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In the contemporary world organisations and work are being fragmented. People change jobs more often and their working lives are made up of 'chunks of labour' (Sennett 1998). This has implications not only for the way they work and the way they learn skills but also for lives outside work. There is a great deal of variation between sectors in the extent to which work and organisations are fragmented. Many areas have changed little over the last few decades while others outsource peripheral tasks such as cleaning or security or supplement existing workforces with temporary staff. However there are some, and UK television production is one of these, in which the changes have been dramatic. Here the process of fragmentation was initiated in the 1980s and the sector changed from one which was dominated by large vertically integrated organisations such as the BBC and ITV to one composed of a large number of small independent production companies and a small number of large ones, working on commissions from the broadcasters.

This chapter considers the implications of these changes on careers in the UK television sector. It observes the uncertainty, serendipity and pitfalls which the new structure fosters. Freelance careers are driven by individuals, but, particularly in a labour market where those seeking employment far outnumber the jobs available, these individuals often face tough competition in 'tournaments' rather than straightforward progression. Too often the careers literature, even when liberated from boundaries, assumes that individuals' influence is unrestricted and that progression is natural. Yet boundaryless careers (Arthur 1994) depend both on individual agency

(Tams and Arthur 2010, Blair et al. 2003, Jones 1996) and macro-level factors (Jones 2010) and the former are often responsive to the latter (Baumann 2002, Platman 2004). This chapter gives due weight to the acts of individuals but also reveals the ways in which individuals are acted upon. We introduce the concept of 'tournament careers' to capture the tenuous character of failure and exit as well as success and progression. Tournaments suggest competing for a desired price; they involve effort, preparation, building strategies, and winning or losing independently of those. The winners always outnumber significantly those competing. And they may drop out at each stage of the tournament, so winning is always temporary. These are all aspects of the way freelancers in the UK television build their working path. In the fluid institutional environment of contemporary television there is a strong element of chance and arbitrariness, beyond the reach of freelancers' strategies. In this labour market the random chance can work either in favour of or against freelance career progression. Adding to the experience of insecurity and making careers more tenuous than much of the literature suggests.

### **Television careers**

In film and television, careers are usually project-based. As Faulkner and Anderson (1987, 883) observe:

Career lines are forged as participants on both sides of the market move from film to film, from opportunity point to opportunity point. Career attributes are accumulated as people move from credit to credit. Sustained participation in this structure of contracts, credits, and attributes is the requirement for continued success.

and

Building a career line is an uncertain and often erratic process, with quite a range of outcomes possible in the form of (a) continuity of contracts over a period of time and (b) a range of recurrent ties with many and different kinds of people in the business. (p.887).

Following the boundaryless career approach, Jones (1996) developed a project-based career model using US film industry data. She distinguished four stages: beginning, crafting, navigating and maintaining the career. Beginning a career in film is challenging as the environment is highly competitive and there are no established entry paths. The process of 'crafting' one's career involves acquiring technical skills through on-the-job training while being socialised into the values and the culture of the industry. The next stage, navigating, involves establishing a reputation (by creating good work), developing skills and establishing a network of industry contacts based on relationships. So it is essential to produce good quality work in order to be able to secure further projects. Jones' respondents associated their individual reputation with the reputation of the final product, e.g the success of the film they worked on (Jones 1996). Careers then become really precarious, because the success of any film, as the author herself points out (p.66) depends on a large number of factors. The final stage of the film career is maintaining it. Jones highlights two main challenges at this stage: sustaining and extending one's network, and balancing professional and personal lives. In this way the focus is shifted to developing others and maintaining the industry.

In a working life constructed between organisations and jobs, there is also a tension between skills development and career development, which previously, in an organisational context, used to run in parallel. This is reflected in the 'career progression paradox' (O'Mahony and Bechky 2006). The concept problematises the ways in which freelance professionals expand their skills in order to take their next career step. In this type of employment such moves depend largely on

the previous project role. In fragmented and external labour markets there is a higher risk for employers hiring people with the right skills. When applying for a job, a freelancer would be looking for positions similar to the last one held, and employers would hire individuals who have experience in similar positions, i.e. use credits as an indicator of skills. Because there is a risk in hiring 'external' individuals anyway, it is highly improbable that a freelancer would be engaged for a position different to or 'higher' than the one (s)he had held previously. And so there is a paradox, which freelancers can overcome by explicit tactics to enable them gain additional skills and progress ('stretchwork').

### **Careers as tournaments**

Boundaryless careers can be conceptualised as tournaments: a term used by Marsden (2007) to describe entry into labour markets dominated by project-based employment. The very idea of a tournament is highly relevant to UK television careers. Firstly, a tournament is an activity that can be won, but may also be lost. Accounts of the 'new careers' usually focus on the ways they unfold and the idea of failure is either not explored or is given far less emphasis than is accorded to success. Conceptualising 'careers as tournaments', however, allows for attention to be paid to the notion of failure and discontinuity: both important and influential aspects of creative careers. Secondly, tournaments suggest a certain degree of preparation, of conscious effort to equip oneself with the skills, contacts and behaviours which can lead to success. At the same time, it also suggests that there is a strong element of chance, of things 'beyond one's control' which can have a powerful influence on the outcome. Finally, tournaments imply competing for a prize, something desirable and prestigious. And this is also an element of work in television: a career perceived to be one of glamour and fame. Thus conceptualising careers as tournaments captures

the delicate dynamics between effort and outcome in a way that is sensible to the often random way in which project-based careers unfold, or, rather, ‘happen’.

The notion of tournament has been applied to careers before. Rosenbaum (1979) suggested a tournament mobility model which introduced the idea of career as a chain of competitions “*each* of which has implications for an individual’s mobility chances in all subsequent selections” (pp.222-23). It particularly stresses the importance of the initial stage of the ‘competitions’ for all subsequent results. This model is helpful in its distinction between ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ at each stage whereby “Winners have the opportunity to compete for high levels, but they have no assurance of attaining them; losers are permitted to compete only for low levels or are denied the opportunity to compete any further at all.” (Rosenbaum 1979, 223). Contemporary television careers resemble such tournaments, however, they are tournaments whose outcomes are marked by ever increasing levels of ambiguity and uncertainty.

Not only is success uncertain at each career step but the desired outcome or direction is tentative, too. Each step is thus a provisional one and is linked to a number of potential opportunities. A key feature of this type of career is its arbitrariness and the lack of clear steps of progression. Thus,

Unlike in organisational careers where jobs are often organised into different career tracks which may be known in broad terms *ex ante*, in this example, there are few such guide posts. Workers know about their previous and present jobs or assignments *ex post*, but can only surmise where they are leading. (Marsden 2007, 979)

In addition to individual effort and strategies, macro-level factors also influence the career outcomes of creative professionals (Jones 2010). When television production was dominated by bureaucratic organisations and their internal labour markets, career steps were linked to the skills

and experience required at each stage which were clearly set out in the professional community. De-regulation, outsourcing, the decline of trade unions and the rise of freelance labour and small independent firms changed all that. Entry was no longer limited, progression routes were far more fluid and (since the number of institutions awarding them had grown so dramatically) the link between job titles and expertise was greatly weakened. This is the environment in which we conducted our study and in which our informants worked. They could certainly influence their own careers, and many went to great lengths to do so. However, as they explained, this fractured labour market worked very differently to the ordered, organisational systems which had preceded it. While individuals could still carve out progression routes (as Jones 1996 reveals) the absence of clear labour market structures meant that such development was uncertain. For many in the industry successes were as much a product of good luck as good judgement and it was the interplay of the random and serendipitous events with freelancers' conscious efforts and strategies that shaped careers.

### **UK Television careers**

Until 1990 the TV sector in the UK was dominated by four major terrestrial broadcasters all of which were large bureaucratic organisations with strong internal labour markets. Entry to the industry was usually through one of them. Once hired, people would expect to progress through the hierarchy building their skills and enriching their knowledge in a relatively structured and predictable way. Trade unions were strong and ensured that only skilled and experienced people were hired on projects. The changes in 1980s and 1990s led to the establishment of a new sectoral configuration a prominent feature of which was the growth in independent production and increase in outsourcing relationships (Saundry 2001). This in turn led to considerable

reductions in staff positions and a corresponding growth in the number of freelance workers (Thynne 2000, Tunstall 1993, Dex et al. 2000). The old vertically integrated and hierarchical production structures were replaced by a network of small companies (Barnatt and Starkey 1994, Davis and Scase 2000, Saundry 1998, Starkey et al. 2000, Tunstall 1993). As the sector fractured, new integrating mechanisms were created. External networks of professionals were set up and small companies had to build links with broadcasters in order to get commissions. The labour market also changed: staff jobs were reduced and freelance employment became widespread (Skillset 2007). Numerous media degrees emerged and trade unions weakened. The numbers of people entering the industry both grew and became more varied since the major broadcasters no longer acted as gatekeepers, restricting entry to a small number, and progression was unregulated. The television industry fragmented into individual freelancers and independent companies. This created challenges for both. Jobs became potentially more diverse with greater individual control over employment, but they also became more uncertain and irregular.

The above changes had a considerable influence on the ways in which careers evolved. They were experienced in different ways across the occupational ‘generations’ who were at various stages in their careers at the time of the reforms. Research showed that there was a shift in the value system of the industry and the efforts to find employment took priority over all other activities (Paterson 2001). Insecurity rose significantly leading to an increased emphasis on job search. This change of focus altered the balance between the types of skills individuals required in order to progress in their working lives, increasing the importance of networking and social capital (Blair 2000, DeFillippi and Arthur 1994). This shift was similar to the one which occurred in the Hollywood film industry following the abandonment of the old studio system (see Christopherson and Storper, 1989).

The outcomes of the shift between from long-term employment within a single large organisation associated with in-house training and progression through well-defined structures and clearly set out grades and roles to short-term contracts based on reputation, on-the-job and freelance training and ambiguous, fluid job roles, raises a number of concerns (Tempest et al. 2004). One of them is the increasingly blurred association between job titles and previous experience; mainly found in cases when less experienced workers were offered an enhanced title in order to compensate for lower pay. The fragmentation also affected the social capital which both individuals and firms acquired. At the individual level, many established freelancers had developed their social capital and established a network of contacts while working full-time for one of the major terrestrials, that is in the course of their organisational career which preceded the freelance one. A process which was facilitated by regular employment, greater opportunities to meet a range of specialists and the (often significantly) larger organisational size. Irregular and brief periods of work during which professionals rarely get the opportunity to meet many of their fellows and a labour market dominated by small companies and small projects offers far fewer opportunities to engage. This raised concerns as to where social capital might be acquired in the future. An acquisition further complicated by the erosion of trust in the sector, with the shift to flexible employment patterns in the industry. "The short-term frame of contemporary business and the constant reconfiguration of flexible capitalism limit the ripening of informal trust." (Tempest et al. 2004, 1541). This resonates with Sennett's (1998) concern of contemporary working lives being fragmented and based on short-term relationships which undermine trust and mutual commitment. Such careers do not create a continuous narrative of one's life and have a destabilising effect on people 'corroding their character'. Hence 'careering alone' i.e. the

fragmentation of career paths and their individualisation, is likely to have negative consequences both for the professional (Tempest et al. 2004, 1542) and for their personal lives.

The changes in career patterns in the UK television were experienced differently by the various age groups of professionals (Paterson 2001). While those who entered the industry before the early 1980s had been 'seeking a career that had purpose, status and good earnings' (p.498), the careers of later recruits were marked by uncertainty which they disliked and responded to with various strategies (Paterson 2001, Dex et al. 2000). Thus freelancers sought additional income from working outside television, dedicated time and effort building and maintaining networks and relied for work predominantly on people they knew. These studies in UK television demonstrate how the new commercial pressures introduced in the sector resulted in increased employment insecurity for the freelance creatives effectively limiting their work and career choices and setting boundaries on boundaryless careers. As Langham summarises:

Anyone who wants a career in film, television or video . . . must understand the new structure (or lack of structure) in the industry and the implications of the changes for employment opportunities. . . . a career in film, television or video demanded great resources of emotional stamina to accept the uncertainty and even enjoy the roller-coaster atmosphere of the industry increasingly subject to rapid change. (Langham 1996, 49)

## **Methodology**

The paper draws on a qualitative study of UK television conducted between 2005 and 2007. The study had two main components: 71 face to face or telephone semi-structured interviews with industry freelance professionals and key informants. The interviews with freelancers revolved

around informants' work histories and explored the main stages of their working lives as well as their views and experiences of work. The second component of the study was three months participant observation in a small production company in the North of England during which one of the authors shadowed the making of a one hour science documentary while observing the day-to-day work in the office of the company. In addition, we participated in industry events and shadowed a one day shoot for a BBC food programme.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The average length of the transcribed interviews was 21 pages. Field notes were taken close to the time and a research diary was kept. The field notes amounted to 160 pages.

### **Random walk: unpredictable tournaments**

A prominent characteristic of television careers is the lack of either a clear structure or easily identifiable career stages. Our interviewees indicated that there were no systems in place to guide them (see also Skov and Pralong et al. in this volume). This was in contrast to the situation before de-regulation and older professionals often contrasted the two. Alexander, an experienced producer-director, described the way in which organisational careers in television had developed, as skills did, on the job:

The problem is that it is ...there is no career paths anymore for people. ....What we used to... I mean there used to be, it wasn't exactly formal structure, but we used to say that you know, most people who start as a researcher, say as a junior researcher, we would expect them to do probably three years as a researcher, you know, working their way up to become a senior researcher.... And then once they could do that and they had been an

assistant producer for a few years, probably again another three years, then we would think about making them into producers ....Well, it is still the same now. It is still the same in terms of the skills that are required and the amount of time that is needed. But you don't have any sort of formal structure....

The changes on the technical side were similar, albeit perhaps not to the same extent. Arthur, a lighting cameraman, reflected on the implications this lack of clear structure had on the current freelancers:

I think, you know, the thing to remember is in today's world it is much more difficult to go through a structured sort of regime of moving up the ladder which I am sure is why you are doing this research in the first place. It used to be, in the sort of days when the studios were much more in control, you used to very much join as a camera trainee, and then a clapper loader and then a focus puller and then an operator and then a DP [Director of Photography]; and it was a set way of doing things and you would generally do it over a set amount of time but that doesn't really exist anymore. So I think it's very difficult for people to know which direction to come in to ... and I think the most common question I'm asked by people starting in the industry is what should I do next? It is difficult.

Moves between jobs or chances to learn and join a network often depended on circumstances: 'being at the right place at the right time' or simply knowing the right people and being available to work. For example Hugh, a camera operator, managed to build his reputation in commercials by standing in for a friend:

quite often John was busy and couldn't do those jobs, so I would; so Peter would ask me to go and do them and that, and then from that you build up a reputation.

The way Sandra got her first production manager position was also telling:

My first up to production in, in production manager in television was when I was employed as a production co-ordinator. They said 'yes, come in'; I went in for the interview on the Thursday and they said 'right, see you Monday'. I turned up Monday morning and my production manager had been hospitalised with pre-eclampsia of pregnancy so I got promoted to production manager. So sometimes it is by accident. Sometimes it literally is by accident. (Sandra, production manager)

In the case of Oliver it was a 'lucky break' six months after a period of persistently attempting to find his first job after a traineeship:

I went back to work at GAP [a clothing store].... I did that thing that I am sure thousands of people do is just send out... get the local directory/production directory for wherever you are living and just go through it with a pen. Go 'OK, I am going to write to them' and then put together a CV and just send out letters and get no replies. Because you never do. And finally my letter arrived on the desk of somebody the day that the person who's job I ended up taking had handed in their notice. So I got a job as a runner at a production company (Oliver, producer)

Abigail, who had also benefitted from her CV landing on someone's desk at the right time, summarised the situation:

I don't know, I would say that everyone has a different experience in television. It is just so random, there is no control. It is so like ...you know, someone will say how they got into it and it is so totally different to you and you are like 'oh, that is interesting' (Abigail, producer-director)

Such random chances were confirmed by the recruiters. Experiencing the pressures of commissioning, Alan, an independent company producer, remembered hiring a 'second choice' candidate simply because she could start immediately:

But it happened at relatively short notice so I was stuck because, again, the whole way the production is to just suddenly leap into action. So, you are not hiring someone for a month's time, you are recruiting someone because we want someone to start on Monday... and so that became a prime qualification for the job. (Alan, producer)

Moving upwards in this labour market sometimes seemed to be easier within rather than between jobs. Project-based career models assume that career steps occur between jobs. This research suggested that previous work with an employer, and 'being known', could be a factor facilitating 'stepping up' in the course of a project. This was particularly so in the low grades where people had not succeeded to build a substantial portfolio or valuable contacts. Chance had a role to play here, too. Ciru was promoted to researcher on the same production on which she had been employed as a runner:

To be honest, it was purely by luck... I had been there by that point about sort of 6/7 weeks or something. And they said ... would I be interested in looking after this element. So they came and asked me to do it. But that was actually... I mean, that was purely, purely luck. Well, no, not all luck, but, you know, it was very much I was in the right place and they sort of said 'look, there she is, let's give it to her.' And anyone...they could have employed someone else to do it but it was almost easier because I had already been on it for 6/7 weeks to just say look she can look after that area... I mean, I have been really lucky because I was only a runner for, like, a month, you know. And I know people who have been runners for 2 years, you know. So, I was really, really lucky to

be... it is just about being in the right place and someone giving me the opportunity to move up. (Ciru, researcher/associate producer)

The fact that there were many different routes to success meant that freelancers had a rich diversity of opportunities to take advantage of. But such choice could also be actively misleading. Even successful freelancers spent the majority of their time out of work (Randle et al. 2008) and many started their careers working for little or no pay in firms or on projects which might generate opportunities for future work (Holgate and McKay 2007, see also Skov in this volume). But paying these industry dues was no guarantee of later employment and the freedoms that permitted many different paths to progress on also allowed many more hopefuls to enter the industry than would ever find work (Marsden 2007). This absence of organisational gatekeepers could be confusing and young people might continue applying for jobs hoping for career breaks long after their more experienced colleagues had effectively written them off. Such individuals were given few clear signals of when to stop and there was a danger that many would not realise that they had failed to establish a career in television until it was too late to start building one elsewhere (Marsden 2007).

Career moves based on chance also meant that there was a greater variability in the skills people in notionally identical positions (and certainly with the same job title) might have. Respondents were careful not to read too much into job titles. The signals they would otherwise have provided for levels of experience and competence were distorted and their function at the labour market undermined (Dex et al. 2000).

Another aspect of the serendipity or happenstance which influenced progress was the availability of more senior colleagues to help and support television freelancers. Mentoring, skills development, advice or simply expressions of good will are important support mechanisms in

freelance lives. A number of interviewees emphasised the crucial role such people played in their careers and again, stressed the role of chance:

The [show] was just coming to the end and the lady I was working with in the music department came back upstairs one day and said ‘oh, I’ve done you a really good favour’ and I sort of, said ‘what, you know, I don’t know what you are talking about’. And then I got a call from the HR ladies and I got offered an interview to be a production secretary on [another show] ...I was very lucky in that the production manager at the time was very good friends with the production co-ordinator at the time. So they were a really nice friendly pair, and I sort of luckily sort of slotted in quite well with them. Half way through the production co-ordinator was made into the production manager as the production manager left, and they brought in a different co-ordinator who also was fantastic. (Grace, researcher)

This collegial good will benefitted Grace further in her career, when a co-worker suggested she e-mailed a particular person at a terrestrial broadcaster:

And I was very lucky she ...it was just at the right time again when the [programme] were looking for researchers and I literally sent my CV to her, got a response saying ‘thank you for sending your CV’ and then I think the day after got a call saying would I come in for an interview .... So I went for that, again didn’t think I would get it because I didn’t think I had enough experience. And I got it and started the week after! (Grace, researcher)

In line with previous research on ‘getting on’ in such ‘tournament’ environments (Barley and Kunda 2004, Baumann 2002, Blair 2001, Blair et al. 2003, Saundry 2001, Ursell 1998) interviewees emphasised the importance of building relationships. This was a ‘rule’ or a ‘factor’

where one could exercise some control over the outcome of the tournament without fundamentally changing its random nature.

I mean, the whole of TV is completely just if you are in the right place at the right time. There is no ...well, I mean obviously it is to do with skill as well but it is like, who you make friends with and I ...you know, I know some runners who will, you know, make friends with everybody and, you know, and stay in contact with everyone and after jobs and everything and they get on really well... I know people who have been runners who you know, have spent a long time trying to get somewhere but not getting anywhere at all even though they are really good. Whereas other people who aren't so good just happen to have a lucky lucky break, so you know it makes them get there and I think a lot of it is to do with making friends with the right people. (Susan, production manager)

Sometimes circumstances would open up opportunities for skills development by making people take on more responsibilities, usually within a production they had been working on. This could be a prerequisite for a positive career move. However such a step also presumed that individuals were already working on a project. As mentioned earlier, moves within jobs or companies were often much easier ways for the freelancers to progress to different job roles than moves between them. This was particularly so in the cases of junior freelancers and in cases where professionals were trying to change or expand on their specialism ('stretchwork'). Trust, established through continuous work, played an important part of. Often just being present was sufficient to create an opportunity, especially for junior freelancers, as their very presence on set legitimised their standing as worthy members of the community. Other strategies involved building a reputation as pleasant, reliable, hard-working and friendly. Partly serendipitous factors were, for example, the knowledge of a language or expertise in a narrow specialism which could benefit a

production (as in the science documentary which sought out science graduates to do the administrative tasks). Sometimes structures were available to support this: some regional independent production companies combined their efforts in order to identify job opportunities for freelancers and thus keep them available as a resource in the region. But these too relied on the human factor and telephone calls notifying other companies of good people about to come on to the market were irregular and far more likely to be prompted by good performance or personable behaviour (plus the originating company's belief in future relevant contracts).

Different genres also seemed to have different tournament rules. Moves between them were sometimes difficult and the individual's very presence in one genre could mean tournament failure in another. For example, a producer in community television was unlikely to become a sought after freelancer working for regional independent production companies and a creative doing TV spots was unlikely to be accepted as a drama professional. There is a hierarchy of genres based on prestige within the community and moves from a less to a more prestigious genre is rather difficult.

In emphasising the element of randomness we are not suggesting that freelancers did not try and actively 'position' themselves, build strategies for finding the 'right' place and time at the different phases of their career (Jones 1996) or for obtaining 'stretchwork' (O'Mahony and Bechky, 2006). They did, with varying degrees of energy, enthusiasm and talent. Rather, we would like to demonstrate that, given the nature of the labour market, career development and destruction were also caused by factors over which freelancers had little control and which ran independently of their strategies.

## **Tenuous Careers**

Working in television does not mean enjoying a lifetime career. Freelance working lives were permeated by an acceptance that careers were fragile and futures uncertain. Careers evolved around various projects, but project-based work is inherently finite so there was an ever present uncertainty about whether such employment would be continued, whether there would be a next project and where or when the end of the working life would come. Many interviewees, at all stages in their careers, told us of the moments of doubt, or fear of whether there was ever going to be another job for them in television. As Claire, a production manager remarked, 'I think everybody has those moments where they think 'oh, God I am going to have to get a bar job!'''. This was a constant feature of the freelance working life and in some cases seemed to result in an erosion of the idea that a working life could be identical with a career. Rather, freelancers had doubts about the continuity and the length of their television work. Anna, a producer-director recalled that she felt the uncertainty even when the result of her application had been positive:

There was an advert in the Media Guardian [newspaper] while I was unemployed so I sent my CV and didn't hear anything and thought 'I am never going to get a job' you know, the Media Guardian, it goes to millions of people. And they rang me up about a month later and said 'yes, come in for an interview' and I got it like that, through the Media Guardian!

Freelance careers in television were characterised by a persisting idea of a secondary career elsewhere, of a 'fall back' option. Respondents spoke of training as therapist, doing organic farming, or setting up their own small business, often related to their TV work. For example, one location manager established a location library which she made available to colleagues for a fee; a production manager set up a website with her card designs which she hoped to develop into a small business. Sometimes the parallel work would be a 'filler' rather than a secondary career.

Periods of unemployment meant that people did part-time jobs in offices or bars in order to earn their living between projects.

Television is known to be a 'young person's game'. There were few respondents in their 40s and even this pattern was gendered. Women often dropped out earlier, in their 30s and for them it would often be a choice between having children, since the erratically long-hours of freelance work was difficult to combine with most forms of childcare, or continuing to work in television.

It is awful to say, but when people get to about 50 or 55, they often get less employed. I do still think it's more of a younger person's industry, and that is not deadly so because I do have a lot of ...know a lot of older location managers. But I think they are just not as employed as much at that age which I think must be quite tricky for them. And they don't like to say their age, a friend of mine, Ralf, who is a location manager, and he is about 50 and you wouldn't know it but he is like 'don't tell anyone my age, they might not employ me'. ... I think it's tough that is why I think they need to sort of plan ahead, really.

(Laura, location manager)

Amber, another location manager, was uncertain whether she would be able to sustain the intensity of the work:

I don't know, 15 years time, no, probably...probably still doing this or completely go out of the industry and do something completely different. I think it is such a fast industry that a lot of people don't live in it all the time. I think a lot of people burn out and just drop and do maybe something.

Claire had similar doubts:

I do have this kind of feeling that I shouldn't be doing this when I am 50. I really do feel...our industry is now, it is so young! I think production managers: there are several areas where you can be older and still get work, and still get respect. But I do think there is a lot of the industry that expects you to be young. And I think that is really bad. But I really can't see that I would be doing this when I turn 50 so I have got to come up with some game plan. Because you know, by the time I am ...in the next few years I need to be thinking how ...what on earth could I do, how could I retrain, what could I afford to be doing.... Once you get to your 40s I would have thought in an awful lot of areas in our industry people are thinking 'what do I do now?' Whether we manage to get out or not I don't know. My colleague, my business partner Jacky is now, she is probably 54 and she is a producer/director and she can't get work. (Claire, production manager)

The early cut-off point and the short working lives put additional pressure and present additional challenge to those who want to build their careers in television. As Simon, a Trade Union representative ironically remarked, 'you are 21, but there are plenty of 18 year olds and 17 year olds coming up behind, you know'.

An important feature of the end of the career is the unknown termination. In the words of Brian, a producer-director, 'you don't leave television, television leaves you.' There was a clear concern about the later working life. But freelance television careers were not just short in duration. Their end point was unclear and people had to realise when that point comes themselves since the only external prompt is that invitations to work on projects cease. Given the erratic and uncertain gaps between work for active freelancers this can be difficult to identify. Chris, an executive producer, elaborated:

I think the biggest pressure .... is that at some point over the next few years I won't be able to get work because I will be too old. In this industry I won't be able to do what I do at some point. Anywhere between three weeks and 15 years time but I won't know when that point is. No one will tell me when that point is. It will just emerge that I am not getting work.

Freelance careers were tenuous and uncertain at least in three ways. Firstly, as our informants agreed, a career in television was not a continuous occupation. The uncertainty of freelance employment meant that individuals faced potential 'discontinuities' at any stage of the working lives. Secondly, working in television usually involved having a secondary job: either to sustain individuals between projects, or to gradually replace the insecure work on productions. Thirdly, these careers were much shortened by their association with youth and energy. This meant that people would exit television, voluntarily or otherwise, fairly young, and that those in work were never aware of the precise moment when their working lives would come to an end.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Positioned in the continually moving gap between projects and organisations, careers in television were both accidental and fragile. Degrees and definitions of success were varied and individual experiences differed greatly, but all accounts, even when informants had achieved a great deal, progressed or enjoyed regular work, were permeated by an emphasis on temporariness and chance.

Such careers raise problems in at least three respects. Firstly, with regard to skills development and career progression. As skills development in television is mainly done on the job (Grugulis

and Stoyanova 2009) random career moves or moves based on accumulation of experience and credentials meant that skills and skills development were highly varied. Identical job titles could denote quite variable experience and expertise, especially on the production and editorial side. As a result, job titles and positions were far less useful at denoting individual expertise and employers found it hard to judge competence based only on past credits. This increased the importance of social mechanisms still further (Baumann 2002) as these are used for verifying and selecting reliable candidates .

Secondly, this dynamic environment was not inherently conducive to building trust. In many cases freelancers took career steps within rather than between jobs. This saved costs by eliminating the need to search outside of the immediate project team and was a way of solving the ‘career progression paradox’ (O’Mahony and Bechky 2006) which reduced the risk of hiring incompetent people.

Thirdly, the career tournaments had profound effect on freelancers’ experiences of work. They reinforced the lure of varied possibilities while increasing the levels of uncertainty. The combination of these nurtured and at the same time undermined individual success strategies making tournament outcomes often a function of chance. Particularly as the number of those competing significantly exceeded the jobs available.

In discussing some of the aspects of contemporary careers in television this chapter has emphasised the uncertainty and randomness in the way that freelancers’ working paths unfold. Contemporary careers are increasingly ‘boundaryless’ (Arthur 1994) as opposed to ‘organisational’ (Watson 2003). Career paths are no longer linear and static, but dynamic and multidirectional (Baruch 2004). This shift also implies that careers are now owned by the individual with individuals adapting, learning and improvising in the changed career

environment (Arthur et al. 1999). In them freelancers are liberated from structural straitjackets to pursue portfolios of work, themed areas of interest or simply make time for life outside work.

Such inter-organisational careers can also be conceptualised as ongoing or extended tournaments (Marsden 2007, 2010) the outcome of which is only partly dependent on the explicit strategies and efforts of the competitors. As with other tournaments, chance has a role to play. This notion does not feature as strongly in the careers literature as it did in the stories of our respondents and here we drew the attention to this characteristic of the new fragmented labour markets.

This study allows us to make a few further suggestions about issues related to making career progressions in freelance labour markets. The first one relates to skills development and career moves. As O'Mahony and Bechky (2006) showed, freelancers need to make a number of compromises in order to overcome the 'career progression paradox'. All of these assume that moves are made between rather than within jobs. Our findings however suggest that, especially for junior freelancers, such steps were sometimes easier to make in the course of a single project. There are a few factors which influence and condition this. In lower level jobs the risks associated with promoting people may be lower and so decisions about promotions are easier to make. This, combined with the often significant time pressures in sourcing crew members, makes promoting an already present junior person an efficient solution for companies. The very fact that these young people were already on set both made them immediately available and 'legitimised' them as reliable candidates. Or, as Dex et al. (2000) also observe, in some cases such promotions were 'rewards' for junior staff members often not matched by financial benefit. And so business pressures as well as the rather fluid rules for promotion made 'being at the right place at the right time' a decisive factor in making a positive career step. The fluid institutional environment made such serendipitous moves perfectly possible.

A point which should also be emphasised is that in the contemporary television labour market such steps are not necessarily a part of an overall career. As Rosenbaum (1979) noted in relation to the tournament mobility model, those who ‘won’ only won the opportunity to compete at the next level.

Our study also allows us to provide three insights about the tournament nature of freelance careers. Firstly, these relate to the possible variety of tournament rules for the various genres. The different status attached to the different genres as well as the different social networks meant that freelancers would have different opportunities to progress. An aspect of this was the extent to which a genre was subjected to job conversions. In some, like factual television, the number of people engaged in a production has been considerably reduced. Job roles are often merged and it is not uncommon for people to be ‘sound recording producer-directors’ or ‘shooting producer-directors’. In others, such as television drama, the demands of the production process have prevented this tendency and one still finds larger crews with more intermediate job positions.

Secondly, the tournament rules are different for the freelancers at the different stages in their careers. Such artistic labour markets based on project-based work organisation and freelance employment, are segmented (Christopherson 2009; Faulkner 1983). We would like to suggest that the different segments of freelancers are competing under different tournament rules. The more junior (or aspiring) professionals are more likely to experience the random element of the tournament in their career progression or at least, are more likely to benefit from it in sourcing a new position. It is at that level that an opportunity stands out because of the large number of junior aspirants competing for a relatively small number of positions (Marsden 2010).

One could (quite rightly) argue that chance has always had a role to play in artistic careers. What research such as this shows however is that in an institutionally fluid environment where entry is

largely unrestricted and there are a vast number of people aspiring to making a career in the field, serendipitous moves become the structurally determined and legitimate rule for the working lives to evolve. Particularly so outside the small core of well-established professionals.

Thirdly, we would like to suggest that the tournament rules had a regional dimension. The labour markets outside of the big hubs of the television industry (e.g. London) face the challenge of retaining people, especially young professionals. In them the rules of competing can sometimes be less ruthless and young people may find some support from the companies in securing a further position, obtaining more exposure or getting credits.

Concluding, we need to point out that our research, in common with most work on careers, exaggerates the success of its informants. Indeed, in this study, the very fact of an individual's presence in the labour market (and our sample) meant that they had been successful in at least some of the tournaments. We heard of many who had dropped out, some to related work (PhDs in drama, teaching in university departments, working for tertiary bodies associated with the television industry) while others embarked on completely unrelated fields (driving taxis, fitting bathrooms). However, while we can note their presence and the implications of such turnover for the labour market, our work cannot represent their views or experiences. Indeed, identifying them would be a major methodological challenge but could add valuable insights into the realities of the tournament careers and the individuals who live and work with them.

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