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**The relationship between work attachment and possible career change:
anchors or chains?**

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The relationship between work attachment and possible career change: anchors or chains?

Abstract

This paper uses interviews with over 100 individuals, mainly working in health care, engineering, IT or telecommunications, in order to construct their ‘strategic biographies’ in relation to their careers and identities. We present cases that exemplify different patterns of strategic action in the development of work-related learning, careers and identities in relation to their orientation and adaptive response to work and possible career change. These different patterns were linked to their attachment to work (whether they identify with their work or offer more constrained commitment) and 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 ‘upskilling’) or else as a ‘chain’ that restricted their perceived freedom of action (e.g. through unwillingness to engage in substantive ‘upskilling’ or ‘reskilling’). Guidance could 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.

Key words:

career change, work-related learning, identity formation, career guidance and counselling

1. Introduction

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. 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.

However, continuing in work over time is not just about skills development it is also links to issues about careers and identities. Work identities are situated within particular communities where socialisation, interaction and learning are key processes that take place in a dynamic context where the nature of employment, work roles and patterns of skill development change, but where nevertheless the individual is also an active agent in the processes whereby work identities are reshaped. As well as mediating the ways in which individuals relate to the work organisation and work process, identities frame the ways individuals cope with the pressures and stresses of work and how skills and knowledge are developed over time (Brown, 1997). Work-related socialisation plays a key role in identity formation, helping individuals develop an occupational orientation, work attachment and commitment (Heinz, 1995; 2003). As work-related identities are becoming increasingly unstable and disrupted (Carruthers & Uzzi, 2000), unfolding experiences at work can be mapped in terms of patterns of relationships, orientations and adaptive responses to work through individuals' 'strategic biographies' (Brown, 2004). Brown (1997) identified how three key sets of relationships operate between the individual and the context in shaping identities in work settings:

- the nature of the work activities themselves and the extent to which the individual finds them challenging, changing, rewarding etc.
- the nature of interactions with other people related to work and the extent to which the individual receives recognition, support, establishes friendships etc.
- identity issues - not only how the individual sees herself or himself but also how far this influences motivation and commitment.

Work activities, interactions and identities can operate either independently or in concert in influencing the approaches to learning and development of workers. In order to understand changing work identities and approaches to work-related learning and development, it is important to acknowledge how the intensity of learning and development varies across different time periods for individuals. When workers engage in substantive learning and development, their work-related learning could be represented as being primarily concerned with *upskilling* (within a current occupation and/or organisation or between different occupations) or *reskilling* (linked to an actual or proposed career change) with a significant change in the development of work-related skills, knowledge and understanding being either intensive or incremental.

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. Six cases of individuals whose biographies exemplify different patterns of behaviour in the development of work-related learning, careers and identities in relation to actual or possible career changes are presented. Two dimensions of interviewees' response to challenges of development of their learning, careers and identities are examined. 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’). There is 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. Methodology and theoretical framework

This paper will draw upon the ‘strategic biographies’ collected from through a series of narrative interviews with a range of individuals 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. There are ‘strategic biographies’ for over 100 individuals, but in this paper only present details of six exemplary cases are presented. One way of reporting on the development of work-related learning, careers and identities of workers is to think 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 engineers’ work-related identities and identified four forms of strategic action: identification; adjustment; strategic career; and redefinition (Brown, 2004). Some of these concepts are explored.

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 recognises that this represents a compromise. Typically factors from outside work (such as 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. **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 those associated with their own role (Brown, 2004). Reshaping could also come from ‘within’ and ‘outside’ a role. 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.

Forms of strategic action could change over time (an individual may become disillusioned, thereby shifting from identification to adjustment; follow a strategic career path for just part of their career; or their orientation may change following redundancy, ill-health or other major changes in life circumstances). The forms of strategic action do help us give meaning and shape to our interviewees’ career histories. In particular, we are interested in exemplifying how 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 ‘upskilling’) or else as a ‘chain’ that restricted their perceived freedom of action (e.g. through unwillingness to engage in substantive ‘upskilling’ or ‘reskilling’). This paper will, therefore, focus upon the role of individual agency in career development, whereas the extent to which individual

career decision-making may be constrained by structural factors is considered in a complementary paper.

3. Current or prior work identities and attachments acting as ‘chains’ restricting likelihood of successful career change

3.1 Senior nurse with very strong work attachment

Amy was a senior nurse with supervisory responsibilities working in haematology. She had over 20 years experience working in the National Health Service and upskilling throughout her career had mainly come through involvement in ‘normal’ (but changing) work activities, together with periods of formal training, working in different specialist units and experience of several changes in the organisation of work. She had a very strong attachment to and identification with work and had a wide range of opportunities for learning and development. She had undertaken a range of formal learning and development activities as well as learning while working. She had involved in implementing, considering or indeed resisting numerous organisational changes in their working practice and environments. Her work, career and identity had been evolving in response to developments in the NHS that included:

- 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, health visitors and modern matrons;
- the implementation of government ‘targets’;
- greater attention to ‘return to practice’ opportunities; and
- changing public aspirations and expectations of the health service.

She had welcomed the expanded professional roles for nurses, but the way changes had been introduced had sometimes led to problems, due to, for example, having insufficient time to devote to mentoring. There were now many more formal training opportunities and a culture of encouragement to undertake further learning and development. Support from managers and colleagues was influential in Amy having such a positive attitude to her current work, and

given the extent to which nursing staff learn from others in the workplace, a positive organisational culture was seen as crucial.

Amy was satisfied with her job, even though she felt that some aspects of their work were problematic. She was highly committed to her work, and the rewards of the job were intrinsic, particularly because 'You can make a difference'. She liked 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.'

Overall, it is clear that, with continuing opportunities for training, development and upskilling and challenging work, Amy, like other of our respondents in nursing, midwifery and health visiting, was able to continue to develop in her 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. So, this is not to say that Amy might not at some future date feel she had to switch to less demanding work, but at the moment her whole work identity is bound up with 'being a nurse' and her work attachment is such that she does not even consider the possibility of a career change.

3.2 Middle manager with car manufacturer with weak work attachment

Cliff had a constrained commitment to and identification with work; after his initial training his learning and development had mainly been through learning while working. His career summary reads as follows: apprentice, technical worker, production engineer; claims adviser; senior claims adviser; then progression into management. It was a 'classic' organisational career, but one which reached a plateau where Cliff was content to stay where he was.

While some other respondents went through phases of intensive work-based upskilling or made use of education-based opportunities for mid-career professional development in their thirties or forties, Cliff was typical of those following weaker upskilling trajectories in later life tending to rely for their learning and development almost exclusively on meeting changing requirements at work that contained a moderate development aspect.

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, and was promoted further through a succession of management posts in merchandising, sales and marketing. However, by the time Cliff became a manager he did not really identify with the company, and once he was no longer in a technical position he no longer had an occupational attachment either, nor any sense of needing or wishing to take any further qualifications. 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.’

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. On one occasion 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 might as well work all hours God sends.’ 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.’ As it turned out one of the temporary relocations had 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’s career is based upon adaptation to, rather than identification with, the company. He made extensive use of formal part-time education opportunities early on while developing his technical career, but since then a succession of managerial jobs, including temporary assignments, have provided plenty of opportunities for learning while working and extending his skills and knowledge base.

Cliff had made a conscious decision not to engage with his work in a way that would maximise the likelihood he would be promoted, so no 'extra' effort was put into either work activities or interactions, and although he worked hard, this still created tensions with his manager. This constrained commitment coupled with a critical understanding of how the company 'used' people meant Cliff's sense of identity was strongly family-oriented rather than work-based. In turn, in relation to his own work learning and development, Cliff actively did not want to do anything additional above the minimum necessary to do his work effectively, even though this made him dependent upon the company in the sense he would probably struggle to find a job with the same level and status, but then again work was not a central life interest and Cliff felt he would still be able to cope with any change in status. Overall, identity in the form of Cliff's constrained commitment meant that his reasonably challenging work activities and interactions were not used as a platform for further learning and development in the ways they could have been. There is, however, still a strong sense of personal agency here and again a weak commitment to upskilling was, among our interviewees, as likely to be a matter of personal choice as being due to having only limited opportunities.

Cliff's rather detached work attachment for the last ten years or so meant he had no interest in further career development and little likelihood of being able to make a career change to a similar position, but psychologically he was in no way 'chained' to his current work identity.

3.3 Disillusionment and disengagement

John: 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. His career summary was as follows: 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 in 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 he was considered 'too old' just after 40, despite reasonably high levels of initial

skills, for training and continuing professional development 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. 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 were 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. 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, such as a taxi driver, and is currently working part-time as a fork-lift truck driver, but he does not identify with these.

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. Current skill sets being used as 'anchors' in facilitating career change

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

Aaron: 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. His career summary is as follows: 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. He had also previously worked as the chief inspector at the company and an inspector. 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. One of the key aspects of the training was the need to facilitate the learning of others when cascading the approach within the company. 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.

Three 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 in at least 20 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. 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.

Looking back across Aaron’s career, it is clear that his approach to learning and development has always exhibited a commitment to upskilling, but for most of that time this was largely accomplished through incremental skill development and his learning and developing through work was seen as a ‘natural’ part of his work and did require much additional effort. However, when engaged in education and training early in his career, upon changing jobs, getting promoted and when undertaking a role as a ‘change agent’, which in essence required a commitment to continuing learning and development, there were periods when Aaron exhibited a strong commitment to learning in these periods of intensive upskilling. This means in the 35 years since he completed his initial education and training, there were four periods (each lasting a few years) when work presented a particularly strong learning challenge that required intensive upskilling. The rest of the time learning and development continued at a more manageable and incremental pace. This differential pacing to development is important to understand in terms of the policy rhetoric about lifelong learning.

Even with a career, based on continuing technical development, and in a knowledge-intensive industry, for most of his career Aaron had to make no special effort to upskill, learning while working on challenging activities and a commitment to his work made such learning seem a natural part of work.

The work activities themselves were challenging and Aaron experienced a sense of achievement in meeting these challenges, the positive results were visible to everyone in the company and also acted to rekindle Aaron's commitment to undertake further self-directed learning. The type of work undertaken, both as a chief inspector and as a 'change agent', also involved rich and varied interactions with other people, including as part of multi-disciplinary, inter-organisational and non-hierarchical teams, which Aaron found very rewarding. Aaron worked with most employees as well suppliers, customers and a number of people in other companies in the supply chain and in his own personal network. Such relationships delivered support, in tackling challenging problems at work, and recognition, in that his expertise and value to the company, including having to make presentations to the directors on a number of strategic and operational issues. These interactions also enabled Aaron to support the learning of others, a role he relished both at work and in his private life. In relation to identity issues, Aaron exhibited very high organisational and occupational commitment and he, and others, saw him possessing valuable expertise, based on his extensive work process knowledge. This in turn contributed to Aaron being highly motivated with a strong attachment to and identification with work. Aaron's work activities, interactions and identities were acting powerfully together in concert producing a strong sense of agency in his approach to learning and development – he was not only committed to upskilling, but also to broadening his learning and development. Other respondents following strong work-based upskilling trajectories did so through career progression that involved switching companies and/or jobs in order to broaden their experience and take on more challenging roles.

Aaron had periodically taken action to update his skill set. He was probably his company's key employee, and his work and standing with other companies meant that even in the unlikely event the company folded, he would almost certainly be able to get work elsewhere. His problem-solving abilities, talent for supporting the learning of others, systems thinking and analytical abilities had already been demonstrated in a number of contexts. These

abilities were ‘career anchors’ that could readily be applied elsewhere, if a change of career was required.

4.2 Intensive reskilling

Upskilling involves individuals remaining within a single occupation or following clearly signposted progression paths from a particular occupation, as in the case outlined above. Some workers, however, may have already embarked upon, or are seeking, a major career change that involves reskilling. That is, the development of skill sets different from those they already possess. Intensive reskilling will usually involve a major career reorientation and, as such, will often require considerable personal commitment and either a major shift in identity or a recasting of current identities. What makes for a flexible employee is a landscape that has already been covered by Kirpal and Brown (2007), but one of their cases exemplifies how awareness and development of your skill set can be used as a career ‘anchor’ across a variety of settings.

Sally is in her late forties and works as a production manager in a car components factory. She is an example of someone who did not become very purposeful about her own career development after the age of 30. Upon completion of a Sports Science degree, she worked in outdoor pursuits for a year and then chose to train as a PE teacher. Her teaching career lasted less than a year. Next, she worked in local authority leisure provision for about six years, and then did some temporary office work for a couple of years. This work was with a small specialist automotive components manufacturer, which led to a permanent job in ‘customer scheduling’. The job consisted of calculating and costing customers’ requirements and keeping track of what was being produced and what had been dispatched.

Sally initially worked in the department for three years and found the work relatively undemanding, but was promoted to ‘Head of Logistics’ with responsibility for six staff. She had rapidly acquired the relevant work process knowledge just from the work itself and she was now determined to use this opportunity to start to build a career. Even upon promotion to a supervisory role, the company was not expecting to have to give her any additional training. However, she embarked upon a self-directed approach to her own learning and development. At her own instigation, she asked to go to the Head Office (in Germany) for a two-week period to orientate herself to the work of the company as a whole. They gave her the time, but it was left to her to structure this period for herself. She spent the time walking around the

factory and talking to people, finding out for herself what was being done and by whom and why. She found this period very informative and helpful.

Sally had good communication and organisation skills, worked well with other people, was a good supervisor and was quickly promoted twice more; to logistics specialist; and then to Production Manager with responsibility for managing over 100 staff on a three shift system. Her work comprised the ordering and control of all materials, responsibility for the production process itself, staff management and customer liaison. The reasons why the company appointed her was two-fold: it recognised the skills she had brought to her previous work, but also recognised that with changes in the organisation of work and sourcing of production, production management itself was changing rapidly with a much greater emphasis on logistics and external as well as internal co-ordination. Even so, the challenges of the new job were considerable: 'My skills acquisition at this time was mainly on the job training; finding out as I went along.' The company did provide training opportunities over time to help her cope with her new responsibilities. She found the training very relevant, but also decided to do a Master's degree to gain a greater understanding of the underpinning of the technical work of her department and her management role: 'I wanted to understand what lay beneath what I was seeing on the shop floor, and what I was controlling in my job.' Much of what she learned on the course was relevant at three levels – business, technical and operational. On her own initiative, she had also enrolled for two evening classes – one on the Japanese view of the auto industry, and the second on leadership and self-management. She has now fully grown into the job as a production manager, and is well paid.

She enjoys her job, although there are frustrations linked to working in what is still very much a man's world: 'It's not so much a glass ceiling as a huge steel ceiling.' Sally had never expected to enter the engineering world: 'The last place I wanted to work was a factory...but I have come to realise is that it doesn't much matter what the workplace is, or where it is, or what it makes, most of the processes for getting something resourced and produced and delivered are the same.' She is still looking to develop her skills; maybe in assertiveness to deal with the gender problem.

So for the last ten years Sally has been very proactive in building her career, has exhibited a powerful commitment to reskilling and has achieved a great deal. Sally's intensive upskilling was underpinned by an approach to learning and development that made use of learning while

working, major education-based technical training, taking other formal training opportunities and being self-directed in seeking out other learning opportunities. So in this case, although work activities, interactions and identity were strongly in alignment, all these were being held together by a strong sense of personal agency in pulling everything together and driving her career forward.

4.3 Incremental reskilling over a long period through development of a strategic career (switching companies, sectors and occupations)

Reskilling will usually involve a major career reorientation and, as such, will often require a considerable personal commitment and, as with Sally, a relatively long period of intensive reskilling and commitment to development in the new career. However, some people change career direction much more frequently such that reskilling also occurs more frequently or incrementally, particularly if an individual is developing a ‘strategic career’, with a strong attachment to her or his own career development and being prepared to switch occupation, organisation and career direction. One example of this, documented more fully in Kirpal and Brown (2007), was Richard, who graduated in engineering and worked in an engineering company, but then for strategic career development reasons every five years or so moved into different areas that required the development of different skill sets, such as contract electronics, technical management, supply chain development and general management. These changes also meant Richard worked in a wide range of different organisational contexts.

Richard 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. Richard’s career has also been based upon a willingness to engage with learning in a wide variety of forms, including: formal education; self-directed learning; training; learning while working; and particularly learning through taking on new challenges. The reskilling aspect of Richard’s career was important, because on at least three occasions he consciously chose to follow that route rather than follow a clear upskilling path, because he thought the latter would narrow his options. The approach to reskilling was incremental because from his mid-twenties onwards he had always used learning through new challenging work as the way to develop new skill sets which he saw as necessary for ‘the job after next.’

Richard in his early fifties is involved in formulation and implementation of strategic management decisions with global responsibilities in a very large company with interests and facilities widely distributed across the world. Whether Richard achieves his goal of reaching the next level, actually leading such teams, is of less concern to us than that his incremental approach to reskilling has meant that he certainly developed the requisite skill sets to put himself in line to be a realistic contender for such a post.

5. Conclusions: ‘anchors’ or ‘chains’

For individuals like Amy work attachment and occupational identity can be so strong that they literally shut out any consideration of doing anything else. Cliff represents those people who have a weak work attachment and a sense of detachment from occupational and organisational roles, whose identity is primarily bound up with non-work interests. For some individuals the lack of engagement acts as a spur to consider a career change, but Cliff has effectively decided to do ‘just enough and hang on for as long as possible’ – he has taken no actions to generalise his skills set and he recognises he is locked into working with his current employer. Cliff recognises this was a risky strategy but he has been lucky. John, in contrast, had a strong occupational and organisational commitment, but when he was made redundant and his particular occupational skill set went into decline John felt he was being defined by his former occupational identity.

All three individuals (Amy, Cliff and John) had for the last 20 or so years of their organisational careers had primarily relied on learning while working as their dominant approach to learning and development, with some occasional short duration training. This does create a degree of dependence – the individual runs the risk of being ‘chained’ to an organisational or occupational identity that means they either do not consider the possibility of a career change or are not very well prepared to implement a change of career direction. This analysis is not to deny that the individuals still exercised personal agency in terms of the choices they made about work and other areas of their life. It is simply that current (or former) work identities may loom large and, without explicit actions in terms of learning and development or guidance support, it may be difficult for individuals to achieve a sense of biographical continuity, whereby they can move comfortably between images of what they are, had been in the past and thoughts of what they might become.

On the other hand, Aaron, Sally and Richard all exhibit high commitment to work, but all three share a developed awareness that they need to develop their own skill sets rather than just taking opportunities as they present themselves in their organisational careers. They actively sought more challenging work at several stages of their career, were aware that they needed to broaden their skill sets and apply their developing skills across a range of contexts. They were in no sense 'chained' to their occupational or organisational contexts, rather they used their own skill sets as career 'anchors' that could be put down in a number of different career settings.

The cases demonstrated 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. 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. In most circumstances a strong attachment to work brings considerable benefits, including a sense of career stability and having a career 'anchor'. Dewey (1916) had seen an occupation as giving direction to life activities and as a concrete representation of continuity: a 'home' with clear psychological, social and ideological 'anchors'. However, a strong commitment to work can sometimes also act as a 'chain', especially if individuals do not update their skills, or consider possible alternatives until it becomes more difficult to achieve. In such circumstances, an external stimulus, like a career guidance and counselling intervention, is needed to help individuals manage possible career transitions. In some cases this will involve helping those who do not do this for themselves, to view aspects of current skill sets as 'anchors' that are transferable to a new setting, even when other aspects of occupational or organisational identities are left behind.

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