Transition in Organisations: 2 – Locating Career Models

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This paper continues my study into how professional service firms (PSFs) facilitate professional transitions. It explores a range of career development theories and considers some of the sociological determinants that may influence a professional's career choice. An understanding of these career models will help professional organisations – one of the principal sectors of the 21st century 'knowledge economy' – develop best practice in enabling the careers of highly skilled professionals.

Emergent 'career development' thinking in professional services

Let's consider some different career models and their implications for career education in PSFs. Many career development theories exist which have influenced the design and application of education and guidance programmes within UK-based organisations. The primary application of these have been within schools and educational settings – Harris (1999) suggests that career education is school-based and, citing Watts and Herr (1976), positions career education as '…an aspect of the curriculum which straddles the education-work transition and is concerned with preparing young people for the world of work and adult life' (Harris, 1999, p.4). This definition excludes career education from the ongoing work environment, which is a reasonable position to adopt as most young people will probably have made their career decisions based on the career education that they received whilst at school or in full-time education.

In an organisational environment, conversations around career advice and guidance are focused on considerations of job performance and advancement as opposed to information about the range of career options open to an individual; this aligns with Harris's distinction that guidance is provided externally by other career advisory services – either educational services or those provided within organisations. In the 1980s 'there was economic growth, particularly in the service sector which led to an expansion in the number of professional, administrative and clerical jobs available' (Marwick, 1982, cited in Harris, 1999, p.45) and, as a result of changing occupational choice, there was a greater need for career guidance in schools. The emergence of career education policy was driven by political ideology and as Harris notes '…it is clear that any critical discussion of the economic infrastructure and occupational structures which help shape young people's

entry into the labour market were of secondary concern' (1999, p.60). As a consequence, there has never been any mutual consensus about the requirements for adult careers advice for those within organisational settings.

In the absence of any direction, organisations have set their own policy that, in many professional environments, focuses on performance management issues rather than career guidance and, in many cases, the actual practice is far removed from the espoused intentions of career education for all employees. Another reason why organisations may be limiting their career guidance programmes is the global economic changes that are impacting on organisational careers today.

This means that organisations need to reinterpret the meaning of career and career theorists need to study different organisational career patterns. As Killeen (1996) notes 'one factor has been declining faith in the "predictability" of careers and in the "stability" or orderliness of adult working life. Associated with uncertainty is the "problematisation" of adult careers' (p.37). This lack of 'adult career stability' causes organisations to search for new ways of thinking about their career structures and results in individuals experiencing new career trajectories. Whilst individuals and organisations strive to establish meaning, theorists continue to search for new models to explain what they observe in the reality of the contemporary business world.

However, let's consider what we already know – current career development theories may be looked at in different ways, but a common distinction is between psychological and sociological approaches. Law (1996a) describes the 'structured categories of self (suggesting the possibility of relatively stable relationships between self and work)' and 'interactive concepts suggesting that links change within self, and between self and community' (p. 50). This matrix (illustrated in figure 1) presents a helpful way of locating some different career development models and positions the various models covered in this paper.

	Psychological	Sociological
Structured	Trait and Factor (Matching) Theories	Opportunity Structure Theories
Interact	Self Concept (Developmental) and Career Learning Theories	Community Interaction and Social Learning Theories

Figure 1: Distinctions between different career development theories (adapted from Law, 1996a, p.50)

Another useful way to think about the emergence of career models is to consider some of the elements of careers or what Killeen (1996) describes as 'the basic building blocks of career theory – the "agent", that is the person who has a career, what are the "environments" in which careers are made and what is the nature of career "action"?'(p. 23).

These building blocks lead to a consideration of the degree to which individuals have control of their career, the occupational environments they work in and the decisions they make when choosing a career. This elementary approach presents a framework for reflecting on the emergence of career development models and helps to focus on why these models are important for an understanding of individual career choice and occupational career patterns. In the following sections, I outline each of the principal career development models and discuss their application, relevance and appropriateness for professional organisations.

Matching individuals by using 'trait theory' to assist occupational choice

An early exponent of career matching theory was Parsons (1909) who proposed 'that optimal career choices required three steps: knowledge of self, knowledge of work environments and some method of matching the characteristics of one's self to those of the work environment' (cited in Betz et al., 1989, p.27). This quest to find congruence between individual preferences and organisational requirements led to the development of a number of career interest inventories based on measuring individual characteristics.

One of these, Holland's 'Career Typology Theory of Vocational Behaviour' (1973, 1985) looks at the relative match between an individual's personality type and their occupational environment. 'The central postulate of Holland's theory is that vocational satisfaction, stability, and achievement depend on the congruence between one's personality and the environment in which one works' (Betz et al., 1989, p. 33). The six personality types are illustrated in figure 2 and identified as "Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising and Conventional" (Betz et al., 1989; Super, 1981) and are more fully explained by Osipow and Fitzgerald (1996). This typology helps to identify an individual's preference for different occupational environments and, as such, is a useful tool for career education prior to organisational entry. Betz et al. (1989, p.33) note that two important predictions of the theory are the following:

1. congruent individuals will be more satisfied and less likely to change environments than will incongruent persons.

2. incongruent persons will be influenced by the dominant environment (that in which they are employed) toward congruence.
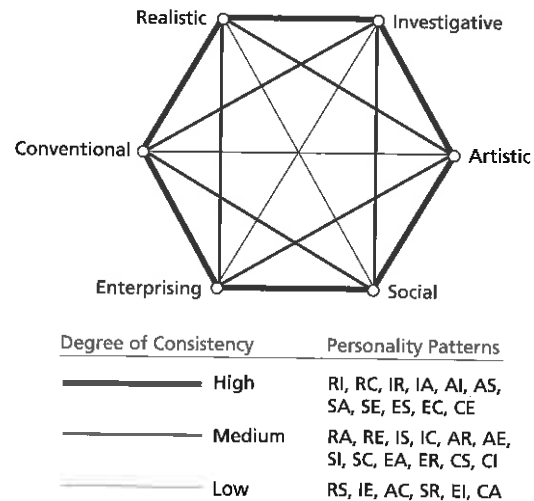

Degree of Consistency	Personality Patterns
High	RI, RC, IR, IA, AI, AS, SA, SE, ES, EC, CE
Medium	RA, RE, IS, IC, AR, AE, SI, SC, EA, ER, CS, CI
Low	RS, IE, AC, SR, EI, CA

Figure 2: Holland's Personality Type Hexagon
(Source: Sharf, 2006, p. 91)

The appeal of these trait-based approaches to career matching is that they are simple to administer, differentiate individuals, explain occupational preferences and are useful for predicting career congruence. However, they do have limitations. The focus on personality and interest, for example, whilst identifying an individual's preference, does not give an indication of their ability to do a particular job. The static orientation of the model also doesn't recognise the dynamic interactions that an individual is likely to experience in an occupational environment and as Betz et al. note, it pays 'insufficient attention to sex, race, and socio-economic status' (1989, p. 35).

Whilst acknowledging their importance, models such as Holland's and its numerous derivatives, appear to have limited application within an organisational environment unless it is to explain why an individual is dissatisfied with their occupational choice and an attempt is to be made to help an individual determine a more congruent working environment. The comprehensive research conducted around Holland's theory gives testimony to its perceived value, but some questions remain regarding its validity and usefulness in the workplace.

A personal approach to developing self through 'life stages'

Early questions emerged concerning the validity of the 'matching theory' approach that led some theorists (Buehler, 1933 and Super, 1942 – cited in Super, 1981; Ginzberg et al., 1951; Rogers 1942, 1951 – cited in Osipow and Fitzgerald, 1996) to focus on 'life stages', as a framework for their interpretation of an individual's progress through life. Evolving from this pioneering work Super fashioned his Self-Concept Developmental Theory based on the notion that '...people strive to implement their self-concept by choosing to enter the occupation seen most likely to permit self-expression. Furthermore,

Super suggests that the particular behaviours a person engages in to implement the self-concept vocationally are a function of the individual's stage of life development' (Osipow and Fitzgerald, 1996, p.111). These 'stages of life development' are illustrated in figure 3.
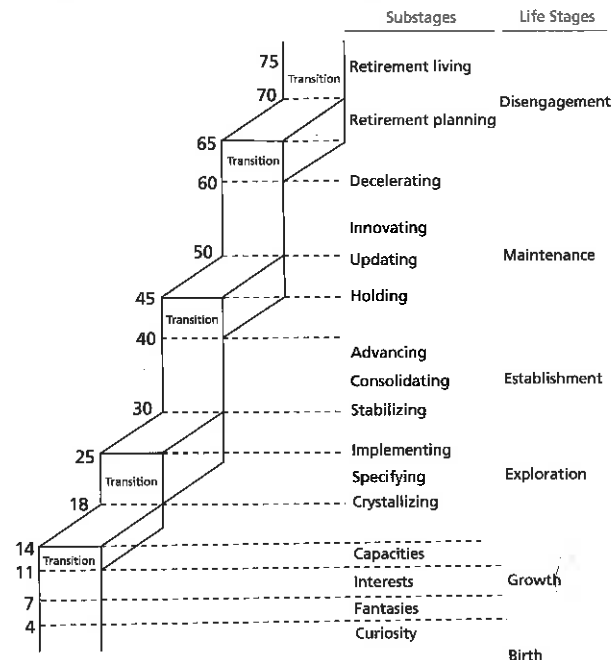

Figure 3: Super's Life Stages and Sub Stages (Source: Sharf, 2006, p.210)

This model suggests that people progress though each stage and achieve those tasks necessary to cope with the stage through which they are passing, but, as Super and Bohn note, 'progress through these life stages does not take place in a linear, uniform manner' (1971, p.141) for all sorts of reasons, both personal and organisational. In modern society, these changes in personal and organisational circumstances, or as Super and Bohn (1971) describe them, 'external (situational) determinants' (p.152), frequently result in fragmented career patterns reflecting the realities of their life experiences rather than the preferences for their career aspirations. This developmental approach is also illustrated by Super as a 'career rainbow' (1981, p.28) that identifies the roles that individuals have at different stages of their life. Super's career models emphasise the developmental tasks associated with each period during an individual's career and highlight the tasks and decisions required of individuals to achieve a satisfying career. In a professional service environment these 'career decisions' have traditionally centred on the dual perspectives of 'probable work and family events' (Guest and Williams, 1973, p.115).

This 'career decisions' approach gives a valuable overview as to how personal careers can be considered in professional settings and has the potential to help individuals understand how their careers have developed/could develop; but it offers little to enable individuals to actually make effective career decisions or to help organisations understand how best to manage and enable career education programmes to facilitate individual

aspiration with regard to organisational requirement. In fact, it can be argued that the focus on identifying the 'self-concept', although important, limits the potential for organisational application as it appears that the individuals have to make their own career choice/s.

However, in her work, Gottfredson (1981), whilst still focusing on 'self-concept', 'helps to explain how people see themselves in terms of society and in terms of their individuality (their values, their feelings and their interests)' by elaborating the two concepts of circumscription and compromise. These are defined by Sharf (2006, pp.156-157) as:

- 'circumscription – a process in which young people eliminate alternatives that they feel will not be appropriate to them;' and

- 'compromise – a process in which young people give up alternatives that they may like for ones that may be more accessible to them.'

She suggests that these concepts influence young people's career choices and they explain the social implications for individuals of the career decisions they make. She also recognises the importance that gender and prestige have. In her later exposition (2002), she describes how biological factors influence individual career choice and explains that 'the theory's aim is to help people prevent or reverse unwarranted constriction in early career development and thereby be more likely to obtain the "best fits" within their reach' (Gottfredson 2002, p.86). Her refocused consideration of how individual careers emerge strongly highlights the importance of 'social influence' on the decisions that individuals make about their career choice, but again it says little about how organisations might establish frameworks to educate and manage their employees' occupational aspirations.

Both Super and Gotffredson concentrated their research efforts on childhood development and, as a consequence, do not consider (in depth) the impact of their theories on adult development. However, when addressing the concept of 'compromise', Gottfredson (1981, p.571) does note that 'any mismatch between the abilities and interests of a working population and the jobs available to it means that some people will not be able to work at the jobs they originally preferred and for which they may be suitable'.

This 'self-concept' approach emphasises individual aspiration and takes too little account of the social environment from which an individual constructs their career interests and preferences.

The influence of sociological determinants in organisations

Whilst the 'trait theory' and 'self-concept' approach to career education are centred on psychological constructs, an individual's social environment strongly influences their occupational choice. A number of theories review from a

sociological perspective the influences on an individual's choice of career. These include:

Opportunity Structure Theory (Ken Roberts)

Ken Roberts (1977) asserted that individuals 'do not "choose" occupations in any meaningful sense; they simply take what is available' (p.1). He argues that an individual's social position determines their career choice and that they are conditioned to the decisions they make by their parents' occupational status and the opportunity structure presented by their local labour economy. Opportunity structure theory contends that 'people are thought of not so much as choosing work as being chosen for it. They do not need to agonise about what they want, because, it is argued, they take what is available to them. If they like their work, this is because they have learned to like what they can secure – through "anticipatory socialisation" (Law, 1996, p.48)'.

Although, traditionally, this career approach applied to those seeking employment in industrial and/or manufacturing organisations, it is increasingly relevant in professional settings as internal 'opportunity structures' adapt (through organisational restructuring and technological development) to reflect economic necessity. Individuals are more likely to accept those career opportunities that are available to them rather than those professional career appointments to which they may once have aspired. Perhaps organisations should look at their internal 'opportunity structures' to understand what they are and how they influence their employees' career attitudes.

Community Interaction Theory (Bill Law)

Whilst the work opportunities available in the local economy present one decision for an individual to make, Law suggests that the community provides another significant influence on individual career choice. He contends that 'people act, it is argued, for and in response to other people; encounters with and attachments to individuals and groups are both the cause and the effect of career development' (Law, 1996, p.48). This influence is more likely to impact on an individual where they are a member of a family community with a higher number of professional persons and the expectation to achieve professional leadership and the associated rewards. However, this theory also applies in industrial and ethnic communities where the members instil their attitudes and beliefs onto their younger community members. In making a career choice, Law suggests that '...developing a point of view is not an introspective event but a series of selective responses to other people's points of view' (1996, p.60). So individuals construct a career through interaction with their familial and neighbourhood communities. This theory is less likely to have an impact within organisations except, perhaps, where strong 'group bonding' occurs, perhaps as a consequence of organisational change, and influences the career choices of its members.

Social Learning Theory (John Krumboltz)

As acknowledged by Mitchell and Krumboltz (1996) this approach to career counselling 'derives from the far more contemporary general social learning theory of behaviour' (p.234) originally promulgated by Bandura (1971). In his theory, Krumboltz recognises that people learn from their experiences and adjust their behaviour to reflect the outcome of those experiences – in other words people will look to repeat favourable outcomes whilst seeking to minimise or avoid those experiences with less favourable outcomes.

He identifies 'two major types of learning experiences that result in individual behavioural and cognitive skills and preferences that allow people to function effectively in the world' (Mitchell and Krumboltz, 1996, p.234):

- 'instrumental learning experiences – which occur when a person's behaviour is positively reinforced or negatively punished as a consequence of that behaviour; and

- 'associative learning experiences – which occur when a person associates an event with a previous event that has significant emotional overtones for them.

Krumboltz suggests that people will make occupational choices based on their learning experience within given social environments. In the world of professional work young professionals will model themselves on their seniors in order to acquire those skills and behaviours associated with successful consulting, i.e. those roles in which they see others succeed and subsequently rewarded. Most PSFs facilitate career conversations through their performance management programmes so employees' experience of these career interventions will influence how they approach and manage their career transitions.

The organisational setting often also supports many other opportunities for learning (online learning, training workshops, seminars and work mentoring/shadowing etc.) that can also have an impact on an individual's career decisions. Recognising that social learning theory explains how a person's career path has evolved, but doesn't help career counsellors understand how to help an individual develop their career choices going forward, Krumboltz 'developed the learning theory of career counseling' in which he 'proposes that people choosing careers in modern society must cope with four fundamental trends and that career counsellors must be prepared to help people in that effort' (Mitchell and Krumboltz , 1996, pp.250-252) These four trends are that 'people need to:

1. expand their capabilities and interests, not base decisions on existing characteristics only,
2. prepare for changing work tasks, not assume that occupations will remain stable,
3. be empowered to take action, not merely to be given a diagnosis', and that

4. 'career counsellors need to play a major role in dealing with all career problems, not just occupational selection'.

This extension to social learning theory gives career counsellors a set of integrated guidelines to help clients address a range of other occupational issues that they face, including job advancement, motivation, relationships, retirement and stress. Social learning theory is highly appropriate and very relevant to professional organisations, but not all of them will appreciate its significance or enable their line managers to utilise its potential in the workplace. As Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey (2002) note, 'the strength of [the theory] is that it provides a description of factors influencing career decision making and identifies outcomes resulting from those influential factors' (p. 62). This overview of career models has given a framework within which to consider how different career development theories may assist PSFs to develop best practice when facilitating professionals' transitions.

Note

The final paper in this series will consider the appropriateness and relevance of these different career models and focus on the capabilities that professionals need to make effective career choices. It will appear in the winter 2007 issue.

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