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Postprint / Postprint
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Haasler, S., & Barabasch, A. (2015). The role of learning and career guidance for managing mid-career transitions - comparing Germany and Denmark. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, *43*(3), 306-322. https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2015.1020758

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https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-59407-6

This is an accepted manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in
British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, Vol. 43, 2015, No. 3, pp. 306-322
available online at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2015.1020758
Page numbers have been adjusted to the publishers version, whereby this postprint is fully quotable.

The role of learning and career guidance for managing mid-career transitions – comparing Germany and Denmark

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In Germany and Denmark, the systems of further education and career guidance are well developed, offering a wide range of services and learning opportunities for targeted, specific and also general skills development. Based on an empirical study with mid-career individuals in both countries, the article investigates how the different systems support individuals to manage a career transition and develop their individual pathways. Mid-career transitions can be considered particularly challenging as they often reflect a more profound crisis and major concerns about future career opportunities. Constraints that prevent individuals in mid-career to fully benefit from the learning and guidance offers available can be identified in both countries. These range from the availability of programmes and accessing funding to getting the 'right' information. These constraints partly derive from adult education and guidance systems presupposing linear careers rather than disruptive trajectories and horizontal mobility.

Keywords: mid-career transitions; career guidance; labour market activation policy; horizontal mobility

1. Introduction

The contingency of the work-life course (Heinz, 2003) increasingly challenges individuals to secure continuous employment over their working life. Combined with flexible labour markets and organisational restructuring this has led to major instabilities in individuals' working lives over the past decades. Polarisation effects on work trajectories can be identified between linear trajectories often associated with the Fordist production model in industry and larger companies and various post-Fordist 'broken line' trajectories in the new economy (Valenduc, Vendramin, Pedaci, & Piersanti, 2009). The continuous expansion of the service sector moreover has induced a steep increase of non-standard and precarious employment across Europe, resulting in new concepts of work and employment beyond the traditional model of wage labour in industry (Baethge, 2011).
Discontinuous employment trajectories mainly result from unemployment, for example, due to organisational restructuring, illness, career changes, individual choice or unforeseen accidental events. Reorienting trajectories typically requires an adjustment of skills to fit new and emerging job profiles. It may require conversion or retraining, entailing professional mobility and consequences on the work status and work-life balance, as work

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trajectories and private life tend to be closely connected. For women, family-related interruptions are often the cause for discontinuities of employment and constrain professional development opportunities later on (Haasler, 2014). While the reasons may be manifold, (re)entering the labour market tends to present a major challenge for individuals.

Transitional trajectories mirror the difficulties of (re)insertion into the labour market. They reflect the acceptance of temporary solutions such as interim or temporary employment, reduced workload or participation in further training courses to bridge unstable employment periods. While contingent labour appears to enhance employability, transitional arrangements may accumulate over longer periods of time, whereby instabilities, uncertainty and precariousness become the norm.

How ‘broken line' trajectories can be managed by the individuals and whether specific support structures are available for those seeking guidance strongly depend upon employment policies and labour market institutions. In the following, we link the institutional systems in Germany and Denmark to individual narratives of work transitions in order to illuminate the particular challenges of mid-career transitions. After having introduced the labour market context and further training opportunities in both countries, we will explore and discuss individual experiences with support structures on the basis of selected narratives. The final section addresses implications for career guidance services.

2. Transitions and learning as a mid-career challenge

Flexible labour markets, enhanced employee mobility and the employability rhetoric combined with lifelong learning policies have significantly contributed to the diversification of trajectories and forms of transition individuals experience. Still, some convergence can be observed, too (Gautié, 2003; Germe, Monchatre, & Pottier, 2003; Méda & Minault, 2005). First, unemployment is at the core of many transitions, making those more risky. Second, transitions are not just a phenomenon of early careers, but also increasingly affect people later in life, including those who can be considered professionally established. Third, transitions affect individuals across all professional hierarchies and specialisations (Amossé, 2002), with trajectories of highly skilled workers tending to be less diversified and more linear than those of low-skilled workers. Fourth, transition phases often involve semi-structured ‘transitional periods' that are supported by public employment policies.

Mid-life career transitions are particularly formative as they typically reflect struggles within the Self and the external world in the sense of a crisis that evokes questioning many aspects of life, including work (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978). Additionally, the mid-career stage can be distinguished by mastery of a particular professional domain, an established professional role and a general engagement with one's career with few thoughts of disengagement or retirement (Hall, 1986). However, while mid-career individuals generally feel acknowledged as being competent, they may as well be concerned about their future career development and that past career opportunities might have been restricted. Such considerations reflect ambiguity and uncertainty and the notion that in mid-life individuals seek to reclaim aspects of the Self that have not been allowed expression due to the prioritisation of other aspects of life (Gibson, 2003). This may also lead to changing the current career path in an attempt to allow expression of suppressed interests, talents or values (Slay, Taylor, & Williamson, 2006). Dominant career models suggest that while the first years of a career (until one is about 35 years) are mainly structured around initial work orientation and first settlement

in a job, the mid-career phase (between 35 and 45 years) may either be geared towards stabilisation (in the job and/or within the organisation) or may result in reorientation and change. The desire to shape one's occupational identity and give meaning to the work one does may also induce a career transition (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Fromm (1942/ 2001) highlighted that self-awareness growing over time and coupled with a sense of personal agency constitutes a process of individuation that forms a key part of human development. Thereby, an individual becomes conscious of making and acting upon a choice among sets of possible alternatives.

Learning can be crucial – and may be used strategically – to facilitate career transitions. While the degree and pace of erosion of classical employment patterns due to fast changing local labour markets are disputed (Blossfeld, Mills, & Bernardi, 2006), the demands on individuals' learning capacity and agency for crafting one's career are undeniably high. Yet analysing and interpreting newly emerging institutional patterns for the stabilisation of employment and careers through learning and the provision of guidance still remains a challenge. For example, Sennett (1998) argues that employees' greater flexibility and mobility result in low levels of commitment towards the workplace, the occupation, the company and the community of practice. Even where workers are committed to their job, lack of employer support for learning and professional development could result in employees feeling over-challenged to respond to changing work demands, which may undermine their sense of professional identity and commitment to learning (Kirpal, 2011; Kirpal & Brown, 2007). This underlines the significance of learning to support the continuous engagement with work and the development of work identities (Billett, 2007). Recent research focused upon identifying learning and career development as interlinked strands of identity building, resulting in the development of strategic career and learning biographies (Cedefop, 2014a). Subsequent studies pointed to the potential of this approach for career intervention and the provision of guidance (Barabasch, 2014).

3. Supporting mid-career transitions in Germany and Denmark – institutional frameworks and the provision of guidance

The guiding question for subsequent analysis is how institutional arrangements derived from policies, norms and practices may support or hinder mid-career transitions. Thereby, the provision of guidance for managing a transition process linked to further learning will be scrutinised apart from other supporting mechanisms, interventions and experiences.

To develop the comparative perspective, Germany and Denmark were selected as two countries with similar qualification systems for the intermediate skills segment of the workforce, but two contrasting labour market contexts. Both countries have a well- established initial vocational education and training (IVET) system with high enrolment rates (Cedefop, 2011).[1] IVET occurs in the framework of vocational secondary education or apprenticeships and is characterised by an alternating structure of learning places, with theoretical knowledge and general education being imparted at vocational schools and practical skills at the company. Occupational profiles, qualification standards and examination procedures are regulated within a tripartite system involving the State and social partners as central actors. The national regulation of vocational qualifications supports job mobility within occupational labour markets (Rubery & Grimshaw, 2003). Skills protection is relatively high, emphasising the primacy of occupational orientations and the recognition of skills within communities of practice.

Despite these similarities among their initial qualification systems, continuing vocational education and training (CVET) and labour market contexts in Denmark and

Germany exhibit different features as reflected in the work trajectories of individuals. While the German labour market is characterised by low levels of flexibility and mobility of the workforce, resulting in high levels of job stability at least for the intermediate skills segment, job mobility among the Danish workforce is high. Here, the flexicurity model provides for high flexibility and mobility of employees backed up by a well-supported lifelong learning system. Interestingly, while the Danish labour market suffered greatly from the last global financial crisis, leading to the Danish flexicurity model losing part of its credibility, post-recession Germany maintained labour market performance accompanied by low levels of unemployment. This was mainly due to the introduction of flexible work schemes at the company level supported by social partners (Herzog-Stein & Seifert, 2010).

3.1. Labour market and institutional frameworks in Denmark

In Denmark, the flexicurity model provides the key contextual framework for further and work-related education and training. First outlined by the Ministry of Labour in 1999 as the ‘golden triangle' of (i) a flexible labour market; (ii) generous unemployment benefits; and (iii) an activation labour market policy, it became widely known as a ‘good practice example' across Europe. The flexibility component involves a high level of numerical flexibility making it easy for firms to lay off personnel with short periods of notice and no compensation requirements for those made redundant. This combines with flexible working hours and a high level of functional flexibility of staff (Andersen, 2012). Today, Denmark stands out with the highest job mobility rate among all European countries, resulting in fragmented trajectories being the norm rather than the exception (Voss, 2009).

Activation policy aims at both upskilling and reskilling the labour force to improve employment opportunities for the unemployed and reduce the risk of redundancy. Training support is embedded in a comprehensive lifelong learning system to facilitate transitions between jobs and, in the case of unemployment, labour market re-entry, with the social partners being highly involved in the design and organisation of training programmes. Whilst in the past years the government has introduced fees for individuals and enterprises participating in CVET, competence funds are available to ensure the right to and possibility of further education for all. To date, Denmark ranks among the European countries with the highest participation rates in adult education and the highest investment in skills development including vocational training (Cort, Thomsen, & Juul, 2013).

This policy is embedded in a high skills road regarded as crucial for Denmark's global competitiveness, and connects to a long-standing tradition of comprehensive public continuing education and training and permeability between educational tracks. Finally, the security component consists of unemployment benefits (partly to compensate for lack of job protection) which are relatively generous and lengthy as compared to other European countries. Government family policy further supports a high employment rate (70% of all aged 15-65) through the provision of public childcare and generous parental leave schemes (Dingeldey, 2011).

The vulnerability of the highly dynamic and flexible Danish labour market became apparent in the context of the global financial crisis of 2008, which featured steeply rising unemployment rates and mass redundancies coupled with the outsourcing of jobs to low- wage countries. This has put the modelling function of the Danish flexicurity model under strain with unemployment benefits being criticised as being too generous and activation policy as inefficient (Andersen, 2012). As a response, reforms since 2009 have

increased the fees for job retraining programmes, shortened the maximum period of eligibility for unemployment benefits and modified the conditions for unemployment insurance eligibility (Cedefop, 2014b). Additionally, participation rates in adult and further training have dropped considerably.

3.2. Labour markets and institutional frameworks in Germany

The concept of ‘Beruf– over centuries – has structured the German labour market, resulting in the close linkage between skill formation and occupational labour markets. In this context, the socialising function of vocational education and training intersects with stratified and standardised educational and occupational routes, resulting in restricted permeability between educational pathways and low levels of flexibility and mobility of the workforce as compared to many other European countries (Solga, 2008; Voss, 2009). This is particularly true for the intermediate skills level. The vocational route offers more than 450 vocational specialisations of which approximately 330 are dual apprenticeship schemes nationally regulated by the Vocational Training Act (Füssel & Leschinsky, 2008). The vocational route keeps a relative strong position as against the academic route, with little permeability between both training tracks.

Although training for industry has lost part of its former significance, skilled workers still are considered the ‘backbone' of the German economy and social welfare system. They can rely on institutionalised patterns of career progression and benefit from high levels of skills protection and social security compared to, for example, unskilled workers. The ‘Facharbeiter' career is furthermore associated with full time, continuous and protected employment and collective workers' participation rights. With strong unions and embedded in welfare state policies, work, employment and skills formation remain largely state-regulated and highly protected.

In contrast is a growing labour market segment of non-standard, marginal and partly precarious employment which, in particular, affects the female workforce as well as the low skilled, migrants and older workers, but increasingly also the ‘ordinary' workforce (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2012). This trend is closely linked to the expansion of the so- called mini- and midi-jobs that confine workers to a maximum wage of €450 or €850 per month, respectively, implying only limited or no contribution to the social security system. For the workers, it translates into considerable disadvantages in terms of entitlement to social security, worker protection, training access and retirement benefits. The high share of female marginal employment can be explained by the fact that more than 80% of the female workforce resides in the service sector, which relies upon a high proportion of non-standard employment and lower wages as compared to jobs of the same qualification level in core industries (Bispinck, 2013).[2]

Another factor that contributed significantly to the steep rise of marginal employment were major labour market reforms enacted between 1998 and 2002. These reforms introduced employability and labour market activation as key pillars of labour market policy, pushing the individual to adopt a new active role in securing not only employment, but also unemployment benefits (Dingeldey, 2011). At the same time, a series of government-supported programmes to promote entrepreneurship and self-employment were introduced in the 1990s, such as start-up grants for launching one person and mini enterprises (Gottschall & Kroos, 2003). These programmes were targeted to supporting individuals who could be skilled or even highly skilled, yet remained unemployed, owing to their skills profile not being in demand on the labour market. This, in turn, was viewed as being largely due to the under- and/or over-supply of narrowly

defined vocational qualifications in the German labour market, which cannot be adjusted easily to respond to fast-changing skilling needs.

The shift to activation policy and employability to enhance job mobility also had an impact on training policies as well as individual training strategies. Germany lags behind most other European countries for a number of relevant CVET indicators. In 2008, the German Government adopted the initiative 'learning for the life course' ('Konzeption für das Lernen im Lebenslauf') not only to address the challenges of lifelong learning, but also to safeguard economic growth and social inclusion. The introduced measures to increase participation rates in adult education include financial incentives, the upgrading of training guidance and advisory services, a quality assurance system for training offers and decentralised learning, among others. However, questions arise as to whether continuous learning will alter labour market risks. Recent studies indicate that employment trajectories are becoming increasingly discontinuous with precarious employment being a main driver of disruptive career patters (Fromm & Bartelheimer, 2012; Hacket, 2012). At least in the case of middle-aged women it is unlikely that their work trajectories can be stabilised through major engagement with learning and further training (Haasler, 2014).

4. Methods

The narratives presented here are based on biographical interviews conducted in Germany and Denmark in 2012 and 2013. The interviews formed part of a five country study that investigated how learning can support individuals' labour market transitions. The aim was to identify and understand individuals' strategies to manage mid-career transitions and how further training and engagement with learning support career development (Brown & Bimrose, 2014).

The comparative study followed a common research and methodological approach. Narrative interviews were conducted by application of a thematic guide. The main themes included relevant skills development; key learning experiences; work and learning transitions; support structures to manage transitions; anticipated future developments; and lessons learned from previous changes and transitions (Barabasch & Merrill, 2014). The target group of the sample represented the main part of the active working population, excluding groups at risk (as, for example, the young, the long-term unemployed, migrants) as well as highly regulated and high level career pathways (e.g. lawyers, medical doctors) and those for whom continuing training is a (formal) requirement. Given the importance of the vocational route in Germany and Denmark, the focus was placed on the intermediate skills segment up to and including bachelor degree graduates. Furthermore, all participants were selected on the basis that they had performed middle-range jobs for at least five years and that they had experienced labour market transitions. The Danish participants were also selected on the basis of recent experiences with career guidance (Cort et al., 2013).

The following five narratives exhibit how strategies for managing career transitions interconnect with CVET and career guidance support. We argue that these narratives are
'iconic cases' in that they are exemplary of the themes under discussion. Furthermore, the cases were contextualised against the respective labour market context by exploring the dialectics between structure and agency (Giddens, 1991). The narratives were selected from an overall Danish sample of 21 participants and a German sample of 25 participants.[3] In both countries the participants, who were currently experiencing a major transition process, were interviewed again after 8-12 months for an in-depth analysis of

how they managed this specific transition process. All interviews took 60-90 minutes were recorded and transcribed verbatim and were treated with strict anonymity. All quotes were translated from the original language into English.

5. Challenges of midlife career transition in Denmark and Germany

In the following, we present five narratives highlighting the support structures that helped managing career transitions in midlife. All are typical of the specific labour market context, representing a career change induced by a profound reflection process and, in four of the cases, by unemployment and the experience of crisis. In Denmark, the individuals were made redundant, which led to a major working life reorientation coupled with a high engagement with learning yet accepting downward mobility (see also Cort & Thomsen, 2014; Cort et al., 2013). The German cases are more diverse, representing, first, uncertainty and precariousness under publicly supported self-employment; second, being placed in an activation scheme; and third, seeking to re-enter the labour market after several years of a family-related interruption.

5.1. Denmark: redundancy and radical career change

Hans is in his forties and lives with his wife and two children in a big city. He initially trained in retail and worked with several employers as salesman and account manager. Over eight years his career developed progressively before he was made redundant in 2008 during the global recession. While unemployed for six months, Hans spent much time at home with his children. This made him consider changing careers, partly by recognising he would like to work with children based upon caring for his autistic son.

Hans expressed this idea during a counselling meeting at the union and received very positive feedback (under Danish legislation the unions have to inform and guide their members in case of unemployment).[4] Realising that there were many people seeking to change their jobs, including salesmen, further encouraged him to pursue a career change. After he had applied for over 100 jobs, Hans got a job in after-school care programme at a primary school. For him, the union's support had been crucial to continue in this new direction and not to give up when initially unsuccessful in the application process.

In his new job, Hans faced a number of challenges: first, he had entered a completely new working culture and, second, managing the transition involved high engagement with learning. As a career changer with no qualification in the field, he started off by working side-by-side with an experienced colleague:

> I had to learn continuously for one and a half years. I started out in a second grade class with a very experienced teacher. I had a hard time finding my role. (...) In the beginning I walked around like an apprentice seeing how things work. What has been most difficult is what lies behind. (.)I'm getting better, but yet not good enough.

After having worked as a teacher assistant for a while, however, Hans had a nervous breakdown. The job shift to caregiving can be considered radical, entailing emotional work. Particularly the close interaction with people was a new experience for Hans who was used to working mainly on his own. The intense personal relationships with the children and colleagues presented a situation of stress. Hans also had problems with distancing himself from work and being overcommitted. After Hans refrained from going

to work for some time, he followed his colleagues' and wife's advice to consult a doctor and finally went to see a psychologist.

When Hans was re-interviewed he was still with the primary school, but it had undergone a major restructuring process which changed his perception of work. Now he perceived the organisation as too big and impersonal and encountered a lot of time pressure. As a response, Hans had started to look for a new job within special needs education.

Eric also had a radical career change combined with downward mobility after having experienced dismissal from the corporate sector. Due to his high position, Eric was sent on 'gardening leave' before becoming unemployed, receiving a full salary for a six-month period. When first interviewed, uncertainty about which direction his professional life should take presented a crisis to him. Eric can look back on a career path from shipping trainee to executive manager in an international company with a strong corporate identity. The merger with another company resulted in a major restructuring process that Eric perceived as very stressful, ultimately resulting in his dismissal. He had to reorient his entire life as this new situation also meant significant less income for the family previously used to a fairly affluent lifestyle. While his wife still earned enough money to maintain the family, Eric's job loss also meant lower social status and prestige. Reflecting on his interests and values, Eric was interested in becoming a green keeper. When he was re-interviewed, he had started to train as green keeper following an apprenticeship that he had found through his extensive network. While initially he had been uncertain about pursuing a career change, the support from others had had a catalytic effect. Intensive conversations with a close friend had particularly helped him 'to find clarity about his situation'. The second influential support came from an outsourcing package at AS3[5] bought by his former employer. The package covered six sessions with placement and outplacement services:

> I was offered an AS3 scheme and I started, but I couldn't really go on with it. I didn't really know what to do and couldn't find out what I wanted to do and so on.

The coaching sessions were thus put on standby until Eric was emotionally ready to start working on his career plans. In the follow-up interview, the support provided by AS3 was narrated as having been central for his decision-making:

> I worked with AS3 about this [decision]. To get the greater perspective: what do you want to do with your working life? I tried to make a journey: I am at the day of retirement and look back at the past 20 years, which are those that I have to define.

Eric had to identify his values and intrinsic motivation and finally came up with a list of 28 points which he defined as the essence of a 'good' working life. He also wanted a more balanced life. He then started to use the AS3 sessions more strategically and the coach adapted to Eric's needs. Eric also reflected about the guidance support provided by the union:

> When I was fired and applied for unemployment benefit, I had to go for an interview. (...) As an introduction, a two hour presentation was given about practical stuff and legislation. It was ok. And then we had this interview and I thought 'that's great, I look forward to it. I'm going to have a good dialogue with this guy about the future. How I see it and my possibilities'. And then I came up to a young guy, who definitely didn't have any management or personal experience. He was standing at a counter. 'You have to apply for so

> and so many jobs!' 'Well, listen, I'm looking into the possibility of becoming a green keeper and of course it's difficult [...]' 'That's not enough. You have to apply for other jobs, too'. 'Well, fine, but my goal is to become a green keeper' . 'But the rules are like this: you have to apply for at least four jobs and then you have to apply for something else'.

The main guidance experience here was control and rigidity, conveying that a career change is not really supported. Ultimately, Eric reflected that engaging in a dialogue (in the sense that somebody listens and takes on the role of a critical friend) had been most important for him in the reflection and learning process. He also underlined the key role of networks through which he found the apprenticeship position. He experienced that people – family, friends, former colleagues, relatives – could be very supportive in his career transitioning process, but there were detractors as well. Some people also expressed concerns that he was 'too old' and should not 'waste his potentials' on a lower qualified job. Downward mobility presents a major shift in middle age, which is likely to be perceived as problematic due to class-based status considerations. For example, Eric reflected that none of his friends had a vocational background and that people's attitude towards him had changed since he made the shift from manager to green keeper, though he was aware that he had a somewhat similar attitude.

5.2 Germany: job reorientation and precariousness

Paul is 42 years and works as a self-employed carpenter. After completion of secondary education ('Abitur') he spent seven years with different temporary jobs before starting an apprenticeship as carpenter at the age of 27. After completion of his training he continued working for the same employer for some years. Interpersonal problems at work and too much routine work were the reasons that made him want to change jobs. Paul also wanted to deepen his expertise. By coincidence he learnt about a full-time handicraft design school offering a two-year course to qualify as certified craft designer ('Gestalter im Handwerk'). Publicly funded with the 'Meister-BAföG', Paul completed this course with the aim to become self-employed. While doing the 'Meister' would have been the alternative, Paul opted for the school-based qualification, which he found more interesting. However, in the end the qualification he had obtained did not allow him to start his own carpentry workshop as this actually required the 'Meister' certificate. Information gaps about the formal requirements for starting a carpentry workshop turned out to be a major obstacle for Paul. As an alternative, he started a business for assembly as this was possible under the given legal framework, gradually transforming it into a workshop. Paul also was not adequately informed about the formalities of getting public funding support, which ultimately combined unemployment benefits with a start-up grant, implying that any income from his regular business was counted towards his subsistence and benefit rates.
Paul's narrative focused on the transition from dependent employment to self-employment and the formal and financial obstacles, lack of guidance and lack of support. Additionally, we see the ambivalences of working in a one-man business and that carpentry was not his first professional choice. In both interviews Paul was ambivalent and considered redirecting his working life because he was working alone and due to all the responsibilities and administration involved in becoming an entrepreneur. Also the financial pressure was high as Paul started with little capital, but had to finance a transporter, tools, machines and all other necessary equipments. Starting his own business involved a lot of risk taking, self-discipline and dealing with bureaucracy. Paul found it

difficult that he was not getting any form of guidance. He once considered getting help from a coach to learn to be more efficient in self-organisation, ‘somebody, who can get you to take decisions, put things into practice, to structure your time efficiently'. However, some in-job training or coaching was either not available or very expensive. Paul also wanted to learn through interaction with others, but in his job situation he did not have the opportunities.

When the second interview was conducted, Paul had taken an occasional job as a hiking tour guide in France. This was after having completed another big and very stressful job. When he returned, his clients had not paid their bills so that Paul became insolvent and very disillusioned about his job situation. He decided to work another six months before considering quitting the business altogether. While Paul was not very motivated, he did secure a few interesting jobs, but remained ambivalent about being self-employed, managing all the stress, work demands and financial pressures. He was still searching and exploring alternatives.

Anke, 44 years old, went straight after school into automobile manufacturing assembling parts. In the subsequent 25 years she worked as fitter for different suppliers (mainly piecework) in different regions of Germany. During this time she also undertook different specialist trainings, mainly employer supported, and also completed a distance learning course in electrical engineering. She mostly changed jobs in pursuit of earning more money (which she described as ‘money addiction'). Her plan had always been to stop working at the age of 50 and migrate to Canada. She reflected that she learnt being a workaholic from her parents. She would take over work from colleagues and work extra hours continuously. However, she neglected her children by overworking and stated that the hardest time for her in life had been when she stayed home during parental leave.

About five years ago, Anke had a burnout and had to stop working altogether. Since then she started living on her savings and the unemployment benefit. Anke reflected on her first breakdown:

> Yes, it was very successful. I always wanted to achieve more and earn more money. I then also moved to (major city), to work with a company that produced medical supplies. (...) Because there I could earn more money. And this was a very, very hard and exhausting job. It really required 200 per cent. And this was when I had my first burnout. (.) I worked there for two years and that was it.

Anke initially ignored her mental anguish, trying to continue as before but could not get back to a normal work routine. She thus moved back to the city where she had lived before and where, in her view, she had ‘still been alright'. Here she started to work for a small newcomer company up to a point where she had to quit working altogether. At first, Anke did not seek help or guidance, also not from her social network, family or employer, but mainly struggled to get on by herself. Only when she became unemployed and had to go to the job centre to receive benefits did she receive some professional advice. In this period Anke became very isolated and was not able to interact with other people anymore or leave the house. Her two daughters had to move to their father.

Anke started a retraining programme at a bakery, but quit as she was unable to interact with people. The agent from the unemployment agency sent Anke to undergo some medical check-ups through which she was admitted to hospital for some weeks, and, later on, to a psychiatric clinic for nine months. Since then she has been in therapy and under constant guidance and support provided by the job centre, which placed her in an activation scheme for which Anke was offered three different jobs. She opted to work

in a cultural institution, which meant interacting with many different people as well as following intensive training on communication and social skills. The job also required a high degree of flexibility. She realised that this opportunity had changed her work attitude and improved her ability to relate to others.
When the first interview was conducted Anke had been in the activation scheme for one year. During the period of crises (burnout, unemployment, psychiatric clinic, activation scheme) Anke learnt self-perception and to become more aware of her own needs and limits. In her view, the job centre's intervention has been 'life-saving'. At the time of the second interview, she had extended this job, because she liked the learning experience, in particular learning a lot about herself. She had increased her working hours to 20 hours per week. The job centre had also encouraged her to additionally try a mini-job, which, apart from the additional income, could also help Anke to get a new job orientation as it was not clear what kind of job she would be able to do in the future. Going back into technical work will not be possible anymore, but Anke wished her future job would be more challenging and diversified.
Karin is 46 years and has two children. She quit general schooling and left without a certificate to work with children for one year, but then decided to go back and complete school specialising in textiles. She then entered a higher education programme to become a teacher. She tried out different course combinations and also had different occasional jobs. After four years Karin abandoned her studies, moved to another town and joined a programme to train as midwife, but stopped after three months because she was pregnant. She then stayed home taking care of her two children for the following eight years. During that time Karin completed a course over 1.5 years to train as prenatal assistant, but could never practise in this profession because it was made redundant due to rationalisation of health care provisions.
In search of possibilities to re-enter the labour market (without being formally qualified or skilled), Karin visited a career orientation seminar which helped her to identify her strengths and interests. These were in the direction of model maker in a museum. Since Karin was receiving unemployment benefits, she was supported by the job centre to do a temporary part-time job at a museum where she worked for 1.5 years alongside a restorer. The precise work and skills required were very fascinating for Karin, but the atmosphere and long-term direction of particular projects did not appeal to her expectations. A colleague thus advised her to try out working at the theatre, and through personal contacts Karin got an internship there working with a prop master. She almost immediately was offered a part-time job while concurrently still receiving unemployment benefits. As this arrangement could not be made permanent, Karin decided to work as a freelance prop master on project-based assignments, which she combined with some decorator jobs elsewhere. While this situation worked well for a couple of years, the prerequisite to continue the job was to get a title or licence as 'prop master' issued by the chamber of crafts. With prop mastery being registered as a crafts business but not being regulated as a 'Beruf', Karin was able to get the title and work permission based on her previous jobs and work practice. Then, six years after she had made the first attempt to re-enter the labour market, she was offered a 60% permanent position at the local theatre.
Karin started and quit a number of different career paths, always in search of what to do professionally. However, Karin did not perceive her career trajectory as disruptive or discontinuous, but rather as a path of gradual adjustments in the sense of a 'continuous flow'. For the narrative this is a very important underpinning, because it generates a different meaning of 'transition'. In this overall flow of gradual adjustments, the career

orientation seminar had been very decisive as it brought about a totally new approach to understanding her professional life. Support from and exchange with friends convinced her to seek out that specific seminar, which made her think in another direction, from ‘this is what I could do' to ‘this is what I want to be doing'. The first direction would not only open up a whole range of possible career paths based on her various interests, but also left Karin unsure about whether she had chosen the right track and made her feel that maybe she should try something else. The second direction, by contrast, buttressed her resolve about her skills and abilities, and what she really wanted to be doing professionally. Pursuing this direction has finally resulted in her becoming a prop master and feeling 100% sure that this was her given vocation and the right track professionally. This determination had not conveyed a feeling of being inflexible, but rather let her see herself in all her facets and on the route towards self-realisation and a deep satisfaction. This insight and certitude gave her the courage to take risks to follow an unconventional particular path.

6. Discussion

The five narratives present interesting communalities despite the different work trajectories embedded in two national contexts. All individuals underwent a transition linked to being in search of a new professional direction that involved a more or less radical career change. Typical of their mid-career transition is striving for a meaningful and satisfying job that aligns with their ‘real' interests and values. All five participants also sought a more balanced work-private life as compared to their former working life, which was perceived as stressful and exhausting (with the exception of Karin who stayed home). For all of them working plays an important part in their life, linked to self-realisation and opportunities for further development. All these aspects underline the notion of mid-career being linked to inner turmoil and the wish to give meaning to one's working life as outlined earlier.

In terms of engagement with learning, it came out strongly that also in mid-career learning plays a central role regardless of whether it involves obtaining a formal qualification to realise horizontal (Eric) or vertical mobility (Paul) or informal learning and training on-the-job (Hans, Anke, Karin). Starting again as a newcomer and feeling like an ‘apprentice' thereby presented a challenge, particularly when once having been established in a professional role. Thus, the individuals perceived the learning involved not only as very demanding, but also as a positive experience, mainly because it was linked to self-realisation and learning about themselves. Notably, in all cases engagement with further training was used strategically as it facilitated managing the transition and becoming more confident and, finally, established in a new professional field. Additionally, all participants experienced the transition as a learning process linked to their own personal development, which Eric and Karin described as a ‘personal journey'. The career change was hence experienced as a more profound transformation, affecting not only the personality but also the social roles within networks and in society.

Seeking and using support structures and (public or private) career guidance services played a decisive role in all five cases. Notably, for those receiving unemployment benefits (as was the case for all participants), interaction with the job centre is required as both Denmark and Germany maintain a fairly strict activation policy This implies that the unemployed have to meet certain requirements to receive unemployment benefits, including regular presence at the centre, participation in training activities and proof of regular job applications.

In the case of Hans there has actually been little career guidance or advice, but the encouragement he received has been decisive to manage the difficult transition process. For Erik, the AS3 package combined with professional counselling and support from his personal networks have been most important, while for Anke the job centre guided, directed and supported her entire transition and transformation process. Paul had the most negative experience with the job centre, partly due to the complex combination of unemployment and self-employment, which resulted in having to deal with a lot of bureaucracy. Furthermore, that he was not adequately informed about the requirements to set up his own business turned into a major obstacle, too. Karin is a special case in many ways. As career changer without prior qualification she found a niche that matched her interests and broad skills profile. The proficiency she obtained through training on-the- job was accepted by getting a title based on prior learning and work experience. All these aspects are exceptional for the German labour market and likely in the creative professions alone. However, Karin also demonstrated resilience, risk taking, patience and an investment in career guidance. Additionally, she was supported by the job centre throughout her journey towards prop mastery, trying out different job situations including internships, temporary jobs and freelance work before being made permanent.

The cases of Hans, Eric and Anke, and in a way also Paul, present the acceptance of downward mobility related to lowered earning potential, a lessening of job status and changing from professional proficiency to unskilled work. For Paul it is not so much prestige, but unstable employment and precariousness related to self-employment as compared to a stable income from dependent employment. In Denmark, obtaining public support to retrain is difficult as education benefits typically target the unskilled, while for career changers qualified in another domain the common approach is the accreditation of prior non-formal learning. Consequently, people like Hans and Eric are not the target group of career guidance services. However, they are also not the main target group for accreditation of prior learning, nor are they entitled to receive study benefits because they are not in a permanent position. As a consequence, they are left to take self-initiative and mobilise their own resources. In Germany, horizontal mobility is more strongly supported when well justified, but requires retraining and considerable engagement with learning. A career changer like Hans would be required to undergo another formal qualification of several years in order to move into the pedagogical field.

7. Implications for policy and the provision of guidance

A career change requires mobilising considerable resources and significant engagement with learning to overcome personal, social and structural barriers. At the personal level, a career change challenges the personal and professional identity and requires will-power and resilience. This is often coupled with the mobilisation of social and financial resources. Socially, a career change implies engaging with new social and professional networks that rely on specific communication structures, communities of practice and so on. Furthermore, a career change is likely to affect the family situation in terms of status, recognition and family resources.

Career guidance services and other support structures – including training and activation schemes – tend to be structured along linear trajectories, which are still considered the norm. However, mid-career adults are inclined to consult career guidance services when exploring possibilities to (re)direct their current and future trajectories. At mid-career, this is often linked to a search for meaning in their working lives. Especially when individuals face major employment and learning discontinuities, they require

navigational skills such as self-reflexivity, openness and career adaptability to negotiate transitional life phases (Patton & McMahon, 2006). The meaning of work per se thereby might not be the main point of departure as occupational identities may vary in the importance individuals ascribe to them and the extent to which they are considered to be enduring or provisional (Kirpal, 2011). Similarly, the interest in and commitment to learning may not be driven by supporting career progression or redirection in the first place. Rather, learning is often linked to the desire for personal development and growth. A 10 country European study, for example, confirmed the primacy of learning for personal development in all qualification segments (Brown & Bimrose, 2012). Hence, the focus on learning for employability may be less effective than learning for personal development, supporting network building and preparing people to meet new challenges. While in the presented mid-career narratives learning played a decisive role in facilitating a major career shift, all participants also underlined that the transition process itself was a relevant and important learning experience and a 'personal journey'. Guidance services should take these factors into account by linking training offers and counselling to personal development and the wish of individuals to engage in a meaningful and more balanced working life.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. In Germany, the vocational route is still being taken up by almost 60% of a school leaving cohort (BMBF, 2012), while for Denmark the figure is just above 50% but with lower completion rates.
2. For example, in 2012, women held 87% of all regular part-time employment of less than 20 hours per week and 81% of all marginal employment contracts (Fromm & Bartelheimer, 2012).
3. The German sample comprised 11 male and 14 female participants aged between 30 and 48 years; the Danish sample included 10 male and 12 female participants ranging in age from 34 to 49 years.
4. Unions in Denmark are to provide career guidance, partly marketing access to career guidance services as one of the advantages of becoming a union member. Since the unions also administer the competence funds, they strongly support their members' lifelong learning, too.
5. AS3 is an outsourcing company that provides coaching and counselling for employees who have been laid off (http://www.as3companies.com/).

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