



## Career Development International

Transforming careers:from linear to multidirectional career paths: Organizational and individual perspectives

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### Article information:

To cite this document:

Yehuda Baruch, (2004),"Transforming careers:from linear to multidirectional career paths", Career Development International, Vol. 9 Iss 1 pp. 58 - 73

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/13620430410518147>

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Received October 2003  
Revised October 2003  
Accepted November  
2003

# Transforming careers: from linear to multidirectional career paths

## Organizational and individual perspectives

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**Keywords** *Career development, Human resource development*

**Abstract** *Within the dynamic nature of labour markets, career systems have witnessed major changes in recent decades. This paper presents several career perspectives, to manifest a trend in career systems and their meaning and implications for individuals, organizations and society. This trend may be portrayed as a transition from what may be labelled “linear career system” into a “multidirectional career system”. Possible explanations to the phenomenon are presented, with suggested ideas for analysing and learning from the trend. The last section of the paper presents the academic career model as a prospective role model for future career systems, suggested as an intriguing idea and food for thought. Such a mental exercise of examining alternative career models, different from the traditional concept of careers, may be useful for both theory development and managerial practice.*

### Introduction

Change has always been with us, but it seems that the pace of change is accelerating. Business firms, not-for-profit, public and private organizations – all experience a combination of fast developments in multiple areas – economy, technology, and society in general. These have wide implications for the management of people at work, and in particular the planning and managing of careers.

Being a major constituency of society, organizations experience an accelerating pace of change. Ever-changing processes of restructuring, often accompanied by redundancies, have shattered traditional bureaucracies. Ashkenas *et al.* (1995) wrote about the phenomenon of boundaryless organization resulting from such changes. One major consequence of boundaryless organizations is the emergence of boundaryless careers, as DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) argued. The present generation witness the blurring of boundaries in many facets of life, and the implications for careers are that they become multidirectional.

Early studies of careers looked at it in a wider context: Hughes (1937) defined career as:

... the moving perspective in which persons orient themselves with reference to the social order, and of the typical sequences and concatenation of office.



A more modern definition looks at career as “a process of development of the employee along a path of experience and jobs in one or more organizations” (Baruch and Rosenstein, 1992). On one hand, careers are the “property” of individuals, but on the other hand, for employed people, it will be planned and managed by their organizations. In the past, career was seen as the major responsibility of the individual: Arthur *et al.* (1989) regard career as “an evolving sequence of person’s work experience over time”. Later, the focus of career development has shifted from the individual to the organization (Gutteridge *et al.*, 1993). In the last turn, by the end of the 2000s, individuals had to take care of their careers again.

Nevertheless, organizational structures, cultures and processes are essential inputs for career systems. Career is a major life constituency – it evolves around work, and work provides sense of purpose, challenge, self-fulfilment, and, of course, income. Moreover, work is a source of identity, creativity, life challenge, as well as status and access to social networking. Overall, one can see career as a life journey. Building on the metaphor of life journey, people can take the beaten path, or opt to navigate their own way in the open plains.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the new emerging nature of career paths, as being multidirectional, dynamic and fluid. This will be contrasted with the traditional view of careers, which is more linear, static and rigid. The paper will conclude by offering different ways and an intriguing model, i.e. the academic career model, as a possible alternative for traditional career perspectives.

Contemporary works put under focus the changing meaning of careers. Scholars point out a shift from the long-term-based career relationships, into transactional, short-term-based ones that evolved between individuals and their employing organizations (e.g. Adamson *et al.*, 1998; Baruch, 2003). In the past, people expected to serve their organization for their entire working life. Even if this was not the actual case, this was the desirable development. Now people expect the organization to serve them, and the time span for the relationship to last could be easily reduced to very few years.

The main shift is manifested in the change of psychological contracts. From the organizational point of view it is mostly moving from offering careers of secure employment for all, to “opportunities for development” (Rousseau, 1995, 1996; Herriot and Pemberton, 1995). From the individual perspective, it is a farewell to traditional commitment to the organization, moving to multiple commitments, which include merely a conditional commitment to the organization. Strong individualism is accompanied by social cognition and prominence of variety of life constituencies. This means that while people have less organizational commitment (Baruch, 1998), they may develop a set of multiple commitments. These refer to several levels of meaning: identification, association, and relationship. These relationships can also depend on the career stage a person experiences (Cohen, 1991). Within career context, Parker and Arthur (2000) offered the following list of commitments:

- industry (sector);
- occupation and professional association;
- region (from local to national);
- ideology;
- religion;
- alumni (of school, university, army service or reserve forces when applied);
- support groups;
- family;
- virtual; and
- organization.

Even within the organization, the commitment need not be just general to the organization, but would usually be shared among different constituencies: organization, the leader and/or the mentor; the team; the department/unit; project (or product); peers/colleagues, even the trade union.

Sullivan (1999) claims that traditional careers have dominated industrial employment because most organizational structures supported it. With the flattening of organizations and elimination of entire managerial layers, career paths have become blurred, we have different types of careers, and a wider meaning for career success. Moreover, new models of career systems are required, that will better fit these changes in both organizations and the wider environment.

### **From past**

The nature and notion of traditional careers was based on a hierarchical, highly structured, and rigid structures. Past career models had a clear, uni-dimensional or linear direction of prescribed “advancement”: this meant promotion (Rosenbaum, 1979; Wilensky, 1964). The organizational hierarchy was the ladder to climb on. As a result, career success was evaluated via the rate of upward mobility and external indicators of achievement (e.g. salary and social status). Stability of structure and clarity of career ladders implied clear career paths, which were mostly “linear”.

### **To future**

In contrast, by the end of the twentieth century, the nature and notion of careers has been altered significantly. With the boundaryless organization (Ashkenas *et al.*, 1995), boundaryless careers emerged (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994). Careers became transitional, flexible, and the dynamics of the re-structuring blur the tidy and firm former routes for success (forcing new perspective of what is success). The new models of careers comprises of a variety of options, many possible directions of development. People experience different ways of

defining career success: it can be a sideways move, change of direction, of organization, of aspiration. People can (or have to) choose across these options, and there is no single way for reaching success, hence the term “multi-directional” career paths. The multidirectionality does not stop in the actual career path undertaken, but also implies for the evaluation of career success: We now have multi-options criteria for assessing success in career. These can be inner satisfaction, life balance, autonomy and freedom, and other measures of self perception. All these have entered the formula, alongside the traditional external measures of income, rank and status.

### *Landscape metaphors*

The linear career model can be depicted as a journey of mountain climbing. There is the summit, where all aspire to reach. People climb up as far as they can. Some find themselves on a plateau, and were considered a failure. Some occupations offered simpler, flatter ladders (e.g. nursing, teaching), but the dominating rule is of the hierarchy system. The linearity of the system is manifested by the existence of single direction for promotion, and rigidity of the system. The path is set for the climber, there is only one mountain you are expected to climb (your present organization), and there is a clear and set guidelines as well as definition of success for each member.

Multi-directional career model takes into account the full scale of landscapes. You can choose. You can climb the mountain, you can opt for another mountain, take some hills instead, wander along the plains – a variety of options is accepted. You navigate your own career, creating a new path when and where you feel it is right, you select whichever direction you wish to pursue and feel capable in reaching personal development. Moreover, you define your success.

### **Career change: the terminology**

DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) were one of the first to use the term “boundaryless career”. The blurring of boundaries demolished the previously clear and static career systems. New economic, technological and social realms transcend organizational and systems boundaries. Careers have become more open, more diverse, and less structured and controlled by employers. The management of such career requires individual qualities that differ considerably from those that were sufficient in the past. Arthur *et al.* (1995) suggested the phrase “intelligent careers” to manifest the elements necessitated for effective career management on the individual side. The “intelligence” meant the “know why” (values, attitudes, internal needs, identity, and life style); “know how” (career competencies: skills, expertise, capabilities; tacit and explicit knowledge); and “know whom” (networking, relationships, how to find the right people). To these Jones and DeFillippi (1996) added the “know what” (opportunities, threats, and requirements), “know where” (entering, training and advancing), and “know when” (timing of choices and activities).

Indeed these qualities better fit an era where people navigate their own careers, opting to various choices, and not confined to a single employer. To these qualities Waterman *et al.* (1994) added the “career resilience”, where “thick skin” and pliability are qualities that support successful management of career, especially the survival.

Two additional concepts were introduced later, one that focuses on the individual, and one on the general system. Hall’s idea of the Protean Career (Hall, 1996; Hall and Moss, 1998) manifested the different perspective of career direction, with focus on the individual as the one in charge. Peiperl and Baruch’s (1997) “Post-corporate career” concept shows in particular how the general system has changed, and as a result there is more complexity and flexibility. These two complementary perspectives will be further discussed later in this paper.

All these recent contributions to career theory represent a major shift from what we used to know in the past, perhaps since the building of the pyramids and even before – whenever the organizational hierarchy structure was invented. Past concepts built on forms of rigid ladders on which people are climbing upward as long as they thrive. That was the basic building-stone for the management of people. Those days have long passed. It will not take even for a generation to pass before people will get used to the “new deal” (Herriot and Pemberton, 1995) and the new psychological contracts (Rousseau, 1995, 1996) which the new forms of career entail.

People need to gain “Employability” (Ghoshal *et al.*, 1999; Baruch, 2001) rather than “secure employment”. Employers can no longer provide secure jobs, and stopped even to pretend that such a commitment is manageable – instead they can help employees to improve their competence and ability to acquire employment in case they are made redundant or just decide to move on (Baruch, 2001). Resilience, intelligence, employability – these are essential survival tools in the struggle to endure the change. And the change can be called by many names – rationalising, layering, downsizing, rightsizing, flattening, restructuring, and even shaping up for the future. The brutal reality beyond these labels is simple – jobs are scarce, and to gain competitiveness or improve market value (albeit it might be only for a short term), organizations lay off their employees on a large scale, unlike the convention and tradition.

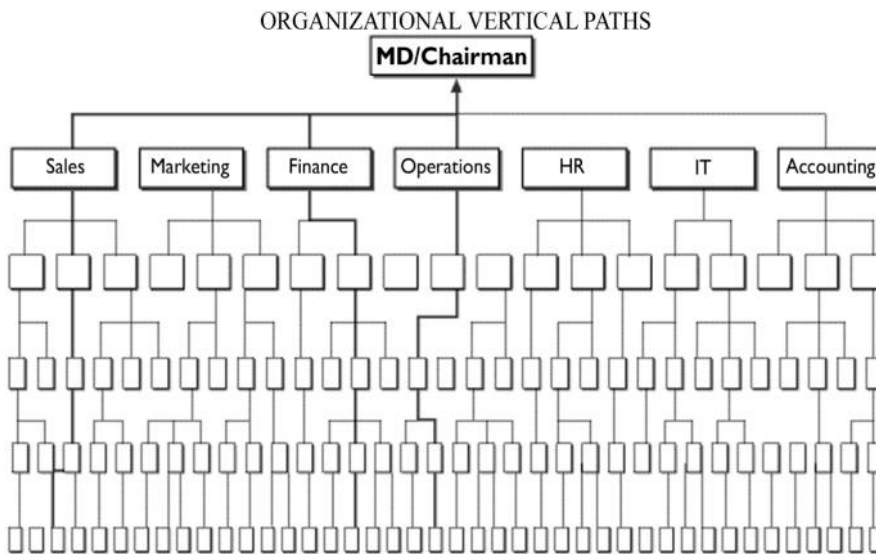
### **The development process**

Following the establishment of the industrial revolution, production organization flourished, and they applied the classical bureaucratic system for careers. This system was in place until the late stages of the twentieth century (Wilensky, 1964). Under such a system the playground was the open system of career structures, based on the tournament approach (Rosenbaum, 1979). Such an approach means that people compete for the few jobs at the top of the organization, and their ideal is to “win” by reaching for the highest possible promotion.

The old system had one direction – upwards, where, according to the Peter principle, people progress up the hierarchy as long as they perform to rule, until reaching their level of incompetence, and there their progress has stopped. The meaning of the new deals and new careers for the participants in the systems is that within the organization there are many options for development and progress, not merely of “up-the-ladder” type; and the world outside the organization is a plausible option, with so much to offer, and which no longer symbolises failure (see Figure 1).

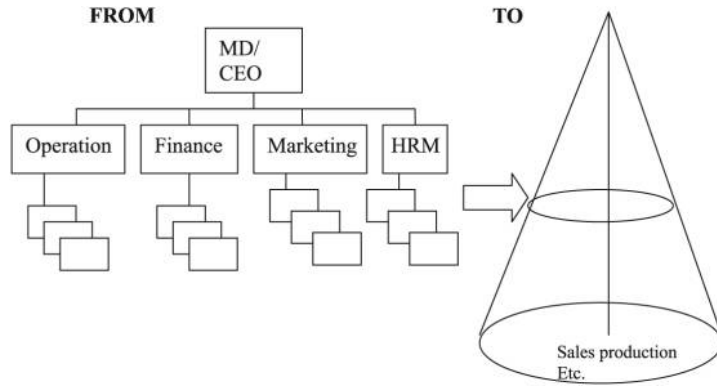
By the end of the 1970s it was clear that organizations needed new ways to manage people and their development across the system. Schein argued for a more advanced model, with better consequences for both individuals and their employer, a model that will involve cross-sectional and functional moves. Schein cone (Schein, 1978) depicted a concept with an additional dimension, namely cross-functional movement within the organization (see Figure 2). At that time, this concept represented a breakthrough, an innovative way of adding a career development dimension. The career path was no longer simply linear. It evolved into inclusion of possible spiral development, where people moved around different functions within the organization on their way up. This shift, however, was kept within the organizational frame (i.e. same organization, single employer, and generally upward progress).

In the late 1990s Peiperl and Baruch (1997) offer a much richer perspective of the options and directions of career moves people can opt for, as opposed to options that the organization only can offer as a single employer. While



Source: Adapted from Peiperl & Baruch (1997)

Figure 1. Organizational vertical paths

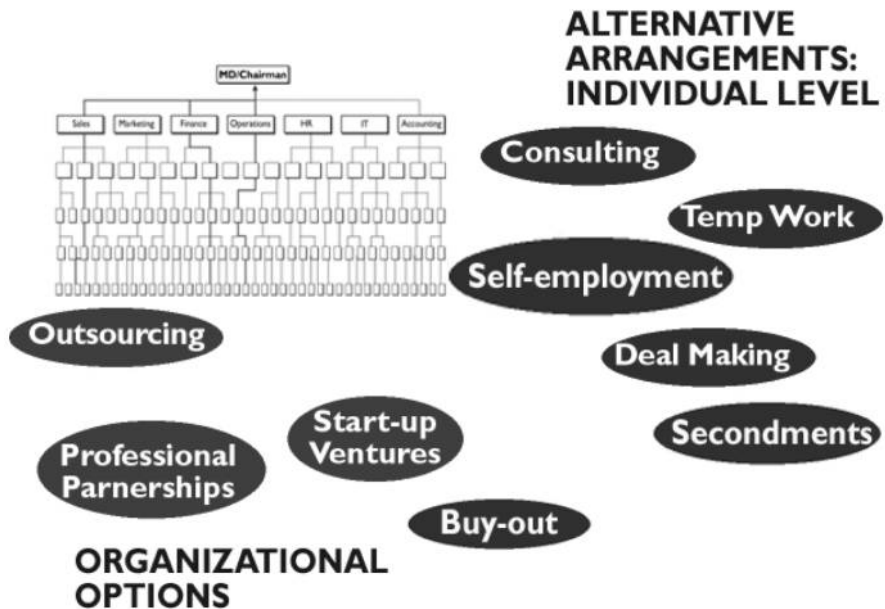


**Figure 2.**  
From two-dimensional  
career paths charts to  
Schein cone

keeping in place (and bringing certain balance to the overall picture) of the role of organizational career systems, they pointed at a variety of career options, as depicted in Figure 3.

As we move to the twenty-first century, we find that Peiperl and Baruch's (1997) anticipation of the direction of career process was quite accurate. While "more-of-the-same" occur in the labour markets, new ways and options emerge, and there is a change in the role of both organizations and employees in

**CONTEMPORARY CAREERS: BEYOND ORGANIZATIONAL BOUNDARIES**



**Figure 3.**  
Contemporary careers:  
beyond organizational  
boundaries

Source: Adapted from Peiperl & Baruch (1997)



managing careers. This model reinforces the fact that people need to abandon the nostalgia for the “good-old-days” of clear and stable systems, and turn on to navigate their own careers. The advantage is that being in charge they have multiple options to choose from, and as argued here, multi-directional careers emerge.

Organizations need to be aware to the fact they are no longer the sole owner of career system and planning of career paths (Arthur *et al.*, 1989; Hall, 1996). This awareness will lead to organizations being able to take advantage of the new system. For example, instead of laying people off they can outsource activities, enabling entire teams to form a new satellite firm or buy-out parts of the operation. They can employ former professional employees as consultants, they can offer alternative work arrangements (Peiperl and Baruch, 1997).

The other side of the formula belongs to the individual, and here Hall's (1976) protean career idea best manifests the changes people experience. The concept of protean career was first proposed some time ago (Hall, 1976), but at that time it did not capture the attention of either career scholars or HR practitioners.

The protean career is a process which the person, not the organization, is managing. It consists of all the person's varied experience in education, training, work in several organizations, 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 (Hall, 1976, p. 201).

A total of 20 years later, time was ripe and the phenomenon Hall forecasted was mirrored in realities of careers. The protean career is a new form of career perspective, where the individual takes on the responsibility of planning and managing the career, changing him/herself according to his/her will and inclinations, and subsequently transforming their career path (Hall and Mirvis, 1996). The term protean was taken from the name of the Greek god Proteus, who could change his shape at will. In its essence, the protean career is the contract between one and the self, rather than a contract with the organization. This meant a decrease in the role organizations play in planning and managing careers.

The two concepts of the post-corporate career for the society level and the protean career for the individual level are complementary. They fit well together to form a new map where careers are indeed multidirectional rather than linear, a map that reflects new and changing landscapes of careers era.

### Why? Challenges

New patterns of production and consumption emerge, in particular with the rise of the service sector that characterizes economy and labour markets in the developed countries. Another influential element for future careers is the continuous technological progress – these developments call for new vocations, new paths and even restructures of the whole labour market. Two prominent examples are the emergence of the e-sector, and the establishment and flourishing of call centres.

Moreover, these developments mean a strong growth of high skilled jobs. People can seek and gain a wide array of professional qualifications. Another perspective of labour market (again, mostly in the developed countries) is the increase of emotional labour – both in types of occupations and the scope of the need for them (Ashkanasy, 2003; Hochschild, 1983; Morris and Feldman, 1996; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987). Alongside these expansions and modifications of labour markets we witness further diversity in the labour market, with implications for career options. Some of this diversity is conventional, such as gender and ethnic diversities, but new concerns emerge about hidden diversities (for example, sexual orientation). The gender and ethnic diversities mean that occupation, roles, and career trajectories that were once restricted to a single group (e.g. top managerial positions were filled almost exclusively by white males) are now open to many.

Managing career will be involved not merely with filling in internal vacancies. The whole area of new alternative work arrangements (see Gottlieb *et al.*, 1998) can encompass working time patterns, numerical and functional flexibility, as well as teleworking and virtual work. Baruch (2004) summarised the changes in Table I, to which this paper adds the last row, indicating the key contribution of the idea presented in this paper. The added value is the concept

Aspect	Traditional deal	Transformed deal
Environment characteristic	Stability	Dynamism
Career choice being made	Ones, at an early career age	Repeated, sometimes cyclical, at different age stages
Main career responsibility lies with	Organization	Individual
Career horizon (workplace)	One organization	Several organizations
Career horizon (time)	Long	Short
Scope of change	Incremental	Transformational
Employer expect/employee give	Loyalty and commitment	Long time working hours
Employer give/employee expect	Job security	Investment in employability
Progress criteria	Advance according to tenure	Advances according to results and knowledge
Success means	Winning the tournament i.e. progress on the hierarchy ladder	Inner feeling of achievement
Training	Formal programmes, generalist	On-the-job, company specific
Essence of career direction	Linear	Multidirectional

**Table I.**  
The transition

**Source:** Adapted from Baruch (2004) list row added

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of looking at the traditional deal as linear whereas the transformed deal is labelled multidirectional.

### Managerial perspective

For the people management in contemporary organizations, Baruch (2003) suggests applying career empowerment, to invest in people, develop a variety of multidirectional career paths based on flexibility, offering alternative work arrangements, and work-family policies. The new psychological contract will mean a true, open partnership. Instead of formal practices based on command and control there is a need for a support system that will take into account the wider context of career, and their multidirectionality.

The organization should be able to provide people with options to gain career success, but the essence of career has changed, and so has the meaning of career success. Career success is different for various constituencies:

- internal – how a person sees the development of own career in terms of inner values, goals, aspirations;
- external – how career success is perceived by the external environment, such as in terms of status, hierarchy, income and power;
- organizational – in terms of organizational power and influence – once measured by upgrading the career ladder, and now more in different ways;
- society level – labour markets, professional development, globalization.

A word of caution: Whyte's (1956) *Organization Man* concept, although perceived outdated, is still valid, for men and women too. Many organizations still have a core structure based on bureaucracy and climbing frames to enable relatively clear hierarchical mobility, mostly for a core group of staff. However, many new forms evolved and even contradict the organization man as the prevailed concept. Arthur *et al.* (1999) depicted the new type of careers in their book *The New Careers*. It seems that unaccustomed qualities are needed for a sustainable post-modern career.

### *Career metaphor: from marriage to conditional attachment*

Further managerial advice would be to explore the metaphor that the relationship between employers and employees has transformed, from marriage-like into conditional attachment.

The metaphor of marriage, which was once very much analogous to employment relationship, is losing its stand as a valid manifestation of employment relationships. This is reinforced as there is now a variety of socially accepted alternatives.

In the past, employment relationships were usually formed early in life, with one organization, planned for, and most of the time indeed lasting, through (working) life time. Separation would have resembled a divorce, with all the pain and suffering involved, and the stigma that followed. Today's

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employment relationships have become more of a conditional attachment. Such a conditional attachment implies transactional relationships, flexibility, and calculative sharing of goals. Intriguingly, the strength of marriage and their existence as the only way to form relationships of couples have also changed, into a more flexible set of options, not all of which manifest strong commitment for life-long togetherness.

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### **Future career systems – multidirectional?**

What can be the face of future career system? One intriguing proposal came in through a special issue of *M@n@gement* (2002): “Basing career models on new science”, and in particular applying chaos theory as the foundation for understanding future careers. While an interesting and thought provoking approach, it is not of much use for management practice. The following section of this paper will offer a different perspective, originally suggested by Baruch and Hall (2003), as a different case, possible alternative for future career model.

### **A case in hand – the academic career model**

Can the academic career model serve as a role model for future careers? Baruch and Hall (2003) proposed to look at this issue seriously. Their argument relies on the following premises.

The academic career system has unique features, which, in the past, have made it significantly different from the traditional career model. The academic career model used to be just different, more of an exclusive and unique model. Now, with the changing nature of careers as described in this paper, organizations in both business and not-for-profit sectors explore alternative career models which they may adopt. Can the academic career model operate as a leading prototype, an indicator of direction and changes in the career systems in other sectors?

The major features of the academic career model are: flat structure (but quite rigid), professionally based. Individually leads where lateral and even downwards movement are accepted (e.g. when a Dean returns to serve as a Professor, conducting research and teaching, it is not considered “demotion”). Upwards mobility is limited, even not desired (becoming a Dean might take scholars off the research route). Cross organizational moves (but not cross functional) have become the norm of career moves (i.e. scholars in biology can move around universities, but will not move within the university to a different section, say to sociology). Sabbaticals are part of the career. Perhaps more fundamental, the academic career model builds on networking within and across organizations.

Before moving on with the argument, it will be right to indicate that the term “academic career model” reflect mostly the North American model of academic life, also to a large extent UK and many other countries that adopted it (from Hong Kong to Israel to The Netherlands). Other academic career systems operate in different ways and offer quite a distinct career model, which is different from the North American model – in particular the French and the

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German models (see Altman and Bournois, 2003 and Harley *et al.*, 2003, for detailed manifestation of these academic career models).

Psychological contracts and career systems in universities resembled much of the new psychological contract as depicted by Rousseau (1995, 1996): they are built around professional challenge, learning environment, and professions, rather than institutional commitment. Social status and professional development are more important than a formal rank. Progress largely depends on merit, not on time in position (although minimal tenure period may be imposed). The source of job security, while still resembling the traditional tenure system and strongly unionized, is based mostly on employability at the individual level. Such employability relies on past achievements in terms of knowledge development and research leadership (plus possible teaching excellence).

These features make the academic career model of new appeal for the general community. It is no longer the “stand-alone” model, fitting only for a very obscure (career-wise) sector. A few decades ago, Caplow and McGee (1958) examined the academic career model as a social phenomenon, which was a “fascinating specimen of social organization, remarkably unlike any other”. Now the picture has changed. DeFillippi and Arthur (1998) model of project-based organization was *de facto* found in academic life long before it was identified in the business world.

#### *Dual convergence?*

On the one hand, the corporate general management model has changed significantly, and in many aspects started to “move” into the direction of the academic model, including the career implications. On the other hand, it seems that the academic model is also changing, moving towards the corporate model. Kogan *et al.* (1994) identified changing forms of governance and a new academic mandate associated with greater flexibility in teaching methods. They suggest there is a move from collegial governance towards management model. Coupled together, these shifts mean convergence, but as Baruch and Hall (2003) argued, the convergence is caused more by the corporate model moving towards the academic model than vice versa.

The analysis and metaphorical idea of depicting the career model as the model for future organizational career systems has a number of limitations. If we take the above argument literally, can the academic career model be a role model for organizational career systems? Will we have academic careers for all? The answer is, unfortunately, not really, or maybe not yet. Not all is so simple in the model, and many features of it do not resemble the modern futuristic model of career systems. It is certainly not an ideal type either: academic careers are still characterized by stability, long-term employment relationships (i.e. the tenure track), and rigid structure of hierarchy (albeit very flat). Within European context the sector is highly unionized, and subject to regulated pay structure. These limitations make the academic

career model not being that likely an ideal contemporary flexible model of careers. Nevertheless, this idea can be taken as a mental and learning exercise. Moreover, organizations can examine the model and adopt at least parts of it into their career systems.

### **Individual implications**

People in a variety of occupations and industrial sectors can adopt elements of career planning and managing from the academic career model: the need to count on yourself, of serving as one's own free agent, the essentiality of being resilient in accepting external changes. Being employable, applying the intelligent career approach. All these would make people's career more manageable, and hopefully more satisfying. When you expect the unexpected you cannot be too surprised.

### **Institutional implications**

In managing careers, organizations should start looking for different models. They need to realize that one should no longer act as if the old notion of organizational commitment and loyalty is valid and applicable. High awareness for the multiple commitments employees carry is necessary and especially the decreasing importance organizational commitment plays within this set of multiple commitments.

As a result, organizations should try and give up control, provide support, and invest in people. If people live on their own accord, this is part of the new fair game, where open labour markets operate. The sooner organizations accept this, the better they can expect in terms of their people management.

### **National implications**

The changing nature of society and economy will inevitably mean a transformation of labour markets and career systems. A variety of educational systems and qualification options should be offered to the public. There will be less stability, and financial implications for the future may be translated into practicalities such as the need for re-evaluation of future pension schemes in light of the fluidity of the system. And, like the academic labour markets, more and more occupations are becoming part of the global rather than local employment system. This needs to be reflected in national policy and strategy, as well as in the legal system.

### **Final note**

This paper has pointed out recent developments in career systems, and argued that basically, we have a transition which was depicted as a change from linear into a multidirectional system. It will be useful to examine alternative career models, different from the traditional concept of careers, and the academic career model was presented as such an option. I hope that this paper will help to

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promote individual, organizational and national responsiveness and proactivity towards managing careers in the future.

Transforming  
careers

71

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