Career Boundaries in a “Boundaryless” World

Anshu Lochab\(^1\) and Kiran Mor\(^2\)

\(^1\)Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology, Kurukshetra, India.

\(^2\) Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology, Kurukshetra, India.

Abstract

Although some individuals (e.g., self-employed, contract workers) have always been outside traditional career models, the traditional career has dominated employment because most organizational structures supported it. Now however, the tall, multi-layer, functionally organized structures characteristic of many large companies has changed (Miles & Snow, 1996). Firms have downsized to become more flexible in response to environmental factors such as rapid technological advancements and increased global competition. In the last two decades, managers, older workers, and the more educated—those typically less affected by downsizing have experienced the highest job loss rates from organizational restructuring. Many of these individuals are now underemployed or working one or two part-time jobs. The psychological employment contract between firms and workers has also altered. Under the old contract, workers exchanged loyalty for job security. Under the new contract, workers exchange performance for continuous learning and marketability. This change in the psychological contract has resulted in decreased job security, decreased employee loyalty and increased worker cynicism.

Keywords: traditional career, organized structures, downsizing, psychological employment, employee loyalty.

1. Introduction

Work on careers within the last decade, however, suggests that the model of employment describes a declining proportion of the workforce in many industrialized
countries, including the US (Arthur et al., 1999; Cappelli, 1999; Osterman, 1996), Britain, (Arnold, 1997), France (Cadin et al., 2000), New Zealand (Arthur et al., 1999), Canada (Gunz et al., 2000) and even Japan (Zaun and Landers, 2001). Even for managerial employees, who typically enjoy the greatest level of employment security and the most extensive employer support of and investment in their career development, average job and organizational tenure have declined, and organizational career development ladders have become much less common (Heckscher, 1995). Both employer commitment to employees and employee loyalty to employers have waned considerably (Tsui et al., 1997). Inter-organizational mobility should therefore figure as prominently in contemporary studies of careers as intra-organizational mobility has in past research.

2. Disentangling the Boundaryless Career
The basis for the boundaryless career echoes the core arguments of recent trendsetting literature on globalization, innovation, and corporate strategy, positing the changing nature of competitive environments and employment relations (Cappelli et al., 1997). In order to survive competitive market turbulence, companies restructured and downsized, decentralized, identified and developed core competences (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990), and implemented continuous improvement policies and high performance practices (Osterman and Burton, 2005). The boundaryless career is predicated on the assumption that organizations are no longer able (or willing) to offer workers job stability and progressive careers in exchange for loyalty and commitment (Arthur, 1994; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). As a result, commentators have posited the end of traditional careers, in which individuals follow a progressive path towards a pinnacle of power, income, and prestige within an organization, and its replacement by an independent, individually driven, and subjectively assessed career concept (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). Under the new deal, the key concepts are flexibility, networking, marketable skills, and continuous learning, which workers exchange for performance in a career that unfolds across organizational boundaries (Sullivan and Arthur, 2006).

3. The Boundaryless Career Concept
The boundaryless career has been depicted as ‘the antonym of the ‘bounded’ or ‘organizational’ career’ (Arthur, 1994: 296) that dominated careers research from the 1970s onwards. Even though it is common for a new metaphor to be defined as the antithesis of a previous dominant image (Inkson, 2006), the opposition between ‘new’ and ‘old’ careers potentially implies that the boundaryless and the organizational career share some important conceptual and operational limitations (e.g. the focus on organizational boundaries). The way the boundaryless career has been construed has attracted criticism concerning its adequacy to address contemporary careers (Arnold and Cohen, 2008; Feldman and Ng, 2007; Inkson, 2006; Mallon, 1998; Pringle and Mallon, 2003). In broad strokes, critics have claimed that: 1) the idea of the
boundaryless career lacks accuracy (Arnold and Cohen, 2008; Inkson, 2006); 2) the concept overemphasizes individual agency over structure (Inkson, 2006); 3) the boundaryless career, like the organizational career model, ascribes primacy to organizational boundaries (Gunz et al., 2000); and 4) the empirical support for the dominant meaning (i.e. inter-firm career mobility) of the metaphor is modest (Mallon, 1998; Pringle and Mallon, 2003).

4. Theory Underlying Career Success
Briscoe, Hall and DeMuth (2006) introduced the Protean and Boundaryless Career Attitude Scales to operationalise the concept of protean (Hall, 1976; 2002) and boundaryless (Arthur, 1994) career.

4.1 The protean career attitude
Hall (1976; 2004) defined the protean career as a career where the individual, rather than the organisation, is in charge. Protean individuals value individual freedom and growth and define career success in terms of psychological criteria, such as the degree of job satisfaction, self-actualisation, personal accomplishment and a feeling of fulfillment (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Hall & Mirvis, 1996). This description contrasts with a more traditional view where career success is defined in terms of external criteria such as promotions, salary and occupational status.

4.2 The boundaryless career attitude
The boundaryless career refers to the crossing of objective and subjective dimensions of career at multiple levels of analysis, including organisational position, mobility, flexibility, the work environment and the opportunity structure while at the same time de-emphasising reliance on organisational promotions and career paths. 

(Briscoe et al., 2006, p. 2)

Arthur, Khapova and Wilderom (2005) emphasised that the boundaryless career concept refers to mobility across physical and psychological career boundaries.

Careers can also be described in two fundamentally different ways. On the one hand there are subjective careers, reflecting the individual’s own sense of his or her career and what it is becoming (Stebbins, 1970). On the other hand there are objective careers, reflecting the more or less publicly observable positions, situations, and status ‘that serve as landmarks for gauging a person’s movement through the social milieu’ (Barley, 1989, p. 49).

5. Are Careers Becoming more Boundaryless?
If careers are becoming boundaryless, we should expect to observe an accelerating trend in workers’ mobility across organizational boundaries from the 1980s onwards. It is difficult to pinpoint the time when careers are considered to have become
boundaryless. Cappelli (1999), for instance, locates the shift in employment and career patterns in the early 1980s, associated with factors such as the increasing pace of globalization and technological change, and pressures to increase shareholder value. In order to assess this assumption, we will review literature on job stability from a variety of sources and analyse data extracted from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Employment Statistics Database. We are interested in capturing historical trends in job stability that provides systematic information to evaluate the core proposition of the boundaryless career. Our data do not cover the period encompassed by the recent economic crisis. Even though it is plausible that the latest economic events will have an impact on employment stability, it is too early to speculate whether any changes in employment patterns are likely to produce long-term career effects.

6. Success in the Boundaryless Career
In the boundaryless career the emphasis is on inter-firm mobility and unpredictability (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996b; Sullivan, Carden, & Martin, 1998). As such, it is suggested that scholars expand their conceptualizations of career success beyond those typically studied (e.g., promotions, salary) while simultaneously de-emphasizing external or objective measures of success (Parker & Arthur, 2000). For example, Hall and colleagues (Hall, 1976; Hall & Mirvis, 1996; Mirvis & Hall, 1994, 1996) discuss the importance of psychological success as a criterion by which to judge career achievement. This represents ‘a feeling of pride and personal accomplishment that comes from knowing that one has done one’s personal best’ (Hall & Mirvis, 1996, p. 26). Likewise, Parker and Arthur (2000) discuss the ‘intelligent subjective career’ (p. 101), emphasizing that how one feels about his or her career accomplishments is more important than external or tangible indicators like salary growth. The construct of perceived career success captures such feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment of one’s career (Seibert, Crant, & Kramier, 1999) and is examined in the present study.

7. Conclusion
To recap, careers research has so far been performed under separate traditions, with each tradition largely independent of the others. However, the nature of contemporary careers invites us to take a fresh look at the possibilities for interdisciplinary inquiry. That means looking at what organizational careers scholars, other careers scholars, and scholars outside the careers research arena can contribute to new research initiatives. Careers research central, rather than peripheral, to future conversations about the global knowledge.
References


