
Protean Career – A Powerful Career Development Strategy

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Abstract

With marketplace changing and organizations transforming in today's cut throat competition, the labor market has realized an even greater shift. The career system of employees in changing organizations has gone through a huge transition.

Ever changing process of restructuring, often accompanied by redundancies, has shattered traditional bureaucracies. Today's turbulent and complex business environment has resulted in ambiguous and contradictory career signals. Individuals, perhaps in self-defense, are becoming correspondingly ambivalent about their desires and plans for career development.

The youth today is witnessing blurring boundaries in many facets of life. As a result, their careers have become multidirectional. An important determinant of career success in the contemporary career era has given birth to one such career perspective called "Protean career" that serves as a powerful career development strategy.

This paper is an attempt to throw light on the new career dimension as a suggestive career strategy for employees to manage their career aspirations and to manifest a trend in career systems with implications for individuals and organizations.

Keywords: Career Development, Protean Career, Career Management, Career Development Strategy, Human Resource Development.

Introduction: The most critical source of competitive advantage in today's knowledge economy is human talent (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 2002). Since the need to compete for talent is escalating - attracting and retaining talent has become a key strategic concern for organizations. Ironically highly qualified workforce is rejecting corporate careers in favor of a less conventional career path. In the current environment, organizations can no longer afford such great losses of talent.

The sweeping changes within the knowledge-driven economy have gradually reshaped the world in which careers are unfolding. These changes can be witnessed as globalization, rapid technological advancements, organizational downsizing, competitive pressures, widening part-time and temporary employment, and increasing reliance on the application of intellectual capabilities for creating and sustaining competitive advantage.

As a result to these changes, individuals are also changing their attitudes and behaviors in response to many factors, such as increasing lifespans and work lives, changing family structures, and seeking opportunities to fulfill needs for personal learning, development, and growth.

All these factors determine individuals to initiate self-directed careers (Tharenou, 2009) or choosing lateral, or

even downward, job moves to fulfill personal needs (Hall et al., 2008), being more motivated by their own desires and wishes, rather than organizational career management arrangements (Sullivan and Baruch, 2009).

Until recently, the traditional career advancement model, emphasizing full-time, long-term organizational employment, and extensive commitment to one's organization, served as the backdrop for most research on careers (Valcour and Ladge, 2008).

Organizations today have realized the need to move away from the traditional career model. Individuals, on the other hand, are more likely to experience intrinsic career success when their values are consistent with organizational values, and therefore they should seek work opportunities in organizations whose aim, scope, and philosophy is consistent with their ideals.

As an alternative perspective to the traditional career, which was more linear, static and rigid, researchers offered the concept of "Protean Career".

Sullivan (1999) claims that traditional careers have dominated industrial employment because most organizational structures supported it. In the past, people expected to serve their organization for their entire working life. Now people expect the organization to

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serve them, and the time span for the relationship to last could be easily reduced to very few years. Today, with managerial layers being eliminated, we have different types of careers, and a wider meaning of career success.

This aim of this paper is to highlight the emerging dynamic concept of “Protean Career” with respect to the traditional view of careers and explore how the concept of protean career can be used to better match the unique career patterns for human resource development with implications for individuals and organizations.

What is a Career?

A career is an individual's sequence of attitudes and behavior associated with work-related experiences and activities over the span of the person's life. In today's work environment where employees and organizations have diverse needs, a more broad definition would be helpful that defines career as “a pattern of work-related experiences that spans the course of a person's life, reflects any work, paid or unpaid.”

The ultimate goal of any career is psychological success, the feeling of pride and personal accomplishment that comes from achieving one's important goals in life, be they work achievement, family happiness, inner peace, or something else. This is in contrast to the vertical success under the traditional contract, where the goal is to climb the corporate ladder.

While there is only one way to achieve vertical success (making it to the top), there are infinite ways to achieve psychological success, as there are unique human needs. Protean career is one such concept that enables an individual to achieve psychological success.

Protean career is the contract between one and the self, rather than a contract with the organization. This means a decrease in the organization's role in planning and managing careers. Protean career is driven by the person and will be reinvented from time to time, as the person and the environment change (Hall, 1996).

Changing Constituencies of Career Success: The organization should be able to provide people with options to gain career success, but the essence of career has changed, and so has the meaning of career success. Career success is different for various constituencies:

- **Internal level** – how a person sees the development of own career in terms of one's work achievement, inner values, personal life goals, aspirations;
- **External level** – how career success is perceived by the external environment, such as in terms of status, hierarchy, income and power;
- **Organizational level** – in terms of organizational power and influence – once measured by upgrading the career ladder, and now more in different ways;

- **Society level** – such as labour markets, professional development, globalization.

What Is Protean Career? The concept of protean career was first proposed some time ago (Hall, 1976). The word “Protean” comes from the mythical Greek Sea God “Proteus,” who was best known for predicting and foretelling the future and his versatility and adaptability to acclimate himself to successfully meet and thrive in the future he envisioned.

The literal interpretation of protean indicates something that is versatile, variable and capable of taking many forms. “Proteus,” who could change shape at will suggest that individuals can also reshape and adapt their career to face different life circumstances.

The “Protean Career” is a new form of career perspective, where the individual takes on the responsibility of planning and managing one's own career according to their will and inclinations, and subsequently transforming the career path (Hall and Mirvis, 1996).

The protean person's own personal career choices and search for self-fulfillment are the unifying or integrative elements of his life (Hall, 1976, p. 201). It consists of the person's varied experience in education, training, work in several organizations, changes in occupational field, etc.

In an early study of managerial careers, Hall (1976) noted the tendency of organizations to take control of employees' careers for them. He suggested the protean career concept as a contrast and espoused the belief that it “is one in which the person, not the organization is managing.”

The protean career offers a self-directed approach to career that is driven by the values of the individual (Briscoe and Hall, 2002). It focuses on achieving career success through self-directed vocational behavior and centres on the psychological success resulting from individual career management, as opposed to career development by the organization (Hall, 1976; 2002).

Hall (2002) suggests that the protean career is driven by the individual rather than the organization, based upon individually defined goals such as satisfaction, achievement and work-life balance, encompassing the whole life space, and being directed by psychological success rather than objectives measures of success such as monetary rewards, power, and position within the organization.

The protean career is therefore a mindset about career, an attitude towards career that reflects autonomy, self-direction and making choices based on personal values. A particularly strong form of protean career orientation occurs when the individual's attitude towards their career reflects a sense of calling in their work or an awareness of

TABLE 11.1 Comparison of Traditional Career and Protean Career

Dimension	Traditional Career	Protean Career
Goal	Promotions Salary increase	Psychological success
Psychological Contract	Security for commitment	Employability for flexibility
Mobility	Vertical	Lateral
Responsibility for Management	Company	Employee
Pattern	Linear and expert	Spiral and transitory
Expertise	Know how	Learn how
Development	Heavy reliance on formal training	Greater reliance on relationships and job experiences

Source: Based on D. T. Hall, "Protean Careers of the 21st Century," *Academy of Management Executive* 10 (1996): 8–16; N. Nicholson, "Career Systems in Crisis: Change and Opportunity in the Information Age," *Academy of Management Executive* 10 (1996): 40–51; K. Brousseau, M. J. Driver, K. Eneroth, and R. Larsson, "Career Pandemonium: Realigning Organizations and Individuals," *Academy of Management Executive* 10 (1996): 52–66; D. Hall, *Careers In and Out of Organizations* (Thousand Oaks: C.A. Sans, 2007).

purpose that gives deep meaning to the career (Hall and Chandler, 2004).

Need for Protean Careers: New patterns of production and consumption have emerged, in particular with the rise of the service sector that characterizes economy and labour markets in the developed countries. Another influential element for future careers is the continuous technological progress – these developments call for new vocations, new paths and even restructures of the whole labour market.

From Managerial Perspective: For contemporary organizations, Baruch (2003) suggests applying career empowerment, to invest in people, develop a variety of multidirectional career paths based on flexibility, offering alternative work arrangements, and work-family policies. Instead of formal practices based on command and control there is a need for a support system that will take into account the wider context of career, and their multi directionality.

From Past: The nature and notion of traditional careers was based on hierarchical and highly rigid structures and was mostly 'linear'. The organizational hierarchy was the ladder to climb on. Career success was evaluated via the rate of upward mobility and external indicators of achievement (e.g. salary and social status), where 'career advancement' meant merely moving "up-the-ladder" to achieve the highest possible 'promotion' (Rosenbaum, 1979; Wilensky, 1964).

To Future - Widely Accepted Metaphors of Career Conceptualizations: In contrast, at the end of the

twentieth century, there has been a significant alteration in the nature and notion of careers. Careers have become transitional and flexible, and have blurred the former routes for success (forcing new perspective of what is success). People experience different ways of defining career success: it can be a sideways move, change of direction, of organization, of aspiration. People can (or have to) choose across these options, and there is no single way for reaching success, hence the term "multi-directional" career paths.

The multi directionality also implies the assessing success in career. These can be inner satisfaction, life balance, autonomy and freedom, and other measures of self perception. Alongside lie the traditional external measures of income, rank and status.

As society attempts to develop flexibility in its work arrangements, individuals frequently depart from traditional career paths and seek alternative routes for career success. The traditional career model of "up the ladder type" has been replaced by contemporary career concepts with varying labels such as boundary less, protean, authentic, portfolio and kaleidoscope careers. They all propose alternative ways of thinking about the contemporary career.

New career theories like multi-directional careers (Baruch, 2004) or boundary less careers (Arthur, 1994) or protean careers (Hall, 1976) are emerging, that better reflect the needs of a more diverse workforce. These theories recognize that employees' are trying to craft customized careers in response to their personal values and particular life situations (Valcour et al., 2007).

In weighing the costs and benefits of following a traditional career, employees decide that the costs of advancing to a higher level are too high (Grady and McCarthy, 2008). As a result they choose a career that enables them to be successful on their own terms, to find their balance (Heslin, 2005).

As the employment landscape becomes less stable and less structured, normal career boundaries and structures become more permeable, enticing individuals to become more willing to cross them. They are not tied to a sole employer, nor represented by an orderly sequence of hierarchical upwards movement and are characterized by less vertical coordination and stability.

One commonality shared by these concepts is that the career is directed by the individual rather than the organization. It is likely to involve a number of shifts in employment, between organizations, industries and, perhaps, cultures.

Protean Career Model: The Protean Career Model (PCM) is a new way of thinking about careers.

Individual Competencies to Become More Protean: Hall (2004) identified two competencies that help individuals become more protean. These are:

- **Adaptability and**
- **Identity (or self-awareness)**

Adaptability involves the capacity to change career and work behaviors in a way that allows the individual to succeed in a number of contexts with the need for externally-driven career development.

Identity Awareness and understanding are pivotal to the values-driven nature of career in having a secure personal base to foster career success and to interact with the changing external conditions.

The capacity on the part of the individual for reflection is central to the ability to drive these two competencies. The greater the ability to harness these attributes, the greater is the likelihood of promoting protean attitudes and identity.

Protean Career Attitude: Briscoe and Hall (2006) define the protean career as one in which an individual has value driven and self-directed attitude.

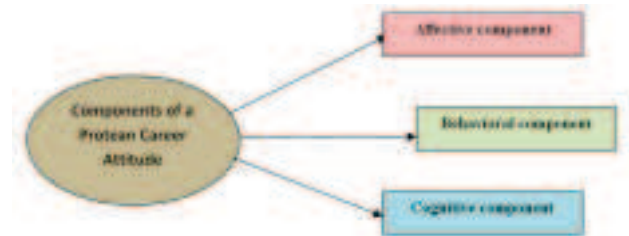
Values driven refer to the extent to which internal values, rather than organizational values for example, provide the guidance and means for measurement of success for the individual's career.

Self-direction in this context of personal career management relates to the ability to adapt to performance and learning demands. Thus, individuals who hold protean career attitudes are intent on using their own values to guide their career and take an independent role

in managing their vocational behavior (Briscoe et al., 2006).

This self-directed and value-driven attitude serves as an “internal compass” for individuals to successfully navigate their careers and provide a guide to action.

Components of Protean Career Attitude



These can also be called the ABC's of Protean Career Attitude:

Affective Component: beliefs as to what constitutes a 'good' or 'bad' career for the individual.

Behavioral Component: a predisposition to react in certain ways.

Cognitive Component: a set of beliefs about the career.

Individuals who do not hold protean attitudes are more likely to make use of externally developed standards, and seek external direction and assistance in behavioral career management as opposed to being proactive and independent.

Protean Career and Gender Issues: People are making major life changes in their careers to shift the pattern of their lives as needed. Men and women change their career objectives in accordance with relational needs and demands of life issues.

For example, at one point, men and women both may delay planning a family so they can devote more energy to their career. At another point, they may subjugate career ambitions for the sake of family needs. Still later, they may forge ahead, searching for meaning and spirituality in their life. Somewhere in the middle they may be concerned about balance and relationships in their life. And, the level of stress they experience at different “tipping points” over the life span largely shapes their career choices.

Men and women start off with similar preferences regarding their careers; however, these preferences diverge over time due to different experiences.

Thus, a final aspect of the protean career indicates towards women's careers that have been found to engage more often in short-term planning using incremental career strategies, a common characteristic of protean careers, while men have more long-term career goals, which is more typical of traditional careers (McDonald et

al., 2005). Life situations, often having children, move women off their original career path (Becker and Moen, 1999; Hull and Nelson, 2000). They redefine their career aspirations and adopt short-term strategies that best fit their changing circumstances.

Reitman and Schneer (2003) found that women on a protean career path were better able to combine work and family. They were equally as likely as men to be married and have children, while women on traditional paths were less likely than men to be married and have children. There was income equality between men and women on protean paths, whereas women following traditional paths earned 20 percent less than men. And finally, more women on a protean path reached top management positions than did those on a traditional path.

Work Life and the Individual: Today employees want the ability to leave their jobs for short periods of time to recharge or to resolve family issues and then to return to those jobs refreshed and more capable than before. A successful career is no longer viewed as working for a single firm forever. The answer lies in more complex issues and trends resulting from a paradigm shift in how careers are developed, created and shaped.

Tired of the inflexibility of standard work hours and the lack of concern for work-family balance, employees are leaving corporate positions in favor of more flexible career options.

The interplay of work and family, and work and self, are inexorably intertwined. Separating out career decisions from other life decisions is a relic, an artefact of twentieth-century old-line manufacturing thinking.

A better understanding of employees' careers can help organizations make meaningful changes in order to retain talent. Previous researches emphasize to focus on the individual choice. Employee's career decisions, largely, are a reaction to outdated work structures, policies, and cultures that do not fit their lives. The limited career options offered by many organizations leave employees with few real choices (Shapiro et al., 2008; Stone, 2007). Widespread changes to the traditional workplace are needed so that employees have more options and don't feel forced to choose between career and family.

Attributes For Protean Career Success: People following the protean career concept 'are less concerned with ... organizational rewards and are more motivated by autonomy, personal values and psychological success' (Hall and Harrington 2004, p.).

Seven related underlying attributes or dispositions are commonly argued in protean career literature to lead to individual career success in the context of the non-traditional career pattern.



Review of Literature: A number of conceptualizations of career have emerged to challenge this notion in the past decade which have influenced career theory and research and have subsequently become part of the new career vocabulary. These new concepts have emerged from the reduction in traditional mechanisms for career structure and success due to the flattening of organizational hierarchies (Littler et al., 2003) and the influence of external labour markets over the employment landscape (Cappelli, 1999).

Employees seek to manage their own careers by taking advantage of opportunities to maximize their success (Eby et al., 2003; Judge et al., 1994). Under the 'new' transactional psychological contract, the protean career actor moves quickly to improvise new ways of working, taking for themselves the empowerment it confers upon the individual (Inkson, 2002).

The challenge with an individual practicing infinite self-direction and adaptability in their career is that while they may become skilled at adapting to change, they may also lose a sense of overall direction.

The protean career can therefore act as a compass in providing direction (Hall, 2002). The compass is derived from the person's sense of identity: understanding that they are and knowing their values, needs, goals and interests. It moves beyond simply adaptability, it also requires self-knowledge and self-identity.

In tracking the nature of protean career changes, Mintz (2003) identifies a high degree of individualization and personality measures like extroversion, openness to new experiences, agreeableness and conscientiousness. The most significant variable appeared to be 'openness to new experiences' and this is consistent with the idea of the protean careerist as one who is a continual learner, open to new possibilities and viewing the career as a series of learning cycles (Hall and Mirvis, 1995).

Shepard's (1984) 'path with a heart' posits the need for the individual to find their unique genius, specific talents that can be developed and utilized. Hall and Moss (1998)

suggest matching the 'path with a heart' with the intensity of a calling. This propels the individual to realize their protean nature particularly when the organization is facilitating adaptability and self-awareness.

In protean careers, career success is internal, based on fulfillment of one's personal values. Given the importance of personal values to protean careers, some studies have specifically examined the nature of the values that drive protean careers. Two values that emerged in Sargent and Domberger's (2007) study were: being engaged in work that makes a contribution to society and achieving work-life balance.

Vigoda-Gadot and Grimland (2008) found a positive relationship between a protean career and good citizenship values or altruistic behavior, defined as doing good things for others. Work that allows individuals to help make the world a better place, like a calling, has also been associated with protean careers (Hall, 1996; Heslin, 2005). Last, the protean career is defined in part by its emphasis on the value of continuous learning and mastery.

Implications for Future:

To Employees: From a boundary less career perspective, career development requires the strengthening of self-direction and adaptability within a more transactional employment relationship. Self-direction and adaptability are primarily determined through the development of particular competencies and social networks.

The aforementioned skills include the understanding of job-related skills and career-related knowledge and provide the confidence necessary to master current and future jobs, as well as the understanding of career-relevant networks, based on which they can generate knowledge, learn, and develop a reputation. An understanding of career competencies allows employees to evaluate which of the skills; competencies or networks can facilitate mobility in the future and identify which skills may become obsolete.

Pursuing the protean career requires a high level of self-awareness and personal responsibility. Many people cherish the autonomy of the protean career, but many others find this freedom terrifying, experiencing it as a lack of external support.

To Companies: In addition to changing work structures so that results are emphasized over face time, career models also need to change. Flexibility in place and time needs to be combined with arc-of-career flexibility (Hewlett, 2007). Providing flexibility over the arc of a career allows for individuals to pass through a series of stages in their careers. They may have periods of intense work followed by some time out, then ramp back up to

part-time or reduced hours work, and later return to work full-time, possibly telecommuting once or twice a week.

Companies that provide flexibility across the career allow women to continue their careers while also adjusting their workloads in order to better balance work and non-work demands. Unfortunately, the culture of most workplaces does not allow for arc-of-career flexibility. Recruiters and employers are very suspicious of people who take time out. And there is stigma attached to working reduced hours or part-time schedules. Continuous, full-time employment and long hours are still used to judge employee commitment and performance.

In order to retain highly educated, companies must change their policies and cultures regarding careers and increase workplace flexibility. Employees should be given more control over how, when, and where they work, while still being held accountable for results.

Conclusion: As suggested by the metaphor of the Greek God Proteus' who had the ability to change his form at will, a protean career similarly implies adaptability: individuals adjust to evolving circumstances by changing the shape of their careers (Inkson, 2006). Using the same metaphor, Wall (2005) suggested that organizations need to become "protean" by embracing change. He argued that the most effective organizations are those that adapt to changes in the environment. The current mismatch between today's workplace and the workforce exists because organizations have failed to recognize the need for change.

In today's transformational and constantly changing workplace, everyone must master the strengths of Proteus!

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