Strategies, competencies and transitions roles in a digital transformational labour market

Paula Ochôa
FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, Portugal
poc.paula@gmail.com

Leonor Gaspar Pinto
CHAM, FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, Universidade dos Açores and Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality, Portugal
lgpinto@sapo.pt

Copyright © 2017 by Paula Ochôa and Leonor Gaspar Pinto. This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0

Abstract:

This paper reviews how work strategies and skills differ in a transformational labour market by describing and discussing findings from a transitional study (2014- ). This initiative arose from a strategy developed by members of the E-skills Observatory of Information-Documentation Sector and teachers from NOVA University on the development of information management and curation competencies in Portugal.

The aim of this study is to explore the extent to which librarians consider the actual transformational labour market have already impacted on their professional roles, competencies and individual development. A range of case studies/narratives/stories from professionals provided part of the evidence base for this research. Data was also collected from written documentation at events and focus groups. Thus, we incorporated not only the perspectives of current professional, but also former ones, analyzing early-, mid- and later-career transitions.

The findings presented in a model of transitions reflected the importance of training more transferable skills through the life course and strategies of career management (adaptability, positivity, action-taking, networking) that facilitate their transitional process.

Keywords: Librarians, Transitions, Competencies, Professional strategies, Digital labour market
Introduction

Transitions research has developed and diversified across different disciplines since the 1980s (life course research, biographical analysis, developmental studies and from different disciplines, especially Sociology, Psychology and Educational Science), epistemological interests and approaches, as well as research methodologies, findings and insights, perspectives and paradigms of uncertain and risky. Transitions research in the Information Society has reached a crossroad: without meaningful change in competencies profiles, obsolescence levels will be a relevant issue in LIS (Library and Information Services) careers, reinforcing the tendency to focus on the professional in permanent transition. As current technological, ecological, economic, political and cultural changes show, a transformational labor market requires that LIS professionals extend their reflexions to the community and stakeholders, creating strong and comprehensive agents of change in the direction of a critical thinking movement in this changing and challenging information landscape.

This paper is based on an ongoing investigation that seeks to answer one particular question posed during one brainstorming discussion about development of information management and digital curation competencies in Portugal: How work strategies and skills differ in a transformational labour market? Answering this question would require understanding individual contributions to collective understandings of activities, performances, interactions and transitions shared meanings. Based on same results, the present paper aims to share some insights into the problematic around Profession theory.

Research Design - interdisciplinary background and influences

Though there are plentiful studies about transitions in careers (Sullivan, 1999; Savickas, 2012), in our opinion the study of LIS transitions still needs to embrace research and interventions that are now proliferating within a wide range of interdisciplinary fields, such as:

Qualitative life course research

It aims reconstructing biographies with a focus on decisions and actions in the life spheres, like education and work, based on narrative interviews or questionnaires, whereas quantitative methods register the course of events and transitions (Heinz, 2009a). Discovering sequences and standard patterns (event history) and linking mechanisms between society and personality in a time and place related framework (Elder, Johnson & Crosnoe, 2003) are expected outcomes of this kind of studies. Recently, the emphasis has been placed on the concept of agency by which individuals construct their own life course in the historical context of opportunities and constraints (Heinz, 2016).

Transitions, turning and tipping points and life trajectories are joint ventures of biographical actors, institutional gatekeepers, opportunity structures, social networks, and living circumstances that demand an active shaping of lives and requiring studying biographies as moving targets (Heinz, 2009b).

The individual construction of a biography is guided not only by institutional standards, models, and social relationships, but also by pathways selection, planning, negotiating, redirecting and actions. Agency is one of the linking mechanisms between changing times and the life course together with the other four principles (Heinz, 2016): the life-span (personality development is a life-long process); time and place (historical periods and socio-ecological settings people experience across their life phases); timing (antecedents and consequences of events and transitions vary according to its timing in a person’s life); and linked lives (socio-historical influences are mediated in networks of shared relationships).
It uses methods of discovery (Abbott, 2004) and procedures in the framework of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), mapping and sequencing transitions as longitudinal dimensions of each life course.

According to the life course paradigm of linked lives, there are no single passages. A person’s life history is not just defined by events, but also by a social recognition of the results of biographical decisions making central the role of narratives in the retrospective construction of the self. Heinz (2016) and Fenwick (2013) give some examples of research questions: How are the causes of an event and its outcome perceived by the actor: is it regarded as a fateful moment in the person’s life or as temporary/passing episode? Do the attributions of causes differ by life experiences, age, gender, levels of education, social origin, professions and living circumstances? And how are transitions mediated by different agencies, policies, and expectations? What metaphors for professional transition can move beyond the limitations of an individual on a forward ‘journey’? (Fenwick, 2013). The focus may be on: the dynamics of specific ‘phases’ of the life course (for example, youth, older life); transitions between these phases, or from one status or circumstance to another (employment trajectories); or the mechanisms which trigger turning points or transitions (like technological disruption in work roles).

Periods of the life course in which new roles are acquired are analyzed as dynamic transitions between the institutions and life spheres of society. Aro (2009) describes an interesting and useful lifespan model of motivation in the context of critical life transitions – the 4C’s characterising the phases of Channeling (goals are inscribed within an opportunity space, constrained by socio-structural factors and age-graded environments), Choices (psychological factors active in the definition of developmental paths), Coagency (the articulation between socio-structural and psychological factors) and Compensation (readjustment to reach desired outcomes).

**Psychological research on transitions**

The study of development processes whereby change occurs. Transitions can be defined as processes of catalysed change due to a rupture and aiming at a new sustainable fit between the person and her current environment studied at a systemic level (Zittoun, 2009). This concept can be connected with other constructs: the individual can be treated as a member of a cohort (life course) and transitions are an institutionalized status passage in the life course of cohorts and a personalized transition for individuals with a distinctive life history. The contexts of the life course change from cohort to cohort and differ within cohorts according to the distribution of economic and social resources. Data can be collected by interviewing carefully selected cases in a cohort, comparing them, and constructing multi-case narratives measuring chronological change at regular intervals: what change, for whom, the direction and extent of change, where and when and how often change occurs (Neale, 2015).

The social or cultural component of psychological processes can be observed at different levels of analysis. It can be observed at the level of intrapersonal phenomena, at the level of interpersonal processes and at the level of intra-group or inter-groups dynamics (Zittoun, 2009). Zittoun (2009) suggests examining systematically three interrelated transition processes: those connected with identity definition, perception or positioning; those connected to learning or also to defining new ways of acting or skills; and those (still a minority) related to sense, values and emotions (through narratives and representations), in order to emphasize the interrelations of dynamics captured by different theoretical constructs.

In this assumption, transitions are seen as processes of reorganization of a system in which people’s interpretation of a perceived rupture plays a major role in their subsequent thoughts,
narratives and actions. A first series of techniques is based on people’s explication of their experience, as these actually unfold (or as close as this is possible). This can be also combined with the collection of various externalisations - for example, asking the subjects to describe their environment, daily activities or current communications (in diaries) that could be compared with other persons, living the same events. As Zittoun (2009, p.21) pointed out, “once the notion of transition becomes theoretically grounded, and translated into non trivial methodological techniques, it can offer an entrance to a better understanding of dynamics of catalysed changes in life-trajectories.”

**Sociology of work and sociology of professions**

According to Fenwick (2013), we might turn to emerging research approaches in professional practice to uncover additional questions and framings that suggest new directions of research in professional transitions, considering Sociology of Professions and their contributions to understand transitions of professions and professional communities.

We can identify at least three main types of transitions affecting professional work:

(1) *Regulation, governance and accountability* with external performance measures and managerial control assuming more importance than internal professional community as a collective, as well as the ascending role of the market in regulating professional work through discourses of client ‘choice’ and demands for customer-orientation in the provision of services (Evetts, 2011; Fenwick, 2013).

(2) *New work structures*, characterised by new interprofessional collaboration and diverse forms of expert knowledge and challenges in LIS boundaries: coproduction and cocreation practices are reconfiguring the nature and demands of professional work.

(3) *Knowledge development* and new capacities among professionals’ roles in digital reconfiguration of professional profiles and identities. Resources for professional learning are potentially richer than ever. Professional competence is more than the routine application of technical knowledge: it is the reflective judgment and decision-making needed to handle uncertain and complex situations. However, knowledge is increasingly marked with insecurity and the task of validating and integrating different knowledges to address specific professional challenges is more demanding. At the same time, this development invites professionals to take on new responsibilities for knowledge and opens new opportunities for engagement. In this dynamic, the cycles of transitions begin with the shift from initial professional education to the workplace, which is generally considered a major gap with consequent struggles in competences readjustments. Workplace learning can be defined as the acquisition of knowledge or skills by formal or informal means that occurs in the workplace also occurring through the relations and dynamics between individual and collectives (Fenwick, 2010). Educational research itself examines whether distinctly different forms of transition are experienced across different professional groups, activities and regions (Lahn & Jensen, 2007, Field, 2009, 2012) and how practices of lifelong learning and systemic transitions influence transitions among professions and professional workers to acknowledge greater complexity.
Different transition types have emerged in sociological and vocational studies (Ochôa & Pinto, 2014), as identified in Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transition type</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic cycles</td>
<td>Events resulting from the beginning/end of academic studies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal development</td>
<td>Events resulting from balancing decisions between familiar life and career.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cycles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning cycles</td>
<td>Events resulting from learning styles developed in formal/informal contexts, personal and group contexts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity cycles</td>
<td>Events resulting from change in Professional identity linked to roles, tasks, organizations and profession.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence cycles</td>
<td>Events resulting from transition periods and from competence development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity cycles</td>
<td>Events resulting from intellectual production and innovation initiatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obsolescence cycles</td>
<td>Events resulting from skills not utilized; skills needed but not available (skills gaps and mismatch).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 – Career transition types (Ochôa & Pinto, 2014)

Career management studies
The inter-relationship between career self-management, competence management, employability and obsolescence have resulted in new perspectives and paradigms for career construction, addressing working issues, such as contextual possibilities, dynamic processes, non-linear progression, multiple perspectives and personal patterns (Savickas, 2012), where knowledge understanding, practical and thinking skills are needed to perform effectively, regardless of the nature, type, size and complexity of work tasks. Within the theory of career construction (Savickas, 2012), the term career means reflection upon activity, that is, reflection upon competences (objective career) and career transitions (subjective career) linked to identity and self-image. An important concept is career adaptability (Savickas, 1997) defined as “the capability of an individual to make a series of successful transitions where the labour market, organization of work and underlying occupational and organizational knowledge bases may all be subject to considerable change” (Bimrose et al., 2011, p. II). Adaptability is a personal strategy (concern, control, curiosity, confidence, commitment) to avoid the risks of skill obsolescence and job insecurity over the life course.

Previous research results
Discussion of LIS critical issues has been made in Portugal since 2005, involving a team of researchers of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of Universidade Nova de Lisboa (Portugal) and librarians of E-skills Observatory of Information Documentation Sector that has been pursuing a line of research that intersects LIS careers with transitions studies and competences development:
From 2005 to 2006: it was developed a prospective study about competencies images perceptions within groups of librarians, stakeholders and users (Pinto & Ochôa, 2006) based on questionnaires and narratives. The study reveals several perceptions gaps between the respondents with negative implications in LIS image and value.

From 2007-2009: it was developed a transitional study with four groups of librarians within four cohorts (1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s), studying their visions about career and based on questionnaires. This study demonstrates that dynamics of continuous novelty and uncertainty, caused by Information Society environments can originate several obsolescence moments.

From 2009-2012: it was developed a transitional study about librarians’ careers, competencies cycle and professional identities (Ochôa, 2012) based on narratives and biographical story. Seven transitions types with several impacts on careers were identified.

From 2012-2014: it was developed a study about obsolescence moments in competencies and major Information Society policies (Ochôa & Pinto, 2014) based on twelve career stories (career biography) narrated by professionals in two librarians cohorts: cohort A, integrating librarians and other information professionals working since 1970 and cohort B, integrating librarians and other information professionals working since 1980. Anchored on the narrative of several and different professional transitions, the study aimed to examine the relationships between information cycles importance in individual careers and individual competence cycles dynamics to understand when obsolescence moments were perceived. Data suggested that obsolescence moments occurs when changes in information processes and tasks implies new ways of working and new skills, crossing all career stages. One of recommendations that emerged from this study pointed to the need of further investigate LIS communities’ obsolescence moments as a critical issue in career and competence management, promoting the debate and new training policies to sustain career capital and improve organizational performance. Another recommendation was the study of LIS profession within the development of transitional labour markets.

**The transitional study (2016-2017): methodology, findings and discussion**

Currently, an ongoing LIS transitional study intends to explore the extent to which librarians consider that the actual transformational labour market have already impacted on their professional roles, competencies and individual development based on a qualitative methodology using a grounded theory approach focused on how subjective experiences can be abstracted into theoretical statements about causal relations between actors, achieved by the interplay between data collection and analysis that constitutes the constant comparative method until the stage of “category saturation” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The purpose of grounded theory is not to make truth statements about reality, but, rather, to elicit understandings about patterned relationships between social actors and how these relationships and interactions actively construct reality (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). According to Suddaby (2006) the grounded theory is an interpretative process that should be used to make statements about how actors interpret reality.

The first goal of this research was the development of a model of how Portuguese librarians collectively view and construe career strategies and competences development in transitions moments related to labour market transformations. As we have mentioned before the process of evolving theory began prior to the actual data collection resulting in preliminary categories related to one another for patterns and themes.
The model (Fig.1), built from in-depth interviews with 25 librarians with multiple and complex transitions and non-linear pathways, suggests that interpretations of changes unfold in three dynamics—Perceived Identity, Competencies self-efficacy and Transitions Interpretation—linked to changes in society and labour market, LIS career self-reflection and Competencies/knowledge use.

A range of case studies/narratives/stories from 20 professionals provide the other part of the evidence base for this research. Data were also collected from written documentation at events and 3 focus groups integrating former 15 LIS community members. Thus, we incorporated not only the perspectives of current but also former and retired professionals, analysing early career, mid- and later-career transitions in the past 10 years as well as the boundary management strategies they used to achieve desired career outcomes and success. The characteristics of transitions management seemed to be dynamic, varying according to life and career stage and pressures from various domains, including family and social background.

Implications for strategies research and the management of personal transitions experiences were also discussed. Besides collective professional strategies through the creation of competencies frameworks in the last decade, the evidence suggests that people construe career strategies along dimensions such as professional Adaptability, positivity, action-taking, and networking. In addition, the study’s reliance on interviews facilitates the emergence of prospective visons about how people construe career boundaries particularly with transferable skills.

Second, the findings indicate that people seek to manage transitions according to their values and goals to engage in desired patterns of career mobility/stability and that these motivate them either to cross or remain within career and competencies-relevant domain boundaries. This suggests that careers strategies encompass dimensions of boundarylessness and embeddedness relating to new competencies cycles. Future research may attempt to map out these patterns and provide a more fully informed perspective for understanding contemporary career patterns. Longitudinal research is also needed to capture and assess how perceptions shape the direction of people’s careers.

By exploring the salience of transitions dynamics and narratives, this study offers a framework for further research with different LIS groups in other countries. This in turn may lead to a greater integration of transition studies within career thinking and competencies cycles.
References


