Barriers to the boundaryless career: A study of managers in career transition

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Abstract
This paper reports on the career transition experiences of a group of managers from a range of industry sectors following job loss. The findings indicate that, despite calls for careers to become more boundaryless, individuals still face significant barriers when attempting to cross organisational or industry boundaries regardless of their skills, experience and qualifications. To overcome these barriers employer and recruiter attitudes and expectations will need to change, and individuals will need to adopt more strategic career management behaviours.

Key words: boundaryless careers, career transitions, employability

Introduction
The decline of the traditional organisational career has led to the emergence of new models of career that reflect how jobs and careers have changed and how contemporary careers should be managed. Models, such as the boundaryless career (Arthur and Rousseau 1996), protean career (Hall 1996), portfolio career (Handy 1994), post-corporate career (Peiperl and Baruch 1997) and intelligent career (DeFillippi and Arthur 1994) have been presented as models for a future in which careers are more likely to be characterised by flexible employment contracts, multiple employers, lateral job moves and multiple career changes (Baruch 2004; Baruch 2006). Among these models the boundaryless career, has arguably received the most widespread support despite criticisms that it provides only a hazy definition and lacks rigorous evidence to support its validity (e.g. Eby, Butts et al. 2003; Pringle and Mallon 2003). Supporters of the boundaryless career claim that it provides a framework for career management in line with flexible employment relationships, transactional psychological contracts, fluid career structures and dynamic organisational environments (Rousseau 2004). Individuals are encouraged to pursue boundaryless careers in order to maintain employability and to increase personal and job satisfaction (Baruch 2001). Yet, to what extent is the boundaryless career indicative of actual career experiences as opposed to an idealised, theoretical model? How easy is it for individuals to cross organisation, industry and professional boundaries in pursuit of flexible jobs and careers? This aim of this paper is to explore the boundaryless career in relation to the actual experiences of a group of mid-level to senior managers in career transition. It considers the extent to which they perceived that physical mobility was achievable and identifies a range of invisible barriers to future employment.
The boundaryless career

Arthur (1994:296) describes the boundaryless career as "one of independence from, rather than dependence on traditional organizational career principles". While the traditional career was primarily enacted within organisational boundaries the boundaryless career operates across boundaries (Arthur and Rousseau 1996). The traditional career was characterised by stability, loyalty and linear progression through an organisational career structure whereas the boundaryless career incorporates flexibility, loyalty to the individual's career or profession rather than to the organisation, and both lateral and vertical progression (Baruch 2003). Traditional careers were managed by the organisation (Hind 2005) whereas in the new careers responsibility for career management is transferred to the individual. The emphasis is now on maintaining employability rather than on retaining a secure job (Mallon and Walton 2005). The boundaryless career is supposedly able to transcend physical organisational boundaries as individuals pursue inter-firm mobility moving from job to job, or from organisation to organisation using transferable competencies acquired in previous jobs (Arthur and Rousseau 1996; Gunz, Evans et al. 2000).

In defining the boundaryless career Arthur (1994) suggested that it could be seen from six different perspectives including movement across the boundaries of separate employers, careers that are validated by contacts outside the present employer, are sustained by extra-organisational networks, transcend traditional reporting and advancement hierarchies, involve the rejection of existing career opportunities for family or personal reasons, and careers that are perceived as boundaryless by the person regardless of structural constraints (Sullivan and Arthur 2006:20). A more succinct definition states that boundarylessness can be "viewed and operationalized by the degree of mobility exhibited by the career actor along both the physical and psychological continua" (Sullivan and Arthur 2006:23). Physical boundarylessness refers to mobility across job, organisation or industry borders while psychological boundarylessness is dependent on "the interpretation of the career actor who may perceive a boundaryless future regardless of structural constraints" (Arthur and Rousseau 1996:6).
Although Arthur's (1994) initial portrayal of the boundaryless career incorporated these broad concepts, much of the subsequent literature has tended to focus on physical boundarylessness, or transitions across organisational boundaries (Briscoe and Hall 2006). A study by Sullivan (1999) found sixteen studies that looked at physical mobility whereas only three considered relationships across boundaries or psychological boundarylessness. Success in the boundaryless career is thus generally associated with having a set of transferable skills, demonstrating flexibility and adaptability, and engaging in professional networks (Inkson 2006), qualities related to physical mobility, or "actual movement between jobs, firms, occupations, and countries" rather than psychological mobility, or "the capacity to move as seen through the mind of the career actor" (Sullivan and Arthur 2006:21). In this paper the concept of physical mobility is explored in relation to ease of transfer during a period of job search.

The research study
The study focused on a group of mid-level to senior managers in career transition following redundancy. Using a non-probability sampling approach (Neuman 2006) participants were drawn from the client list of a career outplacement firm based in a large Australian city. Recruitment was through a flyer which was placed at the reception desk as well as through direct approaches from the firm's reception staff. The sample group comprised seven women and thirteen men aged between 30 and 60 years of age. They had worked across a range of industries including banking, finance, pharmaceutical goods, manufacturing, and in both the public and private sectors. Their redundancy had resulted from either mergers, restructuring or completion of fixed term contracts. In-depth, biographical interviews were conducted in a meeting room provided by the outplacement firm. The interviews, which lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. They began with a discussion of career history to date, how careers had been managed, perceptions of how careers had changed over time and current job search experiences. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Analysis of the data was facilitated by the use of NVivo (QSR 1997) a software system that assists in the coding and indexing of data by emergent themes. This type of software is particularly useful where large amounts of qualitative data have been
collected. Once the data has been coded it is a relatively simple process to cross reference themes and explore patterns in the transcripts.

**Barriers to career transition**

The primary purpose of the study was to explore how individuals are managing their careers at a practical level and if there really has been a shift to more flexible, self-managed careers in which long-term employability is supported and enhanced (Pringle and Mallon 2003). However, during the interviews it became apparent that successful career transitions were as dependent on factors outside of the individual’s control as those within their control. All participants in this study had extensive professional and managerial experience. The majority had postgraduate qualifications in their area of expertise as well as up-to-date industry knowledge. They appeared to be highly motivated in terms of making a successful career change and, in some cases, were prepared to take a backwards step in order to achieve long-term career goals. Yet, the experience of career transition had revealed a range of significant barriers to potentially boundaryless careers. The causes of these barriers are discussed in the following section.

**Career history**

Long-term tenure in either the same job or the same industry had, at one time, been regarded as a sign of loyalty and stability but participants in this study were now finding that instead of enhancing their CV length of tenure was creating a barrier to career transition. Joe had been employed by the same insurance company for 32 years although his career had included a wide variety of positions in both Australia and New Zealand, each position lasting no more than three to four years. Despite evidence of high level skills and varied experience he found that he had been labelled as 'institutionalised' for staying in the one place for too long. Similarly Lee, who had worked for a large bank for almost 30 years, was finding that his career history was creating a significant barrier even though he had made regular lateral and vertical moves throughout his working life. Mike had made a deliberate decision to stay with the same company because it had so much to offer yet, as he looked back over his career he made the following observation;

*People are saying 'you've been there a long time, you should have moved somewhere else and done this and that!', but I always thought, when you actually held the roles that I did there was...*
enough diversity and change within those interesting roles. And I’ve said, ‘why the hell would I move from an organisation that's taken me overseas, given me a great career progression, just for the sake of saying on the CV that I've worked for somebody else?’

He was confident that he would find another job but was aware that length of tenure and very specific industry experience had created barriers to physical mobility. Alison captured the general feeling of many in the study when she commented, "I've been in one place for 11 years and I don't think I'm seen in the same light as somebody who has been in a couple of companies for 3-4 years with broader experience".

**Skills and Experience**

Boundaryless careers require transferable skills to facilitate the transition across organisation, industry or professional boundaries, yet many in this study had found that, regardless of their skill sets, their previous job was proving to be a barrier to future employment options. For example, Alistair had spent most of his career to date in the public sector. He had developed skills in project management and policy development though international and local assignments. He was now looking for a position in the private sector but was finding it very difficult to move across sector boundaries.

*When you're coming from the outside, these days in particular, and certainly at the level at which I apply which is mid-management, employers seem to be focussed on very specific skill sets. People tend to see me as a public servant and try to put me in some form of box.*

Others observed that regardless of their demonstrated skills, employers were reluctant to consider skill sets that did not exactly match their requirements. Alan, who had extensive international experience in IT and project management commented,

* Australians very much from my point of view look more at you know skills sets, your experience base rather than the potential that you have and that's the problem.*

Similarly John noted that employers were primarily interested in people who could make an immediate contribution. From his own experience in recruiting staff as well as his recent job search experiences he recognised what employers wanted from their recruitment processes,

*If you're recruiting you try to buy a skill that you know you'll have today. I don't see them (recruiters) saying 'oh, yes. Now we have the value', it's more like 'what can you do for us here and now?"*
Mike was also finding that without an exact skills and experience match employers were reluctant to even consider what he had to offer;

*I'm finding that a lot of employers these days are very risk averse, particularly in the more senior roles...so that will always be of benefit to someone who's had experience, specific experience within that industry, and within that type of role. A few roles that I've gone for have been out of the box but once they've got to make the decision you find they're normally very risk averse.*

**Age**

In this study age was seen as creating barriers in various ways. Some people felt that employers were reluctant to employ an older person because they believed they lacked the energy of a younger person. For example Andrew commented:

*A recruiter said to a friend of mine last week, hmm, you're starting to get to that age where they really want someone younger and more dynamic.*

At the same time, employers wanted extensive experience that could only be gained through many years in a senior position. In this regard Joe felt that age discrimination tended to work against both younger and older people;

*I think if you're too young there's a perception that you're a young gun and you still need a few years to settle down. And if you're too old, I haven't worked out what too old means, but 50 something, late 50's, and you haven't made it then they worry, well, what's going on?*

Many were unsure how to define 'old' although this seemed to be largely dependent on their recent experiences and the industry in which they worked. Luke (aged 40 with a background in investment banking) had been told by senior people at major companies in Australia that he was too old for another investment banking job whereas Mike (early 50s) had been told by one potential employer that he was "perfect for a non-executive director, you're the right age for that, but unless I brought you in as boss of the place I wouldn't put you in a senior role because you're too old". Several people commented on the need to make a successful career transition as quickly as possible before age became a significant issue. John (aged in his early 40s) had decided to return to Australia from an overseas posting because he felt that "if I'd come home at 45 my mountain would have been much harder to climb". A few believed that at times their age had been an advantage because it reflected
their years of experience but in each case they had only been offered short term contracts rather than long term positions. As Alison (early 50s) commented;

*Older, more experienced people, once they’ve been made redundant have been asked to come back on contract because a lot of knowledge has disappeared with them but with contracts it’s easier to turn them on and off.*

Only one person (Jane aged in her mid 50s) saw age as irrelevant, believing that career progression was related to attitude more than chronological age.

**Networks**

Networking was clearly an important factor in the career transition process. Well developed networks were seen as facilitating transitions or possible transitions across organisational boundaries whereas weak or non-existent networks created invisible barriers in the job search process. Those who had strong networks recognised their importance in terms of gaining access to recruiters, to potential employers, and to the hidden job market. Building relationships through networking provided access to ‘the club’ which, according to Alan, meant that you might obtain a position even if you weren’t the best person for the job or didn’t have the best skills. In the same way, John described networking as essential in a ‘jobs for the boys’ environment where "it’s who you know, not what you know, and it’s relationship driven". In a number of cases previous positions had been obtained through networks rather than formal recruitment channels so there was an expectation that future jobs would also be obtained in this way. Others who had not previously used networks had now begun to realise that they could access organisations and jobs via 'the back door' if they had good contacts. For example, through networks Joe had been approached about a job that had not yet been formally created;

*It’s one of those situations where there’s no role yet. So rather than doing the traditional wait for the role, go through the whole process, this was just because of networking, an opportunity to speak before the role’s even been created, and I haven’t got the job but it just feels so much better, you know.*

Networking could also be used to build relationships with recruitment agencies. Sarah noted she had been contacted about jobs "that haven’t even appeared on the horizon" because of her strong network of recruiters and the good relationships that she had established over time. On the other hand, those who lacked good networks faced invisible barriers that were proving difficult to overcome. For
example, David (who had relocated ten months ago due to his wife’s job) had no local networks. His struggle to make contact with recruitment agencies or to obtain interviews had highlighted the importance of networking;

*It does seem from what I’ve heard that networks are needed in [this city] in particular to find roles. It does seem to be the sort of city that works on that.*

Ken (late 50s) had worked in very senior positions in the energy industry for many years but after a few months out of the industry he was finding that it was becoming more and more difficult to access people with the capacity to offer him a job. He had realised that "networks disappear quickly; the world is moving faster these days, people move on more quickly so it’s harder to maintain networks".

Lee had developed strong internal networks in his previous organisation (a large bank) but had few contacts in other organisations or outside of the industry. The contacts that he did have in the industry had not proven helpful as the majority of large banks were reducing staff rather than hiring. He now realised the importance of external as well as internal networks.

**Recruitment agencies**

Recruiters emerged as key players in the career transition process. They were seen as gate-keepers with the power to decide if an applicant would be rejected at the first level of the recruitment process or allowed to progress to the next level. Recruitment decisions were seen as primarily driven by the desire to achieve a quick outcome, which from John’s perspective was linked to financial objectives;

*It’s like OK, you’re a good candidate, you’ve got a good background so I can turn you over really quickly. They want to get you out because there’s money in it for them.*

This meant that there was a tendency to only consider someone for a position if they exactly matched the position requirements as well as having the right industry background and experience. For example, Ron’s experience had been "that recruiters have decided that if my last job has been in a bank then my next job should be in a bank as well". Similarly, Andrew had found that;

*Some recruiters believe that people who have worked in FMCGs¹ have excellent business acumen but others will say, don’t even waste your time in trying to get into FMCGs if you don’t have FMCGs experience.*

¹ FMCG refers to the Fast Moving Consumer Goods industry sector.
There was considerable frustration at the tendency of recruiters to place people in a box, based on their previous job or industry experience thus negating the concept of using transferable skills to cross industry or professional boundaries. Don described this as a lazy way to get quick results:

I think there’s an enormous bias in the market towards people who have done exactly that role previously, it’s a kind of lazy way of looking at it. I think recruitment has become a more intricate transactional business than a rational skill and experience based assessment.

Even in situations where the applicant had believed that he or she met all the necessary selection criteria it was often difficult to obtain an interview which Ron suspected was because "You’ve got to match something they’ve got and if it doesn’t match absolutely perfectly you’re not going to get your call". Recruiter attitudes also made it difficult to take a backwards step in order to change career direction. David’s observation was that "quite often recruiters will try to put a person into a box, into an existing level, not necessarily accommodate the fact that a person may be interested in stepping back a little to re-enter the workforce in another capacity".

**Qualifications**

Qualifications, although not seen as a major barrier, were nevertheless seen as having the potential to open or close doors. Luke, with a recent history in investment banking, had obtained an MBA while working in a leadership role in the navy. He had thought that his qualifications would give him a leading edge but a senior recruiter had told him, "listen, you will find that most of the senior guys working with you will not have an MBA and you’ll be a bit of a threat, so be careful how you position yourself". He was now omitting the MBA from his CV in the hope that this would make it easier to pass the first level of the recruitment process. By contrast, David who was looking to move into the consulting industry had found that an MBA or similar qualification was a prerequisite for entry to the better firms. Jane, who had decided not to complete her undergraduate degree, was aware that her lack of qualifications was making it difficult for her to compete with better qualified applicants even though she had significant experience at senior management level in both Australian and international companies. Lee, who was also in the same situation, felt that without formal qualifications his experience lacked credibility and thus for potential employers it would be "a bit of a leap of faith" to take him on.
Discussion

Conceptually the boundaryless career would appear to provide a good fit with contemporary employment relationships and career patterns. Movement across organisation and job boundaries is now regarded as both desirable and necessary for ongoing career success given the uncertain nature of employment contracts and the degree of change faced by many organisations (Thite 2001; Arthur, Khapova et al. 2005). Furthermore, boundaryless careers supposedly offer higher levels of personal satisfaction, opportunities for growth and greater autonomy (Arthur and Rousseau 1996; Iles 1997). Yet, reality suggests that even with the requisite characteristics and behaviours physical boundarylessness may be difficult to achieve at an individual level due to a range of invisible, but nonetheless real barriers to career transition. Invisible barriers constrain individual choices.

For example, age has long been recognised as a potential barrier to job and career change (Patrickson and Ranzijn 2003). Despite legislation that forbids discrimination on the basis of age it continues to permeate employer decisions and employment options, particularly for older workers (Encel 1998; Ranzijn, Carson et al. 2002). Evidence from this study suggests that age tends to be used as a filter to sort job applicants and that the age criteria against which people are evaluated differs according to industry and job level. For example, Luke's experience in investment banking indicated that the industry had a preference for younger employees who were able to commit to the long hours and high stress levels required by their employers. At forty years of age he was considered 'too old'. Thus, despite government and employer rhetoric regarding the need to attract and retain older workers as part of the strategy to alleviate skills and labour shortages, age stereotypes continue to create barriers. Older workers still find it difficult to change jobs thus preventing free movement across jobs, organisations and industries and limiting the time span over which it may be possible to pursue boundaryless careers, except perhaps for those with highly fungible skills (Patrickson and Ranzijn 2003).

Employers also tend to stereotype people who have been employed for many years in the same organisation assuming that long-term tenure leads to institutionalisation and an inability to adapt to a
new situations and different organisational cultures. Even with relevant experience and highly transferable skills, individuals with a very stable employment history are discovering that loyalty, once regarded as a positive trait, is now seen as an indication that the person lacks initiative, flexibility and adaptability. A further barrier is created by previous industry experience. Employability, a foundation stone of the boundaryless career, is thought to be linked to the capacity to demonstrate transferable skills (Fugate, Kinicki et al. 2004), yet employers, and more specifically recruiters, appear reluctant to look past job and industry boundaries to consider how skills gained in one industry may be transferable to a different industry. In the words of several people in this study, recruiters have a tendency to 'put people in a box' based on their career to date thus limiting future mobility. When length of tenure is associated with age the combination is likely to create a severe impediment to career transition.

Invisible barriers can exist at different levels in the recruitment process. For example, recruiters can erect invisible barriers that hinder progression from the first level (application) to the next level (preliminary interview) by only selecting those with an exact match to the job requirements in terms of skills, experience and industry knowledge. In this study many expressed frustration at the tendency of recruiters to dismiss their application at the first level because they did not match a limited set of criteria thus making it impossible for them to engage with potential employers. This narrow approach to recruitment and selection also meant that employers missed out on the opportunity to meet and assess potential employees, and then perhaps to modify job requirements for applicants who might not match the set criteria but were able to demonstrate other desirable qualities, such as the capacity to 'think outside the square'. Gunz, Evans et al. (2000:30) suggest that the current approach to recruitment is driven by "contemporary thinking which requires human resource strategy to be linked to overall business strategy: relevant know-how and speed of integration have become important criteria in hiring decisions". In other words, employers are looking for instant, predictable outcomes not long-term potential. This can lead to poor outcomes for both employer and employee. From the employer perspective it means a constriction of the talent pool from which potential employees may be drawn. From the employee perspective it reinforces both visible and invisible boundaries to the
boundaryless career as well as limiting the opportunity for skill transfer across organisations and industries.

Conclusion and implications for practice

The boundaryless career presents a seemingly attractive option for career management in contemporary employment contexts. The boundaryless career is one in which the individual benefits through taking control of his or her career, making considered career choices and building career expertise throughout a lifetime of lateral and vertical, intra-organisational and inter-organisational career moves. At the same time there are potential benefits for employers as individuals are encouraged to develop new skills, gain broad experience and remain flexible and adaptable. Evidence suggests, however, that boundarylessness is not easily attained, and that managing the boundaryless career presents many challenges not evident in more traditional, long-term organisational careers.

The findings of this study indicate the need for a new way of thinking about career if boundarylessness is to become a reality rather than an abstract concept. First, there needs to be a new approach to the recruitment and selection process which reflects diverse patterns of career. That is, the focus needs to shift away from putting people 'in a box' based on previous employment and formal qualifications towards looking for ways to assess transferable skills and future potential thus facilitating mobility across job and organisation boundaries. Second, employers need to develop new attitudes that reflect changing demographics. In the context of an aging workforce, stereotypes based on age and length of tenure will become increasingly irrelevant. Hiring decisions should focus on what the person has to offer, not on their chronological or organisational age. Third, approaches to career management will need to be redesigned to incorporate the development of skills in self assessment, self marketing and networking. Individuals can create their own career barriers by failing to assess their employability, not developing the capacity to market themselves to potential employers and overlooking the importance of developing strong networks to facilitate mobility across boundaries. Only by breaking down these barriers will it be possible to create truly boundaryless careers.
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