Basic Concepts & Definitions

As organizational transformation is taking place on a global scale to make firms smaller, smarter, and swifter in their response to market conditions, the workplace has been similarly transformed. Now employees must be equally flexible and adaptive. This new orientation that is required of the employee has been termed the protean career (Hall & Moss, 1998; Hall, 2002). The term Protean is derived from Greek mythology. Proteus was the Greek God of Sea that could change forms at will in order to adapt to oncoming threats. Hall first noted the emergence of the protean career in 1976, as he saw the beginnings of a shift away from the organizational career to this new orientation. He defined this orientation as:

The protean career is a process which the person, not the organization, is managing. It consists of all of the person's varied experiences in education, training, work in several organizations, changes in occupational field, etc. The protean person's own personal career choices and search for self-fulfillment are the unifying or integrative elements in his or her life. The criterion of success is internal (psychological success), not external. (Hall, 1976, p. 201)

Psychological success means attaining outcomes that are highly valued when measured against one's own personal goals, as opposed to externally defined goals. The protean core values are freedom and growth, mobility is high, and the main success criteria are subjective (psychological success) vs. objective (position, salary). The differences between the profiles of the organizational career and the protean career are summarized in Table 1.
Table 1. Elements in the protean career (Hall, 1976)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Protean Career</th>
<th>Traditional Organizational Career</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who's in charge?</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core values</td>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>Advancement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of mobility</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success criteria</td>
<td>Psychological success</td>
<td>Position level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Salary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key attitudes</td>
<td>Work satisfaction</td>
<td>Organizational commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional commitment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies**

The shift to a protean career challenges many fundamental assumptions about careers and work and their relationship to work-family. For example:

1. **Careers are no longer viewed as having a strong connection with growth within a particular organization.** This means that the notion of seeing one's career as linked to a particular organization has become outmoded. This has implications for issues such as job mobility, job security, training, and benefits such as healthcare, work/life related programs, educational assistance, and retirement, attached to working for a particular employer.

2. **Protean careers have attributes that will likely have both positive and negative repercussions for individuals and their families.** On the positive side, for example, individuals who are highly competent, have a clear sense of identity, and are able to be adaptable are likely to pursue roles that are more congruent with their priorities and values. They are likely to see their careers in the broader context of their lives and identify work that fits in this broader context. Moreover, because professional identity may no longer play as dominant a role for such individuals, they are free to focus on other subidentities, such as family, community, or other
personal interests. As a result, they may look for flexible workplace arrangements such as job sharing, reduced hours, and part-time work (see Encyclopedia entry, Reduced Hours Work/Part-time Work), that enable them to have more time to focus on other highly-valued commitments. They may also be more likely to consider making trade-offs with their spouses in terms of pacing their careers to fit the demands of their families. On the negative side, stability, security, and predictability of one’s work life and one’s career development could be adversely impacted by this loss of the more stable patterns of the past.

State of the Body of Knowledge

In our view the protean career has become a more widely understood view of an orientation to the career over the last five years. Although the concept has been in the literature for more than 25 years, its use as a way of understanding career phenomena is relatively recent.

It is important to point out that the protean concept describes a particular individual orientation to one’s career. Not everyone has this orientation to the career. One can envision a continuum to describe a range of orientations, with the traditional organization orientation at one end and the protean view at the other. Thus, some people are still very much oriented toward having a long career in a particular organization and are concerned with maximizing their chances for achieving promotions, higher pay, and greater power within that context. Individuals with a more protean orientation are less concerned with these organizational rewards and are more motivated by autonomy, personal values and psychological success.

What is our current understanding of these new career processes? Denise Rousseau (1995) has documented the changes in the employment contract, with the move from a longer-term relational understanding to a shorter-term transactional arrangement. Hall and Moss (1998), in a study of 17 organizations which were at different stages of organizational transformation in the 1990s, found that there was a clear shift in the "psychological contract," or the mutual expectations in the employer-employee relationship. There was also a time lag between when organizations changed the nature of the psychological contract and when employees became fully aware of that change and developed a new career orientation. At first there seemed to be a denial and uncertainty about the scope of the change. Next there was an awareness of the dimensions of the change but not a personal acceptance of what it meant for the individual employee. Finally, there was a stage of being more comfortable in the new career environment, even if the person did not like it. Hall and Moss found that it took on average about seven years for organizations and individuals to complete their adaptation to this new protean career contract.

Arthur, Inkson, and Pringle (1999) showed how workers in a rapidly transformed economy (New Zealand) have taken charge and transformed their careers. An interesting comparative study in France by Cadin et
al. (2001) revealed the important ways in which the environmental context affects the way these career processes play themselves out (e.g., more traditional organizational career patterns in France; more self-directed and mobile careers in New Zealand.)

Using data on internal and external labor markets, Peter Cappelli (1999, 2002) makes a compelling case for the increase in the free agent model. This model is evidenced by companies investing less in education and training and using technology to make internal markets more efficient for employee and employer alike, through tools such as electronic job boards. Monica Higgins (2001) shows us how relational influences, such as career networks - the emergent form of mentoring that consists of informal groups of people that support and promote each other's careers over time - are serving as key resources for protean employees. And Lynda Gratton and her colleagues (2002) caution that we still have some organizations, and some individuals, with the traditional organizational career model. And certain groups (such as young males under 40) may be experiencing more freedom and mobility than women and other groups; she also finds that coaching and mentoring help these less advantaged groups.

Gratton et al.’s work also suggests the need to distinguish between the protean career and a related term that has been used to describe the new career contract, the boundaryless career (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996.) The boundaryless career has been defined as not bounded, not tied to a single organization, not represented by an orderly sequence, marked by less vertical coordination and stability. “Put simply, boundaryless careers are the opposite of "organizational careers"-careers conceived to unfold in a single employment setting” (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996, p. 5). Thus, the boundaryless career refers to the objective moves that a person makes as he or she moves across organizational boundaries (e.g., functions within an organization, entry and exit from organizations, movement across industries and sectors.) The protean career, on the other hand, represents the subjective perspective of the individual careerist who faces the external career realities of the boundaryless career (Briscoe & Hall, 2002).

Hall and his colleagues (Hall, 1986; Hall, 2002; Hall & Moss, 1998) are finding that there are two career "metacompetencies" that help equip individuals to be more protean: identity (or self-awareness) and adaptability. For example, Briscoe and Hall (1997) have found that the current stress on competency models in many companies may be misplaced, as the world changes too fast for companies to assess people and develop them against a fixed set of competencies. Rather, it is better to develop greater self-awareness and adaptability (i.e. metacompetencies), as they will equip employees to learn from their experience and develop other new competencies on their own. Karaevli (2002) is testing the hypothesis that the greater the variety in the career experiences of the members of an organization's top management team, the higher the adaptability of the overall organization will be.
Implications for Research and Practice

There are a number of implications that the shift to a protean career model will have for research and practice. These include:

1. Career research should incorporate other, non-work related elements of a person's life: A protean view of careers would see work in the context of the person's life as a whole - more of a "systems" view of looking at work and career. This would suggest that researchers consider the "whole person" when discussing one's career and not simply focus on what is happening in the individual's work life. How work is impacting issues such as personal feelings, the pursuit of personal interests, spousal relations, parenting, and community involvement should all be of interest to career researchers and may therefore bring career research and work/life research more closely in line with one another.

2. Career success as a subjective measure: Research on career success often uses organizational measures as surrogates of "career success" (e.g., salary level, job title, position in a hierarchy, etc.) If success is defined by the individual and is based on a psychological rather than an organizational view, the notion that one's "real" success and "perceived" success are different may be outdated. It may be more appropriate to speak in terms of subjective vs. objective measures of success.

3. Career research related to organizations: Organizational career studies should focus on how and to what extent organizations have responded to work/family pressures through flexible work arrangements (e.g., part-time work, compressed work weeks, job sharing, etc.) and alternative career tracks (e.g., lateral vs. vertical advancement)? How do such arrangements effect employee productivity and work/life stress? Similarly, what is the ease in which such practices are adopted by management at these organizations?

4. Career stage theory: An important question that needs to be explored is whether the concept of career stages still relevant when (a) most careers are no longer associated with a long-term relationship in a particular organization and (b) individuals are expected to change careers more frequently? Is the idea of an individual having one, linear, career path that mirrors the stages of adult development (i.e. establishment stage, maturation stage, etc.) still relevant in light of the more dynamic career pattern suggested by the protean career? Additionally, given that traditional career stage theories tended to focus primarily on men's rather than women's careers, it is important to investigate how stages of family development intersect with career stage theory. This may be particularly relevant since women's (and increasingly men's) career
choices are influenced by a desire to better integrate their family and work responsibilities.

5. Protean careers impact on organizational investment in individuals' development. Finally, research on how the shift to a protean career has impacted organizational investment in employee development is worth further investigation. Have all the changes in the "new career contract" lessened organizational commitment to employee development and diminished investment in training and development and career development programs?

References


**Other Recommended Readings on this Topic:**


**Locations in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Studies**

The Editorial Board of the Teaching Resources section of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network has prepared a Matrix as a way to locate important work-family topics in the broad area of work-family studies. ([More about the Matrix](#)).

Note: The domain areas most closely related to the entry's topic are presented in full color. Other domains, represented in gray, are provided for context.
About the Matrix

Sloan Work and Family Research Network

Resources for Teaching: Mapping the Work-Family Area of Studies

Introduction

It was appropriate that the members of the Founding Editorial Board of the Resources for Teaching began their work in 2000, for their project represented one of the turning points in the area of work and family studies. This group accepted the challenge of developing resources that could support the efforts of teaching faculty from different disciplines and professional schools to better integrate the work-family body of knowledge into their curricula. The Virtual Think Tank began its work with a vision, a spirit of determination, and sense of civic responsibility to the community of work-family scholars.

A fundamental challenge emerged early in the process. It became clear that before we could design resources that would support the teaching of those topics, we would first need to inventory topics and issues relevant to the work-family area of studies (and begin to distinguish the work-family aspect of these topics from "non work-family" aspects).

The members of the Virtual Think Tank were well aware that surveying the area of work and family studies would be a daunting undertaking. However, we really had no other choice. And so, we began to grapple with the mapping process.

Purpose

1. To develop a preliminary map of the body of knowledge relevant to the work-family area of study that reflects current, "across-the-disciplines" understanding of work-family phenomena.

2. To create a flexible framework (or map) that clarifies the conceptual relationships among the different information domains that comprise the work-family knowledge base.

It is important to understand that this mapping exercise was undertaken as a way to identify and organize the wide range of work-family topics. This project was not intended as a meta-analysis for
determining the empirical relationships between specific variables. Therefore, our map of the workfamily area of study does not include any symbols that might suggest the relationships between specific factors or clusters of factors.

**Process**

The Virtual Think Tank used a 3-step process to create the map of the work-family area of studies.

1. **Key Informants:** The members of the Virtual Think Tank included academics from several different disciplines and professions who have taught and written about work-family studies for years. During the first stage of the mapping process, the Virtual Think Tank functioned as a panel of key informants. Initially, the Panel engaged in a few brainstorming sessions to identify work-family topics that could be addressed in academic courses. The inductive brainstorming sessions initially resulted in the identification of nearly 50 topics.

Once the preliminary list of topics had been generated, members of the Virtual Think Tank pursued a deductive approach to the identification of work-family issues. Over the course of several conversations, the Virtual Think Tank created a conceptual map that focused on information domains (see Table 1 below).

The last stage of the mapping process undertaken by the Virtual Think Tank consisted of comparing and adjusting the results of the inductive and deductive processes. The preliminary, reconciled list was used as the first index for the Online Work and Family Encyclopedia.

2. **Literature review:** Members of the project team conducted literature searches to identify writings in which authors attempted to map the work-family area of study or specific domains of this area. The highlights of the literature review will be posted on February 1, 2002 when the First Edition of the Work-Family Encyclopedia will be published.

3. **Peer review:** On October 1, 2001, the Preliminary Mapping of the work-family area of study was posted on the website of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network. The members of the Virtual Think Tank invite work-family leaders to submit suggestions and comments about the Mapping and the List of Work-Family Topics. The Virtual Think Tank will consider the suggestions and, as indicated, will make adjustments in both of these products. Please send your comments to Marcie Pitt-Catsoughes at pittcats@bc.edu
Assumptions

Prior to identifying the different information domains relevant to the work-family area of study, members of the Virtual Think Tank adopted two premises:
1. Our use of the word “family” refers to both traditional and nontraditional families. Therefore, we consider the term “work-family” to be relevant to individuals who might reside by themselves. Many work-family leaders have noted the problematic dimensions of the term “work-family” (see Barnett, 1999). In particular, concern has been expressed that the word “family” continues to connote the married couple family with dependent children, despite the widespread recognition that family structures and relationships continue to be very diverse and often change over time. As a group, we understand the word “family” to refer to relationships characterized by deep caring and commitment that exist over time. We do not limit family relationships to those established by marriage, birth, blood, or shared residency.

2. It is important to examine and measure work-family issues and experiences at many different levels, including: individual, dyadic (e.g., couple relationships, parent-child relationships, caregiver-caretaking relationships), family and other small groups, organizational, community, and societal. Much of the work-family discourse glosses over the fact that the work-family experiences of one person or stakeholder group may, in fact, be different from (and potentially in conflict with) those of another.

Outcomes

We will publish a Working Paper, "Mapping the Work-Family Area of Study," on the Sloan Work and Family Research Network in 2002. In this publication, we will acknowledge the comments and suggestions for improvement sent to us.

Limitations

It is important to understand that the members of the Virtual Think Tank viewed their efforts to map the work-family area of study as a "work in progress." We anticipate that we will periodically review and revise the map as this area of study evolves.

The members of the panel are also cognizant that other scholars may have different conceptualizations of the work-family area of study. We welcome your comments and look forward to public dialogue about this important topic.
Listing of the Information Domains Included in the Map

The members of the Virtual Think Tank wanted to focus their map of work-family issues around the experiences of five principal stakeholder groups:

1. individuals,
2. families,
3. workplaces,
4. communities, and
5. society-at-large.

Each of these stakeholder groups is represented by a row in the Table 1, Information Domain Matrix (below).

**Work-Family Experiences:** The discussions of the members of the Virtual Think Tank began with an identification of some of the salient needs & priorities/problems & concerns of the five principal stakeholder groups. These domains are represented by the cells in Column B of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individuals' work-family needs & priorities
- Individuals' work-family problems & concerns
- Families' work-family need & priorities
- Families' work-family problems & concerns
- Needs & priorities of workplaces related to work-family issues
- Workplace problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs & priorities of communities related to work-family issues
- Communities' problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs and priorities of society related to work-family issues
- Societal problems & concerns related to work-family issues

**Antecedents:** Next, the Virtual Think Tank identified the primary roots causes and factors that might have either precipitated or affected the work-family experiences of the principal stakeholder groups. These domains are highlighted in Column A of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individual Antecedents
- Family Antecedents
• Workplace Antecedents
• Community Antecedents
• Societal Antecedents

Covariates: The third set of information domains include factors that moderate the relationships between the antecedents and the work-family experiences of different stakeholder groups (see Column C in Table 1).

• Individual Covariates
• Family Covariates
• Workplace Covariates
• Community Covariates
• Societal Covariates

Decisions and Responses: The responses of the stakeholder groups to different work-family experiences are highlighted in Column D.

• Individual Decision and Responses
• Family Decisions and Responses
• Workplace Decisions and Responses
• Community Decisions and Responses
• Public Sector Decisions and Responses

Outcomes & Impacts: The fifth set of information domains refer to the outcomes and impacts of different work-family issues and experiences on the principal stakeholder groups (see Column E).

• Outcomes & Impacts on Individuals
• Outcomes & Impacts on Families
• Outcomes & Impacts on Workplaces
• Outcomes & Impacts on Communities
• Outcomes & Impacts on Society

Theoretical Foundations: The Virtual Think Tank established a sixth information domain to designate the multi-disciplinary theoretical underpinnings to the work-family area of study (noted as Information Domain F).
Table 1: Matrix of Information Domains (9/30/01)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain A: Antecedent Descriptives</th>
<th>Domain B: Work-Family Issues and Experiences</th>
<th>Domain C: Covariates</th>
<th>Domain D: Responses to W-F Issues and Experiences</th>
<th>Domain E: Outcomes and Impacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual Antecedents</td>
<td>Individual Experiences: Needs &amp; Priorities; Problems &amp; Concerns</td>
<td>Individual Covariates</td>
<td>Individual Decisions &amp; Responses</td>
<td>Individual Outcomes &amp; Impacts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Antecedents</td>
<td>Family Experiences: Needs &amp; Priorities; Problems &amp; Concerns</td>
<td>Family Covariates</td>
<td>Family Decisions &amp; Responses</td>
<td>Family Outcomes &amp; Impacts</td>
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<td>Workplace Antecedents</td>
<td>Workplace Experiences: Needs &amp; Priorities; Problems &amp; Concerns</td>
<td>Workplace Covariates</td>
<td>Workplace Decisions &amp; Responses</td>
<td>Workplace Outcomes &amp; Impacts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community Antecedents</td>
<td>Community Experiences: Needs &amp; Priorities; Problems &amp; Concerns</td>
<td>Community Covariates</td>
<td>Community Decisions &amp; Responses</td>
<td>Community Outcomes &amp; Impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal Antecedents</td>
<td>Societal Experiences: Needs &amp; Priorities; Problems &amp; Concerns</td>
<td>Societal Covariates</td>
<td>Societal Decisions &amp; Responses</td>
<td>Societal Outcomes &amp; Impacts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains