Career Transition and Change

by

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Abstract

This chapter reviews the literature on career transition and change, identifying two significant gaps: the dearth of recent empirical research on career change and the absence of theory on the determinants and process of non-institutionalized work role transitions. The chapter addresses three questions: Why do people change careers? How does the transition process unfold? What are the key outcomes and moderators of change? The chapter identifies self-conceptions, social networks, and trigger events as central influences in an unfolding process.

Career Transition and Change

Career change has been alternatively defined as any major change in work-role requirements or work context (Nicholson, 1984; Brett, 1984; Latack, 1984) and as a process that may result in a change of job, profession, or a change in one's orientation to work while continuing in the same job (Louis, 1980, Hall, 1976; Ashforth, 2001). In this chapter, I use the term *career change* to refer to a subset of work role transitions that include a change of employers along with some degree of change in the actual job or work role as well as the subjective perception that such changes constitute a "career change" (Higgins, 2001; Ibarra, 2003). Examples of career changes include inter-firm, -industry and -sector transitions or occupational changes, as for example, when a litigator leaves law to run a non-profit organization, a corporate employee starts his or her won business, a government official enters private industry or a consultant becomes a movie producer.

A compelling scholarly argument has been made that career change is on the rise in our society: careers are boundaryless (Arthur, Inkson and Pringle, 1999; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Peiperl and Baruch, 1997; Weick, 1996), unfold outside traditional organizational boundaries (Kunda, Barley and Evans, 2002; Miner and Robinson, 1994), business firms continue to downsize, restructure and lay-off (Capelli, 1999; Osterman, 1996), and values have changed such that people increasingly change work settings in search of greater autonomy, life balance and meaning in work (Hall, et al., 1991; Handy, 1998; Wrzniewski, Dutton, and Debebe, 2003). Despite this well-documented litany of trends, the last two decades have

witnessed a scarcity of empirical research on career change (Higgins, 2001 is an exception) and key theoretical issues pertaining to the antecedents, process and outcomes of career change remain undeveloped.

Many alternative conceptualisations and approaches to the study of career change exist. The socialization literature (e.g., Ashforth, 2001; Barley, 1989; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979) has been a rich source of guidance for researchers concerned with work transitions of all sorts. Most of the empirical work on which existing conceptual models are based, however, concerns early career socialization and highly institutionalised status passages such as entry (Louis, 1980), promotion (Hill, 1992; Ibarra, 1999) and transfer (Beyer and Hannah, 2002; Callister, Kamer and Turban, 1999). Career change, in contrast, tends to occur later in a person's career and is rarely guided by institutionalized separation, transition or incorporation processes and rituals. Instead, the person himself or herself must create the rupture with the old career while generating and learning about new alternatives (Ebaugh, 1988).

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section reviews the literature on antecedents of career change. Self -conceptions, social networks, and exogenous events emerge as key influences in an unfolding process. The second section deals with the transition processes and dynamics of change, noting the need for new theory to guide empirical research on non-institutionalized processes. The third section explores outcomes of career transition, highlighting a range of factors that have been identified as potential moderators of the likelihood of change or the

ease and duration of the transition process. Throughout, the chapter highlights key unanswered questions for future investigation.

Why do People Change Careers?

Both exogenous conditions and individual factors explain change or deviation from an established career path; these might pull the person towards a new career or push them away from the old (Lee and Mitchell, 1994). Situational factors include external market forces that determine what alternatives are available. These may prompt individuals to exit an organization or career voluntarily in search of better opportunity (pull) or, alternatively, may result in restructuring, downsizing and other forms of job loss (push). While labor economists have focused primarily on the supply and demand of labor, in recent years organizational scholars have also documented the role of market intermediaries such as headhunters in facilitating career changes (Khurana, 2002) as well as changing occupational configurations that have created new choices such as contract work (e.g., Kunda et al., 2001). Individual factors include the skills, talents, preferences, past experiences, developmental stage and self-conceptions that individuals brings to their work role and career (Nicholson and West, 1989). While an exhaustive review is beyond the scope of this chapter, three themes or categories of antecedents emerge as highly influential: self conceptions, networks and triggers.

Self-conceptions

Professional identity is the relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role (Schein, 1978). A basic assumption is that professional identity forms over time with varied experiences and meaningful feedback that allow people to gain insight about their central and enduring preferences, talents and values (Schein, 1978). Identities affect career change by their impact of a person's perception of fit between their sense of who they are and their current career. But identities also exist in the future and in people's heads as possible selves, images about who one might become, would like to become, or fear becoming (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Possible selves affect career change by affecting perceptions of fit between individual's ideas about who they would like to become and their beliefs about future opportunities afforded by their current career.

Self-conceptions motivate change or deviation from an established career path in one of two principal ways (Kolb and Plotnick, 1976). First, a person's chosen path may cease to reward the preferences and skills the person brought to it, or reduce opportunities to work towards one's career goals. In a study of physicians Sarason (1977), for example, found that encroaching bureaucracy and a rising need for malpractice protection disillusioned many doctors who felt these preoccupations detracted from their role as healers. Faced with declining opportunity as the career pyramid narrows or the organization enters a period downsizing or decline or offered more consonant opportunities outside, a person may exit a career. Second, people may change with experience and adult development, and come to find that their interests

and preferences have changed such that they now conflict with the chosen career (Kegan, 1982; Levinson, 1981). A person who valued getting ahead earlier in his or her career may come to desire a greater balance between work and personal life, for example, or a person who valued corporate status comes to desire the autonomy of an entrepreneurial career (Moore and Buttner, 1997).

Social Networks

Career decisions are socially embedded and are thus influenced by the social networks that affect referrals and opportunities (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973; Higgins and Kram, 2001; Podolny and Baron, 1997) as well as the development and change in people's identities over time (Barley, 1991; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). Thus, it stands to reason that the desire to exit or remain in a career is in part a function of a person's relational context (Higgins, 2001; Kram, 1996).

If career change involves moving from one firm or sector another, then networks high in external relationships will be more valuable (Higgins, 2001). Contact with people in alternative occupations provides information about new options as well as validation for changes one may be contemplating (Kunda, Barley, and Evans, 2002; Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003; Stuart and Ding, 2003). In the Kunda et al., study of becoming a contractor, for example, the decision to enter contracting required exposure to people or opportunities that made contracting seem more viable or attractive than taking another full-time job. Most of the people who switched to contract work had worked beside contractors in previous jobs where they had the opportunity to observe the realities of free-lance work. Similarly, Stuart and Ding

(2003) found that having network ties to scientists who have left academia for commercial science increases the likelihood of making the shift oneself. These extra-university ties, they argue, facilitate the formation of a reference group that condones what the scientific community sanctions.

Networks also affect career change by providing role models that embody future possibilities (Ibarra, 2003). Levinson (1981) noted the key role of "guiding figures" in helping the person in transition to endure the ambiguity of the transition period by conferring blessings, giving advice, and most importantly, believing in his or her "dream." The guiding figure embodies the fledgling possibility and shapes it through his or her efforts as teacher, critic, sponsor, or mentor (Strauss, 1968). People may consciously seek to establish ties compatible with desired future selves, using these new relationships to pull themselves into new social and professional circles (Ebaugh, 1988). Alternatively, fortuitous encounters with people who have already made transition to a different kind of work may lead a person to make a similar shift (Kunda et al, 2002).

Finally, social networks can hold a person back from making a career change (Ibarra, 2003). In Ebaugh's (1988) study, about one-fifth of her sample reported that someone significant to them responded negatively; this negative response interrupted the exiting process or retarded the process for a significant time period. Similarly, Ibarra (2003) found that people considering career change face doubt, skepticism, conservatism and pigeonholing on the part of friends, family and close work associates. She argued that career transitions are facilitated by dual relational tasks: forging new, high quality working relationships while at the same time ending or

diluting the strong ties within which outdated role identities had been previously negotiated (Ibarra, 2004).

Trigger events

A diverse set of studies and theoretical perspective have converged on the key role of trigger events in stimulating change. Triggers may be positive or negative; momentous or small. They range from major job, organizational and personal life changes or shocks (Hall, 1991) to jolts produced by more mundane interactions (Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy and Quinn, forthcoming). Scholars concur that critical events do not directly produce change; rather, they trigger personal explorations and trial experimentation with new forms of social interaction, which may lead later to career changes (Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003). Kunda et al., for example, found that triggers like getting laid off were insufficient to tip the balance in favor of becoming a contractor; but such triggering events were crucial for deciding to move from permanent to contingent employment because they led informants to consider their options. Positive triggers, such as a chance encounter with someone who becomes a role model for a possible professional future, may play a similar role in clarifying possible selves and increasing the motivation to explore alternatives (Ibarra, 2003).

How does the Transition Process Unfold?

How does the process of career change unfold? Transition refers to the process of simultaneously leaving one thing -- a role or identity, for example -- without having fully left it, while at the same time, entering another, without being fully a part (Levinson, 1981). Louis (1980) defines career transition as the period during which an individual is changing roles or changing their orientation to a role already held; thus, the term transition suggests both a process of change and the period during which the change is taking place. Most existing models of the transition process identify phases or stages of change, with most models based on Van Gennep's (1909) three phases of a rite of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation. Bridges (1980) proposes a similar model consisting of endings, a "neutral zone" or "in between" phase, and beginnings.

Socialization researchers have devoted the bulk of their attention to the incorporation or beginnings phase, and their associated rites and rituals (Trice and Beyer, 1984; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). In Nicholson's (1984) preparation, encounter, adjustment and stabilization model, for example, the encounter period extends from the time of entry into the new situation until the individual has adjusted to that new situation. With the exception of involuntary job loss, these theories treat incorporation as negotiated adaptation to an existing and easily identifiable next position (e.g., Nicholson, 1984).

A defining feature of career change, however, is that it is not guided by institutionalized transition processes. Whereas separation in early career is

accomplished through institutionalised events such as promotions, transfers, lay-offs, retirement ceremonies and so on, there are no institutional forces to impose a separation from the old role at mid-career unless a person is fired. Much of the work of incorporation is also self-initiated, often according to the persons' own timetable. Although in many cases movement may be clearly away from the old, the destination, or new career, in many cases remains undefined and uncertain for a good portion of the process. In career change, therefore, separation and incorporation are often overlapping stages; it is the fact that both are occurring simultaneously that defines a transition stage that is indeterminate in length and not necessarily finite (as in the case where the individual fails to find a suitable career alternative). As a result, several theoretical issues pertaining specifically to career transition as a process remain undeveloped, in particular, how people identify alternatives and what replaces institutionalized separation and incorporation mechanisms.

Beginnings and Endings

Scant career change research has examined the separation/endings stage, with Ebaugh's (1988) "becoming and ex" study a notable exceptions. Although her primary samples were ex-nuns and transsexuals, Ebaugh found that similar processes characterized physicians leaving the practice of medicine and other occupational exits. The process begins with simmering doubts that give way to a search for alternatives followed by a turning point that symbolizes the impossibility of return.

In many cases, endings are long and gradual; often the person is not aware that they are laying the ground work for a career exit: they simply take up a side activity that

over time encroaches more and more on their time and interest (Ebaugh, 1988, Ibarra, 2003). Ebaugh (1988:96) cites the case of an ex-astronaut: "about ten years earlier, he had begun investing in real estate, a venture which mushroomed over the years to the point that he realized he was spending more time and effort as an investor than in his career." In her study, about a fourth of those who changed careers had begun retraining while still in their current jobs, in several cases going to back school part-time or working in the new area on the side as a personal interest or hobby. Such side activities are an important way people learn about new career options and test unfamiliar waters from the safety of their current jobs: provisional activities such as moonlighting, freelance or consulting work, side projects, volunteer work and enrolling in courses often precede a more permanent shift to a different career (Kunda, Barley, and Evans, 2002; Ibarra, 2003; Stuart and Ding, 2003). Entrepreneurs, for example, often spend years building a business on the side, maintaining a "day job" until the new enterprise becomes clearly viable (Hoang and Gimeno, 2003; Moore and Buttner, 1997). Side activities directly augment a person's capacity to become a realistic candidate by allowing them to accumulate relevant experience and a network of social contacts in that sphere (Ibarra, 2003).

Career change, therefore, requires identifying a future path, a difficult task given that most recruitment and socialization experiences are aimed at workforce entrants, and attaining some degree of anticipatory incorporation into the new occupation in order to become a credible entrant to the new field. Future research on career change must take into account ignorance of, or uncertainty about, alternative possible careers as well as the necessity of taking time to consider options and gain enough first-hand experience with them to be a plausible candidate.

When there are no institutional forces to impose a separation from the old role, the decision to separate and the act of separating are left to individual initiative: there is no prescribed start or end-point. In Ebaugh's study (1988) the majority of exit decisions occurred in connection to some abrupt and dramatic turning point in the person's life: But, triggers alone are insufficient for sparking change; people may ignore the information, dismiss it as irrelevant, blame the undesired outcome on fate, or deny its validity (Schein, 1996). Alternatively, what might appear to be objectively a trivial episode, may be infused with great significance by an individual on the brink of change (Ibarra, 2003). Whether the turning point is an objectively significant event or whether it simply bears emotional significance for the person, its function is to justify and rationalize the change. Future research is needed to provide a basis for predicting the impact that trigger events will have on the course of transition.

Transitions: In the Middle

To date, the transition phase has been mostly treated as a matter of anticipatory socialization (Merton, 1968), whereby the focal individual begins to take on the identity, attitudes and relationships of the next role, before he or she has actually attained it (e.g., Ibarra, 1999), or, as the state of marginality experienced by the new recruit who has yet to make his or place in the new role and organization (Trice and Morand, 1989; Van Maanen, 1973). Qualitative studies of a broad range of career change, from exiting an occupation (Ebaugh, 1988) to moving into a very different line of work (Ibarra, 2003; Osherton, 1980), however, suggest that transition periods have unique characteristics, in particular, the experience of liminality: People

in transition invariably feel "in-between" identities," describing their state as like being "in a vacuum," "in midair," "neither here nor there," and "at loose ends" (Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003). This liminal period is not a literal space, between one job and the next, but a psychological zone in which the individual is truly in-between identities, with one foot still firmly planted in the "old world" and the other making tentative steps towards a new world (Bridges, 1980).

In some cases the experience of liminality results from the simultaneous pursuit of two different career paths, as when an would-be entrepreneur works on a new business idea on the side while continuing a day job (Ibarra, 2003); in others, it is created by diverse forms of "time-out" as when a person is laid-off, follows an outplacement program, takes a sabbatical to reflect on what comes next, or following some form of adult education intended to help them change careers (Korotov, 2004). Although Ebaugh (1988) reported a high incidence of returning to graduate schools (e.g., law, engineering) among her role exiters, and the popular press has heralded business schools and other forms of adult education as means for changing careers, few studies to date have investigated the comparative effects of returning to school on career change.

Emerging thinking on nature of liminal experience in organizational life (e.g., Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Dubouloy, 2004; Korotov, 2004) raises interesting questions, for example, the effects on career change of a transitional time that is open-ended compared to one limited to a more fixed period or transitional space that varies on dimensions such as the degree of physical and social encapsulation of the individual (Greil and Rudy, 1984). Future work on transitional states is needed to

explore the extent to which variables such as dedicated time, space and the support of guiding figures affect transition outcomes, such as generating viable alternatives or satisfaction with one's ultimate career choice (Ibarra, 2004).

What are Transition Outcomes and their Moderators?

Research on the outcomes of career transition and career change has focused on the extent to which person and organization engage in mutual adaptation (Nicholson, 1984; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979), and to a lesser extent, on the ease and speed of the transition process (Ebaugh, 1988). Most adaptation work, as noted above, assumes a clear and identifiable next role into which the person will step (Ashford and Taylor, 1990; Nicholson, 1984; Schein, 1978): the question of interest is the extent to which the person will shape the role to fit his or her interests and strengths, or instead, will conform to the role's requirements. Most scholars concur that person and role "evolve interactively such that a new synthesis is achieved that is more than simply a compromise of static role demands and static self demands" (Ashforth and Saks, 1995:173).

In work on institutionalized work role transitions, the ease and speed of transition have been explained to date in terms of the magnitude or novelty of the change from one role to the other, i.e., the number and intensity of changes involved in any given career transition (Hall, 1976) or the degree to which the role permits the exercise of prior knowledge, practiced skills and established habits (Ebaugh, 1988; Louis, 1980; Nicholson and West, 1989). The greater the magnitude or novelty, the more difficult and longer the transition process. In research on non-institutionalized

transitions, an additional set of outcome variables becomes important, notably, whether a person makes a career change versus recommitting to stay in a role after a period of harboring doubt and considering alternatives, as well as the ease and speed with which a person arrives at a viable alternative.

Ebaugh (1988) found the kinds of alternatives explored and entered as well as the duration of the transition process were in part determined by the transferability of skills, interests and experience that the person perceives between the old and potential new career. In her study, some occupational exiters considered jobs at least tangentially related to what they were doing before (e.g., business teachers found jobs as accountants in business, police officers went into private security work); others, however, notably the physicians moved into completely different lines of work (e.g., law, real estate). Future work is needed to investigate what kind of transition processes lead to more or less radical changes.

A more important determinant of taking the leap than skill transferability may be the capacity to explore alternatives. Teachers and coaches who worked on a nine-month contracts were easily able to try out alternative roles during the summer months (Ebaugh, 1988). Similarly, professionals including lawyers and consultants, who had greater flexibility in terms of how they spent their working hours (and who also, by the very nature of their jobs, spent much of their time interacting with clients and other outsiders to their organizations) found it easier than corporate managers to explore alternatives (Ibarra, 2003). Other important factors appear to be barriers to entry into a new occupation, and the extent to which necessary credentials may be acquired by going back to school. Although, Ebaugh (1988) argued that fields that

have relatively low barriers to entry, such as real estate, tend to be attractive second careers, she also found a high incidence of returning to graduate schools (e.g., law, engineering) among her role exiters.

Few studies have investigated whether and why people actually make a career change once a set of alternative is available or what explains satisfaction with one's ultimate choice. Hoang and Gimeno (2003) found, for example, that although getting financial backing is typically the event that pushes a nascent entrepreneur to take the leap; many who do secure financing do not. They suggest building an entrepreneurial identity is a process that occurs in parallel with the evolution of the business case. If either is lacking, the person will not become and entrepreneur. Ebaugh (1988) suggests an alternative explanation using Becker's notion of "side bets." Side bets are things of value to the individual that accrue in the course of job and career, which they would have to give up should they give up the career; these include "golden handcuffs" (e.g., stock options and retirement benefits) and well as intangibles including security, status and prestige.

Age or developmental stage may also be an important category of moderators. A long tradition of adult development research suggests that mid-career change is often motivated by age-related concerns (Levinson, 1981; Williams and Savickas, 1990). Although the mid-life crisis has been debunked as a psychological phenomenon (Lawrence, 1980), it does appear that approaching mid-life has at least two effects that may motivate career change: 1. the feeling that time is running out (Carstensen, Isaacowitz and Charles, 1999), and 2. greater self-knowledge combined with a reduced tendency to make choices based on social or family approval (Hall,

1991; Kets de Vries, 2001). While reaching a certain age like forty or fifty may not have any distinct objective effect, for many people it serves as a symbolic marker that the time is ripe to make a change (Ibarra, 2003).

Also ripe for future investigation is the subject of gender differences in the incidence and process of career change. Nicholson and West (1989) argue that men radical transitions early in their career whereas women maintained a higher rate of divergent mobility throughout their careers. Future work might investigate a range of topics including how being part of a dual career couple, taking time out to raise children or perceptions of limited opportunity (Moore and Buttner, 1997) affect the likelihood and process of career change.

Other moderating factors include the reversibility of the exit; and the degree of social support for making a career change. Ebaugh (1988) found that professionals (e-physicians, ex-dentists and ex-lawyers) all of who had gone through lengthy training programs tended to experience a prolonged transition process. They tended to see their exits as permanent and irreversible since professional norms inculcate a sense of life time commitment. By contrast, corporate managers who start their own firms or who move into the government or nonprofit sector may be more likely to perceive that return to the corporate world is possible should the new venture fail to meet expectations. Few researchers have investigated involuntary turnover as a trigger for career change or investigated conditions under which job loss may generate a creative response such as career change (Latack and Dozier, 1986). Finally, positive social support also speeds up the process by encouraging people to seriously look at alternatives (Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003).

While the list of variables that might moderate likelihood of career change or characteristics of the process may always be lengthened and fine-tuned, an important and unaddressed theoretical question concerns the dynamics and nature of career change: Should scholars view career change as an outcome that can be predicted as a function of facilitating and constraining factors or, instead, as a process, in which a tipping point is reached beyond which career change is inevitable? Nicholson and West (1989) argued for a model of careers as made up changing responses to unfolding opportunities. The scant empirical work since supports his conclusion, pointing to promise of further conceptualizing career change as a social process.

Conclusion

Until recently, research on careers assumed that people developed and advanced largely within the confines of a single organization and occupation, and that the transitions that paced their career were institutionalised in form and timing. New developments have dramatically altered this model (Albert, et al., 2000; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Peiperl and Baruch, 1997). As the myth of life-long job security unravels, career development increasingly involves moving from one firm, sector and occupation to another in search of opportunity and fulfilment. Individuals increasingly develop careers independent of formal organizations as self-employed professionals. These self-designing professional trajectories place a premium on individuals' abilities to create, alter and dissolve career roles and identities as their personal and professional

situations change, and on our ability as researchers to study and conceptualize these non-institutionalized transitions.

It is ironic that a field that for the past fifteen years has so emphatically heralded the arrival of new career forms and trajectories has so few empirical studies of career change to show for it. In moving forward we need new theories that explain how people identify new career options, what replaces traditional means of socialization, and its concomitant identity transformation, and what provides propulsion in this process, absent an externally imposed role change. A particularly promising theme, prevalent in most recent treatments of career processes, concerns the identity transitions that necessarily accompany career changes. Future studies that focus empirical attention on the timing of changes, how they are embedded in social networks that also cross firms and sectors, and how role changes necessarily imply identity transitions will allow scholars to more fully understand the boundaryless career.

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Figure 1

Process of Career Change

Motives: Push & Pull
- Self-conceptions
- Networks
- Triggers

Transition Process:
- Endings
- Middles
- Beginnings

Moderators:
- Autonomy over schedule
- Use of intermediaries: degree programs, coaches, headhunters
- Side bets
- Age
- Gender
- Skill transferability
- Reversibility of exit
- Degree of social support

Change Outcomes:
- Likelihood of change
- Radicality of change
- Speed & ease of transition
- Satisfaction with choice