

## **What Is Career? What Does Career Explain to Us? What Could We Do About It?**

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**Ao Chen**

Chinese Graduate School,  
Panyapiwat Institute of Management,  
Nonthaburi, Thailand  
E-mail: freedom\_cha@msn.com

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## Abstract

This paper has drawn a picture of the evolution of career from traditional, bounded career to transformed, boundaryless career. The findings reflect that the emerging new paradigm of career has not dominated all occupational fields. The boundaryless career is still limited in a narrow range. It is too early for us to confirm that the demise of bureaucratic career and boundaryless career take over. When we talk about the notion of career today, it still has to be related to both concepts of traditional career and transformed career. Therefore, one best way to define what is career is regarded as inappropriate and reckless. Depending on different situations to use different solutions, which may be the best way to go. Contemporary career is more than mere personal biography. Hierarchical progress and self-realisation are both important when we are trying to interpret what career is.

**Keywords:** Boundaryless Career, Traditional Career, Second-wave and Third-wave Organizational Forms, Economic Environment

## 1. Introduction

What is career? In layman's term, career is a job or a job with high status and many promotion prospects. Nevertheless, career is not only a job. The concept of career includes a broader, deeper and more valuable meaning than a job. According to Arthur and Rousseau (1996), the term *job* is like a derivative that stems from such as job design, job analysis or job satisfaction, and makes no meaning regarding the significance of time. In contrast, the concept of career is more complicated, and it is more emphasis on the significance of time for all who participate in work arrangement. For example, time influences employment stability, skills and experience obtained, relationship nurtured and so on. Thus, career is not merely a job. But, what is career? In order to draw a whole picture of career, it is inevitable that we have to search the evolutionary history of career to see what career really looks like, and then we may have more confidence to tell the answer.

This paper is going to offer an entire picture of the evolution of career from yesterday's careers or the "Second-wave careers" to today's careers or the "Third-wave careers" (Toffler, 1986). In the first section it is argued that two main theoretical views of the notion of career: individual and organisation. And then, a separate description of organisational structures in two different periods were given to show the characteristics of the Second-wave organisational form and the Third-wave organisational form. Next, a critical analysis of the evolution of career was developed to reveal the difference between traditional career and transformed career. In the end, a debate of that the demise of traditional career and boundaryless career take over is merely an oversimplified and reckless image was offered.

## Defining career

The concept of career is quite complicated to define due to different theoretical propositions. One of which focuses on the individual view of career and emphasises that career is really a personal thing and depends on the point of view of each individual. It is the product of individual way of viewing the world. Two people who have exactly the same series of jobs in the same places at the same times may not have the same careers. One person may see career as success, the other treat career as disappointment. The word – *career* – has been used a lot in different ways. Psychologists define career as “the pattern of work-related experience that span the course of a person’s life” (Baruch, 2004:3). Arnold (1997) treats career as “the sequence of employment-related positions, roles activities and experiences encountered by a person” (p16). Arthur *et al.* (1989) see career as “an evolving sequence of a person’s work experience over time” (p8). Much of the literature on careers has indeed focused on the individual view. Career is a possession of a person. It is considered as how an individual’s positions, roles and experiences unfold over time, link with one another, change in predictable or unpredictable ways, meet a person’s changing skills and interests, and enable a person to expand individual skills or realise individual potential. In other words, career, at the individual level, is expressed as a sequence of work-role transitions, representing choices between opportunities offered in welcome or unwelcome ways.

However, careers usually take place in specified social environment or in organisations, so that some researchers argued that careers are a property of organisations and cannot exist independently without the influence of society and organisations. Organisations play the vital role in the career development of individuals. As Gutteridge *et al.* (1993) state “the focus of career development has shifted radically from the individual to the organisation”. Baruch and Rosenstein (1992) claim that career as “a process of development by an employee along a path of experience and roles in one or more organisations”. Grandjean (1981) contends that career is not only a single phenomena for individuals, it is located at the intersection of social history and individual biography. Besides the meaning of career for individual, career can also be seen as “a part of a process of social reproduction, which points the way to linking organisational form and behaviour with comparatively stable career patterns characteristic of particular firms or types of firms” (Gunz, 1989; cited in Iellatchitch *et al.* 2003:731). The Concept of career and social and organisational structure are regarded as indissoluble. The continuing evolution of organisational form can largely describe the shape of both past and future careers. As Collin and Watts (1996) maintain career is not only “a privatised endeavour, but rather it arises from the interaction of individuals with organisations and society” (p393). Therefore, in the careers domain, there is always a substantial overlap between individual and organisational roles. Without effect of society and organisations, career may not survive by itself. After we define the concept of career, in the following sections, it is going to show that the big picture of the simultaneous evolution of careers and organisational forms.

## The Second-wave and the Third-wave organisational forms

From the time of the Industrial Revolution to the 1970s, the traditional, hierarchically organised companies dominated the majority of western economy. Small, owner-managed business companies gave way to the large, multilevel corporations that made the United States and the United Kingdom into the forefront of world manufacturing and distribution (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). The most notorious business prescription was a ‘do-it-yourself’ mentality which emphasised that firms should obtain full control over all business ventures, pushing many to engage in extensive vertical integration (*ibid.*). Along with these companies grew, more and more levels of management hierarchy were added to keep operations under control. A tall, steep pyramid was used to describe the characteristics of organisational structure at that time. Moreover, big companies not only changed the

way business was managed, but the way people spent their working lives. For both individuals and organisations, careers were defined in company-specific terms, and involved a lifetime of movement up the corporate ladder. Bureaucratic career was like a blast of whirlwind swept the whole western societies. Almost every big, multinational company more or less utilised the bureaucratic career system to manage their employees. Nevertheless, the traditional or bureaucratic career was not initially designed for the business corporations. On the contrary, the original model of bureaucratic career could be traced to the military and government service. The military provided a lifelong career to its officers, and soldiers pursued their careers within organisations. Similarly, civil-service organisations offered the same career system and encouraged individuals to pursue a lifetime career in government. Both military and civil-service careers were characterised by clearly defined jobs and ranks, as well as by prescribed criteria for promotion. Subsequently, As Weber (1947) maintains bureaucratic career was able to service for the various types of organisations through adjusting its scope and degree of administration. Bureaucratic career was rapidly spread into the various large, private organisations. A mechanical fixing of the conditions of promotion and career system were finally established to keep continuity and efficiency in the both public and private organisations. However, the traditional economic pattern did not hold its dominion forever. After one hundred years of the Industrial Revolution, things were beginning to change.

The second half of twentieth century marked the beginning of the end of the one-company lifetime career. The forces of change like globalisation, virtualisation or demographic development have led older companies to rethink their existing organisational structure and career management system in virtually every industry (e.g. Sennett, 1998). The careful planning and coordination of vast arrays of internal resources that were seen as the most important successful factors of traditional corporations, now, are discovered as unsuitable strategies. Today's business environment is more intense than it used to be. Competitors are reducing costs, improving quality and accelerating deliveries. Products are hitting the market at a faster rate than the typical companies can imagine. Contemporary competitive prescription is far more different from the old one. "Do only what you do best" and then outsource non-core operations to other specialist companies has become the new motto (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). Contemporary firms prefer to grow by increasing the number of beneficial relationships among their suppliers, customers and partners rather than by adding layers of management hierarchy. Unlike older firms that managing in terms of policies, rules and regulations, contemporary companies create organisational arrangements that depend heavily on market forces to make decisions and allocate resources. Many small companies in industries keep a tight shape and focus on their core competencies, and then seek partners from suppliers and retailers to join them, as needed to produce completed goods and services quickly and with cost effectiveness. A new organisational form – *network* – is forming (e.g. Miles and Snow, 1986; Thorelli, 1986), and it can service in a better and cheaper way than these mature companies can achieve. Under this dynamic business environment, both organisations and individuals have to change their traditional, stable career idea to a new, more flexible portfolio career notion in order to fit the new organisational form and the fierce competitive environment.

### **Traditional career – the changing of economic environment – transformed career**

In the early of the Industrial Revolution, career was seen as the sequence of jobs or positions by which one earned one's money. At that time, people had to work in order to survive. A person worth was evaluated by career success or failing. The traditional concept of career is only concerned with "progression up an ordered hierarchy within an organisation or profession" (Watts, 1998:1). If we ask most people what they understand by career, the essentially bureaucratic career was the conception they still held. The bureaucratic career includes progression upwards through various jobs with increasing responsibilities and financial rewards in a formally defined hierarchy. In other

words, employers usually offer stability and security of job to employees. In terms of personal performance and length of service, employees gain the opportunity of promotion within the hierarchical organisational structure. Organisations design the developed route of career for their employees, which encourage their employees to climb up career ladder. People move from lower, less important and lower paid positions to higher, more important and higher paid statuses. In return, employees offer one hundred percent loyalty and commitment to their employers, hard working in order to pursue career progress within organisations. The traditional concept of career matched traits of industrial age and emphasised the shared long-term obligation between employers and employees. It provided order for individuals, and gave them a secure basis for their lives. It also offered order for society, because it tied individuals into social structures, rewarded them for their investment in hierarchical structures (Watts, 1998). During a long time, bureaucratic career system played a crucial role in the career management of employees.

Time has changed. The industrial epoch has been replaced by information age, even knowledge era. The massive restructuring of the economy and the successive change of organisational structure, stemming from the globalisation of markets, have an enormous impact on modern organisations and individuals. Especially, the rapid development of technology in electronic communications and e-commerce are changing the way that we live and social practices. The fading ability of large companies to offer stable internal careers, as well as the emergence of new models of organising, has led to an erosion of the preconditions for traditional hierarchical career patterns (Becker and Haunschild, 2003). Under contemporary business environment, the traditional model of career has not kept up with demand of modern changing. It is fragmenting fast. There are fewer ladders around, and those that survive look less and less secure. The bureaucratic career less and less describes the real world. Even some radical claims has recognised the demise of large, stable companies and continuous hierarchical career employment, and traditional careers are no longer in line with economic and organisational changes. As the result, all organisations have to prepare to change much more regularly and much more rapidly than ever before. They are searching more compact and more flexible forms while less and less prepare to make long-term commitments to individuals. As Handy (1989) mentions in his book, the future organisations will wish to be released from a lifelong obligation to employees in order to keep flexibility.

“The effect can feel like anarchy, as the familiar landmarks disappear” (Watts, 1998:2). Just like Rifkin talks about the end of work, Bridges talks about the end of jobs, even some practitioners talk about the end of career (cited in *ibid.*). Although these metaphors of the end of traditional career sound too much apocalyptic tones, the enormous changing is undoubted. Perhaps it is better if we use a more transformative metaphor of “careerquake” (Watts, 1996) to describe the shaking of the foundations of traditional conceptions. The traditional careers are further discredited. Employees are encouraged to weaken their ties with organisations and develop new psychological contracts in order to build less on expectations of a stable, long-term commitment and more on transactional, short-term, financial and demarcated exchanges (Rousseau, 1996). In other words, contemporary organisational policies have been shifted from guaranteeing employment security to touting employability security. This implies that the only thing career occupants can really expect of an organisation is the opportunity to learn and obtain experience, which makes them more employable in some other organisations. Nevertheless, when an old model of stable employment and organisational careers is fading, there is always a new and more robust structure in its wakes.

Walking into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the concept of career has been redefined. Neat and hierarchy are not the prevalent model of career anymore. Lifelong learning is now a widely-heard mantra. Employability has become the new driver of career development. Inner satisfaction, life balance, autonomy and freedom have entered the formula. Today’s organisational environments and

occupational models are characterised by continual change. In order to keep the right people, organisations and individuals need to develop new psychological contracts in line with contemporary business culture (Baruch, 2004). For organisations, instead of lifelong employment, they prefer to promise to invest in personnel's employability, reward for their performance, encourage their self-development and self-realisation, and support their technological and knowledge update. For individuals, contemporary employees ask more responsibilities for their own careers. They like to offer longer hours and assume added responsibilities for organisations. They also provide broader skills and tolerate change and ambiguity. In return, they need higher pay, self-actualisation and reward for their performance rather than merely hierarchical promotion. The inner feeling of achievement has been seen as more important than the traditional hierarchical promotion. To sum up, "the emergent pace of economic change has resulted in a shift from 'bounded' careers that are characterized by pre-ordained and linear development paths within an organizational hierarchy to 'boundaryless' careers" (Littleton *et al.*, 2000). Continual learning has become the key to progression in work.

The notion of boundaryless careers was first time introduced by Arthur and Rousseau in their book *The boundaryless Career*. It emphasised that all careers as the unfolding sequences of work experiences over time (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). This term *boundaryless career* was developed to distinguish transformed careers from the bounded or organisational careers. It includes several specific meanings: "moving across organisations and employers; drawing validation and marketability from outside the present employer; being sustained by external networks; where traditional organisational career boundaries have been broken; where patterns of paid work are broken for family or personal reasons; where an individual perceives a boundaryless future regardless of structural constraints" (*ibid.*:p6). All the meanings have one point in common is that independence from traditional organisational career arrangement instead of dependence on the old-style bounded career pattern. "Career movements across the boundaries of separate employers, validations from the market rather than the present employer and support by extra-organisational networks or information" (Arthur, 1994:296). One of the most famous examples of this would be the Silicon Valley IT industry that was nurturing regional success based on employee mobility and new-company formation rather than on large-company expansion (Rogers and Larsen, cited in Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). The competitive advantages derive from industry clusters and employment mobility rather than from solo companies. Flexibility, autonomy and mobility reflect the features of boundaryless career in all knowledge-intensive industries.

### **Evolution rather than revolution**

The boundaryless career notion does not represent a full revolution or the demise of bureaucratic career. The boundaryless career still has been applied to a limited sample of people and within a narrow range of occupational environments. As Jaccoby (1999) argues "career jobs have not melted into thin air" (p137), many organisations and individuals are still embracing the traditional capitalist framework established many decades ago. Similarly, Guest and Mackenzie Davey (1996) also argue that we must not give up the traditional career so quickly as their research display that "the rhetoric of the new organisation is some way removed from the reality" (p25). The traditional organisational career still hold its status. Although more and more researchers and practitioners talk about self-management of career and finding personal meaning in it, the common reality of career as linear, progressive and hierarchical still continue to resonate in the career sense making (Pringle and Mallon, 2003). Perhaps career boundaries have not become boundaryless but "become considerably more complex and multifaceted in nature" (Gunz *et al.*, 2000:25). The idea of boundaryless career may be merely an aspirational vision that was developed "at best to be a way of helping individuals understand the apparent instability of their lives, and at worst to be a way of reducing expectations so

that instability seems totally normal, even desirable” (Humphries and Gatenby, 1996:264). Perhaps it is more appropriate if we just see the boundaryless career as a further evolution that complements the weaknesses of traditional career system, rather than a revolution or taking over. The development of this term *boundaryless* is just a way to help people to reduce the painful and alienating that is brought by the loss of organisational career stability. It does not represent that a new dominant career model substitutes the old one. According to Collin (1998), most of the careers literature lacks rigorous definition and clarification of the basic concepts. Pringle and Mallon (2003) apply this perspective to boundaryless career notion and argue that the term *boundaryless* only rests on a claim of explicit opposition to traditional hierarchical careers. Boundaryless itself does not mean anything. The label *boundaryless* still need to be negotiated in an ongoing way. Without further scrutiny of the concept, we may be just recklessly replacing one normative model with another (Brousseau *et al.*, 1996).

## 2. Conclusion

In this paper we have drawn a picture of the evolution of career from traditional, bounded career to transformed, boundaryless career. However, the emerging new paradigm of career has not dominated all occupational fields. The boundaryless career is still limited in a narrow range. It is too early for us to confirm that the demise of bureaucratic career and boundaryless career take over. When we talk about the notion of career today, it still have to be related to both concepts of traditional career and transformed career. Therefore, one best way to define what is career is regarded as inappropriate and reckless. Depending on different situations to use different solutions, which may be the best way to go. Contemporary career is more than mere personal biography. Hierarchical progress and self-realisation are both important when we are trying to interpret what career is.

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