

Redefining the boundaries? Making sense of career in contemporary New Zealand

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This paper outlines the results from an exploratory research project into individual perceptions of career in the changing world of work. The aim was to understand how individuals were making sense of and enacting their career. Three organisations, which had all undergone significant change, were used to identify participants whose stories were generated either through qualitative surveys and interviews. From data analysis using the NUD•ist software program, six themes were generated illustrating patterns of ideas running through the data. These themes were then used to address the research aims of investigating current interpretations of career in New Zealand. Overall, it was found that contemporary workplace changes have impacted on career meaning and subjective interpretations of career have been externalised. These conclusions have practical implications for career practitioners, human resources managers and individuals in their own career planning.

Keywords: boundaryless career, career, discourse, sense-making

The aim of this paper is to explore claims about the changing nature of career in the changing world of work by focusing on how individuals make sense of what they perceive as contemporary career realities. The paper reports on a qualitative study conducted by in-depth interviewing and a survey of how 49 participants in three case-study organisations made sense of their careers

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(Weick 1996). We begin by outlining current debates on emerging notions of career and reassert the link between subjective and objective interpretations of career (Collin and Watts 1996). The three case studies are introduced and the research process explained. Six themes – learning, advancement, enjoyment, change, personal development and ‘occupational identification’ – emerged in data analysis as significant in how people made sense of their career. The paper outlines these six themes and uses them to critically examine and redefine those boundaries that people experience as enabling or constraining their career action.

Changing views on career

Currently, career literature is dominated by claims of dramatic transformation in career paths and norms due to changing economic situations impacting the world of work (e.g. Arthur and Rousseau 1996a, b). New models of career flow from assumptions of the weakening of organisational ties and thus increasing career freedom and independence from previously constraining factors. These models are also underpinned by belief in the growing existence of flexible career free agents focused on learning and development (Arthur and Rousseau 1996b; Hecksher 1995; Kanter 1989). The definition of career becomes looser and individual interpretation is privileged as attention switches from the objective conditions of career to individual’s subjective experience.

There has been a pervasive divide in career theory between those approaches which focus on the objective, macro, institutional, or external realm and those which explore the subjective, micro, or internal perspective (Derr and Laurent 1989; Hughes 1958; Gunz 1989). The notion of the objective career has been dominant in HRM and is associated with traditional views of career. Such an approach reifies careers as structures or routes through organisational or occupational hierarchies which, in some way, exist independently of individuals who might perceive them as real and act accordingly in trying to follow them (Evetts 1992). The objective career thus indicates ‘those institutional forms of participation characteristic of some social world’ (Barley 1989, 49) embodied in traditional notions of career, that is a path of jobs that would eventually secure a management or supervisory position (Wilensky 1960). In contrast the notion of a subjective career, is much less dominant in career research and given less HRM attention, focuses on the meaning individuals attach to the unfolding events of their careers.

From objective to subjective careers?

The divide between the two has been given renewed attention with a growing belief that the objective career as we knew it, as a path up hierarchies, has disappeared in the face of organisational changes. Weick and Berlinger (1989,

321) argue: 'in the absence of such external markers, the objective career dissolves and in its place the subjective career becomes externalised and treated as a framework for career growth'.

They recommend that individuals pursue security through processes rather than outcomes. As such they would seek 'competencies rather than titles, fulfilment rather than advancement and roles rather than positions' (Weick and Berlinger 1989, 320). An emphasis on the subjective career is apparent in much recent career discourse on boundaryless careers, which Arthur and Rousseau (1996a, 3) defined very broadly as 'a range of possible career forms that defy traditional employment assumptions'. Hall introduced the notion of the 'protean career' in 1976 to suggest that career could take many forms and career meanings come from an individual viewpoint. He recognised later, though, that this idea did not gain much prominence or credibility until more recently (Hall 1996).

However, such ideas were in fact evident as far back as the 1930s with the Chicago School of Sociologists who developed a 'life-history' approach to career. Their view of career is represented in Hughes' (1958, 63) much-quoted definition about career as: 'A moving perspective in which the person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meaning of his various attributes, actions and the things which happens to him'.

However, far from separating out objective and subjective careers, the Chicago School Sociologists also argued for the ontological duality of career, maintaining that they must be seen as two sides of the same coin, Janus faced and thus essentially interlinked (Barley 1989). Careers were viewed not simply as of the individual's making but as properties of collectives and informed by dominant scripts for career behaviour. Career scripts can be understood as 'institutionally rather than individually determined programmes' (Arthur, Inkson and Pringle 1999, 42), which prescribe patterns of legitimate thought and which operate as modalities between individual actions and social structures. As Arthur, Inkson and Pringle (1999) elaborate, such scripts can come from the employing company, from industry or professional interests, from family and social contexts. Thus careers are deeply embedded in social and cultural practice. Indeed, it is through their career actions and stories that people reproduce, resist and reconstruct dominant values and prescriptions for action. Individual action will only account for so much of career-making, as career scripts will still impact the structuring of individual and collective action (Weick 1995). Thus, various occupational communities will have their own scripts, which will provide a kind of scaffolding (both ideological and material), with which individuals negotiate in enacting their careers. This negotiation between the individual and institutionally prescribed scripts is illuminated in individuals' accounts of their careers.

As Weick (1996) argues, in making sense of the increasing uncertainty about traditional career scripts of hierarchical progress, people self-design or fill in the blanks for themselves. In making sense of uncertainty, they enact

structures within which to work. Weick builds on Barley's (1989) work on the role of career scripts in the structuring process to argue that over time, enactment, both individual and collective, of revised career scripts both reproduces and acts to change them, such that they may well become new resources and norms that guide (and both constrain and enable) career behaviour (Giddens 1991; Barley 1989).

While there has since been significant criticism of career theory's tendency to dichotomise (e.g. Cohen and Mallon 1999; Arthur, Hall and Lawrence 1989; Barley 1989; Collin and Young 1986), we argue that emerging career models give undue weight to the subjective view of career and underplay the ongoing role of social structures as embedded in dominant career scripts. As Collin and Watts suggest, we should remain cautious of new career models and continue to hold 'objective and subjective realities in dialectical relationship with one another (Collin and Watts 1996, 392).

While a paucity of literature challenges the discursive assumptions of new career models (Cohen and Mallon 1999; Fournier 1998; Grey 1994), there are useful commentaries that challenge the dominant views that careers have changed in the direction discussed above (see Capelli 1999 and Jacoby 1999 for arguments about the extent of change). Through a close examination of labour force factors, Jacoby argues that 'career jobs have not melted into thin air' (1999, 137) and employees and employers are still embracing the welfare capitalist framework established many decades before. Hence projections such as Sennett's 'no long term' (1998, 25) are perceived by Jacoby (1999) to be rather drastic. Similarly Guest and Mackenzie Davey (1996) argue that we must not write off the traditional career as their research showed that 'the rhetoric of the new organisation is some way removed from the reality' (1996, 25). Indeed Gowler and Legge (1989, 446 (italic in original)) comment on similarities between old and new rhetoric on career: 'It seems to us that even this prophecy about the shape of future careers and organisations still envisages achievement (talented individuals with potential) *embedded in a bureaucratic division of labour* (moving between specialist functions)'.

While there is growing debate about new career forms and a new way of talking about career there is a dearth of empirical, qualitative studies that seek to understand how individuals make sense of careers in a changing world of work, particularly studies which explicitly recognise the interlinking of subjective and objective perspectives.

The study

This study sets out to explore the following questions:

1. How is the traditional view of career as hierarchical and progressive and the recent discourse of career as a subjective, more free-form and bound-

aryless phenomenon represented in the individual sense-making and enactment of career?

2. How are individuals making sense of and enacting their career?

Career is 'a very elastic construct' (Collin and Watts 1996, 392) theoretically but it is also a practical construct with reportable meaning in the lives of individuals. The concept lends itself to positivistic approaches – and indeed this is the dominant force in career theory (Ornstein and Isabella 1993; Cochran 1990; Arthur, Inkson and Pringle 1999; Collin and Young 1986); as well as to interpretivist approaches. Historically there have been fewer of the latter approaches but recently studies have again adopted interpretativist frameworks, this is one such study. The study set out to elicit career interpretations in order to explore the ways in which participants made sense of their career (Weick 1996).

There are many reasons for adopting an approach that privileges individual sense-making (Weick 1995). First, rather than treating participants as isolated from their environment, sense-making is concerned with how they sculpt and shape it. The environment is therefore not treated as 'some kind of monolithic, single, fixed environment that exists detached from and external to these people' (Weick 1995, 31). Instead, a sense-making perspective suggests that in enacting their career, people enact also their career environment (Arthur, Inkson and Pringle 1999). Second, sense-making is also a social process; it exists through groups of people with shared meaning, and the ability to interpret that meaning and make sense of it in relation to one's own position. Third, sense-making, like career, is ongoing and retrospective. It is not something that stops and starts but rather, as Weick states, 'people are always in the middle of something' (1995, 45). Like the ebb and flow of life, career also flows throughout ones life and at various moments people retrospectively take stock of their position, and make sense of where they are and how they got there. 'To engage in sense-making is to construct, filter, frame, create facticity (Turner 1987) and render the subjective into something more tangible' (Weick 1995:14).

Weick (1995) suggests that, in approaching the subject of sense-making, we should get used to retrospection as people can only know what they have done after they have done it. Personal narratives may be the 'product of severe editing' (p. 128) but we should not be surprised that people apply hindsight to telling the stories about their own lives, nor that they look at past events in light of the present.

Research organisations

Three organisations (herewith called *Bankwithus*, *Eastcoast Energy* and *Firstclass Research*, all pseudonyms) were used as a base from which to collect career stories; that is, the experience and the thoughts of individuals. The case-study organisations were chosen purposively with the aim of generating a

varied, but non-probability sample of participants which is neither random nor claimed to be fully representative but provides a diverse population who will have information about the topic under study (Hornby and Symon 1994). All three organisations are based in New Zealand, two in the South Island and one in the North Island. By New Zealand standards all of the organisations are large, particularly Bankwithus. All are still active in their respective industries. All three organisations are from different industries therefore no generalisations will be made across industries; rather this exploration will give an interesting insight into how people from a variety of occupational backgrounds make sense of career in changing organisations.

Firstclass Research is a Crown research institute in a highly intensive knowledge industry operating in a time of funding restraint. It has undergone a culture change aimed at moving the organisation towards a more profit-related orientation and consequently there have been restructures and downsizing. It is a large organisation by New Zealand standards, consisting of 598 scientific and 312 support staff who are located throughout the country at five main centres and local stations. Presently Firstclass Research receives over 60% of their total revenue from the government. However due to the instability of funding, Firstclass Research is presently going through changes to initiate new revenue streams and improve its technology transfer. The five participants from Firstclass Research were chosen at random. Four of them were scientists and as such they were working in the core area of the organisations business.

Eastcoast Energy is in the electrical supply industry. Once one of the country's larger companies, in the past ten years it has downsized to a sixth of the original workforce by adopting a structure of core and peripheral workers. There are 30 in the small 'core' workforce and they complete tasks of core competence. In addition there is a larger contracted labour force who carry out other organisational tasks by tender. It was six such 'core' workers, those with access to more traditional career paths and thus potentially more traditional aspirations, who were participants in this research.

Bankwithus is a large financial institution with branches throughout New Zealand and its head office in Wellington. At the time of the research Bankwithus had over 11 000 staff in total, with the head office in Wellington having 1542 employees. It is the product of a recent merger between two large banks, which took a total of two years to complete fully. This involved a number of redundancies, in addition to the rationalisation both banks undertook prior to the merger. The period of change was unsettling for employees who experienced many changes from the composition of the branch network through to the redesign of logos. Such change impacted working lives, providing an interesting forum in which to conduct career research. The research was conducted in the head office in the following departments; treasury (15 employees), products and services (10), international services (35) and the call centre (50). In total 110 surveys were distributed and 37 were received back making the response rate 33.6%. Shortly before this survey

Table 1 **Number of participants**

	Female	Male	Total
Firstclass Research	2	3	5
Eastcoast Energy	3	3	6
Bankwithus	17	21	38
Total	22	27	49

Bankwithus had conducted a climate survey among staff so were restricted in the number of surveys distributed, which may partly account for the rather low response rate.

Research participants

Within the organisations the participants were chosen on a random basis, which resulted in a variety of occupations, ages and qualifications. Table 1 and the descriptions below give an indication of the overall participants in this research.

Four of the five participants (two female and three male) at Firstclass Research worked in the core area of the organisation, all were interviewed for this research. They are two scientific officers, a laboratory technician and a programme leader, the fifth is a strategy implementation leader. All had been working for Firstclass Research between 18 months and 38 years. They were aged between 25 and 65 years.

In Eastcoast Energy we conducted interviews with six people, three males and three females. They ranged in ages from 24 to 54 years and had been working in the organisation from 18 months to 27 years. The positions were financial accountant, maintenance manager, network connections engineer, administration clerk, business analyst and operations manager.

Tables 2 and 3 and details below give the positions, ages and length of

Table 2 **Positions of participants from Bankwithus**

Position	Number (n = 38)	Percentage
Manager	11	29
Analyst	9	24
Customer service representative	11	29
Consultant	3	8
Officer	2	5
Administration	2	5

Table 3 **Age of participants from Bankwithus**

Age	Number (n = 38)	Percentage
18–22	6	16
23–25	2	5
26–30	15	39
31–35	6	16
36–40	4	11
41–45	2	5
46–50	1	3
51–60	2	5

service of participants from Bankwithus. All participants responded via survey only. The length of time varied from Bankwithus participants from less than a year (31%) to more than 15 years (10%). Those who had worked there more than 10 years made up just over one-third of participants (34%) and those who had worked less than 5 years made up just under two-thirds (60%).

Research process

Data were collected either through interviews or questionnaire survey. The interviews were semi-structured allowing space for free discussion of topics important to the participants. The interviews began by asking participants to tell their career stories and continued with further probes and clarifying responses. Each interview was tape recorded, (with consent from each participant), and transcribed verbatim.

The questionnaires also aimed to capture participants' career meanings and experiences. The first section of the questionnaire asked participants for their demographic details and a sketch of their career. The second section focused on their meaning of career and the final section asked practical questions about their career expectations from now. All of the questionnaires received were typed verbatim. A summary of the data collection is shown in table 4.

Research analysis

All of the data generated was entered in the computer as part of the Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorising (NUD•ist) program, which was used to organise the data in the analysis process. In attempting to understand the sense-making of career, six themes emerged as dominant in participants' accounts of what career meant to them. This section briefly explains the process of identifying those themes.

Table 4 Participants and data generated

	Female	Male	Total	Methodology
Firstclass Research	2	3	5	5 interview transcripts 3 training and development board meetings attended Interview with HR manager
Eastcoast Energy	3	3	6	6 interview transcripts Interview with HR manager
Bankwithus	17	21	38	38 completed questionnaires Telephone and e-mail questionnaires with OD manager
Total	22	27	49	

A template (King 1997) was developed based on the interview and the survey questions. It was used first to organise all the data from the questionnaires and interviews into chunks, in order to look for patterns in the way the questions were answered. From the initial template approximately twenty patterns or common issues were identified. All of the data was then recoded according to these twenty issues and the codes were then further analysed for patterns and repetitions. From this last process dominant themes emerged.

In order to ensure that Bankwithus (the largest sample size) was not dominating the themes we separated the data into industries, also writing up the career story for each organisation, based on information collected at that level. Percentages of participants from each organisation were calculated for each emerging theme and, at that stage, there were ten themes altogether. Overall percentages of participants and percentages from each organisation were further examined to calculate and identify the most prominent themes. In total there were six such themes, advancement, occupational identification, enjoyment, change, learning and personal development. The following section provides an overview of the derivation of these themes.

Results

This section provides an overview of the six prominent themes. They are discussed separately here but in reality, are intertwined and complexly inter-related. As table 5 shows, certain themes were stronger than others. The number of participants who mentioned that particular aspect of career indicates the strength of each theme. The calculations were carried out as part

Table 5 Summary of results

Overall themes from all three organisations	Percentage of participants mentioned
Learning	86
Advancement	70
Enjoyment	61
Change	59
Personal development	55
'Occupational identification'	47

of the NUD•ist analysis. The following sections outline the themes in order of prominence.

1. Learning

Learning was the dominant theme in the sense-making of all participants and across all three organisations. It represents those responses that cited the career centrality of learning skills, getting qualifications and maintaining employability. Firstclass Research is, by its very nature, knowledge intensive and four out of the five participants there talked of learning in association with developing their skill and knowledge base. Participants in Bankwithus demonstrated a range of attitudes from a focus on learning for advancement to learning as an ongoing process of development. In Eastcoast Energy learning and training were viewed as integral to career regardless of position in the organisation and the level of skill specialism. Participants cited learning itself and the outcome of it as central to their meaning of career.

Some participants saw learning as a fundamental issue in career: 'I believe career to be an ever-evolving learning process' (participant 21, Bankwithus). Other participants more explicitly linked the idea of learning with advancement and gaining skills and qualifications that can be marketed as career capital to enhance future opportunities:

for me to move up needs study and skills to move up to be a project manager (participant 4, Eastcoast Energy).

I want to have the confidence that I have a saleable commodity/ set of skills (participant 15, Bankwithus).

Almost all participants saw career as fundamentally linked to learning, which resonates with the prominence given to learning in career development

in recent literature (e.g. Bird 1994). However, learning was also strongly linked to advancement, as stated by these two participants in their interviews:

I have gained skills and experience in a chosen field for which I can use to enter into my profession and continue to learn and grow so that I can move forward and progress in my profession (participant 4, Eastcoast Energy).

I was keen to go down the management path and saw the MBA as portable – it was a conscious employable move to obtain a higher position (participant 2, Eastcoast Energy).

2. Advancement

Advancement, commonly associated with traditional views of career, emerged strongly in two of the case studies (Eastcoast Energy, Bankwithus) but not so strongly in the other (Firstclass Research). One reason for this relates to the nature of the job, as scientists have a different focus for their career. Rather than progress hierarchically, they appear to be more interested in advancing scientific knowledge as this interviewee suggested: 'It is important to me to be getting recognition when I deserve it. I'm quite happy for that recognition to be study leave – doesn't have to be financial but I think it is really important to recognise peoples' achievements' (participant 1, Firstclass Research).

The advancement theme encompassed a variety of different ideas that relate to upward movement. e.g. progression, climbing ladders, promotions and increasing responsibilities. Many participants did see advancement in traditional hierarchical career terms: 'Career is a long term, continual, progressive and satisfying climb' (participant 2, Eastcoast Energy). But other participants saw advancement as not just being linear but also involving moving either within or between organisations. For example:

I do not believe that my seniority will advance significantly. I believe I will continue to produce results and potentially move up one or two more steps – however it is more than likely that after 3-5 years in a similar role that I will move across to a different functional area at the same level (participant 3, Bankwithus).

Participants did not necessarily connect advancement with a single organisation but discussed it in more general terms, as this surveyed participant shows: 'I prefer to concentrate on achieving pre-determined shorter-term goals that can be used to facilitate access to higher-level projects' (participant 18, Bankwithus).

The association of career and advancement was strong in this data. The notion of advancement resonates with more traditional views of career, but

participants' responses indicated emerging ways in which advancement can be viewed.

3. Enjoyment

Is it too much to enjoy your work or is that having your cake and eating it too? Sixty-one percent of participants across all the organisations cited enjoyment as integral to their view of career: 'I think more about getting enjoyment and have less concern about stability' (participant 15, Bankwithus).

Enjoyment is used here as an umbrella term to cover comments relating to satisfaction, contentment, happiness and/or excitement with work; 'a career is important for self-satisfaction' (participant 37, Bankwithus). It also includes such notions as being involved with jobs that give pleasure: 'mostly I did things I wanted to do' (participant 5, Firstclass Research); having an interest in the job: 'you need a career to be able to live, pay off your mortgage and to have an interest in something' (participant 4, Bankwithus).

Responses from surveyed participants from Bankwithus to a question asking them to compare their thoughts of career with those of their parents, suggested that career enjoyment is what distinguishes participants' career thoughts from those of their parents or the older generation. For the participants, career should be something to be enjoyed rather than a job to be endured. When participants did not enjoy their work, they rationalised it as a bad career choice and were looking for future alternatives.

Thus, these responses resonate to some degree with emerging literature about new career as a means of liberating employees from the chains of a traditional organisational career and of fulfilling personal satisfactions.

4. Change

The theme of change came through strongly in both Eastcoast Energy and Firstclass Research, slightly less in Bankwithus, possibly because the change in Bankwithus had been more proactive than reactive. Participants' comments suggested that change is more pertinent in career now given the environmental conditions of organisational instability and the consequent need to be adaptable and flexible to cope with the short-term nature of employment relationships. Participants noted that change affected typical career planning, for example: 'You can't focus on any end point or plan that you are going to have your job here for any number of years' (participant 12, Bankwithus).

Participants noted a need to be personally adaptable and flexible: 'If I have to change then I'll change, I have a pretty laid back attitude toward it' (participant 5, Firstclass Research). They focused on the emerging short-term nature of jobs: 'it's short-term jobs that seem to be more common now days with the contracting concept' (participant 3, Firstclass Research). While instability was noted and the root cause attributed to organisations, not all partici-

pants saw it as a negative force. On the contrary, as one participant in an interview noted: 'The value of staying with one employer is now negative, you need a variety of experiences' (participant 6, Firstclass Research).

Many others regarded themselves as adaptable to change even as active agents in change and saw change as integral to career. Most respondents appear to connect the instability with the organisation but some associate the changing career with individual enactment. For example, participant 4 (Eastcoast Energy) when interviewed stated that: 'the value of staying with one employer is now negative, you need a variety of experiences'. Participant 2 from the same organisation noted, 'more people are changing careers, it is happening more and more, including retraining'. Overall, there is a mixture of agency and communion (Marshall 1989); some are enacting and influencing changes (agents), while others depend on organisations or external factors to guide them (communion).

5. Personal development

Personal development is central to emerging discussion of subjective career, as it involves the individuals in constructing their own career meaning: 'A career is important because it gives a framework to your goals and a measure of success. A career is a self managed thing in the main' (participant 12, Bankwithus).

As illustrated in the quote, phrases that were drawn on to create this theme included setting goals and having work aims and objectives more personal to the individual. Whereas advancement dealt with the objective and status side of people's career, personal development opens a window into thoughts and feelings about working lives. For example, 'I feel that I need to be challenged in my job, so career is very important' (participant 2, Eastcoast Energy). It also describes the personal side of status passages in career as individuals move within or across organisations, 'you manage your skills to ensure you reach your goals and pick industries' (participant 16, Bankwithus). Participants also commented about the sense of breached psychological contract and their attempts to come to terms with changed expectations of their own career, for example, 'career is about choosing a job that you would like to do for the rest of your life, or until the economy crumbles' (participant 29, Bankwithus).

Overwhelmingly, responses implied a sense of personal ownership of their development, all the more pertinent as many felt that little help was available from their organisation. This theme of personal development is evident in the boundaryless literature; if the boundaryless career is the antithesis of an organisational career (Arthur 1994), then personal development could be argued to emerge as the human resource replacement to career development. Overall there was little difference in the way participants were talking about personal development in the three organisations. However, it

was interesting to see the way personal development was practised within the three organisations. Eastcoast Energy participants tended to shy from using the word career but were happy to talk about personal development in terms of offering staff training. Firstclass Research strongly linked personal development to career and Bankwithus stated that specific career development is not part of their strategy; instead they have a performance management approach. This could account for the emergence of the theme of personal development; however, despite the policies in two of the three organisations, participants across all organisations continued to link personal development with career.

6. Occupational identification

Some participants also found meaning in their career in terms of ‘occupational identification’, which indicates a chosen profession or vocational selection and identification with that occupation, e.g. ‘career to me means, having expertise in a chosen field for which I will continue with and develop so that I become successful in my chosen field’ (participant 1, Firstclass Research). In general this theme was built from words and phrases suggesting that career was about working in a particular area or occupation. Such ideas raised the question of whether an emphasis on ‘occupational identification’ means disassociation with the organisation or, as a related point, if it is a means for individuals to maintain some continuity? By associating themselves with the task they perform and not the organisation they work for, individuals are embodying the increasing professionalisation said to be occurring in the world of work (Tolbert 1996; Barley and Tolbert 1991) as the following quote illustrates: ‘To me career is a history of work situations in a certain field e.g. a career in accounting may involve three different positions that an individual had held over a period of time’ (participant 6, Eastcoast Energy).

Thus, participants can disassociate with organisations and further their skills in a chosen occupation, e.g. ‘if someone was to ask me what I do for a living I would not say that I work for a bank, I would say that I am a marketer’ (participant 11, Bankwithus). As Tolbert notes ‘the individual connections to occupational networks are likely to become more important determinants of career outcomes’ (1996, 342).

Discussion

We use these themes to turn our attention now to the understanding of individual perspectives of career by examining the ‘critical quality’ or ontological duality (fusing of subjective and objective perspectives) of career.

How is the traditional view of career as hierarchical and progressive, and the recent discourse of career as a subjective, more free-form and boundaryless phenomenon represented in the individual sense-making and enactment of career?

While traditional career literature tended to concentrate on the objective, bureaucratic model that existed in large hierarchical organisation, attention has recently turned to career's subjective side which was given less prominence in the previous dominant discourse (Kanter 1989; Gowler and Legge 1989; Hirsch and Shanley 1996; Humphries and Gatenby 1996). It is the subjective side of career that deals with how people attribute meaning to their lives.

The more recent career literature (and indeed literature of the Chicago School in the 1930s) gives prominence to the individual, subjective, personal reality side of career (Arthur and Rousseau 1996a; Arthur, Inkson and Pringle 1999), suggesting that in the absence of the traditional markers of career success (hierarchical progress, long service etc.) it is up to the individual to make sense of it. Such emerging views are seen as products of changes in the workplace. As organisations have moved away from consisting of large hierarchies relying on succession and career planning, they no longer require or are able to offer a traditional career. Hence, attention shifts to meanings that individuals find in their own career.

Despite the undoubted relevance of these workplace changes, career theorists must also attend to the ontological duality that is career's critical quality (Collin and Watts 1996; Hughes 1958). The objective side of career has not faded from view, although it may well have changed. This research shows some evidence of an objectification of what previously may have been viewed as more subjective factors in making sense of career. Individuals find meaning in aspects of career that may once have been more internal, more private and they are using them to judge and develop their careers (Weick and Berlinger 1989). Hence this data offers echoes of new career discourse that favours notions of career self-management and development, learning and finding one's own path to career success. Against that, however, the participants in this study were also able to find meaning in matters that have been associated with the traditional career: the need to advance in an organisation and/or to find a specific area of work in which to progress.

So has the subjective career gained more legitimacy in the public arena? New literature about career has opened up an array of different ways to make sense of career, ways that always existed but were overshadowed by such dominant views of career as hierarchical progress. It may be that emerging career discourse legitimates very different career stories. However, while there is a new subjective sense of career, participants still recognised more traditional structures of career. As such the common reality of career (Tiedeman and Miller-Tiedeman 1984) as linear, progressive and hierarchical continued to resonate in their career sense-making.

Some evidence in this study points to the notions of the 'new career', including the high percentage of people highlighting the learning theme, and also the themes enjoyment, change, and personal development. However, these themes were not expressed in the same terms as literature about the boundaryless type career. Participants still linked notions of learning to advancement. As such, learning was linked to tangible, objective outcomes and not seen as simply a self-evidently good thing in its own right. Nor did participants see career as being without boundaries; in fact they appeared to be redefining the boundaries or norms of career behaviour. In so doing they mobilised concepts used in recent career literature, like portability and employability.

Two rather extreme views are apparent in career discourse. The first is a traditional bureaucratic career that is now commonly thought to have been superseded by the second, the 'new career'. This research demonstrates both of these scripts being drawn on in individual sense-making, indicating that people's sense of career retains aspects of continuity while incorporating elements of change.

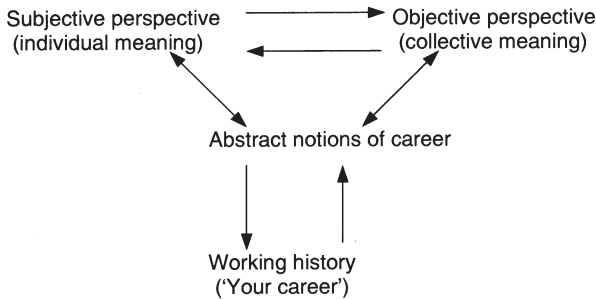
How are individuals making sense of and enacting their career?

The aim of this research was to examine how people are making sense of their career and how they are carrying out their own careers. Defining career is a difficult process due to the multiplicity of disciplines and perspectives involved. Furthermore, the new literature calls for a transformation and redefinition of career. It seems inevitable that notions of the traditional career will struggle in the current business environment. So, we ask, what does career mean now? The six emerging themes (advancement, areas of work, change, enjoyment, learning and personal development) illustrate how participants make sense of career and show that traditional aspects of career, alongside contemporary changes, continue to have meaning.

Career enactment involves considering the objective or external side of career, as individuals look to extant and emerging scripts in their sense-making process (Arthur, Inkson and Pringle 1999; Weick 1995). We can see evidence in this study of participants finding meaning in their career through those themes, which constitute participation in a social world. These themes have socially known meaning external to individuals; for example, advancement and choosing an occupational identification are strongly associated with more traditional career forms. Change and its effects are common realities. More personal meaning was found in the ways of making sense of career that focused on enjoyment, personal development and learning. These could be described as the subjective aspects to career, whereby individuals create their own meaning.

By using the dichotomies in the literature, we do not intend to validate them but rather to show that they break down upon examination. We propose figure 1 as a means of examining and exploring the various dichotomies set up

Figure 1 A reframing of career duality



in the literature along with the data generated in this study. Career can be seen as operating on two levels, first, an abstract or espoused level, where individuals construct their own notions of career and second, a more concrete or actual level, which describes the actual working history and how an individual's career is carried out.

The model splits career into two levels because there are usually differences in the way people describe their career definitions and in the way they carry out their own career. The two descriptions are not always different, however, and are inextricably intertwined, as shown by the double arrows. An individual's meaning of career is also constructed as a duality with the subjective and objective perspectives held in tension. This dynamic duality is illustrative of the way the individual uses social structures to interpret and guide career behaviour and yet in doing so produces and reproduces the social world in which they participate.

The significance of the two levels of career illustrates a possible difference between the individual's definition of career and what their own career has actually involved. Consequently the way an individual defines career may be significantly different to the way in which the individual describes their own career story. Hence, career as a concept can, and indeed did, differ in meaning from the way in which individuals describe their own career. This tentative model is an attempt to make sense of career by incorporating the way people interpret their own career while not letting go of the possibility that how they define career, as a more abstract concept, may significantly differ.

Conclusions

Two significant conclusions emerge from this research. First, the boundaries of career have shifted, although they have not gone as far as some would suggest (e.g. boundaryless career – Arthur and Rousseau 1996a) but rather are

repositioned. The repositioning has occurred partly through changes to the world of work. As the traditional discourse regarding career could no longer be offered by some organisations, a new way of working developed which allows more subjective meanings of career to come to the forefront, e.g. learning and encouraging individuals to take responsibility for career themselves. Hence, it is up to individuals to make sense of their career, as they can no longer be dependent on the organisation.

The second main conclusion states that those ways of understanding career that may have been more implicit and internal/ subjective to the individual have now begun to emerge as more external guides to enable and constrain action. Career retains the ontological duality that is at its heart. The externalisation means that careers can be interpreted in more ways than may previously have been legitimised. This research indicates that people can make sense of careers in terms of some or all of learning, advancement, enjoyment, change, personal development and occupational identification. These two conclusions are set in a model (figure 1) that is a tentative start to understand differences in the way in which people carry out their career and the way in which they begin to define career as a concept.

Implications

This research is a contribution to the process (already started by some, e.g. Arthur, Inkson and Pringle 1999; Mallon 1998) of addressing the paucity of research considering career from the level of individual experience. The New Zealand experience of recent changes to the world of work (e.g. downsizing, restructuring, flexible work, internationalisation) is similar to that of other developed nations, although there are issues specific to the experiences of this country. The research within New Zealand (along with that of Arthur, Inkson and Pringle 1999) does act as a counter to the dominance of the US literature and acts to raise questions about the cultural portability of concepts such as the boundaryless career. This research has focused on certain sectors of the New Zealand economy and concentrated on white-collar workers. Hence issues of generalisability arise. However, as white-collar workers in larger organisations are those thought to have been most affected by changes in careers (Handy 1994), they are a particularly interesting group to study. Furthermore, as Jacoby (1999) and others have argued, the demise of the career-oriented white-collar worker may well have been overstated. As such, we do argue for further studies of blue-collar, professional and self-employed workers with a focus on individual career stories. That this research is qualitative research also has implications for generalisability. However, there is a dearth of studies which give primacy to individual sense-making in career and given that career is ever more likely to be seen as a subjective phenomenon, we argue, as do others (Arthur and Rousseau 1996; Collin and Watts 1996), for more studies which focus on individual meaning in career.

Within the limitations outlined above, we argue that this research does point to particular implications for human resource managers in New Zealand that may well have a wider applicability. We argue that human resource managers should be cautious of the possible bandwagon of the boundaryless and other new career concepts. They provide an avenue for making sense of career, but may be the reality for only a few and are not reflected in their entirety in this research. It seems that while each person is an individual in career sense-making, there is recognition of the abiding reality of common-sense definitions of career as about hierarchical progress. Individuals can draw on a multitude of scripts to follow in their career, but look to have their meanings legitimated in the public arena.

The study enhances understanding of the diversity of individual career sense-making, which can help human resource managers to create a win-win situation in career development, through offering a variety of career development opportunities focused on both skills training and personal development programmes, useful to the company and to the individual who must keep an eye on future employability. Organisations could also heed and facilitate the expressed need for occupational identifications as a means to network, to help employees build skills but also retain some sense of continuity within change. It may only be a 'few' who choose to move into more boundaryless working relationships.

We expect there are many more stories to be told which will provide rich and interesting data such as that discussed here generated. Further, the need for more critical examinations of the notion of career in contemporary workplaces is pressing, given the centrality in peoples' lives.

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