The 'sellable semblance': Employability in the context of mental-illness[*]

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abstract

Embedded within the concept of employability is the constant demand to become more 'employable' and to live up to an ideal 'sellable self', with no 'faults', 'weaknesses' or 'limitations'. In order to maintain employability and stay in employment, individuals may be constrained to conceal information that does not correspond to this sellable self. Examining the costs of living up to the 'semblance' of the sellable self is particularly important in relation to mental health; this is even more so in light of the paucity of critical studies in this context. This paper examines issues of mental health and employability as they are reflected upon through the experiences of people with mental health conditions. Looking at the employment experiences of these individuals offers the potential to illuminate the struggles of all, or most of us, in our endeavours to secure employment and retain employability.

Introduction

Employability is a broad concept and intersects with a range of life aspects. Amongst others, these may include the political, social, citizenship, education, skills, behaviour and lifestyle. A significant feature embedded within the notion of employability is the expectation to continuously become 'more' employable (Costea et al., 2012: 33; Cremin, 2010). The ongoing journey of improving one's employability may be related to a number of aspects such gaining certain skills, experiences and qualifications. The notion of employability, however, is also

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associated with the expectation to retain a 'sellable self' (Fogde, 2007, 2011). The sellable self is associated with the constant expectation to perform, manage-impression, self-promote and 'sell' oneself as an attractive product: with no 'faults', 'weaknesses' or 'limitations', always ready to be, and do 'more' (Costea et al., 2012). This expectation may be captured as something that is not directly connected to the ability to do the job, but nonetheless has implications for one's employability, both during the processes of job-seeking and once employment has been gained.

To maintain one's employability individuals are expected to live up to the notion of the sellable self. However, this can be extremely constraining or in some cases even not possible because some personal traits, characteristics, conditions or worldviews may clash with the meanings embedded within this notion. At the same time employability, being the condition for employment (Cremin, 2010), still needs to be maintained. As such, those who do not live up to the sellable self may be able to retain their employability by demonstrating a 'semblance' of the sellable self, which I will refer to as the 'sellable semblance'. Demonstrating the sellable semblance may thus be associated with concealing or denying what the employer may consider a limitation.

Concealing any information that may jeopardize the sellable semblance may help to retain employability. However, this practice also has broad implications, which may restrict the way in which individuals behave, feel and act at work. This, in turn, can lead to a struggle for many in their attempt to retain their employability and employment, which may be intensified for those living with health conditions, most of which are invisible. It is concealing a mental health condition (MHC) at work that this paper will focus on.

In order to maintain a sellable semblance, many individuals with health conditions feel complied to conceal their illness from their employer. Although concealment may have significant health implications for these individuals, the employment insecurities and the unstable working conditions, which characterize many contemporary work organizations (Sennett, 2006), may restrain many of those with a health condition to conceal it at work (Clair et al., 2005). The stigma and discrimination attached to mental health issues at work (Rosenheck et al., 2006; Lloyd, 2010), as well as the increased prevalence of mental illness worldwide (Üstün, 1999; WHO, 2003, WHO, 2007) intensify the importance of studying employability in this context.

The struggle of individuals with MHCs at work indicates how these individuals are often cyclically trapped into low-paid and/or poor quality working conditions with few opportunities for career development (Marmot Review, 2010). Thus it

may not be surprising that in order to be able to secure employment many end up concealing their MHCs (Braunstein, 2000; Markowitz, 1998). Although these individuals may experience an intensified struggle in employment (Corrigan and Matthews, 2003), there are insufficient studies that examine the employment experiences of these individuals. Studying the experiences of these individuals can illuminate an understudied area in a way that also reflects issues concerning the broader working population. Thus, this examination offers a potential chance to illustrate widespread issues for all, or most of us, in our attempts to retain employability.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. An overview of the employability discourse and its interrelation to the context of mental health and illness at work will be presented, followed by the empirical material on the case of Martin. A brief concluding discussion will consolidate on the previous parts of the paper. This will consider the general implications of the employability discourse as it relates to society at large, and the requirements to constantly endeavour to secure employment and meaning through work.

The employability discourse and the semblance of the sellable self

 The endless expectation to become 'more' employable (Costea et al., 2012) and the personal responsibility to continuously perform in a highly competitive market (Cremin, 2010); to gain, maintain and obtain employment and gain 'skills and the qualifications that will make someone want to employ one' (Oxford dictionary, 2011), could be captured as one of the core concerns within the notion of employability. The focus on the responsibility of the individual, not the state to determine the course of their own employment (Peck and Theodore, 2000; Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004), together with the expectation to continuously be engaged with bridging the gap with other competitors suggests that being employable is a continuous project: both a condition for gaining employment (Cremin, 2010) and for thriving in work. This notion incorporates the spheres of politics, citizenship, inclusion, education and lifestyle. It is often a catchphrase for policymakers (Philpott, 1999) and is also considered to be the New Labour workfare project (Jessop, 1994), even though labour market policies focusing on employability started before the New Labour government (Levitas, 2005; Peck and Theodore, 2000) and have continued after it.

However, whilst presented as aiming to reduce social inequality, counter discrimination, tackle unemployment and stimulate individuals to take part in the workforce (Levitas, 2005), employability is still a problematic concern for many in their attempts to retain employment. Nonetheless, this notion bears

within it significant meanings for those who are seeking work or are in employment. As such it is presented to them as a guide or a strategy (Cremin, 2010) to manoeuvre through employment insecurities (Sennett, 2006) and work ambiguities (cf. Gregg, 2011), which characterize many workplaces today.

One aspect embedded within employability is the expectation to be sellable. At the same time individuals are encouraged to be open, flexible and accountable to keep on learning, to have the social and personal abilities to communicate well, 'team work' and 'network' (Salomonsson, 2005). They are expected to perform their employability in a variety of other ways – all related to the constant commitment to improve and 'work on' their employability (Costea at al., 2012; Thrill, 2002).

While employability relates to engaging with the ambition, initiative, social discipline and ongoing commitment to constantly become more employable by gaining more skills and relevant experiences, they are also expected to maintain a sellable self (Fogde, 2011): a performative subject-position (Thrift, 2002). This subject-position may be based on a multifaceted learning process and ongoing introspective reflexivity: and can be expressed through mediums such as self-presentation; communication (Thunqvist, 2003, 2006); impression management and self-confidence. It is also related to acting out a character to brand oneself and self-promote (Salomonsoon, 2005: 120; Krejsler, 2007), display the appropriate practical awareness or attitude, fine codes and behaviours (Sharone, 2007) as well as self-selling and marketing not only one's skills or labour, but also oneself as a product (Fogde, 2007).

The expectation to maintain a sellable self suggests that employability relates not only to having the required skills and education, but also to certain behaviours, traits and attitudes expected by prospective employers. To be employable, one thus needs to be able to: '... create, to stage manage, not only one's own biography but the bonds and networks surrounding... constantly adapting to the conditions of the labour market, the education system, the welfare state...' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 4). This expectation to retain a sellable self then suggests that although the employability discourse engages with multi-layered sets of meanings from which individuals craft a notion of self, this, in turn, puts constraints on them, making them behave and think in a certain way, which may hinder their ability to be open at work.

A number of studies highlight the struggle to live up to the employability discourse and the sellable self. Fogde (2007, 2008) highlights the experiences of graduate job seekers who struggle to face the task of self-marketing and impression management. Her study illustrates how in order to maintain this a

sellable self, the study participants felt constrained to conceal information or 'work on' (when possible) certain traits such as shyness and low self-confidence which appeared to clash with the sellable self (Fogde, 2009: 41; Fogde 2011: 73) they were expected to take on. Similarly, Grey's (1994) study illuminates the struggle of employees to continuously engage with 'impression-management'. Although Grey (1994) does not refer directly to the notion of employability, his study illustrates the tensions that result from the requirement to demonstrate one's self as sellable at numerous settings throughout one's working life, such as the recruitment process, professional examination, rating and appraisal, assessment of performance and in social contexts.

Overall, it is suggested from the literature that there could be a number of characteristics, traits or information that may not fit into the ideal of the sellable self. Amongst others, these can include traits such as 'shyness' (Fogde, 2007), long-term illness (Charmaz, 1991), age (Fineman, 2011), race (Miles, 1989), religion (Dawkins, 2003), sexuality (Ward and Witstanley, 2003, 2005), disabilities (Holmqvist, 2008; Riessman, 2003), or any performance-related issue (Grey, 1994). As such, presenting certain information or traits that do not fit into the sellable self can be broad and varied and could have many implications for one's employability and thus the decision as for what to reveal about oneself at work can become crucial (Sharone, 2007).

Not revealing information about oneself in employment settings can help to maintain employability by demonstrating a semblance of the sellable self or, in other words, a sellable semblance. However, this can also be constraining, leading to a struggle over hiding characteristics of oneself when at work, and potentially associated with a sense of pretence (Sharone, 2007). Concealing can also be related to a difficulty to build close relationships with colleagues, be open at work, and even the ability to do the work itself. In the context of health conditions, not revealing information about one's illness at work can have more intensified implications. The dilemma of revealing or concealing in this context is extremely important for one's employability and can have an impact on both health situations and employment circumstances (Beatty and Kirby, 2006).

For people with an ongoing health condition, the protection of equality legislation could be gained only by declaring their condition to their employer. At the same time, this declaration could jeopardize one's employability and their ability to demonstrate a sellable self. Thus, many of those with invisible health conditions may choose not to reveal it at work (Clair et al. 2005; Beatty and Kirby, 2006), maintaining a sellable semblance. Not revealing, however, may also be consuming. It may involve ongoing efforts to manage information, and the preoccupation, anxiety and a feeling of pretence that may be associated with

hiding (Smart and Wegner, 2000). Concealing can also have health implications which may then be linked to performance at work. Thus the dilemma over declaring or concealing at work is complex. It may also involve a wider set of considerations over the question of what to say, how much to display; when, where and to whom (Goffman, 1968).

This issue is particularly important to examine in the context of mental health at work. Not only may the stigma and the discrimination attached to mental-illness intensify the disclosure dilemma of MHCs, but also the growing numbers of mental illness worldwide (WHO, 2007) may stress the importance of studying theses issues in the context of employability. Against the background of growing figures on mental health concerns at work, one-fifth of employees would not disclose stress or mental health issues to their employer as they fear that this would jeopardize their employment (Mind, 2011: 2). Whilst depression alone is reported to become the second biggest cause for disability in the world by 2020 (WHO, 2003, Sunley, 2008), restricted self-disclosure may have crucial implications for the individual as well as the organization.

Despite the fact that people with severe and mild MHCs in the West hold jobs in a wide range of sectors (Mechanic et al., 2002), studies show that employment rates for these individuals are extremely low (Tsang et al. 2007; Rinaldi and Hill, 2000). This may be linked with discrimination, stigma and stereotyping associated with mental-illness and the consequent marginalization of these individuals from full work integration (Krupa et al., 2009). Those that are in work are often cyclically trapped into low-pay, poor-quality working conditions, with restricted opportunities for career development (Marmot Review, 2010). In work, people with MHCs report on financial and emotional constraints (Lefley, 1987) as well as experiences of protected relations with work colleagues and a constricted social network. Overall the experiences of these individuals are associated with restricted self-disclosure (Braunstein, 2000) and secrecy (Markowitz, 1998) and the consequent risk of delayed treatment (Gelb and Corrigan, 2008).

Separate from the prejudice and restricted managerial awareness to mental health at work (Hammond, 2001), the nature of the illness itself can limit the ability of persons with MHCs to cope with employment (Ritsher and Phelan, 2004). This is why disclosure at work and support in the workplace are critical for these individuals (e.g. Fung et al., 2007). The paucity of voices of people with MHCs in the organizational literature (Corrigan and Matthews, 2003) intensifies the importance for studying their employment. Nonetheless, the examination of the struggle of people with MHCs – a population with its more striking characteristics – offers an opportunity to elucidate extensive issues of the

paradoxes embedded within the attempts to live up to the employability discourse.

The case of Martin: The employability discourse and the costs of maintaining a sellable semblance

The case below is chosen from a set of repeat interviews which took place between April 2010 and November 2012, with sixteen working individuals, diagnosed with a MHC, who were using the services of a mental health support group. The sample (which was part of a larger study conducted by the author and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council) included both male (twelve) and female (four) participants with varied occupational backgrounds, age (between early thirties and mid-fifties) and personal situation. The struggle to gain and maintain work and good mental health in the different periods of their career history was salient in the interview transcripts. The following case of Martin was chosen from the dataset because it best represents this paper's point of interest. Along the lines of previous studies that presented in-depth accounts to develop theoretical claims (Thomas and Davies, 2005; Watson, 2008), the case presented in this paper is used as an elaborated example to draw on the struggle to live up to the semblance of the sellable self and the consequential constraints entailed with ongoing concealment. The examination of a population with its more striking characteristics, offers a potential chance to illuminate more widespread issues (Goffman 1961, 1968; Clegg 2006; Shenkar, 1996) of the struggle to live up to the ideals of employment discourses.

Martin is a customer complaints manager in his early fifties who has a MHC (bi-polar[1]). Martin was interviewed twice within a period of one year, comprising of two and a half hours of interview material. This, together with further email exchanges, established a trustworthy relationship with the researcher (Benton and Craib, 2001) and a general commitment to the study. During the two interviews with Martin, his employment situation changed swiftly: from a job seeker and a volunteer in a mental health charity, into an employee who has very rapidly progressed as an agency worker for a bank. Within a few months with the organization he moved from a data-entry position to the role of a senior customer complaints manager. When discussing his experiences and thoughts about disclosing his MHC, Martin said the following: 'I know there is stigma out there so I won't put it [on a job application] if they don't ask...'. However, when asked directly about his health, Martin said:

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[1]   Bi-polar disorder is a mood disorder, characterised by extreme moods, referred to as 'highs' (elevated cognition, mood and energy) and 'lows' (sadness, anxiety, isolation, hopelessness, anger) (Yatham, 2010).

> More often I would disclose it [MHC]. Especially as they [employers] would also need my health records from the doctor so there is no point in me not disclosing.

Martin describes a particular incident of displaying his condition during the process of job application:

> ... there was an agency there that wanted to know all my details, 'cos they said: 'Oh this is brilliant, you are the sort of person that needs to work for us. This is great you are doing this and so give us all your details'. So I gave them all my details, and then they needed my doctors' records for me to work for them. So then I mentioned my bi-polar and they said they will be contacting me in the evening, and then nothing happened. I sent them two or three emails and they haven't even replied...

The reading of Martin's quote suggests that displaying information about his MHC clashes with the sellable self. Martin did not get the job. He felt disappointed. Although he was honest with the employer about his MHC disclosing his condition may have made him appear unsellable and jeopardized his employability. Martin's account illustrates how in order to maintain the sellable semblance and increase his chances to gain employment he decided to conceal his MHC when the next interview came along. He says:

> ... I joined a few agencies. I did actually ask their advice on whether to disclose that I have an illness or not and they said that by law I didn't actually have to disclose...

He did not reveal his MHC and got the job for the bank. He says:

> ... I think it's not good for me to say what's wrong with me 'cos then you are vulnerable, they can play on the fact that you are not well sometimes... because I am actually a temporary worker I don't feel as if I can... they can just say: 'OK if you don't want to do this job then go back to the agency'. I am stuck really [...] I do want to work, but I know that there is prejudice there and stigma. So I feel as if I have got to be normal all the time: I can't let myself get ill and off course 'cos I work for an agency you don't get sick pay so if I did mention it to them... I will end up with no support...

The reading of Martin's interview text highlights how the constraints to maintain a sellable semblance are intensified in light of the job insecurities that characterize so many contemporary workplaces (Sennett, 2006). His account illustrates how being sellable is not necessarily something that is connected to the ability to do the job, but nonetheless has implications for one's employability, both during the job search and while being at work. Martin feels that revealing information about his illness would jeopardize his position as an agency worker; which is something that could make his sellable semblance 'unsellable'. His account exemplifies the daily struggle entailed within the maintenance of the sellable semblance: Martin battles through with the management of his

condition on his own, with no support from the workplace. However, the vulnerable work as an agency worker appears as adding more constraints to his work situation. In order to maintain the sellable image and not to jeopardize his employability, Martin continues to conceal the information about his health. His struggle however, to maintain the sellable semblance entails many costs:

> ... I happened to work [whilst] unwell in the past... Sometimes I arrive at work and the anxiety will cause me to be sweating. But I have to [work] 'cos I have to earn some money. It's not very nice. I try things with my diet and exercise and control getting as calm as possible before I get there and then, when it's over I feel quite relieved. It's quite tiring I suppose... I feel the stress getting to me. It hasn't actually triggered my condition as far as I know. But I can see why it may be a problem in the future [...] I dread each day and arrive at work in pools of sweat but I'm hanging on in there [...] I tend to hide the fact that I am down so I try to do what I have got to do and hope they don't notice... I suppose the problem is still going to be there whatever job I have, and unfortunately they have given me a job which may be a trigger so [laughter] only time will tell.

Martin's account illustrates the costs entailed with demonstrating a sellable semblance and retaining his employability. Feeling restrained not to ask for help and support as well as the sweat, anxiety and the sense of relief when 'it's all over', illustrates the intensified daily struggle experienced by Martin to retain his employability. His struggle to maintain a routine of health at the workplace without revealing his condition is further heightened by the expectation to socialize with his work colleagues:

> My colleagues have actually asked me to go out with them next Monday but I am not going to... that always happens everywhere I go. I never go out 'cos I find the big groups of people stressful. And I can't have a drink to relax 'cos that would affect my mood later so... It's the whole social side of it 'cos they have a team drink and a team meal but I just have to say – 'no thank you I'd rather be at home spending time with my family', which I probably would but it probably is dangerous for me to go out with them in case I am having some drinks or because of the way it affects me. But I can't tell them that because they don't know about my condition... Because to me it's an illness, just like any other illness, only that it seem differently by employers which is why I can't mention it to work mates, because they might say something to my employer...

The reading of Martin's account illustrates how the struggle to maintain the semblance of the 'sellable self' has wider implications, which also relate to the social side of work and to building interpersonal relationships with colleagues. Martin feels constrained to reveal his MHC to his colleagues because he fears that this would jeopardize his employment situation. The account illustrates his wariness that revealing would undermine his employability. However, concealing his MHC at work puts additional constraints on his ability to build close and open relationships. Martin constantly hides his condition from his colleagues

and does not reveal why he is not able to attend social events. He continues by explaining how he feels 'trapped':

> It has got to do with being comfortable, I think. If I was comfortable with disclosing I would... I am still trapped... sooner or later it may come to a head when I have to say either that: 'Look, I have this condition and I am not sure if I can do this job' or – 'Look, I have this condition that's why I can't come out. But I think it would come out eventually it will have to... but it's best to find the right moments, I suppose, to do it [...] Since it's a temporary job it could lead to a permanent job, I might ask if there is another role they could put me into. I quite still would like to work for them, but maybe this is not quite the job for me because of my condition...

The account illustrates how Martin is engaged in a position at work that is not ideal for his health condition. However, in order not to jeopardize his unstable employment situation as an agency worker and his sellable semblance, Martin does not reveal his MHC. Overall, Martin's account illustrates the minute struggle to retain the sellable semblance and how his insecurities (which are characteristic of many working conditions today) increase the constraints to remain employable. The account reveals how this struggle is associated with a number of issues related to job performance, relationships with colleagues and health management, as well as other continuous constraints of hiding a significant aspect of one's life at work.

The case illustrates the overarching restraints to live up to the employability discourse when having to maintain a continuous performative sellable semblance. It shows how this situation entails incremental anxiety over hiding, pretence and a difficulty to be open with work colleagues, to build close relationships and to gain help and support. We can see how Martin feels constrained within the limits of the employability discourse to perform and maintain a semblance of an ideal sellable self. As such, he is restricted not to reveal his condition, not to appear unsellable, and not to put his employment situation at risk. In order to maintain a sellable semblance, Martin silences his MHC and relies solely on himself to maintain good health and a high level of performance. This analysis has wider implications for us all, workers and job seekers, which are discussed below and draw on the costs and constraints of living up to the semblance of a sellable self.

Concluding discussion: The costs of maintaining the sellable semblance

The struggle entailed with the ongoing concealment of whichever information that does not retain the sellable self was the main focus of this paper, illustrated through the analysis of the case of Martin. The analysis highlights the constraints

not to disclose information that may be considered a limitation or a weakness by the employer. In the case analysed, Martin felt restrained not to reveal his MHC and not to ask for support because he risked being deemed unemployable. Martin's case also demonstrated the struggle associated with concealing or 'improving' on whatever it is that the employer considers a 'weakness'. Concealing the MHC to demonstrate a semblance of the sellable self was framing his relationships with colleagues, as well as his behaviour at work in a certain way.

Whist the constraints of living up to the sellable self may be intensified in certain contexts such as MHCs, the struggle inherent in doing this may be relevant in many other instances. Individuals may find it restraining to 'work on' personal traits such shyness or introversion (Fogde, 2007); conceal illnesses or disabilities (Holmqvist, 2008); race (Miles, 1989), sexuality (Ward and Witstanley, 2003, 2005) or not to reveal what aspect of the job they struggle with to the employer (Grey, 1994). This suggests that the key theme of jeopardy that revealing what the employer may consider a limitation or a weakness could immediately put one's employment chances at risk (Costea at al., 2012: 31) has number of implications for us all, or most, in our attempts to secure an income when responding to the demands of the employability discourse.

The employability discourse thus illuminates a critical dilemma for the self. Whist concealing whatever it is the employer considers a weakness may be constraining when doing the job, 'silencing limitations' at work (Thrift, 2002) may be associated with a struggle over hiding, pretence (Costas and Fleming, 2009) or acting in a way that is not in accordance with one's values, feelings (Garrety, 2009, 2011) and what individuals believe is important (Foucault, 1994: 300). The compliance not to self-disclose can also shape the relationships individuals have with others. Although disclosure has benefits in many aspects of life, – 'justice, medicine, education, family relationships and love relationships, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in most solemn rites' (Foucault, 1978: 59) – in our attempts to live up to the 'sellable self' and maintain our employability we are constricted not to act in accordance to this popular practice.

This sense of compliance not to disclose what might be considered a weakness at work, has broader implications for our sense of community, our ability to be collegiate with others, and to be recognized for 'who we are' (Frank, 1998; Creed and Scully, 2000). In the context of illness, limited self-disclosure may also lead to a restricted ability to effectively self-manage our health or to care for our ills (Foucault, 1997; Clair et al., 2005). This can result in more suffering, late diagnosis; as a consequence of insufficient support and delayed treatments (Pearlin et al., 1981; Turner, 1981; Gelb and Corrigan, 2008).

As such, at the same time that employability and other 'advanced liberal' programmes in all life aspects embrace the rhetoric of autonomy; freedom; identity; self-realization; self-fulfilment; choice; lifestyle; enterprise; freeing up; self-actualization; ethical citizenship (Rose, 1996; Dean, 1998, 1999; McDonald and Marson, 2005); entrepreneuring own capital (Fogde, 2009: 44; Newton, 1996; Quelette and Hay, 2008); self-helping, and self-managing (Rimke, 2000; Rose, 1998), it is a certain ideal type of subject they encourage the individuals to live up to, restricting what it is they in turn promise to provide.

This illuminates the discomfort that accompanies the continued attempts to retain an ideal semblance (Acker, 1992); the incremental fragility, inner tensions and permanent anxiety of failing, being 'powerless to resist and take control of [our] own limits and real possibilities' (Costea et al. 2012: 34; text amended); the self-blame for failing or struggling to find employment (Sharone, 2007) and to pursue a career (Grey, 1994); the difficulty to simply 'be ourselves' (Frank, 1998) and the preoccupation involved in ongoing concealment (Smart and Wegner, 2000). We thus sacrifice our health and fake our experiences and identities to fit with what 'the employable' is expected to be. And when we fail, we must try again, harder (Sharone, 2007).

Employability is 'the attempted coercive and discursive creation of the self as first and foremost a worker' (Levitas, 2005: 158), who performs their social inclusion by working, and is continuously encouraged to become 'more' (Costea et al., 2012) to maintain employability. This never-ending journey, I argue, is tough, fragile, lonesome, and entails many costs. It affects our health, our sense of self and the way we relate to ourselves and to others in our community. Whilst we all attempt to live up to the employability discourse, and at the same time we craft our sense of self according to the meanings embedded within it, the complied sense of 'falseness' rooted within a culture that encourages a 'denial of limitations' (Thrift, 2002) may have catastrophic consequences for us all as workers and job seekers, in our attempts secure an income and a sense of meaning through work.

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