

# Work identities in comparative perspectives: the role of national and sectoral context variables

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## SUMMARY

New normative ideas about flexibility, employability and lifelong learning are shifting labour market requirements as they induce flexible employment patterns and new skilling needs. While the model of a typical progressive career based on possession of a particular set of (occupational) skills has been largely undermined, employees are increasingly challenged to secure their employability by constantly adjusting their skills profiles and manage their own individualised careers. Such trends increasingly affect workers at all skills levels in both production and service sectors. Several indicators and studies support the hypothesis that a new entrepreneurial type of worker, characterised by individualised sets of skills, internalised control mechanisms and the prioritisation of transferable over technical skills, will gradually become the new prototype highly desired by managers and human resources development experts. Based on findings of the 5th EU framework project '*Vocational identity, flexibility and mobility in the European labour market*', this paper argues that most employees in Europe at intermediate skills level are lacking the resources and capacities to fulfil the requirements of potentially developing into an entrepreneurial type of employee. The focus of this paper is the extent to which different national and sectoral contexts can create a supportive or an adverse environment for employees to develop the ability to deal with great changes at work.

## Key words

Vocational identity, flexibility, work concepts, vocational training, career orientation, professional development

## Introduction

Work identities vary in both the intensity with which they are held and the significance individuals ascribe to them (<sup>1</sup>). They may or may not be of great significance to an individual and they change in their meaning for the individual over the life course and the personal occupational trajectory (Heinz, 2003). As work identities are subject to change and adaptation, they are highly dynamic and dependent on a variety of factors and conditions (Brown, 1997). Still, the concept of work identity can provide a useful means of understanding how individuals relate to their working life and project their future professional development. Further, the theory of work-related socialisation assumes that work identities play a decisive role in helping individuals to define professional orientation and to develop work attachment and commitment (Heinz, 1995; 2002).

While work continues to remain a formative element of the overall identity of an individual, it also constitutes a medium for personal self-realisation and the implementation of biographic intentions and interests. Thus, work in its institutionalised form not only serves social reproduction purposes in a materialistic form, but it also has a vital function in its role as an identity- and sense-giving purpose throughout the life course (Hoff et al., 1985). In addition, work and employment represent one of the key links for conveying social relations. Being integrated into a work context and/or pursuing an occupational specialisation is a major source of the feeling of one's own value, and the means by which someone presents himself to the outside world (Goffman, 1969).

The dynamics between identity formation and the integration into work contexts are certainly changing as employees in Europe are increasingly challenged to meet demands for flexibility and mobility at work (FAME consortium 2003, Kirpal 2004a). Responding to continuous changes at work not only affects employees' professional orientations and career patterns, but also requires that individuals develop specific learning and work attitudes that enable them to engage actively (and positively) in work processes to ensure their successful integration into different work settings and the labour market as a whole. Work identities can help to foster this integration process.

However, internalised work identities can also restrict people in their flexibility by confining them to certain professional roles and preventing them from developing broader occupational orientations (Loogma et al.,

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(<sup>1</sup>) The term 'work identity' makes reference to any kind of identity formation processes that develop through the interaction between the individual and the work context, including vocational education and training. Essentially, vocational, occupational or professional identity can be used as synonyms, but each of these terms may more specifically refer to certain features or a specific concept of work. For example, occupational identity may be more applicable to labour markets and work concepts that are structured along occupations, whereas professional identity is typically used in connection with the so-called professions. Work identity is supposed to be the most inclusive terminology in this context.

2004). The dynamics between developing strong work identities and being able to respond to new flexibility paradigms and changing work demands has been the research focus of the 5th EU framework project *Vocational identity, flexibility and mobility in the European labour market (FAME)*. How individuals develop certain mechanisms and patterns of strategic action in order to deal with those dynamics has been at the heart of several publications in connection with this research project that involved partners from the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Spain and the United Kingdom (UK) (Brown, 2004; Brown et. al., 2004; Dif, 2004; Marhuenda et al., 2004). This article, however, does not so much discuss individual strategies, but shifts the focus of attention to the structural embedding of work identities by looking at how different national and sectoral contexts may influence identity formation at work. The role of vocational education and training (systems) is being looked at more closely as a mechanism at institutional level that connects work-related socialisation with labour market developments. Discussing the role of vocational training in different contexts will help to understand the interdependence between institutional structures, occupational socialisation and the formation of work identities.

Work concepts and employment arrangements vary considerably between European countries and sectors. As employees develop their work identities in the framework of different national and sectoral contexts, we can expect great diversity in how they are being equipped and prepared to handle changes at work and shifting skills requirements. The following paper highlights some of these differentiations by synthesising research findings from the above project.

## Methods

Work identities develop in the course of complex negotiation processes at the interface between personal resources, attitudes and values on the one hand, and work processes and settings on the other hand. They manifest themselves in the interplay between individual dispositions and structural conditions of the work context. In terms of the structural conditions, the project tried to take account of national economies, sectors/occupations and the company environment. Those were regarded as independent variables that create different kinds of restrictions and opportunities to which employees are challenged to respond. For example, the national vocational education and training system, sector-specific patterns of employment in terms of working hours, salary levels and demands on flexibility, and particular occupational traditions influence how specific work settings evolve. At the same time companies shape employees' immediate working environment as they respond to macro-level requirements by adjusting, for example, their organisational structure, job profiles and recruitment policies. In addition, they may actively try to shape work-related identities and

attitudes of employees through their human resources and recruitment policies (FAME Consortium, 2003).

While the first project phase consisted of a literature review to clarify how concepts of work and work identities are nationally and historically embedded in the respective partner countries (Laske, 2001a), the sectoral and company-specific context variables were assessed through an empirical investigation with managers and representatives of human resources departments conducted in 2001 and 2002. The objective of those interviews was to assess an organisational perspective and employers' expectations of employees' learning and work attitudes. The focus was on exploring structural conditions that would specify organisational structures, work profiles and skilling needs, and how managers assess changes at work (in terms of flexibility, mobility, work organisation, working conditions and recruitment policies) that have occurred during the last decade. Interview questions also related to how managers experience and value employees' capacity to deal with those changes and how this might affect employees' work attitude and identity formation at work.

The project applied semi-structured interviews that were based on common interview guidelines and evaluation criteria and complemented with case study methods. To account for varying structures of work organisation and settings, the research covered various occupations across five contrasting sectors and seven different national economies as well as small, medium and large (including multinational) companies (see figure 1 for detail). The combination of countries represented different cultural, socio-economic and political embeddings of work concepts and occupations. The core partners, Estonia, France, Germany, Spain and the UK, conducted large sample interviews, each involving at least seven companies per sector (N=132). The Czech Republic and Greece assumed the role of critical observers, contrasting the research findings of the core partners with results from small-sample empirical investigations.

The guiding principle behind sector selection was diversity, to represent

Figure 1: Overview of the investigated sectors in each partner country

		Sectors of investigation					
		Metal/ engineering	Timber and furniture	Health care (²)	Telecomm.(²)	IT sector (²)	Tourism
Partner country	Estonia		x	x		x	
	France	x		x	x	(x)	
	Germany	x		x	x	x	
	Spain	x		x			x
	UK	x		x	x	x	
	Czech Rep. (¹)				(x)	x	x
	Greece (¹)						x

(¹) Czech Republic and Greece conducted small-sample empirical research.

(²) Samples in telecommunications and Information technology (IT) comprised many 'overlapping' cases due to an increasing move of firms towards providing integrated telecom and IT services.

different occupational traditions and work settings, on the one hand, and different dynamics and challenges in terms of flexibility and mobility, on the other. This article synthesises the results from the literature review and the empirical investigation with managers and representatives of human resources departments, looking more closely at the 'independent variables' of work identity formation. The dependent variables, the kinds of strategies that employees develop to deal with great changes at work and how this affects their levels of identification with work (or their employer) can only briefly be touched upon in the framework of this article. Results from interviews with over 500 employees at intermediate skills level that analyse in detail employees' patterns of adjustments are published elsewhere (see above).

## National contexts: the historical-cultural embedding of work identities

Work concepts are defined differently in different European countries and, consequently, vocational training systems assume different functions in how they respond to labour market demands and skills developments. When looking at France and Germany, for example, we find a relatively stable continuing development of occupational structures and closely related vocational training systems. Occupational employment arrangements and training systems are geared towards responding to emerging labour market demands as training structures and vocational tracks are constantly being adjusted.

In Germany, the concept of *Beruf* has, over centuries, shaped occupational identities, attaching them to the prestige of vocational preparation, qualification standards and professional norms and ethics. Having its origin in the medieval age, this concept has also influenced other parts of continental Europe, establishing a strong connection between skills acquisition and occupational labour markets. In this context, the socialising function of apprenticeships (traditionally in crafts and trade) and vocational education and training played a central role for work-related identity formation processes (Laske, 2001b). As the basis of the dual training system, the concept of *Beruf* still presents the dominant organisational principle for vocational education and training and labour markets in Germany, largely defining skills requirements and adjustments (Greinert, 1997). Initial vocational training continues to play a strong role for socialising young people into acquiring an occupational specialisation, which is linked closely to belonging to certain professional communities through occupationally defined categories with which individuals identify.

Through this system, the relative position of the vocational track, as opposed to the academic route, has traditionally been very strong in Germany, much stronger than in other countries (Lane, 1988; Cantor, 1989). Indeed,

even with very little cross-transfer into, for example, universities, not only was apprenticeship training highly regarded, but there were (for young men, at least) plenty of opportunities for progression in employment and to obtain further technical or supervisory qualifications (Sauter, 1995). However, with the academic route having become more popular during the last two decades, there are great concerns that the status of the vocational track could suffer (Nijhof et al., 2002; Stenström et al., 2000; OECD, 1998). These concerns are linked to the collapse of the virtual guarantee of progression into well-paid, skilled permanent employment, with prospects of further progression, for a sizeable proportion of the apprentice cohort. Reuling (1998) argues that the combination of training for an occupation and training through an occupation is a particular strength of the German system. If the link with progression in employment is broken, then that makes highly specialised vocational education a riskier proposition.

France also has strong occupational traditions and work ethics. At the same time, France is pursuing the incorporation of flexible, diversified vocational training schemes. In the early 1970s a continuing vocational training (CVT) system was introduced as an instrument to promote employee flexibility, learning and professional development by assuming work tasks of higher levels of qualification and responsibility. Designed to complement initial vocational education, the French CVT system aims at promoting access to further learning and training for workers of all skills levels to combat exclusion effects generated through the French formal education system and to foster the accreditation of work-related learning (Dif, 1999; Michelet, 1999). Through this system, French employees are entitled to pursue self-directed learning, usually in the form of training projects financed through the employer's compulsory contribution to the CVT system.

This way of strengthening work-related learning significantly influences concepts of human resources development in France. For example, over two thirds of all employers that offer CVT are actively pursuing a strategy to enhance labour flexibility and mobility (Simula, 1996; Charraud et al., 1998). However, an evaluation of this approach indicates that employee flexibility and career development are not only determined by the provision of training, but structural factors such as the size of the company, its organisational structure and human resources policies; sector specificities also play a significant role (Dubar et al., 1990). The trend towards flatter hierarchies, for example, has significantly restricted opportunities for upward mobility of employees.

While continuing vocational training aims at enhancing employee flexibility and career progression, the development of occupational identity has been undergoing significant changes during the last three decades. According to various studies by Sainsaulieu (1977, 1985, 1996, 1997) and Dubar (1992, 1996, 2000), work identities in France are increasingly becoming atomised and scattered. Concurrently, the type of employee whose work identity is shaped by a high level of interactivity with work, the anticipa-

tion of adjustment and the ability to deal with changing work settings, is growing in significance. For those employees, CVT has become an important instrument for pursuing greater flexibility and increasing access to career opportunities and higher professional status (Barbier, 1996).

While the German dual system demonstrates particular strength in providing high quality vocational preparation, it is less flexible and innovative and, at the same time, much more diversified through the principle of decentralisation. The French system, by contrast, has incorporated a certain level of flexibility into its systems of vocational training. Particularly in responding to new skill requirements due to technological change, the German dual system still has difficulties in adjusting to new demands. However, both countries show similar concepts of work, work ethics and occupational structures that significantly influence how employees develop forms of work identity.

If we look at Estonia and Spain, we are confronted with a situation of transition. Over recent decades both countries have encountered some major instabilities and discontinuities in the development of vocational education and training, institutional structures and labour market configurations. Combined with unstable and weak national economies, these disruptions make it particularly difficult for employees to develop a stable occupational orientation and progressive career.

Countries in transition to a market economy, like Estonia, are facing a complex reorientation process. Over three historical very distinct periods, the pre-communist, the Soviet and the new transition period, their labour markets and vocational training systems have undergone various transformations, each characterised by a radically different political and economic orientation and concept of work. Until the early 20th century, Estonia - similar to the German model - established a close connection between vocational training, skills development and related occupational identities that would interlink with occupational labour markets. The Soviet regime embedded the discourse of the meaning of work and work identities in Marxist-Leninist ideology fostering a strong worker and proletarian identity that went alongside the push for industrialisation and a value system that particularly rewarded manual work. In vocational training, this system established a rigid one-to-one matching between vocational specialisation and work profiles upon which the entire economy and education system relied.

The highly formalised and centralised Soviet system with stable working conditions, limited career progression and virtually no threat for unemployment, produced a rather passive worker attitude with little interest in mobility, flexibility, further training or skills enhancement. Today, this kind of work attitude clashes with emerging demands and working conditions induced by the market economy and democratisation. Like many other post-communist countries, Estonia has to deal with structural unemployment aggravated by a mismatch between the available skills of the labour force and the skills demands of the market economy. During the past decade, great demands for occupational mobility pushed the devel-

opment of retraining measures, multi-skilling and flexibility in the light of establishing new job requirements and occupational profiles. The effects of vocational socialisation of the past, however, cannot just be wiped off. Today, most workers not only lack the required specialised skills, but also the ability to adjust, to communicate, to assume responsibility or to take initiative (Joons et al., 2001).

Estonian employees are only slowly acknowledging that work identities have become less prestructured and ideologically influenced, but are instead dependent on an individual's active construction, largely building on performance and professional progression. Large-scale retraining programmes in many occupational areas are fostering this approach. For example, nurses in Estonia have to undergo retraining and pass examinations according to newly developed curricula to demonstrate that they comply with modern work requirements and the expected work attitude. In the course of adjustment, acquiring new skills and raising their professional status as qualified staff, nurses also develop new forms of occupational identity and professional pride (Kirpal, 2004b).

Spain shows some similarities with the transition countries in that historical periods created fragmentation and discontinuities of concepts of work and the Spanish vocational training system. Those discontinuities are a major factor for perpetuating the inadequacy of skills preparation and unstable work identities that employees experience today. Historically, two incidents initiated an intensive transition process that significantly influenced the Spanish labour market and training system. First, the end of the Franco era in 1975 radically transformed the political environment after the political and economic isolation of the country for 40 years. Second, joining the European Union in 1986 set a new framework for the Spanish economy.

The Spanish vocational education and training system used to be highly diversified, unregulated and of poor quality until the early 1990s when the formal integration of work practice into the curricula of vocational qualification programmes significantly strengthened the connection between skills acquisition and skills demands. Although the quality and adequacy of vocational training has improved significantly since then, high rates of unemployed youth and school-to-work transition of young people continue to remain major problems. Regardless of the level of qualification, the labour market gives little opportunities to young people to find long-term employment and to develop a progressive career. As many jobs in Spain still require low qualified or semi-skilled workers, large numbers of young skilled workers end up being over-qualified for the jobs they are occupying. In addition, many employees struggle with the seeming lack of recognised occupational fields and the low recognition of formal vocational qualifications. Employers rather value continuing vocational training over formal qualifications, particularly when it comes to opening up career opportunities for their employees.

In Spain, the research undertaken could clearly connect the devaluation of formal vocational qualifications with employee difficulties in de-



veloping stable work identities and confidence in their personal skills (Marhuenda et al., 2001; Kirpal, 2004a). For most, working conditions are unstable so employees need to be extremely flexible. This kind of flexibility, however, means continuous adjustment that gives individuals little control over their own professional development and career direction. Subsequently, employee work identities are frequently subject to change depending on the job situation and employment conditions. The lack of recognition of their vocational skills and qualification combined with the unstable Spanish economic situation - high rate of unemployment, unregulated labour markets, diversified vocational training systems and a high demand for low qualified and unskilled workers - makes employees particularly vulnerable to the employment contract they are holding. An individual solution to those circumstances seems to be pursuing employment within the public sector. Today, to become a civil servant is highly aspired by most Spanish citizens as it presents one of the few opportunities to achieve a somewhat stable working situation, which promises continuity and career progression over a longer period of time (Marhuenda et al., 2001).

The different national examples illustrate how strong and continuous occupational traditions can provide a framework to guide and support individuals in developing work-related identities. This is particularly the case for countries where vocational training systems and occupational areas are highly formalised and linked to occupational labour markets, as in Germany. Here, the recognition of vocational qualifications and related job profiles give employees an orientation and a sense of stability when making the transition into the labour market. Even if today most of these structures are in transition and have become unstable, changes are more likely to be gradual, giving individuals some time for making adjustments.

By contrast, countries with disrupted and highly diversified work and labour market traditions often lack the institutional support for developing strong vocational training systems. Vocational qualifications lack recognition and are, to a certain extent, disconnected from labour market requirements. Under these circumstances, employees encounter difficulties in developing stable occupational orientations and progressive career perspectives. Not only are employees challenged to take a much more active part in defining and identifying relevant elements at work they can identify with, but, at the same time, they have to respond to processes of redefinition of their work identities in the context of fast changing job profiles and skills requirements. This is the case in Estonia. The process of transition pushes for new work requirements, qualification standards, training schemes and newly emerging occupational fields with which the labour market has to adjust and the workforce has to internalise. In addition, an interesting aspect of the example of the transition countries is that it shows us how changing concepts of work and work-related identities can be made instrumental in satisfying political or economic purposes. In the context of reorientation, emerging professional communities and interest groups can

play a new central role as they provide a framework for developing collective forms of work identities.

Finally, the UK presents a model where the labour market has never been fully structured along clearly defined occupations and professions, and has become increasingly reliant upon a high level of flexibility, deregulation and fluidity of work profiles and skills requirements. This more open and less formalised system does not place emphasis on an individual's attachment to specific occupations but on an individual's skills development, acquisition of a set of knowledge and competences, work experience and a proactive work attitude. Particularly since the collapse of apprenticeship programmes from the late 1970s, specific work-related or technical skills are usually trained on the job, thus strengthening the importance of general education and work-related learning against vocational education and training (Brown, 2001). Further, work-related learning and vocational training are usually linked to very concrete work settings, instead of preparing the individual to assume a general set of work tasks in an established occupational field.

One characteristic of the British vocational training system is that access to most types of employment is more or less unregulated in terms of preconditions for job access (Tessaring, 1998). This is coupled with weak recognition of qualifications generally, such that it is quite difficult for those completing particular vocational training programmes to be clear about their subsequent progression (Brown, 1995). The situation is highly flexible: it is possible to enter many jobs without particular qualifications and to continue working without necessarily becoming formally qualified subsequently. Hence, much learning while working, and even in more formal training events, is not externally recognised. The generally underdeveloped intermediate skills level in the UK presents a complex, multifaceted issue that cannot be addressed in this paper. One consequence, however, is that many more graduates fill intermediate level jobs in the UK than elsewhere in (northern) Europe, for example, Germany and the Netherlands (Lloyd et al., 1999). Further, graduate recruits are assumed to have better developed generic or core skills such as communication, social and coordinating skills, which in UK training and work contexts are typically prioritised over developing specific technical skills.

The lack of a common model for vocational education and training, skills development and occupational identity formation in the UK also means that there is enormous variation in these processes across sectors and occupations. Therefore, work identities are highly individualised and dependent upon the specific work context, job profile, individual skills composition and career orientation. The economy as a whole is less structured around occupations or professional communities, although such communities are still important in some sectors. It is not that occupations are not significant; it is rather that they are of less significance than in other European countries.

What could be identified as a general trend in all countries under investigation was that employees increasingly need to develop multi-

dimensional (individual and collective) occupational identities that can be adjusted according to socio-economic and technological change. In the light of the general decline of collective forms of work identity, self-initiative has gained significance for the individual employee. This means that the responsibility for forming an attachment to the work context and developing forms of identification with work is almost entirely left to the individual and increasingly manifests itself as an open and unsystematic process. In the five countries we looked at, institutional mechanisms that could guide and support the individual when making adjustments to their work identities and skills are highly underdeveloped. Learning and vocational socialisation seem to play a decisive role in this context. In Germany and Estonia, for example, employees showed great difficulties in reorienting and adjusting their work identities to changing work settings since those had been embedded in stable frameworks until around 10 or 20 years ago. By contrast, UK employees seemed to have learnt how to cope with individualised forms of work identity, sometimes to an extent that lack of commitment and frequent job changes can present a great challenge to employers (Brown et al., 2004).

## The influence of sector specificities in forming work identities

As well as national contexts, sectors and/or occupational groups have specific characteristics, which influence identity formation processes at work <sup>(2)</sup>. At the sectoral level, the research project identified two features that seem to be of particular significance: the degree of formalisation of occupations and learning (including initial and continuing vocational training) and the dynamics of change, including demands for flexibility and mobility. Taking into account those features, the sectors investigated could be grouped as being either highly formalised or unregulated, and being either highly dynamic or less so regarding changes concerning, for example, job profiles, skills requirements, learning, organisational structures, etc.

These structural features of each sector are often, for their part, also dependent on certain traditions, which, in some cases, overlap with their national embedding. This might have, over time, brought about a very specific combination of these features. However, this seems to be the exception <sup>(3)</sup>. What we found was that sectors show their specificities across countries, thus, to a significant degree, superimposing national influences and the historical-cultural embedding of work identities <sup>(4)</sup>. This clearly indicates that international and globalising trends have a strong impact on

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<sup>(2)</sup> These features are analysed in depth for each of the sectors of investigation in *Career Development International*, 2004, Vol. 9, No 3.

<sup>(3)</sup> The sector of metalwork/engineering, for example, was characterised by being highly heterogeneous in certain combinations with national specificities.

work identities. However, it also suggests that work tasks and job profiles, which seem to be relatively invariant of national or cultural particularities as they are largely determined by the nature of work or occupation itself, significantly influence work identities.

For example, for each sector a basic element could be identified that is characteristic for the particular work to be performed. These elements represent a specific 'sectoral culture' that seemed to be decisive at the level of what employees identify with in their work context. Additionally, these elements often attract employees and may be a key motivating factor for

Figure 2: National contexts: the structural embedding of work identities

		Country				
		Germany	France	Estonia	Spain	UK
Condiciones estructurales	VET	Highly formalised; dual apprenticeship training	Highly formalised, mainly school-based	Undergoing severe adjustment	Diversified, unregulated; lack of recognition	Weak against general education and training-on-the-job
	CVT	Mainly state-regulated; mechanism for labour market integration	Flexible; complementing initial VET; employer-supported	Large-scale retraining programmes (state- and employer-directed)	Diversified, partly employer-directed; partly substituting initial VET	Demand-driven, modularised; mechanism to foster transition between different educational tracks
	Work-skills profile	Highly stable	Adjusting	Reorientation; mismatch between skills of the workforce and skills demands	Many jobs require unskilled labour; striving for standards	Highly flexible and deregulated; fluidity of job profiles and skills requirements
	Special features	Strong links between skills acquisition and occupational labour markets	Labour market is driven by formal qualifications	Discontinuity through changing political systems	Discontinuity, lack of standards; high rate of unemployment	Liberal market economy with flexible labour markets
	Overall direction	Stability	Flexibility	Meet new standards	Skills enhancement	Individualisation

(\*) The primacy of sector-specific features and their strong influence on work-related identity formation strengthened the project's approach of concentrating the research analysis on sectoral instead of national perspectives. The first level national analysis was regarded as a tool to facilitate a sector-wide integration of research findings.

choosing to specialise in a particular occupational area, and can be important in constituting employee occupational identity. In metalwork, for example, working with the specific material and work processes involving at least some degree of manual or mechanical work constituted a significant element workers identified with. The same was true for the technical interest of employees working in the telecommunications and IT sector, whereas for nurses the caring aspect and taking responsibility for people seemed to be decisive. Employees working in tourism mentioned that social interaction and communication were basic elements that made them identify with their work.

### The role of vocational education, training and skills

A shift in skills requirements from technical knowledge to the increased importance of generic and communication skills combined with a high demand for multi-skilling could be observed in all sectors. At least two dynamics require such a new skill balance: work organisation along flatter hierarchies and teamwork, and the tertiarisation of the economy that becomes increasingly service-oriented, giving the client a new role in the economic context. The latter implies two consequences in practice: a high level of client interaction at the intermediate worker level, and the fact that clients and customers in general have become much more demanding with very concrete ideas about the quality of service they expect. This leads to a new competitive structure, even for established service sectors like nursing or tourism. The initial vocational training structures gradually acknowledge these new skills requirements and where reforms have been implemented during recent years, training systems have tried to respond to these demands <sup>(5)</sup>.

Multi-skilling comprises a whole range of expectations from employers: "The profile of a multi-skilled IT technician constructed by employers contains a variety of aspects such as confidentiality, language skills, hybrid technical skills, communication skills, readiness for changes and continuous self-development, stress handling ability, team working skills and a general knowledge about administration" (Loogma et al., 2004, p. 329). However, there were also examples where generic and communication skills were regarded as secondary by both employers and employees, particularly in areas that required mainly manual, mechanical or purely technical work, as in some segments of the metal working industry or the telecommunications and IT sector. The desired skill mix often seemed to depend upon how far companies integrate teamwork in their everyday work practice. A great shift was observed, for example, in metalwork/engineering

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<sup>(5)</sup> For example, the creation of the German dual apprenticeship programme for the new IT professions, implemented in 1995, or the new curriculum for nurses in Estonia, incorporate a significant number of modules that focus on fostering communication skills.

in recent years, where transfer of responsibility to the lower levels and teamworking have become more common compared to Taylorist and hierarchical forms of work organisation. A similar shift in health care has made the nursing profession less structured around directives from doctors. In tourism, hierarchical work organisation still predominates, whereas IT and telecommunications present a combination of highly individualised work and work organised around projects and team working.

The nursing profession provides a good example of how skills demands are shifting. The modern patient-oriented approach to care requires a shift from a directive control approach to an empowerment approach that is placing a new focus on consultation. This brings guidance and counselling into the health care process, requiring highly developed interpersonal skills. In addition, 'information and communication technologies and the management of complex data processing combined with a new approach towards customer orientation re-define the traditional profile of health care services' (Kirpal, 2004b, p. 287). Both processes require advanced communication skills in addition to creating general skills amplification and more complex work processes.

The shift in skills demands directly points to the role and recognition of vocational initial and continuing training. The research results suggest that, in many areas, continuing training combined with practical work experience is being prioritised over formal vocational qualifications. This, at least, was the case in the IT sector, in tourism and, to some degree, in telecommunications. In nursing and metalwork/engineering, initial training is highly valued by employers and employees and is considered a prerequisite to entering the job market and for further career progression. In addition, practical work experience in the framework of vocational training programmes is also regarded as a recruitment strategy, especially in the German dual apprenticeship model. Generally, an initial formal qualification increases employability and chances of career progression. Further, it sets the foundation for general learning abilities and developing a basic form of occupational identity, even in the highly diversified tourist industry. However, for many occupational groups, initial vocational qualification does not succeed in preparing young employees to master what is required of them in everyday work practice. In tourism, telecommunications, IT and even nursing, employers and employees confirmed that on-the-job experience is what really counts. Becoming skilled was clearly connected with learning while working, involving training on the job, learning by doing and self-directed learning.

An increasing demand for just-in-time knowledge could be observed in most sectors, particularly in IT, telecommunications and metalwork/engineering. This trend has led to the restructuring of the mode and role of continuing training and places considerable pressure on employees for self-study and informal learning. In most cases, this kind of knowledge acquisition does not significantly contribute towards enhancing vocational competences, as it is short-term, rapidly outdated and regarded as a

minimum requirement to keep pace with changing technologies in order to maintain one's own employability. Employees critically noted that acquiring just-in-time knowledge was leaving little room and resources for more profound and long-term competence development, which may be important to foster opportunities for career progression. Some employees felt that this knowledge structure even gives them far less control over their own skills development. In addition, it favours the increasing employment of graduates, a trend that could be observed in technical areas such as metalwork/engineering, telecommunications and IT. Other factors that prevent employees from enhancing their vocational competences are the incompatibility of courses and training offers with employee work schedules, lack of financial support from employers and the inappropriateness of the training offered. That companies favour a 'core' against a 'disadvantaged' segment of the workforce when it comes to training opportunities, and skills enhancement was an issue in telecommunications/IT, tourism and metalwork/engineering.

## Conclusions

Existing social and economic structures strongly influence the nature of work and lead to a range of modifications meeting the need for change. Obviously, there is much variation between European countries and sectors with respect to how demands for flexibility and mobility affect the workforce and each national and sectoral context presents a different set of issues. However, some contextual variables seem influential in the formation of work identities at the level of the national embedding of work concepts as well as at the level of sector-specific structures.

### Formalisation versus deregulation

Formalised, regulated structures foster stability and continuity and support the individual in developing a professional orientation and work identity. For example, established vocational education and training systems and the recognition of formal qualifications can play a decisive formative role in developing an initial occupational attachment and self-confidence. This applied to a certain extent to all occupational groups investigated. Stable employment situations and reliability are important for the individual to develop company attachment, commitment and to plan his or her own professional development. They are also important for career progression, be it in the sense of deepening one's own knowledge and competences through horizontal mobility (as in nursing) or through promotion involving vertical mobility. By contrast, unstable employment conditions make it particularly difficult for employees to develop a stable work identi-

ty as was typical for employees working in the tourism sector.

The influence of formalisation also applies to the organisation and role of professional communities and associations. Their strong influence on identity formation was seen in almost all professional groups investigated. Where the level of formalisation of professional associations is high (as in nursing and traditionally in the metalworking industry), an offer of professional guidance and support helps employees to strengthen their position in terms of the work context, employer-employee relations and their professional status. Where those mechanisms were absent, either they were replaced by informal professional communities (as in the IT sector) that take on a similar function, or the employment situation and identity formation processes were highly individualised as in tourism.

Where stabilising mechanisms have been eroded (as in the metalworking industry/ engineering and in telecommunications) or are non-existent (as in IT and tourism), employees are challenged to construct their own systems of identification. Three tendencies can be highlighted in this context. First, transferring the concept of a professional work attitude - that is typically expected in the so-called professions (such as lawyers, doctors, managers) - to employees at the intermediate skills level. This development could be observed, for example, among IT experts, highly qualified employees working in tourism and engineering and, to a certain extent, nurses. In this case, the work ethos, personal interest and commitment, a pro-active learner's attitude and self-realisation are promoted and adopted as key concepts. A second possibility observed was a highly individualised work attitude, exemplified within the UK context, but also increasingly observed among most of the occupational groups investigated. The focus here lies on the individual's skills, knowledge, vocational competences and active career development using learning and continuing training, as well as mobility and flexibility, as important tools for career progression. Third, a large number of workers developed a functional or instrumental work attitude, complying with the minimum requirements for learning, flexibility and mobility in order to maintain their employability. Such an approach could be observed in telecommunications and metal/engineering, but was also represented to a lesser degree in the other sectors. It can be regarded as a rather passive response to changing work requirements, whereas the first two trends expect and exemplify a more pro-active approach.

### **Flexibility and mobility**

Organisational changes, technological innovations and strong customer orientation require employees to adjust to new demands in the work context by developing new skills profiles and the ability for continuous learning. Companies are challenged to meet changing organisational demands, to create a rich learning environment and to support employees in adjust-



ing to changing work situations. They are generally in a position to restrict or actively encourage the specific work attitudes of their employees and thus have an influence on shaping work identities.

Regarding mobility, the project consortium distinguished between geographical or spatial mobility, horizontal mobility and vertical mobility. Demands on employees to be spatially mobile, address the need to and/or the possibility of changing workplace, to be transferred to a new location, to travel for the job or to have a long commute on a regular basis. Horizontal mobility relates to changing employer or departments, practising job rotation, acquiring certain specialisations or engaging in teamwork. Finally, vertical mobility encompasses the capacity, interest and opportunity for personal career development by taking advantage of opportunities such as further education or in-house promotion. Horizontal and vertical mobility both connect closely to opportunities for continuous professional development and work-related learning. Migration can be considered as a special form of mobility, usually related to changing employer and occupation. Although this issue may be of great interest at European level, the project did not consider migrant workers as their occupational identity development forms a special case.

In times of severe economic constraints, flexibility and mobility were first regarded as demands that put pressure on companies and employees. However, flexibility and mobility also create opportunities in terms of the learning environment at work, job profiles, career options and employee autonomy and self-realisation. Company organisational strategies may open up new opportunities for employees, or they can create pressure, for example, through work intensification; this was a prevalent feature, mentioned by employees of all sectors under investigation. The study revealed that flexibility and mobility are experienced and valued quite differently in different occupational groups, and showed how this affects identity formation processes at work.

Employees typically connected the issue of flexibility to the ability to cope with, and adapt to, changes at work, such as new work tasks, job situations and work organisation, generally linked to broadening competences and work profiles. They also referred to working conditions in terms of time flexibility, irregular working hours, changing time schedules and the readiness to work overtime. There was great variation in whether flexibility and mobility were perceived as creating opportunities or as new demands that put pressure on employees. Nurses, for example, felt largely in control over the degree of flexibility and mobility to which they were required to respond and considered that they had individual choices. In contrast, in the new economies both elements were perceived as demands beyond the control of employees that created a high stress level. Demands on flexibility were critically seen in the light of working overtime and flexible working hours, particularly in tourism where the compensation mechanisms for such requirements were stated to be inappropriate, not only in terms of financial remuneration but also in terms of job security, career perspec-

tives and training provision. Flexibility had the most negative connotation when it was interpreted as the possibility of hiring and firing without incurring high costs. Negative implications were lack of commitment, company attachment and high levels of staff turnover.

When it comes to the readiness of employees to be flexible and mobile, national (or cultural) differences could also be distinguished. Employees in France and the UK generally seemed to be better prepared to deal with, and personally benefit from, demands for flexibility and mobility than German employees. Socialisation, learning and personal experiences seem to play an important role in this context. This became clear, for example, when comparing the work attitudes of nurses and employees working in telecommunications across the three countries. At the same time, employees in countries with an unstable economy, like Spain or Estonia, are generally also more used to adjusting to changing work requirements, as they often need to be highly flexible in order to bear with turbulence and periods of transition.

Horizontal mobility was often used as an important means to broaden vocational competences and enhance career chances. Particularly in IT and tourism, and especially in the UK, changing employers to gain work experience was closely linked to professional development. In nursing, horizontal mobility (mostly between different hospital departments) was typically pursued to broaden and deepen vocational competences, but without thought of promotion. It was striking that, in most sectors, the majority of workers at intermediate skills level favoured horizontal mobility over vertical mobility. This tendency could be linked to the core elements of an occupation (as described above), with which employees at this skills level typically identify. This pattern of professional identification may lead to a certain incompatibility between performing technical tasks and assuming coordinating and administrative functions with higher level work responsibilities. In telecommunications, IT and metalwork/engineering, for example, the shift from working as a technical expert to assuming a coordinating role turned out to be a conflict for many employees that often prevented them from moving into team leading positions. IT specialists even associated managerial positions with inevitable degeneration of technical knowledge and practical skills (Loogma et al., 2004). Most nurses experienced a similar conflict: nurses who strongly identified with direct patient care generally did not like to move into management and develop skills related to administration, coordination or broader managerial tasks (Kirpal, 2004b).

These results may lead to the conclusion that, for most skilled workers, performing the core tasks of an occupation is more important than making a career as supervisor or team leader, particularly when the salary structure does not change significantly as in nursing. A stronger career orientation was noticeable among British and French employees and among employees working in diversified and less formalised sectors such as tourism and the IT sector. Here it is important to note that, particularly in the UK,

the salary structure changes significantly when moving up the career ladder. It was striking that for UK employees, pursuing a progressive professional development path was mainly related to vertical upward mobility and higher wages; combined with passing through different employment situations this often also involved a change of occupation. Even the attachment to a particular company or work environment did not seem to be of great significance. By contrast, skilled workers in the other countries identified much more with being an expert in a particular field, creating strong identification with the actual work activities that involved applying very specific technical skills.

Other structural factors that generate little incentive for employees to pursue vertical mobility were the lack of opportunities for career progression due to organisational re-structuring, the lack of support from employers, or the nature of how the profession was organised. The trend towards flat hierarchies in work organisation in telecommunications, IT and metalwork/engineering has significantly reduced the number of supervisory positions available particularly in intermediate management. One consequence in Germany, for example, is that far fewer employees use the *Meister* qualification as a classical form of career progression, as this pathway is also increasingly undermined by the recruitment of graduates into these positions. Lack of support from employers in providing and facilitating adequate training was particularly an issue in tourism and IT, whereas in nursing the highly formalised organisation of the profession significantly limited broader career opportunities.

The connection between mobility, flexibility and work identity may become most obvious when looking at the self-understanding of IT specialists and metalworkers, who clearly distinguished themselves from administrative personnel, managers and directors. The IT sector study reveals that the work identity of an IT specialist can be so deeply rooted in technology that it correlates with a high level of inflexibility when it comes to developing a broader occupational orientation. It would be interesting to investigate further the extent to which highly developed, but narrowly focused, technical competences would put such employees at risk in the context of requirements to adjust to changing work contexts.

## Reflections

The research project could confirm that employees in Europe are increasingly exposed to demands for greater flexibility and mobility at work and are challenged to deal with continuous changes and making adjustments. The project findings also showed that not all employees at intermediate skills level possess the personal resources to cope with demands to make adjustments to their job, skills development and career orientation. Shifting the focus back to the individual, in all of the occupational groups investi-

gated we found employees with classical forms of work identities characterised by a high level of identification either with their occupation, the employer, the company's product or their daily work tasks. For this group of employees, rapid changes at work presented quite a challenge, particularly for those who did not have the means or personal resources to adjust to new demands. In such cases, employees typically developed a 'retreat' strategy trying to conserve their current work status and job profile. This group of employees largely resisted demands for greater flexibility, with little or no inclination towards learning, career progression or changing their work place or employer. In addition, pressure to achieve flexibility, and changes in work tasks, professional roles or employers, often lead to stress and a lack of control over work performance. This was particularly the case within occupations and organisations where the requirements for flexibility and mobility are high and forms of work organisation and tasks change rapidly, such as in the IT sector.

By contrast, employees with flexible, transitional and individualised forms of work identities, who are able to anticipate and internalise the requirements for continuous changes at work, were much better equipped to respond to demands for flexibility. Those employees often combined the desired mix of technical and hybrid social skills and had the ability to use flexibility, mobility and learning as instruments to develop their careers. The research results also showed that employers favour such flexible employees and increasingly expect a type of self-employed entrepreneur, who sells his or her services, skills and competences on demand (see also Pongratz et al., 2003; Voß et al., 1998). This type of employee assumes a high level of flexibility, continuous learning, risk management capacity and the ability actively to shape and construct his or her own work identity and career orientation.

Emerging new forms of employer-employee relationship further support this entrepreneurial model, gradually abandoning former types of trust-based relationships and loosening patterns of organisational commitment (Baruch, 1998; Reader et al., 2001). This tendency promotes and supports a general trend towards the 'individualisation' of work identities away from classical collective forms, making collective bargaining for workers difficult. In addition, the model transfers responsibilities for training, learning and professional development from the company to the individual. For the individual employee, however, a proactive, entrepreneurial multi-skilled work attitude also generates complex, flexible and multi-dimensional work identities, which can create conflicts when continuously being 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.

To what extent employees are able to deal with demands for flexibility and adjustments has a significant impact upon their motivation, work commitment and forms of identification with work. This article tried to show that

it is not the individual alone who determines the potential for adjustment, but that structural variables also play a vital role in either supporting or inhibiting employee developments. As the number of employees in Europe who are not of an entrepreneurial type, and thus could be at a disadvantage, is potentially high, employees need some form of support to be equipped and prepared to cope with changing requirements at work. The research results showed that workers at the intermediate skills level aged over 35 need especially to be actively supported and guided to avoid them falling into a passive 'retreat' strategy that may ultimately lead to their professional exclusion. By contrast, employees, who trained during the last 10 years were much better equipped to anticipate and deal with demands for flexibility and continuing learning. This points to the vital role that initial vocational education and training plays in this context if adequately designed to prepare young people to meet the challenges of modern work settings. However, where employees missed the opportunity for being trained to modern standards, continuing work-based learning needs to fulfil a compensating role.

Flexibility is particularly needed when it comes to adequately integrating initial and continuing vocational training and developing a balanced mix between specific technical knowledge and generic skills. The accreditation of informal learning to allow for effective access to further learning, promotion and horizontal job movement also need to be improved. Guiding instruments to support employees in successfully responding to the demands for flexibility and mobility and to empower them to become agents of their own professional development do not necessarily need to be restricted to institutional arrangements. Self initiated and directed continuous vocational learning and 'competence audits' for self guided socioprofessional orientation can also be powerful tools.

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