



## CAREER SUCCESS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper addresses the issue of career success from the point of view of the demands of the changing job market in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The traditional and the new concepts of career and career success are reviewed in light of the ‘connection economy’ which demands networking skills, synchronization, trust and exchange of ideas.

**Key words:** *career, career success, skills, job market, networking, communicating, careers without boundaries, career mobility*

**РЕЗЮМЕ:** В текста се разглежда проблемът за кариерното израстване от гледна точка на изискванията на променящия се пазар на труда в 21 век. Традиционните и новите разбирания за кариера и кариерно израстване са осмислени в светлината на „икономиката на връзките“, която изисква умения за създаване на мрежи от контакти, синхронизация, доверие и обмяна на идеи.

**Ключови думи:** *кариера, кариерно израстване, умения, пазар на труда, създаване на мрежи от контакти, комуникация, кариери без граници, кариерна мобилност.*

### **The traditional concept of career**

Traditionally the concept of career has been perceived as an upward movement within an institution, organization, business or profession. In general, this progression follows a certain hierarchy determined by the nature of the trade/industry. Most people understand career development exactly like this – climbing up a ladder thanks to your professional growth and to being appreciated by your bosses. Because this is what it has been for centuries. It is common sense that this understanding grants order, direction and stability for the government, for society, for employers and for employees alike. This is the bureaucratic understanding of career because it demonstrates the four major characteristics of bureaucracy – a clear hierarchy, specialization, division of labor and a set of formal rules (Troolin). People are able to progress in a field they have chosen based on their education, qualifications and individual capacity. Specialization and division of labor make this progress fairly predictable within an organization and for a set period of time. The set of formal rules or standard working procedures clearly define the specialized functions each individual performs and how and when they can continue up the ladder.

The traditional concept of career entails and receives a traditional approach from career development organizations and specialists – initial help with the choice of career path and from there the system seems to be self-sufficient. People have tended to stay with a chosen career for their entire professional life. The educational systems in many countries are still fostering a traditional understanding of career development. At the same time, the traditional career status has not only been



questioned but has begun to disintegrate. The process began to be taken some notice of during the last decade of the 20 century and has been greatly accelerated in the new millennium. The more we look around, the fewer ladders we see. And those that still exist are far from being stable. The factors leading to this phenomenon will be outlined and discussed further on in this paper.

### **Why is the nature of career changing?**

The real debate about the end of careers or, to put it more mildly, the changes that have taken place in career development, started in the 1990s. It is interesting to start outlining the factors leading to the major transformations in careers with some of the ideas expressed in Douglas Hall and Associates' book with the provocative title "The Career Is Dead – Long Live the Career". The authors prove that the traditional notion of careers as a series of upward repositioning with the respective rise in income, influence, social status, and stability have remained in the past. The old career notion is dead but careers will continue to exist as long as people and their lifelong work experiences exist. The book unfolds the concept and characteristics of the „new career contract” as a counterpoint to the „old career contract” of stability and security gained through educational and professional achievements and long-term dedication and loyalty to an organization. The new version of careers involves, among other things, developing new competencies, flexibility, the individual's responsibility for dealing with the lack of security, researching and gathering resources for ensuring personal growth, etc. The authors claim that the most important source of learning and progress is in relationships and networking (Hall, 1996).

In the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we are living in a world which has changed to an extent largely incomprehensible to the Baby Boomer generation (born between 1945 and 1964) and even to generation X (born between 1961 and 1981) (Robinson's classification). The working world, as part of the global economy, is changing at a very fast rate for a number of reasons. First of all, entire industries have disappeared and new ones have come into being. Secondly, the advent of digital communication and the interconnectedness of the world have changed job opportunities and job requirements. Thirdly, the expectations of employers and employees have changed because of all that.

What has not changed enough yet are our ideas of what is necessary to achieve a successful career throughout our lifetime. Most people have already realized that it is not likely to hold the same job in a single company or institution for as long as it takes to retire. And yet they believe that by retaining their skills and competences they can easily find a job in a company or an institution within the same industry. However, the dynamic economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century does not offer many such opportunities. A large number of people who have lost their jobs are not aware of the alternative career model because it has not been given adequate attention in the education systems and in the training programmes. The knowledge and abilities to undertake an alternative career and the soft skills needed on top of the hard skills to get a job elsewhere have suffered a serious neglect.



It is extremely important today to have and demonstrate your unique value proposition, your skills and competences and how they can be put into operation in various working environments. Relying on a job title and a set of skills required in a certain company cannot get you very far when looking for a job these days because, on the one hand, a lot of jobs and skills have become or may become obsolete in the near future and, on the other hand, a lot of new jobs have emerged or will emerge soon.

What is the key to successful career development in today's economy? People can open more doors in the working world if they change their view of career success and of themselves as 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce.

### **From the traditional to the modern concept of career**

The notion of career changes with the changes in society and economy. It should, therefore, be viewed in the context of the specific social and economic environment. Since society has been undergoing significant changes recently, it can be claimed with some degree of certainty that the notion of career and career success today differs from the one of the recent past. Society is often associated with bureaucracy. Since the time the word 'bureaucracy' was coined it has developed negative connotations among which are inefficiency and inflexibility. Thinking along the lines of career success being socially determined, an interesting analogy between traditional career success and bureaucracy springs to mind. Writing about American bureaucracy Amy Troolin outlines the four key characteristics of bureaucracy. They bear so much resemblance to the main traits of the traditional concept of career success that it seems that the notions can be interchanged. These key features are a clear hierarchy, specialization, division of labour, and a set of formal rules (Troolin, 2009).

Traditionally, the societal perceptions of career success are pretty much tied to going up a ladder within a company or an institution with clear hierarchy. This usually happens after you have performed well at a certain level and have been promoted to the next level within the same organization. Specialization and division of labor matter a lot and are taken into consideration when promotions are considered. People are expected to become experts in their field and are not deemed good specialists if they change their professional path. The prevailing pattern of building a successful career, at least until recently, involved obeying a set of formal rules specific to a particular professional field.

However, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has noticeably changed these as it has changed society and people, the understanding of career success and of social standing, the length of time people stay in the same job, and many other aspects of working life. As early as 1996 Douglas Hall remarks „Careers as we know them have died” but „if we define careers as a series of lifelong work-related experiences and personal learnings, the career will never die” (Hall, 1996: 1, 20, 21). Hall rightly observes that, regretfully, the old career contract has expired and has been replaced by a new one which demands attention to customer needs, constant updating of skills and competencies,



focus on relationships, and good use of outside resources of knowledge and development.

With more big businesses going out of business self-employment and small business development is becoming more the norm in Europe and the USA. „One in five Americans work from home, numbers seen rising over 60%”, reads the headline of a Forbes article by Kenneth Rapoza (Rapoza, 2013). A survey among EU citizens reveals that „45 per cent of EU citizens expressed a preference for self-employment over being an employee”. (Hatfield, 2015: 26).

People’s personal and professional life begin to merge as the working conditions change, e.g. more and more people are freelancers or work from home these days. Lifestyles have changed and are causing changes to the new understanding of the career success desired by contemporary people. Some of its characteristics are:

- Greater than before use of technology;
- Lifelong learning and undertaking various jobs in various industries;
- Career success means personal satisfaction over payment, status and lifestyle;
- Looking for more meaning from work;
- Networking and self-management ensure success;
- Self-responsibility and entrepreneurship;
- Freedom to choose from numerous jobs, tasks, roles and projects;
- More control over personal time and flexibility in how, when and where the work is done;
- More opportunities to develop skills other than the ones needed in your main occupation by working in different fields, etc.

This list of characteristics is not exhaustive and focuses only on some of the most important features that present a challenge for people seeking career success today and tomorrow. Those who want to make it should develop the right skills and competences including flexibility, being proactive and resilient, commitment to lifelong learning, updating their skills and developing new ones required by the changing economy, creating winning self-marketing materials such as CVs, interactive websites, professional Facebook profiles, etc. The top skills for career success that have emerged in recent years are computer-knowledge, communication and creativity.

One specific skill that has proven its efficacy in recent years is the skill to connect or to network. Ian Altman believes that „we are in a Connection Economy. The connection economy rewards value created by building relationships and creating connections, rather than building assets by industrialism”. To those who doubt this Altman points out companies such as AirBnB whose owners have no hotels but are the „largest provider of accommodation”; Uber who own no cars but „excel at connecting riders with drivers”; and Facebook who create no content but is „the largest media company” (Altman, 2016). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is not enough to be an expert in your field. „Today, if you want to succeed as an entrepreneur, you also have to be a storyteller...It is not enough to create a great product; you also have to work out how to let people know about it” (Richard Branson, cited by Galo, 2016).



Another way of defining the competencies that are essential in undertaking a successful and trouble-free career transitions are „knowing why,” „knowing whom,” and „knowing how” (Arthur et al., 1995; Eby et al., 2003). According to some authors „knowing why” relates to a person’s motivation and ability to understand oneself, search for different possibilities, and adapt to the changing job market situation and work circumstances. „Knowing whom” is associated with professional networking and contacts established with people inside and outside a particular business establishment. „Knowing how” entails professional knowledge, skills and competencies accumulated over time. (Arthur et al., 1995; Eby et al., 2003).

### Conclusion

If the situation with careers today were to be summarized in a few words, these words could be careers without boundaries and career mobility. And these are viewed not so much as relating to an organization or a company but as extending to occupations, industries and geography. (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Sullivan and Arthur, 2006). Career mobility can be seen as a path and a journey metaphor. A number of writers see it like this. Baruch (2004) for example, defines career as a journey where people can go along the beaten path or choose to find their own way. Inkson (2002) likewise explains why a journey metaphor is appropriate for a career. To him a career is a movement which has geographical, occupational or organizational dimensions. As any journey it requires preparation, appropriate equipment, and a vision of where you want to be next. You need to take with you the most indispensable items – the skills and competencies that make you marketable in the dynamic global economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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