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“Career by choice” or “career by chance”. The determinants of flexible professional biographies

Introduction

Developing flexible labour market has become a challenge not only for employers but also for employees. The processes of globalisation caused the development of various forms of work and employment. A part of professional biographies are careers which are changing as a result of economic, social and political processes. Those various forms of work and employment enable individuals “to juggle” with the elements of their own careers.

This article is an attempt to answer some questions as a summary of the three editions of my research project: “Social and individual consequences of non-standard forms of work”. The aim of the research was to analyse the professional biographies of the Lubuskie district inhabitants, who experience flexible forms of work and employment. The analysis was based on in-depth interviews.

The aims of the article include to explore the social and individual consequences of flexible employment and to contribute to further research by an attempt to formulate hypotheses.

Social changes in the labour market in Poland

In Poland, in times of real socialism the principle of full employment was implemented. There was the naturalisation of employment phenomenon which was marked by “belief that everyone should work, but also belief that the fact of having a job is an obvious and self-understood attribute of an individual, not demanding of him or her special treatments and almost automatically acquired” (Drozdowski 2002, 53)¹.

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all quotes are translated from Polish into English by the Author.

Thanks to that the society gained a typical pattern of a biography which was characteristic primarily of industrial societies, predictable, transmitted through the socialisation process from generation to generation.

Post-industrial (postmodern) society is a type of society in which “most people for the first time in history do not deal with physical work” (Turner 1999, 65). In the postmodern society there are changes in the relationship between people in terms of the shift from a more personal to a less personal task. The main driving force behind the transformation and change is the capital, which is knowledge, so specialists, experts are highly valued due to their constantly updated skills and competences.

Postmodern society is characterised primarily by changes in the labour market (see Drucker 1962, 1999; Sztompka 2005). The changes transformed labour relations, the relationship between employers and employees, as well as contributed to the creation of new types of careers.

Drozdowski (2002, 81–105), analysing the reasons for changes in the post-modern labour market, mentions the importance of large corporations based on mass production with an equally massive employment declines in traditional sectors. In their places smaller companies are created in which production is based primarily on the quality of the proposed products and specialised work. Experts, who are located in the niches of the labour market, start to decide how much they will earn. The awareness of the demand for highly specialised work increases and, thus, it is easier for the experts to have influence on their employment conditions, wages as well as the principles of cooperation with employers (see Jezior 2011).

Another reason for changes is the information technology (IT) revolution. The increasing importance of modern information technology causes the reduction of employment in certain sectors and an increased demand for labour which uses modern technology. There are two reasons for this situation. First, new technologies might contribute to the growth in unemployment by reducing labour costs and increasing the efficiency of employees in an enterprise. Second, with Internet technology, it is possible to work outside a workplace, or do telework, which is used by businesses and distributed among their own employees. Moreover, as a consequence of teleworking, many people who for some reasons could not work inside an enterprise begin to enter the labour market. The Internet is also a great tool for analysing the labour market, as well as for searching for job and workers for employers and potential employees.

Drozdowski describes the changes in the course of careers as one of the results of the changing labour market. The individual's occupational life course changes from a career evenly shaped as a simple steady rise, which was one of the career types in real socialism, into the form of spikes and troughs, which are interspersed with episodes of unemployment. These jumps, drops, a few or even several professional stages, occur in a variety of workplaces. They might also include some

episodes of acting as entrepreneurs. These capabilities are created by atypical forms of employment that allow to lead a career simultaneously in several work-places. This situation is possible as a consequence of life-long learning. However, it is also necessary because of the changing needs of the workforce in the labour market, mainly due to professional competences which become outdated. Alterations in a career of this type also generate risks which are, among other things, job insecurity and uncertainty about obtaining a fixed remuneration for an equal work.

Social biography, professional biography, professional career and social changes

Klaus Hurrelmann (1994, 138) notes that the changes in such spheres of life as a career — e.g. decisions to postpone a career, the awareness of the importance of free time, the diversification of lifestyles — mean that the crucial element of a social biography is the individualisation of life choices. It is not certain that the choices remain stable. They can change much faster and they are much easier to change because the conditions of individual biography are also modifiable.

Career variations are determined by the transformation of the basic pattern of biography into the pattern of biography of choice. An individual decides when and how to work and which resources to use. These decisions affect an individual's life: from a selection of the first, second or even third profession to personal decisions such as starting a family.

According to Ulrich Beck (2002, 202–203), decisions of individuals who create their own biographies should be wisely made in order for them to stay on the surface of social life. At the same time, an individual must reckon with the consequences of any decisions made. Individuals might construct their biographies using both family resources (see Mach 1998, 2003) and institutional resources.

Individuals create their biographies themselves and therefore "biography by choice" becomes a new type of biography and it is characteristic of the post-modern society. At the same time, certain risk is created in the development of human social identity. "By increasing pressure on the individualised development of one's own biography periods, the identity of individuals begins to be exposed to the unexpected collapse of its own continuity" (Hurrelmann 1994, 139–140).

Professional biography is a part of social biographies and starts with an entry into the labour market. The most commonly implemented pattern of a social biography in the modern, capitalist order, the sequence of "education — work — retirement" (see Hajduk 2001), is less and less frequently performed in a traditional way. At the beginning of the twenty first century, an individual can begin his or her professional biography during the phase of education, or s/he may continue his or her (interrupted) education even in very old age. Professional biography

can incorporate shorter or longer periods of unemployment and/or a planned break from work. This implies a need to distinguish professional biography from a career.

The changes in a position are included in a career and held both vertically and horizontally. Promotion, demotion, changing jobs and losing a job are breakthroughs in the biography of an individual.

Biography by choice is a result of the individualisation of social life:

Individualisation of life expresses, *inter alia*, the need to make decisions about the present and the future, without the possibility of resorting to traditional patterns of their environmentally determined biographical functioning. Everyone must arrange their lives anew, according to their rules of the game, in accordance with their individual choices. (Piorunek 2009, 40)

This carries some consequences which an individual is often unable to predict. The same applies to a career which is formed according to the principles of the modern and postmodern labour market. Real socialism provided individuals with a career based on a pattern that was predetermined by socialisation in which the effects of individual actions were predictable. Postmodern capitalism is governed by different rules. They adapt to a changing situation (including the development of technology), which makes it impossible to predict individual behaviour. "Rapid change can be destabilizing; workers in many different types of occupation now experience job insecurity and a sense of apprehension about both the future safety of their work position and their role within the workplace" (Giddens 2006, 775, English edition).

The struggle for professional existence begins in the labour market. At one end, there are those who, thanks to appropriate qualifications, education and social networks, can receive everything which is offered by the labour market. At another end, there are people who can only use what is left. R. Sennett (2006, 119), following the economists R. Frank and P. Cook, describes a phenomenon in which a herd of mainly young people bears the risk of fighting for everything to become members of an elite group of winners in the labour market. This means that most of the people in the labour market must be content with leftovers. Institutions are no longer engaged in the payment distribution. Flexibility makes it possible for some to grab everything, so that for the rest of the people there is not much left. This can, in turn, lead to the exacerbation of inequality.

These inequalities can manifest themselves in the shape of careers. The pattern of biography by choice in which an individual creates the course of his or her life according to a social structure suggests a simple analogy which directly relates to individuals' careers, namely the distinction between a career "by choice" and a career "by chance" (Róg-Ilnicka 2011). Both categories are connected with the development of careers in the same postmodern conditions in the labour market. The differences arise from the usage of certain personal resources and social biographies of individuals, as well as the choices made by them in the course of

the first phase of their life in which they largely decide on their professional way or further education.

I define a "career by choice" as part of a social biography of individuals whose education and competence in the labour market are still valid and sought for regardless of the changing conditions. Moreover, those individuals have all kinds of diplomas and certificates confirming the usefulness of their competences. Giddens (2006) calls this phenomenon an ability to create a personal portfolio — the more formal evidence of competences, the more chances in the job market.

Thanks to their portfolios of competences and skills, individuals can gain tangible earnings. It makes them aware that the advantage of their situation is their discontinuous employment. For instance, they can afford short episodes of unemployment. In addition, they decide, in most cases, where they work, with whom and for how much. Besides, further education and training are still important, partly because individuals are aware that they are required in the labour market, but also because they have time and money to change or upgrade their qualifications. You can compare them to Bauman's "tourists" who travel around the world with the knowledge of their validity, reliability and freedom and who can think only about the present (Bauman 2000).

A "career by chance" is carried out by individuals whose education is not needed in the labour market and/or has lost some of its importance recently. In addition, their competences are related to performing simple, repetitive tasks which are needed in the labour market, but their value is not too high, that is, their revenues still remain at a low level. They usually do a precarious work not because they consciously choose it, but because it is a necessity. Their family situation, the need to gain any experience, or simply the desire to survive, may be some of the reasons for taking flexible jobs.

Flexibility of employment and careers

Non-standard forms of employment are becoming more common today, but it needs to be kept in mind that they were also elements of careers in the days of real socialism. They were marginally treated, mainly as a way of gaining additional income, a way to get richer and not as an important element of a career.

With the fall of communism in Poland the predictability of careers ended. The labour market has become a capitalist market governed by the rules of a free market which meant the emergence of unemployment and collective redundancies as a result of the liquidation of unprofitable factories.

Real socialism had generated mechanisms which were not necessarily relevant to the use of worker's skills. In times of real socialism, there was the need to provide work for all people and it largely deviated from the assumptions of well-functioning institutions. With the luggage of maladjustment of their skills

to their position and the lack of motivation to learn, Polish people entered the capitalist labour market.

Lubuskie district as an area of research

The Lubuskie district, due to its location at the western border, is a specific area of research. The proximity of the German neighbourhood often determines coping strategies in the labour market that have been particularly evident since the beginning of the systemic transformation, and include economic behaviour and market-related work.

Changing the system at the end of the 1980s resulted in the collapse of companies which were a source of income for the residents of the Lubuskie district. In addition, the elimination of state-owned farms and high unemployment in the countryside resulted in the disappearance of opportunities for sustainable employment. But the proximity of the German border triggered the mechanisms of coping with difficult situations, and thanks to the border area, small Polish entrepreneurship began to flourish.

An attempt to cope with a difficult economic situation began the promoting of pro-market attitudes. The result, however, was the rise of the shadow economy, which was an easy way of getting a job and earning a few dollars. When Poland joined the European Union, many of the activities bordering on the illegal became formal ones and many entrepreneurs officially started trying to apply for co-funding of their work from the EU funds. Thus, the Lubuskie district became the region in Poland, which, as one of the few, was able to use the funds from the European Union in the best way (Zielińska 2012, 194–195).

“Social and individual consequences of non-standard forms of work” — a research project

Observing the labour market in the Lubuskie district, I noticed that there was more and more interest in the flexible forms of employment. At this moment I asked myself the following questions:

- What are the factors which determine the development of a modern professional biography?
- What are the reasons for taking various forms of flexible employment?
- What are the social and individual costs of flexible employment?
- To what extent are individual decisions to start working in the flexible forms of employment a conscious choice and to what extent a necessity?

In an attempt to answer the above questions, I carried out three editions of my own research project entitled: “Social and individual consequences of

non-standard forms of work". The aim of the research was to analyse professional biographies of the Lubuskie district citizens who create their careers thanks to the flexible forms of work and employment. The empirical data included in-depth interviews (Róg-Ilnicka 2009, 2011, 2013, 2014).

The first edition of a survey took place in 2008 (11 interviews), another in 2011 (11 interviews) and the last in 2012 (20 interviews). The primary goal of the project was to explore the difficult terrain of research on the flexible labour market, as well as to make an attempt at determining the consequences of non-standard forms of work and employment.

The research was conducted with the help of sociology students. The students reached their respondents by means of a snowball technique. Each respondent indicated the next person which fulfilled the criteria of the study, i.e. the person who was employed on flexible terms. Each subsequent edition enriched the research tool by adding other issues that were worth exploring. Respondents were adult men and women who at the time of the study worked on flexible terms.

The main areas of the research included:

- the characteristics of professional biographies;
- the reasons for taking the atypical forms of employment;
- the social consequences of this type of employment: relationships with employers, family and friends;
- the individual consequences of atypical forms of employment: education, planning financial future, financial sense of security, development of the specific characteristics of an employee working in a flexible labour market;
- the perception of a flexible labour market and the flexible forms of employment.

I considered the atypical forms of employment to be all types of employment except for the one based on an open-ended contract within the standard organisation of working time and place. Thus, an atypical employment included, among others, contracts of employment for a fixed term, civil law contracts (specific tasks contracts, freelance contracts), a verbal agreement, "black" contracts (i.e. work without any contract), self-employment and these forms of work which involve incomplete and/or flexible working hours. Generally speaking, all the forms which are not a full time job.

General conclusions of the study

Following the analysis of interviews carried out in each edition of the research, I formulated the following conclusions. The excerpts of interviews have previously been published in the form of academic articles (Róg-Ilnicka 2011, 2013, 2014).

Among those who were entrepreneurs self-employment was recognised as the best form of employment. For those who had a full time job, starting a business was

a way of supplementing the household budget and it was treated as additional employment. Interviewees usually related self-employment to some kind of freedom in decision making. Equally important was the ability to decide about their working time and working hours:

In terms of advantages, there are more opportunities, cooperation with many entities, or individuals, which also can directly result in the greater income. (II edition, man, year of birth: 1981)

First of all, yes, ... the peace of mind at work, ... with the desire to come to this work because I know that ... I work for myself, nobody will control me, I won't be told to do something against my will. Peace and quiet, and even above all, no stress. (II edition, woman, year of birth: 1987)

Interviewees (usually women) tend to seek for a more stable job situation because of their family circumstances and their future. They think that a flexible job can be a solution in a short term for those who need it and for students.

In fact, it appeals to the young people who are educated. And I think that people who already have a family and who are already seriously thinking about their future, I think that these forms of employment do not serve them well because they make the future rather uncertain and they tend to be a negative form of employment. (III edition, man, year of birth: 1985)

Interviewees are aware of precarious employment and its consequences such as no benefits and holidays as well as the risk of an immediate dismissal.

The lack of any benefits, no paid holidays. People employed on such contracts are often treated much worse than someone who is employed under an employment contract. Here, you do not care about an employee. As much as I can leave the job, you can also immediately fire me. (III edition, woman, year of birth: 1992)

The main reasons for taking atypical employment are financial reasons as well as the desire to change jobs. Undertaking work in different occupations shows the discrepancy between education and occupation. It also leads to an "unspecified" professional identity.

The interviewees also indicate the advantages of the flexible labour market such as the possibility to change job immediately and learn new things. Moreover, the most important benefits are the independence and ability to earn good money, the possibility to adjust working time to personal and family life, the ability to resign immediately.

In terms of an oral agreement you really can quickly earn more money, but it is so in a short term, ... here in black [informal work] it is better to work well with an oral agreement, for better money ... (I edition, man, year of birth: 1984)

For sure, the advantage may be that if I am employed on [temporary] contract, I can immediately terminate it. If I feel that the work is monotonous for me and I do not want to work there anymore. I do not need to give any notice and I do not have to work there a certain time. (III edition, woman, year of birth: 1992)

There are also the disadvantages of a flexible labour market which are named by interviewees, such as financial risk and uncertainty of employment, and

hence the impossibility to create financial plans, the temporality of work, the lack of social benefits, the lack of holidays, the inability of professional development in a workplace.

This is generally a form of employment for young people, just for those who are out there, do not think about the future, it is known that there are no benefits ... or a pension and health insurance in the long run, it is just not acceptable. (I edition, man, year of birth: 1975)

Well, unfortunately we do not have the continuity of employment and also job security. (II edition, man, year of birth: 1968)

I believe that such forms of employment give no chance of development. Therefore, employers do not try to do anything to change their approach to contracts in such a way that they have an employee who performs a job. They treat such an employee as Lego, which may be stored, and later, as they are no longer needed, can be thrown away in the trash. (III edition, woman, year of birth: 1989)

There is also the possibility to name the social consequences of atypical forms of employment, such as difficulties in establishing lasting relationships between employees in the workplace and the aversion of full-time employees to flexible employees. In addition, interviewees also indicate a lack of sufficient time which they could devote to their family (in particular, the self-employed) (Róg-Ilnicka 2011, 2013, 2014).

Conclusions

By analysing the content of interviews carried out within three editions of the research it is possible to reconstruct the reasons for taking flexible forms of employment. Interviewees mainly take up non-standard employment due to financial motives. However, equally important is the possibility to reconcile work and family responsibilities. For the self-employed, the main reason is a chance for duplicating the main income and/or the possibility to make independent decisions about their own career.

This also leads to the observation that some people formed their careers by "choice" and others by "chance". "Choice" in this case is the conscious use of flexible rules of employment. These types of careers are created without time or financial pressures and are characteristic mostly of professionals. "Chance", in turn, is a result of necessity, primarily a financial one due to which one needs to take any job, even for a small salary. It is typical of those who reenter the labour market after a long break because they have to contribute to their household budget.

There is a need for further studies because nowadays the flexible forms of employment are also a problem of the state policy. There is also an urgent need to analyse the social and individual consequences of flexible forms of work and employment and their relationship to gender, occupation, personal situation and marriage status, as well as to explore the characteristics of a flexible employee depending on the form of his or her employment.

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"Career by choice" or "career by chance". The determinants of flexible professional biographies

Abstract

The article is an attempt to summarise several editions of the qualitative research entitled "Social and individual consequences of non-standard forms of work". The study was conducted in the Lubuskie district in 2008, 2011 and 2012 among people who worked on flexible terms at the time of

the research. The research was intended to answer the question about the individual and social consequences of flexible forms of employment. Based on the analysis of the content of interviews it is possible to distinguish two types of careers: career by choice and career by chance. Career by choice is typical of those who do not feel time and financial pressure with regards to their labour market activities and can subjectively feel the freedom of decisions concerning creating their careers. Career by chance characterises those who accept any job on flexible terms mainly for financial reasons and due to their inability to find another employment.

Kariera „z wyboru” czy kariera „z przypadku”. Uwarunkowania elastycznych biografii zawodowych

Abstrakt

Artykuł jest próbą podsumowania kilku wydań badań jakościowych pod tytułem „Społeczne i indywidualne konsekwencje nietypowych form pracy”. Badanie zostało przeprowadzone w województwie lubuskim w latach 2008, 2011 i 2012, wśród osób, które w czasie badań pracowały na elastycznych warunkach pracy. Badanie miało na celu odpowiedzieć na pytanie o indywidualne i społeczne konsekwencje elastycznych form zatrudnienia. Po przeanalizowaniu treści wypowiedzi respondentów można wymienić dwa rodzaje kariery: kariera z wyboru i kariera z przypadku. Kariera z wyboru jest charakterystyczna dla tych, którzy nie czują presji czasu i presji finansowej, biorąc pod uwagę ich działania na rynku pracy, i którzy subiektywnie mogą czuć swobodę decyzji co do tworzenia swojej kariery. Kariera z przypadku jest charakterystyczna dla tych osób, które podejmują każde zatrudnienie na elastycznych warunkach pracy, głównie z powodów finansowych i braku możliwości znalezienia innego zatrudnienia.