

Evolution of careers

Understanding what we mean by a career, making sense of careers, and exploring the basis of our career decision-making



What do we mean by 'a career'?

Often we can use terms such as 'careers', 'occupations' and 'vocations' inter-changeably (Yates, 2014).

When considering how it can be scoped, one way defines:

"Careers as a sequence of work activities punctuated with work transitions."

Ashforth and Saks, 1995

More recently it has been accepted that a career is subjective in form, rather than an objective reality. What this means is if we think that we have a career, then it is a career (Yates, 2014).

Consequently, it has become acknowledged that "everyone who works has a career" (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 1989: 9).

Why are careers changing?

In recent years, we perhaps are all aware that our working environment has undergone changes. When considering the nature of such changes, four



trends can be seen to have influenced how we work (Kidd, 2008):

1. **Globalisation** – with increasing low-cost international travel and the ease of international electronic communication, even more organisations are trading globally
2. **Technology** – the rise in technology has led to a reduction of semi-skilled roles, leading to an hour-glass shaped labour market with increases in low-level and high-level roles. Also, increasing IT has created flexibility to where we work
3. **Industrial society to information society** – there has been a move away from growing and producing things to one that values expertise and intellectual property
4. **Part-time and flexible working** – such a move to more part-time and flexible working was predicted by Charles Handy (1994) in *The Empty Raincoat* when he coined the notion of 'portfolio working'. Here work may comprise a range of streams, such as: part-time employment, voluntary, self-employment



When reflecting on these changes, another knock-on effect is the recognition that a job for life is now viewed as a thing of the past. Moreover, we are also perhaps in agreement that we, as workers and career owners, take more personal responsibility for our careers:

"These days we are taking more responsibility for our own career development and rather than relying on the organisation we work for to take charge of [...] career progression, we are more likely to make our own decisions."

Yates, 2014: page 12

Making sense of our careers

When attempting to understand and manage our careers, we can draw upon ideas, theories and metaphors, some of which are explored here:

Craft metaphor: Careers as Construction – Several career theories talk about us self-creating our career, including Super's (1996) life-span,

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life-space model and Savickas's (2002) career construction

Matching metaphor: Careers as 'fit' – Since Holland's (1997) inventory of interests, this has been a dominant paradigm for 50 years. However, this static theory has come under scrutiny in an ever-changing world

Path metaphor: Careers as a journey – Featuring in many of our conversations, the notion of our career as a journey is more commonplace

Network metaphor: Careers as encounters – Involving others within the development of our careers is not a new phenomenon. Careers are not pursued in isolation (Yates, 2014) and our relationships can often be a means of getting and keeping work

Economic metaphor: Careers as resources – Career capital emerged as a term (Inkson and Arthur, 2001) denoting our non-financial resources that we acquire as we pursue our career

Narrative metaphor: Careers as a story – Career story-telling is becoming more prevalent within the careers field. This builds on the notion that we can share our career experience from a multiple of perspectives. It holds value as it helps us to bring meaning to and evolve our understanding of our career experiences

What do we base our career-decisions on?

Within our own decision-making, we may naturally draw upon a combination of logic and gut-instinct to inform our choices. However, when it comes down to decisions in relation to our

careers, there are several approaches that we may draw upon:

Matching – Such an approach involves the matching of a role's requirements with a role holder's skills, experience and interests. Although such an approach attracts challenges, it is still prolifically used given its intuitive appeal and accessibility

Relational – Based on a psychological need for relatedness and attachment, involving others in our career decisions is prevalent. Such involvement may include the provision of advice and support:

In a recent study, an impressive 94% of participants based career decisions at least in part on a feeling of 'connectedness'.

Amundson et al., 2010

Happenstance – Planned happenstance – or luck – is a notion that is gathering credence as a successful career management approach. Such an approach encourages openness to the exploring of emerging opportunities

What does this mean for me?

1. **Personal reflection** – Take time to reflect upon your own career to date. What question(s) emerge for you? What is it that you want for yourself in relation to work?
2. **Sense-making** – Reflect again upon the career metaphors. Which ones resonate with

you? How could it support your thinking?

3. **Taking action** – Consider what initial steps would help to answer your questions. Who in your life could support you? What sort of chance opportunities could help you to learn?

Top tip



Crafting and refining your career story can bring many benefits including: meaning, motivation and influence

Consider what would be a good outcome for you from finessing your career narrative

Draft your career story considering the key chapters, catalysts, what happened and outcomes

Identify someone in your life that you trust and respect. Share your career narrative. Explore your narrative's impact and consider how it can be further refined



About the writer

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Cathy Brown is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist, organisational development consultant and author.

She runs Evolve Consulting Services Limited which works with individuals, teams and businesses to manage transition and change. Also, she is also a guest lecturer at University of Derby.

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