

Guidance support for mid-life career transitions

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Abstract

This chapter draws on a Cedefop study concerned with learning for career transitions that has been conducted throughout 2012 and 2013. Researchers from five European countries conducted 125 biographical interviews among mid-life adults who had some vocational training after compulsory school and at least two career transitions in their lives. Of particular interest in the study was the role of education for and during these career transitions. Overall the study revealed a large variety of life circumstances and reasons for career transitions and opened up a spectrum of interrelationships between agency and structure in the life course. For this chapter three of the stories have been depicted and are analysed in more detail with a focus on structural measures that helped the three men to manage their career transitions. The potential of career guidance and counselling in terms of supporting these individuals is elaborated in more detail.

Introduction – Career transitions enclosed between desires and fears

“Learning allows you to enlarge your vital space, enclosed between desires and fears. I believe that we, human beings, are unlimited within limits [...] such as space, time, soul.”
(Mercuzio, Italy)

The recent economic situation has resulted in more adults who are feeling distressed and under pressure to make alternative career decisions seeking career intervention support. While policy is largely concerned with matching skills with available jobs across Europe attention also needs to be paid towards equipping individuals with the competencies to cope with risk and uncertainty at the labour market and the resulting career and life changes. These are often accompanied by identity shifts (Ecclestone, 2009) in which individuals reflect upon the lessons they have learned in life and about ‘becoming’ (Levinson & Levinson, 1996; Merriam, 2005). Labour market conditions as much as personal development lead to transitions which are linked to social roles, experiences, behaviour, social contexts, agency and structure (George, 1993).

Increasing attention is paid to the development of resilience in workers, who should be able to overcome set-backs, engage in continuous learning and, if necessary, individual reinvention (Council of the European Union, 2008; Field, 2010; OECD, 2004). Career guidance and counselling embraces the task to empower individuals to manage their own career paths and deal with multiple transitions (Council of the European Union, 2008). This new interest in equipping individuals with particular skills follows a line of research conducted on behalf of the EU in support of career guidance and counselling (Cedefop, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011b).

Somewhat related to these studies are numerous research projects concerned with transitions, either from school-to-work or labour market transitions, to some extent including the role of learning in life (Biesta et al., 2011; Brown et al., 2010; Buchholz et al., 2008). All of them contributed

to a deeper understanding of the meaning and variations of learning in different work contexts, work cultures and work environments. Many questions remain open. The actual situation of the crisis, structural changes in Europe, new generations with new expectations towards their work-life-balance, demographic shifts and the continuation of globalization effects shape approaches to career transitions and lifelong learning. Individuals are torn between their own ideas and perceptions regarding their careers and the structural conditions in their countries and their families to which they respond to.

Therefore, Cedefop continued with this line of research and has launched two studies concerned with labour market transitions and learning. The first titled “Learning for careers and labour market transitions” (Cedefop, 2014), on which this chapter is based, was conducted in 2012 and 2013. Researchers from Italy, Spain, Denmark, France and Germany, managed by members of the Institute for Employment at the University of Warwick collected 25 biographical interviews among mid-career adults in each country. The group applied the concept of strategic career and learning biographies, which implies that the voices of participants were heard and had a central place in the research process. According to this concept individuals reflect upon, interpret and give meaning to their work and learning experiences within their social context. Overall, the study illuminates individuals’ approaches to career transitions under different structural and individual conditions and reveals the complex processes of learning, labour market experiences and working-life transitions. Particular emphasis throughout the data analysis was given to the role of career guidance, counselling or coaching, experiences with it and the structural provision of measures or their absence. In addition the researchers elaborated in particular cases about the impact guidance can have, if individuals look for it. A second study, to be published in 2015, focuses on low-skilled adults and their approaches to education and career transitions.

In this chapter some of the results of the completed Cedefop study on mid-career adults and career transitions (Cedefop, 2014) will be introduced by means of presenting the stories of three men and analysing them in terms of the influence of agency and structure on their career transitions with a particular emphasis on career guidance, counselling and coaching. The three stories illustrate how structure and agency are interrelated. Although very different in character and place the three individuals portrait here are desperate in their current situation and are somewhat bounded by their own beliefs as much as by structural constraints. The concluding part of the chapter will draw up some lessons for career guidance and summarize major policy messages from the study.

Mid-life reflections and learning from life episodes

“I stand before the day of retirement and look back upon the past 20 years, which are those that I have to define. When you see those years, what do you see? What has been fantastic? Why have you been happy for those 20 years? What have you done where you thought, wauw, this is just fun and great?” (Erik, Denmark)

Career development has changed over generations and in many cases is multifaceted, unstable, cyclical or even inverse over the life-course (Bimrose, Barnes, Orton and Hughes, 2004; Hearne, 2010; Savickas, 2000). Societies are facing a shift towards highly individualized and flexible careers

(Hall, 2004). They are less predictable, less stable and less orderly (Buchmann, 1998; Held, 1986; Myles, 1993) which forces individuals to constantly reinvent themselves and cope with unstable employment and occupational mobility (Beck, 1986; Heinz, 2003a, 2003b). In this situation pro-activity is required, often framed as agency in the sociological literature. De-standardized life courses entail that people go back to education after periods of work and family upbringing, take sabbaticals in-between, change occupations and careers and combine leisure and work in various ways (Riley, Kahn & Foner, 1994).

Any type of major life event or significant organisational or occupational change can disrupt an individual's accustomed lifestyle in a way that may require certain coping strategies (Bimrose, Brown, Barnes, and Hughes, 2011; Fleig-Palmer, Luthans and Mandernace, 2009; Sharf, 2010). Especially the mid-career phase is a phase of intra-career role adjustment and mid-career satisfaction where one's career is often questioned. In this time values and interests are deeply explored and individuals often seek to integrate them into a meaningful and satisfying value system (Hall, 1986; Grady & McCarthy, 2008). Mid-career adults today have higher expectations towards balancing life and work. Particularly women expect to combine careers with family and leisure interests without facing setbacks in their careers. They are increasingly developing new social identities via the workplace (Hofmeister, Blossfeld and Mills, 2006).

Brown et al (2010) have pointed to individuals risk in respect to disengagement in up-skilling or re-skilling for five or more years. It can lead to a situation in which one is locked into a career and potentially even a dead-end road. Lifelong learning eventually becomes essential in peoples careers. The episodic learning that leads to significant changes in values, attitudes, or behaviour might either lead to personality changes or transformation which is relevant for career transitions. Field (2000) strengthens this understanding of significant learning vice versa other learning which involves adaptation to changes in context, organisation, practices and processes of work, while basic values, attitudes and behaviour remain largely unchanged.

Overall then, learning may drive transitions but also experience of transitions in life may drive the need for learning (Merriam, 2005). This means that work transitions can be a major driver of learning, such as changing positions within an organization or across where individuals need to master challenging tasks and patterns of interaction. This requires a range of different forms of learning in order to improve performance. Learning may also precede transitions, as when people engage in further education and training prior to applying for a new job or undertaking a role change.

Learning while working is a powerful driver for mastering the practical, cognitive and communicative demands linked with particular work roles and processes. Yet this can be difficult to accomplish just through accumulation of experience. The development of individuals at the workplace through the allocation of more challenging tasks to them supports individuals to become more self-directed and self-reflexive (Bimrose et al., 2011).

Learning can also be viewed as a process of identity development in the sense of 'learning as becoming'. Key influences in this representation of learning comprise learning through self-understanding, development of personal qualities, sense of personal agency, motivation (determination), resilience, self-efficacy belief, commitment to learning and professional

development and career adaptability (Cedefop, 2014). Learning for occupational identity development can be shaped in many different ways at the workplace through learning from others as much as through teaching others, by taking over more responsibilities and by being exposed to varying work contexts. Certain structural elements impinge upon occupational identity development (Roberts, 2009) such as restrictions in respect to time granted for additional learning, lack of funding or the lack of challenging work.

Mid-career development can be facilitated by education and training in a number of ways. Initial vocational education and training (IVET) can provide a platform for initial occupational development on which an individual can build their later career development. Further, systems of continuing vocational education and training offer a range of opportunities for career progression and development. When initial and further vocational education and training are well aligned the effects for learning are bigger. Hereby development opportunities can fit within a clear framework for career progression. In such cases individual career progression is often linked to formal qualifications. Organisational opportunity structures strongly frame career pathways. Higher education (HE) institutions also play a role in facilitating mid-career development, if the degree of permeability between VET and HE allows for it.

Turning towards institutions for support: Career guidance, counselling, coaching

While transitions may bring opportunities, they can also expose individuals to a risk of deskilling, unemployment and social exclusion. To avoid such undesirable outcomes, individuals may draw on the resources available to them: established networks for social support, learning, and various other policy measures (such as guidance, active labour market policies, and welfare measures). Learning, in particular, may be a very important resource. Career decisions are amongst the most important people make throughout their lives, having significant implications for psychological, social and economic well-being (Gati and Tal, 2008). They are part of the most common vocational problems (Amir and Gati, 2006; Osipow, 1999) in the way that individuals would avoid, procrastinate or push a decision that does not feel ideal (Gati et al., 1996). The provision of career guidance and counselling is an essential support for navigating careers and it helps to become more reflexive (Biesta, 2008; Gati and Tal, 2008). As career counselling can be pivotal at turning points in individuals' lives, various authors have pointed to the needs to accommodate the dual issues of resiliency and career adaptability (Bimrose et al. 2011; Hearne, 2010; Kidd, 2006).

Career resilience is defined as "the extent to which we keep our spirits up when things do not work out as we would have liked. This includes how resistant we are to career barriers or disruptions affecting our work" (London and Stumpf, 1986, p. 26). Certain coping strategies, including emotional capacities, are essential in this context to overcome structural and/or dispositional barriers (Bimrose Barnes, Hughes, 2008; Cardoso and Moreira, 2009; Hearne, 2010). Career adaptability is about the capacity of individuals to negotiate transitions successfully (Savickas, 2008). It refers to their "readiness and resources for coping with current and anticipated tasks, transitions, traumas in their occupational roles that, to some degree large or small, alter their social integration" (Savickas, 2008, p. 4-5). The concept of career adaptability comprises five inter-related competencies: control,

curiosity, commitment, confidence and concern. The latter refers to stimulating or developing a positive and optimistic attitude to the future (Savickas et al., 2009, p. 245). Bimrose further includes individual characteristics that play a key role in the development of career adaptability, such as adaptability to different work environments and personal change management (Bimrose et al., 2011).

Support for learning and career transitions can also be provided by individuals taking on a role as coach, including colleagues as well as designated mentors. Coaching at the workplace often involves scaffolding tasks for individuals and the provision of feed-back on task and role performance. Aspects of performance a coach might focus on could include: task performance; role performance; situational awareness and understanding; teamwork; personal and group development; decision-making and problem-solving; academic knowledge and skills; judgement (Eraut, 2009). In order to coach it is important that a supervisor, manager, trainer or mentor creates mutual trust and a learning culture with opportunities for people to learn together on challenging tasks (Eraut et al., 2004).

Overall, coaching at work can act as a driver of the development of high level vocational practice in four ways. First, there is formal or informal coaching directly associated with work, which is given during or after performance of a particular task. An example of formal coaching support could be by a supervisor or team leader, who in a German context for example may be formally qualified as a *Meister*. Informal coaching support could be offered by a more experienced colleague. Second, reviews of performance, such as weekly case reviews, which provide support expressly concerned with helping people think about learning, development and effective performance by reflecting upon their experience. These reviews may be part of a dialogue with a supervisor or mentor or they could be a collective review where all team members can contribute. Third, there is participation in broader communities and networks, which can help individuals' situate their work processes in a wider context and develop a sense of their place in occupational, organisational and broader communities – an individual may coach others in one aspect and be coached by others on another within the community. Finally, supporting the learning and development of others at work can help those acting in a coaching capacity to become more reflexive of their own learning and development (brown, 2012).

Non-linear careers in an age of uncertainty

Three stories were chosen for this chapter reflecting three life courses of men in Denmark, Germany and France. They were chosen because they illustrate a variety of life circumstances and turning points at which career guidance and counselling have been or could have been supportive. What all of them have in common is that the portrait individuals lives throughout a personal career crisis and needed to reorient themselves. At the same time they represent the struggle with particular structures (public and private) framing their lives and careers.

The story of Mads – disenchanting career ambitions

“You cannot really say that the wish of the employee is considered. It is more like the boss sits there and he decides what the company needs and that is what you get. You can say that you are tied to the job because you can never move on.”

Mads is in his late thirties. He lives in a farmhouse in Denmark, is married and has two young children. As a certified industrial electrician he started working at age 21 and changed jobs several times getting to know small enterprises and large factories. For the last seven years Mads worked as an electrician in a military base. He is not content with his job, because since some years he expresses an interest in leadership training, but his line manager would not grant it to him. Any other training opportunity he takes up, but Mads feels that this does not get him any further in his career.

Mads is in a situation of identity change. He feels that it is time for him to move on with his career, take on new tasks and new challenges. His agency so far has lead him to ask for a leadership training every year in his MUS (Employee Development Dialogue), participate in any training that was offered to him and search for opportunities within his current organization. The structural constraints mainly based on managements' considerations for the need of leadership training for Mads are perceived as a barrier for his career development.

“I find it boring to be an electrician actually. It is not exciting anymore. OK I can turn the light on and get other things to function, but it doesn't speak to me anymore. I would rather do something where I can talk to people or be outside. I think it has become boring but I have also been doing this since 20 years. I am getting bored. I will probably stay a few more years though [...] I regret that I haven't started a leadership course. OK I haven't had much time. But I do regret it. I think that I am wasting my time at the military base. It doesn't get me out of the hole. It doesn't move me onwards. I think that I waste my time, both my time and the company's. I want to move on and try something different.”

Mads would like to make a mid-life career change, but he perceives the barriers as insurmountable.

Half a year later Mads was interviewed again. He still wanted to attend the leadership course. His line manager agreed to pay for the course if Mads would complete the education in his own time. Since Mads wife is currently following a course related to her work it would not be possible for him to also study away from home after work, because of the children and household shores. Based on this situation that seems desperate at the time Mads is worried about his future career opportunities. Much of what Mads does is manual labour, not challenging for him and at the same time he feels that he is losing the newly acquired knowledge, because it has little direct practical application. In addition the training is highly specific and not meant to prepare him for a career change.

“We are highly specialised and that might decrease our possibilities for getting a new job.”

Out of disappointment, boredom and desperation Mads started looking for another job. He is disappointed as he thought that the possibilities for learning would be better at his current employer. One consideration he carries around is the possibility to transfer training days from one year to another which is part of the relevant collective agreement, but the employer still has the final say for which kind of education it can be used.

Mads is a classic case of growing into an occupation (job) and then eventually out-growing it. The metaphors Mads uses are instructive: “growing into the job (growing fast);” “dying in the job”; “being stuck in a hole”. Support structures in the form of access to education, training and guidance were there for his transition into becoming an electrician. Learning through varied challenging work in different contexts together with some work-related training ensured he developed his expertise within his chosen field. His employer, his union and society generally see a highly skilled, well-trained mid-career worker in a permanent post with an employer where his long-term employment prospects are secure. From a labour market economy perspective Mads is not a problematic case: his skills are matching his job.

For Mads taking his individual point of view into account his situation is far from being satisfactory. His occupation had initially been his career anchor, giving him stability and a sense of purpose, now it is seen as a chain – locking him into a job where he feels that his enthusiasm and motivation is fading and replaced by desperation and frustration. Abhaya (1997) makes the point that even when we find a psychological home, after time we may feel it is time to move on: “It [home] is our familiar environment, a place where we know our way around, and above all, where we feel secure’ but ‘the developing individual can feel trapped by all the norms and values which 'home' stands for.” Mads is a developing individual who needs fresh challenges. Until now his labour market transitions have been smooth, but he needs to move on, to make a major career transition. In order to be successful he requires additional support.

The story of Martin – a disrupted career

“To get back into regular employment? Well, how do I see my chances? If I get the possibility to present myself then I think the chances would be quite good. But just on paper, well, I am not sure.”

Martin is in his forties. He completed his ‘Abitur’ in Germany followed by a 3-year apprenticeship as carpenter. Afterwards he worked for 6 months in this profession in Egypt making a considerable income that paid him half way through his studies in design. His girl-friend, being an entrepreneur, had her own fashion design workshop and Martin eventually quit his studies and worked full time with her. After 12 years of a fairly successful business his fiancée became seriously ill and died. Without a degree in fashion design Martin was not permitted to run the company and had to close it down. It followed a personal crisis. A friend of his mother strongly supported him through a 15-months retraining programme as electronic publisher/web designer. After the retraining, Martin was 35 years old and immediately found a job within a small start-up IT-company where he worked for 2.5 years. He found the job boring and stressful and was finally made redundant when the firm went bankrupt. It followed a period of unemployment lasting four years. Eventually Martin found a job at a friends’ company doing graphical work for about 3 years. Martin did some web design and marketing for the firm as a freelancer, but did not appreciate it because he had little interaction with colleagues or clients. When his friend’s business went bankrupt after about two years Martin became unemployed for about three years during which he suffered from depression combined with an autoimmune disorder. After some medical check-ups he was sent for by his career counsellors

from the unemployment agency, his counsellor suggested that Martin should work part-time (50%) and placed him in an activation programme so that he would have some structure in his life.

Soon Martin worked full time, because he enjoyed the job, in particular interacting with a lot of different people, working in a team and feeling to be needed. When the first interview was conducted, his main responsibility was the coordination of a programme as well as coordinating staff and clients, but also mediating between staff members. Very soon he became a team leader and left the activation program. He already has to envision and plan for his next career step since his position is temporary. This proves to be particularly challenging because Martin has no idea what to do next. He feels his network of colleagues and friends is too small and cannot help in his reorientation. When looking back at his career it seems to him, that former transitions went smoothly. All his former jobs including the apprenticeship were acquired through personal contacts.

Martin's narrative involves several career redirections, which are interrelated in a complex way involving personal crisis and illness, retraining and new job entry, but also depression during longer periods of unemployment. His future career is uncertain. When entering unemployment for the first time in his mid-thirties Martin felt kind of relieved to have all the work pressure being taken away from him. He felt privileged not having to work and at the same time receiving money and subsistence support. Since he had had a good income his unemployment benefits during the first year were quite high (in the first year the unemployment benefit in Germany is a fixed percentage of the last income average over 12 months – at that time 62% for individuals without dependants). But from the second year of unemployment Martin became less motivated, also still seeking to overcome his former partner's death. He had several occasional jobs but was not able to return to regular employment. Furthermore, he was diagnosed with an autoimmune disorder, which to date remains as a physical drawback.

Coming from a very creative and artistically-oriented family makes him realize now that in design related career moves and in his creative endeavours he always had full support by his family. He somewhat regrets today that he never completed the design studies but at the same time felt under-challenged at that time and was more motivated to try out something new. Retraining as a web designer in his mid-thirties seemed to be a step into the right direction. The unemployment agency refused to fund this retraining (since Martin was a certified skilled worker) and – again through personal contacts – Martin found a friend who supported him financially. The retraining helped him to overcome his personal crisis through the work in a field to which he has an inclination and not least his emotional attachment, high commitment as much as high identification with the creative work has helped him to find a job afterwards. He can generally be described as someone being enthusiastic and curious about new challenges. During the interview he realized that he would prefer to remain in the cultural industry with a focus on interacting with people. This is where his current interests and skills lie.

The story of Didier – trusting instincts and following ones passion

“I'm a bit of an idealist, I'm a bit different because I think about how it could be; it's more holistic than just doing the usual stuff so I don't just cut something back because it's getting

in the way, I try to find the shape, to reveal or frame something... adding value for the enjoyment of their garden.”

Didier is in his thirties and is a self-employed garden designer. He has always lived and worked in North East France, where he was born and brought up. During his studies in sports education at the university in order to become a physical education teacher he had a knee injury which did not allow him anymore to pursue this career. He used to be very dedicated to sports and education and felt heartbroken when it became obvious that he needed to find a new professional perspective in life. Forced to reconsider his career he eventually dropped out of the program and enrolled at the age of 30 in a professional baccalaureate (bac pro) in landscape gardening. A correspondence course allowed him to combine studying with work, but he did not balance the two well. He discontinued the program and it started a period of insignificant short term jobs, interspersed with medical attention for the knee problem that had forced him out of his original career path. Based on a rediscovered intrinsic interest in gardening he started to work as a landscape gardener at various enterprises. Nevertheless, this second career choice has never provided him with a similar satisfaction as sport did. He somewhat lost self-confidence and self-esteem which in turn led to a prolonged period of uncertainty in which Didier was searching for direction.

The average experience with landscape gardening was not a fulfilling experience, but Didier felt, that there must be more to the job than provided at some of his employers.

“I’d learned quite a lot to start with but it was a bit boring in the end, not creative at all. Sometimes it felt like I was just picking up litter and pushing the lawnmower, just vroom vroom.”

He kept on searching because the assembly line approach did not fulfil him. Nevertheless, the jobs that he found via the Public Employment Service, the placements they offered to him, provided him with the essential work experience and with a sense of direction as to where he would like to specialize himself within the field. He felt that he

“progressed a lot, the work was very intensive, and I grew in confidence - in my work and confidence in myself but they had different task groups for the different aspects of landscaping, and I found it a bit of a production line approach... there was no heart, no reflection.”

After having held two jobs in major enterprises Didier was ready to work in much smaller contexts; artisanal rather than industrial. He also places great emphasis on reflecting and trusting his instincts and pointed out in terms of career progression:

“...heartfelt, fundamental stuff; you’ve got to trust your instincts and go with your heart. Policy [on career guidance] is somewhat industrialising, but they need to realise that it’s all on a human scale, living and working with your own environment.”

In terms of social support Didier was mainly on his own when making career decisions. His parents did not want him to go into teacher training, they thought he would be better off working straight after secondary school – and they were not convinced about the landscape gardening. Ultimately, he

sees that he has done it on his own – although without unemployment benefit, he could not have started to acquire work experience as a gardener, a step that ultimately led him into employment.

Didier is now considering setting up a small company after he has taken on various small contracts and feels confident about finding clients and doing the job right. He wishes to expand his current grey business and take on more clients and bigger projects. In order to do so he needs to be formally registered as a micro enterprise and views this as a risk that he is hopeful to manage. His hesitation is that he is not sure if he wants “all that professional stuff: bills, accounts’, but thinks he is heading in that direction. “I’ll trust my gut instincts.”

Making sense of three life stories

The narratives illustrate how various forms of learning played a role in preparing individuals for their next career steps. Mads would have benefited from management training in order to eventually transition from his current position into a management position with different responsibilities. Not being able to acquire the skills through formal training made him feel blocked in his career. In addition, Mads’ narrative indicates how managers at workplaces can have a significant impact on motivation for learning and on creating support structures and opportunities for learning. Highly relevant for the shaping of individuals self-perception is the way in which decisions about trainings are provided. In Mads case his manager eventually permitted him to participate in the training and agreed to some financial support, expected though that Mads would use his own time. Martin is torn between relying on his creative abilities as a designer or focusing more on a career that requires strong communication and relational skills. Didier experienced success with gardening jobs and needs to figure out if he is ready for being an entrepreneur. This next step might require some training in management, marketing and book keeping.

All three men could have benefited from career guidance and counselling in various ways. Career counsellors could have provided Mads with the tools to reflect upon his current situation and commit himself to a sustainable medium-term plan that would accommodate his family situation as well. Counselling could help to acquire a broader overview of potential leadership course offers and potential career pathways to pursue in the future. Overall, Mads did not know enough about structural support measures in terms of training allowances offered by the state or through other funding mechanism. In this respect Denmark has introduced a tax called Arbejdsmarkedsbidrag (AM) which is used to pay for the AMU and based on the tripartite negotiations each year funding for competence development is set aside for workers participation in different learning activities. The funds can be used to pay for the activity or to pay for a temporary worker replacing the worker who is taking part in competence development. The establishment of the competence funds is meant to support employees to invest their own time in learning opportunities. For instance, the Office and Logistic Agreement from January 2009 ensures each employee 10 training days per year for a training of their choice and 10 days continuous or further education every year according to employment needs. As of January 2013 the employees can transfer their own 10 days over up to

three years¹. When it comes to the agreement applicable to Mads according to the collective agreement with the electrician trade union employees are entitled to 10 days “free choice” education but with the addition that this should be relevant to the trade/sector in a wider sense².

Martin was initially successful in his career, but his lack of formal qualifications or a recognised occupation subsequently became problematic when after the death of his partner he did not possess the degree which is legally required to continue the enterprise. After giving that up and successfully retrain he found work, which turned out to be unsatisfactory. The experience of unemployment was followed by an experience in a cultural institution through a job placement in the framework of an activation program. This structural support measure worked for him in the sense that he discovered his communication and social skills. What he needs now is the recognition of these skills when applying for a new job. Guidance and counselling support has brought him into temporary work in the cultural sphere, but his future is uncertain. Private networks are not sufficiently helpful now and chances of securing a permanent job are at risk the older Martin gets. Through counselling the perception of himself could be strengthened as much as his career adaptability skills when searching for a variety of jobs. He will likely have to prove himself against other candidates who are formally qualified and may also have had more conventional career experiences. Once outside the formal system in Germany it is difficult to get back in without recognized training and qualifications.

For Didier injury forced a major change of career, but after a period of uncertainty this was followed by a gradual transition into landscape gardening. He used a wide range of means of learning and professional development, including experiential learning, continuing vocational education and training and reskilling, but he did not complete his formal qualifications. His transition to a landscape gardener was in part facilitated through working in the grey economy, while claiming unemployment benefit. His particular form of vocational identity as a landscape designer was tied up with aesthetic reasons and having a degree of personal control: as he is self-employed there is scope for creativity rather than the industrial approach required of an employee. Didier is thoughtful and reflective and has mastered his craft, although he has no relevant formal qualifications, he is approached by prospective clients. Didier’s entry into his career is idiosyncratic, and other entrants would be advised to follow more formal routes, but he does show that he can use his skills productively and plot a way through to his goals.

Lessons to be learned for career guidance and counselling provision

From a policy perspective access to advice and guidance services for adults at times of transition could play a crucial role in facilitating positive outcomes for the individual and the smooth functioning of the labour market. Particularly for mid-career adults who feel they need a new challenge after fifteen or twenty years working in the same occupation the economic case for giving

¹ See:

http://www.hk.dk/privat/hk_privats_tema_hjemmesider/selvvalgt_uddannelse/tjek_om_du_har_ret_til_selvvalgt_uddannelse/overenskomster_med_kompetencefonde/dansk_erhverv_kontor_og_lageroverenskomsten

² <http://ipaper.ipapercms.dk/TEKNIQ/Overenskomster/Elektrikeroverenskomst20122014/>

them access to guidance services is very strong. This is a conclusion to be drawn from the three stories outlined here.

Mads represents a worker in an undemanding job (mostly routine work with few challenges), and Didier and Martin stand for a worker wishing to change sectors. Such individuals could benefit from improved access to guidance services. Guidance has the potential to help these individuals articulate and possibly align goals, expectations, development strategies and outcomes in relation to their learning and career development.

Telling a narrative as an approach applied in the Cedefop study is in itself a practiced support mechanism applied within counselling. It helps individuals in realizing where they have been; what they are doing now and where they are going and to find out who they are and what kind of capacities they have. A lack of career guidance, and sometimes a more general lack of support, on the other hand could mean that viable plans are not formalised and that individual career development becomes opportunistic rather than fully considered.

The three stories also indicated how the navigation of one's life course is constrained by specific structural, political and economic circumstances in a country. These constraints need to be identified and attention paid as to how barriers can be lowered. At the same time guidance can provide pillars of orientation as to how one needs to understand the structural conditions and act in them. A guidance counsellor can understand the interplay between external forces and individual dispositions and provide individualised advice.

Especially for those who need to or want to substantially change careers the recognition of prior learning is essential. In Germany and to some extent in Denmark it is still highly relevant to acquire complete degrees in order to practice in a new occupation while in France policies such as the Validation of Acquired Experience (VAE- Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience) support the recognition of informal learning (Dif, Heraud and Nkeng, 2009). Other structural measures that were supportive for the three men in this study are activation programs and financial incentives for start-up companies connected to unemployment benefits.

Overall career guidance has the potential to facilitate learning for career and labour market transitions, provided attention is focused upon the particular requirements of individuals in their mid-career. Bimrose, Barnes and Hughes (2008) highlighted five ways in which clients in the age group (mainly 35 – 45) had found their guidance useful. According to their study guidance is useful when it: provides access to specialist information; reduces confusion; motivates or provides new insights; helps to find alternative options/ideas or confirms ideas and builds confidence. Guidance can help entrants in the labour market to develop perspectives which allow them to think in terms of required skill sets as well as interests, and to find meaning in learning and career choices.

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All information as well as the final report to the project can be found under <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/24006.aspx>.