Eco-careers: Expressing Green Values in Working Lives

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ABSTRACT

Eco-careers are careers in which an individual’s values for a sustainable world are a primary consideration in career decisions. Interest in eco-careers is enhanced by the recent growth of green issues and values in society, and by employee involvement in green business initiatives. Recent forces in contemporary careers enhancing interest in eco-careers are the importance of values in careers, increases in individual agency, a trend to boundaryless careers, a contemporary focus on identity, broadened definitions of career, and the long-term nature of careers. The paper concludes with reflections on the practice and measurement of eco-careers, potential research areas, and implications for career practitioners and managers. The eco-career may be an idea whose time has come.

Keywords

Career development and management - choice behaviour - values - “green” policy - sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Eco-careers are careers in which an individual’s values for a sustainable world are a primary consideration in career decisions. Insofar as individuals consciously consider and enact such values in decisions such as what occupation to pursue, what job to take, which organization to work in, how to perform day-to-day work behaviour, and how to craft their own roles, anyone and everyone can have an eco-career. This includes such day-to-day work activities as recycling documents and reducing consumption of power.

Current developments in science, economics, government policies and public opinion provide fertile ground for theory and research on eco-careers. Scientific concerns about the sustainability of the Earth’s eco-systems following centuries of human exploitation and despoliation are increasingly shared by analysts and politicians (Friedman, 2008; Gore, 2006). Economists likewise argue that the benefits of sustainable behaviour far outweigh the costs (Stern, 2007). International protocols such as the Kyoto Agreement have been signed to promote concerted action, and governmental policy initiatives have been implemented. The business sector is beginning to understand that given the increasing public and governmental sympathy to green issues, business informed by a green agenda can be good business (Friedman, 2008), and is starting to factor climate change into business strategies (Hoffman & Woody,
Organizations are increasingly advised that if they don’t go green they will “go under” (Information World, 2007) and that if they do they will “gain edge” (Philips, 2007).

However this is not a set of issues only for politicians and business leaders. Members of the public are also increasingly concerned about environmental issues, and increasingly responsive to initiatives to increase the sustainability of the ways in which they live their lives. In a survey of global attitudes conducted in 2002 and 2007, participants in nine OECD counties rated pollution and environmental problems as the number 1 global threat, and in the five-year period between surveys, the proportion of people giving it that priority rose from 23% to 37% in the US, from 43% to 54% in Canada, and from 55% to 70% in Japan (Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2007).

Since individuals’ work is a primary arena for them to contribute to exacerbating or alleviating such problems, it is apparent that such concern might result in behaviour change. However, the growing awareness of green issues is not necessarily reflected in individual green behaviour. In their personal behaviour individuals apparently prefer to be led by the governments that they periodically elect and by the organizations that they relate to as consumers and employees (Bonini & Oppenheim, 2008). Could the notion of the eco-career, focusing on long-term autonomous individual work behaviour, assist changes in individual action?¹

**INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITIES FOR SUSTAINABILITY**

Are government and business organizations the only repositories of responsibility for sustainability in economic life? A strong emphasis on organization-level action may blind members of the workforce to their personal environmental responsibilities, and to differences they can make, not just

¹ Eco-careers are not the same as “green careers”. The term “green careers” (Copeland, 2008; Kerpans, 2008) has been coined to represent careers in a range of occupations which are directly concerned with ecology and environmental preservation: for example, environmental scientist, resource planning manager, conservation area ranger, trader in carbon credits. Those in green careers may make an environmental difference through their work, and may provide leadership and role modelling. But they are specialists, a minority, and, in terms of environmental values, an elite. Eco-careers may be practised by anyone, whatever their occupation, through their day-to-day work choices and behaviour. Eco-careers can include people in green careers
as organization members contributing to organizational policies, goals, and programs, but also as individuals pursuing broader values through their work.

Individuals incur environmental costs in two ways – as consumers and as producers. As consumers, they drive cars (or not), go on holiday in aeroplanes (or stay home), buy food in the supermarket (or grow it in their gardens), consume power, build and furnish houses constructed of environmentally-sourced products, etc. The importance of these activities is recognised by proponents of conservation, who encourage consumers to change their consumption patterns and to adopt environmentally friendly ways of living (Horn, 2006; Trask, 2006). But these books on green living have little to say to individuals in their roles as producers: the greening of production-related behaviour is assumed, by default, to be the responsibility not of individuals, but of organizations.

Potentially, individuals can change their consumption patterns in the direction of greater sustainability, not just as consumers, but as producers. As producers (at work), they also drive cars, fly in aeroplanes, and work in offices and factories that are built and equipped from environmentally-sourced items and powered by electricity and oil. Organizational action that despoils or preserves the environment harnesses the collaboration of many individual members. Organizations powerfully affect the environment, by the very nature of the goods and/or services they provide: strip-mining despoils landscapes, chemicals pollute water, animal farming releases methane, etc. Individuals make career choices in terms of which organizations they work for, which occupations and jobs they seek in those organizations, and what actions they take on the job. We therefore suggest that by planning and executing an eco-career an environmentally concerned person can effect reductions in his or her carbon footprint and other measures of pollution that may be as great as, or greater than, any corresponding reductions in consumption. Individuals can also exert major influence on co-workers and organization. We therefore argue that “top-down” efforts by organizations to become more sustainable may be accompanied by “bottom-up” efforts based on individual behaviour and participation.
Sustainable business and employee involvement

There is evidence that individual employees are increasingly concerned that the organizations that employ them should act in a socially responsible manner in relation to the environment. According to a recent survey by the UK Society for Human Resource Management, 73% percent of surveyed employees in companies without an environmental responsibility policy thought it was very or somewhat important that their organization develop such a policy. By adopting such policies, organizations may not only gain direct business benefits, but also enhance their ability to attract and retain the best human resources (Reuters, 2008). Those who ignore green trends may risk losing talented employees, particularly younger employees (Johns, 2008).

Organizations may also harness the values and inventiveness of employees to green goals. “Suggestion schemes” to boost productivity have a long and respectable history (Rapp & Eklund, 2002): employee ingenuity can be similarly engaged in support of green goals. For example, a group of Starbucks employees came up with the idea to put hundreds of pounds of each day’s spent coffee grounds in bags and let customers use it as compost (Klara, 2008). Gas company NW Natural has created an employee-based Sustainability Network, with the goal of organizing ways to collect, study and implement employees' ideas for helping it tread more lightly on the planet (Dodson, 2008).

Many organizations not only harness the green awareness of their employees but also strive to promote it. Fujitsu-Siemens surveyed its staff on green attitudes and launched a “green collar worker” initiative including a “Big Turn-off” initiative (about turning off computers at night) (Marketing Week, 2005). The company also focused the synergy between the green consumer role and the green producer role by encouraging employees to bring hard-to-dispose-of home waste to work with them, so that it can be disposed of in one of the company’s recycling centres (Clapperton, 2006). Encouragingly, the survey by the Society for Human Resource Management in the UK suggested that over half the companies in the survey had environmental policies while others planned to introduce them (Schramm, 2007).

Given the above evidence that organizations and individuals can work collaboratively toward sustainability goals, how can the concept of ‘eco-careers’ add value? The answer, we suggest, is that eco-
careers provide a means of *sustaining* instances of green collaboration such as those mentioned above so that they are not isolated events. Rather, they become part of a texture of commitment to sustainability that informs each eco-careerist’s behaviour throughout his or her working life.

### CAREER STUDIES AND ECO-CAREERS

The new field of ‘career studies’ (Gunz & Peiperl, 2007) provides an excellent lens through which to focus, observe, theorise and support green behaviour by organization members. Many contemporary foci and developments in careers theory and research support the viability of eco-careers and provide a theoretical basis for further study. Here, we note six such foci

1. *The importance of values in careers*

   Brown (2002) posits that individuals’ values are the most important source of motivation in making career choices, and that individuals undergo a process of crystallizing and prioritizing their values before choosing career options or work practices compatible with these. Shepard (1984) used the metaphor “path with a heart” to indicate how a career might provide the opportunity to satisfy one’s central values in life, while Byrne (2008) has recently focused the importance of altruism as a value influencing career choice, noting that altruism may be focused on benefits to society as a whole. Therefore, eco-careers are more likely to be sustained over the long-term when the individual deliberately and autonomously chooses a green perspective from among a competing set of values. If careers truly have enduring “career anchors”—“constellations of self-perceived career-relevant talents, motives and values” (Schein, 1978, p. 128), then it appears likely that green awareness, motives and values will increasingly feature as elements within individuals’ career behaviour. We might also expect green values to become more prominent within the career anchors of those with a strong ‘service/dedication to a cause’
anchor (Schein, 1985): certainly the proportion of people going into traditional private sector roles with goals in mind that increase social ends has increased (Schein, 1996). Although careers appear less planned than many imagine, the longevity and influence of career anchors means that the values of young people now may have their effects on an ongoing and cumulative basis up to 2050.

2. Increasing individual agency

Theorists agree that it has recently become easier for individuals to practise agency over their own careers. Careers are increasingly, it seems, “driven more by the individual than by the organization” (Hall & Associates, 1996, P. xvi). Indeed, the idea of individual autonomy over decisions affecting careers is central to the fashionable concepts of boundaryless and protean careers (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006; Briscoe & Hall, 2006). If organizational control over careers has lessened as individual control has grown, then it follows logically that individuals with strong green values can play a relatively increasing part in enhancing environmental sustainability through their career behaviour. Further, those with the greatest control over their own career decisions, i.e. those the greatest skills, qualifications, and labour market value, are arguably those most in a position to influence the conduct of their organizations.

3. Boundaryless careers

There is also evidence that careers cross the boundaries of organization, occupation, and industry with increasing frequency (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Arthur, deFillippi & Lindsay, 2006). For example, male members of the workforce in their twenties typically move to a new organization once every two or three years, though the frequency decreases as they age (OECD, 2006). This means that the green values of organization members, and the sustainability attitudes and practices they learn in an employing organization need not be confined to that organization. Under the theory of career competencies (de
Fillippi & Arthur, 1996), a person’s green values are part of the “knowing-why” group of competencies based on individual values and motives that provide career direction and also affect the person’s skill/expertise competencies (“knowing-how”) and networks (“knowing-whom”). Career competencies are a form of personal career capital (Inkson & Arthur, 2001), much of which is typically portable between employment settings. Thus, eco-careers provide an opportunity for the cross-pollination (of green values, culture, and practice) to take place, not just between individuals, but between organizations and more widely.

4. Identity as a focus of career

The individual’s sense of identity – derived from various non-work as well as work roles and influences – appears to be a primary source of career direction (Ibarra, 2003). The green movement involves an increasing consciousness of the role of each individual as a steward of the planet and as a progenitor of yet-unborn generations likely to be affected by today’s actions affecting the environment. The movement therefore which encourages its adherents to adopt identities with strong elements of future-oriented altruism. There is increasing recognition that an individual’s personal identity integrates the work and non-work sectors of his or her life, and is a potent source of individual action and change (Hansen, 1997). A likely motivational source and mechanism for the articulation of an eco-career might be in the notion of “calling” (Hall & Chandler, 2005), where an individual’s career actions are infused by a sense of unique purpose, to do “the work one was meant to do” – in this case a purpose driven by green concerns.

5. Broadened definitions of career

The meanings attributed to the term ‘career” by authorities and by ordinary people have varied in terms of the range of an individual’s activities they covered. The Oxford English Dictionary definition confines career activities to those conducted in employment (Gunz & Peiperl, 2007), and much careers research, for example that in which either occupations or work organizations are seen as the only locus
for careers, appears to accept such a view. However, an increasingly commonly accepted definition of career is “the evolving sequence of a person’s work experiences over time” (Arthur, Hall & Lawrence, 1989, p. 8), and the use of the term work in preference to employment allows for the career to be developed in non-employed settings such as the volunteer organizations in which much activity directed at creating a more sustainable world takes place (for example, Greenpeace, forest protection societies, neighbourhood clean-up campaigns). A green orientation may be enacted in any of these social roles, and may act as an integrating force between employed and non-employed roles. Thus a broadened consideration of career issues allows one to see how eco-career activities conducted in an employed setting may be integrated with related forms of non-employment behaviour – including consumer behaviour - based on the same green values.

6. The long-term nature of careers

The concept of career provides a long-term perspective. Careers typically last for 40-50 years, and there appears to be little doubt that the world’s attention will be much more focused on ecological values in 40 years time than it is now. Because of the long-term and planned nature of the career, the individual (and the researcher) can move beyond immediate action to support a current employer’s drive to de-pollute the workplace; to the possibility of environmental protection being a continuing compass through which individuals enact their career transitions and decisions.

ECO-CAREERS IN ACTION

How might an individual with high values for environmental sustainability reflect those values in the employment aspect of his or her career? Choice of occupation, organization and industry at all career stages would be critical. The extent to which each of these institutions contributes to environmental damage is measureable. Just as some young people now consciously avoid the tobacco, alcohol and luxury-goods industries for ideological reasons, so may they come to avoid occupations and industries
which are known to indulge in policies and practices of unsustainable production. According to
Mourkogiannis (2007), individuals should seek out companies whose values reflect their own:

Working with colleagues whose moral ideas resonate with your own can help you find
fulfillment in life and can also enable you to be more successful. This is all the more vital as
you advance in the company and are called upon to set the direction for those around you.

On the other hand, an eco-careerist can arguably contribute more, or differently, by choosing to
work not in institutions with sustainable practices, but in those with unsustainable practices which may
be changed from the inside. For example, Ball (2007) outlines a case where “environmental accounting”
was used by accounting employees to build a response to environmental issues and thereby involve
themselves in “workplace activism.” Thus, other important career behaviours relating to sustainability
are activism within the organization, role modelling green values, and mentoring less senior colleagues.

The concept of career success might advantageously be re-assessed using criteria of
sustainability. To Derr’s (1986) well-known set of markers for career success – “getting ahead, getting
secure, getting free, getting balanced, getting high” - we may be able to add “getting green”. Objective
career success is usually measured in terms of salary and status, but eco-careers may lend themselves to
an objective assessment where the measure of success is the size of the individual’s work-related carbon
footprint as it evolves over time, or his or her record of achievement in effective green initiatives within
employing organizations. Alternatively, success might be defined in terms of positive influence
(including interpersonal influence) on employing organizations’ performance in sustainability. Theorists
have recently put more emphasis on subjective definitions of success and to assess success against
individualised definitions of career goals (Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005), such as (in this case)
achieving green goals. Individuals’ subjective success in achieving green career goals might be measured
attitudinally.

A research agenda for eco-careers
What are the key research questions? What types of study need to be completed? We posit the following research agenda:

- “Baseline” research is needed on the current state of, and the extent of ongoing change in, consciousness of sustainability as an issue in work and career behaviour, and of individuals’ commitment to green values. It also needs to be understood how they sustain such values and competing demands from other values and from the organizational and family roles that they occupy.

- Valid and reliable techniques are needed for measuring green attitudes and values, to be used in research and counselling relating to careers. Established values measurement techniques such as Schein’s (1985) Career Orientation Inventory may be out-of-date in terms of the attitudes they measure. “Carbon footprint”-related techniques to measure career success in sustainability terms are also needed.

- The relationship between individuals’ sustainability attitudes and practices in the home and in the workplace, and the possibility that there is an overarching value that underpins green behaviour in all an individuals’ roles needs to be examined.

- Studies are needed of individuals apparently pursuing eco-careers, to determine the practices they adopt while pursuing their day-to-day work, and the extent to which organizational and social support facilitate these initiatives, and the extent to which their values and behaviour are transmitted to, and adopted by others, both within their organizations and outside.

**Implications for practice**

The notion of an “eco-career” has its strongest practical implications for career actors – those pursuing their own careers. A useful first step would be to produce a guide to ‘eco-careering’ practice based on the research initiatives described above, with measuring one’s carbon footprint at work as the first item.
In education, there are contentious issues related to the role of educational institutions in promoting particular values, such as green values. Scientific facts and the recognition of the existence of sustainability perspectives and motivation should be part of the environment of ideas in which career decisions are made. Teachers, career counsellors and managers who supervise or advise career decision makers should move consciousness of sustainability issues to the forefront of their own thinking and development.

Plant (1999), writing for an audience of careers counsellors, advocated these principles of “green career development”:

- Career counseling should take into account and create awareness of the environmental impact of vocational choices.
- Career development services should play a proactive role in establishing training and educational opportunities with a positive contribution in environmental terms.
- Career development should be measured not only by an economic yardstick, but also by ethical accounting, for example by relating environmental goals to actual performance.
- Career development services themselves should inspect their own practice, for example, routines in the office/school in terms of recycling waste and reducing power consumption.

This prescription is based on a clear ideological slant in favor of green values. There are also practical implications for employing organizations. If they are indeed to be staffed increasingly by eco-careerists, that will provide an additional stimulus for the adoption of green practices and possibly a green strategy to which those employees can increasingly relate. Conversely, a cadre of employees who have green values provides organizations with the basis constantly to evaluate and re-evaluate their practices, and such employees may exercise their own pressures to do so if the organizations remain recalcitrant.
CONCLUSION

The notion of the eco-career is at present no more than that - a notion. Though a few people may practice eco-careers, they do not call it that, and most likely they do not identify it as a whole-career phenomenon. Yet there are convergences of thinking in science, public policy, conventional organizational wisdom, and, most crucially, career studies, which suggest that the study of eco-careers is worth pursuing both as a theory of societal change, a significant contemporary phenomenon and a body of practice for environmentally-conscious people. Is the eco-career an idea whose time has come?

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