

**WORK AS A PROCESS OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT**  
**IL LAVORO COME PROCESSO DI SVILUPPO PERSONALE**

**EDITED BY GIOVANNI MASINO**

*Abstract*

This volume introduces a conception of work as a process of personal growth and development. Three fundamental moments of passage are discussed, in which the life and work connection becomes evident: the transition from education to work, the daily relationship between work and extra-work life, the evaluations in the workplace upon which the career paths depend. Critical reflections about mainstream theories, methodologies and practices are suggested. Examples and case studies illustrate their limitations and negative consequences. Finally, alternative organizational choices aimed at improving the work situations and facilitating, in the workplace, the development and well-being of people, are proposed.

*Keywords*

Education, Recruitment, Work-life reconciliation, Competencies, Organizational action.

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# **WORK AS A PROCESS OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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## **Work as a process of personal development - Introduction**

*Giovanni Masino, Università di Ferrara*

It is possible to talk about work by focusing on many issues, utilizing a variety of approach and describing different interests. However, sometimes we forget that work represents a large part of people's life, for very obvious and relevant reasons: because people spend at work a significant share of their time, and because they find in it meaning and identity. In this volume we will present contributions that, even though they take on different themes, begin from the same, simple but important value premise: work conceived as a personal growth and development process. As we shall see, this is not just a premise but also, maybe even more, a wish. Nonetheless, it encourages focusing on some issues that are not always at the literature's center of attention. First, the fact work, such as life, is punctuated by passages that qualify its contents and outcomes.

There are passages that happens rarely, or even just once in a person's lifetime. For instance, the passage from education to work, which is what Giovanni Masino discusses in his contribution. Such passage concerns mostly the young people having to make crucial decisions about a future that it is hard to imagine with information and experiences that little have to do with what they will have to face once they find themselves in labor market. The author shows that the management of such "transition", not only by the subjects but also by institutions and enterprises involved, may have relevant consequences both at the individual level and at the aggregate level, in terms of the economic systems' capacity to produce wealth and, even more importantly, well-being.

On the contrary, there are passages that happen every day in people's life. This is the passage between the workplace and the extra-work life. This is what Massimo Neri, Francesca Mattioli and Matteo Rinaldini discuss in their

contribution. The issue is usually called “work-life reconciliation”, and authors summarize its history through a review touching several disciplines. Indeed, in this case it appears particularly useful to offer a description of the various disciplinary efforts, because realms such as law, organization, economics, sociology and psychology seem to be intertwined in a very intricate way. Conceiving work as personal growth and development process implies, necessarily, to widen the sight beyond work in a narrow sense, and to include the way work activities are related to other activities which, all combined together, define a complete life experience.

There are also passages that happen occasionally, within the workplace, but nonetheless they characterize in a crucial way people’s professional development and the sense that they attribute to work. These are the career passages and all those evaluative moments that are more and more utilized in managerial practices and policies. This is the issues discussed by Domenico Berdicchia, specifically on the evaluation and management of competencies. Claiming that the so called “human resources”, and in particular their competencies, represent an indispensable element for any company wishing to succeed is a statement that is as common as (maybe for this reason) empty of any real meaning. It is necessary to see what actually happens in practice. It is necessary to understand if and when people’s value is actually emphasized, and if the methods utilized keep their promises. The author explores this issue from both a theoretical and a practical point of view. He helps us to understand that the most common methods of competency management are actually in antithesis with a vision of work as personal growth and development process. Thus, somewhat paradoxically, they are not consistent with the idea of emphasizing people’s abilities and competencies.

Thus, these three contributions focus on different transition and passage moments. They appear to be useful to understand the meaning and sense of work in relation to a wider perspective, centered on the person and his/her well-being. Precisely such wider perspective leads the three contributions to share another *fil rouge*. In each of them the necessity to face fundamental issues,

upstream the design alternatives - issues concerning how to conceive themes, analytical categories, and interpretative frameworks. Depending on what conception is adopted, problems are considered or ignore or formulated in a different way and, consequently, the solutions and the actual choices may vary significantly. Giovanni Masino helps us understanding the conceptions of the education and the recruitment systems have a great influence on the students' experience about their transition to the labor market. Thanks to a case study, the author hypothesize that it is possible to conceive and manage such experience in a way that surpasses the "transition" notion itself. Neri, Mattioli and Rinaldini also focus on the way work-life reconciliation is conceived, they show the limitations of the most common approach, and propose an analytical framework which, by starting from an alternative conception, may help identifying and understanding processes that are transversal to the separate "worlds" to be "reconciliated" and influence people's experience in their life experience, not at all separable in discrete parts. Domenico Berdicchia reflects on the conception of competency and workers' contribution, at any level, to organizational change. Again, the author shows that most contradictions, difficulties and even failures of traditional, widespread methods may be explained in terms of a conception which underestimates precisely what is more precious of the person, that is his/her uniqueness, by reducing people to dictionaries of codified "competencies" and predetermined, standardized behaviors. Instead, a different way to conceive competencies and organization allows to achieve those goals that the companies set for themselves.

As a whole, these contributions seem to share not just a critical reflection on the most common theories, methodologies and practices, but also, as we already argued above, a value premise which becomes, in the end, a wish: the idea that the organizational reflection would (and should) be able to interpret work through the use of concepts and theories truly centered around the person, and to help imagining ways to design and regulate work as part of a wider process of personal growth, development and well-being.

## **From education to work: a possible alternative**

*Giovanni Masino, Università di Ferrara*

*The labor market situation, especially in Italy and for the younger generation, is dramatic. Indicators such as the “qualification mismatch” and the “skill mismatch” illustrate the unsatisfactory effectiveness of the transition from study to work. In this paper we argue that part of the problem is related to the way companies manage the recruitment process and how the education system designs its learning pathways. We illustrate a case study in which transition and recruitment are implemented starting from a radically different conceptual perspective.*

*Keywords: Education, Recruitment, Transition, Study-work alternation, Learning*

### **Introduction**

Youth unemployment, which in these years of economic crisis is becoming an alarming phenomenon, should encourage to a reflection about the relationship between educational pathways and integration in the world of work. This is the goal of this paper. Starting from data that emphasize not only the unemployment problem, but also some qualitative limitations in the labor market, we will argue that the roots of those problems lies in the way the largely dominant conception of the educational and recruitment systems informs actions that are not so effective in order to favor the so-called “transition” from education to work. We will also argue that it is possible to imagine an alternative conception. In order to support that, we will describe the case of an initiative promoted by the University of Ferrara which, in 13 years, involved hundreds of companies and over 1000 students. In this case, it is possible to find some aspects that are consistent to a radically different, more effective way to imagine the education to work transition. As we will see, the conceptual and theoretical issues are tightly connected to “practice”. In order to imagine truly innovative solutions for the tragedy of youth unemployment and bad employment, it is necessary to start from a conceptual reflection, and to put into question some aspects that, almost always are taken for granted.

### **The inefficiency of the labor market**

The labor market is far from being perfectly efficient. There are many data proving this assertion. There are various kinds of inefficiencies<sup>1</sup>. On the one hand, there are inefficiencies of the “quantitative” kind, as illustrated by the fact that there are a number of jobs that remain vacant. According to Istat, the job vacancy ratio<sup>2</sup> in 2011 was 0.8%, while in 2012 it was reduced to 0.5%. These are relevant numbers because they correspond, in absolute value, to several thousands of job opportunities that apparently the current labor market is not able to utilize fruitfully. These data acquired even more meaning if we think that this period is characterized by a very serious economic crisis, which decreases the vacant job opportunities. Indeed, before the crisis, the ratio was even higher (0.8% in 2005, 1.1% in 2007).

Our focus here is also on a different kind of inefficiency of the labor market than we might call “qualitative”, which is related to the difficulty for people to find jobs that fully match their qualities and aspirations, and the difficulty for enterprises to find people that satisfy their business needs and expectations. It is a particularly relevant phenomenon, even though it is often underestimated. Let’s see the available data.

In OECD countries, about a fourth of employees are today under-qualified (that is, they possess a qualification inferior to the one required by their job) and about a fifth are overqualified (that is, they possess a superior qualification to the one required by their job). This data must be analyzed in more detail in order to understand its meaning and reasons.

First, we need to distinguish between formal qualification and actual competences. These two variables are correlated but different. Formal qualification refers to the educational formal level achieved. The competence level refers to the skills, knowledge and abilities actually possessed by the

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper we will utilize the term “labor market efficiency” in a wide sense, as we include in it issues related to both efficiency in a strict sense, concerning the costs associated to the dynamics of the labor supply and demand, and effectiveness, concerning the quality of the outcome of such dynamics.

<sup>2</sup> The job vacancy ratio is measured as the percentage of vacant jobs over the total jobs (both vacant and non vacant), with the exclusion of management positions.

subjects, independently from the formal titles. It is clear that only part of competences are acquired through formal education, while the rest is either developed through work experience or is lost because of obsolescence, especially during inactivity periods.

The difference between the two concepts (formal qualification and actual competences) is very important. For example, OECD research shows that only 40% of over-qualified workers claim to possess the necessary competences to perform tasks of higher level, complexity or responsibility (compared to the tasks they currently perform). Also, only 12% of under-qualified workers claim to need more training in order to perform effectively their current tasks. In other words, there is only a very partial overlapping between formal qualification and actual competences. This means that the problem known as “qualification mismatch” – that is, the gap between necessary qualification and actual qualification – coincides only partially with the problem of “skill mismatch” – that is, the gap between necessary competences and actual competences. The qualification mismatch is easier to measure, as formal qualification is codified according to the institutional education received. However, the skill mismatch, although harder to measure exactly, is far more important from a practical point of view, because it refers to the actual patrimony of existing skills that an economic system does not utilize properly. Both phenomena represent, although in a condensed and different way, the inefficiency of the labor market in terms of gap between the abilities that are potentially available and those that are actually utilized. In other words, they reveal to what extent a Country or a territory utilizes the potential of its “human capital”. How serious is this problem?

It is interesting to notice that if we compare these data (both at the Italian level and at the international level) the most significant problem seems to be the over-skilling phenomenon (in the OECD this concerns over 30% of workers), which concerns the workers with a level of competence higher than what required by their jobs. Also, the difference between over-skilling and under-skilling is particularly significant (over 20%). Similarly, over-qualification is

higher than under-qualification, even though in this case the difference is much smaller. In other words, the western world seems to be characterized by a widespread difficulty to utilize the actual capabilities of workers, and this concerns much more the actual skills than the formal qualifications. The fact that one third of the workers cannot find, in the workplace, a full expression of their qualities and abilities should trigger a concern, just like the fact the formal education does not seem the help filling this gap – on the contrary, one might argue that formal education is actually part of problem rather than part of the solution. In fact, according to OECD data, the relationship between the qualification mismatch and the skill mismatch reveals interesting insights. For instance, if we just consider workers occupied in job categories that are consistent with their formal training and education, we find that only 36% of over-qualified workers are also over-skilled, and only 12% of under-qualified workers are also under-skilled. In other words, just a small part of skill mismatches can be explained in terms of formal education. So, what is the meaning of these data? We propose a brief interpretation.

On the one hand, we can emphasize that the vast majority (about 88%) of under-qualified people – that is, those that do not possess a formal education that is adequate for their current tasks – are nonetheless able to acquire competences and abilities in the workplace. Thus, it seems to emerge the educational value of work, which compensates, in part, the shortcomings of institutional, formalized education.

On the other hand, it should be noted that a large portion of over-qualified workers (about 63%) are not over-skilled. This probably means that either they lose part of their skills during their working life (because of obsolescence, insufficient updates etc.) or they do not develop, during their educational periods, adequate competences for the jobs they were educated for. It is not possible to tell which of the two explanations is the most significant, but it is reasonable to assume that the second one is quite relevant. Anyway, both aspects should be a concern for labor policies. The general issue is whether the market labor is able to fruitfully utilize the existing competences instead of

dissipating them, and whether the institutional educational pathways are able to develop competences that are actually useful and appreciated in the labor market.

Did the economic crisis influence these dynamics? It is possible to imagine some reasonable hypothesis if we look at data on instances of job separation which, although not very recent, mirror the situations that typically become more relevant during crisis or recessions. Especially data on job losses are particularly interesting. Among the fired workers, the risk of over-qualification and over-skilling increases considerably, while the probability of under-qualification decreases. Typical occupational dynamics in times of crisis usually makes these problems even worse, because on the one hand being without a job for a significant period of time may accelerate the obsolescence of competences. On the other hand, being without a job may push people to settle down for occupations that do not require a high level of skills or qualification. Indeed, data show a very clear relationship between unemployment and over-qualification. The higher the unemployment rate in a certain year in relation to the previous years, the higher the over-qualification rate. Another element should be added the picture, which is very important and often underestimated. There is a clear inverse relationship between over-qualification and workers' satisfaction: the higher the former, the lower the latter.

Thus, we can conclude that there are negative phenomena in the labor market (allocation inefficiencies) both in quantitative and, even more, in qualitative terms. The crisis seems to exacerbate the problem, which in general terms can be interpreted as a progressive erosion of the general quality of the available human capital, in terms of competences and skills, but also in psychological and motivational terms. This is a problem that goes beyond the economic realm, as it concerns the more general and important question about how the current labor supply and demand system is able to generate well-being in society, not just in terms of wealth, but also in terms of personal development, satisfaction, happiness.

### **The transition towards work and the mismatch problem**

We argue that a focused and innovative management of the transition from education to work may help to decrease the mismatch problems that we illustrated above.

First, it should be noted that the issue of transition, as it mostly concerns the younger generations, touches a very crucial point of a society's ability to renew its competences. The economic crisis is particularly devastating for the younger, as confirmed by recent, dramatic unemployment data, especially in Italy. The crisis makes it more difficult for the young to go from school to work because of the reduced occupational opportunities. Thus, one can expect an increase of the propensity to extend the education period, as the crisis decreases its opportunity-cost. However, the issue is more complex, because it is influenced by a number of elements including the national policies and the specificity of each territory. Also, it should be considered that there is another option besides education and work, which is inactivity. For the younger generations, inactivity may have a dramatic relevance.

If we analyze the recent trend (1999-2009), we observe that in most OECD countries the average duration of education increases by an average of 8 months. In Italy the increase is slightly higher. Such a trend continued in 2008-09, that is during the early period of the crisis. This is not true for Italy, in which we had a slight decrease. However, this is not necessarily a positive sign, on the contrary. Especially in Italy, inactivity becomes more and more relevant. In 2009 the inactivity rate of Italians in the age group of 25-29 is definitely higher than the OECD average (almost 20% in Italy versus 10% for OECD countries). A similar difference can be found for the age group of 20-24. This data is not compensated by a parallel increase of young in education, for which the Italian figure is very similar to the average OECD (about 15% for the age group of 25-29 and about 40% for the age group of 20-24). Also, it is not compensated by the employment rate, which is significantly lower for Italy when compared to the OECD and the European average. Moreover, even the data about the very young (age group 15-19) is not positive for Italy. Thus, the situation for young

Italians who are living the years of transition toward work is particularly difficult, even when compared to the OECD averages. Evidently, the comparison appears even more negative if we used as reference not the wide range of OECD countries but only the most virtuous western countries, which for Italy should represent a more rigorous comparison.

In this framework, the relevance of transition programs (from education to work) utilizing apprenticeships or other mechanisms aimed at creating synergies between education and work, emerges quite clearly. Indeed, OCSE data show that there is an inverse relationship between the number of young people involved in these programs and both the unemployment rate and the inactivity rate. In those Countries in which these programs involve a higher number of students, the inactivity rates and unemployment rates are definitely lower.

The implications are quite clear. The difficulties that the young encounter to integrate themselves in the labor market, particularly (but not only) in times of crisis, can be reduced through programs that not only facilitate the “encounter” between labor supply and demand, but also allow the acquisition of competences specifically aimed at facilitating work integration. Also, the relevance of this issue is not only related to the employment problem, but also the issue, very important as well, concerning the possibility for enterprises to acquire personal and professional capabilities that are adequate to their competitive needs. Let us explain why.

On the one hand, there is the need to integrate the educational pathways with periods of “first contact” with work, in order to develop, through a work experience, competences that are more consistent (in comparison to the ones developed by traditional educational programs) with the actual needs and request of enterprises. We already mentioned the substantial difference between formal qualification, and its mismatches, and the creation of actual competences, which for an important part develop over time in the workplace. Thus, study-work experiences allow to anticipate the development of specific abilities actually requested by enterprises, thus reducing the mismatch

problems. It is important to notice that the positive effects that these experience normally have on students in terms of their motivation and personal growth. A first, realistic and committing contact with work allows to develop in the younger a “push” towards a life-long learning attitude, a willingness to customize their own educational pathways and, more generally, a logic of “investment” on themselves.

On the other side, these opportunities to dialogue and mutual understanding, allow enterprises to evaluate more clearly the potential of the young, to discover interesting recruitment possibilities which could not even be imagined without such initiatives. Many studies show a significant gap existing between the “millennials” generation (those born between 1980 and 2000) and the “X” generation (those born between 1960 and 1980) and, even more, the “baby boomers” generation. The gap between generations seems to be increasing, as people with very different attitudes, expectations, knowledge and values have to interact more than in the past. It is very plausible that these differences have implications in the workplace – and, even more, in the “places” where labor supply and demand “meet”, exactly because labor supply and demand are typically populated by subjects that are very distant from a generational point of view.

Overall, while it is true that there is a problem of understanding, on the part of the younger, what are the expectations coming from the world of work, it is also true that there is a problem just as relevant for the enterprises to understand what the younger may offer to them. Thus, the study-work integration processes may contribute to reduce the mismatch problems that we discussed above. Not just in quantitative terms – less unemployment, less inactivity – but also in qualitative terms – that is, better “match” between the expectations of the young and the needs (more or less explicit) of enterprises.

It is worthwhile noticing that the world of study-work transition initiatives is very diverse. We find traditional actions, such as stages in various modalities, but also much more advanced experiences, in which the integration between study and work can become deeper and more articulated. Also, there

are programs with a low degree of personalization and tutorship, and other programs with much higher investments in such directions. Thus, there is a variety of experiences, and their effectiveness may vary accordingly. OCDE data showing the effectiveness of transition programs do not take into account the difference between transition program, so it is plausible that if we only considered truly “integrated” programs only, their effectiveness would be even more evident. However, it is also plausible that any experience leading to some sort of anticipated and managed “contact” and “dialogue” between students and companies, no matter how simple, will generate some positive effects in terms of mutual understanding and facilitation for the students.

### **A critique to the education and recruitment systems: the separation issue**

All efforts to facilitate the transition of students from education to work operate, by definition, in order to create a sort of “bridge” between two “worlds”: the world of the education system, from high school to university, and the world of work, with specific reference to the recruitment systems utilized by enterprises. These are good efforts, but they often encounter significant difficulties, and the results do not necessarily meet the expectations – even though, as we have seen above, in Countries where these initiatives are more widespread some non trivial benefits, at the aggregated level, can be clearly observed.

The reason for such difficulties is that these two “worlds” are too distant from each other. Each of them does not create the conditions to facilitate the crossing of the “bridge” by students in search for employment. The problem is generated by the way both activities (education and recruitment) are conceived. We argue that if a different conception was adopted, the “transition” would not be even necessary, because it is exactly the clear “separation” between those system to create the first and fundamental hurdle (not the only one, as we will see) to an effective pathway which should lead, naturally and without interruptions, from education to work. Thus, in order to better understand the transition problem, we need to ask from what and towards what people

“transit”, and how. We need to start from a general reflection about how education is conceived, and how recruitment activities are conceived as well. This is what we are going to talk about in this and next paragraph.

Education (not only at the university level) is almost always managed through criteria (concerning both its design and its assessment) which are prone to limit or even eliminate the real possibilities of integration with the world of work. One should not be misled by the terminology. Even the most advanced experiences of study-work “alternation”, such as the one in Germany, in fact they still contemplate a substantial separation between study and work. This is a typical approach of a functionalistic view of social systems, in which the design criteria are consistent with requisites of technical homogeneity (the classic idea of “function”) according to principles of strict separation among functions (systems and sub-systems). Thus, each system is designed and assessed according to internal criteria of efficiency and effectiveness, a clear self-referential approach – in other words, a “closed-system” logic. The relationships and contiguity of each system with other external processes is not considered, exactly because the idea of a “process” crossing the systems’ boundaries is not envisioned. In the case of education – work transition, this closed system logic generates some significant problems. More specifically, the goals that should be the most relevant tend to be neglected, that is, those processes that are related to the personal experiences of the people crossing the spatial and time boundaries of the two systems (Zucchermaglio, 2005). We are talking about the students / workers, as they would need to experience the education, recruitment and professional development not as separate phases, but as one, integrated personal growth and self-realization process. A process with an horizon that should be wide, continuously reconstituted, expanded and explored in terms of realms and activities, oriented towards long term perspectives and not only to issues of short term survival. On the contrary, a closed system approach creates obstacles to the design of actions and processes that are able to smoothly cross their boundaries. Instead, activities are designed in such a way that find and consume their sense within the system in which

they are implemented. Goals and means become blurry. Teaching, for instance, becomes the goal, not the means to achieve a higher level goal – learning. The education system runs the risk of becoming a set of “teaching” activities without actual concern for “learning”. The actual goal, more or less implicitly, is the legitimation and perpetuation of activities (and of crystallized interests) which do not contribute, if not incidentally, to the goal of the personal and professional development of students.

Overall, the way education and recruitment activities are designed and implemented seem to suffer the typical problems of a functionalistic approach, characterized by closed, separated system (in the name of their technical heterogeneity), self-referentiality, and an unavoidable tendency to lose sight of the personal development and learning goals of life experience that cross their borders. If this is true, then the ineffectiveness of transition between these two “worlds” is hardly surprising, as they become more and more distant and they struggle to communicate with each other. In this view, the information asymmetries between those exiting education and enterprises are not the cause of the problem, but its most evident symptom.

### **The assumption of rationality**

The problem of “separation” is not the only one derived from a functionalistic conception. Another critical aspect concerns the assumption of rationality on which it is based. More specifically, the most widespread recruitment techniques in enterprises reveal, still today, a clear tayloristic heritage. In this volume, Berdicchia shows that the mainstream approach to the management of competences is based on a fundamental assumption – the (presumed) ability of the company to predetermine exactly what are the competences, codified and defined in great detail, necessary to ensure an excellent work performance by each subject. A very similar approach can be found in the recruitment activities. The classic and widely utilized approach implies a perfect ability of the company to identify the personal features (not only the ones that the subject currently possess, but even the ones he will

possess in the future – the so called “potential”) which best match the current and future needs of the company. It is very evident that in such approach is based on a clear assumption of “strong” or “absolute” rationality, not at all dissimilar to a tayloristic vision of the relationship between man and organization. It is worth noticing that such an assumption concerns all the aspects of the recruitment activity: the assumption of knowing precisely the needs of the company (current and future ones) in terms of required skills and competences; the assumption of knowing how to evaluate exactly what are the personal features (current and potential ones) that are able to satisfy those needs; the assumption of knowing how to find and identify, in the labor market, subjects with such features. Such a rationality assumption leaves very little room to the contribution that could be brought by other subjects, such as the education institutions and, even more, the subjects themselves (the candidates). The stronger the assumption of rationality, the lower the need to integrate external knowledge. The main question is the following: how reasonable is such rationality assumption? From an empirical point of view, the answer is in the data. Evidence about the mismatches in the labor market, already described in the previous paragraphs, seems to suggest that the inefficiency/ineffectiveness of allocation is significantly higher than a mere “physiological” level. In the workplace there is surely an insufficient consideration of people’s competences, aspirations, capabilities, and by consequence, of their “potential” as well.

We can add another element to this critical reflection. Not only this assumption of absolute rationality operates at the level of the enterprises, but also at the system level. The most utilized approach for recruitment is based on the so called “best practices”, that is, largely standardized procedures which are widely accepted as the “correct” and “best” way to select and evaluate people. Mostly based on psychometric measurements, these procedures aim at evaluating the consistency (that is, the “fit”) between those measurements and the subjects’ features through techniques more or less complex (relatively simple tools such as interviews, either structured or unstructured, psychological

and motivational tests, evaluations of references and curricula, all the way to more complex methods such as the “assessment centers”). These practices are the “best”, therefore it is assumed their superior rationality independently from the organizational context, the specific goals, the single individuals involved. Thus, the whole system legitimizes and forces its own rationality (a “systemic” rationality) even over the rationality of single enterprises. There are many possible critiques (Newell, 2009). On the one hand, there is a problem of lack of flexibility of an approach based on a fit (adaptation) between the job and the person. When jobs change, the idea that an optimal fit, even if we assume that it is possible to find, is sustainable in the medium-long term cannot be taken for granted (Judge, Ferris, 1992). On the other hand, methods based on best practices inhibit the possibility of change and innovation instead of facilitating them, as they replicate the existing capabilities – in other words, they reproduce the current “organizational culture” instead of contributing to renew it (Newell, 2009). The problem gets even worse if we consider the variety of contexts, especially in multinational companies operating at a global scale. A unified approach does not allow to adapt the “human resources” to diverse markets and social contexts, especially because people coming from different cultures may respond differently to the same recruiting methods. By consequence they may be disadvantaged for reasons that have nothing to do with neither their own personal qualities, nor (paradoxically) with their potential “fit” to the jobs they are applying to (Shackleton, Newell, 1994). Finally, while it is true that the managerial literature praises the idea of “commitment” as a fundamental requisite for the effectiveness of work contributions by subjects, then it should be clear that commitment cannot constitute a criteria upon which it is possible to design a recruitment method, especially a standardized one, because involvement and dedication at work is not (only) an “intrinsic” personal quality, but the outcome of a process that develops over time, which depends not just on the subject but on the his relationship with the organization (Newell, 2009). A process in which elements such as the investments of the company on the person, internal and external opportunities, intrinsic and extrinsic

motivations (and many others) may have a decisive influence, certainly not predictable at the time of recruitment. Notwithstanding these and other critical points, the most widespread method is the one we described, probably the outcome of a managerial culture which privileges approaches oriented towards generalization, control and standardization. It is also the outcome of a certain difficulty to imagine alternative solutions, maybe because the same culture perpetuates, besides methods and techniques, also a cognitive frame in which it is taken for granted that such methods, even discounted of their defects, are the best we can possibly imagine.

The situation is not much different as far as the education system is concerned. We cannot go into much detail, because this would go beyond the goal of this paper. We like to report the words of Ken Robinson (2006; 2009; 2010; 2013), one of the most respected critical voices about the western educational system. He affirms explicitly that such system is neither able to make people flourish nor to develop their natural talents, because it is based on a model that he calls “mechanistic”. In short, Robinson (2013) argues that the education system is designed according to an organizational logic similar to the classic “industrial manufacturing” one, that is, on massification and standardization criteria that, today, are ineffective and undesirable. More specifically, Robinson illustrates the contradiction between the educational conditions and the principles on which is based the possibility for people to prosper and develop at the best of their potential.

A first principle is the great *diversity* characterizing people since their infancy. It is the diversity of talents, aspirations, abilities, predispositions and preferences. The education system, on the contrary, strongly pushes toward *conformism*, because it greatly reduces the variety of learning pathways, so it frustrates since the very beginning the possibility of full development of people consistently with their uniqueness. We need pathways and curricula that celebrate the great natural diversity of talents, rather than suppress it.

A second principle is *curiosity*, that is the aspiration that people would like to see satisfied, within a “healthy” education system, to choose pathways

not just consistent with their aspirations, but also offering the possibility to experiment, to change, to explore different alternatives in their lifetime. On the contrary, the education system pushes towards *compliance*, which means passivity, linearity, sequentiality, and “canalization” of educational experience within predetermined pathways from which it is very hard to exit without paying a steep price.

A third principle concerns *creativity*, that is the enormous capacity for innovation, personal construction and continuous re-invention that characterize most people. On the contrary, the mainstream education system pushes toward *standardization* of contents, for instance by the use of tests not as a diagnostic tool but as a homologation tool. Also, the system does not give enough importance and recognition to teachers, as they are often seen not as facilitators of an autonomous, creative learning process, based on personalization and on the creation of conditions favorable to generate and cultivate passions, but as a mere “transmitter” of notions to an “audience” of passive and undifferentiated “receivers”.

Robinson qualifies the mainstream education system as based to a “command and control” approach, strongly centralized and standardized. There are rare examples of alternative, successful educational initiatives, and they always have the same features: high level of personalization, high consideration of teaching and teachers, decentralization. Thus the alternative, according to Robinson, is to adopt a different organizational logic, one inspired to an “agricultural” model rather than a “manufacturing” one. A logic in which leadership is exercised not as “command and control”, based on the assumption of a strong, centralized and ex-ante rationality which aims at creating standardized and pre-designed human “products”. Instead, a leadership aimed at “cultivating”, at creating the favorable conditions for an autonomous development of talents and abilities, according to the natural predispositions.

Robinson’s critical argument on the educational system is very similar to the critique that we proposed above about the recruitment system, as it is grounded on the very fundamental conception of the system itself. A

functionalistic conception, even mechanistic in some aspects, in which the most important aspect is the assumption of a systemic rationality which is supposed to be able to find the “one best way” of education and to spread it through standardized and codified “best practices”.

To conclude, a reflection of the problem of study - work transition must take into account with a conception (of both education and recruitment) that, de facto, hinders the possibility to imagine transition initiative genuinely aimed at improving the effectiveness of people’s integration in the workplace. Such “effectiveness” must be evaluated in relation the goals of all parties involved. For the companies, the goal is to recruit people that, in the short and the long term, satisfy the need to organizational development and competitiveness. For the students / works, the goal is to engage in a pathway of autonomous and satisfying personal and professional development, consistent with their one predisposition, resonating with their spirit and deeper personality. Ken Robinson calls for a “revolution” of the education system. We believe that any hypothesis of radical transformation must begin from an overcoming from a “separate” view of the two systems. Instead, it should focus the most important process, the one that “cuts” horizontally, over time and through the space of disciplines and jobs, the two realms of activity: the growth and development of each person. How is it possible to put into practice such hypothesis? Of course, we don’t have a ready answer. However, we have a possible starting point, the need for a change of the fundamental conception of education and transition to work. We also have a practical example that maybe, although in an incomplete and not perfect way, may provide suggestions and ideas about how to design and implement an alternative education to work transition - or, even better, a “non transition”, that is a pathway that, with continuity, is able to accompany people in their personal growth process. In the next paragraph we will describe the case study.

### **The case of PIL project of the University of Ferrara: general features**

The PIL project (acronym for “Percorsi di Inserimento Lavorativo”, in English “Pathways of Work Insertion”) began in 2001 at the Faculty of Economics of the University of Ferrara. In a few years it was extended to all the Faculties. It is an articulated transition program based on a study-work alternation logic aimed at emphasizing both the educational value of work for students, the advantages for enterprises, and the social and cultural value of an active role of the University. The origin of PIL precedes 2001. An early version was designed and implemented in the multinational enterprise Montell-Basell since 1996 (Flammini, Foschi, Gandini, 1996).

The main feature of PIL is that it is an educational program. It is not, per se, a placement initiative, even though work is a key element. The whole pathway is conceived as an educational experience in which learning, work and tutoring integrate with each other in a synergistic way. In traditional education programs, the different phases are typically sequential: university level education precedes a specialized, post-bachelor education which, in turns, precedes work. The three phases are not integrated. In the PIL project, instead, integration represents a fundamental aspect. Integration should be understood not only in relation to the time dimension, but also because the passages between one phase and the other are designed and managed in a unitary and homogeneous way. Indeed, the “ideal” candidate for the PIL project is a student with still a few exams to pass in order to acquire his degree. Thus, it is a student who spends the last part of his educational experience by experimenting himself (and his own capabilities, expectations, desires) with a pathway of progressive and tutored approach to work.

### **The phases of the PIL pathway**

The PIL project is articulated in several steps: 1) the University, in collaboration with specialized external partners, look for enterprises willing to participate to the project through a written agreement in which they assume a number of obligations, the most important is to provide (at least) a 1 year work

contract (for a student) concerning a specific job or a specific organizational position; 2) students, once enrolled in the PIL project, receive information (in several occasions and with plenty of details) about the “rules of the game”, the advantages, the risks, the obligations; 3) an introductory interview is held so that the PIL staff can meet, one by one, each of the participant students; 4) then, a phase of a more traditional “frontal teaching” begins, in order to help students in their pathway towards work; 5) participant enterprises introduce themselves to the students, one by one, in specific seminars and they describe the job(s) offered for the PIL students; 6) students apply to individual interviews with some enterprises, then realized; 7) students, through detailed rules, choose the company in which they will experience a year of work; 8) allocated students begin a 3 months of stage, which is preparatory for the actual work, which starts after the stage without interruption; 9) the work experience (3 + 12 months) is constantly monitored by the PIL staff through a variety of means and initiatives; 10) at the end of the pathway, each student writes a report about the whole experience and discusses it with a commission.

We focus now on some details about the most important aspects.

The first part of the pathway provide students with a number of stimula and learning tools, both traditional and innovative ones, almost always characterized by a high level of personalization. The first step is a typical classroom situation, in which students coming from all faculties (very different from each other) learn about topics aimed at improving their knowledge about the world of work (i.e., labor law, typical work contracts, quality, organization, communication techniques, preparation to interviews, how to write a *résumé* etc.). A relevant part of the classroom phase is dedicated to seminars in which students meet the companies participating to PIL. This is an extremely educational situation, as it is the first moment of dialogue between students and companies’ representatives. Indeed, managers and entrepreneurs come to the classroom (one company per seminar, lasting about one hour and a half) to introduce themselves and, most of all, to tell students about the work possibility that will be offered, in the following months, to one (or more) of them. Besides

the company's presentation, the seminar includes a significant opportunity for dialogue between the two parties, for questions and answers with a great deal of freedom. A "moderator", from the PIL staff, is always present in order to facilitate the dialogue. This way, PIL students have the chance to be exposed to several dozens companies. These opportunities constitute a crucial moment of PIL, an obligation that each company formally takes with the University. Participant companies have very diverse features, in terms of industry, size, location. Any kind of firm can participate. These seminars have a major educational value for students. For the vast majority of them, this is the first opportunity to experience something similar to what happens in the labor market, but with the benefit of a regulated, tutored and monitored environment. In the end, students develop a much better idea about what the labor market demands and what it would mean, for them, a work experience in each of the participant companies. Thus, they begin to acquire a very practical sense of the opportunities. They begin to visualize themselves in a work context. Indeed, the seminars are usually characterized by a very attentive participation by all parties because they all have a specific interest. The students know that they have a chance to experience a long, significant work experience in one of the companies, so they have need to grasp all the useful aspects in order to understand what company would be best for them to choose. The companies' managers, on their part, know that at least one of the students in the classroom will spend 15 months (12 with a regular work contract) as their employee, they know that this will represent a significant investment, so they have an interesting not only in introducing themselves effectively, but also to listen and talk to the students.

The second key step happens when students apply to be interviewed by some companies. This is not a traditional classroom context anymore, as the students are required to evaluate and make choices which might influence significantly their life in the next 15 months and, possibly, even longer. So, students apply to be interviewed by some of the participating companies (not all of them, because usually they are several dozens, so a maximum number of

interviews is established, usually around 8-10 interviews per student). Students are accompanied to the interviews by tutors. The interview is useful for the company in order to evaluate the students. Indeed, this is the only moment, over the whole PIL pathway, in which the activity seems to coincide (apparently) with the typical, traditional recruitment activities. However, the goal and the meaning is completely different. While it is true that the company is asked to assess the candidates (which will be considered in a later elaboration of a sort of "ranking" of students, more later on this), however the "weight" of such assessment is moderated by two very important elements. On the one hand, such ranking takes into account other aspects that are not under the companies' control. Thus, the company's assessment, however significant, is not decisive in establish the students' ranking. On the other hand, the final choice about what student will be employed in what company has to be made by the students themselves. We will see shortly how this happens and why, but we can already reflect about the idea that, in the PIL project, the interview is not, for the company a way to select anyone, but instead is the continuation of that process of dialogue and mutual knowledge that began, collectively, with the seminars and carries on with the interviews on an individual basis.

Once the interviews are finished, another crucial step is carried out, called "mercantino" (little market). A ranking of the students is prepared (not an evaluation of students, just a list setting a priority order) based on a combination of parameters including the average academic grades and the assessment of companies at the interviews. According to such order, each student chooses (among the companies that he had an interview with) in what company to continue his PIL experience. In other words, he chooses the company (more specifically, the job) in which he will spend the next 3 months as preparatory stage followed by 12 months of work, with a regular contract. This rule implies that the "best" candidate, according to each company's evaluation, will not necessarily end up in that specific company. On the contrary, usually these "allocation" may take diverse and unexpected (by the company) routes. Very often, it may happen that a certain student (preferred by

a certain company) will choose a different company. At the same time, it also happens very often that the company preferred by a certain student will not be available anymore when his turn to choose comes (because that company was already chosen by another student with a higher position in the ranking), so he will have to choose another company (necessarily among those in which he had an interview). Thus, this is not a process that is able to “optimize” (at first) the reciprocal preferences (and this would not be possible anyway with any algorithm, simply because the preferences are not distributed in a symmetrical way). It is also a process that provides the highest discretion to the students, not the company. Within the PIL rules, it’s the students who have a choice. It is worthwhile reflecting on this aspect, as it represents maybe one of the most unusual, innovative elements of the PIL pathway. In a way, it generates both difficulties and benefits. Eventually, the latter vastly surpass the former. A significant problem is that it’s difficult, for the enterprises, to accept to give up the choice prerogative about a person to employ for more than a year. This is part of what makes finding companies that are willing to participate, within a frame of rules which takes away from them a lot of discretion, a non trivial matter. Companies that are asked to participate to PIL for the first time are usually cautious, they have a hard time accepting and understanding the sense of such rules, as they are afraid to be obliged to accept non satisfactory students. However, after they participate for a first time, companies are usually able to appreciate the value of the experience. However, such value is hard to explain ex-ante, but it is also an absolute key point of PIL. In fact, the concrete outcomes as we will see prove its effectiveness.

Once the “little market” is concluded, students are allocated in the jobs offered by the companies they chose. Each student then begins a 3 months stage experience, followed (necessarily, meaning that the company signed a written agreement with the University including such obligation) by a 1 year work with a regular work contract. The stage period is not a period in which the company assesses the student in order to decide about whether to offer the annual contract. Instead, those 3 months serve as an educational and training value, it

is a way to better prepare the student to the work experience. The job will have to be the same described by the company during the seminars. The whole work experience (both the stage and the annual contract) is monitored by the PIL staff, which organizes periodic “returns”, that is, occasions in which the students come back together at the university, tell about their experience, are helped to solve problems by the PIL staff, and socialize with other students. In the vast majority of cases, student study during their work experience. They prepare some exams and/or work for their thesis, which very often concerns issues related to their work context. At the end of the annual contract, students (whom, at that time, may not be students anymore, because they may have obtained their degree) are asked to write a report in which, according to some guidelines, tell about the whole PIL experience (from beginning to end) and offer an interpretation of it, even in critical terms. Such report is then discussed verbally by the student with a commission.

### **Motivations of participants and results**

In this paragraph we will describe the outcomes of PIL and the motivations behind companies’ and students’ participation. First, let us examine some general data. In over 10 years of experimentation, the project involved over 1000 students from all faculties and over 400 companies. The main outcome of PIL, from the students’ point of view, is a significant improvement of their employability on the labor market. We already emphasized that this project is an educational pathway, not a placement initiative in a strict sense. For this reason, the focus is on how much the educational experience creates the conditions for participants to be employed more effectively in the labor market. After one year from their graduation, PIL students employability is significantly higher than that of students who did not participate to the program. Such an advantage is maintained over time, and it transforms itself into a faster stabilization of their work relation. It is worth noticing that this is due not so much to the fact that PIL students are eventually offered a non-temporary contract by the same company in which they carried

out their PIL experience. Instead, it is mostly due that PIL accelerates the educational process and allows students to be more appealing in the labor market because they become more mature and have more experience than their non-PIL peers. Such a superior maturity, on the other side, transforms itself into a higher level of students' awareness about what professional pathway could be more adequate and consistent to their preferences and attitudes. Thus, once finished the PIL experience, for these (former) students transition towards work becomes a much less traumatic process, which can be faced with more awareness and a richer curriculum.

It is interesting to notice that there is a certain variety in the motivation that pushed students to participate to PIL. A research performed by the PIL staff shows three main motivations, equally distributed among students. A first motivation is the search for a work experience as consistent as possible to the disciplinary area covered by the students in his academic career. For these students it is clear the will to "challenge themselves" and to find an empirical contextualization to the notions and concepts learnt during their study. A second motivation concerns a specific interest for the job offered by the company during the seminars. In this case, what is relevant is not the disciplinary realm, but the interest for a professional profile, or for the activities specifically required by the companies offering the work contract. A third motivation, more generic but not less important, concerns the interest for a first, full work experience in itself, as a useful and educational endeavor independently from its disciplinary or professional realm. These are different motivations, even though they do not exclude each other. Each motivation appears to be prevalent in about one third of the students interviewed.

It is important to understand these motivations because it helps to focus on why a process like the one we are describing here may help future workers to acquire knowledge and awareness about a "world" - work - that they largely ignore, where job search errors happen because of a lack of adequate tools to fill such knowledge gaps. For this reason, in the PIL pathway, even possible negative experiences (which are very few) generates nonetheless a useful

educational value for students. What students learn is not just a set of competences and abilities related to a specific activity, in a specific company. Even more importantly, they learn to manage the job search process and the work process itself (how to relate with the boss, with colleagues, respecting deadlines, responsibilities etc.) independently from its content and professional/disciplinary realm. For this reason, the first motivation (related to the disciplinary consistency) is maybe the most *naïve*, because it reflects the legitimate, maybe even desirable but often illusory idea that academic education is able to prepare students for work in a way that connects without uncertainties disciplines with jobs. On the other hand, the third motivation (related to the interest for a first work experience in itself) is instead the wisest, because it leaves all possibilities open and grasps the overall sense of the PIL pathway as an educational experience that makes students more mature and more employable in the transition process towards work.

The outcomes of this pathway are also important for companies. Research shows that they participate to PIL for a variety of objectives as well. Let us see the main ones, illustrated by some quotations from entrepreneurs involved several times in the PIL projects.

For some companies, PIL represents mainly a useful way to select and recruit young graduates. Here's a comment from an entrepreneur about this issue: *"a young graduate is able to bring a potential unimaginable before his immersion into the many jobs that are necessary for a company [...] He can extract from this experience and educational outcome that can be spent in the same company or in the labor market"*.

For small companies in particular it may be difficult to search and recruits graduates because they don't do it very often or it can be expensive. Counting on a project like PIL may represent for them a significant facilitation: *"we can have good cards to play to induce young graduates to develop new competences and, also, to change their initial professional project. These changes can bring to light unknown but very interesting points of view and opportunities both for us and the young"*.

For the companies interested to technological and managerial innovation, the PIL projects represents an interesting resource as it can provide a steady connection with the University, which is useful not just a state recruitment opportunity but also as a technology transfer process: *“for companies like ours, to receive 23 – 24 years old people is fundamental. They are more flexible, they can see promptly the practical implications of what they studied in theory and what they keep studying”*.

Finally, for other companies, PIL may represent the possibility to maintain a certain operational flexibility through positions that are covered, year after year, by new students: *“these young subjects, with a medium-high level education, with a different personal, mental and methodological approach, often oblige the work team in which they are inserted to challenge itself, as they stimulate to develop new work and organizational modalities”*.

Just like the case of students' motivations, these goals represent very well the need of knowledge about what the world of graduates may offer to companies. It is a need that, apparently, the labor market and the traditional recruitment processes cannot fulfill. The anecdotic experience (which, however, is enriched by 13 years of experimentation and a large number of cases) helps us understanding how PIL is able to contribute to fill this gap of mutual knowledge between the two “worlds”. It is not uncommon, during the PIL pathway, to find students that at the beginning seem very certain about a clear vision of their professional future. Then, in a matter of just a few months, they change their idea completely as they find a new, very successful and satisfactory path in work contexts in which they could not even imagine to spend their abilities. Similarly, it is not uncommon to observe companies which arrive in the classroom with very clear ideas about what kind of candidate they want to recruit, and then they realize that very different candidates can be just as adequate, or the even discover, stimulated by the dialogue with students, to have competence needs that they didn't even imagine. The history of PIL is rich all of examples and anecdotes of this kind.

PIL is not a perfect pathway, is full of difficulties and complexities, and problems that often are not easy to solve. However, it can provide the architecture for a methodology which, with some variations, may be fruitfully applied to other situations. Anyway, it is a program that produced through its significantly long history very interesting outcomes, both in quality and quantitative terms. We refer not only to student's employability data, but also to the quality of their work integration, to the contribution of new ideas, new knowledge and new energy that they bring to the companies. We also refer to the fact that PIL allows allocations that not only are successful, but are also unusual, different from traditional occupational pathways, thus completely unforeseen by the participants, students and enterprises. These are allocations that the labor market could not generate. At this point, we need to ask what are the reasons for this kind of results and opportunities, and what we can learn from them.

### **The need for a change of conception**

We illustrated the PIL case because we think it can be interpreted as a transition experience that "breaks" some of the traditional functionalist frames. PIL attempts to overcome exactly those problems of "systemic separation" between the worlds of education and work. It reinterprets learning by providing a higher level of personalization and more attention to the personal development process. It tries to escape the trap of predetermined, absolute rationality and to build, collectively ensuring the action process, a more satisfying solution thanks to the dialogue between the implied subjects. Let us see in detail each of these points.

A first key elements of PIL is alternation conceived as real integration, not just in temporal terms, between education and work. Other alternation initiatives do not abandon sequentiality and, most of all, separation between education and work. PIL, on the contrary, tries to face the transition problem not by building a larger and longer "bridge", but by making the two borders closer to each other. PIL is not conceived as a "passage" between education and

work, but as a phase of a process of personal development which, in the most natural way, integrates education and work with continuity. This is a very important aspect because, if properly implemented, would allow to emphasize both the educational value of work and the professional value of education. This is not easy, because there is a lot of “resistance” coming from many directions. PIL aims at realizing such idea, on the one hand through educational contents not oriented towards a specific future job, which is completely unpredictable, but towards a search process and dialogue with the labor market (with the initial classroom phase, the seminars with the companies, the preparation to the interviews), on the other hand by integrating study and work (with the returns in class, the study during the work period and, most of all, the thesis concerning issues closely related to the work experience).

Another key aspect of PIL is the attempt to “compose” in a collective process all the concerned “rationalities”, unavoidably bounded, instead of relying to the assumption of absolute, predetermined “systemic” rationality, imposed on the subjects. This means to focus on dialogue, on interactions, on exchange of information and, most of all, on a process regulation which implies, necessarily, a actual participation of all parties to the most important choice (the allocation of each students into a certain company). The evaluation of the University, which has a lower influence on the final choice, is nonetheless influential through all the tutoring and support moments for the students (and through the information support to companies). The evaluation of companies is influential through the assessment of individual students during the interviews. The evaluation of the student, finally, is influential both through the application dynamics in the “little market” and, even more, in the final choice. We can certainly say that students’ discretion plays a central role in PIL, even within a frame of rules which tries to contemplate the company's needs and the University’s capacity to evaluate.

Thus, it is not just the company to select, with static and standardized modalities, the people to integrate in its personnel. The company accepts, by participating to PIL, to put into question its own rationality in terms of

recruitment and, indirectly, even its ability to understand and identify its human capital needs.

However, it is not just the student to decide, with absolute autonomy and scarcity of information, to apply to a certain job opening, as it happens for a vast majority of graduates that, not only in Italy, are not helped in any transition to work project. By participating to PIL, students accepts a set of rules which, on the one hand, provides opportunities and, on the other hand, help them understanding the possible pathways to work and motivates them to imagine in a less constrained way their professional life.

Finally, it is not just the University to presume to know how to orientate its students towards specific career directions, because PIL represents, even for the University, a sort of “admission” about the unavoidable imperfection of the connections between education and professional pathways. PIL itself helps understanding that the variety of such connections is not predictable.

For all these reasons, people can be seen as an attempt to realize a path of personal development according to a radically different approach - we might say “epistemologically” alternative to more traditional transition initiatives. In other words, we find here the effort to overcome the fundamental limitations of the functionalist framework that informs most education and recruitment systems. The reason why this approach can be actually considered alternative concerns the fact that activities are designed by focusing on “processes” rather than “systems”, especially that medium-long term process which is, in this context, by far the most important one: the personal and professional development of the students.

In our view, PIL represents an experience close to an idea of personal development consistent with the premises of the Theory of Organizational Action (Maggi, 1984/1990; 2003). Most PIL’s features that we described above seem to confirm our hypothesis, which is also confirmed by other considerations on further aspects of the program, among them the evaluation process and incentives (Masino, 2012). It is also possible to deepen the reflection even further. In this paper, we would like to underline a specific aspect of

Maggi's theory which appears to be particularly relevant for this paper's objectives. In a contribution about teaching in education and training activities, the author asked an explicitly provocative question: is it possible to transmit knowledge? (Maggi, 2010). In that article, the author clarifies the impossibility of knowledge transmission. Teaching is not an act of transmission of the part of the teacher, but the creation of favorable conditions for an assumption of initiative and responsibility on the part of the learner. Learning, on the other side, is not just mere "reception" but, most of all, a choice of the learner, and the results depend largely by the way, unavoidably subjective, in which he interprets the learning process itself. One chooses to learn or not to learn, and what is learned is the outcome of a strongly individual construction of meaning (Maggi, 2010). It is not difficult to see that this argument is in radical opposition to the way the education system is designed and implemented in most contexts. This is a conception of learning (and teaching) radically alternative to the dominant one. This can also be verified at the "macro" level, when one realizes that educational pathways are usually designed as predetermined "channels" which does not allow, in their general architecture or in their regulation of details, neither the possibility of personalized learning nor, even less, the possibility of "exit" and experimentation. On the contrary, such possibilities are usually forbidden or sanctioned. The active role of the learner does not represent the "heart" of the learning process, its essence, but an element of "disturbance" of system's strong rationality. Thus, one might ask how the PIL example can help to understand the possibility to implement learning based not on the "transmission" hypothesis, but on the creation of favorable condition to the activation of an autonomous learning process by the learner. While there is a variety of activities and processes in the PIL pathway - including an initial part, which is very short, in which the more traditional approach is used -the most significant educational moments of this methodology are represented by situations in which the "transmission-reception" idea is clearly abandoned. Students are asked to become autonomous and active protagonists of their own educational pathway. The process regulation provides to them a lot of

opportunities to exercise discretion, to build their path, to activate their own experience – up to the moment in which this approach culminates when they are free to choose in which company to carry out their work – study alternation experience. This has nothing to do with the flexibility of rules or with sparse rules. On the contrary, PIL does not have more flexible or less pervasive rules in comparison to other transition initiatives. And, in any case, this is not what makes the biggest difference. Instead, what is relevant is the object of regulation: creating opportunities of dialogue and interaction, establishing mutual evaluations, the distribution of decision prerogatives. This is what makes PIL's regulation adequate to generate a learning path in a sense of "receiving" something exogenous, but in a sense in which learning is the appropriation and subjective interpretation of opportunities and, eventually, construction of one's own pathway. The regulatory architecture of PIL does not see the student as a passive recipient of a number of regulated activities, instead it utilizes such regulated activities in order to create the right conditions for him to become an active subject, able to regulate himself, in a highly discretionary way, his own learning process.

It is clear that the PIL program suffers of some compromises, imperfections, and has significant areas in which it could be improved. We did not describe it here as a "recipe" or as a "model", but as an example to the fact that it is possible to imagine an education process alternative from the point of view of its conception. It is a process in which self-referentiality and closed system logic are refused or at least reduced; where all subjects' bounded rationality is recognized and faced through a high level of participation; where the focus of attention and the main goal is the personal development process, not only with a professional orientation of; in which the educational value of work is recognized, but also where the professional value of education is recognized as well; where the role of the University and teachers is not one of building educational channels that cannot be escaped and, in them, transmitting knowledge just like a radio signal can be broadcasted, but to create the best possible conditions in order to encourage people to take charge of their own

learning and, ultimately, of their own growth path. From the University point of view, this is an organizational choice. It is about choosing the regulation, and by consequence the goals, of its own educational action. At the roots of all this there is, unavoidably, and epistemological choice.

## **Conclusions**

The passage from education to work is one of the most delicate and important moments in a person's life. Decisions are made that may greatly influence the future of that person. In this paper we argued that the effectiveness of such passage depends not only by how it is managed, but also by how the activities directly connected to it are conceived, that is, education and work. The most widespread conception of such activities is clearly inspired by a functionalist logic, which generates the difficulties and inefficiencies. The economic crisis not only contributes to make them worse but also to make them evident. Thus, the crisis should motivate to experiment alternative solutions. However, it is necessary a radical rethinking, starting from the fundamental conception of the two systems, or at least of the final phase of education and the recruitment phase by the companies. Such a radical rethinking does not exclude the actual possibility of success. The PIL case study represents a practical example that goes towards such direction. Thus, the alternative is possible. In this article we did not discuss the many difficulties with which programs like PIL have to deal with, especially the problem of explaining especially in the world of education and the world of business the sense and the means for change. This should not be surprising. One of the negative consequences of self referentiality and closed system logic is cognitive inertia, that is the difficulty to question what one is accustomed to take for granted. It is difficult to think, when constrained by such inertia, education and recruitment not as separate and highly rational worlds but as a set of boundedly rational actions and decisions processes, oriented towards the goal that "cuts" horizontally their traditional boundaries - a goal that in turn can be described as a process, the personal and professional growth of the students, future worker. It is difficult

because doing so implies admitting all the limits that we described above, especially the limits of rationality of systems that are consolidated receptacles of interests perpetuating and reaffirming themselves. It is not easy to reason on specific activities in terms that should be very obvious but in the invisible self-referentiality are lost. For instance, it is difficult to think about teaching as facilitation of self-regulated learning instead of passive transmission; it is difficult to think about work as educational and personal growth instead of mere standardized application of pre-existing abilities that are independent from the context and, most of all, independent from the non-reducible individuality of subjects, true and only “value” of the so-called “human capital”; it is difficult to think about the recruitment as mutual instead of unilateral selection, as dialogue instead of monologue. In any case, the translation into practice of a different way of thinking about these processes, that is the actual implementation of the concrete change in organizational terms, encounters a lot of resistance. It is important to insist on the need to invest resources and political attention on the so-called “transition” between education and work for its actual effects on the employability of the young, on the quality of their employment and on the benefits in terms of collective well-being and competitiveness of the economy. Not only: the willingness to invest experiment in this direction might trigger a deep reflection on the inadequacy of the current education and recruiting systems. We should be aware that the most important passage is the overcoming of the “transition” idea itself. The best way to help people to cross the “boundaries” between incompatible systems is to eliminate the boundaries themselves, and to act in organizational terms by clarifying the goals and assuming the point of view of what should be the only, real protagonist: the person and his/her process of growth and development.

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## **Work-life reconciliation: which organizational options?**

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*Work-life reconciliation is one of the current issues within the political and academic debate. First, this article describes the evolution of the concept of work-life reconciliation through an interdisciplinary review of the literature. Second, the article proposes a synthesis of organizational and business reflections and practices; starting from a critical interpretation of the mainstream literature and related controversial results in terms of work life reconciliation practices, the article goes on to offer a working hypothesis which takes explicitly into account a proposal formulated by Masino and Zamarian in relation to the introduction of technological artifacts into the organizational process. The aim is to propose a scheme of analysis of the reconciliation practices based on categories of (possible) choices of design, adoption and use, believing that this proposal could be useful and provide a contribution to the second level collective bargaining.*

*Keywords: Work-life reconciliation, Organizational action, Organizational design, Human resource practices*

### **The relevance of the work-life reconciliation issue**

During the last fifteen years the issue of work-life reconciliation has assumed a significant position in the political debate. At the public discourse level, it has become one of the priorities in the governments' agendas of Western countries and it is considered one of the strategic issue of employment, social and equal opportunities policies (Saraceno, 2006). It is no coincidence that the issue was the subject of a huge legal regulation at different levels, including the supranational one. The same European social model to which the European Union aims is largely pervaded by the concept of work-life reconciliation.

It is possible to briefly outline the main steps characterizing the European normative path on reconciliation. In the 60s and 70s, European legislation gave an equal treatment to men and women within workplace. The main objective was to promote participation of women in the labor market (Calafà, 2001), by assuming as a given their role of caregivers. However, it is since the 80s that a more articulated European policy on reconciliation has begun and has focused on the redistribution of care work. In recent years, the

regulatory framework continues to be oriented mainly to the development of women's employment, but in a more pronounced perspective of sharing of rights and responsibilities, based on the principle of equality.

Reconciliation as an issue of men and women emerged in a clear way only in 1989 with the Community Charter of the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers, and in the 90s it became a recurring issue in legislation and in European policies, highlighting a change in orientation of EU strategies towards the themes of family and family responsibilities. The focus shifted from the reduction of gender discrimination to the contrast of obstacles for women integration into the labor market (Calafà, 2001), also through the introduction of family friendly policies (Gherardi, Poggio, 2003).

The Lisbon Treaty in 2000 and the White Paper in 2003 aim at proposing policies able to strengthen the European labor market, to develop a more competitive and dynamic knowledge economy and to achieve sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. Such acts assign to reconciliation a specific and clear role, taking it as "one of the five pillars of the Union's strategy in terms of equal sharing of family responsibilities" (Trifiletti, 2010: 12). During the following years several guidelines and recommendations were generated and specific funding (European Structural Funds) to support policies and concrete actions were earmarked. Over the years a change of trajectory occurred: from care work protection policies, targeted to women, to policies more and more oriented to the redistribution of family responsibilities. In addition to this, later, European institutions placed the reconciliation issue into a wider strategy of flexibilization of labor. Gradually the issue has been recognized and included among the agendas' priorities of many Member States, which have set up policies and legislative frameworks aimed at the implementation of specific strategies for work-life reconciliation and the introduction of measures to be discussed through collective bargaining.

The analysis of the European pathway also shows how the theme was proposed and promoted through different modalities, to which different

incisiveness in legislative terms have corresponded. Sometimes the EU Commission merely provided general indications, other times it proposed guidelines to follow, but rarely it issued directives to which each Member States had the obligation to comply. Each Member State has defined objectives through different measures and actions. Therefore, the effectiveness of policies adopted has varied depending on the country, the welfare system or the existing prevalent culture in relation to the care activities (Donati, 2005; Del Boca, Rosina, 2009). Today, it seems rather difficult to talk about European reconciliation policies referring to a homogeneous set of actions and tools. In fact, the complexity of the factors involved and the important differences emerging from the comparison of demographic and socio-cultural contexts do not allow to identify neither a common language nor concrete answers on the subject of reconciliation.

In the Italian context, the legal regulation was first concentrated on the right to equality and equal opportunities for women. In the Italian Constitution the principle of equality was introduced, but only in the 60s and 70s the legislation focused on equal treatment and gender equity, on the vision of motherhood as a social value and on protection of such condition. By the mid-80s there was a change of policy regarding reconciliation: from the exclusive defense of motherhood and equal treatment for men and women in matters of employment (Law 1204/1971 and Law 903/1977), to policies promoting positive action to achieve gender equality in the workplace (Law 125/1991 and Law 215/1992).

However, the turning point for the facilitation of regulatory actions and measures supporting reconciliation between life time, care time, working time, training etc... appeared with the Law 53/2000. This law contains provisions to support the motherhood and fatherhood, the right to care and training, and the coordination of the time of cities. Through this law the Italian legislation promotes integration of men into care activities and it considers all aspects, systems and (economic and social) actors which are or may be involved in such activities to carry out integrated actions and effective plans for reconciliation.

From the twenty-first century, a set of specific policies for the harmonization between life time and working time has been built. A series of tools of work-life reconciliation were introduced, such as family leave, full ownership of paternity leave, leave for training, measures for coordination of the time of city and the use of time for social solidarity purposes. For the first time, the law addressed the issue at the national level in an explicit way and it established the clear goal to involve a plurality of economic and social actors. The attempt was to bring forward in a synergic way both the company dimension of work-life reconciliation and the whole social system<sup>1</sup>. The implicit assumption of the legislative act was that the search for work-life reconciliation, in order to be effective, should not be implemented exclusively by the actors directly affected, but also by all the actors able to promote integration between life and working sphere. The law has defined, in fact, roles, actions and intervention measures for both employees and enterprises, as well as for local authorities, institutions and territorial organizations.

Therefore, the introduction of Law 53/2000, together with the possibility to use EU and national funds, stimulated a multiplicity of local projects, both at regional and enterprise level<sup>2</sup>.

The partial shift of the barycenter of the legislation dealing with welfare produced by the Const. Law 3/2001, helped to ensure that the interventions for work-life reconciliation were often implemented at the discretion of the actors involved (Mayors, Councilors for Equality, policy makers, entrepreneurs, etc.) and constructed on the basis of specific characteristics of local contexts (Bifulco, 2005; Balbo, 2008; Trifiletti, 2010). Italian work-life reconciliation policies, coherently with welfare policies, achieved different results “depending on the context, capabilities and possibilities that local actors have got for interpreting

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<sup>1</sup> Just think of the so-called “policies of time” (Bonfiglioli, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Through the Law 53/2000 the use of parental leave is extended to the father, facilitating greater involvement of men in the division of care activities. The norm proposes greater flexibility in working hours and the discussion between the social partners of positive action for the reconciliation in the workplace, reinforcing this goal with the allocation of funds directed to the implementation of corporate reorganization (Article 9 Law 53/2000, recently amended by art. 38 of Law 69/2009, which focuses on the creation of regional networks for reconciliation). Finally, it is emphasized the role that local authorities can exercise through the policies of time.

and governing the territory "(Ranci, 2005: 18). All this, on one hand, has guaranteed the chance to face, through reconciliation policies calibrated ad hoc, a particularly heterogeneous Italian context; on the other hand, it has produced a range of measures in a weak relation with national policies and also territorial fragmentation of policies for work-life reconciliation. In other words, a process of "jeopardization" occurred<sup>3</sup> (Lodi, Riva, 2010).

### **The debate on work-life reconciliation**

Since the 70s in Italy the issue of work-life reconciliation was debated within the social and economic sciences, and it crossed various disciplines. It is not a goal of this article to retrace exhaustively the debate developed in the last forty years<sup>4</sup>. However, it is useful to focus on two strongly interrelated lines of development of the general reflection about work-life reconciliation<sup>5</sup>.

The first trend of reflection on work-life balance is defined as "degenderization" of the theme (Riva, Zanfrini, 2010; Sabbadini, 2004). It was mainly achieved through the progressive inclusion of the male gender inside the work-life reconciliation issue. At the same time the orientation to include

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<sup>3</sup> In recent years, "ITALIA 2020 Plan" and the Law 92/2012 - despite a big debate (Gottardi, 2010; Del Boca, 2010) - raised the issue within the lines of national policies, enhancing the importance of care and nursing services availability and of their strengthening - aimed at enabling women to remain or re-entry in the labor market. The norms were aimed to stimulate the attention of the social partners and to encourage the proposition of work-life reconciliation in collective bargaining, coherently with the tradition of other European countries (ISFOL, 2011). This tendency was supported by a reflection in literature about the need to discuss the issue also in different contexts than policies and legislation framework (Piazza, 2007; Murgia, Poggio, 2007; Calafà, 2006). Collective bargaining represents, in fact, the instrument of mediation between "the two polarizations of enterprises' unilateral initiatives on one hand, and the individualisation of the employment relationship on the other hand" (Murgia, Poggio, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> For an exhaustive review on the subject, see Trifiletti, 2010, and Naldini, Saraceno, 2011. For more details on the evolution of the concept in European law see Carparelli, Tassa, 2011. The issue was addressed in particular from the point of view of family policies and welfare by Bould, Crespi, 2008; Donati, 2005; 2008, Donati, Prandini, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> In the glossary contained in the web page [www.donne-lavoro.bz.it](http://www.donne-lavoro.bz.it), reconciliation is defined as "a theme that is no longer just an individual problem of women, but it is becoming a social issue, which may also involve men and organizations. The life and daily life are composed of multiple occupations for everyone, depending on the cycles of life and family conditions, but also the needs of study, free time and other activities. Reconciliation is a concept that involves many actors in a kind of ecosystem (individuals, companies, social system) and it is entering into the culture of those are working for the improvement of working and social systems".

within the theme of reconciliation other categories of social actors such as disabled people, foreign people, young people, etc. emerged. Therefore, if we recall the debate developed within sociological, economic and organizational disciplines, it is possible to identify the tendency to shift the issue of work-life reconciliation from the restricted female dimension to an inclusive dimension of both gender and of other categories of actors. At the base of all this, obviously, there is the assumption of deep social and cultural transformations which have invested Italy in recent decades. Of course the tendency to a “degenderization” of the reflection on work-life reconciliation does not mean that the issue of women has run out or it has been relegated to a marginal theme in the cultural debate (Piazza, 2001; Naldini, Saraceno, 2011). Theoretical contributions and research related to work-life reconciliation continue to be targeted mainly to the female condition, at least because one of the most radical social transformations was the feminization of the labor market and the occupational structure. Moreover, problems concerning the accessibility of women to work and career still exist. However, it is true that, compared to the 70s, the “female monopoly” on the issue of work-life reconciliation has been reduced (Bombelli, 2003; Piazza, 2006; Biancheri, 2006). The notion of work-life reconciliation, from being a prerequisite for inclusion and quality of life and work for women, has become the fundamental premise of the quality of social life of all citizens (Trifiletti, 2010). The effects of this extension of the work-life reconciliation issue are relevant. In fact, it has been demonstrated that, over the time, interventions of work-life reconciliation have generated the tendency to escape from the boundaries of gender policies, expanding their range of action in the management of human resources (Bombelli, 2004; Cuomo, Mapelli, 2007; Piazza, 2007; Castellucci *et al.*, 2009).

The second line of development of this debate is defined as tendency to “defamilization”. Indeed, the issue of work-life reconciliation appeared initially as reconciliation between family care and working time. The crisis of the “work-family system” (Pleck, 1977) – system born in parallel with the process of industrialization of Western societies and with the relative allocation of paid

and unpaid work by gender (separation between the family and the labor market) - has undoubtedly been the main stimulus to focus on the issue of reconciliation in terms of time to dedicate to family responsibilities and working time (Saraceno, 2006). The crisis of this system and the increasingly important presence of women in the labor market undermined the previous work-life reconciliation model, where the woman was the main point of reference in the process of reconciliation (Crouch, 1999; Saraceno, Naldini, 2004; Reyneri, 2007). All this created the need to think again on the reconciliation between family care and working time, which continued to be expressed for a long time as an exclusively female problem. However, in the most recent years, cultural and social changes, together with labor demand changes, led to a gradual shift of the focus on reconciliation, from an exclusive sphere of family care time<sup>6</sup> to the sphere of self-care time, both in everyday life and during the cycle of life (Ghislieri, Piccardo, 2003; Haas, 2005; Pfau-Effinger, 2005; 2006; Hobson *et al.*, 2008). According to Naldini and Saraceno (2011: 14) “both men and women [...] end up having less time for themselves. This means not only free time. It also means [...] time for social and political participation and for social life outside the family”. It is no coincidence that the official terminology has changed both in the analysis realm and in projects, and today we tend to talk about balance between life and work and less and less about reconciliation between care family and work (Lewis, Campbell, 2008; McGinnity, Whelan, 2009).

Terminology is not irrelevant. It reflects the evolution of the concept in the cultural debate. In fact, despite in current language (but also in legal language) the expressions “work-life reconciliation” and “work-life balance” are used in an undifferentiated way, it was noted (Carparelli, Tassa, 2011) that these expressions imply distinct concepts: the first one, “work-life reconciliation”, emphasizes the possibility to adapt the working sphere to the family one, assuming them as defined and socially recognized; the second one,

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<sup>6</sup> The psychology and sociology of the family U.S. have deepened the problem exclusively as a conflict between working life and family life. For a comprehensive review on this subject see Perry-Jenkins *et al.*, 2000; Greenhouse, Sing, 2003.

“work-life balance”, emphasizes the possibility to adapt the working sphere to subjective needs, whose characteristics may not be detectable a priori.

Of course, the tendency to cut the strong relation between reconciliation on one side and gender and family dimension on the other side, is attributable (in which degree is debatable) to the challenges of feminist movements. As mentioned above, we don't want to propose an exhaustive review of these cultural dynamics, but it is interesting to emphasize the fact that the process of “de-ideologization” (and inevitable “re-ideologization”) emerging from the discussion about of the relations “reconciliation/female sphere” and “reconciliation/family sphere” represents a potential break with the past. However, all this turns out to be also a sort of process of individualization (or personalization) of the work-life reconciliation issue invoking the matter of power relationship within workplace and in society in general. In addition to this, it is not possible to ignore data and research showing that some specific categories (primarily women) continue to represent disadvantaged (or at least vulnerable) groups for what concerns both the access to employment and the possibility of work-life reconciliation.

Moreover, it may be reasonable to argue that the tendency not to use pre-established categories and relationships represents an emancipatory movement. However, rejecting the reifications related to conciliation as harmonization between family time and working time (i.e., the assumption of life times as care time for family, the assumption of care time of the family as female matter, the assumption of clear boundaries between productive sphere and reproductive sphere) and contending the issue of reconciliation as harmonization between life time and working time, produces the risk of new reifications (i.e. by placing the working time outside of life time and *vice versa*).

However, in this article we chose to use the expression “work-life reconciliation” (and not “work-life balance”), in the belief that, independently on the terminology used, neither in literature nor in practice there was a real conceptual passage.

The following pages illustrate how organizational theory and practice deal the issues outlined above.

### **The work-life reconciliation in organizational studies**

Without ambition to be exhaustive, we expose in a schematic way the most common interpretations regarding the issue of work-life reconciliation in the organizational field.

*Reconciliation as attenuation of role conflict.* In a typical functionalist perspective, the issue of reconciliation has been interpreted in relation to potential emerging forms of inter-role conflict. In this case, the conflict would be determined by the fact that requests coming from the job role and from the no-job role (family or other) would be considered incompatible, for some aspects (Greenhouse, Beutell, 1985). Once hypothesized (and in some cases measured with psychometric surveys) the effect of this dysfunctional conflict between life time and working time on work performance and individual stress, this perspective undertakes to reduce the negative impact, identifying which conditions and resources could make more synergistic the participation of the actors to the potential conflicting roles. All this is conceptually located within a framework of satisfaction of needs of integration and adaptation of the organizational system (through the appropriate functioning of its parts) to the environment.

*Reconciliation as an asset for competitiveness.* A further impulse to the interest for the issue of work-life reconciliation appears in the underlining - proposed by some theoretical reflections on the organization - of two factors strictly connected: the changes in the demand for labor by firms and the increasing importance attached to strategic human resource management since the 80s (Scapolan, 2008). With respect to the first dimension, it is argued that the reinforcement and extension of a logic of market-oriented governance of labor (Alves *et al.*, 2007), together with the model of hyper-competitive market accompanying the processes of globalization, determined profound changes in the demand for labor by firms. Among the most significant changes in labor

demand there is undoubtedly the re-articulation of the demand of working time, which followed different trajectories sometimes contradictory (fragmentation of the boundaries between working time and life time, extension of working time, increased working patterns, extemporaneous periods of employment, etc.). In this sense, this issue arises in terms (known and often abused) of emphasizing the notion of flexibility. At the same time, we can observe the widespread idea within organizational disciplines that human resources have a key role in the success of the organization. Thus, the attraction and retention of talent, the development of human capital within organization, the promotion of diversity in the organization, the development of different skills and particularly the combination of all these aspects with other tangible and intangible assets of the organization, can be the key to success<sup>7</sup>. The resource-based view (Barney, 1991) is often the theoretical proposal to which these approaches refer to. Reconciliation is here proposed as functional to the “extraction” of competitive value from the human resources in the organization. Therefore, in this perspective the search for a better work-life reconciliation is oriented to the acquisition of (hypothesized) benefits.

*Reconciliation as social bond.* In recent years sociological institutionalism (or neo-institutionalism) has produced several contributions to the issue of work-life reconciliation even within the organizational studies, where the approach to the “total social organization of labor” is inserted (Borghini, Rizza, 2006; Glucksmann, 1995; 2005). In this perspective, the pursuit of institutional legitimacy for the enterprises is a guideline essential for their survival. Using a terminology coherent with the institutionalist approach, changes occurring within the institutional environment, once recognized by organization and structuring the organizational field, exert pressure to change the organization

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<sup>7</sup> See, with regard to the approach in terms of increased productivity and business performance, Bevan *et al.*, 1999; Chincichilla *et al.*, 2011; Konrad, Mangel, 2000; De Biase, 2002; Castellucci *et al.*, 2009; Bombelli, 2010; with regard to the improvement of workers' motivation, Coccozza, Ciona, 2011; with regard to the increase in business performance and the attractiveness of the talents in the process of recruitment, Beauregard, Henry, 2009; with regard to the enhancement of human resources skills, Piazza, 2007; with regard to the workers' commitment, Roehling *et al.*, 2001; with regard to the management and the limitation of stress, Tausig, Fenwick, 2001; Halpern, 2005.

itself. The analysis of any work activity and the observation of the ways in which it is formed and reproduced through actors, necessarily have to relate to all the different forms of work and to the transformations that occur in “work” as an institution (Borghi, 2007). In other words, changes of lifestyle of women and all citizens in general, social and cultural changes, legal changes of different types and levels, family institution transformations, welfare crisis, changes of institutions regulating markets and all the hard and soft institutions in general, put some pressure oriented towards the activation of work-life reconciliation practices. In this perspective, projects of work-life reconciliation start from the assumption of organizational rigidities in recognizing social constraints (institutionalized or at least with a high level of institutionalization) and they are aimed at transforming the organizations by mitigating reconciliation problems of individuals and their families. It is a sort of invasion of the organizational field in order to orientate its structuration.

In essence, in the light of contributions that have addressed the issue of reconciliation, mainstream theoretical perspectives - attributable to the logic of a predetermined system over subjects - appear to be the ones that colonized the debate. In fact, it is possible to identify as common point of the theoretical paths above mentioned, the attempt to overcome Fordism in favor of the so-called post-Fordist revolution, driven by the logic of a predetermined system over subjects, viewed in an organicistic perspective. At the same time, it does not seem necessary to underline the distinction between the so-called instrumental approaches to the human resources management and the so-called constitutive approaches of human resources management (Costa, Giannecchini, 2005).

In fact, the approach presented above - reconciliation as attenuation of role conflict - is fully included within a logic of functional instrumentality of resources to the system needs. At the same time, the declaration of intentions included in the resource-based approach (related to the goal of emphasizing the value of people) cannot be considered sufficient to recognize its constitutive character to the organizational reality, especially if we consider how such

approach (and other similar ones, such as the competence-based approach) has been articulated (Neri, 2008).

With regard to the solutions related to the vision of work-life reconciliation as a tool for competitiveness, it is no coincidence that the prevalence of the proposals involve micro level re-designing actions (reminiscent of the socio-technical organizational design), often accompanied by practices of psychological support (counseling, coaching, etc.), (re)-training and education. However, when reflections on specific cases were proposed, they were done in order to identify best practices of conciliation.

When work-life reconciliation was assumed as social bond and the theoretical perspective of inspiration was the organizational phenomenology (such as the sociological neo-institutionalism mentioned above), resulting in a “weak functionalism” (Vaira, 2010), interventions were characterized primarily as pressures of the institutional environment with a potential capacity to impact organizational dynamics only indirectly (e.g. the generation of regulations at European, national or local level, specific framework agreements between social partners, innovations disseminated by epistemic communities and/or institutional entrepreneurs).

These different reflections undoubtedly increased the attention on work-life reconciliation and they played a role of raising awareness on this theme. However, the results in terms of increased work-life reconciliation within organizations were not satisfactory. Both at national and European level, several studies show the persistence of a condition of greater difficulty for women in the search for work-life reconciliation and especially the emergence of the imbalance in the allocation of responsibilities and care activities, falling mainly on female gender (Eurostat, 2008; Isfol, 2009; OECD, 2010; ISTAT, 2010; 2011; Eurofound, 2011). The European Commission itself, thanks to analysis of national data, emphasizes that reconciliation continues to be a prevalently female matter. In fact, the participation of women in the labor market is adversely affected by the presence of children or the investment in family care activities (EU27 average -11.3%; -10.9% EU15) while, on the contrary, the

presence of children in families affects the increase in male participation (EU27 average +7.7%; EU15 8.8%) (Eurofound, 2011). In Italy, the percentage of women who decide to stop working after the birth of children continues to remain about 20%, and it concerns both younger and older women (ISTAT, 2010). It was also observed (Saraceno, 2006) that in a deeply changed labor market, where young people are entering in large part with non-standard employment contracts, current legislation on maternity is addressed only to standard workers. The 43% of Italian women under 40 is not part of the target of Law 53/2000 and they don't have access to maternity protection guaranteed to standard workers (Ponzellini, 2010). In addition to this, it should be added the presence of a Mediterranean welfare model with a low supply of child care services in large part of the territory.

In Italy the decision to have a child by women induces significant changes in their working sphere, among which the abandonment of work is only the most manifest (Rondinelli, Zizza, 2010). In fact, women are inclined to choose a job in feminized sectors, such as the tertiary sector, where the flexibility of working time is more common; within organizations women risk isolation starting from the pre-childbirth period (Todisco, 2010); when women return from maternity leave, they have to face masculine cultures of face-time (Fuchs *et al.*, 1998; Pogliana, 2009) and they see their career opportunities vanishing; often women have lower incomes than their male colleagues in the same role and with the same responsibility.

Finally, at the corporate level, there are several initiatives on equal opportunities and different measures of reconciliation, but these initiatives and measures don't seem to have nicked the "glass ceiling", which is a real barrier for women in the access to top positions within the organization (Bombelli, 2000, Connell, 2002; Sestito, 2002; Garofalo, 2002). This leads to an exasperation of the traditional dichotomy between production and reproduction, work and family, and especially to a lack of citizenship of motherhood in the organizations (Gherardi, Poggio, 2003; Saraceno, 2008; Isfol, 2009).

### **A critique to the reflections and practices about work-life reconciliation**

As already mentioned, the reflection on the theme and the dissemination of reconciliation's practices and tools have increased the awareness, bringing the matter to the attention of all the socio-economic actors but, at the same time, it is not possible to consider completely satisfying the state of the art of theoretical reflection and the results achieved.

It's possible to observe that in the setting related to the economic-organizational mainstream, the design of work-life reconciliation tools has mostly taken the form of measures assuming a "curative" perspective. These measures tend to alleviate the consequences of the reconciliation's lack rather than acting on the causes. As already mentioned, family leave<sup>8</sup>, part-time and implementation of best practices are the most used measures. The first two tools reflect a resolution problem setting that can be defined "regulatory"; these are introduced in the organization primarily by legislative requirements (both national and European), to which correspond an "adaptive" and, in most case, temporary organizational project. The implementation of best practices, however, can be defined an "imitative" resolution of the problem. According to this setting, one or more models to support the organizational design can be determined and best practices can be identified on the basis of the results obtained which are considered optimal. This occurs both in the case in which they meet the criteria of the marginal efficiency increasing and in case they respond to other criteria of legitimacy. Subsequently, it is foreseen a systematic reproduction and application based on the best match to the functional requirements of the models themselves. Often, as a result of psychometric surveys (studies on organizational climate, motivational analysis, work stress measurements, etc.) micro-organizational redesign actions are proposed by recalling the theoretical tradition that range from the socio-technical school to Hackman and Oldham (1980) proposals. In any case, it is possible to assert that within the organizational mainstream, work-life reconciliation is reduced to a

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<sup>8</sup> A recent research IZA (Lalive *et al.*, 2011) conducted in Austria showed that parental leave is an excellent tool for the protection of labor and income maintenance when a child born, but at the same time it can lead to a significant delay for returning to work.

“trivial” matter of micro-organizational design, similar to the likewise discussed flexibility of work<sup>9</sup>. This presents the level of criticality of the design action - often highlighted by Maggi (1984/1990; 2003; 2011)<sup>10</sup>, - to which neither theoretical nor traditional practices have been successful in finding and proposing remedies.

Another aspect complicates the analysis and the proposal for effective interventions supporting work-life reconciliation: the one regarding the issue of organizational boundaries. Most of the empirical studies regarding this subject were mainly limited to explore the needs in terms of flexibility and services of a target of workers belonging to the same company. In other words, analyzing the organizational mainstream described in previous sections, it is evident that the field of organizational action coincides with a single company. Some recent researches (Mattioli, 2012) show, on the contrary, the opportunity to extend the analysis of the reconciliation needs beyond the enterprise, especially if we consider the size of small and medium enterprises that characterizes the Italian and European territory<sup>11</sup>.

The opportunity to explore the approach of territorial governance (Piazza, 2005; Calafà, 2006) considers cooperation between the social partners in the identification of needs, interests and responsibilities of reconciliation and in the definition of solutions resulting from the exchange between all actors involved (individuals, families, institutions, public and private service providers, companies, trade unions and entrepreneurs associations). This approach encourages the construction of networks oriented to the study of the problem not in a single company or regarding an individual worker (e.g. voucher system), but in terms of needs of the whole social system (Eurofound,

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<sup>9</sup> No coincidence the site of the Ministry of Labour, a guide is proposed to present useful projects to “Increase the awareness of the instruments at companies disposal to help reconcile demands of work and family commitments”. These projects are defined as projects of flexibility for reconciliation.

<sup>10</sup> On this issue, see also Masino, 2005; Fabbri, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> The territorial analysis perspective may represent a dialogue’s example that allows to overcome from the organizational boundaries and to treat work-life reconciliation as a shared and discussed theme among various parties outside the organization. This perspective can achieve actions taking into account the several factors making up work-life reconciliation (Mattioli, 2012).

2007; Murgia, Poggio, 2007; Commissione Europea, 2008; Saraceno, 2009). All this brings out the impasse that the mainstream literature shows when the level of analysis exceeds the intra-organizational. In fact, limits of the approaches that in the last twenty years have monopolized the debate on inter-organizational design, reifying the organization and its borders, are well known<sup>12</sup>.

The criticism of mainstream approaches proposed by the subjectivist literature/approach (based, *intra alias*, on the rejection of generalizing the notions of family, diversity etc., and based on the understanding that these are socially constructed notions), cannot affect the organization. Theories proposed in this perspective, essentially anchored to an anti-managerial critical perspective, tend renounce to indications about organizational planning and they delegate the intervention of work-life reconciliation to actors outside the organization (the legislature, the institutional innovator, the epistemic community, etc.).

### **A proposal for a reflection on the work-life reconciliation issue**

According to the research carried out by McKinsey & Company (Rizzi *et al.*, 2013), the implementation of supporting services and assistance in the company would generate benefits equivalent to twice the investments made, would increase the engagement index of workers, would reduce absences and generally would generate lower costs for the company.

In a recent conference, at the presence of former Minister of Labour Fornero, the Gender Gap Report 2012 (confirming the chronic delay of Italy on development and management of gender issues at work) claimed that “nowadays many companies have activated interventions in favor of reconciliation or the women empowerment, but the sustainability and quality of

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<sup>12</sup> In particular, this refers to the setting of the organizational economy of Williamson (1985), in relation to which the most incisive criticisms are represented by Maggi, 1988.

these interventions are guaranteed only when gender policies are introduced transversely to the organizational processes and procedures”<sup>13</sup>.

Many, including the institutional leaders, share the idea that work-life reconciliation is an issue to be dealt mainly in organizational terms, and it is a paradox that when the organizational science is recognized as legitimized to deal with work-life reconciliation issue, the organizational science itself is not apparently able to propose adequate solutions.

It is necessary therefore to understand which option is feasible to provide an effective support to public and private operators, able to focus on work-life reconciliation issue and to produce settings of reflection on work potentially useful in order to avoid distortions in the bargaining process (in particular at the second level). Thus, it would be important to turn to an alternative perspective of study in order to avoid the impasse of theoretical approaches that we explained in the previous pages (impasse arising from the assumption of the subject and the organization as two separate and opposing entities, and the system as predetermined). Moreover it is necessary to overcome the passivity, assumed (more or less implicitly) by mainstream approaches, of the subjects involved in the organizational process.

It seems useful to refer to approaches opposing to both the mainstream objectivist perspective and subjectivist perspective. In particular, it is convenient to refer to the organizational theory proposed by Maggi (1984/1990; 2003; 2011): it represents a fundamental contribution to understand the organizational phenomenon as it formed the basis of a significant scientific production on the issue of relations between work and well-being.

Among several aspects considered until now which are useful to reflect on the work-life reconciliation issue, we want to emphasize that this theory helps to develop the theme of coordination starting from the process characterizing a single subject “and then passing both to the combined action of more subjects in a process, and finally to the coordination among processes of

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<sup>13</sup> See [www.repubblica.it](http://www.repubblica.it), November 21, 2012. The quotation marks are to be attributed to Roberta Bortolucci, president of the Women’s Studies Project and Diversity Management.

action of one or more subjects “(Maggi, 2011: 77); we also want to highlight how this theory develops the theme of cooperation (another key issue in terms of conciliation), offering an interpretation that allows to distinguish the finalization of cooperative action from its regulation (ivi: 80). Most important, according to this theory, subjects are active (and responsible as a consequence) in the organizational process, and the source of potential change does not take place outside the process.

The question is, then, what contributions coherent with this approach can help anyone involved to carry out conciliation practices, inside and outside the boundaries of the enterprise. We chose to use – in a consciously and arbitrary way – a theoretical reflection proposed by Masino and Zamarian (later perfected by the same Masino<sup>14</sup>) in order to “contribute to the construction of a conceptual and theoretical framework for the interpretation of the opportunities for change in the regulatory processes resulting from the use of (simple or complex) artifacts”; the authors, by proposing their contribution, clearly claim its coherence “in particular with the theory proposed by Maggi” (Masino, 2011: 164).

We choose, as example, the case of teleworking, an option which, from the studies of Tofler (1980), was mainly seen as a solution that can simultaneously increase the productivity of the company and worker satisfaction<sup>15</sup>. Many studies, including the most recent ones, have instead put into discussion the effects of teleworking, pointing out some negative aspects, not only in terms of isolation and integration, organizational learning and corporate innovation, but also in terms of stress and conflict of life-work<sup>16</sup>; finally it is necessary not to ignore the impact of teleworking in a company on

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<sup>14</sup> The contribution, initially proposed by Masino and Zamarian (2003), was later proposed in Masino, 2005. Below we will also refer to Masino, 2011.

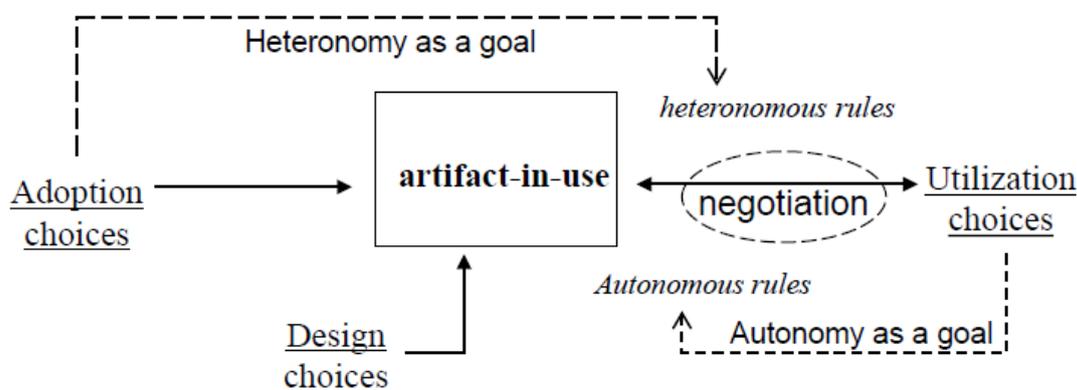
<sup>15</sup> The advantages should realize at different level: on personal satisfaction (largely dependent on the chance to work-life reconciliation) and on corporate savings (in terms of recruitment, absenteeism, emergencies management, workplaces optimization and other fixed operating costs, etc..) but also on social system level in relation to the reduction of traffic and pollution.

<sup>16</sup> Starting from the “classic” contribution of Cowan (1984), the teleworking effects have been studied in many researches and have been interpreted in controversial ways. Here it’s just mentioned the interesting recent study by Bloom *et al.*, 2013.

those not directly affected by that intervention. So, how to deal with the issue of teleworking practices and with the interpretation of the expected effects?

Masino (2011: 168-169) states that, when we reflect on organizational change driven by the introduction of an artifact (in our case the introduction of an application of teleworking), the influence of the “application” cannot be explained according to its intrinsic and objective characteristics, but it depends on the choices made by agents. The identification of analytical categories allowing to not trivialize this application, which implies change (according to Masino, it is necessary to not reify the interpretation of the phenomenon) is what allows to avoid misinterpretations: for example, assuming that the introduction of a process of teleworking/part-time generate a radical transformation of the way to coordinate. That introduction may instead produce a reinforcement of the *status quo* within the work situation (in terms of gender policies: further segmentation in the labor market gender or preserving conditions of female subordination over time).

Masino (2005, 2011) proposes three analytical categories concerning the choice of design of the artifact, choice of adoption of the artifact, choice of use of the artifact (in succession exclusively in the logic chain) (Fig. 1), in the belief that changes cannot be understood “if not by analyzing the evolution of the artifacts, and their relationship with the regulation, in terms of choices separately identified and interpreted” (Masino, 2011: 169). We want to use these categories for the teleworking example (Fig. 2).



**Figure 1** - *Artifact-in-use in the organizational regulation* (Masino, 2005: 144)

### 1. CHOICES OF DESIGN

*Which technical features has the software/technical solution chosen?*

- What are the functionalities, what is the degree and the type of user-friendliness, what are the possibilities for customization, what are the characteristics of the interface, etc.?
- Each of these characteristics implies constraints and opportunities for users (and management) and the choice - intentional - of design requires a 'use theory' by agents.

### 2. CHOICES OF ADOPTION

*How is teleworking integrated in the organizational processes (of the enterprise)?*

- Who and in which roles/position is entitled to use it? Does it completely replace the "in presence activity" or only partially? For what kind of activities is it used? How are the teleworking activities related to other activities? Etc.
- All these choices are partly constrained by the software specifications/technical solution (choices of design), and in turn they imply constraints and opportunities for users (choices of use).

### 3. CHOICES OF USE

*How is teleworking actually used by operators?*

- What are features used and which ones are ignored? what are the features used for other purposes? What are the unforeseen ways of use? How much are the possibilities of customization exploited? Etc.
- Each of these choices is partly constrained by the choices of design and adoption and, at the same time, they are expression of autonomy.

**Figure 2** - *Application to the example of teleworking of the analytical categories of actions and decisions of the design, adoption and use.*

It is important to remember that Masino (2011: 167) points out that these are analytical categories and they should not be confused with concrete actions and agents. In addition to this, Masino points out that overlaps and sequences

that may occur in practice are unlimited: it is possible that “the same acting person at the same time carries out actions analytically interpreted in terms of design and/or adoption and/or use and not necessarily in that order” (*ibid.*).

Moreover, this analytical framework, proposed for the interpretation of the change resulting from the use of artifacts, in our example is extended to the interpretation of a mode of coordination of work processes, teleworking, which can use several artifacts.

This contribution of Masino to the organizational reflection – in particular about the organizational change – seems to be important to us because, without “forcing our hand” towards a normative approach, it allows us to recognize the complexity characterizing the introduction of new organizational solutions; it also allows us to avoid the simplification resulting from reification of elements included in this process (people, systems, techniques), which inevitably leads to think in terms of “adaptation” of a component with respect to another and, consequently, to understand this process in terms of “this one rules, this other suffers”. The analytical distinction among choice of design, choice of adoption and choice of use allows the emancipation from determinism based on the causal relationship between the adopted tools and the obtained results.

By presenting the case of teleworking, we wanted to provide an example of application of the proposal of Masino and Zamarian that we believe coherent because in the case chosen its technological imprint is strong. However, we believe it is possible to use this logic for the analysis of situations in which the conciliation takes less technologically characterized forms and where it is possible to appreciate the potential interpretative of this logic. It is possible to consider, as other examples, the introduction of services oriented to work-life reconciliation as timesaving services, bank of hours, etc. In particular, in the near future we intend to apply the proposal of Masino and Zamarian to the reorganization arising from the needs of part-time work, parental leave and, in general, to what that is commonly identified as needs of “mutual flexibility subject-organization”.

The analytical framework proposed could also be useful to interpret interventions of work-life reconciliation developed at a local level and focused on an inter-organizational level. An example is reconciliation services (such as kindergarten) made (or supported) by local authorities involving more firms in the same area. This kind of interventions may be very frequent in a situation like the Italian one, in which often small firms, which represent the vast majority of economic actors, do not have resources and skills to act individually. In these situations, an alternative reading to the deterministic one, that is the one mainly used in policy-making activities, may be more useful to interpret the processes of goal setting and choice of the most appropriate tools for the context.

## **Conclusion**

Politicians, entrepreneurship, trade unions, etc. are demanding to take the work-life reconciliation theme also as an organizational issue, proposing to the attention of the non-fashion-victim researchers matters related to specific research questions. For which elements of work organization new conciliation practices have relevance? How do procedures for coordination and control change within the organization and among organizations? How do the production and dissemination and information and knowledge change? How do we interpret the processes of valorization/dequalification of competencies and the changes of tasks?

It is neither honest nor useful to try to answer these questions with interpretative frameworks which have already demonstrated to be inefficient. Here we tried to extend the fruitful work of Masino to the issue of work life reconciliation, with the commitment to deepen the analysis in this direction and to explore its opportunities and limits.

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# Management of competencies: a critique and an interpretative proposal

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*This paper contributes to the debate about the management of competencies in relation to organizational change. First, objectivist and socio-constructivist perspectives are critically discussed by examining the main available theories and their limits, both in practical and conceptual terms. Then, we explore the interpretive possibilities offered by a different concept of competency, consistent with a theoretical approach in which organization is conceived as a regulation process. Finally, we illustrate a case study about a multinational company in order to show how different theories lead to different ways to understand the management of competencies and its relation to organizational change.*

*Keywords: Competencies, Human resource management, Organizational action, Organizational change, Regulation process*

## **Introduction**

For more than 30 years, in the managerial and organizational literature the issue of competencies in personnel management has been seen as an opportunity to both improve the competitiveness of enterprises and to support organizational change. Since the very beginning, the competency method has been introduced as a chance to overcome the traditional approaches to manage and conceive organization (Boyatzis, 1982). These were based on a rigid definition of positions and on the supposed predictability of individual contributions. Instead, the goal was to emphasize the need to provide more discretion to workers in order to increase flexibility for the companies. Quite rapidly, in the literature the view that the competency approach should be the ultimate practice in order to implement change became shared by many authors (Boam, Sparrow, 1992). Many contributions emphasized that the competency method allows to interpret in a consistent way all major organizational changes (Altomare, Artuso, 1997). Similarly, other authors argued that in an era in which the economy is increasingly more open and competition is tougher, the

management of competencies has become a crucial challenge (Geffroy, Tijou, 2002). The rhetoric that characterized a quick and pervasive spread of scientific contributions and managerial practices based on competencies does not change over time. Recently, we observed a peak in its diffusion. This increasing interest is widely proved by a number of influential scientific contributions (Campion, *et al.*, 2011; Sanchez, Levine, 2009), conferences (“Competency Modeling for European HR and Policies Bridging Business, Education, and Training”, held in 2011) and special issues in academic journals, in which we can read about the “rise, fall, and rebirth of competency approaches” (Sultana, 2009). At the same time, competency management systems and practices found a widespread utilization not just in enterprises, but also in military organizations (Tian, *et al.*, 2009; U.S. Government, 2011; Young, Dulewicz, 2009) and research institutions (CERN Bulletin, 2011; Frank, 2012).

Notwithstanding a widespread, almost dogmatic acceptance of the rationale that is supposed to connect competency management and organizational change, it is worth noting that a lively debate about this issue is still going on, in which distant interpretations are discussed at an international level. A number of diverse theories, inspired by different conceptions, generate dissimilar explanations. Why, in what way and at what conditions the “use of competencies” in personnel management systems may support organizational change?

### **Competencies and organizational change according to different conceptions**

In order to answer to our research question, we begin with the theoretical proposal by Maggi (1984/1990; 2001; 2003). The author, after emphasizing the multiple meanings that the notion of competency acquires not only in different literatures, but also in different languages (depending on their etymological origins), shows that in the organizational realm any effort to explore the relationship between competency and organizational change should start from a reflection on the conceptions of organization. These describe differently not only the idea of organization and how organizational change may be

interpreted, but also the idea of competency itself. The author proposes to distinguish three fundamental conceptions of organization. To each one of them, he associates a different conception of competency. Let us summarize such a proposal.

Within a first conception, organization can be seen as either a “mechanical system” or an “organic system”. If we reason within the mechanical system logic, competency is an “attribution” defining the contribution of each subject according to explicit and consolidated rules (Maggi, 2001: XVIII). Subjects are seen as mechanical parts of a system designed ex-ante, according to absolute rationality. Tasks are prescribed, and subjects must comply to the system’s requirements. Within the organic system logic, subjects play predefined roles. The execution of rigid prescriptions is not required. Instead, the exercise of discretion is needed in order to achieve the goals defined by the system. Within this conception, competency coincides with “to know how to do”, oriented towards the improvement of the system thanks to the utilization of personal traits consistent with the formal role (ivi: XIX).

According to a second conception, the system emerges from the interactions of individuals through the reiteration of behaviors which, eventually, become institutionalized. We observe ex-post rationality, as it depends on a continuous sense-making activity by the subject. Competency here coincides with “to know how to understand” the contradictions and the counter-intuitive effects of the system, through a reflection on the experience (*ibid.*).

Finally, within a third conception, the social system is understood as a process of actions and decisions, oriented towards expected outcomes and values (*ibid.*). The system is not separated from the subject. Instead, it is conceived as an ongoing process of actions and decisions that each subject continuously nurtures by intervening in its regulation. The premise of absolute rationality is refused: the rationality that actually guides the process is bounded and intentional. Competency, according to this view, is “to know how to evaluate action in relation to the process”, that is, “to know how to evaluate the

instrumentality of actions, the alternative outcomes, the regulation of actions, their relations, their carrying out, and the mutual congruency of all these dimensions of the process" (ivi: XX).

Each conception of organization, besides characterizing in a different way the meaning of competency, naturally leads to different ways to define organizational change (Maggi, 2003). Traditionally, objectivist contributions saw organizational changes as the effort to integrate a certain sub-system to the higher-level system, in relation to the sub-systems' functions (Parsons, 1951). Similarly, organizational change was seen as an attempt to improve the organization's fit to environmental or technological constraints (Lawrence, Lorsch, 1967, Woodward, 1965). While there are some differences, "objectivist approaches treat organizational change in terms of deterministic relations between the structural transformation and the exogenous constraints, both environmental and technological ones", thus "the resulting notion of change is not different from the notion of passive adaptation" (Maggi, 2003: 82).

On the contrary, subjectivist and socio-constructivist approaches conceive change as an erratic, largely unpredictable phenomenon, as it emerges from the interactions of subjects that, through their actions, re-define a continuously changing social system. Contributions from authors such as Weick (1995) describe reality as socially constructed by the relations of actors. Its changes can be interpreted only ex-post, starting from the point of view of the subjects. Another perspective is offered by institutionalist theories (DiMaggio, Powell, 1983). Greenwood e Hinings (1996) show that "institutional theorists declare that regularized organizational behaviors are the product of ideas, values, and beliefs that originate in the institutional context" (Greenwood, Hinings, 1996: 1025) and "to the institutional school [...] the prevailing nature of change is one of constant reproduction and reinforcement of existing modes of thought and organization (i.e., change is convergent change)" (ivi: 1027). Thus, change can be interpreted in terms of the tension towards isomorphism that characterizes organizations.

Finally, according to a conception in which organization is seen as

process of actions and decisions, change is viewed as a heuristic process of transformation guided by intentional, bounded rationality. Such transformation is not guided by adaptive efforts, but by learning processes triggered by reflections on the instrumentality of action in relation to desired goals (Maggi, 2003). Change, according to this conception, is constant and pervasive. The organization changes continuously through a process of pre-ordination of ends and means. Change is intrinsic to the course of action. It is activated and supported through analysis, reflection and re-design on which every choice is based. Change is nurtured by the evaluations of each subject in the organization. The analysis of the process coincides with the design of change, as it represents an attempt to orientate it through better choices, inspired by criteria of consistency, adequateness and search of satisfactory outcomes, and guided by bounded rationality.

In this paper – which finds in Maggi’s reflection its fundamental premise, in relation to both the notion of competency within different conceptions, and to the need to interpret the connection between competencies and organizational change in a way that is not detached from the conception adopted – we introduce and analyze some theories on the issue of competencies in order to reflect on the different nature of change, as proposed by these theories themselves.

Our thesis is that the mainstream method of competencies can be criticized because of its lack of consistency with the change outcomes that it seems to promote. Our goal is twofold. First, through a review of theories and the discussion of a case study, we show that the mainstream method, even though explicitly designed to leverage on the importance of people’s initiative, potential and ability to evaluate, instead it perpetuates the same logic of integration and adaptation proposed by objectivist theories. Then, we elaborate on how it is possible to leverage on competencies, within a logic of process regulation, in order to achieve organizational change.

### **The mainstream and the socio-constructivist conceptions**

There are many different theories treating the notion of competencies in relation to organizational change. It is possible, however, to distinguish those that share an objectivist stance from those sharing a socio-constructivist one.

Objectivist contributions, definitely the most frequent in literature and widely implemented in managerial practices, find in the pioneering work of McClelland (1973), and later in the works of Boyatzis (1982) and Spencer and Spencer (1993), the most common references. In two books, often defined as the “pillars” of the “competency movement”, resulting from multi-year research, these authors propose a vision of competency as a set of individual characteristics that are the foundation of a superior work performance for a certain task. More exactly, competency is defined as a set of motivations and traits that, together with self-image, predicts the behavioral skills of a working subject, casually linked to a superior performance (Spencer, Spencer, 1993). Such a conceptualization allows, according to the authors, to overcome one of the most significant limits of traditional personnel management: “Models based on task or function analysis focus on the job and do not address the person in the job. In doing so, the models include many specific and detailed descriptions of activities, but no mention is made of the characteristics that enable or increase the likelihood of a person’s performing those activities. These models do not establish a causal link between characteristics of people and performance in a job” (Boyatzis, 1982: 8).

The basic idea, which is the real milestone of the “competency method”, is very simple and intuitive. On the one hand, it is necessary for each task to identify explicitly the list of required competencies, casually linked to a good work performance. On the other hand, it is necessary to look for a subject possessing such competencies, in order to find a good match between person and task, and by consequence to improve the performance. The more the individuals’ profile of competency is similar to the one required by the task, the more the person will be adequate for the role, as he will be able to behave effectively. Competencies can be codified, and the same tasks require the same

competencies. This search for a perfect match between required and possessed competencies may support all activities in personnel management: from recruitment (by helping to identify the right person for the role), education and training (by helping to fill competency gaps), incentive and career planning, and so forth. The “novelty” of the approach, according to this literature, is the inductive technique utilized in order to define necessary competencies for each role. The required competencies can be identified by observing the best performers and then by utilizing “competency dictionaries” that establish the causal relations between behaviors and competencies.

Even though the proponents distanced themselves from previous theories, the principles on which this approach is based on are still very consistent to an objectivist conception, which identifies deterministic adaptation laws as the main ideas upon which the organizational reasoning must be based on: “The organization has policies and procedures, which are usually reflected in the internal structure and system of the organization. It also has a direction. This may take form of a mission, purpose or corporate strategy. The organization has physical, financial, and technical resources, which include its assets and its products. It also has a tradition and culture. All of these factors contribute to the internal organizational environment. The organization exists in the context of a larger environment” (Boyatzis, 1982: 12-13). The organizational needs, dictated by external contingencies, are articulated in roles describing and prescribing each subject’s needed contribution: “The role describes a set of activities and responsibilities expected of a person in the [...] job” (ibid.: 17). The design of roles depends deterministically on the organizational context and its specificity: “for the performance of a job to be effective, the definition states that specific result and action taken to obtain them must maintain or be consistent with policies, procedures, and conditions of the organizational environment” (Boyatzis, 1982: 13). Even the subjects required to play the pre-defined roles respond to an adaptation logic: “The internal organizational environment transmits and translates the external environment to its members” (ibid.). Each subject is considered to be competent when he

knows how to behave accordingly to what the formal role requires.

What is supposed to be the major novelty of the competency method – its inductive technique to identify the required competencies and thus to shift the focus from the formal position to the individual – does not seem to be able to really achieve that. The “centrality of the person” within the organization, which seems to be a key aspect of this approach and still today emphasized by most mainstream theories, seems to disappear in the most relevant moment of the organizational process: the organizational design. Design is still demanded to an analyst whose goal is, first, to observe the system and to identify the best performers<sup>1</sup>. Then, the analyst must formalize such link as a general “model” for all the same roles in the organization. The distance between required and possessed competencies shows the pathway for change to each worker and, by consequence, to the entire organization, seen as an aggregation of roles. Not without some contradictions, authors (Spencer and Spencer, 1993) specify that when new roles have to be designed, for example for the implementation of a new strategy (future jobs), it is necessary to abandon the inductive method and to establish, *ex-ante*, the required competencies for the new role. The criteria stays the same: it is necessary to look for a better “match” between role and person. In other words, the fact that required competencies are identified *ex-ante* or *ex-post* does not seem to change the very logic of the competency method, which is based, on the one hand, on the attempt to enrich, articulate and detail the job demands (even in psychological-behavioral terms) and, on other hand, to investigate personal characteristics in order to improve the possibility to integrate and adapt the person to the role. This seems to be the interpretive key of the change opportunity proposed by the mainstream method: to facilitate an effective integration and a better adaptation of the subject to the change designed, activated and governed by the system.

There are several limitations to this approach, basically related to some

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<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the best performers can be understood as “unaware carriers” of that knowledge which illustrates what means (competencies) are adequate for the achievement of desired ends (performance within a role).

internal theoretical contradictions. Indeed, while it is suggested that behavior should not change when competencies are the same in the same role (which is a very fundamental principle), the same authors admit that “it would be inaccurate to say that the person’s competency causes the effective behavior, but that it is a cause” (Boyatzis, 1982: 192). In other words, the possibility to interpret people’s behavior in the relation to personal characteristics is vastly reduced by the variability of a changing context (which contributes to influence observed choices and behaviors), which individual-level psychological theories are not able to grasp.

Socio-constructivist theories are opposed to objectivist ones. The issue of competency is also relevant in relation to organizational changes, but the premises are radically different in terms of how the organization and its relationship with the subject are conceived. The idea of pre-defining positions that prescribe and classify the subjects’ contribution is refused. Individuals do not play any previously designed role. The organizational context is constructed, instead, by the subjects’ interactions that crystallize over time into roles that are then “taken on” by the subjects themselves. Any attempt to formalize task requisites has no meaning. It is not placing the right person in the right place that may improve organizational effectiveness, but the possibility to create a space of personal development in which each subject can share his experiences, his professional practices (in one word, his competencies). That metaphorical place is the community of practice (Brown, Duguid, 1991). These are non-canonical groups formed thanks to a set of lasting relationships between people, activities and the rest of world, in connection and partial overlapping with other communities of practice (Lave, Wenger, 1991). Participation, far from being the “internalization of knowledge coming from the outside” (Zucchermaglio, 1996: 66) or “something static [...] brought from the outside to the inside, [...] constitutes the appropriation process; [...] active participation is the essential practice through which competency is reached while performing a certain activity (ivi: 71). Thus, these are competencies that cannot be codified. They can only be developed through practice. The

community is the sole “repository” of such competency and only the legitimized sharing among the group members can facilitate its socialization. Any attempt to influence from the “outside” the working of such community not only would not be fruitful, but it would even lead to compromise the very existence of the group: “To foster working, learning, and innovating, an organization must [...] legitimize and support the myriad enacting activities perpetrated by its different members. This support cannot be intrusive, or it risks merely bringing potential innovators under the restrictive influence of the existing canonical view (Brown, Duguid, 1991: 53).

Freed from constraints, the community becomes the privileged place where frequent changes happen, as practice creates new problems to solve and proposes new ways to act. In the words of the authors: “Communities-of-practice [...] continue to develop a rich, fluid, noncanonical world view to bridge the gap between their organization's static canonical view and the challenge of changing practice. This process of development is inherently innovative [...] One of the central benefits of these small, self-constituting communities we have been describing is that they evade the ossifying tendencies of large organizations [...] Yet the actual behaviors of communities-of-practice are constantly changing both as newcomers replace old timers and as the demands of practice force the community to revise its relationship to its environment” (ivi: 50). Thus, the organization interested in activating and nurturing change should support the competency development of its members by facilitating their participation to informal groups. On the other side, it should share its outcomes with different communities. Interaction and communication between informal groups may extend change from the single community to the whole organization. In this case, organization is conceived as a “community of communities” (Cepollaro, 2008).

There are some limits and internal contradictions. A first issue concerns the “automatism” which, in the concept of participation, connects the entrance into a community of practice to the development of competencies through the acquisition of practices-in-use. Some authors (Zuccheromaglio, 1996) argued that

in any group there may be “problems about the control of resources related to the conservation of power which create obstacles to the full participation to a community [...]; specifically, in work contexts there may be bad relationship with the bosses, situations of hyper-involvement in work, ineffective time and space related organization of activities, practices that are more similar to slavery than participation. Such conditions might completely bias the possibility of learning through participation” (Zucchermaglio, 1996: 67). The relationship between participation, legitimation and competency development is thus mediated by several factors which make the community of practice not very similar to a “necessarily educational” context. Such a problem appears hard to overcome especially when, according to the socio-constructivist proposal, the possibility to “manage from the outside” the dynamics of the community is denied. Thus, the organization would face a difficult choice. First, it could design with a top-down approach groups in which the development of competency is facilitated and controlled. However, the concept of community of practice would be spoiled, and its potential compromised. Second, it could support unconditionally the development of the community of practice. In this case, the natural dynamics would be saved, but the organization should just “hope” for the enactment of a learning process that, in reality, could not happen or could be different than desired. The direction and the outcome of the organizational change would be completely unpredictable and unmanageable, as it would be solely depending on the subjects.

Another limitation concerns the way to extend the change generated by a community to the organizational level. Even if we conceive the organization as a community of communities, the exchange between communities and the socialization of outcomes remain problematic. Indeed “narratives [...] are embedded in the social system in which they arise and are used. They cannot simply be uprooted and repackaged for circulation without becoming prey to exactly those problems that beset the old abstracted canonical accounts”. (Brown, Duguid, 1991: 54) Also: “Organizational assumptions that given the ‘right’ medium people will exchange information freely overlook the way in

which certain socio-economic groups, organizations, and in particular, corporations, implicitly treat information as a commodity to be hoarded and exchanged [...] Within these communities, news travels fast; community knowledge is readily available to community members. But these communities must function within corporations that treat information as a commodity and that have superior bargaining power in negotiating the terms of exchange. In such unequal conditions, internal communities cannot reasonably be expected to surrender their knowledge freely." (Brown, Duguid, 1991: 54-55).

Within the socio-constructivist conception, competency development can actually be realized. It is necessarily a change promoted by the community of practice through the development of single individuals who may voluntarily choose to share it. In any case, it is a change that cannot be designed. Its nature and direction may only be rationalized *ex-post*.

### **Competencies and change in the organization conceived as process of actions and decisions**

Objectivist and subjectivist theories are not the only ones present in the large debate about competencies and change. In various disciplines there are research works based on radically different analytical categories. Examples can be found in contributions by Maggi within the organizational discipline (Maggi, 2003), by Clot in work psychology (Clot, 1995), and by Terssac in work sociology (Terssac, 1992). These proposals share the opposition to both the objectivist determinism and the subjectivist in-determinism. What is more relevant in these contributions is the organizational process and the subject's actions that orientates it. Terssac defines competency as "a set of knowledge at the individual's disposal and his ability to use them" in the work situation, as the latter is "a social construction, resulting from the combination of social processes that develop in the workplace [...] distant from two methodological dangers. That of determinism of structures over behaviors, and that of indeterminism of organized behaviors based only on the interaction between individuals" (Terssac, 1992).

Maggi, with the Theory of Organizational Action (TAO from now on) 1984/1990; 2003) proposes a reflection on the concept of competency in relation to organization conceived as process of actions and decision guided by bounded, intentional rationality. In his 2001 contribution, competency is defined as “to know how to evaluate the instrumentality of action, the outcome alternatives, the regulation of actions, of their relationships, of their carrying outs, and the reciprocal congruency of all these process dimensions” (Maggi, 2001: XX). Here the unit of analysis for the notion of competency is not the task or the community of practice, but the regulation process.

According to such logic, competency is expressed in the adequacy of choices that orientate the ongoing transformation of each analytical plan of the action process, necessarily characterized by specific contexts, subjects and artifacts that change over time. Competency is not related to behaviors whose adequacy is assessed *ex-ante*<sup>2</sup>. It is the evaluation during the course of action to constitute competency in itself.

It is a competency that, necessarily, cannot be de-contextualized, as it is intrinsic to the organizational process and its regulation, which orders its means and goals, thus “it can only be formed and re-formed within the process. But this does not discount the possibility that it may relate to knowledge that can be gained, to disciplinary know-how that can be cultivated and enriched” (Maggi, 2001: XXII).

Based on such conceptualization, it is possible to propose a few reflections on the relationship between the process of action, competency and organizational change.

Far from prioritizing the subject or the system, competency perfects the relationship between subjectivity and the social process. Competency qualifies, through a contextual evaluation of actions, choices and intervention modalities (always guided by bounded and intentional rationality) of every subject in the organizational process. At every analytical level, values and beliefs meet with experiences and knowledge in order to evaluate means and goals, constraints

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<sup>2</sup> For this reason those behaviors are identified as “competencies”.

and opportunities, which concur to define and modify the choices that constitute the process, which, in that sense, is a direct expression of competencies.

Starting from different premises, TAO proposes a different way in which organization can benefit from competencies.

First of all, the ultimate goal is different. It is not a matter of preserving the functionality of roles or to nurture the generative power of communities of practice, but to perfect the instrumentality of courses of action. Thus, far from promoting a better adaptation to tasks, or instead an unconditioned support to action of the subject already organized in noncanonical groups, the theory of competencies in TAO identifies and analyzes the coherence between analytical plans of the organizational action.

Also, the fundamental logic appears to be very different. Even in TAO the starting point is the analysis and the understanding of choices and actions that can lead to desired outcomes. However, such an effort is not just about the investigation of behaviors deterministically induced by predefined and heteronomous rules, but it is about the analysis of its regulation: "Within the set of actions intentionally oriented towards a desired outcome which constitutes the work process, these actions are very variable, characterized in different ways in each situation. What helps understanding their presence in the process, and their reciprocal relations towards the outcome, is not the specificity of these actions, but the regulation that orders them within the unity of the process, which gives them a sense in relation to the desired outcome" (Maggi, 2003: 141).

At the same time, such analytical effort nurtures the formation of competencies, not because it leads to the identification and formalization of long lists of desired behaviors. Instead, it is the analysis and the evaluation of the process in itself and its regulation, the reflection on expected outcomes and the different possibilities of action, which constitutes the actual genetic moment in the formation of competency and nurtures its development.

Finally, even the opportunities to facilitate the development of competencies are quite different. Such opportunities are neither about the

transmission of skills deemed to be indispensable and required by the role, nor about the understanding of the specific dynamics and relationships characterizing a certain part of the social reality. Instead, they refer to the attempt to improve the analysis and the evaluation of the organizational process' regulation.

More specifically, the goal is to support the subjects in their analysis and evaluation at different analytical levels: "the organizational process [...] does not resolve itself in government decisions and structures. The framework of uncertainty reasons in the relationship between action and decision plans concerns every level of the process" (Maggi, 1984/1990: 98).

Every subject, certainly in spaces of action differently regulated, has responsibilities and opportunities for innovation and regulation. Thus, he will contribute with his competency to orientate the organizational process in which he operates. The learning process of both technical and institutional knowledge (which informs the choices of means and goals), and organizational and methodological knowledge, may facilitate the description and the interpretation of the process, thereby favoring the evaluation of possible alternative courses of action (Maggi, 1984/1990; 2003; Albano, 2010). The organization can benefit from moments of participation<sup>3</sup> to the analysis and the evaluation of action processes. On the one hand, this helps the development of competency of every single subject who takes part to such activity. On the other hand, it increases the opportunity to interpret the process itself.

Indeed, because of the autonomous and heteronomous, pre-ordered and contextual nature of rules in every organizational process (Maggi, 2003), the effort of description and analysis is completed through the contribution that each subject, at different levels, may offer. Through his initiative and his autonomous choices, he continuously changes the process regulation through actions and decisions that may improve the description of the process itself,

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<sup>3</sup> Both the identification of the process for the analysis and the interpretation, and the identification of subjects required to carry out that activity depend on the goals of the investigation.

enrich its interpretation and improve its adequacy to the future.

Consistently with the TAO premises, a participated regulation embodies the “competency criteria” and identifies the fundamental process in which the development of competencies may fully unfold.

This is a supporting process that may be activated and cultivated through systematic moments of training, analysis and discussion about the rules of the organizational process and their coherence and adequacy in relation to the expected outcomes.

The opportunities for organizational change are quite obvious. The reflection on the reciprocal congruency of the analytical components of the organization, and the evaluation of the effects of choices, imply a comparison between alternative courses of action. In this sense, a sort of “design” activity can be identified. Its outcome is the hypothesis of a new process of action including new goals and new means, structured in a different way. The analysis of regulation and the reflection on the courses of action imply the search for adequacy conditions and the evaluation of possible changes. Competencies development and utilization trigger organizational change, which in turn will require new interpretive and evaluative efforts, thus nurturing the development of new competencies in an uninterrupted process.

### **A case study**

In order to illustrate the interpretive proposal, in this paragraph we will describe a case study concerning a large multinational enterprise operating in the mechanical sector. The company utilizes rigorously the orthodox method of competencies as described in the mainstream literature (Spencer, Spencer, 1993). More specifically:

- the company identified each position through a formal description of goals, responsibilities, expectations, activities, etc.;
- for each position the required competencies have been codified. Codification method, mapping, level articulation, relation to behavioral indicators, evaluation, training and maintenance in the dictionary are consistent to the ones

proposed in the mainstream method (Spencer, Spencer, 1993);

- the prevailing logic for utilization of competencies, in personnel management, is put into practice through a constant search of a match between necessary competencies for the position and the competencies possessed by the subject.

The analysis of the observed system (performed through company documents, intranet documents, in-depth interviews to supervisors and factory managers) allowed to identify and describe the main characteristics and the main limitations of the objectivist approach to competencies and, at the same time, to emphasize the opportunities that a different conception of competency, within a theoretical framework in which the organization is seen as organizational action, may offer even in relation to change processes.

#### *Foundry department*

Neri is responsible of the Foundry department. He is also considered by the company as one of the best supervisors, not just because he's able to obtain excellent results, but also because he possesses the required competencies for his role, codified through one of the most utilized and well-known dictionaries in the managerial literature on competencies<sup>4</sup>. Among these we find "Group Leadership", a competency that, as confirmed by the factory manager, "it is very developed by Neri, and probably constitutes one of the main reasons of his success in managing the department"<sup>5</sup> (Verdi, Factory Manager).

The Foundry is a very difficult department, where the early phases of the entire production cycle of the factory are performed. Neri and his workers feel the responsibility to be at the beginning of the production cycle, as they are aware that their mistakes have negative effects on the subsequent production phases. The fact that they produce components for heaters requires a lot of attention because the consequences of production defects could be very serious.

The Foundry is highly automated. Work is coordinated through rigid production plans and the schedule depends on the machines: "In this

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<sup>4</sup> The dictionary adopted by the company is the one proposed by Spencer and Spencer, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Neri's competency is assessed according to the A6 level of the scale utilized by the company.

department you need to understand the machine process. [...] You have to make the machine work at its best [...] Production times are very tight, shifts are tight, cycle times are tight, everything is pushed to the limit. The production speed is exasperated, so a new person will always create some slowdowns, which is an efficiency that has to be compensated by an increased effort of the supervisor. There are many difficulties [...] The company has a technical service office which evaluated the required time to produce each piece. Every machine has a cycle time of a certain number of seconds and we know that the machine must produce 6000 pieces per day, per 12 machines. This is a constraint for the workers. They work for eight hours but they are actually evaluated on the machine numbers. It's obvious that if the machine doesn't work properly, they pay the consequences. It's like a vicious cycle, the evaluation of how many pieces have to be made is performed through a study of the machine time [...] I have some production reports that allow me to understand how the machine worked better than how I can understand how the person worked [...] If the company wants 50,000 pieces per day then that's what I have to make. The company doesn't care whether here I have five women and six men or 12 men or 12 women etc. They just care that I make 50,000 pieces and I have to do anything in order to create the conditions for them to be able to make 50,000 pieces, the tools and everything in the department has to be set in order to make 50,000 pieces" (Neri).

Only the respect of production programs allows the department to keep its efficiency level, because any deviation implies a slowdown of production. All Neri's efforts are aimed at avoiding deviations from the program by minimizing the interruption times in the functioning of the machines. He admits that an even superior level of automation would be desirable because of the nature of tasks. These are highly repetitive and tiring, especially because they are timed in such a strict way. The technology used in the department does not allow otherwise. The space for personal initiative is minimum: "The processes are standardized, advises coming from the workers are very few because of the fatigue in the department. This is the most negative aspect of my

department [...] Once someone told me: 'don't ask me to do a minute of extra work, don't ask me anything more than what I do'. Also the human relationship is at a very low level, not only because of the fast pace of work that we cannot avoid, but also because of the physical environment in the department. The big machines are very noisy and that makes interacting very difficult" (Neri).

The kind of tasks and environment in the department contributed to spread a perception of work as fatigue, as effort, as constraint, and this is obvious in the behaviors of many workers: "Here the production system became overwhelming, and even people are standardized". Respecting the rules is the main concern of the Foundry personnel: "The effectiveness of the worker depends on his compliance to the rules [...] For the workers, to make a valve or a pot is the same thing, but they need to know what to make. This is what they are mostly concerned, they want to have sure rules, as it is a sure thing that their machine closes and opens for 52 seconds. They adjust their work according to my instructions. For them it is important to know that when they arrive here they need to check certain machines. If they arrive and they don't know what to check, then for them is a bad day already [...] To ask them to do something for their workplace is not conceivable, they have a biased vision of the boss, he's the one who is supposed to improve things, and they are right because that's what a boss should also do, to improve the workplace as much as possible [...] If you ask a worker his opinion about a certain job, well ... don't! You are the boss and you have to take care of it. But, if you tell him that a certain job has to be finished in 52 seconds, he will make it so [...] You need to show resolve, that's what they expect. They always want quick and short answers, together with [...] an explanation that has to be clear and understandable" (Neri).

Often, the best strategy is to provide a good example: "in the Foundry, if the worker is able to do 100, the supervisor must at least do 150 otherwise is not providing a good example. You need to be calm and cool, you have to have clear ideas and answers, always and right away, because everybody expect that no matter what the problem is it will be solved by the boss. That's why I never

go home cleaner than the others. When I arrive in the morning I'm clean but at night when I go home I'm the dirtiest of them all. In the morning I arrive before everybody else, at night I am the last one to go home and I try to do whatever they do" (Neri).

Neri's behavior, in the model adopted by the company, is consistent with the psychological-individual approach. It reflects the competency "Group Leadership", thus it should derive from his personal attitude to assume the leadership of the group. In other words, it should be a direct consequence of his desire to guide and lead others, a sort of disposition to impose himself as leader (Spencer, Spencer, 1993).

Instead, if his choices are interpreted as an effort to intervene in a regulation process, his evaluations become relevant in relation to constraints and opportunities, means and goals characterizing his department.

In the department there are heterogeneous tasks arranged in sequence. The prevalence form of coordination is the program. Many subjects perform their tasks through large automated machines. We interpret this work situation through the theoretical contribution of Maggi: "Together with the task coordination process there is also the people coordination process [...] In the social structuration process, like in any coordination process, one can identify government activities and regulation activities. Government is ensured by the information about the modalities and times of carrying out tasks, their relationships and the relationships between the subjects. Regulation is ensured by the information about the verification and correction of task execution, and the relations between the subjects. [...] It appears evident that always, unavoidably, the activity of subjects may diverge from both the task coordination rules and the social structuration rules [...] These deviations are not only ascribable to the will to oppose to the organization, but are more generally related to the complexity of human behaviors and attitudes. In the attempt to reduce such deviations, in case it is assumed that tasks are structured adequately for the achievement of the outcome, the social structure must ensure that all information needed for the correct execution and for the involvement of

the subjects is available" (Maggi, 1984/1990: 61).

Thus, we can explain Neri's behavior. He is aware that the subjective propensity to cooperate may be compromised by the fatigue that takes a daily toll on the motivation of each worker, because of the repetitive nature of tasks, the physical strain, the constraining times and the rigid procedures. His presence in the department, his way to provide a good example, rather than being a form of assertiveness and authoritativeness, seem related to his attempt to motivate his collaborators by sharing the fatigue. He imagines that working just like a normal worker may function as a stimulus and as an incentive for all personnel.

Rather than the expression of a personal feature, a desire to affirm his own leadership, Neri's behavior seems to be the outcome of coordination choices about people, adequate to the strict constraints that the task structuration and specific technological choices contribute to create: "The most significant constraints of the task structure over the social structure do not derive from the division choices, which are reversible, but from the impossibility to divide. The processes that are not divisible, that can be performed only with associated tasks, the processes that cannot be stopped in time, the tasks that are cognitively complex, greatly reduce the people's coordination alternatives" (ivi: 68).

Also, since the Foundry is located at the beginning of the production process, its activity is not conditioned by the action of other departments. So, the supply of raw materials does not seem to constitute a source of uncertainty. Thus, coordination by program represents an adequate coordination choice. Once tasks, people and means are structured in a way that is consistent with the achievement of goals, it is not necessary to intervene often to change that order.

With specific reference to the social structure, the variability conditions of government and regulation information refer to the way such information vary according to species (homogeneity - heterogeneity) and time (stability - instability). "It is confirmed for the social structure the typology of coordination solutions, according to standardized rules, program and mutual adjustment.

The more uniform information and unchanged times are sufficient, the more the people coordination problem can be solved with homogeneous and repetitive rules [...] Instead, the more diverse information are necessary (in terms of source, production and transmission modality), even with stability, or when there is instability, even for the same information, the more people coordination must be ensured by a program, with articulation of rules and feedbacks. Finally, when continuously changing information are necessary, people coordination must proceed through mutual adjustments, which are, at the same time, privileged moments of production and transmission of new information" (Maggi, 1984/1990: 67-68).

Thanks to a constant reflection on the characteristics of his department, Neri is convinced that times, modalities and places for the carrying out of tasks can be steadily defined and communicated, because variability of both time and species is low. For this reason, he notices that it is not necessary to be ready to intervene quickly through the communication of new rules, but only to transmit clearly the rules already defined. And that's what he does, even through his personal example, which certainly represents a reinforcement, although an informal one, of the department's rules. Neri's behavior does not represent the outcome of an improvised choice, but the result of a number of subjective evaluations matured during a long experience in the Foundry, during which he had a chance to reflect on the difficult conditions of the department and to experiment the most adequate solutions in relation to the means, the goals and the constraints that such a difficult environment implied.

In other words, Neri's story seems to offer an excellent example of competency that coincides with the "to know how to evaluate", within an organizational action oriented towards the regulation of the work process in a context of bounded and intentional rationality. And that's exactly the intentionality referred to the regulation processes that emerges very clearly in his story. On the contrary, it doesn't seem possible to argue that Neri's competency in the management of his collaborators is connected to subjective attitudes, as predicted by objectivist theories.

We shall see, in the next paragraph, the case of a colleague of Neri whom, in another department, with very different features, is able to obtain excellent results even though his behavior, related to the same “competency” (as codified by the company), is radically different.

*Department of Chemical-physical treatments*

In the same company, Rossi is responsible of the department of Chemical-physical treatments. He is also considered one of the best performers in his role, and “he developed the ‘Group Leadership’ competency in a very strong way, which is a fundamental premise in order to be a good boss and get excellent results in such a department”<sup>6</sup> (Verdi, Factory Manager). In this department the die-casts are washed, degreased and freed from residuals. In the department there are many thermal washers, other sophisticated machines mostly located in independent work islands and also manual machines for some operation on smaller pieces, often operated for external clients. Thus, in the department arrive not only pieces that are internally produced, but also pieces provided by external companies that demand specific operations on their own products. This creates a work organization that is particularly complex and hard to program: “I also have two customers that bring me valves. Here, when the programming office gives me an order, they do it in relation to urgent codes. Also, since other companies provide the materials to work on, priorities change continuously [...]. You cannot give me a plan and tell me: ‘so, you have these codes to work on in this quantity with this deadline’. This is not the way it works here. There are so many jobs to fit together depending on needs, so it’s not very simple” (Rossi).

Rossi relies on two programming offices. An internal one gives him on a daily or weekly basis the priorities in relation to the production of other departments. Another programming office is located at the headquarter, and its task is to schedule the activity of particular departments such as Rossi’s in relation to operations for external customers. While the two offices try to

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<sup>6</sup> The company assessed Rossi’s “Group Leadership” competency according to the A5 level.

coordinate with each other, this does not always happen in real time. Also, very often, the customers find it difficult to program their own needs, and this unavoidably has consequences on Rossi's work: "The customer might bring the material at 5:30 in the evening or at 7:00 in the morning etc. Every morning I find more material. That's why, besides respecting the urgencies, you have to look around and see what has to be done. Then I talk with the programming office and I start working the codes that need to be worked" (Rossi).

Re-programming the priorities is part of Rossi's job, and that often precedes the analysis of the programming offices: "Sometimes I find material that not even the programming office expected and I have no information about it. At that point I have to ask, I have to take the initiative [...] Here every day I may find a surprise. Information may be missing or insufficient. Sometimes the material comes first, and then a phone call with the request: 'when can you do it?' [...] Often, I realize what I have to do only when they arrive, they give me the material and the paperwork. In that case I have to talk to the programming office and see if they have some urgencies" (Rossi).

Just to simply respect the order of priorities, or to privilege systematically those of one office instead of the other, would generate very bad results for Rossi, as he is assessed at the end of the year not just in relation to the respect of deadlines, but also in relation to the maximization of the machines' working time. However, the absence of a warehouse reduces the possibility to keep the machines working in any case. For this reason Rossi is daily committed to mediate between different production needs, often trying to find a compromise between the indications of the various programming offices to which he has to respond ("there are at least three offices that try to program my job" - Rossi) and the specific priorities of the department. This is clearly emphasized by Rossi: "The programming office has no idea about what I can do. I am the one that tells them what I can do over a certain period of time [...] I decide the timing. I know the timing so I can make an estimate of what I can do in two hours [...] Sometimes, in order to face unpredictable events, I need to slow down certain codes, or I need to make a higher estimate of the working

times than what it would be really necessary. Often the programming office ignores all the things that may happen in the department, and when they communicate their priorities they don't take into account all that. That's why it is necessary for a supervisor to consider in his work plans times that are longer than necessary. Then, if we finish beforehand, we can always use the rest of the time to finish other jobs. And then there's always the work on small pieces, I try to do that when it's more convenient for the department, now and then. The programming office does not always know the real condition of the department, and their priorities not always improve the efficiency of the department, they don't always allow me to maximize the working time of the machines" (Rossi).

Through his approach Rossi has been able to obtain excellent results, and much of the credit goes to his collaborators. He admits that the availability and cooperative attitude of his workers is indispensable in order to get those results. Everything depends on the trust relationship that he built over time with his workers: "I really try to take care of my relationship with them, and I care because that's really useful. Normally, I try to make everybody happy if they need a permit or if they have a problem. Later, when I'm in trouble, it makes me happy to see that they ask me if I need help [...] Two weeks ago, for example, a girl noticed that I had a problem with a machine and that I was falling behind with the production. We were in the middle of the week, so I said to myself that I was going to recuperate later. After a couple of hours the girl told me: 'since you always helped me when I needed it, if you need me all you need to do is call me' [...] It happened with other people as well, another one spontaneously walks around the department to see if I need help. He tells me: 'look, if you need me this Saturday I'm happy to come'. This is gratifying for me you know, if you treat well the workers, with respect, that actually creates a group. [...] You don't have to impose yourself or introduce yourself as an authoritative figure. That doesn't help here. [...] If I did that, they would probably stop being so cooperative [...] Yesterday the robots were not working anymore. So I gathered 2 people to work on the manual island. I had one, so I had to find

another person that could help me from another department [...] My way of dealing with people brings me results. A supervisor does not only have to be good at his job, he has to understand a little bit of everything. You are good not just because you know how to fix a machine or because you work hard, you need to know how to behave, how to interact with people” (Rossi).

Rossi is convinced that listening to people and filling their needs, taking care of his departments’ personnel, is essential for his success. For this reason he based his relationship with his collaborators on understanding and respect of mutual needs. In particular, communication is considered a fundamental aspect of his activity because it allows to bring to the surface everybody’s needs. His concern for this aspect is such that Rossi also uses informal methods in order to support, facilitate and nurture the interactions with his collaborators: “I gave to the people of my department my private phone number, and I told them ‘if you have any problem when I’m home just call me’. Sure, they know that this doesn’t have to be a habit and they call me only when it’s necessary. But I like to be informed when something happens to the machines, I want to be current with everything that happens here [...] I always try to have an open dialogue with my collaborators” (Rossi).

Rossi’s behavior, in the mainstream logic about competency management, is strongly related to what, in the dictionary that Spencer and Spencer proposed (1993), is indicated as “Group Leadership”. Indeed, he frequently affirmed his attention for his collaborators, emphasizing that in such a department is important to obtain the resources and information that the group needs and, at the same time, to satisfy the practical needs of the group<sup>7</sup>. However, a reference to a process dimension of human action and to a conception of organization as a regulation process offers the opportunity to interpret differently Rossi’s actions.

The nature of the activity in this department and the kind of technology allow Rossi to organize his job in a very flexible way. There are many kinds of production and they vary in terms of kinds of pieces. Consequently, they can be

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<sup>7</sup> These are all behaviors consistent with the A5 level of such competency.

carried out in parallel and at the same time, independently from each other. The fact that he doesn't have to respect a specific sequence of operations, thanks to the presence of the autonomous work islands, provides Rossi with a certain freedom in imagining a variety of alternatives to execute tasks, but a crucial condition is to be able to fully involve the personnel of his department. Thus, the cooperative attitude of his collaborators seems to be the most significant constraint in relation to the possible ways to organize work in his department: "Social structure influences tasks structure both because different tasks can be attributed to different people, even though the same person could execute them, and because separable tasks can be attributed conjointly to two or more people. In such cases the choices of people coordination influence the accumulations and the associations of tasks" (Maggi, 1984/1990: 68).

Certainly Rossi could choose to increase the workforce in the department. But, besides implying higher costs, that would systematically leave several people unproductive as there would not be enough tasks to perform. So the only way that he deems adequate is to ask his collaborators to work extra hours. This is, according to Rossi, the most flexible "tool" because it allows to use extra hours only when necessary and, most of all, in a non-systematic way (which is absolutely crucial in a department like this). However, Rossi cannot oblige his personnel to stay over time. He has to rely on their cooperative attitude: "In 10 years of work here I've always needed availability, flexibility, changes of shifts etc. I need to look for personnel for urgencies and much more. I have had the need to recuperate, to use Saturday's etc. I always had last-minute codes and I have always had the need for cooperative people. I have no problem with the workers with whom I have a good relationship, and they give you something back" (Rossi).

The concern that Rossi shows in satisfying as much as possible the needs of the group, the flexibility with which he satisfies the requests of his personnel by giving permits etc., more than just the expression of a certain form of leadership or specific personality traits (as proposed by the objectivist theory) appears as the outcome of a negotiation process aimed at ensuring the

cooperation of each one while pursuing the goals. Rossi knows his job very well, he is very aware of the goals that he can pursue and he reflected very well on how to overcome the limitations and, at the same time, how to make use of the daily opportunities in his activity. He knows very well that, because of the characteristics of his department, personnel cooperation represents one of the best opportunities to achieve excellent results. He does not believe that this is the only way, or that this is a universally valid strategy that can be exported elsewhere ("Here for now it works, maybe in other places things go differently, and maybe one day things will change here as well" - Rossi). He just simply evaluated his way to intervene in the social structure of this specific department as a possible alternative among others, a choice consistent with the goals and means at his disposal, with the constraints and the opportunities that himself, through a continuous effort of reflection on the organizational dimensions of his department, was able to grasp.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

Both the theoretical reflections and the concrete examples provided here raise some questions about the concept of competency and on the way this can be utilized in HRM practices. From the case study it seems to emerge the idea that codifying and measuring the competencies at work by relying on a predefined inventory of behavioral indicators and causal links to motivations, traits, abilities, knowledge and other personal features, may become problematic. In particular, even though mainstream theories are based on the assumption that "Motive, trait and self-concept competencies predict skill behavior actions, which in turn predict job performance outcomes" (Spencer, Spencer, 1993: 12), our case study shows that the link between these elements is not deterministic at all. The idea of being able to explain and contain (and, consequently, to predetermine) the possible universe of human behaviors, by identifying an inventory of "motivations" from which they derive, shows limitations that are hard to overcome because of the nature of human rationality, which is bounded and intentional (Simon, 1947; March, 1994) and

the process nature of human action (Weber, 1922; Thompson, 1967; Giddens, 1984; Maggi, 2003). Each action of the performers certainly depends on some competency, but this competency seems to be more related to an effort of analysis and understanding of the specific context of action and its regulation, rather than to stable preferences, static schemes of action or universally valid and effective behavioral models.

Maggi (2003) emphasized the relevance of reflection on work processes. From that reflection, understanding, learning effort, within a dynamic context, seem to derive the actions (and the performance) of the observed best performers. Each of them showed to be committed to a continuous effort of construction and interpretation of his own work process, of a dynamic production of meaning, of a choice making and creation of possible futures. These are neither predictable in advance, nor they can be formalized completely or contained through an inventory of predefined action alternatives, no matter how rich and articulated it may be.

Our case study clearly shows that actions and decisions ascribable (according to the dictionary used) to contiguous levels of the same "competency" (as defined by the dictionary), have been the outcome of action strategies almost radically different, neither dictated by similar personality traits, nor by similar subjective dispositions or by equivalent motivations.

The behavior of two supervisors, both considered as best performers by the company, does not seem to be described by the same competency as defined and formalized in the dictionary, simply by using the logic of different levels. These levels prescribe changes in the required actions and identify an actual pathway of personal development ("To develop a certain competency means to acquire it according to a higher level in the scale and to conform one's behavior to the one described by the new and higher level" - Verdi, Factory Manager).

In relation to organizational change, the logic of levels clearly shows the logic of the mainstream proposal. For each role are emphasized the phases of a development pathway already designed and laid out. Its adequacy to the future - through the exact predetermination of behaviors that at different levels each

competency requires – is assumed to be evaluated *ex-ante* independently from the specific context and most of all from the evaluation of the subject involved in the process of action.

Despite the discourse that today connects the competency method to organizational change through the emphasis in individual contribution and initiative, not disconnected from an effort of analysis, evaluation and creation of more effective alternatives of action, the observed system shows a very different reality. The dictionary of competencies defines exactly the individual contributions, and the articulation in levels outlines very precisely the expected (prescribed) transformations over time. The discrete sum of these changes (consistently with the objectivist principles) will compose the programmed organizational change.

As significant objectivist contributions clarify, the method of competencies “acknowledges the criticality of role interpretation, and it tries to influence it by loudly signaling the behavioral ‘themes’ that are in alignment with the organization’s strategy, and that the organization would like to see reflected in the incumbent’s approach to the role” (Sanchez, Levine, 2009: 56). Thus, besides the current rhetoric, the way the competency method is supposed to support organizational change is easily revealed: it aims at reinforcing processes of integration and adaptation to pre-designed changes.

However, from our empirical research, it seems to emerge that if one chooses to follow that logic, the risk is to induce workers to change their behavior according to predefined standards that are not adequate to the context and not actually instrumental to the desired outcomes. Rossi’s development of the competency “Group Leadership” at a higher level, in other words the adoption of behaviors similar to those of Neri, would have negative effects as they would not allow him to implement a winning strategy in his department, one for which he is considered a best performer by the company.

We believe that overcoming some significant limitations of the mainstream theory of competency in relation to organizational change would require a re-conceptualization of the notions of competency and organization.

The supervisors are continuously committed to a reflection effort about the rules of their departments, about the goals and the means at their disposal. Through their analysis they promoted adequate solutions, also by evaluating the possible outcomes of alternative choices. By their own initiatives, the supervisors tried to reflect on their work regulation, intervening accordingly in relation not only to prescribed and heteronomous rules, but also to personal preferences and autonomous rules, defined in the course of action. Supporting such a reflection might become the “core” of a new approach to competency that may benefit the organization.

It is necessary to abandon the logic of *ex-ante* codification and formalization of behaviors. It is important to recognize that each person within the organization, if properly informed by reflections about the analysis of regulation, continuously utilizes his own resources and makes choices, thus contributing to the process. It is also necessary to recognize that each person autonomously and creatively appropriates his own work and orientates it according to his own experience, his own reflections, his own evaluations of adequacy in relation to the context. At the foundation of this line of reasoning there is an effort to read, analyze and understand the process’ regulation, from which the opportunities to intervene and change are derived. This contributes to develop competencies and the process of organizational change.

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