

# Annexure I

## Guidelines for Conducting Interviews with Managers

### Company data

- Number of employees
- Description of main products and services
- Core occupational groups working for the company
- Organizational restructuring (including changes in the corporate identity, legal status, products, services, ownership, etc.) during the last years

### Work organization

- General sectoral developments during the past years and how the company has adjusted to these developments
- What does the workplace look like for the core profession/occupation (nurses and IT technicians, respectively) in the organization? What is required of employees in terms of mobility/travel, communicating, learning and updating of skills?
- What are the main work tasks to be performed?
- What is the degree of employees' autonomy in respect to workplace and performance?

### Recruitment

- What is the company's policy in respect to core employment/layoffs and hiring?
- What kind of education and training is required of employees?
- What kind of work experience is required of employees?
- What kind of attitudes is expected of employees in terms of learning and flexibility?
- What is the policy and practice of in-house training and the role of initial training?

### HRD management

- Have there been any changes in the approach to human resources development and if so why (for example, because of technological changes, company's reorientation in terms of services, production etc.)?

- Are there any legal restrictions or obligations (in terms of employment policies and training, for example through unions) the company needs to meet in their HRD policy?
- Are there any tensions between employer and employees as concerns employment status, wages, working time and training, for example?
- How are innovations introduced? Are there any incentives or benefits for employees in terms of how they engage with their work?

#### Restructuring of work-staff requirements

- Have there been changes in employees' attitudes towards work and learning during the past years?
- Have there been any changes in employees' commitment and identification with their work, tasks, company or products and services?

# Annexure II

## Guidelines for Interviews with Employees

Company background (if not already available)

- Name, type of organization/company, number of employees, sector

Biographical data

- Description of current position including role, job, tasks and responsibilities and how long in the company.
- Description of the route towards the current positions, i.e. the detailed training and learning path (which learning/career path did you follow to obtain your current job, including the required specializations and special training?) of initial and further training.
- Questions about employment discontinuities and job and career changes—exploring reasons, motivation and conflicts of career changes.

Motivation for choosing the current profession and overall expectations

- *Job selection:* Why did you choose this particular profession/job (personal, social, family related, professional reasons)?
- *Work expectations:* What idea did you initially have about the profession/job/your current position and the daily work tasks it would entail? What expectations do you have with regards to your current job?
- *Social status of job/profession:* How important are the social status and recognition of the professional field/sector/your current job/your current employer for you and how decisive were these aspects when you decided to work in this area or for a particular employer?

Role of learning

- *Role of initial vocational training:* How useful was your initial training in light of your current job and the daily work tasks? Are there any linkages between your initial training and your current job?

- *Role of continuing training and work-based learning:* How do you acquire the knowledge and skills you need in order to meet the daily work challenges of your current job? What kind of further training does the employer offer and to which extent do you take advantage of these training opportunities? What kind of professional/personal development do the training activities target? Are there any other kinds of training activities offered in the professional field (for example, from other companies)? Is further learning rather voluntary or a requirement to stay in the job?

#### Work environment, performance of roles, interaction with colleagues

- *Performance of roles and work responsibilities:* What kind of work responsibilities and special functions (for example, team-leader position) do you currently perform? How do you relate to colleagues, supervisors, customers, etc.? How is the relation between interaction with colleagues or clients and work performance?
- *Work challenges and commitment:* Self-reflection on work commitment – have there been any changes during the last years?
- *Working conditions:* Have the working conditions changed over the last years? What creates satisfaction and what creates stress at work? Are there any support mechanisms or institutional structures that support employees in dealing with new challenges at work and changing work demands? Are employees supported in their role by supervisors?
- *Work attitude and motivation:* What is the most important feature of the current job profile/current position for job motivation? How satisfied are you overall with the current job situation, the work environment and possibilities for your further career development?
- *Flexibility:* To what extent is the employee expected to deal with new work tasks and skill requirements? How does the employer support employees in managing new work situations? Are changes related to work organization, time management, work tasks and the work environment perceived as a positive challenge or rather as a burden?

#### Future trends and own career orientation

- *Future developments:* According to your own opinion, what are the anticipated most important changes of your occupational field and workplace for the next 10 or so years? How do you prepare yourself to handle these changes? Do these possible changes have any implications when it comes to planning your future life?
- *Career prospects:* How important does the employee think learning and professional development are for the current and future job/career planning/professional and personal development? Where does the employee see himself/herself in the next 5 to 10 years (within the company, outside the company)?

## Appendix: Methods

To further explore the dynamics between labour-market demands and employees' work and career orientations I conducted a qualitative empirical investigation with nurses and IT technicians<sup>1</sup> in Germany and the UK. In the first place this empirical component involved qualitative and comparative methods. In addition, information given by participants on their socio-demographic background (age, gender, educational background) and work history (vocational specialization, date and duration of initial training, further training and career and job changes) was used to obtain an overview in quantitative terms regarding the training and job mobility of employees. For the sub-sample of British nurses a short questionnaire was used to specify this information.

The qualitative research applied semi-structured interviews on the basis of interview guidelines and related evaluation criteria (see further below for details). A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for studying complex social phenomena that are hard to quantify. Given the explorative nature of the investigation, the main objectives were to obtain an overall understanding of the dynamics involved as employees are adjusting their work and career orientations to emerging labour-market demands, to acquire in-depth knowledge of specific issues and to generate hypotheses for further research through inductive methods. Another objective was to create linkages with work practice by formulating implications that might be relevant for human resources development strategies and policies.

The comparative design was chosen in order to assess employees' work and career orientations in relation to different structural and institutional contexts. The structural embedding, in the first place, is represented by employees' immediate work environment largely shaped by the organization they work for and the interaction with their direct community of practice (i.e. colleagues and supervisors). Second, broader labour-market developments have a direct and indirect impact upon

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<sup>1</sup>The term 'IT technician' has been chosen to underline that the target group were employees with a technical background who work in the sector (and who typically identify themselves as 'technicians'). However, as the presentation of research findings evolves reference is also made to IT specialists, experts or consultants. In fact, particularly in the UK technical staff are often given generic titles like 'consultant' in order to avoid a narrow specification and allowed to undertake a broad range of tasks.

how skilling and work demands are undergoing change. Third, the sectoral or occupational context is shaping employees' vocational socialization, skill standards and professional roles, all of which are decisive factors in directing the work and career orientations of the intermediate-skill segment. All three levels were considered for this study: the organizational context by assessing the management perspective during the first interview phase while the interpretation of national and sectoral context variables was facilitated through the comparative approach considering employees who work in two contrasting sectors and two different national economies.

As outlined above, the comparative perspective was realized at two levels: Germany and the UK were chosen to represent different cultural, socioeconomic and institutional embeddings of work, employment and vocational traditions, whereas nursing and the IT sector were chosen because they represent two different work contexts with different dynamics and challenges in terms of flexibility and learning. The work profiles of nurses and employees working in information technology vary considerably in terms of their occupational traditions, the level of formalization, the anticipated pace of change and demands for flexibility and the type of knowledge, learning and skill development that the daily work tasks require. Table A.1 (below) presents an overview of the sample along the comparative perspective.

**Table A.1** Comparative approach and sample size

		Country of investigation		
		Germany	UK	<i>N</i>
Sectors	Nursing	33	30	64
	IT sector	26	23	49
	<i>N</i>	59	53	112

The main objective of comparative research is to identify patterns of similarities and differences across a range of cases of a relatively small number. While according to Ragin (1994) qualitative research emphasizes commonalities between cases in order to clarify categories and concepts, the aim of comparative research is to explain diversity within a particular set of cases in order to identify particular patterns.

...comparative researchers view each case as a combination of characteristics (...) and examine similarities and differences in combinations of characteristics across cases in their effort to find patterns (Ragin, 1994, p. 112).

Thereby the examination of patterns of diversity involves identifying combinations of conditions that distinguish different categories of cases. This is done by searching for uniformity within categories and contrasts between categories. Apart from exploring diversity by identifying differences between cases, one aim of comparative methods is to facilitate the interpretation of historical and cultural influence on certain developments or phenomena.

## Research Steps

Drawing on background material, empirical data and research findings generated through the research project ‘Vocational Identity, Flexibility and Mobility in the European Labour Market – FAME’,<sup>2</sup> the objective of the empirical investigation was to gain insight into employees’ work and career orientations in the interdependence between their respective contextual embedding and individual dispositions and resources. The empirical investigation consisted of interviews with three different groups of people: (i) experts, (ii) managers and human resources development specialists representing the two service sectors in question and (iii) ‘ordinary’ employees and team leaders who fulfilled the requirement of being skilled nurses or IT technicians, respectively, and who worked in their field of expertise during the time the interviews were conducted. Notably, the distinction between managers and team leaders was not always fully clear cut as some team leaders also assume management functions. However, managers typically operated at a higher hierarchical level, assuming responsibility for organizational structures and a greater number of staff.

The first interview phase involved interviews with managers and human resources development specialists. It was set out to obtain information that was assumed to represent the management or organizational perspective on the subject and employers’ expectations. These interviews formed the smaller part of the empirical investigation. The focus here was on exploring structural conditions including changes in organizational structures, how work is being organized, job profiles and the desired and required skill profiles of employees. The aim of this research step was to find out how managers assess changes at work and at the sectoral level (for example, in terms of flexibility, work organization and working conditions) that have occurred during the past decade and are considered to decisively shape the immediate work environment of employees. Interview questions also related to how managers experience and value employees’ capacity to deal with those changes and how this might affect employees’ work and career orientations and learning attitudes.

The interview results of this first phase provided the material for assessing the structural and organizational context from the managers’ perspective. For some organizations collective case studies were developed (Stake, 2000) addressing company data and products, work organization and demands for flexibility of employees, skills requirements and recruitment principles, learning, initial and further vocational training and career opportunities within the company. Annexure I contains the guidelines for this interview phase. The information obtained in this first interview phase with managers was in the first place used to specify the respective sectoral

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<sup>2</sup>The project was funded under the 5th EU Framework Programme with duration from March 2000 to May 2003. The main research findings are published under Brown (2004a), Brown and Kirpal (2004), Dif (2004), FAME Consortium (2003), Kirpal (2004a; 2004b; 2004c; 2006b), Kirpal and Brown (2007), Kirpal et al. (2007), Marhuenda et al. (2004), Loogma et al. (2004), and Patiniotis and Prodromitis (2007).

context and prevailing modes of flexibility and learning demands, which the sections of the empirical findings start with in Chapter 5. In addition, these data facilitated the identification of some major issues that were addressed when conducting the interviews with employees.

As the emphasis of the empirical investigation was placed on individuals' orientations and strategies of making adjustments at work, the major part of the qualitative research focused on interviews with 'ordinary' employees representing the intermediate-skill segments, i.e. nurses and IT technicians, respectively. This part of the empirical investigation aimed at deciphering how employees perceive and cope with flexibility and learning demands at work and how this affects their work and career orientations, commitment patterns and work and learning attitudes. Interview questions were geared towards exploring how employees respond to new forms of work organization and changing skill requirements, how they use opportunities of formal and informal learning, how they cope with changing work settings and experiences of conflicts and stress and how they project their future professional development, among others. The guidelines for conducting interviews with employees are presented in Annexure II.

In addition, interviews with five experts were conducted for the sector of nursing, two in Germany and one in the UK with researchers involved in projects for nurse-curriculum development.

## **Database and Sample**

The database consisted of fully transcribed or summarized interviews, postscripts and case studies. Depending on the situational appropriateness interviews were either individual, in-depth interviews or focus-group discussions with two to four employees usually not exceeding 90 min. Individual interviews were found to be more suitable for interviews with team leaders and supervisors and with employees who had a longer, more complex work history that also involved career changes. Small focus-group discussions proved to be more appropriate for two to four employees with similar work biographies and professional backgrounds.

All interviews were tape-recorded. Group interviews were always fully transcribed verbatim. The individual interviews, which typically lasted for about 45–60 min, were either transcribed or summarized shortly after the interview had been conducted. Summaries covered in detail the employee's occupational and training history and the discussion of central topics. The summaries were complemented by transcribed passages and an annotated interpretation. Postscripts in the form of handwritten notes that were written down after each interview or several interview sessions (for example, after three consecutive individual interviews) complemented the materials and were also used for data analysis. Those postscripts would make reference to and describe relevant impressions from the interview situation such as group dynamics, the interview setting, personal observations or emerging topic-related problems or conflicts. Periodically after several interview sessions I made



a summary of my first impressions and interpretive ideas. As mentioned above case studies of descriptive nature were developed for the first part of the empirical investigation to summarize institutional and sectoral specificities.

The first interview phase with interviews with managers and representatives of human resources departments were conducted in 2001. These were all individual interviews. Overall, 16 managers were interviewed for the health-care sector. The German managers were either human resource development managers in a hospital or heads of a hospital's nursing division. The UK managers mainly represented radiography, physiotherapy and hospital management. This means that, on the one hand, the sectoral developments were looked at from a broader perspective. On the other hand, the institutional context would likewise be hospitals since most of the radiographers and physiotherapists were working in a hospital. Here it was found that sectoral and institutional developments affect all professional groups working in a hospital (nurses, doctors, radiographers, health-care assistants, etc.) in similar ways. For ICT two managers were interviewed in each country representing large IT firms and SMEs.

As a second step pilot interviews with two employees from each sector and country were carried out in order to pre-test the interview guidelines and assess the suitability of the applied interview method (see further below). These pilot interviews also formed part of the database and were considered for the overall data analysis.

Interviews with nurses and IT specialists at the intermediate and advanced skill level were conducted between November 2001 and June 2002. As some of the UK material had been generated by the British partner of the FAME project,<sup>3</sup> these data needed to be reinterpreted and complemented in order to match the objectives of this study. While data available for the IT sector were fairly compatible, I conducted additional interviews with British nurses in Northern England in spring 2005 in order to have matching sample data for the nursing sector. While in nursing the focus was placed on hospital nurses working for public and private employers, jobs linked to information technology involved participants who worked in small, medium and large companies and who were working as independent consultants.

Complementing other studies related to the topic of investigation the focus was placed on employees at the intermediate skills level representing a range of qualifications, work experiences and job profiles. Due to the highly formalized vocational training system in nursing all interviewed nurses in both countries had formally trained as nurses. Additionally, most of them had pursued or completed a specialization course and/or further studies of higher education in a related field such as nursing management (see Annexure III for details). The majority of the German nurses were working in different hospitals in Northern Germany. The majority of nurses interviewed in the UK had specialized as occupational health nurses working either in the NHS, private companies or independently as consultants (14 out of 18). All those nurses had worked in hospitals for a considerable period of time before

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<sup>3</sup>Institute for Employment Research (IER), University of Warwick, UK

going into occupational health. These nurses were coming from all over the country (including Wales) and were interviewed at the university campus of the University of Warwick while attending a 1-week course for getting a diploma in occupational health. One UK interview was done by telephone. All other nurses in Germany and the UK were interviewed at their workplace.

Compared to the nursing sample, the sample of IT technicians was much more diverse comprising of skilled workers, graduates and individuals who did not formally train in the field. Typical of people working in the ICT sector are the high numbers of career changers and laterals coming from other areas so that this group was also represented in the sample. The majority of participants worked in companies that provided ICT-related products and services so that the focus was placed on employees who were working in the ICT sector. This is important, because a number of employees work in the ICT sector in a range of areas but cannot really be designated as IT technicians since their work is not as technical. On the other hand, the majority of IT technicians do not work in the ICT sector but across all sectors of the economy with a high proportion working in financial services, banking and insurance. The selected sample combined both elements, i.e. employees had a technical job profile and most of them worked for an ICT company.

For the German IT sample I conducted four in-depth interviews and two focus-group discussions with IT specialists in a large IT and medium-sized software company (cf. Annexure III for details). The other interviews were conducted at different branches of the formerly German national telecommunications company with employees who had a typical IT job profile. Employees represented different occupational specializations and job positions. Some of the older employees had trained as telecommunications craftsman in a mechanical occupation and had undergone a series of employer-directed retraining programmes to match ICT-specific skill requirements (9 out of 24). While three of the interviewees had trained as communications electricians (between 1986 and 1996), six had trained under the new 'IT professions' apprenticeship programme that was launched in 1996 (cf. Section 5.3.1), three as computer technicians and three as IT-systems electricians. One had trained in an earlier programme as data-processing technician. The remaining employees were career changers ('*Quereinsteiger*'), some of them with a higher education degree. Overall, three employees of the sample were team leaders or project managers.

The UK IT sample was more diverse and included some telecommunications technicians who had undergone an apprenticeship, but mainly graduates with a computing or engineering degree as well as career changers and graduates from other disciplines. Interviewees worked in small and medium-sized, but mainly large, IT and telecommunications companies, some of which were multinationals. In addition, some IT specialists worked in other sectors such as financial services and higher education or were working as independent consultants. They had varying levels of qualification from former apprentices to those with graduate or post-graduate qualifications. Their age ranged from mid-twenties to early fifties. All interviews were conducted at employees' workplace (Table A.2).

**Table A.2** Sample composition

		Country of investigation		
		Germany	UK	<i>N</i>
Interviewees	Managers (nursing)	6	10	16
	Head of Department/team leader	9	3	12
	General and specialized nurses	15	15	33
	Experts	3	2	5
	Managers (IT)	2	2	4
	IT team leaders (different skill levels including career changers and laterals)	3	4	7
	IT employees (different skill levels including career changers and laterals)	21	17	39
	<i>N</i>	59	53	112

All German participants of the second interview phase with employees were selected by company management according to selection criteria defined by the research team. These included employees from a range of professional backgrounds, work experiences, different levels of initial education and training and varying job profiles. Concretely, employees were to (i) have a skilled worker status (with some exceptions for the IT sector), (ii) represent different occupational specializations and (iii) have varying numbers of years of work experience. It was also desired that both male and female employees be represented. Since both sectors are gendered it was not possible to achieve a gender balance by sector but only in terms of the overall sample. In the predominantly female nursing sample six of the German and one of the UK participants were male. In the IT sample, by contrast, three of the German and four of the British sample were female. Due to legal reasons which made it very difficult to interview staff in the NHS, the UK nurse sample interviewed in 2005 was approached via the CHAIN network<sup>4</sup> and the course organizers for the occupational health diploma. For the IT sector in the UK, participants were partly selected by company management and partly approached via an Internet database.

<sup>4</sup>CHAIN is a network for health-care professionals, nurses, consultants, managers and other specialists who can join to exchange experiences of research and practice. It comprises members from all over the UK with a detailed description of their background, interests, job profiles and personal contact information.

## Semi-structured Interview Method

The empirical investigation applied qualitative research on the basis of semi-structured interviews. Those comprised of biographical elements (cf. Hoff et al., 1991) and problem-centred interview parts (cf. Witzel, 1996). All interviews with employees started with their work biography. First, the interviewees described their current job including their position, main tasks, roles and responsibilities. Then, they described their work, training and employment trajectory, starting with their first vocational training or employment after having finished compulsory education and detailing all subsequent stages of their individual career that followed (notably, this typically involved all changes except for some of the UK participants whose careers involved so many changes that they could not recall all of them in the limited interview setting). The first biographical part during which the interviewee essentially ‘told his/her story’ was used as a warm-up and for setting the scene. With this information I could retrospectively reconstruct the approximate age and participants’ learning and employment trajectories as detailed in Annexure III. As a next step I asked some questions of understanding and reflection related to the outlined work biography, exploring in particular motivations and reasons for occupational choices and career changes – or no changes which only occurred in the German sample. From there the participants typically were engaged in a discussion along the problem-centred approach based on the topics outlined in Annexure III.

The problem-centred approach was initially developed and applied as a qualitative method of biographical and life-course research. Although the focus of my own empirical investigation was not on individuals’ overall biography, the reflection upon the participants’ working life and occupational history did have a biographical component which later on was taken into consideration when analysing employees’ patterns of adjustments. The problem-centred interview connects to the method of ‘topic-centred interviews’ as developed by Leithäuser and Volmerg (1979, 1988) in the context of hermeneutic text interpretation. Here, one way of text analysis away from interpreting the narrative as an individual case is to identify topics that appear across different narratives. By further exploring those topics by means of horizontal analysis it is possible to identify communalities and differences between participants with regard to their experiences, perceptions and ideas.

As a methodological tool the problem-centred approach creates close linkages between the interview guidelines and the evaluation categories that support further data analysis. The interview guidelines thereby reflect the thematic foci of the interview. Those were developed on the basis of theoretical considerations that guided the research questions as presented in the previous sections. How these guidelines and topics were realized in the interview situation was left relatively open and depended on the narration structure that developed in the course of the interview. For the interviews conducted with nurses and IT technicians this meant that not all topics outlined in the interview guide were covered in each interview and discussed with the same depth and quality. Which topics were discussed and how also depended on the participants’ engagement and capacities and interest of reflecting upon particular topics. This was for one part dependent upon the individual participant, but there

were also systematic differences, for example, between nurses in Germany and the UK as concerns the main topics of concern. For example, the concept (and quality) of care and how this affects nurses' professional roles was widely discussed among nurses in Germany but did not emerge as a topic of major concern among British nurses. By contrast, working time flexibility emerged as a dominant theme among British nurses. This dynamic also makes clear that the problem-centred interview gives participants the opportunity to bring up new topics in the course of the interview. Some of those topics, for example, were related to experiences of conflicts of commitment between work and family life, an issue that according to its objectives the study did not focus on.

The problem-centred interview shows particular strength in underlining the participants' roles as actors in the process of shaping their own work biography, thereby connecting to the concept of 'self-socialization' which takes account of the dynamic interaction between individuals' actions, normative standards and social structures (Heinz, 2002a; Heinz & Witzel, 1995). In the interview situation the individual as an informant is considered to be a carrier of purposeful actions that reflect concerns for structural risks and chances, decision-making processes and personal values. As individuals are responsible for shaping their own work biographies (and the results and consequences of their decisions and actions) they can be considered 'experts' when it comes to interpreting and making sense of the institutional structures that influence how their work and career orientations develop. They themselves have to resolve the conflicts that may arise between work and training demands and their individual work trajectories that they make decisions about. They have to connect what they have learnt during their vocational training with developing a professional specialization, becoming a member of a community of practice, finding their place in the organization they work for, coping with the working conditions they encounter and projecting their own future employment perspectives that need to be aligned with their personal goals, interests and commitments.

The applied problem-centred interview method facilitated a hermeneutic process aimed at identifying sense-making structures that can explain individuals' actions and conceptions of reality. As an interactive process the interview gives room for interpretation by both the interviewer and the informant. In order to support the process of interaction and interpretation, an open communication structure is needed that allows for correcting thoughts and ideas, asking questions or providing further information. All those reiterations help to make ideas and statements more precise. Interestingly, in conducting small focus-group interviews with employees in Germany and the UK, this process was further supported by interaction and communication among the participants when participants engaged in a discussion among themselves. This brought about yet another level of reflection, i.e. participants' reflections upon their own experiences against the experiences of the other participants.

The narrative structure of the interview helps the interviewer to identify certain patterns, which at the same time are being reinterpreted during the communication process. The interviewer's intervention by posing and directing questions is in itself

theoretically grounded. Thus, on the one hand, the communication strategy generates a narrative while, on the other hand, it also allows getting a broader and more complex understanding of what has been said through posing targeted questions that generate a reflection process (Witzel, 1982, pp. 92–95). Identifying patterns can only be realized on the basis of theoretical assumptions that directly connect to the research questions. At the same time, the open communication structure supports the process of generating unknown patterns, which require asking questions in order to systematically modify some of the pre-assumptions of the interviewer. Through this kind of questioning the participants are engaged in the communication and interpretation process. It further supports the interviewee in reconstructing his/her own interpretations and trying to give meaning to their actions and thoughts. In this process, of course, all kinds of biographical information are interpreted retrospectively, incorporating experiences and learning processes that have occurred in the meantime and that make it possible for the participants to better understand and cope with their current situation. Scientifically these kinds of reconstructions are important because they make us understand how people perceive and are able to cope with their present situation (Witzel, 1996, p. 51).

## Data Analysis

The data analysis followed the evaluation principles of problem-centred interviews inspired by an inductive grounded theory development approach based on (i) categorization, (ii) codification, (iii) fragmentation of texts, (iv) reconceptualization and (v) interpretation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This approach was complemented by collective case studies (Stake, 2000) which had been developed from the interview material of the first interview phase with managers. The interview data was synthesized according to evaluation categories that were adjusted and refined in the course of data analysis. The process of categorization, codification, fragmentation of texts and interpretation was supported by using the software programme ‘WinMax Quadro pro’ specifically designed for qualitative data analysis.

The interview guide (see below), which reflected the thematic foci of the interview, prestructured the evaluation categories for further categorization and interpretation of the interview material. The topics of the interview guidelines further complemented by newly emerging topics provided the basis for comparing the different interviews and defining the categories according to which the transcribed texts were being coded. This procedure creates a close connection between the interview guide, evaluation categories and the coding process.

Für die Auswertung sind die Themenfelder des Leitfadens wesentlich; sie gewährleisten zum einen die Vergleichbarkeit der einzelnen Interviews und beinhalten zum anderen die Kategorien, die einer Kodierung von Textstellen dienen (The topical areas of the interview guide are essential for the analysis of data. They ensure, on the one hand, the comparability of the interviews and contain, on the other hand, the categories that are used for the coding of text passages [translated from German]) (Witzel, 1996, p. 57).

Identifying ‘central themes’ can be regarded as the first step of the interpretation process of the problem-centred interview approach. This process corresponds with Strauss’ and Corbin’s (1990) ‘open coding’, the first step of a complex three-tier coding process. ‘Generative’ or ‘open coding’ describes the process of exploring, breaking down, comparing and conceptualizing the empirical data. The data were in the first place being coded according to predefined ‘conceptual codes’ that emerged from the themes and topics of the interview guide. Complementary so-called *in vivo* codes were most commonly used when referring to the category of ‘conflict’, coping strategies of employees and their professional self-understanding. While according to Strauss and Corbin predefined codes reflect the theoretical assumptions and concepts of the interviewer, ‘*in vivo*’ codes emerge from the interaction with the participants in the interview situation. They correspond to the (non-scientific) language of either the interviewer or the participants and represent the (non-scientific) perspective on the issues and topics that are being explored during the interview as they represent the terminology used by the participants expressing their own views and ideas.<sup>5</sup>

With these two coding procedures it is possible to combine a theoretically grounded perspective with theoretical openness. As concepts of explanations are being formulated on the basis of the empirical data and the theoretical background knowledge of the researcher, it is possible to formulate empirically grounded hypotheses that are reflected by the data (Hopf, 1996). Thus, identifying central themes constitutes the first stage of identifying theoretical concepts, which develop and become more concrete as topics are related back to statements and reflections of the original passages in the texts. Modifying and refining the codes by reiterating between the coded text passages and the multilayered categories (and sub-categories of codes) presents a heuristic tool to refine and validate the interpretation of the material on the one hand and to generate more general hypotheses on the other hand (*ibid.*; Prein, 1996, p. 96).

As Witzel (1996) states, at this stage the theoretical concepts developed on the basis of central themes have the status of a ‘temporary interpretive hypothesis’ that still needs to be validated. The common validation approach that was followed consisted of a validation on the basis of the transcribed texts following the principle of ‘saturation’. This means that an interpretive hypothesis remains valid until no contradicting factors can be found in the text and any contradictory cases or incidents that may lead to alternative interpretations are being made transparent and explained. In addition, the interview itself can be regarded as a valuable tool to validate assumptions as the method allows for reflections and interpretations during the interview process thus already revealing contradictions and nuances of interpretations.

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<sup>5</sup> ‘*In vivo* coding’ means that a marked text fragment is being coded with itself (for example: ‘made me sad’ is coded with ‘made me sad’) and not by corresponding to a more descriptive, generalizing or abstract term or terminology.

Based on this approach, the coding itself can be considered the cornerstone of the data analysis. According to Miles and Huberman (1993) coding is the central process and core methodological principle in qualitative data analysis.

Coding is analysis. To review a set of field notes, transcribed or synthesized, and to dissect them meaningfully, while keeping the relations between the parts intact, is the stuff of analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1993, p. 56).

Codes thereby can refer to certain expressions, sentences, paragraphs or even the whole document (interview) when referring to a ‘case’ that can be used to identify similarities and differences with other ‘cases’ and to develop a typology (Hopf, 1996). In a second step the codes are systematically analysed and organized according to concepts and, later on, categories. For Strauss and Corbin (1990) a category is a classification of concepts at a higher, more abstract level and forms an element of a theory. For example, the ‘caring concept of nurses’ would be a category of abstract nature that emerged from developing, comparing and synthesizing open and in vivo codes. Categories in this sense illustrate theoretically important aspects. They are further refined by sub-categories that specify particular aspects and foci of analysis. Looking at the frequencies and intensities of categories is crucial for characterizing and organizing categories and sub-categories and establishing relationships between them (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 69). Linking up categories and sub-categories in order to redefine and reinterpret the initially created codes and organizing the different categories at a more abstract level and relating them to each other is facilitating the further exploration of the theoretical framework.

In the tradition of life-course research and school-to-work transition, Heinz and Witzel (1995) developed a simplified model to guide the data analysis of problem-centred interviews. The ARB model (*Aspiration, Realisationen und Bilanzen*), which in English might best be translated into ‘aspirations’, ‘realization’ and ‘evaluation’, provides a tool to analyse the procedural nature of how individuals deal with conflicts that emerge from their actual work or employment situation and other structural labour-market conditions. The model assumes that individuals have choices and constantly make decisions not only concerning their working lives but also in relation to their broader professional development. Certain situations or periods of life – such as making the transition from school to work or changing from one employer to another – require that individuals make choices or even a series of consecutive choices. At this stage they will be reflecting upon their professional aspirations, opportunities, arrangements and insecurities, among others. As the model compares individuals’ professional aspirations with their actual occupational trajectory and work situation, it helps to explain how choices develop and materialize. At the same time it reflects the interdependence between individuals’ resources, interests and former experiences, on the one hand, and work demands, opportunities and risks, on the other hand. The focus of the analysis therefore is how individuals make sense of their working life and what kinds of coping strategies and career orientations they develop in order to achieve consistency and continuity in their professional development (Witzel, 1996).



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