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Career behavior in the knowledge economy: Experiences and perceptions of career mobility among management and IT consultants in the UK and the USA

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ABSTRACT

The traditional lifelong organizational career model no longer remains relevant for many workers, particularly those active in the knowledge economy. Instead these workers are claimed to pursue boundaryless and protean careers. This paper explores management and IT consultants' experiences and perceptions of career mobility in the UK and the USA. The findings from this multi-level study reveal that the permeation of organizational boundaries among these workers is characterized by a somewhat segmented spectrum of boundary-crossing behavior. The exploration of this form of career mobility demonstrates that inter-organizational mobility should not be dislocated from other types of career mobility when analyzing career behavior among these workers. In addition, the findings also highlight the role that inter-organizational relations and/or national institutional context play in shaping career patterns in these contemporary forms of work.

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1. Introduction

The traditional lifelong organizational career model no longer remains relevant for many workers (Kalleberg, 2000), particularly those active in the knowledge economy. Instead, careers for these workers are more fragmented and it is claimed that they follow 'boundaryless career' arrangements (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). However, career transitions in this economy are more complex than has been suggested by some advocates of the concept, as knowledge workers potentially cross a variety of boundaries, not just inter-organizational, but also occupational and extra-organizational. Many of these career dynamics are arguably linked to the shifting nature of employment in the knowledge economy and a greater degree of versatility and self-determination among these supposedly 'protean' workers (Baruch, 2004; Briscoe & Hall, 2006).

Research into these career concepts/arrangements has increasingly begun to examine whether these behaviors and experiences are evident internationally or shaped by national context. Where variation is identified, national culture is commonly used as an explanatory variable (Briscoe, 2004; Inkson, Khapova, & Parker, 2007; Tams & Arthur, 2007), yet this focus neglects the strong role played by national institutions in shaping career choices and the organization of careers.

This article explores evidence of these career arrangements and responds to calls to combine traditionally distinct levels of analysis – national, institutional (occupational and organizational), extra-organizational and individual – to examine career behavior in the knowledge economy (Arthur, 2008). The article seeks to achieve this by investigating management and IT consultants' experiences and perceptions of career mobility in the UK and the USA.

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2. Literature review

The literature on the shifting nature of careers in the knowledge economy has expanded over recent years, with increasing interest being paid to national differences in these patterns and arrangements, and the reasons for these differences. This section begins by first examining the literature on the supposedly boundaryless and protean nature of career patterns and behavior in the knowledge economy. Perspectives on the analysis of these career changes in different national contexts are then reviewed before focusing on the two national contexts examined in this research – the UK and the USA.

2.1. Changing careers and the knowledge economy

Careers are in a state of flux in many modern economies. The standard career model – characterized by a full-time permanent job, performed at an employer's place of business under an employer's supervision (Kalleberg, 2000) – is subject to seemingly ongoing structural revision, to the point that life-long careers with a single employer are now increasingly rare and even organizational careers are being realigned, or replaced by temporary contracting arrangements (Handy, 1994; Millward & Brewerton, 1999). Often modern careers are shaped by greater dynamism and fluidity, represented by the notion of boundaryless and protean constructs (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Baruch, 2004; Briscoe & Hall, 2006).

A boundaryless career may be defined as 'a sequence of job opportunities that goes beyond the boundaries of any single employment setting' (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996, p. 116). The career concept stresses the increasing permeability of boundaries both within and between organizations, leading to a degree of independence from, rather than dependence on, traditional organizational and hierarchical career arrangements (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Although some have attempted to extend the notion of the boundaryless career to cover mobility across other kinds of boundaries, such as occupational or cultural boundaries (see, for example, Gunz, Evans, & Jalland, 2000), adopters of the concept tend in practice to privilege inter-organizational mobility and one specific type of boundary – the frontier of a particular employment setting or company – above others (Briscoe & Hall, 2006). However, inter-organizational mobility may take a variety of forms and these boundaries have not been eradicated altogether. Occupational boundaries continue to remain prominent (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006) and individuals perhaps more accurately follow 'boundary-crossing' rather than 'boundaryless' careers (Inkson, 2006; King, Burke, & Pemberton, 2005).

The notion of protean careers is somewhat distinct from the boundaryless career concept as greater emphasis is placed on self-determination and the permeation of a broader range of boundaries, including those between organizational employment and independent contracting. A protean career is one in which 'the individual, rather than the organization, takes responsibility for transforming their career path, in taking responsibility for their career. Moreover, the individual changes himself or herself according to need ... The protean career is essentially a contract with oneself, rather than with the organization' (Baruch, 2004, p. 71). Protean workers are seen as having greater choice in how they interact with the labor market, particularly those operating as contractors (Hall, 2003). Indeed, enthusiastic exponents of this new agenda for careers even go as far as referring to these workers as 'free agents', who opt for contingent work in order to avoid the constraints of permanent organizational employment (Knell, 2000; Pink, 2001).

The development of boundaryless and protean careers is particularly prominent in knowledge-intensive areas of the economy, as knowledge workers are able to benefit from extensive career and employment opportunities (Tams & Arthur, 2006). 'The knowledge economy makes a habit of introducing new ways of working, condemning old ways of working, and thereby triggering changing career arrangements around the globe' (Arthur, 2008, p. 174).

Much of this new career empowerment and fluidity stems from the emergence of the knowledge economy, and associated changes in the employment relationship. Worker ownership of tacit knowledge empowers knowledge workers and results in heightened levels of employer dependence, as the codification of tacit knowledge is problematic, if not impossible, and knowledge workers are often able to take their knowledge with them when they leave (Robertson & Swan, 2004). This shift in the employment relationship generates conflicts between knowledge workers and organizational employment (Donnelly, 2009; Reed, 1996; Scarbrough, 1999), potentially leading to lower levels of employee commitment (Benson & Brown, 2007; May, Korczynski, & Frenkel, 2002). Moreover, the ownership of such capital enables knowledge workers such as IT consultants and management consultants to manage their own work and careers, whether within organizations or as independent contractors (Barley & Kunda, 2004). Indeed, protean and boundaryless career metaphors point to the fact that careers can occur both within and beyond the boundaries of an organization (Hall, 2003).

Although there have been valuable studies about changing careers within organizations (e.g., Baruch, 2003), studies of individuals' experiences of careers outside organizations are more limited (see Arthur, 2008). Few studies combine the analysis of careers both inside as well as outside organizations. Instead, most focus either on organizational careers or careers outside organizations, implicitly depicting such careers paths as almost separate or distinct. Yet both career states are often interlinked, particularly as transitions between the two are not static or unilateral, as many workers may return to organizational employment and vice-versa at numerous stages in their careers. Therefore this article explores the career perceptions and experiences of contractors as well as organizational employees.

The research examined the orientation and career trajectories of both these groups of workers through an analysis of two different types of knowledge work – IT consultancy and management consultancy. Career arrangements in these two forms of knowledge work are examined for a number of reasons. First, both types of work are considered to be archetypal forms of

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