

# Protean Careers of the 21st Century

Douglas T. Hall

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## Executive Overview

*"The career is dead—long live the career!"<sup>1</sup> Such is the mixed message regarding careers that we are carrying into the next millennium. The business environment is highly turbulent and complex, resulting in terribly ambiguous and contradictory career signals. Individuals, perhaps in self-defense, are becoming correspondingly ambivalent about their desires and plans for career development. The traditional psychological contract in which an employee entered a firm, worked hard, performed well, was loyal and committed, and thus received ever-greater rewards and job security, has been replaced by a new contract based on continuous learning and identity change, guided by the search for what Herb Shepard called "the path with a heart." In short, the organizational career is dead, while the protean career is alive and flourishing. In this special issue of The Executive we will examine the ways the career environment and the executive of the 21st century will shape the direction of careers in the years to come. In this opening paper, we will provide a brief overview of the emerging career landscape, for both organizations and individuals. Then we will turn to an overview of the papers in this Special Issue and then to the papers themselves.*

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## The New Career Contract

While the popular writing on this topic has undoubtedly been overdone, it is clear that in the next century what we are now calling the new career contract will be simply part of everyday work life. Let us consider what some essential features of that career contract will be. (These features are summarized in Table 1, based on the work of Hall and Mirvis.)

*Protean careers.* The career of the 21st century will be protean, a career that is driven by the person, not the organization, and that will be reinvented by the person from time to time, as the person and the environment change. (This term is derived from the Greek god Proteus, who could change shape at will.)

*Psychological success.* The ultimate goal of the career is psychological success, the feeling of pride and personal accomplishment that comes from achieving one's most important goals in life, be they achievement, family happiness, inner peace, or something else. This is in contrast to vertical success under the old career contract, where the goal was climbing the corporate pyramid and making a lot of money. While there is only one way to achieve vertical success (making it to the top), there are infinite ways to achieve psychological success, as many ways as there are unique human needs.

Table 1  
The Protean Career of the 21st Century

- The Goal: Psychological Success
- The Career is Managed by the Person, not the Organization
- The Career is a Lifelong Series of Identity Changes and Continuous Learning
- "Career Age" Counts, not Chronological Age
- The Organization Provides
  - Work Challenges and
  - Relationships
- Development is not Necessarily:
  - Formal Training
  - Retraining
  - Upward Mobility
- Profile for Success:
  - From Know-How . . . . . To Learn-How
  - From Job Security . . . . . To employability
  - From Organizational Careers . . . . . To Protean Careers
  - From Work Self . . . . . To Whole Self

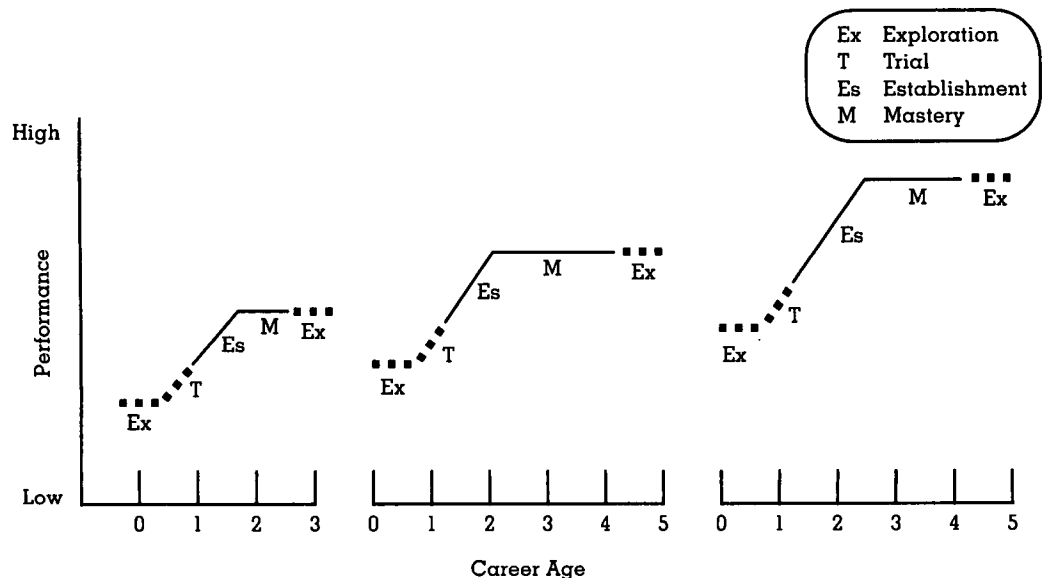
Source: Douglas T. Hall and Philip H. Mirvis, "New styles of management: Career builders or career blockers." Presented at the 1995 Work and Family Conference, "The New Employee-Employer Contract: A Work-Family Perspective," sponsored by the Conference Board and the Families and Work Institute, New York, N.Y., April 26, 1995.

*Continuous learning.* The career of the 21st century is not measured by chronological age and life stages, but by continuous learning and identity changes. Rather than think of a career as made up of a lifelong series of developmental stages, as we might expect from the work of 20th century developmental psychologists such as Daniel Levinson and Donald Super, we will regard the 21st century career as a series of short learning stages (Figure 1). What will count will be "career age," not chronological age.

Figure 1

CAREER STAGES: (LEARNING VS. AGE)

THE NEW MODEL: LEARNING STAGES



*Sources of development: Work challenges and relationships.* In the 21st century model career, growth will be a process of continuous learning fueled by a combination of the person, work challenges, and relationships. We already know from a large body of research that the bulk of our career learning comes from job assignments that stretch us in new ways. We also learn a great deal from our connections with other people in the work environment, be they coworkers, subordinates, customers, superiors, or members of various formal and informal networks.<sup>2</sup> Formal training and retraining programs will be less relevant to the continuous learning process, as they are not only expensive but too cumbersome, too time-consuming to produce, and too disconnected from emerging business needs.

*Profile for success.* In the 21st century, demand in the labor market will shift from those with know-how to those with learn-how. Job security will continue to fade in importance and will be replaced by the goal of employability. (In the current environment, employers like Hewlett-Packard are providing a 1996 preview of this element of the 21st century career environment.) Individuals will expect (and be expected) to bring their whole selves to work; they will not be expected to park their personal lives and values and passions at the office door. The result will be a jump in the creative energy that is brought to work.

#### **Psychological Success and the Path with a Heart**

The new career contract is not a pact with the organization; it is an agreement with one's self and one's work. The path to the top has been replaced by the path with a heart. Herb Shepard used this term to describe success in terms of one's vision and central values. The path with a heart involves one's own most-appreciated talents:

These are the things that you can now or potentially could do with excellence, which are fulfilling in the doing of them; so fulfilling that if you also get paid to do them, it feels not like compensation, but like a gift.<sup>3</sup>

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Unfortunately, it is easy for a person to become successful in an organization, and even in a psychological sense (i.e., in terms of job satisfaction), and still lose sight of one's most deeply-held values. For example, Karen Camp was an account manager with responsibilities that spanned eight states. She was on a business trip just after her son Webb's first birthday. She called home—and learned from the sitter that Webb had just taken his first steps. Her reaction: "I realized that his first year had gone by so quickly, I had been like a visitor in his life."<sup>4</sup>

One loses sight of the path with a heart by failing to realize that one's most important values or needs may have changed. Early career and life choices may not necessarily be best for a person in midcareer. As one shocked 42-year-old manager exclaimed in the middle of a self-reflective career planning exercise, "Oh, no! I just realized I let a 20-year-old choose my wife and my career!"<sup>5</sup>

Pursuing the protean career requires a high level of self-awareness and personal responsibility. Many people cherish the autonomy of the protean career, but many others find this freedom terrifying, experiencing it as a lack of external support. A developmental or learning process is required to adapt. Psychologist Robert Kegan found that fewer than half the adults in his samples were comfortable operating independently in a complex environment.<sup>6</sup>

The positive potential of the new protean career is described by David Noer:

The relationship is still win-win, but it is more equal. The employee does not blindly trust the organization with his or her career. The organization does not assume an unassumable burden. The tremendous energy once required to maintain relationships can be turned to doing good work. The common ground, the meeting point, is not the relationship, but the explicit task. This task-focused relationship is not only healthier for the individual and the organization, it also facilitates the diversity necessary for future survival, since the emphasis is on the task, not on the gender, race or traits of the person performing the task.<sup>7</sup>

### **Career Metacompetencies: Identity and Adaptability**

To realize the potential of the new career, the individual must develop new competencies related to the management of self and career. Since the new career will be increasingly a continuous learning process, the person must learn how to develop self-knowledge and adaptability. These have been called metaskills, since they are the skills required for learning how to learn.<sup>8</sup>

We can think of learning in terms of two dimensions, one describing the time span of the learning (long-term or short-term), and one describing what the learning is about (task learning or personal learning). Personal learning is learning about one's self, about who one is, about one's identity. When we combine these two dimensions of learning, we get a four-cell matrix:<sup>9</sup>

		Object of Learning	
		Task	Self
Time Span	Short term	Improving performance	Changing attitudes
	Long term	Improving adaptability	Developing and extending identity

Short-term learning about a task is what we call performance or skill learning. Short-term learning about the self involves learning about one's personal attitudes (e.g., examining stereotypes in diversity workshops or developing commitment to a team in a team-building activity). Changing performances and attitudes both affect current experience at work.

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On the other hand, learning to improve task performance over a long time requires learning how to adapt to changed task conditions over time. And taking a long-term perspective on the self over time means learning about one's identity and how one constructs one's views of reality. The more the person can learn to adapt to changed task conditions and to form new images of self as the world changes, the more the person is, in fact, learning how to learn. Thus, adaptability and identity are competencies of a higher order than basic skills and knowledge. It is these capabilities for learning how to learn that will be the basic currency of the self-directed protean career of the next century. It will simply be too time-consuming and too costly for people to wait to be told what to learn or to wait until a new training program is created to create learning for them.

### **Relational Learning**

Adaptability and identity learning cannot be done alone. They require

connection and interactions with other people. By enlisting the help of others, a person is essentially leveraging his or own personal resources—and in the process is probably also helping the others, as well. Thus, the world's net supply of resources for learning is expanding.

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As Joyce Fletcher has pointed out, the main form of learning in the future will be collaborative, rather than characterized by what she calls "individual heroics." Fletcher argues that growth-fostering relational interactions will be distinguished by three qualities:

- *Interdependence.* ". . . [The first critical quality entails] a belief that interdependence, rather than autonomy, is the ideal state in which to achieve, grow, and develop. . . . Implicit in this belief in interdependence is an acceptance of the responsibility to contribute to the development of others and a recognition of the opportunity to grow through these enabling interactions."
- *Mutuality.* "Relational growth depends on both parties approaching the interaction expecting to grow and benefit from it. . . . Achieving mutuality in relational interactions, then, depends on both parties having two sets of skills—skills in enabling others (ability to assume the expert role in guiding, teaching, explaining) and skills in being enabled (ability to step away from the expert role in order to be influenced by and learn from others)."
- *Reciprocity.* "Reciprocity refers to the expectation that both parties will have the skills to achieve this two-directional model of growth and will be motivated to use them. That is, it assumes that both parties feel a responsibility and a desire to be both teacher and learner."<sup>12</sup>

For practitioners, Fletcher points out that the critical task is to create conditions and practices to promote the development of the skills for growth-in-connection. One must:

- Clarify and communicate the value of relational skills
- Recognize and reward the value that relational activity currently adds to organizational effectiveness, and
- Address the issue of work-life integration (since much of this relational learning occurs in personal relationships and is then transferred to the work setting).

### **Diversity Learning**

Another key resource that will be part of the career landscape in the next century will be a clear valuing of differences as a source of learning. Not only will diversity continue to provide a powerful competitive advantage for the organization, but it will serve a similar purpose for the effective protean individual.

Barbara Walker<sup>12</sup> has shown that a specific set of relational skills enables a person to learn from differences. These are precisely the same as the career metaskills that we discussed earlier. She describes the core tasks of learning to value differences as:

- Learning about people one regards as different
- Learning about oneself
- Learning how to work with different people differently.

Walker writes:

... when people undertake this [valuing differences] work, they develop a broad range of personal abilities essential to all kinds of endeavors—including career self-development: learning how to learn, self-discovery, effective communication, building interdependent relationships, and coping.<sup>13</sup>

This, then, completes our quick tour of the expected career landscape of the next century. We have not discussed issues such as globalization, technology, and issues of equality of access to rewarding careers. These will be covered in later papers. Let us turn, then, to a brief overview of the rest of this special issue.

### Issue Overview

Because of the strong response to the Call for Papers for this Special Issue on Careers in the 21st Century, we will be presenting the papers in two sections. The papers in the first section appear in this issue; the papers in the second section will appear throughout 1997. This issue deals with strategic issues of careers in the 21st century. Subsequent papers will cover difficult challenges posed by 21st century protean careers, such as the working poor, temporary employment, career entrenchment, and career development in the context of work teams.

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Those of you who are familiar with the careers literature should be pleased with the number of career thought leaders whose work is represented in this volume. A number of relatively new faces are presented, as well.

This issue starts with four papers that take far-ranging views of the external environment of the next century and consider how that environment will play itself out in career dynamics. In "Characteristics of managerial careers in the twenty-first century," Brent Allred, Charles Snow, and Raymond Miles take us on a historical journey to help us understand the origins of modern organizational careers in the 19th and 20th centuries. Starting with functional structures that fit the 19th century business requirements of large specialized firms in industries such as railroads and steel, they move to a divisionalized structure after World War II to respond to national markets, and then to the matrix form that in the last third of the 20th century has responded to the requirements of complexity and change. Each business environment and organizational form created its own requisite career pattern and set of managerial competencies. The opening of global markets and global competition at the brink of the 21st century has created the need for networked organizations and therefore much more flexible careers.

Allred, Snow, and Miles go beyond the networked organization and see the emergence of the cellular organization, a minimalist structure that exists to support the activities of entrepreneurial professionals. Such organizations share many of the properties of guilds and professional associations and create conditions for members to take charge of their own careers, with rich resources for relational learning. In this cellular form, we will see a shift in required managerial competencies toward the following: knowledge-based technical specialty, cross-functional and international experience, collaborative leadership, self-management skills (including skills in work/life balancing), and personal traits such as flexibility, integrity, and trustworthiness.

As the environment of the career changes, so too must our language for conceptualizing and discussing careers. This is part of the larger culture change that is taking place around the meaning of the career. In their paper, "A career lexicon for the 21st century," Michael Arthur and Denise Rousseau serve as guides through this largely-undiscussed shift in meaning. Using the advice of a manager to an employee as text, they trace through the key words and clarify for us the new meanings, along with advice on how to employ them for career self-management.

A somewhat different view of the 21st century career environment is presented by Nigel Nicholson in "Career systems in crisis: Change and opportunity in the information age." Nicholson raises the intriguing possibility that the currently-touted network form may be more mythical than real, just as the old bureaucratic form never existed in practice the way it was purported to on paper. In considering the current realities of organizational life (e.g., downsizing, delayering) and their total-systems impact on the person, he paints a stark picture of the new deal in careers and spins out a variety of types of career systems. Looking at the requirements for careers in the information age, he stresses the need for maintaining the tension between innovation and tradition and between centralized and decentralized elements. The goal is a good linkage between the people system and the job market system by using the capabilities of the management and information system.

Nicholson's theme of the dark side of the new career contract is picked up and expanded on by Kenneth Brousseau, Michael Driver, Kristina Eneroth, and Rikard Larsson in "Career pandemonium: Realigning organizations and individuals." As they put it, these internal organizational changes are "wreaking havoc" on traditional careers. Their concern is that the currently popular call for career self-direction may leave organizations (or their leaders) feeling free of responsibility for employees' careers, but they point out that employees still have the need for both stability and change, as Nicholson also argues. Thus, Brousseau and colleagues conclude that the remedy is for organizations to recognize the diversity of definitions of career success that we see in the work force and to support and reward the growth of different sets of competencies related to these career patterns (linear, expert, spiral and transitory). The authors present a model and corporate examples for linking organizational strategies to career cultures.

Moving from broad environmental and cultural changes, the final three papers offer specific action possibilities for meeting these strategic challenges. Manuel London reviews research and offers practical ideas in a paper whose title speaks for itself: "Redeployment and continuous learning in the 21st century: Hard learning and positive examples from the downsizing era." Again we see no glossing over of the difficulties of the new protean career, but a comprehensive review of the employee displacement that has occurred in recent years, particularly for the older worker. In the emerging economy, many have been left behind. London describes some of the more important programs, public, nonprofit, corporate, community, and professional, and their effectiveness in facilitating career learning and transitions. He concludes with the good news that these employee development processes can and do work. Thus, it is in an organization's interests to retain, motivate, and develop older workers, rather than to displace them.

The issue of promoting employee change (e.g., development, revised identities) and maintaining some stability has been mentioned in several papers, but up to

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now we have not focused directly on what this means in practice. We get some answers in Ed Schein's paper, "Career anchors revisited: Implications for career development in the 21st century." In this paper, the father of organizational careers (and this editor's dissertation chair) takes us on a journey back to the origins of his famous career anchors concept and then considers its relevance to today's environment. At a time when people are feeling buffeted in all directions by the winds of change, there are many ways that, ironically, a clear sense of one's career anchor can promote growth and change.

We conclude this section by coming back to the changing career environment. We do so by looking inside an environment that has for years had many of the boundaryless (or networked or cellular) features that our writers are saying will characterize the future of organizations in other industries: the American film industry. Candace Jones and Robert DeFillippi, take us "Back to the future in film: Combining industry- and self-knowledge to meet career challenges of the 21st century." By showing the ways industry-knowledge and self-knowledge operate to produce boundaryless careers in film, they create a topological map of important dimensions of the boundaryless career system. This map helps promote the growth of six key types of learning (or competencies): knowing what, knowing why, knowing when, knowing how, knowing where, and knowing who. For each competency, they trace out the challenges and specific strategies that are used successfully in the American film industry, as well as the implications for facilitating successful careers in other industries in the future.

This, then, will conclude our first section. I hope you will share my excitement with the new ways of thinking about careers that these papers represent. I hope you will see them as realistic in showing the problems as well as the potential of the new career environment. And I hope you will see them as practical and concrete in describing ways executives might think about (or rethink) these future career issues. In subsequent issues, we will conclude by addressing in detail specific challenges of careers in the 21st century.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Douglas T. Hall and Associates, *The Career is Dead—Long Live the Career: A Relational Approach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996). Regarding the new career contract, see also D.T. Hall and P.H. Mirvis, "Careers as Lifelong Learning," in A. Howard (Ed.), *The Changing Nature of Work* (pp. 323-361). (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995) and D.T. Hall and P.H. Mirvis, "The New Career Contract: Developing the whole person at midlife and beyond." *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 47, 269-289.

<sup>2</sup> For more detail on relational influences on career development in the emerging environment, see Hall and Associates, *The Career is Dead—Long Live the Career* (op. cit.) and Michael B. Arthur and Denise M. Rousseau (eds.), *The Boundaryless Career: A New Employment Principle for a New Organizational Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). See also D.T. Hall and P.H. Mirvis, "Careers as lifelong learning," in A. Howard (Ed.), *The Changing Nature of Work* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995, pp. 323-361) and D.T. Hall and P.H. Mirvis, "The new career contract: Developing the whole person at midlife and beyond," *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 47, 269-289.

<sup>3</sup> H.A. Shepard, "On the realization of human potential: A path with a heart." In M.B. Arthur, L. Bailyn, D.J. Levinson, and H.A. Shepard (Eds.), *Working With Careers*. New York: Center for Research on Careers, Graduate School of Business, Columbia University, 1984, 25-46.

<sup>4</sup> Hall, D.T., "Managing yourself: Building a career." In A.R. Cohen (Ed.), *The Portable MBA in Management*, New York: Wiley, 1993, 190-206.

<sup>5</sup> Hall *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> R. Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> D. Noer, *Healing the Wounds*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 199x, 176-177.

<sup>8</sup> D.T. Hall, "Dilemmas in linking succession planning to individual executive learning." *Human Resource Management*, 25, 235-265.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>10</sup> J.K. Fletcher, "A relational approach to the protean worker." In D.T. Hall and Associates, *The Career is Dead*, op. cit., 124-115.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> B.A. Walker, "The value of diversity in career self-development." In Douglas T. Hall and Associates, *The Career is Dead—Long Live the Career*. Op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.



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About the Author

Douglas T. (Tim) Hall is a professor of organizational behavior and director of the Executive Development Roundtable in the School of Management at Boston University. He is the author of *Careers in Organizations* and editor of *Career Development* and *The Career is Dead—Long Live the Career: A Relational Approach*. He is the co-author of *Organizational Climates and Careers*, *The Two-Career Couple*, *Experiences in Management and Organizational Behavior*, *Human Resource Management*, *Career Development in Organizations*, *Turbulence in the American Workplace*, and co-editor of *The Handbook of Career Theory*. His research interests include work/life balance, career planning and development, executive succession, executive coaching, and managing diversity. He has served as a consultant to organizations such as Sears, AT&T, General Electric, Ford Motor Company, Eli Lilly, Analog Devices, and the World Bank.

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