

# IDENTITIES AT WORK

**UNESCO-UNEVOC Book Series**  
**Technical and Vocational Education and Training:**  
**Issues, Concerns and Prospects**

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**Volume 5**

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# Identities at Work

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A C.I.P. Catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN-10 1-4020-4988-9 (HB)  
ISBN-13 978-1-4020-4988-0 (HB)  
ISBN-10 1-4020-4989-7 (e-book)  
ISBN-13 978-1-4020-4989-7 (e-book)

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Published by Springer,  
P.O. Box 17, 3300 AA Dordrecht, The Netherlands.

*www.springer.com*

*Printed on acid-free paper*

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Edited by Alan Brown, Simone Kirpal and Felix Rauner

## INTRODUCTION BY THE SERIES EDITORS

Work is a central feature in the life of most people. Not only does it provide them with the means of survival in terms of food, shelter and clothing, but for most the type of work undertaken gives purpose and meaning to their life, and, if they are fortunate enough to be undertaking work that they truly like, it is a major source of pleasure and satisfaction in their life. Because of such matters, most of those who are unemployed suffer from feelings of alienation, and a loss of self esteem, work-related identity and status.

It is also no coincidence that when we meet someone for the first time we are often keen to find out ‘what they do for a living’. This is because to know a person’s occupation gives the inquisitive observer a great deal of information about the person in question, such as their likely level of income, educational attainment, standard of living, and the types of people they associate with in both work and leisure time. This information is also likely to provide an indication of their likely attitudes and values regarding a wide range of social, political and economic issues. In other words, a person’s work has a significant influence on their *identity*, both as individuals and as members of social groups.

The relationship between an individual and their work is an interactive one, in that while work helps define an individual’s identity, so an individual’s identity impacts on and helps shape their work, and their relationships with their employer, fellow employees, and the occupational group with which they work.

For many in the workplace, due to a shift from the *Industrial Age* to the *Information Age*, and related matters such as globalisation, and the greater mobility of employees across national and international borders, individuals are increasingly working in rapidly changing environments where they need to take on new areas of responsibility and master increasingly complex work situations. The extent to which individuals and groups of employees are able to cope with, and adjust to, such major change does not only rely on their commitment to, interest

and training for the job in question, but also upon their level of commitment and identification with their employment. That is, it affects their *Identities at Work*, which is the subject of this book.

In this age of increasing mobility of workers across national borders, an individual's ties and commitment to a particular employer or company tends to become weakened, as does the commitment of employers to those they employ. The impact of *globalisation*, particularly the *outsourcing* of jobs, also affects these ties and commitment.

This volume examines the interdependence between employees' identification with work and their work commitment. As such, it relates to such important matters as an individuals' commitment to their work organisation and employer in terms of loyalty and motivation, which in turn impacts on workforce stability and improved performance. It also addresses *how* work identities are formed, learned and obtained.

A feature of this book, which contributes to its importance in the field, is that it adopts a truly multi-disciplinary approach and international perspective, drawing as it does on research insights offered by the disciplines sociology and psychology, and on the literature relating to organisational management and to vocational education and training.

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# Introduction and Overview

**Alan Brown\***, **Simone Kirpal†** and  
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This edited volume on *Identities at Work* brings together international theory and empirical research that deals with continuity and change in identity formation processes at work in the context of changes in working processes and labour market requirements, one outcome of which may lead to new forms of mobility and flexibility for both employers and employees. By emphasising perspectives from sociology, psychology, organisational management and vocational education and training the different contributions connect the debates of human resources development, skills formation and career development with those relating to individual's work commitment and vocational orientations. In this sense this volume presents a new research area embedded in a wholly interdisciplinary and international perspective.

Some modern work settings that make use of decentralised organisational structures based on flat hierarchies and team working also require that employees at all skills levels are able to assume much broader responsibilities, master complex work processes, work independently, take initiative and organise their own, partly self-directed, work-related learning. Modern work processes in manufacturing and service organisations increasingly rely upon responsible and competent employees who are willing and able to engage both with the tasks that their job requires and in learning and developing their skills. The degree to which employees are successful in taking on new forms of responsibility and mastering complex work situations is, however, not only dependent upon employees' skills composition and how well they have been trained, it also relates to the extent to which employees identify with what they do and their

commitment to their work and performance of their tasks. Employee responses to changing work processes are therefore not just a matter of skill development, they essentially involve development in the forms of identification, identity building and commitment that employees experience while engaging with changing work processes and contexts.

Studies of management and behavioural sciences have long since confirmed the interdependence between employees' identification with work and their work commitment. Organisational commitment in particular has received considerable attention, as it is believed (and has been tested) that individuals' commitment towards their employing organisation correlates with outcomes such as loyalty and motivation of employees, workforce stability and improved performance. While these (predominantly quantitative) approaches tend to emphasise the organisational or management perspective on enhancing workforce effectiveness, recent studies stress that organisational commitment is essentially a dual trust-based relationship that also requires commitment from the organisation towards its employees. Under conditions of increased international competition and pressures of rationalisation and economic constraints organisations tend to undermine commitment to their employees resulting in the psychological contract undergoing change and in some cases both parties investing less in establishing forms of commitment and building trust-based relationships.

Perspectives focused more on the employee have emphasised that individuals are challenged to develop and exhibit forms of commitment and identification with work that do not just relate to the organisation. The concept of multiple commitments shifts the focus beyond the organisation to include other sources or dimensions of commitment and identification such as work group, occupational specialisation, task performance or the union, for example. This approach analytically differentiates between organisational commitment, occupational commitment, job involvement, work involvement and group commitment, or in more broader terms, between workplace commitment relating to the direct work environment such as the employing organisation, professional roles, colleagues and the work team, and those commitments external to the immediate workplace such as to the union, occupation, professional association or future career prospects (for more on this see Baruch and Cohen in this volume). Such research suggests that work outcomes can be better understood and explained as a function of several forms of commitment in combination rather than by just exploring one kind of commitment alone, and this has meant that occupational commitment and job involvement in particular are gaining renewed importance as foci for analysis.

Studies on work identities connect occupational commitment, job involvement and levels of tasks performance (work outcomes) to employees' vocational socialisation and skills development. From this perspective, vocational socialisation and becoming skilled are the basis for individuals identifying with their work and vocational roles and developing work commitment and a professional ethic, which can constitute the basis for effective and productive performance. In countries where the tradition of vocational training and apprenticeship programmes is strong, becoming a member of a 'community of practice' is closely linked to developing a vocational identity. Furthermore, developing an occupational commitment and high levels of identification with work are believed to foster the integration of young people into society, particularly of those who perform relatively poorly at school. Hence developing an occupational identity is regarded as an important tool to foster labour market integration and stabilise school-to-work transitions, both at the first threshold (making the transition from general education to vocational training) and the second threshold (making the transition from training into gainful employment). That those processes are intrinsically linked and interdependent with the development of a person's overall identity is the focus of another strand of research in this area that is strongly represented in this volume.

The latter approaches tend to underline a subjective-oriented perspective (hence, at least in this volume, qualitative methods predominate), which develops in the complex interplay between structure and individual agency. Against the interdependence between developing forms of identity at work and a personal identity these approaches acknowledge that individuals' patterns of identification and commitment at work may vary in the intensity with which they are held and in the significance individuals ascribe to them, and that if and how employees identify with their work is dependent upon a variety of factors and conditions. As a pioneering work, this volume aims at investigating in more detail some of those factors and conditions. At the same time it seeks to provide a framework for presenting the factors that influence the development of work identities in their full complexity and to encourage and stimulate the creation of fruitful linkages as a basis for further research.

Changes in work contexts, employment conditions and patterns of work organisation affect individuals' career orientations and in many contexts patterns of commitment and identification with work are themselves undergoing significant change. At the same time the occupation continues to remain a key factor in supporting work-related identity

development and work socialisation as well as often constituting a significant element of a person's more general social identity. Some commentators express concerns that the increasing flexibility of skills, work and employment may negatively affect employees' work motivation, learning aptitude and commitment and even carry the danger of having disruptive effects on the development of an individual's overall personality. By investigating the role and meaning of identity formation processes in different work contexts and under conditions of increasing flexibility of work and employment, the contributions in this volume provide theoretically and empirically grounded insights that provide a significant contribution towards addressing this topic of wider social, political and academic interest.

Changes in work contexts and patterns of employment may mean that some employers and employees are more open to building in more flexibility and independence in the organisation of work, but in other contexts there are dangers that these changes will lead to lower levels of identification with the company, lack of work commitment and instabilities for both the employer and the employees. In practice, the loosening of the employer-employee contract may mean that risk management and responsibility for individual development at work are largely transferred from the company to the individual, requiring from the employees a much higher level of self-initiative and individual agency in making sure their skills and competences are valued in the labour market. While empowered employees may benefit from this trend and may even assert their flexibility and independence by taking their intelligence and know-how with them upon leaving the company to enhance their career chances, disempowered and less qualified employees on the periphery of organisations will more likely tend to be over-challenged when dealing with and adjusting to expectations of self-initiated learning and career planning. The latter group bears a higher risk of long-term labour market exclusion. At the same time some companies increasingly invest in aligning and integrating corporate and individual goals and values for those they consider their key employees, who in return are expected to commit to and identify with the organisation.

Fostering the development of forms of identification with work can help employees to overcome uncertainties in employment conditions and instabilities at work. On the other hand, under the conditions of flexible labour markets and organisational restructuring, strong work identities and the persistence of previous forms of organisational commitment may be a barrier to enhancing the mobility of the workforce and the flexibility of economic processes. Thus in certain work contexts some

employers and employees may consider strong work identities and occupational attachments produce strong inter-firm demarcations and confine employees to particular job positions in ways that may restrict the competitiveness of companies. In such circumstances there may be tensions between an employer's desire for more flexibility and a wish that employees had more adaptable forms of attachments and those employees who wish to retain former attachments and values.

Certainly, we can identify conflicting interests and a number of unanswered questions. Although the different book chapters do not address all of the questions and issues raised, we hope that with this compilation of results from theoretical and empirical research some of those issues can be addressed and clarified. Most of all, however, we hope to have contributed to a reinvigoration of the debate about the nature and development of work-related identities and that discussions of these issues will continue.

The volume is structured into four parts. The first part presents ideas and concepts about work-related identities from different theoretical and empirical perspectives, including mapping out different approaches towards conceptualising vocational identities and investigating the meaning these can have for particular societal or occupational groups. The empirical studies, all of which present their own approach towards a theoretical foundation for the investigations undertaken, focus on bankers in Denmark, young mothers entering training programmes in Germany, tourism employees in Greece and skilled workers in Europe.

The *FAME Consortium* starts this section with an overview of how different national European research traditions connect theoretical concepts of vocational identity formation with empirical research and related theoretical concepts and topics. It outlines how 'identity' is conceptualised in psychology, psychoanalysis and sociology and delineates a new conceptual framework for the analysis of vocational identity. Furthermore, with examples drawn from Estonia, Greece and France it shows how the debate on vocational identity has been anchored in different national, empirically-based research traditions.

The presentation of three empirical studies follows this introductory overview in part one. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods, *Morten Smistrup* investigates the vocational identity of Danish bankers and the role it used to play in the past and currently plays in processes of becoming a committed bank employee. From the analysis of the banking sector he delineates some general aspects of vocation and vocational identity and the significance of these phenomena to society and the individual. The vocation herein is conceptualised as a formative collective

organising principle as opposed to the self, which presents a subjective organising perspective.

Based on a German pilot project with young mothers, *Gwendolyn Paul* and *Uta Zybell* discuss the role of vocational training for an individual's vocational socialisation and the development of a vocational identity. For teenage mothers who break with the regular structure of status passages of German employees (i.e. general schooling, vocational training, gainful employment and then starting a family) being able to take part in a vocational training programme strongly confirms the value of a person learning a trade, becoming skilled and being involved in work contexts as a 'gateway to the world' and as an opportunity for societal participation. By following a considerable number of young mothers during the course of their training, they forcefully show how integration into and participation in work settings also influences the overall identity of these mothers, hence underlining the interdependence between work and family life in identity formation processes.

With a different focus *Nikitas Patiniotis* and *Gerasimos Prodromitis* introduce the issue of the 'double' vocational identity of self-employed owners of small, often family-run, businesses that are to some extent characteristic of people working on the margins of a number of sectors in the economy. Based on an empirical investigation, they discuss the situation of employees working in the Greek tourist industry and hypothesise that self-employed owners in this sector in particular develop a complex vocational identity that reflects responses to the demand for more flexible work practices and the low recognition of formal qualifications and training related to the field. Employees working in this sector find themselves challenged to deal with multiple, and sometimes ambiguous, vocational identities not only due to their position as being self-employed, but also because of the unstable, seasonal and sometimes precarious employment conditions, which are quite common across Europe, but in southern and eastern European countries in particular.

From the policy debate about whether an occupationally structured or a flexibility-based modular system of vocational training drives labour markets more effectively, *Felix Rauner* explores and discusses the future of vocational education and training systems in Europe and their role in fostering or inhibiting the development of a vocational identity. In his analysis vocational training systems in Europe can be structured according to two qualification scenarios: first, education and training for and by means of skilled work—the vocational education scenario, and second, the accumulation of skills necessary for employment—the market-driven employability scenario. He introduces a number of possible criteria that

could support the assessment of vocational training systems in an international comparative perspective. One major finding in this comparative approach is that skilled workers trained according to the first scenario tend to develop a vocational identity in the course of their training process, which has the positive effect of strengthening employees' performance orientation and quality awareness.

Part two brings together contributions that thematise the dynamics between personal identity and work and employment, a strand of research that has received major attention since the first empirical investigations of industrial sociology and work psychology. The dominant theme here is how individuals deal with the flexibility demands of some modern work settings and manage to integrate diverse work experiences into a coherent self-image to generate continuities in their personal identity and career narratives. All three contributions take a subject-oriented approach by methodologically addressing these issues with the help of qualitative studies that present individual narratives from Switzerland, Australia, Germany and the UK.

*Sabine Raeder* and *Gudela Grote* explore personal identity in the context of work flexibility drawing on a psychological approach towards identity. Based on an empirical study with individuals who experienced career changes they conceptualise, according to Hausser's identity model, the dimensions biographical continuity and ecological consistency as aspects of the self-concept, locus of control and self-esteem. They conclude that their interview participants generally succeeded in integrating career changes in their identity through emphasising biographical continuity and a high overall ecological consistency. They argue that detailed analysis is necessary to capture the wide variety in individual biographies and personal identities and that in order to support personally valued vocational identities, individuals should be supported in establishing an appropriate balance within their identity construction.

*Stephen Billett* also looks at how individuals construct continuity in their lives under conditions of change that include re-directions in their careers and employment, and connects his approach with investigating individuals' motivations to engage in lifelong learning. He proposes that individuals' sense of self shapes and is shaped by their participation and learning throughout working life through a quest to become 'themselves' in the sense of creating a coherent self-image. In this process, individuals' agency and intentionality is likely to be directed by and towards their sense of self, which also includes the negotiation of identity as they engage in work. He concludes that in understanding the processes of learning and the remaking of work practice this individual sense of self needs acknowledging and to be accounted for, particularly in

policies and practices associated with lifelong learning and when it comes to attempting to mobilise that learning.

What it takes for individuals to fulfil expected demands of becoming a 'flexible employee' is explored by *Simone Kirpal* and *Alan Brown* on the basis of three narratives. Some human resources departments and managers increasingly favour multi-skilled, mobile and adaptable employees who can potentially perform a variety of tasks as the 'ideal model' against which they wish to recruit. While this may put great pressure on some employees, others may regard themselves as actors who actively try to use flexibility, mobility and learning as instruments to foster their broader vocational goals and career prospects. To what extent this may conflict with or support the development of strong work identities and whether the increasing flexibility of skills, work and employment may negatively affect the development of forms of identification with work and an individual's overall personality is further explored.

The contributions to the third part of this volume connect vocational and professional identity formation with theoretical and empirical research on work and organisational commitment. The chapters presented in this section are either based on quantitative methods or larger qualitative empirical investigations.

*Yehuda Baruch* and *Aaron Cohen* start this section with a theoretical chapter introducing the concepts of organisational commitment and professional identity as two major constructs in behavioural and management studies. They deduce an integrative conceptual framework to clarify the association between organisational commitment and professional identity by relating those two constructs to each other, exploring their multi-dimensional character and the multiple constituent components of which they are comprised. By discussing the relevance and implications of commitment and professional identity for the working life of individuals, they hope to suggest a new perspective for further studies into the combined effect of both constructs.

Based on an empirical investigation in the German automotive industry *Bernd Haasler* explores young trainees' experiences of occupational and organisational commitment as they make their way through the German apprenticeship system. During this period young people typically are expected to meet various expectations of developing attachments and forms of identification with the company and the occupational field they train for at the same time as it is believed that the direction these processes take during this formative period also significantly influences the young people's subsequent work-based learning, competence development and career orientation. Although the

German vocational training system in the first place aims to foster apprentices' vocational identity formation the results show that during the first year of the training young people develop a much greater attachment towards their employing organisation than to the vocational field they are specialising in.

Looking at a broader European perspective, *Simone Kirpal*, *Alan Brown* and *M'Hamed Dif* discuss how individuals' attachments to more classical forms of commitment and identification with work may conflict with new flexibility and learning demands. They observe a general trend towards the 'individualisation' of employee commitment and work identities, which challenge the individual to develop a proactive and 'entrepreneurial' work attitude based on multi-skilling and flexibility. They argue that employees at the intermediate skills level in particular may in many contexts be over-challenged to fulfil increased demands of flexibility and continuous learning, because they may lack the necessary resources, skills and capacities on the one hand, and, on the other hand, are not sufficiently supported in their working environment to become equipped to meeting changing work demands. Especially when considered from a perspective of potential labour market exclusion this is highly problematic and may disadvantage a potentially high number of employees in Europe.

Taking a different perspective and methodological approach *Akihiro Ishikawa* challenges some contemporary stereotypes of Japanese workers by means of cross-cultural comparative study as well as longitudinal analyses. While Japanese workers are commonly assumed to develop their work identity and commitment largely in relation to the organisation they work for, his analyses reveal that attitudes of Japanese permanent full-time employees are not so work centralised, work satisfied and company dependent as compared to workers in other countries. The meaning of work and working, however, differs considerably between different job strata (i.e. between manual workers, administrative staff, supervisors and technical staff). The author regards the growing number of semi-unemployed Japanese youth as one major reason for the declining work-oriented life style in Japan.

Part four of this volume deals with how professional identities are actively shaped through organisational and institutional mechanisms. The two contributions present two case studies of how professional identities are institutionally being created or constructed as newly emerging job profiles or work demands that require new forms of work identity, for example, when professional tasks are being re-defined or require a new skills background or composition.

*Monika Nerland* and *Karen Jensen* address the role that initial education can play in constructing a new professional self. They analyse curricular and policy documents in order to demonstrate how new kinds of work identities are offered to students in Norway who want to become nurses or computer engineers. These documents, which recently have been newly adopted for both professional groups, also define, implicitly or explicitly, emerging visions and expectations of the professional self. Based on theoretical concepts introduced by Foucault the authors discuss how the formulation of goals, activities and evaluation procedures in the curricula impose new demands on the learning self as they view the students as creators of knowledge, boundary crossers and innovators of self and ethics.

The second case study, which *David Finegold* and *Robert Matousek* present, focuses on the bioscience industry in the US. While historically the diverse skills required in the sector were embodied in specialists from different disciplines such as biology, chemistry and computer science, who spoke different technical languages and had different approaches to solving problems, major advances in biotechnology require new types of professionals. The authors introduce two new types of bioscience professionals who embody a new combination of skill mix: computational biologists who are able to integrate programming skills and biological knowledge, and bioscience business professionals who can integrate science and business to help commercialise new products. The authors discuss some of the key labour market, organisational and individual-level factors related to the creation of new professional profiles and identities and identify processes that may also apply to similar developments in other forms of complex knowledge work.