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Challenging the Lure of the Protean Career

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Abstract: In this paper I call attention to unique perspectives among workers and reassert that “worker” does not denote a categorical monolith, but rather a unique human being who perceives the same phenomena differently from everyone else. I position my assertion within the context of the seemingly unquestioned notion of the protean career. Referring to stories by people who participated in a qualitative study I conducted in 2001, I caution that the “emancipatory” qualities of the protean career might not be universally accepted; rather, for personal reasons of one’s own, these same characteristics could be perceived as disruptive of the order that one has constructed. Conclusions suggest that there may be workers like the people in the study I conducted, who find themselves engaged in the protean environment against their will. Even though on the surface they could be said to be taking their place among the residents of “free agent nation”, they might have preferred uninterrupted citizenship in the company wherein they were employed. Implications point to the importance of problematizing the blind acceptance and generalizability of the protean career.

The Lure of the Protean Career

It appears to be a taken-for-granted Truth that the psychological contract has become obsolete and that in the United States, at least, and for other westernized nations, such as New Zealand and the United Kingdom, workers and employers have entered into a different and updated employment relationship (Ardichvili, 2003; Arthur, Inkson, & Pringle, 1999; Beck, 2003). Workers can no longer depend on one organization for continued employment because organizations need flexibility if they are to remain competitive despite global and demographic forces and rapid technological change (Beck, 2003; Clarke, 2001/2002; Short & Opengart, 2001). Arthur et al. (1999) assert,

“Managerial capitalism,” whereby managers decided how to reinvest their companies’ profits, has given ground to “investor capitalism,” whereby investors insist on collecting the profits and making the decisions themselves. If the byword of the Industrial State era was “planning,” its equivalent in the new era is “flexibility.” It is a word that turns conventional career thinking on its head. (p. 9)

In fact, it has been asserted that the average worker remains with the same employer for no more than four to six years and is likely to experience multiple job shifts within one’s career (PRNewswire, 1997).

Management consultants, professional management and economics journals, and prestigious business schools expound the need for workers to reframe their career expectations,

shifting from a perceived desire for stability and mutual exchange to the worship of Proteus, the god who possessed the uncanny ability to morph according to the situation encountered (Ardichvili, 2003; Arthur et al., 1999; Clarke, 2001/2002; Fowke, 1998). Currently embodied in the protean career, Proteus' ability to change and adapt has been adopted by or imposed upon regular employees within an organization as they explore job opportunities within the same company, those who leave one organization for another within the same industry, or even those switching careers to enter a different profession (Arthur et al., 1999; Sullivan & Emerson, 2000; Valcour & Snell, 2002).

Lest workers should fret over the loss of career predictability and continuity that they once had known, current legitimate knowledge reassures them that the psychological contract is not necessarily dead—it, too, has simply changed its conditions (Clarke, 2001/2002; Cohen & Page, n.d.; Sullivan & Emerson, 2000). Whereas organizations once offered employees security in exchange for loyalty and commitment, the new psychological contract provides workers with a job where they can learn and practice new skills for future employability in exchange for their just-in-time knowledge and expert performance (Beck, 2003; Short & Opengart, 2001). Organizations expect full commitment from the worker until the job is completed, and then the worker moves on to a different job within the same company or to a different company completely (Schied, 2003).

Cultural institutions and ideology, including the law, media, press, management books, scholarly journals and trendy business magazines, consultants, presenters at professional conferences, business schools, and restless Gen-Xers assert that the protean career is an empowering one, restoring agency to the worker and organization instead of taking it away (Cohen & Page, n.d.; Sullivan & Emerson, 2000; Valcour & Snell, 2002; Valcour & Tolbert, 2001). For the worker, this suggests that if he or she believes that the employment relationship has failed to yield the expected raise or promotion; if the organization's ability to contribute to the worker's learning or transferable career opportunities has been exhausted; if work life becomes disruptive to one's sense of balance between work and other aspects of life; then he or she is free to leave for another job or a brand new career (Arthur et al., 1999; Sullivan & Emerson, 2000). The employer is also empowered because he or she is free from employee expectations of long-term employment and able to avail oneself of just-in-time knowledge and skills for remaining competitive in a changing environment (Clarke, 2001/2002; Valcour & Snell, 2002).

To navigate successfully the protean career, the worker must hone relevant career-related competencies because one's job security depends on future employability (Sullivan & Emerson, 2000; Valcour & Snell, 2002). Boundless energy; self-directedness; inter- and intrapersonal and networking skills; an insatiable willingness, ability, and opportunity to engage in continuous learning; self-marketing skills; goal setting ability; possession of entrepreneurial savvy; and creativity, for example, are integral to finding a job that contributes to building one's career (Ardichvili, 2003; Beck, 2003; Schied, 2003). Such skills have been handily bundled into categorical labels, including "knowing-why" (personal motives and values one attaches to work), "knowing-how" (the resources one brings to one's work), and "knowing-whom" (social relationships that somehow affect one's work processes and one's social life) (Arthur, Amundson, & Parker, 2003; Clarke, 2001/2002; Imel, 2001). In honing these competencies, the protean worker is now supposedly free to build upon and transfer skills developed through participation in paid and non-paid experiences, including voluntary and community participation

and intermittent times away from paid employment for reasons including parenting or care giving (Arthur et al., 1999).

The utility of developmental theories, such as Levinson's life stage development, are called into question by demands made by the protean career (Arthur et al, 1999). Under its rubrics, careers once bounded by organizational structures have now been liberated, and workers who succeed within a boundaryless career must be ready and willing to move as needed to different job opportunities in their quest for continued employability (Clarke, 2001/2002; Imel, 2001). And so it is that whereas persons in the 40-year-and-over age range were once considered to yearn for established careers, followed by "holding on" for retirement and other family and personal pursuits, they now might discard the traditional arrow model of career development, opting instead to become enmeshed in a spiraling web inclusive of sideways as well as upwards mobility (Arthur et al., 1999; Sullivan & Emerson, 2000).

The notion of the protean career, or boundaryless career, is presented as an attractive evolution of the traditional employment relationship. In much of the management literature, it is couched in terms suggesting agency, self-actualization, and balance. Words such as "new careers," "new economy," "new work order," "intelligent career," "boundaryless," and "free agent nation" (Arthur et al, 2003; Fowke, 1998; Imel, 2001; Schied, 2003) evoke an aura of freedom, agency, aesthetics, vitality, open space, desirability, and trendy identity. In fact, the word "protean" might evoke a sense of awe, wonder, and intrigue.

But is this what all or most workers want, or is the lure of the protean career artificially constructed? If the lure is so strong, how is it that some who have been separated involuntarily from the job, for example, were still working within the same organization instead of having leapt at the opportunity to join in the protean career? Certainly, there are people who likely have chosen the protean career, but as knowledge is transferred through cultural and structural institutions across legitimated professional and international boundaries, does the choice to pursue the protean career become imposed and coercive? I pose these questions based on a qualitative study that I completed in 2001, wherein I explored the experiences of 28 white-collar workers involuntarily separated from the job six months before. While the research did not specifically probe the participants' perceptions about the protean career, it did reveal elements of these participants' relevancy structures that suggested that for reasons of their own they did not wish to avail themselves of the protean career at that time.

Questioning the Lure of the Protean Career

Through in-depth, one-on-one conversations with the participants and content analysis of several journals, company benefits literature, annual report, web site, and investor message boards, I sought to understand not only the participants' experience of the same downsizing event but also how it was that their experience was constituted. As a participant/ researcher, I heuristically began this project by journaling and reading extensively. Ultimately, the research questions and the study were informed by five main bodies of literature across academic disciplines, including downsizing, *person*, (phenomenological concept that denotes the essential structure of persons; Stanage, 1987), institutional theory, violence, and peace studies. Data were collected and analyzed by means of tools borrowed from multiple qualitative disciplines, including phenomenology, linguistic phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and hermeneutics.

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The 28 study participants were among 1,100 white-collar workers who were sent away by the same organization because the organization was at the verge of a cyclical economic downturn in the industry and anticipated third quarter earnings were \$1.75 million below projected goals. Approximately 67 people whom I could identify were invited to participate in this study. These 28 people responded affirmatively. Study participants represented a three to one ratio of men to women, ranged between 30 and 61 years of age, and claimed from two through 38 years of seniority with the company. As it turned out, the participants came from seven different company locations within the metropolitan geographic area. Participants were diverse in other ways as well, including ethnically and racially.

Findings were complex and many. For the purpose of this paper, perhaps most relevant might be the emergence of four broad experiences of the same downsizing event: “the layoff was a godsend,” “opportunity came,” “it happened, move on,” and “we were hurt.” Even though those in the first two categories saw opportunity on the other side of their separation, they frequently did so because the job itself had been oppressive, stifling, or otherwise unsatisfactory or painful. In other cases, these participants were aware that they possessed high potential for employability, they were young, or they were in a position to take early retirement due to their advanced age and/or financial independence. Even though they were not as fearful as their colleagues in the other two categories about the job search experience that lay ahead, it is interesting to note that none had left the organization of their own accord nor did most articulate a desire to launch into a protean career.

Five of 28 participants mentioned the advantage of changing jobs for continued learning and/or career progression and the possibility or desirability of engaging in free-lance activity and part-time or consulting job opportunities. Julia, in her 50s, sought to transition into “free-lance” creative work because there she saw an opportunity to control when, how, and what she would write; and she could work according to “her own terms.” Jim, a 39-year-old man, suggested that in order to continue learning, he had already moved among different departments and careers within the same company. Now it was time for him to move elsewhere again. Had he not been separated from the company at this time, he would have sought opportunities to move to another department within the organization. Sabrina, 37, gave no indication that she would be transitioning into a protean career, but she described her boyfriend’s rapid career progression, which she attributed to his perpetual motion. By the date of our conversation, she had found full-time regular employment in a different industry, performing a job that built upon the skills she had gained at TREBCO (company pseudonym). Bob and Roger, 57 and 59 respectively, had each worked for over 25 years at TREBCO and were hoping to stay until 62 when they could retire with full company and Social Security benefits. One had been an upper-level middle manager and the other had been a director within this hierarchical organization. Now, both thought they would look for part-time employment or comparably-paid full-time employment; and both acknowledged that they did not need to work again if they chose because they were not financially dependent on earning a living. The 59-year-old was not looking forward to embarking on job search activity at this stage of his life and career development; and he expressed concern about employability at his advanced age.

Participants in the last two categories had no intention of leaving this organization until they were ready to do so, if at all. Reasons and personal characteristics varied among them, including age; the importance of structure; stage of career development as it intersected with age, sex, and skills in one’s professional repertoire; belonging; identity; social embeddedness within the organization; family history of employment within this organization; perceived transferability

of skills; continuation of regular pay and benefits; and hanging on for a specific retirement milestone. Interestingly, two of the youngest and less senior members of the participant group, i.e., in their early 30s with fewer than five years of tenure with TREBCO, were among those who experienced this involuntary separation most negatively. Both women described their connectedness with other people employed by the organization and their deep sense of loss. Not only is this contradictory to expectations of some older and more senior colleagues, but it also may be contradictory to studies about acceptability of the boundaryless career: “More recent entrants to the job market are more likely to accept a boundaryless career model than are older workers who are more likely to have started off their careers with the expectation that a single employer would oversee their career development.” (Valcour & Tolbert, 2001, p. 2). For these two young women among participants in the “we were hurt” category, the importance of age and longevity seemed to be overridden by social embeddedness. Some people in both categories were aware of problems within their employment relationship, but they did not believe them to be critical enough to sever the relationship themselves or to be terminated from it. For all of these reasons that they thought important, these participants hoped for uninterrupted employment with *this* company.

Rocky provided evidence that despite popular assertions to the contrary, the psychological contract as he had known it was still in existence and that it had been breached. Contrary to the lure of the protean career, Neil, Peter, Joe, Alexandra, and Lois did not have an opportunity to seek their dream jobs. Instead, they opted to accept a position with the first company that presented a reasonable offer for fear of finding themselves with no income or benefits at all. Many participants cited “respect for people”, “diversity”, “team”, and “family”, i.e., values and guiding behaviors that TREBCO had aggressively promoted through the culture change initiative beginning in the late 1990s. They held that their involuntary separations from TREBCO highlighted a contradiction between espoused values and values in use.

Challenging the Lure of the Protean Career

In this paper, I point to the need for more targeted research that asks questions specific to the protean career; however, evidence suggests that some protean workers encounter the protean career as a result of having been involuntarily separated from a “permanent” job. Thus, it is important to consider that participants across all four experiential categories in my study, but particularly in the “it happened, move on” and “we were hurt” categories, would likely challenge the lure of the protean career. If this is so, then more questions could be asked, including: How is the notion of the protean career constructed, by whom, and for what reasons? How is the notion of the protean career being institutionalized? How are adult educators, responsible for educating adults who will work in the corporate or managerial environments, complicit in further institutionalization of the protean career? If the protean career is indeed what unemployed workers appear to be encountering, then what can human resource developers and career development counselors do to prepare them for sustained employability? Fully aware that by preparing workers for active and successful engagement with the protean career one is simultaneously contributing to the institutionalization of “reality”, how can adult educators find space within the political arena to affect public policy that creates the necessary infrastructure to support workers in a protean career? How can adult educators working as human resource developers raise awareness among corporate decision makers about different perspectives surrounding the protean career? How can human resource developers successfully point out to

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organizational decision makers the contradictions between notions of family, community, and belonging that are promoted through culture initiatives or workplace traditions and employer expectations that the worker relinquish all rights to reciprocal loyalty and long-term commitment? What are the structural and societal forces that contribute to the construction of atomization that is characteristic of the protean career? And finally, what are the implications of such atomization for structural and societal values one holds in esteem?

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