

XVII ISA World Congress of Sociology

Reconnecting professional organizations with professional occupations

Joint Session of RC17 Sociology of Organization & RC52 Sociology of Professional Groups

Gothenburg, Sweden, July 2010

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**“Identity construction and career politics of ICT-Professionals in Switzerland.
Mediating between professional and organizational ethics.”**

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Abstract

This paper investigates the question how highly qualified IT-specialists in the Swiss ICT industry deal with tensions between professional and organizational ethics on the level of identity work and career politics. This question will be discussed based on qualitative interviews with IT-Professionals in a medium-sized Internet-service-provider located in Switzerland. Two different career types will be presented: (1) Development-oriented Professionals and (2) Intrapreneurial Employees. Each career type represents a specific biographical logic in coping with rivaling ethics and following a more or less implicit concept of a “subjective career” (Hall/Mirvis 1995).

I. Introduction, research questions and theoretical framework

The pervasion of ICT into everyday- and professional life has been broadly connected with theses of the information society and knowledge-based economies. More technically spoken ICT could be conceived as a transmission belt for the historical process of economic and cultural globalization (Boes 2005: 7). Hardly recognized by the research on classic professions or the discussion on professional service firms, the ICT-Industry emerged as a significant employer for high-skilled “organizational” Professionals (Adler et al 2008: 361) working in knowledge-intensive, complex and customer-oriented IT-projects (see Gillmann 2001: 16-17, 29ff). Looking at the case of Switzerland, activities towards a standardization of the heterogeneous set of occupational groups in ICT with respect to job titles and career training have been pushed forward (see, for example Swiss ICT 2009). In addition, the focus of organizational human resource strategies has changed from lateral hires to recruiting and retaining highly qualified, rare and fought over IT-Specialists (see BFS 2008). But if this youngest push for professionalization may lead to a breakthrough and consolidation of professionalism for working cultures and career options in the Swiss ICT-Industry is unclear yet (see for example Heimlich 2007 for the situation in Germany). Most IT-Professionals

work under a high performance and accountability pressure, compelled to cope with the transgression of the boundaries between work and life and a lack of long-term orientated career perspectives. The technological knowledge, analytical and problem solving competencies of IT-Professionals represent the core of knowledge-intense IT-Firms, but actually they cannot rely on a strong profession representing their interests.

I will address the question how highly qualified IT-specialists in the Swiss ICT industry deal with their actually ambivalent job and career situation. In the following minutes I will present to you some interim results from a case study taken from a research project running at the Berne university of applied sciences which is named MAPCA. MAPCA is an acronym standing for the project title Managing Professionals' Careers in knowledge-based firms.ⁱ Our research agenda is aimed at the company-specific opportunities for career advancement and professional development as well as the professional biographies of specialists in knowledge and technology-intensive companies in Switzerland.ⁱⁱ By way of a heuristic toolkit for career politics (Kels, 2008), we are reconstructing typical interpretations and strategies of Organizational Professionals trying to affect their career development against the background of organizational structures and resources, labour market chances and the personal life situation (Kels 2008; Vormbusch/Kels 2008).

II. Empirical findings

The interviewed IT-Professionals are working in the area of technical development, project management and IT consulting for a medium sized IT-service provider in the web-business. In this study, we shall call it *Webdesign*. As an integrated service provider, *Webdesign* installs and maintains internet and e-business applications for clients of different sizes. The company is employing 150 people in their offices in Zürich, Berne, Amsterdam and Vienna. *Webdesign* offers younger recruits in particular a fast-track entry into challenging project and software development work. The recruitment of new employees is difficult because of a lack of qualified specialists in the Swiss labourmarket, but the company's main problem is high turnover rate of specialists resulting from the fact that some of its younger employees cannot see long-term oriented career perspectives after their initial, intensive competence development in the firm and consequently turn to external job opportunities. Career moves within the company are subject to chance and lack a sense of structure, being usually the outcome of informal talks. The employees progress from 'juniors' to 'seniors' without much planning which seems to be subject to quickly changing work requirements and chance influences. Let us take a closer look at identity strategies and career politics of these professionals trying to cope with conflicting professional- and organizational-based ethics.

Three of these sixteen interviews with IT-Specialists represent a very coherent career type which we call "**development-oriented professionals**". These people have a strong academic background in informatics, computer science or mathematics and prefer to work in technical ambitious, customer-oriented projects as application architects and technical consultants. Corresponding to their professional self-conception as a **technical avant-garde** in a business context, they feel to be driven by a "passion for silicon" and aspire to create elegant and

qualitative outstanding IT-solutions. They feel committed to use their analytical and technological skills and their creativity to make relevant contributions to the modernization of working environments of customers. The characteristics of their normative orientation are linked with the ideals of academic professions or professional communities: working with high-professional standards based on long-term education and personal expertise in a collaborative community based on trust, collegiality, a critical feedback-culture and value-rationality (Millerson 1964; Brante 1988; Adler et al 2008). Development-oriented Professionals critically observe their working conditions under the aspect of challenging projects, visibility, professional autonomy and internal career options related to the possibility of ongoing competence development and achieving an expert status.

But as “professionals of the capital” (Brante 1988) or more neutrally spoken as “experts working in a knowledge-based occupation” (Watson 2002) they **have to deal with rivaling ethics and performance criteria’s** defined by management and markets. The constraint to develop IT-solutions very quickly and under a high cost-efficiency leads to an attitude which we call **pragmatic or service-based professionalism** or, as one of the interviewed IT-Architects states: “It could be tough when customers expect quick-shots, but in these cases you have to shelve your professional ambition.” The experience that customers often don’t accept to pay for elegant and ambitious IT-solutions and some projects have less learning potentials leads another interviewee to a situation where he switches into a “military mode”, where he “just doesn’t think” but just does what he is told by his supervisor. From a biographical perspective, IT-Professionals have to cope with conflicts rising from differences between their quasi-academic self concept and ambitious career aspirations on the one side and sometimes very restricted possibilities in continuing to develop technological competencies and shape their working environment in terms of professional ethics and quality standards on the other side. Based on the interviews we observed **three different career strategies** within this career type:

- (1) A process of **reshaping the professional self-concept** by moving into managerial functions and developing project management and leadership competencies.
- (2) Trying to **enforce internal visibility and reputation as a technological leader** and establish an expert and innovation culture by engaging in communities of practice and intensifying the dialogue with the general management.
- (3) Leaving the actual employment contract and **moving to technology ventures or to large-scale, sometimes multinational enterprises** with the expectation to find a strong innovation culture and more attractive career perspectives in the field of expert-based work.

The second career type I would like to present to you we named “**Intrapreneurial employees**” (based on four qualitative interviews). These people have either a professionalized background in business data processing or came as a career changer from other academic disciplines. Intrapreneurial employees typically work in interface functions between Technical Professionals and customers as project managers, team leaders or business unit managers. Corresponding to their polyvalent competence profile and their self-perception as intrapreneurs with professional background, they feel challenged by the possibility to

juggle between market and time pressure, improvisation, high latitude in shaping project teams and working together with competent professionals of different disciplines and functions.

Similar to the type of “development-oriented professionals”, they set high values on outstanding performance, a conducive and cooperative team culture and the possibility to enlarge their professional skills, but in some important aspects their working motives and career aspirations differ. At first, their feeling of high self-efficacy is mediated by the experiences of professional team leading competences and responsibilities and they are much more focused on the process dimension of work (in coping market and time pressure, turbulence and the communicative quality of work) than on the product dimension (for example the quality and aesthetics of a technical solutions as it has been stated by development-oriented professionals). Thirdly, career aspirations of intrapreneurial employees are not focused on the idea of earning recognition and reputation in professional communities. Intrapreneurial employees move through different job roles and internal as external job markets boundaryless. They aspire for the feeling of autonomy by the experience to prove their competence and professionalism in different roles and working areas and so construct a generalistic, polyvalent competence profile:

“You see, there is this pattern, that you might have noticed, two years ago. Every two years, I seem to get bored, then I see it. Then I need to find something new to do (...) You see, I have to, I always seem to be in a sort of development phase. Just to see once what I am really good at, that is important for me.”

Two typical career strategies can be distinguished:

- (1) A process of constructing the **professional self-concept** very open, transfusible and polyvalent by moving through different organizational functions and developing a broad scale of social, methodological and managerial skills.
- (2) Trying to **utilize social networks or “social capital”** (with gatekeepers, colleagues and customers) to acquire challenging projects, job and career opportunities within and outside the firm and to ensure personal autonomy in decision making or in the project staffing process through negotiations with line managers.

III. Conclusion

Let me come to a short conclusion. Career politics and identity strategies of the two presented career types are not fixed on narrow jobroles or dominated by a defensive orientation on job-security. Firmly convinced to belonging to a generation making substantial contributions to a technological-based transformation of modern societies, they develop their competencies and careers crossing the classical boundaries of employing organizations and professional ethics. The presented career politics can be understood as biographical strategies of mediating

between rivaling ethics of professional groups on the one side and the uncertainties of markets and the organizations of work on the other side.

However, when we leave this biographical perspective and focus on the processes of marketization, industrialization and internationalization of IT-work, new uncertainties in employment relationships and career perspectives are arising (Sieber 2010). Many employers increasingly hire high-qualified “offshore workers employed in regions with different standards.“ (Adams 2007) – and even in the prestigious ventures and IT-multinationals, time-pressure and cost-cutting-strategies begin to inscribe in working environments and collaborative practices of innovation and expert based work (see also Boes/Kämpf 2009). But in this historical moment, these IT-Professionals seem to be able to utilize their professional knowledge, their social capital and their currently advantageous job market situation as a powerful resource in negotiating and fighting for individual autonomy and deployment.

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ⁱ Involved in the research project of the Commission for Technology and Innovation of the Swiss Federation based at the Bern University of Applied Sciences are Peter Kels (project leader), Isabelle Clerc, and Simone Artho. Further information is available at [/www.reflexive-careers.ch](http://www.reflexive-careers.ch)

ⁱⁱ Three in-depth case studies (at a medium-sized IT service provider, a large-scale energy supplier, and a public transport and logistics company) are conducted to investigate the relevant company-specific circumstances and concepts concerning HR and career development in IT specialist, project management, internal consulting and sales, engineering and energy trade analysts careers. Per case study, approx. 10 expert interviews are conducted with HR managers and executives in addition to a documentary analysis to reconstruct the theory and practice when developing and supporting holders of specific know-how. In parallel to this analysis of the organizational and managerial perspective, each case study includes 16 problem-centric occupational biography interviews (Witzel 1982, 2000) with male and female specialist employees.