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## **THE BOUNDARYLESS CAREER: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The boundaryless career concept widens our perspective towards a range of possible career forms both within and across organizations, but not primarily determined and driven by the career system of a single organization (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). The formulation of the boundaryless career concept responds to the observation that stable employment and careers within organizations account for the career experiences of some people, but not necessarily of all. Boundaryless careers can unfold in a variety of ways. The use of the boundaryless career concept commonly describes careers that involve moves across the physical boundaries of separate employers such as stereotypical Silicon Valley careers (Saxenian, 1996). Boundaryless careers also occur when individuals are either involuntarily forced or voluntarily chose to leave their employer and, thereby, break career advancement within the organization.

The boundaryless career concept is not only relevant to any physical change of employers (Sullivan and Arthur, in print). It also applies to careers that draw validation and marketability from outside the present employer, as in the case of certain highly-skilled professionals or academics or careers that are sustained by external networks, or careers that rely on information from outside, as in the case of a real-estate agent or financial broker. Likewise, careers can be described as boundaryless when individuals base career choices on internal standards such as personal or family reasons rather than external career opportunities. Moreover, the boundaryless career perspective acknowledges people's subjective construction of career despite or regardless of structural constraints.

### **UNDERSTANDING THE BOUNDARYLESS CAREER CONTEXT**

**A focus on employability.** The boundaryless career perspective challenges the overriding influence of large, bureaucratic organizations on people's careers. Observing the consequences of large-scale corporate restructuring (Osterman, 1996), scholars have argued that the promise of long-term employment has been replaced by employment relationships that are increasingly transactional (Guest, 2004; Rousseau, 1995) and insecure (Cappelli, 1999; Sennett, 1998). Even if full-time employment with a single organization may continue to be a prevailing experience for many individuals, the psychological contract has changed significantly. Under this new contract employment is less a result of loyalty to one's employer than of 'employability' in terms of the marketability of one's skills and knowledge on the external labor market (Cappelli, 1999; DeFillippi and Arthur, 1996).

The boundaryless career perspective is particularly relevant to industries with unpredictable and opportunistic markets. Here, employees are exposed to a high degree of employment uncertainty because firms seek to pass on the uncertainty from external markets by using temporal, project-based forms of organizing (Ekinsmyth, 2002; Grabher, 2002; Jones, 1996). For example, in cultural industries such as publishing, film and the arts where funding is typically limited, organizations seek to maintain flexibility by providing freelancers only short-term employment on discrete projects (Blair et al., 2003; Ekinsmyth, 2002; Jones, 1996). In the IT sector, firms need to manage the risk that results from rapid technological changes. By employing contingent IT staff firms avoid being stuck with obsolete technical competences and shift responsibility for skill development to IT professionals themselves (Boh, Slaughter, and Ang, 2001). In other industries, the use of temporary contractual workers or interim managers may not be the dominant organizing principle but simply provide firms with flexibility at the fringes of leaner hierarchically organized core businesses (Inkson, Heising, and Rousseau, 2001).

**Not so flexible after all.** Despite the apparent reorientation of labor markets toward flexibility and marketability of skills, the reality of boundaryless careers is neither unconstrained by social structure nor exclusively regulated by market principles. Studies from a diverse range of industries suggest that boundaryless careers are embedded within social networks, institutional environments, and communities (Granovetter, 1974, 1985). The ways by which social networks facilitate and constrain mobility differ across industries. In cultural industries, access to social networks is important because they provide continuity and access to skills in an environment where production is characterized by short-term funding of project-based organizations.

Since the quality of specific social relations—as opposed to individuals’ competencies alone—shape the outcome of the creative production process, individuals need to rely strongly on informal networks of friends, family, agents, and unions to develop a reputation and mitigate against the insecurity of freelance employment (Blair, Culkin, and Randle, 2003; Ekinsmyth, 2002; Grabher, 2002). Individuals who lack this type of social capital may find it difficult to acquire because collaborative relationships are deeply rooted in their particular locality—such as London’s advertising community in Soho or Los Angeles’ film industry (Blair et al., 2003; Grabher, 2002).

In other occupations collaborative relationships need to be less specific. For example, careers for IT professionals or MBA graduates are more strongly influenced by the codification of a clearly defined set of skills and knowledge (Tolbert, 1996). In these settings, people benefit from access to diverse networks that help to update skills and knowledge. As studies of IT programmers and new venture capitalists suggest, informal social networks can become platforms for the exchange of socially embedded knowledge and competencies (DeFillippi and Arthur, 2002; Higgins, 2001).

Previous research suggests a range of other contextual factors that constrain career mobility. Among these are a country’s institutional frameworks and macro-economic environment as revealed by international studies of Chinese migrant workers in Hong Kong and Britain and of managerial careers in France (Pang, 2003; Dany, 2003). Moreover, individuals’

enactment of careers is often guided by the socially shared meaning, values, and preferences of ethnic groups, nations, and career communities (Parker, 2000; Parker, Arthur, and Inkson, 2004; Pringle and Mallon, 2003). Cultural values can have a pervasive influence on careers because obligations to family and local community determine aspirations and values, and thereby constrain how people enact their careers.

#### CAREER DEVELOPMENT IN A BOUNDARYLESS CAREER CONTEXT

From a boundaryless career perspective, career development needs to be directed at helping individuals maintain agency within a more transactional employment context (Rousseau and Arthur, 1999). Since rational approaches of career development see agency primarily determined by one's ability to engage in beneficial exchanges, they have drawn on institutional economics to improve career mobility and employability through the development of relevant competencies and social networks (Bird, 1996; DeFillippi and Arthur, 1996; Higgins, 2001a, 2001b).

**A competency based view of career development.** A competency-based view of careers suggests that career actors' accumulation and understanding of their own unique bundle of 'knowing why', 'knowing how', and 'knowing whom' competencies can provide individual-centered guideposts in a turbulent and ambiguous career landscape (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1996; Martin, 1998). 'Knowing why' competencies provide individuals with answers about their career motives, personal meaning, and identification based on which they can commit to firms, projects, or personal enterprises in a less certain world of work. 'Knowing how' competencies represent individuals' understanding of job-related skills and career-related knowledge and provide the confidence to master current and prospective jobs. 'Knowing whom' competencies reflect an individuals' understanding of career-relevant networks based on which they can generate knowledge, learn, and develop a reputation. Based on their understanding of career competencies, career actors can evaluate which of their skills, knowledge, networks, or identities may facilitate mobility in the future and which competencies may become obsolete over time (Arthur, Inkson and Pringle, 1999).

This competency-based view has become a widely accepted framework for positioning scholarly work in the area of career development (Arthur, Amundson, and Parker, 2002; Eby et al., 2003; Forret and Sullivan, 2002). For example, studies of entrepreneurs and investors suggest that the combination of different competencies acquired during earlier corporate career stages contributed later on to career success in entrepreneurial settings (Bagdadli et al., 2003; Moore and Buttner, 1997). In another study, Eby and colleagues (2003) identified certain career competencies that are associated with indicators of career success such as perceived career satisfaction, perceived internal marketability, and perceived external marketability. Among the identified career competencies are a proactive personality, openness to experience, career insight, the ability to access mentors and internal and external networks, relevant skills, and a sense of career identity.

**A socially embedded view of career development.** Linking back to our earlier argument that boundaryless careers are both facilitated and constrained by social networks (Blair, Culkin, and Randle, 2003; Grabher, 2002) career scholars have argued that a critical determinant of career success in a boundaryless career environment is access to social support (Eby, et al., 2003; Higgins, 2001a, 2001b). As individuals' commitment to their employers is increasingly turning transactional, relationships to a wider career community of mentors, current and previous work associates, and alumni are often becoming a source of longer-term commitment (Higgins, 2000; Parker, Arthur, and Inkson, 2004). The general conclusion in this area is that relationships with people from different social systems allow individuals to gain access to a wider range of sources of support (Higgins and Kram, 2001; de Janasz, Sullivan, and Whiting, 2003). Yet, diversity alone is not sufficient. As Higgins and colleagues (Higgins, 2000; Higgins and Kram, 2001) suggest, psychologically close relationships with one or a few mentors are associated with greater learning and job satisfaction than diverse networks, alone.

#### SHAPING PERSONALLY MEANINGFUL CAREER JOURNEYS

Agency in boundaryless careers is not only determined by one's ability to maintain physical career mobility (Sullivan and Arthur, in print). The shift of responsibility for career development from the organization to the individual has stimulated increasing attention among career scholars to the duality between individuals' objective and subjective experience of careers (Arthur, Khapova, and Wilderom, 2004; Hall, 2002; Mirvis and Hall, 1996). Traditional criteria of career success such as salary, benefits, or advancement seem no longer appropriate, as individuals view their careers as 'personal projects' whereby they seek to define themselves through work (Ciulla, 2000). Career scholars who have drawn on the humanistic notion of work being a terrain where individuals can develop and express their potential (Shepherd, 1984), have examined how individuals can proactively transform their careers to develop personally meaningful identities (Hall, 1976; Hall, 2002; Ibarra, 2003).

From a boundaryless career perspective developing a clear sense of identity is important for several reasons: Firstly, in an increasingly individualized and transient society an adaptive identity gains in importance because individuals need to cope with the social and emotional costs that may arise from career changes and the loss of attachment to families, local communities, and traditional organizations (Ciulla, 2000; Hall, 2002; Sennett, 1998). Secondly, since traditional criteria of career success may be difficult to attain and not necessarily be desirable to career actors, viewing oneself as able to adapt to changes seems crucial to develop and maintain a sense of psychological success (Mirvis and Hall, 1996; Arthur, Khapova, and Wilderom, 2004). Thirdly, exploring one's deeper motives with regard to work is also instrumental in order to steer one's career trajectory through a context where organizational career systems can no longer serve as a point of reference (Mirvis and Hall, 1996; Sullivan and Arthur, in press).

Attention to the subjective experience of boundaryless careers provides a more comprehensive understanding of boundaryless career experiences that do not deliver advancement in terms of traditional criteria of career success. For example, research on career

mobility, international careers, and women's careers suggests that these experiences may be more adequately understood when accounting for individuals' personal reasons (Eby, 2001; Mao, 2004; Valcour and Tolbert, 2003; Wajcman and Martin, 2001).

**Women's career experiences.** For women—who are more likely than men to pursue boundaryless careers (Marshall, 1995; Valcour and Tolbert, 2003)—career moves often represent adaptive, and in some instances identity-transforming, responses to other events in their lives rather than an advancement of their careers. Boundaryless careers may be the last available resort when alternative forms of long-term employment or advancement within a firm seem blocked (Mallon and Cohen, 2001; Marshall, 1995; Moore and Buttner, 1997). Women are also more likely to switch to another employer if they wish to 'follow' the career move of a partner who is also the primary financial provider (Eby, 2001), perceive limited opportunities for intra-organizational advancement as a result of having children, or experienced marital breakdown (Valcour and Tolbert, 2003). Although such change, triggered by external events, does not always bring about improvements in terms of traditional criteria of career success, it may nevertheless improve perceptions of intrinsic job characteristics such as challenge, variety, freedom, quality of work life, and learning potential (Eby, 2001).

**International career experiences.** Intrinsic rather than extrinsic motives also seem to characterize individuals' decision to initiate international assignments. Studies of expatriate careers suggest that individuals engage in foreign assignments not so much because of career progress or economic benefits. Instead, the motives for international moves are often the perceived opportunities for personal development, enriching one's life, and learning new skills (Inkson et al, 1997; Suutari and Brewster, 2000; Stahl, Miller, and Tung, 2002). Thus, having used organizational opportunities to achieve personal career objectives, the expatriate experience may become an entry point to a boundaryless career upon repatriation since opportunities for career advancement within the same firm can often seem limited (Stahl et al., 2002).

**Identity-based approaches of career development.** There are many ways by which individuals can gain clarity about their career identity. Mirvis and Hall (1996: 239) suggest that "introspective life-planning can be a lonely pursuit, undertaken in off-hours, and steered by self-assessment tests, self-help books, and job-placement agencies". However, to be actionable and successful such self-reflective exploration needs to be embedded in a person's real experiences. In this respect, Ibarra's (2003) in-depth study of individuals changing their careers in their mid-lives reveals that the process of transforming professional identities may in many instances follow a 'first-act-and-then-think' sequence.

The exploration of 'career anchors' (Schein, 1990) and the Intelligent Career Card Sort (ICCS) (Arthur, Amundson, and Parker, 2002; Sturges, Simpson, and Altman, 2003; Wnuk and Amundson, 2003) represent career development activities that help ground introspective self-exploration in a person's career reality. Focusing on a boundaryless career context, the ICCS draws on the 'knowing why', 'knowing how', and 'knowing whom' framework described earlier. In this activity individuals are called to select seven items from each of three larger card sets, where those sets represent the three ways of knowing. Individuals are then asked to explain

the personal meaning that each selected item has in their own career. In contrast to traditional career development approaches that focus on identifying relevant competences and career strategies, the ICCS seeks to elicit subjective knowledge based on which individuals can create personal career narratives that are relevant to their particular career context.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS

The changing employment context characterized by the boundaryless career perspective also has implications for how organizations think about the development of their people. As a consequence of individuals assuming more personal responsibility for the development of their careers in response to increasingly transactional employment relationships, organizations have to manage employees that have become less loyal (Cappelli, 1999, 2000; Rousseau and Arthur, 1999).

For the human resource function, the boundaryless career perspective implies a shift of priorities away from managing 'human capital' and toward managing relationships in ways that enable organizations to respond flexibly to market changes. This changing agenda has to co-exist with the provision of sufficient stability in the processes of recruiting, developing, and retaining people's talent and knowledge (Rousseau and Arthur, 1999). For example, in a more transactional career context organizations need to resource knowledge and talent increasingly from a pool of people with diverse, possibly idiosyncratic career paths. As a result, it becomes difficult for organizations to base their resource allocation decisions on organization-specific career structures and competence systems. Becker and Haunschild (2003) propose two strategies by which organizations can respond to this changing context. Organizations can develop processes that allow them to evaluate and assimilate the diverse experiences and competencies which people gained prior to joining the organization. Alternatively, they can reduce the risk of incompatibility by using contingent work contracts.

The implications of the changing terms of the psychological contract characterized by the boundaryless career perspective go beyond recruitment and resourcing. For organizations, new challenges arise from the need to manage for flexibility while continuing to motivate employees despite weaker bureaucratic and cultural mechanisms of control and co-ordination. Rousseau and Arthur (1999) argue that organizations can balance the harshness resulting from strict market orientation by practicing community values. By encouraging employees' participation in project and occupational communities beyond the boundaries of the firm, organizations enable learning and knowledge sharing, foster individuals' capacity to respond to job, career, and life changes resiliently, and maintain the safety nets and supports that make people less vulnerable to dynamic market changes.

With regards to leadership and motivation, Shamir (1999) argues that leaders can no longer instill motivation through commitment to an elusive organizational vision. Besides, in settings where teams are composed of members from different organizations, individuals' motivation may be difficult to manage because people holding similar experience and competence may work under different contractual arrangements (Rubery, Earnshaw et al, 2002).

An organizational context that is characterized by ambiguous boundaries and a membership that finds itself in constant 'flux' requires from leaders the ability to mobilize members through the creation of metaphors, symbols, and cultural interpretations that build coherence, meaning, and anchors for group identification (Shamir, 1999).

### THE ROAD AHEAD

Our discussion in this chapter points to several priorities for advancing our understanding of career development in an increasingly boundaryless career context: Firstly, to develop the theoretical and practical relevance of this perspective we require more research examining the determinants and outcomes of particular boundaryless career trajectories. Thereby, it seems important to strengthen our ability to generalize of findings. This may be achieved with research that identifies determinants of career outcomes such as mobility, career success, and satisfaction through systematic comparison of boundaryless career trajectories within and across different settings.

Secondly, further research needs to explore interaction effects between competencies, networks, and meaning of careers. For example, studies may explore how particular learning needs determine particular network structures. Likewise, we would expect that systematic preferences for particular types of competencies and network configurations influence individuals' evaluation of experiences and formation of career identities.

Thirdly, the further development of the boundaryless career perspective requires attention to the dynamic between individual agency and structural constraints to career mobility (Pringle and Mallon, 2003). Thereby, attention to both the objective and subjective experience of careers (Arthur, Khapova, and Wilderom, 2004) promises to enrich our understanding of how career actors' behaviors and attitudes may help them respond to structural constraints and a perceived lack of mobility.

Finally, we see particular benefit in research that applies a boundaryless perception of careers at the individual level to more traditional areas of OB and HRM research. The boundaryless career perspective reminds us that individuals will not only respond to their context from the viewpoint of their current job, but also from the longer-term perspective of their career (Arthur, DeFillippi, and Lindsay, 2001; Grabher, 2002). Once we accept that both individuals and organizations are participants in the same, increasingly boundaryless, career context there are new possibilities. We can expect individuals to be concerned about accumulating career capital in terms of knowledge, skills, social networks, and identity investments. We can expect organizations to be concerned about building intellectual capital in terms of their capacities for adaptation, innovation and knowledge retention. Traditional ideas about permanent jobs or lifetime employment fail to recognize these changing concerns of both parties.

In conclusion, looking back at a decade of research exploring boundaryless career phenomena provides individuals, organizational practitioners, and career scholars with a more balanced view of the internal and external dynamics that influence individuals' abilities to enact boundaryless careers. Internally, boundaryless careers promise agency, the development of



career identities that are aligned with personal values, and the attainment of subjective criteria of career success. Externally, boundaryless careers require attention to the marketability of competencies, social networks and institutional environments that constrain and facilitate mobility, and the economic, social, and emotional costs of boundaryless career moves. The relevance of the boundaryless career perspective for career development and HR practice will depend on our ability to give consideration to these dynamics.

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