Reorienting: Career to “Protean Career” in a Boundaryless World

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Abstract

Change has always been with us, but it seems that the pace of change is accelerating. The need for organisations to be lean and flexible in the current competitive environment has made it difficult for them to provide traditional job security to its employees. This has led to a change in the psychological contract. Employability is being considered a substitute for job security. Although references to the changing nature of management have pointed to rather substantial if not revolutionary transformations in both the content and process of managerial work, it is difficult to find shifts of comparable dimensions in the theoretical frameworks which are utilized to investigate and analyze managerial career patterns. This article describes an urgent need for interdisciplinary careers research in the emerging global knowledge economy.

Keywords: Organisations, competitive environment, psychological contract, employability, knowledge economy.

INTRODUCTION

The word 'boundaryless' was introduced to management studies by Jack Welch, CEO of General Electric, whose endorsement of 'the boundaryless organization' (Ashkenas, Ulrich, Jick & Kerr, 1995) was borrowed by the organizers of the 1993 meeting of the Academy of Management in Atlanta as its conference theme. Prompted by the theme, Robert deFillippi and Michael Arthur presented a symposium entitled 'The boundaryless career', which was then developed into a Special Issue of the Journal of Organizational Behavior (Arthur, 1994) and later extended into the edited book (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). As Sullivan has noted, 'the term “boundaryless career” is really a misnomer, as systems need boundaries to define themselves' (1999, p. 477). In practice, 'boundaryless career' denotes not a boundary-less career but a boundary-crossing career (Inkson, 2006; Zeitz, Blau & Fertig, 2009). The notion that a career can be boundaryless potentially trivializes boundaries, even though they are often important means of defining and understanding careers (Gunz, Peiperl & Tzabbar, 2007).

Literature Review

Career Success

The word “Career” is both a descriptive and evaluative term (Super 1980). Career success has been defined as the accumulation and psychological outcomes that result from one's work performance (Callanan, 2003). Individual's career success is a set of desired outcomes, and these outcomes vary between men and women (Baruch, 2004). Ng et al. (2005) mention that there are two mobility perspectives to career success: (i) The contest mobility perspective (ii) The sponsored mobility perspective. The supervisors are responsible for providing support and guidance to individuals in their careers who have a potential to excel (Restubog, Bordia & Bordia, 2011). Ballout (2008) states two broad factors explain the phenomenon of career success: (i) individual level experiences and (ii) organizational level experiences. Individuals want to feel successful with regards to their career aspirations, values and

achievements; and this is why organizations conduct employee satisfaction surveys (Gattiker & Larwood, 1986). Heslin (2003) purports that there are two ways in which subjective career success can be evaluated: (i) self-referent and (ii) other-referent. In self-referent subjective success, an individual compares against his own career relative to personal standards and aspirations. Career aspirations are significantly tied with the subjective career success (Rasdi, Ismail, Uli & Noah, 2009). A positive relationship between individual career aspirations and career success for men is found to exist, but not necessarily for their women counterparts (Dolan, Bejarano & Tzafirir, 2011). Men and women may differ in their expectation of work and achievements and women may define success on a different note (Dann, 1995). Subjective success is said to be the main aim of working life (Abele, Spurk & Volmer, 2011). The success of an individual in his or her career is said to bring an overwhelming feeling of not only achievement but also satisfaction (Akhtar, 2010). Extrinsic career success is linked to General Mental Ability (Judge, Klinger & Simon, 2010). Similarly mentoring is found to predict promotions and turnover intentions (Singh, Ragins & Tharenou, 2009). Hay & Hodgkinson (2006) purport in their study that students with Masters in Business Administration take career success more in terms of external criteria i.e., hierarchy and salary. However this did not apply to all graduates. In an online survey on 4,811 employees and 28 companies working in India, Stumpf, Doh and Tymon (2010) found that performance management and professional development were positively related to career success. In his study on the effects of HRM, social support on career success of men and women, Nabi (2000), purports that peer support is a significant predictor of men's career success rather than women's. Career success has two off-shoots that correspond to the objective and subjective dimensions: (i) intrinsic and (ii) extrinsic. Here extrinsic career success includes salary, promotion and hierarchical status (Judge et al., 1999).

The Protean Career Orientation

The protean career is a process which the person, not the organisation, is managing. It consists of all the person's varied experiences in education, training, work in several organisations, changes in occupational field,

etc. The protean person's own personal career choices and search for self-fulfillment are the unifying or integrative elements in his or her life. The criterion of success is internal (psychological success), not external. As Barley (1989, p. 49) found: "subjective careers changed with time as individuals shifted their social footing and reconstructed their past and future in order to come to terms with their present".

Although Hall first wrote about the idea of the protean career in 1976, it was not until the publication of his book, *The Career Is Dead Long Live the Career*, in 1996 that the concept gained widespread popularity. Using the metaphor of the Greek god Proteus, who could change his shape at will, Hall described the protean careerist as able to repackage his or her knowledge, skills, and abilities to fit the changing work environment in order to remain marketable. Protean careerists are flexible, value freedom, believe in continuous learning, and seek intrinsic rewards from work (Hall, 1996a, 1996b). Recognizing the decreased stability and increased uncertainty in the work environment as well as changes in employment relationships, including reduced job security, protean careerists have taken responsibility for managing their own career (Hall, 2002; Hall & Moss, 1998; Mirvis & Hall, 1996). Briscoe and Hall (2006: 8) elucidated the protean career concept by defining its two dimensions:

(1) values driven in the sense that the person's internal values provide the guidance and measure of success for the individual's career; and (2) self-directed in personal career management having the ability to be adaptive in terms of performance and learning demands.

Based on different combinations of these two dimensions, they suggested four primary career categories: dependent (low values driven, low self-direction), rigid (high values driven, low self-direction), reactive (low values driven, high self-direction), and protean or transformational (high values driven, high self-direction). To empirically examine this clarification and the four primary career categories, Hall and his colleagues developed (Briscoe & Hall, 2005) and validated (Briscoe, Hall, & DeMuth, 2006) a 14-item scale to measure the protean career orientation.

The Boundaryless Career Concept

In response to the “boundaryless organization” theme of the 1993 Academy of Management conference, the term boundaryless career was coined to offer a new perspective on contemporary careers (Arthur, 2008). The concept was subsequently popularized by Arthur and Rousseau's (1996: 6) book, *The Boundaryless Career*, which offered the following definition of the term: “one of independence from, rather than dependence on, traditional organizational career arrangements” involving “opportunities that go beyond any single employer” (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996: 116). In addition, Arthur and Rousseau (1996) offered six different meanings, discussing boundaryless careers like: (a) the stereotypical Silicon Valley career, in which individuals move across the boundaries of separate employers; (b) those of academics or carpenters, that draw validation and marketability from outside the present employer; (c) those of real estate agents, sustained by external networks or information; (d) those that break traditional organizational assumptions about hierarchy and career advancement; (e) those in which the individual rejects existing career opportunities for personal or family reasons; and (f) those based on the interpretation of the career actor, who may perceive a boundaryless future regardless of structural constraints. Although initial research based on the boundaryless career concept tended to focus on physical movement, many of these studies failed to distinguish among different types of physical mobility and did not specify the cause (voluntary or involuntary), origin (company or self-directed), direction (up, down, lateral), and, if appropriate, duration of movement in and out of the work- force (Feldman & Ng, 2007; Ng et al. 2007). Distinguishing among different types of physical mobility is important because these differences may explain conflicting research findings. For instance, the literature on expatriate careers offers insights into differences in outcomes related to origin (company vs. self-initiated) of the transition (see Baruch & Altman, 2002, Bozionelos, 2009). Recent research has found that individuals who self-initiate an expatriate career transition tend to move to roles that pay less and are less challenging than their previous role. Similarly, when self-initiated expatriates return to their home country,

that transition is usually to a position with less pay and challenge. In contrast, company expatriates tend to move to roles with more responsibility than their previous role.

The Next Generation of Career Concepts

A number of new concepts and models have recently been offered to explain the variety of career patterns that are being enacted in today's dynamic work environment. Some of these newer conceptualizations, which we call “integrative frameworks,” represent attempts to combine various ideas from the protean and boundaryless concepts. Some of these newer concepts emerged based on the interpretations of research findings (e.g., hybrid careers). Other models (e.g., kaleidoscope) offer conceptualizations that are not an extension of either the protean or boundaryless concept, but instead offer an alternative lens by which careers can be examined.

Integrative Frameworks Despite the research on the protean and boundaryless careers, there continues to be questions as to the relationship between the two concepts. Granrose and Baccili (2006), for example, did not distinguish between protean and boundaryless careers. Instead, they suggested that the two concepts are a reflection of the new, more ambiguous employer-employee relationship. Greenhaus and associates (2008: 285) noted the lack of consensus in a definition of the boundaryless career, suggesting it is difficult to “determine where boundarylessness ends and protean begins.” While some argue that the two concepts are complementary (e.g., Inkson, 2006) or are distinct but overlapping (Briscoe & Hall, 2006), others have called for the integration of the protean orientation and the boundaryless career into a more comprehensive model of careers (e.g., Peiperl & Baruch, 1997). In response to this debate, three major integrative frameworks have been offered to clarify the relationship between the protean and boundaryless career concepts. First, Peiperl and Baruch (1997) offered the postcorporate career concept as a means of integrating ideas from the protean and boundaryless concepts.

CONCLUSION

To paraphrase a Chinese proverb, we live in interesting times, times in which established ideas about work and careers are continually being challenged. Traditional theories of careers (e.g., Super, 1957) were based on a system of clear, hierarchical organizational structures and a growing economy. The blurring of organizational, industry, and occupational boundaries; the escalation of technological developments; and rapid globalization have all contributed to a new work context, requiring fresh and innovative ways of examining careers. The linear career no longer adequately explained the realities of many individuals and new, more dynamic concepts arose. These concepts reflected the change from individuals relying on organizations for career development to individuals assuming responsibility for their own career management and employability. Individual competencies, resiliency, and adaptability became more important than organizational commitment as job security decreased.

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