

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

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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. Vandeveld, 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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