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The Boundaryless Career: A New Perspective for Organizational Inquiry

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The boundaryless career: a new perspective for organizational inquiry

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Introduction

Let us begin with a baseball story. In 1986 the Boston Red Sox recruited an aging slugger named Don Baylor. It was clearly a short-term arrangement, the club wanted an experienced right-handed hitter, in return for which Baylor was offered a one-year contract and expected to be a relatively minor contributor. Baylor, however, did more than expected. Claiming respect from both senior and junior players, he quickly impressed his experience and personality upon the team. It was Baylor who initiated a ‘kangaroo court’ whereby players sat in judgement of their team-mates’ errors in the field, and imposed escalating fines for repeat offenders. Players took their self-discipline seriously, but inevitably in good spirit.

With Baylor as informal leader, the Boston Red Sox made it to the ‘World Series’, and entered the final inning of the prospectively decisive — for Boston — sixth game with a two-run lead. At this point many saw a clear opportunity to bring Baylor into the game, to capitalize on his right-handed hitting skills against a left-handed pitcher. In turn, Baylor could have been replaced by a specialist defensive player for the remainder of the inning. However, no substitution was made, and the motivational opportunity for the team to have their informal leader and standard-setter join in the action was lost. So, too, was the game — and in turn the ‘World Series’ — through a subsequent comedy of errors forever imprinted on Boston’s collective consciousness.

The Don Baylor story is interesting to careers scholars on several counts:

- (i) It illustrates how organizational effectiveness can be enhanced by career movements across organizational boundaries.
- (ii) It stands as an example of high commitment from someone with a very temporary association with the organization.
- (iii) As the failure to use Baylor in the sixth game illustrates, it suggests how rigid assumptions about roles and careers can interfere with impromptu organizational learning.
- (iv) It highlights in Baylor’s behavior the cultivation of what Kanter (1989) has since called ‘careers by reputation’. The Boston Red Sox may still not know what they let pass by, but Don Baylor will surely never be out of a job in baseball.

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However, each of the above counts also invites us to re-examine our own approach to the study of careers. How much of our empirical work has explored the kind of issues the Don Baylor story raises? To what extent have temporary, market-driven employment arrangements captured our interest? Have we considered what careers, as repositories of individual learning, can mean for organizational learning? The purpose of this issue is to highlight questions such as these, and to promote a new point of departure for careers research, namely the 'boundaryless career'.

Put simply, the boundaryless career is the antonym of the 'bounded' or 'organizational' career that has denominated empirical research in recent times¹. Within this general meaning lie several particular meanings, or emphases. The most prominent is when a career, like the stereotypical Silicon Valley career, moves across the boundaries of separate employers. A second meaning is when a career, like that of an academic or a carpenter, draws validation — and marketability — from outside the present employer. A third meaning is when a career, like that of a real estate agent, is sustained by extra-organizational networks or information. A fourth meaning occurs when traditional organizational career boundaries, notably hierarchical reporting and advancement principles, are broken. A fifth meaning occurs when a person rejects existing career opportunities for personal or family reasons. Perhaps a sixth meaning depends on the interpretation of the career actor, who may perceive a boundaryless future regardless of structural constraints. A common theme to all these meanings is one of independence from, rather than dependence on, traditional organizational career principles.

How significant are boundaryless careers? Direct evidence stems from several sources. The median employment tenure for all U.S. workers is just four and a half years, and just six years for managers and professionals (Maguire, 1993). In Japan, the supposed bastion of lifetime employment, the median for male workers is only eight years (Cheng, 1991). Firms of under 500 employees — the antithesis of large firms in which organizational careers are most viable — account for 56 per cent of U.S. private employment (Small Business Association, 1992), predicted to rise to 70 per cent by the year 2000 (U.S. Bureau of Labor, 1992). A similar shift has already occurred in the U.K. (Bannock and Daly, 1990) and other European countries (Giaoutzi, Nijkamp and Storey, 1988). Japanese large firms account for a mere 15 per cent of that country's employment (Chalmers, 1989), which in turn is higher than large firm employment in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore (Cestells, 1992)².

Further significance stems from large firm decentralization and new job creation. Large firm decentralization, including decentralization of employment authority, creates a hidden boundaryless career effect unreported in aggregate employment statistics³. And regardless of size, boundaryless careers may make better sense for both firms and employees trying to adapt to the modern economic era (e.g. Kanter, 1989). Patterns of new job creation reflect small firms adding to, and large firms subtracting from, the pool of career opportunities (Birch, Haggerty and Parsons, 1993)⁴. New job creation has in turn been estimated to represent only one tenth of overall career moves into new employment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1989).

¹ The focus here derives from GE head Jack Welch's musings about 'the boundaryless organization', whereby units of GE would do what was best for themselves, regardless of claims to special treatment from other units. The idea was picked up as the theme for the 1993 Academy of Management meeting in Atlanta. This volume evolved from a symposium held at that meeting, and we are indebted to the Academy of Management for the opportunity to present and refine our ideas.

² The more usual statistic seen for Japan is 81–82 per cent employed in firms of under 300. Eighty-five per cent at a cut-off size of 500 employees is an estimate.

³ For one of the many business press articles on this phenomenon, see Dumaine (1992).

⁴ Birch *et al.* (1993) claim U.S. firms under 500 employees created 5.9 million net new jobs, and larger firms lost 2.4 million net jobs, over the 1987–1991 period.

In sum, the old picture of stable employment and associated organizational careers is fading. A new picture of dynamic employment and boundaryless careers calls for our attention.

It should be emphasized that the intention here is not to question the organizational career as a legitimate base of inquiry, but rather to promote a second, alternative point of departure. It is a point of departure that acknowledges the unpredictable, market-sensitive world in which so many careers now unfold. However, much of the foundational work previously applied to organizational careers can still inform the boundaryless career perspective.

Also, the intention here is not to question broader efforts in organizational research, but rather to re-position the concept of career within those efforts. Our interest lies beyond seeing careers as artifacts of any single organization. Instead, our interest lies in how careers are linked to the founding, discovery, evolution, strategic positioning, learning, networking and alliance-building of organizations. We emphasize how careers relate to inter-organizational, rather than intra-organizational, phenomena.

This introductory article is divided into three parts. The first part looks at past activities in career studies. It recalls the ‘MIT initiative’ behind career studies in the late 1970s, and reviews the nature of subsequent careers research. This research appears largely insensitive to changing assumptions about the nature of organizations. The second part of the article looks at new opportunities for career studies. This part begins with ideas from recent career theory that do reflect changing assumptions about organizations. It is further argued that new ideas are needed that go beyond previous cause–effect assumptions. Networking, learning and enterprise are cited as prominent activities better understood as stemming from the interdependence of careers and organizations. The third part of this article underscores the significance of the boundaryless career to future research. This part also previews the articles that make up this volume, and points to some of the contrasts among them.

Past activities in career studies

The MIT initiative

Present interest in the concept of career traces back to the mid-1970s at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and to a group of four scholars in particular. Lotte Bailyn, Douglas (Tim) Hall — who completed his PhD at MIT — Edgar Schein, and John Van Maanen produced three landmark books that many still rely on today (Hall, 1976; Van Maanen, 1977a; Schein, 1978)⁵. In doing so, these scholars made four essential contributions equally applicable to both organizational and boundaryless career concepts.

The first contribution was to affirm a definition of career that applies to all workers, and all sequences of work roles. This definition, drawn in turn from both ‘Chicago’ sociology (Hughes, 1958) and ‘Columbia’ educational psychology (Super, 1957), insists that the concept of career is universally applicable to all people, and all forms of organization. The second contribution was to insist, in contrast to other efforts focused on, for example, job satisfaction or job design, that the time dimension be recognized as a key mediator of individual–organizational relationships. The third contribution was to establish the career as a focus for interdisciplinary study. Psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, economics and so on could all be harnessed for the extra contribution they brought to our composite understanding of how careers unfolded.

⁵ Bailyn’s name does not appear on the spine of the cited works, although her influence over both the Schein and Van Maanen books is widely recognized. Her own book from that era appeared somewhat later (Bailyn, 1980).

The fourth contribution was to see the career from both subjective and objective perspectives. The subjective refers generally to the individual's own interpretation of his or her career situation. The objective refers to institutional — organizational or societal — interpretations of the same career situation. This duality of perspectives distinguishes career studies from other social sciences, where subjective and objective views are often represented as opposite ends of the same continuum (e.g. Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Taken together, the four contributions of the MIT group define a unique place for career studies in the broader organizational studies agenda. The four contributions serve the study of all careers — including boundaryless careers — equally well.

However, there are other legacies from the groundbreaking MIT work that do not concur with the boundaryless career perspective. A key legacy is reflected in the titles of the foundational texts: *Careers in Organizations* (Hall, 1976), *Organizational Careers* (Van Maanen, 1977a) and (Schein's subtitle) *Matching Individual and Organizational Needs* (Schein, 1978). As the titles indicate, each text emphasizes intra-organizational rather than inter-organizational phenomena⁶. Two further legacies are suggested less by the MIT initiative than by concurrent assumptions about the nature of organizations. One widespread assumption was that organizations and their environments were relatively stable. Another assumption was that organizational structures were inherently hierarchical. Hierarchical considerations, in turn, invited greater interest in managers and professionals aspiring to top positions, rather than in overall career systems⁷.

Patterns in careers research

Given the MIT initiative, what has been the nature of subsequent careers research? A survey of empirical studies across five interdisciplinary journals for (a) the 1980s, and (b) the early 1990s, reveals some interesting results⁸. All articles accommodate an unrestricted definition of 'career', and all, of course, explore in some fashion along the dimension of time. A range of disciplinary perspectives is evident, and most articles work in some way with both subjective and objective career interpretations. Several popular subjects — such as organizational 'career development' efforts, internal labor markets, mentoring, socialization and work–family accommodation — attest to relatively new lines of inquiry nurtured through careers research⁹.

However, the distinctive trademarks of careers research co-exist with certain underlying assumptions. Almost all articles over the 1980s assume a stable rather than changing environment, an assumption that largely persists into the 1990s¹⁰. More than three-quarters of the articles, over both the 1980s and early 1990s, focus on intra-organizational issues and restrict themselves to managerial, professional or hierarchical careers. The intra-organizational emphasis

⁶ It should also be noted that Hall concludes with the idea of the 'protean career', managed by the career actor across multiple settings and explicitly 'not what happens to the person in any one organization' (Hall, 1976, p. 201, emphasis original).

⁷ Van Maanen (1977a) goes to some length to assert all who work have a career, but most contributed chapters focus on managers or professionals. The subtitle of Sonnenfeld's (1984) book on career systems refers to 'Managing the flow of executive careers' (emphasis added).

⁸ The five journals all cover the range of years sampled. The selection of interdisciplinary journals probably means that psychological studies of careers are underrepresented. I am indebted to Marcia Kassner for her leadership in compiling and classifying the articles.

⁹ Attention to both work and time was a key determinant of whether the article was viewed as careers research or not. The final list of selected articles and their subjects is available from the author.

¹⁰ Studies of race, gender, and work–family issues were difficult to classify, since the question arises whether the choice of subject itself implied social change. It was decided to classify these articles as implying stability, unless social change was emphasized. However, even if these articles were taken as evidence of social instability, they often presume *organizational* stability in their recommendations.

also limits the contrast between subjective and objective career views. Typically, the subjective (for example, personal career aspiration) is compared to the objective (for example, hierarchical job level) out of concern about existing organizational arrangements. As a result, the objective career constrains how the subjective career is viewed. Finally, over both periods, large organizations (more than 500 employees) command more than twice the attention of their small and medium counterparts (Table 1).

Table 1. Career studies in five interdisciplinary journals, 1980–1989, and 1990–1992*

Theme	1980–1989		1990–1992	
	No.	%	No.	%
Environmental stability	43	93	21	78
Intra-organizational focus	36	78	20	74
Managerial, professional or hierarchical Careers	35	76	22	81
Large firms (> 500 employees)	21	46	12	44
Smaller firms (< 500 employees)	7	17	2	7
Mixed sized firms	2	4	3	11
Occupational/convenience sample	14	30	10	37
Total number of articles	46	100	27	100

*Empirical research published in the *Academy of Management Review*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Journal of Management*, *Journal of Management Studies* and *Journal of Organizational* (formerly *Occupational*) *Behavior*.

In sum, the opportunity for careers research to take an interest in the whole workforce, and in the broad interplay between subjective and objective career views, has not been fully realized. Research has continued to emphasize single organizational settings and hierarchical success within them. The agenda has been dominated by bounded, rather than boundaryless, career assumptions. Why has careers research remained so constrained?

Careers research in retrospect

At the time of the MIT initiative, it was widely assumed that an ‘Industrial State (Galbraith, 1971) dominated by large, entrenched organizations, was here to stay. As a result, most ideas about employment emphasized a single, relatively stable, organizational arena. The emphasis was clear, for example, in Hackman and Suttle’s (1976) *Improving Life at Work*, and persisted in subsequent approaches to job satisfaction (Bullock, 1984) and group behavior (Goodman, 1986). Similarly, the organizational commitment literature idealized the continuing attachment of individuals and organizations to one another (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990). More broadly, the field of organizational behavior has only recently begun to address the idea of organization as an *inter-firm* phenomenon (Reddy and Rao, 1990).

Regarding career studies, Van Maanen (1977b, p. 4) saw a ‘for the most part, complementary match between career studies’ interest in unfolding individual identity and in ‘the nature and workings of complex organizations’. Kanter’s (1977) pathbreaking study of the same year focused on careers in a single, supposedly representative, large corporation. Peters and Waterman’s influential *In Search of Excellence* (1982) argued the person’s ‘need to control one’s destiny’

(p. 77) obliged the corporation to provide employment security. The same book celebrated large firm examples such as Caterpillar, Digital, General Motors, Hewlett-Packard and IBM, that were broadly seen as model, and lifelong, contexts for people's careers.

A particular interest of the 1980s was to explain burgeoning Japanese success. However, early reports served to emphasize the dominant large firm, lifetime employment, imperative. *The Art of Japanese Management* (Pascale and Athos, 1981) reported that careers involved an internal 'race for corporate recognition' and offered closing discussion about 'great' companies — all large companies — that leaned heavily on IBM. *Theory Z* (Ouchi, 1981) claimed a continued dominance of the old military-industrial 'zaibatsu', while smaller 'satellite' firms were described to 'exist largely at the pleasure and the mercy of the major firms', and to 'have little hope of ever growing into major competitors' (p. 21). Echoing *In Search of Excellence*, *Theory Z* celebrated large firms such as General Motors, Hewlett Packard, Honeywell, and IBM for their attempts to offer employees 'a stable social setting in which to get their bearings and draw support to cope with and build the other parts of their lives' (p. 166).

By the mid-1980s, the fascination with large corporations had begun to fade. Communities of small European firms were proving more resilient than models of large firm domination would predict (Piore and Sabel, 1984). Silicon Valley, California, offered a different model of regional success based more on new firm formation than large firm expansion (Rogers and Larson, 1986). Recently dominant large firms began to crumble under the weight of their own intransigence, or increased competition, or both (Halal, 1986). Survivor firms dismantled traditional career ladders and simultaneously expanded sub-contract arrangements. New theory began to emphasize 'dynamic networks' of smaller firms instead of vertical coordination of a dominant firm (Miles and Snow, 1986). The presumption of stable contexts associated with 'organizational careers' was evidently fading.

Further evidence about Japanese and other East Asian forms of organization also challenged large firm assumptions. The image of the 'zaibatsu' group gave way to that of the 'keiretsu', suggesting greater autonomy of member firms and an emphasis on horizontal rather than vertical coordination. More attention was paid to the fact that around 85 per cent of Japanese employment occurred in small-to-medium firms. Hong Kong and other successful Asian 'tigers' were emphatically small firm economies (Cestells, 1992), driven by inter-firm, rather than intra-firm, coordination. Revisionist views about Japanese employment suggested external, rather than internal, labor markets underlay Japanese careers (Koike, 1990). Japanese large firms were reported to spend as much capital on new firm spinoffs as they did on internal development (Gerlach, in press).

In sum, recently familiar assumptions about the employment world have suddenly become distant. Widespread and continuing industrial restructuring has brought about the demise of once-proclaimed 'excellent' companies. Kanter (1989) and Peters (1987, 1992), both cited above for their emphasis on large firms, have since turned to recommend those firms' disaggregation. Thus, Kanter's (1989) later interest is in how nominal corporate 'giants' can learn to 'dance', that is to run as collections of, and to relate better to other, autonomous business units. Peters (1992, p. xxxi) acknowledges 'an enormous error' in previously celebrating big manufacturing business over smaller, nimbler rivals.

The suggestion from the preceding discussion is that careers research has maintained its orthodox approach despite the emergent pace of organizational change. Should careers research persist in this approach, and accept a smaller place in the overall organizational studies agenda? Or can there be a change in emphasis of careers research to accommodate the changing realities of organizational life? And what prospective contribution to new knowledge could a change in research emphasis make?

New opportunities for career studies

Responses in career theory

As re-appraisal of the organizational world has progressed, several responses have emerged in career theory. Three kinds of response can be recognized for the new lenses they offer on modern-day careers.

A first response focuses on the inherent *danger in presumed organizational benevolence*. For example, Hirsch (1987) notes that 'yesterday's rules, promises, and pleas to climb the company's career ladder are suddenly transformed into today's uncertainty and fear of firing' (p. 46). Meanwhile, the 1990s promise 'a decade of increasingly transient employment relationships' (p. 159). Dalton (1989) suggests that our reliance on organizations is such that we want them to be 'simple and benign' when in reality they are 'complex and dangerous' (p. 106). Organizations are dangerous 'if we expect things from (them) they cannot deliver' (p. 107) and where the expectations include: that hard workers will be taken care of; that people who make promises will be around to fulfil them; that specialized knowledge or past achievement means future security; and even that 'career pathing' by 'career development specialists' is plausible!

A second response, elaborated in Kanter's (1989) work, views careers from the standpoints of *reputation and employability*, and through these emphasizes the mobility of personnel in a constantly changing mix of firms. Instead of lamenting about lost career opportunities in single organizations, people can rejoice in the new possibilities for inter-organizational moves. A focus on building reputation over one's career can provide employability regardless of the changing fortunes of a single employer (Kanter, 1989). Such reputation-building requires access to external markets and organizations as provided by network employment arrangements (Rousseau and Wade-Benzoni, in press).

A third response considers the *psychological adjustment* of the person, as highlighted by Weick and Berlinger (1989). They point out that while career scholars of the 1970s were bent on improving things within incumbent organizations, others were suggesting changes in the organization's make-up. In particular, the model of the 'self-designing organization' emphasizes the ability to adapt to continuous environmental change. This model of organization elevates the significance of the subjective over the objective career, and reverses other traditional assumptions about organizational careers. Thus, participants in self-designing organizations are advised, among other things, to cultivate 'spiral' rather than 'linear' career concepts, to decouple identity from the jobs they perform, and to preserve discretion over the work that they do and the learning it provides.

However, all of the above initiatives suggest the same cause-effect sequence, namely that organizations cause career effects. With the exception of Bailyn's (e.g. 1978, 1992) pioneering efforts on work and family, few career scholars have suggested the reverse sequence: that careers cause organizational effects. One example of the reverse cause-effect sequence is with founding entrepreneurs, especially habitual entrepreneurs (Starr and Bygrave, 1991), who specifically form new organizations. Yet there are multiple other examples, where organizations already exist but career behavior influences organizational competency, strategy and resultant success. For example, Gilder's (1989) 'break through' thesis implies new organizations prosper from career moves. Florida and Kenney's (1990) countervailing 'follow through' thesis is that established organizations suffer. Both hypotheses concur that careers — boundaryless careers — produce organizational effects.

The study of boundaryless careers can transcend problematic cause-effect assumptions. Moreover, the study of boundaryless careers can highlight interdependencies between career and

organizational outcomes. Such interdependencies are strongly suggested, for example, in recent writing on networking, learning and enterprise. These topics are briefly introduced below, to suggest prominent possibilities for studying boundaryless careers (and to anticipate recurrent themes throughout this volume).

Networking and learning

The themes of networking and learning are closely connected to the above insights about careers, for example as techniques for avoiding dependence on a single organization, or as media through which knowledge accumulation can accrue. These themes also suggest a greater relevance for career studies in the new era of smaller, more interdependent, forms of organization.

‘Cultivating networks’ (Hirsch, 1987) is fundamental to free agent career behavior, providing access to other people’s knowledge and resources. Meanwhile, individual networks accrue into social networks at the level of the firm, and define inter-firm dependencies and exchange relationships (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1985). As a result, network relations simultaneously serve the career interests of individual actors and the strategic interests of employer firms. Both sets of interests are affected by the flow of information and influence, as well as by direct career movements, to new employer situations (Nohria, 1992).

Networks also serve as learning systems (Powell and Brantley, 1992), again with consequences for both individuals and employing firms. Learning over the course of the career prospectively adds to a person’s employment value, or human capital (Becker, 1964). Meanwhile, learning through ‘communities of practice’ (Brown and Duguid, 1991) can have a two-way effect, as people draw learning from and infuse learning into the work groups they join. Also, learning becomes embedded in a firm’s ‘routines’ (Nelson and Winter, 1982) which — like a Broadway play — can still be performed after an individual actor moves on (and takes the benefit of his or her experience to another setting).

A broader influence of learning occurs at the level of the industry region. First, in promoting ‘a pool of skilled and specially trained personnel’ through whom new business can be formed, and second, in creating regional advantages as ‘the stock of knowledge and skill . . . accumulates as firms imitate each other and personnel move among firms’ (Porter, 1990). Associated career mobility can be prompted by both individuals and firms. By individuals, in that the more they learn the more employable they are likely to be elsewhere (Drucker, 1992). By firms, in that ‘great jobs’ — high learning jobs — are by their nature not guaranteed jobs (Kanter, 1991).

Bringing in enterprise

The theme of individual enterprise has drawn limited attention in the wake of the MIT initiative, and lacks a prominent place in the careers research reported in Table 1. Schein’s (1978) ‘creativity’ career anchor and Derr’s (1986) ‘getting high’ career success map both accommodate enterprise, which is also one of six basic career interests identified by Holland (1985). However, the common suggestion is that enterprise is one of several options, rather than a necessary element, in people’s career behavior¹¹.

A stronger case for enterprise — in the broad sense of pursuing distinctive, personally-relevant opportunities — can be built from other views. One draws on persistent ideas about human potential, or uniqueness, and the associated discomfort with externally-defined goals (Shepard,

¹¹ Some would argue autonomy, and therefore a broader literature (e.g. Deci and Ryan, 1985) fits in here. However, this writer sees a distinction between being left alone and being opportunistic when left alone!

1984). A supporting view stems from Axelrod's (1984) influential argument about the alignment between enlightened self-interest and communal interest. A third view concerns the relevance of individual discovery (Kirzner, 1992), which by its nature cannot be anticipated in present job arrangements. A fourth view sees personal enterprise as the path to expression of deeply held identities and values (Freeman and Gilbert, 1988). All these views point to enterprise as more of an integral, rather than optional, component of people's career behavior.

A related view of enterprise stems from work on the sister concept of entrepreneurship. Historically, this work focused on the founding of new firms, and attributed this founding to a single party, or entrepreneur (e.g. Smith and Miner, 1983). However, recent interpretations are broader. They go beyond the archetype of the lone entrepreneur in their views of new firm formation. They see entrepreneurship as a property of the firm as a whole, and as an enduring rather than preliminary concern in a firm's existence (Best, 1990). They also see entrepreneurship as a concern of teams (Stewart, 1989), or as a process involving interdependent efforts among firms (Starr and Macmillan, 1990). They further see entrepreneurship as a principal concern of people pursuing modern-day network-sensitive careers (Kanter, 1989).

In sum, new opportunities for career studies reach beyond an emphasis on organizational phenomena. They frame individual reputation-building and psychological adjustment as inter-firm activities. They emphasize interdependent effects of careers and organizations upon one another. They present individual networking, learning, and enterprise as interwoven with the activities of employing firms. Common to all these opportunities is the suggestion that careers — and prominently boundaryless careers — constitute the threads that bind people, firms and industry regions together.

The boundaryless career: an *inter-organizational* concept

Envisioning the boundaryless career as a thread can help us introduce its multiple properties. First, the thread accumulates individual properties in texture, color and strength that reflect the person's cumulative aptitudes, experience, and reputation in the developing career. Second, threads develop further properties of size, pattern and resilience when woven into the shifting fabric of the firm. So far, and with the added observation that new threads join the fabric and old threads leave, the boundaryless career and the organizational career are similar concepts. However, the distinctiveness of the boundaryless career appears when we extend the metaphor to inter-firm activities. We are encouraged to see from where and to where threads enter and leave the fabric of the firm, and how further cooperation (binding) and competition (tension) among firms are stitched together through people's career behavior. Taking an even broader view, we are encouraged to see how shifting patterns in inter-firm relations contribute to the changing tapestry of industry regions. To better understand this tapestry, there is reason to better understand the properties of the essential threads — boundaryless careers — from which it is woven. Each of the following four papers in this volume makes a distinct attempt to do so.

For DeFillippi and Arthur the focus starts with the firm, as a reference point for viewing people's career competencies within it. However, our attention is quickly drawn to the organizational, occupational and industry community contexts to which the threads of careers connect. The appreciation that careers are interwoven with these contexts suggests a novel research agenda for each of three arenas of career competency. Moreover, the research questions raised have a context-specific rather than firm-specific flavor. In turn, the authors see the opportunity for fresh dialogue with other scholars on how career competencies are acquired, utilized and transferred.

Bird also starts out with a focus on the firm, but this time specifically for its role in knowledge creation. The career is seen as a resultant repository of knowledge, and a source of the firm's differentiation. The thread of the career appears less as a sequence of positions and more as a vehicle to accumulate both explicit and tacit knowledge. In turn, boundaryless careers contribute to knowledge creation in distinctive ways, with attendant individual, group and organizational consequences. Of particular concern is how tacit knowledge is pursued, exchanged and nurtured when driven by individual rather than organizational initiatives.

For Miner and Robinson, the fabric of the employing firm is deeply woven into the fabric of a larger population of firms. Learning for this population is driven by variation, selection and retention processes in which each firm participates, and through which career patterns evolve. Boundaryless careers are particularly associated with variation, and with social interaction that promotes or constrains the flow of information across firms. The flow of information in turn affects the rise and fall of firms, whose aggregate fortunes reflect learning — mediated through careers — for the population of firms as a whole.

Mirvis and Hall zoom in from the broad tapestry of firms to the qualities of its constituent career threads. The authors' focus on psychological success returns career scholars to a familiar viewpoint, but through lenses distinctly crafted from boundaryless career materials. Psychological success involves making sense of forever-changing organizational attachments. Identities less dependent on the firm, and employment contracts more transactional than relational, each shift the locus of responsibility to the career actor. Emergent questions invite new kinds of career research, and a greater emphasis on a 'protean' or self-developing conception of the career actor.

Beyond their suggestions in individual papers, the authors here share a common purpose: to highlight the overall case for the boundaryless career as a point of departure in future organizational research. We invite others to join us in our purpose through related efforts. For as the papers that follow will amply demonstrate, the task of understanding the boundaryless career has only just begun.

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