

Concept of Protean Career

This concept of people adapting to different challenges or threats in their careers was conceived by D.T. Hall as early as 1976. He used the myth of the Greek sea god Proteus, who took on all kinds of shapes and forms in order to be able to react optimally to threatening events. In a first approach, Hall (1976) clarified the differences between a traditional career in organisations and the Protean career.

Elements/Aspects	Protean career	Traditional career patterns in organisations
Who is at the centre?	Individual	Organisation
Central values	freedom, personal development	Advancement, Promotion opportunities
Extent of mobility	high	Low
Criteria for success	Psychological success	Position, payment
Main settings	job satisfaction, professional self-commitment	Organisational Commitment

Table 1: Elements in the protean career.

In recent works (Briscoe, Hall, 2006, p. 8), the protean career is defined as a career in which the individual (1) is oriented towards an independent value system and from this gains the benchmarks for success, (2) has the ability to meet the new challenges in work and competence development in a self-directed way. The two components, "value-driven" and "self-directed in career management", which can be categorised as high and low or weaker and stronger, allow for four basic categorisations:

A **"dependent"** is a person who is incapable of setting priorities or shaping his or her own career independently. He/she is weak in both dimensions.

"Reactive" is a person who can shape his career independently but lacks alignment with the independent value system. Ultimately, this does not lead to a satisfying professional life.

"Rigid" is the name given to the type who is driven by their own values but is not capable of self-directed action. They are unable to cope satisfactorily with professional challenges.

"Protean" (protean) is a person who has high expressions on both components and can, therefore, move themselves and others towards active behaviour towards competence development and vocational transformation processes (Briscoe, Hall, 2006).



The concept of protean behaviour is becoming increasingly important in a time of transition from long-term secure employment relationships to ever shorter-term contractual arrangements and organisational development. In a study of organisational development, Hall and Moss (1998) found a clear departure from the previous "psychological contract", i.e. the unwritten mutual expectations of employers and employees. The results show that there is a "time lag" between organisational change and the employee's perception of its full implications. First, the new developments are not considered significant or at least uncertain. Next, the extent of the changes is recognised, but the personal consequences are not accepted. Finally, people find their way into the new working environment, even if they do not like it. In the end, the authors state that it takes about seven years for organisations and employees to successfully complete their adaptation in terms of a new protean work contract.

These results are put into perspective by a recent study in Germany by D. Hecker (2010):

The psychological contract describes the mutual expectations and obligations that go beyond the legal employment contract (...) and is defined by the perception of the individual fulfilling the individual's expectations in return for their commitment to the organisation. (Hecker, 2010, p. 19).

Whereas the traditional contract focused on job security, lifelong employment, internal promotion, mutual loyalty and identification as well as specialisation, today the focus is on personal responsibility for employment, independent competence development, flexibility and tolerance of ambiguity as well as goal orientation (cf. Raeder, Grote 2001, in Hecker, 2010, p. 22). Nevertheless, even with changed contents (characteristics), the psychological contract retains its importance for job satisfaction, "commitment" (high personal agreement with the goals and values of the organisation, willingness to make an effort and desire to remain in the company) and the experience of stress ("subjectively perceived emotional and cognitive stress in the work context due to experienced imbalance between personal resources and everyday stress") (cf. Hecker, 2010, p. 196).

The organisation can influence the subjective design and perception of psychological contracts through its control mechanisms, personnel policy programmes, corporate culture (canon of values, communication, corporate identity) and the signals from top management. In contrast, the incentive systems in a company can be interpreted in terms of the organisation's expectations of its employees (cf. Hecker, 2010, p. 205). If, in the sense of Rousseau (2004), one assumes the importance of effective psychological contracts for the individual and the company, the critical question for career development approaches is to what extent the dimensions of psychological contracts are taken into account.

Following McLean-Parks et al. (1998), Hecker (2010, p. 33) names the following core elements to describe psychological contracts: "socio-emotional focus" captures the importance of socio-emotional aspects in relation to economic aspects in the working relationship; "tangibility" means the specificity, clarity and concreteness of the relationship and his or her role in it as perceived by the employee; "changeability" refers to the extent to which the conditions and roles, once established, endure; "breadth" characterises the scope of the psychological contract in relation to the different areas of a person's life and private life; uniqueness" refers to the extent of individually perceived replaceability; "voluntariness" results from an employee's choices in shaping his or her relationship with the organisation; the perception of "time frame" refers to whether the relationship is experienced as short-term or long-term; the characteristic "multiple relationships" is particularly relevant in flexible employment relationships where the individual has exchange relationships with more than one organisation.

Contrary to some assumptions in the literature, the results of Hecker's (2010) study show that neither the duration of an employee's attachment to an organisation nor unstable or multiple affiliations have significant changes in relation to the core characteristics of psychological contracts mentioned above. These results are important in our context because they underline the importance of psychological contracts even in times of declining "normal employment relationships".

Closely related to the protean career approach is the boundaryless career concept (Sullivan, Arthur, 2006; Briscoe, Hall, 2006). This concept, essentially developed by Arthur and Rousseau (1996), describes the opposite of the "organisational career" in the sense of being bound to a single organisation, a fixed career pattern with vertical orientation and stability. Characteristics of the boundaryless career are support from external networks, the influence of the work-life balance and the subjective interpretation of the career.

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