ADDRESSING THE ‘BOUNDARYLESS CAREER’: IMPACT ON ORGANIZATIONS, WORKERS, AND INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING
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ABSTRACT

The traditional career paths followed by workers as they join and attempt to progress within an organizational setting may no longer be applicable in the 21st Century. The declining numbers of employees working for large organizations results in many workers now engaged in “boundaryless careers,” whereby workers attempt to gain skills within a number of different organizations, and package themselves as portable skill sets, migrating from one organization to another. This paper explores in more depth the “boundaryless career” concept and its impact on organizations, the workers themselves, and institutions of higher learning.

Introduction

The end of the 20th Century and the beginning of the 21st Century have proved to be fertile ground for development of the term boundaryless in business literature. The concept of viewing organizations within the context of boundaries, or barriers, emanated from former General Electric CEO Jack Welch. His proposed remedy was the concept of “boundary spanning,” which involved linking and coordinating an organization, initially internally via use of more horizontal structures, but then more particularly to elements of its external environment (Daft, 2007). In this way, Welch suggested that the boundaries or barriers between organizations, which he conceived as artificial and resource-consuming, could be disbanded and more networked structures could ensue.

Ashkenash, et al. (1995) enlarged that concept to what they called the “boundaryless organization.” They also envisioned 21st Century business as requiring enhanced communication and coordination, not just internally within a particular organization, but between organizations themselves. This was the next step in the theoretical framework that envisioned most of the traditional organizational structures as creating and perpetuating the barriers that could impede progress in a globally-connected world.

Certainly, notwithstanding the social, economic and legal implications that might arise from adoption of this concept of a web of networked organizations, questions arise as to implications for the individual worker. It appears to be little coincidence that the discourse of boundaryless is occurring within a context of downsizing and flattening of organizational structures. The era of careers based in one relatively large organization, what Toffler (1981) referred to as “second-wave” organizations (emanating from the dawn of the Industrial Revolution until around 1970) appears gone forever. Indeed, Miles and Snow (1996) suggest that modern workers face performing tasks in “fourth-wave” organizations, where the hierarchies that have dominated American business in particular, will be eliminated, and the organization as employer is replaced by organization as nothing more than a “skill facilitator,” a conduit between individual skill sets and locations requiring those skill sets.

It is within this setting that the concept of the boundaryless career for individual workers has germinated and been nourished. Although a formal definition of this concept will be presented in the following section of this paper, for purposes of this introduction it is suggested that workers (especially recent graduates of institutions of higher learning) entering 21st Century careers will discover a decreased emphasis on working for traditional organizations and an increased emphasis on the workers themselves being able to understand and package themselves as portable skill sets. This paper will review the theoretical foundations of the boundaryless career, describe some ramifications, and suggest some responses, particularly by institutions of higher learning, to this new paradigm, which will significantly impact not just the individual graduates, but the institutions themselves which seek to prepare their graduates for success.
Exploring the Concept of the Boundaryless Career

Definition and Context

The often-cited definition of career is the unfolding sequence of a person’s work experience over time (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 1989). Note the importance of the dimension of time to this venerable definition, which neither addresses particular work arrangements nor what constitutes career success (Arthur, Khapova and Wilderom, 2005). Traditional organizational careers are conceived of as “bounded,” subject to the barriers inherent to working within one or a few organizations, where hierarchy and vertical structures have been dominant. Thus, a great deal of traditional career theory or career success literature, and it is in ample supply, is based upon the foundation of the bounded career. However, the emergence of what has been called the “new work order” (Solomon, 1999) has severely eroded the concept of the bounded career, as downsizing and the reality of the global economy increasingly have eroded the stability characterized by employment in “second wave” organizations (Tofler, 1981). Weick (1996) suggests that “What is different now is that work experience is more decoupled from specific organizations, more proactive and enactive, more indistinguishable from organizing, more portable, more discontinuous, less predictable, and more reliant on improvisation” (p. 41).

Although it has been suggested that models of the boundaryless career date back to the 1960’s (Mirvis & Hall, 1996), certainly Arthur & Rousseau (1996) can be credited with popularizing this concept. To build their development of a definition of the boundaryless career, Arthur and Rousseau (1996) suggest that the traditional definition of organization as an entity having relatively constant membership is migrating back to the roots of organization, not as an entity but as a process, one of the four functions of management. Unconstrained by the “boundaries” of organizations, a boundaryless career can thus be defined as “careers that cross organizational boundaries, cross traditional boundaries within the organization, involve allegiance to a profession outside the organization, utilize networks of relationships that cross organizations, or involve extraoccupational considerations such as the family” (Ellig and Thatchenkery, 1996, 172). This represents a more expanded version of the classic definition of boundaryless careers provided as “…a sequence of job opportunities that go beyond the boundaries of a single employment setting” (DeFellippi and Arthur, 1996, p. 116).

Arthur and Rousseau (1996) break down the definition into particular elements, which are very interesting. They include:

- careers which transcend boundaries of separate employers
- careers which draw validation (and marketability) externally from the present employer
- careers sustained by external networks or information
- careers where traditional hierarchical reporting and advancement are no longer applicable
- careers resulting from rejection of opportunities for personal or family reasons
- careers dependent upon the interpretation of the career actor/actress.

In addition, Sullivan (1999) researched the boundaryless career literature to that point and developed a similar list of dimensions, which include (a) portable skills, knowledge, and abilities across multiple firms; (c) personal identification with meaningful work; (d) on-the-job action learning; (e) development of multiple networks and peer learning relationships; and (f) individual responsibility for career management (p. 458). In synthesizing these conceptions, one is struck, first of all, with the sweeping breadth of the definition of boundaryless careers. Also, the familiar concept of a career linked to particular organizations is striking by its absence from these elements, replaced by “an enticing vision of individual initiative, relative independence from a hierarchy, and the building of a sense of community through voluntary associations and networks” (Baker
It is evident that the boundaryless career is not a natural extension of the traditional “bounded” career, but is essentially a new paradigm, timely in the first decade of a new century with new concepts of the nature of work. Certainly, the boundaryless career developed within a context. That context is sometimes referred to as the “new economy,” the migration from a manufacturing to a service economy. Critical research refers to it as the “new work order,” defined as “the dynamic and human nature of post-industrial work…post-Fordism” (Solomon, 1999, p. 121). The transition from production of goods to production of knowledge, coupled with expansion of globalism, an explosion in development of technology, and economic realities has certainly provided fertile ground for germination of the boundaryless career, as many larger organizations began to shrink in size or disappear altogether.

Review of Applicable Literature

Teff (1997), in reviewing Arthur & Rousseau’s (1996) book, makes an interesting point: “It seems noteworthy that…career theories from the past fifty years are substantially absent…Might we conclude that the development of the boundaryless career paradigm will require that we abandon fifty years of career and organizational theory? It would seem so” (p. 68). This paper suggests we should be cautious in rejecting traditional career theory, however. The paradigm of boundaryless career is more about reshaping the context of careers than about reshaping the content of careers. The basic elements of the definition of “career” presented earlier have not changed. Careers still unfold over time, are still sequential (if only in the chronological sense) and still involve work experience. What the boundaryless career literature suggests has changed, however, is the environment or context in which careers occur. Thus, it is useful to briefly review some of the leading career literature, before reviewing significant boundaryless career literature. (As the boundaryless career appears to negatively impact the career success research, however, that concept, including the literature base, will not be reviewed here).

A relatively early “classic” in careers research was Hall’s (1976) Careers in organizations. Now, as reflected in the book’s title, it presupposed a “bounded” environment for careers. Actually, it was dated so fast that, by the time it finally went out of print ten years after publication, there was no interest in reprinting. Hall (2002) admitted that, “not only is the book dead but also perhaps the main idea of the book (careers inside organizations) is dead as well” (p. 5). In fact, Hall himself published a sequel in 1996 entitled The career is dead: Long live the career. Not surprisingly, his later book (2002) was entitled Careers in and out of organizations. The 1976 book was important, though, for the basic definition of “career” that is provided, which, since it is not linked to organizations, has proven to be durable over the decades.

Another “classic” from the same time period was Van Maanen’s (1977a) Organizational careers. As with Hall’s early work, careers in this book are situated within the bounded environment of organizations. The author himself described the book as presenting “for the most part [a] complementary” match between career studies’ interest in unfolding individual identity and “the nature and workings of complex organizations” (Van Maanen, 1977b, as quoted by Arthur and Rousseau, 1976, p. 7).

Ed Schein needs no introduction to organizational culture researchers, but he also wrote one of the earlier careers “classics.” Matching individual and organizational needs (1978) and subsequent works introduced the concept of “career anchors,” wherein certain interests and competencies within individuals could be linked to organizational needs. It is interesting, though, that the later version (1996) is entitled Career anchors: discovering your real values, with the reference to the organization now nowhere evident. As with many “fastcapitalist” (Gee, et. al, 1996) products, the book is linked to assessments and other fee-generating features.

Certainly, one of the most significant resources for the boundaryless organization has been Arthur & Rousseau’s (1996) The boundaryless career: A new employment principle for a new organizational era.
The editors have assembled over twenty pieces, covering subject areas in addition to the nature of the boundaryless career: the influence of knowledge-based components; social structure; individual development and growth; and the impact on social institutions. The editors are to be commended for the quality and breadth of this work, which remains a foundation for any future research.

Arthur, Khapova and Wilderom (2005) address the boundaryless career through the lens of offering “guidelines for bringing about a rapprochement between career theory and career success research” (p. 177). They recognize a disconnect between literature suggesting career opportunities transcend an organization, and the traditional model of defining career success from an individual’s perspective, i.e., rank and promotion. They suggest the career success researchers more clearly address issues related to the boundaryless career.

A key issue in understanding the boundaryless career relates to the psychological contract. It is interesting that, although Denise Rousseau, who co-edited The boundaryless career (1996) was also a leading developer of the psychological contract literature, the issue of the extent to which boundaryless career concepts are integrated into the psychological contract was actually explored by Granrose and Baccili (2006). This empirical study concluded that employees who perceived their organizations violated aspects of the psychological contract, particularly the traditional upward mobility obligation, also perceived that managers violated boundaryless career obligations. Not surprisingly, perceived boundaryless career violations were negatively related to organizational commitment. The authors suggest that “Managers and non-managerial employees might need some help in developing their own capacity to enact a boundaryless career and to develop realistic perceptions of what organizations are willing to offer employees in a tightly competitive global economy” (p. 180).

Weick (1996) offers the related concept of enactment, which he views as a natural extension of the boundaryless career: “the concept of enactment suggests that individuals are agents of their own development, but not simply because they are active, controlling and independent. People also organize cooperatively in order to learn” (p. 45). Enactment reinforces two key components of boundaryless careers: the importance of cooperation with others, even as the traditional bounded organization becomes less important; and the essential ingredient of learning in the new work order. As far as cooperation, Baker and Aldrich (1996) suggest that the boundaryless career permits “the building of a sense of community through voluntary associations and networks” (p. 135). As far as learning, they also remind us that the traditional career dimensions include identify, knowledge accumulation and multiple employers. Bird (1996) reaffirms careers as repositories of knowledge, and develops a model boundaryless careers as themselves a vehicle for knowledge creation.

It should be noted, however, the two relatively recent books dealing with the subject of careers in the new economy do not adopt the boundaryless career lens. Osterman (1996) notes that Kanter (1989) presciently observed that “Reliance on organizations to give shape to a career is being replaced by reliance on self” (p. 299). He goes on to caution that, even though data and cases studies reflect that managerial work is changing, “the data do not suggest the kind of revolutionary change implied by much of the popular literature” (Osterman, 1996, p. 11). Many of the chapters he presents are bounded by what he calls the “internal labor market” of managers. The term “boundaryless career’ does not appear in any of them. In all fairness, that may be due to the fact that this book was released at the same time as that of Arthur and Rousseau (1996), which provided the focus on boundaryless careers.

Similarly, Kummerow (2000), in updating her classic New directions in career planning and the workplace, while acknowledging significant changes in the workplace from 1991, when the original work was published, does not include any chapters that discuss the boundaryless career concept using that terminology. However, contributors Saveri and Falcon (2000) do suggest that “In the new world of
work, employers will continue to support workers, but individuals will take more control over their career paths and seek what is necessary to achieve continuous professional satisfaction, growth, and effectiveness” (p. 51). Although the specific term is not used, the concept appears close to that of the boundaryless organization.

In sum, it seems clear that even some of the authors of the earlier “classic” career literature, while not always embracing the term “boundaryless career,” have acknowledged that the traditional “bounded” career assumption which guided much of that literature may have lost a great deal of its relevance in the 21st Century. While not all subsequent literature has used the specific term “boundaryless career,” the concept itself does appear to drive much of that literature, and it will serve as the focus for the discussion and recommendations of this paper.

**RAMIFICATIONS OF THE BOUNDARYLESS CAREER**

**Alteration of the Psychological Contract**

Rousseau, one of the editors of *The boundaryless career: A new employment principle for a new organizational era* (1996), also has contributed significantly to development of the “psychological contract” literature. The “psychological contract” research suggests that, similarly to a contract at law, employees agree, at least psychologically, to make certain contributions to an organization, such as their time, expertise, loyalty, etc., in exchange for certain inducements from the organization, such as pay and other benefits, job security, etc. Obviously, as the impact of the organization declines, the psychological contract becomes more fragile. Sullivan (1999) suggests that “The psychological employment contract between firms and workers has also altered. Under the old contract, workers exchanged loyalty for job security. Under the new contract, workers exchange performance for continuous learning and marketability” (p. 458).

A recent empirical study by Granrose and Baccili (2006) sought to examine, in part, consequences of perceived violations of the psychological contract pertaining to aspects of boundaryless careers. Based upon a sample of aerospace employees, the researchers hypothesized that boundaryless career contract violations would be negatively related to organizational commitment and positively related to intentions to leave the firm. Results of the study indicated that the data supported both hypotheses, with the interesting caveat that intention to leave the firm after perceived violation was moderated by the interaction between the organization providing boundaryless career training and commitment to the supervising manager.

It is evident that, because the traditional psychological contract was heavily grounded in the assumption that the employee would work for only one or a few organizations during his or her career, it has been significantly altered for many employees, not just by the external environmental impacts upon organizations themselves, but also by the resulting development of the boundaryless career conception. What employees will perceive as inducements received in exchange for their contributions must now also include tangible and intangible enhancements to their knowledge and skill sets, to increase their marketability as their careers unfold.

**Other Potential Psychological Ramifications for Workers**

In addition to the impact on the psychological contract, boundaryless careers will carry other potential psychological ramifications for workers. To understand this better, one must first keep in mind that “Research on careers has been greatly influenced by the theories of adult development” (Sullivan, 1999, p. 459. From the works of Super (1957) came the seminal model of career stages fitted within a life-span approach; implementation of “self-concept through vocational choices” (Sullivan, 1999, p. 459). Levinson (1986) contributed what is called the “punctuated equilibrium” model of life development, which seeks to link specific age groups and attitudes.

In attempting to apply this line of research to the boundaryless career, Mirvis and Hall (1996) first introduce Hall’s (1976) earlier definition of psychological success as “the experience of
achieving goals that are personally meaningful to the individual, rather than those set by parents, peers, an organization or society” (Mirvis and Hall, 1996, p. 238). They suggest that the boundaryless career inevitably results in a cyclical form of career development, which includes periods of reskilling, as opposed to the more linear upward spiral of traditional bounded careers. The result may be the need for adjusted expectations for workers as far as their own career progression, and replacement of the “known unknown” of a bounded organization with the “unknown unknown” as the impact of organizations upon individual careers becomes more marginalized. This is consistent with the suggestion by Leavitt (2003) that the organizational hierarchy fulfills important psychological needs within the individual worker, a sense of personal identity (Hall, 1976).

To combat what could become earlier career plateauing within a boundaryless career, Mirvis and Hall (1996) again suggest the need to view careers within developmental, rather than chronological cycles, thus, in essence, reversing the progression suggested decades earlier by Super (1957) and Levinson (1986). A negative psychological (and material) result, though, would be the realization by the worker that he/she is taking a step backward to, hopefully, be able to take three steps forward. Their suggestion of the need for “adaptability” (p. 244) essentially means that workers in the 21st Century will need a substantial amount of flexibility (again, material and psychologically) to be able to flourish. As a result of these and other psychological issues, Mirvis and Hall (1996) caution that “the movement toward the boundaryless organization is well ahead of acceptance of the boundaryless career” (p. 250).

Potential Sociological Ramification for Workers

Sullivan (1999) notes the dearth of literature addressing career implications for women under the traditional, bounded career. She then cautions that, although “it has been suggested that women’s experiences of balancing work and non-work demands, coupled with feminine traits, may make women better suited than men to boundaryless careers. . . [potential negative effects] may not significantly improve the working lives of women and minorities” (p. 475). Those negative effects could include increased examples of discrimination, sexual harassment, and ability to locate needed mentors. Perrow (1996) would tend to concur, warning that “for every satisfying boundaryless career that opens up, there are five to ten dead-end and degrading ones created, and one or two people left unemployed for a long stretch” (p. 297).

Perrow’s (1996) piece is particularly thought-provoking in that he reminds the readers that, over the past century, organizations have not only benefitted workers themselves, but all of what he terms “civil society,” i.e., those outside of the direct employment parameters. Thus, he would appear to view the “bounded” organization as much less bounded than it appeared, or whose boundaries are permeable to the overall benefit of society as a whole. Benefits of the large organization to civil society include not just those which flow from the employment contract (legal or psychological) but “more subtle sociopolitical processes. . . such as the determination of residence patterns; friendship opportunities; mate selection; political socialization; and most broadly, the ways in which social reality is constructed. . .” (pp. 298-299). Further, the residue of larger organizations is the creation of smaller ones to address specific needs or issues created by the larger organizations.

It should be noted in passing, however, that not all researchers would view what Perrow (1996) terms “absorption” of civil society by large organizations as an entirely positive phenomenon. However, there can be little doubt that emergence of the boundaryless career will result in sociological upheaval to some extent, perhaps even as widespread at the very Industrial Revolution which spawned the proliferation of the large organizations which have dominated society for over a century.

Ramifications for Adult Education and Human Resource Development

No less an adult education research icon than Stephen Brookfield suggested that Eduard Lindeman’s (1926)
The meaning of adult education is “the single work in American adult education which can justly lay claim to the status of a visionary charter for the field... it is the one tract in the field to which the term ‘classic’ can correctly be applied” (Brookfield, 1983, p. 37). It would seem appropriate to review Lindeman’s (1926) seminal work to ascertain whether his vision for adult education encompassed the boundaryless career and, if so, what its potential ramifications for adult education might be.

At first glance it would appear that Lindeman would have viewed the boundaryless career as violative of one of his key principles for adult education: it must be non-vocational in character: “adult education more accurately defined begins where vocational education leaves off. Its purpose is to put meaning into the whole of life” (Lindeman, 1926, p. 5). Essentially, Lindeman rejected the utilization of adult education to foster the training, and thus, the financial position, of the worker. This would seem to be contrary to the fundamental need for continuous training and education of workers engaged in boundaryless careers. However, the above principle was largely rejected during the 20th Century and no longer “predominate[s] in respect to the conduct of adult education in the United States” (Brookfield, 1984, p. 187).

The remaining three fundamental principles of adult education contributed by Lindeman (1926) do, if not foresee, at least address issues related to boundaryless careers. The first is the need for lifelong education. Lindeman rejected the “front-end” model of education, under which education was the province solely of the young and developing. The ringing final sentence of his book is straightforward and clear: “Education is life” (Lindeman, 1926, p. 129). Lifelong education is a cornerstone of adult education and also a requirement for the boundaryless career; thus, the intersection is strong and significant.

The development of the boundaryless career would also be consistent with another principle of adult education formulated by Lindeman (1926): adult education is situational. “Since that education is best which most adequately helps us to meet situations, the best teaching method is one which emerges from situation-experiences” (Lindeman, 1926, p. 115). The need for adult education within the boundaryless career will indeed become very situation-dependent, which will result in an enhanced role for adult educators.

Finally, Lindeman (1926) reminds us that “... the resource of highest value in adult education is the learner’s experience. ... Experience is the adult learner’s living textbook” (p. 7). Now Lindeman was not just looking at adult workers drawing on experience as they learned new trades; indeed, he rejected a vocational lens for adult education. What he was suggesting is that adult education could serve as a vehicle for workers not just in enhancing a package of skill sets but in making a difference within their own worlds: “Experience is, first of all, doing something; second, doing something that makes a difference; third, knowing what difference it makes” (p. 87). Note how this call for adult education to serve as a fulcrum for social action fits very nicely in addressing the concerns of Sullivan (1999) and Perrow (1986) about the potential costs to society as a whole resulting from the boundaryless career.

In short, it is apparent that adult education would indeed have a significant potential role in a world of boundaryless careers. One important vehicle for adult education in the workplace is human resource development (HRD). Interestingly, although some definitions of HRD have been narrowly crafted, as “development of people within organizations” (Gilley, Egland and Gilley, 2002), with development itself defined as “advancement of knowledge, skills and competencies for the purpose of improving performance within an organization...career development” (p. 5), there have been broader applications than this bounded one. McLean and McLean (2001) defined HRD as “any process or activity that, either initially or over the long term, has the potential to develop adults’ work-based knowledge, expertise, productivity and satisfaction, whether for personal or group/team gain, or for the benefit of an organization, community, nation or, ultimately, the whole of humanity” (p. 322).
Driven by this broad concept of HRD, van Dijk (2004) argues that “career development should be a foundation for HRD and not some fad that is insignificant to the discipline” (p. 771). He suggests that even though most people may still be involved in a “traditional” career, “the concept of the boundaryless career will most probably play an important part in the future of career development and HRD” (p. 774), while acknowledging that more research is needed to determine how HRD can play its role.

**Evolution of the Structure of Organizations**

Finally, in addition to the “micro” ramifications to the individual worker resulting from the boundaryless career, several macro, or organizational, ramifications should be noted. A primary organizational ramification might be seen as an evolution into more horizontal structural forms. Miles and Snow (1996) discuss what they call the “cellular” structure, made up of “cells” (self-managing teams or autonomous business units are the examples provided) which can exist independently but could also interact with other cells in a systems-like fashion. They suggest that “In the cellular firm, the organization functions not as an employer, but as a facilitating mechanism to promote the application and enhancement of the professional skills of its membership” (p. 111). Although the concept is interesting, the metaphor they utilized calls to mind the very boundaries that Jack Welch suggested should be spanned within an organization.

Another interesting structural form which could evolve is Handy’s (1989) shamrock model. The shamrock would have three leaves. The first would constitute the core staff of managers, technicians and professionals. The second would be contractors and other specialists. The third would be a “contingent” labor force of part-time and temporary workers serving as a “buffer” for the core workforce. The strengths of this model lie in its networked nature and horizontal layout. However, it does tend to call to mind Mintzberg’s (1979) famous five parts of an organization, which was not intended to address boundaryless careers.

Perhaps it is simply more realistic to conceptualize the boundaryless career as a reaction to the changed nature of organizations, rather than viewing the organization as reacting structurally to the boundaryless career.

**Recommendations for Institutions of Higher Learning**

A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* (July 11, 2008) reported that even not-so-recent college graduates are demanding more career assistance from their former schools as they encounter the current residue of the new economy. The era of the boundaryless career does present some challenges, not just to employers within traditional organizations, but for institutions of higher learning as well. If the traditional career models have not been formally taught, certainly their presence has been assumed as far as career planning and placement of students is concerned. It would appear that, at a minimum, higher education institutions should be shifting their focus in this area. Some recommendations follow below.

1. **Enhance Utilization of Internships and Other Experiential Learning Vehicles.** As a result of the importance of learning and building skill sets in a boundaryless career, the work of Kolb (1984) in presenting the concept of experiential learning, and Schon (1987) in framing the application, often through development of mentorship relationships, becomes crucial to worker success. Institutions of higher learning need to assist in and promote development of internships, service learning projects and other forms of experiential learning, regardless of program. This not only serves to build experience in students, thus enhancing their value, but also serves to initialize the mentoring and networking relationships they will require.

2. **Enhance Focus on Person-to-Job Fit.** Person-to-job fit means essentially ensuring that the position the worker will assume will “fit” that worker’s behavior set, as well as his or her skills, education and ability. This is of added importance in a boundaryless environment,
where workers may not be able to make lateral changes or even ascend the hierarchy in the event they assume a position that does not “fit” them, and in which therefore they will not remain for long. Perhaps behavioral inventories will become even more important in the boundaryless environment, in lieu of the HR counseling function utilized by larger organizations. It would be useful for students graduating into a boundaryless career environment to have developed some idea of their identity as far as the world of work is involved: their strengths, weaknesses, preferences, etc. Parker (2002) suggests the “Intelligent Career” model to integrate subjective career data in counseling workers. Included in this category would be enhancing sensitivity to issues involving diversity and the multicultural workplace, including an emphasis on understanding the generations of workers currently engaged in the workplace.

3. **Increase Student Sensitivity to the Importance of Informal Learning and Lifelong Learning.** Students need to recognize that the formal classroom learning they acquire within institutions of higher learning is not the “end-all” for a career. Institutions of higher learning contribute greatly by enhancing a student’s ability to learn, but that process will continue for the remainder of the student’s life, primarily outside of the classroom setting. This concept needs to be reinforced in students, who often tend to blame their college or university for failing to ‘teach’ them what they might see as “useful” skills. It is prudent for institutions of higher learning to ensure that students understand the difference between training and education, and understand that learning is their responsibility, and it will continue throughout the remainder of their careers, and their lives.

4. **Explore Vehicles to Assist Students With Portfolio Development.** By its very nature, the boundaryless career is going to be largely self-directed by the worker. A portfolio to provide more detail on the skill sets that a worker expresses that he or she possesses is extremely valuable as evidence for prospective employers. Brown (2002) suggests that “developing a portfolio supports not only identification of prior learning but also leads to new learning outcomes” (p. 232). Her qualitative study on the use of portfolios with adult students found (a) a marked increase in the participants’ self-knowledge after portfolio development; (b) a greater recognition of the value of learning from work and from mentors; and (c) improved communication and organizational skills. While there is a great deal of software dealing with portfolio development from an assessment perspective, perhaps more of that software should be tailored towards post-graduation career issues.

5. **Reinforce the Possibility of Becoming a Temporary Worker for a Period of Time.** Students often reject the idea of joining a temporary workforce agency after graduation, even those who do not quickly secure a full-time or even part-time position in the workforce. One reason for that is the stereotype that “temporary workers are locked into a labor market underclass, with low wages, no benefits, negligible job security, little training and no possibility of advancement” (Marler, Milkovich and Barringer, 1998). However, an empirical study at Cornell University found that highly skilled boundaryless temporary workers were more likely to choose temporary work assignments voluntarily, perhaps as a method for building their skill sets, rather than for economic reasons. “They prefer temporary work because it offers them an opportunity to have greater flexibility as well as earn more money. . . “ (Marler, Milkovich and Barringer, 1998, p. 23). The researchers suggest their findings might lead to a “boundaryless temporary career” industry. At the least, it does describe a feasible alternative of which students should become aware.

The above listing is certainly not exhaustive, but perhaps provides a framework for further discussion and development.
Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

As indicated above, certainly the concept of the boundaryless career has not been universally accepted. Brocklehurst (2003) cautions that, “The evidence for the boundaryless career has yet to emerge” (p. 4). Relatively recent works on careers edited by Osterman (1996) and Kummerow (2000) make scant if any mention of it, while acknowledging the changing nature of careers in general. It is true that much of the research on this concept to this point is theoretical in nature, with a paucity of studies to actually support the theory. A good deal more general empirical research on the actual existence of what is termed a boundaryless career is warranted (Sullivan, 1999).

One key limitation may also be its limited applicability to the professions. A recent empirical study by Smith and Sheridan (2006) appears to challenge the applicability of the boundaryless career concept to accountants in Australia. Based on interviews with 60 of them, the authors concluded that “the behaviour, needs and expectations of the men and women interviewed from the accounting profession in Australia are more in line with an organizational career” (p. 231). The researchers attributed this result in part to the structured nature of the accounting profession. Certainly, empirical studies of the applicability of the boundaryless career to other professions would be useful.

Brocklehurst (2003) also reminds the readers that the existence of “boundaries” transcends those of the organizational variety, and may have resulted from past practices that have become routine. He also cautions that while “it may be the case that workers are crossing organizational boundaries at an ever-increasing rate, it does not follow that this amounts to a ‘career’ even of the non-linear, non-hierarchic sort described in the literature on the boundaryless career” (p. 3). He suggests further research on the effect of increasing geographic mobility as job seekers move from place to place.

Van Dijk (2004) also suggests the need for further research in the area of using HRD to facilitate the employability of workers in a boundaryless environment, and the impact of the boundaryless career on HRD. He recommends additional research into the interplay of work-life issues and the effect of societal and national elements, which might be viewed as ‘boundaries’ in themselves.

Sullivan (1999) provides a number of suggestions for future research in this area. Certainly one, which was mentioned earlier is the effect of the boundaryless career on women and minorities. Along those same lines, she also suggests further studies on the cross-cultural generalizability of careers research.

Finally, literature from the field of adult education in this area is scant at this point. More research is needed concerning the intersection of the boundaryless career and adult learning. Particularly of interest might be the enhanced implications for informal and incidental learning as substitutes for continued formal learning mechanisms, such as training, and the increased formalization and communication of tacit (in addition to explicit) knowledge in the workplace.

Conclusion

With the advent of the “new economy” and the “new work order,” as well as the enhanced utilization of technology and increased globalization has come a marked shift in the way many workers perceive their careers. The boundaryless career concept suggests increased proliferation of what has been called the “free agent” worker (van Dijk, 2004), essentially a package of skill sets traveling from workplace to workplace, as a result of increased marginalization of the larger organization. Over the long term, this phenomenon may result in as significant an impact on work and careers as the dawning of the Industrial Age itself. Institutions of higher learning and organizations themselves should be developing mechanisms to address students and workers who will more than likely be involved in this new career paradigm.

References


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