



Career Development

The “Internal Career” and Career Anchors

The word “career” is used in many different ways and has many connotations. Sometimes “having a career” is used to apply only to someone who has a profession or whose occupational life is well structured and involves steady recognition and advancement. But if we think of a career as being what any individual would regard as the steps and phases of his or her occupation, then everyone has a career, and that career is “anchored” by the person’s self-image of his or her competencies, motives, and values.

One might consider this to be the “internal career,” to distinguish it from what others might view that person’s work life to be. Everyone has some kind of picture of his or her work life and role in that life. To distinguish the “internal career” from other uses of the word, we will use “external career” to refer to the actual steps that are required or expected by an occupation or an organization to progress through that occupation. A physician must complete medical school, internship, residency, specialty board examinations, and so on. In some organizations, a general manager has to go through several business functions, have experience in supervising people, take on a functional management job, rotate through the international division, and serve on the corporate staff before being given a true generalist job as a division general manager.

Most external careers involve a period of training or apprenticeship during which the person both learns and is tested to determine whether he or she has the skills and personal characteristics to do the job. Some organizations talk of career paths, which define the necessary or at least desirable steps for the career occupant to take along the way to some goal job. The clearest examples of that kind of formal path are the military and the civil service, with their well-defined ranks, clear rules for how one goes from one rank to another, and the salary levels associated with each level.

At the other extreme is what more and more people are calling a “boundaryless” career or a “protean” career that is more free-form, has to be managed largely

by the career occupant, and may involve movements across many employers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Briscoe & Hall 2006; Briscoe, Hall, & Mayrhofer, 2011). Whereas organizations used to promise “employment security,” employers are increasingly promising nothing at all or only “employability security,” implying that you will learn on-the-job skills that will make you more employable *elsewhere*. Career planning and development programs within organizations—once the province of relatively strong human resources departments—have been trimmed if not eliminated as companies move toward more flexible and “lean” employment policies (Farber, 2008; Harrison, 1997).

Related to this, contract or temporary work is on the rise across most labor markets, including professions and managers, and job tenure in these occupations has been declining precipitously in all developed countries for the past twenty or so years (Barley & Kunda, 2006; Osterman, 2008). More and more people are working part-time at several jobs simultaneously or as short-term contract workers. And most of us today expect to have a serial organizational career rather than a lifetime job with one employer. “Job hopping” is increasingly the norm. One estimate suggests that those who entered the U.S. workforce in 2000 will change employers twelve to fifteen times during their working lives” (Sennett, 2006, p. 95).

These trends—accelerating from the 1980s on—mean far more career instability and uncertainty than in times past. Increasingly, you must manage your own career more and more actively, even if you hope to remain in a single organization. This makes it more important than ever to understand your internal career and the role that career anchors play in it.

External Career Stages and Career Movement

Externally defined career stages are usually well defined by formal occupational criteria and by organizations, if the career is embedded in an organization. Thus, young engineers can pretty well see their external careers in terms of the amount of schooling necessary, entry into an organization as a technical person or management trainee, followed by that organization’s specification of how it defines “career development.” Most organizations have some career “paths” that are based on historical data of what previous entrants have experienced and can tell the young engineer or manager-to-be what steps to expect. However, as noted above, the career world is changing, and there are fewer and fewer standard paths visible in occupations and organizations.

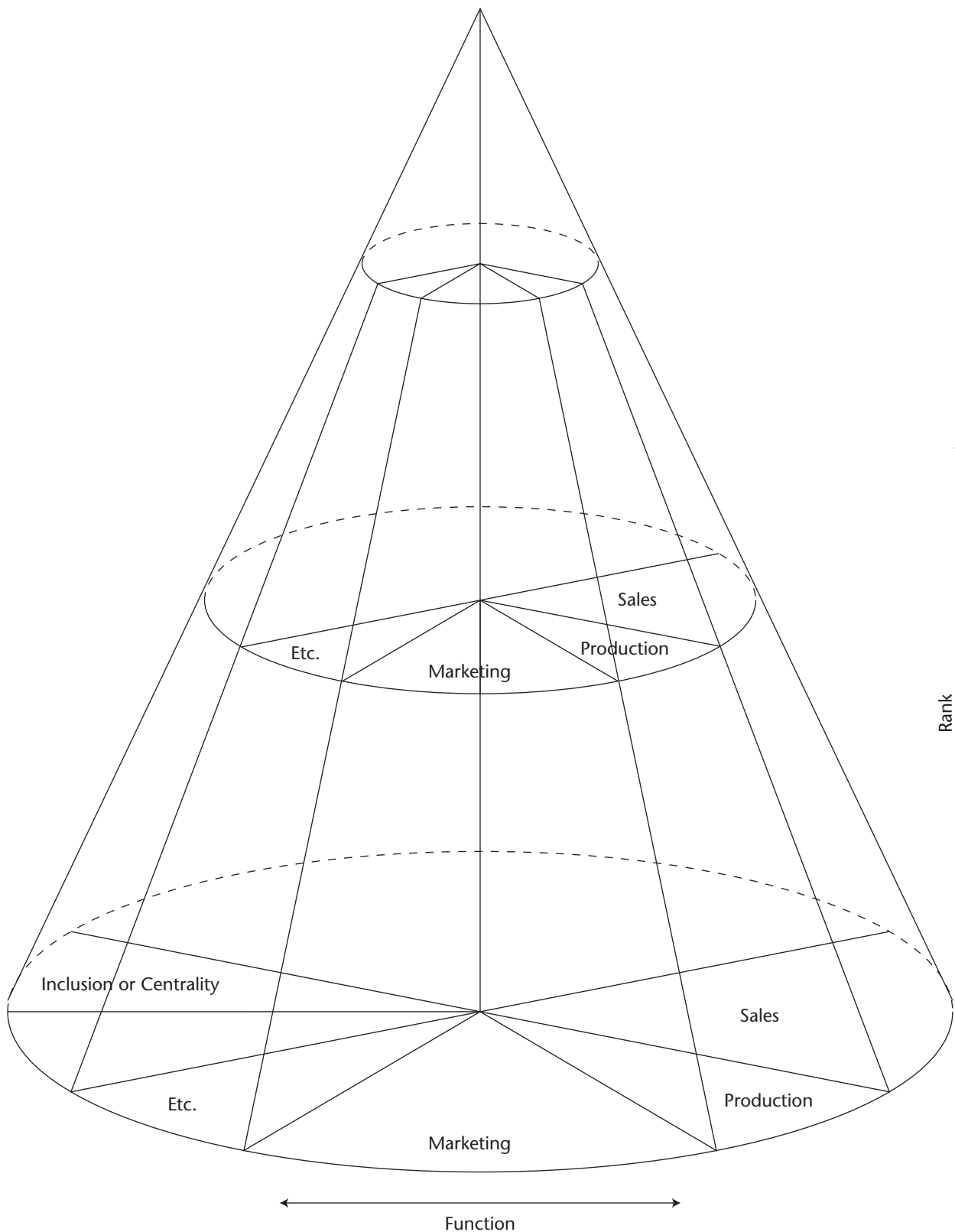
Throughout the developed world, we are seeing people struggle with entry into and progress through their careers as they confront relatively weaker job prospects and markets, less stability in employment, and ever-growing demands for advanced degrees and higher educational credentials. Structurally, high

levels of unemployment still linger, thus making fewer jobs available to meet the expectations of job seekers, even the well-educated who are streaming out of colleges and universities across the globe. The rise of the so-called “accordion family” is a noticeable result as adult children, unable to get their careers underway, return home after college for indefinite and sometimes lengthy periods (Newman, 2012). Faced with the high costs of living and the scarcity of decent, entry-level jobs, the family for many university graduates serves as the shelter from the storm and the welfare state of first resort.

By viewing a large number of organizations and occupations one can analyze certain generic career stages: (1) a period of pre-career choosing of a field; (2) educational preparation for entry into that field; (3) formal education and training in the chosen field or occupation; (4) if one is fortunate, entry into the occupation or organization; (5) a period of additional learning, apprenticeship, and socialization; (6) a period of full use of one’s talent, leading in some cases to some form of granting of “tenure” through being given permanent membership, a professional license, or some other form of certification; (7) a period of productive employment in one or more organizations; (8) a gradual branching into administrative, managerial, coaching, or mentoring roles and other forms of becoming a “leader”; (9) gradual disengagement, part-time work, and even going into other kinds of work; and (10) eventual retirement. These generic stages are far less predictable or certain in today’s world than in the past, but their hold on our imagination as to what constitutes an external career are perhaps as strong as ever.

At any point in the external career, the person may discover that his or her internal career and career anchors are out of line with what the external career offers in terms of challenge, opportunities, and rewards. At that point, the person may switch to another career and start going through the stages over again, but usually in a more truncated form because the experience acquired in one career is often transferable to another. The engineer employed in a technical organization may discover a talent and desire for entrepreneurial ventures or for management and may decide to start a company or switch to an organization that provides more managerial opportunities. Some training in management may then be required, and the person may have to start at the bottom of a new career ladder.

Career stages in the external career within an organization or even across several organizations can be thought of as a series of movements along three different dimensions: (1) moving up in the hierarchical structure of the occupation or organization; (2) moving laterally across the various subfields of an occupation or functional groups of an organization; and (3) moving in toward the centers of influence and leadership in the occupation or organization. Depending on what the person is looking for in his or her internal career, movement along each of these

Figure 1. A Three-Dimensional Model of an Organization*

*From "The Individual, the Organization, and the Career: A Conceptual Scheme," by E.H. Schein, 1971, *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 7, p. 404. Copyright 1971 by JAI Press, Inc. Reprinted by permission.

dimensions will have different meanings. For some, such as managers, it is moving up that is important; for some, such as the technical person, it is job challenge and lateral movement to new and challenging work that is most important; and for some, such as the power or socially motivated person, it is moving toward the inner circle and positions of influence that is most important. People with different career anchors will seek movement in different dimensions. Figure 1 helps to illustrate these three dimensions.

Each dimension also has its own stages associated with it, but these are usually idiosyncratic in particular occupations or organizations. In summary, career stages in the externally defined career are the sequence of roles and statuses defined by a particular occupation or organization as the way to progress through the career. They represent what we typically mark on our work resumes or use when describing to others our progress to date in the world of work and where we would like to go. Critically, they may or may not correspond to the individual's own sense of his or her internal career stages.

Development of the Career Anchor in the Internal Career

With each educational or job experience, we have an opportunity to learn. It is important to go beyond just judging each experience as good or bad, fun or not, useful or not, and to ask, "What have I learned about myself?" As we grow, we need to learn not only what is "out there" in the arena of work, but also what our own reactions are to the experiences. These reactions are best thought of in terms of three domains:

1. *Skills and competencies.* You need to learn from each experience what you are good at; that learning comes both from your own assessment and from the feedback you receive from others;
2. *Motives.* You need to learn from each experience what it is you really desire; early in life we think we know what we want, what our career aspirations are, but with each experience we discover that there are things we like or don't like, that some of our aspirations are unrealistic, and that we develop new ambitions.
3. *Values.* You need to learn from each experience what it is you value in the context of what your occupation or organization considers important, what your colleagues value, and how the kind of organizational culture you encounter fits with those values.

As you gain experience, you become more clear about each of these domains until you have a self-concept of what you are good at and not good at, want and do not want, and value or do not value. This self-concept is your *career anchor*.

The self-concept builds on whatever insight you have acquired from the experiences of youth, education, and career experience to date. However, it cannot be a mature self-concept until you have had enough real occupational experience to know what your talents, motives, and values are. Such learning may require up to ten years or more of actual work experience. If you have had many varied experiences and have received meaningful feedback with each one, your self-concept will have developed more quickly. But if you have had only a few jobs in the early years of your career and/or have obtained minimal feedback, it may take much longer.

Talents, motives, and values become intertwined so it may be hard to figure out your career anchor. People learn to be better at those things they value and are motivated to do; and they learn to value and become motivated by those things they happen to do well. They also gradually learn to avoid those things that they do not do well, although, without clear feedback, they may cling to illusions about themselves that set them up for repeated failures. Motivation without talent will eventually fade, just as talent without motivation will gradually atrophy. Conversely, new challenges can reveal latent or hidden talents and introduce a motivation that simply had not had an opportunity to appear earlier.

People differ initially as to whether it is their talents, their motives, or their values that dictate their early career choices. As time goes on, however, a need for congruence causes people to seek consistency and integration among these different elements of their self-concepts. Such a need comes about in part because others expect us to present ourselves as on a reasonably coherent career path and, in part, because we ourselves want to be on a path built on a solid foundation that moves steadily forward as we gain experience. How is this consistency learned? People first enter the world of work with many ambitions, hopes, fears, and illusions but with relatively little good information about themselves, especially about their abilities and talents. Through testing and counseling, they gain an idea of their interests, motives, and values as well as their intellectual and motor skills, but they cannot really determine how good they will be at a certain kind of work or how they will react to it emotionally.

Nowhere is this more true than in moving from a technical job into a supervisory or managerial role because of the difficulty in simulating during the educational period some of the interpersonal and emotional skills needed in those roles. Until a person actually feels the responsibility of committing large sums of money, of hiring and firing people, of saying “no” to a valued subordinate, that person cannot tell whether he or she will be able to do it or will like doing it. In many occupations, a person cannot tell whether he or she has the talent or the emotional makeup to do the job without actually performing that job.

For these reasons, the early years in an occupation are a crucial time of learning—learning about the occupation or organization and learning about oneself in relation to the demands of the job. This process is often painful and

full of surprises because of the many misconceptions and illusions with which people typically enter their early work situations. Many of the dreams people have for themselves about what their work will be like may be inconsistent with their work experiences, causing “reality shock,” a phenomenon that is observed in all occupations in the early years.

As you accumulate work experience, you have the opportunity to make choices; from these choices you begin to ascertain what you really find important. Dominant themes emerge—critical skills or abilities that you want to exercise or crucial needs or values that dominate your orientation toward life. You may have had a vague sense of these elements but, in the absence of actual life experience, you do not know how important they are or how any given talent, motive, or value relates in a subjective hierarchy to other elements of your total personality. Only when you are confronted with difficult choices do you begin to decide what is really important to you.

With accumulation of work experience and feedback come clarification and insight, providing a basis for making more rational and empowered career decisions. The self-concept begins to function more and more as a guidance system and as an anchor that constrains career choices. You begin to have a sense of what is “you” and what is “not you.” This knowledge keeps you on course or in a safe harbor. As people recount their career choices, they increasingly refer to “being pulled back” to things they have strayed from or, looking ahead, “figuring out what they really want to do” or “finding themselves.” This process leads people to gradually move from having broad goals to a sense of knowing better what it is that they would not give up if forced to make a choice. The career anchor, as defined here, is that one element in a person’s self-concept that he or she will not give up, even in the face of difficult choices. And if their work does not permit expression of the anchor, people find ways of expressing it in their hobbies, in second jobs, or in leisure activities.

