The Aspirants
How faith is built in emerging occupations

Rebecca Ye

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Abstract
Anticipating future demands in skills and workforce development has been a longstanding practice and challenge for governments and policy-makers. While such developments are examined closely at the national and regional levels, an even more pressing issue is to advance our understanding of how people who take on jobs in new and emerging fields embark on and persist in their occupational pathways. A striking feature of these occupations is their weakly defined and unstable nature. How do individuals traverse career trajectories with these characteristics? What drives and enables them to take the road less travelled? To address such questions, this research project set off from a distinctive occupational school in Sweden that prepares individuals for emerging occupational roles in digital work. Using an interpretative, longitudinal, and multi-method approach, this study focuses on a group of aspirants who were being trained to become specialists in extracting, analysing, and using digital data for the growth and profit of organisations. These individuals can be viewed as experiencing a double “not-yet” situation, since not only are they at the stage of aspiring to certain work roles, but the occupations to which they aspire are also in a nascent, not yet fully defined stage. This study accompanies them through significant events over the years: from when they are in training, to when they search for jobs, and, finally, when they are in work.

The monograph contains three empirical sections that are sequenced by the aspirants’ school-to-work pathways. The first section examines the processes of socialisation into the occupational school; the second analyses their efforts to meet the labour market; and the final one investigates the ways in which they persist in their occupational trajectories. Following these stages reveals how a strong school culture, coupled with a strong labour market, facilitates the building of “faith” into weak-form occupational pathways. Through the ceremony of being selected into the educational organisation and performing everyday rituals that engender confidence in their individual and collective futures, the analysis reveals types of “scripts” that are fashioned into the school’s methodology as well as the expectations of future hirers. It becomes apparent that aspirants generally accept these scripts as necessary and adhere to them to navigate the constantly changing demands of the labour market. However, when these interpretive schemes fail to help them cope with their unclear occupational futures, uncertainties of worth, and the unstable normative logics they encounter at work sites, the aspirants are compelled to deliberate and adapt conceptions of what is possible and permissible through individual and collective projections. In all, the empirical findings form the basis for a sociological model that offers a perspective on how to treat temporality, anticipation, and the “not-yets”, particularly in the context of education to work transitions.

Keywords: weak-form occupations, transitions, temporality, anticipation, career scripts, projections, school culture, higher vocational education and training, yrkeshögskola.

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Department of Sociology
Stockholm University, 106 91 Stockholm
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REBECCA YE
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## CONTENTS

### INTRODUCTION

- Weak-form occupations 3
- The research setting 6
- Plan of the monograph 19

### THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

- Career scripts 22
- Projection 27
- School culture 30

### METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Longitudinal qualitative research 38
- Job ads as a site of projectivity 49
- Fashioning biographies through digital résumés 54
- Bringing the various strands together 56
PERSISTING IN AN OCCUPATIONAL TRAJECTORY 148

Fashioning biographies 149
The mover 152
The multi-skilled 155
The connected evangelist 158

Imagined futures and possible selves 164
Disjunctures in imagined futures 165
Moral conflicts and possible selves 170

CODA 177

Strong school culture and weak-form occupations 178
Aspirational scripts 180
Projection as a script for weak-form occupations 182
Weak-form occupations in a strong labour market 188
Directions for future research 190

Appendices 195
Sammanfattning (Swedish summary) 201
Acknowledgements 205
References 209
LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Figure 1.1. Number of applicants to data/IT AVET programmes (2006–2013) 9
Figure 3.1. Design for longitudinal qualitative interviews 42
Figure 5.1. Number of IT specialists in Sweden, by gender and age 122
Figure 5.2. Average monthly salaries of IT specialists, by gender and age 122
Figure 6.1. Number of labour market moves displayed in biographies 153
Figure 7.1. A model of how individuals enter weak-form occupations 184
Figure 8.1. The evolution of the Swedish Occupational Classification 196
Figure 8.2. Unemployment rate (annual average) in Sweden (1990-2017) 199

Table 2.1. Concepts and research foci 34
Table 3.1. Characteristics of hirers and positions for which they are hiring 52
Table 3.2. Overview of data gathering: type, source, and purpose 57
Table 4.1. Cultural forms and role in aspirants' education and work careers 95
Table 5.1. Salience and frequency of aspirational job-search scripts 114
Table 5.2. Coding schema for personal qualities in requirements of ads 137
Table 5.3. Salience of personal qualities in ad descriptions 138
Table 6.1. Most frequently listed skills by cohort 156
Table 6.2. Number of skills stated on profile 157
INTRODUCTION

In 2016, the World Economic Forum published a report entitled *The Future of Jobs*, which begins by citing a popular estimate that “65% of children entering primary school today will ultimately end up working in completely new job types that don’t yet exist” (World Economic Forum, 2016, p. 3). Whether accurate or not, these claims of an upcoming transformation in the labour market have become a rallying cry for governments and policy-makers to launch initiatives to equip the workforce with skills anticipated to be vital for future work tasks. For instance, the notion of lifelong learning has been influential in European labour market and educational policies in the last few decades, and a series of reforms aimed at “upskilling” the labour force has been launched at regional and national levels (Brown & Lauder, 1996; Lloyd & Payne, 2016). However, projecting and anticipating future demands in skills and workforce development are challenges not only for governments and policy-makers; even more pressing is how individuals — who will take on these jobs that “don’t yet exist” — will embark and persist on such emerging occupational pathways.

This thesis is concerned with the question of how individuals enter occupations that are weakly defined and unstable, and how they traverse pathways that lack clear career tracks. As early as the 1970s, Everett Hughes encouraged sociologists to “give full and comparative attention to the not-yets, the didn’t quite-make-its, the not quite respectable, the unremarked and the openly ‘anti’ goings-on in our society” (Hughes, 1971, p. 53). Applied to the contemporary labour market, Hughes’ advocacy for studying the “not-yets” compels us to devote attention to pathways that are emerging and not fully formed. This is especially crucial in order to move beyond existing research that concentrates on traditional,
established occupational trajectories. By making the phenomenon of the “not-yets” the central focus of the thesis, this study takes seriously temporality and the significance of future-oriented actions at both the levels of the individual and the collective (Beckert, 2016; Mische, 2009).

To address the research problem at hand, this study sets off from a distinctive specialist training school in Sweden that prepares individuals for emerging occupational roles, particularly in digital work. I follow a group of aspirants enrolled in the school’s newest training programme at the time of research, a programme that deals with training individuals to become specialists in extracting, analysing, and using digital data for the growth and profit of organisations. By starting from a particular school, I am able to accompany a group of individuals as they move from education to labour markets and to follow them as they journey toward emerging job tasks and occupational identities in the making. The individuals I follow can be seen as experiencing a double “not-yet” situation, since not only are they at the stage of aspiring to certain work roles, but the occupations to which they aspire are also in a nascent, not yet fully defined stage.

Through an interpretative, longitudinal, and multi-method approach, I follow these aspirants through significant events over the years: from the point when they are in training to when they search for jobs, experience work, and continue in their occupational trajectories. By moving beyond analysing what happens exclusively in schools or at work sites, I aim to be attentive to the movements between both realms. The analyses presented in this thesis uncover several motifs of temporality and anticipation, which aim to contribute to ongoing discussions within the sociology of work and education. Beyond membership, identification, and commitment, topics often addressed in organisational research, the notion of “faith”, I will argue, is more useful for examining emerging occupations, as there is intangibility in these labour market outcomes and career pathways. Faith in the occupational pathway is different from commitment and this distinction is made because there are no strong rewards, career system or a consistent line of activity that these aspirants can be committed to (Becker, 1960). Yet, as we shall see, it is vital for these aspirants to anticipate that the trajectory they are on will lead to positive labour market outcomes in order for them to even embark on a “weak-form” occupational pathway in the first place.
Weak-form occupations

There is nothing new about “new occupations”. Work on identifying and planning for emerging occupations, or occupational forecasting, has been on the rise since the 1970s. In a U.S. report published in 1976, a new occupation was defined as one “which has come into existence in the past ten years in skilled and technical areas, for which there is an established demand, a basis for projecting growth, and a shortage of trained labour, and for which no public vocational training is available” (Heleen et al., 1976, pp. 9–10). Some of the new and emerging occupations identified in this 1976 report included the “child advocate”, the “nuclear quality assurance inspector”, and the “industrial hygiene technician”. These occupations are said to have emerged from trends such as new technology, legislation, social and institutional change, job restructuring, or the intermingling of various trends.

From the perspective of planning and policy practices, there may be nothing novel about new occupations. But from a more theoretical perspective, how have these emerging occupations been studied previously, especially within sociology? A variety of concepts can be found in previous research. For example, some occupations that are said to have attempted to become professions (e.g., pharmacy, librarianship, optometry, chiropractory) but have, according to Denzin and Mettlin (1968), experienced incomplete professionalisation. Others may be considered “minor professions”, a phrase coined by Glazer (1974, p. 346), who writes that the “major professions are medicine and law; the minor professions are all the rest”. Other terms that have been used to describe “all the rest” include “limited, marginal and quasi-practitioners” (Wardwell, 1963), or “semi-professions”, such as teachers, nurses, and social workers (Etzioni, 1969), comprising a veritable conceptual smorgasbord.

What unites these notions is how they start out by viewing these occupations through the traditional professional framework. Through this framework, professions are defined as occupations based upon specialised study and training, with a mandate to supply skilled service to others for a fee; they are governed by codes of ethics, transmit knowledge through formal institutions, and are organised in ways designed to protect and ensure the continuity of the profession through time (Carr-Saunders &
Wilson, 1933; Denzin & Mettlin, 1968; Hughes, 1953). These perspectives also contain a value judgement about the outcome of the occupation, implied by the connotations of the terms used ("minor", "incomplete", "quasi", "marginal"). Abbott's (1988) seminal work, *The System of Professions*, points out this dominant practice whereby researchers study professions by identifying an occupation that resembles the ideal, strong-form type and then projecting backward to the formation of the group to determine its level of power and status \(^1\).

For the type of occupational pathways that are central to this study, it is not clear if the individuals on these pathways will, as a social group, aim for professionalisation or if they want to even attain a form of organisation that would "exercise strict control over its members and which would ensure its perpetuation through time" (Denzin & Mettlin, 1968). If that were so, we would observe pressures leading to the prolongation of their training or the multiplication of prerequisites for entry into the training programmes (Hughes, 1963). Furusten and Garsten (2005, p. 33) make a similar point in their ideal-type description of the "new professional" who has "little interest in building up the profession into formal structures where the mystique of what their expertise consists of is clearly laid out on the table".

How, then, should we treat new occupations, especially if newness is a fleeting phenomenon? An elaborate discussion on new occupations can be found in Bourdieu’s exposition of cultural intermediaries in *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984). Specifically, he speaks of the "new petite bourgeoisie", which he describes as those involved in providing symbolic goods and services, working in occupations such as sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, and fashion. For Bourdieu, this emerging class can be found particularly in the "most ill-defined and professionally unstructured occupations" as well as the newest sectors of cultural and artistic production (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 151). This is because such jobs do not possess the rigidity and bureaucracy of older professions. Recruitment

\(^1\) In *Things of Boundaries*, Abbott describes four types of occupations: strong form, quasi, workless, and turnover occupations. The strong form, or "ideal type" of an occupation, according to this theory of occupations, includes three things: "a particular group of people, a particular type of work, and an organized body or structure" (Abbott, 1995, pp. 873-874).
into such occupations takes place largely through connections instead of formal qualifications. Because these sectors are indeterminate, they are conducive to producing areas of “specialist expertise” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 153).

Bourdieu’s model of new occupations focuses primarily on struggles for recognition. In focusing on the new petite bourgeoisie as engaging in practices to distinguish themselves from the old middle class, Bourdieu’s attention to changes in this class structure focuses on taste making and differences in lifestyles between the *vieux jeu* and the *nouveau jeu*.2 His observations of the new petite bourgeoisie in French society might be similarly observed in other European contexts (Bennett et al., 2009; Börjesson et al., 2016). Although these issues were significant for Bourdieu and his research programme, I find myself concerned with other questions within this sphere of sociological research, specifically, how do aspirants embark on occupational pathways that are not clearly defined? How do they persist in pathways that are uncertain and, if possible, thrive in them?

As I followed a cohort of individuals who were entering occupations that are still taking shape, what I found compelling was not so much the “newness” of these jobs or the titles that come and go. Some of these seemingly new tech companies where the aspirants eventually found work have been around for a decade, and some of the occupational titles they eventually hold are emulations of previous technology (for example, the “publishing manager”; see Martinez, 2016). By focusing on newness (whatever it happens to be at a particular moment), the new would soon become old. Instead, what is most striking about the jobs this cohort took was that, being in occupations in the nascent stage, they share the characteristic of being *weak-form*. Weak-form occupations will always exist, since developments in scientific, technological discovery and changes in society will always result in new occupations or in old ones trying to change the way they work.

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2 Roughly translated from French: *vieux jeu* = old game; *nouveau jeu* = new game. He evokes stark images of these distinctions: the new petite bourgeoisie strives to be “amusing, refined, stylish, artistic, imaginative” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 359). As a “modern manager”, he is up to date with what is trendy in business administration, public relations, and group dynamics (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 311). This is contrasted with the traditional industrialist, the “pot-bellied, pompous patron” who is nothing quite like “the slim, sun-tanned cadre”, who is casual in his dress and relaxed at cocktail parties (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 311).
In using the term “weak-form occupations”, the intent here is not to evaluate if these types of job roles qualify, now or in the future, as professions. Nor is the intent to predict the positions of these occupations in a larger class structure. Rather, the purpose is to provide a vocabulary to discuss the stage in which an occupation is found and to elucidate the kind of dynamics, processes, and characteristics found in occupations that are still in the nascent stage and being defined. This can reveal important ideas about occupational organisation at the micro- and meso-levels. The term “weak-form occupations” serves as a communicative device by referring to occupations that are in a stage of formation, emergence, and early development. The occupation and the stage it is in provide the context for exploring and understanding temporality and anticipation within the spheres of sociology of work and education.

To say that an occupation is weak-form does not mean it is “weak” in the sense that those who work in these occupations have poor labour market outcomes. As this thesis will show, expertise is marked out in a new light when expressed in job sites that are still changing and still being defined. For those who embark on weak-form occupations, their career futures are not intuitive or predictable. How, then, do individuals embark and attempt to thrive in occupational pathways that are weak-form? Where can they go to begin these journeys and what can they do to navigate these terrains? In the section to follow, I outline the setting where the exploration of a group of aspirants embarking on weak-form occupations begins.

The research setting

Like many national economies that have been pivoting from manufacturing to service sectors in the last few decades, private and state organisations in Sweden have been looking to the creative and digital sectors for avenues of growth. Discursively this has been branded as a move toward the “experience economy”, often with an emphasis on “creative business” or creative entrepreneurship. Organisations like The Knowledge Foundation (KK-Stiftelsen) have been significant promoters and funders of these early efforts (Power, 2009). The growth of the digital industries has been welcomed and continues to garner significant interest
in business and political spheres. Augustsson (2005) provides a detailed study of the formation and organisation of information technology (IT) firms in Sweden. He argues that, because IT was viewed early on by the state as crucial for the future of Sweden and as affecting all of society, it gained legitimacy easily and was often presented as “all-encompassing, all-embraceable and apolitical” (Augustsson, 2005, p. 66).

Early adoption of comprehensive broadband penetration and a strong engineering tradition created the industrial linkages essential for sustained economic growth (Berner, 1996) as well as shoulders for IT firms and specialists to stand on. Coupled with strong support from the state, Swedish companies managed to move “from boom to bust and back again” as they went through the volatility of technology valuation when the country was hit by the dot-com bubble burst at the turn of the century (Maican, 2012). By 2015, Sweden was already host to a disproportionally large number of tech start-ups valued at over a billion U.S. dollars, or what the tech community colloquially calls unicorns.3

However, for a relatively small country like Sweden, it would be impossible to describe this setting without noting the kinds of external influences on this national growth strategy. Augustsson (2005, p. 99) writes, for example, about the influence of Silicon Valley and New York (“Silicon Alley”) on the development of the digital and tech sector in Sweden. In particular, he describes how the celebratory attention afforded to the rapid financialisation and high valuation of American interactive media companies played a part in leading Swedish interactive media companies to harbour similar ambitions. The establishment of research parks, as in the case of the creation of Novum forskningspark in Southern Sweden in the 1980s, was done with heavy referencing to the success story of Silicon Valley (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996).

With these efforts, the push for training more workers with skills for future work tasks can be seen clearly when charting out rising and declining segments in the labour market. Unsurprisingly, over the time

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3 The first published use of the term “unicorns” can be traced back to a 2013 article in TechCrunch (a technology media property that profiles start-ups and breaks tech news) that was penned by investor Aileen Lee. She is said to have coined this now popular Silicon Valley concept by using it to describe start-ups valued at over a billion dollars, which was then almost as a rare sighting as the mythical animal.
frame from 2005 to 2012, as the number of “computer system designers, analysts and programmers”\(^4\) rose, the older manufacturing occupations, such as machine-tool operators, decreased concomitantly.\(^5\) This rise has been starkest in the country’s capital, Stockholm, and its aspiration to be the start-up capital of the world and best tech city in Europe is overt. Various organisations have worked on tilling the soil to make it fertile for grooming workers to support digitalisation ventures through funding from state, municipality to private spheres. The Swedish government, the Stockholm municipality, business enterprises as well as schools have actively sponsored programmes, hackathons, and co-working spaces for start-ups right in the city centre, as well as spreading a “unicorn discourse”. This is done especially by showcasing Sweden’s digital success stories such as Skype, Spotify, and Mojang, and championing Stockholm as being a hotbed for innovation and a “unicorn factory”.

Efforts to develop the educational sector to prepare and train individuals for these emerging occupational roles have also been observed over the last decade (Statistics Sweden, 2013). A particularly revealing development in the educational landscape can be found in the segment of post-secondary advanced vocational education and training. In comparison with universities, such institutions work more closely with the industries for which they train students, and they have shorter diploma programmes, as I detail later. For the purposes of this research, these characteristics make these specialist occupational schools a valuable segment of the educational landscape to study, particularly in examining pathways into digital work, where fast technological progress requires faster adjustments by both people and institutions than what universities offer (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). The problem with poor linkages between universities and the tech industry has been earlier noted by Sardiello (2011), whose study of founders and investors in software start-ups in Stockholm lamented the universities’ exclusively science-oriented

\(^4\) This category was used formally, via the Occupational Classification scheme (SSYK) version of 1996, by Swedish state bureaucracies to broadly classify individuals who would be viewed today as IT specialists. The SSYK 1996 was used to categorise occupational data up until 2014. In Appendix A, I provide a more detailed write-up of the evolution of the Swedish Occupational Classification over time and the difficulties of occupational schemata in keeping up with transformations in the division of labour.

\(^5\) Source: Statistics Sweden’s occupational register.
engineering programmes and their weak entrepreneurial culture, which produced workers with inadequate skills for commercialising the products and services they create.

Accordingly, in this study, I focus on data/IT programmes at the advanced vocational education and training level, representing a subset of the broader category of vocational schools and programmes in Sweden. These programmes offer education at the post-secondary level (eftergymnasial nivå) and are different from initial vocational education and training in upper secondary schools. In Sweden, they consist of educational types such as kvalificerad yrkesutbildning (KY) and yrkesbägskoleutbildning (YH). The growth and evolution of this segment of the educational system will be detailed later.

Figure 1.1. Number of applicants to data/IT advanced vocational education and training programmes (2006–2013)

Figure 1.1 shows that the number of applicants to data/IT programmes at the advanced vocational training level has increased rather quickly (more than a 100 per cent increase over six years) over the short period of 2006 to 2013. Despite the number of training places in these programmes increasing by almost 85 per cent over six years, this expansion has not kept up with the rapid increase in the number of applicants wanting to be admitted. In my research, by focusing on such programmes rather than the entire advanced vocational system as a whole, I intend to break with monolithic conceptions of vocational training as non-competitive, as issues of selectivity and selection come to the fore in an unlikely segment of the Swedish educational landscape.

The gap between the number of individuals admitted into these programmes and the number who complete them is also noteworthy. One explanation could be that the students are getting jobs in the field before they complete their training. But this and other potential reasons to explain the gaps illustrated in the figure above need to be studied empirically to provide meaningful insights into education-to-work transitions (or disruptions) and the efficacy of education systems in preparing individuals for emerging occupations. Furthermore, it is necessary to go beyond the focus on individual skill acquisition by opening the “black box” of the process of skill formation in order to aid in understanding the collective dimensions of skill formation (Brown, 2001). In the paragraphs to follow, I outline how this study aims to do so by siting the research conducted at an occupational school in Sweden.

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6 Even though there is a time lag that needs to be considered in reading this graph (i.e., those who are admitted in 2007 probably complete training a few years later in 2008 or 2009), the proportion of each annual cohort that completes is approximately only half of each intake. When compared against other programmes offered at the advanced vocational training level, the trend in Figure 1.1 (of applicants admitted and completed) is not a general one. Some programmes, such as journalism, teaching, and transport services, experienced a decline in number of applicants over the same time period. For the more popular programmes in terms of application numbers — such as business administration/sales, and healthcare/social work — even with the high applicant-to-places ratio, the completion rates are higher than for the data/IT programmes illustrated here.
The school

Sweden is home to hundreds of advanced vocational education and training organisations that offer post-secondary training for various types of occupations in sectors that range from healthcare, construction, communication, and business administration. Amongst these schools, one stands out when it comes to being a conduit to digital work. “Skolan X” first opened its doors to students in the 1990s. Its founders formulated the idea of building a new organisation of professional learning while they were working in the field of what was then called “interactive media production”. Since they observed how much difficulty individuals and organisations were having in adapting to the onset of digitalisation, they proposed starting a school that would equip people to cope with these transformations.

Over the years, the educational organisation has acquired a kind of “elite” status within the world of digital creative work. It has also expanded globally and has established learning hubs in four different continents. This growth is illustrative not only of an intriguing transnational expansion of a learning organisation but, more generally, of the global character of the labour market for digital workers.

Even though the focus of this thesis is on the journey of the aspirants, their relationship to this school is central to their trajectories. In this study, Skolan X (henceforth “SX”) is used as a strategic case to explore how individuals embark on emerging occupational pathways, particularly in digital work, and what the role of schools is in facilitating such journeys. The underlying premise is that this occupational school and its educational form are poised in valuable ways for shedding insights on a crucial phenomenon such as education-to-work transitions. As proposed by Johnson and Powell (2017), “poisedness” refers to circumstances, within a particular social and historical context, that are steeped with potential for being receptive to innovation. The availability or vulnerability of this particular context allows for relations and trends at one level to be coupled with innovations at a different one.

7 The name of the school has been changed in this thesis.
From the brief descriptions above, one could surmise that the texture of the soil in which the school was built has allowed it to thrive over these few decades. Details such as having its base in Sweden, a country with strong infrastructure to sustain technological advancements and market growth, along with a fairly open education system that receives strong funding from the state, all point to advantageous conditions for an entrepreneurial digital school to operate in with success. In addition, the area of training for digital work has not been standardised or controlled by state agencies or professional associations, and the individuals who undergo such forms of training mostly enter segments of the labour market that are relatively unregulated, at least up till this point.\(^8\) SX thus entered a free space early (the 1990s) and got to set the pace and tone of the game.

Furthermore, the school’s non-conventional ways of instruction and learning follow the currents of the trending “unschooling” movement, an educational philosophy that advocates learner-chosen activities as the primary means for learning. Changes in educational technology have greatly impacted the accessibility, affordability, relevance, and content of higher education. The unschooling movement has garnered a loud voice as the cost of attending college continues to rise (in places where education is not publicly funded), and the arrival of massive open online courses (MOOCs) on the scene have compelled individuals and organisations to adopt other types of learning ideologies and practices.

In the case of this particular school, SX has no teachers on the campuses but, rather, “programme managers” and “learning facilitators”. Learning revolves around real-live projects, often issued by clients who pose challenges for the students to “hack”. Students develop a high reliance on mentors found amongst industry practitioners and SX alumni. One-third of the duration of the diploma programmes are spent on

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\(^8\) The Swedish labour market is characterised as having a highly compressed wage structure, strong unions, a high degree of centralised bargaining, and extensive legal regulations (Le Grand & Tåhlin, 2002). For this particular segment of the labour market, however, there are fewer rules governing who can enter, what kinds of qualifications they need to do the work, and the kinds of salaries they draw. In 2017, for example, it was reported by the Swedish public radio service that 9 out of 10 gaming companies skip collective agreements, with representatives from the industry citing reasons such as skills shortage and the need for competitiveness (Gustafsson, 2017).
internships, which can take place anywhere in the world. Moreover, this programme structure, which forces the students to look for jobs and to be in work, facilitates a research design that makes it possible to follow aspirants through the most significant events of their education-to-work transitions. It could be said that the characteristics of the school described here are similar to what others have noted of post-bureaucratic organisations, where there tends to be less extreme levels of hierarchy, an emphasis on flexibility, more permeability between the borders of the organisation, and an increased use of sub-contracting and consultants instead of permanent or in-house expertise (Grey & Garsten, 2001).

In later sections, I will elaborate on how this school is very much a product of its time, emerging at a point when significant developments are taking place in higher education and labour market policies, especially at the regional level. As noted by Ahrne (1994), time sequence is fundamental to the founding of organisations. The “success story” of Silicon Valley is often cited as an example that demonstrates what can result when a “constellation of organisations” (universities, state agencies, city administrations, and private businesses) comes together under distinctive conditions at a highly specific period in history (Ahrne, 1994, p. 139). My decision to focus on only one school was to enable an in-depth exploration that would lead to an adequate understanding of the context, processes, and mechanisms found in the educational organisation and how it facilitates education-to-work transitions into weak-form occupations. Furthermore, an in-depth case study can allow for a deeper understanding of how an “alternative” school might handle dilemmas that are often common to other schools considered to be more “mainstream” (Gerring, 2006; Flyvbjerg, 2011; Chen, 2016).[^1]

[^1]: There is no agreed definition of what constitutes an alternative school. A notable study on alternative schools, however, can be found in Swidler’s (1979) research on free schools in the US. She defines alternative schools as teaching a hidden curriculum, i.e., a set of norms that are the opposite of what traditional schools teach and focus on (Swidler, 1976).
The programme

With an interest in understanding how schools prepare individuals for job roles that are not clearly defined — especially in the area of digital work — I sought access to SX’s newest training programme at the time of research, which, in this text, will be called “Digi”. This full-time training programme prepared aspirants to become skilled in dealing with digital data for business organisations and in producing solutions that can eventually lead to profit or growth for the company. The participants who were enrolled in the programme were trained in areas such as data-driven marketing, data visualisation, or search engine optimisation, amongst other related skill areas.

To situate this research in time, one would find it on the cusp of a changing division of labour, or what Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2014) fashionably term the “second machine age”. These optimistic technologists locate our current point in history as one where the progress of digital technologies is astonishing and will continue to improve and be able to do unprecedented things. Central to their argument is how this technological shift has led to skill-based technical changes. Big data and analytics, high-speed communications, and rapid prototyping have amplified the contributions made by more abstract and data-driven reasoning. This, they argue, is consequently augmenting the value of individuals with the right set of engineering, creative, or design skills and transforming how work will be done, the kinds of tasks and problems that will have to be solved, and what workers will be expected to accomplish.

Due to the ease and “cheapness” of turning activities and digital communications into recorded data nowadays, data are increasingly viewed as a kind of “raw material” that can be “extracted” (Srnicek, 2017). The sheer amount and quantity of data that can now be used by businesses for purposes that range from optimising processes, understanding consumer preferences, to selling to advertisers has led to the emergence of new industries, as well as providing the foundation for new products and services (Srnicek, 2017). As a result of these technological and business developments, new tasks and roles have emerged (and are still emerging) to keep up with the possibilities of data extraction, analysis, and use.
When I met Alva, the programme manager of Digi, for the first time, she introduced the school’s programme to me this way:

I tell my students that, when you go out into the working world, you are going to have job titles that never existed. It’s going to be scary and there might be nothing you can hold on to. You will have to hold on to . . . [grabs own shirt] yourself.

This presentation, which I initially thought was merely a stylised introduction to the work roles for which the school offered training, turned out, I would later discover, to be a fair representation of the dramatic situation the aspirants would face in the occupational landscape. One-and-a-half years after the cohort of forty aspirants graduated from one specialist programme, they assumed a plethora of occupational titles, some of which did not exist when the aspirants were still in training. There were more than thirty occupational titles amongst them (such as growth manager, programmatic publishing manager, conversion specialist, just to name a few), and they were dispersed across various industries. Over the years of interviewing these individuals, I would learn of the difficulties they faced in defining the work they do to themselves and to relevant others in ways that people in more mature forms of occupations tend to take for granted. For example, some had trouble explaining to their families what it was they did for a living, while others were not sure what to write on immigration cards in the box for “occupation” to avoid scrutiny at border control points asking what that occupation entails.

The Digi programme, with its purpose of training individuals for jobs that “do not yet exist”, represents a strategic site for learning more about transitions into weak-form occupations. By following a specific programme and single cohort, I was able to follow the aspirants through various key events in their education-to-work movements. Through such delimitation, I could observe with greater intimacy how aspirants made sense of individual and collective trajectories, both retrospectively and prospectively, as they related to their surroundings, the school, their peers, mentors, future employers, and the labour market they aspired to enter.
The evolution of advanced vocational education in Sweden

It would not be possible to discuss the emergence and growth of a school like SX, and the kinds of programmes it can launch, without noting the evolution of advanced vocational education and training in Sweden over the last three decades. In the paragraphs to follow, I show how the political context and the reforms launched in the educational system during this period have been significant in supporting and sustaining this very educational organisation. In particular, during the 1990s, Sweden faced an economic recession and struggled with unemployment, particularly amongst youth.\(^\text{10}\) The lack of an infrastructure and policy tools to facilitate education-to-work transitions through a single integrated education system became a thorny issue for politicians, consequently compelling policy reforms and initiatives in the educational sector (Larsson, 2006; Lindell, 2004).\(^\text{11}\)

One of these political moves was the launch of a massive five-year programme called the Adult Education Initiative (Kunskapslyftet) in 1997; along with this, the government piloted an educational pathway called kvalificerad yrkesutbildning (KY). This experiment, as set out in Proposition 1995/96:145, was to begin with 1,700 participants in 1996 to test out a new educational form to be delivered by new learning providers and to be administrated by the municipalities (Sveriges Riksdag, 1996). These experimental KY tertiary programmes were designed to train students for between one to three years. One consequence of this reform was that municipalities and private companies took over the organisation

\(^{10}\) See Appendix B, Figure 8.2 for a chart that maps out the unemployment rate in Sweden over the last three decades.

\(^{11}\) In the earlier part of the twentieth century, vocational education and training (VET) existed in Sweden but was found mostly in trade schools or within companies. It was not formalised, and there did not exist a system with tests, diplomas, or national qualifications to recognise the acquisition of vocational skills and competencies (Abrahamsson, 1999). In the 1970s, a reform merged vocational education with general education into an integrated upper-secondary school system with an aim of delivering comprehensive education and eliminating socio-economical and gender biases found in educational access (Lindell, 2004; Persson Thunqvist & Hallqvist, 2014).
and provision of advanced education and training. KY was thus delivered in a variety of educational sites, such as folk high schools, adult education organisations (komvux) and private training companies, instead of a single type of educational organisation. One of the goals, following the KY experiment, was for adult education in Sweden to be reformed and developed so that it could meet the labour market challenges that individuals and organisations were anticipated to face at the turn of the century (Rubenson, 2001).

Following this pilot project (from 1996 to 2001) of providing decentralised, flexible education adapted to local labour markets, recommendations were delivered on how this tertiary educational form could be permanently established within the educational system. In 2002, advanced vocational education became a regular part of the national education system, with training places for 12,500 students (Lindell & Johanson, 2003). By 2009, a statutory board, called the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolan, MYH), was set up to oversee quality assurance, validate vocational education, skills and competences, and implement consistent funding mechanisms for post-secondary vocational education (CEDEFOP, 2009). All post-secondary vocational education and training forms, including KY, were now brought under a common framework administered by this state agency, and programmes would be delivered in “occupational schools” called yrkeshögskolan (YH).

The present higher vocational education system in Sweden has been conceived as a means to supply the industries and public sector with the “right competence at the right time”.13 As a type of educational form, the YH is young compared to universities, folk high schools, and conservatories that provide post-secondary education. It differs from universities and colleges as the programmes are shorter, are focused on

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12 The enactment of the KY experiment did not happen without contestation, as adult education is an arena that represents a diversity of interests intertwined with educational, labour market, and economic and social policies (Andersson & Wärvik, 2012). See Lindell (2004) who traced the policy-making process of the formation of this educational track, and who showed how, in its initial proposal stage in 1995, there was more support from the employers than the employee bodies and unions.

13 This slogan in Swedish — rätt kompetens i rätt tid — can be found embossed on many of the YH promotional materials.
work-based learning, involve an internship or job training component, and are developed together with industry practitioners. Because of its relative nascence, there have also been few studies on this segment of the education landscape.¹⁴

Even though the shape and form of vocational education and training in Sweden has evolved — and been criticised — over time and through different governments, it is clearly undergoing a process of expansion and institutionalisation. As such, the YH educational form will become an ever more stable fixture of the Swedish educational landscape. This was made especially evident when the Ministry of Education presented a memorandum in the autumn of 2015 that contained proposals to increase the stability of the YH and to enhance the status of this educational form by strengthening the YH “brand” (Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolan, 2016). In the 2018 budget proposal, the government announced its largest investment in YH to date, forecasting an expansion of 14,000 more training places by the year 2022 (Regeringskansliet, 2017).

What is important to note for the Swedish context is that these training places are publicly funded; hence, participants attend these programmes without a fee and are also eligible for student financial assistance to cover living costs and expenses. The set-up of such an infrastructure thus enables and facilitates labour market mobility and provides the material conditions for individuals to make school-to-work or occupational transitions.

SX is one of such schools that have been part of this educational expansion since its experimental form. Although I will discuss in subsequent sections the distinctive culture the school has and how it has developed through time and geographical boundaries, it is useful at this point to consider how the school has been able to grow and flourish due to the evolution of this segment of the educational system as well as the state’s funding support. This section on the research setting is intended to

¹⁴ Most available studies are found in the form of reports that use data collected by Statistics Sweden on behalf of the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education. They also focus predominantly on labour market outcomes; see, for example, Lind & Westerberg (2015). Sociological studies that examine vocational education in Sweden tend to be at the level of upper-secondary school (gymnasium) and not on the post-secondary level (see e.g. Berner, 2010; Ferm, Persson Thunqvist, Svensson, & Gustavsson, 2018; Högberg, 2009).
explain the significance of selecting this strategic case and programme to site the study, as well as to detail the landscape and historical backdrop from which this organisation has emerged. With these in mind, the exploration of how aspirations are formulated within a double “not-yet” situation will shortly begin.

Plan of the monograph

The monograph consists of seven parts. This introductory section presents the research question the thesis focused on, its aims, the contributions it intends to make, and the research setting. The next two chapters deal with how the research was conducted, what was accomplished, and what guided the research process. In “Theoretical Perspectives”, I discuss how I draw from theories of career scripts and theories of projection in order to attend to issues of temporality and anticipation in this particular context of transitioning into weak-form occupations. In “Methodological Considerations”, I map out the multi-method, longitudinal, and interpretative research approach adopted in this study to collect and analyse data on the individual and collective trajectories of the aspirants whom I followed over time.

The empirical discussion is then divided into three sections, with the aspirants’ school-to-work trajectories providing the sequence and frame for discussing findings. Section I deals with induction and socialisation into an occupational school and community. It follows the aspirants through their first encounters and illustrates how school culture builds faith in weak-form occupational trajectories. By focusing on three types of organisational cultural forms, the aim of this section is to demonstrate how the ceremony of getting into the school, the rituals that aspirants learn to perform once recruited, and the stories they are told and subsequently tell all serve as passageways for communicating particular principles and encoding particular scripts, especially during the stage of socialisation into the organisation as well as into the occupation (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). A strong school culture is found to engender confidence and to produce strong collective sentiments amongst the aspirants, processes that are vital for building faith in embarking, traversing, and persisting in weak-form occupations.
In Section II, the aspirants’ encounter with the labour market takes centre stage. Three distinct analyses can be found in this section. The first analyses their experiences of job searching, where six job-search scripts are identified: opportunistic, strategic, pivot, fixed, safe, and risky. The results from this analysis emphasise the multiplicity of action patterns in job searches and lead to a consideration of the role of collective job-search behaviour in individual search outcomes. In the second part of Section II, I examine the ways in which the unanticipated can throw the aspirants off their tracks and disrupt script following. Specifically, I trace three sources of uncertainty that were accounted for in the aspirants’ education-to-work transition, and which pertain to issues of worth, inequality in labour market outcomes, and unclear occupational futures. The third analysis in Section II shifts the gaze slightly to the employers; in this section, I consider the kinds of representations that hirers project as necessary in an ideal candidate and which the aspirants learn to internalise and relate to. Through an analysis of job vacancy advertisements targeting the aspirants, I uncover, for example, how personal qualities are emphasised over academic credentials, and how these qualities are often ambidextrous, conflicting, and must fit with an organisation’s prevailing culture.

The empirical finale, Section III, is dedicated to understanding how the aspirants traverse and persist in their career trajectories during the period after getting a job. The first part in this section examines how the aspirants present themselves as qualified specialists by fashioning carefully crafted, curated biographies after entering the labour market. From their occupational biographies, we see how self-presentation is a response acquired through learning and experience. Three dominant elements of self-presentation come to the fore, whereby the aspirants intentionally display mobility and multi-skilling, as well as showcasing themselves as well-connected evangelists with strong ties to their alma mater. Furthermore, as we will see, they need to build devices of validation into their self-presentations since, in weak-form occupations, what is considered a credible occupational biography is ambiguous. The second part of Section III examines how the aspirants adjust their conceptions of their “possible selves” as a response to the events and constraints they encounter in the workplace. I discuss how their imagined futures are related to issues of recognition from peers and superiors, how they grapple with the ethics of digital data extraction, analysis and use, while making
sense of normative logics that are still unstable and in the midst of crystallising.

The monograph concludes with a “Coda”, which summarises the findings, main contributions, and suggestions for future research. Here, I propose a model for examining movements between education and labour markets, specifically those into occupational pathways that are weakly defined and lacking clear career tracks. While the model shows how a strong school culture is a vital component for the acquisition of scripts and occupational socialisation, it also shows that, when scripts cease to be helpful for the aspirant in navigating “fuzzy” career pathways, deliberations take their place, and aspirants have to adapt conceptions of what is possible and permissible with the aid of individual and collective projections.
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The theoretical orientation that frames this study is composed of sensitising concepts rather than definitive ones. As earlier coined by Blumer (1954, p. 7) the two are distinguished like this: “Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitising concepts merely suggest directions along which to look”. Exploring issues through sensitising concepts involves not only investigation and interrogation but also improvisation and adventure (Faulkner, 2009). In this study, three sensitising concepts have proven to be useful for addressing the various research problems that emerged from examining trajectories and transitions. Some are existing concepts that I exploit, and some are new combinations that I have put together for exploration. Together, they frame my mode of seeing, grasping, and construing trajectories, transitions, and aspirations (Geertz, 1973). In the paragraphs to follow, I outline how each sensitising concept has offered directions for where and how to look.

Career scripts

The notion of “boundaryless careers” was first introduced by Arthur (1994) as a concept to describe the move away from stable notions of career to more informal, insecure, and discontinuous employment. In boundaryless careers, individuals more frequently move not just amongst jobs but also amongst careers. The increased physical and psychological mobility of individual careers leads to career unpredictability and career

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1 Faulkner (2009) makes this distinction of using sensitising concepts to exploit and explore.
uncertainty. The kind of aspiring digital worker I study would seem to be embarking on archetypical boundaryless careers, since their occupational pathways are not dependent on any single organisation, they are not highly regulated, and they span organisational boundaries and geographical distance. Along such lines, the careers they create are not bounded by any predetermined pattern.

Assertions that the “career is dead” were heard from the late 1990s (Hall, 1996), and alongside the notion of increased boundarylessness was that of the rise of the “protean” career (Briscoe, Hall, & Frautschy DeMuth, 2006; Hall, 1996), which argues that people increasingly manage their own careers and impose their own definitions of career success. This body of research, residing within the “new career literature” (Arthur, Inkson, & Pringle, 1999), was a reaction against, almost an antithesis of, the notion of the “organisational career” that dominated earlier research paradigms. Boundarylessness has been used to discuss creative and cultural workers (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Zwaan, ter Bogt, & Raaijmakers, 2010); information-technology workers (Gubler, Arnold, & Coombs, 2014); freelancers and workers with flexible working conditions (Allvin, Mellner, Movitz, & Aronsson, 2013; van den Born & van Witteloostuijn, 2013). It has become a much-used concept by authors trying to characterise new types of careers and the skills they require (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009).

Although the writings on the boundaryless career have broadened the research agenda by highlighting changing career preferences, work–life interaction, and peculiar views of success (Guest & Rodrigues, 2014), the concept of “boundarylessness”, like the assertion that “the career is dead”, is problematic for several reasons. As the author of this concept has point out, the notion of “careers” has been misunderstood as simply “organisational careers” or structured, defined, and predictable work trajectories (Arthur, 2014). The ability of the boundaryless career to adequately capture the nature of contemporary careers has also been questioned because of the lack of empirical data and attention to context that those using the concept often display (Dany, 2003; Dany, Louvel, & Valette, 2011; Duberley, Cohen, & Mallon, 2006). Since the boundaryless career perspective implies that people take responsibility for their own career futures, it over-emphasises the agency and supremacy of the actor, neglecting the role of institutions and societal factors (Dany et al., 2011).
Furthermore, increased flexibility in boundaries does not mean that such boundaries become less germane (Rodrigues, Guest, & Budjanovcanin, 2016). Nor can the role of institutions (such as education) or organisations (such as schools), be neglected when studying careers.

In this study, I draw on career theory as it has been applied by Chicago School sociologists and the MIT School of organisation sociologists whom they influenced (Abbott, 1988; Barley, 1986; Becker, 1982; Becker & Carper, 1956; Faulkner, 1983; Goffman, 1961; Hughes, 1937; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). In particular, classical studies of newcomers socialised into specific occupational roles, for example, Becker and colleagues’ (1961) study of medical students, and Van Maanen's (1975) study of "rookie" police, have been insightful. From this theoretical perspective, a career is composed of a subjective and an objective side. Viewing the career as Janus-faced reveals how it reflects both the individual’s needs, motives, and aspirations in relation to work as well as the societal expectations of what is worthwhile to pursue though a life course (Schein, 1977). When it is stated in this text that the occupation lacks clear career pathways, I refer to this latter external, prescriptive perspective of the career shape (Van Maanen, 1977). Because the concept of career allows the researcher’s view to oscillate between the personal and the public (Goffman, 1961), studying careers in particular times and contexts is one way to analyse culture (Nicholson & West, 1989), as well as to study both individuals and social structure in their interconnections (Cuzzocrea & Lyon, 2011).

For the Chicago School of occupational sociology, the idea of “career contingencies” is a sensitising concept that has placed emphasis on the factors that lead to career success (Faulkner, 2009). Researchers are thus often compelled to ask the question of why one particular composer, musician, or writer was more successful than another (Faulkner, 1983; Becker, 1982; Fürst, 2017). In this study, I depart from this emphasis by focusing not on occupational success but, rather, first and foremost on how these careers are traversed. Despite their emphasis on temporality, the traditional type of career research pursued by the Chicago School was often cross-sectional and assumed institutional stability, portraying people as members of one specific social system (Barley, 1989). This study, however, does not share such an assumption, instead taking change and flux in the social system as givens. As elaborated later in the methods...
Within career theory, I follow closely the work of Stephen Barley and his notion of “career scripts”. A student of Van Maanen, his first paper was on the career of funeral directing (Barley, 1983). His further research has focused on professional and technical work as well as on the effects of technological change on work and organisation (Barley, 1986, 1990, 1996; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). In the late eighties, in a chapter for the *Handbook of Career Theory*, Barley revisited the legacy of the Chicago School of Sociology’s work on careers, identities, and institutions. There, he attempted to combine two popular theories of that time — institutional theory (à la Berger and Luckmann) and structuration theory (à la Giddens) — in the formulation of the “career scripts” framework.

For Barley, “scripts” may be thought of as plans for recurrent patterns of action that define the actors’ roles in a particular interaction order (Barley, 1986, 1989). Like all scripts, careers offer actors ways to interpret and to traverse a particular social world. Interactions are scripted in different ways, and each type of script follows a particular plot (Barley, 1986). The notion of scripts as applied by Barley has roots in Goffman’s ideas of people being aware that certain settings and contexts require certain specific performances (Goffman, 1956). Barley also built his ideas on the works of psychologists who had proposed that a script can be viewed as a type of knowledge structure (Abelson, 1981) or as a metaphor for understanding the means by which members of an organisation understand and perform expected behaviour (Gioia & Poole, 1984). Scripts are therefore both cognitive and behavioural.

Repetition can often be found in organisations through cultural forms like rituals, customs, and procedures, allowing many examples of scripted organisational behaviour to be investigated; organisations such as schools are thus ideal sites for studying how scripts are acquired and learnt through experience (Gioia & Poole, 1984). In Barley’s conception of the career-scripts framework, he asserts that studies need to have a dual focus of examining the link “between career scripts and patterns of interaction as well as the relation between such scripts and the institutions they encode” (Barley, 1989, p. 54). Consequently, these studies should be longitudinal so that the dynamics of scripts being encoded, fashioned,
enacted, and constituted can be observed and analysed (Barley, 1989). The encoding of scripts, for example, takes place frequently during the stage of socialisation when rules are internalised and appropriate behaviour learnt (Barley & Tolbert, 1997), while the next dynamic can be observed by examining how actors draw on scripts to fashion meaningful career biographies (Barley, 1989).

The scripts framework has been used to research inter- and intra-organisational careers within specific occupational domains, such as that of technicians (Barley, 1986), academics (Dany et al., 2011; Duberley et al., 2006), and identity work within organisations with changing institutional logics (Bévort & Suddaby, 2016). By demonstrating how scripts steer patterns of thought and mediate between agency and structure, these studies bring forth the sociological utility of the concept (Duberley et al., 2006). Note that various communities have their own scripts that individuals interpret and respond to in different ways when enacting their careers. That is to say, there is no one singular script, but many. The consequences of how individuals act out scripts can maintain, challenge, or transform the organisation or the occupation over time (Barley & Tolbert, 1997).

In this study, I use “scripts” as a sensitising concept to study how a cohort of individuals embarks on weak-form occupations and how they use these interpretive schemes to navigate the uncertain moments of education-to-work transitions. In doing so, I aim to ask where these “cognitive maps” that are provided to the aspirant originate from and how they “are diffused, negotiated and contested” (Garsten, 2008, p. 7). Coincidentally or not, the aspirants I study would eventually also work with computing scripts and algorithms, which, in this technical sense, refer to an automated series of instructions carried out in a specific order.

My perspective of scripts is closely related to that used by researchers cited here in that, through interaction with others, scripts shape the social role and behaviour deemed appropriate for particular situations. The aspirants are at a phase of undergoing transitions, exiting a previous role, and entering a new one. Furthermore, individuals in a “state of transition are more or less in an anxiety-producing situation. They are motivated to reduce this anxiety by learning the functional and social requirements of their new role as quickly as possible” (Van Maanen,
There is thus a need for them to rely on interpretive schemes, at least during initial encounters and first steps.

Specifically, the study is concerned with the scripts that the aspirants learn and enact in their interaction with the occupational community they aspire to join. The use of the term “occupational community” might seem discordant, given that the occupation in question is at a nascent stage. However, the concept here appeals to the idea of a community as symbolically constructed (Cohen, 1985). In other words, an occupational community can be regarded here, following Van Maanen and Barley’s (1984, p. 12) definition, as “a group of people who consider themselves to be engaged in the same sort of work; who identify (more or less positively) with their work; who share with one another a set of values, norms, and perspectives that apply to, but extend beyond, work related matters; and whose social relationships meld the realms of work and leisure”.

Another term that I use intentionally in this thesis and highlight in its title is that of “aspirants”. This is not a term assigned by the school to the students I followed or a term they use for themselves. Rather, the motivation behind this usage is to signal my interest in these individuals as more than just newcomers, rookies, or neophytes; they are as continually engaging in a process of aspiring or striving, not only in relation to their individual career trajectories but also in relation to the development of weak-form occupations. For this reason, I continue to refer to them as aspirants even after they enter the labour market, since the future orientation of their actions do not simply end at the point of when they get a job.

**Projection**

Constructed with the aid of the past and present, aspiring is a future-oriented action. Within sociological research, the rich field of social stratification has shed light on how the reproduction of social inequalities can be explained by expectations held by actors in their youth and in particular social contexts. In these studies, Beckert (2016) contends that aspirations are too often investigated as a dependent variable, further down the line of a person’s trajectory, and that these studies tend to focus on horizons that are fixed (see e.g. Ball, Macrae, & Maguire, 1999).
Similarly, Mische (2014, p. 439) asserts that much of the work in sociology pertaining to future aspirations focus on role expectations and interpretive schemes that are routinised, consequently paying less attention to “reflexive engagement with future scenarios of action”. Together with Emirbayer, she argues that actors, compelled by their evolving desires and purposes, are capable of moving away from “schemas, habits, and traditions that constrain social identities and institutions” (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, p. 984). Sociological approaches that are anchored in future perspectives in the social structure thus neglect the creativity generated from expectations or “an actor’s ability to imagine futures that deviate from existing norms and habits and create counterfactual worlds” (Beckert, 2016, p. 53).

As these individuals whom I follow are in a double “not-yet” situation (as mentioned earlier, not yet in their aspired positions and entering weak-form occupations that are not yet consolidated), reliance on scripts is only one part of their decision-making process. A world with an “open future” that depends on risky decisions forces the aspirants into calculative and reflexive modes of action and requires them to make decisions through intentional rationality (Beckert, 2016). Beckert defines intentional rationality as a situation where “actors want to enhance their utility but do not necessarily know what strategy will lead them to achieve this end” (Beckert, 2013, p. 220). Some of these intentional rational actions enacted by the aspirants include investing time, money, and resources in professional training with the hope of future gain. As this research will show, a prevalent hope of future gain amongst the aspirants involves an expectation that they will possess a unique type of expertise that will be sought in the labour market because they were trained in this area early and “got out there” before the crowd formed.

Such personal (and state) investments in “human capital” are connected to the issue of valuation, since investing in skill formation implies a certain value assigned with the “expectations of future profits or utility” (Beckert, 2016, p. 168). However, the investment in a specific form of vocational training, although motivated by a desired future outcome, is not guaranteed (Beckert, 2016). Furthermore, for Beckert, expectations can never be actual forecasts of the future, merely projections that can only be verified once the future becomes present. Mische (2009), who has similarly been concerned with the link between future cognition
and social action, reminds us that the concept of the “project”, where actors engage in a retrospective and prospective process of drawing on “stocks of knowledge” while “fantasising” about progression, has its roots in the social phenomenology of Alfred Schutz (1967), as well as pragmatist theories of Mead (1932) and Dewey (1922). For Dewey, thoughts about future happenings are the only way we can judge the present and evaluate its significance, for “without such projection, there can be no projects, no plans for administering present energies, overcoming present obstacles” (Dewey 1922, p. 267). Projectivity is thus composed of “creative as well as wilful foresight… a process of imaginative experimentation with projected courses of action” (Mische, 2009, p. 697). To study projection is to have a pragmatic understanding of action, whereby expectations and goals are viewed as the outcomes of a process unfolding in time (Beckert, 2013).

By using projection as a sensitising concept in this study, I join others who advocate that, when people interact, they “coordinate their orientations to the future” (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013, p. 909). While aspirants imagine a future of gains by taking on certain investments and embarking on a particular weak-form occupational pathway, employers and governmental bodies similarly engage in instilling expectations by projecting imageries of ideal candidates or supporting skills formation in this nascent-stage occupational field. Projection operates “both at the level of individual lives — particularly during life course transitions, crises, and turning points — as well as at the level of collectivities, which jointly elaborate, argue over, and attempt to implement projects of social change” (Mische, 2014, p. 441). To examine future projections is not to assume that they will come true (Mische, 2009). Instead, the sociological purpose is to explore the ways that projections affect the actions and interactions of the aspirants within school and work and the movement between them.

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2 A related line of research that is concerned with the performativity of expectations and promises can be found in the “sociology of expectations”, a research area that can be said to have its roots in Science and Technology Studies (STS) (see Borup et al., 2006; van Lente & Rip, 1998). The research in this area is, however, primarily concerned with the role of expectations in shaping technological developments.
School culture

So far, I have devoted a fair amount of attention to explaining why I have sited this research in a school. In the paragraphs to follow, I would like to specify the theoretical perspective adopted in studying schools. The idea that organisations have their own “culture” gained popularity from the 1970s onward, which led to researchers adopting cultural concepts to study different dimensions of organisational behaviour (Allaire & Fiersiotu, 1984; Trice & Beyer, 1984). It is generally agreed that organisational culture is shared because it defines the group; since it can be learnt, cultural elements are passed on to new members as they react to problems of “external adaptation and internal integration” (Schein, 2004). This study adopts a cultural approach to studying organisations, and the organisation in focus here is a specialist training school. As early as in the 1930s, Waller (1932, p. 96) wrote,

Schools have a culture that is definitely their own. There are, in the school, complex rituals of personal relationships, a set of folkways, mores, and irrational sanctions, a moral code based upon them. There are games, which are sublimated wars, teams, and an elaborate set of ceremonies concerning them. There are traditions and traditionalists waging their world-old battle against innovators.

Schools have been said to transmit two cultures: an instrumental one and an expressive one. According to Bernstein and colleagues (1966) the former consists of day-to-day activities that pertain to the acquisition of vocationally important skills, while the expressive culture consists of activities, procedures, and judgements that transmit values and their derived norms. The more recent body of research on school culture has tended to focus on how leadership (particularly school principals and management) ought to define cultural patterns and how changes in school culture should be enacted by teachers (see, for example, Hargreaves, 1995). The consequences of “positive school culture” on school achievement and effectiveness, and, on the flipside, “negative school culture”, or toxic cultures that should be eradicated (Deal & Peterson, 2016), drive the outcome-focused and policy orientation of these studies (see Prosser, 1999, for a summary of research). Much of existing research
on school culture is also set in primary and secondary schools, and less so on adult learning organisations, thus shaping the content and foci of these studies: staff room and departmental culture, bullying, inclusion versus exclusion, effects of healthy learning environments on students’ grades, etc.

In this thesis, I intend to draw directly from perspectives in theories of organisational culture and to offer a sociological take on school culture in an adult learning organisation where the student–teacher relationship is significantly different, if not of an altogether different kind. Other forms of social interaction and relationships are key to everyday life in these schools, for example, the students’ relationships with mentors, industry practitioners, and alumni. Of interest here are the affects in school culture and their effects on a particular aspirational context, and the role these play in regulating — by warming up or cooling down — the ambitions of aspirants and in setting the tone when they embark on a new occupational trajectory.

If we move back a few decades, we can see that the study of schools has actually been central to the evolution of research on organisational culture. Schools were found to be resilient to bureaucratic interpretation and to be organised in ways that were inconsistent with formal organisational structure (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985). As organisations, schools construct and mediate certainty, and their culture provides a basis for this organisational control (Ahrne, 1994; Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985). An organisation’s culture can thus be viewed as a representation of the ways in which its members learn to cope with uncertainty (Schein, 1983).

Examining the organisation from a cultural perspective is appealing here since it forces the analysis to consider how certain behaviours, which may appear irrational, non-rational, or unproductive to non-members, can be functional for members of the organisation (Trice & Beyer, 1984). Such a perspective builds on the Durkheimian emphasis of the importance of myth and ritual, whereby “symbolic representations of a complex social reality are fundamental to collective life” (Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985, p.
It should therefore be made clear that culture, rather than social structure, is what I attend to in the observations of the school.3

I also borrow from the concept of “organisational identification” to elucidate how aspirants relate to the school and its culture. Although various definitions of organisational identification abound, it can be generally regarded as occurring when aspirants link their membership in a particular school to their own conceptions of self (Ashforth & Mael, 1996). This connection can be cognitive (for example, internalising organisational values), emotional (pride in membership), or both (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Riketta, 2005). To clarify, this study will approach organisational identification as being specific to the aspirants’ identification with the school, not with the workplaces they eventually enter. I distinguish this sense of school membership (organisational identification) with their sense of membership in occupational groups, which, in this study, is termed “occupational identification” (Becker & Carper, 1956; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984).

Organisational identification is valuable to examine here because the actions that aspirants take in their career trajectories are shaped both by the attributes they ascribe to themselves and by the attributes they perceive others to infer about them from having membership in a particular school (Dutton et al., 1994). In other words, if the aspirant perceives a positive external image of the school — that others view it to be reputable and the training they receive to be valuable — it could translate to pride in being a student or graduate of the school, promoting more commitment to the organisation and its mandates even after they have left its very portals and have entered work sites.

Finally, it is worthwhile to note here that one flourishing area of research on organisational culture has been the study of emotions, which explores how affect and emotions are vital both to the process of organising and to participation in organisational life (Elfenbein, 2008).
Fineman, 2000; Putnam & Mumby, 1993). In these studies, especially pertaining to the sociology of work, emotions are analysed as forms of labour (Hochschild, 2003) and as something integral to the building of strong collectives and viable work environments (Putnam & Mumby, 1993). Although the focus of this study is not on emotions, the ways in which organisations like schools can pick up on uncomfortable feelings and uncertainties and transform them into anticipation and aspiration is of particular interest here. Likewise, it would be impossible to ignore the emotional component to projection. Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 987) write, “Actors invest effort in the formulation of project because in some way or other they care about (not just ‘have an interest in’) what will happen to them in the future.” In examining the aspirants’ reflections about the future, I therefore also consider how these projections are characterised by emotional engagement.

Summary

The theoretical perspective in this study is framed by three sensitising concepts: career scripts, projection, and school culture. I am aware that such a theoretical preference might be considered pluralistic for some readers. The first and last concepts (career scripts and school culture) are more closely related to symbolic interactionism, while the second concept (projection) is rooted in social phenomenology and pragmatism. However, since symbolic interactionism has its roots in pragmatism, such a combination of perspectives is not completely incompatible. Furthermore, as already pointed out by others (Beckert, 2016; Mische, 2009; van Lente & Rip, 1998), studies that focus on future-oriented actions seek to shake off an either/or focus on structure or agency. Instead, they attend to the longstanding neglect of “prospective stories and diffuse scenarios as key phenomena of social life” (van Lente & Rip 1998, p. 204). Rather than being incompatible, the conceptual diversity directs research attention to different parts of an aspirant’s trajectory and suggests two ways of

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4 More specifically, Blumerian symbolic interactionism has been argued as essentially continuing from the Dewey branch of American pragmatism, with Mead as the main precursor of symbolic interactionism (Lewis, 1976).
approaching the study of aspirants’ actions. In the table below, I map out how each concept relates to the various research foci in this thesis.

Table 2.1. Concepts and research foci

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Building on perspectives of</th>
<th>Research focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career scripts</td>
<td>Career theory, script theory, theories of job search</td>
<td>How aspirants meet the labour market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projectivity</td>
<td>Theories of anticipation and aspiration</td>
<td>How aspirants fashion biographies and project occupational futures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School culture</td>
<td>Theories of organisational culture, occupational socialisation, organisational identification</td>
<td>The role of schools in preparing aspirants for job roles that are not clearly defined</td>
</tr>
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The first sensitising concept, career scripts, builds on career theory, script theory, and theories of job search. It is used to examine how aspirants meet the labour market. Because of the Janus-faced nature of “career” that this study treats as a fundamental characteristic, and the mediating role of scripts between the individual and the institution, the use of the concept here spans both the micro-level (aspirant) and meso-level (school, potential employers). The second sensitising concept, projectivity, builds on theories of anticipation and aspiration, and addresses the area of the research that is concerned with how aspirants fashion their occupational biographies and project occupational futures. This concept is used predominantly at the micro-level of the aspirant’s trajectory. The third and final sensitising concept of school culture builds on the theoretical perspectives of organisational culture, occupational socialisation, and organisational identification. I use this concept predominantly for the area of study that focuses on the role of the school in preparing aspirants for weak-form occupations. Thus, this concept operates here at the meso-level.
In sum, these perspectives are drawn from to aid in examining what goes on at a particular intersection of education and work, and in attending to this helix of temporality and anticipation, cognition and action, retrospection and protention. The level of analysis starts out from the educational form (a tertiary vocational school), and moves down to the programme (the cohort) and then to the individual (the aspirant). What is being analysed, with the aid of these theoretical perspectives, are routinised activities, procedures, and cultural forms (scripts), before panning out to aspirants’ more deliberative efforts and engagement with futures (projection). In the next chapter, I outline in detail the methodological considerations and how the study was conducted.
Difficult as it is to study the “not-yets”, there are ways to overcome the methodological challenges of analysing something that is changing and not fully formed. One solution, this study proposes, is to focus on transitions as a way to attend to temporality and as a way of capturing and observing change. More recent studies have argued, however, that the school-to-work transition is less neat and clear-cut than analysts make it to be, especially since education is expanding into the life-period of work (Abbott, 2005; Guile, 2009). While I do not disagree with such an observation, it should be made clear that this study sets out to study a particular marked-out movement starting from a period in school through to the period of entering the labour market. The intention of vocational training is to facilitate education-to-work transitions, wherever an individual might be in the life course. Some of the individuals I followed were making the education-to-work transition for the first time; others were making occupational transitions by choice or, in some cases, because of other circumstances such as country migration.

The focus in this present study is not on the particularities of the kind of transition but, rather, on the fact that a transition happened that now puts aspirants on pathways into weak-form occupations. Investing time and money in a specialist training programme signifies a turning point for these individuals, since they could either exit after the training and not commit, or move deeper into the world of work they trained for. As defined by Abbott (1997, p. 99), turning points are critical junctures where “action might make particularly consequential bridges by making or breaking links between many networks”. Furthermore, career transitions are a particular type of status passage that offers the
opportunity to study how aspirants renegotiate both private and public views of the self (Ibarra, 1999). More broadly, I am interested in the transitions that “punctuate” (Pallas, 2003) career trajectories, for instance, getting into a selective training school, being trained, looking for work, and getting a job.

Another methodological consideration in my study has been to begin the examination of this transition with an educational organisation. The characteristics of this particular school have already been elaborated in the preceding section, but I will spend a few lines here to explain this methodological move. By starting from a specific school, the social world under investigation becomes “bounded”, which aids in the study of both individuals and cohorts. Career lines can only emerge when a number of individuals have followed a path that begins to be socially recognised, either by the group itself or by others (Barley, 1989). Furthermore, by focusing on a cohort, the unit becomes a “small group” and, as Fine (1979, p. 744) proposes, “small groups can be examined adequately, and they represent locations where much culture... has its origin”. Sherry Ortner’s work in *New Jersey Dreaming*, in which she tracked down her classmates from her high school class of 1958 and analysed the trajectories of that particular cohort, exemplifies how the methodological choice of a cohort analysis can be strategic in allowing the researcher to gather insights from examining the rich linkages between informants, their shared projects, and institutional connections (Ortner, 2003).

The final methodological consideration has been to use a mixed methods approach in data collection in order to attain data over time and at the individual, cohort, and organisational level. The text to follow outlines three main sources of data that were gathered, the reasons for using them, as well as data collection and analytical strategies. 1

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1 In its conception, the methodology of this research was inspired by the works of Andrew Abbott and Luc Boltanski who, despite coming from rather different traditions, were both concerned with occupations and temporality. Abbott, from the Chicago School of sociology, advocates what he calls processual sociology; Boltanski, from the “pragmatic” school of French sociology, theorises about conventions, risks, and uncertainties, amongst other sociological concerns. Abbott has examined the emergence of the medical profession in the United States (Abbott, 1988), while Boltanski has analysed how the French “cadres”, or engineers, constitute themselves as a class (Boltanski, 1987). They both used systemic and
Longitudinal qualitative research

Within sociological literature, important empirical studies that have aided our understanding of educational transitions into work have been largely quantitative (Breen & Jonsson, 2005; Kerckhoff, 2000; Mare, 1980, 1981; Shavit & Müller, 1998). Due to the focus on processes, events, and time, coupled with the research question posed as a “how” question, this study adopts an interpretative research approach. More specifically, I build on the method of longitudinal qualitative research as my primary means of gathering data. Longitudinal qualitative research can be viewed as a wedding between, on the one hand, qualitative research, which attends to meaning and perspectives that people developed from experiencing events, and, on the other, longitudinal research, which attends to trajectory and the course of experiences and events (Hermanowicz, 2016). An event can be seen as a collision of interests, just as the same event can be interpreted by the aspirants in similar or different ways. This approach thus allows me to follow these aspirants through various significant events, experienced at the same time, and to observe how they make sense of their trajectories retrospectively and prospectively as they relate to their surroundings, school, peers, mentors, future employers, and the labour market.

This methodological move consists of conducting semi-structured interviews, which are valuable in allowing aspirants to develop a personal narrative (Cochran, 1990), both in retrospection and prospection. Narratives showcase the intentions of individuals; they humanise time and are crucial means through which individuals organise their experiences into “temporally meaningful episodes” (Richardson, 1990, pp. 117, 124). In this study, the aspirants express their imaginaries of the future in the form of narratives that demonstrate their “convictions, beliefs, fears and hopes, supported by calculative tools” (Beckert, 2016, p. 133). The narrative approach allows researchers to identify ways in which futures are thought of by means of stories about what “will, could, or should” happen (Mische, 2014, p. 444). The aspirants are also able to provide historical approaches to their respective studies, examining processes of institutionalisation taking place in the arenas of work organisations, schools, and governmental agencies.
METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

retrospective accounts, allowing us to peer into the subjective face of the career. Subjective careers, according to Barley (1989), change over time as individuals shift their “social footing” and reformulate their past and future in order to come to terms with the present.

Earlier, Duberley and colleagues (2006) emphasised that, for career theory to progress, researchers should place a stronger focus on longitudinal studies that map the relations amongst individuals’ perceptions of institutional contexts that are evolving. By following these same individuals over a time period that is sufficient enough to collect data on specified conditions of change, researchers are better equipped to examine how people interpret and respond to temporal change across their lives (Hermanowicz, 2013). The longitudinal approach also facilitates the gathering of data of ongoing events and processes that are taking place in these individuals’ lives. By examining processes, we gain insights on turning points and can more clearly disentangle what is objective (i.e., what “actually happened”) from what might be a subjective account that is retrospectively told.

Consider this example from empirical material collected for this study. At our first meeting at the start of their training programme, one of my interviewees told me about his journey to come to study in Sweden, a move that was unplanned and impulsive. He decided to quit his job, sell his car to pay for the education, and move to a different country, all in the span of three days. He emphasised many times in the interview about how it was such a “crazy” move:

Whenever I speak to people that I’m an impulsive person, I use this example because I don’t think anything I’ve done in my life explains better... In the space of three days, then a month, I decided to change my whole life, sold my car, to pay for this, came to Sweden — a place I knew nothing about — for a year and a half.

Two years later, after undergoing the training programme, starting a job, and being in work, this interviewee explained to me that his migration to

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2 International students (who were non-Nordic residents) had to pay a fee to attend this training programme.
Sweden to study at this particular school was intentional, all part of a plan that he had thought through carefully.

What underlies this sort of adjustment in narratives at different periods? One criticism of reliance on qualitative interviews is that it might lead to an image of individual selves as more coherent, with less contradiction and unpredictability than real lives normally have. As Lamont and Swidler have written earlier, “a life told from the present backward almost certainly will appear to have inevitability and a direction that it did not have as it was lived” (Lamont & Swidler 2014, p. 163). Had I only interviewed this aspirant when he was already at work, confident and successful, I would not have known if what he was telling me was more coherent and intentional than it appeared in relation to earlier narratives. Longitudinal data allow us to thematically analyse how aspirants shift between moments of uncertainty and certainty, and how they alter meanings and perspectives developed from experiencing events and shift in their “social footing” (Barley, 1989).

Data collection of longitudinal qualitative interviews

The reasons for selecting this school and specialist training programme have already been explained in the section on the research setting. I made further decisions to ensure that sampling of interviewees was purposive (Eisenhardt, 1989). For example, the Stockholm campus of SX was selected out of the range of various campuses around the world not only because it serves as the organisation’s headquarters but, in addition, because it is the biggest campus with the most full-time programmes. The longitudinal qualitative research was conducted over three years in the 2010s. In the first year of the study, I met with the programme manager of the cohort that I would eventually follow. An alumnus of the school, an acquaintance whom I got to know after I moved to Stockholm, put us in contact. After setting up a meeting and discussing the research aims, the programme manager granted me access to conduct research with her

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3 Besides full-time programmes, the school also offers part-time programmes, intensive courses (such as Master Classes), and online courses, which are tailored more specifically to practitioners in the field and are outside the remit of the YH framework.
programme group. Although brokered, “getting into” SX was uncomplicated in comparison with more difficult or impossible to access events, situations, or organisations (cf. Garsten & Sörbom, 2017; Sundberg, 2015). Throughout the research process, I was also given the autonomy to reach out directly to participants and to move in and out of the school rather freely, which, in my opinion, speaks to the openness of the organisation.

One month after meeting with the programme manager, I was given a lecture slot with the students at their studio. The invitation presentation was publicised and open to all students in the programme cohort. I presented the purpose and aim of the research, highlighted the longitudinal aspect, and invited them to participate in this study. The students were adept at asking questions. One asked me what I was looking out for “specifically”. Another had trouble with the way I defined “digital creatives”, a term I had used in the early stage of the research to describe individuals like them. Approximately forty participants were present at that time. I passed around sign-up forms and my name card. Some students came by to me later and commented that they found the research interesting, while another told me to put my details on Facebook, as “no one uses paper anymore”. That day, sixteen of them signed up. As the training programme duration was short, demanding, and revolved around team projects, I managed my expectations about commitment to and participation in a research project that was longitudinal in nature. As I did not offer any type of incentive for participation (material or financial), the students’ long-term participation would be done largely out of interest or support for research.

Ten of the sixteen students who signed up responded to my request for the first meeting. Eventually, one from the ten dropped out due to personal reasons that made meeting difficult. Altogether, I had nine participants whom I would follow over the years and interview on three occasions. This resulted in twenty-seven interviews conducted with this group of individuals. The aspirants whom I followed ranged from being in

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4 I did offer to pay for coffee or lunch at the interview venue, if and when the interview was done at a cafe or restaurant. Some refused and insisted on paying for their own purchase, while others obliged.

5 The limitations of volunteer sampling are discussed in the text to follow.
their early twenties to their fifties. Eight of them had attended some sort of tertiary educational programme prior to enrolling at SX. This included completing a university programme, dropping out of a university programme, or completing another type of vocational or specialist training. All except for one had prior work experience from interning, working part-time, or working full-time in related or different occupational fields. The female to male ratio was four is to five. Their occupational interests varied and included development, programming, advertising, digital data analysis, and strategy. I am rather confident of having captured a broad variation from the experiences of the group followed here, such that “the uncommon case is as important as the most common kind of case” (Larsson, 2009, p. 31).

For this educational programme, the last segment of training involves a work placement in the industry. This is a position that the aspirants must secure for themselves and complete in order to attain their diploma. The structure of this learning journey is thus unique in that it enabled me to have a longitudinal qualitative interview research design and to follow these students through the process of transitioning from education into work, as they shuffle between moments of uncertainty and certainty, and as they make sense of the values particular to the labour market they are to enter. By following a cohort over time, I was presented with the opportunity to compare their individual and collective accounts as they experienced significant events in tandem.

Figure 3.1. Design for longitudinal qualitative interviews

In summary, my first meeting with these aspirants at Timepoint 1 (T1) was when they were in the initial stages of their training programme. The next interview with each research participant was conducted at the
final stage of their training and as they searched for internship and job opportunities (T2). The last interview (T3) was conducted after the aspirants experienced work in the labour market for some time. Interviews were conducted on- or off-campus, depending on the preference of the interviewee. At T3, when they had started to work, I would meet them somewhere closer to their offices.6

A different interview schedule was prepared for each time point, so three different schedules were used over the three waves of interviews. At each time point, there were questions that would relate to the past, questions that focused on the present, and ones that discussed the future. The questions were crafted via a hybrid approach in that they were informed by theory but also allowed insights from emerging data to take me deeper or away from particular research pursuits. I asked a lot of “how” questions, that is, questions phrased as “how” rather than ones phrased as “why” (Becker, 1998). As Becker (1998, p. 59) suggests,

“How?” questions, when I asked them, gave people more leeway, were less constraining, invited them to answer in any way that suited them, to tell a story that included whatever they thought the story ought to include in order to make sense. They didn’t demand a “right” answer, didn’t seem to be trying to place responsibility for bad actions or outcomes anywhere.

As examples of questions posed during these interviews — at T1: How did you find out about SX? How was the selection process? At T2: How has your experience at the school been? How have you been looking for work? At T3: How would you describe what you do at work? How have you been surprised? As stated earlier, the interviews were semi-structured. I followed a protocol, but each interview (especially after T1) took on its own character depending on the trajectory of the aspirant. Before I headed off for an aspirant interview at T(x), I would read the

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6 Two of the final interviews at T3 were done via Skype (one aspirant was working abroad, and one could not meet in person due to personal family reasons). While I am generally not in favour of using video calls as a basic mode of interviewing, I was compelled to do so due to practical constraints. These interviews turned out to be insightful, despite the medium in which they took place.
transcript or listen again to the aspirant's interview from T(x-1). I would then look at the protocol and tailor the questions to the individual with whom I was interviewing, since their experiences started to diverge over time.

All interviews were recorded with consent and lasted between one to two hours. I would not take notes, so I relied a lot on memory for documenting the non-verbal communication, or what White (2008) calls the “three g’s of semiotics” — the glances, gestures, and grunts — that are used to express relations in stories. I made field notes immediately after each interview was done and eventually included these notes in the interview transcripts.

**Analytical and interpretive strategies**

All interviews were transcribed by me. Because the data collection spanned over years, transcribing took place over time. After all the interviews were transcribed, the transcripts were then imported into NVivo, together with the fieldnotes, for organising and coding. Although I had conducted preliminary analyses of the data collected from the first two time points, the systematic, formal coding process was conducted only after all the data from the three waves were collected. The interviews were sorted by time waves. Starting with T3, I worked iteratively with an initial coding tree, using theory codes, that applied Barley's (1989) scripts framework, as well as relevant theories of socialisation drawn from organisational research (Dutton et al., 1994; Kunda, 2006; Van Maanen, 1978). I then moved back and forth between the data and theory, a process of iteration that resulted in a more elaborated coding template with categories that were inductively generated (King, 1994); these focused on school culture (encoding of scripts), the job search (enacting of scripts), and self-presentation (persistence and constitution of scripts). I also identified commonalities across scripts and compared scripts over time (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). While coding, I kept memos. One such memo

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7 See earlier section, “Theoretical Perspectives”.

was a summary of each aspirant’s trajectory. Another memo was used for keeping track of how my coding nodes evolved over time.

In longitudinal research, more time is introduced for ideas to “come about”, emerge, and develop; thus research emphases, questions, and themes may evolve and change over time (Hermanowicz, 2013, p. 195). Over the phase of analysis, I found that the scripts framework had its limits in allowing me to adequately formulate explanations for what I was observing in the data, especially with regards to the aspirants’ future-oriented actions. This compelled me to move beyond the initial scripts framework to reformulate and discover new approaches, particularly from theories on aspiration and projection (Beckert, 2016; Mische, 2009).

As aspiring “digital storytellers”, the interviewees were cognisant of how they talked and presented themselves in the interviews. Orchestrating narratives and storytelling were amongst the skills they were trained to do and eventually to use at work. When the interview came to an end, there were times when some aspirants would say, “Is that it?” One even asked me to pose more questions, since he wanted to keep talking. Even though narratives are an essential aspect of experience and trajectory, these factors above cautioned me against relying too heavily on narrative tropes and to focus instead on searching for patterns, asking why some stories can be told and others not, or why some stories are favoured and others prevented (Abbott, 2001). Notably, the aspirants in this study were both informants of the school as well as self-reporters of their own actions and decisions. In considering them as informants, I compared the accounts of the school across interviewees. In considering them as self-reporters, I compared their accounts across time as well as across interviewees.

Throughout this thesis, I offer interpretations of the empirical material by developing concepts and typologies (Becker, 1998; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). This strategy is a way to get to the point of generalisation via context similarity; it is particularly useful for case studies where there is a lot of context data (Larsson, 2009). As should become apparent in the empirical sections, I strive in presenting my analyses to carry on a constant dialogue between my interpretation of the empirical material and earlier research by others. The prior research I draw on while anchoring these interpretations might not always stem from the same theoretical perspective. I would attribute this to the nature of
THE ASPIRANTS

studying school-to-work transitions, which benefits from greater insights by taking advantage of several theoretical traditions.

Supplementary interviews and organisational ethnography

In this study, sampling took place at various levels. As mentioned earlier, purposive sampling was used for recruiting volunteers into the longitudinal group. As the research progressed, I also adopted the technique of theoretical sampling, whereby the data that were collected and the preliminary analyses from time point “x” shaped what kinds of questions I would ask at time point “x+1”. As questions emerged through the research process, they also shaped the kinds of interviews I would conduct beyond the longitudinal group with other key informants and affiliates of the school. For example, I interviewed SX alumni, the chair of the steering committee of the Digi cohort that I followed, SX programme managers (past and present), and the organisation’s relationship managers on campuses outside of Sweden. These interviews were conducted to uncover how affiliates describe the organisation, its purpose, and their relation to it, and to fill in any gaps in knowledge I might have regarding the school and its programme. In total, the number of interviews conducted in this study (inclusive of the longitudinal interviews) was thirty-four.

I also made frequent visits to the Stockholm campus of SX and its surroundings, lived in the neighbourhood of the campus for a quarter of a year, and attended SX events in Stockholm. In addition, I visited its learning hubs located outside of Sweden in order to observe and understand how the school is organised globally. The goal of theoretical sampling is to select cases that are likely to replicate or extend the emergent theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). The sampling procedure is also grounded in this basic question: “What groups or subgroups does one turn to next in data collection? And for what theoretical purpose?” (Glaser & Strauss, 1999, p. 47). As I made discoveries through the research process, they led me to collect other forms of data (for example, job ads and digital profiles) that would assist with grasping a fuller understanding of the
phenomenon in question. These other methods will be elaborated in the paragraphs to follow.

Limitations and reflections on method and ethics

There are several points of reflection with regards to this particular phase and method of data collection via longitudinal qualitative interviews. Some of these points are what I view as potential shortcomings or limitations, and others are reflections on ethical issues.

First, all of the interviews were conducted in English, even though for all of my interviewees, English was not their first language. This was done out of practicality, and can be justified since the language in use at SX is English, and, since the students represented an international group, it was the lingua franca amongst all aspirants in the longitudinal interview group. Although they were not speaking in their first language in these interviews, a factor that might have affected the flow of the conversations, all the aspirants were proficient in English and did not seem to feel uncomfortable or have problems expressing themselves in this language.

Secondly, the longitudinal aspect of this research meant that developing some kind of relationship with the interviewees was rather inevitable. Hermanowicz (2013) notes that an advantage of this participant–researcher relationship can be that interviewees are more willing to share private and detailed accounts than many initial interviews might obtain. My interviewees allowed me to enter highly anxious moments and to journey with them, such that I could watch them traverse a particular transition in their life course. I was able to observe how their style, presentation, and the way they spoke changed as they entered the labour market and evolved from student to worker. One aspect of the longitudinal approach used was that the interviewees might “save stories” to tell me. For example, one interviewee told me at our last T3 interview, “Every time I reach a milestone, I think, ‘I have to tell Rebecca about this the next time [we meet]!’” Relating to an earlier point, this became part of the orchestration of their narrative, their career storyline. It was imperative for me to have a good relationship with the interviewees so they would agree to meet with me repeatedly over time and so there would
be no attrition from this interview group. Fortunately, this turned out to be the case. I have thought of my “outsider” position in relation to them, that of being non-Swede and coming from a non-commercial (academic) sphere, as a characteristic that perhaps enabled me to come across as less threatening to them than an “insider” might have been.

In the conduct and presentation of the findings, I take seriously my responsibility as a researcher in protecting the identities of my informants; accordingly, I have undertaken the following procedures to ensure this. First, participation in the longitudinal research was voluntary, and all participants in this longitudinal group signed an informed consent form.8 In the consent form and in my initial briefings with them before the interviews, they were informed of what the research entailed, that an audio recording device would be used to record the interview, and that data collected would be used in analyses forming the basis of my doctoral thesis and publications. They were also notified of their rights as a participant: that they could pull out at any time of the research and that, although information gathered during the study would be published, they would not be identified and their personal data would be kept confidential. All the participants signed the consent form after they understood the nature of the research.

Even though some of the interviewees indicated that they did not mind being named in the publications, I have applied the measure of ensuring anonymity across all informants. Doing so has been challenging due to the small group followed and possible identifying characteristics of the school and the programme. Hence, besides changing the names of the interviewees, I leave out nationalities and mix up genders (for the school affiliates and in instances where gender is not relevant to the analysis) in text descriptions. I have pseudonymised the name of the school and the particular programme I followed, and I have been vague about the exact years in which this study was conducted (i.e., “in the 2010s”). With these steps, I hope to have demonstrated ethics of care.

The final limitation pertains to having a volunteer sample for the longitudinal qualitative interview group. Although the group invited to participate was selected purposively, relying on the aspirants to sign up and commit to the process meant that there could be the inevitable biases

8 All participants were above the age of eighteen (adult consenting age) at time of research.
found in self-selection. I have considered the problems the analysis would face if the group I ended up following were composed of only the interested and the talkative rather than the ambivalent and the reluctant. Although in some respects, I was limited in practical terms by what could be accomplished through this sampling technique, in the end, I was confident about the make-up of the group, which turned out to be a “mixed bag”, with diversity captured in terms of age group, labour market outcomes, reservations, and motivations. There were also no drop-outs from this programme cohort. By adopting a multi-method research approach in gathering data and collecting data at the cohort level, as I will detail in the paragraphs to follow, it is my intention to better deal with this potential limitation.

Job ads as a site of projectivity

Another source of empirical material for this study was a corpus of vacancy advertisements for positions in the labour market that the aspirants sought to enter. One way that aspirants anticipate the labour market they are entering is through reading job advertisements. They view these texts as offering ideas of what they should aspire toward, what they should know, have, and become, as well as how they should improve themselves to attain such roles or to be considered good in their current work role.

From my interviews with aspirants, I learnt of how they started to browse job portals early into their training programme. Having a source of representations that they could regularly turn to as a guide to understanding what is considered an ideal candidate became valuable for the aspirants, especially since they believed that these demands are constantly changing. Also, because they were new to the area of work, the aspirants were more open and willing to take seriously what hirers stated to be worthwhile for gaining access to positions. As argued by Mohr and White (2008, p. 493), values provide anchors for the interpretative understandings of what goes on within an institutional realm as well as enabling participants to orient themselves toward “what is important, what is appropriate, and what will be valued by others who share this institutional space”.
The corpus of advertisements analysed in this study was collected during the period when the aspirants were looking for work. Analysing job vacancy advertisements served as a means to identify types of representations of the ideal candidate that are offered to the aspirants within their occupational community. To be sure, the aspirants were exposed to ideas of how they should present themselves as candidates through a myriad of ways. For example, expectations were communicated to them when they listened to industry practitioners invited to the school to hold seminars or workshops, when they attended hackathons, industry events, tech summits, or when they tuned in to chatter and gossip found online and offline.

Job descriptions, however, explicitly communicate desired qualities for specific positions. Ads that advertise for positions within weak-form job roles, in particular, may be written to reflect a desired future state rather than a current reality, and, as such, they can be viewed as data that reflect ideal values (Harper, 2012). These representations can be seen as social psychological constructs. That is, in order for an occupational group to exist, the group must create in the minds of its members (and aspiring members) a representation of what it stands for (Boltanski, 1987). In Goffmanian terms, such representations would involve “a dramatic enhancement of the group’s defining characteristics”, a stylised image that establishes a sort of collective belief (Boltanski, 1987, pp. 34–35). While analysing job ads might not provide us with material to understand the process of how these texts are crafted and negotiated, they do give us insight into a community’s conceptions of the ideal candidate. Embedded in these ads are ideas of what traits are recognised as valuable; for emerging jobs of interest in the present research, the ads also express what organisations want to recognise as valuable and to reflect as ideal values to aspirants.

Data collection and analysis of job vacancy ads

To sample the job ads in a purposeful way and to relate them to the case at hand, I narrowed the focus to hirers who target and seek to recruit students and graduates from SX. The platform where the ads were
gathered was an online portal set up by the school itself. This jobs board was available for anyone to access or to post job ads, and could be said to function as an intermediary between the hirer and the potential applicant (Marchal, Mellet & Rieucau, 2007). By focusing on jobs posted on this platform, it was also possible to examine if there was coherence or deviations in the way occupational and organisational scripts were presented to the aspirants.

The jobs that were advertised focused on “digital creative” types of work, but those hiring were not limited to those types of organisations. It was thus possible to find, for example, a sports company that was more than a hundred years old advertising for a search engine optimisation specialist, or a start-up hiring for a growth hacker. Although the jobs posted covered positions around the world, the majority of jobs in this sample were located in Sweden or posted by Swedish companies. Most of the jobs advertised within this corpus were in the private sector and were for full-time positions, and they ranged from large established companies to young, small start-ups. The positions ranged from junior roles (e.g., interns, junior developer) to C-suite leaders (e.g., Chief Technology Officer) of an organisation (see Table 3.1 for characteristics of hirers and positions for which they are hiring).

Over a period of nine months, I collected these ads from the jobs portal at least three times a week. This period coincided with the start of my fieldwork and spanned the period when I conducted the T1 and T2 interviews. By collecting these ads manually, the process allowed me to get a sense of this world of work that I was trying to get acquainted with and the labour market that these aspirants were gradually entering. When posting an ad, there was a template to guide the hirer. The required fields were: company name, company description, company URL, company country, company city, contact email, job title, employment type (full-time, part-time, freelance, internship), requirements and skills, and job descriptions.

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9 I focused on ads posted online, since it was not a bland assumption to make that information on job possibilities and available positions for the kinds of work the aspirants searched for were more often than not accessed digitally rather than from newspaper or magazine classified advertisements.
Table 3.1. Characteristics of hirers and positions for which they are hiring

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of employment arrangement for position advertised</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time(^{10})</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freelance</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intern</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of position advertised</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lead</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle-weight(^{11})</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intern</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age of hiring organisation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 5</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 – 10</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 – 20</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 +</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No info</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(N=265)

For the analysis of this material to be presented in Section II, I decided to focus on job ads posted within a three-month period that corresponded with the phase when the aspirants I followed were searching

\(^{10}\) It is difficult to ascertain from the ads if these were permanent employment positions (or in Swedish, *tillsvidareanställning* or *fast anställning*). However, within the ads, eleven of these “full-time” positions were described as fixed-term contract positions, e.g., to substitute an employee on parental leave. This categorisation of full-time, part-time, internship, and freelance were the categories used in the template for hirers to fill in, hence retained here.

\(^{11}\) A conventional term in this community for middle-level positions.
for work, that is, the period around the T2 interviews. The total number of ads contained in this corpus and used for analysis is 265. The advantage of dealing with this amount of texts is that I was able to use techniques to find patterns while also going in-depth to explore the material qualitatively.

The positions were advertised by a total of 217 different organisations. As 78% of ads were in English, I translated the non-English ads (Swedish and Norwegian) into English to ensure more consistency in the coding. For terms that cannot be adequately translated into English, I left them as is in the translated text. From the descriptions in each ad, I also coded the following qualities they expected from the applicant: (i) personal qualities, (ii) requirement of formal education or training qualifications; (iii) technical and tactical skills (e.g., proficiency in particular software, programmes, coding languages); and (iv) requirement of work or demonstrable experience.

The coding process spanned a period of three months. A proportion of the time was spent ensuring consistency and accuracy in the construction of the database of ads. For example, if the “job level” of the position was not explicitly stated (e.g., junior web developer or lead designer), I had to check against the ad itself to derive the information. I also spent time collapsing the data into more manageable categories. There were more than two hundred different job titles for a sample of 265 advertisements, the variety sometimes being a result of the creativity of these hirers in adding adjectives to the job position (e.g., “front-end ninja”; “product designer rock star”). The eventual analysis provided in this thesis (and found in Section II) presents patterns and aggregates of these requirements stated in this corpus of advertisements, and are used to relate to how the aspirants anticipate expectations from the labour market.

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12 I conducted a pre-test with data collected half a year earlier (also a three-month period) to see if this was a feasible methodological approach.

13 For example, words and phrases such as “prestigelös”, “bögt i tak”. 
Fashioning biographies through digital résumés

A third source of data was the occupational biographies of the aspirants and the cohort they were part of, providing a way to uncover patterns in their career trajectories and self-presentation. Even as a newcomer with little or no work history, aspirants are required to possess an occupational biography that can be presented to the occupational community they aspire to join. Technologies, in the form of social networking platforms, have leveraged this increasing need for the effective presentation of the self as qualified and hireable. One such professionally oriented social network is LinkedIn. It is different from other social media sites, such as Facebook, since it focuses on people’s professional networks rather than personal ones.14 As compared to a Facebook “friend”, LinkedIn users affiliate with their professional network contacts that are termed “connections”. Furthermore, compared to personal websites and portfolios, self-presentation here is constrained as well as mediated by the template provided by the platform. Aspirants thus present themselves in ways tailored to impress potential employers since it is becoming increasingly common for hirers to use these technologies to screen job candidates (Bohnert & Ross, 2010; Chiang & Suen, 2015).

There are several reasons for this methodological move. Having a professional online résumé is increasingly expected of aspirants, regardless of whether they are in tech work or not. These digital occupational biographies are imperative, just as “books” (portfolios of photos) are obligatory when fashion models show up for an open call or go-see (Mears, 2011), or as portfolios are for fashion photographers when they go for interviews (Aspers, 2001). Moreover, by using this material, I was able to follow the entire cohort over time, well past our last T3 interviews. Not only could I better situate this group of nine aspirants I followed through longitudinal qualitative interviews within their cohort of forty, it also allowed me to continue the study of how they all traverse their occupational trajectory, at least from the view of the “front stage”, to borrow a Goffmanian concept.

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14 Olivier Legrand, vice-president of LinkedIn, in a media interview, cited Reed Hoffman, the company’s founder as making this distinction: “Facebook is a backyard barbecue and LinkedIn is a business lunch” (Khanna, 2016).
Recent studies concerned with career trajectories have sought to utilise “big data” possibilities from LinkedIn data to study the movements and transitions of groups of people in various types of occupational communities. For example, Stephens and colleagues (2018), using data from this platform, build career trajectories as network graphs that provide insights into the career paths of entrepreneurs, executives, and senior managers in the high-tech sector, while Norris-Tirrell et al. (2018) use similar types of data to chart the “unique” career paths taken by professionals in the highest positions in the non-profit sector. The analysis presented in this monograph (in Section III), although conducted on a smaller scale, focuses on a targeted group, examines self-presentation, and is concerned with a particular segment of the aspirants’ trajectories. The occupational biographies of the cohort were studied at two points. The first point was almost a year after they graduated from their training programme, and the second was half a year after the first point of study (i.e., approximately 18 months after graduation). The reasons for this sampling move were both strategic (some time had to pass since the aspirants graduated) and practical (I had a cut-off time as data collection for the study was running into its fourth year).

The use of publicly available digital data for research is no doubt a contested issue (Zimmer, 2010). Unlike very personal data that can be found on other kinds of social networking sites, such as housing location, cultural preferences, friendship networks, personal photos of everyday life (Zimmer, 2010), the information gathered here is not sensitive or limited to a selected circle of friends. The LinkedIn profile is an intentionally public profile. Since the aim in this analysis is to pick out patterns in aspirants’ career trajectories as a way to address the research question at hand, the ethics of care exercised here consist of anonymising data in the analyses so there is no possibility of identification at the individual level. While the ethical guidance around the use and analysis of social media data remains somewhat inconsistent (Sugiura, Wiles & Pope, 2016), I followed the most revised recommendations made by the Association of Internet Researchers in their report, *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research* (Markham & Buchanan, 2012), as a guide to ensure that I best addressed and resolved the various issues that might arise from this part of the analysis.
Bringing the various strands together

To sum up, the methodological approach in this study follows others who advocate multiple data collection methods to strengthen the grounding of theory through the triangulation of evidence (Eisenhardt, 1989). Although varied in the mode in which the data were collected, undergirding each methodological move is a concern with temporality and how the data collected and mobilised aid in illuminating various aspects of the aspirants’ school-to-work trajectories.

Data have been collected at various levels: the meso-level for the school as a strategic case, and micro-level for the individual aspirant. However, the aspirants’ voices are undoubtedly the loudest in this text because the focus of the study is on their journeys and anticipation of future work-roles. The manner in which individuals and collectives narrate their trajectories, projects, and concerns can vary greatly in frontstage and backstage settings, depending on who they imagine their audience to be (Eliasoph, 1996; Mische, 2014). One aim of this multi-method approach is to try to get as close as possible to these different stages so as to distinguish between what is said, what is not said, how it was said, what is performed, and how it is performed. Interpretations offered in this thesis are thus derived from data that were collected via a multi-method and multi-source approach. Table 3.2 provides an overview of the types and purpose of each data source gathered.
### Table 3.2. Overview of data gathering: type, source, and purpose

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE</th>
<th>SOURCE</th>
<th>DETAILS</th>
<th>PURPOSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews</td>
<td>Longitudinal qualitative interviews with a group of aspirants enrolled in a similar training programme. Followed them over significant events: when they are in school, looking for work, in work</td>
<td>To enable the study of meaning (perspectives people develop from experiencing events) and trajectory (attention to the course of experiences and events)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discussions and interviews with organisational affiliates</td>
<td></td>
<td>To understand how affiliates describe the organisation, its purpose, their relation to it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>Observations on campuses and at organisational events</td>
<td></td>
<td>To collect data on organisational characteristics and infrastructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>Jobs data</td>
<td>Vacancy ads put out by hirers targeting aspirants during the time when interviewed group was searching for work</td>
<td>To uncover how employers project values and representations of the ideal candidate, which aspirants pick up and learn as they anticipate expectations from the labour market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Digital résumés</td>
<td>Examination of digital résumés of cohort at two points after graduation</td>
<td>To examine how aspirants fashion occupational biographies and to map out school–work trajectories of individuals and cohort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Official statistics</td>
<td>Labour market and education statistics</td>
<td>To understand the education segment that aspirants participated in and the labour market they enter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SCHOOL CULTURE AND BUILDING FAITH
SCHOOL CULTURE AND BUILDING FAITH

The interest in understanding how aspirants navigate entry into weak-form occupations brought me to a specialist training school, so it is from this site that I will begin my exposition. Of special concern in this first empirical section are the effects of school culture on a particular aspirational context and how it plays a role in regulating aspirants’ ambitions by warming up or cooling them down. Although school culture is in itself an “unobservable force”, it is represented and manifested through norms and cultural forms (Prosser, 1999). Cultural forms are practices whereby a group’s network of meanings are “expressed, affirmed, and communicated to members” (Trice & Beyer, 1984, p. 654).

By focusing on three types of organisational cultural forms, I intend to demonstrate how the ceremony of getting into the school, the rituals that aspirants learn to perform once recruited, and the stories that they are told and subsequently tell, serve as passageways for communicating and instilling particular principles, especially during the stage of socialisation into the organisation as well as the occupation (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Schein, 2004). Although organisations have a broad repertoire of cultural forms, rituals, ceremonies, and storytelling are cultural manifestations (Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983), thus offering us vantage points for observing how the organisation communicates its collective identity to its members (Allaire & Firsio, 1984; Dutton et al., 1994; Trice & Beyer, 1984).

As the aspirants gain membership in SX, we will see how the cultural forms of ceremony, rituals, and storytelling objectify and communicate the school’s institutional ethos (Dutton et al., 1994). This empirical section will illustrate how the socialisation into the organisation
begins from the moment aspirants consider applying to the school and continues as they undergo the ceremonial admissions cycle, experience rites of initiation, and serve as both organisational story listeners and storytellers. When individuals undergo transitions — in this case, being trained, looking for jobs, and being in work — their a priori understandings are bound to change in either “a subtle or a dramatic fashion” as they encounter the organisation and develop perspectives and rules to deal with the particulars of organisational life (Van Maanen, 1978, p. 21). Importantly, we learn from the accounts of the aspirants of how the school’s culture engenders confidence and produces strong collective sentiments amongst them, processes that are vital for building faith in weak-form occupations.

CEREMONIES OF GETTING IN AND FITTING IN

Selection as socialisation

Admissions into schools, especially schools with significantly more applicants than places, have been of longstanding interest to sociologists of education. While more scholarly attention has been afforded to undergraduate admissions into elite universities (Bourdieu, 1996; Cookson & Persell, 1985; Karabel, 2006) others have also explored the selection processes into specialist education programmes (Nylander, 2014). In these studies, the ceremonial character of “getting in” is often emphasised. How a school selects applicants serves to signal who they want coming through their portals to bear the organisation’s name. The selection process can thus be seen as igniting the transition to belonging to a community.

Selection and socialisation, however, are often studied and described as two separate processes. Anderson and Ostroff (1997) propose, in the context of entry into work, that socialisation commences during selection when the applicant experiences the organisation’s procedures for the first time and tries to make sense of what the organisation is and stands for. The authors contend that selection techniques serve as both a sort of facilitator in the socialisation process that promotes person–organisation fit and as an effector of future attitudes and behaviour. Earlier research
has also provided evidence that rigorous recruitment and selection procedures, coupled with a strong organisational value system, are associated with higher levels of member commitment that is reflected via internalisation and identification (Caldwell, Chatman, & O’Reilly, 1990). Rather than viewing these processes as distinct from each other, selection into a school like SX could be seen as the start of socialisation into the educational organisation. Identifying with the organisation from the earliest of stages is quite an explicit aim of the school, and, as I would come to learn, a corollary of such identification is that students would be more likely to legitimise the modes of evaluation that had been used to assess and select them.

The application process to SX begins with what is called a “Creative Task”: a first-stage judgement and evaluation device used by the gatekeeper into the school. Each year, applicants are given a specific challenge, and their task is to demonstrate how they can solve this particular “real-world” problem. Aspirants have to submit material that could be visualised and/or written using any form of media, but it “should be driven by digital technology, data and/or have a marketing or business focus”. In their submission, they have to showcase innovation, feasibility, and originality in a digital format — respecting the limits of a file size of five megabytes and a time frame of five minutes for reviewing it. Since SX is a post-secondary vocational school, it does not have to accept recruits based on academic grades or standardised tests, such as the Swedish Scholastic Aptitude Test (högskoleprovet). Although there are prerequisites to the various programmes, such as level of English language proficiency and work experience or equivalent skills validated in the form of previous studies, this form of recognition of prior learning and the ability to recruit via evaluation devices like the Creative Task offers the school a kind of openness and autonomy in selection that the more traditional higher educational organisations in Sweden do not have.

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1 In sociological and educational research, a distinction is often made between primary and secondary socialisation. If not already apparent, this present analysis focuses on the latter.

2 As stated in application guidelines.

3 In the Swedish context, the Creative Task is equivalent to an arbetsprov, roughly translated as an “admissions test”. The arbetsprov is common for applications to art and design education programmes in Sweden.
Given the significance of the Creative Task for entry, aspiring students of SX hold this exercise in high regard. Many view this as a way to offer good first impressions, to put on a credible social “front” (Goffman, 1956). Yet, because of the open-endedness of the task or the absence of “model answers”, aspiring applicants are generally unsure of what is expected of them in their submissions. This uncertainty was felt across the group of aspirants I followed, regardless of their previous educational backgrounds. Erik, who had undergone another type of vocational training before attempting to enrol at SX, felt that the Creative Task was very “flummig”, roughly translated from Swedish to mean fuzzy or vague. Another aspirant, who had dropped out of a leading technological university in Sweden after a year to enrol in this school shared, “I was nervous because getting into SX was like the one thing that I wanted to do. And it was an application process that was not based on your grades or anything, so I did not know what they were looking for in the Creative Task” (T1 Interview).

SX has capitalised on the Creative Task as a means to begin the process of inducting interested candidates into the school, even before they are enrolled. The school organises workshops where people intending to apply can gather at the campus for a brainstorming session that will help “kick-start their own creative process”. It also curates an online Support Group where applicants can solicit feedback from the SX network (alumni, current students) before submitting their Creative Task. The school thus turns its admissions procedure into a collaborative platform for competitors to meet and work together, constituting what we could call collaborative competition. Through these tactics, it emphasises qualities of collaboration, sharing, openness, and commitment to the process.

It is not uncommon for applicants to include the Creative Task they submitted in their online portfolios or video channels, hence, these submissions could be digitally traced. To cope with preparing for the Task, the aspirants related to me how they searched for past and present submissions as a means to model applicants who had been successful or as a way to “suss out” the competition in their cohort. More typically in school admissions, admission artefacts are private: kept within closed doors of audition rooms, filed in admission folders, visible only to a select panel of gatekeepers. The public display of an admission artefact observed
amongst applications to SX, however, plays several functions, such as signalling competence to other competing applicants or, upon gaining entry into the school, serving as a badge of honour. The aspirants I followed differed in what they did for the Creative Task the year they applied, from shooting videos, coding games, to submitting prototypes. Their experiences converged, however, in their description of the numerous “hours” they had put into preparing the submission, an investment of time and a demonstration of commitment to the process.

When applicants make it through this first stage of the Creative Task, they get a call-back for Admissions Day. During this full day of assessments, they undergo a series of admission activities that include personal interviews, group assignments (where they have to collaborate with other applicants), and an individual task. They also attend presentations from current students about what to expect from the school and what is expected of them. According to SX, Admissions Day is not only an opportunity for the school staff to get to know applicants, but also for applicants to “feel safe” in their decision to join SX, if admitted.

For the aspirants I spoke with, the ambiguity of the selection process was nerve-wrecking yet enticing. While they did not feel “safe” after going through the selection process and were anxiously waiting for results, they described how they were hooked on SX and wanted nothing more than to get in. The prospect of not getting in vexed them greatly, since entry into the school was perceived as a pivotal turning point in their trajectories.

As already stated, identifying with the organisation from the earliest of stages is one of the explicit aims of the school, and a consequence of such identification is that students are more likely to justify to others the significance of the selection process. For example, Leila, one of the aspirants who already had a university degree when she applied to SX, related to me how she appreciated the application process because the candidate–school fit was not measured merely through grades or her CV. She described herself as shy during first encounters, and said that people are not be able to “scratch” her in the beginning to know what she is really like. Having the Creative Task and Admission Day as evaluation devices allowed her to “prove something else” that went beyond her shyness and introversion. More importantly, she repeated several times on our first meeting that she found selection into SX to be a very fair process: “Honestly after that day, if [SX] said “no”, I would accept it... because
they analysed me in a very different dimension. So if it’s a “no” — well, there’s a reason… It seems like a very fair selection” (T1 Interview).

Instead of harping on the fact that she had been selected, Leila’s retrospection here centres on the counterfactual. She focuses on sharing a version of what her sentiments would have been had she not been admitted and suggests that she would have accepted the rejection as a justified response from the school. In this regard, undergoing organisational ceremonial rites and emerging victorious can be very powerful in legitimising an organisation’s processes. Because selection is like an election, the journey of winning a spot in prestigious schools, as Bourdieu (1996) earlier argued, invokes a transformation that allows students to recognise for themselves — and be recognised by others — that they have been “consecrated” and worthy of consecration. A precondition for belonging to an organisation is that one believes in the process of selection.

The ceremony of getting into SX continues with the aspirants learning the school’s culture, colloquially known as the “SX Way”. After jumping through the hoops of selection and getting a ticket into the school, students begin their first weeks in autumn at SX with an intensive orientation week. One of the aspirants summarised the first days in school:

The first weeks we didn’t even do any work. We just learnt “the SX Way”, which is this really sketchy thing. Feels like you’re in a sect. You got to reflect upon yourself, learn to talk with your group members… you get this kind of work environment guidelines that you have to learn, which we will also be assessed on. (T1 Interview)

The orientation week takes place across the various campuses. In the Stockholm campus during this early stage of school attendance, students from the various programmes are brought together and entrenched in exercises and challenges that centre on experienced-based learning, self-insight, leadership, active participation, and group dynamics. The intensity of this first week appears to be about pushing the aspirants out of their comfort zone, internalising how things are done at SX, cohering as a group, appreciating different types of group dynamics, and
learning non-violent communication. As strangers, the aspirants learn about their peers in a very intense, emotional, and short period. On the first day of this induction process, for example, the participants were made to engage in intimate tasks like drawing portraits of each other, publicly share about turning points in their lives, and give feedback to others they hardly knew.

Regardless of whether they are current students, former students, or collaborators, the terms “cult” or “sect” had been used rather casually in conversations with me to describe SX as a peculiar organisation, as demonstrated by the usage in the quote above. What these aspirants might describe loosely as sectarian conversion, sociologists have called rigorous socialisation, a condition often observed in elite professional schools and one that is necessary for influencing members to adopt standards of the occupational group (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). Rigorous socialisation is most potent when the outcome is uncertain and the aspirant is embedded within a community that requires its members to adopt certain types of values (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). In the same conversation I had with the aspirant quoted above, his somewhat suspicious reference to the cultish ways of the school ultimately fanned into a positive explanation of why they had to learn “the SX Way”:

I learnt that if we didn’t do this [learn the SX Way] with all the members in the class during the first two days, that would be really weird... Since we had this orientation week, we learnt how to work in groups. And everyone had the same understanding of what it should be because we had these rules: “this is how you should work”. And everyone was more or less willing to do this, try everything out.

From this interviewee’s perspective, we see that conversion to the SX Way becomes a key process for the aspirants to undergo, due to the diverse backgrounds of the students in each cohort and the expectation that they will have to work very closely with each other over the course of the programme. Their diversity is captured in the differing nationalities of the participants, their age (ranging from twenty to fifty years old), their educational backgrounds (ranging from not having any higher education experience to having multiple forms of higher educational qualifications
and Masters Degrees), and previous work experience (some had no work experience, others had experience but in another occupational field). Conversion is necessary to get to common understandings as they undergo training in the school and as they adopt the standards and values expected of them.

From the vagueness of selection devices used to evaluate the aspirants, the modelling and signalling of collaborative competition, the seduction of selection that leads to a form of legitimation of that very process, and, finally, the conversion to and adoption of the organisational standards, we can see the ceremony of getting in and fitting in as powerful means of facilitating socialisation into the organisation.
RITUALS

The studio resembled a post-party site. A party did happen the night before, when the previous cohort of students graduated. There were limp balloons and falling buntings. Leftover wine and strands of hair stained the table where I would set up the laptop for my presentation. The students were working around in different stations, around boards of colourful post-its, some sitting on tables, some lying on the floor.

At three o’clock they started to gather around in the convertible lecture area. It was messy. Then a fist went up. And another. And another. There was hushing and silence soon filled the space as approximately forty hands were pumped up in the air. I asked what this all meant.

“It means for us to shut up.”

“Are there any other hand signs?” I pursued.

“The others are probably universal.”

When entering spaces like creative schools, messiness or disarray ought not to surprise. Even though I was prepared to be “surprised” during my visits to SX, I was intrigued through this first encounter, as captured in the fieldnote presented above, of the rituals that created structure in seeming chaos, rituals that were obvious to the insiders but not to the outsider. From the aspirants’ accounts, I learn of two types of rituals that are prominent during the stage of socialisation: structuring and teaming rituals. These rituals are not spectacular, in that they do not occur with pompousness or proclamation, but they are found in the everyday activities of the aspirant’s school life and, at times, thereafter. Kunda, in
his work on engineering culture, offer a useful definition of rituals as collectively produced, structured occasions that create, in Goffmanian terminology, a *frame* from which participants “are expected to express and confirm sanctioned ways of experiencing social reality” (Kunda 2006, p. 93). This perspective allows us to see organisational ritual as a mechanism for structuring social interaction.

**Structuring rituals**

Through following the aspirants in their learning journeys at SX, I learnt of rituals that structure their fast-paced, chaotic, and collective everyday activities. For example, they used steering documents through the project cycle or worked around a big board of post-its, a process involving colourful problem solving and demonstrating productivity that has been adopted from Agile and Scrum methods. All of the SX campuses I have visited are similarly equipped with open classrooms where the space is malleable and students and facilitators are able to modify its use. Studios are built in such a way that the learning space can be easily transformed with movable furniture, curtains to section off areas, and glass partition walls that keep the learning space “open” and double up as ideation boards. At first glance, there seems to be a sense of creative mess and a lack of formal structure. Yet the studios across campuses and across countries I visited are similar in appearance, suggesting that a structuring principle is being followed in developing the school’s infrastructure. The way the studios are designed permits certain kinds of everyday rituals to take place. Their adaptability allows for flexibility and modification, which is necessary for the kind of collaborative work central to the organisation. They also resemble, to some extent, what the future workplaces of these aspirants might look like.

Rituals are facilitated with “tools” and “energisers” from the SX Toolbox. The Toolbox contains tried and tested exercises that participants can use for what the school describes as “creative collaboration”. These tools are said to be anchored in the organisation’s methodology and have been created internally or borrowed from ideas elsewhere. Every exercise has its own aim, steps to follow, time frame, type of facilitation style, stipulated group size, and indication of how much participants will be
pushed out of their comfort zone ("safe, medium, stretch"). One example is the ritual of “checking in” and “checking out” at the start and end of a school day or a team meeting. Participants stand or sit in a circle and are invited to share one thing they check in with, for example, a feeling, a reflection from the previous day, or an attitude they bring into the session.

An alumnus I spoke with told me that there are no limitations to what one could express when checking in; even if someone was hung over from partying too hard the day before and felt like it was valuable for his or her team mates to know, that would be shared with the team and considered a form of accountability. When the session is over, they check out in the same way, sharing, one by one, a feeling — “I did not appreciate the way you handled the conflict just now” — or something significant they take with them — “I was extremely challenged during ideation today.” Checking in, as it is stated in the SX Toolbox, “emphasises presence, focus and group commitment”, while checking out “emphasises reflection and symbolic closure”.

The Toolbox has been documented as an Open Source resource kit and is available online for public access. It is used across cohorts, programmes, and learning hubs globally. Such documentation and dissemination suggests an intention of institutionalising the SX Way as well as an organisational eagerness for its diffusion. After experiencing these rituals on a regular basis, students and alumni can also take the Toolbox with them into their workplaces or transpose them for use in new ventures. One of my interviewees, who was part of a team that conducted development workshops for companies using these tools, described the euphoria that she experienced from diffusing and celebrating this way of creative collaboration.

When we do these workshops, it’s kind of giving you a high. It really does. It feels like you’re really empowering people, and seeing them grow, and that it gives a really positive energy in the room... That is fun ‘cause you feel like you provide so much value for them and they appreciate it so much and that they really have learnt something that is useful for the future. That is a lot of positive energy. (T2 Interview)
In inviting others to partake in rituals she had herself participated in, this aspirant describes how she gets a “high” from the “positive energy” these workshops engender. This quote is exemplary in highlighting the emotional significance in partaking in organisational rituals for aspirants. As we will continue to explore below, these collectively produced occasions create frames from which participants journey into the occupational community.

**Teaming rituals**

“SX is a very emotional place”, according to one of my interviewees; “we’re always creating a group, developing the group, terminating the group, giving feedback” (T1 Interview). Throughout their training programme, the aspirants are put in teams to deal with a “real” problem posed by a company that wants solutions. Formalised under a type of learning partnership programme, a business can provide a challenge, in the form of a brief, for the SX students to work on. As part of their training, the students will work on this challenge over four to eight weeks and eventually produce and deliver a concept, strategy, or prototype to the client. The school pitches this as a “unique opportunity” for the business organisation to work with the next generation of digital creatives. In return, the business organisation will make a “small sponsorship”, and according to the school, the sponsorship will go directly back into running and enhancing the training programmes.

It is characteristic for the higher vocational education and training programmes to be formulated and reviewed with the advice of steering committees, composed of employers and industry representatives. Members of the steering committee may also contribute to the programme by giving lectures or by offering work placements. The members serve without monetary compensation, and this is often couched as a service to the occupational community. Nora, the Chair of the Steering Committee of the Digi Programme at the time of this research, described how the learning partnership programme was an effective tactic used by the school:
It is a good way to communicate to the industry that the people that we are educating are valuable, so you don’t get them for free.... If any of the big companies want to do a project with the students, then they pay for it — which is not very common if you look at the universities. That’s a good way to communicate that these are valuable talents that you might be able to hire.

Working on real-live projects in teams had several consequences for the aspirants. One upshot was that it convinced them that they were amassing vocational “know-how” even before entering workplaces. When one respondent was asked if he saw his contemporaries studying in similar programmes at other vocational institutions or universities as competitors, he expressed candidly that SX graduates were in another “league” because they accumulated practical experience in dealing and working with real clients.

I think I feel like we are in a different league, in some kind of elitist way. Just because they do not get the hands-on, working with real clients, coming out to actually go to all these meetings. They get very theoretical? And I think, what I’ve heard, and what I’ve experienced, like practical skills always conquer theoretical skills when it comes to landing a job. (T2 Interview)

Their hands-on experience of working on live projects, accumulating work experience through the embedded internship component in their programme, and shorter school time (therefore having more time for work) engenders a sense of certainty that they are being prepared to be “real-world ready”, a guiding principle central to the SX methodology. Furthermore, because learning is structured around projects and every project constitutes a new team, the aspirants experience the seasonal nature of the group as well as the creation, development, and dissolution of team cultures (Fine, 1979).

One of the core tenets of the SX methodology is “team is everything”. Through this principle, the school advocates collaboration, inclusion, and transparency, which they see as crucial for personal development. Participants are encouraged to engage in constant feedback and intense reflection in order to gain deeper self-awareness and to
become more effective team members and leaders. A core procedure for each programme is thus team development sessions — a scheduled activity where students are made to reflect about how their team is performing and working (or not) together to meet with the requirements of the project. These sessions take place in the middle of the project cycle and are led by a trained facilitator. At one of my campus visits, one of the aspirants had emerged crying from a two-hour session. She described the session as one where they had to reiterate their reasons for applying to SX and thrashed out the problems of the team: “That was so intense, like us being against each other for like the first hour and like disagreeing... But then in the last hour [of the session], everything changed. Now we’re working so much better together” (T1 Interview).

All incoming students to SX are told to read Creating Effective Teams, by Susan Wheelan, before they start their training programme. Wheelan writes, for example, “Teamwork is necessary for organizational success... While ‘teaming’ may feel like a fad or craze, it’s not. Groups and teams have always been with us and will not go away” (1999, pp. 2, 4). The aspirants often related to the team development sessions in the interviews, emphasising its impact on their learning process. They refer and restate the stages of a team that have been proposed by Wheelan (1999) intuitively: “dependency and inclusion” is followed by the stage of “counterdependency and fight”, which comes before “trust and structure”, before the team can finally “work”. Teaming becomes akin to a ritual of rehearsing co-operation, and the display of co-operation becomes “a situational performance” through which conflicts are tacitly managed (Sennett, 2013; Collins, 2004). Take, for instance, this passage from an interview with one of the aspirants at the end of his training programme:

Before SX, I always thought a malfunctioning group was a conflicting group with a lot of conflicts, which I learnt by now that it isn’t. Because you need conflicts, and there will always be conflicts. And that doesn’t mean you have a malfunctioning group? It’s more that your group is progressing towards trust, and structure within the group, since you’re starting to question each other. (T2 Interview)
This interviewee describes the teaming ritual, restating ideas from Wheelan’s text such as the notions of “fight” and progressing toward “trust” and “structure” within the group. Although it was uncomfortable in the beginning for the aspirants to be repeatedly put in random teams and to work toward a common goal, over time, the interviewees described how they learnt to “trust the process” and coped by acknowledging the blemishes of teams, dealing with conflicts that emerged from clash of logics or personalities, or simply ignoring parts of teaming that irritated them.

Why are these teaming rituals important for the aspirants? There are two possible interpretations. The first is that the school anticipates “teaming” is necessary for socialisation into weak-form occupations, where job tasks and roles are often evolving or where someone’s position in the organisation is not set. The need for these individuals to be able to work with different types of teams and team dynamics is accorded significance. This was something the aspirants related to, as shared by Annika in our T2 interview: “I think tools — especially in digital — they’re always going to change. But the things I’m learning through teamwork... they can’t be learnt somewhere else”.

The second interpretation is that teaming rituals can exert a conservative force of stimulating participation and screening out those who do not contribute; it is therefore less easy for one member within a group to free-ride (Iannaccone, 1994). This consequently ensures stronger teams and commitment to the school. The literature on intergroup relations, which dates back several decades, already informs us of the socio-emotional orientations of group life, experienced most through bonding and through creating a group product (Fine, 1979). In particular, when strangers are gathered in a group situation to fulfil certain common goals, they tend to produce a group structure that leads to positive in-group identifications (Sherif & Sherif, 1953). From her work on free schools, Swidler (1979) argues that group solidarity, group identification, and dependence on a group are some of the most powerful motives in social life. However, in special organisations like alternative schools, while group spirit develops easily, collective coordination can be more difficult due to the absence of authority or hierarchy. To sustain positive group dynamics, a complex set of organisational controls is required (Swidler, 1979). In this context of the Digi programme, the lack of authority refers
to the absence of teachers, a formal curriculum, or dictated career pathways. The organisational controls observed here are rituals that are regularly performed to structure and frame interaction within teams.

Ritual in education has earlier been described as a form of restricted code because its meanings are indirect and not made verbally explicit (Bernstein et al., 1966). Similarly, as Turner (1969, p. 7) points out, “It is one thing to observe people performing the stylized gestures and singing the cryptic songs of ritual performances and quite another to reach an adequate understanding of what the movements and words mean to them”. The meaning of ritual is thus never fixed or uniform, but always context-dependent and an empirical question of interpretation (Kunda, 2006; Cohen, 1985).

In the context of this specialist training school, we see how teaming and structuring rituals emerge as both a mechanism for normative control and additionally, as a way to facilitate the meeting and integration of opposing forces such as “order and chaos”, “individual and group” (Bell, 1992). As they strengthen the aspirants’ sense of social location and become a means for them to experience belonging and “community”, the rituals also inculcate a sense of difference from others (Cohen, 1985, p. 50). The rituals observed here are carriers for celebrating key organisational messages such as creative collaboration as well as a means to structure social action. Seemingly unintuitive, creative collaboration requires structure, and there is a format for the rituals of creativity (Wilf, 2012). Partaking in structuring rituals becomes fundamental to the way that aspirants learn how to cope with what they are often warned is the “chaos” inherent in their high-velocity, highly volatile digital creative work environments.

Furthermore, these rituals observed at SX are reminiscent of Collins’ (2004) “interaction rituals chains”. An interaction ritual, according to him, is essentially an “emotion transformer”, taking some (transient) emotions as ingredients and turning them into other emotions as (long-term) outcomes. In his seminal text, Collins draws on classical Durkheimian and Goffmanian ideas, noting, for example, that successful social rituals can lead to participants feeling strong, confident, and “full of impulses” (Collins, 2004, p. xii). Participants get pumped up with emotional strength from participating in the group’s interaction, and this
“emotional energy” ultimately leads to the production of feelings of solidarity (Collins, 2004, pp. 108ff).

In the humdrum of everyday life, emotional energy can be viewed as a latent force that motivates individuals to engage and invest or, conversely, to shy away and refrain (Collins, 2004). As the aspirants repeatedly and successfully interact with one another, they amass emotional energy and confidence from gaining a sense of belonging in a group. In this regard, the everyday rituals, which the aspirants experience over the course of training in this specialist school, not only warms up their ambitions; they also draw them deeper into committing to and being confident about embarking on these weak-form occupational pathways.
The significance of storytelling for the livelihood of organisations has been explored in earlier research; this importance is underscored in different ways but evinced as altogether necessary, regardless of whether the organisation is a new start-up, a mature firm, or an annual event (Biggart, 1989; Chen, 2012; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). In her study of the growing organisation behind the annual Burning Man event, Chen (2012) shows how storytelling serves as a mechanism for meaning making and fosters enchantment — especially in uncertain environments — as stories provide richness and contexts for members to navigate unfamiliar rules and draw on collective knowledge to guide unfamiliar activities. Similarly, Bogdanova (2011) in her study of an antiques market, illustrates how storytelling overcomes the problem of uncertainty not by reducing it but by creating confidence, thus serving as a market tool. Put simply, stories are used to cope with uncertainty.

Through journeying with the aspirants, I could observe storytelling that takes place at various levels: stories they are told about the organisation and its members, and stories they tell others (like me). As such, the aspirants are both story listeners and storytellers. These stories that are heard and retold are picked up in gossip and encapsulate collective experiences rather than merely individual, specific ones (Boje, 1991; Boyce, 1995; Godart & White, 2010). In this section, I suggest that storytelling matters to these aspirants because it creates confidence and celebrates individual and collective journeys into weak-form occupations. The stories considered here are organisational stories told “in the language of uplift and idealism” to set apart the aims and practices of the organisation (Selzick, 1957, p. 151). The stories are drawn from the organisation’s history, and the stories’ protagonists are often its members (Martin et al., 1983). While these stories are evoked from memories of the organisational past, they set the stage for different claims about the organisation’s future identity (Schultz & Hernes, 2013). When the aspirants listen and retell organisational stories, this, I argue, can be seen as a manifestation of learning, particularly during the phase of socialisation.
Stories of a global tribe

Several stories are often told about the school by its members. The first is that it is a “global tribe”. This story is told with the description of SX campuses and hubs spread across various continents and of its alumni “going places”. A few years back, a group of students attempted to visually represent this geographical spread of the school’s network by charting the locations of SX students, alumni, collaborators, and employees. This project resulted in the production of a “live” map where individuals from the SX network could be located around the world.

For the aspirants, the “global tribe” story creates confidence that there is an international network they can tap into when they travel or relocate. An aspirant who, after graduating, had moved outside of Sweden and found work in an advertising agency, relates the charm of SX’s network in Europe:

SX is more widespread in Europe than anywhere else. I guess the more they expand the network here, the better? If I go somewhere new, just having the community or being able to access that community is fine. Now that I’m not a student anymore, I guess that doesn’t matter as much because the alumni network is already very international. So I don’t need a SX office in Barcelona if I go there. I can just talk to SX people who are living there. (T3 Interview)

The global story becomes an important one for the aspirants because the belief in an international alumni network fosters certitude that, even if they are to travel outside of Sweden, they will be able to find others from their tribe. Alumni relations — especially at tertiary education organisations — have traditionally been developed and used as a major resource for fundraising and charitable giving. In countries such as Sweden, where higher education is funded largely by the state and less reliant on philanthropy and volunteers, formal alumni associations have relatively short histories. They also have a different focus than elsewhere, such as linking staff and former students in open and trust-based relations, especially for “entrepreneurial universities” that thrive on the transfer of information and industry collaboration (Jacob, Lundqvist, & Hellsmark, 2003). Although SX is not an entrepreneurial university, it taps into its
alumni network as a way to keep the education market and the labour market in close proximity.

Earlier studies on transnational education have shed light on how the accumulation of what has been termed “cosmopolitan” or “transnational capital” acts as a strategy for upper- and middle-class families as well as elite schools to further distinguish their offspring and students from the masses (Börjesson, 2005; Munk, 2009; Weenink, 2008; Ye & Nylander, 2015). A kind of cosmopolitan orientation is also presented by SX through its efforts to showcase how students can be plugged into globalised markets and to promote the prospects of living and working abroad. A less explicit consequence of the global story can also be uncovered: the belief in being part of an international network manages uncertainty and fosters certitude, which is necessary for aspirants when taking their first steps out into the world. An unfamiliar terrain can be less daunting if they know there are others like them around.

Stories of a successful tribe

Another story is that SX is a “successful tribe”. A SX alumnus, Tristan, confidently stated that “If you go to SX, all the agencies are willing to speak to you. It gets the first knock on the door”. Tristan’s own work trajectory has benefitted from him being a SX graduate. He was able to continue working with the company where he did an internship and where the boss had a connection with the school. In his own words, “you hire people from your own tribe”. From the empirical material, the telling of this type of story was a salient observation, especially at the T3 interviews, when the aspirants had graduated and were in the labour market. The group I followed overwhelmingly shared the view of how they were mostly successful upon graduation. For example, Simon at our T3 interview, commented on the positive labour market outcomes of SX graduates and remarked, “we are on the f***ing top of the food chain. Obviously we are doing something good”. One of his counterparts, Annika, spoke about this sense of confidence that was shared amongst her peers, manifested particularly on graduation day:
When our class graduated, everybody was so cocky, talking to others... I was like, “You weren’t like that when you didn’t have an internship!” And they were like, “Whatever! It’s going to be so good!” And after everyone’s presentation, everybody was like, “I got a job.” It was maybe two or three who did not have a job. And if you didn’t get a job through your internship, you got it somewhere else. (T3 Interview)

The success of its students, past and present, is told and retold both by its members, through stories and personal accounts, and by spokespersons through promotional material for the school. A figure and finding cited from an old SX student survey is often heard: “98% of students get a job in the industry before or shortly after graduation”. For some of the interviewees I followed, this particular statistic was cited as one of the reasons they signed up to SX in the first place. Stories of alumni who set up their own agencies after graduation, doing work that mimics the ideology and practice of SX, are also used by the school to showcase successful former students.

The salience, availability, and authoritativeness of a story is dependent on who is telling it, when, and for what purpose (Polletta, 1998). I had learnt through the one-to-one interviews, however, of aspirants who were struggling to get a job after graduation. The imagery produced by the interviewees of a more widespread triumph is thus noteworthy. The magnification of success stories is an essential part of the storytelling process because it creates confidence. One of the aspirants reflected on this situation of excessive confidence in our T3 interview: “When we got back (for graduation), everyone had this super weird confidence: ‘It’s no problem, I’ve seen the world now. Step aside, younglings.’ We call it *hubris*. A lot of *hubris*”. The story of success in this context thus engenders confidence amongst the aspirants that offers, in turn, a sense of security. As newcomers, even when they might not have known what kind of jobs they would end up in, what provided confidence were stories of others who were similarly unsure, but ended up in seemingly good, desirable labour market positions.

\footnote{1 Swedish for “hubris”}
Furthermore, the story of success is often connected to the story of the school being at the forefront of offering programmes that are not offered elsewhere in Sweden or abroad. The students were told frequently that their training would get them a foot in the door of digital work and that, when they complete the Digi programme, there would be strong demand for their skills. Aspirants retold stories of demand told to them by industry practitioners and held on to the aspiration of possessing sought-after expertise when they graduate, especially in my first interviews with them.

**Kim:** I think [the kind of work we do] is a niche thing. But not as many people are aware of it. It still creates a sort of buzz, an interest.

**RY:** And you are…

[Kim interrupts and completes sentence]

**Kim:** … at the forefront of that.

Like this statement above, these following storylines extracted from the first wave of interviews with other interviewees are illustrative of how the aspirants viewed themselves as vanguards of an emerging task area: “I am not at all stressed by the competition. All the previous students have said it’s so easy to get jobs. All the people in the industry say it’s so hard to find people who know this stuff”, or “I’m not really worried about it because there’s so much demand right now. So I don’t think there’s going to be any problem to find an internship, or a job”.

From the onset of applying to the Digi programme, this story of being part of a school that is at the forefront of training desirable skills is evident. The course description, for instance, stated that the aspirants would emerge as a unique breed of problem solvers, with storytelling listed as a competence they will develop. Viewed in another way, the aspirants are trained to become storytellers in their professional capacity,
but with this same skill, they are able to post-rationalise and manage perceptions of their own career trajectories. \(^2\)

**Stories of an alternative school**

Even though the stories presented thus far are not novel — an organisation that is global, successful, at the forefront — and can be commonly found in the story plots of other organisations, they are told in a manner that embodies a claim to uniqueness (Martin et al., 1983). The uniqueness factor is crucial for a school that stresses its non-conventional ways of organising learning. To meet changing organisational needs and demands of the occupational communities it serves, the school augments its efforts to move away from teacher-centric, test-based education. The students are often told, as they would later tell me, that the programmes they undergo are built in collaboration with the industry and on experience-based learning. They attend interactive sessions and workshops where the school brings industry players from around the globe to facilitate lectures and seminars.

However, instead of inventing new ways of doing education, the school is more often than not combining existing materials and forces in new ways, such that the resulting “non-conventional” way of educating is an innovation rather than an invention (Schumpeter, 1934). One example of a new combination is how SX draw ideas of pedagogy and methodology from a foundational leadership course that has been used in the Swedish Armed Forces for more than twenty years, *Utveckling av grupp och ledare* (UGL), translated as Group Development and Leadership. The design of the UGL course is centred around Experiential Learning and is based on Fundamental Interpersonal Relations

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\(^2\) Layered on top of this successful tribe story is the narrative of Sweden being ahead in the tech game. One common reference made by the interviewees was how often they came across other Swedish contributors on online forums such as Stack Overflow. As one of them remarked, “You always find some guy called Johan.” The aspirants find comfort in there being a larger digital creative community they can plug themselves into, even if their workrole is niche or seemingly new.
Orientation (FIRO), a theory of interpersonal relations, and transformational leadership. Of particular relevance to this analysis is how the school has managed to be perceived as distinctive to its members. Clark (1970) offers some clues about how such observations may be interpreted. In his analysis of the “distinctive college”, he argues that the critical ingredient of a distinct school is a strong “organizational saga” that is capable of bringing out identification and faithful allegiance to the school’s ethos amongst its members. When such an allegiance is forged, schools can grow and spread, both locally and transnationally, to become the “global tribe” they aspire to be. Applied to SX, the three stories identified in this section can be said to constitute the organisational saga that enables its members to perceive the school as distinctive.

Even if these claims of uniqueness remain merely as claims, it is less crucial than the potential of these stories to foster a collective identity for its members (Dutton et al., 1994). Embedded in the alternative school story, for instance, is a message about challenging conventions. This is illuminated from an interview with Kim who talked about how the non-traditional way of learning at SX influenced his own perspective of rule breaking. At this T2 interview, he had already started working in a start-up and had experienced the movement from school to work.

SX has an alternative way of teaching; non-conventional. I think that I have started to look at the world in a different way. Like, not everything needs to be according to the conventions. You can break those. It can even be very valuable to do so because if no one else is doing it then you will stick out.

This interviewee described how he had been emboldened to refuse to conform to the expectations of his colleagues, who were mostly trained in technological universities, and to not be afraid to stick out in the workplace, in large part because of his training at SX. By being in a school that claims to be alternative, the message of pursuing uniqueness is not a strange one, being congruent with the organisation’s own ambitions. The

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notion of challenging conventions is seductive, especially in cultural markets for goods and services where the value of uniqueness is cherished. Thus, storytelling, besides being mobilised by the school and the aspirants as a means to engender confidence and celebrate individual and collective journeys into weak-form occupations, is also a means for promoting the values and culture of the educational organisation.

**Enchantment and disenchantment**

Thus far, the analysis in this empirical section has focused on what happens when these cultural forms are efficacious in doing what the organisation and its members intend. But what happens when these forms do not “work”? Perhaps stories become trite and cliché, losing their power, or rituals cultivate discontent in the organisation, as has been found in previous research on knowledge workers (Kunda, 2006). In an earlier work, Van Maanen (1978, pp. 22–23) suggests that there are two waves in organisational socialisation: the first, a formal phase, stresses general skills and attitudes that aspirants should learn, while the second emphasises the application of rules to particular situations in order to perform their roles. When the gap between these two types of socialisation is large, he argues that there can be disillusionment. In the case of SX, the tensions between these two waves of socialisation are revealed after the aspirants have been in the training programme for some time and begin to face difficulties in reconciling their individual needs and desires with the goals of the collective. Robert seemed to epitomise this stage when he expressed these feelings during his T1 interview:

I'm extremely test-oriented. And I get really frustrated with all the discussions, ideation and stuff like that. I guess it's an important thing, but that's my main frustration here... I really, really long to do something that does not involve a team. And as I said, like all these discussions [laughs] sometimes it's driving me crazy. I try to be very diplomatic about it. I don't want to start any arguments because I realise it's a very important thing for some people to have that [working in teams].
Here, Robert described this frustration he felt from having to constantly work in teams. He said that he tried to manage this grievance because the tenet of “team is everything” is central to the school’s ethos. However, it was apparent that there was a thorn in his flesh when going through the motion of playing the role that was expected of him. Being a test-oriented individual, he experienced difficulty in an educational organisation that was not focused on assessments through conventional test taking.

Other aspirants discussed challenges faced in their initial period of socialisation into the organisation. For example, some aspirants wished that the programme were longer in duration, with more opportunities for in-depth explorations and learning. In an interview with Annika at T2, for example, she described her anxiety that stemmed from feeling like she had only scratched the surface of the subject because the training programme was so short. The mandate of vocational schools to work quickly to prepare and send aspirants out into the labour market seems to come into conflict with some of the aspirants’ desire to spend more time in school. However, Annika often oscillated in her accounts between placing the responsibility for not meeting her learning expectations on the school and then back on herself.

Individuals experiencing transition are not clean slates, *tabula rasa*, “waiting patiently for the organization to do its work” (Van Maanen, 1978, p. 35). Furthermore, organisations can imperfectly socialise members to the collective view (Dutton et al., 1994), as seen in Robert’s case above when he could not conform to the notion of “team is everything”. It is useful to consider the elements of organisational identification here in order to help us better understand the varying degrees of attachment to the school. Dutton and colleagues’ work on organisational identification proposes that there are two kinds of key organisational images: one based on what members believe is distinctive and enduring about their organisation (what they call “perceived organisational identity”) and another based on members’ beliefs about what others think about their organisation (what they call a “construed external image”). This model of organisational identification predicts that members evaluate the attractiveness of these images by the extent to which the image “preserves the continuity of their self-concept, provides distinctiveness, and enhances self-esteem” (Dutton et al., 1994, p. 239).
An empirical example could put this model to work. On two different occasions, George expressed how he experienced the “distinctive school” story dissolving and how he had to reassess the manner in which he identified with the school. In his T3 interview, he described how he initially saw part of the charisma of the school emanating from SX due to it being unattainable. Since it is located in Sweden, way up north, international students like him have to leave everything at home and journey to an “exotic” country for a phase of education and training. With this investment comes the imagined profit of a unique storyline to be added to one’s own career trajectory. However, he narrated that, as the school opened up more campuses around the world, the magic of the school became diffused as it was being transformed into a transnational organisation. What was once a unique and difficult-to-attain experience was now, in his opinion, becoming more accessible and less of a “singularity” (Karpik, 2010).

[SX] was this kind of mythical place? Like, ah! It’s this amazing school in Europe, or in Sweden — which is super exotic and far out from everything... it also had this, I don’t want to say unreachable, but it has this like mythical quality to it. So for me it was very interesting. Not only being able to say that I went to the school, but like, yeah! I went to Sweden. If you talk about that school, people will think that there’s some adventure to it... Now that we have it on our backyard, I guess it took a little bit away from it. I don’t think it actually did, it definitely probably is just me. But I liked it a little bit better when it was a little bit more like exotic. I felt like it was a little bit more unique... It’s just that I feel like I’m not as unique as I used to be. But again, it’s like a vanity thing. (T3 Interview)

George revealed that he no longer felt unique because the school was no longer unique, but also seemed to disdain the “vanity” expressed in these thoughts. In an earlier interview, he specified a similar concern: “At one point SX was the cool new thing; everything that SX produced and everyone SX dropped on the outside world was like very much, this is the newest you can get, this is the coolest you can get... but it’s lost the new thing, the hype.” George’s description in this quote resonates with the “hype cycle” that is typical in describing technological innovations, where
expectations are triggered at the beginning of an innovation, peaks, and then falls to a “trough of disillusionment” (Fenn & Raskino, 2008).

More importantly, George’s casual remark that his thoughts revealed a certain vanity, his distancing of self from what might be considered “hype”, along with his ability to migrate to acquire a form of education he aspired toward, demonstrate an “ease of privilege” to move about in a changing world (Bourdieu, 1996; Khan, 2011). Ease, as defined by Bourdieu, is expressed when behaviour seems to bear “no mark of the effort and no trace of the work that go into their acquisition”; ease is the privilege of those who acquire their culture through a “gradual familiarisation in the bosom of the family” and a privilege of those who can be ambivalent about its acquisition (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 21). From this perspective, ease is a kind of disposition that elites develop and which gives them certain advantages, not least in the education system.

Shamus Khan, who has built on the work of Bourdieu in his study of privilege in American boarding schools, notes, however, that “ease is not simply inherited from experiences with families; it is made in interactions at the school” (Khan, 2011, p. 83). While it could be argued that George displays ease due to his class background, I would go further to suggest that a function of the aspirants’ training in the school is that they learn to be at ease. We have seen in the sections above of the ways in which the school trains the aspirants to be at ease with uncertainty through teaming and structuring rituals, storytelling, and socialisation through the ceremonial selection. This can also be detected in the vocabularies of the aspirants and SX affiliates: “I don’t struggle” (Simon, T3 interview); “[there’s] a lot of anxiety, but at the same time, it’s good anxiety” (Maria, T2 interview); “some people want security. I’m not one of those; I know it will work out” (interview with Nora, Chair of Steering Committee); and, as quoted earlier, “You need conflicts, and there will always be conflicts” (Erik, T2 Interview).

In Section II of this text, I will specify and explore the kinds of certainties and uncertainties the aspirants experience through their school-to-work trajectories. It is not that the aspirants do not feel anxious about the flux they are in when traversing such unstable career journeys. Yet the overall flavour of their narratives suggests that they deploy such justifications in order to be comfortable with uncomfortable feelings, to become casual about uncertain events in one’s career that might compel
anxious feelings in others. I will argue that the cultivation of being at ease with uncertainty is one of the initial steps the aspirants have to take before they embark on weak-form occupations.

Returning to George’s quote above, we see that, in formulating a way to cope with the loss of novelty, he explains that there is a way to make this membership work for his career trajectory: “It’s less about having SX on your résumé, and more about what you took from SX.” In other words, for George and other aspirants, it is not sufficient to ride on the “collective effervescence” (Durkheim, 1915) that was once seductive in their first encounters in school. The responsibility is on the learner to qualify to others how they have benefitted from walking through the portals of this educational organisation.

Accepting the weight of individualisation

A prominent guiding principle that forms the core of the SX methodology is “learning by doing”. The principle is borrowed from the progressive philosopher, John Dewey, who theorised as far back as the early 1900s that learning should be relevant and practical, not just passive and theoretical (Dewey, 1920). Today, however, set against a backdrop where “a global political imaginary” envisages future economic growth through citizens’ active engagement in lifelong learning (Beckert, 2016, p. 161), this learning philosophy has regained prominence in political thought and discourse. The “learning by doing” principle can be seen as an idea that is borrowed and that has evolved over time.

From the interviews and observations, learning by doing was often emphasised by staff and facilitators in the school, serving as a trope that was, in turn, regularly used by the aspirants to describe their learning and work trajectories. For example, as Maria recounted in a T2 interview, “If you go to [the programme manager] and ask, ‘What do you think? Should we do this, or that?’ [She replies] ‘Just f***ing do it. Tweak along the way. Just f***ing do it.’ That was over and over and over and over again.” All of the aspirants drew on this trope of “just doing it” to describe their work and learning journeys. Kim, at T2, described how he found it necessary and useful to “just start somewhere” and learn while
doing, instead of trying to figure out the most ideal solution to problems. According to him, there is “not really any point of trying to figure out what the best way of learning or what the best thing to learn is... Even though you might not be learning the most valuable (programming) language at the moment, you’re still like learning how to code”.

Kim hinted at the vulnerability of what may be considered a valuable technical skill at one point but which can lose significance quickly. Because programming languages evolve, he found that it was more crucial to just learn by doing and not to worry about whether the language he used was the most valuable one at that point or not. Simon, at T2, detailed this approach in similar fashion, but with an extra dose of confidence: “If something needs to be done, and I get assigned to do it, I do it, and I learn it. All you need is to just create one website, and you know how to create ten more”.

Unmistakably, talk of how crucial it was to learn to learn, to constantly “develop” and to “grow”, was salient amongst the aspirants through the various waves of interviews. From school to work, they felt motivated when they found themselves making personal progress and when the culture of their company allowed them to “maximise their potential”. They were less satisfied, and more anxious, when they felt like they were stagnating, no longer learning anything new. One of the aspirants related at T2 how, a few months into commencing work, he wanted to leave his start-up because the culture felt toxic, but he eventually stayed on because he was “learning a lot”. At T3, another aspirant admitted to the pleasure he got from learning by “osmosis” and watching himself becoming a better strategist at the agency where he was working. In this interview extract below, Erik reflected on what drove him at work:

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4 Programming languages have been evolving rapidly over the last half of a century, and hundreds of them have been invented since the implementation of FORTRAN, the first “high-level” programming language, in the 1950s.
Many times what gives me the motivation to go on in [name of company] is, absolutely, self-development. And I notice that from a month-to-month basis I notice that I’m getting better at certain things: I’m getting better at delegating, I’m getting better at leadership, I’m getting better at analysis. Constant development. And I think that drives me. I think that drives me very, very much.

(T3 Interview)

Sara told me, similarly, that her view of success (at T3) was not linked to “what kind of position I’m standing at; it’s that from time to time I have made progress. That’s most important”. The meanings that the aspirants assigned to the desire to be constantly engaged in developmental activities could be taken as personal goals or, alternatively, as a reflection of what is currently considered a hireable trait demanded from the occupational community. Robert, at T3, was of the view that demonstrating a “drive to learn more, that you are interested — that’s what (employers) value the most”.

This phenomenon of having to constantly self-improve and self-develop was earlier written about by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005). In reference to the “new service economy”, they show how the process of qualifying oneself through exhibiting a constant engagement in “activity” has become more crucial than before. They contrasted the type of job security of the 1960s, which was based on the achievement of negotiated targets and holding a steady work position (the Industrial Cité), with contemporary careers, which are viewed as a series of fulfilled projects. They describe this as a new type of justificatory regime, “a project-oriented Cité”, in which evaluations are based on activity. In this service economy, what is imperative is to be “always pursuing some sort of activity, never to be without a project, without ideas, to be always looking forward to, and preparing for, something along with other persons, whose encounter is the result of being always driven by the impulse of activity” (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005, p. 169).

Even though there was a strong desire amongst the aspirants to be driven by the impulse of activity, the weight of having to bear the individual responsibility of learning to learn was not always easy for the aspirants to bear. Sara’s evaluation of her training put into focus the responsibility that participants take on for their learning journeys.
[The school says] “It’s all up to you. It’s all up to you.” How you want to sketch your study, what you want to learn, how you want to learn, what you want to become, how far you think you are or how you want to deal with people — it’s all up to you. If you think that’s good, go for it. But then make sure you achieve your personal goal, that’s it. If you choose to come to school and you learn nothing, it’s also your decision. (T2 Interview)

On the contrary, her peer, Leila, describes at T1 the unease that came with the freedom of individualised learning. Having gone through more traditional, teacher-centric forms of education before, she was enticed by the refreshing independence she was accorded in SX to steer her own learning journey. However, the freedom, ironically, was also a great source of anxiety for her. She shared that “in the beginning it’s exciting, because with that (freedom) I know I can do what I want. But in difficult moments, it’s very scary”, because she was left to choose, for herself, how her learning journey ought to be defined.

Despite the unease, there was a tacit acceptance amongst the aspirants that they were responsible for steering their own vessels. An example of this acceptance can be found in this interview with Simon at T2, where he was visibly bothered when discussing his peers who, in his opinion, did not take ownership for their own learning:

What has been exposed to me has been overwhelming. But what I choose to learn is all me. If I’m not satisfied with what I’ve learnt, I can’t blame anything, or anyone else than myself, in my opinion. And I get frustrated when people say they haven’t learnt enough. Because I’ve learnt so much that they also could have learnt.

Simon asserted that whatever he chose to learn was entirely his responsibility, and his quote underscores a disdain for others who lacked appreciation for their opportunities to learn. Like Simon, Kim, reflected on this “special right” to be able to develop “for the sake of it”: “I think being in a position that you’re developing in the way that you want is a privilege that is not given to a lot of people. It’s something to appreciate” (T3 Interview). In a final example, this quote below from a T2 interview
with George traces his process of moving from excitement to irritation to acceptance of this individualised form of learning.

At different points you have a different understanding of what [“it’s your journey”] means. At first it’s like, “Dude, cool, I can do whatever I want.” Then it’s like, “Damn, it’s an excuse for the school to not do their job and put everything on me.” And then you mature a little bit and it’s like, “I don’t really care what they think about it.” It’s my journey. I understand now... I’ve been to that point where I didn’t understand that and I was very frustrated... And then afterward I use the same quote to say, “This is why I love the school. This is why I make the most out of it”... When you finally understand what they mean by it, it makes a really big difference.

Here, George related how he started out by enjoying the freedom to craft his own learning journey, to being frustrated with the individualised mode of learning, to finally arguing that he had to reach some sort of enlightened maturity in order to truly comprehend the rationale for this form of individualised learning. The aspirants were observed to alternate between enchantment and disenchantment, but eventually tended to fall back on the side of persuasion. Even if initially frustrated, they ended up justifying why this type of training was of value to them. As such, they displayed faith in how the school is training and preparing them for the uncertainties that await them in the labour market. To understand the disillusionment that the aspirants went through, it has been useful to draw on Van Maanen’s (1978) distinction between the two waves of socialisation and the gap between them that aspirants may experience when trying to apply the rules they learn. But what explains their eventual willingness to accept responsibility for their own learning? How can we explain such shifts the aspirants go through from enchantment to disenchantment and back?

Since the turn of the century, researchers have been showing how “responsible and empowered actorhood” has become a dominant script in global organisations (Drori, Meyer, & Hwang, 2009). Others have argued that students are increasingly offered the freedom to customise their own education but, at the same time, they have to be responsible for
demonstrating growth and progression, “a progress and coherence that was previously ‘guaranteed’ by the disciplines” (Krause-Jensen & Garsten, 2014, p. 2). In many regards, being trained in a specific vocational programme for an occupation that is weak-form is different from disciplinary training via formal university education. While coherence in career trajectories is not “guaranteed” for these aspirants, taking individual responsibility for their own learning and career trajectories seems to be more palatable for them, as witnessed in the aspirants’ statements above when defending such notions.

It is necessary to consider here that the school and its educational form was conceived of at a time in the 1990s when the notion of lifelong learning was gaining traction amongst policy actors and being championed in policy discourse, both in state and regional arenas. Intergovernmental agencies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) appropriated the lifelong education concept, which was previously understood as the enrichment and broadening of lives through cultural or recreational pursuits, and launched it into policy discourse by emphasising the necessity for individuals to learn through and for working life (Billett, 2010).³ This was vital, these agencies argued, in order for economies to stay competitive. In 1995, the European Commission published a white paper on education and training, which proposed that the society of the future would be a learning society: “Education and training will increasingly become the main vehicles for self-awareness, belonging, advancement and self-fulfilment” (Commission of the European Communities, 1995, p. 2).

The years to follow after the publication of this white paper saw lifelong learning thrust into the core of higher education and employment policies. The European Commission declared 1996 to be the European Year of Lifelong Learning, and, in 2000, it issued a Memorandum of Lifelong Learning at the Lisbon Summit. In 2006, “learning to learn” — alongside literacy in reading, maths, and science, ICT skills, and civic skills

³ The first trace of the concept can be found, however, in the notion of “lifelong education”, used by Faure and colleagues in the 1972 UNESCO Learning To Be report.
— was identified as a key competency by the EC’s education council, thus cementing this ideal into the rhetoric of employability in Europe. With such notions infusing the environment, the organisational values formulated by SX gleaned much from the lifelong learning doctrine.

Another prevalent societal development that can be identified from the time of the school’s founding is the diffusion of the “therapeutic discourse”. This follows from a larger movement in organisational management pertaining to work-enabling self-help psychology and the promulgation of a culture of self-help (Illouz, 2008; Tunestad, 2014). As Illouz (2008) notes, this therapeutic discourse has emerged as one of the “major codes” in recent times that express, shape, and guide selfhood. Accordingly, we observe what Tunestad (2014, p. 13) terms the social construction of a “toolbox psychology” whereby individuals are offered “tools”, or an assortment of know-how and skills, “to achieve a more functional existence — at work as well as in life more generally”. Under such a regime, individuals are required to display emotional intelligence, to be involved, and to strive for synergy via practices of teambuilding and of giving and receiving feedback (Tunestad, 2014).

As we saw in the sections above through the organisation’s cultural forms, the aspirants were trained in various ways to help themselves achieve personal development and to become “effective” members in teams. What this suggests is that a script of self-management is encoded into the school’s methodology and institutionalised into resources like the SX Toolbox. Since the aspirants are immersed in an environment that transforms these ideals into everyday scripts of lifelong learning and self-management, it is not entirely surprising that they would view their capacity to take responsibility for their own learning as necessary and vital for their career trajectories.
As the aspirants gain membership in the school, the cultural forms of ceremony, rituals, and storytelling objectify and communicate the organisation’s identity and institutional ethos (Dutton et al., 1994). This empirical section has illustrated how the encoding of organisational values begins from the moment an aspirant considers applying to the school and continues as they undergo the ceremonial admissions cycle, experience rites of initiation, perform everyday rituals, and serve as both organisational story listeners and storytellers. Table 4.1 below provides a summary of the findings by outlining the three organisational cultural forms discussed, their salience, and their function in the aspirants’ education and work careers.

**Table 4.1. Cultural forms and role in aspirants’ education and work careers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisational cultural form</th>
<th>Type examined</th>
<th>Salience</th>
<th>What it does</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ceremony</td>
<td>Ceremony of selection</td>
<td>One-time, but significant</td>
<td>Initiates and socialises aspirants into organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rituals</td>
<td>Structuring and teaming rituals</td>
<td>Regular, “everyday”</td>
<td>Structure interactions and generate emotional energy and commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storytelling</td>
<td>Stories of a global, successful, alternative tribe</td>
<td>Ad hoc, but purposeful</td>
<td>Engenders confidence; promotes organisational identification and collective identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Through the discussion of organisational concepts like ceremonies, rituals, and stories in this empirical section, the reader might have sensed religious undertones in this text, not least because the parallels are strong. Geertz (1966), known for his anthropological studies of religion, earlier argued that it is in practices like rituals that conviction of the soundness of one’s religious conceptions are generated. Here, within the context of a highly uncertain moment of education-to-work transitions, where a person’s a priori understandings can change dramatically through encountering an organisation (Van Maanen, 1978), a similar need for assurance and belief amongst aspirants is stressed.

With a strong school culture manifested through these various cultural forms, the aspirants experience the magic of group solidarity and collective effervescence that propels them forward in their pursuit of a particular occupational pathway, even if it is weakly defined. However, this aspirational process is not straightforward, as the weight of an individualised form of learning can, at times, erode the aspirant’s dependence on and adherence to the “team” — something the school claims to value. Furthermore, because socialisation processes are not fixed (Van Maanen, 1978), we can see how the aspirants waiver when they sense their expectations are not being met. Yet, in most instances, we find that they end up back on the side of being persuaded, with faith that the school is preparing them for their impending work lives.

Through examining how the school prepares the aspirants for work that does not yet exist, this analysis teases out three scripts that are encoded during the stage of socialisation into the organisation. The first is the script of lifelong learning, whereby the value of acquiring the competence to learn to learn is given much priority through the aspirants’ training. The second script is that of self-management, through which the aspirants are trained to draw from “toolboxes” they become acquainted with through the course of their training. Paradoxically, much of this self-improvement is focused not on the self but on learning to reflect and to give and receive feedback in order to become an effective team player. The third script, dealt with briefly, is that of being “at ease”, particularly with uncertainty.

These scripts, it should be emphasised, are derived from developments that are taking place at the level of higher education and labour market policies; they did not come about in a vacuum. At the level
of the institution, we can observe how these scripts are encoded and fashioned into the school’s guiding principles, the programme’s curriculum, and the manner in which the training programme is carried out. At the level of the individual, we then see the scripts enacted and constituted in the narratives of the aspirants, revealed in the manner in which they narrate their experiences through time. These scripts are powerful means in cultivating and preparing the aspirants for weak-form occupational trajectories, since the aspirants generally accept them as necessary to follow and to use for navigating the constantly changing demands of the labour market.

Beyond membership, identification, and commitment, topics often cast as important for organisational research, the notion of faith might come in as more useful in examining weak-form occupations, as there is intangibility in these labour market outcomes and career pathways. Faith in the occupational pathway is different from commitment, precisely because there are no strong rewards, career systems, or consistent lines of activity to which these aspirants can be committed (Becker, 1960). Yet it is vital that these aspirants believe that the pathway they are on will lead to a positive labour market outcome for them if they are to muster the motivation to embark on education and training in the first place.

In biblical prose, faith is described as “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). In secular prose, even though he does not use the concept “faith”, Beckert (2016, p. 62) terms such phenomena in capitalist economies “fictional expectations”, that is, the “imaginaries of future states of the world and of causal relations that inform actors’ decisions”. Under conditions of uncertainty, as in the case of preparing for occupations that do not yet exist or are in weak-form, expectations of a career are projections, not actual forecasts (Beckert, 2016). While a weak-form occupational trajectory cannot be “seen”, the aspirants make decisions and take actions based on cultivating faith that there will be future gains.
Two

MEETING THE LABOUR MARKET
MEETING THE LABOUR MARKET

After forty-five weeks in school, the aspirants head to work. Even though the twenty-week job placement is an official requirement of the programme, necessary to complete in order for the participant to graduate, aspirants are preoccupied for months about where they will be placed, what they will be doing, and how much they will be paid. For many, this programme requirement is more than an internship stint. If the organisation has the ability to hire them as employees after their traineeship, the aspirants may stay on in the company and continue on this trajectory. Thus, this work placement is a critical first step into the occupational pathway.

In this second empirical section, the aspirants’ meeting of the labour market takes centre stage. By focusing particularly on the process of job search, I get to examine turning points and events that punctuate the career (Abbott, 1995; Pallas, 2003). The literature on job searching is vast and spans various research fields. Within the field of socio-economics, a body of research has been focused on the distinction between formal methods of job searching (the use of job ads or employment services) and informal ones (social network), showing that the distribution of a person’s social capital and network composition affect the use of informal methods (Granovetter, 1973; Montgomery, 1992; Try, 2005). Other studies focus on job seekers’ “reservation wage” or “locus of control”, whereby individuals possess subjective beliefs about the impact of their search effort on successfully getting a job (Caliendo, Cobb-Clark, & Uhlendorff, 2015). In the fields of vocational behaviour and applied psychology, studies have looked at antecedents to job-search behaviour (e.g., personality, motivation, self-efficacy, and trait affect) on job-search
outcomes and likelihood of getting a job (Blau, 1994; see also Côté et al., 2006, and Kanfer et al., 2001 for a review). Most of these studies focus on one outcome: job-search success or failure. They also often rely on survey data, which are commonly based on the social characteristics and attitudes of the job seekers.

Although individual variation in search behaviour is of interest when studying variation in success, my intention here is to connect to extant research by offering an in-depth account that examines how aspirants think and act during the job-search process. I followed the small group through a longitudinal qualitative exploration of their job searches, an approach that captures critical temporal dimensions. Moreover, by examining the aspirants’ deliberations, it is also possible to understand their search behaviour more profoundly by taking into account the twists and turns in this dynamic process. For example, accounts of how they set out to use a particular type of job-search script, but had to alter it or enact another script based on their interactions with hirers, invites us to consider the multiplicity and complexity of script enactment. This phase of the job search is also highly specific: it takes place while the aspirants are still in school. Hence, the ideas, gossip, rumours, and fantasies they are exposed to when embedded in this collective play a role in shaping their conceptions of what is possible in looking for and obtaining work.

This empirical section of the monograph is composed of three distinct but related analyses. The first concentrates on the aspirants’ experiences of looking for work and identifies six types of job-search scripts that characterise their action orientation, the direction of action, and level of exposure to risk. While earlier sections hinted at the uncertainties of entering weak-form occupations, the next part of this section specifies what they are. I trace three sources of uncertainty that were accounted for in the aspirants’ education-to-work transition and which pertain to issues of worth, inequality in labour market outcomes, and unclear occupational futures. I show how these, largely, unanticipated contexts had the potential of throwing the aspirants off their tracks and disrupting script following. The final part in this section analyses a corpus of job advertisements and identifies the kinds of scripts hirers put forth that articulate their conceptions of the ideal candidate. I link these to ways in which the aspirants anticipated expectations from hirers in the labour market and argue that job ads serve as sites of projectivity.
Job searching shapes the set of available job opportunities for an aspirant. The period of job searching was a significant time for the aspirants I followed: obtaining a “good” internship position was perceived as offering a foot in the door of the labour market and a tentative assessment of how they were fairing at this initial stage of their occupational trajectory. Even though their preoccupations over job search were strongest at T2, since that was the period they needed to secure a job placement, the phenomenon of searching and obtaining work had always been on their minds, starting when they were still in training (T1) through to when they were already in the labour market (T3).

In this analysis, I mobilise all the empirical material collected over time in order to formulate a comprehensive understanding of the job search in this particular aspirational context. The central focus is on how the aspirants went about their job searches. I refer to the action patterns identified here as the aspirants’ job-search “scripts”. Such scripts are picked up and learnt when the aspirants are in training; they frame patterns of job-search behaviour; and they mediate agency and structure. In analysing the longitudinal qualitative data, I use scripts as a focal point in the analysis and inductively derive these patterns of behaviour based on the actions and accounts of the aspirants.

The scripts identified can be analysed into three broader categories. The first is “action orientation”, which characterises the aspirants’ mode of obtaining and acting on job opportunities. These actions can be strategic, involving planning and plotting, or opportunistic, whereby the aspirants exploit immediate opportunities that come about without planning. Second, “direction of action” indicates whether the job search went according to a fixed plan or whether the aspirants changed course via a pivot. Third, “action exposure” refers to whether the aspirants embarked on their job search from a zone considered to be safe or risky.

From this analysis, I show that every aspirant drew on at least two types of job-search scripts, thus emphasising the multiplicity of action patterns used when they searched for and obtained work. That there is no single, specific way of getting on this occupational pathway can be viewed
as a characteristic of weak-form occupations. Furthermore, all the scripts enacted reveal the crucial role of the collective in shaping individual action in the job search. Aspirants acquire scripts of how to search for work in shared settings, leading to mimicry and collective patterns of how they should go about making this transition from school to work. In the paragraphs to follow, I elaborate on these job-search scripts: how they have been identified, and what they entail.

**Action orientation: strategic or opportunistic**

Let us begin with the first job-search script characterised as *strategic*. In this cohort, there were two particular strategies that the aspirants used in plotting and planning for job search. These involved reaching out to organisations directly and asking for work placements (instead of waiting for companies to advertise) as well as starting early in the application calendar, before the applicant pool becomes congested with other seekers. These strategies were learnt, either through the aspirant’s own previous experience of job search or from the experiences of previous cohorts from the school. Annika noted how she adapted her approach based on what she learnt from her previous (less successful) job-search attempts when she was working in another occupational field. At that time, she had hesitated in applying early for jobs because she was worried that she was not ready. Now, however, when hearing in the middle of the school term of an opportunity to apply for an internship in a large global tech company, she decided not to wait.

In my past experiences, I always waited for such a long time before applying for anything because I felt that I had to *know everything*. But [this time] I was like, “shoot, I’m just going to do it.” So I sent an email out, and I have a good CV with the previous things I’ve done. But also, I did my portfolio online, [spells out name of her site], which I coded myself. So, so proud. I also wrote a letter [to the company] saying that I don’t know what the role is going to be like but what interests me is the big, huge datasets.
Annika’s strategy here entailed several tactics: applying early and not waiting until the application season arrived; exhibiting a willingness to start her internship over the summer months and forgo vacation altogether; “doing her homework” by coding and creating her own portfolio; and reaching out to the hirer directly by asking questions and displaying honesty. In a lengthier account illustrating what planning and plotting looks like in an aspirational context, one of the interviewees articulated in great detail his method for job search. He was clearly proud of what came out from this job search when he secured a traineeship at an agency he had set his eyes on for a long time.

I think I actively started looking in March-ish? Because we were supposed to go for our internships in August. But I was always so eager to work; I don’t need vacations right now. So I don’t mind going straight out of school [to work]. And also because I’m international, I knew that it could be a longer process, just ‘cause visas, legal bullshit. So I started really early. I just started cold-calling agencies and I… I did my research. I know which companies I wanted to work with. Companies that I really admire.

I had this list — this Excel sheet — on my computer with the name of the company, the contact, and just started adding people on LinkedIn and sending emails, and trying to figure out what the CEO’s email would be and emailing them. Basically cold-calling? ... The vast majority of companies I approached didn’t have anything open. It was just like, “Hi. You don’t know me. I’m from [name of country], been living in Sweden, been working for this and that, and I want to work with you guys...” I had this list of like ten, fifteen companies in Amsterdam, ten, fifteen companies in London, that was my pool. And although it was in order of what I wanted the most, what I wanted less, let’s say every Monday or Tuesday I will send an email to the top five, and wait to talk to some people, and next week I will send to the other five... I wasn’t always talking to a lot of people, but just to keep the ball rolling.

This aspirant’s strategic method for job search entailed starting the job-search process earlier than his peers as well as reaching out by “cold-calling” a targeted group of organisations that he “admired”. Like
Annika, he sought to exhibit the Calvinistic work ethic that emphasises discipline (“I don’t need vacations right now”). He also knew that, as an “international”, he had to work harder at plotting his strategy, dealing with the constraints and realities of mobility that call for more time spent responding to bureaucratic rules and administrative work.

Despite revealing to me later that the agency said it was a project he did at SX that stood out in his portfolio, his narrative above sought to convince me, as the listener, that it was his method of searching that played a major part in securing him the job. His description of the method he used emphasised the benefits that came from being at the front of the queue. He also stressed his own meticulous planning, systematic plotting, endurance, and self-initiative — not on a reliance on networks to “cut the queue”. Although there is no way of knowing if his version of job search filtered out aspects that were not strategic, what this aspirant emphasised was the detail and intensity of what he did, such as creating a spreadsheet listing companies to focus on, adding the “right” people on LinkedIn, and following a weekly calendar of reaching out to companies. In his own words, “I did my research”.

This kind of narrative contrasts with his peers who obtained work via the opportunistic script, where immediate opportunities were exploited, often without planning. One aspirant, for example, landed a job in a start-up through a recommendation. He was at first unaware that he had been recommended to representatives from a start-up when they presented a lecture at SX, which he did not attend; when they asked for developers, his peers recommended him. This aspirant shared candidly with me that part of the reason why he took the job was that, on the same night that he was notified of this opening, he was dealing with a difficult personal issue, and the offer gave him something else to think about. Hence, he followed up on the job opportunity as soon as it was presented to him.

Leila had similar experiences of exploiting opportunities. On one occasion, what started out as a conversation at a social event landed her an internship: “We were at a birthday party... One of the other girls, her husband who has this company, was just talking to me, and at the end he was like, ‘if you’re interested we’re looking for people’”. Her next job opportunity was also derived from a conversation at SX. After she expressed her interest in a particular area of tech work, someone in the
group responded that his brother had just launched a start-up; that led to her getting a foot in the door and, subsequently, a position as a developer.

That not all job-search methods are planned and not all jobs are obtained through an active search reveals important characteristics of the opportunistic script. The aspirants’ networks have shaped the opportunities described here, and they had to seize such opportunities in order for them to lead to a job. Obtaining work without active searching is often mediated by social networks (Marsden & Gorman, 2001). In this regard, the enactment of the opportunistic script casts into the spotlight the role of the school in constructing vital networks for the aspirants to use in their job searches.

Direction of action: pivot or fixed

The next set of scripts deals with the direction of action in the job search. Here, I use the dichotomy of fixed and pivot to define action that either follows a planned course of action or, by contrast, changes during the search. A pivot, in start-up speak, can be described as a “structured course correction” (Ries, 2011, p. 103) or a “delicate change of course as graceful as it seems intentional” (Martinez, 2016, p. 52). Pivots can occur in an unsystematic fashion as a response to circumstances that could not have been foreseen. These include personal events in the aspirants’ lives, for example, a sickness in the family or a change in relationship statuses (unions and dissolutions) with significant others. These typically unforeseen circumstances compel aspirants to take up job opportunities that are presented to them, even if these opportunities do not fit an existing plan.

The need to pivot is not surprising, since the process of looking for work can drag out over long periods of time, during which life circumstances can and will change. In this account below, the aspirant had to pivot out of a job search altogether because of an illness in the family.
Well, it has been having a few surprising turns. But I did get an internship at [name of firm]... And in the middle of all that, my family member got sick so I had a really hard time to finish my internship there but I did. And when I thought I was going to go out in the world and get a good pay job I've instead been home, hundred per cent. So I haven't really been able to work, yet. (T3 Interview)

Pivots can also take place because initial ambitions cool down. In the T1 interviews, there was a shared aspiration amongst the aspirants to find work placements overseas, in places such as Singapore, Tokyo, Silicon Valley, or Berlin. This ambition was fuelled by earlier cohorts of alumni taking steps out of Sweden as well as by encouragement from the school that they could do their internships “anywhere in the world”. In the end, only one of the aspirants out of the group I followed stuck to and realised his overseas work plan, while the others altered their ambitions by staying put, citing reasons such as the uncertainties and costs of moving abroad, getting employment visas, and a present satisfaction for their lives in Sweden. Even though aspirants are encouraged to demonstrate agency in their careers, the inconveniences and economic, cognitive, and social “costs” of geographical movement cool out their previously grand ambitions of being “cosmopolitan” (Dany et al., 2011).

Up until the mid-nineties, job-search research had predominantly used cross-sectional designs, treating the phenomenon as static. For those who have focused on studying changes in job search, they tend to emphasise how behaviour changes systematically along stages, and distinguish between searching extensively and searching intensively or amongst types of reactions (persistence, avoidance, or withdrawal) to job-search stress (see e.g., Barber et al., 1994). However, as I found, changes in job-search behaviour do not always follow a sequential pattern, nor do they necessarily happen because search behaviour adapts to search outcomes. Pivots in job search can also occur in an unsystematic fashion as a response to unforeseen circumstances and be framed later as a sort of intentional course correction.

The inverse to pivoting in a job search is the enactment of a fixed script. Those who find work via this script follow through in the direction of their job-search plans. The fixed script shares similarities with the strategic script in that both move in accordance with a plan. However,
while the strategic script deals with planning and plotting, the fixed script is characterised by the rigidity and firmness of the action’s direction.

Of the aspirants I followed, one commonality amongst those who drew on the fixed script was the admiration they expressed for the companies they sought to work for. In our conversations, Robert often tried to set apart the agency that hired him. He stressed that, even though the agency was in the business of digital marketing, they had hired mathematicians, statisticians, and quantum physicists. “They are putting another level of effort into this (business),” he said. “That’s why it’s fascinating with them.” In a similar fashion, George spoke of how he “stalked” the organisation he wanted to work for, and described how he “knew the organisation” even before getting in.

Getting this job was less about the job itself but the satisfaction of getting something that I really wanted, or like going to a city that I really wanted to meet. Those are the kinds of things that I think are really important, to always be fighting for something... Like for example, not so many people when they get hired for a job, they had been stalking that company for a while. They [might] know about it, they get excited about it, “ah, cool money, cool position”. But for me, I really knew this company from before.

Fixated on the idea of getting work in this agency, George claimed he found satisfaction not so much from getting the job per se but, rather, in sticking with the plan and getting what he had set his eyes on. He distinguished himself from others, who strive for money or for the “cool” positions but who might not have “fought” for it. The style of a stalker in job search — pursuing, preying, and proceeding — was painted in new, positive, strokes in his narrative. I found that aspirants who enacted the fixed script reached out to companies first and only later negotiated about positions or tasks. The desirability of getting work at a specific company thus shaped how these aspirants would pursue job positions and openings.
Action exposure: safe or risky

Regarding how cautious the aspirants were in their job searches, two scripts were identified. The first script was enacted when aspirants embarked from a zone characterised as safe, thus minimising their exposure to risk. In this case, the actions were marked as safe if the aspirants selected work sites where they had ties to a pre-existing social network or, alternatively, if the traineeship was pitched as a probationary period with a possible job offer after. Robert, in the T2 interview extract below, shared how he secured a position at an agency, acting on the lead and advice from a close friend:

One of my best friends — he is the one who has shown me everything [about the business] — he knows the CEO of that company and they had just been talking a little bit. And he said, “If you want an internship you should apply for this. I can’t be involved in the process because I kinda know you.” And then I contacted the guy who was handling the application for internships and… [clicks his tongue and flashes a pistol sign].

By following through with a lead and advice from a trusted source, Robert got a job placement rather quickly and securely. If they had no pre-existing social ties, it was often through working on live projects during their school term and interacting with industry practitioners that aspirants could create a network of experts they could leverage when searching for job opportunities. Even if they did not enjoy the practice of networking themselves, all the aspirants believed that who you know is more important than what you know. For them, connections possessed more strategic value in the search for work opportunities than possessing mere theoretical knowledge (Tholen, Brown, Power, & Allouch, 2013).

Using networks and petitioning agencies to create a traineeship position was a means for some aspirants to secure a work placement. Unlike other markets that might be congested with job seekers, such that connections become exclusive opportunities or entry passes (Tholen et al., 2013), in the case of weak-form occupations, positions are often newly created, often experimental. Connections and trust-based recommendations become more important in serving as conduits to these
positions for the aspirants. Earlier research has shown that referral applicants present more appropriate résumés than do non-referral applicants and are more likely than non-referrals to apply when market conditions are favourable; moreover, the positive effect of referral ties continues beyond the search and hiring process onto employee attachment and performance (Castilla, 2005; Fernandez & Weinberg, 1997). The “learning model” also predicts an increase in the use of connections, since it is more likely to lead to positive employment outcomes (Barber et al., 1994; Granovetter, 1974; Saks & Ashforth, 2000). Taken together, using connections as a way into a job can be conceived of as a “safe bet”.

Not all of the aspirants at SX, however, acted from a zone of safety or minimised their exposure to risk. For instance, some of them applied to jobs where they knew no one at the organisation or were unsure about the firm’s future. This is constitutive of the risky script, one in which the aspirant embarked on the job-search process with little connection or information about the organisation. Kim, who took on a job without any referral or prior contact in the start-up where he was hired, told me how the risks in his work were gradually revealed after he commenced employment there. In his T2 interview, he discussed how the uncertainty of the start-up’s business directly affected the security of his job and that there was a possibility that he might lose his position at any time.

Our office right now is very... it's not the most respectable, or whatever you want to call it. It's kind of in the basement, or below ground... And we've hired so many people since I've started so it's becoming really, really sparse space... In the short time-span, like half a year or something, it's either that I'm going to get fired, because of anything really. Or that the company is going to go bankrupt or something. And that I'm going to be out of a job and that it's going to be hard for me to find another one. I don't think that it's going to be like that but it's still something that worries me. Since the company is kind of new and is still growing, and it's like... is still dependent on investor money and that it keeps coming in... It's not the most stable job in the world.

That Kim was aware of the instability of his employment position but continued working there demonstrated either a kind of propensity for
risk or the lack of alternative employment. Other aspirants were confronted with situations in which they were told that there were no prospects of a job after the traineeship or that they were not going to be paid.

In management literature, much has been written about the risks to employers for offering unpaid internships, risks that deal mostly with the legal consequences if an intern should sue the organisation for unfair employment practice. The arguments used to justify not paying interns tend to say that the workplace training benefits interns more than employers, or that supervising an intern represents a cost to the organisation.

In the creative and digital industries especially, the “vocational need” to amass “vocational practice” via a combination of unpaid internships and work placements is often emphasised (Fuller & Unwin, 2010; Guile, 2010). Mears (2015) earlier mapped out various examples in different occupations to understand why people would consent to work for free, particularly in relational work. The explanations for engaging in unpaid labour can range from an aspirant’s anticipation of gaining status, to working on projects for free in order to “beef up” one’s portfolio, or framing one’s labour as a pursuit of passions (Aspers, 2001; Mears, 2011, 2015; Neff, 2012). All of these reasons point toward a sort of imagined future profit (Beckert, 2016), or perceived symbolic benefit (Mears, 2015), that come from offering one’s labour and walking away with no pay.

Because unpaid internships are often pitched as “beneficial” to the intern, less is discussed about the risks to the intern for working for free. In the 1950s, Becker and Strauss (1956, p. 256) already pointed out that during internships, “Learning may depend upon circumstances which the candidate cannot control and of which he may not even be aware”. When a large part of a training programme takes place in the workplace and there is a heavy degree of non-standardisation, the aspirants’ learning experiences may vary greatly across different internships and be dependent on the quality of their mentors, the kinds of work tasks they are assigned, and the amount of time and space they get to reflect on their practice (Becker & Strauss, 1956). The aspirants thus embark from a zone of risk if they are not being compensated for their time or the work they put in, in addition to the lack of any guarantee that they will amass useful vocational experience.
Despite these risks of not being paid or being guaranteed a job after the training period, the aspirants at SX who enacted this script accepted the internship offers. Before they commenced work, however, they attempted to justify why they would go unpaid or described how they would mitigate exposure to risk by developing ways to approach the employer about these unfavourable employment arrangements. This conversation with Erik at our T2 interview is illustrative:

RY: Are you getting paid for this internship?

No. And that sucks. I could have gotten a paid internship probably, but it might not be where I want to be? Then I checked up with some mates who got their internships at [name of agency], which is like the Coca Cola of agencies — they don’t get paid. So then I realised that it might be hard: if [this agency] is not paying, who’s going to pay? That’s my way of thinking. I think my plan, at least, is at the ten-week mark, I want to have a meeting about either getting paid or getting like recognition: “You’re doing a great job. If you keep this up, you will get a job”. And if they can’t tell me that, I will tell them that in the last ten weeks, I will be searching for another job. So that’s my plan, at least. But since they don’t know what I can do, they don’t know my capabilities yet, I think it’s fair for them to not pay me. But after ten weeks, I do not think it’s fair. That’s where I’m going to bring it up.

In the first part of the quote, Erik articulated his thinking behind undertaking an unpaid internship offer. Besides accepting that it was a common practice in the industry, he noted a trade-off between undergoing an unpaid internship in a company where he wanted to work at, versus a paid internship in a company that was less desirable to him. The imagined, symbolic rewards of working at a sought-after company shapes the amount of risk an aspirant would take. In this regard, the risk was their willingness to work for free for a period of time. However, as seen from this extract above, Erik had a plan to deal with the condition of being unpaid, which was to prove his worth and then negotiate for a job guarantee after the traineeship. In the subsequent T3 interview, I learnt...
that he followed through with this plan, and the agency, nervous that he might leave after the internship, offered him a paid, permanent position.

Although one might expect that the aspirants would be more willing to take on risks at the early stage of their occupational trajectories, even more so because taking risks was such a strong ideological narrative in the school and occupational community, there was an equal salience in the usage of both the safe and risky scripts. Furthermore, as we saw above, for those who skirted the edges of risky, they also devised ways to minimise exposure to hazard by lessening the open-endedness of precarious internship arrangements.

**Script pluralism and the collective orientation of job search**

In this section of meeting the labour market, six scripts that are enacted during job search in an aspirational context have been identified: strategic, opportunistic, fixed, pivot, safe, and risky. The salience and frequency of the scripts found in the aspirants’ job-search accounts are mapped out and presented in Table 5.1 below. Crucial to the findings presented here is that every aspirant drew on multiple job-search scripts, thus emphasising the plurality of action patterns in searching for work. That there is no one, singular way to get a foot into the labour market could be viewed as characteristic of entering occupations that are emerging and in nascent stage. We also see that aspirants vary in the scripts they followed. Those who were opportunistic in their job search also pivoted in their search, and took on more risky job possibilities.

Based on salience (that is how many aspirants drew on each particular script) the aspirants were more strategic than opportunistic, and more fixed than pivoting in the direction of their job search, although the differences are not large. There was also an equal salience between those who embarked from a zone of safety and a zone of risk. Overall, the fixed script was the most drawn upon. One way to view this is to argue that the aspirants were attempting to exhibit job-search clarity, retrospectively, through their accounts. As shown briefly through this analysis (and to become clearer in subsequent chapters), when the aspirants are able to follow through with a career plan, their ambitions are stoked and confidence is engendered. The inverse is also expected: when they have to
pivot or change course due to unanticipated circumstances or contexts in the labour market, uncertainty is produced.

Table 5.1. Salience and frequency of aspirational job-search scripts in aspirants’ longitudinal accounts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Realm of action</th>
<th>Aspirant</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>Salience</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action Orientation</td>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunistic</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direction of Action</td>
<td>Fixed</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pivot</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action exposure</td>
<td>Safe</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Risky</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of scripts aspirant drew from</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

How does this analysis presented here contribute to what is already known about job searching? A thread running through the scripts is the role of the collective in shaping individual action in searching for work. In the strategic script, for example, we saw how the aspirants learnt tricks of the trade for job search from others around them and from earlier cohorts of students at the school. In the opportunistic script, we observed how networks mediated job opportunities such that aspirants could find themselves at the “right place at the right time” when a job opportunity came up. In the fixed script, organisations carved out pathways for the aspirants to the extent that the aspirants became strongly attached to the potentiality of traversing these tracks. And in the risky script, we saw how the aspirants took risks based on imagined, symbolic rewards; what was

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1 Salience refers to how many aspirants drew on the script; frequency refers to how many times all the aspirants drew on the script, as found in the 27 interviews over the three waves of interviews.
considered symbolic was shaped collectively by the occupational community.

Over and beyond examining how individual traits or demographic attributes affect job search, the analysis here compels us to consider the weight of collective job-search behaviour in our understanding of individual search outcomes. Aspirants acquired scripts of how to go about looking for work in shared settings and there was mimicry and shared patterns of how they would go about traversing from education to work. From this analysis, it becomes apparent that once aspirants embarked on this pathway into a weak-form occupation, their next steps and moves were more calculated and cautious than hasty or careless, as if to mitigate the risks they anticipated to lie ahead of them.
THE UNANTICIPATED: DISRUPTION TO SCRIPT FOLLOWING

Up to this point, we have followed the aspirants through their experiences of being groomed and prepared in a school setting for occupational pathways that are emerging and evolving. We have also observed how they searched for work through a multiplicity of job-search scripts and the significance of collective job search in shaping how they would meet the labour market. In this part of Section II, I will take a little detour to examine how the aspirants’ process of script following can be derailed from the path they expected. Specifically, I trace three sources of uncertainty that arose in the aspirants’ education-to-work transition and which pertain to issues of worth, inequality in labour market outcomes, and unclear occupational futures.

The individual and collective profiling of their careers as “uncertain” gave an overpowering flavour to the aspirants’ narratives. This is curious, if we consider their trajectories against the backdrop of the relatively favourable conditions characterising the labour market when they graduated. The aspirants entered this market at an opportune time when many businesses — from financial services to publishing to healthcare — were transforming the way they worked, the means by which they generated profits, and the priorities they placed on data-driven reasoning. For example, “growth hacking”, a function earlier found in start-ups to scale their businesses, was finding its way into large corporations and quickly becoming mainstream. As opportunities demanding the kinds of skills they were trained in sprouted throughout the labour market, it expanded the number of job possibilities for the aspirants.

Furthermore, in the year that the aspirants searched for work, the average salary of “IT specialists” in Sweden (a bureaucratic occupational category that includes developers, data analysts, and other related occupations) was 42,800 SEK,\(^1\) with the lowest tenth percentile earning

\[^1\] 10 SEK ≈ €1.
30,000 SEK and the 90th percentile earning 57,200 SEK.\textsuperscript{2} Compared to other occupational groups in that same year, IT specialists drew a higher average salary than university lecturers (39,600 SEK), designers (34,800 SEK), and artists (32,400 SEK). Over the course of this research, GDP growth was on the rise in Sweden, and since 2010, unemployment in Sweden has been on a steady decline (see Appendix B for figure on unemployment rate in Sweden). These trends have been met concurrently with a rise in job vacancies (especially in the IT and communications sectors) over the same time period.

What, then, explains the uncertainties that the aspirants speak about? Is this merely a result of the charismatic posturing of the digital economy the aspirants participate in, or are their anxieties stemming from the kinds of inequality and ambiguities they observe when in the labour market? West et al., (1987) point out that there are often two contrasting sides to “newly created jobs”: on the one hand, these jobs offer opportunities for growth and exploration, and, on the other, they can present more novelty and change than people can cope with comfortably.\textsuperscript{3}

Although often viewed and compared to the unpredictable, creative career, the kind of trajectories these aspirants traverse are not entirely similar to their counterparts in the artistic field. The latter is a segment of the labour market characterised by higher rates of unemployment or “constrained underemployment” (i.e., non-voluntary part-time work, intermittent work, fewer hours of work) (Menger, 1999). As seen from the outcomes of the cohort the aspirants were part of, the majority of them had a job one year after graduation in various kinds of work organisations, with a handful being self-employed.

\textsuperscript{2} In 2014, Statistics Sweden (SCB) began coding occupational data using the most updated SSYK2012 classification, which used a more precise classification for IT occupational groups as compared to the previous schema. The occupational code for the labour market data represented here is “251”, a category consisting of occupations broadly classified as “IT architects, system developers and test managers” and including app developers, data analysts, programmers (2512), game developers (2513), and web analysts (2511) — a broadly defined occupational group that the aspirants strove to enter or ended up in. See Appendix A for a write-up on the evolution of the Swedish Occupational Classification and the significance of its development for the study of this group.

\textsuperscript{3} The study by West et al. (1987) concerned newly created managerial positions within an organisation (i.e., positions that had no incumbent), not “new occupations” per se.
The uncertainties that the aspirants experienced were therefore less about whether or not they would get a job. As will be elaborated in the paragraphs to follow, the first source of uncertainty pertains to how they should act as newcomers in this emerging area of work. Although newcomer anxiety can be viewed as a general form of anxiety for any aspirant, we see how the ambiguity can be stronger for those in weak-form occupations (in a double “not-yet” situation) because of the absence of stabilised forms of worth. The second uncertainty relates to how the aspirants attempted to make sense of the gender–age skew in the “tech industry”. Central to this ambiguity was the difficulty in reconciling the observed divisive employment outcomes within tech work with the values of equality and inclusivity that are emphasised discursively. The final form of uncertainty pertains to the plurality of the occupational titles the aspirants ended up having and the industries they ended up in after graduation. The ambiguity of their career shape became most visible at this stage, since they were dispersed into different industries and work roles upon leaving school and meeting the labour market.

Worth

In earlier sections of this monograph, we observed how the aspirants were filled with confidence about the kinds of labour market demands for the skill sets and competences they possessed. When the aspirants actually looked for work, however, the more tangible aspects of how much they should be paid or how much they were “worth” in monetary terms were less apparent. The uncertainty observed here reflects a more general type of aspirant anxiety, as well as an effect of a cultural norm in Sweden where people do not commonly talk about how much they are paid. This cultural avoidance of salary-talk meant that it was difficult to gather information and make comparisons with peers, thus compounding their anxieties about how much they should be paid or how much their services were worth.

Take, for example, this discussion on wages, found in a T3 interview with Simon: “You know Jante right? It’s not that common... I mean, it’s not correct in Sweden to ask people what they make. It’s not like that in most of the world. So I don’t think people have the courage to
do it. They just stand there with their lack of knowledge and settle for whatever they get”. Here, Simon evoked the concept of janteloven (the law of Jante), which was first used in the literary work of Aksel Sandemose’s En flyktning krysser sitt spor (A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks) (1933). Sandemose described the social rules prescribed in the fictional town of Jante, where some of the laws include: “You shall not believe you are anything”, or “You shall not believe you are more than us.” Colloquially, the term Jante is nowadays applied rather loosely (and contentiously) to describe the cultural de-emphasis on individual success, achievement, and standing out in a crowd, especially within Nordic societies.

The awkwardness around salary discussions made it difficult for the aspirants to compare amongst themselves how they were being remunerated and compounded the anxiety that came with being a newcomer in young occupations, not fully comprehending the game of how to put a price on one’s skills and abilities. Annika, for example, landed an internship at a big tech company, was paid 29,000 SEK (around €3000) a month, and received vacation days. She revealed to me that she would have had worked for the company for free.

One of my biggest [challenges] is that I can’t put money on myself. You know like, how much is my time worth? I got so surprised that I got the kind of money this summer, but I could have gone for way, way, way less. So like I’m scared that when I come out [from this internship], I’m not going to be able to put a price on my hat... what if I get a job there? What should I ask? (T2 Interview)

Annika went on to explain her apprehension of not knowing enough when she commenced work — “What if I don’t know the tools? What if I’m just a liability instead of help?” This unease was magnified because she was going to be paid, and she sensed that there would be fewer leniencies for poor performance. Being remunerated for interning, ironically, became a form of stress. This contrasted with the discussion in the previous section about the risk the aspirants were exposed to when they embarked on unpaid internships. From the perspectives of the aspirants, we see how the valuation practice of newcomers was not straightforward. Although Annika’s seeming lack of confidence about how
to “price” herself was reflected in her alleged willingness to work for free, Leila, on the other hand, felt like she could have been paid more but lacked the courage to negotiate.

Their offer was in the range, like an average. Like a pretty good salary, not pretty good, but it’s a good one. I could ask for more. But I didn’t know how. That’s the problem when you’ve just started — you can ask for more, but what is your argument? Like, “Seriously, just give me more because I can ask for more.” Well, I have not signed the contract yet, but maybe I’ll just go for it, not go into this negotiation part. I’ll definitely do this later when I have more experience. I’ll be like, “No, this is how much [I will be paid] because I can do this and this and that.” But now I don’t have the confidence to say that. I have the confidence that I will do the job. That’s all. (T3 Interview)

Leila hesitated to enter into salary negotiations with the hirers, as she was unsure if that was appropriate aspirant behaviour. She expressed the sense that she had the confidence to do the job, but she did not have the confidence to bargain about how much she should be paid. As a result, she settled for what she was offered. The tendency to hesitate over wage bargaining was observed more strongly amongst the female aspirants, consequently raising the question about whether the differences in negotiation strategies, observed here, stratify along gender lines. This is necessary to consider, since earlier research studies in Sweden have found that women consistently submit lower wage bids than men do and receive lower counter-offers from employers (Säve-Söderbergh, 2007, 2016). Furthermore, as will be explored in more detail below, the inequalities observed in tech work that stem from being female and older was a source of concern for the aspirants with these traits.
Inequality

I’ve seen a lot of very open-minded, super positive people that have open arms, like, “this is just what we need”; open-arms-do-anything-you-like. Then my own *stinky fish* might be like, “will they think I’m too old, not fit into the team?” “Will it matter that I’m a woman, will a man get more pay?” Discrimination of different kinds? But my impression is that, in this industry, it’s very open-minded people. So from everything I see and hear, in practice, it’s just positive. So I think it’s mostly in my own mind. But then we’ll see, when it comes down to business.

In my first interview with this aspirant, the oldest female in the group, she spoke of her anxieties by evoking the “stinky fish” metaphor, which at SX was used to describe a fear that participants have but do not like to talk about; the longer one conceals this fear, the smellier it gets. Here, she discussed the diversity problem in the tech sector. The delicacy of this issue and the general difficulty in talking about it comes from the paradoxical openness that the tech sector claims to possess. This aspirant grappled with what she saw as an industry that was uninhibited, but she was still unsure about whether her ascriptive characteristics (being older and female) would affect her chances of securing employment in this line of work. At T3, she had not found work after her internship and said that, when looking for work via job advertisements, “anything that says ‘young team and fast paced’ — is not for me. I won’t fit in a young and fast-paced team when I have kids to take care of.”

This aspirant’s anxieties are not unwarranted. In Sweden, a country often characterised as open and equal, labour force participation in the tech sector is very clearly stratified along the lines of gender and age. Social stratification researchers have also found that the gender wage gap in Sweden is especially strong in segments with high occupational prestige (see, e.g., Magnusson 2010, 2016).
Figure 5.1. Number of IT specialists in Sweden, by gender and age

Source of data for both figures: Statistics Sweden (SCB); 10 SEK = €1
Figure 5.1 depicts the age and gender distribution of IT specialists in Sweden, the year the aspirants were looking for work. Men aged between 30 and 50 dominate in numbers in this segment of the labour market, while younger and older women are least represented. In terms of remuneration, Figure 5.2 shows how the salaries of both genders, while rather similar at the youngest age band, start to separate as age increases: males consistently earn more on average than females and female average salaries even start to dip after age 45.

Although this study did not set out to analyse gender issues, the problem of stratification along gender and age lines came up rather prominently during the job-search phase. It was an issue that was difficult to discuss for the female aspirants, as seen in the accounts above, but also for their male counterparts. For example, in attempting to describe the start-up he was employed at, Kim, at our T3 interview, struggled to explain the dominance of young males in the organisation.

We are twenty people now. Yup, we’re twenty. Or I guess you could say 18.5, and 1.5 of those are female. Everyone is under thirty, in development, in particular. I mean, it is very hard to find women, to find women with the right skills… With that said though, I did not have the right skills when I joined, so I don’t really see… Yeah, I definitely think that there… ugh… we could be better on that point.

In this section of the interview, Kim hesitated and stumbled when trying to explain the overwhelming number of young male developers in the start-up he worked at. His analysis of this dominance in the field made him suggest that maybe females were not applying for these positions, but he also appeared unsatisfied with this explanation. Later on in the interview, he proceeded again to explain and justify this observation, but not without difficulty: “There definitely have been some women who have been interested in joining the company or who have almost joined the company, but for one reason or another, they haven’t. With that said, I definitely think that our male… that we are so many males in the company is definitely not helping at least” (T3 Interview). The male aspirants often related that an explanation used in the community to

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4 The “0.5” was to describe a female colleague who was working part-time.
justify the skew in gender distribution was that women did not apply for these jobs. Simon, at T3, recounted his experience when interviewing for a position in an agency: “I asked (the recruitment person) how is the (gender) equality of the company, and she was like, ‘ssss, there are seventeen people, fifteen of them are guys’. And I was like ‘Okay that’s quite an important matter to me’. And the recruiter replied, ‘There just aren’t any women who apply for these jobs’”.

Why is the gender disparity in this segment of the labour market a difficult subject to discuss? The male aspirants’ attempts to make sense of their privileged gender position in the field was laced with discomfort, perhaps in large part because of the openness and equality that the tech world strives to display but has not achieved. The gender disparity in tech work is no longer a secret. Even as more and stronger voices call for the “gender problem” to be “fixed”, the persistence of women’s lack of representation continues to be perplexing. This problem has been brought to the attention of an array of governmental bodies, women associations, and social scientists. Analysts like Cheryan et al., (2009, p. 1046) point to issues such as “ambient belonging” and “stereotypical cues” and argue that people are deterred from domains “when they do not feel a sense of belonging with the people in them”. In earlier studies of labour market segments or organisations that are heavily skewed toward one particular gender, deciding to reveal or conceal gender was found to be a vital undertaking for those in the disadvantaged gender group (Lewis & Simpson, 2010; Lewis, 2006).

For the trajectories examined here, it could be seen that the female aspirants wrestled with the uncertainty of whether they held fair assessments of their own capabilities to do such forms of work. Would judgements they would be facing, such as whether or not they get a job, be based on their competencies or would these judgements be rooted in “stereotypical cues”? What would the gaze of the gatekeepers focus on? One of the female aspirants, in our T3 interview, proceeded into a long exposition when we started to talk about gender.

I’ve never seen [gender] as an issue until I saw all those articles showing up about women struggling in the tech industry. And suddenly even when nothing is happening... I became very sensitive to the topic. When I went to an interview in a start-up, obviously the
whole tech department was men. If this happened maybe five years ago, I would not have even bothered thinking about it. I’ll be like, “Whatever, I’m just here to do my job.” Now when I go [to interviews], I’m like, “I’m a girl, I need to prove something.” I started seeing myself differently from before. Which is kind of weird because basically all of these movements, they are supposed to empower, but suddenly it’s making me feel more inferior. I feel I need to prove. I never felt I needed to prove anything. I’m like, if I’m stupid, then I’m stupid. But now, I’m like, they should not say I’m stupid because they will be like, “Oh, she’s stupid because she’s a girl.” It’s a very complicated topic for me.

From the above account, we observe how this aspirant’s projection of a future in tech work had been challenged by the talk and events in her surroundings. She underscored and repeated in our interview how encountering movements that seek to empower women in tech had a reverse effect on her; it made her unsure of her status as an aspiring female developer. Paradoxically, the movements that have helped to reveal and shed light on the gendered nature of contemporary tech work were also seen as part of the problem for this aspirant. She now felt more obliged to “represent” her gender but was also unsure about how others in the industry might evaluate her competence.

There’s this Stockholm tech event where there’s a lot of tech companies and start-ups and investors, and then there’s the side event called “Women in Tech”. It’s women only. I went to the first one just because everyone was going, at SX it was like, “Yeah! Let’s go!” I was expecting them to talk about technical things, their passion for tech, or what do you think of the future in tech, in general. But then it was just about their problems as a woman. I had this impression that everyone was having problems at their jobs. I’m not sure if you should only see it through a gender prism. Some people are truly sexist. That’s for sure. But maybe sometimes you can be a little bit paranoid? Yeah, I think that’s what happened to me, I became super paranoid, even when nothing was happening.

(T3 Interview)
Attending an event that was expected to be an inspiring learning encounter that would fuel her passion for tech work ended up, in this aspirant’s case, casting more doubt and concern about embarking on this career pathway as a female. In puzzling over the sense of inequality she experienced “even when nothing was happening”, she likened her discomfort to paranoia, a perception that dominated groups typically experience. Most importantly, while we can see how she struggled to make sense of this gender skew, it also seems that she did not want the prevailing labour market disadvantage to affect her own projections of what was possible in her own career. The sensitivity and complexity around broaching the topic for the aspirants could be compounded by the uncertainty of being at an early stage of a career when they were still sorting out what is possible and permissible.

Unclear occupational futures

It was stated previously that there were some forms of certainties for the aspirants, particularly in the likelihood of their getting a job due to the timing of their entry into the labour market and the existence of a labour opportunity structure that was in their favour. However, a very clear source of anxiety for the aspirants lay in the “fuzziness” of their career shapes and trajectories, evident from how they were dispersed and spread out in the labour market after graduation. A year and a half after they left the portals of the specialist occupational school, the cohort of forty had more than thirty occupational labels amongst them that were used to identify their job positions. Just to name a few, the labels ranged from “account strategist”, “digital analyst”, “conversion specialist”, “growth manager”, “interaction designer”, “programmatic publisher manager”, “developer”, and “digital strategist”, amongst others.5

The plurality of occupational titles that follows from a group of individuals undergoing a specialist training programme can be said to be indicative of weak-form occupations. Another characteristic of weak-form occupations can be seen in how the aspirants were dispersed into different

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5 This information was gathered from the digital resumes of the cohort one and a half years after they graduated.
industries. Within this cohort of forty, the aspirants ended up in thirteen different industries that ranged from “financial services” to “insurance”, “information technology and services”, and “design”.

Since newcomers frequently face uncertainty about occupational roles and responsibilities; occupational titles thus provide an important structure from which aspirants can define to others what they do (Fine, 1996). These titles carry symbolic meaning, as noted by Becker and Carper (1956, p. 342), for “an important part of a person’s work-based identity grows out of his relationship to his occupational title”. From the interviews, the uncertainty the aspirants experienced about what to call themselves or what occupational routes they were embarking on was striking. In particular, the lack of correspondence between their occupational “tag” (Hughes, 1971) and what they did at work proved to be perplexing for the aspirants.

At our T3 interview, Erik attempted to sum up the employment outcomes of his cohort, but evinced bewilderment. As a strategist in an agency, he found peers in his cohort had other occupational labels, although they did similar work tasks.

All the people in my class have different labels on them. Some are digital planners, digital strategists, digital-data strategists. Someone is like interaction designer, someone is just strategist or someone is just a planner? It's so weird, there's so many different labels and a lot of us do exactly the same thing but with different labels. That stresses me out a lot. When I was applying for jobs, I noticed you could be “AdWords specialist” as much as you could be a digital strategist. I know AdWords, I know DFP, all these kinds of different skills... There are also social media strategists and social media experts. And what do they do? I asked. They do the same thing that I do. So what am I?

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6 AdWords is Google’s advertising system where advertisers bid on certain keywords so that their advertisements appear in a user’s search results. If a user clicks on these ads, the advertiser pays a fee to Google. This is how Google generates its high revenue from search and advertising.

7 DFP stands for DoubleClick for Publishers, an advertisement software run by Google.
Other aspirants presented similar accounts of anxieties over the fuzziness of their career shape. After two internships at big firms, Annika concluded, “I’m still a bit unclear about what I am... Am I SEM [search engine marketing] or SEO [search engine optimisation], CRO [conversion rate optimisation], am I like pure ‘Growth’ within campaigns? I don’t even know where I’m going to be in a year.” Annika’s account here resembles Erik’s above, but highlights, in addition, the arduousness for her to envision where she would be occupationally in the short period of one year.

The plurality of occupational names erected boundaries that separated the cohort in ways the aspirants did not expect. From being together in an intensive and emotional collective journey — as we observed in the section on “School Culture” — they suddenly wondered why they are drifting apart upon entering the labour market. In this context, it could be argued that in “things” like weak-form occupations, proto-boundaries are more often found. Abbott describes “proto-boundaries” as internal group boundaries which are not necessarily stable over time (Abbott, 1995, 2001). He gave the example of the kind of demarcation that emerged between systems analysts and programmers in the 1970s and 80s, and how this difference in labels appeared and reappeared across work sites and organisations. Even though they did the same tasks, the differentiation, in this case, came about from how systems analysts and programmers differed in the ways they dealt with computing problems. Eventually, this difference in nomenclature came about in enough settings for a proto-boundary to be enacted (Abbott, 1995, p. 867).

Some might suggest here that the proliferation of job titles could be viewed as something that is obvious or a norm for the digital world of work and start-up economies. However, the fragmentation of job titles is not a new phenomenon. In Baron and Bielby’s (1986) analysis of the proliferation of job titles, they found that the excess in vertical and horizontal distinctions amongst jobs reflect status gradations, not distinctions in actual technical duties or what is technically required of task areas. In addressing the need to avoid taking the division of labour for granted, Baron and Bielby hypothesised that fragmentation is used by organisations in institutional environments to preserve an appearance of having legitimate organisational structures (Baron & Bielby, 1986). The
findings from the analysis supported their hypothesis that it was the larger, more established organisations that created more gradations in the division of labour as a way to evoke status distinctions. Accordingly, this leads to the question of whether the mystique that envelopes weak-form occupations, such that the individuals who fill these roles are not able to explicitly describe what one does, should be considered a kind of status in itself.

Although the aspirants were puzzled by these boundaries, they were aware of their contingent futures. One means by which they coped with this contingency was by role modelling others who were walking similar fuzzy pathways. Every aspirant was assigned a mentor from the previous cohort of the Digi programme, as well as being encouraged to independently seek out a mentor from the industry. Often, the aspirant–alumni mentorship match was made based on their interests and backgrounds. The proximity in the time period between the point when the mentor made the transition into the work world and the point when they served as an informal source of advisor to the mentee enabled them to be realistic and relevant in their counsel to the aspirants.

However, the extent to which the “experienced” grooms the “rookie” was very much left to the decision of the mentor and mentee. For those who drew on this resource, alumni mentors could serve as brokers into the labour market and effective role models. In our T3 interview, the following aspirant recounted how she had been influenced by the way her mentor transitioned from school to work. At that time, she was meeting her mentor every week.

[My mentor] could have been a very high-level engineer. She’s super smart. But she decided to do creative technology. And right now, she’s not even working for a company; she’s doing her own thing… When I met her [recently] it was when I had quit the internship to do my own development thing. I was by myself, being crazy… Having those kinds of people who are with you in the same boat... it’s good to see that there are other people who are doing more crazy things than you. She’s not even doing a full-time job. She’s doing this just by herself. Giving workshops about creative technology, making robots… super insane.
By embarking on an occupational pathway that seemingly deviates from the norm, this aspirant was able to counter the insecurity of going it alone by identifying with a well-functioning target. In this case, the comparison target was someone who had graduated from a similar training programme, whom she deemed to be as “crazy” as she was, and who was charting her own pathway. This finding corroborates earlier research that shows how inappropriate role models have little impact on others. Rather, the “ideal role model is a person who is somewhat older and at a more advanced career stage than the target individuals and who has achieved what these individuals hope for — outstanding but not impossible success at an enterprise in which they too wish to excel” (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997, p. 102).

Seeking inspiration from alumni mentors became a means for the aspirants to cope with the ambiguity of their career shapes because they see a similarity between their comparison target and the potentiality in those pathways (Buunk, Peiró, & Griffioen, 2007). The aspirants derived justification for their chosen pathways from the few who choose similar. This reference group provided the aspirants with models of available pathways, offered alternate ways for them to judge career progress, and provided them with vocabularies to describe their role and identity (Barley, 1989; Van Maanen, 1980).

Modelling career actions involves script-based learning, a notion based on the view that the underlying mechanism involved in “vicarious learning” is the display of an appropriate script by a model (Gioia & Poole, 1984). In this context, the aspirants are modelling others who are in the midst of crafting new scripts. In other words, the aspirants are projecting, with the aid of others who are themselves engaged in the work of projection. Individual projections meet collective projections, and in orienting themselves to this reference group, the aspirants begin to phrase their careers into something socially meaningful (Barley, 1989; Shibutani, 1955). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) assert that the locus of agency lies in the “hypothesization of experience”. When actors orient themselves to the future, they construct changing images of “where they think they are going, where they want to go, and how they can get there from where they are at present” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 984). Such images can be conceived of with “varying degrees of clarity and detail and extend with
greater or lesser reach into the future” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 984).

Here, I argue that individual acts of projection can be magnified when supported by collective projections to enable aspirants to decide what is desirable or feasible in their career trajectories. That is, these individual projections become clearer, more detailed, and have “greater transformative leverage” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), when combined with the projections of others in their collective. This dual form of projection is necessary for the aspirants, especially when there is unclear occupational identification due to proto-boundaries being erected, the plethora of occupational titles they take on, and their dispersion in a variety of industries when they enter the labour market.

Taken together, the analysis presented in the paragraphs above has sought to contribute to our ongoing understanding of how aspirants contend with, justify, and make sense of the (un)certainties found in weak-form occupations. In this part of Section II, I have outlined the areas of the aspirants’ career transition that displayed more certitude than ambiguity, for instance, in the area of remuneration and job opportunities. Three sources of uncertainties that the aspirants encountered in their transition from school to work have been identified and used to illustrate how unanticipated contexts can affect them differently, depending on their gender and age attributes. By specifying these varying conditions and experiences, I have attempted to draw attention to how varied the spectrum of aspirational uncertainty is as well as how unanticipated events can disrupt script following. In the absence of clear interpretive scripts to follow and enact, the aspirants searched for coping mechanisms to counter insecurities, such as through role modelling and tuning in to collective projections.
ANTICIPATING EXPECTATIONS
FROM THE LABOUR MARKET

Since this is a study on aspirations, the voices of the aspirants have been prominent. However, to attain a fuller understanding of how the aspirants dealt with the labour market and how they engaged with other key actors in the job-search phase of their career trajectory, it is crucial to incorporate the voices of employers and hirers as well. To be sure, the aspirants were exposed to ideas of how they should present themselves as ideal candidates through a myriad of ways. For example, expectations were communicated to them when they listened to industry practitioners invited to the school to hold workshops, when they attended hackathons, industry events, tech summits, or when tuned in to chatter and gossip.

Besides drawing on the longitudinal interviews and observations of how the school prepares the aspirants to meet the labour market, this section will use another strategy to understand how they anticipated expectations from hirers, which will involve analysing a corpus of vacancy advertisements for positions in the labour market the aspirants sought to enter. Analysing job vacancy advertisements serves as a means to identify types of representations of the ideal candidate that were offered to the aspirants within their occupational community.

For the aspirants, having a source of representations that they could regularly turn to guide them through understanding what was important, especially since they believed that these demands were constantly changing within emergent roles and tasks. Although most of them did not learn of their job opportunities directly through job vacancy advertisements, reading job advertisements had another function for them. They tended to view these texts as offering ideas of what they should aspire toward, what they should know, have, and become, and how they should perfect themselves in order to attain such roles or to be considered good in their current work role. From my interviews with aspirants, I learnt how they often started to browse job portals early in their training programme.
I started to read job ads early. [My programme manager] thought it was a really good idea to start already now. She helped to start a little group for us so we have new jobs postings. And then she throws in anything she finds, so we can read it. And maybe we don’t want to do that, or it’s too early, because you have to quit school. But at least we get to know what’s out there, and the job descriptions, and if that’s something for us, what type of companies, what they call the different titles. It’s useful. (T1 Interview)

In this T1 interview, Maria described how she started browsing job advertisements as early as in the beginning stages of her training, and how the programme manager of the Digi programme curated vacancy positions and shared them with all the aspirants. The collective activity of reading and sharing job ads as a cohort enabled the aspirants to keep abreast of developments in their labour market. Even after graduating and being in work, the aspirants continued to scan ads as a way to evaluate their own capabilities. Leila, at T3, shared how she “saved” advertisements as way to keep track of what the industry was demanding: “Sometimes I save (the ads) because if I want to be good as a front-end [developer], these are the kind of ideas I should have about this framework; this is how people think about this [position].” They are very informative about how the industry sees this [position].”

The descriptions in the job ads become scripts from which the aspirants formulated ideas of what qualities were important to possess and acquire. George, at T3, commented that he looked at job ads not because he wanted to leave the agency where he was working at the time, “but to keep up with what the market is requiring”. In addition, he used these advertised requirements as a way to know what to bring to his current work organisation. Kim, who was hired in a start-up at T3, similarly explained how he continued to check out ads even after being hired, but not because he was actively searching for other jobs to move to. Rather he used the requirements stated in the ads as a tool for self-assessment: to ascertain for himself what kinds of positions were possible to pursue, as well as to chart his own progression as a developer.
Most of the time I don’t go looking for jobs. For example, if I’m looking at an interesting company, like a tech start-up or something, I often take a peek at what and who they are hiring. I think it’s quite interesting and you are aware of what those companies have, what sort of infrastructure those companies have as well... Or least I’d say it shapes my perception of my possibilities? Previously it was more in a negative way, that is, “Oh, I’m never going to know all of these requirements.” Now it’s more of like, “Yeah, I know most of this stuff. I know a lot of this.” That’s a rewarding progression.

The aspirants applied the reading of job advertisements as an exercise in anticipating hiring expectations. Since the 1970s, practitioners in library and information science have been analysing job advertisements as a way to understand the changing nature of skills that characterise the workplaces of information workers (Harper, 2012). As job roles diversify with the aid of technology, certain types of skills and qualities become obsolete for librarians, while others become emphasised (Harper, 2012). Like “information workers”, the aspirants faced similar concerns of changing skill expectations, compelling them to understand what kinds of qualifications and requirements were seen to be valued, especially as the nature of work tasks were perceived to continually and rapidly evolve.

Finally, reading job ads also offered the aspirants a window into the culture of the hiring organisation. One of the aspirants described to me at T3: “Job descriptions in [development], they look like an article. There’s a lot of fun and you also see the culture of the company... There’s some sort of style and personality in how they write the ad”. Because job ads are publicly available and can be viewed by anyone, organisations can look at each other to figure out who is hiring for what and what requirements are specified by others in the community. If organisations act on the principle of mimicry (Godart & Mears, 2009), they may collectively form hiring criteria from the way ads are crafted and requirements are represented. The practice of crafting advertisements and presenting a portrait of an ideal candidate can be seen as one means of establishing collective taste within a specific labour market.

As I will show through this analysis, in texts that seek out their ideal candidates, hirers place emphasis on the importance and value of personal qualities over academic credentials. The stress on personal qualities in
hiring practices is a familiar tune, congruent with earlier research on the shifting nature of “employability” (Cremin, 2003; Jackson, Goldthorpe, & Mills, 2005; Mills, 1951). Furthermore, in the contemporary, knowledge-based economy, analysts like Brown et al., (2002) contend that academic credentials alone no longer guarantee the value of a candidate to a hirer. Instead, hiring judgements are made based on assessments of a candidate’s “drive”, “commitment”, ability to work in teams, self-manage, and increasingly, on what the authors call an economy of experience (Brown et al., 2002). One explanation offered for this change in the rules of the game is the massification of higher education and the weakening value of academic credentials (Brown, 2013). As hirers demand that candidates should be able to adapt quickly to changing tasks and evolving roles, the hiring emphasis has shifted to the “softer currencies” of “personality, character and social confidence” (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Jackson et al., 2005).

As I will demonstrate, the findings from my research connect with extant research but go further by illustrating how hirers demand that these specified personal qualities fit into prevailing organisational and group cultures. In particular, I will show how hirers demand that candidates be adept at rationalising creatively, be able to work fast, be capable of multitasking yet deliver flawless work, and be unique yet able to work in and respect teams. Such attributes can be likened to what others have termed the “ambidextrous”1 ideal (Holmqvist & Spicer, 2013) where the worker is expected to be possess qualities that might seem demanding and at times conflicting. Through this section, I also aim to demonstrate that the ambidextrous ideal is popular within weak-form occupations because the model of such a worker is itself weakly institutionalised (Dany et al., 2011).

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1 Ambidextrous literally refers to the ability to use both the left and right hands equally well.
You are hungry, you are agile: spotlight on personal qualities

The corpus of advertisements analysed and presented in this section was collected during the period when the aspirants were looking for work, that is, around the period of the T2 interviews. In addition, these were advertisements specifically targeting SX students and alumni. Through categorising and sorting out the various requirements communicated by hirers relating to personal qualities, formal education or training qualifications, technical skills, and work or demonstrable experience, what stood out as prevalent in the ads were requirements that converged at describing personal qualities that candidates should possess in order to optimise cultural fit within the hiring organisation.

A key activity in this analysis was, therefore, conducting a second-stage coding for personal qualities. In searching for these vocabularies, I first conducted counts of the most frequently used terms within descriptions of personal qualities and then worked iteratively to identify similar types of words and expressions. The result was an inductively derived catalogue of dictionary terms, which can be found in Table 5.2.

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2 See the section, “Methodological Considerations”, for a discussion on the data collection and analytical strategies used for this part of the study.

3 In this corpus of ads, 77 per cent of them contained some sort of personal quality in their description of the ideal job applicants. 58 per cent stated requirement of work experience. Only 22 per cent stated educational or training qualifications as a requirement (half of these were ads of organisations that were twenty years old and older). While 74 per cent of the ads stated technical skills as a requirement (e.g., proficiency in design software or programming in various computing languages), they were often prefaced as “nice to have” or “desirable”, not mandatory. Coding for “technical skill” was the trickiest of all the requirements, since these skills could be obscured in texts regarding work experience. I coded an ad as containing technical skill requirements when the texts explicitly stated “technical skills required”. When it is hidden or less obvious in textual descriptors, I made a decision about whether a particular requirement was considered “technical” by assessing if the skill asked for was related to the task area of the job advertised.
Table 5.2. Coding schema for personal qualities in requirements of ads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal qualities (Types)</th>
<th>Dictionary terms (Items)</th>
<th>Examples from corpus of ads</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structured</td>
<td>e.g., structure~, thorough, detail~, organiz~, meticulous, careful, analytical</td>
<td>“structured with an analytical sense” #10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>e.g., problem solv~, deliver, doer, goal-oriented</td>
<td>“we’re looking for a creative problem solver” #156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>e.g., creativ~</td>
<td>“a creative star who loves improving the user experience” #175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passion, hunger</td>
<td>e.g., passion~, love, heart, hungry, breathe, dream, thirst, obsess</td>
<td>“when you’re passionate about something you pour yourself into the task” #164; “dreams in digital” #175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talented, unique</td>
<td>e.g., talent~, gift~, unique, awesome, <em>gym, rockstar</em></td>
<td>“gifted with aesthetic sensibility” #22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team</td>
<td>e.g., team~, collaborat~</td>
<td>“empathy, team spirit... act as a good team player regardless of the workload” #76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humble</td>
<td>e.g., humble, <em>prestiglös</em></td>
<td>“confident in your chosen field but remains humble” #244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driven</td>
<td>e.g., driv~, motivat~, self-directed, independent, proactive, propelled</td>
<td>“driven by a strong desire to see the campaigns you are managing be more profitable and more efficient” #125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agile</td>
<td>e.g., agil~, multi-task, pressure, flexib~, fast, stress-resistant, juggles</td>
<td>“ability to work independently and in a team in a fast paced and dynamic environment... manage multiple responsibilities to ensure tasks are completed on schedule” #90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital savvy</td>
<td>e.g., digital native, up to date, latest trends, savvy</td>
<td>“you are a digital expert, perhaps a ‘digital native’” #115</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NB: word before or after “~” is the root word. In measuring salience, I search for variations of the dictionary term in the corpus of ads.
An ad that contained any of the personal qualities sought in applicant was coded as stating that quality was a requirement. This could range from sentences (“have a big passion around design and web development”; “have a passion for creating immersive and impressive experiences”), to phrases (“you’re hungry”; “a passionate technologist”), to just listing “passionate” as a requirement. Table 5.3 presents the most frequently stated types of personal qualities.

Table 5.3. Salience of personal qualities in ad descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal qualities in ads</th>
<th>% of ads that contain at least one mention of stated trait (N=265)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passion and hunger</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driven</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agile</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talented and unique</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is notable here is the stage in the hiring process in which these personal qualities are being identified or emphasised. The “testing” of personal qualities used to be done more typically through personality tests and assessment centres, a part of the hiring process that took place behind closed doors and was hidden from the public view. The prominence of displaying these requirements of personal qualities as early and as overtly as in the stage of advertising for the position is intriguing, since these job descriptions appear to be profiling the applicant rather than the position itself (Marchal et al., 2007). Viewed another way, person–organisation fit comes across as more central to the selection of a candidate, than person–job fit.

Furthermore, if we line up these expectations and compare them, they begin to come across as highly demanding and sometimes conflicting. From the ads, candidates are expected to be able to work fast, deliver on deadlines, and be adept at juggling multiple tasks. The metaphor of a
“ninja” is used in these advertisements to represent a kind of swift worker who is versatile in tools, programming languages, and skills. Consider this extract from an ad for a full-time developer in an interactive agency: “If you are a HTML5 / CSS / JavaScript ninja who also knows a thing or two about Node.js and RESTful services, you might be the person we are looking for”. By drawing such comparisons, hirers express their desire for candidates who can hop through hoops and get things done quickly. In the next example, the hirer expects the candidate to be able to move swiftly between the use of different programming languages: “You call yourself a ‘full-stack’ developer, or you're simply a person who gets things done. Jumping between Go, JavaScript and Python is a no-brainer for you” (Ad for full-time full-stack developer for a tech company).

Candidates are expected to demonstrate different types of qualities and elegantly shuffle between them. As captured in this description for a full-time lead designer in a design consultancy: “You are a thinker and a doer, a generalist and a specialist, a teacher and a student. You are someone who can express and protect the vision of a project, and at the same time be able to lead its execution”. The ad is crafted like an allegory, with a strong assertion that the candidate must be skilled in evolving and switching roles and tasks. Other times, hirers use the metaphor of a craftsman, such as in this ad for a full-time web developer: “You approach website development as a Master Craftsman: a blend between a skilful developer and web designer”. The ideal of being able to engage in their work tasks with great care and finesse is what is being emphasised through such imagery.

Being a problem solver as well as being structured and analytical are also qualities typically represented in the job descriptions. They point to the ability of the candidate to cope with the rationality of commerce and the ability to orient themselves toward achieving a goal that is often profit-related. These are stated alongside the concomitant call for qualities that require the heart (“passion”) and body (“hunger”; “live and breathe digital”) of the candidate. As displayed in Table 5.3 above, almost half of the ads stated passion, hunger, or related qualities as requirements.

Hence, the motif of a rational creative who possesses the skills to produce work that is both beautiful and clean, demonstrating creativity without messiness, is salient through these texts. Vocabularies of “elegance”, “charm”, and “beauty”, are used to describe the technical
work of design, programming, and development. It is not sufficient that candidates are proficient in these skills; there are aesthetical values attached to the manner in which they are expected to deliver their work. In this ad for a full-time lead designer in a consultancy, such qualities were expressed as vital: “You have a good eye for design and the finer details; you write clean and extendable code... you have the ability to build beautiful applications”. A worker’s technical abilities are thus subjected to creative assessment.

Another type of ideal candidate represented in this corpus of ads is one who is humble and does not like to stand out, but who is also very gifted, talented, and has “awesome” skills. The vocabularies “prestigelös” (roughly translated from Swedish as “unpretentious”) and “grym” (“awesome”) are commonly found in the ads. The notion of being unpretentious is reminiscent of the earlier discussion on Jante, as is the Scandinavian cultural preference for not “sticking out”. Hirers talk about low tolerance for “prima donnas”. Refer to this example: “Cool, straight up, no bullshit, no drama kind of person... you’d be part of the alpha team, so we can’t have drama, bullshit, white lies or anything like that between us” (Ad for full-time developer for a tech company).

To be explicit about such qualities in a job ad signals that these hirers find it necessary to emphasise that applicants can work well in a team. They might want “rock stars”, but they want rock stars who can work with others. The emphasis on uniqueness in a candidate’s personality is strong, but so is being able to fit in with the prevailing organisational culture. References to cultural fit are ubiquitous — “You can recognise three different kinds of beer, blindfolded, without drinking them” (ad for full-time lead developer in an agency); “an equal love of bits, bytes and sit-ups, be more full-stack than haystack, love the spirit of a fast-paced environment” (ad for Chief Technology Officer for an e-commerce company). As we have seen through these paragraphs, these descriptors, at first glance, are excessively masculine (“part of the alpha team”; beer-drinking; “no drama”; love for speed and sport). They reflect the interests of those who craft these texts and additionally showcase a strong regard for cultural similarities.
Personal qualities and cultural fit

The pattern of emphasising personal qualities, as identified above, resonates with earlier research on “knowledge-intensive work”, where managers and workers were found to often downplay the role of technical expertise in their everyday work (Alvesson, 1995). It also reflects trends in employability where workers are increasingly expected to demonstrate passion, hunger, drive, and be able to convincingly show the ability to manage conflicting sets of demands (Garsten, 1994). The demands featured in the representations of the ideal candidate and analysed here are contrasting and sometimes conflicting. Hirers want (i) applicants who can work fast, multi-task, yet deliver flawless work; (ii) applicants who are able to rationalise creatively; and (iii) applicants who are unique yet able to work in and respect teams. Although these expectations are contrasting, they converge by emphasising personal qualities that are necessary for a cultural fit with the organisation.

The emphasis on personal qualities and cultural fit leads us to consider how representations of individual personal qualities can shape collective occupational belief systems. For occupational communities that have belief systems that value personal identity, institutional norms can often be phrased in terms of distinctive, unique, and individual characteristics (Koppman, 2014, 2015). Thus, when hirers describe the ideal candidate through the use of vocabularies of desired individual personal qualities, it could be argued that collective ideals of the larger occupational community are what are actually being communicated. By not limiting selection through stating more “objective” requirements like educational background but, rather, by placing emphasis on non-visible, non-cognitive traits, hirers are defining a mode of selection that is essentially subjective. On the other hand, it could also be that the need to state these qualities in the advertisements indicates a sort of representation of what is considered normal or idealised within the occupational community.

Although technical ability and skills required to do a job are often stated in hiring requirements, the more recent shift to emphasising cultural proficiency is of interest here, especially since research has provided evidence that candidates who can show cultural fit with a professional organisation are more likely to be hired by that organisation (Gorman,
Cultural fit, as recently studied by Rivera (2012) and Koppman (2015), is exemplified by the sharing of tastes, preferences, and experiences, and it serves to promote attraction and liking. In her study of hiring practices in elite professional service firms in the U.S., for example, Rivera (2012) found that employers seek candidates who are not only competent but also culturally similar to themselves in terms of leisure pursuits, experiences, and self-presentation styles.

While this present analysis is not about how employers evaluate or select candidates, advertising vacancy positions is a first step in the hiring process where hirers state their requirements to a pool of potential candidates. In assigning value to these personal qualities in job vacancy ads, and more frequently than other more traditional qualification indicators, hirers make apparent that they want to hire people they describe as passionate, hungry, driven, and able to survive in fast-paced, constantly changing environments; they want to hire people like themselves, or, at least, how they see themselves.

**Personal qualities and the ambidextrous ideal**

Returning to the primary data of interviews and observations, there are two prominent types of personal qualities that were stressed to the aspirants as important for them to possess in anticipation of entering the labour market. The first oft-emphasised quality inside the portals of SX was that of “daring to fail” so that one could learn from failure. While failure has conventionally been viewed as a negative educational outcome and measured as such in practice and research, the tenor of “failure” has more recently been given a new spin with the mainstreaming of entrepreneurship education and the acceptance that learning can be derived from failing (Minniti & Bygrave, 2001; Shepherd, 2004).

The aspirants’ account of failure in school was that it was normalised. They were cultivated to strike out the fear of failing because, at SX, the process allegedly mattered more than the outcome. In her T2 interview, Maria shared that the school “thinks it’s good that you fail. Because then it’s like a real, immediate, ‘okay, what have you learnt? How can you apply what you learnt next time?’ They train you to fail fast.”
Simon, at T3, recalled his experience at SX as one that gave him the confidence to fail: “You don’t want to fail, but you have this safety net”.

However, despite the normalisation of failure as an important ingredient for learning, it was not easy for the aspirants to accept being unsuccessful. Annika, at the end of our T2 interview, revealed that she wanted to be able to say to herself at the end of her training period that “failure is okay... but I’m not there yet, to be okay to fail and not to blame myself”. The ideological narrative of failing and progressing, even though popular, was difficult to enact. Nevertheless, there was strong normative pressure to be able to display such a quality, for this way of viewing failure had been passed down as gospel from one cohort to the next. Tristan, an alumnus, had been sharing his own experiences of success and failure with incoming batches of aspirants. During my interview with him, he enacted the metaphor of “swimming” to describe his own struggles of getting work and trying to launch his own product.

It’s like swimming. You can stand on the side of the pool and get all the instructions on how to dry paddle and look at how deep the pool is and listen to a hundred stories about how hard it is. But you would never really know until you jump in. And then when you’re kicking and thrashing around and trying to come up for air, then you know: this is what it feels like. It is tough, and it is not as dramatic; if I fail, I won’t die, I won’t drown. But it will be a huge blow to my ego, in some sense.

In this quote, Tristan drew a distinction between the passive actors who remain at the sidelines with instructions, and those who actively take the plunge, even if they do not know the strokes. According to him, the passage of struggling and attempting to stay afloat was an important visceral experience for learning to take place. It was far worse, according to him, to not take the plunge at all. Daring to fail came with a precondition that the aspirants should be willing to show vulnerability. But displaying vulnerability seemed to go against another quality expected of them, that of being self-confident. When in the labour market, the aspirants expressed how they saw the primacy of displaying confidence in their work lives in order to move forward and accomplish tasks. Robert, in our T3 interview, compared himself to another colleague who had a
similar type of advanced vocational training, but from another school. He described this peer as not possessing the same kind of confidence that he had learnt to muster at SX.

If I compare myself with the guy who was from [another Swedish vocational school]... he likes to ask for things, “Can I do this, can I do this?” And I think what you learn at SX is to be like a little bit cocky about these things: just kick in doors and then you ask for forgiveness and understanding. Actually there’s not that much you can screw up in a big sense. It only involves clicks — no one is going to die.

The repercussions for a mistake made in their field of work, Robert believed, are not severe, echoing what Tristan earlier described (“if I fail, I won’t die”). In making such comparisons, the aspirants alluded to a perceived safe space they had in their work sites to make mistakes and to learn from them. In a similar vein, Erik, in our T2 interview, related his experience of servicing clients and how he would agree to work on a brief, even if he had no experience in that assigned task. In one example, he cited a project in which he had to produce a data dashboard that visually tracked, analysed, and displayed key performance indicators of the business.

I had never done dashboards [before] — but I can say, ‘Yes, I’ll do that, I know how to do it’. And then we went back [and did it]. It is not that hard, because we have all the fundamental building blocks... That is what I think it means by “fake it ‘til you make it.” Not in the sense that you’ll do a bad job when you fake it, but you’ll make it.

The trope, “fake it till you make it”, was often used in the aspirants’ accounts. According to them, this was a frequently used phrase in the studio, when they were working on tasks and projects. As Erik described above, the idea that underscored this quality was to trust that they would be able to accomplish a new or difficult task, as they had been equipped with the basic skills to devise solutions and to improvise. In our T3
interview later, Erik returned to this topic of projecting confidence, something he discovered over his school-to-work journey as a vital quality. He said that self-undermining was “the stupidest thing you can do, at least in this industry. Believing in what you say is stronger than knowing what you’re saying”.

Even though displaying vulnerability and displaying confidence seem to be at odds each other, this “ambidextrous ideal” can be viewed as an expectation imposed on the aspirants. The notion of the ambidextrous work ideal has built on ideas regarding organisational learning, and, in particular, the work of March (1991), who explicated the relationship between the exploration of new possibilities, the exploitation of old certainties and the complexity in allocating resources to these two processes. More recently within critical management literature, this notion has been taken up again to interrogate the ideal of the ambidextrous worker. Holmqvist and Spicer (2013, p. 11) write that balancing exploitation and exploration implies that:

People need to have the intellectual, social, and physical capacity, will, strength and ability to produce, execute, and refine existing rules and routines. But they also need to have the intellectual, social, and physical capacity, will, strength and ability to experiment, search, and play with new rules and routines for attending to and interpreting the environment. They need both be able to discipline themselves in line with narrowly prescribed ways of interpreting the environment, and “go crazy”. They need both focus and fantasy. They need to adhere to organizational proscriptions, as well as challenge them.

As part of this ideal, the worker has to self-manage, a regular exercise found to be necessary for occupations such as management consultants, who have to make “their subjectivity the motor of organizational interests” and who are supposed to have an adequate sense of their capabilities and limits (Muhr, Pedersen, & Alvesson, 2012, p. 194). However, Holmqvist and Spicer are generally critical of this popular ideal, which they find to be unrealistic. They argue that it leads to organisations implementing ambiguous control systems with incompatible demands, which ultimately forces employees to choose to either exploit
It could be argued that these demands for ambidextrous personal qualities would privilege already privileged groups, who are better placed to capitalise on their social networks, extracurricular activities, or travel-abroad experiences, to demonstrate to hirers their “economy of experience” and ability to both exploit and explore (Brown, 2013; Tholen et al., 2013). However, as has been pointed out in earlier studies of education and employability, these qualities can no longer be acquired passively through properties such as privileged social backgrounds (Brown, 2013; Brown & Hesketh, 2004). Rather, individuals now have the added pressure to have to showcase that they are tending toward the “reflexive project of the self”, where their regular activities and pursuits have to continually represent and demonstrate a “narrative of individual employability” (Brown, 2013, p. 688). This brings us back to the earlier discussion in Section I, where I examined the scripts encoded at SX — that of self-management and the cultivation of a disposition of ease — as well as more recent propositions that highlight how ease is not simply inherited from within families but is also made in interactions at settings such as schools (Khan, 2011).

Given these demands from hirers and employers, we can see how the ambidextrous ideal is popular within weak-form occupations, due largely, perhaps, to the model of such workers being weakly institutionalised (Dany et al., 2011). When no one really knows what to expect of nascent-stage work tasks or positions, the responsibility is placed on the aspirant to fantasise about what they will focus on and to explain to others through convincing accounts what they have done and can do.

Cultural fit has been emphasised within organisations when there are high levels of task uncertainty and ambiguity in the nature of roles (Alvesson, 2001; Koppman, 2015; Rivera, 2012). In order for trust and co-operation to be engendered amongst colleagues, the responsibility of producing convincing accounts of what they do is then put on the individual (Alvesson, 1993). Thus, besides cultural fit, aspirants must also be proficient and effective in self-presentation (Gorman, 2015). In the final empirical section to follow, which examines how the aspirants persist in their occupational journeys, the ways in which they present and fashion “convincing” and meaningful biographies will take centre stage.
Three

PERSISTING IN AN OCCUPATIONAL TRAJECTORY
Studies of education-to-work transitions tend to draw to a close once the research participants find work. When the story ends there, the observation of an aspirant's trajectory is discontinued and their ensuing experiences of entering the labour market entry are no longer in view. However, when aspirants enter a weak-form occupation, the process of labour market entry does not end with their first success in impressing someone to hire them. As I learnt when I continued to follow the aspirants in my study, I found that they moved quickly into other positions and organisations shortly after their first work placement. Within this cohort of forty students who got work, almost half of them made at least one further labour market move within eighteen months of graduation, and a third of them moved at least twice during the same period. Against the backdrop of these movements were both active and passive searches for new job opportunities as aspirants fashioned certain kinds of occupational biographies that would marshal the experience they had gathered in school and in work.

Up to this point, I have analysed the processes of socialisation and how the culture of the school the aspirants belonged to played a key role in facilitating their first steps into the labour market. I have also identified job-search scripts, sources of uncertainties they encountered, and the ways they anticipated labour market demands. In this final empirical section, I will examine how the aspirants traversed paths into the labour market after they leave the portals of the school. When analysing the interplay between individuals and organisations, examining entries into organisations is just as important as examining the exits (Ahrne, 1994).
How do these aspirants move within the labour market as alumni from a distinctive specialist school, and what are the consequences of alumni identification for the ways in which they navigate their career trajectories? The findings presented here fall within two dimensions: first, how the aspirants present themselves after graduation as qualified specialists by fashioning carefully crafted biographies; and second, how they adjust their conceptions of their “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986) as a response to opportunities and constraints they encounter in the workplace.

**Fashioning Biographies**

A career as represented in a résumé (French for “summary”) or curriculum vitae (Latin for “course of life”) is a narrative built to impress recruiters through the use of degrees, skills, and experiences relevant for attaining professional goals (Godart & White, 2010). While once viewed predominantly as a historical record of an individual’s career, the résumé is increasingly seen as a marketing document (Gershon, 2017). Aspirants are expected to showcase a determined sense of self and a persona that can be adapted to meet market demands (Sternberg, 1998). This need for the effective presentation of the self as qualified and hireable has been intensified by technologies in the form of social networking platforms, since these social media profiles can “steer and validate personal and professional lives” both in and out of work sites (van Dijck, 2013, p. 210). Aspirants thus present themselves in ways tailored to impress potential employers since it is becoming increasingly normal and common for hirers to use these technologies to screen job applicants (Bohnert & Ross, 2010; Chiang & Suen, 2015).

The application of Goffmanian ideas is popular in studies of self-presentation on social media (see Marwick & boyd, 2011; Murthy, 2012; Hogan, 2010; Chiang & Suen, 2015). In his seminal text *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1956) introduced a perspective of analysing human interaction with dramaturgical concepts, comparing them to theatrical performances in which individuals have roles and society is a stage. In various types of “ordinary” situations, he considered the ways in which individuals present idealised portraits of themselves and
their activities to others. Although individuals devise strategies to uphold a certain image and identity, self-presentation is often shaped in collaboration with and in relation to others. Goffmanian concepts have thus been used in studies of social media to explain meaning making and activity in online participation.

Self-presentation on social network sites, however, does not always have to be seen as a networked identity performance (boyd, 2007); it can also be viewed as an “exhibition”. Hogan (2010) points out that while performances (such as virtual gaming) focus on dramaturgical aspects and are more appropriate for discussing micro situational interactions, self-presentation on certain kinds of social media, such as digital résumé platforms, are more similar to exhibitions. Not only is the individual able to manage online impressions of self, but algorithms designed by site maintainers also curate certain aspects of a person’s profile to certain audiences via the process of filtering (Hogan, 2010). Hirers can then filter, order, and search content to locate suitable candidates.

Different perspectives on self-presentational behaviour have been used to study this phenomenon over time, particularly in the context of selection and hiring. As noted by Jansen and colleagues (2012), previously, more negative connotations were imposed on self-presentational behaviour that examined faking, lying, impression management, or deception before a shift in approach instigated a body of research that viewed self-presentation as a type of social competence. Those who are able to adapt their presentations of selves to impress hirers are also better able to deal with changing social situations at the workplace (Jansen et al., 2012). However, these authors adopt a more neutral response within this array of perspectives, arguing that applicants may simply be behaving in a way that is consistent with recruiters’ expectations. That is, self-presentation may be merely a response to the script of the hiring situation.

For this analysis, I share the perspective of others who view self-presentation as a response that is acquired through learning and experience (Jansen et al., 2012; Gioia & Poole, 1984). Aspirants learn how to present themselves in a certain way and how to fashion their biographies to impress hirers and significant others in the occupational community. It is a hiring convention to treat résumés and CVs as evidence of a person’s employability and a key tool in selecting candidates (Chiang & Suen, 2015). In this section, I thus examine the aspirants’ self-
presentations through a digital résumé platform serving as the vehicle for this form of expression.

The reasons for this analytical strategy are not few. Having a digital résumé is increasingly expected of aspirants in tech work, not just when they are actively searching for work but also when they are passive about job search. One of the projects midway through the Digi training programme at SX was called Portfolio, where aspirants were tasked to come up with a strategy for self-presentation and “personal branding”. Since setting up a digital résumé page was a task the aspirants were assigned to do in this project, all of them had set up a LinkedIn profile if they did not already have one enrolling in the training programme. There were several purposes for getting the aspirants on board the platform. Using the LinkedIn platform was a way to potentially get a job, since their profiles could show up when hirers searched for candidates with certain skills. Furthermore, using the platform was a way to connect with the occupational community by sharing and discussing ideas related to work. The platform is therefore a “goal-oriented space” (Marwick & boyd, 2011) where the aim is to present the self as hireable. This can be done in an expressive, communicative, or promotional way (Goffman, 1956). Aspirants also engage in self-presentation with a specific “imagined audience” (Marwick & boyd, 2011). In the case of SX, the audience included hirers, counterparts, and future collaborators, and the audience was present whether or not the aspirants were actively or passively looking for their next job opportunity.

As mentioned in the section on “Methodological Considerations”, the occupational biographies of the aspirants were studied at two points: the first was twelve months after graduation, and then again six months after the first point of study (i.e., eighteen months after graduation). By examining their profiles at two time points, I could observe not only changes in their labour market positions within a short period of half a year but also how they learnt to tailor their biographies as they ventured further along their occupational journeys. The content coverage of their digital profiles varied. Some aspirants were very detailed and expressive, while some appeared to just go through the motions of filling out suggested fields. Nevertheless, this platform proved to be one of the more
useful portals for examining self-presentation and the fashioning of biographies.¹

It is necessary to preface here that this data source is not meant to offer an objective map of their labour market trajectories, since the data only capture what the aspirants chose to present about themselves. What I discuss here are patterns of self-presentation I observed as well as the ways in which the aspirants projected images of their selves as qualified and hireable. I argue that such practices were vital for pitching their worth to others when they were in a nascent stage of their careers, especially in young occupations where outsiders to the occupational community might not necessarily know what people in such occupations do for a living.

Three dominant elements of the aspirants’ occupational biographies will structure the analysis and discussion to follow. The aspirants’ profiles (i) display a great deal of labour market movement, (ii) present them as multi-skilled, and (iii) portray them as highly connected evangalists with a strong attachment to their alma mater. I will show how, despite already exiting from the school, there are consequences to alumni identification. Because what is considered a credible occupational biography in weak-form occupations is ambiguous, the necessity of building in devices of validation into the aspirants’ self-presentations was observed to be prominent for the aspirants.

The mover

The aspirants were free to list every type of work experience they had in their digital résumés. For this analysis, I considered every title change on their profiles as a labour market “move”, each move being a node in their career. Moves could be an organisational change (i.e., inter-organisational movement) or a position change within the organisation (intra-

¹ Even though there were other profile sites where I could locate the aspirants, such as digital portfolio communities (e.g., CargoCollective, Dribbble, Behance), platforms to upload photographs (Instagram) or videos (Vimeo), open-source portals for developing codes (e.g., Github), and platforms to provide regular updates on their professional and personal lives or share news (e.g., Twitter), everyone in this cohort had a LinkedIn profile, which allowed for a more complete analysis of their presentation of selves.
organisational movement), as long as they were listed as a separate entry. Several movements could take place concurrently, for example, if an aspirant held multiple jobs at one time. Every move listed made that work experience, position, or project identifiable in the aspirant’s career line. The figure below presents the various labour market movements listed in the cohort’s occupational biographies. I use the period of their internship (the work placement as part of their training programme) as a point of reference for the volume of work experience they had amassed before enrolling at SX and after graduating from the programme.

**Figure 6.1.** Number of labour market moves displayed in aspirants’ occupational biographies

Even though a tenth of them had listed no work experience or just one occupational title in their work history before this point, the grey bars in the figure (which represent pre-internship moves) illustrate that most aspirants had already moved at least once in the labour market, be it inter- or intra-organisationally. This can be interpreted as meaning that, even though everyone who enrolled in this programme was training to become
a specialist in this field, their entry points into the field were different. Some of them had already amassed other forms of work experience and, through their occupational biographies, they marshalled these movements to present themselves as more than just “aspirants”. When zooming in on those who had made frequent moves in the labour market, a qualitative examination of their profiles reveals that these aspirants elaborated the kinds of movements they had made within different types of organisations. Their descriptions of job responsibilities for these various titles presented themselves as possessing a wide range of experiences and interests, and their biographies were crafted to showcase a candidate who was mobile, desirable, and flexible.

While the grey bars depict movements over a varied period of time (one job history entry was for a position that commenced in 1989, so this period captures movements over two decades), the white striped bars, which represent post-internship moves, illustrate the movements within a bounded period of time, specifically, eighteen months after graduation. During this period, 40 per cent of the cohort listed at least one labour market move. That is to say, within a short period of one-and-a-half years, a sizeable group of the aspirants were already “moving on” and changing jobs. Finally, the black bars in the figure depict the total number of moves stated in the occupational biographies of the cohort, up to the point of eighteen months after they graduated from SX. In total, more than half of them listed three to five labour market movements in their biographies.

This frequent number of moves within a relatively short period may be due in part to the aspirants having been in the early stage of their careers, where job changing is common and a crucial facet of an aspirant’s movement toward a more stable and mature career (Topel & Ward, 1992). It could also be due in part to the characteristic of tech work. Since technical know-how is acquired through hands-on experience at organisations and transmitted through the flow of tech labour, the mobility of tech workers is often rapid (Fallick, Fleischman, & Rebitzer, 2006; Tambe & Hitt, 2014). In her study of hiring practices in Silicon Valley, Gershon (2017) finds that “moving on is the new normal”, as quitting is no longer laden with the meaning that it used to have when someone decided to exit an organisation. Rather, she notes that, in the Valley “everyone ‘should’ always be anticipating their next job” (Gershon, 2017, p. 207).
Such frequent movements in the labour market does raise a question about how this quality can appear to be at odds with what organisations may want in their candidates: loyalty and continuity. Gershon (2017) proposes that one means through which organisations have grappled with attitudinal changes toward company loyalty is to evoke the emotional driving force of “passion”, which echoes the earlier discussion here of hirers indicating this quality as one sought in their ideal candidates. She draws attention to recent measures by big tech companies such as the “Pay to Quit” scheme, which offers employees a bonus if they choose to leave the company. Gershon argues that “paying employees to quit makes sense in a context where companies look for ways to guarantee that passion is the emotion that keeps employees committed to their jobs, just as paying people a pension made sense in a context where companies sought to ensure employee commitment through loyalty” (Gershon, 2017, p. 217).

The high degree of movement in the aspirants’ profiles can thus be associated with the general trend and expectation of mobility in tech work. These frequent moves in the labour market reflect the “mobility imperative” that Garsten (2008) and others have written about, arguing that changing organisational structures and global market forces demand versatile and skilled employees to meet urgent organisational needs and fill vacancies quickly. According to Garsten (2008), when individuals act in accordance with this imperative and demonstrate mobility in their careers, they can repackage these movements and present themselves as workers who are empowered, self-actualised, and able to seize learning opportunities.

The multi-skilled

Aside from the mobility and number of labour market moves the aspirants displayed in their profiles, the way they presented their skills was also a dominant element in their occupational biographies. The online platform has a Skills Feature that allows users to list their skills and enables their connections to validate whether or not those skills stated are indeed a fair self-assessment. While no specific definition of “skill” is provided to the users, the platform encourages users to include skills on their profile to showcase their strengths to their network and potential employers. The
Skills Feature is, arguably, a critical component of the aspirants’ profiles. The screening and hiring process of candidates is becoming increasingly automated, so when hirers search via this platform, the kinds of skills they seek are included in the search algorithm that filters out candidates. What the aspirants list as their skills, although based on self-evaluation, is part of the exhibition of convincing recruiters and collaborators.

Table 6.1. Most frequently listed skills by cohort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill listed</th>
<th>Proportion of cohort that listed particular skill (N=40)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Google Analytics</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Strategy</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing Strategy</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Management</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Marketing</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Strategy</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSS(^2)</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Marketing</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.1 shows the ten most frequently stated skills listed by the cohort eighteen months after graduation. This overview provides a sense of what the aspirants saw as their strengths. The list displays a convergence of domain-specific technical skills, such as data strategy and analytics, with relational or social skills, such as project management. These skillsets, common amongst the cohort, can be seen to form the basis of a communal identity (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). Additionally, more than half of the aspirants also listed — in a separate field on their digital profiles — the certificates they had obtained, primarily Google certifications (e.g., Google AdWords or Google Analytics), to showcase a

\(^2\) CSS is abbreviation for “Cascading Style Sheets”, a kind of language used for formatting content on web pages.
kind of technical specialism. Possessing and believing that one possesses specialised skills can generate an impression that one has sought-after expertise (Fine, 1996).

Beyond the quality of the skills listed, what was also revealing was the quantity of skills the aspirants listed on their profiles. Sixty per cent of the cohort listed more than twenty skills on their résumés (see Table 6.2 below). In the description sections of the profiles, they also expanded, in their own words, on the multiplicity of their repertoire of skills. Vocabularies like “eclectic”, “multidisciplinary approach”, “digital wizard”, “diverse skill set”, and “multi-sector experience” were used in their biographies. These representations can be taken together as exhibitions of self as multi-skilled.

Table 6.2. Number of skills stated on profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of skills stated on profile (range)</th>
<th>Proportion of cohort (N=40)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 — 10</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 — 20</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 — 30</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 — 40</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 — 50</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It has already been noted that the ability to acquire new skills fast is valued in tech work (Stark & Girard, 2009). However, herein lies a tension in the presentations that is worth nothing. The aspirants present themselves as not only possessing specific technical skills but also lots of skills; from having skills that are general and transferable to skills that are unique, technical, and specific. This exhibition of self as multi-skilled can be seen as meeting the expectation that employees be able to perform a range of tasks and demonstrate “functional flexibility” (Garsten & Grey, 1997), or to show their capacity to be an effective “portfolio worker” who can move from job to job by applying their many “transferable skills” in any context or setting (Grey & Garsten, 2001; Handy, 1995). Being multi-skilled matches the upskilling mandate found in the European region,
where skills are, arguably, fetishised; it also reveals an ongoing assumption that technological changes and new patterns of work organisation will require a more highly-skilled workforce (Brown, 2001; Lloyd & Payne, 2016).³

The connected evangelist

Although less of a conscious exercise when compared to detailing and curating one’s work histories and skills, the number of connections that aspirants have on this networking platform is an essential part of their self-presentations. The size of their “professional network” is displayed rather prominently in the header of their profile page. These contacts constitute the main segment of the aspirants’ audience on this platform. As they access information from these connections, they also circulate and exchange aspects of their professional attitudes and knowledge within this network. In this cohort, over 50 per cent of the aspirants had more than four hundred contacts on the network platform.

LinkedIn does not share any available data on the average number of connections users have on the platform (the same goes for average number of skills displayed), hence there is no good reference point for assessing whether the patterns displayed here are typical or not. However, on this issue of connections, it is plausible to argue that aspirants need large networks to access job opportunities. The ties within them need not be strong and can remain virtual, since it is already well established that non-redundant, useful information (such as job opportunities) can flow between weak ties (Granovetter, 1973; Montgomery, 1992). It is therefore not surprising to find that the aspirants in this study had “large” networks.

³ In introducing the upskilling discourse that has been strong in the EU ever since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Lloyd and Payne (2016) cite a 2008 speech in which the then-President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, said, “While we don’t yet know what the jobs of the future will be, we do know that more and more jobs will demand high skills... While we can’t know with complete certainty what jobs will be around in 2020, we can try to define the sets of skills companies will need”.
What may be more intriguing to explore here is the notion of the necessity of making visible one’s network. In tech work, “knowing people” is pivotal for accessing occupationally-relevant knowledge (Garsten, 1994). Because personal industry-based networks are already widely recognised as a key feature of work and career development in creative and tech industries (Christopherson, 2008; Grabher, 2002; Neff, 2005), the size and character of the network an aspirant can showcase in their biography serves another function. As others can view who you know and who knows you, the aspirant is able to use these visible connections as a form of “validation” (Alvesson, 2001). Belonging to the “right” network can demonstrate someone’s capacity in the absence of less tangible evidence (Alvesson, 2001).

Connecting to their educational history and making connections with the network of people from their alma mater represented one way for the aspirant’s experience to be validated. A commonality across the entire cohort’s occupational biographies was that everyone stated that they attended SX, displayed it in the education history section of their profile, and specified that they had attended the Digi programme and which cohort they belonged to. However, listing SX in their biographies was not just a punctuation in the career lines of the aspirants or a turning point that showed when they had made steps into the occupational field. Interestingly, more than half of the cohort’s profiles detailed what SX is as an educational organisation and what the Digi programme entailed. Frequently found in their profiles were elaborate descriptions of the programme, with statements lifted from the curriculum. In these descriptions of their training at the school, the aspirants made lists of the kind of skills they have acquired from the programme, as well as lists of corporate clients they have worked with during school projects to demonstrate their “real work experience”. Despite the short duration of the training programme, the aspirants, through their profiles, showcased strong ties and attachment to the school.

Earlier studies have already confirmed that hirers use educational credentials as a common criterion to screen résumés. More recent discussions draw attention to the insufficiency of elite educational affiliations and how hirers are increasingly looking for a candidate’s engagement in extracurricular activities, such as sports or volunteering, which are time and resource intensive, as a proxy for an individual’s
“drive” and ability to manage time (Rivera, 2010). In this cohort’s digital profiles, 33 per cent of the aspirants listed volunteering experiences. While not the majority, it still shows that a group of them was attentive to these demands in hiring expectations.

Embedded in their descriptions of selves were also traces of the school’s ideological narratives that were discussed in earlier sections of this monograph. Vocabularies and grammars picked up in school were used to fashion their biographies, such as: “My motto is ‘fail fast’”; “I push myself and others around me out of their comfort zones”; “Don’t ask for permission, ask for forgiveness”; “I value proactive team development”. It is not peculiar for anyone to state their educational credential on their CVs, especially so if they have attended a selective and prestigious school. But what is perhaps less typical to find is when individuals devote great space and effort to explaining to their imagined audience what the school stands for and how they have benefitted from having been a student there. Amongst the reasons for such activity may be that exhibiting a connection with SX was a display of strong organisational identification.

While various definitions of organisational identification abound, it can be generally regarded as occurring when the aspirants link their school membership to their self-conception, “either cognitively (e.g., feeling a part of the organization; internalising organizational values), emotionally (pride in membership), or both” (Riketta 2005, p. 361). This form of organisational identification, often described in earlier research, is somewhat different, however, from what the aspirants I followed were displaying in their digital résumés, since their membership in SX is in the past tense. Perhaps for this reason, alumni identification is rarely studied in the context of organisational identification. When it is, the consequence of this identification is measured as support for the organisation qualified by charitable giving of time or financial donations (see Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Okunade & Berl, 1997).

The consequences of alumni identification can be looked upon in another way, from the perspective of the member and not the organisation. By displaying their connection with their alma mater, the aspirants used the listing in their biography as a means of claiming that they had been trained in a particular methodology. When the aspirants incorporated the identity of the organisation into their own through these
public displays of self-presentation, this identification served as both a means of “school evangelism” and as a means to seek validation from the occupational community. This is valuable for aspirants who want to enter a particular occupational field, and especially for weak-form occupations, where the ambiguity of career pathways requires attachment to more stabilised forms of worth.

The presentation of self with an alma mater through these occupational biographies can thus be viewed as something more than just alumni identification. Wearing the SX badge on their digital résumés promoted a sort of subtle evangelism, where the aspirant had to explain to others what they perceived as the “mystique” of the organisation. Although the biographies showcased strong affiliation to their alma mater, these evangelistic endeavours were illuminated most vividly through the longitudinal interviews, after the aspirants had been at work after graduating.

A few examples from their accounts are offered here to illustrate this attachment. In one T3 interview for example, Simon talked about the conceptions that some of his colleagues had about his alma mater: “They point it out, like, “oh you’re from SX, oh you’re this hippy, digital person”. One vivid account was offered through another aspirant’s T2 interview, where he shared similar experiences of how, in his early days at work, he struggled to deal with opinions floating around the start-up about his school affiliation. He found his school background to be “dualistic”, as he was often proud of it but also had to deal with derision from his colleagues.

I’m happy to have [SX] on my CV… [pauses]. It’s… it’s fun to feel to be part of something that is kind of mythical in some circles. However, it’s also something that’s become sort of a joke? Especially at my work, there are some developers who know of SX, but SX has become such a thing that it becomes mocked for being such a way? So, they ask me if I wanna talk about my feelings [laughs]. Or if I want to hug it out, or stuff like that. It’s all in good fun. But it still feels like it’s become… [pauses]. The SX Way, or whatever you want to call it, is so special, or at least feels so special that it’s very easy to mock it. I don’t really take it too hard. But I think it’s sad that it’s not respected in the way that I think it should be.
In making sense of his educational background vis-à-vis that of his colleagues, this aspirant accounted for this mild derision at the workplace as a consequence of the school’s “mythical” organisational identity, which, in his opinion, only members, not outsiders, would comprehend. By being trained in an “alternative school”, he sensed that his experience was not being taken seriously by many of the male developers who were mostly trained in technological universities. By evoking “The SX Way”, his reflection brings us back to earlier discussions of the “collective effervescence” the aspirants experienced during their time and training in school (Durkheim, 1915).

The emotions that hold certain groups together can also mobilise conflicts between groups (Collins, 2004). In their interaction with colleagues and work peers, the aspirants incorporated their alumni status into their presentation of selves but also had to be ready to champion “The SX Way” if others around them did not value that status as they did. For example, in a T3 interview with the same aspirant above, he shared with me how he eventually took up the role of “Head of Culture” at his start-up, where he was tasked with overseeing development of the organisation’s culture. Instead of mulling over being misunderstood or not having his educational background respected, he sought to bear witness to “The SX Way” by transposing its methodology of team development into his own workplace. Because their alma mater might be perceived by others from more traditional educational backgrounds as a sort of anti-school — not quite respected, not quite there yet (Hughes, 1971) — the aspirants become alumni evangelists when dealing with “non-believers” as they are connected and plugged into a larger occupational community. They play this role by inciting enthusiasm and excitement for the kind of training they had invested time and resources in, and become diffusers of a particular methodology that they anticipate would eventually become a stabilised form of worth.

Summary

Through identifying ways that the aspirants went about crafting their biographies, we can see how they marshalled and displayed educational
and work histories, how they evaluated themselves and publicly presented their individual skills, and how they connected with others in their occupational field. Conscientious crafting of these biographies was necessary in order for their profiles to show up in the right online searches and to the right employers who were searching for candidates via the platform. Three features emerged as especially salient in characterising the biographies of this group: (i) displaying a great deal of movement in the labour market; (ii) defining themselves as multi-skilled; (iii) portraying themselves as highly connected and strongly attached to their alma mater. These characteristics fall squarely into broader human resource management trends observed by analysts, including the “mobility imperative” (Garsten, 2008) and being ambidextrous and multi-skilled (Garsten & Grey, 1997; Holmqvist & Spicer, 2013; Lloyd & Payne, 2016).

Since there are distinct patterns in the profiles of this cohort, I would assert that their self-presentations was a response that was acquired through learning and experience (Gioia & Poole, 1984; Jansen et al., 2012). Aspirants are cognisant that certain settings require specific performances as they are trained in school on how to fashion their biographies in a certain way to impress hirers and significant others in the occupational community. Put simply, they are trained in this script. Because résumés require “a post-rationalization of a necessarily chaotic social trajectory” (Godart & White, 2010, p. 577), the digital storytelling of an individual’s own biography is a skill that requires patching together a cohesive narrative of his or her past, present, and imagined future.

For this case of aspirants entering weak-form occupations, we see the necessity of building devices of validation into their self-presentations. For example, using the visibility of their connections and social–professional network, or attaching themselves to other forms of worth, such as the reputation of a school, appeared to be a means to harness legitimacy for their career trajectories. In weak-form occupations more broadly, what is considered a credible occupational biography is ambiguous. In the absence of tangible qualities for evaluation, projecting an image of self as taking care to nurture sought-after expertise (Alvesson, 2001) becomes paramount for aspirants as they persist and continue in their trajectories.
In this empirical finale, the aspirants’ attempts to shed their rookie identity and put on the skin of a “professional” come into focus. The aim of the analysis presented here is to understand how the aspirants adapted their conceptions of their “possible selves” to accommodate the situations faced at work while also preserving aspects of their identity that were meaningful to themselves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Ibarra, 1999). Being in work and utilising the skills they had invested time and resources in developing was the endpoint they had aspired to reach. At this stage, the aspirants revealed their desire to be taken seriously by the occupational community and to be recognised for a unique expertise they had honed over the course of their training and work placements. However, as the aspirants experienced the transition into work, they met with situations they did not quite foresee, for example, the fear of their expertise becoming mainstreamed, or the moral difficulties of navigating ethical grey areas in their work. As a response to these unanticipated situations — echoing the uncertainty of an earlier stage and as explored in Section II — the aspirants were compelled to find ways of coping with disruption in script following.

Since these imagined futures of their “possible selves” are offered through their narrative accounts, this present analysis extends the theme of self-presentation discussed in the preceding chapter. A concept coined by Markus & Nurius (1986, p. 954), “possible selves” represent the aspirants’ ideas of “what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming”. According to the authors, possible selves are derived from representations of the self in the past but also include representations of the self in the future. Notably, “possible selves” provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation that is relevant here as a way of analysing the aspirants’ acts of projection. Even if individuals have a bad track record of predicting the future due to projection bias (Loewenstein, O’Donoghue, & Rabin, 2003), it does not mean the researcher should refrain from examining these future-oriented actions that people use to realise their aspirations. As Beckert (2016, p.
32) puts it, it is precisely because of this inadequacy that researchers should devote more attention to understanding how projections are formulated, especially if “imaginaries of the future are a cognitive and emotional force that helps orient and animate the capitalist economy”.

In this final analysis, I will also offer examples of how the aspirants have to make normative assessments when responding to the dilemmas and ambiguities that emerge and evolve from work situations and demands. By considering what Emirbayer & Mische (1998) propose as the “practical-evaluative element” of agency, I hope to put in place the final piece of this examination of school-to-work trajectories into weak-form occupations. Not through focusing on whether or not the aspirants were ultimately “successful”, “happy”, or “hopeful” but, rather, how they dealt with and presented their ways of coping with the most difficult and thorny issues they faced when they became part of the labour market, what they had to do in order to persist in their trajectories.

Disjunctures in imagined futures

Notions about becoming a “professional” emerged frequently in the aspirants’ accounts as unprovoked comments; these notions often served as an index for validation or evaluation of self and others in the occupation. This was surprising since, due to the nature of the research problem, I had intended to avoid beginning the study of weak-form occupations from the perspective of the traditional “professions” framework. Therefore, I never posed questions related to or containing that notion.

Yet all but one of the aspirants brought up the idea of being or becoming a professional, and the word “professional” was uttered a total of sixty times by them through the interviews over time. Sometimes the word was used as a noun, other times as an adjective. For example, Simon described how he would become more confident of his abilities once he was able to compare himself with other “professionals” with the same skill set, to evaluate who was doing “worse or better” (T2 Interview). Similarly, George talked about how he did not think anyone could finish four years of university education “without having ever worked” and expecting to use only theoretical knowledge to become a good
“professional” (T2 Interview). For Leila, to be “professional” meant having the ability to overcome technical challenges proficiently. Leila harboured aspirations of becoming a developer, and one of her biggest struggles was teaching herself how to code. She was of the view that, until she could write “good code” and, better yet, “high performance code”, she was not yet a “professional” (T3 Interview).

Conceptually, the meaning of professionalism is not fixed; the definitional struggle amongst social scientists of what constitutes professionalism or what a professional is has gone on for more than a century (Evetts, 2003; Flexner, 1915). According to Barley et al., (2016, p. 128), during the 1970s and ‘80s, when scholars shared the view that analyses should not wrongly identify an insider’s claim of being professional as being “objective evidence of a profession”, few scholars drew attention to how people used the terms “professional” in everyday speech by treating the term as a folk concept and attending to its cultural meaning (Becker, 1970).

In their own research, Barley and colleagues (2016) point out that, for occupational groups such as technicians, “being professional” is not a call for greater power or a desire for legitimacy. When they talked about professionalism, these technicians were pointing to their specific expertise and making a claim that others should respect and appreciate what they know and can do. For them, talk of professionalism means successful performance and a serious orientation to their work; it highlights their notions of how they should treat each other and how they should be treated.

The ways in which the term “professional” was evoked amongst the group of aspirants I followed shared similarities with what Barley and colleagues found in their study of technicians (Barley et al., 2016). Their claims of being or becoming professional were not a plea for raising the status of their occupational group; rather, it was a more evident plea to be recognised as having specific skills and expertise. Being recognised for their expertise, or having others appreciate that they are on the path to eventually becoming specialists, was an essential component of the aspirants’ projections of their “possible selves”. Before entering the labour market, the aspirants expressed a common vision of becoming experts in their field and being recognised by others for a specific kind of expertise. Imagining that sort of occupational future provided them with drive and
energy to embark on this pathway, and being part of a specialist training programme also aided greatly in warming up those ambitions.

At the T2 interviews, as they were nearing the end of their training, such statements from the aspirants were frequent: “I do not want to be good at a lot of things. I want to be good at one thing, which makes me valued, in a way... that gives me motivation to pursue that specific expertise” (Erik, T2 Interview); “I really enjoy it when I solve a problem that others cannot do. I don’t want to be a sales person, trying to grab a lot of clients and talk and talk all the time. I prefer to have a skill, have a kind of expertise... people will respect you” (Sara, T2 Interview). Both these accounts converged on the aspirants’ desire to be respected in their work lives for possessing a very specific form of skill set or expertise that was valued within the community. The vision of emerging as an expert motivated them to continue to engage in and commit to this career pathway.

The concepts of expertise and a group’s ability to monopolise esoteric knowledge have been a central concern for the study of traditional professions (Hughes, 1963). Expertise in conjunction with “credentialing”, “licensing”, and “organising” form the basis of evaluating when a group achieves professional status. Identification with an occupation also occurs when members believe they possess unique, socially valued abilities (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). More recently, there have been various suggestions about how to conceptualise expertise. Eyal (2013, p. 869), for example, proposes an analytical distinction between “experts” (the actors who enforce jurisdictional claims over a task by “professing” their skills and credibility) and “expertise” (the capacity to accomplish a task better and quicker because of one’s experience in dealing with particular problems).

The desire of the SX aspirants to possess a specific kind of expertise seemed to be less about the group achieving status and power and more about their own eagerness to possess technical capacities to achieve tasks better and quicker, and thus be recognised for that. However, the findings, at this stage of the research, of the aspirants wanting to possess and be recognised for “unique” skills, go contrary to what was found in the preceding analysis in Section II, where there was a pattern of exhibiting themselves as multi-skilled and ambidextrous. While the labour market
expected them to be something akin to a jack-of-all-trades, an implicit desire seemed to lie at the heart of their narratives to be a master of one.

In the aspirants’ early moments of being in work, having the opportunity to hone and showcase expertise was, however, limited to only a few of them. Annika, who did a traineeship in a newly launched unit of an agency, shared how her supervisor did not like the idea of roles, telling her early into her internship, “You’re not an intern. You work here. Some people see you in an intern position, I see you as a worker”. Annika was trusted with conducting her own client meetings as early as a month after she commenced work. Rather than being treated as a neophyte, Annika found this recognition she obtained from her supervisor significant in inciting her commitment to continue pursuing this line of work. At one point in her T3 interview, she remarked, “I know I’m valuable!” This confidence contrasted with her earlier doubts expressed when she had not yet begun work and was uncertain about her worth or, as she put it, how to “put money on her hat” (see Section II).

One of her peers, Kim, also related at T3 his first experience of receiving recognition at work for solving a vexing technical problem that was troubling other developers at his company.

I did quite a complicated graph last year, which had been bothering us for like half a year... So we had thought about this problem for a long time, and we decided that it was finally time to do it. And I was the one who was given responsibility for it. It took me maybe one and half weeks to create it. It was super fun. It was a lot of maths, hard tricky problems, going back and forth, trying out different things. And actually to see the results in a graphical way was really cool... I think it was the first time that I actually felt proud, very proud, of my work. A lot of the other developers in the company told me that I’ve done a great job whereas those who couldn’t code just looked at it and like shrugged their shoulders [Kim laughs], “Oh, it’s just another graph”.

Kim’s account traced the contours of what he considered to be expertise: leading in a task that required time, complex problem solving, testing, and visibility in outcome. Not everyone appreciated what he had accomplished, but what mattered for him was who the recognition came
from. In this case, the recognition he received from the other developers in the organisation propped him up, while he came across as not wanting to care for the blasé attitudes of the other colleagues who “couldn’t code”.

Such experiences of being recognised and respected at the workplace were, however, not common amongst the group of aspirants. What was more frequently discussed, especially at the T3 interviews, was how the aspirants felt they were not being acknowledged at the workplace.

It seemed like they needed very basic office help you know? And I was there when they had their presentations, when all the board members were there, from all kinds of big companies... They wouldn’t let me sit in there and listen... They did want me to be there and help receive the [people who were pitching idea]. Like open the door, let them in, show them around, where they should hang their coat. I was kind of like a receptionist! And I thought, okay, I'll do the best of a bad bargain. (T3 Interview)

In the extract above, Maria related moments of disappointment that stemmed from not being able to use more of the skills she had been trained in and not being given opportunities to prove herself at her work site. Even though she was not accorded the chance to sit in the same room with everyone else, she continued to perform the duties assigned to her while carving out her own ways to be seen and to be heard, for instance, by speaking with the visitors and asking them questions about their work and ideas.

Other aspirants also shared how they felt invisible in their organisation until their colleagues realised the skill sets they possessed: “In the beginning, when I joined the company, some of the managers, they did not even say ‘hej’ to me. They did not give a shit. Now that they know I can give them some numbers, they start to add me on LinkedIn, Facebook, stuff like that” (Sara, T3). Another aspirant described how he was not given any real work task or supervision during his internship, but when his colleagues realised what he could do, his traineeship period was almost coming to its end.
They give their reports to their clients in a keynote format, with Excel and graphs and stuff. I just completed it a lot of faster than they usually did. I also found errors in the report that they had sent to one of their biggest customers for years. I found like faulty formulas, and they hadn’t even noticed that. And I noticed that in half an hour sitting on that for the first time… I think the best part was the last couple of weeks, they actually understood my value. And they were like, “f***, what have we done?”

For lack of recognition and opportunities to realise his “possible self”, this aspirant did not remain long in the organisation and eventually moved on to a full-time position at another agency.\(^1\) There was a general acknowledgement amongst the aspirants that, as interns or junior staff, they were placed at the bottom of the labour “food chain” and there was a long way to go before they could be recognised as “experts”. However, these accounts revealed the ways in which their colleagues’ orientation to their work and performance could shape the aspirants’ decisions of whether they would stay on in a particular organisation or move on. Their disappointment was probably more intense because of how they were prepped in school to believe that they would be at the forefront of this occupational field and that they would be seen as specialists with valuable, sought-after competence. Because the notion of possible selves provides an “evaluative and interpretive context for the current view of self” (Markus & Nurius, 1986), the aspirants adapted, adjusted, and made moves until they found experiences that matched their self-conceptions.

**Moral conflicts and possible selves**

The gap between their imagined futures of being professionals with expertise and what actually happened in the early stages of their work lives compelled the aspirants to adjust their conceptions of their possible selves, in light of the kinds of responsibilities andautonomies they were

\(^1\) This form of recognition, discussed here, specifically refers to acknowledgment from the aspirants’ peers and superiors. It is different from the battle for recognition and distinction among social groups, à la Bourdieu, and which I addressed in the “Introduction” section of this monograph.
accorded in their work organisations. Another observation that triggered their adaptation was the lack of clarity of the code of conduct in their occupational task area. More generally, “newness” in work tasks and employment arrangements tend to produce new normative logics and consequently new sources of ethical conflict (Gorman & Sandefur, 2011). The struggle over what was legal, moral, and collectively or individually acceptable in their line of work was prominent in the aspirants’ T3 accounts.

In the final wave of interviews, when the aspirants had been in work for some time, one issue raised, often with much difficulty, was how digital data should be treated, dealt with, analysed, and extracted in ethical ways. This was a particularly contentious issue for those working in agencies and whose key responsibilities involved producing reports and analyses as part of their service to clients. In the extract below, one of the aspirants related how the firm he worked for needed to demonstrate to their clients that the campaigns they devised were working, and this was often done via the presentation of data reports.

It’s all about benchmarks. It’s all about how we tweak and how we optimise, all from the concept development to the actual managing of the project, to the execution of the project. I mean it’s a full circle in some ways. Sometimes you can see, “oh this is bad, this is good”, and sometimes you don’t know... What I noticed is that everyone does it in the industry: if you get bad numbers, you tweak the numbers. Not that you type in another number, but you make it look good.

“Making the numbers look good”, according to this aspirant, was something he observed to be a widely adopted practice. Yet, from this extract presented, we see how he attempted to make sense of what was considered appropriate code of conduct. He was of the opinion that the way the agency presented the data to clients was a norm: “everyone” knew “everyone” was doing it. But at the same time, he was conflicted, as we shall see in the continuation of this extract.
Finding the sweet spots in the data. Maybe highlighting the sweet spots rather than highlighting something else. I think it’s kind of dirty? I go in with the mentality that: always look on the bright side of data. In the beginning of my training at SX, I thought that numbers and data and analysis were very, very objective. It can only mean this. If you look at the data, it’s only this. I realised fast that it’s how you perceive and how you crunch the numbers that you can get different results. You can absolutely pinpoint it in one direction and make it look good. At the same time I’m not lying and at the same time it’s not that... if I get bad data, I am going to not present it — it’s not that kind of way? It’s more of how I put the phrasing and what I’m actually highlighting.

In the initial stages of his training at SX, this aspirant shared that he believed that data were objective. Over time, working on projects and entering work exposed him to practices of handling data that he found to be ethically questionable. He tried to deal with his discomfort by shifting his gaze, to look “at the bright side of data” and his role as a digital storyteller whose responsibility was to “phrase” and highlight data points to meet organisational goals. But in making sense of the fundamental task areas of his work, he was uncomfortable and unsure.

Navigating ethical grey areas in an occupation that is weak form and lacking clear codes of conduct is a kind of skill that aspirants to such occupations have to acquire and develop. As Barley and colleagues have shown, the expertise that technicians talk about in “being professional” often had little to do with formal training. Rather, they were convinced that their expertise was grounded in practical experience (Barley et al., 2016). The accumulation of “practical experience” was particularly salient to the aspirants from SX when they were faced with having to hone their skills through work tasks that involved ethical issues they were conflicted over, making them realise, for instance, that data could be very easily massaged and packaged to appease clients.

One aspirant, for example, described in our final interview how he was troubled when his colleagues coached him in how to present data reports in a manner that pleased customers, but which involved tactics that he found to be ambiguous and problematic:
I’ve always strived to make a good product. So it was hard to me to aggregate and manipulate the data to make the customer happy. And that wasn’t the whole truth. We didn’t lie, but we aggregated. So, you know, I didn’t think it was fully honorary, like what they did. (T3 Interview)

Like his peer quoted above, this aspirant wrestled with making sense of what was an appropriate code of conduct, especially against the backdrop of senior colleagues acting in such ways. When the aspirant was asked about how he recognised when someone was good to work with, he returned to the topic of ethics and equated being a professional with having some sort of moral compass: “Most of the time [values] reflect how you are a professional as well. I’m not saying that people should have the same values as me, but certain values everyone should have. Like ethics and morals” (T3 Interview).

It is evident that, central to this uneasiness observed in these accounts, were contestation and conflict over the key object around which the aspirants’ work tasks revolve — data. Events like these encountered by the aspirants appeared to be unforeseen, since many of them lacked the practical experience of what to do and how to react. Although they identified a clear zone of transgression and violation such as “lying”, as repeatedly expressed in the extracts above, what was done outside of this zone appeared to be grey and murky. Besides reacting with strong aversion, having to navigate these “grey zones” as junior staff, alongside senior colleagues, seemed to challenge their pre-existing interpretative schemes.

Chicago School occupational sociologists have earlier emphasised that the meaning derived from work is always socially constructed and “validated in practice” by members of an occupational community. Furthermore, “work roles provide incumbents with a social identity and a code for conduct, both within and without the workplace” (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984, p. 11). Here, we observe how the aspirants grappled with the meaning of what was considered appropriate code of conduct within the workplace, precisely because such codes are still uncertain, evolving, and not yet crystallised in weak-form occupations. Moreover, these unstable normative logics do not fit with newcomers’ pre-existing beliefs,
By drawing again from Emirbayer and Mische (1998), we can think through this analysis with what the authors term the “practical-evaluative” element of agency. They define this as the capacity of human agency to make “practical and normative judgements amongst alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). The significance for considering the practical-evaluative element in examining agentic orientations is that judgement is situationally-based, and, in reality, even the most creative and “newly imagined projects must be brought down to earth within real-world circumstances” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 994).

The narratives of the aspirants reveal key instances of occasions when they had to exercise practical evaluation. Additionally, their conceptions of data — what data are, what data do — which are so fundamental to the core of their work, shifted as they moved from school to work. From learning how to refine, “break down”, and provide data analyses that could be sold, they anticipated that these would be skills they could claim expertise in doing. From viewing data as something objective while they were in school, once in their new jobs, they learnt quickly how data could be easily manipulated to meet certain business objectives.

While being in work and dealing with the demands of their new work sites, the aspirants’ conceptions of their possible selves shifted. The pressures of client servicing and company profit competed with their desires to perform their role with integrity. From idealising the “professional” as one with technical competencies and expertise, the aspirants adapted their conceptions of a “professional” to one who is able to make moral judgements in the face of difficult situations. This revised notion of their possible selves represented not just what they wanted to become but was also a reaction to what they were afraid they might become (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

One question that emerges from these findings is whether school culture, such as the one studied here, reflects work culture, or if schools have a culture of their own. Since higher vocational educational organisations are located in such close proximity to the work places that
the students they train will enter, and the ones who train the students are practitioners themselves, it would be hard to imagine that these sites would not exert influences on each other. However, the sections above showed what happens when there is a disjuncture between them. The school, SX, emphasised the positive, noble attributes of leading and driving societal change, as well as qualities of empathy and emotional awareness. While we can see how the events the aspirants faced at work challenged their pre-existing interpretative schemes as they were forced to deal with the exigencies of their work organisations, we can also view the aspirants’ accounts as their attempts to exercise the qualities that are emphasised at SX — empathy and sensitivity — by distancing themselves from what they see as non-empathetic business practices.

This final analysis points to how the disjuncture in the aspirants’ imagined futures and the unanticipated sources of ethical conflicts that they face at work impacted the ways in which they formulate ideas of their possible selves. The evolving, uncertain normative logics of weak-form occupations are central to inciting these types of ruptures. The ability to navigate terrains that lack clear codes of conduct is a skill that aspirants to such occupations must acquire through experience.
CODA

How do individuals enter occupations that are weakly defined and which lack clear career tracks? In addressing this query, the present study zoomed in on the intersection of a particular education to labour market crossing to develop an in-depth account of a cohort being trained for an occupational area that is weak-form and is in a nascent stage. By using an interpretative research approach, I followed a group of individuals who were in a double “not-yet” situation — aspirants entering an occupation in a nascent stage — as they experienced significant events such as undergoing specialist training, searching for jobs, and beginning the work experience.

Specifically, this study uncovers a particular school culture that builds faith and confidence in the occupational trajectories of these aspirants, despite its weak form and unclear destinations in the labour market. A strong school culture permits the aspirants to fall back and draw on interpretive schemes and rules to navigate uncertainties; it bolsters their confidence to hope for future gains and to take roads less travelled. Yet there is a limit to script following. As the aspirants cross from school to work and they experience being in the labour market, scripts are sometimes questioned, sometimes altered, or sometimes do not exist at all. In these moments, aspirants shift from reliance on routinised activities and procedures (scripts), to reliance on deliberative efforts and engagement with futures (projections). The results of this analysis reveal several motifs of temporality and anticipation, which will be addressed in this concluding section.
Strong school culture and weak-form occupations

One of the key findings from this study is the significance of strong school culture for aspirants embarking on weak-form occupations. The school is said to be “strong” here in reference to its culture, which, through its emphasis on distinctiveness, strives to build a strong and confident collective. By following the aspirants from the point of school enrolment until graduation and being in work, we can observe how the encoding of organisational and occupational scripts begins from the moment an aspirant considers applying to SX, since the selection process itself is a form of socialisation.

This process of cultivating the aspirants continues as they undergo the ceremonial admissions cycle, learn and perform rituals that structure interactions and generate emotional energy, and serve as both organisational story listeners and storytellers. These stories that are heard and retold are picked up in gossip; significantly, they encapsulate collective experiences rather than individual, specific ones (Boje, 1991; Boyce, 1995; Godart & White, 2010). We can also observe how storytelling matters to the aspirants because it demonstrates learning, creates confidence, and celebrates individual and collective journeys into weak-form occupations.

With a strong school culture manifested through these various organisational cultural forms, the aspirants experience the magic of group solidarity and collective effervescence that propels them forward in their occupational pathways, even if these pathways are weakly defined. Beyond membership, identification, or commitment, topics often cast as important for organisational research, I propose that the notion of faith serves as a more appropriate concept for examining weak-form occupations that involve intangible labour market outcomes and career pathways. Faith in the occupational pathway is different from commitment; the distinction is made because there is no strong rewards, career system, or consistent line of activity that these aspirants can be committed to (Becker, 1960). Yet we have observed how it is important for the aspirants to anticipate that the pathway they are on will lead to a positive labour market outcome in order for them to embark on specialist training in the first place.
Schools that are vocational in nature have been conventionally assumed to be inferior to schools with academic and theoretical profiles (Billett, 2014; Berner, 2010). Accounts of “strong schools” have thus concentrated on those that are regarded as “elite”, with long histories or successful graduate labour market outcomes (Bourdieu, 1996; Khan, 2011; Ye & Nylander, 2015). One would not generally expect to find a school within a segment of vocational training to have a strong school culture, where programmes are shorter and have been said to suffer from “short-termism” and “cyclical bets” (Karlson & Ronquist, 2016). However, in this study, we have seen a case of an occupational school within the segment of vocational training that has managed to establish itself as a “strong brand”. Although this could be an exception in the landscape of advanced vocational training in Sweden, this finding suggests we should not limit our study of distinctive school cultures to a narrow portion of the education system.

Furthermore, recent studies by technologists predict that massive open online courses (MOOCs) will eventually eradicate the need for physical schools (see e.g. Susskind & Susskind, 2015). Yet, as we have seen here, the role of the school, even if vocational in profile, goes beyond instruction by playing other functions. Ceremonies of selection and induction, coupled with the intensity of everyday interaction rituals, serve as passageways for communicating and instilling particular principles, especially during the stage of socialisation. The school’s culture engenders confidence and produces strong collective sentiments amongst the aspirants, processes that are vital for building faith for embarking, traversing, and persisting in weak-form occupations.

At the tertiary level of advanced education and training, individuals have been increasingly expected to construct their own learning portfolios, a trend that follows from policies of higher education reforms that places “employability” of the learner as one of its prominent goals (Krause-Jensen & Garsten, 2014). The “responsibilisation” of individual students has meant that aspirants must navigate the educational landscape and its unforeseen challenges on their own (Krause-Jensen & Garsten, 2014). In the present inquiry, traces of the individualisation of learning are readily apparent. But what stands out through the observations is, paradoxically, how individualisation can also be a collective project. As schools prepare...
students to go it alone, we observe how, in some ways, it still takes a village to raise an individualist.

Aspirational scripts

By focusing on how the school prepares the aspirants for work that does not yet exist, I teased out three scripts that are encoded during the stage of socialisation into the school: the script of “lifelong learning” (acquiring the competence to learn how to learn); the script of “self-management” (using “tools” to achieve personal and team development); and the script of “being at ease” (particularly with uncertain and uncomfortable situations). Through the analyses, we observed how these scripts are fashioned into the school’s guiding principles, the programme’s curriculum, and the manner in which the training programme is carried out. The scripts are then enacted and constituted in the narratives of the aspirants over time. Notably, these scripts are powerful means in cultivating and preparing the aspirants for weak-form occupational trajectories, since they are generally accepted by the aspirants as necessary to follow and to use for navigating the constantly changing demands of the labour market.

Following their time in school, three specific segments of the aspirants’ career trajectories were used as sites to observe script acquisition and enactment: job search, learning expectations from the labour market, and how they fashioned their occupational biographies. In the job-search phase, we uncovered that the aspirants’ actions can be strategic, involving planning and plotting, or opportunistic, whereby the aspirants exploit immediate opportunities that come about without planning. Their job search can also follow a plan that is fixed or they can change course via a pivot. Finally, aspirants can embark from a search zone that is characterised as safe (where their exposure to risk is minimised), or toward a zone characterised as risky (e.g., applying to jobs where they know no one at the organisation, where they are not paid, or no possibility of a job after the traineeship).

On the whole, this analysis has demonstrated that not all job-search behaviour is strategic, hence the reference to these six identified action patterns as job-search “scripts” rather than the more commonly used
concept of job-search “strategies”. The findings have also shown that aspirants into weak-form occupations do not always pursue risky endeavours but rather, often err on the side of caution. While extant literature on job search and “employability” largely focuses on how individual personality traits (e.g., impatience, self-control), demographic attributes (e.g., gender, age), or an individual’s efficacy to “sell” the self in the labour market affect search outcomes, the present analysis compels us to consider the importance of collective job-search behaviour. It highlights how aspirants acquire scripts to go about looking for work in shared settings and how there is mimicry and shared patterns of how they can go about traversing the path from education to work.

In the second segment on anticipating expectations from the labour market, I examined how aspirants acquire scripts from job descriptions that explicitly communicate desired qualities of the ideal candidate. Ads that seek candidates for positions within weak-form job roles, in particular, may be written to reflect a desired future state rather than a current reality, thus serving as a site of projectivity. Embedded in these ads are ideas of what are recognised by hirers as valuable and, for the emerging occupations of interest here, the ads also express what characteristics organisations want to recognise as valuable and communicate as necessary for aspirants must possess. Through categorising and sorting out the various requirements communicated by hirers from a corpus of job advertisements that target the aspirants, what stands out as prevalent are requirements that describe personal qualities candidates should possess in order to optimise cultural fit within the hiring organisation.

In representing these “personal” qualities in detail and more frequently than other more traditional qualification indicators, hirers make apparent that they want to employ people who are passionate, hungry, driven, agile, and who can survive in fast-paced, constantly changing environments; they want to hire people like themselves or how they aspire to see themselves. Some of these qualities that are expected, however, require the aspirants to be “ambidextrous”. For example, aspirants should dare to fail, and fail fast; daring to fail comes with a precondition that the aspirants are willing to show vulnerability. But displaying vulnerability goes against the tenor of another quality expected of them, that of displaying and projecting confidence.
I argue that the ambidextrous ideal is popular within weak-form occupations because the model of such a worker is itself weakly institutionalised. When no one really knows what to expect of nascent-stage work tasks or positions, the onus is placed on the aspirant to define what they will focus on and to explain to others through convincing accounts what they have done and can do. Besides cultural fit, the aspirants therefore need to possess another kind of cultural proficiency, that of effective self-presentation.

**Projection as a script for weak-form occupations**

In discussing the final segment of their trajectories, I examined the ways the aspirants presented their “professional selves”. The way they fashion their occupational biographies follows a type of script in which their biographies are characterised by a great deal of movement in the labour market, multi-skilling, being highly connected, and showing allegiance and attachment to their alma mater. These characteristics fall squarely within current human resource management trends observed by analysts, such as that of the “mobility imperative” (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Garsten, 2008) or being multi-skilled (Garsten & Grey, 1997; Holmqvist & Spicer, 2013). Aspirants are cognisant that certain settings require specific performances (Gioia & Poole, 1984) as they are trained in school on how to fashion their biographies to impress hirers and significant others in the occupational community. Since the crafting of résumés require the aspirants to post-rationalise their trajectories (Godart & White, 2010), the digital storytelling of one’s own biography is an occupationally specific skill that requires patching together a cohesive narrative of one’s past, present, and imagined future.

More specifically for this case of aspirants entering weak-form occupations, we see the necessity of building devices of validation into their self-presentations. Some examples are using the visibility of their connections in their social-professional network or attaching themselves to a more stable form of worth, such as the reputation of the school. In weak-form occupations, what is considered a credible occupational biography is ambiguous. In lieu of tangible qualities for evaluation, projecting an image of self as taking care to nurture sought-after expertise
becomes paramount for the aspirants as they persist in their trajectories (Alvesson, 2001). Furthermore, while the aspirants have to show that they are individuals with their own unique biographies, the means through which they do this is framed, learnt, and collectively produced. This individual–collective tension has emerged at several points throughout this thesis in polarities such as having to be a unique individual displaying personal qualities but fitting culturally in a competent group, or being multi-skilled while possessing specific expertise.

Now, where’s the drama in the story told up to this point? In this text, we have seen how scripts are sometimes questioned, sometimes altered. For example, aspirants who anticipate occupational futures in an open, diverse occupational community — the cherished hope of the tech sector — experience, instead, marginalisation or fears of discrimination along the lines of gender and age in the labour market. Then again, through their attempts to project a “professional” self, the aspirants draw on the name of the school as a means to seek validation, but this attachment to their alma mater is, on some occasions, derided. Aspirants are left having to question their faith or defend the faith.

We also witnessed the anxiety around navigating ethical grey zones in their work, given the lack of a clear sense of what the codes of conduct are for work tasks in occupations that are young and in a nascent stage. When scripts cease to be helpful for the aspirants in their career orientations, or when they do not exist, deliberations take its place and the aspirants have to adapt their conceptions of their possible selves. This refined notion of their possible selves represents not just what they would like to become, but is also a reaction to what they are afraid they might become (Markus & Nurius, 1986). It should be clear by now that the attention placed on examining future-oriented actions in studying careers has been central to this analysis. The aspirants’ imagined future as “professionals” with “expertise” keeps them on track. Furthermore, we observe how these imaginaries are not just of “success” but of getting out there first and being innovative in charting career pathways.

As I have attempted to answer some questions, others naturally arise. For example, how do aspirants project career futures when it is not clear what they should be committed to? Even though this was not a question posed at the onset of this study, I would venture a suggestion that they are committed to an open future (Beckert, 2016). What is common
amongst these aspirants, despite their very different backgrounds, educational histories, nationalities, and interests is their propensity for role exploration and acceptance that futures are contingent, not predetermined or fixed. Everett Hughes (1963, p. 657) wrote of the early professions that “A man who leaves a profession, once he is fully trained, licensed and initiated, is something of a renegade in the eyes of his fellows... It takes a rite of passage to get him in, another to read him out”. Since this does not seem to be the case for contemporary work life, which no longer requires “lifelong commitment” to an occupation, I posit that the allowance to not commit to a singular occupational trajectory is what permits projections in the aspirants’ careers.

**Figure 7.1.** A model of how individuals enter weak-form occupations

In Figure 7.1, I attempt to visually summarise the key findings of this study that seek to answer the question: how do individuals enter occupations that are weakly defined? As the model shows, there are several typical, familiar processes, such as organisational identification and occupational socialisation. Moreover, through the latter process, the aspirants learn and enact scripts as they transition from education and into weak-form occupations. These scripts, as have been described earlier,
include job-search scripts, scripts of the ideal candidate, and scripts of how to fashion one’s own occupational biography.

The first significant lines in this diagram are the dotted ones that illustrate “latent forces” of faith and confidence. The argument here is that, if we are to remove “school” from this model, the faith → confidence spiral will not set off. Something else (another organisational form or resource) would have to be in the place of “school” in order to generate and support this sense of belief in the unknown. In their study of “student culture” in medical school, Becker et al., (1961, p. 435) describe the groups of students as forming a “community of fate” because, however individualistic their motives, the aspirants “share goals, a body of crucial experiences, and exposure to the same perils”. Being brought together in an intimate, intense setting like specialist training produces forces that shape career trajectories in ways that should not be taken for granted. As Beckert (2016, pp. 73, 168) noted repeatedly in his book, Imagined Futures, confidence in future developments is an ongoing and inevitable process of the market struggle in capitalist economies; once actors lose confidence in an asset’s future — in this case, an aspirant’s own career — it loses its value.

The second set of important lines in the model includes the grey ones that distinguish individual projection from collective projections. As noted earlier in this monograph, projection operates both at the level of individual lives, as well as at the levels of collectives, when individuals come together to jointly develop and implement projects (Mische, 2014). The projections that I have discussed in this study are not just derived from the aspirants themselves, since the school and its members collectively project images of professional selves to the aspirants as well.

Together these individual and collective projections constitute a critical facet of weak-form occupational trajectories. In this thesis, I demonstrated how modelling career actions involves script-based learning, based on the premise that the underlying mechanism involved in “vicarious learning” is the display of an appropriate script by a model (Gioia & Poole, 1984). Aspirants model others who are, themselves, in the midst of crafting new scripts; similarly, aspirants project with the aid of others who are themselves engaged in the work of projection. Individual projections meet collective projections, and in orienting themselves to this reference group, aspirants begin to phrase their careers into something
socially meaningful (Barley, 1989; Shibutani, 1955). I suggest here that these individual acts of projection are magnified when supported by collective projections that enable aspirants to decide what is desirable or feasible in their career trajectories. Individual projections become clearer, more detailed, and have more leverage when combined with the projections of others in their group.

Scenarios for weak-form occupations

In this monograph, the final empirical analysis concluded at the point of how the aspirants adjusted conceptions of their “possible selves” as a response to events and constraints they encountered when in the workplace. Since this is a study with temporality at its core, it is worth some space in this concluding section to discuss what the larger horizon might look like for the aspirants as well as for the occupational area they are moving toward.

The emergence of the weak-form occupations for which the aspirants were trained for and ended up in can be traced to the moments after the tech bubble burst at the turn of the century. While mapping how technology companies sought to devise viable business models after venture capital funding dried up, Srnicek (2017) noted how Google found a way to use digital data (in particular search data and cookies) to sell targeted advertising space through an automated auction system. Other technology platforms then imitated and began shifting their business models toward this process — monopolising user data, extracting, analysing, using, and selling them — as a key source of revenue (Srnicek, 2017).

This shift in how digital platforms generated profits gave rise to task areas that required the services of developers, specialists, designers, analysts, and account managers — occupational roles that the aspirants we studied here ended up assuming. Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 1006) propose that periods of upheavals, such as economic crises or downturns, can spur “agentic activity” whereby individuals and collectivities project and imagine alternatives to deal with the problems of
the present. In some ways, the emergence of new occupational areas can be seen as a result of these projections taking place during unsettled times.

However, as Emirbayer and Mishe note, such future orientations, intent on realising visions in the present, may not focus or prioritise the management of situational complexities. In the case of occupations or organisations that create these new roles, situational complexities may refer, for instance, to the establishment of codes of conduct to navigate and settle ethical conflicts that might arise in their line of work. It is during the later moments of “settled times” that we may observe steps taken by a particular group toward practical evaluation or institution building (Swidler, 1986; Emirbayer & Mishe, 1998). Thus, as conceived here, weak-form occupations can become strong-form if the group manages, during later moments of settled times, to draw on established routines and practices to solidify the group’s presence, expertise, and value to their constituents (Abbott, 1995).

A second possible scenario is that the weak-form occupation remains weak-form. As already suggested at the onset of this study, this might be due to the absence of interest in the group to “professionalise”. Because of the “fuzziness” in occupational identification, the interests of the aspirants reside in other areas rather than attending to issues of gaining legitimation or status for the group. The instability of these occupational areas could also be a result of the shifting meaning of data and the kinds of work tasks that surround it. What data are, how they should be used, and who will own them will continue to be contested issues, potentially contributing to impeding the occupation from moving toward a stronger form.1

1 In the immediate moments following the 2008 economic crisis, organisations like the European Commission and the World Economic Forum came forward to praise how “personal data will be the new oil” (World Economic Forum, 2011). As shown in Section I, the aspirants were repeatedly told stories of data as the “new oil” when they were in training. However, the tenor of this tune has been changing. In January 2018, Adam Schlosser of the World Economic Forum published a piece arguing why data is not the new oil: “Treating data like oil can result in misguided government policy that reduces economic and social benefits”. While the comparison to a single use commodity is what is at the heart of the criticism, Schlosser still portrays the knowledge and skills to analyse data for insights as a value generator: “Unlike oil, the value of data doesn’t grow by merely accumulating more. It is the insights generated through analytics and combinations of different data sets that generate the real value” (Schlosser, 2018). The specialist skills that the aspirants possess
We could also propose the extreme: that weak-form occupations gradually dissipate. This could happen if the work that the aspirants do becomes completely automated or outsourced to countries with cheaper cost of labour, resulting in the occupation disappearing from local labour markets. Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2008, p. 11) term this Digital Taylorism, in that organisations translate “knowledge work into working knowledge through the extraction, codification and digitalisation of knowledge into software prescripts and packages that can be transmitted and manipulated by others regardless of location”. While the automation of particular tasks might result in the redundancy of certain roles, I would argue that the complete disappearance of these occupations is less likely than the occupation continually evolving, since specialists in these positions constantly “reinvent” their responsibilities as a result of changes in regulations, expectations, and technical developments.

**Weak-form occupations in a strong labour market**

In this thesis, the acquisition of skills through professional training has been viewed as a kind of commitment that the aspirants undertake with the hope of future gain (Beckert, 2016). These gains are based on imaginaries of the future, such as anticipating that the qualifications acquired will lead to employment or higher remuneration. Even though this investment in a particular form of training is compelled by a desirable future outcome, the imagined profit is not guaranteed. The outcomes of investments in skills formation are unpredictable and rely on factors such as the tenacity of an individual's career goals, technological changes (which might result in certain skill sets becoming obsolete), or economic downturns and periods of unemployment (Beckert, 2016, pp. 160, 162).

To assert that the school’s culture works in isolation in producing the observed effects of faithful crossings into weak-form occupations would therefore be too simplistic. Since transitions are boundary-crossing activities, the stage these aspirants are in, that of entering new roles (as workers) and exiting previous roles (as students) makes the situational
context ripe for influencing their role behaviour, self-conceptions, and propensity to follow scripts (Ashforth et al., 2000; Ashforth, 2012). In addition, the relatively advantageous labour market structure, as discussed in Section II, was beneficial to the aspirants as the faith that was built in the school could be sustained in the labour market.

At any given moment, there is a particular labour opportunity structure, which Abbott (2005) defines as the events and period changes that mark and shape the experiences of cohorts, such as occupational-specific advantages. This structure represents a set of “possibilities and constraints within which various actors must work in the present” (Abbott, 2005, p. 310). The study presented in this thesis took place during a post-crisis period where the Swedish economy was relatively strong and the aspirants were in a labour market that could be characterised as favouring the “sellers” or those with the “right” set of engineering, creative, or design skills (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014).

This then leads to the question of whether faith building in weak-form occupations is only sustainable in a labour market with an abundance of opportunities rather than when the economy is cooling off and heading toward a recession. This is necessary to consider, especially in relation to the discussion of “employability” for emerging job roles in nascent-stage. Brown and colleagues made a distinction about employability as one that should not be limited to merely an individual’s capacity or characteristics to gain employment but, more broadly, should recognise that how employable someone might be varies greatly according to economic conditions (Brown et al., 2002). Employability is a relative concept that is dependent on the laws of supply and demand within the market for jobs. In other words, employability is positional, and “an individual’s employability depends on the employability of others” (Brown et al., 2002, p. 10).

The aspirants were thus traversing the pathway from school to work during a time where the economy was buoyant. It would not be careless to assert that a strong economy enables the creation of new roles, stokes optimism about the availability of work and opportunities, and facilitates faith building in these occupations. The effects of precarity or vulnerability, by being part of an otherwise over-qualified service sector in a globalised workforce, are perhaps less felt (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Lloyd & Payne, 2016; Ross, 2009). It would be difficult to claim without evidence
that the optimism that has been witnessed here would be absent in a downturn. However, Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2011) have provided a vocabulary to discuss what might happen if there is too much faith or if faith cannot be sustained, especially with regards to pursuing more advanced forms of education and training during a recession. If the excess in confidence in unknown futures drives people to invest more time, effort, and money in activities in an attempt to enter occupational pathways that are indefinite, aspirants may find themselves in what the authors call an opportunity trap, whereby everyone adopts the same tactics, but few ultimately secure an advantage (Brown et al., 2011).

**Directions for future research**

What are the implications of this study and how may I suggest transferability of findings? Here, I have three main areas to note, relating to the research fields of the sociology of education, the sociology of work, as well as methodology. The first point harks back to the opening sentences of this monograph, pertaining to the preparation of students for jobs that “do not yet exist”. In the last decade, efforts to “disrupt” education have proliferated, in part due to technology being an enabler, concerns associated with high levels of youth unemployment, and schools becoming sites of financial investments. These efforts have resulted in the emergence of educational start-ups and the adoption of “unschooling” pedagogies that aim to create new institutions of learning to respond to present challenges. If you recall, this was the very premise on which SX was created. Innovation in the educational system at the level of higher vocational training in Sweden also provided schools, like SX, with opportunities to grow and facilitated the prospects for launching programmes such as Digi.

From this study, we have seen the possibilities and challenges of a learning organisation that sets out to prepare the “worker of tomorrow”. The school is able to concentrate its resources and prime its networks to groom aspirants to acquire the necessary traits and qualities for job types that are in a nascent stage, in no small part due to the post-bureaucratic organisational form that allows for more flexibility and less rigidity than what their counterparts in the traditional university system face. For
example, SX can launch and dismantle programmes more quickly and, with its shorter training duration, more easily track the post-graduate outcomes of its students, thus shortening the feedback loop necessary to tailor and improve their training programmes. At time of writing, new programmes are being set up to be launched in coming years while old ones have been removed.

On a local level, the ongoing expansion of advanced vocational education at the post-secondary level (yrkeshögkola) would make this segment a fertile area to pursue questions of school-to-work transitions, especially for emerging occupational areas. What will these trajectories look like for the increasing number of individuals who will embark on such pathways? What kind of meanings will be attached to these experiences? How will individuals undergoing such forms of training that are relatively short and quick be assessed and have their skills validated? This study has not focused on forms of assessments; however, this would be a fascinating area to pursue in future research, since assessment processes can shed light on script learning and rule breaking.

I argued at the beginning of this thesis for the usefulness of examining strategic cases (Chen, 2016; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) and how the school selected here can provide valuable insights on the phenomenon of education-to-work transitions. For the purposes of future research, a comparative element could expand on the findings of this present work, for example, by extending the research to examine similar alternative schools around the world or by comparing this type of educational organisation to the more established, traditional technological university. While single-case studies enable in-depth descriptions of particular phenomena, multiple-case studies could provide a stronger foundation for theory building (Yin, 1994; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

Secondly, in this study, I have focused on a particular emerging occupational area situated within digital work. Another phenomenon that is happening in parallel to these technological developments is the “greening” of occupations and the emergence of new roles as a response to problems like climate change. Occupations such as the “carbon trader”, “smart energy manager”, “eco-designer”, or “solar energy entrepreneur” are now positions that are being filled and deemed to be vital job types for countries striving to become low-carbon economies (CEDEFOP, 2010). The projections taking place at a higher policy level will thus shape the
career futures of individual aspiring workers. It is a humble ambition that, through this analysis, I have brought attention to the necessity of distinguishing the imagining of futures at various levels and have offered ideas about how to go about studying aspirants in occupations that are in the nascent stage, still defining and evolving.

This thesis has taken a temporal view of exploring the phenomenon of what is not yet, so it is with this temporal perspective that this text will conclude. Longitudinal qualitative research that attends to trajectory and meaning, or collecting other kinds of data that serve as sites of projectivity, can enable us to better examine agentic processes that are linked to changing time points and situations (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Hermanowicz, 2016). These methods allow for thorough examinations of trajectories, especially if we are concerned with how individuals assign meanings to the significant events they experience over time. By joining those who have begun and progressed the study of anticipation, this work seeks to contribute in some small way to understanding how individuals can draw on, reject, or alter scripts to project possible futures. Yet these “anticipatory identifications” are never finished, because what compels human motivations and facilitates social relationships and interaction is always evolving and multifaceted (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 989). By continuing and expanding research on future-oriented actions that relate to and reflect on the present and the past, it is hoped that ongoing studies on the transition between education and work will give space and place to examining both individual and collective projections and to the significance of such actions to ongoing events and processes.
Appendix A. Evolution of Swedish Occupational Classification over time

When embarking on this study, one of the earliest difficulties faced was placing individuals entering young occupations into standardised categories and locating them in data registries. While these classificatory schemata are important in and of themselves (Desrosières, 2002), most scholars working on the sociology of occupations and labour markets agree that formal classifications of work are often outdated. Classifications have either been noted to function as ideal types into which collections of work tasks in real organisations do not fit comfortably (Fine, 1996, p. 111) or, as Barley (1996, p. 406) notes, that researchers are often forced to study occupations with categories developed for an economy that existed too long ago. Earlier, Barley and Van Maanen asserted that “superficial occupational descriptions are the norm in work studies, not the exception”; according to them, these abstractions function merely as “linguistic proxies for an uncharted population of distinct occupational pursuits” (Barley & Van Maanen, 1984, p. 15). For these researchers, occupational labels fail to identify the bounds of a community because many occupations are hidden from public view and far from the gaze of social researchers (Barley & Van Maanen, 1984).

Considering the importance of statistical reporting to support the functioning and operation of the welfare state and its implementation and evaluation of policies, the categorisation and classification of work in Sweden is not a trivial issue. Statistics Sweden (Statistiska centralbyrån, abbreviated SCB) is a key state institution that has been instrumental in setting up the infrastructure for data collection, data management, and data usage of research. Despite the wealth of data that are available for use in studying labour market and occupational trends, a thorny challenge for anyone studying newer forms of work is that, at any given point of time, much of the data coded for occupations under study are based on codes that would not necessarily reflect more recent transformations in the division of work and labour. Figure 8.1 shows the transformation of the
Swedish Occupational Classification (SSYK) and how it has been adapted from the instruments of other supranational actors (such as the International Labour Office). Even though the last two versions of the Swedish Occupational Classification were adaptations of the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO), the SSYK possesses its own national distinctions, especially when it comes to classifying digital and creative workers.

**Figure 8.1. The evolution of the Swedish Occupational Classification**

When a particular group is said to be “on the rise”, an opportunity for sociological examination is presented. A rich account that traces the rise of one occupational group offered by Boltanski (1987) illustrates how the rhetoric of the “rise” of a group could be interrogated rather than taken at face value. The term “cadre”\(^1\) was first used in the 1930s in France to distinguish groups of university-trained industrial engineers. Over time, however, the term became a catch-all class for other profiles, such as self-made blue-collar workers promoted to lower-rank management positions or non-engineer staff managers. It also became a classificatory label in official taxonomies. In studying representations of the cadres over various historical periods, Boltanski notes how the ascent

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\(^1\) Left without translation due to the lack of an adequate, substitutable English word.
of this group appears to have begun as a proposition that expressed belief in a prophecy, which “plays on the ambiguity of the verb ‘to rise’” (Boltanski, 1987, p. 151). Were cadres actually “on the rise” or were they “going to rise” some day? Did the term “rise” mean “to increase in size” or “to ascend to a position of dominance”?²

Instead of looking for criteria in terms of how this group ought to be defined to show that there is a well-defined object of study, my focus has been on investigating how institutions and group values are produced and reproduced over time and how that affects the modes and means in which the aspirants traverse career pathways (Boltanksi, 1987, pp. 30–31). Therefore, a question that relates to the research problem of this study is how state agencies recognise emerging occupations in digital work, in the way they ascribe them place and position in the occupational schema.

For example, in the SSYK 1996 — which was used to code occupational data up until 2014 — there was only one sub-category for “computer professionals” (code 213), which came under the broader category of “physical, mathematical and engineering science professionals”. For the latest revision of SSYK 2012, the most updated version presently available, there is a new sub-category at the managerial level for IT managers (code 131), a new category for professional IT occupations (code 25), and a new category for IT associate professionals (code 35). The latter two categories are large categories, which include well-differentiated occupational groups such as games and digital media developers, app developers, and digital analysts.

What is interesting to note is how these categories have been labelled in Swedish: “Yrken med krav på fördjupad högskolekompetens inom IT”, translated to mean occupations requiring advanced higher education qualifications. A new category for designers has also been

² A few years before Boltanski published this rich account on the “making” of the engineering class in France, Berner (1981) published a similar historical account of the world of engineers in Sweden. In her seminal dissertation, she showed how, since the early 1900s, university-educated engineers successfully created important non-technical positions within the system of professions, rising in status to the levels of military officers and lawyers. She also problematized the assumption that engineers formed a homogenous group by taking seriously the distinctions between those who worked for companies, those who were entrepreneurs, and those who worked in the public sector.
introduced in the most recent revision. As a result, occupations such as web designers and graphic designers, that used to be categorised with clowns and property managers (SSYK 1996, code 347), moved up from an associate professional category to a professional category (SSYK 2012, code 217), where the same demand for advanced higher education qualification is stated. Furthermore, there is a change in language in the labelling of occupations, e.g., from “computer” to “IT / digital”.

Occupational classifications categorise but are not legally binding. By stating that workers within these occupations should have gone to university (or the equivalent) does not equate to a mandate that they must possess these qualifications. What this classification represents more clearly, however, is that state agencies agree that these forms of work require advanced levels of skills acquisition through the educational and training system. From such a classificatory act, this connection between educational credentials and professional credentials takes on a quasi-legal form (Boltanski, 1987). Although some might dismiss such occupational schemata as merely designed for research and comparability of occupational groups, the manner in which the classification is constructed and agreed upon could be regarded as a type of valuation practice undertaken by state agencies; how they recognise and legitimise new forms of work can be read through the way they accord place and position to these occupations.
Appendix B. Unemployment in Sweden

Figure 8.2. Unemployment rate (annual average) in Sweden (1990-2017)\(^3\)

![Unemployment rate graph]

Source of data: Statistics Sweden, Labour Force Surveys

\(^3\) The unemployment rate data presented in this figure are based on the percentage of the active population aged 16-64.
SAMMANFATTNING


Avhandlingen baseras på tre empiriska delstudier som följor aspiranterna på deras karriärvägar genom utbildning och arbetsmarknad. I det första avsnittet analyseras socialiseringen i utbildningsprogrammet, i det andra mötet med arbetsmarknaden och i det tredje övergången och framhärdandet inom digitala yrkesfunktioner. Analysen visar att karriärvägarna mot den typ av vagt definierade yrken som studeras i avhandlingen förutsätter en karriärmässig tro som i detta fall byggs upp av en stark skolkultur och organiseringen av ceremoniella ritualer. Skapandet av självförtroende och tilltro inför framtiden sker både på en individuell och en kollektiv nivå. Handlingsprinciper (scripts) för hur studenterna ska förhålla sig till de oklara arbetsmarknadsutsikterna genereras dels från skolans håll och dels från deltagarna själva. Utöver detta gör studenterna praktik under studieprogrammen och försöker även förekomma arbetsmarknadens efterfrågan genom att själva studera och tolka innebörden i relevanta jobbannonser.
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