

Moving beyond discussions about paradigm shifts – creating space for multiple meanings and narratives on changing patterns of employment and careers

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Introduction

The contribution of Steve Williams (this volume) highlights the extent to which there are elements of both continuity and change in current patterns of work, employment and employment relations, while the contribution of Michael White (this volume) points to a conditional renewal of organisational careers from the perspective of employers.

The contribution of Tony Watts (this volume) in trying to accommodate counter-arguments to the ‘paradigm shift’ outlined by Jarvis (2003) moved towards the idea that the “concept of a ‘paradigm shift’ represents a change of pattern, not the replacement of one model by another.” We have some sympathy with this position as there are indeed changes in patterns of employment and notions of career, but we cannot let pass the idea that, in the UK at least, this represents a ‘paradigm shift’. The usual understanding of ‘paradigm shift’, from the perspective of Kuhn (1962), or even if adapted to apply to Foucault (1972), does indeed mean one dominant model has been supplanted by another. Does agreement of whether or not we should use ‘paradigm shift’ matter – it probably does in the sense that in this field it encourages others to think of the past, the present and future in overly simple terms, and this does a disservice to guidance practitioners and ultimately their clients.

In this contribution therefore we will initially focus upon an examination of the meaning of ‘paradigm shift’ in order to show that, in this context, the use of the term is not helpful. Then, after an examination of some evidence about the complexity of the patterns of employment and career, we will conclude that there may be some value in the use of illustrative narratives as a way to convey the complexities in the patterns of employment and careers. These are also valuable because many individuals still find the concept of ‘career’ useful as a device for making sense of their lives: especially as Moynagh and Worsley (2005) point out that “between 1986 and 2001,

the proportion of employees seeing themselves as having a career jumped from just under half to over 60%” (p. 96).

What constitutes a ‘paradigm shift’?

Thomas Kuhn's (1962) original concept of a paradigm shift applied to situations where stable established scientific ways of thinking are interrupted by periods of scientific revolution after which one dominant way of looking at some aspect of the scientific world is replaced by another. Now what the contributions to this volume have made clear is that the evidence for changes in patterns of employment and careers is contested and whatever else this alone is evidence that the way social scientists think about these issues has not, as yet, undergone a ‘paradigm shift’. Indeed professional scepticism about the basis of popular claims for the ‘learning organisation’, ‘knowledge society’ and the ‘skills needed for new careers’ would seem to be the hall-mark of a critical social scientist (Brown and Keep, 2003; Brown, 1999).

Kuhn’s (1962) standard of proof for a paradigm shift of a fundamental change in **scientific** thinking has clearly not been met, but what of the idea that there has been a shift in cultural thinking about careers? Foucault (1972) outlined the idea of how one system of thought, with dominant ways of thinking, replaced another in periods of revolutionary cultural change. At first, this looks as though it could be a more fruitful avenue for those advocating a profound shift in thinking about careers, especially as we are clearly in a time of profound cultural change. The problem for those advocating a ‘paradigm shift’, however, is that all the changes would have to line up in more or less the same direction and would have to be widely accepted as such. We will show later that the changes in pattern in employment and careers are much too mixed for that to be a sustainable position. However, there is a much more fundamental philosophical objection to the ‘paradigm shift’ argument and that it represents an imaginative failure to represent the world in such binary terms.

A post-structuralist perspective draws attention to how much of our imaginative world is structured in binary ways when there is a much wider range of ways to look at things. Within social science, structuralist, or other binary, views emphasised how certain ways of thinking were dominant and constrained how people viewed the world, with culture offering a degree of agency and choice but also circumscribing the range of possibilities. In contrast, post-structuralism sees a much wider range of possibilities, and questions the extent to which people can be represented as sharing one of a relatively small number of ways of thinking about society and culture. The much wider range of options is coupled with a view that cultural 'scripts' are much more open to individual influence. Post-structuralism is concerned with breaking down over-arching narratives, concerned with the 'big picture', into a series of smaller narratives that deconstruct the 'structure' as a whole and thereby release more ways of making sense of particular parts of the bigger picture. This we believe is a more

fruitful avenue for those with an interest in understanding changing patterns of employment and careers to explore.

In some senses therefore post-structuralism is a tool to sensitise researchers and practitioners to the possibility of multiple meanings and narratives associated with discourse and action in the particular contexts under investigation: in this case changing patterns of employment and careers. The focus upon narrative and meaning offers the possibility of bringing to life the complexity underlying the changing patterns in a way that does not over-simplify the representation of these changes. You can, of course, use other frameworks to achieve similar effects, but the key is to move away from an obsession with grand narratives.

Some evidence about the complexity of the changing patterns of employment and careers

There is a danger of being seduced by rhetorics that centre on the novelty and alarm inherent in alleged fundamental discontinuities and paradigm shifts in the labour market. The realities of developments are in reality often extremely complex and do not fit neatly into simple change narratives (see Nolan and Wood, 2003). We are thus fortunate in having a major body of recent research evidence generated through the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Future of Work Programme, the work-related projects in the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) and the review of evidence of the human impact of modern working practices produced by Holman, Wall and colleagues (2005).

What the research demonstrates is that many of apocalyptic notions about economic and labour market change in the sense of seriously undermining the prevalence of full-time employment have not happened (Moynagh and Worsley, 2005). While the Future of Work Programme has produced a mountain of evidence that could be used to argue exactly how the trends are developing, their key finding for our purposes is that looking at the labour market in aggregate terms is not very helpful – the differences between sectors, people at different stages of their lives and so on are much too complex to be represented as unambiguous universal trends: “many of the generalisations of the late 1990s have been unpicked by detailed research, which has dissolved neat trends into a complex picture” (Moynagh and Worsley, 2005, p.1).

The idea of individual responsibility for employability as advocated in official documents (DfES/DTI/HMT/DWP, 2003: 11) is subject to a theoretically-informed critique by Phil Brown and colleagues (2003) who highlight that employability should be viewed in terms of the relative chances of finding and maintaining different kinds of employment. This immediately draws attention to the importance of the positional competition with others and the state of the labour market, while Tamkin and Hillage (1999) argue that employers could take a much more proactive role in supporting the development of their staff in this respect.

Similarly, the evidence for the adoption of flatter, less hierarchical structures in organisations employing empowered, polyvalent knowledge workers is mixed. While there are some high profile successes, Holman, Wood and colleagues (2005) cite a range of evidence showing that ‘when modern working practices are implemented they can alter work in unintended ways, have deleterious effects on employees and not produce the hoped for improvements in employee and organisational performance’ (2005, p. 1). Other empirical evidence (from both surveys and case studies) points to people elsewhere in the workforce facing declining task discretion and autonomy, increasing work intensification, and declining levels of employee commitment – Taylor, 2002; Cully et al. 1999; Felstead, Gallie and Green, 2002; White et al, 2003; Hyman et al, 2003). What is not at issue here is whether some organisations are delayering, but it is an empirical question as to what are the consequences for individuals and their careers.

Perhaps we should address this issue directly: what effect is the introduction of modern working practices having on individual workers? Holman, Wood and colleagues (2005) in their comprehensive review of the evidence draw attention to the importance of having a separate dimension for whether there is a qualitatively different experience of work for employees from the introduction of modern working practices per se, as these can lead to more interesting work and lower stress or to work intensification and reduced well-being. Hence it is less a question of whether it is done but how it is done that influences the outcome. This approach helps those interested in reviewing current empirical findings to reach a more nuanced understanding about the nature of change in the workplace. Interestingly too, for those drawn to binary perspectives there is evidence that the introduction of modern working practices is leading to greater well-being in some cases and reduced well-being in others!

Remember too that workplaces vary enormously in the extent to which they have introduced modern working practices and which (sub-set of) practices they have introduced. This applies to team-working where Cordery (2005) shows it is possible to identify the characteristics of effective teams, but that in practice there are enormous variations in how team-working is implemented, the extent to which it is successful and the implications for individual careers. The variation in implementation and implications of modern working practices comes partly from the need to consider issues of power, control and organisational change in the particular contexts in which new working practices are introduced. Total Quality Management (TQM) can lead to significant high-skill job enrichment for those directly involved in development as demands on problem-solving and data analysis increase, but subsequently may limit employee autonomy in significant respects.

Hence TQM can be both enabling and constraining for employees. Similarly, ‘hard’ TQM as a technical process can deliver improvements in quality, but ‘soft’ TQM, including greater Employee Involvement, has most effect on employees (Cooney and Sohal, 2005). The paradoxes continue. The ideal implementation of advanced manufacturing technology (AMT) should lead to more empowered job design, yet in

practice implementation of AMT is often poorly integrated with human capabilities (Cooney and Sohal, 2005). Even where successful in some respects what this means for organisations or employees is not always clear: for example, what if the new organisation of work delivers higher quality, greater flexibility and team consciousness but less job satisfaction? Frustrations at work can also be due to a lack of challenge as well as too much challenge, and the allocation and structuring of work for early career professionals was very varied both within and between professions and this was central to how their early careers developed “because it affected (1) the difficulty or challenge of the work, (2) the extent to which it was individual or collaborative, and (3) the opportunities for meeting, observing and working alongside people who had more or different expertise, and for forming relationships that might provide feedback and support” (Eraut et al., 2004, p.4).

What are we to make of the development of teleworking and how virtual workers are managed? Again those who review the empirical evidence of the effects of these changes are struck by how not only is there is no one form, but there is also no one best way to manage teleworking, although it is clear that rather than a single focus on outputs it makes sense to manage outputs, context and process (Lamond et al, 2005). In pictures as complex as these it is hard to see an increase in teleworking per se being used as evidence of a single uni-directional trend: rather the spread of teleworking and virtual working is having a range of different consequences.

Batt and Doellgast (2005) in their review of current evidence conclude that more research is required before we can make meaningful statements about the influences on organisational performance of the introduction of modern working practices in the service sector. In contrast, Wood (2005) believes we can draw some conclusions about what research tells us about the effects on organisational performance of the introduction of modern working practices in the manufacturing sector. Here prescriptive packages (on, for example, lean manufacturing or integrated manufacture) do offer organisations what for them may be fresh ways of thinking: in relation to operations management, customer-pull on their activities and so on. Such approaches do address some of problems that have plagued Fordist production systems. However, precisely because of the almost universal value of the techniques, there is a tendency to adopt a technocratic approach that underplays the role of Employee Involvement and the problems of implementation (Wood, 2005). In other words, there is a world of difference between rhetoric and intentions and what happens in practice, not least because both managers and workers can be active agents in how working practices, conditions of employment and career patterns evolve.

Wood (2005) goes on to argue that combining technical and human aspects, as with Total Quality Management and Employee Involvement, could offer the most productive way forward. “If successful, the combined use of modern manufacturing and involvement methods should result in employees being flexible, expansive in their perceptions and willing to contribute proactively to innovation. Their main effect on performance is thus through work restructuring, innovation and learning, not

through employee commitment” (Wood, 2005, p. 199). There is nothing inevitable here about how the introduction of leading-edge working practices leading to the demise of organisational careers, the whole future is much more open, depending partly upon choices made by the employees themselves. Remember too that for the foreseeable future this vision would only apply to a minority of organisations in manufacturing – other methods of work organisation and seeking competitive advantage could flourish in manufacturing as well as in other sectors.

The evidence on the effect of Employee Involvement in decision making on performance is difficult to read, partly because interest from both employers and employees tends to be cyclical (Ramsay, 1977), and partly because there is the need to implement ‘bundles’ of practices, rather than single practices, in order to have an effect (Sung and Ashton, 2005). Furthermore, the most effective combination of practices may be industry (or context) specific. That EI has only been strongly embraced by a minority of firms is perhaps as much about organisational choice and values as about effectiveness. This seems to come down to a question of values. If an organisation believes in Continuing Improvement as much as an expression of values as a technique, then commitment to EI in practice may also appear as a core belief. In this view there is an expectation that involvement, improvement, learning, development and higher levels of performance will be inter-twined, but even in such cases the forms these processes take may be very different in different contexts. Once again a comprehensive review of the evidence on the issue of employee participation points to diversity and complexity rather than any simple reading of how work will develop and careers will be affected (Summers and Hyman, 2005).

The notion of the knowledge driven economy (KDE) is equally problematic. As many academics have argued evidence for the existence of a KDE at any level beyond that of rhetoric is lacking (Crouch, 1997; Crouch, Finegold and Sako, 1999; Thompson, Warhurst and Callaghan, 2001; and Brown, 2003). Indeed, if the KDE is meant to cover the bulk of the workforce then the evidence suggests that its arrival is a very distant prospect indeed. Brown and Hesketh (2004), and Brown (2003), demonstrate all too clearly that even the USA – surely the model for the KDE – does not show many signs of developing a labour market where the bulk of the workforce will require particularly high levels of skill. What emerges is a picture of an economy in which there are islands of high skill (geographic clusters, sectors and a few occupations – see Finegold, 1999) set amidst a sea of low skill (and often very poorly paid) service work (Applebaum et al., 2003; Milkman, 1998; Ehrenreich, 2002; Cormier and Craypo, 2000; and Lafer, 2002). If the USA is not showing any great signs of transforming itself into a KDE, the prognosis for the UK is perhaps even less promising. Future labour force trends suggest increasing polarisation, with growth in high skilled professional and managerial occupations, but also extensive demand for labour in low skilled occupations at the bottom end of the occupational spectrum (Campbell et al, 2001): Moynagh and Worsley (2005) see trends towards an hour-glass economy strengthening.

We apologise if our reviews of different aspects of current research on the social, psychological and organisational effects of modern working practices and complementary human resource practices seems rather laboured, but we did wish to emphasise that there is one common factor in all the reviews. That is that you cannot read across from a single 'global trend' (whether towards team-working, delayering, continuous improvement, employee involvement, teleworking, virtual working, total quality management etc.) in a simple linear fashion to how these are implemented in particular contexts and their consequences for employment and careers. The contexts and processes of implementation vary so widely, especially when used in combination, that the consequences for individuals in terms of patterns of employment and career development are kaleidoscopic rather than capable of being meaningfully expressed in terms of binary narratives.

We hope therefore that we have done enough, along with other contributors to this volume, to draw attention to the increasing complexity of changing patterns of employment and careers. In such circumstances seeking out evidence of more or less part-time workers, contingent workers, teleworkers and so on in the aggregate figures in order to construct grand narratives misses the essential point that these are not homogeneous categories and the changes underway are not uniform nor uni-directional.

An Evolving Perspective on Complexity of Choices, Routes and Transitions

The foregoing suggests that there are clear dangers in trying to base a case for more and better careers guidance and counselling on simple, futurology-inspired grand narratives. However, this is not to say that there are no grounds for making such a case – indeed we would argue that use of narratives to illustrate the complexity of changes in the patterns of employment and careers do offer the possibility of making a more realistic and sustainable case for high quality career guidance provision.

In England there are a number of developments, in terms of scale somewhere in the middle range, some of fairly long-standing, others more recent, in education more generally, but especially in vocational education and training (VET), that together add further complexity and uncertainty to the changes underway in the labour market and in patterns of work organisation, employment and careers. These changes suggest that without a fundamental step change in the volume and quality of careers advice and guidance that is on offer, both to young people and to adults, well-informed choices will not be achieved and that this will generate significant economic costs to individuals, communities, and the state (whether local, regional or national). Some of these changes are being generated by shifts over time within the structure of the labour market, others are the result of a range of government policies – mostly concerned with vocational education and training (VET), but also aspects of welfare and employment policy. Remember our argument is not that there are not significant changes occurring, but rather that these changes are complex and cannot helpfully be encompassed within simple binary narratives.

Some important items, and we defy anyone to weave these into a single coherent narrative, include:

- ∞ The growing polarisation of the labour market, with significant rises in the number of better-paid professional, managerial and associate professional employment; and also slower but still important increases in the volume of low paid, low skill employment (see Goos and Manning, 2003 for details). Jobs in the middle of the pay range have been declining in numbers (Moynagh and Worsley, 2005).
- ∞ The gap between the employment and people management practices of the best and worst employers appears to be growing (Holman, Wall et al., 2005).
- ∞ The size of the vocational route within English education has been diminishing. The proportion of 16-19 year olds following the work-based route, plus studying vocational courses (including general vocational qualifications) in schools, VI form colleges and further education was lower in 2002 than in 1989 (Payne, 2003).
- ∞ The tendency for the vocational route to be associated with lower prior academic achievement (as measured by examination success at GCSE), and lower socio-economic status (see Payne, 2003).
- ∞ The vast array of qualifications on offer in England, particularly vocational qualifications.
- ∞ The low (sometimes negative) economic returns to the individual from investment in vocational qualifications, particularly below Level 3 (Conlon and Chevalier, 2002).
- ∞ An apprenticeship system and work-based route that provides a very varied picture in terms of quality of provision and robustness of labour market outcomes. Apprenticeship in some sectors produces high quality offerings and high completion rates (e.g. engineering). In other sectors, such as retailing, apprenticeship often appears to be little more than state-subsidised work experience, with little or no formalised training content and very low qualification achievement rates (.Steedman, 2001; Fuller and Unwin, 2003)
- ∞ The, not unconnected, growth in the scale and impact of ‘massified’ Higher Education (HE) on all other aspects of VET provision. In this regard it is worth noting that, in terms of completion rates as a percentage of relevant age cohort, the English VET system will soon have a far larger HE component than the vast majority of other EU countries.
- ∞ The fact that, compared to most other developed countries with ‘massified’ HE systems, England operates with a much lower level of prior educational attainment

(as measured by qualifications) – only about 50 per cent of the age cohort achieve the 5 A-C passes at GCSE that normally form the basic platform for subsequent progression towards a course in HE.

- ∞ The growing dispersion in the economic outcomes that accrue to successful participation in HE. Different disciplines, courses and institutions produce access to fundamentally divergent labour market opportunities and outcomes – some vocationally specific, others not (Blasko, Brennan and Shah, 2003). Choices across the above listed dimensions are liable to produce a profound impact on lifetime earning profiles. Many of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to find themselves enrolled in those options that produce lower returns (Brown and Hesketh, 2004).
- ∞ The introduction of new offerings within HE, in particular Foundation Degrees, the returns to which within the labour market are untested and unclear, but which will probably be significantly lower than the average returns to three-year degrees (see Keep, 2004). Employer commitment to Foundation Degrees is also uncertain.
- ∞ Overall uncertainty about what, in a world of 50 per cent participation in HE, will be on offer, in terms of educational routes, qualifications and employment opportunities for the ‘bottom half’ who will not be obtaining degree-level education (see Keep and Mayhew, 2004).
- ∞ The growth of a range of new occupations, for example fitness instructor, that do not fit into established patterns of occupational identity.
- ∞ Evidence that suggests that, overall, the role that qualifications play in the recruitment and selection process is often extremely patchy and limited (see Miller, Acutt and Kellie, 2002; Jackson, 2001; Spilsbury and Lane, 2000; and Nickson, Warhurst and Dutton, 2004), and that large swathes of employment have no formal qualification requirements attached to them. In addition, whereas the importance of qualifications in the selection and recruitment process appears to be increasing in some occupational areas (higher managerial and professional work), it is apparently declining in many others (Jackson, Goldthorpe and Mills, 2002).
- ∞ The growing importance of social and ‘soft’ skills, attributes, and personal characteristics – for example, aesthetic labour skills (such as appearance, size, accent, voice, dress sense and deportment) – in recruitment to many higher end service sector jobs (Jackson, 2001; Spilsbury and Lane, 2000; Wahurst and Nickson, 2001; and Nickson, Warhurst and Dutton, 2004). The vast bulk of these skills and attributes are not formally assessed within the current qualifications structure and remain uncertified.
- ∞ The large and possibly growing disparities between different regional and sub-regional labour markets across England. Hepworth and Spencer (2002) note in

particular the widely varying potential for the different regions to absorb an increasing flow of graduate labour.

- ∞ The tendency for the transition from education to employment to have become longer, more complex and less linear than was generally the case twenty years ago (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson, 1996).
- ∞ Some traditional purveyors of advice (for example parents) struggle to understand the complexities of changes in education, training and employment, and hence advice can be ill-informed even if well-intentioned, even though personalised advice can be seen by the recipients as 'hot knowledge' rather than more impersonal official information offered by others (Ball et al., 1999, 2000).

Taken individually, many of these developments are liable to have a significant impact on the ability of individuals to ascertain, assess and weigh the opportunities (and their associated costs) that are liable to be available to them. Taken together, they represent a labour market wherein the processes of education to employment transitions are considerably more complex and potentially uncertain than was the case until recently, and where the consequences of incorrect decisions to the individual have increased significantly by an order of magnitude. Both VET provision and the labour market opportunities it may or may not lead towards have become more varied, dispersed and complex. The combinations will vary by potential educational attainment (and many other personal characteristics), social class, geographic location, occupational aspiration (if decided), and desired route of access thereunto. The flows of information needed to support coherent and informed choice of combinations is often unavailable.

Put simply, in the absence of adequate advice and guidance, increased complexity leads to a concomitant increase in the likelihood of a substantial proportion of individuals reaching sub-optimal decisions, which in turn lead to a significant level of sub-optimal outcomes. For instance, undertaking a three-year degree course that leads to a specific occupation that the individual ultimately decides is not what they want, will leave the individual not only with a student loan to repay (as and when their earnings reach the required threshold level), but also in all probability a significant level of personal indebtedness related to supporting a student lifestyle through a degree. Moreover, as suggested above, many options within higher education appear to offer at best uncertain and limited returns, and yet these tend to be the institutions and courses that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds end up in.

In addition, many of the simple certitudes upon which current policies are based are at best questionable. For example, the injunction 'work hard and gain a qualification because this will help you achieve a better job', is not wholly borne out by research. It all depends on which qualification is the goal. If the qualification aimed for is an NVQ Level 2, and the means of acquiring it is some form of government-supported training (GST), current evidence suggests that whereas you may be somewhat more

likely to be employed than someone with no qualifications, you are significantly more likely to be earning less than them (Dearden et al., 2000; Conlon and Chevalier, 2002). At a more general level the weak connection between qualifications and the recruitment and selection process suggests that managing the VET system largely through targets specified in terms of general levels of qualification held by sections of the population may also be mistaken.

Despite these developments, many of them relatively unmarked in the official policy discourse, the current VET system is based on the implicit assumption that those using the system, whether young people or adults, will be able to get a clear picture of what is on offer, evaluate the different options that are available to them, and make informed choices that will produce the desired outcomes – not just for individuals, but also for employers and society as a whole. Given current levels of advice and guidance this seems an optimistic reading of the likely results.

Besides the costs of wasted investment, perhaps the largest danger underlying this situation is that of declining social mobility and increasing social polarisation (Keep and Mayhew, forthcoming). Given current patterns of access to HE, and given the way that many of the social skills desired by employers often act as a proxy for middle class backgrounds (see Warhurst and Nickson, 2001; and Jackson, Goldthorpe and Mills, 2002), there is a substantial danger that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds will find themselves largely restricted to lower status vocational routes that produce weak returns in the labour market. The political and societal implications of such a development may not be benign.

Concluding comments

Our argument can be summarised in six steps. First, that the traditional (bureaucratic) model of career was only dominant for particular groups (mainly middle class men) for relatively short periods of time in the twentieth century (Brown, 1999). Second, the case for considering there has been a major uni-directional shift towards work becoming more peripheral, contingent, flexible, team-based, insecure etc. is unproven. The reality was more complex than that allowed in ascribing dominance to the first model and patterns in employment and career have become even more complex now. Third, this means that the empirical basis for talking in social scientific terms of a ‘paradigm shift’ is almost completely non-existent. It could be argued that as a rhetorical device it can be used to argue for more resources for career guidance by aligning this with equally rhetorical devices like ‘employability’, the ‘knowledge society’ and the ‘learning organisation’. Fourth, the problem with the ‘paradigm shift’ is that this creates problems for practitioners and clients alike if they believe the rhetoric and base their actions upon such a simplistic and binary picture. In any case, the alternative approach, arguing that the research evidence shows a much more complex picture in the patterns of employment and careers, can also be used to underline the importance of guidance. Fifth, and this gets to the heart of why we need to move on from notions of a ‘paradigm shift’, is that it completely undermines our

ability to argue for evidence-based policy, if we ourselves extrapolate way beyond the evidence, and it encourages policy-makers and practitioners alike to think in simplistic terms. Sixth, we are uneasy about the ideological dimension of the shift towards individual responsibility for ensuring employability.

So we will conclude with an illustrative narrative as a way to convey the complexities in the patterns of employment and careers. It will be an example of a worker whose work was peripheral, contingent, flexible, team-based and insecure – but it is drawn from the start of the twentieth century rather than the twenty-first! It is drawn from the experience of one of our grandfathers working (and not working) in the London docks almost a century ago: waiting with others at the dock gates to be chosen for work for a day or half-day. His employability skills included changing his name for work (it sounded French!); buying a ‘ganger’ a drink in the pub the night before to get his name on the list of those to be chosen; and, if not chosen, changing into his best suit so he could wait in an adjoining square where the local minister sometimes came out of his church and paid him to be a witness at the wedding of itinerant seamen!

The point of this story is that even if there is evidence in some directions of a focus upon employability and move towards greater individualisation of responsibility for career development, researchers do not have to extrapolate from these to a vision with an apparently immutable future. Alternative narratives that challenge such visions are necessary and social science is delivering the evidence from which such narratives can be constructed. It is time to move on from a focus on grand narratives and pay closer attention to the full range of evidence on changing patterns of employment and careers and to construct narratives that represent this complexity and the challenges this presents for those with an interest in career guidance.

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