# Chapter 14
# CAREER MANAGEMENT: TAKING CONTROL OF THE QUALITY OF WORK EXPERIENCES

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*Mountains cannot be surmounted except by winding paths.*
*Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe*

The job-for-life contract between employer and employee has been replaced by an insecure and uncertain job market. Job security is no longer dependent on length of service; loyalty to an employer and career progression in the conventional sense, that is, along fixed career lines, is not a realistic option anymore. These changes in the nature of jobs and career development are due to flatter and rapidly changing organisations, which will remain to be the dominant characteristic of most companies in the future.

Many authors have emphasised that the way in which these organisational changes will impact upon peoples' careers force them to take the lead in building their own careers. Otherwise, employees may easily become the plaything of organisations' short-term operational policies and choices. Hence, employees should engage in career management activities in order to identify and pursue their opportunities for development and self-improvement (Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001). From this perspective, career management no longer exclusively refers to the activities of the organisation with respect to the effective selection, assessment, assignment, and development of their employees in order to provide a pool of qualified people to meet future corporate needs (Hall, 1986). Instead, employees themselves need to become the managers of their careers.

From the employees' perspective, career management should include: (a) engaging in personal development, (b) using career planning skills, (c) optimising career prospects, and (d) balancing work and non-work (Ball, 1997). More specifically, the new employee should: seek for opportunities to further develop his or her (range of) skills in order to stay marketable, review his/her career on a regularly base, promote his/her own career interests, and find a balance between his/her professional and personal life.

This chapter focuses on the first aspect of individual career management, that is, personal development. There are several ways in which individuals may develop themselves. For example, employees may engage in job-related training in order to

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broaden and deepen their abilities and skills, or they may obtain higher levels of proficiency by enlarging their experiences within a certain work domain. All these activities help to increase individuals' human capital, that is, their value on the labour market, which will lead to higher ascendancy rates and salaries (Becker, 1975). Indeed, personal investments in education and work experiences are considered the strongest and most consistent predictors of career success (Tharenou, 1997).

Extant literature on the role of human capital for career development primarily addressed the *quantity* of employees' experiences, such as the number of trainings and the length of work experiences (e.g., people's tenure in a job). In this chapter, however, it is argued that the *quality* of people's experiences will be as important if not more important than their quantity. The quality of work experiences refers to the specific content of jobs and the types of tasks and activities people perform in their work. The quality of work experiences is particularly crucial for future career success, in that it contributes to objective as well as subjective career outcomes.

The next paragraph addresses the question of what makes a career successful. Thereafter, the literature on human capital will be discussed and it is concluded that human capital should encompass the breadth of people's work experiences. The best way to broaden one's job content is to engage in challenging assignments, since these types of assignments stimulate learning, and development and may lead to career flexibility. Optimally, employees themselves should initiate their challenging work experiences. It is, however, more realistic to assume that employees will often need the support and encouragement of their environment. At the end of this chapter the role that individuals and organisations have in broadening employees' scope and employability will be discussed.

## Career Success

Career success has been defined as the accumulated positive work and psychological outcomes resulting from one's work experiences (Seibert & Kraimer, 2001). This definition includes two different perspectives on careers, an individual/subjective and a societal/objective perspective. The individual subjective perspective encompasses different facets of a career as experienced by the person and outcomes of a career are evaluated against the goals that individuals have set for themselves. Typical outcomes of a successful career are psychological in nature, such as people's job and career satisfaction (Judge, Higgins, Thorensen, & Barrick, 1999). Heslin (2005) rightly noted that subjective career success covers a broader scope than one's immediate job satisfaction. It may, for example, include a good work-life balance. The societal objective perspective on careers takes the tangible facets of careers into account, such as individuals' income and occupational status. As recently argued by Hall and Chandler (2005), both perspectives are interdependent since people's subjective career success often is a function of both subjective and objective career outcomes. That is not to say that objective successful outcomes always lead to subjective career success. Some people may adhere more to subjec-

tive rather than objective outcomes. Thus, if individuals experience objective success (e.g., higher income) but the subjective outcomes (time for self) are less than wished, their subjective career success yet will be suboptimal.

When asked about their career success, most people tend to use objective career success criteria (Heslin, 2005). One reason for this is that people generally tend to evaluate their outcomes relative to the outcomes of others (Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2000). In an organisational context, these social comparisons are easily to establish: employees differ in their salaries and only few people are promoted to higher hierarchical levels. Objective career success seems to be reserved for only some and not all employees. Moreover, several authors have pointed to a future increase in "winner-take-all markets" as characterised by very few winners and many losers. In competitive markets, most of the rewards go to the very few individuals that are able to excel, whereas other talented individuals receive less rewards and recognition (Frank & Cook, 1995). This contest model of career success (see Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005) combined with flatter hierarchies cause many employees who are in their mid-career to experience a career failure. They encounter a so-called career plateau (Allen, Poteet, & Russell, 1998) in that they are not able to reach higher organisational levels. Specifically those employees who have a "career" work orientation, emphasising upward advancement within their work as the prime reason for working, will be faced with this career plateau (Wrzesniewski, 2002).

The traditional linear careers are replaced by more non-linear or even "boundaryless" careers (DeFillipi & Arthur, 1994) due to the market mechanisms as described above. A career focused on making progressive upward steps will become a career that includes periodic shifts between occupational areas. That necessitates the development of a broad set of skills for all employees and not only for those who intend to climb the career ladder. Important outcomes of non-linear careers will be, for example, personal growth, variety, and independence. Consequently, the definition of career plateauing will change from the inability to move up hierarchically in the organisation into the inability to develop any further. The latter has also been referred to as job content plateauing. This type of plateauing occurs when work has been mastered and individuals feel no longer challenged by the content of their job (Chao, 1990; Feldman & Weitz, 1988).

In non-linear careers, individuals are better off when they learn to set their own career goals and standards rather than those of others, because a comparison with others in order to establish one's "objective" hierarchical career success will no longer be tenable. There is yet an objective criterion of career success that continues to exist for all employees, that is, whether one is able to remain employable in a changing job market.

## Human Capital

Human capital concerns the total set of people's educational, personal, and professional experiences (Becker, 1975). People's human capital contributes to their value in the market place and is, therefore, particularly related to traditional measures of objective career success (Ng et al., 2005). Personal investments in education and

training are supposed to be the strongest and most consistent predictors of career success (Tharenou, 1997). These and other human capital predictors, such as the number of years worked, reflect the *quantity* of people's work experiences.

The relationship between quantitative work experiences, often measured as job tenure or seniority, and career success is weaker than presupposed. Job tenure, defined as length of time in a job, is a weak predictor of salary and it is weakly and even negatively related to promotion. One reason for this is the curvilinear relationship between tenure and performance: after a period of linear growth in performance it finally reaches a point of saturation (Avolio, Waldman, & McDaniel, 1990). If individuals' performance has reached its plateau no higher salary or job level is to be expected. Also, no relationship between job tenure and subjective career success seems to exist (Ng et al., 2005).

The main reason for the minor contribution of these human capital factors is that individuals with equal amounts of tenure in the same job can differ considerably with respect to the content, quality, and breadth of their experiences (e.g., Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998). Individuals develop their own specialities in their jobs due to their task choices based on specific task preferences and/or because of the assignments they get from their supervisor. Surprisingly, only few authors have addressed the role of the *quality* of work experiences for career development and career success. For future careers, however, the quality rather than the quantity of work experiences will become of crucial importance. The quality of work experiences refers to the richness, variety and breadth of tasks and responsibilities people encounter in their work. The core element of these work experiences is that they challenge employees to explore their capacities and to acquire new skills.

## The Quality of Work: Challenging Experiences

A job is considered to be of high quality if the job offers opportunities for learning and encourages an employee to explore and broaden his/her knowledge, skills and abilities. A job of high quality provides a person with *challenging* experiences, because particularly these types of experiences create good opportunities for learning and development, more so than formal training programs (Berlew & Hall, 1966; Davies & Easterby-Smith, 1984; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988; Wick, 1989). *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) refers to challenge as "a difficult or demanding task, especially one seen as a test of one's abilities or character". Additionally, the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (2004) speaks of "a test of one's abilities or resources in a demanding but stimulating undertaking". Hence, people are challenged if they are faced with an activity that is new, demanding, stimulating, exciting and calls on their ability and determination. Tesluk and Jacobs (1998) mentioned another aspect of these challenging activities that may impact upon development and learning, that is, their density. Challenging experiences display greater density if employees are repeatedly faced with them. It is assumed that frequent exposure to challenging situations stimulates work motivation.

The role of challenging experiences has been mainly recognised in the context of management development (De Pater, 2005; McCauley, Ohlott, & Ruderman, 1999). In that context, McCauley et al. (1999) identified clusters of job components that represent challenging aspects of work: (a) job transitions, with individuals being confronted with new tasks and situations in which existing tactics and routines are inadequate, (b) creating change, with individuals having a clear goal to change a situation, but a loosely defined role that gives them the freedom to determine how to accomplish the goal, (c) managing at high levels of responsibility, characterised by increased visibility, the opportunity to make a significant impact, dealing with broader and more complex problems and higher stakes, (d) managing boundaries, in case employees have to work with people over whom they have no direct authority and have to develop strategies for influencing them and gaining their cooperation, and (e) dealing with diversity, when working with people who are different from themselves regarding their values, backgrounds, experiences, and needs.

Although these challenging job components particularly concern managerial jobs, most of their ingredients are applicable to non-managerial jobs as well. An assignment can be qualified as being challenging to the extent that the task: (a) is new and asks for non-routine skills and behaviours, (b) tests one's abilities or resources, (c) gives an individual the freedom to determine how to accomplish the task, and (d) involves a higher level of responsibility and visibility.

The extent to which individuals have challenging experiences during their pre-occupational years and early careers seems to promote their future career development and success (e.g., Lyness & Thompson, 2000; McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott, & Morrow, 1994). Watson (2001), for example, showed that pre-occupational experiences in social and educational settings, such as activities at school, in sports, and as a club member, affect later career progress. People's early experiences particularly direct their activity preferences in future jobs and their choices for specific jobs or training (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990). In this way, they affect and endorse career relevant behaviours.

Additionally, several other reasons have been proposed for why challenging experiences are generally important for career development. First, challenging experiences provide *opportunities for learning* a wide range of skills, abilities, and insights that enable people to function effectively (McCall et al., 1988). Secondly, they affect people's *job attitudes* and their *competency perceptions*. If a person has to meet high expectations in the first years of his or her career, this will likely lead to the internalisation of high work standards which facilitate performance and success in his or her later years (Berlew & Hall, 1966). Moreover, challenging experiences seem to increase one's self esteem (Hall & Chandler, 2005) and the willingness to "launch out into the unknown again" (Davies & Easterby-Smith, 1984, p. 176). For, if a challenging task was successfully performed this will increase people's self-efficacy beliefs regarding the accomplishment of other challenging tasks, which in turn may encourage them to seek out additional challenging experiences (Maurer & Tarulli, 1994), and boost their ambition for other challenging jobs (Van Vianen, 1999).

The third reason why challenging assignments are thought to be important for career development is related to opportunities to increase one's *organisational*

*power*, such as visibility to others, and the building of effective interpersonal networks within and outside the organisation. Both visibility and networking are considered important for career advancement (Hurley & Sonnenfeld, 1998). Finally, challenging experiences may serve as a *cue for individuals' promotability*. Information with regard to the type of tasks employees perform is used as a cue to determine employees' abilities and career potential (Humphrey, 1985).

Employees differ in the extent to which they experience challenge in their job. The next paragraphs address possible reasons for these differences. Are challenging experiences the result of personal or organisational initiatives?

## *Challenging Experiences: Self-Initiated*

Whether employees encounter challenge in their job may depend on their personal initiatives. As noted above, two people that occupy a similar job often differ in the specific activities they employ in their job. Take two persons who both occupy a position as math teacher at the same school at a similar job level. One of them spends much of her time on developing new teaching programs whereas the other is mainly concerned with coaching students. What both teachers have in common is that for years they have already excelled in their specific tasks. In their school, they are acknowledged as the "developer" and "the coach", respectively. However, both teachers feel plateaued because their job is no longer a challenge to them. The first teacher takes the initiative to withdraw from her current tasks and to explore other more challenging ones, whereas the second teacher continues with what he is already doing for years. Whether people initiate challenging experiences may depend on personal motives, self-efficacy, personality factors that relate to proactivity, or the combination of these personal factors.

### *Motives*

Amabile, Hill, Hennessey, and Tighe (1994) considered challenge as an important aspect of intrinsic motivation. Individuals who are intrinsically motivated strive to select work assignments that allow them to develop new skills and to be autonomous. This is in line with extant theory and research that describe intrinsic motivation as including: self-determination, that is, preference for choice and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985), competence, that is, mastery orientation and preference for challenge (Deci & Ryan, 1985), task involvement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), curiosity, and interest (Reeve, Cole, & Olson, 1986). The extent to which people are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated has generally been conceived of as a stable trait. Amabile et al. (1994), for example, demonstrated that people's motivations remained stable for longer periods and across major life transitions. This may suggest that people who are intrinsically motivated will initiate tasks and assignments that are challenging, whereas extrinsically motivated people will be less focused on

performing these types of tasks. To date, little research has addressed this specific relationship. Only recently, in a study on job flexibility of career starters, it was found that adolescents who rated high on intrinsic work values showed less resistance to accept a challenging job than those who rated low on intrinsic work values (Peiró, García-Montalvo, & Gracia, 2002).

Literatures on learning and development have emphasised the role of people's mastery and performance goals in work and educational settings, that are related to intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of motivation, respectively. Mastery-oriented individuals focus on the development of competence through task mastery, whereas performance-oriented individuals focus on demonstrating and validating their competence (e.g., Elliot, 1999; VandeWalle, Cron, & Slocum, 2001). Students with mastery goals persist when they are challenged because they want to learn. In contrast, students with performance goals tend to prevent the risk of being viewed as incompetent by others and they therefore will avoid challenging situations.

Other researchers have emphasised approach orientations as opposed to avoidance orientations in people. Individuals with an approach orientation aim at gaining desirable possibilities (i.e., success), whereas individuals with an avoidance orientation aim at avoiding negative, undesirable possibilities such as failure (e.g., Atkinson, 1957). Together, these dimensions comprise four motivational orientations (Elliot & McGregor, 2001): Performance-approach orientation (demonstrating one's abilities and gaining favourable judgments from others), performance-avoidance orientation (avoiding demonstrating incompetence as compared to others), mastery-approach orientation (developing competence or attaining task mastery), and mastery-avoidance orientation (avoiding failure to develop competence or to attain task mastery).

Classic achievement theories postulate that initial choice among a set of tasks differing in difficulty is a function of the relative strength of individuals' motivational orientations. Positively motivated individuals (i.e., individuals with motive to approach success stronger than their motive to avoid failure) prefer difficult tasks over easier tasks, whereas negatively motivated individuals (i.e., subjects with motive to approach success weaker than their motive to avoid failure) prefer performing moderately easy tasks (Cooper, 1983). Thus, individuals high in motive to approach success are expected to be more quickly engaging in challenging tasks than individuals low in motive to approach success. Individuals high in motive to avoid failure are expected to be less willing to engage in challenging tasks and more easily switching to routine tasks than individuals low in motive to avoid failure. This was demonstrated in a recent study with students from a Dutch university (De Pater, 2005). Students participated in an assessment centre and they were told that their management potential would be established based on their task performance. They were encouraged to show their capacities as best as they could during the assessment centre. Participants were free to choose three tasks from among a set of ten that could be performed during the assessment. The assessment centre tasks were pre-tested with another group of students who had rated the tasks as challenging or non-challenging. The participants in the assessment centre were asked to rank order the three tasks of their choice. There were clear differences among the

students regarding their task choices. Although all of them realised that the challenging tasks were more informative for establishing management potential than the non-challenging ones (as measured after the assessment centre), a substantial part of the participants yet chose to perform non-challenging tasks. Their task choice was most strongly related to the motive to avoid failure: Participants that rated high on this motive didn't want to perform the challenging tasks, whereas participants that were motivated to demonstrate their abilities preferentially performed the challenging tasks.

## *Self-Efficacy*

Pursuing challenging tasks may also depend on individuals' self-efficacy regarding these types of tasks. If individuals feel less confident in carrying out tasks that are beyond their usual tasks, they will probably stick to the types of tasks they are used to. Recently, this type of self-efficacy has been conceptualised as role breadth self-efficacy, that is: "the extent to which people feel confident and that they are able to carry out a broader and proactive role, beyond traditional prescribed technical requirements" (Parker, 1998, p. 835). According to Bandura's (1986) original self-efficacy theory, self-efficacy is considered being dynamic and task specific: it refers to people's judgments about their capability to perform *specific* tasks. Hence, role breadth self-efficacy differs from this task-specific conceptualisation of self-efficacy. Rather, it refers to an array of tasks comprising challenging tasks. As task specific self-efficacy, people's role breadth self-efficacy is not necessarily fixed but it can be influenced, for instance, by earlier and more frequent exposure to challenging tasks.

Self-efficacy beliefs are acquired and modified through four informational sources (Bandura, 1986): enactive mastery or performance attainment (repeated performance success), vicarious experience (modelling), verbal persuasion, and physiological states and reactions.

Personal success experiences with a given task tend to raise efficacy estimates, while repeated failures lower them. Lent and Hackett (1987) have stressed the importance of having enough opportunities for performance attainment. If a person is provided with relatively few enactive mastery experiences, one will be deprived of valuable information for developing competence beliefs. Indeed, Parker (1998) found that employees' role breadth self-efficacy was significantly related to the breadth of activities they had within their job.

Observing similar others succeed or fail at a particular activity (vicarious experience) may also affect one's self-efficacy, especially if one has had little direct experience upon which to estimate personal competence. People's role-breath self-efficacy may be enhanced if they see others effectively dealing with broader and more challenging tasks.

Verbal persuasion, that is telling people that they possess capabilities, may help to determine choices of activities and environments. Noe, Noe, and Bachhuber

(1990) found that career motivation was positively related to supervisor support. In a similar vein, employees will perform challenging tasks if their supervisor encourages them to do so. According to Bandura (1986), social persuasion can contribute to self-efficacy, but social persuasion alone may be limited in its power. One's physiological state when performing a task may also affect efficacy judgments. Evidence of anxiety, fatigue or depression during task performance may diminish inferred self-efficacy, whereas calmness, resilience or excitement may enhance perceived task proficiency. Of the four principle sources of information, physiological states and reactions have been shown to have the least influence on self-efficacy (Gist & Mitchell, 1992). Although enactive mastery seems one of the most influential sources of efficacy information, the relative effects of the four sources apparently depend on how they are patterned within a given learning context (Van Vianen, 1999). Since challenge denotes higher levels of arousal, physiological reactions as experienced during the performance of a challenging task may yet affect efficacy beliefs after task performance. Future research should scrutinise this issue because the balance between positive and negative emotions (excitement and/or fear) might be of greater importance for role breath self-efficacy than expected from existing research.

Enactive mastery may result from the initiatives of individuals themselves as well as from organisational practices. Thus, both the individual and the organisation contribute to providing the sources of self-efficacy. However, people's motives are the driving force for seeking or ignoring opportunities for performance attainment that in turn influences the building of role breadth self-efficacy.

## *Proactivity*

In general, individuals differ with regard to showing behaviour. Proactive individuals "select, create, and influence situations in which they work" (Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999, p. 417). They are more likely to engage in career management activities and they are more likely to identify and pursue opportunities for self-improvement (Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001). De Pater (2005) examined the early work and learning experiences of bachelor students during their internship at different companies in The Netherlands. Students' proactivity ratings as measured with the *Proactive Personality Scale* (see Seibert et al., 1999) were indeed positively related to having challenging experiences. Proactive students reported to have more of these experiences during their internship.

Proactivity is conceived of as a *trait*, but there are good reasons to believe that proactivity may rather reflect a *state* as being related to certain stages of people's careers. In later career stages, people may encounter a career plateau, as has been discussed above. Mid and late-career employees may have fully mastered their current work and they may perceive no opportunities for further upward career progress. The career literature emphasises content plateauing as being negative for

organisations but also as negatively experienced by individuals (e.g., Allen, Russell, Poteet, & Dobbins, 1999). The latter is questionable as many organisations report that their older and tenured employees are not willing to change their jobs and have no interest in improving their employability. A recent study among a large sample of employees working in health care institutions showed, for example, that employees who were satisfied with their career were less willing to accept other assignments or jobs within their organisation (Nauta, Van der Heijden, Van Vianen, Preenen, & Van Dam, 2007). Indeed, why should individuals change their work situation if this situation is experienced as comfortable? A basic principle of human motivation is that people become motivated and activated in situations of deprivation, but not when their needs are already fulfilled. On the contrary, research has revealed that positive affect, that is a state of positive mood, may even lead to higher levels of risk-aversion because unknown situations may be viewed as having the potential of loss (Isen & Geva, 1987).

## *Career Anchors*

Schein (1996) has organised people's motives, self-efficacy and personality into a higher order pattern of eight career anchors that guide career directions and decisions. The anchors are: autonomy/independence, security/stability, technical-functional competence, managerial competence, entrepreneurial creativity, service or dedication to a cause, life style, and pure challenge. Some of these anchors point to the seeking of challenging experiences, such as: autonomy/independence (i.e., the need to be autonomous and self-reliant regarding work and career development), entrepreneurial creativity (i.e., preference for starting new projects or businesses), and pure challenge (i.e., desire to conquer, and preference for problem-solving and constant self-testing). Also individuals with a managerial competence anchor are expected to seek challenging opportunities, because they have an interest in occupying positions that encompass broader managerial responsibilities. They, therefore, will pursue a career that involves challenges.

In contrast, people guided by the security anchor will avoid challenging and insecure situations, because they seek career stability and job security. Also, people with career anchors of technical competence (i.e., motivated to develop one's skills in a specific discipline), service/dedication (i.e., driven by core values of helping others rather than the work itself), and life style (a need to balance work and other aspects of life) may tend to neglect challenging opportunities at work. These categories of workers seem to be most vulnerable in a turbulent market where employees themselves carry the main responsibility for their own career and work experiences.

Of course, people's specific work experiences are not only determined by their own initiatives, but also by factors in the work environment. Organisational practices and supervisor behaviours may largely determine employees' exposure to enactive mastery experiences.

## *Challenging Experiences: Assigned*

In many educational and work settings, individuals are not entirely free to choose which activities to engage in, and thus, what experiences to have. Teachers assign tasks to their students and supervisors assign tasks to their employees. Moreover, since assignments in educational and work settings are often organised in groups, tasks are allocated among group members. Whether or not individuals have challenging experiences will to a certain extent depend on the behaviours of peers and supervisors. Thus, despite the important role of individuals' own characteristics in pursuing specific activities as mentioned above, their role breadth self-efficacy and opportunities for its enhancement are at least partly affected by the behaviours of others.

The role that peers may play in task choice decisions has been demonstrated in a study that examined the division of tasks among men and women (De Pater, Van Vianen, Humphrey, Sleeth, Hartman, & Fischer, 2004). In this study, the researchers created a situation in which challenging tasks were scarce (as they often are). Based on earlier literature that suggested that women might be less eager than men to perform challenging tasks (Dickerson & Taylor, 2000), it was proposed that women would less likely end up with performing these tasks after task division in mixed-sex groups. The researchers first examined the task preferences of male and female students and found no gender differences in task preferences. Thereafter, they created mixed-gender dyads with males and females having similar task preferences. The dyads participated in an assessment centre advertised to investigate their management potential. They were informed that both members of a dyad were not allowed to perform the same tasks. Therefore, they were asked to allocate the tasks among each other before starting to work on the tasks. The results of this study showed that male and female participants did not differ in the total number of initially chosen tasks they maintained during the task allocation. However, they did differ in the number of *challenging* tasks maintained after the task allocation. From the original set of challenging and non-challenging tasks they had chosen, males stuck to their initially chosen challenging tasks during task allocation whereas female participants more often held their initially chosen non-challenging tasks. Moreover, although the female participants actually performed more tasks in total during the assessment centre, male participants completed more challenging tasks. Thus after task allocation, females had *fewer* challenging tasks than males had, although they had similar preferences for these types of tasks. Female participants may have shifted their task preferences in the direction of more non-challenging tasks under the influence of gender stereotypes, that is, the belief that responsibility for challenging tasks is more appropriate for men than for women. This study clearly shows that employees' opportunities for performing challenging tasks depend on the specific characteristics of group members and the process of task allocation among them. If employees stay in their work group for a substantial amount of time, "standardised" processes of task allocation may easily arise with some group members being repeatedly deprived from challenging experiences whereas few others become showered with these experiences.

Supervisors, even more so than group members, strongly influence the types of task experiences of their employees. For instance, through delegation of some of their tasks to subordinates they may stimulate the development of subordinates' skills, knowledge, and even careers (Vinton, 1987; Yukl & Fu, 1999). Delegation may concern both challenging and routine tasks, but most supervisors will be particularly careful in delegating challenging tasks. Delegating challenging assignments to subordinates involves a certain risk for the supervisor (Van de Vliert & Smith, 2004). They will try to reduce that risk by delegating assignments exclusively to those subordinates they trust to be both willing (Hersey & Blanchard, 1993) and able (e.g., Leana, 1986) to perform well. Bauer and Green (1996) indeed found that supervisors' delegation behaviours were positively related to the job performance ratings of their subordinates. Also other factors may play a role in supervisors' delegation behaviours, such as supervisors' impression of subordinates' ambition and similarity. Ambitious subordinates may impress their supervisor as being eager to perform challenging assignments in order to improve their promotability. At least the risk of task failure due to subordinates' lower effort might be reduced if the subordinate is ambitious. Moreover, research has shown that supervisors evaluate the contextual performance of ambitious subordinates higher than those of non-ambitious ones (Hogan, Rybicki, Motowidlo, & Borman, 1998).

Perceptions of similarity influence initial interactions between supervisors and subordinates, which support the development of leader-member exchange relationships. Supervisors develop separate exchange relationships with each subordinate, as a result of social exchange between the leader and subordinate (e.g., Graen & Uhl Bien, 1995). Exchange relationships can either be high or low, with high exchange relationships being characterised by strong mutual trust and loyalty (Yukl & Fu, 1999). High exchange relationships are related to both subordinate performance (Graen & Uhl Bien, 1995) and the delegation of tasks and responsibilities (Bauer & Green, 1996).

Although supervisors' delegation behaviours have received some attention in the literature, supervisors' assignment of challenging tasks has hardly been addressed yet. Only recently, De Pater, Van Vianen, and Bechtoldt (2007) have examined supervisors' willingness to assign challenging tasks to their subordinates. They assumed that the proposed similarity mechanism as discussed above might cause male supervisors to assign fewer tasks to their female subordinates than to their male subordinates. In their study, they investigated to what extent supervisors' task assignment intentions were affected by subordinates' job performance, ambition, similarity with the supervisor, gender, and the quality of the leader-member exchange relationship. Supervisors were first asked about their intention to assign challenging tasks to their subordinates and then to provide their impression of each of their subordinates. Results showed that subordinates' perceived ambition, job performance, similarity, and gender were related to supervisors' assignment of challenging tasks. Ambitious, well performing, similar males were most likely to receive challenging assignments.

To summarise, the task allocation behaviours of peers and supervisors in particular significantly influence employees' opportunities for development and learning. The

assignment of undemanding tasks will seriously jeopardise employees' subsequent interests, role breadth self-efficacy, and employability orientation. Since only few supervisors may realise the far reaching consequences of their daily task allocation behaviours most of them actually may not manage the development and careers of their employees. No wonder that some older and tenured employees are less willing to learn and change. Generally, organisational support is of great importance for on the job development, particularly so for individuals that tend to rely more on environmental cues than on their self-concept to guide their development (Brutus, Ruderman, Ohlott, & McCauley, 2000).

## Discussion

### *Building a Career Through Paving the Path with Challenging Stones*

The career literature claims that future careers will change dramatically. During their careers, individuals will work in a larger number of different jobs and organisations (e.g., Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998). Job changes are particularly expected to occur *within* rather than *between* organisations, since no empirical evidence yet exists that supports an increase in external mobility. For example, mobility figures in The Netherlands have remained stable over the past 20 years (Gesthuizen & Dagevos, 2005). Moreover, external mobility appears to be strongly related to specific career stages, with career starters showing higher mobility rates than individuals in midlife and late careers. Additionally, external mobility rates highly depend on economic factors that affect demand and supply on the labour market. Therefore, the dramatic change in careers may be less concerned with external mobility. It will, however, unquestionably concern organisations' internal mobility because economic market mechanisms force organisations and people to change their activities regularly.

Nowadays, organisations struggle with the low employability of specific categories of employees and they expect to face even more of these problems in the near future. Job rotation was one of the attractive solutions that were proposed by human resource managers. Lateral transfers between job assignments within the organisation would be a good strategy to enrich the quality of employees' work experiences (Campion, Cheraskin, & Stevens, 1994). Yet, it seems that only few organisations were actually successful in implementing systems of job rotation. Most of them employed job rotation mainly in management development programs for the young group of management trainees. Besides, many organisations are simply not large enough to be able to rotate jobs among their members. Job rotation might indeed be a useful instrument for higher level and general management jobs, but it will be less appropriate for those categories of employees whose development is mostly in danger, such as the specialists and security seekers.

About 30 years ago, Hackman and Oldham (1976) proposed a job characteristics model that describes the satisfying and motivating ingredients of jobs: skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback. These characteristics remain to be highly relevant for future jobs; yet another characteristic should be added. Skill variety should be complemented with "skill challenge". Jobs should provide employees the opportunity to perform challenging activities, that is, activities that are new and ask for non-routine skills and behaviours, test one's abilities or resources, and may involve higher levels of responsibility and visibility.

The career literature emphasises that employees will be held more and more responsible for their development and employability. Individuals who fail to develop during their careers will be like a drifting ship that has lost its control on a stormy sea with a captain who forgot to check the machinery before and after leaving the port. In order to adequately manage their nonlinear careers, people first need to focus on their own criteria of career success rather than those of others. It is a necessity to find out what really matters to us and to depend less on what others might want. Do I want to sail around the world in 12 months or do I wish to travel around and to see as much as I can? Answering these types of questions will not be easy and most people will, therefore, need the suggestions and support of others. Career self-management, thus, also involves seeking the help of others, such as professional counsellors: We need some crew to check our machinery.

A stronger focus on the self may, however, have some hazards as well. Schwartz (2004) notified that "as people become free to do whatever they want, they get less happy" (p. 70). The more options for choice people have the more they tend to strive for the most optimal outcome (i.e., the maximum) rather than an outcome that is satisfying. Maximisers, as these people are called, are more prone to rumination and disappointment. Therefore, counsellors should take care not to overstate people's control of their own life. A healthy striving for one's own goals also means that environmental obstacles should be taken into account and that in some occasions one has to settle for a second best option. Having said this, we would like to note that many employees might not be aware of the consequences of their daily activity choices. Furthermore, those employees that may be more consciously dealing with their career strivings may do this with "restricted" motives, for example, with the intention to outperform others. A mastery-approach orientation will, however, be more suitable and healthy for setting one's goals in future careers.

The mechanisms and positive outcomes of goal striving have been extensively discussed in the goal setting literature. A basic premise of goal setting theory is that goals should be difficult and attainable. In a similar vein, work experiences should be challenging and attainable. Brutus et al. (2000) rightly noted that challenging job assignments have two sides of a coin: a beneficial one and a risky one. Challenging experiences are beneficial in case they are successfully dealt with. Challenging experiences have, however, also the risk of failure. Failure in itself will provide individuals with useful information about their weaknesses. It may, however, also lower individuals' self-esteem and interest in exploring other job facets. Challenge may even hurt peoples' development if the challenge is too much and/or too soon (Van Velsor & Hughes, 1990). Challenges may easily become too much of a good thing

if individuals experience lack of control and become anxious rather than excited. Challenging experiences, therefore, should be attainable in such a way that there are good options and no serious obstacles for successful mastery. A challenge differs from a goal in that it is subjective rather than objective: it should build on existing experiences and skills, as perceived by employees themselves.

Besides modest optimism about successful performance, employees need to have positive expectations about the support they will receive from their supervisors and peers. Organisations and supervisors in particular can manage the challenging experiences of their employees in several ways. First, they can provide frequent feedback and support in case employees engage in challenging activities. Secondly, they can create a culture of tolerance where employees are allowed to fail on their challenging experiences. Moreover, if the task performance was less successful than expected they can, together with the employee, seek for other challenges that fit the employee better. A continuous learning culture encourages employees to seek for challenging opportunities and lowers their fears of failure. Thirdly, if employees do not initiate and direct their development, organisations can do. Not only employees but also supervisors might be reluctant to change existing routines, as we have noted in this paper. Hence, in a turbulent market, employees but organisations as well should be aware of their risk-avoidant behaviours.

The human resource instruments that are most common nowadays seem risk avoidant: they aim for selection and cure. For example, personnel selection instruments have been developed to reduce the number of "false positives", specific training programs were organised to bridge missing skills, and career self-management training programs were set up to cure employees from learned helplessness. However, formal career self-management training is generally not very successful in getting people to actually engage in career self-management activities and may even backfire if the company has mandated employees' training participation (Kossek, Roberts, Fisher, & Demarr, 1998). Future human resource management practices should aim for more challenging strategies, for instance by breaking down the daily routines of employees and supervisors and by encouraging experimentation and risk-taking. It is too easy and an illusion as well to assume that employees could manage their careers entirely on their own. Employees will need the coaching of others, such as organisations and counsellors.

DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) have stressed the importance of three career competencies: know-why, know-whom¸ and know-how competencies. Know-why competencies relate to individuals' self-concept as reflected in their career motivation, values, and interests. Know-whom competencies relate to the building of career supportive networks. The know-how competencies concern individuals' skills and development. In this paper, most attention has been paid to the latter competency, since this competency can be viewed as the most basic one. If people neglect their development, know-why and know-whom competencies will become almost useless for building a satisfactory career in a flexible job market. The human resource management approaches that are traditionally related to individuals' know-how competencies are job-analysis, job design, performance appraisal, and training (see DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). We aimed to stress the point that these

HRM instruments remain to be valuable yet insufficient. Employees' development is a matter of new "routines", that is the routinely initiation or assignment of challenging work experiences.

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