

# Transition in Organisations: 3 – Connecting Career Capability

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This paper concludes my study into how Professional Service Firms (PSFs) facilitate professional transitions. It focuses on the capabilities that professionals might adopt to make effective career choices. In particular it considers:

- Bill Law's approach to 'career-learning' which identifies the skills that a competent individual might utilise when deciding on career progression; and
- the appropriateness and relevance of different career development models.

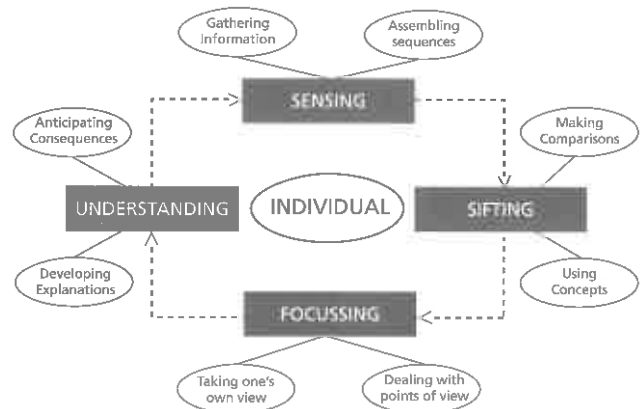
It ends by considering the future challenges that are likely to impact on PSFs in the 21st century when determining organisational career practice.

## Building a repertoire of career learning capacities

The career development theories considered in the previous article have added value to careers thinking and practice but have focused on an approach to thinking about careers (a framework or model) rather than the skills that an individual requires to make effective career choices. Bill Law, in seeking answers to the question "what new questions might a career learning theory seek to answer?" (1996, p.50), concludes that an individual requires a 'repertoire' of skills progressing them through a programme of career development learning activities. Citing Meadows (1993), he describes "a repertoire (as) a progressively acquired range of material – some basic, some developed – any part of which can be called into play as it proves appropriate" (Law, 1996, p.51). He refers to this as 'career learning theory' and proposes a four step approach to how people make their career decisions as illustrated in figure 1.

Law proposes that an individual needs to work through each of these four steps working progressively from one step to the next in order to determine their most appropriate career decision at the time they are making their choice i.e. within their 'current context'.

Figure 1: Law's Career-learning Theory



Watts (1998, p.4) also suggests that "increasingly, people need the more advanced capacities in order to manage their careers effectively. But these more advanced capacities cannot be developed unless the more basic capacities have been built to support them".

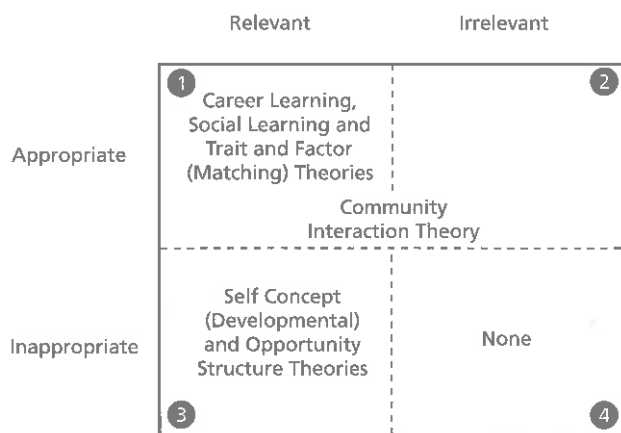
This theory gives both counsellor and client a clear process as to what the client needs to do to make an appropriate career decision and, for this reason, provides managers and their reports a sound process for enabling effective career conversations in professional environments. It also complements the meta-theory of career development presented in the previous paper in this series – see figure 1 adapted from the work of Bill Law (King, 2007) – by adding a third dimension. Law contends that "the third dimension discriminates between *differentialist* theories which assume that the important differences are between people, and *progressive* theories which assume that the important differences are between different stages of learning progression" (1996, p.67).

Besides the importance of this 'third dimension' a distinct advantage of this approach is that it focuses individuals on what is important to them and concentrates their thinking on the pertinent issues that they need to explore in order to make a sound career decision; as Law *et al* (2002) note "career-learning theory points to a 'bridge', by showing how learning occurs in such a way that what a person says about work and self are aspects of one process" (p.436). This means that an individual can, by reflecting on their past experiences, identify salient features (such as job achievements, preferences and working environments) and see whether they can replicate them in their new employment thereby connecting their past with their future experience.

## Assessing the organisational value of career development models

How do these different versions compete in terms of relevance and appropriateness? In professional service organisations each of the career models have different applications and relevance/appropriateness to the original purpose for which they were designed. The Cambridge Dictionary (2005) defines the two terms as – appropriateness, “suitable or right for a particular situation or occasion”; relevance, “the degree to which something is related or useful to what is happening or being talked about”. Figure 2 shows the relevance and appropriateness of each career development model.

**Figure 2: Organisational Value of Different Career Development Models**



Theories in ‘quadrant 1’ (Career Learning, Social Learning and Trait and Factor Matching) are both relevant and appropriate in organisational settings as they offer the following benefits in a professional culture:

- Career Learning – most professional firms conduct performance management reviews which include ‘career conversations’ and, although not well known, this theory gives professional organisations a set of skills which will enhance an individual’s ability to make optimal career choices
- Social Learning – is the traditional way in which professional consultants learn by role modelling more senior consultants and developing their own behaviours to reflect those of a successful consultant. This is a natural socialisation process, but might be strengthened if organisations sought new ways of reinforcing this process through structured learning interventions such as job shadowing, role reinforcement etc.

- Trait and Factor Matching – offers assessments which appeal to professionals who prefer to see structured feedback giving personal meaning to their challenging and complex existence; most organisations have made extensive use of psychometric profiling and, therefore, professionals are keen to experience this type of career review tool.

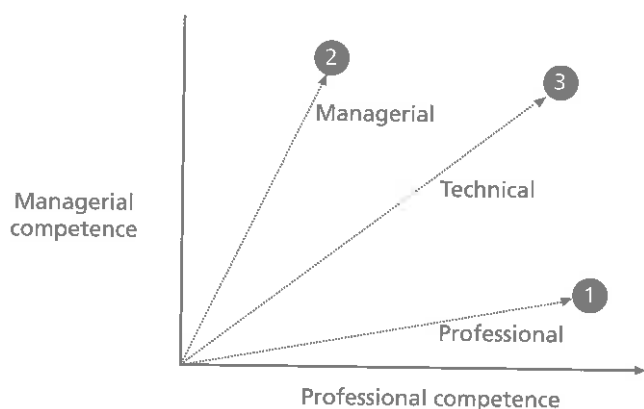
Next, looking between ‘quadrant 1 and 2’ (Community Interaction) theory, this is appropriate because it talks about how individuals are influenced by their local community when it comes to making a career choice and that, for professionals, it is both relevant and irrelevant to the organisations they find themselves in for the following reason: although the theory is largely irrelevant for the organisation itself professionals will be strongly influenced by the professional institution which they will have become members of, usually by qualification. This professional community will influence how an individual behaves within their organisation so the theory applies to the professional community rather than the organisational one. Finally, ‘quadrant 3’ (Self Concept – Developmental and Opportunity Structure) theories are very relevant to professional organisations as they, if properly understood, would be useful to organisations. However, in the current global business environment they are arguably less appropriate, even inappropriate, as the opportunities for matching individuals to the organisation are limited as a consequence of organisational restructuring, delayering etc. In the old ‘traditional’ careers, professionals advanced by moving up the organisational career ladder as proposed by Dalton *et al* (1977) in their model of career stages, but today there are fewer appointments for them to aspire to and the consequent opportunity structures do not exist within or without their local labour economies. This means that these two theories, although well grounded in professional organisations for many centuries, are no longer appropriate to contemporary professional business.

## The future of organisational career practice in the 21st century

Finally I look at some of the future challenges likely to impact on the 21st century professional organisation. Knowledge is the principal asset that PSFs trade in the post-modern world, so how are professional firms adapting to accommodate their professionals’ careers in this ‘knowledge economy’? The traditional approach to career education has evaporated as global economics have changed the way in which organisations transact business and hence the opportunities that exist for employees hoping to advance in their career. Littleton *et al* (2000) note that “...a shift from ‘bounded’ careers – prescribed by relatively stable organisational and occupational structures – to ‘boundary less’ careers – where uncertainty

and flexibility are the order of the day – is increasingly common” (p.101). In PSFs this is particularly true as the ‘knowledge’ of such organisations has become increasingly codified and captured by technology systems; this suggests a dilution of the professional’s role and a subsequent change in the career framework of professional organisations. However, in her study, Södergren (2002) found that knowledge intensive workers “not surprisingly, focus on the possibilities of learning and knowledge creation more than on formal positions in their perception of a positive development at work” (p.38).

**Figure 3: Managerial and Professional Competence**



This suggests that organisations should be focusing their career education programmes on a dialogue about how best to develop their professionals’ competence (‘route 1’) by creating “new career opportunities, reward systems, employee contracts, and so on” (Södergren, 2002, p.52) rather than the more traditional path of constructing managerial careers (‘route 2’). This may mean focusing on the content and meaning of an employee’s job rather than the position/role they occupy and will necessitate a greater emphasis on those career development models which are both relevant and appropriate – primarily, I suggest, career learning and social learning theories as identified in figure 2. Regarding ‘route 3’, Södergren (2002) states her opinion that “many knowledge-intensive organizations would be better off if they could find ways to reinforce and develop competence-based strategies, knowledge-based careers, and a leadership that maximized learning and knowledge creation” (p.53) – perhaps this is the route that PSFs should promote to achieve optimal business performance.

How can professional organisations develop their career practices and, in the 21st century, best achieve an ‘appropriate’ approach to career education and development? In the first paper of this series we looked at the possible elements of an organisational career system and noted many of the possible career interventions that an organisation might employ to facilitate career education and guidance programmes. In his ‘postscript’ Arnold (1997) suggests that “perhaps the most sure-fire way to achieve this is to combine developmental work

assignments with self-reflection aided perhaps by personal development planning, mentoring or career workshops” (p.206). This combination of approaches will create, for each individual, an opportunity to reflect on their own career preferences and make the occupational choice that is most appropriate in their current personal and organisational context.

This approach also supports the conclusions of Arthur *et al* (1999) who contend that “for present and future career actors, our evidence suggests that personal survival and growth through careers will increasingly depend on flexibility, versatility, improvisation and persistent learning” (p.170). It seems that the most relevant and appropriate career development models for professional organisations will be those that enable individuals to be adaptable within their careers and understand what that means as a result of continual career learning throughout their life. Career education remains important to 21st century professional organisations, but, in the light of global changes, continues to present many challenges for those organisations seeking to genuinely invest in their employees’ career education.

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