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Are there no longer defined job paths?

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Abstract

The notion the boundaryless career has lately entered the careers literature. However, many have argued that the idea is too abstract to be put into practice. In addition, the careers literature seldom provides a comprehensive examination of one of the major assumptions, namely the demise of conventional organizational careers coupled with rising mobility across organizational borders. In two ways, this paper hopes to further the discussion around the examination of the boundless career notion. We begin by pointing up some fundamental conceptual and practical difficulties. We contend that the present discussion, which centers on the porousness of organizational boundaries, does not do justice to the complexities of modern careers. To back up our claim that the conventional career model has not collapsed, we secondly include labour economics' insights on job security. We conclude by using boundary theory to describe the possibilities of a new way of thinking about professional limits.

Keywords : boundary theory, boundaryless career, career boundaries, career mobility, job stability

Introduction

For some years, there has been considerable interest in the concept of the 'new' career and in particular in the boundaryless career. Since the idea was introduced to a wider audience in the 1990s (Arthur, 1994) the concept has made an important contribution by highlighting the limitations of organizational career research and proposing a new perspective for career inquiry (Arthur, 2008). However, despite the widespread assumption that the decline of organizational careers in advanced industrial societies is both inevitable, and, for many people, desirable (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Cappelli, 1999), little systematic evidence that careers have become more boundaryless has been presented. Moreover, critics have outlined a number of conceptual and operationalization problems, which can partly explain Sullivan and Arthur's (2006) recently expressed disappointment about the amount of empirical work the boundaryless career had stimulated.

Our article contributes to the analysis of the boundaryless career in two ways. First, we extend existing critiques of the boundaryless career (see, for example, Arnold and Cohen, 2008; Feldman and Ng, 2007; Inkson, 2006; King et al., 2005) through an emphasis on an evidence-based approach, reflecting the need for a stronger empirical basis on which to evaluate the claims for the emergence of the boundaryless career. Furthermore, we argue that the current debate has tended in practice to centre on the permeability of organizational boundaries, and in so doing fails to address the complexity of contemporary careers. Second, we integrate contributions from labour economics on job stability with careers research to explore how far the core assumption about the emergence of the boundaryless career, namely the collapse of the traditional career model, is supported by the empirical evidence. Finally, in the conclusion of this article we briefly outline a way forward for boundaryless career research, drawing on boundary theory.

Disentangling the boundaryless career

The basis for the boundaryless career echoes the core arguments of recent trendsetting literature on globalization, innovation, and corporate strategy, positing the changing nature of competitive environments and employment relations (Cappelli et al., 1997). In order to survive competitive market turbulence, companies restructured and downsized, decentralized, identified and developed core competences (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990), and implemented continuous improvement policies and high performance practices (Osterman and Burton, 2005).

The boundaryless career is predicated on the assumption that organizations are no longer able (or willing) to offer workers job stability and progressive careers in exchange for loyalty and commitment (Arthur, 1994; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). As a result, commentators have posited the end of traditional careers, in which individuals follow a progressive path towards a pinnacle of power, income, and prestige within an organization, and its replacement by an independent, individually driven, and subjectively assessed career concept (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). Under the new deal, the key concepts are flexibility, networking, marketable skills, and continuous learning, which workers exchange for performance in a career that unfolds across organizational boundaries (Sullivan and Arthur, 2006).

The boundaryless career is then the opposite of the organizational career (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). The idea is frequently associated in the literature with physical mobility across jobs, functions and organizations, as well as the demise of rigid job structures and hierarchical career paths (Arthur, 1994; Briscoe and Hall, 2006; Eby, 2001). The concept is, however, broader and richer. Arthur (1994) originally described the boundaryless career along six streams of meaning depicting different aspects of permeability of, and movement across, organizational boundaries:

The most prominent [meaning] is when a career, like the stereotypical Silicon Valley career, moves across the boundaries of separate employers [italics added]. A second meaning is when a career, like that of an academic or a carpenter, draws validation – and marketability – from outside the present employer. A third meaning is when a career,

like that of a real estate agent, is sustained by extra-organizational networks or information. A fourth meaning occurs when traditional organizational career boundaries, notably hierarchical reporting and advancement principles, are broken. A fifth meaning occurs when a person rejects existing career opportunities for personal reasons. Perhaps a sixth meaning depends on the interpretation of the career actor, who may perceive a boundaryless future regardless of structural constraints. A common theme to all these meanings is one of independence from, rather than dependence on, traditional organizational principles. (Arthur, 1994: 296)

The richness of the concept, as presented by Arthur, may help account for the attraction of the boundaryless career but also contributes to the analytical and operational challenges it presents. At the same time, the highlighted section in the quote from Arthur illustrates the primacy given to organizational boundaries at the heart of the concept. Despite this, the core assumption of increasing mobility across organizational boundaries has rarely been systematically analysed in the careers literature. Several aspects of career mobility encompassed by Arthur's definition have been linked to the growth of the boundaryless career. Research has suggested that the meaning of work is changing for the younger generations, who aspire above all to a healthier work-life balance rather than a traditional organizational career (Smola and Sutton, 2002). Getting balanced also appears to be a salient orientation among several groups of workers, including managers (Sturges, 2008), some of whom seem to be adopting idiosyncratic and self-referent criteria of success. It has also been suggested that some workers are taking responsibility for the development of their own human capital, choosing or being forced to manage their own careers, instead of relying on formal organizational career development programmes (Barley and Kunda, 2004; Hall and Moss, 1998).

Though attracting recent interest, these aspects of career behaviour are hardly new (Scase and Goffee, 1989; Sofer, 1970) and until there is stronger evidence that they reflect contemporary practice in a distinctive way, they seem to be insufficient to suggest that we are entering a 'new' career era. There is also counter-evidence suggesting that many young managers still expect traditional forms of organizational support in managing their careers (Sturges et al., 2002). If we are to accept the boundaryless career argument, then there should be more consistent evidence in advanced industrial economies to suggest a significant change in career-related behaviour and in employment patterns and, more specifically, in levels of mobility across organizations. Since a core argument at the heart of the case for the boundaryless career maintains that careers are increasingly played out across organizational boundaries rather than within a single organization, this would appear to provide a critical test of the concept. In the following sections we will unpack the boundaryless career concept and explore the extent to which the evidence suggests that there is a widespread change in employment and career patterns, particularly among those who have traditionally enjoyed organizational careers.

The boundaryless career concept

The boundaryless career has been depicted as 'the antonym of the "bounded" or "organizational" career' (Arthur, 1994: 296) that dominated careers research from the 1970s onwards. Even though it is common for a new metaphor to be defined as the antithesis of a previous dominant image (Inkson, 2006), the opposition between 'new' and 'old' careers potentially implies that the boundaryless and the organizational career share some important conceptual and operational limitations (e.g. the focus on organizational boundaries). The way the boundaryless career has been construed has attracted criticism concerning its adequacy to address contemporary careers (Arnold and Cohen, 2008; Feldman and Ng, 2007; Inkson, 2006; Mallon, 1998; Pringle and Mallon, 2003). In broad strokes, critics have claimed that: 1) the idea of the boundaryless career lacks accuracy (Arnold and Cohen, 2008; Inkson, 2006); 2) the concept overemphasizes individual agency over structure (Inkson, 2006); 3) the boundaryless career, like the organizational career model, ascribes primacy to organizational boundaries (Gunz et al., 2000); and 4) the empirical support for the dominant meaning (i.e. inter-firm career mobility) of the metaphor is modest (Mallon, 1998; Pringle and Mallon, 2003). In this section we review and extend the conceptual and operational challenges presented by the boundaryless career. The fourth issue will be discussed in the second part of the article.

The first limitation of construing the boundaryless career as the opposite of the organizational career is that it provides an oversimplified account of changes in career patterns that risks caricaturing and stereotyping both metaphors. Metaphors provide a useful lens to describe, explain, and develop insights about social phenomena (Morgan, 1980). However, metaphors are also incomplete explanations of reality (Inkson, 2004). Both the organizational and the boundaryless career models emphasize distinct aspects of career mobility (intra-organizational progression/inter-firm mobility) and therefore offer a partial account of contemporary careers. As Arnold and Cohen (2008) observe, mobility across organizational boundaries is not incompatible with traditional hierarchical notions of career and success. Moreover, the evidence also suggests that the type of career mobility commonly associated with boundarylessness has been present in the US and other countries in periods considered to be dominated by hierarchical careers within organizations. For instance, following a panel of workers between 1957 and 1972, Topel and Ward (1992) showed that American workers held an average of 10 jobs throughout their careers. Hashimoto and Raisian (1985) reported that a typical 65-year-old Japanese worker in 1977 would have had five jobs. Moreover, Abraham and Farber (1987) showed that between 1968 and 1981 the wages of American professionals and managers who were in long-term employment relations increased only by an additional half a percent per year in comparison with similar workers in independent career paths. The evidence challenges not only the consistency of the organizational career model but also the case for a shift in career patterns from the 1980s onwards. In summary, even if metaphors usefully signal

changes and point new directions for social research, in order to further our understanding of contemporary career dynamics one needs to go beyond the dominant imagery and consider embeddedness and boundarylessness as co-existing career dimensions. We will return to this issue later in the article.

The second cause for concern is the assumption underpinning many of the contributions to the boundaryless career literature that individuals are becoming 'the main agents in career direction and progression' (Bird, 1994: 337). The excessive emphasis on individual agency is fostered by an ideology that legitimizes 'individual career actors' emancipation from the constraints of "traditional" careers' (Inkson, 2006: 49). Freeing oneself from organizational control is often being depicted as the expression of a new employment choice and the assumption of a protean attitude (Forret and Dougherty, 2001; Hall and Moss, 1998). However, the evidence suggests that people are less proactive in managing their careers than what is often being implied. For instance, Swinnerton and Wial (1995) provide evidence that in the 1980s patterns of job mobility in the US seem to be more readily explained by changes in the business cycle than by individual's propensity to enact an independent career. Sturges et al. (2002) also showed that young managers perceive career self-management as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, organizational career management.

These contributions suggest that, despite the arguments favouring greater organizational flexibility and restructuring and the assumption that workers are developing more of a boundaryless career attitude, the evidence indicates that both organizations and workers still value and retain traditional careers (Dany, 2003; Guest and Mackenzie Davey, 1996). The free worker ethos seems to be associated with particular career patterns, formed in specific contexts, such as those of IT professionals in Silicon Valley (Saxenian, 1996). Hence, the boundaryless career framework, like the organizational career model, risks leaving the careers of the majority of workers unaddressed (Guest and Sturges, 2007). Moreover, it underestimates the degree of stability, and the desire for stability in industry and employment and the extent to which organizations benefit from and have succeeded in gaining sufficient commitment to embed workers in their employment settings (Tsui et al., 1997). Even if heightened international competition has affected the structure of traditional internal labour markets, and people no longer have the implicit guarantee of long-term employment and hierarchical promotion, 'workers' desire for job security and employers' need for a predictable source of adequately skilled workers create strong, continuing pressures to rebuild something akin to ILMs' (Moss et al., 2000: 3).

The third limitation of construing the boundaryless career as the opposite of the organizational career is that both metaphors share an underlying assumption that organizations are the main, or even the only, device structuring people's careers. In this respect, both may adopt a limited perspective towards career boundaries. The label 'boundaryless career', in particular, would suggest that the range and nature of career boundaries would be extensively discussed. Surprisingly, and with a few exceptions (Bagdadli et al., 2003; Gunz et al., 2000), the question is largely overlooked. The focus and primacy ascribed to organizational boundaries is reflected in all six meanings with which Arthur (1994) illustrated the concept as well as in 11 of the 13 items of the boundaryless career attitude scale developed by Briscoe et al. (2006) to operationalize the metaphor (e.g. 'In my ideal career, I would work for only one organization'; 'I would feel very lost if I couldn't work for my current organization').

In a recent clarification of the concept, Sullivan and Arthur highlighted the interdependence between the objective and the subjective sides of career, arguing that a boundaryless career should be understood as 'one that involves physical and/or psychological career mobility' (2006: 22). They also acknowledged that boundarylessness may involve mobility across several career dimensions, such as organizational, occupational, and cultural boundaries. However, their elaboration raises additional questions concerning the conceptual clarity and, particularly, the operationalization of the metaphor. At the conceptual level, as Arnold and Cohen (2008) observe, unless there is complete career immobility it is difficult not to classify any career as potentially boundaryless. As a result, the contrast between organizational and boundaryless careers, upon which the idea is predicated, would be lost. At the operational level, it is also not clear how Sullivan and Arthur's (2006) model contributes to stimulate research that has applicability for individuals, managers, and career counsellors and also furthers our understanding of contemporary careers. Even though their distinction between physical and psychological boundarylessness highlights the versatility of the concept, it presents two additional challenges concerning the operationalization of the metaphor. First, while the idea of physical career mobility is clear and easy to assess, the notion of psychological boundarylessness, defined as 'the perception of the capacity to make transitions' (Sullivan and Arthur, 2006: 21) is fuzzy and difficult to operationalize. Second, it is unclear how operationalizing the boundaryless career by 'the degree of mobility exhibited by the career actor along both the physical and psychological continua' (Sullivan and Arthur, 2006: 23) can usefully address the idea that careers may be shaped by sets of multiple and coexisting boundaries. Their model does not seem to consider that people may perceive boundaries as qualitatively different and, therefore, ascribe to them different degrees of physical and psychological permeability. As Inkson (2006) observes, 'the crossing of one type of boundary (e.g., organizational) may inhibit the crossing of others (e.g., occupational, industry)' (2006: 55). Hence, what does being in a boundaryless career mean? We argue that a more complete elaboration and operationalization of the concept needs to consider the range and the nature of boundaries, identifying the relevant domains that structure people's careers and discuss how different career boundaries operate to influence one's career choices and trajectories. We will return to this argument in the conclusion of the article.

Finally, critics have claimed that the empirical support for the core assumption of the boundaryless career is modest (Jacoby, 1999; Pringle and Mallon, 2003). Even if we were to agree that the boundaryless career encompasses more than physical career mobility, in practice the concept has been introduced and derives its popularity among scholars and

practitioners from the idea that organizational boundaries have become more permeable so that traditional careers have been compromised. However, the evidence-base for the most prominent meaning that can be derived from the boundaryless career concept has not been systematically analysed in the literature. There may be a variety of ways in which we can seek to test this core proposition but given the preceding analysis, the key test is whether there has been an increase in movement across organizational boundaries. This can be explored by analysing longitudinal trends in job stability. We will therefore address this in the next section by seeking evidence for any changes in patterns of employment stability and career mobility.

Are careers becoming more boundaryless?

If careers are becoming boundaryless, we should expect to observe an accelerating trend in workers' mobility across organizational boundaries from the 1980s onwards. It is difficult to pinpoint the time when careers are considered to have become boundaryless. Cappelli (1999),

for instance, locates the shift in employment and career patterns in the early 1980s, associated with factors such as the increasing pace of globalization and technological change, and pressures to increase shareholder value. In order to assess this assumption, we will review literature on job stability from a variety of sources and analyse data extracted from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Employment Statistics Database. We are interested in capturing historical trends in job stability that provide systematic information to evaluate the core proposition of the boundaryless career. Our data do not cover the period encompassed by the recent economic crisis. Even though it is plausible that the latest economic events will have an impact on employment stability, it is too early to speculate whether any changes in employment patterns are likely to produce long-term career effects.

Research on job stability has analysed trends in the duration of jobs from two main perspectives. The first explores trends in job tenure, either counting the number of years people are with their employer, or calculating the probability of people staying with their employer for an additional number of years (job retention rates). The second focuses on job separations, analysing overall trends and counts of voluntary and involuntary turnover. The use of tenure and turnover as measures of job stability requires caution as both indicators are sensitive to business cycles. Nevertheless, earnings seem to correlate positively with average job tenure, and involuntary job loss usually entails a decline in earnings in the subsequent job (OECD, 2001).

In the next sections we will explore the following questions: is there evidence of an overall increase in job mobility that supports the case for the boundaryless career? Is job mobility concentrated on particular regions, industries, or groups of workers whose careers are becoming more organizationally boundaryless? Research on the boundaryless career has spanned a large number of countries such as the US (Eby et al., 2003), New Zealand (Pringle and Mallon, 2003), Nigeria (Ituma and Simpson, 2009), France (Cadin et al., 2000; Dany, 2003) or Germany (Stahl et al., 2002). Since this seems to be a widespread phenomenon we will review evidence and analyse data from the US, Japan, and major European economies such as France, Germany, and the UK, where there is available an extensive and rich literature on job stability.

Compositional changes in job stability: Are core workers bearing the brunt of instability?

In the US, despite the overall employment stability, research highlighted compositional changes in patterns of career mobility affecting workers at both ends of the labour market. There is a broad consensus that job stability declined among more disadvantaged groups of workers, younger workers, and men. From the 1970s to the 1980s job tenure declined for black people relative to white people and high school dropouts relative to the college educated (Diebold et al., 1997; Marcotte, 1995, 1999; Neumark et al., 1999). From the 1960s onwards turnover also increased among younger workers, particularly men (Bernhardt et al., 1999; Monks and Pizer, 1998). In fact, men generally became more susceptible to job loss (Boisjoly et al., 1998) and job churning until the age of 30, and less likely to be in long-term employment (Farber, 2007a). This trend was compensated by women, who increased their participation in the job market and became also more likely to be in higher tenured jobs than in the past.

There is less consensus in the literature about the evolution of job stability among core organizational workers. Some studies have indicated that managers and professionals (Polsky, 1999), older (Chan and Stevens, 2001), more tenured, and better-educated workers (Aaronson and Sullivan, 1998; Farber, 2007b) were not immune to job instability. However, the evidence suggests that the impact of globalization and company restructuring was modest among those who traditionally had access to employment security and progressive organizational careers. Farber et al. (1997) reported that job loss among managers and professionals increased in the late 1980s and declined in the early 1990s, thus reflecting the business cycle rather than a more general alternative trend in employment and career patterns. Polsky (1999) also did not find evidence of an increase in the probability of job loss among managers and professionals from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, even though the adverse consequences of involuntary turnover, namely a reduction in the probability of reemployment and an increased likelihood of wage cuts in the subsequent job, became more severe. Moreover, in a study in 51 large American corporations Alan et al. (1999) showed that mean job tenure and the percentage of workers with more than 10 years of service remained virtually unchanged, even when companies downsized. Overall, the evidence suggests insofar as we are witnessing any changes, they are 'changes of degree, not of kind' (Jacoby, 1999: 124) in patterns of career mobility in the US and that key workers can still count on organizations for their careers.

There is no evidence that job stability declined among core workers in Japan. Companies avoided layoffs by

transferring employees to subsidiaries and hiring cuts (Kato, 2001). While there is evidence of some decline in job stability among younger and low tenured workers from the 1980s to the 1990s (Cheng, 1991; Kato, 2001), job tenure soared among full-time working women and at the same time female part-time employment increased dramatically (Farber, 2007c). Hence, there seems to be segmentation in the Japanese labour market between those who already hold good jobs in large firms and some younger and less protected groups of workers for whom accessing well paid and reasonably secure jobs may be getting more difficult (Ono, 2007).

European evidence does not indicate significant changes in job stability in recent decades. In the UK, from the 1970s to the 1990s job instability seems to have particularly affected unskilled workers (Booth et al., 1999), men (Burgess and Rees, 1996), contingent workers (Gregg and Wadsworth, 2002), and people in disproportionately female and non-white workplaces (Mumford and Smith, 2004). However, despite a negligible decline in job tenure among men in all age cohorts from the early 1990s onwards, job stability increased consistently among women aged 25 and above (see Table 3). Moreover, from the year 2000 onwards, long-term employment increased for both men and women (see Table 2). Overall, the data suggest some segmentation in the British labour market between the good jobs held by full-time permanent employees, who were not affected by market turbulence, and the lower quality jobs made available to the remaining workers (Gregg and Wadsworth, 1995).

In Germany, as Table 1 showed, average job tenure has remained stable with a slight tendency to increase in more recent years. However, as Tables 2 and 3 reveal, this hides some variations within the working population. Job tenure declined moderately among younger and low tenured workers and men in the 55–64 age bracket (see Tables 2 and 3). In contrast, tenure increased for women over 25 years of age and remained remarkably stable among higher tenured workers (see Tables 2 and 3). Mertens and colleagues (Bergemann and Mertens, 2004; Burda and Mertens, 2001) have also argued that job mobility increased among men, low wage workers, and some specific sectors.

Finally, in France job tenure and long-term employment increased for both men and women in all age cohorts between 1992 and 2006, with the exception of women in the 15–24 age bracket (see Tables 2 and 3). The gender gap in France is almost non-existent, partly due to a dramatic increase of women's participation in the labour market. Moreover, job instability doesn't seem to be affecting any groups of workers in particular (Givord and Maurin, 2004).

From the evidence presented here and in the previous section we conclude that the changes in employment patterns do not support the core proposition of the boundaryless career. We presented evidence from several countries suggesting that most people still have long-term employment. There is also no evidence of a significant increase in mobility across organizational boundaries. Moreover, managers and professionals, who traditionally benefitted from progressive organizational careers and have been the main focus of the boundaryless career literature, seem to be the least affected by market instability. Overall, careers have not become organizationally boundaryless and it seems that 'firms will continue to be the dominant organizing device in the labour market' (Osterman and Burton, 2005: 442).

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