Career theories faced with the new work roadmap challenges

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Abstract

Work is a defining activity for individuals and also a major preoccupation for organizations, stake holders, governments and states. The actual global world is confronted with alert changes, introduction of new, smart technologies that can ease the work for some employees, facilitate access to many products for large categories of population, but can also scare some others because they may fear losing their jobs. Besides individuals, organizations are also confronted with such transformations, trying to keep up with the competition, preparing, motivating and retaining their human resources.

Given the actual global context, defined as a rapid changing one, faced with unexpected events, like the spread of coronavirus or significant migratory flows, this paper sets to explore the transformations regarding the work domain, their challenging impact on career construction and the contribution of career counseling theories in mitigating such aspects.

Keywords: career, globalization, transformations, vocational counseling, work

Introduction

Changes are an inherent component of development, as continuous processes of transformations have shaped the way humanity itself looks today. Some of these changes are wanted, predictable, manageable, smooth, while others are abrupt, unexpected, unwanted and disrupting. In terms of consequences related to the work domain, the discussion may address the shifts from modernism to post modernism, from early stages of industrialization to mass production and automation.

Our path will start from analyzing the existing context, already described by rapid transformation, global connectedness, instant communication, and implementation of new technologies in several domains. Furthermore, on this terrain, the Covid 19 pandemic brought a new set of challenges, accelerating some already existing trends and left some consequences that will be further addressed in the following section of this paper. The next stop of the expose is represented by the construction of the theoretical framework, resorting to some of the acknowledged career counseling theories. Following, empirical information regarding the work domain is presented, trying to link such practical issues to the resorts that vocational counseling models may offer.

The context

This section will describe the general context represented by globalization and its impact on the labour force, the main aspects related to the introduction of automation, digitalization and smart technologies in the work domain and will end by discussing the major transformations brought by the Covid 19 pandemic.

Globalization is a long-term process, which extends over centuries and lacks a single accepted definition. Extensively analyzed, by economists, anthropologists and other social scientists, globalization is portrayed as creating a world-system (Wallerstein, 2006), with several scapes (Appadurai, 1994), in which individuals, economies, cultures, organizations are all interconnected. Communication is facilitated by new technologies, information can instantly spread, people also can travel, migrate from their hometown or country to new promising destinations, even on another continent, in a different culture. Organizations are able to have subsidiaries in other countries, to easily outsource part of the activities, to have collaborators that work remote, due to such technological development. Economies from all over the globe, financial and commercial services, are all connected and interdependent and individuals may communicate, entertain, work, live in this global world.

Arnett (2002) describes the global culture and the global citizen identity and consciousness, which characterize individuals, together with his/her local, traditional context.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, globalization is a long-term process, which has been going on for centuries, through trade interactions between cultures. What brought the discussion about globalization to a higher degree of interest in both public and scientific arena, is the intensification of this process. Such acceleration was fostered by the technological developments following the Second World War, the massive migratory flows from Est to West and South to North, the development of the World Wide Web. These transformations are seen as facets of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Schwab, 2006). If the first industrial revolution is characterized by the introduction of the steam power engine, the second one was alimented by electricity and third one by automation, the actual industrial revolution has some features that differentiate it from the previous ones. While the first three revolutions were defined by the introduction of new technologies maneuvered by man, that could ease humans` physical work, the fourth one brings to the front artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), which could replace cognition and more complex human activities. Thus, in this stage of development smart equipment can communicate to each other, devices can provide information, receive it, decide and answer, instead of a human operator.

Automation and digitization were sometimes seen as threatening labour market (https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/blog-articles/machines-robots-and-threat-automation-eu-jobs), increasing the risk of unemployment, especially for those jobs that had a high potential for automation (Autor, 2015). On this terrain, already defined as rapidly changing, with interconnected economies, people easily traveling and instantly communicating, the Coronavirus could quickly spread and conquer country after country and domain after domain.

In the beginning, Covid 19 represented a medical threat that rapidly transformed each layer of individuals` and states` lives. The impact of the sanitary crisis was far beyond what was initially expected. Some work sectors were considered unessential and forced to reduce or even stop their activity, while others, defined as frontline, needed more workforce or longer working hours. In all economic domains the work program, shifts, access ways and even working conditions transformed in an unprecedented manner. Protective sanitary measures were implemented, such as wearing a mask, gloves and other protective equipment, establishing new, strict protocols for arriving to the job, leaving, interacting with the colleagues or other people outside the organization.

In the care sector, like facilities for elderly or ill people, or the energetic one, employees even had to remain on site for longer periods of time, working in shifts of one or two weeks. Many employers used testing before receiving people back to work and shifted to special working arrangements were possible, like teleworking or online meetings, for example. While for some domains the activity narrowed during the lockdown or quarantine periods, like tourism, restaurants and leisure activities in general, others intensified their operations (medical sector, delivery services, essential shops employees).

In terms of numbers, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) (https://www.who.int/countries/rou), until September 2022, over 3 million coronavirus infection cases were recorded in Romania and approximately 66.000 confirmed deaths, reported to a population of 19 million inhabitants. Obviously, the analysis must go beyond such tight statistics and move to a deeper inquiry and understanding of the transformations caused by the Covid 19 pandemic on the Romanian labour market and the work sector in general. Previous research discuses about increasing gaps between men and women, between the high skilled, white-collar jobs, that can be done remote, online, and the low skilled, blue-collar ones, that are not susceptible to such translations (Sim, 2020; Salas-Nicás et al. 2021; Warren and Lyonette). For both categories, new challenges emerged, even if different. For example, the pause in providing care and education for children during the lockdown and in recurrent waves after, during 2020, 2021 and the beginning of 2022, represented a major difficulty for parents, no matter if they worked from home or on site. Numerous studies address the blurrier boundaries between work and non-work, difficulties in meeting professional, family and child related demands (Lonska et al., 2021; Wang et. al, 2021).

Some of the practices developed during the pandemic that proved to be efficient were used on long term, like online meetings, for example, and the tendency towards implementation of new, smart technologies was accelerated. Drawing the lines of the existing context, allows us to better follow the underpinnings of the new work trajectories or roadmaps, which will be unfolded in the next sections.

Theoretical framework

Although it has only recently crystallized as a study discipline (the last 100 years, approximately), with well consolidated sets of theories, models, methods and techniques, vocational guidance, in different forms, already existed, from older periods. The actual global world brings a common set of challenges for individuals all

around the world regarding their work, preparation for a desired job or professional reconversion, for example. Other events, such as relocation in terms of international migration, may bring along the need for improved skills or even retraining, and the once national labor force markets are now opened to the access of migrants (Porumbescu, 2018). On the other hand, organizations are confronted with the lack of prepared work force, staff turnover; governments have to deal with unemployment, in any country and continent, even if some differences do exist between domains and the amplitude of such issues is variable, according to the specific context.

Concerns regarding the ways of developing careers are present in the individuals` discourse, but also on organizations` agenda and in the public narrative of jobs, work and workforce. Trying to meet such needs, theorists and practitioners developed several theories and models that can facilitate both the understanding of vocational path and the career counseling process. Without aiming to be exhaustive, the following paragraphs try to review some of the major previous theoretical contribution regarding career counseling and vocational guidance.

The work adjustment theory of Frank Parson (1909) can be understood as following the person-environment fit paradigm, this trait-factor perspective arguing that identifying individual`s strengths, that differentiate each person from the others, will facilitate compatibility between the employee and a specific job and his/her adaptability regarding that working environment. Shifting from correspondence to congruence, Holland`s perspective builds mainly on concepts as personality, interests, and person-environment interaction. His theory of vocational personalities in work environment represents a valuable guiding tool for research and practice in career counseling (Leung, 2008).

Constructivist theories, as Super`s Career Development Theory (Super, 1969) or Savickas (2013) emphasize the understanding of the process of career building defined by career decisions, life stages and the self-concept. Super also discusses about career maturity and life roles that change their importance in individuals` lives at different times, during their maturation process. Furthermore, Savickas (2013) proposes an integrative perspective, where the professional identity is connected with the non-professional one, increasing a sense of coherence and purpose (Hirschi, p.6).

Moving to a rather contextual approach, the social cognitive perspective (Lent, Brown, Hackett, 1994) tries to explain the bidirectional interactions between individuals and the environment, building on the self-efficacy concept of Bandura (1977). According to this theory, career choices are determined by the interaction between interest, outcome expectations and self-efficacy (Leung, 2018, p.126).
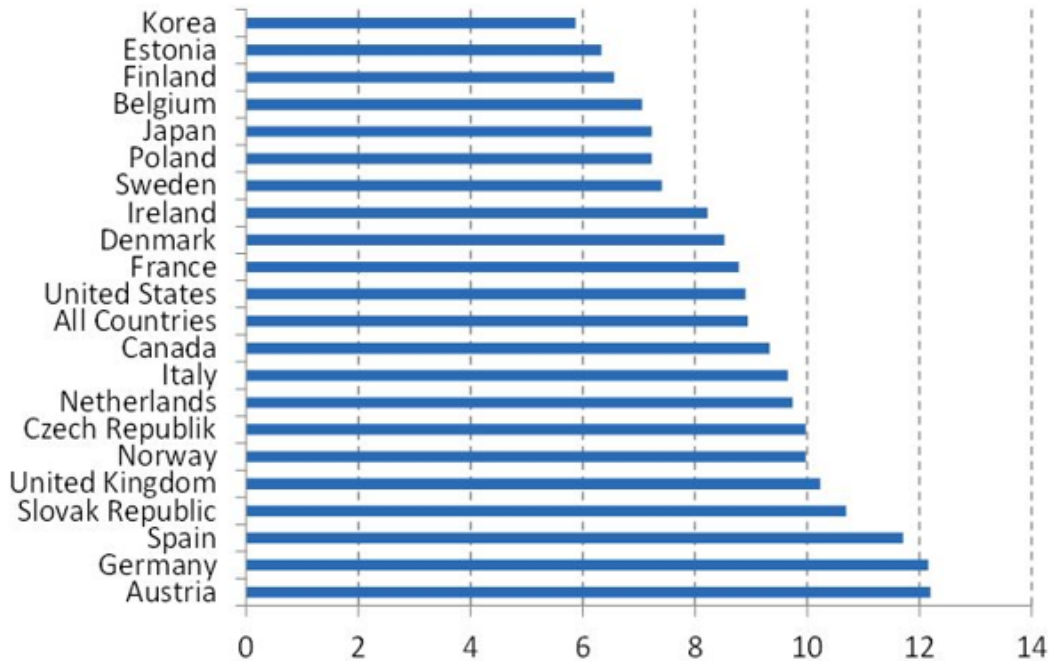
Empirical challenges

Implementing new, smart technologies and automation in many work domains already was noticeable before de major changes caused by the Covid 19 outbreak. Thus, at European level, a report of the European Center for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) from 2018 showed that 4 out of 10 employees were confronted with transformations regarding the technologies they are using at work (CEDEFOP, 2018). The Mc Kinsey Global Institute released three reports analyzing the post pandemic economy in terms of several aspects. Examining the future trends regarding work, they state that 25% more workers than estimated before the pandemic will have to change their occupations, due to the accelerated transformations in terms of automation, e-commerce and remote work. Automation already was a major issue in some industry sectors, for appropriate tasks and activities. The same, remote work was used at a reduced scale, in IT and programming sector mostly, while online meetings for conferences, for example, did not represent a "normality" before 2020.

Recent research sees a maintained high use of such new ways of working and communicating (Clifton and Holliday, 2022) and foresee continuity. Employees are also willing to continue to work remotely, either fully or on hybrid arrangements. Gallup`s survey from 2022 shows that 30% of the American full-time employees that can work from distance prefer to do their job fully remotely and 60 percent would choose hybrid (Clifton and Holliday, 2022). The first reasons indicated by the respondents as justifying their option for remote work were the commute, their improved wellbeing and increased flexibility in mitigating family and professional needs (Wiggert, 2022).

Even before the Covid 19 outbreak, automatization was a major theme regarding jobs and several studies tried to understand and foresee trends, like, for example, the one deployed for OECD countries (Figure 1). Analyzing this data one can see that several European countries (Austria, Germany, Spain) have a share of more than 10 percent of jobs highly automatable.
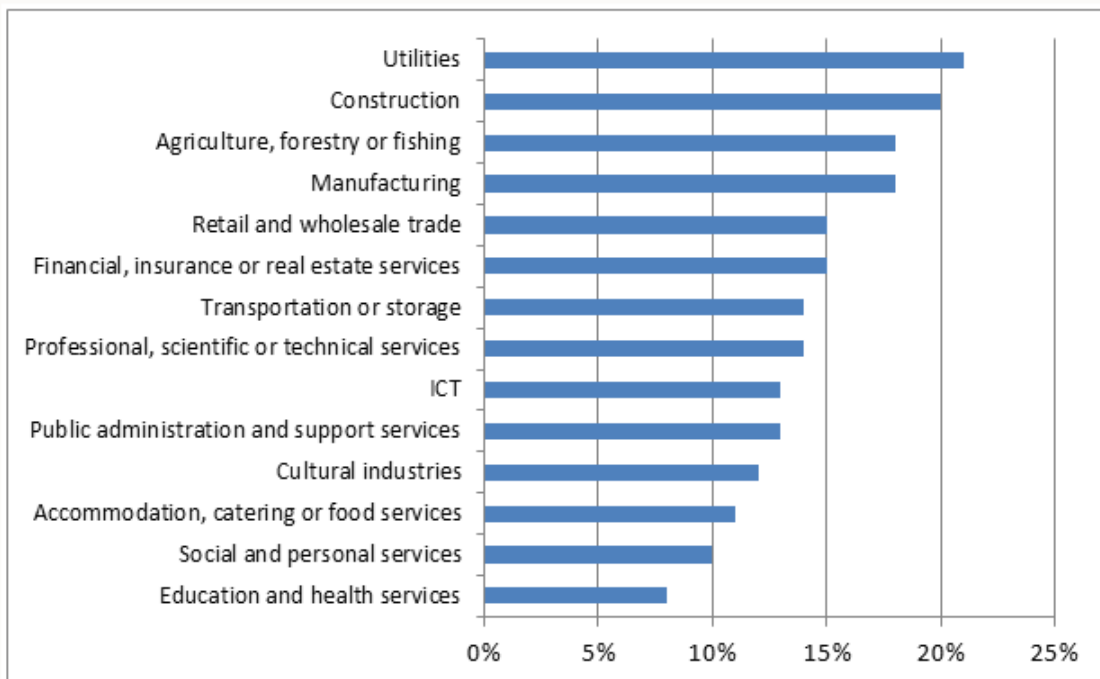
Figure 1. The share of high automatable jobs by country (OECD Countries)

Source: Arntz, Gregory, Zierahn (2016) (https://blogs.worldbank.org/jobs/digitization-unlikely-destroy-jobs-may-increase-inequalities)

Shifting our attention to the European countries, data regarding the Union`s member states emphasize that for some domains introducing new, smart technologies regarding work is more feasible, like construction, manufacturing, agriculture, retail and trade, while for others the shift towards automatization is not that simple. In this later category, as seen in Figure 2, are introduced sectors that imply human presence, interaction, cooperation, as educational and care services, medical and cultural activities, for example.

Figure 2. The share of automatable jobs by industry sector in the European Union (EU28)

Source: Pouliakas (2018), apud CEDEFOP (2019) (https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/blog-articles/machines-robots-and-threat-automation-eu-jobs#note3)

Discussions

Work transformations are undoubtedly a major challenge for employees, employers, companies and all type of organizations and institutions, repainting the way people see their own professional pathways. Given the increasing flexibility, mobility and connectivity fostered by the global context and large-scale use of smart technologies, the work roadmap becomes less predictable and career theories can contribute in different manners in mitigating such challenges. For example, researchers recommend that career counselors assist their clients in developing resilience to ambiguity and uncertainty, practical and interpersonal skills and in accessing training opportunities (Coutinho, Dam and Blustein, 2008, p.15).

Furthermore, considering the possibilities of remote work and the increased connectivity between professional and personal domains, the constructivist assumptions of Super`s and Savickas`s models can provide a valuable framework for building the sense of purpose and competence regarding one`s career, and integrating several sets of roles in a congruent identity. The social cognitive perspectives regarding career (Lent, Brown, Hackett, 1994) can also contribute here, through their models that address finding useful resources from both personal and professional spheres. Such resources are seen as valuable for the employees, who are confronted with increased requests of adaptability, flexibilization and tolerance to ambiguity regarding their professional roadmaps.

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