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Middle Managerial Careers in the 21st Century

by

Dr Uma Jogulu
School of Management & Marketing, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia
Email: uma.jogulu@deakin.edu.au

and

Dr Melissa A. Parris
School of Management & Marketing, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia
Email: melissa.parris@deakin.edu.au

and

Professor Julie Wolfram Cox
School of Management & Marketing, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia
Email: julie.wolfram-cox@deakin.edu.au
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ABSTRACT  Managerial careers no longer conform to traditional career paths, progressing within the hierarchical structure of one or two organisations. Instead, organisational restructuring and changed business practices have impacted middle managers' job security and the need to take personal responsibility for their careers. Concurrently, the nature of middle managerial work has altered – bringing increasing intensity and a requirement to manage within new workplace practices such as flexibility initiatives and short-term managerial contracts. These changes have implications for how human resource professionals both attract and retain talented managers. This paper argues for a critical re-consideration of the distinct nature of middle managerial careers.

Keywords: Human resource development; learning and development; new forms of work organisation

Traditionally, managers could anticipate their career progressing within one or two organisations, with organisational loyalty and achievement being rewarded through a climb in the hierarchical structure. The career paths for managers were generally clearly delineated within these organisations, and it was often the organisation, rather than the individual, who managed an employee's career, with senior managers pointing out where they best felt the manager should focus their actions. Over the past twenty-five years, scholars have identified a shift away from these traditional career paths, as managerial careers become more non-linear (including a number of lateral moves both within and between organisations) and the responsibility for career management moves to the individual (Brousseau, Driver, Eneroth & Larsson 1996; Hall 1996; Herriot & Pemberton 1995). Much of this understanding developed at a time when organisations were experiencing major structural change, including downsizing actions which impacted large numbers of middle managers – an environment that continues today. However, organisational restructuring and changed business practices have not only impacted middle managers' job security and personal responsibility for their careers. The nature of managerial work has also been altered, leading to an intensification of the middle
management labour process (McCann, Morris & Hassard 2008), which has broader implications for middle managers’ career paths. Furthermore, recent research suggests that while the tasks and responsibilities of middle managers have increased considerably, many now have limited promotion prospects (Ebadan & Winstanley 1997; McCann, Hassard & Morris 2004; Redman, Wilkinson & Snape 1997). This paper considers the potential impact of new work practices on managerial careers. In doing so, we first provide a brief overview of current theories before discussing the changing work context for middle managers. Consideration is then given to the implications of the current workplace environment on middle managers’ careers.

**CAREER THEORIES: AN OVERVIEW**

The term *career* represents a range of meanings and definitions in the literature. Career stands for a “route” or “direction” which is pursued by an individual with a purpose or in order to attain a specific intention (Adamson, Doherty & Viney 1998). Some scholars and researchers have defined career as more than a job and referred to career as a professional employment with a distinct purpose to progress and move ahead (Adamson et al. 1998; Gunz & Peiperl 2007). Career can be viewed as a logical ordering of work experience so that it is linked to the successful positioning of an individual in their desired occupation. Thus, a career is not limited to a paid job, but incorporates a wider definition to include a process for continuous development and advancement in an organisational position. In fact, it was over three decades ago that Becker (1975) conceptualised career as a way to accumulate human capital in the form of education, training and experience throughout one’s lifetime. In contrast, Kaufman (1960) argued that career is all about maximising one’s self interest in gaining extreme power, wealth, status and prominence. In keeping with these varied definitions and understandings of the term *career*, career theories have been redefined, revisited and changed to best conceptualise and represent the evolving nature of careers for most employees in organisations.
The early work in the field of careers and the initial development of career theories arose from a sociological perspective by Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. These scholars inspired the early work by distinguished researchers in the field of careers including Hughes (1928), Goffman (1959), Becker (1952) and Schein (1978). In this initial work, early career paths were believed to progress in strict hierarchies and within one specific function, usually in a vertical route in selected organisations. This traditional career trajectory was a firm cycle of upward progression within one or two organisations that had tall structures and numerous levels. Career success in these organisations was viewed as progression up the multiple layers of the company. In the employment contract, employees would exchange job security for loyalty and would follow a linear, upward and predictable career development. In sum, organisations managed individual careers.

However, due to expansion in technology, intensified diversity in the labour market and the increased international competition between corporations, organisational structures have changed considerably. As organisations moved toward flatter structures in order to respond to external environmental changes, traditional career paths began to lose their relevance. With multiple levels of organisational hierarchies being “collapsed”, a clear career path vanished for the majority of middle managers. It was twenty years ago that Kanter (1989) noted, ‘career paths are no longer straightforward and predictable but have become idiosyncratic and confusing’ (p. 85).

In recognition of these changes, contemporary career theories identify more flexible career pathways that are beyond organisational limitations and boundaries. These structural and fundamental changes in conceptualising career paths arose in response to long-standing calls in the literature (Bailyn 1993; Marshall 1989), requesting traditional career theories to be revised to embrace a wider and inclusive perspective of career. In these new career theories, employees are encouraged to shift laterally and vertically in their career movement if they aspire for progression. This altered view of the employment contract suggests that employees replace...
performance at work for training and development in order to remain employable (Adamson et al. 1998).

Some scholars have termed these new career paths or trends as ‘boundaryless’ career trajectories (Arthur 1994; Arthur & Rousseau 1996) whereby employees are required to manage their own careers outside the physical organisational boundaries, and therefore are not constrained by rigid organisational structures. Furthermore, the notion of boundaryless career paths is the reverse conceptualisation to traditional career paths because it calls for transformation in the way in which organisations operate and individual careers are practised (Arthur & Rousseau 1996). Rather than occupations and employment creating organisational structure, this view of career paths emphasises that individual skills and expertise build organisational success (Sullivan, Carden & Martin 1998).

The increased recognition for boundaryless career theories and the declining trend in traditional managerial careers are also evidenced by changes in the labour market demographics. For instance, employees without tenure and with short-term contracts have risen in recent years worldwide, including for managerial positions. Many countries around the globe including the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan and Spain have statistics that suggest that contract employees have risen and indirectly point towards the declining patterns in traditional careers (Ackah & Heaton 2004). These changes to the organisational context for all employees identify the ongoing need for researchers to scrutinise careers in new ways. In particular, we argue that current models of careers do not adequately represent the situation for middle managers today. In furthering our understanding of managerial career paths, it is important to consider the implications of new work practices, as we now discuss.
NEW WORK PRACTICES AND THE MIDDLE MANAGER

Both the nature and context of work have changed over time due to the impact of various factors, including: increasing workforce participation by women; changing patterns of work, particularly the prevalence of longer working hours; a move to knowledge-based work; and technological advances influencing both how and where work is done (Blyton & Dastmalchian 2006; Lewis & Cooper 2005). New work practices, which focus on flexibility, innovation and rapid response to change, have resulted in increased work demands and longer working hours for many employees (Brett & Stroh 2003; Lewis & Cooper 2005). In particular, the notion that one result of these changes is the blurring of boundaries between work and the rest of life is increasingly discussed in the work-life balance literature (e.g. Lewis, Rapoport & Gambles 2003; Wilson, Butler, James, Partington, Singh & Vinnicombe 2004).

These changes to ways of working have dual implications for middle managers – those managers who are in various stages of their careers. First, as organisational employees, middle managers have been experiencing intensification of their work, through both wider spans of control (Klagge 1998) and enlarged roles (Balogun 2003). Second, as managers, they have responsibility both for the implementation of new initiatives and ongoing people-management of staff working within these changed work practices. “Success” in a middle management role requires not only achievement of the manager’s goals, but the ability to support their employees’ development and achievement in the modern workplace.

While the particular experiences of middle managers are still under-represented in organisational studies, researchers have begun to focus on the effects of new work practices on middle managers’ working and personal lives (e.g. McCann et al. 2008; Parris, Vickers & Wilkes 2008b; Sims 2003; Turnbull 2001), particularly considering the notion of work-life balance. In particular, it has been argued that intensification of middle managerial work is impacting these managers’ ability to develop both formal and informal networks (Parris,
Vickers & Wilkes 2008a) – which has ramifications for career development, particularly in moving between organisations. Consideration has also been given to how economic and structural changes are impacting managerial career paths (e.g., Newell & Dopson 1996; Redman et al. 1997; Thomas & Linstead 2002). However, limited attention has been given to the implications of new organisational work practices for middle managers’ careers. We now consider the potential consequences for the careers of middle managers of a number of these changed practices, namely, increased work intensity, flexibility initiatives, and short-term managerial contracts.

MANAGERIAL CAREERS IN THE CHANGING WORK ENVIRONMENT

Both intensified work patterns and longer working hours are now the norm for many middle managers (Thomas & Dunkerley 1999), as the flattening of organisational structures has led to wider spans of control and enlarged roles. A number of studies of middle managers have indicated positive reactions to the increased variety and responsibility in their roles (Dopson & Neumann 1998). The opportunity for increased autonomy and wider skill use is seen as both interesting and rewarding for many middle managers (McCann et al. 2008). We argue that greater exposure to a range of experiences and opportunity for skills development should prove a positive aspect for managers’ career development today, and assist them in moving between organisations. Furthermore, as middle managers are given the opportunity for greater control with respect to decision-making and problem-solving (Thomas & Dunkerley 1999), there is the potential for exposure to “higher” managerial responsibilities that may enable more than just a lateral move when changing organisations. However, the antithesis of this optimistic view is that flatter organisational structures lead to greater distinctions between managerial levels, and some managers may never have the opportunity for skills development towards a higher level and instead be unable to make any but lateral moves, regardless of their desire for career advancement. Furthermore, it should be recognised that not all middle managers have reported perceiving their role as ‘enhanced’, but merely expanded in the amount of time it consumes.
This intensification of their current roles can have a negative impact for individuals who now have sole responsibility for their career development, as they have limited time to reflect or develop new skills (Parris et al. 2008a). For senior managers and human resource professionals seeking to recruit talented middle managers, consideration should be given to the “time crunch” for these individuals. These factors have relevance both for the methods used to seek out potential employees and what the organisation might offer to attract and retain them, such as providing time and space for personal and professional development.

A second change in the work environment which has implications for middle managers is that of flexibility initiatives. A key driver for new ways of organising work has been increasing expectations for both organisational and personal flexibility (Anell & Wilson 2000; Reilly 2001). These initiatives have been expounded as positive for both organisations (in enabling rapid response to changing business demands) and employees (in enabling them to better meet family and other non-work responsibilities). However, employees vary in their use of these initiatives, which is not solely related to their perceived personal benefit (Lambert & Haley-Lock 2004). Managers also appear limited in their ability – or perceived ability – to take advantage of such initiatives. In particular, both middle and senior managers have reported a concern for how their organisational commitment would be viewed – and ultimately their career prospects – if they chose to take advantage of favourable flexibility arrangements (Drew & Murtagh 2005; Parris et al. 2008a). These concerns suggest that, while managerial career paths today are following the non-linear and “boundaryless” trajectory that researchers have described, organisational expectations of managers still present a façade of the traditional career path. The expectations of long-term job security may have all but disappeared for employees, but impression management on the part of managers remains crucial (eg. Palmer, Welker, Campbell & Magner 2001); the middle manager must be seen to want to progress within the organisation. The ability of managers to take advantage of non-financial incentives in the workplace warrants further consideration by executives and human resource professionals.
With reduced “rewards” through career progression within organisations, the potential for flexibility may assist organisations in retaining high-performing managers.

The final work practice we consider here is that of short-term managerial contracts. In contrast to the above discussion, these “interim managers” (Inks on, Heising & Rousseau 2001) have less concern for managing the impression of long-term organisational commitment. Indeed, for a manager to truly be in control of their career – and have time to both reflect on their career plans and enhance their skills – contractual work may prove the optimal vehicle for the ‘new’ career path. However, while expanding in their use, such contracts are still not the norm and therefore not a viable option for all managers. Indeed, the boundaryless career concept has been criticised for its potentially narrow applicability (Pringle & Mallon 2003). The positive picture of the new boundaryless career still remains out of reach for many managers, particularly those who are ‘middle-aged, working in regions of relatively-high unemployment [or] with limited mobility due to domestic commitments’ (Thomas & Dunkerley 1999: 167). Furthermore, while some individuals may choose to pursue short-term contracts or self-employment to meet their personal ambitions, this is not an option for many due to financial, family and other constraints. There is a need to consider those for whom middle management remains the zenith of their organisational progression, and identify factors that play a role in career development within the “boundaries” of the organisational and industry structures in which these managers operate.

CONCLUSION

The concept of career has received much research attention but the particular experiences of middle managers are less commonly identified within career theories in organisational research. Although previous research has considered managerial careers in general, we argue that middle management can not merely be considered as a stage individuals “pass through” in their progression to senior management. The particular workplace experiences of middle managers – and the changing context in which they now unfold – necessitate a critical consideration of the
distinct nature of middle managerial careers. We propose that future research investigate how
those in middle management positions describe their own careers, including their aspirations for
further career progression or whether they are comfortable at their current levels. Such research
should include consideration of middle managers' age and life stage, incorporating both
personal and external influences.

We have discussed how the juxtaposition of contemporary understanding of careers with new
forms of work organisation brings particular implications for middle managers. One key
concern is the shift of responsibility for career management and development from the
organisation to the individual, at a time when middle managers' roles have been identified as
more intensive and requiring longer working hours. Building on existing research – and critique
– of boundaryless careers, future research could enhance understanding through investigating
how middle managers today view the degree of organisational responsibility for their career
development, in addition to their expectations of opportunities and support within their
organisations.

Issues related to managers' career development such as organisational entry and exit,
performance evaluation, training and promotion are all important elements of human resource
management systems (Bagdadli 2007). However, the issues discussed here highlight the risk of
a disconnection between these elements. If promotion opportunities remain limited, what other
rewards might be offered to high-performing middle managers? We argue that further research
focused on middle managers' workplace expectations and experiences is required. How do
middle managers themselves understand new forms of work? What are the implications for
both their motivation and their ability to perform capably in their roles? The findings from this
research would assist in better aligning evaluation and reward systems (both formal and
informal) with the current context in which middle managers work. For example, it may be that
further development of existing skills no longer provides a valuable incentive. Rather, an
organisation may consider training middle managers in new areas that can benefit both the organisation and the individual manager.

In exploring these research areas, we argue that there is an ongoing need to recognise – and respond to – individual differences in middle managers’ circumstances and aspirations. Continuing research with middle managers will enable development of an inclusive understanding of their careers, with recognition of new work practices in addition to individual, organisational and external influences.
References


