

Transition in Organisations:

1 - Valuing Career Perspectives

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This review looks at how organisations, specifically professional service firms (PSFs), facilitate individual transition. PSFs need skilled individuals who are capable of delivering a high quality service to their clients, and global consulting organisations are continually seeking to secure talented employees who can consult on a range of corporate assignments. However, as this need to recruit and retain talent grows, so too does the uncertainty of long-term job security, resulting in ever changing career patterns and loss of career stability. This first paper considers the context of organisational transitions within PSFs and the implications for organisational career(s) education in the 21st century; two further papers will review the application of career development models and the importance of career skill repertoires in professional service organisations.

The importance of career education in professional services

In formal terms, a career is defined by King and Harrison as "the total sequence of employment-related positions, roles, activities and experiences encountered by a person" (1998, p. vii), a definition that encompasses the organisation's perspective of what a career means. From an individual viewpoint Hirsh *et al.* define it as "the sequence of work experiences which individuals have over their working lives (1995, p. 11). But what is meant by career in professional service firms (PSFs)? Traditionally, a formal career was the means by which a trainee acquired the skills and expertise necessary to become a 'professional' and then continue to practise their professional expertise throughout their working lifetime. Over centuries, professionals had an expectation that, provided they gained the necessary qualifications and experience required, they would advance their career becoming recognised professionals and, for many, partners (and consequently part owners) of their professional practice.

This anticipation is reflected in a model of career stages first proposed by Dalton *et al.* (1977) who found that individuals within professional environments progressed through four career stages described in "primary relationship" terms as "apprentice, colleague, mentor and sponsor" (p. 23). This model was adapted by Rennekamp

and Nall (1994) who "suggest that there are four distinct stages in extension careers ... labelled entry, colleague, counsellor and advisor" (p. 2). In a firm of consultants that I formerly worked for, these four stages were represented by consulting assistants (apprentice/entry), consultant (colleague), senior consultant and associate (mentor/counsellor) and partner (sponsor/advisor). These models suggest progression from one stage to the next, but also acknowledge that some professionals, although moving out of the entry stage, would not necessarily progress through all four stages.

Whilst recognising the importance of the career concept within professional organisations, these models also typify the traditional picture of career as being long term advancement and progression, an illustration acknowledged by Irving who, citing Watts (1991), noted that "... the concept of career has been constructed around progression up an ordered hierarchy within an organisation or profession" (2005 p. 14); although traditionally true for PSFs, this has never been so for unskilled or semi-skilled workers who are more likely to have experienced 'sideways' career moves, rarely moving up an organisational ladder.

In their article, Rennekamp and Nall (1994), noting the recommendations of the Extension Committee on Organisation and Policy (ECOP), suggest that "career development and enhancement for the individual employee are part of the overall (change). To move through the 1990s, this part of human resource management should be synchronized with other organisation restructuring strategies" (p. 1). This recommendation acknowledges the important part that career education should play in organisational development strategies and encapsulates the hope held by many employees over successive generations; but what actually is the experience of a professional in a 21st-century organisation?

Maister (1997) suggests that individuals need to make a choice:

'the choice to be made is not what you want to do with your entire career, but which next challenge would fulfil you... careers are built by moving from one challenge to the next' (p. 35).

This acknowledges the importance of a professional's personal choice in determining future career direction, but often there is no choice particularly where an organisation is restructuring or delayering to adapt to new market conditions. This organisational environment, therefore, influences how professional organisations think about careers and manage career education programmes.

The challenges for career transition

Within PSFs organisational careers are changing and the traditional patterns of professional employment are no longer available to most professionals. Many writers (Arthur et al., 1999; Hirsh et al., 1995; King and Harrison, 1998) recognised that, pending the close of the 20th century, the need for an organisational career system has fragmented or evaporated altogether; but what is contributing to this changing practice? In her research report, Holbeche (2000) identifies the following challenges to the premise of a stable career:

- Global economic trends – globalisation and the desire amongst professional organisations to have a global service capability,
- Workplace practices – more flexible approaches to designing and delivering core services, market repositioning and consequent changes to the employer/employee relationship with regard to commitment and loyalty,
- Technological impact – in the knowledge economy, organisations are using technology to share knowledge and develop client solutions more effectively,
- Organisational structuring – network and cellular organisations change the way in which an organisation manages its client, and consequently employee, relationships,
- Mergers and acquisitions – amalgamations and strategic partnering result in re-defined markets and service offers, and
- Work flexibilisation – changes to more flexible working patterns result in different working (e.g. job share, part time or telecommuting) practices.

These challenges have implications for the careers of those affected, which, in the 21st century, is nearly everyone whether employed, non-employed or self employed. In PSFs, these challenges are making a significant impact as larger global organisations are continually restructuring to adjust to the ever-changing demands of the global economy. These organisational changes impact the permanence of career structures and mean that individuals now face very different career patterns to those they might have expected no more than 20 years ago.

The traditional careers of the mid-to-late 20th century were dependent on what Arthur et al. describe as:

‘strong situations... characterised by clear structures and salient guides to behaviour; the scope for individual variation in response is minimal... (whilst) in weak situations there is less

prescription of individual behaviour and people are better able to choose among alternative actions’ (1999, p. 13).

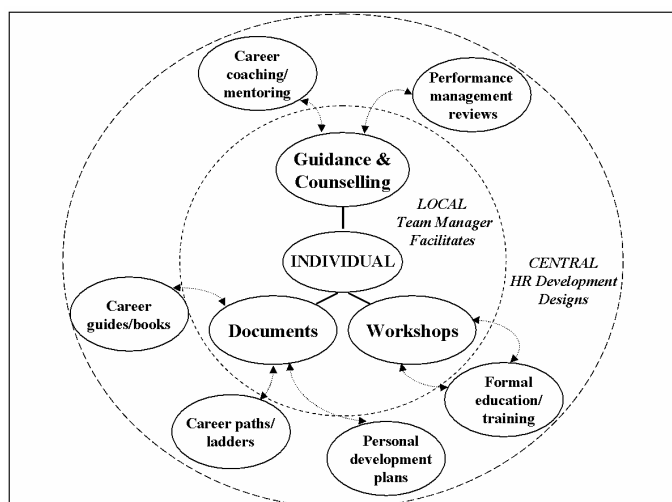
As organisations restructure to adapt to market demands so their hierarchical structures ‘weaken’ and the traditional career languishes as moving up an organisational ladder is replaced by the need to respond to more flexible working practices; this notion moves the responsibility for career decision making to the individual and diminishes the requirement for structured organisational careers.

Savickas (2000) suggests that people need to draw “meaning from the role of work in their lives, not from an organisational culture. Career must become more personal and self-directed to flourish in the post-modern information age” (p.59). This reflection is increasingly apposite for all workers who experience a fragmented career as a consequence of organisational restructuring, delayering, etc. and to others, including women, who face a variety of personal career choices (e.g. balancing work and family commitments) throughout their lives. Through his definition, Savickas refocuses the responsibility for career to the individual rather than the organisation to which they are contracted.

The definitions presented so far introduce the idea of an objective–subjective continuum of approaches to careers thinking. Some approaches are distinctly ‘objective’ (Dalton et al., 1977; Rennekamp and Nall, 1994; Watts, 1991) in that they show the ‘career actor’ (i.e. the person who owns their career) progressing through defined stages. Other approaches (Maister, 1997; Savickas, 2000; Guest and Williams, 1973) suggest a more ‘subjective’ approach by encouraging the ‘career actor’ to reflect on the meaning, work/family events and challenges that will influence their career direction. This differentiated approach to career thinking may help the ‘career actor’ to see that career is more than their experiences in the work environment alone. Arguably, it is the totality of their experience throughout their period of contribution to/participation in society i.e. their lifetime. So how do professional organisations help individuals think about their career options and make the right career choice? What are the different career interventions that PSFs adopt?

An overview of career practice within a professional community

Organisations provide a variety of opportunities to reflect on personal career choice; figure 1 identifies the possible elements of an organisational career system. It shows the career strategies and practices that PSFs may use to set up a career education and development framework.



The career practices illustrated in this map include some practices noted by Gutteridge, Leibowitz & Shore (1993) and Baruch & Peiperl (2000) and show an array of career strategies together with tools available to contemporary organisations. The comprehensive nature of this 'career system' highlights the variety of approaches/interventions available for career development and education within an organisational setting; but how effective are they in facilitating career transition? In their study, Mabey and Iles (1994) reported that "... development centres, psychometric tests with feedback and career reviews with superiors seem particularly well regarded" (1994, p. 130). These findings suggest that employees participating in career interventions prefer those approaches that involve social interaction rather than those more structured techniques, such as career and self-assessment information, which do not involve personal counselling.

This overview illustrates the possibilities for career development activity within organisations, but Doyle (2000) extends this perspective suggesting that "in addition to career management being viewed as a series of functional activities and processes designed to meet organisational and individual needs, it must also be viewed as an integral part of the complex framework of social interactions that define work organisations" (p. 232); career management is an integral element of a larger organisational system and should be included within the social dialogue of the organisation, not just handled as a series of disconnected activities. This proposition suggests that career education and management should be woven into the social fabric of an organisation and highlights one of the main challenges facing professional organisations who understand the value of providing effective career education in the 21st century.

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Note

The next paper in this series will look at the application of career development models within professional service organisations. It will appear in the summer 2007 issue.

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