

Career Success in a New Perspective: An Interview with Michael Arthur

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Michael Arthur grew up in the UK and is now a Professor of Management at Suffolk University, Boston, USA. He is author of *The New Careers* (Sage, 1999, with Kerr Inkson and Judith Pringle) and editor of a series of books aimed at developing career theory, including *Handbook of Career Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), *The Boundaryless Career* (Oxford University Press, 1996) and *Career Creativity* (Oxford University Press, 2002). The interview below was originally published in the February 2002 Danish journal *Civiløkonomen*, and the interviewer is editor of that journal. Michael is currently a Visiting Fellow at NICEC.

What is the state of the art in human resources - and what are you working on right now?

You ask about human resources, but there's a question - resources for whom? As typically viewed through the lens of 'human resource management' the person is a resource of the employer. This is a way of thinking we have inherited from the 'industrial state' era that followed World War II. To oversimplify, it means that we are supposed to do what the employer wants rather than what we want for ourselves. That doesn't work any more. Indeed, it seems immoral.

Immoral?

When a company could be reasonably sure of offering lifetime employment, it was more defensible to ask people to do the company's bidding. Doing so was a response to the company's offer of employment security. Today, a company that claims to offer such security is deceiving itself - and its employees. So people need to think of themselves as resources in a larger sense, to the occupations, industries, and economies in which their careers are invested. Companies can come and go, while industries and economies stay healthy.

Can you explain that a bit more?

Take the independent film industry. A new firm gets formed just about every time a movie gets made and then the firm is disbanded on the movie's completion. But the industry thrives because people make their own career and learning investments in each movie project and then stay closely networked over future opportunities. The same phenomenon is largely true in the software industry, the cellular phone industry and in many other industries that we used to think of as providing permanent jobs. Healthy industries don't offer permanent jobs any more. There's too much change going on.

So what's the moral high ground for companies today?

Simply to be honest with the employee. Don't promise what you can't deliver. Do try to provide a good learning opportunity so that the people will be more employable if

and when they move on. And get rid of those old assumptions that people can't be trusted. Also, don't claim you have got rid of the old assumptions until you've cleaned out old-fashioned seniority-based pay and promotion systems or pension schemes that are back-loaded according to length of service.

Is there anything else in it for companies?

How about being part of something larger, and more dynamic than the old employment contract ever supposed? How about being part of a healthy industry in which people come and go and pollinate firms with knowledge like bees pollinate the flowers in a meadow? How about being among the firms that take best advantage of this cross-pollination? What came first, Nokia or the regional industry conditions that host Nokia? Didn't the industry conditions come first? Yet you wouldn't think so if you read the mainstream management and human resource management advice.

So that brings us back to people?

Back to people and their careers, but let's be clear what we mean. The basic meaning of 'career' is the person's - unfolding set of work experiences over time. Seen in this light, it's up to the individual to make what he or she wants to out of his or her career. There's no need to make social attributions about what represents success. Having fun or keeping a roof over the family home or keeping enough time free to pursue serious hobbies can all be forms of career success.

Could we get back to the state of art of research in human resource management and career development?

We need to pursue a new kind of research that responds to new questions. A central issue is the way we view career mobility. Looking at employee turnover only looks at one side, and what is most commonly seen as a negative side, of the mobility picture. However, we have done very little to systematically track when and where people come and go and what they carry with them. Doing research on any single organisation or even a group of organisations doesn't

address how knowledge flows within and between industries. We have tended to dismiss as 'noise' what may be most important.

If you are looking at careers themselves, what do you see?

People are more empowered and more in charge of their own careers when those careers develop through a series of jobs that nurture an individual's unfolding enthusiasm, skill sets and networks. People are economic actors in their own right. The image used before was one of cross-pollinating knowledge. Each of us brings knowledge with us, picking up more as we go along, stimulating other people's accumulation of knowledge, and distributing knowledge in the economy. However, unlike pollen, knowledge multiplies each time we share it.

Perhaps young people are brought up to share knowledge more easily? Perhaps they realise we can all get 'richer' through that sharing?

Let's hope so! However, many influential people still look at knowledge in the traditional way. McKinsey & Co recently proclaimed a 'war for talent' where they treated knowledge like bread, or cash in the pocket. The image suggests that instead of sharing knowledge we ought to guard it. The message suggests companies ought to hoard people and even constrain their professional communications.

Why not think less about employment and think more about knowledge management? Companies can accumulate and retain knowledge while people come and go. For example, companies can make effective use of management consultants, like McKinsey consultants, by having them work with a project group, and learning from the consultant's experience. This goes for working with other outside specialists as well - like suppliers, customers, distributors and alliance partners.

What can career research be used for in practical life?

One of the most important things is to help people effectively participate in economic life on their own terms. That will in turn provide a key to promote creativity and innovation in the economy at large. We won't do this through formal hierarchies or job descriptions. However we might do it by thinking about the possibilities in bringing people together in project-centred teams. In effective project teams, the members learn from each other while the project unfolds. Moreover, relationships developed during the project have the potential to last a lifetime to the mutual benefit of the people involved as well as of their future employers.

And how do older people fit in?

They must also make career investments. They, too, have a capacity for new learning. We all know examples of lively older people. But we haven't made it easy for everyone to continue to learn and grow. So it's hard when people have

been constrained by old employment practices and can't have their time back. Nevertheless, it's better that we acknowledge the problem. And people may have more knowledge and learning capacity than some observers would presume. The best we can do is work on the problems in as constructive a way as we can while making sure we don't end up in the same place with the next generation of older workers.

You have been working in the UK, USA and a little bit in Denmark. Do you see any characteristic likenesses or differences?

A lot of deference has been paid to large American companies over the last fifty years, with California's Silicon Valley as a notable exception. Britain also seems to take its cues from large organisations and to grant them a special place in the social system. However, the traditional large corporation may not be the economic engine of the 21st century. The knowledge economy changes the rules. Companies may come and go, but the knowledge generated in them hangs around. It's not clear that either the US or the UK offers the best model for the future. Let companies be more temporary and adaptive and let people go for jobs where they can learn the most.

Like good actors want to work with Woody Allen and (Danish Film Director) Lars Von Trier for little money but a large learning experience?

Exactly. Self-respecting actors seek to work with such people. They put learning before earning. Yet we tend to deny the chance for this self-organisation and re-organisation to occur in everyday employment practice. We can do better.

Note

Michael Arthur will give the 2002 annual lecture at the Centre for Guidance Studies on 11th December from 4.30pm-5.30pm.

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