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Uta Wilkens, Daniel Nermerich*

”Love it, change it, or leave it“–

Understanding Highly-skilled Flexible Workers’ Job Satisfaction from a Psychological Contract Perspective**

In order to understand highly-skilled flexible workers’ job satisfaction, we take their track records into consideration, integrating several employment contracts. We conceptualize our research interest within the framework of the psychological contract to explore individual rationalities in exchange relationships. This expectancy-oriented approach allows the reflection of contract arrangements and related attitudes from a process perspective.

The analysis is based on a qualitative approach, investigating data from 13 in-depth interviews with workers from knowledge-intensive working contexts. As a result, it becomes evident that an inherent notion of continuity independent of the formal work contract exists, job episodes apparently indicate continuity. For the interviewees, pro-active changes in episodic work relationships are a dominant coping pattern for sustaining satisfaction at a high aspiration level. Satisfaction appears as an interactional construct with a high notion of reciprocity, acknowledgment and skill development. The emphasis on career track satisfaction instead of job satisfaction and the specification of dynamics across several job episodes as an external regulation for keeping satisfaction at a high aspiration level provides new insights in research on job satisfaction.

Key words: **job satisfaction, aspiration level, flexible employment, new employment relationship, psychological contract, reciprocity**
(JEL: D23, J28, J24)

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1. Introduction

How does labor market flexibility affect job satisfaction and vice versa? This interdependence is the key concern of this paper. The focus of analysis relies on highly-skilled flexible workers and is based on qualitative interviews. Contradictory findings exist concerning the job satisfaction of this group of employees. In-depth analysis exploring the actors' considerations and rationalities is therefore a promising approach for a better understanding of their demands, expectations and the fulfillment of these criteria.

Job satisfaction is a widespread research topic (Fischer, 2006; Matiaske & Mellewigt, 2001). Empirical analysis concerning job satisfaction related to different contractual arrangements is diverse and do not allow us to draw a clear picture. Several studies confirm the detrimental impact of flexible contracts. Some find negative effects of temporary work on job satisfaction which are linked to perceived job insecurity and involuntariness (Origo & Pagani, 2006; Green & Heywood, 2007). Similar findings, using the European Community Household Panel Survey data, state lower levels of overall satisfaction for fixed-term full-time workers and the self-employed (Kaiser, 2002). Likewise, temporary employment is found to be associated with significantly lower levels of job satisfaction compared to its permanent counterpart (Bardasi & Francesconi, 2003), still marking long-term jobs within a single organization as an ideal for many "new employees" (Huiskamp & Klyutmans, 2004). Related studies provide evidence that temporary contracts are generally less desirable than permanent employment but are considered as stepping stones to permanent jobs (Booth et al., 2002).

Other studies stress no overall significant differences between workers with flexible employment contracts and permanent employees (Green et al., 2009). Following this direction, the contract type does not clearly predict job satisfaction (De Cyper & De Witte, 2006). Likewise, there is evidence that highly qualified flexible workers do not principally differ in job satisfaction from workers in standard employment relationships (Martin, 2006). Differences in job satisfaction cannot be traced back to the question of contract type, whether flexible or not. Especially studies that do not focus on a single employment contract but emphasize career satisfaction including career aspirations and "post organizational career patterns" (Herrmann & Mayrhofer, 2005) identify similar levels of satisfaction among permanent and flexibly employed workers (Mayrhofer et al., 2005; Schiffinger et al., 2007). There is evidence that instead of the contract type the skill level explains differences between employees' job satisfaction. Higher educational levels are typically determined to be associated with higher levels of job satisfaction (e.g. Forth European Working Conditions Survey, 2007). Bidwell and Briscoe (2009) emphasize that highly-skilled workers with other labor market options are more likely to enter free contracting voluntarily. As De Witte and Näswall (2003) or Origo and Pagani (2009) show, it is the feeling of insecurity that is rather associated with a reduction in job satisfaction than temporary work itself. This feeling is more widespread among low-skilled employees and can be explained by reason of reduced choice and weaker labor market bargaining positions (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2008). These distinctive findings make it especially interesting to investigate the job

satisfaction of the highly-skilled flexible workers since two contradicting parameters meet here: the skill level presumably supporting and the formal contract arrangement presumably decreasing job satisfaction due to higher risks of being unemployed.

Labor market statistics (Eurostat, Labour Force Survey, 2009) demonstrate that there is a trend of increasing the forms of flexible employment among highly qualified workers in the last ten years, reaching a share of 33.6 percent in the EU or 35.5 percent in Germany in 2009 related to the total employment of this group (all data relate to the group with tertiary education, ISCED levels 5 and 6). The research focus in our study addresses a group of employees of increasing relevance in the employment system. However, a distinction between different forms of flexibility is necessary within this field of analysis because of the different qualitative characteristics of these forms. Part-time employment concerns 15.2 percent of highly-skilled employees in the EU or 18.4 percent in Germany. This form of employment flexibility is viewed as voluntary and does not change the quality of working life in general. Instead, emerging forms of flexibility, especially temporary employment, are more often considered as disadvantageous for workers. Temporary employment is a phenomenon not limited to low-skilled employees, workers who more likely experience precarious situations. Data from Eurostat, Labour Force Survey (2009) indicate 9.6 percent of fixed-term workers among the highly-qualified employees in Europe or 8.2 percent in Germany. Another group is subsumed under flexible employment in official statistics, the self-employed who can be defined as entrepreneurs without staff members. Likewise, this group of workers is also described as “entreployee“, as entrepreneurs of their own manpower (Pongratz & Voß, 2003) in scientific discourse. The share of self-employment among the highly-qualified workers increased from 7.4 in 2000 to 8.8 percent in 2009 in the EU and from 7.2 to 8.9 percent in Germany. When excluding part-time employment from the data indicating increasing labor market flexibility, a share of 18.4 percent in the EU and 17.1 percent in Germany remains among the highly-skilled who are temporary employed or self-employed in 2009.

The overall picture of labor market flexibility including the highly-skilled work force leads to the conclusion that the subject plays a vital role in management studies. Since highly-skilled workers are regarded as critical for organizational performance, the increasing number of flexibly employed highly-skilled workers must be treated seriously. Their job satisfaction is of major concern and challenging for Human Resource Management policies and practices.

In the next section, we explain why we consider psychological contract research as a suitable framework for analyzing highly-skilled flexible workers' job satisfaction. Moreover, we link this research direction with concepts of job satisfaction. In the third section, we introduce our research design of a qualitative process analysis. Empirical findings are presented in the fourth section. We then succeed with the data interpretation in the light of job satisfaction research and finally give a summary of limitations, further research demands and some practical implications.

2. Job satisfaction within the framework of psychological contract research

2.1 *Premises for the analysis of job satisfaction of highly-skilled flexible workers*

Analyzing the highly-skilled flexible workers' job satisfaction requires a framework facing more than a single employment contract or job. The track record and career progression, especially employees' opportunities and ways of assuring continuity in the track record must be taken into consideration since they can presumably compensate the restrictions of a fixed-term contract (Schiffinger et al., 2007). In time-framed work relationships it is open whether a long term perspective is realized in other settings or if these settings rather express discontinuity. We assume that instead of a progression within an employing organization, the alternative notion of continuity in loosely coupled work relationships facing mutually valued exchange episodes among temporary and changing contract partners exists. Therefore, the theoretical framework should give access to the general logic between certain jobs being of individual relevance for the flexibly employed. This post-organizational perspective draws attention to varying membership across organizations (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2003) and considers employees' network base, bridging time shaped assignments and setting opportunities beyond the borders of a single organization (Wilkens, 2008). The theoretical framework must deal with the assumption that the single work contract is not necessarily the relevant unit for highly-skilled flexible workers when reflecting work-related satisfaction. A framework that includes possible considerations of a diverging reference base is needed for the analysis. The framework must be open for both a process analysis including certain contracts as well as an asset analysis integrating certain job characteristics.

2.2 *Psychological contract research*

In order to find access to job satisfaction of highly-skilled flexible workers, we subsume our research question under the perspective of psychological contract research. This step allows process-oriented evaluation of the fulfillment of demands in the employment biography. Additionally, psychological contract research focuses on a cognitive representation instead of customized conditions (Hornung et al., 2010). A psychological contract is defined as an individual's expectations and beliefs regarding a series of mutual obligations in the employee-employer-relationship (Levinson et al., 1962; Rousseau 1995). The "terms and conditions of the reciprocal exchange agreement that constitutes the employment relationship" (Hornung et al., 2010, p. 112) are of major concern. The construct of the psychological contract is not a clear theoretical approach, but rather a framework in order to address questions in the employer-employee-relationship that have to do with expectations, perceived obligations as well as affective and normative aspects of the relationship beyond the formal work contract. With respect to highly-skilled flexible workers, this is a fruitful perspective since it allows the analysis of their rationalities. Moreover, there is an increasing awareness for a procedural perspective (Conway & Briner, 2009) in psychological contract research, which means that the evaluation whether expectations could be fulfilled or not does not necessarily address a single work contract but rather a track record. This is

also connected with the consideration that actors other than the current employer are regarded as psychological contract partners, addressing a professional community or network base as a reference (Wilkens, 2004). These are aspects that make the framework fruitful for our research issue.

2.3 Psychological contract research and the construct of job satisfaction

In linking the psychological contract perspective with job satisfaction, the basic outline is straightforward. Promises which are kept promote satisfaction and ongoing relationships, whereas broken promises are associated with negative emotions, followed by withdrawal (Zhao et al., 2007; Conway & Briner, 2009). Thus, the explanation of job satisfaction offered by means of a psychological contract approach is twofold. Firstly, a negative perspective considers violation or contract breach as a precursor of dissatisfaction, ensuing withdrawal cognitions and turnover intentions. This perspective is predominant and these consequences are steadily confirmed by strong correlations (meta-analytic findings: withdrawal cognitions (-.74) and turnover intentions (-.53); see Tett & Meyer, 1993). Secondly, the construct includes aspects of job satisfaction which can be traced back to matters of a reciprocal nature of social exchange relationships (Gouldner, 1960; Blau, 1964), especially as reciprocity is seen as a “key explanatory mechanism” for the underlying psychological contract approach (Coyle-Shapiro, 2002) that matters for all forms of work relationships (Martin, 2006; Wilkens, 2006). This is in line with the high notion of fairness rules and reciprocity in research regarding the interdependence between workers and organizations (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2008; Wilkens & Minssen, 2010). The construct of reciprocity can be seen as both a consequence and process. Reciprocity in consequence evaluates results and reflects obligations in a mutual gift exchange (Fehr & Schmidt, 1999; Göbel et al., 2007). Reciprocity in processes focuses on the interdependence of actions. It is understood in terms of interactions or in-kind responding actions in order “to reciprocate” (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2002; Wilson, 2008). This means that workers evaluate their counterparts’ actions as disadvantageous or beneficial and respond by building up commensurate negative or positive attitudes, (dis)satisfaction. Thus, job satisfaction can be seen as result of a process in social exchange relationships.

Regarding a positive assessment result (reciprocity as a consequence), it can be assumed that workers adhere to a favorable situation building up positive attitudes. This notion corresponds with the common definition of job satisfaction aiming at underlying favorable judgments of the job (as a whole with its certain characteristics) which include the described notion of continuity facing employment episodes of temporary workers that are considered of mutual value among the contract partners.

Research on job satisfaction provides a very distinctive discussion of fulfilling job demands. Despite conceptual diversity, the typical approach is accordingly represented in measuring correlations between evaluative satisfaction reports and observable job aspects like pay, colleagues or task characteristics (Martin, 2003; Landy, 2007). Therefore, usually the objective work situation is shaping a global understanding of job satisfaction as a feature of apparent work conditions.

An alternative approach is proposed by Bruggemann (1974) shifting the focus to a dynamic process-oriented and qualitative perspective. Bruggemann draws attention

to the existence of different forms of job satisfaction depending on external job characteristics as well as individual aspiration levels. As a result, different individual reactions and dynamics can be distinguished as coping patterns for similar situations (Bruggemann, 1976). The original concept is continued and introduced internationally by Büssing and Bissels (1998), marking three central variables: a comparison of the actual work situation and personal aspirations, a motivational variable in changing aspiration levels and problem-solving behavior in terms of pro-active or resigned coping patterns.

The consideration of dynamics in examination of work situations, the cognitive conception and diverging forms of satisfaction is essential to us for this field of research. This enables us to take job satisfaction into account as part of job-related socialization processes. Consequently and in line with the psychological contract approach, attention to rationalities in connection with aspirations and expectations must be considered as well as mutuality in work relationships (Büssing, 1991).

The lesson learned from integrating job satisfaction research with the psychological contract perspective is that there is a dynamic component of workers' evaluation and coping processes in examining their individual constructs of work relationships. This crucial point allows us and also claims to focus on cognitions, especially expectations, to identify the relevant recipients for fulfilling expectations, as well as individual aspiration levels and coping patterns in interaction systems.

3. Method and sample of the qualitative empirical exploration

In order to explore meanings, cognitions and rationalities regarding their work relationships, thirteen semi-structured, in-depth interviews with highly skilled flexible workers were conducted in 2009/2010. The interviews lasted on average 90 minutes. They were based on workers' representations of their employment biographies and detailed descriptions of their current working situations. The nature of typically quantitative empirical analysis of job satisfaction coincides with difficulties in making mutual interaction and relationships accessible. Similarly, research on psychological contracts is methodologically designed mostly by means of self-report questionnaires, facing diverse problems (Conway & Briner, 2009). Limitations in wording and scope of closed evaluative questions neglect important facets of perception, associations or context-specific references in terms of social interactions and critical incidents. Therefore, we selected a more open, qualitative approach at this point in research to investigate the cognitive evaluation process embedded in work relationships including normative and affective orientations. For this reason we conducted semi-structured interviews with narrative parts.

Our sample consists of workers, employed in knowledge-intense professional service sectors in Germany such as consulting, IT and media, where flexible arrangements are rather typical. The mean age of the interviewees is 43, the genders equally represented. The sample consists of the self-employed people working on a freelance basis and (project-oriented) fixed-term workers as well as of "entreploees" with permanent contracts in case they show different contractual arrangements and changes of contract partners, possibly including periods of unemployment. The selection criterion here was the post-organizational career since our target group is not sufficiently de-

fined by the formal work arrangement as a single criterion in a specific point in time. Therefore, we did not limit our perspective to the narrow distinction between legally independent or formally fixed-term contracts versus permanent employment contracts. To assure that flexibility is a characteristic of their employment biographies as opposed to a phenomenon of career entry, we excluded job starters from our sample. Thus, we premised at least five years of work experience. With regard to the group of self-employed, the most important characteristic is that they are not entrepreneurs in the sense of predominantly exploiting other workers' performance. All interviewees marked as self-employed therefore focus on their own manpower. Moreover, as we targeted the group of highly-skilled participants we premised a certain formal level of education (at least one academic degree) and employment at a related level. We therefore focus on a group of workers not principally belonging to disadvantaged participants of the labor market in terms of limited alternatives. This distinction seems to be valuable in order to control pure involuntary contracting as a potential predicting factor of low job satisfaction (Bidwell & Briscoe, 2009).

Table 1: Sample

	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6
Age	43	47	45	41	33	45
Qualification	Degree in education	MA	Dipl.	M.A., MBA, Doctoral Degree	M.A., Doctoral Degree	Dipl.
Occupation	25 years	18 years	20 years	14 years	7 years	15 years
Turnover	4	3	8	3	3	3
Contracts	Perm., free	Perm., free	Perm., free, fixed term/perm.	Free/self employed, self-employed	Fixed-term, unemployed, self-employed, fixed-term	Perm., self-employed
Sector	Consulting	Media	IT	Consulting	Science	Consulting

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7
Age	34	37	42	53	53	44	45
Qualification	MBA	Dipl., MBA	Degreed en- gineer	Dipl.	Dipl., MBA	Dipl., Doctoral De- gree	Dipl., Doctoral Degree, MBA
Occupation	9 years	15 years	14 years	28 years	26 years	16 years	17 years
Turnover	3	3	5	9	4	3	5
Contracts	Free, Perm.	Free, Perm.	Perm.	Perm.	employed, managing partner, self-employed	Perm., self-employed	Perm., Self- employed
Sector	Consulting	IT	IT	IT	Consulting	Consulting	Consulting

Research access was mainly gained through the use of a professional social network inquiry and in addition for some cases through the authors' professional contacts. Workers meeting the research requirements were requested to participate by submitting them a digital covering letter and flyer explaining the purpose and scope of the study as well as assuring anonymity.

An exploration of job satisfaction of highly-skilled flexible workers in the framework of a psychological contract needs to specify and reflect certain variables discussed in the former paragraphs. Our access to these constructs was as follows:

- The general perception and evaluation of flexible contract arrangements was analyzed by discussing time-phased and freelance contracts as well as related risks in the respective employment biography.
- The centrality of work and performance orientation was subject of the interviews in order to estimate the individual aspiration level.
- The most important job characteristics explicitly or implicitly expected by the flexible workers as well as the perceived individual obligations were explored by narrative questions concerning the employment biography, including reasons for leaving an organization, and reflections of certain developments and critical incidents in the individual track record.
- In order to understand the level and unit most relevant for being satisfied with the job or employment biography we asked in the interviews who the counterparts of the psychological contract are to whom the flexible workers feel obliged and address their expectations.
- In order to detect the construct of *reciprocity* and surrounding *cognitive processes* we tried to gain an understanding of the balance of contracts and asked for job related expectations and perceived obligations directly and indirectly by open description in the narrative interview parts (see above). The analysis was not exclusively limited to matters of contract breach, rather focused on relevant time phases and episodes that were highlighted by the interviewees. Since we considered fairness as an important indicator for reciprocal, balanced work relationships, we tried to identify this from two directions. Firstly, we asked interviewees to give a picture of critical incidents by describing and reflecting situations perceived as unfair. Secondly, we complemented this incident-based approach by asking for associations of what they believe a fair work relationship generally consists, in order to investigate norms governing the relationship, identify reference groups and reflect exchange modes.

As typically general satisfaction statements and the evaluation of certain job characteristics do not allow the understanding of the cognitive processes leading to the individual perception of reciprocity, the reflection of the whole professional biography including rationalities, expectations, obligations and activities or coping patterns is considered as suitable access for the analysis presented.

Emphasis was given to the identification of patterns in order to explore its more general meaning on basis of descriptions and representations in the data evaluation process. "In general, data analysis means a search for pattern in data – recurrent be-

havior, objects, or a body of knowledge. Once, a pattern is identified, it is interpreted in terms of a social theory or the setting in which it occurred“ (Neuman, 2003, p. 447). Thus a process of organizing data into conceptual categories with respect to our research question was conducted, supported by the qualitative text analysis software MAXQDA.

For this purpose, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. In order to support validation at the initial step of data creation as well as to control for interviewer effects, the interviews were conducted by two interviewers in most cases. All interviews were subsequently discussed with the help of a short report sheet containing the evaluation of the interview situation mainly to reveal possible inconsistencies and difficult sections. This approach also allowed for later reconsideration of the individual cases. However, the findings are an interpretation based on the larger body of the material, abstracted from single cases. The analytic process started by structuring respondent's narratives concerning their employment biographies, including reflections of transitions and turnover or career stages. In order to structure respondents' representations of their work relationships, a category system was devised, comprising the main categories: content of their psychological contract (comprising expectations and perceived obligations), contract partners (who is addressed), evaluation process (fairness perception and critical incidents), basic orientations towards work (self-perception and role in work relationships, significance of work). In a second step, those interview passages were extracted, where participants expressed (dis)satisfaction and related terms (e.g. satisfy, (dis)satisfying). We suppose this direct approach being appropriate, since the construct of "satisfaction" can be articulated in workers' experience (Nagy, 2002, Neuberger, 1974, p. 151). Thirdly, in order to identify central themes, satisfaction statements highlighted by the interviewees were related to the above-mentioned categories. In this manner, relevant aspects of job satisfaction could be revealed that correspond to the structured material, representing interviewees representations of their work biographies and current work arrangements.

4. Empirical findings – Perception and evaluation of flexible contract arrangements

4.1 Continuity of job episodes

Since flexibility is a characteristic of the interviewees' employment biography for many years, this circumstance is taken for granted and not discussed as an obstacle or a source of dissatisfaction in general. A fixed-term contract is not considered as an indicator for increasing job insecurity. *“Well, such time limitations are per se no problem, as long as the framework of the fixed-term contract or similar, yes, gives access to a higher-level or more challenging job”*(F5). Risks in an employment biography are recognized but considered as problem of long-term employment contracts as well: *“This insecurity: I am dependent somewhere. There is no, really no guarantee that you actually get the price later [...] Funnily enough, the person I spoke to [in a job interview] was not in the company any more, three weeks after we spoke”*(M7).

The flexibility in the work contract does not lead to a specific discussion around security and insecurity as could be assumed especially from research dealing with the risks of flexibility (e.g. van Oorschot, 2004). This can be explained as flexibility does

not necessarily conflict with continuity. The continuity of the track record and not of work contract is pivotal for the interviewees. Their crucial point is the logical connection between the single job episodes representing a fixed-term contract or certain contract changes. *“The actual career plan is certainly a process that is based on certain considerations and then definitive decisions too”* (M4). However it must be mentioned that this process of realizing opportunities is not consequently planned or predictable *“I am actually convinced that my personal development is not strategy-based, but that favorable circumstances and maybe also certain competencies of mine such as professional competency naturally, but also a certain social competence [...] have played a role”* (M3). The continuity through logically connected job episodes results from a strong focus on individual expertise (see 4.2) and network building (see 4.4.).

The interviewees try to achieve positions and projects where they can move something, gain influence, and show high performance with adequate compensation. They also recognize limitations within organizational structures and that there are path-dependencies in their track record of post-organizational careers, allowing two directions: integrating into a company after a few years (see also 4.3) or the institutionalization of a self-deployment status. *“This whole career plan is designed so that you reach this position eventually, and I simply decided to realize it on my own”* (F6). *“because I have come to love my independency and the flexibility associated with it and now don't want to exchange it through a larger network and once more end up being a servant to a master”*(M6). The integration into corporate enterprises is considered – not necessarily realized – as an alternative personal development perspective within organizational borders: *“which, by the way, was one of the reasons to apply initially to a corporate enterprise back then, where there are possibly better prospects for development”*(M2). In contrast, a pure continuation of fixed-term contracts as dependent employee is considered as not socially accepted as a successful track record: *“Job hopping is not good. And after a year you know how the official processes work and how to manage your work [...] So actually my point is always to create a structure that supports problem-oriented work”* (F3).

As a consequence, the question of job satisfaction must be mirrored in the light of the track record whether job episodes are connected to each other or not.

4.2 Centrality of work as centrality of expertise

The focus on continued job episodes is combined with a high centrality of work. To state this more precisely, it is not just centrality of work but centrality of work expertise, since workers have to assure and signalize specialized skills and effectiveness: *“Regardless of my actual capabilities, if my track record solely contains “astro-paleo-botany”, than no one will say that I could manage light rail traffic, so something must be entered in professional CV competencies, experience and references”* (M5). The difference between centrality of expertise versus centrality of work highlights an emphasis of work content and development, which is important for the interviewees. Project-oriented work appears to be an adequate framework in this context since certain stages are understood as possibilities to experience success, professionally grow and build a source of personal valued impulses, basing the central position of work as expertise: *“Project work allows me to more or less constantly contribute to corporate changes and personally develop”*(F4). *“I get a mind-blowing number of impulses from work which keep me on my toes. I meet interesting people, develop personal*

relationships which are pleasant and learn. No, without work life would be gruesome” There is more emphasis on expertise than on work context: *“If I sit down and read specialist literature [...] and then write an article and am not paid for writing it, is this then work? [...] Honestly I cannot imagine a life without reading a specialist book, but it would be fine without a work relationship if I had enough savings”* (M5) or on payment: *“If I label my profession as work one day, then I’ll quit. I believe that if you spend so much time with this activity each day of your life (...) then you should choose an activity that you enjoy and that motivates intrinsically and you do not regard as work in the original sense”*(M1). *“That is to say, you find it so exciting and this is the true incentive for me to do it [...] this is a super interesting case for me, great as a reference, forget the money [...] but if there is nothing more than a very poor day’s rate in it for me then I will consider whether to do this project”* (F6).

Consequently, even if there are basic considerations on adequate payment, workers tend to highlight work content under the lens of a personal development perspective, building up expertise.

4.3 Keeping aspiration levels: acknowledgment and skill development in challenging jobs, sustained through job mobility

A considerably high aspiration level can be confirmed within our sample group as they live up to their own standards in *“being and delivering the best”* (F6). There is a predominant notion of problem-solving in most of the interviewed persons’ self-perceptions, seeing themselves in a position to improve, help and create success: *“I always sell myself as a “Swiss Army knife”: multifunctional, easy to handle and as a provider of pragmatic results”* (M7). Job satisfaction is gained by results confirmed by self-assessment, client feedback as well as feedback from peers and subordinates: *“I really thrive on people who I appreciate saying: that was a great job”* (M7). *“I like it when someone poses me a problem and then says: “I’m at a loss” and I work on it and provide a solution and seeing that you have managed something for employees who were unable to manage it themselves, that’s great”* (M5).

The general job characteristics of the highly-skilled flexible workers can be described by demanding jobs and satisfaction resulting from fulfilling these demands. If the interviewees have to deal with restrictions and are afraid of failing their high aspiration level, they consider exit options leading to voluntary turnover. This is especially true if their demands are answered with *“killer phrases”* such as *“we have never done it this way before and why do we have to change it, everything’s just fine as it is and similar phrases [...] so that I wait and see who will then call me”* (M1). Most interviewees perceive a window of opportunities and tend to decrease discrepancies by action, not necessarily by cognitive adjustment or reevaluation. In this way, episodic, project-oriented working forms allow a framework of changing challenges, renegotiation and choice: *“I am not obliged to accept tasks. I can also always say “no”. That is very important to me; to simply have the feeling not to be obliged to do something, and I sometimes don’t”* (F2). The aspirations of high-quality work are on the one hand seen as an obligation, but on the other hand sought to realize as a personal standard, which cannot be easily abandoned: *“you develop certain common quality standards [...] at the back of your mind [...] going down a gear is difficult, but going a gear higher would be easier I guess”*(F2).

Accordingly, within our sample, a decrease in the aspiration level was generally not the coping pattern for restrictions and critical situations. The dynamic could rather

be observed with respect to the individual mobility as a coping pattern for holding and fulfilling high aspirations. As a contrasting result to the tendency of proactively changing work situations, a decrease of the aspiration level as a coping pattern in a situation of unfulfilled job demands can be observed. According to Bruggemann, this resembles the form of resigned job satisfaction. It refers to a person who indistinctly feels satisfied by decreasing the level of aspiration, adapting to an unfavorable work situation. The interviewee is reporting to be *“actually fully satisfied”* (F3) which turns out to be a cognitive adaption, as this statement appears to be relative to an earlier situation where she was *“highly dissatisfied”* due to overextended tasks and insufficient but claimed support. However, generally sharing a high aspiration level, this reaction is shown in the light of being a last resort, forced by external necessities. Satisfaction is associated with a capitulation of former aspiration levels in which not high performance, but little success counts: *“I also always strive to make the best out of a situation, and see things positively. Well, I have now created my own little division where I can act and where I experience my little feeling of success [...] and where I work along independently”*. Turnover intentions are expressed, but not realized because of transaction-related obstacles facing family commitment: *“If the financial aspect didn't exist, I probably would have already quit. So I am satisfied in sense of me making the best of it, as has been said. I have certain necessities due to my private situation. My mother is sick, I have to care for her [...] therefore I have little leeway. This conflict has always existed. I would have moved jobs, but I couldn't [...] and so I have now decided to simply live with it.”*

This observation is exceptional and might also explain why the expression “job satisfaction” does not have a purely positive connotation for the interviewees. If it has a notion of going backwards and being passive (resigned job satisfaction according to Bruggemann), there is a negative association. There is only a positive association with the expression in the sense of progress and development: *“you always try to give your best [...], achieve the best possible, don't you? That's it, you could never be satisfied with what you had [...] so you need an early-warning system and there you also have to do more than merely what's expected”* (M4).

4.4 Psychological contract partners: Self-obligation and supportive counterparts

The construct of the psychological contract incorporates expectations, workers' perceived obligations and fulfillment of obligations by their counterparts. The specification of the psychological contract partner is an important information in order to identify reasons, interactions or the point in time when expectations are violated in the employment biography. Who are the crucial counterparts?

It is noticeable that the interviewees articulate a high level of self-obligation. They express a feeling of being obliged *“to my standards [...] standards related to what you actually do and do not do and in relation to quality, [...] “You solve problems at the touch of a button. You take care of your pension yourself. You have to sell the items yourself, complete the work yourself.”* (M7). Moreover, the interviewees address individual actors more than companies or collective actors. *“I don't get orders from companies, I always get them from a person who signs them”* (M5). There is a close relationship to the identified counterparts or psychological contract partners: *“If I work together with such a client, I collaborate with them very closely [...] mutual trust which is quite evident. I would say that within the course of all projects in the last ten*

years [...] I have always made friends" (M5). Counterparts or psychological contract partners are especially associated in the meaning of increasing opportunities, personal development and growth: "because I am getting the most tasks from him. He is also now the person who interfaces with [the company] and maintained the contact earlier" (F2). "He is the best sales trainer I have ever experienced. So I fully hold him in high regard [...] Even though we occasionally didn't work together we have always kept in touch" (F1). The interviewees especially highlight the supportive role of diverse counterparts in their employment biography.

In addition to the individualized relationships with supportive counterparts a personal network for stabilizing the individual development and track record is of relevance: *"Until now this has been carried out exclusively in a personal network [...], this means that I have enough people who call me and say: I have an idea, we are currently looking for this and that...do you have any time for me?" (F4). It can be summarized that the interviewees do not consider the fulfillment of their demands in a specific bounded framework with specific actors (e.g. supervisors) and units (e.g. departments, organizations). Rather they think and act across boundaries in a kind of personal flow. This is combined with a high level of self-obligation. Therefore, there is no specific set of expectations that has to be fulfilled by specific people or organizations – an important point for reconceptualizing the construct of job satisfaction of highly-skilled flexible workers.*

4.5 Reciprocity

The findings presented so far show that the highly-skilled flexible workers developed certain coping patterns for dealing with the challenges of their contractual arrangement in terms of expertise status, episodic orientation, voluntary turnover, high self-obligation as well as high community-orientation. However, in the light of psychological contract research, the mere existence of these coping patterns should not already be interpreted as indicator for reciprocity. In our theoretical framework satisfaction is related to reciprocity as a result of a process in social exchange relationships.

With respect to our framework, satisfaction is regarded as an evaluation result where imbalance eventually initiates turnover *"I have just used this metaphor of a scale. Well, this very scale is not only balanced, but is also tilted to the positive side. Positive in this sense means that I remain loyal to the company, stay there and enjoy a certain satisfaction with this work" (M1). According to the content of the psychological contract high performance is exchanged for high payment in the course of project-oriented work. In this respect, workers expect demanding tasks where they can experience effectiveness and significance, facing perspectives for personal development as well (see 4.2). The high aspiration levels mentioned above are important here. "If I gain the long-term impression that I cannot realize this because the company is not backing me, then I must look for something else. Here, I am only aware of three options: love it, change it, or leave it" (M4). With this notion in mind, it is expected that the preconditions for high performance are fulfilled, including autonomy, where applicable a powerful team and managerial backing for projects, assured feasibility, the possibility to succeed but challenging tasks and opportunities for professional development.*

Additionally, satisfaction shows up within interaction. However, it is not fully expressed in short term compensation, but with a meaning of continuity, reliability and reputation. Mutual support and reciprocal exchange initiates and facilitates work rela-

tionships, and therefore the opportunity of linkages between episodes: “*and I was his sparring partner on the phone as he was extremely busy. And then there was a first real project order*” [...] “*So I am even giving input in advance, in a carefree manner, but I have a fairly good feeling that this will form a reciprocal basis*” (F6). In reflecting the balance of work relationships, again something personal is crucial and the essential question is, if a work relationship is fundamentally affected, concerning personal respect: “*In the end it pretty much boils down to the chemistry between us, I can put away unfairness. I have been stabbed in the back, and someone even betrayed me. I mean I become aware of the whole spectrum [...] but as long as I have the impression that the someone respects me and I can or do respect this person too...business is war with modern instruments [...] you must be able to cope with this*” (F6). As a result, in work arrangements, whether they are timed or permanent by contract, the social exchange nature of work relationships must be considered and therefore mutuality as well as a certain alignment of perspectives. For those with employment contracts, it is reflected in being a high performance member of the organization, for free contractors it shows up in the perception of being a respected actor in a professional community, a “sparring partner”. Thus, satisfaction is expressed in respective appreciation and recurring contacts: “*you perceive [...] it for example by being asked and by being offered projects or tasks. If this stops [...] you know that people are unhappy with your work*” (M4). “*So, a sparring partner is only someone who I respect and respects me. That has something to do with being on a par [...]. My contact network incorporates giving and taking. If this is one-sided, it doesn't work*” (F6). It becomes obvious that interviewees' job satisfaction is routed in mutuality, in shared value of the exchange relationship. Job satisfaction is only thinkable “*as well as a measure for [...] clients, [...] for mutual satisfaction of course*” (F2).

Therefore, understanding job satisfaction of our target group demands the consideration of reciprocity in consequence and action. It is represented in an assessment result reflecting the exchange relationship and covers normative aspects of fairness in interactions. Independent work arrangements, respectively project-oriented frameworks, seem to meet workers expectations, since they allow challenges and changes, choice and renegotiation as well as a feeling of success. Bearing in mind the aspect of continuity, balanced exchange is also expressed by acknowledgement from important organizational actors and the network community.

5. Data interpretation and discussion

5.1 Career track satisfaction replaces the construct of job satisfaction

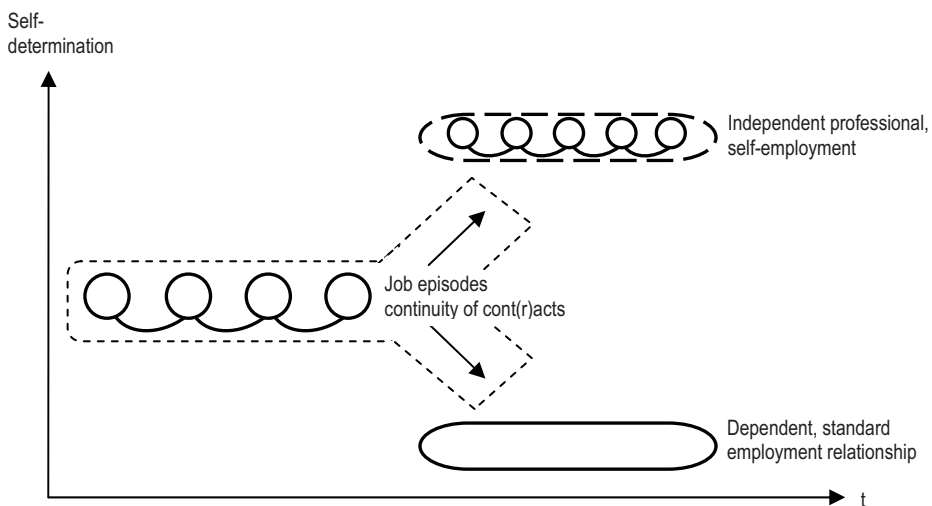
To sum up our findings, they show that perceptions and evaluations of flexible contract arrangements beyond permanent employment relationships are mirrored in a continuity of job episodes. Continuity is not sufficiently determined by the objective contract or job characteristics. In this respect, opportunities and links between stages of an episodic construct of work relationships are crucial for workers, symbolized by the sequence of circles in figure 1. This especially demands the assurance of skill development towards building up expertise and bridging time shaped-working forms. The fulfillment of expectations and related aspects of job satisfaction depend on the continuity between the episodes. In the rationality of the highly-skilled flexible workers the construct of career track satisfaction is pivotal whereas job satisfaction with a narrow framework and focus of a specific job does not meet the observed evaluation

process that goes beyond this border. As long as a job episode allows to meet enabling counterpart and provides some opportunities for the future it is accepted as reciprocal exchange relationship even though benefits are expected in future and not in present. Actual work relationships are evaluated in the light of opportunities for future development.

5.2 *Voluntary turnover and cross-border movements for keeping aspiration levels*

The high aspiration level of the flexible employed highly-skilled workers defines a quality standard that is essential for personal development. There is a tendency to keep aspiration levels and rather adapt current work situations. The so-called standard employment relationship (at the bottom of figure 1), which is commonly defined by a permanent, full-time, presumably socially secure contract of employment, and that in turn is characterized at heart by submission to one employer's command in time, place and manner of how the work is to be done, might conflict with a high aspiration level and a more independent self-concept. In order to fulfill high demands of personal growth, job mobility to more inspiring and challenging work contexts is the consequence. Turnover to other jobs is voluntary and pro-active, preferably not a pure reaction to existing dependencies or perceived penalties. This pro-activity leading to job-mobility is combined with and seems to result from the high self-obligation.

Figure 1: The Y-model in the track-record of highly-skilled flexible workers



The flexibly employed cannot reconcile the formal status of dependent time-shaped working forms (whether fixed-term or frequent changes of “permanent” contracts) with their high aspiration level, a self-conception as expert and their high self-obligation along the track record. As a consequence, they shift their formal status from dependent to self-employment and conceptualize this for themselves (and pre-

sumably also to impress others) as individual development to a higher status as “independent professionals” (top of figure 1). They build a new framework that facilitates self-determination and choice. In order to deal with related risks the “entreprenees” develop a network base that bridges time shaped assignments. Actual work relationships are evaluated in the light of opportunities for future development.

5.3 Extending the process-perspective in the concept of job satisfaction

According to Bruggemann (1976) job satisfaction is not a static construct of customized demands, but rather a concept with inherent dynamics of increasing and decreasing aspiration levels according to the fulfillment of demands. One case in our sample mirrored this concept. The decision for a permanent employment contract was explained with security demands – a status that could in this case only be achieved by decreasing the aspiration level. Resigned job satisfaction was the consequence.

Within our sample, a second type could be observed – a type that leads to an extension of the process-perspective in job satisfaction research. Job dynamics can be explained by pro-active operations of the highly-skilled flexible employed for keeping their high aspiration level. The observed dynamic is not based on a regulation of the individual aspiration level within an organizational framework. In contrast there is a regulation via changing the job or job conditions while maintaining the high job demands. An external dynamic must be considered in addition to the internal dynamic of aspiration levels which has already been described by Bruggemann (1976). The external dynamic should not be primarily conceptualized as a coping pattern due to perceived psychological contract breach - a well known interpretation from psychological contract research - but as a proactive pattern for sustaining high aspiration levels.

This allows the conclusion from our analysis that job satisfaction in the sense of career track satisfaction is especially crucial for highly-skilled flexible workers since their regulating activities not only affect the psychological contract but also the formal work contract. Voluntary turnover and cross-border movements are the consequence. In order to deal with increasing risks of unemployment resulting from the self-initiated flexibility the highly-skilled workers develop activities for stabilizing their employment biography by individual professional networks and skill development.

6. Outlook

It must be emphasized that our sample incorporates limitations regarding industry sector and age. The presented data based on a biographical approach including individual ups and downs (e.g. periods of unemployment) have a pure explorative character and do not allow us to draw general conclusions beyond the phenomenon observed in the sample. Within the sample we identified two types, the first and dominant pro-active type among the interviewees can be characterized by cross-border movements for keeping aspiration levels and track-record related satisfaction instead of job satisfaction. The second type was only represented by one person moving into a permanent employment while decreasing the aspiration level and reporting resigned job satisfaction. Since this second type is already well-known in research on job satisfaction while the first type represented by 12 interviewees gives new insights with respect to rationalities and self-conceptions it is justifiable to introduce this type. Further quantitative

research must systematically analyze the relevance of this type and to test the assumed relations between aspiration level, self-obligation and voluntary turnover among the highly-skilled flexible workers.

In general, the sample of highly-skilled flexible workers in knowledge-intense work fields focuses an important and growing professional group, since patchwork-like employment biographies and nontraditional careers beyond organizational borders are of increasing relevance for the employment market. Moreover, we suppose this group to be highly relevant for organizational performance, as they enhance client-specific services and contribute to the ability to manage organizational change. Consequently, more attention should be paid to the appropriate practical policies facilitating career track satisfaction of these workers.

According to our findings, important job characteristics are challenging projects allowing personal development on the job in terms of expertise and professional knowledge. Contacts in professional communities for establishing a personal network are similarly important. Highly-skilled flexible workers want to experience opportunities and are prepared to accept higher job insecurity as long as alternative mechanisms for stabilizing their employment biography are attainable. A personnel management which transforms these principles in policy and practice does not necessarily reduce voluntary turnover significantly but enhances the development of dynamic capabilities since a development orientation is cultivated. Moreover, related policies and practices denote signals in recruitment policies attracting employees with demands in individual growth and with high self-obligation.

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