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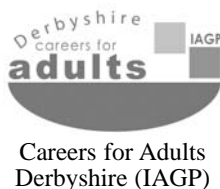
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New Careers, New Relationships: Understanding and Supporting the Contemporary Worker

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New Careers, New Relationships

Times have changed, and both jobs and their associated 'career ladders' appear more temporary, and more elusive, than before. Yet people still seek certain fundamentals - security, community, and self-fulfilment - from their working lives. How can we still help to provide these fundamentals in a time of greater uncertainty? One answer lies in finding continuity in what we used to see as discontinuous events. People may change jobs, but retain the relationships and support systems that they had before. This paper draws on examples from a recent book *The New Careers* by Professor Michael Arthur and colleagues and discusses the implications of these examples for future research and practice.

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New Careers, New Relationships

Understanding the Contemporary Worker

The New Zealand Experiment

A few years ago I was invited to visit New Zealand. At the time the country was coming out of a ten-year "experiment" to transform itself from a largely static, financially-overburdened, economy into a more dynamic, entrepreneurial one. The experiment earned mixed reports. One political camp cited tales of personal hardships and labelled the experiment a failure, while another camp celebrated the economic turnaround and proclaimed the experiment a success[1]. Setting the claims of either camp aside, our team saw a distinct opportunity to explore the nature of people's career experiences over a period of unusual employment turbulence.

Our research design was simple: to put together a representative sample of the work-force, including representative proportions of women and minorities; to gather some basic background data, and then to get everyone we interviewed to talk about their career experiences. We wanted to hear about every job that our informants had held, how they arrived in those jobs, what they gave to and got back from each job, and why and how they moved on from each job, over the ten-year period in question. We put together a 75-person sample, locating most of them by cold calling over the telephone. As our sampling requirements became more constrained we identified potential pools of workers, for example a group of welders, or an association of fish farmers, and asked helpers to pick someone randomly from a list. In no case did we use a direct personal contact in our sampling approach. Table 1 summarises the final sample that we used.

After completing our interviews, we put together some data about overall patterns of career mobility. The average time people held any one job was over four years. The average time people stayed in any one company was around six years. Yet most of our sample was mobile, according to a simple definition of whether they had changed jobs or been self-employed over the ten years in question. The great majority of moves were voluntary rather than obligatory. Moreover, most of this voluntary mobility could not be classified as career advancement in any traditional sense. People appeared to have other reasons for moving on. Layoffs were relatively rare, while movements across industry, occupational and geographic boundaries were relatively frequent. Table 2 overleaf summarises some of these data. What, though, lay behind the mobility patterns that we witnessed?

Two stories

It is tempting for researchers, especially management researchers, to look at relatively well-educated, upwardly-mobile subjects and presume their observations apply to a larger population. Let us make it a point to avoid that temptation here. Let us do so through the stories of Bruce, who started out as a boilermaker, and of Gina, who started out as a factory worker[3].

Bruce was a boilermaker. He worked and socialised with his boilermaker "mates". He was a union representative who "took on some pretty big companies, and brought them to their knees". But when Bruce started to question his union's tactics he became ostracised, and out of work. Desperate for a change, he called an overseas friend whose family owned a hotel, and was offered a job as a barman. He took up the offer, and developed what he called "people skills" in managing the bar's customers. However, he soon discovered the hotel was going into receivership. All was not lost, however, since the receivers were looking for someone who "didn't have any bad habits" to take

Table 1 Research Sample for The New Careers[2]

Occupational Group		Number in Sample	Males	Females	Caucasian	Non-Caucasian	Age Range
No.	Description						
1.	Legislators, Administrators & Managers	11	5	6	9	2	27-28
2.	Professionals	13	6	7	12	1	25-56
3.	Technicians and Associate Professionals	8	3	5	6	2	26-56
4.	Clerks	8	1	7	6	2	27-28
5.	Service and Sales Workers	11	5	6	9	2	26-58
6.	Agricultural and Fishery Workers	7	5	2	7	0	26-56
7.	Trades Workers	6	6	0	5	1	32-51
8.	Plant and Machine Operators and Assemblers	5	4	1	4	1	26-66
9.	Elementary Occupations	6	4	2	2	4	28-54
Total		**75**	**39**	**36**	**60**	**15**	**25-66**

the job of duty manager. Bruce was duty manager for the next twelve months, extended his people skills, and added book-keeping and budgeting skills. When the hotel closed Bruce returned home, touted his emergent people skills, and got a job as a used-car salesperson.

In the car sales position, Bruce developed further skills in product representation and "closing the deal". A year later he saw a position advertised for someone to represent a line of engineering products. He concluded he had the necessary engineering skills (from boilermaking), people skills (from running the bar), territory management skills (from being the hotel duty manager), selling skills (from being a used-car salesperson) and that he could "do that job". He got it, succeeded in it, and the last we heard was a trusted confidante of the company's owner and a contributor to the company's further development.

Gina was a factory worker, but the husband and wife who owned the factory noticed she had a special talent with children, and would occasionally ask Gina to look after their own offspring instead of working on the factory floor. Eventually, they encouraged Gina to try to leave the factory to work with children, and gave her a glowing reference. She took a 40 percent drop in pay to become a day-care worker. Once she was doing day-care work she trained to become a supervisor, and transferred to a new employer that offered a supervisor's position. However, one day when her father came to collect her from work she was overheard talking to him about the additional administrative burden that the owner placed on her. The next day Gina was fired.

Once Gina's dismissal became known, nine of the parents associated with the day-care centre turned up at her home. They wanted her to set up her own centre with themselves and their children as the first customers. Gina acquiesced, and her business later grew substantially. The last we heard she was strongly committed to her industry and a frequent speaker at government and public forums about its effectiveness. She took pride in her transformation from being an "almost pathetic, shy and quiet" person to becoming an enterprising businesswoman and passionate advocate for quality child care.

In both of these stories the people were willing to make what would be conventionally seen as sideward or downward moves. Both people ended up in different occupations from where they started out. Both people also ended up in different organisations from where they started out. Accordingly, neither story is about upward occupational mobility or organisational mobility. Neither story, therefore, conforms to the two principal perspectives - occupational and organisational - that have been used in traditional work on careers[5].

Boundaryless versus Bounded Benefits

Let us dig deeper. Bruce benefited from successive components of knowledge, as well as self-assurance, that he took with him. These comprised engineering knowledge from his boilermaking days, people knowledge from his bartending days, managerial knowledge from his duty manager days, and sales knowledge from his used-car dealership days. All of these components of knowledge were useful to him in his last job as an engineering sales representative. Similarly, Gina, courtesy of her first boss, took a belief from her factory job that she was good with children, and a belief from her day-care work that she had what it took to be supervisor. The support she received from her customers when she was fired from her last job was perhaps the most important career benefit of all.

All of the above benefits can be described as boundaryless benefits, in the sense that they are benefits that people take with them when they change employers. They stand in contrast to bounded benefits, most obviously the pay or satisfaction to be gained from a job, which cease as soon as the person moves. When we asked people what they got from their jobs, boundaryless benefits like those Bruce and Gina gained were mentioned more frequently than bounded ones. Some typical boundaryless benefits included the skills and knowledge gained through on-the-job learning, the new perspectives or personal growth that a job experience nurtured, or the reputation or access to knowledge found through relevant others (Table 3). In a world where no employer (or at least no private-sector employer) can think in terms of offering lifetime employment, boundaryless benefits would seem to be preferable to bounded ones.

Table 2 Research Sample for The New Careers[4]

Occupation Group		Average Job Tenure (Years)	Average Employment Tenure(Years)	Total No. of Layoffs	Average No. of Jobs	Average No. of Employees
No.	Description					
1	Legislators, Administrators and Managers	3.3	5.8	2	4.5	3
2	Professionals	6.2	7.5	4	2.8	2.5
3	Technicians and Associate Professionals	4.1	6.0	3	3.6	3.0
4	Clerks	4.0	4.8	1	3.9	3.4
5	Service and Sales Workers	3.1	4.7	1	4.7	3.4
6	Agricultural and Fishery Workers	5.4	6.5	2	3.3	2.9
7	Trades Workers	5.0	5.4	2	3.2	3
8	Plant and Machine Operators and Assemblers	6.0	6.0	0	2.8	3
9	Elementary Occupations	8.4	9.0	2	2.2	1.77
Totals:		4.3	5.9	17	3.5	2.9

New Careers, New Relationships

Table 3 Contrasts between bounded and boundaryless career benefits

<u>Bounded Benefits</u>
1. Specific work satisfactions
2. Money
3. Enjoyment
4. Social life
5. Safety and support
6. Autonomy

<u>Boundaryless Benefits</u>
1. Skills and knowledge
2. Enhanced networks
3. Self-assurance
4. Personal growth
5. Broader viewpoints
6. Communication Skills

Three Ways of Knowing

We have found it helpful to think of people's careers as unfolding through three ways of knowing, called knowing-why, knowing-how and knowing-whom respectively. Knowing-why concerns *why* we work, and involves such things as our values and interests, our related motivation to work, and our desire to accommodate work and lifestyle or family. Knowing-how concerns *how* we work, and involves our skills and expertise, including particular occupational skills, analytical skills, leadership skills and interpersonal skills. Knowing-whom concerns with *whom* we work, and involves work-mates, mentors and protégés, occupational or industry connections and family and friends [6]. The three ways of knowing are shown in Figure 1[7]. They reflect much of what career counselling has traditionally been about, including especially links from (knowing-why) interests to (knowing-how) job performance, and from (knowing-whom) networks to (knowing-how) job opportunity. However, our interest

is more in the dynamic interplay between the ways of knowing.

This dynamic interplay is easily seen in our two example stories, as well as in most other stories in our New Zealand sample. Bruce's (knowing-why) motivation to change his boilermakers' way of working changed his life, and he had a (knowing-whom) friend to help him find another job where he could develop new abilities. His emergent set of (knowing-how) sales and engineering skills helped him to open up a new (knowing-whom) relationship with his present boss. Gina's factory experience led to (knowing-whom) encouragement to get into child care, and her emergent (knowing-why) enthusiasm for and (knowing-how) skills in that field led to her being asked to found her own day-care centre. Both stories illustrate how people's career behaviour both influences and is influenced by the social arrangements with which it engages [8]. Moreover, a particular feature of both stories is the knowing-whom relationships that each career actor was able to foster along the way. Let us explore such relationships more closely.

The Role of Relationships

Bruce sought out a helpful contact he had met on vacation, and later built a solid relationship with his boss at the industrial sales company. Gina was encouraged by her relationship with her first boss and his wife, and later by the those parents who sought her out after she was fired. Their stories are illustrative of other data about interpersonal relationships. In "The New Careers" we confirmed what other people have noticed, that two out of three new employment opportunities are found at least in part through personal networks. Loose ties, formed as a natural by-product of social, educational or work experience, frequently provide the links through which new jobs are identified and secured [9].

However, there is more to careers than having loose ties, and calling on them when one needs a new job. Relationships play a much more continuous role in contemporary careers. We have made progress over the past twenty years understanding the importance of mentors, or more broadly of "relationship
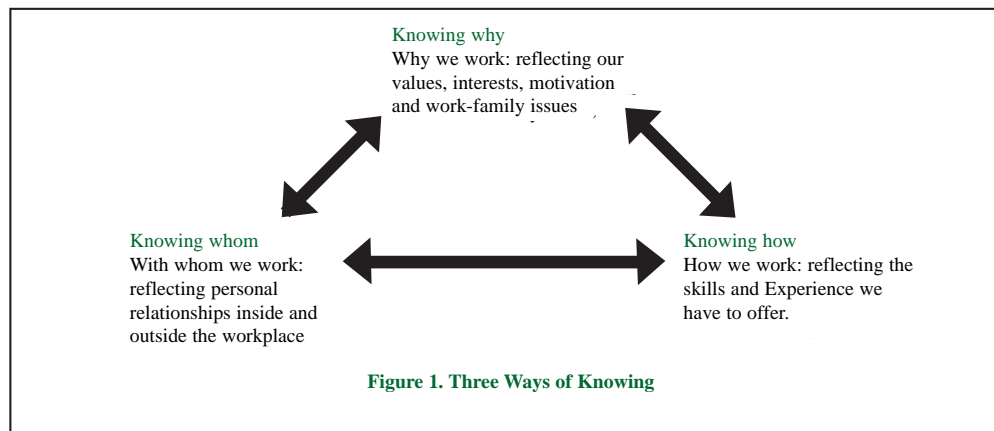

Knowing why
Why we work: reflecting our values, interests, motivation and work-family issues

Knowing whom
With whom we work: reflecting personal relationships inside and outside the workplace

Knowing how
How we work: reflecting the skills and Experience we have to offer.

Figure 1. Three Ways of Knowing

constellations" that support people's careers [10]. However, it is only recently that we have begun to see how much those relationships can prevail outside the work setting, and thereby provide both the support and tutelage from which people can benefit as they pursue new careers with greater levels of employment mobility [11].

The significance of relationships gets a further boost from the emergence of the world-wide-web. The web allows us to more easily keep in touch with people we have grown up with, studied with, worked with, or who belong to an alumni group with which we identify. The web also allows us to more deeply explore possible employment opportunities so that our connections with personal contacts, such as fellow-alumni within a target firm, can be more useful. The web promises to further empower the career actor by making knowing-whom connections more substantial and more influential than ever before [12].

Community Ties

Before we leave Bruce and Gina, let us notice one more suggestion in their stories, about the relevance of community. For Bruce, perhaps his biggest single career move was to walk away from the community of boilermakers that used to dominate both his working and social life. For Gina, there was the community of parents who insisted she continue to care for their children. These examples affirm the significance of community attachments in our lives [13]. They also suggest there is life beyond the direct work groups that have been so emphasised in contemporary studies of work. Let us move on to two other kinds of community we have studied. One involves sexual abuse counsellors, the other involves the "virtual community" behind the highly popular Linux computer operating system.

We recently had the opportunity to work with a group of people that provided specialised counselling services to victims of sexual abuse. The people all worked for the same non-profit institution, but their overlapping career investments had little to do with any idea of regular employment or rewards. Instead, the group's (knowing-why) motivation was concerned with making a contribution to society through their work, and to help one another to work more effectively. Their (knowing-how) investments were to get better at what they did, to learn more about themselves in the process, and to find support for their learning among their colleagues. Their (knowing-whom) relationships were focused on giving and receiving the kind of social support that complemented their professional identities. In sum, they described themselves as a community that shared an ideological commitment to their work, provided support for one another, invested in overlapping occupational learning, and just happened to work for the same organisation [14].

Linux software developers evolved a different kind of community. Their unconventional young leader, the Finn Linus Torvalds, sought to develop a more flexible operating system than that recommended by conventional wisdom. In a few short years, a global community of volunteer software developers came up with a product that overtook rival offerings from leading firms such as IBM and Microsoft, who were in turn obliged to make major investments to accommodate the popular Linux system. The volunteers shared (knowing-why) enthusiasm for their work, and for the related idea of "open software," gave rise to their investment in developing cutting-edge (knowing-how) skills and applying them to their collaborative work. Their (knowing-whom) links were often begun and maintained over the Internet, rather than through any face-to-face dialogue. The community they formed was largely a virtual one, lacking in face-to-face contact but still driven by its members' passion for their programming occupation, and by the members' shared ideological commitment to open software [15].

The last two stories suggest we can find community support for our careers in a variety of places. A provisional list covers the occupations in which we work, the industries that host our work, the geographic regions where we apply our work, the ideological bonds we share with others (covering paid work and voluntary work), the projects through which we collaborate (and from which a sense of community can persist even when the work is done), fellow alumni from school, college, military or employment experiences, groups intended to provide direct support around issues of gender or hardship, the immediate and extended families in which we participate, the virtual communities we belong to and - last but not necessarily least - the organisations in which we find employment. Moreover, we can belong to a range of communities at any one time, so that we can find continuity of support for our careers even as employment arrangements change [16].

There has only been space here to share a limited range of examples. However, the new career circumstances underlying these examples appear to be ubiquitous. Not long ago there was widespread Western interest in Japanese models of management, and in related claims of lifetime employment. However, data from that time reported that the average employment period for the supposedly immobile Japanese male worker was only eight years [17]. UK data from the 1980s show that managers were mobile before the era of downsizing took effect [18]. In most OECD countries, typical employment periods run between five and eight years. To put it another way, most people change employers, and most employers change most of their personnel, in any ten year period.

Supporting the Contemporary Worker

Stories of unpredictable job changes, boundaryless career benefits, dynamic interdependence among knowing-why, knowing-how and knowing-whom career investments, the influence of loose ties, and support from overlapping community attachments are all parts of the new career landscape. Unless technological progress suddenly ceases, or the lowering of trade barriers is catastrophically reversed, we can expect that landscape to persist. Let us turn to ask how we might support people – predictably the majority of people – to be found in the new landscape.

New Careers, New Relationships

Affirm the New Careers: A fundamental challenge is to affirm the new career realities. Perhaps we are becoming better at that, but it is not part of our tradition. The term "vocational guidance" suggests otherwise, that occupational choice ought to last a lifetime. Similarly, in management studies the term "organisational careers" suggests employment arrangements ought to last a lifetime. Perhaps it is still the ideal of some career counsellors to promote such outcomes? Yet, they are unlikely to happen for most workers. Our models need to be more dynamic, and to anticipate career mobility rather than neglect it. Our advice needs to help people think about securing employment two, five, or even ten years ahead, not by presuming where those people will be, but by helping them to remain employable.

Promote Knowledge Accumulation: One issue we haven't fully embraced concerns how the new careers promote the knowledge economy. Just as bees cross-pollinate the flowers in the meadow, new careers provide effective conveyors for knowledge transfer. A graphic example comes from independent film-making, where participants get together, learn from one another, and disband back into the industry one movie at a time[19]. It's a process where people's developing knowledge drives the success of the industry. We can find parallels to this process in other industries, such as in legal work and software writing. Moreover, the parallels are just as evident in the blue-collar world of construction as they are in white-collar occupations. New, knowledge-based careers aren't just good for the people, they're good for the economy.

Seek Out Career Communities: The construction industry suggests a basis for community attachments, namely the occupational communities in which people find shared identification. Organisations can nurture helpful community attachments too, provided we acknowledge, rather than suppress, emergent realities about labour market uncertainties. As previously indicated, we can also find "career communities" – places where people find career support – in industry, alumni, volunteer, and ideologically-based situations, including situations where people congregate around the experience of unemployment. However, we haven't always been adept at teasing out just where those communities exist, and what they can provide. Let us not only seek out those career communities, but also work with them as sources of enduring career support, rather than as any quick fix for finding the next job.

Get Ahead of the Problems: There appears to be something of a paradox for those who work with careers. They are frequently placed where they are needed most, but where – in career terms – they may see the least. That is, they may be placed in situations of transition – from school or college to work, unemployment to employment, or despair to hope – in people's life situations. The challenge is to successfully deal with the immediate situation, rather than to see that situation within a longer time horizon. However, there is a risk that both career advisers and their clients may focus on the short-term at the cost of the longer-term, and that we come to view career counselling as crisis counselling. To help people claim greater control over their personal career development calls for using more dynamic models of career, models that emphasise choice and persistent learning above dependency and routine work.

Follow the People: There is a challenge to do better in following the progress of the careers we seek to serve. In writing "The New Careers" we reported that the stories we found were "frequently surprising, occasionally delightful, sometimes distressing, but… always informative"[20]. Yet, the stories were only "frequently surprising" because of our brought assumptions that organisational or occupational chimneys would funnel most careers. What seemed like exceptional behaviour at first sight turned out to be embedded within larger patterns of career creativity and adaptation. The lesson that suggests itself is to try harder and act smarter in coming together to understand these patterns. If we can do so, we will be better positioned to represent them - and through them people's career investments - in our work.

Act the Part!: Now for the confessional piece. This paper is written by a tenured professor. Once, the concept of tenure was deemed necessary to protect academic freedom. However, it seems to be often used as a simple prop for job security, thereby putting academic careers on a different plane to other kinds of career. Where else do we find these protected work situations, and to what extent do they occur in educational and public sector roles from where career advising may emerge? In turn, how much are we assuming one part for ourselves and suggesting a different part for our clients? We can't change the world overnight, but perhaps we can make it a point to express ourselves inside our own professional associations? Perhaps we can in turn help those associations become more relevant along the way? Let us be comfortable ourselves in the part that we ask others to play.

Conclusion

Our purpose here has been to explore the new careers and the relationships through which people find career support. The new careers are represented by the experiences of Bruce and Gina. These kind of people commonly exhibit occupational or employment mobility, and accumulate boundaryless rather than bounded career benefits. The new careers are also about relationships, both interpersonal and communal. Relationships underlie the career support that people develop, support that frequently endures while employment arrangements change.

Our exploration suggests that affirming the new careers, promoting knowledge accumulation, seeking out career communities, getting ahead of the problems and following the progress of people's career journeys can all be helpful to the individuals we seek to serve. So can seeing for ourselves the same career possibilities we see for others. Let us have fun, work well, learn new things, and support each other as we go. Let us be part of the new career landscape as well.

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[2] Source: Arthur, M.B. Inkson, K and Pringle, J. (1999). *The New Career: Individual Action and Economic Change.* London: Sage

[3] Both stories are from Arthur, Inkson and Pringle, op. cit.

[4] Source: Arthur, Inkson and Pringle, op. cit.

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[20] Arthur, Inkson and Pringle, op. cit., p. 18.