Career Policy
for the Contemporary World:

DICTAT OR STIMULANT?

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This article is based on a strategy paper for the Dutch Department of Education.

The author outlines the way in which national policy struggles to stay abreast of economic development and its human and social consequences. He maps the extent of that concern among EU countries. The way we now work requires that all levels in an organisation have the freedom to meet customers' and clients' needs, and the paper moves towards a changed conception of learning for that new situation. It requires learning-about-work settings involving not only schools and colleges but all social partners - or stakeholders - in careers work. The article leads to a challenging issue concerning where much-needed innovative ideas in careers work are to come from. It concludes with a suggested strategy for The Netherlands, in which the central regulative strategy and local autonomy are re-balanced in a new framework.

The Dutch Department of Education is now organising discussion meetings where the original paper will be discussed by the different stakeholders it identifies.

Right now, fundamental changes in careers are taking place. A career was - until recently - closely connected to a profession and a limited number of companies; for most employees re-training and re-education was an unknown phenomenon. The rise of a service and knowledge economy has resulted in a flexibilisation of labour relations which is still expanding. It is true that temporary and on-call employment in The Netherlands has been declining, from 10.1% in 1996 to 7.5% in 1998 (OSA, 2000). This is due to a shortage of workers, but is now expected to rise again. But, throughout this period, functional flexibility has increased: multiple employability and working outside the occupation in which one started are still rising (Bridges, 1994). This not only implies a diminishing clarity over occupational requirements, but also a diminishing number of reasonably stable communities of labour. And this means fewer, locations in which socialisation into and identification with an occupation can take place. Another consequence is that competencies, once acquired, will not any more serve for a long time. Flexibility, and the ability to keep learning, have become more important than specific occupational knowledge and skills.

Formerly, careers developed mainly vertically. This meant that promotion normally took place within a company (over a lifetime) and often within the occupation in which one started. Now, however, careers are less and less dependent on the former relations to

occupation and company - the so-called "boundary-less career""(Arthur, 1994). The pressure on the working population to become more mobile and flexible is steadily increasing. As a consequence, individuals are subjected to more career risks and have to develop into competent career actors in order to be able to make adequate use of opportunities. Modern employees must become "reflexive practitioners" in order to stay employable; they must develop the competency to continually explicate the meaning of what they do, both for the labour organisation in which they work and in relation to their own life (Drucker, 1993). As all discussions of employability show, the modern employee must continually explore both the internal and the external job markets, while at the same time building an affective bond with the labour organisation in which they actually are working (Kessels, 2001).

In modern and late-modern industrial societies clear boundaries existed between school or college, labour, career and biography. The educational system was responsible for realising an initial qualification, but it barely took any responsibility for career as such. From 1968 in The Netherlands, it offered careers education, in which - not occupational - but educational choice was the pivotal issue. As far as attention was paid to the choice of an occupation, the model of "lifetime employment" dominated. In companies, career development went on more-or-less automatically, influenced by level of education (which determined the level of entrance in the labour market) and the amount of years in service or office.

With regard to biography there was a clear division of labour between men and women. Men were supposed to work to their retirement; women took, after their marriage, the role of housekeeper and mother. Today, the clear boundaries between school or college, work and biography are under growing strain. Politicians, employers and parents expect education to prepare more explicitly for a changing career. Politicians expect all of these social partners to help with the improvement of the employability. And the once so self-evident division of labour between men and women is under pressure, since more and more women want and realise a working career.

It is not surprising, then, that "career problems" appear on the agenda of politicians, governments and social partners - more often, and more intensely. A special European Council, held in Lisbon during March 2000, agreed on a strategy emphasising the importance of career development to knowledge, innovation and social cohesion. The ultimate goal is, within ten years, to reform European economy into the world's most competing and dynamic knowledge economy. The idea behind this goal is that an innovation-driven economy results in high-quality labour and a growth in productivity. This

policy strategy not only focuses on the establishment of a more dynamic knowledge economy, but also on the modernisation of the European "social model", in which the key phrases are "investment in people" and "social inclusion". It recognises that, in a knowledge economy, the lower-skilled are at risk. The strategy makes high demands on the quality of initial education to ensure that school or college leavers enter the labour market well qualified. A policy is sought in which central governments, together with social partners, take responsibility for an attractive "human-capital climate".

What is an adequate qualification for the knowledge economy?

The transition to a service and knowledge economy influences the nature of the necessary competencies as well as the manner in which these competencies can be acquired. On the basis of an extensive literature review and research, Onstenk (1997) shows that an employee in a knowledge society must possess three crucial and basic competencies.

The first competence is concerned here with the "what?" question. Onstenk calls the development of this competence the broadening of the professional skill. In the earlier industrial societies, the school or college was almost entirely responsible for the realisation of this competence. In the knowledge society, the school or college will still be responsible for the initial education, but employers and employees will be primarily responsible for necessary re-education and supplementary training.

The second competence involves the implementation of knowledge, the "how?" question. The development of this competence is explained by Onstenk as the deepening of the professional skill. This deepening mainly occurs through reflection on action, and - later - during the automation of action. In the industrial society this aspect of professional skill was primarily realised on the work floor itself; and it will continue so to be in the knowledge society.

The third competence is new: the knowledge society demands of her employees that they are not only able to answer the "what?" and "how?" questions, but also the "why?" question. Employees must be able to explain why they are doing their work, that is, what the value of their work is - in relation to not only their own life but also in relation to the work-organisation. Employees need, then, to become "reflective professionals" - Onstenk uses the term "identity formation".

A first reason for this development is, first of all, the increasing flexibilisation of labour. This influences personal life: the border between work and private life becomes more diffuse (Law, 2001). It also influences the experience of the role of labour: the increasing

vagueness of professions demands another type of loyalty or attachment to the brand as well as the employer. A second reason for the development of "identity formation" is that products must be tailored to the specific needs of the client or customer, and this - in turn - requires considerable freedom of action on the part of even lower ranks of the organisation. It is mainly these lower-ranking employees who are continuously in contact with the customers and clients, and they are therefore the ones most able to produce tailored products.

Who is responsible for the development of career identity?

It is still an open question whose authority shapes the formation of a career identity. There are a number of considerations. (For a more comprehensive examination of identity and career, see Law, Meijers and Wijers, 2003.)

First of all, we should ask whether there actually should be an investment in identity formation and reflective practice. Research shows that when employability is operationalised only in terms of continually broadening and deepening professional knowledge, without investing in identity formation, then employees primarily focus on the uncertainties that are associated with flexibilisation and become resistant to improvements in their own employability (Meijers & Den Broeder 1999). Putting this another way: employability involves a clearly human dimension. This need could be met passively, by combining measures designed to enhance employability with measures designed to ensure "social security". Such a strategy would extend the remit of the welfare state, and is controversial for that reason. But taking the human dimension into account can also be done actively, namely by investing in the ability of employees to become actively involved in their careers in uncertain circumstances - to become, that is - "career entrepreneurs".

A second consideration involves the nature of identity development and reflection. It is primarily the competence to direct one's self in the job, as well as in one's career. The acquisition of the competence to "set one's own course" in uncertain situations, is a learning process which consists of experience and experiential learning. A key phrase here is "career development". Thus, a learning environment is needed for which not only educational but also labour organisations are responsible. The fact that career development is a lifetime process, whereby many different partners are actively involved, implies that many department are involved. For example, in The Netherlands departments of education, social affairs, economics, and the interior are already involved in with career development in

a variety of policy areas. We will return later, to examine these departments' present and future roles in more detail.

The present situation with respect to career development

The Netherlands has at least three significant developments in the field of careers education and counselling. They are relatively isolated from each other - in practice and in policy.

Firstly, under the auspices of the Dutch Department of Education, career development and counselling have - in recent years - been integrated as basic processes, by implementing more modern methods. (Key phrases here are "career learning" - with an active role for the student).

Secondly, there are developments concerning employability - occurring mainly in commercial contexts. The Department of Education also plays an appreciable role here. Career development and counselling are implemented by expanding traditional educational policy with career components - such as vouchers and personal-development plans.

Thirdly, career counselling has been developed in various ways, to varying extents and for various target groups. More attention for career oriented aspects has gradually developed. The Department of Social Affairs runs reintegration projects for individuals isolated from the labour market. The Home Office has reintegration projects for refugees and ethnic minorities.

But, outside of education, the career development and counselling component in these initiatives is not strong. Even in education the case for career learning in an active role is not well understood.

Underlying everything, a continuously-changing governmental policy in this area generates suspicion (Bakkenes, Oomen, & Meijers, 2001).

And so traditional education models from past societies remain dominant. The process of teaching remains central. This is despite the fact that - both inside and outside The Netherlands - theory and practice for alternative modes have been developed. But school or college systems do not seem to be motivated to invest in these changes (Leenders & Stokking, 2000).

In the commercial sector the situation seems to be similar. Employability is - for most of those involved - synonymous with education and training. There are hardly any programmes which go beyond that, even though the limits of the traditional schooling

approach are becoming clearer. Examples of this lag can be found in the way in which the limited transferability of the skills is achieved, limited motivation is found for re-training for those with lower educational levels, and the difficulty that employers have in enabling the preventative functions of mobility centres. It is, then, not surprising that a major theme in this sector concerns how to generate commitment among employees. It would seem that these social partners have only a limited amount of innovative energy (Meijers. & Den Broeder 1999).

Career counselling does not seem to have reached many interested parties,. There are also enormous problems implementing an "activating approach"(with career counselling as an important component). The innovative energies of the institutions that implement these programmes are not able to solve problems where regulations hinder productive cooperation between the significant parties (Terpstra, 2000).

Where is the innovative edge in careers work?

The conclusion seems to be that an external influence is needed to achieve a more innovative career development and counselling in both the educational and commercial sectors, as well as the reintegration of programmes. The question is, from whom should this influence be forthcoming? For the last 10-15 years this question would be immediately answered "from the central government". Yet, the negative consequences off a centrally administered welfare state became manifestly clear during the 1980s. Decentralisation and deregulation were, then, chosen as important policy axioms. These principles have been implemented in the 1990s in a wide variety of areas. Arguments for a return to government regulation is politically unrealistic and not implementable.

So, which other party could provide this external influence? A number of independent institutions such as pedagogical centres, scientific institutions and applied research companies, could provide some assistance,. But one can expect that this assistance - if given directly and in isolation - would gain scant support.

The government therefore has to play some role, without falling back into its old and out-dated role of "strong leader".

A lesson of the 2001 Vancouver symposium "Career Development and Public Policy" is useful here. It is that, although decentralisation reduces regulatory complexity, it also creates new levels of complexity. In the welfare state, for example, one set of problems is being replaced with another. Most important among these are problems with fragmented services. This fragmentation is not only in

the services provided, but also between the providers and their clients.

Fragmentation at the level of the services themselves results in an incoherent patchwork. A government is then confronted with the uncertainty of whether or not the total package of provided services meets either actual needs - or, at least, the policy-related requirements.

Fragmentation between organisations and clients take partly the form of a "multiple-booth" (with many, apparently disconnected, points of entry). It leaves the responsibility for career development squarely on the shoulders of the client. The strength of those shoulders appears not to be a consideration of any importance in policy-directed eyes.

The presentations and discussions of the Vancouver symposium clarified how fragmentation cannot, for the most part, provide for services for career development. It stands in the way of a continuous career counselling. In addition, the quality of services provided remains inadequate: the provision of information remaining the dominant model in career services. By contrast the insights of career- and developmental-psychology suggest that the priority should be more on the realisation of "career learning".

Furthermore, the symposium highlights the way in which fragmented services result in an inability to formulate and implement integral quality standards. In fact, one is hardly able to formulate and implement standards at sector, actor and institutional levels in a specific field. Only occasionally are practitioners trained for this work. The consequence is that the professionalism in this field is unclear and also - as remarked by many participants - is under heavy pressure from policies which support "market conditions" (Meijers, 2001). When the clients' economic power becomes an important factor in the equation, the dangers are that (1) less well-to-do clients and organisations will be disadvantaged, and (2) services provided will be formulated to obtain as much throughput as possible in as short a time as possible.

The overall conclusion of the symposium identifies the dilemma: some form of regulation by the central government is desirable, but so is the continuation of decentralisation.

However, the socio-political situations of the participating countries were so different, making it impossible specifically to resolve this dilemma terms of the nature and form of governmental roles. For this reason, the following paragraphs are an attempt to sketch the contours of this role within the specifically Dutch context.

Towards a 'stimulating' role for policy in The Netherlands

Before these contours can be filled in, a qualifying remark is necessary: most departments operate in a policy context with each their own culture and history. Summarising, the Department of Education operates in a context that is traditionally hierarchical, determining policy by means of laws and regulations for schools and colleges to implement. The department has not concerned itself for many years with matters like retraining. When it started to become involved in the 1970s, it limited itself to initial schooling. A centralist policy strategy was embarked during the early 1990s; but, until now, the roles of the various deregulated and decentralised agencies is still not clear.

The Department of Economic Affairs is traditionally not involved with law making and, typically, adopts a cautious role in central government. Much was - and is - left to the workings of the market; and, as a consequence, the social partners are viewed as being entirely responsible for the required labour-market arrangements. This department seeks only to fill a facilitating and stimulating role; and - then - only for a short period; and - even then - only in limited areas of schooling.

The Department of Social Affairs traditionally makes policy in close communication and cooperation with the social partners. To this day, policy relies on this tradition.

The Department of the Interior has - like the Department of Education- a hierarchical tradition characterised by rules and regulations.

Against this background any sketch of the possible role of central government will be general. And, in all cases, it would require some reflection on the part that government and its various departments seek to fulfil. Do they want to orchestrate? direct? activate? stimulate? or just offer some working space? A first step would then be to coordinate these approaches among the departments themselves - taking account of each department's models and traditions.

Below is an illustration of the role that the government could play, noting the insights of recent literature about learning organisations (Weggeman, 1997).

This literatures sketches the following, dominant paradox which confronts organisations in a service-oriented society. On the one hand, institutions are forced to provide tailor-made services, and this can only be done by means of a bottom-up process (because not the management, but the workers must realise tailor-made solutions). On the other hand, in order to achieve synergy in an organisation (an important requirement for ensuring its survival) there has to be some

top-down direction. A resolution can be found where senior figures work out a clear strategy, explicating the strategic goals, and - together with the base - choosing priorities. The strategic goals are not limited only to material and personal requirements, but also concern the desired content of "primary processes". How can such top-down and bottom-up control be achieved at the same time? This is precisely the problem that confronts, not only government, but also modern organisations. It is only resolvable when a great deal of attention is continuously paid to the creation and maintenance of a common frame of reference. A common language has to be constructed and adapted to the problems encountered by the point-of-delivery - in contact with the clients and users.

In our opinion, it seems desirable that central government (and in any case the Department of Education, Social Affairs, and Economic Affairs) should takes the initiative in the construction of a common frame of reference in this field. This is possible in a number of ways, all of which have a number of common characteristics:

- the problem must be clearly identified and discussed;
- solutions for the identified problem should be proposed;
- the implementation of these solutions should be evaluated in the light of that problem.

A possible scenario is as follows: a six-monthly strategic discussion is organised, wherein stakeholding organisations as well as independent experts can explicate a vision of the future. The discussion could take the form of four-stage rocket launch:

1. initial consultations, where each department sets out specific issues in a common format;
2. an expert conference, in which strategic lines are sketched;
3. a series of mini-conferences, showing how the implementation and instrumentation of these strategic lines can be applied in specific areas;
4. two years after the expert conference - a new conference, to evaluate progress in realisation of strategic goals.

"Lessons learned" can then be articulated, and eventual adjustments in the strategic goals can be made.

A consultation could focus, for example, on "career development 15 years from now". Research findings from the Central Bureau for Strategic Planning and the Department of Social Affairs could be used for this purpose. Evaluation studies of the content and functioning of career services and of training for this work and its impact on policy purposes would provide a basis for reconsidering government roles.

The conference stages would need to draw on further evaluation procedures for schools and colleges . These procedures would need to be appropriate varied for school or college inspection. The should include instruments for self-evaluation, for showing both qualitative and quantitative results, as well as for identifying international comparisons.

The whole process would initiate an examination of professional standards for services and counsellors.

It would lead to the support - by means of a national innovation funds - of new and developed services. It might also suggest the creation of temporary "sanctuaries" where innovative ideas can be protected from regulation while their potential is tested.

Government - in this view- is the continuous stimulant for a learning process concerning career development and counselling. (We need a""learning process" rather than merely a "discussion".) It remains entirely in the line of contemporary policy trends, since the responsibility is taken by specific social groups (individual employers, labour unions, schools and colleges, and other stakeholders).

Government doesn't dictate, it stimulates!

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