



A Career Lexicon for the 21st Century

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A Career Lexicon for the 21st Century

Michael B. Arthur and Denise M. Rousseau

Executive Overview

The shift from circumscribed careers to boundarylessness confronts us with a problem outside our previous experience. No norms and few models exist to tell how to evaluate, plan, review, analyze, promote, or otherwise live out a boundaryless career. Change dominates over stability. But of all changes, the most fundamental are changes in assumptions about the way the world works, and what we mean by the terms we use.

Chaos is not bad, it is what is.¹

Consider the following advice from a department manager, Jack, to an employee, Jill, who was worried about her career future:

"Career opportunities are not what they were before delayering and cutbacks. The whole organization is constrained at every level. I've done what I can to keep this group intact. I think its boundaries remain clear, and I assure you I will fight to defend them. I'm trying my best to maintain continuity of employment in a tough environment. I'm also trying my best to protect our training programs and the learning that they offer you. But it's tough going. The transition from old to new realities isn't easy. The civility of the old days is gone, but I will try to take care of your interests. In the final analysis, though, you have little choice but to look after yourself."

Jill left with her doubts about the future confirmed, but grateful that her manager seemed to understand. She concluded that her present department seemed as good a place as any to weather the storm of limited career opportunity. But how would you rate Jack's advice? On a 10-point scale, would you score Jack a five, a seven, perhaps even a nine? And what about Jill's reaction? A similar score to Jack's, perhaps, or even a higher score for knowing a good boss when she has one?

If your inclination is to score either Jack or Jill at all favorably, you are thinking about careers from the standpoint of the departing 20th century instead of the upcoming 21st century. As the old rhyme goes, Jack will fall down and Jill will come tumbling after. Moreover, they will not climb right back again until they make a fundamental shift in their adopted use of language. By our reckoning, Jack uses and Jill accepts at least nine key terms in the language of the old, departing career era rather than the new, upcoming one. Jack and Jill both need a new career lexicon.

We have recently had the opportunity to develop a new career lexicon through collaborative efforts with a range of management scholars. In editing our forthcoming book, *The Boundaryless Career*, we gave each author or authorship

team a challenge to leave behind the largely static, restrictive assumptions of the bounded or organizational career systems of old and to anticipate the dynamic, knowledge-driven, boundaryless career world ahead. This article draws heavily on those authors' efforts. The original version of our lexicon was written as the final chapter of our book for a mixed academic and practitioner audience.² This version is directed explicitly toward the reader of this journal, the active participant in the boundaryless career world, where adaptation to the possibilities ahead is especially urgent.³ If Jack's assumptions become Jill's, she will be trying to cope with old career meanings in the new career era. She deserves better.

A Lexicon

Appropriating old terms for new meanings brings to the surface old assumptions and replaces them with new premises. Assumptions, powerful beliefs normally invisible to the holder, function like the lens of the eye. Everything we know about the world we know through the lens of our assumptions, a lens we cannot usually see. We see careers and organization through our concepts of what organization or careers should be. Our lexicon bears examination.

Boundary: *Old meaning:* a limit; the division between familiar and hostile territory. *New meaning:* something to be crossed in career behavior, or in taking on complexity

In Jack's world, the boundaries to his department define a safe haven for employees. In turn, they are expected to stay in place, to value the security Jack tries to provide, and to maintain a principal loyalty to the department he runs. Yet the modern competitive arena calls on company departments to work together to persistently improve customer service, or go out of business. Beyond interdepartment efforts, the territory of the company blurs into collaborative arrangements with suppliers and customers or into the kind of intercompany milieu that underlies the success of industry regions like the Silicon Valley. New conceptions of collaboration mean that the old ideas about boundaries—confining people to narrow career paths, a functional focus, and narrow specialization—disappear.

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We used to think a company was nearly decomposable, that a part was separable from other parts with its own isolated existence. We are now coming to see the dangers of that thinking. It has brought about the isolationism to which Jack clings, but which means less and less in the new era. Marking out your territory is ineffective, even futile. When a large hospital's data processing staff failed to deliver on a new information system, they summarily found themselves reassigned as employees of EDS. As a result they became accountable to, and professionally much better off for, that software house's exemplary productivity standards, which came in from outside. Similar boundary-spanning through outsourcing or spin-off arrangements is commonplace, and usually relocates the old activity under more efficient and deserving bosses and workers. People need to look well beyond the boundaries of their immediate work setting to understand what's going on, rather than deferring to a patronizing boss. Someone ought to tell Jill so.

Career: *Old meaning:* a course of professional advancement; usage restricted to occupations with formal hierarchical progression, such as managers and

professionals. *New meaning*: the unfolding sequence of any person's work experiences over time.

Resumes reflecting life experiences people have had, rather than positions they have held, are the keys to tomorrow's success. Resumes can also present old experiences in new ways, as people's new learning allows them to reinterpret what has gone before. Careers are now improvised along with the workflows in which people participate, and success has its own meaning for each improviser.

As Jack sees it, work experiences labeled as careers affect only people who enjoy institutional rewards for advancing up an established hierarchy. The old status to having a career left many people behind—clerical workers, blue-collar workers, part-time workers struggling to balance work and family. Yet Lincoln Electric recently rejected most of the 20,000 applications for entry-level positions it received, but still had positions to fill.⁴ And despite the rebound in U.S. manufacturing, some job loss victims lack the technology and teamwork capabilities to perform the new work. Even entry-level workers must have skills that companies cannot easily train for, or acquire elsewhere, such as high school trigonometry or the ability to read technical drawings. Skills create careers and career opportunity, but many people are locked into the notion that resembles the people-movers at the airport—hop on and you move forward. A boundaryless career path is neither automatic nor linear.

Strange things happen when companies abandon titles. People find it harder to chart the progress of their careers without the obvious benchmarks.⁵ "Management" always used to be something to which you aspired. Now some companies avoid the term altogether, or use it to mean "facilitation," "self-management," or taking your turn at project leadership. Disconnecting careers from status and hierarchy dislodges traditional assumptions behind career success. Resumes reflecting life experiences people have had, rather than positions they have held, are the keys to tomorrow's success. Resumes can also present old experiences in new ways, as people's new learning allows them to reinterpret what has gone before. Careers are now improvised along with the workflows in which people participate, and success has its own meaning for each improviser. Jill must improvise, too.

Organization: *Old meaning*: a legal entity defining authority relations and property rights. *New meaning*: organizing through networks, value chains and so on; a more dynamic, process-centered usage.

Jack still sees organization as the formal structuring of work, performed and owned by the firm in exchange for pay and sometimes job security. The formal hierarchical arrangements supposedly allow work to be organized in the same fashion even when the people change. This kind of organization works a lot like board games; it has its own rules which cannot be questioned. Trace the rules to source and you'll probably find a concept of infallibility at the top (and a matching concept at the bottom), driven by acceptance of the rules, of blind faith. When Tom Peters argued recently that what the U.S. needed was a "Declaration of Interdependence," he was challenging the notion of decomposable work and workers.⁶ Dynamic network analysis, with workers helping to set their own rules, better captures the structure of work than any formal organization chart. Nonlinear, cumulative, network-centered experiences form the basis of the new career.

The new interdependence among work and workers means that organization has given way to organizing where cooperative teams act as building blocks for work. Organizing—that is the organization process—reflects the entire value

chain producing goods and services and builds teams across functions and across suppliers, producers, distributors, and customers. People actively organizing their own and each others' work participate in on-going discovery and learning. Under the old rules, mobility was supposed to leave companies vulnerable when people moved on. Under the new rules companies and workers learn from a temporary visitor, a rented executive, or a technical specialist hired to show others the way forward. Chrysler designs the Neon or Spielberg directs a movie by bringing all the contributors under one roof. When the work is over, everyone moves out again. Organizing means that people shape the settings in which they work. Jill must shape her own work setting, too.

Employment: *Old meaning:* the action of employing a person or making use of a thing; a state of being employed; a person's regular occupation or business. *New meaning:* a temporary state, or the current manifestation of long-term employability.

In today's fluid employment situations, skills create opportunities more than opportunities create skills. The new employment arena reverses traditional cause-effect assumptions.

Jack views employment as a response to, and an effect of, an established firm. His belief traces back to the industrial revolution, when factories consolidated work to be done at one time and one place under managerial control, and people became largely dependent on factories for work. A vast body of employment law has since evolved to formalize the rights of firms and employees against one another. For example, the Wagner Act, originating in the 1930s, specifies appropriate and inappropriate employment relations based on a need to protect workers from the more powerful corporation. Recent moves toward workplace collaboration and high involvement practices run counter to such laws and the corporatist world view from which they came.⁷ As organization comes to mean organizing through the energies of flexible workers, old protections become constraints. But some protections, such as health care benefits, pensions, and marketable skills, must still be accessible, albeit in new and more portable ways.

In contrast, employability fuels interfirm movement.⁸ Boeing runs a 19-week small business training program, in collaboration with the state of Washington and a council of business, government, union and community officials, to help turn skills acquired at Boeing into the basis for small-business development. Employability is critical to large and small firms alike. As soon as Larry Barton left the comfort of a university professorship for a managerial post at Motorola, he created his own "cabinet of advisors." These were old Motorola consulting contacts with whom he could discuss his next career steps in the changing, unfamiliar world he had joined.⁹ In today's fluid employment situations, skills create opportunities more than opportunities create skills. The new employment arena reverses traditional cause-effect assumptions. Jill needs to know and practice that.

Group: *Old meaning:* interdependent individuals within a social unit such as a firm or voluntary association. *New meaning:* interdependent individuals who identify psychologically with one another.

To Jack, groups are building blocks of the formal organization, where workflows create units intermediate between individual and firm levels of analysis. Groups therefore have common member interests, and group theory has taught us how cohesion could be leveraged, and intergroup conflict contained, to the greater benefit of the firm. Jack probably learned as much in business school. If he didn't he could hardly have missed a similar story from the armies of

consultants and trainers peddling a similar message. A collective pat on the head is supposed to reinforce group identity. The stroke of paternalism would keep the group subordinate to the firm, and responsive to motivation on the firm's behalf. Many people still think like Jack, as if group members never had a further purpose except to hang together and stay friends.

In contrast, the new groups are commonly interfirm phenomena, including networks of contractors, independents and entrepreneurs. Interdependent interests replace common interests, and groups integrate the interests of multiple firms rather than subordinating their interests to those of a single firm. Modern product design teams consist of suppliers, customers, engineers, and marketing experts. Upcoming "fourth wave" forms of organizing, fashioned on the inevitability of a knowledge society taking over from an industrial society, will rely on such groups to bind multifirm agendas together, and to hold individual firms to project commitments. In the days of the Internet, such groups are often more virtual than real, held together in cyberspace rather than physical space. The new groups have identities that are external to any one firm, yet essential in making multiple firms cohere. Jill needs a new kind of group in her life.

Learning: *Old meaning:* acquisition of knowledge committed to memory, typically by individuals. *New meaning:* a multilevel phenomenon, includes creation and acquisition of knowledge, collective processes for shared interpretation, and patterns of adaptation and transformation.

Jack's view of learning is individually-centered. At its extreme, this holds that people are passive vessels into which knowledge gets poured. Skills and knowledge transfer are presumed best acquired in a dedicated learning environment like a training program or school. In companies like Jack's, the traditional focus has been on defining required skills by analyzing jobs into component tasks, specifying work methods in detail, and finding the best way to do the task, which is then reinforced by drill and practice. Companies like Jack's would also typically withhold investments in employee learning until their appointment to a new job deemed it necessary. However, more recent excursions into organizational learning have suggested how firms learn as collectives.¹⁰ These contemporary ideas reverse the cause-effect assumptions of the old meaning of learning, and celebrate the persistent advantages of learning by doing.

In companies like Jack's, the traditional focus has been on defining required skills by analyzing jobs into component tasks, specifying work methods in detail, and finding the best way to do the task, which is then reinforced by drill and practice.

Learning also makes progressively less sense as an intrafirm phenomenon. When we use it that way, it constrains the meaning we attach to the knowledge worker. Knowledge today is about whom we know as much as what we know, and supplier, customer and even competitor contacts are important for the added value they can bring.¹¹ And what we know can have regional, transferable qualities, which helps explain why industries are so often clustered in distinct geographic regions, and why Boeing and the state of Washington, mentioned earlier, feel that they can contribute something to one another. Shared learning is also an increasing concern of occupational groups, as they extend and institutionize their expectations for their members' continuing education. But less formal models of shared learning are everywhere. The watering holes frequented by Silicon Valley engineers offer ample evidence of unbounded knowledge transfer, of new processes and problem solving, over beers. Jill needs new projects and collaborators, and a watering hole frequented by outsiders to her firm, if she is to learn the right things.

Civility: *Old meaning:* the status of citizenship; state of being civilized, freedom from barbarity. *New meaning:* community membership where entitlements are coupled with responsibilities; an infrastructure sustaining and enhancing social and personal relations.

Civility implies both allegiance to a social order and the obligations derived from it. It refers to private rights, those held by citizens, the body of which form the notion of a civil society. Civility can be applied to persons, to the milieu in which they live and work, or to the larger society. Peter Drucker, who fifty years ago argued that large firms ought to take charge of their employees' welfare, has now reversed himself.¹² Charles Perrow notes that the growth of large firms' enhancing their control over work behaviors has unwittingly absorbed many segments of society and made movement outside a firm's walls truly dangerous. Company softball leagues still deflect people from outside social arrangements. Health care and pension benefits, once markers of an employer of choice, are now markers of intransigence.¹³ As employers now divest themselves of broad social functions, a multilevel infrastructure beyond firms is pressed to respond.

Obsolete models of career success, based on ineffective division of labor and cumbersome reporting obligations, make failures out of competent people by measuring progress on outmoded yardsticks. The recent reengineering fad has been directed toward clearing those yardsticks out, but has all too frequently ended once new yardsticks have been brought in.

A new civility is needed. Its desiderata include: portable health and retirement benefits, easy access to quality training and lifelong education, refreshers and updates, access to labor markets where one's reputation is known, and more flexible opportunities to accommodate work and family. Rocky Rhoades at age 41 was a software genius who could write his own ticket. As co-founder and chief engineer at Silicon Graphics, he had his pick of cutting edge projects. But this father of three took an action that felt "like jumping off a cliff," cut back to a parttime schedule "to resolve an abiding conflict: a struggle against the ability of my work life to totally consume me, and . . . this blossoming family life that I felt was more important." Years earlier, and with few models to guide him, Mr. Rhoades had been the first in his company to take three weeks paternity leave. Today, he allocates his time among his kids, his job, and volunteer work. "I don't know if working half-time will catch on," he says. "But it would be nice if more people gave more thought to things they hold dear."¹⁴ Jill should give more thought to those things, too.

Transition: *Old meaning:* The movement between states. *New meaning:* The now prevailing cycles of change and adaptation, including stages of preparation, encounter, adjustment, stabilization, and renewed preparation.

Jack sees a transition as something exceptional, an undesirable if occasionally necessary event punctuating stable employment arrangements. He was schooled, we might suspect, in a model of change that posited unfreezing and refreezing episodes before and after the change event. But transitions are now pervasive, reflected in unprecedented rates of job loss, uncertain job prospects, and old institutions (high schools, pensions, health insurance) that have not kept up with the shift. Obsolete models of career success, based on ineffective division of labor and cumbersome reporting obligations, make failures out of competent people by measuring progress on outmoded yardsticks. The recent reengineering fad has been directed toward clearing those yardsticks out, but has all too frequently ended once new yardsticks have been brought in. Our instinctive reactions to the problems we find still reflect the old change model. We repair the old routine by installing a new routine. The new quickly becomes old in its turn.

In the new economy, transition is a continuing process through which people

carve out careers of their choice. Transition and employability work in tandem, driven by shifting personal competencies, project activities, and perpetual discovery. Andersen consulting recognizes the temporary nature of its front-line positions, and provides an exiting process more sophisticated than those many firms use to socialize in-coming employees. Soon-to-be alums are treated as community members, and are helped to use their consulting experiences as stepping stones to new positions. Needless to say, talented and loyal alums are good referrals for new recruits and sources of future business. The same alums also have a greater sense of their own efficacy and worth, and have a valuable base of experience to enhance their credibility in subsequent work experiences.¹⁵ Jill could become an alum, too.

There are more new definitions. **Occupation:** a set of tasks associated with codified knowledge, or an anchor for lifelong learning? **Nonwork:** a secondary and subordinate social or family arena; or a priority in life demanding accommodation? **Self:** psychological identity associated with a sense of agency and independence, or an identity grounded in a sense of interdependence? **Competition:** the attempt to destroy a presumed mortal enemy; or joining other players in an expanding and invigorating game? We hope that by now our point is well made, and that readers will feel ready to expand our lexicon on their own. The Jills of this world deserve far better than the lexicon twentieth century careers threaten to leave behind. The Jacks of this world, whatever their past investments in their own careers, owe it to the Jills of this world to do better.

Using the Lexicon

Building a new career lexicon leads to how it should be used, by Jack, Jill, or anyone else engaged in the boundaryless career era. One use is to challenge ideas that may be grounded in old meanings. A second use is to expand upon ideas that don't address or clarify shifts between old and new meanings. A third use is to cultivate fresh ideas explicitly grounded in the new meanings. All three uses call for the persistent attention of career actors to their own career circumstances. We present a variety of pointers for use below, and within each of them address questions directly to the reader of this article. The pointers and questions are focused on knowing your situation, leveraging your competencies, extending your collaborations, broadening your accountabilities, and cultivating career resiliency.

Know Your Situation

Knowing your career situation extends across both self-knowledge and market knowledge. Self-knowledge stems from the kind of self-assessment activities chronicled in, for example, "What Color Is Your Parachute?" and other popular self-help books. But how much more important is regular reassessment as boundaries shift and transitions persist? How, for example, do your skills honed on discontinued spreadsheet programs relate to successor programs? Some approaches to self-knowledge use occupational labels as a basis for understanding both what you like and what you can do. But how temporary are these approaches as new patterns of organizing change the occupational structure and opportunities within it? Will the knowledge accountants of tomorrow look at all like the financial accountants of today? And if the unfolding of a career now leads toward greater personal uniqueness over conformity, what is the value of labels such as "general management" to describe your situation? Helpful self-knowledge needs to be both more distinctive and more dynamic in the boundaryless career era.

The complement to self-knowledge is to know the marketplace for the services your career can provide. The internal markets and job posting systems of

traditional employment practice are no substitute for broader personal investigations. How can your immediate employment boundaries be reinterpreted as platforms for future opportunity? What is the larger marketplace for your emergent career competencies? What customer knowledge do you have, for example, that distinguishes your ability to provide new services? The new meanings of employment and learning also play in here. How can these inform more dynamic monitoring about the career opportunity structure beyond your present firm? Notice that your present firm can also be a beneficiary here. Knowing the range of opportunities open to you will leave you better able to articulate alternative uses to which your talents can be applied. Knowing your situation is a precondition to getting either your present or a future employer to respond to your unfolding career aspirations.

Leverage Your Competencies

Use what you are presently good at to help you become good at something new. In some cases the link is obvious, as when new skills or training require previous exposure, for example, when basic computer programming skills open the door to learning about more advanced skills. However, in some cases effective leveraging will involve developing new, complementary competencies. The organizing of an interfirm project may leave you with a good technical understanding of a supplier's developing product line and the manufacturing efficiencies it can promote. How much extra effort would it take for you to extend your group of contacts to alternative suppliers with similar equipment? How quickly could you become a budding industry expert on this kind of equipment? And when you get noticed, will you have the market knowledge or presentational skills to demonstrate your recent learning, and if not, what can you do about that? Leveraging your competencies involves seeing and acting on the possibilities that lie ahead.

The internal markets and job posting systems of traditional employment practice are no substitute for broader personal investigations. How can your immediate employment boundaries be reinterpreted as platforms for future opportunity? What is the larger marketplace for your emergent career competencies? What customer knowledge do you have, for example, that distinguishes your ability to provide new services?

Economist Nucla Beck maintains that thriving in the new economy calls for industries to develop proportionally higher knowledge ratios, to have more and more knowledge workers.¹⁶ Some of the more visionary companies are already pressing employees in that direction through explicit customer-driven or open book management policies. Both approaches can help you appreciate the new organizing realities on which the new economy depends. Yet should you rely on your own company's policies, waiting if necessary, until it develops some? Or should you cultivate new competencies by setting developmental goals for yourself? We know the manager of a small but prestigious office design company who has done just about every task her company performs. She joined the firm straight from high school less than ten years ago, and has not taken one day of formal education since. She learned design skills, management skills, and merchandising skills, leveraging her competencies one project at a time. What can you learn from the next project you take on for your company or professional association?

Extend Your Collaborations

Harvard professor Robert Putnam has been worrying about the demise of bowling leagues, part of a four-decade long decline in American associations, from the PTA and the NAACP to garden clubs. Putnam's point is that we've been too engaged with work, and too neglectful of the broader social capital on which civic life and public trust depend.¹⁷ The flip side is that all the time we've spent socializing with department colleagues doesn't mean very much. We've overworked the same bounded set of connections, and lost perspective in the process. Civility, learning and, increasingly, employment, have all taken their

toll from misguided old ideas about socialization in a single company setting. How are we to bring in new ideas, and contribute to new organizing, if we don't reach out? How are we to negotiate successive transitions if we have become so isolated from the potential targets of those transitions?

The plumber, electrician, tailor or hairdresser doesn't always know where or for whom he or she will be working next week. But they all know they will be working, because one of their regular accounts, or a new customer referred by one of those accounts, will show up and need help. These working people typically succeed without trade unions or employment law to represent them.

One antidote to emergent social isolation is to volunteer. Again, savvy firms are leading the way, providing guilt-free opportunities for busy young professionals to serve their communities. Again, though, the point of the boundaryless career era is not to wait. A recent *Fortune* article describes how Ronald Homer, CEO of the African-American-managed Boston Bank of Commerce, invested heavily in local charitable activities. His emergent group of contacts helped out at a critical time when his bank was desperately in need of fresh capital. You don't need to be operating at Homer's level to make a difference. People who identify with and appreciate you from past experience will be ready to do you a future favor. It may not even come to that. For some employers, it's enough to demonstrate through engaging in volunteer activities that you have a more caring instinct and not just a money instinct. The assumption is that your broader engagement with society will bring better ideas and sensitivities to the table.¹⁸ How can your own volunteer activities feed that kind of engagement?

Broaden Your Accountabilities

All of the above means that you and your career will no longer be accountable to any one job description or department or boss or even company. You will be an agent of your own career, simultaneously respectful of the work for which you have contracted and the careers of others. Working tradespeople have much to teach us here. The plumber, electrician, tailor or hairdresser doesn't always know where or for whom he or she will be working next week. But they all know they will be working, because one of their regular accounts, or a new customer referred by one of those accounts, will show up and need help. These working people typically succeed without trade unions or employment law to represent them. The extent of their accountabilities, and established reputation through honoring those accountabilities, continue to get them work. How can you imitate the tradesperson, and build a broader, opportunity-enhancing, set of accountabilities into your own work?

A principal accountability in the new era is to family. Career advice often used to hold that if you want to get credit for what you do, you must manage people and manage money. So old organization arrangements got in the way of family, as the 9 to 5 workday and centralized control systems resisted creative accommodations. Flex-time and job-sharing were simple variants on the full-time job rather than any challenge to its assumed centrality. The new era and its technological support systems mean that more and more work can be done from home at flexible hours, and that customer services can often be extended by taking advantage of the differences in people's work preferences. How can you help make the case for greater family or social accountability to help rather than hinder company accountability? And how can you make sure you are accountable to companies that give you a fresh chance?

Exercise Resiliency

JobShift author William Bridges puts it this way: "What you will need . . . is the ability to bend and not break, to let go readily of the outdated and learn the new, to bounce back quickly from disappointment, to live with high levels of uncertainty, and to find your security from within rather than from outside."¹⁹ The same idea has been propounded by Robert Waterman, joining his *In Search*

of *Excellence* co-author, Tom Peters, to claim that individual people, and expressly not large corporations, are the keys to future career and economic success.²⁰ Rigid boundaries, static views of organization, orderly rather than disorderly learning, false group loyalties, and viewing transitions as the exception rather than the rule all stand in the way of the kind of resiliency suggested. In sum, the message is to engage the new, adaptive meanings of career terms over their predecessors. How can you apply that message to yourself?

A wise professor counseled his student to save some “go to hell money” to create the freedom to conduct her work life as she saw appropriate. In that vein, we recently had an experience with a part-time MBA student who had kept in touch with a company that had provided him with an undergraduate internship. He chose to subsequently put in weekend hours helping that company get established, witnessed first hand the excellence of its management, and was on hand when a major national distributor offered to take on the company’s product. Our student stepped up and offered the money (not a great deal of money) that he knew was needed for some vital expansion equipment. He is now an owner of the company, and more formally obligated to give them a day of his time each weekend. But he retains, for now, his full-time position with his present employer. Can we all act like that student? Can we all make sensible bets with our available time and resources to leave us more options, and a broader platform of trusting relationships, to cover what might be ahead? Why not?

Conclusion

One term excluded from our lexicon is the one from our opening quotation—**chaos**. For years, chaos was something we sought to avoid, as advice about getting a qualification, dressing for success, or becoming a one-minute manager filled the personal help bookshelves. When that advice began to fail, “Pack Your Own Parachute” came along, a hint of the new era to come, an invitation to float above the chaos on the air of free agency. The author of that work now decries the costs of free agency, leaving the impression you may pack your own parachute but perhaps it would be better to simply deplane.²¹

Yet chaos has itself become respectable. It has shifted from meaning everything undesirable to the principal factor behind what we now see as an orderly universe. And chaos is in many ways the handmaiden of boundaryless careers, a source of vitality and movement, that which makes the unusual usual. One particularly pertinent feature of chaos theory to the boundaryless career is the principle of “sensitive dependence on initial conditions.” Labeled the “Butterfly Effect,” the principle states that great events, and upheavals, follow from small behaviors and minor actions, “that a butterfly stirring the air today in Peking can transform storm systems next month in New York.”²² Chaos means orderly disorder created out of simple processes. An engineer’s old work on a hydroelectric project in Egypt finds his new employer assigning him to a product design team based on his knowledge of the Middle East. A schoolteacher’s old classroom presentation skills have her new customers warming to the software services she now sells. Fill in examples about what you have seen. Fill in examples about yourself.

We may wish that both chaos and boundaryless careers would go away, but we know in our better judgment they will not. Moreover, if we embrace them we may surprise ourselves at the pace with which our new appreciation grows. We close by suggesting what Jack *might* have said. What follows uses the same key

terms as our opening quotation, but in each case the new lexicon is respected. Judge for yourself which quotation stands up best.

"Careers in today's world are what you make them. The apparent boundaries to this department are also your platforms for further opportunity. Organize your employment around your professional and social networks, and use those networks as your link to the larger environment. Don't wait for formal training, but make sure the group of colleagues and collaborators you surround yourself with sustain new learning for you, and try to reciprocate for them. Transition to new ways is constant. Look after yourself, but don't be afraid to trust and to work to build trust around you. Be civil, and build reputation, in giving and taking help as change unfolds. Remember that who you are and what you achieve will always be embedded in your relationships with others."

To all the Jacks and Jills out there, we hope this helps. As the world and your circumstances inevitably change, we urge you to continue to build the new career lexicon on your own. And we wish you the very best of 21st Century luck.

Endnotes

¹ W. Bercquist, "The postmodern organization." San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.

² This article draws freely on the multiple contributions to the book *The Boundaryless Career: A New Employment Principle for a New Organizational Era*, edited by Michael Arthur and Denise Rousseau, published in August, 1996, by Oxford University Press. Space does not allow us to list every chapter title here, but we would like to acknowledge a heavy dependence on the following set of contributing authors: Howard Aldrich, Lotte Bailyn, Ted Baker, Allan Bird, Michael Best, Ronald Burt, Bee Leng Chua, Tojo Thatchenkery, Robert DeFillippi, Jerry Ellig, Joyce Fletcher, Nanette Fondas, Robert Forrant, Cherlyn Granrose, Douglas (Tim) Hall, Monica Higgins, Paul Hirsch, Candace Jones, Raymond Miles, Anne Miner, Philip Mirvis, Charles Perrow, Holly Raider, David Robinson, James Rosenbaum, AnnaLee Saxenian, Mark Shanley, Charles Snow, David Thomas, Pamela Tolbert and Karl Weick.

³ Our concept of the boundaryless career is similar to that of the protean career, introduced in Douglas T. Hall, *Careers in Organizations*, Goodyear, 1976. Twenty years on, our label more explicitly confronts the traditional organizational career perspective and its limitations.

⁴ See "Job paradox: Manufacturers decry a shortage of workers while rejecting many . . ." *The Wall Street Journal*, September 8, 1995.

⁵ See the Hal Lancaster column, *The Wall Street Journal*, May 16, 1995.

⁶ Tom Peters, A declaration of interdependence. *San Jose Mercury*, July 4, 1991.

⁷ D.M. Rousseau, *Psychological contracts in organizations: Written and unwritten agreements*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1995.

⁸ R.M. Kanter, *When giants learn to dance: Mastering the challenge of strategy*,

management and careers in the 1990s. New York: Basic Books, 1989.

⁹ See *The Wall Street Journal* "Boeing teaches employees how to run small business," November 7, 1995; and "Many are still looking to leave small ponds for deep waters" (Hal Lancaster column) September 5, 1995.

¹⁰ See, for example, I. Nonaka, I. and H. Takeuchi, *The knowledge-creating company*. New York: Oxford, 1995.

¹¹ See M.B. Arthur, P.H. Claman and R.J. DeFillippi, "Intelligent enterprise, intelligent careers," *Academy of Management Executive*, November 1995, 7-22; also C. Heckscher *White Collar Blues*, New York: Basic Books, 1995.

¹² P.F. Drucker, "The age of social transformation," *Atlantic Monthly*, November 1994, 53-80.

¹³ M.A. Lucero and R.E. Allen, "Employee benefits: A growing source of psychological contract violations," *Human Resource Management*, 1994, 33, 425-446.

¹⁴ See Sue Shelienbarger column, *The Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 1996.

¹⁵ See Rousseau, *Psychological contracts in organizations*, op. cit.

¹⁶ Nuala Beck, "Shifting Gears: Thriving in the New Economy," New York: Harper-Collins, 1996.

¹⁷ Robert Putnam, "Our separate ways: Has television sapped America's civic vitality by making us a nation of loners?" *People*, September 25, 1995.

¹⁸ See M. Loeb column of *Fortune*, March 18, 1996, page 135.

¹⁹ W. Bridges, *JobShift*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995.

²⁰ R.H. Waterman, J.A. Waterman and B.A. Collard, "Toward a career-resilient workforce," *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 1994

²¹ P.M. Hirsch, *Pack your own parachute*, New York: Addison-Wesley, 1987.

²² J. Gleick, *Chaos: Making a new science*. New York: Penguin, 1987.

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