

EXORDIUM

WHICH “CAREER” GUIDANCE IN THE AGE  
OF GREAT CONTRADICTIONS?

QUALE ORIENTAMENTO “AL LAVORO”  
NELL’ EPOCA DELLE GRANDI CONTRADDIZIONI?

*Miriam Bassi (University of Foggia)*

The trust between worker and organization, historically based on the stability and durability of the employment relationship, has been exposed to great vulnerability especially in the post-pandemic era leading to the emergence of the phenomena of quiet quitting and great resignation. These phenomena fit into a scenario already marked by unemployment and precariousness, holding an almost antithetical position. The attention that orientation has gained in recent years, at the normative as well as pedagogical level, takes the shape of an unprecedented opportunity for reflection in relation to pedagogical theory and practice on the subject. Such reflection can only take its starting point from the centrality that guidance processes hold from the earliest years of life, through adulthood, to old age, in supporting and promoting a new thinkability of work and the subject and new balances that on the one hand recognize the needs of the individual and on the other ensure the development of sustainable organizations.

La fiducia tra lavoratore e organizzazione, storicamente fondata sulla stabilità e sulla durata del rapporto di lavoro, è stata esposta a una grande vulnerabilità soprattutto nell’epoca post-pandemica portando alla comparsa dei fenomeni del *quiet quitting* e della *great resignation*. Fenomeni, quelli appena citati, che si inseriscono in

uno scenario già contrassegnato da disoccupazione e precarietà, ricoprendo una posizione quasi antitetica. L’attenzione che l’orientamento ha conquistato negli ultimi anni, a livello normativo oltre che pedagogico, si configura come un’inedita occasione di riflessione rispetto alla teoria e alla prassi pedagogica sul tema. Tale riflessione, non può che prendere le mosse dalla centralità che ricoprono i processi orientativi sin dai primi anni di vita, passando per l’adulthood, fino alla vecchiaia, nel sostenere e promuovere una nuova pensabilità del lavoro e del soggetto e nuovi equilibri che da una parte riconoscano i bisogni del singolo e dall’altra garantiscano lo sviluppo di organizzazioni sostenibili.

### *1. Defining work in the era of great contradictions*

Discussing career guidance today means, first and foremost, grappling with a series of questions, starting with the complexity inherent in the very definition of the word “work”. In its most common sense, we can define work as the application of the physical and intellectual faculties of both men and women oriented towards the realization of a product useful to the individual or the community<sup>1</sup>. Its significance in economic and sociological terms refers, indeed, to activities necessary for the survival of society<sup>2</sup>. Although not exhaustive, these definitions suffice to bring to the forefront of reflection the dominant role that work has played since the earliest attempts at social organization in human life. It is evident, therefore, that the price to be paid for the survival of society is directly attributable to the contribution of every human being. Throughout history, as confirmed by narratives related to the

<sup>1</sup> Refer to the definition in Treccani: <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/lavoro/> [20/03/2024].

<sup>2</sup> Refer to the definition in Britannica encyclopedia: <https://www.britannica.com/money/work-economics> [20/03/2024].

world of work<sup>3</sup>, this commitment has translated into slavery and alienation, making it necessary to recognize and protect working conditions as an inalienable right of men and women: «Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment» (United General Assembly, 1948, p. 6). An additional safeguard for workers is provided by the publication of the International Labour Conference (ILO), which aimed in 1999 to ensure that all men and women could have access to productive work, in conditions of freedom, equality, security, and human dignity. However, in the current era, there are still a series of normative and cultural constraints that continue to undermine the achievement of these objectives. Consider, for instance, the persistence of gender stereotypes in terms of access to professions, which all too often results in wage disparities between women and men. Similarly, all forms of exploitation, which can lead to the limitation of personal freedom, contribute to the lack of conditions that make work not only sustainable and dignified but also a time and space for personal emancipation.

Regarding worker remuneration, another issue historically debated alongside the conditions that prevent the realization of decent work is the issue of unpaid (or underpaid) work. The publication “*Salari rubati* (stolen wages)” brings attention to the issue of worker remuneration for those who agree to work for free – whether willingly or under coercion – in the name of a promise that is all too often unfulfilled.

This promise is indeed the mirage of a better future, the pivot that legitimizes the provision of unpaid work as a tool for employability in qualified positions. This is the logic that leads interns and freelancers, artists and editors, authors and curators – or simply anyone who writes projects and grant proposals for free – in the illusion that they will lead

<sup>3</sup> As an example, see the work of Potestio A. (2020b). La narrazione del lavoro in Simone Weil. Note pedagogiche su “La condizione operaia”. *CQILA*, 10(31), 9-21.

to a paid position. However, the promise has a greater capacity to persuade to unpaid work the more negative the starting condition is – based on the need to escape poverty and the threat of unemployment. The unspoken secret of the promise, in this sense, is hierarchy: the dark soul of our time, the unspeakable social inequality exacerbated by the dismantling of public spending that transforms the lucid fear of unemployment into the most powerful propellant to docility (Coin, 2017, p. 12).

The other side of the coin is finding oneself in an era where living without work – whether by choice or unforeseen circumstance – becomes an increasingly common condition. Despite the unemployment rate remaining concerning, especially in countries like Italy, phenomena such as the great resignations and quiet quitting<sup>4</sup> are being witnessing. There are millions of people who decide to leave their jobs to seek better conditions. However, while this phenomenon becomes increasingly popular in the United States, in Italy, it is considered a true anomaly: «the strange case of a country where there are about five million unemployed and discouraged people, and yet entire sectors are capable of finding personnel» (Coin, 2023, pp. 101-102). The Italian picture is indeed extremely complex: the rampant phenomenon of unemployment is accompanied by a strong mismatch between labor supply and demand. However, the inability of upskilling and reskilling actions to emerge as a viable solution to reduce this gap confirms the complex situation. Additionally, according to Censis data, the majority of workers would not leave their jobs even if they are unhappy, for fear of not finding another job (Censis, 2022; Coin, 2023).

Such considerations are useful but not sufficient to capture the complexity of the current scenario. Therefore, it is crucial to employ additional frameworks to decode the condition of our time. The reference is to a time marked by the features encapsulated in

<sup>4</sup>The phenomenon of quiet quitting refers to the tendency to put in as much effort, enthusiasm and involvement as necessary to keep one's job, for more on this see: Johnson J.R. (2023). What's New About Quiet Quitting (and What's Not). *The Transdisciplinary Journal of Management*. <https://tjm.scholasticahq.com/article/72079-what-s-new-about-quiet-quitting-and-what-s-not> [20/03/2024].

the acronym VUCA, which has been strongly influenced by the pandemic situation, defined in turn by the acronym BANI (Cascio, 2021). The first acronym, originally used in a military context (U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, 2018), has progressively gained ground in the corporate sector (Bennis & Nanus, 1985) and, more recently, in the field of education. VUCA signifies the general conditions of contemporary society, attributing to them the following characteristics: volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. This implies that in such a scenario, it is fundamental to consider the speed and interdependence among various variables, the unclear relationships among different situations composing a scenario, and the unpredictability of change. Additionally, four new variables related to the second acronym, BANI, emerge considering the pandemic situation, which has affected the entire planet in recent years, rendering the scenario: fragile, anxious, nonlinear, and incomprehensible. The notion is that the world, and consequently the existence of each human being, are susceptible to potentially catastrophic events at any moment. This condition generates a sense of urgency and perpetual danger, not only for personal survival but also concerning the changes that characterize, or could characterize, the job market, making symptoms of anxiety increasingly prevalent on a global scale, to the extent that they affect 25% of people worldwide<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, there is the awareness, now deeply ingrained especially among younger generations, of the impossibility of planning one's life definitively or long-term, as the cause-effect relationships of events present increasingly unpredictable variables. Lastly, the acronym just elucidated sheds light, more broadly, on the condition of ambiguity rendered by the acronym VUCA, which this time assumes the character of incomprehensibility, namely the awareness that not everything surrounding the human being can be governed or fully understood.

Considering the foregoing, the objective to be pursued in the following paragraphs is to identify a viable strategy for promoting

<sup>5</sup> Refers to Organizzazione Mondiale della Sanità (2022). Covid-19 aumenta del 25% i casi di ansia e depressione. <https://unric.org/it/oms-covid-19-aumenta-del-25-i-casi-di-ansia-e-depressione> [20/03/2024].

effective orientation processes. This starts with considering certain *a priori* elements that must constitute the solid foundations of a culture of fair and sustainable work. It is possible, therefore, to align work with the organized use of energies and skills to achieve personal and collective goals linked to the sustenance of society as a whole. There are three essential characteristics for work to be defined as fair and sustainable: freedom, liable to change, and engaging. Firstly, working should always be a personal choice and never coercive in any way, whether it is unpaid work (such as care work, mostly carried out for free and by women) or paid work. Furthermore, work can be subject to changes in two directions: on one hand, every employment contract, regardless of its form, can and should be terminable by the worker at any time; on the other hand, it is possible for the worker to undergo such termination, finding themselves in the condition of changing jobs – more so today than in the past. Lastly, work – in all its forms – presupposes the creation and constant maintenance of a relationship of trust. This pillar finds scientific basis in the studies of Gardner and what the author himself defines as “Good work”: work can be “good” when a series of elements come together (2010). Technical excellence, in terms of expertise in human resources, is only one of the pillars of this theory, to which is added the pillar of ethics, namely the responsibility towards the implications of actions taken towards the community (Gardner, 2010). To these two elements, the need to promote the well-being of workers through the promotion of trust and engagement between the parties involved (e.g., between worker and company, between professional and user/client) is added.

If, with the post-work manifesto published twenty-six years ago, Aronowitz hoped not only for better working conditions but also for a better reconciliation between personal life and work life, looking at the present, it is evident that reflection on these two aspects is still crucial both in terms of the (often denied) rights of workers and in reference to all those educational and training processes that prepare human beings to face such conditions. The current conditions of the labor market, both in Italy and elsewhere in

the world, are tangible proof of the need to put human beings back at the center of the discussion with the aim of ensuring that work activity, in all its nuances, can once again be considered a crucial dimension for the development of personal identity and the well-being of the individual and the community.

## *2. Career guidance to work and at work*

Starting from considerations regarding the current era, is it still possible to speak of “career guidance” – which concerns the promotion of Career Management Skills for (future) workers – and “on-the-job” guidance – which refers to actions carried out by work contexts, to promote the professional development of workers? Before answering these questions, it is necessary to outline the characteristics and objectives of such guidance processes. In this context, the focus will be on two key words concerning “career guidance” and “on-the-job guidance” respectively: employability and engagement.

The rapid obsolescence affecting technical-professional skills has made it increasingly necessary to promote specific skills related to career management, known as Career Management Skills (CMS). These skills are recognized as a series of structured modalities to ensure that individuals and groups can adequately manage decision-making processes, as well as changes and transitions (ELGPN, 2012; Sultana, 2012). In the context of career guidance processes, promoting CMS means enabling individuals to develop transferable skills that allow them to improve their employability. Indeed, employability entails cultivating transferable skills and credentials that empower individuals to leverage educational and training prospects effectively, ensuring the acquisition and maintenance of satisfactory employment, career advancement, adaptability to evolving technology, and changing labor market dynamics. (UNESCO, 1984).

This construct shifts the focus from the skills required by professional contexts to a combination of individual factors that enable a person to build their career and pursue their growth objectives. Indeed Eurofound, an agency of the European Union aimed at promoting better work conditions, defines employability as a combination of factors – linked both to job-specific and soft skills – that allow individuals to move towards employment and progress in their career development (Eurofound, 2022).

The concept of employability lends itself well to pedagogical reflections due to its strong emphasis on learning processes. Developing employability skills is closely related to both the ability to learn and, above all, the ability to capitalize on learning in order to achieve professional goals. Educational institutions of all levels are therefore called upon to meet this challenge with the aim of promoting the employability of future workers, particularly in fulfilling their guidance function. In this regard, Boffo and Terzaroli (2017) draw attention to the transformative value of employability in re-considering, from a pedagogical-didactic point of view, contexts related to higher education. They emphasize that the relationship between employability and higher education

raises the issue of the use and presence of skills "for life" in order to build appropriate and solid bridges with the world of work. In a social context that demands increasingly focused skills for a greater number of graduates and for productive growth, reflecting deeply on the category of employability becomes crucial to understand the direction in which efforts for improvement in university teaching, the creation of internships and apprenticeships, and the establishment of specific connections with companies, associations, and public and private productive sectors should be directed (Boffo & Terzaroli, 2017, p. 442).

This relationship underscores the importance of taking care of the connection between educational institutions and professional contexts through the powerful tool of work-based learning. Promoting learning experiences within professional contexts can be crucial in terms of guidance. In this sense, work activity becomes a catalyst for employability and enables the promotion of personal

reflexivity processes, which are fundamental for making decisions regarding one’s professional future. That is, work-based learning activities should make work activity a tool for guidance rather than just a tool for acquiring job-related skills (Potestio, 2020a).

When guidance processes are delivered by the same work contexts and are aimed at professionals, it is referred to as “on-the-job” guidance. Interventions of this kind can involve updating job-related knowledge and skills, or enhancing them in view of career advancements, as well as promoting the values of corporate culture for personnel retention. With the aim of bringing attention to the variables to be considered in identifying a viable path for “on-the-job” guidance processes, particular attention is paid to the second type of actions. Therefore, specific reference is made to employee care policies, namely,

the promotion of a culture of design that permeates organizations, which responds to the intentionally pedagogical objective of transforming – or rather – redesigning and reconsidering work as a place of “care” and “well-being”, attempting to reconcile both the needs and constraints of the context and individual needs for self-realization (Dato, 2018, p. 28).

In this direction, the objective is to train an “engaged worker”, that is, an employee who demonstrates high levels of personal investment in the job and adjusts their actions and level of commitment to the activity based on the level of involvement and motivation (Dato, 2014, p. 58), certain that

meaningful work cannot be considered solely a source of profit but also and above all a generator of personal identity, emancipation activities that bring to light the need to promote paths of self-knowledge management, self-employment, and active participation in the same productive and organizational processes (Dato, 2014, p. 59).

However, the worker’s engagement as a «mixture of intellectual, affective-emotional, and social commitment to the organization» (Cardone, 2018, p. 60) highlights the rupture of trust between

the worker and the organization, emphasized by the increasing individualism promoted by neoliberalism. Indeed,

neoliberalism entrusts the individual with the responsibility for their success or failure, substantially denying the value of the presence of others, except for instrumental objectives. It is time to dismantle this impoverished vision and to credit one of anthropological prosperity, discernible only with the hospitality of otherness and the consequent weaving of ethical-educational work relationships, supporting the transition from being the entrepreneur of oneself to the building of a self-educating us (d’Aniello, 2023a, p. 103).

To heal this rupture with others, the transition from engagement to worker commitment is crucial. While engagement corresponds to an externally directed commitment – from the need to receive positive feedback or career progressions – commitment refers to the activation of personal resources with the desire to feel part of a community made up of relationships. In this sense, d’Aniello, drawing on Amartya Sen, defines commitment as the capacity that «urges to associate the choice of action with a core of values actively assessed by the subject in view of a decision placed in a shared context, considering the other actors involved» (d’Aniello, 2023b, p. 331).

### *3. Pedagogical implications*

What future can be envisioned for career guidance in the era of great contradictions? The commitment of pedagogy to addressing this question lies in problematizing existing guidance processes. Starting from the awareness that guidance can no longer be considered merely as a process aimed at seeking and maintaining a job position. The stance required by the current era, laden with individualism, is one that allows for an holistic and systemic approach. In other words, guidance can no longer simply refer to the creation of a “toolbox” to prepare individuals for changes in the world of work. This is not only due to the understanding that job-related

knowledge and skills are subject to rapid obsolescence, but also to reduce the sense of responsibility for one's own success or failure, which leads individuals to abandon the construction of authentic relationships with others.

Similarly, it is not possible to guide “on-the-job”, that is, during work, solely based on the companies' need to retain human capital to achieve objectives that would only benefit the corporate context. In fact, employee engagement is likened to a successful marriage, recognizing that

an employee engaged with the company is available when it comes to doing something extra [...]. From this perspective, the company should be like a large family. When a family member needs help, you immediately take action and make an effort to solve the problem, even if help is not explicitly requested or remunerated. Employees should do the same: be devoted to the company and work for it even when not openly requested (Coin, 2023, p. 31).

This relationship of trust and loyalty, however, has gradually been put to the test, leading to phenomena, already mentioned, known as the great resignation and quiet quitting. Therefore, the challenge lies in shifting from the “me” to the “us”, both in the processes of career guidance and those that accompany the worker in the workplace, with the aim of reflectively thickening the ability

to respond to one's own and others' growth demands, arriving at a significantly inclusive signification capable of generating in-progress knowledge that is economically productive and extra-economic, useful for a comprehensive life plan, also sharing ethical-moral responses and values of human action in the face of a reciprocal recognition dynamic that becomes a relationship of ontological gift (d'Aniello, 2023b, p. 332).

Therefore, in conclusion, in recalling the ultimate task of pedagogy, the processes of guidance (and self-guidance) should be guided by the need to support the individual in answering the following questions: what skills do I need to develop to face the changes in the world around me? How can I build a life plan that

is consistent with my needs and goals? And, furthermore, how can this plan – in recalling the very meaning of the word “work” – contribute to the sustenance and development of my community and the world around me?

In this direction, the challenge is to adopt collaborative and inclusive approaches in all phases that characterize career guidance processes, both inside and outside companies, with the aim of promoting emancipation and a sense of participation for everyone. Starting from the awareness that, just as for educational and training interventions, every guidance intervention must be configured as a diachronic-formative process (Domenici, 2009), it becomes crucial to direct efforts towards the design of situated and integrated interventions, in the multiple contexts and times of the individual's life. This can only translate into the adoption of approaches that involve high levels of user participation and engagement – which should always be considered as part of a specific community – from design to intervention evaluation (Thomsen, 2017).

Whether it concerns choosing an educational path, searching for a job, or even finding a better balance between personal and professional life, career guidance becomes an invaluable tool and resource through which to ensure active citizenship and social inclusion, starting from the awareness that «uncertainty is inseparable from life» (Morin, 2015, p. 31). Through a critical and problematizing approach, as guaranteed by pedagogy, it is possible to consider the complexity that characterizes contemporary existence to improve guidance processes and their natural and necessary integration with learning processes in various contexts and throughout all stages of life. In order to let career guidance – precisely because of its permanent, emancipatory, and transformative nature – to configure itself as an existential process and, therefore, to ensure benefits in terms of well-being and happiness not only in the workplace but also beyond work, and in the post-work age, namely during retirement, as it is not strictly tied to moments of choice or transition but in shaping a life-long planning, experienced not only

in personal but also, and above all, in communal terms. The commitment, finally, is to requalify the emancipatory value of work starting from guidance practices, through the promotion of the dimension related to work, which means to engage in activities that involve physical or mental effort to achieve a goal, and not just the dimension related to the job, which refers to activities done regularly to earn money. In this direction, career guidance today means not only educating about the complexity that characterizes, even contradictorily, the current and future reality but also educating and training in self-awareness and one's own needs so that the individual can build their career based on their ability to give profound meaning to the physical and mental energies they will invest in their future professional duties.

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