

New Conceptualisations of Careers

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Is it appropriate to talk of the career of a ditch digger or is ditch digging just an occupation (Wilensky, 1960). This paper will answer the question by indicating that careers involve learning and development and therefore ditch digging is probably just a job. More important, what are careers going to be like as we approach the new millennium? This paper provides one of the first attempts at integrating current thinking and writing on new career concepts for the 21st Century. Much has been written in the popular press and management journals about this topic. Many new labels for careers have been proposed. This paper synthesises much of this writing and thinking, and proposes a new integrated definition of careers.

First the “old” notion of careers will be reviewed. Then, changes to the workplace in the form of organisational restructuring will be briefly addressed. This is done to provide some context for the new environment in which careers will be taking place. The issue of the increase in contingent, or insecure, employment is also raised, as this trend has had a major impact on the availability of the traditional job that used to constitute a career. Finally, several of the prescriptions for career management that can be found in the literature are brought together to give the reader some insights into what career behaviour will be required in future.

Because this paper focuses on integrating new ideas, it does not address the controversial issues associated with these new ideas at length. However, one key issue is raised. That is, who is responsible for the investment in learning (ie training and development) in this new career environment. The paper will indicate that it is increasingly becoming the individual’s responsibility.

Careers were conceived as an orderly progression through logically connected functions by early sociologists, who emphasised the importance of careers as stabilising influences on individuals, families, organisations, and wider society (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Glaser, 1968; Inkson, 1995). That is, individual career paths were executed in organisational structures. The definition of organisational careers centred on upward movement through one organisation. For example, a 'status passage of a person through a social structure commonly called an organisation or bureaucracy' (Glaser, 1968, p 13).

In contrast to Glaser, Wilensky and other early theorists, boundaryless careers' theory is a term used to challenge the concept of an individual's career taking place within one organisation only (Arthur, Hall & Lawrence, 1989). Most early writers discussing careers agreed that there was an element of meaningful development. Now, several writers take up the idea that careers may *not* have a theme, represent continuity, or display status progress. For example a career is 'the evolving sequence of a person's work experience over time' (Arthur *et al*, 1989, p 8). In Arthur *et al*'s definition, *all* work is included, there is the dimension of change, and it is intended to convey the importance of a persons' changing identity over the course of their adult life (Arthur *et al*, 1989).

Since this definition includes the term *evolving*, which signifies change, and adaptation, it is more useful than earlier definitions limited to upward progress. It still distinguishes between people whose work is just a job, with little or no change or development, and thus answers the question posed above – ditch digging is just a job. So, using this definition, a career is about 'the evolving sequence of work history of individuals over time'. However I have some reservations about the term 'work history' which perhaps places too much emphasis on what has been, not what may be. Therefore, a second part will be added, using Hall (1996, p 9). The definition then becomes 'the unfolding sequence of a person's work experience over time, which involves a lifelong series of identity change and continuous learning'.

Changes within existing organisation structures, the changing nature of work, new organisational forms, increasing employment in small-medium sized enterprises, and increasing self-employment may have all resulted in a shift in the nature of available career opportunities, as will be described below. First, the increase in the prevalence of job insecurity will be addressed, since the end of the job for life signals the biggest change in career opportunities in the last decade.

There is considerable research interest in the question of flows into job insecurity, which are increasing (Allen & Henry, 1996; Burchell, 1996). Part-time employment as a percentage of all employment in Australia grew from 16 percent to 24 percent in the five years to 1993 (Dawkins & Norris, 1995). Casual employment in Australian firms increased by 6 percent in six years (Bramble Littler, & O'Brien, 1996). Also, 60 percent of Australian academics, and 45 percent of administration staff are employed on short term contracts, or on a casual basis (Healy, 1996). In the banking, insurance, computing, hospitality and community service sectors there has been an increase in low-skilled, casual, and part-time workers, who are mainly female and have little access to career paths (McDermott, 1990 in Kramar, 1990). This result supports the general argument that employees manipulate employee hours worked, rather than the less fine tuned adjustment of number of employees (EPAC, 1996). Self-employment in Australia has risen along with the unemployment rate (Le, 1995). Similar results in the United Kingdom have been attributed to an unemployment push rather than an entrepreneurial pull (Granger, Stanworth & Stanworth, 1995). Temporary contract employment is a fast growing work option (von Hippel, Mangum, Greenberger, Heneman, & Skoglind, 1997). For example, one in five new jobs offered by companies in a United Kingdom consultant survey were fixed-term contracts. This is said to suit the employers, but not those on the contract, 93 percent of whom felt that it benefited the employer, not them. In addition, this rise in precarious employment has negative implications for the health and safety of the employees involved (Rousseau & Libuser, 1997).

The trend towards more precarious employment has been described as resulting in a new dichotomy between standard (regulated) employment and non-standard employment. Non-standard jobs are waged at a level that may not support a

minimum standard of living, are not necessarily secure, and may not be located in an employer's organisation (Burgess, 1994). Burgess argues that this distinction is different from Doeringer and Piore's (1971) dual labour market hypothesis because in his case the criteria used to distinguish jobs is regulation. However from his description it would seem that the *outcomes* are similar.

In this paper, of particular interest are the effects that changes within organisations have had on careers. Table 1 shows some of the specific effects of organisational restructuring, which is a major change that has been occurring in the Australian economy for almost the last ten years.

Table 1
Career consequences of downsizing and delayering

	Australia (1993-1995, n=653)
Organisations downsizing	57 percent
Organisations delayering	44 percent
Delayering in which middle managers were targeted	80 percent
Organisations with a decrease in the number of middle managers	44 percent
Organisations with an increase in middle managers	15 percent
Reports of decreased organisational commitment	51 percent
Reports of decreased promotion opportunities	51 percent
Concern about job security increased	72 percent

Sources: Littler (1996); Littler, Dunford, Bramble, & Hede (1997);

The growth in business from the 1950s to the 1970s resulted in enough demand for managers to ensure long career ladders and good promotion prospects (Warren, Ference & Stoner, 1977, in O'Brien, 1991). 'Now even the bastions of bureaucratic careerism are breached' according to Stewart (1995, p 47). Downsizing has consequences for managers' careers. 'The removal of scores of positions in the middle of the corporate hierarchy has had significant consequences for organisational careers' (Brockner & Lee, 1995, p 57). Restructuring has led to fewer management levels and fewer managers (Management Services, June 1995). The number of managers passed over for promotion has increased significantly (Connor & Fielden 1986, cited in O'Brien, 1991).

Australian case studies provide at least partial support for the argument that managers' career opportunities have diminished as a consequence of organisational restructuring. The position of managers in the labour market changed in the 1980s. These observations imply decreased job security for managers. Opportunities for managers to progress have been limited by the abolition of levels of management, and the fragmentation of organisation-wide labour markets (Kramar, 1989, p 482).

In Table 2, a summary of some of the new labels proposed for careers is presented.

Table 2
Some new conceptualisations of careers

New Careers Label	Definition
Holonic	Careers within holonic organisations which are self contained, self-managing, and self-replicating, techno-organisational systems (Mathews, 1995).
Self-responsible	The person is responsible for their own career, responsibility does not rest with the organisation (Frohman & Johnson, 1993, p 90).
Serial	Individuals have multiple careers over the course of a lifetime (Management Today, 1996).
Intelligent	(Arthur, Claman & DeFillippi, 1995)
Protean	A self-based career which embraces change and personal fulfilment (Hall, 1976; Hall & Mirvis, 1995a).
Boundaryless	Careers that span organisational boundaries (Arthur, 1994, Arthur <i>et al</i> , 1989; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996a; 1996b)

Source: Marchant, T. *The effect of organisational restructuring on managers' careers*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, USQ, Toowoomba

This means that careers are going to be very different from the traditional definition given above; they are likely to be more like the *boundaryless* career concept. These changes in organisations have precipitated a change in the career behaviour and attitudes expected of individuals. The impact on careers is elaborated below in Table 3.

Table 3
Career predictions and prescriptions from the press and popular literature

Expectations	Some authors
Notions of change and flexibility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change jobs more often • Be prepared to cope with change • Thrive on ambiguity • Have a ready set of job search skills • Be flexible, adaptable, resilient, hardy and agile 	Martin, 1997 Kiechel, 1994 Richman, 1994 Price & Vinokur, 1995 Hiltrop, 1995; Jukes, 1996; Kramar, 1990; Price & Vinokur, 1995; Waterman, Waterman & Collard, 1994
Emphasis on continuous learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know how to use information • Develop a broader skill base • Develop skills to move across, and work with people from, different functional areas • Be prepared to be continually learning • Learn how to work in teams, and demonstrate better communication and interpersonal skills 	Drucker, 1995; Fisher, 1997 Martin, 1997; Richman, 1994 Waterman <i>et al</i> , 1994 McDermott, 1995 Keenan, 1994; Kiechel, 1994; Kramar, 1990
Develop an employability career orientation. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop an entrepreneurial, commercial, or marketing approach – ‘think of yourself as a ‘business of one’ • Build a professional reputation, and commit to a set of professional values • The accomplishment of a task will be the reward, not the achievement of status symbols • Take charge of their own careers, be self-reliant • Jobs will evaporate • What counts now is employability 	Fox, 1996; Keenan, 1994; Kiechel, 1994 Handy, 1989, in Hiltrop, 1995; Penzias, 1995 Penzias, 1995 Hiltrop, 1995; Richman, 1994 Bridges, 1995; 1997 Finn, 1997; Richman, 1994
Career mobility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals will be hired for project teams that will be disbanded when the project is finished • Be prepared to move along a horizontal ladder • Do not expect a lifetime career with one employer 	Kiechel, 1994; Bennis, 1986, in Stewart, 1995 Penzias, 1995 Clark, 1992 in Hiltrop, 1995; Pemberton & McBeth, 1995;
Ensure that they make an identifiable, value-added contribution	McDermott, 1995

Source: Marchant, T. (1998) *The effect of organisational restructuring on managers' careers*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, USQ, Toowoomba

The popular press and business literature make many other observations about what will be expected of managers in new organisations. For example:

What distinguishes a star in the corporate firmament from a dim bulb in the basement is not his level in the organisation but the value of the project he works on (Stewart, 1995, p 48).

The inference here is that career success will be defined by reference to different values such as performance and contribution, rather than rank in the hierarchy. In brief, these observations suggest that employees need to learn new attitudes and behaviours, be prepared to keep learning other new ones, be mobile, and find rewards in internal characteristics of their careers, rather than in external status-based characteristics. It will be the individual's responsibility to invest in their own 'employability'.

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