

Responding to career uncertainty: Applying a 'dual-empathy' approach to career development using corporate strategy theory

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We live in rapidly changing times, with workers continuously facing challenges as organisations go through repeat and rapid transformations. Furthermore, literature on Future of Work, including the rise of artificial intelligence in the workplace, predicts greater levels of occupational hybridisation and contingent working, which will further increase job uncertainty. This paper argues that by drawing on theory and practice from organisational literature, career practitioners can appreciate better the impact of organisational change on work, and the implications of this for people's careers. Thus, in understanding both organisational and individual transformation, they can offer a 'dual-empathy' approach to career practice.



A changing world of work

'People need to prepare for changing work tasks, not assume that occupations will remain stable.'

Gothard (2001, p. 24)

University career services, both in the UK and globally, are considered the key facilitators of employment outcomes, as student employability and thus graduate employment forms a fundamental aspect of key performance indicators at higher education institutions. Careers teams are under growing pressure from students and universities to deliver exceptional careers development results for students, as well as to meet employer skills expectations - which are mounting in demand and complexity (Tomlinson, 2012). Furthermore, governments repeatedly address

the graduate skills agenda and voice concerns on shortages and skills gaps, emphasising the importance of industry skills needs and impact on productivity. Recently, Philip Hammond, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer in the previous UK government, suggested that the current slowing of productivity in the UK is partly because companies are not developing new skills at a pace to enable the effective adoption of emerging technologies. He argued that employers need to respond rapidly in order to be internationally competitive and meet the economic challenges of a changing world of work, (Gov.UK Speeches, 2018). Similarly, Shaffer and Zalewski (2011) argue that the current labour market requires a newer approach from careers teams, to support new graduates to gain entry, arguing the skills needed to manage a career in a new world of work are very different than were expected even a decade ago. These skills are, to a certain extent, different to current employability skills because the nature of work is predicted to be dissimilar due to the rise in automation, machine learning, and robotics (Schäfer, 2018). According to Shaffer and Zalewski (2011, p. 64), the shift from certainty to uncertainty is growing and has meant a different approach to career thinking, arguing:

From the beginning of the last decade of the 20th-century American business and industry noted that fundamental forces of change were reshaping the employment realities of the knowledge-driven, post-industrial economy.

Shaffer & Zalewski (2011, p. 64)

Lo Presti et al (2018) also highlighted the changes predicted in the economy in their study, including a greater number of jobs that are temporary, contingent,

hybridized and nonlinear, thus reflecting an increasing diversification of the workforce and organisations. As such, personal attributes and skills needed to work in a labour economy experiencing greater flux is now an increased requirement in career self-management (Bimrose, Barnes, Brown & Hughes 2011).

Career delivery for a VUCA world

It is important that modern service delivery for career and people development should acknowledge that a career, an organisation, and people are all subject to unexpected change. Consequently, asking people to 'choose and follow' a certain career path becomes irrelevant, given that certainty in careers may either disappear or change beyond recognition. Commentators such as Baruch (2004) suggest that workers in modern-day society are now subject to a multiplicity of changes within a 'Volatile Uncertain Complex Ambiguous' (VUCA) world and consequently career delivery needs to be modernised. VUCA is an 'organisational' related term as stated by Kinsinger and Walch (2012), to describe a changeable corporate/organisation environment. Shaffer and Zalewski (2011) also contend that new graduates are now entering a VUCA environment. Indeed, Shaffer and Zalewski claim that many graduates will face frequent job changes and they suggest career skills need to be adapted accordingly;

In a VUCA work environment, job security does not result from having a job, but from purposely and self-consciously maintaining a currency of skill and special knowledge that assures employability.

Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011, p. 69

They further suggest that the last 20 years of careers advice practices have supported graduates for permanent secure roles within traditional careers, with their job-offer of lifelong security and opportunities for financial success. They argue that this model of delivery is no longer valid in a new VUCA labour climate and therefore career practitioners should look towards newer methods of delivery. This paper argues that one such field to consider is *change strategy* drawn from corporate and organisational literature. This field

draws on theory and practice of how organisations adapt to change, and this paper argues that theories such as *Dynamic Capability Theory* (Teece et al. 1997) that examine change and adaptation from a macro 'organisation level can translate to micro 'worker' level and as such can offer valuable concepts for career development application.

A dual-empathy approach to careers

A considerable portion of current careers literature is focussed on 'the individual' and not on 'the employer'. This is because the literature on careers is often drawn from psychological and educational work which focusses on the individual, rather than corporate organisational literature – despite workers carrying out their careers 'in-situ' within organisations. However, it could be argued that as career development is a lifelong pursuit and careers occur within organisations, consequently careers practitioners ought to consider in more detail the impact of the organisation on careers. Indeed, many authors such as Inkson and King (2011) call for a 'dual empathy' approach for career development describing this approach where:

Individuals look at their careers through the lens of personal advantage and consider how their careers may provide opportunities to optimize earnings, status, personal development and family life, both immediately and in the long term.

Organizations consider those careers through the lens of organizational advantage and note that the careers of their staff may give them a means of maintaining or enhancing expertise, corporate culture and institutional memory as sources of long-term competitive advantage.

Inkson & King (2011, p. 38)

As such, this paper argues that both careers, and indeed HR practitioners working with employees on their career development, should move toward a delivery model that supports individuals to develop their career paths in a way that ensures they adopt adaptive qualities and skills that are in 'dual empathy' with organisations trends.

An example of dual empathy is the development of talent attraction schemes and talent development

programmes that are designed more explicitly to meet the aims of an organisation (in its plans for success and growth), and also acknowledge an individual worker's career expectations, offering workers more agency over their career development.

This rationale draws on corporate literature and mirrors that of how organisations maintain a competitive advantage by adopting a change-oriented approach, as described in the *Dynamic Capabilities* theory. This approach advocates that a more 'fluid' way of approaching career development is needed to also meet employer requirements as well as that of the individual, thereby proposing an inter-related stance by addressing both organisational needs and worker needs.

Dynamic Capabilities - a dual empathy method of managing change

Dynamic Capabilities is an academic field that offers empirical support on how organisations gain competitive advantage (Teece et al., 1997). Dynamic capability research considers factors that enable an organisation to adapt to its environment to achieve success, sustainability and robustness. The concept of dynamic capability as outlined by major proponents in the field state:

Dynamic capability is the firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments.

Teece et al. (1997, p. 509)

Dynamic capability essentially relates to an organisation's strategic ability to adapt, evolve and remain competitively advantaged in an unpredictable and unstable VUCA world. Therefore, dynamic capabilities are different to an organisation's *operational* capability, which relates to the day-to-day running of an organisation (such as administrative, legal and operational duties), whereas dynamic capabilities relate to the *directional* planning of an organisation. Leading proponents such as Teece et al. (1997) argue that by effectively applying a dynamic capabilities framework,

an organisation will be able to create a short-term benefit - by which the continued application will build a longer-term competitive lead and thus be able to meet the challenges of a highly changeable world. Whilst the original framework was developed in 1997, Teece has since written substantially on this area and subsequently created a significant research body examining the impact of dynamic capabilities on successful outcomes across many industries - from international global tech firms through to small start-ups and public sector organisations. Teece notes, in all cases, despite the varying sizes and purpose of an organisation, the ability to adapt effectively to their environment is the chief factor in continuous success and in maintaining competitive advantage. His more recent studies highlight research on companies such as Apple, Google, and IBM as examples of firms who have adopted this dynamic framework model for growth and success. Teece posits that for an organisation to create and maintain a competitive lead there are three key attributes that enable an evolutionary approach and states three constructs that constitute the dynamic capabilities that organisations need to adopt:

- **Sensing:** this is an ability for a firm to develop insights into the world around them by understanding trends and behaviours
- **Seizing:** this is an ability for a firm to take risks where possible and seize opportunities for growth and development
- **Transforming:** this is an ability for a firm to enable change processes within an organisation to occur by transforming an organisation (both tangible; products and processes and intangible assets; skills and outlook) and to reconfiguring strategy and structure.

(Teece et al., 1997)

Whilst it could be argued that by adopting continuous change processes is costly for firms, commentators such as D'Aveni, Dagnino & Smith (2010) suggest by not doing so could lead to an organisation failing, as the need to embrace uncertainty and transformation is necessary in order to survive. An interesting case study cited in this field of research to demonstrate the success of a dynamic capability model is that of Samsung who have developed a successful business from an unforeseen start:

Twenty years ago, few people would have predicted that Samsung could transform itself from a low-cost original equipment manufacturer to a world leader... By the end of 2010, Samsung was selling as many smartphones as Apple. And by 2013, it had become the leading smartphone manufacturer in the world, with a 32% global market share. How did Samsung rebound so quickly? The key was dynamic capabilities. While existing research has emphasized cooperation among organizational units in developing new products and technologies, the example of Samsung demonstrates that competition among business units can also enhance a firm's dynamic capabilities.

Song, Kyungmook Lee, and Khanna (2016, p. 118)

The key to dynamism is people

Teece (2007) asserts that a dynamic capability environment can only work if the people within it are able to adapt to it – and ideally for the whole firm culture to be open to change. Indeed, Teece argues that the whole of the organisation must gear its workforce to adopt creative and innovative thinking and then enable this to happen through creating effective organisational design, saying:

While certain individuals in the enterprise may have the necessary cognitive and creative skills, the more desirable approach is to embed scanning, interpretative, and creative processes inside the enterprise itself. The enterprise will be vulnerable if the sensing, creative and learning functions are left to the cognitive traits of a few individuals.

Teece (2007, p. 1323)

For career and HR practitioners this would suggest that there is a potential for consolidation of dynamic capabilities and employability by considering the skills needed to develop a *dynamic capability*. Indeed, according to Finch, Peacock, Levallet & Foster (2016), there is a strong relationship with dynamic capability and successful employability. It is argued the type of career behaviours that would enhance employability

includes being able to transform knowledge and learning into more effective career self-management (Finch et al. 2016). It is suggested that graduates would be able to improve their employability by adopting 'organisational-based' skills such as used in dynamic capabilities. Examples of dynamic capability competencies include: the ability to communicate well, being able to build effective relationships, being open to new experiences and being conscientious (Finch et al. 2016). Dynamic capability is dependent on worker behaviours of being able to connect and communicate with people in order to develop a shared approach to change. Indeed, Teece (2007) also suggests that 'Dynamic Microfoundations' (which include people skills) are needed for the application of a dynamic capability for a firm and outlines the critical microfoundations people-skills needed as:

- to be able to scan and analyse market changes and make interpretive choices based on the data;
- adopting creative and innovative thinking to enable new products and services to meet changing customer needs; and
- developing strong relationships and social contacts to enable a better understanding of a market.

Consequently, careers and HR practitioners need to consider that many firms will adopt a version of dynamic capabilities to enable their ability to continually adapt, and to also recognise that firms will feel that key to this strategy is in attracting and developing the 'Microfoundation people-skills' to enable them to achieve longer-term success. Accordingly, the impact of dynamic capabilities for career teams is to consider how they can create career delivery to meet VUCA and skills delivery for changeable and unstable career structures.

Career Dynamism

To adopt to dynamic capabilities, a firm would need workers with aptitudes and attributes of managing well with change and instability - to enable growth (Wall, Cordery & Clegg, 2002). Recent research showed those best at managing change have demonstrated the skills of resilience, self-reliance and 'career self-management' needed to meet the changing world of work that

is fluid in nature (Bimrose et al., 2011). People who demonstrate they can manage uncertainty are more likely to manage in the new world of work as expected in a firm adopting dynamic capabilities that are both VUCA and dynamic. As such the 'Career Dynamism' approach advocated by Pasha (2019) 'bridges' the two theoretical constructs of 'worker career' development and 'organisational strategy' development and so offers a 'dual empathy' approach.

Central to 'career dynamism' is the belief that to manage change and uncertainty, workers need adaptive and pro-active career qualities and these same qualities are desirable for dynamic capability corporate success (Zhou & Li, 2010). The study by Pasha (2019) revealed four highly significant career dynamism qualities: (1) *Analytical Skills*; possessing the personality traits of (2) *Openness to Experience*; (3) *Conscientiousness*, and the Career Resilience trait of (4) *Self Reliance*. These attributes are similar to the Microfoundations people-skills that are key to dynamic capabilities success and to the qualities described in dynamic capability with employability (Finch et al., 2016). These factors also align to those described by proponents of career adaptability, such as pro-active career management skills. For example, there is clear alignment of the career adaptability factor of 'curiosity' as it is also a sub-trait of 'Openness to Experience' (Bimrose et al. 2011)

Dynamic capabilities skills are needed by workers in firms to achieve sustainable development, as outlined by Harreld et al.:

Dynamic capabilities [at IBM] are not abstract academic concepts but a concrete set of mechanisms that help managers address the fundamental question of strategy, which is to develop a truly sustainable competitive advantage. Interestingly, we are beginning to realize that sustainability is fleeting unless it is aligned with capabilities to continually sense how the marketplace is changing and seize these changes through dynamic organizational realignment.

Harreld et al. (2007, p. 41).

As such, the rationale of career dynamism mirrors the dynamic capabilities that Harreld et al. (2007) highlight in their paper that described how IBM achieved success

from near failure in the 1990s. In implementing a change-orientated organisational dynamic capability strategy, IBM was able gain a competitive advantage by focussing on building people qualities needed for evolution and change. This approach has been repeated in numerous studies and strategies across the world. A crucial learning point is that these people-capabilities are qualities needed not only in a firm by its workers, but potentially all workers to manage a VUCA influenced career. Career dynamism highlights the key people skills that should be adopted in order to more successfully navigate a changing world of work. These skills are also related to recent career literature and especially those outlined by postmodern career theorists such as in the Chaos Theory of Careers (CTC) by Bright and Pryor (2005). They, and other postmodern career theorists, advocate that career practitioners should offer career delivery that enables people to develop career management skills for success for a seemingly disordered VUCA career environment – by placing greater emphasis on skills development within career practice – as described within CTC. Indeed, Bright and Pryor (2005) argue that by focussing more on skills and behavioural qualities, and less on learning occupational information (given it is subject to rapid and repeat change), career practitioners are enabling better lifelong employability, which may also include lifelong learning, in order to adapt to newer skills and job requirements.

Conclusion

Trying to place an evolving person into the changing work environment is like trying to hit a butterfly with a boomerang.

Mitchell and Krumboltz (1996, p. 263)

Career theory has developed as a response to the processes and progress of social, economic, geopolitical and industrial changes. Moving from the early 20th century industrial age of career permanence into career transformation in the 21st century, the literature shows there has been a change from traditional career theory to postmodernist contemporary career theory, suggesting that life-long careers have disappeared and volatility in careers is now commonplace. As career development is a process that an individual undertakes throughout their lifetime, career delivery

therefore needs be focussed more on developing career management skills to a changing world of work. Furthermore, the world of work is anticipated to become more uncertain and changeable, and consequently traditional career delivery models may not be an apposite process for contemporary career development, which is expected to be subject to more ambiguous, chaos led and changeable market forces (Hall & Mirvis, 2013; Bright & Pryor, 2005).

However, current practices of careers delivery are often based on traditional career models and are not designed to offer career support for a new generation of workers moving into a world that will be more uncertain and subject to many changes - including future work scenarios predicted with the advancement of technology and organisational changes. The work by Teece et al (1997) in the field of Dynamic Capabilities demonstrates that firms need to adapt to survive. As demonstrated, dynamic capabilities theory is a useful body of literature to draw on for career development practice, as examining the strategy of firms gives an indication of the impact on future employability needs, especially in relation to future of work scenarios (Lo Presti et al., 2018).

As such, the study by Pasha (2019) argues that people practitioners (HR and careers) should move to supporting individuals to acquire adaptive qualities that would increase their prospects of life-long employability. Many firms are now adopting a model of employment of non-permanent workers as one method of being more responsive and agile, and therefore it is possible that a more dynamic careers strategy, such as one with *career dynamism*, will influence recruitment and development. This paper suggests that keeping a focussed 'individual' view and not including 'employer' views restricts career theory evolution. Thus, considering career development qualities as part of organisational strategy ought to be a significant area for future career management research.



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