Challenging Notions of Career

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This session will present and examine the argument that the traditional notions of career, that have underpinned guidance theories and practice, are now open to challenge. This argument is woven from several strands.

Guidance theories and practice have been primarily concerned with the labour market, whether easing the transition from school to work or, more recently, helping adults avoid or escape unemployment. The nature of organisations, where careers are played out, has not featured in mainstream guidance theory and practice, but has been in the domain of human resource management and development.

However, the lifelong perspective upon learning means that guidance theories and practice will have to adopt a lifelong perspective upon career. This will mean that they will have to encompass more than a knowledge of the nature of occupations, and develop an understanding of the nature and dynamics of organisations.

From this organisational perspective, two challenges immediately arise to the traditional understanding of career. First, employers make a different interpretation of 'career' from those in the guidance field. It is not solely about fulfilling the employee's needs; employers see - and manage -the individual's career in terms of how it meets organisational needs. Second, there are several stakeholders in the individual's career, among them the employer, the individual's manager, whose own career may be dependent upon the success of subordinates and colleagues.

The way organisations are structured and operate, and hence how they configure and utilise their labour, is changing. Some of these changes - virtual organisations, team-working, knowledge management - have implications not only for individual's careers but also for the construct of career. It is often no longer appropriate to regard an individual's career as discrete, as predictable, as long-term.

These perspectives upon career suggest not only that changes in the world of work are challenging our notions of career but, perhaps more importantly, that those notions have hitherto been partial and blinkered. The construct of career has to be 'reframed' (Collin & Young, 2000) to enable us to recognise that career is:

- relational
- political
- ambivalent
- rhetorical

Moreover, for the future, we perhaps need to look at career in terms of projects, and attend to the 'subjective' as well as the 'objective' career.

Traditional understandings of career have been constructed through, and buttressed by, orthodox social science, with its distinction between objective and subjective. However, new approaches in the social sciences, sometimes referred to by the shorthand 'postmodern', are both initiating and facilitating these new ways of looking at career:

- constructionism
- contextualism
- relational approaches
- chaos theory, etc.
- indigenous psychologies

Further reading

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