

New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 54

Work Identities in Europe

Context of the Research

Employees in Europe are increasingly exposed to demands for flexibility and mobility at work. They are challenged to adjust to continuous changes like technological innovations, the development of globalised economies and organisational restructuring.

Adjusting to these changes requires specific learning and work attitudes that enable the individual to actively engage in work processes in order to ensure their successful integration into the labour market. “Work identities” can play a decisive role in this process as they help employees to define a professional orientation and develop work attachment and commitment.

The project has mapped some of the different ways “work identities” are composed, decomposed and restructured in a time of change. It has investigated the elements that influence identity formation processes at work and how these processes develop when employees are challenged to cope with flexibility, changing work settings, new skill requirements and demands for greater mobility.

By looking at how these processes influence an individual’s concept of work and career orientations, work identities were conceptualised as forms of identification individuals develop with their job, work setting or their employer. Research confirms a strong connection between employees’ forms of identification with work and their work commitment, motivation, performance and quality of work.

In order to represent the variety and diversity of Europe with regards to the cultural, socio-economic and political embedding of work concepts, occupations and vocational education and training systems, the project was conducted in seven European countries - Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Spain and the United Kingdom - focusing on different occupations across five contrasting sectors - metal working industry/engineering, health care, telecommunications/IT, tourism and the timber/furniture industry.

Key Conclusions

1. Three dominant modes of 'strategic action' taken by employees in forming their work-related identities have been identified: -
 - In all of the occupational groups investigated, employees were found with an affiliation towards classical types of occupational identities with a high level of identification either with their occupation, the employer, the product or the daily work tasks. For this group of employees, changes at work present a great challenge, particularly for those who do not have the means or personal resources to adjust flexibly to new demands. In this case employees typically develop a 'retreat' strategy by holding on to traditional forms of identification with work aimed at conserving as much as possible their current work status and job profile. This group of employees was largely resisting demands for greater flexibility with little or no inclination towards learning, career development or changing the work setting or employer.
 - At the other extreme, highly dynamic and pro-active employees were identified, with flexible and transitional forms of work identity, who were able to anticipate and internalise the requirements for continuous adjustments and changes at work. Those were highly flexible and mobile, often combining the desired mix of technical and hybrid social skills. This group is characterised by using flexibility and mobility as instruments to actively develop their career plans and professional development. Their work identity is highly individualised, primarily based upon their personal skills, capacity for continuous learning and a project-oriented work attitude. Flexible and passing work identities were typically found among the higher qualified *and* the lower qualified who were holding temporary, short-term employment contracts.
 - Between these two extremes the project identified a continuum of various forms of work identities that can be characterised as different kinds of 'adjustment', 're-definition' or 'cross-border' strategies. These generally represent 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 rather than an ideal situation. Typically factors from outside work (family commitments, personal networks, attachment to a particular location) may 'hold' an individual in place. The individual may still seek to satisfy the expectations (of employer, colleagues and customers, patients or clients) of how they should perform their role, but they typically have some reservations about their work or employer. However, employees may remain in the same job for a considerable period of time, but may (internally or externally) move on if the 'holding' circumstances or external conditions change.
4. Employer-employee relations are increasingly based upon a 'user-provider' concept of work by which the employee is rather considered as a self-employed

‘entrepreneur’ who is selling his or her services, skills and competencies upon demand. This model assumes a high level of flexibility, continuous learning, risk management capacity and the ability to actively shape and construct one’s own work identity and career orientation.

5. This new form of employer-employee relationship has a number of implications:
 - It promotes and supports a general trend towards the ‘individualisation’ of work identities away from classical collective forms of work-related identities. This makes collective bargaining for workers and employees difficult. Instead, collective bargaining strategies are increasingly being replaced by individual negotiation to deal with tension and conflict situations at work.
 - For the employer, it transfers responsibilities for training, learning and professional development from the company to the individual level.
 - For the individual employee a pro-active, ‘entrepreneurial’ multi-skilled work attitude also generates complex, flexible and multi-dimensional work identities that can continuously be adjusted to the requirements of change. Stability and continuity that were formally generated through, for example, permanent employment contracts and a stable company attachment, increasingly have to be actively constructed by the employees themselves.
4. However, not all employees and workers possess the personal resources to cope with demands for making flexible adjustments in relation to their job, skills and career orientation. For example, high pressure for time flexibility and horizontal mobility that involve changing work tasks, professional roles or employers, often lead to stress and a lack of control over work performance. This can be observed especially within occupations and organisations where the requirements for flexibility and mobility are high and related forms of work organisation and tasks are changing rapidly such as in the IT sector.
5. There is also a danger of segmentation of the work force by excluding an increasing number of people who cannot or do not have the means to be an ‘entrepreneurial’ type of employee, because they lack the right qualifications or skills; they may come from a disadvantaged socio-economic background; they may not be very flexible in general or prefer to hold on to more classical forms of work concepts.
6. The number of employees in Europe who are not of an ‘entrepreneurial’ type and thus could be at a disadvantage is potentially high.
7. This has implications for the social costs that might be incurred by government and other agencies. These costs are dependent on the extent to which workers and employees are equipped and prepared to cope with these changing requirements.

Key Recommendations

1. Most employees, but particularly workers at the intermediate skills level over 35 years of age need to be actively supported and guided to cope with changing work settings to avoid them falling into a passive 'retreat' strategy that will ultimately lead to their professional exclusion. Work-related socialisation and learning can play a decisive role in better equipping employees to deal with such challenges.
2. There is a need to encourage flexibility in learning during and between initial education and work-related continuous vocational training by:
 - Promoting 'curricular flexibility' through the development of a balanced mix between specific/technical knowledge and transversal/generic skills;
 - The accreditation of informal learning to allow for a voluntary and effective access to further learning, promotion and horizontal job movements;
 - The development of a 'competence audit regime' ("Bilan de Compétences") that can be used as a guidance instrument to support the individuals in successfully responding to the demands for flexibility and mobility and empower them to become agents of their own socio-professional development.
3. There is a need to develop more comprehensive and active socio-vocational inclusion/re-inclusion programmes based upon effective and individualised accompaniment and continuing follow-up.
4. There is a need to encourage self-initiated and directed continuous vocational learning and 'competence audits' for self-guided socio-professional development.

Further Information

The full title of the project is: "FAME - Vocational Identity, Flexibility and Mobility in the European Labour Market". The final report was completed in July 2003.

The Project's web site: <http://www.itb.uni-bremen.de/projekte/fame/fame.htm>

[Partner details](#)

Key Publications

Working Papers:

FAME Consortium, *Work-related Identities in Europe: How Personnel Management and HR Policies Shape Workers' Identities*, ITB Working Paper Series No. 46, University of Bremen 2003.

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Book:

Marhuenda, F., Navas, A. and Roda, F. *Explorando las identidades profesionales. Materiales curriculares para el área de FOL*, Universitat de València, ISBN: 84-370-5546-6, 2003.

Martínez. F., *Condiciones de trabajo e identidad laboral en el sector hotelero en la Comunidad Valenciana*. Universitat de València, ISBN: 84-370-5655-1, 2003.

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Brown, A. and Kirpal, S., "Old nurses with new qualifications are best': managers' attitudes towards the recruitment of health care professionals in Estonia, France, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom", in Warhurst, C., Keep, E. and Grugulis, I. (eds.), *The Skills that Matter*, New York, Palgrave, 2003.

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On-line publications:

Dif, M., "On the Emerging Models of Labour Flexibility within the French CVT Institutions: Implications for inclusion, skill and identity formation", paper presented at

TSER FORUM on "Identities in VET and Labour Market", Nant Gwythern, Wales, 29 June - 2 July 2000.

http://www.theknownet.com/xml/forum_front/changing_identities/meat.html

Dif, M., "Induced Labour Mobility through Continuing Vocational Training: Investigating its Development in the French Context during the Last Three Decades", in Manning, S. & Raffe, D. (eds.), *VETNET ECER 2000 Proceedings*, <http://www.b.shuttle.de/wifo/abstract/difmh01.htm>

(also at ERIC "Resource in Education" since September 2002)

Research Institutions

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Departament de Didàctica i Organització Escolar, University of Valencia, Spain

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University of Patras, Greece

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