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14. A carpenter yesterday, an electronics technician today: a Syrian refugee's career transition and subjective career success upon entering the German labour market

Maike Andresen and Svenja Rosseburg

SETTING THE SCENE

Malek (name changed) had clear career plans and pursued them successfully by setting up his own company. By the age of 29, Malek already had 15 years of work experience as a carpenter. He had learned the craft from his father, following in the family tradition of his grandfather. However, the Syrian civil war made these career plans secondary by forcing Malek to flee from Syria via Turkey, Greece, Hungary and Austria to his final destination of Germany in 2015.

A career shock followed when he realised that German authorities would not recognise his professional experience as a carpenter. Although he had firmly planned to work in this trade in Germany, too, he was now left with two choices: to pursue full apprenticeship training as a carpenter for three years, in accordance with German norms, or to master a different occupation. In his eyes, the first option meant losing three years on retraining in an occupation in which he already had 15 years of experience. The second option implied a major career change. Both options, he felt, involved falling to a lower level of career development than the level he had previously achieved.

THE WIDER CONTEXT

Malek decided to flee to Germany in 2015 at a time when the country was dealing with high numbers of first-time asylum seekers. A total of 476,676 applications for asylum were made in 2015, an additional 745,545 coming in 2016 (BMI, 2017). The term 'refugee crisis' has been used to describe this

period in which Germany received the highest number of asylum applications since the foundation of the German migration ministry in 1953 (BAMF, 2016).

For Syrian refugees, especially, Germany was the most popular destination country in Europe, receiving more than one-third of the applicants for asylum in 2015 and 2016 (BAMF, 2016; BMI, 2017). They fled from human rights violations and bombings of civilian areas in the civil war that started in 2011 (Amnesty International, 2015). In 2016, approximately 98 per cent of 268,866 Syrian applicants (BMI, 2017) received protection in Germany by being granted political asylum (BAMF, 2016).

One of the main challenges for the integration of refugees into the German labour market is that career norms differ between Germany and the refugees' respective home countries with regard to how occupations and professions are defined (types of work that demand special training or particular skills and often involve a high level of education, Eberhard et al., 2017). German authorities therefore do not always recognise refugees' occupational skills and qualifications from their home countries (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2020), as they base their decisions mainly on the extent to which structured formal or vocational training was completed and corresponding certificates are available (BAMF, 2016). Access to the German labour market is thus largely determined by the availability of educational certificates (Protsch and Solga, 2016).

Around 330 nationally recognised vocational occupations in Germany require formal training. The main characteristic of this vocational education and training system is the provision of two-to-three-year apprenticeships provided by companies together with publicly funded vocational schools – a form of cooperation enshrined in and regulated by legislation. The qualifications attained in this way are documented by means of certificates issued by the competent bodies, the chambers of industry and commerce or chambers of crafts and trades (BMBF, 2020). Apprentices must at least hold a secondary school leaving certificate (nine years). Occupations and career structures are clearly defined, and each apprentice nominally receives the same standard of training.

German authorities and the country's business community have felt and still feel largely positive about the influx of refugees and the opportunities it has created to address labour needs (Kühn, 2017). Rising numbers of older people and workers in combination with a decline in the population due to declining birth rates have caused an unprecedented shift in the supply of labour (BMAS, 2016). Due to improved sanitation and health care in Germany, people born today can expect to live between 78 and 83 years (Statista, 2020). With an average number of children per woman of 1.54 in 2019 (Destatis, 2020), the numbers are below the replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman needed to maintain population levels without immigration (Destatis, 2015). Consequently, the above-mentioned trends have led to a shortage of skilled

workers in Germany, a *war for talent* that extends across many areas of the workforce – including the skilled crafts and trades sector (BMWI, 2020). Reducing the intensity of the war for talent by integrating refugees into the labour market is of great relevance for individuals, organisations and the economy in Germany (BMAS, 2020). Despite entering the country for noneconomic reasons, many refugees intend to resume working quickly (Battisti et al., 2019). Finding relevant work has been shown to be of particular importance for the integration of refugees in their host countries.

However, accessing work with a good fit between refugees' competencies and job requirements (Krahn et al., 2000) appears to be difficult. In consequence, various factors lead to people with a migration background being unemployed about twice as frequently as people without a migration background (BMAS, 2020). The reasons for this are often refugees' difficulties with the German language, lower educational and vocational qualifications, and foreign vocational qualifications not (yet) recognised, but deficits in the advice and information provided on labour market issues also have an impact (Battisti et al., 2019; BMAS, 2020). Due to the strong orientation towards norms in education prevailing in Germany, refugees from countries with different norms cannot fill the labour supply gap immediately. Experienced workers like Malek can be an asset to companies and benefit the economy, but it is important to find ways of overcoming barriers related to the recognition of previous careers.

MALEK'S STORY

Malek was born in 1986 in Aleppo, Syria and worked as a third-generation carpenter. He learned the occupation from his father, starting from age 16 when he finished school after completing the 9th grade. During his career, Malek has worked both in his family's business and as an employee of a large company. After two years in the military, he first worked in a large company in Syria and then went to Libya for five years and was able to start his own company as a kitchen carpenter there. Malek was happy with how his career was developing and wanted to extend his stay in Libya to expand his own company and support his family in Syria.

I wanted to make my company bigger. But then the war [in Libya] came and I couldn't do anything more.

The civil war in Libya forced Malek to return to Syria in 2011. At the same time, however, a civil war also broke out in Syria and forced him and some of his family to flee to Turkey.

The ISIS saw us and they said ‘What are you doing here? Go fight in Syria’ and then we just left. We were three cousins and we all went to Turkey.

Although Malek was able to work as a carpenter in Turkey for two months, he was not earning enough money to support his family. Therefore, he decided to move on to Germany, first by making the perilous journey across the Mediterranean. In Greece, he was able to work as a carpenter for one month. He moved on to Hungary, where local police told him to move on to Austria or face jail, and finally from Austria to Germany.

Actually, no matter where I was, I tried to work.

However, after he reached Germany, regulations prevented Malek from pursuing any employment there. He remained unemployed and in receipt of state benefits for more than 2.5 years between 2015 and 2017. He lived in reception centres in two different German cities for 11 months and tried, with the help of a lawyer whom he contacted, to ensure that he was not sent back to another European state. As Malek was not allowed to take official German language classes during this time, he tried to pick up a few words of German by talking to volunteer workers in a church that supported refugees. Since he could not do much at present, Malek also decided to overcome his fear of water (from which he suffered greatly when fleeing across the Mediterranean) by taking swimming classes.

I went over sea, although I couldn’t swim. Therefore, I was very afraid of the water. But I wanted to overcome this fear, so I learned to swim.

Eventually, Malek received official refugee status and a residence permit in 2016. Although the good news of his recognition as a refugee was overshadowed by sad news about the death of his brother who had remained in Syria, Malek immediately looked for an apartment and found and moved into a shared flat. He took German classes and received considerable support from his German flatmates. When Malek realised that his application to have his occupation officially recognised had been rejected and as a consequence was advised to learn his profession from scratch by taking a three-year apprenticeship, he talked to his local friends and searched online for alternative occupations, as he was not willing to undergo training in something he already had mastery of. His online research led Malek to form the impression that

working in the electronics sector would be conducive to a promising career in Germany. As he had already gained initial experience in this field in Libya and enjoyed the work, he decided to take an apprenticeship as an electronics technician despite the low apprentice wage, which was far below what he was used to earning in Syria and Libya. The father of one of his flatmates worked in a company which was looking for apprentices. By coincidence, Malek happened to see an information stand this company was running in town and decided to approach the person at the stand. This contact person immediately offered Malek a place on a one-year integration programme for refugees that would allow him to transfer into a formal apprenticeship if he performed well.

I saw my future employer in the city, it was an information stand from the company and then I just said I was looking for an internship or apprenticeship for next year. I was told they have one for this year. I was a bit surprised, what do I do now? And then I said yes with pleasure.

Despite having issues with the German language, with support from his colleagues and classmates, Malek managed to perform well in the integration programme and was able to finish his vocational training in another 2.5 years. He was subsequently hired by the same company on a permanent basis as an electronics technician and still works there today. He is not entirely satisfied with the work because (1) he would prefer to be his own boss, (2) he is still not allowed to install electronic devices without a superior being present, and (3) his wages are not sufficient to support his family members who fled to Turkey.

He has registered a business so he can work independently as a part-time kitchen builder. He is also thinking about other career options.

I thought for a moment that I was making my 'Meister'.¹ Then I realised that I did not like it. I stopped the ongoing training and maybe I will take the instructor qualification exam.² Maybe I will, maybe I won't, I don't know what the future will bring exactly. So now with my self-employment, that is something new for me. This is more than my apprenticeship and this is what I want to continue at the moment. [...] I would like to stay in Germany, [...] I want to stand on my own feet and work properly here.

Registering his business enables him to carry out both occupations he is trained in, the carpentry from his home country and the electronics technician role from his new home country, and hopefully soon as a self-employed tradesman. Overall, Malek has gained control over his career path despite the career shock that he experienced, and he has developed further plans to shape his career.

REFLECTIONS

Malek's experience is an example of a *negative career shock*, that is, 'a disruptive and extraordinary event that is, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focal individual's control and that triggers a deliberate thought process concerning one's career' (Akkermans et al., 2018, p. 4). The flight to Germany triggered by the Syrian civil war had a disruptive impact on Malek's career plans to work as a self-employed carpenter when German authorities did not recognise his prior occupation as equivalent to a qualification awarded according to German norms. He perceived a loss of control over his advanced career as a carpenter when German authorities required him, at the age of 29, to start from scratch and embark on an apprenticeship together with much younger apprentices who were fresh out of school. The shock was intense, as he had pursued his occupation passionately and competently in Syria and Libya. This nonrecognition led to a thought process and finally to contemplation of the prospect of a change in his career-related behaviour.

The situation triggered a *sense-making process* that led Malek to analyse his career situation, to explore promising alternative career options in Germany and to reappraise the likelihood of attaining the career goals as a carpenter that he had pursued in Germany. His reanalysis suggested a poor fit with his image of career goal attainment, because thinking himself overqualified for an apprenticeship as a carpenter, he considered that this option offered not only a loss of time and face but also downward career mobility (i.e. downward moves in terms of pay, status or responsibilities) (Krahn et al., 2000). An *image violation* thus occurred (Seibert et al., 2013). To restore his image, he decided to learn a new profession as an electronics technician instead – a profession that he saw as having a promising future in Germany with its strong automobile industry. While getting there also meant going through the kind of apprenticeship that is usually offered to younger learners, this alternative allowed him to regain control over his career and had a higher and positive *valence* for him. Malek's career shock thus led to a career transition of the kind sometimes prompted by a shock (Seibert et al., 2013).

Career transitions are defined as 'the period during which an individual is either changing roles (taking on a different objective role [inter-role transition]) or changing their orientation towards a role already held (altering a subjective state [intra-role transition])' (Louis, 1980, p. 330). In the refugee context, three inter-role transitions have an important function: (1) *career entry*: refugees who have just reached working age during their flight are in an early career stage in which they enter the labour market often for the first time; (2) *intercompany transition*: for refugees with work experience, the change of residence results in a change of employers; and (3) *interprofessional*

transition: whenever qualifications acquired in the home country are not recognised in the host country, learning a new occupation is required. Malek was confronted with an interprofessional transition that forced him to adjust his profession – from carpenter to electronics technician.

Whether a person can overcome a career shock and even turn it around for the better, for example through a career transition, depends in particular on individual characteristics and career capital. Malek's high level of *resilience*, that is, his adaptability in the face of adversity (Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003), that he has repeatedly demonstrated, for example by searching for new work in each country, completing a swimming course despite his fear of water, identifying a new occupation to avoid restarting from scratch, proactively approaching his future employer despite the language barrier, helped him to achieve his goal of being independent in Germany – professionally and personally. Moreover, Malek demonstrated *change-related attitudes* that have been shown to be based on resilience (Hartmann et al., 2020). Every country has certain career norms that 'guide' career development. To successfully pursue a career abroad, individuals must be familiar with the career norms of the home and the new country and able to adjust to the new norms. This requires willingness to critically interrogate one's own *career capital* and then the personal flexibility to further develop existing career capital as necessary (Andresen, 2021; Andresen and Domsch, 2020). Arthur and colleagues (1995) distinguish essential career capitals as forms of *knowing how* (skills and knowledge), *knowing why* (personal motivation, values and attitudes) and *knowing who* (interpersonal relationships or social networks). Malek showed ambition to adapt all three career capitals by acquiring new skills and knowledge through an apprenticeship, by investing in both personal networks (e.g. shared flat with Germans) and professional networks (e.g. close contact with supervisors outside the workplace), and by creating a new fit between his identity and his new career as an electronics technician and developing a new sense of purpose, identification and direction in work.

Eby and colleagues (2003) found that career capitals were major predictors of perceived *career success*. Malek anticipated that professional reorientation and adaptation to local norms would allow him – at least in the medium term – to reach his highest ranked subjective career success goals of *financial security* (achieving an increasing income over time and being able to afford goods beyond basic necessities) and *entrepreneurship* (founding and running one's own enterprise or pursuing one's own projects) (Briscoe et al., 2021). Achieving the goal of financial security has increased in importance since Malek's flight as he strives to support family members in Turkey and to become able to establish his own family in Germany. Compared to his financial situation in Syria, he now earns less while needing to spend more (e.g. on rent, groceries, remittances to family members in Turkey). Although he is able

to get by with what he earns, he is not yet satisfied with the level of subjective career success he has achieved. As a consequence, his second subjective career success goal of entrepreneurship has become even more important. To achieve this goal in Germany, Malek has registered his own business as a carpenter with the plan to pursue this as a sideline alongside his work as an electronics technician. This takes him one step closer to being his own boss and increasing his subjective career success in this area. The future will show whether this plan is successful.

BOX 14.1 STOP AND THINK

1. Is a career shock a positive or negative event? What mechanisms can individuals use to change a career shock into a positive career development?
2. Which characteristics of individuals help to accelerate career transitions?
3. Think about your personal environment: What could you personally do to make refugees' integration easier and more effective?

NOTES

1. The 'Meister' ('Master craftsman') is the highest professional qualification in crafts and trades and a state-approved award.
2. A qualification that entitles holders to train future apprentices.

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