

How to write your CV

Advice, Expert knowledge and Job Seeking Skills

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Abstract

The paper examines the construction of an employable subject in relation to contemporary job search practices. Advice in how to become employed on a flexible and global labour market is provided by experts and certain tools and technologies are facilitated to the job seekers. In contemporary working life the emphasis of job seeking skills e.g. 'How to write your CV' or 'How to succeed at an interview' are fundamental features in job search. Moreover, what counts is being able to become an *entrepreneur of the self*, to use Rose's (1998) phrase, on the labour market.

Today working life, as well as society, is characterized of fast changes and the concept flexibility can be perceived as a buzzword for signifying social change within the framework of global capitalism. Another buzzword, can be conveyed on a state level, and supranational levels as in the European Union when talking about education or working life, which is the concept of *employability*. In welfare states, on a governmental level, the view on employment was earlier considered a state responsibility and the goal was to achieve full employment (Garsten and Jacobsson 2004; Finn 2000; Stråth 2000). The concept of employability can be regarded as changes and ideas regarding responsibility and learning, as well as with changes in ideas about the division of risk between the state, enterprises and individuals. A general consequence is the shift from a view on state having responsibility to a greater emphasis on worker responsibility (Garsten and Jacobsson 2004). In relation to this background, about transformations for the worker/learner in society, this paper explores the construction of an employable subject in advice given from a white collar-trade union in Sweden. The analysis demonstrates the ways in which certain subjectivities and practices of the self are being shaped as ideal for the job seekers. The discursive shaping of job seeker subjectivity is a combination of self-reflection and improvement, self-marketing, and risk management. The governing of a learning subject in job search is imbued with neo-liberal practises of self-governance. In constructing oneself as an employable individual the symbol production focuses upon individual action. The responsibility for becoming employable is constructed as an individual responsibility, and risk avoiding means to mastering the skills of communicating and planning in relation to the job search.

Key words: *job seeking skills, white-collar union, employable subject, expert knowledge, commodification of self, self-governance*

Introduction: The 'styling' of workers

New kinds of relationships are emerging between organizations and employees, many of them relating to the global stretching of business and a preference for more flexible organizational structures. There are good reasons to believe that the nature and character of work and organization, as well as the individual experience of work, has undergone important changes (Garsten 1999: 602).

Following this quote Garsten exemplify this by examining the experiences and organizational subjectivity among temporary employees in Sweden and US in temporary staffing agencies. The temps experience ambiguity; on the one hand they transcend institutional boundaries and have feelings of being entrepreneurs of the self and on the other hand they experience marginality in being disposable and an outsider in a temporary organizational setting. The value of adapting and displaying the right attitude and competencies are valuable assets for temporary employees and they pay attention to their looks, manners and appearance. As Garsten (1999:611) shows adaptability as a skill is experienced in the Swedish staffing agency Olsten as the word 'chameleons' are used by employees to refer to themselves as a way of describing their ability to adapt to different situations and to different people. This new work ethic underlines the importance of being flexible and adaptable in relation to the demands on a flexible and global labour market (Sennett 2000; Gee et al. 1996; Bauman1998; Garsten and Jacobson 2004; Salomonsson 2005). There is also an increased focus upon social and communicative skills in working life. Communicative skills and personal characteristics are significant ideals in the governing of contemporary workers (e.g. Walkerdine 2005, Cameron 2000a, 200b).

One of the ways in which there has been a change in patterns of work could also be related to a contemporary career discourse as individuals are encouraged 'to plan their career within a wider context of economic change, job insecurity, decreased wages and conditions, and erosion of social safety nets' (Dyer and Humphries, 2002:3). Consultants and career coaches in career guidance and discourses of self-help in career styling are becoming a new category of 'experts of subjectivity' (ibid: 5; Rose 1999). Garsten and Grey (1997: 219) links this in a broader sense to the 'How to'- phenomenon in management texts. It is argued that such texts encourage a kind of 'aesthetic reflexivity' in focusing on self-presentation. This phenomenon is apparent in management discourses as well as in lifestyles magazines and can be seen to be characterizing contemporary market societies 'to which individuals are imbued with responsibility for their own destinies vis-à-vis everything from career success to life expectancy'(Hancock and Tyler, 2004: 632). Consequently success is based on entrepreneurialism and the responsibility taken by the individual. The 'styling' (Cameron 2000a) of workers in career discourse can for individuals be seen as 'a solo show in which you alone play the leading role. The character you play, your personality and appearance, are therefore just as important as professional skills and knowledge' (Salomonsson 2005: 120). Another way of describing this is the importance of branding and to be sellable. Cameron (2000b) shows how communication training has become an area for experts in a variety of areas from employers to self-help books to improve the self in different directions. These kinds of performances presuppose new modes of self-disciplining and there are 'experts' that are increasingly involved in the management of subjectivity i.e. in managing the subjective capacity of individuals.

The ideal type of the flexible individual is open to constant changes and discontinuity. Sennett (2000) argues that flexible capitalism results in 'corrosion of character', making individuals fragmented in their sense of continuity of personal life-projects, as working life and society are based on discontinuity. As less pessimistic view is that is important to not presuppose in

what way people react to changes. In studies of workplaces Ieedema and Scheeres (2003) and du Gay (1996) distinguish between those who are favoured by the changes in work identity and those who have problems adjusting to the new worker ideals. For some people the new work order can have advantages while others have problems adjusting to the ideals. Ieedema and Scheeres (2003) claim that changes in working life can be looked upon as either liberating or oppressing. According to them, it could rather be reflexivity that is the main change as people are encouraged to reflect upon and work on themselves.

The reflexivity of the worker is displayed in research about the new character of work and new work identity. Some groups have problems adjusting to the new ideals of the worker. Taking into account the possibility of different subjectivities, Walkerdine (2005) asserts that some groups more easily embody dominating discourses, while others, especially working class men, have difficulties in this. In her empirical work she concludes that a major change in contemporary work identity has been in its focus on the personal characteristics of the worker, which are regulated in practices of self-management, and in the ability of the worker to 'sell' him or herself. In interviews with career coaches in Sweden they argue that class, generation and gender matters in terms of marketing the self. It is argued that those who just finished university are 'professional minglers' and regards every person as a useful contact. In terms of gender it is suggested that men have better confidence and when reading job adverts they believe that they match the qualifications no matter if they do or not. Women act in an opposite way and might not apply for the position if not being sure of being qualified (Salomonsson 2005:120-121).

However, what is neglected in the studies of different means of 'styling' the worker is the role of career coaching and advice towards the job seekers provided by the union. This paper seeks to begin to address such neglect by exploring the construction of an employable subject in advice given from a white collar-trade union in Sweden. The analysis offered here focus primarily on brochures and web pages, as empirical material, on how a Swedish union for white-collar workers, Sif^d, communicates about job search. Taking inspiration from a Foucauldian framework, discourses are here viewed as productive of knowledge within 'ways of thinking', which classify and justify what is normal or deviant (Foucault 1977). In organization theory and in critical management studies it is argued important with Foucault-inspired analyses (e.g. Chan and Garrick 2002; McKinlay and Starkey 1998). In this chapter this is illuminated by examining how a job seeking subject is constructed within, and governed through, advice about job seeking. In this paper I give some examples of what kind of attitudes, behaviour and practices constituting discourses of 'how to' apply for work.

The paper is structured in the following way. Firstly, I introduce a background by drawing attention to the discourses of flexibility and employability in a flexible and global labour market. I argue that the making of employable workers must be problematized in relation to a flexible insecure labour market considering the division of risk and responsibility. After that the Foucauldian approach is accentuated. I then discuss some empirical examples on the making of an employable individual from a union perspective.

Discourses of flexibility and employability

In the discourse about changes in working life in general, and in modern management thinking, the concept of flexibility has been frequently used (e.g. Garsten 1999; Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004). The hegemonic rhetoric is about contemporary working life being characterized as flexible; firstly in terms of markets being global and competitive, and secondly, in terms of how companies and organizations need to be flexible to meet the

demands of the markets. As a logical outcome individuals should be multi-skilled and flexible in the labour market (i.e. short term employments, social competence etc.)

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Dean (1999, 1998) gives an example of this from an Australian context in which the nation state constructs the unemployed as active job seekers by providing job search assistance and training, and in return the unemployed gets access to benefits. As earlier mentioned the responsibility for getting a job is placed on the individual. One example of individualization is the way the unemployed are constructed as active job seekers. In this sense enterprising qualities treated as important in succeeding to get a job. The unemployed and the question of governing unemployment are further explored in other studies from an Australian context and especially in employment services (McDonald & Marston 2005). A similar example from a Swedish context is how municipalities construct temporary youth projects for young unemployed people to learn how to get a job by training skills in simulated job interviews in order to become competent job seekers (Persson Thunqvist 2003, 2006).

The concept of employability is connected to the ideals of individuals taking responsibility for being employable, i.e. in having the ‘right’ education and skills for the demands of the labour market (Salomonsson 2003). Further ideals of having ‘soft’ skills and personal related characteristics as social competence, enjoy to work in teams etc are part of being an employable individual. Furthermore the ideal of being employable is related to the discourse of life long learning and competence development. In a broader sense employability is a key concept in labour market policies as an ideal in making people employable. In the EU discourse, education and training are emphasized as ways of improving employability (Jacobsson 2004). The emphasis on learning and knowledge in organizations has also become an important factor for the unions to strive for. In relation to employability, the competence of workers and life-long learning are crucial to having a workforce fit for the flexible demands of working life. Competence development has become a central union question and for securing the employability of the workforce. Huzzard (2004) shows that the unions prioritize life-long learning, and their members, perceived as individuals, are supposed to take responsibility for their own education.

The management of subjectivity

A main point for understanding power and subjectivity on a flexible and global labour market is by *governance at a distance* which is a way of regulating populations, as exemplified in the role of experts who functions as non-political modes of authorities in relation to the state. Rose (1998) shows the division between public/private are no longer a productive division as the private life and the life world to an increased extent has become a target of regulations. One of Foucault's main arguments in the emergence of a modern state was that the 'population' became the target of regulation, 'an objective of governmental techniques' as described in his commonly cited lecture about governmentality (Foucault 1991:102). A contemporary way of governing is a kind of government through freedom which implies a kind of governing based on choices and self-steering capacities of individuals. This advanced liberalism entails autonomization and responsabilization for individual actors (Rose 1999). The way subjects act upon themselves are not considered deterministic or oppressive, rather it is looked upon as techniques or in Foucauldian terms, technologies, for shaping and constructing rationality of social practises. The way we do things and how we think about certain things are pursued by active subjects. As with questions concerning ethics, the subject must in some way regulate oneself by certain practises in relation to normative guidelines. Therefore, the question of self-governance is an important level for an understanding of government. Ethics are related to action and as Rose (1998:153) puts it 'means by which individuals come to construe, decipher, act upon themselves in relation to the true and false, the permitted and the forbidden, the desirable and the undesirable'.

In relation to a new work ethics what is interesting is 'new ways in which persons are encouraged to imagine and know themselves, their obligations, responsibilities and duties in relation to their capacities for performance in work contexts'(Kelly et al. 2007: 275). In accordance with Foucault (1980:64) a study can be argued to be chosen for having a political value that has 'some kind of involvement with the struggles taking place in the area in question'. On the other hand one must consider that the contexts of ideas are in many ways global in its scope due to the rapid globalization. Ideas, objects and practises travel and are part of both heterogeneous and homogeneous processes (Czarniawska and Sevón 2005). The discourse of job search, the label 'job seeker', the practises of learning in job search are part of ideas that travel and are therefore likely to have some similar characteristics in a transnational sense as well as marked by local features. In this particular example the governing of a job seeking subject will be further discussed in career coaching from a union in Sweden.

Career coaching and the discursive shaping of employable subjects

In this section I demonstrate normative-regulatory ideals in terms of the attitudes, behaviour and practices that are part of the shaping of conduct in job search. These empirical illustrations are further developed in Fogde (2007a; 2007b) as part of an ongoing research project about the governing of job seeking subjects.

The white collar union, Sif, help their members with services in examining the quality of CV's, simulated interviews and provide lectures in job search. In addition, brochures and advice on the Internet are also ways of coaching the job seekers. The trade unions function as 'coaches' in helping the job seeker with 'tools' (Sif 2005 pp. 9-11) for the job search. The trade union is described as an expert and coach in giving prescriptions of what should be done expressed as 'giving professional counselling and feedback'(Sif 2005, p.2). This kind of counselling ranges from statistics about salaries, to CV reviews and simulated job interviews, where job seekers can practise their communication skills.. An implicit dimension of the trade

union's counselling is to promote itself by giving 'personal services' towards its members. The trade union's guidance in job seeking is intended to improve one's skills in communicating in order to make a good impression. Planning and careful preparation are considered crucial in the job search. In a Swedish context a personal letter is also recommended to be sent to an employer which includes an overview of education, reason for seeking the position, and hobbies. It is communicated that it is important to show who you are as an individual. This can be displayed by mentioning hobbies or positions of responsibility in organizations. To be honest and to be yourself are emphasized, and there are strict guidelines about what is considered desirable in how to act and be as a person. They include advice about how to write a CV; emphasizing the structure of the application in terms of 'key words', 'headings', 'personal goal's' etc. In a CV, it is argued, it is important to mention hobbies:

Describe interests and hobbies, or something you like to do in your free time. Be aware of that sedentary, inactive free time can raise doubt about your go and ambition (Sif 2002, p. 10).

Expressing one's personality, being active and ambitious are thus moral qualities that are underlined. There are also instructions on how to behave and act in front of a prospective employer in an interview situation.

Exaggerated politeness or being pushy seldom pay – in interviews it is best to be yourself... Become aware of your body language! More than 50% of what we communicate is through body language – not speech. Eye contact with everyone interviewing you is important, for example. (2002, p. 16)

These practices locate the subject as a self-governing individual, taking responsibility for his or her own situation, but with some expert knowledge provided from the union. The attitude that an ideal job seeker should aspire to is first of all marketing oneself on the labour market. The subject is then located as an individual by marketing his or her personal characteristics. This indicates that entrepreneurial skills are considered important for the job seeker. In order to be able to market oneself it is crucial to know who you are as a person. On the job market there are self assessment tests with the purpose of identifying personal strengths and characteristics of individuals. To know who you are is two-fold; it is essential in order to be able to market oneself and to be prepared for answering questions that can be posed by employers. The ideal subject is a person engaged in personal labour to find out and reflect about the self, in other words to engage in a 'therapeutic project of self' (Rose 1998:116-117) In order to succeed, the reflexive ability is emphasized in evaluating and constructing oneself. Being in the position of a job-seeker you need, in order to get a job, the knowledge of how to present yourself to an employer, to show that you are the right person for the job. As the following example from Sif shows, the individual is required to learn how to communicate in this process of getting work:

Your application is about selling. You have to convince the person who reads it that you can solve the need the company has and that the appointment is within your sphere of interest... If an application is full of spelling mistakes it is never positive.....When you describe yourself you should avoid empty phrases. Instead describe characteristics by giving specific examples: "In my present role as a project leader I am responsible of four projects at the same time and I regularly have new contacts, which I find very stimulating. (www.sif.se 2006-01-18)

This particular example points to the ways in which there are formal guidelines on how to write, and examples of how to present the self. This includes layout, what to be included or not, the order of certain skills and certain words or phrases to be emphasized. It is a goal

within the union to be employable, and the practices could be seen as one way of contributing to the ideals of employability. An interesting part of this learning to be employable is communication of how to act in job search discourse. The descriptions are written as more or less explicit prescriptions, and contain value claims concerning what is considered good or desirable. They are written in a style that implies the provision of expert knowledge on how to act in order to get work. The trade union expresses this in normative ways, with verbs such as 'ought to' (Sif 2002, p.9) in their way of communicating about the job search. The normative language is powerful in shaping ideals of what is desirable and the ideal of an individual in working life. In that respect an ideal job seeker should be confident and be able to market his or herself. It can be considered quite paradoxical that the authenticity of the self is accentuated alongside the performativity in how to communicate in the right way. As Foucault argues, the constitution of self is not only constituted in a symbolic system, it is by using and acting in real practices that the self is constituted (Foucault in Rabinow 1984, p. 369). And that is the practice of writing a CV, going to an interview and preparing for it. These practices are in relation to the normative representations of how to apply for work, something that the individual has to negotiate and internalize in doing it 'the right way'. The performative dimension of this - in the words of Goffman (1959) - "impression management" is central in constructing an employable subject.

Commonly asked questions are listed, and the job seeker should prepare answers to them in advance. The ideals communicated about how to behave and act before the employer are communicated from an employer perspective. These ideals can be classified as a typical management discourse emphasizing 'flexibility', 'stress tolerance' and 'effectiveness'. Having a particular type of personality is preferable. A common piece of advice in describing positive and negative characteristics is to mention negative characteristics that can have both positive and negative aspects to them and something that one could work on to improve. This point is reinforced by encouraging job seekers to present themselves as having 'strategies to develop those parts of your personality that you are less satisfied with' (2002, p.15). The advice given to the job seeker is constructed as a project in learning to manage the self. Ways of improving and learning the skills of presenting the self, as for instance, the possibility to get help with feedback on one's CV and simulated interviews. Moreover training is also offered in getting more confidence in the identity position as a job seeker. The rationality of self-governance and the self-steering capacities of individuals are, as shown in the empirical examples, called upon in the making of an employable individual.

There are clearly intertextual references to self-improvement through taking individual responsibility and learning who you are as a person. It is emphasized that in order to succeed the reflexive ability of evaluating and constructing oneself is needed. This implies introspection about personal skills, which bears a resemblance with the discourse of self-help. In Rimke's (2000) description of self-help literature, this often refers to questions of 'who am I' and 'how can I better myself'? The employability of the worker is thus constructed as the responsibility of the individual which is a neo-liberal rationality that emphasizes entrepreneurial capacities in constructing an 'entrepreneur of self' (see Rose 1998).

Conclusion and discussion

In late capitalism, communication often takes the shape of commodities (Fornäs 2002). Furthermore, characteristic is also the greater impact of information and communication in society. The importance of mediated signs cannot be omitted and the importance of media

culture (Castells 1999; Lash & Urry 2002). In addition, researchers have also pointed out that branding and immaterial values are becoming more emphasized in organizations and on the labour market (Arvidsson 2006; Löfgren 2006). A fruitful way is to see the hybridization between the economy and culture, the culturalization of the economy and the economization of culture (du Gay & Pryke 2002 ; Salomonsson 2003). In the context of working life, career coaching and competence development can be considered as commodities that can be consumed in order to become more employable on a flexible and insecure labour market (Salomonsson 2003). The job seeker in the empirical material discussed here is constructed as a consumer in taking responsibility and learning certain job search practices in how to become a 'competent' job seeker. As Lury (1999:8) points out consumer culture is 'a source of the contemporary belief that self-identity is a kind of cultural resource, asset or possession' which includes 'a process of self-fashioning'. In relation to labour market research immaterial values as symbol production and communication is important to empirically study. In relation to identity or subjectivity the dimension of *image* is crucial in understanding the relation between media culture and consumer culture. Images are expressions that; 'contribute to the reproduction of cultural categorizations which, in a specific period of time, are shared within a certain (although vaguely demarcated) cultural community and are relevant within a certain situational context of consumption' (Jansson 2002:26). This also presupposes that cultural meaning is negotiated by active subjects in contexts where images are consumed. The discursive making of the job seeker plays a role in job search and in how the job seeker is constructed in relation to employers.

The techniques of governing in contemporary job seeking such as preparing and learning how to act and behave in order to get work emphasize planning. They also encourage introspection and knowing who you are as an individual. The discursive shaping of job seeker subjectivity is a combination of self-reflection and improvement, self-marketing, and risk management. In constructing oneself as an employable individual it focuses upon individual action. These kinds of performances encourages new modes of self-discipling and in this case the union are the 'experts' involved in the management of subjectivity i.e. in managing the subjective capacity of individuals. The responsibility for becoming employable is an individual responsibility, and risk avoiding means to mastering the skills of communicating and planning in relation to the job search. To make oneself into an employable worker must be problematized in relation to a flexible insecure labour market considering the division of risk and responsibility. The performativity of the job seeker is stressed, and there are normative regulations of ways of acting, performing and even simulating job interviews to learn how to present oneself in the 'right way. A conclusion is that the practice of how to apply for work must be understood in relation to the discourses of employability and flexibility. This making of a job seeker is also a part of being employable in working life and performing the ideals of management discourse. The degree to which people internalize and live by the rules of conduct presented in advice about 'how to apply for work' cannot be concluded by analyses of the content of texts. There is, in addition, a need to investigate how people shape their ways of being and acting in real life in order to see in what ways these norms are reproduced and challenged.

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ⁱ (Sif) The Swedish white-collar union of Industrial and Technical Workers in Industry. They have 346 000 members and are the third largest union in Sweden. Members are mostly employed in the private sector. For more information see www.sif.se (also in English). A relevant feature of the labour market in Sweden is the clear distinction between and organization of white and blue-collar workers into separate trade unions. The union, Sif, chosen for this study, is a vertically organized trade union, organizing white-collar workers at all levels from office workers to leadership in industry (Kjellberg 1997).