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*Publication date:*  
2009

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Jørgensen, C. H. (2009). *The role and meaning of vocations in the transition from education to work*. Paper presented at Den 6. internationale konference om arbejde og læring., Roskilde, Denmark.

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# The role and meaning of vocations in the transition from education to work

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RWL6 2009

## Introduction

For young people the process of transition to a stable position on the labour market has become more demanding and drawn out and less transparent (Ryan 1999; Heinz 1999; Gangl & Müller 2003). They have access to abundant knowledge about a large number of potential pathways and are at the same time faced with many choices that involve the handling of risks in situations of uncertainty (Hodkinson a.o.1996; Raffe 2003; Wyn & Dwyer 2000). Young people often move in and out of the educational system, change direction or shift from one programme or track to another. And a substantial part breaks off, drops out and never completes the vocational education they started.

For politicians a fast and efficient transition from education to employment has a high priority given the demographic prospects of a declining number of young people entering the labour market and a growing population of elderly. Across countries a number of political reforms have been implemented to increase retention in systems of vocational education and training (Ryan 2001). Following the neo-liberal inspiration this often takes place through policies of decentralisation, flexibilisation and individualisation that aims to increase the scope for individual choice and remove institutional barriers to individual pathways from education to work (Voß 2002; Green & Wolf & Leeny 1999).

There seems, though, to be a divergence between on the one hand the political initiatives that build on assumptions of rational and goal-oriented choices of young people, and on the other hand young peoples actual life courses that become more complex and discontinuous. And their choices are often provisional and ambivalent – or choices are not taken, but postponed (Hodkinson et al 1996).

Many of these new patterns of transition emerge similarly across countries, but still the pathways of transition differ very much between countries in Europe. These differences are related to the different interconnections between education and work in the education and training regimes. The three main types of European education and training regimes (state, market and corporatist) differ not only with respect to their dominant form of interconnections, but also with respect to the strength of institutional support they provide for young people transition from education to work (Greinert 1999; Gangl 2001).

Regimes based the Dual System, apprenticeships and occupational labour markets are generally noted for having low levels of youth unemployment, and this is taken as a good indicator for the ability of this regime to provide a smooth transition to work (Cedefop 2001). A key mechanism behind this ability is the provision of specific skills in this system and the gradual socialisation to work life that takes place as an integral part of training in the workplace (Deissinger 1998). The smooth transitions also have to do with the transparency of the system that is linked to the institution of *vocation* ('*Beruf*' in German, '*yrke*' in Swedish/Norwegian and '*fag*' in Danish). The choice of a vocational education is

known by young people to give access to a specific type of occupation that is recognized as a valuable alternative to higher education. Furthermore the close involvement of the social partners of the labour market in the regulation of the VET system secures a high degree of legitimacy and recognition of even the school-based parts of these educations (Streeck 1992). The vocation provides guidelines for the curriculum of the education; it is basis for the division of labour and it is basis for the organisation of members of the vocation (unionisation).

The Danish system of VET is based on this Dual System type of institutional regime. It is a means of successful transition from education to work for more than one third of an average cohort of young people. They spend around 60 % of the time learning and working in an enterprise and the rest of the time in a vocational college, typically in block of 10 weeks. The system though has problems with low retention rates, drop-outs and a threat of falling esteem of the vocational track in relation to general education. In addition there are signs of growing internal tensions in the system between the different social interests and stakeholders, who have until now cooperated to modernize and develop the system in the neo-corporatist institutional framework: state, schools, business, trade unions and vocational students (Jørgensen 2008). At the same time there has been a debate of the point in preserving the tracking and separation between vocational and general education. And there is a questioning of the role of companies in the training of vocational students and of the ability of firms to provide a sufficient number and a satisfactory quality of training places in the future.

A number of educational reforms have been launched with contradictory intentions that have pointed both in the direction of a more school based and a more market based regime. On the one hand reforms have put more emphasis on preparing for further studies and higher education and on attracting the educationally 'stronger' youths who would otherwise choose general education (Gymnasium). On the other hand the system has been decentralised, diversified and made more flexible in order to respond to the diverse demands of businesses and individual students: modularisation, variable length and content. This often takes place under the heading of employability (Kraus 2006). These developments have questioned the central role of *vocations* as the 'organizing principle' (Deissinger 1998) of the VET-system and as a guideline for socialisation and integration of the new generations on the labour market.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the current patterns of transition from education to work through the Dual system type of vocational education and training in Denmark in the light of these changes. Special interest is taken to clarify and examine the role and meaning of vocations in the transition process.

First I will introduce and discuss some central concepts relating to transition and secondly I will try to answer the question of what a vocation is in vocational education – its role or function on the one hand and its meaning on the other. Thirdly the paper will present some findings from a research project on the role and meaning of vocations in the transition from education to work in the business educations of the Danish VET system.

### **New patterns of transition from school to work**

Research has challenged the conventional conceptions of transition that are based on assumptions of a standardised linear life course. Young people's pathways are increasingly not direct and linear, but characterised by ruptures and discontinuities. Research

points to two changes taking place in patterns of transition (Heinz 1999; Ryan 1999; Wyn & Dwyer 2000). One is that transitions are becoming *prolonged*. The prolongation happens both in the start and the end of transitions. Children are becoming young at an earlier age and become adults at a later age. There is a growing incongruity between biological maturing and socio-economic maturing as the age of entrance on the labour market is rising. In the Danish vocational educations the average age has grown 4 years from the early nineties so that the average age at completion has risen to 25 years (OECD 1998). This affects their readiness to move to find a training place and thus complete a vocational education. In addition borders between initial and continuing vocational education is becoming blurred, and as more adults participate in initial vocational educations the links between age and stages in the transition are becoming more loose.

Different approaches in research put emphasis on either changing social and economic structures or on changes in youth culture and subjectivity. The prolongation of transition can not be explained only as a result of structural changes like higher demands for qualifications on the labour market or a shift from manufacture to service and knowledge work. It is also a result of changes in the cultural and subjective strategies of young people, for example trying to keep as many as possible options open by staying on in the educational system and postponing the binding choices. In our research on students completing Danish business educations almost 2/3 of them had a double degree from vocational and general education (Gymnasium). Still a large group of more traditional students were oriented towards a specific vocation and sought to complete their education as fast as possible.

The other change in the patterns of transition is the tendency for transitions to become more *complex* and discontinuous (Wyn & Dwyer 2000). The falling rate of completion reported in many countries does not mean that young people drop out and enter the labour market without any completed education. More often they shift between different educational programmes, take a years leave, pick up temporary jobs, travel around the world or engage in social activities other than work and education (Ryan 1999). It can also be misleading to talk about transition from school to work as two distinct stages, since young people often combine education and temporary and precarious forms of work. Though this typically is not related to the education, it can give experiences that are valuable for chances for later employment. (Brooks 2006).

The extent of temporary and part time work is growing in most countries with the Nordic countries as an exception (Kalleberg 2000). And a growing number only after many years succeeds in acquiring stable employment. In the Danish Dual System of VET education and work is integrated, and few take on other forms of paid work during apprenticeship. Our research showed that half of the students in the business sector have had full time employment for more than 1/2 year before they started the education. And more than 60% of all vocational students (apprentices) in the business educations continued in regular employment in the same firms as where they were trained. This result seems to confirm other research (Niederalt 2004) that shows that the major reason for at least larger firms to take on apprentices is recruitment. The apprentices often did not perceive of the completion of their education and the beginning of regular employment as a transition, since they already were socially well integrated in the workplace. But also in Denmark a large number of vocational students do not complete the education they have started. One study show that from 8% in business to 33% in the food industries drop out (AER 2004), another that more than half break off or drop out before

completion (DA 2006, p.12). Most of the young people who break or start another education, but 25% of them find employment as the conditions on the labour market in Denmark currently make it easy to find a job. Even though employment rates of vocational student who complete their education is high, the low retention rates during the education constitutes a major social and political problem.

## Multiple Transitions

Policy initiatives aiming at improving the school to work transition generally have a one-dimensional focus on the economical effectiveness of transition and the performance of educational programmes in providing employability. Policies run a risk of failing because they neglect the multiple transitions in the lives of young people and their interconnectiveness. Research on transition distinguishes between different transitions over time in the course of life, and different transitions that occur simultaneously (Raffe, 2003; Ryan 1999). In the first dimension two main transitions take place, the first from comprehensive school to higher secondary education (eg a vocational education) and the second transition from a vocational education to stable employment on the labour market. This distinction is important in countries as Denmark and Germany where the division of the educational system between general and vocational tracks is strong. The first transition has much less interest in countries like Sweden, where almost all young people continue together in a comprehensive 'Gymnasium'. In Britain the term "*one step transition*" is used to describe the large number of young people who leave the school system early and go directly on to labour market (Lefresne 1994). The Danish research project that I report in this paper investigates the second transition.

In the other synchronic dimension we can distinguish between different types of transitions that often takes place simultaneously:

- **Transition between socio-economic positions:** the school to work transition involves a shift from being a student or apprentice to become an ordinarily employed person – maybe after a period of unemployment or insecure employment.
- **Transition between stages in the life course and of family positions:** the transition from living with their parents to become established in their own home and maybe enter a stable relationship or marry and have children represents a basic change in the life course.
- **Transition between identities:** the shift from being a child or a young person to become an adult signifies a change in identity and life perspective. It both closes of some of the unfinished drafts of the future life course of the young person and opens up new opportunities that are made possible by virtue of economic independence and adulthood.

Research has pointed to a tendency that these different transitions are becoming increasingly disconnected (Zoll 1993; Heinz & Nagel 1997). Biological and social age and identity, family and labour market position develop more independent than earlier. It is possible to see oneself as a young person in a much longer stage of life, or to marry and start a family while in education. The social regulation and timing of these different transitions have become weakened and the demands on the individual to handle them have grown. It is thus important to be aware of the interconnections between these transitions as for example drop out of the educational system can be caused by difficulties in relation to one of the other transitions.

It is also important to be aware of the differences between institutional regimes in relation to the coordination of the transitions. In Britain *age* is more significant for the structuring of school to work transitions than in Germany and Denmark, where the acquisition of specific skills is decisive (Hillmert 2002). A significant quality of the Dual System of Denmark and Germany is that it combines training with socialisation to work as an integrated process. The completion of a vocational education does not just provide an educational title, but it typically also entails becoming member of a community of skilled workers in a workplace and typically also a member of a trade union with access to a specific occupational labour market. During training vocational students (apprentices) receive wages from the employer that are negotiated by the social partners on the labour market, and many apprentices enter the trade union even before completing the education. The role of the vocation is central for in the socio-economic transition, the integration on the labour market and in society, as well as for the transition between the identities of youth and adulthood. I will therefore go into the question of the nature of vocations.

### **What are vocations in vocational education?**

Vocations are on the one hand inherited institutions - their identity, content and borders are shaped by traditions and historical struggles and compromises. On the other hand vocations are also being reshaped and modernised, and new vocations are constantly emerging in new areas on the labour market in Denmark. A number of formerly unskilled jobs have become 'professionalized' and now require 2-3 years of formalised vocational education; and in August 2007 the health sector and the agrarian sector was included in the system of vocational educations. So it is relevant to ask, what the driving forces today are behind the production and reproduction of vocations.

A number of different approaches are possible when trying to examine the social dynamics behind vocations. Their historical evolution and the processes of institutionalisation that have made them to be what they are today can be traced (Thelen 2004). Or one can try to analyse their current functions as social subsystems or institutions in relation to the larger society (Parsons 1939). Or one can explore the social actors and interests around vocations, their strategies and resources, their struggles and alliances in order to identify the social constructor of the vocations. Or lastly vocations can be studied with respect to the meaning they represent for the people who *have* a vocation or *are* a vocation (e.g. *to be a clerk*) - what does it mean to them? A social institution like a vocation can not prevail just by virtue of its functions; it must also be experienced as meaningful by the social actors who make up the institution (Heinz 2001).

In our research on the role of vocations in the transition from school to work we used two different approaches. We studied the role of vocations directly as social 'objects' to be counted and measured, and we studied them as meaningful phenomena in the biographies and life worlds of young people in their transition from school to work. We tried to map the actual pathways taken by vocational students (apprentices) from the time they completed their education and to follow them 6 years after. This was done by using the national labour market database and two surveys that included initially 875 students. We also interviewed 27 of the former students 6 years after they completed the education about their relationship to the vocation.

To do this we had to clarify more in detail what a vocation could be as a special social institution and the meanings it can have for the coming members of the vocation. Two different dimensions of a vocation can be distinguished. The first dimension refers to the double reality of a vocation indicated above. A vocation can on the one hand be studied

as an *objective* social reality: As a specific division of labour, as an organisation, as a vocational education, etc. On the other hand it can be studied as a *subjective* reality for the social actors in and around the vocation: its meanings, qualities, affordances, etc. In the diagram below we use the two terms institutional role and biographical meaning of a vocation to distinguish the two realities in this dimension.

The other dimension is related to the growing historical separation of work and education and the evolution of a modern labour market to coordinate between the two (Luhmann 1977). Vocations related to the craft tradition represented earlier a unity of specialised work, skills and training related to this work and the social organisation of the members of the vocation – the guild that comprised master, journeyman and apprentice. In Denmark the learning of a vocation has gradually been separated from the practice of skilled work of the vocation, so that typically 40% of the 3-4 years of the vocational education is school based. Moreover with the development of capitalism masters and journeymen have become organised in separate organisations that negotiate the general agreements covering the skilled work of the vocation. As a result a separation has emerged between the employment system, the labour market and the educational system. But still 'the vocation' is an institution that comprises vocational education, work and the organisation of the vocation (or trade), the trade union (which is mirrored by a common term 'fag' for these in Danish language). This is a key quality of vocations in relation to transition that they have resisted the centrifugal forces that have in other countries separated work, labour market and education. That is why national systems based on vocations can be considered strong institutional regimes for transition (Hillmert 2002; Greinert 1999). I will explain a bit more in detail the analytical approach indicated in the diagram. In the vertical dimension is specified the role and meaning of vocations in the three subsystems (or social fields).

1. In the *employment system* the role of vocations is to organise work in functionally coherent jobs that are generally broader and have more autonomy than similar job in countries without vocational tradition that is with more Taylorised and fragmented jobs (Maurice a.o. 1986; Sorge a.o. 1986). In addition work organised according to the principle of vocations involves less separation between executing and planning functions. Vocational work is thus 'broader' (many different functions) and 'higher' (executing as well as preparatory and evaluative functions) than work of similar type that is not organised in vocations.

Social sub-system ↓	Institutional role of vocations	Biographical meaning of vocations
<b>Employment system</b>	Vocations provide functionally coherent and socially recognized positions in the social division of labour.	Meaning of vocational work - competent mastering of skilled work, - participation in a community of skilled workers in the workplace, - sensuous, bodily engagement with tools, tasks and materials.
<b>Labour market</b>	Vocations organize member of the vocation to safeguard their social interests (trade unions)	Participation in an organization of skilled workers: social belonging, solidarity, status, guaranteed rights.

<b>Educational system</b>	Vocations make up specialized and institutionalized knowledge organized in coherent educational programmes certified by an educational title.	Experience of mastering specialized knowledge of the vocation and acquiring the status of the educational title.
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2. On the *occupational labour markets* the role of vocation is to organise members of the vocation to represent their interests. A basic role of the organisation is to reduce competition between members and conclude collective agreements with the employers on the terms of employment. But in contrast to the industrial type of trade unionism unions based on vocations in Denmark have a stronger professional orientation that includes taking interest in the vocational education, the quality of work and the development of production. And they are involved in a neo-corporatist type of regulation of disputes on the labour market that sustain a high degree of trust between the partners (Streeck 1992).

3. In the *education system* the role of vocations are to provide guidelines for the curricular content and direction of the educations to make them fit with the skilled work of the vocation. The vocational education gives access to a specific occupational (vocational) labour market because it is standardised and regulated by the social partners in collaboration with public authorities.

In each of these three social systems *being in, belonging to or having* a vocation can have different meanings for members of the vocation. This is indicated in the right column in the diagram. A vocational identity can rely on different qualities of the vocation: the educational title, the participation in a community, the exercise and development of skills or the autonomy in a skilled job (Volmerg m.fl. 1986). There are signs that the meaning and quality of a vocation for young people also has come to rely on the images of it transmitted by mass media. The attraction of certain vocations seems to correlate with television programs presenting gardeners, real estate agents or cooks as media stars. The growing problems of retention in vocational educations though indicate that there is a problematic relation between the *personal* identity (biography) and the *vocational* identities that are afforded by schools, in the labour market, in workplaces or through media.

### **Vocational identities and biographies**

To choose an education or a vocation for a young person is not just to choose a way to earn a living, but also to choose what kind of life and adult identity they search for. The process of constructing a coherent biography in working life seems today to be more difficult than in earlier times, when the life course was more predetermined by social origin, gender and the limited opportunities on the local labour market. With the growing individualisation and the increasing length and complexity of the transition process the relation between personal identity and the vocational identity becomes more contingent. Yet a successful integration on the labour market depends on the concordance between the two (Heinz & Nagel 1997). There seem to be divergent as well as convergent relations between the two.



In the general discussion of the formation of identities and biographies in vocational education two different arguments are put forward. One position takes as point of departure Ulrich Beck's diagnosis of 'Risk Society' (Beck 1992), which implies that late modern societies increasingly require people to make choices as they are faced with incalculable risks created by human beings. The choice of job and education appears today a more open and undetermined process that involves more uncertainty about the future. This creates a new kind of reflexive awareness about risks and uncertainties since choices could have been made differently. And increasingly choices are not irreversible, they can be changed: by starting a new education; finding another job; getting a new partner or a new place to live, etc. (Giddens 1991). This diagnosis means that the personal and the vocational identity are diverging. The increasing reflexive distance to choices and strategies means that they are considered as provisional and temporary. This implies a loss of stability and certainty, but also an increased independence and individual autonomy. The reflexive distance to the profession or vocation implies a reduction of the emotional involvement and personal commitment, since the profession is no longer a fate of life, but a contingent choice.

The other position in the discussion points to an increasing integration of work identity and biography and a growing subjectivation of work (Kleemann a.o. 1999). This is supposed to be the result of the growing demand for subjective inputs into the work process: self-management, emotions, creativity, etc. Taylorism and bureaucracy both had the aim of eliminating subjectivity, but with flexible knowledge capitalism subjectivity is considered a key asset to enhance productivity in the competition based on knowledge, innovation and creativity (Olssen 2006). This development link up with the changing life perspectives of the employees – at least the younger generations with higher education. They expect work to provide room for the realization of their personal life project. This implies a tight integration of personal life and work life, of personal and vocational identity.

These two different analyses of either divergence or convergence between the personal identity and the vocational work role seem contradictory, but they might not be incompatible. They might reflect the contradictory conditions of modern working life. Work demands a personal involvement and an investment of the personal life project in the organization, but at the same time demands an ability to handle the risks, unreliability and instability of most modern organizations – and to keep these at a distance.

Heinz & Nagel (1997) argue that modern work identities have integrated a high degree of awareness of risks and contingency in relation to the future life course and career. This implies that skilled young workers and professionals already during their training are prepared for the risks and insecurities on the labour market. Consequently instability is not considered a problem, but an opportunity to move on in the career and develop personally. At least for a group of self-assured and well educated persons it is neither the profession nor the organization that forms the basis of their work identity, but their individual career (Voß 2002). They consider themselves autonomous agents on a dynamic labour market and have faith in their own competencies and potentials. Their work identity can be termed '*engaged distance*' (Heinz & Nagel 1997). They identify strongly with their job and at the same time they consider it temporary. For other groups on the labour market the instability does represent a threat in relation to their identity and the possibility of constructing a coherent work biography. For this group the vocation (the profession or *Beruf*) constitutes an opportunity for a more stable investment of subjectivity and life plans since the vocations have a longer history and more continuity. In comparison with

most modern enterprises and organizations the vocations offer opportunities for more stable identities, communities and cultures.

Based on these discussions of the role and meaning of vocations in the transition from school to work we have designed questionnaires for surveys and interviews with former vocational students in business sector (finance, retail and trade). I will shortly present some of the results.

## **Preliminary results: the role and meaning of vocations in the transition process**

1. The completion of a 3-4 year vocational education and the start of a career as a regular employee is *not* for the majority of apprentices experienced as a major biographical transition. This is due to the fact that more than 60% of them continue in regular employment after completion of the education in the firm where they were trained. This is convincing sign that the school to work transition in the dual system based on vocations is successful also from the perspective of the vocational students. They enter the labour market hardly without noticing and they are recognized straight away as competent skilled employees on an equal footing by their colleagues. Many students told that they found the start of the first training period harder, but since this took place in the institutional framework of the education, they had a legitimate position of learners. And they appreciated the school based periods of the education for being more relaxing and giving them access to a community of apprentices from other firms.

This seamless transition is partly a result of the role of vocations in providing guidelines for a curricular content of the school based parts of the educations that fit with the current demands of business. And the in-firm training and socialization that is built-into the education, equips the students with a broad range of social and specific skills that gives access to a well-defined occupational labour market. In addition for the students the vocational educations are strongly connected with specific jobs, communities of adult employees and work identities that provide them with a more distinct meaning than general educations.

The common direct transition to employment in the training firm is a strong indicator that a main motivation of businesses to provide training places is that this gives them an opportunity to recruit new employees with company specific training. Even though the dual system has suffered from a permanent deficit of training places since the 1970'ies, the long term development in Denmark does not point to any structural decline in the willingness of business to provide training places (Albæk 2005).

2. A vocational education provides a strong foundation for the development of a vocational identity.

In our survey 80-90% stated that through the education they developed a sense of vocational pride and work satisfaction and they acquired confidence that they could cope with the challenges of the vocation. A bit surprising was that a third of the apprentices stated that they did not have interest in the vocation before they started the education. Our interviews and surveys show that even though many seem to have chosen the vocation at random, they did develop a strong vocational identity – mainly through the practical training part that takes place in a workplace. Nearly 80% stated that the education gave them interest in a future working life in the vocation area, and more than 90% have actually worked in the vocational area. Some of them only developed their specific vocational identity after completing the education. This is due to the fact that the business

educations are quite broadly defined so that the specialization often takes place after completion. For example an education in administrative work (clerk) can lead to a later specialization in salary accountancy.

The dominant attachment of employees with a vocational education was to colleagues in the workplace and to the firm or public institution where they were employed. The vocational identity was not strongly connected with membership of a trade union. Only around 20% stated that they felt attached to the trade union, even though almost all of them were members of the union. This probably has to do with the weaker traditions of trade unionism in the 'white collar' sector. Less than half had a local trade union organisation (a club) in the workplace, which is lower than in the manufacturing sector.

A critical result of our research was that the former vocational students attached little value to the school based part of the education. 6 years after completion almost half of the students stated that they had had little or no use of the school based part of the education, while only 13% thought so of the practical training part. This can be interpreted so that the practical and vocational content of the education has greater value for the students than the school based and more general content. This is a result of their choice of a vocational education. But it must also be taken as a serious indication that the quality of the school based teaching is inadequate.

3. The division of the Danish (and German) higher secondary educations in a general and a vocational track is often criticized for implying a strong social segmentation, because the vocational educations are experienced as blind alleys with few opportunities for moving on into higher education. Our research has shown that this is not the case. Almost two thirds of the vocational students had double qualification of a vocational and a general education that gives access to higher education. Many have started on a general education (the Danish Gymnasium) but find out that they prefer a shorter vocational education. This defies the formal structure of the educational system, which is based on a tracking and where taking double qualifications is considered 'waste of time'.

Furthermore, 6 years after completing their vocational education 40% had taken up further education on tertiary level and over 20% had worked as managers or supervisors or as self-employed. In some industries like Finance & Assurance continuing into further education is highly institutionalized and seems to be part of the normal career pattern. In other industries like Retail this is less usual and seems more often to be the result of individual initiative. The inclination to take up further education was closely related to the level of education the vocational students had before completing their initial vocational education. Only half of the students who did not have double qualifications (vocational and Gymnasium/Abitur) did this compared to those who had the double qualifications. Another criticism of the strongly vocational nature of the educations is that they are based on specific skills that does not prepare for flexibility or for moving into other types of jobs and industries. Our survey showed that 6 years after completion 30% had experiences of employment outside the vocation and around 20% had advanced to supervisor or managerial positions. This certainly does not confirm the criticism referred - at least in the business sector, where there seem to be a high degree of flexibility in mobility patterns upwards or out into other job areas.

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