

LABOUR-MARKET FLEXIBILITY
AND INDIVIDUAL CAREERS

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Labour-Market Flexibility and Individual Careers

A Comparative Study

by

SIMONE R. KIRPAL
University of Bremen, Germany

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Series Editor's Introduction

People's professional orientation is not only guided by the skills they develop and the career objectives they set for themselves – it is also influenced by global labour-market trends, which in the course of a lifetime often require individuals to undertake considerable career adjustments. These career adjustments can take place for a wide variety of reasons which are often well beyond the control of the individual, and which are reached through pathways that may be consciously or unconsciously taken up.

While these adjustments can open up new opportunities for employees, they also often involve significant challenges. Against the backdrop of ever-accelerating labour-market developments, the concept of work-based learning gains new importance at a time when careers are marked by discontinuity and where, increasingly, the only constant is change. Learning and teaching strategies must adapt, moving away from rigid, theory-based frameworks to more flexible and generic approaches that encompass notions of mobility and transition, while at the same time transmitting up-to-date and relevant content.

These considerations are particularly true for technical and vocational occupations: these require workers highly specialized in skills that are increasingly short-lived as the technological advances resulting from the shift from the Industrial to the Information Age rapidly make knowledge acquired in the educational setting obsolete. In specific fields of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) there is a high risk of a skills mismatch occurring when skills taught in classes will not be put into practice within the actual workplace. As a case in point, information and communication technology (ICT) specialists, as showcased in this interesting and informative book, represent an occupation which is under the direct influence of globalized technology and market trends that require IT workers not only to constantly keep abreast of latest developments but also to anticipate these changes. The more traditionally embedded profession of nursing is also impacted by technological advances. In comparison to that of IT specialists, nursing provides interesting material for a high-contrast analysis of how the changing labour-market situation leads individuals to engage in career decisions in different professional settings as well as in two dissimilar economic ('liberal' in the UK and 'coordinated' in Germany) market contexts. At the same time, a comparison of these two branches

provides rich substance for an analysis of how gender bias and workplace stereotypes can affect career choices: it is no coincidence that IT is a male-dominated area whereas nursing remains a predominantly female profession.

The aim of the study presented in this cutting-edge book is to examine the process of how individuals adjust their careers to meet changing labour-market demands and to assess the extent to which they are able to shape, reshape and restructure their work biographies.

In the light of such demands and (often) anxiety-creating developments, the key question arises: how do workers develop a sense of commitment to their employer if they are expected to always remain flexible and adaptable (in terms of working hours, work location and relocation but also in terms of job profile, tasks to be performed and salary expectations), at the risk of being exposed to exploitative work conditions, and often no longer having any guarantee of securing, long-term employment? In this latest volume in the UNESCO-UNEVOC Series on *Technical and Vocational Education and Training: Issues, Concerns and Prospects*, the question of how individuals and groups develop a work identity and sense of commitment in flexible settings is at the very heart of the discussion. This book, which builds on an earlier volume in the Series (*Identities at Work*, co-edited by Simone Kirpal), demonstrates that commitment to work does not develop by instilling the worker with a sense of hierarchy and fear. Rather, the findings presented here demonstrate that a true sense of vocational identity and responsibility can best and most effectively develop through strong identification with the profession itself rather than with a particular company or employer, through, for example, the establishment of communities of practice.

It is timely that TVET systems take these workplace changes into account when developing education and training programmes as part of career-long skills development for employability. At the international level, a number of countries have already included notions of situated learning and career adjustments into their teaching programmes. However, many countries are lagging behind. In order to meet the requirements of modern, evolving labour markets, it is essential that working individuals possess, and are assisted to develop, an occupational flexibility that enables them to achieve effective career transitions. As this book clearly demonstrates, TVET systems that offer dynamic learning strategies have the potential to strengthen vocational flexibility among individuals and groups in the workplace.

As UNESCO's specialized agency concerned with promoting TVET and skills development for the world of work, the UNESCO-UNEVOC International Centre in Bonn, Germany, closely monitors such new developments and innovations in TVET and seeks to showcase these through its publications programme. UNEVOC highlights and publicizes best and innovative practices and explores controversial issues, using concrete case studies as examples. As part of its mandate to act as a clearinghouse and major contributor to the global TVET debate, UNESCO-UNEVOC aims, through its extensive publishing and information-sharing programmes, to provide reliable evidence-based information to enable decision makers undertaking

policy reviews to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of different models and to facilitate cooperation between countries facing similar challenges. I trust that this innovative study will prove to be highly relevant reading for those interested in the effects of labour-market changes on career choices and about how TVET administration and policy can absorb these changes.

Series Editor

Rupert Maclean
Hong Kong

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