



Photo: Colourbox. Career professionals are also there to support the client to strike an individual balance between sustainable career goals and economic productivity, by encouraging personal reflection.

Career equilibrium and sustainable development

We cannot build our careers on economic growth forever. The earth is a closed system with finite resources to exploit, and a limited capacity to absorb waste products. It is essential to consider how we can find a new equilibrium for sustainable development.

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Labour market equilibrium

A powerful criticism of modern societies is that as they have been governed with the objective of continuous increase of economic performance, where money is equated with value, and development is equated with growth in national income. An alternative world view has arisen focused on the natural environment. Sustainability has become a fashionable word, although its meaning is elusive. Different stakeholders have their own interpretations of what sustainable development means. The question is how we can develop an economy that is compatible with the Earth's capacity. And the answer is certainly not compatible with the established view that economic growth is always desirable. Our thinking about careers has been locked-in to this growth-dominated perspective.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)) represents an attempt to reconcile two conflicting value systems. The global economy and its associated technologies are underpinned by valuing efficiency, productivity, growth, and profit maximisation – these tend to encourage large corporations and agricultural monocultures. In contrast, respect for the natural world is associated with core values such as diversity, balance, cycles, self-healing, and regeneration. The relationship between the natural and economic-technological subsystems of the planet is in tension; it cannot be fully optimised. The UN SDGs attempt to manage this tension by setting multiple policy objectives for nation states.

Economists tend to believe that markets move towards an equilibrium point where there is a match between the price acceptable to the buyer and seller. But the balance is temporary. The market never actually reaches equilibrium, though it is constantly moving toward it. This eternal movement is also true for the labour markets where; *“Workers prefer to work when the wage is high, and firms prefer to hire when the wage is low. Labour market equilibrium ‘balances out’ the conflicting desires of workers and firms and determines the wage and employment observed in the labour market.”* (Borjas, 2020). How the labour market reconciles the demand side (employers) and the supply side (workers) is a key concern. In addition, wage distribution, unemployment, underemployment, migration, and mobility, are all discussed and regularly monitored by labour economists and government agencies around the globe.

According to Daly (1997): *“Sustainable development ... is a definite turn away from the growing economy and all that implies for a growing economy, and towards to a steady-state economy.”* If this view is taken as a starting point, the question of a sustainable labour market cannot be considered in isolation.

For Meadows, Randers, & Meadows (2013) the main message is that *“efficiency gains come at the expense of resilience, and this is felt in all sectors of society.”* The need for collective action implies a ‘prisoner’s dilemma’: everyone would be better off acting, and everyone should act in the common good. Individually, however, each actor has a selfish interest in minimising their own effort. This tension plays at a national level, but also in the lives of individuals.

Decent work and Sustainable Development Goals

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) [Decent Work Agenda](#) has four building blocks:

- employment creation
- social protection
- rights at work
- social dialogue

Since 2015, Decent Work Agenda is a part of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) No. 8, to: *“promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”* by 2030. Although lack of fairness has persisted in the labour market and there is no sign that it will not persist in the future, striving for it is still valuable.

Lessons for career development professionals: Careers and ecosystems

Career guidance supports individuals to cope with the personal consequences of the dynamics of the labour market. To some extent this is done by introducing concepts such as career resilience, and career adaptability. These concepts are useful if practitioners want to foster flexibility in career choice and development. However, there are some logical building blocks missing here. Hall (2002)

put it this way; career effectiveness has both a long-term orientation - encompassing identity and adaptability, as well as a short-term orientation - encompassing career attitudes and performance.

Whilst an HR manager will prioritise the needs of the employer, the role of the career counsellor is to look after the values of the individual client (and their family). The SDG structure is best used in their counselling practice as a framework to learn more about the client's values, attitudes and expected lifestyle, and reflect this back to them. Career professionals are also there to support the client to strike an individual balance between sustainable career goals and economic productivity, by encouraging personal reflection.

Arguably, individual or family level balances (equilibriums) are the targets of the counselling interventions. The learning outcomes of the counselling interventions can be clearly connected with the issue of personal, household and family level balances. These learning outcomes do not automatically create sustainability but could lead to a more self-conscious way of life. For example, calculating the client's [ecological footprint](#) is an exercise which can be connected with the way of life different professions and jobs may provide now and into the future.

Lifestyle is a concept that is under-emphasised in career counselling, even though it is linked to the attitudes, values, and economic opportunities of the client. Lifestyle is a system of activities undertaken to meet our personal needs. Activities are chosen in a given social context and in line with personal preferences. In career counselling, it would be valuable to discuss with the client not only vocational interests and skills, but also the lifestyle features of their work and study options. For example, someone who spends a lot of time in front of a computer has little time outdoors. Our activities are linked to occupational diseases and our general health. These may ultimately determine if our lifestyle and career are sustainable or not.

Sustainable development means that the needs of the present generation can be met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development has three dimensions – economic, social, and environmental – which are interrelated, of equal importance and must be addressed together (ILO, 2015). In the modern labour market sustainable careers are protean careers (Hall, 2004) – that means they extend beyond employers and work settings. Individuals and families are also forging a lifestyle within the context of the state social security regime.

Careers are local

The terms 'sustainable' or 'sustainability' have become so intertwined with the global idea of sustainable development - and the UN-defined SGDs - that they are used everywhere as a catch-all for eco-friendly, environmentally friendly, energy-conscious, environmentally conscious, eco-conscious, bio-eco, green and as a powerful call to action.

The eco-friendly, environmentally friendly approach has become a feature of career conversations. The UN SGD has a clear and easy-to-use structure that may provide a simple tool for clients, as well as counsellors, to support these discussions. Sustainability at the individual level ultimately comes from changing patterns of thinking and changed daily routines (Sorson, 2010). Both can be addressed by career development and counselling.

The UN goals can mean different things in different places. For example, Goal 15 (Life on Land) may be interpreted differently in Norway, where the population density per square kilometre is 14 people, in Canada, where it is only 3 people, and in the crowded Netherlands, where it is 415 people. For the purpose of career counselling, even national data is too general, we are concerned with local opportunities, environments and lifestyles.

Careers are part of a bigger ecosystem where each step has an environmental footprint in local communities as well as global consequences. Our experience of work is usually not about big choices but rather small decisions (Harford, 2007). For example:

Shall I take part in a conference in person or join online?

Do I need to print draft documents for editing, or buy a bigger second screen for proofreading?

Do I need a car to commute for work, or should I wake up 30 minutes earlier and take the bus?

Should I drink coffee served in a disposable cup?

Conclusion

Career development support services should teach their clients how to use their own resources, but also to appreciate the resources of others - our community and our environment. For career counsellors, the SDGs mean tailoring the process to enable people to consider their lifestyle expectations in the context of their local environment. It must be conducted with the decent work agenda in mind. What counsellors must learn from economics and natural science is that there is a trade-off between resilience and efficiency. Each time a client raises their personal resilience level, they may lose some of their work and learning related efficiency. This needs to be reflected in the [Norwegian career learning in context model](#). For example, comparing career opportunities versus personal adaptability during individual action planning with the client. As the Norwegian National Quality Framework for Career Guidance points out regarding career competence: *“In education, the labour market and career, there can be a continuous ‘negotiation’ between adaptation and resistance”*. This negotiation is owned by the individual and needs to be re-balanced time after time during the lifespan.

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