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# **Youths and Atypical Work in Italy: The Uneven Path to Occupational Stability**

Agostino Massa

Summary: 1. Introduction – 2. Non standard labour contracts: common features and specific differences – 3. From job security to sustainable career paths: how to get out of precarious employment – 4. Research hypothesis and methodology – References

## **Abstract**

The paper presents the characteristics of atypical work in Italy and the theoretical basis of a sociological research, currently in progress, aiming to study the positive or negative consequences of working under non standard employment contracts in order to get to a permanent job position in the service sector.

At first, a definition will be offered of what “non standard” work is, stressing the differences among its different forms with regard to legal regulations and utilization purposes by private and public organizations. These differences will be considered also in a territorial perspective.

A second analysis will be carried out from the point of view of the individual worker, to study the career paths in which the modalities of atypical work are included and the patterns of their development. In particular the hypothesis of their effectiveness, especially for the youths, to enter successfully the labour market will be discussed.

Finally, the structure of the research will be presented.

## **1. Introduction**

The transformation of work and the differentiation of contractual terms of employment are among the most important features of contemporary advanced societies. Work contracts differ from the ones typical of the fordist age but at the same time are also different between them. In last decades, in the Italian labour market the proportion of non standard workers against total workers has increased, as well as the proportion of non standard workers against the total number of entrants to the labour market.

In this paper we are set to present the characteristics of atypical work in Italy and to discuss the main hypothesis and the methodology of a research which is currently in progress, carried out by a team coordinated by the Author at DISPOS – Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali dell'Università degli Studi di Genova. By means of qualitative techniques, the research aims to draw the career paths of youths (aged 20-30) employed with permanent contracts in the service sector, highlighting how the presence or absence of a previous atypical work experience have been relevant in order to achieve a secure occupational position.

The paper is divided in three parts.

At first, a definition will be offered of what “non standard” work is, stressing the differences among its different forms. We shall try to shed light over NSW<sup>1</sup> contracts, explaining that it is not possible to consider them as a whole (Roccella 2005, pp. 129-130). It appears on the contrary as a very heterogeneous field, where every NS contract has for instance different rates of transformation into permanent jobs and a specific use by companies and public administrations. These differences must also be considered in a territorial perspective and with regard to the delivering of active labour policies.

In this frame, a second (and major) analysis will be carried out starting from the point of view of the individual worker. Our attention will shift here to career paths in which the modalities of NSW are included and the patterns of their development. Relying on a review of the latest sociological literature on the topic, we shall discuss the utilization of NS contracts, controlling the hypothesis of their effectiveness, especially for the youths, to enter successfully the labour market. The focus is on understanding what kind of resources – cultural, economic and social capital – are more useful to complete the path to a permanent job, in order to verify whether and under which conditions NS jobs can be a sort of “jumping board” to get to a secure job or, on the contrary, a “trap” from which is difficult to escape.

After the discussion of the theoretical basis, we shall finally present the structure of the research and the methodology adopted.

## **2. Non standard labour contracts: common features and specific differences**

The diffusion of different forms of NS employment, in the private as well as in the public sector, is one of the main aspects of transformation of contemporary work. Given the diversity of these forms, it is necessary to start with a preliminary definition of their common features and specific differences.

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<sup>1</sup>From now on, NS will stand for “non standard” and NSW for “non standard work”. “Atypical work” is used as a synonym for “non standard work”.

The term NSW can be referred to all the forms of employment lacking one or more of the characteristics of the so-called standard employment, consisting in a full-time open-end labour contract, the subordination to only one entrepreneur and the integration in only one productive unit, legal or contractual job protection<sup>2</sup>. Except for part-time work, that can also be related to permanent contracts of employment, all forms of NSW are fixed-term.

Out of the field of traditional employment, also independent and professional work can be considered typical to some extent. Therefore we can recognize forms of NSW developed in the frame of either dependent and independent work. While temporary jobs are an example of the former, the so-called “para-subordination”<sup>3</sup> is one of the latter. All in all, the Italian legal frame offers a set of more than 40 contractual forms (Isfol 2006, p. 81; Gallino 2007, p. 33) which show different grades also in their precariousness<sup>4</sup>.

Considering the usual full-time open-end employment and professional independent work as standard is helpful not just to distinguish standard from NSW but also NS from precarious work. The latter includes all low-skilled fixed-term workers, in a broader meaning employed in enterprises affected by sector or market crisis, so that they feel uncertainty about their job<sup>5</sup>. According to this definition, two different categories can be therefore identified: *explicit* precarious workers, on the basis of the features of their labour contract, and *implicit* precarious workers, on the basis of the perception of their own occupational condition (Isfol 2006, pp. 82-83).

The area of NSW has been therefore estimated as large as the 15%, equal to 3.309.000 people, of the total Italian workforce equal to 22.060.491 (Isfol 2006, p. 88). Standard workers are about 77,7% of the total workforce but they can get up to 85,5%, including also part time permanent workers. According to this study, NS workers are actually the 6,6% of the workforce employed with different fixed-term contracts (equal to 1.447.128 people) and the 5,8% of project workers (equal to 1.289.282 people), while the 2,1% of workers involved in stages or internships are not easy to classify<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>This definition by Reyneri (2005, p. 84) is one of the most quoted in Italian sociology of work. For a discussion of the issue in the anglosaxon literature see, among others, Castells (1996, chapter 4) and Carnoy (2000).

<sup>3</sup>Contracts of “coordinated and continuous collaboration” are usually shortened in “co.co.co.”. The law 30/2003 (known as “Biagi Law”) has modified them into “*contratti a progetto*” for the private employment, while there are no changes for the public sector. We shall refer here to them as to “project work contracts”.

<sup>4</sup>Gasparre (2006, pp. 9-10) summarizes these forms into six macro-categories, of which only project work contracts are strictly considered “atypical”.

<sup>5</sup>The same situation can be found in particular cases of permanent labour contracts, such as flexible part-time or job on call (Roccella 2005, p. 130).

<sup>6</sup>There are different opinions about the size of the NSW area, according to the criteria used. One of the largest esteems is proposed by Gallino (2007, p. 11) considering a number between 10 and 11 millions people generally working in flexible conditions, of which a number between 5 and 6 millions under legal non standard labour contracts.

NS workers are employed according to a set of different contracts. Each contract has its own regulations and specific utilization purposes. Generally speaking, companies try to pursue strategies of external flexibility and to keep labour cost low. As it has been stressed, they can outsource, on a legal basis, part of the workforce without losing the benefits of their integration in the organizational unit (Reyneri 2005, p. 86). Reducing job security, companies transfer on workers the risks and the uncertainty coming from unpredictable markets.

Not all companies make the same use of atypical contracts, according to their industrial sector, their production processes and even their corporate culture (Gasparre 2006, pp. 23-24). Moreover, each contract is used for specific purposes (Samek Lodovici and Semenza 2001). Temporary workers, for example, are hired mainly to meet a sudden increasing demand – sometimes for replacing temporarily absent employees. Most interim assignments are carried out in medium-large companies of the manufacturing sector, based in Northern Italy. Project workers, to the contrary, seem to be hired for replacing standard workers at a lower cost for salary and benefits (Cazzola 2006, p. 859). Time labour contracts<sup>7</sup> are usually used for longer periods than temporary work and often for more qualified jobs (Massa 2005).

Organizations, however, do not use such NS contracts just to increase profits. Many of these, notably project and temporary work, are largely used also by the public administration, sometimes oriented to new activities requiring peculiar skills and competences not owned by already employed workers but in general affected by shrinking budgets and a blocked human resource turnover. According to latest estimates (Isfol 2006, p. 34), NS workers are about 7% of total employed in the central public administration and in the public health sector, and about 12% in regional administrations and local governments. Their quote is even bigger in university and research institutes, where they are about 35%<sup>8</sup>.

The main problem about NS contracts is not their *use* as much as their *misuse*. The starting point, however, must be the awareness that is not the law to make labour more flexible but the need for adaptation to organizational changes in the production processes<sup>9</sup>. This situation cannot be brought back “by legal order” but must be faced using effective up-to-date tools. Current legislation can be improved but no doubts it provides NS workers with a legal basis for their labour relationship and therefore with social visibility, rights and protections – even if not as strong as those of standard workers.

Besides the purposes of numerical flexibility to meet a sudden rise of production or seasonal work, in the current field of labour there are many positions with little integration in the organizational structure and related to

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<sup>7</sup>“*Contratti di lavoro a tempo determinato*” are the oldest atypical contracts in Italian labour legislation (Gualmini 2000; Roccella 2005, pp. 132-148).

<sup>8</sup>See also Gallino (2007, pp. 42-44).

<sup>9</sup>We have argued that labour flexibility has been thrust by different interlinked factors, such as the postfordist transition and the development of the service sector, in an economic environment reshaped by globalization processes (Massa 2004).

activities lacking continuity within the process of production or service delivering. These activities are important with regard to the whole outcome but they must be carried out just by temporary workers. It is not possible for instance to require manufacturing companies to hire permanently merchandisers promoting their products in supermarkets over the weekend or market research companies to hire interviewers under open-end contracts. These positions can easily have a legal basis in the frame of law 196/1997 and law 30/2003. They must not be stabilized, also because workers themselves would not. Very often these activities take just a period of time within an individual's lifespan, as in the case of temporary working students, or they are undertaken to integrate the household income – typical is the case of married women with children. When these workers look for more security, they usually apply for different jobs.

The worst situation is that of positions performing continuous activities with full integration in the organization. In this case, workforce turnover is used (or even pushed) to replace standard workers, often with a remarkable seniority and therefore expensive for the employer, with fresh NS ones. Project workers, who are formally independent workers, have been sometimes proved to be in practice “camouflaged” subordinate employees. As it is evident, there is no project in “laying down bricks in lines” or in “answering phone calls in a call centre”. These atypical workers are not employed (just) to improve organizational flexibility but mainly to keep labour cost low, spoiling them at the same time of social rights and benefits. Companies can therefore rely on workers unlikely to ask for leaves, even sick leaves, and to join trade unions while more likely to take on heavy workloads under the Damoclean sword to have their contracts not renewed. Women can have their contracts not confirmed also because of pregnancy. NS workers can get to an open-end contract but only when they have proved to be resistant and to have understood and agreed the “rules of the game”.

### **3. From job security to sustainable career paths: how to get out of precarious employment**

The increasing diffusion of NS working relationships has forced workers to change their mind as well as social scientists to review analytical categories. People can change their occupational condition from employed to unemployed, and back again, many more times than in the past, while more often students are involved in odd jobs. Employed people are keener on looking for a better job, to improve their professional condition or to earn more money<sup>10</sup>. To understand transformations in the labour market and in work conditions, it is useful to turn the attention from single jobs to career paths (Magatti and Fullin 2002). We shall try to offer here some interpretations of such heterogeneous and uneven professional patterns.

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<sup>10</sup>See for instance Massa and Poli (2004).



It has been stressed in sociological literature that is currently very common to accept a job under NS contracts to enter the labour market, especially among young people. Once they are in, anyway, most atypical workers say that they are in such condition because they have not found a permanent position yet (Reyneri 2005, p. 96). It is therefore crucial to see which consequences this condition can have on the continuation of a career. To this purpose, we shall review the latest researches on this topic, taking into account that too few data are anyway available in Italy so that it is not possible to clearly identify which people are exposed to the highest risk to get entrapped in job insecurity and which are the characteristics allowing them to get to different outcomes (Fullin 2004, p. 18).

According to Istat, transition rates from fixed-term to permanent employment have increased between 1997 and 2000 from 31% to 39%, to go down to 34% in 2002 (Fullin 2004, p. 15). More recently, other data show that more than 60% of fixed-term jobs, 50% of co.co.co. and nearly 50% of other atypical forms of employment have turned into a (dependent or independent) permanent job, while 40% of fixed-term jobs, 50% of co.co.co. and 54% of other atypical forms of employment have remained in a NS occupational condition (Isfol 2006, p. 37).

Entering the labour market under NS contracts has been considered ambivalent with regard to further job positions. Among others, Barbieri and Scherer first reckoned that entering the labour market in atypical positions had no negative effects on job contents and on people's opportunities for career advancement (Barbieri 2002; Barbieri and Scherer 2004 and 2005, p. 300; Scherer 2004), then turned to a more pessimistic view. Data shown (Barbieri and Scherer 2005, p. 309) suggest that having had a previous atypical job experience has a strong negative effect on the probability to get to a permanent job, in Northern as well as in Southern Italy. On the contrary, Ichino, Mealli and Nannicini (2003), as quoted also by Fullin (2004, p. 17), make a positive evaluation of the effects of an atypical job experience on the probability to get to a permanent job.

It is therefore important to understand under which conditions people experiencing such NS works can find stability either getting permanent employment in a firm or facing successfully the market as independent professionals. For these purposes, many variables are considered relevant: the occupational status from which a NS labour contract is got; gender; age; education; proximity of atypical job to the workers' professional profile; time spent in a NSW condition.

It has been stressed as relevant by many authors how people get into the labour market. In particular, to have looked for and chosen a secure first job, after having evaluated all alternatives, is reckoned to be the best choice with regard to further professional and welfare opportunities (Barbieri and Scherer 2005). Having entered the labour market as a peripheral worker, on the contrary, reduces the probability to be employed when 35 years old. The study strongly emphasizes the importance of the availability of economic resources, in order to delay the access to labour market, waiting for a good job opportunity in the

primary one<sup>11</sup>. All in all, as it has been stressed, to get entrapped in the secondary labour market are always the same people who are already less privileged according to the classic dimensions (gender, social origins, education) of social stratification and inequality.

A successful alternative to starting a career under a standard contract is to spend just a short period as a NS worker, possibly occupying jobs close to his/her own professional profile. Therefore, young people starting to work with odd jobs, are not exposed to the risk of a blocked career on condition that the professional contents of their first formal job is in line with their education (Reyneri 2005, p. 141). Among temporary workers, the probability that an assignment turns into permanent employment is higher for the longer ones and for workers who have carried out few missions but not for those who have done many (Reyneri 2005, p. 110). As it has been metaphorically pointed out, if atypical work can be considered like a bus getting to an open-end labour contract, no doubts it is a bus from which get off as soon as possible, to catch the right train heading to primary labour market (Barbieri and Scherer 2005, p. 313). In practice, the best would be shifting to a permanent job from the very first atypical work experience<sup>12</sup>. To carry on such contracts means facing a very high risk of entrapment. With regard to age, the critical threshold seems to be placed at 35. After this stage, the probability to get entrapped in fixed-term work is very high as well, especially for female workers<sup>13</sup> and / or living in Southern Italy (Reyneri 2005, pp. 98-99).

Stabilization is even more difficult for those who get an atypical job coming from unemployment or informal work. Official data on workforce show that, among fixed-term workers, former unemployed are over-represented. As it has been pointed out, fixed-term working activities can make a break in unemployment and make it more acceptable in the long run. When they are over, anyway, workers can become unemployed once again. Only permanent jobs make possible to get out of unemployment but atypical activities, on the contrary, do not (Reyneri 2005, p. 97).

The level of education can play an ambivalent role. The cultural capital, on the one hand, is reckoned very important for career path orientation (Magatti and Fullin 2002, p. 188) but, on the other hand, the most educated young men and, notably, women are found to be the more exposed to the risk of working under atypical contracts (Schizzerotto 2002; Barbieri and Scherer 2004; Barbieri and Scherer 2005, p. 300). Moreover it has been stressed that a good professional qualification brings about job security, preventing workers to slip into secondary unprotected labour market more than a higher education title (Barbieri and Scherer 2005, p. 313).

To explain differences in stabilization patterns, it is finally important to consider the features of the economic context in which the worker is situated (Magatti and

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<sup>11</sup>See also Saraceno (2002, p. 225) and Schizzerotto (2002).

<sup>12</sup>This is usually the case of work-training contracts.

<sup>13</sup>Women coming back to the labour market are very easy to find an atypical job, even if often for lower positions, but their stabilization is very difficult. In general, women are at a risk higher than men to spend their whole career in secondary labour market.



Fullin 2002; Salmieri 2006). In a comparative analysis it has been found that NS workers in Central and Northern Italy have a probability to get to a permanent job higher than Southerners, even if this probability is decreasing as long as younger generations enter the labour market (Barbieri and Scherer 2005, pp. 311-313).

Career paths of NS workers are often fragmented, consisting of many different segments. They sometimes look like surfing from one job to another. They try for upward social mobility but in some cases the trend proves to be apparent and mobility just lateral (Sennett 1998).

Nevertheless, according to atypical workers' expectations and aims, two different patterns have been identified: transitional career paths and oriented career paths (Magatti and Fullin 2002). Those who have undertaken a transitional path are not satisfied with their current job and are searching a better and more secure new one. Oriented workers, on the contrary, appreciate their job, which is usually in line with their educational background. This is the reason why they took it on, even under NS contracts, in a trade-off of job security for satisfaction.

Evidence from the researches here discussed highlights that the Italian labour market is far from being completely deregulated and fragmented, even if there are reasons for concern. The area of NSW in Italy is by little smaller than the average of the EU countries, but it must be stressed that the shadow labour market is by far bigger. More than 3 millions people, close to 15% of official workforce, are estimated to moonlight (Reyneri 2005, p. 159).

NS workers are just a part of total employment but the real problem is their over-representation among entrants to the labour market, therefore among young people and women. It is not correct, in our opinion, to talk about a general precariousness of Italian workforce, as well as to define as a "precarious generation" the one entering the labour market since the Nineties. Quality jobs, as we consider those associated with all the characteristics of standard employment (Reyneri 2005, p. 84), still exist and are grabbed by the best and brightest youths, especially those well connected to central social networks.

The strongest feature of the younger component of labour supply, working under either standard or NS contracts, is not the fact to be all precarious as much as the fact to be all exposed to the potential risk of precariousness (Chicchi 2001).

The possibility to be not able to get a permanent and guaranteed job – or the possibility to lose it – can be defined as a risk, that according to sociological literature is an event or a situation which can bear negative consequences, something dangerous that is possible to run into even if it can be avoided as soon as it has not happened yet. Peculiar to contemporary risks is that they are socially generated but at the same time they are beyond social control. They are at the very core of what is described by Beck (1992) as a *risk society*, with reference to the environment but also to *the brave new world of work* (Beck 2000). As the Author argues, «In contrast to all earlier epochs (including industrial society), the risk society is characterized by a lack: the impossibility of an external attribution of hazards. In other words, risks depend on decisions, they are industrially produced and in this sense politically reflexive» (Beck 1992, p. 183). In Beck's theory, the modernization of tradition (classical modernization)

has been replaced by the modernization of industrial society (reflexive modernization). Reflexivity is a key concept in the theories of “postmodernity” or “late modernity”. It is defined by Giddens (1990) as the process whereby social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices. In broader terms, this implies that while modernity is the result of modernisation – most notably rationalisation – of traditional societies, reflexive modernity is the result of a process in which modern societies themselves are subject to the same ongoing process.

The impossibility to forecast with reasonable certainty future situations means therefore that the condition of atypical worker cannot be considered just as the linear consequence of a behaviour pattern but as a risk to which all prospective workers are exposed. In practice, in a different way from the fordist second postwar age (which anyway was a period of economic growth), in the current *age of uncertainty* (Bauman 2006; Treu 2006) top level educational credentials (Collins 1979) together with a persevering and adaptive attitude can be not enough to get a quality job for those entering the labour market. The role of the individual is still important but the environment in which he or she are making choices is characterized by high complexity and becomes very difficult to manage. At this stage, what really matters is the cultural, social and economic capital owned by individual subjects and their families. These resources, as we have seen, can make the difference in order to reduce the exposition to risks and to increase the possibility to get to a permanent and guaranteed job. The delivering of active labour policies to limit the consequences of a regulation relying just upon the market is considered opportune to avoid the reproduction and widening of social inequalities.

#### **4. Research hypothesis and methodology**

In this frame, two issues appear to be important for further investigation. First, the consequence of working under NSW contracts, while entering the labour market or along a career, on the probability to get to open-end employment. Second, the actual relevance of this kind of employment for young people. Given the features of both research objectives, we are set to achieve them using qualitative techniques. Here we discuss our methodological choice, summarizing the main aspects of the investigation process.

An innovative point of the research is that, instead of interviewing fixed-term workers as in most studies in this field, we turn to the career path of young people currently open-end employed. From the reconstruction of their career we would identify the most remarkable steps leading them to a secure professional position. It will be therefore possible to check whether they have had temporary work experience or not and how they succeeded in getting out of it.

A problem at the very core of the research is that the information we want to get from workers' experience is something related to their career, not just to their

current situation. It means that they have to look back to previous periods, even ten years back, and that careers can be very different from one to another. It is not easy to put such pieces of information into boxes of a standardized questionnaire.

In more details, the investigation focuses on two moments in a career which are considered crucial: the passage from education to work and the passage from NSW to permanent employment. In both situations it is important to understand how the change has been undertaken, which elements have had a positive or negative role in it, how it has been evaluated by the worker – currently and in that moment. Moreover, as we have assumed from the reviewed literature, the first remarkable work experience has relevant consequences on further career. Then it is important to understand very well which one has been considered remarkable by workers themselves, and not judged so by the interviewer.

Strictly connected with the previous is the second point. The debate on NSW aims mainly to find out solutions to take young people out of precariousness. It seems that the ultimate goal should be for everybody to get to an open-end labour contract. One objective of the research is also to understand what are the actual attitudes of young secure workers about their occupational status. For example, whether they consider it as a final or an intermediate goal and what is the trade-off for such stability in term of self-esteem and global satisfaction. To some extent, permanent employment itself can be seen as a further jumping board or as a trap for someone in his/her twenties.

These remarks, adding that there is not obviously a population available from which getting out a valid statistical sample, push us to adopt a qualitative approach to the research. In the empirical phase, at least 30 semistructured interviews (Corbetta 2003) will be carried out with young people living in the Genoese area, male and female, employed with permanent contracts and front-line positions in two service sectors: retail (small shops and large-scale retail trade) and financial services (mainly bank branches).

According to the epistemological basis of the qualitative approach, far from considering the correlations between variables in an explication process and from results generalization, the research is set to draw models of career paths from NS to permanent employment, with an ideal-typical value. Moreover, taking into account two service sectors will make possible a comparative analysis.

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### **Agostino Massa**

Ricercatore di sociologia  
Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali (DISPOS)  
Facoltà di Scienze Politiche, Università degli Studi di Genova  
Largo Zecca, 8/16  
16124 – Genova  
e-mail: agostino.massa @ unige.it