

What constitutes a good career? A vision of responsive careers and choices in the broader interest

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Abstract

This article examines the tension between individual freedom of choice (personal fit) and collective necessity (social fit) against the backdrop of the current labour market crisis. Whereas the focus has historically shifted from social necessity to personal self-development, shortages in crucial sectors are now forcing a moral and political reevaluation of what constitutes a 'good career'. The authors advocate the development of responsive career paths that explicitly link individual desires with societal interests. Through value-driven guidance, a new balance can be found between personal meaning (personal fit) and the solidarity necessary for a sustainable society (social fit).

Keywords: Fit, freedom, solidarity, values, responsiveness

Introduction and context

In the Netherlands, David van Lennep (1896-1982) is considered one of the pioneers of psychotechnics, the precursor to occupational and organisational psychology. He was the

founder and first director of the Utrecht Bureau for Career Choice in 1925, the predecessor of the Dutch foundation for psychotechnics NSvP. The underlying idea of this bureau was that people and occupations should be a good fit and that understanding people's personal characteristics was the basis for such a 'suitable' career choice. Van Lennep was strongly inspired by the ideas of the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre's existentialist philosophy emphasised the freedom *and* responsibility of human beings to give meaning to their own lives. A salient detail is that Sartre's radical ideas resonated so deeply in Van Lennep that he travelled to Paris immediately after the liberation in 1945 to meet Sartre and arranged the first lecture by the French philosopher in the Netherlands (Berkelaar, 2015).

Freedom of choice in education and career as advocated by Van Lennep is still relevant today but has also been critically discussed in recent years. In the Netherlands for instance, a growing number of articles in national newspapers and magazines show a pledge for the restriction of free choice in career and education, to combat labour market shortages. These news items reflect an increased tension between individual and collective interests. The same tension and discussion can be found in for example France (CESE, 2022) and Germany (BIBB, 2023). Over the past 100 years, we have become accustomed to our (Sartrean) freedom of educational and career choice, emphasised by a pioneer such as Van Lennep. However, due to the current labour market crisis and sectoral shortages, that acquired freedom now seems to be reaching its limits. After all, one of the consequences of these shortages is that the continuity of certain sectors is being jeopardised. The most acute shortages are clear: healthcare, technology, education and the energy transition (European Commission, 2023). The 'security of supply' in these sectors is under pressure, with impact for everyone in their daily lives. Will I still get maternity care? Will I find an installation technician for my faulty boiler? The fact that this service continuity will remain a key focus in the coming decades is evident, for example, from a forecast of staffing requirements in healthcare. By 2040, approximately 1 in 4 Dutch people will need to be working in healthcare to meet demand (Neurink, 2023). Based on the most recent Skills Forecast, Cedefop states that shortages in healthcare and long-term care will continue to exist in most of European countries (Cedefop, 2023).

Freedom of choice under scrutiny

The central thesis of this article is that the freedom to choose our studies and careers will have to be critically examined in the coming decades. Our individual freedom of choice must be linked to the necessity to maintain collective and sectoral continuity in the labour market. The relationship between individual freedom and collective responsibility requires further coordination, dialogue and fundamental (policy) choices. This relationship is not a contradiction, but a common and shared interest. It is both a complex and urgent challenge that affects the immediate interests of all citizens. The theme of freedom raises new questions, such as:

- can individual choices be easily guided or 'nudged' by policy?
- should it primarily be a moral appeal to individuals to steer their careers in a *certain* direction, or should the government discourage *certain types of work*?
- What consequences does this new relationship between freedom and responsibility pose for professionals in the careers field?

This article is structured as follows:

- We begin with a historical perspective on careers and career choices, outlining the shift from social fit (working based on social necessity) to personal fit (working based on individual wishes and values). We then zoom in on the current context: the structural shortages in the labour market, the increasing mismatches and the political debate on steering career choices.
- We continue with an exploration of the moral and political dimensions of work and careers. What do we mean by a 'good career'? How can we connect personal and social interests in a way that is future-proof and meaningful? These questions lead to a plea for value-driven career guidance, in which values, meaning and solidarity are given a central place.
- Finally, the practical applications are explored. What courses of action are available to professionals and policymakers? The article concludes with some examples of possible solutions and suggestions to guide the debate and action in the coming years.

Careers: two types of fit

Careers take place at the intersection of the individual and the society. On the one hand, there is the supply of labour, i.e. the choosing pupil, student, worker or job seeker. On the other hand, there is the demand for labour: a set of tasks, based on a job, organisation or employer. Considering the theme of this article, a career can be understood as a tension field (Meijers & Wijers, 1997), namely between the individual's freedom of choice at the micro level and the context at the meso (e.g. organisational needs) and macro levels (societal needs). What is necessary and useful in the collective sphere (e.g. professionals for green jobs) is not necessarily in line with what people want or are able to do at the individual level of work and (vocational) training.

Careers relate to the classic question 'Who does what and on what grounds?' (Law, 1981). This question concerns the division or allocation of labour: the distribution of certain work ('what') among certain people ('who'). In this article, we will primarily view the division of labour as a matching issue. The interrelated concepts of matching and Persons-Environment (P-E) Fit can be traced back to Frank Parsons (1909). He developed a theory of matching that is considered one of the milestones in careers theory and practice. Matching theory has often been criticised for its reductionism and limited view of the dynamics between individuals and their working environment (Post, 2019). Nevertheless, the concept of P-E fit remains influential in practice: many career guidance methods and HR tools are based on it. Matching is therefore still relevant, but from a more dynamic perspective (Edwards, 2008).

The concept of matching offers us starting points for an analysis of modern careers from the perspective of suitability, fairness and labour market shortages. A thorough and innovative elaboration of the concept of 'fit' can be found in *Just Work* by political philosopher Russell Muirhead (2004), in which he distinguishes between two types of fit: social fit and personal fit. Because both types of fit offer an important conceptual framework for understanding the tension between freedom and responsibility in careers, they are explained in more detail below.

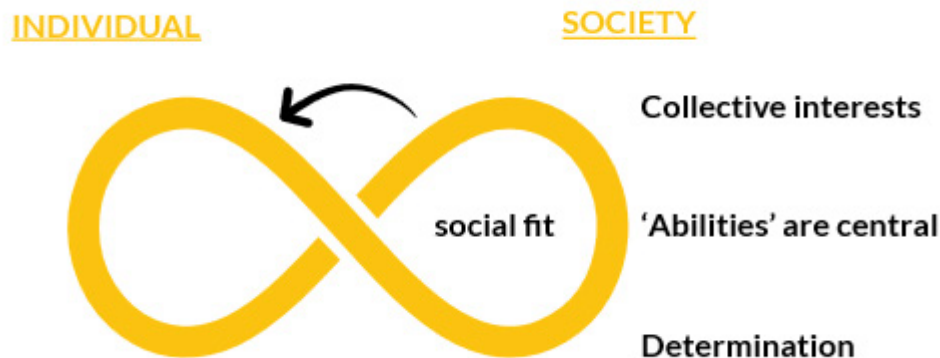


Figure 1. Characteristics of social fit

The concept of *social fit* (figure 1) revolves around the alignment of individual capacities with social tasks, with the aim of contributing as much as possible to the common good. The emphasis here is not on individual preference, but on social necessity: the 'choice' of work that someone does is largely determined by what society needs and what someone is considered 'suitable' for. Historically, this idea has its roots in Plato, who argued that people *should* fulfil a fixed role in society based on their natural aptitudes — and that a political system could serve as a justification for this (Waterfield, 2000). In Plato's time, social fit therefore also had this character of (external) determination, and the scope for choice was very limited.

In modern societies, markets have partly taken over this role: they distribute work based on labour demand, efficiency, effectiveness and profit, usually without coercion. Nevertheless, structural limitations remain in our time: individual preferences, fair remuneration, human dignity and freedom are of secondary importance in many jobs (Christie et al., 2021). Social fit therefore still has strong downsides in our time. External determination or limited scope for career choices form the basis of social fit: people are primarily deployed based on their usefulness and value to the greater good, i.e. society and the economy.

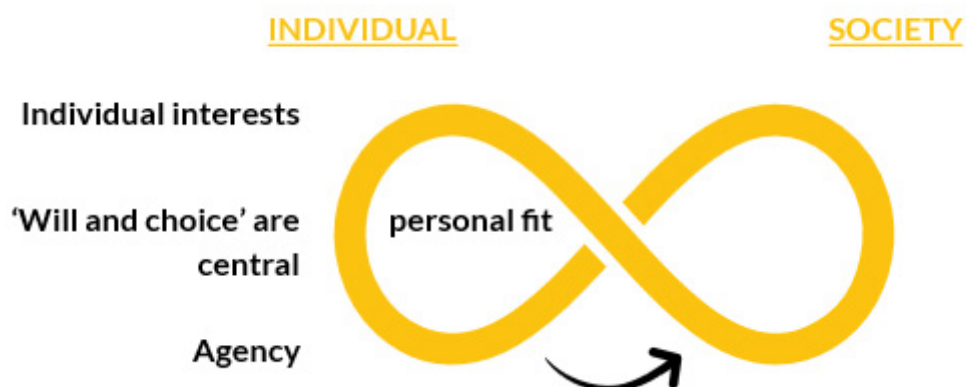


Figure 2. Characteristics of personal fit

Personal fit (figure 2) emphasises the extent to which work matches the needs, desires and values of the individual and focuses on what the work means to the individual. It recognises that even in a socially useful role, a person can still feel unhappy or empty if

the work does not offer room for personal growth, autonomy or meaning. Working within your role ('having to') is not enough: the work must also match who you are and what you need to flourish ('wanting to'). The relationship with *freedom* is essential in this concept: personal fit emphasises that people have a right to work in which they can be themselves and develop. It opposes the idea that people can be used solely for external goals – such as productivity or collective utility – without regard for their inner lives. Central to this is the democratic value that every individual has a life of their own to live. In this respect, personal fit is closely linked to concepts that we will encounter later, such as (moral) autonomy, career self-management and individual dignity.

Social fit and personal fit are both opposites and complementary; they can also be applied simultaneously. The current labour market crisis, in which there are various mismatches in the quantitative and qualitative alignment of labour supply and demand, sharply highlights the tension between social fit and personal fit. Social fit is primarily based on the macro and meso levels of a society: what is needed to ensure the continuity of the supply of products and services? What are the staffing needs in certain sectors and/or regions, both now and soon, and how do educational institutions and intermediaries in the labour market respond to this? Personal fit concerns the micro level of individual career development, throughout the entire career, in which choices are made based on personal preferences and considerations. Personal fit optimises individual desires and imposes those desires as expectations and demands on the content, conditions and returns of our work.

The distinction between social and personal fit reveals that work and careers are complex and multi-layered phenomena, in which sometimes conflicting interests and forces come together.

Social and personal fit: a brief historical perspective.

There is an evident relation between Muirhead's classification of social and personal fit and society in general, including its political structure. After all, careers and life courses are always framed within the context of political and social (power) relations. This concerns the question of how careers and career services are embedded in a political order and how that structure influences or exerts power over both the individual opportunities and possibilities of citizens and the role perception of professionals in this domain (Watts, 1996).

Historical circumstances strongly influence this societal and political order and the personal beliefs concerning work and careers. In the period from antiquity to the Middle Ages, when social fit was the dominant guiding principle of careers, the social and political order was rarely, if ever, questioned. People accepted the order and hierarchy created by God or by the political elite. Before the advent of modern science in the 16th century, reality was generally seen as a meaningful and coherent whole, in which humans also had their natural place and function. In that order, everything had a fixed essence and purpose (*telos*). As a result, social roles – such as those of man or woman, and certainly also one's profession – were considered natural and unchangeable and were regarded as fixed from birth. This descriptive order, one's social position at birth, coincided with what one *was supposed* to be, the normative order, i.e. political or religious morality. This coalescence of the descriptive and normative order is typical of this period. As a result, there was relatively little tension or discrepancy between social fit and personal fit.

Gerald Sailmann's study *Der Beruf* traces the cautious emergence of thinking in terms of personal fit (Sailmann, 2018). He mentions that one of the first texts to reflect the spirit of personal fit was written by Levinus Lemmius (1505-1568), a prominent Dutch physician, philosopher, botanist and writer of the Renaissance. We find the first traces of thinking in terms of personal fit in this quote:

Therefore, lest anyone commit himself imprudently, he must take time to consider what profession of life he wishes to enter before accepting it. In this deliberation, everyone must consider his own nature to see whether, in addition to the diligence required by his profession, he can also persevere steadfastly in the same life. (Sailmann, 2018, p. 73).

The demands and requirements of the profession ('diligence' and 'steadfastness') are here tactfully linked to individuality and desire ('his own nature' and 'willingness to enter'). Lemnius saw the choice of a profession as an individual act of will, requiring prior consultation and self-examination. These new ideas about the role of natural aptitude and a well-considered choice were an important step away from a career choice determined purely by birth or divine decree (social fit) towards personal fit.

In the centuries that followed, this 'free choice of profession' evolved into a fundamental right based on individual aptitude, characteristics and self-determination, which is considered essential for personal well-being and social integration. In the 19th century in particular, a steady shift took place in the social hierarchy in Western Europe. '*La carrière ouverte aux talents*' ('A career open to talents') is a famous statement by Napoleon and primarily reflects his own career, in which he gradually rose from an impoverished aristocratic background to become emperor (Drentje, 2021). In addition, his statement reflects the optimistic and emancipatory spirit of a new era, in which social position was determined not so much by ancestry as by talent and achievement. Education became a key driver in this period.

From the 19th century onwards, personal fit gradually became the dominant starting point for citizens' career orientation. This transition was reinforced during the 20th century by the sociological process of individualisation. As a result of structural developments in society, the decisive influence of collective institutions (church, trade unions, political parties) and traditions declined, while individual freedom of choice increased. Life courses became less predictable and offered more room for choices and reflection. Paradoxically, this meant that the individual freedom that was gained, at the same time became an obligation and a necessity. '*We are condemned to freedom*,' Sartre says. And he adds: '*we have no choice but to choose*' (Sartre, 1948, p. 33).

In 2026, we are well accustomed to this acquired freedom to want, be allowed and be able to choose our school, job and career. Technological, political and socio-economic developments have led to an increasing emphasis on career self-management, both voluntary and 'forced'. In the first quarter of the 21st century, this development has continued towards the increasing importance of Lifelong Learning and Development (LLD), driven by the growing dynamics of the labour market. This recent definition of LLD clearly expresses the 'ubiquity' of this need for development: '(pro)active development of qualities throughout life, based on one's own interests and values, for a sustainable contribution to society, one's health and happiness, for now and in the future' (Kuijpers & Draaisma, 2020,

p. 6). It requires citizens to constantly reflect on the classic career questions: what do I want, what can I do, and what steps should I take in my working life?

Labour in crisis?

Although the current labour market crisis cannot entirely be attributed to the coronavirus crisis, the pandemic was certainly an important catalyst. The crisis brought shortages into sharper focus and created the structural tightness that we have been experiencing in Europe since 2021-2022 (Eurofound, 2022). These shortages are caused by a combination of demographic changes (such as ageing and dejuvenation), an accelerated economic recovery after the coronavirus pandemic and an insufficient influx of new workers (Marois et al., 2025). As a result, sectors such as healthcare, technology, education and ICT are unable to fill their vacancies, leading to social problems such as healthcare waiting lists and delayed construction projects (OECD, n.d.). From our combined perspective of career development and division of labour, the crisis can be interpreted primarily as a combination of a *quantitative* mismatch (not enough people for certain jobs) and a *qualitative* mismatch (not the 'right', i.e. suitable people for certain jobs). The inflow, throughflow and outflow of personnel in certain sectors and regions is far from optimal and is leading to all kinds of urgent bottlenecks.

Parallel to and certainly fuelled by this shortage, there is a lot of attention in the public debate for the so-called '*systemic relevance*' of certain professions and sectors. The value of occupations and sectors was highlighted in a new way during the pandemic: some occupations proved to be 'essential' and 'crucial', i.e. indispensable for the functioning of society. In the wake of this distinction, the concept of 'bullshit jobs' was coined by anthropologist David Graeber (2018). Graeber defines a bullshit job as a job that the employee himself believes does not make a meaningful contribution to society. Although the scientific basis for the concept is disputed (Pot, 2022), the term bullshit job is very popular in the public debate. In the eyes of many, certain jobs (the food delivery worker or the 'umpteenth coach') add little or no value to the collective.

The shortages and scarcity have therefore resulted in jobs, occupations, sectors and career choices being increasingly scrutinised, both in a positive sense ('essential') and in a negative sense ('bullshit'). We are asking ourselves more sharply than in previous decades what the added value and usefulness of certain work is. Should we discourage jobs that we no longer *want* to do ourselves, such as greenhouse horticulture, as advocated by De Beer (2022)? And if there are so many shortages, should we encourage people who do work that does not seem useful or necessary, such as meal delivery drivers, influencers or 'YouTubers', to look for more useful work in healthcare or construction? Ballafkih argues that it is high time for moral choices in labour market policy (Ballafkih, n.d.). By this he means fundamental decisions about which occupations and services are essential, and which are less important, given the increasing staff shortages. In his view, this requires public debate about what society still wants to have done and what we do not need. If we, as a society, can no longer do everything, we must focus on doing what matters, Ballafkih succinctly summarises the solution. So, the new question seems: '*How do we move from bullshit jobs to bull's eye jobs in a tight labour market?*' (NSvP, n.d.-a). These inevitable choices are certainly not easy, because they involve difficult trade-offs between, for example, the energy transition, accessible healthcare and combating cyberterrorism.

Policymakers and politicians can no longer ignore the crisis and the structural mismatch: there is a need for a policy philosophy that not only supports individual careers but also takes broader social interests into account. Many policy and management philosophies in the labour market and welfare state assume that citizens are independent actors who are responsible for their own fate, status and (career) development (Mounk, 2017). In line with the political climate of liberalism, the national government provides relatively little guidance on the *content* of career or educational choices, in the hopeful assumption that individual choices will automatically lead to collectively desirable outcomes. More specifically, the labour market relevance of individual choices is not always explicitly guided.

The political order: individual and community

In the foregoing, we have explored the tension between meaning and freedom at the individual and psychological level and utility and necessity at the economic and collective level ('the common good'). In line with Muirhead's classification, this is a tension between self-interest and personal fit on the one hand and the general interest and social fit on the other. This tension has always played a role in careers. We find a useful expression of this in a text written by Karl Marx at the age of 17, in which he discusses these two seemingly opposing interests. Marx argues that it is up to individuals to choose the position in society that suits them best and from which they can best elevate themselves and society.

But the chief guide which must direct us in the choice of a profession is the welfare of mankind and our own perfection. It should not be thought that these two interests could be in conflict, that one would have to destroy the other; on the contrary, man's nature is so constituted that he can attain his own perfection only by working for the perfection, for the good, of his fellow men. (Marx, 1835, p. 5).

The optimistic tone of this quote indicates that, in Marx's view, the tension between personal and public interest is a misconception. He strongly believes that personal fulfilment and lasting happiness ('perfection') can only be achieved through selfless dedication to the welfare of all humanity. For Marx, this is the highest level of 'dignity' that a profession can offer. On closer inspection, the young Marx's view, which presupposes the natural harmony between self-interest and the common good, can be characterised as rather rosy. Individual and collective interests can surely be conflicting and give rise to heated discussions, as the public debate on essential and bullshit jobs clearly illustrates.

In the eyes of political philosopher Michael Sandel, the dominant political climate of (neo)liberalism over the past 80 years has caused us to lose sight of what our common interest and collective identity actually consists of (Sandel, 2012). The overbearing governing philosophy of economic and democratic liberalism deliberately leaves a great deal of freedom and choice to the individual. This type of freedom is also referred to as negative freedom, i.e. as little government interference as possible. Trust in the free market, a central feature of (neo)liberalism, reinforces individualism, i.e. the focus of citizens primarily on their own interests and autonomy. A second effect of (neo)liberalism and market forces is that it banishes moral discussions ('what is the right thing to do or choose?') from the public domain as much as possible, based on the guiding principle that everyone is able to determine what is best for themselves. Markets do not exhibit morality in the form of 'pointing fingers'.

Sandel argues that this broad political space for individual self-determination and sovereignty weakens social engagement. Discussions about collective values and the common good are avoided. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama recently pointed out these downsides of (neo)liberalism sharply and argues that our freedom needs to be redesigned (Fukuyama, 2022). We must seek to restore the balance between individual autonomy and common values, as well as between economic freedom and social protection.

This plea for a new balance ties in seamlessly with the vision on labour, division of labour and solidarity that Lisa Herzog expresses in her book *Die Rettung der Arbeit* (Herzog, 2019). She argues that an individualistic view on labour, characteristic of economic models, neglects the fact that we are highly dependent on each other and that our work is embedded in a complex and coherent system of division of labour. From this more systemic perspective, the division of labour can be understood above all as a principle of solidarity, whereby individuals are socially dependent on each other's expertise and skills. There is no doctor without a nurse, and vice versa, no contractor without an architectural draughtsman; the dependencies are endless. Herzog sees this shared and social nature of labour and our mutual dependence as both the foundation and the Achilles heel of our solidarity.

Translated to our theme of modern careers, this means that the division of labour ('who does what?') could be used as a source of positive interdependence and cohesion, which refers to community and solidarity. Careers, although primarily individual phenomena, are also connected to the meso- and macro levels and the systemic dimensions of our working world. If we want to reverse the one-sided emphasis on self-interest and (excessive) individualism, we will have to discuss the other side of the coin: the general or public interest. More specifically, recalibrating our freedom, with greater attention to the general interest, requires an in-depth, critical and moral dialogue about our collective values. After all, freedom must always be weighed against other values, such as privacy, prosperity and justice (Roessler, 2021). A crisis, such as the one currently affecting the labour market, exposes this complexity and layered nature of our moral reality and calls for unity, coordination and fundamental choices. This means that normative and moral questions are inevitable and that we must seek shared answers. These normative questions are contained in the core theme of this article: what constitutes a good career?

Focusing on scarcity?

An increasing number of publications argue that young people's initial study choices should be influenced in the direction of sectors experiencing shortages. In 2025 the Dutch thinktank 'Denkwerk' published a report called *Kiezen én Delen (Choosing and Sharing)* (Baarsma et al., 2025). This report examines the answers to questions such as: is the Netherlands capable of simultaneously realising the many social challenges and ambitions of the coming decades (in sectors like construction, climate, and health)? Do we have the financial resources, the right people and enough space to do so? DenkWerk states, that without active government intervention, it will not be possible to maintain broad prosperity and achieve the necessary changes. The market alone will not solve the challenges. One of the necessary changes concerns steering the supply of education programmes. A quote from this report:

In the long term, the Netherlands must steer towards training for occupations relevant for society. Currently, young people base their choice of study mainly on

interest, with little regard for labour market opportunities. This does not solve the shortages in, for example, construction and healthcare. Moreover, free choice of study leads to a waste of talent for ambitious sectors. (Baarsma et al., 2025, p. 45).

According to the authors of this report, one of the concrete solutions to the shortage is to introduce a *numerus clausus*, i.e. to limit the number of places available for courses with poor prospects on the labour market.

Given the complexity of the matter, a perhaps less drastic route would be to provide labour market information (about e.g. job opportunities, wages, career prospects) during the school period. Research does indeed indicate that providing good labour market information encourages young people to choose studies and courses with better job opportunities and income prospects (Fouarge et al., 2016). They also develop higher expectations about pursuing education, are more likely to choose further education and are willing to switch to a track with better prospects. This leads to better labour market outcomes: a greater chance of finding work, a higher wage, and less regret about their choice (Hofer et al., 2020). However, this research also shows that personal preferences are decisive: interests dominate the choice.

The moral dimension of careers

If external control of educational choices through policy measures and government intervention is so complicated and, moreover, has relatively little effect, we would perhaps be better off focusing on the self-direction of those choosing their studies, work and careers. This brings up questions like: how can the choosing individual be actively and voluntarily encouraged to choose a career in the 'right direction'? Are there approaches available or conceivable that bring together the individual and collective interests?

With this question of 'the right choice', we enter the realm of ethics and morality. In exploring this question, we can benefit from the ideas of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. He has conducted a thorough study on the origins of our modern self-concept and has provided indications of how we can organise our lives and careers in an autonomous and authentic way, without falling into detached atomism ('every man for himself') (Taylor, 1992). It is important to note that his perspective is considerably broader than the societal relevance of career choices. His thinking focuses on creating a fulfilling life that gives value, meaning and significance. In that sense Taylor's thinking is in line with the ideas of Van Lennep.

A moral orientation in life and work is inevitable, according to Taylor. We cannot help but use a yardstick to determine the extent to which our lives are 'good' in the ethical sense. This also applies to our careers, of course. This moral orientation always takes place against a '*horizon of meaning*'. This is a historically determined framework of collective values. Sartre argued that we create these values and horizon of meaning ourselves (Sartre, 1948). In Taylor's view however, they are given and exist independently of us. We are born and grow up in a world that is already full of meaning. This horizon therefore forms a socio-dialogical background and a meaningful framework of collective values within which we develop our identity and moral orientation. Gradually, we develop a moral map, individuals form their specific '*strong evaluations*', based on interaction with others. These are reflexive judgements that relate to the unique values and principles of the individual.

Strong evaluations are not only about preferences, but also about what is important and meaningful in life and what *kind of person* one wants to be. They are therefore essential for the formation of identity, individuality and responsibility.

Taylor thus sees the emergence of values as a highly interactive process, a dynamic between humans and an *already* existing horizon of meaning. Sartre's freedom, openness and free choice are too empty for Taylor and do not provide meaning. Authenticity and autonomy involve discovering and articulating your own identity; a process that is a balance between finding yourself (active) and creating and discovering yourself (creative).

With the help of these concepts, Taylor articulates his difficulty with the radical individualism and negative freedom discussed earlier. For him, this is too one-sidedly focused on self-expression and self-interest. Moreover, freedom should not only be a possibility ('opportunity'), a 'door that is open', as in the case of negative freedom. Freedom is only real when it is realized ('exercise'), that is, when we 'walk through the open door'. True freedom is positive freedom; we must also be able to actively use and achieve our freedom to be truly free. This positive freedom is not a passive state, but an autonomous, active and dynamic conquest and an art of living that is focused on the good life (Gescinska, 2012).

Value-driven career guidance

Taylor's ideas offer a useful conceptual framework for understanding the current tensions surrounding careers in a different way. In Taylor's vision, it is about the tension between, on the one hand, the dimension of our positive freedom of choice, strong evaluations and authenticity and, on the other hand, the dimension of our collective needs, values and horizon of meaning. Following in the footsteps of Taylor and his kindred spirits (e.g. Rosa, 2021), we can translate the emphasis on individual values and the stronger focus on the common good into the field of guiding young people and adults in their studies, work and careers. The starting point here is that this guidance should not be exclusively about one-sided self-interest, but that we want to connect the individual and the collective.

The moral question 'What constitutes a "good" career?' is, in Taylor's view, a relevant, legitimate and unavoidable question. We should even ask ourselves this question to be able to develop a yardstick and evaluate the choices we make in our own careers and those of others. As professionals in the field of careers, we certainly do not need to abandon the ideals of freedom, autonomy and authenticity. In fact, self-management and staying true to yourself are very prominent issues in the professional guidance of people in relation to work and careers.

In our search for 'the good' in work and career, we can be inspired by the answer given in passing by Tony Watts to the question 'What is a career?' He states: 'It's all about finding spaces to work in. That's what a career is ideally about: people finding spaces where they can use their talents and do something they believe in' (Hooley, 2014, p. 40). We note that in this normative ideal of a career ('ideally'), Watts explicitly links ability ('using your talents') to *desire*, i.e. interests, meaning and, above all, values ('doing something you believe in'). In line with our arguments and Taylor's thinking, this second component, that of our values and beliefs, becomes more important in times of crisis and scarcity.

Since the inception of the field, attention to people's desires has been an important pillar of career guidance. Clarifying interests, values and meaning during counselling sessions is a very common and established approach within career guidance and occupational and organisational psychology. There is an extensive theoretical and methodical foundation for the application of these components in these fields.

The good news is therefore that we do not need to reinvent the wheel when it comes to guidance based on individual interests, values and meaning. However, looking ahead, we should ask ourselves if we need to put more methodical emphasis on societal values, needs and interests. Are there existing initiatives, projects or policy measures that are applicable? What new approaches can we come up with to stimulate a deeper and more value-driven orientation towards the 'right career' for individuals and to establish a better balance between personal fit and social fit?

The challenge for policy, theory and practice: shaping responsive careers

The field of career guidance and human resources cannot turn a blind eye to the impact of (sectoral) shortages and the challenges they provide. It should position itself as a crucial part of a *system of responsive career development and guidance* in the educational and labour market and the welfare state. The importance of responsiveness in practice, governance and policy has been reinforced by the labour market crisis. Responsiveness is the ability to respond adequately and in a timely manner to signals, needs and changes in a particular field of work or policy area (Movisie, 2021). In line with this responsiveness, career guidance must therefore focus more strongly on stimulating so-called *responsive career paths*, which respond flexibly and adaptively to the changing needs of both the individual and the broader context, such as the organization or society (Future Skills Centre, 2021).

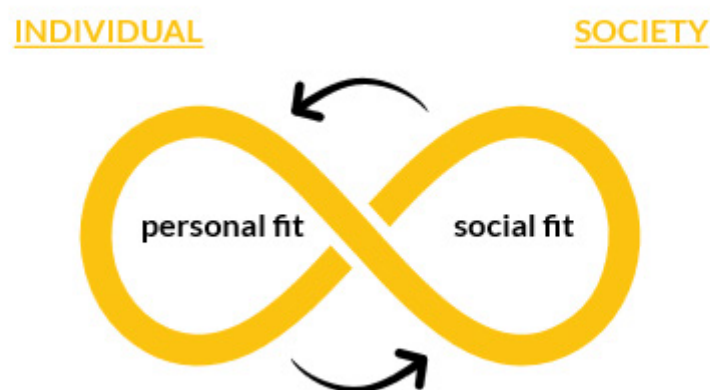


Figure 3. Responsive careers

The central feature of responsive careers (figure 3) is that they combine personal fit and social fit and relate and align them with each other. In responsive career paths, choices are informed by both (information) perspectives: what the individual wants and can do (personal fit), and what is useful, necessary and possible at the macro and meso levels

(social fit). Ideally, this ensures a balanced approach, in which both personal interests and the general interest are explicitly addressed. Because the danger of one-sidedness remains.

Shaping this responsive career guidance is a crucial challenge for the field in the coming years. In many respects, this is still uncharted territory, and this challenge requires practice, education, policy, research and science to join forces. To illustrate this, we briefly will describe four examples in which this responsiveness is pursued and where a stronger emphasis is explicitly placed on social fit, the broader interest or a better world.

1. More attention to social fit in the deeper layer of desire

If we want to strengthen and enrich the personal fit with the social fit, we can work with clients on a deeper level of interests, meaning and values. We thus offer them the opportunity to become aware of their 'strong evaluations', in Taylor's terminology, and put more emphasis on the question what added value the individual wants to contribute to the world of work. This is not to encourage the client to make a choice that is useful and promising, but uninspired. Personal fit remains the guiding principle. But by placing greater emphasis on the moral and societal dimensions of career choices the client is invited to choose a wider perspective and to bring more balance to those choices. Lusch (2018) explored the question of morality and goodness in the practice of career guidance and provides us with relevant and practical suggestions for this. He encourages career professionals to look beyond the basic question 'What can or should I do with my career?' and to ask deeper or underlying questions, with explicit attention to the contribution to the greater whole:

- What kind of world do I want to live in?
- How can I contribute to this?
- How can I use my skills and knowledge to benefit others?
- How can I work together effectively for my own well-being and that of others?

2. The application of labour market information and skills tools

A second example places greater emphasis on social fit by paying more attention to labour market information and skills-based matching. This approach is beneficial to the creation of responsive career paths. They make it possible to map both personal fit and social fit in a much more refined and detailed manner. Skills-based matching implies that skills form the basis for job mobility rather than matching based on occupations (Post & Woldendorp, 2023). Skills classifications, such as the European ESCO and CompetentNL in the Netherlands, and associated matching tools increase the transparency of (inter)sectoral mobility and support targeted transitions to promising occupations and sectors with labour shortages. In addition, forms of skills validation, such as the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) or skills passports, make informal or elsewhere acquired skills visible and valuable (Ballafkih et al., 2022). If the danger of an overly technocratic and insufficiently people-oriented application of these tools is recognised, optimal use of these digital tools can provide people with fine-grained opportunities to switch to work in crucial or shortage sectors.

3. Working in the broader interest

The third example is the Dutch 'Working in the broader interest' programme set up by the NSvP to highlight the need for socially useful work (NSvP, n.d.-b). It can be seen as placing greater emphasis on the public interest in career choices. The programme subsidises projects that connect businesses with crucial social sectors, for example through staff exchanges. The 'smart reservist model for social professions' is a fitting example, in which people are on standby for sectors such as healthcare and education in addition to their regular jobs. Professionals are encouraged to step outside their comfort zone and use their knowledge and experience for the benefit of society, for example by combining a job in construction with work in the armed forces. In the various activities of the programme the emphasis shifts from exclusively individual career paths to a more responsive model in which social needs, collective goals and personal meaning go hand in hand.

4. Green guidance

A fourth example is the emergence of 'green guidance' (Lucas Casanova et al., 2025). This is career guidance that explores how it can contribute to tackling climate change and the environmental crisis. It involves addressing issues such as sustainability, social justice and environmental awareness in the guidance process, with the aim of encouraging people to make sustainable choices. This approach is in line with the critical-emancipatory approach to careers and career guidance, as advocated by Sultana, Blustein, Hooley and Thomsen, among others (COAG, n.d.). It does not only seek to understand through research and science, but also to actively improve the world of work and education. In addition to individual action, it focuses on collective action.

These four examples are by no means exhaustive. A description of other examples can be found in Post (2026).

Conclusions

In this article we have chosen a perspective that combines career development with the division of labour and solidarity. We conceive careers primarily as fields of tension, in which various contradictions and layers (micro, meso and macro) are simultaneously at work. The current labour market crisis reinforces these contradictions and compels us to make both sharper political and moral choices and to engage in professional and ethical reflections on what desirable and 'good' careers are. There are three conclusions we want to draw.

Firstly: our individual freedom of choice needs to be recalibrated. The current labour market crisis and shortages in vital sectors such as healthcare, education and technology are forcing us to reexamine the freedom that we have taken for granted over the past hundred years. A 'good career' can no longer be exclusively about *personal fit* (what do I want and what makes me happy?) but must be inextricably linked to *social fit*: what society needs to ensure the continuity of essential services.

Our second conclusion is that careers are inherently moral and political. The debate about 'bullshit jobs' versus 'essential occupations' illustrates that we can no longer ignore these dimensions. The way freedom has been shaped in the (neo)liberal political climate of the last 80 years is one-sided and out of balance. We must look for a new balance between individual autonomy and our shared values, as well as between economic freedom and social protection.

Thirdly: the future calls for responsive career paths. We must understand the division of labour as a positive and vulnerable source of solidarity and interdependence. The call to policymakers, scholars, professionals and citizens is to promote responsive careers that respond flexibly to the changing needs of both the individual and society. This requires ongoing dialogue regarding our common interests and the courage to make fundamental choices about how individuals use their talents for the public good. Career guidance needs to position itself as a crucial component in a system of lifelong guidance to facilitate these responsive career pathways. As a value-driven and innovative practice it has the potential to refine and invent methods and instruments that combine personal and social fit.

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