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#### Authors

Name: Dr. Paula McDonald

Affiliation: Post-doctoral Research Fellow, School of Management, Faculty of Business,  
Queensland University of Technology

Mailing Address: GPO Box 2434, Brisbane, Queensland 4001

Email: [p.mcdonald@qut.edu.au](mailto:p.mcdonald@qut.edu.au)

Ph: 61 7 3864 5318

Name: Dr. Kerry Brown

Affiliation: Associate Professor, School of Management, Faculty of Business, Queensland  
University of Technology

Mailing Address: GPO Box 2434, Brisbane, Queensland, 4001

Email: [ka.brown@qut.edu.au](mailto:ka.brown@qut.edu.au)

Ph: 61 7 3864 2939

Name: Dr. Lisa Bradley

Affiliation: Senior Lecturer, School of Management, Faculty of Business, Queensland  
University of Technology

Mailing Address: GPO Box 2434, Brisbane, Queensland, 4001

Email: [lm.bradley@qut.edu.au](mailto:lm.bradley@qut.edu.au)

*Title*

Have traditional career paths given way to protean ones? Evidence from Senior Managers  
in the Australian Public Sector

*Abstract*

**Purpose:** This mixed-method study aimed to determine the extent to which the career paths of senior managers conform to the traditional versus protean elements described in the careers literature and whether these paths varied by gender. **Methodology:** 15 senior managers (7 women and 8 men) in a large public sector agency in Australia were interviewed about their career trajectories to date. Data were coded according to four major areas which characterise and distinguish between traditional and protean careers: Development, Orientation of the Employee, Definition of Success and Organisational Environment. 81 managers (34 women and 47 men) from the same organisation were also surveyed. Variables of interest were those that could be triangulated with qualitative data such as the availability of career opportunities. **Findings:** Results suggest that contrary to much existing literature which proposes that all careers have been fundamentally altered, the traditional career which relies on length of service, geographic mobility and a steady climb up the corporate ladder, is still the dominant model in some organisations. However, the trend towards protean careers is evident and is more pronounced for women than for men. **Limitations:** The specific nature of the organisation (large, male-dominated, public sector) may limit the generalisability of results. **Implications:** The framework used to explore career paths according to traditional / protean elements in this study may assist human resource practitioners to develop

appropriate strategies which maximise the professional development of employees. The results also challenge the universality of change in the nature of careers, particularly in public sector environments.

*Key Words:* Career development; protean; public service; gender.

## *Introduction*

Traditionally, careers have been oriented externally to the person, emphasising vertical progression through positions carrying increasing responsibility, status and rewards defined by the organisation (Hall & Mirvis, 1995). More recently, careers are thought to be more internally-oriented, flexible and mobile, with goals defined by individual workers (Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Sullivan, 1999). This paper examines changes in public sector career paths in a study of senior male and female managers in a male-dominated organisation. The study explores the extent to which self-reported career trajectories conform to either the traditional, linear career patterns or the self-managed, protean paths described in the careers literature and examines whether the character of these paths vary by gender. The study informs and extends existing literature by establishing evidence that supports or refutes changing career structures.

### *Traditional Versus Protean Careers*

Wilensky (1960, p. 554) provides an early definition of career: “a succession of related jobs, arranged in a hierarchy of prestige, through which persons move in an ordered, predictable sequence”. This conceptualisation of career has typified the conventional public service career structure (Selby Smith, 1993). More recently, Hall (1996) characterised the traditional career by vertical success, climbing the corporate pyramid and monetary rewards. Progression was also based on frequent upward moves entailing geographical mobility (Edwards, Robinson, Welchman & Woodall, 1999) and ability, hard work and loyalty rewarded with increased seniority (Reitman & Schneer, 2003). Employment in the public sector in particular, was based on the notion of a ‘career service’ of security of tenure and lifelong employment and was framed through the operation of an internal labour market

(Gardner & Palmer, 1997). Promotion was based on seniority and length of service (Selby Smith, 1993). In the late 1980s however, environmental forces such as increased global competition, recession, and in the public sector, the shift in emphasis from administration to management and efficiency, organisations were compelled to restructure, downsize and reinvent themselves (Reitman & Schneer, 2003). These organisational changes in turn, led to fundamental changes to the way careers were defined, negotiated and carried out.

Hall (1996, 2004) outlines a fundamental shift away from the traditional career starting in the late 1980s, to one that is more 'protean' (derived from the Greek God Proteus, who could change shape at will). Hall and Moss (1998) suggest that in contrast to the traditional career, the protean career is characterised by relationships which are driven by the individual, not the organisation and is subject to reinvention by the person from time to time as the person and the environment change. In contrast to traditional careers which involve vertical success (as defined by hierarchical levels within an organisation), Hall (1996) argues that the protean career is defined by psychological success which is unique to the individual and can mean personal accomplishment, feelings of pride, achievement or family happiness. The personal qualities required for a successful protean career include continuous learning, self-awareness, personal responsibility and autonomy (Hall, 1996, 2004). Traditional loyalty and commitment to an organisation is less important in the protean career as organisations pursue more transactional relationships with their employees and employees are encouraged to pursue more self-interested careers (Maguire, 2002).

The emergence of protean careers in organisations is supported by a range of studies. For example, Maguire's (2002) research in the banking industry found that the relational aspects of the psychological contract between employees and the organisation had decreased. That is, relational contract components such as commitment, company loyalty and trust in management, which had traditionally been exchanged for sense of belonging, competent

management and opportunity for input, had markedly changed. Further, Stroh (1996) and her colleagues compared data collected in 1978 and 1989 and found that, consistent with several elements of protean careers already described, satisfaction with the company decreased but job involvement and job satisfaction increased.

Despite some compelling evidence to suggest that the traditional career has given way to new processes of negotiating work arrangements across the lifecourse, these claims are not universal. Guest and McKenzie-Davey's (1996) organisational research suggests the traditional career remains a feature of contemporary organisations. Also, Reitman & Schneer (2003) found that the promised or traditional career path still existed for one third of MBA graduates in the northeastern United States. Thus, although the majority of careers literature suggests careers have become more or less protean in nature, this position remains to be determined, particularly across different industries and organisations.

### *The Interaction of Gender with Traditional versus Protean Careers*

The suggestion that women and men display different career paths is not a new concept. The traditional career is considered to require a typically male pattern of working steadily full-time for the same employer for an entire career, always seeking vertical advancement and external rewards (MacDermid, Dean Lee, Buck & Williams, 2001). Women aspiring to successful professional and managerial careers have been expected to conform to these same behaviours and goals (MacDermid et al, 2001).

An orientation to long term goals, that is, setting one's sights on a key position at the top of the hierarchy and calculating the steps on the way is another fundamental element of the traditional career (Pascall, Parker & Evetts, 2000). Although there is evidence that successful men often use long-term goal-setting strategies (Evetts, 1990), a substantial

amount of evidence suggests that women use different strategies to achieve career success, and define 'career' differently than men. Women for example, tend to acknowledge career in retrospect but not in prospect (Dunlap, 1994) and accommodate their own goals to other family members (Pascall & Cox, 1993). Also, women tend to engage in short term promotion plans rather than long term goals (Evetts, 1990). In a study of employees in the banking industry, Pascall et al (2000) conceptualised women's career strategies in terms of incrementalism (seeing only the possibility of promotion to the next level before gaining enough confidence to aspire to another) and credit-accumulation (making investments such as gaining qualifications and filling gaps in experience). Credit accumulation was considered to be a defensive strategy against discrimination as well as an insurance policy that dealt with the uncertainties of career and family demands.

Although Hall (2004) asserts that a person's career orientation appears to be unrelated to gender, some evidence suggests that protean careers may be beneficial for women. Using a longitudinal sample of MBA graduates over 13 years, Reitman & Schneer (2003) found the protean career path is more supportive for women, allowing women to more effectively blend work and family responsibilities. The study found that on the protean career path women had achieved income and advancement equality, while women on the promised career path earned 20 percent less than men and only one-eighth had reached top management level (Reitman & Schneer, 2003). Women are also more likely than men to pursue career goals focused on individual learning and growth than organisational rewards (Still & Timms, 1998; Sullivan, 1999; Tolbert & Moen, 1998). Although this body of literature suggests women tend to engage in more protean-type career behaviours and men tend to exhibit more traditional career patterns, further work is necessary to establish whether men and women at similar organisational levels have achieved these levels via similar trajectories. The organisational environments in which these patterns apply, also warrant further attention.

Previous studies have also examined a range of structural factors which influence both men's and women's career paths. Many of these studies are based on liberal feminist critiques of organisational power which attempt to explain the percentage gap between women in middle and top management and how to increase women's power and influence by attempting to reform corporate practices such as tokenism, barriers to job entry and other issues of equal opportunity (Oakley, 2000). However, few of these studies have directly linked the identified barriers and facilitators of women's career progression with notions of the traditional and/or protean career. Understanding how various career-influencing factors in the work environment reflect aspects of either traditional or protean careers, has both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, a framework can be built up for understanding how these factors jointly influence career paths and practically, organisations can be advised about career development strategies for their employees.

Many of the factors found to influence career paths for women in the contemporary careers literature are consistent with the protean career. These include the availability of good mentors (Hansman, 1998); self-confidence (Rosenthal, 1995; Tharenou and Conroy, 1994); tendency to self-rate and self-promote (Hite and McDonald, 1995); perseverance (Richie et al, 1997); assertiveness (McDonald & Hite, 1996) and level of exposure to assignments involving risk and visibility (Ohlott et al, 1994). Lyness and Thompson (2000) found that although the career histories of men and women in their study were similar, women faced greater barriers to career advancement such as lack of culture fit, being excluded from informal networks, difficulty in getting developmental assignments and lesser geographic mobility.

Other barriers to women's career progression are more consistent with the traditional career. For example, women tend to have lower participation in formal training, a characteristic of traditional careers, and when they do participate, the training is often designed for women, has lower status and participants receive less feedback than men (Hite &



Mcdonald, 1995). Line experience, another characteristic of traditional careers, has also been found to be less for women, than men (Ragins, Townsend & Mattis, 1998).

### *Research Questions*

This research examines the career paths of male and female senior managers in a public service organisation, focusing on the extent to which these retrospectively perceived paths reflect aspects of the protean versus traditional career and whether differences in career types exhibit gendered outcomes. The lengthy work experience of many senior managers in the organisation means they are a group well-placed to reflect on the nature and extent of career changes, given the transition from traditional to protean careers that was argued to have begun in the late 1980s and continued through the 1990s. Two major research questions are addressed:

1. How do managers reflect on their career experiences and in what sense do these experiences represent aspects of traditional versus protean career paths described in the literature?; and
2. To what extent are gender differences evident in the way careers are experienced by managers in the public sector and how do these gender differences intersect with aspects of traditional versus protean career paths?

### *The Research Context*

The research is undertaken in a male-dominated public sector organisation in Australia. The gender-dominated nature of the department is a relevant contextual feature of

the organisation that was likely to influence the career paths of participants and thus the interpretation of findings. For example, Simpson (2000) explored the gender mix across organisations and found that the proportion of men and women in an organisation influenced women's career progression. The focus on the public sector environment specifically is also an important component of the study because of the relatively stable work categories and more easily identifiable employment classifications that allow more reliable internal organisational comparisons.

### *Methods*

#### *Participants*

This research was conducted in an Australian Government agency responsible for the policies and programs related to capital works. Close to 80% of the workforce are men.

*Interviews.* The 15 interview respondents consisted of seven female and eight male senior managers who had significant responsibilities in the organisation including the supervision of up to hundreds of staff and the management of large budgets. The mean age of participants was 41.7 years. Seven participants were from regional areas and eight were employed in the capital city. All respondents were employed on a full-time basis.

*Questionnaires.* Questionnaires were administered to a stratified random sample of Department employees (stratified by gender, organisational level, type of employment and age). Respondents consisted of 47 men and 34 women managers (mean age = 42.7 years, SD = 8.5), defined as having an occupational category at a level at which they had responsibility

for managing subordinates (mean number of subordinates = 12.8, SD = 14.6). The stratified sample ensured male and female questionnaire respondents were equally represented in terms of seniority, as measured by mean current classification levels, although women hold fewer senior positions in the organisation than men overall. Women managers in the sample were younger than men (mean age 38.1 years compared to 45.8 years); were more likely to have dependent children; and had fewer subordinates (mean 8.8 subordinates compared to 15.2). All but five participants (6.2 percent) were employed on a full-time basis and most (88 percent) as permanent employees, as opposed to temporary, casual or contractual arrangements.

### *Procedure*

*Interviews.* All senior female managers (defined as above AO8) in the organisation were interviewed, except for the principal research contact, who was also a woman. Male managers were purposefully selected to include those from both urban and regional areas and to represent a range of seniority from department managers to the director general. All interviews (including regional ones) were conducted in the employee's own office environment. All interviewees were asked the same questions, although they were not necessarily covered in the same order. Prior to asking any questions, interviewees were assured of the confidentiality of any information they provided and permission to tape-record the interview was also obtained. Paraphrasing and claim checking were used extensively to demonstrate the data was being interpreted as intended by the interviewees. The interviews were transcribed prior to analysis.

*Questionnaires.* Questionnaires were administered to a stratified random sample of Department employees (stratified by gender, organisational level and type of employment) using the organisation's internal mail system and accompanied by a letter from the Director-General of the Department encouraging participation and a reply-paid envelope addressed to the researchers. One follow-up consisting of a mailed reminder letter was also conducted.

### *Instruments*

*Interviews.* The interview schedule was developed to elicit information about the retrospective career paths of senior managers and the way these paths reflect aspects of traditional and protean careers identified in the literature. Four principal questions were asked: "Please describe your career path so far"; "To what extent are you satisfied with your career progress in the Department?"; "What issues have helped or hindered your career progress to date?"; "What are your future goals and aspirations in terms of career?", with prompt and follow-up questions used as required. A semi-structured interview was utilised to balance the requirements of consistency across interviews with flexibility of responses (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994).

*Questionnaires.* Questionnaire data from managers were derived from a larger survey (58 percent response rate) exploring employment trends across all employees in the organisation. Variables consisted of eight demographic characteristics (gender, age, number of subordinates, number of dependents, current classification, number of years spent working in the public service, department and current position); four attitudinal variables (satisfaction with career success; career encouragement; career development; and mentoring); and two measures of career aspiration (i.e., "What classification do you hope to be in two years time?"

and “What classification do you hope to be in five years time?”). Career satisfaction was measured with 5 items from Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley (1990), for example, “I am satisfied with the success I have achieved at work”. Career encouragement was measured with three items from Tharenou et al. (1994) (e.g. “I have been encouraged in my career progression by colleagues at the same level as myself”). Career development consisted of three items adapted from Lyness and Thompson, 2000 (e.g., “I get the opportunity to move across work areas”); Career management consisted of three items adapted from Lyness and Thompson, 2000 (e.g., “I take personal risks in my career”). Finally, Mentoring comprised 5 items from Lyness and Thompson (2000) (e.g. “I get support from my supervisor/manager at stressful times”). All attitudinal variables were measured on a 7 point Likert scale with “strongly disagree” (1) and “strongly agree” (7) as anchor points.

### *Analysis*

*Interviews.* Interview data were analysed using a deductive approach. Firstly, four major areas of distinction between traditional and protean career patterns (as identified in the literature) were specified a priori (see Table *i* for these comparative areas). The text was then literally (e.g., years of service) and interpretively (e.g., how career goals were mentally represented) coded as categories of career information provided by respondents that represented examples in each of these eight areas. For example, responses about the personal responsibility that each employee took for their own careers was thought to represent ‘Protean Orientation’ while the geographic mobility that respondents regarded as crucial to career success was encapsulated under the heading ‘Traditional Development’. The differences and similarities between men’s and women’s career paths across and between these categories

were also sought during the data analysis in order to confirm or disconfirm gender-based, theoretical propositions that women's careers have become more protean than men's.

*Table i.*

Major areas of interest and examples of traditional / protean elements

Major area	Traditional (examples)	Protean (examples)
Development	Geographic mobility, formal training and long-term goals	Continuous learning, involvement in key projects
Orientation of the Employee	Value and serve the organization	Autonomous, personal responsibility and self-focused
Definition of Success	Objective, external and vertical	Subjective, internal and psychological
Organisational Environment	Relationship with organisation all important; provides career opportunities in exchange for loyalty and commitment	Common ground is task, not rel'ship to organisation; provides opportunities for knowledge/skill enhancement

To enhance the validity of the findings, independent coding on a random sample of transcripts was undertaken by another researcher familiar with the subject matter, with significant overlap. Consistent with guidelines outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994), frequencies, or 'counts' of occurrences of a particular theme were reported where it was important to verify the consistency of a reported phenomenon.

*Questionnaires.* Data were entered into SPSS for analysis. Descriptive statistics, T-tests and correlations were conducted.

## *Results*

### *Interviews*

The qualitative data is organised around four major themes identified in the careers literature as distinguishing between traditional and protean careers: Development; Orientation of Employee; Definition of Success; and Organisational Environment. Sub-categories identified within each of these themes reflect aspects of either traditional or protean careers expressed by interview respondents and where responses varied by gender, this is noted.

*Development.* Clear differences between male and female managers were evident in the way they described the development of their careers. In terms of goals, men tended to describe long-term goals which they had held since starting in the public service many years earlier and are typical of a traditional career. Women on the other hand were more likely to reflect on their career in terms of incremental goals. Typical of the male responses was:

“I guess I have always aspired to being a manager at whatever level – obviously there is a career structure within [the organisation] that takes you from the supervising level to middle management to senior management” (male) .

In contrast, typical female responses were:

“I guess with my whole career I have never been one to say – this is where I want to be in 5 years time – head of department or whatever. I have just done what I think I have been capable of doing” (female).

One notable exception to short-term goal setting expressed by women, was one female manager who had carefully and strategically planned her career from the start. This woman was also unique in the sample in that she appeared to have adopted a traditionally male model of working. For example, she was highly individualistic, worked extremely long hours, completely rejected the idea that being female was a disadvantage in a male-dominated organisation, and felt that performance outcomes should be rated above all other concerns. For example:

“I absolutely oppose women whom you see working short hours and doing all this part-time stuff who are just not delivering on their job and they’re opposing the burden back down on them, and the men have enormous resentment over this” (female).

The majority of respondents (both men and women) also emphasised the importance of geographic mobility for career progression because it contributed to getting the appropriate experience for promotion and also indicated commitment to career. Male managers had held positions in different regions of the State far more frequently than women in the sample, particularly in relation to promotion to Regional Manager. One male respondent mentioned the negative consequences of these moves on their families, for example, “my oldest girl went to 7 different State Schools” although his was the only account of the impact of re-location on partner and family. Two women stated that their inability to be geographically mobile had hindered their careers, and a further woman reported following her partner to another region but being downgraded in her position in the process. Typical responses in terms of geographic mobility included:



“You only gain a certain amount of knowledge in one region. If you move around, your knowledge is increased and your experience of course... and I think that really helps progress your career” (male).

“If you wanted advancement, you had to move” (female).

In contrast to male interviewees’ emphasis on mobility for future promotion, women tended to stress the importance of involvement in key organisational projects for optimal career development. The following excerpt illustrates this focus:

“I was involved in some key projects. I think that sort of makes a name for you – it proves what you can do. You are seen to be someone who can get things done and achieve and also, those sort of projects really test you [and] ... tend to help you in your career” (female).

Another sub-category of career development concerned training and experience. There was consensus across gender that traditional, formal training that had been a big part of the public service in past decades, was no longer a worthwhile practice. For example:

“I don’t think I have ever got a job because of the courses I took within the work environment” (female).

The support of a supervisor was also considered crucial to achieving career success and an important vehicle to transfer knowledge and information. Several participants

described personal experiences where a supportive supervisor, often described as a “mentor”, had assisted their career:

“I’ve got to say that through every step of my career, my supervisors have got me to my respective levels and given me the correct advice and helped me in my career development and placed me in areas that I hadn’t been exposed to before in the job so it gave me a knowledge of the business” (male).

Women in particular placed great emphasis on the benefit of having a supportive mentor to buffer them from the major disadvantages of firstly, career breaks that result from childbearing and secondly, not having a trade background. For example:

“One of the things that struck me when I had my first child was that no one talked to me about what my options were, there was no one I felt comfortable to go to and say well look, this is my situation. I saw no examples of anyone else who had done it so far and I felt like I was the only person in the world who had ever had a baby – total isolation... now by default, I am a mentor of younger people thinking about having a family” (female).

An additional developmental theme that emerged from the data, but one that had not been identified a priori in the careers literature was the emphasis that the organisation appeared to place on technical qualifications and/or trade background as being required for achieving higher-level positions. Although this apparent requirement was salient for both men and women, there were gender differences in terms of agreement with this organisational

principle and how it differentially impacted on them. Not surprisingly perhaps, men tended to agree with the emphasis on trade qualifications for management. For example:

“I feel that if I am talking to my client about advice on a structure, I need to have some knowledge of what I am talking about... I don’t know how you can sell ice-creams when you’ve never tasted one” (male).

One senior male manager, while in principle not agreeing with the emphasis on trade qualifications for management, justified the continued practice of favouring those with a trade background. In contrast, women managers in this sample, who tended to have tertiary rather than trade qualifications, thought the emphasis on a trade background for senior management was unfounded. For example:

“I don’t think having technical skills should matter because whether you pluck out technical terms is not as important as being able to surround yourself with highly competent people and as being able to task the pertinent question to help you understand what you are looking for. You don’t expect the Health Minister to be a doctor in health” (female).

Thus, although women were as likely as men to acknowledge the importance of technical qualifications in regards to career success, they were more likely to be disadvantaged as a result.

*Orientation of Employee.* The orientation of the employees interviewed for this research had aspects of both traditional and protean careers. However, unlike Career

Development above, men and women had relatively similar orientations to length of service, work hours, and levels of autonomy and personal responsibility for career. Both men and women had a typically traditional career history, evident in the average length of employment in the public service of 21 years. Indeed, 13 of the interviewees had started in the Department, or a related public sector department, from high school as a cadet, apprentice or graduate. Apart from the two interviewees who had previously worked in the private sector and had made sideways moves, both men and women described a slow, steady climb up occupational increments to their current positions in senior management.

A further sub-category related to employee orientation, but one which reflects a protean-type of career, was personal responsibility. Both men and women expressed that it was up to the individual, rather than the organisation, to take responsibility for their career success. According to these respondents, each employee needs to promote themselves, look for advantageous opportunities, actively develop their skills and overcome impediments to success. Some excerpts which reflect these attitudes are:

“I always believe in putting myself forward and promoting yourself, getting yourself noticed and then progressing up the career chain. I think I have gotten to where I have gotten on my own” (female).

“I think it comes back to the individual – how they want to be in their career within the organisation” (male).

In terms of career barriers, several respondents felt that impediments to success were essentially non-existent, because if the individual was determined enough, they could overcome anything. For example:

“There are so many opportunities out there in the world, when one door shuts, just switch, well right, what are we going to do, that’s just a personal approach. I could never say to you I felt that anything has been an impediment, I mean, I would put it back on myself. I would say, oh why, what else can I do?” (female).

*Definition of Success.* A mixed picture emerged in terms of internal (protean) versus external (traditional) definitions of career success for this interview sample. In general, most interviewees, both men and women, conceptualised success in terms of objective occupational levels and goals, moving up the organisational ladder and progressing through the ranks. For example:

“A job that I would want is the Assistant General Manager’s job one day” (male).

“The traditional logical next step for me is the CEO of the department” (female).

A notable and clear-cut exception to the external, hierarchical conceptualisations of career success expressed by most interviewees however, were the two women who were responsible for dependent children. These women were the only respondents who expressed a more internal, psychological orientation to career success, such as:

“I think it would be nice to be a director at times, but if that never happens, it wouldn’t disappoint me. I would only do it if I felt that I was capable of taking on that role because I’ve got my stuff at home... Wherever the best wind blows, I will do that and enjoy myself” (female).

*Organisational Environment.* Several aspects of the internal and external organisational environment within which these managers worked, were important in understanding the extent to which aspects of protean and traditional careers were operating. Firstly, the female managers interviewed were very aware of the male-dominated nature of the organisation and felt that their achievements in this environment were the result of perseverance and very hard work. One woman stated this widely held view succinctly by saying:

“I have worked so hard and I have put in long hours and I have done the all-nighters to get things out and that sort of thing because I’ve had to win their [the men’s] acceptance. Where I have seen that there is hostility, I have worked triply hard to make sure that I beat it down” (female).

Several women also felt that their achievements had made them role models for other women or ‘champions for the cause’. One woman, talking about gaining her first management position in the organisation, stated:

“They [the other women she worked with] just said to me, I think it’s great, you have just started something for us females because it had never been done before. They sent me a bunch of flowers” (female).

In addition to being male-dominated, the internal environment was characterised by several participants as showing increasing specialisation. This specialisation, especially through the advent of a greater reliance on information technology solutions, was thought to

be responsible for increasingly ‘locking’ people into particular jobs and thwarting the career progression of some employees. That is, fewer people have specialised knowledge and these people are heavily relied on to retain the institutional knowledge of operating a particular system. There was a sense that if you are very good at your job you are ‘punished’ by being left in a particular position while managers deal with more pressing day-to-day problems.

Also of concern was that specialisation resulted in a narrow skills mix which in turn did not prepare staff adequately to be competitive in an open recruitment process. This situation was thought to be exacerbated by the use of temporary staff who were moved around into different positions and obtained experience in a range of duties, often becoming more competitive for departmental positions. Job rotation was cited by several respondents as a solution to this problem, but that rotation should occur across departments to maximise skill development, rather than simply within departments.

Closely related to the problem of increasing job specialisation, were expressions of concern regarding the way relieving or acting opportunities were made available. For example, in some areas, email was used to offer opportunities to a wide range of staff who could register an expression of interest in those positions, whereas in other areas, an informal system of asking certain individuals to act in other positions, operated. One woman was also critical of the quality of experience gained during a relieving period, especially if it was for a short period of time:

“You don’t have relieving for 8 weeks because for 8 weeks you are only talking tactical issues, you’re like a caretaker government. You are only there to sign and rubber stamp, but all the hard decisions will be waiting” (female).

Without exception, managers in this interview sample agreed that the external social and political environment in which the Department operated had made the organisation, over the course of their careers, more commercial, more competitive and less stable. The comments below are typical of new public management environments in which protean careers are said to operate. This first quote illustrates the competitiveness and the second represents the uncertainty inherent in the current work environment:

“We are in a changing environment, so there are always challenges there, we are competing with the private sector” (male).

“One of the biggest hurdles is the political environment of working for the government. You could have the greatest job in the world one minute and the next minute the government changes and that position disappears” (female).

Two male managers also spoke about the difficulty of operating in a competitive, commercial environment while at the same time being bound by the constraints of the public service. Comparing the organisation with those in the private sector:

“It is more challenging knowing that you have one hand tied behind your back from a government type of perspective and to work in a commercial environment in the Public Sector against private enterprise” (male).

Summarising these qualitative results, the self-reported career trajectories of senior managers in this relatively traditional and structured organisation which would normally discourage



protean careers, suggest that several protean aspects were evident. Men tended to report a career path with more traditional elements than women.

### *Questionnaire Results*

An exploration of career-related constructs measured in the questionnaire was undertaken in order to compare and contrast with qualitative findings derived from interviews. These constructs consisted of general career issues (e.g., career satisfaction, career ambition) which provided context-specific information about managers' career perceptions, as well as specific variables which represented elements of traditional / protean careers (e.g., length of service, career opportunity). Gender differences across these measures were also explored.

In relation to general career issues, career satisfaction for managers in this public sector organisation was moderate to high, with respondents reporting satisfaction levels of 4.9 out of a possible 7. There were no significant differences between men and women on this construct, although younger respondents reported greater career satisfaction than older respondents ( $r = -.38, p < .01$ ). Career ambitions were measured via a question which asked about what level respondents hoped to be employed at, in two years time and in five years time. Overall, respondents wanted to move up 1.03 classifications within the 2 year time-frame and 2.02 classifications within the 5 year time-frame. Men and women had similar expectations for both the 2 year time-frame, up approximately one classification, and the 5 year time-frame, up approximately two classifications.

Consistent with the small number of women in the interview sample who were responsible for dependent children (two of seven), only 35.3% of female managers who responded to the questionnaire indicated that they had children while 72.3% of male managers indicated they had dependents. Despite being less likely to have children, women were more

likely to have taken a career break than men (38.2 % of women compared to 14.9% of men). These findings were consistent across levels of managerial seniority and are relevant because for women they suggest a negative relationship between career / seniority in the organisation and the presence of dependent children. It may be that it is easier for women without children to achieve management positions, whereas for men this is less of a problem, or that female managers, more so than male managers, decide not to have children at all.

Several other variables measured in the questionnaire can be specifically compared to interview responses in relation to elements of traditional / protean careers and their associated gender differences. In regards to length of service, which attested to traditional notions of security of tenure and lifelong employment in the careers literature, questionnaire results suggest parameters similarly long as those indicated by interview respondents. The mean tenure in the public service for all respondents was 14.6 years and in the organisation, 10.9 years. Although both men and women had been employed in the public sector a relatively long time, male managers had been employed significantly longer than women in their current position (3.8 years compared to 1.9 years); in the organisation (15.0 years compared to 5.0 years,  $t = 4.34$ ,  $p = .000$ ) and in the public service (18.3 years compared to 9.3 years,  $t = 4.07$ ,  $p = .000$ ).

Four additional indicators of career opportunity were useful for comparisons with interview data regarding traditional and protean concepts. Scores on several of these measures were uniformly low. For example, consistent with interview participants who believed the organisation should have a greater role in mentoring, career planning and development by supervisors, the mean score (out of a possible 7) for the 4 career encouragement items was 3.7 and the mean score for the 6 items on the mentoring scale was 4.1.

Relating to another protean concept, involvement in key projects (Hall, 2004), respondents also scored a low 3.6 out of 7 on the career development item “I get the opportunity to move across work areas”, and an even lower 3.4 on the item “I am satisfied with the access I have to relieving positions”. As suggested by several interviewees in the qualitative phase of the study, these responses reflect the need for greater job rotation, secondment opportunities and skill development across organisational areas. However, respondents scored much higher on another protean notion of career, “career management” (5.1 out of a possible 7), which measures the responsibility individuals themselves take for progression. A correlation matrix including means and standard deviations for major variables is presented in Table *ii*.

*Table ii*

Correlation matrix including means, SDs for major variables, full sample.

	Mean	SD	Ten PS	Ten org	Satisf	Encour	Mentor	Develop	Manage
Age	42.7	8.5	.47**	.50**	-.38**	-.33**	-.14	-.26*	.13
Tenure public service	14.6	10.7		.80**	-.01	.01	.10	-.087	.025
Tenure organisation	10.9	10.8			.04	.03	.12	.01	.13
Career satisfaction	4.9	1.0				.52**	.43**	.08	.50**
Career encouragement	3.7	1.4					.61**	.71**	.14
Mentoring	4.2	1.2						.53**	.19
Career development	4.5	1.3							.25*
Career management	5.1	1.0							

*Note.* \*\* =  $p < .01$ , \* =  $p < .05$ .

Comparisons of responses across gender provided a means of exploring whether male and female managers differed on any quantitatively measured constructs related to career

opportunity and satisfaction. Male and female respondents indicated very similar indicators on all measures, including career satisfaction; career encouragement; mentoring; career development and career management. Younger respondents however, reported higher levels of both career encouragement and career development than older respondents. Means, standard deviations and analysis for independent samples t-tests exploring gender differences for each construct are presented in Table *iii*.

*Table iii.*

Means, SDs and t-test analysis for major career constructs by gender

	t-tests		Female Managers		Male Managers	
	t	Sig.	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Age	4.37	.00	38.1	6.6	45.8	8.3
Ambition 2 years	1.14	.26	.88	.59	1.1	1.0
Ambition 5 years	-.53	.60	2.1	1.3	1.9	1.3
Tenure in pub. Service (yrs)	4.07	.00	9.3	8.2	18.3	10.8
Tenure in organisation (yrs)	4.34	.00	4.9	7.1	15.0	11.3
Career satisfaction (5 items)	-.76	.45	5.0	1.1	4.8	1.0
Career encouragement (4 items)	-.89	.377	3.8	1.4	3.6	1.3
Mentoring (6 items)	-.33	.74	4.2	1.2	4.1	1.2
Career development (4 items)	-.76	.44	4.6	1.4	4.4	1.2
Career management (3 items)	-.61	.54	5.1	1.1	5.0	1.1

*Note: Five career-related constructs (satisfaction, encouragement, mentoring, development and management) were measured on a 1 to 7 Likert scale.*

## *Discussion*

This study examined the retrospective career paths of male and female senior managers in an Australian public sector organisation using a framework of traditional versus protean elements. Results suggest that while some aspects of career trajectories have indeed shifted from traditional to protean patterns, a traditional career model relying on length of service and a predictable climb up the corporate ladder has been typical for many senior managers. However, this trend towards more traditional career patterns was stronger for men than for women, who were more likely to report protean aspects of their careers, a significant finding given the highly structured environment in which the research was undertaken.

*Research Question One: Have Traditional Careers Given Way to Protean Ones in the Public Sector?*

The premise of traditional career progression based on continuity and length of service (MacDermid, Dean Lee, Buck & Williams, 2001) with frequent upward moves entailing geographical mobility (Edwards et al, 1999) remains an enduring feature in this organisation. For this cohort of employees, frequent moves from job to job and company to company, a key feature of protean careers, was not evident. The majority of participants had worked for the same agency for over a decade, and many for their entire careers. Some features of employment in the Australian public sector, such as long service leave entitlements (i.e., three months paid leave following 10 years of continuous service) likely attract those seeking security and reinforce this tendency towards long tenures in the same organisation.

Only two managers in the interview sample indicated an ‘internal definition of success’, suggesting that they did not need status and seniority to be satisfied with their

careers. Of interest, these two managers were both women and were the only two women responsible for dependent children. Although we cannot make any confident generalisations based on such a small number of employees in one agency, it is possible that these women defined success internally because their family responsibilities dictated a less normative model of working and therefore a psychologically different perspective on achievement. This possibility is tentative though, especially given that the two women with dependents had achieved similar levels of seniority to other women in the sample. However, questionnaire data indicated that female managers in this organisation were less than half as likely to have children as their male counterparts. These findings indicate substantial difficulties associated with achieving management positions with dependents and/or combining a management career and child-bearing/rearing. Thus, the retention of traditional career paths in this organisation may contribute to an organisational environment which is less supportive of blending work and family responsibilities (Reitman & Schneer, 2003).

The remainder of the interview sample, both men and women, expressed a more 'externally-driven definition of success' which relied on a continuous climb up the corporate ladder. This orientation of the employee is consistent with the notion of a 'career service' (Gardner & Palmer, 1997) where security of tenure and lifelong employment is framed through the operation of an internal labour market.

Despite the traditional aspects of career such as long tenures and geographic mobility, interviewees also reported several protean aspects of careers within this organisation. For example, all of the managers interviewed spoke about career responsibility in entirely personal terms, saying that, albeit with the assistance of trusted mentors, looking for opportunities and developing a portfolio of expertise, was entirely dependent on the individual rather than the organisation. This finding was supported by questionnaire data which revealed relatively high scores on the scale measuring self-initiated job changes, setting

own career goals and taking personal risks. This shift to self-determined careers may have been influenced by new public management principles such as changes from administration to management and efficiency (Reitman & Schneer, 2003) which, according to the senior managers in the organisation, was a highly salient component of the business context.

This perception that the development of careers is almost exclusively the responsibility of individual employees, as opposed to the organisation having a role, is somewhat inconsistent with a highly structured public sector work environment and the traditional aspects of career discussed previously. That is, it would be expected that where career success is achieved via a lengthy tenure and climbing a corporate ladder (as seems to be the case for this organisation), one would expect the organisation to provide formal structures which assisted that process. Thus, it is possible that at least some of the shifts which have occurred from traditional to protean careers (such as moves away from formal training and towards involvement in key projects) have benefited organisations more than their employees, although similar studies conducted in different types of organisations would obviously be needed to confirm this possibility.

Respondents in both the interview and questionnaire phases of the research recognised the importance of gaining experience on important projects within the organisation. However, they were somewhat negative about the opportunities for employees to rotate jobs, relieve in other positions, and otherwise develop their skills in a different role. Responses to questionnaire items about access to experience in different positions for example, were also uniformly low. Further, increasing specialisation within this organisation in recent years was thought to negatively impinge on career advancement by narrowing job skills and making employees less competitive in an open job market. Enlarging people's job descriptions, promoting multi-skilling and providing transparent opportunities for novel job assignments such as cross-functional secondments (Hall, 2004), appear to be important career-

development strategies for an organisation wanting to retain their long-serving and loyal employees. However, a longer-term approach is to foster scholarships and staff exchanges with other national and international authorities and organisations for employees to gain broader work experience.

It was generally agreed that formal training, which was a major component of the traditional career, was not a particularly useful strategy for providing employees with the relevant skills to meet the organisation's needs. Maguire (2002) suggests training and continuous development is a high cost option in times of low continuance commitment and a highly mobile workforce and suggests a lower cost alternative may be to increase the potential for intrinsic rewards such as sense of achievement, recognition, sense of responsibility and relationship with colleagues.

*Research Question Two: Are Gender Differences Evident in the Career Paths of Public Sector Managers?*

Geographic mobility has been described as a key aspect of traditional careers (Edwards et al, 1999) and remains an important component of vertical success in this organisation. Both men and women described the importance of being available to move to another region to gain experience on key projects, but the career histories described by the male managers in this sample involved a far greater number of moves than those described by women. It remains unclear why the women without children in this interview sample (five out of seven) had not moved to different regions as often as the men. It is possible that despite being unencumbered with dependent children, they were still unable or unwilling to move to another location because of their partner's career or for other family / non-work reasons. The expectation of a trade background for regional managers appears to prevent



women achieving career progression through geographic mobility. The value placed on geographic mobility in this organisation appeared to strongly favour traditional relationships where the man's career is central. This finding is consistent with research demonstrating geographic constraints on married women's careers (Deitch, Sanderson & Walsh, 1987).

Unlike research conducted in the 1970s which found that successful women were reluctant to assist other women in management (e.g., Stains et al, 1973), several women managers in this study enthusiastically mentored other women who indicated an interest in career progression within the organisation. This finding is supported by other recent research in this area (e.g., Rindfleish, 2000) and suggests many successful career women view their ability to mentor other women as a valuable part of their role. Although the male interviewees rarely mentioned mentoring, both male and female questionnaire respondents indicated mentoring opportunities and arrangements in the organisation were less than optimal (a score of 4.2 out of 7). Formal encouragement of successful managers to mentor others by encouraging more established rather than ad hoc relationships and allowing protected time and regular meetings, may facilitate career success.

Both male and female interview respondents perceived that technical qualifications and/or a trade background are required for achieving higher-level positions in this gender-dominated organisation. However, the emphasis on trade backgrounds is concerning in this instance because few technically-qualified women are recruited into lower level positions in the Department. If the perception that technical qualifications are required for management positions is correct, this may constitute indirect discrimination because a technical background is effectively an irrelevant promotion prerequisite for a management career (Hunter, 1992; 1998). The conventional wisdom that a technical / trade background is required for higher-level management positions may also intersect with the positive influence of geographic mobility on career advancement. That is, it may be that a combination of

mobility and trade background works to secure regional management positions because of the well-defined career expectations embedded in that particular career pathway. As such, technical qualifications as pre-requisites for management, although not stated as a component of traditional careers in the literature, appear to be conventional as well as time-honoured in this organisation. Although this result may be peculiar to organisations which are both male-dominated and/or responsible for traditionally male enterprises such as building and capital works, this possibility remains to be explored. The potential for this issue to constitute indirect discrimination (Hunter, 1992; 1998) in relation to employment practices, should also be considered by organisations.

#### *Strengths, Limitations and Future Research*

Categorising data according to aspects of protean versus traditional careers was considered to be a useful way of assessing whether the nature of careers has changed as much as the careers literature suggests. However, a number of limitations of the study are noteworthy, most importantly the specific organisational environment in which the research was undertaken. It is likely that employees in a large, male-dominated, public service environment would be on the conservative end of any 'career metamorphosis' that was and is taking place across Western societies. Men and women employed in smaller organisations, in organisations with greater proportions of women, or in the private sector, may describe careers which are less clearly defined at the organizational level and more protean than those in this research. Comparisons between these types of industries and organisations are yet to be made, but careers characterised by loyalty and vertical success may not have changed as fundamentally as the careers literature (e.g., Hall, 1996; Edwards et al, 1999) suggests. This conclusion is strengthened by the fact that the mean age of both interview and questionnaire

respondents was around 42 years, which means that most of their working lives would have been conducted since the time when careers were supposed to have begun to move from traditional towards protean, that is the late 1980s (Hall, 1996). However, it may also be that organisations such as this one, which are male-dominated and highly structured, compel certain career behaviours which are contrary to trends towards protean careers evident in less structured organisational environments. Further, the fact that males outnumbered females at all levels of this organisation, is consistent with research indicating that women are more likely to be excluded from informal networks (Simpson, 2000), a key feature of the protean career (Hall, 1996). Organisational factors which impact on the evolution of career patterns from traditional to protean have received little attention in the literature.

Another limitation of the study is that there may be more potentially important elements of traditional / protean careers that were not identified in this research. Although we coded the data according to four major areas of difference identified in the literature, respondents only mentioned aspects of their careers that were salient to them, and it is possible that with larger samples, a greater number and diversity of categories of information could be generated. Also, the extent to which women's over-represented seniority in questionnaire data influenced results, especially satisfaction with career development opportunities, is unknown.

### *Conclusions*

This organisation had indeed substantially changed in the last 15 years or so, becoming more efficient, highly competitive within the construction industry and being subjected to many of the new public management shifts that most public sector organisation in Australia have undergone. It would be expected that the nature of these external pressures

and internal changes would have had a profound effect on the careers of its employees. Indeed, all interviewees emphasised several aspects of protean careers such as taking personal responsibility for opportunities and the importance of getting experience on key projects. However, several clear elements of traditional career trajectories were also evident in the data, such as length of service and external definitions of success. Some gender differences in career experiences were found, for example, women were more likely to emphasise the importance of mentoring. However, males and females were consistent in terms of their emphasis on geographic mobility and technical backgrounds, although women expressed that they were more disadvantaged by this focus.

These findings inform existing literature by highlighting that, contrary to some reports which suggest that careers have been fundamentally altered, in some organisations at least, the nature of careers has only partially shifted from traditional to protean and more so for women than for men. Policy makers and human resource specialists need to be aware of these shifts and the specific nature of careers in their organisations in order to be able to develop appropriate strategies for optimising the professional development of employees.

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