



## Careers, clusters and employment mobility: The influences of psychological mobility and organizational support



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### ABSTRACT

Industry-specific, innovation-driven regional clusters have become a central focus for economic development and government intervention, and invite a deeper understanding of cluster participants' careers. In the extant research on careers and clusters, most studies have focused on examining employment mobility levels of the individuals involved. However, so far little research has tried to understand the psychological mechanisms and processes behind those careers. This paper aims to contribute to the research gap by investigating how individuals' participation in regional inter-firm collaborations affects their careers, and with what consequences for their employment mobility. Based on two-wave qualitative data from a French competitiveness cluster, we identify a set of psychological constructs, and offer a model depicting links that describe the career consequences of individuals' inter-firm collaborations. The paper concludes with a discussion of these findings in light of their contributions for future research.

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Industry-specific, innovation-driven regional clusters have become a central focus for economic development and government intervention (Delgado, Porter, & Stern, 2010; Leigh & Blakely, 2013). Strategic management authority Michael Porter and his colleagues have asserted that “it is the microeconomic conditions associated with a nation's clusters which determine whether firms respond to technological opportunity and innovate at the global frontier” (Stern & Porter, 2000). Further research has directly or indirectly implicated the role of individual workers, and over time their careers, in contributing to innovation (e.g. Arikan, 2009; Currid & Stolarick, 2010; Dahl & Pedersen, 2004; Menzel & Fornahl, 2010). Moreover, attempts to broaden our appreciation of why clusters succeed – citing both the attained knowledge and social capability of cluster participants (e.g. Rodríguez-Pose & Comptour, 2012) – invite a deeper understanding of the careers of those participants.

Clusters have been succinctly defined by Porter (1998, 1999), as “geographically proximate group[s] of interconnected companies and associated institutions in a particular field, linked by commonalities and complementarities.” Porter's (1990) earlier writing on clusters was cited in fundamental work on boundaryless careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), and related work by Saxenian (1996) highlighted “regional advantage” in the emergence of Silicon Valley careers. However, that work emphasized the role of both individuals and institutions in encouraging widespread interpersonal and community attachments – like the archetype “Homebrew Computer Club” – across company boundaries. Saxenian (1996) also reported comparative work suggesting that other clusters do not share Silicon Valley's heritage. Rather, other clusters emerge from different regional dynamics (e.g. Fallick, Fleischman, & Rebitzer, 2006).

Governments and the established companies with which governments interact over industry policy have a strong influence over cluster formation and development, and both sets of institutions have a vested interest in the way clusters unfold (Klepper, 2010; Metcalfe, 2010). So, too, do institutions promoting entrepreneurship, and the role of new company formation (e.g., Zheng,

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2010). Meanwhile, different legal traditions between regions and countries also influence how clusters develop (Kuchiki & Tsuji, 2010). All of these factors encourage a more fine-grained examination of how work in clusters gets done, and with what contributions from – and effects on – individual participants' careers (Currid & Stolarick, 2010).

So far, most studies of careers and regional clusters have focused on examining overall employment mobility patterns of the individuals involved (Becattini, 1990; Gunz, Evans, & Jalland, 2000; Ituma & Simpson, 2009; Saxenian, 1996). Very few studies have examined the psychological mechanisms associated with those individuals. However, mobility patterns require fresh research attention if we are to better understand the micro processes that drive regional economic success (Dahl & Pedersen, 2004). This paper responds to the research gap by investigating a “black box” of individual experiences from regional inter-firm collaborations (Figure 1). In doing so, we focus on the question: *How does participation in regional inter-firm collaborations affect individual careers, and with what consequences for employment mobility?*

In examining this question we first draw on “boundaryless career” theory, in the sense that it allows us to view careers as sequences of job opportunities that go beyond single employment settings (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996: 116). In doing so, we respond to recent calls for boundaryless careers research to guard against being insufficiently focused, and to concentrate on more particular research settings and questions (Dries & Verbruggen, 2012; Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh, & Roper, 2012; Rodrigues & Guest, 2010). We also draw on turnover theory (e.g. Price & Mueller, 1981; Steers & Mowday, 1981) to examine psychological processes underlying individual motivations to change employers. Both of these approaches respond to a call for wider examination of the context underlying organizational behavior investigations (Gunz, Mayrhofer, & Tolbert, 2011; Rousseau & Fried, 2001).

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we offer a brief review of recently published work on careers within regional clusters. Next, we draw on the two aforementioned theories – boundaryless career theory and turnover theory – to speculate about the interaction of individuals' experiences within the aforementioned black box. We then present our research, based on longitudinal qualitative data from a French “competitiveness cluster,” on the consequences of inter-firm collaborations on individuals' employment mobility. The data allowed us to identify a set of psychological constructs and their sub-dimensions, and in turn to provide a conceptual model which depicts links between those constructs. Finally, we discuss our findings and offer suggestions for future research.

## 1. Theoretical background

In their book *The Boundaryless Career*, Arthur and Rousseau (1996) and their colleagues argued that regional clusters provided a special context for work and workers' careers. Specifically, regional clusters provided a) a competitive edge in binding complex technologies and human capabilities across adjacent small firms (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996), b) proximity for renewed and sustainable development and knowledge transfer (Best & Forrant, 1996), c) opportunities for information exchange among producers and workers (Saxenian, 1996) and d) channels to share information with competitors as well as collaborators (Jones, 1996). The editors concluded the book by noting:

“The region emerges as an increasingly important subject for social science research. New models of career development, technological change, and learning will surely fail us unless they incorporate regions, and regional factors such as industry concentration and social networks, into their analysis.” (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996: 377)

Arthur and Rousseau's (1996) key argument, that careers within regional clusters were unlikely to follow traditional organizational career arrangements, stimulated a wave of subsequent research (e.g., King, Burke, & Pemberton, 2005; Valcour & Tolbert, 2003). Related research has shown that it is common for high-technology clusters other than the Silicon Valley, in the USA and around the globe, to experience lower employment mobility (Fallick et al., 2006; Gunz et al., 2000). However, most of this research has been focused on the investigation of people changing employers – that is on *physical* mobility (Rodrigues & Guest, 2010). In their more recent work, Sullivan and Arthur (2006) have emphasized that physical mobility reflects only a subset of the career opportunities available.

Specifically, the concept of *psychological* mobility, defined by Sullivan and Arthur (2006: 21) as “the capacity to move as seen through the mind of the career actor,” provides an additional lens for the examination of regional employment mobility. However, little research has so far been conducted to better understand this concept (Dries & Verbruggen, 2012; Verbruggen, 2012). Among the exceptions is work by Briscoe, Hall, and Frautschy DeMuth (2006: 33) who propose that psychological mobility equates to a “boundaryless mindset” and can be defined as “one's general attitude to working across organizational boundaries.” This attitudinal view of psychological mobility has been adopted in certain recent studies of contemporary careers (e.g. Briscoe & Finkelstein, 2009; Briscoe, Henagan, Burton, & Murphy, 2012; McArdle, Waters, Briscoe, & Hall, 2007; Verbruggen, 2012). In contrast, Forret, Sullivan, and Mainiero (2010: 647) definition of psychological mobility, as “the career's actor capacity to envision a variety of career options,” invites a wider view of how that capacity might arise. However, none of these works have addressed the *process* through which psychological mobility is developed through work experience.

A further explanation for the emphasis on physical mobility within regional clusters lies in the selective interests of economists, economic geographers and strategic management scholars. Their disciplinary perspectives on why individuals move have been rooted, for example, in employment protection law and the share of owner-occupied housing (Huber, 2004), in the geographic proximity of firms (Boschma, Eriksson, & Lindgren, 2009), and in strategic alliances (Rosenkopf & Almeida, 2003). At

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