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Time, Person-Career Fit, and the Boundaryless Career

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## Time, Person-Career Fit, and the Boundaryless Career

The concept of time is implicitly or explicitly embedded in a number of topics related to the workplace. Although early management researchers studied time in the context of efficiency and productivity, it remains a neglected topic in much of the organizational behavior research. Time is a complex concept, with different meanings in different contexts. Researchers in the social sciences view time as a mechanism by which social institutions segment activities into precise temporal units, and condition individuals to organized “time consciousness” (Hassard, 1991).

Time and its many dimensions enter into different elements of the employment relationship between individuals and organizations. Work schedules such as the five-day, 40-hour work week and the three-shift, around-the-clock operation are examples of the time-structuring of organizations and individuals. The total number of hours worked per week is used to classify employees as full-time or part-time. Work that exceeds the normal working hours has been described as “overtime” if required by the employer, and may be eligible for additional compensation. Time also determines the mode of compensation (hourly or salaried), and eligibility for employer-sponsored benefits, as well as the continuity and security of employment (Fisher, Schoenfeldt, & Shaw, 1999).

Prominent among the many properties of time is the fact that it is fixed and immutable. Hence, time is viewed as a scarce resource to be managed carefully (Bluedorn & Denhardt, 1988; Hassard, 1991). Non-attendance at work is described as “time lost” and is usually measured by the number of days an individual is absent from work over a period of time (Chadwick-Jones, Brown, Nicholson, & Sheppard, 1971).

The passage of time has also been treated as an indicator or proxy for a variety of work-related phenomena. Thus, organizational tenure has traditionally been interpreted as an indicator of employee loyalty or commitment to the organization. Additionally, the number of hours spent per week at work is regarded both as a behavioral indicator of career and organizational commitment as well as of high performance, reflecting the importance of “face time” in organizational settings (Christensen, 1997). In contrast, length of time spent in the same job with no added responsibility is generally regarded as a sign of career plateauing with limited prospects for upward mobility.

Despite the many ways in which the concept of time has been incorporated into the study of various organizational phenomena, there is surprisingly little research examining time and temporal factors explicitly in the organizational literature. It is only relatively recently that organizational researchers have recognized this void and called for research examining the role of time in diverse aspects of organizational behavior (Bluedorn & Denhardt, 1988; Hassard, 1991; Katz, 1980).

This chapter examines the role of time in shaping individuals’ career experiences, and traces the changes in the implications of time that have accompanied recent shifts in the meaning of a career. First, we discuss the ways in which the passage of time has been incorporated into the traditional view of an organizational career. Next, we explore the properties of evolving alternative careers represented in the “boundaryless career” (Arthur, 1994), and review differences in the time horizons within organizational careers and boundaryless careers. We then explore the concept of person-career fit, and conclude with the development of a model that depicts three patterns of changes in person-career fit over the life-course.

### Time and the Organizational Career

Time occupies a central role in career theory. The importance of time is illustrated abundantly in theoretical models of careers that typically take a life-course perspective on the work experiences of individuals. In a review of career-related articles published in inter-disciplinary journals during the 1980's and early 1990's, Arthur (1994) found that some discussion of time was common to every article. Time is the key element that differentiates a job from a career, a distinction widely accepted until the 1970's. Whereas a career was considered to involve a long-term goal and consist of a sequence of planned moves up the organizational hierarchy, a job was regarded as merely employment and an ad-hoc work experience. Careers were also thought to include professional work, hierarchical advancement, and occupational stability as essential characteristics (Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 1999).

Contemporary conceptualizations of a career are broader and less restrictive. Hall's (1976, p. 4) definition of a career as "an individually perceived sequence of attitudes and behaviors associated with work-related experiences and activities over the span of the person's life" was among the first to drop the constraints of professionalism, advancement, and stability. A recent and widely accepted definition describes a career as the "evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time" (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989, p. 8). Similar definitions of a career have been offered by Feldman (1988) and Greenhaus et al. (1999).

Despite these broadened conceptualizations of a career, the notion of pursuing a career *within a single organization* has persisted throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially for men. The economic prosperity ushered in after World War II stimulated growth and generated tremendous demand for human capital (Callanan & Greenhaus, 1999). To attract and retain

productive employees, organizations promised job security and opportunities for continued advancement in exchange for loyalty to the organization on the part of the employee (Nicholson, 1996; Robinson, Kraatz, & Rousseau, 1994; Rousseau & Wade-Benzoni, 1994). The psychological contract between employee and employer was “relational” in nature, and provided a sense of long-term security and stability to both parties (MacNeill, 1985). Not surprisingly, many employees aspired to spend all, or nearly all, of their career with the same organization, and the organization in turn reciprocated with recognition and gold watches for longevity of employment.

The concept of an organizational career has also been inextricably linked to the passage of time and stages in the life cycle of individuals. Career experiences of individuals were believed to involve distinct stages of development that assume a set of predictable work experiences pursued within one occupation if not one organization. Such stages as exploration, establishment, advancement, maintenance, and decline (Hall & Nougaim, 1968; Super, 1980) were assumed to be universal among all employees, with individuals passing through each stage of development only once as their careers unfolded. Schein’s influential model of career development—with its demarcations of early career, mid career, and late career—is based on “a model of what a career would look like if pursued fully and successfully” (Schein, 1978, p. 37).

These early conceptualizations of career development were generally consistent with the reality of the times because many employees did spend a large part of their adult life within one occupation and even in one organization. Each stage of career development unfolded over a long period of time (typically 10 to 20 or more years) and presented specific tasks and challenges that required the attention of the employee. Consequently, there were relatively few major career transitions that occurred between these lengthy career stages.

It should be noted that the traditional view of careers did not reflect the career experiences of women. Early career theories were predicated on the assumption that men are the primary breadwinners and careers were mostly pursued by men for whom work was believed to be a central life interest. In this view of careers, men are able to devote inordinate amounts of time to the work role due to the presence of a non-employed spouse who assumes almost total responsibility for home maintenance and childcare. The careers of women (especially those who are married and have children) are typically characterized by discontinuities in employment, periods of part-time employment and career interruptions due to childbirth, parenting demands, or involuntary moves related to the spouse's career (Arthur et al., 1999; Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 1993).

The assumed predictable sequence and timing of career stages enabled individuals to assess their career success in terms of the level in the organizational hierarchy they had reached by a certain age. Lawrence (1984) discussed the process of "age grading" in organizations and observed how individuals determine whether they are on-schedule, ahead of schedule, or behind schedule in their accomplishments. Indeed, the whole concept of a "fast track" represents an attempt to accelerate the experiences and accomplishments of select high potential managers. Alternatively, being behind schedule is interpreted as having reached a career plateau, "the point in a career where the likelihood of additional hierarchical promotion is very low" (FERENCE, Stoner, & Warren, 1977, p. 602).

This traditional view of an organizational career was based on the assumption of steady growth in the economy and relative stability in organizations' internal and external environments. However, social, economic, technological, and cultural changes during the last two decades have radically altered the nature of work and the workforce, necessitating changes in the organization of

work and the nature of careers, and the consequent revision of theories of career development. We now examine an alternative career perspective and discuss its implications for time over the life-course.

### Time and the Boundaryless Career

The 1980's and 1990s have witnessed the emergence of alternative perspectives on the meaning of a career. No longer tied or "bounded" to a single employer or even to one occupation, individuals' careers are increasingly viewed as boundaryless in nature (Arthur, 1994), with nearly all careers crossing multiple employer boundaries (Arthur et al., 1999). The concept of the boundaryless career evolved in response to fundamental changes in organizational structures and processes. Global competitive pressures and the need to be more flexible and innovative have led to ongoing downsizing and restructuring of organizations and a shift toward becoming leaner, flatter, and more customer-driven (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994).

Working with only a small core staff and a larger group of temporary contract and contingent employees, boundaryless organizations use cross-functional teams extensively to respond more quickly and effectively to changes in the marketplace (Byrne, 1993). These organizations are boundaryless in the sense that the borders between functional areas, between hierarchical levels, and between the organization and its suppliers of physical, informational, and human resources have become increasingly permeable.

Perhaps the most significant change within the boundaryless organization is the replacement of the old relational psychological contract between employer and employee by a more transactional contract. The short-term nature of the transactional contract enables organizations to change directions rapidly in response to changes in the marketplace. In this still

evolving contract, the employee's contribution is not loyalty, but rather the acquisition of a portfolio of skills that are required by the organization at a particular point in time (Arthur et al., 1999). This requires organizations to invest in the development of human capital and individuals to develop diverse new skills when needed.

In return, the organization does not provide the promise of continued employment—as in a relational contract—but rather opportunities for the employee to develop new skills and become employable or marketable, in the current organization or in a different firm (Waterman, Waterman, & Collard, 1994). Moreover, the organization no longer promises rapid advancement up the hierarchy. Work assignments are more temporary and project-based, career paths—to the extent that they exist—are more unpredictable, and mobility in such organizations is more likely to be horizontal than vertical. However, career paths today are also more likely to be characterized by mobility across companies, rather than within a single company. In their study of the career paths of 75 employees in 9 occupational categories, Arthur et al. (1999) found that the proportion of mobile employees who made inter-company moves was nearly four times (79 percent) that of employees who made intra-company moves (21 percent). The moves across organizational boundaries involved not only a change of employer, but also of industry, occupation, and geographic location. In addition, most of the voluntary interorganizational moves did not involve conventional career advancement in terms of higher levels of responsibility, status, or pay.

Boundaryless careers are pursued within this changing landscape of work. This destabilization of the organization has led to the subsequent de-coupling of careers from organizational structures. Boundaryless careers are self-directed paths cutting across less formal organizational and extra-organizational boundaries (Arthur, 1994; Arthur et al., 1999; DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994).

In the traditional organizational career, stages of development were typically based on chronological age. Employees explored options, chose an occupation, established themselves in the field, rose in the organizational hierarchy, plateaued, and ultimately declined and disengaged from work. In the boundaryless career, stages or cycles of development are likely to repeat themselves many times over the course of one's work life. The stages are of shorter duration because of the number and frequency of major changes that require adaptation and learning (Arthur et al., 1999; Hall & Mirvis, 1995). Frequent moves across projects, companies, industries, or even occupations create shorter cycles of exploration, establishment, advancement, maintenance, and decline. Similarly, moving between full-time employment and part-time employment, between work and sabbatical, or between organizational employment and self-employment produce more frequent cycles of shorter duration—and more frequent career transitions.

These transitions have been viewed as “prevailing cycles of change and adaptation,” each of which requires “preparation, encounter, adjustment, stabilization, and renewed preparation” (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996, p. 33). Mirvis and Hall (1994) view these cycles as periods of reskilling, and introduce the notion of “career age” (rather than chronological age) to capture an individual's progress through a particular career cycle.

Whereas advancement in the traditional organizational career was more predictably linked to an organization's timetable, flatter, boundaryless organizations provide fewer opportunities for advancement, and the route to advancement may require many lateral moves, and some seemingly downward changes. In addition, there can be disruptions to orderly and predictable advancement because of radical changes to an organization's strategy or structure (e.g., acquisitions, outsourcing of functions). Furthermore, because an individual may shift between core and temporary worker,

between part-time and full-time employment, between one company and another, it is difficult to determine whether one is on schedule. In fact, there may not be one schedule but rather many variations of schedules.

As a result, the recent literature has directed attention away from viewing rapid upward, linear progression through an organization as the sole—or primary—indicator of career success. The reliance on external guides for sequences of work experience has given way to the use of internal self-generated guides such as growth, learning, and integration. Career growth is increasingly measured by feelings of psychological success derived from achieving personally important goals (Hall, 1996; Mirvis & Hall, 1994), as well as by the development of skills, competence, and experience (Weick, 1996) that can enhance the individual's marketability. This perspective has served not only to focus careers research on individual characteristics, attitudes and motives, but also to disconnect careers and career success from organizations and hierarchies (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).

Table 1 summarizes and compares the key properties of the boundaryless model with

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those of the organizational career model and differentiates the models on the basis of their orientation to time. The presence of repeated career cycles over the course of an individual's work life—and the emergence of the concept of career age to depict one's development through each cycle—raises a number of interesting issues regarding career development over the life span. In the next section, we propose a model of life-long career transitions to stimulate theory development and empirical research.

### A Model of Life-Long Career Transitions

The representation of a boundaryless career as a series of frequent cycles of relatively short duration raises two important questions that suggest new avenues for theory and research. First, does the *sequence* of career cycles form a larger pattern of development over the life course? Despite the significance of the concept of career age, we believe that chronological age can also help us understand the evolution of career cycles in boundaryless careers. We propose that there may be overarching patterns of development *across* career cycles, and that an individual's age—and the associated growth in experience and wisdom—plays a role in determining the pattern. Moreover, as we discuss below, we believe that Levinson's (1986) concept of adult life development may help us understand the pattern of career cycles across the life-span.

Second, if career cycles form a larger pattern over the life course, in what ways do cycles vary over time? Hall's (1996) model of learning stages identifies changes in an individual's job performance from one cycle to the next. Although job performance is relevant to individuals and their employers, we believe that the degree of fit or congruence between personal characteristics and career experiences may be an especially useful perspective to examine changes in career cycles across the life course.

Person-career fit, being a cornerstone of many career decision-making theories, is the extent to which an individual's career experiences are compatible with his or her needs, values, interests, and talents. Individuals generally choose career fields that are compatible with these personal qualities and therefore represent an expression of the self-concept. Moreover, because a high degree of fit can promote positive work attitudes and stability in a career field (Blau, 1987; Smart, Elton, & McLaughlin, 1986; Spokane, 1985), it is considered an important indicator of

career effectiveness (Betz, Fitzgerald, & Hill, 1989). Although person-career fit is usually achieved through the selection of a job or career field that is compatible with personal qualities, it is also likely that individuals can proactively change their work environment—what 1996) has referred to as enactment—to achieve greater fit.

The model presented in Figure 1 portrays the career as a series of cycles that unfold over the span of an individual's life. By reconnecting age and careers, and coupling them with the concept of person-career fit, the model helps to identify transitional career patterns that may emerge over an individual's life. Each career cycle is represented by a circle, the diameter of which depicts the duration of the cycle. Although not shown in the diagram, each cycle contains the developmental tasks of exploration, trial, establishment, and mastery (Hall, 1996; Mirvis & Hall, 1994). The overlap between some of the circles is indicative of the overlap that can occur across career cycles, i.e., the completion of one cycle can lay the groundwork for the initiation of the subsequent cycle. Finally, the arrows represent the career movements that occur between cycles.

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Insert Figure 1 about here  
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The horizontal axis of Figure 1 represents chronological age, and the vertical axis represents the degree of person-career fit. Figure 1 indicates that career cycles generally display an increasing level of person-career fit over the course of an individual's life. This is an ideal pattern of development because it suggests that individuals enhance their capacity to achieve fit over time. However, some individuals may display a random pattern of person-career fit as they

get older, and others may witness a decline in fit over time (Figures 2 and 3 respectively). We next discuss the factors that may differentiate these three sequences of career cycles.

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Insert Figures 2 and 3 about here  
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We expect that some—perhaps many—individuals will achieve increasingly higher levels of person-career fit over the course of a lifetime, due to growth in their experience, maturity, and career competencies. This positive relationship between age and fit does not imply that each career cycle will necessarily produce a higher level of fit than the immediately preceding cycle. Figure 1 shows that cycles of lower fit are occasionally interspersed with general increases in fit over time.

It has been suggested that boundaryless careers require three types of career competencies (Arthur, Claman, & DeFillippi, 1995). Employees need to understand themselves to determine whether they fit the culture of their organization (“knowing why” competencies). They also must add to their repertoire of skills to maintain their job performance and reputation (“knowing how”), and must cultivate a broad array of relationships inside and outside the organization (“knowing whom”). In a similar vein, Hall (1996; Mirvis & Hall, 1994) emphasizes the importance of two meta-skills necessary to experience psychological success over time: the development of personal identity and adaptability.

Following Hall and Mirvis (1995), we assume that career competencies and meta-skills can increase as individuals get older, acquire more extensive experience, and achieve greater maturity. Employees who learn from their experiences should develop greater insight into themselves and work environments as their career experiences accumulate over time. They can also expand their

portfolio of skills, extend their network of relationships, and appreciate the benefits of adaptability as they move from cycle to cycle throughout their lives.

These age-related career competencies and meta-skills are likely to steer individuals toward new career cycles that have the capacity to satisfy their personal needs and values and utilize their talents. The better we understand ourselves, the more capably we assess work environments, and the more extensively we utilize networks, the more likely we are to pursue and select jobs and assignments that are compatible with our self-concept. In effect, these competencies enable individuals to make “vigilant” career decisions that are based on a deep understanding of oneself and one’s options (Greenhaus et al., 1999). Moreover, heightened insight and greater adaptability should enable individuals to modify their work environment when necessary to achieve greater fit.

This pattern of increasing person-career fit over the life course, however, requires more than the acquisition of career competencies and skills. It also demands sufficiently high self-esteem for individuals to pursue situations that are capable of satisfying their needs (Korman, 1976). High self-esteem employees are likely to utilize their competencies to achieve increasing fit over the course of their career because they are motivated to meet their needs and confirm their positive self-concept. Low self-esteem employees, whose self-concept is threatened by success, are not expected to display increasing levels of fit as they progress through life.

Moreover, individuals who place moderate or substantial importance on the work role are more likely to achieve increasing person-career fit over the lifetime than individuals who place minimal importance on work. Work-salient individuals tend to be proactive in career management (Sugalski & Greenhaus, 1986) which can promote effective career decision-making. If work takes a back seat to other life roles, individuals may not be highly motivated to seek career situations that are compatible with their needs, values, interests, and talents.

In sum, the pattern of increasing fit over the lifetime requires (1) the competencies and skills to make effective career decisions and (2) the motivation to satisfy one's career needs derived from high self-esteem and a salient work role. If any of these ingredients are substantially lacking, other patterns of fit may emerge. For example, Figure 2 reveals an apparently random pattern of person-career fit over the life course. Increases in fit from one cycle to the next are as likely to be followed by subsequent declines in fit as by further increases. We speculate that this pattern is due to a number of factors. First, it is possible that individuals have not fully developed their career competencies as they have gotten older. They may not have learned from their prior experiences what they want from work or how to assess career opportunities as a source of congruence or fit. Their occasional increases in fit from one cycle to the next may be due more to serendipity rather than to any proactive efforts or skill on their part.

It is also possible that many of their career moves have been driven by external factors. Time and economic pressures often accompany involuntary or externally driven career moves. Employees who lose their jobs due to an organizational downsizing or a divestiture may not have made adequate financial preparations for an extended period of time without income. Thus, it is likely that externally driven transitions result in career decisions based purely on economic factors with little consideration of compatibility or fit with a wide range of values or needs. Moreover, individuals who experience high levels of anxiety in their career may panic at the need to make a quick decision and therefore make a hasty, ill-conceived "hypervigilant" decision to relieve their stress (Greenhaus et al., 1999).

Conversely, internally driven transitions may not produce the same time or financial urgency as those precipitated by factors outside the control of the individual. These transitions are more likely to be based on the individual's own timetable and a greater knowledge of the

consequences of the choice that is being made. This allows the individual more time to prepare for the change both psychologically and financially. Therefore, the pattern of internally and externally driven transitions can help explain changes in fit over time.

The pattern of declining fit over a lifetime (Figure 3) is more difficult to explain. Such situations—which are hopefully not commonplace—may reflect a vicious cycle of failure and pessimism that drastically erode self-esteem which, in turn, can decrease feelings of competence and involvement in the career role (Hall, 1976). Thus, they invest less of themselves in making career decisions as they get older, and the poor quality of these decisions reinforces their low self-esteem and aversion to work.

So far, the models we've presented have addressed changes in the *level* of person-career fit achieved over time. It is possible that the elements that comprise fit also change during the life-course. An individual can make career decisions to satisfy primarily work-related values (e.g., money, status, challenge, advancement, responsibility), or can make decisions based also on a variety of work, family, and personal values (Greenhaus et al., 1999) by expanding their sense of self (Mirvis & Hall, 1994). Some individuals—perhaps in increasing numbers—make career decisions that are intended to bring balance between their work and other parts of their lives. Others focus narrowly on the implications of their career decisions solely for their work life.

We propose that self-initiated career transitions during middle adulthood and late adulthood are more likely to involve the search for work-life balance than transitions during early adulthood. According to Levinson (1986), the main tasks of early adulthood are to find a niche for oneself in adult society and to pursue a “dream,” an intense view of how one wants to live his or her life. This often requires individuals to establish priorities in order to achieve substantial success in the dominant focus of their lives, the objects of their dreams. The early career generally

involves an intense career focus as individuals attempt to establish themselves and demonstrate their competence to their employers and themselves. Therefore, we propose that the aim of career decisions during early adulthood is primarily to achieve fit with an individual's significant work needs, values, interests, and talents.

Middle adulthood involves a reexamination of the decisions and accomplishments and or failures of early adulthood and a subsequent attempt to fashion a satisfactory lifestyle for the middle years of one's life. Late adulthood requires a reappraisal of the previous era and an effort to achieve a sense of integrity regarding one's entire life. Because of the importance of "wholeness" and integrity in middle and late adulthood, we predict that career decisions during these eras of adult life development are driven by the need to achieve a broader type of fit that includes balance among significant life roles.

### Conclusions

Our exploration of the concept of time in relation to organizational behavior demonstrates that time occupies a central role in theoretical models of careers and career development over the course of individuals' working lives. Our analysis and interpretation of the key characteristics of careers indicate that time is a critical factor that differentiates organizational or traditional careers from the still evolving boundaryless career. We found that the frequency, duration, and timing of events are relevant to a better understanding of variations in career cycles over time. We identified the notion of fit or congruence between career experiences and personal characteristics as a useful perspective to examine the pattern of relationships between career cycles. Coupling the concept of fit with age and career cycles, we propose a model that posits the likelihood of increasing fit over

the life course as individuals gain experience, mature, and develop new competencies. We also present alternative scenarios that explain the possibility of declining fit or a random pattern of fit over time.

We hope that our model will stimulate scholarly discussions and additional research on different aspects of time and its relationship to careers. We encourage researchers interested in career development to undertake empirical research to develop operational measures that capture the various dimensions and meanings of time in the world of careers. It would also be useful to assess whether there are differences in the pattern of long-term fit between individuals who occupy core roles and those who occupy more temporary positions in boundaryless organizations. Finally, we call on researchers in international careers to examine differences in the role of time in careers that cross national boundaries, and the impact of such differences on the pathways to career success and satisfaction across cultures.

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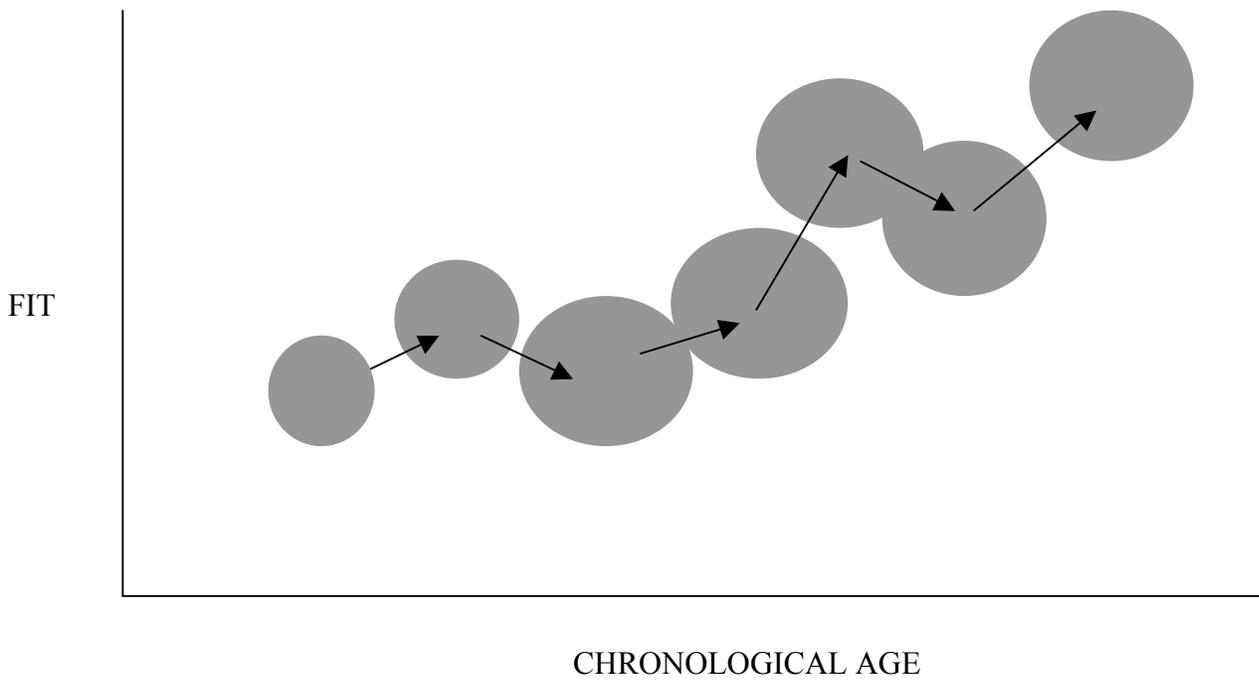
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Table 1 The Relationship Between Time and Key Dimensions of Organizational and Boundaryless Careers

DIMENSION	ORGANIZATIONAL	BOUNDARYLESS	TIME HORIZONS
Focus	Career	Jobs/projects	Long term vs. Short term
Career Stages	Chronological age coincides with career stages of fixed duration and sequence	No relationship between career cycles and chronological age. Cycles are variable in duration.	Fixed vs. Variable
Mobility	Linear, upward, hierarchical	Lateral and non-hierarchical, intra - and inter – organizational moves.	Infrequent vs. Frequent
Identification with work	Single organizations or occupation	Multiple organizations & occupations	Long term vs. short term.
Rewards criteria	Seniority, long-term achievement and potential	Short-term, demonstrated results.	Total career vs. immediate accomplishments
Career success (individual perspective)	On/ahead of perceived organizational schedule.	Psychological success and continued development	Organizationally defined timetable vs. Personal timetable.
Career success (organizational perspective)	Job performance & face time Salary, rank and position in hierarchy	Deliverable results & growth in personal identity and adaptability.	Duration: Long vs. short

Figure 1 Model of Life-Long Career Transitions: Increasing Levels of Person-Career Fit Over Time



Legend:

- Represents career cycle, which includes progression through career stages (exploration, trial, establishment, and mastery).
- Career transition

Figure 2 Model of Life-Long Career Transitions: Random Changes in Person-Career Fit Over Time

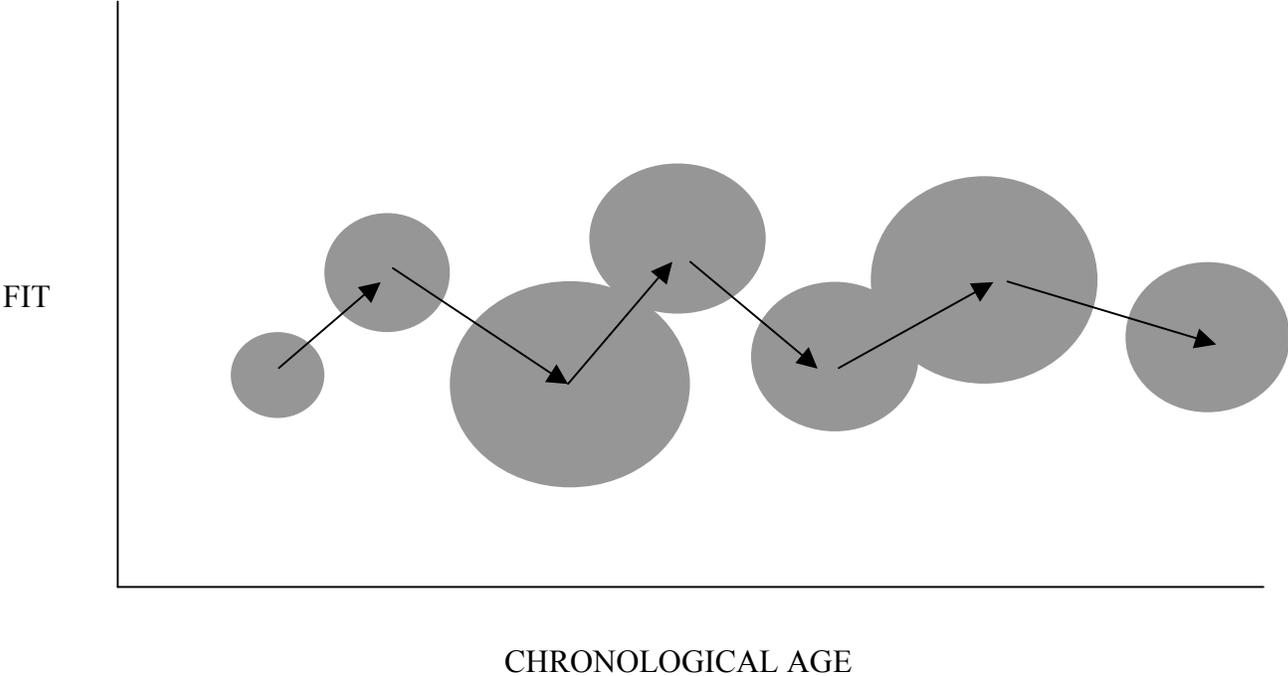


Figure 3 Model of Life-Long Career Transitions: Declining Levels of Person-Career Fit Over Time

