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Career development in organizations and beyond: Balancing traditional and contemporary viewpoints

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Abstract

The changing nature of work has resulted in major transition in the shape of careers and their management within and outside organizations. Scholars, though, tend to suggest that the changes are overwhelming and colossal, whereas in reality much has remained stable. In this paper, I bring a balanced view of the management of careers in organizations and beyond. This paper takes into account recent developments in the nature of the business environment, and at the same time acknowledges that much of the basics in career development theory and practice is still valid for Western societies.
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Contemporary literature on business in general and on careers' specific related issues emphasize the dynamic nature of labor markets. The impression portrayed is that in the past organizations had a rigid hierarchical structure, and operated within a stable environment. Thus careers were predictable, secure, and linear. In contrast, the organizational system is now in a mode of all change, all dynamic, total fluidity, and thus careers are unpredictable, vulnerable, and multidirectional. Both depictions of the past and the current state represent extreme scenarios, which, I argue, do not reflect a true and fair representation of the real case in hand. On the one hand, while much have shifted from the traditional and conventional mode, many organizations still perform within a relatively stable environment and apply well established strategies for their management, keeping significant share of the traditional system in tact. On the other hand, even within the traditional mode, the psychological contract and the actual practice were not fully rigid. A more valid and reliable perspective will acknowledge that current organizations are less rigid, but not fully fluid; control may not be solely with the organization, but the shift does not mean that the organization has no say in career management; individuals take more control of their own career, but much remains for organizations to manage; career can be seen as successful based on internal feelings, but moving up the (somewhat flatter) hierarchy ladder, high earnings, and gaining status and power are nevertheless determining factors of success for people. For a long time career theory argue that careers are structured (e.g. Super, 1957; Wilensky, 1961), i.e. extreme traditional and organizationally focused, whereas now scholars offer the opposite end of continuum (i.e. extreme nontraditional, like boundaryless or protean, individually focused). I argue that neither truly captures the true nature of today's career realities.

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In this paper I deal with these and other career related dichotomies, and analyze them to reach a fair and open-minded depiction of the present state of the art of career management. Further, I offer a cautious glimpse into the future to come. The aim of this paper is to provide a balanced view of the state of the art of careers and their future, rooted in the literature. The analysis and discussion will not be limited to a single level or a narrow theoretical discipline. To understand careers, scholars should apply a variety of views at different levels of analysis (Klein & Kozlowski, 2000), and understand their changing nature (Feldman, 1999). Thus the analysis is presented at both the individual and the organizational level. Further, scholars should refrain from approaching career from the quite limited perspective of a single discipline—Arthur, Hall, and Lawrence (1989) listed eight such disciplines from which the study of career benefit and contribute to: psychology, social psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, political science, history and geography. Along these lines, I will try to build on a variety of theoretical prisms in developing this paper.

We live is a world that is more complex than it used to be, or at least, in a world where complexity is acknowledged. People have multiple identities (Ibarra, 2003), multiple commitments (Cohen, 2003), variety of obligations (Burke, Greenglass, & Schwarzer, 1993; Wiley, 1987), and high level of stress and anxiety (which naturally stem from ambiguity and lack of security—see Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2002). Organizations go through fast changes and become boundaryless (Ashkenas, Ulrich, Jick, & Kerr, 1995), global (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989), and competitive (Porter, 1998).

Among the changes that have shaped contemporary career systems are developments in the social and economical realms, as well as in individual identities. Global macro-economic and social forces provided impetus for a growing number of global careers, for introduction of females and minorities to the full range of roles (albeit discrimination still clearly prevails), for major restructuring of organizations, and generally a less stable business environment. At the micro-level, they are coupled by a development in norms, values and attitudes to life and work, which are manifested in new behaviors of individuals.

Hughes (1937) defined career as "the moving perspective in which persons orient themselves with reference to the social order, and of the typical sequences and concatenation of office". A more recent definition look at career as "a process of development of the employee along a path of experience and jobs in one or more organizations" (Baruch & Rosenstein, 1992). On the one hand, the career is the 'property' of the individual, who may be inspired by new social norms, but on the other hand, for employed people, it is planned and managed to a large extent by their organizations.

In the past the planning and management of careers was seen as the major responsibility of the individual: Arthur et al. (1989) regard career as "an evolving sequence of person's work experience over time". Later, the focus of career development has shifted from the individual to the organization (Gutteridge, Leibowitz, & Shore, 1993). Traditional careers have dominated industrial employment because most organizational structures supported it (Sullivan, 1999). Traditional career systems were hierarchy based (Whyte, 1956; Wilensky, 1961, 1964), where people compete for limited promotional opportunities (Rosenbaum, 1979), and climbing up the ladder was the ultimate indicator of success (Townsend, 1970). These were the norms since the inception of the industrial revolution.

The main shift in the relationship between employers and employees was manifested in the change of psychological contracts which took place in the last decades of the 20th Century (Conway & Briner, 2005; Rousseau, 1995). A psychological contract is characterized as a set of "individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organizations" (Rousseau, 1995, p. 9). From the organizational point of view, the new psychological contract mostly meant a move from offering careers characterized by a secure employment for all, to 'opportunities for development' only for those needed and fit for their jobs (Herriot & Pemberton, 1995; Rousseau, 1995, 1996). Individuals discovered that they have a variety of career goals, career anchors (Schein, 1985; Baruch, 2004a), and perspectives of what do they mean by career success (Derr, 1986; Gunz & Heslin, 2005).

1. A balanced view of traditional and contemporary theories

Overall, one can see career as a life journey. Building on the metaphor of life journey, people can take the beaten path, or opt to navigate their own way in the open plains (Baruch, 2004a).

Much of recent writing on careers focused on the vast changes in the business environment, hence changes that the career system experienced. DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) introduced the boundaryless career concept, which emphasize the blurring of career related boundaries within organizations and beyond (for details see Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Further, Peiperl and Baruch's (1997) 'Post-corporate career' concept depicts how the general system has changed. The