

Enhancing the sustainability of careers in disruptive times

Ans De Vos

Antwerp Management School and University of Antwerp, Belgium

For correspondence

Ans De Vos: Ans.DeVos@ams.ac.be

To cite this article:

De Vos, A. (2024). Enhancing the sustainability of careers in disruptive times. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, 53(1), 8-17. <https://doi.org/10.20856/jnicec.5302>

Abstract

Our current world is putting to the test the resilience of many workers when dealing with uncertainty and adjusting to changing ways of working, rapid digitisation, combined with a pressure to perform and stay employable. In these uncertain times, it has become even more clear that careers cannot be seen as a linear sequence of predictable work experiences that one has full control over, and that individuals cannot just rely on others to take care of their career security. At the same time, it provokes questions regarding the role of different stakeholders involved. Moreover, it becomes important to broaden the view of sustainable careers to encompass not only how individuals' careers are affected by a changing context, but also how individual career choices affect this context and hence can contribute to enhancing sustainability in a broader sense. This article summarises the key elements of sustainable careers theory and discusses the relevance of this framework for understanding and addressing contemporary career challenges and implications for career counselling. It is a summary of my keynote address at the NICEC conference in Birmingham, July 2024.

Keywords: sustainable careers; time; social space; agency and meaning

Introduction

A career comes down to the pattern of work-related experiences that a person accumulates throughout their professional life (Arthur et al., 1989). It is a complex mosaic of objective situations and events, along with the subjective evaluations people make of them. In other words, it's about the accumulation of work we do daily and how we feel about it. Careers are highly subjective and complex, unique to each individual and dynamic over time.

In our current world of work, the traditional view of a career as a relatively stable, linear and predictable sequence of work-related experiences no longer holds for capturing the multiplicity of sequences of work experiences, the large variety and inequalities in the careers of different groups of people, and the disruptions people encounter in their work over time. Moreover, traditional academic perspectives on careers no longer suffice for understanding (mental) health issues, including burnout, employability threats, and workplace trends such as 'quiet quitting' – all signaling a disconnect between what's needed for individuals to stay happy, healthy and productive throughout their career and what organisations are currently providing. Differently stated: the current context calls for innovations in career management theories and policies, as well as in career guidance and counseling.

In recent years, the topic of sustainable careers has received increased interest from scholars as a promising perspective to understand contemporary careers. First coined by Karen Newman in 2011, academic interest in the topic steadily increased after the publication of the *Handbook of Research on Sustainable Careers* in 2015 (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2015). Since then, academic publications have been on the rise, including a dedicated special issue in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (Van der Heijden et al., 2020) and symposia at different conferences. At the same time, changes in the context have also brought the topic to the table of policy makers, (HR-)managers and other key actors (De Vos et al., 2016).

Sustainable careers research focuses on the dynamic interplay of person, context, and time to study how person-career fit can enhance the long-term sustainability of people's careers (De Vos et al., 2020). Recent research has applied the sustainable career model to, for example, the challenges of career sustainability for different groups of workers (e.g., contingent workers, Retkowski et al., 2023; managerial mothers, Michaelides et al., 2023), the processes involved in career sustainability over time (e.g., Richardson & McKenna, 2020; Van den Groenendaal, 2022) and the interplay of multiple stakeholders in different contexts affecting sustainable careers (e.g., Donald et al., 2020; Hennekam et al., 2022).

The interest in protecting the sustainability of people's careers can be framed within the broader concerns for sustainability, i.e. the protection and renewal of the natural environment, the maintenance of equitable economic progress, and the realisation of social well-being (Greenhaus et al., 2024). Sustainable careers are typically seen within the latter category, as external forces (economic turbulence, changing employer-employee relationships, technological change, the pandemic and geopolitical threats) are impacting (opportunities for) employment and bringing along pressure and uncertainty. Within the current academic discourse on sustainable careers, most attention is going towards the implications of these forces for people's careers. There has been less attention for how solutions for these broader sustainability issues may also require people, and all stakeholders involved, to think differently about careers and how the choices people make throughout their career may contribute to resolving sustainability issues related to environmental sustainability – by joining sectors or organisations focusing on finding solutions rather than further depleting resources, as an example (De Vos et al., 2023). Career counseling plays a role in guiding individuals toward careers in occupations or sectors focused on enhancing sustainability rather than depleting it, as captured for instance by the notion of green careers. This can be seen as a personal and societal commitment to career sustainability and addressing global environmental challenges

In the current literature, sustainable careers are typically being conceptualised at the individual level, situating the individual in a broader career ecosystem (Baruch, 2015). At a more macro level, and seen from a broader sustainability perspective, there are clear links with several of the UN Sustainable Development Goals including SDG 6 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) yet until now, the academic research on sustainable careers has developed rather independently from these goals.

A rapidly changing career context

Individuals' careers do not develop in a vacuum but are affected by the multiple contexts in which they unfold. In other words, careers are part of a wide and dynamic ecosystem which operates across internal and external labour markets (Baruch, 2015; Donald et al., 2024). This career ecosystem is not purely economic but is also part of a socio-political environment on a global scale. Within an ecosystem, actors create value through relationships, and within the career ecosystem, work and employment relationships determine careers and their outcomes. Similar to a natural ecosystem, it involves the flow of people, knowledge, and talent within a complex environment of labour markets and organisations (Baruch, 2015).

Compared to the past, this ecosystem has become more dynamic in many ways. The most prominent are the rapid changes and growth in certain professions (such as those related to technology and AI), the disappearance of other professions, changes in employment relationships, and shifting sectoral focuses (such as automation and the relocation of production capacity).

Careers are intertwined with a societal context and cannot be viewed separately from labour law, social law, and social security. Societal developments and government policies around these issues influence the sustainability of careers and the way organisations can and want to manage them. Several trends are emerging in our labour market, including growing workforce diversity, a structural mismatch between supply and demand, and a shrinking replacement ratio due to an ageing and shrinking population.

Moreover, careers are not separate from personal life contexts, which also evolve over time. Changes in family composition, shifting patterns in life stages, migration, and education levels all impact people's career needs, aspirations, and opportunities to find meaningful work and build a fulfilling career. Employees do not leave this personal life context at the door when they enter the workplace, so organisations must consider it in their policies.

Organisations, in turn, are confronted with a rapidly changing context in terms of informatisation, technology, and globalisation, making agility and speed the core of competitive advantage. However, success in this area is only possible when employees are willing and able to change as well.

To fully understand careers, one has to realise the influences of these multiple career contexts and the changes occurring within them, the career actors that take part in the play, and the dynamic nature of the system. Moreover, there are major differences in the characteristics of these contexts and how key actors are shaping the ecosystem across the world – both between and within countries – bringing along different challenges depending upon the geographical context.

Within this ecosystem, different actors may have different views on careers, different needs and possibilities, which means that what one party sees as a solution, another party may see as a problem. For example, from a societal perspective, policies around raising the retirement age provide a solution to keep pensions affordable, to protect social security systems as well as productivity. Yet, for many workers involved, it may create challenges to protect their health and stay employable in a context where there is much pressure to perform and adapt to rapidly changing jobs. Moreover, older job seekers often face prejudices from employers when applying for jobs. For employers, a higher retirement age requires measures in terms of employability and brings higher labour costs with a larger group of older employees.

Thus, the multiple and rapid changes in the environment have many implications for careers but also for the actors involved in policy making regarding careers, both at the organisational level and the societal level. Whilst organisations need to reconsider the meaning of an organisational career and how career development can be managed to match individual and organisational needs, policy makers are faced with challenges related to sustainable employment and the employability of all individuals in the workforce. For career counsellors, this calls for interventions that facilitate individuals' efforts to enhance the sustainability of their careers across the lifespan, taking into account the (changing) needs of multiple stakeholders involved.

The ultimate challenge this presents is the inherently dynamic, idiosyncratic and often unpredictable nature of careers. The complex combination of factors affecting an individual's career decisions, behaviors and outcomes over time requires measures that facilitate individuals in making career choices that are in line with their individual needs, that take into account the needs stemming from their private life context, and that also contribute to organisational (e.g. high performance, loyalty, employability) and societal (e.g. protecting wellbeing and welfare) needs.

Sustainable careers

Seen from an individual perspective, the rich variety of possible sequences of experiences making up an individual's career implies that we may encounter examples of both 'positive spirals' wherein career episodes over time become enriched, and 'negative spirals' wherein career episodes may be characterised by, for instance, demotivating or unrewarding experiences (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). As noted by Van der Heijden & De Vos (2015), the complexity of our world today entails many opportunities for individuals to make choices in line with their inner drives, but yet there is also an ample list of factors which endanger the continuity of careers or at least continuity in realising a personally satisfying sequence of work experiences. Moreover, what might appear to be a 'successful' or 'satisfying' career in the short run does not always remain so in the long run.

In other words, through the ways in which society, organisations and individuals deal with careers they either facilitate the sustainability of careers or put careers 'at risk' because they might become unsustainable over time.

Building on recent career concepts such as the boundaryless career (Arthur, 1994), the protean career (Hall, 2002), the kaleidoscope career (Maniero & Sullivan, 2005), the

customised career (Valcour, Bailyn, & Quijada, 2007), and the post-corporate career (Peiperl & Baruch, 1997), Van der Heijden & De Vos (2015) introduced the notion of a sustainable career, offering a complementary but fresh perspective on the conceptualisation of careers in today's economy.

Sustainable careers refer to *'sequences of career experiences reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, thereby crossing several social spaces, characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual'* (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015: 7). They imply the continuous development, conservation, and renewal of individuals' career-related resources over time.

Four core dimensions are thereby important to consider (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2015): (1) time, (2) social space, (3) agency, and (4) meaning.

Time dimension: Longer and less predictable

The essence of sustainability is that there is continuity over time, i.e. that present needs are being fulfilled without compromising future needs. In that sense, the cycle of career-related events and decisions making up an individual's career over the course of one's professional life will determine sustainability of a career in the long run. Many different patterns of continuity are possible, whereby periods of employment can be interchanged by periods of part-time work, volunteering, unemployment, sabbatical leave, care-giving, and so on.

Recently, the time aspect of careers has gained attention due to increased retirement ages, resulting in longer careers. In addition, careers have become more unpredictable as organisations are more volatile and rapid technological changes are impacting jobs, leading to less fixed career paths.

Social context: From unidimensional to increasing complexity

Careers exist at the intersection of individuals and organisations. They are influenced by factors in both personal life contexts and organisational contexts. Both, in turn, are influenced by a broader societal context. Advances in information technology have decoupled work for many jobs from time and place. As a result, an increasing number of employees experience a blurring of boundaries between work and private life, a form of flexibility that offers opportunities for both organisations and employees, but also poses the challenge of maintaining healthy boundaries between work time and private time.

People also make choices across various life domains that impact their careers. For instance, an employee's career decision may be influenced by a partner's decision to accept a job abroad. People with young children may temporarily work less and later increase their work volume again. The traditional breadwinner model has been replaced by a dual-earner model, and there is a growing diversity in family structures that are less likely to coincide with predictable age categories, bringing along the need for caregiving (for children, parents...) at different life stages. All this makes careers today quite complex and—again—less certain and predictable. It also becomes harder for organisations to predict their employees' decisions.

Moreover, careers increasingly do not coincide with a single organisation where one spends their entire professional life. Employees who are more mobile generally experience more ownership over their careers when this mobility is self-chosen. At the same time, there are still large groups of employees experiencing high mobility due to a lack of job security, a succession of short-term contracts, or temporary employment.

Ownership: From organisation-driven to self-directed

Despite the many structural factors at all levels (personal circumstances, job, organisation, profession, society) that influence a career, the career ultimately belongs to the individual. This has always been the case, but with the overlap of a career with employment in the same organisation, it often seemed to many employees that their career belonged more to the organisation than to themselves. This was also reflected in the strong top-down approach characterizing organizational career management.

There is a general trend toward viewing careers as more independent from organisations than before. Employees are now considered responsible for their own career success and continuity. This 'ownership' of the career also brings increased responsibility, in a world that seems more complex, with seemingly more choices than ever. Ownership therefore requires the development of a set of career competencies, such as awareness of one's own talents, motives and needs as well as communication skills and proactive behaviors including feedback seeking and networking. Developing career competencies is therefore an essential ingredient of contemporary career policy.

Agency is also a timely topic when considering the sustainability of careers for those groups who are more vulnerable in the labour market (e.g., young workers without qualifications, unemployed older workers). The latter often experience a lack of agency due to a lack of required (career) competencies, or due to the negative experiences they encounter when putting this agency into practice without the desired result of obtaining a job.

Meaning of career success: From objective to subjective

Since contemporary careers conform less to the 'classic' definition— a succession of jobs, often organised hierarchically, with the same employer—career success is also less measurable in terms of salary, promotion, and status. People can have very different ideas about what a career means to them. Thus, the experience of objective career success, as reflected in achievements like salary, promotion, and status, has changed, with more emphasis now placed on subjective success. The advantage of these subjective values is that each employee can make their own career choices based on them. But it also implies a challenge. Satisfaction must come from one's own criteria, rather than from objective status symbols or evaluations by others.

Moreover, these success criteria are neither fixed nor predictable. What people find important in a job at the start of their career will often not align with what they find important toward the end of their career.

Our contemporary world challenges the extent to which a sustainable career can be achieved by taking a purely inside-out perspective. Careers are part of a global and rapidly changing socio-economic environment, which is not only affecting individuals' careers, but

whereby individuals' career choices also impact this environment. To turn around trends such as increasing inequality, biodiversity loss, climate change, and forced migration, there is a need for people to develop sustainability intelligence and a global mindset (De Vos et al., 2023). When subjective career success comes at the cost of, for instance, depleting resources, raising inequality or contributing to climate change, one might question to what extent this can be called a sustainable career.

Enhancing the sustainability of careers

There are challenges pertaining to the sustainability of careers for individuals in all key stages of the career life cycle. Depending on the career and life stage they are in, individuals may have different needs which call for different types of measures. For instance, individuals in their early career might need opportunities to put into practice what they have learned at school, young parents might need measures that allow them to combine career and care without compromising their future career growth. Older workers might need measures that enhance person-environment fit, for instance in terms of physical capacities or mental health, or allow them to transfer their experience to the younger generation through coaching.

To facilitate sustainable careers throughout the lifecourse it is therefore important to enhance person-career fit from a dynamic perspective. This means that the individual should be facilitated in career crafting to create a dynamic balance between what they need to be(come) and stay happy, healthy and productive over the course of their career, and what's needed from the organisational perspective – thereby acknowledging the multiple changes that may affect both parties' needs.

Employee health, happiness and productivity are typically being seen as the key indicators of a sustainable career (Van der Heijden, 2005; De Vos et al., 2020). Together these three indicators refer to careers at the crossroad of individuals and organisations, as they move beyond a mere focus upon individual career success criteria and (mental) health to also include outcomes that matter to the organisation. The reasoning is that to continue working in jobs that keep one happy and healthy, it will be important to also be mindful about what the organisational needs are in terms of performance and employability. From the organisational perspective, the idea is that to have keep people productive and employable, it will be important to address what they need in order to stay happy and healthy.

First, happiness refers to the satisfaction people gain from their work. Over time, people might change their perspective upon what's needed for them to stay satisfied – which might be due to ageing and increased (life) experience, but which might also be affected by events in one's personal or professional context making a person actively reconsider what's important for them to stay satisfied.

Second, staying healthy requires actions from both employers and individuals to ensure that there remains a fit between physical and psychological work demands and a person's capacities – taking into account changes occurring over time on both sides. This requires attention for how resources can be developed that help people cope with (changing) demands, not only at work but also in their private life sphere.

Third, to stay productive across the course of one's career, attention is needed for lifelong learning to sustain a fit with changing job requirements in terms of competencies. Careers can be seen as a sequence of learning cycles, successions of mini-stages of exploration-trial-mastery-exit, that people go through across their career. The key issue determining a learning stage will not be the chronological age but career age, where perhaps five years in a given occupation or sector may be midlife for one area or only the early career for another area.

Careers for a sustainable future: Opportunities for career counseling

There is a growing need to take into account the sustainability of careers when facilitating individuals in their career development – both when it comes to protecting their own career sustainability and when it comes to considering the implications of their career choices for broader sustainability challenges.

Regarding the first, this requires the development of a critical set of meta-competencies which enable people to be reflective about what's needed in order to stay productive, as well as happy and healthy throughout their career. In parallel with sustainability competencies, a sustainable career orientation implies a capacity to balance short-term and long-term thinking, and to consider the needs of multiple stakeholders. Career counselors can facilitate individuals in developing these meta-competencies by helping them to obtain insight into both their personal needs and opportunities as well as those within their context and the multiple stakeholders involved. It requires taking a broader perspective than only focusing upon finding work that fits with 'who I am, what I want, and what I am good at' to also include the broader life context, stakeholders therein, and addressing the potential longer-term implications of short-term choices.

Regarding the second, the current grand challenges our world is facing create an urgent need to broaden the meaning of a sustainable career as, through the career choices people make, they can impact sustainability in a broader sense. Thus, it is important to address not only how the context impacts careers, but also how careers impact the context. Career counselors can play a crucial role in this, by taking a broad approach towards sustainability and by exploring together with their clients how to find and keep work that is not only enhancing the sustainability of their own career over time but at the same time contributing to a more sustainable future for all. When doing so, providing people with a sufficient sense of control and believe that they can make a difference, will be important as bringing in these grand challenges may also induce fear and a feeling of not being in control. If career counselors can help people in finding work that matters – not only for themselves but for the broader context - it might help building the sense of control, resilience and hope that's so much needed in society today.

All this requires career counselors moving beyond the individual as the focal point of attention, for whom an (ideal) match is being sought with available jobs based upon their interests, needs, motives and talents. There is a need to bring in the multiple layers of context, and to help people understand and navigate this context. Career counselors can work collaboratively with educational institutions, green organisations, and policymakers for example, to channel individuals toward sustainable sectors in view of future-proofing careers and addressing societal needs.

This can be realised by expanding the focus upon career meta-competencies to include green competencies, such as knowledge of SDGs and sustainable practices, which are becoming crucial in many industries. Career counseling can help individuals acquire these competencies, which are vital for long-term employability in green careers.

To conclude, navigating today's world of work is complex and people will likely be challenged in their career development throughout their career journey. Career counselors can be a 'compagnon de route', providing guidance and helping people choose direction, supporting them to change course when needed, thereby providing the tools they need for crafting a sustainable career.

References

- Arthur, M.B. (1994). The boundaryless career: A new perspective for organisational inquiry. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 15(4), 295-306. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.4030150402>
- Arthur, M.B., Hall, D. T., & Lawrence, B. S. (1989). Generating new directions in career theory: the case for a transdisciplinary approach. In M.B. Arthur, D.T. Hall, & B.S. Lawrence (Eds.), *Handbook of Career Theory* (pp. 7-25). Cambridge University Press.
- Baruch, Y. (2015). Organisational and labor markets as career eco-system. In A. De Vos & B. Van der Heijden (Eds.) *Handbook of research on sustainable careers*, Edward Elgar Publishing.
- De Vos, A., Dujardin, J.M., Gielens, T., & Meyers, C. (2016). *Developing sustainable career across the lifespan: European Social Fund network on Career and AGE (Age, Generations, Experience)*. Springer.
- De Vos, A., Van der Heijden, B. I., & Akkermans, J. (2020). Sustainable careers: Towards a conceptual model. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 117, 103196. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.06.011>
- Donald, W.E., Baruch, Y., & Ashleigh, M.J. (2020). Striving for sustainable graduate careers: Conceptualization via career ecosystems and the new psychological contract. *Career Development International*, 25(2), 90-110. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-03-2019-0079>
- Greenhaus, J. H., Callanan, G.A., & Powell, G.N. (2024). Advancing research on career sustainability. *Journal of Career Development*, 51(4), 478-497. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08948453241260871>
- Hall, D. T. (2002). *Careers in and out of organizations*. Sage Publications.
- Hennekam, S., de Becdelievre, P., & Grima, F. (2022). A sustainable career for interim managers: the role of career communities. *Personnel Review*, 51(4), 1277-1297. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PR-09-2020-0670>
- Michaelides, A., Anderson, D., & Vinnicombe, S. (2023). A qualitative exploration of managerial mothers' flexible careers: The role of multiple contexts. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 141, 103840. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2022.103840>

- Peiperl, M., & Baruch, Y. (1997). Back to square zero: the post-corporate career. *Organizational Dynamics*, 25(4), 7-22. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0090-2616\(97\)90033-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0090-2616(97)90033-4)
- Retkowsky, J., Nijs, S., Akkermans, J., Jansen, P., & Khapova, S.N. (2023). Toward a sustainable career perspective on contingent work: a critical review and a research agenda. *Career Development International*, 28(1), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-06-2022-0181>
- Richardson, J., & McKenna, S. (2020). An exploration of career sustainability in and after professional sport. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 117, 103314. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2019.06.002>
- Valcour, M.L., Baily, L., & Quijada, M.A. (2007). Customized careers. In H.P. Gunz & M.A. Peiperl (Eds.), *Handbook of career studies* (pp. 188-210). Sage.
- Van den Groenendaal, S.M.E., Akkermans, J., Fleisher, C., Kooij, D.T., Poell, R.F., & Freese, C. (2022). A qualitative exploration of solo self-employed workers' career sustainability. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 134, 103692. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2022.103692>
- Van der Heijden, B., & De Vos, A. (2015). Sustainable careers: Introductory chapter. In A. De Vos & B. Van der Heijden (Eds.) *Handbook of research on sustainable careers* (pp.1-19). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Van der Heijden, B., De Vos, A., Akkermans, J., Spurk, D., Semeijn, J., Van der Velde, M., & Fugate, M. (2020). Sustainable careers across the lifespan: Moving the field forward. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 117, 103344. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2019.103344>