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## **Chapter 5**

### **Learning, career development and progression from low skilled work in developed countries**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The role of low skilled work in people's career development has been a relatively neglected topic for career development researchers and practitioners. However, given that continuing to work in low skilled employment has so many negative consequences in the labour market, then finding ways to assist individuals' progress from low skilled work is an important challenge for those interested in career development theory, research and practice. In order to support progression from low skilled work we need to understand the problems and challenges of being in low skilled work, the nature of different forms of development of skills, knowledge and understanding in different employment, training and education contexts and the form different progression pathways from low skilled employment may take. Following examination of these three areas the conclusion will focus on the role of career guidance, learning and career development in supporting people to move beyond low skilled work.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Career guidance has traditionally had a middle class orientation, focused mainly upon employment where individuals experience a sense of vocation or work has intrinsic value – with career anchors playing an important part in their life as a whole (Schein, 1978). This approach tends to overlook the role low skilled work can play in people's career

development, so this chapter will focus upon patterns of learning, development and progression from low skilled work in developed countries. The key question for career development is ‘how can we equip people to move beyond low skilled work?’ In developed economies there have been exhortations about the need, for reasons of economic competitiveness, to move towards an industrial structure with more highly skilled work (European Commission, 2005). This approach has tended to disparage the value of low skilled work in the sense of it belonging to their past – such work in the future is expected to be mainly performed in low cost countries in the developing world, where career development, occupational identities and progression pathways take on a whole set of different meanings beyond the scope of this chapter. The underplaying of the significance of low skilled work misinterprets medium term skill forecasts – although there will be far fewer low skilled jobs in developed economies in future, because of high labour turnover such jobs will be undertaken at some stage of their lives by large numbers of people. An interesting question then is what role can such low skilled work play in people’s lives and can it be accompanied by a sense of learning, progression and development.

This question is particularly relevant for career guidance practitioners because the most common way for people in low skilled work throughout Europe to upgrade their skills, knowledge and understanding is to change jobs (Brynin & Longhi, 2007). That is, the work is either more challenging in itself and/or it offers an opportunity to develop new patterns of interaction and relationships, thereby developing individuals’ abilities to make successful transitions. Being in low skilled employment is not necessarily problematic for a person’s longer term prospects but staying in such employment most certainly is (Bynner & Parsons, 1997), so supporting progression from low skilled work is an important challenge for those interested in career development theory, research and practice. In order to support progression, we need to understand the problems and challenges of being in low skilled work, the nature of different forms of development in various employment, training and education contexts and the form different progression pathways may take. Following an examination of these three areas the conclusion will focus on the role of guidance, learning and career development in supporting people to move beyond low skilled work.

### **PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF BEING IN LOW SKILLED WORK**

Low skilled work can be regarded as work which makes few demands in terms of practical skills, cognitive skills, social skills or the affective domain (Felstead, Gallie, Green, & Zhou, 2007). It offers limited opportunities for psychomotor, cognitive, social or emotional

development and mastery – the reward of doing something well (Sennett, 2008). Defining low skilled work in this way draws attention to the contextual nature of skill development – working in hotel kitchens in the 1930s was redolent with opportunities of personal development for an Old Etonian like George Orwell in a way which it was not for many others who were down and out in Paris and London and who had lived their lives in those lower class milieux (Orwell, 1933). While Orwell is an extreme example, higher education students or migrant workers ‘passing through’ low skilled work may experience significant personal learning and development in a number of ways, including learning from and about the perspectives of others.

It is also important to distinguish between low skilled and low paid work because, although they often go together, this is not always the case. For example, some forms of agricultural labour require a high degree of skill but are comparatively poorly paid. Conversely, some work, such as refuse collection, which was undemanding from a skill perspective, was nevertheless in the past much more highly rewarded than more skilled work, such as working as a home help, in local authorities, as a consequence of historic gender inequalities in the labour market (Acker, 2006). Low paid work is often clustered by industry, occupation and social class and gives rise to certain problems irrespective of skill level (Lloyd, Mason, & Mayhew, 2008), but the quality of jobs in terms of their skill content can also be problematic for individuals. Being in low skilled work, where this is associated with a lack of autonomy and discretion over work increases the likelihood of an individual suffering stress, which may spill over to other areas of their life (Marmot *et al.*, 1991). Staying in low skilled work may also serve to dampen expectations about finding work to look forward to, that is work which could be affirming, enriching or enhancing, with a strong affective dimension which can be engaging of passion, joy and spirit.

For some people low skilled work is not something which they see themselves ‘passing through’ but rather a setting which reflects their view of their ‘natural place’ (Nixon, 2006). The relative lack of inter-generational mobility in some societies (Goldthorpe & Mills, 2008) means that where other family members are in low skilled employment and/or experience significant spells of unemployment then young people from lower class backgrounds are much more likely to settle for such work over a long period of time. Where employment opportunities allow, such individuals may engage in considerable job hopping, which can help them build up their skills, but such choices may still be confined to relatively low skilled work. In such settings individual career choice is operating within the boundaries

of the opportunity structures available (Roberts, 2009), which reflect inter-relationships between factors such as gender, ethnicity, religion, family and place and labour market processes and employers' recruitment practices. These factors operate to privilege particular and different career routes and pathways for people from different backgrounds and locations, partly depending upon the social and cultural capital on which individuals can draw, including different ideas of what is regarded as 'doing well'. Most people look for work where they will fit in and can cope, but for those young people from lower social class backgrounds who have not achieved well in school, their problems are likely to be compounded if they are unable to embark on stable and progressive careers (Bradley & Devadson, 2008). Choices do have immediate consequences for successive stages of transition and development but as they operate within constrained pathways, there is a clear role for career guidance in terms of helping individuals and their families widen their horizons and consider longer term consequences.

The health of the labour market also influences the attractiveness of low skilled work, particularly for young people entering the labour market. When unemployment is high and 'warehousing' training schemes are used mainly to keep young people off the dole, while adding little to their employability (Roberts, 2009), then experience of work is valuable as it is much easier to get employment if you already have experience of working. So engaging in low skilled work early in a career does offer opportunities in a number of respects. It can be used as a platform from which to seek other employment, it can help an individual develop their adaptability – the ability to apply their developing skills, knowledge and understanding in a new context. If coupled with a significant attempt at substantive learning and development it can also lead to the individual learning how to combine work, learning and personal development (Brown *et al.*, 2010).

For young people who did not do well at school and have no appetite, at least for the time being, to continue their education and training, being in work, even low skilled employment, may represent an opportunity for them to define themselves as successful. Such positive 'identity work' may also create a platform for a later return to education and training, for example through an adult apprenticeship. It is important to remember those insights gained from neuroscience that cognitive and emotional development continue as the brain continues to change in structure up till the age of 25 (Tamnes *et al.*, 2009). This means that some young adults in low skilled employment may be readier to re-engage with learning and development in more challenging education, training or employment settings than they were

when their learner identities were more fragile immediately after leaving compulsory education (Ball, Macrae, & Maguire, 1999). Workers engaged in low skilled work late in their career may be dealing with other sets of issues. For example, they may be downshifting from more demanding work because of health issues, seeking a new balance between work and other activities or valuing work for social reasons. As such they may value support in making these transitions (McNair, 2010).

Overall, engaging in low skilled work for long periods of times is problematic in terms of learning, career development and progression, particularly where such work is highly routine. However, there are also a variety of circumstances and contexts in which low skilled work does afford opportunities for individuals to develop their careers and career guidance can help build on those opportunities.

## **SKILL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH WORK, TRAINING AND EDUCATION**

### ***Learning through challenging work***

There are many ways to develop work-related skills, knowledge and understanding in employment, training and education contexts. For many people work at different times in their life offers an important route to substantive skill development through engagement with challenging work (Brown, 2009). Although this is most obvious in knowledge intensive fields and activities such as project work and performance improvement, lower skilled work too can offer opportunities for substantive learning and development. For example, at first sight a van driver delivering sandwiches for small businesses to sell may seem relatively undemanding. However, the van driver may play a key role for the company in establishing a rapport with customers and his/her 'influencing skills' could make a significant difference to sales (Felstead, Fuller, Jewson, & Unwin, 2009). This example also demonstrates how, when a job is expanded to incorporate more complex tasks and duties, this provides opportunities for the development of higher levels of skills, knowledge and understanding at work. Similarly, any work role involving customer service can be treated as challenging. Some retail banks actively encourage applications from people who are good at engaging customers, even if they are performing low skilled work in, for example, burger chains, as managers think it is easier to develop the necessary technical skills than the 'soft skills' of interacting well with customers (Nickson, Warhurst, & Dutton, 2005).

Workers at any level of an organisation can be engaged in activities that are more or less challenging. The extent to which individuals have the opportunity to develop higher

levels of skills, knowledge and understanding at work is an open question. Some forms of low skilled work allow individuals to build up considerable organisational and work process knowledge. For example, some hospital porters treat their job as simply moving supplies and people from one point to another as directed, whereas others engage patients providing them with valuable knowledge that was not gleaned from clinicians. The latter may act as a key ‘unofficial’ communications channel between departments on issues such as admissions and bed allocation, giving advance notice of information which has not yet been processed through formal channels. Both the hospital porter with well developed networks and the worker in a fast food restaurant skilled in customer service draw attention to another way that work may act as a route to substantive learning and development – through interactions at work.

### ***Learning through interactions at work***

Working and learning are social activities and work relationships, interactions and learning shape opportunities for the development of work-relevant skills, knowledge and understanding. It is an open question whether interactions at work do lead to substantive learning and development (Brown, 2009). How workers at any level of an organisation can engage in interactions with potential for development is illustrated through a striking contrast. Workers may engage in highly routine activities with little challenge, and yet take on additional responsibilities as, for example, health and safety representatives, shop stewards or union learning representatives. These duties require the exercise and development of higher level skills, knowledge and understanding. On the other hand, some newly qualified graduate engineers were given routine work, because of a dearth of challenging projects in a recession (Eraut *et al.*, 2007). The lack of the expected (and promised) professional interactions compromised their professional development as the engineers needed to apply the skills they had developed during training and being well paid to work largely in isolation on routine tasks was no consolation for the lack of opportunities to learn through rich interactions at work (Eraut *et al.*, 2007).

One type of interaction at work has a direct development function and that is where someone explicitly supports the learning of another, whether by a supervisor, mentor or colleague (Eraut, 2007). Getting feedback on aspects of your performance over time can be very helpful in improving performance and/or general skills development. Feedback can take many forms including immediate comment on aspects of a task given on the spot; informal conversations away from the job; as part of formal roles such as mentor or supervisor on an

employee's short to medium term progress and regular formative feedback; or a review designed to give employees feedback on strengths and weaknesses and ascertaining views on future learning opportunities and expectations (Eraut, 2009). Such support is often informal as when an older colleague supports the learning and development of a younger colleague but it can also operate the other way where a younger colleague is more familiar with new ways of working. Making sure some people are good at supporting the learning and development of others can be an essential element in how work teams are put together.

### ***Skill development through education, training or changing jobs***

Both challenges and interactions at work can be fundamental to the work itself or linked through the context of work. Thus some forms of low skilled work can still provide significant learning and development opportunities. On the other hand, in some routine work challenges and opportunities for meaningful engagement with others are missing. In these cases if individuals wish to develop their work-related skills, knowledge and understanding they either have to engage in some form of education and training or change their jobs. Work-related training can be an important means of upskilling employees. However, the problem for employees in low skilled jobs is gaining access to such training – the more highly skilled you are already the more likely you are to be provided with such training. Some organisations do operate 'skills escalators' where all employees are able to access training which will equip them with the skills to at least compete for more highly skilled work. Such schemes have had some limited success, although sometimes take up is limited, particularly when training takes place in your own time, or because of other barriers to engagement with training, including issues around self-confidence, learning identities, time, cost and other responsibilities (McNair, 2010).

An alternative approach facilitated by some organisations or by individuals themselves is to engage with education opportunities which may not be directly related to their current employment. Some organisations have offered access to education and training opportunities for all employees as part of an employee development scheme, whereas in other cases adult basic skills provision has been targeted at those in low skilled employment. The employer is not directly involved as provision is organised through a trade union or an external educational institution or other learning provider (Wolf & Evans, 2010). The individual may also act independently and choose to take a (part-time) course while continuing to work without any employer support. All these routes are established and, depending on the degree of state, employer or other support, individual characteristics and the

nature of the particular scheme, may have more or less success: for example, in developing language learning provision for migrant workers (Wolf & Evans, 2010).

Switching to a job with a greater degree of challenge and/or more opportunities for interaction is the most obvious way that workers can develop as they learn while working (Brown, 2009). However, even switching between different types of low skilled employment could still offer opportunities for personal development, as individuals have to learn to apply their skills and knowledge in a new context and may need to develop new forms of situational awareness and ways of working. This type of development, however, perhaps because it occurs naturally while working, is often overlooked by public policy. Some work-based adult basic skills schemes have proved very expensive to deliver and resources have been spread very thinly (Wolf & Evans, 2010). Thus, instead of exhorting reluctant employers and employees to undertake special courses it might be much more effective to allow employers to offer relatively unchallenging low skilled work, but in return allow workers access to career guidance when they feel ready to move on.

### **PROGRESSION PATHWAYS FROM LOW SKILLED EMPLOYMENT**

For many adults learning and development takes place while they are working, rather than in recognisable education or training settings, so we should perhaps differentiate between different types of low skilled employment according to the extent to which they offer particular individuals opportunities for learning, development and progression to more challenging work. For example, a switch from working on an assembly line to working as a tyre fitter may offer more prospects for eventual progression to more skilled work. Similarly, for migrant workers, low skilled work which is rich in opportunities to improve their language skills is likely to be more rewarding than employment with very limited opportunities for interaction with native speakers. Traditionally, in some sectors working in low skilled employment at some stage of your career was considered useful for giving perspective to later more highly skilled work. For instance, performing routine work on food preparation in a hotel kitchen was thought to give insight into the dynamics of how a complex operation worked in practice.

Some types of low skilled work have very clear progression pathways for those who demonstrate their abilities while performing more routine activities. For example, in a call centre success in highly routinised work following a script may lead to work with greater discretion where an individual is expected to draw on a fuller set of decision making, problem-solving and communication skills. Similarly, someone doing highly routine work in



the retail sector may progress through to more skilled work involving specialist, supervisory or managerial responsibilities. Experience at work and a progressive deepening understanding of the work process may also lead to greater opportunities for the exercise of judgement, situational awareness and understanding, involvement in continuing improvement activities or opportunities for supporting the learning of others. All these activities can lead to the development and broadening of skill sets of individuals, even if much of their everyday work remains routine. In other cases, however, where task discretion is minimal and the pace of work is externally driven it may be almost impossible to distinguish between performance of employees and development is only likely through work linked activities or from changing jobs.

Individual progression from low skilled employment can also be facilitated by drawing on contacts or networks developed through work. Social capital, developed through participation in work-related networks, can play a role in helping individuals sustain their employability (Brown, 2005). In a range of contexts those individuals whose work regularly took them to other workplaces, or who changed jobs frequently early in their career, often developed strong networks and their social and networking skills could be very helpful both for their skill development at work and in keeping them abreast of a range of opportunities. The informal learning associated with personal networks could result in individuals hearing about job opportunities and different ways of developing their skills, knowledge and experience (Brown, 2005).

Such networks often had a pragmatic and informal nature and the strength of the weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) associated with these contacts were such that the networks could spread out to include the help of relatives, friends, colleagues or others and could be an effective way to help individuals critically reflect upon work and learning and become more self-directed in work-related learning. That much learning at work is collaborative can also lead to individuals in low skilled employment recovering a sense that they can be effective learners, particularly as the range of types of knowledge which are useful extend beyond the know-what and know-why associated with much formal education. Practical know-how associated with the particular work processes becomes important (for example in avoiding machine or process break-downs) as does know-who (in relation to who to approach to deal with particular issues, particularly where this means going round the formal channels). On the other hand, many individuals also recognise that learning 'by doing' (accumulating experience through performing work processes) or 'by using' (particular tools and

techniques) can often only take you so far in terms of progression from low skilled employment. In such circumstances, where engagement with more substantive learning and development is seen as critical, use of more formal education and training may be considered.

### **CONCLUSION: THE ROLE OF GUIDANCE IN SUPPORTING PROGRESSION FROM LOW SKILLED WORK**

For employees in low skilled work one popular way to upgrade their work-related skills, knowledge and understanding is by changing jobs (Brynin & Longhi, 2007). Career guidance can facilitate that process, particularly as many people welcome support in making such decisions (Brown *et al.*, 2010). Public policy should therefore promote guidance to encourage people in undemanding work to find more challenging employment (CEDEFOP, 2010). Even switching between forms of low skilled employment may build confidence in individuals that they are able to apply their skills, knowledge and understanding in a number of contexts and this can act as a considerable spur to further development.

Some employees engaged in low skilled work already have skill sets which are highly valued in the labour market and are just ‘passing through’ such work: for example, graduates moving on to career related employment (Purcell, Elias, & Wilton, 2004). However, other employees need to develop their skills further in order to find longer-term career related employment and career guidance can play a role in helping them articulate both the types of skills and knowledge which they may wish to develop and the education, training or employment contexts in which such skills and knowledge may be developed. For example, practical or psychomotor skills could be developed through a combination of work and training, while cognitive skills might be developed in formal education within integrated programmes such as adult apprenticeships. Such apprenticeships also engage with issues linked to identity development and the affective domain as part of programmes to develop ways of thinking and practising appropriate for a skilled worker.

In other cases, guidance may help workers reflect upon the nature of their skill sets and whether switching between low skilled work contexts could nevertheless help them develop their adaptability or employability. Guidance can also help employees in low skilled work change their perspective towards aspects of learning, training and working which may help them become more reflexive in how they view opportunities, themselves and their support networks and help them develop a new sense of direction and become more proactive in their own career development. For older workers in low skilled employment, guidance

may help them understand the risks they will face later in life of premature exit from and an inability to return to the labour market (McNair, 2010). In all stages of life career guidance can help workers in low skilled employment consider the most effective ways they can deploy and develop their skills, knowledge and understanding through a range of employment, education and training contexts.

However, workers engaged in low skilled work still face some barriers to accessing such provision, despite attempts both to mainstream service provision and develop a greater range of services, especially to cater for the information, counselling and learning needs of more hard-to-reach groups (CEDEFOP, 2010). Access to career guidance provision has been widened in some contexts through a combination of web-based and telephone provision to go alongside more traditional face-to-face guidance which is generally much harder for those in employment to access. However, the development of web-based information sources, provided by a wide variety of providers, has far outstripped provision of impartial labour market information and purely guidance-oriented online services to such an extent that quality assurance of guidance support has itself become a priority (CEDEFOP, 2010). So meeting the challenges of securing progression from low skilled work and gaining access to appropriate guidance support to facilitate career development continue to require a combination of individual action and appropriate structural support.

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