Dublin Institute of Technology
ARROW@DIT

Conference papers

School of Marketing

2006-09-06

The International Protean Career: Considerations for Human Resource Management

Marian Crowley-Henry
Dublin Institute of Technology, marian.crowleyhenry@dit.ie

Follow this and additional works at: https://arrow.dit.ie/buschmarcon

Part of the Human Resources Management Commons, International Business Commons, and the Sociology Commons

Recommended Citation

Crowley-Henry, M.: The international protean career: considerations for human resource management. 'New Models of Management in the Knowledge Economy', 9th Annual Conference of the Irish Academy of Management, 6th-8th September 2006, University College Cork, Ireland.

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Marketing at ARROW@DIT. It has been accepted for inclusion in Conference papers by an authorized administrator of ARROW@DIT. For more information, please contact yvonne.desmond@dit.ie, arrow.admin@dit.ie, brian.widdis@dit.ie.

Dublin Institute of Technology
ARROW@DIT

Articles

School of Marketing

2006-09-06

The international protean career: considerations for human resource management

Marian Crowley-Henry
Dublin Institute of Technology, marian.crowleyhenry@dit.ie

Recommended Citation

Crowley-Henry, Marian : The international protean career: considerations for human resource management. 'New Models of Management in the Knowledge Economy', 9th Annual Conference of the Irish Academy of Management, 6th-8th September 2006, University College Cork, Ireland

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Marketing at ARROW@DIT. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of ARROW@DIT. For more information, please contact yvonne.desmond@dit.ie, arrow.admin@dit.ie.

'New Models of Management in the Knowledge Economy'
9th Annual Conference of the Irish Academy of Management, 6th-8th September 2006, University College Cork

POSTGRADUATE COMPETITIVE PAPER

TITLE:

THE INTERNATIONAL PROTEAN CAREER: CONSIDERATIONS FOR HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

AUTHOR: Marian Crowley-Henry

Dublin Institute of Technology

Business Department

Aungier Street

Dublin

marian_crowley@hotmail.com

TRACK: HRM

THE INTERNATIONAL PROTEAN CAREER: CONSIDERATIONS FOR HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Introduction

This paper presents some career patterns from a research undertaking which qualitatively sampled highly educated Western foreign residents in the South of France. In the data collection, their individual career stories were relayed to the researcher from in-depth exploratory interviews. The very personal and individual nature of these careers is underlined in the research findings. The aim of this paper is to share some of the broader findings from the study, which invoke discussion on the wider concerns for career management within the HRM discipline in the future.

Career Considerations

While orthodox career theory relates to organisational careers, i.e. "careers conceived to unfold in a single employment setting" (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996: 5), the boundaryless career (ibid) refers to "the objective moves that a person makes as he or she moves across organizational boundaries" (Hall & Harrington, 2004). It could be argued that Whyte (1956)'s "organization man" is practically invisible in knowledge economy (Drucker, 1959; Kunda, 1992; Deetz, 1994; Alvesson, 2001), where any education or knowledge distinction between employee (knowledge worker) and employer is blurred. Given the contemporary more transactional psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995; Gratton & Hope-Hailey, 1999) between employee and organisation, it could be assumed that the proliferation of the boundaryless career concept would be more pronounced and visible in practice, with white collar workers in particular more inclined to move inter-organisationally in furtherance of

their career. Traditional versus boundaryless career patterns from the international sample analysed in this research undertaking are discussed in the findings section of this paper.

A further career concept which emerged inductively on analysis of the narratives was that of the 'protean career'. 'Protean' evolves from Proteus, a god who had the ability to freely change his form and morph into different objects or substances so as to avoid capture (Ardichvili, 2003; Arthur et al., 1999). Protean career theory (Hall, 1976; Fletcher, 1996; Hall & Moss, 1998; Hall & Harrington, 2004) has developed from this and focuses on the individual's role and ability to transform his/her own career path. Hall describes it as follows: "The protean career is a process which the person, not the organisation, is managing. It consists of all the person's varied experiences in education, training, work in several organisations, changes in occupational field, etc. The protean person's own personal career choices and search for self-fulfillment are the unifying or integrative elements in his or her life. The criterion of success is internal (psychological success), not external" (1976: 201). Here, career is more "individual-focused" (Baruch, 2004: 9). This concept is further discussed in the findings section of this paper, where its relevance to the sample investigated is highlighted.

This research undertaking is part of a doctoral research study. This paper focuses on the implications of the boundaryless and protean career findings for HRM practitioners and research. The following section outlines the research methodology, sample and limitations of this study. Next, I focus on some of the common patterns from the narratives relating to the boundaryless and protean career concepts and implications for HRM. Suggestions for further research are also put forward.

Methodology

The findings and issues presented in this paper stem from a qualitative hermeneutic inductive[1] research undertaking on international careers. In-depth interviews were conducted with thirty-seven foreign residents in the South of France. All interviewees had either English as their native language or as a close second language. This facilitated analysis and prevented bias which may have arisen in translation or lack of comprehension. Nonetheless it does mean the interviewees are all Western European or originating from North America or Australia. All of the interviewees work in white collar employment in the South of France The sample is depicted in Table 1.

The interview transcripts (narratives (see Kohler Riessman, 1993)) were interpreted hermeneutically and this paper shares some of the patterns that emerged from the findings, particularly relating to the protean career concept. The aim of the study was never to generalise the findings, rather but to share patterns in the findings and to raise awareness of the depth and complexity of career issues for internationals and for HRM as a discipline.

[1] Since this was an inductive, qualitative study, there were initially no hypotheses to test or prove (Trochim, 2000). "Inductive reasoning, by its very nature, is more open-ended and exploratory, especially at the beginning." (ibid).

Table 1: Research Sample

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Marital Status	Children	Nationality	Profession
Milly	F	34	Married	2 children (2/boy, 8 months/girl)	American	Project Manager
Angie	F	41	Married	2 children (10/boy, 8/girl)	American	Program Manager
Clare	F	62	Divorced	none (4 stepchildren)	American	People Manager
Catherine	F	40	Married	None	Australian	Program Manager
John	M	29	Single	None	Belge	Technology Consultant
Kate	F	38	Married	2 children (6/boy, 3/girl)	English	Site Manager
Susan	F	39	Single	None	English	Help Desk employee
Elaine	F	45	Single	None	English	Laboratory employee
Sarah	F	46	Divorced	1 child/son (21)	English	Self employed consultant
Tracy	F	54	Widowed	2 children/girls (24, 21)	English	Senior Manager Marketing
Natalie	F	56	Married	1 child/girl (17)	English	Self-employed consultant
Pat	M	34	Engaged	None	English	Technology Consultant
Steve	M	34	Married	None	English	Services Manager
Barry	M	39	Married	2 children (6/boy, 3/girl)	English	Professor
Shaun	M	39	Married	2 children (2/boy, 8 months/girl)	English	People Manager
Rick	M	43	Engaged	None	English	Business Manager
Philip	M	51	Married	2 children (5, 7)	English	Professor
Tim	M	54	Married	3 children (17, 15, 13)	English	Self-employed consultant
Joe	M	55	Married	2 (26/boy, 25/girl)	English	Self-employed consultant
Geraldine	F	52	Divorced	2 children/boys (both in 20s)	French (British)	Office manager/director
Katharina	F	37	Married	2 children/girls (12, 10)	German	Professor
Hilda	F	41	Married	1 child/daughter (7)	German	People Manager
Lisa	F	33	Married	2 children/girls (14, 12)	German (East)	Self-employed consultant
Fiona	F	28	Long term partner	None	Irish	Marketing Manager
Deirdre	F	42	Married	2 children/girls (11, 8)	Irish	Toxicology employee
David	M	32	Single	None	Irish	Networking Consultant
Francis	M	32	Engaged	None	Irish	Internet Technology Developer
Donal	M	36	Married	2 step-children/girls (12, 10)	Irish	People Manager
Vincent	M	41	Married	2 children/girls (11, 8)	Irish	Partner
Ronald	M	40	Married	1 child/girl (6)	Italian	People Manager
Mark	M	34	Married	None	Norwegian	Product Manager
Mary	F	34	Married	None	Scottish	Pharmacist, employee
Alice	F	43	Married	2 children/sons (13, 8)	Scottish	Self-employed consultant
Gordon	M	35	Married	None	Scottish	Self-employed consultant
Ingrid	F	30	Single	None	Swedish	Team Coordinator
Billy	M	52	Divorced	3 children (19, 14, 11)	Welsh (British)	Technology consultant

Findings

Despite assuming that highly educated and skilled individuals would have a high propensity to follow a boundaryless career, the findings from this particular study outline the effect that the current international climate of redundancies, reorganisations and re-locating has on individuals. Quite simply the inter-organisational opportunities are not what they were in the economic boom of the late 1990s, currently restricting the propensity of individuals in following a boundaryless career.

The following quote from Francis (Irish, 32, long term girlfriend) reminds us how buoyant the employment market was in the late 1990s: "After 5 years I actually handed in my notice. Because I had attempted to change job internally, to move on to new challenges, new technical challenges was my main motivation and [the company] at the time wasn't willing to; internally I wasn't able to get what I wanted. So I got it outside the company... I'd got a lot of offers outside".

While both John (Belgian, 29, single) and Hilda (German, 41, married, one child) stress how the employment situation has changed today.

John: "[B]ecause in today's economic environment… it's just not that easy – you could easily find yourself without a job. [Y]ou don't have that luxury anymore …to just go 'OK, …I'll get a job anywhere'."

Hilda: "[N]owadays … it's not so easy to find a job, less easy to find a job at a certain age, when you are not 20 or 25".

The shift from relational to transactional organisational employment contracts is obvious, as the following quote from Billy (Welsh, 52, divorced, 2 children) demonstrates:

Billy: "It was very clear to me … up until … early 90s when the company was going very strongly that there was an initiative to go to training, to be trained, to move forward, … and there were opportunities opening all the time. Since the mid 90s it's been very difficult because the company's been shrunk, opportunities are less and less… It's a question of you wanting to go out and get it rather than the company forcing it down your neck. So it's very much left to the individual".

This would suggest that career management has become more of an individual concern. While the interviewees expressed a desire to take more control of their careers and to be able to move freely inter-organisationally, the current climate has weighted the power of employment on the side of the organisation. Employees are in a weak position to expect or demand career management on behalf of the organisation given the highly competitive global market place where positions are insecure and easily replaced. Equally, individuals are not encouraged to manage their own careers given the lack of external opportunity. Nonetheless, it could be assumed that when the employment market picks up again ("the constant reconfiguration of power relations" (Deetz, 1998: 153)), which in a period of labour shortages would switch control from the organisation to the individual/employee, such individuals will not be slow in moving inter-organisationally if they perceive such a move would be beneficial to their career.

The protean career suggests a more all-encompassing approach to careers, including personal stakeholders and: looking at "work in the context of a person's life as a whole" (Hall &

Harrington, 2004). Wider factors in individuals' lives (including life stage, marital/parental status) have a role to play in building up the respective protean career, which is ever-changing, with significant life occurrences potentially altering career priorities. This is evident from Shaun (English, 39)'s comments: "I mean to be honest if I was on my own here then I wouldn't think twice about going to [corporate headquarters location on assignment for a few years]… But I don't think I'd survive away from my family".

Susan (English, 39) also gives a significant life occurrence (in her case the death of a close family member) as the catalyst in her reassessing her career priorities and taking a wider view of what are the most important things in her life: "I'm not particularly interested in …rising up a ladder in a corporation. … you get the worst from both ends – the directors are pulling you one way and then all the staff are pulling you another. And I really found that the job … could get very very stressful…… [I]t got to the point where I … started to not like it. … And plus the fact I have a very different attitude now because my father died when I was 25 and before he died my mentality was go it alone, you don't think of anything else outside of just getting … a job and proving… Now a death in the family of a very close loved one really completely changes your outlook of how you should be living your life and it makes you wake up … to say "hang on, am I enjoying this?". And so now I tend to really live my life where … money isn't - obviously you need enough to survive - but it's not the be all and end all".

Kate (English, 38) also experienced a significant life occurrence when she was made redundant, which has changed her career outlook: "Before we were closed I wanted to be the next level up: I was senior manager and the next level up was … partner and I was … keen to do that. But looking back that would have been selling your soul really, the amount of work

you have to put in. Now I'm not quite so keen. I want to be able to do my job and enjoy it, but also have some time for myself which I'd never had before, and enjoy the kids".

These examples exemplify and describe the three key elements in a protean career – autonomy (e.g. having control over one's working life), personal value (e.g. prioritising personal goals to organisational goals), and psychological success (e.g. feeling content in oneself).

The sample in this study 'morphed' their professional role as time and need dictated – moving position due to chance/serendipity or necessity (after having been made redundant).

Sarah (English, 46, divorced, 1 son in his 20s) stressed how being made redundant from her managerial position during the economic downturn lead to her new career direction:

"I think I just found opportunities that built on each stage of my career and today I'd say I'm using everything - I have to do quite a lot of research - so studying at university and now I have to do quite a lot of studying in research for these companies. I have to write reports which remind me of when I had to write essays in university so all that's useful. I have to facilitate which is my teaching background. I have to communicate a lot, there again teaching has been important and sort of helping people see the pros and cons of different situations, all that is sort of coming from the teaching experience. All my customer and sales knowledge has come from working in the customer centre. I really am using everything. I think I've sort of managed to intelligently move from one thing to another."

Her description of how her past educational and work experiences have now come together to form her new career (as an independent consultant) epitomises the protean career concept (Hall, 1976).

Similarly for those in the sample following a more traditional career path with the same organisation, these also highlight the requirement to adapt working practices or managerial style over time and depending on life stage and circumstance, stressing the significance of the protean career concept.

Billy (Welsh, 52) consciously chose to prioritise his family over an ambitious career, here exercising his individual control over his protean career: "I think you have to take a choice at some time in your career - either you want to stay around your family or you decide to, you want to make a career. And …. so my choice was to stay around my family, to avoid travelling if I could, so that limited my career path... I mean the social and the family life is essential. And that over-rides my professional life, any kind of career move..."

The research sample shared the broad consensus that while their careers were important to them, but not to the detriment of their family life or personal objectives. Decisions surrounding career choices would be made in the context of the full life package (living standards/quality of life) for all personal stakeholders (partner, children…).

Considerations for HRM - Discussion

Human resource management faces many challenges which although currently can be controlled due to the weak external labour market. However, it could be assumed that such challenges will become more critical with labour shortages. In the knowledge economy with

individual employees' advanced education, knowledge and marketability, the long term retention of such skilled individuals could be called into question when more appealing organisation positions become available.

The boundaryless career, which on the one hand supports the choice of individuals to move inter-organisationally in furtherance of their careers, has been criticised for supporting the transactional psychological contract (Hall & Mirvis, 1996; Janssens et al., 2003). In an era of job insecurity, reduced promotional opportunities due to increased competition among ever-more knowledgeable employees (Larsen & Ellehave, 2004), a new organisation model which values the individual contributors more than the mass face-less human resources of the organisation could be the success of the future. Organisation loyalty has diminished in the age of the transactional psychological contract where everyone is replaceable. However, employees do still crave stability of employment (Janssens et al., 2003) and the status of being in employment.

The core implication of this for organisations is the necessity to individualise and personalise career development planning for employees (see Hesketh, 2003; Swart & Kinnie, 2004). Individuals are unique, with different goals and motivations which change over time from significant life occurrences (Larsen & Ellehave, 2004). Such career planning needs to be conducted in cooperation between the employee and employer, with expectations, alternatives and contingencies clearly identified. Similar to a flexible benefits scheme which some organisations offer their employees (e.g. where employees can pay for additional holidays or receive payment in lieu of holidays, or can opt for greater health insurance or less…), organisational careers could include options such as career breaks (sabbaticals for study leave, child rearing, entrepreneurial activity), job-sharing at executive position level,

apprenticeships for family members, in return for employee commitment, loyalty and holding the organisation in good esteem.

Rather than taking an operational approach to career management, the human resources function within organisations (much of which relating to the career management of employees rests at line management) needs to look strategically at how white collar employment has changed over the past decades due to external competitive market forces and an increasingly knowledgeable workforce. There is a need for acknowledgement that work is but a portion of an individual's life, and that individuals increasingly want more control over their work/life balance and careers. Rather than ignore outside work concerns of employees or become overbearing in including all outside work concerns, there needs to be a middle ground where there is a transparency regarding career possibilities for individuals which take changing priorities and ambitions into consideration. This needs to take place on an ongoing basis, since individuals encounter life altering events (e.g. birth of child, death of a loved one) or develop different priorities over different stages of their lives (e.g. desire to return to challenging work after time off/part-time, job-sharing work, desire to move from technical to people management position or vice versa, from people management position to technical or customer expert position). Such a radical re-think of career management and offering options and contingencies to the modern workforce of many valued individual contributors may be required in order to cater for knowledge individuals discontented with the current lack of transparency of organisational careers and the lack of better alternative external job opportunities.

Recommendations for Further Research

This paper presents the relevance of the boundaryless and protean concepts in international careers. A taster of the findings has been shared here. However further research and analysis would be welcomed in undertaking a cross-country qualitative study of international careers to assess the country specific or cultural factors that may have a role to play.

Further analyses relating to individual characteristics (age, sex, marital status…) and the relevance of unplanned/unexpected significant life occurrences of international career followers would also help uncover patterns relating to the boundaryless and protean career concepts in international human resource management. This is currently part of my own research agenda.

Conclusions

Findings from the empirical study showed the relevance of the protean career (the whole life approach to careers which changes constantly forcing individuals to morph their professional career direction and content over time). Factors such as quality of life, work/life balance and family stability all play a major role in the decision to remain foreign residents. This underlines the necessity to personalise career planning within organisations, to account for different life stages and priorities for different individuals (Swart & Kinnie, 2004).

References

Alvesson, M. (2001), "Knowledge work: Ambiguity, image and identity", *Human Relations*, Vol. 54, No. 7, http://hum.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/54/7/863.

Ardichvili, A. (2003) "Constructing socially situated learning experiences in human resource development: an activity theory perspective", *Human Resource Development International 6*(1), pp. 5-20

Arthur, M.B., Inkson, K. & Pringle, J.K. (1999) *The new careers: Individual action and economic change*. Thousand Oaks: Sage

Arthur, M.B. & Rousseau, D.M. (eds.) (1996). *The boundaryless career: A new employment principle for a new organizational era*, New York: Oxford University Press

Baruch, Y. (2004). *Managing Careers. Theory and Practice*, Essex, England: Prentice Hall Financial Times

Deetz, S. (1998) "Discursive Formations, Strategized subordination and self surveillance",.in McKinlay, A. and Starkey, K. (eds.), *Foucault, Management and Organization Theory*, London, Sage**:** 151-172

Deetz, S. (1994), `The micro-politics of identity formation: the case of a knowledge intensive firm', *Human Studies*, Vol. 17, pp. 23-44.

Drucker, P. (1959), *Landmarks of Tomorrow*, Harper & Brothers, New York.

Fletcher, J. K. (1996) "A relational approach to the Protean worker", in Hall, D. T. & Associates (eds.), *The Career is Dead – Long Live the Career*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp. 105-131

Gratton, L. & Hope-Hailey, V. (1999). "The Rhetoric and Reality of 'New Careers'", in Gratton, L., Hope-Hailey, V., Stiles, P. & Truss, C, *Strategic Human Resource Management. Corporate Rhetoric and Human Reality*, Chapter 4, pp 79-100, London: Oxford University Press

Hall, D.T. (1976). *Careers in organizations*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman

Hall, D.T. & Harrington, B. (2004). "The protean Career. A Sloan Work and Family Encyclopedia Entry", http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/wfnetwork/rft/wfpedia/wfpPCARent.html, last updated 21 March 2004

Hall, D.T., & Mirvis, P.H. (1996). The new protean career: psychological success and the path with a heart. In D.T. Hall (Ed.). *The career is dead-long live the career: A relational approach to careers* (pp 15-45). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Hall, D. T. & Moss, J. E. (1998). "The new protean career contract: Helping organizations and employees adapt", *Organizational Dynamics*, Winter, vol. 26, iss. 3, pp. 22-37

Hesketh, A. (2003) "Employability in the knowledge economy: living the fulfilled life or policy chimera", *Lancaster University Management School Working Paper,* Lancaster.

Kohler Riessman, C. (1993) *Narrative Analysis. Qualitative Research Methods Series 30*, Newbury Park, Ca., London, New Delhi: Sage

Janssens M, Sels L, & Van den Brande I, (2003). Multiple types of psychological contracts. A six-cluster solution. *Human Relations*, *56* (11), 1349 - 1378

Kunda, G. (1992), *Engineering culture: control and commitment in a high-tech corporation*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia.

Larsen, H. H. & Ellehave, C. F. (2004). "Careers in Organizations. Theoretical Developments and Empirical Findings", in Brewster, C. & Larsen, H. H. (eds.), *Human Resource Management in Northern Europe. Trends, Dilemmas and Strategy*, Oxford UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., pp.89-124

Rousseau, D. M. (1995). *Psychological contracts in organizations*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

Swart, J. & Kinnie, J. (2004). *Managing the Careers of Professional Knowledge Workers*, London: CIPD

Trochim, W.M. (2000). *The Research Methods Knowledge Base*, 2nd Edition. Internet WWW page, at URL: <http://trochim.human.cornell.edu/kb/index.htm> (version current as of 6/29/2000)

Whyte, W.H. (1956) *The Organization Man*, New York: Simon & Schuster