

**Recommendations for Successfully Navigating the Boundaryless Career:  
From Theory to Practice**

Sherry E. Sullivan  
and  
Ryan Emerson

Department of Management  
College of Business  
Bowling Green State University  
Bowling Green, Ohio 43403  
(419) 372-2366  
ssulliv@cba.bgsu.edu

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The way we view and enact careers has markedly changed. The popular press had heralded “The End of the Job” (Bridges, 1994) and the “Free Agent Nation” (Pink, 1998). Academic research notes that the ascent up the corporate ladder is no longer the reality for most U.S. workers (see Sullivan, 1999 for a review). For example, Schmeer and Reitman (1993) report that 23% of MBAs surveyed experienced early career gaps (e.g., periods of unemployment of at least one month) and 13% experienced mid-career gaps. Most Americans now change jobs every four-and-one-half years (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).

Traditionally, careers were thought to evolve within the context of one or two firms and were conceptualized to progress in linear career stages. Success was defined by the organization and measured by promotions and merit increases. Although some individuals (e.g., self-employed, contract workers) have always been outside traditional career models, the traditional career has dominated U.S. employment, primarily because most organizational structures supported it. Now however, the tall, multi-layer, functionally organized structures characteristic of many large companies have changed. Firms have downsized to become more flexible in response to environmental factors like rapid technological advancements and increased global competition. As organizations have changed, so has their workforce. Workers outside of the traditional career model, who have “boundaryless careers,” are becoming the norm rather than the exception (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Whereas the traditional career was defined as professional advancement within one or two firms, a boundaryless career is defined as “...a sequence of job opportunities that go beyond the boundaries of a single employment setting” (Defillippi & Arthur, 1996, p. 116).

The purpose of this paper is to examine three major characteristics in employment relative to the movement from the traditional to the boundaryless career, and to recommend strategies individuals can use to successfully navigate this changing work environment. Given that academics are often criticized for not translating theory into practical applications, it is hoped that this article begins to bridge the gap between career research and individual career management.

### **Major Characteristics of the Boundaryless Career**

Given increased technological changes and globalization, organizational forms have become flatter and more fluid. In turn, careers have changed. Workers have become less committed to a single firm and occupation. There are three major changes in the move from traditional, organizationally bounded careers to boundaryless careers.

#### **(1) Change from Organizational Loyalty to Professional Loyalty.**

The psychological employment contract between firms and workers has altered. Under the old contract, workers exchanged loyalty for job security. Under the new

contract, workers exchange performance for continuous learning and marketability (Altman & Post, 1996; Hall & Mirvis, 1996; Rousseau, 1989; Rousseau & Wade-Benzoni, 1995). This change in the psychological contract has resulted in decreased job security, (Batt, 1996; Beckman, 1996; Scott, O'Shaughnessy & Cappelli, 1996), and decreased employee loyalty (Goffee & Scase, 1992; Murrell, Frieze & Olson, 1996).

In the past, workers were more attached to their employing firm, working for it for long spans of time, perhaps even until retirement. Today, workers move more freely between organizations. For example, Saxenian (1996) studied professionals in Silicon Valley where job hopping was the norm and job search information was shared among colleagues who worked for different employers. Saxenian reported how these professionals developed loyalty based on professional relationships rather than organizational membership. These professional relationships permitted increased job mobility.

Given employees' decreased attachment to employing organizations in a boundaryless career, workers must focus on developing competencies that are transferable to many organizations rather than on firm-specific knowledge and skills. Thus, individuals should seek out opportunities for continuous learning and obtain skills that increase their marketability.

## (2) Change from Focus on Extrinsic to Intrinsic Rewards.

Traditionally, Americans have measured success in terms of salary, status, and power. Often, however, employees have earned them at the expense of personal values and ideals (Hall & Mirvis, 1996). This may be one reason for the increased interest in spirituality in organizations.

Some organizations now focus on educating workers for employability. For example, The Body Shop education center's goal is to maximize individual potential as it discusses topics ranging from aging, to AIDS, to urban survival (Hall, 1996). Similarly, all 4,000 employees of Australia's leading real-estate company, Lend Leases, receive \$1000 annually to spend on a variety of activities including health counseling, computer training, and life-planning coaching (Labarre, 1999).

Not all organizations provide such intrinsic rewards and opportunities for personal growth. Zabusky and Barley (1996) examined the careers of technicians and found that while they valued growth and challenging work over promotions, their firms did not reward their expertise or achievements. Managing a boundaryless career requires an individual seek out and contract personally fulfilling work. As Hall and Moss (1998, pg. 25) note, "the protean person's own personal career choices and search for self-fulfillment are the unifying or integrative elements in his or her life. The criterion of success is internal (psychological success), not external." Today's employment contract is not with the organization, but with one's self. Some persons are choosing fulfilling work over jobs with higher salaries or more status.

### (3) Change from Firm Reliance to Self Reliance.

In the traditional career, the organization took the responsibility for managing an individual's professional development. It offered long term employment and job security in exchange for worker loyalty. The organization offered firm specific training, usually at specific points in the career. However, this management training often ceased once the individual reached a certain age—usually as young as 40 (Sullivan & Duplaga, 1997)—or was seen as lacking potential for upper management. Thus, workers were further bound to the organization as they lacked transferable skills and marketability (Sullivan, Carden & Martin, 1998).

Today, as workers hop from job to job, some organizations offer less training and/or focus training efforts on their core, long-term employees and on legally required issues (e.g., safety, sexual harassment). Without organizational training support, workers must accept responsibility and seek opportunities for their own training and development. Those who do not engage in such continuous development will be unable to compete in this quickly changing job market.

### **Strategies for Managing a Boundaryless Career**

Success in a boundaryless career requires great attention to personal career management. Indeed, it is not enough to merely adapt to the changing career environment--one must take advantage of it. To that end, the following three major recommendations are suggested for managing a boundaryless career.

#### (1) Develop Transferable Skills.

Formerly, a worker's skill set was developed within, by, and for a particular firm. Training and development programs taught firm-specific abilities and attendance was mandatory. Any applicability to other industries or jobs was coincidental. Today, workers moving across organizational and occupational boundaries need transferable skills. For instance, innovative companies including 3M, Motorola, Eli Lilly and GE, use action learning programs that permit workers to develop new skills while completing real work projects (Mirvis & Hall, 1996). Some organizations offer team building and diversity programs, for example, that benefit the firm but are not firm-specific.

Careerists need to focus on skills that will increase their marketability. Research on the boundaryless career suggests that organizations prefer generalist over specialist skills because of increased team-based approaches and new technologies (e.g., Scott, O'Shaughnessy & Cappelli, 1996; Useem, 1996). For example, Beckman (1996) examined how managerial jobs at Hewlett-Packard became more fluid as the company evolved from a bureaucratic to a more networked organization. Skills in negotiation, teamwork, and cross-boundary management grew in importance over traditional supervisory and technical skills.

Furthermore, to be able to switch organizations, individuals will need to have a strong network of contacts and negotiation skills. For instance, approximately 2500 former Microsoft workers pay \$100 a year to join the Microsoft Alumni Network. The network is used to recruit job candidates and form virtual teams for contract projects (Mieszkowski, 1999).

In an era of dejobbing, more employees' activities are centered around projects and not specific job content. Those managing a boundaryless career are increasingly negotiating their salaries and their roles—both the desired and undesired aspects. Negotiating personal responsibilities in accordance with psychological desires is gaining more legitimacy amongst managers. In the era of the free agent, this becomes an important key to success.

### (2) Obtain Psychologically Meaningful Work.

Elemental to obtaining meaningful work is an understanding of what is personally meaningful. This requires self-evaluation and introspection. Given the fast pace nature of American society, few workers regularly engage in self-assessment. Classic books such as Richard Bolles' *What Color is Your Parachute?* and Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* may be useful tools for self-examination. Others may find life enhancement retreats, such as those offered by Covey Institute, Canyon Ranch and some universities, aid in developing self-awareness.

Research has discovered that white-collar jobs are becoming increasingly complex and time consuming. For example, Landers, Rebitzer and Taylor (1996) examined how law firms and a consulting firm based promotion decisions on long working hours and travel as surrogate measures of commitment and ambition. These norms resulted in a "long hours trap," making it difficult for employees trying to balance work and nonwork demands. Thus, individuals need to examine the balance of work/nonwork that is acceptable to them.

Individuals also need to seek out organizational cultures that match their values and lifestyles. For instance, firms including American Express, DuPont and AT&T, have voluntary sabbatical programs that permit employees to self-learn and grow as they work on community service projects. Similarly, Xerox has a work-family action research project whereby work practices that make it difficult for employees to balance work and family life are examined and changed (Fletcher, 1996).

### (3) Manage Your Own Career.

The new boundaryless career permits individuals to obtain more fulfilling work. Individuals, however, must be willing to take risks and change occupations, firms, or seek out new types of employment, including self-employment, to find more meaningful work. For instance, Breeden (1993), in a longitudinal study of 436 employed adults seeking career counseling, found that those who changed careers had significantly greater satisfaction than those that made no changes.

In addition to taking risks, boundaryless careerists need to take responsibility for their own career planning and develop a strategy for obtaining their objectives. A 1997 survey of management consultants revealed that only six percent had documented personal plans (Bobrow, 1997). Planning activities force individuals to analyze their goals and the means by which they will obtain them.

Table 1 provides some specific strategies for developing transferable skills, obtaining meaningful work, and managing one's own career.

## **Conclusion**

The nature of careers continues to change. Individuals who will flourish in the boundaryless career environment will adapt and switch their focus from organizational loyalty, extrinsic rewards, and firm reliance, to a focus on professional loyalty, intrinsic rewards, and self-reliance.

The purpose of this article was to provide individuals with specific strategies for making the transition from a traditional to a boundaryless career. These recommendations are based on current research in the field. We hope this article begins to bridge the gap between career theory and practice.

**Table 1**  
**Specific Suggestions for Managing a Boundaryless Career**

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### Develop Transferable Skills

- *Keep Personal Skills Inventory*--Be aware of what skills you have, how they add value to organizations, and how they can be repackaged for new job opportunities.
- *Keep abreast of market needs*--Ask yourself if you have lost job assignments, promotions or new job opportunities because of a lack of certain skills or knowledge. If yes, you need to develop these skills or knowledge.
- *Develop permanently marketable skills*-- Some skills and abilities, such as critical thinking, time management, and interpersonal and team skills, transcend the oscillation of business fads, trends, and crazes and should therefore be developed.
- *Develop learning relationships*--Go beyond traditional mentor relationships and also learn from peers, subordinates, customers and developmental support groups.

### Obtain Psychologically Meaningful Work

- *Prioritize*--It is unlikely that all job expectations will be met. Prioritize which job and organizational factors must be present and which are flexible.
- *Balance*--Determine what balance of work/nonwork factors are important to you. As the boundaries between work and home become more blurred, it is important to decide how different areas of one's life will affect each other.

## Manage Your Own Career

- *Develop a Personal Portfolio*-- Maintain a written record of skills, accomplishments, activities, knowledge, aptitudes, and lessons learned at each job. Such a portfolio is useful for self-assessment, marketing, and storing up-to-date information.
  - *Enhance Interpersonal Skills*-- Developing and maintaining interpersonal skills pays dividends in a number of areas spanning from job negotiation to networking. Join groups such as Toastmasters or professional associations in order to enhance and fine-tune these skills.
  - *Invest in Yourself*-- Each year use approximately 10% of your income to take courses, purchase new home business equipment or software, and up-date your personal library.
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