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Vocational Identity: It's about Working at Becoming

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In general, it is the inability to settle on an occupational identity which most disturbs young people.

Erik Erikson

Abstract

This article focuses on how a worker's relationship with either a place of work or employer- or with what the skilled worker does very well- contributes to very different forms of work identity. Work identity that reflects a determination on the employee's part to commit to the values of the work group is vocational identity, which is important for the employee's well being as an adult. According to a European research group, how workers accept or reject challenge and change will determine their success in their jobs and affect productivity. The group's recommendations are relevant to community colleges in their function as gatekeepers to employment readiness; as is a consideration of how craft identity compares with the form of vocational identity that the research group has determined to be crucial to global competitiveness for the western world.

Introduction

This paper will present craft identity as a currently relevant form of vocational identity that can provide a foundation for a successful life span employment experience, and one that is crucial to personal well-being. The discussion will include a survey of forms of work identity, and work-centred vocational identity will be contrasted with craft-centred vocational identity.

Excellence in placing graduates into a wide range of places of employment is a great point of pride among Ontario's community colleges. Vocational identity can complement that primary focus on readiness for entering employment; since success in finding and adopting a field as a career choice is equally as important to graduates. As will be shown, current research shows that employees of the future will need to actively direct their own development of a dynamic identity rather than passively accept one provided by an institutional or corporate employer. Research also affirms that employees who welcome change and value challenge demonstrate confidence in their vocational identities. While considering vocation in its broadest and most inclusive sense, this discussion will consider various forms of work identity, and how craft identity can reflect the

ideals of vocational identity and positively influence the delivery of community college curricula. As well, several fictional illustrations such as the one to follow will serve to further the reader's understanding of craft principles in practice, by illustrating what is essentially a subjective experience.

Vocational Identity

As an IT specialist for a small plant owned by a tier three automotive manufacturer, Jill always kept an ear out for what was happening in the IT field beyond the plant. She estimated that she was getting about 15K less than she could further south in a larger centre, but the plant was close to home, accommodated her weekend sports activities, and the company paid for all the courses she needed. Monthly pep talks and a company wide newsletter she didn't feel obligated to read were the extent of any communication of a corporate culture. The plant manager and company IT manager regularly questioned her to be sure she was happy. They knew they were lucky to have her. Overall, staff turnover in the plant was high. But because of Jill's skill level and the fact that she was indispensable to the smooth running of the plant she enjoyed an autonomy and job security that not even the plant manager shared.

Before considering how workers form a vocational identity, let's look at how individuals acquire an identity during their youth. The first of two periods of development extends from adolescence through to the typical age for leaving home as identified by Erik Erikson, who considered identity formation to be a crucial aspect of adolescent development. He also stated that identities are formed as young people experiment with varied types of work while helping parents or neighbours, by working at part-time jobs, or after leaving school (Erikson, E., 1968, pp. 123,127-8). Blue-collar communities in the past, according to sociologist Dorothy Smith, played an important role at this stage by preparing coming generations of workers for inclusion into the local work force (Smith & Dobson, 2000.).

The term emerging adulthood has been given to the second key formative period (Arnett, 2006, p. xvii.), which ranges from the age of eighteen until the mid to late twenties. During this time young people withdraw from the cloistered existence of home with its strictures and rules in favour of inclusion into new relationships and societal institutions such as work. This unstable period, when young people frequently change jobs while they seek suitable and satisfying work, has been characterized as "floundering" (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006, p. 265.) A second term, prolonged identity moratorium, has been given to the one or more "time outs" society allows young people to seek an education, travel, and experiment during the period between secondary school and permanent employment (Côté, 2006, pp.85-116.). Arnett also noted that nearly all (96% of those surveyed, (Arnett, 2006, p. 13.)) expect to find a job that is "well paying and personally fulfilling", and "an expression of their identity rather than simply a way to make a living" irrespective of educational realities

(Arnett, 2006, p.13.). This optimism that youth would achieve their dreams of financial success was similar to the expectation of all young couples that their marriages will last their lifetimes rather than end in divorce.

Discovering what work suits their abilities and interests during their twenties assists young people in attaining their life goals and eventually settling into vocations (Côté & Allahaar, 1994, pp. 74,81; Côté 2006, p.105.) As they feel comfortable in the work environment and in time adopt the work as their own, their identities change to reflect the values of a particular corporate, institutional or labour group. Identification can also be especially profound when the work involves shared risk, camaraderie, or strong recognition and high esteem by the general public. The form of work identity that develops as individuals establish attachments to the work they do, to their employer, or to their workplace is termed vocational identity. One researcher observed that vocational identity develops when workers take their career directions seriously and identify “a form of work that both suits them and offers them a reasonable expectation of finding a job, earning a living, and succeeding in an occupation” (Waidtlow, 2004). At the same time, they are embarking on critical life-long commitments that will characterize their adulthood (Tanner, 2005, p.30.) As an example, work identity sets our roles and status in the communities where we live, as is commonly shown during social introductions. We will be asked what we do for a living, and our response will set the tone for the evening, and future interactions as well (Ciulla, 2000, p. xii; Beder, 2000, p. 124; Gini, 2001, p.9; Rothman, 1998, p. 192.).

The European Connection

“Adjusting to [change] 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.” (FAME (1))

Several European university research branches have formed a group, titled “Vocational Identity, Flexibility, and Mobility in the European Labour Market” (known as FAME), and are convinced that Europe’s ability to compete in the highly competitive global environment depends fully on research and promotion of new approaches to vocational or occupational identity. They emphasize a strong correlation between the kinds of identification that workers form and the qualities of their relationships with their work (such as commitment, motivation and performance) and the impact of an individual worker’s approach on identity formation.

Thus, the onus has been placed on the employee- not the employer- to actively pursue a form of identity that will lead to workplace success (FAME (1)). Employees choose the form of

vocational identity that characterizes their individual work experience by their response, or lack of it, to changes in the workplace and demands for flexibility. Further, although personal identity formations are “characterized by diversity”, or as Arnett puts it, are “heterogeneous”, identifiable subgroups begin to emerge (Arnett, 2006, p.15.). In fact, FAME concluded that workers tend to experience a vocational identity that is in keeping with one of three categories; either predominantly traditional, proactive, or on a continuum of adjustment.

Employees following the traditional (the least flexible) approach react to challenges by holding fast to current work status, and are also inflexible toward change, increases in workplace demands, or opportunities for mobility within the company. Though identification with the organization is high, these individuals often lack the knowledge, resources, or inclination toward learning and personal development to meet change positively (FAME (1)); preferring to conserve their present work status and job profile by retreating from challenges or demands that they don't want to face. The FAME research emphasizes, it should be noted, the choice the employee makes over time rather than what motivated the lack of response or the effect that forms of passive resistance, previous plant turmoil, or unresolved labour disputes might have on the workers' willingness to respond positively to workplace change. Also, while the research does not suggest that all corporate employees react negatively, that kind of reaction does correspond to the alienation that is a predominant characteristic of employment in modern organizations (Rinehart, 1987, pp. 13-24.), and of corporate identity that will be discussed later in the article.

In sharp contrast, proactive employees anticipate the need for adjustment and change. Work identity for these highly skilled and motivated workers is individualized rather than collective (emphasizing diversity of contributions) and will reflect uniquely personal strengths and characteristics. By taking responsibility for training and development, this ideal employee constructs the stability and continuity once provided from above (FAME (1)); a format that does not suit organized group bargaining, but rather agreements between management and individual workers based on the worker's unique contribution. Acceptance of autonomy in the workplace is increasingly recognized by employers as necessary to attract and retain the highly skilled worker (Bauer, 2004. p.24.; Beder, 2000. p.19.). The two key words that are used to describe this ideal employee are “flexible”, and “entrepreneurial”, the latter referring to the readiness to initiate a new approach or solution. The third group, which functions on a continuum of adjustment, retains an arms length approach in their relationship to their workplaces and employers. Researchers conclude that workers from this group typically remain attached to their workplaces largely for family or economic needs, though they may very well be aware that their employment situation is less than ideal. In fact, their relationship with their employer is best characterized as conditional or driven by compromise. Also, the

inability of many workers in this group to assume the role of entrepreneur in the worker-employer relationship could, in their view, create have's and have not's within a working class and thereby create social problems that would need to be addressed.

The North American Model

As just discussed, the FAME group found that though vocational identities vary widely, personal experiences tend to follow certain patterns in three categories and on the basis of employee responsiveness. However, this section will contrast two forms of vocational identity based on whether the identity emphasizes the employer or the skills of the employee. The form that is present in most North American modern organizations is delivered top down (corporate identity) in contrast to one that arises from the skill set of the worker (craft identity). Actual experience will emphasize one or the other in varying degrees, even though these two forms contrast greatly and can be considered as being at opposite end of a continuum. For example, a junior in a large newspaper might initially gain an identity primarily from the popularity of the paper, but as a veteran reporter, identity would emphasize reporting craft.

Corporate Identity

Kenny's home was full of Coke memorabilia. On holidays, he'd die of thirst before drinking a Pepsi. Out of high school, after driving a Coke truck for a couple years, he moved into sales, mainly Mom and Pop stores and small supermarkets. When the company offered him a sales job at a larger center, he jumped at the opportunity. Five years later he was given a cardboard box to fill and walked to the door by security. Even though he knew that the economy had turned sour and no-name cola had taken over the soft drink market, he was devastated. He used up his buyout, sat at home for a year or so, and eventually got a sales managers job with a food service company. Kenny was a poster boy for a traditional corporate work identity.

Within a typical North American organization, like the traditional model, an employee receives a ready-made identity once employment begins (Carr & Zanetti, 2000, p.14). This construct, a joint effort between human resource and public relations departments, conveys what senior management believes and desires to convey to the public. This practice does offer benefits, such as the opportunity for the employees to participate in something much larger than their own abilities. A floor sweeper at Boeing, for example, shares in the excitement of each new jet taking off from the runway (Sabbach, 1996, pp. 33, 66.), and esteem from the general public if the company is well liked (Van Dick, 2004, pp. 193-195.) in addition to tangible benefits such as pension and medical plans, and collective bargaining. Also, unlike a craft apprentice who struggles to grasp new concepts and measure up to journeyman expectations, tasks may be micro-fragmented with pre-configured training and development in accordance with a company-wide manual.

Drawbacks can accrue from impermanence of work and identity; a terminated employee can lose a significant part of work identity when a lengthy term of employment comes to an abrupt end. As Susan Faludi discovered while interviewing for her book "Stiffed- The betrayal of the American man", loss of employment after decades of loyal service to the corporation can have lasting and profound results (Faludi, 1998.). The corporate model is potentially manipulative and coercive as workers are subtly pressured to conform, and at best views workers as "problematic"; whereby non-conformity is an ailment to be cured or excised. Since pre-screening and testing ensure that only individuals predisposed to conform to a specific identity are hired, inability of an employee to successfully integrate may be perceived as a failure of the filtering system and as a deficiency on the part of the employee, in contrast to ideal employees who are euphemistically referred to as "team players" (Carr & Zanetti, 2000, p.14).

Craft Identity

"We draw upon both recognizable and widely shared perceptions of the kind of work that we do, both in terms of the skills and activities involved and in terms of social value associated with different industries or professions, as a means of registering or calibrating where we stand to other people" (Ramsome, 1999, p.168.).

Craft identity is an affirming alternative, like the proactive model, and is directed by the employee; and emphasizes being and doing, what makes our work distinct from that of others, and who we are with respect to what we do well. There are two distinct uses of the term; Classic craft vocations apply to plumbers, steelworkers and mechanics, whereas non-traditional craft vocations refers to writers, teachers, and also academics that have used the term in reference to advanced skills of peers. A third use, referring primarily to handiwork performed often for casual or recreational purposes, falls outside of the current discussion.

The classic craft worker, who retains the right to be identified as such, is the product in large part of past struggles of workers, often in a single segment of a plant or industry, who wanted to be recognized apart from the general work population or have the ability to bargain on the basis of the skills set that makes them a unique group (NLRB pp. 177-184). This fact is underscored by the several hundred occupations recognized by the National Labour Relations Board (NLRB) in the U.S. Differentiation between groups, as defined by the board, is significant and legally binding and serves as precedent to future parties seeking arbitration. Craft units, or distinct groups of workers as defined by the NLRB, are characterized by such terms as separate and distinct, and are found by the NLRB to be defined as;"one consisting of a distinct and homogeneous group of skilled journeyperson craftsmen, who, together with helpers or apprentices, are primarily engaged in the performance of tasks which are not primarily performed by other employees and which require the use of substantial craft skills and specialized tools and equipment" (NLRB,

p.177.).

Classic craft fell out of favour due to fierce struggles during the past century between management and labour; as the labour conflicts Karl Marx recognized more than a century ago over management control of production continued well into the last century, pitting craft workers on the shop floor against management interests. In spite of the assertion during the 1960's by economist Peter Drucker that craft was dead as a means of training (Drucker, 1968, p.59.), the resurgence of craft apprenticeship (critical skilled worker shortages) and its variants (preceptorships and apprenticeships in traditional professional fields of medicine, care giving and law) clearly underscores the relevance of craft training. Formal learning needs to be complemented by practical experience along side veteran practitioners (Gjerde et.al, 1998).

Craft, as discussed previously (Armishaw, 2005), is what we mean when we talk about experience, and expertise (Berliner, 1994.). Craft encompasses what makes us feel good about what we do, and is bottom-up (employee-based) rather than top-down (employer-based) in nature. Rather than being imposed, craft develops naturally as a novice gains enthusiasm about the skilled work that is being attempted, and while pursuing excellence that arises as the artisan strives to perfect methods and broaden his range of abilities (Mills, 1951, pp. 220-225.). In addition, craft workers enjoy peer respect, greater autonomy than usual, and some insulation from market volatility and globalization.

Guild culture is especially well developed in occupations where unionization is strong; and is sustained in large part through the lore and bragging that is part of skilled workers being together. Curran has researched the role of such stories in meaning-making and identity formation within a group, and notes, "stories tend to deal with human experience, and as such they engage us in meaning-making as we use our own knowledge of self and the world to understand the characters with whom we engage" (Curran, 2005, p.18.). It could be added that since craft lore helps us to become incorporated into work society, what appears to be braggadocio to outsiders performs an important role. Stories also have lasting results, since early experiences of adulthood are an integral part of biographies that shape the rest of our lives (Tanner, 2006, p.25.).

Non-Traditional Craft

Craft can also refer to advanced skills as recognized by a broad group of peers; as a seasoned journalist or nature photographer might be said to be practicing craft or as having crafted a news story; implying work performance that demonstrates maturity and mastery and depth of knowledge. Craft existed long before guilds were organized, exists independent of guild activity, and must be relevant for all workers. The term craft has been widely adopted because it encapsulates what is most admirable about work at its best; the same

principle being at work whether a master violinist picks up an instrument and flawlessly plays a musical masterpiece that had not been attempted for many years, a boat restorer brings back the hand rubbed finish on an antique boat, or a esteemed journalist fine-tunes an editorial for the New York Times. Interestingly, more non-craft workers respond to the term than traditional; a college teacher or writer will be more likely familiar with the concept than plumbers or carpenters.

How should we view craft? As a profoundly human experience; as a long standing ideal; and through its many manifestations that include preceptorships among the professions. Also, when skills are in high demand and retention is important, even corporations recognize the benefits of encouraging entrepreneurship and autonomy among employees; and craft reflects many of the ideals of the European proactive model. In intellectual circles, to excel in one's craft is to be a "seasoned"- or a well experienced practitioner- in one's field. Craft denotes broad and extensive mastery, versatility, and having risen well above the norm in peer respect and proven accomplishments. Engineers go one further, though they do not roll up their sleeves and work alone side craft workers as they did until a century ago. Not only do they consider craft guilds their natural progenitors, but they claim affiliation with all creative craftsmen of the past (Florman, 1987, p. 41; de Camp, 1991).

Craft is an essential human experience (Florman, 1987, pp. 26-27.), as several anthropologists have claimed, emphasizing the central importance of craft progress to society and showing from tribal experience how craft functions naturally- without guild activity of any kind- and serves the community's needs (Ingold, 2001; Leroi-Ghourhan, 1968.). Tim Ingold, of Aberdeen University, for example, emphasizes the folly of disembodied intelligence- differentiating between intellectual and hand skills- (Ingold, 2001, pp. 17-30) as society has only progressed when artisans have applied intelligence to the making and improving of tools and goods.

Ingold points out that technology is commonly discussed in abstract terms, ignoring the important fact of the finished product or "artifact" being, "regarded no longer as the original outcome of a skilled, sensuous engagement between the craftsman and his raw material, but as a copy run off mechanically from a pre-established template or design" (Ingold, 2001, p. 18). Ingold also emphasized the importance of care, judgment and dexterity, referencing the well-known writing of British cabinetmaker and instructor David Pye on the subject of craftsmanship (Pye, 1968), and also Russian neurophysiologist Nicholai A. Bernstein (Latash & Turvey, 1996, pp. 15-21.). Bernstein's research on motor theory with respect to dexterity and advanced skill development has yet to make the impact it should, due in large part to the vast established body of influence of erroneous work based on Pavlovian theory (Feigenberg & Latash, 1996, p. 273; see also Dunlap, 1972). Clearly, technophilia-embracing methodology apart from worker ingenuity- has robbed us

of a proper understanding and appreciation for the marvel of human dexterity; a short coming that significantly impacts how we view skilled work and that one needs to be responded to.

Secondly, use of the terminology of craft by academic writers may have come into vogue as the result of an article by C. Wright Mills on "Intellectual Craftsmanship" which gained popularity among academics (Mills, 1967, pp. 195-226; Horowitz, 1963.). He drew on his extensive personal woodworking experience to apply rules of practice and discipline to academic scholarship. As a result of wider utilization, for whatever the reason, professionals use craft terms in reference to accomplishments of their practitioners. Thus journalists, movie directors and novelists are said to produce "well-crafted" results, and practice their "craft"- in reference to the exercise of wisdom and cunning suggested in earliest Biblical references; suggesting the possession of inside knowledge and secrecy that set the skilled workers apart.

The third example comes from the varied forms of master: novice pairings that currently proliferate throughout skill delivery and indicate increasing receptiveness to craft issues. In law, medicine, and similar professions, no amount of formal schooling suffices as preparation for independent practice. Apprenticeships, preceptorships, mentoring and internships arise when knowledge needs to be passed on that cannot be effectively acquired in the classroom. Further, the relationship between an experienced practitioner and a learner is an opportunity for transfer of human skills of caring and empathy.

Also, although industry relies on formal work relationships and hierarchy, retention of quality employees necessitates permitting some experience of autonomy. Put another way, good people won't hang around if they don't have some say in conditions of work. Further, many positions in all forms of employment require what is often advertised as "able to work without direct supervision" or "self starter", which is being able to initiate or follow through on work independently.

Finally, there is a very strong correspondence between craft and the proactive European model that recognizes value throughout the work-span of the individual. This parallel contrasts with the North American model that seems front-loaded for the "educated novice" with decreasing value as the worker ages and is deemed to be resistant to arbitrary change. However, given the growing alarm over the aging workforce and the challenge of how to keep the older worker at the bench a little longer until the novices get some experience, it would seem appropriate to consider craft as a component worth keeping. Recognizing the mature worker's craft lends credibility to the seasoned employee's wealth of knowledge, experience, and wisdom in diverse career-related choices.

Promoting a Successful Identity Formation

By the time Karen stepped into her community college classroom to teaching the final accounting class of the semester, several students had already arrived. It was unusual for her to be late, but she'd been delayed by a plumbing problem. She'd been irked when the plumber showed up 15 minutes after the agreed time, but he was courteous, and seemed to know right away what needed to be done. She'd been worried, but when she left a half hour later than normal she no longer felt concern about it being repaired satisfactorily. Thinking about how assured Rob was about what seemed to her to be a big problem, prompted her to recall that her usual practice at the end of an advanced course was to give students a few practical pointers for success in the workplace. Rob's place in the job market was clear to him; he knew who he was. Would her students be so fortunate as to find a satisfactory identity in their new place of work? What should she tell them?

Ontario's Community Colleges' ability to respond to the needs of the modern corporate marketplace can benefit from the European findings. The latter stages of formal education and the beginnings of continuous vocational training are as important as being proactive and self-directed at various career stages for the individual. Further, as graduates have expectations of achieving the role of their choice, they need a realistic understanding of how workplace dynamics will affect their entry in the real world of work; and how demands for flexibility and identity will form their lives in the future.

The FAME group's emphasis on informal learning may produce challenges in terms of accreditation, but does encourage graduates to diversify their learning portfolio with practical, work-specific knowledge from a wide range of sources. As graduates are expected to fill a variety of roles in their respective places of employment, readiness to accommodate horizontal role shifts becomes a valued asset to employers.

In summary, craft provides an opportunity for employees working in a variety of work groups to develop their own identities; which will reflect aspects of their workplace, but emphasize their own personal development. This form of vocational identity is portable between employers, has resilience, and serves employees well throughout their work-lives. As community colleges foster this positive aspect of identity formation, they are ensuring influence and growth long after graduates have hung up their graduation robes.

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