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Chapter 21. Re-skilling and inequalities of capabilities in France: how socio-economic groups matter

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Abstract

Re-skilling has become a central feature to making worker's career path more secure but also to responding to labour market shortages and supporting the green and digital transitions. However, the implementation of these policy lines raises delicate questions as to how the responsibility for reskilling should be shared. The capability approach is used here to raise critical issues about transformations of reskilling policies. Based on the French longitudinal quantitative survey DEFIS, the study shows that the implementation of these policy lines contributes to shape inequalities between social groups of the capability to attend reskilling programs and to secure their career paths: low-skilled workers have less capability for reskilling ensuing from the fact that they operate in more opaque environments, less benefit from ambitious reskilling schemes, and face fewer valuable achievements. What makes their pathway so difficult to achieve doesn't depend so much on their motivation or willpower.

1. Introduction

In France, the economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic vary from sector to sector: some jobs are at risk, while other so-called "potential growth" or "tight" sectors struggle to recruit, particularly in human services, digital, or ecological transition (Bouvard et al. 2021, Bignon & Garnier, 2020; Ducoudré et al. 2020). Although the French employment-relationship model is historically characterized by a high level of job security and the creation of internal markets (Piore, 1978), this is already not as obvious anymore (Marchand and Minni, 2019). Slowing economic growth has made companies' handling of temporary setbacks more unpredictable and has undermined the sustainable employment-relationship pattern. In addition, the traditional form of employment relationship has been disrupted by the various changes affecting work in general and notably industrial labour. As a result, the idea of being recruited into a large firm with long-term career prospects has, in part, been replaced by workers with temporary or multi-active contracts, or self-employment and sub-contracting, especially among low-skilled workers. In this context, reskilling policies have become one of the keys for making career path more secure and a central feature of contemporary activation policies targeting especially the low skilled. Reskilling entails acquiring new skills with the aim of changing jobs completely. The aim is no longer so much to improve skills for the current job as to completely transform professional skills for a new job. Clearly, this orientation is not specific to France. Since the European Skills Agenda adopted in 2016 and the Recovery Plan for Europe, the novel Skills Agenda intends to develop reskilling (European Commission, 2020).

The expectations raised by reskilling have never been higher. Reskilling is intended not only protecting employees' career path but also responding to labour market shortages and achieve full employment, supporting the green and digital transitions, giving employers good returns and to benefit the community by boosting overall competition. There are the key issues at stake in the implementation of the French Act of 5 September 2018 "for the Freedom to Choose One's Future Career" (Pour la liberté de choisir son avenir professionnel), the Skills Investment Plan in 2018 strengthened by the Recovery Plan in 2020. Thus, since the summer of 2020, reskilling programmes for labour shortage occupations or promising fields have been a major element of the efforts being made to rebuild following the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and to deal with the digital and ecological transformations. With a €15 billion endowment over five years, the French government has unlocked unprecedented resources through the skills Investment Plan. However, there is a strong ambivalence in these policies as they swing between a desire to leave room for individual freedom and a concern to steer reskilling programmes towards labour shortage occupations or occupations of the future. Obviously considerable uncertainties remain as to the room for manoeuvre individuals, particularly low-skilled workers, actually enjoy moving into new occupations and to benefit from such moves while they are being called on to become actors in their own working lives.

This chapter aims to clarify these policy lines and analyse to what extent reskilling schemes allow individuals, especially in low-skilled jobs, to enhance the real freedom to choose the life they have reason to value. As a theoretical framework, we will use Sen's capability approach (CA) for examining the ambiguous links between freedom and responsibility involved in the French reforms (Sen, 1999). The study is based on the French longitudinal quantitative survey DEFIS (Dispositif d'Enquêtes sur les Formations et les Itinéraires des Salariés) over the 2015-2019 period. It shows that the environment provided by institutions and companies shape inequalities between socio-economic groups. Low skilled workers have less capability for reskilling ensuing from the fact that they operate in more opaque environments, they request career change scheme just as much as other groups but benefit less from ambitious reskilling schemes and face fewer achievements. Now what makes their career path so difficult to achieve doesn't depend so much on their willpower. Our argumentation will develop along this chapter which is structured as follows. Section 2 briefly recalls the history of the 'French' re-skilling system, highlighting how it has gradually shifted the centre of gravity from collective to individual re-skilling rights. Section 3 deals with theoretical and methodological issues and presents the French survey DEFIS. Section 4 applies the CA to the critical notion of capability for re-skilling. Section 5 concludes.

2. Professional reskilling strategy in France

For more than 30 years, re-skilling policies have become a central feature of employment policies rooted in the logic of activation. Active programs often focus on the necessity to upgrade people's employability (Bonvin and Farvaque, 2005; Bonvin

and Orton, 2009), thereby considering skill improvement as the adequate tool to secure career path. The current theoretical framework for reskilling policies boils down to the idea of learning completely new skills to be able to switch into a new occupation. The rationale of such policies, conveyed by new instruments is to improve people's ability to integrate the labour market rather than to protect them from the market as it used to occur between 1950s and 1980s. This section provides an historical perspective and traces the facts leading to the emergence of the current reskilling policy.

2.1. 1950-1980: Collective leverage to handle large scale reskilling campaigns

Early professional reskilling initiatives were akin to a type of social response to layoffs aimed at humanizing or making termination of the employment contract more acceptable (Tuschszirer, 2005). They relied on collective leverage to manage large scale retraining programmes (Brochier, 2021). Firstly, they were tied to the "*Labour Re-deployment Fund*", introduced by the decree of 14 September 1954, the scope of which was limited to companies decentralizing from the Paris region, by means of financial support for training or rehabilitation undertaken by these companies in non-industrial areas. But it was in 1963 that the first major social difficulties appeared, the origin of which was not only related to a cyclical crisis but to the need to reorganize and modernize large French companies to enable them to compete internationally.

The government set up the National Employment Fund (FNE) in 1963, which mainly focused on implementing so-called passive measures. These included *special allowance arrangements* for certain categories of workers over the age of 60. A further step towards managing large scale reskilling was taken in 1977, with a financial incentive for workers accepting voluntary redundancy and an extension to the guarantee for employees who resigned. This measure ensured age schemes were incorporated into employment policies by institutionalizing the incentive for employees over 60 to be laid off. Resorting increasingly frequently to age measures was thus the means to reduce both the number of employees and the social conflicts resulting from corporate streamlining policies. Age measures were the most used of all FNE instruments until the mid-eighties (Hocquet, 1985). They ensured income (65% of the reference salary) for workers, over the age of 56 who were made redundant, until they could receive a full pension. The early 1980's saw a huge increase in both contractual and regulatory measures. In 1982, redundancy incentives represented 40 % of employment expenditure compared to 19 % in 1973 (Galland, Gaudin, Vrain, 1984). The processing of unemployment benefits was at its peak.

An incentive to withdraw from the labour market therefore clearly preceded the right to professional reskilling (Tuschszirer, 2005). The aim of the initial reskilling scheme, introduced by the law of 5 August 1985, was to undo this image of a redundancy plan involving applying the unemployment benefit concept in response to economic redundancies (Couturier, 1985). This was called *reskilling leave*. As part of redundancy rights, the reskilling leave meant employees laid off for economic reasons could benefit

from a period of outplacement assistance and *reskilling* programmes, irrespective of the sector of activity. Established by law or under the leadership of public authorities as early as the mid-1980s, public schemes in support of restructuring were proposed by companies in a voluntary or compulsory way when they intended to lay-off staff for economic reasons, or in anticipation of changes to the structure of their jobs. These reskilling schemes had a curative dimension in response to layoffs. However, individual Training Leave (Congé Individual de Formation, CIF) brought since 1971 a second route to reskilling, in a preventive and voluntary way. One advantage of CIF is that it gave individuals more freedom regarding their training aspiration and decision and made them less dependent of their employer. It enabled employees to undergo training of a maximum of one year to get a qualification, to reskill or to evolve. If the conditions were met (seniority and waiting period), the employer could not refuse the request.

2.2 1990-2020: Implementing individual empowerment policies

Having noted the adverse effects of restructuring for more than twenty years, the discussion between the social partners has highlighted the challenge of securing career paths and organizing professional reskilling in a new preventive way (CESE, 2007). The idea of taking responsibility and the right to individual initiative has gradually asserted itself. As a result, from 1990 onwards, given that a person will be made responsible for his or her own career path, new terms of retraining were created, separate from the law of economic redundancy. In 1991, this idea emerged by the introduction of the Skills Assessment (*Bilan de Compétences*). This scheme still assesses the vocational skills gained through experience. The rationale is that individual must be able to plough these skills back into other professional projects, in a circular way.

Subsequently, in 2003, the training system took another step in this new direction by formulating the explicit goal to make "every employee the main player in his/her career development" (Introduction shared by the 2003 and 2009 National Interprofessional Agreements) to model training programmes around changes in the employment scene, by establishing an Individual Right to Training (*Droit Individuel à la Formation*, DIF) that would promote the development of training programmes upon the initiative and under the responsibility of the individual (Merle and Lichtenberger, 2001). The DIF was unique in that it encouraged people to undertake training, giving the initiative to employees while requiring the employer's consent. The law of 24 November 2009 strengthened this scheme by creating the concept of DIF portability. When the employment contract was ended, portability gave employees the right to use their DIF, under certain conditions. It also set up a right to guidance and the concept of Public Guidance Service (SPO) as well as a provision to help job seekers Operationally Prepare for Employment (POE). It would enable them to acquire the skills they lacked in order to fill a job vacancy.

The law of 5 March 2014 paved the way for an “entrepreneurial” view of training and re-skilling, by generating the conditions to empower workers to manage their assets, careers and portfolio. The individual was, more than ever, called on to be "The main player in his/her professional development" (Article 5.1 of the law). The most significant contribution to achieving this objective appeared to be the Individual Training Account (*Compte Personnel de Formation, CPF*). Over and above their employment contract, individuals are afforded a right. It aims to "give each person the means to secure his/her career path". A second flagship measure is the free Vocational Guidance (*Conseil en Evolution Professionnelle, CEP*), whose role is to inform employees about the possibilities of career development and reskilling. Finally, the compulsory third measure involves the career interview, and is dedicated to reviewing employees' careers every two years.

Four years later, on the strength of even more assertive beliefs, lawmakers took the fundamental principle, that individuals would have the freedom to choose their professional future, even further. Centred around a completely new look CIF, CEP and a “marketized” CPF, employee-led schemes genuinely broke away from the past with the 2018 Act “for the Freedom to Choose One’s Future Career” (*Pour la liberté de choisir son avenir professionnel*). Firmly embedded in the skills rationale, individual-driven measures became levers in a new empowerment of employees, freed from their employers' requirements, and aiming for an inherent mobility of the flexicurity model¹. From “becoming the main player in your professional life” in 2014 to “being free to choose one’s professional future” in 2018, there is more than just a matter of technique. First, the law established the Vocational Transition Project (PTP), which corresponds to the former Individual Training Leave (CIF). But it would be a serious misjudgement to believe that the PTP can adequately replace the previous CIF. The shift from CIF to PTP was accompanied by a significant reduction in the budgets thereto allocated, from more than €1 billion to less than €500 million. Access is more restrictive as it aims to comply with labour market shortages rather than granting real freedom of choice. The creation of the PTP has not really reopened the possibilities offered by the CIF. Second, the CEP, considered as a real gateway to re-skilling projects, now guides individuals on career path according to a logic of adaptation to the labour market.

Re-skilling instruments have taken on new meaning in recent years. Previously considered as constraints and collective options, as they were primarily associated with industrial retraining, they are now promoted as a voluntary and individual project. Re-skilling programs were presented as a chosen act motivated by an individual project, which would be designed to anticipate future changes to one's own job and to set out a career path punctuated by adjustments needed to keep pace with the market. These

¹ The balance between flexibility and security on the labour market has since 2007 become a priority on the European Union's agenda. This agenda is pursued through the open method of coordination, whereby each country is responsible for determining how to implement the flexicurity model. However, security is viewed in terms of adaptation to labour market requirements rather than in terms of real freedom for workers has been discussed in several papers. Cf. Bonvin and Vielle (2008); Vero et al. (2012).

adjustments could ultimately result in training for new vocations for which workers were thereby held responsible. Promoting individual responsibility and freedom became one of the essential features of reskilling programmes. However, shifting responsibility from the collective context to the individual is an ambivalent development. The individuals' power to act is encouraged, but at the same time, the individual is held accountable, regardless of the structural constraints on them. Wanting to change jobs does not guarantee retraining, much less finding work. Empowering people depends as much on the rights assigned to them as the conditions for their effectiveness. This makes converting formal rights into genuinely real rights a key issue. In this way, being mindful of the capability for reskilling implies not only studying training rights and schemes, but also venturing away from the law and into the field where it is being implemented. It is therefore important to develop methods capable of assessing the scope of reskilling policies.

3. Using capabilities to question inequalities: theoretical and methodological issues

Identifying similarities and inequalities in the ability of social groups to reskill is the core of the research we present in this chapter. While research on inequality measurements has developed in different directions, Sen (1992, 1999) advocates a capability approach to measure inequality, on which we draw from now on. In what follows, we start by identifying the four components of capabilities to question “equality of what?” (Sen, 1992). We then describe our data and provide a description of different social groups to also question “equality of whom?” (Gasper, 2002, p. 451; Zimmermann, 2006).

3.1 Assessing reskilling using the capability approach

The CA is a major contribution to the theories of justice. It focuses on “*real freedom to lead the life people have reasons to value*” (Sen, 2009). It develops a demanding view of freedom, based on democratic participation, access to opportunities and the power to act. Capabilities are intended to give real content, beyond its formal aspects, in line with the idea of freedom. One of the characteristics of the approach is to be a turning point between a normative perspective, which renders the equal distribution of this freedom a principle of justice, and a descriptive perspective assessing the freedom to act, based on scrutiny of freedom according to several dimensions. We will use four dimensions to understand the capability for reskilling of employees (Subramanian and Zimmermann, 2017; Sigot and Vero 2017; Vero and Zimmermann 2018).

The first dimension refers to *aspirations*, which revolves around the diversity of objectives that human beings may pursue. Developing projects has become the heart of the economic and social organization of contemporary capitalist societies (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). Whether in the workplace or at the social welfare counter, people are expected to actively steer their lives and plan for the future. Goals and projects vary from one person to another, depending on their social origin and view of work. While

most activation policies tend to confine it to a capability that is equally distributed (as the objective is labour market integration), the CA takes a broad view that goes beyond employability (Zimmermann, 2022).

The second dimension, *process-freedom*, refers to processes that condition “exercising freedom of choice through action” (Sen, 2000, p. 32). Beyond rights, schemes and resources, or opportunities, processes allow people to determine what makes sense to them, to express themselves about what is of value in a given situation (Bonvin, 2008). Shaping aspirations is not a matter for individuals but for collective deliberation. Aspirations are not announced without deliberation but are rather developed and reviewed during this deliberation. This is why the information available to people about reskilling schemes or career interview can support process-freedom. It is essential to identify the players, practices and procedures involved in accessing information and opportunities, but also in choosing a training programme.

The third dimension involves *opportunity-freedom*, which raises the issue of the scope and quality of opportunities available to a person. It depends as much on resources and access to rights as on the ability to acquire them. The CIF for example is a resource available to an employee but having this formal right for reskilling is not enough to guarantee the capability for reskilling. This is one of the main contributions of the CA. People still must be able to transform this right into an achievement of value in their eyes. Several factors, called conversion factors, occur at this stage; they may be individual, cultural, organisational, or institutional. The opportunity-freedom then refers to the adjustment between resources and conversion factors and the resulting areas of possibilities.

Finally, the idea of *valued functioning* has been established as a fourth feature. In Sen’s mind, what good is the right to reskill if people are not able to make use of it in a way that makes sense to them? This idea of achieving valued functioning is central to understanding the concept of capability, but its heuristic power cannot be understood without the other complementary registers of aspirations, opportunities, and processes.

3. 2 Data

To assess the capability for reskilling of workers we used data gathered by Céreq and France Competences from the DEFIS survey. It is both linked and longitudinal in that it documents the characteristics of the workers and the workplaces in 2014-2015 and follows repeatedly workers every year from 2015 to 2019. The target population for the “workplace” component of the survey is defined as the collection of all French firms who employed three or more employees in December 2013 in all private sectors of the economy (excluding agriculture). For the “employee” component, the target population is the collection of all employees working in the workplace target population.

The sample for the workplaces comes from the “Business registry” of the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) which contains information on every business operating in France. Employees are then sampled from the employees list of the selected firms. For every workplace, a maximum of twelve employees are selected, and for firms with three employees, all employees are sampled. The firm questionnaire includes data from 4,500 companies and gather detailed information on the context in which employees undertake training (or do not). It provides a rich overview on human resources management, training policies, work organisation. From the employee questionnaire, we can investigate the dynamics of employees’ reskilling, employment, and career path in all their diversity. The sample includes 16,000 employees in 2015. Regardless of their pathway within or outside the original firm, they are tracked over a five-year period. The employee questionnaire includes detailed information about aspirations, workplace practices, reskilling opportunities and processes and any training undertaken or changes in their career path enabling us to assess achievement of employees’ aspirations over four years.

Inequality studies have been developed in two directions: some of them concentrate on individuals, whereas others focus on social groups. We consider here the second line of research and investigate the association between socioeconomic groups and capability for reskilling. Classifications play a remarkable role in economic and social statistics. It would be impossible to give an account of a perceptible reality that is too diverse to be directly observed, measured and understood without the use of classifications. The Professions and Socio-Professional Categories (PCS) are emblematic of the consideration given to statistical classifications in France. From the employee questionnaire, we can classify occupations in this classification. Employees are classified on the basis of the skill level of the job they hold: managerial and executive, intermediate profession (IPs), skilled white-collar (SWC), skilled blue-collar (SBC), low-skilled white-collar (LSWC) and low-skilled blue-collar (LSBC). The job skill level was recorded in 2015 at the time of the first wave when employees were voicing their career aspirations for the next five years. The occupation recorded at that time was categorised initially according to the French nomenclature of occupations developed by the French Institute of Statistics (*Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques*, INSEE). The distinction between low-skilled and white-collar is based on Chardon’s division (2002).

4. Results

Based on the theoretical framework proposed in the previous section, the next pages assess the reskilling practices against the capability framework and focus on four dimensions: aspirations, process-freedom, opportunity freedom and functioning’s. We give an empirical account of inequalities along these four dimensions and investigate the underlying conditions for the flourishing of capability for reskilling.

4.1 Aspirations for re-skilling: Reasons that differ according to social groups

Far from being pure result of a strictly rational calculation, what individuals aspire is the result of a social interaction that determines both what seems to them desirable and what it seems possible to achieve (Sen 1987b). While Appadurai (2004) invites us to view aspirations not just as individual but cultural productions, Sen's CA complements usefully this view by offering an agency-oriented approach. By relating the production of aspirations to the opportunities people have to achieve them, the capability to aspire (Lambert et al. 2012) strongly links projectivity to the scope of possibilities everyday life affords to people. The aim of this section is to study more specifically how socio-economic groups are projecting themselves.

In 2015, according to DEFIS, 33% of all employees wanted to reskill. Those in low-skilled jobs were the group most likely to be reskilling, with 39% of them seeking a move, compared with 32% of skilled blue- and white-collar employees and 29% of those in the intermediate professions and managerial positions. Given this empirical background, a research question arises as to which factors influence aspiration for reskilling. To address this question, three logit models have been used to investigate the relationship between aspirations of reskilling and explanatory variables at both workplaces and individual levels. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 –Aspiring to reskill within five years: results of three logistic regressions

When ...	LSBC-LSWC	SBC-SWC	Managers-IP
Professional dissatisfaction Overall, the employee claims to be dissatisfied with his or her employment status	↑ ***	↑ ***	↑ ***
Economic health of the company The employee states there is a redundancy plan in his or her firm The firm claims to have recently reached an agreement on training	↑ *** ↑ **	ns ns	ns ns
Job or salary insecurity The employee has two or more employers (multi-employer) The company announces a pay policy based on performance Seniority in the company at January 2014 The employee is on a temporary contract (vs permanent contract) The firm declares that it does not recruit on temporary contracts The part-time employee is selected (training, study, free time, The employee is part-time for health reasons (vs full-time) The employee is part-time as did not find full-time employment and other hinderance (vs full-time)	↑ ** ↑ *** ↓ *** ns ns ↓ ** ns ns	ns ns ns ↑ ** ↓ ** ns ↓ ** ns	ns ns ns ns ns ns ↓ ** ns
Feeling of downgrade The employee says that he/she is overeducated for the job The employee does not feel the pay is sufficient for the work done	ns ns	↑ *** ↑ ***	ns ns
Working conditions The employee says his/her working conditions are harsh The employee states that his/her work is not interesting The employee reports a health problem preventing him/her from holding some positions sustainably and performing certain tasks	↑ ** ↑ *** ns	↑ ** ns ↑ **	ns ↑ ** ns

The employee claims to always repeat the same gestures or	ns	↑**	ns
The company professes a tight (on demand) workflow organisation	ns	ns	↑***
The employee often proclaims being bored with his/her work	ns	↑**	↑**
The company discloses a task-rotation type organisation	ns	ns	↓**
The employee reports to fully use his or her skills	ns	ns	↓***
Personal-professional life relationship			
The employee states having difficulty reconciling personal and professional life	ns	↑***	↑***
Anticipation of a risk			
The employee believes there is a risk of job loss within the next 12	ns	ns	↑***
The employee claims that hi work environment was significantly modified by a change in the management team or hierarchy	ns	ns	↑**
Training policy			
The company did not provide any training between 2014-2015	↑***	ns	ns
The employee claims not to have had a career interview	ns	ns	↑**
Training policy directed toward external mobilities	ns	ns	↑**
Training policy steered toward flexibility and versatility	ns	ns	↓**
Individual characteristics			
Woman in a relationship (Ref: Man in a relationship)	ns	↓***	ns
Age	ns	↑***	↑***
Age squared	ns	↓***	↓***
Size and sectors			
The employee works in the hotel-catering industry	↑**	ns	ns
The employee works in construction	↑**	ns	ns
The employee works in financial, insurance, real estate activities	ns	ns	↑**
The employee works in a large company	ns	ns	↑***

Note: Only significant variables are reported. The non-significant variables include salary, highest degree obtained, company belonging to a group, employee's statement that restructuring has changed the environment, organisation of independent teamwork, quality-driven initiatives and purposes of the training policy, previous training experiences, market developments matching the company's main activity. **, *** indicate that the variable is significant at the 5% and 1% threshold respectively.

It appears that these aspirations reflect widespread dissatisfaction among workers with their employment situation. Although it is a decisive factor, this dissatisfaction does not have a single cause; on the contrary, it varies depending on socio-occupational group.

Low-skilled blue- and white-collar workers: when jobs are at stake. For workers employed in low-skilled jobs, aspiration for reskilling is usually forged when difficulties are encountered in the labour market, e.g., in the event of a massive upheaval caused by a social plan or redundancy programme or the experience of insecurity, particularly when it goes hand in hand with multiple jobs. It may also be expressed when the share of an employee's basic salary is based on performance. In this case, reskilling aspiration is more a matter of security linked to the current job and wage. In short, it is mainly when a job is at stake i.e., in a situation of constraint or defensive position. Employees are less likely to embark on a reskilling as a purely preventive measure or in response to merely deteriorating working conditions.

Skilled blue- and white-collar workers: when work and its recognition and organisation are at stake. For SBC and SWC, reskilling aspiration is less likely to erupt suddenly when their position is being jeopardized although reskilling aspiration

emerges out of a rejection of precarity and experience of fixed-term jobs. The motivations generally cluster around work itself and the recognition thereof: the impression of not being paid sufficiently well given the work they do or a feeling that they are overqualified for the jobs they are currently doing. The triggering events also usually have something to do with working conditions reminiscent of Tayloristic work practices: when employees carry out monotonous, repetitive tasks, have to work in arduous conditions or when they have a health problem that prevents them from accomplishing certain tasks on a long-term basis. And finally, another important motivation is being better able to reconcile work and personal life.

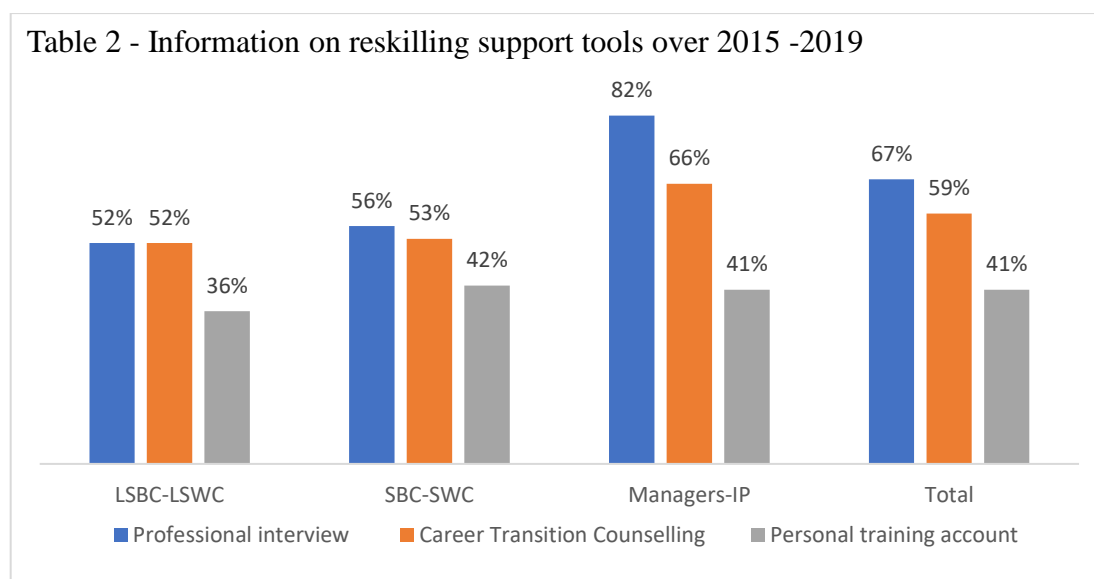
Managers and intermediate professionals: when what is at stake is an anticipated risk of job loss and a search for meaning. For managerial staff and IPs, reskilling aspiration emerges in a context again different. They are more aware of the changes taking place in their company that may appear to them as threats to their jobs and lead them to consider reskilling as a preventive measure. This is more likely to be the case when there is a change in the management team or when they anticipate risk of losing their jobs. The significant situations are also more likely to be connected to the work itself: to look for more interesting work, to work less frequently on a just-in-time basis or to stop their work conflicting with their personal lives. Reskilling aspiration have more to do with a search for a job and a life that have meaning.

4.2. Process-freedom: Low-skilled workers operate in more opaque environments

The scope of what employees perceive as possible is conditioned by the information available to them. However, the instruments supporting reskilling appear to the employees in very different ways. Low skilled workers are less knowledgeable. While an average of 67% said they had had a career interview between 2015 and 2019, this was true for only 52% of the lowest-skilled, compared with 82% of managers and IPs. The career interview is, however, a mandatory appointment between the employee and the employer, which is to play a decisive role in career paths. It is intended to map out employees' career prospects and any related training and reskilling opportunities. This is the instance where employees are informed about being able to take advantage of Vocational Guidance (CEP) and the rights acquired in their CPF. But the opportunities to gain information are limited to interviews mainly reserved for qualified employees.

While access to career interview shows disparity over socio-professional groups, the information available to low-skilled workers about CEP and CPF proved to be lacking. In fact, between 2015 and 2019, they are less likely to be aware of their entitlement about the CPF or CEP (Table 2). The least skilled move in more opaque circles. Businesses have a crucial responsibility that is not always fulfilled. Entitlements form the basis of the capability set, but they are not enough to ensure the development of capabilities. Process-freedom entails the active participation of all partners involved. This implies that employers actually take part in the implementing processes supporting reskilling for all employees. In the absence of such a capability-friendly environment,

reskilling instruments are nothing but a formal right. The conversion of all formal rights into real rights is a sine qua non condition of capability-friendly reskilling policies.

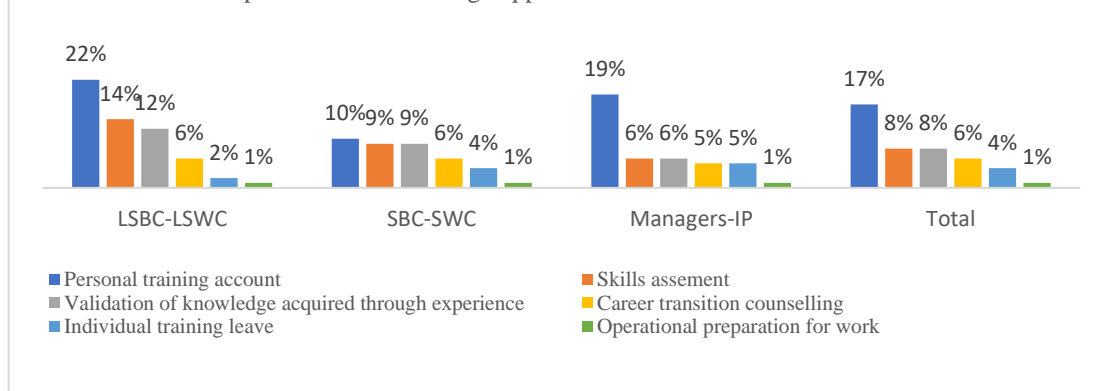


Source : France compétences-Céreq, DEFIS. Scope: all employees

4.3. Opportunity-freedom: Low-skilled workers request career change schemes just as much

On the other hand, reskilling opportunities also matter, and the content of the capability set very much depends on the value of each of its set. The opportunity set must be as inclusive and as attractive as possible. Capability for reskilling cannot be reduced to a restricted view of short-term training, especially for low-skilled workers. There are various instruments available for those seeking to reskill: Career transition counselling (CEP), validation of the Acquisition of Experience (VAE), or skills assessments are part of the arsenal of measures. Although such instruments remain relatively unused, low-skilled workers are no less likely to take advantage of them. Between 2015 and 2019, 6% of them sought CEP, 14% undertook a personal skills assessment and 12% opted for VAE (Table 3). Between 2015 and 2019, it is even the low-skilled categories that made greatest use of personal training accounts (CPF), at a rate of 22% compared with 10% for skilled blue- and white-collar employees. However, it is a modest instrument for embarking on a reskilling without additional resources.

Table 3: The use of professional reskilling support between 2015 and 2019



Source: France compétences-Céreq, DEFIS. **Scope:** all employees.

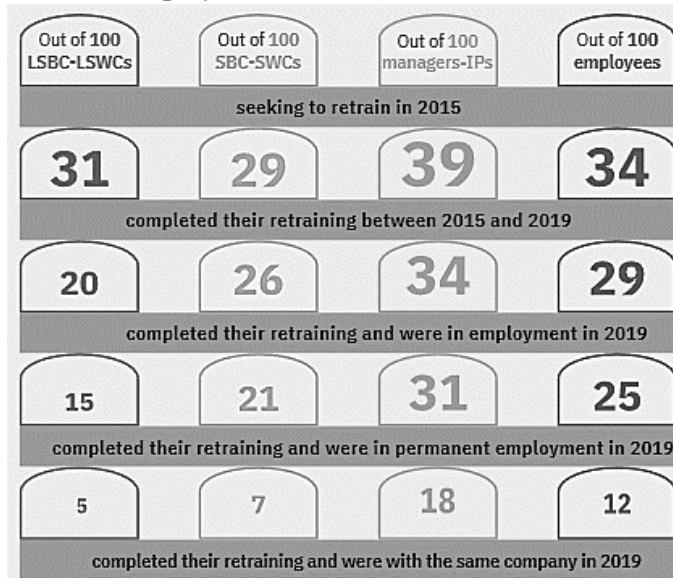
Whereas CPF tend to be used to finance short training courses, this tendency is reversed with the CIF, which is the cornerstone of an approach that links training, promotion, and social mobility. This latter enables employees to undertake a reskilling of their own choice in working hours while retaining their job and their pay for a period of one year. However, only 2% of low-skilled workers have taken advantage of this arrangement while it is intended to play a central role.

4.4. Achievements: Disparities between socio-professional groups

Opportunity and process aspects of capability are not enough, capability implies freedom to accomplish, i.e., also the power to achieve. We aim here to go a step further toward a capability assessment and study reskilling outcomes exploring the temporal dynamics of career paths. We put forward an analysis related not only to capability for reskilling but also including capability for work and shed light on career change from aspirations to labour market outcomes.

To what extent do workers from low-skilled jobs have the capability to fulfil a career change project? There is a long way still to go before reskilling policies contributes to this goal. It was employees in low-skilled jobs who were most eager to retrain but they were also the ones who were most likely to fail in this endeavour. For them, a change of occupation is less likely to go hand in hand with access to employment, particularly stable employment, and is usually achieved through external mobility. The highest reskilling success rates are observed among employees in highly skilled jobs, although the differences between the categories remain relatively small: between 2015 and 2019, 39% of skilled-workers wishing to reskill did so successfully, compared with 29% of intermediate-skilled workers and 31% of low-skilled workers (Table 4).

Table 4: Employees' reskilling achievements between 2015 and 2019



Source: France compétences-Céreq, DEFIS 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019. **Scope:** all employees who have reskill aspiration in 2015 (excluding retirees).

On the other hand, at the end of a reskilling programme, a key question remains, namely that of the return to employment. This is an issue where the inequalities are even more pronounced: in 2019, scarcely one low-skilled worker in five seeking to reskill completed their reskilling and was in a job, compared with one intermediate-skilled workers in four and one skilled-workers in three. Access to stable employment is even more selective and unequal. Low-skilled workers are only half as likely as managers to complete a retraining programme and be in permanent employment in 2019. Furthermore, skilled-workers are more likely to move jobs internally: 18% of those who wished to reskill in 2015 did so internally over the period, compared with just 7% of intermediate-skilled workers and 5% of low-skilled workers. The latter category is 3.5 times less likely to complete an internal retraining programme than skilled workers. External mobility is their principal mode of reskilling when they succeed in doing so.

5. Conclusion

Our empirical study into reskilling capabilities shows that socio-economic group plays a decisive role in unequal powers to convert aspiration into functioning's. Freedom does not pertain exclusively to individual action but is also dependent on the collective frameworks that shape and allow such action. Yet, this collective framework contributes to shape inequalities between social groups to the capability of the latter to attend reskilling programs and secure their career paths: low-skilled workers have less capability for reskilling ensuing from the fact that they operate in more opaque environments, less benefit from ambitious reskilling schemes, and they face fewer valuable achievements. What makes their pathway so difficult to achieve doesn't depend so much on their motivation or willpower.

The findings call into question the opportunities and room for manoeuvre low-skilled workers enjoy when it comes to professional retraining. They echo the Conseil Economique et Environnemental, CESE (2021) finding of unequal access to long professional retraining programmes and point to some possible solutions, through a strengthening of actual rights to ambitious training programmes designed as preventive measures. If every worker is being called on to become “*an actor in their own professional development*” and to shoulder the responsibility for it, this will require them to have at their disposal the means to assume such a responsibility. In parallel, the question arises of the return to employment. While recruitment is becoming increasingly difficult, many workers are not managing to find a job on completion of their reskilling. It is just as essential to put in place an ambitious reskilling policy as it is to promote the creation of quality jobs to take up the challenge of unemployment among the low-skilled. The current crisis may call for more ambitious management of professional transitions, especially for the least skilled workers.

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