



## 2.5 Managing Careers in a Liquid Society

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The world of work is changing rapidly as it is permeated by the 'liquid era'. In this context of fluidity, employees face a number of challenges wherein they are required to remain competitive whilst adapting to the impact of technology. Whilst trying to maximise the opportunities ahead, employees need to identify prospects, tackle problems, take initiative, persevere, be flexible and work in teams. This means developing the right 'enterprise skills' for the future.

The last two decades have witnessed the further advance of world-wide capitalism and corresponding social changes which have had a huge impact on the world of work; a world which is fundamentally concerned with social relationships between different people and the relationships between diverse institutions. These processes have intensified the complexity within which we live, and have pushed Maltese society into what has been termed a 'liquid era'. To use the analogy from Zygmunt Bauman, the liquid society is one which shifts from the solid and territorial to a boundary-less, post-modern way of life, shaped by globalisation, world-wide-web communication, super-smart-technologies and a host of post-modern processes. In this context, the community feeling is lost to the intensity and individualisation of personal identity (Bauman, 2007). In this sense, Maltese society is moving towards further 'liquidity'. It is in constant flux and people need to keep changing and adjust to the social rhythms by continuously being 'flexible' and constantly ready to change (Boudon, 1986).

Within this scenario, exploring the world of work and managing one's career, requires an examination of both one's skills and the institutions and processes that govern the course of history and culture (Beck, 1992) which continually set the opportunities and constraints on businesses and employees in Malta.

It is clear that changing relations of production and 'commodification', fuelled by the successive crises and challenges to economic activities, are here to stay. This is because: post-modern capitalism is dependent on the quickening process of economic growth and performance, measured in terms of business profits and successive failures of the capitalistic system. To use the 'sociological imagination', the individual has to see the relation between private life and public issues (Mills, 1959), which means discerning the evolving legal framework, the local neighbourhood, the fluid social context, the collective dynamics of employee unions and so on. For example, at the time of writing this paper, Japan is facing an environmental catastrophe, Libya is experiencing a populist-uprising, Bahrain is containing unrest, and China is expanding its free trade zones, with very good prospects of flourishing and registering higher profits. European economic figures also attest that business across many European countries is slowly expanding and recovering from the world crisis of 2008. Nevertheless, the average household income in many of the Eastern European competing countries is lower than the average in Malta. The 'cost of labour' in Malta is in a number of instances much higher than that in other European countries (<http://www.fedee.com/paytrends.html>). In a very forceful way, the process of globalization has contributed to drive jobs out of Malta, especially since businesses have been forced to cut costs, have been made to shift their production factories and transfer their operations overseas to places like China, Eastern Europe and Northern Africa. This process has stripped Malta of many of its economic advantages, especially during the times of restructuring and shake-ups. To this, labour intensive jobs have been replaced by automated technologies. Many economies in Europe are shifting to being increasingly dependent for their prosperity on the wealth generated by the 'service' industry rather than the production of goods, and other non-European-countries compete with other forms of business incentives. This global economic process has had its effects on the Maltese employment relationship - especially since Maltese business organisations have to compete in this 'global village'. Within all of this, human resources in Malta have emerged as one of the country's major assets. This is because employees are the fulcrum of any organisation, critical in any business strategy. It is clear for anyone who looks at the world of work that workers are the front-liners, and the ones who know what is

actually going on. It is crystal clear that the prosperity of any organisation lies with its people.

This intense global competition has put pressure on Maltese businesses to be flexible – and this requirement has been transferred on to the employees. The employment relationship of the liquid society necessitates more employee trust. The employment process is thus being permeated into one wherein organisations need to employ ‘associates’, in the sense of workers who need to believe in continuous training and development, and employees who can work in self-managed teams, ready for the challenges brought by job rotation and greater commitment to quality. The ‘liquid’ era requires workers who have high expectations and can share common organisational visions, and who are still able to adapt, are flexible and dynamic.

In many instances the Maltese employment relationship is one which believes in hard work and in people who can contribute towards sensible choices. In this era where the Maltese employees have to compete with ‘foreigners’, they are required to lead in their area of expertise and exercise their full set of skills. Businesses require employees who can be coached into customer driven work paradigms. This is not to mean that the academic knowledge, educational qualifications and job competency of the employees are not of interest to the employer, but, this is not enough anymore. Liquid Malta is shifting and moving towards a workforce that has to be ready to be managed differently. It is thus a challenge for any employee to integrate oneself within the organisational ethos, culture and business strategy. With increasing acceptance of the fact that the crucial competitive advantage are the skills, attitude and performance of the Maltese workforce, emphasis has to be placed on employing associates who can be of greater involvement in matters affecting their jobs, through effective consultation, information sharing and two-way communication: in a nutshell, employees who are ready to be empowered. Organisations seek employees who can be trained to respond to participative forms of management which in itself requires good interpersonal skills. It is also clear that nowadays each and every employee must be literate; but not only that: verbal and written communication, understanding of basic mathematics and computer skills are a must; as is the ability to accept responsibility. Employment in 2011 Malta is not about filling a position, but about having associates who can make a difference in

the organization which requires core traditional values such as hard work, integrity, loyalty and honesty. Employers simply cannot afford to invest valuable training time, resources and compensation on workers who do not live according to these work values or who routinely move from one job to another.

Employment is about choosing candidates who contribute towards profitable win-win situations and this happens only through demonstrated honesty and sincerity. This may at times run counter to the instant-satisfaction-cultural model (Giddens, 1991). The instant gratification model does not fit the work ethic needed by many employers, because in reality there is no 'instant high-returns with minimum expenditure of effort' reality. This gratification-model has influenced the way we are educated and the way we think, but essentially runs counter to what is needed at the Maltese place of work. It is only through core work values that employees help their business deliver results, enable their organization to face the never-ending battle for success and help their firms go through difficult periods. And these are the essential qualities sought by employers. This is the only way through which employees can protect their jobs.

Working in the 'liquid' era, means transcending old paradigms and finding the ability to adapt to the new culture, wherein the entire globe is integrated in one big multinational. The consequences of these shifts will be of benefit to many, as new economic sectors are integrated within the local infrastructure. Unless businesses are able to face the challenges that lie ahead, they will pose a threat to their very own existence.

#### References

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