

Trade unions and career services: Potential partners for promoting social justice at work

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This paper argues that trade unions represent natural allies for career services, as they have shared interests in addressing issues of social justice at work. This potentially valuable partnership has been underdeveloped. Two case studies of innovative practice will be presented, one relating to guidance practice in the Netherlands, the other related to career education proposals in Scotland. The challenges to be overcome in union involvement in careers work are explored. Working with unions represents a pragmatic approach to career guidance practice that is responsive to the social justice implications of new employment relationships.



Introduction

In recent years, influential texts have focused attention on economic inequality and its harmful social consequences (notably Piketty, 2014; Standing, 2011; Stiglitz, 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). They persuasively demonstrated that whilst more equal societies do better across a range of quality of life indicators, market-led growth has led to deepening inequalities. International bodies, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019) share these concerns about growing disparity between rich and poor, and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) has focused attention on their decent work agenda, and the trend for employment that fails to meet acceptable standards (ILO, 2020). Recognition of these issues has led to a resurgence of interest in social justice in the career guidance profession (e.g. Irving, 2005; Sultana, 2014a&b).

An aspect of this focus is a concern that career services have themselves become infused with neoliberal assumptions, and that their practices inadvertently place responsibility on individuals to adapt themselves to the requirements of an economic system that preserves socio-economic status inequalities, and is potentially exploitative (Hooley, Sultana, & Thomsen, 2017).

Discussion of social justice in career guidance has become conceptually rich in recent years, but for the most part the literature is intellectual rather than pragmatic. Whilst volume 2 of Hooley, Sultana & Thomsen's book (2018) represents a step towards answering the question 'what can the career guidance profession do in response to growing inequality driven by neoliberal ideology?', there remains further work to be done in offering practitioners a way forward. In this article we suggest that aligning the work of career services with trades union may offer some practical solutions.

Trade unions play an important role in helping to combat inequalities (Navarro, 2002; Dromey, 2018). As discussed in a recent Global Deal report, 'social dialogue and tripartite collective bargaining' (between governments, employers and unions) can 'reduce inequalities in labour markets, improve their functioning and deliver sound and productive labour relations...' and that in advanced economies, '...co-ordinated and centralised collective bargaining systems contribute to higher employment, lower unemployment and lower inequality than fully decentralised systems with weak collective bargaining' (Global Deal 2018, p. 8).

Despite a general decline in membership since a peak in the 1970s, trade unions remain the largest membership-based organisations globally and continue to provide an

important voice for millions of workers. By aggregating the power of the workforce, trade unions can act as a critical counterweight to employers. They can help workers win a fairer share of the wealth generated, reduce information asymmetries, collectively organise workers and improve their bargaining power - as well as support litigation and class actions (Silberman & Irani 2016, cited in OECD 2019).

Gottschalk and Joyce (1997) show that countries with a strong trade union movement, strong social contracts (between governments, employers and unions), and highly centralised collective bargaining agreements, have lower income inequalities than countries such as the USA and the UK, where trade unions are weak due to unfavourable policy environments. Sweden, The Netherlands, Germany, Italy, and France, for example, all have centralised bargaining systems, and have lower income inequality than the USA and UK. Declining rates of union membership directly contributed to an increase in wage inequality in the United States and the United Kingdom in the 1980s (Gosling & Machin, 1995; Card, Lemieux & Riddell, 2004).

Trade unions have a strong concern to address inequality and injustice at work, and have extensive practical experience of doing this. This article will develop arguments presented by Cimini & Robertson (2018) for the involvement of trade unions in career education and guidance. Firstly, union involvement in career guidance will be considered, illustrated by a case study from the Netherlands. Secondly, union involvement in career education will be discussed with reference to proposals from Scotland. Potential challenges and dilemmas for practice are then highlighted. Finally, the case is made that trade unions and career services are natural allies in promoting decent work.

Union involvement in career guidance for adults and workers

Examples of union involvement in practice can be found in the published literature. Plant (2005; 2008) describes union led initiatives to provide guidance in the workplace in the UK and in Denmark. In both countries peer based educational guidance has been

provided to promote lifelong learning. In Denmark, a distinctive approach took the form of 'guidance corners', establishing a presence in a canteen or social space in the workplace. This model does not lend itself to the private individual conversations typical of career guidance, but Thomsen (2012) argues this is potentially a virtue, fostering the development of a supportive community, where peers are drawn into career conversations. Peer support in the workplace offers advantages of accessibility, even to those on shift work who might normally have difficulty in accessing guidance. Sustaining the model in Denmark has been challenging (Keil, 2008), in part due to its reliance on peer support rather than specialists with ownership of the process.

CEDEFOP (2008) looked at guidance in the workplace and identified seven European examples of union involvement: in England, Denmark, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, Poland, Finland, and Sweden. They found that accessible locations for service delivery were valuable. The sustainability of services was a key concern, not just in Denmark but across several countries. Ultimately this depends on securing funding, but the training of advisers and co-ordination also made a difference to service sustainability.

Ford & Watts (1998) described initiatives to introduce guidance for union members in the UK, where this provision is now well established, and has proved sustainable. Union learning representatives have a legally protected role, as elected members of an independent union. Recognised by the employer, they champion training and development in the workplace. It is primarily educational guidance that is offered, as this sits well with employers' needs to encourage skill development, and with government aspirations to promote lifelong learning. Vocational guidance, or advice to support planning for future employment aspirations is downplayed as this offers more potential conflict with employer needs.

Recently attention has turned to union support for young people entering industry from vocational education and training (TUC, 2018), and also to young workers (TUC, 2017a) - most recently including 'career kickstart reviews' (TUC, 2019). This reflects a recognition by the union movement of weaknesses in provision of information and advice and guidance for youth in England. These activities are part of a wider

UnionLearn strategy (TUC, 2017b), with support to access learning, particularly for disadvantaged groups (TUC, 2017c) as central to the approach.

Our first case study relates to an innovative cross-sectoral guidance service provided by a union, which does not rely solely on peer support, but also employs specialist career development practitioners.

Case Study One: James in the Netherlands

Inspired by the belief that career guidance is a crucial element for sustainable employability, in 2014 the trade union CNV Vakmensen created 'James' - an independent private company, and wholly owned subsidiary. There are 15 career development professionals employed by James, supported by freelance advisers on a flexible basis.

In 2019, James supported around 5000 construction workers, cleaners, shop assistants, metalworkers, bankers, and workers from other sectors. James' mission is that everyone in the Netherlands has lifelong access to good quality guidance. To reach this goal, James works along two 'tracks':

1. The delivery of individual guidance normally by a career coach, and sometimes by a union learning representative. This is not limited to members of the trade union or current employees on traditional contracts; support is offered to those on flexible employment contracts, and during voluntary transitions or lay-offs. This service consists mostly of a combination of interviews and digital assessment tools to develop self-knowledge and opportunity awareness. Conversations to stimulate career awareness may happen on the shopfloor. The main goal is to help people to reflect on their current situation and develop a career action plan. Possible outcomes include modification of a job role to better fit the individual (jobcrafting), or access to training.
2. Structural activities that complement career service delivery and provide systems to support career self-management. This includes the operation of training funds to support workers to prepare for job changes.

A key feature is the *James Individual Learning Account*. Workers receive their own budget for development, which they can take with them and deploy from one employer to another over the years. They can freely choose routes that do not serve their job or current company or boss, but their career and long-term goals. Agreements negotiated with employers and labour market sector organisations incorporate support to access career checks and career advice.

James encourages service users to be autonomous and take responsibility for their careers, by supporting self-navigation including access to digital services, and strengthening and developing career competences. This is backed up by the safety net of support from an adviser if a service user has questions or concerns.

Union involvement in career education for young people attending learning institutions

The involvement of employers (and employer associations) in education is a long-established facet of career education, and of wider work-related curriculum activities, and is seen as good practice. If anything, these activities have grown in importance in recent years with the emergence of evidence suggesting that substantial employer input to schools leads to long-term benefits to pupils (e.g. Kashefpakdel & Percy, 2017; Mann, Rehill, & Kashefpakdel, 2018).

A striking feature of career education is the relatively low level of effort put into balancing the interests of the demand side of the labour market with those of the supply side. The focus is on learning to adapt to meet the requirements of the demand for labour; not on defending one's interests in the supply of labour. The point here is not that employer input should be reduced or replaced; far from it – it is an essential and valuable element of effective career education. Rather the issue is the need to recognise that employers' interests are not identical to those of young people. This is true even where employer engagement in education is motivated not just by the instrumental need to recruit workers, but by a sense of social responsibility and commitment

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to educational values. There is a power asymmetry in employment relations which is problematic to respond to as an individual (Healy, 2004).

The institutional interests of trades unions are also not identical to those of young people, but they are well placed to balance the input of employers, and bring a concern for social justice and worker welfare to the table. Unions receive little attention in the career education policy and practice literature, certainly substantially less attention than employers. The increasing concentration of young people in precarious work offering low wages and poor conditions means there is a growing need for entrants to the labour market to be equipped to navigate modern employment contracts. Young workers need to understand the risks they face, their rights, and the sources of support available to them. To adapt to current learning needs, career education must address these issues, and unions can support educational institutions to do this in a variety of ways including direct teaching input, or the development of up-to-date learning materials and resources.

Specifically, young people need to understand the drawbacks of flexible working in terms of reduced employment protection (such as access to sickness absence pay or maternity/paternity entitlements). Contemporary ideology in career education has reified flexibility as a universal route to career success in uncertain times. Exposure to the risks of flexibility are greatest for socio-economically disadvantaged groups, and for young people:

Everyone should have the chance of a decent job and career, no matter what their age. But young people are most likely to experience unemployment, underemployment, low wages, casual and temporary work, zero-hours contracts and workplace exploitation. They are also least likely to be in a trade union, know their rights or have the skills or the knowledge to demand more from their employers.

(TUC, 2017, p. 1).

An additional contribution that unions can bring to career education is to help young people see that individual action is not the only way to improve their working lives, and that some career development issues

are best addressed by collective action (Healy, 2004). Our second case study relates to proposals rather than current delivery models, but is worthy of inclusion as the rationale behind it directly relates to the arguments presented above.

Case Study Two: Unison in Scotland

Unison is currently the largest trade union in the UK, and Europe's largest public service union. Unison Scotland believe there is no place in Scotland's economy for unfair work characterised by precarious employment, low pay and abusive work practices. This is particularly the case in relation to learning, training and employment support.

Skills Development Scotland (SDS) is Scotland's national skills body and contributes to sustainable economic growth by supporting people and businesses to develop and apply their skills. SDS is also the national provider of career services (SDS, 2019), and the majority of its career advisers are members of the Unison SDS branch.

SDS and Unison have a mutually shared aspiration to make SDS an exemplar fair work employer. Fair work as it is understood in Scotland has five dimensions: effective voice, opportunity, security, fulfilment and respect (Fair Work Convention, 2016), and incorporates recognition of trade unions. These aspirations go beyond the internal employer /employee relationships. They also relate to SDS interventions in the skills and labour market.

Every secondary school in Scotland has a linked SDS adviser and a service level agreement negotiated and reviewed annually. Services include both group work and individual guidance to develop career management skills. Unison SDS Branch are seeking to develop and pilot in partnership with SDS a lesson for senior phase pupils to be delivered in the autumn of 2020 by careers guidance practitioners. The focus of the session will be to raise pupil awareness of the principles and applications of fair work in the world of work. The sessions will:

- equip school leavers with an understanding of their rights in any future employment relationship, and
- enable them to develop the awareness and confidence to identify, challenge, call out and

reject workplace practices that fall short of the fair work principles, throughout their working life.

Equipped with this knowledge, school pupils will be better placed to make decisions about their future employment opportunities informed by an understanding of fair work criteria. The interactive lesson will include case studies for pupils to discuss using video footage of realistic scenarios experienced by young people in the workplace. The videos are to be created in partnership with the wider trade union movement. These will draw on the Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC, 2019) 'Better than Zero' resources which address issues of precarious work. This approach is intended to generate group debate, discussion and evaluation of each scenario from a fair work perspective. The activity is also informed by guidelines from the STUC (2018) 'Unions into Schools' initiative.

Challenges and dilemmas for practice

These case studies offer some ways forward, but it would be naïve to think that practice in this field is unproblematic. Some of the challenges and dilemmas are explored in this section.

There can be tensions between the role of service provider and activist (Haak & Post, 2018). Unions have a long progressive-radical tradition, and there are advocates for radical action in the career guidance movement (e.g. Hooley, Sultana & Thomsen, 2017), but activism naturally produces friction. Good and sustainable relationships with partners and stakeholder organisations underpin effective career service delivery so a delicate balance must be struck. Union advisers will not automatically be trusted by employees, let alone employers, and may have to establish credibility with young people and teaching staff in educational institutions.

The issue of who pays for the career development activities undertaken by trade unions cannot be avoided. As membership organisations, a strong case can be made that members fees should be directed solely to services for those members. This position might undermine an aspiration to wider social responsibility, in the form of offering career services to young people in education, or to potential new workers. This concern

might be mitigated by the need that unions have to reach out and engage with the workers of the future, to raise awareness of their services and to recruit new members. Other sources of funds for services might potentially be available from employers, from government, or from industry sector bodies. Going forward this will be essential to sustain the support for skills training offered by James, for example. Funding is welcome, but may also introduce another agenda (such as directing people towards skills shortage areas) which may be in tension with individual worker's interests and trust in union advisers.

Two general perspectives on the politics of trade unionism are important for understanding this possible tension. The first perspective opposes any political role for trade unions beyond servicing the immediate needs of union members - negotiating wages, hours of work, processes for airing grievances and so forth. The second (dominant) perspective suggests that trade unions and social democratic political parties have distinct but complementary spheres of influence: economics is the realm of the unions and politics the realm of the party. Taken to their logical conclusions, both these perspectives might limit the role unions might play in careers education for young people, an activity which is unavoidably political.

In the case of James, the service is striving towards supporting workers to become autonomous, and self-navigate their careers. This position is consistent with much contemporary thinking on career management, which has been critiqued as a neoliberal 'responsibilisation' of workers to adapt to the labour market conditions imposed on them (Hooley, Sultana & Thomsen, 2017). In fact, the challenges facing James' service users are often more prosaic: many workers find the labour market too complex to self-navigate, struggle with the digital skills required, and are not at a point where they could engage in effective peer support. It is possible to offer *both* individual support *and* collective support (Healy, 2004). One-to-one helping - the historic function of guidance services - continues to have a vital role to play. Individual support can complement group level activities, and needs to continue while collective routes to action (such as consciousness raising, political engagement, and empowerment through education) are developed.

Conclusion

With a recognition of growing economic inequality and unequal access to decent work, the international career guidance community has renewed its focus on social justice, and begun to challenge the neoliberal assumptions underpinning its practices. The resulting academic discourse has been both fertile and radical, but largely conceptual rather than pragmatic.

We argue that trade unions represent natural allies for career services. Unions occupy a unique and occasionally powerful position, at the intersection of individual support and collective influence. They share the concern to promote access to decent work, and they have considerable practical experience of addressing social justice issues in the workplace through collective action. They also engage in individual support and guidance activities.

Unions face problems and choices if they engage with issues of career development. They must determine if their services will solely be to support current (fee paying) members, or if they will accept a wider social responsibility, or a quasi-political role. Engagement with young people in education potentially becomes more attractive to unions if they can promote union membership whilst also raising awareness of workplace justice issues. Career services routinely facilitate employers to access pupils and students in educational institutions, and support their recruitment activities. In the interests of balance, and to educate young people about their rights, careers services should also actively support trade unions to communicate with young people in career education contexts.



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