

## 4. Leonardo da Vinci's spirit: a career story of an Italian creative entrepreneur

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### SETTING THE SCENE

Elena Dominique Midolo, born in 1977, has dreamed of a career in academia since her childhood. She pursued her dream with passion and perseverance, earning a *magna cum laude* in Foreign Languages and Literature (2001), with a specialization in Cultural Studies, and a PhD in Sociology (2007) at the Catholic University of Milan, Italy. As a PhD student, she participated in international research projects, authored several articles and two books, taught in different courses, and moved temporarily to the United Kingdom to conduct field research for her doctoral thesis at the Goldsmiths' College Centre for Cultural Studies. She worked hard because she believed that to climb the traditional ladder in academia she had to prove her dedication and intellectual ability. Over the years, she has managed to combine scientific rigor with her distinctive skills and attitudes, including innovation and eclectic and interdisciplinary approaches, as well as her entrepreneurship spirit. In spite of her efforts and results, gradually, her idealized image as a free and innovative thinker started to falter. Throughout her career, she faced the bureaucratic burden of a regulated profession and the challenges of a work environment which rarely rewarded individual initiative and merit. As she experienced in 2008, the organizational politics surrounding academia are of utmost importance. Her involvement in an important international research project, to which she dedicated several months of effort, risked disappearing because of the minimal interest of some senior scholars she was working with. It served as a "wake-up call" to refocus her efforts dedicated to an academic career and devote her passion to something else.

The same year, her brother, Claudio Midolo, a designer, video maker, and tech enthusiast, married Clio Zammatteo, a young YouTube creator, who developed a strong interest in makeup tutorial videos. Meeting Clio repre-

sented a life-changing event for Elena. Due to her academic background in sociology of culture and new media, she immediately recognized Clio's potential: her innovative, unique communication style combined with her impressive skills and extensive knowledge as a makeup artist. In 2008, after Claudio and Clio cofounded the YouTube channel "ClioMakeUp," Elena started to manage Clio's business, initially informally and then through a formal agreement. Since then, the three began to have a shared career, as Clio became the face and the art director of the brand, Claudio its chief technical officer, and Elena its general manager. Their collaboration has led to three different beauty businesses throughout the years, allowing Elena to evolve toward a career matching her goals and interests.

## CONTEXTUALIZING

Italy has many contradictory institutional systems in place. The two most relevant systems are, on the one hand, the industrial system, characterized by efficient and innovative small businesses, and on the other, the large public sector, characterized by poor efficiency, bureaucracy, non-meritocratic policies, and a high rate of absenteeism.

Italy's diversified industrial economy is the eighth largest in the world (seventh prior to Covid-19). Entrepreneurship and creativity are the two important characteristics of the Italian industrial system that distinguish it from the system in many other countries: Valentino Garavani, Domencio Dolce and Stefano Gabbana, and Giorgio Armani in the fashion industry; Enzo Ferrari, Giorgetto Giugiaro, and Antonio Ducati in the automotive industry; and Pietro Ferrero and Massimo Bottura in the food industry are just a few examples of creative individuals who converted their passion into an entrepreneurial career. According to International Labour Organization data for 2020, entrepreneurs make up approximately 6 percent of the Italian labor force (even though this percentage has been declining over the last decade), placing Italy among the top ten countries for entrepreneurial activity.

Italy's second institutional system is its vast public administration sector, which employed over 3.5 million long-term employees in the first decade of the 2000s, roughly half of them in local bodies and organizations and half in the centralized bodies (Corazziari, 2007), with the number gradually decreasing to 3.2 million in 2020 due to retirements.

The public sector in Italy began to expand after World War II. Amintore Fanfani, one of the fathers of the Italian Republic and one of the most prominent politicians in the Christian Democratic Party, played a critical role in this expansion and in the development of a culture far removed from one of "public service and interest" (Samuels, 2003). As a result of this system, Italian public administration has been characterized by low productivity, a non-meritocratic

culture, and a high rate of absenteeism (Ichino, 2008). In the 1990s, the global phenomenon of public management reforms reached Italy too, but “resulted in an ‘implementation gap’: it appears that there is a certain gap between the contents of the reform laws and the actual diffusion of the corresponding management tools; and an even greater gap between the mere presence and the actual utilization of the management tools” (Ongaro and Valotti, 2008, p. 174).

The Italian state university system, which incorporates most of Italy’s universities, is completely integrated into the public administration sector and the malfunctioning of the system reflects the malfunctioning of the public administration sector, regardless of the legislative attempts to change the recruitment or incentive systems. Academic careers in Italy are characterized by a series of promotions (strictly intended as upward movement) within a very traditional professional hierarchy. Since 1980, the Italian academic career path has had three stages: researcher, associate professor, and full-time professor. All formal roles are tenured in the Italian academy. Promotion to each stage requires the approval of would-be peers, following a formal process as stated by law. Various reforms have affected the nature of this process but left substantially untouched the idea of a formal evaluation, which is referred to as “*concorso*” (“contest”).

Embedded in this contradictory context, Elena started her career in the academic system equipped with skills such as pragmatism and creativity and an entrepreneurial spirit that she soon realized she could not fully utilize or express in that system. Additionally, she conducted research mainly overseas and taught frontier and new topics such as new media and digital and popular culture, pioneering an area that was not immediately recognized by the Italian academia.

It was necessary for her to make a decision. Should she remain stuck in the system, watching her dreams slowly fade away, or should she move out from a structured yet uncertain system and venture into a completely new one?

The details of this career change and venture will be revealed in the following section. Besides the content, there are two main theoretical reasons for reading through it: 1) to understand the agentic role of individuals in shaping their careers and 2) to understand how the transition from an individual career to a shared career can be made.

## THE STORY

Elena Dominique Midolo graduated from the Catholic University of Milan in 2001 with a degree in Foreign Languages and Literature (English and German). Thereafter, she worked as a market research analyst in London for some time. She began working as a teaching assistant in several courses at the Catholic University of Milan in 2003, before being accepted with a scholarship, in 2004,

as a PhD student in Sociology at the same university. While earning her PhD she worked toward realizing her childhood dream, as she vividly expressed in interviews: “*I always dreamed of having a university career since childhood.*”

She developed her skills as a researcher and teacher, and identified a topic for developing her own research path, namely *Popular Music Studies*: music as an expression of youth cultures in multiethnic contexts. As a means of attaining a deeper understanding of the topic, she first moved to Newcastle upon Tyne, studying at Northumbria University, and then to London, to study at the prestigious Centre for Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths’ College, where she had the opportunity to network with senior scholars with similar research interests. However, some senior Italian professors did not acknowledge her potential and considered her research topic as “*totally irrelevant.*” Their attitude did not discourage Elena, who persisted in her efforts and, to demonstrate her abilities, built relationships with other international universities so that her university could participate in international research bids. Despite her considerable efforts – contributing to the writing of the project, developing international relationships, and drafting the budget – the seniors she worked with in Italy did not fully engage in the project. Such an episode served as a “*wake-up call*” for her.

The working conditions and opportunities in academia were beyond my control. It was possible to reach a certain point with my strengths and my skills, but the many factors I could not control worried me a lot.

Furthermore, Elena felt her perspective did not align with the common attitude in academia that disregards the economic dimensions of research.

I consider being a university professor as any other profession, and believe that every profession should be properly rewarded. I appreciate the so-called Protestant work ethic: if things are going well financially, it is a blessing. It signifies that your work is being recognized. On the contrary, at that point in Italy and in the environment I was working in, fundraising activities were not valued: the general approach can be described with the Latin expression “*pecunia olet.*”

In general, Elena felt she would be defined by her research interests and placed into the “*not so relevant*” category. She also felt that her work was not valued enough and that the “*dysfunctional*” organizational micro-politics would hinder her overall career progression. More than once, she got the impression that other mechanisms were advancing others over her, and that her merits, initiatives, and qualifications would not suffice, thus decreasing her willingness to dedicate herself to such an environment.

After the difficulties encountered with the participation in the international research bid described above, she began to question her desire to pursue a career in academia.

In the same way that a player has a limited number of chips in hand and must decide where they should be placed, I realized that the particular table would not provide me with what I had in mind. (...) I felt like a lobster at that point: the carapace was too tight for me, and it was time to change it.

The opportunity for a career transition emerged from her personal life, during the preparations for her wedding in June 2008. Since she wanted everything to be perfect, she scouted out many makeup artists, looking for the best. The most suitable makeup was provided to her by her own sister-in-law, Clio. She trusted her, and it was a success.

All the female guests at my wedding expressed great interest in my make-up: they were enthusiastic about it and said I looked like a red-carpet diva.

Clio Zammatteo, Elena's sister-in-law, moved to New York immediately after her graduation along with Claudio, Elena's brother. In the beginning, Clio worked casual jobs to pay the rent and attended a professional school for makeup artists, while Claudio started working as a game designer for New York's "Institute of Play." Clio was passionate about makeup and new media, and the praises she received during Elena's wedding inspired her to pursue her dream of working as a makeup artist. Claudio convinced her to create her first YouTube video in 2008 and thus "ClioMakeUp" was founded. In her first contribution, Clio expressed her desire to publish DIY tutorials, sharing with others online what she was learning at the prestigious school for makeup artistry that she was attending in New York City. YouTube was born in 2005, when content creation was still in its infancy: users were sharing funny or amateur music videos. In 2008, recording and publishing tutorials in Italian, even if with a basic editorial plan, was considered very innovative and cutting edge. It was a huge success for Clio. Starting her own business as a content creator and independent video publisher, Clio sought advice from Elena regarding strategic issues.

As a result of my academic background, she felt comfortable and secure, and, consequently, we developed a relationship of mutual trust.

At the beginning of 2009, Clio began receiving numerous requests for collaborations from different makeup brands due to the success of her tutorials.

Clio, inexperienced and concerned, sought the assistance of Elena to deal with clients and her growing business.

During that time, Clio granted me access to her e-mail account. I continued to conduct research at the university during the day, while at night I worked a second shift answering fans and companies on Clio's behalf.

This informal collaboration, which was not regulated by any written agreement, lasted for several years. Elena did not receive any monetary compensation in the beginning, but she was motivated by their common "*passion*." As Clio's business prospered, she published two makeup manuals (*Clio Make-Up: La scuola di trucco della regina del web* and *Clio Make-Up Beauty Care*) with a major Italian publisher, worked with all the major cosmetic and beauty brands – from Vogue to L'Oréal, from Pierre Fabre to Estee Lauder, from Dior to Coty – and became a celebrity. In February 2012, Elena discontinued her research activities at the university, while continuing to teach. She and Clio decided to sign a formal agreement to regulate their partnership. According to that contract, Elena would manage Clio's relationship with clients and the media, as well as collaborate with her brother Claudio in guiding the operational and strategic development of Clio's commercial and business activities. Elena understood their respective roles in the business relationship from the very beginning.

As the artist, Clio must only be concerned with the content, without any worries. My role is to create the best business and organizational environment and conditions to allow Clio to work with freedom, autonomy and independence.

Initially, she was not driven by a clear business plan, but rather by her "*gut feeling*" as an entrepreneur. Meanwhile, Clio's business, powered by Claudio and now managed by Elena, was rapidly growing. By 2013, Clio had hosted three daily television shows on Real Time, an Italian television channel owned by Discovery Networks Europe. Ultimately, to structure the activities and businesses arising from this show as well as to protect Clio's image rights, it was decided to establish their first company in 2013.

The company's name was inspired by an impregnable castle. We created the company to safeguard Clio's interests and work: we wanted to ensure that she would never feel at risk.

Elena was the majority shareholder (with 99 percent of the shares) and CEO of the company, responsible for the success or failure of the business activity Clio and Claudio assigned to her. Her management style was particularly cautious and strongly affected by an "adverse event that threatened the survival of the

business itself.” Following that negative event, she built a network of external consultants, “*the best in every area of the business.*”

One year later, in 2014, a second company was founded to manage the digital content for the ClioMakeUp editorial department. Over the past couple of years, Elena and Claudio have worked tirelessly to develop a blog where Clio could express herself. They followed a reverse development path, moving from the production of videos (YouTube) to writing (blog) content, whereas many influencers start their activity writing simple texts and only eventually publishing videos on social media platforms. As a result of the creation of the blog, they had to initiate two major changes in the business: an increase in the company’s size to hire editorial staff to support Clio in writing the blog, as well as a diversification into a digital business as the blog was published on a proprietary platform.

*Table 4.1 Company’s figures (2018–2021)*

| Company activity                     | Clio image rights protection  | Public relations and digital content activities | Cosmetics production |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|----------------------|
| Foundation year                      | 2013  | 2014  | 2016                 |
| Revenues – 2020 (€)                  | N/A   | 1,004,479                                       | 7,268,446            |
| Revenues – 2019 (€)                  | 379,744   | 617,544   | 6,752,596            |
| Revenues – 2018 (€)                  | 555,876   | 670,626   | 3,837,489            |
| Employees – 2020                     | N/A   | 4   | 14                   |
| Employees – 2019                     | 1   | 3   | 11                   |
| Employees – 2018                     | 0   | 2   | 5                    |
|                                      | <b>ClioMakeUp Blog</b>  |   |                      |
|                                      | 5.2 million users/month; 19.2 million page views/month                  |   |                      |
|                                      | <b>Facebook</b>   |   |                      |
|                                      | 2.6 million followers   |   |                      |
|                                      | <b>Instagram</b>  |   |                      |
| Other business info (September 2021) | 3.1 million followers   |   |                      |
|                                      | <b>Instagram stories @cliomakeup</b>                                    |   |                      |
|                                      | 500k views/story  |   |                      |
|                                      | <b>YouTube</b>  |   |                      |
|                                      | 4 million views/month; 350 million total views; 1.6 million subscribers |   |                      |
|                                      | <b>Pinterest</b>  |   |                      |
|                                      | 110.9k followers  |   |                      |

The last company was founded in 2016 and specializes in the production of cosmetics products under the ClioMakeUp brand (Table 4.1). In April 2017, Claudio launched a proprietary e-commerce website (ClioMakeUpShop), which he developed using an innovative platform for the Italian market

(Shopify), to commercialize their products. On the same day they opened their virtual shop, all the products were sold out.

Elena faced several difficulties in her entrepreneurial career. For example, the cosmetics company was experiencing difficulties (delayed delivery times) with its suppliers regarding the production of lipsticks in 2017. Consequently, the newly founded company decided to transform this liability into a business opportunity by opening a temporary store – “gelateria” style – where they created lipsticks on-demand. This event prompted Elena to open a plant in 2018, supervising its industrial design with Claudio in order to increase their “*independence from the suppliers and control the entire production of the most important products.*” Recently, Elena has been struggling with managing the increasing number of employees joining the companies, the typical “*people management*” dilemma. Hence, managers (e.g., a human resource manager) have been hired, whose goal is to help the brand grow harmoniously. The road ahead is open; the future is as bright and colorful as makeup can be!

## REFLECTIONS

Elena’s career is characterized by two major theoretical themes: a continuous struggle between individual agency and institutional (organizational and business) structure, and a transition from an individual career to a shared one.

As far as the relationship between *individual agency and institutional structure* is concerned, career literature (Duberley et al., 2006; Schneidhofer et al., 2020) has explored its dualistic character to understand how individuals make sense of their careers and utilize them in a variety of settings. Exploring career transitions and mobility (Forrier et al., 2009), scholars focus on how social structures and material conditions determine the extent to which individuals are free to act according to their desires and aspirations. In this instance, normative constraints (McRae, 2003) – the set of cultural and social expectations that we place on ourselves and others – appear particularly relevant in the early stages of Elena’s career. As a young researcher in Italian academia, Elena demonstrated her agentic attitude by proposing innovative research topics and joining international research networks. However, a perceived lack of meritocracy, a lack of interest in interdisciplinary topics, and the bureaucratic academic structure hindered her desire to pursue a career in academia. During the later stages of Elena’s career, she operated as an entrepreneur in the beauty business; structural constraints – the set of institutional conditions related to the economic and social environment – conditioned her career. The presence of big competitors in the cosmetics industry and of aggressive venture capitalists more interested in financial returns than in the development of a nascent business forced Elena to make career decisions (e.g., establishing three compa-



nies) aimed at protecting Clio's creativity, innovativeness, and independence and interests.

Elena's agentic approach was forged by normative and structural constraints throughout her entire career: a general skepticism regarding her research interests, the international bid whose potential was not appreciated, delays in the delivering of materials, and difficulties in managing employees. By overcoming such adversities Elena demonstrated her *career resilience*, defined as "a developmental process of persisting, adapting, and/or flourishing in one's career despite challenges, changing events, and disruptions over time" (Mishra and McDonald, 2017, p. 216). By reacting to crisis, Elena not only learned how to face similar challenges in the future, but also, based on a *career capital* perspective that differentiates between knowing-why, knowing-how, and knowing-whom (Arthur et al., 1995; DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994), clarified her knowing-why in terms of career motivation and identification of the fit between one's professional identity and choices made in relation to tasks, projects, and organizations.

The second theoretical theme is that Elena's career has been characterized by a twofold career transition (Chudzikowski, 2012): from a public administration professional to an entrepreneur in the beauty industry, and from an individual career to a shared one. During her transition from a professional (researcher and teacher) in public administration to an entrepreneur, Elena leveraged the second dimension of her career capital, namely the knowing-how, which is defined as the job-related skills and expertise that one accumulates over time and that can transfer across organizational boundaries. In particular, her knowledge of new media and of the creative and cultural industry was beneficial not only in recognizing Clio's potential, but also in orienting and negotiating important business decisions (e.g., the decision to develop a blog, television shows, a cosmetic line, to name a few). Having such expertise formed the basis of Clio's trust in Elena, and was therefore one of the determining factors in transforming Elena's, Clio's, and Claudio's individual careers into a *shared one* (Svejenova et al., 2010). The term "shared career" refers to a collaboration between two or more individuals who jointly pursued career opportunities. These collective responses reflect common goals and mutual accountability, as individuals in shared careers identify, define, and modify some of their career goals together. Ultimately, though, while individual motivations do play a role in a shared career, the relationship itself is the principal career anchor. The second part of Elena's career is shared with Clio, Clio being the artist and Elena acting as her manager who, in this particular case, created a series of business ventures for protecting and developing the creative skills of her counterpart. At the foundation of Elena, Clio, and Claudio's shared career lies their mutual trust, both on a personal and a professional level. Their relationship extends beyond work collaboration

and is fundamentally embedded in their family connection, which is featured on screen in an original docuseries produced by Discovery Channel. While this deep personal connection may become a liability in cases of business decisions with potentially negative externalities on their personal relationship, as demonstrated by many failed Italian family businesses, on the contrary, it could represent a potential advantage in comparison with common artist–agent relationships focused solely on economic gains.

#### BOX 4.1 STOP AND THINK

1. Would there be a ClioMakeUp company without Elena Midolo?
2. How did Elena demonstrate her agentic attitude to pursue her career? What role does an agentic attitude play in shaping a career in general?
3. What skills and knowledge has Elena gained during her career transition?
4. How could you leverage your skills in order to change your career?
5. What are the contextual conditions that favor (or hinder) the development of an entrepreneurial career?
6. Does the country you live in encourage entrepreneurial careers?

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