

## *The personal is political:*

# A CALLING TO SUSTAINABLE CAREER DEVELOPMENT?



GILL FRIGERIO, Associate Professor at the University of Warwick, and MIRIAM DIMSITS, owner of *Everything about Careers* and external lecturer at Aarhus University, take a look at how the politics of sustainable career development meshes with other key concepts in the careers world.

The tensions we juggle in career development work come from our position at the intersection of individual and societal concerns. This reflects the same tensions as the dominant socio-political ideologies of the day. Nowhere is this shown more clearly than in the struggle between the need to find work in the here and now and concern for the future of the planet.

This is deep stuff: for today's graduates, the existential nature of the climate emergency brings together a powerful clash of activism and despair, of hope for a fulfilling personal future and hopelessness about the future of humanity. Here, we seek to integrate this with a further concept that informs our work, that of 'calling', and see what it means for our ways of enacting sustainable career development.

### SUSTAINABLE CAREER GUIDANCE

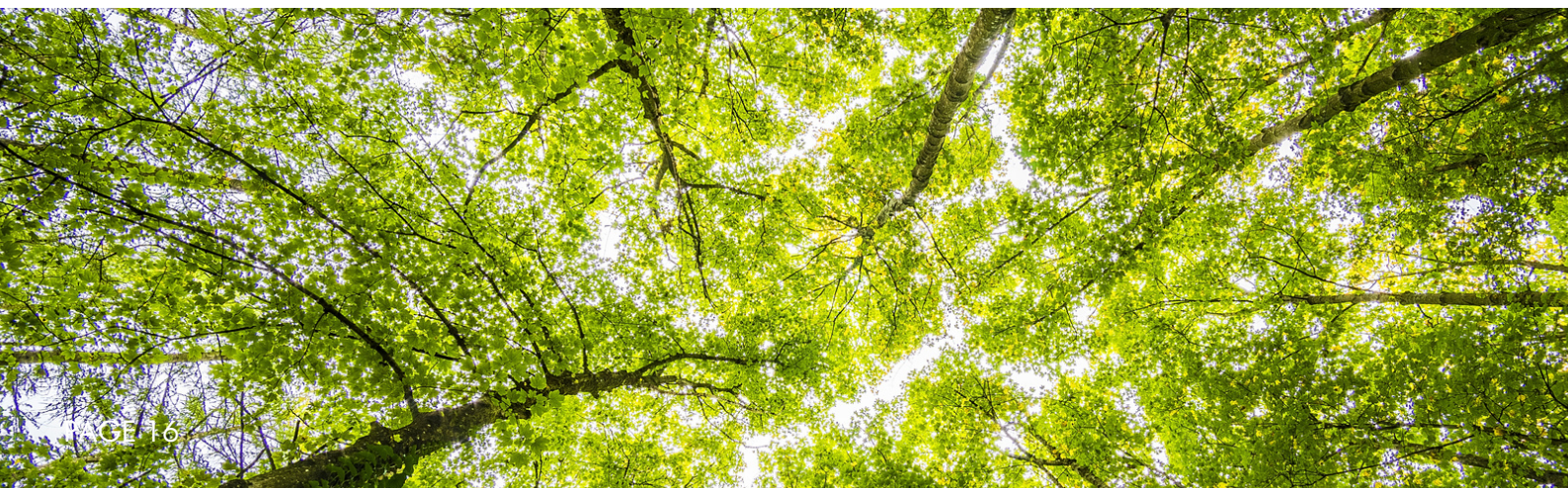
Since Peter Plant first articulated the importance of green guidance, careers researchers and practitioners have argued for a broadening of perspective to 'sustainable career guidance' (Di Fabio & Bucci, 2016; Pouyaud & Guichard, 2017; Dimsits, 2022) which supports 'career development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (2021). This is vital for invoking the UN's sustainable development goals (SDGs) for individual career action. By viewing the 17 SDGs, the career development professional can invite global, societal and ethical perspectives into careers work with graduates looking for meaningful ways to unite skills, competence and livelihood.

### SUSTAINABILITY AS A CALLING

The motivation for many students to pursue sustainable careers relates to deep-seated matters of personal vocation or 'calling' – a concept which has extended from Judeo-Christian religious roots to become widely understood as the meaning and purpose we find in work. In fact, 'calling' features extensively in the scholarly literature on careers and is much researched and debated. It is even the focus of one module offered by the Career Studies team at Warwick, where we look at integrating it with a career development focus on wellbeing, happiness, values and subjective career success. We also connect it to clients' potential draw towards sustainable careers.

Definitions of 'calling' encompass both a person's inner drive and process of self-actualisation and motivations of duty and service. As people perceive, enact, hone and live out a calling in a variety of contexts, career development practitioners can support them in crafting scenarios which meet their needs. Studies suggest that people who self-describe as having a calling are happier at work, and employers value people with callings, with reports of greater commitment and productivity – so it can look like a win-win.

“ **Work must be sustainable in more ways than one** ”



## CALLINGS AND ETHICS

There is a dark side, however, to this level of work commitment: it can lead to perfectionism and overwork and make it harder to manage adverse or stressful work events. If a calling can't be followed, or a lived calling goes wrong, how do we respond?

It also plays into situations where a calling traps people in contexts with poor conditions, and perhaps enables employers to neglect staff wellbeing: very committed staff may work for low (or no) pay, removing at least one driver to improve conditions. The realities of this are played out in contemporary industrial relations, as well as evidenced in numerous studies ([Bunderson and Thompson, 2009](#); [Schabram and Maitlis, 2017](#)).

This requires ethical consideration of the career development professional's role in helping students balance their calling to sustainable careers. On the one hand, we encourage this human drive towards a societal goal outside of the individual, but pursuing this career goal must never be at the expense of individual autonomy, humanity and compassion.

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***We can encourage students to consider what they need in order to work sustainably***

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## DECENT WORK FOR EVERYONE

One of the UN SDGs is for decent work for everyone, referring to quality and dignity in work and respecting the rights, safety, and equality of workers. Even with a calling, precarious and exploitative working conditions such as unpaid internships, long hours cultures, increased workloads and devalued pay are not sustainable.

We owe it to our activist-oriented students to discuss these matters with them. We can't pre-determine the job roles that contribute to sustainability: knowledge constantly deepens, and technology develops to handle sustainability challenges. Sustainable career guidance must support users in learning to explore and examine how their career can contribute to sustainability and to encourage this as a lifelong task, as the labour market changes.

As part of this, we can work with students to help them reframe their thinking and find how they can support and advocate for sustainability. We can also encourage them to and consider what they need in order to work sustainably.



## THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

The green transition in the labour market sees employers and organisations looking to gain the competitive advantage, through recruitment of a properly qualified workforce. Recruitment strategies are then often led by new positive sounding 'greenwashing' narratives on how your career in this company will be particularly green and sustainable. The risk here is that these narratives are uncritically and seamlessly adopted by graduates and other professionals.

This turns political matters to the personal for us. Is a call to a purposeful career contributing to sustainability? Or is it a masked exploitation of individuals' good, ethical and socially responsible intentions? It is important to discuss whose interests are being served, what forms of society are offered to the labour force in these greenwashing narratives and ask if these are socially just ways of working and living.

Students drawn towards working in sustainability may need help to see themselves as part of a wider movement, and to understand that their work must be sustainable in more ways than one. Sustainable careers work will enable career development practitioners to maintain autonomy, freedom and decency as we work to save the world.



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