equally rhetorical devices like 'employability', the 'knowledge society' and the 'learning organisation'. Fourth, the problem with the 'paradigm shift' is that this creates problems for practitioners and clients alike if they believe the rhetoric and base their actions upon such a simplistic and binary picture. In any case, the alternative approach, arguing that the research evidence shows a much more complex picture in the patterns of employment and careers, can also be used to underline the importance of guidance. Fifth, and this gets to the heart of why we need to move on from notions of a 'paradigm shift', is that it completely undermines our ability to argue for evidence-based policy, if we ourselves extrapolate way beyond the evidence, and it encourages policy-makers and practitioners alike to think in simplistic terms. Sixth, we are uneasy about the ideological dimension of the shift towards individual responsibility for ensuring employability.

So we will conclude with an illustrative narrative as a way to convey the complexities in the patterns of employment and careers. It will be an example of a worker whose work was peripheral, contingent, flexible, team-based and insecure – but it is drawn from the start of the twentieth century rather than the twenty-first! It is drawn from the experience of one of our grandfathers working (and not working) in the London docks almost a century ago: waiting with others at the dock gates to be chosen for work for a day or half-day. His employability skills included changing his name for work (it sounded French!); buying a 'ganger' a drink in the pub the night before to get his name on the list of those to be chosen; and, if not chosen, changing into his best suit so he could wait in an adjoining square where the local minister sometimes came out of his church and paid him to be a witness at the wedding of itinerant seamen!

The point of this story is that even if there is evidence in some directions of a focus upon employability and move towards greater individualisation of responsibility for career development, researchers do not have to extrapolate from these to a vision with an apparently immutable future. Alternative narratives that challenge such visions are necessary and social science is delivering the evidence from which such narratives can be constructed. It is time to move on from a focus on grand narratives and pay closer attention to the full range of evidence on changing patterns of employment and careers and to construct narratives that represent this complexity and the challenges this presents for those with an interest in career guidance.

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# What is Going on at Work?

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## A paradigm shift?

Has there been a paradigm shift/transformational change in the nature of careers? Alternatively, are we simply seeing a more gradual change as a response to ongoing shifts in the structure of employment opportunities and the way work is organised? What are the implications of these changes for the skills individuals need to manage their careers effectively? What are the implications for the career professionals who might advise them?
I write this as someone who was co-author of a report, *Managing Careers in 2000 and Beyond* (Jackson *et al.*, 1996) that argued that profound changes were happening to careers. Paradigm shift may be a strong term to use but I think it is important to challenge the notion that careers have not changed very much. This does not necessarily imply that all careers have undergone radical change. The picture is more complex than that.

The argument we presented in *Managing Careers in 2000 and Beyond* was that it would be useful to reconceptualise the term 'career' in a way that made it apply to everyone and not just to some subset of the working population. This approach had implications for individuals, employers, career and education professionals as well as policy makers. So in that sense we were asking for a paradigm shift in how we think about careers but not saying that work itself has undergone a paradigm shift, although I still think that very significant changes have taken place in the way work is organised and in the structure of employment opportunities. One of the reasons for reconceptualising what we mean by career is to enable everyone to respond better to these changes.
One of my main concerns is that by looking at the labour market in aggregate, it is easy to ignore both the complexity of the labour market and, in particular, the diversity of experiences that people are having within it. A second concern is that the focus on external labour markets ignores the internal labour market dimension, that is, the considerable changes that are going on *inside* organisations.

In my view it is the changes that have been taking place inside organisations that have had the greatest impact on how people feel about careers. As a consequence, changes in career behaviour are required to enable individuals to cope better with the new world of work. However, these internal changes in organisations have been driven to a large extent by economic forces and so it is sensible to start any discussion by briefly noting some structural features of the labour market and trends that are taking place within it, both in terms of labour market supply and economic demand.

## Labour market change leading to increasing diversity of experience

As is well known, there have been long-term trends in the sector balance of the UK economy. Jobs in primary industries, such as mining or agriculture have been in steady decline since at least the 1950s. Over the last 20 years in the UK, however, it is probably the decline in manufacturing employment that has been most significant, although just under 4 million workers are still employed in manufacturing industries and manufacturing still accounts for 15% of British economic activity. Nevertheless, there are more jobs available in Britain today than ever before and unemployment is lower than it has been in most people's working lifetime. This is because many new high value jobs have been created in growth sectors, such as financial and professional services, and these, in turn, have stimulated the growth of jobs in other sectors with a high labour content, such as retail and personal services.

The creative industries are frequently mentioned as an example of this change. According to Gordon Brown at the Labour Party conference (as quoted in the Guardian, 1/10/05), they now account for 8% of Britain's national income and employ one in twenty of the workforce.
The first part of my argument is that these changes in the balance and structure of the labour market have not only led to a change in the pattern of employment opportunities but also in how work is organised and what it feels like to be at work.

At the same time, there have been other significant changes going on in the labour market. In the mid 1970s, less than two million people were either self-employed or employers (Central Statistical Office, 1977). Now the number in self-employment has nearly doubled to 3.6 million. Overall, nearly a third of the workforce (9 million people) are either self-employed (3.6 million), working as solo employees (2.2 million) or in businesses employing less than four people (3.2 million).

Further evidence of the increasing diversity of the labour market is shown by the widening of the pay gap between those whose skills are in demand (e.g. knowledge workers, people working in the City) and the low skilled. We all know that the pay gap between top and bottom earnings has widened (Hill *et al*., 2004). Some commentators (e.g. Moynagh and Worsley, 2005) talk about an 'hour glass' economy in which there has been a growth in both high paid and low paid work at the expense of middle income jobs.

Another long-term trend of great significance is the feminisation of work as more women not only enter the workplace but persist in it. There are still crucial differences in the experiences of women overall, for example, part-time working is almost the exclusive preserve of women apart from a relatively small number of men in marginal positions in the labour market, e.g. students and older workers. Elsewhere, however, there has been a gradual convergence between the employment experiences of women and men. This is reflected in such things as converging activity rates, declining occupational segregation, increasing proportion of women managers, and so on.

As more women work and more men and women find themselves in dual career couples, it is not surprising that issues such as achieving work-life balance are becoming more significant and, perhaps, intransigent. In the future, designing and implementing more flexible working arrangements is likely to be a major challenge for employers if they want to attract and retain talented women and men.

Taken all together, these changes suggest to me that it is misleading to base comments on what is happening in the labour market on the average (mean) experience of those participating in it. Instead, it is more important to be aware of the widening diversity in the experiences of different groups as they respond to changes in the labour market.

## Relentless pace of change inside organisations

Although the rhetoric about the new career only dates back to the 1990s, it seems to me that changes inside organisations predate this by about 10 to 15 years. The drivers of these changes have been primarily economic – notably globalisation and new technology – and these have caused not only the structural changes in the labour market (outlined briefly above) but also a changing business culture.

It is possible to be optimistic or pessimistic about these changes. After more than 10 years of economic growth, there is a tendency to be optimistic about the future. The talk is therefore more about continuing skill shortages and problems of labour supply than about what happens to those with few skills or whose skills are no longer required.

Much of the change that most of us experience in the workplace results from the relentless pace of reorganisation that has taken place, and continues to take place, inside organisations. This leads to continuing change in the mix of jobs that exist within organisations. Nicholson and West (1988) observed that 38% of the managers in their survey had changed jobs in the 12 to 15 months between their two surveys and over half (52%) of these job moves were into newly created jobs. While some of these job changes will have resulted in employment change, the majority were internal job moves, many of which were the result of organisational restructuring. Most commentators also accept that the psychological contract has become more transactional, arguably with costs for both individuals and organisations. While there are strong arguments for organisations needing to develop and retain their workers, there is evidence of declining levels of job satisfaction and of increasing work intensification leading to decreasing employee commitment.

There is little doubt that this pressure on all organisations to change will continue. This is true as much in the public sector as in the private sector. Ironically, this often results in organisations making people redundant in one part of their business, while they hire new workers elsewhere. Some other changes that are taking place can be hard to interpret. Reports of some organisations putting in extra managerial layers may be as much to limit pay progression and to maintain control as to create more opportunities for career progression.

It sometimes appears that the left-hand does not know what the right hand is doing. However, it is probably better seen as one consequence of the complexity of the challenges that organisations face.

Both internal and external labour markets are turbulent places. There is a lot of discontinuity and change. Although many workers survive reorganisations, about half a million people are made redundant every year in the UK and my perception is that this, along with the other changes, has made many people feel the future is now less predictable than it was previously. In the present economic climate, it is possible that people are less worried by this unpredictability, but this may not last. To summarise, I would suggest that one key feature of these changes inside organisations has been to transfer risk from organisations to individuals. The widespread impact of such activities as performance-related pay, individual pay negotiations, and the decline in final salary pension schemes has meant that, along with a less predictable employment future, individuals have to face increasing financial uncertainty over the long term. This is also likely to have heightened feelings of insecurity.

## New career skills

High rates of change in organisations mean that individuals will need new skills to manage their careers

successfully. Traditional onward and upward careers will continue to be available but others of us will have to pursue our careers differently. We may have periods of upward progress but, for many of us, there will be times when lateral moves, either within or across organisations, will be required.

This is not only a result of structural change within organisations but also reflects a recognition that traditional career routes that have focussed on a single career ladder, often within a particular function or part of the business, have not developed people with the breadth of experience required for senior roles. Individuals need to develop more resilient career strategies to cope with a less predictable future. Employability is a useful concept. Other researchers (e.g. Arthur *et al*., 1999) have also argued that the concept of career needs to be changed and to focus more on individuals' actions.

Elsewhere, I have suggested (Jackson, 1996) that as well as skills for personal career management (Kidd and Killeen, 1992), individuals need to develop a set of 'working to get work' skills. Kanter (1989) also noted that 'networking and selling occupy a great deal of time'. These 'working to get work' skills are essentially a set of entrepreneurial skills that include networking, business, time and project management skills. Also required are a good understanding of how a specialised labour market operates and, in particular, how to seek and get work in it. These skills apply as much to those seeking job moves inside organisations as to those changing employers. I would argue that you don't have to believe in the radical 'Me plc' model of the future of work to accept that people require additional career skills if they are to be effective in managing their careers. Historically (and perhaps with the benefit of hindsight), the models we had were not very effective at helping people manage their careers proactively.

Many people did not think they had careers. Redefining our concept of what having a career means in a more inclusive and process-oriented way provides a rationale for new and, what I believe, will be more effective approaches to career management. This new rationale will emphasise learning and the acquisition of skills. There is an important role for career professionals in enabling this vision of career to be realised in practice.

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# Careers in Britain: Recovering a Future

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## Are careers dead?

In the past decade or so, there has been much debate about a possible demise of careers. Two decades of redundancies, firm closures, the movement of jobs overseas, variable unemployment levels, and personal insecurity, have made this almost the received wisdom. One argument is that employers are so beset by competition and change that they cannot provide either the stability or the security that are needed to make careers possible. In the USA, Peter Cappelli (1999) has expressed this in terms of a move by employers towards market-centered employment policies in which employees are acquired, rewarded, and dumped, according to competitive needs. Because markets are dominated by the short-term, careers – an essentially long-term concept – are squeezed out.

This of course only considers a career as something which takes place within a particular employment – an intra-company career – and leaves open the possibility that people can still build occupational careers by moving from employer to employer. Even if occupational careers exist, though, this may not be much consolation to those who are in relatively humdrum jobs involving little in the way of qualifications. For these, moving around the job market may offer much less prospect of building a career than for the higher qualified. Moreover, there are some commentators on the contemporary scene who claim that even professional careers are on the verge of demise. Charles Handy, for example, has foreseen that professional work will move towards a self-employment model with individuals patching together an ever-changing portfolio of project assignments rather than following a predictable career trajectory (Handy, 1989).

Although many have found these ideas persuasive, there has been little attempt to assess them through systematic and nationally representative evidence. Projects under the Economic and Social Research Council's Future of Work research programme have attempted to fill this gap. Two national surveys, one of 2132 employees, the other of 2000 employers at workplace level, were carried out in 2000/01 and 2002 respectively. The evidence from these surveys, which were directed by a research team from the London School of Economics and the Policy Studies Institute, reveals a remarkable resurgence of intra-company careers.

## What employers say

I begin with the employer survey evidence (see White *et al.*, 2004, for details). The survey shows that the great majority of British employers now claim to be offering internal career paths and supporting them with other relevant policies.

- o  Two in three employees are in workplaces where management claims that career ladders are available to most employees.
- o  Workplaces covering seven in ten of all employees profess to recruit internally for management or professional posts wherever possible.
- o  Internal recruitment for vacancies below management or professional level is only slightly less widespread.

This evidence, it is true, comes from managers responsible for human resource policies and might be painting an over-rosy picture. Other detailed evidence, however, is consistent with the claim. In particular, twice as many workplaces have been increasing the proportion of managerial and professional jobs as reducing them, and similarly there have been far more workplaces putting additional layers into their job grade structures, at both management and sub-management levels, than stripping them out. The general tendency, then, has been to expand higher-level jobs, thus creating real opportunities for upward progression.

The most remarkable point about this turn-around in intra-company careers is the way it is spread across industries (see Chart 1). Manufacturing and utilities tend to lag, while it is the service industries which lead. It is not only the booming financial and business services, or the recently re-expanded public services that are propagating career structures, but equally distribution, hotels and catering, and personal and leisure services. Some of these service industries have, in the not too distant past, had a negative image for 'dead-end' jobs, yet they now emerge as career leaders.

This picture may not seem credible to many who have become accustomed to the gloomier prognostications about the future of careers. To establish it as credible, one needs to provide explanations of what is driving the recovery of careers. I will address this in a

moment, but first I would like to turn to the views of employees, to see if these chime with what employers say.

**Chart 1 Career ladders, by industry**
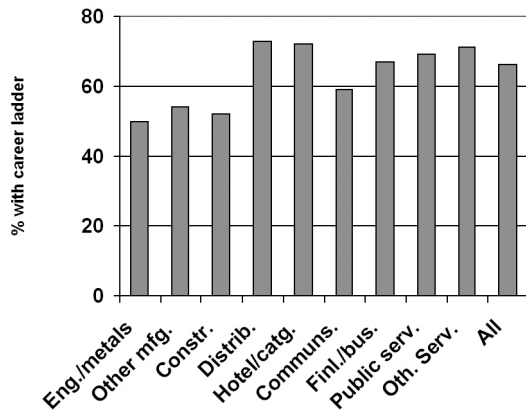


Source: White et al., 2004. The percentages are weighted by employment.

## What employees think

We are in a particularly strong position to assess employees' views about career prospects, because we not only have the 2000/01 *Working in Britain* survey, but also the *Employment in Britain* survey of 1992, which asked some similar questions about careers and was also nationally representative of employees aged 20-60. It turns out that perceptions of career structures remained virtually stable over the decade, with rather more than one half (56 per cent) seeing themselves in jobs that were part of careers. This included movement across employers, as well as careers within the present employer. Another striking aspect of this stability was the social class distribution of career access. In both years, about one half of those who saw themselves as being in careers were in managerial or professional occupations, with the other half in non-management and non-professional jobs.

This impression of stability dissolves, however, when we consider questions about individual prospects through staying in the current job or moving around between employers. If employers are really becoming more market-centered in their policies, then employees would surely also be looking more to the external job market. This would be accentuated by the improving job market over the decade which saw a shift from economic recession to a prolonged economic boom with an associated rise in job vacancies. However, increased faith in the market is found only among senior managers and senior professionals. Among people in lower-skilled jobs, there is a great deal of change, but it is in the opposite direction. The swing is greater, in fact, as one goes down the jobs hierarchy. Of those in semi-skilled or unskilled manual work, or routine clerical and sales jobs, only four in ten saw their best prospects in 1992 as staying with the organisation, but in 2000/01 this proportion had risen to six in ten. Perceptions of promotion chances in their present organisation also rose steeply among the employees in

lower-level jobs. Among those in semi-skilled manual work, 24 per cent felt they had a 50-50 chance of promotion, or better, in 1992 but by 2000/01 this had risen to 36 per cent. For those in routine clerical and sales jobs, the rise was from 23 per cent to 40 per cent.

Overall, then, employees' views have moved in a way that is consistent with many employers' claims to have restored or cemented internal career structures. Perceived prospects have improved most for those lower down the occupational hierarchy, although their position remains less advantageous than for those in the upper occupational reaches.

## Why employers construct careers

Why then have the admittedly increasing pressures of competition failed to erode career structures, especially careers internal to an organisation? If careers have survived, and even in many instances been extended downward, this must be because employers need to retain and develop employees for economic reasons. I will discuss two potential reasons, which look particularly significant.

## Technical and organisational change

The first, and possibly most fundamental, reason is that employers - both commercial and public sector - are experiencing unprecedented rates of combined technical and organisational change. Information and communications technology (ICT) is not only widespread but its uses are rapidly developing. Consider, for instance, that e-mails and the Internet were virtually non-existent in all but the largest organisations as recently as ten years ago. ICT has made it possible to devise new ways of doing business and organising work, and such opportunities have been eagerly taken up in both commerce and public services. This has accentuated a tendency towards continuous organisational change that was already developing by the early 1980s. It is not technology in itself, which generates career opportunities: indeed, workplaces with high levels of ICT usage are only a little more likely than others to offer careers. However, the availability of intra-company careers depends particularly on the degree of *recent change* in ICT usage. Workplaces with a high degree of recent expansion of ICT usage are much more likely than other workplaces to be offering careers (for a wide range of connected evidence, see Timothy Bresnahan, 1999).

The consequences of ICT, in terms of organisations' skill needs, have sometimes been misinterpreted, with the emphasis placed on high-level technical staff and 'power users' of the new technology. This is one-sided, failing to notice the organisational change, which goes hand-in-hand with technical change. Most organisations have only a limited need for high-level technical skills, and can often get them when they do need them from

consultancies and specialist agencies. What organisations cannot do without (as argued by Bresnahan, 1999) is the capacity, across a very wide range of employees, to adapt to continuous change and to help in solving the practical problems of implementing new methods of working and of dealing with customers in situations that are changing day by day and year on year. Staff who can demonstrate the right know-how and attitude in these respects become valuable, and worth retaining and developing.

## Complexity

The second major factor, which I would stress, is organisational complexity. The link between complexity and career ladders is suggested in a simple way by Chart 2. Complexity is also, I believe, a large part of the explanation for the industry results shown earlier in Chart 1. The 2002 employers' survey revealed that three in five of all workplaces with five or more employees were part of a wider multi-site organisation, and this rose to nearly four in five in the distribution sector. Indeed, a walk along any high street in Britain will confirm the prevalence of multiple-chain and franchise organisations, across supermarkets, speciality stores, financial services, or restaurants and coffee shops. In many cases, these chains are backed by vertically integrated supply and technical service set-ups, involving difficult tasks of logistics management. Yet another facet of complexity is the longer and more varied working hours (leading to multi-shift-working) that are required to run service operations in order to meet the needs of customers and clients who themselves are working more flexibly.

**Chart 2 Complexity (number of job levels at workplace), and career ladder**
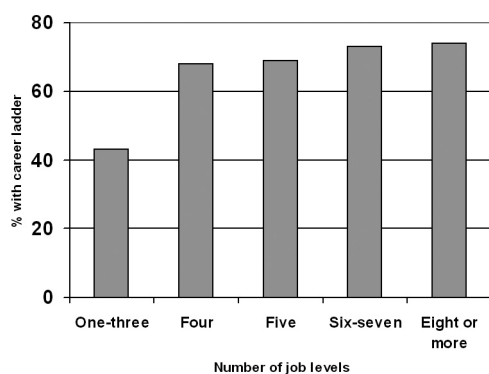


Source: White et al., 2004. The percentages are weighted by employment.

Combine these aspects of complexity, and one readily sees why service industries like retailing and catering have insatiable needs for supervisors and managers, not only to run all the outlets but also to control and coordinate operations in-store, regionally, and nationally. For such industries, which traditionally have not had large intakes of highly qualified people, the identification of home-grown talent, and its retention and development through career systems, is likely to be a crucial competitive factor.

## Limits to euphoria

The outline that I have sketched of renewed in-house career opportunities is undoubtedly a more optimistic one than many other recent accounts. But it is important to note some limitations as well. The first, already mentioned, is that the early 2000s were years of exceptional economic stability and prosperity. British companies, especially in services, were for a time the most profitable in the world, unemployment fell lower than for two decades, and the government provided funding for many more public service jobs. Not surprisingly, then, twice as many workplaces in our survey of employers had experienced recent expansion of the workforce than had experienced contraction. Although the basic policy of offering career paths was not dependent on this circumstance, some of the supporting changes did seem sensitive to growth or contraction. A rising proportion of jobs at management level, and extra job grades, have particularly occurred where there is growth. Where there is contraction, conversely, there has been an increased tendency to slim down management and cut out grades, albeit only in a minority of workplaces.

Another cautionary point is that large workplaces (100 or more employees) are less likely to be expanding their management and their grade structures, than medium-sized workplaces (25-99 employees). Even among large workplaces that are growing in overall terms, a sizeable minority has been reducing the managerial proportions and trying to simplify grade structures. These policies, which go under the unattractive name of 'delayering', could well become more prominent in the event of a new economic recession.

The situation might be best characterised, therefore, as one of *conditional* career renewal on the part of employers. There is no reason to doubt their long-term commitment to offering careers, and taking steps to make them a reality, since that is based on self-interest in maintaining the knowledge and skills they need. But nor should we glibly suppose that the ride along the career path will always be smooth. Careers may be pushed off-track during adverse economic periods, although we can reasonably expect them to pick up again thereafter.

## Conclusions and implications for practice

The prevailing pessimism about the future of careers is not supported by recent evidence. Career opportunities are not shrinking; indeed they have hardly changed for the higher-level occupations and have expanded for those at lower levels. But the main growth in opportunities for those in less-skilled jobs has been through in-house promotion. I interpret this as the result of rapid and sustained organisational and technical change, and increased organisational complexity especially in services, since these tendencies make employers more dependent on the adaptability, practical know-how and enterprise of a wide range of their employees.

Of course, none of this should make one sanguine about the lack of opportunities which many people face. Managers and professionals remain much more likely than other groups to see themselves as having careers. Even with their currently enhanced prospects, the majority of people in semi-skilled jobs feel that they have less than a 50/50 chance of promotion. Moreover, such gains as have recently appeared may well be vulnerable to economic recession, at least temporarily.

None the less, for those involved in policy and practice concerning employment, skills and careers, there are still worthwhile stakes to play for. The question is, then, how the policy-makers and practitioners in this field can best help people of working age to make use of the present structure of opportunity. I will only offer a few rather general observations, leaving it to others to work through the practical implications.

One implication of the evidence is that it is still valid to emphasise the availability of careers. Careers are not merely for graduates and other privileged people. Nor are they confined to the public sector and large corporate sector. There are careers in medium-sized and small workplaces, especially as many of these belong to chains. Most importantly, perhaps, no industry is off-limits for careers and some of those that have had a poor reputation in the past are now among the most career orientated.

Many of the current opportunities, however, depend on organisations, not occupations or industries. In some ways this may make it harder to offer advice or to promote careers. Rather than discriminate among the attributes of jobs, and think how their own personalities fit in, people need to get more grasp of the change processes which preoccupy employers, and the qualities they need in order to contribute to change. But these are elusive things to describe or to grasp from description. They can better be learned by experience in organisations. Teachers and careers advisers, however, can help to make young people aware of these dimensions of experience - to get them looking in the right direction, so to speak. The teaching of social skills, teamwork and communications in schools is highly relevant from the viewpoint of organisational careers despite media jibes about the 'soft' curriculum.

To engage with the development of careers within organisations, policy and practice may need to develop more of an organisational focus. This could be criticised as cosying up to employers, but need not be. For instance, the government's policies on basic skills education appear to be moving towards supporting employer-education joint initiatives, through funding and course facilitation. But it is still in the hands of the educators, who are independent practitioners, to devise the courses and one can be reasonably confident that their priority will be the welfare of employees. Is there scope for this type of intra-organisational involvement for careers guidance professionals? Surely the many organisations that are trying to encourage their employees' self-development could benefit from expert advice given to their employees by impartial professionals.

On the other hand, does the growing importance of organisational careers leave non-professional employees locked in to their employers, if they want to progress? What advice can be given to an employee if she has a career path but (like so many of those who seek careers guidance) is deeply dissatisfied with her job for other reasons? Clearly, the chances of moving jobs without losing materially in the process depend on having skills that are needed by other employers, and being aware what those skills are. The new premium transferable skills include the skills of working with new technology, the people-skills of teamwork and customer contact, and the habits of adaptability which come from involvement in change. I wonder how many people who have gained these skills appreciate their current value on the job market. Individuals need access to advice which can help them to understand the changing balance between traditional qualifications and experiential skills. For that to be possible, the advisers must themselves be able to keep up-to-date with a world of work which continues to change.

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# Understanding Contemporary Developments in Work, Employment and Employment Relations: Some Reflections

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## 1. Introduction

It is important that policy interventions formulated by professionals in the fields of careers education and guidance are informed by accurate knowledge of contemporary developments in work, employment and employment relations. Popularised by writers such as Charles Handy and Charles Leadbeater, the notion that there has been transformation in the world of work, associated with the rise of a 'new economy', has attracted widespread attention and also some considerable sympathy, particularly among policy makers. Although there is a considerable amount of diversity in their approaches and perspectives, transformational accounts tend to be characterised by a number of distinctive features. First, there is often a presumption that conventional jobs, and traditional bureaucratic careers, are being displaced by the growth of so-called 'portfolio' working arrangements, featuring self-employed workers engaged on temporary projects who benefit from the greater control they are able to exercise over their own working lives (Handy 1994; Leadbeater 1999). Second, it is sometimes held that occupational change, in particular the growth of professional and managerial work, is associated with a shift towards more highly skilled and intrinsically rewarding 'knowledge' work (Leadbeater, 1999). Third, it is also asserted that conventional employment patterns, full-time permanent jobs in particular, are being displaced by more flexible arrangements, most notably part-time and temporary working (Beck, 2000). A fourth aspect of the 'transformational' thesis is the notion that globalisation leaves the governments of nation-states unable to intervene and regulate their labour markets (Gray, 1998).

The principal aim of these reflections, though, is to critically assess some of the key assumptions that inform transformational perspectives. Based on up-to-date quantitative and qualitative research evidence, this paper focuses on four important, but often neglected, aspects of contemporary developments in work, employment and employment relations: the complex and incremental nature of change; the relevance of power and managerial attempts to exercise control; the role of political ideology; and the experiences and activities of workers.

## 2. The complex and incremental nature of change

One of the most significant features of transformational accounts of workplace change is the emphasis that is placed on self-employment as a means of organising work. However, after a marked period of growth during the 1980s, over the last fifteen years the number of self-employed in Britain has been rather stable, at around three and a half million people (Lindsay and Macaulay, 2004). The notion of an emergent 'new economy' based on increasing numbers of 'portfolio' workers appears misplaced (Nolan and Slater, 2003).

Moreover, the assumption that technological change at work, associated with the development of an information-based knowledge, or 'new', economy, has been responsible for a substantial increase in the number of professional and managerial jobs, involving 'knowledge work', is also rather exaggerated. For one thing, much so-called 'knowledge work' is of a rather routine and mundane nature – see Poynter's (2000) case studies of organisational change in financial services for a relevant example. Moreover, there is evidence that occupational change has been characterised by an increase in the proportion of care assistants and security operatives, as well as software engineers and the like. It would appear that the 'traditional' labour force, largely comprising white-collar staff in routine administrative jobs, dominates employment in Britain, notwithstanding the growth of professional and managerial positions (Nolan and Wood, 2003; Nolan and Slater, 2003).

Following on from this, it is sometimes assumed that technological change at work and the utilisation of information technology in particular, is associated with an increase in skill levels. Notwithstanding the difficulties associated with measuring skill (Bradley et al., 2000), there is some evidence of upskilling in Britain (Gallie et al., 1998). Felstead et al. (2004. p. 166) report evidence of 'a considerable upward movement in the complexity of jobs carried out in Britain', particularly in respect of computing skills. Yet there remains a concern that insufficient demand from employers for skills impedes the emergence of a high skill economy (Grugulis et al., 2004). Moreover, technological innovation appears to be strongly associated with work intensification in Britain (Green, 2004).

One of the most pronounced assumptions about the way in which workplaces are changing concerns the assumption that in search of efficiency savings organisations have, helped by technological changes, stripped out layers to such an extent that traditional bureaucratic careers have been rendered obsolete. Such traditional careers were often highly gendered, in as much as they were largely restricted to men. Yet recent research data indicate the presence of a trend towards 'grade expansion, rather than delayering' (White *et al*., 2004. p. 61). It appears that the fashion for reducing the number of job grades, and for stripping out organisational levels in a process of delayering, did not last long since in many organisations bureaucratic career paths seem to be enjoying a revival.

It is sometimes assumed that the labour market in Britain is increasingly dominated by flexible, or so-called 'non-standard', employment arrangements, such as part-time and temporary work. Yet it is important to emphasise the gradual, incremental basis of such change (Robinson, 1999). Since the mid-1980s there has been a steady growth in the number of part-time employees in Britain, from about 4.5 million to 6.5 million. The 1990s saw a modest increase in the number of temporary employees, to a peak of 1.85 million in 1997. Since then, though, the number of temporary employees has declined to around 1.5 million. White *et al*. (2004) highlight the ubiquity of flexible labour in British workplaces; the presence of part-time and/ or temporary workers has become the norm. However, the incidence within workplaces appears to have reached its limit.

## 3. Power, control and the management of labour

Having outlined the complex and incremental nature of change in work, employment and employment relations, a further concern of this paper is to demonstrate the relevance of management's attempts to use its power to effect control at work. Transformational accounts of change tend to be informed by a unitary ideology; they assume that work organisations are characterised by a harmony of interests. Concepts such as power and control are notable by their absence. Indeed it is sometimes assumed that the growth of knowledge work, and the emergence of a new economy, renders them obsolete (see Leadbeater, 1999). Yet one of the most pronounced trends in contemporary work organisations is the attempt by managers to exercise greater control over their workforces. It can be seen, for example, in the efforts expended to resist unionisation. While a new statutory union recognition procedure introduced by the Labour government in 2000 has stimulated hundreds of new union recognition agreements, there is evidence of the determination of some firms to exclude trade unions (Oxenbridge *et al*., 2003). Even where unions have been able to maintain a presence, it has often been achieved only by eschewing confrontational tactics through

the explicit acceptance of a co-operative 'partnership' approach with an employer (Kelly, 2004).

While some writers have made much of the potential for new technology to liberate workers, and generate more meaningful and skilled jobs, there is plenty of evidence that information technology, and the growing use of sophisticated performance management techniques, are used as part of an attempt to extend managerial control at work, since they permit greater monitoring and surveillance (Gallie *et al*., 1998; White *et al* 2004). Unsurprisingly, then, there is evidence of a decline in the extent of the task discretion enjoyed by workers (Felstead *et al*., 2004).

What about empowerment initiatives? Have they allowed workers more influence over the way in which their work tasks are undertaken? Research studies point to the modesty of most empowerment initiatives; see Lashley's (2000) study of TGI Fridays for example. Waiting staff were encouraged to personalise the way in which they interacted with customers. Yet their efforts to do so were constrained by corporate rules governing the way in which services should be delivered, such as waiting times between courses for example. There is evidence that where workers are given greater scope for participation in respect of their work tasks, it is often accompanied by stricter managerial control over discipline and standards of performance (Edwards *et al*. 1998). Moreover, the resilience of managerial discipline in general is a prominent feature of contemporary work organisations (Edwards, 2000).

One prominent aspect of workplace change in contemporary Britain concerns the increasing incidence of practices associated with what White *et al*. (2004) term 'intelligent flexibility'; work arrangements that enable workers to become involved in a greater variety of tasks or extend the scope of their participation, through teamworking initiatives for example. According to the 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey, teamworking is present in 72 per cent of workplaces (Kersley *et al*., 2005). Yet how significant is such a development? In the service sector, for example, teams are generally no more than 'administrative work groups of individual workers under the jurisdiction of one supervisor' (Korczynski, 2002. p. 134). Moreover, there is some evidence that teamworking initiatives can be used by managers to challenge organised labour rather than as a genuine attempt to extend participation (Danford, 1998). Managers, then, often promote flexibility as a way of extending their own control. This was evident in the case studies of public and private sector organisations undertaken by Beynon et al. (2002). The researchers found that flexibility was associated with the erosion of hitherto established workplace norms and practices, in a way that rendered the workforce more 'disposable'. Rather than extending workers' participation, flexibility represents a commodification of their labour.

## 4. Political ideology and labour market regulation

Not only does any attempt to understand contemporary developments in work, employment and employment relations need to be aware of the relevance of management's attempts to use their power to extend control at work, but it also has to consider the significance of political choices. One of the main features of transformational accounts is the often implicit assumption that change is driven solely by economic and technological imperatives, to such an extent that matters affecting the world of work are beyond the scope of political interventions. This is exemplified by the proposition that globalisation, given that it is a process driven by, and operating to the benefit of, increasingly mobile multinational companies whose location decisions are governed by the search for competitiveness and flexibility, undermines the degree to which nation-states are able to regulate their own labour markets and employment systems (see Gray, 1998). Yet it seems clear that governments exaggerate the extent of their helplessness in the face of the supposedly unstoppable juggernaut of globalisation as a means of legitimising neo-liberal, deregulatory policies (Hirst and Thompson, 1999).

In Britain, for example, Labour's employment policy has been informed by a neo-liberal assumption that de-regulated, flexible labour markets and weak trade unions are the main source of enhanced economic competitiveness (Smith and Morton, 2001). Nevertheless, largely because of pressure from unions, campaign groups and also its own activists, Labour has increased the degree of labour market regulation in Britain. Since the late 1990s new laws have, among other things, introduced a National Minimum Wage, established a new statutory recognition procedure for trade unions, extended the scope of anti-discrimination legislation, enhanced maternity leave, and brought in paternity leave. Much of this legislative programme was enacted in a way that was designed to make it amenable to employers; European Union directives, for example, have often been implemented in a 'minimalist' way, with the aim of diluting their effects (McKay, 2001; Smith and Morton, 2001). Nevertheless, the fact of its existence gives the lie to the proposition that globalisation renders political intervention obsolete; Labour's reluctance to enact more rigorous labour market regulation reflects its obeisance to the principles of neo-liberalism, not an inability to intervene.

## 5. The experiences and activities of workers

Finally, an adequate analysis of change in work, employment and employment relations needs to examine, and take into account, the experiences of workers themselves. Transformational accounts either rely on the anecdotal and unrepresentative experiences of isolated individuals, or on managerial perspectives. Yet there is a wealth of evidence suggesting that change is informed by the experiences and activities of workers. This is well illustrated with reference to the concepts of job security and insecurity. Much has been written about the growing climate of job insecurity (see Elliot and Atkinson, 1998; Sennett, 1998), something that is sometimes associated with the presence of flexible employment arrangements (Conley, 2002). Yet it is important to treat the concept of job insecurity in a more sophisticated way, being something that is not just a product of particular employment configurations, but which incorporates the subjective feelings of employees, particularly the prospect of losing their jobs, and the consequences for their livelihoods, in a neo-liberal political context (Doogan, 2001; Heery and Salmon, 2000). Charles *et al.* (2005) use data from a study of three retail stores to demonstrate the important way in which gender influences workers' perceptions of job insecurity, particularly in respect of the availability of alternative employment opportunities. Whereas men were largely concerned with maintaining their existing terms and conditions, women tended to regard the provision of working arrangements that enabled them to uphold their caring responsibilities as being more important.

A proper analysis of contemporary developments in work, employment and employment relations must also appreciate that workers, often collectively, influence change. It is often suggested that globalisation is leading to a 'race to the bottom' in respect of labour standards as multinational companies use the power that comes from their ability to make investment decisions to insist that developing countries, and their workers, accept lower wages, poorer working conditions and limited or no union organisation (Tsogas, 2001). Yet it is becoming increasingly clear that workers in such situations do not passively accept the conditions under which they labour, but play an active role in agitating for better employment rights. The concept of a 'race to the bottom', then, fails to capture the numerous ways in which workers in developing countries challenge their employers and contest their employment relationships (Silver, 2003). In order to develop an appropriate understanding of the implications of globalisation for work, employment and employment relations, the experiences and activities of workers, and of organised labour, must also be taken into account.

## 6. Concluding thoughts

It is important not to understate the significance of change in work, employment and employment relations since the 1980s: the diminution of trade unionism and collective bargaining coverage, for example (Millward, *et al.* 2000), and the more extensive use of information technology at work (White *et al.*, 2004), being particularly notable developments. The most recent Workplace Employment Relations Survey, undertaken in 2004 and 2005, among other things points to the increasing incidence of employee involvement initiatives and 'family-friendly' practices (Kersley *et al.* 2005). The

large extent to which change in work, employment and employment relations is complex and incremental, though, must be recognised: something that is particularly apparent from trends in flexible employment. There are also important areas of continuity, most notably the concern of managers with extending their control in the workplace. What has changed, though, is that information technology and new performance management techniques have enhanced the capacity of managers to exercise control. Contemporary work, employment and employment relations are, then, characterised by a complex pattern of continuity and change. It is also strongly influenced by political choices. While governments may claim that global pressures leave them unable to regulate labour markets, their interventions, or lack of them, are generally a function of political ideology. Finally, it is imperative that analyses of developments in work, employment and employment relations pay appropriate regard to the experiences and activities of workers. Organised labour may well be in a weak state in Britain, but its influence on a global scale should not be downplayed.

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# Paradigm Shuffle

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'The times they were a-changin'!'; as it turned out, more than Bob Dylan could have known. Economic changes on a global scale, and in the technology which made them possible, have dominated the last several decades. They are well documented in policy and in careers-education-and-guidance. What have been less well documented are the consequences for both the way people now seek to deal with change (cf. Galbraith, 1992) and what that means for local communities (cf. Davies, 1997). More important, and yet even more neglected are cultural changes - in the way people arrive at their beliefs and values, and the way they see themselves in the communities they inhabit (cf. Eagleton, 2003). We might, in careers work, try to argue that such socio-emotional stuff is none of our business; but it is.

Not that careers education and guidance is ducking the issue of change. A lot can be said: there is no more need for guidance-as-we-know-it in the 'de-jobbed' world (Bridges, 1999); well, if not that, it is certainly a time for transformation in what we do (Bezanson, 2004); and not adjusting entails a severe risk of marginalisation (Bolam, 2004); because we are facing no less than a paradigm shift (Jarvis, 2003). We'll see.

Supporters of careers education and guidance have always been ready to talk about the technological and economic side of change. It has sustained our case among policy makers. But there has been a turn-round in policy. Policy increasingly points to what is happening in the ways that people deal with economic and technological change. Indeed social and cultural changes are increasingly starting points for what government now urges (DfES, 2005a, cf. 2005b).

But, however we choose to see it, what is going on now is cumulative and accelerating – and may well be irreversible. It is not so much the facts of change that are important, it is the dynamics. And that is so whether we think of change politically, technologically, economically, social or culturally.

But there is also this: in careers work we need most to think about how people learn for action. Since that is the case, then the place to start is social and cultural attitudes. The authors of those policy documents are right about that.

## Careers-work conversations

This edition of the journal focuses on economic change – what's happening in the labour market? Nothing wrong with that. But the question can be asked in at least three different careers-work conversations.

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| 1. Career-development<br>   - 'What's going on in working life?' |
| Identifies influences on career and how those dynamics flow. |

| |
|---|
| 2. Career-management<br>   - 'What is people's experience of that?' |
| Looks at how people try to resolve the dilemmas and solve the problems. |

| |
|---|
| 3. Careers-work<br>   - 'How can anybody help?' |
| Suggests who can do what to help - in IAG, careers education and other versions of careers work. |

These conversations are three clear focuses for our attention, spread across two hard-to-miss separations: some careers develop *without* having been particularly managed; and some people manage their careers *without* any particular help.

Information about economic change is part of labour-market information (LMI): LMI relies on research for the first of these conversations. But LMI is also a basic provision in the third: people need to know what is going on in the working world, what it offers and demands and how that is changing.

But people do not just inhabit the labour market, they participate; and question two asks how. The answers are an account not so much of LMI as labour-market experience (LME). LMI is a tool; and we use it in the contexts of LME.

That should make a difference to how we talk about help: what advisers do in IAG; and, maybe more so, what teachers do in curriculum.

## Information, experience and help

Careers education and guidance people talk a lot about information. Much is made of 'impartial information'. And 'information' appears first in the dominant analysis of face-to-face help – 'IAG'.

This journal reports research to feed into LMI. It suggests that the extent of change is exaggerated (Keep and Brown, this journal); and that this is partly because losses of opportunity in some sectors and organisations are accompanied by gains in others (White, this journal). It argues that, anyway, no trend is irreversible: society has choices about change and continuity, for example in the way managers manage (Williams, this journal).

But few deny that change is occurring. Some of the elements in the process are detectable in the way (in an earlier NICEC project) Wendy Hirsh and her colleagues (1998) set out how job titles and their associated skill-sets are changing.

From all of this, labour market words and phrases useful to LMI include:

*'demands and incentives',*
*'structures and outsourcing',*
*'global off-shoring and new technologies', '*
*'industrial- and organisation-bases',*
*'sectors, organisations and skill-sets',*
*'competitiveness and trends',*
*'meritocracy, gender-distributions and recruitment.*

Learners need to have it organised into useful form; but this is pretty much a vocabulary of labour economics.

The list could also include a feature of recruitment - 'stratification'. It refers to how people's social backgrounds influence the way they gain entry to the labour economy. It occurs where origins predict destinies. Where that happens careers develop differently. And there is no dispute that social stratification in the UK is an intensifying factor in recruitment (Giddens and Diamond, 2005).

In thinking about how to help, it is an open question just how impartial LMI can be. But LMI provides a lot of the 'I' in 'IAG'; and the jump straight from the 'I' to the 'A and G' may seem, at the first attempt, not so hard to make. There are easy-to-make links between the fact of 'change' and the need for 'flexibility', and between the fact of 'competitiveness' and the need for 'self reliance'. Other words deriving from how we see the contemporary labour-economy include 'choice', 'enterprise' and 'employability. The organisation of that kind of information for the enablement of that kind of learning has become a marker of our expertise.

But it mustn't leave out experience.

For, when it comes to planning for action people attend to both expertise and experience. Indeed, in careers work, it seems that learners may well place greater trust in experience. Sara Bosley finds that learners value 'insider knowledge', based on direct involvement in the working world; they also value helpers who are able to talk in terms which 'resonate' with their own experience (Bosley, 2004; and in preparation).

LMI does not always conjure up accounts of experience. Its narrative is not of lives, but of structures and trends: it is a *meta-narrative*. That is not to deny that people have experiences which have to do with 'skills', 'competitiveness' and 'stratification'. But that experience is not of structures and trends, but of up-close-and-personal events and encounters: it is a *biographical narrative*.

For that kind of account of the labour market we need other sources. And there are some: in parallel with the literature informing LMI there is a literature informing LME. Some get a mention in this NICEC collection. But there is more.

And what does it say? It speaks of recruitment which may be both careful and arbitrary (Warhurst and Nickson, 2001). It points to consequences in people's lives of stratified recruitment (Wilkinson, 2005). It shows how the labour market poses quality-of-life issues, which bring both stress and fulfillment (Bunting, 2004). It sets out how work both rewards and exploits (Toynbee, 2004). It shows how emerging work patterns both offer a role, and re-shape attitudes (Sennett, 1998). It describes how a changing labour economy brings individual prosperity for some and social decay for others (Davies, 1998). It indicates how structures and trends vary in the way they support meaningful lives (Lindsey and McQaid, 2004). It illustrates how economic activity is not all that 'work' can mean (Terkel, 2005).

These are sources for LME rather than LMI. Although they are all carefully documented, they are as likely to declare a point-of-view as claim impartiality. They are as much social commentary as academic literature. Where they are academic, they come from both sociology and economics. They rest on observations which are more difficult to verify and harder to replicate. But their credibility is not lessened on any count. The point about insisting on verifiable impartiality is that it enables learners to act with their eyes open; and do we best serve that purpose by leaving experience out, or by bringing it in?

The two vocabularies are different; but the vocabulary of LME is no less about the labour economy:

*'selection and rejection',*
*'work fulfilment. and quality-of-life',*
*'over- and under-employment',*

*'employment and other work roles',*
*'using skills and dealing with conflict',*
*'earning and owing',*
*'promotion and casualisation'.*
*'consequences for self, others and communities'.*

Engaging that kind of 'insider knowledge' and 'resonating' with such learner experience enlarges the basis for help - for:

*'being flexible' and 'coping with stress',*
*'making choices' and 'finding meaning'.*
*'holding on' and 'moving on',*
*'being enterprising' and 'realising values',*
*'achieving employability' and 'work-life balance',*
*'fulfilling functions' and 'realising identity'*
*being 'self-reliant' and 'examining alternatives'.*

It is a learning agenda for curriculum at least as much as for IAG. Well-managed work experience could be an important resource; work-life mentoring another. Neither denies the authority of professional expertise, both look for the authority of experience – both in the learners and among other-than-professionals. But there are no quick-and-easy ways to doing this. Aware and astute programme management will be critical.

## Paradigm shift?

And so are we shifting, shuffling or just drifting about? In Kuhn's (1962) coinage of the term, a paradigm shift is not change in the way things are 'out there'; we shift paradigms by allowing ourselves to see familiar things in unfamiliar ways. Aha! the sun does not revolve around us. Aha! there is more to light than a wave in the ether! And on we go. It's how we change the world: equipping ourselves with fuller accounts of how things are; developing better explanations of how they got that way; thinking up more ideas about what we can do about them.

If any careers-work paradigms are to be shifted, we must shift them. We might do that by tumbling to the fact that what we thought was one thing is more than one thing. Or we might realise that what we formerly thought was at the centre of everything isn't. And on we go.

You catch my drift.

This argument will be developed in *Re-positioning Careers Education and Guidance* - to be published by Canterbury Christ Church University later this year. It will also feature an article by Tony Watts.

Bill will shortly upload an examination of more of the practical implications of this position at www.hihohiho.com. You can be updated on this by emailing 'yes' to bill@hihohiho.com.

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**Lynn Barham**

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