Change at work

At a time of cutbacks and redundancies, insufficient attention is being focused on how organisations can facilitate an individual’s change of employment. Associate Professors Claudia Bernhard-Oettel and Katharina Näswall explain why, when it comes to transferability, it is important to stay aware of available jobs that fit these interests and plans for the future; the type and amount of knowledge, skills and abilities; their interests and the nature of the agreement, these agencies may, for example, help individuals to assess their knowledge, skills and abilities; their interests and plans for the future; the type and amount of available jobs that fit these interests and competencies; and any potential needs for more occupational training, in order to get into this type of job.

Could you begin by outlining the goals of your research?

The overarching objective is to study how individuals go from one job to another, either within the same organisation, or when being laid off or transferring to another employer. Often, such transitions to new jobs are facilitated by so-called ‘re-employment support’ agencies in Sweden. Depending on the nature of the agreement, these agencies may, for example, help individuals to assess their knowledge, skills and abilities; their interests and plans for the future; the type and amount of available jobs that fit these interests and competencies; and any potential needs for more occupational training, in order to get into this type of job.

Could you briefly explain what is meant by the ‘transfer perspective’ in the context of your research?

This means that individuals take their knowledge, experiences, skills, abilities and competencies with them from the old to the new job. By using this perspective we highlight how competencies are utilised across organisations, not just with individuals. With the increased mobility of workers between organisations, it becomes important to not only understand how knowledge is transmitted, but also how organisations can help individuals to utilise knowledge from other working experiences in the current organisation. These different processes are all part of our focus and are included in the transfer perspective.

Why do you think there is very little scientific evidence about transfer in terms of knowledge supply, organisational change and the employability of people after changes in the workplace?

The transfer of knowledge has been studied widely in the context of training and education. The term is well-established, but there is a lot of controversy and scientific discussion about what this transfer is and how it works. We are applying a term developed in a different field to the area of job changes.

However, when talking to consultants in re-employment and unemployment agencies, it turns out that they actually do assess, in some way or another, whether an individual with all their accumulated experiences could fill a certain job role. Implicitly, this means that they are investigating whether people are able use their experiences from one setting in a different one. However, some issues have seldom been looked at, such as whether the individual actually agrees with this assessment and how he/she perceives the transferability of their competencies, as well as the role that contextual and organisational factors play in either facilitating or hindering this type of transfer.

What conclusions have been drawn about the processes of re-employment and the transition to a new working environment?

Since we are still collecting data, there is a lot more to come than what we have today. An interesting result from an organisation where all managers had to go through a new recruitment process was that those who were dissatisfied before the change reported plans to apply for new jobs elsewhere. However, after the change, there were only a handful of individuals who actually had gone to other employers. This could mean that people are highly reluctant to switch to new working environments if they do not absolutely have to, or that the change was perceived more positively than expected. Further analysis of the organisational factors that might be related to these results will reveal the role of the organisation in keeping its employees.

Have you come across any major challenges or limitations during your study?

A major challenge was that it took us a while to gain access to organisations. We needed to find organisations that cut back and hired re-employment agencies or organised internal job transitions while our project was active. Also, to fully understand how transfers from one job to another works, people have to be screened in their old job before they lose it. Furthermore, we need to be able to follow them during a difficult time in their lives, through periods of reorientation and unemployment and a great deal of uncertainty, and we encountered difficulties here.

Where do you hope to focus your research efforts in the near future?

There are many things that would be interesting to follow up after this project. Currently, we are preparing studies that look at how companies manage their personnel in a turbulent environment; how they make use of competencies when individuals transition in and out of the organisation; and how individuals perceive the policies and practices of their employers when it comes to job transitions, competence transfer, and downsizing and re-employment processes.
Transfer and re-employment

Following the recent economic downturn, many organisations have been forced to change their employment models. A research group at Stockholm University has dedicated its focus to employees affected by such changes.

WE DO NOT need a research group to tell us that there have been great alterations within employment over the last few years. But despite this unsettling fact, we still lack sufficient studies into how employees have responded in the face of uncertainty and how organisations are working to control this threatened drain of skills. At a time when large groups of workers are being given notice or laid off, a group at the Departments of Psychology and Sociology at Stockholm University is coming together to unearth new complexities that have the potential to show organisations how unemployment should be managed.

Led by project manager Claudia Bernhard-Oettel, the study takes into account a variety of different groups affected by unemployment. The research follows the journey of a number of individuals as they make the transition from one period of employment to the next, and analyses the re-employment or job search process that come between the two roles. So far, Bernhard-Oettel and her team have monitored two distinctive sample groups over a period of two months, using weekly questionnaires to plot the ongoing fluctuation of emotions and attitudes amongst the affected candidates.

ORGANISATIONAL RESTRUCTURING

Throughout the project, attention has been divided between two key groups. The first is made up of former managers who have retained a role within their company, but have been forced to go through an internal recruitment process and a period of restructuring. The researchers at Stockholm University have been fortunate enough to gain access to a governmental organisation whose restructuring process meant that all managerial staff had to apply for a new position. By analysing data from such a remarkable sample, the research team has generated a clear level of awareness regarding employees’ position, role and sense of security within a workforce. The study has also taken into account the emotional reaction of individuals when their employer places them in such a situation, looking at how employees embrace and utilise existing skills in order to navigate their own prospects and to adapt to new roles.

RE-EMPLOYMENT AGENCIES

Alongside studies of internal restructuring, Bernhard-Oettel’s group is also working to understand individuals whose redundancies have led them to completely refocus their
skills as they embark on the search for new employment in a different company. Unlike those within the previous group, the individuals here were faced with no guarantee of work, causing them to thoroughly interrogate their own sense of employability. The research group identifies the work of re-employment agencies as pivotal in sculpting understandings here, as such organisations endeavour to focus on an unemployed individual's existing competencies and successfully reallocate them into a new job.

It is worth observing that while the first group focuses on employees who are adjusting to new roles in similar positions, this second sample has urged the research group to broaden their understanding and quickly develop their self-awareness. In this study of individuals who have been driven by geographical limitations to seek out entirely new roles, the research group has identified more active or overt attempts to assert and understand employability. At present, the team has just completed wave one of the analysis, but it acknowledges the potential of focusing on this group of people in future.

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

Central to the research surrounding both of these sample groups has been the idea of ‘transfer’. The process of re-employment comprises a review of how the individual’s competencies, acquired and developed in one area, can be transferred to another organisation, area or activity. With regard to transferability, this research addresses a key gap in our analysis of unemployment, restructuring and redundancy. While re-employment statistics are kept, Bernhard-Oettel has observed that little is known about the type of organisational and individual circumstances that facilitate the transitions into new jobs. The work at Stockholm’s Department of Psychology sheds new light on how individuals perceive transferable skills, and how employers use this awareness in order to allocate staff into new roles. In some cases, where roles are similar, this process proves to be relatively simple; in other instances, where new types of vocation are found, awareness of transferable skills and their application becomes more clouded. However, no matter how drastic the move, an awareness of the individual’s knowledge and competencies is at the core of a successful transition.

VOCATIONAL MOBILITY

The research has revealed a further pattern attributed to the uncertain economy, where sample members have exhibited a heightened awareness of their own mobility. The researchers have attributed this trend to the fact that transferable skills and competences are in some cases necessary for mobility and contribute to increased employability. With this in mind, they stress that it is important that employers and organisations also take note of these larger trends, deeming the notion of transferability as an issue of great strategic importance for the development of Sweden’s business enterprises.

A DIVERSE SAMPLE

While the research group identifies that such patterns are evident, the findings also highlight that it is important not to view employees as a homogeneous group. When considering the managers affected by the restructuring of a governmental organisation, the group noticed differences between team manager, process managers and departmental managers. While members of each group stressed that they had received sufficient information and were confident their skills could be incorporated in a different level of the organisation, their confidence when asked about their employability altered noticeably.

By looking closely at their data, Bernhard-Oettel’s team identified further socioeconomic factors that played a part in influencing a comfortable reemployment. Within their managerial sample, the research group found that women seem to be ‘covering their bases more’, exhibiting a significantly more proactive approach when it came to applying for non-managerial positions in different organisations. Another factor that should not be underestimated is age. However, analysis of this factor proved to be a little more problematic than that linked to gender, due to its relationship to related factors such as status and developed commitment to the company.

LOCKED-IN EMPLOYMENT

Another factor that emerged from the study was a state of feeling ‘locked-in’ a job. A close study of this situation is important to Bernhard-Oettel and her colleagues as it is linked to diminished wellbeing, low job satisfaction, and a lack of support and development opportunities. Now this is identified, the group has outlined a plan to bring an additional focus onto this position, taking into consideration the idea of positive mobility, where individuals make job transitions into better-fitting jobs and employment. Bernhard-Oettel acknowledges the absence of studies that take this factor into consideration over time.

THE FINDINGS

The results of these unemployment studies are surprisingly optimistic, indicating that the effect of organisational restructuring can be reduced through considerate management. After considering her findings at this stage in the research project, Bernhard-Oettel is keen to credit the governmental organisation within her sample for their work in preventing a great loss of trust and a great increase in workload. While the researchers did observe a dip in job satisfaction and a slight increase in somatic complaints among their participants, the overall findings have been reassuring, with workers gaining a richer awareness of their own employability, as well as exhibiting increased confidence levels generally. These patterns have led Bernhard-Oettel to conclude that the importance of an employee’s sense of autonomy and participation within change must not be underestimated.

INTELLIGENCE

TRANSITIONS FROM AN ORGANIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVE AND TRANSFER

OBJECTIVES

To identify organisational and individual factors that either facilitate or hinder individuals in a re-employment or transition process. Another important aspect is to identify the extent to which transfer can contribute to the employability of individuals, and what role these aspects play for re-employment after redundancy or restructuring.

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