Anchors or chains: career stability and career transitions - employees' attachments to work

Alan Brown and Jenny Bimrose

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Contact details:

jenny.bimrose@warwick.ac.uk

alan.brown@warwick.ac.uk

Professor Alan Brown and Dr Jenny Bimrose

Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick,

Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK

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1. Abstract:

This paper will draw upon narrative interviews with over 100 individuals, either working in health care, engineering, IT or telecommunications; having completed mid-career professional development; in permanent relationships involving long-distance commuting; or having accessed adult guidance services. From these data sources it was possible to construct 'strategic biographies' of people in work, who had been made redundant, had taken a 'career break' or who were in transition. We will present cases that exemplify different patterns of behaviour in the development of work-related learning, careers and identities. The relationship between interviewees and their work-related roles could be represented as patterns of strategic action in their patterns of relationships, orientation and adaptive response to work. We examined two dimensions of interviewees' response to challenges of development of their learning, careers and identities from either a position of continuing employment, seeking a career change or if they were currently not in work. The first is the extent of their attachment to work (whether they identify with their work or offer more constrained commitment) and the second is the nature of the opportunities they had for, and their approach to, learning and development. Interestingly a strong attachment, or adjustment, to a current work role could act as a career 'anchor' from which it was possible for individuals to continue their career development (e.g. through willingness to engage in 'upskilling') or else as a 'chain' that restricted their perceived freedom of action (e.g. through unwillingness to engage in substantive 'upskilling' or 'reskilling'). We have evidence that guidance can help individuals manage career transitions by helping clients view their current skill sets as 'anchors' that can be taken with them on a journey and utilised in a new setting, rather than as 'chains' that hold them close to their current roles.

2. Context:

Many individuals face challenges in developing their skills and managing transitions in dynamic labour markets. These challenges may be one of five types. First, there is the challenge of upgrading the depth of your skills, knowledge and understanding in relation to your existing job in your current workplace if there is or may be a change in the organisation of work. Second, there is the challenge of augmenting the breadth of your skills, knowledge and understanding if you change jobs with your existing employer or change employers while still doing the same or related work. Third, there is the major challenge of reskilling if you change your occupation and the new work is dependent upon a very different skill set. Fourth, there is the challenge of finding new employment if your career is disrupted through redundancy or a major change in your personal circumstances. Fifth, there is the possible challenge of dealing with the transition from full-time employment to part-time work or semi-retirement, which may challenge you to use your skills, knowledge and understanding in new ways, possibly as a result of changing interests. Semi-retirement is associated with self-

employment, with employees moving from permanent to fixed- or short-term contracts, with a reduction in working hours and with a move away from people's main line of work (Humphrey *et al.*, 2003).

Workers in the future may also need to maintain a set of work-related competences and manage effective work transitions for much longer than has been customary in the past. After examining a number of strategic biographies of workers we will draw out some policy implications for addressing this issue with particular emphasis on what practices need to be adopted by workplaces and educational institutions, and by workers themselves, to maintain the effectiveness of workers, including assisting in their work transitions.

3. Methodology and theoretical framework:

This paper will draw upon two major data sources: interviews and longitudinal tracking. The first data source comes from the 'strategic biographies' collected from a range of individuals through a series of narrative interviews with workers and guidance practitioners carried out across a number of projects undertaken by IER focusing upon the development of learning, careers and identities at work. The biographies were constructed from the following individual or group interviews:

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

Some of the above were interviewed on a single occasion, whereas contact was maintained with others over a period of several years. These interviews were almost exclusively conducted with those in work, although occasionally we did interview workers who had been made redundant, were on a 'career break' or who were in transition in other ways. The second data source, however, was complementary in that involved the longitudinal tracking of a range of individuals using career guidance services and in this way we were able to pick up on some individuals who were not in employment. The longitudinal study involved initial interviews with clients after they participated in a careers guidance session and then follow-up interviews one, two, three and four years later. [There will also be one more round of interviews, so the individuals will have been tracked in total for five years.]

The total number of individuals for whom we have 'strategic biographies' comprises over one hundred individuals, but in this paper we will only present details of some exemplary cases, as we are interested here in the different patterns of behaviour. One way of reporting on the development of work-related learning, careers and identities of workers is to think in terms of strategic action. Our interviews highlighted that the relationship between workers and the work-related roles they were required to perform could be represented in terms of their patterns of strategic action across a range of structural, cultural and social contexts (compare Pollard et al, 2000). Their experiences could be mapped in terms of their patterns of relationships, orientation and adaptive response to work and it is possible to trace the dynamic development of individuals' characteristic repertoires of strategic action - their 'strategic biographies'. This type of approach was used in an earlier study of the development of engineers'

work-related identities and identified four forms of strategic action that individuals may have in relation to their current work: identification; adjustment; strategic career; and redefinition (Brown, 2004).

Identification represents the 'classical' form of adaptive strategy - the individual identifies more or less completely with her or his work - both with the occupation and the employing organisation. **Long-term adjustment** represents a more conditional form of adaptation - the individual may remain in an occupation and/or with a particular employer, but he or she recognises that this represents a compromise rather than an ideal situation. Typically factors from outside work (family commitments, personal networks, attachment to a particular location) may act to 'hold' an individual in place. **Short-term adjustment** represents a fully conditional form of adaptation - the individual recognises that he or she only intends to remain in the job and/or with a particular employer for a relatively short time. Either because of individual circumstances, choice or long-term career plans, or because of dissatisfaction with the work, the individual may be actively seeking or intending to seek alternative employment or just ‘running down the clock’ until they are able to retire. These workers may be ambivalent to any requirements to update their skills, knowledge and understanding as part of their current job, but in some cases they could be looking to reskill or build a different skill set in order to get work in a different area. **Strategic careerists** see their current occupational position and/or organisational attachment as one phase of a career that involves relatively frequent changes in the nature of work they do. Their careers may have involved a number of promotions and they may be used to having to adapt and update their skills, knowledge and understanding in new roles. There were also some individuals who identified with their work, but who were also much more active in **re-defining**, rather than passively accepting, **work-related roles**. This strategy is often only viable for those who are recognised to have particular expertise, and/or formal authority and/or high social status. Some 'change agents' in engineering had both the formal responsibility and social influence to achieve this - sometimes they were influential in reshaping the identities of others as well as that associated with their own role (Brown, 2004). Reshaping could come from 'within' a role and sometimes from 'outside' (or above). The second form of **personal re-definition** occurred when an individual sought to change their occupation and/or employer, because they wanted (or saw themselves forced) to change direction. A number of individuals interviewed had changed career direction quite radically. The development and utilisation of a new skill set in these cases was sometimes experienced as exhilarating – almost literally giving some people ‘a new lease of life.’

The above forms of strategic action could and did change over time (an individual may become disillusioned leading to a change from identification to adjustment, or an individual may follow a strategic career path for part but not all of their working life) or in response to particular events (most notably redundancy, but also ill-health, divorce or other major changes in life circumstances). The forms of strategic action do help us give meaning and shape to our interviewees' career histories by outlining some typical and relatively coherent repertoires of strategic response to the challenges posed by the development of work-related learning, careers and identities of older workers.

For workers updating their work-related skills, knowledge and understanding from within work is one proposition, but doing this, and seeking work, after being made redundant and/or returning to the labour market after a lengthy period of absence is another. There were two pro-active responses from individuals in this situation: upskilling; and reskilling and career change. We will examine cases where these strategies were successful, but also highlight that in some cases individuals were

unable to get employment of the type they desired and either remained out of work or else they settled for a different type of work that used much less than their full range of capabilities.

Overall then, we will examine two dimensions of how workers responded to challenges of development of their learning, careers and identities from either a position of continuing employment, seeking a career change or if they were currently not in work. The first is the extent of their attachment to work (whether they identify with their work or offer more constrained commitment) and the second is the nature of the opportunities they had for, and their approach to, learning and development.

4. Different approaches to work-related learning, careers and identities of older workers

The dominant representation of the work-related learning, careers and identities of most workers we interviewed was that they identified with their work, although sometimes with reservations. Many interviewees also saw learning and development as a 'normal' and continuing part of their job. We will examine eight ways of representing the work-related learning, careers and identities of our interviewees:

- work-based upskilling from within work
- part-time education-based upskilling (through mid-career professional development)
- reskilling following redundancy
- change in employment status following redundancy
- downward drift following redundancy
- career transition following a career break
- education-based reskilling following a career break
- downward drift following spell unemployed
- career transition following spell unemployed.

4.1 Development of learning, careers and identities from within work: work-based upskilling

4.1.1 Upskillling through work that comprises series of highly challenging work activities (for example, project-based activities)

Case A: strong attachment to and identification with work; substantive opportunities for learning and development; upskilling leading to becoming more self-directed in approach to learning and development.

Aaron career summary: apprentice, technical worker, inspector, senior inspector, 'change agent' with responsibility for implementing continuing improvement in manufacturing processes

Aaron is in his fifties and works for a small specialist engineering company that produces specialist parts for aircraft and nuclear submarines. The company employs 60 people and technically qualified workers play a key role in the company. Five years ago, Aaron became the lead person, with responsibility as a 'change agent', to implement a new approach to continuous improvement of manufacturing processes in the company. For the six years prior to that he had been the chief inspector at the

company. Previously he had worked as an inspector at the lead company in the supply chain network for 10 years. The 'change agent' training and subsequent application of what had been learned involved Aaron not just in the development of new techniques and training of other workers, but also the implementation of a series of changes to the organisation of work, the culture of the organisation that required considerable skills in the 'management of change.' The achievements were marked: 'the improvements have included significantly better Overall Equipment Efficiency (OEE); weekly efficiency monitoring; reduced set-up times (90 minutes to 30 minutes because it has been possible to pre-set machines); the introduction of a kanban system with access straight into production line of lead company in the supply chain network.'

Involvement in the 'change agent' training had led to personal development for Aaron: 'I have become more interested in problem solving, …… I still want to carry on learning and gain further qualifications.' The training did not just lead to individual development, as one of the key aspects of the training was the need to facilitate the learning of others when cascading the approach within the company. Now what is striking here is that for Aaron his fifties are the time when there has been the greatest development in his skills, knowledge and understanding at work. The training, a one week workshop plus a series of follow-up one day workshops and application visits to other companies in the supply chain, was very helpful, but the greatest development came through meeting the challenges associated with his day to day work of implementing a new approach to continuous improvement in manufacturing processes. The project improvement activities undertaken, by their very nature, were challenging and required utilisation of a full range of skills, knowledge and experience from all those involved in the development teams that Aaron had to facilitate. Additionally, the resulting transformation of how Aaron viewed his own continuing learning and development meant that he was going to study for further qualifications too.

Four things are worthy of further comment here. First, this type of development, based around challenging day to day work activities, is the most painless way to develop skills, knowledge and understanding as learning and development are fully integrated with working. Second, it is important not to pathologise the problems that older workers face learning new skills: the learning and development of experienced older workers like Aaron were replicated across the three supply chain networks we studied – there were at least twenty similar cases. This should not be surprising because two of the reasons for choosing older workers as 'change agents' were the breadth of their experience and the extent of their work commitment – they were chosen precisely because they were exemplars of people who strongly identified with the company and their work and could be expected to be able to work in cross-disciplinary and cross-hierarchical work teams. Third, being involved in substantive learning and development often acted as a spur to a transformation in how they perceived themselves and what they believed they could do. Fourth, the interaction of training and creating opportunities for significant learning experiences at work (and it should be remembered that other workers, as well as the change agent, had opportunities to develop their skills, knowledge and understanding through involvement in process improvement teams) meant it was possible to support learning and innovation in small companies, where traditionally it has often been difficult to get workers engaged in substantive learning and development.

4.1.2 Upskilling through involvement in 'normal' work activities, together with formal training, where work organisation is changing

Group B: strong attachment to and identification with work; major changes in organisation of work; substantive opportunities for learning and development; engagement in learning and development.

A focus group was held with six women with careers in nursing, health visiting and midwifery. Of the six nurses, five had at least 20 years experience working in the National Health Service, and three had responsibility for 25 staff or more. The range of specialist areas represented included health visiting, haematology, acute mental health, midwifery and nurse education. They were involved in implementing, considering or indeed resisting numerous organisational changes in their working practice and environments. The work of all those involved in these careers was changing in response to the evolution in the NHS including:

- Changes in the tasks undertaken by qualified nursing staff and health care assistants
- Changes in tasks undertaken by doctors and nurses
- Re-formulation of the roles of primary and secondary care
- Issues and obligations related to clinical governance, including continuing professional development.
- The introduction of consultant nurses, midwives and health visitors and Modern Matrons
- The implementation of government 'targets'
- Greater attention to 'Return to Practice' opportunities
- Changing public aspirations and expectations of the health service.

The expanded professional roles for nurses had been welcomed but the way they had been introduced had sometimes led to problems, due to, for example, insufficient time being given to mentoring. There were now many more formal training opportunities and a culture of encouragement to undertake further learning and development. This was important as one respondent, who had just undertaken significant additional responsibilities in her new role, remarked 'You're just encouraged, with anything that comes through the door', and as a result, she predicted that in five years' time, she might still be in the same job and 'thoroughly enjoying it'. Support from managers and colleagues was influential in keeping people in their current work, and given the extent to which nursing staff learn from others in the workplace, a positive organisational culture becomes crucial.

Overall, the group were mainly satisfied with their jobs, although individuals felt that some aspects of their work were problematic. However, all the individuals were highly committed to their work, and the rewards of the job were intrinsic, particularly because *'You can make a difference'.* These nurses spoke of how their jobs offered inherent rewards and moments of appreciation. A nurse in an acute ward cited the variety and constant challenge of her work: 'When you're in a hospital you just don't know what's going to happen. You walk in one day and it's a completely different situation to the previous day or next day. It is satisfying because it gives you a buzz, it gives you a high…. When it's busy and there's a lot going on, it gets your adrenaline going.'

For a midwife, job satisfaction derived partly from the intensity and drama on a maternity unit: 'You can make a difference. Certainly in childbirth, it's the difference between a bad experience/good experience. You'll always be remembered sometimes…. Being part of that family for that moment, it's just very privileged, it's a special moment in the couple's life. It's nice to be part of that.'

Now two things are of particular interest from these cases about learning and development. First, it is clear that, with continuing opportunities for training, development and upskilling and challenging work, individuals with careers in nursing, midwifery and health visiting are able to continue to grow with their work. Indeed the degree of challenge is such that even highly committed nurses may feel there is a limit on how long they can work in the profession. With proposed extension to working careers, this problem may become more acute – is it reasonable to expect many people to work in such stressful jobs for say forty five years? Maybe just as the NHS encourages people from outside the health service to retrain for a second career so maybe a right to retrain for a career outside the health service, or to take a career break, after say twenty five years may help with problems of 'burn-out.' The nurses thought that 'flexibility' in relation to work could be interpreted creatively: the chance to have a long break (not necessarily for study) and return to one's job might prove an incentive in recruitment and retention.

Second, there is the perceived pressure that you have to be involved at all times in plans for continuing learning and development.[1] This touches a more fundamental point that, while it is probably unwise for individuals to go for very long periods of time without engaging in substantive learning and development, it is perhaps equally undesirable to create a situation where people feel undervalued if, while doing their work conscientiously and updating through work, they are not engaged in additional learning activities and do not have active plans for further professional development. The challenge lies in finding ways to recognise well grounded professional expertise without requiring people to complete academically accredited courses.

4.1.3 Upskilling through career progression within one company

Case C: constrained commitment to and identification with work; learning and development associated with work; upskilling; progression into management

Cliff career summary: apprentice, technical worker, production engineer; claims adviser; then progression into management

Cliff is in his early fifties and has been with the same company, a car and truck manufacturer, for well over 30 years, but has adapted to work in the company rather than identifying with it. He completed an apprenticeship, continued learning on and off-the-job, eventually gaining a Higher National Certificate in Engineering and becoming a production engineer. Cliff then worked as a junior / senior claims assessor, deciding how much it would cost to repair company vehicles under warranty, authorising repairs (or writing off the vehicles) and deciding the value of a claim under warranty. Cliff was promoted further through a succession of management posts in merchandising, sales and marketing. He had adapted to working with the company rather than identifying with it. Cliff considered that once you reached management level the company tended to be quite ruthless in terms of what they expected from you: 'they certainly don't care about their employees' domestic and family circumstances. They are like a sponge - no matter how much you give - they wouldn't care at what cost this was given.'

While Cliff worked in three different locations for the company that he could reach from home, he has also three times been relocated to offices over a hundred miles away. Particularly when you are drafted into positions such as regional manager Cliff

[1] This attitude was also reflected in our earlier work with radiographers, where several respondents highlighted how some of their colleagues felt that in reviews you were made to feel almost a failure if you wanted to remain just a 'general radiographer' with no desire to develop your career further.

felt you have no choice but to agree. On two occasions the relocations have been for relatively short periods of time - once for three years and once for eighteen months. The second assignment was temporary and family circumstances meant that he had to live apart from his family during the week for eighteen months. You lose, 'you are forced to make connections with your children', and not only does the company not suffer, but in a perverse way it actually gains: 'you have no social life so you as well work all hours God sends.' Family are seen as unimportant by the company whose attitude is 'don't worry about the family just relocate and get the job started. They don't give you a long lead-in.' The only concessions were that you could leave work early on Friday and come in a bit later on Monday, but only if no meetings were scheduled.

He did not identify with the company by 'putting the company first' as did some of his contemporaries. He put his children first in order to have stability for them while they were at school - 'this had been a bone of contention with his manager.' You need to be mobile to get ahead in a large company - 'only a very few (the 3% who are 'high fliers') get their careers planned and for the rest it is a scramble.' You need to be able to relocate, and go if you are offered a promotion, and it is not always easy to get back into a job you want if you come back from a temporary assignment, as you have to compete with others…For example, you are dependent upon sponsors within head office to sponsor you back into a function. There is still an element of favouritism or preferment – 'certain key senior managers will get the people they prefer into the positions they want - or move you.' As it turned out the temporary relocation has led to a further permanent promotion in the same area, but although things have turned out well, this has been more by good luck than good management, and he is under no illusions that the company is just interested in whether you do the job, they do not support you, and any consequential problems are your problems. Cliff has built a career over time with the company, but based upon adaptation to rather than identification with the company. He made extensive use of formal part-time education opportunities early in his career, but since then a succession of technical and managerial jobs, including temporary assignments, have provided plenty of opportunities for learning while working and extending and broadening his skills and knowledge base.

4.1.4 Upskilling through career progression (mainly within one company but then a switch to a more challenging role elsewhere)

Case D: strong attachment to and identification with work; learning and development associated with work; upskilling; eventual disillusion with company and switch to more challenging work

Danny career summary: apprentice, technical worker, promotions and development within a single company, then switch to technical specialist with consulting engineers

Danny was in his mid-forties, now working for a firm of consulting engineers as a technical specialist with responsibility for a department of about 65 people. He had left school at 16 and did a technical apprenticeship with the local car manufacturer. After completing his apprenticeship, including day release at college, Danny progressed internally within the company doing a wide range of technical jobs primarily in the design and manufacturing areas over the next twenty seven years. The company had a range of open learning centres and was very active in supporting 'learning while working'. However, for Danny most learning came from the challenges of work itself, including project work. The company was strongly influenced by Japanese manufacturing methods and then it was taken over by another foreign

multi-national company. He had identified more or less totally with his work and the people with whom he worked: 'it's not the company, it's the people', but when it was taken over he felt it was time to go as he was unhappy with where the company was going.

However, Danny did not want to move into the supply base, and 'I didn't really want to move to another automotive manufacturer', so seeking work with an engineering consultancy seemed like a good way to use his experience. He applied for and got his current job, where he has been working for two years. He works with people in many countries now, and would be prepared to work for a company in Europe or North America. He had a job offer from a company in North America previously, 'but at the last minute failed to have the nerve to go through with it.' After 27 years it took a bit of nerve to move even within the UK, but having moved once 'I think it would take less nerve to make a slightly bigger move another time.' The work now is a bit 'up and down' depending on where you are working, but he does get paid more. He does miss his former work colleagues - he had worked with them for a long time, but he does keep in touch with a lot of them ‘on both a personal and a business level.’

4.1.5 Upkilling through development of a strategic career (switching companies, sectors and occupations)

Case E: strategic career - strong attachment to own career development – switching occupation, organisation and career direction

Edward career summary: engineering graduate, worked in engineering, contract electronics, technical management, supply chain development, general management

Edward is in his late forties – he did an engineering degree and was sponsored while at university by a large engineering company for whom he then worked for seven years. He was involved in a range of project work, undertook a manufacturing management conversion programme for engineers and then returned to another division of the company to a job in logistics and supply chain management. Edward, however, had become increasingly interested in electronics and decided strategically that he wanted to work in the expanding electronics industry. He worked in contract electronics for a couple of years, learning while working on different contracts. One of the contracts involved working with a global IT company and eventually he moved with the contract as the company took the work in-house. He worked with this company for two years and then switched to being a supply chain manager with a large company of drinks suppliers.

The job in group planning was now totally underpinned by IT and Edward’s experience in this area was responsible for him getting the job. He joined the company in the late 1980s but since then the company has expanded considerably through mergers and acquisitions. Initially his IT expertise coupled with the ability to combine this with business development and to lead project teams had been rather rare. However, since then and partly as a consequence of rationalisations following mergers the standards of the company have gone up: 'you are working with some very, very capable people, very motivated people, and you have to work hard to keep ahead or to keep up to them. So this is a competitive environment…'

Edward is highly committed to his work and regards the company as a 'very good employer, a good company to work for, I enjoy working here and they reward you well.' He transferred to London where his work now involves being part of specially formed project teams with an international remit, whether they are engaged in management of change programmes, supporting global customer development or

brand building. He is increasing his experience in areas that are business-led rather than technically-led, although he recognises he has much less international market experience than others in the commercial field. On the technical operations side Edward had gone as far as he was likely to go. This was partly because he had had a very good relationship with his previous boss, who had 'sponsored his career development' but who had left the company when his counterpart from the other company had got his job in the merged organisation. Politically, he was then 'badged as one of his men.'

Edward is a 'classic' example of a strategic career with, for example, the decisions to get both into and out of IT as a career being taken for strategic reasons. Edward's career has also been based upon a willingness to engage with learning in a wide variety of forms: formal education; self-directed learning; training; learning while working; and particularly learning through taking on new challenges.

4.2 Development of learning, careers and identities from within work: education-based upskilling

4.2.1 Upskilling through mid-career professional development (completion of a Master's degree); leading to strategic career development

Case F: constrained commitment to work; mid-career professional development as a stimulus to a more strategic approach to career development

Frederic career summary: apprentice, technical worker, engineer, completed Master's and then switched employers twice, ending up with major project management responsibilities with consulting engineers

Frederic is his forties and had worked for the same company for over 20 years. He completed an apprenticeship with the local car manufacturer, continued his education through to Higher National Certificate level, and was finally employed as an engineer working on engine development. Frederic and his wife came from the same small town and had many local attachments; his wife was self-employed and had built a loyal client base, so he continued for eighteen years to work at the same plant, which was the only large engineering employer in the area. When they had two children the local links were intensified and eventually Fredric realised that he had to think about the direction his career was taking and decided to move. 'I think the only real reason I moved out [of the local area for work] was because I knew I'd be stuck in a dead-end job for the rest of my career, and I was only in my mid-30s so I didn't want to do that.'

The company had taken over another car manufacturer and were intending to design and develop a new engine, so he moved over a hundred miles away to take a job which promised more challenge and would improve his career prospects. His wife and two school-age children stayed at home, and he commuted at week-ends. The job was initially a temporary secondment, but he was then offered a full-time post and he worked there three more years. He also completed a part-time Master's degree in manufacturing management. He felt his combination of experience and qualifications were not being fully recognised by the company, and going on the Master's course had extended his horizons and networks and he received various job offers.

He accepted a job with another car manufacturer on a 'contract basis', even further away from home, and he worked for them for two years. During this time he was approached by a firm of consulting engineers with a couple of job offers. The first time he refused, but a year later they 'asked me if I would consider this position and I

was gently persuaded I suppose.' He recognised 'there were opportunities within the new company to get on. It was quite a young small company and I knew from working with major manufacturers that with my strengths I could develop quite well; and also the money was good.' The job as project operations manager for engine test operations was challenging, with responsibility for all stages of the design, delivery and test process, a large team to manage and considerable autonomy with reporting directly to one of the directors. After working on contract for a couple of years to broaden his experience it was also attractive to have a 'proper job (again) with benefits like pension schemes and health schemes - it was very tempting, the whole package.'

This type of work only became available as a consequence of a major change of policy of the major manufacturers. Previously each company would have kept responsibility for this work in-house, now they were in favour of strategic partnerships with suppliers who would supply specialist expertise in co-developing major components such as engines. Engineers and other specialist staff too therefore had to accommodate to these changed ways of working and new patterns of working relationships. One consequence of this was that it made it clear to the employee that the heart of the wage-work nexus was the immediate value of their expertise rather than having a longer-term relationship with an expectation of a developing career. In such a small company it is clear that each person has to look to themselves to develop their career. For this reason the 'company has a high turnover of staff and to get people to show long-term commitment to the company is particularly hard', as they can and do effectively cash in on their developing expertise, including getting other jobs with the major manufacturers.

There was one major drawback with working with the new company, however. While the two previous jobs had involved commuting for two or three hours, this one involved journeys of four to five hours, starting at 3.30 on Monday morning and not usually getting back till 9 on Friday evening. Fredric did this for about nine months before finally the whole family did move. Frederic was for the first time really committing to a company.

Overall then, Frederic identified with his work as an engineer, but for a long time he adapted rather than identified with his company because of the strength of his family and local attachments. With the new company he felt he belonged - partly because he was able to make friends at work. More recently his travelling (and studying) had contributed to feeling that he did not really 'belong', and in the original company he 'belonged' to the area rather than the company. However, after making the decision to move from his local workplace he set about strategically building his career in ways that fitted to the new more 'flexible' working patterns. He took temporary assignments, studied part-time, took contract work to broaden his experience and paid attention to building a network of contacts. It was one of his contacts, who was putting a team together at the engineering consultants in line with the new co-developing arrangements with major manufacturers, who made the initial approach.

4.2.2 Upskilling through mid-career professional development (completion of a Master's degree); keeping career options open despite constrained commitment to work

Case G: varied career within healthcare; accommodation to a partner's career; long-term adjustment; mid-career professional development; career rebuilding

Gabrielle career summary: nurse; graduate nurse; health visitor; health promotion; health research; health management; very strong commitment to learning in and

outside work; upskilling, but career constrained because of priority given to partner's career

Gabrielle is in her forties and did the conventional hospital-based nurse training, but after a short time working she was amongst the first cohort of nurses to take a fast-track university-based nursing degree. So she was one of the first graduate nurses and got a job working at a hospital in the west of England. At this time she also got married and she decided she would look for a job wherever her husband found work. Her husband got a job in the North of England, and she found work in a hospital some distance away that involved her in a lengthy commute to work. So she changed jobs and became a health visitor closer to home. Gabrielle changed jobs again, this time closer still to home, and then moved into a more specialist area, working as a health visitor dealing with preventive health. She found this job was restrictive and lacked challenge: 'I was not encouraged to think, just follow what was always done.' She was not happy in her job or with the area where they lived, so she encouraged her husband to apply for a new job about forty miles away. He got the job, they moved and then she found a job in the new area, working as a health promotion facilitator in specialist nursing for three years. Gabrielle was then head-hunted (approached by recruitment consultants to fill a vacancy) by a large family practice unit (which had been set up following health service reforms) and her job involved carrying out medical audits across a wide geographical area.

Gabrielle felt her career was taking off and applied for and got a job in the Midlands. This was going to be a 'big career move and would have established my career in management.' [At the time the market-led health service reforms had created considerable numbers of new management posts.] However, her husband refused to countenance a move to the new area, despite the fact that his job took him out of the country for long periods of time. Instead she got a temporary health research job that was based part of the time in London for two and half years. When that was completed she went back to nursing for a time, but she found that frustrating as she felt that she had moved away from that. She applied for a job as a health service manager in another city about seventy miles away. This time they were able to move, as her husband could transfer to another company office in that city.

He then got a job with another company based in London. However, as she liked her job and wanted to stay longer in it, and as neither of them liked the idea of living full-time in London, he lived in a flat there during the week. Partly because she was on her own during the week, and partly for personal interest, Gabrielle took two part-time health-related Masters degrees that involved study during the evenings. Now though she has decided to move to London too, and is looking for a health service management position there: 'there is a lot of restructuring and there are plenty of opportunities so now may be a good time to go.'

The career of her husband has always taken precedence. Even now, when she is employed as a middle manager in the health service, her husband earns four times as much as she does. Indeed she thought that nursing was an example of a secondary career (like teaching): 'it is one career where you can move round with your husband….Nursing in some respects is an insurance policy - you can pick up after an absence or moving from elsewhere - and it is flexible enough to let you balance your career with other commitments and it allows part-time work.'

Gabrielle has, partly from necessity and partly from choice, built something of a portfolio career in the health field. For most of her career she has been engaged in health-related activities (health promotion, research, health auditing, management)

and spent comparatively little time engaged in direct patient care. She has also continued her professional development - completing three degrees in addition to her initial training. For someone with such talents she has not risen as far as she undoubtedly would have if her career had been given a higher priority within their marriage. She was very negative about having to turn down the promotion opportunity (and move) earlier in her career, and subsequently did not apply for such positions.

The biggest accommodation of her career has been to fit into with the relocations of her husband because of his work - they expect total commitment: 'companies have no conception how difficult it is for partners with careers - they don't care and you can't complain.' What is clear is that, despite the limitations set upon her own career development by fitting in with her husband's career, Gabrielle has used upskilling and strong engagement with learning opportunities inside and outside work so that she has always a range of employment options within geographical limits – she has refused to 'coast' within work, always seeking to progress her career within the limits set.

4.3 Development of learning, careers and identities following redundancy: reskilling

4.3.1 Reskilling and career redirection through self-directed learning

Case H: constrained commitment to work; value of learning outside work - self-taught IT skills; compulsory redundancy; switched occupational focus and has been developing a work identity based upon organisational attachment

Henry career summary: technician apprenticeship, electronics engineer in telecommunications; redundancy; computer sales; electronics repair then switch to university IT technician

Henry is in his fifties and his career has involved a transition from working for a large telecoms company that experienced major job losses in the 1990s to working as a self-taught IT technician. He had over twenty years experience with a very large telecommunications company where, after completing a technician apprenticeship and achieving sub-degree HE technical qualifications, he worked as an electronic engineer that experienced major job losses in the 1990s. For the next 2 or 3 years he was employed 'selling computer ancillaries but I wasn't good at that', so he applied for the role of electronics repair man at a university. However, because the university found it very difficult to recruit IT technicians (pay was very low compared with the private sector), in practice very quickly nearly all of his time was spent helping install computers and problem solving: 'I had had experience of working with things like Excel spreadsheets and such like … and knew quite a lot from reading (computing) magazines, I'd never actually touched a computer (technically) but I knew about it from reading so fortunately it was a useful second string to the bow and ….it's appropriate to what I now do, I've learnt programming for example and some of those skills plus the electronics …….providing for classes making equipment available …..obviously other colleagues have other specialisations.'

His job has expanded in terms of the IT part of the job, but also in relation to things like 'for practical reasons very often I find myself representing the department when dealing with other departments and services. Sometimes I have to know the politics and deal with people whether it be the IT department, or other departments in the case of web development, or in the struggle to get this building re-wired: you have to

argue your case with the university authorities when they say that it is extremely unlikely to happen in the next 12 months due to apparently external funding considerations.'

Two things are clear from this. First, after his experiences in the private sector (redundancy and doing work he did not like) he is happy to work in a more sheltered environment. The pay is not so good, but his skills are valued and he gets to undertake as an interesting range of work. Second, Henry's **work-related identity is now organisational rather than occupational: very much bound up with an affiliation to the department**. Occupationally, he sees himself as a 'technician', willing and able to undertake a range of work depending not only on his own skills but also those of others.

Henry is able to work fairly autonomously: 'I feel very fortunate, actually, I do have quite a degree of licence to make my own decisions.' Another example of having found a niche that is not too demanding can be seen in his attitude to shiftwork and overtime: 'personally, technically I am required to work one night a week overtime up to nine o'clock if required to do so, but there are enough of my colleagues who welcome the extra money who are willing to work the shifts to cover the evenings, so in practice I choose not to and its 9 - 5 for me.'

Henry tended to be self taught anyway so that is his style of developing knowledge: 'Yes I either buy books or get knowledge from scouring the world wide web nowadays.' When asked about his future prospects in the short and long term, he replied: 'That's a good question, I think probably I have reached the limits of my ambition at the moment, that perhaps sounds rather sad, I wanted to get involved with the development of the web site which I am effectively doing for the department. Although now there are more constraints as the marketing department have been a bit more active in that regard so I do have limits as to what I can do, as it has to fit the corporate image which is only fair and natural. I have been doing web programming but I don't think there is any natural progression from here that is just the nature of the job.'

He wants to stay in the public sector and has no desire to work in the private sector: 'Yes, indeed I think it is about the pressure. It's only speculative because one can only imagine what goes on in the big wide world, but I would be inclined to think that the expectations are greater especially in the field of programming. I think it tends to suit young bachelors rather than old married people such as myself. I can imagine that it would be expected of me to work until 8 or 9 at night and come in at the weekends, and programming in particular is that kind of beast. Also I think that the pension opportunities are better in the public sector as well.' [Henry felt there was a feeling that you were too old for the private sector of the IT industry if you are over 40.]

Henry strongly identifies with the particular work he does now: in particular, 'I get a lot of pleasure out of helping people, or teaching them in a way. I don't just like to walk into a room fix something and walk out, it's nice to communicate the reasons why they are having a problem or how they can convert their documents from one format to another or whatever.' Asked if he sees this as an educative role, he says 'I feel so, yes.'

When asked 'so you see yourself staying here in the same job for the foreseeable future at least' the reply was unequivocal: ' I'm sure yes and am happy to do so.' This was an example of an individual getting his life into what he saw as an appropriate balance. Henry exemplifies a constrained commitment to work (never

working past 5; not doing certain types of work); strong engagement with informal learning both at work and outside work; and a work identity that was organisational rather than primarily occupational. Henry reskilled and has found a niche at work that involves learning and development at work, but is not too demanding and Henry is convinced he will continue to work there till he retires.

4.4. Development of learning, careers and identities following redundancy: change in employment status

4.4.1 Switch to being self-employed

Case I: constrained commitment to work; engaged with learning at and outside work; redundancy; switched to part-time working as a self-employed consultant

Ian career summary: technician apprenticeship, telecoms engineer in telecommunications; voluntary redundancy; switch to working as part-time self-employed consultant

Ian was in his 40s and had worked for a large telecoms company he joined upon leaving school for nearly thirty years. He had completed an apprenticeship with the company and, as well as the part-time technician qualification he obtained through day release during his apprenticeship, he continued to study part-time gaining a Higher National Certificate (a sub-degree Higher Education qualification.) He worked most of the time on the installation and maintenance of telecommunications systems. His work continued to evolve and required considerable learning and development. But with technological change and shifts in focus the company was unsure what to do with staff with these particular technical skill sets, who had survived earlier waves of redundancies.

Note the rapid pace of technological change meant that throughout the 1990s the company kept redeploying people. Sometimes, however, it did not know what to do with the people. In a previous time it had made many such people redundant only to find it wished it had more people with those skills a short time later. So now rather than rushing to make people redundant in such circumstances, the company takes some time to decide what to do with such people. It continues to employ them even though it does not have any work at that time for them to do. Within the company the employees talk of this as being on 'gardening leave.'

Ian was on 'gardening leave' (being paid but with no work to do) for about nine months, a time he enjoyed greatly, before he accepted an offer of redundancy. Since then he has continued to work successfully in a freelance capacity. However, the period of 'gardening leave' and subsequently going back to working five days a week made him fundamentally rethink his attitudes to work and reflect on his priorities in and outside work. Although he could continue working full-time, his aim now is to balance his work and other elements of his life so that he only works three days a week, so that this would give him space to pursue other interests.

Ian has enjoyed his work and working with colleagues in the past, but is now at the stage where he sees there is more to life than work and this influences both his current attitudes and aspirations and upon how he looks at the past. It should be stressed that Ian has been materially very successful. His redundancy package and current high level of earnings make working just three days a week a viable option, while maintaining more or less his current standard of living. He did not want to

escalate his outgoings, however, on new cars, moving house and so on so that he would be 'locked into' needing to work five days a week at the higher level of earnings in order to maintain his lifestyle**.** In other words he was making a conscious decision to get off the 'material escalator' and to seek a less intensive work-life balance.

Ian had been willing to learn on the job and update his skills, including studying part-time for a sub-degree HE qualification, but he thinks he was very lucky and that going down the graduate / post-graduate route gives you far more options.

4.5. Downward drift of learning, careers and identities following redundancy: trying to overcome a career setback

4.5.1 Switch to less skilled work

Case J: initial high commitment to work; engagement only with learning at work; following redundancy locked into a work identity in decline and eventually both identity and commitment decay

John career summary: technician apprenticeship, telecoms engineer in telecommunications; engineer in IT industry; IT trainer; voluntary redundancy; computer maintenance; IT trainer; switch to less skilled work

John, who is his early 50s, left school at 16 and completed a telecommunications technician apprenticeship with a major telecommunications company. Upon completion of training he worked as a telecommunications engineer but he only worked in the industry until he was 20. He then switched to a major company in the growing IT industry. His case is interesting because despite reasonably high levels of initial skills training and continuing professional development he was considered 'too old' just after 40, and his career spiralled downwards.

John's career with the company initially went well and **he learned through a mixture of on the job learning and short periods of company-specific training**. He became a senior engineer, working from a service centre, making decisions about whether to repair IT equipment or recommend replacement. A couple of years later, however, the company decided to withdraw from offering support services itself directly to one where it encouraged independent contractors to deliver these services. As a consequence for a couple of years he **worked for the company as a trainer** of these new independent contractors. ['I suppose I was really working myself out of a job. I was at that time earning over £30,000 a year, and for that sum the company could get three independent contractors, driving their vans to company premises to do the work, mainly computer repair and problem-solving.'] At this time he has a strong organisational identity, shown by his willingness to move over to a training role and an expectation that the company would find him new employment.

When the company implemented its policy of closing down its service centres in the early 1990s he was offered either relocation to the head office or a fairly generous redundancy package. He chose to take redundancy for two reasons. Primarily, because moving to the head office would have meant relocating and this he did not want to do for family reasons. The second reason was that he thought he would find alternative employment reasonably quickly, even if not quite at his previous salary level.

In fact it proved very difficult for John to get another job: 'although I was only just 40, and there quite a lot of jobs advertised, many employers thought I was too old for work in IT.' Eventually he was able to find work with the computing services arm of a large entertainment conglomerate. The work was not so attractive, repairing computerised systems in pubs and clubs, and the salary was half what he had earned previously. 'It was 10.30 p.m. one New Year's Eve and I was working repairing a computerised till in a pub miles from home. It was hot, noisy and crowded, and there were strobe lights flashing while I was trying to solder a connection, and I was supposed to be at a party somewhere else, and I suddenly felt I have had enough of this.'

John was disillusioned with this particular job, and believing that most employers felt he was too old to be in the field at all, and aware that those working in computer maintenance were not earning anywhere near as much as he did ten years previously, he quit this line of work altogether. His company pension was at a level that meant he only had to do some work to top this up to a level on which he could live and 'give myself enough time to go fishing.' From this time on, John **did not feel he had an active occupational identity**: if he views himself in this way at all it is as a **'former computer maintenance technician.'**

For John, commitment was initially quite high but learning at work was only directly linked to the evolving job. When the allocation of work changed and he was no longer linked to the organisation, he had no further engagement with professional updating so his work identity remained ‘locked’. He tried to continue in the role when computer repair function had changed – eventually both commitment and identity eroded.

He has had other jobs, but he does not identify with these. In the mid-1990s he worked as a taxi driver, mainly at night, in the suburbs of London: 'it was very high stress - you could have a fight every night if you wanted.' He is currently working part-time as a fork-lift truck driver at a local company:

Personal circumstances, age discrimination and being tied to a particular geographical location made it very difficult to recover from a major career set-back. From then on work was always about short-term adaptation rather than identification, and other events in his life reinforced a feeling that you had to 'make do the best you can in the face of events you cannot control.'

This is the territory explored by Sennett (1998): **initial high commitment to work with a large company; engagement only with learning at work; expectation that the company will look after you, but finding yourself locked into a work identity in decline. Then both work identity and work commitment start to slip away.**

4.5.2 Re-entry to the labour market following redundancy

Case K: **Keith** career summary
Keith had been made redundant after twenty six years with the same company in the telecommunications industry. He specialised in electronics and had experience in quality management. Unsure about the career direction he now wanted to take, Keith realised that this was an opportunity to make major changes in his life and decided he would research a range of alternative careers. Areas in which he is interested include occupational therapy and accountancy. However, Keith decides that up-skilling for these careers would simply require too great an investment.

Sixteen months after being made redundant, Keith is still unemployed in spite of considerable efforts to return to work. His whole life is focused on applying for jobs and going to interviews. The feedback he has received from interviews suggests that he is over-qualified for everything he has applied for and is consequently regarded with suspicion. To apply for other jobs he would need new qualifications - but cannot afford to do this without working. He is ineligible for free training, because he is too highly qualified and is not in receipt of benefits because he has savings. From his research on the internet, Keith is aware that he might be able to secure employment in northern England, Eastern Europe or Ireland, but has constrained himself geographically because he wants to remain living close to his family. However, he is willing to consider part-time, temporary posts and also voluntary work, to provide him with current references.

4.5.3 Re-orientation after redundancy

Case L: Lesley career summary:

A Fine Arts graduate, Lesley completed her degree some twenty years previously. At the time of her interview, she had been teaching for nine years and was working part time as a teacher in a Nursery School. She had recently been told her post would be made redundant at the end of the academic year. Her main concern was, therefore, to find other employment, but her situation had prompted an exploration of alternatives to nursery teaching as she had felt discontent for some time and was concerned that teaching posts with young children would become increasingly scarce. Family commitments meant that in reality she needed to stay in the same area. She had already undertaken some careers research and had identified Basic Skills work and work as an assessor for work-based qualifications in Further Education. Other possible career ideas included employment that involved working with disadvantaged young people and adults.

Eventually, Lesley decided to leave her teaching post voluntarily. She tried, unsuccessfully, to return to teaching. Then she applied for a training course to lecture teaching assistants on their foundation degree. Immediately on completion of this training, she was offered part-time employment. Alongside this particular part-time employment, Lesley had had another part-time position as a learning support assistant (which she had also undergone training for) and was attending college to train to be a work-based assessor. To supplement her low income, she's working in a café:

With a significant period of working life ahead of her, she feels as though she's regressed and that her skills and experience are under-valued in the labour market. New areas she is considering are health and social care.

Two years after leaving her teaching post voluntarily, Lesley has made good use of all the opportunities that have presented themselves and enjoyed the portfolio career she has created, describing it as 'finding a new way of life'. Whilst her career development has been somewhat dependant on personal contacts and being 'in the right place at the right time', she particularly enjoyed her backstage theatre work (which came from a job she had in the theatre's café) and the experience of working with people much younger than herself. She has also lectured on a teaching assistant's course at Further Education level and more recently on a Diploma in Child Care.

4.6. Development of learning, careers and identities following career break: career transition

4.6.1 Switch to less demanding work

Case M: strategic career; family formation; switched to less demanding part-time work; constrained commitment to work

Mandy career summary: auxiliary nurse; nurse; social worker; committed to learning in and outside work; switched to working as part-time; career break; part-time working in a play-group

Mandy is in her forties and after leaving school started work as an auxiliary nurse, then did nurse training. She initially worked in a hospital, but subsequently obtained a more specialist post working with people with disabilities in a day centre. She then applied to train full-time as a social worker and the year she qualified she also got married. She moved to London because of her partner's job, but easily found employment in the local area as a social worker working with older people. She worked full time until the birth of her first child (when she was 38), when she switched to part-time working. Kathy stopped working altogether for a time upon birth of a second child, but three years later she resumed part-time employment in a local play-group that her daughter also attends.

Nursing was therefore just the first stage of a varied 'caring career', but although she initially built a 'strategic career', by her late twenties she was fitting her employment decisions around those of her partner who was earning considerably more and had a 'company career'. By her late thirties employment decisions were constrained even more by family formation. Kathy also accepted that it was necessary to move for the purposes of her husband's career, particularly as the alternative of long-distance commuting proved very wearing.

Mandy does not have a strong occupational identity at this time, rather she is very aware that you go through different stages in your life and is just focused on the current one - principally as a primary care-giver for her young children, with employment fitting into those demands; settling down in a new neighbourhood and maintaining contact with old friends.

4.7. Development of learning, careers and identities following career break: education-based reskilling

4.7.1 Still in education

Case N: Norma career summary
A single mother of a school-age child, Norma was attempting to return to employment after a personal upheaval. She had originally wanted to train to be a hairdresser, but the nearest college offering the course was too far away for her, given her child-care responsibilities. As an alternative, she enrolled on an Adult Returners' Course. She hoped to pursue a strand about confidence building and 'returner', skills but this was not offered, so she is studying social science subjects. Additionally, she is up-grading her out-dated school qualifications by taking GCSE Maths and English. There is also the opportunity to achieve OCN accreditation in other subjects, which include sociology, psychology, study skills and research methods and ICT. Another outcome of the course will be a fully developed Curriculum Vitae. The college offers personal support and review through a tutorial system (as well as a free travel card). She is enjoying the course, although it is hard work and 'there are not enough hours in the week'. Her only difficulty relates to her

inability to afford a computer with internet access at home. Her longer term career goal is to enrol on an Access to Higher Education course.

4.7.2 Transition in progress

Case O: Olivia career summary:
A 'woman returner', Olivia plans to re-enter the labour market after ten years, during which she has been raising her family. As she still has child care responsibilities, she is only looking for part-time employment or training at present. Previously, she worked as an IT instructor, draftsperson and in electronics and telecommunications (in which she holds a qualification). At the time of her first interview, she had arranged an interview at a college to start a teaching qualification for those in Further Education. However, whilst taking this qualification, the client had decided that she really wanted '*to follow her dream*' to be a garden designer. So she took steps to achieve this by enrolling on a three year part-time degree course in garden design at an agricultural college. Once her child is at senior school, she hopes to set up her own business, initially offering a design service. Two years later, Olivia was half way through her part-time degree course in garden design. She is also undertaking work experience and has volunteered at her daughter's school to tend the gardens and start a vegetable patch.

Additionally, rather than paying someone else, she has undertaken much of the decoration and renovation of her new house. Despite being proactive in re-defining her career trajectory, this client still lacks confidence in her ability:

> *There's still that: 'Oh my goodness'. You know: 'who would ever want me!' That comes, I think, from 12 years of not being employed. You devalue yourself totally.*

4.7.3 Career transition: unable to follow chosen career path

Case P: Paula career summary:

Paula had completed an Access course with the intention of training for one of the paramedical professions. However, her health has prevented her from pursuing this particular course of action. Persistent health problems have resulted in loss of confidence. Two years after her initial interview, she was still unemployed. She is involved in different types of voluntary work and is undertaking a leisure class. She suffers from a depressive illness and has become concerned about starting something that she may not be able to finish, as well as the financial implications of undertaking higher education.

> *It's too much of a risk emotionally, mentally, physically including the financial thing……*

Over the last year, she has re-evaluated her career aspiration and is now considering ways in which she could achieve her career aspiration via a non-traditional entry route.

4.8. Downward drift of learning, careers and identities following a spell unemployed

4.8.1 Failure to overcome loss of job through ill-health

Case Q: Queenie career summary:

Queenie was suffering from multiple, long-term, serious health problems. Difficulties encountered in finding employment with these health problems were further compounded by her poor literacy skills. She had been referred for an initial guidance interview by the Job Centre Disability Employment Adviser and had been put in touch with an employment support programme that sent information about vacancies. However, nothing had come of this, as she has a medical assessment pending which related to yet another a chronic health problem. Once prospective employers understood her exact circumstances, they were no longer interested. Queenie saw her situation as '*hopeless*', unless her health problems could be resolved.

Two years after her initial interview, Queenie was still unemployed. She is, however, currently undertaking an ICT course for two and a half days per week, together with a painting and drawing course. She has still not received a clear diagnosis of the particular medical condition for which she was being assessed and two other health conditions from which she suffers have become more problematic. The client was also recovering from surgery for yet another health problem.

She feels she has not progressed in her aim of getting a job and feels there is no-one who can help her, due to the multiple and complex nature of situation. Additionally, she no longer feels that it is even worth applying for jobs, as she is either refused (being told it's because of health and safety concerns), or doesn't get a reply. Her attitude to her current situation is one of despair:

> *I'm lost!*

4.8.2 Switch to less skilled (part-time) work

Case R: Robert is currently suffering from a lack of appropriate skills. He was made redundant from the printing industry and is pessimistic about access to the labour market for older men like him (his fiftieth birthday is looming) with what he regards as out-dated skills. After his first interview, he secured part-time employment in a warehouse. Two years on, he has not made any further progress. He has continued to work part-time in a warehouse, which he finds very boring. However, he regards any job as better than being unemployed. Ideally, he would like to get another part-time job, though this has not so far proved possible. He is cynical about the lack of opportunities available to him and seems resigned to what he regards as an unsatisfactory situation. Lack of transport is proving to be a major obstacle to his horizons, but his attitude has also become a factor since he is now unmotivated and disillusioned. Robert hates 'being typecast and pushed into things' and feels he has no future which involves doing anything he wants to do. Disillusioned with the Jobcentre, which could not offer any suitable training, his only hope is that finance might soon become available to enable him to secure a means of transport, which would enable him to apply for a much wider range of jobs.

4.9 Development of learning, careers and identities following a spell unemployed: career transition

Case S: Stuart is in his fifties and had been out of work since April 2003 after suffering a stroke caused by job-related stress. As a consequence of his ill health, the client's medical consultant had recommended a change of career. The client was very unsure about his abilities to return to full-time employment and his future employment options. He was concerned about paying his mortgage. This was further complicated as his wife was due to go in to hospital because of a serious

medical problem, which would further place strain on the family's finances. It was agreed that returning to part-time employment would be a good method of testing the client's abilities and to check how much work he could physically undertake.

One year on, he had tried a computer training course, which had proved to be a negative experience ('I *was really knocking my head against the wall*…') and applied unsuccessfully for retail jobs. However, he was working 70 hours a week across two employers in jobs that are both in the social care sector. One of the employers is supporting him to study for vocational qualifications.

Two years on, this client was still working across the same two employers. Despite long hours, he is not experiencing problems related to stress: '*I love my job!'* He has progressed with his NVQ Level 3 in care work and is very keen to continue his studies to an NVQ level 4. Although he is '*keeping an eye'* out for other jobs in the same sector he has no plans to change jobs. As part of his review at work, colleagues have noted that he is capable of management duties and could run his own care home.

5. Conclusions

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

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

Upskillling could come through work that comprises a series of highly challenging work activities (for example, project-based activities) or through involvement in 'normal' work activities, together with formal training, where the work organisation is changing. Upskilling could also be associated with career progression within one company or through development of a strategic career (switching companies, sectors and occupations). However, it is also possible to develop work-related learning, careers and identities through education-based upskilling. The value of substantive mid-career development, for example through the completion of a Master's programme, was also demonstrated in many cases, not only in terms of positive career development, but also in a negative sense in that downward career drift seemed associated with those individuals not having engaged in any substantive updating since their early twenties. Substantive upskilling was not always necessary to maintain a career, but the absence of engagement in any substantive learning or development certainly left an individual doubly vulnerable to any change in their career prospects, in that both getting a new job or reskilling could be much more difficult.

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

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

It was striking that the achievements and aspirations of most of our interviewees only seldom indicated a willingness to 'wind down' – in most cases they wanted to be active participants in the labour market and still have career plans. Barriers to career progression for people, especially older people, out of work included financial constraints; family commitments; health issues and local labour market conditions. Some people were experiencing prolonged transitions into the labour market and were using various strategies to continue to make progress. The evidence of the positive impacts of guidance (complementing evidence collected during the initial stage of research[2]) included having helped people with upskilling and reskilling but

[2] Participants identified five ways in which they had found their guidance useful. Guidance was useful when it: gave access to specialist information; reduced confusion; motivated or provided new insights; confirmed ideas and built confidence. Guidance had resulted in direct and positive change (such as: a

also in managing a range of career transitions and support in trying to maintain a positive self-image even when transitions were not working out favourably. It follows that the measurement of the impact of guidance needs to take account of 'distance travelled' by clients, in a way that focuses on the process of effective guidance as well as its quantifiable outcomes. The implications of this for education, training and guidance were in line with the findings of Ford (2005): 'guidance services that older adults find particularly helpful are mainly highly personalised and people-focused initiatives that combine a range of guidance and learning activities into an integrated service.'

From our interviews with people in employment, out of work and making career changes issues around the capacities and potential of older workers because of their age never arose directly, although they were sometimes health-related. Many were active in their own learning and development, although this was easiest if directly linked to learning while working. There are still, however, issues around cultural norms and values with a number of participants commenting that it could be difficult to recover from a career set-back because of the perceptions of others that older workers could not adapt so easily as younger workers. Most of our interviewees had 'successful careers', but even some of them pointed out that it was possible to find your skills were no longer in demand and that with increasing age it became more difficult to overcome a career setback.

Policy should:

- encourage individuals to engage in mid-career learning and development;
- give individuals the right to (3 sessions of) independent careers guidance after working for twenty years;
- encourage workplaces and education institutions to consider how best they can effectively support older workers' learning, development and work transitions;
- identify appropriate learning strategies and pedagogic practices that will assist the development and maintenance of older workers' capacities for working, learning, development and transitions;
- identify good practice in policy measures, workplace practices and educational programmes in support of the continuing development of older workers' workplace competence and learning dispositions;
- give workers the right to a 'career break' of say six months to be taken at any time after twenty five years in work.

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

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change in their situation, or thinking, and/or future plans; being pointed in the right direction; given alternative options/ideas to consider; or had affirmation of their ideas). Guidance had acted as a catalyst for positive change, even where agreed action had not been implemented or advice followed.

self with dimensions of their work-related identity. Older workers' biographies often involved elements of growth, learning, recovery or development as individuals moved between images of what they were, had been in the past or thought they might become, thereby emphasising biographical continuity. While major dislocations in individual careers could obviously be traumatic, where individuals had been able to construct coherent career narratives and 'move on' this proved to be psychologically valuable and career guidance often played an important role in that process.

Finally, let us turn to the issue of employees' attachments to work. Most of our interviewees exhibited a strong sense of attachment to their work, although many others had found it was possible to continue in work as a form of short-term or long-term adjustment. In most circumstances strong attachment to work brings considerable benefits, including a sense of career stability and having a career 'anchor', but there is the question as to whether a strong commitment to your current work also acts to hold you in 'chains', preventing you from attempting an appropriate career transition until it becomes more and more difficult to achieve. One way of considering an occupational identity, to which we are adjusted and that is relatively stable over a period of time, is as a psychological 'home'. 'Home' in this context is a "familiar environment, a place where we know our way around, and above all, where we feel secure" (Abhaya, 1997, p2). Viewed in this way it is easy to understand the sense of loss and dislocation that people may feel when they are made redundant, with little prospect of regaining their former occupational identity (Sennett, 1998). On the other hand, religion, literature and film abound with stories of people 'breaking free' and "loosening attachments to 'homes' of many kinds, be they psychological, social or ideological" (Abhaya, 1997, p.2). In this sense, after a period of stability, an occupational identity may come to be viewed as a confinement from which the individual longs to escape. That is, what is initially experienced as interesting and exciting may, with the passage of time, lead to "a sense of profound dissatisfaction with the comfortable limits" (Abhaya, 1997, p.8) of the existing way of life.

Dewey (1916) had seen an occupation as giving direction to life activities and as a concrete representation of continuity: a 'home' with clear psychological, social and ideological 'anchors'. But what of the process for some individuals where the 'anchors' become progressively perceived as 'chains'? Our interviewees' strategic biographies did seem to suggest that where a prospective working life may now be closer to fifty than forty years, there may be value in offering mid-career guidance to even those who are well settled in their occupations: changing direction or engaging in substantive learning and development after twenty to thirty years may prolong work attachment – the risk of continuing longer is that individuals will just start to 'run down the clock': an attitude that makes individuals very vulnerable if occupational or organisational change does occur. An individual may still want to keep their 'career anchor' but they should at least consider the benefits of action that reaffirms their commitment to their career even if they do not want to undertake a career change.

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