Contemporary careers management: critical challenges for human resource management

Gestión de carreras contemporáneas: desafíos críticos para la gestión humana

Gestão de carreiras contemporâneas: desafios críticos para a gestão de pessoas

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Resumen

Con el presente artículo de revisión se exponen algunos lineamientos conceptuales sobre carreras en organizaciones. Se hace especial énfasis en la transformación que esta práctica ha sufrido, dadas las nuevas condiciones del trabajo generadas por los cambios tecnológicos, económicos y culturales que se han venido presenciando desde finales del siglo XX. La literatura especializada muestra, en el presente momento histórico, un escenario más dinámico y complejo para las personas y las organizaciones. Se encontró que en las condiciones actuales, las personas dirigen su propia carrera con el propósito de alcanzar mejores niveles en sus trayectorias dentro o fuera de la organización. Ello plantea nuevos retos y maneras de pensar la gestión de personas, a fin de generar prácticas alternativas. En último término, a modo de sugerencia, se plantean algunas cuestiones para ser abordadas por los responsables en gestión humana, en el sentido de construir relaciones recíprocas con las que se contribuya al desarrollo mutuo.

Palabras clave: carrera, gestión de carrera, gestión humana.

Clasificación JEL: M53, M11, M12

Abstract

This review article lays out some conceptual guidelines regarding careers in organizations. Special emphasis is made on the transformation that has been experienced in this area since the late twentieth century, given the new working conditions created by the technological, economic, and cultural changes that have taken place. The specialized literature shows, in the present historic moment, a more dynamic and complex setting for people and organizations. It has been found that, under current conditions, people direct their own careers, aiming to reach higher levels within, or outside of, an organization. This poses new challenges and requires new ways of thinking about human resources management, in order to develop alternative practices. Finally, some questions are suggested to those responsible for human resource management, which are aimed at building reciprocal relationships that contribute to mutual development.

Keywords: career, career management, human resource management.

Resumo

Este artigo de revisão expõe alguns lineamentos conceituais sobre carreiras em organizações. É feita uma ênfase especial sobre a transformação que esta prática tem sofrido, dadas as novas condições de trabalho geradas pelas mudanças tecnológicas, econômicas e culturais que têm se apresentado desde o final do século XX. A literatura especializada amostra, neste momento histórico, um panorama mais dinâmico e complexo para as pessoas e organizações. Verificou-se que, nas condições atuais, as pessoas dirigem sua própria carreira, procurando alcançar melhores níveis em suas trajetórias no interior e/ou fora da organização. Isso cria novos desafios e formas de pensar acerca da gestão de pessoas, a fim de gerar práticas alternativas. Enfim, como uma sugestão, surgem algumas questões a serem abordadas pelos responsáveis da gestão de pessoas, no sentido de construir relações de reciprocidade que possam contribuir ao desenvolvimento mútuo.

Palavras-chave: carreira, gestão de carreira, gestão de pessoas.

*It does not make sense to hire smart people
And tell them what to do. We hire smart people
So they can tell us what to do.*

Steve Jobs

INTRODUCTION

The XXI century has brought a series of new circumstances for organizations, derived from the incorporation of tele-information technologies in replacement of electromechanical technology (Malvezzi, 1998, p. 1). Global competitiveness has pressured organizations to rethink their actions in accordance with the new scenario in the spheres of production, finance, and marketing. The area of human resource management does not escape this challenge. Managing people in the existing historical context, requires being in tune with the implications that arise from global changes.

Recognizing the importance of human resource management as a strategic factor in organizations (Calderón, 2004; García, Murillo & González, 2011), it is worth wondering what possible actions can be carried out within organizations. In this context, it is necessary to problematize some key categories - such as careers- in order to broaden our understanding about the world of organizations and work (Rentería, 2009).

This document –by way of theoretical revision– proposes to examine and discuss the concept of career in the current conditions of the world of work and organizations, with the aim of formulating some questions which will point to possible actions to undertake in the human resource management area. To that end, a documentary review process of theoretical texts on career management was carried out. Content analysis was applied, from the perspective of Bardin (2002), considering categories such as: 1) historical changes in the concept of career, 2) career typologies, and 3) careers and human resource management.

Thus, it was possible to compile and organize material that covers the various angles from which the phenomena of careers in the contemporary world can be studied. The academic career model (Baruch, 2011) was used with the objective of glimpsing some alternatives for discussion. Finally, a directory of possible actions to be undertaken by organizations is presented, aimed at managing people's careers in accordance with the development of the organization as well of the people themselves, guided by an ideal of reciprocity.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

Concepts such as organization, work, career, human resource management, psychological contract, commitment, and identity, among others, have been discussed since the end of the last century, given the new conditions generated by the technical, financial, political, social, and cultural changes that have impacted on organizations (Rentería & Torres, 2012; Kilimnik, 2011; Dutra, 2010; Veloso & Dutra, 2010; Ribeiro, 2009b; Rentería, 2008; Dent & Whitehead, 2002; Malvezzi, 2001; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996b). Many of these authors highlight the necessity of rethinking the directories that have been developed around the organizational phenomenon, as they are based on large organizations of the industrial sector, which existed in relatively stable environments. This is why, it is necessary to consider the new

discussions which try to expand the horizons of understanding, in order to focus on the current diversity in the types of organizations and, consequently, on careers.

Ribeiro (2009a) maintains that the concept of career is linked to different disciplines and theoretical approaches used to approach the phenomenon since the beginning of the XX century. In this way, he proposes a historical analysis of the concepts of career in two periods: 1) from 1900 to the 1970s and, 2) from "1970 until the present day" (Ribeiro, 2009ª, p. 143). During the first period, career studies were focused on large, industrial organizations, characterized by assigning routine tasks in the framework of a hierarchical structure, within which people rose according to the promotion criteria determined by human resource management[1]. At that moment, the management sciences (administration and traditional organizational psychology) understood career as the individuals' route within the organizational structure in a continual and ascending direction.

During the second period, in the so-called, "postmodern" period, which is characterized by multiple organizational forms, mediated by information technologies, as well as by the orientation towards a changing and dynamic market, careers´ studies are dedicated to understanding the diverse possibilities surrounding the phenomenon of work that people and organizations

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[1]   From now on: HR-M.

are experimenting with. In this sense, at present a career is conceived as the route a person can take in multiple organizations throughout their working life, considering the options as well as the conditions they find in the labor market, now that it is more complex and changing.Therefore, for the management sciences, a career becomes understood to mean a movement determined by the individual through their skills and learning abilities, without necessarily passing through predefined stages and linked not only to one organization. On the other hand, for the work sciences (social psychology of work and organizations, and sociology of work) a career is a construction based on the individual-organizational processes relationship, which generates collective structures and individual experiences. In this way, a career would no longer be a predetermined structure, but a "social project under joint construction with the life project of each person, always in a relational dynamic" (Ribeiro, 2009a, p.146).

Thus, the present reflection is set out in the framework of a new scenario, which demands other approaches to guide organizational actions. For this, it is necessary to go back to what was articulated by some authors about the concept of career.

APPROACHES TO THE CONCEPT OF CAREER AND THE PERSON WHO WORKS

In disciplinary terms, careers have been examined from different points of view.

Ribeiro (2009a) suggests that traditional organizational psychology has understood career as a means of self-realization. For its part, sociology has seen it as the fulfillment of roles and mobility in social systems. On the other hand, social psychology takes it to be a phenomenon of adjustment, interaction or a dialectic relationship between the individual and society. Other contributions can be found in anthropology, which studies the social status; economics, which observes responses to market forces; political science, which is focused on the strategies of power; and history, which contributes to the understanding of autobiographic compositions.

With respect to epistemological approaches, according to Ribeiro (2009a), there are five points of view. From the essentialist approach, the individual is born with certain traits that facilitate their access to work (Holland, 1973). The development of the career is made easier insofar as the person knows themselves, so as to tap into their potential, which they already possess. The interactionist point of view suggests that the individual exists as a result of his relationship with society (Schein, 1978). A career would consist of the persons' behaviors at work based on the influences received from their closest source. From the functionalist point of view, the individual adapts to social conditions (Savickas, 1997). A career would be defined by the actions taken to adjust to the requirements of the job. In the dialectic view, the individual and society mutually affect one other (Arthur, Hall & Lawrence, 1989). A career would be

based on the negotiations that take place between people and the organization in a power dynamic. Finally, from a constructivist perspective, individuals discursively interpret their place in their everyday social space (Young & Collin, 2004). Here the career is part of personal development –mediated by the collective–, as regards what work is and what it could mean as a determining factor of their own reality.

Ribeiro (2009a) proposes five possible methods of career analysis. The structural analysis focuses on the hierarchical ladder of the organizational chart (Hall, 1976); the typological is dedicated to establishing classifications and models (Super, 1957; Chanlat, 1995; Kanter, 1997; Dutra, 2001); the developmental stipulates the stages or phases which describe the careers' maturity process (Schein 1993); the transitional considers the changes and the disruptions that people experience when they go from one organization to another, or change their occupation (Hopson & Adams, 1977); and the psychosocial analysis studies the interaction between people and organizations (Super, 1957; Baruch, 2004; Bourdieu, 1974), highlighting its dynamic nature and the possibility that each of the parties has to influence the other.

For the purposes of this document, starting from the dialectic perspective focused on psychosocial analysis, from where a career is conceived as the itinerary, or route that people take through multiple organizational scenarios throughout their work trajectory. With this in mind, authors such as Arthur and Rousseau (1996a) suggest that, at present, a career is in the hands of each individual, given that they can move from one position to another in the labor market (as well as within organizations), mapping their own trajectory.

In this sense, it is no longer the person in charge of HR-M who designs the career of the organizations' employees. Instead, it is the people themselves who now make decisions as regards what they consider to be more appropriate for their life projects. Thus, we are witnessing what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) have called the historical process of individualization, understood as a contemporary phenomenon in which each person wants to be the author of their own biography[2].

From the psychosocial point of view, some authors Kilimnik, 2011; Baruch, 2011; Dutra, 2010; Veloso & Dutra, 2010; Ribeiro, 2009b; Rentería, 2008; Dent & Whitehead, 2002; Malvezzi, 2001; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996a) have suggested that, in contemporary organizations, people are taking advantage of their relationship with the organizations, in that they capitalize on what they learn and the relationships they develop, which agrees with what Schein (1993) calls the "internal career."

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[2]   However, Rentería (2012) warns that the personal and socio-historical conditions of employability are not the same for everyone. Keeping this in mind is important, given that the discourses of individual responsibility regarding entrance into the labor market legitimize practices of social exclusion.

Thus, we find ourselves face to face with the contemporary worker, which Malvezzi (1998) calls the "reflexive economic agent," and which he describes as the professional who has incorporated criticism and hermeneutics as their main work supplies. All this generates questions, never before raised, for the HR-M , in the sense that now people also decide where and under which conditions they work, understanding that their time in the organization may be temporary, that is to say, just one step in their individual career.

Assuming this viewpoint would allow for reflection on, at least, two implications for the HR-M. Firstly, focusing attention on people, such as for example, their ways of interacting, how they relate, their identity, and the meanings that they establish around work, as suggested by Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski (2010) and Wrzesniewski, Dutton and Debebe (2003), and secondly, as regards evaluating individual strengths in terms of work. To this end, contributions from "positive psychology" (Linley, Harrington & Garcea; 2010), could offer interesting points related to the possibility of identifying and optimizing positive personal resources in work contexts.

In this respect, we witness what Bendasoli (2009) calls a recomposition in the relationships of people with their own work. There is now the question of the understanding of this new reality, on the

part of those in charge of human resources management in organizations. And even more so, what could the HR-M do to manage -or contribute to- the careers of the people who work?

SOME CONTRIBUTIONS

The revision of the literature seen until now has suggested that organizations are involved in a new dynamic that outlines, on the one hand, the pressures of global competitiveness (external tensions) and, on the other hand, the forces of working people (internal tensions). In this way, it should be acknowledged that people have reached a new stage regarding their individual life projects, committed not only to an organization but also to their own trajectory, in multiple directions and with the capacity to renew their work resources (knowledge, competences, relationship networks) so as to put them at the service of whoever they consider to be more in tune with their expectations. According to what has been mentioned so far, it should be asked: what actions can be suggested to the HR-M to manage career processes in the current conditions? How could individual interests be reconciled with those of organizations? What type of worker are we faced with?

Baruch (2011) proposes that one of the alternatives for understanding and managing careers in contemporary organizations is related to the academic career model[3].

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[3]   On the concept of the academic career, Baruch (2011) suggests that one possibility for managing human resource processes in business organizations, in the present dynamic conditions, would be that of the university model. In this sense, the idea of internal mobility could be picked up, which includes notions such as temporary positions, promotions based on productivity, support as regards training, among others, as career management policy.

To this effect, Baruch and Hall (2003) affirm that this model can operate as a "guide prototype" (Baruch, 2011, p. 20), an indicator of direction and of change in the career systems in other sectors. From this perspective, interesting inputs for career management could be found, based on internal mobility, supporting permanent training, assessment of productivity and not time, rotation of positions, constant updating, among others, as aspects which shape the so-called multidirectional careers (Baruch, 2003).

In this new panorama of careers, the HR-M could take on some challenges in order to face the new career dynamic, starting from a dialectic perspective in which individuals and organization influence each other, agree on conditions, and, thus, mutually transform. In the background of human management, we are not accustomed to negotiating, but rather to just assigning conditions and responsibilities. We resort to instrumental reason so as to obtain ideas of people in order to increase productivity or expand the market, but little when negotiating the conditions that facilitate the development of careers.

For this reason, below some ideass are proposed in order to encourage reflection -and action- from those who are interested in topics related to administration and personnel management. They are not universal formulae; instead, they represent a set of suggestions, given that different conditions are exhibited in each organization:

- Remodel the concept of career: give it a broader meaning, conceding that the promise of work for life is very difficult to keep (on both sides) and that, therefore, people are in constant pursuit of better conditions both within and outside of organizations.

- Acknowledge the new worker profile: recognize that people develop around their individual aspirations, competences, and expertise that they can then deliver to the organization beyond the minimum performance standards expected in each position.

- Take advantage of new skills: be open to the benefits of the creative, proactive, and innovative possibilities that all human beings in contemporary organizations possess, through participation in projects, committees, or other forms of temporary organization.

- Create the conditions for autonomous work: provide the means (technical and administrative) to focus activities on results, instead of engaging in authoritarian control, typical of the old industrial type of organization.

- Provide technical tools to achieve efficiency: dedicate the equipment necessary to improve administrative processes with the objective of speeding up work and resulting in time available for management and socialization of knowledge.

- Generate alternative reward systems: propose and negotiate incentive strategies and more flexible and personalized benefits, which will stimulate the potential of workers

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inside and outside the organization.

- Encourage space for dialog: employ mechanisms to establish work agreements which are in tune with the individual needs of the workers, such as: improving the work-family relationship and training.

- Make resources available: provide financial, training, and technical supplies for dealing with the world of work, in case workers need to make their own entrepreneurial decisions, from which they can establish strategic and consultative alliances.

- Establish flexible and multidirectional career criteria: formulate guidelines based on individual achievements related to contributions to the organization, instead of deciding on internal promotion based solely on the time the person has been in the position.

- Allow for the incorporation of young people: consider, where possible, the potential skills of workers who are just starting their professional careers, acknowledging that the human being has the ability to learn and that it would contribute to the objectives of both parties.

- Promote values of solidarity and mutual support rather than individualistic competitiveness in order to develop more cooperative environments.

All this would imply transforming the purpose of those who are in charge of human resources management processes, from delegating work to others, under the principles of work flexibilization, multifunctionality, cooperation, and loyalty. In this context the HR-M has the challenge of transforming their view of the new conditions (external and internal) in which organizations find themselves nowadays. In this way, their actions could be more in accordance with the people who make up these organizations.

CONCLUSIONS

The classic concept of career, anchored to one organization, through the gradual fulfillment of criteria established by the HR-M, is gradually being outgrown, in view of a notion of a multidirectional career, or a career without borders, in which the individuals are the ones who direct their own trajectory according to their own interests, both within and outside the organization.

At present, from a dialectic perspective and a psychosocial approximation, it is possible to recognize that a person can influence the decisions of the organization as regards human resource management, so as to, perhaps, be the author of their own biography. For this reason, those in charge of the human resources department should consider what has been called the "subjective career," regarding the working life project that people develop for themselves. This implies rethinking the traditional conception of the "individual" so as to appreciate in a broader sense the possibilities that people can offer an organization, even on a temporary basis. However, the challenge does not end there. Apart from revising

what is understood by person, work, career, and organization, it is necessary that the actions taken also contribute to the development of individual trajectories and, in this way, shape relationships of reciprocity.

The questions raised, far from trying to formulate prescriptions that can be applied generally to any type of organization, seek to trigger discussion regarding what could be done in the new career landscape.

Given that, traditionally, personnel management has had the intention of changing people according to the objectives of the organization; it would be worth questioning the practices that are carried out in order to rethink the forms of interacting. Perhaps it is time to invert the equation and recognize that people now have the capacity to discern where they could best deliver their potential.

The duties of those responsible for the human resources department with regard to careers could be an interesting topic of research, so as to understand how they are currently dealing with people's ambitions to reach higher levels in their trajectories. Future studies could focus on the directories that have been incorporated, and could include a viewpoint on work, the new organization, personnel management, and, of course, the career; ideas which will direct activities in the new scenario of the XXI century.

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