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Diversification of careers of knowledge workers *A European perspective from the WORKS project*



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Work Organisation and Restructuring in the Knowledge Society
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- Conceptual approach to careers and occupational trajectories of "knowledge workers"
- Empirical findings: the diversification of careers and occupational trajectories
- Key issues for career development and labour market organisation



Conceptual approach

• Careers and trajectories

- Concept of career: related to human resource management. Focus on individual paths within or between organisations.
- Concept of trajectory: related to the labour market. Focus on insertion, mobility, transitions, occupational paths (including conversion)

• Organisational versus boundaryless careers

- Organisational careers: formalised paths within organisations
- "Protean" career: not a model; a script rather than a path, managed by the individual.
 - Accumulating experiences + learning + own employability + fulfilment.



Conceptual approach

• Organisational versus boundaryless careers (continued)

- Boundaryless careers: one step further
 - Weak environments (unstable, unpredictable, self-designed)
 - "Knowing" competences: knowing how, whom, why
 - Enactment process
- Often considered as the emerging career profile of knowledge / creative workers – and as a new paradigm in career theory.
- Constrained nomadism may lead to chronic flexibility

• Trajectories in the labour market

- Studies of transitions in the labour market, shaped by employment policies, labour legislation, labour market institutions
- Identification of "transition phases"
- Trends: multiplication of transitions; diversification of trajectories; but persistence of linear trajectories



Empirical findings: diversification

● Brief overview of the methodology

- In-depth interviews concerning the individual experience of occupational changes, including a biographical dimension. Focus on career construction and choices; occupational identities; quality of work; learning and skills development; work life balance.

● The WOKRS sample of "knowledge-based" occupations

- 3 occupational groups: dress designers + ICT researchers + software professionals
 - 113 interviews, 14 case study reports, 11 countries
- Not covering the whole range of knowledge workers, as defined by several scholars (including Castells and Reich)
- ... but attempting to avoid reducing "knowledge intensive" occupations to ICT occupations



Empirical findings: diversification

● Varieties of organisational careers

- Hierarchical organisational careers
 - Still very frequent, including in IT. Step-by-step progression, however through a reduced number of steps
 - Challenged by mergers and restructuring, and by customer-oriented skills shift
 - Leading to managerial positions
 - Persistence of the glass ceiling for women
- Technical organisational careers
 - Increasing level of expertise is increasingly specialised areas
 - Recognition by peers and by international institutions
 - Leading to expert positions (but gender discriminations in expertise)
- Multi-organisational careers
 - Moving to other organisations to achieve better positions / wages
 - Leading both managerial or expert positions



Empirical findings: diversification

• Singularities of boundaryless careers

- Among dress designers: either artistic or entrepreneurial drivers
 - Skills passport = the "portfolio"
 - Relevance of the 3 "knowing" of the boundaryless model
- Among IT professionals: the free-lance model
 - Not representative of IT careers; more frequent in multimedia and Internet than in mainstream IT.
 - Leading either to entrepreneurship or to organisational integration
 - Not fully fitting with the boundaryless model
 - Are boundaryless careers trapped in a core / periphery model ?

• Widespread of chronic flexibility

- More frequent than boundaryless model: constrained mobility due to restructuring, renunciations, problems in the management of the portfolio.



Empirical findings: diversification

• More frequent transitions in the labour market

- Mainly at the beginning of the occupational trajectory, or after company restructuring
- More frequent among women than men (particularly reorientations towards IT occupations after other jobs)
- Sensitive to fashions (as well in dress design as in IT)
- Example: the multiplication of "transitional settings" for IT professionals



Conclusions and key issues

• Career management

- Need for a "life-cycle approach" to careers in knowledge-intensive occupations (also in order to anticipate the ageing effects)
- Emerging crisis of the "protean" model in large knowledge-intensive companies

• Labour market management

- Relevance of transitional settings
 - Facilitating reorientations and giving frames the lost nomads
 - Managing the effects of restructuring
- Framing learning and training in occupational trajectories



References to WORKS reports

- Valenduc G., Vendramin P., Krings B.-J., Nierling L., **Occupational case studies - Synthesis report and comparative analysis**, WORKS Report D11 (2007)
- Valenduc G., Vendramin P., Pedaci M., Piersanti M., **Changing careers and trajectories - How individuals cope with organisational change and restructuring**, WORKS Report D12.4 (2009)
- All WORKS reports are downloadable from www.worksproject.be

