Varying degrees of boundarylessness? The careers of self-employed and directly employed ICT professionals in the UK and Germany

Article

Accepted Version

Varying degrees of boundarylessness? The careers of self-employed and directly employed ICT professionals in the UK and Germany

Patricia Kinsella, independent academic scholar

Steve Williams, Faculty of Business and Law, University of Portsmouth, UK

Peter Scott, Faculty of Business and Law, University of Portsmouth, UK

Rita Fontinha, Henley Business School, University of Reading, UK

Varying degrees of boundarylessness? The careers of self-employed and directly employed ICT professionals in the UK and Germany

ABSTRACT

Despite growing interest in the influence of social and institutional settings on the nature of career trajectories, research into comparative differences in boundaryless careers is scarce. Informed by the Varieties of Capitalism approach, which emphasizes the embeddedness of employment practices within discrete types of capitalist market economy, and based on rich qualitative data from in-depth interviews with 32 self-employed and directly employed information and communications (ICT) professionals based in the UK and Germany, we investigate variation in their experience of, and attitudes towards, boundaryless careers. The research findings provide scant evidence that ICT professionals embrace boundaryless careers, despite working in a sector where positive engagement with boundarylessness, if it is going to be found anywhere, should be evident. The findings also point to cross-national differences; directly employed ICT professionals based in Germany are more concerned about insecurity than their UK-based counterparts. In highlighting the complex and subtle influences on how boundaryless careers are experienced and understood, the research builds on existing work which both attests to the importance of context in influencing boundarylessness and its consequences and questions an overly crude distinction between 'bounded' and 'boundaryless' careers, to emphasize the value of an approach which is concerned with understanding comparative variation in the degree of career boundarylessness.

KEYWORDS: Boundaryless careers; comparative careers; employability; ICT professionals; Varieties of Capitalism

Varying degrees of boundarylessness? The careers of self-employed and directly employed ICT professionals in the UK and Germany

INTRODUCTION

Making sense of contemporary careers is an important feature of scholarly work in international human resource management. There is a particular concern with understanding how far, and in what ways, traditional career patterns, based around employing organizations, have been superseded by those of a more 'boundaryless' nature (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Adopting a comparative perspective, using data from 32 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with self-employed and directly employed ICT professionals in the UK and Germany, our key research objective is to explore how their experience of, and engagement with, boundarylessness vary according to their respective country setting.

Informed by the Varieties of Capitalism (VoC) approach, which holds that social structures and processes are influenced by distinctive models of capitalist market economy (Hall & Soskice, 2001), the paper focuses on ICT professionals' experiences and perceptions of portfolio working, career (in)security and employability. Although some notable commonality is evident, cross-national differences between the UK and Germany suggest that individual careers in general, and career boundarylessness in particular, are embedded within discrete country settings, with the latter varying in degree as a consequence. Thus the paper builds on existing work which critiques the excessively individualistic focus on boundaryless careers and affirms the important influence of broader social and institutional settings on career trajectories (Arnold, Coombs & Gubler, 2019; Rodrigues, Guest & Budjanovcanin, 2016; Tomlinson, Baird, Berg & Cooper, 2018; Zeitz, Blau & Fertig, 2009).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The boundaryless model posits that people enjoy greater flexibility over, and ownership of, their own career trajectories, independent from, and beyond the boundaries of, employing organizations (Inkson, 2008; Rodrigues & Guest, 2010; Roper, Ganesh & Inkson, 2010). A key feature of the boundaryless career is said to be greater inter-organizational mobility (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). This has two dimensions. One is psychological, and concerns individuals' orientation towards, and preference for, greater mobility. Briscoe and Hall's (2006) concept of the boundaryless career orientation (BCO) incorporates two elements of psychological mobility – a boundaryless 'mindset' and a 'mobility preference'. The second dimension of mobility concerns the extent to which individuals' careers are characterized by physical mobility across organizational boundaries (Rodrigues & Guest, 2010; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006), in the form of boundaryless career paths (BCPs) (Gubler, Arnold & Coombs, 2014).

Greater boundarylessness is associated with the presence of portfolio working arrangements (Cohen & Mallon, 1999; Mallon, 1999), as "individuals contract their skills and knowledge to various individuals and organizations, in effect creating a 'portfolio' of work activity for themselves" (Fenwick, 2006 p.66). Portfolio working is often predicated on individuals' dissatisfaction with the rigidities and limited opportunities for professional development associated with organizationally-based career trajectories (Cohen & Mallon, 1999; Mallon, 1999). Individual workers are claimed to have increased scope for autonomy and free agency, given their independence from restrictive direct employment arrangements (Barley & Kunda, 2004; Fenwick, 2006), and benefit from a healthier work–life balance, increased sense of personal fulfilment and greater flexibility over work arrangements (Sturges, 2008).

Yet portfolio working requires a high degree of self-sufficiency on the part of the individuals concerned. They must actively cultivate their own employability, increasing their marketability, through assuming responsibility for, and ownership of, their careers (Berntson, Näswall & Sverke, 2010), implying that traditional forms of job security, based on stable careers in employing organizations, may no longer be so relevant. A boundaryless mindset is associated with a greater propensity for workers to seek external sources of support (Briscoe, Henagan, Burton & Murphy, 2012). Self-employed workers have a particular concern with actively maintaining their employability; developing their own professional networks for example (Lo Presti, Pluviano & Briscoe, 2018)

There are some difficulties with the boundaryless career concept. One is the questionable extent to which careers have been transformed along boundaryless lines (Clarke, 2013; Inkson, Ganz, Ganesh & Roper, 2012; Rodrigues & Guest, 2010). A second issue concerns the adverse consequences of boundaryless careers and portfolio working, including greater job insecurity (Budtz-Jørgensen, Johnsen & Sørensen, 2019; Cohen & Mallon, 1999; Fenwick, 2006), and lower levels of career, life and job satisfaction (Rodrigues, Butler & Guest, 2019). A third difficulty involves claims that boundaryless careers are often a function, not of individual choice, but rather a lack of alternative job opportunities (Zeitz et al, 2009). While pursuing a boundaryless career may suit skilled professionals who have a relatively high level of individual labour market bargaining power, others can find themselves pushed into portfolio work, rather than actively choosing it themselves, often as a consequence of organizational restructuring (Trusson & Woods, 2017). This exemplifies what Guan et al (2019: 392) refer to as ‘involuntary career boundarylessness’, something which is particularly associated with negative career outcomes.

A more profound issue concerns the limited value of the career boundaryless concept, given the complexity of career trajectories (Rodrigues et al, 2016). Changes to the boundaries of careers – including greater 'boundary-crossing' and the development of new boundaries – are perhaps more important than any increase in supposed boundarylessness (Guan et al, 2019; Inkson et al, 2012; Tomlinson et al, 2018). The careers of portfolio workers are often bounded by the necessity of securing regular assignments from organizations (Platman, 2004). This highlights the importance of eschewing an overly simplistic distinction between 'bounded' and 'boundaryless' careers (Rodrigues et al, 2016; Budtz-Jørgensen et al, 2019), and the desirability of focusing instead on understanding boundarylessness.

For the purpose of this paper, the most notable problem with much of the work on boundaryless careers is its excessively individualistic bias (Zeitz et al, 2009). Career trajectories are viewed as being largely a function of 'individual agency' (Rodrigues and Guest, 2010; Rodrigues et al, 2016; Rodrigues et al, 2019). Yet the importance of contextual factors in influencing individual careers has long been recognized (Fouad & Kantamneni, 2008; Super, 1992). Moreover, extant scholarship increasingly recognizes how contextual factors affect supposedly individual career agency (Roper et al, 2010; Tams & Arthur, 2010); and that "boundaryless careers cannot be constructed independently of institutional and cultural contexts…" (Tams & Arthur, 2010 p.635). Arnold et al (2019) demonstrate how national differences in cultural contexts influence IT professionals' perception of organizational career management practices. Career trajectories are also affected by the institutional features of the environments in which they are situated, including government policies and organizational structures and processes (Guan et al, 2019; Kost, Fieseler & Wong, 2019). The implication is that individual career trajectories are embedded – in the

sense of being deeply rooted – within specific social and institutional contexts, including discrete country settings (Rodrigues et al, 2016; Roper et al, 2010; Tomlinson et al, 2018).

A comparative institutionalist perspective recognizes the importance of distinctive national-level institutions—political and legal structures, business systems, employment relations arrangements—when it comes to influencing employment change. Pressure for greater uniformity exists, linked to liberalization and the cross-border diffusion of employment practices, of the kind evident in supposedly advanced sectors such as ICT. However, since they are embedded in discrete country settings, processes of change vary cross-nationally in their speed, scale and scope (Baccaro & Howell, 2017). The most well-known comparative institutionalist perspective is the VoC approach (Hall & Soskice, 2001). Focusing on how economic activities are coordinated, it distinguishes between two ideal-type varieties of capitalism. In a 'liberal market economy' (LME), such as the UK, markets have a dominant role in resolving coordination difficulties, characterized by an emphasis on competition, labour market flexibility and weak employment regulation. In a 'coordinated market economy' (CME), such as Germany, however, problems of coordination are resolved more by non-market mechanisms, with the process of marketization attenuated by the presence of strong institutions, such as employers' associations and trade unions (Baccaro & Howell, 2017; Hall & Soskice, 2001; Williams et al, 2013).

The VoC approach has attracted critique (Bechter, Brandl & Meardi, 2012), including for paying insufficient attention to capitalism itself (Bruff & Horn, 2012). It perhaps neglects the importance of liberalization-induced change in CMEs such as Germany (Baccaro & Howell, 2017; Doellgast, 2009; Streeck, 2009). Nevertheless, in emphasizing how social structures and processes are embedded within specific country settings the VoC typology is important

for understanding cross-national diversity in employment (Greer & Doellgast, 2017). Its value for this study concerns the implication that individual career trajectories in general, and career boundarylessness in particular, are embedded within, and thus influenced by, country-specific institutional domains, varying accordingly. The concept of the boundaryless career epitomizes the rise of more individualized, flexible, market-oriented career expectations and trajectories, of the kind likely to be more prevalent, and received more favourably, in an LME such as the UK compared to a CME such as Germany.

RESEARCH METHODS

The ICT sector was selected as the research setting because it is often regarded as a 'vanguard' sector, in the sense of being at the forefront of changes in employment that subsequently extend to the wider labour market in general (Chillas, Marks & Galloway, 2015). The erosion of traditional organizational careers, and the rise of more boundaryless career trajectories, seem to be particularly evident in ICT (Donnelly, 2008; Gubler et al, 2014). The ICT sector is thus a particularly suitable research setting, given the expectation that positive experiences of, and engagement with, boundarylessness are more likely to be found there than anywhere else, in a way that transcends the country setting.

That said, though, the nature of country-specific institutional contexts can influence work and employment in the ICT sector (Donnelly, Grimshaw & Miozzo, 2011). The UK and Germany were selected as the comparative research locations for investigating boundaryless ICT careers, as each represents a distinct form of market economy in Hall and Soskice's (2001) VoC approach. Comparing the experiences of ICT professionals in Germany, an archetypal CME, with those in the UK, a quintessential LME (Hall & Soskice, 2001), was justified on the basis that ICT professionals in Germany should be less positively disposed towards, and

have more limited engagement with, the individualized, market-based boundaryless career model than their counterparts based in the more liberalized UK.

Our key concern was to explore how ICT professionals in the UK and Germany experience, understand and make sense of their careers and career trajectories, using qualitative data. The research took the form of an interpretive enquiry, guided by the phenomenological method, for the purpose of capturing the depth, richness and complexity of ICT professionals' employment (Moustakas, 1994). As Miles, Huberman & Saldaña (2014 p.31) observe, "qualitative researchers usually work with small samples of people, nested in their context and studied in-depth", who are deliberately and purposively selected. Semi-structured interviews with 32 ICT professionals were used to elicit free-flowing and personal narratives from open-ended questions, covering topics such as: independence, autonomy, and flexibility; perceptions of job security; and employability. Knowledge of the career trajectories of self-employed workers is lacking; yet they supposedly "represent the quintessence of the individual career" (Lo Presti, et al, 2018 p.438). Therefore, in establishing our sample we included both directly employed and self-employed ICT professionals. Equal numbers of research participants were recruited from two groups in the UK and Germany: individuals who are either directly employed by an organization in the ICT sector or who provide ICT services to such an organization in an employed capacity; and individuals who either pursue contractual work on a self-employed basis in the ICT sector or provide ICT services to an organization in a self-employed capacity.

Table one near here

Table one and appendix one provide details of our pseudonomyized research participants. Those in self-employment tended to skew older than directly employed participants. In general, our research participants either worked directly in providing ICT services (e.g. software engineer, IT architect), or operated in a professional capacity in ICT firms (e.g. marketing manager). They were recruited using personal contacts, existing networks, relevant industry associations and by 'snowballing', whereby the recommendation of previous informants produced new participants – what Noy (2008 p.328) refers to as "chain sampling".

Of the 32 interviews, a half (n=16) were conducted over the telephone, and a further four were undertaken using Skype – see table one for details. Although face-to-face interviewing is often regarded as superior to other techniques when undertaking qualitative research, using telephone and electronic methods is both cost effective and capable of generating rich data (Holt, 2010; Vogl, 2013). The duration of each interview varied between 45-60 minutes. Before fieldwork commenced, the research was ethically approved according to the host institution's procedures, with participants' informed consent, anonymity and data confidentiality being primary considerations.

Figure one near here

Interviews were audio recorded using a dictaphone, and subsequently transcribed. Based on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a comprehensive, rigorous and manually operated coding system was applied for the purpose of organizing the raw, qualitative interview data and producing the findings. The codes were generated in a process that involved four phases (see figure one). The first phase involved a process of 'open' or 'initial' coding (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), as the raw interview data from each transcript were intensely

reviewed before being disaggregated and codified. This ensured that the experiences and perceptions of ICT professionals were integral to the data analysis (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013). A second phase of 'holistic' coding (Saldaña, 2013) followed, as the codes from phase one were assigned to a topic area (e.g. marketability, employability and skills) previously identified as relevant from the literature and which had informed the content of the semi-structured interview schedule. The third phase encompassed a process of both 'pattern' and 'axial' coding – identifying patterns in the codes, generating categories as appropriate, and finding connections between these categories (Charmaz, 2014; Miles et al, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The fourth and final phase – a process of 'selective' or 'theoretical' coding – involved generating key themes from these categories to organize the research findings (Saldaña, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Although the coding was undertaken individually, such a carefully designed and rigorous process of data analysis contributed to the validity of the qualitative research findings (Bazeley, 2013).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Portfolio working

The question of mobility is integral to the concept of the boundaryless career, based on the preparedness of individuals to engage in multiple work assignments – as portfolio workers – beyond the boundaries of a single employing organization (Fenwick, 2006; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). Considering that it is associated with flexible, market-based and individualized career trajectories, in applying the VoC approach we should expect greater engagement with portfolio working among ICT professionals in the UK, an LME, than those in Germany, a CME. Our data show that, irrespective of their country setting, self-employed ICT professionals largely appreciated the value of portfolio working in principle. The choice to become self-employed was clearly rooted in a desire for flexibility, independence and

autonomy and a general dissatisfaction with the constraints associated with a direct employment, consistent with a 'boundaryless mindset' (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). Over half (n=9) of our sixteen self-employed informants expressed enthusiasm regarding portfolio arrangements. As Robert (UK), with a career as a self-employed IT architect, explained:

> 'That is my preferred option to have a portfolio of clients that I am working for, so that when one project finishes, I still have income from other clients and I have leeway about finding the next piece of work and I still have some income coming in. Or if I want to, I can take some holiday and get a bit of a…work-life balance'.

Robert's experience exemplifies how some self-employed ICT professionals, in both the UK and Germany, had either already successfully developed a portfolio approach, or regarded pursuing one as an attractive prospect. It is valued because it enables those in self-employment to secure some job security, by balancing assignments from multiple client organizations. Some (n=6) directly employed ICT professionals also expressed a willingness to engage in, or evinced enthusiasm towards, a portfolio approach. For John (UK), the thought of portfolio working was a 'very exciting' prospect. He expressed an interest in 'taking on additional work to build a portfolio career'.

Yet fewer than half (n=15) of all the ICT professionals in the study had developed, or were desirous of developing, a portfolio approach. Given that portfolio work is commonly associated with a series of short-term contracts to generate a continuous income stream, by managing a set of varied work commitments, somewhat surprisingly nearly half (n=7) of our self-employed respondents were either not engaged in, or unwilling to consider, a portfolio approach. This raises questions about the attractiveness of boundarylessness, even in ICT,

suggesting that claims about the increasing prevalence of the boundaryless career model should be treated with caution (Rodrigues and Guest, 2010).

Even in the UK, where the VoC approach would lead us to expect ICT professionals to be more engaged with portfolio working, respondents expressed concerns about the difficulties associated with having to focus on undertaking multiple engagements and the demands – particularly relating to time pressures and client expectations – they impose. Engagement with boundarylessness is compromised by the demanding nature of portfolio work arrangements. This is especially acute in the UK's liberalized environment, where ICT professionals recognized the challenges involved in operating in highly competitive market conditions, particularly pressures for reduced costs. Directly employed ICT respondents in the UK reported notably higher levels of work pressure than their counterparts in Germany. Jane (UK), who worked as an IT sales specialist, claimed:

> 'There is quite a lot of pressure and if I didn't have the flexibility, it would make things even worse. There is a lot of work, there is a lot of worry and pressure but because there's this flexibility along with it, it makes it more manageable'.

Inter-organizational career mobility can also be bounded in other respects. For example, Anthony, an experienced ICT consultant, highlighted the extent to which portfolio working involves having to depart from one's core specialism, with adverse reputational consequences:

> 'It simply means that you don't have enough work in the main area, so you go into an area where you can get some odd jobs. They tend to be badly paid, and I personally

> don't want to be a jack-of-all-trades … Most employers I know want a proven track record, so it's better that you are committing to your chosen field and be a specialist as I am' (Anthony, UK).

Among directly employed ICT professionals there was a tendency to view portfolio work as a fall-back option, to be pursued out of necessity, rather than choice, and only if the time needed for it could be accommodated:

> 'It's tough when companies want their pound of flesh. They want you solely and singly contracted to them and are not happy if you've got some other commitments. You couldn't do very much portfolio work. I've only done short bursts of it' (Claire, UK).

Inter-organizational career mobility is also bounded in other respects. Paradoxically, considering the supposed greater freedom and autonomy it heralds, portfolio working could inhibit self-employed ICT professionals' control over their schedules. As David – a self-employed ICT financial consultant in Germany – explained, the short-term pressures associated with maintaining an appropriate balance of portfolio activities can militate against self-employed ICT professionals' capacity to plan their career trajectories effectively:

> '…[there is] not enough time to pick the next projects carefully, as you tend to do projects simultaneously, so it hinders you from developing into a preferred direction as you just pick whatever comes your way'.

While a portfolio arrangement in theory offers individuals greater opportunities to control how they perform their jobs, as well as schedule their work, there was little evidence of such autonomy. These findings thus caution against assertions about the supposedly greater eagerness of knowledge workers to establish their own individual career trajectories based on portfolio working (Donnelly, 2008), and thus the continuing relevance of boundaries to inter-organizational career mobility. Even in the frontline ICT sector, the degree of engagement with, and support for, a portfolio approach was rather muted. This was evident irrespective of the country setting, contrary to what using the VoC approach would anticipate. For ICT professionals, the principle of portfolio working, and the greater individual mobility it portends, was attractive. Yet their experiences led them to reflect on the problems of such an approach, and their circumscribed agency as individuals, in a way that suggests that career boundaries are evolving rather than dissolving (Tomlinson et al, 2018). The data revealed no evident differences between the career experiences and perceptions of ICT professionals in the UK, an LME, and Germany, a CME. In respect of portfolio working, then, the country setting in which they are based does not seem to influence ICT professionals' engagement with boundarylessness, casting doubt about the analytical value of the VoC approach.

Career uncertainty and job (in)security

Based on the VoC approach, we would expect the careers of ICT professionals operating in the UK, an LME, to be characterized by greater uncertainty and insecurity than those in Germany, a CME. Yet they should also be somewhat at ease with, and habituated to, the greater boundarylessness associated with market-based, individualized career trajectories, moderating anxieties about job insecurity. In contrast, using the VoC approach would imply that concerns about the insecurity associated with boundarylessness should be particularly

evident in Germany, since ICT professionals operating there should have greater expectations of stability than their UK-based counterparts.

There was a high level of perceived job insecurity evident among ICT professionals in general – 20 of our 32 respondents believed themselves to be insecure and to have unpredictable career paths. Perceptions of insecurity were particularly evident among the self-employed ICT professionals featured in the research, with eleven out of sixteen reporting a belief that their jobs were insecure. Robert (UK), for example, highlighted the lack of certainty about work and income, given the fluctuating nature of his assignments:

> 'Sometimes, it's very frustrating. There is no guaranteed work. No guaranteed income. The danger of freelancing is that you get times of feast or famine. You have too much work in one period and that comes to an end and then you have time to find new work and you have a gap for several months'.

The unpredictability associated with a self-employed career, and its adverse consequences, were noted by experienced UK-based ICT professionals:

> 'The main disadvantage about being self-employed is the uncertainty because you don't know where the next job is coming from. It's very high earning when I am in work but there's nothing when I'm not in work' (Anthony, UK).

> 'The gaps in between are dissatisfying and having to find new work regularly. There are ups and downs. It's the uncertainty' (Peter, UK).

Yet unpredictable career patterns, associated with a lack of job security were also evident among self-employed ICT professionals in Germany. Based on his experience as a self-employed financial consultant, Tim observed:

> ‘Being self-employed, there’s always the added element that you cannot really plan for long-term. My work set-up isn’t the most secure. There is far more uncertainty than when you are an employee’.

The extent to which self-employed ICT professionals not only believed themselves to be insecure, but also understood this as a disagreeable feature of their working lives, irrespective of whether they were based in the UK or Germany, was striking. Although pointing to the limited value of the VoC approach, this is consistent with other research which emphasizes the unfavourable consequences of job insecurity, rather than viewing it as an integral and desirable component of more fractured and individualized career trajectories beyond the boundaries of employing organizations (Budtz-Jørgensen, Johnsen & Sørensen, 2019; Trusson & Woods, 2017).

We would expect directly employed ICT professionals, being positioned within employing organizations, to feel more secure in their careers; it was those based in the UK, though, who expressed particular confidence in the security of their employment and the stability of their careers. Working in IT sales, Jane considered herself to be:

> ‘pretty secure. Part of the reason is that I don’t get paid much and I am cheap labour. So in terms of long-term career progression, I’m very confident that the company is

never going to get rid of me. I also do a pretty important job because I cover a lot of customers'.

This suggests that UK-based ICT professionals' understanding of job security is predicated on their perceived contribution or performance as individuals, rather than a function of their directly employed status. The research findings highlight the influence of employment status, manifest in directly employed respondents generally expressing more confidence in their security than their self-employed counterparts. Nevertheless, little evidence emerges overall that ICT professionals in general, and those in the UK in particular, have become habituated to individualized, marketized and fragmented career trajectories, of the kind associated with the boundaryless model, given their perceived unpredictability and insecurity.

Compared with the more liberalized UK, Germany offers an institutional setting in which ICT professionals should feel protected, in a way that discourages efforts to build external employability for the purpose of pursuing greater inter-organizational career mobility of the kind associated with greater boundarylessness. There was some evidence that the presence of a strong system of welfare support results in ICT professionals in Germany believing themselves to be better looked after than their UK-based counterparts. According to Stephanie (Germany):

'In general, there is a very good social system available to ensure that you never fall too low when you lose your job'.

Yet directly employed ICT professionals in Germany sense that, under pressures of greater liberalization and marketization, their hitherto rather stable careers could be under threat. Six

out of eight participants claimed their careers were insecure, double the number of UK counterparts doing so. Julia (Germany), who worked as a marketing manager in an ICT firm, explained that:

> 'It's a two-fold perspective. I perceive my work set-up as stable but I know when I think about it that this can be deceptive. Due to changes in management or the spin-off of companies, your work and the corporate culture can change very, very quickly and the apparent stability can lead to instability within weeks. You need to be a little bit aware of this'.

How are these findings consistent with the VoC approach? Our interpretation is that directly employed ICT professionals in Germany are accustomed to the relative stability and security offered by working in a CME, where organizations and individuals are traditionally less exposed to external market pressures than is the case in an LME such as the UK. However, as liberalization advances in Germany (Addison, Teixeira, Pahnke & Bellmann, 2017; Baccaro & Howell, 2017), eroding the established CME 'variety' of capitalism, perceptions of insecurity have grown.

Employability

Boundaryless careers require individuals to be aware of, and ensure they are suitable for, new employment opportunities, particularly in the external labour market. In a supposedly vanguard sector such as ICT workers should be particularly cognisant of, and committed to, measures designed to enhance their career development, and thus their employability, in order to navigate more market-based, individualized career trajectories (Gubler et al, 2014). Yet using the VoC approach would imply that ICT professionals in the UK, an LME, are

likely to be exposed to greater market pressures, and thus be more concerned with measures to enhance their external employability, than their counterparts in Germany, a CME, whose efforts should be more organizationally focused.

As might be expected, those in self-employment possessed a heightened awareness of the importance of being self-sufficient, and of bearing individual responsibility for their career trajectories (Lo Presti et al, 2018). All 16 self-employed ICT professionals featured in the research were actively engaged in seeking new employment opportunities, for the purpose of securing a continuous flow of engagements, compared to just half (n=8) of directly employed respondents. In this respect, clearly boundarylessness is more evident among self-employed ICT professionals than those who are directly employed. Self-employed ICT professionals should be particularly interested in, and engaged with, the kind of measures necessary to maintain and enhance career employability, such as undertaking specialist training activities, or seeking external support, reflective of a greater 'boundaryless mindset' (Briscoe et al, 2012). Yet this proved not to be the case. Marc's (Germany) comment neatly captures self-employed respondents' short-term focus: 'I am not really doing anything, just learning by doing the tasks for my job'.

Studies of international assignments suggest that effective networking can enhance individuals' career capital, aiding their career progression (Dickmann & Doherty, 2008). For ICT professionals, using personal recommendations and networks is an important aspect of maintaining employability and facilitating a self-employed career. Anthony, a highly experienced UK-based ICT consultant, explained:

> ‘I only get work through personal recommendation from a former client or someone who knows about my work. I network with a lot of other professionals who are not competitors. Everything comes from personal recommendation’.

Self-employed ICT professionals appeared confident about their existing skills portfolio, and seemed little concerned about the need to update their skills to enhance their marketability and employability. That said, though, consistent with the VoC approach, those operating in Germany reported enjoying greater access than their UK-based counterparts to formal training and development opportunities through the organizations with which they contracted. Robert highlighted the reluctance of employing organizations to provide training for UK-based self-employed ICT professionals such as himself:

> ‘I typically work for them just a few days per month, and then they are paying me quite a high daily rate when I go in to deliver their services, so they would not want to be providing training courses for me. Because they’re effectively learning how to do the job that I’m doing for them’.

Self-employed ICT professionals clearly recognize the importance of being aware of alternative employment opportunities, but in a largely passive manner. There was little evidence they were actively engaged in efforts to manage their own individual career trajectories, and maintain their employability, in a manner consistent with a boundaryless orientation (Briscoe et al, 2012; Gubler et al, 2014; Lo Presti et al, 2018).

Using the VoC approach as a comparative lens implies that ICT professionals based in the UK, an LME, should be more concerned with operating formalized, external networking

arrangements than their counterparts in Germany, a CME. Yet the research findings did not bear this out. Self-employed ICT professionals in Germany emphasized the importance of using personal networks and recommendations to build trust and enhance their reputations, to the advantage of their careers. They also used professional social media networks for self-marketing and career development. However this was relatively unimportant among UK-based ICT professionals, who seemed little interested in actively taking steps to maintain or enhance their career prospects, tending to rely more on informal, word-of-mouth arrangements, including personal recommendations.

A further key research finding concerns the contrasting experiences of directly employed workers in Germany and the UK respectively. Consistent with a VoC approach, those based in Germany displayed a pronounced degree of commitment and loyalty to their current employing organizations and seemed reluctant to pursue alternative employment opportunities in the external labour market. Despite the liberalization pressures evident in Germany, it remains a CME (Baccaro & Howell, 2017), and thus a less accommodating environment for boundarylessness than the UK.

While there was an awareness of the importance of being flexible and adaptable, with such attributes viewed as integral to working in ICT, respondents generally expressed a strong degree of self-assurance about their existing portfolio of skills. Julia, an ICT marketing manager based in Germany, was confident that:

> ‘There are always areas where you can learn more or become better at things that you want to accomplish personally. But to do the job as it is at the moment, my skills are sufficient’.

There was little evidence that directly employed ICT professionals were much engaged in formal arrangements to enhance their individual employability. The kind of physical mobility associated with greater boundarylessness is constrained by the limited take-up of formal development opportunities, particularly in the UK. While ICT professionals in Germany seemed to make more use of training and development opportunities offered by their employers, as should be expected in a CME, based on the VoC approach, the relevance of such interventions was questioned. According to Daniel, an IT architect based in Germany:

> 'Yes, for general know-how or specialist, technical know-how although it's more effective to pick this up from the actual job that you are doing rather than through the learning programmes that are offered'.

Although the acquisition of new skills could be considered integral to promoting employability, and thus inducing greater boundarylessness, the research highlights the presence of a rather narrow focus on the current job that characterized processes of skills development. Directly employed ICT professionals took a largely short-term perspective, being predominantly engaged with the responsibilities arising from their current work commitments. The demands of their existing jobs hampered much consideration of investing in longer-term skills development, and thus enhancing their external employability, as a boundaryless career orientation would anticipate. Consistent with a VoC approach, though, the experiences of directly employed ICT workers in Germany were distinctive. They displayed a particularly marked degree of commitment and loyalty to their current organizations and seemed more reluctant to pursue alternative employment opportunities than their UK-based counterparts.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This comparative study of ICT professionals in Germany and the UK explores their engagement with career boundarylessness, centred upon their experiences of, and attitudes towards, portfolio working, career (in)security and employability. Situated in a 'vanguard' sector (Chillas et al, 2015), ICT professionals should be positively disposed towards, and engaged in, boundaryless careers, irrespective of the country setting. Yet notwithstanding the benefits of portfolio working, including greater autonomy over work schedules (Fenwick, 2006), there was only modest support for, or evidence of, boundarylessness among the ICT professionals who featured in this study. Nevertheless the research findings do attest to the divergent experiences of self-employed and directly employed respondents, with the former, as anticipated (Lo Presti et al, 2018), expressing greater boundarylessness than the latter. For example, self-employed ICT professionals were more engaged with portfolio working. But it is a highly qualified boundarylessness all the same, with training and development activities focused on the demands of their current position rather than anticipating, and enhancing, their future external employability.

Existing scholarship highlights the insecurity associated with greater boundarylessness (Budtz-Jørgensen et al, 2019), attests to the adverse consequences of boundaryless careers for individuals (Rodrigues et al, 2019) and casts doubt on how far such careers have been embraced (Rodrigues & Guest, 2010). The findings reported in this study raise further questions about the extent to which new, more flexible and individualized career trajectories are supplanting organizationally-based career patterns (Clarke, 2013). Even in the relatively highly professionalized field of ICT boundaryless careers are far from being normalized, as this study demonstrates.

Centred upon the VoC approach, which emphasizes the embeddedness of social structures and processes, and which identifies two ideal-type varieties of capitalism (Hall & Soskice, 2001), the research in this paper compares ICT professionals in a 'liberal market economy', represented by the UK, with those in a 'coordinated market economy', exemplified by Germany. Despite some commonality being evident, especially in respect of portfolio working, the research findings demonstrate how ICT professionals' experience of, and engagement with, boundarylessness vary according to the institutional context they inhabit, in a way that is largely, although not entirely, consistent with the VoC approach. For example, self-employed ICT professionals in Germany had greater access to training and development opportunities through the organizations with which they contract than those in the UK. ICT professionals in both countries perceived their careers to be marked by insecurity. However the experience of directly employed ICT professionals in Germany was distinctive. They displayed a particularly marked degree of commitment and loyalty to their current employing organizations and were particularly troubled by the prospect of career insecurity; yet they seemed more reluctant to pursue alternative employment opportunities than their UK-based counterparts. While there was little evidence of, or appetite for, boundarylessness in general, the individual career trajectories of ICT professionals, particularly those who are directly employed, were more bounded in Germany than in the UK.

Drawing on these findings, our paper builds on work that both questions the emphasis on individual agency ascribed to boundaryless careers and attests to the importance of context in influencing boundarylessness and its consequences (Arnold et al, 2019; Rodrigues et al, 2016; Tams & Arthur, 2010; Tomlinson et al, 2018; Zeitz et al, 2009). The paper's main contribution to existing theory is to emphasize the importance of comparative variation in the

degree of career boundarylessness. Complementing the work of those, such as Rodrigues et al (2016), who reject a straightforward, and overly simplistic, dichotomy between 'bounded' and 'boundaryless' careers, this paper demonstrates how individuals' experiences of, and attitudes towards, career boundarylessness reflect the embeddedness of their career trajectories within discrete country-based institutional contexts. Existing studies already acknowledge the continued importance, and complexity, of career boundaries (Guan et al, 2019). Our research builds on this work by highlighting that in Germany, a CME, individuals' experiences of, and engagement with, boundarylessness are more circumscribed than in the UK, an LME, where market-based and flexible careers are more established and normalized.

The evidently limited appeal of, and engagement with, career boundarylessness highlighted by our research poses a challenge for organizational human resource (HR) practice. Rather than assuming that individual workers, even those involved in professional jobs, are desirous of pursuing flexible and marketized career trajectories, HR practitioners should reflect on what organizations can do to accommodate the aspirations of workers, particularly directly employed staff, for career stability. This is particularly important for organizations operating in CMEs, such as Germany, where individual workers are likely to be more wary of engaging with boundaryless careers.

As with any qualitative work of this kind, the emphasis was on depth of analysis, with interpretation derived from detailed exploration of ICT professionals' experiences and perceptions (Gioia et al, 2013; Miles et al, 2014). This carries some inherent limitations. The reliance on personal contacts and snowballing for recruiting the sample might have caused some inadvertent bias. Ideally, a more structured sampling approach – ensuring that the

sample from each country was as closely aligned as possible in terms of experience, gender, age, and perhaps also including details of participants' ethnicity – would have been beneficial, permitting a more systematic comparison between ICT professionals in the two countries. On reflection the highly gendered nature of ICT work and employment (Kenny and Donnelly, 2020) means that some consideration of gender would also have been desirable, ideally including data on participants' dependents. Clearly, further studies devoted to investigating how career boundarylessness varies, particularly in ICT, should acknowledge the relevance of gender, as well as the influence of country settings, in building on the insights offered here.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

REFERENCES

Addison, J., Teixeira, P., Pahnke, A. & Bellmann, L. (2017). The demise of a model? The state of collective bargaining and worker representation in Germany. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 38(2), 193-234.

Arthur, M. & Rousseau, D. (1996). The boundaryless career as a new employment principle. In M. Arthur & D. Rousseau (Eds), *The boundaryless career: A new employment principle for a new organisational era* (pp.3-20). New York: Oxford University Press.

Arnold, J., Coombs, C. & Gubler, M. (2019). Career anchors and preferences for organizational career management: a study of information technology professionals in three European countries. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 30(22), 3190-3222.

Baccaro, L. & Howell, C. (2017). *Trajectories of neoliberal transformation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Barley, S. & Kunda, G. (2004). *Gurus, hired guns, and warm bodies.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bazeley, P. (2013). *Qualitative data analysis: practical strategies*. London: SAGE Publications.

Bechter, B., Brandl, B. & Meardi, G. (2012). Sectors or countries? Typologies and levels of analysis in comparative industrial relations. *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 18(3), 185–202.

Berntson, E., Näswall, K. & Sverke, M. (2010). The moderating role of employability in the association between job insecurity and exit, voice, loyalty and neglect. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 31(2), 215–230.

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.

Briscoe, J. & Hall, D. (2006). The interplay of boundaryless and protean careers: combinations and implications. *Journal of Vocational Behavior,* 69(1), 4–18.

Briscoe, J., Henagan, S., Burton, J. & Murphy, W. (2012). Coping with an insecure employment environment: the differing roles of protean and boundaryless career orientations. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 80(2), 308-316.

Bruff, I. & Horn, L. (2012). Varieties of capitalism in crisis? *Socio-Economic Review*, 16(3), 161-168.

Budtz-Jørgensen, J. Johnsen, C. & Sørensen, B. (2019). Against boundarylessness: the liminal career of the flexible employee. *Organization*, 26(6), 917-935.

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory*, 2nd Edition. London: SAGE Publications.

Chillas, S., Marks, A. & Galloway, L. (2015). Learning to labour: an evaluation of internships and employability in the ICT sector. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 30(1), 1-15.

Clarke, M. (2013). The organizational career: not dead but in need of redefinition. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 24(4), 684-703.

Cohen, L. & Mallon M. (1999). The transition from organisational employment to portfolio working: perceptions of 'boundarylessness'. *Work, Employment and Society*, 13(2), 329-352.

Dickmann, M. & Doherty, N. (2008). Exploring the career capital impact of international assignments within distinct organizational contexts. *British Journal of Management,* 19(2), 145-161.

Doellgast, V. (2009). Still a Coordinated Model? Market Liberalization and the Transformation of Employment Relations in the German Telecommunications Industry. *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 63(1), 3–23.

Donnelly, R. (2008). Careers and temporal flexibility in the new economy: an Anglo-Dutch comparison of the organisation of consultancy work. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 18(3) 197–215.

Donnelly, R., Grimshaw, D. & Miozzo, M. (2011). Does the UK have a 'comparative institutional advantage' that is supportive of the IT services sector? *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 26(2), 98-112.

Fenwick, T. (2006). Contradictions in portfolio careers: work design and client relations. *Career Development International*, 11(1), 66–79.

Fouad, N. & Kantamneni, N. (2008). Contextual factors in vocational psychology: intersections of individual, group, and societal dimensions. In S. Brown & R. Lent (Eds.), Handbook of counseling psychology (pp.408-425). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Gioia, D. A., Corley, K. G. & Hamilton, A. L. (2013). Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research: notes on the Gioia methodology. *Organizational Research Methods*, 16(1), 15-31.

Gubler, M., Arnold, J. & Coombs, C. (2014) Organizational boundaries and beyond: a new look at the components of a boundaryless career orientation. *Career Development International*, 19(6), 641-667.

Greer, I. & Doellgast, V. (2017). Marketization, inequality and institutional change: toward a new framework for comparative employment relations. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 59(2) 192-208.

Guan, Y., Arthur, M., Khopova, S., Hall, R. & Lord, R. (2019). Career boundarylessness and career success: a review, integration and guide to future research. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 110(B), 390-402.

Hall, P. & Soskice, D. (2001). *Varieties of capitalism: The institutional foundations of comparative advantage*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Holt, A. (2010). Using the telephone for narrative interviewing: a research note. *Qualitative Research*, 10(1), 113–121.

Inkson, K. (2008). The boundaryless career. In S. Cartwright, S & C. Cooper (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of personnel psychology* (pp.545-563). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Inkson, K., Ganz, H., Ganesh, S. & Roper, J. (2012). Boundaryless careers: bringing back boundaries. *Organization Studies*, 33(2), 323-340.

Kenny, E. & Donnelly, R. (2020). Navigating the gender structure in information technology: how does this affect the experiences and behaviours of women? *Human Relations*, 72(3), 326-350.

Kost, D., Fieseler, C. & Wong, S. (2019). Boundaryless careers in the gig economy: an oxymoron? *Human Resource Management Journal*, 30(1), 100-113.

Lo Presti, A., Pluviano, S. & Briscoe, J. (2018). Are freelancers a breed apart? The role of protean and boundaryless career attitudes in employability and career success. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 28(3), 427-442.

Mallon, M. (1999). Going 'portfolio': making sense of changing careers. *Career Development International*, 4(7), 358-69.

Miles, M., Huberman, A. & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook*, 3rd Edition. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods.* Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Noy, C. (2008). Sampling knowledge: the hermeneutics of snowball sampling in qualitative research. *International Journal Social Research Methodology*, 11(4), 327–344.

Platman, K. (2004). Portfolio careers and the search for flexibility in later life. *Work, Employment, and Society*, 18(3), 573–599.

Rodrigues, R., Butler, C. & Guest, D. (2019). Antecedents of protean and boundaryless career orientations: the role of core self-evaluations, perceived employability and social capital. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 110(A), 1-11.

Rodrigues, R. & Guest, D. (2010). Have careers become boundaryless? *Human Relations*, 63(8), 1157–1175.

Rodrigues, R., Guest, D. & Budjanovcanin, A. (2016). Bounded or boundaryless? An empirical investigation of career boundaries and boundary crossing. *Work, Employment and Society*, 30(4), 669-686.

Roper, J., Ganesh, S. & Inkson, K. (2010). Neoliberalism and knowledge interests in boundaryless careers discourse. *Work, Employment and Society*, 24(4), 661-679.

Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*, 2nd Edition. London: SAGE Publications.

Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Streeck, W. (2009) *Re-forming capitalism. Institutional change in the German political economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sturges, J. (2008). All in a day's work? Career self-management and the management of the boundary between work and non-work. *Human Resource Management Journal,* 18(2), 118–134.

Sullivan, S. & Arthur, M. (2006). The evolution of the boundaryless career concept. Examining physical and psychological mobility. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, 69(1), 19-29.

Super, D. (1992). Toward a comprehensive theory of career development. In D. Montross & C. Shinkman (Eds.), Career development: theory and practice (pp.35-64). Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas.

Tams, S. & Arthur, M. (2010). New directions for boundaryless careers: agency and interdependence in a changing world. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 31(5), 629-646.

Tomlinson, J., Baird, M., Berg, P. & Cooper, R. (2018). Flexible careers across the life course: advancing theory, research and practice. *Human Relations*, 71(1), 4-22.

Trusson, C. & Woods, F. (2017). 'An end to the job as we know it': how an IT professional has experienced the uncertainty of IT outsourcing. *Work, Employment and Society*, 31(3), 542-552.

Vogl, S. (2013). Telephone versus face-to-face interviews: mode effect on semistructured interviews with children. *Social Methodology*, 43(1), 133-177.

Williams, S., Bradley, H., Devadason, R. & Erickson, M. (2013). *Globalization and work.* Cambridge: Polity.

Zeitz, G., Blau, G. & Fertig, J. (2009). Boundaryless careers and institutional resources. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 20(2), 372-398.

Figure 1: Illustration of coding process (excerpt)

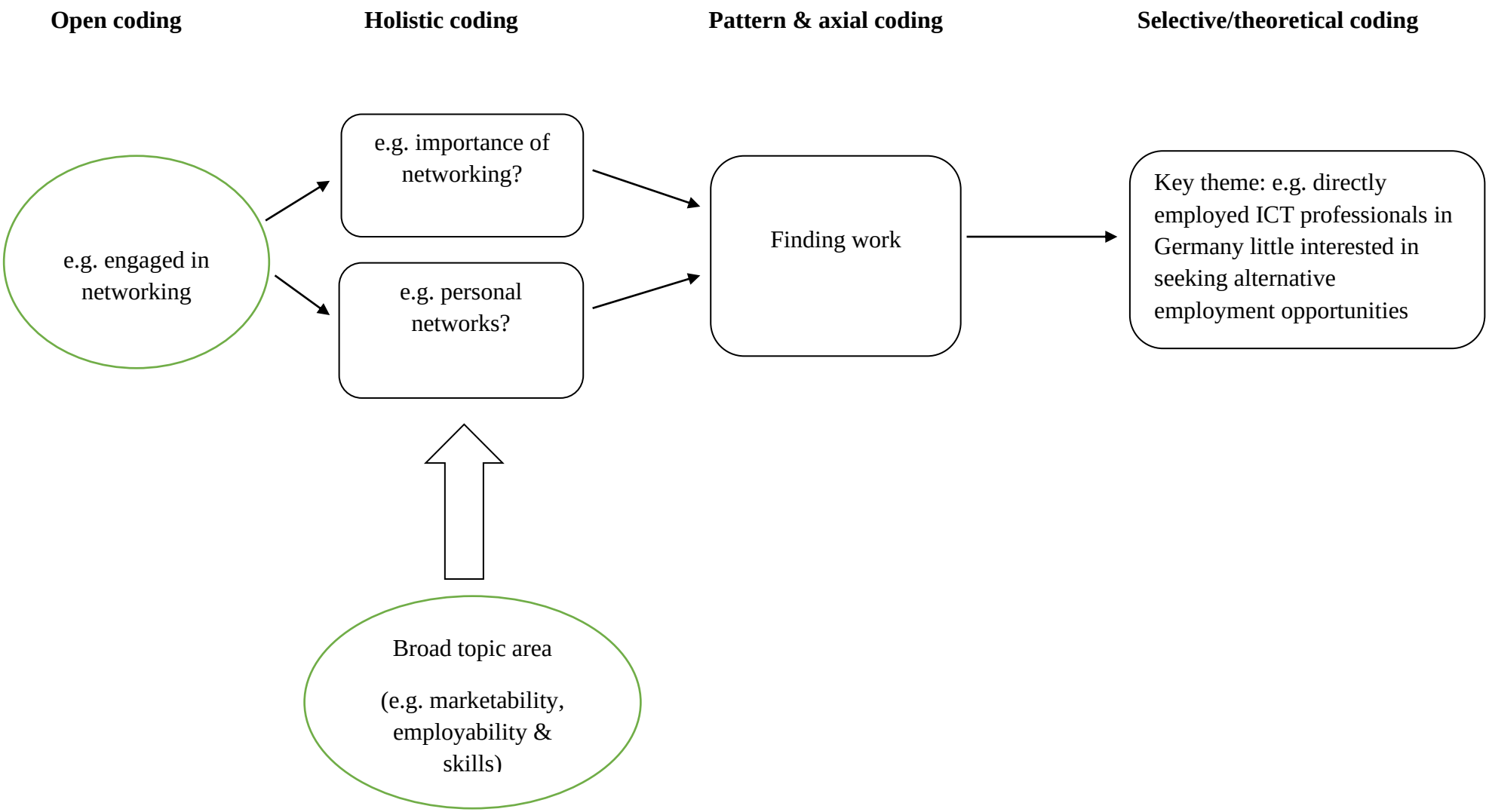

Table 1: Details of research participants

Participants	Country	Gender	Age range	Contract type	Interview mode
John	UK	Male	35-44	Directly employed	Face-to-face
Michael	UK	Male	45-54	Directly employed	Face-to-face
Ben	UK	Male	35-44	Directly employed	Face-to-face
Sarah	UK	Female	35-44	Directly employed	Face-to-face
Jane	UK	Female	25-34	Directly employed	Face-to-face
Stephen	UK	Male	45-54	Directly employed	Telephone
Barbara	UK	Female	45-54	Directly employed	Face-to-face
Emma	UK	Female	35-44	Directly employed	Face-to-face
Julia	Germany	Female	25-34	Directly employed	Face-to-face
Stephanie	Germany	Female	25-34	Directly employed	Face-to-face
Thomas	Germany	Male	55-64	Directly employed	Face-to-face
Claudia	Germany	Female	35-44	Directly employed	Telephone

Martin	Germany	Male	45-54	Directly employed	Telephone
Daniel	Germany	Male	45-54	Directly employed	Telephone
Christian	Germany	Male	45-54	Directly employed	Telephone
Paul	Germany	Male	45-54	Directly employed	Face-to-face
Claire	UK	Female	45-54	Self-employed	Skype
Andy	UK	Male	35-44	Self-employed	Skype
Elizabeth	UK	Female	45-54	Self-employed	Skype
Peter	UK	Male	55-64	Self-employed	Telephone
Robert	UK	Male	55-64	Self-employed	Telephone
Anthony	UK	Male	55-64	Self-employed	Telephone
Louise	UK	Female	45-54	Self-employed	Telephone
James	UK	Male	55-64	Self-employed	Telephone
Marc	Germany	Male	45-54	Self-employed	Telephone
Tim	Germany	Male	55-64	Self-employed	Telephone
David	Germany	Male	45-54	Self-employed	Face-to-face

Max	Germany	Male	35-44	Self-employed	Skype
Frank	Germany	Male	45-54	Self-employed	Telephone
Karl	Germany	Male	55-64	Self-employed	Telephone
Wolfgang	Germany	Male	45-54	Self-employed	Telephone
Christoph	Germany	Male	45-54	Self-employed	Telephone